
Stadsportretten / City Portraits

JLIC – Issue 4 (2019)



Journal for Literary &
Intermedial Crossings

Special issue edited by:
Daniel Acke, Elisabeth Bekers, Diana Castilleja
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

JLIC is the journal of the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (CLIC)
Vrije Universiteit Brussel



Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings

ISSN: 2506-8709

Journal homepage: <https://clic.research.vub.be/journal>

 Submit your article to JLIC

Megacity Portraits and Perspectives: Writing Mexico City from Below

Liesbeth François – KU Leuven

Issue: 4

Published: Autumn 2019

To link this article: <https://clic.research.vub.be/volume-4-herfst-automne-fall-2019-stadsportretten-city-portraits>

To cite this article: François, Liesbeth. "Megacity Portraits and Perspectives: Writing Mexico City from Below." *Stadsportretten/City Portraits*, special issue of *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings*, vol., 4, 2019, pp. e1-23.



BY-NC 4.0 DEED: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license.

Megacity Portraits and Perspectives: Writing Mexico City from Below

Liesbeth FRANÇOIS

KU Leuven

What do we look for in a portrait? In general, we would expect it to offer an in-depth but concise description of a person: what distinguishes him/her from other people, and which characteristics can be selected to create the most complete image of his/her appearance and personality? The act of portraying thus requires a representative and global image of its object, and the same logic applies when we broaden its scope to include not only human beings, but also objects and landscapes. In the case of city portraits, this implies a selection of elements that are able to represent the whole urban environment, while preserving its distinctiveness in comparison with other cities. When we refer to the literary depiction of contemporary megacities such as Mexico City, however, these two conditions are precisely the ones that are met with most difficulties. On the one hand, the aspiration to representativeness collides with the imaginaries of the Mexican capital as an irrepresentable, monstrous, excessive and chaotic city that have dominated literary depictions in the last three decades. As Carlos Monsiváis, one of the most important public intellectuals of the second half of the past century, has stated in 1994, Mexico City inhabitants adopt a “post-apocalyptic” mentality: the demographic explosion that has taken place in the capital since the 1960s (Davis) and the failure for urban infrastructure and policies to keep up with this growth, has strongly consolidated the idea that “the worst has already happened” (Monsiváis 21),¹ and that one might actually wonder whether what is left can still be called a city. Whereas authors of the Boom period in Latin American literature (roughly 1950-1980) such as Carlos Fuentes still ventured into encompassing

¹ Unless signaled otherwise, all translations from the Spanish in this article are mine.

descriptions that tried to make sense of the urban environment as a whole—see, for instance, the multitude of characters, places and narrative threads in his *La región más transparente* [*The Most Transparent Region*], published in 1958—authors whose major publications have appeared from the 90s onwards have typically accepted or even thematized the impossibility of these totalizing projects and of the very ideal of the organized *polis*, which, as Ángel Rama (35-54) famously argued, strongly shaped the outline and form of Latin American cities. One particularly illustrative example of this tendency is the large strand of apocalyptic narratives that have chosen Mexico City as their setting during the last decade of the 20th century (see López-Lozano). On the other hand, in reference to the city’s distinctiveness or its “identity”, the increasing prominence of global companies and other effects of economically-inspired decision-making in the urban landscape are perceived by several authors and intellectuals as a threat to the specificity of the capital, which risks to be subjected to the homogenizing impact of accelerated modernization processes (Gallo). This way, the literary portrait seems to reach its limits when confronted with the strongly engrained idea of an increasingly irrepresentable and generic city.

In this article, however, I aim to analyze how some contemporary Mexican authors deal with these problems by exploring the city from another perspective: by observing it not from an aerial, panoramic viewpoint—which would appear as a logical choice when one tries to sketch an overview of a city—but from below. I will argue that, through the exploration of or reference to subterranean city spaces, they leave aside the paralyzing stereotype of irrepresentability, and, instead, search for ways to discover aspects that shed light on the urban environment as a whole, on the one hand, and to recover the dimension of human experience in city spaces that seem sterile or even oppressive, on the other hand. For this purpose, I have selected three examples: the novel *El huésped* by Guadalupe Nettel, the short story “El esquinista” by Laia Jufresa, and the collection of essays *Papeles falsos* by Valeria Luiselli. As

we will see, and in spite of their belonging to three different genres, a striking resemblance between these texts is the way in which subterranean spaces not only reveal what can be called the “hidden face” of the surface city, but also offer a compensation for what this surface city is described to be suppressing or lacking in “personality”. They are, of course, not the first ones in turning their attention to the Mexican capital’s subsoil: several twentieth-century writers and intellectuals such as Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, and José Emilio Pacheco, to name just a few, have used the underground as a powerful metaphor to symbolize the superposition of prehispanic and Hispanic cultures, as well as of different historical periods, in Mexico.² In the texts that will be studied in this article, however, attention is displaced from the archeological and cultural-historical perspective to the material form and tangible effects of subterranean spaces. What is more, characters in all three cases are led to discover this alternative dimension through the mediating function of other, non-literary channels: respectively, braille signs in *El huésped*, a fictitious form of visual arts in “El esquinista”, and architecture in *Papeles falsos*. This way, the works here analyzed do not only search to overcome the difficulties involved in portraying the Mexican capital, but they also launch a metaliterary reflection on the role literature and other forms of medialities can play in this task.

The subterranean perspective adopted by the authors here studied connects with a broader body of scholarly work that has highlighted the importance and the potential of a focus on the underground. Firstly, several scholars have identified a “horizontal bias” (Hewitt & Graham) in the field of urban (cultural) studies, to which the consideration of vertically situated spaces can offer a useful correction. As Stephen Graham states in his pioneering book *Vertical*, dedicated exclusively to this topic,

[s]truggles over the right to the city, to living space, to resources, to security, to privacy, to mobility, to food and water, to justice [...] are increasingly shaped

² See, for instance, Paz’s *Posdata* (1970), Fuentes’s “Chac Mool” (1954) and “Gente de razón” (1988), and José Emilio Pacheco’s “La fiesta brava” and “Tenga para que se entretenga”, both included in *El principio del placer* (1972).

across vertical as well as horizontal geographies of power. [...] Flat perspectives seen from the ‘God’s eye’ view of the cartographer or satellite imager inevitably fail to support understanding of such three-dimensional geographies. (n. pag.)

In this context, and through an ecocritical perspective, Mark Anderson has argued that the literary depiction of subterranean spaces can generate a “volumetric perspective”: a viewpoint that reemphasizes volume against the grain of the two-dimensional cartographic abstractions through which city space is commonly imagined, represented and studied. Although the connection between the choice of underground settings and the adoption of a “volumetric perspective” is not necessary nor automatic, the works here analyzed do elaborate their verticalized spatial structures in this sense. Secondly, the underground is, traditionally, a source of cultural imaginaries in several major world cities, where both its symbolic heritage and its conquest through processes of modernization are fundamental for the understanding of urban life (Pike). In the case of Mexico City, these imaginaries are particularly strong and evocative, but comparative or systematic studies on this topic are lacking. Prone to earthquakes, instable, sinking, dried-up, resulting from a violent superposition of cultures, the subsoil represents a major source of fear and fascination in the Mexican capital. The earthquake of 1985—the most destructive in its history, with a death toll that ranges anywhere between 4.000 and 40.000 victims (Trujillo 51)—is one of the reasons why the importance and the persistence of underground imagination in contemporary Mexico City can be hardly overestimated. Its literary resonances tapped into a complex network of associations, in which natural, historical and social processes converge. These include not only the natural conditions of the Mesoamerican plateau and the underground interventions through which subsequent rulers constructed and transformed the city, but also multiple metaphorical connotations, such as the idea that pre-Hispanic cultures constitute the underground of modern Mexico (see Bonfil), the religious resonances of the Aztec and Catholic underworlds (see Cooper), or the control of natural resources as a metaphor for political power throughout the history of the city (see

Krieger, Vitz). This way, “going underground” in Mexico City is an action that is, from its start, laden with cultural and symbolic connotations that are perceived to be buried under the surface perspective on the city.

The examination of and opposition to the horizontal cartographic abstractions mentioned by Graham and Anderson is a central concern for several critical spatial theories of the second half of the twentieth century, but it is particularly evocative of the ideas elaborated by the French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his seminal *La production de l'espace* (1974). According to Lefebvre, “abstract space”, the space produced by capitalist societies, favors “conceived space”—the domain of, precisely, cartographic and abstract projections—over “lived space”—that dimension of space which is directly lived through symbols and bodily experience. Spatial experience is thus sterilized by mental reductions that are instrumental to the exercise of control: “[In abstract space], the [conceived space], in thrall to both knowledge and power, leaves only the narrowest leeway to [lived space], which [is] limited to works, images and memories whose content, whether sensory, sensual or sexual, is so far displaced that it barely achieves symbolic force” (50). One of the features of this abstract space is its tendency to reduce space to its geometric measures and corresponding economical value, and in this process, as Lefebvre remarks, “[v]erticality, and the independence of volumes with respect to the original land and its peculiarities are, precisely, produced [...] At the same time—literally—volumes are treated as surfaces, as a heap of ‘plans’, without any account being taken of time” (Lefebvre 337). In capitalist societies, according to Lefebvre, the neglect of volume leads to a distancing with respect to the actual geographical and temporal features of space—which are, of course, the main conditions for human experience. In this sense, it is one of the strategies through which space is exclusively conceptualized in terms of its exchange value, thereby suppressing the experience of “lived space”. The works analyzed in this article address precisely this tension: in a city that does not correspond intuitively to the ordered,

regulated and controlled urban environments Lefebvre mentions as examples of this alienation, they nevertheless reveal the workings of “abstract space” as a repressive mindset, and delve into the underground in order to search traces of “lived space”. The recuperation of volume and lived experience is thus realized in these texts through one fundamental condition: the prior exposure of the “flattening forces” of “abstract space” within the urban environment.

In these processes, the metaliterary explorations of the texts here analyzed address the function of literature itself. More specifically, all three authors implicitly raise the question as to how to break the complicity of language as a rational and ordered semiotic system in itself with the workings of abstract space, hereby exploring the disruptive potential of literary discourse. This is accomplished through the incorporation of other forms of “medialities”, which, in particular, emphasize the materiality of human experience and search ways to foreground it within literature. I use Jørgen Bruhn’s broad concept of “medialities” as “specified clusters of communicative forms” (17) that, as defined by Bohn, Müller and Ruppert, “mediates for and between humans a (meaningful) sign (or combination of signs) with the aid of suitable transmitters across temporal and/or spatial distances” (cited in Bruhn 17). Bruhn furthermore considers, following Marie-Laure Ryan, that “media are not hollow conduits for the transmission of messages but material supports of information whose materiality, precisely, ‘matters’ for the type of meanings that can be encoded” (Ryan, cited in Bruhn 1–2). This is particularly true for the texts of these Mexican authors: the medium, and particularly its material form, becomes a very important part of the message. In all three cases, the incorporation of other medialities points to the will to overcome the limitations of abstraction through a consideration of more concrete and tangible features of experience, although the degree to which these other medialities themselves are capable of doing so, varies.

Blindness in the Metro: *El huésped* by Guadalupe Nettel

My first case study is *El huésped* by Guadalupe Nettel, published in 2006. The work of Nettel, born in 1973 in Mexico City and newly residing there after large periods of living in France and other countries, consists of several novels and short stories that bear witness to the author's interest in marginal beings and conditions. *El huésped* (translated as *The Guest*, in the most common use of the term, or *The Host*, as a biological entity inhabited by a parasite—see Sinno), her first novel, tells the struggle of a young woman, Ana, with a strange being which she thinks she is possessed by and which she calls “La Cosa” (“The Thing”). While observing the increasing presence of La Cosa inside her, Ana ventures into the streets of Mexico City, and, particularly into the subway (or Metro, as it is called by the city dwellers). The internal conflict, although not visible to others, takes up the major part of the novel: Ana blames her parasite for sudden anger attacks and other actions that she does not recall afterwards, while La Cosa denies responsibility for them—including the terminal illness and death of her brother Diego. She discovers that La Cosa is blind, and decides to take up a position as a reader at an institute for blind people in order to prepare herself for the final takeover which, she fears, is nearby. This way, she meets El Cacho, a lame tramp. He introduces her to a group of beggars who chose to live in the Metro, because they see it as a space that allows for a freer and more democratic form of community. She participates in a clandestine protest action of the organization against the government, during which she and Marisol, El Cacho's girlfriend, are discovered and the latter is caught. Burdened with guilt when she learns that Marisol has been killed after her arrest, Ana goes to see El Cacho at his home address, where she realizes the hypocrisy of his revolutionary stances upon discovering that he actually lives in a rather nice apartment. Nevertheless, a sexual encounter occurs between them, which, in turn, prefigures the reconciliation between Ana and her alter ego, and leads to her final decision to live in the Metro, suggested by the last pages of the novel.

As can be seen already in this description, the Metro receives a major role in *El huésped*, and the way in which the protagonist experiences Mexico City is significantly altered by her growing fascination for this space.³ The initial relationship between Ana and the city is highly molded by her social background—upper middle class—and by her personality, which can be described as highly asocial (see Pitois-Pallares 281-282). Her perception of space stresses physical or social boundaries and produces, as a result, a strongly divisive image of the city. For instance, she reacts like a fury when she perceives her personal space to be invaded by the blind residents of the institute, who want to pay her a visit while she is ill. The place that most clearly incarnates this conception is the institute itself, where the movements of the “interns” are strictly controlled: their access to the different parts of the building is limited by their timetable and by several other prohibitions, as certain areas are reserved for teachers and other staff only. Ana’s attitude, however, changes dramatically through her journeys in the Metro. While it is at first clear that, normally—and again, because of a certain disdain—she does not take the subway, the platforms, wagons and corridors introduce her to a new perspective on space: as a medium that can be shared instead of divided, and where a freer experience is possible. Several characters belonging to the group, such as the hermit-like Madero and the ex-resident Lorenzo, starkly contrast the life at the institute with the freedom and independence of the blind members of the underground organization. Through the contacts with the group, Ana also gradually leaves behind her normative vision on space. A clear example is the following description of her feelings while she is participating in the preparation of the protest action: “En ese ambiente contenido, una mezcla de ceremonia sectaria y carnaval, encontré algo que no había experimentado en años: fraternidad en el sentido más cotidiano; tropezarse con los demás; sentir sus cuerpos cerca [In that enclosed atmosphere, a mix of sectarian ceremony and carnival, I found something that I had not experienced in several years: fraternity in its most

³ Some of the ideas used in the analysis of *El huésped* have been published in previous form in François 2018.

everyday sense; bumping into the others; feeling their bodies close to me]” (144). This way, in one of the hidden subterranean spaces of the subway system, a sense of community that clearly contrasts with the aboveground perspective, is activated.

A fundamental condition for this transition is sensory experience, and, in particular, the conflict between visual and tactile perception. As can be seen in the aforementioned citation from *La production de l'espace*, Lefebvre identifies abstract space with the predominance of the visual, which displaces and suppresses the corporal and sensory dimension that corresponds to “lived space”. *El huésped* explores this tension both on the internal level of the struggle between Ana and her “guest” and on the level of space itself. In particular, the changes in her perspective are catalyzed by the transition of alphabetic writing to braille: when she starts to learn the signs, she discovers that the strange mark left on her brother’s body and that she interprets as La Cosa’s signature, is in fact her own name in braille, but mirrored. From this point onwards, the process of acceptance of her alter ego develops with considerably more ease (see Ferrero Cárdenas 61). She gradually becomes more uncomfortable with her position as a reader in the institute, which sets her apart from her blind public, and the shift from visual to tactile messages—highlighted, for instance, when El Cacho draws her attention to the indications in braille in the Metro—leads her to value her other senses. This is why, in complete contrast with the distant, hostile view of the city as a place to maintain divisions, she visits, towards the end of the novel, the Metro with the explicit intention of “sentir los cuerpos húmedos y tibios de la gente [sensing the humid and tepid bodies of the people]” (188). While Ana previously goes through large difficulties to establish relationships with people, she discovers touch instead of sight as a means of communication. This way, the novel explores braille as an intermedial presence that manages to expand the reach of literary discourse in its traditional form and draw explicit attention to the sensorial density of spatial experience.

As a consequence, Ana's previous view on the city is called into question. After Marisol's death, she sees the spaces that up until that moment had always appeared as peaceful and familiar from a different light. This way, the alternative experiences of space lived by Ana in the Metro reveal the workings of the city as a space where inhabitants are controlled through their spatial distribution by powers that are not directly visible to the eye. The reversal of perspectives on the city is also closely linked to the role reversal of Ana's two personalities. While "La Cosa" is depicted from the start as an ominous presence, and this impression is largely maintained throughout the story, the final scene is one of conciliation, where Ana is relieved to let go of her "normal" personality, which can be seen as, in reality, more conflictive than "La Cosa". *El huésped*, in this sense, shows how, when we immerse ourselves in spaces and thoughts that appear as dark and repulsive, we may actually discover the dark and repulsive side of what we have always considered as normal. As the hypocrisy of El Cacho and the fact that belonging to the group depends on other rules and exclusions shows, however, the reversal of perspectives is not straightforward. The "lived space" of the Metro and the underground community is not utopian, but is presented in all its ambiguity, as a basis for both liberation and new oppressive or harmful tendencies. *El huésped* marks the importance of going against the grain of the divisive and sterile vision of "abstract space", but it can also be read as a critique of Lefebvre's own overly positive evaluation of "lived space"—see, for instance, his optimistic and rather unfortunate use of *favelas* as examples of how a more flexible conception of space can emerge (373-374). The novel shows how the recuperation of embodied experience of space is fundamental, but not unilaterally benign. As in the case of a person's portrait, it goes beyond the mere physical appearance in order to create an idea of personality, but it depicts that personality in all its moral diversity.

Verticalized Geographies And "Cornerism": Laia Jufresa's "El Esquinista"

The same process that is realized through the exploration of the underground in *El huésped* on a social level, can be noted in the second example, but in an aesthetic sense. “El esquinista” was written by Mexican author Laia Jufresa (1983) and published in her homonymous short story collection in 2014. Jufresa has, up until now, published this volume, and a novel, *Umami*, which came out in 2015. She has been widely recognized as a promising talent—see, for instance, the fact that her novel has been translated into several languages and was awarded with the PEN Translates Award in 2017. The short story takes place in a futurist version of Mexico City, where people live in thousand-storey housing blocks and the ground level of the city has been closed off because of its severe pollution. The protagonist, Amauro Montiel, is a famous “esquinista” or “cornerist”: an artist who draws figures in the air with floating pigments, on the basis of shapes he recognizes below him in the urban landscape. However, he has become increasingly critical of this discipline, and the artistic dogmas sustained by his colleagues. As he feels he is getting closer to death, he decides to bribe several officers in order to pay a visit to the ground level. It is from this place that his story is told, and, as he is running out of oxygen, it functions as his final letter or even, so to speak, as his epitaph.

From the start, the opposition between ways of experiencing space in the upper city and in the subsoil is suggested. Amauro tells how he envies his older sister because she has been able to visit the ground level before access to it was prohibited:

Crecí sospechando que el privilegio de haber tocado el suelo, olido la tierra, visto el mar, designaba a mi hermana como alguien irrevocablemente superior a mí. Ella, en cambio, nunca le dio mucha importancia y al irse de casa me regaló su frasco de arena, sellado con una etiqueta militar que pone DESINFECTADO [I grew up assuming that the privilege of having touched the ground, smelled the earth, seen the sea made my sister a superior being. She, on the other hand, never lent it much importance, and when she left home she gave me her jar, which was sealed with a military stamp that read: DISINFECTED]⁴ (105).

⁴ For the English version of the citations from “El esquinista”, I rely on the translation by Sophie Hughes.

The citation is highly enlightening with respect to the opposition between the world above and the world below. The terms used to describe the experience below all point insistently to sensory experience—touch, smell, sight; this contrasts sharply with the clinical and military control suggested by the sealed bottle with the stamp. However polluted the underground of the aerial city—which once was the ground level of the previous urban environment—may be, something essential appears to be lost when access to it is blocked.

As an artist, Amauro can use the underground seen from above as a source of inspiration for his works of “cornerism”, the discipline that constitutes the (fictitious) intermedial presence in this case. Even if he does believe in the power of this artform, however, it becomes clear throughout the story that he stumbles upon several impediments to exercise his talent freely. He laments the straitjacket of the schools of cornerism, and the blockage he has experienced because of the commercialization of his art. Most importantly, his fierce desire to explore the ground level of the city points to a certain insufficiency he perceives in the practice of cornerism: the distance that is always imposed between the source of inspiration, the work of art, and the observer. Cornerist works float in the air: they are untouchable, ephemeral, and necessarily disconnected from the world below. They reduce the ground level of the megalopolis to mere shapes and lines. In so doing, they provide the possibility for aesthetic experience, but an aesthetic experience that is reduced to the purely formal and visible—in spite of Montiel’s insistence on “cornerism” as a scenic form. “Cornerism” does not reconnect its artists or its public with a tangible dimension, but, on the contrary, contributes to the distancing of experience through the other senses by interposing itself between the aerial viewpoint and the long-lost ground level, thereby complicating the recuperation of “lived space” in the futuristic city. It is important to note, indeed, that Lefebvre does not equate art with “lived space”, but identifies “a certain type of artist with a scientific bent” (38) as participant and creator of “conceived space”, while insisting that “lived space” is the domain

of other artists—for instance, those who only aim to describe, not transform (39). “Cornerism” can thus be identified as the preferred artform of those creators “with a scientific bent”.

This conception of cornerism, in turn, very much recalls the formalist tendency in modernist art identified by Martin Jay in *Force Fields. Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (1993), linked to an autonomist, abstract and mostly visual perspective (61-73). According to Jay, this tendency is opposed to the *informe* that is the hallmark of several avant-garde artists of the first half of the twentieth century,⁵ and which refers to an active destruction of form as a way to undo social and/or rational restrictions on the imagination and aesthetic pleasure in general. In this sense, the presence of cornerism as another instance of medialities plays the opposite role as in *El huésped*: this fictitious art distances its beholder from their object, and the effect of its formalist perspective is a disembodied and abstract experience of space. Above, in the clinical and hypertechnological city, “cornerism” does not counter these features, but, on the contrary, intensifies them. Yet, there is a way in which it can move closer to the idea of the *informe*: through its ephemerality. “El esquinista” indicates how Montiel tries to escape the limiting influence of fixed form: “Tenemos que ser firmes en esto: el esquinismo debe dejar de ser tratado como un arte puramente visual cuando es mucho más un acto escénico. Irrepetible. Longevo, sí, pero efímero. [We have to be firm on this matter: Cornerism must not be treated as a purely visual art form, when it is more a scenic act. Unrepeatable. Lasting, yes, but ephemeral.]” (115). This quote illustrates how the perishability of form is an essential condition for Montiel to keep creating works of art. As “El esquinista” shows, the recuperation of full experience starts with the destruction of form—in this context, it is no coincidence either that Lîla, in whom Montiel sees the most talented cornerist ever, never actually draws. In this sense, cornerism doubly functions as the reason why Amauro

⁵ Jay takes the concept of the “*informe*” from Georges Bataille and extends its application in order to characterize a broader tendency in the twentieth-century avant-garde.

understands the necessity of recuperating the materiality and corporal experience of space that seems irremediably lost in his current environment: not only does this artform foreground the abstract character of urban experience in the upper city, but it also suggests the possibility of destruction and the creation of an *informe* as an aesthetic option.

This is, indeed, why the protagonist decides to go down to the ground level in order to die while fulfilling his most arduous wish: touching the earth and experiencing the beauty of the city from below. Sensory experience is put forward in the present of his narration:

Yo bajé para enterrarme. Los cerebralistas del futuro quizá llamen a esto ‘mi último gesto’. Lástima por aquellos incapaces de imaginar la alegría de las horas que me esperan: las uñas negras, el abrazo de la arcilla, el peso en el pecho, la posición fetal [I came down for a proper burial. One day, the intellectual types will call it my ‘last desperate gesture.’ A shame for those who will never be able to picture the ecstasy of these hours that await me: my blackened nails, the embrace of the clay, the weight on my chest, the fetal position]. (119)

This way, the body acquires the full presence it lacked in the earlier descriptions of cornerism, even if this also means that it will die soon. The destruction of formal limitations—both aesthetic and material, as the difficulties to reach the subsoil illustrate—requires, in this case, a sacrifice of life itself. This way, the ephemerality highlighted by Montiel is taken to its last consequences. Through this final descent, an *informe* is projected, in which the body will eventually merge into the chaotic and unstructured matter of the earth. And once again, the journey through the subterranean strata of the city reveals the need for a “lived space” in opposition to a space where experience is limited and controlled by abstraction. Jufresa, through her invention of this artform, confronts two aspects of the aesthetic in the urban environment—the beautiful, in its current meaning, and the sensory, in its, broader, historical acceptance (see Eagleton) —and problematizes their separation.

The City As Language: *Papeles Falsos* By Valeria Luiselli

In the third case, architecture and geography are the medial supports that help linguistic discourse acquire a more tangible character. *Papeles falsos* (literally “False Papers”, but translated as *Sidewalks*), a collection of essays, is the first book by Valeria Luiselli (1983), and was published in 2010. Luiselli, although she currently lives in New York after residing in several other cities of the world, writes mostly in Spanish. Her work has widely engaged with the theme of the city and its aesthetic representation—for instance through her novel *Los ingravidos* (2011, translated as *Faces in the Crowd*), in which she chooses Mexican poet Gilberto Owen and the New York of the 1920s as protagonists, and *Historia de mis dientes* [*History of My Teeth*] (2013), which features walks, maps and pictures of several quarters of the Mexican capital.⁶ *Papeles falsos* collects several essays on cities around the world, but it focuses on Mexico City in particular. It can be conceived of as one large urban exploration, as it structurally mirrors walks and routes along the streets and buildings of the city through the essay’s titles and subtitles (in “Dos calles y una banqueta [Two Streets and a Sidewalk]”, for instance, the subtitles correspond to the streets she traverses during a bicycle ride). In her poetic-essayistic approach to the Mexican capital, Luiselli does not only describe the urban landscape, but she also elaborates a thorough reflection on the best way to discover it: literally, as she argues that the *flâneur* has become an impossible figure in the present-day megacity and explores ways to replace him, but also metaphorically, through her loosely associated but suggestive ideas on the acquisition and use of language.

It is at this point where the urban environment described by the essayist starts to supersede the status of mere thematic content, and becomes the support for reflection on literature’s mediating function in its appreciation. Not only does the structure of the essays mimic urban explorations, but Luiselli explores the well-known metaphor used by Wittgenstein

⁶ Her more recent work has, to a certain extent, moved this perspective to the background: *Los niños perdidos* (2016) and *Lost Children Archive* (2019) focus on the stories of unaccompanied minors from Central America who try to reach the United States.

of language as an organized city in the context of the Mexican capital and its concrete material reality. In “Paraíso en obras” [“Paradise under construction”], she compares the destruction brought about by both decadence and natural disasters such as earthquakes—to which Mexico City, as we have seen before, is especially prone—to a certain deterioration of language. She notes that “[v]amos dejando pedazos de piel muerta sobre la banqueta, palabras muertas sobre la mesa; olvidamos calles y oraciones repasadas con tinta. Las ciudades, como nuestros cuerpos, como el lenguaje, están en obra de destrucción [we are leaving shreds of dead skin on the sidewalk, dead words on the table; we forget streets and sentences that have been highlighted with ink. The cities, like our bodies, like language, are in the process of destruction]” (67). This way, as Luiselli suggests, we come ever closer to a point where we will completely forget the meaning of words and, ultimately, to silence. The only sound that will be heard will be the echo of the earthquake, which reminds the urban landscape of its constitutive fragility: “aquí, el lenguaje y la ciudad son el eco perpetuo de un temblor [here, language and the city are the perpetual echo of a [temblor]” (70). Yet again, the rational structure of the city—which is, in this case, also the rational structure of language—is undermined from below: Mexico City’s unstable underground complicates the mental categories of order and harmony on which the Latin American city is built, by showing their precariousness.

Nevertheless, as the “text speaker” —the equivalent of the narrator in a narrative text (Bretz 23) —continues,

esta amenaza constante de temblor es lo único que nos queda: sólo un escenario así—paisaje de escombros sobre escombros—compele a salir a buscar las últimas cosas; sólo así se vuelve necesario excavar en el lenguaje, indispensable encontrar la palabra exacta [this constant menace of tremor is the only thing with which we are left: only a stage like that—a landscape of rubble upon rubble—compels us to look for the last things; only that way it becomes necessary to excavate in language, indispensable to find the exact word]. (67)

This way, *Papeles falsos* makes clear that in the fact that the city and language are constantly undermined, lies precisely their redemption, their potential for being opened up—literally and metaphorically—and creatively rethought. A similar idea is elaborated in the essay “Relingos”, which refers to the concept of “terrain vague” elaborated by Ignacio Solá-Morales to designate those spaces of which the function has been lost or is unclear. As Luiselli’s ideas on “relingos” show, empty spaces, or spaces that somehow escape from the otherwise “rational” and planned fabric of the city, can be fundamental for the reactivation of urban experience: in the examples provided by the author, these apparently useless volumes stir the imagination. And, returning to the city-language metaphor, the tension with the common, functionally oriented language is what makes this emptiness productive: “Escribir: taladrar paredes, romper ventanas, dinamitar edificios. Excavaciones profundas para encontrar—¿encontrar qué?—, no encontrar nada. / Escritor es el que distribuye silencios y vacíos. / Escribir: hacerle hueco a la lectura. / Escribir: hacer relingos [To write: to drill walls, to break windows, to dynamite buildings. Deep excavations in order to find—to find what?—to find nothing. / The writer is she who distributes silences and voids. / To write: to make a hole in reading. / To write: to create *relingos*]” (79). In its vindication of the productiveness of emptying out both language and city space, the urban poetics that arise from *Papeles falsos* are strongly reminiscent of the multiple mid-20th century avant-garde movements that sought to destroy the socially accepted and normative use of language, and of which several had a marked interest in the exploration of the hidden, not functionally defined spaces of the city (see, in this context Careri (68-88) and Sheringham (71-77) on the Dadaist and Surrealist poetics of practicing the city). Here, standard language—the used-up, worn-out words to which Luiselli alludes—is comparable to abstract space, which has superimposed its mental categories over lived experience. Through the destruction of abstract space and common speech, the historical avant-garde movements tried to discover a more

authentic, less socially coded and restrained use of space and language—another instance of the aforementioned *informe*.

However, as the reference to the constant menace of earthquakes suggests, does a poetics like this one not risk total silence? Up to which point can the idea of undermining be [persecuted] without turning into complete destruction—into a blank page or a completely ethereal space? An answer to this question is suggested by the final lines of “Paraíso en obras”, which can be read as an indication of how Luiselli navigates the tension between the desire to break through language and the will to speak, by drawing attention to the material basis of the metaphors she uses. In this passage, the “text speaker” dedicates her attention to the men who are remodeling the patio of her building, and who constituted the starting point for her string of reflections on language and the city. She overhears them saying “—Vamos a romper todo de acá hasta acá. —¿Pero y dónde vamos a poner el cascajo? —Aquí, mira. Vamos armando la montañita y ya luego vemos [We are going to break up everything from here to here. —But where are we going to leave the rubble? —Here, look. We will make a small pile and then we will see]” (70). Read through the brief scene that functions as a stage for this essay, Luiselli’s reflections show that demolition is only the first step in a process of which the outcome is unknown. The work of demolishing is gradual and provisional: walls and limits have to be brought down, and their fragments have to be reassembled or thrown out according to the demands of the context. This way, a “lived space”, both on the level of the city and of language, has to be excavated among the ruins of buildings and sentences. Lived experience needs breaking through the molds of city space and standard language, but the results of this process are always provisional and insecure. This is precisely what the essays of *Papeles falsos* do: they gather glimpses and fragments of earlier, mostly affirmative versions of urban and linguistic conceptions, in order to break them up and go through the debris in order to select what can be used to construct a more diverse, open image of the city.

Conclusive remarks

Converting a city description into a city portrait is accomplished in these literary works through their use of verticalized imaginaries. In the surface city, all three authors detect the same abstracting tendency that Stephen Graham has identified in the unproportioned emphasis on the horizontal perspective. Their subterranean explorations aim to both undermine “abstract space” as a way of experiencing and describing the city, and to discover elements that can contribute to a recovery of “lived space”. By going underground, their city portraits create a sense of dimensionality that breaks through what Lefebvre sees as the failure to imagine the urban environment as a medium to live in and to experience through the whole body—not instead of, but in addition to its mere functionality. The inclusion of other medialities enhances the reach of literary discourse by performing a rupture in the predominance of the visual paradigm, and, at the same time, uncovers its potential for capturing the urban atmosphere in a more tangible way.

With respect to Mexico City’s perceived inaptitude for portrayal, the underground perspectives created by these three authors suggest an interesting way to overcome the frequent references to the city’s irrepresentability. On the one hand, the recuperation of “lived space” through a destruction of “abstract space” is a way of avoiding the fragmentation that has led many contemporary writers to limit themselves to the adoption of more specific viewpoints—mostly quarters or certain zones (Puga 21-22). The very unstructuredness of the “lived space” discovered through the underground functions, in this sense, as a means to deviate from the functional fragmentation performed by “abstract space”, which is often mirrored in literature as a result of the supposed impossibility to say something about the city as a whole. The choice made by these authors to liberate experience from categorization through the unformatted and dense composition of actual subterranean spaces allows them to create a global impression of

the urban environment, without aspiring to total representation. On the other hand, the specter of “genericity” that haunts contemporary representations of Mexico City is also thrown off track by this very same process: the undermining of surface categories and the fashioning of a subterranean *informe* results in a description that is inextricably bound-up with concrete, corporal and/or personal experiences.

In order to accomplish this effect, all three authors connect with the richly evocative potential of Mexico City’s subsoil. They do so, however, in markedly different ways than the historical and cultural use that several canonical authors of twentieth-century Mexican literature have made of the subterranean imaginary. While the metaphorical association with Aztec culture or religious imaginaries prevailed in the work of the latter, the texts here studied take the material characteristics of represented underground space themselves as an alternative entry point into the city. In so doing, they provide an aesthetic development of a point that has already been made, from another perspective, by Carlos Monsiváis in his observations on Mexico City’s subway: the density and compression associated with underground spaces can be used to call into question established material and physical forms—according to Monsiváis, Metro users are figuratively converted into one large body, which puts the spatial limitations imposed by the urban administration under pressure. The underground becomes, in this sense, a site of compression and disarticulation in itself, rather than a mythological underworld. However, as all three examples show, the metaphorical association of the subsoil with death and destruction is never far away: the shared specter of instability haunts these texts through ambiguity (Nettel), death (Jufresa) and disaster (Luiselli). For these writers, then, city portraits do not become impossible in a megacity like Mexico City, but their underground perspectives do appear as necessarily bound-up with the conscience of their fleeting and provisional character.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Mark. "The Ground of Crisis and the Geopolitics of Depth." *Ecological Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America: Ecocritical Perspectives on Art, Film, and Literature*. Ed. Mark Anderson and Zelia Bora. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2016. n. pag. E-book.
- Bonfil, Guillermo. *México profundo*. México D.F.: Grijalbo, 1990. Print.
- Bretz, Mary Lee. *Voices, Silences and Echoes: A Theory of the Essay and the Critical Reception of Naturalism in Spain*. London, Rochester, NY, USA: Tamesis, 1992. Print.
- Bruhn, Jørgen. *The Intermediality of Narrative Literature: Medialities Matter*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Print.
- Careri, Francesco. *Walkscapes. El andar como práctica estética/ Walking as an Aesthetic Practice*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gil, 2002. Print.
- Cooper Alarcón, Daniel. *The Aztec Palimpsest: Mexico in the Modern Imagination*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997. Print.
- Davis, Diane. *Urban Leviathan: Mexico City in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. Print.
- Eagleton, Terry. "The Ideology of the Aesthetic." *Poetics Today* 9.2 (1988): 327–338. Print.
- Ferrero Cárdenas, Inés. "Geografía en el cuerpo: El otro yo en *El huésped*, de Guadalupe Nettel." *Revista de literatura mexicana contemporánea* 15.41 (2009): 55–62. Print.
- François, Liesbeth. "Beyond the Ruins of the Organized City: Urban Experiences Through the Metro in Contemporary Mexican Literature." *Urban Spaces in Contemporary Latin American Literature*. Ed. José Eduardo González & Timothy Robbins. Cham: Palgrave, 2018. 19-46. Print.

- Gallo, Rubén, ed. *The Mexico City Reader*. Trans. Rubén Gallo and Lorna Scott Fox. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. E-book.
- Graham, Stephen. *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers*. London, New York: Verso, 2016. E-book.
- Hewitt, Lucy, and Stephen Graham. "Vertical Cities: Representations of Urban Verticality in 20th-Century Science Fiction Literature." *Urban Studies* 52.5 (2015): 923–937. Print.
- Jay, Martin. *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique*. London, New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Jufresa, Laia. "The cornerist". Trans. Sophie Hughes. *Words Without Borders*, 2015. Web. 26 September 2017.
- Jufresa, Laia. "El esquinista." *El esquinista*. México: Tierra Adentro, 2014. Print.
- Krieger, Peter. "Megalópolis México: perspectivas críticas." *Megalópolis: La Modernización de la Ciudad de México en el Siglo XX*. Ed. Peter Krieger. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 2006. 27–54. Print.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford-Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991. Print.
- López-Lozano, Miguel. *Utopian Dreams, Apocalyptic Nightmares: Globalization in Recent Mexican and Chicano Narrative*. Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2008. Print.
- Luiselli, Valeria. *Papeles falsos*. México: Sexto Piso, 2010. Print.
- Monsiváis, Carlos. *Los rituales del caos*. México: Ediciones Era, 2001. Print.
- Nettel, Guadalupe. *El huésped*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2006. Print.
- Pike, David Lawrence. *Metropolis on the Styx: The Underworlds of Modern Urban Culture, 1800-2001*. Cornell University Press, 2007. Print.

- Pitois-Pallares, Véronique. *Sous le signe du Je: Pratiques introspectives dans le roman mexicain (2000-2010)*. Diss. Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier III, 2015. Web. 27 May 2017.
- Puga, Alejandro. *La ciudad novelada a fines del siglo XX: estructura, retórica y figuración*, México: UAM, 2012. Print.
- Rama, Ángel. *La ciudad letrada*. Santiago: Tajamar, 2004. Print.
- Sheringham, Michael. *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.
- Sinno, Neige. "Cuerpo habitado: Alteridad, hospitalidad y literatura en *El huésped* de Guadalupe Nettel." *Écritures dans les Amériques au féminin : Un regard transnational*. Ed. Anne Reynes-Delobel and Dante Barrientos-Tecun. Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2017. n. pag. *OpenEdition Books*. Web. 22 Aug. 2018.
- Solá-Morales, Ignacio de. "Terrain Vague." *Anyplace*. Ed. Cynthia Davidson. New York: Anyone Corporation, 1995. Print.
- Trujillo, Janny Amaya. "Dinámicas transmediales de construcción de la memoria cultural: Un análisis en torno a la memoria del terremoto de 1985 en México." *Mediaciones* 13.19 (2017): 48–64. Print.
- Vitz, Matthew. *A City on a Lake: Urban Political Ecology and the Growth of Mexico City*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. Print.