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## **BELLES-LETTRES' CITIES: AN APPROACH OF LITERATURE AND URBAN STUDIES**

### **Abstract:**

There are many possibilities for Literature to be an instrument of study reflection; multiple are also the methodological paths to the understanding of urban complexities. Both – literature and city – are filled by a plurality of voices, authors, discussions and themes. From this perspective, an effort emerges to scrutinize, through an interdisciplinary transfer of ideas, the methodological possibilities of dialogue between these epistemic fields in which Literature can play an essential role in reflecting the diachronic evolution of cities. In this paper, considerations on the urban topics into narratives are differentiated into three distinct approaches: the first, mostly commonly found, occurs through the spatial description of cities in literary works, thus giving them the role of scenario builder (real or not) for the events narrated. That was Paris to Victor Hugo; London to Dickens; Buenos Aires to Borges; Lisbon to Eça de Queirós; Rio de Janeiro to Machado de Assis. The second form of insertion of the city in the literature resembles the previous one, but the importance given to the described space is deepened. In this sense, it is no longer just a geographical setting, but the narrative ambience that becomes inextricable from the story, conditioning it. Thus, the narrated events could not occur at a different time, in any other way and, especially, anywhere else. Examples of this are: A tale of two cities by Dickens; Ulysses by Joyce, and; Down and out in Paris and London by Orwell. The third and last form to be analyzed corresponds to technical works of Urbanism whose objects of study are closely related to cities morphology and development. Here, it may or may not limit the study to one or another city specifically, however, the priority of analysis is given to the context, habits and socioeconomic attributes of these urban spaces. Some examples of this scientific literature are: The Death and Life of Great American Cities by Jacobs, with her New York and its compartments; The City in History by Mumford, excluding some specific cities as the author himself declares; Storia della città by Benevolo, focusing on classical western history; and many other titles. In this perspective, the article tries to validate the approach of the scientific fields through an unconventional perspective that allows to impel themes that, at first sight, did not arouse interest or due to the fact they have been forgotten in the scientific production on cities.

### **Keywords:**

Literature; City; Transfer of ideas; Interdisciplinarity.

**JEL Classification:** N01, R00, Z11

## Introduction

The debate about the transfer of ideas in the urban space has been expanding over the years, and it presents itself as a convenient tool to understand sundry urban processes, also contributing to the adoption of adapted ideas, practices, legislations, guidelines and projects in different cities (Ultramari; Jazar, 2016).

Appropriation or discarding of ideas in this context explicitly reveals the impermanence of things in urban space and the need for constant revision of what is considered ideal for each period of the history: the city as a *continuum*, not a static object, but rather a process (Monte-Mór, 2006; Koolhaas, 1995). The city, as a dynamic element, can host transmissions of information, ideas and knowledge, both through tangible aspects (plans, projects, maps and interventions), and intangible (methodologies, management, normative and administrative policies); identified in the spatial planning, in the administration and implementation of policies and practices, and in the theoretical and methodological improvement.

It is known that, at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century, the rationalization and objectification of nature and science consolidated autonomous and isolated disciplines, each with its own theories, strategies, methodologies and fields of action, however, these readings are no longer enough to face the increasing of urban complexities. Isolated studies from areas such as architecture, geography, urbanism, etc. begin to compose an outdated perspective of analysis, whereas looking for interferences and overlaps of disciplinary fields allows the discovery of innovation moments and, consequently, of intellectual progress.

In order to think about the future of the city, it is increasingly necessary to view it as a multi and interdisciplinary object, expanding the discussions about its heterogeneity: "the rapidly developing modern metropolis proved to be an inspiring enough environment for artists and thinkers because of its immense variability and diversity" (Cholupský; Grmelová, 2010, p. 1).

Interdisciplinarity is a more fruitful approach, since, in order to face the great urban challenges that are been presented over the years, it is necessary to understand them in their magnitude. In this confluence of knowledges there are gradations between the traditional path (for example, urbanism associated with architecture, geography, history) and the non-obvious path (urbanism relating to literature, cinema, painting). This discussion, inserted in the sphere of transfer of ideas about the city, emphasizes the investigative potentialities in unusual tools when dealing with urban observation.

The beginning of a dilemma that links less common articulations between knowledges, without denying traditional scientific methods, proves fruitful in the urban apprehension and in its symbolic and cultural production. Therefore, this is an analysis of theoretical conceptual bias that intent to compose, prior to reading and application on a specific city, a theoretical aid for further studies.

Considering that traditional research practices on the city may not be enough to understand its complexity, the need to explore new apprehension forms of the contemporary urban experience emerges here.

Thus, the reason for this paper is an attempt to debate the expansion of methodological diversity – or, at least, the development of information sources, and identification of other possible analysis approaches – in the study of cities, their management and planning. In order to do so, it is based on the hypothesis that there are investigative emptinesses in urban studies and the Literature allows, through an interdisciplinary perspective still little explored - and also presenting itself as a methodological tool -, to fill these gaps, either by the content of their narratives, or by the capacity of contextual analysis concerning the city (real or fictional). The discussion turns to an accentuate relationship between scientific fields that are, at first sight, distant (urban space and literature), complementing studies previously published in this area by other researchers and also by the author herself.

## Literature as an urban method

To develop urban researches, projects or plans, the tendency is to compose a “pendular” analysis between exploratory thoughts (divergent search, increase of the repertoire, difficulties to propose concrete solutions) and evaluative thoughts (convergent grouping of ideas, selection and hierarchization); and thus understand the contributions from different disciplines and their useful and beneficial approaches to the city.

The interdisciplinary approach of scientific fields, processing and internalizing their different knowledges, synthesizing and seeking possible convergences results in the conscious construction of ideas and the possible paths these ideas travel along. Literature can provide clues to the richer understanding of the urban space, but the inverse relationship is also true: “space has been a multiperspective topic in literary studies” (Alves; Queiroz, 2013, p. 458).

Admittedly, the interpretation of the urban and urbanized space inserted in the literary world has its bases on analytical constructions of who writes it and, after that, of who reads it. In other words, the author’s and the reader’s experience and practice of city space are fundamental for the construction and transfer of the idea through literary narrative.

Proust complements this idea affirming that an author can only evoke the desire for answers; and the reflection about these issues is up to the reader. The wisdom of one (the reader’s) begins when the other (the author’s) comes to its end: “This is the value of reading and also its insufficiency”<sup>1</sup> (Proust, [1905] 2016, p. 31, own translation). Writing and reading therefore constitute transmitter tools in the way they describe, expose, narrate and think about living in the city. This symbiosis between the projection

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<sup>1</sup> Original text: “*Esse é o valor da leitura e também sua insuficiência*”.

and the interpretation of an urban reality assists the articulation between memory-narrative-history and, consequently, results in an explicit process of transfer of ideas.

In this sense, Shama (1995) claims that:

The city neither is nor was exactly what the writers have told us. In fact their work reflects a set of preconceptions, common knowledge, and experiences (including their own), reproducing and reinventing landscapes. [...] The readers share the description of these spaces and mentally assimilate the geography. This relationship is separate from the described realism: once a vision is created, the metaphors become more real than their referents and become part of the scenarios (pp. 60-61).

Once language goes beyond the simple function of transmitting information, being intrinsically linked to aspects that involve and define individual and social human relations (Arraes, 2011), it is understood that a text carries, within itself, ideologies that represent reality and become a means of reflection on it. Thereby, it is possible to discuss how the evolutionary characteristics of the cities are printed in literary works while the rigorous analysis of these works support the evaluation of the urban context, whether in socioeconomic, historical or geospatial fields. So “the generic and discursive hybridisation of the novel reflects the hybridisation that forms the very essence of modern city life” (Cholupský; Grmelová, 2010, p. 5).

Victor Hugo, in one of his classics<sup>2</sup>, wrote “**architecture is the great book of humanity**, the principal expression of man in his different stages of development, either as a force or as an intelligence<sup>3</sup>” (Hugo, [1831] 2009, p. 275, own translation, highlighted by me). Thus, one risks to affirm that the city, composed in its concreteness by the architecture, is also this great book, since “not only the form of edifices, but the sites selected for them, revealed the thought which they represented”<sup>4</sup> (*ibidem*, p. 277, own translation).

There are many possibilities for Literature to be an instrument of study reflection; multiple are also the methodological paths for the understanding of urban complexities. Both – literature and city – are filled by a plurality of voices, authors, discussions and themes. When it is verified that one of the recurrent inputs for literary production is related to the urban sphere, this became a source of reflection on cities’ diachronic evolution and spatial attributes.

[...] it’s impossible to even think literature without any spatial context. In many cases writers choose settings for their stories which have a ‘real world counterpart’ – and they design these settings in a rather realistic way, sometimes even that realistic that one could as well use the novels in question as guidebooks to the described

<sup>2</sup> **Notre-Dame de Paris**, or **The Hunchback of Notre Dame**, was originally published in 1831.

<sup>3</sup> Original text: “[...] l’architecture est le grand livre de l’humanité, l’expression principale de l’homme à ses divers états de développement, soit comme force, soit comme intelligence”.

<sup>4</sup> Original text: “Et non seulement la forme des édifices mais encore l’emplacement qu’ils se choisissaient révélait la pensée qu’ils représentaient”.

region or city. But literature has infinite options to deal with space [...] (Piatti et. al, 2009, p. 180).

Again the city as an object in permanent transience bears a diversity of speeches and views from inhabitants challenged to understand the almost illegible dimension of urban space. Thus, multiple literary inspirations emerge either directly or indirectly, introducing the city as a simple narrative character or mere scenery. So it is with Paris to Honoré de Balzac, Émile Zola, Charles Baudelaire and Victor Hugo himself; London to Charles Dickens; St. Petersburg to Fyodor Dostoyevsky; Lisbon to Eça de Queirós, Cesário Verde and José Cardoso Pires; Buenos Aires to Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Roberto Arlt and Ricardo Piglia; Rio de Janeiro to Machado de Assis, Lima Barreto, João do Rio, Marques Rebelo and Rubem Fonseca; São Paulo to Mario de Andrade; Belo Horizonte to Pedro Nava and Carlos Drummond; Manaus to Milton Hatoum; and so many other possible examples (Gomes, 1997; Jazar, 2015; Ultramar; Jazar, 2016).

The interdisciplinary debates began in the 1960s and 1970s, and their application may be associated with several related knowledge domains (Floriani, 2004). By proposing this interdisciplinary methodology between city and literature, an attempt is made to emphasize the contributions brought by the literary narratives, besides the technical urbanism books, to the urban management and planning. In order to make it happen, consecrated literary works were analyzed, always focusing in space descriptions presented by the authors, and subsequent comparison with the urban reality of each city addressed. It allows then to determine at what levels it is possible to establish relations between those fields and in what aspects they become influenced and influencers.

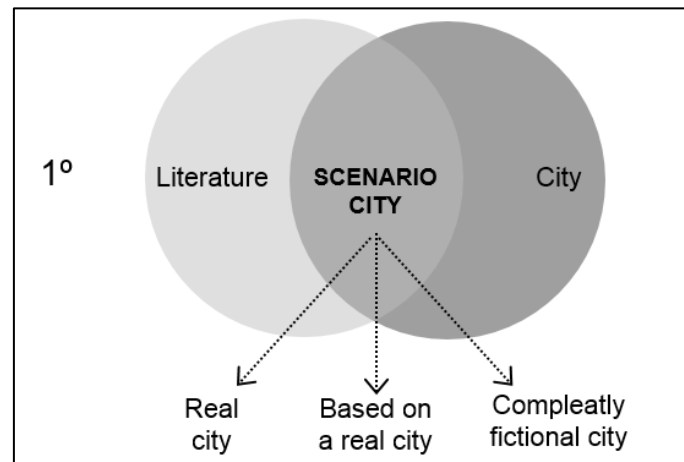
## Reading the cities

From what has been presented so far, reading the city from a literary view demonstrated to be viable, but the approaches of this relation are distinct. It is possible to identify different forms of interpretation of space in literature, and they are separated here into three categories: the city as literary scenery, the city as narrative protagonist, and the city as an object of study – in urbanism.

The first relation could be considered more usual because it encompasses the spatial contextualization of the literary narrative, corresponding to the presentation of territorial and geographical characteristics and giving the city the scenery role; the urban becomes an element of support for the story structure. This representation substantiates the experience of the individual in the urban space, where the city is the scene of actions, wills and fundamental impulses for the personal development of these characters. “The city itself becomes reduced to a single identifiable delineated image, a quantifiable entity the character ‘calculates’ and psychologically creates to organize entire matrices of modern social conditions and stimuli” (McKeown, 2004, p. 6).

This classification is here subdivided again into three typologies (see Figure 1): i) an explicit indication and / or description of real cities; ii) description / construction of fictional cities from obvious allusions to real ones; iii) conception of fictitious urban centers without any link with reality (Ultramari; Jazar, 2016).

**Figure 1 - Scenario City**



Source: Jazar, 2015 (adapted).

The objective description of real cities in literature is a “rescue” of geographical spaces into the storytelling – even if it is adapted. Commonly, as Piatti et al. (2009, p.180) affirm, the authors “design these settings in a rather realistic way, sometimes even that realistic that one could as well use the novels in question as guidebooks to the described region or city”. This is observed, for example, in ***Os Maias*** (1888), by Eça de Queirós, in which the descriptions precisely given of Lisbon’s streets allow mapping churches, hotels, squares, corners, shops, monuments, avenues and other peculiarities of a European urban scene that, at that time, tried to reproduce the Parisian model of the boulevards. Similarly, Machado de Assis can be quoted in Rio de Janeiro, whose works, such as ***Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*** (1881) and ***Dom Casmurro*** (1899), related the specificities of that former Brazilian national capital. It is also possible to mention the medieval construction of Paris by Victor Hugo in ***Notre-Dame de Paris*** (1831), or the multiple references to London’s streets and monuments in ***Oliver Twist*** (1838), by Charles Dickens. In a slightly different way, Jorge Luis Borges also builds his hometown, not always describing it with such precision, but using Buenos Aires as a setting in many pieces of his work (Padrão, 2008).

The fictional space, therefore, can be represented in the literature in different ways:

It can be partly or completely invented [...]; it can be a crossfading of two spaces [...]; it can be an existing and known region combined with fictitious elements [...], it might be a likely place with an invented name, only vaguely localised [...] or an existing region remodeled [...] (Piatti et al., 2009, p. 180).

In case of fictional cities construction based on real spaces, one of the most significant examples is Macondo by Gabriel García Márquez, in ***Cien años de soledad*** (1967); the Colombian city of Aracataca – the author's native land – inspired the environment

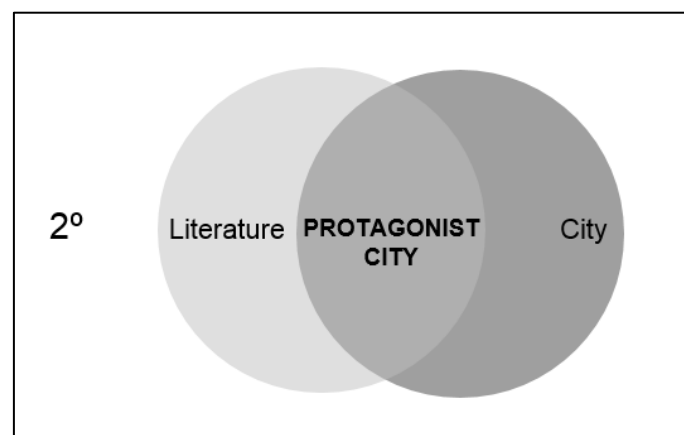
where the Buendía's genealogical line was developed. Lima (2008) also points out the examples of Marcel Proust, in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913), and William Faulkner in *The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963) who "founded" their own cities - Combray and Yoknapatawpha, representations of Illiers (France) and Lafayette (Mississippi, USA), respectively.

The last group is that of fictitious cities, those truly invented; here, the narrative descriptions of urban structures are not linked to any specific real city. One of the most representative examples is Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili* (1972), in which Marco Polo describes his journey through the fifty-five cities of the Mongol Empire to the Emperor Kublai Khan and proposes multiple reflections over real cities. The fictional, then, can assume a complex symbolic character (Gomes, 1999; Neitzel, 2002; Jazar, 2015).

From these three sub-types, it is identified that in the city-scenario model there is a literary tendency to value the character, its actions and social accomplishments above the place in which these occur. Consequently, as Ultramari and Jazar (2016) point out, this suggests multiple interpretations that focus on socioeconomic dynamics, urban cultural conflicts and diversities, and especially on the experience of space.

In the same bias of the city-scenario, the city-protagonist emerges (see Figure 2) – as the second category identified here –, which also corresponds to analysis of literary narratives, but deepening the treatment given to urban space in the construction of the plot. Here, an atmosphere that conditions the story replaces a mere characterization of the location where the character's actions reverberates: "narrated events could not occur at another time, in another way, and especially in another place" (Ultramari; Jazar, 2016, own translation).

**Figure 2 - Protagonist City**



Source: Jazar, 2015 (adapted).

As city becomes more important in narrative context, according to Howe (1971),

[...] there occur major changes in regard to permissible subjects, settings, and characters. The idea of literary decorum is radically transformed, perhaps

destroyed. Literature gains a new freedom; everything, which may be too much, is now possible (IV, para. 7).

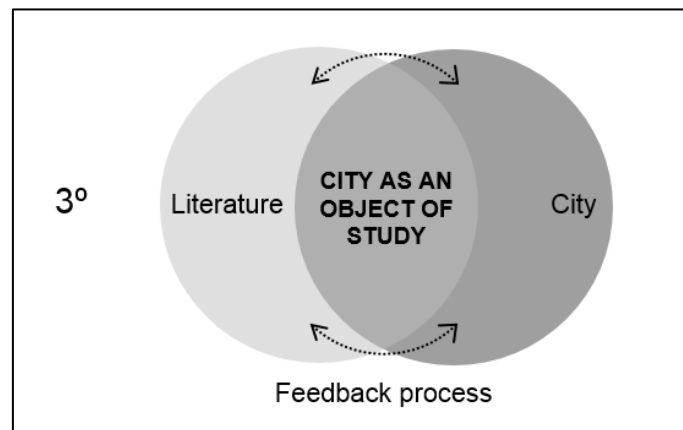
In addition, the concept of *flâneur* becomes essential for the cities' literary construction. Initially explored by Baudelaire in relation to Paris' descriptions of the nineteenth-century, the image of a wandering observer who reports the details of urban life to an unknown reader, at those times, consolidates one process of modernity representation. In contrast, the physical aspects of the urban landscape – such as land use, transportation, urban design, infrastructure, and natural resources – are essential to motivate the insightful perspective of this insightful vision of this spectator of space (Milburn, 2009).

Despite being susceptible to different interpretations and further discussions, this analysis considers that the city-protagonist can be exemplified by works such as **Les mystères de Paris** (1843), by Eugène Sue; **Bleak House** (1853) and **A tale of two cities** (1859) by Charles Dickens. Also mentioning **Ulysses** (1922), by James Joyce; **Mistérios do Rio** (1924), by Benjamin Costallat, and; **Down and out in Paris and London** (1933) by George Orwell. In these books, the descriptions of urban spaces are obligatorily based on real cities; however, these representations do not support a simple panorama perspective, once that they influence the plot: these works could not have been developed in another city but Paris, London or Rio de Janeiro, respectively.

This idea of urban identity, however, has been losing strength over the years. Globalization followed by a process of cultural homogenization, deterritorialization, and standardization affects the design of spaces (Santos, 1996, 2000; Harvey, 1992). We are living a city of non-space (Augé, 1992), with fluid, virtual and impersonal relations, its representation becomes a surface reflection of a generic urban center and not a specific one; creating a "city stamp", replicated almost indistinctly throughout the world. From the moment this starts to happen, the city-protagonist succumbs to a few urban exemplars who are able to maintain their importance, normally, in consequence of some geographical peculiarities. This is the case, for example, of **Dois Irmãos** (2000), by Milton Hatoum, where Manaus' rivers imposes spatial, urban and social configurations.

Finally, aside the categories that the city is literally inserted in stories and narratives, the third and last approach identified here treats the city as an object of study belonging to technical works of Urbanism (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3 - City as an object of study**

Source: Jazar, 2015 (adapted).

Here, the city is also taken as protagonist, however in a specialized / technical literature. Urbanism proposes the study of the city through a more complex and heterogeneous trend, encompassing the dissensions and tensions of space, adding physical-natural concerns and social issues. Information and observations from different disciplines and urban aspects are taken for consistent analyses; anthropology, culture and memory become relevant particulars to construct the image of cities in literary productions.

The bibliography for this category is extensive, however, some titles emerge as "classics". This is the case of **The Death and Life of Great American Cities** (1961), by Jane Jacobs, about New York and its compartments organized by streets, sidewalks, neighborhoods and parks that guarantee diversities of uses, populations, landscapes, etc. Another example is **The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects** (1961), by Lewis Mumford, which – excluding regions of Spain, Latin America, Palestine, Western Europe and former Soviet Union, as the author himself declares – presents an extensive and meticulous analysis about the development of urban forms, functions, and consequences. In **Storia della città** (1975), Leonardo Benevolo promotes, through detailed studies, the urban history in Europe and the Near East, whose evolutions of society culminate in the development of modern city. Kevin Lynch's **The Image of the City** (1960) presents elementary concepts of urban design and space perception; the proposed method of mental maps<sup>5</sup> essentially applied in three North American cities (Boston, New Jersey and Los Angeles) allowed the identification of basic elements for city interpretation. There is also the book **Cities for a Small Planet** (1997), in which Richard Rogers presents a critical assessment of cities and their impacts on the environment, pointing out how social and cultural values perpetuate the inequality of natural available resources; it is followed by a call for change and search for answers on a path for sustainable cities.

It is relevant to realize that this category works in a constant process of feedback: at the same time that the actual city is the object of inspiration and influence for production of

<sup>5</sup> Mental representations / images of urban areas "classified into five types of [city] elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks" (LYNCH, 1960, p. 46).

various literary works in terms of their spatial, social, economic, technological, infrastructural – or other possible topics to be discussed –, this corresponding literature becomes an instrument / appliance of great importance for urban planning and transformations in the real city.

That is, from interpretations and surveys, one can risk hypotheses, diagnoses and trends that later have the potential to play the role of proposals, projects, laws, norms. Here are considered growth and development indices of urban areas; transformations in the urbanization profile; increases in need for infrastructure; qualitative and quantitative spaces aspects; political, economic, legal, social, environmental and technological contexts. This more specialized literature – looking at the city as an object of study – searches more frequently for planning and management purposes and actions.

In all these cases, the city assumes different values for the literary context; in the same way that the Literature indicates different possibilities of facing urban characteristics. Through the set of authors and works selected here, this exploratory discussion points to significant adherences in the city / literature relation, emphasizing the relevance of multi and interdisciplinary studies in the urban question.

## **Final considerations**

This article has the objective of stimulating the discussion about possible investigative emptiness in the urban context and the perspective of filling these gaps through the interdisciplinary approach and the transfer of ideas process between literature and city. The initial discussion about literary narrative as a method to achieve a proper urban interpretation highlighted the importance of the roles of the writer and the reader in this procedure of reading the space, allowing a certain degree of subjectivity regarding the grouping of works in front of the three categories proposed in this work: scenario city, protagonist city, and city as object of study.

By understanding that city is a complex and multifaceted object, as well as the disciplines of Urbanism and Literature, it is important to assemble these knowledges that related these heterogeneous elements articulating the fragments of urban experience in different contexts. It is emphasized here questions about production and representation of the city space (Lefebvre, 1970, 1971), and (to a lesser extent) its narrative or design structure consequences. That is, the urban allows multiple approaches with different disciplines, and the importance of non-specialized discourse is to awaken understandings about the formation of the city, society and culture in different dimensions, which go beyond traditional proposals.

The proposal presented here was precisely the expansion of thinking the urban space as a theoretical and methodological paradigm bearing new combinations of procedures, knowledge and possibilities of analysis. Therefore, it was an attempt to validate the approach between scientific fields through an unconventional perspective that allows to

impel themes that, at first sight, did not arouse interest or have been forgotten for a long time in the scientific production on cities, also contributing to the expansion of the diversity of sources and information data and reference in this field.

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