Literary, Filmic, and Intermedial Constructions of Metropolitan Identity: The City Portrait as a Creative and Analytical Concept

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This fourth special issue of the *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings* focuses on the literary, filmic and intermedial city portraits and the (real or imaginary) urban identities they evoke or create. The contributions to this special issue develop some of the arguments originally presented at the seventh annual symposium of the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (CLIC), held at Vrije Universiteit Brussel on 10 November 2017. The eight articles, by ten scholars in literary and film studies, collectively give an impression of the linguistic, geographical and generic variety of city portraits ("portraits de ville", "retratos de la ciudad", "ritratti di città", "stadsportretten", "Städtebilder") that have been drawn by artists over time. The questions they have sought to answer include: How is the portrait of the city constructed in literature? How is the city's portrait approached intermedially? Which literary-theoretical insights are relevant for the study of these city portraits? To what extent do the literary and intermedial portraits emphasize the city's uniqueness or rather ascribe to an urban typology? To what extent do they give rise to a confrontation with the past or to a reflection on (European, American and Latin American) culture? To what extent do the various city portraits evoke and comment on the identity construction of peoples and nations, or give shape to the authors' self-reflections?

A quick search for the term 'city portrait' reveals the concept's wide scope, with travel guides, tourist brochures, illustrated books and blogs devoted to some or other a particular city all being

labelled as city portraits. This vagueness sharply contrasts with the clear-cut understanding of the city portrait in the visual arts, where the cityscape or the urban *veduta* is a long-standing tradition dating back to the Renaissance. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries many painted or etched cityscapes were produced, with Guillaume Guéroult publishing his *Premier livre de figures et pourtraits de villes* as early as 1552, until this tradition is replaced with the rational topography of modern maps, and later of (orto)photography (de Seta). In literature, the concept of the city portrait is much more complex, as the contributions to this special issue illustrate.

Issues of Genre

The literary city portrait has many connotations, grounded as it can be in a wide range of genres. One such genre is the essay, a term that, in this context, is generally applied to non-fictional explorations of cities that draw on the personal experiences of the authors. The essayistic city portrait has been a highly popular genre in European literature since the twentieth century, and is often closely related to travel literature, as the author tends to be a traveller rather than a permanent resident. Notable examples are German sociologist Georg Simmel's essays from around 1900 about Rome, Florence and Venice,[1] the short texts that German philosopher Walter Benjamin penned between 1925 and 1935 about Napels, Moscow, Paris, Marseille and San Gimignano in "Denkbilder" (305-438), the more recent travel writings of Italian author and art critic Mario Praz and, closer to home, Flemish author Stefan Hertmans' novel about cities. Such city portraits can also develop into book-length publications, such as the beautiful but forgotten portrait of Paris in *Notes d'un Vaudois* (1938) by the Swiss writer Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz. Noteworthy in this regard are the works published in the *Des villes* series

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[1] The essays were respectively written in 1898, 1906 and 1907. See Simmel 221-234; 235-241; 243-250.

of the French publisher Champ Vallon , created four decades ago by Luc Decaunes. Each writer in this series was given the opportunity to sketch the portrait of a city that was dear to him or her and instructed to do so 'like a painter before his model' ("comme un peintre devant son modèle") (Decaunes). More recently, the Valencia-based publisher Pre-Textos has issued "Cosmopolis", a similar series of city portraits by authors writing in Spanish and other languages. Incidentally, the first part of this series is the Spanish translation of Hertman's *Steden* (1998); the two most recent books are *México, ciudad que es un país* (2018) by the Mexican author Vicente Quirarte and *Dublin* (2019) by the Argentinian poet Jorge Fondebrider.

Autobiographies and fictional life-writing, too, can develop around the authors' own urban experiences, as for instance the extensive *Istambul, Memories and the City* (2003/2005) by the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk. The autobiographically-inspired novels of the French Nobel Prize winner Patrick Modiano are not simply set in Paris; the French capital here also serves as the stage for the characters' exploration of their own pasts. Other writers innovate or add to the habitual evocations of a particular city. For instance, Black British writers of the 1960s and 1970s expanded the existing literary portraits of London by drawing attention to the "lonely Londoners" and "second-class citizen[s]" from Britain's former colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, who contribute to the ethnic diversification of post-war London, as is illustrated in the eponymous novels of the Trinidadian Samuel Selvon and the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta.

City portraits can also be found in poetry, including in more narrative variants such as poetical prose or prose poetry, as for example in Johan Van Cauwenberge's collection *Suburbia: de mooiste gedichten over de stad uit Nederland en Vlaanderen* (2003) or Jacques Reda's *Les poètes et la ville* (2006). Generally, poems evoke actual cities, as does "Rien ne peut se comparer à Paris" by the fourteenth-century poet Eustache Deschamps or its

anonymous English counterpart "London, thou art of townes a per se" (ca. 1500). More recent examples are Jorge Luis Borges' moving poetical tributes to Buenos Aires in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), all of which are named after the Argentinian city. In the beautiful poem "London" (*Voices in a Giant City,* 1947) by the English poet A. S. J. Tessimond, the city, speaking in the first person, defines itself to the reader: "I am the city of two divided cities/ Where the eyes of rich and poor collide and wonder" (536). The French poet Paul Claudel, in his prose poem "Villes" (1900), only needs a few lines to successively draw evocative portraits of Paris, London, New York and Boston (38), while his countryman Arthur Rimbaud prefers to create imaginary cities in "Ville" (1886) and in his two poems entitled "Villes" (both published in 1886) (345; 347; 350).

The genre of the novel too, with its interest in the adventures and life-world of life-like protagonists, has provided writers with the opportunity to more or less indirectly draw a portrait of an urban environment. Honoré Balzac's famous *Comédie humaine* (1829-1850) paints a picture of Paris during the Bourbon Restoration in France, while Emile Zola's novel cycle *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1870-1893) not only presents a family history, but also a portrait of Paris during the Second Empire. On the other side of the Channel, the oeuvre of Charles Dickens draws a socio-critical portrait of Victorian London, while James Joyce presents early twentieth-century Dublin in such detail that the city, if destroyed, could be rebuilt from his works, as the author himself declared. Ramón María del Valle Inclán, for his part, captures the bohemian atmosphere of early twentieth-century Madrid in his monumental grotesque play *Luces de bohemia* (1924), with which he launched the literary genre of the *esperpento*. In *Sobre héroes y tumbas* (1961) the Argentinian Ernesto Sábato explores Buenos Aires in the turbulent period stretching from Juan Manuel de Rosas's dictatorship in the nineteenth century to Juan Perón's in the twentieth.

Some literary city portraits acquire an intermedial dimension through the inclusion of photos and other illustrations; in others works, the use of different media is the very foundation of the urban portrait that is constructed. Such intermedial city portraits date back to the end of the nineteenth century, when photography and cinema boosted an interest in urban portraiture. This world-wide trend of capturing city life in still and moving images also promoted the creation of new print media to represent the visual reality of the city, such as the illustrated magazines *Caras y Caretas* (1898-1941) in Argentina or *El Cojo Ilustrado* (1892-1915) in Venezuela. Another example of intermedial city portraits are the photo albums that were popular in France between the 1930s and 1980s, when the blooming tourist industry kindled interest in short portrayals of countries and cities, to which we will return below.

The generic diversity of the city portraits that have emerged in literature is particularly noticeable in anthologies presenting a single city's portraits, as for example in Philip Lopate's *Writing New York* (1998) or Mark Ford's *London: A History in Verse* (2012), as well as in volumes of literary criticism similarly concentrating on a specific city, such as Jattie Enklaar and Hans Ester's *Das Jahrhundert Berlins: Eine Stadt in der Literatur* (2000). A more recent example is *Brussel Schrijven/Écrire Bruxelles* (2016), edited by Daniel Acke and Elisabeth Bekers, which includes contributions by various members of the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings and demonstrated how Brussels has been imagined in a broad range of works since the nineteenth century. The present special issue similarly acknowledges the city portrait's heterogeneity by considering examples from different genres and media as well as the cross-pollination between different genres and media.

The novel genre receives a strong Mexican representation in this issue, with Diana Castilleja focusing on the contemporary Mexican city portraits of male novelists Martin Solares and Pedro de Isla, while Liesbeth François explores those offered by women writers Guadalupe Nettel, Laia Jufresa and Valeria Luiselli. The correspondences between the novelistic and

essayistic descriptions of Naples penned by the Italian author Raffaele La Capria in the 1990s are highlighted by Dirk Vanden Berghe. The other contributions take us beyond the purely verbal city portrait and into other media, including film. Alexandra Sanchez, Inge Lanslots and An Van Hecke focus on the critical portrait that John Valadez and Cristina Ibarra's documentary film *The Last Conquistador* (2008) draws of the ethnic complexities of the southern American border town of El Paso. Ronald Geerts examines how New Orleans, another iconic city of the American South, is presented in David Simon and Carl Overmeyer's well-received HBO television series *Treme* (2010-2013). Rather than focus on the Big Easy's reputation as the capital of carnival or its complex multi-ethnic composition, both of which do play a role in the series' portrait of New Orleans, Geerts explores how the series in its four-season run captures the incredible resilience of its inhabitants following the destructive and deadly path that Hurricane Katrina carved through the city and its environs in August 2015.

The contributions to this issue also testify to the generic hybridity that marks so many city portraits. In his discussion of the earlier-mentioned twentieth-century French photo albums, David Martens draws attention to the intermediality of this type of "portraits de ville", which had to comply with specific publication requirements in terms of length, themes and the inclusion of photographic illustrations. He aptly labels them "portraits phototextuels", a term that is also applicable to the "geographical slideshow" reviewed by Janine Hauthal. Her analysis of *A Bend in the River* (2012), which is the result of a collaboration between the Caribbean-born British author Caryl Philips and the Black British photographer Johny Pitts, pays particular attention to the ways in which text, sound and image are related in their joint intermedial portrait of contemporary multicultural London. Peter Van Goethem, in his artistic keynote address at the 2017 CLIC symposium as well as in his contribution to this special issue,

reflects on his own creative reuse of authentic film material on Brussels in his found-footage film *Night Has Come* (2019).2

Emblematic and Lesser-Known Cities

City portraits are not only influenced by the laws and possibilities that are specific to the genres and media on which they draw, they also vary according to the kind of cities they present.3 These cities may be imaginary, nameless or renamed, such as Villette – a barely disguised Brussels – in Charlotte Brontë's 1853 eponymous novel or the anonymous, sepulchral appearance of colonial Belgium's capital in Joseph Conrad's modernist novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899/1902).4 Authors may also choose to identify the cities by which they are inspired, which range from smaller or more peripheral towns that have rarely caught the eye of artists to large metropoles that have reached metaphorical stardom, such as Paris and New York with their respective reputations of city of romance and of ethnic melting pot.

The works discussed in the contributions to this issue, accordingly, portray a wide range of emblematic and lesser-known cities in North America and Europe. Brussels, which has received relatively little attention in literature,5 is the subject of Van Goethem's found-footage film, while the contemporary Mexican novelists Solares and de Isla add the cities of North Mexico to their country's literary map. As Castilleja demonstrates, they move away from the rural portraits that were the former mainstay of Mexican literature, to present the northern

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2 The film is situated at the intersection of Van Goethem's artistic endeavours and his archival research for the project "Brussels, gefilmde stad", in collaboration with Cinematek. Formerly known as the Royal Belgian Film Archive, Cinematek holds the world's largest collection of films. The research project resulted in an inventory of archival film material on Brussels, which appeared on DVD in 2014 (Jacobs et al.).

3 On the wide range of cities in literature and a typology, see Acke 134-137.

4 On the thinly disguised appearance of Brussels in *Villette* and *Heart of Darkness* and the anachronistic identification of Brussels as capital of Belgium in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1948)*, see Bekers.

5 For a discussion of the state of the art, see Acke and Bekers, "Brussel schrijven sinds de 19e eeuw" and "Ecrire Bruxelles depuis le 19e siècle."

border towns as cities in decay, the corrupted products of a disastrous political, economic and social system. Marked by violence and fear, their fictional urban geographies demonstrate the current degradation of the border town of northern Mexico into a "locus horribilis".

This special issue does not privilege cities that have acquired mythical proportions; when they do appear in the works discussed, the authors and film makers readily grant their readers and viewers a look beyond their mythical façades, as do the contributions on London, Mexico City and New Orleans. Hauthal, for instance, demonstrates how, in their search for "other Londons" in *A Bend in the River*, Pitts and Phillips correct the city's traditional iconography and present a far more ethnically diverse portrait of London. The Mexican women writers discussed by François take their readers below the surface of the nation's megapolis, and, as stated earlier, the makers of *Treme* focus on the impact of Katrina in New Orleans rather than on the Big Easy's reputation as Party Capital. What is at stake in each of these city portraits, is the identity of the city.

Myth, Portrait and Identity

Although a conclusive reading may remain utopic, a city may acquire a stable identity through mythologization. Karlheinz Stierle, in this regard, speaks of the city's 'unreadabilty made readable' ("lesbar gewordene Unlesbarkeit") (670). The evocation of such mythical identities[6] may increase the urban portrait's recognisability and consistency, but whatever the nature of the city, its portrait, like the portrait of a person, is expected to somehow depict a totality and suggest an identity.[7] Following the example of the extensive *tableaux* and novel cycles typical

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[6] In *The Spirit of Cities: Why the Identity of a City Matters in a Global Age* (2011) Daniel Bell and Avner de-Shalit, for instance, identify in nine chapters the identities of particular cities, such as "Jerusalem: The City of Religion", "Hong Kong: The City of Materialism" and "Paris: The City of Romance".

[7] These two criteria are vital, as they prevent all urban literature from being categorised as city portrait. Burton Pike (after Blanche Gelfant) distinguishes three types of urban novel: the portrait type, in which the city presents itself through the adventures of the protagonist; the synoptic urban novel, in which the city, rather than a character, is the hero of the text and in which the author highlights the multiplicity of the urban experience; the ecological

of the nineteenth century, contemporary authors, too, have tried to grasp the identity, ethos or character of the city. Writers sometimes are caught in a vicious circle: they go in search of the individuality of the city, only to find what they already know. French poet Franck Venaille's image of Trieste, for example, has been shaped by his reading of Italo Svevo and Umberto Saba and by his familiarity with the culture of Central Europe (1985). The author's imagination and emotion, too, can influence the city portrait, as can be seen, for example, in French writer's Valéry Larbaud's antropomorphisation of his relationship with the city: "J'ai des souvenirs de villes comme on a des souvenirs d'amour" (77). Through symbolism, too, the portrayed city can reflect indirectly on the feelings of the author or the characters, as for instance in French symbolist literature.[8] The city portrait, in this manner, becomes a kind of self-portrait of the writer.

However, it would be wrong to consider city portraits exclusively within the paradigm of art as the expression of subjectivity. City portraits are also quite capable of projecting a collective identity. Geerts offers an interesting illustration of this point in his discussion of *Treme*. He argues that this American television series, through the construction of a polyphonic narrative and the interplay of its characters, succeeds in drawing a collective portrait of New Orleans. This portrait highlights both the city's resilience after Katrina and the authenticity and *créolité* that are said to distinguish New Orleans from other American cities. This cultural and social dimension of the identity of a city is also apparent in other contributions to this issue, most notably in those addressing the complexities of profoundly multi-ethnic cities such as El Paso and London.

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urban novel, which concentrates on a smaller unit of the city, such as a neighbourhood (10). From our perspective then, not only urban novels in which the city presents itself through the adventures of the protagonist may draw a portrait of the city; a synoptic novel, too, may result in a city portrait.

[8] "Rodenbach a admirablement réussi à ce que le 'dehors', la ville, soit le décalque symétrique du 'dedans', du moi de son héros [i.e. Hugues Viane in the 1892 novel *Bruges-la-morte*]" (Gorceix 17); see also Quaghebeur.

While the portrait suggests a well-defined, subjectively-coloured, cultural or social identity, this trend cannot be separated from the opposite move to question such a fixed identity rooted in tradition. Just like human portraiture takes note of the impossibility of grasping a person's appearance, let alone his or her character, the city portrait may lead to the conclusion that the urban reality cannot be captured by a clear-cut formula or be reduced to a well-defined identity and eventually to a postmodern acceptance of the city's irreducible multiplicity. Various contributions to this issue show how the writers tend to widen our perceptions of the city beyond the image that is relayed through cultural traditions and stereotypes. Dirk Vanden Berghe, Janine Hauthal, Liesbeth François and Alexandra Sanchez, Inge Lanslots and An Van Hecke show how the images of, respectively, Naples, London, Mexico City and El Paso are given a twist in the creative urban portraits they examine.

In his discussion of Raffaele La Capria's relationship with Naples and the centrality of the author's native city in his œuvre, Vanden Berghe demonstrates how La Capria's interpretation of *napoletanità* (napolitanity) defies all clichés. La Capria, who had successfully established himself as an innovative novelist, especially with his novel *Ferito a morte* (1961), in later years turned to the essay genre, addressing in the volumes *L'armonia perduta: una fantasia sulla storia di Napoli* (1986) and *L'occhio di Napoli* (1994) the origin and development of the napolitanity concept as well as Naples' general distinctiveness from other European cities. Vanden Berghe highlights La Capria's use of a contemplative style with narrative characteristics in his exploration of the Napolitan space in his essays.

Although London has featured quite prominently in verbal and visual art over the centuries, Hauthal reveals how the postcolonial perspectives of two collaborating Black British artists help to diversify the image of London. She shows how Caryl Phillips, neither in his essay "A London Address" (2012) nor in his collaboration with photographer Johny Pitts on the multimedia slideshow *A Bend in the River*, shies away from the darker side of the city's history.

Through intertextual and symbolic references, Phillips and Pitts draw attention to London's ethnic and religious multiplicity and thus contradict the title of Paul Gilroy's book *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987).

In the same vein, the contribution of Sanchez, Lanslots and Van Hecke shows how the makers of *The Last Conquistador* challenge the stereotypical image of the American metropolis and suggest a more complex urban identity. They contend that El Paso is deridingly presented as a paradigmatic city (Glick Schiller and Çağlar) in the documentary film of Valadez and Ibarra (the latter a native of the city). Focusing on the dispute generated by the City Council's decision in the late eighties to fund a statue for a highly contested Spanish conquistador, the film makers set out to undermine the city's self-identification as positively exemplary of the American nation state. They show how the conflict over the statue lays bare the tensions between the Caucasian, Latino and Native American (Acoma) communities of the Southwestern border town, tensions that also underly the demographic segregation in Valadez and Ibarra's triptych portrait of El Paso.

While contemporary representations of Mexico City have tended to focus on the city's irrepresentability, François discusses the original approach adopted in three contemporary novels written by young Mexican women writers: *El huésped* (2006) by Guadalupe Nettel, "El esquinista" (2014) by Laia Jufresa and *Papeles falsos* (2010) by Valeria Luiselli. Leaving the common place behind, they present a hidden view of the megacity by delving below the city's surface. In their work, François shows, the underground city presents itself as another city, as a city within the city. The two spaces clash with, but also complement one another, whereby the underground perspective supplements the (literally but also figuratively) superficial view of the city to which one is customarily is exposed. By combining the readily apparent with the hidden, the authors successfully underscore the multi-layeredness of Mexico City.

Unfinished Business

The different contributions to this special issue thus give an impression of the most recent trends in literature, showing how city portraits in literary and other media expose the plural identity of the city and, in doing so, break with earlier subjectivist and romantic approaches to the city. Moreover, in our postmodern era, we are encouraged to accept the impossibility of capturing the identity of the city through its always deficient portrait. Similar concerns are raised by Van Goethem in his artist's reflections on his found-footage film *Night Has Come.* He underlines that his creative collage of authentic film fragments of Brussels is not aimed at creating a historical account of the Belgian capital. Rather, it explores whether the city has a memory and what new perspectives this may have for the representation of the past. By implicitly raising questions regarding historiography, the artistic collage calls attention to the fact that the city's narrative remains unfinished.

Despite being unfinished business, or precisely because claims to comprehensiveness and exhaustiveness have been abandoned, the city portrait in literature and film continues to charm artists and readers alike. This special issue has organised its contributions into two geographically organised sections, North America and Europe. As our editorial discussion has clarified, the spaces analysed range from famous megacities to lesser-known urban centres, whose formation, growth, degradation or symbolism are captured in a variety of genres, whether or not hybridized: novels, essays, films, documentaries and photographic albums. These choices of genre affect the different ways in which the lived and perceived spaces are portrayed, and inevitably transformed, influenced as the city portraits are by the points of view, techniques and styles that are adopted, but also by the values of the different times in which they are produced. The analysed literary, filmic and intermedial city portraits thus complement the work of historians, sociologists, educators, travellers and, in doing so, contribute to the (re)discovery of the depicted cities.

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