

The city and its displays: literature and urban experience

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Abstract:

The city as stage of struggles and staging for progress in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century has become a privileged locus for literary writing. In this work, it is intended to make some considerations about the urban phenomenon image in literature and its presence in the social imaginary, taking as a base the rereading of important texts, which dealt with the relationship between literature, urban experience and modernity, such as Simmel; Berman, Bradbury; Schorske; Benjamin.

Key Words: Literature and Urban Experience; Modernity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

How to think and perceive the city in its vast network of multiple meanings, in the senses and feelings of each inhabitant of this space, which is the result of the imaginary and labor articulated by many men, where people come together and disaggregate and each one is, simultaneously, a set fragment; a collective part.

A look at Augusto de Campos' poem entitled "cidade/city/cité" (1963), whose text is organized by a minimal sequence of lexical units capable of evoking a diversity of echoes from the abbey city. The Portuguese, English and French language use, alongside the semantic field "city" emphasize and universalize the urban space dimension. At first glance, the reader does not get to distinguish the semantic fields that form the gigantic 158-letter word-poem. However, this scrambling of letters clearly denotes the city's babelic character, which in turn has its origins in the modern urban space of the late 19th century.

In the text – *The urban landscape*, Win Wenders expresses his experience of being an appreciator and *flaneur* of cities and their signs: "I am neither an architect nor an urban planner". Wenders points out in his text, the experience in/of cities, just like the Baudelairian matrix *flaneur* that tracks in this space not only the urban landscape, but also the man in his relationship with it, denoting that, no matter how technical the cities are, even so, the streets and their buildings are still not enough to make this space a real city, as it is necessary to create a soul for this physical entity.

Thus, we search in Italo Calvino text, in his *Invisible Cities*, whose work Marco Polo narrates to Kublai Khan, Emperor of the Tartars, the cities he creates from his memory. Trying to describe, for example, the city of Zaíra, the traveler Marco Polo talks about: its streets and its steps, the portals and the zinc roofs, but, in addition to these physical descriptions, Polo says that the city not only comprises material aspects, but also it, too, is made up of "relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of the past: the distance from the ground to a lamp... [...] the route of the queen's nuptial procession; [...] and the adulterer's jump who runs away at dawn." (Calvino, 1990, p. 14).

In other words, as it is seen in Polo's account, a city does not just contain just a plant created by modern urbanism, but it is above all a tangle of existences, where past, with its histories and traditions, has a relevant role in this environment. Therefore, in this tangle of cities which cohabit the same space at the same time, we have the architect's city, the citizens' city, the memory underground city, the imaginary city and also the literary city.

In this process of building cities, whether real or imaginary, visible or invisible, veiled or revealed, the speeches which are inscribed on it legitimize them. The many images created, in a way, fixed and established constructions on them. A walk through the images of the cities, allows us to observe how the speeches created identities and icons for the cities.

Starting from the oldest known city image, Babel's myth – which constituted the image of urban chaos, and it is indelibly associated with the modern city –, babel refers to technique, to man's intention to create another nature, that is, artificial, dominating primitive nature, corresponding, therefore, to a nature domination project: "In apocalyptic literature, Babylon-Jerusalem are an antinomy as antichrist-Christ; Babylon is the city of technique, Jerusalem, of grace; Babylon is the prostitute, Jerusalem, the wife" (Holy Bible, Capuchin Missionary, Lisbon, p. 281).

But the celestial Jerusalem, a utopian city, became some source of inspiration for the utopians and reformers of the city, conformed to the Renaissance city image of Utopia, by Morus, that is, the space of the non-place, the *utopos*, as well as illuminated the images renaissance of A New Atlantida, God's City, The Sun City. This antinomy also reverberated in the literary representations of the city at the height of industrialization and the consolidation of capitalism. Carl Schorske states that the modern urban space is defined by three features: "the city as a virtue, the city as an addiction, the city beyond good and evil" (Schorske, 2000): "I believe that three broad assessments of the city in the last two hundred years can be discerned: the city as a virtue, the city as an addiction and the city beyond good and evil. These attitudes appear in thinkers and artists in temporal succession. The eighteenth century developed, from the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the view of the city as a virtue. The industrialization of the beginning of the 19th century brought to the fore an opposite conception: the city as an addiction. Finally, in the context of a new subjectivist culture born in the middle of the 19th century, an intellectual attitude emerged that placed the city beyond good and evil". (Schorske, 2000, p. 53).

In this sense, we realize that the speeches of the literary writers, no matter how different they may be, ranged between praising the city as a modernity display and the realization of linking losses between individuals and the malaise over a space which is not familiar anymore. Thus, it is possible to observe that literature establishes a discourse in and about the city, expressing the shocks and experiences of individuals and their relationships within this place. Literature therefore creates another city, that is, the written city which is apprehended at a unique moment, whether by the *flâneur*, the dandy or the voyeur, whose situations demarcate points of view about the city's legibility.

In the second half of the 19th century, within the emergence of the urban phenomenon, a modern imaginary was established. We can observe that much of the literature started to be produced in and about the city, whose process was driven by the circulation of ideas, the development of the press, the circulation of newspapers, the creation of bookstores and publishers. It can be seen that many of the literary texts that circulated about the city, be they chronicles, short stories or novels, all contributed significantly to establish a new urban and modern sensibility, as well as expressed in great part, the aspirations of modernity of a consumer urban class.

II. CITY AND LITERATURE: TRACES, TIES AND TENTACLES

Bradbury and Mcfarlane (1989), when analyzing the modern phenomenon and its configurations in society, point out that the city is the environment of cultural effervescence, of the modern imagination, characterized by new sociability, the entertainment industry and the circulation of ideas and books, which featured, according to the authors, an interrelation between literature and urban experience, as there has always been a close relationship between literature and cities, as these are, mainly, "basic literary institutions: publishers, patrons, libraries, museums, bookstores, theaters, magazines. There are also the intensities of cultural contact and the frontiers of experience: the pressures, the news, the debates, leisure, money, the high turnover of people, the flows of visitors, the sound of many languages, the rapid exchange of ideas and styles, the opportunity for artistic specialization". (Bradbury, 1989, p.76-77).

Despite this connection, the relationship between city and literature was not only established because the city became a place of literary circulation, according to Bradbury and Mcfarlane, the literary writer was largely "captured by the spirit of the modern city" (Bradbury; Mcfarlane, 1989, p. 77), which demonstrates the recurrence of urban themes in literature and also in the development of the novel as a genre capable of fully representing modern urban life.

This urban space feature was directly associated with the development of capitalism and the market as well, and, in fact, cities gained a design that distinguished them from other sources of previous agglomeration, even if we think about the generation of new urban sociability. According to George Simmel, in the text, *The metropolis and mental life*, portentous were the urban changes of the social imaginary of the eighties, which established a diverse sociability that came to generate ways of being and behaving in the city: "Cities are, in the first place, home to the highest economic division of labor. Therefore, they produce phenomena as extreme as, in Paris, the paid occupation of the quatorzième. They are people who identify themselves by means of notices in their homes and who are ready, at dinner time, correctly dressed, so that they can be called quickly if a dinner consists of thirteen people. As it expands, the city offers more and more the decisive conditions for the division of labor. It offers a circle that, through its size, can absorb a highly diverse range of services". (Simmel, 1976, p. 21-22).

In the first decades of the 19th century, accelerated industrialization caused the formation of high demographic concentrations, producing major changes in the ways of life in European cities. Demographic growth, urban conflicts, poverty and class conflicts have become more frequent, leading to the development of what Foucault characterized as "urban fear", that is, "[...] the city anguish that will be characterized by several elements; fear of the workshops and factories that are being built, of the population crowding, of the very high

houses, of the large population growing; fear, too, of urban epidemics, of cemeteries that become more and more numerous and gradually invade the city; fear of the sewers, of the cellars on which the houses are built, which are always in danger of falling apart. This urban panic is characteristic of this care, of this political-sanitary anxiety which is formed as the urban fabric develops” (Foucault, 1984, p. 87).

Over the years, the great city has had its image shaped by vice, the perversion of customs, and insolent luxury; fragmentation of communal life and crime. If we refer to the Scriptures, we can see that they mention that God was the architect of the first garden; Cain built the first city. 19th century literature and 20th century cinema represented the city as a space for the shuffling of experiences, as well as a space of solitude, illusion and helplessness in the midst of crowds.

When it comes to the relationship between literature and society, it is observed that not only in the novels, but also in the lyric or in the daily chronicle, the city stopped constituting just a stage or a scenario for the unfolding of the events, passing, therefore, to the protagonist status. So it was with Paris by Charles Baudelaire or Émile Zola; with Dickens’s London; with Dostoevsky’s St. Petersburg; with Rio de Janeiro from Alencar, Machado, João do Rio or Lima Barreto; with Buenos Aires from Borges or Montevideo Vieja, from José Saldaña, among many other authors who expressed their perceptions about the city, elaborating images and expressing meanings, which still allow us to read those cities today, because, as Brito Broca states, as they were captured in literary discourse, cities gain a mythology: “What constitutes the main attraction of a city is what we can call [its] myth. Paris, London, Rome, Lisbon, Madrid and so many other old-world cities all have a mythology and it is the literature which creates them. It is romances, poems, history in a deep sedimentation of impressions and reminiscences that form (...) the mythological superstructure of cities”. (Broca, 1993, p. 15).

This modern city that is immortalized by the writers’ pen becomes text and multifaceted object, like a glass polyhedron, which can be seen in a wide spectrum as a light that is outlined over it. The citizen attributes meanings to his experiences in the urban space. In *Everything that is solid it fades in the air. The adventure of modernity*, Marshal Berman debates the many images of modernity, from the urban phenomenon, establishing an intrinsic link between these two elements. The author shows us that the cities and the literature that was produced about them, bring us the senses and ambivalences experienced by their inhabitants, very particular characters of that stage, because the city is a space that combines disenchantment and fascination. The literature that inscribes the city gives body to the experiences of the senses and feelings experienced by the inhabitants of the big city and, without a doubt, it is in the chronicle and in the novel, mainly, that the city opens up in reports. According to Franco Moretti, the novel is the “first truly global symbolic form” that founded links between social life and literary discourse, precisely because it brought the accounts of everyday life to the literary scene.

III. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Urban modernity as a space of the imaginary was also inscribed in poetry and was an incessant object of study by Walter Benjamin. The German philosopher showed that the modernity of the French poet Charles Baudelaire incorporated the melancholy and dark side of the city, in counterpoint to luxury and the idea of modernity exalted by scientific and industrial discourse.

The city in the wake of modernity became the civilization locus and the image of progress in the late 19th century. Renato Cordeiro Gomes, in his text *Urban cartographies: representations of the city in literature*, establishes the relationship between the concrete city and the fictional one. According to Gomes, the city, when fictionalized, becomes text, image and object: “The written city is, then, the result of reading, construction of the subject who reads it, as a physical space and cultural myth, thinking of it as symbolic and material condensation and a scenario of change, in search of meaning. To write, therefore, the city is also to read it, even if it proves to be unreadable at first sight; it is to devise a form for this always mobile reality. Mapping its multiple meanings and its multiple voices and spellings is a poetic operation that seeks to apprehend the writing of the city and the city as writing, in a game open to complexity”. (Gomes, 1997, s.p.)

It is worth mentioning that not only the literary discourse, but also the press and the political discourse as well, many times, surrounded by nationalism and the idea of modernity, contributed to immortalize the image of cities around the world, having art and reproduction technique as an ally, from photographs, postcards and souvenirs. Walter Benjamin, in his text – *The work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility*, states that the techniques of reproduction allowed a wider public access to images, to art, although the object of art has lost its aura.

The city images reproduced through photography, according to Walter Benjamin, could be reproduced massively, fixing the ephemeral images, in addition to providing the photographer with the possibility of immortalizing all aspects of everyday life and the product, undoubtedly, reflected some good part of the social imaginary.

Finally, the modern city represented the very image of civilization. By dispensing with the representative schemes of the ancient order, the modern *urbs* caused a radical break with everything related to the old order, giving rise to the urban as we know it today. This rupture took place, above all, in architecture, in

the construction and renovation of cities, as well as in the use that its inhabitants began to make of that new environment.

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