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Reseña de The Spanish American Crónica Modernista, Temporality and Material Culture: Modernismo's Unstoppable Presses de Andrew Reynolds

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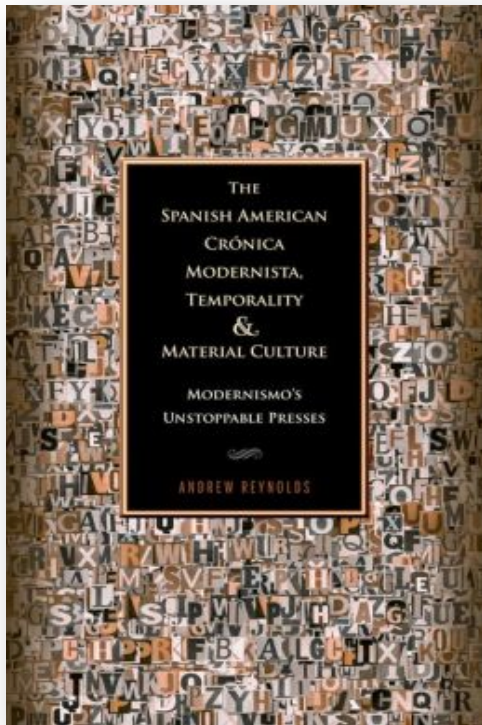
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RESEÑA

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LATIN AMERICAN *modernismo* does not get old. We might say that the obsessions of the *modernistas* —eroticism, the dark side of reason, the horror of urbanism, and alienation— became so ubiquitous in the twentieth century as to be woven into the very fabric of our cultural present. More than other “movements,” Modernismo has also proven itself ideally suited to modern, interpretive approaches to the study of Literature. Its sublimation of desire and expression of primitive fears invites psychoanalytic criticism, while its interest in luxury calls for a Marxist exploration of commodification, consumption and false consciousness. The representation of women in *modernismo*, as well as copious *modernista* formulations about what it means to be modern, have also made it an excellent fit with more eclectic, cultural studies

approaches that privilege gender and urbanism. Andrew Reynolds’ new book, *The Spanish American Crónica Modernista, Temporality and Material Culture: Modernismo’s Unstoppable Presses* (Bucknell UP, 2012), belongs in this cultural studies constellation. Specifically, Reynolds employs a material culture studies approach by reading the *crónica* through journalistic practices, while also drawing from sociological and poststructuralist theorists such as Deleuze and Bourdieu. His take on the *crónica modernista* is a valuable contribution to *crónica* studies that revises some of the current analytical commonplaces on the topic.

The book’s introduction plots key themes and definitions. Reynolds argues that journalistic form was intrinsic to the development of *modernismo* writ large and that the genre of the *crónica* was central to its poetics and sensibility. The *crónica* is a textual

kaleidoscope for understanding not only *modernismo* but also the very crisis of modernity, a kind of spiritual unmooring of the subject in a world of acceleration, mechanization and materialism. “The heart of the world is sick,” writes Rubén Darío, for example, “life is injured, universal instability manifests in a thousand different ways.” Reynolds defines the *crónica* as a brief text that is bound up with journalistic forms of authorship (the “reporter,” the “foreign correspondent,” etc.), as well as with different types of printing, such as newspapers, literary magazines and the book. Since a *crónica* can be on any imaginable subject, he emphasizes its “manufactured” or aesthetic flavor.

Chapter One, “Journalism as Literary Practice during Modernismo,” poses the question of the relationship between aesthetic journalism (the *crónica*) and concise newspaper reportage through a comparison of the figure of the *cronista* and the reporter. Reynolds demonstrates that the *modernistas* did not necessarily agree on the relationship between these two categories of authorship. Rubén Darío, for example, at one point in time argued that both could be blended together, whereas Gutiérrez Nájera saw them as irreconcilable. Indeed, Reynolds demonstrates how writers like Gómez Carrillo and Tablada wove in and out of both categories without choosing one over the other in a definitive way; their *crónicas* were a hybrid of both modalities. As in subsequent chapters, Reynolds cuts against the grain of the idea that journalism was a limiting or oppressive force for the *modernistas*, and instead posits journalism as a generative force driving literary innovation and productivity.

The theme of temporality and modernity is at the center of Chapter Two, titled “Possession of the Infinite: Temporality and Difference in Modernismo.” Reynolds begins with a useful recap of how critics like Susana Rotker, Gerard Aching and Aníbal González have placed temporality at the center of the definition of *modernismo* and the experience of the modern. For these critics, modernity is a bewildering acceleration of experience that drove the *modernistas* into aesthetic, mystical and esoteric modalities of expression. Reynolds builds upon their work by suggesting that temporality, as expressed through the speedy production of *crónicas* on deadline for newspapers, and the continuous reprinting and reframing of these texts, embodies the Deleuzian model of repetition. For Deleuze, repetition did not represent an empty copy of an absent original, but rather a transgressive textual practice that challenged singular and homogenous definitions of meaning. “It puts law into question,” writes Deleuze, “it denounces its nominal or general character in favor of a more profound and more artistic reality” (69). Reynolds uses this idea of repetition as original creation and transgression to suggest that the acceleration of time (through publishing deadlines, frequency of publication etc.) actually constitutes an important backbone of *modernismo*. Since the newspaper is the vehicle for this experience of time as a motor for writing, he argues that journalism did not subjugate the creative spirit of the *modernistas* but rather inspired them. Reynolds indicates that the *crónica modernista* is a dynamic, a push and pull, a call and response, a dialogue. “The repetitious

characteristic of mass-produced newspapers not only helped to establish the modernista movement and its central aesthetic features,” writes Reynolds, “but also created a network of repeated self-representation and self-discovery that injected the literary field with constant renovation” (86).

In Chapter Three, “Circulation and Vitality: Editorial Influence, Visual Culture, and the *Crónica Modernista*,” Reynolds argues for reading *crónicas* through their relationship to late nineteenth and early twentieth century newspaper form. In particular, he zeroes in on visuality: “Consumption of modernista journalism. . . was essentially a visual experience not only due to accompanying visual content but also the narrative mood of the genre. . .” (97). As with other facets of the *modernista* aesthetic experience explored in the book, the relationship between the *crónica* and its sponsoring publication, the newspaper, is one that intertwines commerce and art. Reynolds here argues for a subtler understanding of the binary commerce/art, one that poses a mutually reinforcing relationship as opposed to confrontation. For example, the ubiquity of the newspaper and its stylized advertisements did not diminish the *crónica* and the stature of the *modernistas* but actually heightened their profile as cultural arbiters of the written word, promoting literary experimentation and productivity. One part of the chapter reviews Enrique Gómez Carrillo’s project to reimagine the culture of publishing when he became editor in chief of *El Liberal*, one of Spain’s most important newspapers. Gómez Carrillo recommitted the newspaper to national themes and deliberately highlighted the views and discourse of major Spanish writers. Reynolds closes the chapter with a discussion of Rubén Darío’s urban *crónicas* about Paris, which he titled “Films de París” and published in 1910 in *La Nación*. Darío appropriates the visual authority of film to authorize his writerly voice while also emphasizing visual tropes and metaphors that were reinscribed by newspaper advertisements. All of this suggests that what is significant about the *crónica modernista* is that it cannot be removed from the body of the newspaper. Advertisements, headlines, and story placement, among many other stylistic, formal and thematic features of the newspaper, connect and resonate with it, echoing it and feeding it with imagery and status. However, Reynolds’ extended discussion of Gómez Carrillo’s numerous writings about the book industry in Spain is out of place here; thematically, this section belongs in the final chapter, which deals with both the ideal and the material reality of the book.

Chapter Four, “The House of Ideas,” explores the symbolic, literal and financial meanings that *modernista* writers attributed to the form of the book. Reynolds builds his argument around three focal points: a review of Bourdieu’s field theory as it relates to the materiality of the book, a selection of *modernista crónicas* about books and bookselling and a case study about Rubén Darío’s *Los raros* (1896), which was republished in a “luxury” edition in 1905. The argument of the chapter is that *modernistas* were both repelled by and attracted to the book as a material and commercial object. On the one hand, the book could have an extraordinary aura of

sacrality and achievement, while on the other it served as a reminder of the writer's enslavement to the market, or his marginalization from it. Indeed, as Reynold observes, writers like Nervo and Darío intuited that books might not be what they seem; just because a book is printed does not mean that it will be read, promoted and sold. Such ambiguities about the status of the book are accompanied by other complexities that Reynolds explores through a case study about the early publishing history of Darío's *Los raros* (1896-1905). In his account, *Los raros* represents a kind of rewriting and reframing of the original newspaper *crónicas* that constitute its content. The transformation of *crónicas* into "chapters" with different titles and the inclusion of a prologue to frame the reading experience indicate that *Los raros* is more than a "collection" of *crónicas*; it is an independent work of art in its own right, predicated on the reorganization and reinscription of its source material. The opportunity to publish in book form allows Darío to project what had originally been separate pieces into an organic whole that promoted his definition of *modernismo*. Moreover, the partnership between Darío and the Spanish publishing house Maucci illustrates the ways in which print culture connects literature to commerce, and writers to publishers and advertisers.

As all of the above indicates, this is an ambitious book that steers clear from easy answers in favor of nuance, tension and even paradox. Its ambitious argument in favor of reintegrating the *crónica* into the world of turn-of-the-century journalism is provocative yet persuasive. Reynolds establishes that the multiple engagements of the *modernista* author of *crónicas* —with their literary craft, with the industrialized materialism of their age, with journalism— provided them with the social capital and the ability to create an undeniably modern transatlantic and transnational literature unlike any that had preceded it. He asks us to reassemble *modernismo* and its *crónicas* through the world of journalism and its history, rather than abstracting them into the generic definitions that appear in most literary handbooks and histories. However, the writing suffers from a lack of copyediting, and there are passages on theory and culture that are awkwardly phrased and developed. These issues aside, this is a book that puts forward excellent claims about the history of journalism and the always slippery definition of both the *crónica* and the *modernista* movement.

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