Cultures of Anyone
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time for that kind of analysis, which is very well developed in these works. They all agree on the importance of the ‘fame and name’ paradigm to which Ferlosio refers, the ‘proper nouns’ with which the new cultural industries, designed for mass consumption and concentrated around a few big media groups, were creating a kind of cultural ‘star-system’ to stimulate sales.

I will return shortly to the type of ‘culture bubble’ to which that ‘cultural world’s’ neoliberal decline leads. However, first I want to propose that there is something else that works together with the power of money to foster that perversion of aesthetic modernity, which tends to turn it into nothing more than a mere individual whim. That something is the appearance of a specific historical juncture at which a large part of the Spanish ‘creative class’ tended to hide the relationship between their aesthetic work and the historical and cultural communities from which they took the conventional materials they used (languages, traditions, collective imaginaries, etc.), and to which, inevitably, they returned those materials transformed into ‘works of art.’ In other words, I propose that the type of degraded individualism that facilitated the ‘buying and selling’ of artists (and intellectuals) by those in power during the so-called Culture of Transition derived in part from the artists themselves, in exacerbating the individualism that was latent in the tradition of aesthetic modernity (to the detriment of its civic potential).

2.3. The Engineer’s Great Style: A Depoliticized Aesthetic Modernity

2.3.1. An itch for artistic modernity in the face of Francoism

This is not at all a new idea. There have been innumerable discussions about the famous ‘modernizing’ itch that afflicted Spanish culture perhaps more than other countries during the 1960s and ’70s. This is due precisely to the fact that Spain had experienced such a long interruption in its aesthetic ‘modernization’ because of Francoism—an interruption that entailed, of course, a notable decrease in the ‘openness to a perceivable exteriority’ that constitutes modern aesthetics. Such openness was replaced, by both the regime and its opposition, with a more conservative formal paradigm. To synthesize and simplify the argument: the new ‘moderns’ at the end of
Francoism would have disapproved of anything that smacked of collectivity, of aesthetics in service to a community, or even, more generally, to ‘politics,’ and would identify these elements with the ‘backwardness’ that Francoism had imposed on aesthetic modernization.10

We know this wasn’t always so, and shortly I will give some examples of important exceptions. But at the same time, a tendency was undeniably forged towards the end of Francoism, and continues today with different variations in the sphere of institutional culture. That tendency emphasizes the individual aspect of aesthetics over the collective, its transgressive capacity over its foundational aspect, the formal over the historical, the ephemeral over the sustainable. And finally, in Spain, the side of aesthetic modernity that carried the relativization of the conventional to extremes tended to be emphasized over the side that sought a new convention. This relativization was understood (perhaps simplistically) as an expression of overcoming Francoism, which was associated with the past and with tradition.

An archetypal example of this modernizing itch in the Spanish aesthetics of the 1960s and ’70s is the figure and the work of the writer Juan Benet. Bringing him into the discussion is particularly useful because it also allows me to clarify my small contribution to the debate about the CT. As I noted earlier, this deals with illuminating the structural connections between politics and cultural power (including the aura of aesthetics) that appear beyond the explicit personal alliances or collusions in the world of the CT. Juan Benet (1982) wrote in his famous 1965 essay *La inspiration y el estilo*, that the latter, when it could be characterized as *grand style*, was ‘the state of grace,’ that is, the place in which to seek

that region of the spirit which, after having evicted the gods who had dwelled there, needs to replace their functions to give the writer an obvious path of knowledge … that prepares him for a full description of the world, and is ultimately able to supply any type of response to the questions the writer had previously raised to his god. (38)

By putting style in the place hitherto occupied by divine inspiration, Benet repeats the move of modern aesthetics, for which formal experimentation would be, as Laddaga says, a procedure without rules, increasingly different, always unlikely and unpredictable, which the artwork must carry out every time to find the singularity that reveals the whole.

At the same time, Benet’s essay attacked the type of literature that seemed incompatible with the revelation of aesthetic singularity, by

10 See, for example, Mainer (1994, 113).
concentrating on a function that he called ‘informative,’ ‘realist,’ or ‘social’: ‘The informative novel has ended ... Naturalism died and the realist social novel was exhausted because its information interests very few people and leaves little impression other than a brief moment of febrile interest and a sequel of fraudulent interruptions’ (128). He goes on to add, ‘literature is only interesting for its style, not for its substance’ (135). Starting from these types of considerations and from the prolonged, intense elaboration of a fiction that tried to put them in practice, Benet concentrates on his surroundings much of that ‘modernizing itch’ which Francoism had caused in opposition circles—not without a certain amount of misunderstanding, it seems to me. His rejection of the ‘informative,’ ‘realist,’ or ‘social’ in literature was often understood as—or at least contributed in one way or another to—a disdain for anything that seemed to put a political twist on aesthetic things. This helped foster that ‘perverted’ interpretation of aesthetic modernity denounced by Ferlosio.

Benet’s interpretation of aesthetic modernity—with its misunderstandings—would stand for three decades until it became a whole aesthetic-political canon (of which Benet was obviously not the only inspiration). His substantial identification with the irrefutable value of ‘modernity’ was clearly announced in El País (García Posada 1994) on the first anniversary of his death:

The emergence of Juan Benet in 1967 with Volverás a Región, put a permanent end to that never, or almost never, achieved desire for modernity in the Spanish novel ... Juan Benet takes on and finishes off the enterprise of locating the Spanish novel in the very center of modernity. What the poets of [the Generation of] ’27 did for poetry, Benet does all on his own in his novel. Volverás a Región channels Joyce, channels Proust, and above all, channels Faulkner. It also channels the impenetrability that Ortega noted as an essential characteristic of narrative fiction capable of being fully modern.

2.3.2. Political consequences of a depoliticized aesthetic
Ignacio Echevarría’s aforementioned article, ‘La CT: un cambio de paradigma,’ quotes this same essay by Benet, La inspiration y el estilo, but not to investigate whether the author ascribes to aesthetic modernity and how. Rather, he wants to recuperate Benet’s idea that intellectuals in Spain had always been apart from the state, something that, according to Echevarría, could only have changed with the advent of the CT. As a notable example of this change, besides those already cited of the meetings in the bodeguilla of Moncloa Palace, Echevarría recalls the outstanding participation of Juan Benet in the
manifesto ‘Yes to NATO’ that the PSOE in government had requested of the citizens in the 1986 referendum (País 1986).

Indeed, one might be surprised, as Echevarría says, not only to find Benet among the signatories of that manifesto, but even more surprised to find so many other intellectuals. Right besides Benet was none other than Ferlosio, ‘characterized by his heated anti-war and anti-military stance’ (besides being a fundamental model for the ‘CT hypothesis’), as well as many others like Julio Caro Baroja, Jaime Gil de Biedma, Jorge Semprún, Santos Juliá, Assumpta Serna, Sancho Gracia, Adolfo Domínguez, and Luis Antonio de Villena. And there are still more: Eduardo Chillida, Antonio López, Carlos Bousoño, Amancio Prada, Oriol Bohígas, Juan Cueto, Víctor Pérez Díaz, Juan Marsé, Luis Goytisolo, José María Guelbenzu, Álvaro Pombo, Eduardo Úrculo, Jaime de Armiñán, Blanca Andreu, Luis de Pablo, Francisco Calvo Serraller, Javier Pradera, and even Michi Panero (among yet others).

It is worth asking why so many artists and intellectuals would agree to support something when, in principle, it might have brought them more popularity among their respective audiences if they had rejected it—or at least not supported it publicly. What kind of pact of the elites, or what ‘spirit of the times’ brought them to this surprising agreement?

When it comes to explaining these phenomena, there are two important points, temporal and structural, that must be borne in mind. First, and perhaps more typical, is the ‘setting aside of any overtly critical attitude in the interest of a conciliatory, universal spirit’—more temporal—that Echevarría talks about (borrowing from Vázquez Montalbán). Second, and perhaps more critical for my purposes, is the influence—more structural—of the traditions of cultural modernity that had been recuperated at the end of Francoism in a form that was particularly blind to the political and social potentialities of aesthetic modernity. These were potentialities that could assuredly have provided shared alternatives from which to offer consistency to intellectuals’ and artists’ criticisms of capitalist power, which at that time was entering its neoliberal globalization phase.

In fact, there were plenty of criticisms. A trip through the archives reveals that in reality there was no lack of ‘critical spirit’ among the intellectuals and artists of the CT. Echevarría himself acknowledges that in the ‘Yes to NATO’ manifesto Benet was ‘very critical’ with ‘the evident contradictions and culpable errors of the socialist leaders.’ And there are many other examples, many of which I will return to later.

What was lacking, however, was that constructive, community component which was latent in the tradition of modern aesthetics, that ‘will to bring art to life’ of the avant-garde. This had been erased from the map by those, like Benet, who would establish the depoliticized canon of the Spanish version
of aesthetic modernity by understanding 'style' as a formal and individual matter. Given that, perhaps we can view Juan Benet's promotion of the 'Yes to NATO' manifesto as an effect derived from helplessness in the face of the capitalist version of economic and political modernization produced by his particular interpretation of aesthetic modernity. Furthermore, we can understand the fact that so many other artists and intellectuals also signed it as an effect derived from the general acceptance of Benet's interpretation.

All this, by the way, is in no way incompatible with the idea of the 'deactivation of culture' in the CT discussed by Guillem Martínez. It will, though, perhaps allow us to nuance it, above all in the sense that it would no longer be necessary to deny the existence of constant criticisms of power from intellectuals and artists. Rather, it seems that starting in the early eighties, the intellectuals of the CT assiduously and openly protested and criticized the government and power in general. However, their critiques were made from an understanding of the figures of the intellectual and the artist that annulled their political capacity to open alternative social worlds. They were limited in this regard to movement in an abstractly formal environment and, tacitly, to a hegemonic understanding—liberal and capitalist—of society: 'society as a pact of theoretically independent individuals who decide to associate to exchange property,' to recall the words of the philosopher Marina Garcés discussed in the first chapter. The 'style' of the individual artist or intellectual would be, then, perhaps simply one more of those 'properties.'

2.3.3. Counter-example: The politicized aesthetic of the transitional underground

In any case, perhaps the strongest argument to explain the importance of this 'depoliticization' is the confirmation of the existence of a very important counter-version of that same aesthetic modernity: the underground counterculture. This counterculture did cultivate its civic, community aspect, and moreover, it did it during those same years. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the historian Germán Labrador has studied this counterculture exhaustively and exceptionally lucidly, as part of what he calls 'transitional cultures.' These transitional cultures construct subjectivities that don't fit with Francoist mesocratic values. Labrador has unearthed a whole constellation of practices, identities, and forms that turn on the recuperation of aesthetic modernity by marginal youth cultures that understand art as something that must necessarily 'change life,' in the same way that Rimbaud and the avant-garde envisaged it.

This culture begins in the sixties with the emergence of some 'strange lives,' which accompany their aesthetic experimentation with experiments in ways of life that clash head-on both with Francoist norms and with the
orthodoxy of the opposition—for example, the transvestite artist Ocaña, the singer-songwriter Chicho Sánchez-Ferlosio, and the poets Leopoldo María Panero and Eduardo Haro Ivars. Despite the strangeness and radical positions of these figures, the enormous relevance of Labrador’s research (2008) is based precisely on demonstrating that they were pioneers of a whole ‘politics of life’ that would spread among the youth of the generation he (and Pablo Sánchez León (2004)) calls the generation of ’77; that is, those who were no longer socialized in the anti-Francoism that understood politics more as a change of institutions than of daily life itself, but did not socialize in the democratic ‘normalization’ that depoliticized cultural practices either.

Among these ‘youth of ’77,’ experimentation with drugs, sex, music, and poetry constituted a form of political life and an avant-garde aesthetic all in one. Labrador exemplifies this double dimension by analyzing groups of poets he describes as ‘from the extreme wing of the novísimos.’ He finds in them a cosmovision that doesn’t exclude politics, since they follow the romantic and avant-garde creed according to which ‘the poet must supply aesthetic ideas that serve to change life and reality.’ Surrounding these poets, and with respect to that generation of ’77, Labrador studies an entire almost forgotten archive of what he calls an ‘epochal culture’:

In very general terms, we would be talking about a nucleus of some 2,000 books (poetry, narrative, theater, academic essays, or overtly countercultural, revelatory texts, texts of current events, translations of theoretical works about the counterculture and similar topics, biographies, translations of marginal or unorthodox literary works, collage texts, photograph books …), some 20 magazines, ten alternative publishers and a couple hundred by very active cultural agents, thinkers and intellectuals. All together, and taking productions from all artistic disciplines, we should be able to speak of a legacy of some few thousand cultural objects; not a huge number, but still significant enough to constitute an epochal culture. (2006, 93)

11 The Novísimos—translated as the ‘Newest Ones’—were a group of poets in Spain who took their name from an anthology in which the Catalan critic Josep Maria Castellet gathered the work of young experimental poets in the 1970s: Nueve novísimos poetas españoles [Nine Very New Spanish Poets] (1970).

12 Labrador goes on to specify, ’At a strictly descriptive level, we would be talking about the works and productions of publishers such as La Banda de Moebius, La Piqueta, and Star Books; magazines like Ajoblanco, Bicicleta, and El Viejo Topo; poets like Aníbal Núñez, Fernando Merlo, and Carlos Oroza; musical groups like Derribos Arias or Veneno; and filmmakers like Maenza or Zulueta; not to mention innumerable painters, artists, and comic book illustrators’ (92).
The mostly tragic end of this epochal culture is perhaps what is best known about it decades later. The violent deaths, the suicides, and the drug overdoses have contributed to feeding the individual legend of some of its most emblematic figures, tending to assimilate the lifestyle experimentation of this counterculture within the individualistic and depoliticized paradigm of modern aesthetics, which was imposed as hegemonic. In fact, the great misunderstanding is to confuse this world with what in fact was its decline and transformation into a culture of individualist consumption, during the years of the so-called ‘Movida’ in Madrid. But, on the other hand, as Labrador asserts, the transitional underground was a culture that

in its moral order, in its world view, had a collective definition of identity; there the subject was a social being who needed relationships with others, destined to grow and better herself by living in community, with her limits and opportunities determined by the community, and committed to its improvement to achieve in this way her own improvement. (2008, 410)

It seems to me that we should never lose sight of this communitarian understanding of life held by the underground if we want to understand figures like Ocaña. He was a contradictory character whose stripteases and homoerotic shows scandalized even the anarchists of the Jornadas Libertarias de Barcelona in 1977, but also returned regularly to his hometown to organize pasacalles, costumed musical events held in the streets with local youngsters. In one of them, Ocaña ended up getting burned by accident when his elaborate sun costume caught fire from some firecrackers. He would not survive his injuries.

One might think that comparing someone like Juan Benet to Ocaña doesn’t make much sense. But do they not both represent fundamental reappropriations of the tradition of modern aesthetics that are produced in the same historical moment? Ocaña, too, believed in ‘style,’ in his own way. While Benet practiced style in art, Ocaña practiced it in art and in life. But also, and this is the key to their differing modern aesthetics, Ocaña understood that the power of his style was only validated in community, in the construction of a daily relationship with others.

For the type of aesthetics, of style, that Benet represents, leaning more towards the formal and hermetic than towards the performative and common, the relationship of the artist with the communities of which he forms a part in his daily life isn’t relevant. For Ocaña, it was just the opposite: living with the prostitutes of the Plaza Real in Barcelona was a