Fragmentation and the Digital City: An Analysis of Vicente Luis Mora's *Circular 07. Las afueras*

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This essay juxtaposes three recent publications, Vicente Luis Mora's Circular 07. Las afueras *(2007-), Kenneth Goldsmith's* Capital: New York, Capital of the 20th Century *(2015), and Jorge Carrión's* Barcelona. Libro de los pasajes *(2016), in order to explore how contemporary digital technologies construct and fragment urban experience on a global scale. Despite their different political intentions, these three works share a common aesthetic of appropriation, unoriginal quotation, and fragmentation, as they are also all modelled after Walter Benjamin's* Arcades Project. *Just like Benjamin did with Paris, each of these works focuses on a particular Western city—Madrid, New York, and Barcelona—now being proposed as paradigmatic representations of urban experience, which is meant to mimic digital media's modularity and disintegration. Goldsmith's use of appropriation is read as a blank endorsement of digital mediation of everyday life, which sits in opposition to Carrión's and Mora's political projects.* Circular 07 *and* Barcelona *mix unoriginal writing techniques, like Goldsmith's conceptual writing, with other experimental methods to warn readers against apolitical adoption of digital technologies. Fragmentation is still proposed as the most important aesthetic form of twenty-first century writing, but these two Spanish works strive for its contextualization as a complex mechanism structured around reader/writer subjectivity. Finally, this essay ponders how to consider new reader/writer subjectivities within the larger context of global cities in late capitalism.*

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1

> Walter Benjamin, con quien estoy de acuerdo en tantas cosas, escribió una de la que discrepo: "las relaciones alternantes de los hombres con las grandes ciudades se distinguen por una preponderancia expresa de los ojos sobre la del oído". Valgan las páginas siguientes como refutación, in extenso, de esa afirmación.
> —Vicente Luis Mora, *Circular 07. Las afueras* (104)

2

Nowadays, it might not seem revolutionary to claim that digital technology has impacted every aspect of twenty-first-century life and its cultural products. On the one hand, objects—and even experiences—that once existed outside the screen are now being digitized and uploaded onto virtual clouds, while, on the other, those digital products comprise an invisible network of relations where Web traffic has taken over the physical maps of our towns and cities. Digital technologies are behind the production of all labor practices, and it is impossible to find a creative industry that doesn't rely on digital tools of production: from graphic design, to music, and even to writing.

The remix of different creative practices in these fields seems as commonplace as the practice of remix itself as a new aesthetic category in which new products are built out of mashed-up fragments. We encounter fragmentation as the backbone of digital experience and, as this seeps into our physical reality, the latter also becomes increasingly fragmented. The belief that, in the society of information, scattered data jumps out at us from every screen and pocket has almost become a twenty-first-century truism, in the sense that information has abandoned the modern impulse of creating a unified discourse of our reality. In other words, just as information has been reduced to digital—fragmented—data points, so has our experiencing of the world. From measuring the outside temperature, to controlling the traffic lights in a big city, we rely on concrete bits of information to regulate our experience, situating fragmentation as the new measure of our lives.

3

Taking these two ideas as a point of departure, this essay looks at Vicente Luis Mora's *Circular 07. Las afueras* (2007-on) in order to explore how the use of digital technologies replicates the fragmented experience of today's global cities, understanding urban living as paradigmatic of contemporary life and culture. In my analysis, Mora's work is compared against two recent publications on similar matters: Kenneth Goldsmith's *Capital: New York, Capital of the 20th Century* (2015) and Jorge Carrión's *Barcelona: Libro de los Pasajes* (2016). Although

Goldsmith's book is written in English and Carrión's and Mora's are in Spanish, all three translate digital sampling and juxtaposition as the most appropriate technique to capturing the experience of the global city—albeit with different intent.

Just as Walter Benjamin did with his *Arcades Project* and Paris—in which he presents a city built of quotations—juxtaposition and fragmentation, instead of narration, become the tool to capture contemporary life: "los escritores tendemos inconscientemente a devolver la información de un modo similar a aquel en que la recibimos, y la construcción de nuestro mundo, incluso cerebralmente, es fragmentaria" (Mora, "Fragmentarismo" 100). In a sort of mimetic experiment, fragmentation in today's literature is to be read as a "consecuencia del modo en que recibimos la información en nuestros días. Lo sincopado del discurso informativo que nos bombardea a diario acaba por abrir una brecha en nuestro modo de procesarlo."

Likewise, Kenneth Goldsmith's *Capital: New York, Capital of the 20th Century* is built on the juxtaposition of sampled fragments about the city, none of them originally written by him, but sourced from a variety of documents dealing with the city. Jorge Carrión also takes fragments from other works about Barcelona to build his book, but intertwines them with original essays, interviews, and short autobiographical entries. Finally, Vicente Mora's *Circular 07. Las afueras* uses the city of Madrid as a map upon which to structure a selection of his own poems, short stories, and the like.

Although the question of originality is different in each work, fragmentation and montage—i.e. digital remix—is chosen as a literary method to represent the urban experience. Fragmentation understands that a city—be it Madrid, Barcelona or New York—comprises a multitude of elements, agents, and forces. Within them, experience must be approached from the subjectivity of the individual, as Walter Benjamin insisted with this representation of Paris as the capital of the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, all three books are either modeled on—Goldmisth's and Carrión's—or opposed to—Mora's—Benjamin's text, and, in their own different ways, they present the writer's own subjectivity as a way of filtering and recycling the many scattered bits of the world. As Goldsmith himself famously put it when describing US conceptual writing: "The 're-' gestures —such as reblogging and retweeting —have become cultural rites of cachet in and of themselves . . . *Filtering is taste*" (*Against* xix, my emphasis).

4

Fragmented writing—understood as tasteful sampling—and copying and pasting are two of the maxims behind the conceptual practices of the US movement lead by Goldsmith, and including the work of Craig Dworkin, Christian Bök, Vanessa Place or even Marjorie Perloff. It is also a common technique in the Spanish Generación Mutante, with which Mora and Carrión have both been associated. Also marketed as Generación Nocilla following the success of Agustín Fernández Mallo's *Nocilla Dream* (2006), the group comprises the multidisciplinary work of graphic designers, musicians, and writers influenced by the digital revolution. Like their North American counterparts, these writers are also literary critics, and essays like Eloy Fernández Porta's *Afterpop* (2007) or Vicente Mora's *El lectoespectador* (2012) have helped shape the literary mo(ve)ment.

The three books I have chosen as examples of how digital fragmentation can be read as an aesthetic technique to best represent contemporary life and our living environments—the global city—are thus similar in their methodology but seek different objectives. While Goldsmith's digitally inspired poetics seem to simply mimic the workings of the computer representing a victory of the digital revolution, Carrión's and, more specifically, Mora's work move beyond these celebratory claims to question darker aspects of the so-called revolution. By mixing their own creative pieces with unoriginal quotations, they strive to make their works as accessible as possible. In a technological environment where digital abstraction threatens to homogenize our reality by translating it all into the interchangeable electrical pulses of 1s and 0s, writing must embrace "la inteligibilidad; cuidar la accesibilidad, entendida como posibilidad de implicación personal del lector en lo leído pero dentro de una ambición compleja" (Mora, "La sencillez" 4). As mentioned, fragmentation is championed as the chief aesthetic form of twenty-first century writing, but it must occur within a framework of (complex) accessibility supported by the subjectivity of the reading and writing practice.

Hence, after discussing fragmentation in Benjamin's, Goldsmith's, and Carrión's works to contextualize fragmentation as a pervasive and evolving technique, I will show how Mora's *Circular 07* deviates from the norm as he readapts it to serve a different (political) purpose.

5

Written between 1927 and 1940, and published as an unfinished, posthumous work, Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* comprises a collection of heterogeneous fragments about or related to the city of Paris in the nineteenth century, "and its shopping arcades as the emblem of capital, whose power to transform culture extends the urban history of the Second Empire into an allegory of modernity" (Patke 5). Intervening rarely in his own voice to interpret the discourse, Benjamin relied on montage as the discursive method for this work, juxtaposing fragments to show that saying was to be displaced by showing in order to master "the art of citing without quotation marks" (*Arcades* 460, 458). He believed that this method would come to resemble his object of study: "the fortuitous correspondence" reinforcing "the self-relation between modern cities and the discourse they generate" (Patke 3). For that, he created an archive of the city, looking beyond the ordinary to the marginal and the repressed, and presented it as potentially revolutionary by finding a role "for the unconscious only in relation to what consciousness could retrieve from it. His practice insists that the city may contain multitudes, but in it, human experience is to be approached always at the level of the subjective" (Patke 4).

This method of collection inevitably represents the fragmented city as a conceptual image, seen more than heard or even felt and lived in, as refuted by the opening epigraph of this essay. The experience of the fragmented city is visual, although the gaze is not that of the detached CCTV camera or the bird's-eye view of today's Google satellites, but the ground perspective of the individual on foot, traveling solo, who encounters the city as passages, streets, and shops, rather than as abstract grids, maps, or even monuments. The representation and the experience of the city for Benjamin is still visual, although perhaps at loggerheads with how we deal with urban space today via GPS maps, smartphones, and other devices that guide our detached traversing of the city and beyond. Virtual maps organize fragments of space, and highlight the way we experience the city's multiplicity as a unified abstract concept, translatable to the informational networks that run through it. The city becomes a sort of immaterial construct, uprooting neighborhoods from their geographies, and making them interchangeable as far as their representative qualities go.

6

Saskia Sassen has defined "global cities" as highly concentrated points within the organization of the world economy, finances, and innovation (*Global* 3–4). She also points out that global cities are directly related to one another as networks rather than to the nation state in which they are graphically located (8–9), blurring the geographical and linguistic distinctions we could anticipate finding in cities such as Paris, New York or Barcelona, and reducing our experiences to the patterns seen in the books mentioned in this article.

In turn, spatial theorists like Henry Lefebvre and Michel Foucault have insisted on the social aspects of the construction of space, understanding them as products of the social imagination, mostly determined by the abstract circulations of (global) capital. Lefebvre, for his part, distinguishes space as that which is perceived, that which is conceived, and that which is lived (39), emphasizing the intertwining of such experiences that never exist in isolation. Within the many sophisticated forms that capital takes, he argues that the abstract representations of space have come to predominate over our spatial practice and have diminished the possibilities for that lived social space. The spatial practice that Lefebvre sees emerging from capitalism is one characterized, precisely, by being "global," "fragmented," and "hierarchical"—what he calls the "capitalist trinity established in space" (282)—which relies on models of abstraction to deny its inherent violence while setting itself up as the most natural and logical organization of our social relations within space (387).

When looking at the organization of space, particularly in global cities, Rolf Goebel, following Mark Abrahamson and John Tomlinson, argues that these urban spaces are "marked by a mutual interrelation between post-industrial economic strength and postmodern culture, neither factor having priority over the other," and stresses that globalization cannot be properly understood without "the conceptual vocabulary of culture" (488). Even though culture is not to be understood as the dominant key to globalization, Goebel concurs with Tomlinson that "these transformations change the very fabric of cultural experience and, indeed, affect our sense of what culture actually is in the modern world" (488).

Applying this framework to the *Arcades Project*, we can see that Paris is showcased as a forerunner of the global city, in which local culture is always challenged by mediated forms of deterritorialized knowledge—in the shape of "foreign information, images or ideas that have been severed from their original cultural context and reconfigured by the media technologies and urban-planning ideologies of metropolitan postmodernity for purposes of entertainment, commerce or fashionable lifestyles in the age of transnational capitalism" (Goebel 491). Paris becomes a city fragmented by foreign images and discourses, sampled and relocated in different contexts, in a very similar way to the literary remixes represented in Goldsmith's *Capital* or Carrión's *Barcelona.* If we accept Goebel's premise, we can employ the *Arcades Project* and its discursive fragmentation "as a methodological framework for attaining a historically informed perspective on the global cities of today" (Goebel 492). Eighty years later, the model has been radicalized thanks to the speed and pervasiveness of digital technologies. We are all part of the network.

Furthermore, as Patke suggests, Benjamin himself would have made a similar claim for the extrapolation of his methodology of describing cities, inviting even a speculative idea of the postcolonial city. According to Patke, Benjamin mitigates the fact that he was Eurocentric by stating that the cities he wrote about were "formative of a discourse that can be transposed to other cities whose patterns of urban development were shaped by forces analogous to those he studied in the period of their inception" (Patke 3). Even though their patterns of urban development may have occurred at slightly different historical moments, Barcelona, Madrid, and New York stand today as global cities intertwined by virtual networks of capital and information. It is not surprising, therefore, that Benjamin's work appears in all three books analyzed here, albeit to different degrees.

7

Goldsmith's *Capital: New York, Capital of the 20th Century* takes Benjamin's project as a formal template now with content related to the US city. In pure conceptual style, Goldsmith takes each of Benjamin's original chapter headings—*konvoluts*—and applies a chosen few to the

"entire corpus of literature written about NYC in the twentieth century" ("Rewriting"). The result is a 500,000 word remix, divided into 52 themes—some of them updated versions of Benjamin's—without a single word of Goldsmith's own reality: "not a thought, not a commentary, nor a sentiment" ("Rewriting"). Instead of "reflecting contemporary concerns, my task is merely appropriative" (Goldsmith, "Rewriting"), he claims. Goldsmith's sampling methodology remains true to his "filtering as taste" motto, making this book more about the process of contemporary writing than about reading—or the reader. While many other authors could have written Benjamin's book, Goldsmith wonders what makes this one so successful, so "endlessly fascinating? It's about what he chooses" (Goldsmith, "Rewriting"). As with tweeting, filtering becomes taste.

The impossibility of representing the magnitude and complexity of the global city and its virtual networks as a book is contrasted with the subjectivity of the single author who reads through each city's vast archive. Art, in its turn, is reduced to a reflection of each artist's singularity: "As such, the book—in an ontological sense—will fail: Can a megapolis such as this truly be described? Absolutely not. Can history really be written objectively? No" (Goldsmith, "Rewriting"). Faced with the impossibility of history, art presents an answer: "Yet art cannot fail. What emerges instead is a compendium of fleeting impressions as dictated by one's whim and curiosity, while engaged in the act of reading and note-taking. And so, it's a unique work of art; one that anyone could do." Yet, this work is signed by Kenneth Goldsmith.

While the poet has repeatedly stated that he limited himself to information contained in old books and yellowed magazines and journals for *Capital*, the goal of this new project is along the same lines of his previous more mediatically inspired works, such as his American Trilogy—three books consisting of transcriptions of weather reports, a baseball game, and daily activities—or his more academic *Wasting Time on the Internet*. Perloff's concept of the "unoriginal genius," meaning that a poet can create completely new verses without an original word, appropriating text always "according to taste" (169), is still viewed as "the logical form of 'writing' in an age of literally mobile or transferable text" (17). Although *Capital* was famously made without using the internet, Goldsmith maintains and reproduces the same naive discourses about the democratizing utopia of the early internet, without bothering to question anything else. The purpose of writing is to reflect the

author's choices, stressing that poetry is determined by its context and little more, reducing Benjamin's methodology to a question of taste.

8

Jorge Carrión's *Barcelona: Libro de los Pasajes* also takes on the *Arcades Project* as a template but with a different intent than Goldsmith's *Capital*, perhaps closer to Benjamin's original work, even if formally different. The book explores Barcelona's more than 400 arcades—not only commercial boulevards, but also arcades where people live—and intertwines his description of the space with interviews of their residents, famous citizens of Barcelona, and essays on a variety of urban-related topics, alongside Carrión's autobiographical commentary, all fragmented into 225 sections. Like Goldsmith, he stresses the importance of subjectivity and filtering when writing, but, like Benjamin, he highlights the role of the ground-level viewer, the body and gaze of he who walks the city, and not just the whim of he who rummages through the archive.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau proposed walking, precisely, as a powerful spatial practice which could appropriate the topographical system of space (i.e. maps of the city) against the abstracted and fragmented representation of space (97). Walking is seen as a personalized act, "a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation" that recognizes and opposes the anonymity of established orders, grids, and other structuring elements of urban space (97). Walking implies a history, a memory of other routes in space by forcing the subject to recognize the unknown and unknowable, by "creating a nowhere in places," which, by naming the routes, "changes them into passages" (de Certeau 104). By rediscovering an alternative map of the city—and telling us about it—Carrión is discerning a trace of an unknown (and unknowable) past in the present of the city—he is renaming it, changing it into, literally, a "libro de los pasajes." The emphasis of this book, however, is not on the walker but on the other individuals: namely the residents, artists, and workers of Barcelona who inhabit the arcades as residential safe havens buried inside the modern city—instead of presenting the arcade as the emblem of capitalism.

Although he acknowledges the use of Google Maps, Google Books, Google News, and Google Street View "porque la información

más valiosa sobre los pasajes está en las hemerotecas y en los blogs, que son los pasajes de esa megalópolis virtual e infinita que llamamos internet" (Carrión, *Barcelona* 56), most of the works' content is based on personal *in situ* observations and original writing. Appropriated quotations are used only as structural elements to introduce new topics or change the tone of the writing. To deal with the vast information Carrión found about Barcelona, sampling was not enough. Instead, "lo que hay que extraer son líneas narrativas, por eso el big data tiene sentido cuando encuentras el modo de narrarlo. Entre el big data y el storytelling siempre hay una historia de odio y de amor" (Carrión qtd. in Basciani). In opposition to the pure and simple copying and pasting of digital sampling, Carrión proposes a hybrid methodology that engages digital sourcing with more traditional storytelling. In order to represent the twenty-first-century city, he moves away from appropriation to open "el espectro de Josep Pla a Italo Calvino porque quiero que este libro sobre Barcelona sea un libro sobre cualquier ciudad, por eso el gran modelo del libro es *Las ciudades invisibles* de Calvino, una gran guía para viajar a cualquier ciudad del mundo" (Carrión qtd. in Corominas). Carrión's proposal for reading the contemporary city is also structured around the fragment and the subjective but focuses on creativity and original writing—fiction even—to suggest that the hidden arcades of the city can be the places from which to question the official map.

9

By turning his gaze to—and storicizing rather than historicizing—these undocumented spaces, Carrión opens "puertas traseras al subconsciente social de la ciudad, enterrado y negado en la memoria pública pero aún activo: el chabolismo desarrollista, la segregación urbana burguesa, la construcción de una periferia obrera" (Rendueles). According to the philosopher César Rendueles, Carrión's *pasajes* act as symbolic breaches in the touristy city, forcing us to look at its B-side, "a su doble siniestro, un pasado de lavanderas, chatarreros, impresores o amas de casa y un presente de inmigrantes, niños, precarios u okupas. Por eso este ensayo no es tanto una historia alternativa de Barcelona

como una exploración desde el urbanismo de las posibilidades de demo-
cratización enterradas en la política constituida" (Rendueles). By focus-
ing on the narrative lines—the personal stories linking the fragmented
city and how it's experienced—and delineating the connections behind
the fragmented network, Carrión brings the city's blueprint to the
fore. Essentially, Carrión's orchestrated fragmentation helps us see the
invisible network of physical, financial, and now also virtual, relations
that hold it together, by turning the lives of those invisible citizens into
narrative stories. Storicizing the map and its inhabitants should unearth
the city's buried democratic possibilities.

      Although Carrión's and Goldsmith's books emulate Benja-
min's *Arcades* in that they both follow his fragmentation methodology,
Carrión's project has a different political intent. He uses the ellipses
between fragments to shape an invisible matrix, reminding us of the
power of invisible structures to organize space—and to subvert it, as
Rendueles states. His take on Benjamin's work and his meditation on
the use of digital sources and tools to construct this map of "buried
democracy" also allows for a questioning of the value of said tools and
methods. Rather than simply celebrating the ease of their mechanics—
and, to an extent, hiding his true intentions behind them—Carrión's
ground-level interviews with the city's inhabitants, as well as his own
autobiographical interventions, bring back the type of storytelling that
was, perhaps, lost within the big data of his archive. The subject is
emphasized as a mediating force with which to construct reality, and
writing is presented to the reader as a way to not only explain this real-
ity but also to learn about oneself. "En el centro del libro hay un yo que
se orienta. Un yo que antes aprendió a leer. Porque cada nuevo libro te
ayuda a aprender a leer de nuevo" (Carrión, *Barcelona* 307). Storytell-
ing and creativity are seen as ways to humanize abstract data, making
the work—and the fragmented city—more accessible to the human
reader by building upon a shared moment of communication between
her and the author.

10

      Still seeking a form that resembles the global city, but in a spirit
closer to Carrión's than to Goldsmith's, Vicente Luis Mora's *Circular*

07. Las afueras uses fragmentation to turn his work into a street guide of Madrid. Rather than presenting an abstract collection of numbered fragments like in Carrión's and Goldsmith's books, he links his extracts directly to a street map, each segment corresponding to a location in Madrid—although some are imaginary. These entries are comprised of poems, short stories, fake press reports, algorithms or even crosswords, most of them originally written by Mora. There are some quotations, but these account for under twenty percent of the total. Although each fragment is different, as a whole, they all emphasize the relationship between the city, writing, and digital media. Technology is still essential to this work, but its impact on writing goes beyond the appropriation championed by US conceptualism, or Carrión's documentation methodology.

Furthermore, in a spirit akin to digital writing media like blogs or other online environments that are open to revision and update, *Circular* has also been conceived as a work in progress. Published originally in 2003 as *Circular* (Editorial Plurabelle), an expanded version reappeared in 2007 as *Circular 07. Las afueras.* It is expected that the next iteration will be *Circular 18. Centro*, and will include *Derb*—cul-de-sac in Arabic—a real-time writing experience set in Marrakesh, Morocco. *Circular* is, thus, an ongoing writing experiment, finished but never completed, in a constant evolution that resembles digital writing media. Although printed, it seems to have internalized the performative ethos of the digital text, which, as Katherine Hayles reminds us "literally does not exist if it is not generated by the appropriate hardware running the appropriate software. Rigorously speaking, an electronic text is a process rather than an object, although objects (like hardware and software) are required to produce it" (80).

The text, and the book itself, like the city and its virtual networks, is flexible and rewrites itself in a constant loop. *Circular* mimics the mechanics of the digital text as coming from its print poetics. It expands and grows, incorporating new materials and spaces, with apparent disregard for geographical boundaries. Like virtual space, *Circular* presents itself as neither global nor local, "ni cosmopolita, sino extraterritorial" (Mora, email). The global city conforms a new network of relations that surpasses territories and is understood only as evolution—as work in progress. Its poetics and boundaries are procedural, a process rather than an object, in constant flux and change.

11

Navigating *Circular 07* becomes a cartographic experience, emphasizing the mutability of the book and a renewed emphasis on its materiality. The content of the book can be accessed as a street map, checking for street names in the index. It can also be travelled linearly, in a sort of circular manner that resembles the Metro line that goes around the city of Madrid. Apart from demanding the reader to engage with the book as an object to manipulate, the writing also stresses its visual and material qualities by presenting examples of concrete poetry, visual games, and graphic design that use the printed page in a poetic way.

For instance, the center of the work/trip is graphically marked by the physicality of the book, by two pages that read "ESTAUSTE-DENELCE," "NTRODECIRCULAR" (Mora, *Circular* 214, 215). The book's spine cuts through the text's center, literally slicing the word "ce/ntro." The center of the work does not correspond to the middle of the book, however. These two pages are placed at the end of the physical object, pointing to a different traversal of the book that defies the object's lineal temporal and spatial sequencing.

The cut also creates an empty space in the word, a gap in the center that gives us pause. The book's materiality becomes a dynamic process that, as Hayles observed while working with digital literature, understands materiality as "the interplay between a text's physical characteristics and its signifying strategies" (72). According to her, textual materiality occupies a borderland that joins the artifact and the user, and cannot be specified in advance since it emerges from the interplay between "the text as a physical artifact, its conceptual content, and the interpretive activities of readers and writers."

Mora's digitally inspired experimental writing understands the book as a signifying element in the poetics of the work, rather than of limiting it to a platform for distributing sampled fragments from other sources. Goldsmith's copied and pasted appropriation—and even Carrión's, to an extent—emphasizes the portability of writing in an age of digital text, as Perloff noted, rejoicing in its replication and transferability at the expense of ignoring the real material infrastructures that permit these mechanisms. By using the page in a poetic fashion, Mora's text is bound to it, considering its material aspects and their poetic

possibilities. Poetic materiality understood this way challenges the supposed ephemerality and immaterial transferability of digital text, while bringing attention to the work's actual surface. As Rita Raley famously puts in "Code.surface || Code.depth," digital "code is a deep structure that instantiates a surface," even if, as "code artists might say, there is a tendency to regard the work of art as separate from the work of software engineering and situating code on the interface complicates the notion that a program is merely a tool with which to produce the 'real' art" (Raley). Mora might not be situating code at the interface of his work like digital poets John Caley or Ted Warnell do, but his visual poetics point in that direction.

12

As such, the book and the affordances of print are highlighted, in contrast to the digital poetics we see on its pages. In the same way, the digital rhetoric and aesthetic that seem so natural when presented electronically as emails, chats or text messages are defamiliarized when placed out of their original environment. In what could be explained as a case of reversed contextualization, Mora replicates the language seen in SMS and emails. In "Calle Arroyo Del Fresno. SMS," we read:

> Kriño, siento no haber
> ido. tráfico imposible, he
> teni do q volver a casa.
> mńna
> cenaremos juntos. te kiero.
> (Mora, *Circular* 87)

The shortened language typical of early 2000s texting—when cell phone carriers charged by character count—is captured on the printed page as a sort of historical document. The ephemerality of texting becomes a permanent record of that practice and, to an extent, legitimates and backdates its aesthetics and rhetoric. Its language takes us back to a quickly forgotten past by illustrating the constraints of the digital affordances of that era.

13

In their 1999 work, *Remediation*, Bolter and Grusin called the refashioning of one medium into another "remediation," and they argued that it was "a defining characteristic of the new digital media" in their striving to reproduce the sensation of the outside world through their digital screens (45). What we saw in the previous example is a case of reversed remediation—where the digital screen is frozen upon the earlier medium of print.

In "Cibercafé. E-Mail," electronic mail communication is also remediated back to the page, forcing us to see elements that have become almost invisible to the digital user:

> De: p@com
> Para: d@arthv@der
> CC:
> Asunto: dispersión.
> (Mora *Circular* 66)

In a sort of humorous parody of the conventions of emailing—too many useless symbols, silly names like "Darthvader" or "Paco" turned "p@com" pointing to the abuse of the @ symbol and the rise of the .doc industries, the copy field left empty yet present, etc.—Mora emphasizes the layers of mediation present when communicating via email. He does not simply present the content of the email, but recreates and mocks the infrastructure that allows digital messaging. Humor is used as a technique to show us the interface of internet servers and email clients, which, because we use them every day, go unnoticed. Remediation exposes the almost imperceptible mediation that is always at work in our digital devices.

14

As Alexander Galloway explains, "the more user-friendly an interface is touted to be, the more invisible it is as it attempts to erase every trace of its own functioning" (931). Lori Emerson notices, in addition, how this blinding seduction of the wondrous invisible interface—the more user-friendly it gets—comes at the cost of having less

access to the underlying flow of information and the workings of the machine/medium (133). In this way, when working with computers, software not only obscures hardware, but also makes the interface obscure software itself (Emerson 2). In response to this, critics like Eduardo Ledesma, who analyze the politics of Latin American code poetry, or David Berry in the US case, have argued that researching computer code is closely linked to questions concerning the ways that technology impacts culture. Allowing users to view and/or modify code is thus not only crucial to the "free software and open source movements," but also "crystallize(s) discursively a more substantive challenge for wider society, namely issues surrounding the legitimacy of technocratic society, reflexive modernization, the democratization of technology, and the public deliberation of technology policy" (Berry 66).

Consequently, there has been a global increase in works of electronic literature—e.g. Jodi.org (Belgium), Giselle Beiguelman (Brazil), Antonio Mendoza (Cuba), among many others—that feed on software obscurity and glitch aesthetics in an effort to demystify our devices and show how interfaces—and therefore their constraints—are becoming ever more difficult to perceive. Ledesma believes that the impetus behind current examples of code poetry "might be said to counter the growing domination of surface aesthetic over deep structure" (105). Although not meant for the screen, the particular digital-to-print parodies that Mora produces seek the same goal of breaking the invisible interface's magic.

As such, revealing the graphic user interface has been at the center of conceptual and digital art, particularly since the mid-90s, when the Web became universally commercialized. According to David Rokeby, what distinguishes the work of digital technology engineers and artists is precisely the attention they give to this inherent, yet obscured, dichotomy between transparency and opacity. Bolter and Grusin frame Rokeby's affirmation within modernist aesthetics, explaining that: "while engineers strive to maintain the illusion of transparency in the design and refinement of media technologies, artists explore the meaning of the interface itself, using various transformations of the media as their palette" (Rokeby qtd. in Bolter and Grusin 42). Moreover, Bolter and Grusin go so far as to suggest that, since Matisse and Picasso, or even as far back as the first impressionists, most artists have devoted themselves to exploring the "interface" (42).

15

Bolter and Grusin's modernist framing of digital practices can be extrapolated to suggest that the remediation of a digital interface to print aims to bring the former to the forefront, arguing that those practices are but fighting automatism in order to focus on perception. Looking further back, at the core of the purpose of formalist analysis, we find the reinstitution of perception as the purpose and function of art. In Viktor Shklovsky's famous words: "If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic" (11). In order to recover the sensation of the object—or the interface mediating our vision of the object—art has to make objects "difficult," rendering their perception "unfamiliar."

Almost a century after these early formalist claims, *Circular 07* can be read as an attempt to refresh automatized representations of the city in literature, now within a framework of digital mediation. Its proposal to use digital media to reproduce the experience of the city goes beyond the translation of the "fragmented experience" associated with the digital condition—and exploited by the likes of Goldsmith. It takes the city of Madrid and looks at it from the deforming, splitting perspective of the poetic word. It makes us hear the city that we experience empirically, by listening in on its inhabitants, busy streets, trains, and buses, as well as feel the city as a social, political, and cultural concept, whose structures are not made of concrete, but by the power of the word. On the one hand, digital remediation to print aims to recover the sensation of the object—the interface, the writing software, and the inscription hardware technologies of these—before it becomes unfamiliar. On the other, this makes us look beyond the object to rethink the system of material and immaterial processes in connection with their contextual reality. This process is like a split referentiality (Herzberger 429), or a recursive referentiality, and it draws forcefully from the act of creation itself, facilitated now by digital writing technologies.

Mora's original fragments, rather than emulate the true experiencing of the city in a conceptual copy and paste technique à la Goldsmith, which would aim to deny its mediation, strive for the opposite. They seek the real outside by pointing to the satiety of experience that we encounter in big global cities, plagued by media. Fragmentation gives way to de-automatizing perception, by presenting funny word

games, parodies, experimental poems, and the like. Shklovsky's claim that art's function is "a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object, the object itself is not important" is used here as a means of experiencing the artfulness, and presence (12), of that digital mediation that lies behind most of our urban experience, and, as we have seen, most products of art and literature. It is not just a question of inferring the taste of the sampling author who juxtaposes paragraphs of his fragmented experience; reader accessibility is based on a shared sense of discovery and humor between reader and writer.

16

This type of humor is not something we see; it could be better described as something we hear. It is a conceptual construct, rather than an image, and as such is part of Mora's array of techniques to help us hear the city. Along with the digital games that try to defamiliarize print and vice versa, humor and absurdity are also elements used to reinforce Mora's project of artistic perception. In the fragment "Metropolitano. Línea 6 Circular," he describes a ghost train that runs endlessly, without passengers or a known destination: "Se rumoreaba: el Circular viaja toda la noche, sin viajeros a bordo. El Circular no se detiene" (Mora, *Circular* 21). In a different section, Mora tells us about a man who leaves his home to spend the rest of his days on this circular train.

> —¿Cuál es su destino?
> —Pues . . . no lo sé . . . me he montado sin pensar.
> —Pero sabrá dónde va.
> —No, no lo sé, es lo que trato de explicarle.
> —Se lo preguntaré de otra forma. ¿En qué parada se baja?
> —Ah . . . pues creo que en la última.
> —Este es el metro Circular. Aquí no hay últimas paradas, ni paradas intermedias. Se trata sólo de seguir el círculo, siempre.
> — . . .
> —¿Y bien?
> — . . . Entonces, ese es el destino, supongo.
> —Perfecto, todo en orden. ¿Puedo sentarme con usted?
> —Como quiera. (23)

This short scene makes no sense semantically, and yet, it is a perfect syntactical construction, along the lines of the theater of the absurd.

Thanks to this syntactical logic, we can read it without being surprised by this man's irrational decision to abandon his home for a train that never stops, and we can rationalize the conceptual possibility of inhabiting a space of transit, a no-place, bringing new life to it, a new meaning in de Certeau's sense. Rather than looking for mimetic identification, however, humor defamiliarizes the train and its passengers to turn them into concepts to be logically explored.

The streets on the map of *Circular 07* are all reduced to mere points on the outskirts of the city, yet they are not connected by the train that passes through them and never stops. In the global city overrun by information systems, these outside spaces are conceived of conceptually, and remain invisible and disconnected. Madrid's citizens are located outside the space of the map, to be directly relocated within the framework of the systemic network—like the train racks of a circular subway system. However, they occupy a place in this book, albeit one that remains silenced. As with Carrión's description of the unmapped arcades in Barcelona, Mora recreates a map of unmappable spaces, streets and places left out of the official description of the city. In this particular case, the B-side of the network is made up of poetry, humor, games, and the silenced gaps between each of these fragments, the necessary ellipses existing in all fragmented techniques.

17

In a fragment entitled "Cámara aneoica," Mora explores the meaningful potential of silence. After a quote by John Cage where the musician talks about the perpetuity of sound within silence— "se llama *cámara aneoica*. Entré en una de ellas [. . .] hace ya años, y escuché dos sonidos, uno agudo y otro grave. Cuando se los describí al ingeniero responsable, me explicó que el agudo era la actividad de mi sistema nervioso, el grave mi sangre circulando. Hasta que me muera habrá sonidos. Y seguirán tras mi muerte. No hay que temer por el futuro de la música"—alongside another quote by the abstract painter Kandinsky— "De todas partes fluyen voces y el mundo entero resuena"—Mora gives us two blank pages but for the pagination at the bottom (37). The anechoic chamber is designed to absorb any sound reflections, constructing a space of pure silence, a vacuum that, despite its efforts, is still

unable to quiet the sounds of the listener—i.e. Cage's own bodily func-
tions—; the book, in its turn, erases writing to emphasize the silence of
the unsaid word. The blank space amplifies the signifying qualities of
the page, now able to hold more than what it is written.

     Pointing to an outside that can't be comprised within the book,
Circular 07 fails to capture the totality of the representation of the
city—and in this way, failing like Goldsmith's and Carrión's projects.
But it succeeds in opening a window to those elements of the city left
out of the official map and its discourse. *Las afueras*, the outskirts of
Madrid, burst out of the pause in the discourse, through the ellipses
opened by those two blank pages. Not mentioned as geographical
spaces, nor described in any realistic way, the Unsaid reclaims its place
on the map of the book. The ellipses that structure all fragmented
rhetoric—the physical gap between the printed content—are turned
inside out to make them significant per se. From a formalist perspec-
tive, a new dynamic relation is forged by the interplay between the text,
the book, and signifying strategies. From a political stand, I suggest we
read the resulting poetics as a proposal for a new language of visibility.

18

     Jacques Rancière, in his seminal *Disagreement*, affirms that, in
order to speak about politics, we should make a distinction between the
State and the Police as dominating structures. Rancière's particular un-
derstanding of the Police defines it as "first an order of bodies that de-
fines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying,
and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and
task; it is an order of *the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular
activity is visible and another is not*, that this speech is understood as
discourse and another as noise (29, my emphasis). "Police" expands
beyond our understanding of the State: it is a complex system of bodies,
order, and ideologies that structure society. For our purposes, the book,
the text, and its ellipses should also be conceptualized as systems, just as
language is the ultimate system of speech. The Police is manifested in
everything that is visible; it is essentially a system of sound and silence,
one that exists in the absence of the other, much like a book or a text.
In the case of the representation of a city, its infrastructure and its in-
habitants, the parallel becomes immediately significant.

At the same time, Rancière offers his definition of political activity, describing it as "always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being" (30). A political act, then, is tied to its visibility amid the presence of the police, being right at the center of any permissible, habitual, and foundational structures. Political action subverts the core of sound, of that which is perceivable.

Circular 07, as a work that aims to reproduce the sound of the city, of its margins and silences, is presented as a political activity, as a project with the potential to make visible the invisible hiding under the layers of mediation from which it originates. Although Mora's political intent is not as obvious as Carrión's project of giving a voice to the marginalized citizens of a Barcelona corroded by unrestricted neoliberal progress, *Circular 07* can be framed as an aesthetic take on Rancière's politics. Its proposal to use digital technologies to represent the contemporary city by defending a return to the modernist aesthetics of defamiliarization lies, not in opposition to, but alongside the fragmented appropriation championed by Goldsmith et al. The absent speech on a page that erases all content solely to represent the material affordances of its shape and construct bring its design to the forefront, emphasizing the power of its interface, the power of the page as a space where things happen beyond what is printed or heard. Rather than focusing on the content (or the inhabitant, be it the squatter, the gipsy, or the sporadic Catalan artist), Mora reworks the Police itself (the template) as the interface that orders and structures what can be said, heard, and done. The ellipses and their allusion to a content that is not here, running beneath the visible surface of the book—or screen—become part of Mora's take on fragmentation as a technique whose ideological signification differs greatly from Goldsmith's conceptual remixes. What's absent here is not just the discarded content unable to pass the author's taste test, but something politically signifying in the larger context of the Police and the State.

Currently, when visual interfaces have replaced language as the preferred medium to share our experience of reality, while, simultaneously, these interfaces seek to be invisible, *Circular 07*'s attempts to

defamiliarize the book and its digital remediation should be read in this
sort of political light.

19

Literature, as a medium, is proposed as a space to hear rather
than see the contemporary city, as the fragment that opened this essay
reads. However, literature is also conceived of as a highly mediated
space, operating within and intervened by the same forces that are in-
volved in our experience of reality, of our environment—of the global.
Aside from the digital mediation that fragments reality, literature and
art are also contextualized in thrall to the market, as a further invisible
but dominant structure, governing and ordering life and society.

As *Circular* leaves Madrid to be transformed in other cities, a
new fragment, "Córdoba. Barrio del Arroyo del Moro," reads:

> [A]parece José Luis Brea en el suplemento *Culturas* sobre ARCO y por
> fin algo de luz, algo que une este libro, la feria y los problemas de dis-
> curso: "yo diría que el movimiento que entre nosotros podría reivindicar
> alguna *fuerza de criticidad* tendría que ser uno que se desmarcara del
> curso y el funcionamiento institucionalizado del sistema-arte: aquel mo-
> vimiento que territorializara el escenario de una *exterioridad*, la marca
> de un *afuera de la institución*". Ah, sí, esto sí. Esto es lo que yo buscaba,
> colocar el discurso en las afueras, sacarlo del centro, demasiado lleno de
> escombros, y colocarlo no al margen ni en la marginalidad, sino en los
> márgenes . . . En nuestra sociedad no hay un afuera total del mercado,
> porque la nuestra es, incluso constitucionalmente (artículo 32) una
> sociedad de mercado; este libro sólo puede leerse porque ha pasado
> por él, pero sí cabe un aparte, un inciso, un resquicio, un descanso: ese
> lugar está en los márgenes . . . [S]e conquista un espacio . . . en el que
> el mercado y el arte de escombreras ya no pueden entrar. Pero tú sí.
> (Mora, *Circular* 200)

Within the ordered structure of the dominant discourse,
which determines what can be seen and heard, the book—potentially
any book, but specifically this one—is ready to open a new space of
the sayable, shared by writer and reader. The type of discourse of that
which has no place must be shaped in a different manner than the of-
ficial voice—or maps—of the city, and yet, it can only be built using
the same materials. Literature, and the archaic form of a codex, should

provide enough distance for us to see the digital wiring running below our cities, and hear the buzzing of its electric interface. Turning them around in a defamiliarizing aesthetic is Vicente Luis Mora's proposal to rethink this media and hear the city again, thus involving the reader directly.

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20

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Capital: New York, Capital of the 20th Century, Barcelona: libro de los pasajes, and, more extensively, *Circular 07. Las afueras* are three examples I have chosen with which to discuss the pervasiveness of fragmentation in recent literature about the city, but the sample is much wider. Within Spanish letters, authors as diverse as Agustín Fernández Mallo, Javier Moreno, Mario Cuenca, Cristina Grande, and Mercedes Cebrián in Spain, or César Aira, Mario Bellatin, and Rodrigo Fresán in Latin America have published fragmented novels within the last 10 years, engaging to a greater or lesser extent with the imprint of digital technologies. Authors such as Horacio Warpola, Claudia Ulloa, Hernán Casciari, Cristina Rivera Garza, and Claudia Apablaza have gone even further by exploiting the fragment as a part of online projects modeled after Twitter and blog platforms.

Faced with this unprecedented number of fragmented novels, Vicente Luis Mora explains that the fragment "es la expresión de un profundo malestar, de un angst metafísico de disconformidad con nuestro entorno y nuestro quehacer creativo. Así sucede tanto desde el punto de vista filosófico como desde el estético" ("Fragmentarismo" 102). Defending the practice carried out by Warburg, Richter, Serres, and—significantly—Benjamin in times when historical crises produced fragmented and pluralist discourses, Mora sees its return today as a sign of the new crisis of the digital experience (103).

As noted in an early analysis of another of Mora's highly fragmented books, *Alba Cromm* (2010), and its striking use of graphics to dissolve the novel's narrative voice into a sort of "interface narrator" (Saum-Pascual 250), this type of fragmented information is never linked together by the guiding voice of a narrator, who would traditionally be in charge of making sense of the recounted data. Information, in the form of paragraphs, photographs, and graphs, is merely dumped

onto the page, cut and pasted onto the textual space, creating a semantic field of knowledge that the reader has to put back together: a textual and graphical remix of information.

Thanks to its remediation and remix techniques, *Alba Cromm* exposed its concern for the changing ways of communicating human experience in today's internet age in an uncannily similar way to Walter Benjamin's disquisitions about the disappearance of storytelling at the beginning of the twentieth century (Saum-Pascual 250). Benjamin then correlated it to the abandonment of experience by the late-nineteenth-century's rising middle class in their search for information after the press had become one "of the most important instruments in fully developed capitalism" (*Illuminations* 88), taking control of all new material. This crisis of experience was related to a waning effect of the power of storytelling removed once from its physical environment of face-to-face oral narrative and into the static, detached world of the printing press. In other words, storytelling got lost in mass-produced print. Undoubtedly, Benjamin's writing of the *Arcades Project* was informed by the changes he noted in storytelling and—human—data processing.

Working around the fragment in the creative fashion that Mora proposes in *Circular 07*, nonetheless, one sees Benjamin's diagnosis in a different light. Still using the literary fragment in a way that resembles its object—the fragmented experience of the global city—his push for creativity exposes the existing tension between machines' big data and our human need to process the information about our reality. Carrión's storicizing of the lives in or around Barcelona's arcades serves a similar purpose. Goldsmith's appropriation project, however, reduces the subject to a filtering machine, putting taste at the core of human subjectivity. As I mentioned earlier, his use of fragmentation is one focused on writing, situating the reader and her comprehension in a secondary place.

Mora and Carrión use fragmentation to seek a moment of communication with the reader, be it through the empathy projected onto the marginal inhabitants of Barcelona's unofficial map, or through intellectual humor in Mora's conceptual map of Madrid. These two proposals of working through the fragmented experience mark "las limitaciones que tenemos como especie, como artistas, como pensadores" and Mora hopes that the fragment and its structural denial of unity and completion mark a philosophical turn away from narrativity and

its push for oneness—but I believe this should not be understood as a claim to turn ourselves into mere filtering machines ("Fragmentarismo" 103).

21

When confronted with a collection of juxtaposed fragments, the reader is turned against her own subjectivity as she works through the author's selection of data—be it appropriated or original. A similar situation arises when we try to make sense of the global city, a physical and virtual space where a multiplicity of processes assume concrete, localized forms. In today's globalized world, similar forces structure Barcelona, New York, and Madrid, but their localized forms are also the hallmark of globalization. The three books of this essay—four if we include Benjamin's *Arcades*—explore discursive fragmentation as a methodological framework to attain a contextually informed perspective of the global city. They engage with the globalized digital discourse from the particularities of their own place and its archive, hence the emphasis on tying the books to a place: New York, Barcelona or Madrid—although, in Mora's case, the city is more of a fluid space, expanding to other Spanish cities, such as Córdoba, by the end of the book. Place is almost equaled to the information and stories recovered from—or projected onto—it, and the sensation of the city can be reproduced by its digital mediation. In order to expose the invisible network, literature rehashes its interface, bringing back to print techniques that originated in the unworkable digital space.

Exploiting the possibilities of fragmentation and digital remediation, these print novels recover the mechanisms that make them digital in the first place. Very clearly, *Circular 07. Las afueras* (and *Barcelona. Libro de los pasajes*, to a certain extent) shows its efforts to recover its place within Spanish letters by sharing its compositional devices with the reader, taking reader accessibility to heart, and by doing so, aiming to make a political gesture within Spanish society at large. Goldsmith's *Capital: New York, Capital of the 20th Century*, although still exploiting the poetic possibilities of fragmentation, relies solely on appropriation and the whim and taste of the author to the detriment of the reader, celebrating the independence and individuality brought about by the

digital condition, but without the critical approach we see in the Spanish works. We should not read these two Spanish texts as examples of collaborative activism à la Wu Ming, El tronco de Senegal, or Roberto Jacoby. These artists' digitally inspired projects push the boundaries of what we understand as a work of art to become spontaneous collaborative performances where artists and the public create artistic situations within a "régimen práctico de las artes" in Reinaldo Laddaga's terms (26). However, like those artistic experiments, these books by Mora and Carrión open the door to the reader and her collaboration in building the experience, functioning as templates to expose the mediation present in today's appreciation of reality, rather than simply presenting themselves as closed-end and complete—untouchable—works. In a way, the accessible fragmentation that *Circular 07* and *Barcelona: Libro de los pasajes* present to us subverts the unworkable interface of digital mediation, recovering the affordances of print literature, narrative, and creativity to bring back our sense of the city and ourselves.

In the larger context of global cities in late capitalism, Saskia Sassen believes that "recovering place" means, precisely, "recovering the multiplicity of presences in this landscape" ("Global" 40). Today's large cities have emerged as strategic sites for "a whole new type of operations—political, economic, 'cultural,' subjective" where new translocal communities and identities are formed. These identities reshape the city according to new cultural and subjective operations, and it is in their nexi where the formation of new claims materializes and assumes concrete form ("Global" 40). Sassen goes as far as proposing that these claims and their constitution of new entitlements could open the possibility of new forms of citizenship ("Global" 38).

What types of citizens and voices make up the multitudes represented in these fragmented works? What form do their claims take? What types of readers and writers are working in the construction of the digital city? How can they—we—work with digital technology to build a—hopefully—better place? Instead of focusing on how the effects of capital and the homogenization of culture through technology have made cities bigger, dirtier, and scarier, we could also think about how digital technology can bring futures closer to hand, setting the stage to rethink subjectivities, media, and literature. Fragmentation and appropriation can be read as literary techniques for projecting the digital writer's ego,

but they can also be subverted to expose the many other constructing forces at work behind the digital mediation of our contemporary life.

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