

REVIEWS

These reflections are based on my links and familiarity with a subject —the uses of symbols— which I regard as a ragingly contemporary issue. More than a subject, it is a question: is the presence of the symbol possible in contemporary culture and in the history of our time? Do any traces remain of symbolism as we reach the end of the 20th century, and of the second millennium?

To begin, we should ask ourselves what is the symbol in art. It is the condensation of time in space and imagery, and, as an interval of time, the representation of the artist's will to persist, to continue along history's path, to seek the immortality of one's own sign and one's own character.

I have also individualised certain symbols that have constructed history and which have reached us mainly because they have defied history: in terms of spatial condensation, they have managed to hold on to their own time, while also pointing to the future.

The first sign, naturally, was the one that appeared to Constantine in his tent on the eve of the first great battle, the cross with the inscription "in hoc signo vinces", not advertising for a material, nor for a metal for a new suit of armour, or a new sword with which to slay the enemy, but rather an

The Reproduction of Symbols

apparition, an epiphany symbolising hope —a fount of confidence— not in war, but in faith. The cross is a symbol which in a sense overcomes the passing moment, and is the prolonging of the battle, as we learn from *The Dream of Constantine* (1466) by Piero della Francesca.

Turning to our own times, to our secular and industrial society, I would say that Coca-Cola is another symbol. Coca-Cola, whose image has never changed, has become over time a symbol of the society of the United States, that *impetuous, competitive, "young" society*: the new world where, substantially, the rhythms of life related to the economy, war, entertainment, peace, and play are ever speeding. Coca-Cola, with its secret formula, is the ultimate expression of the alchemist's industry.

As is well known, alchemy springs from and is preserved by the supposition of secrecy; the secret formula that is never disclosed to the public. The artist engages in a process of transformation of his materials —from the most "vile" to pure gold— and then invites the public to contemplate only the final result, never revealing the "ingredients" making up the product. The laws of the United States have allowed Coca-Cola to keep its formula a secret. Here we have a strange synthesis between industry and alchemy. Here, then, we have a product that is presented as a symbol capable of ensuring the triumph, the supremacy of the Anglo-American world.

In contemporary art we might point out other images that have worked as symbolic representations, but in terms that I would not lump together with "advertising". Let us consider Picasso's *Guernica*, which perfectly represents the noble expression of avant-garde art placed at the service of society to convey a meaning, a message to the public. This message was sent following the massacre committed by the German Stukas of the Third Reich, which carried out history's first saturation bombing mission on this little town, one Saturday at noon, on a market day, when the square was thronged with people.

Picasso decided to “reduce the interest rate”, so to speak, on a Cubist experiment, to use it in cordial terms for society, creating a product —not by accident in black and white— that could be used as a great manifesto for transmitting a message of brotherhood, and against war, horror, death, and destruction.

In the post-war years, among the new avant-gardes, we find in Beuys the leading exponent of symbolic art: the use of the cross is many of his works is laden with a sentiment linked to German Romanticism, and he also uses a number of materials taken from daily life, shaping them, I might say, with the strategy of an alchemist. The cross is used as a symbol capable of bestowing, baptising, and sacralising the product of the artist’s individual imagination.

Let us say that, substantially, as time is accelerating and with it the pace of life, along with the proliferation of electronics, computers and telecommunications technologies, there emerges an antithesis, linked to symbolism. If the symbol, then, is the representation of the cross-roads between space and time —the capacity to condense temporality in space and image— then the acceptance of time undermines this possibility, making us descend to considering the origin of the quotation, which implies an attitude that is more secular, but also more two-dimensional and less profound in semantic terms.

This attitude was not born in the 20th century, since it first flowered in Mannerism which, as we know, arose with the apogee of Italian art —the Renaissance—, when at the end of the 15th century, society was undergoing a deep epistemological crisis, a crisis of knowledge precipitated by geography with the discovery of America. Religion turned a decisive corner due to the “protest” against centralism and the supremacy of the Catholic Church, with Luther’s protestant theses and the Council of Trent’s response in the form of the counter-reformation. Then Kepler discovered that the sun did not circle the earth, but vice versa, hence the earth lacked the central and anthropocentric position it had been attributed for being inhabited by creatures made in God’s image.

With Marsilio Ficino, who located the structure of the human spirit in the “*ansietas*”, the transition was made from Aristotelian philosophy to neo-Platonic.

We also have Machiavelli’s theory of *realpolitik*, which de-mythifies the ideality of political conflict, portraying political struggle as a consequence of the appetites and selfish interests of the Prince, who sometimes employs the mask of the fox and others that of the lion to usurp and defend power.

Lastly, I will mention the sack of Rome in 1527, when Charles V’s forces occupied St. Peter’s for more than a year, defending the city with iron and fire.

All this caused a great commotion in the spirit of 16th century intellectuals and artists, who felt they had lost their cultural underpinnings. Their familiar reference points and criteria had been swept away, and in the crisis that followed they suffered a sort of historical exhaustion in which they were unable to imagine the future, and able only to remember the past. The use of the allusion was a consequence of this exhaustion, along with the recovery of the linguistic models of the Renaissance, revisited and reformulated in conceptual terms precisely as the fruit of subjective memory. Even pictorial space was transformed into psychological space; we can appreciate this more easily if we consider the restoration of the Sistine Chapel by that magnificent Mannerist Michelangelo. Colours become mental, electric; space becomes psychological.

When an artist adopts a subjective point of view and loses confidence in his way of seeing the world, the condensation of time in space becomes fruit of an extravagant, eccentric, and “manic” personal memory.

And this allusive procedure was taken up and developed by that neo-Mannerist movement which spread throughout the world at the end of the 1960’s: the *transavant-garde*.

Returning to the initial question — is the persistence of symbols still possible at the end of the 20th century, of the second millennium?— I consider

that art is still driven by the desire to give persistence to the ephemeral, to freeze the instant, to condense within oneself a kind of depth of time.

However, the problem is that society is represented, almost supplanted, by data transmission, by television, where everything flies and nothing is permanent. Because of technology, it seems as if there is an organised and structural “unmemory” against which art tries to wage its own battle.

If we consider, for example, Paolo Uccello’s *The Battle of San Romano* (1456), we see how the artist addressed the problem of a representation that was not merely the documentary achievement of one who records the iconography of an act of war; there is a transfiguration of the colour—the horses become blue, and continuous use is made of the *mazzocchio* (the spiral hat that is an important structural component of some parts of the work), and space is organised through the deployment of the armies, lances, weapons and nature in terms of economy that sacrifice from literal documentation for the sake of an iconographic representation that is capable of reaching out to us.

If we knew how to look with these same eyes at the television screens which in 1991 showed us the first bombardment of Baghdad by the Anglo-Americans, or the war in Bosnia, or even—in black and white— what we saw of

Vietnam 25 years ago, would realise that telecommunications are not at the service of representation, but tend to be confined purely to the documentary realm.

Television condenses time, but only in terms of instantaneousness, an immediacy that is replaced by another, ulterior one, requiring other instants, but lacking the capacity for synthesis that is necessary to guide the artist’s process of formalisation.

Images of war transmitted by television: they lead us to a perverse slide into pure spectacularity, fulfilling Nietzsche’s prophecy that art would become a show-window of itself.

The show-window implies the development of a representation capable of satisfying the visual appetite of a mass society that asks the show-window to deliver the merchandise, in quantity and not quality, space instead of time, the instant rather than the reflection.

The nocturnal fire over Baghdad, curiously, produces a perverse result, appearing as an almost festive spectacle, fireworks over a city under curfew, appearing in no way reprehensible, and without a hint of the deaths that followed the bright explosion of each bomb. When the bomb disappears by deflagration, semantically it loses its meaning of death and it survives syntactically for an instant as a pure visual segment, a luminous moment on the dark of the screen.

Modern telecommunications

anthropologically modifies our way of seeing, of waiting, the sensibility of the public viewing an event, while—geographically removed but synchronically close in time—a squint between space and time is created: just the opposite of what occurs in the artistic process, where time is condensed in space. In this case there is a denuding, a report from a far-off land, Iraq, testimony, in a certain sense, to space as a sort of small noise: there emerges an instantaneous temporality that cannot last, a time that eludes profundity, dissolving into a horizontal two-dimensionality.

All this naturally leads to a position that is the fruit of the electronic media which tends to expel time, taking it up to make it run, rather than becoming a deposit of time. All this produces a sort of anti-artistic process which removes reflection from the process of knowledge.

The electronic media in general tend to present only figurative images, a sort of visual tautology circumscribed to the television screen. Within this space death is only a colour, a sound, a stereophonic element with no capacity for causing reflection, pain or affliction. Death becomes just another piece of merchandise for the eye, for the cannibalism of the spectator, like some exotic element.

All this is brought into even sharper relief if we consider that over time television has put another

prosthetic device at the public's disposal: zapping. Metaphorically, zapping is a sort of paintbrush for the spectator. Just as a painter can make a sign disappear, so can the spectator achieve this same sense of omnipotence, allowing him to behead any person, event, or drama, replacing it, and shifting his attention from one channel to another.

It is obvious that telecommunication media are necessarily, structurally, far removed from the symbol, since, as I have said, if the symbol is the condensation of time in space, representation, the iconographical interval that illustrates the yearning for immortality of the image, then television openly proclaims its own strategy for the death of the image; the media are not interested in the duration of the image, since they thrive on iconographic substitutions, and interchangeability, while death is not interchangeable.

The loss of thickness, the semantic reduction of the image, is all that permits this process of sliding away.

And so, facing this panorama, how might the symbolic value of art be re-established at the end of the 20th century, the end of the second millennium.

Let us consider the latest advance of technology, so-called "virtual reality". As we know, virtual reality tends to lead to a sort of anthropology of play on reality: it is like playing an arcade game via an instrument, a technological

prosthetic device that places us virtually within a reality that is not in front of us like a television screen, but that encircles us, besieges us, surrounds us like a landscape. This virtuality, by definition, can be based only on movement, to and fro —first I go to virtual reality, then I return to natural reality. Here again there is no chance of real comprehension of the subject, of the semantic thickness of death, because death signifies a cut, a wound, suspension, obliteration. If death were considered in its true significance, this shift back and forth between the virtual and the natural would not be possible.

Technology —telecommunications, computers, electronics— condemns us to virtual immortality.

With this in mind I must mention a book that was for me a great discovery. It is *La invención de Morel*, by Bioy Casares, a great Argentine writer, a friend and collaborator Borges.

This book, a sort of detective novel, tells the story of a man who escapes from jail and, pursued by the police, finds refuge on an island. There he finds a palace that seems to be inhabited —there is light inside, and people can be seen through the windows, on the balconies, and in the garden. The fugitive hides behind some bushes and waits for nightfall. In the palace a party seems to be in progress, and, approaching stealthily, the fugitive hears voices, conversations, and feels like a eavesdropper. But when he comes closer

he learns that these bodies and personalities are not real, but are projected by a strange machine in the basement, using the tides. Morel's invention consists precisely of making a future life a from an exhausted present.

Technology, computers, and electronics produce a virtual immortality, while art does the opposite, since it uses symbols to permit the condensation of time in space, engendering a real immortality —*La Gioconda* is still herself 478 years after the death of Leonardo.

It is precisely in the anthropological realm that the main difference lies. Viewing the Mona Lisa causes a short-circuit that loses no intensity with time., since this is an image presented through a creative process in which the subject is protagonist and has been defined by the artist in a space which is the one before we find ourselves..

In contrast, if we find ourselves in front of Morel's palace, disappointment quickly follows excitement, as we realise the images are ghostly and repetitive. There is no present, but only the decoration of a past that is repeated. And here the paradox lies in the fact that virtual immortality corresponds, by means of repetition, to instantaneousness, precisely that of television. This deception prevents contemplation, reflection and concentration.

Electronic media completely alter

the metabolism of the artistic process. Art forgets its product or makes one forget the procedures employed by the artist, while electronic media exalt the technical process, to the point where, as we know, the greatest spectacle is that of the technology itself showing us what it can do.

At the same time, Nietzsche had already understood this when he said that the world was becoming a show-window. Even Heidegger understood this, as did the Nazis, although in a terrible, dramatic and regressive way.

While technology advances, the world is emptied of meaning. There are no values, so the Nazis sought to harness this chaos through discipline, the military imposition of order, the repressive law of the blood, racism, the invocation of the Aryan model, or perhaps the external prosthetic devices that could fill the semantic vacuum, the loss of meaning in the world.

Let it be understood that when we consider the electronic media and the services—all of them important—they make possible, we need not take a Luddite position (at the end of the 18th century, the Luddites believed that machinery should be destroyed since industrial society killed nature and threatened mankind with destruction). It should be obvious that we cannot halt technological advance, but surely the development of electronic media technology illustrates to some extent the problems that art must address. A sort

of invention of a time so accelerated that are has trouble assimilating it to use in the image space.

At other times there is a parody of this condensation, an electronic gag, precisely as a kind of grotesque symptom of incapacity, or perhaps of lack of anthropological preparation, not just by the artist, but also by people in general with respect to the advance of a progress for which we are not prepared.

However, I feel that art, now more than ever, can play an important role. Why? Precisely because—now that we have abandoned all dogmas, the struggle between capitalism and communism, between collectivism and individualism, and lost the strong models of the 1960s and 1970s—we can think that art, in its complexity and is anti-authoritarian power to engender reflection could become the touchstone of each person for finding in images a place to rest and to learn to reflection on complexity.

Substantially, electronics and telecommunications tend to foster a sort of infantilisation in people, in spectators, by hinting at the possibility that there is an answer to all problems, and by making people wait to practise a sort of consumption that society, production and the system can satisfy. Every question implies ordering a product, and all absorption is the satisfaction of a need.

But art is not an answer, it is not the delivery of satisfaction. Art is investigation, curiosity, complication. It

is the possibility of restoring to humanity a time of peace and reflection, which telecommunications tends to steal, thanks to its facility for satisfying “needs” from a distance. In the United States, for instance, cable television circuits connected to the supermarket allow housewives to shop from their homes, ordering the goods to be delivered. In California there are experiments with computerised confessionals—machines that will listen to your sins and impose the appropriate penance.

This implies, on the one hand, the development of a prosthetic device which in itself is not a bad thing in the abstract, since in effect it may improve living conditions, and on the other, it engenders a sort of unsociableness, because, in a certain sense, it devalues the spaces of socialisation, of genuine encounters between people who, stimulated by zapping, suffer from a sort of psychological priapism, from the omnipotent feeling of the consumer in the solitary space of the bedroom; in the bedroom the need is originated, and from outside comes the satisfaction of that need. A binary system is re-established; at bottom, however, art is the breaking of the chain of cause and effect, it is the introduction of a third party in discord, of discontinuity, of complexity. For art, it signifies going back to open up the bedroom, to return humanity to the problematical space of a knowledge without end.

PAPELES

DE CUESTIONES INTERNACIONALES

INTRODUCCION

Euskal Herria entre España y Europa

Alberto Piris

PAIS VASCO

El País Vasco desde fuera

José María Tortosa

Euskal Herria en la construcción de Europa

Iñaki Lasagabaster

La autodeterminación en un mundo global

Gurutz Jauregi

Las miradas divergentes sobre el conflicto vasco

Sabino Ayestarán

El nacionalismo, una perspectiva crítica

Pedro Ibarra

Violencia estructural y cultura de paz

Rafael Sainz de Rozas

Estado de derecho, estado de guerra, ETA y GAL

Miguel Ruiz Muñoz

Claves históricas del problema vasco

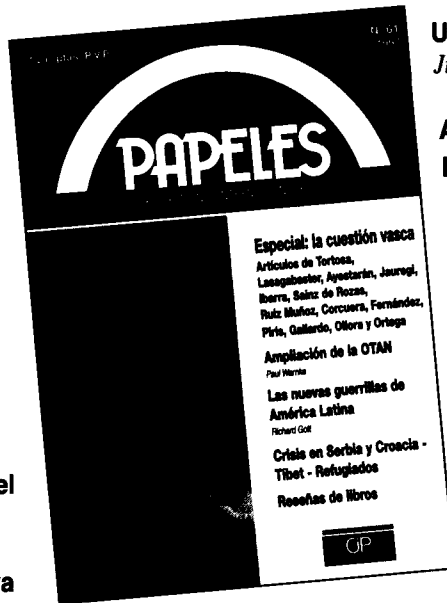
Javier Corcuera

Diálogo y democracia: camino de salida

Jonan Fernández

¿Una identidad transformadora para la sociedad vasca?

Luis M. Gallardo Garica



Una vía hacia la paz

Juan María Ollora

Acuerdo para la normalización y pacificación de Euskadi

CRONICA DE NO-PROLIFERACION

Crónica de no-proliferación y desarme nuclear

Vicente Garrido Rebolledo

ACTUALIDAD

¿Son compatibles el desarme nuclear y la ampliación de la OTAN?

Paul C. Warnke

Serbia y Croacia: el

crepúsculo de los dictadores

Tihomir Loza

La otra Serbia: alternativas de democratización

Xabier Agirre Aranburu

Perú, Japón y los movimientos guerrilleros de América Latina

Richard Gott

Tíbet, el conflicto ignorado

M^a José Bautista-Cerro Ruiz

Hebrón, entre el repliegue y la retirada

Tamara Osorio

RESEÑAS DE LIBROS

BOLETIN DE SUSCRIPCION

Deseo suscribirme por un año a la revista **PAPELES de cuestiones internacionales**
P.V.P. España: 3.000 pts. (IVA incluido)
P.V.P. Europa: 4.200 pts.
P.V.P. Resto del mundo: 5.000 pts.

FORMA DE PAGO

DATOS PERSONALES

Nombre

Dirección

Población

C.P.

País

JOSÉ BEDIA
JACK BENG-THI
ASHLEY BICKERTON
SEMA CASTRO
NIKOS CHARALAMBIDES
MOUSTAPHA DIMÉ
WILLIE DOHERTY
BARBARA ESS
ANNA EYJÓLFSDÓTTIR
JACQUELINE FRASER
TOLAND GRINNELL
EMILIO ISGRÒ
MARC LATAMIE
MARCOS LORA READ
JEAN PAUL MARCHESCHI
MANUEL MENDIVE
GUILLEM NADAL
FRANCIS NARANJO
SIGURDUR ÖRLYGSSON
LUIS PALMERO
GUILLERMO PANEQUE
RICHARD REDDAWAY
SANTIAGO RODRÍGUEZ OLAZÁBAL
BERNARDÍ ROIG
YUMIKO SUGANO
HERVÉ TÉLÉMAQUE
MARK WALLER
NARI WARD



VICECONSEJERÍA DE CULTURA Y DEPORTES
GOBIERNO DE CANARIAS



CENTRO ATLANTICO DE ARTE MODERNO
CABILDO INSULAR DE GRAN CANARIA



JUNTA DE ANDALUCIA

CONSEJERÍA DE CULTURA
CENTRO ANDALUZ DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO



COMISIÓN EUROPEA



WELLINGTON POLYTHECNIC
NEW ZEALAND

DRAC, ÎLE DE LA RÉUNION
FRANCE

© Del documento, los autores. Digitalización realizada por ULPGC. Biblioteca Universitaria, 2006



ISLAS

16 DE SEPTIEMBRE – 6 DE NOVIEMBRE DE 1997

CENTRO ATLANTICO DE ARTE MODERNO

