

The City in Writing



Humor and Irony in the Contemporary Mexican Urban Short Story

Part II

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AN ATOMIZED CITY

Contemporary Mexican narrators seem to recognize that Mexico City is in reality many cities and have therefore opted to tell the story of day-to-day urban life in very specific milieus.

Each writer offers his or her own testimony of our way of life and death in Mexico City in the last years of the millennium. Each of them takes as his or her own one of the many cities

that make up the conglomerate that we call Mexico City: Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl (Emiliano Pérez Cruz), the historic downtown area (Guillermo Samperio), the Condesa neighborhood (Luis Miguel Aguilar), the Roma neighborhood (Ignacio Trejo Fuentes), the Peralvillo neighborhood (Pepe Martínez de la Vega), the Obrera neighborhood (Paco Ignacio Taibo II) and University City (Guillermo Sheridan).

In the paradigmatic story "Oh, That Woman!" by Guillermo Samperio, we find the portrait of one of the most typical characters found in government offices in Mexico City's historical downtown area (although probably the traits described

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here would be just as familiar to the inhabitants of any other city):

With all due respect and without any hidden meaning or double entendre, the woman who sticks in our mind could be called Big Mama. She's a Big Mama in good faith and by the grace of her caste. In good faith because she goes decidedly out to meet the Mexican compliment *par excellence*, "Hey there, Big Mama!" said frankly and energetically. She loves it when they shout it out to her from any distance and they aim it at her ass....

During any talk with her, her lips will produce sensual pouts, childish smiles, accidental bites and highfalutin adjectives. Her hands will touch the excited man she is talking to on the shoulder by way of an intimate confession, on the arm after something funny, on the thighs while relaying sexual gossip, until she naturally ends up taking microscopic specks off his jacket and concentrates on perfecting the knot of his tie.¹

Guillermo Samperio's narrative universe is peopled with almost archetypical characters of the urban geography, like the Man of the Keys, the Simple Woman of Noon and the Man of the

Shadows. They are vignettes that make it possible to recover the human dimension in the office-reality of big cities.

Paco Ignacio Taibo II has created a more political urban mythology. The adventures of The Spider, a proletarian hero of union struggles in Mexico City's poor neighborhoods, in addition to having endings that are both surprising and entertaining, are also narrated in a strangely romantic ambiance amidst the debates and marches of the working class. So, for example, in the short story "Loves," marginalized spaces are eroticized, immediately giving rise to a reflection about the act of writing:

What could be more romantic on the face of the asphalt than the sunsets red with foundry smoke that sparkled in miniature in her eyes? Where was there more tenderness than in the corner, cold, clinging to each other waiting for the complaining old bus? What embraces more sultry than those in the back seat of the collective taxi on the way to La Villa, knowing all the while that you just had to avoid the neon light every 15 seconds and with 14 seconds to explore each other's skin? How could you compare other loves with the love-with-fear conveyed by a sweaty hand when the horizon became blue with mounted police, sabers in hand?

They were love stories of movies that would never be made. Loves without the subtitles on the bottom of the TV screen; socialist realist novels that nobody would write because back then the little fat man had not been possessed by the fever of beginning to play with our past in the name of the sacred testimony.²

On another part of the social spectrum, Luis Miguel Aguilar and Rafael Pérez Gay present us with an ingenious and complex portrait of the educated middle class, particularly those living in areas like Coyoacán, Condesa and Copilco (the three C's of Mexico City's urban intellectual map).

These exercises of emotional confession contain enough material for parody. Let us see the

obvious allusion to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in a brief dialogue between the narrator and a couple of phone company workers, from "Godzilón y Clavería, telefonistas beckettianos" (Godzilón and Clavería, Beckettian Phone Workers):

The set consists of a sidewalk, a lamp post and a Telephone Company truck. Godzilón and Clavería are on stage. Enter You.

You: Give me a hand, won't you? I've been without a phone for three months. It's right nearby. I'll pay you. I promise.

Clavería: We can't go.

You: I'm begging you. I've already reported it 15,000 times and nobody comes.

Clavería: We can't go. (To Godzilón) We can't go, can we?

Godzilón: (Looking away) We can't go.

Clavería: We can't go.

You: Please. I'll pay you.

Clavería: (Moving his head as he looks at the ground) No, we can't go.

You: So, you can't go?

Godzilón: No, we can't.

Clavería: We can't go.

You: Well, thanks.

Clavería: Thanks for what? We can't go.³

This dialogue of the absurd—a faithful rendition of many dialogues *a la Mexicana*—is part of a New Mexican Types series, which also includes "El Barrendero a la Hitchcock" (The Street Sweeper in the Hitchcock Style); "El Taxista Heraclíteo" (The Heraclitusian Taxi Driver); "Toñito, el Velador Impasible" (Toñito, the Ugly Night Watchman); "El Marchante del Duino" (The Merchant of Duino) and "No Pus No': El Carpintero Buonarrottiano" ("No, Er, No': The Buonarrottian Carpenter). These parodies appeal to readers' familiarity with U.S. and European U.S. movies, poetry, sculpture, novels and theater. Using this strategy, an examination of one's navel acquires the dimensions of erudite cosmopolitanism and chronicles of day-to-day urban life reach the heights of an unparalleled feat.

DOMUS AND POLIS

FROM THE STREET TO THE HOME

In the period covered by this essay (1975 to 2000), the number of studies about urban cultural identity has multiplied. Almost all of them point to transformations in the symbolic organization of urban areas, and in particular of the functions assigned to the distinction between domestic and public spaces, between the home and the street.

From a synchronic perspective, this distinction makes it possible to understand a new assignation of gender roles. Today, segregation of urban space in terms of its belonging to one gender or another is no longer as absolute as before; while more and more women are in the work place, men are now relatively more secluded in the domestic space when they turn their own homes into offices, using electronic communications.

The diachronic perspective has also directed attention to momentary changes, pointing to how consumption and cultural recreation have moved from the street into the home. In the 1960s, the spaces for casual and sometimes ritual encounters with others were parks, plazas, stadiums, bars or dance halls. But in the 1990s, homes were outfitted with televisions, computers, telephones, radios and newspapers,





which seemed sufficient to inform and entertain urban residents.

These transformations have been dealt with in different ways in contemporary short stories. In the stories in the collection *Mi vida privada es del dominio público* (My Private Life Is a Matter of Public Domain), Bernarda Solís links both aspects of the urban experience (the private and the public) in paradoxes. The protagonists' personal conflicts are narrated with considerable critical distance given the intimist tradition typical of the first half of the century. It becomes clear here that the conflicts are caused by the conventions of a city in which women have been relegated to a secondary role.

Few writers have explored women's internal world as solidly and with as much of a sense of humor as Elena Poniatowska. In her "De noche vienes" (You Come By Night), we see the district attorney interrogate a woman who has been married to five different men for seven years without any of them suspecting that the others existed. The apparent ironic indifference of the interrogator is clear from the beginning of the story:

"But, aren't you unhappy?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"Sometimes, a little, when my shoes are too tight..."

"I mean aren't you unhappy because of your situation, ma'am." He emphasized "ma'am", letting it sink to the bottom of Hell "Ma'am."

"And everything that comes out of it. Doesn't it make you unhappy?"

"No."

"Were you examined by the doctor on duty?"

"No. Why?" protested García. "This isn't a rape case."

"Oh, yes. Right. They're the ones who should be examined," laughed the questioner, making vulgar motions with his hands.⁴

Urban narrative also shows signs of black humor. This is the case of Francisco Hinojosa, who uses it even in his very popular stories for children, like *La señora más fea del mundo* (The Ugliest Woman in the World). In "Nunca en domingo" (Never on Sunday) —part of a genre the author himself created that consists of writing a story in the form of a novel with 100 very brief chapters— we encounter a tone more of parody than journalism, as part of the urban tradition of the crime genre. They are all crimes related somehow to the tedium and routine of urban life, told with the cynicism of an indolent narrator. The crime story tradition is already part of our urban identity, as the symptom of hidden violence, always on the point of surfacing. Irony freezes our smile into a rictus of skepticism, similar to the one so familiar to us when we meet up with our neighbors.

THE TRADITION OF URBAN BESTIARIES

Some sub-genres of the short story are traditionally urban, like the police story and science fiction. Anthologies also cover urban bestiaries, social fiction and political prophesies.

Let us look at three examples of fantasy narrative and contemporary science fiction, each of them an allegory of our urban condition.

Guillermo Sheridan's *El dedo de oro* (The Golden Finger) is a political science fiction novel about the presidential succession in Mexico. The chapter called "Depende" (It Depends) can be read as an independent story. The following is a fragment that gives an indication of the Kafka-esque labyrinths of the Mexican bureaucracy and the everyday climate of influence brokery:

"Yes?"

"We want a passport."

"You want or you wanted?"

"We wanted."

"Did you want an inside track or did you want to get it yourselves?"

"What's better?"

"That depends."

"Depends on what?"

"On who you are."

In a quick glance, Baldy and Sofía exchanged the fear of being someone.

"We're not anybody," said Sofía, smiling humbly.

"Well, then, what ya need is to take out some influence."

"And how do you do that?" asked Baldy.

"Go to window 322 and ask for an application form."

Sofía dropped her eyes and Baldy pressed her hand.

"Where's that window?"

"Depends."

"Depends? Depends on what?"

"On whether y'r goin' to the Ped offices or the Sumo offices..."

"Which is better?"

"They're both just as bad."

"And what's next?"

"Well, you fill out the application form for some influence."

"And are they gonna give it to me?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"That there's any available."

"Hmmm..." Baldy looked at the ceiling.

"Next!" yelled the half face behind the window.⁵

Guadalupe Loaeza, in her "La rosa púrpura de San Lázaro" (The Purple Rose of San Lázaro), proposes a parody of Woody Allen in which the narrator is watching the minister of the interior on television as he answers opposition criticisms in the Chamber of Deputies:

"Inflation dropped from 150 percent to 60 percent, an important difference and, undoubtedly, an achievement of our policy," he said to the PSUM deputy.

"Yes, but what was the cost?" I exclaimed suddenly. At that very moment, the minister raised his head and looked straight at me.

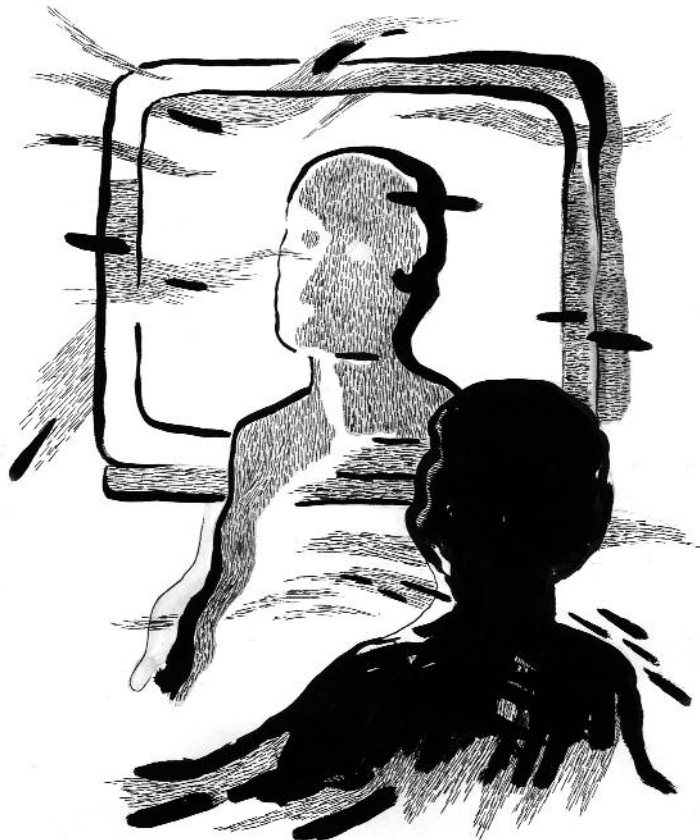
"What did you say?" he asked me.

"Me?" I asked incredulously, surprised.

"Yes, yes, you."

"Are you talking to me?"

"Yes, you've been sitting in front of your television for hours."



I couldn't believe it. The same thing was happening to me that had happened to Cecilia (Mia Farrow) in Woody Allen's last movie, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. And just like Tom Baxter decides to come down off the screen, I watched Jesús Silva-Herzog come out of the television.

"Why did you say that?" he asked, standing in front of me.

We quickly got into my Volkswagen and headed downtown. Since the traffic was holding us up, we decided to take the subway. The minister couldn't believe his eyes.

"Why are there so many people?" he asked.

"Oh, it's always this full, Mr. Minister. This is Mexico City."⁶

Science fiction is also creating a tradition of its own. It has become mature enough to enjoy the luxury of parodying the genre's conventions, adapted to the Mexican context. Héctor Chavarría narrates the reactions of Mexico City residents when they hear a nuclear alert. In "Lo último de nuestras vidas" (The Last Thing in Our Lives), each of the inhabitants of Mexico City decides to do whatever he or she had never dared do under normal conditions, like "the TV commentator who ends up doing a strip tease on the freeway to the delight of passersby."⁷ In the end, it all turns out to be a computer hacker's joke, although the lives of those who did not commit suicide changed radically and, sometimes, ridiculously.

These forms of pessimism about the country's future seem to fit into the paranoid, hopeless climate also shared by a surprisingly growing number of cyber-punk writers who adopt the perspective of what some have called a post-apocalyptic narrative.

AFTER THE END

Each form of humor contributes to the collective portrait of a common space, precisely because of each writer's vocation to show a particular vision of the apocalypse and give voice to the city's many characters.

Humor is a narrative strategy and can also be a life style, a vehicle for social criticism, a symptom of a break with convention, an exploration of what is different, a voyage toward the other and, perhaps, at the end of the day, the beginning of a more satisfactory dialogue with reality.

Humor can also be a symptom of the collective aspiration to a climate of discussion and criticism that would make the city a democratic space for living together in a civilized fashion. After all, the city is many cities, and the literary city is just as complex and diverse as the political city.

In all these cases, it is always the reader who has the last word. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Guillermo Samperio, *Gente de la ciudad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981), pp. 33-37.

² Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *El regreso de la verdadera araña* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1988), p. 109.

³ Luis Miguel Aguilar, *Nadie puede escribir un libro* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1997), p. 56.

⁴ Elena Poniatowska, *De noche vienes* (Mexico City: Era, 1979), pp. 149 and 151.

⁵ Guillermo Sheridan, *El dedo de oro* (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 1996), pp. 223-228.

⁶ Guadalupe Loaeza, *Las niñas bien* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1988), pp. 136-138.

⁷ Héctor Chavarría, "Lo último de nuestras vidas," Gerardo Horacio Porcayo, comp., *Los mapas del caos* (Mexico City: Ramón Llaca, 1997), p. 8.

