

Terrorism Revisited

Modernisme, Art, and Anarchy in the City of Bombs

Eduardo Ledesma

Eduardo Ledesma is a graduate student in Spanish and Portuguese at Harvard. His academic interests include 20th and 21st century Ibero-American literature (in Spanish, Catalan, and Portuguese) as well as film and new media studies. He is currently working on his dissertation, which explores the intersections between word and image in experimental poetry, from the avant-gardes to the digital age. Eduardo is also an avid runner, and enjoys immensely running the Boston Marathon every year.

1. Some background notes

Let's start with a bang. On November 7, 1893, opening night of the season at the Barcelona opera house, the Liceu,¹ two Orsini bombs were tossed into the audience. The carnage was considerable, some twenty people were killed, many injured. It was the work of anarchist Santiago Salvador, in retaliation for the execution of Paulí Pallás, another anarchist who earlier that year had unsuccessfully tried to assassinate the Madrid appointed Captain General of Catalonia, Martínez Campos. Pallás' terrorist act was viewed with admiration by some members of the working class, perhaps even by some sectors of the bourgeoisie, resentful of Madrid's rule, but the explosion at the Liceu deeply shocked the upper echelons of Barcelona society, the "bones families" or good families. The Liceu bombing became a symbol of social unrest, exposing the fissures of a polarized society. What followed—justified in the eyes of many—was a period of police repression, of suspect round-ups, military trials and summary executions, directed (mostly) at the working class quarters of Barcelona. Hundreds of anarchists and their sympathizers were arrested, although a significant number of those

who were imprisoned had no anarchist connections. A few were teachers of secular schools; others were simply labor organizers, and some were accused by neighbors who had personal vendettas to settle. Confessions were extracted through torture, and the prison at the fortress of Montjuïc became a feared site of unspeakable atrocities. Barcelona's good society, for the most part, tacitly approved or looked the other way, ignoring the government's heavy-handed tactics.

These violent years also saw the birth of Barcelona's principal aesthetic movement, *Modernisme*, a (more metaphorical) explosion in the arts lasting approximately from 1888 until 1910.² Santiago Rusiñol, considered the patriarch of the movement, has been characterized by some scholars as an apolitical bohemian, distant from the daily struggle of the working class, in short, a dandy practicing art for art's sake. Recent retrospective exhibitions of Rusiñol's work and a fresh look at the "other Rusiñol" or the "unknown Rusiñol" have begun to present some previously hidden or missed sides of the artist—his addiction to morphine, his conflictive relation with women, his homo-social tendencies, and his ambivalent attitude toward revolutionary social and political movements, to name a few. I intend to examine some possible connections between *Modernisme* and anarchism, including Rusiñol's own ambivalent stance, but also that of other members of his cadre. Rusiñol's position with re-

gards to anarchism is tenuous, and archival material is scant. Although other *Modernistes*—Jaume Brossa, Gabriel Alomar—considered themselves as intellectual anarchists, Rusiñol was not openly affiliated with any revolutionary movement, and certainly did not partake in any 'direct action,' but his response to anarchism leaves many questions unanswered.³

2. Barcelona under a climate of fear

The City of Bombs. The Rose of Fire. The Catalan Manchester. The Paris of the South. Turn-of-the-century Barcelona's many nicknames invoked a city which underwent rapid industrialization and the creation of vast fortunes in the manufacturing industries. The new wealth allowed a flourishing of the arts, but exacerbated the contrast with the poor—often immigrants from the south or from the agrarian Catalan countryside—who worked under intolerable conditions and lived in appalling squalor. This led, perhaps inevitably, to social unrest, labor strikes, and the much reviled anarchist 'direct action,' a euphemism for bombings, political assassinations and church arsons. The embattled bourgeoisie lived in a state of constant terror, and viewed the working class as unruly and ignorant mobs ("masas") on the verge of imminent revolution and in need of harsh discipline.

3. *Modernisme* and anarchism

As an artistic movement, *Modernisme*⁴ was comprised of radical innovations, following a philosophy that pursued an arguably radical break with the aesthetic past, particularly that of the *Renaixença*.⁵ A departure from academic conventions, a rejection of bourgeois values, and a social critique of state policy—both in regards to the arts and in the sociopolitical arena—coalesced with the fierce individualism of its practitioners, artists such as Santiago Rusiñol, Ramon Casas, Isidre Nonell or Pablo Picasso. But there was not a unified response to the events of their day—no manifestos, no spokesperson for the movement,—and as the art scholar Robert Lubar states, “the relation between intellectuals and anarchism [in Barcelona...] was never straightforward.”⁶ Not all *Modernistes* can be painted with the same ideological brush, as the spectrum ran from the fervent Catholic and conservative architect Antoni Gaudí, or the humanist poet Joan Maragall to the avowed anticlericalist Ramon Casas, from socialists and anarchists to liberals, republicans and monarchists. But, undoubtedly, there was a radical branch in the movement which included figures such as Jaume Brossa, Gabriel Alomar, Alexandre Cortada, Diego Ruiz, and Pere Coromines, all of whom were ideologically close to anarchism (or, more accurately, anarcho-syndicalism). Gabriel Alomar was an atheist, a Catalan nationalist, and a political radical.⁷ Jaume

Brossa was a firm believer in the need to rupture with the past aesthetically and politically “a épocas nuevas, formas de arte nuevas.”⁸ As Joan Ramon Resina explains, the “vanguardia de lucha social influye en el núcleo progresista del Modernismo,” resulting in a blurring of the distinction between artist-activist and terrorist-revolutionary. According to Catalan literature scholar Jordi Castellanos, the radicalized component of the modernista movement “comparte[n] la finalidad de la ‘propaganda por la acción’ anarquista,”⁹ in a context where the ends would justify the violent means. Theirs was a fundamentally utopian desire first to destroy the existing social fabric, then to build a New City, a new Barcelona (within a new Catalunya), like a phoenix rising from the ashes. Resina explores the connections between the modernista publication *L’Avenç* (*The Future*) and the anarchists:

Eudald Canibell, uno de los escritores del equipo de *L’Avenç*, mantenía correspondencia con Bakunin. También Emili Guanyavents, Cels Gomis, y el dibujante Joseph Lluís Pellicer, que formaban parte del primer grupo de la revista, fueron dirigentes anarquistas. Los contactos entre intelectuales modernistas y el anarquismo se estrechan tras la desaparición de *L’Avenç* a principios de 1894.¹⁰

As the anarchist movement became increasingly radicalized in the late 1890’s, the links that existed between moderate anarchists and less extreme *modernista* intellectuals weakened. Most *modernists*—even those who fer-

vently desired social justice—did not support violence,¹¹ and as Lubar remarks “intellectual anarchism as a posture for social reform remained at a significant distance from the cause of direct action.”¹²

However, at around 1900, subject matter for the *Modernistes* remained focused on the urban and proletarian, and had taken what art critic Cristina Mendoza calls “a radical turn,”¹³ which attempted to synthesize the aesthetic and the political. Jordi Falgàs comments that the Modernistes “not only tried to make political statements in terms of subject matter but also attempted to experiment with their work’s formal qualities.” Most failed to conjoin their new ‘revolutionary’ aesthetic with a radical ideology, and although they achieved a certain “thematic and formal freedom,”¹⁴ their political statements remained considerably more ambiguous (at times clearly troubled) and did not articulate any clear social message. Falgàs attributes the lack of political clarity to the “tenacious grip” of their bourgeois background and catholic upbringing; they were, undoubtedly, indebted to the system they opposed; they hailed from the bourgeois families they ridiculed and they had achieved their status as independent artists in most cases thanks to the wealth those families had accumulated through often questionable means (at the very least worker exploitation in textile and other industries, but also land speculation, colonial commerce,

and in some cases like the respected Güell family, through the slave trade).

Despite Falgàs’ astute point, one cannot deny the social quality (in both style and theme) of much of *Moderniste* art. See, for instance, Ramon Casas *The Charge* 1899,¹⁵ rejected by the Paris World Fair of 1900—perhaps because of its highly ‘charged’ message of social unrest.¹⁶ The main action depicts a mounted Assault Guard (*Guardia de Asalto*) trampling a protester, a common form of crowd control, strike resolution and worker suppression. Radically from a pictorial standpoint the action in the foreground occurs at the extreme right of the painting, while the crowd flees the police in the background. The painting represents a rupture with neoclassic tendencies—typically showing a few well proportioned figures, calm, static poses, a composition centered in middle of the canvas, etc.—as well as an obvious social critique. An asymmetrical composition that rejects academic uniformity and centralized action (and locates the observer in the fray, forced to make a choice), it also depicts an asymmetrical struggle which pits unarmed protesters against the forces of police repression, clearly placed on a plane of aggression by virtue of being on horseback.¹⁷ Concepts of order and disorder—as well as uniformity and uniform—transcend mere notions of artistic composition and enter the realm of the political.

In *The Garroting* (1894),¹⁸ Casas depicts the execution of nineteen year old

Aniceto Peinador. According to Carmen Belén Lord, the painting demonstrates Casas' "disquieted reaction."¹⁹ Although the work shows a certain distance—an elevated point of view, the lack of close up features—it also provides a sense of the collective character of the public execution: the shame, the horror, and the spectacle associated with it. The death penalty was highly criticized by many of the *Modernistes*, especially by Alomar and Maragall,²⁰ but also by Rusiñol. By placing the viewer in the position of a spectator to the execution, Casas might be indicating that guilt does not lie exclusively with the criminal, or the executioner, but is collective, the burden of an unjust society. And yet, despite the sense of the collective (guilt), the distance and the facelessness of the executioners and their victim create a sense of ambivalence. It is hard to identify with the pain of those whose faces we cannot see, and even when those faces become visible, "we" might not see "them," or perhaps we simply look away. This act of not-looking, of remaining distant, however, remains a political one, perhaps the very act Casas is trying to invoke through the "aesthetic" distancing effect of the painting.

4. Santiago Rusiñol's political ambivalence

In 1889, having rejected the lucrative career the directorship of the family textile factory offered him,²¹ Santi-

ago Rusiñol—painter, writer, and art collector—arrives at Montmartre in the company of fellow artist Ramon Casas. His stay in the neighborhood of bohemians and the working class poor, with its brothels, cabarets and dives, brought him into contact with the lower strata of Parisian life, including—quite possibly—anarchist agitators.²² Alexander Varias in his book *Paris and the Anarchists: Aesthetes and Subversives During the Fin de Siècle*,²³ identifies Montmartre as an anarchist enclave, home to avant-garde artists and revolutionary artisans, amongst them propagandist and working class agitator Emile Pouget who was one of the first anarchist journalists to use artists for his agit-prop ventures. Basing his research partly on police records (and thus, perhaps, one might cast some doubt and further ambivalence even into this methodology), Varias identifies Montmartre as a focal point for the anarchists' activities.²⁴ These probable encounters might have left a mark on a young, sensitive and impressionable Santiago Rusiñol. In his novel *L'auca del senyor Esteve* (1907) Rusiñol would demonstrate a deep concern for the role of the artist in society, and to a lesser extent, a growing awareness toward social inequality. Partly autobiographical, the novel narrates how the heir to a line of bourgeois shop owners refuses to take over the family business, becoming a sculptor instead. In the *Auca*, Rusiñol captured the tensions between the Catalan bourgeoisie and the bohemian

artists who may have flirted with working class ideology as a way to deny what they hated in themselves, their bourgeois birth, but never fully overcame their economic and ideological dependence on their middle class origins.

Art historian Teresa M. Sala posits that Rusiñol's pictorial work "oscila entre el registro popular y el refinamiento elitista." The same oscillation between the popular and the elite is inherent in *Modernisme* itself (as Brad Epps describes it, the oscillation between splendor and misery), manifested in both the aesthetic—which never fully breaks with naturalism—and the political—which never fully embraces the revolutionary. In Rusiñol, the aesthetic front represents a tendency to reject academic classicism and naturalism, and to move toward symbolism and art nouveau; on the political front, Rusiñol was interested in the regeneration of Catalan culture and language and also entertained nationalist aspirations, both values he shared with the majority of the Catalan middle class. Sala defines his complex nature as "mesiánico redentor al mismo tiempo que soñador-revolucionario, con una marcada mitificación del yo creador."

During his first period as a painter in the 1880's Rusiñol had not completely departed from naturalism, showing only a few characteristics of the modern (grey tones or certain light patterns suggesting impressionist influences, a penchant for *plein air* painting), yet his subject matter reflected his

social preoccupations, as Salas points out "espacios marginados, personajes enfermos, calles aisladas, vistas del cementerio o retratos de la casa de préstamos."²⁵ According to Josep Laplana, Rusiñol's later work in the 1890's, takes an even more intense social significance.²⁶ Rusiñol's pictorial *modernisme* derived from a combination of French Naturalism and Impressionism, Art Nouveau and a dose of Decadentism—as seen in the self-referential painting *Morphine*—, but despite its modernity it falls short of the more aggressive rupture with the past achieved by the avant-garde of the 1920's.

In an engaging article about one of Rusiñol's lesser known drawings, *Caps d'anarquistes (Anarchists' heads)*, Brad Epps delves into the "ambiguous fascination" that anarchism held for the artist. The drawings show the heads of the suspects rounded up after the Liceu bombing, rendered in a stark naturalist style that remits to criminal phrenology, a pseudo science that retained its positivist vigor well past the turn of the century. At least that is what critics such as Juan José Lahuerta have seen in these sketches, pointing out that they reveal "las características físicas del hombre criminal."²⁷ Epps, in contrast, sees the drawings as responding to a much more nuanced, ambiguous motivation that eludes such clear (reductive) interpretation. What is significant is that even if only momentarily, Rusiñol stopped painting bohemians and languid morphine addicts to turn

his attention to this “group” of anarchists, some of whom would be executed after their ‘trial.’ For Epps, Rusiñol’s interest is noteworthy, since even though he had written works criticizing the colonial wars,²⁸ and did sometimes retreat from certain (strictly) aesthetic, elitist tendencies, the sketches quite possibly revealed something personal; perhaps they were “the product of an artist who in drawing the anarchists is drawing himself” [my translation]. As was the case with the Casas’ paintings, “the drawings present an unbalanced power play that implicates the artist, the anarchists and the spectators” [my translation].²⁹ Without revealing the motivation of the artist, the portraits of the—already dead—condemned raise the same questions about collective guilt and responsibility that permeate other modes of *Moderniste* art, from the Expiatory Temple of the Holy Family (the Sagrada Família)—ostensibly built to expiate the sins of the Catalonian working class, but also to draw them in, bring them back to the religious fold—to Joaquim Mir’s possible social criticism of the costly structure in his painting *The Cathedral of the Poor* which depicts beggars panhandling outside the construction site of the (still, and perhaps forever so) to be completed cathedral. In *Anarchists’ Heads*, the faces of the abject show something beyond their possible guilt or innocence—the bumps and deformities which can be read as phrenology’s dictum on predetermined criminal behavior might also reveal the

bruises of torture, indeed they might be an indictment on society’s own inhumanity to its less fortunate members. The eyes of the accused stare at us impassably, their fate as uncertain (uncertain to them, the spectator knows of their unfortunate end) as their humble social condition is apparent.

Santiago Rusiñol’s shifting conception of the *Modernistes’* mission was a complicated amalgam of the aesthetic and the political, in which the two were dialectically inseparable, in constant tension. Despite their best intentions the *Modernistes* could not sever their ties to the bourgeoisie whose patronage they depended on, and whose ideology had raised them, much like the anarchists could not effectively change a society controlled by the privileged. Moderate anarchists who sought not destruction, but rather a gradual evolution of society toward greater equality, not chaos but individual rights, arguably had much more in common with *Modernistes* than those who advocated direct action. Rusiñol articulates the connection between art and anarchy when speaking about the *Modernisme* movement, even as he retains the ambivalent tension between the terms: “el brote de hoy viene cansado de abusos de naturalismo y busca espiritualidad [...] El brote de hoy tiene de mística, por lo que tiene la *anarquía* de fantasía imposible [...] tiene de revolucionaria ideal por la poca fe en las prácticas de los hombres; tiene todo lo que sea soñar, soñar solo, sin estorbos de burgueses ri-

cos ni pobres, burgueses del arte.”³⁰

The absence of a clear denunciation by Rusiñol and other *Modernistes* of such events as the Barcelona Liceu or the Corpus Christi procession bombings leaves our contemporary sensibility at a loss. Rusiñol’s personal stakes were significant, as his wife and brother were both wounded in the Liceu incident, and therefore an angry, retributive reaction might have been expected. Laplana places Rusiñol’s reaction to the terrorist act as somewhere between repugnance and forgiveness, but this is mere conjecture based on the *Anarquists’ heads* sketches. What we know of Rusiñol was that he condemned a situation that went much further than a handful of terrorist acts, placing fault partly within society itself. The country was ‘sick’, and the ailment was an emp-

teness that Rusiñol declared turned men into “the gears of a machine without a soul.”³¹ Others sensed this societal emptiness and the general apathy toward the less fortunate, and tried to awaken feelings of collective responsibility. Poet Joan Maragall uttered an impassioned cry in *The City of Forgiveness*, an article written to halt the executions of suspected anarchists,³² and appealed to the bourgeoisie by pointing out common guilt and appealing to common humanity: “Just look inside their eyes: See! It is yourselves: a man like yourselves: and with that there is enough.”³³ Catalan society chose not to look into the eyes of the condemned, and the penance for this sin of omission would come in a later conflagration, in 1936.

¹ During a performance of Rossini’s *William Tell*, which is also the tune some bohemian wall painters significantly whistle in Rusiñol’s celebrated novel *L’auca del senyor Esteve* (1907).

² In “The New Art: Modernisme” (*Barcelona and Modernity: Picasso, Gaudí, Miró, Dalí*, Yale University Press, 2006, 34), Carmen Belen Lord calls it “the most important Catalan artistic movement of the 19th century.” While the adjective “modern” is already used by Cadalso in his *Cartas Marruecas* (1793) in a pejorative sense, the term Modernismo in regards to an artistic current was vaguely used by Rubén Darío in 1888, and later officially at the launching of the distinct Latin American movement in 1896. The origin of the term in Catalunya is much earlier, dating from an 1884 article published by Ramon Casas in *L’Avenç*. The term becomes fully ‘cemented’ by the 1888 Universal Exposition in Barcelona, which featured several buildings in that style and arguably ushered in the movement in full force. In fact, Darío experienced Catalan Modernisme during a visit to Barcelona in 1898, where he befriended its foremost figure, Santiago Rusiñol.

³ Despite these pitfalls, the topic is worth exploring since it might counter the false ‘sanitized’ image of an artist whose praxis has been charged with keeping the spheres of art and politics apart, under the motto ‘art for art’s sake.’ Although there have been some efforts recently directed at investigating this aspect of Rusiñol’s life (as well as those of other Spanish and Latin American modernists, such as Darío), we are far from a clear understanding of his political motivations.

⁴ Modernisme rejected middle class values, and embraced a fiercely independent bohemian lifestyle. Without making overt political statements, modernistes paid close attention to class conflict and the political turmoil of their times. Paintings and drawings by Santiago Rusiñol, Ramón Casas, Joaquim Mir, Isidre Nonell, Pablo Picasso and others depict gypsies, beggars, prostitutes, and the wealthy bourgeoisie; they portray the suffering of the less fortunate with a pathos that challenges the notion of an apolitical Modernisme. Other works depict anarchist bombings, public executions, strikes and scenes of police repression.

⁵ A Romantic revivalist movement focused on Catalunya's medieval past, an era of empire and expansion under Jaume I the Conqueror.

⁶ Robert S. Lubar "Art and Anarchism in the City of Bombs," in *Barcelona and Modernity*, 106.

⁷ Later Alomar abandoned anarchism, became a socialist, and a prominent political figure

⁸ Joan Ramón Resina, "Observaciones sobre la vanguardia catalana" in Joan Ramón Resina, ed. *El aeroplano y la estrella. El movimiento de vanguardia en los Países Catalanes, 1904-1936* (Rodopi, 1997), 14.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. According to Resina after the magazine was shut down—because of its connection with anarchism—several of the modernistes, Jaume Brossa, Ignasi Iglèsies and Pere Coromines founded an activist group called Foc Nou (New Fire), a provocative name considering Barcelona's nickname, the Rose of Fire, —a reference to bombs and burning churches. The group presented modernist plays in the Teatre Independent, held conferences in worker centers and printed and distributed social agitation propaganda. Foc Nou was dismantled during the repression that followed the bombing of the Corpus Procession in 1896.

¹¹ In Barcelona the possibility of intellectual anarchism was further complicated by the rise of Catalan nationalism within the bourgeoisie, and an associated project of cultural regeneration. In this respect, the Moderniste artist found himself torn by two opposing tendencies, the destructive desire of a violent rupture with the past, and the drive to consolidate and construct a sense of what it meant to be Catalan, of revitalizing the language and recuperating lost traditions. Ultimately the regenerative, constructive tendency would win out.

¹² Robert S. Lubar, "Art and Anarchism in the City of Bombs," in *Barcelona and Modernity*, 109.

¹³ Cristina Mendoza and Doñate (eds.), *Isidre A. Nonell, 1872-1911* (MNAC/Fundación Cultural Mapfre Vida, 2000), 25. Mendoza is speaking specifically about Isidre Nonell's work, but this is applicable to several other modernistes.

¹⁴ Jordi Falgàs, "Picasso's Fellows at the Tavern. Beyond Modernisme?," in *Barcelona and Modernity*, 102.

¹⁵ Oil on canvas, 298x470.5 cm, Museu d'Art Modern (MNAC), Olot.

¹⁶ Although in 1904 it won a first prize medal in Madrid, at the National Fair (Exposición Nacional).

¹⁷ The painting was important enough to Casas that he painted a smaller version, as well as a charcoal self-portrait of himself painting *The Charge*. Interestingly, in 1910 he painted a different smaller version where the charging guard is on foot—perhaps a reflection on Casas less radicalized politics at that time? This smaller painting is in a private collection in the United States.

¹⁸ Oil on canvas; 50 x 65 1/2 in. (127 x 166.2 cm), Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain.

¹⁹ Carmen Belen Lord, “Casas and the Chronicle of Social Life,” in *Barcelona and Modernity*, 120.

²⁰ Joan Maragall made impassioned pleas to Barcelona’s bourgeoisie to grant a reprieve from execution for the anarchists condemned to death after the Liceu bombing.

²¹ Although he still received support from the factory’s proceeds.

²² Paris was also a hotbed of anarchism. Worthy of note were the Ravachol bombings which took place in 1892.

²³ Alexander Varias, *Paris and the Anarchists: Aesthetes and Subversives During the Fin de Siècle* (St. Martin's Press, 1996).

²⁴ Other well known anarchists such as art critic Felix Feneon, who might have also been involved in direct action, made their home in Montmartre. The anarchist group Les Naturiens, was also based there.

²⁵ Teresa M. Sala, “Bajo el signo de la melancolía: El ideario estético,” in Margarida Casacuberta, *Rusiñol Desconocido* (Grupo 3, 2006), 18, 22, 24.

²⁶ Josep de C. Laplana. *Santiago Rusiñol: el pintor, l'home* (Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1995), 166.

²⁷ J. J. Lahuerta. “La tentación del hombre: Notas sobre una escultura de Gaudí” in *¿Qué es la escultura moderna? Del objeto a la arquitectura* (Fundación Cultural MAPFRE Vida, 2003), 34.

²⁸ A narrative, *Llibertat!* (Freedom!) and later a play, *L'heroi* (The Hero).

²⁹ Brad Epps, “Entre l’art i la frenologia: Santiago Rusiñol i els anarquistes,” in R. Panyella (ed.), *La projecció social de l’escriptor en la literatura catalana contemporània* (Punctum/GELCC, 2007), 117, 124.

³⁰ Santiago Rusiñol, *Obres Completes*, Vol. II (Selecta, 1976), 738, as quoted by Salas, *Barcelona and Modernity*, 22.

³¹ Josep de C. Laplana. *Santiago Rusiñol*, 176, 277. My translation.

³² Maragall tried to publish the article unsuccessfully in several Barcelona newspapers, including *La Veu de Catalunya* to which he was a regular contributor, but it never went to print, possibly because of its accusatory nature.

³³ My translation from the Catalan, Joan Maragall, *Elogi de la paraula i altres assaigs* (Edicions 62, 1978), 132.