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MICHAEL G. KELLY, Mariano Paz

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URBAN UTOPICS WRITING THE CITY IN THE LIGHT OF UTOPIA

MICHAEL G. KELLY AND MARIANO PAZ

One of the abundant uncanny features of the Covid-19 lockdowns was the still photography and video footage that emerged of cities deserted, emptied of their ordinary human activities, in broad daylight. While commentary sometimes focused on the potentially positive impact on air quality and the renewed sense of a natural presence taking hold in the urban space – thereby underlining the challenges posed by 'business as usual' in a dynamic of permanent activity and expansion – there was also an awareness that here, revealed in an exceptional way, were the infrastructure and decor of the urban phenomena stripped of their human actors.[1] The uncanniness of such a revelation was that it showed, at one and the same time, the enabling constructions of ongoing urbanity and interdependence (matters of acute collective awareness in the circumstances) together with an urban world as if after the end of human presence: a prefiguration of post-apocalypse; the 'day after' become the day underway.[2]

It was in this period, Spring 2020, that work on this Special Issue began, and it seems to us necessary at the outset to acknowledge how this amplifying event both revealed to us our subject in a new way, and arguably changed the terms of the problem – in its entirely contemporary iteration. The migration of much activity to online platforms and the displacement of much physical circulation (e.g. of goods) into the invisible circuits of logistical systems (i.e. outside the 'social' spaces of inhabited agglomerations), led many to predict an imminent demise of the city as focus and localizer of human activities and energies – along with a great leap into the unknown for the human subject, for human sociability and community, that this represented. Likewise, hierarchies of essential and non-essential work were (at least temporarily) revised and placed in ever starker contrast with the system of reward in the 'market society' – as frontline workers were mobilized under classical notions of a shared, common good and need, the fortunes of those at the top of reconfigured economic food chains grew exponentially. The sense was of social and economic systems facing unprecedented levels of inner inconsistency, stress and conflict. As we complete work on this issue in Autumn 2022, and as other crises move to the fore, these

questions are now embedded in the discussion of social futures, with a sense of fundamental shifts begun, if not completed nor even fully manifested.

The 'urban', in this perspective, finds itself open to question and revision at the very moment of its becoming a majority human experience – indeed, it is common for contemporary discussions of urbanism, across disciplinary boundaries, to open with the observation that urban life has become the dominant setting of social interaction for human beings.[3] Urbanization and urban redevelopment, argues David Harvey, may be understood as the response of the different modes of capitalist organization (industrial, post-industrial) to the multiple crises that have affected the European and global economies from the nineteenth century to the present.[4] But the predominance of urban space in human experience and interaction has become even more pronounced over the past decade: overall, more of the world's population now lives in cities than in rural areas, reaching as high as between seventy and eighty percent in parts of Europe and Latin America. As such, the 'urban' could be argued to have migrated from a major discrete object of reflection, representation and analysis to the status of a constitutive element (and metonym) of the global prospects and challenges now faced by humanity.[5]

Such an evolution of the status of the urban requires a diversification of the ways in which the city is constituted within and subjected to analysis and critique – one to which the category of writing is well placed to contribute. As several urban theorists and sociologists have noted, a consideration of *literature* can serve as 'an entry point to the 'big' questions of comparative and global urban research'.[6] According to this view, literary texts can provide insights into the dynamics of urban life that would not necessarily be captured by quantitative research – and can thereby supplement and act as correctives to other modes of scientific investigation into the urban. Literary and cultural criticism, then, should also pay attention to this phenomenon, since the scope and methods of these disciplines would also contribute to the understanding of 'urban texts', no longer confined to the minorized disciplinary status of merely 'literary' objects.

To reason thus, in our view, is to move slightly too efficiently to the assignment of a service role to the writing of the city, in the calculation of disciplinary utilities. In particular, it elides the ways in which writing and the city have evolved symbiotically – both as technological realizations and as cultural realities. Writing's function, in this respect, is not necessarily limited to one of more or less accurate or nuanced 'representation', it may just as readily inhabit a range of different, partial 'perceptions', from envisioning to glimpsing. It is towards the great diversity of modes in which such writing can occur and be realized that our longer title ('Writing the City in the Light of Utopia') gestures.

We will return to this longer title below, but we remark from the outset, here, that our concern is not frontally with a utopian *object*, in the writing of the urban, but with the variable effects and manifestations of a utopian *parameter* to such writing. This parameter has its origins, but not its exclusive form(s), in the debate on utopia as both a distinct literary genre and a mode of political and social practice. The possibility of envisaging a transformed urban reality is a key component of the complex category

of utopia,[7] and the corpus of works partaking of the utopian *genre* clearly involves different forms of what Lyman Tower Sargent calls 'social dreaming'.[8] Although the term entails, in the words of Lucy Sargisson, 'a conflict between desire and realization',[9] this does not mean that urban utopia should be approached as an estranged fantasy with no connection to lived urban reality. Utopia, furthermore, encompasses not only what is imagined in cultural production, but also an experienced *impulse* that informs collective practice,[10] itself related, in the words of Ruth Levitas, to a recourse to utopia as *method*.[11]

An established view in the field of utopian studies thus sees *utopia* as the name both of a literary genre and a practical impulse infusing attempts to plan and build neighbourhoods, cities and other social and political communities and infrastructures.[12] In its positive sense, as a *eu*topia, it entails the imagination of a society that is never perfect, but is intended to be considered as better than that in which the text has been produced. Other prefixes have been applied to the suffix *topos*. Within this interpretive framework, utopia and dystopia are generally regarded as interdependent concepts with different generic outcomes and related temperamental signatures. Dystopia, often associated with science fiction (but an automatic conflation should not be assumed, as some of the articles in this Special Issue will demonstrate), has become a widespread presence in contemporary cultural production, but it may entail an ideological function: naturalizing the idea that the future will be negative, normalizing feelings of pessimism and thus inducing conformance with the present order of things. Not all dystopias are ideological in this sense, and scholars of utopianism have identified a number of subforms that coexist within a utopian spectrum. They include the anti-utopia (a text that is intended to reject the impulse to change society, informed by the idea that eutopian projects lead to the creation of failed or totalitarian societies) and the critical dystopia (a dystopian text that is nonetheless directed at proposing a positive social alternative by warning against existing social problems). Much has been written about these categories and shadings of utopian concern, their interrelations and their ongoing relevance both to evolving literary practice and to increasingly urgent reflections on the state of the world at present and in an unclear but impending future.[13] The very prevalence of the resultant (sub)genres in contemporary debates, however, has had a tendency of imposing them frontally upon our attention as readers and scholars. One of the consequences of this development, arguably, is to elide the extent to which a broader, more wholly dialectical and less generically codified utopian problematic can be seen to inhabit a wide range of literary production.

What might be termed the utopian problematic can be thought to derive from the original figure of the literary utopia, from Thomas More onwards, and understood to act as shorthand for a set of conceptual relations which stem from that figure, both within literary production and across a wider history of cultural and political thought.[14] While the most prominent such relation is thus that between utopia and dystopia, both as cultural and political forms and variably enacted historical realities, a structuring tension of central critical concern characterizes the relations between ideology and utopia – in which the utopian moment is understood variously as a

subcategory of, or an oppositional force with respect to, the contextually dominant constructs governing economic, social, political and cultural attitudes and actions.[15] Although other lines of development can also be brought into play, our core point here is to distinguish the classic figure of utopia from the dynamic configuration of issues to which the term provides more oblique access across a wide range of texts and contexts.[16]

To pose the question of the utopian at this angle is thus not, in the first instance, to focus on the fortunes of generic trends more or less in phase with the rhythms of the publishing world. It is, rather, to see in the 'utopian' a problematic locus of contending forces and considerations, a representational fault-line in and around which refreshed forms of reflection on contemporary lived experience can crystallize and be developed. Moving to some extent beyond the widely recognized relations between the question of the city in literature and the genre of utopia,[17] the question of utopia can be seen to be woven, imperfectly and on occasion destructively, into the fabric of everyday urban life and cultural representations thereof.

This move governs the choice of a derived term as a lead element of our proposed title: *utopics*. It is a term we borrow and adapt from the work of Louis Marin, whose *Utopiques. Jeux d'espace* (1973) [*Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces* (translated 1984)] marked an important intervention in the critical and theoretical context of post-1968 France.[18] Framing our concern with the urban in this way is to approach it (a) as an object in discourse and (b) as a mobile category of representations which open up the possibility of critical reading precisely because of the incongruities – the tensions, contradictions, slippages – such representations hold together. It is this set of uneasy co-presences that Marin's key term attempts to capture. For example, in the chapter of *Utopiques* titled 'The City's Portrait in its Utopics', a discussion of city maps, his focus is on how different regimes of representation are incorporated into a single textual realization in a manner that translates both social differences and tensions (between dominant, ascendant and subaltern social groupings, for example, but also secular and spiritual forces), as well as offering possibilities for critical counter-readings.[19] The spatial play of the *utopic* is precisely that critically suggestive discontinuity of elements within the textual frame of a single complex (and here: urban) utterance. Marin sets out the following 'propositions' whereby the question or identification of the 'utopic' becomes that of a critical (readable) manifestation of the operations of ideology in the city 'space' (i.e. the space of discourse of and about the city):

PROPOSITIONS: 1. Le plan de la ville représente la production du discours sur la ville. 2. La déconstruction de cette représentation met à jour l'idéologie dans laquelle ce discours est saisi. 3. Le plan de la ville est une 'utopique' dans la mesure où il laisse apparaître une pluralité de lieux dont la non-congruence permet de figurer l'espace critique de l'idéologie.[20]

[PROPOSITIONS 1. The city map represents the production of discourse about the city. 2. The deconstruction of this representation uncovers the ideology controlling it. 3. The city

map is a 'utopic' insofar as it reveals a plurality of places whose incongruity lets us examine the critical space of ideology.][21]

The 'utopic' is thus the name of a property of spatial representational practices, where that property is understood to disclose a potential or opportunity for a critical reading of underlying ideological forces. Marin is significant as a theorist of the tensions between processes of 'utopian' representation and the realities of historical power and ideology. His representational concerns throughout *Utopiques* are wide-ranging, and merge into the simulacrum-reality of a built space such as Disneyland (read as a 'degenerate utopia'), which would subsequently re-emerge in writings as diverse as those of Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson. The particular text he identifies as a 'utopic', in the discussion containing the given quotation, is the *city* map – and we draw from this the hypothesis of a particular pertinence of the *urban* to the *utopic* as a conceptual tool. While Marin could be argued to have implied a cartographical horizon of textual practice more generally, we would argue that the 'urban' is one major name of this horizon for contemporary literary production and provides a comparative category in which the utopian problematic can be observed to play out in its full complexity.

Though the urban phenomenon is unarguably a contemporary question – and, indeed, crisis – there is less consensus as to the centrality of an urban poetics to contemporary concerns. An influential intervention such as Franco Moretti's 1983 discussion of 'Balzac and Urban Personality' made the case for a high point of such poetics in the nineteenth-century configuration of the becoming-modern city, as if urban poetics were to exhaust their possibilities even as the realities that shaped them became ever more dominant.[22] The 'utopic' in Marin's sense can be of help in addressing this *décalage* or time lapse between aesthetic implications and lived realities, as it is concerned, by definition, with ways in which the spatial experience and its representations are not internally coherent or consistent, and leave the subject (whether reader, viewer or *citadin* [civic subject]) in an incomplete or at least suboptimal relation to the always elusive whole, the city as both city and as complete proposition. It suggests that it is in this very experience of breakdown that the critical import lies and that valuable meanings become available to the reader.

Fragmentariness and incompleteness also inform the extended element of our long title, which borrows from a significant interlinguistic engagement around the city. The late Belfast poet Ciaran Carson's 2012 volume *In the Light Of* presents versified reworkings in English of a number of Arthur Rimbaud's poetic prose texts from *Illuminations* (1886). One such text, titled 'Invisible Cities (Les Ponts)', proposes a verse version of 'Les Ponts' [The Bridges], in which a somewhat unclear urban vision is transposed. We cite Rimbaud's original followed by Carson's version:

Quelques-uns de ces ponts sont encore chargés de masures. D'autres soutiennent des mâts, des signaux, de frêles parapets. Des accords mineurs se croisent, et filent, des cordes montent des berges. On distingue une veste rouge, peut-être d'autres costumes et des instruments de musique. Sont-ce des airs populaires, des bouts de concerts seigneuriaux,

des restants d'hymnes publics? L'eau est grise et bleue, large comme un bras de mer. – Un rayon blanc, tombant du haut du ciel, anéantit cette comédie.[23]

[A few of the said bridges are still covered

with hovels. Others support poles, frail parapets and tropes.
Minor chords cross each other and fade away; ropes

ascend from the embankments. You can make out a red coat,
perhaps other costumes; musical instruments you may note.

Are these popular tunes, snatches of seigneurial spree,
fragments of public anthems? Wide as an arm of the sea,

the water is grey and blue. A white ray
falling from the outer sky annihilates this comedy.][24]

The prose poems of the *Illuminations*, following on from those of Charles Baudelaire's *Spleen de Paris* [1869], mark a key evolution in the relations of literary form with urban transformation. That Carson would bring out an underlying musicality, the trace of a versified structure, in this contemporary translational response is already a comment on the non-linear natures of both literary relations and literary evolution. But of particular interest to us is the closing representation of a moment of illumination, which – in both the original and its derived, linguistically and culturally othered form – captures with great clarity and power the temporality and gravity of a utopian epiphany, beyond all existing forms of socialized 'music'. As if in a moment of suspension, a new light is thrown on the human 'comedy' (one notes the Balzacian connection), bringing it to nothing (*néant*) and revealing it in the same, momentary movement. Here, poetic illumination and the act of critical understanding enter into suggestive contact – in a passing moment outside of ordinary, or everyday, time.

Carson's alternative title is also highly suggestive in the way that it links Rimbaud's text into a contemporary intertextual network which is of considerable relevance to our problem. For again, in Italo Calvino's seminal work of almost exactly a century later, we find the alternative temporality of an imagined city which, in a given moment, contains all of the possible versions of itself, as potential future or as past. *Le città invisibili* [*Invisible Cities*] ends with the city of Berenice, a final exemplar of the 'hidden city':

Dal mio discorso avrai tratto la conclusione che la vera Berenice è una successione nel tempo di città diverse, alternativamente giuste e ingiuste. Ma la cosa di cui volevo avvertirti è un'altra: che tutte le Berenici future sono già presenti in questo istante, avvolte l'una dentro l'altra, strette pigiate indistricabili.[25]

L'inferno dei viventi non è qualcosa che sarà; se ce n'è uno, è quello che è già qui, l'inferno che abitiamo tutti i giorni, che formiamo stando insieme. Due modi ci sono per non soffrirne. Il primo riesce facile a molti: accetare l'inferno e diventarne parte fino al punto di non vederlo più. Il secondo è rischioso ed esige attenzione e apprendimento continui:

cercare e saper riconoscere chi e cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio.[26]

[From my words you will have reached the conclusion that the real Berenice is a temporal succession of different cities, alternately just and unjust. But what I wanted to warn you is about something else: all the future Berenices are already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable.[27]

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day; that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.][28]

In these concluding lines of the work, Calvino can be argued to have outlined a central possible telos for the critical reading of writings of the city. It is that of a sifting discernment, which would disclose what is life-giving both within the complex tensions and reversals of city life and within the writing that weaves those positive and negative elements into a continuum analogous to (if not directly representative of) that of the built urban complex. This is how we understand a consideration of the utopian to impact upon the writing of the city – as issuing in a recognition of how, even in its most suboptimal experiences, the city carries within it the question, and the promise, of a better life.[29] To write the city in the light of utopia is, then, far from the assembly of a simple transcript of what appears in the glare of the floodlights – a poetics of complete visibility and self-transparency, that could be attributed to a dominant tradition of utopian thought and representational practice. It is to be attuned and attentive to something fragmentary, intermittent – and momentarily absolute: in the mode of Rimbaud's epiphanic illumination but where what is revealed is the very immanence of the scene, its presence, its givenness.[30] The everyday is thus liberated from any characterization as simple repetition – and rendered visible in the fullness of its ability to mean *transformatively*, to enable living differently.[31]

Hence also, in our view, the fruitful incongruity, for a project with utopia in its title, of a preponderance of studies which highlight far from ideal qualities in far from ideal lived and represented urban realities. The studies collected here are not primarily first-order representations of urban utopia, but of urban realities considered where the question (or shadow) of utopia is a live and shaping presence. 'Writing the City in the Light of Utopia' as a critical remit can thus result in a focus on nonconformist or disruptive spaces within the urban fabric, an attention to spatial discontinuities and their textual correlates, and to their accompanying discourses and poetics. It can equally lead to a focus on singular experience, on the event and its afterlife, on memory and anticipation of that which itself evades satisfactory representation. But it can also, furthermore and critically, lead to a focus on the transitional processes internal to the utopian problematic itself, in particular those historical

movements through which utopia and dystopia reveal their interrelatedness and, on occasion, interchangeability.

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The articles brought together in this Special Issue point to the relevance and urgency of these concerns across a number of literary cultures and languages, and suggest new lines of approach to the utopian problematic in its full(er) complexity. These articles thus allow us to observe the actual or erstwhile promise of utopia as it finds itself enacted and on occasions diffracted or indeed distorted in available representations of urban life, across cultural and linguistic boundaries.[32] This is the case firstly for articles which deal with literary treatments of aspects of a particular named city in a broadly contemporary context – as do the contributions of Ruth Glynn (on Naples), Hanna Henryson (on Berlin) and Michael G. Kelly (on Marseille).

Two strongly comparable Mediterranean port cities, Naples and Marseille, evolve as singular urban spaces in a tense relation to their broader national contexts, enjoying an ambivalent status within them. Both have been the object of contradictory imaginaries in cultural representation, dismissed as a social stereotype or praised as a symbol of national identity. Glynn and Kelly explore representations of these cities across a range of contemporary texts. In 'Utopia in Late Modernity: Literary Critiques of the "Neapolitan Renaissance"', Glynn focuses on works that respond to the period of civic confidence that characterized Naples in the 1990s. This 'Neapolitan Renaissance', realized in part by urban regeneration and cultural development, counteracted the usual image of Naples as a 'vilified Other' in Italian culture – a city associated in the national imaginary with organized crime and social degradation. Glynn discusses two novels – Giuseppe Montesano's *Di questa vita menzognera* [*Of This Lying Life*] (2003) and Ruggero Cappuccio's *Fuoco su Napoli* [*Fire over Naples*] (2010) – as examples of texts that engage critically with the apparent utopianism of this Neapolitan resurgence. Montesano's novel imagines a Naples fully controlled by a criminal family and turned into a theme park. This is a dystopian fantasy that plays out as an allusion to different vectors that connect the city with consumerism, with the pervasiveness of mediatized spectacle and with the politics of the Berlusconi era. Cappuccio's text also revolves around organized crime and the control exerted by the Camorra at municipal level. The vision here is much darker, perhaps because of the novel's later publication date, at a time when mafia wars and the literary phenomenon of Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra* [*Gomorrah*] (2006) had already overtaken the positive associations of the 'Renaissance'. Yet, as in Montesano's novel, the solution offered to reinvigorate a declining city is to turn it into a site of spectacle and circulation of people – in this case as a museumified, elite tourist destination. Ultimately, in both fictions the exploitation of the cultural and architectural heritage of Naples traces a passage between imaginaries of utopian potential and dystopian scenarios that capture the city as a form of merchandise, to be sold for the profit of criminal gangs.

Kelly's article begins by referencing a text whose political discourses echo the denunciation of urban corruption and greed found in the novels studied by Glynn. *Marseille* (2015), the first non-English language series produced by Netflix, marks a new parameter to the problematic of urban representation and storytelling in this context – allowing for a reframing of the writing question that is of central concern to us. The series mobilizes for potentially global consumption a vision of the city as a mythological sign that manifests quite differently in the three prose works that are the primary focus of discussion: Emmanuel Loi's *Marseille amor* (2013), Sabrina Calvo's *Sous la colline* [*Beneath the Hill*] (2015) and Maylis de Kerangal's *Corniche Kennedy* (2008). These works are connected because they underscore an association between the utopian and a set of specific cognitive vectors (respectively, melancholy, curiosity and disobedience), while elaborating different forms through which *the space of possibility* (as derived from a conjoined reading of Pierre Bourdieu and Marin) is occupied in writing. *Marseille amor* – the Latin or Spanish *amor* of the title playfully mixing resonances of love (*amour*) and death (*mort*) in French – merges several modes of representing the city (including sociological realism and autofiction) in a text that comes to terms with an experience of Marseille as a formally elusive entity. The utopian possibilities found in the city's architecture by the text's wandering protagonist, however, do not necessarily deliver on their original expectations – but without the narrative fully foreclosing their potential for social change (which is ultimately linked to self-healing in a dialectical relation between the subject and the city). *Sous la colline* illustrates the links between utopia and curiosity, through a story revolving around Le Corbusier's first *Unité d'habitation*, whose iconicity is directly traced to the identity of Marseille when, venturing into the fantastic and the supernatural, the protagonist (Colline – identified playfully with the telluric site or *colline* of the title) travels back to the mythological origins of the city. Here again, the urban environment and the inner psychology of the protagonist are entwined, and it is in this nexus that Kelly sees utopic plays emerge. Territorial and temporal constraints are in the end fully disrupted, enabling the appearance of new forms of identity and agency in and beyond the imagined city. The final text discussed, *Corniche Kennedy*, is understood to contain a heterotopia (located within the titular place name) within which a gang of teenagers signal, in defiance of authority and with liberated agency, the existence of a potentially utopian underside to the life of the city, a potential marginalized both socially and spatially.

Hanna Henryson's Berlin article returns to more conventional realism to focus on the literary representation of a very specific urban version of a wider utopian phenomenon – intentional communities, a term which refers broadly to a group of people living together with the same communal aim, but is actualized here in the housing collectives of the contemporary German capital.[33] Henryson analyses the literary representation of this type of housing arrangement in two recent novels by German writer Anke Stelling: *Bodentiefe Fenster* [*Floor-length Windows*] (2015) and *Schäfchen im Trockenen* [*Higher Ground*] (2018). These two tell realist stories set in the district of Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, a residential neighbourhood situated in what used to be the East-German sector of the city. After the collapse of the German

Democratic Republic (GDR), its dilapidated buildings were occupied by students, artists and activists, taking advantage of low rents – conditions which facilitated the emergence of private-collective living arrangements. Under such schemes, groups of city-dwellers would pool their resources to develop communal housing projects in which they would live according to certain rules, while also fostering an atmosphere of creativity and energy in their locality. A decade into the twenty-first century, however, gentrification had significantly changed the demographics of Prenzlauer Berg – a phenomenon that is registered and explored in the Stelling novels. Each tells the story of a couple building and negotiating their lives in communal housing projects, tracing, at the same time, the economic and urban challenges faced by these forms of living arrangements, which had been originally conceived with utopian intent. Indeed, communal living was supposed to promote the development of ties between residents, thus reducing the alienation of modern urban life, while also ensuring social diversity through the inclusion of residents that belonged to different social classes, age groups and ethnic origins. This sense of solidarity and inclusion, however, is challenged by cultural and economic change, and the protagonists of both novels experience how the initial expectations of communal living give way to new forms in which diversity is lost, the founding ethos is exposed to the pressures of evolving life circumstances and individual needs, and external economic factors operate to confound the ethical self-understandings of different actors.

Each of these three articles focuses on an ambivalent leveraging of the utopian within a difficult, differentiated, contemporary urban terrain – revealing issues both with respect to the appropriation of the utopian impulse or aspect within the urban utopic, and questions as to the location of utopian potential within the social and symbolic configuration of the urban territory. Such considerations move from a broader prehistory of the utopian as an urbanistic question – indeed, a symbiotic aspect to the questions of utopia and of the urban environment as a designed, willed and rational plan for the improvement of individual and collective lives.[34] This important and (again) ambivalent legacy of the *historic* relations of utopia and the city are explored in the contributions of Giulia Brecciaroli and Stephan Ehrig to this Special Issue. They deal with the literary representation of urban space as an expression of both promise and disenchantment in two different post-World War II contexts of reconstruction and redevelopment: Italy and the GDR. In 'Writing Milan and Turin in the Light of (Failed) Utopia: Luciano Bianciardi and Paolo Volponi' Brecciaroli discusses two writers whose work chart the urban changes brought about in the Italian north by the economic boom of the late 1950s and early 1960s and its aftermath. The Italian economic 'miracle' generated massive internal migration from the impoverished south to the industrialized north. Brecciaroli shows how the ensuing social changes are registered by Bianciardi and Volponi in novels that combine autobiographical experiences with a dystopian appraisal of the new urban realities. Whereas Volponi worked in Turin for the Olivetti company (the renowned manufacturer of typewriters, whose owner Adriano Olivetti was also known for this attempt to develop a progressive approach to industry), Bianciardi was employed by the Feltrinelli publishing house in Milan. In his novels, Volponi

describes an urban landscape of increased consumerism and an industrial system that dehumanizes and alienates its labourers. Similarly, Bianciardi debunks the myth that Milan would stand for the materialization of the promise of a better life for the thousands of new residents looking for a more prosperous existence. Thus, the dystopian tone of their novels does not stem from an estranged or fantastic perspective, but flows directly from their pessimistic narratives about the failure of the urban space to provide the levels of happiness and fulfilment that post-war economic development had been supposed to deliver. This is seen in portraits of a congested Milan overwhelmed by cars, where citizens no longer have time for leisure and art, and the imperative of efficiency undermines the search for personal self-realization; and of an empty Turin in which the city centre has been displaced by the factory as a site of social interaction.

In 'Circular Utopia(s): Alfred Wellm's *Morisco* and the Socialist City', Ehrig discusses a novel produced under very different conditions from those of Bianciardi and Volponi, in the GDR. Yet the underlying preoccupations about urban space and redevelopment in a pessimistic and disenchanted manner seem to echo those of the writings analysed by Brecciaroli. Ehrig is concerned with the building of new towns not as a by-product of capitalist industrialization but as the result of a carefully planned, state-led socialist economy. Despite the differences in social context, urban redevelopment in the GDR is comparably informed by a utopian intention to build new cities that will allow their inhabitants to live efficient, comfortable and fulfilling lives. Urban planning in the 1950s GDR, argues Ehrig, was informed by a Marxist, teleological belief in rationalism and the principles of a fair, equal society. But the promises of equity and emancipation that new cities would bring about failed to materialize. Alfred Wellm's novel *Morisco* looks back at the construction of an unnamed city (though the allusions mark it as Halle-Neustadt) with a sense of retrospective scepticism. The protagonist is an architect who had been involved in the planning of the new socialist city, somebody who had faith in this utopian project and who was convinced of the possibilities offered by modern architecture to contribute to those aims. Ehrig traces the connections between the building of a Neustadt and the urban imaginary described in Tommaso Campanella's *La città del sole* [*The City of the Sun*] (1602), one of the foundational works of the utopian genre. However, the initial enthusiasm gives way to disappointment and disenchantment after the realities of industry and politics result not only in a less creative design of the city but also in a lived reality in which the promise of equality and personal realization, and a classless society, have not been achieved.

The ever-present danger for discussions of the utopian, especially via studies of work in some of the dominant European languages, is the implication, if not the open suggestion, that such problematics are either inherently or predominantly 'European' or Eurocentric. While acknowledging the practical limits to any multilingual and multicultural survey of this sort, we would argue that such a view is blinkered, even as the need for epistemological and cultural discernment and sensitivity is clear. In three further contributions to the present issue, our hope is that lines of flight towards a more general, generically and geopolitically diverse plotting of the

question come into view. The first of these, by Carla Almanza-Gálvez, outlines an expansive underlying engagement with the urban question in its discussion of three different works by the Spanish novelist Ray Loriga. This engagement is across genres (the novel and short prose), modes (such as contemporary 'supermodernity', as outlined by the French anthropologist Marc Augé; technologically enhanced anticipation; allegorical dystopia) and territories, with the global wanderings of the protagonist of *Tokio ya no nos quiere* [*Tokyo Doesn't Love Us Anymore*] (1999) giving way to the city as global microcosm of *El hombre que inventó Manhattan* [*The Man Who Invented Manhattan*] (2004) before turning to the city as allegorical horizon in *Rendición* [*Surrender*] (2017). A key implication of Almanza-Gálvez's analysis is that the urban question in contemporary literature resolutely exceeds the customary national or jurisdictional framings while offering significant symptomatic underpinnings to a broader attempt to think the world and the contemporary human condition. The article also makes important connections between the problem of memory at individual and collective levels and the evolving nature of designed urban spaces – in an engagement with the concept of the *non-lieu* (the transitional, friction-less and depersonalized spaces of the consumer-subject), and its related categories (supermodernity; anthropological space) in the thought of Augé. It is the resistance of such contemporary and future urban spaces to the sense-making processes of the human subject that is understood in this study to underpin the continuum between apparently utopian spatial arrangements and manifestly dystopian subjective conditions in the fictional work under discussion. In this way, Loriga's fiction can be seen to illustrate the inherently perspectival nature of the 'urban' problem – existing only by and through the fragile and evolving realities of those subjects who occupy the urban space – while reframing the question as one of shared concern for a global human community traversing trauma and crisis at both micro (individual) and macro (societal and inter-societal) levels.

Similar hints at universality, whether actual or anticipatory, appear in the contributions by Karen Bouwer and Mariano Paz, both of which also extend the territory of 'writing' as envisaged in this Special Issue to the domain of film and wider audiovisual practice. Cinema has been a distinctly urban medium ever since its emergence at the end of the nineteenth century, and the narrative strategies and tropes in utopian cinema are borrowed from its literary counterpart. Film, then, whether fictional (Paz) or documentary (Bouwer), is another platform through which the urban can be imagined and 'written' (the etymology of the term used by the Lumière Brothers to name their invention of a camera/projector, the *cinématographe*, denoting of course a 'writing in movement'). Bouwer and Paz both focus on cities located in the Global South, which share an experience of a colonial past and levels of inequality that far exceed those found in the Global North. In fact, the cities of the Global South are characterized by the presence of vast areas of slum dwelling, a phenomenon that demonstrates one of the worst undersides of modern and contemporary urbanization.[35] It is not surprising, therefore, that the representation of these cities edges towards dystopia. Yet the idea that these environments can only evoke despair is challenged by Bouwer in 'Axes of Hope: Flights of Fancy in Recent Work on Urban

Congo', her discussion of two contemporary texts from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The first is a documentary film, *The Tower: A Concrete Utopia* (2016), by Congolese artist Sammy Baloji and Belgian anthropologist Filip De Boeck, shot in Kinshasa. The second is the novel *Généalogie d'une banalité* [*Genealogy of a Banality*] (2015), by Sinzo Aanza – set in Lubumbashi, the third-largest city in the DRC. Both cities struggle with a colonial legacy of exploitation that has resulted in vast sections of the population living in poverty. At the same time, the texts that Bouwer analyses portray *ad hoc* utopian strategies for generating a better urban life for citizens. In the case of *The Tower*, this is through the unlikely but actual development of a high-rise building; in *Généalogie d'une banalité*, through the possibility of escaping poverty offered by mineral resources, to be accessed through the excavation of an improvised mine. Bouwer contrasts the movement in two different directions along a vertical axis (building upwards and excavating downwards) and highlights that in both projects the agents are not corporations or the government but private citizens operating informally and independently. In both cases examined, these are social actors who lack the financial resources to professionally carry out their utopian projects. Although neither of them is ultimately successful, Bouwer concludes, they exemplify the resilience of the excluded, who manage to generate their own spaces of hope.

The scenarios discussed by Bouwer speak of cities in which the state has vanished, with people left to improvise strategies to protect and improve their lives. In his contribution, 'City of Fury: Urban Violence, Dystopia and Anti-Utopia in *Nuevo orden* and *Era uma vez Brasília*', Paz discusses two feature films that show, on the contrary, an authoritarian state asserting control over the city. *Nuevo orden* [*New Order*] (Mexico, dir. Michel Franco, 2020) portrays a present-day Mexico City overtaken by widespread social violence through riots that do not seem to obey a political programme. It is a graphically violent film in which impoverished citizens (all dark-skinned and mostly with indigenous features), enact a literal class struggle by killing the rich and destroying their property. In its attempt to re-establish order, the Mexican military imposes a form of repressive dictatorial regime. The film might be read as a denunciation of inequality and authoritarianism, but by warning against attempts to change the social order, and by racializing and Othering the excluded, it becomes a reactionary and anti-utopian text. *Era uma vez Brasília* [*Once There Was Brasilia*] (Brazil, dir. Adirley Queirós, 2017) focuses on an underground resistance movement operating in the city of Brasilia in 2016, just as the then President of Brazil Dilma Rousseff was being impeached. Here, the city and its metropolitan area are portrayed in an estranged, science-fictional manner as decaying, post-industrial spaces, ruled by a police state. While the ultimate view proposed by the film is pessimistic, the portrayal of the small group of dissidents as political actors attempting to resist the increasingly undemocratic government also offers, as in the works discussed by Bouwer, a sense of resilience and hopeful possibility.

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Beyond the comparative and intercultural remit of the present project, our (inter)disciplinary dialogue in this Special Issue is with the emerging field of Literary Urban

Studies, in which an expansive notion of the literary (the amenability of a diverse range of texts to the tools of literary reading and critique) confronts the urgency of the contemporary urban phenomenon. In this textually mediated encounter, the concern is both for a deeper understanding of how rhetorical and representational processes feed into the realization of built urban realities, and for an enhanced sense of how urban realities impact upon and are in turn impacted by the subjects (individual, sectoral and collective) of urban experience. The objectives and orientations of this developing field place the reading and interpretation of texts in relation to an understanding of urban challenges and transformations – with the potential to influence urbanistic thinking and action, and public policy more generally. There are, equally, potential implications for the way literature is studied and taught, as well as for the interpretative stance of the general reader as both critical and broader political concerns turn ever more urgently to problems of organization, resilience and survival in the face of human-generated catastrophe(s).[36] Our hope in bringing together the work presented here is to contribute to opening up the space of possible discussions in this developing field of reflection and to demonstrating in a diversified manner that field's relevance to a shared future.

University of Limerick
Ireland
Michael.G.Kelly@ul.ie
Orcid 0000-0002-3559-2486

University of Limerick
Ireland
Mariano.Paz@ul.ie
Orcid 0000-0001-5254-3363

NOTES

[1] This emptying of the 'urban' scene is a generic property of much publishing that takes the 'city' as its discursive and visual object – whether architectural publications or more general-public albeit 'high-end' presentations of the 'urban' offering. Pictures showcase prime architectural, cultural and social sites emptied of all direct human presence. This anticipates eerily the effect of lockdown. It is in itself, at the same time, an ideological-aesthetic commonplace of urban consumer utopia – the iconic 'space' of self-realization most fully itself when cleared of actual bodies (even as all such spaces speak of the work done to create and maintain them). Hence there is a curious paradox in the way the city *as offering* is consumed: reified, cooled, distanced, curated; where the human excess or mess is an imaginary adjunct, setting off the full value of the privileged objects and spaces for the busy, discerning *visitor* to come (to be joined by the exemplary – presentable if not present – *local inhabitant*). This aesthetic meshes thus seamlessly with the discourse of leisured commodification and its ideological underpinnings. An example might be the standard series description for the Wallpaper* City Guide: 'a tightly edited, discreetly packaged list of the best a location has to offer the design-conscious traveller. Here is a precise, informative insider's checklist of all you need to know about the world's most intoxicating cities. Whether you are staying for 48 hours or five days, visiting for business or a vacation, we've done the hard work for you, from finding the best restaurants, bars and hotels (including which rooms to request) to the most extraordinary stores and sites, and the most enticing architecture and design. [The guides] enable you to come away from your trip, however brief, with a real taste of the city's landscape and the satisfaction you've seen all that you should. In short, these guides act as a passport to the best the world has to offer. Enjoy.' *Antwerp* (London: Phaidon, 2008) rear inner flap text; reproduced across the series.

[2] Among the many examples of this type of text one could single out the music video for the song *Living in a Ghost Town*, by The Rolling Stones. Shot on location during lockdown, the video shows

the deserted streets (and underground networks) of cities such as London, Toronto, Osaka and Cape Town. The images convey an apocalyptic tone, and the fisheye shots of urban settings, with their circular frame, connote that this is a global phenomenon. At the same time, the music is rather lively, and the shots of the band enjoying themselves as they play act as a counterpoint to the imaginary of gloom. See The Rolling Stones, *Living in a Ghost Town*, online music video, YouTube, 23 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNNPNweSbp8> [accessed 17 January 2022].

[3] Edward W. Soja and J. Miguel Kani, 'The Urbanization of the World', in *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization*, ed. by Neil Brenner (Berlin: Jovis, 2014), pp. 142–59.

[4] David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's 'Capital', Volume 2* (London: Verso, 2013).

[5] This is the status of a 'hyperobject', in the terminology of the philosopher Timothy Morton. See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

[6] Stefan Kipfer, 'Worldwide Urbanization and Neocolonial Fractures: Insights from the Literary World', in *Implosions/Explosions*, ed. by Brenner, pp. 287–305 (p. 294). See also *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature*, ed. by Kevin R. McNamara (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 5.

[7] In an influential act of categorization, Lyman Tower Sargent has assimilated 'city utopias' to what he terms 'utopias of human contrivance'. These function so as 'to put the whole thing under human control and create an entirely new tradition – the utopia of human contrivance or city utopia. Plato's *Republic* is the most cited early Western example, although I think that his *Laws* fits better.' Lyman Tower Sargent, 'The Three Faces' in *Rethinking Utopia and Utopianism: The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited and Other Essays* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022, pp. 1–49) p. 9 (first publ. as 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited' in *Utopian Studies*, 5.1 (1994), 1–37).

[8] 'At its root [...] utopianism is the result of the human propensity to dream while both asleep and awake': Sargent, 'The Three Faces', p. 8.

[9] Lucy Sargisson, *Fool's Gold? Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 7.

[10] See *Exploring the Utopian Impulse: Essays on Utopian Thought and Practice* ed. by Michael J. Griffin and Tom Moylan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007).

[11] See Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[12] See, for example, Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991); Gregory Claeys, *Utopia: The History of an Idea* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011); Roberto Mordacci, *Ritorno a utopia* (Rome: Laterza, 2020).

[13] On these categorizations see, for example, Sargent, 'The Three Faces', and Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[14] An imaginary and consolidated vision of an urban reality is a widespread feature of the foundational texts of utopian literature, such as those of More and Tommaso Campanella. The links between the city, the built environment and architecture have been a concern of several studies devoted to the utopian, as well as more focused chapters and articles. See Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method*; Lucy Sargissson, *Fool's Gold?*; Antonis Balasopoulos, 'Celestial Cities and Rationalist Utopias' in *The Cambridge Companion*, ed. by McNamara, pp. 17–30; John Friedman, 'The Good City: In Defense of Utopian Thinking', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 24.2 (2000), 460–72.

[15] See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* [1936], trans. by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955); Paul Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. by George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Fredric Jameson, 'Of Islands and Trenches: Naturalization and the Production of Utopian Discourse', *Diacritics*, 7.2 (1977), 2–21.

[16] Markku Salmela, Lieven Ameel and Jason Finch have argued that the diverse tradition of literature of the city is encompassed within the category of 'literature of the possible'. This includes, alongside a 'more realistic branch' of texts, a corpus described as 'the imagined possibilities for the

city, especially for the city as an imagined community or as an imagined polity', which itself includes 'large-scale city visions that can be found in utopian literature [...]': 'The Possible in Literature and Urban Life: Clearing the Field', in *Literatures of Urban Possibility*, ed. by Markku Salmela, Lieven Ameel and Jason Finch (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 1–18 (p. 2). The account they propose has the advantage of avoiding a common misperception regarding the notion of utopia: that, whether urban or not, as a literary genre it engages by definition with impossible scenarios, with ideal worlds that could never be enacted.

[17] In this respect, see inter alia, *Writing the City: Eden, Babylon, and the New Jerusalem*, ed. by Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley (London: Routledge, 1994) and Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), for example.

[18] Louis Marin, *Utopiques. Jeux d'espaces* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1973); Louis Marin, *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, trans. by Robert A. Vollrath (New York: Humanity Books, 1984).

[19] Further consideration is given to this aspect of Marin's study in Michael G. Kelly's article on contemporary Marseille in this Special Issue.

[20] Marin, *Utopiques*, p. 257.

[21] Marin, *Utopics*, trans. by Vollrath, p. 201.

[22] See Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. by Susan Fischer (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 109–29.

[23] 'Les Ponts', in Arthur Rimbaud, *Poésies. Une saison en enfer. Illuminations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 170–71.

[24] 'Invisible Cities (Les Ponts)', in Ciaran Carson, *In the Light Of* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2012), p. 38.

[25] Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili* [1972] (Milan: Mondadori, 1993), pp. 161.

[26] Ibid., p. 164.

[27] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Picador, 1979), p. 125.

[28] Ibid., pp. 126–27.

[29] As Giovanna Rizzarelli notes, Calvino's account of Berenice is one in which 'il giusto e l'ingiusto convivono; anzi, in un gioco di scatole cinesi la città giusta contiene quella ingiusta, e l'ingiusta racchiude un germe di giustizia e così via, all'infinito. Il polo positivo e quello negativo sono ormai inestricabili, ma non si fondono, non si superano' [the just and the unjust coexist; indeed, in a game of Chinese boxes, the just city contains the unjust one, and the unjust city includes a seed of justice, and so on ad infinitum. The positive and the negative sides have become inextricable, but they do not merge, they do not supersede each other]: Giovanna Rizzarelli, 'La città di carta e inchiostro: 'Le Città invisibile' di Italo Calvino e la letteratura utopica', *Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana*, 31.2/3 (2002), 219–35 (p. 225). Translation our own.

[30] Observable in the canon across generic divides, in modernist urban fiction such as *Ulysses* (1922), quite as much as in the poetry of French late-Romantic and Symbolist periods.

[31] On the broad intersections of the utopian and the everyday see, inter alia, Michael E. Gardiner, *Weak Messianism: Essays in Everyday Utopianism* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013) and Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

[32] Indeed, a key aspect of the present Special Issue is its intuition as to the importance of languages and linguistic diversity to the study of the topic – and to Literary Urban Studies (LUS) in general. The city is itself no longer a homogeneous linguistic reality – if it ever was. Indeed, the city often stands in counterdistinction to the nation in the imaginary and reality of language. If it is to have methodological relevance to wider social debates, LUS must be a multilingual practice and conversation. There are limits to what can be done in the context of this Special Issue, but our effort was towards a modicum of linguistic and territorial spread in the articles included. This also counters the inherent abstraction and generalization of discourse on the 'urban', which constructs its object across what is by definition at each point a singularity.

[33] Sargisson places intentional communities within the category of 'empirical utopia', a category that complements the fictional utopias in literature and the theoretical utopias of social and political philosophy. See Sargisson, *Fool's Gold?*, p. 2.

[34] See Françoise Choay's influential anthology, in this respect: Françoise Choay, *L'Urbanisme, utopies et réalités. Une Anthologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1965).

[35] See, inter alia, Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2017).

[36] See Lieven Ameel and others, 'Teaching Literary Urban Studies' in Lieven Ameel, *The Routledge Companion to Literary Urban Studies* (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 11–26.