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Dossier "Resistance and normalization: uses of the past and cultural discourses in contemporary Catalonia"

Josep Pla: space, time and memory*

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Abstract

This article examines how the writer and journalist Josep Pla contributed to opinion formation regarding architectural *modernisme*, an important part of Catalan cultural and urban heritage. The fact that Pla's aesthetic proposals varied from one period to another demonstrates how culture is manipulated by politics and the media so as to impose principles that have little to do with initial ideological and aesthetic values.

Keywords

Josep Pla, *modernisme*, Catalan literature

Josep Pla, els espais i els temps de la memòria

Resum

Aquest article analitza com l'escriptor i periodista Josep Pla va contribuir a crear un estat d'opinió sobre una part important del nostre patrimoni cultural i urbà, com és el modernisme arquitectònic. Els seus plantejaments estètics van variar d'un període a l'altre, amb la qual cosa es demostra que la cultura pot ser objecte de manipulació per part de la política i dels mitjans de comunicació per a imposar principis que tenen poc a veure amb els seus valors estètics i ideològics inicials.

Paraules clau

Josep Pla, *modernisme*, literatura catalana

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The recovery of space and memory form the body of the work of Josep Pla. This article, however, will limit itself to a consideration of Pla's views on the *modernisme* movement. Over the years, but especially in recent months, the press has reported on the fragility of Catalonia's *modernista* architectural heritage, not only an essential part of its identity and recent history, but also a main tourist attraction. One such article, by Ramon Suñé, was titled "Contempt for *modernisme*. Another story of heritage destroyed: neighbours denounce the looting of Casa Burés" (*La Vanguardia*, 8 December 2012).¹ Yet other press reports referred to the remodelling and rebuilding of Adolf Ruiz i Casamitjana's Rotonda (1906-1918). It was, however, Lluís Permanyer's TV3 documentary – *Catalan Modernism, a History of Destruction* (28 November 2012) which demonstrated in how little regard *modernista* architecture was held by the *noucentisme* movement led by Eugeni d'Ors until the 1960s. Over several decades, illustrious intellectuals and poets – Carles Riba, J.V. Foix, Salvador Espriu, Augustí Calvet – but most particularly Josep Pla, from 1940 until his death in 1984, coincided in discrediting *modernisme*; in doing so they reflected a widespread view held by intellectuals and society after the Civil War. One only needs to remember the sorry state of most of the buildings today considered to be jewels of *modernisme*.²

This article will focus on several articles and manuscripts by Josep Pla, who, in 1940, launched a literary career via the rediscovery of Catalonia through the Spanish language, commencing with anthropology articles and essays on the Empordà region that went beyond localism in order to integrate this part of Catalonia into a broader Mediterranean civilization that holds classical Greece as a particular reference.³ Pla was also beginning to displace Catalan nationalism with a growing pride in Barcelona.

Leaving aside his interest in space, Pla also retrieved certain artistic personalities from memory, particularly Santiago Rusiñol, Joaquim

Mir and Manolo Hugué, using them to depict Catalan history and culture at the turn of the century. He also contributed generously to *Destino* magazine with articles on Josep Llimona, Rafael Benet, Ramon Casas, Josep Maria Prim and Francesc Gimeno.⁴ His observations regarding the figures who shaped his understanding of life was shared with readers through an intelligent, ironic and sentimental narrative voice that dared to openly express opinions regarding officially sanctioned personalities. This subjective sincerity led him to develop a complicity with readers that enabled him to share less mythical and more human insights into the people who were responsible for building a Catalan cultural and scientific tradition. Years later, his interest in leaving a record of contemporary artists and intellectuals was embodied in a desire to more broadly preserve memory and heritage for future generations – a desire reflected in one prologue after another until his death. Looking at the writings of the period immediately following the Civil War, we can see how Pla endorsed the values of the preceding *noucentista* generation regarding the most exiguous representatives of the *modernista* generation. Lluís Permanyer alluded to this, in his documentary, as the reaction of a son who felt he had to kill the father. Pla expanded on his thinking in this regard in the 1967 *Homenots* essay dedicated to the architect Antoni Gaudí.⁵

Prior to the *Homenot* essay Pla had only made a few references to Gaudí; these were usually in relation to another artist — as in biographies of Manolo Hugué, Santiago Rusiñol and Joaquim Mir⁶ — or in not entirely flattering references to Gaudí's work, for instance, referring to its incoherence: "The Sagrada Família seems to me to have a cold in summer." (*Cartes de lluny*).⁷ Not until 1956 and *Barcelona (papers d'un estudiant)*⁸ would Pla devote an entire chapter to the Sagrada Família, placing Eugeni d'Ors, however, in the role of detractor:

For the *noucentistes*, the problem was resolved by Eugeni d'Ors in the *Glosari* [his daily column in *La Veu de Catalunya*]

1. All translations, except where otherwise indicated, are the author's.
2. Permanyer explains how the Palau de la Música was the target of much criticism and pejorative names (some called it the "Palau de la Quincalleria Catalana", in a reference to trinkets or baubles, for Carles Riba it was a "great iron egg" and for Salvador Espriu, it was in "deliriously poor taste"). This was the case even before the Civil War. J. V. Foix, for instance, published an article in the 1920s in *La Cònsola* that criticized *modernista* houses in the Eixample and the Palau de la Música. And *Mirador* published a devastating article in the 1930s titled "Can the Palau de la Música Catalana be redeemed?"
3. This initiative started with the first of three guides, *Guia de la Costa Brava*, followed up a decade later by guides with a more pan-Catalan perspective, such as *Guia de Mallorca, Menorca e Ibiza*, and *Cataluña* in 1961. Other intervening publications were *Viaje en autobús* (1942), *Las ciudades del mar* (1942), *Cadaqués* (1947) and *Viaje a pie* (1949).
4. A key aspect was evocation and memory, as recorded in prose written towards the end of 1921 and early 1922, Six years later, in 1928, Pla redefined his thinking, resulting in the structure that would bring to his overly fragmented work with some degree of unity. The project remained uncompleted, however, as Pla was distracted by the wave of political activity inspired by the weakening of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera.
5. Josep Pla (1969). *Obra completa*. Barcelona: Edicions Destino, Vol. 11, pp. 202-203. This edition is more complete than *Obres completes* (1956), Vol. XX, published by Editorial Selecta, and also contains some additions.
6. Josep Pla (1928). *Vida de Manolo contada per ell mateix*. Sabadell: Ed. La Mirada, p. 60; J. Pla (1942). *Rusiñol y su tiempo*. Barcelona: Ed. Barna, pp. 219-220; J. Pla (1944). *El pintor Joaquín Mir*. Barcelona: Ed. Destino, p. 42.
7. Josep Pla (1928). "Cartes de lluny". *La Nova Revista* (Barcelona), p. 131; J. Pla (1967). *Obres completes*. Barcelona: Edicions Destino, Vol. V, p. 186.
8. Published in Volume V of the *Obres completes* (Editorial Selecta), p. 102-103, and reproduced in Volume 3 of *Obra completa* (Edicions Destino), under the title "Barcelona, una discussió entranyable" in "Primera volada" of 1972.



in establishing a distinction between human life and cosmic life, between the world of nature and the world of culture, between romanticism and classicism. As implied by these elements, architecture is an art contrary to nature, an art of arbitrariness, a typical construction of culture and of human life, that is, styles. Nature does not produce styles: nature is mountains, seas, forests, the unformed, chaos. Only the cultivated person, domesticated by authority, produces styles. Architecture cannot be art imitating nature, architecture cannot be naturalistic. Breaking the European architectural tradition, Gaudí wanted architecture to return to nature.⁹

Pla's description of the temple of the Sagrada Família exemplifies the theory that stigmatized the major *modernista* works:

In the moonlight, whether you look at it from afar or close up, the temple is unique. But maybe when the view is from close up – when one feels the details collapse on one and feels pure geology within – that one realizes its spirit. The architect [Gaudí] liked to subdue the nature of things and include them in the Sagrada Família. This leads me to imagine how the mass might be displaced from where it naturally belongs, in the air, down to the seabed and underwater light. This would be, perhaps, its most natural and most logical environment. The building itself would gradually become layered with mineral deposits and that murky coldness that characterizes underwater light would have transmitted its fuzzy vagueness, along with twists, protuberances, caverns, crevices, caves, all that unformed world of cosmic life would take shape, a vast throbbing animal-and-plant biology, tingling primitively above and around the shapeless mass, as soft forms, flickering shapes, spikes, viscosities, the sleepwalking of reptiles. The towers, the flying buttresses, the abutments – these would quake and quiver like pulp and their temperature would be that of primeval pulsation.¹⁰

Pla justified comments of this kind not as his own criticism, but as echoing both the thinking of young people and the culture of the time. Yet it was Pla himself who was responsible for such descriptions circulating in articles and in the press. Indeed, this was a frequently used device of his, as in the *Homenot* article on Joaquim Ruyra. Inventions from start to finish, based on alleged and generally non-existent testimonies or, in the case of Ruyra, gossip. This was also the case for his opinions on the

Sagrada Família, which convey the *vox populi* and the views of his generation, for which he stood up as a spokesperson:

The issue of the Sagrada Família is not one of taste, even though taste, since it is linked with reactions of the skin, is a matter of depth. The issue is one of principles and the youth of my time perceived Gaudí's work as I have just described. That was how we perceived the cathedral; this did not mean that we were critical, as our critical faculties were, in fact, extremely poor. We could not imagine it as other than submerged, crawling with crustaceans, molluscs and limpets (as appropriate as mushrooms to the taste of the architect), protozoa, algae and all things slimy from the seabed, no more than we could imagine the front of the Pedrera without imaging a fish tank and corridors and rooms with twisted walls as a suitable medium for fish to swim in.¹¹

Lluís Domènech i Montaner's Palau de la Música received a similar, if not more scathing, treatment. In January 1942, an article by Pla was published in *Destino* (featured in the Lluís Permanyer documentary) that practically proposed demolishing the concert hall. This article was duly reproduced in Catalan in the same book as the article on the Sagrada Família. Thus it was that Gaudí's church and Domènech i Montaner's concert hall were discredited time again and again – in 1956, 1966 and in subsequent editions of Pla's publications.¹² As was usual in his articles and more critical and combative prose, Pla began advising against demolition mainly for economic reasons, to then follow up with a subjective description of the accumulation of features (out of place, naturally, in a concert hall), duly described with a series of increasingly emphatic adjectives:

The presence of those horses, those figures, those flowers incrustated in the ceiling of pressed bricks, those hideous lights, the excess of detail that makes the theatre an outpouring of gratuitous objects, intricate and useless – all this has led me to deprive myself of countless concerts, of listening to music that I would have greatly liked to know and deeply feel – because music never fatigues.

Pla ultimately recognized this experience as derived from the most absolute subjectivity and particularism, raised to the level of facts and, therefore, to the level of reality, thanks to publication (and hence objectification) in a public medium. *Destino* was targeted

9. Josep Pla (1956). "Barcelona, papers d'un estudiant". In: *Obres completes*. Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, Vol. V, pp. 104-105.

10. Josep Pla (1956). "Barcelona, papers d'un estudiant". In: *Obres completes*. Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, Vol. V, pp. 113-114.

11. Josep Pla (1956). "Barcelona, papers d'un estudiant". In: *Obres completes*. Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, Vol. V, pp. 115-116.

12. Josep Pla (17 January 1942). "Calendario sin fechas". *Destino*; J. Pla (1956). "Barcelona, papers d'un estudiant". In: *Obres completes*. Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, Vol. V, pp. 144-153; J. Pla (1966). "Barcelona, una discussió entranyable", dins "Primera volada". In: *Obra completa*. Barcelona: Edicions Destino, Vol. 3, pp. 374-378.



to members of the middle classes and bourgeoisie who identified with the views and thoughts of Pla and of many other *Destino* contributors in the 1940s and later with Pla's *Obra completa*.

The above description continued with a detailed description of the acoustic inconveniences and concluded with a broad commentary on *modernista* art, Domènech i Montaner and the shift in his own experience from subjectivity to generalization:

If [Domènech i Montaner] had lived in an epoch of good taste, with his personality he would have done things, possibly mediocre but nevertheless valued. This would not be a trivial achievement. He lived, however, in the era of *modernisme*, of the 'modern style'*, of the hideous 'liberty'* style, of the absolute triumph of the anarchy of bourgeois taste in this country, and he did not have the strength to let it go." [*in English in the original]

Pla put principles before taste in evaluating *modernista* architecture. These were principles that formed the core of his political and philosophical thinking, namely, the preservation of tradition against the disorder and anarchy that would inevitably lead to revolution. *Noucentisme* could be identified with order and tradition, whereas *modernisme* represented all that was diverse, strange and monstrous. If, as pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu, art and artistic consumption have a social function in terms of legitimating social differences,¹³ Pla, like his friends, his contemporaries and his readers, could easily coincide in sharing the aesthetic taste of Eugeni d'Ors.

Pla also tied aesthetics to a political idea. In an article on architecture in the *Dictionnaire critique* of the journal *Documents*, Georges Bataille wrote that architecture is not what in a building is related to construction, but is, rather, the space of representation; it represents something other than the construction. Rather than define the term 'architecture', he described its expansion, that is, the mastery or shaping of the social field, imposed as an organizing fulcrum. For him, the origin of architecture was as an image of social order which, with the intention of ensuring order, imposes

order, to the extent that, instead of expressing the essence of society, it chokes it. Thus, architecture both evades death and hides death and the monument and the pyramid fill in the void left by death. Death is heterogeneous to homologies; it cannot be assimilated.¹⁴ *Modernista* architecture, however, is different because it wants to bring unformed and chaotic nature into the urban world; unlike *noucentisme*, it is 'anti-monumental'.

Between 1939 and 1941, Pla wrote *Rusiñol y su tiempo*,¹⁵ inspired and edited by his friend Albert Puig Palau, avid collector and passionate enthusiast of *modernisme*. By the time subsequent editions of the book appeared (in Catalan in 1955 and 1970), two key works on *modernisme* had been published: *Modernismo y modernistas* by Josep F. Ràfols (1949) and *El arte modernista catalán* by Alexandre Cirici i Pellicer (1951). These publications, however, left Pla indifferent. His prologues therefore continued to reiterate that Rusiñol was anything but a *modernista*, despite having been its soul, and also his definition of *modernisme* as "truly European gibberish" – represented in Barcelona by "the lilies and lotuses in the hall of the Palau de la Música, with the long plaits of reinforced concrete ladies decorating ugly balconies."¹⁶ His description of Bohemian life also remain consistently the same, other than when he accentuated its more ridiculous aspects.¹⁷

Between 1941 and 1944 Pla wrote a second book in Spanish on the subject of Joaquim Mir, *El pintor Joaquín Mir*, published this time by Edicions Destino. In this publication he expounded a theory of art as applied to Mir and his contemporaries (and already expounded in regard to realism in articles published in 1928 in *La Veu de Catalunya*).¹⁸ Pla, in drawing a distinction between different trends in *modernista* painting, took up an old theory about the concept of 'beauty', as defined by Milà i Fontanals from readings of Thomas Aquinas' writings on what is good and what is beautiful (*bonum* and *pulchrum*). Pla enriched this theory with cutting-edge contributions to a lecture by Salvador Dalí in Sala Parés, after the opening of the Tercer Saló de Tardor.¹⁹ Dalí argued – and Pla agreed with him – that an aesthetic principle of contemporary creative art was to directly capture reality through intuition, instinct, and the unconscious. This proposal

13. Pierre Bourdieu (1979). *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, p. 8.

14. Georges Bataille (1970). "Architecture". In: O. C. Paris: Ed. Gallimard, Vol. I, pp. 171-172.

15. Josep Pla (1942). *Rusiñol y su tiempo*. Barcelona: Editorial Barna; J. Pla (1955). *Santiago Rusiñol i el seu temps*. Barcelona: Editorial Selecta; J. Pla (1970). *Santiago Rusiñol i el seu temps*. Barcelona: Edicions Destino, Vol. 14.

16. And like Eusebi Arnau's sculptures in Casa Lleó Morera, brutally destroyed in 1943. The head of one of these nymphs found its way into the hands of Salvador Dalí who, even as a young man and against the general trend, defended *modernisme* as representing heterogeneity.

17. Josep Pla (1970). *Obra completa*. Barcelona: Ed. Destino, Vol. 14, p. 338.

18. Cristina Badosa (1994). *Josep Pla, el difícil equilibri entre literatura i política (1927-1939)*. Barcelona: Ed. Curial, pàg. 76-77; C. Badosa (2004). "De Joaquim Ruyra a Josep Pla, un model de prosa literària". In: *Als cent anys de l'eclosió literària de Joaquim Ruyra: "Marines i boscatges"*. Papers from the First Joaquim Ruyra Symposium, Catalan Summer School Foundation, University of Girona. Barcelona: Galerada, pp. 389-412.

19. Josep Pla (25 November 1928). "La nostra generació". *La Veu de Catalunya*; J. Pla (12 December 1928) "No ens ve pas d'un any". *La Veu de Catalunya*; J. Pla (19 November 1928) "A l'Empordà anem endavant". *La Veu de Catalunya*.



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was underpinned by new philosophical trends, especially that of Bergson, who valued the unconscious above what traditionally were understood to be the 'higher faculties of man.' Regarding the Dalí conference, Pla particularly took note of the principles that conformed to the new sensitivity and formed the basis for the corresponding literature. Pla did not abide by the principle of the unconscious and was not a reader of Freud or a follower of psychoanalysis; nonetheless, in his portrayals of people, he used all kinds of devices to reveal their hidden side. Although this placed him in direct opposition to the scholastic tradition defended by Manuel Milà i Fontanals, Pla's goal was to go beyond truth and goodness and, through intuition and even subterfuge, to achieve beauty, in other words, pleasure. When it came to a choice between analytical work and intuitive and creative work, Pla undoubtedly preferred the latter.

Another example is Pla's description of *L'Avenç* magazine, which he never linked with *modernisme*. In the first volume of his biography of Francesc Cambó, also published in 1928, Pla recognized the merit of *L'Avenç* on three fronts: for having launched spelling reform; as a catalyst for political ideas; and for its openness to a wide range of intellectual trends and developments in Catalonia and Europe. The corresponding article was published unamended in the volume dedicated to Francesc Cambó in *Obra completa* in 1973.²⁰

A few years later, in 1977, *Prosperitat i rauxa de Catalunya* was published. According to the preface, signed "J.P.",²¹ the book was, in accordance with the wishes of Jaume Vicens i Vives, originally to be based on articles published in *Revista de Catalunya*. However, it would appear that these articles were not sufficient to create a volume of 650 pages, so Pla had to contribute a few more pages; this explains those included in the chapter entitled "Història de la revista *Juventut* (1900-1906)", a repetitive and meandering miscellany on the magazine and the Vergés family. On the first

page he wrote that the only positive contribution of *L'Avenç* was Pompeu Fabra's linguistic reform and that "everything else is runaway mental disorder and the most confusing and muddled intellectual anarchy."²²

The opinions and definitions of Pla regarding taste, often poorly developed, responded to their time, especially during the Franco dictatorship, when Pla was legitimated on the basis of a brilliant literary past. Indeed, society legitimated him through the prestigious journal *Destino*. Catalan society was in full reconstruction of its identity and took full advantage of the few avenues admitted by a vigilant and efficient censorship. For nearly four decades, Pla wrote for and from a window that embraced the middle classes and the bourgeoisie and was fully in tune with their tastes. It was probably for this reason that his discourse excluded nuances; furthermore, in opposition to Kantian aesthetics (which, according to Bourdieu, made disinterestedness the sole guarantor of the aesthetic quality of contemplation), he adapted to a majority, 'popular' taste, based on moral and ethical principles, and – in the case of Catalan society – on reason, order and *seny* ('good sense'). After the trauma of the Civil War, *noucentisme* and the preservation of tradition received greater support than *modernisme*, as the latter was identified with the chaos of nature and anarchy. Ideology thus participated in the construction of an incomplete and uncritical identity by a large segment of society. Fortunately, power relations and ideology did not lead to stagnation, but admitted a paradigm shift.

As for Josep Pla, we will always have his texts of 1928, when Catalan society experienced a new explosive period of creativity coinciding with the end of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. During this period, Pla's thoughts on art and creativity broke new ground regarding the distinction between legitimate culture and popular culture; they also adhered to avant-garde principles that placed intuition, instinct and the unconscious at the heart of the creative act.

20. Josep Pla (1928). *Francesc Cambó, materials per a una història d'aquests últims anys*. Barcelona: Edicions de La Nova Revista, Vol. I, p. 117-118; J. Pla (1973). "Francesc Cambó, materials per a una història". In: *Obra completa*. Barcelona: Edicions Destino, Vol. 25, p. 79.

21. As I explain in *Josep Pla, biografia del solitari*, the later volumes published in *Obra completa* (Edicions Destino) include prologues signed, as usual, "J. P.", but written by Josep Vergés. These volumes consisted of a miscellany of essays and articles by a Pla who was now old and tired. These volumes detract from the overall complete works of Pla.

22. Josep Pla (1977). "Prosperitat i rauxa de Catalunya". In: *Obra completa*. Barcelona: Edicions Destino, Vol. 32, p. 259.



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