

This is the accepted author manuscript of the chapter published in *Literatures of Urban Possibility* (Palgrave, 2021), pp. 89–111.

## **Donald Barthelme's Impossible Cities**

Markku Salmela

The ironic postmodernist textuality of Donald Barthelme's short stories may easily conceal the fact that many of the stories are also thought-experiments into cities. In an oft-quoted phrase uttered by a character in the eponymous story of Barthelme's 1970 collection *City Life*, the chaotic but creative metropolis becomes a 'most exquisite mysterious muck [that] heaves and palpitates' (152). Barthelme (1931–89), who rose to prominence in the late 1960s as part of the new generation of experimental American writers, dwells on this absurdist image in other stories as well. In the allegorical story 'The Indian Uprising' (1965), the narrator notes that '[t]here was a sort of muck running in the gutters, yellowish, filthy stream suggesting excrement, or nervousness, a city that does not know what it has done to deserve baldness, errors, infidelity' (104). This phrasing suggests a site where moral problems, aesthetic flaws and functional shortcomings come together as the fundamental, perhaps unresolvable quandary of city life. Buried in the same string of phrases, and resounding in many other Barthelme stories, is a kind of urban disorientation, an uncertainty about how everything connects.

The muck metaphor serves as a backdrop for the more fantastical urban conceptions in some of the author's best-known stories, such as 'The Balloon' (1966) and 'The Glass Mountain' (1970), both of which place an enormous, mysterious object within or above Manhattan's street grid. Yet the author's urban visions are far from limited to such superimpositions and interpolations. Several stories play with more directly political or

societal scenarios. Notions of the resilient city, a regular topic in urban studies that arguably gained new traction after the turn of the millennium, are examined ironically in ‘The Indian Uprising.’ The text represents a twentieth-century city much like New York under a Comanche siege, in a clash between the pre-modern and the post-industrial. Arguably, urban resilience functions as a rooted framework for understanding ‘our ultimate faith in the human project’ (Vale and Campanella 353). This idea that protecting or rebuilding a city is a form of reassurance about the significance of place, and perhaps a way of reaffirming the importance of human community, echoes in oblique ways throughout much of the story. Such a sentiment may seem as obvious in New York City in 2020 as it did in 1975 or 2001. There are other comparable examples of Barthelme’s urban visions. For example, ‘I Bought a Little City’ (1974) engages humorously but directly with problems of urban governance and planning, again foregrounding the complexity and conflicting interests characteristic of cities.

This chapter investigates the improbable city visions of Barthelme’s short stories from the viewpoint of literary urban studies, taking into account the debates concerning the commitments, both poetical and societal, of postmodernist fiction. The stories analysed in this chapter were all selected from the retrospective volume *Sixty Stories* (1981). The ones that play the most important roles are ‘City Life,’ ‘The Indian Uprising,’ ‘Critique de la Vie Quotidienne’ (1971) and ‘The Balloon.’ Yet a number of other narratives are mentioned briefly, and in fact, most of the short story texts are here treated less as individual works built upon unique circumstances than as manifestations of larger principles at work in Barthelme – patterns that also emerge in intertextual connections between story details. My main argument, accepting certain caveats, is that despite the numerous obstacles to individual and communal fulfilment in Barthelme’s textual worlds, his stories repeatedly succeed in suggesting emancipatory possibilities stemming from the urban environment.

It is worth noting that postmodernism as a literary category was largely an urban phenomenon to begin with, dependent on the intense pace, energy and mediated stimuli characteristic of life in the late-twentieth-century city. Allen Scott and Michael Storper point out that, from the viewpoint of urban studies, it makes sense ‘to insist on the distinction between issues that are to be found in cities but that are not intrinsically urban in character and issues of cities in the strict sense’ (9). The strategies of representation employed by writers like Barthelme are of the latter kind. His texts become sites for *citiness* to manifest itself – a concept that has recently emerged in literary urban studies (Finch et al.). Part of my argument in this chapter, then, boils down to the idea that the politics and poetics of Barthelme’s stories are ‘of cities in the strict sense’: they are informed by, and potentially inform, understandings of what is possible for urban inhabitants, or for cities themselves.

The author’s penchant for envisioning the city as a system – or even the text as a kind of diverse complexity that displays figurative affinities to a city – was noted early on. In a brief 1972 article exploring this idea without much theoretical engagement, Francis Gillen concludes that ‘Barthelme’s metropolis’ is ultimately ‘a city of unrelated surface meanings’ that provides the artist, or any inhabitant, with virtually insurmountable challenges (37, 43). The core of the problem is the disconnect between everyday life and its multiple representations in various abstract, fleeting, unrealistic or confusingly fragmentary forms (Gillen 44). This is an established and well-founded starting point in studies of Barthelme, but equally justifiable alternatives exist. To counterbalance the emphasis on surfaces, catalogues and quick sensations, stories such as ‘The Indian Uprising’ were often interpreted in the light of contemporary events such as the Vietnam War (e.g. McHale and Ron 54; Shaw 173–75), if also with reference to mythical frontier histories, whose sites had now been rhetorically transposed to the city. This transposition has been long acknowledged in urban studies: numerous scholars have examined, for example, the free-for-all frontiers of

gentrification, with all their elements of emancipation, struggle, ‘progress,’ violence, displacement and profit-making (e.g. Smith 186–205; Lees et al. 195–236). Most of those historical contexts are left aside in what follows, as are most specific geographical locations, with the occasional exception of New York City, where the Philadelphia-born Houston native Barthelme more or less explicitly set many of his best-known stories. At the end of this chapter, I will return briefly to the topic of Barthelme’s politics, or the ways his texts attach themselves to issues in the material world, particularly questions of urbanism.

### **Conceptualising Barthelme’s City**

Four already classic accounts of different facets of postmodernism help us form a working idea of how Donald Barthelme’s short stories approach the city. Three of these approaches were first conceived by American scholars during the 1980s and one represents French postmodern theory. These accounts are Brian McHale’s definition of literary postmodernism in his 1987 book *Postmodernist Fiction*; Fredric Jameson’s analysis of ‘the cultural logic of late capitalism’ in a 1984 article which later developed into the book *Postmodernism* (1991); Edward Soja’s interpretation of the city in the postmodern geographical imagination, first comprehensively presented in *Postmodern Geographies* (1989); and Jean-François Lyotard’s analysis of postmodern knowledge, originally published in 1979. The idea here is not to rehearse the well-known schemes once more from the viewpoint of their contribution to postmodern theory but to expose very selectively how they all shed light on Barthelme’s specific city visions.

To begin with McHale, his much-quoted characterisation of postmodernist fiction centres on it having an ontological dominant and thus foregrounding questions of being (10). In other words, rather than asking questions about knowledge and its limits (as modernist texts do, according to McHale), postmodernist texts inquire, for example: ‘Which world is

this? What is to be done in it? [. . .] What is a world? [. . .] What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?’ (McHale 10). One conclusion from such questioning – and an effect familiar to readers of Barthelme’s texts – is that both characters and readers are faced with fundamental levels of uncertainty. From an urban studies perspective, however, such problems may be unusually productive, as they can be seen as analogous to many complications of urban life and development. If the ‘postmodernist poetics of ontology’ involves the ‘unconstrained projection of worlds in the plural’ (McHale 25), can we not think of cities as such projectable entities, as worlds imagined and recreated by characters, dependent on perspectives and discourses? The concepts of world and city are not always far apart in the thinking of urban dwellers even in the material world: the bigger the city, the more it encourages its inhabitants to mistake it for the world. In approaching Barthelme’s city images, we may well consider modifying McHale’s exemplary questions slightly by substituting *city* for *world*: What is to be done in this city? What is a city? What kinds of city are there? How are they constituted? The ‘exquisite mysterious muck’ experienced by characters in ‘City Life’ is a catalyst for precisely such questions.

Within the scope of the present chapter, it makes sense to bypass most of the myriad complexities of definition that any student of postmodernism is bound to face. To begin widening the topic from the realm of literature only, the modified questions above point to the way that postmodernist writing is often considered to treat the city much as it treats language, foregrounding its fragmentariness and discontinuity, its dependence on mediated discourses and manipulable codes, and its status as a problematic conglomeration of artefacts. Barthelme’s case illustrates how such a project can manifest itself at various levels of city experience, including politics and administration, the phenomenology of the built environment, or everyday human relations. As Paul March-Russell writes in a study of the short story genre, ‘the postmodern city works against an absolute or totalising political

structure, in which power is experienced everywhere but emanates from nowhere' (159). In this view, the city (like language) is a decentralised system in which power (like meaning) operates through a complicated set of relations rather than stemming from any identifiable source.

On a more general level this disorientation typical of the postmodern city relates to the unmappability of the social and spatial environment as famously demonstrated by Fredric Jameson, whose account of postmodern culture and environments complements McHale's analysis of fiction. Jameson argues that postmodern spatiality, or what he names 'hyperspace' in the passage in question, has 'transcend[ed] the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world' (44). As Jameson's formulations also reveal, this set of obstacles for perception and understanding is not to be anchored to local identities, nor is it limited to spatial observation. Instead, it should be understood as a more universal cultural condition, 'the incapacity of our minds [. . .] to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects' (44).

Characters in Barthelme's stories, the earliest of which were published in the first half of the 1960s, are beginning to grapple with this dilemma at the everyday level. Many of his stories show an 'individual who is so bombarded by canned happenings, sensations, reactions, and general noise that he can no longer distinguish the self from the surroundings' (Gillen 37). As the two female characters in 'City Life' exclaim about the story's eponymous theme, 'It goes faster and faster! [. . .] It's so difficult!' (145). In other words, as in 'The Balloon,' the inhabitants of the city suffer from a feeling of 'bewildered inadequacy' (58). One might call this postmodern urban condition a caricature of those fundamental shocks of metropolitan life which, in Georg Simmel's classic account, are caused by 'rapidly shifting

stimulations of the nerves [. . .] thrown together in all their contrasts' (14). But the characters in Barthelme's stories who react strongly to such overwhelming stimuli seem oddly deprived of the psychological protections Simmel identified in his metropolitan type. Alternatively, one could see the postmodern characters, in their open artificiality, as *consisting* primarily of these immediate responses to their environment. Although they may lack the psychological verisimilitude of nineteenth-century characters, they emphatically express the problem of navigating the enormously complex 'ensemble of society's structures as a whole' (Jameson 51).

Barthelme's cities, which are consistently seen through the eyes of a first-person narrator, also conform to Edward Soja's vision of postmodern cities to the limited extent that this vision is rooted in individual experience. A significant portion of Soja's overall project was about familiarising English-speaking audiences with the work of Henri Lefebvre, the seminal urban theorist who also plays a visible role in one of Barthelme's stories. The concept of Soja's most relevant here is that of *Simcities*, one of the six 'discourses of the postmetropolis' he outlined in *Postmetropolis* (2000). This applies to Barthelme's cities, which are thoroughly permeated by forms of media, principles of storytelling, various manipulations of perception, and the difficulty of distinguishing the real from the imagined. The notion of Simcities, influenced by the (almost) eponymous computer game, essentially denotes a new 'restructuring of the urban imaginary' (Soja 339), which largely translates into the postmodern urban condition. Soja's vocabulary echoes Jameson to an extent: at issue are 'mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretive grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate, and decide to act in the places, spaces, and communities in which we live' (324). The foundations for such mappings and actions are changed, if not undermined, by elements of fantasy and hyperreality. Predictably, Soja here draws on Jean Baudrillard, who postulated that a specific condition of knowledge, with the simulacrum as

its metaphor, emerged in the late twentieth century, and it ‘threatens the very existence of a difference [. . .] between the true and the false, the real and the imaginary, the signifier and the signified (Soja 329). This stage of the simulacrum is the third in Baudrillard’s outline of how images and representations proceed to replace the real world in successive periods of modernity (Baudrillard 173), and, as Soja hopes (330), the last one discernible in twentieth-century experience.

Finally, Lyotard’s focus on postmodernism’s scepticism towards metanarratives, or grand narratives, finds apposite counterparts in Barthelme’s fictions, which subvert narrative and linguistic conventions in multiple ways. According to Lyotard’s central statements in *The Postmodern Condition*, in the postmodern era ‘the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms’ because metanarratives (such as that of human emancipation) are no longer tenable (37). In the absence of these larger frameworks that order and legitimise knowledge, one is left with separate ‘language games’ whose rules can be expanded and modified in a discursive process Lyotard terms *paralogy*. This is the realm of postmodern knowledge that reaches for the unknown and the undecidable (Lyotard 60). Paralogy, simply put, is the continuous practice of disturbing the existing order, of issuing correctives to the rules of the ‘heteromorphous’ language games (66). In the aesthetic realm, as Lyotard states in conclusion, this postmodern procedure ‘puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself [and] denies itself the solace of good forms’ (81).

How do these four theoretical viewpoints connect with each other, with Barthelme’s fiction, and with the notion of urban possibility? All four presume a certain disconnection with reality, which in the case of McHale and postmodernist fiction is less a problem than a distinctive feature of a rich paradigm. Jameson and Soja both conceptualise the disconnection primarily as an obstacle to understanding that may be overcome by the right strategies. Both also suggest what this resistance might consist of: for Jameson, its key element is the practice

of cognitive mapping that aims to equip the self against spatial and societal disorientation (51–54); for Soja, part of the solution is his grand concept of Thirdspace, a cultural politics that seeks to avoid dichotomies and builds upon ‘inclusive foundations of solidarity, collective consciousness, and coalition building’ (279; for a more inclusive description, see his book *Thirdspace*). Somewhat similarly, Lyotard’s also presents paralogy as a remedy to problems of reliability in the collective production of knowledge, a practice that reveals the evolving role of narrative as a mediator of legitimate information.

With respect to Soja’s notion of Simcities, Barthelme’s 1960s and 1970s mediations of city life are obviously not influenced by online media or widespread computer-generated experience. Yet they powerfully reflect an older, distinctly televisual obsession with the image and mediated realities, with seeing and being seen. David Foster Wallace encapsulated this condition in his seminal retrospective essay ‘E Unibus Pluram’ (1993):

How people [. . .] understand themselves changes, becomes spectatorial, self-conscious. Because the practice of watching is expansive. Exponential. We spend enough time watching, pretty soon we start watching ourselves watching. We start to ‘feel’ ourselves feeling, yearn to experience ‘experiences.’ (160)

This condition of selfhood under the influence of mediated images is familiar to Barthelme’s characters. In the middle of the siege, the narrator in ‘The Indian Uprising’ meditates on cinematic desire and an actor’s experience of being visually framed by both a movie camera and the crew’s gazes, ‘when they shot the scene in the bed’ (109). The spectatorial mood also prevails in ‘City Life,’ where ‘[e]verybody in the city was watching’ the same movie (158), and in many other stories by Barthelme and his fellow postmodernists such as Robert Coover.

Barthelme’s urban stories are early examples of what Wallace goes on to call *image-fiction* (‘E Unibus Pluram’ 172). This kind of fiction is self-referential and experimental in insisting, unlike earlier more realist paradigms, that stories need to remain explicitly aware of

different layers of representation, textual caveats and questions of positionality. Thus image-fiction aims not to call it ‘like it saw it’ but to call it ‘as it saw itself seeing itself see it’ (‘E Unibus Pluram’ 161). In a 1979 assessment of Barthelme’s fiction, Larry McCaffery sought to illustrate the complex experience behind the author’s literary aesthetics in specifically urban terms, imagining Barthelme’s own perspective ‘in his Manhattan apartment’ (76). As this imaginary author prepares to write, he is surrounded by words and (as we might add) images ‘from his radio and television, both of which drone on tirelessly; [. . .] in the newspapers which cover his floor, along with all sorts of popular magazines and obscure, scholarly journals; [. . .] in books lining his walls,’ while he also keeps overhearing ‘banalities and gossip’ from the street and reliving ‘the incredibly boring, pretentious party he went to the night before’ (76). This demonstrates well one aspect of the experience captured in stories like ‘City Life,’ which begins with the significant line, ‘Elsa and Ramona entered the complicated city’ (136). Much of that complexity stems from the sheer volume of linguistic and sensory stimuli.

The remaining sections of this chapter set out to discover in Barthelme’s short fiction positive suggestions of an improved urban condition, or routes around the impasses of postmodernist textuality that manifest themselves in his text-infused city. In this body of work, the writer develops two overlapping responses to the unrepresentable whole of the social system from the vantage point of the city, both of which are often simultaneously present in the short stories. In either option, the starting point is the basic observation outlined so far: the fact that the postmodern city makes causes and origins difficult to grasp, relations impossible to map out, and consequences of actions hard to pin down. First, the noise and fantasies of the Simcity can itself become a source for an emancipatory experience from city inhabitants’ viewpoint. In other words, some of the stories take advantage of the unpredictable combinations of fragmentary representations that comprise the disorienting

complexity of the city, turning them into positively intense experiences. Second, Barthelme's fiction directly evokes practical and theoretical models that suggest possibilities for an improved urbanism. The other response, then, is the tendency to imagine an alternative, more comprehensible or unified urban reality through some element that seems capable of neutralising disorienting incongruities.

### **Possibilities in the Fragmentary City**

Despite the pervasive ironies and comic showmanship that Barthelme's texts habitually demonstrate, his characters are not immune to feelings of melancholy resulting from postmodern disorientation. Barthelme can be seen to contribute to a 'fundamental, aesthetic relationship between the short story and the fragment, in which the city is grasped as an incalculable loss' (March-Russell 164). Barthelme's city is fragmented as a matter of course, in persistent denial of a narrative that would provide a comprehensive explanation for the urban experience. Yet his characters are generally not resigned to the unattainability of tangible reality – a stance Soja tantalisingly calls 'the bovine immobility of extreme baudrillardism' (339) – but are instead often stimulated, even energised by this difficulty. As the author himself opined in an interview with McCaffery, the melancholy or resigned spirit occasionally discernible in stories such as 'City Life' is not an example of 'any personal passivity; it's more a sociological observation' (qtd in Gates 11). As such, it can be seen in the context of the cultural condition diagnosed by sociologist David Riesman in the 1950 book *The Lonely Crowd*, particularly that of the 'other-directed' character who depends on approval from peer groups and whose weakness is therefore a certain 'contagious, highly diffuse anxiety' (Riesman et al 42). Riesman described the defining (especially negative) aspects of this mentality in much the same terms as critics have used to read the cultural environment of postmodernist fiction, with emphasis on the need or ability to 'shop' for

suitable images ‘in the mass circulation media’ (Riesman et al 42). As a historically rooted societal condition, the postmodernist disorientation described by Jameson and others is at least partly built upon such a lack of inner direction.

The impulse against readability – regarding both the city and the text – is expressed twice by the narrator of the story ‘See the Moon?’ with the line, ‘Fragments are the only forms I trust’ (91, 100). In ‘The Indian Uprising,’ the character Miss R. makes a similar statement, expressing a preference not for individual fragments but for a quantity of them: ‘The only form of discourse of which I approve [. . .] is the litany’ (106). The story includes several examples of such litanies, lists consisting of sets of words from loose semantic categories. The suggestion is that the litany is an utterance that ‘can safely be said’ (106), is free of the bias and the sensitive information possibly contained in a sentence, thus perhaps providing a measure of reliability and comfort in a beleaguered city. In the context of postmodernist writing Barthelme’s litanies, including Miss R.’s *‘pewter, snake, tea, Fad #6 sherry, serviette, fenestration, crown, blue’* (106), must also be seen, as McHale does, as more purely poetic devices serving ‘to disengage words from the syntax that controls the projection of worlds’ (153). In a more recent and largely parallel argument, Jan Alber suggests that one of the main functions of postmodernist literary lists is to ‘radically challenge [. . .] quests for order’ (348). While Barthelme’s litanies are far from meaningless, they do spell out a linguistic resistance against readable totalities, emphatically denying ‘the solace of good forms’ (Lyotard 81). The list, catalogue or litany becomes, in his stories, a collection of fragments that plausibly provides material for art. The narrator of ‘See the Moon?’ keeps mentioning his artistic aspirations, and in ‘The Indian Uprising’ Miss R. concludes her rant by saying: ‘I might point out that there is enough aesthetic excitement here to satisfy anyone but a damned fool’ (106). This notion of aesthetic pleasure stemming from

fragmentary urban experience is, in Barthelme, a central method of evading the negative effects of disorientation.

Another method is more cerebral, even directly theoretical. Barthelme, like many of his contemporaries and other fellow postmodernists, engages with academic theory in explicit ways. In doing so, he participates in the performance of postmodernism as later characterised by David Foster Wallace, as a representative of ‘the first generation of writers who’d actually read a lot of criticism’ (Interview 00:43:58). Probably the most prominent aspect of writing in dialogue with theory was – for the generation of Barthelme, Barth, Coover and Pynchon – the deliberate and consistently ironic manipulation of metafictional narrative conventions. Barthelme, however, also touches upon urban and architectural theory, branches of continental philosophy and, as mentioned, sociological perspectives, from multiple angles. This allusive tendency makes some of his city stories readable as hypothetical treatises about urban possibility. It also allows his fictions to be analysed in true parallel with contemporary theoretical texts – or more recent ones – in a reading that may blur the academic boundary between primary and secondary sources. Occasionally, the stories engage in self-theorisation, claiming their identity as sources of theoretical insight rather than merely artistic expressions in need of scholarly explication.

One case in point is the story ‘Critique de la Vie Quotidienne,’ which relates the past failure of the narrator and his former wife’s marriage, a private collapse caused by the tedium of everyday life and aided by alcoholism. Yet the downcast narrative points toward a much more general condition. As a kind of academic footnote to the title (itself containing a parenthetical note of clarification), the last paragraph reads as a post-divorce note set in the present:

Wanda is happier now, I think. She has taken herself off to Nanterre, where she is studying Marxist sociology with Lefebvre (not impertinently, the author of the

*Critique de la Vie Quotidienne*). The child is being cared for in an experimental nursery school for the children of graduate students run, I understand, in accord with the best Piagetian principles. (184)

Approaching this from the viewpoint of literary urban studies, we can choose to pass over the allusion to the well-known developmental psychologist Jean Piaget and focus on the Henri Lefebvre link. The first volume of the book *Critique of Everyday Life* includes a section titled ‘What is Possible?’, which Lefebvre composed in 1945. It is a profoundly literary chapter that uses allusions to multiple writers and canonical texts to explore the notion of the possible in human experience. In the same chapter, Lefebvre ranks French literature below American in one specific aspect: the writers’ ability to stage ‘the trial of so-called “modern” life, the analysis of its contradictory aspects, poverty and wealth, weakness and power, blindness and lucidity, individuality and massiveness’ (235). One purpose of the allusion, then, seems to be to draw further attention to Barthelme’s own expression of those contradictions. ‘Just as this decline [of everyday life] proceeds to its ultimate consequences,’ Lefebvre writes, ‘possibilities become more apparent, more immediately perceptible, in this sphere than elsewhere’ (228). This sentence effectively summarises Barthelme’s story, at least from Wanda’s point of view. The fictional version of the scholar comes to the aid of the narrator’s wife and makes it possible for her to be ‘happier now.’

But what is that improvement, that sense of possibility, premised upon? In ‘What Is Possible?’ Lefebvre draws on the horrors of the concentration camps and post-war disillusionment for a satisfactory explication of the modern urban experience, ‘the social mystery [. . .] around us, in our most “modern” towns’ (243). He locates a number of tragic ‘unresolved contradictions’ in city life, the most detrimental of these being ‘that between absurdity and Reason, both equally inhuman, both indivisibly united’ (244). In Barthelme’s city, as in Lefebvre’s view of everyday life, it seems demonstrably difficult to reconcile ‘the

painful or ridiculous situation' of individual lives with the 'absurdly externalized forms' of power (Lefebvre 232). Barthelme depicts this problem through the alienated, alcoholic narrator who initially persists 'in a truce with [his] circumstances' (186), brooding in his living room with 'nine drinks' and 'false insight' for solace (184). Lefebvre does express some hope for reconciliation, albeit in a vague, meditative form: 'the gigantic, shapeless movement [. . .] that we have called "human alienation," must eventually come to an end' (249). This may seem insufficient as a consolation, but the specific vocabulary employed by Lefebvre is worth noting. If the predicament is 'gigantic, shapeless,' so is human reality itself: a 'confrontation [. . .] with *the possible*' happens against the crucial background of the 'enormous, shapeless, ill-defined mass' of everyday life (251, 252). Even though no ultimate relief is available for the narrator of 'Critique de la Vie Quotidienne,' the more important point here is that this language of shapelessness resonates in Barthelme's stories overall, often providing a tangible sense of positive resolution.

'City Life' is one example of the pleasure of formlessness, as intertwined with ontological concerns about the city, the disorientation associated with the urban environment, and evaporating distinctions between the real and the imaginary. After Elsa and Ramona, the characters, enter 'the complicated city' (which, like many of Barthelme's settings, remains anonymous but resembles New York), the notion of overwhelming urban complexity in multiple forms continues to mark the text to the very end. At the core of the problematic, as mentioned, is the seemingly irreconcilable relationship between private lives and the totality of the city's social and political system. The highly disjointed narrative follows the fragmentary events in the two women's lives, with several satellite characters laying claim to their minds and bodies. Little conventional narrative structure or connecting textual tissue is there to integrate the scenes into a unified plot.

Anchored in the urban environment through its very title, the story immediately facilitates the reader's – and communicates the characters' – disorientation. A number of deliberately one-dimensional male characters play a role in the two women's lives, including one named Jacques, who is involved in a vague 'struggle' against the privileged class. Another one called Charles moves to Cleveland, where his 'devoted heart lift[s] him to the highest levels' (141), only for him to be kidnapped (apparently by Ramona's men) and brought to the women's place. A singer named Moonbelly, 'Vercingetorix, leader of the firemen' and 'Hector Guimard, the former trombone player,' also make brief appearances (146, 151). To add to the absurdity, the fantastic emerges through events such as Ramona's 'ordinary virgin' pregnancy (148). Problems of urban governance and social inequalities are quickly alluded to: Jacques's cause antagonises '[I]aughing aristocrats mov[ing] up and down the corridors of the city,' and Moonbelly performs a song called 'The System Cannot Withstand Close Scrutiny' while benefitting enormously from that very system. He earns a gold record for celebrating the virgin birth with, paradoxically, another song titled 'Cities Are Centers of Copulation.' In all their chaotic quality the moments depicted constitute a vivid urban collage. 'Well, Ramona,' Elsa concludes at one stage, 'I am glad we came to the city. In spite of everything' (143). Indeed the overall assessment of city life seems to lean towards the positive, and it is so not despite but *because of* the disorienting combination of cultural and interpersonal incidents.

The strange events culminate in Ramona's conclusive statement about the 'exquisite mysterious muck':

This muck heaves and palpitates. It is multidirectional and has a mayor. To describe it takes many hundreds of thousands of words. Our muck is only a part of a much greater muck – the nation-state – which is itself the creation of that muck of mucks, human consciousness. (152)

Here we have the city in full context: not as a self-sufficient entity but as a piece in a much greater puzzle that consists of humanity itself. Ultimately, it is from human consciousness that both the possibilities inherent in cities and the impossibility of city life emerge. The ‘muck of mucks’ seems to share a great deal of its meaning with the equally human ‘ill-defined mass’ in which Lefebvre located the main potentialities of urban life. The Chinese-box model of mucks of different sizes is also readable as a Lyotardian set of questionable metanarratives. Is the individual’s absurd experience legitimised by some greater good such as the city’s, the nation’s or humanity’s success?

### **Alternative possibilities**

Many of the stories Barthelme wrote in the 1960s and 1970s reveal links with more recently established discussions of urban possibility, as well as with wider notions of urban planning and development. As we have seen, ‘Critique de la Vie Quotidienne’ addresses in a subdued way the Marxist emphasis upon inevitable societal change, perhaps approaching the idea of the ‘right to the city’ suggested by Lefebvre in 1968, a few years before the story’s publication (see *Writings* 63–181). As stated above, ‘The Indian Uprising,’ for all its ironic disconnections, can be read as a depiction of a city’s resilience in the face of crises and decisive societal changes. Such ideas of ongoing adversity were voiced in New York City during the time Barthelme composed the story. For example, in 1967 the mayor’s task force produced a report titled *The Threatened City*, which detailed the city’s trouble and suggested some solutions (Paley et al.; see also Ameal 906).

Another story, ‘A City of Churches’ (1972) introduces what the title promises, a town called Prester whose every building is a church and which represents a rather bizarre variant of the *specialised* (or ‘specialised-function’) city – a notion employed in examinations of urbanism to account for the dominance of a particular function or sector in many cities’

reputations or economic strategies (e.g. Harris and Ullman; see also Salmela). Specialisation is what often facilitates the thriving of cities in a globalised economy, as economic studies of ‘clusters,’ for example, have suggested (Porter). Simply put, ‘[t]rade enables cities to specialize and sell their outputs in exchange for the specialized outputs of other places’ (Scott and Storper 7). These concepts of participation, resilience and specialisation are, in short, often central to the success of both cities and the people living in them. Barthelme’s absurdist angle on these issues suggests that urban development is indeed one of his master themes.

Despite multiple caricatures of idiosyncratic urban experiences such as those depicted in ‘City Life,’ Barthelme’s engagement with the city emerges primarily through his commentary on the built environment and, quite directly, city planning. His stories abound in details readable as mockeries of grand, utopian city plans. One of the stories in which this arguably manifests itself quite directly is ‘Paraguay’ (1969), which Nicole Sierra has read as ‘a tale of Le Corbusier’s Utopian vision of a “radiant city” gone awkwardly fantastical’ (88). The country referred to in the title is expressly not the same Paraguay that appears on the map of South America but an imaginary realm that functions, among other things, as a lab for the construction and governance of ‘silver cities,’ a thinly veiled referential notion accompanied by a lengthy quotation from Le Corbusier’s *The Modulor* (misspelled in the footnote as *The Modular*; 125). Barthelme’s ridicule seems directed, broadly speaking, at the utopian notion that projects of construction and regulation could miraculously convert reality into something more functional. For example, the story describes a curious industrial procedure for producing art where ‘[e]ach citizen is given as much art as his system can tolerate’ (124); ‘sand is sifted twice daily to remove impurities and maintain whiteness’ (123); and parks have been partly replaced by a system of undifferentiated ‘white space’ (126). This Paraguay’s principles of planning and construction, while far from realist, seem in complete disregard of the well-being of natural life, some projects having been ‘swung upon small

collections of rare animals spaced (on the lost-horse principle) on a lack of grid' (126). The fiction is consistent with the author's own statements: he saw 'a not insignificant totalitarian bent' in grand master plans – particularly those representing modernist architectural vision – claiming to improve people's lives dramatically (qtd in Sierra 88). In Lyotard's terms, Barthelme's position seems to be that the language game of architecture should amend its rules and cease to seek legitimation from such a pompous narrative of progress. According to Sierra, the architectural field becomes an alternative site in which Barthelme, the son of a successful modernist architect also called Donald, asserts his relationship with the past.

However, Barthelme's way of modifying past artistic principles is by no means a simple case of patricide but rather a complicated mixture of continuation, qualification and subversion. Within literary theory, this complex paradigm shift plays a relatively central role, since prominent theories of postmodernism, such as McHale's or Ihab Hassan's, are largely premised upon the distinction between modernism and postmodernism. Literary postmodernism's resistance to modernist poetics and politics is in many ways analogous to urban theorists' critique of grand modernist city plans. Jameson raises this issue at the very beginning of *Postmodernism*, noting that architecture is where recent 'modifications in aesthetic production are most dramatically visible, and [where] their theoretical problems have been most centrally raised and articulated' (2). A biographical fact of some significance is that from the early 1960s onwards Barthelme lived mostly in Greenwich Village, like Jane Jacobs, who famously represented that neighbourhood as a model urban community. In its organic complexity and 'exuberant diversity,' Jacobs argued, the Village is able to realise its 'city potentialities' in the present (150), which makes it preferable (and antithetical) to the rationalist utopias of large-scale urban renewal projects. Yet it would be misleading to draw direct equations between Jacobs and Barthelme. As Sierra aptly observes, Barthelme's playful literary project is one that favours 'dispersive imagery to "wholeness"' and perhaps

finds a more useful comparison in Robert Venturi, author of the postmodernist milestone *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (83). In the writer's urban postmodernism, cultural pluralism and creative contradiction must coexist.

The story that best represents an antidote to grand diagonal designs, as well as exemplifying the liberating characteristics of indistinct formlessness, is 'The Balloon.' Set in Manhattan and narrated by the characteristic first-person voice, the story opens with the description of a colossal balloon's expansion over the street grid:

The balloon, beginning at a point on Fourteenth Street, the exact location of which I cannot reveal, expanded northward all one night, while people were sleeping, until it reached the Park. There, I stopped it; at dawn the northernmost edges lay over the Plaza; the free-hanging motion was frivolous and gentle. But experiencing a faint irritation at stopping, even to protect the trees, and seeing no reason the balloon should not be allowed to expand upward, over the parts of the city it was already covering, into the 'air space' to be found there, I asked the engineers to see to it. (46)

The balloon – evidently the narrator's own work – grows faster than any real-world construction, and the narrator perhaps has more absolute control over his creation than architects in our world have over theirs. Yet the emphasis on engineering teamwork and the need to set specific boundaries to the development are reminiscent of real projects in urban regeneration, and the 'frivolous and gentle' traits could well describe postmodernist architecture in the fashion of Venturi. The narrator's practical capacity for creating such a material wonder is, of course, never explained.

Although the materiality of the balloon is emphatic – it is a 'great, vari-shaped mass' (46) with a 'structured' and bouncy surface (47) – the creation is fundamentally also a gesture of textual self-reflexiveness. The story suggests as much with its multiple references to different ways of reading, interpreting and evaluating the balloon on aesthetic grounds and its

quick, ironic dismissal of all those attempts at the end to make way for a simplistic autobiographical explanation (Barthelme also employs balloons as apparent textual metaphors in ‘The Great Hug’ [1976]). Until, or perhaps despite, the deliberate anti-climax, the amorphous creation is fully open to interpretation, with assessments divided. In a key section of the five-page story, a selection from ‘critical opinion’ is spread in typographical fragments around the page, including ‘harp,’ ‘conservative eclecticism that has so far governed modern balloon design,’ ‘*Quelle catastrophe!*’ and ‘munching’ (49–50). As suggested previously, Barthelme’s litanies tend to imply resistance to ordered entities and foreground the aesthetic possibilities of fragments. Here that tendency is amplified by the fact that many of the quotations, all supposedly originating in highly ordered pieces of critical writing, are simply too short to suggest any kind of argumentative context. The incompleteness of these fragments contrasts the massive wholeness of the object they critique, and the contradictions among them seem to ridicule what might be termed the metanarrative of art criticism.

The central practical advantage of the balloon is, perhaps predictably, the fun it makes possible: ‘That all these varied motions [of bouncing and falling], as well as others, were within one’s possibilities, in experiencing the “up” side of the balloon, was extremely exciting for children, accustomed to the city’s flat, hard skin’ (47). The pop-up adventure park of the balloon, unlike the regular city, is covered with a flexible, safe surface. For Daan Wesselman, who examines the similarities between New York’s High Line park and Barthelme’s imaginary balloon in Foucauldian terms, the latter is ‘a perfect literary instance of heterotopia’ (25). The rectangular street grid, often seen as the ultimate representation of the kind of linear rationality that tends to block out pluralism (Sennett 270), becomes the balloon’s significant counterpoint, the city’s ‘flat, hard skin.’ The cool, neutral efficiency of the grid is compromised when the soft balloon’s top replaces it as the city inhabitants’ space

of leisure. This new ‘landscape’ superimposes a semblance of natural terrain on the city, with ‘small valleys as well as slight knolls, or mounds [. . .] There was pleasure in being able to run down an incline, then up the opposing slope, both gently graded’ (47).

One way of conceptualising this opposition between the balloon and the grid is through Deleuze and Guattari’s terms of smoothness and striation. These modalities generally indicate opposing tendencies: smooth space is associated with nomad thought, with affective ‘events’ rather than propertied ‘things,’ while the regularity of striated space stems from sedentary organisation, typically state-sanctioned (Deleuze and Guattari 474, 479). Smoothness, which here obviously characterises Barthelme’s balloon, is not ‘homogeneous, quite the contrary: it is an amorphous, nonformal space prefiguring op art’ (477). Nevertheless, the two forces can be understood as equally necessary, even co-dependent. Deleuze and Guattari emphasise that they ‘exist only in mixture’ and are constantly being converted into one another (474). In principle, built environments are characterised by striation: ‘the city is the striated space par excellence’ (481); yet ‘[e]ven the most striated city gives rise to smooth spaces’ allowing at least moments of nomadic existence (500). In Elizabeth Grosz’s interpretation, striation generally emerges after the ‘event’ of smoothness, rendering it ‘predictable, or at least to some extent, controllable’ (Grosz 83). ‘The Balloon’ manipulates this temporal order in that the ‘event’ of the balloon, appearing at night, intrudes upon the relatively permanent, regulated network of urban form. Arguably, the nocturnal appearance and the ‘frustration [. . .] evidenced by those city officers into whose province such manifestations normally fell’ suggest a degree of political potentiality in the balloon (48).

In comparison with the grid’s rational economy, the gigantic mass is ‘an anomaly that just hangs there’ (Wesselman 20), and the story explicitly proposes that the balloon’s essential quality is simply that ‘it was not limited, or defined’ (50). The lack of a regular

order in the entity itself becomes, for some of the story's passing New Yorkers, the spatial equivalent of political liberation, even social justice:

This ability of the balloon to shift its shape, to change, was very pleasing, especially to people whose lives were rather rigidly patterned, persons to whom change, although desired, was not available. The balloon, for the twenty-two days of its existence, offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet. (50)

Here, city inhabitants are allowed an opportunity to subvert the negative consequences of postmodern disorientation and identify instead a method of positive 'mislocation.' If we repeat one of the questions posed by McHale in its modified form – What is to be done in this city? – the answer, for twenty-two days, is that one is to re-create oneself by playing with a gargantuan balloon. That the balloon may be a floating signifier without referent, an image manifestly detached from the real and therefore an element of Simcity, makes no great difference. It still represents a horizon of urban possibility, 'a prototype, or "rough draft"' pointing the way towards yet unimaginable 'solutions' (51). To use Deleuze and Guattari's wording on the potentialities of smooth space, the balloon may not be 'liberatory' as of itself, but the very conditions of possibility seem 'changed or displaced' under its influence (500).

## **Conclusion**

'The Balloon' may represent the clearest sense of positive urban promise in Barthelme. However, his playful but theoretically informed city visions are perhaps equally well captured by the impulsive narrator of 'I Bought a Little City,' who purchases for personal experimentation the city of Galveston, Texas, the town that in the extratextual world happens to be the birthplace of Donald Barthelme Sr., the architect (H. Barthelme 7). After testing the

limits of his city-managing powers, much like the narrator of ‘The Balloon’ tries his creative faculties in balloon design, the man draws conclusions in somewhat unlyrical verse:

I own a little city  
 Awful pretty  
 Can’t help people  
 Can hurt them though  
 Shoot their dogs  
 Mess ’em up  
 Be imaginative  
 Plant trees  
 Best to leave ’em alone?  
 Who decides?  
 Sam’s wife is Sam’s wife and coveting  
 Is not nice. (295)

In addition to effectively summarising the whole, characteristically absurdist, story, these lines move through very basic ideas of city development and modification from aesthetic improvement and creative destruction to cleaning up and *laissez-faire* policies. Two seemingly inconsequential things also draw the attention: the notion of imaginativeness, which suggests at least an ostensible presence of the writer’s faculties in the otherwise rather pedestrian mind of the narrator, and the fact that all the possible abstractions of urban structure, in the end, boil down to their effect on interpersonal relationships (here the narrator’s desire for another man’s wife). This insistence on the momentousness of private emotion – just like, perhaps, the simplistic language – reiterates Barthelme’s consistent scepticism towards grand utopian scenarios. The deliberately banal allusion to the Biblical ‘thou shalt not covet’ commandment, with its merging of greed and lust, also points toward

the unique combination of Puritanism and capitalism that has greatly influenced American city life (though analysing those ideological formations is much beyond the scope of this chapter).

I have cautiously identified some emancipatory urban possibilities in Barthelme's work. Roughly the same characteristics can be named more assertively from a different perspective: we may be able to locate in some of the texts examined in this chapter 'an endeavor to liberate consciousness from entrapment within the dominant language forms of late capitalism' (Maltby 187). Such a conclusion shares its basic form with my argument, and it is consistent with the previously outlined theoretical perspectives associated with postmodernism. Whatever the full extent of that engagement, Barthelme's texts project, or simulate, cities of words that also contain images of community. It is a specific kind of heterogeneous, mobile, disjointed and contradictory community that often seems disengaged from conventional social structure in much the same way as the author's litanies detach themselves from syntax. To go back to the 'muck' image we started with, it makes sense to place the main emphasis on the words modifying the noun in 'City Life': 'exquisite,' 'mysterious,' and 'multidirectional' (152). These adjectives aptly describe Barthelme's texts as well as the imagined cities mediated by them. Despite the impossibility of his fictional cities, Barthelme's metafictional and often absurdist stories succeed in showing appreciation for the possibilities and materialities of everyday urbanism.

### **Works Cited**

Alber, Jan. 'Absurd Catalogues: The Functions of Lists in Postmodernist Fiction.' *Style*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2016, pp. 342–58.

- Ameel, Lieven. ‘The “Valley of Ashes” and the “Fresh Green Breast”: Metaphors from *The Great Gatsby* in Planning New York.’ *Planning Perspectives*, vol. 34, no. 5, 2019, pp. 903–10.
- Barthelme, Donald. *Sixty Stories*. Penguin, 2003.
- Barthelme, Helen Moore. *Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound*. Texas A & M UP, 2001.
- Baudrillard, Jean. ‘Simulacra and Simulations.’ *Selected Writings*, 2nd ed., edited by Mark Poster, Stanford UP, 2001, pp. 169–87.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- Finch, Jason, et al. Preface. *Literary Second Cities*, edited by Jason Finch et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. v–vii.
- Gates, David. ‘Explanatory Notes to Donald Barthelme’s *Sixty Stories*.’ *Penguinclassics.com*, 2003, <https://www.penguin.com/static/pdf/classics/sixtystories.pdf>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2020.
- Gillen, Francis. ‘Donald Barthelme’s City: A Guide.’ *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1972, pp. 37–44.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. ‘Deleuze, Theory, and Space.’ *Log*, no. 1, 2003, pp. 77–86.
- Harris, Chauncy D., and Edward L. Ullman. ‘The Nature of Cities.’ 1945. *A Geography of Urban Places: Selected Readings*, edited by Robert G. Putnam et al., Routledge, 2007, pp. 91–100.
- Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Vintage, 1961.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Verso, 1991.
- Lees, Loretta, et al. *Gentrification*. Routledge, 2008.

- Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1: Introduction*. Translated by John Moore, Verso, 1991.
- . *Writings on Cities*. Translated and edited by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, Blackwell, 1996.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- Maltby, Paul. *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon*. U of Pennsylvania P, 1991.
- March-Russell, Paul. *The Short Story: An Introduction*. Edinburgh UP, 2009.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. Methuen, 1987.
- McHale, Brian, and Moshe Ron. 'On Not-Knowing How to Read Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising."' *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1991, pp. 50–68.
- Paley, William S., et al. *The Threatened City: A Report on the Design of the City of New York*. New York, 1967. *Internet Archive*, [archive.org/details/threatenedcityre00newy](https://archive.org/details/threatenedcityre00newy). Accessed 20 June 2020.
- Porter, Michael. 'Clusters and the New Economics of Competition.' *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 76, no. 6, 1998, pp. 77–90, [hbr.org/1998/11/clusters-and-the-new-economics-of-competition](https://hbr.org/1998/11/clusters-and-the-new-economics-of-competition). Accessed 29 May 2020.
- Riesman, David, et al. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. Abridged and revised ed., Yale UP, 2020.
- Salmela, Markku. 'Still Learning from Las Vegas: Imagining America's Urban Other.' *Literary Second Cities*, edited by Jason Finch et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 109–30.

- Scott, Allen J., and Michael Storper. 'The Nature of Cities: The Scope and Limits of Urban Theory.' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–15.
- Sennett, Richard. 'American Cities: The Grid Plan and the Protestant Ethic.' *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1990, pp. 269–85.
- Shaw, Jonathan Imber. 'Unnatural Acts, Exceptional States.' *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2014, pp. 169–96.
- Sierra, Nicole. 'Landscapes of Postmodernity: Donald Barthelme's Architecture.' *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 47, 2012, pp. 75–92.
- Simmel, Georg. 'The Metropolis and Mental Life.' *The Blackwell City Reader*, edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, Blackwell, 2002, pp. 11–19.
- Smith, Neil. *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. Routledge, 1996.
- Soja, Edward. *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*. Blackwell, 2000.
- Wallace, David Foster. 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.' *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1993, pp. 151–94.
- . Interview by Charlie Rose. PBS, 27 March 1997. *CharlieRose.com*, [charlierose.com/videos/23253](http://charlierose.com/videos/23253). Accessed 12 April 2020.
- Wesselman, Daan. 'The High Line, "The Balloon," and Heterotopia.' *Space and Culture*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2013, pp. 16–27.
- Vale, Lawrence J., and Thomas J. Campanella. 'Conclusion: Axioms of Resilience.' *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, edited by Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, Oxford UP, 2005, pp. 335–53.