

RÉSUMÉ/ABSTRACT

The “return to the subject” in the contemporary French narrative is accompanied by a tendency to investigate the city, which is no more a specific urban space but rather a space experienced as an urban tissue. A new writing mode takes the floor: a fragmented and disoriented one, trying to render continuous modifications of our cities where the virtual and the real tend to melt into one. The big city, mobile and exploding, imposes its form onto the narrative.

Jean Échenoz, François Bon and Jean-Philippe Toussaint represent this important tendency in the contemporary literature which is the “return of the text to the reality”. In the case of the presentation of the city, it manifests itself, among others, in the form of an emphasis of the textual character of the city. In these novels one can find passages, sentences or even insulated words which draw attention rather to themselves than to the city and contribute to a kind of derealization of its picture and to its fragmentation. Échenoz, Bon and Toussaint choose frames, situations and scenes which, while staying on the side of the real, in some way derealize the represented world, create an effect of distance and call into question the possibility of the direct access to the contents of the urban world. The Toussaint’s city is, particularly, a city in movement. The author of *Fuir* undertakes the derealization of the city by using two types of means: the window pane and light. His relationship with the city is also based on double repulsion: it is the author himself who wanders around the city, but such created distance gives the impression that it is the city which evades the hold of literary presentation.

Some concepts of Bertrand Westphal’s “géocritique”, and particularly the idea of the “poetics of archipelago”, may be applied to

the analysis of Jean Échenoz' novels. Space conceived as archipelago, i.e. as a knot of many interrelated factors, signifies abandoning the singular and the multiple perception of space, or, in other words, the perception of space as a multiplicity. Thus the Échenoz' novels are frequently set in suburbs, uninhabited territories, voids, undetermined areas which are zones of transit (Marc Augé's "non-places") where any rooting is impossible.

Échenoz' universe may be also interpreted in terms of dystopia as much as it proposes a discussion with the ideas of functionalist urbanism and architecture. Especially in his novel *Au piano* (2003) Paris, living on a frenetic pace, seems to function on its own, without any impact from his inhabitants. This urban vision is founded on the idea of monstrosity, surveillance and oppression (images of labyrinth, disorder, inferno). Yet Échenoz attenuates this nightmarish impression by distancing himself through humor and artistic and literary allusions.

The series of François Schuiten's and Benoît Peeters' comics *Les Cités obscures* (1983-2008) is a perfect example of the postmodern fascination with the city and its everyday space, whose apparent banality conceals an alternative, mysterious and dangerous reality. Subsequent volumes of the series cumulate elements of architectural poetics, creating the omnipresent and omnipotent myth of *Obscure Cities*, which invokes a complex imagery. The textualisation of the city turns it into a Barthesian text, expressing the world, its meaning and man's relationship with the living space. This palimpsest city is simultaneously a (post)modern encyclopaedia of history of architecture, a prophetic vision of technological future and a postmodern dystopia presenting a world subordinated to dubious political ambitions. As the city turns out to be "the capital of signs," creating its own discourse, the text becomes a city, constituting a world parallel to reality. The heart of entangled plots of all the volumes of *Cités obscures*, the classic motif of the play of worlds is all the more seductive as it constitutes the essence of the whole series and is employed on all the levels of the text. The fascination with architecture significantly determines the structure of the text: playing with generic conventions, it employs various narrative techniques and departs from the traditional form of comics. A fiction about architecture thus becomes a laboratory of architecture of fiction.

In Antoine Volodine's *Dondog* (2002) the city bears marks of the catastrophes of the 20th century, signs impossible to decipher and interpret. The association city-amnesia seems to be the rule of the novel's world as every proper story, particularity and identity dissolves into anonymity and banality of all the modern metropolises. *Dondog* is another Volodine's text which reposes on the conception of "post-exoticism": world and text "built upon what remains when nothing remains". A city which has not kept the memory of its past (other than some illegible signs) may represent the history's dream, a dream that says both the catastrophe and its oblivion: Volodine links the amnesia of history and refusal of realism with the will to forget traumatic events.

Michel de Certeau's parallel between the act of walking and the act of writing may be used to examine how the writer's movements in the city space transform it into social and ethnological spaces. According to the idea of the rhetoric of walking, constituting stylistic figures and thus non-normative usages of the city system, the writing "I" as a figure of subjectivity manifesting itself in discourse (Benveniste) appears to play a significant role in this transformation, becoming a tactics of appropriation of social and textual spaces called "ethnotext" by Ernaux. "Ethnotext" may also be considered as a form of testimonial writing situated between literature and science.

The city plays a crucial role in postcolonial literature and especially in the fictions of Assia Djebar, the first Maghreb writer being elected to the *Académie française*. In *Oran, langue morte* (1997), a collection of seven stories, Djebar depicts the destiny of different women who have to struggle with the violence of the 1990s in post-colonial Algeria. The tension between city and language, between city and writing is at the heart of the texts as the title of the collection already suggests. A close reading of the eponymous novel "Oran, langue morte" [dead language], how to find a discourse about her hometown with a language that is no longer alive. She thus creates a visual and textual palimpsest of the city, by retracing the memories of her childhood in the city, the trauma of her parents' assassination by the French OAS (Secret Armed Organization).

In the work of the Belgian writer Guy Vaes the *flânerie* in the city, including visits in restaurants, exhibitions and concerts, sets the

environment in which the figure of a once seen woman emerges, the portrait of whom the protagonist tries to keep in memory. The city becomes a pretext to create networks of analogies and a laboratory where the recollections actualize in the memory. At the same time the city and the woman's portraiture superimpose mutually, constituting a screen for each other, which is both an obstacle and a palimpsest. Strolling in the ill identified urban space provides a kaleidoscopic image of the woman and of the city, both built in memory.

In Patrick Modiano's novel *L'Horizon* (2010), like in his other works, the city (here Paris) is the space where the work of memory takes place, difficult and ambivalent, struggling with the time, both fleeting and persistent. The protagonists live in a state of incertitude due to their problematic identity, a status which gives them the capacity of revealing the ambivalence and the incertitude of the urban (Parisian) chronotope. They reveal forgotten and lost stories of forgotten people, and thus acquire access to the hidden history of the city. Demolitions and changes in the urban tissue reflect the violence of the past and the inextricable links between memory and urban space.

In his literary œuvre Alain Fleischer, a contemporary French artist, photographer and writer, presents a vision of history in which disappearance, reminiscence, encounter and contingency emerge as the main themes. The cities in his work, either real or purely imaginary, bear signs of the lost universe, signs the narrator only is capable to decipher. The urban scenery always serves as a décor of chance and potentiality and its lost and mysterious places give him a shelter where to avoid the revenants from the past. In a magnificent superposition of past and present the "Atlantis of Mitteleuropa" comes to life as ghosts of the past and last survivors make the journey from void and oblivion to presence and today world.