

## TRACES OF ANTONIA MERCÉ IN THE POSTWAR PERIOD: FROM HAUNTOLOGY TO MYTHOLOGY

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Fecha de recepción: 16/05/2025 / Fecha de aceptación: 17/06/2025

### Abstract

The death of Antonia Mercé in 1936 caused a profound shock to Spanish artistic culture and its performance scene. However, her name did not disappear from the stage during the postwar period; rather, it was appropriated by various artistic and cultural agents under the Franco regime, especially related to other dancers. This article aims to analyze the different ways in which the figure and body of La Argentina remained present on stage after her death, and the role that this spectral survival played in the construction of her mythological and foundational status in Spanish dance. To that end, particular attention has been paid to the analysis of a series of material traces (press clippings, photographs, costumes, etc.), which can be understood both as signs in themselves and as carriers of meaning. In this sense, the concept of trace in this research is approached in both its mnemonic and material dimensions, encompassing all those phenomena, media, and objects capable of invoking her presence.

**Keywords:** Antonia Mercé, Spanish Dance, Francoism, Genealogies, Material Culture, Thanatopolitics.

## LA HUELLA DE ANTONIA MERCÉ EN LA POSGUERRA: DE LA FANTOLOGÍA A LA MITOLOGÍA

### Resumen

La muerte de Antonia Mercé en 1936 produjo una conmoción para la cultura artística y la escena española. Sin embargo, su nombre no desapareció del escenario durante la posguerra y fue utilizado por distintos agentes culturales durante el franquismo, especialmente en relación a otras bailarinas. Este artículo se propone analizar las diferentes formas y modos en los que la figura y el cuerpo de La Argentina se mantuvo vivo sobre el escenario tras su muerte y el papel que esta supervivencia espectral tuvo en la creación de su carácter mitológico y fundacional para la danza española. Para ello se ha puesto especial atención al análisis de una serie de rastros materiales (recortes de prensa, fotografías, vestuario, etc.), que pueden entenderse en sí mismos como signos, pero también como portadores de significado. En ese sentido, el concepto de huella en esta investigación se comprende en su dimensión tanto mnémica, como material y, por tanto, implica todos aquellos fenómenos, medios y objetos capaces de invocar su presencia.

**Palabras clave:** Antonia Mercé, danza española, franquismo, genealogías, cultura material, tanatopolítica.

They don't know how to love her and cannot,  
because loving a dead person is difficult.

It is simpler to pretend that she is alive,  
to cover her members... with masks and shaves  
in order to display them.  
(Agamben, *Desnudez* 58)

What we see has no value –  
does not live –  
in our eyes other than that which looks back at us.  
(Didi-Huberman, *Lo que vemos...* 13)



Fig. 1 (left). *Antonia Mercé's mortuary mask*, 1936. Musée Basque et de l'histoire de Bayonne. Ref. 96.15.1.

Fig. 2 (right). Antonia Mercé with her face turned looking smiling at the camera, and her hair tied in a low bun with a flower headdress, 1926. Photography from Album 7, Antonia Mercé «La Argentina» Archive. Juan March Foundation Library (Madrid). Ref. A07P066F02.

Every death produces an absence, a void (Fig. 1). Antonia Mercé died in Bayonne on July 18, 1936. Her funeral mask is held at the Basque Museum in this city (Naverán 14)<sup>1</sup>. The plaster cast of her inert face is the negative of the iconography generated in life by the dancer (Fig. 2). La Argentina is dead, she no longer sees<sup>2</sup> or smiles.

«Antonia Mercé: the first victim of July 18», wrote Antonina Rodrigo in a headline of the newspaper *El País* in 1986. The writer thus included the dancer within the Republican martyrology of the war, something which also happened in 1938, when it was claimed that she

<sup>1</sup> The research process began prior to the publication of the book *Envoltura, historia, síncope* by the same author in 2022, in which she connects La Argentina with other figures from different geographical and temporal contexts. The bronze version of the mask is held at Institut del Teatre in Barcelona.

<sup>2</sup> «For an ancient Greek... to die was to lose one's sight. We say "his last breath", but they said "his last look"» (Debray 21).

had been poisoned by order of a high-ranking Francoist («Se asegura que» 22)<sup>3</sup>. Rodrigo, less conspiratorial this time, wrote, «a legendary Spanish dancer fell, as if struck by lightning, on hearing the news of the uprising against the Republic by the army of Africa» (Rodrigo, «Antonia Mercé»)<sup>4</sup>. La Argentina was thus returning as an «allegory of the Republic» (Naverán 10) again the «nation-dancer» (Murga Castro, «La danza en el imaginario» 453) that had been celebrated for her role as an ambassador of Spanish art in 1931, when Manuel Azaña awarded her the Bow of the Order of Isabella the Catholic (Fig. 3). The image of Antonia Mercé as a Republican symbol has prevailed in historiography until quite recently. Only in the past few years has there been an effort to counter this view. These nuances have emerged upon learning of several tributes paid to the artist in Occupied Paris, attended by political and intellectual authorities of the Francoist regime. The support shown by Francoist Spain in these memorials suggests a further step by the regime toward the appropriation of her figure —or, given what has just been outlined, a symbolic reappropriation in competition with Republican Spain<sup>5</sup>.



Fig. 3. Manuel Azaña awarding Antonia Mercé La Argentina the Bow of the Order of Isabella the Catholic, December 3, 1931. Spanish National Museum of Theater (Almagro). Ref. FT11042.

La Argentina not only represented an allegory of the nation but also came to embody the benchmark —a canon— against which an entire generation of female dancers was assessed, in a context where there was also an effort and a desire to identify in them a legitimate heir to her legacy. Thus, it can be observed how numerous performers turned to La Argentina to «create a genealogy» (Murga Castro, «La danza en el imaginario» 451) and to legitimize their position

<sup>3</sup> «Se asegura que “La Argentina” murió envenenada por orden del alto mando facciosos». Also in Murga Castro («La danza en el imaginario» 451 and 453).

<sup>4</sup> Later it would be taken up in Rodrigo, 2002. Also in Collado (337).

<sup>5</sup> Antonia Mercé's own political affiliation remains a subject yet to be clarified, see Fernández Higuero («La escena española» 176).

within a landscape impoverished by the Spanish Republican exile of 1939, which had affected other performers and choreographers of the time.

If we pay close attention to the development and reception of some of these events and performances —as well as to other sources relevant to Spanish dance from those years— it becomes evident that Antonia Mercé was consistently invoked during the postwar period and the early years of the Francoist regime as a kind of spectral presence that may be understood through Derrida's notion of «hauntology» (*Espectros de Marx*). Indeed, some of these tributes and references carry an esoteric, ritualistic aura that evokes funerary rites and recalls certain necropolitical practices of early Francoism, aimed at reinforcing national myths (Box, «Rituales Funerarios») and «inventing traditions», as proposed by Hobsbawm and Ranger (*The Invention of Tradition*).

This article seeks to compile and examine a selection of Antonia Mercé's posthumous appearances, as part of an effort to understand the mechanisms through which the dancer's presence persisted over time. To what extent did these events contribute to the construction of her mythology up to the present? How, and in what forms, was the dancer represented during these years? In order to address these questions, the study considers not only reception but also a range of sources that may help trace her lingering presence. This entails following the trail of an absence made perceptible through presence —an absence shaped by death and historical distance, as well as by the ephemeral nature of dance itself.

Kristine Stiles (35) has emphasized the importance of material traces in the study of the performing arts, particularly in relation to the needs of communication and memory. In this spirit, the article highlights the value of such traces, placing particular emphasis on a set of material remnants —press clippings, photographs, costumes, and more—that function both as signs in themselves and as carriers of meaning<sup>6</sup>. In this context, Antonia Mercé's «trace» is understood as encompassing all phenomena, media, gestures, and objects capable of invoking her presence<sup>7</sup>.

## 1. AN ENDURING SHADOW

Death masks emerge as part of ancestor worship. Other sculptural pieces, such as commemorative plaques, can also be included in the same group of rites for the dead. These plaques were placed during some of the tributes that since 1937 were held in France<sup>8</sup>, her

<sup>6</sup> For the idea of trace and that of the materialist historian in Walter Benjamin, see Benjamin (*Libro de los pasajes*).

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, it has been very useful to understand the concept of trace in Derridean terms, as both a presence and an absence. In relation to this term, «invoke» has been used to refer to its «spectral» and or «phantasmagoric» character, with reference to Derrida and also Benjamin. See Derrida (*Artes de lo visible* 327-349). In this same methodological line see also: Blanco and Peeren (*The spectralities reader*).

<sup>8</sup> Churches of La Magdalena and la Rue de la Pompe de Paris. On November 3, 1937, a gala was also held in honor of La Argentina at the Cercle Français of Montreal, under the patronage of the French General Consul and with the participation of the Studios Mary Beetles School of Dance, the Montreal Concert Dance Group, the Rialto Dance School, and the Russian Ballet Studio. See «Le gala de la danse».

country of residence at the time of her death and the place where she is still buried in the cemetery of Neuilly-sur-Seine. The first plaque was placed in 1939 on one of the walls of the *Chambre Argentina* at the Maison de Retraite in Aix-sur-Ponte, a retirement home for dramatic and lyric artists. A note beneath photographs of the event —preserved in one of the artist's albums at the Juan March Foundation— reads: «Several mementos were displayed in the salon, including the costume from *Puerto de Tierra*». In the foreground of the image stands the actor Victor Bouche, who officiates as the master of ceremonies and shows the plaque affixed to the room's door to another man, José Mercé, the artist's brother. The second photograph corroborates the description: the aforementioned costume, designed by Salvador Bacarisas, a book—possibly Levinson's—some pictures hanging on the wall, and the furniture in the room. Alongside all these material remnants, the presence of other attendees can be identified, including the playwright Colette and the mime Georges Wague (Fig. 4). The latter, in addition to having been part of the dancer's company, presided over the Association des Amis d'Argentina, an organization created in 1936 by her partner and manager, Arnold Meckel<sup>9</sup>, with the aim of preserving La Argentina's legacy. The association had also been the promoter of this celebration.



Fig. 4. General view of the hall inaugurated in memory of La Argentina by the Association of Friends of Antonia Mercé at the Maison de Retraite des Artistes, 1939. Photography from Álbum 9, Antonia Mercé «La Argentina» Archive. Juan March Foundation Library (Madrid). Ref. A09P108F01.

<sup>9</sup> The Association des Amis d'Argentina was created in 1936 by Arnold Meckel. Among its various actions to commemorate her was the creation of a museum and a retreat center for choreographic artists («Musique» 7). The «Chambre Argentine» was inaugurated by the president of the Drama Artist Association, Victor Bouche, and by the French mime Georges Wague, who played The Ghost at the premiere of *El amor brujo* in 1925. This is recorded in «Nouvelles» (5). The ceremony was also attended by José Mercé Luque, the artist's brother, as seen in the photograph in the Juan March Foundation.



Fig. 5. Commemorative plaque installed at the Salle Pleyel with the funds raised during a tribute organized by the dancer Nana de Herrera, 1941. Photography from Álbum 9, Antonia Mercé «La Argentina» Archive. Juan March Foundation Library (Madrid). Ref. A09P111F01.

On the next page of the album, a photograph of another plaque can be seen (Fig. 5). With no further visual context for its background beyond its iconography, it features a bas-relief depicting the effigy of Antonia Mercé and the inscription «À la mémoire de celle qui flamme vive et pure harmonie de l'Espagne ici dansa» [In memory of that living flame and pure harmony from Spain, here she danced]. This is the bronze plaque that was placed in the Salle Pleyel on July 18, 1942, marking the sixth anniversary of her death. The work, now preserved at the Museu de les Arts Escèniques of the Institut del Teatre, was created by the Spanish sculptor Ignacio Gallo winner of a contest organized by the Spanish Consulate in Paris (Fig. 5)<sup>10</sup>. The plaque also included the name of Nana de Herrera<sup>11</sup>, the dancer<sup>12</sup> who promoted its creation during a tribute which took place in the same concert hall, on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of Mercé's death (Davray 2). That event, also organized by her in collaboration with La Argentina's brother, José Mercé, included the projection of an unreleased film by him (Fernández Higuero, «La escena española 176), music by the pianist Rafael Arroyo, and the sale of personal objects that belonged to La Argentina (Murga Castro, «La danza en el imaginario» 456)<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, the head of Falange in Paris, Colonel Barroso and the General

<sup>10</sup> The jury was composed of the painters Beltrán-Massés, José María Sert, Francisco Merenciano, the Uruguayan sculptor Pablo Mané and Nana Herrera herself («Le souvenir d'Argentina» 2).

<sup>11</sup> This happened at the behest of José Mercé, see: N.P., 1942, 2. Also mentioned in Fernández Higuero («Control and recitals» 177).

<sup>12</sup> Born in Perú, Nana Herrera was a famous Spanish dance performer and teacher. Tamara Lempicka painted her portrait in 1928, *vid. Lambert, Jacques. Nana de Herrera, la gitane de Montmartre*, Paris, Fauves, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> These were part of private collections such as Serge Lifar's. See the Grande Salle Pleyel programme, July 18, 1941. BMO, AS, 228 (t. 2).

Consul of Spain, Bernard Rolland, were both present at this event together with other political-intellectual authorities of the Franco regime. The presence of Falange Exterior, an organization associated with Falange de las FET y de las JONS, the only political party in Spain, through which various political and cultural activities were coordinated outside the national territory, is evident. This is confirmed by the press coverage of the event itself:

Mrs. Meckel placed a wreath of flowers, followed by Mr. Bernardo Rolland, Spanish Consul General, who read a speech by Mr. de Léquérida [sic], Spanish Ambassador, and he himself thanked Miss Nana de Herrera, instigator of this commemorative celebration. While the audience listened to Miguel Ramos perform with his art of nuances, an added charm to his virtuosity, «La Danza del Fuego» and «Córdoba,» we noted the presence of Mr. Velilla, head of Falange, Infantil Luis de España, Georges Wague, Mr. and Mrs. Maranon, Mrs. Goni, president of the Social Aid, André de Fouquières, Mr. Camille Mauclair, Mr. Lety-Courbière, and Mr. A. Bonnet, vice president of the European Circle, Mr. José Torrès, and Mrs. Mercé<sup>14</sup>.

The support of Francoist Spain shown in these memorials marks a step by the regime toward the appropriation of her figure, or, given the precedents, a symbolic reappropriation in competition with Republican Spain. In relation to the latter, it is important to recall that in 1939, Cipriano Rivas Cherif, a former collaborator of the deceased, was also interested in reviving Antonia Mercé's company in exile.

On the side of Nana de Herrera, we must also point to another maneuver of legitimization. With the aforementioned commemorations, this was the third time Herrera paid tribute to Antonia Mercé. A few years earlier, she had done so in a danced lecture: «After honoring the memory of Argentina, Miss Nana de Herrera has successfully translated boleros, flamencos, sevillanas, the clatter of castanets, and, in short, all the regional poetry of a Spain that will always tempt poets»<sup>15</sup>. This also had a symbolic tone, especially if we consider that one of the last activities on Antonia Mercé's agenda before her death was precisely giving a lecture at the Archives de la Danse in Paris.

## 2. FILLING THE VOID: THE TRACE IS AN IMAGE BY REPETITION

The coincidence of Antonia Mercé's death with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War created both temporal and symbolic distance, delaying any public tributes to her memory in Spain. When the war was over, however, only six months passed before such events began to take place. In the autumn of 1939, the Asturian dancer Manuela del Río<sup>16</sup> crossed the Pyrenean border with the support of Pro-Arte to participate in the first tribute to La Argentina in Spain (Fig. 6). Like Antonia Mercé, Del Río had spent many years abroad. Before leaving Spain,

<sup>14</sup> S.P. «Le souvenir de l'Argentina a la Salle Pleyel», *L'Oeuvre*, París, 20 August 1942, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> «Après avoir rendu hommage à mémoire d'Argentina, Mlle Nana de Herrera a traduit avec bonheur boléros, flamengos, sévillanes, bruissements de castagnettes, enfin tou la poésie régionale d'une espagne qui tentera toujours les poètes», translated by the author from David (6).

<sup>16</sup> Manuela Juana del Río Martínez Arcos was born in Grado, Asturias, in 1909. See program for the Festejos de San Pelayo, Grado, July 4, 5 and 6, 1981, 53.

between 1925 and 1927, she had been a lead dancer at the Teatro Liceo in Barcelona. By the 1930s she was based in Paris, although her tours had taken her all over the world<sup>17</sup>. Shortly after these tributes to Antonia Mercé, held at the Teatro de la Zarzuela in Madrid and the Palau de la Música in Barcelona on October 23 and November 5<sup>18</sup>, respectively, Manuela became part of the group of «dance-ambassadors» (Prevots) sent by Francoist Spain to Axis-aligned countries<sup>19</sup>. When she danced in Madrid, she was praised by the writer José María Pemán, who «evoked the figure of that unparalleled dancer» (Sainz de la Maza, «Español: homenaje» 17) in a speech that preceded the «tribute to the glorious disappeared Spanish dancer» (Sainz de la Maza, «Español: homenaje» 19). Both the nature of the event—and of the one in Barcelona—and the participation of the then director of the Real Academia Española, did not escape the double legitimization that has been mentioned above, despite the fact that it was unofficial. However, what perhaps meant «social leverage» for the Asturian woman was seen as a mere «box-office trick» (Puig 134) by others. This was the view expressed by Alfonso Puig from Barcelona, to a certain extent in line with his fellow countryman Sebastià Gasch. The latter was clear; the death of La Argentina had left «an enormous vacuum that would be difficult to fill. It is a waste of time to discuss potential successors» (Gasch, *La danza* 39).



Fig. 6. Playbill Sole recital of dances featuring the debut of the great Spanish dancer Manuela del Rio, November 5, 1939. Centre de Documentació de l'Orfeó Català (Barcelona)- Memòria Digital de Catalunya.

<sup>17</sup> Including England, the USA, Russia, the Netherlands, Finland and others. See, *ibid.*, 59-71.

<sup>18</sup> Manuela del Río danced in both occasions with Alberto Torres.

<sup>19</sup> Manuela danced in Nazi Germany in 1939, see «Manuela del Río» (12-13) and also in Salazar's Portugal in 1945, see Castro (129). Her situation is the same as that of other dancers and musicians who were used in those years to encourage these relationships. See Martínez del Fresno (357-406); Suárez Pajares (59-95).

The Antonia Mercé-vacuum dichotomy was largely at the center of the whole discourse shaped by postwar dance specialists<sup>20</sup>. But what vacuum are these authors talking about, given the virtually total absence of Antonia Mercé from Spanish stages over the last ten years of her career? The identification of dance with the essence of Spain «the most expressive and clear language of the people, a manifestation of its soul, is dance» (García-Asti 14) and the need to find a prestigious international figure at the service of those propaganda purposes achieved by la Mercé during the Republic seems to be behind all these tactics, the best source being the Spanish dancers living in Occupied Paris who arrived in Spain «fleeing from World War II and to collaborate with the new Spanish political powers» (Fernández Higuero, «Control and Dance recitals» 356). In 1942, Tomás Borrás was clear about it: Ana de España would be the next Diaghilev of Spanish dance. However, he regretted the misfortune of previous attempts: «Antonia Mercé, lacking in official or private protection, was forced to resign her chance to occupy the position that the Ballet Russes left empty» («La danza escénica» 3); his faith was now in the dance skills of the fashion designer Ana de Pombo, a true identity (Martínez i Albero 9)<sup>21</sup> of this new «hope» for dance:

The core that will bind dancers, poets, musicians, decorators, and costume and stage designers has already been created; the core that will transform our «loose,» individual spontaneous art into a harmonious and architecturally ordered art. From shuffle to dance and from the personal to the national. Ana de España is our Diaghilev [sic]. Let those who must know. And also, do not let this resurgence of the best expression art, rhythm, and temperament die. (Borrás, «La danza escénica» 3)

Although also failed, the enthusiasm that this proposal seemed to generate, and in which Vicente Escudero and Carmita García also played a part<sup>22</sup>, encouraged the creation of a national Spanish dance company (López Fernández, «Entre el “ser nacional” y el “habitar alado”»). The project planned during the Second Republic years, with Antonia Mercé as a strong candidate, resonates in this desire, expressed institutionally through the Deputy Secretary of Education and Propaganda since 1941 (Fernández Higuero, «Control and Dance Recitals» 376-377). The need to achieve «a spiritual policy parallel to that which is being carried out in the material order» (Sainz de la Maza, «Presentación de los bailados» 12) required of a project that would be at the level of other initiatives such as *Verde Gaio* in Portugal, inspired by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. La Argentina's Ballets Espagnols, born from those same principles, and therefore, committed to the idea a work of art driven by a conception of «Spanishness» sustained in the ideas of the Generation of 1914 (Murga Castro, «Embodying Spanishness» 12-

<sup>20</sup> This can also be extended to the publication that Néstor Luján and Xavier Montsalvatge dedicated to her, published by Nortesur in 1948. The prologue is significant: «This book has a sole protagonist, the special and utterly important figure, unique in the history of Spanish dance, Antonia Mercé» (Luján and Montsalvatge 11).

<sup>21</sup> For further insight into the political and emotional dimension of her dances within that historical context, see López Fernández («El talismán» 211-238).

<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that, apart from being internationally famous, both had been hired to dance for Antonia Mercé's company just before her death.

17)<sup>23</sup> was a model fit to satisfy these desires and be the basis for «future performances of the highest level» (Sainz de la Maza, «Espectáculo de bailes» 28).

Antonia Mercé was —from the moment her company was created— a role model not only for those dancers arriving from Paris, as Laura Santelmo (Puig 160) or Teresina Boronat (Murga Castro, *Escenografía* 174-179) but also for those based in Spain who followed in her steps and not only in terms of company or repertoire (Puig 157)<sup>24</sup>. In the case of one of them, Trini Borrull, Alfonso Puig noted: «she cannot and does not want to hide that she is pleased to imitate Antonia Mercé» (157). This is patent in some of Borrull's promotional images of the time, which portray her dressed and posing virtually exactly as Mercé, as seen for example in *Málaga*; it inevitably reminds us of Antonia Mercé performing the same piece (Figs. 7-8)<sup>25</sup>. Even with the differences inherent to each performer's physicality and *carácter* —or the quality of the photographies—, some similarities also can be observed in certain photographs of Trini Borrull posing with the costume she used to perform the popular piece *Alegrias*, and in those that immortalize La Argentina in *Tango Andaluz*, captured in one of her most iconic poses (Figs. 9-10). In other instances, such as *Córdoba*, set to music by Isaac Albéniz, while no surviving photographs reproduce this mirroring effect, a remarkable likeness can still be observed in the costumes of both dancers, particularly in the use of lace for the ruffles and the mantilla (Figs. 11-12).

<sup>23</sup> See also Murga Castro (*Escenografía* 13, 9-174).

<sup>24</sup> «Carmen Romero, daughter of Irene Ibáñez, Antonia Mercé's loyal friend, has come to Paris, beautiful, young and elegant, with a repertoire copied from the Great Antonia, and she is a hard-working dancer» (Puig 157).

<sup>25</sup> Even in the 1950s, the dancer Rosario —known as Antonio Ruiz Soler's partner during that decade— would once again evoke La Argentina through her costume and gesture in *El Puerto*. See the photograph by Goyanes, reproduced in the program *Rosario*, Théâtre l'Etoile, Paris, n.d., Centre National de la Danse, Paris.



Fig. 7. Postcard of Trini Borrull in Málaga. Photo: Batlles-Compte. Particular Collection



Fig. 8. Antonia Mercé in *Malaga*. Photo: Dora Kallmus. Photography from Álbum 8, Antonia Merce's Archive, Juan March Foundation (Madrid). Ref. A08P035F01.

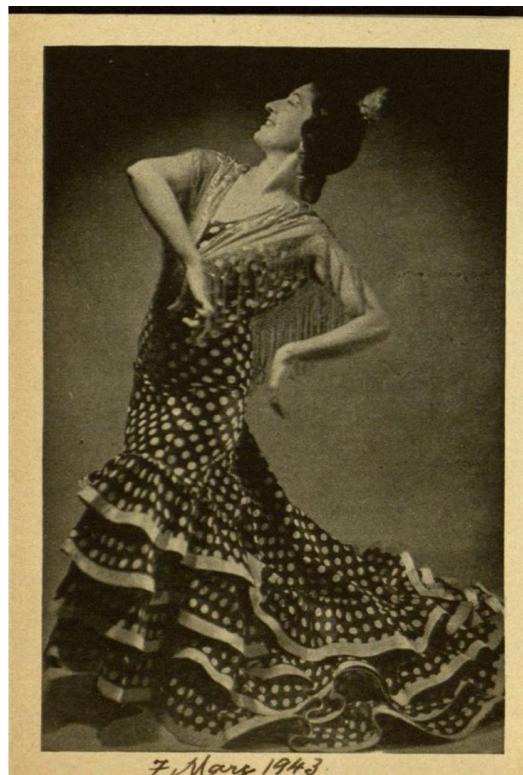


Fig. 9. Trini Borrull dancing *Alegrias*, 1943. Reproduced in a program leaflet from the performance held on March 7, 1943. Centre de Documentació de l'Orfeo Català (Barcelona)-Memòria Digital de Catalunya.



Fig. 10. Poster of Antonia Mercé in profile with her torso turned and her arms curved at her hips, dressed for *Tango andaluz*, 1933. Centre de Documentació i Museu de les Arts Escèniques. Institut del Teatre (Barcelona). Ref. 31966.



Fig. 11. Trini Borrull dressed for *Córdoba* (I. Albéniz), c. 1940-1950. Photo: Batlle-Compte. Reproduced in Trini Borrull, *La danza española* (Barcelona: Suceso de E. Meseguer, 1981).



Fig. 12. Poster of Antonia Mercé dressed for *Córdoba* (I. Albéniz). Photo: Dora Kallmus. Centre de Documentació i Museu de les Arts Escèniques. Institut del Teatre (Barcelona). Ref. 215469.

### 3. BEYOND MIMESIS: TRACE-IMAGES

However, in the case of other dancers this relationship goes beyond mere mimesis. From the beginning, Mariemma emerged as a strong candidate to be Merce's successor. Renowned worldwide as a solo performer, she also directed her own Spanish ballet company from 1955, served as chair of Spanish Dance Studies at the Royal Higher School of Dramatic Art and Dance of Madrid (1969), and was awarded numerous national and international prizes, also including the Dame's Sash of the Order of Isabella the Catholic (1995)<sup>26</sup>. Some of her choreographies still remain in the Ballet Nacional de España's repertoire. Her legacy includes the systematization of Spanish dance, set out in her treatise *Mis caminos a través de la danza* (1997). Born in Spain, this dancer had grown up in France, where her family had moved from Íscar, Valladolid. Mariemma, trained in ballet, had made her music hall debut in Paris as a child, in 1928, in a duet with her older sister, María Martínez<sup>27</sup>. Soon after that she had joined María del Villar's *Ballet Espagnol*<sup>28</sup>. Mariemma was described as «the only artist officially sponsored by Falange in Paris» (Fernández Higuero, «La escena española» 189)<sup>29</sup>, but her debut in Spain in 1940 was supported by the Catholic sector (Fernández Higuero, «Control and Dance Recitals» 373)<sup>30</sup>. After her performance at the Teatro Español, Regino Sainz de la Maza wrote, «Watching the art of the Castilian dancer, the shadow of Antonia Mercé would repeatedly be drawn before us, unabated» («Español: la bailarina» 13). This idea of a shadow drawn on the stage, used by De la Maza the year before to describe Manuela del Río's show (13), can be read in multiple ways (Stoichita 71)<sup>31</sup>. However, the relationship with drawing evokes one of the founding myths of art, an essential one in the History of Western artistic representation. Here we could briefly recount the story in book XXXV of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, about a clay modeler, Butades, and his daughter. As her lover prepares to depart, the daughter traces the outline of his shadow on a wall, attempting to preserve his image. In this gesture —rooted in loss and memory— drawing is born. From absence comes art; from shadow, image.

In 1943 Ernesto Giménez Caballero proposed another allegoric device based on shadows. A syncretic version of the Myth of the Cave explains the origin of cinema: «The moving shadow of Palaeolithic men projected by the newly discovered fire on the rock screen of a primitive

<sup>26</sup> The company's early years were quite irregular, leading to a hiatus at the end of the 1950s that was overcome with the Ballet's renewal in 1962. Among the awards received are: the National Dance Award (1950), Gold Medal of the Circle of Fine Arts of Madrid (1952), Silver Medal for Tourist Merit (1968), «Sagittario d'Oro»—International Art Prize (Roma, 1976), Johann Strauss Medal (Wien, 1977), the Fine Arts Medal of Spain (1981), and the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres Medal (France, 1996). To know more about her biography and career, see: Ruiz Celá Rosa, Álvarez Cañibano and de Castro.

<sup>27</sup> María Martínez danced with la Argentina's Ballets Espagnols in some performances through 1929, see Alberdi (186).

<sup>28</sup> On these early years, see Tortuero Martín (149-164).

<sup>29</sup> Mariemma's career through these years see also: Cavia Naya («La danza Española» 238-254) and Cavia Naya («Tradición popular»).

<sup>30</sup> She was supported by Manuel Herrera Oria, Cardinal Ángel Herrera Oria's brother and one of the most influential figures.

<sup>31</sup> «La danza española ha encontrado en esta artista excepcional su más pura encarnación». See also Sainz de la Maza («Español: la bailarina» 13).

cave was the first precedent of Cinema» (Giménez Caballero 10). For Giménez Caballero cinema was the mystery of moving shadows, which in turn, in the old Western tradition, constituted the soul. A metaphysical meaning for cinema is also found in Tomás Borrás who, in 1947, praised the seventh art for its pantheistic capacity. That is, as a storage unit for «the exemplary dead [...] which allows to keep them with us» (Borrás, «Nueva evocación de los muertos» 3). And it is for this exact reason that he regrets that Mercé never recorded her movements in film: «So many times did I beg her to record her dance in film, it would have been the best school for future dancers!» (Borrás, «Nueva evocación de los muertos» 3). Borrás probably did not know about the few shots filmed for the 1941 movie. In any case, the spectral value of cinema gives new meanings to those cinematographic productions. «Fragmentos de “Epicedio” de la Danza de Antonia Mercé», reads the first frame of the film<sup>32</sup>. An *epicedium* is an old Greek lyric poem mourning the death of a person with the body present.

Both the Butades myth and the Paleolithic cave require a body to cast its shadow. If the shadow belonged to La Argentina, and there was only one body on the stage —Mariemma's— whose body, then, did the stage lights spotted to allow for that choreographic portrait? There was no space to delve more deeply into the idea of shadow as «autonomous power»<sup>33</sup>. Five years later the answer was clearer. Regino Sainz de la Maza again reviews a performance by Mariemma, «The young dancer showed her emotion at wearing the late Antonia Mercé's tassels, frills and shawls. And undoubtedly La Argentina was casting her fine shadow over the turns and stirs that wanted to bring her back to life for the audience» (Sáinz de la Maza, «Mariemma en el María Guerrero» 17). Other voices echoed this idea:

Wearing the same drapes... that had covered the immortal Antonia Mercé's body and soul, (her costume and a relic that La Argentina's brother had recently given her), she has resurrected her memory in Albéniz' «Cuba,» an exact copy of her choreography, her same tropical laziness, her steps, her gestures, though lacking the imponderable irony of the late dancer. (Puig 170)

Mariemma strove to replicate La Argentina's steps, but it was clearly La Argentina's costumes, given to her by José and Carlota Mercé<sup>34</sup> that gave rise to the *phantasmata* (Figs. 13-14). *Phantasmata* was used by Plato to refer to both shadows and reflections<sup>35</sup>, while Aristotle used it to describe the images that give rise to thoughts (*noemata*). In any case, this refers to the art

<sup>32</sup> About the film fragments of Antonia Mercé and the hesitant encounters between the dancer and cinema; see the already cited work by Marinero and Murga Castro (1-25).

<sup>33</sup>This expression is taken from Stoichita and relates to a sinister presence of the shadow that acts as an animation of the inert, as its «double». This, as well as its link to projection systems, is related to some of the questions described above, see Corneille, *L'illusion comique*. The presence of this character in artistic culture is explained by different examples over time in Chapter IV of Stoichita (127-157).

<sup>34</sup> Today, apart from some other objects, the Mariemma Museum in Íscar holds costumes for: *Danzas Charras*; *La Gitana*, by Quinito Valverde; *Sacromonte*, by Joaquín Turina; *Serenata*, by Joaquín Malat, *Danza V*, by Granados; *La Corrida*, by Quinito Valverde; *Los Tientos*, by Manuel Infante; *La Danza de los Ojos Verdes*, by Enrique Granados; *La Leyenda* (also Asturias) by Isaac Albéniz and *Almería*, also by Isaac Albéniz. As stated below and according to Carlota Mercé's statements, she also received the costume for *Cuba*, see Mariemma (15).

<sup>35</sup> They are shadow and reflection in various parts of *The Republic* and art of appearances in *The Sophist*, Stoichita, 1999, 27-29. It is worth noting that the word *phantasmata* was also used by the choreographer Domenico de Piacenza, it was one of the 6 elements of dance. See Agamben (*Ninfas* 13).

of representation, of appearances, which in this context could also be described as a representation through all those activating material traces that also created desire: a desire to reunite with La Argentina. They thus activate the mnemonic link and images<sup>36</sup>: «memory is not possible... without an image (*phantasma*), which is a condition, a *pathos* of sensation or of thought» (Belting 14-15). The rebirth of image brings about the resurrection of the body. The shadow is also incarnation (Stoichita 54-55, 70-71).

Indeed, critics had found in her more than just a memory —«her purest embodiment», (Sainz de la Maza, «En el español» 13)<sup>37</sup>. From that moment on, references to the late dancer became a constant presence in both the press and performance programs, reflecting the «successor's» own interest in emphasizing these characteristics. She saw herself as a follower of Antonia Mercé and the continuer of what she defined as «danza estilizada española», a style blending Spanish dance forms with classical ballet. In 1982, she was once again invited to embody La Argentina's spirit in a UNESCO tribute, performing *Danza de los ojos verdes* (*Dance of the green eyes*), the piece Enrique Granados created specifically for La Argentina in 1916.



Fig. 13 (left). Antonia Mercé in *Almería*, 1932. Photo: Dora Kallmus. Álbum 8, Antonia Mercé «La Argentina» Archive. Juan March Foundation Library (Madrid).

Fig. 14 (right). Mariemma wearing Antonia Mercé's *Almería* costume, n.d. Mariemma Museum, Íscar (Valladolid).

<sup>36</sup> Thus, it is explained from the anthropology of the image. See: Belting (*Antropología de la imagen*).

<sup>37</sup> Agustín de Figueroa had also prepared the audience with an article in the magazine *Vértice*, in which he insisted on attributing to her the same qualities as La Argentina, while also placing her within a lineage of «distinctly Spanish» female performers (41). We can observe the same idea in: Borrás («La danza escénica» 3).

#### 4. ALLEGORICAL TRACES

It could be said that the Mercé family's donation to Mariemma ultimately tipped the scales and, to some extent, resolved the issue of genealogical legitimacy that had been developing during those years, «since it was Antonia's express wish that her costumes be inherited by a dancer who deserved them» (Mariemma 15)<sup>38</sup>. The stage transposition of the image of La Argentina through these costumes not only confirmed that choice but, it should be noted, was reinforced through other symbolic gestures. In 1947, it was precisely Mariemma who choreographed and performed the lead role in a production of *El amor brujo*, accompanied by the first of the spectral presences: the aforementioned mime and director of the Association Amis d'Argentina, Georges Wague<sup>39</sup>. This fact gains significance when considering that the other major Spanish-themed dance production of the 1940s was staged by Serge Lifar at the Paris Opera, with the renowned Spanish dancer Teresina Boronat in the role of Candelas<sup>40</sup>. Boronat, who had likewise been compared to Antonia Mercé and by that time had already established a more consolidated career within the Parisian dance circuit, had even served as the director of a company closely resembling the Ballets Espagnols in 1929<sup>41</sup>.

The totemic nature of this relationship, which have been analyzed elsewhere (López Fernández, «De gira con el franquismo» 171-178), is directly linked to the allegorical dimension of these objects. Once again, Sainz de la Maza gives us a clue on this new status in a review on occasion of the 1944 tribute organized at the Teatro Calderón in memory of Anna Pavlova and Antonia Mercé, «whose memory is almost mythical», said Regino («Danza y poesía» 15)<sup>42</sup>. De la Maza continues to describe the event and talks about the costume «that Antonia Mercé used to wear to dance *Goyescas*» and that by then was held at the Museo del Teatro. The following passage is worth noting:

<sup>38</sup> Although, as previously noted, Mariemma's sister had danced with the Ballets Espagnols, this meeting is said to have been arranged through the mediation of Máximo Díez Quijano. The ties of both the Mercé family — Carlota Mercé had even served as a librarian at the Hogar Español (Fernández Higuero 177)— and Mariemma herself to the Falangist sphere may have played a role in facilitating this connection.

<sup>39</sup> Program from the Théâtre National de l'Opéra-Comique. Réunion des Théâtres Lyriques Nationaux. 27 June 1947, preserved at the Mariemma Museum in Íscar.

<sup>40</sup> F. D. «"l'Amour sorcier" à l'Opéra», *Paris-miror*, 28 January 1943. Dossier «Antigone» de Jean Cocteau d'après Sophocle, «L'amour sorcier» de Gregorio Martínez Sierra, 1943, Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra National de Paris, Bibliothèque National de France, sig. 8-RSUPP-1043.

<sup>41</sup> Teresina Boronat was a highly accomplished and well-known dancer by that time. Her position in relation to all this is complex, since although she remained quite active during Occupied Paris and, as we have seen, performed closely linked to the Paris Opera under Lifar's leadership and his pro-fascist connections, the dancer had also performed at the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 International Exposition, which was erected by the Republican government against which the coup d'état had taken place, in the midst of the Spanish Civil War. From the correspondence of Cipriano Rivas Cherif, we know that she was also considered as a potential member for a company similar to Antonia Mercé's Ballets Espagnols in exile, although she «was extremely reserved, because of our "redness"» (qtd. in Cañibano [754] after Emilio Casares).

<sup>42</sup> Elvira Lucena danced on this occasion. The author also alluded again to the shadow in an emotional sense, «Fighting the glorious shadows of the dancing geniuses is a very dangerous business» (Sainz de la Maza, «Danza y poesía» 15).

There it was, a splendid empty phantom, rigid, as if stripped from its soul... This cloth that Antonia filled with the genial energy of her oh so delicate figure stood there, a stunning inert token of the great dancer... at one point in the celebration the stage was empty while a pale light frantically searched for the figure of Antonia Mercé... For one moment... it was as if she were there before our eyes. («Danza y poesía» 15)

Thus, we witness a new death —the second one— (Didi-Huberman, «El gesto fantasma» 280)<sup>43</sup> of Antonia Mercé, who cannot now reappear without shadows and movement. The phantom, in fact, in ancient Greek «is associated with the sensory appearance as well as with the sense of the specter» (Ludueña 145). The relic nature of the costumes, which we have mentioned before, becomes a *souvenir*; in the words of Benjamin, «The relic comes from the corpse; the souvenir, from experience that has died out» (qtd. in Estévez 35).

##### 5. FROM TRADITION TO MYTH: THE CANONIZATION OF ANTONIA MERCÉ

Another part of Antonia Mercé's legacy found its way to Barcelona. The Institut del Teatre is still responsible for preserving some of her material belongings, including the commemorative plaque sculpted by Ignacio Gallo, previously mentioned. In that same institution, in 1956, a room dedicated to the dancer was inaugurated. Like at the Maison de Retraite in France, held an exhibition of costumes, photographs, documents, ornamental combs, castanets, and her medals. All this was donated again by José Mercé (Fig. 15). Present at the opening ceremony were Máximo Díaz Quijano, fashion designer Marbel, Alfonso Puig, Juan Magriñá, Guillermo Díaz-Plaja, and the dancers Antoñita Barrera, Araceli Torrens, and Aurora Pons —the latter having been awarded the «Antonia Mercé» prize by the Institut del Teatre (Gasch, «“La Argentina”» 44)— who performed a series of pieces from La Argentina's repertoire. Some of the «old» dancers «competing» over her legacy were already, by then, highly prestigious figures in both the national and international Spanish dance scene —as was the case with Mariemma — and had either retired or significantly reduced their stage presence.

Despite the historical distance from the previously described memorials, the ritual dimension of the event remained present in relation to the costume elements. The Catalan dance critic Sebastià Gasch was eloquent in this regard:

Her brother José Mercé has donated two costumes. Two costumes —the one for «Tanguillo,» [Tango] and the one for «Bolero»— which after two decades still keep the shine of her aura, these costumes shall never become rags, they shall forever remain living relics. (Puig 44)

<sup>43</sup> «According to anthropology, the true death of the corpse occurs when it is double, the first as a body and the second as a soul. Anthropologists say that a corpse is really dead when it is dead twice: once as a body (body destined to disappear into the earth as matter), and then as psyche (body destined to reappear again in the images as a ghost)» (Huberman, «El gesto fantasma» 280).



Fig. 15. Tribute to Antonia Mercé, La Argentina, 06-05-1957. Photo: Joaquim Brangulí i Claramunt, 1913-1991.  
Centre de Documentació i Museu de les Arts Escèniques. Institut del Teatre, Barcelona. Ref. 39842.

The idea of a reliquary conveys not only a sense of sacredness but also a thanatological, thaumaturgical, and certainly funerary dimension of the space, very much akin to the one proposed by the aforementioned Debray, who, in 1994, noted: «Museums are the appropriate tombs for civilizations that no longer know how to build tombs» (20). If we consider this sepulchral nature of museums, along with all that has been previously analyzed, the creation of this space may also be understood as the construction of a mausoleum for the dancer. A place in which Antonia Mercé could finally be laid to rest and remembered<sup>44</sup>, thus closing the funeral ritual that began in 1939 with Manuel del Río's recitals held in homage to the «fallen» of the Francoist side (Fernández Higuero, «Control and Dance Recitals» 367-368): a monument would be raised after the liturgy<sup>45</sup>. With the return of her costumes came, in a symbolic way, a return of her body —at least in the sense of having been in contact with and/or belonging to the dancer. As pointed out by Zira Box: «The transformation of the anomic experience of death into a significant event full of reason was presented... as one of the most promising within a legitimization process» (Box, «Rituales Funerarios» 265), and without a doubt, in this space we can read such closure for many reasons.

To understand this further, it is important to revisit another key concept within the Francoist imaginary: the «value of remains», closely related to the «value of ruins». After a war that had left the country devastated by bombs and artillery, the remains of certain monuments were highly valued and re-signified as a *topos* upon which to (re)build the new order —a powerful metaphor for the potential to rise again (Box, *España año cero* 190-196). Their

<sup>44</sup> Relics by contact are, as the name suggests, materials that have touched the sacred body. The importance of the relic, as with the fetish, is its materiality, its singularity and its power of repetition of the original event. In other words, through them, the human being is able to restore the experience, to recover the whole from a part. See Pietz, 1985, 5-17. Mark Franko applies the relic nature to Isadora Duncan's solar plexus. See Franko (33).

<sup>45</sup> This had been the ordered followed at public funerals since the nineteenth century, see Ucelay-Da Cal (265-298).

symbolic potential transformed them into more than just discursive triggers: they became objects of veneration. As with the fallen heroes of the war, these materials were used in commemorations, homages, and funerary rituals. In many cases, they were also treated as relics and monumentalized. Following these ideas —and despite the war having long ended— the objects exhibited in the *Museu de les Arts Escèniques*, in their ceremonial function as relics, were also memories and promises of resurgence, traces of the «days of glory of Spanish dance» (Cifra 108).

The temporal distance from these Argentina's «remnants» should not obscure their political potential. Even if she cannot be read as a «martyr» of the war, their artistic and heritage value remains. Beyond the supernatural properties of these *souvenirs*<sup>46</sup>, their entry into the museum as «remembrances of her brilliant figure» also suggests the idea of restituting a national heritage once expatriated<sup>47</sup>, a key propaganda device for certain cultural and artistic policies carried out during various moments of the dictatorship. This symbolism becomes even clearer when we consider that, just a year earlier, the Paris Opera had organized a temporary exhibition to commemorate the 20th anniversary of La Argentina's death, featuring over twenty of her costumes, a portrait by Zuloaga, and other mementos<sup>48</sup>.

Thus, this operation marked the culmination of a definitive process of appropriation of the memory of Antonia Mercé, and it also meant extricating her memory from Republican Spain<sup>49</sup>. Her family's involvement in this movement seems beyond doubt—as does the absence of the Order of Isabella the Catholic among the medals preserved and displayed.

Both in its fragmentary and multifaceted dimension, and in its evocative and substitutive nature, the remains of Antonia Mercé ultimately return us to the allegory proposed at the beginning of this essay. This concept, here associated with the thought of Walter Benjamin—beyond any possible reading through a national-geographic lens—is understood as «a material in which history is written and an expression that lends itself to reading»<sup>50</sup>. Even if, by the time of the exhibition, the ruins of La Argentina were no longer essential to the rebirth of an art form already revitalized by internationally recognized projects—including those led by other «returned—and alive—bodies» such as Antonio Ruiz Soler and Pilar López (Ferrer Cayón 219-254)—, her musealization nonetheless reveals a will of historic inscription that does connect with the present.

<sup>46</sup> The *souvenir* also shares the logic of the fetish, as several authors have shown. As an introduction to the subject see Hume (50-83) and Estévez González (35-49).

<sup>47</sup> During the 1940s the revival of Spanish art outside Spain was key to anti-republican and anti-French policies, see Castellary, 2018. The chronology of this inauguration is, however, closer to the artistic policies of the 1950s, rather than the Hispanic, see Cabañas Bravo (*La política artística*).

<sup>48</sup> However, it was sponsored by the Spanish embassy, EFE, 1956, 32. In Spain she was honoured with a tribute at the Círculo de Bellas Artes with the participation of Tomás Borrás, Agustín de Figueroa, Máximo Díez Quijano, and José Franco, among others, and a performance by Mariemma («Homenaje a la memoria» 42).

<sup>49</sup> As Adorno proposes, all use value is also an exchange value (Adorno 15-50).

<sup>50</sup> «In the spirit of allegory, it is from the beginning conceived as remain, as fragment» (Benjamin, *El origen* 243).

Once admitted to the museum, these objects conferred upon Antonia Mercé a dual canonization: both mystical and cultural<sup>51</sup>. What we might call a process of «transfiguration of her absence» into tangible presence helped solidify her not only—or not merely—as tradition, but as myth. In this process, the sign no longer merely represents—it embodies a constellation of values, beliefs, and culturally established meanings (Barthes 237-238)<sup>52</sup>. She is thus remembered not only for her imagined «eternal return»<sup>53</sup> to the stage but also as a foundational figure of Spanish dance, for which she came to represent a solid foundation—a symbolic fossil upon which a performative tradition that endures to this day has been built.

## Acknowledgments

This paper forms part of the research projects: I+D+i *Cuerpo danzante: archivos, imaginarios y transculturalidades en la danza entre el Romanticismo y la Modernidad* (PID2021-122286NB-I00), funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/ «FEDER Una manera de hacer Europa»; and *Los ballets argentinos de la primera mitad del siglo XX. Representaciones e imaginarios identitarios nacionales en ámbitos oficiales de la cultura* (PICT-2021-I-INV1-00216), funded by AGENCIA I+D+i, FONCyT; as well as the Juan de la Cierva fellowship funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (MICINN-JDC2022-049-061-I).

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<sup>51</sup> Although the two are connected, we refer to the idea of a common culture shared by certain elites (LaCapra 19).

<sup>52</sup> The myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological investment that defines it.

<sup>53</sup> This mythical figure and very well studied by Mircea Eliade was also the one used in the process of «canonization» of one of the most important fallen heroes of the «Francoist pantheon»; and it is in this way that he is presented by Dionisio Ridruejo, one of the most prominent figures of the Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS at the time, see Ridruejo (300).

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