

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Flamenco (1995) Carlos Saura (1932-2023)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Carlos Saura was arguably the most lauded and well-known director in Spain in the second half of the twentieth century. Born in Huesca, Aragon in 1932, Saura grew up in the stark post civil-war landscape. From an early age, he experimented with photography, painting, and music, and all three artforms informed the themes and visual frames in his films. For this reason, many of his early films (most notably *Golfos* of 1962 and *La Caza* of 1966) depict the poverty and violence of both the city and the country in the mid-twentieth century. Saura's middle period was characterized by satires of the bourgeoisie and a dissection of the Spanish family unit. Saura married three different women and had a long-term relationship with his favorite actress and muse, Geraldine Chaplin. All four relationships yielded children: one daughter, and six sons. In the 1980s and 1990s, Saura became fascinated with various music and dance styles and used his documentary eye to capture the process of performance with music. His later period includes films about tango from Argentina, fados from Portugal, and flamenco and theater from Andalucía (southern Spain). Saura died in 2023, right before he was set to receive the lifetime achievement award at the Goya Awards.

Film *Flamenco* (1995) is a documentary that films an extended performance of twenty-two flamenco songs and dances. Rather than tell a three-act story through dance, as was the case with Saura's dance documentaries *Blood Wedding* (1984) and *Carmen* (1986), *Flamenco* focuses more closely on the style and craft of flamenco and the artists who embody that style. Each number is performed on stage and features a different subset of flamenco song and dance, from soleás to bulerías to a fandango. Although Saura wrote the "script" for the documentary, the visual framing of the performance depends heavily on the director of photography, Vittorio Storaro.

Background In his later period, Saura focused heavily on the mechanics of artistic expression in music and dance. While the director himself grew up in Aragón (north central Spain), his films frequently explore the culture of Andalucía, which is best known for flamenco. As a photographer and admirer of paintings, Saura used his visual composition skills to frame the dance performances in a unique manner. At times, he moves in for a close-up on the musician's or dancer's face, while in other moments, the viewer sees the whole picture presented on stage (as if they were sitting in the audience). Saura also used his trademark panos, or colored panels, behind the singers and dancers, which create vivid color palettes for each dance. Unlike some of his other dance/music documentaries, Saura does not film the rehearsal process. The film garnered international acclaim, and Storaro won an Oscar for his cinematography.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

<i>Elder Singers</i>	grandparents who are featured as singers
<i>Middle-Aged Singers</i>	matriarchal and patriarchal soloists
<i>The Guitarists</i>	male musicians who accompany the singers
<i>The Percussionists</i>	drummers and guiro (gourd with grooves) players
<i>String Instrumentalists</i>	violinist and bassist in the tango
<i>The Chorus</i>	those who sing choruses or clap alternative rhythms
<i>Teenage Dancers</i>	girl in white and boy in purple (featured dancers)
<i>Elder Dancers</i>	grandparents who model traditional steps
<i>Professional Dancers</i>	young female flamenco ballerinas in the corps (also two advanced young men)
<i>Middle-Aged Dancers</i>	flamenco specialists and soloists who are older than the corps dancers

SYNOPSIS

Director Saura and Cinematographer Storaro create their own crafted performance of multiple varieties of flamenco. Rather than follow a dance company around and document their preparations for the performance, the film begins directly in the performance space—a rectangular hall that appears like the nave of a church. After Saura has established the size and shape of the hall, he films the singers and dancers filing onto the stage while a narrator explains the history of flamenco.

Once the first bulería, or noisy improvised group flamenco number, begins, there are no breaks for applause or further narration. Instead, Saura places one song right after the next for nearly 90 minutes straight. Each number (and sometimes sections within one number), are marked visually by a distinct color palette and lighting design. Sometimes Saura manipulates the frontal and overhead lighting instruments so that the singers and dancers appear in silhouette or in partial shadow (such as in a film noir). In other moments, we see the singers and dancers fully illuminated with traditional theatrical lighting. For every number, however, Saura crafts a unique panel design that frames the singers and dancers. Often, the panels are lit from behind with a scrim light, which bathes the panels in saturated colors.

Along with unique lighting designs, Saura and Storaro introduce several different subgenres, or *palos*, of flamenco to the viewer. Each genre of flamenco originated from a different area of Andalucía and often incorporates different influences. In addition, the rhythm and structure of each genre (for example, the number of verses or guitarists) varies. Saura does not give us a guide to distinguishing the different subgenres; rather, he offers a smorgasbord of expression that we enjoy as spectators. The last song is a group rumba that expands into a big community dance party, which further emphasizes the communal nature of many forms of flamenco.

SCENES

Saura Shows Us the Performance Space There is a close-up of stain glass windows, followed by a camera pan around the interior of a building. The camera descends from the windows to a series of rectangular mirrors that lean up against the wall. We hear the trills and arpeggios of a flamenco guitarist as the pan continues. We see the ceiling of the building upside down through the mirrors' reflection, then another pan up to the ceiling with skylight windows. Figures, in silhouette, walk across the audience area. Instead of a traditional auditorium, the performance space is a rectangular hall. There is a cut to the stage, where about twelve wooden chairs are lined up in a semi-circle. The upside wall of the stage is lit up with an orange-pink scrim (a stage light that lies on the floor behind a backdrop). Then, we see another configuration of the chairs with in pairs, with one set of chairs placed further downstage. The shadows from earlier now appear behind the panel as more distinct shadows. The figures represent different ages and genders.



The Narrator Explains the Origins of Flamenco As the performers cross the stage behind the orange scrim, a male narrator begins to define and explain the history of flamenco. He mentions that it is really a mixing and matching of all of the cultural influences and peoples of southern Spain: from Gregorian chants, to Arabic, Persian, and Jewish ballads, to African rhythms, and yes, the gypsy / Roma peoples with which this style of music and dance is most associated. He explains that the “invention” of flamenco occurred in the mid-nineteenth century but it is really an amalgamation of the cultural diversity that is and always has been Andalucía. As the narrator expounds on Andalusian culture, the figures in shadow come out from behind the scrim and cross the stage to take their positions. We see that the group includes many elders and their grandchildren. Other dancers and performers join the group and walk towards the stage with the chairs in semi-circle. A few audience members join them and take their seats as spectators.

Song and Dance #1: The Family Bulería (Improvised and “Noisy” Flamenco)

The musicians and the women take their places in the chairs on stage. The men line up behind them and remain standing. They appear in shadow with the orange-colored scrim behind them. The guitarist starts playing, and one of the elder women steps forward into the light. She sings heartily in a yelling style typical of a



bulería. The others clap along in intersecting rhythms and cheer her on from upstage. A middle-aged man (possibly the singer's son) rises from his chair stage right and makes his way towards the singer, dancing rhythmically. The grandmother turns her body to face the dancer and sings directly at him; he smiles at her and continues tapping his feet lightly and circling his arms and wrists in the typical flamenco fashion. When the grandmother sits down, a male elder standing behind the chairs takes up the singing. The women clap along. Another seated grandmother in a white mantilla rises and dances towards the center stage while the man continues singing. When she sits, another younger male singer takes up the singing. A young girl (possibly a teenager) rises to take her turn at dancing. She uses her face expressively to accent the rhythmic action of her arms and feet. Yet another man takes the last verse of the song while an elder man in a suit gradually moves center stage. This particular dancer specializes in fast footwork. As he turns towards upstage, the other three dancers (the grandmother, the teenager, and the middle-aged man) join him center stage for a brief section in unison. They dance off stage left and leave the rest of the family, which continues to sing and clap in rhythm.

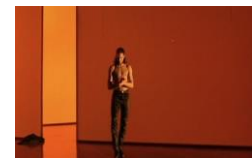
Song and Dance #2: Female Group Ballet (guajira) There is a close-up of a woman's arms and torso in a high-fifth flamenco pose. We then see her full body in a white period dress with a bustle (circa 1890). She carries a white fan and wears her hair in a bun with a white flower adornment. As she moves her arms gracefully, a guitar ballad plays. The stage remains bathed in orange light with the musicians upstage in shadow. This time, there are four seated, male musicians—two guitarists, a singer, and a percussionist who drums on a box. She turns gracefully and uses the fan as accent. While she taps occasionally, the dance focuses largely on her arm shapes and movements. As she turns stage left, we see four other women (in the white period dresses) standing in front of floor-length mirrors placed on the stage left wall. The five women move center stage and dance in formation with their fans. There are also four other female dancers stage right, who wait for their turn. The stage-right women wear mantillas but do not have fans. The stage-right dancers face the others and swing their mantillas as if they were bullfighters waving their capes. The two groups cross each other in formation, then dance in pairs and trios. Eventually, they form a tableau center stage.



Song #3: Male Musicians and Female Chorus (Alegrías) The scrim color reddens to indicate a change in genre. Three men sit downstage in front of a table: a guitarist and two singers (who also provide percussion). Upstage, five women sing in silhouette a la back up singers. Occasionally, the camera closes in on the women's faces from a side angle. The guitarist takes the lead with the singers cheering him on. The two singers clap, tap their hands on the table, and provide raps / patter that accentuate the pauses in the guitarists' playing. There are several close-ups of the men smiling and moving their arms and shoulders to the rhythm of the guitar.



Song and Dance #4: Male Soloist with String Musicians (farruca) There are now three instrumentalists—a guitarist, violinist, and cellist—placed in a cubicle-like hallway. Two diagonal panels create a hexagonal shape with the floor. A male dancer walks downstage slightly but remains in the hexagonal space in front of the instrumentalists. The instrumentalists are placed in front of a yellow rectangle, while the diagonal panels turn into a sunset orange pink. The floor is a vivid magenta. At first, all four figures appear in silhouette in front of the colored panels. The male dancer moves stage left and into lights so that we can see his face and body clearly. We hear the musicians, but they are no longer in frame. The male dancer is bare chested with black pants and healed shoes. His dance style is very athletic and virile, with vigorous tapping, precise pirouettes, and deep lunges. The rhythm quickens and the musicians drop out so that we can hear the dancer's tapping.



Song #5: Hygiene Desire (martinete) Two men sit in front of a yellow panel. The man stage right sings acapella about his desire to wash his lover's face and brush her hair. The singer stretches out his runs and trills, and there is an extreme close-up on his face and wide mouth. After a pause, the man stage left begins to sing, also acapella. The second singer also stretches out his phrases, singing about his willingness to sacrifice everything for his love. Both singers express their passion and sadness, almost as if they were sing-crying.



Dance # 6: Acapella Tapping (martinete) The number begins with a male dancer sitting on a stool with a circular yellow spotlight behind him. Before him on the floor is a pink circle. Both lights keep the dancer in silhouette. There is rhythmic clapping but no instrumentals. The man remains seated and extends and crosses his legs. An overhead spot without color follows the soloist as he rises and taps across the stage. As the lights come up, we see two other male dancers in the hexagonal space—one on each side of soloist, forming a triangle. The panels turn blood-red, then orange. The two “backup” dancers maintain the rhythm but suddenly run downstage and grab the soloist arms. The three dance in this pretzel formation with the soloist’s arms reaching back. Eventually, the soloist is released and three men dance side by side.



Song #7: Group Family Meeting at the Table (fandangos) The singer stands at the head of the table with a guitarist seated on either side. The rest of the table includes about 10 family members who lightly tap the table to establish a foundational rhythm. They cheer on the soloist for one verse, then they all sing together in a boisterous chorus. The panels behind the soloist remain yellow and a burnt sienna.



Song #8: Woman’s Lament (soleá) A female elder, wearing a black dress and mantilla, sings a mother’s lament. To her right sits a guitarist, also in black. They perform downstage but with yellow panels behind them upstage. There are several tight shots of the singer’s face as she describes her sacrifices in taking care of her love, who doesn’t appreciate her.



Song and Dance #9: Black and White Ballad (petenera) A bright, white oval appears on the upstage panel, which is all black. To the side, we see two rectangular panels: one black, one white. A silhouette of a female dancer appears and strikes several poses behind the white panel. The camera cuts back to the white oval, where a male singer and male guitarist start playing and singing. The female dancer emerges and the lights come up so that we can see her face and body. She dances in front of a black panel with white on either side. She wears a long gray dress and dances with an emphasis on her arm and wrist movements. The camera cuts back and forth between close-ups of the singer’s face and full shots of the dancer’s body—sometimes in silhouette behind the white panel, sometimes in full light in front of the black panel.



Song # 10: Singer and Guitarist Technique (siguriya) The white oval in the black panel remains, but a new singer and guitarist sit in front. There are multiple close-ups of both the singer’s anguished face and the guitarist’s hands as he strums with the right hand and plays scales and arpeggios with the left. The song ends with an even more extreme close-up of the singer’s face, who drops his chin, then looks admiringly at the guitarist. The last image is the singer’s head in silhouette.



Song and Dance #11: Female Dancer and Male Triangle Chorus (soleá) Five men, two male guitarists, and one female dancer in a pink fringe dress sit (or stand) in a triangle formation center stage with “normal” lighting. The male soloist singer sits in front stage right, while the dancer sits front stage left, forming two ends of the triangle formation. The guitarists sit front center, while the male chorus stands behind the front row. The panels behind them are layered on a diagonal angle, which creates the illusion of perspective. The colors of the panels are various shades of brown and tan. As the male soloist sings with guitar accompaniment, there are close-ups of the dancer’s profile, and we see that she wears red, decorative earrings and a green mantilla. There are also close-ups of the singer’s face. When the dancer stands up and walks downstage, the lights dim on the male chorus. She moves gracefully towards a bright, white circle on the floor center stage. She stops right before the circle and stomps vigorously. When the singer starts again, she dances around the circle with more focus on the arm movements. When the music cuts out, she taps in a fast sequence, and there is a close-up on her lightning-fast feet. The men behind the soloist clap in rhythm.



Song #12: Generational Shadow Dance (soleá) A male singer and guitarist sit in the front row with clapping women standing behind them. As the camera pans to a more widened shot, we see a young girl and an elder male dancer seated alongside the guitarist stage right. This time, the panel behind them is completely black, and there is overhead lighting that casts shadows on the musicians' faces. The male dancer in front slowly rises and starts to move towards a blank panel. His shadow appears behind him. He wears a white shirt with a striped vest and a black hat. The man proceeds to dance with his shadow. Suddenly, a young boy in a purple suit jumps onto the stage and crosses in front of the elder. The older man walks off stage slowly and rhythmically as the young boy takes his position center stage. Like his elder, the young boy dances with his shadow. He spins frenetically. When he begins to tap vigorously, the lights shift so that the shadow on the panel disappears but the boy appears in silhouette. The female chorus shouts in admiration at the boy's skills. The old man jumps back in, and the two dance side by side. The lights change again from silhouette to frontal lighting with the shadows projected. The two dance off stage right with the old man donning his hat to the young boy.



Song #13: Female Singer in Red (taranta) A female singer in a slinky red dress sits alongside a male guitarist. Overhead lighting casts shadows on their faces. The panel behind them is black. There are close-ups of the female singer's hand with her wedding ring and the guitarist's hands as he plays. The camera moves to a semi-wide shot of both musicians sitting in front of a white panel with a blue scrim background. The frontal lights come up so that we can clearly see the singer's expressions.



Song #14: Blue Triangle Group Number (tangos) Three women and two male guitarists sit in the front row, and three men stand behind them. The formation is similar to that of the group with the female dancer in pink and green in that the two rows form a triangle shape. The group sits in front of three saturated blue panels. Each woman in the front row dances towards her center stage position and sings a verse of the song. The first woman wears a polka dot dress, apron, and vest. She accents her singing with a few arm and wrist circles. The second female singer wears a green pattern dress with matching eye shadow. The third woman wears a salmon-colored dress with a white scarf. Rather than face the audience, this final singer gradually turns around and sings directly at the musicians. The camera, in turn, circles around the performance space and rests behind the musicians. Eventually, the other two women rise and join the lady in pink center-stage. As they dance together in a line, the camera circles back around to the audience perspective. We see the three singers from the side, then from the front. They dance and clap their way back to their seat upstage, where the male chorus keeps up their rhythmic clapping.



Song #15: Percussive Song with Big Group Chorus (villancico) The camera sits at a low angle and pans left to right, looking up at the faces of a big group of singers. Initially, the back panels remain blue, but there are also low frontal lights that bath the singers' faces in red. As the camera pans from face-to-face, the color of the lights warms to a sunny yellow, and we see that is quite a big group of singers—many of whom we recognize from earlier numbers. There are also several members of the chorus who play percussive instruments, including various tambourines and an instrument resembling a butter churner called a güiro. There are also two male guitarists. As the low front lights turn yellow, the women start to sing a boisterous unison chorus. The effect is that of a family or community gathered around a campfire. The singer in the red dress takes the first solo verse seated in the front row of the circle. The chorus comes in, and the camera continues its low-angle turn around the community circle.



Song #16: White-Blue Butterfly (poema por bulerías) A young female singer in a white dress sits alongside a male guitarist center stage. The panels behind them include: a full black panel, a series of diagonal white panels stage right (behind the female singer), and tan diagonal panels behind the male guitarists. As the woman begins to sing, both musicians are bathed in a saturated blue light. She sings about how she is delicate like a butterfly. Later, the panels behind them turn blue, but the frontal lighting is more natural. The guitarist raises the arm of his guitar and plays with his cheek against his instrument.



Dance #17: Female Professionals in the “Studio” (tangos) There are over twenty female dancers in formation, and they fill up the whole stage. The panels upstage remain a neutral white and are set up at a diagonal. Stage right, there are multiple full-length mirrors. The dancers are all young and lithe like professional ballerinas, and they dance in perfect unison (mostly in three rows). A matron stands at the “front” of the studio and calls out steps and corrections as if she were the ballet mistress. A male guitarist sits at her side in front of the studio. The female corps wear black and white leotards (with one woman in red) with extremely long, ruffled skirts that drag on the floor. As they turn in unison, the dancers flip the ruffled trains with their feet, creating a wave effect. Saura and Storaro keep most of the shots wide angle so that we see the full effect of the ballet corps in formation. Occasionally, there are close-ups on individual dancer’s faces, but not nearly as frequent or long as the close-up on the singers’ faces.



Dance #18: Matron in Yellow with Male Musicians At the end of one number, the ballet mistress walks into the “studio” space, and the young professionals form a circle around her. The lights dim, and a yellow overhead spot appears on the matron. Two male singers and male guitarist remain seated at the “front” of the studio and sing. The matron dances in a tight circle within the yellow spot. She then walks back and forth, swishing her skirt to the rhythm of the song. She ends with a pose directly in the center of the spot.

Song #19: Male Instrumentalists in Blue (alegrías) Seven male musicians sit in a circle: there are three featured guitarists, two percussionists, and a flautist on chairs, and a male singer sitting directly on the stage floor. The upstage panels are blue, with one yellow circle placed in-between the shoulders of two guitarists. There are extended close-ups of the lead guitarist’s face and hands. The camera occasionally cuts to other musicians, often from a side angle. The singer moves to a position more downstage and looks as though he is sitting on the edge of the stage. As the camera moves back, we see that the seven men are placed on a wooden platform in a semi-circle. Eight bluish panels surround them—also placed in a semi-circle. The song ends with the frontal lights fading, and we see all seven men in shadow, from distance (as if we were sitting in the balcony of an auditorium).



Song and Dance #20: Male Musicians, Female Dancer in Green, Male Dancer in Black (bulerías) A group of men sit around a short table. A young man in a white shirt sings the first verse while the other men clap and tap on the table. A female dancer in a solid green dress stays seated at the table, but gets up after the first verse. She moves balletically in front of several white panels. As she moves stage right, the panels turn to a saturated yellow. The guitar and voices cut out, and the dancer taps vigorously in the pause between verses. For the second verse, the camera cuts back to the table and we see close-ups of the men’s faces and their knuckles tapping on the table. When Verse 2 ends, a thin male dancer in black rises and takes his position in front of the bright yellow panels. The music cuts out, and he dances a rapid-fire tap sequence. He crescendos with a series of lightning-fast *tacones*, or heel stomps. The music comes back in, and the lady in green joins him for a short duet.



Song #21: Club Party in Yellow (Rumba) The panels turn an even more intense yellow. Five male musicians sit in the front row, with one percussionist and a trio of male clappers standing behind them. The guitarists and the male singer sing an opening line in unison. The lead guitarist sings the first verse with a Bassa nova-like shaker effect. The male singer takes the second verse. The men in back continue clapping. As the chorus is repeated, we notice that the lyrics come from the verses of a famous Andalusian poem: “Verde, que te quiero verde,” or I want you green,” by Federico García Lorca, arguably the most important author of twentieth-century Andalucía (and the playwright who wrote *Blood Wedding*, the subject of another dance documentary of Saura). During the second chorus, multiple audience members and dancers from former numbers enter the audience area and start dancing. By the third chorus, there are about a hundred people dancing club style in front of the musicians. While some perform recognizable flamenco moves, other simply jive to the music.



Dance #22: Acapella Tap Finale When the music cuts out, the dancers of all ages form groups and tap in different rhythms. There is a long mirror place in the center of the dance floor, and several dancers look at themselves as they pose and move. The camera pulls back, and we see that the rectangular hall is packed with dancers to the point that it is difficult to move. There is an aerial shot of the rectangular hall, then a pan up to the stain glass windows and ceilings of the building. The credits roll over the shots of the skylights.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS: The Character of the Dance and Dancer

Since there is no story arc through narration or dance, there are no characters per se. Instead, Saura nods to archetypes of flamenco singers and dancers, and he also shows us various facets of the character of the dance itself.

For the female singers and dancers, there are stereotypical Andalusian adornments and flourishes: the long, ruffled skirt, hair in a bun with a clip, long, dangling earrings, character shoes with a small heel, and the use of mantillas (fringe shawls) and fans as props. Some women also embrace the polka dot pattern on their dresses.

For the male singers and dancers, the garb is also somewhat stereotypical: tight black pants, ballroom-style shoes with noticeable heels, white shirt with vest (or shirtless), and pork pie hat. The men tend to wear their hair long.

With this “costuming,” Saura leans into the national and international perception of what is flamenco, but he combines the stereotypes with the authenticity of the non-professional dancers, families, and the diversity of subgenres of flamenco on display.

THEMES

SOCIETY

National and Regional Identity On one hand, flamenco is a very regional art. It is a song and dance that forms the beating heart of Andalusian culture, as it was born in the nineteenth century from multiple influences that mixed and matched in southern Spain across the centuries—in particular, African, Middle Eastern and Roma gypsy peoples that became residents of Al-Andaluz or Andalucia across the centuries. In addition, each Andalusian town developed its own subgenre of flamenco that reflected its particular culture. In this sense, the diversity of influences reflects the particular history and stories of this particular Spanish province, and that diversity and specialness is the character that Saura and Storaro wish to highlight. However, Saura and Storaro are not Andalusian or of Roma descent: Saura grew up in Aragón, and Storaro is an Italian cinematographer. In addition, Franco used the imagery of flamenco dancers as part of his nationalist propaganda during his dictatorship; specifically, his regime touted the tourist slogan “Spain is Different” and often used stereotypical images of bullfighters and flamenco dancers to sell Spain as an “exotic” travel destination. In this way, Franco appropriated Andalusian culture and made it synonymous with Spanish culture, and this international fascination with flamenco has persisted. Throughout the twentieth century, flamenco became as much a Spanish tradition as an Andalusian one, which is why even the most subversive or satirical Spanish cinema of the twentieth century still features flamenco (Buñuel did it in his last film in 1977—*That Obscure Object of Desire*).

Illustrative Moment: The Narrator Discusses the Multiple Origins of Flamenco

As the performers cross the stage behind the orange panels, a male narrator begins to define and explain the history of flamenco. He mentions that it is really a mixing and matching of all of the cultural influences and peoples of southern Spain: from Gregorian chants, to Arabic, Persian, and Jewish ballads, to African rhythms, and yes, the gypsy / Roma peoples with which this style of music and dance is most associated. He explains that the “invention” of flamenco occurred in the mid-nineteenth century but it is really an amalgamation of the cultural diversity that is and always has been Andalucía. This description underscores how flamenco is simultaneously culturally specific and diverse but also nationally symbolic. If every group in Spain contributed to the artistic stew, flamenco exemplifies Spain as a whole.



RELATIONSHIP

Family Rather than highlight a “professional” company performance of thin, 20-year-old flamenco ballerinas, Saura chooses instead to focus on the family and community dynamic of this regionally specific song and dance style. The first and last numbers of the documentary feature families of multiple generations dancing and singing together. In the first bulería, each generation has their moment in the sun, and then all four representative dancers come together. In the finale, the rumba ensemble keeps expanding until the hall is packed with hundreds of dancers of all ages and abilities. Saura emphasizes the bond among families and communities as expressed in the music itself. The improvised group numbers require that each person listen and watch the others and take their turn when appropriate. Moreover, many numbers include a chorus which stands behind the featured musicians, and they often provide the rhythmic foundation by clapping and shouting out phrases of encouragement. Although some of the numbers in-between only feature two or three performers (or more professional dancers), the theme of family and community remains present in the expressions of the lyrics. Often, the singers in the soleás and other ballads express their tenderness and sadness from caring for others who don’t appreciate them—the mother’s sacrifice, in particular. In addition, Saura explores the grandparent / grandchildren dynamic by having an elder take the first verse, then hand it over to their grandchildren.

Illustrative Moment: Grandpa Dances, then the Young Buck Shows Off

The man proceeds to dance with his shadow. Suddenly, a young boy in a purple suit jumps onto the stage and crosses in front of the elder. The older man walks off stage slowly and rhythmically as the young boy takes his position center stage. Like his elder, the young boy dances with his shadow. He spins frenetically. When he begins to tap vigorously, the lights shift so that the shadow on the panel disappears but the boy appears in silhouette. The female chorus shouts in admiration at the boy’s skills. The old man jumps back in, and the two dance side by side. The lights change again from silhouette to frontal lighting with the shadows projected. The two dance off stage right with the old man donning his hat to the young boy. While we don’t know for sure that the dancers are related, the number is staged in such a way as to respect the model of the elder, then pass on the traditions to the younger generation.



APPEARANCE

Performance More than anything else, this documentary is celebrating the joy and beauty of the performing arts. Rather than focus on the process or stages of performance (warm-ups, rehearsal, reception after the performance), this film captures the essence of performing in the moment. While each number required a prepared staging and lighting design, it is likely that the performers also improvised with each other on the spot. Saura also creates the feeling that these performers live flamenco—it is not their job to perform; rather, it is a cathartic and a communal expression of their history and heritage in the moment. The emotional truth of the performance is captured with frequent and prolonged close-up of the singers’ faces. In addition, we see the relationship between performers when Saura chooses to film close-ups from the side. Often, the performers will watch each other carefully and respond instinctually. Both the singers and dancers take turns at their solos, and while some entrances and exits might have been blocked out, others certainly depended upon the dancer sensing when his time was up—and when to give someone else a turn. Saura and Storaro also emphasize the talent and skills of the performers with close-ups on the guitarists’ hands and the dancers’ feet. We see the agility and speed with which they play and dance. In this sense, Saura and Storaro portray the flamenco as both a tradition and as a display of skill through the performance. Unlike other performance documentaries, where we hear the audience clapping, whistling, groaning, breathing, etc, the action in Flamenco remains squarely focused on each song and the performers’ emotional experience in the moment.

Illustrative Moment: The Intimate Connection in the Butterfly Song

A young female singer in a white dress sits alongside a male guitarist center stage. The panels behind them include: a full black panel, a series of diagonal white panels stage right (behind the female singer), and tan diagonal panels behind the male guitarists. As the woman begins to sing, both musicians are



bathed in a saturated blue light. She sings about how she is delicate like a butterfly. Later, the panels behind them turn blue, but the frontal lighting is more natural. The guitarist raises the arm of his guitar and plays with his cheek against his instrument. In this particular number, both the singer and the guitarist seem partially transfixed in the performance. They connect with their inner selves but also look at and respond instinctually to each other.

Artistic Gaze / Framing of the Dance Throughout the film, Saura and Storaro create pictures for each number. On stage, the technique for lighting dance performances is to highlight the dancer's whole body as well as the formations of the corps—in other words, to make sure that the public can see the whole picture of the dance and appreciate the lines of the arms and legs. Usually, highlighting the pictures on stage requires traditional theatrical lighting with a lot of frontally placed lighting instruments and a soft white color (often achieved by mixing violet and amber). Saura and Storaro, however, frame the dancers' bodies in a myriad number of ways. There is rarely frontal lighting with soft white colors, but instead overhead and low-angle lights with extremely saturated colors (as well as the colors of Saura's trademark panels). In addition, the dancers' whole body is often not visible due to multiple close-ups on certain parts of the body. We do see the dancer's whole body occasionally and especially in silhouette, which does help to emphasize the line and shape of the arms and legs. The mixed framing of the dance leads to the viewer seeing each number and performer from different angles and with different lighting. Along with varied angles and illuminations, Saura also includes one of his favorite visual symbols: mirrors. In four of the numbers, the performers look at themselves in the mirror, which is a necessary part of rehearsal and training for dancers. In addition, the mirrors evoke the notion of self-reflection and contemplation, which further emphasizes how flamenco speaks to Andalusian and Spanish identity.

Illustrative Moment: The Children Dance in Front of the Mirror in the Finale

When the music cuts out, the dancers of all ages form groups and tap in different rhythms. There is a long mirror placed in the center of the dance floor, and several dancers look at themselves as they pose and move. The camera pulls back, and we see that the rectangular hall is packed with dancers to the point that it is difficult to move. There is an aerial shot of the rectangular hall, then a pan up to the stained glass windows and ceilings of the building. The credits roll over the shots of the skylights. This finale sequence shows the dancers looking at themselves and each other (and we look at them looking at themselves). Then, Saura gives us an aerial view of the packed hall, followed by the ceiling with skylights. In this way, the end of the film has us reflecting on reflections with a literal mirror and literal windows.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does Saura create a feeling of community through flamenco?
2. How does the use of shadow and silhouette frame the dancers' body?
3. What is the effect of close-ups on faces and hands?
4. How is the performance space unique? Why does Saura focus on mirrors, windows, and skylights?
5. What is the effect of a warm palette for the first handful of numbers, black and white in the middle, and a cool (mostly blue) palette at the end? Do the colors correspond to the themes or styles of the featured numbers?
6. How is flamenco culturally significant for Spaniards who are not Andalusian, including Saura himself?