NEUTRAL GROUNDS, OR, THE UTOPIA OF THE URBAN

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Introduction

Before a rapt audience of influential statesmen in the Netherlands, Raphael Hythlodaeus—that dispenser of nonsense—describes the geography, economy, political structure, and mores of the remarkable but hitherto unknown *Utopia*, an island republic discovered somewhere between Europe and the New World, reportedly during one of Amerigo Vespucci's voyages. Among the marvellous achievements in this land that is both a no-place (*u-topia*) and also a good place (*eu-topia*), urban planning must be counted near the top. "There are fifty-four splendid big towns on the island, all with the same language, laws, customs and institutions. They're all built on the same plan, and, so far as the sites will allow, they all look exactly alike" (More 50). Hythlodaeus describes the regular layout of the Utopian city, which in every case is the same—the regularizing of the Utopian urban space is itself part of what makes it utopian. "But let me tell you some more about the towns. Well, when you've seen one of them, you've seen all of them, for they're as nearly identical as local conditions will permit. So I'll just give you one example—it doesn't matter which. However, the obvious choice is [the capital city] *Amaurotum*, for the fact that Parliament meets there gives it special importance" (More 52, translation modified). Even where all cities are essentially the same, there is something special about the Capital.

Standing on the very threshold of the new world, More's *Utopia* marks the transitional moment between a medieval worldview and a modern one. In his property-less, money-less paradise, More combines a classical, rustic ideal with the rational, nearly mathematical organization of space which would come to characterize the Baroque Age a century later, when the great European powers organized themselves into States and consolidated their

power in the quintessentially modern form of the capital city. This city is itself a kind of utopia, neutral space—from the Latin, *ne* and *uter,* neither one nor the other—that managed to represent the country while also exceeding its limits. This is a critical space, with respect both to its position within a larger world system and to the lives of its inhabitants. Like utopia, the urban experience shimmers between worlds, between the actual and the possible, as a perennial *becoming* forever challenges being and nothingness. Utopia, as a literary genre launched by More's little book, functions, in a variety of ways, as a means of understanding our world even as it projects an alternative world. (In this sense, the Dystopia operates in the same capacity as does Utopia, since both the negative and the positive images offer critiques of our own actually existing social form.) The utopian impulse drives us to map our world, partly by imagining other worlds. And the experience of the city, perhaps more so in our postmodern condition than ever before, calls for utopian analysis, since the urban space itself seems a utopian space as well.

In the seventeenth century, in the "Europe of the Capitals" (as Giulio Carlo Argan so aptly named his study of the Baroque, urban space embodied the centralization of state power essential to the formation of the modern world system, helping to establish the core-periphery dichotomy identified by Immanuel Wallerstein in his exposition of the *Modern World System*. In that age, the capital city became the central place in an organization of power that formed the nation-state, which was the dominant social formation in the West. Now, in the age of globalization, which is marked in part by a relative diminution in the influence of the nation-state and the transnational flow of economic and cultural resources, the metropolis—far from diminishing in its turn—has become all the more significant, as the "global cities" (as Saskia Sassen calls them) becomes key nodes in the multinational system of power relations. From the representative *topos* of modernity, cities have evolved into the essential though problematic social space of the postmodern condition, a point made all the more remarkable by the contributions of such postmodern geographers as David Harvey, Edward Soja, and Derek Gregory.

Yet the city is not merely a representative space but also a unique place. The urban locale—like the distinctive regional spaces depicted in local narratives or the exotic zones of traveller's tales—presents an eccentric

experience, unfamiliar or out of the ordinary, and often at odds with the mainstream image presented in national narratives. (In the United States, for instance, the popular national image remains rural or agrarian, even with the vast majority of the population living in metropolitan communities.) Unlike the rustic byways and far-flung regions, the city is literally central, situated at the heart of the nation-state and crucial to the multinational world system. The city is unique. It provides the grounds for a local narrative (i.e., the urban locale) whose effects are entirely different from the regional. The urban *topos* is also inassimilable to national narrative by its very excess, its labyrinthine ambiguity and its global significance. It is both a text to be read (á la Bertrand Westphal's notion of *la géocritique*) and a process of writing (as with Michel de Certeau's discussion of "Walking in the City").

The city is, thus, *utopian*, not in the sense of an ideal place, but as a critical *no-place*, a neutral ground that is neither local nor national; as Louis Marin points out in *Utopiques*, this neutrality is fundamental to utopian spaces. The bewildering urban experience becomes a figure for utopian writing itself, for the projection of an imaginary cartography allows one to make sense of the global space (the social totality) while also navigating amid the vicissitudinous sensual barrage of the urban landscape. This is, in part, what Fredric Jameson proposes as *cognitive mapping*, but the map here becomes a form of both understanding the world and living in it. Like literature and like the city, this project transforms the space even as it represents it. The urban, constituting those neutral grounds of a problematic modernity and postmodernity, is a utopian project itself.

This utopian aspect of the urban reveals itself with greater insistence in the era of globalization, where the centrality of the "capital" is less important than the liminality of the border, the porous membrane of international commerce where goods and services flow. I will take as my example of the twenty-first century metropolis par excellence, then, not London or Paris or New York or Hong Kong or Tokyo (although all of these still register as key nodes of economic and political power in the age of globalization), but Vancouver, whose situatedness on the Pacific Rim and in North America makes it the apotheosis of Western Civilization as its circles round to find itself face-to-face with Eastern Civilization again. Vancouver, capital of the twenty-first century, offers a glimpse of the utopian and urban space in our era.

The State of the Capital: A Seventeenth-Century Digression

Giulio Carlos Argan's beautiful study of art, architecture, and life in the Baroque Age is significantly titled *The Europe of the Capitals, 1600–1700.* Argan's is a work of art history, not urban studies, yet he recognizes that the radical transformation of social space, occurring in connection to the rise of the modern nation-state and embodied in the State's quintessential or representative topos of the capital city, inaugurates a new era in the perception and representation of space. This necessarily transforms art as well as life. The "Europe of the Capitals" is, thus, quite different from the Europe organized around principalities and city-states of the medieval and renaissance epochs. The capital city becomes something altogether different, and, as a consequence, art and life change as well. From our own vantage, in the postmodern condition, we may perhaps see more clearly how this works in the seventeenth-century, as our own senses of space, of the city, and of the world have also become transformed.

The consolidation of power in the urban center was itself both the cause and the result of form-giving power of the State. As Argan elaborates :

> In the seventeenth century, the concentration of power in one city established its supremacy; it became the seat of authority, with the organs of government and public administration, and was the residence of foreign diplomatic representatives, while the remaining towns were reduced to the rank of regional administrative centers. There was now a "capital city" art and culture, sensitive to international currents and exchanges; and a "provincial city" art and culture which, although, sometimes, of a high order, suffered from the disadvantage of the town's peripheral position, and its remoteness from the broader currents of international thought. (Argan 34-35)

This distribution of power across territories, within the boundaries of the nation-state but also tending toward a broader world system, altered the way space itself was imagined and used.

As Lewis Mumford has written, the new conception of space is what principally characterized the politics and the intellectual developments of the Baroque era : "a change in the entire conceptual framework took place. And first : a new conception of space. It was one of the great triumphs of the

baroque mind to organize space, make it continuous, reduce it to measure and order, to extend the limits of magnitude, embracing the extremely distant and the extremely minute; finally, to associate space with motion" (Mumford 91). Here, the practical necessities of crowd control, transportation, military defenses, and political organization come under the same sign as modern philosophy, with its (utopian) dream of a purely rational organization and knowledge of the world.

The development of the capital city was not only the result of novel perceptions of space, but actively formed and reformed such spatial perception.

> The structure of the capital city, determined by the new political function of the State, went far to shape the seventeenth-century conception of space. In the capital city, modern man does not live in familiar, unchanging surroundings; he is caught up, rather, in a network of relations, a complex of intersecting perspectives, a system of communications, a ceaseless play of movements and counter-movements. His position in this articulated space, whose limits are beyond his ken, is at once central and peripheral; similarly, on the 'world stage,' the individual is at once the protagonist and the supernumerary" (Argan 37).

This necessarily involves a breakdown between subject and world. The literary counterpart to the rise of the State and the consolidation of power in the urban center is the rise of the novel, which is also a form-giving form. As Georg Lukacs has noted, the novel emerges in response to a "transcendental homelessness", in which one is alienated from the world while remaining tied to it. In a "world abandoned by God," the individual subject cannot assume a divine plan—or, at least, cannot confidently *know* such a plan—and must therefore create a plan, a plot or map, by which to make sense of the world. This is, to some extent, what the modern novel is: a map of a world with no transcendental referent. I have referred to this as literary cartography.

The novel form is not necessarily limited to the modern novel, but, following Lukacs's *Theory of the Novel*, we might say that the modern condition cries out for such mappings (as will the postmodern condition). Drawing upon Hegel and the Romantics a bit more than an older Lukacs would prefer, this young Lukács contrasts the integrated civilizations of the ancient world of the epic with the fragmented, modern world of the novel.

The epic belongs to that "happy age" when "the starry sky is the map of all possible paths […] The world is wide and yet it is like a home" (29). The modern condition seems to involve a thoroughgoing sense of disorientation, perhaps most visibly figured in the individual lost in the city. Heidegger even makes a kind of homelessness typical of existential angst in *Being and Time*: "In anxiety one feels '*uncanny*' [*unheimlich*]. […] But here 'uncanniness' also means 'not-being-at-home' [*das Nicht-zuhause-sein*]" (233). The age of the novel, in the Europe of the capitals, thus requires a map, a figurative way to connect one's self to one's world. The theory of the novel and the experience of the urban, thus, offer overlapping territories for exploring the utopian project.

No Place like Home : A Nineteenth-Century Pause

The great images of nineteenth-century life in the West are projected in relation to contrasts between a non- or even anti-urban wilderness and an increasingly dominant urban experience. The clash between an idyllic rural landscape and the densely complex urban space plays itself out in literature and art throughout the century, as writers and visual artists draw on elements of romanticism, realism, and naturalism not only to represent their societies, but to shape them as well.

As I have noted in my study of Melville's literary cartography, the United States, what Charles Baudelaire somewhat derisively referred to as "a country without a capital", had no counterpart to the system developed within the European nations (or the "core" countries as described by Wallerstein's image of the world-system). The metropolitan center functions, at once, as the seat of an ever-more-powerful state government and as the principal agora for an expanding, international market, but already in the U.S., the capital became diffuse, as the nation's capital (Washington, D.C.) was not really a capital in the traditional sense, with New York (and, to a lesser extent, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, and later Chicago and San Francisco) occupying the place of the cultural, commercial, or economic center of urban power in the country. Nevertheless, the burgeoning American metropolis comes to stand for another type of city, a capital that does not necessarily concentrate state power so much as it concentrates capital itself.

In the urban literature of the nineteenth century, commonly used images of urban space were the panorama, which provided a sweeping

overview of the city as a means of bringing order to an increasingly complex social space, and the labyrinth, which also provides an imaginary order, but in this case the image is far less comforting. The labyrinth represents a difficult, if not insoluble, mystery. Often, of course, the secret of the labyrinth, the purpose, is the key to escaping from it, which indicates the mood associated with the urban space. Thus, in the nineteenth-century, the baroque model of urban order—rectilinear organization, military precision, grand showiness—becomes inverted; now the image of the city is nightmarish, as when Poe describes the inscrutable "man of the crowd," whom he calls a text that does not allow itself to be read. The orderliness of urban space, reinterpreted by Romanticism and anti-urban sentimentalists, becomes an infernal space. The utopia seems thoroughly dystopian.

A big part of this transformation in the image of the city is the paradox of its own success: namely, that in establishing the city as a place of freedom and social mobility, its population understandably grows, and the spectre of the "other" becomes exponentially haunting. As Fredric Jameson has pointed out, the anti-urban picture painted by so much science fiction or even utopian literature (in its critical capacity) has highlighted the dangers of overpopulation—*Soylent Green* is the lurid apotheosis of this fear.

> The principal anxiety we have about the city today can probably be best expressed in terms of sheer urban concentration. […] this fear of urban concentration is clearly a twentieth-century variant, a coded or "sedimented" persistence, of that older, ideologically far more transparent, nineteenth-century terror of the mob itself, the revolutionary crowd … (Jameson, "Of Islands and Trenches", 89).

But the crowd has terrors beyond mere criminal or social upheaval. The crowd is also unknowable, and in its unpredictability, it stands for the inscrutability of the urban text more generally.

The breakdown of what Raymond Williams calls "knowable communities" also relates to that sense of alienation associated with urban life, and specifically with the movement from the country to the city, a key theme in so many novels. In the nineteenth-century, the urban pedestrian becomes a new subject. It is not surprising that Walter Benjamin found Paris to be "the Capital of the Nineteenth Century", and its most representative subject is the window-shopper or *flâneur*. For all of the American ideology of the rustic and the rural, city populations swelled in between 1800 and 1850;

New York City, for example, was not rural at all, but a relatively large, commercial city. Yet it was still what Wyn Kelley calls a "Walking City", in which a stroller could reasonably "master his urban environment in a day's walk" (68–69). But knowing a community by walking in the city was becoming more and more difficult. As Williams explains, in an English context,

> identity and community became more problematic, as a matter of perception and as a matter of valuation, as the scale and complexity of the characteristic social organisation increased. Up to that point, the transition from country to city—from a predominantly rural to a predominately urban society—is transforming and significant. The growth of towns and especially of cities and a metropolis; the increasing division and complexity of labour; the altered and critical relations between and within social classes: in changes like these any assumption of a knowable community—a whole community, wholly knowable—became harder and harder to sustain. (165).

In this sense, the use of landmarks or "wayfinding" described by Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City* become necessary strategies for coping with urban life, which for ever greater numbers of people is the same thing as modern life more generally. The individual walking in the city, thus, performs a kind of mapping, of establishing an imaginary overview that allows him or her to navigate the space successfully, and to do so with the least possible anguish. Indeed, using Heidegger's example, this utopian project requires one to be "at home" in an unfamiliar, possible unknowable milieu. However, in Heidegger, the idea of "home" is always rustic, as Adorno rightly ridiculed in his *Jargon of Authenticity*. The utopia of the urban is, almost literally for Heidegger, no place like home.

There is, however, a difference between the Romantic rhetoric of home and the homey, and the practical necessities of urban negotiation. Lynch does not say that the city needs to become more like the small village or farmlands; rather, he argues that it needs to be chartable, able to be mapped by its users—that is, the people who actually live and work in the city. This process involves, as Jameson puts it in his encapsulation of Lynch's argument, "the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction and reconstruction of an articulable ensemble which can be

retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 51). This is, in one version, what Jameson means by *cognitive mapping*, itself a form of utopian practice inasmuch as it involves the figural projection of an alternate reality (the mental map) that then has some allegorical relation to the places in which man moves and rests.

Getting to Know the Place: A Twentieth-Century Stroll

In "Walking in the City", Michel de Certeau offers a somewhat different view of the urban text, in which he contrasts the panoramic image of the city (New York City, in this case) seen from the top of the then newly erected World Trade Center with that more labyrinthine and limited view available to one down on the streets.

> To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more. (191)

Although he recognizes the human desire, if not need, for overview, Certeau deplores the totalization that such a "scopic drive" demands. Balking at the inauthentic overview, Certeau believes that the true "practitioners of the city" are walking on the streets, writing "a long poem of walking" (101). Opposite these heroes are the mere "voyeurs" overhead, who seek to impose a panoptic order, à la Foucault's prison guards, in which their bird's-eye view "freezes" the otherwise mobile metaphorics of the city. Following Baudelaire's panegyric to the *flâneur*, the intellectual poet strolling idly in the city who can become "a *kaleidoscope* equipped with

consciousness," Certeau imagines that the "window shopper" is a fitting representative of urban modernity.

In "Narrate or Describe," Lukács distinguishes between realist narration and naturalist description in a manner similar to Certeau vision of the spatial practices in the city, essentially saying that the one (narration or the walker) equals *experiencing* and the other (describing or the voyeur) observing, and that these two are "basically divergent approaches to reality" (120). Realism is motivated by a narrator-participant, one who creates the story and who takes part in it. The narrator of the realist text is, thus, a free agent, one who can actively determine the events unfolding in the narrative, unlike the naturalist narrator, who can merely describe situations, characters, and events observed at some distance. As I have argued elsewhere, Lukács views the latter with disdain, of course, but the cartographic activity involved in describing is no less present in narrating, and often the two overlap. The recounting of events and places involves a dynamic mapping practice that is irreducible to either the static map or the transient itinerary.

Jameson has noticed the tension between narrative and description, "profoundly characteristic of all Utopian discourse," which seems to undermine the utopian project itself, as it leads one to imagine utopian society as static, and, therefore, unreal. The same applies to an image of the city, which here in its very defamiliarization, appears to be no place like home. There may be a contradiction between "the effort of the text to establish the coordinates of a stable geographical entity, and its other vocation as sheer movement and restless displacement, as itinerary and exploration and, ultimately, event" (Jameson, "Of Islands and Trenches" 95). In order to grasp the city, to fix it in a meaningful ensemble, one maps, observes, or describes it; but the experience of the city is one of constant flux, motion, participation and narration.

Talking about and walking about the city. As Certeau says, "To walk is to lack a place" (103), and yet the no-place or utopia of urban life is undoubtedly a placement and a displacement, a situation and a movement. Whether we like it or not, we are mapping a moving target, always fixing that which cannot be fixed, all the more so now, in our postmodern condition, in which the old codes or templates—like the nation-state—aren't as reliable as they once were. We who are in the labyrinth would undoubtedly like to see a

map of it. In the absence of a reliable chart, we will attempt to map it ourselves, using whatever is at hand.

Before leaving this abstract discussion of the city—the legible Capital of the baroque moment, the anxious, thronging metropolis of modernity, and the inscrutable text or unknown spaces of late capitalist urban milieu—I'd like to suggest that Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, seems an apt representative of the global city in the twenty-first century, knowing fully well that it shares little in common with the Rome of seventeenth, London of the eighteenth, Paris of the nineteenth, or New York of the twentieth centuries (not to mention many other worthy candidates for the dubious and Benjaminian "city,-capital-of-the-century" title). In the era of postnational, postmodern globalization, the city on the rim may be of far more significance than the city in the center.

Vancouver, Capital of the Twenty-first Century

Thanks to the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2010 Winter Olympics, as well as the games themselves, hundreds of millions of newcomers join the several millions who already know that Vancouver is a beautiful city. But it is even more than that. Vancouver is the capital of the twenty-first century.

I say this as a relative stranger to the city. But my outsider's sense of wonder also offers me some critical detachment, and in Vancouver, the exile feels at home and this home is like a foreign land, a vibrant mixture of the familiar and the exotic. It was Erich Auerbach, who noted that that one who can view the entire world as a foreign land (*mundus totus exilium est*) shows a proper love for the world ("Philology" 19).   Another critic living in exile, Benjamin named Paris the "capital of the nineteenth century," as that city's crucial position in the development of modern civilization—for Benjamin, this meant the rise of bourgeois culture and industrial capitalism—made it the urban embodiment of the age. In 1941, Henry Luce declared the twentieth to be the "American Century", which for better or worse did typify the post-war period of expanding influence and economic domination. From World Wars to Cold Wars and onto the Cola Wars, Americanism impressed itself upon the world, and perhaps, the capital in the twentieth century could be found somewhere between Pennsylvania Avenue and Madison Avenue. But after the American Century, in an era of globalization and of multi- or transnational culture, Vancouver embodies the spirit of our age.

The very landscape of Vancouver makes the case for its worldliness. In Vancouver, the snow-capped mountains plunge into the sea at the same point that gleaming, postmodern skyscraper towers reflect upon the waters. Here, the astonishing Alpine beauty celebrated by the Romantic poets combines with the equally awe-inspiring Pacific, the biggest damned geographic body in the world and a world unto itself, the seascape that gave Melville's great American novel its oceanic aura.

Vancouver is both distinctive as its own city and representative of globalization itself. Here, East meets West in the limbic and liminal space of the Pacific: a Pacific Rim that defines itself in terms of borderlines (hence, the "rim") yet embodies the "borderless world" (as Kenichi Ohmae calls it) of the global economy. Any port city will have populations from around the world, but Vancouver's multiculturalism goes beyond diversity to a full-scale hybridity. The Vancouverite is a *citoyen du monde*, without pretension or even effort. The people of Vancouver, though also proudly British Columbian and Canadian, are thoroughly worldly, of the whole world. Other cities— London, New York, Hong Kong, and so on—maintain this aspect as well, but in Vancouver there is a seemingly "natural" worldliness, based on the sense of being-in-the-world rather than a gathering of forces into a particular node within the world system. The fact that Vancouver does not also have to be *the* national or financial capital actually enhances this worldliness, as Vancouver does not have to try to represent Canada or its economy other than being itself. Indeed, Vancouver is all the more appropriate a "global city" for its non-capital status; Vancouver is not even the capital of British Columbia (Victoria is), and its crucial economic position along the Pacific Rim nevertheless does not make it anything comparable, as a financial center, to even Toronto, never mind Hong Kong, Tokyo, London, or New York. But in the largely decentered global political economy—a world in which sparsely populated Cayman Islands wield power—*not* being a tradition capital, yet maintaining a finger on the pulse of the world, may be more important.

If the twenty-first century be the Chinese Century, as many have suggested, that doesn't necessarily mean it will be based in China itself. Vancouver, the jewel of the Pacific Rim, boasts a large Chinese and generally multinational, population. Of course, Vancouver's Chinese population are not the same as Beijing's, but then neither are Shanghai's or Hong Kong's. Vancouver's Chinese food may be the best in the world, as it

combines the authenticity of "real" Chinese with the sacred difference that comes with being away from home. The truly wondrous is always a hybrid.

The eastern influence is visible everywhere in Vancouver, but I said that Vancouver is the *locus classicus* of East-meeting-West. By West, I mean both the North American West, with all the symbolic significance associated with it—rugged frontier spirit, technical and, perhaps, spiritual progress, the encounter with forces of Nature, complete with the whole mythology of European-derived settlers and the First Nations or Indians that fill the nineteenth- and twentieth-century imaginations. But I also mean that Western Civilization of Argan's *Europe of the Capitals*, now transposed and displaced, discernible in multiple variants and yet also always slightly unfamiliar, like a well, known song played on a foreign instrument. With Vancouver, the utopian character is both homey and no place like home, a land of exile that seems like a long lost friend. The stranger is welcome, and welcome to remain a stranger.

But, there's something about a stranger's view that can frequently deliver an even more powerful picture; the stranger's straightforward lack of authenticity liberates the view. In a world where even those who stay at home seem to be exiles, displaced by technology or economics or politics or culture (even within their own homes, thanks to satellite dishes and cable television), the outsider's sense of wonder and a critic's detachment prevails. As Auerbach suggested, the reader who can see the whole world as a foreign land is free to read without the limiting emotional ties of nationality or home. Thus, the critic in exile may be well suited to understand the place. In Vancouver, especially, the exile feels at home and the home is like a foreign land, a vibrant mixture of the familiar and the exotic.

In the end, this is the utopia of the urban in the era of globalization. The city forms those neutral grounds, neither one thing nor another but partaking in many. Once the center of a system of nation-states, the capitals today are flexible portals, frequently on the edges or permeable borders of zones of cultural contact. The Pacific Rim is one such zone, and may be the dominant zone for the dimly foreseeable time to come. But the urban spaces—shifting and transformed from its premodern, modern, and now even postmodern configurations—maintain a spiritual connection to thought itself, a distinctive place that is also a utopian no-place: this is where the future dwells.

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