

**A Reading of Latin American Avant-Garde through the  
Decolonial Lense:  
*Alejandro Xul Solar and Joaquín Torres-García, from the  
Ineluctable Modern Eurocentrism to the Search for a  
Communication 'Other'***

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## Synopsis

This dissertation revisits modern art in Latin America. The paradoxes of the Latin American avant-garde discourse, which uses modern ideals in order to create a culturally decolonised identity freed from Eurocentrism, are confronted to the theory defended by the decolonial thinking according to which coloniality is inherent to modernity. Through the examination of the texts and paintings of Alejandro Xul Solar and Joaquín Torres-García, two artists who participated in the renewal of the vanguard scenes of Argentina and Uruguay between the 1920s and the 1940s, my aim is to understand whether modern art is – as decolonial thinkers imply – doomed to reproduce coloniality, or if it can conversely allow to undermine it. The analysis of their works first shows their discourses as entrenched in a narrative of modernity that indeed proves to be a fallacious mirror of coloniality. The focus on abstraction and on the thinking and communicating ‘other’ it produces, nevertheless leads me to question the decolonial premise. I finally conclude that the aesthetic freedom brought by the avant-garde allowed Solar and Torres-García to, in some cases, avoid reproducing coloniality, but does however not make them decolonial artists.

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## Introduction

*Il faut être absolument moderne*  
Arthur Rimbaud, 1873

*Plásticos y arquitectos, dando fin a la actual anarquía, podrían darse las manos en el labor de levantar una nueva América. [...] Y con esto, parece que quiero decir que debemos orientarnos hacia lo moderno*  
Joaquín Torres-García, 1940

*Thus, it is not modernity that will overcome coloniality, because it is precisely modernity that needs and produces coloniality*  
Walter Mignolo, 2005

With the first two assertions, Arthur Rimbaud and Joaquín Torres-García manifest a real faith in modernity. In their words, to be modern is not a desirable aspiration but a necessity. One ‘must’ be modern as if it were the ineluctable condition of humankind, the only possibility for the world to progress and the earth to spin. This assumption echoes a Hegelian comprehension of history, where rupture is seen as a positive drive that allows the contestation and therefore the advancement and improvement of humanity, in both individual and collective terms. Modernity usually connotes positive concepts such as newness, amelioration, progression, growth, development, unfolding or rise. One might therefore be surprised to see Walter Mignolo comparing it to a negative term: coloniality, a concept that many defenders of modernity who sought to overcome colonialism did not take into account. Two conceptions of modernity are confronting: on the one hand there are modern artists, who believed modernity to enable the evolution of society through the renewal of art, which in Latin America meant eliminating what was left of colonisation; on the other hand stands Mignolo and the ‘decolonial thinking’ group, for whom this project is doomed to failure. Are these views irreconcilable? Is one part true and the other wrong? Before beginning to trace an answer, a short insight into each of the opposed conceptions of modernity will be provided.

According to Aníbal González, ‘modernity, both as a nascent concept and as a historical experience, has been present in Spanish American life since the Conquest and is present in the very notion of the Americas as a “New World”’.<sup>1</sup> Yet, he explains that although defined as ‘new’, Latin America was not considered as modern but as the belated recipient of a modernity produced by Europe.<sup>2</sup> With the Independence, questions of identity that were intimately linked to those of modernity arose. This led to the emergence of *modernismo*, a trend that developed between the 1880s and 1920s and reversed the relation of primacy between the two continents, as it was first originated in Latin America to then reach and influence Spain. According to Edward Mozejko, *modernismo* ‘became a means of pursuance for the renewal of literature by freeing it from the one-sided influence of the “mother-country” Spain by a broader opening to other European artistic currents, particularly those of French literature’.<sup>3</sup> The period that will be here considered however corresponds to a second wave of modernity that reached its peak during the 1920s but persisted until the 1940s. It corresponds to the time of the avant-gardes, when Latin American nations were still in the process of being consolidated. In this purpose, national identity had to be reconfigured, notably in a city such as Buenos Aires that was quickly evolving due to modernisation and the arrival of an important wave of immigration.<sup>4</sup> The avant-gardes thus sought to renew the artistic scene of their nations in order to provide them with a distinctive culture, which would reflect their peculiar and independent identity. Yet, tracing the contours of this identity was not an easy task in countries that encompassed various cultures and ethnicities. As identity is always better defined in contrast with a negative referential, opposing the ‘I’ to the ‘other’, Europe was the model against which it was forged. The aim of the Latin American avant-gardes was therefore to create new aesthetics for a renewed identity through which to achieve the complete independence of their nations, not only in political terms but also at a cultural level. In this context, to be modern meant criticising colonisation and fighting the coloniser, action thought of as possibly engaged thanks to artistic modernity.

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<sup>1</sup> Aníbal González, *A Companion to Spanish American Modernismo* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2007), p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Mozejko, ‘Tracing the Modernist Paradigm’, in *Modernism*, ed. by Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007), p.15.

<sup>4</sup> Beatriz Sarlo, ‘Buenos Aires, Una Metrópolis Periférica’, *Guaragua*, 2001, p.15.

In the 1990s, a completely opposed conception of modernity emerged from Latin American academia with the ‘decolonial thinking’. This expression refers to the work of an independent research group, which brings together academics coming from different fields of humanities and social sciences, and from various Latin American countries, in a program designated by Arturo Escobar as ‘modernity/coloniality’.<sup>5</sup> The slash bar that separates the two terms insists on their symmetric relationship, pointing them as the ‘two sides of the same coin’.<sup>6</sup> The main premise behind this theory is that modernity appeared as a hegemonic paradigm at the time of the colonisation of America. The conquest disrupted Europe’s geographic representation of the world, translating it from a Western position – as West of the religious central point that was Jerusalem – to this of centre of the map.<sup>7</sup> Modernity was then an ideal that came to justify colonisation as a necessary passage in the march of history. Who was not modern was considered as primitive, barbaric, undeveloped. Europe’s necessary task was then considered as leading the way to civilisation, firstly thanks to Christianity, and secondly through the Enlightenment and its inherent ideal of rationality, which provided the racism and inequalities of the colonial system with a logical scientific discourse. The narratives of progress and reason served to legitimise and embellish the ‘darker side’ of modernity that is coloniality.<sup>8</sup> Mignolo claims that coloniality did not come to an end with the disappearance of the colonial administration.<sup>9</sup> Decolonisation rather marked the transition from ‘modern colonialism to global coloniality’.<sup>10</sup> The latter indeed is a pattern deeply rooted in the modern, capitalist, society. Decolonial thinking hinges on Immanuel Wallerstein’s concept of the ‘world-system’. Since the end of the fifteenth century and the division of the world between a European centre – that concentrates the means and benefits of production – and peripheries – which constitute a labour force dispossessed of the fruits of its work – this organic, social and global system has been dominated by the capitalist ‘world-economy’. Hence, ‘The creation of this geo-social entity, the

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<sup>5</sup> Arturo Escobar, ‘Mundos y conocimientos de otro modo, el programa de investigación de modernidad/colonialidad Latinoamericano’, *Tabula Rasa*, 2003, p.52.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), p.6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.35.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel, ‘Prólogo. Giro decolonial, teoría crítica y pensamiento heterárquico’, by Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel, *El giro decolonial. Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global* (Bogota: Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2007), p.13.

Americas, was the constitutive act of the modern world-system. The Americas were not incorporated into an already existing capitalist world-economy. There could not have been a capitalist world-economy without the Americas'.<sup>11</sup> This system still being dominant nowadays, society cannot be described as 'postcolonial'. Decolonial thinkers moreover consider coloniality as not only being economic but above all epistemic. The Western world maintains its hegemony on the production of knowledge. It establishes what shall be considered as true and thus feeds the rationalisation of its own dominance. Decoloniality therefore means reminding that alternative modes of thinking exist that are equally valid. The aim of the modernity/coloniality group consists in 'intervenir decisivamente en la discursividad propia de las ciencias modernas para configurar otro espacio para la producción de conocimiento — una forma distinta de pensamiento, "un paradigma otro", la posibilidad misma de hablar sobre "mundos y conocimientos de otro modo".<sup>12</sup> In other words, they tend to open up the production of knowledge to non-Eurocentric rationalities that will be referred to as modes of thinking 'others'.

Latin American modern art presents anti-colonial claims and seeks to create a culture that would escape Eurocentrism, but is, as its name implies, funded on modern ideals. Yet, according to decolonial thinking, modernity is equated to coloniality. The question under discussion therefore is: are the avant-gardes doomed to transmit coloniality? Or can modern art provide the means to contest this system, employing the freedom brought by modernity to undermine its own paradigm?

To understand how the pieces of this puzzle might be assembled, the artistic path of two Latin American artists will be analysed. The first one is Joaquín Torres-García (1874-1949), Uruguayan painter and theorist whose faith in modernity has previously been mentioned. The second is Alejandro Xul Solar (1887-1963), an Argentine artist less famous in Europe but nevertheless major member of Buenos Aires vanguard scene. These painters probably never met and might not have influenced each other, and yet, their artistic trajectories manifest various similarities. Their lives indeed followed the typical itinerary of the Latin American artist of the beginning of the twentieth century: young adults, they both went to Europe where they spent many years developing their art in the emulation of the different artistic circles.

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<sup>11</sup> Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Americanness as a Concept, Or the Americas in the Modern World-System', *ISSA*, 1992, p.549.

<sup>12</sup> Escobar, p.53.



Solar stayed twelve years in Europe, living in England, France, Germany and Italy, while Torres-García spent over forty years between Spain, France, Italy and the United States. They both eventually came back to their homelands with the aim of affirming their style and enlivening the effervescent vanguards of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. There, they were confronted to the identity crisis that inspired these groups and joined the reflection around national identity with their own aesthetic experimentations. Their discourses are therefore imbued with anti-colonial claims. In their case however, the entanglement of the critique of European influence with an identity quest can seem paradoxical since they are themselves descendent of Europeans and thus form part of the *criollo* elite. As Piotr Piotrowski coined, referring to artists of Central and Eastern Europe, Solar and Torres-García can be described as ‘not-quite-other’.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, they are neither quite European, nor completely ‘others’. They are at the same time ‘outside the centre’ and ‘within the same cultural frame of reference’.<sup>14</sup> This interstitial position, as would Homi Bhabha say, complicates the way they deal with the already complex interweaving of modernity and coloniality and yet, it will be shown that they unexpectedly seem to have come to the same conclusions.

As the trajectories of Solar and Torres-García epitomise that of many *criollo* vanguard artists of the beginning of the twentieth century, their works will serve as exemplifications of the paradoxical way Latin American modern art approaches colonialism and Eurocentrism. To this end, confronting concepts brought by decolonial thinking to different aspects of the avant-garde will enable unfolding the question of its potentially intrinsic coloniality. First, their work will be considered from the perspective of the discourse. It will be shown how parts of their written and visual pieces can be considered as manifestos. This will allow studying the coloniality implied by the narrative of modernity. Proceeding to focus on their aesthetic, represented by abstraction, will result in broaching the dialectic between universalism and primitivism, from which the concept of ‘pluriversalism’ arises. Finally, analysing how both Solar and Torres-García blur the boundary between writing and painting

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<sup>13</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, ‘Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Gardes’, in *Europa! Europa?: The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, ed. by Sascha Bru (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 2009), p.52.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.53.

will allow confronting the Eurocentric epistemologic domination to a thinking ‘other’ that is not merely another one but one fundamentally different.

## 1. The Manifesto and the Narrative of modernity/coloniality

### Introduction

If the avant-garde represents the most subversive expression of modernism, the manifesto is conceived as its most extreme materialisation. Benedikt Hjartarson thus explains that:

Since its emergence in the French Revolution, the subversive manifesto has been related to the most radical conceptions of modernity, its rhetoric showing the dynamic character of the idea of “the modern” in an extremely clear light rarely to be found in other genres. The manifesto constitutes a discursive sphere in which the ideological conflicts of modernity are brought to their extreme limits and played out there.<sup>15</sup>

The manifesto would therefore not only be a product of modernity, but an embodiment of it. As a reflection of both aesthetic and political projects of modernity, one might expect to find in Latin American manifestos the epitome of the vanguard’s quest for cultural independence. Torres-García and Xul Solar never wrote any texts that were officially published as manifestos and nevertheless, some of their writings are considered as such. Back in Montevideo in 1934, the Uruguayan painter dedicated himself to the creation of an avant-garde scene in his country. In this context, he gave around a hundred and fifty conferences in which he developed his artistic programme. They will later be published under the title *Universalismo constructivo*.<sup>16</sup> The most

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<sup>15</sup> Benedikt Hjartarson, ‘Myths of Rupture, The Manifesto and the Concept of Avant-Garde’, in Eysteinnsson and Liska (2007), p. 173.

<sup>16</sup> Joaquín Torres-García, *Universalismo constructivo*, (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1984). First publication dated 1944 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Poseidón).

famous of these lectures was given in February 1935. In this vehement text, entitled ‘La Escuela del Sur’, Torres-García does not only expose his art theory, he also expounds his will to create a new national school of art that would be freed from European hegemony.<sup>17</sup> Xul Solar never published any reflective text on his own work. Yet, between 1923 and 1924, he wrote four articles on his friend and compatriot painter Emilio Pettoruti.<sup>18</sup> As will be demonstrated through this chapter, the programmatic tone of these texts makes them equally identifiable as manifestos of his very own avant-gardist program and commitment. Thus, both Solar’s and Torres-García’s programmatic texts combine aesthetic and political statements. As a discourse of modernity, the manifesto is characterized by a specific rhetoric that is the same wherever the location of its utterance might be – but can Latin American avant-gardes fight European influence with its own weapons? If Solar and Torres-García intend to subvert the colonial system that maintains Europe’s cultural dominance over its former colonies, the manifesto is the place where to express their views clearly and fiercely. To verify if this genre indeed enables them to perform their political engagement, it will first be analysed how its enunciation is already shaped by the ideology of modernity through the formulation of a particular chronotope, a notion that will be explained later on. This will allow asking what kind of project, for the individual and for the community, can thus be set down. From there, it will be possible to assess to which extent modernity can criticise itself through the form of the manifesto.

### 1.1. The Chronotope of the Manifesto

In order to justify the place of ‘La Escuela del Sur’ and of the texts on Pettoruti within the genre of the vanguard manifesto as epitomised by Marinetti’s ‘Manifiesto of Futurism’, it will be demonstrated that their major common characteristic must be

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp.193-198.

<sup>18</sup> Alejandro Xul Solar, ‘Pettoruti y obras’ (a), ‘Pettoruti’ (b), ‘Pettoruti y el desconcertante futurismo’ (c), ‘Pettoruti’ (d), in *Xul Solar; Entrevistas, artículos y textos inéditos*, ed. by Patricia Artundo, (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2006), pp.96-111.

recognised in the formulation of a same ‘chronotope’.<sup>19</sup> This concept was defined by Mikhail Bakhtin in his 1937 essay *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the novel*. Borrowed from Einstein’s ‘Theory of Relativity’, the term refers to the ‘intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature’.<sup>20</sup> The chronotope is an essential feature of literature, for it configures the construction of the dramatic action and the evolution of the characters as they experience it. Indeed, ‘All the novel’s abstract elements – philosophical and social generalisations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect – gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood permitting the imaging power of art to do its work’.<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin analyses this concept in a very specific context that is, that of the novel. One might thus ask whether it is pertinent to use this notion in the case of the manifesto, a form that is usually considered as a proclamation, or a report on the artist’s aesthetic project, but not as a fictional narration. To support the present argument, it is important to first recall that avant-gardists’ manifestos were more than theoretical texts; they were artworks in their own right. Moreover, the manifesto will here be considered as a chronotope within the larger narrative of modernity. This concept is therefore particularly interesting for it will allow to read the manifesto as, firstly, condensing the essence of this narrative, and secondly, permitting the formulation of its turning points. It will thus be examined how the ideology of modernity takes shape in the manifesto and how it makes its own contestation conceivable.

One possible explanation of the advent of the ‘Manifesto of Futurism’ as the main reference of the genre might be found in the particular way this movement emphasised the ideals of its epoch, that are, the ideals of modernisation and modernity, by converting their very specific space-time into aesthetic features. Thus, Marinetti declares that ‘the beauty of the world has been enriched by a new form of beauty: the beauty of speed’.<sup>22</sup> His text, because it confronts the arts of yesterday to the new futurist creation, opposes two conceptions of time: the ‘contemplative

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<sup>19</sup> F.T. Marinetti, ‘The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism’, in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp.49–53. First publication dated February 20th 1909, *Le Figaro* (Paris).

<sup>20</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.84.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.250.

<sup>22</sup> Marinetti, p.51.

stillness' of the past on the one hand, and the 'movement and aggression' on the other.<sup>23</sup> In order to provide the movement he fiercely defends with a textual materialisation, Marinetti exposes the eleven points of his program as a list: each point, being very short, sets the text in movement, thus giving to the reader an impression of dynamism. His prose is particularly rhythmic: the anaphoric repetition of the 'we + verb in present tense' form at the beginning of each paragraph beats out the rhythm, while the accumulation of short sentences punctuated by numerous comas accelerates it. The pace is even more hastened by the omnipresence of exclamation marks. This rhythm can equally be seen as a striking feature of 'La Escuela del Sur' and of the different texts about Pettoruti. Although they do not use enumerations, they nevertheless privilege the form of short paragraphs where the rhythm is set by the frequency of comas and exclamation points. The cadence is also visually depicted in both texts. Solar makes use of anaphoric repetitions and gives emphasis to the text by punctuating it with words in capital letters, while Torres-García employs both capitals and italics. Like Marinetti, they both glorify the rapidity and the novelty. Torres-García thus states that 'Las cosas se desplazan y más aprisa de lo que pensamos. No nos dimos cuenta, y ya la plataforma cambió; es que el ritmo de hoy es acelerado. Y nosotros, afortunadamente, vamos a este compás'.<sup>24</sup> Along similar lines, Solar admires the fact that for Pettoruti 'lo que ha sido una vez, ya fue; que es inútil detener la corriente del tiempo'<sup>25</sup> because 'el arte no puede seguir siendo la estereotopía de los tiempos idos, se renueva continuamente'.<sup>26</sup> The momentum that characterises both modernisation and modernity is not only reflected in the ideas they present, but above all, through the aesthetic of the manifesto they use to represent them. Moreover, the specificity of the chronotope is to make the reader feel this space-time. Bakhtin distinguishes historical time, the time of the clock, from concrete time, that is, the duration of time as an individual subjectively experiences it.<sup>27</sup> The experience proposed by the chronotope of the manifesto is a very particular one, for it is both fast, reflecting modernity's ideals, and out-of-time, breaching its continuity.

The manifesto can be compared to what Bakhtin defines as the chronotope of the threshold for both are 'connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.195.

<sup>25</sup> Solar (2006c), p.106.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.107.

<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin, p.208.

crisis, the decision that changes a life'.<sup>28</sup> There, 'time is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time'.<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin explains that the chronotope of the threshold 'can be combined with the motif of encounter'.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it shapes an experience akin to what an individual or a character can feel during a love encounter: time is stopped, but the moment is so full of emotions and promises that it also accelerates, triggering the decisions of the protagonist and therefore also the plot. Similarly, in the chronotope of the manifesto, the emphasis on movement and novelty makes it full, saturates the space, and yet, the lack of narrative development or dramatic action conveys a sense of time that, no matter how dynamic, is essentially static. It thus inserts a rupture in the linearity of time and in the narrative of modernity, allowing it to take a new start and reinvent itself. Mainly written in present tense, the manifesto is indeed characterized by this instantaneousness. Thus, the use of anaphoras in present tense is a recurrent syntactic strategy in Solar's and Marinetti's texts: 'Somos y nos sentimos nuevos [...] Diferenciémonos. Somos mayores de edad';<sup>31</sup> 'We intend', 'We affirm', 'We stand', 'We shall'.<sup>32</sup> Banishing the past, the three authors rather prefer facing the future: 'They will come against us, our successors [...] and all of them, exasperated by our lofty daring, will attempt to kill us';<sup>33</sup> 'empezaremos a decir lo nuevo nuestro';<sup>34</sup> 'adquirirá nuevo carácter', 'Se agrandará', 'Trabajaré'.<sup>35</sup> In these texts, the present and future tenses have the same value. Indeed, they are here equal to the use of the imperative, a mood that the three authors also use in abundance: 'tenemos que ir', '¡cuidado con salirse de la línea!';<sup>36</sup> 'tal arte ha de';<sup>37</sup> 'Seamos felices, nuevas generaciones de creadores';<sup>38</sup> 'poets must',<sup>39</sup> 'Set fire',<sup>40</sup> 'Seize your pickaxes'.<sup>41</sup> Then, what does the imperative mood represent if not a future forced to become present? All these formulas are programmatic presents that announce and perform

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.248.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Solar (2006b), p,99.

<sup>32</sup> Marinetti, p.51.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.53.

<sup>34</sup> Solar (2006b), p,99.

<sup>35</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.196.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.195.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.198.

<sup>38</sup> Solar (2006b), p,101.

<sup>39</sup> Marinetti, p.51.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.52.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.53.

their goal simultaneously. The word ‘manifest’ itself comes originally from an Old French word indicating something ‘evident’ or ‘palpable’, and from Latin ‘manifestus’, meaning ‘plainly apprehensible, clear, apparent, evident’.<sup>42</sup> The property of the manifesto is thus to be unmediated and therefore immediate. This chronotope hence is fundamentally performative. It acts as a threshold that does not only introduce a break from the past, but also, and it is its specificity, already contains its future. For Marinetti, ‘Time and space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, for we have already created velocity which is eternal and omnipresent’.<sup>43</sup> The chronotope of the manifesto is comparable to the point of no return where, at the edge of a waterfall, time seems to dissolve in the eternity of a present that already holds the fall to come.

Thriving on Walter Benjamin’s conception of historical materialism, Laura Winkiel reads the ‘now-time’ of the manifesto as a crisis in the narrative of progress that opens up the contestation of modernity.<sup>44</sup> In the essay ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Benjamin opposes two conceptions of time.<sup>45</sup> He calls the dominant one ‘historicism’, a comprehension of history written from the perspective of the victors in order to rationalise the present order. Following the narrative of progress, this conception ‘contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history’, and hence, does not allow the contestation of the established order.<sup>46</sup> In opposition, he advocates a historical materialist view that ‘cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop’.<sup>47</sup> This ‘jetztzeit’, full and present, is detached from the continuum of history, and consequently, contains the possibility of a revolution. For Winkiel, the now-time is thus characteristic of the manifesto and allow it to ‘generate alternative modernisms and to reconceptualize modernity’.<sup>48</sup> Thinking along these lines, the chronotope of the manifesto would be both the epitome of modernity, reflecting its ideology in its spatiotemporal features, and its contestation, inserting a

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<sup>42</sup> Douglas Harper, ‘Manifest’, *Online Etymology Dictionary* (2001), <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=manifest>> [accessed 22 March 2015].

<sup>43</sup> Marinetti, p.51.

<sup>44</sup> Laura Winkiel, *Modernism, Race, and Manifestos* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.2.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Thesis on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, by Walter Benjamin (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 253–64.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p.163.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p.162.

<sup>48</sup> Winkiel (2008), p.159.

rupture in the continuum of its narrative. According to Bakhtin, ‘The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic’ and indeed, both the character and the reader who go through the chronotopic experience of the manifesto are equally called to embody the ideals of modernity and to become the agents that will perform the now-time.<sup>49</sup>

The aim of the avant-garde is to create a rupture. Yet, the now-time that characterises the chronotope of the manifesto will only allow this breach to happen if it is performed. The discursive form and straightforward tone of the manifesto create the condition for a direct type of communication that tends to facilitate this performativity. In order to transform the reader into an agent, various techniques of seduction are indeed deployed. First, the rhythm of the manifesto implies a constant stimulation of the readers, involving them in every sentence. The abundance of rhetorical questions then establishes a false dialogue: ‘Why would we wish to poison ourselves? Why wish to rot?’;<sup>50</sup> ‘¿tiene que ver nada con nosotros el *foot-ball*?’.<sup>51</sup> The imperative forms and exclamations aim at mobilising the readers’ attention, addressing them directly. The use of superlatives seeks to drive them into the text’s exhilarating flow: ‘gran Escuela de Arte’, ‘nuestro Gran Río’;<sup>52</sup> ‘El arte complejísimo de Pettoruti’, ‘nuestra América colossal’;<sup>53</sup> ‘we strong and youthful *Futurists!*’.<sup>54</sup> The manifesto appeals to all the senses. It indeed is as sonorous – ‘We shall sing the great masses [...] the fervor of factories’<sup>55</sup> – as it is visual – ‘PETTORUTI’,<sup>56</sup> ‘¡Pe-tto-ru-ti!’;<sup>57</sup> ‘la ley que impone la *Regla armónica*’.<sup>58</sup> Manifesto authors intend to create a sense of community among their readers by writing in the first-person plural. The ‘we’ is omnipresent in the three texts and serves to include them into the narrator’s community. Once they are seduced and united, the manifesto offers them a guide, a model to follow in order to perform their agent role.

Avant-gardists inherited a romantic vision of the artist, conceiving themselves as prophets. They glorify this figure, putting the emphasis on its bravery and

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<sup>49</sup> Bakhtin, p.85.

<sup>50</sup> Marinetti, p.52.

<sup>51</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.194. Italics in original.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Solar (2006b), p.101.

<sup>54</sup> Marinetti, p.52. Italics in original.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.51.

<sup>56</sup> Solar (2006b). Throughout.

<sup>57</sup> Solar (2006c), p.104.

<sup>58</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.198.



boldness. Marinetti's futurist is 'alone'<sup>59</sup> and Solar's neocriollo 'será tan fuerte de poder ir contra corriente' even if 'Es difícil para un artista ser revolucionario'.<sup>60</sup> For Torres-García, he must create 'sin temor al pleonasma', that is, he must invent new forms that go beyond the established rules limiting his imagination.<sup>61</sup> Describing his 'ánimo virgen', 'sincero y genuino', Solar emphasises the perfection of this character.<sup>62</sup> He even grants him magical power, comparing his art to 'brujería' or 'magia'.<sup>63</sup> For the three authors, the vanguard artist is above all a visionary. Marinetti's narrator is the leader, the one who pronounces the 'let's go' that triggers the movement towards modernity.<sup>64</sup> Torres-García sees his work as a 'rectificación [...] necesaria'.<sup>65</sup> Solar depicts Pettoruti as 'uno de los padres del futuro arte criollo que ahora nace',<sup>66</sup> 'profeta en su tierra',<sup>67</sup> but 'guiado sólo por su Dios'.<sup>68</sup> He is a hero who acts independently and yet, not selfishly. Prophet of his own God, the artist appears as both creator and creation of the manifesto. He is at once the author, the narrator, the character and the reader to come. The chronotope of the manifesto indeed allows this mythicized figure of the harbinger of modernity to be performed whilst being created. According to Benjamin's theory, the now-time is not 'naturally occurring' but 'takes the intervention of the artist or revolutionary to produce it by "blasting" it free from the ceaseless flow in which it would otherwise be trapped'.<sup>69</sup> The role of the prophet artist therefore is to invoke the 'messianic time' of the instantaneous present in order to allow the readers to become the agents of the revolution.

When describing the topography of Uruguay, Torres-García uses a personification of his country, imagining it '*adelantarse [...] para marchar a la vanguardia*'.<sup>70</sup> With this metaphor, the painter plays with the ambiguity of the term 'avant-garde', referring to both its original military meaning and its designation of the

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<sup>59</sup> Marinetti, p.49.

<sup>60</sup> Solar (2006a), p.97.

<sup>61</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.193.

<sup>62</sup> Solar (2006b), p.100.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Marinetti, p.49.

<sup>65</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.193.

<sup>66</sup> Solar (2006b), p.102.

<sup>67</sup> Solar (2006a), p.98.

<sup>68</sup> Solar (2006b), p.101.

<sup>69</sup> 'Jetztzeit', *Oxford Reference* (2010.01.01) < <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100020224> > [Date Accessed 7 Apr. 2015].

<sup>70</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.194. Italics in original.

most experimental trends of modern art. The manifesto is inherent to the concept of the avant-garde and copies the warlike lexicon of its original connotation. Solar thus speaks of ‘lucha pro belleza’<sup>71</sup> or ‘guerras pro independencia’.<sup>72</sup> To describe the action of the futurist man, Marinetti associates the ‘movement’ of the manifesto’s space-time to the ‘aggression’, the ‘violent assault’, or the ‘destructive gesture’<sup>73</sup> of a ‘burning and overwhelming violence’.<sup>74</sup> The individual who emerges from this narrative can therefore not be a simple man. Solar calls him ‘superhombre’, explicitly referring to Nietzsche’s concept of ‘übermensch’.<sup>75</sup> It is well known that Nietzsche was also of great influence to Marinetti’s elaboration of futurism.<sup>76</sup> For the German philosopher, ‘Man is something that shall be overcome’.<sup>77</sup> The chronotope of the manifesto provides the violent environment necessary for one to be pushed to go forward and surpass himself, breaching his own continuity. The ‘superhombre’ is thus a ‘luchador incansable por su fe’,<sup>78</sup> ‘fuerte y rebelde’,<sup>79</sup> able to be ‘at the steering wheel’ of modernity.<sup>80</sup> It also means that the overman is always someone to come. Marinetti here names him the ‘futurist’,<sup>81</sup> Solar the ‘neocriollo’ or ‘tipo de los futuros’,<sup>82</sup> Torres-García the ‘Uruguayo de hoy’.<sup>83</sup> Moulded by the chronotope of the manifesto, he is always present and future at the same time.

Shaping a violent and inspired man, this space-time might at first seem to glorify an extraordinary individual only, but is it therefore individualistic? In the avant-gardist thought, art and life are two indivisible entities and acting on the first results in acting on the latter. Its aim, more than imagining the future, consists in making it present. The manifesto does therefore not merely tend to glorify a mythical figure, it also aims at inspiring the reader who will perform the text. It is not about the destiny of an individual alone but of individuals capable of changing the world all

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<sup>71</sup> Solar (2006a), p.1998.

<sup>72</sup> Solar (2006b), p.99.

<sup>73</sup> Marinetti, p.51.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p.52.

<sup>75</sup> Solar (2006b), p.99.

<sup>76</sup> Gunther Berghaus, *International Futurism in Arts and Literature* (New York: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 2000), p.23.

<sup>77</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1978), p.12.

<sup>78</sup> Solar (2006b), p.99.

<sup>79</sup> Solar (2006c), p.104.

<sup>80</sup> Marinetti, p.51.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p.52.

<sup>82</sup> Solar (2006b), p.99.

<sup>83</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.195.

together. If the immediacy of the chronotope of the manifesto inserts a rupture in the linear narrative of modernity from which it emerged, inspiring people to create a new one, the question remains: is this new narrative really different from the previous one? It introduces the possibility of a renovation, but is this newness not constitutive of the narrative of modernity? Does it really allow contesting modernity or does it help it to remain always modern, thus perpetuating its narrative?

## 1.2. Inverting the Narrative, Preserving the Framework

Amongst the multiplicity of avant-gardist groups worldwide, Daina Teters distinguishes two general tendencies: the first one would be driven by ‘individually-destructive’ strategies while the second would follow a ‘collectively-constructive’ path.<sup>84</sup> At first sight, one might read Marinetti’s violent prose as a proof of his belonging to the first tendency while the Latin American artists’ emphasis on the construction of a new national art would inscribe them within the latter. Yet, such division soon appears porous and reductive, for the avant-garde destructive instinct always works in favour of the construction of a collective vision. Laura Winkiel thus interprets the structure of the ‘Manifesto of Futurism’ as one that precisely ‘narrates the mythic transformation of the modern subject from a state of individual decadent passivity to one of collectivist modernist action’.<sup>85</sup> Yet, in which terms is this action formulated? The manifesto presents a project of society and aims at creating a new community that Winkiel designates as ‘alternative’.<sup>86</sup> One can however wonder whether this community can really be alternative, that is, intrinsically different, when it is built out of the same materials. It will first be seen that the kind of community thus imagined is dual: supposedly supranational, it is actually entrenched in a nationalist discourse. An examination of this discourse will then show the essentialist and binary system on which this community is based, finally allowing the

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<sup>84</sup> Daina Teters, ‘Peculiarities in the Use of the Concepts Centre and Periphery in Avant-Garde Strategies’, in *Decentring the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), p.81.

<sup>85</sup> Winkiel (2008), p.88.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, p.2.

demonstration of how the manifesto might enable to reverse the narrative of modernity, but not the modality of its enunciation.

Against an essentialist conception of the nation, Benedict Anderson proposes the concept of ‘imagined community’, that is, an artificially constructed community and nevertheless real for it is performed in the mind of its members. He explains part of the advent of nationalism by the growth of the printed form, and more particularly the success of novels and newspapers.<sup>87</sup> The ephemeral feature of the latter would indeed create an effect of ‘mass ceremony’, connecting people around the event of their publication. It is noteworthy that the press, be it under the form of a revue or a magazine, was indeed one of the main means that permitted the creation of an avant-garde community, networking artists across the globe. During his stay in Paris, Torres-García created the constructivist magazine *Cercle et carré* with the French painter Michel Seuphor and relocated it in Montevideo after his return to Uruguay. Solar was also present in the avant-garde scene through his participation in the Buenos Aires magazines *Proa* and *Martin Fierro*, where one of his texts on Pettoruti was published.<sup>88</sup> The straightforward tone of the manifesto made it particularly adapted to this media, which allowed artists to create and propagate a specific lexicon of modernity that goes together with a particular conception of space and time. The avant-garde therefore shared not only a common vocabulary, but also a same worldview, that is, a modernist parlance. As the comparison between Torres-García, Solar and Marinetti’s manifestos proved, avant-gardists might not all write in the same national language, but they were nevertheless using a similar speech. It is thus through this common language, spread by revues and magazines, that an international community could be bond. Yet, Bäckström and Hjartarson assert that one should ‘avoid constructing an idealized vision of the avant-garde as a transnational and implicitly subversive current that contests national and cultural boundaries in every form’.<sup>89</sup> Does this mean that a parallel narrative, going against this supranational movement, would exist? Revues were paradoxically both ways of networking avant-gardist groups worldwide and of reinforcing a sense of national cultural identity. This

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<sup>87</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), p.25.

<sup>88</sup> Solar, ‘Pettoruti’ (2006d), p.107.

<sup>89</sup> Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson, ‘Rethinking the Topography of the International Avant-Garde’, in Bäckström and Hjartarson (2014), p.14.

is particularly true in Latin America, but as the case of Marinetti shows, manifestos in general were marked by this double dynamic.

The avant-garde is always political since it engages with reality, breaking the border between art and life. It seeks to reverse the established order, upheaving the bourgeois society. As it has already been pinpointed, the manifesto is shaped in a warlike lexicon. It stages a struggle and therefore needs two opponents. Partha Mitter considers that for artists coming from a postcolonial context, 'national identity has been a language of resistance to colonial art in their struggle to create a counter-narrative to the dominant canon'.<sup>90</sup> Torres-García and Solar thus use the nationalist argument in order to nourish a discourse that supposedly stands against European hegemony. When Marinetti is fighting against everything that was old and passive, these artists direct their weapons at Europe. The Argentine calls to 'hacer patria' in order to continue 'las guerras de independencias' so that 'Acabe ya la tutela moral de Europa'.<sup>91</sup> He also claims 'Veamos claro lo urgente que es romper las cadenas invisibles (las mas fuertes que son) que en tantos campos nos tienen aún como COLONIA, a la gran AMÉRICA IBÉRICA con 90 Millones de habitantes'.<sup>92</sup> The new art both artists want to create must be 'nuevo y autónomo, ni parte ni reflejo de otra',<sup>93</sup> 'no como quieren en el resto del mundo'.<sup>94</sup> Argentina, Uruguay and by extension, Latin America, are in their words on the side of modernity, of the new, whereas Europe would be old and outdated: 'pasó la época del coloniaje y de la importación'.<sup>95</sup> Many Latin American avant-gardists were sharing this view as they were attesting the decadence of Europe after the devastating First World War, while cities like Buenos Aires were quickly expanding and modernising. Oswald Spengler's first volume of *The Decline of the West*, published in 1918, thus had a special echo in the vanguard circles of Latin America. In this book, the German philosopher explains that civilisations have a cyclic nature that, as the four seasons, starts with spring and must end in winter.<sup>96</sup> Europe would not escape from the rule and, having come through birth, growth, and decadence, would now be about to die. Through this

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<sup>90</sup> Partha Mitter, 'Modern Global Art and Its Discontents', in Bäckström and Hjartarson (2014), p.43.

<sup>91</sup> Solar (2006b), p.99.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p.101.

<sup>94</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.193.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p.195.

<sup>96</sup> Roque Baldovinos, 'La "novela épica". Nacionalismo carismático y vanguardia en América Latina', *Realidad*, 107 (2006), pp.122-123.

theory, vanguards could enrich their nationalism with the myth of their own advent, supposed to logically follow European decline. Solar thus takes back the colonialist opposition between the old and the new world in order to place it in the manifesto dichotomy between obsolescence and novelty. He opposes the ‘viejas naciones del Continente Sur’<sup>97</sup> against the ‘futuro riquísimo de este nuevo mundo’.<sup>98</sup> Torres-García insists on saying that modernity is not synonymous with European: ‘*las cosas de hoy. No digo aquí europeo, sino simplemente aquello que ha traído el tiempo*’, ‘lo europeo, hoy ya igualmente retrospectivo’.<sup>99</sup> The artists therefore assimilate their national art with the true modern one and their fellow countryman with the overmen, whereas Europe is described as out of the chronotope of the manifesto, incapable of adapting to this particular space-time. Albeit allegedly international, cosmopolitan and pro-independence, the avant-garde therefore possesses a nationalist discourse that reproduces the system of colonial relationships.

Torres-García and Solar intend to break free from European hegemony by building their singularity, and use an essentialist conception of the nation in order to justify their battle. If ‘La Escuela del Sur’ is an art manifesto that aims at launching a new artistic school in Montevideo, it is above all an attempt to define an essence of the Uruguayan identity. Torres-García first describes Montevideo and its dwellers in terms of uniqueness, using adjectives such as ‘tan única’, ‘inconfundible’, ‘propio’, ‘particular’,<sup>100</sup> ‘especial’, ‘peculiar’, ‘típica’ or ‘idiosincrasia’.<sup>101</sup> This authenticity is reinforced by the contrast with the ‘pretensiones europeizantes’ of the opposite camp.<sup>102</sup> Solar goes further in this essentialist view of nationalism, seeing in his compatriot ‘la tan rara esencia, de la verdadera originalidad’,<sup>103</sup> or explaining that ‘Desde el fuese él a Europe, donde luego de la novedosa turbación, encontró a la patria nuevamente, dentro de sí’, as if homeland was an intrinsic feature of man.<sup>104</sup> This essentialist conception of the nation implies a relation of superiority. Anderson thus explains, referring to Marco Polo’s travel writings, that ‘in the unselfconscious

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<sup>97</sup> Solar (2006a), p.96.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p.97.

<sup>99</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.195.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p.193.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p.194.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Solar (2006a), p.97.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p.98. Underlined in original.

use of ‘our’ (which becomes ‘their’), and the description of the faith of the Christians as ‘truest’, rather than ‘true’, we can detect the seeds of a territorialization of faiths which foreshadows the language of many nationalists (‘our’ nation is ‘the best’ – in a competitive, *comparative field*).<sup>105</sup> Likewise, the superiority of the community created by Torres-García’s ‘we’ is only sustained and legitimised by territorial reasons. Even then, the painter tends to limit the essence of the Uruguayan identity to the one of Montevideo. For him, Uruguayans cannot get out of their condition, even if they try to follow the European fashion, for this essence is ‘algo más sutil, que todo lo satura y que tiene la misma claridad, la misma luz blanca de la ciudad’.<sup>106</sup> National identity is here embodied by the city dweller and therefore, does not include the whole Uruguayan community. The members of *Martin Fierro* were supporting the same position, considering the cosmopolitanism of Buenos Aires as the epitome of Argentina’s national identity and modernity.<sup>107</sup> Borges however cleverly married the two antagonistic lineages of Argentina – its European and American strands, the city and the Pampa – through the ideologeme of the ‘orillas’, which became the dominant narrative of the avant-garde.<sup>108</sup> He thus advocates a new kind of *criollismo*, that goes beyond the mere idealisation of the countryside defended by *modernismo* writers such as Lugones. Solar similarly calls his national model ‘neocriollo’ and defends ‘una escuela criolla de raíz’.<sup>109</sup> Yet, be this *criollismo* different from the one of the previous generation, it still reduces the Argentinian identity to that of the descendants of colonisers, and thus tends to erase indigenous peoples from this community. This process corresponds to what Grosfoguel describes as:

[E]l universalismo que gran parte de las elites criollas blancas latinoamericanas, imitando el republicanismo imperial francés, han reproducido en los discursos de ‘nación’ disolviendo las particularidades africanas e indígenas en el universal abstracto de la ‘nación’ que privilegia la particularidad de la herencia europea de los blancos criollos sobre los demás.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Anderson, p.17.

<sup>106</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.194.

<sup>107</sup> María Lúcia Bastos Kern, ‘El campo del arte en Buenos Aires: debates y prácticas artísticas’, in *Xul Solar: visiones y revelaciones*, by Patricia Artundo (Buenos Aires, São Paulo: Fundación Eduardo F. Costantini, Pinacoteca, 2005), p.72.

<sup>108</sup> Eleni Kefala, ‘Borges and Nationalism: Urban Myth and Nation-Dreaming in the 1920s’, *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 2011, p.38.

<sup>109</sup> Solar (2006b), p.100.

<sup>110</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, ‘Hacia un pluri-versalismo transmoderno decolonial’, *Tabula Rasa*, 2008, pp.209-210.

Solar's alleged stance against colonisation thus appears contradicted by its own principles. Moreover, both artists define national identity in racial terms. Torres-García distinguishes different 'types' that constitute the Uruguayan essence: 'Pues tenemos al tipo que se apoya en el europeo, al mestizo de indio o de negro y a estos últimos tipos casi puros'.<sup>111</sup> Solar seems to be defending a type of hybridism, but that is still based on the idea of race. On the one hand, his project for the future is based on humanist values that enhance cooperation and fraternisation in order to give rise to a superior humanity:

Al mundo cansado, aportar un sentido nuevo, una vida más múltiple y más alta nuestra misión de raza que se alza. Cada patria no debe ser algo cerrado, xenófobo, mezquino, sino solo como un departamento especializado de la HUMANIDAD, en que espíritus afines cooperen en construir la futura tierra tan lejana, en que cada hombre – ya superhombre – SERÁ COMPLETO.<sup>112</sup>

On the other hand, he keeps defining the neocriollo identity in racial terms:

Los neocriollos recogeremos tanto que queda de las viejas naciones del Continente Sur, no muertas, sino muy vivaces en otros ropajes; aportaremos las experiencias desta edad, y lo que culturas heterogéneas nos enseñaron, y más que todo la pujanza individualista espiritual inquieta de los arios, magna parte de nosotros.

COLORES: Raza blanca, raza roja, raza negra, con el ensueño azul de lo futuro, la aureola dorada intelectual, y lo pardo de las mezclas<sup>113</sup>

According to Patricia Artundo, Solar would have taken the expression 'raza roja' from *Memoria sobre la raza roja en la prehistoria universal*. In this book, Florencio de Basaldúa, a Basque engineer who immigrated to Argentina when he was fifteen, explains that the 'red race' was a peculiar people, with a singular language, who inhabited a big continent between Australia and America before fleeing to the Basque Country, Egypt, India and South and Central America when this continent disappeared.<sup>114</sup> The term 'arios' would refer to what Madam Blavatsky, a Russian theorist of occultism and co-founder of the Theosophical Society, considers as the fifth race. This 'white race' would encompass seven sub-races from which two were still to appear in America.<sup>115</sup> Solar would therefore have established his own myth of

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<sup>111</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.194.

<sup>112</sup> Solar (2006b), p.99. His emphasis.

<sup>113</sup> Solar (2006a), pp.96-97.

<sup>114</sup> Patricia Artundo (2006), p.32, note 22. Referring to Florencio de Basaldúa, *Memoire on The Red Race in Universal Prehistory* (Thacker, Spink & Co.: Calcutta, 1911).

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, note 23. Referring to H. P. Blavatsky, *Glosario teosófico* (Buenos Aires : Glem, 1957). First English edition dated 1892.



the advent of the ‘neocriollo’ man – and language – on questionable theories that put the emphasis on racial differences. One can therefore wonder whether this kind of principles can actually lead to a society exempt of coloniality. The Modernity/Coloniality group indeed puts forward the argument that racial categorisation is constitutive of coloniality. Mignolo explains that “Race” [...] is not a question of skin color or pure blood but of categorizing individuals according to their level of similarity/proximity to an assumed model of ideal humanity’.<sup>116</sup> For Anibal Quijano, the very idea of ‘race’, that led to classify people as ‘indigenous’, ‘black’, ‘mestizo’ or ‘white’, was invented during the colonisation of America.<sup>117</sup> From this moment, geographical origins came to be defined in racial terms, which means that superficial phenotypic differences began to be considered as intrinsic features. This allegedly natural distinctness was then used to justify one’s place in the social hierarchy and would thus sustain the ‘coloniality of power’. With this expression, Quijano designates the system of domination implemented by the capitalist modernity that legitimises the place of Europe at the top of the pyramid. Torres-García and Solar, imagining a community whose independence is justified by the superiority of its race, would therefore reiterate the colonial system of domination they originally criticised.

Thanks to the manifesto form, Winkiel states, modern artists were able to rewrite their ‘history and national myths’, thus showing the artificiality of such a process and opening ‘a space for anticolonial contestations’.<sup>118</sup> Xul Solar and Torres-García demonstrate, in these writings, openly anti-European arguments funded on their vision of a new national community. Does the manifesto therefore really allow them to contest the modern/colonial narrative? It rather seems that its specific rhetoric pushes these artists to reproduce a colonial discourse, although they initially aim at opposite ends. They legitimise their struggle for independence arguing that they are the only true moderns and that this modernity is an essential fact that cannot be questioned. For decolonial thinkers, the unquestionability of one community’s superiority over another is precisely a fundament of coloniality. Presenting the

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<sup>116</sup> Mignolo (2005), p.16.

<sup>117</sup> Anibal Quijano, ‘Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina’, in *La colonialidad del saber, eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales: perspectivas latinoamericanas*, ed. by Edgardo Lander (Caracas: CLACSO, 2000), pp. 202–203.

<sup>118</sup> Winkiel (2008), p.2.

‘neocriollo’ or the ‘uruguayo de hoy’ as the ultimate model of modern humanity, Torres-García and Solar would therefore reproduce a ‘racist’ colonial model.

Winkiel argues that the manifesto form – thanks to its constitutive irony, when it comes to futurism, and of its mimicry, in the case of postcolonial ones – interrupts ‘the narrative of modernity in which those who claim to be modern exclude others by considering them to be outside of history’.<sup>119</sup> The paradoxically simultaneous inscription and distance of the manifesto regarding modernity would therefore allow vanguard artists to create an alternative narrative to coloniality. Avant-garde manifestos certainly possess a part of irony, but would it become mimicry when written in a postcolonial context? According to Homi Bhabha’s concept, in a colonial situation, the colonizer, considering himself a model of progress, modernity and civilization, wants the colonized to imitate him.<sup>120</sup> Yet, the latter will never achieve a perfect resemblance, and the settler paradoxically does not want him to succeed, since he wants to maintain the difference between them. The ambivalence of this mimicry creates an ironic kind of mockery against the colonizer, seen as a technique of resistance against his domination. Thus, the work of Latin American avant-garde artists is filled with references to the language of colonisation that they invert and subvert. The most common method consists in going back over the colonial mapping of the world and its hierarchical division between North and South. Vicente Huidobro epitomises this stance when he ironically writes that ‘Los cuatro puntos cardinales son tres: el sur y el norte’.<sup>121</sup> He also claimed, together with Borges and Hidalgo, that ‘The compass no longer wants to point North’, defying the scientific authority that allowed and sustained colonisation.<sup>122</sup> With ‘La Escuela del Sur’, Torres-García equally falls within this approach. He opens his texts asserting that:

He dicho Escuela del Sur; porque en realidad *nuestro norte es el Sur*. No debe haber norte para nosotros, sino por oposición a nuestro Sur. Por eso ahora ponemos el mapa el revés, y entonces ya tenemos justa idea de nuestra posición [...] Igualmente nuestra brújula: se inclina irremisiblemente siempre hacia el

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p.83.

<sup>120</sup> Homi Bhabha, ‘Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’, *October, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 28 (1984), pp.125-133.

<sup>121</sup> Vicente Huidobro, *Altazor O El Viaje En Paracaídas, Poema En VII Cantos* (1919) <<http://www.philosophia.cl/biblioteca/Huidobro/altazor.pdf>> [accessed 27 March 2015].

<sup>122</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, Alberto Hidalgo and Vicente Huidobro, *Indice de la nueva poesia Americana* (Buenos Aires: Sociedad de publicaciones El Inca, 1926), p.52. Cited by Fernando J. Rosenberg, *The Avant-Garde and Geopolitics in Latin America* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), p.26.

Sur, hacia nuestro polo. Los buques, cuando se van de aquí, *bajan, no suben*, como antes, para irse hacia el norte. Porque el norte ahora está *abajo*. Y levante, poniéndonos frente a nuestro Sur, está a nuestra izquierda.

The painter does not only describe this process, he already performs it in the body of the text. He indeed represents the contours of South America ‘upside-down’, with the equator in the south and the South Pole on the top (fig.1). It is however noteworthy that he excludes Mesoamerica from his representation but gives a central place to Uruguay, the only country that is delimited and indicated. A ship is represented on the left side but, although the map is inverted, it is still going from Europe to Uruguay – privileged enunciation point and apparent recipient of modernity. On the opposite, with *Drago*, Solar overturns the colonisation trajectory (fig.2). This painting can be considered as a manifesto for it illustrates most of the arguments developed in the texts on Pettoruti. A human figure that can be associated with the neocriollo, armed with a lance, is riding a dragon carrying the flags of all Latin American countries. They are crossing the ocean, directing their weapons towards the West, that is, to Europe as represented by the flags of Italy, France, Great Britain and Germany. Yet, when inverting the map or retaking the path of colonisation the other way round, Solar and Torres-García reverse the relationship between Europe and Latin America but keep using European references. If they introduce a critical distance regarding former colonial powers and their framework of thought, it is difficult to interpret it as the mimicry visible, for example, in Andrade’s ‘Manifiesto Antropofago’, for they reverse the narrative but maintain it flowing from one point to another. As Mignolo pinpointed when describing Torres-García upside-down map of Latin America, ‘it changes the content, not the terms of the conversation’.<sup>123</sup>

Turning their homelands into centres, the artists thus valorise what used to be depreciated but maintain the division between centre and periphery in which one favoured point can look at another and judge it. Marinetti declares that ‘It is from Italy that we are flinging this to the world’, the same way in which the ‘Manifiesto de Martín Fierro’ announces ‘Martín Fierro acepta las consecuencias y las responsabilidades de localizarse, porque sabe que de ello depende su salud’.<sup>124</sup> Solar and Torres-García equally fall within this approach by making the man of the futures

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<sup>123</sup> Mignolo (2005), p.149.

<sup>124</sup> ‘Manifiesto de Martín Fierro’, *Martín Fierro*, n°4 (1924) <<http://www.revistacontratiempo.com.ar/propuestas.htm>> [accessed 6 April 2015].

arise from their original land.<sup>125</sup> Insisting on locality, they deploy a narrative of directionality that represents the spatial inscription of a linear vision of history. In the chronotope of the manifesto, the ‘now’ is tantamount to a ‘here’ and as Torres-García explains, ‘nuestra posición nos marca un destino’.<sup>126</sup> When Latin American avant-gardists define themselves as moderns, they imply that Europe is outdated. On the one hand, they reverse the idea of belatedness according to which Europe would not only be the centre in terms of space, but also in terms of time, pioneer of a modernity that non-Western nations would just have copied later.<sup>127</sup> On the other hand, they preserve the relationship of inequality implied by the narrative of modernity, saying that one has to come late. Moreover, the manifesto form might undermine the narrative of progress by inserting the rupture of the now-time, but the discourse it produces is imbued with the myth of destiny. Solar talks about ‘construir la futura tierra’<sup>128</sup> as if it were the land of promise, and sees ‘neocriollo’ art as a ‘necesidad tan lógica’.<sup>129</sup> The first quote alludes to a Christian imaginary while the second refers to the rationality of the Enlightenment. The Modernity/Coloniality group precisely recognises these two frameworks as the two phases of modernity that consecutively served to justify and legitimise colonisation and its inherent inequality, showing it as a necessary step in the march of history.<sup>130</sup> Torres-García pushes Europe out of the space-time of modernity saying that ‘si no aprendió la lección de Europa a su debido tiempo, tanto peor para él, porque ya pasó el momento’, and justifies Uruguay’s right to enter this chronotope because ‘somos *ya adultos*’.<sup>131</sup> He thus implies that Europe has been legitimate as centre before, but that the linearity of history now wants Latin America to replace it. Considering postcolonial nations as having sufficiently grown up to go beyond Europe however means that they were too childish in the past. Using this narrative of progress, be it cyclic as in Spengler’s theory, the painters suggest that their homelands must enter modernity because it is now their turn, but consequently,

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<sup>125</sup> Marinetti, p.52.

<sup>126</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.195.

<sup>127</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Taylor & Francis, Inc., 1994), pp.236-256.

<sup>128</sup> Solar (2006b), p.99.

<sup>129</sup> Solar (2006d), p.108.

<sup>130</sup> Grupo de Estudios para la Liberación, ‘Breve introducción al pensamiento descolonial’, *Revista Reseñas Y Debates*, Vol.VII, n°52 (2010), pp.29–40.

<sup>131</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.195.

do not contest their previous place in the ‘waiting room of history’.<sup>132</sup> In their manifestos, written or visual, Xul Solar and Torres-García therefore invert the ratio of power but maintain a two-tier view of the world.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was not to decide whether Torres-García and Solar advocate racism or colonialism, but involved questioning whether the avant-garde discourse had given them the tools to emancipate from these categories. Reading a manifesto is looking at modernity with magnifying glasses and it demonstrated that the type of utterance thus shaped was indivisible from a colonial ideology. The aesthetic and political programmes produced by the two artists appear to be intrinsically paradoxical. On the one hand, the chronotope of the manifesto offers them the possibility to fracture the continuity of the narrative of modernity. This allows them to envisage the rise of another community, emancipated from European cultural hegemony. The performativity of this form moreover inspires the readers, insisting on their capacity of agency to contest the established order. On the other hand, the manifesto epitomises the discourse of modernity, with its particular space-time and binary system. The chronotope is a reflection of its epoch. Therefore, Torres-García and Solar, when choosing to elaborate their project through it, cannot escape reproducing the ideology of modern time. The ‘world-system’ of modernity might have been able to persist from the colonisation of America to the present day because it includes – and therefore annihilates – the possibility of a revolution. The now-time of the manifesto can thus insert a breach in the continuum of history that enables the emergence of a new conception of community, but this newness only participates in feeding the narrative of modernity, allowing it to remain ceaselessly modern. Therefore, the avant-garde manifesto appears unable to conceptualise an ‘alternative’ model of society, that would not refer to another community but to a community

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<sup>132</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Introduction’, in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, ed. by Dipesh Chakrabarty (United States: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 3–23.

‘other’, that is, determined by a decolonised thought, which would respond to other epistemic rules that those of European modern rationality.

One aspect of Benjamin’s concept of the now-time has not been taken into account for it is absent of the manifesto. When he explains that ‘to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history’, the philosopher insists on the value of the past, made present, as a necessary tool which breaks with historicism in order to achieve the revolution.<sup>133</sup> In the manifesto, the past emerges as an anti-element, with which modernity must break, but it is not actually made present. It is noteworthy that Benjamin uses a watercolour by Paul Klee, a painter who is often compared to Solar, as an allegory of the ‘angel of history’, whose face is turned towards the past but who is launched to the future by the storm of progress.<sup>134</sup> This angel brings back the memory of time and opposes it to a modernity that only leaves ruins at its feet. One might therefore wonder whether Solar’s and Torres-García’s potential criticism of the modernity/coloniality system, rather than in the futurist look of the manifesto, would not be found in the works where, as the angel of history, they turn themselves towards the past.

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<sup>133</sup> Benjamin, p.261.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, pp.257-258.

## 2. Primitivism/Universalism, the Dialectic of Abstract Art

### Introduction

The main driving force of the avant-garde consists in seeking the originality. However, the term ‘original’ is polysemous. Coming from the Latin ‘originalis’, meaning ‘beginning’ or ‘birth’, it first designates something that comes directly from the source.<sup>135</sup> This primary state having no antecedent, it also came to refer to something unique and new, that is, lacking of origins. This dual definition is epitomised by the apparent oxymoron contained in the expression ‘primitivist modernism’. If vanguard artists were searching ‘au fond de l’inconnu pour trouver du nouveau’, this unknown was often considered as the remote, be it in terms of space or time.<sup>136</sup> For the majority of them, inventing the future paradoxically implied looking at the past, but whose past? In Latin America, this investigation coincided with the quest for a national culture and identity. Yet, such intent confronted *criollo* artists with the ambivalence of their situation. In which origins shall they indeed find the new? Building their identity in opposition to their European roots, they had to turn towards a past that was not really theirs. It might thus been asked whether they shall approach this past as a foreign heritage or from a genealogic perspective. Examining the point of departure of this attitude will therefore be the first step to take in order to understand whether the irruption of the past can allow painters such as Solar and Torres-García to breach the narrative of modernity/coloniality. This will allow one to understand why the nationalist discourse of these artists paradoxically tends to a universalist claim that, performed through the prism of a modernist primitivism, can be considered as reiterating to a certain extent the mechanisms of coloniality. Yet, it

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<sup>135</sup> Douglas Harper, ‘Original’, *Online Etymology Dictionary* (2001), <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=original>> [accessed 22 April 2015].

<sup>136</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘Le Voyage’, *Les Fleurs Du Mal* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1985), p.335.

will then be argued that this search for universality also led the painters on the way to abstraction, a new aesthetic paradigm that, as will finally be shown, permits the emergence of a pluriversalist worldview that breaks with the Eurocentric modern universalism.

## 2.1. Primitivist Universalism

Both Solar and Torres-García have, at some point of their artistic trajectory, used a 'Pre-Columbian' iconography. *Tlaloc* (fig.3) and *Nana-Watzin* (fig.4), two of the works that constitute Solar's 'recorrido americano' of 1923, are inspired by the Aztec myths of the third and the fifth sun.<sup>137</sup> As for Torres-García, the inspiration principally comes from Inca arts. In *Indomérica*, one can thus recognise a face with geometrical eyes and nose or a condor (fig.5). When looking at the past, both artists turn towards Pre-Columbian cultures. This dynamic a priori comes in contrast with the *criollo* nationalist stance seen in their manifestos. Torres-García explains that '[la cultura inca] podría constituir, no sólo la base de nuestra unificación suramericana, sino también la posibilidad, al fin, de poseer una verdadera cultura integral y además autóctona'. Two problems are induced by this assertion. First, why would one defend the Inca culture in Uruguay? Second, why does his nationalist discourse become a Latin American claim? To understand this paradoxical passing from primitivism to universalism, the perspective from which the artists approach Pre-Columbian arts will first be questioned. It will then be asked how their Pan-American project becomes an international one.

Identifying with remote civilisations such as the Incas or the Aztecs, the artists seem to consider that their own homelands, once the European influence has been erased, was lacking of valuable origins. Doing so, they perpetuate the Eurocentric lie of the absence of indigenous cultures in Uruguay and Argentina, silencing the planned

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<sup>137</sup> Adriana B. Armando and Guillermo A. Fantoni, 'Recorridos americanos: algunos temas en Xul Solar', *Ciencia Hoy*, 1997, pp.297–315.



extermination that occurred there in the nineteenth century. Moreover, they repeat a Western system of valorisation that can esteem foreign civilisations but does not recognise other types of social models such as tribal societies. Rosa Sarabia does not consider Torres-García's interest in Pre-Columbian art as an identity claim and valorisation of indigenous culture, but as a mere pretext that justifies his art.<sup>138</sup> Turning towards the past, Solar and Torres-García do not face their own origins. Consequently, this trend cannot be read as an attempt to recover their local history, but should rather be thought of as a global design epitomised by the notion of primitivism. This term refers to a trend of modern art that seeks to renew its aesthetic forms by copying elements of the so-called 'primitive' arts. The latter concept misleadingly designates both European prehistoric and world Pre-Colonial arts, as if there was no history before European hegemony. Susan Hiller sums up the main criticism addressed to this approach in the following terms:

The enlargement of European aesthetic horizons in the modern period through the importation of visual ideas originating (mainly) in Africa and the Pacific, suggests an increasing recognition by artists that the artistic resources of those lands and peoples were just as available for exploitation as their mineral and agricultural resources.<sup>139</sup>

After the appropriation of land and labour, European artists would thus appropriate the foreign culture, depriving the colonised of its own tradition. For Hiller, primitivism is linked to the concept of cultural colonialism,<sup>140</sup> that is, 'the extension of colonial power through cultural activities and institutions (particularly education and media) or the asymmetrical influence of one culture over another'.<sup>141</sup> Mignolo coined this uneven relationship under the expression 'epistemic colonial difference', that he sees epitomised by the term 'discovery'.<sup>142</sup> Used to refer to the colonisation, or 'invention', of Latin America, this term denies the existence of cultures outwith the European view and implies an unequal system of bond from the very moment of the encounter. The discoverer is indeed represented as the active and glorified one, while the discovered appears as a passive object. The myth of discovery similarly permeates the narrative of primitivism, notably through what might be called the 'Trocadero

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<sup>138</sup> Rosa Sarabia, 'Manuscription in "La ciudad sin nombre" by Joaquín Torres- García', *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 2010, p.308.

<sup>139</sup> Susan Miller, *The Myth of Primitivism* (London, New York: Routledge, 1991), p.3.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Sarah Amsler, 'Cultural Colonialism', by George Ritzer, *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2007, <[http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405124331\\_chunk\\_g97814051243319\\_ss1-203#citation](http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_chunk_g97814051243319_ss1-203#citation)> [accessed 23 April 2015].

<sup>142</sup> Mignolo (2005), p.32.

effect’, in reference to the Parisian museum of ethnography where modern artists could admire for the first time arts from America, Oceania or Africa. According to a legend spread by the critic, Picasso would be the first artist to recognise the aesthetic value of African and Oceanic arts and would have accounted this turning point of his career as follow: ‘When I went to the old Trocadero, it was disgusting. The Flea Market. The smell. I was alone. I wanted to get away. But I didn't leave. I stayed. I stayed. I understood that it was very important: something was happening to me’.<sup>143</sup> This account, which strangely resembles the chronic of a Conquistador, vehemently depreciates the African and Oceanic arts and shows that, in the primitivist discourse, the only value given to these aesthetics comes from the European artist’s approval. Only because Picasso was brave enough to ‘discover’ them can these objects become art. Critics employ the same narrative when it comes to explain Solar’s and Torres-García’s interest in Pre-Columbian arts. The Argentine would have studied Mesoamerican in 1912 in the British Museum,<sup>144</sup> while the Uruguayan would have ‘discovered’ Inca creations in 1928 during the exhibition ‘Les Arts anciens de l’Amérique’ organised by the Museum of Decorative Arts, and was then astonished by the collection of Nazca glasses in the Archeological Museum of Madrid.<sup>145</sup> The artists’ engagement with the ‘origins’ of Latin America has been originated by an aesthetic shock during a museum visit, which means that it comes from a European perspective. Contrary to Torres-García’s declaration, they do not have the legitimacy to reclaim this heritage only ‘por ser nosotros de estas tierras’.<sup>146</sup> Yet, that Solar and Torres-García adopt a European perspective does not mean they copy artists of the old continent. As Mitter explains, Western criticism too often makes the mistake of considering ‘borrowings of primitive art by Western artists such as Picasso [...] as mere affinities, unlike the use of the syntax of cubism by non-Western artists, which is seen as the influence of the West’.<sup>147</sup> During his stay in Munich, the Argentine painter, often compared to the *Blaue Reiter* group, ironically reversed this conception

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<sup>143</sup> Conversation with André Malraux in 1937, published in André Malraux, *La Tête d’obsidienne* (1974). Cited by Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), p.36.

<sup>144</sup> María Bernardete Ramos Flores, ‘When the Dragon Takes the Horse’s Place: a Post-Colonial Character in Xul Solar’s Criollo Piece’, *Revista Brasileira de História*, 2012, p.368.

<sup>145</sup> María Elena Lucero, ‘Entre el arte y la antropología: sutilezas del pasado prehispánico en la obra de Joaquín Torres-García’, *Comechingonia, Revista Virtual de Arqueología*, 2007, p.110.

<sup>146</sup> Torres-García (1984) p.816.

<sup>147</sup> Mitter, p.35.

when writing in regard to their famous *Almanach*: ‘Creo que no me gusta mucho en verdad, pero estoy muy satisfecho porque veo cómo yo solo, sin ninguna inspiración de afuera, he trabajado en la tendencia que será la dominante del arte más elevado del porvenir, por una parte, y por la otra veo cómo podré sobre salir entre estos artistas nuevos fácilmente’.<sup>148</sup> He thus shows that Latin American artists were not belated but were orientating their aesthetic researches towards the same direction at the same moment.

In primitivism, Solar and Torres-García do not seek the specific as much as the universal. They were more interested in the archaic as a common origin than in national roots. Seeking an originality that must be opposed to the European, they first came to associate their discourse on national identity to a Latin American unity claim. One can surmise that the transition of the Uruguayan painter’s approach from the local to the universal was generated by his failure to find a genealogy in his own country and by the lack of coherence of his appropriation of remote origins. Solar was more interested in *americanidad* than in *argentinidad* as such. He created the Neocriollo, a language that ‘reúne términos de las dos lenguas del Centro y de Sudamérica’ – that are the two colonial languages – in order to strengthen the unity and harmony of the continent. His discourse, as that of Torres-García, is imbued with the Bolivarian ideals of a ‘Confederation of Spanish American Nations’ that unites national sovereignty with supranational collaboration, all joined together against the coloniser. When advocating ‘nuestra unificación suramericana’ or the rise of Neocriollo, the artists also seem to be influenced by José Vasconcelos’ concept of ‘raza cósmica’.<sup>149</sup> This fifth race, supposed to emerge from Latin America, mixes the white, red, black and yellow races in order to overcome them and give rise to the universal era of humanity. This transition from Latin American to universal unity can also be found in Solar’s passage from Neocriollo to the ‘Panlengua’, an international language supposed to sustain the world peace thanks to a pre-Babelian comprehension.<sup>150</sup> Mignolo explains that in Vasconcelo’s discourse, ‘Mestizaje became, curiously enough, an ideal for homogenizing national identities. Yet

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<sup>148</sup> Solar, letter to his mother dated November 8<sup>th</sup> 1912. Cited by Mario Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Alba, 1994), p.25.

<sup>149</sup> Eleni Kefala, “La gran América Ibérica” : humanismo y utopía en los años veinte. El caso de Xul Solar’, *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 2012, p.460.

<sup>150</sup> Daniel Nelson, ‘Los San Signos de Xul Solar: El libro de las mutaciones’, in *Xul Solar, Visiones y revelaciones*, in Artundo (2005), p.52.

mestizaje was always a mirage, since the mixture of blood never accompanied a mixture of cosmologies (or epistemologies if you like).<sup>151</sup> Similarly, the universalism of the Panlengua, albeit pacific, can be compared to a totalitarian project, or at least to the Eurocentric illusion of possessing a truth that unifies the world by making it uniform, which contradicts Solar's initial search for an idiosyncratic identity. Yet, do Solar's and Torres-García's works really participate in the *mestizaje* 'mirage'? When turning towards the past to find shared archaic human features, do they actually privilege a single cosmology?

There is not a single primitivist perspective. Robert Goldwater distinguishes four different ways to approach primitivism: 'subconscious', 'emotional', 'romantic', or 'intellectual'.<sup>152</sup> The first one corresponds to the primitive as a personal and interior drive, or the expression of the *Id* that surrealists tried to liberate. Similarly, the second is directed towards the creation of emotions that 'express the "jungle" life of the human psyche'.<sup>153</sup> If these two tendencies can in some aspects be related to the works of Solar and Torres-García, the painters however do not follow a romantic perspective. Exemplified by Paul Gauguin, the latter corresponds to an objectifying vision of the 'other' as a projection of the artist's own fantasy. This look reifies the 'primitive' that becomes an object of its enlightened rational comprehension, or of its erotic imagination. On the opposite, the painters are not interested in the iconography or in the 'primitive' subject as such. They might rather be characterised as 'intellectual primitivists' for in their paintings, 'the structure and compositional arrangement of the aesthetic object are far more important than the content'.<sup>154</sup> Although their art is always figurative, both Solar and Torres-García often tend towards an abstraction that does not consider the primitive as an object of fantasy but as a world of new forms.

## 2.2. Abstract Universalism

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<sup>151</sup> Mignolo (2005), p.136.

<sup>152</sup> Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1986), p.16.

<sup>153</sup> Lemke, p.42.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

In Solar's and Torres-García's work, the primitive is not to be found in the subject but in the form. When the past comes to the surface of their modern paintings, time becomes space and the archaic universal. Seeking the primeval consists in looking for the fundamental, which in art, is constituted by the assemblage of shapes and colours. The whole composition of paintings such as *Tlaloc* and *Nana-Watzin* consists of the juxtaposition and superposition of various basic shapes. The flames and arrows of the rain of fire are for instance made up of rectangles topped by triangles, while the trees and the bird's head are diamond-shaped. These two works are watercolours, an elementary method that requires the only mixing of pigments and water. This technique allows obtaining an effect of transparency that links and harmonises the different levels of depth of the picture. It also makes the colours appear more 'natural' since, unlike oil or acrylic colours, they mix together. Their lack of opacity makes them look paradoxically both more transparent – and therefore pure – and less clean, for primary colours do not remain unsullied. Watercolours are also more autonomous: depending on the amount of water they contain, colours can move and expand in an organic way. Although Solar makes use of geometrical forms, these are hand-drawn and consequently never perfectly traced. The few right angles are never parallel to the frame and there are many curved lines, giving the spectator an impression of natural chaos and vital dynamism. On the opposite, Torres-García's constructivist paintings are organised according to a fixed structure. This does nevertheless not prevent them to be purposely 'flawed'. In Paris, the painter was part of the vanguard group linked to Neoplasticism, which sought to create a universal art by purifying shapes and colours to the maximum in order to find the spiritual harmony from the structure. Yet, he soon got away from this trend, considering the coldness of Mondrian's painting as inhuman. He declared: 'si la naturaleza llegase al equilibrio deseado por Mondrian sería sencillamente la muerte'.<sup>155</sup> Comparing Torres-García's *Construction I* (fig.6) to Mondrian's *Composition with red yellow and blue* (fig.7), one can see the inputs that primitivism added to the Uruguayan painter's conception of universalism. Mondrian's artwork is an oil on canvas where the grid pattern is clearly drawn by thick black lines that separate tint areas of primary, black, grey and white colours. Torres-García's composition is at first very similar: black lines delimitate rectangles of basic colours:

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<sup>155</sup> Torres-García, *Universalismo Constructivo* (1944), p.474. Cited by Miguel Battagazzore, *J. Torres-García: La trama y el signo* (Montevideo: Intendencia Municipal de Maldonado, 1999), p.35.

black, grey, white, yellow and red. However, the perception of this work gives a completely different feeling for here, the colour possesses a texture that gives the whole a sensation of life lacking in Mondrian's painting. This effect is produced by the medium employed, a wooden board assembled on a black canvas that provides colours with multiple shades and asperities. These imperfections are felt as more natural, and consequently more humane. Irregularities insert change, movement, and therefore time in the painting, while perfect tint areas make time appear uniform and hence absent. This technique criticises the objective universalism of modernity that takes the allegedly archaic non-Western culture as an object of study or fantasy or simply erases the print of time in favour of a pure future, as is the case of Mondrian. Opposed to this conception, Solar and Torres-García propose an abstraction that is universal for it addresses the imperfection of humankind, reminding humanity of its finitude through the representation of a primary emotion, that is the feeling of time passing.

The artists' works are generally not completely abstracts. Yet, although they remain figurative, they are never naturalists. Solar constructs his figures out of geometrical forms, while Torres-García uses signs. The constructivist painter considers that: 'a lo abstracto, debe siempre corresponder, como idea de cosa, algo también abstracto. ¿Qué puede ser esto? Tendrá que ser, para ser figurado gráficamente, o bien el nombre escrito de la cosa, o una imagen esquemática lo menos aparentemente real posible, tal como un signo'.<sup>156</sup> They do not only decompose and synthesise the reality, they also make it 'the less real possible' by bringing all the elements back to the foreground. In *Tlaloc* or *Nana-Watzin*, the depth is only created by the shades of colour and the superposition of shapes while in Torres-García's works, the sign is placed at the same level as the construction. There can be reliefs but there is no perspective, a paradigm that dominated Western art since the Renaissance. According to the art historian Daniel Arasse, the development of perspective is intimately linked to the advance of cartography and therefore, to a will to represent the world in an allegedly objective matter.<sup>157</sup> Erwin Panofsky, in his seminal essay on this topic, puts forward the argument that perspective originated the modern conception of space. This conception does not correspond to the copy of the real

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<sup>156</sup> Joaquín Torres-García, *Historia de mi vida* (Montevideo: Arca, 2000), p.148.

<sup>157</sup> Daniel Arasse, 'La Dimension politique de la perspective' (YouTube, 2012) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKxmeN1gHFQ>> [accessed 25 April 2015].

human view and perception but to a mathematical rationalisation of space. Panovsky puts forward the contentious thesis according to which contrary to the modern perspective, the preceding “‘primitive” modes of representation’ would only be false and naïve representations of the world.<sup>158</sup> Seeking to correct the human view thanks to ‘objective’ geometrical rules, this modern rational paradigm implies the thought of being able to reproduce and understand a universally true vision of the world. Castro Gómez uses the expression ‘punto cero’ to refer to the supposed universal objectivity of the Enlightened scientific judgement that justified the domination of Europe over its colonies.<sup>159</sup> He even describes this pretension as a ‘hybris’, a concept of the Ancient Greece designating the crime of pride that leads humankind to believe to be able of equalling the Gods. Linear perspective might thus equally be considered as a hybris that pretends to be able of overcoming the weakness of human perception and imposes a single, ‘rational’, viewpoint on the world. Ascribing themselves in a trend of global modern art that contests this paradigm, Solar and Torres-García do not consider universalism as an objectively true perspective, but rather as a common interior drive. The Uruguayan painter composes symbols that do not direct a message to the spectator but address their collective subconscious, that is, according to Carl Jung, the part of the psyche composed by universal patterns.<sup>160</sup> Solar’s interest in metaphysics and mysticism seems to meet Wassily Kandinsky for a return to ‘the spiritual in art’. For the Russian theorist, the composition of shapes and colours holds an interior music that touches directly the soul. Kandinsky believes in a real communion between paintings and spectators, a mystic relationship through which humans can access the secret emotions of their inner lives.<sup>161</sup> Abstract primitivism thus seems to serve the painters as a tool against the enlightened rationality and in favour of the subconscious or the spiritual, tendencies that often take the risk of reaffirming the dichotomy between reason and irrationality proper to the modern thinking.

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<sup>158</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p.47

<sup>159</sup> Santiago Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero : ciencia, raza e ilustración en la Nueva Granada* (Bogotá: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005), p.18.

<sup>160</sup> Mario Gradowczyk, *Torres-García : utopía y transgresión* (Montevideo: Museo Torres García, 2007), p.225.

<sup>161</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (The Floating Press, 2008). Throughout.

## 2.3. Pluriversalism

Defining primitivism, Lemke explains that:

“The primitive” is a highly charged term; in the racist discourse of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was infused with negative connotations and indiscriminately applied to peoples and objects worldwide (as well as to African Americans, of course). But when referring to human conduct or manners, “primitive” was the antonym of discipline, order, rationality—the antithesis of “civilized”.<sup>162</sup>

Once appropriated by modern art, this term acquires a positive connotation as a remote ideal that artists aim at finding. Yet, once again, inverting the hierarchy does not erase the dichotomy. For Éva Forgács, this duality can be traced back to the difference between ‘rationalism’ and ‘classicism’, two narratives that are, since Rousseau, ‘competing for dominance in Western discourse’, and ‘still constitute the framework and master narrative of Modernism’.<sup>163</sup> Likewise, García-Canclini describes the opposition between ‘classicism’ and ‘romanticism’ as follows:

For the romantics, art is a production of the intuitive and solitary genius; in the same way, reception is defined as an act of unconditional contemplation, the empathy of an individual sensitive disposition which allows itself to be penetrated by the mysterious eloquence of the work. Classical thought, by contrast, always works to subordinate sensibility and intuition to the order of reason: artistic production should be a way of presenting multiple meanings and expand the world in relation to its forms.<sup>164</sup>

It has been argued before that Solar and Torres-García did not have a romantic use of primitivism for they are not interested in the ‘other’ as an exterior object but are inspired by the construction and assemblage of forms. Still, their abstraction, to be universal, must correspond to the intuitive drive of humankind, where shapes and colours echo with one’s primordial emotions, and therefore resembles García-

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<sup>162</sup> Lemke, p.4.

<sup>163</sup> Éva Forgács, ‘Romantic Peripheries, The Dynamics of Enlightenment and Romanticism in East-Central Europe’, in Bäckström and Hjartarson (2014), p.64.

<sup>164</sup> Néstor García-Canclini, ‘Remaking Passports: Visual Thought in the Debate on Multiculturalism’, in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Nicholas Mirzoeff (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 372.



Canclini's definition of romanticism. Thus, one might wonder whether the alleged dichotomy between rationality and irrationality is indeed reiterated through the work of modern artists, or if these antagonist categories are not merely applied by a criticism that lacks of other references. Can Solar and Torres-García's artistic approach be read beyond this duality? It will be shown that their works first appear to be swinging between these two opposites, while the abolition of perspective, in their paintings as in their thought, gives rise to a universalism that undermines these dualisms.

Tracing the lineage of rationalism and romanticism in modern art, Forgács opposes various characteristics of the avant-garde such as expressionism and constructivism, individualism and collectivism, the artist as a high priest and the artist engineer, or the esotericism and the machine. Applying these dichotomies to Torres-García would most obviously result in placing his work on the side of constructivism, and therefore, of rationalism. The Uruguayan's artistic thought comes from classicism. He started his career with the Noucentism, a Catalan movement of the beginning of the twentieth century that defended Neoclassicism against the new vanguard aesthetics arising at that time. Miguel Battezzore suggests that even when affiliated with the avant-gardes, he remained classicist during his all career.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, at the very heart of his aesthetic theory lies the construction, that is, 'the order of reason'. Torres-García considers himself as a builder for whom must first prevail the structure.<sup>166</sup> Architecture is the basis of his style, which was first inspired by the classical Hellenistic orders.<sup>167</sup> He later found in the Inca construction and its monumental organisation of big rectangular stones a better model to his pattern. Hence, be they Hellenistic or Inca, the constructivist painter does not hierarchies his influences. He finds in both a similar potential to create a rational order able to make arise the harmony. For him, 'pensar', that is, to rationalise, is 'geometrizar' and 'El indio era geométrico', whereas modern humanity seems to be lacking of this ability.<sup>168</sup> This primitive geometrical thought allows him to criticise the fragmentation of modernity and the emptiness, loss of individuality and alienation of industrial

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<sup>165</sup> Battezzore. Throughout.

<sup>166</sup> Joaquín Torres-García, *Estructura* (Montevideo: La Regla de Oro, 1974), p.66.

<sup>167</sup> Battezzore, p.34.

<sup>168</sup> Torres-García (1984), p.822.

time.<sup>169</sup> He thus maintains the dichotomy between ‘modernity’ and ‘primitivism’, and appropriates ‘primitivist’ influences to this end. However, it is modernity that is here lacking of rationality, while primitivism does not appear antonymous with technology. In a canvas such as *Composición universal*, the symbol of a train stands alongside that of a condor, together with a classical temple, a clock, a compass or a llama-like quadruped (fig.8). The composition unites signs that refer to different spaces, times or orders, and the absence of perspective bring them all back to the foreground, avoiding any organisation into a hierarchy. Moreover, they are all linked together by a structure that harmonises them through the use of the golden section. This irrational number, defined by Euclid but that might have already been known at the time of the construction of the Kheops pyramid, determines a ratio said to create a universal harmony. It indeed allows finding the balance between order and disorder, for the structure thus elaborated is, as in nature, both organised and dynamic. In *Construction I*, one can thus see various rectangles, arranged according to a harmonious relation of proportionality. They are however never symmetrical. They form lines that, as a windmill, create a rhythm that sets the image in motion. The golden ratio epitomises the impossibility of separating the rational and the spiritual, since it is a mathematical law, observed in nature, which is also said to have metaphysical powers. For Torres-García as for Solar, primitivism means above all making present a time when the rigour of mathematics was a key to enter a universal, mystic and cosmic harmony.

The Argentine is less known for his classicism than for his interest in mysticism. Seeking universalism, he mixes all kind of influences – kabbalah, Pythagoras’ harmony of the spheres, Pre-Columbian or oriental philosophies – without privileging any. His career can be read as an attempt to synthesise human knowledge.<sup>170</sup> If chess is often considered as the most rational game, Solar expands it into the ‘panajedrez’, or ‘pan-chess’, adding to this game the possibility of rewriting the universe. Every piece is a planet that navigates through the zodiac constellations but that can also combine syllables, colours, chords or number, allowing the creation

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<sup>169</sup> Jorge Schwartz, ‘Un flâneur en Montevideo: *La ciudad sin nombre* de Joaquín Torres-García’, *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 1999, pp.209–218.

<sup>170</sup> Naomi Lindstrom, ‘Xul Solar, los principios organizadores de su pensamiento totalizador’, *Hispanía*, 9, n°25/26 (1980), p.162.

of new words, poems, tunes, equations, or to read one's horoscope.<sup>171</sup> Although its scalable rules might not be clear, they are still logical to the inventor. Solar defines himself as the 'padre de una panlengua [...] que así nadie habla' and 'padrino de otra lengua vulgar sin vulgo', but he nevertheless concludes that 'esto que parece negativo, deviene (werde) positivo con un adverbio: aún, y un casi: creciente'.<sup>172</sup> Ángeles Smart compares the painter's faith in the 'yet' and 'almost' to the metaphysical concept of potentiality, which implies that although something might not be immediately realisable, it still holds the possibility of its becoming.<sup>173</sup> Solar's mysticism corresponds to a true will to affect the reality. His inventions aim at improving and simplifying the daily life. Mixing esotericism and machines, he can be both compared to the artist high-priest and the artist engineer. Eleni Kefala thus argues that the painter is not utopian but eutopian, the humanism arising from the combination of his spiritualist thinking and his enthusiasm for technology leading him to bring his ideal to the concrete world.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, paintings such as *Tlaloc* and *Nana-Watzin* illustrate myths that are linked to the Aztec cosmology and explain the cycle of the seasons. They are consequently necessary to the elaboration of the agricultural calendar. Reading Solar's representation of these myths as an interest for intuitive and pre-logic tale implies applying a Eurocentric system of valorisation that might not correspond to the painter's interpretation. One might rather deduce from his artistic thinking that he uses myths for their form, as Dussel formulates it, 'una narrativa racional en base a símbolos'.<sup>175</sup> The philosopher develops the claim that the formulation of myths requires a high degree of rationalisation and criticism, since 'La sola lengua humana y su discurso simbólico sistematizado en "relatos" consentido es una obra de la razón de enorme desarrollo'.<sup>176</sup> Dussel's argument hinges on Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory according to which the 'mythical thinking, albeit shaped in images, can already be generalising, and is therefore scientific'.<sup>177</sup> If the myth is

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<sup>171</sup> Enrique Andrés Ruiz, 'Borges y Xul Solar', *Renacimiento*, n°21/22, 1998, p.39.

<sup>172</sup> Solar, 'Autómatas en la historia chica', *Mirador*, n°2, 1957, p.37. Cited by Ángeles Smart, 'La estética de lo posible en la pintura de Xul Solar', *Páginas de Filosofía*, 2010, pp.82–109.

<sup>173</sup> Smart, p.90.

<sup>174</sup> Eleni Kefala, 'Xul Solar, the Reluctant Utopian', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 2012, pp.253–279.

<sup>175</sup> Enrique Dussel, 'Primer encuentro del Buen Vivir - El estado como campo de lucha' (YouTube, 2013), 5:08, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieRwuIurppo>> [accessed 1 May 2015].

<sup>176</sup> Enrique Dussel, *1492, el encubrimiento del otro, hacia el origen del 'mito de la modernidad': Conferencias de Frankfurt* (Santafé de Bogotá: Ediciones Antropos, 1992), p.89.

<sup>177</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage* (Paris: Agora, 1962), p.32. My translation.

another kind of scientific discourse, built on a structured thinking itself based on a structured language, Solar does probably not consider it as an irrational story but conversely, as another rational way to understand the world.

For both artists, primitivism is not about expressing the repressed irrationality of the so-called 'primitive', of a child not yet spoiled by society or of the Freudian 'id', putting them all at the same level as might be the case in expressionism or surrealism. They rather seek in this trend a sense of the universal and of totality that was lost in the modern dichotomous worldview that separates rationalism and spiritualism, science and myth, sacred and profane, order and disorder, technology and crafts. Solar and Torres-García's approach is holistic, not hierarchic. Therefore, aspects of their thought that seem a priori paradoxical might look so by lack of references from part of spectator, criticism and historians to read them otherwise.

## Conclusion

Primitivism and universalism are two concepts whose interaction varies depending on the angle from which they are observed. Making use of Pre-Columbian symbols that do not refer to their own origins, Solar and Torres-García first seem to fall within the scope of a European modernist primitivism that reaffirms the colonial mechanisms of cultural appropriation. Universalism is there a totalitarian force that absorbs foreign references for its own benefits. Yet, despite a profound commitment to creating a distinct American identity, the painters are less interested in Pre-Columbian motifs than in the archaic as a universal language of forms and colours. This led them to elaborate a figuralist form of abstraction through which they could develop their aesthetic outwith the paradigm of a single-point perspective that would imply an enlightened universalist viewpoint. To describe this process, one is easily tempted to say that they 'simplify' or 'reduce' the reality. However, would these words not relay a value of judgement that precisely comes from the parameters of perspective? Using symbols, Solar and Torres-García rather aim to expand their meaning, giving them a new dimension. They do not seek to display an iconology that the spectator should recognise, and to impose a one-point perspective on it. On the contrary, presenting

elements of various influences on the foreground simultaneously, they avoid representing the world in a hierarchized and dualistic manner. They tend to a form of universalism that, shaped through an abstract and holistic thought, no longer corresponds to that of Enlightenment, which could only tolerate a unique single truth. It conversely permits the emergence of a pluriversal thinking where different worldviews, cosmologies and philosophies, can be gathered and harmonised, without having to suffer from homogenisation. Against the Eurocentrism of the philosophy of the 'punto cero' as explained above, the decolonial thinking defends a pluriversalism that, paraphrasing the Zapatista motto, allows conceptualising 'un mundo donde quepan otros mundos'.<sup>178</sup> For Mignolo, 'If a pluriverse is not a world of independent units (cultural relativism) but a world entangled through and by the colonial matrix of power, then, it is a way of thinking and understanding that what dwells in the entanglement, in the borders, is needed'.<sup>179</sup> Thus, Solar's and Torres-García's primitivist abstract universalism allows global modern art to produce a pluriversalist representation of the world that undermines the paradigm of modernity/coloniality. This does not only make non-Western modes of thinking visible, but, through the abolishment of the dichotomy rationality/spirituality, also allows the creation of a type of communication that is 'other'.

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<sup>178</sup> Grosfoguel (2008), p.213.

<sup>179</sup> Mignolo, 'On Pluriversity', 2013 <<http://waltermignolo.com/on-pluriversity/>> [accessed 1 May 2015].

### 3. Writing or Painting, Towards a Communication ‘Other’

#### Introduction

If communication determines the relationship between people, controlling its means is being in position of domination. More than economically, this is particularly true in epistemic terms. In *The Darker Side of Renaissance*, Mignolo explains that ‘Toward the end of the fifteenth century, a philosophy of language based on the celebration of the letter and of vernacular languages began to emerge in Europe’.<sup>180</sup> Humanists considered language as the main difference between human beings and other systems of living and particularly valorised the written form.<sup>181</sup> Yet, when language became synonymous with civilisation, this argument led to ‘the colonization of Amerindian languages (by writing their grammars) and the colonization of the Amerindian memories (by writing their histories [...])’.<sup>182</sup> By imposing Castilian and transcribing the indigenous languages using the Latin alphabet, while some of them already had a written form, the colonial power did not only prevent them from developing their own knowledge further, it also denaturalised those which already existed. Thus, ‘Spreading literacy meant teaching Amerindians what the Western man of letters understood by reading and writing’.<sup>183</sup> It deprived them from their own voices, and identified European thinking as the unique valid rationality. Against this epistemic coloniality, decolonial thinking aims at valorising the epistemologies ‘others’ of those who became the ‘subalterns’. The worldviews and modes of sharing and recording knowledge that have been silenced by the modernity/coloniality system are, in Latin

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<sup>180</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, & Colonization*, 2nd Edition (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), p.29.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, p.39.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p.59.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, p.45.

America, to be found in the indigenous models. Highlighting their validity brings the possibility of breaking with coloniality, in order ‘to think otherwise, to move toward “an other logic” – in sum, to change the terms, not just the content of the conversation’.<sup>184</sup> The link between indigenous epistemologies and modern art is not evident and might even appear contradictory. Yet, one of the aims of the avant-gardes consists in creating new aesthetic languages. It can therefore be asked whether these are merely new, or if they also are ‘other’. It is noteworthy that the main common point between the works of Solar and Torres-García, besides the interest shared with their contemporary avant-gardists in renovating their national cultural scene, is to be found in the way they both approach language. Indeed, they are painters who write and treat writing in a very specific manner. As rationality and spirituality are not antonymous, it will be demonstrated that abstract writing does not prevent them from conveying meaning. To understand if they succeed in creating a communication ‘other’, it will first be shown that approaching writing as painters, they breach the dichotomy between the two mediums. This will lead to consider this rupture as a way of contesting the Eurocentric notion of language by proving that communication does not always require words.

### 3.1. Painting with Words

In the introduction of *Writing Without Words*, Elizabeth Hill Boone highlights the difficulty the Western mind has to conceptualise Pre-Columbian forms of recording and communicating.<sup>185</sup> She entitled the roundtable from which her book proceeds ‘Art and Writing: Recording Knowledge in Pre-Columbian America’, maintaining the division between the two means of communication while her aim was precisely to erase the boundary that separates them. She found a resolution to this conflict in the

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<sup>184</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp.69-70.

<sup>185</sup> Elizabeth Hill Boone, ‘Introduction: Writing and Recording Knowledge’, in *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, ed. by Walter Mignolo and Elizabeth Hill Boone (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 3.

word ‘tlacuilociztli’, a Nahuatl concept that refers to both the acts of writing and painting.<sup>186</sup> In some of the works of Solar and Torres-García, the same confusion between these two actions can be noticed. One can indeed wonder what happens when painters write. Do they become writers or do they still address the text as painters? Focusing on two of their texts, it will be shown that for both artists, writing and painting proceed from a similar dynamic. Thus, one can ask if the term ‘tlacuilociztli’ would not also better correspond to their approach.

In 1941, Torres-García published *La ciudad sin nombre*, a wandering across a modern city that explicitly resembles Montevideo.<sup>187</sup> The reader is invited to follow a first-person narrator into the tumult of the streets and the chaos of his mind. It is an internal monologue that might remind one of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The reader is blown away in a stream of consciousness that alternates short sentences, long descriptions and dialogues with the city-dwellers: ‘Diálogos. Echan la escala; suben. Abrazos, frases rápidas; emoción’; ‘En cambio, en los barrios pobres, se ve lo realmente típico de la población: niños, negros, mujeres del hogar y del trabajo, pequeñas tiendas de fruta, casas viejas [...]’.<sup>188</sup> The narration is very difficult to follow and soon, the reading becomes a trance where words succeed one another. Converted into sounds, they lose their initial meaning to become a dematerialised music. This impression is strengthened by the peculiar characteristic of the book: it is entirely handwritten in the very singular calligraphy of the author. As he is a constructivist painter, Torres-García also is a constructivist writer. His typography is geometrical and uncanny, troubling the readers used to the uniformity normally imposed by publishing (fig.9). When one paragraph only covers the whole page, and the line spacing is especially small, focusing on reading becomes impossible (fig.10). Meaning is then simply induced by the feeling that the typography’s change of size creates (fig.11). Losing their bearings, readers cannot approach the book as a normal text but must accept to consider it as a visual art piece. Torres-García had warned in the foreword, ‘No se ha querido pintar aquí otra cosa que la inacabable lucha entre el Hombre y el individuo’, using the verb ‘to paint’ rather than ‘to write’ to describe the

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid, p.120. Citing Alonso de Molina, *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana y mexicana y castellana* (Porrua: Ed. Miguel León-Portilla, 1970).

<sup>187</sup> Torres-García, *La Ciudad sin nombre* (Montevideo: Edición facsimilar. Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1974).

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, p.10.



work that follows.<sup>189</sup> Text and illustrations are indeed entangled. Sometimes, the drawing infringes upon the text and the city represented becomes the city evoked (fig.12). Both are very similar: formed by black lines traced with a quill, although slightly bigger when it comes to letters, they merge into each other. Letters, which seem to be symmetrically reflecting the text, cover the façade of the building as banners indicating the name of the shops. Yet, these do not form recognisable words. At the bottom of the edifice, they even become mere lines, triangles or crosses, similar to the square-like heads of the men of the crowd populating the street. Both letters and figures are thus abstracted until becoming signs. These, as the structure, are omnipresent features of Torres-García's work. Signs are integrated to the textual body. They sometimes become 'mega-signo', that is, a sign which encompasses the text in its body, as a human who would embrace the whole cosmos (fig.13). They can also complete the narration like a rebus (fig.14), or even replace the text (fig.15). Signs are letters and letters are signs. Disconnected from references to any known language, they form a new glyph that mixes with or replaces the Spanish language. Torres-García thus seems to write as he draws, tracing figures, signs or letters with the same impetus.

Although he does not mix the two mediums, the same dynamic can be observed in Solar's 'Poema', an oneiric text published in 1931.<sup>190</sup> This text is part of the *San Signos*, a request of the occultist Aleister Crowley that presents a series of texts based on the *I Ching*.<sup>191</sup> This Chinese 'Book of Changes' is a divinatory tool that comprises sixty-four hexagrams. Each of them presents a different combination of six broken and unbroken lines, which figure dualist pairs, Yin and Yang, being and nothingness.<sup>192</sup> It is therefore a graphic text, in which the very minimal assemblage of pure black lines suffices to convey a philosophical message. Solar's aim consists in 'Reescribir el I Ching describiendo cada hexagrama por medio de una vision pura'.<sup>193</sup> He thus starts with a picture, which carries a high metaphysical meaning, and then invokes a vision that he finally transcribes into words. Is not the text then equally visual? It was originally written in Neocriollo, a mix between Spanish and Portuguese, to which was added grammatical rules of English and German but which

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid, p.1.

<sup>190</sup> Solar, 'Poema', by Artundo (2006e), pp. 161–164.

<sup>191</sup> Daniel Nelson, 'Los San Signos de Xul Solar: el libro de las mutaciones', in Artundo (2005), p.49.

<sup>192</sup> Wayne McEvilly, 'Synchronicity and the I Ching', *Philosophy East and West*, 1968, pp-142-143.

<sup>193</sup> Nelson, p.49.

however presents only few elements of Guarani and none of African languages, making it an essentially Eurocentric language.<sup>194</sup> The transcription of Pre-Columbian languages into Latin alphabetic system was a key factor of the establishment of a perennial colonial domination. Neocriollo can similarly appear a glottophagic project for it is a Eurocentric Pan-American language that the indigenous peoples of the continent shall embrace. Yet, although written in Neocriollo, 'Poema' is not a programmatic text but a poem. Solar was fully aware that his audience would not be familiar with this language, which he described as a 'lengua vulgar sin vulgo'.<sup>195</sup>

Borges reported the following account:

Él me preguntó: lo firmaré o no, y yo le dije, no; entonces él escribió un excelente artículo en español común, pero si hubiese tenido que firmarlo lo hubiese escrito en su idioma ininteligible para los demás, incluso para el mismo Xul, que ya lo había dejado atrás en el momento en que me entregaba el manuscrito.<sup>196</sup>

This anecdote shows that Solar considered Neocriollo as his personal signature. He was not willing to convert people to his language, but nevertheless persisted in confronting them to it, with a certain humor and provocation. This attitude might first be interpreted as a proof that he had progressively delinked Neocriollo from a real Pan-American project. 'Poema' was indeed published in 1931, year that represents a turning point in his career, marked by a larger spiritualism and a diminished *criollo* fervor.<sup>197</sup> Then, it also shows that by addressing a Spanish-speaking audience with a surrealist poem in Neocriollo, Solar wanted to surprise the readers and de-familiarise them with the language. Despite a certain Eurocentrism, which might be partly explained by the fact that these were the languages available for him to learn in his socio-historical context, Solar might have privileged German and English for they authorise the creation of compound words, be they juxtaposed or clumped together in a single word. This process allows producing a more efficient language when Latin languages would require long sentences filled with prepositions.<sup>198</sup> According to Naomi Lindstrom, the painter might even have taken this inspiration from non-

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid, p.53.

<sup>195</sup> Solar, *Revista Mirador*, n°2 (Buenos Aires:1957). Cited by Sabrina Gil, 'Xul Solar: escritura visual y nueva oralidad', *Estudios de teoría literaria, revista digital*, 1, n°1 (2012), p.107.

<sup>196</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Borges habla de Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes/Juntapalabras). Soporte: CD ROM. Cited by Artundo (2006).

<sup>197</sup> Kefala (2012), p.473.

<sup>198</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'La traducción me parece una operación del espíritu más interesante que la escritura', *La Opinión*, 1975 <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/la-traduccion-me-parece-una-operacion-del-espiritu/a7eef456-7359-11e1-b1fb-00163ebf5e63.pdf>> [accessed 7 May 2015].

European agglutinative languages.<sup>199</sup> In any case, the use of Neocriollo in ‘Poema’ allowed him, for instance, to employ only one verb, ‘qierflotan’, instead of using two, ‘quieren flotar’.<sup>200</sup> Words being apposed without the mediation of a preposition, they form direct mental images that would make the French surrealists envious. In a sentence such as ‘En sus grumos I espumas dismultitú omes flotan pasivue, disdestellan, hai también solos, mayores, péjoides, y perluzen suavue’, one starts reading a familiar and intelligible language when suddenly, an uncanny word appears, surprising one by its peculiar spelling and enigmatic meaning.<sup>201</sup> To confuse the reader, Solar systematically deletes the ‘u’ of the grapheme ‘qu’, thus writing ‘qizás’ or ‘qe’. The singular transcription of this language is full of letters that are commonly unusual in Castilian, such as the ‘y’ and the ‘x’ in the expression ‘Yi yuxtavuelan’.<sup>202</sup> Such synthesis of unknown and recognisable languages produces what Bertolt Brecht would call a ‘verfremdunseffekt’, that is, an effect of both distancing and ‘estrangement’.<sup>203</sup> Playing with language, Solar makes it stranger, that is, both bizarre and foreign, preventing readers from identifying with it and compelling them to read it otherwise. ‘Poema’ is indeed at first a hermetic text. As in *La ciudad sin nombre*, the narration is particularly difficult to follow, not due to its calligraphy but to its enigmatic language. Yet, for the reader ready to go beyond this aspect, hermeticism can conversely enable the emergence of an alternative and intuitive form of understanding that, as in Torres-García’s book, principally comes from the plastic qualities of the writing. In this poem, letters constitute the palette the artist employs to paint the text. The combination of both intimate and foreign letters seems to invite one to understand it through its visual properties. In the mind of the reader these become music, a combination of sonorities that, once performed, goes back to the visual form through mental images. Solar did not only invent languages, he worked on a new musical notation with the same goal: to simplify and optimise the writing.<sup>204</sup> This led him to create the *Multicoloured Piano*. The keys of this piano correspond to different colours, allowing a more intuitive learning of music through the fusion of

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<sup>199</sup> Lindstrom, p. 162.

<sup>200</sup> Solar (2006e), p.161

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> ‘Estrangement-effect’, *Oxford Reference* (2010.01.01) < <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100020224> > [Date Accessed 12 May 2015].

<sup>204</sup> Cintia Cristía, ‘Xul Solar y la música: la reunión de los artes’, in Artundo (2005), p.65.

painting and composing.<sup>205</sup> Thus, for the synesthete, music can become images, and images a language. Establishing a parallel between his music and linguistic investigations, Cintia Cristia affirms that what interests the artist the most is the sound, be it produced by music or words.<sup>206</sup> Following this aim, Solar, in his poem, abstracts the language through music, as Torres-García abstracted it through calligraphy.

In these two examples, one can see that for the two painters, writing and painting – and even composing – constitute similar actions. Thus, *La ciudad sin nombre* is as much a graphic art piece as it is a text, and ‘Poema’ can equally be read as a visual symphony. One of the objectives of the avant-garde was to erase the boundaries between arts. Following this trend, Solar and Torres-García oblige one to reconsider the heterogeneous definitions of writing and painting and to resort to concepts coming from other modes of thinking. It could therefore be argued that in the works studied, the artists ‘tlacuilociztli’. Yet, the blurring of the separation between text and image is not merely to be observed in the artists’ impetus, but also in the way the addressee – reader, spectator or listener – receives and assimilates the information. It indeed imposes a form of a comprehension ‘other’, which does not always require words.

### 3.2. Writing with Images

More than in their text, ‘tlacuilociztli’ takes its full meaning in Solar’s and Torres-García’s canvas. In many of their works, words appear with shapes and figures concomitantly on the foreground. Notwithstanding that some paintings do not even display words, the spectator still wants to read them as languages. For Mignolo, ‘much as writing is an activity common to all cultures, its conceptualisation remains ‘culture specific’.<sup>207</sup> By the same token, phonetic writing shall not be considered as

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid, pp.66-67.

<sup>207</sup> Mignolo (1995), p.119.

the normal form of recording knowledge, but as one among others. Hill Boone explains that the Eurocentric conception of writing according to which pictographic communication is a 'primitive' art is what allowed the colonial power to maintain its cultural domination on Latin America.<sup>208</sup> The 'superiority of alphabetic writing and of Western books' was used as a tool of 'measurement of civilization'.<sup>209</sup> To maintain its hegemony, modernity/coloniality implemented next to the narrative of progress an evolutionist conception of writing according to which human language recording would logically go from primitive pictographic signs to an allegedly more efficient modern phonetic transcription. The first would be art, while the second would be proper writing. This dichotomy is therefore necessary to the success of the evolutionist narrative. Yet, it has previously been demonstrated that Solar and Torres-García intended to erase this dualist view. Does this also allow them to undermine the linear perspective on the history of writing? It will be shown that their paintings are as semantically charged as their texts, although they convey meaning through a poetic of the openness that implies a communication that is visual and thus 'other'.

Rubén Tani considers Torres-García's constructivist universalism as a 'teoría estético-semiológica'.<sup>210</sup> The Uruguayan wrote that: 'A lo abstracto, debe siempre corresponder, como idea de cosa, algo también abstracto. ¿Qué puede ser esto? Tendrá que ser, para ser figurado gráficamente, o bien el nombre escrito de la cosa, o una imagen esquemática lo menos aparentemente real posible, tal como un signo'.<sup>211</sup> His use of the term 'sign', and not symbol, implies that he considers his painting as a means of communication. Indeed, according to Charles Sanders Peirce, 'A sign [...] just in so far as it fulfils the function of a sign, and none other, perfectly conforms to the definition of a medium of communication'.<sup>212</sup> Mignolo moreover argues that from a semiotic point of view, writing has no reason to be restricted to syllabic and alphabetic writing. He explains that:

Semiotically, a graphic sign is, then, a physical sign made with the purpose of establishing a semiotic interaction. Consequently, a human interaction is a semiotic one if there is a community and a body of common knowledge according to which (a) a person can produce a graphic sign with the purpose of conveying a message (to somebody else or to him or herself); (b) a person perceives the graphic

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<sup>208</sup> Hill Boone, p.5.

<sup>209</sup> Mignolo (1995), p.65.

<sup>210</sup> Rubén Tani, 'Joaquín Torres-García: Constructivismo, semiología y mitología', *Anuario antropología social y cultural en Uruguay 2009-2010*, 2010, p.24.

<sup>211</sup> Torres-García (2000), p.148.

<sup>212</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings (1893-1913)*, ed. by Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p.391.

sign and interprets it as a sign produced with the purpose of conveying a message; and (c) that person attributes a given meaning to the graphic sign. Notice that in this theoretical definition of writing the links between speech and writing are not necessary because writing is not conceived of as the representation of speech.<sup>213</sup>

Following this argument, Torres-García's use of pictorial signs would perfectly be able to establish a communication. For Peirce, such transmission of information requires the interrelation of three different types of signs: the object, as it appears in the physical world, the 'representamen', that is a material representation of the object, such as a written word, and the 'interpretant', or concept, which is a mental representation of the relation between the two previous elements.<sup>214</sup> According to this definition, Torres-García's constructivist paintings would present two subcategories of representamens. There are first 'iconic signs', which refer to the object through an aesthetic similarity, be it pictorial, sound or calling on any other sense. Then, there are 'symbolic signs', which relation to the object is purely conventional.<sup>215</sup> In *Indoamerica* and *Universal Composition*, one can identify various common iconic signs, such as the man and woman pair, the sun or the fish, and symbolic signs, as triangles or Arabic numbers. Yet, for Torres-García, the sign is not reduced to its reference to an actual object. It possesses a metaphysical power. It does not imitate or reproduce an illusion of the world but substantiates the *idea*, in the Platonic sense. Although these signs form the lexicon of his own language, and therefore possess a meaning for him that he intends to communicate, he does not seek to deliver a precise message that the spectator shall understand as it is.<sup>216</sup> The reading is guided but is however not closed.

Torres-García's art pieces thus correspond to what Umberto Eco calls 'open works'. Contrary to closed ones, which are written in order to respond to the expectation of an average, heterogeneous readership, to which the liberty to interpret the text in all kind of ideological manner has been given, an open text requires a 'good' reader.<sup>217</sup> The latter is not empirical but created by the textual strategy through the reading process, in order to be able to adequately decipher the codes contained in the text.<sup>218</sup> This definition supposes a very essentialist notion of the text, which

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<sup>213</sup> Mignolo (1995), p.78.

<sup>214</sup> Jorgen Dines Johansen and Svend Erik Larsen, *Signs in Use: An Introduction to Semiotics* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), pp.26-27.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid*, pp.32-46.

<sup>216</sup> Battezzato, p.127.

<sup>217</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1984), p.8.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid* p.9.

corresponds to Torres-García's Platonic conception of the sign, and implies that the reader would have to unveil some truth hidden in the narrative or pictorial web. This truth is however not previously conferred to the text by the author but performed by the reader as he experiences its aesthetic strategies. The interpretation is therefore neither totally wide nor completely determined, for it is guided by the signs and performed by the reader/spectator. Openness might also be what prevents Solar's poems in Neocriollo from relaying the latent Eurocentrism of this language. It has previously been argued that the Argentine's Neocriollo or Panlengua could be compared to totalitarian projects for defending a common language would impose uniformity on a continent or in the Globe. Mignolo similarly criticises the allegedly humanist thinking of Francisco Antonio Lorenzana y Bultrón, archbishop of Mexico in the eighteenth century, for he believed that 'when only one language is spoken in a nation and that language is the language of the sovereign, an expanding love and familiarity between persons are engendered, in a way that will be impossible without such a common language'.<sup>219</sup> Yet, when this language is the one of the Spanish sovereign, as it is also partly the case of Neocriollo, fraternisation is a rather euphemistic way to designate epistemic coloniality. Although Solar's language was originally based on European languages, the painter made many changes in the course of his career. From the 1930s on, his interest moved from ideology to spirituality.<sup>220</sup> The poems, or artistic writings, published in these years can thus be read as open texts. These cannot be ideologically interpreted since the distancing effect they intend to produce guides their comprehension through the creation of mental images, but do not impose a single concept to the understanding.

Solar abstracted Neocriollo more and more until it became completely pictorial with a series entitled *Pensiformas* or *Grafías Plastiútiles* that he painted at the beginning of the 1960s. Translating words into pictographic aphorism as if it was the logical evolution of language, the painter challenges the Eurocentric linear conception of language transcription. A canvas such as *Nel hondo mundo mi muy pide o min Dios* thus presents a sequence of colourful signs (fig.16). Some are iconic: the eye and the arms. Others are symbolic: the star, the moon, numbers and letters. Most of them however are completely abstract and leave the spectator without any concept to which refer them. As for Torres-García, a painting such as *Composition* disrupts

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<sup>219</sup> Mignolo (1995), pp.61-62.

<sup>220</sup> Kefala (2012), p.474.

the continuity of his work by presenting shapes that float on the foreground freed from their usual grid pattern (fig.17). Apart from one sign that might resemble a fish, representamens no longer refer to objects taken from reality but are completely abstract. Through their metaphysical conception of signs, Solar and Torres-García aim at creating an unmediated language that would act ‘sobre nuestra sensibilidad espiritual, directamente, sin necesidad de interpretación ni lectura’.<sup>221</sup> Yet, using symbolic and iconic signs implies a communication that requires the interaction of an object and a representamen through the mediation of the interpretant. To achieve more immediacy, they both tend to use abstract signs. These do not refer to a recognisable object. They consequently do not evoke a word-concept either. To interpret them, the mind must create its own interpretant but this, formulated through a thought process that functions without words, can be shaped outwith speech. To communicate ideas that do not refer to precise objects of reality but must address the intellect or the sensibility of the addressee more directly, Solar and Torres-García employ a visual communication. Doing so is tantamount to contest the Eurocentric notion of phonetic transcription as the most efficient means of recording and conveying information. To put it in Hill Boone’s words:

The notion that spoken language is the only system that allows humans to convey any and all thought fails to consider the full range of human experience. Certainly speech may be the most efficient manner of communicating many things; but it is noticeably deficient in conveying ideas of a musical, mathematical, or visual nature, for example. It is nearly impossible to communicate sound through words; instead, one uses a musical notation that has now become standard in "Western cultures".<sup>222</sup>

She explains that two different categories of writing can be distinguished: glottographic systems, which refer to a spoken language and can be phonographic, as Latin alphabet, or logographic, as hieroglyphs, and semasiographic systems, in which ideas are expressed directly through the combination of signs that do not require the mediation of oral language.<sup>223</sup> Examples of these systems can be observed in the Mixtec and Aztec pictographic writings.<sup>224</sup> Mainly ideographic, and not phonetic, they convey meaning ‘by pictorial and conventionalized images, by their relative

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<sup>221</sup> Torres-García, ‘Símbolos’, extracts from *Universalismo Constructivo* (1934), *Museo Torres García* <[http://www.torresgarcia.org.uy/uc\\_71\\_1.html](http://www.torresgarcia.org.uy/uc_71_1.html)> [accessed 8 May 2015].

<sup>222</sup> Hill Boone, p.9.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid*, p.15.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid*, p.18.



placement, and by the contexts in which they participate'.<sup>225</sup> As in the *Pensiformas* or in the universal constructivist paintings where signs are placed simultaneously on the foreground, semasiographic systems do not set a precise reading order. Thus, the canvas remains open to different readings. Although they might present phonetic elements, such as names of people or places, they are 'intelligible to those who share a general cultural base even though they might speak different languages'.<sup>226</sup> As Solar's and Torres-García's semiotic paintings, they seem to be open texts. Saying without speech, they moreover imply, in the same way as the painters' works, a communication 'other' that does not pass through word-concepts but images.

## Conclusion

If one admits that communication can be established without speech, that painting and writing are the same activity, and that the decolonisation of the Eurocentric conception of writing requires the reconsideration of the semiotic – not decorative – characteristic of ideographic systems, could not it be argued that, in this regard and in the works studied in this chapter, Solar and Torres-García disgress from the narrative of modernity/coloniality? This world-system imposed a linear vision of the history of writing that goes from the wall to the book and from pictorial to alphabetic writing. Yet, this is a misconception, as shows the example of the semasiographic writings of the Aztec and Mixtec, which replaced Mayan hieroglyphs in the XIV and XV centuries. With the works previously analysed, Solar and Torres-García similarly contradict this narrative by proving the porosity of the boundary that separates writing and painting. They oblige to think the definition of painting and writing otherwise, highlighting the lack of adequate term in Western languages. This implies that the conception of communication imposed by the modernity/coloniality system, valorising only letters and books, is highly restrictive. The mixing of verbal and visual idioms is a current strategy in the avant-garde. Caligrams were notably very popular

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid, p.18-19.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid, p.19.

and could reflect the diverse philosophies and ideologies of Dadaism, Constructivism or Futurism, to name only few movements. With *Nel hondo mundo mi muy pide o min Dios* or *Composition*, Solar and Torres-García however go beyond the mere graphic organisation of words. They paint visual pictographs that have no connexion to phonetic word-concepts and thus create a semasiographic system of communication that goes beyond that of words and of figurative signs. This process might also be noticed in some of Kandinsky's work such as *Succession* (1935) for the Russian painter similarly tended to escape from ideology and to create an *other* communication. Mignolo explains that he prefers to use 'the expression "world-sensing" instead of "world vision," because the latter, restricted and privileged by Western epistemology, blocked the affects and the realms of the senses beyond the eyes'.<sup>227</sup> One might wonder whether the idea according to which meaning could solely be established through words would not similarly enclose the transmission of signs in one realm. Torres-García's and Solar's synesthetic understanding of communication indeed reveals that writing is visual and sonorous while painting is semantic and musical. Pictographic signs, be they iconic, symbolic, or abstract, are not compelled to be interpreted through the mediation of a word-representamen, but can create mental images, sounds, feelings or perfumes equally capable of transmitting information. In these works, the painters allow the creation of a communication 'other', which contradicts the narrative of modernity/coloniality, changing not the content but the terms of the conversation. Yet, does that make them decolonial artists? According to Mignolo, 'Decoloniality requires epistemic disobedience, for border thinking is by definition thinking in exteriority, in the spaces and time that the self-narrative of modernity invented as its outside to legitimize its own logic of coloniality'.<sup>228</sup> Thus, it seems that in order to be 'decolonial', the enunciation of Solar's and Torres-García's works shall be located in the border of modernity while, as vanguard artists, they create from within the modern matrix. Their communication 'other' thus undermines coloniality, but it might however not allow them to adopt a decolonial, or border, thinking.

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<sup>227</sup> Mignolo, 'Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (De)Coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience', *Transversal - EIPCP Multilingual Webjournal*, 2011 <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0112/mignolo/en>> [accessed 13 May 2015].

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.



## Conclusion

In the catalogue of the exhibition *Estéticas decoloniales*, Walter Mignolo and Pedro Pablo Gómez call for ‘Decolonizar la estética para liberar la aesthesis’.<sup>229</sup> They put forward the hypothesis that the aesthetic serves as a tool of colonisation of subjectivities.<sup>230</sup> Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten would have coined this term in the eighteenth century, transforming the Greek *aesthesis*, that refers to the sensations and perceptions, into the aesthetic, a normative instrument used to determine the definitions of art and beauty.<sup>231</sup> The aesthetic thus colonised the *aesthesis* because it conditioned one’s taste and perception.<sup>232</sup> As modernity equals coloniality, the decolonial thinkers go further asserting that ‘la estética y el arte modernos son constituidos y constituyentes del problema de la modernidad y su premisa mayor – el eurocentrismo – en la medida en que forma parte de su sistema/mundo, cuya lógica medular está determinada por el capitalismo y la racionalidad científico-tecnológica’.<sup>233</sup> Modern art would therefore be trapped by this paradigm and equally colonise the *aesthesis*.

This indeed proved to be true to some extent. The first chapter, comparing Torres-García’s and Solar’s programmatic texts, provided evidence that a very specific chronotope was constitutive of this genre and that this space-time was shaped by the ideals of modernity. This led to the conclusion that as a discourse of modernity, the manifesto reiterated the mechanisms of coloniality. When expressing their vision for the future of a culturally independent Latin America through this form, the artists thus demonstrated a lingering Eurocentrism. Since they purported to fight European influence, this propensity was not to be explicitly identified. It nevertheless was latent in their texts through a nationalist discourse that hinged on racial terms, a dualist vision of the world that implied the superiority of one part over another, or a linear

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<sup>229</sup> Pedro Pablo Gómez and Mignolo, *Estéticas decoloniales* (Bogotá: Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, 2012), p.20.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid*, p.12.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid*, p.14.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid*, p.12 and 15.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid*, p.15.

conception of time modelled on the myth of progress. Quoting García-Canclini, it could therefore be asked whether the artists were ‘thinking the nation or thinking for it’, that is, if they ‘thought the nation in their work’ or ‘left the pre-existing cultural structure to shape the configuration’.<sup>234</sup> They indeed intended to reverse the dialogue with Europe, but did not change ‘the terms of the conversation’.

Mignolo’s and Gómez’s assertion regarding modern art might however be nuanced for it does not take into account the input brought by the avant-garde in the search for modes of communication ‘others’. Breaking with the paradigm of linear perspective, Solar and Torres-García participated in the undermining of the dominant canon and opened up the way to a pluriversalist representation. Although the modern system, and its inherent capitalist market, can easily seize upon the avant-garde’s constant search for novelty in order to fuel its own interests, the thirst for rupture also allows to always question the aesthetic norm. The third chapter aimed at showing that Solar’s and Torres-García’s deletion of the frontier between writing and painting obliges one to call on a concept that is lacking in European languages and must therefore be found in a language that has been silenced. This also allows debunking the evolutionist narrative of writing that legitimised the domination of the West over centuries, showing it as a mere convention. Moreover, the semasiographic systems they build in painting such as *Nel hondo mundo mi muy pide o min Dios* and *Composition* imply a communication other that demonstrates the possibility of writing and conveying meaning without words, creating open texts that enable to think otherwise, outside the dominant thinking and without imposing another ideology. Mignolo and Gómez argue that since Aristotle, the dominant canon privileged the *mimesis* and *catharsis*, which tend to orientate the sensations of the recipient and therefore control the *aesthesis*. Yet, it has been demonstrated that when abstracting the language, Solar’s and Torres-García’s works avoided copying the reality and inserted a distancing effect that prevented one to indentify with language. Therefore, there seems to be no compelling reason not to argue that the artists thus ‘liberate the *aesthesis*’. They do indeed not express a close communication, telling a story or relaying a moral or didactic message, through words, iconography, or figurative signs. Neither do they impose a single perspective on their paintings, but open up the perception, creating a communication that calls on different senses.

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<sup>234</sup> García-Canclini (1998), p.374.

These considerations imply that the painters would be able to escape from reiterating coloniality when their works are autonomous, that is, not ideological or political. Yet, is it possible to completely delink some of their artworks from their projects? Theorists such as Theodor Adorno consider that the political power of art is not to be found in the commitment of the artist but in the art piece itself.<sup>235</sup> According to the German philosopher, ‘art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as “socially useful”, it criticizes society by merely existing’.<sup>236</sup> Thus, the emancipatory potential of art is for him only released when it escapes from a direct link to reality thanks to a formal freedom – brought by modern art, which enables the creation of a new language for a new type of communication.<sup>237</sup> Thinking along these lines, the subversion to the hegemonic paradigm of coloniality would not consist in claiming that Europe is the enemy, as Solar and Torres-García do in their manifestos, but in undermining its ideology through the elaboration of new worlds, new sensibilities that would allow the creation of a rationality ‘other’. It is therefore possible when the artists escape from their spatio-temporal reality. Yet, a decolonial aesthetic precisely requires location. To put it in Mignolo’s terms, ‘Border thinking is the necessary condition for thinking decolonially’, and it implies ‘dwelling and thinking in the borders of local histories confronting global designs’.<sup>238</sup> It requires an ‘epistemic disobedience’ that goes beyond the imperative breaking with the canon that constitutes the new canon of modern art. In order to achieve a subversive autonomy, Solar and Torres-García must draw away from the local, from nationalist, Pan-Americanist and primitivist tendencies entrenched in coloniality. Thus, they do not locate themselves at the border of modernity but in an exteriority that can escape from reproducing coloniality but does not engender a decolonial process. On this basis, it may be concluded that, as announced by the modernity/coloniality group – and although some of the autonomous works it produced, when liberating the *aesthesis*, can be read outside the framework of coloniality – modern art can never fully achieve decoloniality.

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<sup>235</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.8.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid*, pp.225-226.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid*, p.227.

<sup>238</sup> Mignolo (2011).

## Appendix

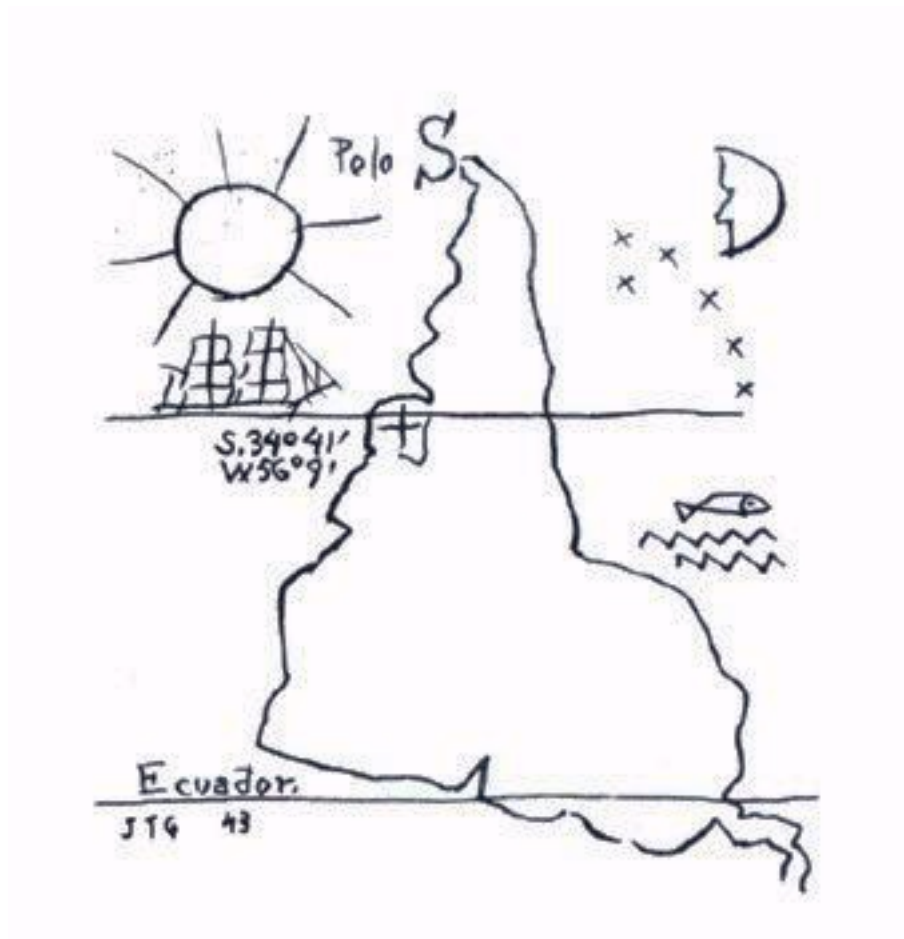


Figure 1

Joaquín Torres-García, *Mapa de Sudamérica con el Sur como norte*, 1943, ink on paper.  
Reproduced in *Universalismo Constructivo*, Lección 30, "La escuela del Sur" (Buenos Aires:  
Alianza, 1984), p.197.



Figure 2

Alejandro Xul Solar, *Drago*, 1927, watercolour on paper, 25.5 x 32 cm. Museo Xul Solar, Buenos Aires.



Figure 3

Alejandro Xul Solar, *Tlaloc, dios de la lluvia*, 1923, watercolour on paper, 26x32 cm. Francisco Traba collection, Buenos Aires.





Figure 5

Alejandro Xul Solar, *Nana-Watzin*, 1923, watercolour on paper, 25.5x31.5 cm. Galería Vermeer, Buenos Aires.

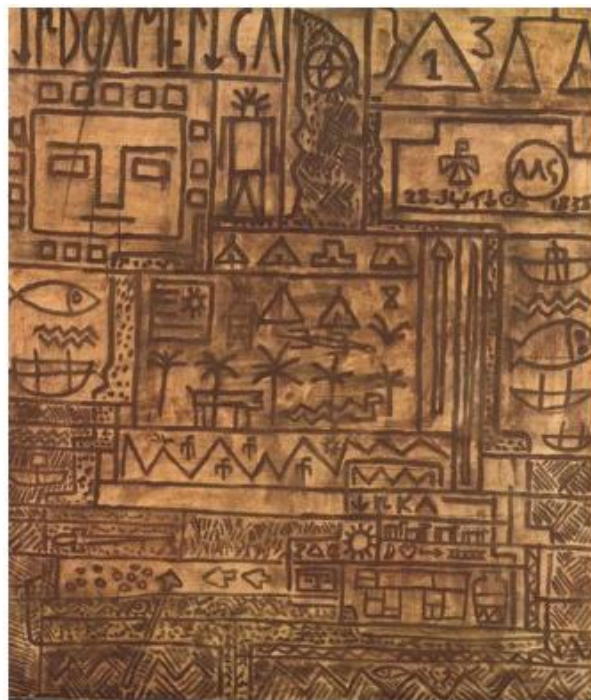


Figure 4

Joaquín Torres-García, *Indoamérica*, 1947, oil on cardboard, 100x80cm. Private collection, Buenos Aires.



Figure 7

Torres Garcia, *Construction I*, 1930, oil on wood, 42x32.5 cm. Collection Jose Mugarabi, New York.

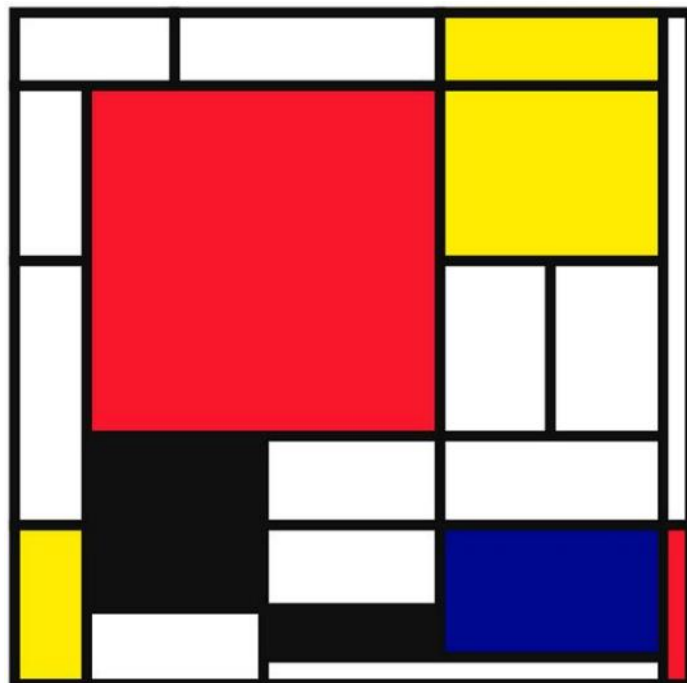


Figure 6

Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Large Red Plane, Yellow, Black, Gray and Blue*, 1921, oil on canvas, 95.7x95.1 cm. Gemeentemuseum, the Hague.

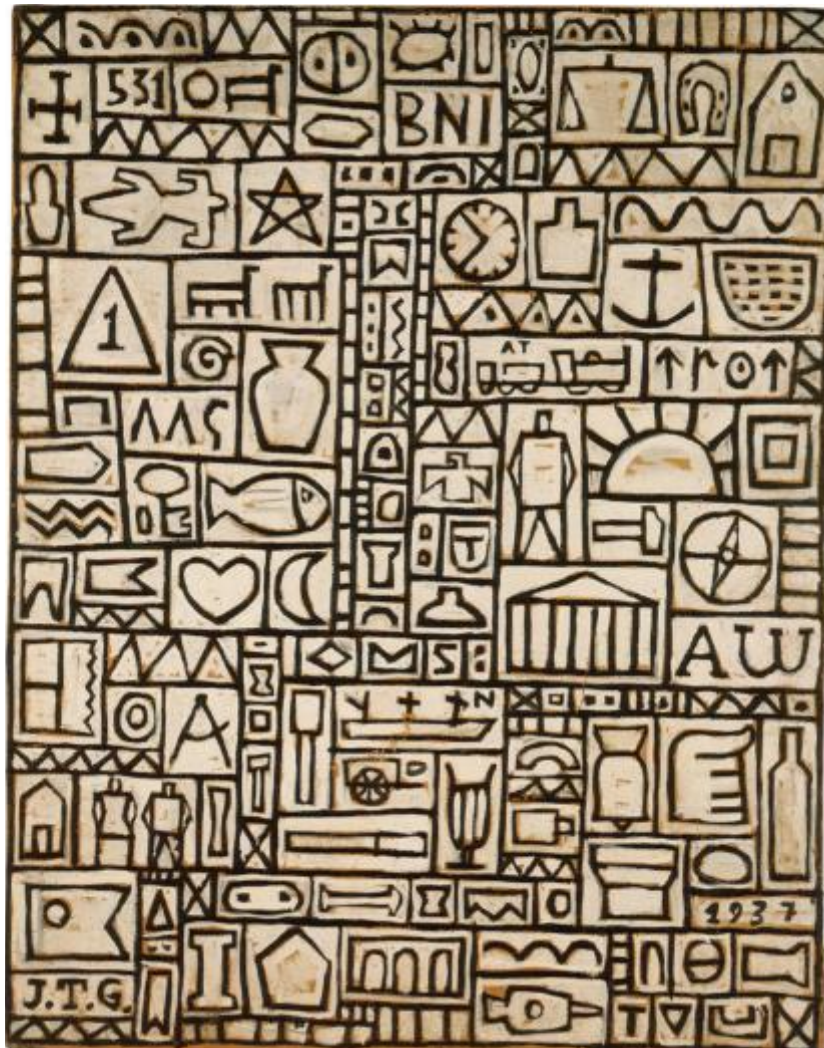


Figure 8

Joaquín Torres-García, *Universal Composition*, 1937, oil on cardboard, 108x85 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris.



que le tienen que ser adversas, Y entonces, y como el momento actual es de dura lucha, la pasión no es fácil que permita el libre discernimiento. Dominando tal tumulto, dos son, entre otras, las fuerzas que luchan en antagonismo cerrado, pero en la lobreguez de esta noche del espíritu es difícil distinguir las. El entremezclamiento de todo es tan caótico que no es posible percibir algo que de un vislumbre,

Figure 10

Joaquín Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre* (Montevideo: Edición facsimilar. Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1974), p.79.

ción. Pues sí mucho buscó en los libros, fue solo para hallar el rastro de lo que él intuía. En suma, un creador y un apóstol. ¿Y que pasó? Que al principio fue curiosa, impertinente y abusadora, ya que él era todo benevolencia y así le molían a preguntas indiscretas y presuntuosas. Gente que luego, al desaharrarse por la ciudad ya no pensaba más en él ni en sus sabias y profundas teorías. Hubo individuo que le manifestó una adhesión total, pero que, por ser intelectual y no afectiva, tuvo que durar poco, y así se disipó como fuego fátuo. Alguno, con una sola visita tuvo bastante, y luego de manifestarse entusiasmado ya no le volvió más. Y no faltó quien urdió terribles intrigas contra él. — Y bien ¿es que se estudió si su doctrina era buena o mala? Nadie pudo pensar en eso, pues nadie estaba capacitado para comprenderla. ¿Que faltaba, pues, en aquella gente? Faltaba ese impulso interno del espíritu que es el que solo puede levantarnos. — A pesar de tal fracaso, los profesores de filosofía y pedagogos, casi por instinto, sentían una secreta ira contra tal hombre. Y le dijeron que debía ponerse más a tono con el ambiente y, finalmente, que debía intervenir en política como ellos. — No era hombre de esa basta calidad, pero cedió. Cedió por benevolencia, y más por que se le dio a entender que así se acabarían las disensiones, y que esto sería un bien para todos. — Nunca, quien está en el trabajo puro, es decir, desinteresado, de una ciencia o de un arte, debe abandonar tal posición y bajar a la lucha de los otros. Pues bien, tal error, condujo a ese hombre a las peores situaciones. Entre tal turba de groseros, tuvo que enfermar y casi enloquecer. Pero no fue lo peor. Trataron de llevarle a la nueva universidad que

Figure 9

Joaquín Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre* (Montevideo: Edición facsimilar. Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1974), p.69.

Pedimos por él, y no tardamos en ser introducidos.  
 A nuestro ruego nos dijo:  
 — Todo tiene su explicación; supongámonos que alguien  
 en toma de memoria un texto, en un idioma que  
 desconoce, y luego lo recita. Tal recitación no  
 tiene que causarle ningún placer, pues ignora lo que  
 dice; pero puede haber dicho algo sublime. No ha-  
 llaron pues, placer, en practicar lo que  
 aún no podían comprender; tu-  
 vo que faltarles la necesaria con-  
 VICCIÓN. Porque no se trataba solamen-

Figure 11

Joaquín Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre* (Montevideo: Edición facsimilar. Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1974), p.72.

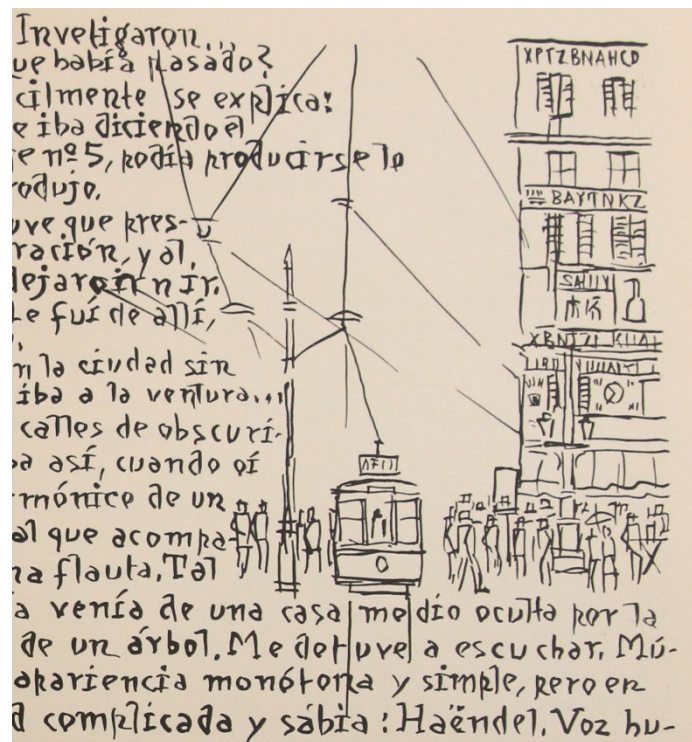


Figure 12

Joaquín Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre* (Montevideo: Edición facsimilar. Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1974), p.58.



una conversación que sostenían tres caballeros en una mesa contigua a la suya, Rafael Mendoza Castellí disparó, casi a boca de jarro, tres tiros, sin que, afortunadamente, causaran otro efecto que la consiguiente alarma entre los concurrentes a dicho establecimiento. Personado de inmediato el guardia de punto y asistido por otros dos policías, se detuvo, tras breve investigación, al autor de tan lamentable hecho.

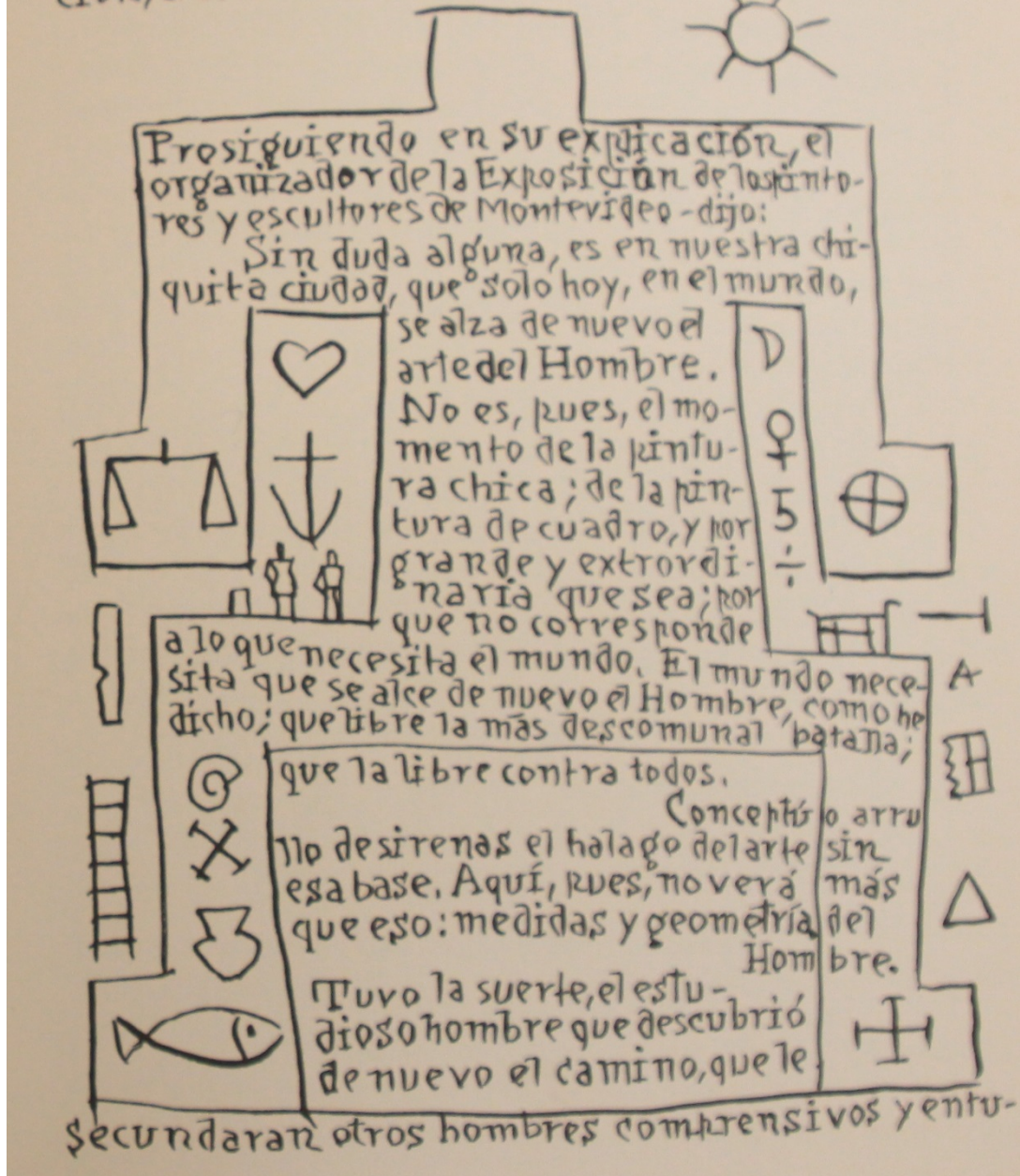


Figure 13

Joaquín Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre* (Montevideo: Edición facsimilar. Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1974), p.65.

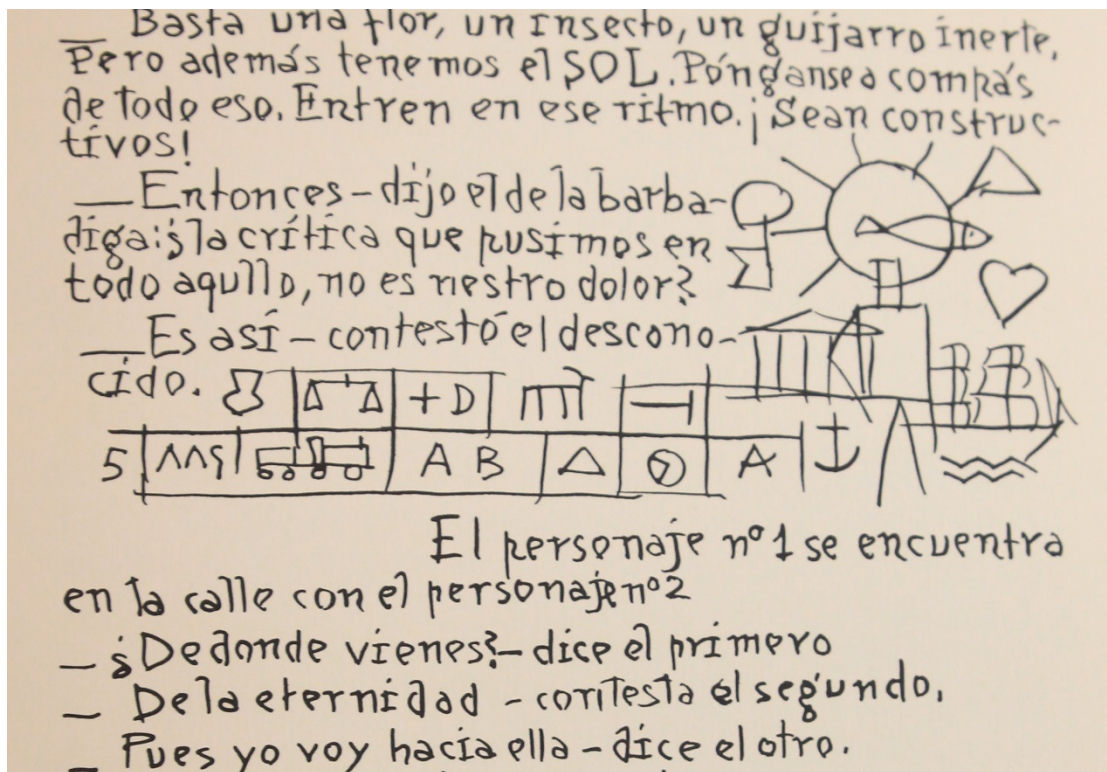


Figure 14

Joaquín Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre* (Montevideo: Edición facsimilar. Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1974), p47.

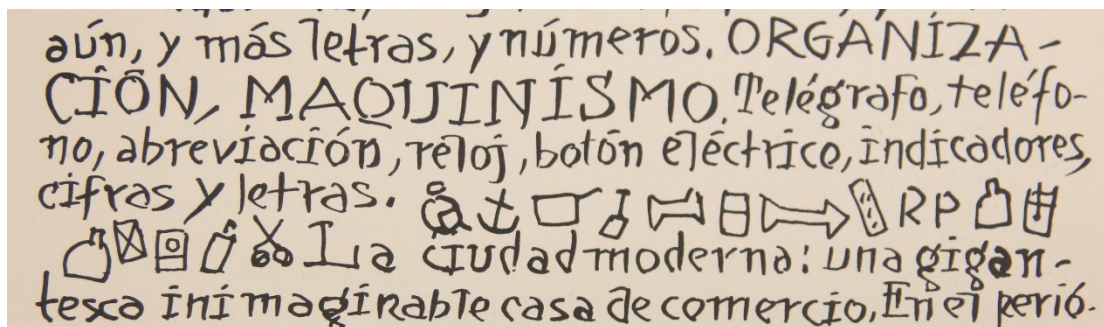


Figure 15

Joaquín Torres-García, *La ciudad sin nombre* (Montevideo: Edición facsimilar. Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1974), p.19.





Figure 12

Joaquín Torres-García, *Composition*, tempera on cardboard, 1938, 81.3x104.2cm. Guggenheim Museum, New York.



Figure 17

Alejandro Xul Solar, *Nel hondo mundo mi muy pide o min Dios*, 1961, tempera on paper, 46x55.5 cm. Private collection, Buenos Aires.



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