A traveler who has just left the walls of an immense city climbs the neighboring hill; [...] he can no longer distinguish the public squares, and he can scarcely trace out the great thoroughfares; but his eye has less difficulty in following the boundaries of the city, and for the first time he sees the shape of the vast whole.


It occurred to me that the city might afford me an asylum. [...] I had been there twice or thrice in my life, but only for a few hours each time. I knew not a human face, and was a stranger to its modes and dangers.


She told people she wanted to leave the city. [...] They said, Leave the City? For what? To go where? It was the locally honed cosmocentric idiom of New York, loud and blunt, but she felt it in her heart no less than they did.


1 Introduction

When the French historian and political analyst Alexis de Tocqueville set out to study prisonhouses in America in 1831, his actual goal was to scrutinize American democracy. Tocqueville’s findings, as he would later report in his two books *De la Démocratie en Amerique* (1835 and 1840), asserted a basic link between democratic culture and the modern correctional system. Nowhere does this intersection of the discourses of empowerment (*democracy*) and limitation (*the penitentiary system*) become more transparent than in Tocqueville’s portrayal of the American city. When he returned from his trip to the United States after less than two years, Tocqueville reasoned (in a chapter aptly titled “Principal Causes Maintaining the Democratic Republic”) that “America has no great capital city, whose influence is directly or indirectly felt over the whole extent of the country, which I hold to be one of the first

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1 Parts of this essay have been published in *Amerikastudien – American Studies* 54.4 (2010): 553-581. I want to thank the editors for allowing me to republish these passages.
causes of the maintenance of republican institutions in the United States” (318-9, my italics). While insisting on the pivotal function of a “great capital city” for the implementation of democracy, Tocqueville also pointed out the potential dangers emanating from urban life. As he warningly added in a footnote, the emergence of large cities (such as Philadelphia and New York) also advanced the formation of “serious riots” – some of them witnessed by Tocqueville himself. Such social tensions, he argued, signified a vital threat to the existence of democracy on American soil:

I look upon the size of certain American cities, and especially on the nature of their population, as a real danger which threatens the future security of the democratic republics of the New World; and I venture to predict that they will perish from this circumstance unless the government succeeds in creating an armed force, which […] will be independent of the town population, and able to repress its excesses. (319)

The city – and the American city, in particular – has often been imagined in terms of the oppositional discourses discussed by Tocqueville. With the American Revolution taking place in the last decades of the 18th century, one image became firmly embedded into the cultural imaginary: that of the Open City² which also functioned as closed space. While serving as beacons of democracy and progress, cities also functioned as pessimistic heralds of a possible collapse of cultural life. As Marxist critic Raymond Williams contends in his landmark study The Country and the City, urbanity has been invested since the arrival of the modern era with two sets of contradictory notions that have both strongly influenced the dominant image of cities. The positive side of this image consists of values such as civilization, cosmopolitanism, complexity, protection, light, and tolerance. The negative side refers to the counterconcepts of degeneration, anomie, violence, darkness, obscurity, and sin.

This essay wants to show how these two sets of images were utilized in the dominant literary imagination of the United States as complementary, yet also intricately connected devices of representation. The ‘Open City’ of modernity and postmodernity, I will argue, is constructed as a hoax – a companion narrative to that of the labyrinthine city which continually builds up new borders to the inside and to the outside. The rhetoric of openness, as instrumental as it may have been in the literary practice of the American Renaissance – for example, in Walt Whitman’s odes to the cosmopolitanism of “Mannahatta” –, only masked the persistence of an aesthetics of closure which invested the concepts of urbanity with elements of over-determination and complexity projected onto the narrative structure of the labyrinth. The suggestion of ‘openness’ as part of the metropolitan aesthetics was fundamentally needed to make the narrative of the labyrinth operate on the level of per-

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² According to the data provided by Tocqueville in the first volume of his book, Philadelphia had 161,000 inhabitants and New York 202,000 in the year 1830 (318).

³ Since I am referring to the ‘Open City’ as a concept, I will use capital letters for the term.
ception. This tactic becomes obvious in the postmodern imagination which sketches the cityscape as an ambiguous place: it invites the flâneur to follow the multitudinous promises of urban life, but also erects new boundaries that evoke the impression of ‘being locked.’

Edward W. Soja’s notion of the ‘expansive postmetropolis’ (the mega city built upon patterns of deterritorialization and productive conflation of experiential zones) is as central to my argument as Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “chronotopic” imagination (a literary strategy which merges the levels of time and space in order to enable new forms of literary experience). These theoretical models help to understand what I call the “metropolitan aesthetics” of literary texts – their usage of urban border zones as markers of the symbolic intersection of ‘open space’ and ‘closed space.’

2 From ‘Open City’ to ‘Postmetropolis’

It has been widely argued that the ‘Open City’ was a unique invention of the modern era (beginning with the Enlightenment and reaching its peak around the turn to the 20th century). As a result of the challenges of industrialization and large waves of immigration during the 19th century, American cities gradually changed their appearance. The metropolitan discourse began to adopt new modes of representation, answering to the altered needs, behaviors, and attitudes of people living in American cities and responding to the growing function that these urban centers had in the modern world (see Harding 1-30; Ickstadt 199-214). The image of the ‘Open City’ – as we know it today – was fabricated during the early years of the republic when writers began to discover the ‘pulsating city’ as an epitome of a prospering American nation. Philadelphia, for a long time, was regarded as the cosmopolitan city in America, harboring large numbers of immigrants from Europe and also giving shelter to many fugitive slaves. Next to Boston and New York City, Philadelphia was one of the centers of European immigration in the United States and a model of lively transcultural exchange (Warner 56-62).

During the 1840s and 50s, it was New York City which assumed this role of a ‘nodal point’ of transatlantic encounters between Europe and the United States. Functioning as the center of what critics have called the ‘American Empire,’ New York City in the mid-19th century epitomized the ideals of world citizenship and unrestricted flow of immigration (Berrol 39-74). Geographically as well as emotionally, American cities were increasingly perceived as synonyms of a New World Order that celebrated individualism and complexity instead of conformity and assimilation. Urban fiction at this time attempted to transcend established boundaries to form a potentially liberating vision of urban life (see Wheeler 1).

The ‘Open City’ of the 19th century was widely perceived as a counter-model to the ‘built’ reality of American urban space, reflecting an image of an ‘other’ America imagined by a group of progressive thinkers and writers.
The utopian ideal of a heterogeneous, multi-faceted, and playful society, “a place where people witness and appreciate diverse cultural expressions” (Young 269), became an important rhetorical device in 19th century U.S. literature. Functioning as “an arena in which diverse social and ethnic groups can coexist, interact, and generate complex relationships and networks” (K. Christiaanse, qtd. in: Armborst et al), the model of the ‘Open City’ was never more than an enticing fantasy, a bulwark against the sad realities of boundary maintenance and ghettoization. “City life as an openness to unassimilated otherness,” the late Urban Studies scholar Iris Marion Young explains, “represents only an unrealized social ideal” (251). In the 20th century, the entrenchment of urban culture further increased, generating a gulf of exclusion in social and cultural practice. For Gerald E. Frug, the outcome of this development was the ‘divided city,’ which privileged the urban elite to the disadvantage of the lower classes:

Neighborhood boundaries, city/suburb boundaries, and the boundaries between suburbs have [...] divided residents of metropolitan areas along class and ethnic lines. [...] The overall impact of American urban policy in the twentieth century has thus been to disperse and divide the people who live in America’s metropolitan areas, and, as a result, to reduce the number of places where people encounter men and women different from themselves. (132, my italics)

This politics of division has not only shaped the appearance of American cities, but also the self-image of individuals living in the city and the aesthetics of the urban imaginary. In his astute study of metropolitan America, Kenneth T. Jackson observes that those “invisible fences” which “surround entire municipal jurisdictions in the United States” are widely perceived “as real and effective as both the fortifications of Medieval Europe and the gated communities of our own time” (186). If the metropolitan areas of our day are indeed ‘fortress cities,’ as Mike Davis has convincingly shown in City of Quartz (with respect to Los Angeles), why are these cities still associated in the popular imagination with freedom and openness? One possible answer would be that the invisible walls erected in the urban landscape must be counterbalanced in the cultural imaginary by images of hopefulness and expansion. Davis’s Los Angeles may be experienced as a garrisoned place with bloated prisonhouses, guarded communities, and cruel street environments. Yet these urban frontiers also seem to bear the potential to evoke notions of transcendence and even hybridization.

As sociologist Richard Sennett has contended in The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life (1970), the mere existence of border zones suggests the possibility of their metamorphosis into livable areas, due to their inherently hybrid and transformative character. In his study, Sennett theorizes the prospect of a city which incorporates diversity, creative disorder, and even chaos into a functioning cultural practice. The ‘Open City’ envisioned here is a place which allows for anarchic places of self-empowerment and energetically rejects “the myth of a purified community” (27-49; 172-98). As Sennett
cautions in a recent essay, we have to remain aware of the difference between ‘boundaries’ and ‘borders.’ While boundaries are conceived as limits which demarcate certain territories from others, borders (for example in natural eco systems) “are the zones in a habitat where organisms become more active, due to the meeting of different species or physical conditions” (“Public Realm” 265). Borders can thus be conceived as vital zones of transition. Openness, on the other hand, does not necessarily mean ‘lack of order,’ as Sennett clarifies:

Openness can be planned, as in the flexible use of building materials like glass, in transport technologies as minute as the automated bollard, in the porosity of monumental buildings, or in access to natural resources like water. (op. cit. 271)

Just as borders may enable, or even necessitate, a sense of permeability, open spaces may appear in the form of a constructed, ‘built’ fabric.4 If, as Richard Sennett claims, the “basic principle of a closed system is over-determined form” (op. cit. 263), even the ‘Open City’ can be conceptualized as ‘closed’ as far its aesthetic structure is concerned. According to Sennett, the ‘over-determination’ of closed systems articulates itself in the form of two correlated axioms: equilibrium and integration. In order to counterbalance the arising energies produced by the state of closure, a given system may unintentionally set processes into motion which fundamentally alter its inner structure and lead to its explosion, or implosion. In other words: a seemingly closed system may evoke its own deconstruction, by virtue of the explosive energies generated through the state of closure.

The concept of ‘postmetropolis,’ developed by political geographer Edward W. Soja, is particularly useful to understand the symbolic nexus of open and closed spaces. The term defines the heterogeneous mega city of the postmodern age – a place in which urban space has increasingly become exteriorized.5 The postmodern metropolis, Soja contends, is spatially organized through strategies of fragmentation, dislocation, and centering. Cul-

4 City planner August Heckscher has shown in Open Spaces: The Life of American Cities (1977) that U.S. urban areas (with the examples of Omaha, Dallas, Cincinnati, Buffalo, and Milwaukee) are fundamentally based upon a “desire for openness” (17). “The town in America, as soon as it could dispense with the stockade and exist with reasonable security, showed a liking for open vistas and an uncomplicated structural form” (17-18).

5 Following Soja, the ‘postmetropolis’ is represented by six intersected discourses: ‘flexcity,’ ‘cosmopolis,’ ‘exopolis,’ ‘metropolarities,’ ‘carceral archipelagos,’ and ‘simcities.’ ‘Flexcity’ refers to the highly specialized post-Fordist metropolis of the industrial era; ‘cosmopolis’ relates to the effects of globalization and the formation of new hierarchies; ‘exopolis’ relates to the effects of globalization and the formation of new hierarchies; ‘metropolarities’ revolves around the emergence of new polarities and the restructuring of the social fabric; ‘carceral archipelagos’ can be found in Davis’s concept of the “city of quartz” or “fortified city,” e.g., Detroit and Los Angeles; ‘simcities’ can be found in hyperreality and the culture of simulacra, for example, in cyberspace. These models, Soja claims, signal the continuous transformation of the urban imaginary “from the modern metropolis to the expansive postmetropolis” – a development characterized by Soja as “postmetropolitan transition” (Postmetropolis 4).
tural practice in the ‘postmetropolis’ is enacted as performance; the tactile fabric of this city is constructed as surface – as a mirror image of the mental constitution of its inhabitants, reflecting feelings of confusion and reversal of experiential spaces. The ‘postmetropolis’ has become a hyperreal site of detours and impasses, evoking the impression of inner depth through staged images.

The postmetropolitan imaginary, Soja contends, is inextricably linked to “our 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” (Postmetropolis 324). The postmetropolis thus operates as a marketplace of ever-shifting borders and identities through which American cultural identity is defined, challenged, and, then again, reinscribed:

Postfordist economic restructuring, intensified globalization, […] and many other forces shaping the postmetropolitan transition have significantly reconfigured our urban imaginary, blurring its once much clearer boundaries and meanings while also creating new ways of thinking and acting in the urban milieu. (ibid.)

I will try to show in the following that this ‘blurring of once much clearer boundaries’ not only defines the functioning of a ‘postmetropolitan’ rhetoric, but lies at the heart of the American urban imaginary itself. Such patterns of boundary confusion can be found in the metaphoric play between open and closed spaces in dominant city fiction. Literary texts, I shall argue, stage the border spheres of the city as counterdiscourses to the increasing tendencies of reification and materialization. The “Post Urbanism” (Kelbaugh)⁶ or “New Metropolitanism” (Bender)⁷ negotiated in postmodern texts offers a radically new version of urban experience, confronting the reader with the unparalleled challenges but also the – seemingly – endless possibilities of city life.

In Don DeLillo’s novel Falling Man (2007), the character Lianne, a 9/11 survivor’s estranged wife, is staged as a border character. In a desperate attempt to cope with the trauma of September 11, Lianne has become extremely sensitive, responding to any ‘invasion’ of her private sphere with unusual vigor. At one point, she feels disturbed by a neighbor listening to music during the day. When the neighbor rejects her complaint, calling her “ultrasensitive,” she exclaims, “The whole city is ultrasensitive right now. Where have you been hiding?” (151). Lianne’s statement suggests that to be exposed to the city also means to internalize the city’s sensory patterns. Metaphorically speaking, Lianne has become the city. The character’s vulnerability to external

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⁶ Kelbaugh defines “Post Urbanism” as a “heterotopian, sensational, and poststructuralist” project within the deconstructionist discourse which communicates postmodern sensibilities and underlines the technological aspects of globalization (133-80; 167).

⁷ According to Thomas Bender, “New Metropolitanism” can be defined, first, by an explosive ‘urban sprawl’ and, second, by the expansive creation of new ‘local publics.’ Like the related phenomenon of “New Urbanism,” he holds, it shares “more than is acknowledged with the modernist urbanism to which it is supposed to be an alternative” (55-56).
influences, DeLillo’s novel asserts, must be seen as a response to postmodern urban culture which has become unbearably intense after 9/11.

The hypersensitive practice of the postmodern metropolis, in this case New York City, leaves its inhabitants no choice but to engage in the city’s jerky rhythms, to become part of its all-encompassing dynamics. I want to suggest the phrase “reversal of experiential fields” to designate this form of interiorized urban space. “The American city,” Mike Davis explains in City of Quartz, “is being systematically turned inside out – or, rather, outside in” (226). The result of this process, Davis argues, is a “destruction of accessible public space” and, consequently, an incorporation of the street environment (ibid.). Davis’s observation explains why elements of city life, particularly the sounds produced by the streets, keep entering the psyche of urban dwellers.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s experimental novel Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2005) already carries the conflation of exterior and interior space in its title. The novel’s characters, all of them trying to cope with the traumata of 9/11, seem filled with the sounds of the city – to the extent that this urban noise no longer operates as an external force, but is actually inside of them. The individuals in urban fiction are literally haunted by the noise of the city. Both in Foer’s Extremely Loud and DeLillo’s Falling Man, the urban soundscape is perceived as a constant threat, unremittingly invading the private sphere. Even when the protagonists become detached from the actual noise of city streets, the signifiers of this noise are still haunting them.

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The loss of a stable center in urban fiction signals the climax of a long experiential process, in the course of which city space shifted its focus to the periphery. The ‘Open City’ of modernism is a place of transition, establishing the transitory zones of urban space as the definite markers of metropolitanism. The impressionistic setting of John Dos Passos’s Manhattan Transfer (1925) – a novel which, like hardly any other, has inspired discussions regarding American urban literature – draws our attention to isolated experiences of urban life, which form what seems to be the ‘body of the city’ (and, at the same time, the body of the protagonist). Metropolitan aesthetics in Dos Passos, I will argue, seems built upon a logic of inversion of spaces. One of the main characters, Bud Korpenning, moves to the city from the countryside to find work, but eventually commits suicide after almost starving to death. Another character, Ellen Thatcher Oglethorpe, finds her way from the lower middle class to the upper class, ending up as an actress, successful but unhappy (like Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie a quarter of a century before). The emphasis on border situations is further accentuated by the fact that Ellen changes her name frequently and even marries a gay man at one point.\(^{10}\)

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\(^{8}\) In Don DeLillo’s first major novel White Noise, the concept of “panasonic” (meaning “all is sound”) is used to illustrate the pervasiveness of noise in modern city life (239-41).

\(^{9}\) See Gersdorf’s discussion of Manhattan Transfer in this book (30-31); cf. Dallmann, Conspiracy City New York (73-85).

\(^{10}\) Manhattan Transfer seems strongly influenced by a naturalist aesthetics which informs the construction of the city as ‘boundary space.’ It has been argued that the novel is per-
Dos Passos’s murky vision of New York is a perverse countermodel to Whitman’s ‘Open City’ with its happy immigrants and citizens. “The literary Open City of the twentieth century,” one urban studies scholar explains, “descends from Walt Whitman’s literary Open City of the nineteenth” (Wheeler 194). Whitman’s celebration of the lively, vibrant city in his 1855 collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, functioned as a harbinger of a ‘free society’ which welcomed immigrants from places all over the world. Modernist fiction in many ways reversed the urban dynamic negotiated in *Leaves of Grass*. Whereas in Whitman’s verses the city is freely accessible to people from other countries, Dos Passos depicts this fluctuation as a painful process of ‘bleeding out.’ While Whitman’s “Mannahatta” celebrates the “immigrants arriving, fifteen or twenty thousand in a week” (216), Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* portrays the travelers at the ports of New York as “deportees,” many of them convicted as communists by the Department of Justice (262-3). The “numberless, crowded streets, high growths of iron, slender, strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies” in Whitman’s poem (216), are contrasted in Dos Passos’s novel with images of “gorillafaced chipontheashoulder policemen” (263) and seagulls wheeling “above the dark dingydressed crowd that stood silently looking down the bay” (ibid.).

The flux of people streaming into the city in Whitman’s verses is replaced in Dos Passos by a ghastly scenario of expulsion. The struggling immigrants are no happy daydreamers but “undesirable aliens” (ibid.). Although the gates are seemingly open in Dos Passos’s New York, the “transfer” depicted is rather one from inside to outside, never reaching the heart of the city, that enigmatic “center of things” (16). Towards the end of the novel, Jimmy Herf leaves the island of Manhattan on a ferry (just as he has entered the city on a boat), now destitute and deprived of his hopes and illusions. The metropolis of New York is portrayed as a shrinking moloch which loses its inhabitants either by death or by eviction. Only a bunch of rich ‘power brokers’ seem to occupy the space inside this metropolis. Like Stephen Crane in his naturalist novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) (which is also set near Bowery Street in New York City), Dos Passos plays with the notion of the city as apparently closed space. *Manhattan Transfer*’s metropolis is full of abysses, class hierarchies and impasses that hinder the protagonists from actually ‘making it.’

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11 The notion of ‘power brokers’ in *Manhattan Transfer* is also manifested through the ‘modernist prototype of the “self-divided man”’ (21). Having become alienated from his environment, Jimmy desperately explores the urban jungle in search for gratification.

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12 A block of determinist, naturalist narrative” that runs “beneath an accelerated, yearning impressionism” (Brooker, *New York Fictions* 53). In *Manhattan Transfer*’s plot, this determinist discourse is manifested through the erection of borders and dead-ends which hinder the characters’ movements and often lead them into a fatal direction.
3 Metropolitan Aesthetics and the City Labyrinth

In his influential study *The Image of the City* (1960), Kevin Lynch has described the modern metropolis as an “alienated city,” in which the inhabitants have become unable to find orientation. Since traditional indicators such as natural boundaries, monuments, and traffic knots are rendered obsolete or interchangeable (Jersey City being the most blatant example), people can no longer create a mental map of either their own position or the overarching urban space in which they live (25-32). The encoding of the city takes place in the form of a language game. It forms urban identity as a structural web, comparable to the famous ‘grid’ of New York City with its squares and blocks (Trabant 79-88). Each quarter in this model city has its own laws which constitute identity and shape ways of behavior. Accordingly, there is a multitude of identities, all of them existing at the same time and struggling for dominion. “What makes this city postmodern,” John Williams contends, “is that there is no way of avoiding these conflicts between quarters” (28). The postmodern city is based upon notions of heterogeneity and diversity. It points to the unfading possibilities of urban cultural practice but also to its restrictions. It is both an ‘Open City,’ encouraging the transcendence of boundaries and the creation of zones of hybridity, and a ‘closed space,’ confronting the urban dweller with limitations, detours, and dead-ends.

The circulation of these contradictory notions of openness and closure in city culture is linked to what Henri Lefebvre has described, in his 1991 book by the same title, as “the production of space.” Following Lefebvre, space can be subjectively experienced as well as empirically categorized and analyzed. It may assume form as an “affective space” filled with mythology and emotion but also as a “rational space” to be found in the various modes of spatial practice, e.g., the division of labor, the social diversification of age groups and genders, and the material production of a social infrastructure (houses, roads, and cities).

A characteristic expression of this collision of spaces is the metaphor of the city as labyrinth. The maze is, first of all, an ideological construction, designed to impose a system of power onto all members of society. Second, it is also a mode of spatialization of everyday life, connected to the futile attempts of individuals to map their environment (Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 17-21). In urban writing, the labyrinth serves at once as an iconic representation and as a structuring pattern. As a textualized image, it may also assume the function of a metaliterary event, commenting on the act of text production itself. Through the metaphor of the urban maze we are confronted with the mechanisms of writing and become aware of our own difficulty in accessing and comprehending fictional texts. 12

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12 For a discussion of the ‘city as labyrinth,’ see Wendy B. Faris’s essay “The Labyrinth as Sign” (1991) and Peter F. Smith’s classical study *The Syntax of Cities* (1977, 171).
Notably, Paul Auster begins his “City of Glass” (1985) – the first part of The New York Trilogy – with a detailed portrayal of the labyrinthine character of America’s archetypal metropolis: “New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhood and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost” (3-4). Not only does Auster’s detective hero Quinn ‘lose himself’ in the maze of buildings and streets. The reader as well becomes lost in the labyrinth of the text. The structural analogy between protagonist and reader is firmly grounded in the aesthetic design of Auster’s novel. To achieve this aim, Auster uses a number of intertextual references to Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Man of the Crowd” (1840) and later to Poe’s “Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym” (1838).

In Poe’s short story, which is also narrated from the first-person perspective, an unnamed character strays through the streets of London, observing the diverse types of city dwellers. Not coincidentally, the first (and last) sentence of “The Man of the Crowd” cites “a certain German book” which “does not permit itself to be read” (475). When the narrator’s attention is attracted by a “decrepit old man” (478) with an idiosyncratic expression on his face, he follows the stranger, suspecting him of having committed an atrocious crime. All indications that the old man is actually a criminal, confirmed by a diamond and a dagger the man seems to carry under his suit, are in the course of events revealed as figments of the protagonist’s imagination. As the restless protagonist embarks on an ultimately fruitless journey through the city streets, following the mysterious “man of the crowd,” the reader as well attempts to detect the mystery. The reader’s endeavor, like the protagonist’s, has to end in frustration, since the text resists any form of cogent interpretation.13 The mindless search of Poe’s protagonist, one critic observes, is constructed as a pre-Freudian investigation into the human mind.

If one reads the narrator and the man of the crowd as the two elements of the split self, the ‘eye’ and the ‘I’, then the nightly wanderings in the dark streets of London become an externalized image, and a textual manifestation, of the mental process. (Varvogli 66)

Poe’s analogy between the architectural organization of the urban maze and the structure of the human Unconscious is reintroduced by many postmodern narratives. When the first-person narrator in Auster’s “The Locked Room” (1986),14 notably an unnamed writer living in New York City, tries to

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13 Towards the end of the tale, the first-person narrator claims to have verified that the old man is indeed “the type and the genius of deep crime” (481). Yet, he decides it would be useless to continue the pursuit since there is no way of solving the riddle. Like a book, the mysterious stranger ‘refuses to be read.’ The final words, reiterated from the beginning of the tale – “er lässt sich nicht lesen” (ibid.) – may refer to both the book mentioned shortly before (Hortulus Animae by German composer Hans Grüninger) and the old man, who appears in the male German pronoun ‘er.’ Both seem inscrutable.

14 “The Locked Room” constitutes the third part of Auster’s The New York Trilogy.
picture his vanished childhood friend Fanshawe, he has only “one impover-
ished image” in mind:

the door of a locked room. That was the extent of it: Fanshawe alone in that room,
condemned to a mythical solitude – living perhaps, breathing perhaps, dreaming
God knows what. This room, I now discovered, was located inside my skull. (293)

Similar to our Unconscious, which alters its own structure in order to elude
attempts of interpretation, the fictional city encourages us to trespass bound-
aries and explore new realms of experience. The urban labyrinth offers the
flâneur an enigmatic assemblage of indecipherable signs. Looking at Manhat-
tan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, “the tallest letters of the
world,” Michel de Certeau ponders over the hidden rhetoric of the modern
metropolis which constructs its buildings in the form of narratives (127). The
complexity of the city, de Certeau argues, is turned into a panorama of signs
that offers the observer a vast number of different reading options. The only
way of exploring the city is to perambulate it.

The ordinary practitioners of the city walk – an elementary form of this experience
of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmanner, whose bodies follow the thicks and
thins of the urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it. (de Certeau 128)

The urban dweller’s “walking rhetorics,” as de Certeau calls it (131), becomes
a strategy of decoding the ramified space of the city:

The walking of passers-by offers a series of turns (tours) and detours that can be
compared to ‘turns of phrases’ or ‘stylistic figures’. There is a rhetoric of walking.
The art of ‘turning’ phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path
(tourner un parcours). (ibid.)

Based in the semiotic field of modern urbanity, the “rhetoric of walking”
facilitates the conflation of geography, textuality, and imagination into one
experience: that of the city itself. The urban flâneur is both an explorer and a
creator of city space, remodeling established lines and structures. The re-
construction of urban space through the figure of the walker, I shall argue,
lies at the heart of the American urban imaginary. The typical hero of Ameri-
15 can city fiction trespasses the segmented spaces of the city only to discover
that the greater whole is a “locked room” – in some cases even literally, as
Auster’s New York Trilogy illustrates.

In order to illustrate this continuity from the post-revolutionary epoch to
postmodernity, I want to draw attention to Charles Brockden Brown’s early
city novel, Arthur Mervyn, or, Memoirs of the Year 1793. Published in two parts
in the years 1799 and 1800, Arthur Mervyn is set in Philadelphia during the
yellow fever epidemic. The main character is an eighteen-year-old boy from

15 Walter Benjamin, in his unfinished fragments called Das Passagen-Werk (written be-
tween 1927 & 1940 and posthumously published as The Arcades Project) has argued that
the flâneur is an ‘archaeologist of the streets.’ Cityscape is experienced by the flâneur as a
“colportage of space” – a place loaded with history and ideology. “Space winks at the
flâneur, ‘What do you think may have gone on here?’” (418-419).
the country who has moved to Philadelphia to earn a living. Arthur Mervyn experiences his trip through the city as a series of meanders, detours, and impasses which lead him, time and again, to high walls and empty houses. When Arthur has finally managed to overcome all these hindrances, he is awaited by sheer darkness, as the following scene illustrates: “We arrived at a brick wall, through which we passed by a gate into an extensive court or yard. The darkness would allow me to see nothing but outlines” (I: 35).

At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist is robbed of his money and ends up on a courtyard where he is deprived of his sight by darkness and other buildings. His next station is a domicile in which he hides, a bedroom, and as a climax of this chain of events – a bedroom closet into which he finds himself confined. “What a condition was mine! Immersed in palpable darkness! shut up in this unknown recess! lurking like a robber!” (I: 38). In passages like this, Brown anticipates Edgar Allan Poe’s grim visions of being immured and buried alive. As if mysteriously attracted by such claustrophobic spaces, the character keeps stumbling into one dead-end after another. “I stepped into the closet, and closed the door. Some one [sic] immediately after unlocked the chamber door” (ibid.). Before Arthur actually steps into the closet, which will become his temporary grave, he ponders the advantages and disadvantages of such a leap into the unknown:

Should I immure myself in this closet? I saw no benefit that would finally result from it. I discovered that there was a bolt on the inside, which would somewhat contribute to security. This being drawn, no one could enter without breaking the door. (I: 38)

Closed rooms, Arthur Mervyn’s first-person narrator concludes, offer a sense of protection and inner peace, given the fact that they can be locked. Notably, Brown in the passage above operates with images of both “opening up” (doors) and “closing” (bolts, closets), suggesting that the city of Philadelphia as the location of Arthur’s odyssey consists of many segmented spaces. These spaces seem literally ‘interlocked’ through areas of transition which either enable the walker to find his way into the open or lead to his incarceration.

16 To what extent the yellow fever epidemics of the late 18th century – in urban centers like New York and Philadelphia – had blemished the reputation of cities, is illustrated in a letter Thomas Jefferson, then Vice President of the United States, sent to the renowned physician Benjamin Rush on September 23, 1800: “The yellow fever will discourage the growth of great cities in our nation, and I view great cities as pestilential to the morals, the health, and the liberties of mankind” (“Evil Effects” 462).

17 The first part of Arthur Mervyn is full of references to the character’s attempts to break out of the boundaries of the city. Early into his odyssey, the narrator tells us: “I had formed the resolution to leave the city next day, and was astonished at the folly that had led me into it” (I: 29; cf. I: 47). When Arthur finally manages to escape, he is soon drawn back, magically, to what he calls the “heart of the city” (I: 140; cf. II: 77). These erratic excursions in and out of the limits of the city describe a symbolic space which is essentially inescapable. Even though Arthur does finally move to the country to marry Achsa Fielding, his final decision is to cross yet another boundary line and “hie to Europe” (II: 230).
As if to underline this interplay of breaking free and imprisonment, Arthur’s movements through the city are marked by a circular route that scratches on the city’s borders but then throws him back again to his lonely chamber:

After viewing various parts of the city, intruding into churches, and diving into alleys, I returned. The rest of the day I spent chiefly in my chamber, reflecting on my new condition; surveying my apartment, its presses and closets; and conjecturing the causes of appearances. (I: 62)

Arthur Mervyn’s world is marked as a territory of closets and closed rooms. Even when Arthur eventually steps outside and wanders through the city, he usually ends up in his chamber and “surveys” his apartment. The labyrinthine character of the metropolis is underlined by references to a convoluted network of streets, buildings, and yards, sometimes evoking the image of Davis’s “fortified city”: “The doors communicating with the court, and, through the court, with the street, were fastened by inside bolts” (I: 215). Brown’s Philadelphia is truly a fortress, equipped with a massive bulwark to protect what seems to be the inner core of the city. Yet Arthur manages to pervade these lines of defense when he first arrives at the city limits. It is part of Brown’s metropolitan aesthetics that he portrays the metropolis as an essentially closed space with only a few – often hidden or locked – entrances.

In *Edgar Huntly, or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799), Brown’s companion text to *Arthur Mervyn*, the city of Philadelphia appears metaphorically in the form of a trunk in a secluded house in the woods. This trunk has keys to it, but no keyholes. When Edgar breaks it open with eagerness, he discovers an amazing setting:

The space within was divided into numerous compartments, none of which contained any thing of moment. Tools of different and curious constructions, and remnants of minute machinery, were all that offered themselves to my notice. (113)

The labyrinthine interior of the box as well as the “minute machinery” contained in it are placed in analogy to the urban maze of Philadelphia. While set in a vast territory in the badlands of Pennsylvania (in a region called “Norwalk”), *Edgar Huntly* needs references to the city to design its allegorical space. When Edgar traces Clithero’s manuscripts in a little cottage, he immediately falls into a habit of confining himself into a locked space: “I bolted the door, and, drawing near the light, opened and began to read” (115). And a few lines later Edgar falls into a mysterious pit whose high walls are reminiscent of the barriers that his literary alter ego Arthur Mervyn has to fight against.

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18 *Edgar Huntly, or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* was published right between the two parts of *Arthur Mervyn* in August, 1799. The first part of *Arthur Mervyn* appeared in May, 1799, the second part more than a year later, in September, 1800. This chronology is particularly interesting, since it generates the impression that *Edgar Huntly* is an ‘enframed’ text, informed by both the “catastrophic” urbanity in the first part of *Arthur Mervyn* and the symbolic return to rural life in the novel’s second part. On the theme of boundary transgression which can be classified as a key theme in both novels, see Watts (115).
The sides of this pit were inaccessible; human footsteps would never wander into these recesses. My friends were unapprized of my forlorn state. Here I should continue till wasted by famine. In this grave should I linger out a few days in unspeakable agonies, and then perish forever. (156)

The claustrophobic states of mind described in *Edgar Huntly* evoke the shadowy projections of the expanding urban centers in the late 18th century. The ‘urban jungle’ in *Arthur Mervyn*, charged with images of disease, battle, and corruption, is replaced in *Edgar Huntly* by the natural jungle, including a panther and a bunch of Indians, all of whom Edgar slaughters with a tomahawk. Just like Arthur Mervyn almost perishes from the yellow fever in Philadelphia, Edgar is close to dying in the wilderness, first from starvation, later from the attacks of the panther in the pit. The space of the pit here emerges as mirror image to the space of the city. Both spatial fields equally threaten to overwhelm their inhabitants. The image of the “verge of the pit” (155), on which Edgar finds himself, evokes that of the urban abyss (and the “people of the abyss”) created by Jack London over one hundred years later.\(^\text{19}\)

### 4 Urban Space after 9/11 and the Chronotopic Imagination

The very first lines of Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* introduce a veritably apocalyptic scenario: “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night” (3, my italics). Interestingly enough, DeLillo uses the terms ‘time’ and ‘space’ as synonyms to describe the cataclysmic state of a ‘city lying in ruins.’ Moreover, time and space are deployed as signifiers of an even larger place – the “world.” The space of the city is expanded in this opening passage to encompass a global trauma, an impression matching a common phrase in the days and weeks after 9/11 that the grief and shock of Americans was actually shared by citizens across the globe. The urban space of New York City post-9/11 is established in *Falling Man* as a nightmarish place (*topos*) uncannily extended by the dimension of time (*chronos*). The concept of ‘timespace’ seems embedded in the novel into the lasting trauma of the terrorist attacks burnt into the post-apocalyptic imagination like napalm – an imagination inspired by and accompanied with the melancholic tunes of Irish folk singer Enya’s number one hit “Only Time.”

Just as “Only Time” became something of a background score to the upsetting images of the terrorist attacks and the victims’ sufferings, the idea of

\(^{19}\) A similar image is evoked in Auster’s *The New York Trilogy*, where the ‘Big Apple’ is described as “the most forlorn of places, the most abject” (78). Not unlike Brown’s Philadelphia, Auster’s New York is a devastated city, full of detours, dead-end streets, and wrecked individuals. “The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap” (78). The apocalyptic metropolis of Auster’s following novel, *In the Country of Last Things*, resembles Arthur Mervyn’s sick city even more. It is a place of slaughterhouses, wrecked homeless shelters, and crematoria. The main task of the police is to pick up the corpses lying in the streets (17).
‘time’ itself was turned into an iconic image of 9/11. This idea of time became transfixed in slow-motion clips shown on CNN and pictures like that of the famous ‘falling man,’ the title-giving figure of DeLillo’s novel. Time seems literally frozen in these shots. The ‘falling man’ is reduced in such pictures – and in DeLillo’s novel – to his most recognizable features caught by unsteady cam shots and displayed on mainstream television: his shirt – a sight which clearly shocks the protagonist of Falling Man, 39-year-old lawyer Keith Neudecker: “[H]e saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in his life” (316). This climactic moment, personified by the tragic figure of the ‘jumper,’ is linked throughout the novel to the performance act of an artist whom Keith’s wife keeps seeing in various areas of the city. As I will argue in the following, the concept of time is merged in DeLillo’s and Foer’s novels with space, giving rise to the formation of visceral images of intense shock and trauma. The time and place portrayed in the ‘falling man’ pictures seems to reject the notions of finiteness and limitation. The time frame of the images captures a body still alive but about to be shattered on the ground. Likewise, the space shown is somewhere ‘in-between’, flanked by heaven and earth, in midair, and thus beyond death.

The concept of the chronotope developed by Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin can help to understand the dynamic which underlies such visual strategies. Defined by Bakhtin as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature,” the chronotope – literally: timespace – is grounded in the “collective historical life” shared by the members of a community at a given point in time (The Dialogic Imagination 84, 208). Through the fictionalization of this moment, Bakhtin argues, particularly dramatic events become more accessible and manageable. In another work, Bakhtin suggests that, with the literary figure of the chronotope, historical time becomes “condensed in space” (Speech Genres 49). The chronotope thus enables readers to cope with previously unfathomable and threatening events, in other words, to make them comprehensible. However, since there is not only one perception of the events surrounding 9/11, but multitudinous vantage points, we can speak of a

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Post-9/11 fiction here reiterates a pattern which was already utilized in classical realism and modernism – that of time reactivated through its fusion with space. “In many realist and modernist novels,” Bart Keunen argues, “the image of the protagonist arriving in the big city is created through descriptions of urban space that contextualize the (temporal) process of the encounter with the metropolis” (421). This ‘chronotopic’ visualization of the city becomes especially relevant in neo-realism and postmodernism where notions of fragmented or disrupted time are blended with notions of dislocation and loss of orientation. In Extremely Loud, this sense of disorientation is linked to the location of Central Park, which, like hardly any other place in New York City, symbolizes metropolitan space as a lived space. “I spent all day walking around in the park,” the first-person narrator tells us, “looking for something that might tell me something, but the problem was that I didn’t know what I was looking for” (8). Typically, 9/11 texts focus on the spatial gap generated by 9/11 – a gap that the traumatized city dweller living “in the shadow of no towers,” as Art Spiegelman phrased it in his eponymous work, has to fill.
“polychronotopic” imaginary, using a terminology coined by Lynne Pearce in her study *Reading Dialogics*. Hereby, Pearce defines the possible coexistence of multiple ‘timespaces’ within the same literary text (174).

Postmodern and neo-realist texts, in particular, lend themselves to a Bakhtinian reading. The centrality of multiple, interconnected perspectives to the postmodern aesthetics encourages the usage of concepts such as *polychronotopicity* and *heteroglossia*. For example, DeLillo, in *Falling Man*, employs techniques of polychronotopicity by introducing tropes which imply a conflation of the temporal and the spatial dimension. Like Dos Passos in *Manhattan Transfer*, DeLillo utilizes an impressionistic approach that emphasizes isolated events connected to ‘lived’ urban space. The trauma of 9/11 becomes visible, even tangible, in *Falling Man* in the form of hysterical scenes on fire escapes and jam-packed shafts. The notion of ‘being locked’ associated with such places is used to evoke a setting of sheer terror: “The stairwell was crowded now, and slow, with people coming from other floors” (69). Emphasis is placed here on the combination of a symbolic *place* – the stairwell which served as a last escape to many imprisoned in the burning Twin Towers – and the aspect of *time* – the fact that these vital escape routes have become unbearably slow with other persons still coming in.

Another important chronotope is constructed with respect to the area immediately surrounding the World Trade Center, with the towers just about to collapse: “[A] man came out of an ash storm, all blood and slag, reeking of burnt matter, with pinpoint glints of slivered glass in his face” (109). In such short vignettes, *Falling Man* illustrates the force of terror experienced by the characters. DeLillo scatters these brief scenes all through his text without ever elaborating on them in detail. The short sentence, “His car hit a wall” (114) is followed by a rather banal interior monologue held by Keith’s mother who puts the blame on her son’s mistress Florence – another 9/11 survivor, who, as she thinks, has destroyed his marriage to Lianne.

Foer, in *Extremely Loud*, finds numerous images where *place* (the events of September 11) and time (the urge to forget and cope with the trauma) coincide. Written from the unreliable point of view of nine-year-old Oskar Schell, the novel interlaces various historical events – for instance, the bombing of Dresden and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 – with images of ‘place.’ The novel’s protagonist has lost his father in the attacks of 9/11, an event which he finds hard to handle or even fully realize. Isolated lines such as “Start spreading the news” (22) ironically refer to a cheerful image of New York City (that of Frank Sinatra’s famous hymn) which has been temporarily invalidated. The iconic images of the “old New York” seem to be inconsistent with the new one. Oskar’s obsession with numbers (like the cryptic “googolplex,” the number 1 followed by $10^{100}$ zeros) indicates a desire to pin down the terrible events in the form of data and thus make them manageable (35). Significant-
ly, Oskar is also preoccupied with British physicist Stephen Hawking, and particularly with his work *A Brief History of Time* (86).21

In the final images of the novel, time seems to stand still, appearing almost ‘frozen’ in the form of an image sequence of the ‘falling man.’22 Oskar removes these well-known images, depicting a man jumping from a tower shortly before its collapse, from his private diary (called *Stuff That Happened to Me*) and carefully arranges them as a flip-book, but in reverse order. Looking at the images in his own journal, Oskar begins to see the body flying up to the sky instead of falling to the ground. “When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky. And if I’d had more pictures, he would’ve flown through a window back into the building” (325). Through the act of rewinding the actual course of events in his private photo book, Oskar resists the attempt to forget. He decides to access the past through the performance of visually rearranging its chronological order. Foer actually utilizes the iconic images of the ‘falling man’ as the final fifteen pages of his book, thus “bringing their cinematic temporality to the reader’s own fingertips and making the novel performatively coextensive with Oskar’s journal” (Huehls 43). Oskar’s spatio-temporal lifeworld thus also becomes our own, offering us a vision of rereading history and integrating the space of the past into that of the present. More intensely than other postmodern or neo-realist texts, especially those created before 9/11, *Extremely Loud* puts emphasis on the dimension of physical experience, aiming at a haptic and visual involvement of the reader. Through his decision to recreate an “imaginary timespace” based in the realm of the past, Oskar gains a sense of control over his body and, paradoxically, also over his own future.23

The same sense of a rejection of time as a firm category is negotiated in Auster’s 9/11 novel *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005). Here, 60-year-old cancer patient Paul Glass returns to Brooklyn to find “a quiet place to die” (1). Brought

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21 Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* (1988), a bestseller in the late Eighties and recently re-edited in an abridged version (together with Leonard Mlodinov), has since been marketed as an attempt to explain to a mainstream audience the laws of cosmology, referring to subjects such as the Big Bang and Black Holes. One of its famous passages deals with the distinction between “real time” and “imaginary time” (*Brief History* 138-9), an issue also negotiated in Foer’s novel. “[I]n imaginary time, there are no singularities or boundaries. So maybe what we call imaginary time is really more basic, and what we call real is just an idea that we invent to help us describe what we think the universe is like” (139).

22 Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), has argued that photographic illustrations of traumatic events have a more powerful effect upon us than, for example, movies or streaming clips. “[W]hen it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freezeframes: its basic unit is the single image” (22, my italics). In Foer’s novel, this petrification – what Sontag calls “freeze framing” – is suspended and transferred into cinematic motion, experienced by the readers themselves as they browse through the images.

23 Not coincidentally, the cover image for the first hardcover edition of Foer’s 9/11 novel, published by Houghton Mifflin, shows a human hand into which the words of the title are inscribed.
to the hospital by paramedics and “hooked up to a heart monitor” (298), he realizes that you “become the person who inhabits your body, and what you are now is the sum total of that body’s failures” (299). This body is now perceived by the protagonist as a crossroads of events and internal processes, not unlike the city in which he lives. These experiences entirely change the character’s perception of his environment. As the boundaries between internal and external processes begin to blur, the sense of reality shifts from the environment into the inner core of the body: “Nothing felt real to me except my own body” (ibid.). When Paul is released from the hospital, having been told that he will not die, it is “eight o’clock on the morning of September 11, 2001 – just forty-six minutes before the first plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center” (306). At first glance, the exact usage of timelines in this passage seems to evoke a concrete sense of history. Yet, by leaving out any reference to the following trauma of 9/11, the historical dimension is omitted from the plot, causing the protagonist to feel “as happy as any man who had ever lived” (ibid.). In the postmetropolis of New York, there seems to be no fixed past – just present and future. Hence, Michel de Certeau characterizes the ‘Big Apple’ as a place that has never managed to deal with its history: “New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour” (127).

In Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, we become actively involved in the redefinition of history which emerges as an arbitrary, yet finally controllable event. Like Oskar, the readers of the novel pick up traces of the past – a key that does not seem to fit in any keyhole (note the parallel to Brown’s trope of the missing keyhole in Edgar Huntly) and a set of mysterious tape recordings. Oskar’s trauma is our trauma as well. His naïve belief that the world is ‘one big city’ is shared by us. The dread of forgetting becomes vividly acute in Extremely Loud, culminating in the comic reference to an elephant – a reference illustrated by a close-up image of the animal’s eye (94-95). The novel’s last sentence, “We would have been safe” (326), notably phrased in the past conditional tense, appeals to our desire to go back in time.

The concept of ‘altered time’ is already negotiated in Paul Auster’s pre-9/11 book In the Country of Last Things (1987). The novel is composed in the form of a long letter written by the protagonist Anna Blume who searches for her brother in a mysterious, destroyed city. Like Quinn in The New York Trilo-gy, Anna has a tendency of losing herself in the urban labyrinth. “Nothing lasts,” she tells us, “not even the thoughts inside you. And you mustn’t waste your time looking for them” (2). The groundwork of this nightmare city is changing every day, confronting Anna with ever new problems and challenges. It is a divided city which constantly erects new fences and boundaries:

Wherever buildings have fallen or garbage has gathered, large mounds stand in the middle of the street, blocking all passage. Men build these barricades whenever the materials are at hand, and they mount them, with clubs, or rifles, or bricks, and wait on their perches for people to pass by. They are in control of the street. (6)
Anna begins to realize that in order to survive “you must be able to change, to drop what you are doing, to reverse” (6). What Anna is so afraid of is the fact that the city is literally eating itself up, mercilessly eliminating its inhabitants’ energies and existence. “Dark areas form in the brain, and unless you make a constant effort to summon up the things that are gone, they will quickly be lost to you forever” (87). To underline this notion of sickness and loss of stable structures, the novel makes use of cannibalistic imagery: “In order to live, you must make yourself die” (20). These self-destructive processes by which the inhabitants of the city are gripped are only symptoms of a much larger development: “Slowly and steadily, the city seems to be consuming itself, even as it remains” (21-22). The image conjured up is that of a metropolis devouring its own intestines. Instead of expanding, this city is gradually shrinking. Auster’s apocalyptic scenario shows not only humans affected by this impulse but also language itself. “The words get smaller and smaller, so small that perhaps they are not even legible anymore” (183). The shrinking city produces individuals who either waste their energies aggressively by joining so-called “Assassination Clubs” (14) or become introverted like Anna. While telling us in the beginning of the novel how much she likes to “walk through the city” (5), the narrator concludes her story by stating: “I have lost the habit of the streets now, and excursions have become a great strain on me” (184). Anna’s tendency to reject things of the past and her refusal to continue “the habit of the streets” illustrate the nexus of *chronos* and *topos* in American city fiction. In postmodern and neo-realist writing, the temporal and the spatial dimension are entwined to form an apocalyptic timespace commenting on historical events such as the Cold War or 9/11.

5 Conclusion

In this essay, I have put forward the argument that the ambiguous trope of the ‘Open City as closed space’ runs through American literature, with necessary adaptations to the respective socio-historical and aesthetic context, from the revolutionary period to postmodernity and neo-realism. One explanation for the remarkable nexus of ‘openness’ and ‘closure’ within the symbolic field of ‘the city’ can be found in the cultural desire for a balance between ‘empowerment’ and ‘limitation’ – epitomized by the ideal of unrestricted liberty on the one hand and the necessity of maintaining a stable democracy (grounded on a modern penitentiary system) on the other. Alexis de Tocqueville’s mixed expectations regarding the future of American cities, uttered in 1835, accentuate both their potential (e.g., their affirmative function for the “maintenance of republican institutions”) and their perceived menace to society (in the form of social tensions, the outbreak of riots, etc.).

Equipped with an array of oppositional attributes (civilization vs. degeneration, light vs. darkness, etc.), cities have been deployed as metaphors for the ambiguous nature of American democracy. This is illustrated in Charles
Brockden Brown’s twin novels *Arthur Mervyn* and *Edgar Huntly* which outline an imagery most characteristic of the post-revolutionary epoch. While attracting thousands of citizens and offering new possibilities of self-realization, the urban centers also seemed to display a ‘labyrinthine structure’ which made them appear more and more suspect. Did this labyrinthine framework to be found in the big cities not enhance the vices of corruption, prostitution, and moral decay? The yellow fever epidemics of the early 1790s marked a shift from a rather positive portrayal to a widely critical one. The ideal of the ‘Open City’ experienced its renaissance in the 1850s with Walt Whitman who celebrated the American Dream as an offer to cheerful masses of immigrants streaming to the urban centers of the United States.

The image of the vibrant American city welcoming its new residents was replaced in turn-of-the-century naturalism (especially in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie* and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*) by a more pessimistic view that pointed to the flipside of the urban dream. John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*, written a few years later, invested this tendency with a new twist by mixing naturalist and impressionist techniques, now depicting a city of moribund questers and deportees. In Dos Passos’s novel, the gradual transformation of the ‘Open City’ into the ‘postmetropolis’ (the overboarding mega city with its fragmented and dislocated sections) is already foreshadowed. If the ‘Open City’ of the modern era operated as a cosmopolitan ideal, the ‘postmetropolis’ after World War II began to indicate a drift towards uncontrolled fragmentation and diversification. Postmodernity’s taste for hyperreal constructions and a questioning of metanarratives is foregrounded in Auster’s detective narratives in *The New York Trilogy*. The city is experienced here as an inscrutable text whose hidden meaning (if there is one) can no longer be traced or even verified. It is no coincidence that Auster frequently uses references to other narratives of unsuccessful quests – apart from the traditional tale of Don Quixote also to Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” where the urban dweller’s search for meaning is exposed as a hoax.

In post-9/11 fiction, the trope of the ‘open city as closed space’ is reintroduced with a vengeance. The characters’ desperate struggle to cope with the trauma of the terrorist attacks leads to the incorporation of chronotopic images as signifiers of stagnation and emotional deadlock.24 Whereas the chronotope was utilized in the realist and modernist tradition to illustrate a newcomer’s first encounter with the city, the nexus of time and space is now increasingly employed to negotiate states of hopelessness and hermetic closure. The ‘falling man’ performances which Lianne keeps watching in DeLillo’s novel by the same title point to a notion of frozen time and failed commemoration. Vignettes of the traumatic events underscore the atmosphere of emotional imprisonment. The characters in Foer’s and Auster’s novels tend to reject the presence of history itself and utilize time as an escape to

24 For a discussion of Don DeLillo’s fiction as a countermodel to the hegemonic discourse of national security, see Brooker’s essay “Terrorism and Counternarratives” (2006).
deal with their traumata. Thus, Oskar in Foer’s novel rebuilds historical timelines in order to adapt them to his needs. In Auster’s *Brooklyn Follies*, the fatal consequences of the 9/11 attacks are entirely omitted to leave the protagonist, who has just learned that his cancer will not be fatal, as the happiest man on earth.

It has been my main goal to show that the dynamic interplay between *openness* and *closure* emerges as an important aesthetic device in U.S. urban fiction. In its diverse configurations, the trope of ‘the open city as closed space’ has been adapted to developments in the emotional and historical framework of American society. Its unbroken strength and relevance as a figure of cultural self-fashioning owes itself to the flexibility of its two components. *Openness*, in addition to its emancipatory quality, also suggests a mode of construction and fixation, e.g. in the form of established myths such as ‘the city that never sleeps’ which is ironically demystified in Foer’s novel. *Closure*, in contrast to the term’s classical association with restriction and boundary maintenance, may also point to a possible transcendence of existing limits. If, as I have suggested, the guiding principle of a closed system is its affinity towards over-determination, the ‘petrified’ images produced in literary texts offer a blind spot from which the seemingly ‘shut’ space of the city can be deconstructed, that is: opened up towards its underlying potential. Closed systems, I have argued, always tend to evoke the possibility of subversion, of setting free an inner dynamic and explosiveness already indicated by the mere illusion of ‘hermetic closure.’

The closed spaces in Auster’s, Foer’s, and DeLillo’s narratives are charged with such explosive energy; the novels seem to encourage the reader to reinvent spatial fields within the texts. By means of the dimension of *time*, ‘frozen’ images like that of the ‘failing man’ or Ground Zero are reinvested with life. The ‘real time’ of urban space is transformed into ‘imaginary time,’ assuming a quality of boundary transcendence and empowerment. If the ‘Open City’ functioned as a labyrinth in Brown, as a place of mystification in Poe, and as an open harbor in Whitman, it became somewhat deconstructed in modern and postmodern texts. Dos Passos interprets the ‘Open City’ as a fluctuating, yet *shrinking* city in which the searchers either die or have to leave town. In Auster, Foer, and DeLillo, the ‘Open City’ is a place of disintegration and contraction which, at the same time, becomes expansive and multi-leveled through the performative usage of time. It is through the combination of temporal and spatial patterns that the city of postmodernity is literally *re*-opened, that is, rediscovered as a site of agency and empowerment. The underlying patterns in the texts I have discussed in this essay remind us that the American urban imaginary has always been obsessed by images of ambiguity and outright contradiction. Thus conceived, America’s “metropolitan aesthetics,” as I have termed it, must be seen as a vehicle of critical self-reflection, uniting the components of ‘openness’ (*freedom*) and ‘closure’ (*restraint*), which are, as a matter of fact, crucial to an understanding of American society itself.
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