

THE 1850s AND 1860s: TOWARDS A COMPARISON BETWEEN FRANCE AND SPAIN

The 1850s and 1860s have habitually been seen as the crucial turning point in cultural modernity. These are the years in which Manet and Flaubert are said to set culture on a new course. *Modernité* is born in Paris. The means of representation, the signs, symbols, and media themselves become the fundamental subject of art, rather than being deployed primarily in the service of expression or mimesis. As T.J. Clark puts it, Manet places ‘a stress on the material means by which illusions and likeness are made’ (Clark 1985: 10). Frequently, it has therefore been thought that the role of the historian-cum-theorist of cultural modernity is to reflect back upon the way in which this defining change took place, for better or for worse. In so doing, we understand the very grounds of our specifically modern cultural condition, and can meditate upon it and upon its consequences. This mode of thought might be termed a *recognition*: we experience a *prise de conscience* in which we comprehend from our history what it is to be modern. Some of the most influential essays and books of the twentieth century were based upon such an approach, from Greenberg through Clark and Fried, to Bourdieu and Foucault. To give just one example, Foucault in his ‘Fantasia of the Library’ (1967) tells us that Flaubert was ‘singularly modern’, because he ‘produced the first literary work whose exclusive domain is that of books’. Consequently, ‘modern literature is activated’. Similarly, Manet brings ‘the new and substantial relationship of painting to itself’ (Foucault 1977: 90, 92). It is but a step from here to the erasure of the face of man, and the death of the author: the text and the sign now predominate. We must recognise this major shift in our discourse, and consider its implications.

These various attempts at what we might term the recognition of cultural modernity are not, however, unproblematic. In particular, there have been widespread challenges to the centrality of the French model of modernity, not least in the history of art. It has been pointed out that the Francocentric approach creates a perilous circularity. Any text or work of art will be deemed ‘not truly modern’ if it does not agree with the line of thought attributed to the canonical French figures. This has been the fate, for example, of the Catalan artist Fortuny, and of the Italian *Macchiaioli*, dubbed failed moderns because they were not French Impressionists. Considerable achievements and alternative viewpoints are thus casually discarded. Alarm at this state of affairs has led such influential critics as Boime to insist on a plurality of modernities in which the historian is open-minded in her or his approach to the multiple developments of the modern period (Boime 1993: 2-5, 17-18). The disadvantage of such an approach is that it begs the question of the sense in which such diverse movements can all be dubbed *modern*. The Francocentric position at least rests on what is sometimes called a *step-change*: that is to say, a clear break with the way in which culture had previously been conceived, and which allows us to delineate a new, modernist culture. In contrast, the assertion of plural modernities is open to the accusation of being an insufficiently critical form of relativism.

In this paper, I want to attempt to square that circle, with particular regard to the case of mid-nineteenth-century Spain. I am going to examine four figures who are concerned, each in their own way, with a turn to the medium in itself: the painter Eugenio

Lucas, and the writers Antonio Ros de Olano, Rosalía de Castro, and Antonio Flores. What I hope to do is to show that they do present us with a radical step-change in culture, but that they do so in ways that are strikingly at odds with the Parisian avant-garde. More than that, I aim to show how, in consequence, there are very serious problems with the recognition approach to the theorisation of cultural modernity, not least because the focus on canonical figures, such as Manet and Flaubert, leads to the importation into Theory of some quite deep assumptions about the nature of the step change to cultural modernity.

The first figure in Spain who undertakes a really radical turn towards attention to the medium itself is the Republican painter, Eugenio Lucas Velázquez in the 1850s and 1860s. Few figures could be further from the account in Bourdieu (1993) of how modern art emerges by a severing of the relationship between commercial art and the autonomous space of true art. Lucas was so commercial he may even have been involved in lucrative forgery. Indeed such activities are not unconnected from his importance in the development of cultural modernity. Lucas was an artist primarily concerned with playful recreations of other painters. Today he pretends to be Goya, tomorrow Velázquez, then Ribera, perhaps another day a commercial *costumbrista* from Andalusia, or a seventeenth-century Dutch artist, but almost always with a twist, playful alterations to the original. Lucas is forever almost someone else. So much is this so that there have been serious problems of attribution concerning him. Unconcerned with personal self-expression (he is no Romantic Lamp, to borrow Abrams' phrase), or with anything like direct mimesis, Lucas's main concern is with the means by which things are and have been represented. So, he is interested, in Greenberg's terms, in 'the imitation of imitating' (Greenberg 1961: 8). In this respect, we might most obviously compare him to Manet's use of pastiche, to the French artist's recreation and citation of Velázquez, Goya, and others. But just as he is distinct in his mode of production and his attitude to markets, so Lucas is also at odds with Manet over the role of pastiche. In the French painter, the attention to the medium in itself certainly does involve disconnected tissues of citations, but it also involves a markedly distinctive style into which these are subsumed: what has been called (slightly misleadingly) his flattening of the image. Fried has commented of Manet that 'the discrepancy between his citations of a broad range of earlier works and what was all but unanimously viewed as his wilfully eccentric mode of execution [...] further separated his art from what most critics of the time understood by the terms "archaism" or even "pastiche"' (Fried 1996: 164). Manet may avoid an emphasis on emotive self-expression and mimesis, but he still asserts a stylistic identity that is radically at odds with his predecessors. In contrast, Lucas is more of a ventriloquist, one might say: he finds other people's voices unavoidable, and freely adopts them to his own ends. For Lucas, identity can only be constructed out of existing modes of representation: we cannot step beyond them. His is a more deeply historicist vision, for we can never move fundamentally beyond the historical legacy of the ways in which things have been represented. For him, the turn to representation in itself is an acceptance of our radical historicity.

It is important to observe here that Lucas is not merely at odds with Manet, but with one of the deep assumptions embedded in the theory-cum-history of cultural modernity. When critics identify the turn the turn to the medium in itself, they do so in a way that almost always asserts the coming of a radically new way of envisaging representation, even as they affirm the importance of pastiche and re-creations. For

Greenberg, there is *flatness*, for Barthes *texte* or *écriture*, and for Foucault ‘the anonymity of a murmur’ (Foucault 1988: 210). Nothing of this sort is to be found in Lucas.

Something of Lucas’s refusal to adopt a radically new voice, but simultaneous turn to the medium in itself is to be seen too in the Conservative Liberal prose writer Antonio Ros de Olano. Ros is not a *pasticheur*, but he remains deeply wed to some of the established, if challenging features of German Romanticism. The story line of his most famous work, *El doctor Lañuela* (1863), similarly echoes both the habitual epic quest for the Ideal woman (one thinks of *Faust* or *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*) and the mixture of ideal realities and grotesque mundanities that one sees in Hoffmann and Arnim: Josef is despatched by an angry uncle to secure the services of the ambidexterous medical hypnotist Doctor Lañuela in order to cure his relative’s painful corns, but in the process Josef becomes entranced by the spiritualised woman Luz, whilst suffering the fury of his scorned, and more sensual mistress Camila. The latter in turn befriends Luz, briefly becoming her lesbian lover. But whilst continuing to echo the style and narrative of earlier Germans, Ros in his own way pursues a major emphasis on the medium of representation at the expense of self-expression or mimesis. As I have argued elsewhere, the writer is concerned to undermine Romantic accounts of self-expression by suggesting that he appears in his own book only as the penumbra cast by it. The writer thus does not project himself into the work, as a God-like emanation into a sublunary world, nor even is he glimpsed in a shadowy way within his own creation as the originator of its light (the latter was Jean-Paul Richter’s view). In a startling reversal of Plato’s cave, we cannot turn from shadow to an originating, authorial light, but rather can only perceive Ros in the shadows that his own text casts. Indeed, under the most radical interpretation, if the author appears as the text’s shadow, he is the product of the text, not vice-versa. In turn, the author finds himself abandoned by his own book, precisely as the autonomy of the text is affirmed (Ginger 2000: 32-36).

Whilst we have here then something not entirely remote from Flaubert’s ‘personnalité de l’auteur absente’ (Fairlie 1962: 14), we do not find in Ros what has been discerned so carefully by Fairlie and others in Flaubert, or indeed by Hiddleston in Baudelaire (Hiddleston 1999: 115-16, 132-33, 246): a serious attempt at a radical stylistic break with the earlier construction of narrative, even where the latter is parodied.

In both Flaubert and Baudelaire, such a break is closely linked to a diagnosis of a specifically modern condition. As Heath argues, Flaubert seeks to find a literary way of mediating between an aloofness from the folly of modern life, the universal stupidity of the dominant bourgeoisie, the democratising debasement of ideas the mass production of books (*bêtises*), and, on the other hand, the inescapability of such things. This is the celebrated *style indirect libre* which ironises without annihilating the way in which people speak of their lives. And, in turn, that style itself becomes the primary subject of his work, infinitely more valuable than its mimetic subject matter: that is what Flaubert meant about writing about nothing (Heath 1992: 7, 15, 22, 25; Fairlie 1962: 20-21). In a different way, in Baudelaire’s vision of the painter of modern life, the artist finds eternal beauty in his memories of the fugitive, transient phenomena of new urban development and the proliferation of fashions, which are utterly new, ‘moderne’, purely contingent and lacking any essence (Baudelaire 1965)

In contrast, Ros’s view is that it is precisely because of the accelerating transformations of mid-nineteenth-century society that the turn to the medium in itself

cannot be associated with such a radical break with existing style. For Ros, we are submerged in the traumatic confusions of a rapid transition from old to new. We live in a world without the metaphysical consolation of evident divine light (Luz herself is sick and dies), and, by the same token, there is no parallel authorial illumination of what is a very obscure text. But, precisely for this reason, we are caught in the collapse of our efforts to make sense of a changing world, we are plunged into deep disenchantment, and cannot imagine a radical alternative to our existing means of expression.

However, it would be wrong to conclude simplistically that there was a distinctive Spanish cultural modernity, whose characteristic was its refusal to undertake so direct a break with past forms of expression. We can see deeper complications if we turn to two more writers: the Conservative Liberal Antonio Flores and the Progressive Regionalist Rosalía de Castro, and their respective prose masterpieces, *Ayer, Hoy, y Mañana* (1863-64), and *El caballero de las botas azules* (1867). The first of these works is a vast, seven-volume attempt to give literary expression to the transition to the modern world and its future. The second, which is attracting increasing admiration, tells of the mysterious Duque de la Gloria who entrances Madrid society with his blue boots and promises to bring the Book of Books. In both these works, appropriately modern forms of representation are presented both as radically at odds with everything that has preceded them, and as symptomatic of a fundamentally new or transformed society. In that sense, they could be said to fit much better with the canonical model of the emergence of cultural modernity.

In the view of Flores, the mid-nineteenth-century sees such radical change that it has completely lost sight of the past: 'Alumbrado por el faro de la civilización, con viento de libertad por la popa, y con bogadores románticos, hemos perdido de vista el pasado' (Flores 1863-64: III, xv). What is most distinctive about modern life is the destruction of privacy and the placing of all aspects of life on public view. There is a constant transmission and flow of information (not least through the telegraph), and a continual insistence upon public debate. There is a parallel demand for constant transparency and accountability, which, in the future, leads the State to require continual updates on everyone's domestic activity, presented in statistical form. Robotic guards are stationed at doorways to this effect. And there is the power of commerce and capital, which brings people together in large corporate associations rather than in private family concerns, and which means that everything is advertised for sale: society, as Flores puts it, 'vive dentro de un escaparate de cristal' (V, 8).

What really comes to matter in the modern world is representation itself: everything of importance has to be displayed, all that matters is what can be publicly represented, and everything that matters has to be represented in public. Appearance, how we represent ourselves, is all that matters any more: Spanish female features disappear behind blonde wigs and make-up, everyone poses to have their picture taken, and, in consequence, 'nadie se escapa de ser retratado y de ser vendido' (IV, 107-120). We inhabit a world of pure representation.

The form of *Ayer, Hoy, y Mañana* itself echoes the distinctly representational qualities of the modern world. Flores tells us that modern society is peculiarly easy to depict, because everything, as we have seen, is to be observed as if in a shop window. Moreover, modernity supplies us with endless instruments for effective representation: from daguerrotypes to the newspaper (an entire edition of one of which is reproduced in

Hoy). And so it is that Flores proceeds to represent modernity with his book. What we have before us is itself nothing other than a representation, as is supremely evident in the self-evidently fictional *Mañana*, dictated down Flores's arm by the magician Merlin during that peculiarly modern religious experience, a spiritualist encounter.¹

In considering Flores, one thinks of the analysis of the concerns of French *modernité* undertaken by T.J. Clark among others. The modern urban world is one of shop-window displays, of the transformation of all things into representative monetary value by the fluid activity of capital; it is a kingdom in which, through commodification, public corporate forms shape everything that was once private (Clark 1985: 9-10). Flores sits alongside Manet and Baudelaire in his observation of *la vie moderne*. The medium in itself, the 'material means by which illusions and likeness are made' (to repeat that remark by Clark) becomes the focus of attention, precisely because all there is in the capital-dominated modern world is public representation, and it becomes the task of art to investigate how such representations are constituted.

Similar remarks might be made about Castro's *El caballero de las botas azules*. The blue boots of the title are an evident reminiscence of the blue flower, the subject of German Romanticism's epic quest for the Ideal. In turn, the public statue erected to the eponymous Knight at the end is a nod to the numerous such monuments raised in nineteenth-century Europe to create a meaningful focus of secular loyalty. However, the Duke offers no such deep meaning. His blue boots, fascinating as they are, are a fashion item with no significance beyond the fact that people become obsessed by what they might mean. The statue recalls the departure of a man who promised and delivered a supposed Book of Books. But of this opus we know nothing, significantly, beyond the attractiveness of its cover. The eschatological, even Biblical text is important for its external presentation, not its contents (Castro 1995: 343-44). In short, the Duke and his Book of Books are an empty, if playful sign, signifying nothing. As the introduction tells us, instead of embodying a 'sublime' new spirit, the Knight is 'burlón' (106). The Knight of the Blue Boots and his book to end all books are the medium-in-itself about town.

It is not difficult, then, to interpret the *Caballero de las botas azules* as a novel about the signifier in itself, where the Duke is the very image of a society given over to the rise of commodifying fashion, to capital-driven mass book markets with their endless bestsellers, and the correspondingly (supposedly) vacuous desires of modern society such as those of increasingly promiscuous society women. He is a symbol of the supposedly empty, pointless things that people desire, of Flaubertian *bêtise*, he is indeed one such object, and for that very reason he has no meaning. As the Muse of Novelty puts it, 'Los espectadores devanarán los sesos por comprender su argumento, y te juro que no lo conseguirán, así como nadie comprende a ellos' (105-06).

But there is a fundamental difference between Flores and Castro, and their canonical French counterparts. By turning their attention to the means of representation, the Parisian trio do more than to offer us a means by which our world of representations might be understood. They present us with an alternative set of supreme values rooted not least in the aesthetic. The modern world may lack deep meaning, it may be given over to the superficial, the purely representational, even the downright stupid. But, the art in which we explore the relentlessly superficial is its own justification, whether in Manet's deadpan investigation of representations, in Baudelaire's 'comique absolu', or in Flaubert's opinion that, as Heath puts it, 'Art is now the only possible religion' (Clark 47-

49, 250-58; Hanoosh 1992: 310-15; Hiddleston 1999: 132-33; Heath 1992: 22). The medium in itself provides an almost religious combination of comprehension and supreme value. And, in turn, as Bourdieu (1993) observes, the artist or writer takes up a new social position, aloof from mainstream audiences and markets, in pursuit of aesthetic purity.

In neither Flores nor Castro do we find any such positive new plane from which the modern world might be viewed. The *Duque de la Gloria* is a grotesque parody of Romantic transcendence, not an alternative to it. As he tells the Muse, 'tu poder, querida Musa, sólo alcanza a añadir nuevas locuras y vanidades a las vanidades y locuras de los hombres' (Castro 1995: 301). In turn, Flores's exploration of the world as pure representation takes a similarly negative view. The representational world of Liberal Europe and Spain is the very destruction of humanity. The Telegraph with its constant flow of public information, is conjured up as a Hellish vision, summarising the horror of modernity: 'ese gran noticiario moderno, que ni de día ni de noche se cierra la boca [...] la imagen satánica del siglo XIX, indiferente a las penas y a las alegrías de la humanidad' (Flores 1863-64: IV, 143-44). The medium is not just the message; it is the nightmare.

The distinct approach we see in Flores and Castro matters not least because the Parisian avant-garde's distinct approach colours the later theoretical conception of modernity and postmodernity. The insistence on observing matters from a new aesthetic plane translates, even in many of its most avowedly anti-transcendental observers, and in spite of them, into a form of positive eschatology. The coming of the medium in itself initiates a new and distinct era, it erases the face of man, it releases art from its unenlightened concern with things other than art, it creates the unique social status of the modern artist, it heralds the death of the author and the birth of the reader, it opens the door to the kingdom of the text.

Dominant theories of cultural modernity have been significantly shaped by an historical recognition of the achievements of the mid-nineteenth-century Parisian avant-garde as the very grounds of our cultural condition. But if the recognition approach had been applied to Spain and not France, radically distinct answers would have been reached. There might never have been an equation of the turn to the medium in itself and the emergence of a radically new order of discourse. Alternatively, the latter eventuality might have occurred, but it would not have offered an overcoming; it would have lacked a positive eschatological value of any kind. Instead we would dwell on Lucas's continual ventriloquism of existing and established voices, on Ros's traumatic sense that the language and forms of the past are both in ruins and inescapable, or on Flores and Castro's critical distancing of the turn to representation in itself, seen unequivocally as a manifestation of the ills of the modern city. And the possibilities would become more complex and varied still if, for example, we threw Bécquer and Fortuny into the equation.

What the Spanish case study shows us is that the historical recognition upon which many influential theories are founded is deeply flawed. Even a relatively narrowly defined phenomenon, such as the turn to the medium in itself, is radically variegated. We should give up any aspiration to defining the terms of a singular modernity that is the ground of our cultural condition, and open our minds to the wider diversity of intellectual possibilities and historical paths. And we should realise that doing so does not require us to be uncritical or indiscriminating, rather quite the opposite. The genuinely critical mind will not see modernity as a defining ground of our cultural condition (whether for good or

ill). Instead, cultural modernity is a plural series of potential values and debates that are worthy of ongoing discussion and reflection, and which can continually surprise and stimulate us in our present-day thoughts.

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NOTES

ⁱ For a full account of this text, see my forthcoming article, 'Modernity, Representation, and Personality in Antonio Flores' *Ayer, Hoy, y Mañana* (1863-64)', in *Hispanic Research Journal*.