

## TRANSNATIONAL AESTHETICS: LITERATURE AND FILM BETWEEN BORDERS

GONZALO NAVAJAS  
University of California, Irvine

### I. THE NEW CONSTRUCT OF THE NATION

With Étienne Balibar and Jürgen Habermas, it can be said that modernity, the most encompassing cultural paradigm of the last three centuries, is defined by its adherence to fundamental principles that have a unified nature and can be made universally extensive. Some of those guiding principles that are current until today are the defense of individual and collective freedom, the institutionalization of controls of political power, and the democratic forms of government. All those ideals constitute a driving force of modernity and they have contributed to its characterization and advancement. They are all subordinated, however, to an ultimate referent that encompasses them all: the nation. Modernity is purported to be a project beyond borders and it attempts to unify humanity under a single umbrella of principles and aspirations. Yet, in reality, that universality has been constrained to function within the limits of the nation.

For Ernest Renan, Menéndez y Pelayo, Ortega y Gasset, and Thomas Mann, among others, the nation is the most fundamental source of individual and collective identity, an overarching structure that surpasses other concepts, such as freedom and justice, as the primordial principle of social and political organization. On the other hand, for Marx, Nietzsche, Pi y Margall, Kafka, and Homi Bhabha, among others, the nation is an unavoidable refer-

ent, but one that is looked at with suspicion and it is ultimately destined to redefinition and overcoming. The modern paradigm moves between those two orientations, at times one prevailing over the other, but without it ever eliminating entirely the other option. The foundation of the United States of America, the Napoleonic empire, the unification of Germany and Italy in 1871, and more recently the creation of the European Union are some of the decisive *points de repère* in this process of the assertion and explosion of the nation not just as a political reality but in particular as a cognitive framework that conditions decisively our perception of the world. As I will consider, lately, in the last two decades, this oscillating trend has been decisively altered because of the emergence of the new information and communication paradigm.

The case of Spain is exemplary in this respect because, in that country, the two orientations are being confronted in a direct manner. Both universalism and nationalism interchange in an open and at times antagonistic manner. Thus the consideration of the specific Spanish situation is in many respects prototypical for the study of the contemporary cultural condition that I believe is at a crossroads between a factual reality that is still bound to the past national mode and a rapidly emerging paradigm that is open to new configurations of understanding and organizing identity and difference.

A traditionalist country by nature, Spain has had for centuries a problematic relation with modernity and change and, within the European context, it has been emblematic of resistance to new paradigms. Nevertheless, Spain has experienced remarkable changes in the last three decades, in particular in the area of the relations between the peoples, languages, and nationalities that compose it. At the same time, as a society, Spain has had to tackle one of the most significant demographic and social phenomena of our time: the extensive transmigration and transculturization of peoples. Thus a traditionally homogeneous and mono-cultural society has experienced pressures from within and from without to transform some of its inveterate structures quickly and often against its customary historical tendencies.

Other countries, with a much longer and profound history of dealing with the assimilation of difference, such as the United States, have had in place for a long time the resources and mechanisms to define and address the issues at hand. Spain, monolith-

ic and repressive towards otherness during the Franco dictatorship, lacked such mechanisms and thus its approach to the new situation has been fitful, sometimes tentative and at other times excessive. On the one hand, Spain is one of the most pro-European countries in the European Union and thus it would seem to underplay the value of the national identity. On the other, it is a country in which the role of the internal nationalities is the strongest. Nation and super-nation confront each other, the local and the cosmopolitan coexist in a difficult interchange that defines one of the decisive issues of our time.

Technology has had a determinant role in the new configuration of the nation and its power to confer identity to collectivities. In the 1920s and 30s, Heidegger and Adorno, from different ideological perspectives, warned about the power of technology to disturb established patterns of the definition of the self and its awesome capability to trivialize and disrupt canonical taxonomies and hierarchies. Adorno blamed the new industries of film, popular music, and mass entertainment that, according to him, shaped the cultural scene with which he was confronted upon his arrival to the United States after fleeing Nazi Germany. According to that view, technology had become a tool for the devaluation of conventional culture and the depersonalization of the individual self and the new media had the power to destroy the archives of humanistic civilization.

This view of the impact of technology upon culture has changed dramatically with the era of digital communication and the irruption of the visual. The doubts of the past about technology, even if they have not completely vanished, have become largely irrelevant because the technology of communication, with the instant transportability of images and ideas throughout the world, is a fact as unmistakable as Gutenberg's press or photography. The technology of communication has revealed borders as essentially an artificial construct. To enter the Internet in order to engage in economic, cultural or inter-relational exchanges happens independently of the physical or administrative barriers that are ascribed to nations. For the first time, it is possible to communicate and act with the decisions being made throughout the world above and beyond artificial national boundaries. Those barriers still exist and they can be a powerful deterrent for free human exchanges, but, at the same time, they have proven vulnerable. In

that respect, technology has been at the avant-garde of political agendas and it has revitalized and re-connected the modern project —after the productive phase of postmodern and poststructuralist criticism— with its original *Aufklärung* orientation leading to the creation of a shared paradigm of knowledge and human values. The Kantian project envisioning a perpetual environment of peace for humanity failed because it, in fact, could be subjected to the manipulation of a single nation over others. The agendas of the state prevailed over those of the universal human project. The Napoleonic program had some potential for the implementation of some of the items in the Kantian program. Its humanistic and progressive agenda was, however, subverted by the *Diktat* of Empire.

The communication technology has proven more elusive to the power of the state. It has thus softened the ontological import of the nation precisely because that communication happens beyond the conventional delimitations of the human exchanges. There is no need for documentation or passport to access the vast communication network and the exchanges are there free and uninterrupted. If not in fact, at least in concept, the new communication paradigm is making the nation obsolete. The model of soft thought and minimalist morals brought about by postmodern thought is increasingly paralleled by the model of the soft nation and the soft national identity. Voltaire and Goethe's ideals have been vindicated two hundred years later not by the power of the written medium as they conceived it originally, but by a new technology that, in its apparent conceptual neutrality —it is just a context of communication—, has shown that it can decisively affect the world.

## II. THE POST-NATIONAL SELF

The new post-national paradigm of communication is limitless and it opens up the missing word to new referents that transcend the familiar and conventional. Any post-national forms of identity for the self, precisely because they are a becoming and not a factual reality, can be potentially everything and nothing at the same time. The most vast encyclopedia of data and the most thorough and unrestricted modes of communication, mobility, and human

exchange in the history of mankind leave also the self unprotected and devoid of tangible and credible principles. The post-national paradigm is a medium and a vehicle, but it cannot provide a *Heimat*, a secure ontological dwelling where to reside affectively as well as intellectually. It is a vast space without the emotive and mythical contents that, according to Anderson, Bhabha, and Habermas, are fundamental in constituting the nation and giving its strength and power of persuasion. It is not surprising that this new and incomplete paradigm can provoke emptiness and nothingness in the self since it offers a vast but imprecise space without specific referents and recognizable principles.

Against this backdrop, it is to be expected that the familiar and readily available option of the nation resurfaces with renewed strength. Nationalism gives an unequivocal response to the indeterminateness of the global, the desire to fulfill the need for one's recognition in a collective other that transcends the alienation of the self and it gives it a shared discourse of common icons. The nation means reassurance and self-affirmation, but often at the expense of the other, the dismissal of difference, the overestimation of one's restricted set of values and the devaluation of those of others.

In contrast with the temporal indeterminateness of the global paradigm, the national paradigm offers a perpetual time, in which the past has a clear definition, a meaning delineated by all and with which the self can connect without obstacles. Permanence and immutability are the additional rewards for the adherence to the nation. Fukuyama, Samuelson, and Bloom have proclaimed the closure of the temporal process and the ultimate absorption of the subject in a timeless structure composed of universally consensual signs and identity. Yet the confrontation between the collective and the subjective, the national and the supranational continues unabated and it still is one of the constitutive conflicts of our time.

### III. THE NEW NARRATIVES

There are challenges to this dichotomy. Rather than from the realm of the macrostructural —the political, the economic— they come from the area of the microstructural —art, literature, film,

architecture— and they conform an ambiguous rather than a complete and well-articulated reality.

### III.i. THE BORDERLESS SELF

The nationally defined subject has a secure identity that is configured around a set of commonly shared referents within the collective *Heimat* of the nation. That subject is defined as much as for what *it is not* as for what it is. It is sameness with others that are like him. It is also that which others, different from him, are not. The national subject requires the exclusion of difference and a clear delimitation of those who belong and do not belong in the privileged national *Heimat*. *Heimat* connotes warmth and protection to those who are inside of it and coldness and hostility to those who are outside. More than the physical separation of borders it is the psychological but strong separation caused by affective exclusion that determines the opposition of the national subject to the non-national other. It is an often invisible demarcation but one that defines the opposition with clarity and unambiguity. On a historical and sociological level, it is the ultimate reason behind the revolts of excluded peoples against the masters of the exclusion and separation.

Against the secure possessor of the national *Heimat*, another subject arises. It also has an origin but it is not ancestral and historically recorded in exalted terms. On the contrary, it is an origin that is shrouded in ambiguity, uncertainty, and denial. It has been erased and forgotten and, when it is remembered, that memory is denied the collective recognition, the comfortable reassurance of the assimilation by the collective other. That subject lacks common referents, since the ones that he can claim as his own are just a memory and the new ones are not fully accessible to him. This subject is dispossessed of a *Heimat* and no precise physical or emotional frontiers define or welcome him. Its social, political, and cultural impact is doubtful and yet it constitutes an increasingly common mode of individual subjectivity and identity. The a-national self is rapidly becoming the predominant and more defining mode of selfhood in contemporary history. It has reshaped the social and cultural policies of the European and American continents and it has enormous consequences for the future of

many nations. Increasingly, the internal relations of many countries will be shaped by the pressures brought about by the groups of those who do not belong fully anywhere, who move and reside between borders. In the case of Spain, the issue of the borderless subject has become in the last two decades an area of paramount importance, and it may soon overshadow other more traditional topics of contention.

In literature and film, the examples of the emergence of this new borderless and post-national self are many. The films of Almodóvar, for instance, have progressively evolved from focusing on marginal modes of social behavior —*Pepi, Luci, Bom; What Have I Done to Deserve This?*— to centering on segments of society that do not have a well-established national identity. *All About my Mother*, for instance, undermines the foundations of the family belonging to the Barcelona establishment by way of the foregrounding of several outside characters who question the legitimacy of that representative family and the values they incarnate. The modernist city, linked to the aestheticism of Gaudí's buildings, is threatened by various people that by choice have decided to live *between* the borders of that secure and beautiful space rather than inside them. The mobile and shifting national identity of the Argentinean nurse is replicated by the other women in the film and by their companion, Agrado, who has also opted for not accommodating himself to the strictures and prerogatives of the normative city.

Likewise, *Talk to Her* incorporates a borderless roaming journalist —also originally from Argentina— that finds in a utopian mode of love a surrogate *Heimat*, or affective homeland, to replace the original one left behind. Although Almodóvar's films are physically located in clearly recognizable locales in Spain, they are, in fact, an exploration of the nature of the landless self, the one that cannot find an external confirmation in his or her search for sexual, cultural, or artistic identity.

*The Bilingual Lover (El amante bilingüe)*, both in its literary and cinematographic versions by Juan Marsé and Vicente Aranda respectively, is another example of the borderless self, in this case realized through the schizophrenic ego of Marés/Faneca, who renounces his integration in the inner circle of a powerful family to which he has had access through marriage in order to assert the indetermination of his identity and the nomadic nature of his life.

In the novel, that indetermination is conveyed in particular through the hybrid language of Marés/Faneca who prefers the inconsistencies of his chaotic discourse to the well-balanced and canonical norm of his wife's family. That norm is founded on the principles of symmetry and harmony on which Eugeni D'Ors, in *La Ben Plantada*, centered the psyche of the national *Geist* of Catalonia. Marés's words undo that symmetrical order and they assert another mode of being without clear referents and purpose: «ora con la barretina, ora con la montera, o zea que a m'i me guta el mestizaje, zeñó, la barreja y el combinao...» (220). This monologue is an affirmation of the indefinition of the *Heimatloss*, those who live in between borders and exalt that shifting mobility as the nucleus of the contemporary condition.

Aranda's version of *The Bilingual Lover* retraces the origins of Marés through an Odisseic archetypal journey to Ithaca, which, in Marés's case, is the «calle Verdi,» a popular area in the quarter of Gràcia, where Marés was brought up. Marés recognizes himself in that area of the city but, unlike Homer's mythical return, Marés's reencounter with his primordial origin is disturbed by the provisionality of his return that appears merely as a subliminal reality and it is doomed to be undone. Thus, the borderless self can only undertake a return home in an ironic and delusional way.

The modes of exclusion of the self do not always have external agents that are forcibly imposed on the subject. They may also originate in the critical analysis the self performs on him/herself and his/her personal reality. Enrique Vila-Matas' *The Vertical Voyage* is an example. The novel is located in Barcelona and its central figure, Federico Mayol, is originally clearly identified with the nationalist politics of the city. Yet, the text explores Mayol's progressive separation from his national identity and origin. His cultural referents evolve from being identified with the city of Barcelona and its internal politics to opening to the world. Mayol's journey leads him to the replacement of the familiar environment for a much vaster cultural repertoire. His self-imposed exile from the ancestral domain is physical and geographical as well as literary and cultural. First, Lisbon and then the island of Madeira become his adopted lands where he attempts to rewrite a new personal biography that is devoid of the attachments to a collective past that he has rejected. Although for different reasons than



Marés, Mayol progressively rejects the harmonious and symmetric milieu of the D'Orsian Mediterranean civilization that nurtured him and that he actively promoted in order to insert himself in a new cultural environment where he could achieve a more genuine sense of belonging. Pessoa, Musil, Beckett, Sartre, and Heidegger are the vehicles of the reconfiguration of his self. His journey is existential in nature and it attempts to relate him to the central figures of contemporary thought. Without a land, without a single language and culture, he rediscovers, at the end of his life, a more persuasive mode of being. Mayol's new fatherland is philosophical and literary rather than national. He inhabits this abstract country with renewed eagerness believing that it represents an uncertain but more legitimate notion of selfhood.

Following Benjamin and Brecht, irony and parody replace the direct language and discourse of the analytical and logical language of political discourse. The old fatherland has lost for Mayol its power and attributes to confer personal qualities. As a response, he dismisses the *bon seny*, the common sense strategies that have made of him a successful businessman but have denied him the development of his human potential. His last acts are a testimony of the power of utopia and —with Nietzsche, Bakunin, and Breton— he undertakes an ultimate adventure towards the Ur-Nation, the repository of the central cultural referents of mankind. In a powerful reposition of the ontological power of the transnational, Mayol shows the ultimate futility of the paradigm of the frontier in an undertaking akin to that of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce, or to the rootless and erratic figures of Kafka.

Mayol shows that the most difficult task is that of the creation of the post-national imaginary, the identity of the Nation-less. And, in this respect, the media of narration, literature and film, can reach further than the political discourse precisely because, like Mayol demonstrates, they are potentially capable of constructing projects that transcend the predictable and ordinary. Mayol assumes as his own the signs of cultural identity of all human history and he decides to inhabit that utopian realm as his most natural space. The «Atlàntida» (a parodical reference to Verdaguer's work) is Mayol's new land. In his letter to his son, he uncovers the program of his project of transnational identity: «Estoy preparando una expedición a la Atlántida ... y si un día me buscas has de saber que podrás encontrarme en una casa del Ensanche,

en una casa de la Gran Llanura que se halla al norte de la capital de la isla hundida [...] De Cataluña me acuerdo pero ya me dirás tú dónde está [...] Espero morirme sabiendo qué es el *big bang* y soy un experto en la sabiduría de la lejanía» (241).

From the comfort of the limited and familiar *Heimat*, the city of Barcelona where he has spent most of his life, Mayol enters the realm of the unknown, making apparent, as Blanchot argued, the capacity of the mad and illogical mind for reaching to unexplored areas. Mayol is attached to the world of the *littera*, the written literary culture and thus his new land has a metaphorical and subliminal nature. In its indetermination and fluidity it parallels, however, the nature of the transmigrated and transcultural peoples that increasingly compose a greater part of the stable and ancient societies of the western world.

Like Vila-Matas, Javier Marías views literature as the most natural and genuine nation for the writer. Marías takes as his own the major referents of the Western cultural archive: from Shakespeare and Nabokov to Calvino, Borges, and Umberto Eco. At the same time, he attempts a fusion of the great referents of literature, which are classified within precise national and cultural boundaries, with the more geographically imprecise discourse of popular and visual culture. His drive to foreground marginal writers and texts, to empower the non-canonical and to focus on the art that lies at the outskirts of the great *urbi* of culture, responds to an effort to combine and to mix the apparently incompatible. Although Marías writes in Spanish by choice, his language, syntax, and general discourse belong to the transnational contemporary condition. The extensive influence of Anglo-Saxon history and literature in his work, the re-elaboration of topics of modern European history and in particular those involving World War II, the peripatetic course of his characters on both sides of the Atlantic, shape Marías's narrative as a cosmopolitan and universal realm with which to counter what he sees as the provincial and self-absorbed drive of Spanish history that has made difficult the meaningful cultural exchanges of the country with the outside. His criticism of the average Spaniard is often direct and unambiguous: «tenía esa mezcla de cursilería y zafiedad, ñoñería y ordinariéz, edulcuración y brutalidad, que se da tanto entre mis compatriotas, una verdadera plaga y una grave amenaza» (*Tu rostro mañana*, 74).

London, New York, Havana and the vast space of modern culture and thought constitute the new nation where Mariás places his work. A nation that, because it does not require visible and monumental referents to define itself, can afford to be anti-hierarchical and assert the canonical simultaneously with the peripheral. The transnational exploration initiated in *All the Souls (Todas las almas)* and then reconstituted in other works such as *Such a White Heart (Corazón tan blanco)* and *Tomorrow in the Battle Think of Me (Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí)* is an example of the reconducting of the literary discourse toward the nationally weak and marginal.

Architecture, perhaps the most emblematic of contemporary media, provides numerous examples of the transnational paradigm. Rafael Moneo's Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral or Frank Gehry's Disney Hall in downtown Los Angeles fuse the codes of classical architecture with the most daring forms of the culturally indetermined. A Cathedral that faces a busy and gray freeway and a Concert Hall placed in the midst of the popular Latin and financial community of downtown Los Angeles are an assertion of an art that refuses to accept borders and barriers as permanent and it proposes instead a polyglot and multinational vision of culture.

### III.ii. THE ETHICAL A-NATIONAL SELF

Despite the weakening of its constitutive principles, the nation still is the basic source for the creation and legitimization of norms and laws that have validity for a community that accepts them consensually by common agreement. Although international law has had increasing visibility and functions in the world, it is a fact that the law of the nation still is the ultimate agent and arbiter in legal affairs. Dictatorships and administrative corruption find protection in this national origin and grounding of jurisprudence. From Pinochet to Fujimori, the examples are numerous. In the last few years, we have been witnessing that a central hindrance for the further unification of Europe has been precisely the predominance of the national over the supranational goals and norms.

The advantage that the national enjoys over the transnational

is the familiarity of the objectively existing and known over the unfamiliarity of the virtual and unknown. Since transnational discourse lacks a unified history and well-defined spatial borders, the issue of the creation of a transnational ethical norm is paramount. To be between borders, to be at the fringes of the nation is to be nowhere, to lack a voice and the power to be heard. Recent international films such as a Stephen Frears' *Dirty Pretty Things* and Fernando Meirelles, *Cidade de Deus (City of God)* are an example of the particular functioning of the norm in peripheral collectivities, such as London's underground community of undocumented workers in *Dirty Pretty Things* and the clandestine youth bands of the *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro.

The global has brought about a reconfiguration of the meaning of time and history. Rather than continuity with that past, the global paradigm is a call to write history *ab nihilo*, privileging the present as the definitive point of the beginning of a new era free from the burden of the mistakes and guilt of the past. The post-modern offered a temporal medley, the appealing hybridity of the classical and the contemporary that is exemplified in the many buildings of the 70s and 80s throughout the world. The new age of global information and communication can dispense with the historical producing in turn a void of referentiality and identity.

The void of a pure Pascalian *Existenz* brings about the new historical bent that can be detected in the latest developments in literature and film. *Soldiers of Salamina (Soldados de Salamina)*, both in its literary and cinematographic versions by Javier Cercas and David Trueba respectively, illustrates the desire of the young (in the film clearly linked to the new means of communication and identity) to find emblematic figures in the past. Miralles embodies the only possible option for exemplary models. And yet he is an ambiguous figure, living outside the core of the nation, in between lands, languages and norms, residing physically in Dijon, but emotionally in Girona, speaking French, but thinking in Spanish and Catalan. Assimilated to the strange environment surrounding him, but installed, in fact, in the mythical past of a heroic time that cannot return. A past, however, that is not dead but that beacons towards him and perhaps also towards us proclaiming the rights of the uprooted, and revealing them as the ultimate and most difficult choice of history. In contrast to the trivialized view of time which is present in the devalued products and objects of

the proliferating culture industries of our time, the language and acts of the nation-less, those without a home may still produce a persuasive post-Nietzschean dimension of an inclusive and anti-normative paragon of individual and collective identity.

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