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THE PRESENCE OF CROSSROADS IN MEXICAN ART

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— Abstract—

The idea of crossroads appears quite frequently in Mexican art, and, though a fairly universal symbol, within the context of the country's artistic expression it takes on its own particular features. The present work is part of a project concerning the presence of crossroads in Mexican art, and deals with a number of works of considerable artistic value, viz. the sculpture of Coatlicue, as interpreted by Justino Fernández; the Popol Vuh; the Memorial de Sololá; the novel Pedro Páramo by Juan Rulfo; various songs by José Alfredo Jiménez, among other works of Mexican artistic expression. Although the Popol Vuh and Memorial de Sololá were made in what is currently the country of Guatemala, they share the vision of the Mayan cultures of Mexico.

Keywords

Crossroads; Mesoamérica; Mexican art; Coatlicue.

Netzahualcoyotl wrote, in the fifteenth century, that "from four to four we men, / we will all have to leave, [...]. / Like a painting / we will be erased (José Luis Martínez, 1984, p.203). The poet of Texcoco seems to indicate in these verses that the man is a continuous loss; however, like flowers, it is beautiful in its transience; life presents a hole where you walk towards your twin sister: death; the four indicates their confluence, the embrace of its borders.

At the crossroads the protagonists arrive at the threshold of disappearance; it is said that *La Llorona Mexicana* –whose legend takes root in the *Cihuacoatl*, the snake-woman– left her son *Mixcoatl* at a crossroads, to which she frequently returns to mourn for her offspring lost, "but in that place she only finds a sacrificial knife", says Yólotl González Torres (1995: 38-39). Fray Francisco Ximénez (1999, p.140) points out that one of the rites of the indigenous people of Guatemala took place at crossroads:

> If the children were already big, they went together to the skirts of the mountains, and if there were none, at the crossroads (*at these crossroads they had and still have many superstitions, as it is said*)[1] and there the parents began to sacrifice themselves and draw blood from many parts of their body with stones and knives and taught the children to do the same.

Allen J. Christenson, in his commentary on the *Popol Vuh*, (2012, note 176) affirms that, among the Mayans, the crossroads were considered dangerous "because they are focal points of the hidden powers that can come from any direction". Christerson also says that Fray Francisco Ximénez "wrote that the ancient k'iche' ceremonially gathered the sins of the entire community and abandoned them at a crossroads".

Tezcatlipoca, one of the most enigmatic deities of the Nahuatl world, represented fate, walked in heaven, on earth and in hell; he materialized to men as a ghost, shapeless mass or gray shadow. Westheim (1985, p.14) notes that Mexicans erected stone seats "at the crossroads, the place of uncertainty, where the traveler doubts which road to take."

Justino Fernández (1959) showed that the sculpture of *Coatlicue*, the most important work of the Mesoamerican indigenous history, corresponds to a

1 Italics are from the author.

fundamentally cruciform structure, if one looks at it from front to back; and pyramidal, if it is observed laterally. The configuration of this goddess figures the worldview of the Aztec society and of the other Mesoamerican groups.

Fernández observes that the fundamental components of this divinity refer to the symbolic and religious numbers of two and four; two basic structures, two claws, two feather hangings, two leather hangings, two snakes per belt, two skulls, two arms, two snakes per hands, two breasts, two snakes per head, and two faces. Its fundamental structures have four parts: the cross with its four directions, four parts make up the pyramidal structure, four the front claws, four eyes on top of the claws, four eagle or snake heads partially cover the arms, four bracelets, four parts form the front flaps of the bracelets, four hands on the collar in front and four hearts, four hands on the shoulders and back and two more hearts, four fangs on each side have the serpents of the big head, with four eyes on the two faces, and all the tongues of the serpents are bifid, so they become four in the heads of hanging snakes of the belt, four in the serpents that make of hands and four in which they act as heads; four are the large feathers on the leather hangings. The number five appears in the elements of the necklace, because at the center and in front the four hands and the four hearts finish in the hanging skull.

Justino Fernández says that *Coatlicue* objectifies a religious, cosmic, mythical, magical and poetic conception of the Aztec people as heir of old traditions of the indigenous cultures that preceded it, that absorbed and enriched with their own creations; its structure obeys a primordial, mythical order, by means of which men must have felt certain security before chaos. Four were the main gods, sons of the dual principle, male and female, who resided in *Omeyocan*, place 2, and who had by name *Ometecuhtli*, Two lord, and *Omecíhuatl*, Two lady. The four children of the divine and indivisible couple were: *Tezcatlipoca*, represented by the black color and corresponding to the North; *Huitzilopochtli* or *Tezcatlipoca* blue, which belonged to the South; *Tezcatlipoca* red, also *Xipe* or *Camaxtle*, of the East direction, and *Quetzalcóatl* or *Tezcatlipoca* white, of the West. On the other hand, the divine principle or couple represented the central direction, up and down, heaven and earth. Four times the world and man had been created, four suns too, and four cataclysms that had ended with everything; the fifth sun was being inhabited, the fifth world, destined to perish by tremor or earthquake. This dynamic conception of the world and of man, of creation and destruction, gave existence an inflexible sense of expiration, of death, but also of constant resurgence.

A central feature of the human skull that the *Coatlicue* carries lies, according to Justino Fernández, in which it is represented alive; its place in the navel of the goddess refers to the most central and deepest of the Earth.

The author of *Estética del arte mexicano* states that for Mesoamericans the world was built on a cross, on the crossroads that lead from East to West and from North to South. The cross was the symbol of the world as a whole. But these roads had a dynamic sense towards the unknown: the mystery, because the center also meant the crossing of the high and the low, which was the fifth direction, thus completing the dynamic conception of space: the pyramidal form of ascent and descent, which goes from the bottom of the earth, the world of the dead, to the highest site: *Omeyocan*.

Justino Fernández concludes by affirming that *Coatlicue* is alive because of its artistic expressiveness and tragic beauty; it is not a relic of our past, but its presence is a source of suggestions that moves our aesthetic, historical, vital and mortal interests.

Rubén Bonifaz Nuño (1995, pp. 19-31) finds in the Olmec culture the origin of the quincunx or cross of San Andrés, that abounds in the Mesoamerican plastic, which, under the different forms of its representation (points, crossed or linked bands, square with circle and interior quadrants, vanes with varied centers, and others) have received from the scholars different interpretations; however, there is, until today, no clear theoretical explanation for them. In search of such clarification, and based on an ancient text whose truth is proven by an abundance of images created in different times and places of pre-Hispanic culture, he presents a hypothesis: the five points of the quincunx symbolize the creative power applied to the matter of the creation, as well as its evolutionary development. The quincunx is a symbol of the precious, of heaven and earth: these are the immediate fruit of the supreme act of power; it is a symbol of the world's space, because space is the area that acquires its full meaning when it is populated with the created; it is its movement: creation is not a static fact, but a permanent process; it is a symbol of this same process: it represents, in its central point, the present time, and in the rest, the existence of the times that preceded it.

The quincunx thus understood, adds Bonifaz Nuño, acquires the fullness of its meaning in the images where it is related to the snakes and the human being; those represent the gods qualified for creation; the last one, the entity that gave them the impulse and provided them with the necessary material to carry it out. Man is a condition without which the universe would not exist; he is the irreplaceable mean of its preservation and its development.

The author of *El cercado cósmico* refers to a myth whose interpretation clarifies and establishes the meaning of the quincunx. "It is the text contained in the *Histoyre du Mechique*, irreplaceable as the key to understanding the original values of our ancient culture." Here's the story:

> Some others say that the earth was created this way: two gods, Çalcoatl and Tezcatlipuca, brought the goddess of the earth Atlalteutli from the heavens below. Which was full in all the joints of eyes and mouths, with which she bit like a wild beast; and before they had lowered her, there was already water, which they do not know who created it, on which this goddess walked. When the gods saw this, they said: "There is a need to make the earth." And saying this, they exchanged the two in two great serpents, of which one grabbed the goddess from the right hand to the left foot, another from the left hand to the right foot, and oppressed her so much that they made her break by the half, and from one half to the shoulders they made the earth, and the other half they took it to heaven.

For Bonifaz Nuño, the text exposes the development of universal creation. Its elements are four: a previous meeting of waters without a known creator, two gods that change into snakes and a human form. "Changed in serpents, the gods-opposed divine principles of creation- come to this form, whose sight made them feel the need to create, and in that human form, of their own body, they make the earth and the sky." In the moment of the union of the divine serpents with the human form, the creative power of the versal sum is integrated. That moment is represented in the Mesoamerican culture by the image of the entity called *Tláloc* by the Nahuas, and whose representation has its origin in the Olmecs. But, after that moment, the creation took place.

Imagine says Bonifaz Nuño, now the moment where both gods, changed into big snakes, are put to the creative task: one of them grabs the human form of the right hand to the left foot; the other, in reverse, from the left hand to the right foot. In doing so, they necessarily mark five points: those corresponding to the limbs, hands and feet of the human form, and the central one, that which their ophidian bodies engender when they cross one over the other. A point in the center; another four indicating the angles of an ideal surface: there is the quincunx or also called cross of San Andrés. Those five points represent the power of the gods that, applied to the human form, will create the universe. They are, in this way, signs of the cosmogony action.

Bonifaz Nuño, based on the study of iconographic and textual relations, says the quincunx was invented by the Olmecs in order to express their fundamental

conceptions of man and the world, they were transmitted, keeping their original meanings, to the fields and centuries of multiple manifestations of Mesoamerican culture.

The meaning of these crosses was not completely buried in the past; it often appears in rituals masked with the symbol of the Christian cross. Currently, various rituals in Chiapas are about crossroads; in Tuxtla Gutiérrez there is still a dance whose steps trace crosses. The Dance Master of Zoque Stewardship, Víctor Manuel Velázquez López, tells the symbolism of two "carnival dances", which refer to certain Nahua myths about the creation of the sun and the moon and also to the *Popol Vuh*:

> Not only the dance of San Roque carries crosses; for example the Carnival dance alludes to the four points; a standing cross is danced; that is the sky, the moon, the sun and below is the *Jocoshto* or the underworld. It is danced towards the sunrise and towards the sunset; the crest, or the character that wears it, should bow to the four points, not to the cardinals, but to the four sacred points; although we do the dance for the virgins, there are other points; they are the goddesses; then we have to bow before them, as a greeting; and it is how the *Yomo-Etzé* is formed to later perform the dance of *Napapok-Etzé* or Carnival; an allusion is made to the celestial bodies and the underworld, the Jocoshto, as old people used to say, that's what they called him, the bad lord and that he was down. The Yomo-Etzé is the fertility dance; previously all the dancers wore a hat on their heads; but due to the course of time, people stopped doing it, and it was lost until only the dance lady wears the hat; she is the one who also makes and carries the crest and marks those points: towards the front, towards the back and towards both sides, she together with the crest. As this festival is the largest in Tuxtla, the two dances are joined; first the dance of the women is given and later the dance of the Carnival. They dance from January 30th to February 2nd, and from there they dance again in union until October 14th and 23th. That of the *Yomo-Etzé* makes the turn in the opposite direction of the hands of the clock; in the middle there is a small house where irrigated land, corn, banana and other plants are planted; at the end of the twelfth, the old ladies of Carnival and the dancers of the *Yomo-Etzé* run and acquire one of these products; we call it "*La robadera*", it is sacred; when the virgins are already seated, we can plant them in the yards to have good harvests. It was named Dance of Carnival so that it could subsist to the European conquest, but this dance alludes to time, the sun and the moon. The girl, who is the moon, carries four mirrors which represent the four lunar phases, and the crest is the sun; they both play a fundamental role in dance, from its beginning to its end. The music starts early in the morning and ends in the afternoon, at sunset. They tell that these women, "the Old ones", are

> the dead ones in childbirth that gave birth to a warrior son; and the squiggles are to defend the sun and the moon as they pass through the underworld. The world is here but they are transcending all the time; when they arrive at night, they help them to emerge so that they can subsist again during the day, the afternoon and again the sunset. Men dress as women because they refer to those women warriors.[2]

Jacques Soustelle (2012, pp. 164-166) says that the center is the contact point of the four spaces, of our world and of the afterlife, the crossroad par excellence; the *Cihuateteo* and *Tezcatlipoca* appear at night at the crossroads. Every crossroad is an ambiguous, dangerous and disturbing point, where diverse influences come to collide, where the conjunctures of appearances can relax for a moment to make room for the extraordinary and the horrible that lies hidden behind what we see. The world is constituted on a cross, on the crossing of the roads. Soustelle considers that the cross and the cruciform signs among the *Tarahumaras* refer to that past, also among the Indians who have become Christianized and in the non-Christians.

The rites conjured up the chaos of the world, allowed the communities to maintain their unity, to not disorient the path of their existence. Many Mexicans, who participated in armed movements, such as the Mexican Revolution or the Cristero movement, did so under the symbolism of the cross with their apparently Christian sense and left the mark of it in various songs such as "The stone bed":

> The day where they kill me
> let it be of five shots
> and to be near you
> so I can die in your arms.
> Instead of a box I want a zarape;
> instead of a cross, my double cartridge belt,
> and let it be written on my grave
> my last goodbye with a thousand bullets.

The lyrical subject of "The stone bed", longs to leave with "five bullets" and that his grave has "instead of a cross" his "double cartridge belt", with which he risked his life; that is to say, as in the poem of *Netzahualcóyotl*, it goes

2 See Antonio Durán Ruiz (2017, pp.71-72)

with the four and the five, the magic numbers of the deep Mexico. In the mural "Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park" by Diego Rivera, the belt buckle of the Catrina sports the *Nahuiollin* sign, which represents the sun with the four cosmic directions and its center. This sign is, then, on the navel of the Catrina, in the place of being and non-being.

Juan Rulfo (1997, p.877) spoke about the deep thought, relative to the cross, among contemporary Tzeltal Mayans, during a talk, in March 1974, with students of the Central University of Venezuela:

> In Tenexapa[3] they have, like all towns of that zone, many crosses. They have some in front of the church; they have others in all the roads that enter the town. And always, when leaving or entering, they kneel, they cross themselves and I do not know how many things they say to the cross. And one says: "Man, how religious are these people! Aren't they?" Then I knew, because I asked one of the principals, a butler who was bilingual: "Hey, why are the indigenous people so devoted here? I see that any crosses they find, they kneel before it and begin to pray." -" No- he says-, they do not pray. The crosses are the doors of the roads; they ask the cross to open to let them pass, because if they don't do it the cross does not let them in or leave the town. But they do not pray, they do not know how to pray."

The crosses are the doors of the roads, from there the paths of man start and there they converge. The butler offers flashing revelations because the words that the Tzeltals speak to the crosses, like the poetic substance of which José Gorostiza spoke, is magical and opens the interior roads.

Crossroads also play a central role in the songs of one of Mexico's most popular composers, José Alfredo Jiménez (2002, p.91); there they appear referred to with number four:

> There are four roads in my life,
> which of the four will be the best?
> You who saw me cry of anguish,
> tell me, dove, which one should I go to.

3 Rulfo talks about the *tzeltal* town of Tenejapa, Chiapas

The question posed in this verse by the lyrical subject is similar to the query that the protagonists of the *Popol Vuh* (p.54) make the four paths in their journey to the *Xibalba*, the world of the gods of death. In light of the travelers' question, the black road says: "I am the one you should take because I am the way of the Lord".

Another José Alfredo Jiménez' song (2000, p.92) says:

> Buy me a drink or I shall buy you one,
> we need to talk about our matters.
> We won't get drunk,
> we'll just take four drinks

Four glasses suppose for the Mexican the trip towards a situation where reason or modesty do not act but, often, the suppressed yearnings; the lyrical subject formulates the invitation to leave the world of reasons and conventions to arrive at a place of loving freedom, beyond reason and the oppressive laws of this world.

In the *Popol Vuh*, the twin gods *Hun Hunhpú* and *Vucub Hunahpú* roam the places that lead to the realm of death: steep stairs, banks of a river that runs between the *Nuziván Cul* and *Cuziván* ravines, a river that advances between thorny *jícaros*, riverside of a river of blood, a river of water and a river of *podre*, the region inhabited by the *Molay* birds and, finally, the crossroads of four roads. The couples take, finally, the course of the black road.

A substrate of this is present in the novel *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo (2007); Juan Preciado's path to *Comala* is similar to that of the dead who go to *Mictlán* and the mythological heroes of the *Popol Vuh* towards *Xibalba*. Juan Preciado meets with the muleteer Abundio at a crossroads: "I had run into him at *Los Encuentros*, where several roads cross. I was there waiting, until at last this man appeared "(page 67).

In "*Los Encuentros*" the loss begins; the protagonist arrives at a labyrinthine time and space. *Comala* is at the same time the navel of the world, the place where the four roads come together, the cosmic crossroads and, at the same time, the deep human crossroads with its burdens of loneliness and anguish.

The crossroads of contemporary Mexican art, except in certain popular expressions, generally present the crossroads in the negative sense, as a rootlessness of life, as doors that open to throw them into wastelands.

In the pre-Hispanic world, it is observed that the march to the underworld is also towards the rebirth. In *Pedro Páramo*, however, death is sterile. Abundio is already dead when he meets Juan Preciado and heads to another crossroad: "I go further, where you see the work of the hills. There I have my house"[4] (p. 71). Abundio lives in the navel of loneliness, in the middle of nowhere, where it cannot be reached.

Comala refers to the mythical *Tulán*, from where the Nahuas and the *Cakchiquels* are said to proceed. In *Memorial de Sololá* (1980, page 48) it is said: "From four [places] the people came to *Tulán*. In the east there is a *Tulán*; another in *Xibalbay*; another in the west, from there we arrived, from the west; and another where is God. Therefore there were four *Tulans*, oh our children!"

The Tula "where is God" and the Tula of "*Xibalbay*" belong to the domains of heaven and the underworld. In *Pedro Páramo*, the following dialogue is given between Juan Preciado and Donis' sister:

> -[...]. How does one leave here?
> -Where to?
> -Anywhere
> -There are plenty of roads. There is one that goes to Contla; other one that comes from there; another one that goes straight to the mountain range. That one that can be seen from here, that I don't know where it leads to- and he pointed me with his fingers the hollow of the roof, where the roof has cracked-. (p.110)

Rulfo's characters wander, with their uninhabited faith, in search for redemption, but they are far from the world and from themselves. Juan Rulfo presents that Mexico that Octavio Paz (2008, p.423) observes so alive, deeply traditional, tied to its roots and rich in legendary antiquity.

> I believe that the authentic history of a society has to do not only with explicit ideas but above all with implicit beliefs [...] Beliefs live in deeper layers of the soul and therefore change much less than ideas [...] What interested me in the case of Mexico was to trace certain buried beliefs.

4 Gerald Martin, in his commentary on Men of Maize, by Miguel Ángel Asturias (1981, pp. 429-430, note 424), offers an explanation of the confluence of the hills: "The hills that come together [...]. Sahagun tells us that when a man or a woman died in ancient Mexico, they wrapped the deceased with blankets and papers and with some material goods, and told him the following: 'See here you must cross between two mountains ranges that are meeting each other"[...]. The same beliefs persist among the current chortís of Guatemala. "

Who seems to interpret pictorially the inner reality of the Rulfian characters, especially women, is the picture "Tata Jesus Christ" by Francisco Goitia; Why this title? What do these women look at? What makes them suffer? Paul Westheim (1985, p.12) gave the answer: "They are crying tears for our race, our sorrows and our tears, different from that of the others. All the anguish of Mexico is in them." These women seem to represent Christ at the moment of feeling abandoned by God.

The crossroads symbolize the man structured by a fundamental flaw; according to Lacan's theory, there is a trace, a mark of the lack where a subject is born. When the subject is born, something constitutive remains in the dark and will pulsate in the pain of existing. The constitutive lack of the subject opens a vacuum that is not filled; this opening constitutes the errata in the heart of the being that, as it is observed in several poems of Rosario Castellanos, marks the distance with the unit and, simultaneously, its longing.

Emptiness assumes, according to Jacques Lacan (2009, p.807), the existence of the lost object, and is the cause of nostalgia for death. Life crackles over death yearning for lost and remembered unity at the level of Platonic reminiscence. The subject, as the subject of the fault, is also the solitude: "This because the signifier as such, by crossing out the subject, of first intention, has brought into it the meaning of death. (The letter kills, but we learn this from the letter itself). This is why every drive is a virtual death drive."

In the Mexican literature field, the poetry of Rosario Castellanos (2004, p.19) expresses the sensation of that metaphysical abandonment: "Always abandoned. From what? From who? From where? / It does not matter. We are just abandoned." Fullness is impossible. The fundamental flaw is not filled, it turns the man into a clepsydra where the sand of death drips and causes the pain to exist. The lack is alive: "The death drive, says Jacques Lacan (2004, p.53), is but to realize that life is improbable and completely expired."

In the lyrics of Rosario Castellanos, the man appears faint and lost in his own labyrinth, essentially unknown and ghostlike by time, in permanent state of perishing: "[...] is animal of solitudes, / deer with an arrow in the flank / that flees and bleeds" (p 177). By the constitutive ripping, man is also a crossword puzzle with errors; he is at the crossroads of roads. Life is the error in the crossword because there is no unity, something has failed, and something does not fit, as expressed in the poem "Valium 10":

> Sometimes (and don't try
> to diminish its importance

saying that it does not happen often)
your measurement stick breaks,
your compass goes missing
and you do not understand anything.
[...]
And you have the embarrassing feeling
that in the crossword an error slipped
that makes it unsolvable.

Death lives killing us as it appears in Death without end by José Gorostiza. At the center of the cross, the man walks between heaven and earth, existence is put into a trance of life and death.

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