

The Distopic Vision of the City: António Lobo Antunes and Rubem Fonseca

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Le città invisibili sono un sogno che nasce dal cuore delle città
invisibili.
(Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*)

My contribution is a sort of synthesis of my Ph. D. thesis in progress *A Window with a View: Lisbon in the Fiction by António Lobo Antunes*, combined with the analysis of some aspects of Rubem Fonseca's work which was the main subject of my thesis for the undergraduate degree. The reason why I decided to put together these two authors, born in different continents, was the fact that both have chosen as their narrative scene their own big cities: Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro, offering of them a very particular perspective.

The Portuguese author António Lobo Antunes starts his career publishing two different titles at the same time, both strongly autobiographical: *Memória de Elefante* and *Os Cus de Judas*, in 1979, where he portrays a morally and economically decaying Lisbon, victim of a nearly half century long dictatorship that was also responsible for a general insensibility towards Lisbon's urban decadence, and victim of building speculation.

The Brazilian author Rubem Fonseca has also portrayed in his short story collection *Feliz Ano Novo*, published in 1975, a similar process of degradation that hurts his Rio de Janeiro. Fonseca, however, adds the social phenomenon of the generalized extreme violence, so characteristic of Brazilian

society in this turn of the century. Moreover, both authors, with a very bold and original style, denounce the deliberate hiding of the growing decline of their own countries where the responsibility for all these institutional lies must be searched for in their respective governments (Fonseca's book nevertheless, will be forbidden by the political censorship in 1976 and will be only republished ten years later).

“Lisbon...cidade morta em urnas de azulejos”

António Lobo Antunes, in *Memória de Elefante*, introduces his dystopic vision of Lisbon, describing a veteran doctor who returns home after 27th months in Angola front and sees the city from a taxi window. The streets and squares are full of widows, retired and blind people. These urban spaces are all alike an urn, in which people lives in a state of stagnation, and where all the symbols of a great past (the statues, the river and the sea) are silent observers of the decadence of the human being, in his impossibility to fight for his ideals of transformation. In this two passages the city (or the country) seems to be left an orphan, concentrating metaphorically, a general mourning:

a certificar-se rua a rua, no taxi, de que nada mudara na sua ausência, país a preto e branco de muros caiados e de viúvas de negro, de estátuas de regicidas a levantarem braços carbonários em praças habitadas, em doses equitativas, de reformados e de pombos, uns e outros esquecidos já da alegria de um voo? [...] Todas as estátuas apontavam o dedo na direção do mar, convidando à Índia ou a um suicídio discreto. (33)

Um cego que se deslocava adiante de si batia com a bengala no passeio no ruído de castanholas indecisas: cidade morta, pensou o médico, *cidade morta em urna de azulejos* a esperar sem esperança que não virá mais:

cegos, reformados e viúvas e o Salazar que se Deus quisser não expirou. (120-121)

The psychiatric protagonist also likes, in his free time, to drive his car through the historical centre where he sees the urban decadence and the poverty due to Fascism. The image of mould and humidity infiltrating the façades, is particularly relevant. In fact, in my opinion, this could be seen as a metaphor of the beginning of the sliding down that will drag away Fascist dictatorship.

Na Praça da Figueira, [...] D. João IV, herói problemático, fitava de órbitas ocas um renque de varandas, escritórios de representações representando o bolor, o tabaco frio e a humidade. Adivinhavam-se autoclismos que não funcionavam atrás de cada parede, inválidos do comércio em cada adolescente hirsuto, menopausas desesperadas nas mulheres-policías. [...] Imobilizou o automóvel [...] e desceu o vidro para cheirar a água lodosa onde homens e mulheres, enterrados até aos joelhos, enchiam de iscos latas ferrugentas. Os ceifeiros da vazante, disse-se ele, garças que o fascismo criou, aves pernaltas da fome e da miséria. (102-103)

In another example from his book *Os Cus de Judas*, we find the portrait of a provincial and mean Lisbon. Again, the doctor protagonist takes a taxi at the airport and sees the city from the car window:

A minha lembrança grandiosa de uma capital cintilante de agitação e de mistério copiada de John dos Passos, que alimentara fervorosamente durante um ano nos areais de Angola, encolhia-se envergonhada defronte de prédios de subúrbia onde um povo de terceiros-escriturários ressonava entre salvas de casquinha e ovais de croché.(104-105)

In this third example, instead, the character looks lost in his own hometown. Benfica, the suburb where he spent his childhood, has profoundly changed due to the phenomenon of urbanization and increase of the metropolis. In this way the narrator feels destitute of his anthropological references, as these new huge buildings have altered the social stability and turned the urban space more vulnerable:

O médico sentia uma imensa ternura pela Benfica da sua infância transformada em Póvoa de Santo Adrião por via da cupidez dos construtores, a ternura que se dedica a um amigo velho desfigurado por múltiplas cicatrizes e em cujo rosto se procuram em vão os traços cúmplices de outrora. Quando deitarem abaixo o prédio Pires, disse ele pensando no enorme e antigo edifício diante da casa dos pais, por que norte magnético me orientarei, eu que tão poucos pontos de referência conservo já e tanta dificuldade possuo em me fabricar novos? E imaginou-se à deriva na cidade, sem bússola, perdido num labirinto de travessas, porque o Estoril [where the doctor protagonist actually lives] permaneceria para sempre uma ilha estrangeira a que se achava incapaz de se adaptar, longe dos ruídos e dos cheiros da sua floresta natal. (157-158, my italic)

The urbanist Kevin Lynch in his classical book *The image of the city* explains the importance of the building as one of the main element that characterizes the city, and which the observer uses as a sign of identity: “they are frequently used as sign of identity and even structure, and they seem to be increasingly reliable, as an itinerary become more familiar [...]. A good image of the environment gives an important sense of emotional security” (quoted by Choay 396). Indeed, a characteristic place that is ‘readable’ offers not only reliability but turns the human experience more intense: “The need of recognizing and structure

what surround us, is so intense and has deep roots in the past, to give this image a wide practical and emotional importance for the man” (395).

Lisbon as a spider-web

This vision of the city of Lisbon in the late Seventies, with the loss of all possible references and where it is easy to get lost in those narrow streets that all look the same, is like one of the invisible cities (*Le città invisibili*) by Italo Calvino, namely Cecilia, where Marco Polo one day was walking “tra angoli di case tutte uguali: mi ero perso” (153) and a shepherd replies him “I luoghi si sono mescolati [...] Cecilia è dappertutto; qui una volta doveva esserci il Prato della Salvia Bassa. Le mie capre riconoscono le erbe dallo spartitraffico” (153).¹ It is Calvino again who concludes Marco Polo’s peregrination in the city of Berenice, predicting the unfair and ugly city “che germoglia in segreto nella segreta città giusta” (161).²

Lisbon as portrayed by Lobo Antunes looks like a spider-web without any path or itinerary and within which one wanders around in vain. The urban scene therefore reflects the character’s internal worries, his fears as if, after his experience in Africa, he is still not used to that anonymity and that outrageous environment.

The same negative vision of the city culminates in his book of chronicles, *Livro de Crónicas*, published almost 20 years after his first two books, in 1998. Here the author, like the genre suggests, offers us realistic pictures that focus his everyday life. In *Elogio do Suburbio*, for instance, we find again

¹ “amongst the corners of houses all alike: I got lost”; “Places have melted [...] Cecilia is everywhere: here once upon a time there must be a Meadow of Sage Short: my goats recognize the grass of the traffic island” (my translation).

² “that sprouts in secret in the secret fair city”. On Calvino and the city see: “Gli dèi della città”, *Una pietra sopra*, and Barengi, Mario, Canova Giovanni e Bruno Falchetto (Ed.) *La visione dell’invisibile*.

vulgar way, in purple and green tracksuits along with several golden necklaces around their necks and:

todos os automóveis do parque são Seat Ibiza, todos têm mantas alentejanas nos bancos, todos apresentam um autocolante no vidro que diz Não me siga Que eu Ando Perdido, todos possuem uma rodela Vida Curta no guarda-lamas direito e uma rodela Vida Longa no guarda-lamas esquerdo, de todos os espelhos retrovisores se pendura o mesmo boneco de peluche [...] todos trouxeram os sogros e o filho, todos devem habitar em Alterca e todos circulam a tarde inteira no Centro de forma idêntica à nossa. (59)

And this is the place where everybody signs contracts to buy furniture and domestic appliances by instalments, in a surreal atmosphere. In the end, the main character goes back home with a family which is not the original one, and which will change again next Sunday, even if he strongly identifies with one of these “mistaken” families. Here we can find a portrait of a Lisbon which loses its peculiar monumental characteristics, its sentimental cartography, its real face, to reach the paramount of the depersonalisation and disorientation. Where people meet each other, are confused with each other and get lost – not in labyrinth of the city any more – but strangely enough in a Shopping Centre, where the promenade has become the ultimate fashion.

Fredric Jameson in the chapter “Postmodernism and the City”, in his famous essay *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, analyses the transformation of the new contemporary architectonic space. The human subjects who access this new space, which Jameson calls hyperspace: “Would not be capable of perceiving it correctly or of harmonizing with it in, so far as they still have to develop and expand their own sensory perceptions and their own bodies in new dimensions which are as yet unimaginable and maybe, in

the final analysis, impossible”(75). This new space should be analyzed and interpreted, then, through what he calls cognitive *cartography or Mapping* (96) which should be able to offer, once again, a sense of place and the building or rebuilding of an articulated set of elements which may be conserved in memory and around which the individual may design or redesign itineraries offered by precise coordinates, as it happened in past.

It is Kevin Lynch again, who tells us that the alienated city is above all a space in which the ordinary man is not capable of drawing a mental map, nor of establishing his own position, nor of picturing the urban totality which he is in. The vision of the fragmented and alienating city described by Lynch and then by Jane Jacobs in the Sixties, in her famous essay *Life and Death of the Great American Cities*, can also be found in the Rio de Janeiro of the Seventies.

Rio de Janeiro.. *misturando no mesmo coquetel instinto e asfalto*

In the period that spans the Sixties and the Seventies in Brazil, the urban conglomerates, like many others in Latin America, have grown behind measure, creating a slow profound transformation of all spaces and ways of life, with uncontrolled growth and without a single plan for a rational development of the *favelas*, both the ones near or inside downtown areas and the ones in suburban areas, with the inevitable increase in number of emarginated people, violence and the deterioration of the quality of life. Rubem Fonseca will be the most representative voice of this big changing; in the short-story collection *Feliz Ano Novo*, in the story *Intestino Grosso*, which portrays an interview with a journalist and a character identified with the author himself, we can read about his lacerated vision of his town. He writes:

Eu nada tenho a ver com Guimarães Rosa, estou escrevendo sobre pessoas empilhadas na cidade enquanto os tecnocratas afiam o arame farpado [...].

Passamos anos e anos preocupados com o que alguns cientistas cretinos ingleses e alemães (Humboldt?) disseram sobre a impossibilidade de se criar uma civilização abaixo do Equador e decidimos arregaçar as mangas [...] e construimos São Paulo, Santo André, São Bernardo e São Caetano, as nossas Manchesteres tropicais com suas sementes mortíferas. (468)

Eles queriam que eu escrevesse igual ao Machado de Assis, e eu não queria e não sabia [...]. Eles queriam os neguinhos do pastoeiro, os guaranis, os sertões da vida. Eu morava num edifício de apartamentos no centro da cidade e da janela do meu quarto via anúncios coloridos em gás néon e ouvia barulho de motores de automóveis. (470)

The American critic Elisabeth Lowe writes about the urban scene elevated to a privileged observatory by Fonseca: “The city is a central metaphor and dynamic force in Fonseca’s fiction; and into the microcosm of Brazilian city he projects an apocalyptic vision of the human condition, recreating the myth of the Fall.[...] He adopts an aggressive attitude towards the city experience, destructing and then restructuring traditional narrative technique in a manner expressive of the dynamics of the big city. In this urban setting his characters, functioning both as symbols and as anti-heroes, confront each other from the poles of an alienated, technocratic society” (18-19).

Feliz Ano Novo portrays, as in his previous works, marginalized underworld of Rio’s Zona Sul, and the problems that emerge are the extreme violence, sexuality in its all possible forms, including the most perverse ones, general schizophrenia and a huge mass of excluded men and women. As Alçada Baptista reflects: “A grande metrópole consumista não consegue funcionar sem un altíssimo grau de desperdício: marginais e lixo vão sendo empurrados para os lados da cidade e, com os ratos, os marginais disputam os sobejos do

consume”(14). The anti-heroes that crowded the pages of this collection are symbol-characters, both of the poorest social class, the “underdogs”, and of the ones from the most privileged class, Rio’s “noble and fine” social environment.

One year after the release of *Feliz Ano Novo*, when the 4th edition of the book was in print, the book was forbidden, censored, and accused of attempting against morality and decency by the former Minister of Justice Armando Falcão, during General Geisel’s presidency of the Country (1974-1979). Rubem Fonseca would sue the Government in 1977, and only in 1986 will the Brazilian Supreme Court decide in his favor and the publication of the book will be authorized again. Rubem Fonseca presents the Brazilian city of Rio, in the mid Seventies, with the same profile that would be its hallmark in succeeding years, and until the present days. In Malcom Silverman’s words, the author is gifted with a particular style with an “aspreza contínua com que pinta o drama (tragédia?) urbano [...], a acidez satírica que lhe provoca o seu mundo torturado” (262), very different from all other Brazilian writers from that period. Indeed, even if the phenomenon of violence is also present in the works of these other writers, none of them would merit the qualification of “brutalist” that critic Alfredo Bosi has created specially to give a synthetic conceptualization of this thematic and stylistic universe, which find its form and motivation in the explosion of “wild capitalism” in a Third World country. In the agony of all values caused by technology inside a poor society, “misturando no mesmo coquetel instinto e asfalto, objetos plásticos e expressões de uma libido sem saídas para um convívio de afeto e projeto”(18), in other words, in the barbaric crowded streets, in the matter-of-fact brutalized human beings, destroyed by a system they can not decipher and that is eager to devour them.

Both authors present a disenchanting and sceptical vision of the contemporary city and society in general, in which it seems impossible to maintain stable emotional relationships,

and we could add, we even get the feeling that a background of misogynist behaviour is also present in both books and in their entire literary work, as we can perceive from the attitude and words of their characters. Characters that they choose amongst the low middle class society, of the first generation, who chose “to have” instead of “to be”, with a poor inner life, like the book by Cerami, *Un borghese piccolo piccolo*, for my Italian colleagues at this congress, for instance, or the same low middle class portrait by surrealist poets Alexandre O’Neill and Mário Cesariny.

I would like to underline that this is a work still in progress but I’m also convinced that a real understanding of the essence of the literary motivations present in the work of these two writers will also reflect the understanding of a great deal of the contradictions and the general and so widespread discontent of the contemporary man.

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