

The Publicity Tree

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The first significant examples of science fiction in Spain were produced within the framework of a genre that was very popular in the country back then, the so-called ‘cuadro de costumbres.’ Translated literally, this phrase would be a ‘picture of manners’ in English. Similar to Addisonian sketches of manners and contemporary French ‘physiologies,’ in the ‘cuadro de costumbres,’ typical attitudes, behaviors, values and habits that were common to a particular profession, region or social class are shown mainly by means of the description of the social environment and customs of representative people in a society. Most of these ‘cuadros’ describe contemporary manners, but some writers dared to imagine how the social, economic and technological changes that were being brought about by the Industrial Revolution could also change those manners in the future, as Émile Souvestre had shown in his novel (really a succession of sketches of manners) entitled *Le Monde tel qu’il sera en l’an 3000* (1846), in English *The World As it Shall Be* (early Classics of Science Fiction, 2004). Only a year later, Antonio Neira de Mosquera published the first ‘cuadro de costumbres’ set in the future, showing a city ‘both sublime and ridiculous’ where superficial literary works were mass produced.

There was a similar portrayal some years later in a far more significant and extensive work by another ‘costumbrista,’ or writer of ‘cuadros de costumbres,’ Antonio Flores. His *Ayer, hoy y mañana* was published in its final



form in 1863. As its title suggests, it was divided into three parts. Each of them is composed of ‘cuadros de costumbres’ respectively set in 1800 (*ayer*, yesterday), 1850 (*hoy*, today) and 1899 (*mañana*, tomorrow). The last volume is a full-fledged story of anticipation. In the framework of a love story between the



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only heir of a wealthy rural family going to Madrid in order to have a political career and an authoress of industrial literature, Flores describes in every ‘cuadro’ a particular feature of the technologically advanced future Madrid, from air transportation to hotel amenities not yet heard of. This material progress comes at a cost: it is a purely capitalistic society where only money is of value. Time is money and true emotions are not considered worth one’s precious time because nothing is worth anything unless it is profitable. A good example of this mentality is demonstrated in one of the ‘cuadros,’ which is unrelated to the framework of the story and therefore can be read as an independent piece. Its title, “El árbol de la publicidad”¹, designates a huge tree-like engine set in a

public square to send out large amounts of paper leaves with public notices and all kinds of advertisements, both public and private, although businesses seem to be the main parties taking advantage of this futuristic means of communication. This engine can have a certain steampunk flavor today, given the Victorian-style humoristic prose used by Flores. However, the presence of the advertisements all the time and everywhere in the cities suggests how relevant the ironic tone adopted by Flores is still today. He is able to masterfully criticize, solely through the description of a representative object of the future and without any explanation, the conflation between technology and financial interests in order to turn people into machines willing to make money for others.

¹ The translated text is based on the original version published as “Cuadro tercero” (Third Picture) in the book entitled *Mañana o la chispa eléctrica en 1899* (Tomorrow or the Electric Spark in 1899). This appeared as the third part of the series entitled *Ayer, hoy y mañana, o la fe, el vapor y la electricidad. Cuadros sociales de 1800, 1850 y 1899* (Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow; or Faith, Steam and Electricity: Social Pictures from 1800, 1850 and 1899), vol. VI, Madrid, Mellado, 1863, p. 47-56.

Antonio Flores

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In plaza number 50, which is perfectly round and has six streets feeding into it, the ones on the right known by their names or the even numbers 22, 44, and 66, and the ones on the left known by the odd numbers 33, 55 and 77, there is a large gathering of people at all hours of the day and in the early hours of the evening. Some of these people circle around on the three concentric pathways that are united in the spiral shape of the plaza and others, who are much fewer in number, occupy the modest iron benches that are around the axis of the large circle. I want you, the reader, to know that in the center there is not a monumental fountain or equestrian statue of some king. There is not even a statue of a dark-green poet, caged like a mad man after having been immortalized for being very sane, nor a wooden box to temporarily imprison vagrants and riff-raff.

In the center of the plaza stands a towering tree that is majestic and splendid. Every single day it starts out bare and later it is covered with leaves. And then, in plain view of the public, it sheds them with amazing speed and in a completely magical way.

How this tree works and the mystery of its fecundity are a secret that belongs to the large anonymous company that is the proprietor of the invention. The company, which does not have the privileges of invention and exploitation because those privileges were buried with the people in 1850, attempts to hide it from the eyes of the public. I will tell you what can be seen there, and if you guess what is not there in plain sight, I will be very pleased.

The first thing I'll tell you is that the tree grows suddenly until it threatens to get lost in the clouds. It expands and contracts its branches when it wants to and it shakes its leaves when it sees fit. It bears fruit to great heights, elevating them high above the roof-

tops of the plaza, whose buildings, like almost all of them of the new Madrid, are no higher than three stories, including the ground floor, which is in the ground. Given this, you will understand that the tree in Plaza Fifty is more like a gunpowder-tree than a plant-tree, and that rather than let you search for its species among botanical families, it is necessary to tell you that it belongs to the same genus and is of the same ilk as the Liberty Tree.

They call it Publicity Tree because just as its brother provides shade for patriotism, it does so for commerce, and those that seem more aware of its history say that it originated with the old town criers of the villages and cities, and that after having latched on to the walls in order to grow like ivy in the form of edicts and posters, it allowed itself to be grafted by journalism and has come to be what it is today.

On its trunk, which is ten meters wide, there are a multitude of signs with lettering of various sizes and colors that slither up like vines. On its branches suddenly sprout a multitude of written pages, which fly by the thousands through space, and balloons of various sizes take off in all directions, emitting a veritable shower of brochures, cards and ads of all types, while passing through different neighborhoods of the city.

From the government (which although lately has convinced itself that the way to do everything is not to make a mystery of anything) to the very last shoe shiner, who understands that publicity is the heart of commerce, all Spaniards contribute their efforts to sustaining the constant blooming of the Publicity Tree.

The first one, from his own office, from the same Council of Ministers and even from the ministerial bench of Parliament communicates with the Publicity Tree, without the angry intervention of ministerial journalists, in

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order to prepare public opinion with a rumor, to consult it with a project or to publicize an official law. Aggressive businesses also have, like the minister, their underground drivers to make their ads reach the great underground publicity lab. In regard to the lower classes, those that are not daily patrons of the tree have in each of the districts of the court, just a few steps from their respective homes, collection boxes like the ones that were used in old times for the memorials of those that were living in mortal sin, on which the following words could be read:

SUBSIDIARY NUMBER WHATEVER, DIRECTLY FROM THE GREAT PUBLICITY TREE.

One of kind in the world. Six minutes from the time that the advertisement is put in the collection box until it goes out to the public in whatever form requested. One hundred thousand copies per hour. A million readers guaranteed.

If someone needs to advertise something to his fellow men and does not feel like going to the telegraphic stations of the tree, he can write it on a piece of paper, sign it, include his home address, and put it in a mailbox and it is immediately sent off. Within ten minutes and when he is most carefree when he is out and about, suddenly his own printed out advertisement will be there right in front of his face and distributed in an infinite number of messenger balloons that pass through the city, laughing, like the crafty sparrow that laughs about the elastic band that boys put on it, and at homeowners that still write on the corners of their houses: *Do not put up posters here.* If someone does not want to give his name and knows the importance of the advertisement, he accompanies it, but the custom is to sign and not pay for it in cash, because everyone that creates an advertisement opens an account and this takes some of

the burden away from the accounting staff of the company.

The offices of the company are all underground, as the reader will have already presumed, and in the center of them there is a large machine, whose ingenious mechanisms are not known to the public (even though it is that very same public that puts it into motion), because neither vapor, nor water, nor air, nor any of the mechanical agents known to date are used for the great rotation of the tree, for the ads scaling up the bark of the tree, for the sprouting of the leaves, or for the launching of the balloons. The Publicity Tree, and some still suspect all of its auxiliary offices, are powered only by blood, and not irrational animal blood, as was the case in the times of horse mills and flour mills, but rather the rational kind, that of the human species.

The pavement of Plaza Fifty is not made of cobblestone like in the Plaza Mayor, nor asphalt like in the Puerta del Sol, but rather a metallic-like substance (also a company secret) that is so elastic that when one just barely sets foot on it, it produces a latent vibration in the whole plaza. And now if a foot develops an elasticity that is very sensitive and a vibration that is quite noticeable, it is easy to know how much more will increase that elasticity and that vibration when the four thousand feet of the two thousand people that can fit in the plaza step on that pavement. And if on top of all that those feet are continually in motion and this type of elasticity is constant and the vibrations are permanent, you can understand the great driving force of which the anonymous Publicity Company has taken advantage.

It is so much that at times they have to declare half of the pavement inactive because otherwise ads would come out so quickly that

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they would almost become invisible, even to the most experienced eye. Suffice it to say that as was recently demonstrated by a wise mathematician, if all the elastic force lost during a sunny day while strolling on the sidewalks of Madrid (on a holiday, it is understood) were gathered together at a given point and that force could be applied to a large machine, one could rip up the monastery of the Escorial from its foundation and suspend it in the air, even if it were just for a few seconds.

Undoubtedly, the twentieth century must be right in rejecting the centuries that came before it. Careful, because humanity must have been blind in order not to have seen the source that it had beneath the very soles of its feet! And the curious thing about the situation is that the first blood motor that man knew about was the soles of their feet. The origin of the grinders and of the bellows of the organs and of the forges is lost in the mists of times, and they did not have any other motor than the one that is used today by the anonymous Publicity Company on a large scale.

But, all things considered, the older generations should not be blamed, because now, as advanced as people are today, this movement is still a proprietary secret of the Company.

And now consider, reader (pardon this reactionary parenthesis and this realistic exclamation that escapes my lips), one of the advantages of despotism over freedom. If we had the principle of authority and the court of the Inquisition and dungeons and torture, we would put the chief executive of the Company in one of them, and we would stretch out his bones until he told us what material the pavement in the plaza is made of, why it is so sensitive that it is like a frog on a Volta bat-

tery, and how they get it so that those vibrations all converge at one point and move the machine with a force that is calculated as the equivalent of 1,350 horses. But since it is not the case, as the State is now totally worthless and the social body is leaderless, we feel obliged to look on with indifference at the great driving force that is lost on the streets, the plazas and public walkways. If all the pavement were elastic, all the pedestrians would be industrial, or at least occasionally the direct cause of the movement of the industry, as happens to those that walk around in Publicity Plaza.

And these pedestrians, those remaining members of the old patrons of the Puerta del Sol, are not in Publicity Plaza *gratis et amore*, but rather they receive a daily stipend that varies according to approximately how many steps they have taken. A surprising and extraordinary fact that frankly seems unbelievable, but nevertheless is true, is that on the pathway that people take that goes in an infinite spiral around the tree, there are no old horse mills or flour mills with a foreman and a whip, nor does each subject wear a bell so that the owner knows when they stop. Instead, the same machine that they move records for each of them a precise count, not exactly of the number of steps they have taken because that is not possible, but rather the time in minutes that they have worked. In this way, they have absolute freedom to enter and leave the circles when they want, which did not happen with the poor mule that went in circles around the horse mill, and furthermore this helps many other people who are not getting paid to bear the burden. Since entry is free, an infinite number of people pass through there daily that are not idle in their work and are really fond of going on walks, and there are many foreigners that watch the



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tree's transformation with shock and, not realizing that they are the ones making the machine move, would pay if it were required so that they could enjoy the spectacle.

But the only ones that pay there are those that sit so that others do not take them for industry agents and so that they can read the ads comfortably, like how they used to read, with a cup of chocolate, in the press. These are the ones that can lean back and talk and cross their legs, and furthermore, they can smoke, something that is completely forbidden to the others. And not because the pavement is combustible, as at first some industrialists suspected, but rather because by smoking, the energy escapes from the mouth instead of going down to the feet, which is where the publicity business needs it to be.

So tell me, dear reader, is it not true that it was a great idea to take advantage of the energy that was lost in Puerta del Sol and to

put it to work? And to such an industry! To the mother of all of them! To publicity.

The Catalan¹ (because a Catalan who has been in London for many years is the originator of this idea) who approached the first group of lazy people and proposed his business idea to them was a genius.

When this new motor that the man implemented can be standardized, the majority of the steam engines will fall out of use and this will provide jobs to the portion of the population that the industry has put out of work.

But imagine what they would have done with this system in the days when a million armed men did not have anything better to do than to wander about in the streets or plazas with a rifle on their shoulders!

So the reader can have an idea of what one does with a handful of men in the Publicity Tree, I beseech the reader to take a look at the following picture².

¹ Catalans were considered good businessmen back then, when Catalonia was at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution in Spain. (*Translator's note*).

² The following 'cuadro' in Flores' book is composed of examples of ads from the Publicity Tree. (*Translator's note*).