

# Weightless cities. Speculations on certain relationships between urbanism and contemporary Latin American Literature

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## ABSTRACT

Literature produces cities as the city engenders novels: since Herodotus threaded them with a continuous line braided with words, writers committed to space have been concerned with giving cities to reality in unison as many other disciplines have. This essay defends the fact that plenty of architectural thinking and urban postulates, useful and necessary for historiography, analysis and the project of transformation and improvement of the contemporary city, can be found in the works of some Latin American authors of the last decades (Cortázar, Bolaño, Borges, García Márquez, Onetti, Rulfo, and others). It is also speculated that the verbal city, where patrimony and vanguard coexist in harmony, and the built city, which is the physical scenery for conflicts, are, at times, one sole entity: that the dense city of pedestrians and the weightless city of readers is analogous and that because of their affinity and dense network of correspondences, one can be analysed resorting to the other; that, after all,

*fictional architecture is not less consistent nor more precarious that the one that is temporarily expressed in the matter.*

Weightless cities, in spite of their intrinsic lightness, are subject to the action of catastrophe and all the destructive processes that lead to ruin; because they are destined to suffering the damaging course of time, like their replicas in reality that are resigned to disintegrating themselves into immaterial nothingness after the agony preceding their extinction. Although they are built with words, their appearance, their societies and circumstances are similar to those of the cities that were built with mud and stone, with metal or with wood; their respective inhabitants are not very different and their habits are common, as well as their destiny, which like that of all architecture, is to return indifferent to the land they come from. From North to South, from Cape Horn to the Tijuana frontier in the United States of America (if prolonged below the cartography proposed by Joaquín Torres García in 1936), Latin America is, of all latitudes, the most prodigal of verbal cities, true or imaginary, barren or saturated, old or utopian: cities that draw a constellation superposed to the plural territory that goes from the Pacific to the Atlantic ocean, delimiting the only plan in which it is not always possible to distinguish, nor even necessary, whether the Caribbean city to which Alejo Carpentier took the guillotine in

El siglo de las luces is less solid than La Habana portrayed by himself in La ciudad de las columnas or in El amor a la ciudad, or if the profane Santa Teresa projected by Roberto Bolaño in 2666 has more credibility than many other cities of violence that feature in conventional travel guides or if the ironical Angosta that Héctor Abad Faciolince contrasts with the Medellín harassed by delinquency and poverty is fictitious or not.

It can be demonstrated that architectures and cities lost in the pages of the exceptional contemporary literature written in Spanish have been planned taking into consideration the geography and politics, the climate and roads, the corruption and emotions, founded in the swamp, like the centenary Macondo that Gabriel García Márquez recorded for eternity in the short list of immemorial cities, or emancipated at the top of a dusty hill for the disorientation of spectres, as it happens with Luvina, the city of the deepest sadness of the moorland of solitude with which Juan Rulfo enriched the landscape.

Macondo, Luvina and Santa María, one, erased from the face of the earth by a windstorm, another, waiting for the earthquake that will bury the calcined bones that still give it consistency, and the last one, devastated by an intentional fire to prevent anyone from appropriating it; some commemorating the biblical cities

sentenced to death even though they are not guilty, from Babel to Gomorra, and others reminding of mythical cities, the Babylon known by Herodotus as well as the Homeric Troy that served as a grave for the heroes; some erected according to the mysterious Nazca lines or the outline of streets imposed on America by the invading religious orders, others pre-figured in the fabulous plan of Tenochtitlán contained in the Mendoza Code, and many of them heirs of the ones included by William Faulkner in the limits of his inaugural Yoknapatawpha, woven with similar syntactic techniques even though, unlike those of the Mississippi county, do not need a specific cartography to sustain them.

All of these, cities composed of well embedded fragments of pre-existing towns such as those dreamed of by writers, with images and words, created in the same way as architects project theirs with lines, form part of the Latin atlas of essential urbanism, of the nomenclature of model cities and, therefore, should be included in the treatises of poliorcetics<sup>(1)</sup> and feature in monographs on planning and land management, and be analysed in schools of architecture and in faculties of sociology or of geography, together with Rome and New York, Aldo Rossi's "Analogous City" or Unidad Vecinal Portales.

The heterogeneous nature of the Latin American literary city, in expanse and variety, is next to the typological and formal multiplicity of cities built in that vast continental area, founded against nature at the mouth of mighty rivers as well as on top of the most remote mountains, in the heart of hardly penetrable forests or in the middle of vast pampas mentioned by Juan José

Saer (Las nubes) and César Aira (Un episodio en la vida del pintor viajero), the latter in relation to Johann Moritz Rugendas and the former because of the feat of a caravan of mad people who crossed the prairie, in the perennial humidity of a tropical climate in which fish may go into houses comfortably swimming in the air through the windows as in windstorms coming from the Antarctic glaciers.

Literature dealing with the carnal city, that makes it the central object of its reflection and privileged scenery of the events of contemporary man and his societies, is in Latin America more a twentieth than nineteenth century phenomenon and, therefore, contrary to what happened in Europe, not linked to Romanticism: they preferred, but for a few exceptions (Torrente Ballester or Giorgio Manganelli), to analyse than imagine, research, create and discover superimposed cities in the mass of historic cities rather than "Frankenstein" cities built with the remnants and debris of others which were not satisfactory. The reasons why built cities were not useful for Latin American writers inclined to projecting (the vice of projecting places is not exclusive of architecture: it is also typical, and probably previous, to literature), the motives that led them to omit and not choose them as scenery, are yet to be elucidated, as it is pending to analyse in detail each case of illusory city and its correlates with the matter cities to which they correspond, or vice versa.

There are many landmarks that might be chosen to make evident the eclosion and effervescence of the subject of the city, or the city as a nuclear topic of the novel; mention could be made of the earliest, where conflicts are presented between the civilized and the barbarian,

which in the context of what happens in Doña Bárbara, published in 1929 by Romulo Gallegos, is like saying, between culture and indomitableness, or between the centripetal city and the surrounding countryside. If attention were be given to poetry rather than to narrative, one of the nodes of this transformation of the look is found in Fervor de Buenos Aires published by Jorge Luis Borges in 1923, who, in the prologue for the 1969 edition argued that "At that time, I looked for sunsets, the suburbs and misfortune; now, for mornings, the town centre and serenity", and it is this substitution of the periphery for the centre which contains a new urban manifesto where the new paradigm is registered. This change of direction is altered in the last quarter of the 20th century when the road is reversed to go back to the favelas, to the peri urban ruins and other experimental architectures in the outskirts. This looking for other places, other moments, other typical events of the city, proposed by Borges, will have almost immediate effects on another traumatic encounter between poetry and the great city, which is the composition Poeta en Nueva York, where, in 1929, Federico García Lorca leaves an emotional record of his experience and his difficult relationship with the disproportionate and massive city that has already begun to dehumanize itself.

The great launching of narrative production by the metropolis, not so much the modern city with its tower urbanizations but that vagueness called "historical city", however recent it might be, is produced in the second half of the 20th century, when writers that will be glorified some decades later will deal, some with cities that on either side of the ocean have built themselves and others with not less real cities that they have dreamed of in their sleepless nights

and in which the characters that will dream their dreams have been forced to live. Thus, Vargas Llosa will deal with his *Lima* in *La ciudad y los perros* and *Lezama Lima* with *La Habana* in *Paradiso*; in the north, stalked by *Malcom Lowry*, *Carlos Fuentes* asked himself in *La región más transparente* for the inapprehensible vastness of *México D. F.*, *Clarice Lispector* in the centre unraveled *Brazilian cities* (*La ciudad sitiada*), while further south they dealt with that synthesis of the city which is the house of authors like *José Donoso* (*Casa de campo*), *Héctor Tizón* (*La casa y el viento*) or *Pablo Neruda* (*Residencia en la tierra*).

Subsidiaries of the government cities proposed by writers as favourable places for the geographic development of their stories, there are other smaller cities, also invented, in the surrounding territory – *Lavanda*, *Enduro*, *San Martín* and others, in the case of *Santa María*; *Tlalpa*, *Tonaya*, *Luvina* and others, in that of *Comala*, prefigured by *Rulfo* with his superb photographic work – which are premonitory of future stories, populations of which at first only their names are revealed and where then, now following the path traced by *Faulkner* (from 1929 in *The sound and the fury* to 1957 in *The town*) other autonomous stories will germinate. And linked to these secondary cities, other satellite small towns and villages, farms and ranches, cottages and camps: another pleiad of minor places which give regional coherence to the dominant cities supported in their network. In any case, it is not the “*urbs*” but the “*civitas*” what interests committed literature the most about the city, nor the place itself, its appearance or its characteristics, but the society that inhabits it and the set of relationships established between it and the architecture that determines it.

The weightless city if often undistinguishable from the one that is subject to the action of gravity, or the effort to demarcate one from the other is useless: they are frequently intermingled and you go from one to the other, as from outside to inside in *Cortázar*’s “*Continuidad de los parques*”, without noticing any change, they can be read and understood without discontinuity. For *Vargas Llosa* (*El viaje a la ficción*), in *Onetti*’s novels located in *Santa María*, the invented city is not always distinguishable from the city it refers to: this difficulty probably lies in the fact that both of them, confused and not juxtaposed nor overlapping, together, form another non-hybrid entity, a new substance, different from the two components it integrates. In *El último lector*, *Ricardo Piglia* (author of *La ciudad ausente*) states that for *Onetti* “the tension between the real and the imaginary object does not exist, everything is real, everything is there”, as it is in the miniature city that a certain *Russell* has built in his house in *Buenos Aires*, a “synoptic machine”, that is not a map nor a sketch, *Piglia* clarifies in the prologue, in which he has known how to concentrate the essence of the gigantic city that he remembers: a city to be read and not inhabited, to be thought and not suffered, in which to get lost without the need for plans.

Besides the cities projected in their books, those urban writers paid particular attention to the European cities that welcomed them in their exile or drifting period, which was the case of *Paris*, about which master pages were written, to mention just a few of its guests, the poet *César Vallejo*, the diplomat *Carpentier* in *La consagración de la primavera* and *Cortázar* in *Rayuela*, establishing perceptive correlations between literary

*Paris* and the transatlantic cities they came from. Recent generations have been more concerned with their native cities than with the foreign ones, often without characterising them by their topics or their symbols, generalising and universalising them, making them unrecognizable at a distance, as it happens with the *Santiago de Chile* of *Alejandro Zambra* (*Maneras de volver a casa*) or of *Damiela Eltit* (*Fuerzas especiales*) or with the fragmented *Mexico D. F.* of *Valeria Luiselli* in *Papeles falsos*, an essay-novel linked in form and technique to the architectural writing inspired by *W. G. Sebald* (*Schwindel; Die Ringe des Saturn*; *Austerlitz*) awaited for by so many followers and diligent imitators, and which had Latin American precedents in, for example, *Ernesto Sabato* (*Uno y el Universo*) and *Augusto Monterroso* (*Movimiento perpetuo*), although, unlike Europeans, they do not introduce photographs between the paragraphs<sup>(2)</sup>.

So, unlike what used to happen in the work of the so-called “boom writers”, related or not to the very controversial name “magical realism”, the written city is not proposed as an alternative to the stone city: now, the imagined city is again within the three-dimensional city and it is inside it where it is conceived and, as already proposed by *Poe*, *Flaubert* and *Baudelaire*, and already done by *W. Benjamin*, *Wittgenstein* and *Perec*, it has to be looked for and decoded once it has become a symbol. It is a city like the one that no longer resides in the dissimilar chapters of heterogeneous texts of today but in the ephemeral pages of periodicals. In order to write a scientific report on the contemporary city, a true story on hegemonic urbanism, the place where one would have to go first is the periodicals library, even though cities have also been forged, distorted, commercialised and stripped of all their

basic characteristics. Because all cities, as distorted by perspective, are false and have been forged by historians and archaeologists, by architects and by journalists, by poets and promoters.

Every city, as urbanism and Latin American literature have shown, is a version of another city: of a previous one to which it goes back or a later one which it anticipates. Literature is, after all, the discipline that deals with, or aspires to, fully contain the city, in its entirety and integrity, from its prehistory until it becomes a myth, if it has deserved such a privilege: that is to say, the one that intends understanding and explaining the cycle that leads from the legend that sustains it to the fable it wishes to become: the one that gives it a name. Its passing through the matter, its precarious solid state, is nothing but an accident. The theoretical city and the poetic city, that is to say, the graphic city (written or drawn) and the one implemented in space, the pronounced one and the materialized one, are in the aleph, for art, the same. 

#### NOTES

(1) Even though the *Diccionario de la lengua española* of the RAE defines the term “poliorcética” as the “art of attacking and defending fortresses”, from the *History of the Peloponnesian War* by the Greek Tucídides and after his Renaissance interpretations, included the proposals of fortification of Alberto Durero (*Etliche Underricht zu Befestigung der Stett, Schloss und Flecken*, printed in 1527) poliorcetics is the discipline that, also from the interests of architecture, deals widely with the conflicts and agressions the city is subject to as well as the systems of protection it supports, in the way proposed in J. J. Parra, *Tratados de poliorcética* (El Desembarco, 2003).

(2) In most of his literary works, W. G. Sebald (1994–2001) included interspersed images in the text, although frequently without clearly mentioning them. They were drawings as well as photographs taken by himself or by others: images always in black and white that sometimes intended to illustrate something of what has been expressed by words and, others, pretend to propose a graphic discourse that, on occasions was parallel and complementary to the verbal one and, on others, zig-zagged onwards as in a divergent and disturbing story. This is what happens, for instance, in *Vertigo* (1999), *The Emigrants* (1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), *Austerlitz* (2001) and in the precursor and also poliorcetic *On the natural history of destruction* (1999). Aby Warburg (*Serpent Ritual*), Marcel Duchamp and André Breton (*Nadja*) are some of its predecessors. The exhibition “Las variaciones Sebald” (“The variations of Sebald”, Centro de Cultura Contemporánea de Barcelona, 2015), where the writer Valeria Luiselli was a guest speaker, contains some of its sequels.