The City and the Plan:
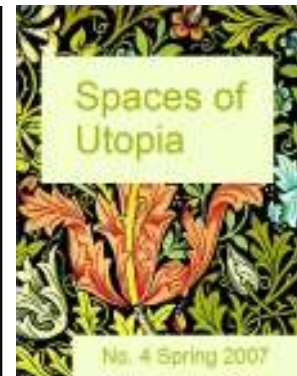
Schuiten and Peeters's Graphic Meta-utopias

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1. Introduction

In 1983, François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters published a comic book story called *The Walls of Samaris* in the magazine *À Suivre*, a story which would afterwards be published in book format, marking the starting-point of a collaboration which has since then given us several graphic novels and related objects, all of them concerning the complex universe of the so-called *Obscure Cities*.

In this study I intend to go through this series, so as to try to determine and develop its already well-known connections to Utopian Literature. To do so, I will consider most of its albums and connected objects and will focus my attention on their spatial, textual and generic construction. I will first consider whether or not to substitute "graphic novel" for the term "comic book". I will then explore the spatial construction of the series, through the use of Spatiality Studies theory, which will already have generic consequences. These consequences will in turn be revised when I deal with the intricately self-referential textual construction of the albums, after which I will analyse in more detail one of the best-known albums of the series – *The Tower*. The last part of my essay will then consider several possibilities of classifying this universe within Utopian Literature and I will argue that only the category of *meta-utopia* is capable of encompassing and describing all these cities as a whole.

2. Comic book or graphic novel – a question of genre?

As comic strips began to be published in book format, the fact that many of them were aimed not at young but at mature audiences, while at the same time claiming aesthetic value, triggered the need to find a name less associated with children's entertainment. Hence the expression "graphic novel" came to be used, with the aim of giving more dignity to this still recent medium. The literary implications are obvious and the name was therefore also meant to express certain complexities absent from comic strips in newspapers and magazines, such as complex character psychology and a more developed use of time, mostly expressed in greater time-spans and lengthier albums. Bolder narrative strategies (verbal and/or visual) were also implied.

To take literary genre naming seriously is, however, to dwell on a false premise. The characteristics invoked, when applied to the novel as a literary genre are hardly defining, indeed they are misleading. Moreover, if one tries to define a novel by such standards, one will end up with a severely restricted notion of what a novel is. The same happens to the graphic novel. If one thinks that the French term for both comic book and graphic novel is *bande dessinée*, a much more neutral expression, one realises that "graphic novel" is more a way to reject certain connotations present in the name "comic book" than a generic description. By using the word "novel", the literary and hence canonical elements of textual production are immediately brought into mind, thus casting away the idea of low quality magazines with characters such as Spider-Man or Hulk, who go through more or less unconnected adventures.[1] To call a comic book "graphic novel" is then a strategy of legitimisation, of insertion into the artistic canon akin to publishing Elizabethan or Jacobean plays in Complete Works Folios. In the expression "graphic novel", one finds the traces of an aspiration at being literary rather than the name for a specific and autonomous genre inside comics (or outside, which is basically the claim made).

I go through this somewhat wearied discussion because Schuiten's and Peeters's albums have frequently been called graphic novels, so as to call attention to their artistic value and maturity of themes and references. As I think I have shown, the expression is equivocal and, even if one were to take it as a genre definition, it would moreover not fit some of the albums, which, while

spawning from the comic book universe, are already contaminated by other genres, such as the city guide, the newspaper facsimile or even the collection of conference papers, as we shall see. Finally, the artistic value of these albums is not an issue in this essay (comic books can be considered as artistic a form as any product coming from the established arts) and the maturity of their intended readership is sometimes unclear, many albums being enjoyed by both youthful and more mature audiences.

Despite all my previous arguments and similar objections (cf. Zink 1999: 10,15), I will use the expression "graphic novel" as an English equivalent to the French *bande dessinée*. The equivalence is rather oblique ("graphic literature" or "graphic narrative" could perhaps be more general as concepts), but "graphic novel" is not very attached to a literal meaning (the same being the case with the word "novel", which, pointing nowadays to a literary genre, has ceased to indicate its original sense of a novelty), and it is hence a somewhat devoid expression. By "graphic novel" I will then mean a general type of interaction between image and text in book format, sometimes directly and sometimes only vaguely connected to the tradition of comics (the comic strip, for instance), and not a generic type of text with clear and defining characteristics.

3. The heterotopic dimension

From the Art Noveau architecture of Xhystos to the fascist-like monumental buildings of Urbicande, one can see that the Obscure Cities have been in continuity with certain moments of our own style of urban planning, that is, until the mid-twentieth century. As Benoît Peeters himself puts it,

> [This universe] evokes, in fact, what would have happened, had there been a fracture in time, if instead of evolving towards what we now know, architecture and technique had switched tracks from a certain moment, so as to pursue until the end a path which, in reality, was abandoned at a very early stage. (*apud* Lameiras/Santos 1998: 93; my translation)

We thus have a fracture in our architectural past and a continuous development (in isolation) from that point on. This retro-futurism gives us the concept of another place in *another* time, a time of *heterochronia*, a place in a different time-line,[2] and therefore not a simple euchronia. In these stories, the

Obscure Cities take place in another world, with a different History and no direct connection to our world.

In this parallel universe based on the juxtaposition of several different cities, criticism (as a defining factor in considering them utopias) is to be understood as criticism of urban planning and of spatial organisation. Social, political and economic issues are usually not addressed in themselves, but almost always as connected to deficient or productive urban planning. We can then say that social conflicts are often expressed as spatial conflicts, in a relation of *mise en abyme*. This, as we will no doubt notice, is a common feature of these albums.

Many of these issues come to the fore as effects of urban planning: Urbicande is a sociably unstable city because the Southern Bank is highly developed, while the Northern Bank is not. Brüsel almost goes bankrupt with its plan of total rebuilding, a plan which is not even completed, leaving the city in ruins. But, of course, political and economic issues are frequently at the root of most of this urban planning: most cities undergo a total rebuilding as a result of competition and envy, each city wanting to be great enough to be considered the capital of the continent.[3] On the other hand, many of these cities have city-walls because their suburbs were not duly developed and became dangerously poor. Mylos is a purely industrial city, as it is run by a corporation of factory owners, who exploit children and workers in general. There is again the case of Brüsel, which is led into a misguided programme of complete urban renewal by the corrupt business-man Freddy de Vrouw, who simultaneously leads the construction and deals in real-estate, buying land at very low prices which he then sells at much higher prices to the city-council. These changes bring serious consequences and frequently wreck whole cities.

If political and economic issues are sometimes at the root of radical changes, it is also true that most of these changes, in the way they are made, have an aesthetic more than a political, economic or social purpose, such as when Blossfeldtstadt seeks to apply to its buildings the design of plants photographed by Karl Blossfeldt in his *Urformen der Kunst*, or when the Southern Bank of Urbicande is redesigned so as to be rigorously symmetric. Architecture, or, as it is sometimes called in the Obscure Cities, *Urbatecture*,

the art of designing and building whole cities, thus becomes stronger and more imposing than the cities themselves or their inhabitants: it becomes a thing existing in and for itself, or at least it so wishes, by creating a space which would be only indirectly social.

But, of course, as Michel Foucault reminds us, architecture ensures

> [A] certain allocation of people in space, a canalization of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations. So it is not only considered as an element in space, but is especially thought of as a plunge into a field of social relations in which it brings about some specific effects. (Foucault 1993: 169)

This connection is clearly made when one of the rulers of Urbicande says to Eugen Robick, the Urbatect:

> But you are an urbatect, not a politician. We know that both domains are close, but we fear that sometimes they are not close enough and that you do not always measure the stakes implied in your plans. (Schuiten/Peeters 1985: 24; my translation)

In this sense, as a field productive of certain social relations, one can understand that urban planning and building tend to create, as a reaction or as continuity, heterotopias in Foucault's sense.[4] Heterotopias, in many of the developments of such a general definition, as Kevin Hetherington notes,

> [H]ave more often been conceived as examples of sites of an ambiguous spatiality associated with identity formation in relation to acts of resistance, rather than panoptical ordering and social control. In general, the term has been used to try and capture something of the significance of sites of marginality that act as postmodern spaces for resistance and transgression. (Hetherington 1997: 42)

In this version of heterotopias as spaces of resistance, one can find the case of Monsieur de la Barque (cf. Schuiten/Peeters 2001: 14,15). In Urbicande, where everything tends towards symmetry, there is an Urbatectural Brigade, which insures that urban and architectural plans are followed. Monsieur de la Barque, so as to apply for a class B apartment, is forced to hide the existence of his third child, and thus has to adapt the apartment for more people than those for whom it was designed. This and the fact that the child is hidden cause him and his family to be expelled from the city.

Other versions of heterotopias in this universe are more official and not at all connected to resistance, but to control. As Hetherington notes, heterotopias are "spaces of alternate ordering" which means that they include spaces such as Bentham's Panopticon (Hetherington 1997: 41); that is, sites of control and of discipline, often carceral. Both my examples are entire cities. One is Samaris, which traps the foreign visitor, controls him at all times, until he realises that he is the only living person in the whole city, and that everything and everyone else are props and sets designed to maintain him locked inside it. The other example is the city of Galatograd, built as an enormous dome. Everyone can see the centre and the other apartments from their own houses, solely separated by large windows with no curtains, and this means that whoever is at the centre can also see into everyone's apartments too, there being a constant peering out of the window (cf. Schuiten /Peeters 2001: 16,17).

I have stressed the role of heterotopias, because I believe they are an important part of this universe, and cannot be ignored, but, as we shall see, they are not its major social and urban manifestation.

4. The space of the page

Most of these cities, starting off as normal villages which grow to become cities, show the consequences of a place which is constructed over a long time span for utility purposes: they offer a range of building types, usually not grand in style, mostly detached houses, just a few floors in height – in short, they show no signs of urban planning. What they then undergo, as they grow to become rich and important cities, is the imposition of a plan, a blueprint, for their complete and radical transformation: all buildings are torn down, and new ones are constructed, usually skyscrapers, or dome-like spaces, or even monumental yet geometrically simple buildings.

There is then a conflict between blueprint and the city prior to its refashioning. The blueprints and models are presented as perfect, as *the* total solution for all the cities' problems. Indeed, a frequent characteristic of scientists and architects in the universe of the Obscure Cities is that they understand no middle term: their solutions are always as revolutionary as they are extravagant, and their failures are no less grand, which, by a satirical treatment, brings us

close to the style of anti-utopia.[5] This is aggravated by the fact that science in the Obscure Cities is *not* "an exact science". It is constantly faced with inexplicable and uncontrollable phenomena, which disturb plans or the newly built cities: there is the case of the man with a coloured shadow, of the young girl who becomes bent in an abnormal direction, suspected of having fallen under the gravitational influence of another planet, and finally the case of the so-called *net* of Urbicande, a cube of unknown origin and made of an unidentified material, which grows and multiplies itself from the size of a book to traverse a whole house and then the entire city. It grows through all these spaces without ever materially displacing or destroying them, although one can build on it. This, however, brings huge consequences for Urbicande and for its chief-Urbatect, Eugen Robick: once the net becomes too big to be ignored, it shatters all symmetry, that is, it annuls the previous blueprint, as well as joining the two banks of the city, strictly kept apart before the incident.

This net then serves as a metaphor for the plan, or blueprint, which is imposed onto the city and its inhabitants in an almost arbitrary way, thus radically changing their style of life. At this stage, the blueprint becomes the part of the story which we can say is genuinely utopian: by showing the positive effects of the net, as a potential blueprint that literally projects itself upon the city, the reader sees that the net does what the adaptation of the plan to the city should have done. By simply growing from a mere cube (a potential net) without any mediation, one can say that the net is a blueprint directly turned into architectural object; it is a plan, as a material object, turned into a site, imprinted onto the city. What we find in this cube is a utopian object mindless of urbatectural regulations, an object that joins the two banks of the city and gives it life beyond its greyish blocks.

This cube also constitutes an interference by an external force which cannot be controlled by either architects or scientists, and, as an object metaphorical of a blueprint, a city on a page, it points to the fact that this universe is a construction, a narrative, not only a vaguely utopian universe, but a universe that includes in it a reflection on utopia, its variants, problems and solutions. By inserting problems which seem to transcend human effort as well as symbolise its difficulties, the implied authors of these albums not only show

the limitations, flaws and follies of social and urban ordering, but also indicate the textual net, the albums themselves in their self-reflexive games.

Indeed, as objects that we see and read, these albums are very close to a blueprint or a map. They share with the genre of utopia the compulsion to have us believe that these are real places, while at the same time spreading hints towards their status as constructs. In terms of intertextual play, there are frequent uses of Franz Kafka, Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, and most of all Jules Verne, who actually becomes a character in one or two books, besides numberless references in the field of architecture. But, more importantly, the authors go beyond the comic strip format and there are several albums which transcend it entirely. There is the collection of documents collected in a file and commented on by a librarian from our world pointing to the real existence of these cities; there is the facsimile of selections from a newspaper of the Obscure Cities; and finally there is a tourist guide to the Obscure Cities, organised by the authors of the series, who declare they have visited them and collected the information themselves. We there find information about history, ethnic diversity, language, the arts, geography, fauna and flora, a description of the major cities and of the major characters of their world, and even a list of recommended wines and a recipe for duck! All these albums remind us of what Diana Knight, while referring to Roland Barthes, calls "the fantasmatic formulation of the very detail of utopia" (Knight 1997: 9), after which she quotes Barthes saying

> [I]t's from these [the details of this society] that we deduce utopia, that we deduce desire. For utopia, and this is precisely its special feature, imagines times, places, and customs in minutest details. (*apud ibidem*)

As the main character of the album *The Archivist*, a character coming from our world, puts it, in what has become a commonplace of this series,

> One cannot keep hiding this any longer: in this net of exceptions and rules, of beautiful dreams and dramas, of projects and renunciations, which characterize the obscure universe, I can recognize only one thing: the indubitable traces of the Real. (Schuiten/Peeters 2003b: 46; my translation)

Moreover, there have been other even more convincing objects, such as an art-catalogue about a Belgian painter, Augustin Desombres, which actually fooled Belgian art-critics into referring to him as if he had really existed, while he was in fact a creation of Schuiten and Peeters, having become a character in one of their other more traditional albums (cf. Lameiras/Santos 1998: 102). But for me the most curious object of them all is of Portuguese origin: a book whose title translates as *The Visible Cities*, supposedly a collection of papers presented at a conference about *The Obscure Cities* in Coimbra, in November 1997. Besides the illustrations, the papers and some brief biographies of the participants, the book also includes an interview with the organisers, a collection of newspaper clips about the conference and an after-word by Benoît Peeters himself. Some of the papers and of the biographies are particularly extravagant, and one can be led to think they were later insertions written by the organizers themselves, in a continuation of the play with verisimilitude initiated by the authors of the series. This is confirmed by a fictional story which accompanies the whole volume, and which ends in a highly fantastical manner. Despite all these hints, one may yet dismiss them as incursions into fiction, which do not affect the whole book as the result of a conference, however different the conference may have been from this final object. What we learn, though (and this is something we only discover from searching the Internet and reading other texts about *The Obscure Cities*), is that such a conference never actually took place and that all texts were written by the so-called organisers of the event, João Miguel Lameiras and João Ramalho Santos.[6]

All fields, even the field of conference papers, are invaded. This phenomenon points to the status of these texts as simulacra, as representations of cities previously set to paper, which we get second-hand. The representation of the city which in turn is represented to us, readers, is the pattern we find in three albums at least: the newspaper facsimile, the collection of library documents and the city guide. These serve to highlight the role of mediation, the frame that reminds us of perspective, which can be forgotten when reading the comic-strip albums, in their supposed directness of unmediated communication. This is in keeping with a commonplace of utopian literature, where we are told by a narrator that he found someone who told him about a

utopia, except that here we are not only told but also shown. Because of this distance between initial observer and reader, these cities forever remain at a distance, unreachable, inaccessible, and therefore obscure.

5. The tower and the idea

As cities of paper, akin to blueprints and maps, the Obscure Cities have a fitting founding myth, told to us in the album *The Tower*. The story is very much like the one of the Tower of Babel, and it is considered to be a myth in the other albums, presenting itself as a chronicle, encased as if in a papyrus. It is worth quoting Elias Auréolus Palingénius, one of the characters, in length, as he tries to explain its origin,

> The universe (…) is composed of four levels. The first one, the material one, is the tangible world where we live (…). The second one, the spiritual one, is that of our thoughts, our dreams and our desires. The third one is astral (…): it is an equivalent in the cosmic order of the material universe (…). The fourth one is the divine universe: it is as untouchable as the spiritual, but it is so far away that it is hard to imagine.
>
> In the beginning, the tower was conceived in the image of the universe; a construction that ought to allow the abolition of the differences between the levels, so as to gradually approach the divine (…) [and which] should grow thinner and purer as it rose, casting away all weight, all impurity. That way, we would reach the soul of the tower, the true purpose of the building.
>
> All this was theory (…), symbolism used by philosophers so that people could understand them. But it was a terrible naivety, a horrible absurdity to have wanted to build this tower, which should have remained just an image. (Schuiten/Peeters 1989: 55, 56; my translation)

I cling on to this phrase, a tower "which should have remained just an image", which, after what I said about plans, blueprints and self-reference, should sound quite pregnant. This, however, should be taken further. What this character says, although quite anti-utopian, sounds reasonable: it is folly to want to reach spirituality through a tower, especially after the disasters we have witnessed happening to the other cities, once a new blueprint is imprinted on them. However, considering the logic of these albums, we should not be so sure of ourselves. The album is black and white, but the last few pages, once the protagonist has left the tower and reached the ground, are in colour. When he looks back at it, however, the tower is still black and white.

Bearing in mind the speech quoted above, I would advance the following interpretation. The tower, starting from a blueprint, which is now lost, was

supposedly the materialisation of the plan, *an idea turned into matter with the purpose of becoming idea again* (the so-called "soul of the tower"). The tower was, however, left incomplete, because all everyone wanted was to build the upper floors to reach divinity as soon as possible, leaving the lower floors in a very fragile state. But when our protagonist reaches the top of the tower, he sees only a plain material sky, no spiritual heaven. When he finally reaches the ground, everything is in colour, except for the tower, and we understand that the tower had already become an idea, its inhabitants living inside an idea, without being aware of it. As the tower is built, it materialises the idea and this reminds us of Louis Marin writing about the Holy City, when he says that "Geographic space is thus the transcription of the 'meta-physical', beyond this world, in the represented earth" (Marin 1984: 206). *As a transcription, the tower inscribes the ideal in the landscape*. But the tower falls, after the protagonist has left it, and one thinks of what David Harvey says in all its literality: "can any utopianism of spatial form that gets materialized be anything other than 'degenerate' in the sense that Marin has in mind? Perhaps Utopia can never be realized without destroying itself" (Harvey 2000: 167). What the builders of the tower managed, even if for a short period of time, was to implant a building in the soil, which then grew to become an idea again. Once materialised, once placed, the utopia, which is a no-place, had to once more idealise itself; it has after all become an image, as Elias wished it to have remained, a black and white utopia, before finally crumbling down, in an inevitable self-destruction. To this one should add the relation between the tower and the plan as compared to their material media and to both their places in the story. By this I mean that both are images constructed on paper, either a blueprint or a graphic novel. The status of the tower is further complicated by the fact that it serves a dual function which is proper of utopias: it is simultaneously the dwelling-place of a number of characters, the actual place inside the fiction of the graphic novel (and a potential blueprint for readers, who indeed look at it in the images) and it is also the blueprint inside the book, that is, it is not only a supposed model of unity (which would be fairly obvious), but most of all a plan inscribed into the landscape, twice removed from us, readers.

6. Conclusion: what are the Obscure Cities?

It is finally time to ascertain what, in the field of Utopian Studies, the Obscure Cities are. Their founding myth, with all its complications arising from the relation between ideal and materiality, functions as a prelude to a world where blueprint and construction always relate to each other in a problematic way. Moreover, as the two Portuguese critics I mentioned have noted, there is no lack of dystopian elements in these cities (cf. Lameiras/Santos 1998: 139-152): Mylos is a hellish industrial complex, Brüsel is deeply technocratic, the republic of Sodrovno-Voldachie is clearly totalitarian, and Eugen Robick has traces of an anti-utopian architect (a characteristic which he shares with the city council of Brüsel), who thinks he and his plans are too good for the undeserving population of Urbicande.

The fixation with gigantic awe-inspiring urban structures and the fact that these cities adulterate their historical records[7] are also telling of totalitarian tendencies. According to Lameiras and Ramalho Santos, although Schuiten and Peeters are interested in working with the concept of utopia, as a mode of social thinking, dystopia has received the most attention in these albums, some of its main cities falling into that category (cf. *idem*, 148). Although I would not deny that Brüsel, Urbicande, Mylos and the republic of Sodrovno-Voldachie are closer to the genre of dystopia than to anything else, one should also note that all of these contain heterotopias inside them and still have the possibility of becoming eutopias, which means that they must fall into the category of "critical dystopias", since "the ambiguous, open endings of these (…) [texts] maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work" (Baccolini/Moylan 2003: 7).

On the other hand, there are several cities which are presented as eutopias, happy places, such as Calvani and Alaxis, and other dubious situations, bordering on dystopia, such as Xhystos and Pâhry. And one should not forget that, according to the maps shown in several of these albums, there are many more cities to visit, and that the work of Schuiten and Peeters has not yet been considered finished.

One major obstacle against considering these cities utopias has been the cost implied by the realisation of blueprints, their failures and disasters being brought to mind. Nevertheless, after these sacrifices, success usually comes

along, and this takes us back to yet another version of utopia, the "flawed utopia", one of the categories of which, according to Lyman Tower Sargent, "poses the fundamental dilemma of what cost we are willing to pay or require others to pay to achieve a good life" (Sargent 2003: 226). The form of "critical utopia" might also be useful for the attitude behind the construction of some of these cities, because, as Tom Moylan remarks, a "central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as dream" (*apud* Baccolini/Moylan 2003: 2). Bearing in mind what has here been said of blueprints, the notion of "critical utopia" sounds quite reasonable, also because it serves as a neat counterpoint to the "critical dystopias" I believe to have located.

As such, we seem to have run into the final problem: we could go through each of these cities, one by one, fitting them into categories, but we would then miss the overall effect of the Obscure Cities as a universe. Utopia, dystopia, critical utopia, critical dystopia, flawed utopia, and heterotopia – all these lead us to another category which, although it is not above the ones I mentioned (it is not an arch-genre), crosses all of them and is able to contain them: it is *meta-utopia* (in this case, a graphic meta-utopia). As such, it is a type of utopia which is highly self-reflexive as a study about the possibilities and problems of the genre and its variants, constructing itself out of the immense field of utopian literature and thinking and pointing towards *it* and not so much to an outside against which it would be measured. This can be seen in the name of one of the main cities, Urbicande, the name meaning "city of cities" (cf. Schuiten/Peeters 2002a: 137), and its emblem being a great V (the city's name is occasionally written VRBICANDE), which reminds us of the crucial V in Utopia's Roman spelling (VTOPIA). I would then note two ways (in addition to and deriving from the previous views presented in this essay) by which this type manifests itself in *The Obscure Cities*, thus concluding this essay:

1. There is a clear notion of history. The *Guide des Cités*, for example, presents a chronology starting from the moment in which the construction of the Tower is initiated (cf. *idem*, 27-37). This means that

ideas of change, of historical becoming and of significant human action are always present (cf. Lameiras/Santos 1998: 96). Moreover, the creation of plans and their realisation show the Cities in progress, not as unchanging static entities, which we could then easily judge. This focus on the process reminds us that even traditional utopias had to contain a moment of construction and of change in their history and that such moments are hardly ever utopian. By thinking itself through history (that is, through the comparison between several spatial and social moments of a city throughout a temporal line), this dynamic meta-utopia reinforces the belief in the possibility of change and the desire for change, presenting "utopianism as process or moment of change" (Levitas/Sargisson 2003: 16).

2. If the first element has to do with a temporal dimension (which is also spatial, in that it allows us to see how one city goes through several stages, several other cities, to become something else), then the second element is definitely spatial. There are several cities in this universe, some closer, some farther from traditional utopia. Besides, utopias are not perfect places, only better than real ones. It is from this diversity, then, from the comparison between all these cities, that we see why a meta-utopia is at action here: as a plurality of hypotheses, none of them perfect, Schuiten and Peeters leave us the choice and encourage us to accept and/or criticise the models we are shown. By putting a plural utopian vision in front of us, the authors refuse to propose a single, total and all-solving form of society. Total blueprints, we have seen, do not often fare well in this world. The play of construction and of social thinking, we then see, is to be continued by the readers, in a continuous critique of what we have read and of what we project.

Notes

[1] In fact, were one to look for complex characters, temporal development, novelistic narrative devices and other such characteristics in comic books as, for example, *Spider-Man*, one would have no trouble finding them. The fact that comics with super-heroes have also been published in graphic novel format (book format) has also complicated matters further.

[2] Heterochronia is used here as a way of stressing the fact that the time-line is different in the universe of the Obscure Cities, as compared to ours. Euchronia is an insufficient concept here, since it presupposes a place ahead or behind our temporal moment, but inside our own time-line. Indeed, the Obscure Cities are heterochronic for two reasons: first of all they are anachronic (cf. Lameiras/Santos 1998: 93), because they are built out of a heteroclite mass of materials spread out through a long history of architecture, everyday objects, art, etc. These materials are then brought together into the same temporal moment. Secondly, the Obscure Cities are anisochronic (cf. Genette 1984: 85-87), that is, their time has a different speed from ours – it is considerably slower. Moreover, the temporal difference is given to paradoxical phenomena: for one, the subjective impression of time is apparently identical in both universes; on the other hand, the difference between times also allows for temporal reversals between both universes (a sort of bi-universal anachronism, akin to time-travelling) (cf. Schuiten/Peeters 2002a: 24, 5).

[3] As would be expected, theories about centre and margin would become useful above, while discussing the class struggles in the opposition between the inner city and its suburbs, but these theories, in their assessment of relations between geography and Eurocentrism, can also be applied to the dearly cherished discipline of geography in the Obscure Cities. Although, in this world, they are more of an art (a branch of philosophy) than of an exact science, cartography and geography are of great political importance. As the *Guide des Cités* tells us, "Each of the cities has engaged in its own representation of the Continent, presenting itself as the true capital. 'Around Samaris there are eight big cities', says The Great Book of Samaris" (Schuiten/Peeters 2002a: 9; my translation). This phenomenon is what Derek Gregory, referring himself to the discursive production of Eurocentrism, calls "the production of abstract space [, which] also required the prosecution of concepts through which European metrics and meanings of 'History' and 'Geography', each with their own imperial capital, were taken to be natural and inviolable, as making the single centre around which it was meet and proper to organize other histories and other geographies" (Gregory 1998: 75).

[4] "[T]hose singular spaces to be found in some given social spaces whose functions are different or even the opposite of others" (Foucault 1993: 168).

[5] If the satirical treatment of these alternative cities (as a form of regarding them critically) is often an element to be kept in mind, it is by no means an attack on the whole idea of utopian thinking, it is not anti-utopia. We can perhaps find only one clear case of anti-utopia in this series: the album *Brüsel*. What makes this album special is the connection made between a total reconstruction of the city, its clearly traumatic effects, and the element of corruption. The ruling class is presented as hopelessly naïve and indifferent to the catastrophic effects of their urban planning, at least until they hear of corruption (cf. Schuiten/Peeters 1997: 36-39). Scientists, architects and surgeons are shown as complete clowns (cf. *idem*, 29, 50-54, 68-71, 80-84, 104), unaware of the harm derived from their experiments and considering that all criticism to what they do is a manifestation of backwardness, a resistance against progress. Moreover, the disaster that falls upon the city of Brüsel is even more explicit than in other albums. This can be explained by the fact that, more than with any other album, the purpose of this one is to denounce the process and results of a similarly disastrous urban reconstruction, which had taken place in Brüsel's corresponding city in our world, Brussels, where the authors of these graphic novels live. This intervention is then set against the clumsy and indifferent "urban planning" (if we can call it so) of Brussels, which went hand in hand with corruption, more than against all notion of progress, whatever forms it may take (cf. Lameiras/Santos 1998: 101, 146, 147, 164).

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[6] The fact that the circumstances surrounding these essays are fictional is not, however, sufficient argument for us to deem the essays themselves fictional. In their dialogism, they show the multiplicity of approaches one can make to *The Obscure Cities* albums, while also showing a major characteristic of this series: a diversity which constantly escapes unification, also in their difficult classification within the field of Utopian Studies. They thus serve as a good (and/though sometimes unreliable and playfully provocative) introduction to this universe, as far as Portuguese readers are concerned.

[7] In the Obscure Cities, this falsification of history goes so far that the *Guide des Cités* complains how, despite the recent convention against archive falsification, the habit of rewriting history after each military victory had the following result: "knowledge about the past is extremely fragmentary and it rarely happens that a city is capable of going back more than two or three centuries in its own History" (Schuiten/Peeters 2002a: 25; my translation).

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