A Europeanizing Geography. The First Spanish Avant-Garde’s Re-Mapping of Castile (1914-1925)

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The critical discourse surrounding modernity – the end of empire, the displacement of the self from the territory of the nation, Europeanization and its discontents – has tended towards the spatial and perceptual. From Foucault and Lefèbvre to Cultural Geography and Franco Moretti’s 1998 Atlas of the European Novel, the organization and representation of space have been attributed to the same ordering factors to which the nation is subject (cf. Foucault 1972; Foucault 1994; Lefèbvre 1984; Moretti, 1998; Rabinow 1984). Recent scholarship has changed course from the Foucauldian view of space as coextensive with the nation-state’s consolidation of power to focus on the perceptual mechanisms that inculcate the values of nationalism and the marketplace. New theories of apperception – consider work by Jonathan Crary, David Michael Levin, Martin Jay, Rosalind Krauss, and Hal Foster – raise the possibility of regarding the psychology and physiology of the specular as parallel to the production of political and social modernity. From this perspective, the mutual approximation between subjects (the human agents that create a mental picture) and the objects of vision becomes paradigmatic of intersubjective relations – the exchangeable views of self and other that develop concurrently with the organization of the social sphere (Crary 1990; Crary 2001; Foster 1988; Krauss 1994; Levin 1993).

In light of the correlation between the history of perceptual and political discourses, the envisioning of space as national and the national as space in aesthetics of Spanish modernism has rich implications for how the development of our concept of national
identity and the modern coincide. Analysis of the first Spanish avant-garde’s heightened awareness of its peripheral position with respect to “European” modernity – reflected in a hyperbolic use of the language of visual perception to reflect on this distance – leads to deeper understanding of the reciprocity between space and the imagining of place. In particular, the avant-garde’s deconstruction of the textual and philosophical equivalent of national space created during Spain’s fin-de-siècle crisis – its psychic transition from the imperial to the post-colonial following the loss of Cuba to the United States in 1898 – was accomplished by transforming the perceptual mechanisms that were productive of its nationalist cultural geography.

As early as 1913, only a very few years before the advent of the predominant vanguard movement in poetry, *Ultraísmo* (1918-1925), principal philosopher of the preceding, inward-looking Generation of 1898 Miguel de Unamuno launched his famous diatribe against Europeanization. His words turned the metaphysics of national identity on its head, thereby transforming geography into a negative metaphor for the politics of internationalism: “Europe! This at once primitive and immediately geographical notion has become, magically, an almost metaphysical category” (Unamuno, 1913: 304). Effectively closing all borders against the importation of all influences not indigenous to Spanish soil, the cordon separating Spain from Europe becomes the limit of Unamuno’s map. The roots of subjectivity – Spanish cultural identity – are thus circumscribed by national boundaries. Moreover, the scope of this territory was determined by regional hierarchies dating from the medieval period; from the time of the publication of Unamuno’s 1895 *En torno al casticismo* (On Casticismo), the philosophy of the Generation of 1898 contained national subjectivity in the geographically and politically central province of Castile, which was also the traditional locus of “historical” narratives of Spain’s national unification (Unamuno 1902).

*Perspectivismo* (Perspectivism), José Ortega y Gasset’s philosophical response to the isolationist attitudes prevalent in 1898, opened Spain’s borders by reversing the visual order that Unamuno’s generation used to plot the Castilian topography according to its concept of nationhood. In order to re-orient Spain politically and geographically towards Europe, Ortega substituted the objective spaces of avant-garde abstraction for the mythological histories