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Tradition, modernization and canon in the XXth Century Spain (1919-1950)

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When Marinetti was in London trying to spread Futurism, he meets Wyndham Lewis with a proposal on the table: Lewis will be the Captain of the British Futurists. It's very famous Lewis' answer: "You wops insist too much on the machine. You plows always on about these driving belts, you plows always exploding about internal combustion. We've had machines in for England to donkey's years, they're nothing new to us".

Maybe Lewis was the first to find out that Futurism would be successful just in countries with a low industrial development. Many years later, Richard M. Morse (2005) wrote "Ciudades periféricas como arenas culturales" ("Peripheral cities like cultural arenas"). Morse was writing about Russia, Austria and Latin America as hegemonic centers of avant-garde production. Maybe the reason is because, in this peripheral world, Modernization is lived like a struggle, or in a non comfortable way because not in the center, not in the mainstream of the Modern World.

Spain as a peripheral country was put under tension in the own process of literary modernization. Futurism is only one more of the elements that give form to the first Spanish avant-garde movement: Ultraísmo. Inside the Ultraísmo the only one articulated group was the Creacionist one (cubist, constructivist): Gerardo Diego, Juan Larrea, disciples of Vicente Huidobro.

There is not a Futurist Movement in Spain like, for example, in Portugal, not an articulated group. *Futurist Manifest* was translated into spanish in 1909 by Ramón Gómez de la Serna in *Prometeo* magazine. It's was misunderstood and published by an Anarchist Publisher.

The real impact of the Futurism: a new vision over reality. Icons of modernity as poetics themes: trains, planes, machines... The most important sentence in The Futurist Manifesto: "a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace". Until the 60s with the Pop Movement we don't find a cultural normalization of the objects, habits, etc. of the modern real life.

Pedro Salinas (Madrid, 1891 - Boston, 1951) writes poems in the 20s like "35 Candle-Powers" devoted to a light bulb or the love poem "Underwood Girls", devoted to typewriter keys.

Modernity represents the incorporation (freedom) of women to the labour market, first

as secretaries and telephonists. So the typewriter keys are “blondes and beautiful”. We can see typewriter as the the substitution of the piano (women are no more beautiful flowers playing piano keys at home, but workforce living in a new igualitarian world taping a new dance on the office typewriter keys). This new role was been spreading by the Hollywood (Busby Berkeley) movies ¹.

So we are going to see 3 moments (5 views) in this “percorso” between literature, arts, politics and tradition: 1919, 1936, 1950.

1. Madrid Atocha Railway Station (1919)



Uruguayan Painter Rafael Barradas (1890-1929) was painting vibracionists paintings in Madrid at the time. In “De Pacífico a Atocha (1)” (1919) we can see both oxes and train wagons/smoke in front of Atocha Railway Station. Urban landscape in transformation. Compromise between Modernity and Tradition as a way of progress.

2. Deconstructing Symbolist Landscape (1919)

¹ Frances Williams and chorus sing “Hollywood” as Art Deco Telephone Operators in “Sing A Jazzy Song” (1934) : <http://youtu.be/fWPRudkTvyM>

Huelva. South of Spain. A crossroads of symbols. Two “onubenses” (from Huelva, Andalusia) poets: Symbolist Juan Ramón Jiménez (Moguer, Huelva, 1881 - Puerto Rico, 1956) and Ultraist Rogelio Buendía (Huelva, 1891 - Madrid, 1969).

Jiménez was born in Moguer, near Palos de la Frontera. This is the cradle of Hispanisation of America and one of the focus of the Francoist cultural canon. Jiménez received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1956 and he sang the pure nature of the area. There is the natural park of Doñana, a pure landscape protected by national and international agencies.

In Huelva we also have the Riotinto Industrial Complex. Riotinto (“Red River”, tinted by mineral). Ancient mines exploited by English companies at that time (Recreativo de Huelva is the oldest football team in Spain). Francoism placed there too an industrial center ².

The most important thing is how you look at the reality. Buendía deconstructed the symbolist landscape in “Poemas modernos” ³ (1919): “El humo de los hornos Bessemer”, “Paisaje desde la bomba Cornill”, “El pueblo sin campo”, “La contramina”.

“El humo de los hornos Bessemer” ⁴ talks about Bessemer furnaces and rail mills ⁵, representing the latest in steelmaking technology, began operating in 1875. Its another view of the landscape, not rural but industrial. It was industrial from the 1880s but the poets were not able to see it.

The same in “Paisaje desde la bomba Cornill” (sic) (“Landscape from Cornill Pump”). It is a landscape from the top of a water deposit. Buendía is deconstructing here the symbol of “Ivory Tower”. Ziolkowski (1998) has studied towers as places of resistance to the modern world, e. g. in Yeats poetry and life (Yeats was translated by Jiménez, who was so close to the Irish poet):

Desde lo alto del depósito
del agua de cementación,
adonde se convierte en cobre

² We find a similar situation in Italy, in the surroundings of Duino castle (Rainer M. Rilke. *The Duino Elegies*), where there is the Montefalcone Industrial Complex.

³ *Cervantes*, 1919, pp. 35-40.

⁴ Bessemer Furnaces Smoke: “penacho de plumas” (“plumes of smoke”), “la chimenea es una torre” (chimney is a tower), “grande como la de Babel” (“tall like the one of Babel”), “que se levanta por encima / de la altura de la de Eiffel” (“taller than the Eiffel tower”).

⁵ Bessemer process: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessemer_process

el hierro y hasta el corazón,
desde esta altura en que corre
el agua como un torrente de berilo
y en que se escuchan estos sútoles (sic)
en medio de un solemne sigilo, [...]

In this industrial height we can see “blue rivers” between the grey pyrite, “iron oxide mounts” and, instead of sheeps or Platero the donkey ⁶, “a row of small railway wagons”:

se ven los ríos azules que se pierden
entre la gris pirita,
el monte de óxido de hierro
y la hilera de vagonetas que pita.

3. A Civil War as a Car Crash (1936)

Alfonso Ponce de León (1906-1936) was a Falangist artist. His approach was very close to the German “Neue Sachlichkeit” (“New Objectivity”) school. He was part of the “corte de los poetas” (Court of the Poets) that give birth to Falange Española -a very similar Fascist movement in Spain, but Catholic, non antisemitic and with a strong engage with Tradition. His leader was José Antonio Primo de Rivera #.

⁶ Platero is a little donkey, main character of *Platero y yo* (*Platero and I*), one of Jiménez's most popular works. We can consider the image of donkeys like symbols of innocence utopia in the Catholic tradition from the Jesus' entry into Jerusalem until *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), film by Robert Bresson. The same about sheeps.



This painting is nowadays exposed like “Accident” at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, but was exposed for the first time as “Self-portrait” at Exposición Nacional in Madrid (Spring 1936). Some weeks later exploded Spanish Civil War and Ponce de León was tortured, killed and left lying in a “cuneta” (“on a road ditch”, like many others) in a road near Madrid (Vicálvaro) by leftist “chekistas” (Inglada, 2008).

We can see the artist after a car crash with his Hispano-Suiza, lying injured on a “cuneta” (road ditch). Injured in the forehead (“frente” in Spanish, like “frente de guerra - “war front”). Car accident injuries, war injuries, martyrs injuries.

[Interpretation of the painting] Spanish Civil War as a failure of the political Modernization process. Ponce de León, a real “casticista” surname, found in a “cuneta”, tortured like Jesus Christ. In the painting: a stone (Petrus; redemption of Spain by Catholicism in a war as Crusade), a crown of thorns (bush), a cross with an inscription above, a light from above (headlights) in a classic diagonal composition (lights of the car like in a circus, like in a theater, like in the cinema; a canyon of light), a theatrical scene. An allegory of Christ's Passion.

War as a Crusade. War as Utopia. Modernity is an accident. Spain have to come back to the glorious Past. The car of Modernity is a crash (1929). Falangist utopia results in to build upon the stone of the Spanish tradition. A new Future rooted in the Past.

4. The Anarchist Utopia (1936)

Anarchism uses a Catholic iconography, very familiar images for every single Spanish individual at the Spanish Civil War time.

The film *Aurora de esperanza* (“Hope Sunrise”, 1936)⁷, by Antonio Sau. “Aurora” is the same word used by Falangist. Images, rethoric, anticapitalism ideas, rejection of the modern world, is always the same in Anarchism and Falangism⁸.

In this film maniquees are like saints in a church (shop) and we can see a child maniquee, so a modern representation of Jesus Christ a a child. The “hombre nuevo” (“new man”) is the same in Left and in Christianity. That’s the reason both politics utopias were using a recognizable set of images and symbols provided by Catholic Tradition.

The man in the scene is going into a modern temple of trade. His behaviour is the same like Jesus in the Bible, as we can see in the famous painting by El Greco: *Christ driving the Traders from the Temple* (London, National Gallery, c. 1600).

⁷ This film remember Murnau film in USA: “Sunrise” (“Amanecer”, 1928). A young farmer falls in love with a tempting woman from the city, who persuades him to try and kill his wife, so they can be together. What will happen when the man has a vision of what the city is really like..? Winner of the 1929 ‘Best Picture’ Oscar for ‘Unique and Artistic’ Production, and ‘Best Actress’ for Janet Gaynor

⁸ <http://youtu.be/CMEwbSOgsfA>



Fashion clothes shops in the city as new temples of corruption; shops like churches, and he (the anarchist) says “merchachifles” (a derogatory word for “merchants, traders”).

Anarchists and Falangists have the same approach to Modern World and against Capitalism. Modernity is the place of corruption: cities, fashion, machines... Both political movements are looking for going back to some kind of Utopia, full of adanism (closest to nature in the Anarchist case, and close to the History in the Falangist case ⁹.

Comunism are defending Modernity: “socialism *plus* electrification”. Agustín de Foxá is the most important Falangist poet and wroted so much about Russian tanks v. Spiritual Spain. Poems by Foxá. And *Un mundo sin melodía*; Foxá regrets the modern world as “esa cultura de tedio, una civilización de aburrimiento, sin locura ni símbolo” (“this culture of boredom, a boredom civilization without insanity, without symbol”).

⁹ <http://youtu.be/E6VMM3nyMEs>

5. The End of the Falangist Utopia (1950)

The film *El último caballo* (“The Last Horse”, 1950), by Falangist writer and filmmaker Edgard Neville (Madrid, 1899 - 1967) try to represent the end of the Francoist utopia.



Franco and the Nationalists won the Civil War and Spain went back in time. Modernization is considered Evil and artistic canon is reshaped in autocracy terms. Looking back to the Past is the point. But the consequences of this splendid isolation is obviously an economic default. So, in order to save the State and the totalitarian regime, there is no more than an option: beginning another time of a new controlled modernization.

At the end of the film we can see the main character with his horse stuck in a traffic jam at the Gran Vía, the main Madrid modern urban arteria. The horse is named “Bucéfalo”, like Alexander the Great’s horse. This is very revealing scene in the film¹⁰. We are in a “taberna” called “La cruzada” (“The crusade”) in the old part of Madrid.

¹⁰ <http://youtu.be/XoZ5xp3zwj4>



There are 4 characters: in the center (an office worker in an electric company who is just demobilised from the Army and he has a horse but cannot find a place for the animal) – right one, a fireman in the same situation, demobilised – Civil War finished ten years before) – the woman is a florist - so, a representation of Edgar Maxence's symbolist women, related to country life, natural past way of living, a symbolist up-to-date woman (she is working with flowers, not just making bouquets in a protected garden).

Conversation ¹¹:

FFG: Ahora vamos a brindar por el mundo antiguo.

JLO: ¿Y eso qué es?

FFG: El mundo en que un pobre hombre podía tener un caballo y le podía dar de comer sin grandes dificultades. El mundo en que se podía vivir tranquilamente sin matarse trabajando. El mundo en el que todo era suave y fácil, cuando había SO-LI-DA-RI-DAD entre los hombres. Y cuando todo lo que se movía tenía sangre caliente.

JLO: Viva, vamos a beber por la sangre caliente.

CM: ¿Qué quieres decir con eso de la sangre caliente?

FFG: Quiero decir cuando no había tanto motor y tanta máquina y tanto hierro y tanta gasolina y tanto humo y tanta... porquería. Cuando la gente no tenía tanta prisa y vivía con más sosiego. Cuando sobraban unas horas al día para pasear en un caballo, o en un coche tirado por caballos. Cuando no había ese gesto hosco que hoy se observa en todas partes porque a la gente le falta siempre la peseta sobrante con la cual se compraba la alegría. Cuando todo valía unos céntimos.

¹¹ FFG (man in the center): Now we are going to offer a toast for the old world.

JLO (man left side): And what is that ?

FFG: The world in which a poor man could have a horse and could give him to eat without great difficulties. The world in which it was possible to be lived calmly without killing itself working. The world in which everything was smooth and easy, when there was SO-LI-DA-RI-TY between men. And when everything what it moved had hot blood.

JLO: Viva, we are going to drink by the hot blood.

CM (woman right side): What do you mean with that of the hot blood?

FFG: I mean when there was not so much motor and not so much machine and not so much iron and not so much gasoline and not so much smoke and not so much... nastiness. When people were not in a as much hurry and lived with more calmness. When hours to the day exceeded to take a walk in a horse, or a car thrown by horses. When it did not have that sullen gesture that today is observed everywhere because to people it always needs the leftover peseta with which bought the joy. When everything was worth pennies. Ten, ten pennies.

JLO: Now more gains.

FFG: Yes, today more gains. But today, it must only to live and to eat, and that... that is little.

CM: Sure, and so little.

FFG: In addition, no, it is not only about to eat.

JLG: Naturally. We are going to offer by the drink.

FFG: No, no, I no longer drink more.

CM: They had to prohibit wine.

FFG: It is a poison, a poison. Cm: We are going to drink by the Prohibition? [They toast by the Prohibition]

FFG: And the guilty of all of this is modern life with its haste and their ordinarieces.

DOWN WITH THE TRUCKS! DOWN WITH CARS (AUTOMOBILES)! DOWN WITH THE MODERN LIFE! IT IS NECESSARY TO END THE MODERN LIFE!

JLO: [Going out] Already we are fed up with this time of gasoline and trucks and are going to finish with it. [This is a good definition of Spanish Civil War for many people fighting in the Francoist side]

Diez, diez céntimos.

JLO: Ahora se gana más.

FFG: Sí, hoy se gana más. Pero hoy, se tiene solo para vivir y para comer, y eso... eso es poco.

CM: Toma, y tan poco.

FFG: Además, no, no se trata solo de comer.

JLG: Naturalmente. Vamos a brindar por la bebida.

FFG: No, no, yo ya no bebo más.

CM: Eso, eso. El vino lo debían prohibir.

FFG: Es un veneno, un veneno.

CM: ¿Vamos a beber por la Ley Seca?

[Brindan por la Ley Seca]

FFG: Y de todo esto tiene la culpa la vida moderna con sus prisas y sus ordinarieces. **!ABAJO LOS CAMIONES! !ABAJO LOS AUTOMOVILES! !ABAJO LA VIDA MODERNA! !HAY QUE ACABAR CON LA VIDA MODERNA!**

JLO: [Sale] Ya estamos hartos de esta época de gasolina y de camiones y vamos a acabar con ella.

Finally, they escape from Madrid, go to the countryside and they live happily there.

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