Biljana Oklopcic

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek

Visualizing the City in Central European[1] Literature of the Twentieth Century

Abstract: The aim of this paper is twofold. The first part of the paper discusses development of the city image in Western literature and gives insight into visual methods Central European authors of the twentieth century have used to depict the city in their works. The second part of the paper shows how the urban space is represented, documented, evoked, and performed in the novels of Michal Ajvaz, Marija Jurić Zagorka, and George Konrad.

Key words: the urban space, visual methods, literature, Central European literature, Marija Jurić Zagorka, Michal Ajvaz, George Konrad

As both a place/space and as an idea, the city is inseparable from its depiction in different literary movements – especially the development of the novel and subsequent narrative modes: comic realism, magic realism, naturalism, modernism, and postmodernism. On the one hand, the cities depicted in literature are imaginative constructions; on the other, literary cities tend to reflect the material reality of their originals so precisely that from the literature, for example, Budapest, Warsaw, Prague, London, Poznań or Osijek could be rebuilt. A number of literary critics and theorists argue that the city in literature has been brought into being through temporality, as a narrative of event or events. For one of the most important of these theorists, Franco Moretti:

> the city as a physical place – and therefore as a support to descriptions and classifications – becomes the mere backdrop to the city as a network of developing social relationships – and hence a prop to narrative temporality. The novel reveals that the meaning of the city is not to be found in any particular place, but manifests itself only through a temporal trajectory (…) the urban novel (…) seeks to resolve the spatial in terms of the sequential.[2]

Others concentrate on the idea of the city as constructed through/as human relationships, echoing the arguments of Georg Simmel who saw the significance of the city in the effect it had on the mental life and, indirectly, the relationships of the city dwellers. J. Hillis Miller

---

[1]   The term "Central European" refers to the countries geographically (and for cultural reasons) located in Central Europe: Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Switzerland.

[2]   F. Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, Verso, London 1988, p. 112.

thus argues that "the houses, roads, paths, and walls stand (…) for the dynamic field of relations among"[3] the characters. Similarly, paraphrasing Raymond Williams, Jeri Johnson asserts that the representation of the material reality of the city is important only if it "communicates an ideology of the individual as s/he exists within a community".[4]

Even though they are imaginative constructions, the cities found in literature – whether they be the ancient Greek and Roman cities, the walled city of the Middle Ages, the fortified city of the seventeenth century, the Puritan citadel staring out into the primeval forest, the smokestacks of the industrial city viewed from the refuge of its hills, or the postindustrial modern and postmodern megalopolises – all do reflect the social, cultural, political, and economic reality of their originals. A few examples will illustrate this point. When Daniel Defoe depicted the seventeenth-century London, his portrait reflected the ideas of Christopher Wren, who in 1666 drew up a plan for a new London – "an entity held together by commercial need".[5] In his novels, Defoe welcomed this new city as a place offering a new way of life to a new class of people. As the city became more materialistic, a number of writers could not help but feeling hostility and distrust toward Enlightenment values when writing about the city: their cities were described as empty of spiritual and emotional energy. For example, Charles Dickens's depiction of London showed that the process of urban development had become so materialistic that it had changed the perception of basic human feelings such as compassion, helpfulness, love, or friendship. The rise of the industrial city found its most persuasive depiction in naturalism, most famously in the works of Émile Zola, George Gissing, George Moore, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris. Zola captures the rise of the industrial city in his *Rougon-Macquart* novels which center in Paris where his characters come in search of an essential self and power. In much the same way, Dreiser and Norris write about the industrial city in the New World. The novels of these authors show that the naturalist city was both a place of limits and a product of material activity and mechanical forces producing only a certain amount of wealth and involving the hierarchical pyramid: if some were rich, others had to be poor; some would succeed, others would fail.

Arthur Conan Doyle and Bram Stoker depicted the city that moved toward empire, and the capital city that weakened its center; Joseph Conrad concentrated on the attempts of the modern city to hide the destructive tendencies in both civilized and primitive societies. In this, Conrad resembles T.S. Eliot who, too, saw the modern city as the city of the dead, as the city in decline, as *the waste land*. As Richard Lehan sums it up, the modernist city was

> reconciled to myths of the land, involved a community of like selves, and kept alive a cyclical sense of time by juxtaposing the present against a more heroic past. The modernists – turning to aestheticism, religion, and politics – tried to ground the self within the city, but the result was often a sense of individualism either autistic or power hungry, paralleling the trials of the nation-state.[6]

---

[3] J.H. Miller, *Topographies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1995, p. 20.
[4] J. Johnson, *Literary Geography: Joyce, Woolf, and the City*, "City" 2000, no. 4, p. 200.
[5] R. Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*, University of California Press, Berkley–Los Angeles–London 1998, p. 4.
[6] R. Lehan, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

The modern city involving myths, symbolism, and the cyclical sense of time was undone by the postmodern where consciousness collapsed into discourse, structure, grammar, rhetoric, system, or paradigm. Jacques Derrida echoed this point when he challenged the assumption that once the city became a system of signs, a transcendental signifier – God, nature, history, or the rational mind – was required to hold the other signs in place. He argued that "such abstractions became the foundations of unwarranted constructs, thus falsely privileging meaning from the outset. He questioned concepts such as 'origins' and 'destiny' on the grounds that they were unknowable, that meaning contained its own negation, and that language was unstable, in constant flux if not regression".[7] When observed from within a system as unstable as Derrida's system of language, the city appears to be no longer "real". People who inhabit the city get back only what they contribute to it and this "echo" principle becomes the foundation of their reality. Without any hope for transcendence, the city has to stay within what it consumes; the mind has to accept its limitations. As a result, the city becomes a state of mind: it thinks for us and not the other way around.

The city in Central European literature

The city novel has been a highly distinctive feature of modern and contemporary, popular and canonical, Central European literature as well. Visual methods used to portray the city in Central European novels include (but are not limited to):
1. the image of the city is evoked from the point of view of the narrator or other characters;
2. the figure of the *flâneur* usually documents the urban in the novel;
3. the city is represented as a place/space determined by its inhabitants;
4. the city is documented as a symbolically different but at the same time unchanging space that is marked by particular well-known places and monuments;
5. the city is documented as a historical memory space;
6. the city dwellers live out the urban reality through certain features that correspond with the described space/place;
7. the city is represented and/or evoked as a Bakhtinian, open, socially and culturally heterogeneous, polyphonic, multiple, and multi-perspective space/place;
8. the city is occasionally evoked in terms of centre and periphery;
9. the city is documented as the image of the world, time, society, or a national, or multi--national culture.

Some of the most intriguing images of the city in Central European literature can be found in the novels *The Other City* (1993) by Michal Ajvaz, *Vitez slavonske ravni* (1938) by Marija Jurić Zagorka, and *The City Builder* (1977) by George Konrád.

---

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 265.

Vitez slavonske ravni[8]

Best known for her historical romances, Marija Jurić Zagorka, a Croatian journalist, feminist, and writer of the first half of the twentieth century, visualizes the Croatian city by setting most of her novels in Zagreb, the Croatian capital. One of the rare exceptions to this rule is her novel *Vitez slavonske ravni*. This novel is set in the eighteenth century Osijek and it presents Zagorka's attempt to visualize the city in other parts of Croatia as well as to explore the dichotomy of the centre and periphery as enacted through the rivalry of different city parts and different cities/regions in Croatia.

To present a visually accurate picture of the city of Osijek, Zagorka meticulously investigated its history. Her investigation began at the Zagreb University Library, where she consulted Dr. Rudolf Horvat, a famous historian, and it continued in Osijek, where she visited another important Croatian historian Dr. Josip Boesendorfer. The visits and the interviews helped her "collect (…) all that had been written about Osijek and Slavonia".[9] The very beginning of her investigation was not promising. She was disappointed because she found:

> nowhere an image she [had] created in her head. The whole Osijek Tvrđava[10] collapsed into the plain. She dreamed about huge grey city walls and dark corners under arched ceilings. She secretly hoped to find something that would look like catacombs or at least an underground passage. It went without saying that there should have been a huge old tower.[11]

However, she did not give up. She was "a historical novel writer"[12] and, as such, she refused to be defeated by this first obstacle. A few steps farther, she found "high and old bulwarks! Dark walls of the old fortress, beautiful wide streets with little old houses (…) which tell stories about (…) families that used to live there",[13] and, most important of all, she found "the deep affection of the Osijek citizens for their city".[14]

To visualize the urban space of Osijek as well as its influence on its citizens – how they lived, how the city as the place/space affected their relationships and mental states – Zagorka uses "city-mapping": she sets her novel in the well-known parts, churches, buildings, and inns of the old Osijek:

- Tvrđava,
- Donja Varoš,[15]

---

[8] The novel has not yet been translated into English. The title of the novel can be translated as *The Knight of the Slavonian Plain*.

[9] M. Jurić Zagorka, *Kako je nastao* Vitez slavonske ravni*?: Historijski podaci za novi roman* Hrvatskog Lista, "Hrvatski List" 1937, no. 349, p. 13. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Croatian to English are made by the author of this article.

[10] In English: the Fortress/the Citadel.

[11] M. Jurić Zagorka, *Moji osječki dojmovi*, "Hrvatski List" 1937, no. 348, p. 8.

[12] *Ibidem.*

[13] *Ibidem.*

[14] *Ibidem.*

[15] In English: the Down Town.

- Gornja Varoš,[16]
- župna crkva svetog Mihajla,[17]
- Generalska komanda,[18]
- Franjevački samostan,[19]
- Vodena vrata,[20] and
- the inns "Zlatni vol" and "K jelenu".[21]

The novel even documents the antagonism of the three Osijek parts:

> I am – a policeman from Osijek! From Donja Varoš? – God forbid! How could I be from Donja Varoš! The Donja Varoš people, those "repanci", are led by the nose by Varnica, the road robber. Neither am I a "tukar" from Gornja Varoš! I am a policeman – from a citadel! Yes. From the citadel – says he proudly.[22]

The antagonism of the Osijek city parts and their inhabitants is shown through the use of the mid-eighteenth century Osijek jargon, in which the term "repanac" was used to denote an inhabitant of the Down Town, the term "tukar" referred to an inhabitant of the Upper Town, and the term "gospoda" denoted the inhabitants of the Fortress/the Citadel. The etymology of the above-mentioned terms can be explained as follows:

> the inhabitants of the Fortress/the Citadel considered themselves an upper class; they spoke German, and were mostly in military service. They were thus contemptuously called "gospoda" by other city parts. The inhabitants of the Upper Town considered themselves the original inhabitants of the city; they had lived in Osijek from the very beginnings of the city. They had to leave their original settlement when the Fortress/the Citadel had been built. They were, therefore, named "tukari". The Down Town was built later and it was thus named a tail and its inhabitants "repanci".[23]

The next step in the documentation of the Osijek city culture is achieved by recreating the actual political upheavals of the time and their influence on both real and fictional characters in the novel. Despite the (un)intentional irregularities in the events chronology, the background of the novel is founded on the Empress Maria Theresa's letter from August 25th, 1746, in which she asked for "the three Osijek parts to unite".[24] In *Vitez slavonske ravni* this is mentioned in the letter upon which the road robber Stojan Varnica came when he captured Maria Theresa's councillor, Weber. In both letters – fictional and real – Maria Theresa expresses her dissatisfaction with the Osijek magistrate, because it constantly "fails in at-

---

[16]   In English: the Upper Town.
[17]   In English: the Parish Church of St. Michael.
[18]   In English: the Osijek Military Headquarters.
[19]   In English: the Franciscan monastery of the Holy Cross.
[20]   In Latin: Porta Aquatica.
[21]   In English: "The Golden Ox" and "At the deer's".
[22]   M. Jurić Zagorka, *Vitez slavonske ravni*, Stvarnost, Zagreb 1983, p. 16.
[23]   S. Sršan, *Osječki ljetopisi 1686–1945*, Povijesni arhiv u Osijeku, Osijek 1993, p. 57.
[24]   I. Mažuran *et al.*, *Od turskog do suvremenog Osijeka*, Zavod za znanstveni rad Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti u Osijeku, Gradsko poglavarstvo Osijek and Školska knjiga d.d., Zagreb and Osijek 1996, p. 34.

tempts to unite the three Osijek parts".[25] The novel follows the historical line of events as it, among other things, shows the failure of both Weber's mission and Maria Theresa's request. Historically, this attempt failed because of two reasons: first, the parts were too far away, and second, "each part had its privileges" which they did not want to give up and there were "certain religious differences"[26] which prevented the parts from uniting.

The novel further evokes the urban by emphasizing the importance of the regional setting as an essential component of the centre-periphery dichotomy in the creation of the Osijek city culture: the novel is set in the eighteenth century Osijek, in Slavonia, which is a region within Croatia, which was one of the regions/provinces of the multi-national and multi-cultural Habsburg Monarchy. The centre-periphery dichotomy is further brought into being by the description of the patriotic mission connected to the regional milieu: the plot focuses on an incident from regional history the resolution of which did not depend on the Habsburg monarchy state apparatus but on the willingness and patriotism of local individuals – Slavonians i.e. Croats. The "local colour" of the novel conveys the idea, or rather the conviction, that the Croatian national identity should be separated from the Habsburg history.

In addition to visual methods such as the space-time aspect and the centre-periphery dichotomy, Zagorka visualizes the Osijek urban identity as inseparable from its inhabitants: from aristocracy to the middle class to robbers. The antagonist of the novel is a historical figure – the road robber Stojan Varnica who is in the Osijek historical records described as "plurimorum hujus patriae incolarum pestis et interitus".[27] This mirrors the novel's description of him as an evil "master of towns, villages, castles"; he is so evil that "everyone is afraid of him in Osijek".[28] Further mirroring of the actual into the fictional is brought into being by a complicated net of spies of all social classes which the real and fictional Varnica relied on. In both real life and the novel, these spies "bought weapons, gun powder, lead, and flint; informed their leader of rich targets; and alarmed him when danger occurred".[29] The representatives of the middle class are embodied in the characters of merchants, inn owners, and policemen – Osijek citizens, whose devotion to their city and its well-being unites them in their efforts to stand up to the notorious road robber. The most impressive of them is the female protagonist of the novel Marija Ana whose flâneur traits help us visualize the Osijek of the mid-eighteenth century as well as contribute to the novel's plot. The city culture of *Vitez slavonske ravni* is, too, portrayed with the help of the local gentry: the Pejačevićs, the Prandaus, the Adamović-Čepinskis, and the Jankovićs. In contrast to the Prandaus, the Adamović-Čepinskis, and the Jankovićs, who provide a mere historical backdrop for the novel, the Pejaćevićs are the major characters in the novel. Much of the novel's plot centers around the attack on their Retfala castle, the events taking place in their city house in Tvrđava, and the love story between Magda Pejačević and Zorislav Morović.

---

[25] M. Jurić Zagorka, *Vitez slavonske ravni, op. cit.*, p. 57.
[26] B. Plevnik, *Stari Osijek*, Radničko sveučilište Božidar Maslarić, Osijek 1987, p. 43.
[27] J. Boesendorfer, *Crtice iz slavonske povijesti*, Privlačica, Vinkovci 1994, p. 365. In English: "the plague of the region".
[28] M. Jurić Zagorka, *Vitez slavonske ravni, op. cit.*, p. 37.
[29] J. Boesendorfer, *op. cit.*, p. 366.

In Zagorka's *Vitez slavonske ravni*, the city of Osijek is thus visualized as it is lived, as a text that can be approached not only as a system of structures and patterns present in "city-mapping", but as the text that can be read through the lens of history, experience, and language. Zagorka transforms the text of the novel into an urban text by documenting physical structures (famous buildings, monuments, and city parts) as well as particular "lived" places (houses and palaces, inns and taverns); by using formal and informal city documents, and by portraying the life of the city through ups and downs, conflicts and reunions of real and fictional Osijek dwellers. In using those symbols, metaphors, characters, and settings, Zagorka opens a discursive space within which she ascribes culturally specific meanings to Osijek urban landscape and Osijek urban life.

The Other City[30]

Written in the literary tradition of Gnosticism and magical Prague, *The Other City* is a first-person narrative in which "the present-day city and its fantastic or legendary alter-ego are as much the main characters as the somewhat puppetlike human protagonists".[31] The inspiration for the novel, as Ajvaz explains to Erika Zlamalová in the interview preceding the Prague Writers' Festival 2010, came from:

> a feeling that (…) [he] had in snow-covered Pohořelec, and at the beginning of Empty Streets, the feeling that (…) [he] had one hot summer day when (…) [he] walked along an empty street in Nusle from the Vršovice train station. This feeling came to (…) [him] from a white fog, in which tens of indistinct shapes and individual stories flickered, and those shapes and stories challenged (…) [him] to liberate them from the fog, to give them some kind of form.[32]

Ajvaz visualizes this feeling by setting his novel in various Prague locations. He does this by city-mapping Prague's:
- streets: Karlova Street, Kaprova Street, Žatecká Street, Železná Street, Celetná Street, Maisel Street, Široká Street, Lilová Street, Seminary Street, Neruda Street, Letná Street, Bridge Street, Úvoz Street, St Thomas Street, Jerusalem Street, Seminary Lane, the lane of Nový Svét, and Paris Avenue;
- churches: St Savior's Church, St Nicholas's Church, St Vitus's Cathedral, and the Týn Church;
- pubs, coffee houses, and restaurants: the Malá Strana Café, the Café Slavia, the 'U hradeb' milk bar, the Snake wine restaurant, the Blue Pike Tavern, the café of the Hotel Evropa, and the Excelsior restaurant;
- palaces, towers, and monuments: the Kinsky Palace, the Clam-Gallas Palace, the Martinitz Palace, the Castle, the Town Hall, the monument to Jan Hus, the statues of

---

30 The novel was translated into English by Gerald Turner in 2009.
31 C. Harwood, *Writing in the Time since Time Exploded: The Czech Novel, 1990–2002*, "World Literature Today" 2003, no. 77, p. 66.
32 The complete interview can be found on the web page: http://www.pwf.cz/en/authors-archive/michal-ajvaz/2984.html (access: 23.09.2013). A few grammatical changes have been made in the body of the paragraph.

SS Cosmas and Damian, St Wenceslas, St Augustine, St Francis Borgia, St Christopher, SS Barbara, Margaret and Elizabeth, the Old Town bridge tower, and the Malá Strana bridge tower;
- bridges: the Charles Bridge, Jirásek Bridge, the Legions Bridge, Mánes Bridge, and the Powder Bridge;
- squares: Pohořelec Square, Hradčany Square, the Old Town Square, Marian Square, Crusaders' Square, Malá Strana Square, and St Anne's Square;
- parks and rivers: the Strahov Gardens, Kampa Park, the Botič river, and the Vltava;
- academic institutions: the University Library, the Clementinum, the Arts Faculty, and the Týn School;
- other locations: the Old Town, Smetana Embankment, Petřín Hill, Radlice, Bakov nad Jizerou, Újezd, Všenory, Janáček Embankment, the Main Station, Vinohrady, the Nusle Steps, Nusle Vale, and Pankrác.

The documentary reality of Prague – the places where a lone young man walks in the ghastly hours of the night – provides the basis for the imaginative evocation of Prague's other city, which starts unexpectedly popping up in hints and flashes and "from the things (…) [the narrator] heard".[33] Unwilling to disentangle himself from the curious need to reveal Prague's otherness, in which he himself is enmeshed, the narrator gradually develops "the feeling that in our immediate vicinity there lies some strange world".[34] Its presence evokes the narrator's dilemmas and makes him wonder if he:

> had found (…) [himself] on the frontier of an unknown city adjoining our own? Is it a city growing out of the waste that our own order has not been able to consume and throw away, or is it a community of autochthons, who were here before we arrived and to whom we are of so little account that they will not even notice when we depart? What is the ground plan of that city? What districts is it divided into and what are its laws? Where are its boulevards, squares and gardens, where its gleaming royal palace?[35]

Gradually, the glimpses and flashes of the Other City intertwine with the reality of Prague and the narrator documents two cities at work: one visible, the other invisible, one of the surface, the other underground or hidden; one a realm of mastery and control, the other of mystery and turmoil. He even discovers that the basic units of the urban – apartments:

> are much bigger than we imagine, that the dwelling areas and known spaces constitute only a small part, that the totality of the apartment includes dank stone halls whose walls are covered in dreary frescoes, paradise gardens overgrown with luxuriant vegetation, and atria, in whose midst the cold water of fountains gushes high into the air. The secret spaces are linked with the living areas of the apartment by camouflaged passages in nooks and crannies and behind wardrobes, but usually we never set foot in them in our lives – and yet we sense that the decisions whereby our lives are transformed and renewed ripen in the breath that wafts from these places whose existence we deny.[36]

---

[33]   M. Ajvaz, *The Other City*, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign–London 2009, p. 12.
[34]   *Ibidem.*
[35]   *Ibidem*, p. 22.
[36]   *Ibidem*, p. 52.

In this way, the narrator, too, recalls, in the most realistically presented scenes, "the pictures of ancient world cultures, thereby broadening local experience with the experience of humankind, giving it a metaphysical dimension".[37]

In evoking the ideas of the real and the symbolic, the visible and the invisible, the surface and the underground, the ancient and the modern, Ajvaz's *The Other City* touches on one of the major issues of the urban space, that of the definition of centre and periphery and, by extension, the relationship of the centre and the periphery. Ajvaz thus maintains that there are no such terms as centre and periphery in the urban space (at least that of his novel) and illustrates this point by insisting that "by searching for the center you move further away from it. The moment you stop looking for it and you forget about it, you'll discover that you never left it"[38]. In accord with this is Ajvaz's definition of the mentioned terms: "The places we call the fringes are the secret center on whose fringes we dwell"[39] and his idea that "all cities are mutually the center and periphery, beginning and end, capital and colony of each other".[40]

Further investigation helps to reveal one more visual method Ajvaz uses in *The Other City*: the character of a *flâneur* and/or the motif of flânery. Originally, a *flâneur* was a well-dressed man marked by the traits of wealth, education, and idleness who strolled leisurely through the Parisian arcades of the nineteenth century to pass the time that his wealth afforded him. He treated the people who passed and the objects he saw as texts for his own pleasure. In being so, the *flâneur* becomes a personification of the urban itself and operates as a metaphor of the closeness between the individual and his/her urban surroundings. The scholarship surrounding the subject of the *flâneur* always in some way refers to Walter Benjamin's writing on Charles Baudelaire – *The Arcades Project*[41] (1927–1940). Besides Benjamin's works, the figure of the *flâneur* appears also in the works of Chris Jenks and Michel de Certeau, who both use it as a metaphor and methodological tool for the analysis of urban culture. In literature, the *flâneur* operates as a creative principle and as a prose writing strategy of modern and postmodern fiction. Portrayed as a kind of a stroller, walker, or idler, who walks through urban landscapes, the *flâneur* experiences mysterious encounters and revelations mainly produced by visual effects. His/her walks are without particular motivation and they usually turn into adventures bringing him/her aesthetic or erotic pleasures. In this way, she or he becomes a narrator fluent in deciphering the visual vocabulary of the urban space.

---

[37] H. Janaszek-Ivaničkova, *Slavic Literatures in the Chaos of Postmodern Changes*, "Neohelicon" 2006, no. 2, p. 29.

[38] M. Ajvaz, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

[39] *Ibidem*, p. 110.

[40] *Ibidem*, p. 156.

[41] The character of *flâneur* first appeared in Walter Benjamin's *Die Wiederkehr des Flâneurs* (1929), a work reviewing Franz Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin*. In his later work on the nineteenth-century Paris, Benjamin reexamines the figure in what he considers its true dwelling place: Paris. The flâneur is also depicted in his 1935 sketch *Paris – Capital of the Nineteenth Century* (1935) and in the two studies on Baudelaire written in 1938.

In Ajvaz's *The Other City*, there is also a man walking through Prague, a *flâneur* documenting the secret paths, chance meetings, and curved streets of the Czech capital. Ajvaz's narrator takes his place "in a long tradition of «Prague walkers», stretching all the way from the pilgrim in Jan Amos Comenius's seventeenth-century allegory *The Labyrinth of the World* to the twentieth-century poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire, Vítezslav Nezval, and Vladimír Holan".[42] In *The Other City*, the reader will also find a new mythical geography because Ajvaz's Prague is repopulated by ghosts, eccentrics, talking animals, and statues. They confront Ajvaz's flâneur on his wanderings forcing him to notice more and more cracks in familiar places, until "the other city" begins to open up, parallel with the real Prague but invisible to its inhabitants. As Jonathan Bolton notices, *The Other City* can be seen as a

> guidebook to this invisibility, reminding us that we see least clearly what is most familiar. Only when we remove objects from "the network of purposes" that entangle them, will we awaken to the possibility of seeing them anew; only then will libraries turn into jungles, only then will we notice hatchways leading inside statues and ocean waves lapping at our bedspreads.[43]

The City Builder[44]

Konrád's early novel *The City Builder* is semiautobiographical and recalls his work at the Budapest Institute of Urban Planning. Although shifting in time and space, the novel does not exhibit narrative progression. The continuity of structure and plot is provided by the first person narrator who documents his memories and views on the people and world around him. The narrator of *The City Builder* is a city planner, an architect, a city builder in an unnamed provincial Eastern European city who comes from a long line of city planners and builders. But while his great-grandfather "selected the bricks himself, testing them for a steely ring with a hammer (…) [and] toppled over rooftrees with a long-handled ax, and when it came to lifting and crushing stone, he outdid his day laborers"[45], the narrator does not possess his ruthlessness. He is instead a:

> city planner in the early phase of socialism. From [the] bourgeois (…) [he] became a member of the intelligentsia, and was servant of law and order, agent of an open future, wizard of upward-soaring graphs, and self-hating hawker in an ideology shop, all in one. (…) [His] father was a private planner, (…) [he] was a planner employed by the state. To make decisions about others (…) [his father] needed money, (…) [he] (…) [has his] office. What makes others envy (…) [him], what enables (…) [him] to imagine in arrogant moments that (…) [he is] what (…) [he is], are wealth and power, and of these (…) [they] both had more than (…) [their] share.[46]

---

[42]   J. Bolton, *Reading Michal Ajvaz*, "Context", no. 17, http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/book/?fa =customcontent& GCOI=15647100511460&extrasfile=A1260DE2%2DB0D0%2DB086% 2DB6C01D239DCE1501%2Ehtml (access: 8.01.2013).

[43]   J. Bolton, *op. cit*.

[44]   The novel was translated into English by Ivan Sanders in 1977 and 2007.

[45]   G. Konrád, *The City Builder*, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign–London 2007, p. 54.

[46]   *Ibidem*, p. 75.

As a young city planner he "wanted to build a great city, (…) a new city (…) in whose identical neighborhoods families, equal in social position, would no longer disdainfully keep apart"[47]; as a middle-aged man he became "state-owned, and a loyal socialist, (…) a technician of a centrally prescribed military strategy, at middle level in the pyramid of decision making",[48] satisfied with his modest share of power and glad that he has not completely been dehumanized by the repressive system that had made him.

The City Builder allows one more reading, one in which the novel is elevated to a series of "universal life situations and archetypal confrontations".[49] In this reading, the narrator performs "Everyman"[50]: he is a husband, lover, father, son, *flâneur*, *bourgeois*, revolutionary, socialist, and technocrat. He has a vision of the city that is unique and universal, utopian and real, a vision that could be shared by an individual and the mass alike – an Everyman's vision:

> I dream of a city in which action is synonymous with change, where I have a right to my surroundings, where I don't exist for the city but am wooed by it; where only after consultation with me could decisions be made about me; (…) where I am a reformer because of my ideas, not because I have been appointed; (…) where the front pages of newspaper contain intellectual revelations, and the community rewards those who are different; where a high school is run differently from a chicken farm, and a teacher teaches by sharing his interests with his students; (…) where entire streets are bulletin boards, and everyone can paint the sidewalks and address passers-by; where there is music in public squares and people take pleasure in shaping their environment.[51]

Similarly, the city builder's cynicism and quiet despair, his anguished litanies, appeals, and exhortations on the limitations of the city life can be read as belonging not only to himself or his fellow citizens' in an unnamed provincial Eastern European city but as all peoples' dreaming for a more meaningful life.

> I don't want a city in which pedestrians are chased by warning signs amid ruined or abandoned walls; where nothing is allowed, nothing is possible, nothing is worth the trouble; where ready-made regulations stare at me from shopwindows. I don't want a city where everything stays the same, where suspicion oozes from plaster walls, [where] squares are contaminated by idiotic monotony and a heap of garbage on the corner reminds me of my deformities. I don't want a city where I cower to avoid being snapped at, until I am snapped at for cowering; where greatness is an obtrusion, cowardice is peace, and talk is conspiracy; where I have to like the way things are because they cannot be otherwise; where cunning nobodies search the bunkers of wasted years, and humanity is an irritable substance, a graphic illustration of inattention, the refutation of my hopes, where street-corner lottery-ticket vendors represent transcendence.[52]

---

[47] *Ibidem*, p. 79.
[48] *Ibidem*, pp. 80–81, 83.
[49] I. Sanders, *Freedom's Captives: Notes on George Konrád's Novels*, "World Literature Today" 1983, no. 57, p. 211.
[50] *Ibidem*.
[51] G. Konrád, *op. cit.*, pp. 120–122.
[52] *Ibidem*, p. 119.

Seen in this light, even his profession is "a curiously ambivalent, all-inclusive metaphor. On the one hand, the planner is the artist, the creator, the preserver of civilization; but obsessed with his goals, he is also a ruthless and amoral manipulator".[53]

Finally, *The City Builder* is a novel in which the city is as much the main protagonist as the city builder. Even though a "coupling of stone and light", the city is presented as a living organism, as "a stretched-out body in the folds of a mountain"[54] whose "white-stoned City Hall" and "Central European Square", with its impressive public buildings and statuary "mentioned in histories of architecture",[55] remind the narrator that he is actually there because of the city and not the other way around. This is one of the reasons why the narrator finds his "gossipy provincial"[56] city at the same time comforting and imprisoning, irreplaceable and loathsome, "an Eastern European showcase of devastation and reconstruction" that "can welcome the enemy with salt and bread, and, having taken crash courses in the art of survival (...) change its greeting signs, statues, scapegoats – its history".[57]

Conclusion

It can be seen that visualization of the urban space in the twentieth century Central European literature demonstrates a complex and, at moments, a similar development of the city image. Finding hints and clues in the works of the leading urban-and-social space historians and sociologists, this paper has attempted to assert that literature, in being at least in part the reflection of life, also shares their affinity to employ and examine similar subject matters. The interest in the city in literature firstly occurred in the Bible and has regularly reemerged in each and every national literature. It has occupied Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Émile Zola, Joseph Conrad, and T.S. Eliot on the Old Continent as well as Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Ralph Ellison, William Faulkner, Thomas Pynchon, and many other writers on the New. It has become one of the main existential dilemmas in the works of the twentieth century Central European writers as well. Sharing a number of features such as the first-person narrator, the centre-periphery opposition, the figure of the flâneur, the Bakhtinian perspective, the use of particular well-known places, etc., Central European writers open a discursive space on the city as the image of the world, time, society, national, or multi-national culture and give it their own touch. Some, like Michal Ajvaz, use the character of the *flâneur*, strolling through the present-day city and the creative principles of magic realism to draw attention to "the other cities" invisible to us because we are caught up in our own habits of seeing. Others, like George Konrád, imbue their portrait of the city with their own memories successfully avoiding the impersonality of the post-modernist fiction. The rest,

---

[53]   I. Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
[54]   G. Konrád, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
[55]   *Ibidem*, p. 176.
[56]   *Ibidem*, p. 22.
[57]   *Ibidem*.

like Marija Jurić Zagorka, visualize the city as the cultural, political, and historical (memory) space in/out of the context of other major cities/regions/countries.

Bibliography

Ajvaz M., *The Other City*, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign–London 2009.

Boesendorfer J., *Crtice iz slavonske povijesti*, Privlačica, Vinkovci 1994.

Bolton J., *Reading Michal Ajvaz*, "Context", no. 17, http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/book/?fa=custom-content&GCOI=15647100511460&extrasfile=A1260DE2%2DB0D0%2DB086%2DB6C01D239DCE1501%2Ehtml (access: 8.01.2013).

Harwood C., *Writing in the Time since Time Exploded: The Czech Novel, 1990–2002*, "World Literature Today" 2003, vol. 77.

Janaszek-Ivaničkova H., *Slavic Literatures in the Chaos of Postmodern Changes*, "Neohelicon" 2006, vol. 2.

Johnson J., *Literary Geography: Joyce, Woolf, and the City*, "City" 2000, vol. 4.

Konrád G., *The City Builder*, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign–London 2007.

Lehan R., *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*, University of California Press, Berkley–Los Angeles–London 1998.

Mažuran I. *et al.*, *Od turskog do suvremenog Osijeka. Zavod za znanstveni rad Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti u Osijeku*, Gradsko poglavarstvo Osijek and Školska knjiga d.d., Zagreb–Osijek 1996.

Miller J.H., *Topographies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1995.

Moretti F., *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, Verso, London 1998.

Plevnik B., *Stari Osijek*, Radničko sveučilište Božidar Maslarić, Osijek 1987.

Sanders I., *Freedom's Captives: Notes on George Konrád's Novels*, "World Literature Today" 1983, vol. 57.

Sršan S., *Osječki ljetopisi 1686–1945*, Povijesni arhiv u Osijeku, Osijek 1993.

Zagorka M.J., *Kako je nastao* Vitez slavonske ravni? *Historijski podaci za novi roman* Hrvatskog Lista, "Hrvatski List" 1937, vol. 349.

Zagorka M.J., *Moji osječki dojmovi*, "Hrvatski List" 1937, vol. 348.

Zagorka M.J., *Vitez slavonske ravni*, Stvarnost, Zagreb 1983.