



Avelino Sala: the power of the symbol

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*In any event, the Greek world teaches us the following lesson:
the arte of the statue was developed alongside public institutions,
forming a perfect body, and they originate in Sparta.*

GOTTFRIED BENN

Angels as severe as eagles.

JUAN EDUARDO CIRLOT

1. On emblems, cloisters and symbols

*As he who comprehends such ideas is an Eagle, so he who is capable of producing them must be ranked among angels: for it is an employment of cherubims and an elevation of man which raises him to sublime hierarchy*¹. Extravagance, paradox and symbolic nature in a traditional sense are constant in the history of art. It is the art of the concept as artifice or finding which, with the weave of the representation, is conformed in the shadow land installed by Avelino Sala in a Baroque and emblematic setting. The change of significance represented by the appropriation of ready-made has lead to destruction where the image of reality appears before a specific deed: the representation disappears in a strange hiatus between the real and the ideal. The concept annuls everyday conditions, creating a new space where the idea is vigilant, protects and lies in waiting. In this sense, in his interven-

1. Baltasar Gracián: "Essencia de la Agudeza ilustrada", *Arte de ingenio, Tratado de la Agudeza*, ed. de Emilio Blanco, Cátedra, 1998, p. 138.



tion in Universidad Laboral, Avelino Sala invites us to attack, announcing that the enemy is already within, *cloistered* in a phantasmagorical place².

Alciato had defined the emblematic as discovery of the represented in the interpreted, based on the *body*, the *title* and the *text*³. Three spaces watched over by an eagle who distrusts old moles and which, in his last proposal, is transformed into a subtle domination of a space linked to the Franco regime in El Escorial, the original use of which has now been lost to cultural innovation. Previously, like an emblem, Avelino Sala had installed guard dogs, transparent men and messages in apparently natural places such as cliffs or deserted beaches. A post-Romanic inspiration which helps to configure his work from concepts such as waiting, drama, resistance or anxiety. Gradually sliding towards a conceptual change, his dedication to icons continues, Duchamps-like, to change the original meaning of objects, to open new possibilities by merely introducing a message brought from elsewhere. These associations of apparently unrelated things in a new place are metaphorical procedures where the lyric and the conceptual coincide with the non-place of art. In the case of Avelino Sala, they provide a meaning to the new because the unexpected is found in that *giving*.

2. Memory of anguish

In general, the spirit of allegory can be found in the meeting between an image and a text with moralising intentions. This duality between love and death, between body and soul, between reality and desire, is precisely what leads to tiredness and battle: the appropriationist sensation which leads us to believe that everything has been said. Avelino Sala's

2. Santiago Sebastián: *Emblemática e Historia del Arte*, Cátedra, 1995. As seen by the author, the cloister is an important emblematic and written place. Another important book for understanding occult symbolism is by musical anthropologist Marius Schneider: *El origen musical de los animales-símbolo en la mitología y escultura antiguas*, Siruela, Madrid, 1999.

3. Alciato, *Emblemas*, Editora Nacional, 1975. For Alciato (1492-1550), the emblem comprises three parts: the *body* represented by a figure or icon, the *title*, which was an inscription or slogan, and the *text*, which was a statement, an epigram. In the case of Avelino Sala in Universidad Laboral, he uses an eagle, an imperative sentence ("The enemy is within, shoot against us") attributed to the head of the Simancas Barracks in Gijón, now a Jesuit school. The third term corresponds to a video in which a group of dogs devour letters made out of meat which spell the word *culture*.

symbolic approach uses this idea to transform the meaning of things, looking towards political and economic power. In spite of the imperative affiliation of allegory, in the sense of warning of danger and repetitive actions, caution and the vigilance of a stone eagle have to be used by memory in order not to wither in the attempt⁴. This temptation of the infinite was one of his initial assumptions, the crossing of the meridian where nihilism is patent. The search for vertigo where not to succumb, the anguish which, for Heidegger, had become nihilist existentialism, is at the origin of the work of art and in its vital strength. One must be aware that all aesthetic theories are found in an hileomorphic presence. In the case of the secret space of the sculptures of Avelino Sala's hero, we are presented with a problematic reflection about what makes us the creators of our own lives: perplexity in a vacuum⁵. The need to arrive somewhere, from shift seas, to board love boats, is what is offered under the protection of hermetic salvation, in the visibility from beneath the water. A combination of cleverness and literality that the artist has affirmed by means of a motto in a church (*Socorro*, 2007).

The memory of anxiety (*Anxiety*, 2007) reveals, like an unconscious negative, that failure can never be ruled out. The project of the desperate, as a profoundly active nihilist, is at least aware that the only option is having steered the remains over glass. This Smithsonian transparency of the limit, the light and the word convene in a space away from home and one's country, where Nietzsche finds the impossible origin of nihilism: the sinister strangeness of being vigilant and cautious before the obscure hyperborean light of melancholy. Violent dogs directly warned of the destruction typical of the exhausted (*Restlessness*, 2003). As a symptom of the anxiety characteristic of creation, this has not prevented Avelino Sala

4. Alciato uses the image of the eagle associated to classic mythological themes. Such is the case of Prometheus in chains, whose liver grows as it is eaten, the emblem of which is entitled *Que con cuidado se alcanza la ciencia*. In Avelino Sala's images, it can also be associated to the figure of Icarus, to whom he dedicated his transparent sculptures located in non-places (*Proyecto Ícaro*, 2004) We shall see that the symbolic nature of his work is linked to a continuous project (*Desarrollo sostenido*, 2004), where he used some children which could well be related to the mythical sequestering of Ganímedes, present in the *Emblemas* or in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. This is possibly one of the most important characteristics of Avelino Sala's work, and as the Roman exile on the banks of the Black Sea would say, of poets in general.

5. This was shown in *Hombre del siglo XXI* (2005), where man visits woods and cemeteries. As Nietzsche says, "the artist phenomenon is the most *transparent*: he looks at the *fundamental instincts of power*, of nature, etc.! Also religion and morals!", Friedrich Nietzsche: *Fragments póstumos* (1885-1889), trans. Juan Luis Vermal, volume IV, 2006, p. 116.

from searching, holding on to a last resort which is no longer useful, for the weight of the material dismantling of the ready-made converted into work of art (*Drama*, 2005). In this sense, as Nietzsche says, drama is not only associated to action, but to its relevance as an event and reflection, it is a modern perspective of the hieratic and rigid⁶.

3. Arde lo que será

As Deleuze says, today's society fears neither vacuum, nor misery nor scarcity. It only fears one thing, water flooding the land: "This is the drama. We find something that collapses and we do not know what it is. It does not respond to codes, but flees beneath them"⁷. In this sense, *Fuego, camina conmigo* (2006) is linked to the presence of spectacularity in today's welfare society⁸. Avelino Sala makes us of an image representing a nocturnal game where a group of people plays with a swollen ball. A symbol of the artist's participation, not only in society but before it. An ardent grade where fire becomes a way of escaping from the ancillary and limitation, aware that it is a dangerous game because it has to follow the rules characteristic of an artist's activity. It is the affinity hidden between the verb and rising fire.

As corresponds to his past history, Avelino Sala attempts to link two spaces of multiplicity. His work as a producer and the approach to a reflection about the vacuum found in our society, announce the confabulation of time which forces us to presence a body bordering on the madness of capitalism, a projection of the need to endlessly investigate what the artist intends in his life. This association of life and art represents seeing the game and

6. Ibidem, p. 518.

7. "I believe that in a society there are two things which refer to its decline, to its death. There are always two co-existing moments. All deaths, in a way, come from within – this is the principle of the Tanatos- and they all come from without. I mean that all societies have internal threats and these threats are represented by the danger of decoded flows", Gilles Deleuze: *Derrames entre el capitalismo y la esquizofrenia*, Cactus, 2005, pp. 24-25.

8. "In this decomposition, we ultimately have to seek the reason for the only effect of extraneation produced by Lynch's films, often associated to the sensitivity of Edward Hopper's paintings; however, between the extraneation of Hopper's paintings and that of Lynch's films, there is the same difference as there is between modernism and postmodernism", Slavoj Žižek: "David Lynch, o el arte del ridículo sublime", *Lacrimae rerum*, Debate, trans. Ramón Vilà Vernis, 2006, p. 167.

the fire; it is the approximation to figures kicking a burning ball, a metaphor of space and time which become contemporaneous as they are consumed. What else can this fire mean, when all that is left is smoke? What is the game about. Primarily, risk. Avelino Sala does not see fire as entertainment or as chance. It is the flame separated from the value of the artistic object. If his sculptural work showed a body without organs, creating a vacuum, his figures installed in liminal areas projected a wish. When studying the drawing, a sort of frozen instant persists. This burning in the power of desire is his persistence as an artist; where the game feeds the aesthetic capacity of a society with little spectacle.

4. After the romantic

It can be agreed that the romantic spirit has a gesture of surrealism; the post-romantic spirit becomes a denier which still believes in effort and joviality where the high and the low live together and aspire to the sublime. In *La espera* (2004), Avelina Sala proposed the creation of advertising fiction in which a wave was awaited as the perverted image of a young, handsome, stereotyped and absurd winner. That direction towards the values that should be sustaining young westerners became a vain dramatic hope, because the board on which the waves were surfed was immersion in impossibility and the extreme. Adorno already remarked upon this incapacity between the consideration of art as work or something just for free time at weekends⁹. Art has the key to its situation in bourgeois society, considering whether it is useful or whether its interests belong to an ingenuous freedom. In the case of Avelino Sala, we would be nearer the expression of desperation, without mistaking the joy of the shipwreck with a comic face. Art, then, has instead the possibility of taking things with a lightness far from ephemeral. As Adorno says, the idea is to confirm its paradoxical essence by negativist dissonance, precisely because it is modelled on fluid reality: the falseness of the juvenile impose by the culture industry¹⁰. And here, although the philosopher recants his condemning position regarding poetry, he confirms that art's inability to be jovial

9. "Art fluctuates between severity and joviality, in the form of what has escaped but is nonetheless full of reality. Only this tension constitutes art", Theodor W. Adorno: "¿Es jovial el arte?", *Notas sobre literatura*, trad. Alfredo Brotons, Akal, 2003, pp. 579-586.

10. This would be one of the interests that Avelino Sala attempted to show in the fiction created in relation to surfing in *Drama* (2005) or in his ironic view of the art world in *Diario de un artista* (2006).

after Auschwitz is inevitable: art can no longer be optimistic or committed; it corresponds to a third, excluded, term.

However, the ascent to the sublime, the distant and the high, is in Avelino Sala the consequence of a post-romanticism which, rather than an ingenuous twist to the mystical powers of the earth and the sea, or an imagined consideration of the water and fire proposed by Gaston Bachelard, is on a realist border, in the sense that he uses his own life as aesthetic material. This special sensitivity leads him to draw in a way that seeks profiles and contours in silhouettes, showing the same vacuum revealed by their poliedric nature¹¹.

5. Cultural criticism under siege

Lezama Lima tied the epic siege of the *Iliad* to captivity, where the important thing for poetry was the situation of those who wait at the feet of the walls and not the city under siege¹². What is really manifest is the fictional, a vacuum appropriate for fear, failure and horror where a lack of valid images, annulled by a powerful observer, tells us that the enemy continues to be within. In the case of Avelino Sala's intervention in the cloister of Universidad Laboral, the figure of the eagle, together with mottos, texts and the site's history, show us the way to a formalism which attempts to feed on the flesh spelling out *culture*¹³. A satirical banquet of hounds where Jonathan Swift had positioned the false critics of art, showing their historic presence in the controversy of those in favour of antiquity of modernity, linking its existence to tarts and nobility¹⁴. Something that would be underlined, on this

11. This proteic and poliedric nature that we underline in Avelino Sala is due to his different interventions in curating exhibitions, management of *Sublime arte + cultura contemporánea* magazine or cultural management. But it could also be related to the technical diversity of his work, which goes from exploring drawing and painting to videos, advertising, sport and the new concept proposed by the artist as *postperformance*.

12. "Because those under siege decide between permanence and death. The end of a city under siege is fire or invasion by barbarians [...] But those who wait at the feet of the walls run the risk of withdrawal", José Lezama Lima, "A partir de la poesía", *Introducción a los vasos órficos*, Barral Editores, 1971, p. 170.

13. The action of hounds devouring the word *culture* undergoes a terrible Beckett-like twist, like in one of his best known poems called *Vulture*, which is not too far from carrion. This situation of the corrupt is essential for positioning formalism, allegory and poetry in the symbolist decadence of modernity, a trace of romanticism which has already been welcomed into a strange home.

14. "A true critic in the perusal of the book is like a dog at a feast, whose thoughts and stomach are wholly set

occasion from a critical perspective, when the artist is also seen as a prostitute, especially in the easily annoyed Baudelerian opinion. Something which does not leave cultural creators in a good place in society. Thus was it seen by Adorno when he considered criticism as a product of the liberal age. Especially, in its consequences due to a lack of independent deployment and cultural neutralisation. The fact is that the group of hungry dogs presented by Avelino Sala, in his persistent reflection on the disintegration of the ego, places us in a critical position before a grateful culture. The idea is not to understand the incorporation of culture in this aim to take over the spirit incarnate¹⁵. It shows, ironically but strongly, that a conception of culture as a feast becomes the putrid which eventually ends in pedantic wording. So critics think of nothing, because nothing occurs to them, because they sustain a mediocre concept of criticism in a truly Roman sense. When envy *-in videre-* makes us look to others from awry. This is not the same as a serious reflection on the aesthetic and the appearance of vacuum in relation to sculpture, the dominating power or intellectual exchange: the incidence of the symbolic in the space of the city (*Eagles*, 2007).

6. On figures

As we shall see, the multiple issues considered in the work of Avelino Sala has become rizophore and figure, maintaining correspondence since the beginning with the symbolic and with its material and conceptual presence. Because the proteic brings figures and figures unwrap the vacuum and the original significance of the effigy becomes the silhouette, the limit of its empty bodies becomes the action of creating fiction, inscribing absence in a plastic image¹⁶. As described in the prologue to *Figura* by José M. Cuesta Abad, Auer-

upon what the guests fling away, and consequently is apt to snarl most when there are the fewest bones", Jonathan Swift: "Digresión sobre los críticos", *Cuento de una barrica*, trans. Emilio Lorenzo, Cátedra, pp. 259-269.

15. "Its true task is completely the opposite: to discover the intangible part of each individual's solitude which can never be attacked [...] Rather than fighting for freedom it has to be used, incarnate in what is said. Its own liberty is often destructive, making it stronger. So what it loves is the daring, limitless freedom which sometimes causes death, and even leads to a love of death", Georges Bataille: "¿Es útil la literatura", *La literatura como lujo*, Versal, trans. Ana Torrent, 1993, p. 32.

16. "Figures, then, are not only provisional; they are at the same time the provisional configuration of the eternal, recurring or timeless; they not only point to a practical future, but also to eternity and timelessness: the eternal is represented in them and is a fragmented provisional reality, present at all times", Erich Auerbach: *Figura*, Trotta, trans. Yolanda García Hernández and Julio A. Pardos, 1998.

bach turns the study of drama into a poetic reflection about the different meanings of the word, the importance of which is found in the evaluation of a concept which does not interpret based on symbols or allegory, but is also associated to a broad concept of history. Auerbach analyses a philological history of the word, providing clues for understanding the relationship not only between contemporary poetry and art but also for reaching an open interpretation in which statues are consistent with literature, poetry with images, stamps and laws with cleverness. In the case of Avelino Sala, this reflection on the figure could well be what, in his latest projects, becomes the treatment of a place's history: the emptiness of the symbol¹⁷.

7. On eagles, temples and cities

As in Brueghel's famous *Landscape with the fall of Icarus*, we are in the presence of a mythical fall. Enclosure, flight and daring have to take flight and find a place elsewhere. This lack of memory of the foundation of cities is closely related to the sudden appearance of the symbolic eagle and its emblematic use by Avelino Sala. Like the Aztecs, the foundation of Tenochtitlan was due to the discovery of an eagle on a cactus¹⁸. It was the symbol of the *augur*, a character who oversaw the creation of the *templum*, the centre from which the city grew. So the harmonious view of heaven coincides with human creation and its remains. Misery as metaphysics of the wasteland where Avelino Sala has located his personal Icarus refers to this origin. The *mundus* was the cavity in the centre of the *templum* where,

17. This is seen from the last knives used by Avelino Sala in *Hope* (2007) The artist included the motto that legend attributes to Caravaggio: no hope, no fear. This new appearance of lacking is a good description of the active nihilism that the symbol inflicts on the real. It defends itself and attacks an enemy within. The knife was also similarly used by Maya Deren in *Meshes of the afternoon*. It arises in the presence of the other, in our alter ego, as it appears in a scene of the Dostoyevskian version of *The idiot* by Akira Kurosawa, when the mad man discovers his destructive side before a shop window full of knives.

18. Without intending to make an inventory of all the esoteric symbolism in the figure of the eagle, we will say, however, that it was used in Egyptian hieroglyphs to represent the letter A. In Greece, it was the sacred animal of Zeus, representing light, lightning and fire. It was also the symbol of the Gospel of St. John. As we know, since Rome, it was the heraldic symbol of the kings of Germany and Poland, from where it would spread to the Austrian Empire and Tsarist Russia. It was linked to battle and to waiting, to the bolt of lightning found on Macedonian coins. Always linked to divine and earthy power, its importance in North America is evident, as a symbol of money and power.



like on a tattoo, it contains three elements loaded with symbolism belonging to the three levels of the cosmos. The sky was represented by the wings of an eagle. Man was a relic of the founder and the earth was represented by a handful of earth from another sister city. The *mundus* was then covered with a stone slab which would subsequently be the altar from which fire would accompany good omens. As we know, the affiliation of fire and the *focus* during the Roman empire was important for one's fate during battle. In the Roman legions, an eagle was used to see the future. It was the start of a contemplation of an erased future. These three levels, which can be identified with the three elements found in the intervention of Avelino Sala in Universidad Laboral, the use of the eagle and the inclusion of a text, the appearance of critics as shown in the words of Walter Benjamin and the video of the dogs eating the flesh of *culture*, configure a new emblematic idea which leads Avelino Sala to continue his great work as an artist of the new.