

13 Ways of Mistranslating Txuspo Poyo

Nico Israel

1. “Animation,” Txuspo Poyo writes me, using a language, English, which is not his mother tongue but which he inhabited for several years, is a “sweet arrow that goes from education program to war conflict.” I ponder this statement, translating it into back into a Spanish, which, despite being the language of my Sephardic Jewish ancestors, is not my mother tongue; and then again into my own idiom of contemporary American English, watching it shuttle between languages.
2. To be sure, animation, like static illustration before it, has a pedagogical function (un “programa de educación”?): throughout its history animation has been deployed to *demonstrate* something, often written text which it purports to *animate*—literally to give a spirit, from the Latin *anima*, for air, breath, life, soul, mind. By making the static dynamic, animation can certainly “educate”—teach, lead forth, rear up—even as it entertains and brings delight. But *animate*—in English at least—also means “to excite to action”; to incite, stir up feelings, even those of a hostile character; this from *anima*’s masculine counterpart, *animus*. And so we see how *even etymologically* “animation” suggests the generation of feelings strong enough to provoke “war conflict” (“conflicto de guerra”?), which it has also done throughout its history as a medium, from the days of the zoetrope and kinoscope (with their early tendency toward emphasizing conflict and danger as well as propaganda) through Disney (about whose politics much, perhaps too much, has already been written) to the Warner Brothers Bugs Bunny cartoons which as a child growing up at the end of the Cold War I drank up like mother’s milk: Bugs was the epitome of American pluck and courage; the giant Russian-accented bear who was sometimes his adversary was slow-witted and evil.
3. But what about Poyo’s “sweet arrow” (“flecha dulce”?) How can an arrow, a figure of animus designed to kill or at least wound, also be “sweet”? (I think immediately of Cupid and his erotic arrows, which immediately reveal the deep imbrication in the classical mindset between war and love, but also of the story of Psyche who, when she glanced at her lover Cupid, was abandoned, heartbroken: must mind and love always be kept separate?) And how can this arrow “go”—sweetly—from “education program to war conflict”? I wonder whether “flecha dulce” is an idiomatic Spanish expression or whether Txuspo is being poetic, and wonder, too, how this “dicho” might be said in Euskera, the Basque language once banned by the Franco regime but still spoken (and now promoted) in Bilbao, the city in which Txuspo now lives. In English, “sweet arrow” is an oxymoron, a figure of speech “in which a pair of opposed or markedly contradictory terms are placed in conjunction for emphasis.” But even as oxymoron something doesn’t really work, the words will not cross over: “No pasarán.” The “Flecha dulce de animación,” if that is what Txuspo had in mind “in the original,” cannot really be translated; or, if translated, cannot be properly “borne across” languages.
4. Walter Benjamin, the brilliant German Jewish philosopher whose life was cut short by the “flecha dulce” of morphine he took while in Port Bou, on the French-Spanish border on September 26, 1940, as he attempted to flee the Nazi regime, owed his death, according to a story that might be apocryphal, to a partial misunderstanding of what he was told by a Spanish border guard: that despite being in possession of legitimate visas, his group of refugees would not be allowed to “cross over” into the “freedom” of Franco-dominated Spain and set sail for the United States. A pathetically prosaic end for the thinker who had written so thoughtfully both on Spain (see the *Ibizan Sequence* in his *Selected Writings*, and, especially, the lovely meditation “Spain, 1932”) and, in much better-known work, on the question of translation. Here, introducing his own translation into German of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*, Benjamin suggests, “The question of whether a work is translatable has a dual meaning. Either: Will an adequate translator ever be found among the totality of its readers? Or, more pertinently: Does its nature lend itself to translation and, therefore, in view of the significance of the mode, call for it?”
5. Benjamin’s questions concerning translatability reposition the relation between “original” and “copy” not only in literature but in art, whose reproducibility Benjamin would write about later, in his most famous essay, “The Work

of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility.” No longer is the translation merely a faithful “secondary” rendering of the “primary” document; rather, in works that “call” for translation, both original and translation are transformed, as is the case with the Biblical Scriptures, which for Benjamin are the “ideal of all translation.” “The task of the translator,” Benjamin suggests—and, as Paul de Man emphasizes, the original German *task* (*Aufgabe*) implies to “give up” or “surrender” (*geben auf*)—is not simply to *repeat* the original in other words, even if such a repetition were possible; rather it “consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original.”

6. “Sweet arrow”/“flecha dulce” may not “call for” extended translation, but the echoes it produces call to mind how the questions of translation, mistranslation, and untranslatability pervade Txuspo’s work (which is probably appropriate for an artist whose very name, Txuspo, has no English or Spanish equivalent; does 18201046-L, Poyo’s European identification number and title of his last catalogue, “translate” Txuspo Poyo?). This question of pass meeting impasse seems especially pertinent concerning those animations that “animate” text, which has been a feature of Txuspo’s work since the beginning of his career, with “The Endless” (1994), a film focusing on the word “The End” taken from different movies in a variety of scripts and languages flitting on and off and across the screen, and extends to some of his most recent projects, including “Crossing Tracks” (2003), in which “If You See Something, Say Something/Si Ves Algo, Di Algo,” the idiotic mantra of New York’s Metropolitan Transit Authority unveiled in the months after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, is repeated over and over again as images of subway doors open and close.
7. “If You See Something, Say Something”: this is not only a reminder to be vigilant in the face of an ever-lurking (and ever-exploited) political threat. When translated into the filmic medium, it challenges the very formality or propriety of watching an animation: If you “say something” when you view a work like Txuspo’s in a gallery or exhibition space or movie theater, you might be acting inappropriately, even dangerously. But if you sit passively or inattentively, allowing the images to pass uncommented upon, you run the risk of becoming the massified consumer of film warned about in Benjamin’s “Technical Reproducibility” essay. The challenge is to react critically while in the “state of distraction” that film, by its very nature as moving technical reproduction, encourages. But when is it appropriate to “say something”? (In a twice-translated essay that few will likely read to “the end”?)
8. I’m suddenly reminded of an anecdote told by a friend, who was riding on the New York subway after September 11th, when the slogan “If You See Something, Say Something” had been recently launched. Like most of us jittery New Yorkers who “survived” the attacks, she was ever-mindful of the possibility of another bombing—a bombing, of course, repeated on train tracks in Spain a couple of years later and initially blamed on “Basque Separatists” for political gain. This friend suddenly noticed a strong smell of gasoline in the subway station, and sat frozen, not knowing whether she ought to tell the token booth clerk (who throughout New York are notorious for their irascibility). Finally, she summoned her courage and went up to the booth. “I just wanted to let you know I smell gasoline,” she said. The station agent sat silent. “Well the sign says ‘If You See Something, Say Something’ so I’m saying something.” The token booth clerk paused, and then responded, “it says ‘If You See Something, Say Something,’ not ‘If You Smell Something, Say Something’!
9. The token booth clerk was no superman (and, according to the just-released Hollywood movie, *Hollywoodland*, even handsome George Reeves, who played “Superman” in the American television series of the 1950s, was no superman: depressed about the state of his career, he committed suicide in 1959.) But the residual image of “Superman” pervasive in all American superheroes is translated throughout the rest of the world, and becomes one of the US’s prime exports, a masculinity that no one can measure up to. As if to respond to this “translation” and its worldwide impact, Txuspo created *Combustiones Domesticas: Héroes con Error/Domestic Combustions: Heroes with Flaw[s]*, a 2002 wall drawing of 4000 matches cast in the signature Superman “S” shape amid diamond background, and, in a performance, he set the matches aflame. The “work” becomes the residue of the performance. That *Combustiones* was made (and performance enacted) in Cuba, former Spanish colony long subject to a US blockade (while also awash in Americana), makes the (mis)translation of the “S” all the more pointed, animated.

10. Digital animation is essentially different from performance or sculpture in that its object is neither solid nor tangible. It is even different from the kind of “animation” seen in the “analog” illustrations that Txuspo, a devoted fan of comic books, still draws (and in which “digits”—human fingers—play a decisive role; see *Open 24 Hours: USA News Today/Elecciones Americanas 2004*). In a recent work, the super-high-tech *Ambientes Hostiles/ Hostile Environments*, 2005, hammer and nails, the most rudimentary of tools, “dance” along to traditional Txalaparta music in what is part Busby Berkeley extravaganza (produced by “21st Century Bilbao!”), part snuff film. At times the hammer looks like a churning oil derrick, then an amputated Gober-esque leg; the nails morph into spermatozoa, then gather “companion” nails to spell out words and expressions in both English and Spanish (*silencia, solo, ojo por ojo*). All the while hammer and nails rhythmically pound home inevitable connections to both primal war and to crucifixion, the cruelty that will supposedly usher in eternal piece.
11. In Dante’s *Inferno*, the very bottom rung of hell, Judecca, is occupied by Lucifer, who has three faces, one red, one black, and one a pale yellow, each having a mouth that chews on a prominent traitor: Brutus, Cassius, and, front and center, Judas Iscariot. In the same rung of hell, only a little higher up, one finds the giant Nimrod; he has been condemned to this rung because of his role in building the Tower of Babel, whose existence, indicative of extreme pride and arrogance, insulted God so much that he sent an angel from the sky to destroy the giant tower and, as punishment, caused languages to multiply. “Raphael mai amech izabi almi” he exclaims to Dante, in a language that no one understands.
12. If digital technology seems to be the new frontier for animation, it is not entirely clear that it is possible or advisable to leave the analogical digit entirely behind. In Txuspo’s latest film, *Passenger*, whose title recalls the Antonioni film of the same name, the “real” but unreal-seeming streets of Bilbao are the site for filmic and computer-aided imaginings. Here, Scott’s *Blade Runner* and Lang’s *Metropolis* meet the computer-generated iconography of the video series *Grand Theft Auto*. Against a fearful and empty-seeming cityscape where it is always night, Bilbao’s famous elevated *Ascensor Begoña* becomes, in Txuspo’s hands, also a *ensor*, exerting a powerful impression of pervasive, carceral surveillance. The lift, which is supposed (literally) to elevate (like a *programa de educación*) instead serves to advance the base and unfree agenda of the *conflicto de guerra*. But here, the arrow between the realms is anything but sweet.
13. “Azkena.”

Nico Israel teaches comparative literature at Hunter College, New York, and is a faculty member at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. The author of *Outlandish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora* (Stanford University Press, 2000), Israel has been a contributing writer to *Artforum* since 1995 and has seen his reviews and criticism published in *Bookforum*, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, and *Modern Fiction Studies*.