

Global Histories through the Lens of Fiction

What Time is Global History? That is really an intriguing question.

It is quite rare nowadays to talk about History in the singular. Not even historians use to do that. The grand narratives of Modernity have not (as yet) recovered from the deconstruction of the 1980s and '90s. History with H is long since replaced by *histories* in the plural, challenging a (supposedly) still hegemonic Eurocentric, Western, Male, White interpretation of how the world has become what it is today.

Writers of fiction can however unashamedly assume a totalitarian approach.

Totalitarian has some nasty connotations. Holistic sounds much nicer. But totalitarian is better to characterize the literary fantasy's relation to reality – and history. I will state that literature is the totalitarian genre per preference.

Time is the second keyword. Temporality – that is the notion of a past, a present and a future – which we normally perceive in a linear manner.

History is what we in the present carry with us from the past – as individual AND collective memories. *Modernity* is, in contrast, tightly tied to the present – the *contemporary* – and with a view to the future rather than the past. Yet, Modernity is also a historical era, which – whatever starting-point you may choose, happens to coincide with the global expansion of European power and domination – and, more importantly, the diffusion of Capitalism (with Socialism as its – temporary – counterpart).

Modernity in that sense has become aware of its historicity – that was the meaning of *post-modernity* – a notion that now seems strangely obsolete. And this brings us to the third, and principal, keyword: the *global*.

Globalization as a concept is fairly new. It is about as new as postmodernity is obsolete. Few people would nowadays associate these two terms. But in fact, the notion of globalization emerged – not in economic or political discourse – but in *cultural studies*, precisely in the discussion of modernity and postmodernity of the late 1980s and early '90s.

But it is only now, in the ongoing worldwide transition, and the restructuring of the global economic and political power relations, that one may also detect a rising self-awareness in the traditional West of its own particularity – although 'Western' and 'Modern' are still largely seen as synonymous categories – and assumed to be Universal. (Universal is by the way an interesting term. It is only in a planetary sense that one can think of the world as one entity. It makes little sense to talk of *world history* or *world literature*. This is the seeming paradox of globalization – which, arguably, should rather be called glocalization, since the global and the local are intrinsically connected and integrated.

Now, what is the point in looking at these global histories through the lens of fiction? Recording the past is what History is about. Remembering the present is, at a basic level, what we do all the time. (A diary – or a blog – may simply be a way of documenting the quotidian for future remembrance. Reporting is a more elaborate way of making sense of *the present continuous*.)

But what about *remembering the future*? Some might suggest *prophesies* as examples of that - but then we are entering the domains of mysticism – or *fiction* - and leaving rational science behind.

Yet – that may be precisely what we need to do to better understand our contemporary predicament. The ability to do so is, in my view, the great asset of art and, especially, literature. I'll give you a few examples ...

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I came upon the intriguing notion of 'the future past' in the reading of a novel by the Argentinean writer Juan José Saer. The novel, *Glosa* (Gloss), from 1986, was written from Saer's voluntary exile in Paris, but it takes place in an imaginary space of the country and province of his birth.

Gloss, as a literary genre, is an interpretation or explanation of an obscure or unintelligible text, and *Glosa* is one of Saer's most complex and evasive works. The narrative frame is a conversation between two reunited friends during a walk along San Martín street in the city of Santa Fe on an early October morning in 1961.

One of the two friends has recently returned from a journey to Europe and his fresh memories are popping up as they walk, as one of many different time layers that interfere with the narrative present (the one hour it takes to walk the 21 blocks). The most intriguing – and *disturbing* – temporality is this curious *future past*, 18 years ahead in which one of the protagonists will remember this walk and know that his friend the year before, in 1978, had killed himself after being ambushed by the police.

This other layer of their future fate adds a resonance of nightmarish horror to the walk through the empty streets. And there is one specific detail that stands out as a condensation of this horror: the capsule of venom (cyanide), which the militants were provided with by their organizations as "death insurance" in case they were captured.

In *Glosa*, in the future past of Leto's years of militancy, the sordid capsule of venom becomes – in literary critic Beatriz Sarlo's words **PP3**

a talisman that represents the all-or-nothing of a struggle and gives the violent action a sort of negative metaphysical shine: an assured Nothing

This novel was published three years after Argentina's transition from military dictatorship back to parliamentary democracy, at a moment when the country seemed eager to close the book on the horrors of the immediate past. Although *Glosa* may have had little public impact, it stands as a chillingly exact depiction of the social solitude of the militant, with an existential depth that a retrospective testimony is hardly able to transmit.

Another Argentinean example of creative distortion of past and future is Carlos Gamerro's novel *Las Islas* (The Islands) from 1998. PP4 It is one of the very few novels that deal with the taboo subject of the disastrous war against Great Britain over Malvinas (The Falklands) in 1982.

Gamerro was born in '62 – the year class of “los chicos de la guerra” – the conscripts who were sent to fight the well-equipped professional British troops in the Antarctic winter on the barren islands in the South Atlantic. He was supposed to be one of the boys, and he writes his novel as if he were one of the veterans – as if that actually had been his fate, a parallel fictional life.

And the truth is, that he most probably could not have written the novel about the war and its aftermath if he had been there. (I'll come back to why.)

The decisive contribution of literature in the Argentinean transition, and the principal challenge for Argentinean writers is, in my view, the dismantling of the still-pervasive national mythology. The particular case of Malvinas condensates the complex of complicity, revealing the ambiguous, yet intimate relationship between the dictatorship and civil society.

(On 30 March 1982, one of the major popular manifestations against the military government was held at Plaza de Mayo. Three days later, on 2 April, after the surprise disembarking on the islands, there were as huge manifestations, and with largely the same people, expressing their support for the Malvinas campaign. Even the guerrillas, who had barely survived the total defeat in the dirty war, immediately buried the hatchet and whole-heartedly joined sides with the former enemy in this “anti-imperialist” endeavour.)

This is difficult to understand, even for Argentineans themselves. And it is somehow the *National Shame* – and the reason why this really remains a sensitive subject. (By the way, the conflict may surface again any moment, since British Petroleum now is drilling for oil in the sea outside the Falklands.)

The other extraordinary Malvinas novel – or chronologically the first one – is Fogwill’s *Los pichiciegos*, which was written in one week during the height of the war, before any witness reports of the disaster had reached the Argentinean mainland. (The first copies of the manuscript were circulated before the short war had even ended – and when the military dictatorship was still in power. The book was published in its first edition in 1983.)

Pichiciego is a species of armadillo; a small, armour-coated, burrowing animal that is active only at night. The *pichiciegos*, or *pichis*, in Fogwill's tale – *dillos* in the English translation – are a group of Argentinean deserters who have buried a tunnel and established a subterranean bunker - *La Pichicera* - on the outskirts of the battle zone, on territory that is unmarked on the deficient Argentinean maps.

They are obviously the negation of “*the heroes of Malvinas*”; cowardly deserters and even collaborators, spying on the Argies on behalf of the Brits, trading with both sides, unscrupulously plundering the shipwrecked and the dead, denouncing and delivering “useless” members of their own community that do not conform with the rules of the warren.

To Beatriz Sarlo, the dillo community demonstrates the paradox of the Malvinas war; the dissolution of the very idea of a nation that the campaign intended to (re-)construct. Everything dissolves in the pure present of *la Pichicera*, where the sole principle is staying alive.

But the struggle for subsistence is to no avail. All dillos but one – Quiquito, who tells their story – eventually succumb in the subterranean shelter, not by starvation or cold, though – but due to the accidental clogging of their ventilation shaft by British communication cables.

Fogwill's fictional Malvinas is an extreme, yet accurate approximation of what was really happening on the islands. And, at the same time, this all-imaginary story of a subterranean colony of Argentinean deserters, is, if you like, an allegory and astonishing anticipation of the post-dictatorial Argentina of Carlos Menem.

Gamerro's novel is the story of that prophesy materialized; a *tragicomic hyperbole* of the grand illusion of the neoliberal 1990s. It is set in 1992 – ten years after the war – but in a slightly distorted Buenos Aires, resembling the near-future cityscapes of cyber punk.

I will not go in to the intricate plot. But let me just give you a hint of the style:

When the main protagonist, hacker Felipe Félix, is commissioned to design a computer game on Malvinas, he finds, to his surprise, that the battle of the South Atlantic is not included in the existing computer games' catalogues on real and hypothetical modern wars. To simulate the British-Argentinean confrontation, he therefore has to put together an eclectic concoction of past and present conflicts. He picks World War I, with its trenches and bayonets, for the combat on land, adjusting the armament by putting World War II and Six Day War weapons in the hands of the Argentineans, and Gulf War weapons at the disposal of the British.

For geographical setting he decides on Russia in 1944, but finds the corresponding soldiers too well clad to be Argentinean.

Looking for the best match in the latter respect, he finally, after thorough research and consideration, settles for the Iraqis of Desert Storm. It turns out to be a real hit; even their features resemble those of the Argentineans, not least after the lightning defeat:

somewhat confused, dirty, worn-out, uncertain of what they were doing there and relieved that they had been defeated so fast.

Saddam Hussein's surprise occupation of Kuwait, with its similar disastrous outcome, indeed makes for an intriguing comparison. It is even more fascinating that it is suggested by an Argentinean.

Las islas is an exceptional novel; a satirical *tour de force*; exuberant, hallucinatory, mercilessly self-ironic. But is more than slapstick comedy. At another level it is just as much an elegy over the recent and recurrent tragedy, resonant with clarified anger and sorrow, and Gamarro's great accomplishment is, in my view, the consistent dialectic between these two narrative registers.

The two Malvinas novels demonstrate how *Literature works the void of experience*, as opposed to journalism, testimonies and other forms of witness reports. Now, what does that really mean?

When I interviewed Gamarro, he explained that fiction to him is "a life unlived". PP5 (I quote:)

When someone asks me if my fiction is autobiographical, I say, yes, it's a negative autobiography. It's what could have happened to me but didn't. Yes, I should have gone to the Malvinas. So it's as though my life divided itself into a real life and a ghostly life that somehow accompanies me. When I interviewed the ex-combatants, my fear was, "how could I write about a war I didn't fight?" Did I have the right? It was almost a moral issue, not only a question of information. (...) PP6

There's a famous phrase by Walter Benjamin: "The soldiers came back mute from the battlefield". However, when I talked to them, they were not mute; they were laconic. They were not capable of talking because each word was so charged with meaning and experience that they didn't see the need to elaborate. They said, "yes, yes, it was cold", or "yes, the trenches were wet", or "yes, the explosions were terrible". PP7

So I realized that fiction also restitutes something that the testimony doesn't necessarily have. The testimony is tied to a shared experience that already took place, whereas fiction has to create that reality. I somehow needed to use many words to give that world an identity – words the soldiers considered unnecessary because for them that world was already real. I think I discovered, then, that fiction could clearly be on par with the testimonies.

On par, that is, in terms of truth-telling. This truth revealed by *Las islas* – and *Los pichiciegos* – equally refutes the two grand narratives by which the story of Malvinas is still being told in Argentina.

- the victorious discourse of *the military campaign*, which was embraced by practically all Argentines
- *and* the following victimization discourse of the transition, in which the vanguard of the young nation sent out to defy the decaying British empire was turned into sacrificed martyrs – victims, not so much of the superior British troops as of their own deceitful officers.

I dare state that it is *only literature* that breaks and deconstructs this binary structure.

What we may moreover conclude from this example is the following:

Although Literature has historically played an important role as witness-bearer, especially when other forms of documentation have been missing, today, when we have immediate access to almost all dramatic events in the world, there is perhaps less incitement for literature to assume that role.

It can seldom compete with Journalism anyway, in terms of immediate impact or communication power. In terms of *imaginative* power, however, literary fantasy is and remains unsurpassed.

That could have been my concluding remark. But I'll give you one final example, to bring us back to the notion of the future past. The example is my own writing.

PP8 (The Triangle)

This has become my trademark. What this simple figure illustrates is what I regard as the three main writing practices and their interrelations.

I would even suggest that all forms of creative writing happen in the dynamic tension between these three poles. (Think of them, not as a triangle, or a pyramid, but as the three poles of a triangular field of force.)

There is a crucial difference between the literary practice and the other two. While everything in the world can, metaphorically speaking, be turned into literature, everything cannot claim to be journalism or science. A novel can *incorporate* the other genres in a totalizing effort that the others could only dream of. (Gamerro's novel is a good example of that. Another more recent example, that you may be more familiar with, is David Mitchell's extraordinary novel *Cloud Atlas* from 2004. I didn't see Tom Tykwer's film yet, but turning that novel into a film inevitably implies a severe reduction.)

(The flip side of this cannibalistic capacity is a correspondent vulnerability to the influence of these other practices with their more formatted language and sturdier genre conventions.) The literary *freedom* can indeed also serve as an excuse for not doing proper research on a subject. You can always hide behind this shield of fiction...

It has been very fashionable lately to play on the borders of fact and fiction. And, it is the privilege of the arts to do so. Historians may play with *counterfactual hypotheses*, and that is certainly a form of fiction – but based on the assumption of established fact, that serves as comparison or corrective.

I actually don't believe that the practices should be fused. I am very much in favour of *hybrid forms* and *genre transgressions*, but I believe that every such attempt still has to be anchored in one of the three corners of the triangle (there is nothing in the middle). When I did my research on fiction and truth in the transition processes of Argentina and South Africa **PP9**, I, as a non-academic on the outset, adapted to the academic form and pushed its limits from within. The resulting text has elements of reportage and memoir, but it is definitely to be classified as *non-fiction*.

However.

After spending five years doing this arduous academic research, it was really a relief to go back to writing fiction. My latest novel, *Santiago*, was published in 2007, as the second part in a planned Argentina trilogy (that is why all my previous examples were from Argentina). The first novel came out in 2000, and the third, which I have recently completed, will hopefully be out within the next year. (They are all in Swedish, so no need to give you the titles, but the last one is called *Misiones*. **PP10** I've had that title in the back of my head ever since I wrote *Santiago*, or even earlier, and I'd probably written it a long time ago if the Fiction and Truth project had not come in-between.

But then, it would certainly have become a quite different novel. Why?

The more thorough research into the ethnographic material that I was beginning to explore in *Santiago* has given my writing a more solid historical ground. And, more importantly, the subsequent greater confidence in my own authority, if you like, has given me the ability and motivation to invent more freely.

One of my South African interviewees, Ivan Vladislavic, suggested that there is not enough invention in literature and called for more writers who would simply make things up. (He was primarily thinking of South African literature of the transition, but I think it can be applied to Literature in general – and I think that is a good point.

For example, Misiones (which means *Missions*) is a province in NE Argentina with a fairly large and largely unknown community of Swedish immigrants, who arrived in the late 19th and early 20th century. I have been there, very briefly, but I have all the time planned to go there and do some proper research for my novel.

But in the end I decided to write the novel first, completely based on imagination and not making use of any of the "real" history.

Moreover I decided to set my novel in a near future – 2018/19. If you didn't know, a low-scale world war will then be going on, with its epicentre in Central Asia... All intercontinental air traffic will be cancelled, Europe is on the verge of complete dissolution, millions of migrants are once again going – by boat - from the old world to the new, and from North to South, with Argentina and Australia as main recipients –*and* emerging new economic and political powers, joining the others in what someone wittily has named ABRICA.

It has been truly funny to write completely without inhibitions– not knowing where imagination would take me.

But – and this will be my concluding remark – this literary fantasy is a just as serious interrogation of the present past as the academic dissertation. >>>

They are indeed very different approaches, but they have mutually informed each other – and they have more in common than I would ever have assumed.

In fact, in retrospect, I can even see these two big projects – the dissertation and the trilogy – as two sides of one larger interrogation of what you may call Global Modernity.

And please note that although Modernity, like History, ought to be written in the plural, I, as a fiction writer primarily, assume the totalitarian subjective singular.