

Making Urban Literature in the Latin American Context¹

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I come here as a writer and screenwriter. I am not really a historian. I wanted to talk, based on my personal experience, about what it means the urban literature in Brazil as from the turn of the millennium³.

They say that writers are made when they discover the meaning of the word metaphor. I remember I was between ten and eleven years old when I first understood this figure of speech. I am talking about a word that was very much discussed at home. I come from a family of steelworkers. My grandfather arrived from Italy in 1918. He was a man from Calabria, at the tip of the Italian “boot” - illiterate, who turned into a wagoner when he arrived in Brazil. When you reminded that man about the word “Europe” he used to say “Do not say this word *Europe* or I will pick up a machete.” The European experience of these people was about famine. Europe as a place

of prosperity is a very recent phenomenon. Either you belonged to the villages or you were miserable. For good or for evil, what distributed the income in the European society was the massacre of about eighty million souls throughout the 20th century. We did not have this in Brazil. I come from a very critical moment, a group of immigrants who leave their country of origin...

My father comes from the same social status: he was an unskilled worker who has become literate by the time the Brazilian government began to pay a bit more attention to the education, within the scope of Getúlio Vargas’ dictatorship, in which technical schools began to be built and commissioned, and an important part of the population, illiterate or semi-literate started to be incorporated by the State into the educational system.

Forty years later, I am the first person in my family, of all generations, to arrive to the public university, in this case the University of São Paulo (USP). My family is almost an example of the Brazilian inclusion process throughout the 20th century, start of the 21st one. A journey that passes by demographic explosion, poor income distribution and so on, into a reality that Brazilians know only too well.

The first word that I perceived within the metaphor figure of speech was machete. I remember that my two grandmothers lived near each other. One had seven children, the other eight. All returned together from work. Fifteen uncles and aunts coming back in two or three buses which the companies sent to fetch these people at home, and then delivered them back. Sometimes out of these fifteen people ten came home downcast and uttered the word *machete*. I was about seven or eight years old and used to see those huge men come home saying that word, until I found out that *machete* was the nickname given to large layoffs in the metallurgical industry in Brazil

1 This text is the printed version of the oral presentation submitted by the author in São Paulo in the 2008 edition of the Symposium. This transcription was made by the journalist Felype Falcão [Organizers’ note]

2 Cinema and television screenwriter, play writer, film-maker and author of several works, among which *Declaração Universal do moleque invocado* (Cosac & Naify) and *São Paulo/Brasil* (Dimensão), both publications were finalists of the Jabuti Award in its years of publication. He is co-screenwriter of films such as *Carandiru* (by Hector Babenco – TAM Award for the Brazilian Cinema for the best adapted screenplay of 2003); *Garotas do ABC* (by Carlos Reichenbach), *Cazuza* (by SAndra Werneck – TAM Award for the Brazilian Cinema for the best adapted screenplay of 2004). In the theater, it is highlighted the stage work of *Apocalipse 1,11* (in cooperation with Teatro da Vertigem); the play of the fragment *Estilhaços de São Paulo*, in the show *Megalopolis do Theater der Klänge* (Stuttgart, Germany) and *Centro nervoso*, when he debuted in the direction, in August 2006. The romance *Subúrbio* had the rights bought by the *Deutsches Schauspielhaus*, from Hamburg, Germany. The theater adaptation debuted on April 4th 1998. In this same year, he was the winner of the *Künstlerprogramm* of the *Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst* (DAAD). Since 1997 he is a columnist of the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* [note from the organizers].

3 The author, one of the main names of the Brazilian contemporary literature, was invited to talk about the fact of belonging to the first generation of Brazilian writers which do not need to have a double activity. For Bonassi, there is possible survival in the cultural industry for the first time. There is for the first time and in this moment, with the *de rigueur* exceptions, literature being produced to and by all the classes. Nevertheless, “we have never been so much supervised and – who knows? – domesticated” [note from the organizers].

in the 1970s. Companies such as Volkswagen, for example, had twenty, twenty-five thousand employees in that decade and, sometimes, dismissed five thousand in one go. Brazilians do know well what is not having work, because there is no social protection in the country at all, and back then there was not either. If there is any today, there was less when I was seven years old. You were thrown into privation very fast.

The idea of the metaphor, the perception of literature is related to the phenomenon of survival, to be in touch with life, with the work, or as we say down here, “run after the lunch to pay for the dinner afterwards,” and repeat this activity every day. Interestingly enough, I also make a parenthesis to tell a bit about what, we, from the so-called “90’s generation” represent. The Brazilian literature deemed correct, until recently, has always been regional. The great Brazilian literature still is that one which deals with the agrarian world. I am not the first generation of urban literature, but perhaps I am of the first generation to survive from the literary production. This is always important to say⁴.

The first Brazilian writer to discuss the city not as a place to which the country man went to and was destroyed in the process, but as a space which also features metaphor, poetry, soul of people, was perhaps Rubem Fonseca, with a book called “*The prisoners*”, from 1962. This publication establishes the urban landscape in Brazilian literature not as a folk phenomenon, but rather as a space worthy of literary and cultural representation, and so on. I add to that statement the fact that this evolution style here in Brazil is significantly metaphorical. On this occasion I am 45 years old and I must have lived in some fifteen homes throughout my life. None of them are

still standing. I am unable to return to every place I once lived in, because whenever I try to do it, I cannot find such places anymore. In the place where I was born, it is no longer possible to recognize the landscape of my childhood.

The experience that the Brazilian has about the public space is that of a privatized environment by the private sector or by stronger entities from the economic viewpoint, and in this aspect enter closed streets, semi-appropriated squares, houses which are built in public areas. This is a common phenomenon in the urban landscape of São Paulo. Or the space was privatized by economic interests, or is under dispute, in conflict. I brought a text for your reading. It is a story that takes place in an intersection, which is where the possible takes place in São Paulo and at the same time as a flow town, in which the transport routes are too urban, there is much that does not happen. If the people living in the city of São Paulo place their finger in the conscience and remember, last week, about the amount of commitments to which they were unable to attend, this will not be irrelevant.

It is quite curious to produce literature wherein nothing happens⁵, because the day is stopped, and yet,

5 Words from Nelson de Oliveira about Bonassi:

“I met Fernando Bonassi around 1997. At that time the literature of new Brazilian authors was my main interest. “I met Bonassi” is, in this case, a metonymy. In spite of living in the same city that he lived, I was not used to circulate through the literary circles of the city of São Paulo. Out of timidity, I’d rather circulate only through the books. In the middle of the last decade, almost by chance, what I really met was the romance *Subúrbio*.

Starred by an old man and an old woman – the lack of name and surname reflects the lack of importance of these poor devils without past or future, i.e., without identity or subjectivity –, the plot evolves in an industrial suburb of the city of São Paulo. More precisely in a quite worn out house in the Rua Lombroso. A Street which has “by one side Vila Prudente and Largo da Vila Zelina, with the church, the madhouse and the Lithuans” and “on the other the left banks of the Tamanduatei river, down there, in the border with São Caetano do Sul”.

In truth, the geographical site of the romance is much bigger than this one. It is the size of the bitter recollections of the old man and the old woman. Expanded memories in miniature chapters. And it was this neo-realist expansion of time and space which seduced me: the narrator going in zig-zag, going to and fro, linking Lima Barreto to Ignácio de Loyola Brandão, Oswald de Andrade to Ivan Ângelo. What caught me for good, during the reading, was this nervous and non-continual flow of the fictional language. *Subúrbio* is the loneliness and the deprivation oozing by the orifices of the body and of the plot.

This nervous and non-continual flow is the main characteristic of Bonassi as well. This has made of him a multi media author. The literature, the theater, the cinema or the television, singly, each one with its own set of rules, is not enough. He needs the

4 As from the decade of the 1980’s the Brazilian literature incorporates, with a higher or lesser degree of evidence, themes concerning the diversity issue, resulting in works which sought to give voice – within the scope of the literary representation – to the several extracts of the society. One of the authors who with more insistence intended to insert the theme of the diversity in his fictional production was, indeed, Fernando Bonassi, whose literature is inscribed, mainly, in the varied and still controversial aesthetic plan of the urban realism. Author of romances, theater plays, cinematographic screenplays, literary works intended for children and teens, journalistic chronicles, etc., Bonassi stands out in the Brazilian contemporary literary production, as a multiple writer, becoming a central figure of the new generation of writers who have in the somewhat fluid concept of post-modernity one of their main references” (SILVA; COUTO, 2012).

people are moving, hearts are beating, the desire is happening, however, the city blocks this flow, it is a place where things do not happen. We measured five hundred thousand couriers (“motoboy”), out of a fleet of seven million vehicles and one forgets that all this is locked down in the traffic, it is not flowing. This is becoming confusing and it is bumping at the intersection. As I think the street intersections in São Paulo is structural, what happens at the intersection is fundamental to understanding the city. So, I wrote a text called *Cena brasileira* [Brazilian Scene] that takes place at an intersection and I would like you to read the following:

four in order to fully express himself. I only came to realize this quite later, when watching the monologue *Preso entre ferragens*, about a man who suffers an accident and is held in the wreck of the automobile.

Bonassi does not accept this immobility, not in the plane of creation. If on one hand it is impossible to gather the arts in a single one, on the other hand it is not difficult to share the expression amongst three or four of these. Even staying solely in the literary sphere, the various formats of the romance, of the tale or of the chronicle are, singly, not enough for Bonassi. His maximum expression is in the whole, in the set of the forms which his creativity dresses.

The minitales are an important part of this maximum expression. They are the resisting synthesis against the facility. It suffices to see the collection *Passaporte*, in which 137 travel reports, were gathered, mini narratives written in several countries of the world. Or the *15 cenas de descobrimento de Brasília*, of the anthology *Os cem melhores contos brasileiros do século*. Or the cycle *Violência & Paixão*, from the anthology *Geração 90: manuscritos de computador*.

With the popularity of the word processor, by the middle of the decade of the 90's, writing became less painful. This for the common of the mortals. For the writers, the facility of the paste and glue, which did not exist in the typewriter, brought back the minimalist challenge: say more with less words. Play hide and seek. Hiding from the reader all the excess which did not need to be revealed. In other words: all the excess which, hidden, screams louder.

But I do not want to wander about the author and his work. Much less attempting to theorize. Not here, beside full-fledged professionals which made this with lots of competence, being supported by heavy-weight thinkers. I prefer to stay in the scope of the chronicle.

From the initial metonymy to the flesh and bone person it did not take long. I met personally Bonassi in the start of this century-millennium. This after having read, apart from the books, many of his texts published by the press. I prefer like that: before knowing the individual or the public persona of the author, I need first to enjoy his literature. What sense would there be in meeting a writer (talking, commenting his work, shake his hand) who writes badly? [...]

Once someone asked Bonassi what is the role of the writer in the contemporary society. He answered: “confound, create problems”. I fully agree with this. We are not here to entertain and delight. Our role is to disturb and provoke. Mainly the uncomplaining ones” (SILVA; COUTO, 2012)

Brazilian scene

It is the intersection of a hurry with lack of time. The encounter of the being with the void; the junction of the carving to go with the urge to run. And all of a suddenly, everything stops. It is almost nothing. The citizen slowly approaches the red traffic lights. The other slowly approaches the green traffic lights. It is a signal for both of them. The other one with that carving which is not from today and he does not even know where it comes from. A lack of meat, fat, of oil. He would eat the four hundred horses grilled, with bread and vinaigrette dressing. There is between them a guided alarm driven by shortwave emissions, which shall report an ongoing accident to the security company. The hired security company is far away. In a sinister place close to where the other lives when going home. One lives with the comfort of electrified fences; the other one with the light cut off for lack of payment. He does have documents. Any bandit has. The citizen as well. No one is better than anyone, in theory. None of them made any fancy thesis about this, since they are not concerned at all, or thinking in such things. As to owning material things, one anyhow has more than the other. That can be seen by the carcasses: one armored in the structure on reinforced cinturato tires, the other a skeleton of spiky hard bone and crushed against the walls of the world. In the head, straightened hair and treated or abandoned to the whim. Generally they are equal. The law is for everyone, but not everyone has the means to be served by the injustice courts. The two sides are both, but they are opposite, they are pointed to each other when they meet. One believes himself to be untouchable hidden in his car, the other betting with his open chest in the belief of closed body. They have nothing to say and they do not talk to each other. On one hand the citizen waives his hand signaling that he does not want to buy nor donate anything at all. The other one is not asking, but ordering or demanding, what he thinks belongs to him. There is a gun in the path between them. One has a lot to remember, what the other wants most is to forget. The shield of the cabin is level two. The weapon in the hands of the other is level three. The technicians are not there to say if the level is low, high or who is better than the other in this story. Each life is worth the same sadness. It would be a pathetic drama, if it was not a pre-announced tragic outcome, for it is good to advise from the outset that this is a case of life and death, no matter how we try to avoid them. It may even be that one attempts to hide his caliber behind

withered flowers, imported toys from enslaved people or even manufactured by the other, tranquil in his brand new car. He does not think that it is with him, despite the fact that the other guy is pointing out that doubtless thing towards the hydraulic direction in which he finds himself. He disguises and pretends that he does not. The other says yes, even though the other does not listen to him. He wants that golden watch on the wrist of the other, since he himself has only one Bonfim ribbon that insists on staying glued delaying his wishes. The other one looks at the watch, concerned with the appointments. The commitment of the other guy is with the right now. The seated fellow thinks in investing something to have a bit more afterwards, when he is resting. But this is not going to happen.

There will be no longer this time, for instance, when the other guy presses the trigger...

Although he does not want it, the fact is that he feels a chill down his spine with the funny noise in shattered glass, after an acute heat in the wrinkled forehead of urgent concerns and now inaudible. Because he becomes deaf, then goes blind and dies in a few seconds, grabbed to his Rolex.

The origin of that clock is unknown even to the relatives who earned it as inheritance. The other guy disappeared.