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*Contemporáneos*

Edited from 1928 to 1931 – Mexico City, Mexico

*Contemporáneos: Mexican Magazine of Culture* was a literary journal founded by several writers whose formative context is post-revolutionary Mexico of the 1920s, and who were mainly identified as a group, in their own time, by their detractors, and later on by critics and scholars. The main 'members' were Xavier Villaurrutia, Jaime Torres Bodet, Carlos Pellicer, Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, Salvador Novo, Enrique González Rojo, José Gorostiza, Gilberto Owen, and Jorge Cuesta, although the network in which they developed their poetic and prose work was extense enough as to reach other genres such as theatre and essay. Nevertheless, José Gorostiza characterised the group as an “irreducible sum of individualities” that produced a multiple and distinct *ouvre*; the principal overarching commonality shared amongst them was the deeply held belief in the autonomy of art, understood within the historical current of Western modernism in terms of its radical modification of tradition, as well as against the Mexican avant-garde's demands to commit to the hyper-romantic, nationalist political program outlined by the State after the Revolution. Closer to an ideal of art as a rational expression of the universal as emerging from the particular, the Contemporáneos found kinship in the writings of James Joyce, André Gide, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Jorge Luis Borges, Vicente Huidobro, among other representatives of international literary modernism in the first half of the twentieth century.

Before *Contemporáneos* started its regular publishing run, most of its authors had participated in smaller, akin projects such as *La Falange* (1922-23) and *Ulises* (1927-28), and had been building relationships with each other not only through their closeness and participation in the cultural bureaucracy of Mexico (many of them held, intermittently, government positions in the cultural sector) but also through the publication of general overviews on Mexican literature of the time such as Villaurrutia's “La poesía de los jóvenes en México” (“The poetry of youth in Mexico”) of 1924 and Torres Bodet's book of 1928 entitled *Contemporáneos*, which cemented their identity as artists united, if not by style, at least by a philosophy grounded in the possibility of an endlessly free – yet controlled, ordered – creative act.

Difficult to classify, their works intermingle the idealism of art for art's sake (sights set on an ever-original future in which there is an implicit disdain for the past) with the much more materialistic discipline of a classicism that seeks to flow from the hard-won lessons of a literature that has evolved across several centuries. It is in this sense that several modernist undercurrents coincide in the texts of the Contemporáneos, who were avid readers of Surrealism and Ultraism as much as of the aestheticism of 'pure poetry' and the new Spanish literature of the Generation of 27. However, given their rationalist, classicist (if by no means *conservative*) political position, it would be inexact to call the Contemporáneos an avant-garde, even if they were committed to creativity without constraints and worked within the conceptual environment of a revolutionary approach to literary language.

This complex, superficially ambiguous set of references and values earned them the spite of both the nationalist avant-garde and the conservative wing of the Mexican art-world, which started a serious polemic against the group in 1932. By 1931 the group had started to dissolve due to each individual's differing interests (Villaurrutia, for example, was often attracted to cinema and theatre, while Cuesta was drawn to the politics of literature) as well as to a generalized, gradual discontent with the magazine's course. After its run had ceased, the group was brought together *as an image* by the force of public critique; Jorge Cuesta's follow-up magazine, *Examen*, faced in 1932 the very first trial against a cultural entity in the history of Mexico, as a result of publishing an excerpt of a novel by “proletarianist” writer Rubén Salazar Mallén in which the use of “bad, blasphemous language” was widespread. Amidst the scandal, the various authors that had once contributed to *Contemporáneos* were variously targeted by nationalists and conservatives alike through the rhetorical (negative) stereotyping figures of elitists, reactionaries, avant-gardists, anti-Mexican, decadent, and cosmopolitan. While the polemic lasted no more than a year, the reputation of the “group without a group”, as Villaurrutia described it, became so overwhelming that its 'members' found it nearly impossible to set themselves apart from the collectivity imagined by their opponents and the public.

This is why even if the Contemporáneos individually produced their most highly regarded works after 1932, it is the period of the magazine of the same name which, in general, could be seen to define the spirit and the philosophy that support their distinct processes as writers in the context of a culture that, for a very long time, rejected them on nationalist grounds. In retrospective, authors like Octavio Paz have re-evaluated the accusations with a critical eye and found that the Contemporáneos would often satirise foreigners (especially Spanish and Anglo-Americans) and make very subtle declarations of 'mexicanism': their patriotism was not that of the Revolution, always obvious, always grand, but that of a tradition that plays its grandiosity in the key of everyday life.

**Selected works:**

Jorge Cuesta: “Canto a un dios mineral” (circa 1938, published 1942)

Enrique González Rojo: *Viviendas en el mar* (1927)

José Gorostiza: *Muerte sin fin* (1939)

Salvador Novo: *Espejo* (1933), *Nueva grandeza mexicana* (1947)

Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano: “Muerte de cielo azul” (1936)

Gilberto Owen: *Perseo Vencido* (1948)

Carlos Pellicer: *Esquemas para una oda tropical* (1933), *Exágonos* (1941)

Jaime Torres Bodet: *Proserpina rescatada* (1931), *Tiempo de arena* (1955)

Xavier Villaurrutia: *Nostalgia de la muerte* (1938), *Autos profanos* (1943)

**Further Reading:**

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Palou, Pedro Ángel. *Escribir en México durante los años locos: el campo literario de contemporáneos.* Puebla, Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2001.

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