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Just what was it that made yesterday's cities so different, so appealing

Picture a young artist. She might be writing or making music or making art. She comes from the countryside, a small or mid-sized town. She grew up ambitious and talented, with enough free time and support to allow her gifts to flourish. Her talent and work have been rewarded. She has published a short story, or had an exhibition. Her creativity is budding. She has a vision of herself establishing her practice, deepening her knowledge and widening her network, making it, making it big. What does she do?

Of course, she moves to a city.

This story is timeless, or seems to be so. It is the story of my own move from Italy to Berlin, circa 2008, with a moderately successful novel in Italian. It is the story of Andy Warhol's move to New York from Pittsburgh, in 1949, as related in Lou Reed and John Cale's 2004 song, "Smalltown". It is the story of Lucien Chardon, the main character of Honoré de Balzac's mid-nineteenth century serial novel, *Lost Illusions*:

"Here in Paris," writes Balzac, "there is a spirit which you breathe in the air; it infuses the least details, every literary creation bears traces of its influence. You learn more by talk in a cafe, or at a theatre, in one half hour, than you would learn in ten years in the provinces. Here, in truth, wherever you go, there is always something to see, something to learn, some comparison to make. Extreme cheapness, too, of course."

Lost Illusions deals largely with an aspiring young writer from the countryside experiencing literary life in a big city. Published just as the industrial revolution started fuelling the expansion of the first Western metropolises, the novel played a major role in defining the image of the city as a hub for creatives of all disciplines.

That image would linger. Whether living in scrappy attic rooms in Paris' Latin Quarter, talking poetry on the banks of the Seine, or shivering in unheatable, fashionably run-down lofts in lower Manhattan, talking literature over lazy afternoon parties, while watching the skyline from a rooftop, or ambling across the bare floor planks of a too big, half-empty Altbau apartment in Berlin, talking art in the darkness over the beat of a techno club, the blueprint set by Balzac for the life of a young, or youngish, artist or writer has remained unchallenged for almost two centuries.

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I followed that blueprint too, moving to Berlin at the very beginning of the twenty-first century. I had just published a novel in Italy (to relatively little success) but was working on my second. Like all the other aspiring somethings flocking to Berlin from across Europe, I sought networking opportunities and cultural nourishment. The art and music that most interested me most was happening there, at a time, circa twenty million years ago, during which I could not have seen it on Instagram or streamed it on Soundcloud. Bookstores and galleries and bars were popping up everywhere, every day, just like theatres and "cabinets de lecture" in Balzac's Paris, just like underground clubs and art spaces in Warhol's New York.

If this explains why aspiring artists were "willing" to flock to Paris and New York and Berlin, another factor explains why they could. Balzac says it quite plainly: those cities were "cheap".

We can know exactly how cheap, because Balzac was obsessed with writing about money, detailing the precise income and expenses of his characters with patience and glee. This was a programmatic aspect of his novels' realism. Frustrated with the dreamy, philosophical sentimentality of earlier literature, he felt it impossible to write about reality without writing about what in reality mattered most: cash.

For instance, a rather sordid, but inhabitable attic studio in the Latin Quarter cost fifteen francs a month. The aspiring writer working on his manuscript could expect to sell a book for at least 1000 francs, if without fame and exploited by a savvy publisher. That same writer would sell articles to daily newspapers for three francs a column, and longer magazine pieces for a hundred.

This adds up rather well for the aspiring writer: two days' worth of newspaper articles would pay for a month's rent; a magazine feature for over half a year; a novel for the better part of a decade. He (in Balzac's times it was only "he") could reasonably hope to buy himself the time to work hard on growing as an artist and establishing his craft.

Oddly enough, similar economic circumstances made it possible for me to move to Berlin in the early years of the twenty-first century, before the financial crisis crushed the publishing industry and spiked European real estate. Rent for my scrappy one-bedroom in Neukölln was less than 300 euros. As an entry-level contributor for an art and architecture magazine, I could cover it by writing three shorter articles for its online daily; a longer feature would buy me five months; the advance for my first novel, low but in line with Italian standards at the time, would cover it for almost three years, in which hopefully a second novel would come.

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It might seem counter-intuitive now, but for the two millennia, before Balzac's time, the ideal place for cultural production was a princely manor on an estate in the British countryside, or in the Tuscan hills, or in rural Germany. This, of course, was because this was the place where culture actually was produced, by the only people who could afford to do so: aristocrats, and their courtiers, secretaries, librarians, teachers and priests.

Even after the invention and proliferation of the printing press, books remained a luxury, only the very wealthy could own more than a few. International art-seeing trips were reserved for the extremely privileged. "Networking" largely consisted in keeping (expensive) correspondences around the continent, using a dead language only rich people knew, or in visiting each other's estates on one's way to yet another estate.

There have been, of course, a small number of significant exceptions: talented, poor writers saved by benevolent patrons or the priesthood; women willing (and financially able) to defy conventions and go their own way; visual artists successful enough to set up workshops and handle an international clientele. But that's what they were: exceptions in a world where artistic creation was an utmost privilege.

Big cities opened up this closed caste. Starting in the early nineteenth century, they provided men (and much later, women), who lacked independent wealth, the possibility to develop as artists and writers. For the first time, thanks to libraries and museums, theatres and cafés, cities offered the possibility for networking and cultural development without the need for wealth or means of travel. There was plenty of empty space at their margins, where rent was cheap, preempting the housing needs of the coming influx of industrial workers.

But cheap isn't free, and crucially, big cities housed a cultural industry where aspiring writers and artists could support themselves by working sporadically, thereby keeping time free for their craft: the burgeoning newspaper business in Balzac's Paris; advertising in Warhol's New York; music in London; the visual arts in noughties Berlin. These three elements—networking opportunities, cheap space, easy, lucrative and flexible work in the cultural sector—were the great promise of cities for two centuries, they were a crucial element in the democratization of art. Of course, in 2020, none of this is true anymore.

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Whoever walked through a major city in the seventies or eighties or nineties would barely recognize that same place now. It is not about physical, superficial changes to a street or building—this happens all the time. Rather, it's as if the very essence of places, what made a city a city, has been subtly transformed.

Vacant lots aren't vacant anymore. Empty buildings—a common sight for anyone growing up in the 1980s and 1990s—only exist as fast-paced construction sites shrouded in advertisements for the new condos. Dark, dodgy areas, places you shouldn't be seen at night, are not so dark and dodgy anymore. Small, low value-added businesses like stores and crafts workshops are being replaced by fancier, more capital-intensive, more profitable food and beverage establishments. Façades are repainted, then repainted again. E-bikes appear. So do surveillance cameras.

Much of this can be understood as a positive transformation, at least by some, and in certain respects it undoubtedly is. However, its impact has also caused a drastic flattening in the social structure of big cities: margins do not exist anymore. The cheap, run-down buildings in the scrappy downtown have been renovated into luxury condos; the huge abandoned warehouses now house open-plan service industry offices; single-room-occupancy hotels are now hostels aimed at mass tourism; empty apartments have been bought and renovated and flipped and flipped and flipped until the only way to squeeze enough profit to justify their price is to maximise their occupancy on Airbnb. The quest for cheaper living conditions has pushed artists from Montmartre to Montreuil, from Shoreditch to Hackney, from Soho to Queens, from Mitte to Marzahn. Capital has followed them, and pushed them away again.

This, of course, is first and foremost a problem for the lowest-paid workers whose presence is essential: nurses and teachers, cleaners and waiters. Inhospitability toward budding artists and writers is by far the shallowest problem ailing the contemporary city. Indeed, a city can function perfectly well as an engine of financial accumulation and production without hosting a bunch of dreamy good-for-nothings in its otherwise precious slivers of real estate. What about those good-for-nothings, though?

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Nothing available to Belle Époque-era Parisians, mid-century New Yorkers, or Berliners fifteen years ago is available today. Rent in those cities, even in the far-off peripheries, would be mostly unaffordable on an entry-level salary. Competition for contracts is so high that an artist's lack of fixed income is usually enough to disqualify her from the start. Meanwhile, the cultural industry that, previously, could at least provide her enough to subsist on, has been reshaped by the same forces responsible for transforming physical realities. Newspapers and magazines have been forced to cut costs drastically; temp gigs is available only through businesses whose models aim to drive compensation down by omitting sick pay, among other responsibilities; the art-space and gallery system continues to turn into a winner-takes-all market, with prohibitive entry barriers past which a small number of operators, international players crowd, blocking smaller, independent operators from one of their main sources of revenue.

Networking has been impacted too. Long hours spent working a "steady" job which "" requires an arduous commute from one end of the city to the other, eat into time that could be spent talking, watching, reading—which makes an artist both a lazy flaneur, and someone able to exercise creative freedom. The scattering of people to far-flung peripheries makes people less likely and less willing to meet casually. The networking sites—the cafés and art spaces and clubs that popped up everywhere when space was cheap—are themselves vanishing alongside the free time of their public, whose presence in the cities was made possible by the same economics that allowed those places to exist to begin with.

The latter factor, however, allows for a significant exception. Most networking today—definitely most cultural discovery—happens through the Internet.

But, to use the Internet, one doesn't have to be in a city.

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Cities haven't amassed inhabitants and wealth by creating them out of thin air. Mostly, they have purged them from the countryside, starting with the working class migrating to feed factory lines in the nineteenth century, up to the extreme inequality in real-estate price trends since the 2008 market crash, which has seen values in city centres more than double while rural areas sank. This has provided the countryside and the villages and the small and medium-sized towns with an abundance of precisely what cities lack: space.

Meanwhile, most freelance work in the cultural sector has migrated to laptops, allowing such work to be carried out remotely. The wages—comparatively low—are not enough to live on, in any metropolis anymore, but they do suffice elsewhere. In the countryside, time is free to be spent working on one's craft, just as space—a disproportionately precious commodity in increasingly crowded cities—seems to be infinitely available.

Airports and train stations offer connections to the same international network of events that one would have reached from a capital. The instant worldwide connectivity offered by the Internet, mostly, does the rest. This seems to point out something slightly paradoxical, yet historically plausible: for artists and writers, the countryside seems to be the new city.

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This was to be the premise of this essay. Logically, the section that follows should have developed this conclusion, detailing case studies and sketching an image of the future in which artists' communities would thrive in previously abandoned rural areas.

This was also the premise of my own move to the German countryside, a year ago, with the intention of starting a writers' residency. The year has been spent dealing with overwhelming renovations. Visiting artists and writers double as carpenters and masons, as the building gradually takes shape.

Any experience I might have had over this past year fails to substantiate my theory, perhaps because it is too early. Perhaps because the theory, "If artists communities have a future, it's in the countryside", begins with an ominous "If". I had examples in mind, which I would have discussed in this section. There would have been the Performing Arts Forum—a self-reliant artists' residency in France—or the village of Gerswalde, one hour away from Berlin. I would have outlined a model in which villages and towns might become hubs for smaller communities of artists and writers that float from one such place to the next over the years, in the gaps between international residencies and shows and events.

It is by far not a sustainable model. The connection between cities and the countryside is made of oil, as is the bridge between villages and biennials, and rural areas worldwide are currently the hotbed of a nativist right-wing ideology, that seems to run counter to any such development. However, in another way, the possibility of working towards agricultural self-reliance in smaller communities seems to point at a solution to problems the West seems destined to face, sooner rather than later.

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I was in Italy, and had been working on this essay for a couple of days when the country was declared under quarantine after the spread of the coronavirus. I suspended all writing and spent forty-eight hours figuring out how to fly north and make it back to my village. During the trip, I crossed cities emptied by fear, and passed through train stations surveilled by the military. Police questioned me about my need to travel, and I scrolled through updates on social media from my friends in Milan: scrambles at supermarkets, fights over personal space on public transit. After days of forced lockdown, people made up excuses just to get a chance for a walk through deserted streets, among shuttered stores. If they got questioned they could get arrested. I spent several hours of my plane and car trip reading news, reading analyses, reading projections, reading terrifying stories and desperate stories, and stories proving the sweetness, and generosity, and resilience, of people shutting themselves in their apartments for months to avoid spreading contagion, suddenly at risk in overflowing, food-scarce cities all over the world.

Then I got home to Scharpzwow. Population: 63.

This article by novelist, critic, and translator Vincenzo Latronico originally appeared on the Spring/Summer 2020 issue of Provenca.