

CONFLICTS AND EVOLUTION OF THE IMAGINARY: THE LANDSCAPE OF THE ALBUFERA LAGOON AND THE DEHESA OF SALER (VALENCIA)

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I. INTRODUCTION

The article analyses the problematic construction of the Valencian imaginary about the Albufera and the Dehesa of Saler over several centuries. The accumulation of written and visual sources, supports of the emotional identification with these identity's emblems, has been proportional to the drastic reduction and degradation of the territory of the lake, the marshes and the restinga that separates them from the coast. If we rely on a broad post-modern conceptualization, from Benjamin to Appadurai, we can interpret the Albufera as a paradigmatic example of socially and culturally produced space, but also, reciprocally, as a symbolic artefact that articulates memory and subordinates the experience of individuals and groups. We can also decode it as a construct of cultural and landscape heritage, inseparable from its reinterpretability, a changing result of a network of histories, some of them self-referential, concerning the heritagization.

II. THE HISTORY

One aspect of the history of the coastal lagoon concerns the legal regulation that organized the use of this space, royal property since king Jaume I. The eagerness with which its medieval and modern successors restricted and monitored the usufruct of this royal heritage, make us suspect a lax observance of the rules. We also have abundant hunting literature that testifies to the solemn scenography framing the royal hunts. And while the poets have glorified the musical staging of naval battles, typical of the Habsburgs, the popular memory has kept unflattering memories of the gastronomic habits of some Bourbons, such as Charles IV's eel addiction (Momb Blanch, 2011). The name of this dynasty is related to less playful

aspects of the history of the lake: after long hesitations the law supported the agrarian colonization, intensifying the process of conversion of large parts of the marsh into rice fields (Rosselló, 1995). It also focused the transformative utopias of the Enlightenment thinkers on the lagoon's territory. From a place of select relaxation and symbolic ostentation, the Albufera became a key part of the intervention projects on the natural environment, most of which remained on paper.

Dictated by an urbanizing spirit, obsessed with commercial communications and the rational optimization of resources, these plans for hydraulic transformations share the vision of Enlightenment chroniclers, as we know it by the Cavanilles' work: *Observations on Natural History, Geography, Agriculture, population and fruits of the kingdom of Valencia*. The botanist's systematic notes on the Albufera leave no room for doubt: the ultimate aim of describing the landscape was to improve productivity and correct the natural defects that drove the life of the inhabitants off of the enlightened ideal. What, in terms of the territory, is equivalent to water intakes for the irrigation and elimination of the unhealthy marshlands (Cavanilles, 1795). This helps us understand the ambition of failed contemporary projects, such as that of Marquis of Romana, who decided to build a large commercial port in Cullera, which would connect with the city by a canal through the Albufera and the land between the rivers Turia and Júcar (Albiñana, Hernández, 1983). Later vain enterprises included drainage projects and proposals for full desiccation of the lagoon. The XIX inherited the dream of the commercial channeling: a poet dedicated verses that identified steam and life to the inauguration of the navigation channel between Valencia and Sueca... before then this project followed the others in the bankruptcy of utopias (Momb Blanch, 2011).

The history is much more reserved when it come to the real life of the local inhabitants. The fishermen of the banks, who later settled in the Palmar Island, literally lived on the remains, sometimes stolen from the royal patrimony. They survived only thanks to a community system of task sharing, which remained unchanged until the contemporary introduction of motor boats (Sanmartin, 2008). The titanic task of the land reclamations, which limited the lagoon's size to less than a quarter of its surface, was accomplished by these same hungry fishermen, barely armed with rudimentary tools, who competed for the gained surface with the inhabitants of the nearby villages (Fuster, 1993). Zone of intense social conflicts, the Albufera also staged the struggle of the incipient agrarian bourgeoisie against royal property, which ended with the defeat of the monarchy: in 1865, Isabel II gave up the patrimony of the lagoon and the coastal strip (García Moneris, 1983). Needless to say, the political class that benefited from the changes was not the one that who made the land reclamation and placated hunger by poaching.

The changes in the area of Albufera and the resting of Saler have a close link with the territorial relations between their two neighbours: the agricultural land of the Horta and the city of Valencia. Throughout the modern era, the metropolis went from being a city that lived from its agricultural environment to an invader of its own original territory, which today threatens to destroy it completely. Valencia, with its chronic lack of global urbanization approaches, grew in a tentacular way, along the highways, promoting processes of speculation and degradation of the reached areas (Romero, Francés, 2012). These processes were completed by the Southern Plan of 1958, which remodelled the course of the last stretches of the river Turia. This promoted the destruction of the last agrarian zones that separated

Valencia from the Albufera, and turned the territory of the Dehesa into an imminent victim of the expansionist appetites of its new neighbour. So, the historical review explains the logical dating, between 1964 and 1978, of the megaproject of luxury urbanization, which was about to ravage the entire coastal strip that separates the lagoon from the sea, with its valuable ecosystem. The unusual citizen mobilization saved the Dehesa and the Albufera, although, as all current studies claim, in a partial way. The polluting of the nearby industrial areas is promoted by the persistent social instability in the region, creating problems for which the regulation of the Albufera Natural Park is not enough (Cabrejas, García, 1997; Rodríguez, Cabrejas, 1998).

III. THE IMAGINARY

The imaginary built around the lagoon and the coast restinga completes its history and interacts with it, becoming a dynamic factor of territorial changes. The early literary and plastic representations of the Albufera, like the verses of Gaspar Aguilar or some pieces of pottery of Manises, display the topic of the *upside-down world*, a chaotic mixture of abundance and threat. Sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century European travelers watched the lagoon from the royal road, an exotic image, slightly blurred by the quotation that went from chronic to chronic (Arciniega, 2015). The contours of the attractive engraving were confused with those of the surrounding agricultural area, the Horta. The royal road bordered on paradise, with a conscious self-representative will, if we reread the early program of Francesc Eiximenis in the *Regiment of the Public Thing*. A harmonious Eden that bonded, intentionally, beauty, pleasure and utility. But with the advance of the Enlightenment, only a part of that Christian Arcadia was studied in depth, while its radical transformation was dreamed: the most contradictory, the one that mixed the attraction with the compulsive fear of the marshes, the Albufera.

In spite of this challenge, from the Reason, to the disorder of the fantastic figure, in the nineteenth century, the lagoon and the coastal forest area merged definitively with the idea of the Horta as a symbolic centre of the Happy *Levante*. Teodoro Llorente outlined the myth of the *Renaixença* on the Albufera. It was the pearl of that poetic agricultural space that forged the Valencian unity, promising a utopian union of progress and nature (Boira, 2004: 97). For him, the lagoon reconciled fire and water, the malarial threat and the symbolic gold of the ricefield fertility, and even his eels resembled the snakes of the Laocoon (Llorente, 1889).

Despite the loss of many nineteenth-century pictures, we can state that the preserved works confirm the literary symbolism. Valencian landscape painters dedicated themselves to represent significant places: spaces full of everyday poetry, idiosyncratic variants of the realistic lessons of Carlos de Haes and Aureliano Beruete (Arias, 2007). It was the time of the boom of the Hiking societies and the painting à *plein air*, to the way of the school of Barbizón, time of the search of the concrete instant and the personal view-point in painting. Valencian art critics, divided between scientism and consecrated rules, extolled those landscapes of the Albufera that corresponded the emblematic identity representation. Their reviews celebrated the triumph of the poetic Levantine light over the storms, sunsets and mists, typical of the lagoon and interpreted the set, formed by nature and peasants as “serene”, “picturesque”, and thus “our” (in Lopez Albert, 2006).

Some exceptional artistic personalities filled the topic with its own content, occasionally threatening with its fracture. Figures as different as Sorolla or Antonio Muñoz Degraín draw an itinerary from the most modern photographic framing to the universal mythology. The costumbrist types of the great Valencian nineteenth-century painting also populate the Albufera. Nevertheless, the most interesting images are related to the ideology that marked all Valencian landscape art: the regenerationism of the Free Institution of Education (Hernández, 2015). Nature and landscape had a high pedagogical value, participated in the education of the gaze, moved it away from the utopia and brought it closer (rather than a paradox, we speak of a desired evolution) to the social conflicts that characterized the territory. We have examples of this pictorial approach to the social in masterpieces of the beginning of the XX, belonging to José Benlliure and, especially, to Antonio Fillol (Bonet, 1989). In the images of the later, the poetry of space, configured by light and colour, is signified by the activity of the protagonists. The paintings that Fillol dedicates to the lagoon and its marshes between 1899 and 1903, form a real thematic cycle: *The harvest of the rice in the Albufera; Family of fishermen on the beach of Perelló; Fishing in the Perelló; Transporting the rice; A hut in the Albufera ...* In all of them, the light effects, which provoke in the spectator an almost sensorial empathy, are meant to monumentalize the human figures, captured in moments of extreme physical effort. The peasant families, organized in the pictorial composition by the movements of their eternal work, are turned into the main characters of a heroic saga.

In the great literary representation, contemporary with the works of Fillol, *Canes and mud* of Blasco Ibáñez, the tensions between the different layers of symbolism that transmits the Albufera are clearly stated. The following decisive literary image that interprets the territory, Joan Fuster's Albufera, already reflects the fracture between the reality and the cultural construct. Fuster's writing coincided with the great drama that triggered the displacement of all the meanings materialized by the local landscape. In 1962 the company TEVASA began to elaborate a plan of urbanization of the Dehesa, that aroused voices of protest as soon as it was known. The debate, opened by Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente, quickly gained breadth and intensity, nourished by divergent actors: the University of Valencia, the School of Architecture, the environmental group AEORMA, the militants of *Germania Socialista*, the newspapers *Triunfo*, *Levante* and *Las Provincias* and, above all, thousands of readers of this press who, for the first time during the dictatorship, could freely express their opinion on an issue that was also political. This was an unprecedented process of mobilization and consensus, channelled by the assistant manager of *Las Provincias* María Consuelo Reyna (Mateu, Domínguez, 2011). In 1974, civil actions against urbanization had a historical balance: "12 kilos of documents, 35 legal challenges and about 5,000 memorandums" (A.E.O.R.M.A., 1975). The defenders of successive projects, that sought to reform the initial in the name of populist right wing ideas (progress, tourism, the trademark of a local identity for sale), were opposed by conscious citizens with arguments such as responsibility to future generations: "How much did you sell the kilo of pines for, daddy?", demand a headline of Josep Vicent Marqués (*Las Provincias*, 18-VI-1974). The *Saler for the people* campaign, favoured by the economic disaster brought about by the construction, ended with the freezing of those and, later, the creation of the Albufera Natural Park. But the real displacement of the symbolism of the Albufera-Saler space had only begun. In the nineties, a team in charge of recuperating the dune ecosystem devastated by the works of the urbanization, found the emptiness

of an unrecoverable landscape, of blurred visual references. The specialists had to reinvent dunes, forest and interdunar ecosystem under the sign of geometry (Fernández, 2001). We can draw a parallel: the public image of the Albufera-Saler territory was also reconstructed from the old surviving elements. After having meant the enlightened planning utopias, the corrosive action of speculation or the identity resignification, it became a problematic patrimonial space, whose real inhabitants are still very far from finding the sustainable economic alternatives. The Albufera and Saler, with their changes and conflicts, has come to be, for many, a kind of experimental laboratory, available to those affected by the disappearance of Valencian Horta.

IV. THE PROJECTED ARCHITECTURE

It is necessary to complete the history of the image of the area with a section referring to the architecture projected in it, and its very significant stylistic features. The changes related to the anthropization of the lagoon don't explain the genesis of the three megaprojects planned in the coastal restinga, disproportionately inadequate for the fragile ecosystem of the area. The earliest was the first Valencian airport, conceived in the early twentieth century. The first flight in Spain took place in 1909, as part of the closure of the Regional Valencian Exhibition. It was welcomed by a city that since the late nineteenth century had been the scene of a radical renewal of transport infrastructure, especially the railway. The first third of XX brought to Valencia deep changes in the urban framework and equipment; roads, bridges and port buildings are part of the expansive modernization through public works (Serra, 1996, Peñín, 1978). As part of this process, since 1927, the city became a priority area for the promotion of national aeronautics. The new airport project abounds in paradoxes. The choice of La Dehesa del Saler was mainly justified, in addition to the proximity of water, suitable for hydro aviation, with the uniformity of the terrain. However, in 1929, the work began with disastrous levellings. Francisco Mora Berenguer projected the buildings in the best tradition of Art Deco, with meaningful eclectic citations; progress had to show its own beauty, structural and symbolic, combining modernity and regionalism. None of them could be built on the unstable dune floor. A more advantageous offer caused the relocation of the airport in Manises (Alba, 2000; 2009).

The second major project began in 1976, with the transfer of land in the Dehesa for the construction of a new Labor University, and was commissioned to Fernando Moreno Barbera. It was the time of the legitimation of the dictatorship through the misappropriation of rationalist architectural language, that is, the time of *desarrollismo* promoted by Opus technocrats (Lafuente, in Vasileva, 2015). The unsafe ground alerted the shrewd architect. It not only threatened to undermine the profitability of the construction, but it also wouldn't allow him to display his ideas in the line of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe: functional modularity organized around each individual activity, so that the building is ordered into a perfect "machine to live in" and to produce ideas. Although he wrote about the role of nature in the creation of this exemplary social-architectural ensemble, the Labour University, Moreno Barbera ended up preferring the site near Cheste: a gigantic space created *ex nihilo*, redone and civilized in record time. Only a centralist power, remote and also myopic, could imagine that a project of such magnitude would have room in a symbolic space full of history, as the Dehesa.

There is a historical antecedent of the relation between communications and leisure that materialize in the coastal strip. Blasco Ibáñez was the author of the idea of a road that would bring the working class closer to the virgin paradise of the Dehesa, with its healing and ennobling powers (Sanchis, 2007). Much later, the political program of the writer degenerated into two road structures: the Nazaret-Oliva road of the twenties, which severely separated the ecosystems of the lake and the Dehesa, and the even more damaging Saler highway, whose construction accompanied the TEVASA project.

In spite of the populist declarations of authorities and technicians, this urbanization, that tried to remodel 11 km. of littoral strip, dedicated only 2.5 km. to a “popular area”, cleverly separated from the private luxury. The buildings, mentioned in the successive plans, astonish: 194 hotels, more than 9,000 dwellings, several churches, dozens of elite sports clubs, a congress palace, a Greek theatre ... This and much more united for 50 km. of roads and streets (A.E.O.R.M.A., 1975). The promoters spoke of this complex in terms like Mediterranean character, colourism, and modernization of the landscape. What we can observe today, from that part of the urbanization that survived the failure of the project and was never destroyed, is something different: decorative pastiches multiplied in great heights, antifunctional structures, the keys of the architecture of the provisional of the period.

V. CONCLUSIONS

During its long history the geographical space of the Albufera and the Saler generated opposing representations and ideas in constant struggle. It was codified, successively and sometimes in parallel, as a theatrical scenery of the royal power, as a support of the transformative projects of the Enlightenment, as a cradle of a particular class struggle, as a tourist cliché or as an identity emblem in permanent reconstruction. The great urbanization projects of the twentieth century tried without success to erase these layers of accumulated meanings, whereas they succeeded in intensifying the dynamic evolution of the imaginary. Today the areas of the lagoon and the Dehesa find themselves in an unstable equilibrium between the laws of protection and the social and cultural reality of the inhabitants, far from being fully understood.