

Mexico City's Metro (a voyage to the end of the squeeze)

Mexico City is a city of contrasts, of change and tradition, which has long captured the imagination of chroniclers and poets alike. The British Academy and the Mexican Embassy to the UK organised an event to celebrate this diversity, tracing the history of the city from its pre-Columbian origins to its transition into modernity, whilst exploring its rich cultural heritage, and in spring 2009 the Academy is publishing the presentations. The book begins with an atmospheric prologue by the famous Mexican writer and journalist, Carlos Monsiváis. In this extract, he captures the essence of Mexico City's metro system.

EVERY day, close to five million people make use of Mexico City's metro, fighting a vicious battle for oxygen and millimetres. Long gone the marvellous scene of Oliver Hardy and Stan Laurel in Mexico, watching countless individuals getting out of a taxi. That was a surreal metaphor, in any case; this is something entirely different: turmoil in a nutshell. The city – its essence, its idiosyncrasies – plays itself out in the metro. Passengers are sullen or raucous, rueful or exasperated. They burst out in choral monologues or keep quiet (doubtless in an effort to communicate telepathically with their inner self). Reluctant paragons of tolerance, they boast the energy to remain upright in a stampede, to slim and instantly regain their customary body types with each squeeze. The close proximity to so many bodies breeds – and cushions – *impure* thoughts, and, in two or three seconds, give *impure* a holy definition. In the metro, the legacy of institutionalized corruption, ecological devastation, and the repression of human rights is formally passed on to each passenger and to the legions he or she potentially contains (each passenger will

engender a carriage-full; in California in 2006, 52 per cent of new borns were of Hispanic origin, most of them Mexican: the invasion of the bellies, said the racist). They keep this heritage alive: it's the 'humanism of the squeeze'.

While one cannot claim as the ancient saying that what feeds ten people will also feed eleven, one can assert that where a thousand fit, ten thousand will be crammed, for space is more fertile than food. In all the world, there is nothing so flexible as space; there's always room for one more, and another and another, and in the metro, human density is not a sign of the struggle for life, but of the opposite. Who said objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time? In the metro, the laws of molecular structure lose their universal validity, bodies merge like spiritual essences, and transcorporeal graftings are commonplace.

One can attain pluralism by venturing into the metro at peak hours (feats of warlike retreat, already calling for their Xenophon), or by venturing into public housing projects where privacy is a matter of weaving and



Figure 1: *Solidarity. Mexico City metro. Photo © Francisco Mata Rosas.*

dodging, an aspiration contradicted by packed streets and families breeding in front of the television set. There are so many of us that even the most outlandish thought is shared by millions. There are so many of us, who cares if the next man agrees or disagrees?

Figure 2: *The Squeeze*.
Metro entrance in the
Zocalo. Photo ©
Francisco Mata Rosas.



There are so many of us that the real miracle is getting home, closing the front door, and seeing the crowds magically diminish.

How could one not be a pluralist, when subway trips teach us the virtues of unity in diversity? How could one not be a pluralist, when identity is constructed by pushing and shoving, and maintained by the mysteries of population explosion? Prejudices become personal views, demography takes the place of tradition, and we remember this about the past: there used to be fewer people, and the old minorities (in contrast to the current majorities) counterbalanced their numerical handicap by spending time outdoors. Claustrophobia arose – a hunger for fresh air, for a life that could never go underground and could never be compared to a descent into hell – and street life prospered. Then came the metro, and agoraphobia became fashionable.

Is it possible to score in the metro? Many say yes, it's a piece of cake, because if the metro

represents the city and recreates the street, it must by necessity contain sex – all kinds of sex. Packed into subway cars, humankind reverts to primal chaos, a *horror vacui* that is fertile ground for propositions, the rubbing of bodies, lustful advances frustrated by lack of differentiation, surreptitious grinding, blatant grinding, risk taking, and other transgressions. It's all the same in the end. The metro abolishes singularity, anonymity, chastity, desire – mere individual reactions that become insignificant in the larger scale of things, in which a former 'many' is the only precedent for the current 'too many'. It's all the same whether one enters or exits. But machismo still reigns supreme.

The metro's perpetual novelty consists of concentrating the entire country into one square metre. A feat of hospitality, each carriage becomes a biblical metaphor, generating space for loners, couples, families, tribes, progenies. The metro dissolves the boundaries between bodies; there is room for everyone, after all.¹

Note

¹ Parts of this extract are based on a translation of Carlos Monsiváis' work in Rubén Gallo (ed.), *The Mexico City Reader*, trans. Lorna Scott Fox (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004). The photographs are by Francisco Mata Rosas, one of Mexico City's most illuminating photographic chroniclers. Born in Mexico City in 1958, his work has been exhibited throughout Latin America, North America and Europe.

Mexico City through History and Culture, edited by Linda A Newson & John P King (British Academy Occasional Papers, No 13) will be published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press. For more see www.britac.ac.uk/pubs
