

## SPACE IN MOVEMENT

The first great European novel –I refer, of course, to the one by Cervantes– is not an urban novel. Don Quixote and his squire cross rural Spain on their travels and only at the end of the Second Part of the book do they come across a city, but it is not described to us. The two characters of this work just visit the printing press where the volume which narrates their adventures is printed. Typography is not yet the product of the topography of the city, as it will be three hundred years later.

Over the course of the 17th and 18th Centuries, the most significant works in the genre– “Moll Flanders”, “Tristram Shandy”, “Jacques le fataliste”...–take place in urban settings, but their authors don't bother to portray their cartography. This will prevail a century later, and it is almost a cliché to say that Paris was created by Balzac, London by Dickens and Madrid by Galdós. But said creation –the references to their neighborhoods, streets, squares and markets in which the lives of their heroes and heroines take place– still doesn't reach the meticulousness and precision of a true topographical relationship: the city makes up the scenery which frames the action of the book but does not directly take on its leading role. This only happened in the last century, after Joyce's “Ulysses”, Dos Passos' “Manhattan Transfer”, Döblin's “Berlin Alexanderplatz”, Fuentes' “La región más transparente”, Orhan Pamuk's “The Black Book” (to cite a few examples) which convert Dublin, New York, Berlin, Mexico City, and Istanbul into the true protagonists of these novels. In them, as Julián Ríos says, ‘topography is transformed into typography’ and, thanks to their authors, we are emerged into a fruitful reading of the space in movement.

The first author to captured urban scenery from the destabilizing perspective of change was Baudelaire. His interpretation, in light of what Walter Benjamin would later write, was the sprout or seed of my own narrative course. The transformations of Paris undertaken by Haussmann during the reign of Napoleon III, described by the author of “Les fleurs du mal” with a lucidity and sharpness that still fascinates us, introduce in the novel –forgive me the flagrant anachronism– the fourth Einsteinian dimension: that of time and its relativity. The new urban order of the bourgeoisie and their aspirations to arrive at an exclusive space would provoke complex cleaning operations and refurbishment: the creation of cleared areas and wide avenues, the destruction of the plebian neighborhoods described in the chronicles from before the French Revolution. As I wrote some twenty years ago –‘the breathtaking acceleration of the changes in the Parisian landscape reduced things to mere images in one's memory: everything contributed towards highlighting the frailness of the present and the uncertainty of the future to come in a universe of gossip and furor, similar to that of de Sade and of the author of “La Celestina”.’

As I am going to set forth over the course of my talk, there are two ways to approach the urban landscape: from the point of view of a timeless present, that of the city-museum, and that of this machine that destroys and constructs time, in perpetual and stimulating evolution. Paris and Berlin will serve as the connecting link, although I will refer in passing to other experiences of cities in which I have lived and which in one form or another have influenced my work.

There are cities that are finished once and for all and in which any change happens to the detriment of its beauty and completeness. Leaving to one side Venice and a long

string of city-museums, the Paris created by Napoleon III, although soon demystified by Emile Zola, attracted the admiring attention of numerous foreign authors and artists who, captivated by the majestic grandeur of the scene, paid tribute to the world of the Champs Elysees and l'Etoile, or portrayed the neighborhoods of Montarnasse and Saint Germain-des-Prés with intellectual vintage. Writers like Hemingway and Gertrude Stein and later Carpentier and Cortázar found in Paris a source of inspiration and magnified its myth. We have them and their most modest followers to thank for a series of novels which allow us to inhabit the privileged space existing between the two World Wars, and that which flowered in the decade of the 1950s with the *Who's Who* of its painters, philosophers, poets, and novelists.

When, at twenty five, I left the impoverished Spain oppressed by Franco's regime for the first time, my arrival in Paris overwhelmed me. The stimulating and creative world of the Rive Gauche, the book shops, theatres, and cinemas in which I found all the intellectual attractions my Step-Fatherland forbade me, changed my life for good. Although I didn't choose freedom until two years later, it prepared me mentally to make the leap... from a homogenous and closed realm like the one in which I had been raised to another in which the ideological, literary, and artistic currents of the entire world converged. Paris was also like a big party for me: a workshop of experiences and ideas in which I feverishly brought myself up to date after years of sad indoctrination, misery, and drought.

But in the Latin Quarter I also met, I don't remember how or through whom, someone who indirectly would influence my perception of the city later on: I refer to the young Guy Debord, the driving force of the tiny Situationist International and author much later of the wise and farsighted "Society of the Spectacle", whose ever-present reality overwhelms us daily. He and his companion Michèle Bernstein provided me with the rudiments for an opening into other vibrant areas of life, especially enticing for the new species of urban animal formed by the exposure to diverse cultures and their inspiring developments. Instead of guiding me through the radiant and educated Paris which fascinated me, they preferred to lead me to the banlieues of Aubervilliers, the areas around Stalingrad Square and the Saint-Martin canal, in whose little cafés they chatted with exiled Spaniards and immigrants from the Maghreb.

When I finally settled in Paris – and thanks to my constant companion Monique Lange, I entered into contact with the publishing house Gallimard and the brilliant Pléiade of writers in its orbit – the official stage of Paris as the symbol and beacon of civilization gradually gave way to another: namely the neighborhood of the Sentier where we both lived, and the districts that extended from it towards the Gare du Nord station, Barbès, and the Boulevard de Rochechouart.

During my wanderings as a "notorious city-nomad" – I've defined myself thus for forty years – I became aware of the frailness of the city's texture and of the inherent changes to the Baudelairean perception of modernity; of the fact that the culture of the future could be neither national nor homogenous – French, English, German, or even circumscribed to European –, but rather plural and mixed, fruit of interchanges and osmosis, of the fertile coexistence with women and men coming from different backgrounds. I began to contemplate it from the peripheries and to satirise it based on the new realities created by our urban space in continuous movement; and so, the solemn recitation of Aragon's poem 'Elsa, mon amour' in its funerals are transformed in

the mouth of an African street sweeper in 'L'sa Monammú', a Moravian whose gifts as a spell-caster and necromancer figure among the cards distributed to the metro passengers in the Barbés station.

The covered passageways of the Rue and the Faubourg Saint-Denis and of the Place du Caire (today converted into a marketplace for hiring Pakistani laborers) offered me, as I wrote in the essay "Paris, Capital of the 21st Century?", "an example of the space-time collisions provoked by the arrival of working communities fully different from those for whom they were originally conceived; Second Empire decorative elements and smells of Turkish or Indian cooking." All this took form in the novel "Paisajes después de la batalla" (Landscapes after the Battle) in response to the challenge that the appearance of polyglot and mixed urban textures put forward to those for whom the conjunction of synchronic and diachronic elements and the polyphony of voices and languages would not be mere ingredients in a daring artistic experiment, but rather the fruit of a vital and enriching experience of modernity. The contact with these and other neighborhoods of New York, Berlin, Tangiers, Istanbul, etc. gave me an education that no university could have provided. Bajtín shook hands with Rabelais, Baudelaire with the writers of urban texts which converted topography into typography. Forgive me for citing myself with regard to this puzzle assembled with pieces of various colours and shapes; Jewish and Armenian merchants together with Turkish, Maghrebi, Sub-Saharan, Pakistani, Indian, Vietnamese, Caribbean immigrants:

*At certain times of the day it is a true Babel of languages. The walls of the houses are full of paintings and inscriptions in Arabic which the natives don't understand and which I decipher with true pleasure [...] the emigrants and their families bring with them their customs, their clothing, their hairstyles, music, adornments, cooking habits. The modest neighborhoods of the city become happier and more colorful; their inhabitants have the marvelous opportunity (I would say the unmerited honour) of coming into contact with men, women, and children from very different horizons, of learning to mutually respect one another's difference, of rubbing shoulders with them in the workplace, in a café, or at school. Suddenly, the ethnocentric vision of things, boring and petty, dissolves, respected values are relativised, prejudices and misgivings lose importance. The monumental Paris of papier mâché—that of the Arc d'Triompf and the Unknown Soldier—remains for the great bourgeois, high bureaucrats, retired financiers, and war widows. In the other – the truly alive Paris – the Döner Kebab and couscous joints proliferated like mushrooms. African drums, Berber rebecks, Amerindian instruments resound along the passageways of the Metro. The showrooms of totems and elephant horns invade the pavements a little more each day. The packing cardboard on which money is bet at cards to deceive the onlookers has jumped from Jemâa-el-Fna to Barbés.*

It is useless to say that this singular vision of the Ville Lumière did not especially please those who clung to a city which, with the disappearance the majority of the prestigious intellectuals who converted it into a beacon and attracted those who admired them, tended to transform itself into a museum. Someone relayed to me the indignant reaction of the person responsible for a well-known cultural magazine: "pour qu'il se prend-il pour parler de Paris de cette façon?" The truth which springs from the margins always offends someone, ignoring the consequences of colonialism, slavery, wars of conquest, hunger, forced migrations of war zones which devastate our planet, they live in the present of constant plenty. But, despite the offended pride of some, this was the *other*

Paris of the 1960s and 1970s, that of the glorious twenties which spread from the end of the Algerian War until the eruption of the AIDS pandemic and the emergence of a new radical Islam erased the permissive behaviors and changed the relativistic perception of distant communities, thereby opening the doors to new "cleansing" operations, to the whitening of the population through the gradual expulsion of foreign groups to the shantytowns, with the consequent creation of ghettos and of identity cliques like those which today threaten our timorous and fragile democracies. It would be easier to hide daylight from the sun. Nature abhors a vacuum and no European Law will impede the formation of Maghrebi souks, Caribbean hamlets, gatherings of Indians, Pakistanis, or Turks in the space of our cities, nor the mixing and reciprocal contamination that gives rise to new ways of life and of art. As my old friend Scheherazade said (and I don't ever tire of repeating) in her Book of Books, "the world is the home of those who have none."

The metamorphoses of Berlin over the course of the 20th Century are even more destabilizing and Baudelairean. I discovered the city and submerged myself in it thanks to "Berlin Alexanderplatz". Alfred Döblin's genius converted its topography into typography. The tingling mass of pedestrians, their incessant agitation, the life struggles of its protagonists took place in an urban atmosphere magnificently drawn by the novelist. Passionate reader that I am, I knew Berlin without having set foot in it, before the successive disasters of Nazism, the Second World War, the savage aerial bombings and the partition of the city in two as a consequence of the defeat. The Yalta conference swept away the world portrayed in its pages and transformed them into ruins, debris, and urban forests for more than half a century. Faced with this unusual landscape and with the sinister grayness of the eastern part of the city, this reader of Döblin believed himself to be the victim of a nightmare three decades ago when, in reality, he witnessed without realising it the process of destruction and reinvention of a city which, far from becoming a museum of itself, remade itself at breakneck speed. Like in Baudelaire's Paris, the natural passage of time reduced things regarded as unalterable into mere memories.

A stay in the old Western Berlin in the spring of 1981, thanks to a creative grant that allowed me to comfortably finish the novel "Paisajes después de la batalla", showed me with greater force than any essay, the mechanism of time's workings and its impact in the destabilising vision of what, in the line of Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, we understand as artistic and literary modernity.

I had chosen to reside in a simple apartment in the then peripheral neighborhood of Kreuzberg, not far from the canal where in 1919 the corpse of the great revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg was thrown, a choice which owed as much to my lamentable ignorance of German as to my desire to continue studying Turkish. I used to wander along Oranienburgerstrasse and I would come out onto the viewing platform which looked out over no man's land, protected by wire fences, trenches, security watchtowers and powerful spotlights, that is to say, the entire carefully elaborated mechanism of the German Democratic Republic for dissuading the eventual deserters of paradise.

In an article titled "Berliner Kronik" published in the newspaper "El País" and later included in one of my books of essays, I describe this fragmented (almost schizophrenic) reality, which transformed the Berliners from one side and the other into true strangers:

*A stay in Berlin, although brief, invites any foreigner to a fertile consideration of Space. Levelled by war, split in two by the irregular and obsessive line of an absurd wall, the ex capital of the Reich and of the most modest and interesting Weimar Republic has lost its center of gravity and, at least in the Western sector, offers open air views, forests, deserted and empty areas: an extravagant ecological paradise. From the car of the tram which crosses Kreuzberg I discover, astonished, the emergence of meadows and clear fields in areas previously dense and full of life and activity. Like Pompeii or Palmyra, the central neighborhoods of Tiergarten and Potsdamer Platz insidiously convert us into archeologists and scholars. But their ruins don't date back two millennia: as impossible as it seems, they don't even date back half a century. To ascend in the discovered elevator that leads to the viewing platform built beside an anti-atomic bunker with a map of old Berlin and to observe from there the panorama which encompasses the gray line of the wall and the two halves of the devastated city is not just a direct invitation to mental splitting and schizophrenia: it is a multi-coloured and dream-like spectacle which foreshortens, without need for hallucinogens, the prodigious historic unreality in which we live.*

In the suggestive text "A Berlin Metro Station" written by the novelist Uwe Johnson after leaving the GDR, the author evoked the ghostly journey by metro of an almost-empty convoy through the dead stations, from Friedrichstrasse in West Berlin to what was the frontier post of police control in the GDR. To cross this and to rise to the surface on the other side was to emerge onto a different planet; semi-empty streets, silent and hurried passersby, an Unter den Linden with neither strollers nor traffic, the hated bulk of the Palace of the Republic, half-demolished today but which, in my opinion, should be preserved as it is, as a reminder of that "aesthetic of loyalty" belonging to a State which visibly denied its supposed democratic and socialist nature. Günter Grass's extraordinary novel, "Too Far Afield", which I analyzed extensively in my book of essays "Contra las sagradas formas" (Against the Sacred Forms), portrays in a magisterial fashion the agony of said regime and the life of a populace resigned during decades to fear, greyness, and mediocrity, and later victim of a predatory capitalism and of the struggle of the Global Village and its motto of "Every man for himself".

A reading in two voices of Döblin and Grass would be instructive. To contrast the febrile, chaotic and creative Berlin of the 1920s around Alexanderplatz with the ugly expanse of cement and brick seen from the gigantic tower erected by the GDR as an emblem of its illusory continuity. Few times have I felt as in Berlin the vertigo inspired by the passage of time which changes, destroys, recreates, that everything is left in the cold by its passage and it leaves us all behind. Here, the urban stratification is not gradually added on as in Paris; it is undertaken with violence, with calculated brutality. On one side of the wall, the Kreuzberg of punks, hippies, and Turkish immigrants, with its extravagant paintings and graffiti to the glory of the Illuminating Path and the revolutionary fight of the masses in Peru; on the other, the resigned silence of a population deprived of incentives, without the least vital outlook.

In Kreuzberg, as in my Parisian haunts, I verified that you can enjoy the privilege of traveling without moving from where you are. If before we had to embark on a voyage, to take the train or the bus and go to the airport, now the remote country we seek comes to us and calls at our door. We can pass from Maghreb to Pakistan, from China to

Senegal, from Ecuador to India in the same sphere in which our everyday recreation and workdays take place.

What an extraordinary lesson for me and my compatriots enclosed until thirty years ago in watertight compartments far from all intercultural interaction! In order to be European, Barcelona and Madrid must Africanise, Arabicise, Asianise, and Latin Americanise themselves according to the examples of Paris and Berlin. Open themselves to the stimulating variety of languages, customs, rites, cosmogonies. New literary and artistic forms will thus sprout in these spaces open to diversity, like those which the Raval and Lavapiés embody today. If the past colonial expansion of England and France was the origin of the current seedbed of works being written in the languages of Dickens and of Balzac, there likewise exist excellent Turkish-German novelists such as my friend Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Asian authors who express themselves in Dutch and Moroccan and ones who do so in Catalan. This entire crucible of languages and varied human experiences germinate in the fluid space, in perpetual motion, that we call *cive*, metropolis, medina or city.

He who returns to Berlin after a few years' absence witnesses, astonished, the new and prodigious transformation of its old eastern half into the most dynamic and youngest city of old Europe. Compared with this laboratory of initiatives and ideas, the other capitals appear like city-museums in which the changes introduced from above for the supposed uncontrolled progress which overwhelms us all often do not improve but instead make uglier. The new Berlin – creative, heterogeneous and open to the dynamic of time – awaits the novelist who, from the destabilizing perspective of the change, will transform its topography into typography and, in the face of its history and its miseries, will celebrate the final victory of literature.