

ANTONIO FLORES THE GRAND HOTEL OF THE TRANSATLANTIC UNION

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The first significant examples of science fiction in Spain were produced within the framework of a genre that was very popular in the country back then, the so-called 'cuadro de costumbres.' Translated literally, this phrase would be a 'portrait of customs' in English. Similar to Addisonian sketches of customs and manners, in the 'cuadro de costumbres' typical attitudes, behaviours, values and habits that were common to a particular profession, region or social class are shown mainly by means of the description of the social environment and customs of people in a given society. Most of these 'cuadros' or sketches describe contemporary customs. However, some writers also dared to imagine how the social, economic and technological changes that were being brought about by the Industrial Revolution could also change those customs in the future, as the Spanish writer Antonio Flores (1818-1865) shows in the third volume of his series titled *Ayer, hoy y mañana*, which was published in its final form in 1863. As its title suggests, it

was divided into three parts. Each of them is composed of sketches respectively set in 1800 (*ayer*, yesterday), 1850 (*hoy*, today) and 1899 (*mañana*, tomorrow).

Its third and last volume is a full-fledged story of anticipation. In the framework of a love story between the only heir of a wealthy rural family going to Madrid in order to have a political career and an authoress of industrial literature, Flores describes in each chapter a particular feature of the technologically advanced future Madrid, from air transportation to an advanced advertising technology. This material progress comes at a cost: it is a purely capitalistic society where only money is of value. Time is money and true emotions are not considered worth one's precious time because nothing is worth anything unless it is profitable. A good example of this mentality is demonstrated in one of the sketches, which is unrelated to the framework of the story and therefore can be read as an independent sketch. Its title is in Spanish "El Gran Hotel de la Unidad Transatlántica," and

“The Grand Hotel of the Transatlantic Union” in the English translation below.¹

This huge resort is described according to a guide to it, some passages of which are reproduced in Flores’ text. The hotel is, indeed, gigantic. For this reason, guidebooks are printed to help guests to find their way around its premises, where there is so much going on that a newspaper is even printed to report its daily news. All kinds of services are offered, mostly automatically and almost without limitation, but each one is exactly priced in order to ensure precise accounting and a continuous cash flow. These financial and administrative processes are all controlled by technology: a telegraphic system receives, continuously and in real time, all the transactions carried out, all the food consumed, etc. The “sensitive nerve structure hidden behind the walls and floors of the Grand Hotel” ensures that there is no mismatch between customers’ desires and their monetised satisfaction by the establishment. Thus, the hotel is managed by a sort of artificial intelligence similar in the way it works to the one currently being developed. This shows Flores’ extraordinary capacity to speculate on the shape of things to come based on the automation brought about by the Industrial Revolution, even if this was still in its infancy back then.

No less prophetic, although less surprising because organised travel already existed in that period thanks to the Thomas Cook travel agency, is the conversion of tourism into an economic sector rationally exploited by multinational companies such as the Transatlantic Union. Its hotel is therefore a large commercial corporation that operates entirely as such. Its search for profit has led to investment in a hotel of a new kind that allows anyone, for a relatively small amount, to celebrate social events with a luxury previously

only within the reach of princely fortunes, with the consequent democratisation of social rites and customs. The immense hotel is not just for the wealthy. Almost everyone seems to be able to enjoy one thing or another in this virtually self-sufficient microcosm, with almost complete freedom. The rented rooms and lounges are guaranteed to allow their users to do what they want in them without fear of being monitored or interrupted, so that the grand hotel also represents a space where social control ceases to operate to some extent. This characteristic refers to a form of collective coexistence radically opposed to that advocated by contemporary utopian socialism. The contemporary concept of ‘phalanstery’ implied the priority of the collective over the individual, while Flores ponders the wide variety of the hotel’s amenities for customers who are already consumers. This is another successful anticipation by Flores of our current consumerist society, as well as of corporate greed.

“The Grand Hotel of the Transatlantic Union” is not only interesting for its perception of trends that will be general only many years after its publication. The text is also a successful example of futuristic topothesia. This literary genre is about the description of buildings, both real and imaginary, including their interiors and surroundings, as well as the activities that take place in them, in order to illustrate the conditions of residence, work or study therein. The building as a whole can serve as a symbolic image of the functioning of the society of which it is spatially and functionally part, e.g. consumer capitalism in Flores’ Grand Hotel. Therefore, this futuristic sketch is one of the first examples in literature where the described building is not only fully imaginary, but also speculative and, considering its advanced technology, science-fictional as well.

¹ This is based on the text from the following edition: Antonio Flores, “El Gran Hotel de la Unidad Transatlántica,” in Mariano Martín Rodríguez (ed.), *El Madrid futuro según los costumbristas isabelinos*, Madrid, Ediciones 19, 2019, p. 149-165.

ANTONIO FLORES

THE GRAND HOTEL OF THE TRANSATLANTIC UNION

Should this establishment be asked for its aristocratic genealogy, it would have to admit it descends from the ancient boarding house owners: principled widows who, if two of their wards were unwedded daughters, furrowed their brows and were not welcoming of any third ward arriving at the house. Leaping from the boarding house owner to the landlady and from her to the inn keeper, one would exhaust the ancestors' tree. However, from the boarding house to the Transatlantic Hotel there is a true Ocean's distance.

Whereas all the old families have gone down, that of the guesthouse has come way up.

Dear reader, let me explain what is, what has been and what will be of the world. Noble houses, which were everything before, now amount to nothing; boarding houses, which were nothing before, now are everything.

Freedom, which could not withstand friars to be free to live as they wished in their monasteries, has to endure that guests live the way it pleases them in inns. Now freedom, which banned religious communities, finds itself forced to tolerate culinary societies.

It disrobed the friars and cloistered the foreigners, let loose the small families, only to later bind them all together under a big national family.

For this reason, the Grand Hotel, with four thousand servants and two thousand guests, is the successor of the boarding house owner with two daughters and two wards.

How odd it is then that, while the loving boarding house owner used to go the market to buy half a pound of veal, lean and deboned, to make a stew for the wards, now the Grand Hotel has its own flocks of sheep and livestock and can slaughter however many animals are needed to feed the six thousand stomachs under its charge.

You could not imagine, dear reader, how amusing we, spirits, find these changes in the world. And let me tell you in all honesty: were it not because I suspect you have some attachment to bodily life, I would wish you soon forsake that land of sorrow and grief, where every lucky strike is followed by three setbacks, and join the infinite space, where nobody bumps into us or bothers us and where we wander as the whim takes us – to ask for more would be immoderate.

Truth be said, we roam without finding rest anywhere, but, since we do not feel wear, we do not miss neither boarding houses nor grand hotels.

For the former we had no envy and the latter we see with pity. You, dear reader, may see them with awe and even question my veracity,

believing me at least exaggerated, yet, come what may, I cannot refrain from talking to you about the Transatlantic Grand Hotel, lest half of Madrid and of its population fall in oblivion.

Spain is proud ever since, in its capital, this Grand Hotel has established itself – and it is rightly proud. In the whole world there are only three nations that can claim so. Thanks to this hotel, Spain is considered a prominent power. This is quite the feat, to the extent that Italy is jealous and not lightly, because this country, which, even when split and divided, always was ahead of the rest of the peoples of the world in culinary matters, cannot nowadays boast of a hotel such as the Transatlantic Union.

Just try to guess, dear reader, what a big inn this must be, because, even if I were tell you that its vast facilities occupy an area of 2,780,480 feet and that inside you can find four gardens, twelve courtyards and an orchard, it would still seem to me, and it would be true, that I have not given you an accurate idea of its real magnificence.

I would not be satisfied either if I told you there are two theatres, a circus, a bullfighting arena and a big circular plaza for the permanent exhibition of items from industry.

Still I feel I have not managed to explain to you the grandiosity of this building, which has come to corner all the wonders of the ancient world, even the Monastery of El Escorial, which is still standing and seems besides the Transatlantic Hotel indeed a large construction, but not extraordinary.

In order for you to get a notion, approximate at least, of what this guesthouse stands for, I would like to extract the main pages of *A Foreigner's Guide to the Grand Hotel of the Transatlantic Union*. This curious octavo book of eighty pages depicting the Grand Hotel with fifty prints and eighteen blueprints can be found for sale in the vicinities of the hotel.

I shall pay no heed to the historic news about the origin and foundation of the house, which explain the international fraternity reasons that propelled the first French capitalists to establish these grand hotels in various locations across Europe, and instead I shall only say that the owner of that big boarding house is a large stock corporation that represents an effective equity of two billion francs, has shareholders in every town of the globe, trades its shares in all the big stock exchanges of the world and, lastly, has in every capital of Europe, Asia and America and in some towns in Central Africa company's representatives that bear the title 'business correspondent' or 'industry agent,' depending on the importance of the town they live in.

These employees, who do not have a fixed salary but rather have stocks of the company or receive a percentage of the business they bring to the house, are a real diplomatic corps, writing notes, organizing banquets, engaging in negotiations, arranging loans and entering into commercial agreements.

The duties of these high officials, who would have been formerly called Company's correspondents, are very hard indeed to discharge – perhaps not so much the consular duties, which include procuring for the Grand Hotel wine, cheese, meat and other indigenous products from the country near which they are established, but rather the diplomatic duties, which entail more and harder tasks.

A representative of the Grand Hotel of the Transatlantic Union must keep close contact with all the butlers and chief helpers from the houses, including those of the Head of State where they live, to know enough in advance the trips they plan to make and the rank of the people who intend to visit the capital city of Spain. In order to receive such news, the Company recommends its

business correspondents to resort to banquets, receptions and even gifts. It also recommends that diplomatic notes or urgent dispatches be sent with such news to the managing board of the hotel.

This is why, dear reader, I am telling you that you will understand the difference between this character, who lives almost in a palace with the national banner over the gate and a sign saying “Delegation from the Grand Hotel of the Transatlantic Union, Madrid,” and the old porter, who while carrying the trunk would dare say the voyager, when asked, that the best boarding house was that of a Navarrese lady or that of the one from Biscay. Because, the same way they have become adept at looking for patrons, they have at receiving them and entertaining them.

If a foreign prince or somebody else who is not a prince but wants to pay to be treated as such gives timely notice of his arrival, he will find that the coach that comes to welcome him, the curtains of his chamber, the furniture, the cutlery and the staff’s livery, they all bear the colours and blazon of his house. If he is Chinese, his servants will speak to him in the language of the Celestial Empire. If he is Arab, he will find too those who understand him and, in general, he will not find anything missing, because, as stated in the Guide, eighty two live languages are spoken in the Hotel, and the kitchen cooks in all manners of fashion. And, of course, if the business correspondent has mentioned in his reserved note that the guest has this or that interest, however bizarre, it will be satisfied.

This applies to the guests of high station, who live inside that large building with more independence than in their own palaces. The other guests, who are the majority in the hotel and the main audience of the Guide, live in quite another fashion.

The two thousand cells of the first, second, third, fourth, fifth or sixth class belong to them, according to the number of rooms they ask for and the floor they are in. The big first class restaurant, with capacity for five hundred, is for them, and the second class one, with capacity for another five hundred, and the third class one, with capacity for a thousand. They were taken into account when establishing the fifty-eight public parlours, about which, besides the theatres and the concert hall of the house, the Guide explains at length.

The main of these parlours are the following, in the words of the Guide:

‘Intellectual Rest Parlour, where all manner of gymnastic machines for agility and strength can be found and guests can sweat buckets, thus re-establishing the balance between spirit and matter.

Bodily Rest Parlour. In this facility, one of the parlours that best honours this establishment, one is to find the opposite to the former parlour. Whereas the body is so lushly pampered that it could fall sleep within five minutes, a series of terrifying images displayed upon the walls, inarticulate screams coming from everywhere and sundry other happenings targeting the senses excite the brain so that it will not get any rest.

Mourning and Grief Parlour. It is designed not only for the guests of the hotel, who may suddenly lose a family member, but also for the other neighbours of the city that, for lack of a better space are deprived of the possibility of properly mourning the loss of a relative or any other event equally sad, like a bankruptcy, etc. The Transatlantic Union has a large parlour, which is, beyond doubt, not only the best but also the one and only of its kind of all of the hotels of the enlightened world. It may be rented along with downcast help, with the guarantee that the help will not do any unseemly motion

or gesture in that situation, weekly, daily, hourly or as needed. It can be reached directly from the street through a little cypress park. Any ornaments, allegories and similar figures will be implemented on demand – what is proven, however, to make grievance more serious is to have little light and absolute silence. The latter can also be ensured. If the interested parties so ask, nothing will be heard save the grinding of the springs within the sofas every time the mourning people move about on their seats.

Weddings, Feasts and All Sorts of Celebrations Parlour. This facility has it all. The family man who lives quite modestly yet wishes for his daughter as much as the banker for his may spend her wedding day laughing at the unfair inequalities of fortune. Sacrificing a minor sum, he contrives to host a dance or meal in such luxurious and magnificent halls that nobody, except a prince, could compete with him.

Both for these events as well as for the mourning occasions this establishment takes care of printing the invitations and announcing it, if so wished, in all the three hundred ninety-eight newspapers that are distributed in Madrid.'

Besides those general parlours, including those of dance, music, reading and transactions – the latter can also be booked by the general public, as neutral field to deal in stock market or family business – there are too an infinity of little parlours, which are high price rooms.

However, both the former and the latter are absolutely independent and in complete quiet.

As long as the guest pays for his room or the out-of-towner uses the rented parlour, they have the right to do in them as they wish, with the certainty that nobody will interrupt them. And this will not be the case because all the corridors inside the hotel, that is, the cloisters

with access to the cells, are as watched as the neighbourhoods in town by the establishment's patrols, not only by day, but also by night.

Two times a day a journal is handed out in the hotel, namely, the *Morning Echo* and the *Evening Echo of the Transatlantic Union*. In its main article there is always the commented list of dishes and wines to be served in the round tables at lunch or at dinner. The ads speak of the gastronomic or comfortable novelties in offer. The feuilleton tells of anecdotes, jokes and sundry scandalous chronicles about the guests, with their consent. The bulletin of spectacles announce those of the house and the names of the newcomers, if they so wish.

This journal has two thousand subscribers on a steady basis, not only because it is mandatory for all guests, but also because when a room is vacant the next guest to come takes over the subscription. They receive upon arrival all the back numbers, for they are delivered by means of an ingenious mechanic wheel, which leaves the copies in the rooms without entering to ascertain whether they occupied or vacant. Of course, the kind of paper used for printing the copies identifies the guest's category. The same applies to the invoices and other documents handed out by the establishment. It is justice to respect these precepts of etiquette not only out of consideration for the guests, but also because they simplify the service and facilitate the accounting. Of the latter I will say, dear reader, a couple of words, even if it will entail a digression from the text of the Guide, which is very sparse about this issue.

I will show you the heart of this megatherium of the guesthouses, leviathan of the boarding houses and monster of the hospitality industry, so that, by seeing the circulatory device that pumps blood into its arteries, you will understand the mechanism

behind all of its movements and admire the simplification of its accounting.

At the centre of the building there is a large subterranean roundabout, where the office of the house is to be found, staffed by twelve young ladies and a somewhat more aged one, acting as what in other times would have been called 'chair,' now known as 'universal condensation.'

The grand twelve backdoors of the hotel and twelve districts the latter is divided into are communicated with each of the twelve desks or offices, and the young ladies only have to write down in the designated book all the vicissitudes within their remit, whether it is at the check-in or at the check-out of the travellers or the luggage, the weight of the former or the latter, the consumption of the former of all manner of things, such as food, beverages, leisure, vanities, etc. For each guest and piece of luggage an account is open, and the same happens with the clerical staff and the movable and immovable property of their responsibility.

The condensing desk, which incidentally resembles the chair's desk, is all the time receiving and writing down in the big ledger the definitive data of each department, which are to be presented to the board of directors and the shareholders' general assembly.

However, not a single word is spoken at this desk – everything is conveyed telegraphically. The vibrations of the communications between desks combined with those produced by the wires coming from the outside make for a frantic environment that can hardly be withstood for more than eight hours. Thus the accounting staff is replaced from time to time with new shifts so that the work goes on uninterrupted day and night. Regrettably, despite these and other precautions adopted by the board of directors with wisdom and benevolence worth praising, there is seldom a year in which the statistics do not show two hundred fifty or three

hundred young ladies having suffered from St. Vitus' Dance in the underground of the hotel. Nonetheless, the accuracy and precision of the accounting are truly marvellous and the morality of the clerical staff of the establishment is unbeatable – indeed, all imaginably plausible frauds are foreseen.

It is to no avail that the kitchen's chef declares he has consumed one or two thousand cubic metres of caloric substance. Among other checks that can be performed to verify the truth of the statement, there is the *pyromether*, which indicates by the minute the temperature registered in each oven and stove and conveys the data to the desk by means of dilatation of metallic wire. It would be useless that the suppliers of the establishment say they delivered this or that many kilograms of meat or vegetables, because everything coming in or out through the doors of the establishment leaves trace of its weight in the very act of passing under the lintel. In the cellar, it is known the weight of the lad prior to and after running the errand, and the difference is... Well, you know what I mean, dear reader. It is impossible to cheat.

Out of this recording at the gates, which, like I said, applies to everything the goes in or out of the hotel, some rather curious applications have been developed for statistical purposes. In last year's Annual Directory, since this year's has not been issued yet, it reads thus:

"Average guest weight when checking-in at the Grand Hotel of the Transatlantic Union.

Same when checking-out, having followed at least for a month the healthy nutrition regime of the house..."

This mechanical intervention, that silent act of espionage ensuring the morality, good faith and conscience of all the Corporation's clerical staff, applies to the guests too, especially to those asking for mechanical service and

could, because of the lack of such intervention, abuse without witnesses of any sort of the elements made available to them.

With such a system, allowing this generation to say, not that the walls have ears, like in 1800, but that the walls have mouths, and thanks to such sensitive nerve structure hidden behind the walls and floors of the Grand Hotel, the underground desk is an infallible stopwatch signalling every movement of the house, to the very minute, copper and hair of the accounts of the machine, the traveller and the goods.

With this system there is no possibility of having candy. Nobody can eat a steak or drink a glass of wine without the inquisitorial damsels of the Transatlantic Union knowing of it right away.

Oh, blessed be the wedding of Camacho, the Rich! I can almost hear some readers crying out, for being the cook not content with supplying Sancho Panza three hens and two geese in foam state, he still asked him to keep the pot where he cooked them.

Here it is not only tough to 'foam' without the anonymous owner of the foam not noticing, but also even the leftovers in the refectories are not handed out freely for the love of God, like mush used to be at the gate of convents.

Here everything is well accounted for, because accounting is the leitmotif of those people from tomorrow, as you will soon see.