

Fantastic invention and cultural nationality: the case of Xul Solar

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Xul Solar offers a composite profile: avant-gardiste Janus, he produced, as early as 1915 (when painting in Argentina was mostly post-Impressionism, pompier symbolism or late realism à la Courbet), the subtly figurative designs of his water-colors; and, a few years later, the abstract space where floated imaginary creatures among hieroglyphs and inscriptions of esoteric origin. He was an enigmatic protagonist of the artistic renewal in Argentina, the performer of a one-man *mise en scène* where mystic and magical topics were transposed through a most refined pictorial technique, and, at the same time, a man involved in the challenges that modernity presented to art and culture.

In the nineteen twenties the Argentine avant-garde movement rotated around three axis: the open question about nationality and cultural heritage in a country whose demographic profile was dramatically changing due to the presence of thousands of immigrants; the relation to be established with Western art and literature; and the research of new formal means in order to draw a clear limit vis à vis the literary past, on one hand, and the contemporary realist and socialist aesthetics, on the other. Xul Solar, together with Jorge Luis Borges, Oliverio Girondo, Ricardo Güiraldes and Emilio Pettoruti, are the names that range in the very front of these battles of modernity. Criticism has read Xul Solar in the irrefutable key of his humorous and sophisticated use of religious mythologies, mystical traditions and astrology.⁽¹⁾ This essay will place him in the scene of the Argentine cultural debate.⁽²⁾ Without overlooking the significance of his work in the unfolding of a *fantastic imagination*, I will try to read his paintings and inventions as a response to the three main questions that haunted Argentine avant-garde.

Language and origin

Xul Solar himself was of mixed origins: his father a German, Emilio Schulz, his mother an Italian, Agustina Solari.⁽³⁾ From the very beginning, he chose to change his name, compounding and synthesizing his own origins and adopting a Spanish form of his mother's patronymic. The gesture signals one of the passionate debates of the period, about the European origins of Argentine racial blend and whether the preeminence of the social elite of hispanic origin should be vindicated in front of the immigrants that had arrived and continued arriving from all the corners in Europe. In his first books of poetry and his essays of the twenties and early thirties, Borges himself faces this issue: What does it really mean to be Argentinian? Who has acquired the rights to define the still unlimited field of Argentine culture?

Language was at stake, namely in a country where newly-arrived immigrants introduced their own languages in the cultural landscape of littoral cities as Buenos Aires. As Xul, Borges was inclined to play with the idea of artificial languages,⁽⁴⁾ and these were for him not only a matter of philosophical and aesthetical invention, as he has shown in stories like "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", but also conveyed the sense of an endangered linguistic 'authenticity' that should be preserved by those that were not strict conservatives nor fanatic purists in these matters, but lawful heirs to the Argentine cultural patrimony. In fact, a line drawn by social class defined ownership and propriety over language; the partition

included men and women of mixed European origins as long as these could not be traced down to the proletarian world of the working immigrants.

It is not farfetched, then, to read Xul Solar's and Borges' inventions of artificial languages as a double-faced programmatic response to a historical challenge: the abstract, free impulse of a playful invention, on one hand; the national concern with mixture and cross-breeding on the other. Xul worked on both directions: he invented 'neocriollo' that intended to be a panamerican language based on Latin roots and local expressions; and he also invented 'panlengua', one of the hundreds of Esperanto-like creations, very typical of the period, based on a simple syntax and an additive method of word-building. Both, 'neocriollo' and 'panlengua', could be thought as a symbolic alternative to the malaise risen by the modifications Spanish was suffering under the influence of words, images and sounds of remote foreign origins. Borges, who also felt the uneasiness of these changes, acknowledged Xul's precedence and influence on his own account of imaginary languages.

Fiction and the man

A novel, written by one of the prominent members of the avant-garde movement, Leopoldo Marechal, offers some clues that could help to reconstruct how Xul Solar was seen by his contemporaries. *Adán Buenosayres*, a Joyce-inspired fiction published in 1948, features Xul Solar under the most evident guise of the astrologer Schultze, member of a group of young friends (among whom a transparent figuration of Borges and of the author himself) that embark in a delirious expedition into the suburbs of Buenos Aires where they aim to discover the true sense of Argentine culture. The voyage ends in a descent to the Hades of a fantastic city, Cacodelphia, through whose spirals Schultze guides Adán Buenosayres, establishing himself as a comic Vergil. Both the excursion to the suburbs and the descent to Cacodelphia are heavily stressed by parodical discussions on the peculiar and inevitable mixture that produces Argentine culture.

Exploring the suburbs of Buenos Aires, the group of friends encounter a sort of comical monster that, according to Schultze-Xul, is the prefiguration of the future Argentine type. Paying a playful homage to Xul Solar's panamerican language, Marechal names him the 'Neocriollo' and describes him as the fantastic man-artifact compound that proliferates in Xul Solar's paintings:

"The form was completely naked; his trunk and abdomen were transparent as illuminated with X rays and the subtle design of his organs could be easily seen; he stood on one of his huge legs and bent the other [...] his head was surrounded by a radiant mist, his phosphorescent eyes revolved like spots placed on the extreme of two huge anthers; his mouth was a saxophone and his ears were two revolving funnels..."⁽⁵⁾

Many of Xul's paintings of this years offer a similar iconology: translucent planes for the bodies, technical forms mixed with stylised parts of the human anatomy, mechanical attributes. Through the disjunction of these elements, Xul Solar presents his deliberate invention of fantastic creatures that inhabit a fantastic landscape and drive fantastic machines. The tribute to these inventions is quite obvious, but Marechal adds an ideological turn to his literary rendering of Xul's man-and-machine creatures. The future,

he states in *Adán Buenosayres*, is seen through Xul's eyes and is therefore a humorous and, at the same time, serious extension of Xul's mythology.

The originality of these visual myths is so strong (an so new in Argentine painting) that no reader could be mistaken by the literary version of the 'Neocriollo': there he stood, an imaginary blend of disparate elements, as Argentine nationality was a cultural blend of heterogenous origins and heritages. The novel goes on, after the appearance of the optimistic monster, to show how Schultze-Xul is the only one in the group of friends able to translate the Neocriollo's vibrant although completely incomprehensible address to the expeditionaries: a sort of pedantic, prophetic poem that does not conceal its parodical use of the techniques of avant-garde literature.

Not only does Schultze-Xul recognize and understand a creature that looks very much like his own painted inventions, he also acts as guide of the group, leading his friends through the suburbs of Buenos Aires by means of his knowledge of the position of stars and planets. This prominent role is attributed to him throughout the novel and culminates when Schultze-Xul makes possible the descent to Hades-Cacodelphia: Schultze draws a magic circle in the midst of the pampas, writes the names of three cultural epitomes of nationality (that correspond to three literary characters: Santos Vega the gaucho defeated by progress; Juan Sin Ropa, the devilish incarnation of a new country based on capitalist relations; and Martín Fierro, the national hero sung in a nineteenth century poem and consecrated by the criollo elite at the turn of the century), recites a conjuration in (false) Hebrew and summons a feminine personification of a benevolent criollo devil who, after examining Schultze in several folkloric topics, opens a crack in the earth that leads to Hades.

The versatility in multiple fields of knowledge (i.e., magic, astrology, Argentine traditional lore) is attributed throughout the novel to Schultze-Xul and it is not incongruous with the cosmopolitanism that permeates the mixture of topics and myths in the paintings and inventions of the real Xul Solar. In fact, Xul is highly representative of the intellectual type that defined the direction of Argentine avant-garde in the twenties and thirties. He tackles the same problems that interested Borges and provides a perspective that has many common traits with the paradoxical 'national universalism' that can be found in Borges' first books of essays and in the short stories he published in 1935 under the hyperbolic title of *Universal History of Infamy*, where fiction grows from the translation of fables, anecdotes and exempla drawn from various literary and historical sources. Through these decades, for Borges as for Xul, *criollismo* and cosmopolitanism did not oppose in an unresolved contradiction, but, on the contrary, their blend offered an original solution to the open question about the profile of culture in a marginal country where diverse lays of heritage (criollo-hispanic, Western-European) were undergoing swift modifications under the disruptive pressure of other traditions that, impersonated by the immigrants, were not always judged as genteel and literate but more than often as menacing and coarse.

Beings, buildings and flags

Three motives persist in Xul Solar's paintings: fantastic beings, architecture and flags. All the three can be organised in a transcendent, mythical or theological interpretation, but this perspective which is very obvious and meets Xul's own claims, does not forbid a

different (socio-cultural) reading of the mentioned motives. Along his extended career, Xul always painted complex, compound creatures: humanlike, dragonlike, birdlike, based on signs that evoke the imaginary of modern science fiction. His cosmogony needs them to present the mythological universe organised by a new and syncretic order, sustained by mathematical, astronomical and astrological rhythms. Xul's fantastic beings offer a non-naturalist, non-realistic solution to the representation of the human or animal body, a solution devised through the geometrical discipline imposed to all the elements of the picture.

The fantastic creatures respond to a curious blend of technical inspiration (mechanical patterns and direct quotations of helices, gear-like spirals or rectangles that remind the parts of a machine), and fragments of the human body designed through an avant-gardist and primitivistic geometrization (oval hollow eyes, perfect circles as breasts, layers of rectangles that correspond to trunks and limbs). The creatures are, at the same time, poetical and technological, futuristic and mythical; they amalgam different temporalities corresponding to a mythical era and a modernist present.

Liquid, subtle, translucent colored planes intersect creating a space of representation that combines its abstract qualities with motives drawn from architecture or basic natural forms (as the sun, mountains, valleys, oceans and clouds). The collision of geometrical forms and the quotation of "natural" objects build a fantastic landscape doubling in a second series of translucent regular forms which often intersect to produce the fantastic creatures. Signs representing the map of astrological skies, or symbols that can be traced back to archaic Western and Eastern religions, crossed circles or arrows, float in this abstract-representative spaces, fraternizing with fantastic flying machines, wind-propelled aerial cities, steam-boats and winged-animals. The jumble of the old and the very new is a typical feature of important lines of the European avant-garde that Xul knew well.⁽⁶⁾ This trait of the avant-garde (clearly represented by Kandinsky) matches, in the case of Xul Solar, with the question that haunted contemporary Argentine culture: what to do with the past in the construction of the future, how to conjugate traditional elements in the new mixture of a modern culture that also bears the pressure of a very strong technical bias.⁽⁷⁾ Architectural motives were an evident presence in Xul Solar's paintings right to the end. Still in 1962, the palladian inspiration of his "Domus Aurea", although it alternates with cryptograms of magical and theological origin, shows up to which point the cityscape was an obsession that Xul shared with other artists of the Argentine avant-garde. But he did not feel, as Borges felt, the nostalgia for the past hispanic city, nor did he stressed, as Borges did, the popular criollo suburbs where the last houses stood in a close relation to the open pampas that still surrounded Buenos Aires at the beginning of the century.

Xul Solar's architectures quotes a moderate version of Modernism,⁽⁸⁾ severely geometrical although brightly colored. His buildings are organised by a strict disposition of the volumes and even when he represents the modern city (which is often thought of not only as technical rationality but also as chaos), Xul imposes a complex but discernible order. He does not jumble buildings and façades to create the menacing (or enticing) image of the modern city; on the contrary, he studiously establishes a cityscape where sky-scrapers or modern square houses respond to an organic perspective. Architectural modernity means order and geometry, even in the fantastic spaces of Xul Solar's paintings.

At the same time, Xul is not an advocate of "white modernism": his buildings repel the uniformity of a sole color and, instead, present a plural, lively, heterogeneous image of the city ultimately organized by form and not by color, by order and by subtle quotations of classic elements (as colonnades, stairs and arches). The unity of the design grants the possibility of deploying the diversity of color and detail. The idiom of architecture offered Xul a plastic organization of the surface (which was essential for a highly rational painter as he was) and, at the same time, a possibility of playing with differences and repetitions, a formula that suits particularly well not only his cityscapes but also the more abstract and fantastic landscapes where very simple geometrical volumes and surfaces, communicated through roads and bridges, present imaginary geographies marked by non-local, namely universal, icons.

Thus Xul Solar presents a visual counterpart of what, during the first half of this century, was the object of important discussion in Argentine essays and fictions: the plurality of modern city whether considered in its capacity to incorporate foreign and even exotic components or as the cluttered chaos produced by the combination of elements of different and even incompatible origins. The city was a symbolic battlefield for Argentine intellectuals and, in the case of Xul Solar, it represented the double image of a classical modernity planted in an imaginary space where graphisms of occultist, religious and magic origins could also be deployed.

Flags abound in Xul Solar's cityscapes and in his fantastic landscapes, especially in the twenties and early thirties. They crown the heads of his floating creatures, that also carry them on poles or painted on their garments; they decorate dragons' bodies or birds' wings; they float freely in abstract spaces; they are shown on the mast of boats and on the chimneys of ships, on the façades of buildings or on the platform of fantastic flying machines, painted on the walls of houses or hanging loosely from cords. Flags speak the language of nationality and their presence point to diversity as a central quality of Xul Solar's imaginary. Together with religious and magic signs (all type of crosses, Jewish stars, arrows, hieroglyphs, numbers and letters, cabalistic formulae, astrological notations), flags organize a universal space open to the exhibition of legitimate differences. As in the case of religions and myths, Xul's painting tends to incorporate and synthesise: invented or existing flags coexist as visual epithets of space and of the fantastic beings and artifacts that drift through it.

Flags and other signs stress the semiotic quality of Xul Solar's visual inventions. In the forties and fifties, his paintings invite to be considered as syntactically organized surfaces, where signs are combined in a structure that can be interpreted as a visual phrase. The transcendent quality of these paintings cannot be overlooked: signs produce meaning in a deliberate and highly allegorical way that legitimates a reading of Xul Solar's painting according to magic, religious and mythical values. In the "grafías" and objects (altars, retablos, modified chessboard and Tarot cards) all the painted elements are *signs* in the strictest sense; each of them means something not only in the overall structure of the painted surface but also in relation to a system that exists outside and independent of it. They represent the ultra-semiotic moment of Xul Solar's always highly semiotic painting. But they do not call for a literary rendition of their meaning; on the contrary, they present a visual allegory whose sense cannot be wholly attained through a verbal translation.

Heavily laden with meaning, nevertheless Xul Solar's paintings never narrate. They are not tableaux that offer an occultist epic or a myth, but plastic organizations of allegorical elements. This might be the reason why Xul Solar's aesthetics can be appreciated independently of the mystics endeavors that doubtless were also a substantive base for his creative impulse.

The ideological materials that Xul Solar turned into the subject of his painting claim to be considered as the gist of his inspiration; however, as it is the case with Mondrian or Kandinsky, the strong syntactic organization of the painted surface justly demands at least as much attention. It sets the conditions of a formal reading of his art and also of a socio-cultural interpretation, placing Xul Solar in the history of Argentine painting as an original response to questions about nationality and the constitution of culture in a marginal country, that the avant-garde of the twenties and thirties had as a common and often obsessive preoccupation.

Notes

1.

See: Rafael Squirru, 'Xul Solar, Esoteric Glimpses', in Mario H. Gradowczyk (ed.), *Xul Solar: Collection of the Art Works of the Museum*, Pan Klub Foundation, Xul Solar Museum (Buenos Aires) 1990; Mario Gradowczyk, 'Xul Solar, el umbral de otro cosmos', *Artinf*, XII, 64-65 (Buenos Aires) 1987; León Benarós, 'Símbolo, número, magia en Xul Solar', *Artinf*, X, 52-53 (Buenos Aires) 1985; Carlos Areán, 'Xul Solar, surrealista argentino', *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 524 (Madrid) 1994.

2.

John King has traced the topics of this debate and pointed to its cultural importance in 'Xul Solar: Buenos Aires, modernity and utopia'.

3.

Oscar Agustín Alejandro Schulz Solari (Xul Solar) was born in a small town very near Buenos Aires in 1887. He attended English and French schools; in 1901, his family moved to Buenos Aires where, in 1906, he went to the University to study architecture. In 1912, he began a long period of travels abroad: London, Torino, Paris, Florence, the Italian seaside, München, Milano, where he presented his first exhibition in 1920. In 1924, he showed several paintings in Paris and returned to Argentina where he immediately got acquainted with the avant-garde group formed around the magazine *Martín Fierro*. In 1926, he organized an exhibition with Emilio Pettorutti and Norah Borges; a year later, with the same and Del Prete; in 1929, with Antonio Berni. From 1933 to 1939, Xul Solar showed his work in collective exhibitions in Buenos Aires and other Argentine cities and, in 1940, Amigos del Arte, a very important institution of the artistic field, organised an individual exhibition of his work. During the nineteen forties he gave lectures and courses on astrology and spiritualism. In 1948, his work was shown in the prestigious Galería Witcomb; in 1951, in Galería Bonino, and, in 1953, in Galería Van Riel. In 1954 he moved his atelier to the margins of the Río Luján on the Delta of the Paraná, near Buenos Aires; the house was especially designed by Xul Solar. He died in 1963. In 1977, the Musée

d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris organized an exhibition of 61 pictures, whose catalogue includes texts by Jorge Luis Borges and Aldo Pellegrini. Almost every year after his death, Galería Rubbers and other institutions show part of Xul Solar's work in Buenos Aires. A remarkable collection can be visited in the Museo Xul Solar, Buenos Aires, where one of the members of the Pan Klub, Martha Rastelli de Caprotti, is extremely helpful to visitors and researchers.

4.

For the best study on Xul's artificial languages, their ideological implications, and the coincidences with Borges, see Alfredo Rubione, 'Xul Solar: Utopía y vanguardia', *Punto de Vista*, X, 29 (Buenos Aires) 1987.

5. Leopoldo Marechal, *Adán Buenosayres*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1966 [1948], p. 191.

6.

See Katya García-Antón and Christopher Green (with interventions from Dawn Ades), 'The Architectures of Alejandro Xul Solar', where the links of the Argentine painter with the European avant-garde are carefully established.

7.

I have traced the technological influences on Argentine culture of the period in *La imaginación t écnica; sueños modernos de la cultura argentina*, Nueva Visión (Buenos Aires) 1992.

8.

This is convincingly proved by Katya García-Antón and Christopher Green, op. cit.

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