➲ Dissonant Echoes of the Great War: Avant-garde, Urban Space, and Immigrant Voices in Armando Discépolo's *Babilonia*

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Abstract: The present essay proposes that the problem of WWI is central to the "dissemination" trope of the Argentine cultural production in the 1920's. The trope is examined in relation to modernity and urban space, in Armando Discépolo's *Babilonia* (1925) and Xul Solar's "Puerto" paintings (1923-1925). Through a contextualized reading of *Babilonia*, the essay analyzes the disseminated nationalities and languages, at a time when post WWI European immigrants presented a "threat" to national purity. Babylonian trope is associated with images of distraction, dissemination, and destruction. This is of particular importance for the analysis, especially with regard to the presence of Babylonian "dissemination" trope alongside *criollismo* and the emergent avant-garde currents in Argentina (Duchamp in Buenos Aires 1918-19, Marinetti in 1926, Borges, Girondo).

Keywords: Armando Discépolo; *Grotesco criollo*; Urban space; Immigration; Avant-garde; World War I; Argentina.

Resumen: El presente ensayo propone que el problema de la Primera Guerra Mundial es central a la metáfora de la "diseminación" en la producción cultural argentina de los años 20. La metáfora es examinada en relación a la modernidad y el espacio urbano, en *Babilonia* de Armado Discépolo (1925) y la serie de pinturas "Puerto" (1923-1925) de Xul Solar. Mediante una lectura contextualizada de *Babilonia*, el ensayo analiza las nacionalidades y las lenguas diseminadas en la época en que los inmigrantes europeos de la postguerra presentaban una "amenaza" a la pureza nacional. La metáfora babilónica se asocia con las imágenes de la distracción, diseminación y destrucción. Esto es de particular importancia para el análisis, especialmente con respecto a la presencia de la metáfora babilónica de diseminación junto al criollismo y las emergentes corrientes vanguardistas en Argentina (Duchamp en Buenos Aires, 1918-19, Marinetti en 1926, Borges, Girondo).

Palabras clave: Armando Discépolo; Grotesco criollo; Espacio urbano; Inmigración; Vanguardias; Primera Guerra Mundial; Argentina.

Sarajevo, June 28, 1914. Standing against the empire in a colonized country, Gavrilo Princip waited on the banks of the Miljacka river, with a bouquet of flowers hiding the gun that would shoot the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria. World War I, *the Great War,* would begin soon thereafter. With Europe in ruins and famine arising, millions of immigrants would set sail towards the shores of the *New World*, in both North and South America. My own great-grandfather left Croatia (then the Austro-Hungarian Empire) at the outset of the war and arrived in New York in 1914. After a short stay at Ellis Island,

where Petar Ovuka's name is recorded, he journeyed across America and died six years later, in Hibbing, Minnesota, while working in the world's largest open-pit iron mine. His family had stayed behind. My own arrival to the US owes itself to the violence of yet another war, the Civil War of the 1990s that split Yugoslavia into pieces. As an elementary school student in Belgrade, the old capital, I fondly remember an event at which I was invited to recite war-inspired poetry to a group of octogenarian World War I veterans, Serbian survivors of the Thessaloniki front. This essay is written in their memory.

Many years later, while studying Argentine culture as an US-based academic, I looked at a Xul Solar painting recently exhibited at the Americas Society in New York. "Untitled, 1923" is a watercolor on paper mounted on cardboard. On it there are numerous ships sailing the rough seas. There are small human figures aboard the ships and flags from different countries waving in the air. I was transported to the post-World War I period and the immigrants' crossing of the Atlantic that this painting seems to evoke. The immigrants' arrival is depicted in another one of Solar's paintings, from 1925, titled "Puerto - Serpiente y cintas". Double-sided, it represents a busy scene crowded with overlapping images. On the side of the painting that depicts the port, there are several human faces floating in the air, falling bodies, as if flying down to the port, one large ship docked in the center, port buildings with prominently-displayed ownership titles, other smaller boats and ships, and two large human bodies: one figure of a man dressed in a long coat who seems to be flying above the port, and one other larger figure lying on the docks.[1] Solar's "Puerto" encapsulates the anxiety of encounter, the old and the new world in close contact.

Social, political, and cultural values brought into Argentina with the frenetic arrival of massive waves of immigration from Europe and other parts of the world immediately triggered a whole series of reflections on the pre-existing elements of the national *criollo* tradition, for Xul Solar and other artists of his time. I propose here that the immigrants' arrival to Argentina put them in a marginalized position of representatives of a "non-tradition" and, in doing so, destabilized the other narratives of the time, including those produced by the emerging avant-gardes. This "non-tradition" or "ex-tradition" provided a basis, among other factors, for a whole aesthetics of Río de la Plata writing, where "home literature" became a "porous entity". Its boundaries exceeded the dictates of national policy and called into question the culturally-dominant account of national writing that revolved around issues of *criollo* identity. Fleeing the wreckage in Europe, the immigrants' arrival in Argentina *and* the avant-gardes' influence across the arts transformed them both into representatives of a "non-tradition" or "ex-tradition".[2]

In the present essay, I argue that the problem of World War I is central to the "dissemination" trope of this time period, as associated with immigration, theater production, and to a certain extent, the Argentine avant-gardes. I examine the "dissemination" trope, as highlighted in Xul Solar's 1923 and 1925 paintings described above, as one of the principal paradigms of the Argentine cultural production in the aftermath of the Great War. The common denominator of the trope is the disseminating, centrifugal force that also,

1 "Untitled, 1923" and "Puerto - Serpiente y cintas" appear on pages 54 and 94-95, respectively, of the book *Xul Solar and Jorge Luis Borges: The Art of Friendship* (Rangel 2013). This publication was produced in conjunction with the homonymous exhibition, on view at the Americas Society Art Gallery from April 18 to July 20, 2013, and the Phoenix Museum of Art from September 21 to December 31, 2013.

2 For an excellent discussion of the "porousness" of home, and by extension of national literatures, see Maeera (1998).

albeit paradoxically, contains its own counterpart: the centripetal and unifying impetus. In the analysis that follows, I propose a contextualized reading of Armando Discépolo's 1925 play *Babilonia*, where the disseminated materials are multiple nationalities and languages, all embodied in the immigrant characters of this one-act play. Roberto Arlt, the pioneer of Argentine modern novel and modern theater, considered it Discépolo's *obra maestra* (Arlt 2003: 70).

Babilonia. Una hora entre los criados was written in 1925 by Armando Discépolo (1887-1971) and performed in Buenos Aires at the old Teatro Nacional. The play is written against a backdrop of Buenos Aires, a capital city undergoing rampant transformation. In Discépolo's time, Buenos Aires was rapidly loosing its *criollo* characteristics that for many years had served to describe it as a *gran aldea*. In the period following the economic stagnation caused by World War I, its urban modernity was now in flux: it demanded new art forms and new theater. Discépolo sought to capture precisely this fast-changing dynamic of modern urban life, and in doing so he produced a remarkable play whose protagonists are newly arrived immigrants, dispossessed of claims to the Argentine *criollo* "authenticity" of the past. These claims of identity are deflected first and foremost by their lack of access to the *criollo* tradition and to the Spanish language. Discépolo himself grew up in Buenos Aires speaking Italian and listened to stories about Italian immigrants shaping the new nation. On my research trip to Buenos Aires in 1998 I saw a production of *Babilonia* at the Teatro Palermo. At the same time Teatro Babilonia was one of the cutting-edge performance spaces in the Argentine capital. Discépolo's *Babilonia* enjoyed enormous popular success throughout the years and continues to draw *porteño* and Argentine audiences at large with its poignant social themes, as pertinent today as they were then.

Immigrant characters are central to Armando Discépolo's work. They carry the dramatic tension in *Mustafá* (1921), *Giácomo* (1924), *Patria nueva* (1926), and *Relojero* (1934), among other plays. Influenced and inspired by Russian authors, namely Dostoevsky, Andreiev, and Tolstoy, Discépolo wrote and staged his first play, *Entre el hierro*, in 1910. Discépolo's last original production, *Relojero*, was performed in 1934. From 1910 to 1934, Discépolo also wrote plays in collaboration: *La Armonía*, with Rafael José de Rosa and Mario Falco in 1918, and *Mustafá*, with de Rosa in 1921, among others. From 1934 until his death in 1971, Discépolo did not write original plays, although he remained active in Buenos Aires theatre life as a translator and director of numerous productions.

The "dissemination" gesture may be studied as one of the principal paradigms of Argentine cultural production in the 1920s. In *Babilonia*, the immigrant subjects embodying multiple nationalities and languages are centrifugally disseminated from their native European countries, and then centripetally unified in one place. This place is the grand house in whose asphyxiating basement kitchen they all work as cooks and servants, marginalized and disenfranchised. David Viñas (1996) has aptly characterized their social and psychological reality as *grotesco criollo.* The owners of the house are a couple, *criolla* Doña Emilia and a wealthy Italian immigrant, Don Esteban. Their marriage is representative of an already-broken image of national unity. Until the flux of immigration, the core of the Argentine tradition was based on the value system of the *criollo* elite. The re-examination of this tradition thus became a crucial point of reference in this time period and new responses vis-à-vis the pre-existing elements of the national *criollo* tradition promptly emerged in the Argentine cultural circuits.

In studying the conditioning of Cuban literature in the early part of the 20th century, Gustavo Pérez Firmat succinctly describes the two dominant literary currents of the time: on the one hand, the so-called "primitive" *criollismo*, and on the other, what he terms "critical" *criollismo*. Primitive *criollismo*, according to Pérez Firmat, is a foundational enterprise, while critical *criollismo* is translational in nature. The conflict between these two tendencies is embedded in the tension between the "aboriginality" of the former and the "originality" of the latter (Pérez Firmat 1989: 8). In the same period that Pérez Firmat studies in Cuba, *criollismo* agglutinated in Argentina the main ideological strains of writing invested in nation solidification. In a negative reaction to the cosmopolitan excess of his *modernista* predecessors, the *criollista* writer, as Pérez Firmat has put it, "was someone who had his gaze fixed on American reality" (Pérez Firmat 1989: 8). Although not in the line of *criollista* writing, Discépolo's staging of the Babylonian trope in Buenos Aires focuses closely on the Argentine urban reality undergoing rapid change and extensive growth.

In one of *Babilonia*'s opening scenes, Isabel, a servant from Madrid, asks Otto, a German chauffeur, to tell the other servants, who come from Spain and Italy, about the war. Otto utters "Ferdun" (Verdun) but is unable to give a detailed answer about the First World War battle because of all the subsequent pressure about the preparation of the dinner for the guests upstairs. Otto can only wonder if he was asked to invoke history's bloodiest period (of imperial and economic reconfiguration) "para entrar en calor?" (Discépolo 1986: 369).

Argentine critic and theatre historian Osvaldo Pellettieri has read the role of Piccione, a chef in the house, as the playwright's spokesman for the grotesque degradation of Argentine immigrants (Pellettieri 1996: 19). However, it is the character of Isabel, one could argue, whose voice expresses dissent, although in a more oblique way, with regard to the immigrants' complacency with their social status quo. She constantly rejects offers of economic prosperity made by her male suitors, ironically responding that she has a fear of high living. Significantly, she is also the character who asks Otto about the historical repercussions of World War I.

The Spanish being spoken on stage is filled with Babylonian echoes that resonate within the contact and contamination of languages. It is a dissonant chorus of voices, if it is a chorus at all, in which Spanish is mostly heard together with Italian, and their *Lunfardo* and *Cocoliche* mix, but also with some words from French and German. The word "*Cocoliche*" originated in the theatre. It was first used to refer to a character portraying an Italian immigrant, and soon thereafter it was used as a term referring to the mixture of Italian and Spanish that this character spoke. "*La mezcolanza*" defines the Buenos Aires reality that Discépolo also captures in his 1921 *sainete Mustafá*:

> ¿La razza forte no sale de la mezcolanza? ¿E dónde se produce la mezcolanza? Al conventillo. Por eso que cuando se ve un hombre robusto, luchadore, atéleta, se le pregunta siempre: ¿a qué conventillo ha nacido osté? "Lo do mundo", "La catorce provincia", "El palomare", "Babilonia" (Discépolo quoted in Ordaz 1981: 414).

In this short play, written four years prior to *Babilonia*, racial and linguistic mixture is seen as a strengthening force for the nation. In contrast to numerous tensions between *Babilonia*'s characters, in *Mustafá*, contact between different immigrant groups is portrayed as harmonious:

> E lo lindo ese que en medio de esto batifondo nel conventillo todo ese armonía, todo se entiéndeno: ruso co japonese, franchese co tedesco; taliano co africano; gallego co marrueco. ¿A qué parte del mondo se entiéndeno como acá: catalane co español; andaluce co madrileño; napoletano co genovese; romañolo co calabrese? A nenguna parte. Este e no paraíso. Ese na jauja. ¡No queremo todo! (Discépolo quoted in Ordaz 1981: 415).

In 1925 *Babilonia*, apart from the *gallegos* and *madrileños*, the cook Carlota is French. The youngest of the servants is Cacerola, a *napolitano*. The chef, Piccione, is Cacerola's fellow countryman. José, the Galician butler, has been losing his eyesight and fears that his position will be taken over by the *criollo* Eustaquio. His twelve years of hard immigrant labor will then have been all in vain, and he and his wife will be on the streets again. In the middle of a rush to prepare the engagement dinner party for the landlords' daughter, Piccione refers to the play's title:

> Vivimo en una ensalada fantásteca... Eh, no hay que hacerle, estamo a la tierra de la carbonada: salado, picante, agrio, dulce, veneno, explosivo... Todo e bueno: ¡a la cacerola! ¡Te lo sancóchano todo e te lo sírveno! ¡Coma, coma o revienta! Ladrones, víttimas, artistas, comerciantes, ignorantes, profesores, serpientes, pajaritos ... Son uguale: ¡a la olla! Te lo báteno un poco e te lo brindano. "¡Trágalo, trágalo o reviente!" ¡Jesú, qué Babilonia! (Discépolo 1986: 374).

The Babylonian cultural heterogeneity whereby its confusion of meals, people, professions, knowledge, and values stands in contrast to the classical cosmopolitan value scale in which there is always a clear-cut hierarchy of categories, from high to low. Piccione's culinary metaphor for Argentina, "una ensalada fantásteca", is further enlarged by his comments on citizenship:

> "Señores habitante, que cada cual se agarra con las uñas que tiene; la cuestión es agarrarse". "¿Se ha agarrado?... ¡Qué tipo inteligente! ¡Bravo! ¡Bravo!..." ¡Qué paíse fantasmagórico! ¡No te respétano nada, te lo improvísano todo, te lo retuérceno todo, te lo transfórmano todo. E come una galera de prestiyitadore (Discépolo 1986: 374).

The assimilationist gesture of "agarrarse" thus becomes complicated with the series of transformations that takes place on the *galera* of immigrants. In this phantasmagoric nation, it is the *criollo* Eustaquio who perceives himself as left without a place: "Mete un ruso quinielero y sale un señor con auto; mete un tarugo con clavos y sale un cavalier de frac... El único que no entra en la galera es el crioyo. ¡Es un gran país este... Pa' ustedes!" (Discépolo 1986: 374).

Eustaquio's *criollo* lament is juxtaposed against the scene that is taking place upstairs in the master's dining room. Twenty-five guests have been invited to the engagement party of Emma, the daughter of the house. Meanwhile, the Italian and the French cooks are arguing about whose food is better. The tensions in the kitchen are running high. However, as Eustaquio notes, "en esta tierra de la carbonada no engañás a nadie. Nos hacemos los engañaos" (Discépolo 1986: 384). Piccione follows with an ironic remark to Secundino, the doorman, whom he calls "Lenin". The self-mocking exchanges among the newly-arrived immigrants register a historical shift in Argentine immigration, from radical agencies of anarchism and socialism (that characterized some of the previous waves of

immigration) to the more complacent ones associated with acculturation and assimilationism, which were to be inscribed within the preexisting narratives of the national order. Vladimir Tatlin's 1919 Babel (a monumental tower that never materialized), would have stood ideologically much closer to the esthetics and ethics professed by the progressive Argentine immigration. In sum, the Buenos Aires of the early 20th century "was a spatial/symbolic site of tensions and representations, in contact and contradiction with one another, all expressing the intense class struggle that marked Argentina's first stage of modernization" (Bergero 2008: 14-15).

José, "orejero oficiale [sic] de la patrona", steals a wedding necklace, a recent gift to Emma, and places it in Eustaquio's jacket. If Eustaquio is discovered and punished, José will still remain the head servant in the house. Doña Emilia, the landlady, interrupts the food preparation and the arguing. She joins the scene downstairs, yelling, "¡Qué horror de gente! Vive rodeada de chusma una, de chusma que alimenta. Sitiada de gringos vive una" (Discépolo 1986: 386). "Besieged" by immigrants, the *criolla* Doña Emilia discovers the robbery and descends to the kitchen once again. The servants' identity, Bergero argues, is constructed by the space they occupy. In this claustrophobic space there is a clearly marked social separation and special polarization. Different social groups were compartmentalized within the mansion (upper classes above and the servants below, in an overcrowded, low basement), resulting in the production of urban space where "each level of the house functioned as a separate world" and "every contact between them channeled by the division of work and the semantization of spaces" (Bergero 2008: 38 and 40). When Eustaquio realizes that someone has put the necklace in his pocket, he takes it out and passes it on to Piccione. Together with this problematic gesture of identity smuggling, *Babilonia* both questions and reinforces the immigrant negotiations that take place around the issues of authenticity, class conflict, citizenship, and the struggle for the historical and ethical right to signify.

The play's ending turns into a Lope-esque *Fuenteovejuna*. Assuming collective responsibility and blaming the guests upstairs, Piccione at this point reveals Don Esteban's secret past as an Italian sailor and occasional smuggler. Afraid of scandal, Doña Emilia and her husband leave. Once the servants are left alone again, they confront José with his crime and push him upstairs to confess it. The violence from both upstairs and downstairs merges in Piccione's disgust:

> ¡Retíranse sirvientes! Ya no se puede vivir ne con lo de arriba ne con lo de abajo. Está todo pútrido; allá (arriba) primero te apláudeno, después te mándono en galera... Ne revolcamo todos en el barro. Hervimos todos nel agua sucia (Discépolo 1986: 396).

The text returns once again to the *galera* metaphor, paradigmatic of slavery and imperial history. The first passengers on the *galeras* were prisoners on Spanish colonial voyages. Later, their place on the *galeras* was replaced with immigrants sailing away from dangers of war, westward for a new life. America — the "New World", was not only offered as a "metaphor of promise" but it was at the same time a geographical location that served as refuge. Since the publication of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918), many Latin

American and foreign intellectuals and artists (including Xul Solar) considered America as a salvation for the European malaise in the aftermath of the Great War.[3]

Wars (Russo-Japanese War and the Russian Revolution of 1905), accompanied by sounds of death, hunger, and desperation could be heard in Blaise Cendrars' *Prose du Transsibérien* and much of European avant-garde art that followed the devastating years of World War I. It has been widely argued by art historians and literary critics alike that the violence and destruction caused by World War I produced a key impact on the international avant-gardes and their Expressionist, Futurist, Simultaneist, Dadaist, Surrealist, and other experimental artistic practices. On the other side of the Atlantic, in Argentina, similar sounds were being heard on the *galeras* that carried the European post-war immigrants and deposited them on the soil of the New World. Faced with contempt for his newly-found "home", Buenos Aires, Piccione has the urge to leave. At the very end of this one-act play, another character, *gallego* Alcibíades, also needs "¡Aire! ¡Aire! ... (Va hacia la calle, sin smoking, arrancándose del cuello)" (Discépolo 1986: 397). The play's last line comprises a chorus of servants denouncing the butler and calling out, "¡Señora! ¡Señora!" (Discépolo 1986: 397), while the curtain closes on Discepolo's Babylonian staging for/of the nation. By the virtue of coming to see *Babilonia* the audiences of the time witnessed a theatrical performance that was indeed far more culturally and politically unsettled than the classical *criollo* art forms.

"As an allegory of an impossible unity and transparency", Miriam Hansen points out, "the Babylonian narrative dramatizes the impossibility of historical continuity" (1991: 195). On the one hand, the *criollo* community in its "pure" cultural form does not have the possibility of historical continuity, and, on the other, the immigrants cannot pursue the continuity of their respective national genealogies. Culture as a strategy of survival is, in Bhabha's analysis, "both transnational and translational" (1995: 48). It is transnational because postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, and it is translational because such spatial histories of displacement "make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, rather complex issues" (Bhabha 1995: 48). The Tower of Babel and Babylon metaphors thus indicate the right to signify—to make a name for oneself—"that Derrida uses to describe both the process of displacement through which language names its object, and the cultural, communal process of 'making a name for oneself'" (Bhabha 1995: 51).

The problem of language is central in the Tower of Babel trope. It was also central to the Argentine avant-garde and to the whole literary production of the time. However, in Argentina the language and the "new" was defended, Beatriz Sarlo reminds us, precisely by those who were sure of their past. Not only *criollos*, immigrants, and foreign visitors spoke many languages in the Buenos Aires and Argentina of the time, but artificial languages were invented as well. It is not far-fetched, according to Sarlo, "to read Solar's and Borges' invention of artificial languages as a double-faced and programmatic response to a particular historical challenge, showing both an abstract, free impulse of playful intention and a national concern with mixture and cross-breeding" (Sarlo 1994: 35). Solar worked in both directions, Sarlo points out, as he invented *neocriollo* and

3 Stefan Zweig's title speaks volumes on the promise of America: *Brazil, Land of the Future* (1936). Zweig was influenced by Count Hermann Keyserling, especially by his *Meditaciones sudamericanas*. On the relationship between Keyserling and Victoria Ocampo, see Kaminsky (2008).

panlengua. He imagined *neocriollo* as a Pan-American language that included a combination of Spanish and Portuguese, with mixed words coming from English and German; *panlengua* was based on a simple syntax and an additive method of word-building. Both *neocriollo* and *panlengua*, Sarlo concludes, "could be thought of as symbolic alternatives to the malaise caused by the modification Spanish was suffering under the stress of words, images and sounds of remote foreign origin" (Sarlo 1994: 35).

In constantly calling attention to language as a form of cultural capital, the distinction is being made between a local identity and a foreign one. Discépolo's plays and the whole literary production of this period plunges the reader into central concerns regarding Río de la Plata writing. These central concerns reside in the shifting and constantly unstable ground between the universal and the particular, being in place and displacement, local and foreign. Oliverio Girondo summarizes the main principle of this aesthetic by noting in the epigraph to his *Veinte poemas para ser leídos en el tranvía* (1922) that "En nuestra calidad de latinoamericanos, poseemos el mejor estómago del mundo, un estómago ecléctico" (Girondo 1922: 4). The eclecticism of Girondo's epigraph attests to the Argentine and Latin American capacity to engage in a complex process consisting of cosmopolitanism (vernacular and critical), immigration, travel and adoption of foreign languages and cultural values, among other phenomena factoring into this syncretic process.[4] Beatriz Sarlo summarizes the Argentine cultural scene in the 1920s as revolving around the following three main axes:

> Firstly, the question of nationality and cultural heritage was critical in a country in which the influx of thousands of immigrants had dramatically changed the demographic profile. Secondly, the relationship with Western Art and literature had to be clarified. Thirdly, new formal means had to be found with which clear dividing lines could be drawn with both the literary past and contemporary realist and socialist aesthetics (Sarlo 1994: 34).

"Se debe escribir en una lengua que no sea materna", the Chilean Vicente Huidobro wrote in 1931 at the beginning of his avant-garde masterpiece poem *Altazor o el viaje en paracaídas* (Huidobro 1985: 9). *Altazor's* precipitous movement downward, towards the particular, stands in contrast to the ascension towards the universal (of the Tower of Babel construction), yet, as in one of the imaginary principles of Borges' Tlön (which says that a book that does not contain its counter-book is incomplete), these two movements, while paradoxically taking place at the same time in both instances, attempt to complete each other. Furthermore, the Babel metaphor in its most evident manifestation incorporates the construction of a Tower, situated in antiquity at a specific location (now contemporary Iraq). As a modern metaphor, however, Babel is situated in "no man's land". Therefore, the friction between "aboriginality" and "originality" is further propelled through the thrusting of these tropes onto the artistic stage of Buenos Aires, both in Solar's "Puerto" and in Discépolo's *Babilonia*.

The Tower of Babel trope suggests another inherent paradox. On the one hand, it points to a multiplicity of peoples and languages dispersed around the world. On the other, it refers biblically to a desire for one recuperated language and one united people. By the same token, the Tower of Babel may be interpreted as a trope of one nation. Xul Solar's

4 See Masiello (1986) and Aguilar (2009).

paintings are a case in point, as they illustrate the paradox between a multinational reality that he represented in forms of flags from a number of different countries, including his own nation, Argentina. In Solar's 1923 painting, entitled "Añoro patria", the Argentine flag figures prominently on a boat situated in the center of the work. Flags represented a creative touchstone to which Xul Solar would return again and again. In 1925, upon his return to Buenos Aires from Europe, Solar painted "País". Here, the Argentine flag is accompanied by a number of other national flags. That same year, he made another painting, titled "Mundo", and yet, this piece is almost identical to the one he titled "País". The world and homeland (Argentina) are one and the same, for the world, as in *Babilonia*, is in Argentina, consisting of immigrants from all over the globe.

"Bearing out the fate of the metaphor," Miriam Hansen points out, "the Babylonian narrative is associated with images of distraction, dissemination, and destruction — images that contaminate the relative stability and clarity of the other narratives" (1991: 184). This last point, in Hansen's study of the Babylonian trope in the American silent film, is of particular importance to my analysis, especially with regard to the presence of this trope alongside the predominance of *criollismo* in the 1920s. A major case in point, Ricardo Güiraldes' novel *Don Segundo Sombra* was published in 1926, a year after *Babilonia* premiered on Corrientes Avenue. The uniformity of national *criollista* ideology, manifested in Güiraldes' work, if not broken, is destabilized through the potential for multiplicity implied in Discépolo's *Babilonia* and other artistic discourses employing the Tower of Babel and Babylon tropes.

Alongside the literary and artistic production on the national scene, in the same period, many foreign artists and intellectuals visited Buenos Aires and brought different languages and cultural outlooks with them. One of those artists, the Futurist Filippo Tomaso Marinetti, was invited to Buenos Aires by the Martín Fierro group in 1926, and a banquet was held in his honor. When asked about the influence Marinetti could exert in Buenos Aires, Borges responded that his influence would be minimal. The reason for this, according to Borges, lays in the destruction of museums and antiquities that had already taken place in Buenos Aires, moreover by local artists, who were themselves not avant-garde at all but rather traditional in their aesthetics.[5]

Marcel Duchamp, arguably the first conceptual artist and the author of a *readymade* "Fountain" (1917), arrived at the port of Buenos Aires in September 1918, following the three weeks he sailed on the transatlantic liner SS Crofton Hall. During his nine-month stay in Buenos Aires (apparently to escape being drafted into the army towards the end of the First World War), Duchamp attempted to organize a Cubist exhibition "that never materialized" (Filipovic 2009). Graciela Speranza (2006) goes as far to suggest that Duchamp's time as a citizen of Buenos Aires marked the beginning of an alternative history of modern art in Argentina. In Duchamp's provocative words, "La tribu 'pictórica' [en Buenos Aires] no presenta ningún interés" (quoted in Gradowczyk 1994: 114). However, the Argentine avant-garde artistic experimentation, insufficient as it has been characterized by many critics, was to indeed take place in Buenos Aires, in visual arts mainly upon Xul Solar's and Emilio Pettoruti's return from Europe in 1924.

5 See Borges (1997: 392). For an analysis of Marinetti's stay in Argentina, see Saítta (1999). Borges and other young writers founded *Prisma* (1921-1922), a mural review. Soon thereafter the literary journal *Proa* (1922-1923, 1924-1926) was founded, and *Martín Fierro* was published from 1924 to 1927.

In view of culture as a collective project, it is likely that during his stay in Europe Xul Solar became aware of Fernand Léger's work, whose re-prints appeared in avant-garde magazines. Léger painted "The City" in 1919, soon after he returned to Paris from his wartime service. The French painter, who also influenced other Latin American painters such as Diego Rivera and Tarsila do Amaral, served in World War I from 1914 to 1918. He said that his experiences during the war sparked his fascination with machines and mechanical forms.[6] With its cluster of overlapping circles, columns and squares presented in contrasting color and form, Léger's mural-size "The City" has been frequently called an "ode to the metropolis". Architectural forms and mechanical structures dominate much of Xul Solar's art that depicts the port of Buenos Aires, an entryway into a growing metropolis. While the Argentine painter was in fact in Europe during the war, he was there not as a soldier, but rather a student of the arts and the occult. Influenced more directly by Paul Klee than by Léger, in his series of "Puerto" paintings Solar nevertheless embodies a similar idea of the city, as seen in Léger's famous piece.

The historian Bill Albert describes the port of Buenos Aires at the outset of World War I where "the always busy docks came to an almost complete standstill" (2002: 40) Commerce throughout Latin America was massively disrupted because of the war and yet, the war brought significant advantages to local economy as well. Overall, Argentina at the time of World War I witnessed far-reaching political, social and cultural changes that included the mixture of high art and mass culture, as well as the emergence of a more vocal urban class such as the one whose immigrant voices were captured in Discépolo's *Babilonia.* Its discrepant mix of sounds and languages filled the port and streets of Buenos Aires and contained dissonant echoes of the Great War.

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6 *Léger: Modern Art and the Metropolis* is an interdisciplinary exhibition held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, from October 14, 2013 to January 5, 2014.

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