

# Monumental metaphors of Art and Culture: The case of the Néstor Kirchner Cultural Center in Buenos Aires

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### Abstract

Between 2006 and 2015, the Buenos Aires Post Office Palace was transformed into the President Dr. Néstor Carlos Kirchner Cultural Center. The designation of the Cultural Center, an institution dedicated to art and culture, with the name of the deceased former president generated great controversy in Argentina. The Government, the opposition and the media enunciated and recognized the Cultural Center as a metaphor of political power. The metaphorical uses of cultural heritage were sustained in the discourse of the main political and social actors. This case study describes one of the uses of cultural and art heritage in contemporary societies and the tense link between the media field and cultural management.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, metaphors, cultural hermeneutics, cultural management, informative discourse.

### 1. Introduction

During the 20th century, a rhetoric renewed by the perspective of discourse enriched the concept of metaphor beyond the limits of philology (Ricoeur 2001). Various areas of study discovered the importance of this figure in the generation of meaning: cognitive metaphors (Lakoff 1987, 1994, 2002; Lakoff and Johnson 2009), visual metaphors (Indurkha 1999; Rothenberg 2008), architecture metaphors (Ayiran 2012; Perronet 1770), political metaphors (González García 1998), among others. For García Canclini, metaphors also appeared in the media discourse of art and culture: “(the media) do not matter only as informants, but because of the reconceptualization and metaphorization that they carry out in connection with other fields of social life” (2010, 74).

On May 23, 2015, in the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*, the art critic Pablo Gianera published an opinion column entitled “Kirchner Cultural Centre: monumental metaphor of a controversial time”. Gianera explained:

The new Center is an *artifact* of evident political and aesthetic complexity and, in a way, it could be said that it encloses one dimension within another. This is not a simple metaphor. Like a *matryoshka*, the

Kirchner Cultural Center also contains a (permanent) room called Néstor Kirchner<sup>1</sup>, which, in turn, houses an exhibition (also permanent) dedicated to Néstor Kirchner (...).

Probably, the idea of a “monumental metaphor” refers in part to the monumental architectural style and this relation is interesting for its link with heritage, because cultural heritage consists precisely in the social consideration of the symbolic value of certain reality. In other words, if cultural heritage functions as a metaphor, then there is a game between the sense of heritage and the metaphorical sense.

Some authors agree on the relevance of cultural heritage and artistic expressions for social development (Buitrago Restrepo and Duque Márquez 2013; Brea 2008; Du Gay and Pryke 2002; Dormaels 2011; Howkins 2013; Rifkin 2000; Scott 2014; Yúdice 2002). Other authors highlight the importance of heritage and art institutions for the identity of communities (Ballart 1997; García Canclini 1999, 2010, 2012; Groys 2008; Fernández de Paz 2006; Lipovetsky and Serroy 2015; Morente del Monte 2006; Sanjuán Ballano 2007; Vecco 2010). In terms of García Canclini, it is important “(...) to undo the network of concepts in which (heritage) is involved. The terms to which it is

<sup>1</sup> President of Argentina between 2003 and 2007. He died in 2010.

usually associated (...) define a territory, in which its use 'makes sense'" (1999, 16).

The link between metaphor and culture, then, opens a discussion, because while cultural heritage is already a "symbolic repertoire" (García Canclini 2010, 74), metaphor implies considering that something *is* something else, and, in that way, the understanding of an artistic or cultural object or matter is enriched. Therefore, the metaphor indicates the very being of the object to which it refers: "The 'transference' -precisely another word to designate the metaphor- is not reduced to a play on words, but it acts on our ways of being, loving, acting (...)" (Ricoeur 2001, 116). However, it is worth wondering how an object that is already symbolic in itself, like an artwork or a cultural institution, can function as a metaphor for another matter not originally linked to it. In logical terms, the metaphor defines, but, on the other, that definition belongs to the domain of connotation and is impossible to catch in a dictionary.

Traditionally, the metaphor requires that a subject enunciates the figure, but it is also possible that an expression, *a priori* not metaphorical, is read as a metaphor in a certain context, even long after the act of enunciation. In other words, in Ricoeur's terms, it is necessary to consider the senses of the interpreter: "Only one answer is possible: it is necessary to take into account the listener or the reader, and consider the novelty of an emergent meaning such as the instantaneous work of the reader" (2001, 134).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze part of the public speeches where certain metaphorical meanings are held about a cultural heritage object. Unlike other metaphors, such as most lyrical metaphors, in this case the effectiveness of a "monumental metaphor" seems to be specified not only in the figure itself, but in the discourses in which the meaning of the metaphor it is alluded to and reinforced.

## 2. Methodology

This research was based on 49 journalistic texts of various genres, published between 2003 and 2020, about the renovation and transformation of the *Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones*, the old Buenos Aires Post

Office Palace, into the President Dr. Néstor Carlos Kirchner Cultural Center, later known as "CCK". Of that total, 19 were from the online version of the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*; 16 from *Clarín*; 7 from *Página/12*; 4 from *Infobae*; 1 from *Perfil*; 1 from *Télam* and 1 from *Los Andes*.

From then on, a hermeneutical reading of the corpora was carried out using the *atlas.TI* software. After a general reading, keywords and their co-texts<sup>2</sup> were found. Later on, the meaning mechanisms that began to appear as more relevant were searched and codified, and finally paragraphs were extracted for analysis.

The design combined between case study and discourse analysis was based on the interpretive approach of Fernández Pedemonte (1999, 2011, 2014), and on the considerations of Becker (2016), Neiman and Quaranta (2006), and Stake (2013). One of the values of the case method consists in its representativeness and plasticity: "the didactic method of the case is nourished by the scientific method of the case. Likewise, the constructed theory serves as an analysis model for new cases, both for other phases of scientific research and for applied research (...)" (Fernández Pedemonte 2014, 54). In Becker's words, there is a need to ask what it means for something to have happened "at least once" (2016, 34). For Neiman and Quaranta, the instrumental case study "illuminates" a broader conceptual or empirical problem (2006, 219). It is characterized by facilitating the knowledge of "something else". Stake considers that "a particular case is examined mainly to provide an understanding of an issue or to redraw a generalization" (2013, 159).

Finally, the case study methodology facilitates the understanding of social situations. For Grossberg, it is necessary to explain the processes of change in themselves and one of the ways to do it is through conjunctures analysis: "the result of a complex and fragile set of conjunctures" (2010, 61). From this perspective, an attempt is made to understand how relationships are articulated and disarticulated, what "complex balance of forces" make up a phenomenon that can be identified as a case.

<sup>2</sup> In the field of Discourse Studies, the set of linguistic elements that precede and follow the term or statement being analyzed is called "co-text" (Pardo Abril 2007, 96).

### 3. The history of a heritage building

In 1888, Argentina's President Miguel Juárez Celman approved the project for the construction of the *Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones*. The construction of the building was in charge of the French architect Norbert-Auguste Maillart<sup>3</sup>. In 1890, when the Government of Juárez Celman fell, construction was interrupted. More than a decade later, President Manuel Quintana approved the budget for the completion of the work.

Finally, the palace was inaugurated in 1928. Years later, in 1946, it housed the Eva Perón Foundation. It was declared a National Historic Monument in 1997 for its architectural value. In 2006, an international competition was called to decide the new use of the heritage building. The first prize was won by the architecture studios *Bares y Asociados* from the city of La Plata and *Becker-Ferrari* from Buenos Aires. In 2010 work began on the new "*Centro Cultural del Bicentenario*", the Bicentennial Cultural Center. Two years later, it was named "*Centro Cultural Presidente Dr. Néstor Carlos Kirchner*". In 2015 it was finally inaugurated by the president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. That same year, a news item in *La Nación* indicated that, at the end of the work, the Government had invested 2,469 million pesos in the CCK, a number that tripled the original budget (*La Nación*, May 16, 2015).

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. The construction of a metaphor

The following are fragments of media texts that belong to the corpora about the case study. The metaphors were indicated in italics: those metaphors that were stated directly and those that were stated indirectly through the lexicon of the metaphorical domain as well (Lakoff and Johnson 2009, 44).

On April 2, 2013, the journalist Mariana Verón titled a text for *La Nación*: "Kirchnerism already dreams of seeing the '*Colón of the XXI century*' inaugurated". It alluded to a phrase by President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner about the Cultural Center, which would later be cited over and over

again. The president had affirmed the day before, in the National Congress, that the CCK would be the "*Colón Theater*" of the present century. Later, the news continued: "I dream that It is the *Colón of the XXI century*. It is going to be an architectural and cultural marvel for all Argentinians', Cristina Kirchner herself described it in her nearly four hours of speech before the Legislative Assembly, on March 1<sup>st</sup>".

In this case, the metaphorical name is "*Teatro Colón*", the famous opera house in Buenos Aires; while the CCK is what the metaphor acts on. The allusion is evocative, because the *Teatro Colón* has traditionally been a site linked to refinement, distinction and high culture. The reference that the Cultural Center will be the current *Colón* would imply a certain class questioning and the much-mentioned idea in the field of cultural studies of a "democratization" of high culture. It is also important to point out a fact of the political context at that time: between 2006 and 2010, the *Colón Theater* had been closed for renovation, carried out by the Government of the City of Buenos Aires, led by Mauricio Macri, main opponent of Cristina Fernández and future president. Both the inauguration of the renovated *Teatro Colón* and the creation of the CCK were part of the celebrations of the national Bicentennial, between 2010 and 2015. The mention of Fernández de Kirchner, then, could be interpreted as a political counterpoint.

As mentioned at the beginning, on May 23, 2015, the art critic Pablo Gianera opened his opinion column on the CCK calling it "an *artifact* of evident political and aesthetic complexity" and a "*matryoshka*", for containing a room called Néstor Kirchner, which, in turn, it housed an exhibition also dedicated to the former president. Gianera's text was titled: "Kirchner Cultural Center: *monumental metaphor* of a controversial time". For Gianera, the CCK seems to be "something more" than a trope and implies a complex significance. A monumental metaphor would be, then, a metaphor that houses other figures inside, which are in turn miniatures of the previous one and that require the reader to "open" them in a collaborative way.

In an opinion column on May 24, 2015 by journalist Matilde Sánchez, for the *Clarín* newspaper, it read: "Renamed in 2012, It now

<sup>3</sup> "Ex Palacio de Correos de Buenos Aires". *Arquitectura + Acero*. <http://www.arquitecturaenacero.org/historia/equipamiento/ex-palacio-de-correo-de-buenos-aires>

stands as a party *cathedral*, a *spatial materialization* of the Kirchnerist belief, destined to *shield* a family of leaders. Likewise, it designates Kirchnerism as the culminating and delayed rise of Peronism to high culture". In this interesting fragment, the Cultural Center is named first by a religious metaphor, "*cathedral*", which in turn "*shields*". That is to say, it is used metaphorical vocabulary from the domain of confrontation, resistance or war. Then the Cultural Center is defined as "*materialization of belief*", and finally its character of sign is underlined: "it *designates* Kirchnerism". Also, as in the words of Cristina Fernández, the link with "high culture" stands out. The text closes with that metaphor of the president: "The president had been eloquent, 'I dream that it is the *Colón of the XXI century*'. In recent months, Government officials used to speak of the CCK as 'Cristina's *Colón*'".

On August 22, 2015, the journalist Patricia Kolesnicov titled an opinion column for *Clarín* by means of another imperial metaphor, first, and religious, later: "*All roads lead to the Kirchner Center*"<sup>4</sup>. In this way, the Cultural Center was to Kirchnerism what Rome had been to the empire, or what Rome was to the world within the universal Catholic worldview, in which that phrase was reinterpreted. In the same news, a spatial metaphor is used: "the CCK is, by name, the *land* of Kirchnerism". In other words, cultural heritage is interpreted as the property of a political faction.

On January 5, 2016, journalist Matilde Sánchez interviewed Gabriela Ricardes, Content Secretary during the presidency of Mauricio Macri. One of the journalist's comments in *Clarín* was: "Beyond its exceptional beauty, I am struck by its status as a '*mausoleum*', an aura of a vintage funeral palace in the tributes to Néstor (Kirchner)". The building that had been interpreted as a "*cathedral*" was, after the defeat of Kirchnerism at the polls, a "*mausoleum*".

In a news item on February 25, 2016, again in *Clarín*, Matilde Sánchez suggested: "(...) the channel (public television) gets into a long controversy over the name of the Cultural Center that was the *flagship* of Kirchnerist culture". A navigational warlike metaphor appears in this statement: the huge cultural center is a "*flagship*". That is, the CCK is the ship that leads a

naval squad. It is also a cultural center, but of "*Kirchnerist culture*".

On August 11, 2016, *La Nación* referred to the words of Cristina Fernández: "'I love to build, I must be the reincarnation of a great *Egyptian architect*'. That was the confession with which Cristina Kirchner once surprised the Argentinians, while announcing the creation of an audiovisual pole on Marchi Island that was never built". In this case, in a news item about the CCK, the newspaper recalled the president's reference to herself, but in relation to another public work. This historical metaphor has a strange resonance, because the pyramids were, after all, the tomb of the pharaohs. In the same text, later on, the newspaper recalled another intervention by the president: "Months before, when she was inaugurating a gas pipeline, Cristina Kirchner had once again looked at herself in the mirror of history. 'I feel like *Cheops* in front of the finished *pyramid*', she said, alluding to the pharaoh of ancient Egypt who had built the Great Pyramid of Giza".

#### 4.2. The inner metaphors

In addition to the metaphorical enunciation reinforced by the media, the CCK had been designed in an evocative way. The large concert hall that houses inside was named "Blue Whale". The word "whale" awakens biblical and literary connotations. In the text of May 23, 2015, in *La Nación*, Pablo Gianera mentioned the belly of the cetacean where the prophet Jonah had rested. And although it is not mentioned in the media, the white and terrible Moby Dick inhabits the same symbol. In Argentina, in addition, the whales are a spectacle of the Patagonian seas, the site of origin of the Kirchner family. The Patagonian zoological designation was not alien to Kirchnerism, whose supporters are called "penguins".

On the space of the "Blue Whale", the CCK has another exhibition hall called "*Chandelier*", "Great Lamp", in English. That its name is in French presumably comes from the architectural style of the building, typical of the nineteenth-century period in Paris. But the name could connote other meanings: the CCK, like the Post Office Building before, would maintain the spirit of progress that animated the young South

<sup>4</sup> The headline refers to the popular phrase "all roads lead to Rome."

American nations during the Centennial. One hundred years later, the old building repeats the symbol of luminaire and progress: “the *Colón of the XXI Century*”, in the words of Cristina Fernández, or, in a news item of September 16, 2003, in *La Nación*, for means of a symbolic metaphor: “a building that is a *paradigm of the aspiration of greatness of the generation of ‘80’*”. In the same direction, the idea of “*lighthouse*” appears in the title of a news item of September 13, 2016 in *La Nación*: “The CCK, from Kirchnerist *lighthouse* to investment forum”.

#### 4.3. Common metaphors about art and culture

Some common metaphors about art and culture appear in the media references to the CCK. These “metaphorical families” are materialistic or idealistic (Casillo 2020). The group of materialistic metaphors highlights the economic aspect of the Center, either as a resource for the development of the City or as a source of work.

On May 22, 2015, the journalist Miguel Jurado suggested in *Clarín*: “With *dynamic uses* in non-administrative hours, on weekends and holidays, huge portions of the city can be reborn (...). The CCK will change the center of Buenos Aires adding an *extra cultural attraction*”. Here culture appears as “use” and an “extra cultural attraction”, common references in the field of tourism. The same day, in another *Clarín* news item, the words of President Cristina Fernández were quoted: “It took 30 years to build the building and we have *re-functionalized* it (...)”. In this case, the “*function*” of the building stands out.

On May 21, 2015, *Clarín* quoted the words of the Argentinian president: “Cristina warned that ‘*culture is work*’, it is not only entertainment, nor recreation”. Then, in the news of May 23, 2015, Pablo Gianera ironized in *La Nación* about the words of Julio De Vido, a Kirchnerist politician: “He also spoke of ‘*bringing artists excluded from the market*’, although the language played a trick on him and started the phrase with ‘*shopping center*’ instead of cultural center”. Gianera alluded in this way to the classic dispute between culture in the ideal sense and commercial culture.

Idealistic metaphors are the already mentioned “*cathedral*”, “*emblem*”, “*all roads lead to...*”. Metaphors referring to the CCK as a place to “celebrate” art and culture also belong to this same group. These figures do not indicate the use of heritage or culture but rather underline its

intangible value, meanings and relevance for social identity.

#### 4.4. From metaphor to simulation

Regarding the controversy over the name of the Cultural Center and the costs of the work, Teresa Parodi, Minister of Culture for a year since 2014, said in an interview with *Radio America*, that also in Paris a renowned cultural center bore the name of a prime minister: the “Beaubourg” or Georges Pompidou Cultural Center. In a news item dated May 27, 2015, the *Télam* news agency quoted this interview: “everyone talks about the Center Pompidou, and they don’t know that it was the President of France Georges Pompidou (1969-1974) who built it”. The connection with the Pompidou, however, is still curious and certainly controversial.

It was Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, then President of the French Republic, who finally inaugurated the Pompidou in January 1977. The architecture of Rogers and Piano was peculiar, with a factory appearance, typical of suburban refineries. From the beginning, the Pompidou was the subject of intense praise, but also fierce criticism, not only for its appearance but for the eclectic museum proposal and the commercial use of the building.

For the philosopher Jean Baudrillard, in *The Beaubourg Effect*, the Cultural Center was an example of “hyper-reality” or of “the precession of simulacra” (1978, 5-7). It was a “supplantation of the real by the signs of the real”. For the author, contemporary citizens lived in a universe strangely similar to the original, where things appeared doubled by their own staging, “already expunged from his death, better still, more smiling, more authentic in the light of his model, like the faces of funeral homes. *Disneyland* with the dimensions of a whole universe (1978, 24)”.

### 5. Conclusions

This study shows how art and culture sometimes appear in tension with the political and economic sphere. In the informative discourse analyzed, there is a reference to political statements in which the Néstor Kirchner Cultural Center, an institution that hosts art exhibitions and concerts, is referred to as a metaphor. President Cristina Fernández described it as “the *Colón Theatre of the XXI Century*”; on other occasions, it appears as

“Cristina’s Colón”, “cathedral”, “lighthouse”, “flagship”, “emblem” and “monumental metaphor”, among other references. In addition, the Cultural Center has a metaphorical design: one of its rooms is called “Blue Whale”; another, “Chandelier” or “Great Lamp”. An important aspect of understanding CCK as a monumental metaphor is its image status. The Cultural Center is a construction to be seen and it is a building from which visitors can have better views of the city. In this sense, it concretizes an ancient metaphor of the illustration and maintains the spirit with which it was built, as a force for progress and national connection.

In the media and political enunciation, the CCK functioned as a monumental metaphor. Metaphors about art and culture imply that new

interpretations, not necessarily related to the art world, represent artworks and cultural institutions. Cultural management needs to reflect on these new representations that affect the cultural field, the creators, their works and audiences.

From the perspective of the hermeneutics of culture, it is possible to suggest that cultural management should consider a properly cultural discourse rather than a political or commercial one. A discourse of culture and not just a discourse about culture would enable the enunciation of artists and cultural actors in a community in which heritage is a symbol in the Gadamerian sense, like a “*tessera hospitalis*”, an ancient promise of meeting (Gadamer 1996, 84), and not a mere sign of power.

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