The City as a Postmodern Metaphor

The city may be involved in metaphorical strategies in two positions, either – as in William Mitchell's netbased city – as the known category with which we reach out to the partly unknown phenomenon. Or – as in Honoré de Balzac's placebound city – as the partly unknown phenomenon we try to subsume under known categories

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Literature and urban culture

In cultural analysis the theoretical focus on post-modernism and the historical focus on the metropolis is often taken to be one of a kind. But, in fact, this double focus is oxymoronic in nature. The term 'metropolis' means 'mother city' or 'mother of cities'. This term is based on the assumption that there is an original city, *either* in the historical sense of a first city from which other cities emerge like Athens or Rome in Antiquity or Paris in the nineteenth century, *or* in the ideal sense of a prototypical city, real or not, on which other cities are modeled, as is familiar, for example, from the urban planning of functionalism or from the recirculation of grid structure on the North American continent. At any rate, the idea is that there is a specific place that, self-evidently, as it were, is more truly urban than anything else. However, the other term of the title, post-modernity, means almost everything that goes against and even destroys this notion of the city and of place in general. But, nevertheless, without a highly developed urbanity, postmodernity would never have existed or been thought of.

More often than not, this contradiction is subsumed under the unifying umbrella of 'urban culture', which seems to allow us to avoid predetermining whether the postmodern urban condition is contradictory or not. The decision is left open to the actual dynamics of history, where we are confronted with various manifestations of urban culture through history, the term itself being considered historically neutral. But urban culture is too complex to just be a trivial fact, because it is always an imagined reality – 'reality' because it is a material fact whatever its definition might be, and 'imagined' because its conceptualization, the basic understanding of it, does not automatically follow from historical urban reality all by itself. Hence, such an understanding requires self-reflection through interpretation, analysis and theory. And as urban culture in this respect always rests on partly incompatible features, literature and other art forms play an active role in this process, making it an imagined reality that we can come to grips with. Among the art forms, this function involves literature in particular, because literature, as the verbal art form par excellence, is self-reflexive by nature, and because both written literature as well as systematic thinking is an urban phenomenon – emerging in, circulating in, and emanating from the city, postmodern or not. So, whenever the question arises of what urban culture actually refers to and it cannot be answered but nevertheless *has* to be answered, literature comes into play.

Urban culture

Does urban culture as '*urban* culture' refer to a specific urban variety of a vast phenomenon called 'culture', the city being a *species* of the *generic* term culture? Or, does it refer to a certain particular but restricted aspect of the city, that of 'urban *culture*' as distinct from urban economy, urban social structure, urban material layout, urban life style and so forth?

But urban culture as a quality of the city is also taken in a third and wider sense as an expression of the ubiquity and general pervasiveness of the Urban, of its very comprehensiveness. This is the late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century contribution to the study of the modern city as a generalized metropolis: it is a cultural space in its own right encompassing the entire scope of human life, also outside its physical boundaries, from stomach to consciousness. Also the welfare state, or more broadly speaking the welfare society, is generated in and by the city and transformed according to urban development, and it may vanish if we are no longer able to specify the concept of urban culture. Here the *specific* cultural aspect of the city becomes its *general* characteristics, an interpretation of urban culture that is an effect of historical urban development itself.

Today, urban culture mostly refers vaguely to the Urban in the last and broader sense of the term, thereby presupposing that its position as a delimitable totality is challenged by, interrelated to and different from, maybe even opposed to, other subcultural totalities, and that it exercises a more important effect on them than vice versa. Our conceptual insecurity is born together with this historical reality of the city. From Antiquity to the dawn of Modernity the city still represented a self-reflective position vis-à-vis, first, the cosmos and later society as a whole, its clearly marked non-urban features and regions included. They became urban derivatives, as evident in the works of Augustine, Dante, Balzac, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Dos Passos, Joyce, Döblin and many others. But in post-modernity the alleged synechdochical or metonymical role of the city vanishes, simply because what is urban and what is social in general become undistinguishable. Maybe the electronic media and their technology take over the city's position as the place of social self-reflection, as suggested by William Mitchell's *The City of Bits* (1995), to which I shall return shortly.

But is this development true? Hasn't the city always been more problematical and complex than our images of it? Was it ever a specific totality as a culture? And is this assumption, true or not, a good point of departure for anticipating the postmodern Urban in our millennium? Isn't the label 'urban culture' simply made up by some people for whom the Urban at a certain point in time was experienced as so vast and so foreign compared to familiar social spaces that it by *that* fact alone, but not because of any detailed internal understanding of the Urban in itself, has to be seen as a specific totality that could be called urban culture apart from other social spaces? A kind of conceptual defense in order not to be completely absorbed by the Urban. Don't forget that the Urban as Balzac saw it was not something he experienced but something he imagined on the basis of a generalized perception of details.

When we are taking issue with the Urban in our century we are in a certain sense in the same situation as Balzac: we are free to speculate, simply because it is not yet there, although urban structures with an anticipating dynamics are already in place. But it is also important that we do not just *prognostically* set up the prolongation and transformation of the existing state of affairs. Such a way of thinking might force us to select only those features that are most easily adaptable to the prognostic methods at hand, a strategy that is most caricatured of course in statistics and in economic prophecies. The free speculation I'm hinting at is different: it addresses the basic questions of how to *conceptualize* or reconceptualize the city.

While *prognostic* procedures produce an image of a probable future – which may be very useful in certain limited contexts – an *imaginative conceptualization* produces new ideas for which we do not yet have any image. The first approach suggests answers, while the last opens questions and is theoretical in the Greek sense – 'theorein' meaning to overlook. We are, as it were, overlooking a landscape, many of the concrete details of which we do not yet see, filled as it is with blanks. In that respect, asking questions concerning the city is a theoretical issue. The prognostic approach anchors the Urban-to-be in a variety of planning-adaptable disciplines; it outlines our possibilities. The conceptual one challenges our possibilities, making the urban question a deeply philosophical one concerning conditions for humanly produced ways of human presence, and thus anchoring it in the humanities. That is why literature is important.

Dwelling and communication

If we think of a city as exemplifying a culture in the sense of an imagined totality in its own right – the common way to use the term 'urban culture' – then it makes sense to ask how we enter it. It must be possible to be inside it or outside it. When I drive on a French highway and spot the physical outline of the cityscape, signposts will tell me that I have to proceed through a

basic dichotomous procedure: I can go toward 'centre ville' or 'autres directions'. If I follow the first option, further dichotomies will help my orientation, 'centre ville' always being one of the options. If instead I take 'autres directions' a more open-ended set of choices will help me around the city on a 'périphérique', most frequently with 'autres directions' as one of the options.

Now, approaching Trenton, the capital of New Jersey, the situation is quite different: I take Exit 7A from the New Jersey Turnpike in order to arrive in Trenton via Interstate 195. To be able to find my way I have to know beforehand that the three-digit number beginning with an odd number indicates a road leading to the city (while 295 is a beltway). However, following Interstate 195 I am still confused. There are no road signs for the centre of the city or for downtown. But at every exit there are names of major streets (Kennedy Boulevard, Market Street and so on), but I do not know which one actually leads me into the city. Asking people for the centre is no help: "Do you mean the Capitol or the public parking lot near the police headquarters?" How should I know? I cross the Delaware River a couple of times before finally, by chance as it were, reaching a kind of centre.

The French example clearly reflects or presupposes the notion of urban culture as a totality, even as a centred totality with the circular metaphors of centre and periphery, whereas the American example reflects or presupposes the city as a fuzzy network. The former will have Place des Vosges as an emblematic site, the latter Times Square; the former makes *dwelling* the pivotal feature dominating other aspects of urbanized human presence, the latter *communication* the overall characteristic determining other aspects of the Urban. A prognostic approach would ask for the most probable dominant form of the two in respect to the future city and, I guess, opt for the American. A conceptual approach, however, would ask for whether these two simultaneously present urban layouts constitute an urban culture and how they co-exist as dissonant phenomena or even as different urban cultures. The point of view and imaginative conceptualization will comprehend the two positions in dialogue as an unsolved tension – "this city which is always on its way, always in the process of being something else. This may be why it is too difficult to perceive it, especially for those who live in it", as Walter Benjamin's friend Franz Hessel aptly puts it (1968: 14).

The square and the city

If we now follow urban planner Rob Krier into a city to find a square, his reflection on this specific element in the urban layout reflects the problems I have been touching upon up till now. In his book *Urban Space* he remarks on, among other things, the following aspect of the square:

This spatial model - that is, the square - is admirably suited to residential use. In the private sphere it corresponds to the

inner courtyard or atrium. The courtyard house is the oldest type of town house. In spite of its undisputed advantages, the courtyard house has now been discredited. It is all too easily subject to ideological misinterpretation, and people are afraid that this design may imply enforced conformity to a communal lifestyle or a particular philosophy. [...]

In the public sphere, the square has undergone the same development. Market places, parade grounds, ceremonial places, squares in front of churches and town halls etc., all relics of the Middle Ages, have been robbed of their original functions and their symbolic content and in many places are only kept up through the activities of conservationists.

[...] No contemporary public squares have been laid out which could be compared with urban squares like the Grande Place in Brussels, the Place Stanislas in Nancy, the Piazza del Campo in Siena, the Place Vendôme and the Place des Vosges in Paris, the Plaza Mayor in Madrid, the Plaza Real in Barcelona etc. This spatial type awaits rediscovery. This can only occur firstly when it can be endowed with meaningful functions, and secondly is planned in the right place within the overall town layout. (Krier 1979: 19).

I am not interested in discussing the somewhat nostalgic stance taken by Krier, but rather the structure and elements of his argument.

First, a certain urban element, the square, is seen from one point of view, as a model for a dwelling place and, from another, as a site of communication, a dichotomy overarching – to use a appropriate metaphor in this context – the dichotomy between private and public. Second, the square enters in a relation of *pars-pro-toto* to the Urban as a whole. This also implies, of course, that the reduction of functions reflects what is going on in the city as a whole – by way of example, the Disneyfication of Times Square. Third, the city is seen as a closed system inside which functions may change, be exchanged, reevaluated and so forth. Fourth, change, exchange and reevaluation take place between levels of the urban system: from economical and symbolic functions to non-economical functions and new symbolic meanings; or, from being a node in a social structure the square is taken as a kind of philosophical statement about the entire urban structure. Fifth, the system evolves over time, producing itself the dynamics that produces the changes.

Thus, underlying Krier's argument concerning the square is the basic assumption that the city is a dynamic totality where material, social and symbolic levels work together and change each other and their mutual relationship. His argument presupposes that we have an urban culture that generates its own norms – a house, a square – that can be rediscovered and reinvested because of the urban development itself; in other words: one does not need to go beyond the city to take a look at it and its alternative possibilities; the city itself contains a meta-urban level from which it can be evaluated.

It is not Krier's concern whether this process leads us to see the city – as a cultural totality – that expands structurally and symbolically beyond its physical borders and thereby moves these borders and changes the external effects of the city.

Exemplification and generative metaphors
Had Krier been preoccupied with this meta-reflexive aspect of the city it would have taken two forms:

First, a reflection on the city would be a reflection on the structure and functions of society at large; in a sense the city *is* the meta-level of society. The city enters into a part-whole relationship with society, a relationship called *exemplification* by philosophers like Nelson Goodman (1969: 52ff): A certain element of material nature refers to a larger structure of the same material of which it is entirely a part, such as a color sample we put on the wall before painting it, which is different from a picture of the color in the catalogue that we use to decide whether this is the color we want. Thus, the city is part of the same social structure of which it is a condensed version.

The second thing implied from the meta-status of the city is that the city itself may become a core *metaphor* for the understanding of human life as a permanent series of changes and exchanges inside a given framework. In that sense it becomes what social scientist Donald Schön calls a *generative metaphor* (1996: 137-163), that is, a metaphor which in a non-theoretical way offers a list of features with a certain cohesiveness that must be dealt with theoretically in order for us to understand the phenomenon to which the metaphor refers. Thus, the liquid metaphor of a stream was a generative metaphor propelling the understanding of electricity in the nineteenth century.

An exemplification and a generative metaphor are both different from the symbolic role that the city has when the material city is seen as, for example, an iconic sign of the heavenly city as in Augustine, when Babylon is interpreted in the Bible through the image of the big whore, or when the city is seen as an iconic sign of the vital centre of the universe, the sun, in Tomassio Campanella's *Città del sole* of the Renaissance. In such cases the city is not, as in exemplification, a genuine part of the universe to which it refers; neither is it a dynamic and heterogeneous metaphor calling for further and innovative conceptualization, but a static and well-delimited sign evoking already established homogeneous notions of the world, as is the case in traditional symbolism. A generative metaphor initiates a process of cognition that also changes the limits of the metaphor itself; it does not replace this process by a non-tenable analogy such as, for example, when the city is imagined as the sun of the terrestrial world, or when, later on, social structures in much nineteenth-century realism and naturalism are seen metaphorically as nature and thereby as inaccessible to planned and intentional change and only as fate or just bad luck.

If the ubiquity of the Urban has become a generally accepted fact, its meta-function as both exemplification and generative metaphor is enhanced. Our predeces-

sors from the nineteenth century produced analyses, fictions, pictures of an urban reality of a future-invested present they could not grasp completely. They often saw it very traditionally, as a place-bound reality that nevertheless, and in contrast to traditional notions of place, required a double and complementary point of view to be grasped. One could either overlook it panoramically from above as a *structure* but not as a human living space, or one could experience it from street level as a *human living space* but not as an organized structure. No one could occupy these two positions at the same time, let alone subsume them under one metaphorical category. They are complementary in the sense of the work of the physicist Niels Bohr: certain phenomena can only be grasped from two alternating viewpoints that cannot be merged into one. This fact was not yet part of a theoretical language in those days, but mostly accessible in literary fiction, which often used the metaphors of the map and of the maze to represent the two viewpoints.

A new dual viewpoint
What I am suggesting here is that a new dual viewpoint will be produced by the Urban and define its new role as a culture. On the one hand, it will *exemplify* the entire society of which it has been the dynamic centre for so long. In the nineteenth century the city was still opposed to what was not or not yet urbanized and did not exemplify it in Goodman's sense. On the other hand, it will become a *generative metaphor* for our understanding of the new dynamics of our lives as multiple intertwined networks – social, electronic and otherwise. Exemplification and generative metaphors engender reflection but don't offer a ready-made imaginative synthesis.

This much to point to the relevant, and I think only relevant, perspective of seeing the city as a culture and not only as a material space: its capacity to be the pivotal point of reflection of our culture as an open-ended dynamics of networks; its meta-function, as it were. This is a new way of seeing the symbolic character of the Urban; it is not a symbol referring to something outside itself – there *is* no outside. Its symbolic character is not an abstract quality independent of or just accidentally attached to its material existence. It is an essential part of its material dynamics, produced and maintained by it. Symbols in that respect are material parts of our world of experience and refer to that world only.

The ubiquity of the Urban is more often than not used to lament the placelessness of urban life or the bewildering confusion and rootlessness of the stressed urbanite, or simply to state that there is no urban culture anymore, because if it is ubiquitous we cannot single it out as something specific that may be labeled culture. Everything is within reach on urban conditions – conditions set up by the media, the Net, ticket outlets for charter tourism, political agendas relating us to people on the other side of the globe we have never met except

on urban conditions, which nevertheless are sufficient to force us to make political, economical or environmental decisions and take action accordingly. Urban experience is enough to see that we are part of their and they of ours. Thus, we enter into a relationship of exemplification. Moreover, urban experience also offers us an image of what the lives of others are or should be like. In other words, we can use our own experience as a generative metaphor – for instance, if we know that their environment is polluted by the same Shell Company that owns the gas station we ourselves find just around the corner.

The city projected on itself on communicative conditions – this is the logic of urban culture. But ubiquity means that the city is both a material and dynamic, expanding structure and at the same time, *because of that* and essentially *embedded* in that material reality, it is a materially based symbolic structure of exemplification and generative metaphorization. That is why it is a place of general reflection.

Regressive metaphors
The two texts I am going to examine show the role of metaphors in the line of generative metaphors: William Mitchell's *The City of Bits* (1995) and Honoré de Balzac's *Ferragus* (1833). If we focus on the function of metaphors and not on their definitions as such, we may say that metaphors are semiotic strategies by which a partly unknown phenomenon is subsumed under a known category, or, alternatively, a known phenomenon is categorized in a new way. In either case the phenomenon is something and something else at the same time, thus dealt with in a way that comes very close to Aristotle's fourth definition in *Poetics*, namely, metaphor by way of analogy. Different things are made similar without their difference being ignored. Metaphors always create or maintain a tension between experience and textual strategy. In this way metaphors are seen as strategies with which we try to grasp a world where what is known and unknown is constantly changing.

This strategy is used in different cultural contexts. First, in order to reach an understanding of phenomena that are new to us, like the new continents in the Renaissance, which were shaped according to the classical images of categories of monsters, miracles, or ideal or strange landscapes taken right out of Pliny's natural history. Second, metaphors are produced in order to approach phenomena which by definition are beyond the reach of direct sense experience – death, paradise, atoms and neutrons, God, the entire universe and so on. Third, we use this strategy when we want to conceptualize phenomena that are known but that change in the course of history from one Protean shape to another, having radical change as part of their nature. They are always known and unknown at the same time. Such phenomena are instantiated by the city and urban culture general.

Therefore, the city may be involved in metaphorical strategies in two positions, either as the known category with which we reach out to the partly unknown phenomenon, or as the partly unknown phenomenon we try to subsume under known categories. My last quotes will show these two strategies at work. To start with, I will present them and briefly analyze them before reaching a conclusion in relation to our understanding of the modern and postmodern city.

In *The City of Bits* William Mitchell uses the traditional city as a metaphor for the electronically engendered network reality.

(1) Spatial cities […] are not only condensations of activity to maximize accessibility and promote face-to-face interaction, but are also elaborate structures for organizing and controlling access. They are subdivided into districts, neighborhoods, and turfs, legally partitioned by property lines and jurisdictional boundaries […] So it is on the Net, as well, but the game gets some new rules: structures of access and exclusion are reconstructed in entirely nonarchitectural terms. […] Places on the Net are software constructions. […] The network is the urban site before us, an invitation to design and construct the City of Bits (capital of the twenty-first century), (2) just as, so long ago, a narrow peninsula beside the Maeander became the place of Miletos. […] We have reinvented the human habitat. Back when it took many months for an exchange of letters between an isolated Australian settlement and a foreign city, most of a citizen's interactions were necessarily with other inhabitants of the same settlement. […] This unprecedented, hyperextended habitat will transcend national boundaries; the increasingly dense and widespread connectivity that it supplies will quickly create opportunities – the first in the century of humankind – for planning and designing truly worldwide communities. Just as the ancient *polis* provided an agora, markets, and theaters for those living within its walls, the twenty-first-century bitsphere will require a growing number of virtual gathering places, exchanges, and entertainment spots for its plugged-in populace. (Mitchell1995: 21-22, 24, 167).

Here the city is used – like the city in, for example, Leibniz's *La monadologie* – as a metaphor with which he approaches the structure of the infinite and unknown cosmos. This is the ideal classical and premodern city – a homogeneous dwelling place with a clearly delimited outline and a functional layout with a transparent structure. In Mitchell's case the unknown phenomenon is the Net. In his text the city is really seen as a metropolis, that is, both an original historical site and a model, but to the effect that the Net as the basic dynamic of the postmodernity of communicative interaction is turned into a very classical and premodern phenomenon by way of the metaphorical strategy. However, this paradox disappears in the text by means of Mitchell's actual metaphorical strategy. The ultramodern or postmodern is made accessible on the condition that it is grasped as something premodern.

The basic logic of Mitchell's strategy is *repetition*. The city as metaphor is repeated to the extent that we are hardly able to see the Net as anything but a premodern city. Also the features of the Net are repeated, but simply as a list evoked by the urban metaphor. There is no independent analysis of the Net, just an enumeration of its not-yet-existing structures of interaction. It is almost an incantation of the Net, which brings it close to the way in which the city has been depicted throughout history as a utopian place with divine or cosmic dimensions. Thus, from the city is taken both a certain utopian rhetoric and a series of features.

A proper analysis of the Net is replaced by a slight change in the perspective of the city, which is produced in two steps indicated by numbers in the above quotation. First, we have a static and systematic opposition between the Net as new and immaterial *versus* the city as an old and material entity, the effect being that this opposition makes the Net known and imagined as material through an urban analogy. Second, we also have a dynamic and historical opposition between the Net as a phenomenon of the present that is engaged in shaping the future *versus* the city as the phenomenon in the past that also emerged as a new phenomenon shaping the future of mankind. What the city once did is now redone by the Net. The unknown future is brought into the present as something known via the metaphorical strategy.

But the city referred to for that purpose is the classical closed, walled, secured, finite city of static social positions and cultural values, a city that is the exact opposite of everything that makes the Net dynamic. The repetitive use of the city blurs the rhetorical shift from the systematic to the historical approach, thus erasing the fact that the urban metaphor offers neither a systematic nor a historical analysis of the Net, as the above-mentioned generative metaphor may do. Instead, it replaces the analysis by a regressive orientation of the future toward the past, behind the superficial, hyper-trendy verbalization.

Why is this so? First, because it is not possible metaphorically to exploit the city that is contemporary with the Net in this way. It is as open and indefinable as the Net itself. They go together and might both require a new generative metaphor. Second, the paradoxical nature of the city cannot be grasped by a metaphor, which, as in Mitchell, is turned into a kind of prognosis of the future – the Net today will operate like the city in Antiquity. The imaginative conceptualization requires metaphorical strategies of higher complexity.

Progressive metaphors
This is where Balzac comes in. He is aware of the fact that "it is necessary to forge words to express phenomena without a name"[1], as he states in relation to the occult phenomena that deeply fascinated him, such as the daguerreotype, which he regards as ghostlike. The city is one such phenomenon, too. But in order to see it that way, first he has to free it from the classical under-

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[1] "il est nécessaire de forger des mots pour exprimer des phénomènes innommés" (Balzac 1966: 207, my translation.)

standing and then "forge words" to show its new and unknown nature. The opening of *Ferragus* (1833) reads in the English translation:

[(1) In Paris there are certain streets which are in as much disrepute as any man branded with infamy can be. There are also noble streets; then there are just simply decent, and, so to speak, adolescent streets about whose morality the public has not yet formed an opinion. There are murderous streets; streets which are more aged than aged dowagers; respectable streets; streets which are always clean; streets which are always dirty; working-class, industrious, mercantile streets. In short, the streets of Paris have human qualities and such a physiognomy as leaves us with impressions against which we can put up no resistance. […] Some of them, like the Rue Montmartre, are like mermaids – lovely heads, but fish-tails at the other extremity. […] (2) If you wander along the streets of the Île Saint-Louis, look for no other cause of the uneasy sadness that takes possession of you than the solitariness, the dejected appearance of its houses and forsaken mansions. This island, the cemetery so to speak of the Old Regime tax-farming magnates, is as it were the Venice of Paris. Stock Exchange Square is all rattle, bustle and harlotry. It is beautiful only in the moonlight, at two in the morning; in the day-time an epitome of Paris, at night-time a dream-vision from Greece. Is not the Rue Traversière-Saint-Honoré a street of ill fame, with its shabby, double-windowed houses in which, as you mount from storey to storey, you climb upwards to vice, crime and poverty? […] (3) These observations, which outside Paris would have no application, will no doubt be comprehensible to those men of thought and study, those poetic voluptuaries who, as they saunter through Paris, are adept at gathering a whole harvest of enjoyable experiences, one which undulates like a field of ripe corn within the city walls – and also to those for whom Paris is the most delightful of monsters: here a pretty woman, farther off a poverty-stricken old hag: here as freshly minted as the coin of a new reign, and in another corner of the town as elegant as a lady of fashion. A monster, certainly, from head to foot: its head is in the garrets, inhabited by men of science and genius; the first floors house the well-filled stomachs; on the ground floor are the shops, the legs and feet, since the busy trot of trade goes in and out of them. […] Every door yawns open and turns on its hinges like the articulations of a huge lobster, invisibly operated by thirty thousand men or women. […] (4) Imperceptibly these articulations begin to crack, movement is communicated[2] from one to another, the streets become noisy with talk. By midday all is alive, the chimneys are smoking, the monster eats; then it roars and stirs its thousand legs. […] he who has not listened to your murmurings between midnight and two in the morning, still knows nothing of the real poetry within you, or the strange, broad contrasts you offer. […] Paris is […] an astounding assemblage of movements, machines and ideas, the city of thousand different romances, the world's thinking-box […] Paris is a sensuous being[3]; every individual, every bit of a house is a lobe in the cellular tissue of that great harlot whose head, heart and unpredictable behaviour are perfectly familiar to them. (Balzac 1833/ 1974: 31ff)

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[2] The original translation has 'joints' and 'passed on'. My suggested translation 'articulations' and 'is communicated' renders the French double meaning better, see below.

[3] The original translation has 'sentient being' for 'créature'. My translation 'sensuous being' renders the neutral meaning of 'créature' as just a 'being' as well as the slightly animal-like meaning.

Balzac reverses the metaphorical strategy of Mitchell by 180 degrees: rather than being the core metaphor, the city is the target for metaphorical strategies taken from elsewhere. This strategy develops in four steps and shows a still highly relevant complexity and an awareness of the very process of inducing meaning into an unknown and permanently changing historical phenomenon, the city, from a vantage point inside its own historical context. Mitchell tries instead to grasp a complex historical phenomenon by stepping out of the historical situation and back to an earlier stage, the classical city. But in doing so he denies both the historical character of the Net and the city. Not so in Balzac.

First of all, Balzac proceeds through a process of *variation* rather than repetition. The realm of metaphorical references is not taken from one source, as in Mitchell, but from a variety of hardly compatible references – monsters, poetry, psychology, technology, nature and so forth, all rooted in the city with which he is confronted. Thus, the city can enter a relationship of exemplification with its cultural context. If this fragmentation of interpretative paradigms and codes on the surface appears as lack of interpretation, on a more profound level it constitutes an essential part of the interpretation of a phenomenon fragmented by nature – it is an "assemblage" and "enjoyable experiences which undulate" Thus, Balzac both describes the city in various ways, metaphorical strategies being one of them, and illuminates the very process of understanding a phenomenon of which he as observer is himself part and parcel. This is a progressive and visionary conceptualization of the city, not a simple prognostic prediction of its future. This process develops in four steps, indicated by numbers in the above quotation.

First, Balzac encapsulates the city in a very traditional metaphorical frame. The city takes on the shape of the people living there, who are seen as unidimensional and functional characters. In terms of characters the basic idea is that the character of a person is made immediately readable by his or her bodily appearance. This is an old notion of how body and mind are interrelated, and was renewed in Balzac's time by the physiognomic theories of Johann Caspar Lavater and Franz Joseph Gall, which were very much cherished by Balzac and left their traces in this quotation. In the opening lines a static city is mirrored by a static conception of humans. In terms of the city the intimate relation between urban space and the human body has been a point of reference since Vitruvius defined spatial proportions of the city from the ideal proportions of the human body in the first century AD. His spatial ideas were active in Renaissance utopian urban thinking and later also in the ideas behind the embellishment of Paris in the eighteenth century. Therefore, Balzac's opening lines can be summed up in a clear statement, self-evident for "the public" inside or outside Paris – "In short, the streets of Paris have human qualities". There is no specific point of view involved. Just as in

Mitchell, for whom a city is a city and that's all there is to it.

The next step constitutes a transition to another situation. The strategy is now taken to its limits – questions pop up, monstrous and inhuman comparisons are introduced, the psychological particularities alluded to are no longer uni- but pluri-dimensional, the general point of view of "the public" is no longer referred to. Instead, a reference is made to a dreamlike vision of a casual urbanite on very particular temporal conditions (night, moonlight). The general observer, "the public", from the first section is turned into an individual, a "you", who ambulates at random in the city.

The third step offers a conclusion very different from the summary of the introductory section. Rather than a general conclusion, we are now only given a conclusion valid for certain groups of Parisians – "those men" with certain professional qualities. The basic assumption of immediate readability that guided us through the opening section is gone. And therefore two new metaphorical strategies are introduced, one of them related to what transgresses the human – the monstrosity of the mixed techno-animal-like appearance beyond the natural proportions of the inhabitants and their experience. What is described cannot be grasped by a single individual from any observation post inside the city. And the view from outside has already been dismissed as irrelevant. Vitruvius and physiognomic studies are obsolete points of reference in this urban space.

Therefore, the fourth step unfolds, already prepared through the third step and based on two new metaphorical references – that of language and poetry. It is already introduced by the third step, which contains references to "poetic voluptuaries" and also metaphorically introduces the terms "articulations" and "is communicated" which in English as in the French original text cover both linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena. And finally, in step four, the life of Paris is called its "poetry" because its contrasts can only be grasped by poetry, as Balzac has just shown. This is the only medium that allows us to reflect on our position in a space and a situation we cannot escape. As a result, the subject who is responsible for the observation and for the literary self-reflection is neither part of the general public, as in the beginning, nor a casual stroller like the "you" in the second and third step. Neither is he just a professional thinker or poet, as singled out in the third step; he is a seduced person – *both* inescapably present as a body in the erotic, monstrous body of Paris, a prostitute, annihilated, made anonymous by this same city, *and* surviving as the narrator of the text, the creator of fictitious worlds based on metaphorical strategies by which he nevertheless conquers the city, makes it *his* city.

The city Balzac envisions is a collective entity that only comes alive on individual conditions, and therefore always requires an observation and a self-reflection in the same move – a presence and a distance. As we are always positioned inside the city, socially and culturally, this distance, necessary for understanding the city and the subject living in it, can only be brought about by generative metaphors that imagine the city as a contradictory entity on all levels, contradictions that cannot be removed unless we betray the urban conditions of life. These contradictions go against the simplistic reductions of Mitchell, in spite of the postmodern attitude he adopts in his jubilant approach to the Net. Instead they require permanent self-reflection, which cannot be performed on the basis of observations alone. Balzac demonstrates the relevant interpretative complexity when he gradually dissolves his way of describing the city as an immediately readable space and, in the same text, specifies the double perspective of dwelling and communication as a tension between the non-human proportions of the city and the human creativity realized in poetic communication. Always inside the city, socially and culturally, Balzac shows how this reflection on both the city and the self can only be realized through a medium other than the city and therefore, as in the end of the quotation, also through a reflection on that medium and its way of positioning the human subject. Balzac anticipates the words of Louis-Ferdinand Céline: "On ne peut pas ne pas vivre dans une ville" : *One cannot* not *live in a city* . The city exemplifies the condition of modern life, but in necessitating metaphorical strategies of imaginary conceptualization, it also makes it possible for us to come to grips with it.

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