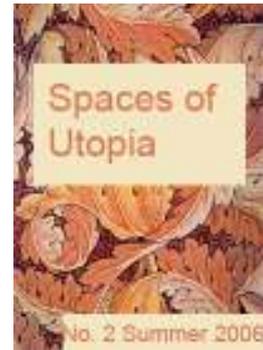


Self and the City:

Spanish Women Writing Utopian Dreams and Nightmares

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Don't try to bury your pain: it will spread all over the earth, and under your feet; it will filter through the water which you will have to drink and it will poison your blood. The wounds will close, but there will always be scars, more or less visible, which will come back and trouble you when the weather changes, reminding you of their existence in your skin and also of the misfortune which caused them. And the memory of the misfortune will affect future decisions, it will create useless fears and persistent memories, and you will grow into a creature both dulled and cowardly. Why try to run away and leave behind the city of your fall? Is it in the vain hope that in another place, in a better climate, the scars will no longer hurt and the water you drink will be purer? All around you, the ruins of your life will arise because, no matter where you go, you will carry the city with you. There is no new land, no new sea; the life you have wasted will remain wasted wherever you go. I am twenty-two, and I speak with the voice of others. (Etxebarria 1998: 19)¹

The above passage – pessimistic though it might seem at first – “no new land, no new sea” out there, suggests that utopia is to be found within, if it is to be found at all. The self is not only psychically, socially and sexually produced by the outside, it also challenges and questions that outside in a constant effort to negotiate meanings: who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? The last line of the passage, “I am twenty-two, and I speak with the voice of others” points to an inherited, innate knowledge, a shared and intimate *knowing* weathered by life’s experiences. The city – and the self’s experience of the city – acknowledge the intricacies of identity: the mind and the city that controls, sees and measures all things, the city pleasures and aesthetics that speak to the senses, the hidden crimes and tensions that create fear and the abject which lurks in the unseen and unknown depths. Nevertheless, city dwellers do

not walk around the streets smiling and grimacing at all these pleasures and fears; their emotional expression is detached and seemingly indifferent to the narratives that the streets and buildings hold. Blank, distant looks, preoccupied by the day ahead and keeping to time commitments, add up to the reserved urban behaviour which Robert Park calls the city *state of mind* (Pile 2005:1). Indeed, there is little time in city life to stop and chat, or to stroll along the streets as the *flâneur* was wont to do. The city is framed within a very special concept of both time and space: its geographical limits expand horizontally across large areas of surface, rise vertically with the buildings and skyscrapers which literally scrape the sky, and the city depths reach down further than the roots of any tree, fingering a hidden underworld of transport communications, sewage systems, the dead and the long forgotten. Time is speed, time is money. Punctuality, rush hours, traffic lights, opening and closing times, all contribute to making city life a hectic life. Little wonder that the city clock imposes itself on the body clock, with the difference that the city never sleeps.

This article looks at four Spanish novels which depict the city as a psychogeographical space for the construction of identity. Two of the novels are recognisable as dystopias, two of them have certain utopian elements in them. All four are written by women and offer interesting debates on the relationship between the body and the city, and on language, sexuality and desire.

Dystopian Futures

Two of the novels depict futuristic dystopian societies. The first is Montserrat Julió's *Memòries d'un futur bàrbar* [Memories of a Barbaric Future], published in Catalan in the year of Franco's death (1975). The last page of the novel is dated 3rd March, 1974. Franco died on 20th November, 1975. The novel narrates the past experiences of a male gynaecologist in Barcelona, Joan [John] Garriga. The year is 2023, the city is in ruins, the birth rate has dropped

to zero and the whole planet is becoming depopulated as he sits at his old Olympia typewriter and writes about the past to a world with no future. If “in the beginning was the word”, it follows that, at the end of time, there will be no word. As humans die and decay and civilization collapses, language too fades away. The last page of Garriga’s typed memoirs is dotted with blanks: the letters A, S, T are missing. He knows he is one of the last human beings on a sterile planet but, in spite of this, he writes his memoirs, describing the gradual death of humanity, the ensuing political chaos, the loss of love and solidarity and the knowledge of apocalypse. The novel begins with the news that a series of biological mutations have caused all mammals to become sterile. No more babies are being born and this brings about the closure of all industries, banks, schools, and transport. Everything comes to a halt. Food becomes the substitute for money, people leave the cities and go back to the land, if they can find transport. The frontiers between one country and another disappear and passports are no longer needed. Governments fall and nothing is as it was. The abject, as Kristeva defines it, is that which dwells on the borders between the *I* and the *not I*, which disturbs the social, and linguistic order, creates a space of ambiguity which is then occupied by a strangeness and a sense of the uncanny (Kristeva 1982).

Julió’s futuristic dystopia creates that space of decay and destruction before regeneration can begin – if at all. In this sense, the novel portrays the atmosphere in Spain prior to Franco’s death. It took him almost one year to die whilst medical specialists, priests, and politicians tried to delay the decaying process for as long as they could. Time stood still in all the cities, towns and villages throughout the country. Each hour, on the hour, all radio stations tuned in to the latest “official” medical report, and people stopped to listen: some ready to celebrate with a bottle of champagne, some to mourn, some fearful of what the future might bring. Death and dying, and an end to forty years’

dictatorship are all reflected in the novel in many ways. As a gynaecologist, Joan Garriga's job is to help in pregnancies and birthing, to introduce the newly-born into life. When faced with death, however, the sight of a rotting male cadaver brings about a paralysis of his body and the loss of his voice:

On top of a platform which resembled a burial mound, a corpse awaited burial. The flesh was shrunken, the skin wizened. Withered flowers covered in dust lay around the platform as well as some iron candlesticks in which only the wicks remained (...). A host of insects fed upon the dead body and eye sockets accommodated a new form of life: a crawling mass of larvae and pupae which were about to burst (...). Accustomed as I am to contemplating the repulsive, yet, when I came face to face with death so suddenly, I tried to scream but my voice was strangled with fear, and when I wanted to run, my legs wouldn't carry me. (Julió 1975: 144)

The abject, the dead body which *has fallen* (cadaver comes from *cadere*: to fall) destabilizes the boundaries between his own living self and this dead other. All that was once human has been reduced to food for the insects which live off, and thrive on, the dead flesh. The body has lain there for quite some time and will probably not be buried at all. The burned-down candles tell him that his own time is also running out. Little wonder that he is paralysed by fear, silenced by this sight. "In abjection", writes Kristeva, "revolt is completely within being. Within the being of language". Unlike hysteria, the subject of abjection is involved in the production of culture within the symbolic order and "[i]ts symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages" (Kristeva 1982: 45).

The city (in this case, Barcelona) is reduced to ruins and gradually becomes an empty shell, devoid of life, the streets covered in refuse and dust, cars, buses and trains stranded, their drivers dead or dying, and the nameplates of banks, administration and council buildings become meaningless words. With no babies being born, there are no schools and no marriages. The dissolution of the nuclear family brings about the downfall of the capitalist system, but in the anarchy that follows there is little hope of a new order being set up. The novel ends in a similar vein to Mary Shelley's dystopian

novel *The Last Man* (1826), with Garriga, typing his last words whilst being aware that no words have been invented to describe an “apocalyptic emotion” (Julió 1975:17). The structures of society and language, as he knew them, collapse and give way to negative emotions brought on by his own impotence and a series of losses: the loss of his daughter, his girlfriend Laura, the loss of his job, his “adopted” son Jordi, the death of his mother and the death of his friend, Gunnar.

The second dystopia takes place in the far future in New York and Paris: the year is 2069. Written by Gabriela Bustelo, *Planeta Hembra* [Female Planet] was published in 2001, and describes the future of the planet ruled by the neoliberalist XX Party. Thatcherite [sic!] women rule with fists of steel, control the media, abolish all family systems, prohibit heterosexual encounters, eliminate books and the written word, eradicate historical memory, and secretly work towards the death of man (all men). Does all this sound familiar? Bustelo did a degree in English literature in Madrid and there are clear influences of Orwell and Huxley in her novel. In this role-reversal dystopian society, men organize a commando (el Commando H) in an attempt to topple the female government. The all-male opposition party XY joins forces with the all-women XX to seek out the rebels and eliminate them.

The novel begins with a scene from a 20th century (heterosexual) porno movie. Baez, one of the leading ladies, is disgusted by what she sees and is ordered by President Eckart to find out the rebel Commando group who are circulating the images on telescreens. To do this she has to liaise with Graf, who is party leader of XY. Baez and Graf eventually become dissidents themselves by falling in love, having a heterosexual relationship, and realizing that this, indeed was “perfection, passion, completeness, peace” (Bustelo 2001: 212).

The bodies described in this futuristic society are smooth, athletic, strong and healthy. Fascist in their perfection, they are contained, controlled, pure and clinically clean. All imperfections and excesses are modified genetically. The women do not menstruate, they do not bear children, their bodies bear no scars of life's experiences. Their hairdos are their only marker of difference. Pleasure, if it exists at all, is momentary and fleeting, and always contained. The popular Relaxation Centres offer orgasm on demand at a regulated time of 173 seconds. Sex is sex and sexual desire is relieved mechanically. At one point, a man from the XY party attempts to explain to a young girl from the XX party the concepts of love (which is an obsolete, historical concept) and sexual pleasure.

- You are still young – the Man continued –. And you won't have any experience in this matter. But you must know what an orgasm is.
- It is the climax of sexual pleasure which produces local modifications like hyperemia and congestion, and general modifications such as tachycardia, tachypnea, a rise in the blood pressure and a spreading of pleasure – said Dillon solemnly. (Bustelo 2001: 171)

Each citizen dwells in an individual sterile cubicle, full of gadgets, smooth walls, and everything in perfect functioning order. Their bodies mirror their living quarters in absolute synchronicity. Order and self-containment allow no space for excess, the abject or the marginalized. Thus, the surface world in the city of New York is visibly under control, but the underworld is also inhabited: by the people of the tunnels, “the homeless, the forgotten, the Others” and by the headquarters of the terrorist group, Commando H, who live “in the hidden bowels” of the city (Bustelo 2001: 154).

All citizens are periodically checked for any form of dissidence which is eradicated immediately by operating on the brain. Dillon (perhaps her name renders homage to the Dillon bookshop) is a young dissident who has managed to hack into the government-controlled computer system to retrieve censored material in the form of ten books, ten films and ten records. Thus armed with “historical memory” of a kind, she escapes with Graf and Baez after civil war

breaks out between the men and women. This war is a result of their illicit romance. Both XX and XY have access to nuclear bombs, and they use them. A nuclear explosion destroys the planet Earth which the three just manage to escape from, as they travel off on their way to the planet Andromeda, where a new world awaits them.

In a critical review of Bustelo's utopian/dystopian novel in *El País* (16th July, 2001), the author claims that she does not want her readers to see her as machista, homophobic or misogynistic. "I've always been a feminist, but now I see myself as a post or neo feminist, certainly not a fundamentalist". When challenged on the question of "political correctness", she answers that her intention was "to write a thought-provoking and politically incorrect novel" because she believed the time had come "to revise all those old feminist (or feminine) attitudes which have their origin in the politics of the sixties" (Mora 2001: 34). The novel is written in a racy, street-language style. It incorporates slang, Anglicisms and many invented words. Bustelo claims that her book critiques the uniform politics of globalisation, the disappearance of culture, the "terrifying" [*infame*] use of technology and the death of love, but her objectives do not come over so clearly to the reader. While I write this (June, 2005), supporters and representatives of the Church and the conservative Popular Party in Spain are demonstrating in Madrid against the present socialist government's law which will grant gay and heterosexual couples the same rights in marriage and adoption. The protest banners the demonstrators are carrying claim that the new law will bring about a destruction of all human values: love will be lost, the family (read: the nuclear family) will be lost, and so many children will be deprived of a mother and a father. "My mother is not called Ramón", one banner angrily declares.

Is Bustelo's *Planeta Hembra* feminist or not? Is it written with irony (as she suggests) or is there an underlying conservatism in her futuristic vision?

Clearly, role-reversal societies are doomed from the start because they lock individuals into dichotomies and seem to play out the man/woman, master/slave, mind/body predicament which makes this kind of novel “foreseeable”... and somewhat monotonous to read. Utopia, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. The underlying ideologies of the novel seem to suggest a nostalgia for past gender politics rather than a sympathy for alternative lifestyles.

The City Within

The last two novels I would like to discuss are written in a more realistic mode but are groundbreaking in ways the other two are not. “No matter where you go, you will always carry the city within you” – this quote from Lucía Etxebarria’s *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* (published 1998, Premio Nadal, 1998) runs through the novel as a leitmotiv. The novel is interestingly summarized on the back cover like this:

Three women: Cat, a convinced lesbian; Mónica, a compulsive man-eater, and Beatriz, who considers that love has no gender. Three moments in the life of one woman: her childhood, shut up in a claustrophobic home and under family pressures; her adolescence, a permanent escape forward, and her youth as a sentimental exile, tinged with the nostalgia of her hometown. And two cities: Edinburgh, sombre and vertical, and Madrid, horizontal and bright, both contribute to this original novel on love for friends, for the family and for lovers.

Beatriz runs away from Madrid, from her tortured experiences of the underworld: drugs, discos, a murder and a passionate lesbian love to the city of Edinburgh, where she studies literature, moves in with Cat (Caitlin), and meets Ralph. Cat and Ralph become her lovers in this city of tears, of “chiaroscuros”, of Jekyll & Hyde closes, of secret chambers and gender transgressions:

I became fifteen and stopped going to mass. I became eighteen and kissed Mónica. Then I set off for Edinburgh. There I shaved off my hair and bought army boots. In the streets, no one could tell whether I was a boy or girl. This was the last transgression. The last transgression.

Each delicate detail of my body can be interpreted or reinterpreted, depending on whether I wanted to be a woman or a person. My vagina can be the gateway of pleasure or of life. My breasts, a fountain of milk or erotic zones. My pierced belly button can be an advert or a sign of a future connection between my life and another's who will be dependent on me. My body, with a foetus inside – will it be full of life or simply invaded, deformed and destroyed? (Etxebarria 2002: 214).

Beatriz's body is mapped out as home, a landscape, a sign, and a country. It is also a site of desire, of eroticism, of pleasure. Thus, her body interacts with the environment, both giving and receiving, mapping out and colonizing, becoming both object and agent.

Elizabeth Grosz discusses the two most pervasive models which define the interrelation of bodies and cities. The first sees the city being produced by the body and reflecting it. The second sees a parallelism between the body and the city as, for example, the body and the state, where the head of state is the king and the body represents the people. She rejects both models because they are based on humanist concepts of the self and the world, in which the self is given, and subordinates the body to the mind. This position retains, and locks the self, into the structure of binary opposites. Grosz proposes a third model by adapting Derrida's reading of *Chora*. This opens up a whole range of alternatives through the destabilizing of the self, absolute truths and transcendental signifiers. The feminine connotations of *Chora* (no definite article, according to Derrida!) have also become the basis of the theoretical writings of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, among many others. *Chora* can be translated by notions of place, site, location, city, region, country. It is also that which contains, and is contained by, at the same time. It is the site of subversion of the symbolic order of language, refusing to read desire as lack, and proposing a new mode of inhabiting space. The following passage from Etxebarria's novel suggests this way forward in an attempt to escape the tedious binaries:

Academically speaking, I should write that when Ralph and I made love it was he who possessed me, who took me. But actually, it was me who did this, it was me who took him into myself, because he entered me. I felt him as an Other, indecipherable and complementary to time. If I received him within me, I thought he would make me complete. Heaven and Earth, Light and Dark, Life and Death, Chaos and Order. I wouldn't have to ask constantly who I really was. (Etxebarria 2002: 215)

Beatriz's desire to know is bound up with the memories that Madrid and Edinburgh imprint on her body and the bodies of her lovers and this dialogic relationship between bodies and cities is expressed in her story-telling. Narratives of fear and loss, of nostalgia and yearning, of love and desire:

I write on a keyboard, a portable computer I bought in Edinburgh just before returning. The twenty-something letters of the alphabet embrace each other to form words; they lovingly offer each other the warmth that I lacked. All that I am, what solidly or precariously defines me and supports me, returns at the moment of writing. I only know how to be sincere in front of the keyboard. I miss the life I had in the same way I missed Madrid when I was in Edinburgh. Maybe it was a lie. Maybe it was memory, religion or art. When I close my eyes, I imagine the greenish-blue eyes of Cat, capable of inventing reality at every moment. A two-coloured reality like them [her eyes], a space and a time more deserving of me. (...) The reality I write of comes from another time, another landscape, other days; (...) it leads me through the hours in which we kissed, passing through labyrinths walled in by her curves, echoing with her voice. I pass through her corridors and turn round her corners, and arrive right at the hidden centre of her lack. I descend into the deepest and blackest regions, where my leaving becomes more and more infinite and her staying becomes more and more profound. The earth exhales a sweet perfume. (*idem*, 55)

Women writers in Spain may not be producing social blueprints for utopia but, in accordance with the times, they are exploring desire, language, sexuality and alternative lifestyles in very exciting ways and many of their novels have a utopian aspect to them. Spain used to have the lowest birth-rate in Europe, now it is on the rise again, thanks to immigration, adoption policies, and certain changes made in legislation regarding maternity/paternity leave and divorce laws. The novel with which I close this paper, *La edad secreta* [The Secret Age] by Eugenia Rico, published in 2004, is a highly original and sensitive utopian narrative. It begins with a quote from Picasso "Yo no busco, encuentro" [I do not search, I find]. A woman leaves her home in Madrid, a ruined marriage, and drives off in her car, picks up a hitch-hiker who is 20 years

younger than she is and sets off on a journey with him through small Spanish villages and the motorways of Europe. She had previously been told she had terminal cancer and was then informed that it had been an error; she had been given someone else's files. Thus, this is also a journey from death to life. The "Secret Age" of the title refers to two utopian spaces: first, a new imaginary time-space which challenges rational and chronological time whilst retaining it as a reality. This is explained at the beginning of the novel when the narrator claims that everyone is of the same age – not the years experienced in the past but those we have left to live in the future. Secondly, the Secret Age is also the age, or era, of the Neanderthals, people who mysteriously disappeared some 30,000 years ago. This Secret Age links the remote past to a present and a utopian future through a map of Nauchipán (the imaginary land of the Neanderthals) which the young hitchhiker carries around with him. The map on the manuscript becomes a country of somewhere else which draws both travellers together and offers them a common goal. Their first kiss brings them the recognition that "the abyss between their souls is there, the infinite distance between two tongues, the precipice between their mouths" (Rico 2004: 28). They are both well aware that history is written on their lips but are too wrapped up in each other to stop and read it. Each lover traces the map of somewhere else on the other's body. The utopian imagination in this novel exists in its deconstruction of time: futures, pasts, presents are brought together in the bodies of the two lovers, distanced in age by twenty years, he bringing her the history and map of Nauchipán with him, and she bringing to him her own special history of Spain:

My grandmother was born in the Middle Ages and my mother passed through the 19th century to the 21st in the time it took me to come out of my nappies and go to school. (...)

Now princesses marry while they are pregnant, lesbian aristocrats become artificially inseminated by gay friends and modern couples neither marry nor have kids. From being the most backward country in Europe, we now shock the world with our films, our gay neighbourhoods and our self-confidence. (*idem*, 123)

We are all made of time, writes Octavio Paz, and there is no escaping time unless it is through love. Love alone is simultaneously conscious of death and of transforming the momentary into the eternal. Even the most tragic love will offer the experience of one instance of otherworldly joy, given to lovers when they glimpse the beyond ..., that somewhere else which becomes a here and a now, “where nothing changes and where everything is as it really *is*” (Paz 2001:213).

Nauchipán does not exist. Or maybe it does. The (nameless) lover says he might even have invented it in order to make her (also nameless) fall in love. Or maybe not. Catherine Belsey writes that:

We want what we don't have – and there is a good deal of that from any perspective. But desire is the metonym of a discontent which envisages utopia, a continuing restlessness that motivates change, whether for better or worse. (Belsey 1994: 209)

and, perhaps, Julia Kristeva would answer with:

(...) if all utopias seem attainable today, if modern life is about to achieve them, perhaps we should try to avoid them in order to recover a non-utopic society, less perfect and more free ... But how can one be free without some sort of utopia, some sort of strangeness? Let us therefore be of nowhere, but without forgetting that we are somewhere... (Kristeva 1991: 117)

Note

¹ All passages cited from the Spanish novels, including the quote from Octavio Paz, are my translations.

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