Caught In Between: The Conflicted City in *DMZ*

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In Brian Wood’s and Riccardo Burchielli’s graphic narrative *DMZ*, the United States are in the middle of a second civil war, and Manhattan has become a demilitarized zone caught between the federal army stationed on the east and the advancing armies of seceding states in the west. Matty Roth, a young intern from a media network, finds himself stranded in the DMZ and becomes the only journalist embedded in the city. In exploring the ways Matty tries to make sense of the embattled zone, *DMZ* presents the city as a dynamic space, whose meaning changes according to the different ways it is perceived. The aim of this paper is to examine the conflicting representations of the city in the narrative, taking into consideration not only its dystopian aspects, but also its utopian possibilities. In *DMZ*, the city has become a symbolic space where the tensions of global capitalism are played out and those excluded by the system try to make themselves visible. This article will also examine how personal identity is influenced by the way the individual sees and interacts with this contradictory space, being fundamentally shaped by the experience of the city.

A zone of conflict

In his *The System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen argues for a systematic approach to the language of comics based on the articulation of its most elemental units, the panels. In Groensteen’s formulation, each panel is articulated with other panels according to its specific location within the spatial organization of the page, which in turn is related to the other pages that comprise the narrative. Comics emerge as a system resulting from the interaction of its constitutive elements in a coherent whole (Groensteen 2007, 1–23). Each individual panel retains a relative autonomy, but it only acquires a specific function – and a specific significance – in its insertion in the logic of the system. It is interesting that this conception of comics as a system finds its correlation in the way a particular graphic narrative, Brian Wood’s and Riccardo Burchielli’s *DMZ*, approaches its subject matter. In *DMZ*, the island of Manhattan has become a conflict zone in a second American civil war. As a disputed territory, the matter of its insertion in a larger political order is a pressing issue in the narrative. Just as the panel in comics is defined by its placement within a larger sequence, the question here is the position the city occupies within a larger social and political system. While marginalized, the city is nevertheless the object of economic, strategic and ideological interests, and it still has a role to play in the logic of global capitalism. It therefore occupies an ambiguous position. It is both an element in a system of forces and an entity that remains outside the system. In the following pages, I will discuss how *DMZ* explores this ambiguity in its representation of the city as a place in-between, and how this in-betweenness becomes the basis for the moral stance of the individual in relation to the social body.

In the conflict depicted in *DMZ*, the self-proclaimed “Free States” and their largely informal army composed of the disenfranchised population from Western and Southern states have risen against the organized army of the American federal government. As the Free States army advances east, it is finally stopped in New Jersey, drawing a clear battle-line along the Hudson River. The island of Manhattan becomes a demilitarized zone fiercely disputed by the Free States and the US troops stationed in Queens, Brooklyn and Long Island. The narrative begins five years into the war, when Matty Roth, a young photo-technician intern at a news corporation, joins star journalist Viktor Ferguson in an assignment to cover the everyday life of the inhabitants of the DMZ. When Ferguson is apparently killed in an attack by a local militia as soon as the helicopter carrying the news team lands in Manhattan, Matty finds himself stranded in the DMZ and decides to carry out the original assignment, which leads him to assume the role of improvised journalist. Initially a disinterested, although sympathetic, observer of life in the DMZ, Matty gets increasingly involved in its dynamics and its conflicts, finally influencing its destiny and its relationship with the outside world.

*DMZ* is clearly a dystopian or even a post-apocalyptic narrative both in terms of the conflicts it explores and in its visual language, which emphasizes the devastation caused by war in a ruined city. But while dystopias typically focus on a character who is already immersed in the negative society represented in the narrative, and who

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1 *DMZ* is written by Brian Wood, with art by Riccardo Burchielli, although other artists worked in individual issues of the series. Published by DC Comics in the United States, under its Vertigo imprint, it was originally serialized in monthly instalments from 2006 to 2012, and later collected in book format in two collected editions. References to *DMZ* in this article follow the deluxe collected edition.
increasingly questions this society, DMZ subverts this scheme by having its protagonist come from outside and travel into the dystopian world depicted in the narrative—a pattern much more frequent in utopias, where a comparison between the utopian order and the visitor’s original society leads to an indictment of the latter (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 5). This destabilizes and at the same time intensifies the relation between the fictional city and the real world. The utopian narrative device of the traveller in a foreign land invites a comparison between the fictional society and the actual world shared by the protagonist and the reader, identifiable in DMZ as the territory controlled by the United States government, still ruled by the social structure we are familiar with. In the first pages of DMZ, Manhattan is presented as a mysterious place about which very little is known, a chaotic space dominated by looters and militia troops, without any laws or body of government—at least, from the point of view of the media. As in classic utopias, Manhattan emerges as an isolated island, fundamentally different from the world around it. According to Bauman, in early modernity, when utopia appeared as a literary genre, it was easy to imagine an isolated place where the utopia could be; now, however,

“The globe is full. There are no as yet undiscovered places left and no places where one could hide from the order (or for that matter disorder) ruling (or for that matter misruling) in places already known and mapped, crisscrossed by beaten tracks, administered and managed. (Bauman 2003, 22)

But DMZ turns Manhattan, one of the centres of global capitalism, into a largely unknown place, thus symbolically opening up again a space for utopian speculation within a world order in which this possibility seemed to be foreclosed, since capitalism has colonized “all non-capitalized spaces, from the genome to people’s desires,” co-opting all it can from utopia—a situation that leads Darko Suvin to state that we already live in a dystopia (2010, 389–390).

Manhattan, then, becomes a no man’s land, where new social relations may be established with the suspension of the old order. The reproduction in DMZ of the familiar device of the traveller cast in an unfamiliar country also allows for a criticism of the protagonist’s original society and inverts the usual logic of dystopia, so that the DMZ surfaces not only as the dark mirror of contemporary society, but also, at least in some of its aspects, as its more desirable other. This, of course, problematizes the issue of perspective. In stressing its protagonist’s position as an outsider, and an outsider whose essential function is to observe, DMZ raises the question of how the city is supposed to be seen. Not only is it the subject of conflicting discourses within the narrative itself, but its symbolic role also fluctuates, ranging from an indictment of US intervention abroad to a discussion of the dynamics of power in contemporary society and a portrait of New York as it is today: “Brian and Riccardo weren’t trying to make me see their vision; they were pointing out what already was there,” Brian Azzarello declares in his introduction to the first volume of the collected edition of DMZ (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013–15, vol. 1, 5). The city in DMZ is at the same time a territory situated in space and an imaginary construction resulting from shifting perceptions. It is a disputed place not only in terms of its strategic importance for the opposed sides in the war, but also in terms of the symbolic meanings it acquires for those who live within its boundaries, those who visit it or those who only know it from a distance.

In order to discuss these different views of New York in DMZ, I will first examine the representation of the city as a war zone and a dystopian space, taking into
consideration its connections to a broader globalized world. Next I will move on to a study of the utopian possibilities present in the DMZ and how they are both threatened and fostered by the situation of crisis which the narrative explores. Finally, I will examine how the protagonist of the narrative is affected by his perception of the city, assuming a strong moral commitment in relation to what he sees.

Cityscapes

The narrative of DMZ opens with a succession of fragmented images of the city, of a soldier, of the reporter Viktor Ferguson on the field, of a police helicopter. These two pages, with art by Brian Wood, offer a strong visual contrast to the rest of the first issue of the series, drawn by Riccardo Burchielli. The style here is sombre, the colouring darker and more subdued, so that it is hard to grasp with precision what is being shown (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, vol. 1, 7-8). Our first glimpses of the DMZ are of a shadowy, vague, almost unreal world – a modern visual rendition of “one of the dark places of the earth” Marlow refers to in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1994, 243). But unlike Conrad’s dark places, the DMZ is not a blank space on the map: the first image in these two introductory pages is a map of downtown Manhattan, the New Jersey shore and parts of the other boroughs of New York, firmly establishing the DMZ as a geographical location. The clarity of the map, whose white lines seem to reproduce the contours of streets and buildings from a satellite view of the city, is opposed to the nebulous outlines of the images from the ground, whose actual status is uncertain: are they supposed to be a direct representation of the city, a collection of fragmentary TV shots or simply the way the city is imagined by a public who has no access to it? It is as if the distant, objective view from above allows the unfolding of darkness below, in the hidden spaces between the lines of the map. As in Heart of Darkness, this mysterious space is the ultimate place to be conquered and colonized. Dark in its perceived brutality and imponderability, it is waiting to be organized once again in accordance to the regular lines of the street grid on the map, and to be reinserted in the productive order of global capitalism under the control of the American government, or under the rule of the rising Free States. In fact, in DMZ views of the city from above, usually from surveillance satellites and military airplanes, reveal a structure of power, the gaze of those in authority levelled against a territory they wish to control.
The images in these two introductory pages are overlaid by the text of an announcement from the ironically named Liberty News, the dominant news corporation in the narrative, advertising Viktor Ferguson’s imminent departure for the demilitarized zone. The newscast describes Manhattan as a city dominated by “looters, roving gangs of neighborhood militias, insurgents, car bombers, contract killers,” and the lives of its inhabitants as “largely a mystery” (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, vol. 1, 7-8). The open condemnation of the Free States army in the same announcement, as well as the reductionist and alarming terms in which the city is presented, point to a criticism of network news, which is always shown as biased in DMZ, delivering propaganda instead of an impartial assessment of the events it covers. Nevertheless, this disparaging view of Manhattan is confirmed by one of the soldiers who escort Matty and Ferguson into the DMZ, presumably a direct witness of the conflict: “Don’t assume nothing. ‘Cause everything you’ve heard is true. All those rumors and urban myths about the enemy… It’s all fucking true” (1: 12-13; emphasis in the original). It is no wonder, then, that the first clear image we have of the DMZ, from the point of view of the helicopter carrying the news team as it approaches Manhattan, seems lopsided, the buildings apparently thrown together in irregular angles, many of them ruined, smoke rising from their gutted structures. The old glamour of New York, embodied in an Empire State Building dangerously leaning to the right, is offset by the realistic register of the damage caused by war, an improvised clothesline on a rooftop attesting to the precariousness of living in a battle zone.
However, as Douglas Wolk (2007, 20-1) argues, comic books do not actually present a direct representation of the world, but an interpretation, “deliberately
constructed by a specific person or people,” cartooning being, according to Wolk, “a metaphor for the subjectivity of perception.” This subjectivity of perception is attested by this first image of Manhattan, which acts as an illustration of the soldier’s view of the city, since it shows the chaos and devastation he associates with the DMZ. But, together with the first two pages of the narrative, it also points to the conflicting discourses that take shape in an attempt to define the conflict zone. For new voices soon begin to be heard. The bullet holes and marks of explosions on the buildings are a physical inscription of the memory of the war, as if the city itself could silently bear its own testimony. For Angus Nurse, DMZ visually “explores the difference between the reality on the ground explicit in its violent imagery, and the ‘official’ version of the war relayed in news overlays and text boxes that convey positive reporting on the war” (2017, 5) as a justifiable fight against a mass of cruel terrorists. The damaged buildings are a metonymic image of the suffering of the inhabitants of Manhattan unwillingly caught up in the conflict. But the city also speaks in a more explicit way through the graffiti on its walls, which frequently offer a comment on the images presented in specific panels or on certain events in the narrative. An early example can be seen in Figure 1, where a text on the bottom right of the panel (“They are lying to you”) offers a counterpoint to the discourse of the newscast (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, vol. 1, 8). Other examples are the graffiti “Crazy for war” on the wall next to an armed combatant (vol. 1, 14) and the one which reads “Wake up” looming over Matty’s abandoned mobile phone, his only means of communication with the network, when he decides to sever his ties with the outside world and remain in the DMZ (vol. 1, 30). Graffiti acts as a sort of Greek chorus in DMZ, voicing the feelings and often the revolt of the people of Manhattan, but also offering a moral compass, especially when denouncing the true interests of those conducting the war or revealing the powerlessness of its victims.

“We’re not your enemy, we just live here,” cries Zee, the girl Matty meets on his first day in the DMZ, and who becomes his on-and-off companion for the rest of the series (vol. 1, 26; emphasis in the original). This comes shortly after Matty’s shock in seeing children loot the remains of the helicopter in which he had arrived in Manhattan in order to sell its parts back to the US army or even to the Free States, who Matty still sees as the enemy. “Your sides don’t mean much around here,” Zee explains. “Everyone feels like the enemy to us” (vol. 1, 25; emphasis in the original). This enmity against those who live outside the city comes from the sense of the inhabitants of the DMZ that they have been forsaken by those who are truly responsible for the war, which goes on with no regard for the interests of the people of Manhattan or even their bare survival. They are a representation of what Bauman calls “human waste”, the ones left behind by modernization in its attempt to build an organized world, the necessary “side-effect of order-building” (Bauman 2004, loc. 101-07; emphasis in the original). Again, in Zee’s words: “we were the abandoned, the neglected” (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, 1: 254).

Indeed, as Zee explains to Matty, most of the people who were left behind in Manhattan when the Free States army approached were the poor, who had no means to escape the island (1: 185). The division between the DMZ and the rest of the United States, then, is established along economic lines. Its inhabitants are the “flawed, incomplete, unfulfilled consumers” who, according to Bauman (2004, loc. 243, 282), are given no alternatives once they have been excluded, and who have no clear paths towards reintegration. Their plight is consistently presented as a consequence of the
manipulation and aggressive business tactics conducted by the corporate elite, and war becomes to a great extent a metaphor for the logic of international capitalism. The landscape of Manhattan in *DMZ* is to a large extent a representation of conflagrated areas around the world, but it is also a representation of the slums in poor nations in the margins of capitalism, their squalor visually expressed in the bedraggled clothing of some of the inhabitants of the city, in the presence of garbage and open sewers among the ruins, in the improvised living quarters in reclaimed tenements where water and electricity are scarce and uncertain. The DMZ is a microcosm that brings the periphery to the center, joining the North to the South, and calling attention to the presence of the excluded in a city that is one of the focal points of global capitalism.

The tensions inherent in this mechanism of exclusion are often expressed in *DMZ* through the conflict between word and picture in the panels, exploiting what Hillary Chute (2010, 5) calls the cross-discursivity of comics, the juxtaposition of text and images that is characteristic of the medium. In working with multiple layers of words and images, a comics “conveys several productive tensions in its basic structure. The words and images entwine, but never synthesize,” so that it is possible to mix different points of view and temporalities in the same panel. In comics, the text frequently offers an ironic counterpart to the image (Groensteen 2007, 53; Baetens and Frey 2015, 147). This technique is used with didactic intensity at a point in which the US government has decided to begin the reconstruction of selected sites in the DMZ in the hopes of winning “the hearts and minds of its citizens”. The words of the newscast making this announcement are juxtaposed to the image of a mob attacking a bus carrying a group of workers to one of the construction sites, followed by panels showing the mob being violently repressed by armed security (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, vol. 2, 9). Behind the supposedly good intentions of the government are the interests of the Trustwell corporation, which had been awarded the contract for the reconstruction. Modelled after Blackwater and Halliburton, and their participation in the Iraq war, Trustwell is accused of corruption and violence on a global scale. Although excluded from being active participants in the system, the inhabitants of the DMZ are still a means to generate the kind of profit that feeds international capitalism. Like Agamben’s *homo sacer* (1998, loc. 112-27), they are the excluded who are nevertheless captured by the system, who are both inside and outside the political realm, and whose state of exception is “the hidden foundation on which the entire political system” rests.

Manhattan emerges in *DMZ* as a contested node of the global empire, which Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000, 319-20) describe as a network with no defined centre; in the city, the struggle between the control imposed by the network and the autonomous resistance of its subjects, which Negri and Hardt see as an integral part of the dynamics of globalization, is explicitly played out. In turning New York into the target of repeated bombings and several attempts of occupation by the US army, *DMZ* brings the war home, blurring the borders between the city and “the nation’s military targets in Afghanistan and Iraq” (Lund 2017, 249). As Martin Lund argues, *DMZ* interweaves local and global events, establishing a connection between the attack against the Twin Towers, US intervention abroad, and global capitalism (250).² Symbolically, the DMZ represents the whole system of global capitalism, with

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² One of the first panels of the narrative shows Matty leaning against a wall under a graffiti that reads: "Every day is 9/11!" (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, 1: 9). This phrase silently echoes through the narrative as one of its motifs.
its tensions and structures of power; it is a place that is also a no-place that contains everything.

**But life still goes on**

Paradoxically, though, while the DMZ is a figure for both a globalized war and the city as a locus of global contradictions, it is also an isolated space where the absence of a formal order opens the possibility of new social arrangements. As Kelly Connolly, a reporter from an independent news group who visits Manhattan, points out to Matty:

> This is really an incredible place, you know. This is a city stuck in between everything. This doesn’t feel like any recognizable place anymore. Certainly doesn’t feel like America. (...) [T]his city, the people who are left here... (...) They don’t belong to either side. This is like a whole new tribe, a new culture. (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, vol. 1, 209-10; emphasis in the original)

In Kelly’s assessment, the DMZ asserts itself in opposition to any prevalent social order and in the creation of a new identity, independent from the US, not only in terms of political structure, but more importantly in terms of culture and ideology. But it is not precisely defined; in fact, it cannot be. In “Le corps utopique,” Foucault argues that the body is in principle the opposite of utopia: being essentially concrete and always occupying a precise location in space, it could never be the no-place of utopia. Nevertheless, the body also has its “places without a place”: the head, for instance, which Foucault describes as a deep mysterious cavern, penetrated by the exterior world through our eyes; also, parts of our body, such as our backs, remain invisible to us, and therefore indefinite. For Foucault, the body is both open and shut, penetrable and opaque; because of that, it acquires utopian possibilities (Foucault 2009, 12-3). The utopian potential of the body lies in those of its elements that blur the boundaries between what is inside and what is outside, that turn it from an inescapable physical presence to a no-place. As Foucault’s utopian body, the DMZ is at the same time a fixed space with clearly defined borders and a porous entity whose boundaries with the outside world are permeable to external forces. It also shifts in its internal balance of power and in the way it is perceived by its inhabitants and its visitors; consequently, it is unpredictable and undefinable. Caught in a state of exception, it becomes singular through negation, in not belonging to any side, in being apart from a larger system at the same time that it belongs to it as its necessary other – it is in between.

Here, an analogy with the formal structure of comics may again help us understand the way DMZ constructs its vision of the city. In her analysis of comics, Hillary Chute pays special attention to the gutter, the empty space between panels. For Chute, the gutter is where the reader projects causality, establishing a connection between one panel and the next. Consequently, it fosters the narrative drive, at the same time that it arrests it by drawing attention to singular panels within the sequence. It both fragments and consolidates, establishing a kind of discontinuous continuity among the panels. The gutter provides “a constant proffering of the unmarked in spaces that are carefully bounded and marked out. At the heart of the attention to the gutter is the fact of its constitutive absence.” It also graphically marks the idea of in-betweenness in the narrative itself: “Thinking of architecture, one might conceive the gutter as the space in between walls” (Chute 2016, 35). The gutter is put to highly productive uses in DMZ, marking dramatic shifts in the narrative, such as
the one from a moment of stillness to a sudden explosion. Thus, it symbolically represents what remains unexplainable and arbitrary in the transition from quiet to the eruption of violence. It also points to radical shifts of perspective, from an intimate scene that focuses closely on the characters, to monumental views of the city viewed from above. Such changes of perspective are particularly significant when maps or satellite views of the city are juxtaposed to the view on the ground, since this establishes a contrast between the controlling gaze from above and the chaotic and dynamic vision of life on the streets. The gutter also has an important expressive function in *DMZ*, since it is often painted black instead of the traditional white of the page, highlighting particularly sombre moments in the narrative. More interestingly, the image of the city in *DMZ* seems to reproduce the logic of the gutter: Manhattan is both present and absent, an undefined space that remains invisible for the public at large, part of a system and separated from it by a gap, incorporating the in-between status of the gutter.

In cancelling out the traditional social structure (at least within the DMZ itself), war offers liberation to the inhabitants of the city: “Before, I had rent to worry about, ConEd, late fees, asshole bar-hopping pretty boys and smoking bans,” declares a man Matty interviews (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, vol. 1, 266). “In many ways I feel freer than I did before the war,” says someone else. “Everything’s underground now, music, fashion, culture. Block by block, everyone does their thing. We’re all fueled by innovation and style, not money, so it’s pure, it’s all pure now,” explains a third (vol. 1, 274). Matty himself is caught up in this kind of enthusiasm in his perception of Manhattan: “This city has a way of changing every few blocks. Something new around every corner” (vol. 1, 75). Much of this has to do with the aura that surrounds New York in the present and its utopian overtones: its dynamism, its diversity, its role in cultural innovation. But the war erases much of its past, especially its connection to corporate capitalism, almost as if its history began with the conflict. Many of its landmarks, such as the Empire State and the Chrysler Building, appear as archaeological remnants from a distant past whose meaning has changed, or as identity signs that allow the reader to easily identify the city and its haunting aura. They form a devastated landscape that has become a new territory conductive to an almost transcendental transformation of the self, characterized by the freedom brought by a lack of definition. As a character muses when entering the DMZ after defecting from the Free States army: “I felt like I was drifting... not only was I in a land between nations, but that I was in a certain state of being, trapped between life and death. [...] Why do I gotta belong to one side or the other?” (vol. 2, 368; emphasis in the original).

Other elements in this landscape acquire a different meaning. When the installations of the Trustwell corporation are shown during its bid to reconstruct Manhattan, the panels focus on their fences, their armed guards, their security cameras. The entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel, which connects Manhattan to New Jersey, is represented as a fortress of monumental scale, its severe lines reminiscent of Soviet architecture. These are clearly nightmarish structures, drawn from an already established repertoire of dystopian images. They are presented in this guise because they point to the intrusion of vigilance, control and power, or because they are an attempt to impose a clear frontier, as in the case of the Lincoln Tunnel, controlled by the Free States army. They interrupt fluidity by trying to establish a rigid organization. Similarly, when Parco Delgado, a populist leader, manages to be elected as provisional governor of the DMZ, the city hall is represented as a shadowy
dystopian building, a Kafkian state bureaucracy is put into operation, and the streets are covered with huge posters of the new leader, evocative of the ubiquitous posters of Big Brother in *1984* – unlike Big Brother, though, Parco is wearing the conservative suit of a businessman or a professional politician, in stark contrast to the street clothes he wore before being elected.

Figure 3: DMZ, vol. 1, p. 122. DMZ © 2005 DC Comics. Written by Brian Wood and illustrated by Riccardo Burchielli. Courtesy of DC Comics.
What these images stand for again helps to define the utopian elements of the DMZ through negation: a denial of power, of fixed institutions, of investment in an official political structure. On the other hand, some of the features of the DMZ reproduce certain traits or desires frequently associated with utopian thought, such as the abolition of money, the cultivation of the arts and creativity, and personal freedom. The figure of the isolated island, strongly associated with classic utopias since Thomas More’s inaugural work, is brought to the fore, at the same time that the notion of fluidity is reinforced in opposition to the conception of utopia as a static society,
following a tendency of more recent narratives which reject the notion of a perfected blueprint in favour of a utopia that allows for continuous change (Moylan 2000, 88). What seems to be at stake in DMZ, then, are the very ideas of dystopia and utopia. Lyman Tower Sargent’s definition of dystopia as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived” (1994, 9) relies heavily on the problematic notion of authorial intention. The use of easily recognizable icons from the dystopian tradition in DMZ, however, indicates clearly which elements are expected to be considered dystopian in the narrative. The fact that these elements appear in opposition to strong utopian elements indicates that DMZ can be read as a critical dystopia. Critical dystopias reject the static aspect of the negative societies depicted in traditional dystopias, favouring the possibility of change and often opting for an open-ended narrative in which the possibility of social transformation still remains; they point either to this possibility of transformation in the future or to utopian enclaves within the dystopian society itself (Moylan 2000, 187-96). DMZ is peculiar in that its utopian impulse is not relegated to an enclave, but coexists with the dystopian situation itself – as the testimony of the people interviewed by Matty indicates, the utopia of the DMZ has as its necessary condition the state of war. Rather than leading to the proposal of a specific plan for a better society, the disruption caused by the war unleashes the utopian energies that already existed in potential in the imaginary of the city. To the extent that the DMZ is utopian at all, it is undoubtedly an urban utopia. And, to the extent that it is also a representation of global capitalism as a dystopia that we already live in the present, it works according to what China Miéville calls a “strategy for ruination” (2017, 183-4), an attempt to cobble together and repurpose the detritus of the world, to work from the ruins of tradition towards something new and unpredictable. Instead of a plan, improvisation.

Despite its fluidity, the utopia outlined in DMZ is not the kind of vague utopian longings that Bauman describes in Liquid Times as being dominant in contemporary society, where change is a superficial (and illusory) outcome of consumerism, and happiness has become a purely individual pursuit – “a ‘deregulated’, ‘privatized’ and ‘individualized’ version of the old-style visions of the good society” (2007, 107). As one of the characters interviewed by Matty declares: “This is the sort of work I dreamed about when I was young: designing and building something that’ll make a real difference to my city. I wouldn’t be doing this right now if the war hadn’t happened, I bet” (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, vol. 1, 270). The war offers an opportunity for people to pursue their dreams in a way that otherwise would be denied them, but this is not a purely individual enterprise, since it is firmly grounded on a sense of community. While official institutions crumble, they are replaced by improvised, independent initiatives that turn out to be more efficient, and whose prime goal is to serve the community – or to answer some drive towards self-expression, as in the case of DJs who play for free, or the restaurants that serve food grown on roof gardens. In fact, personal identity in the DMZ is largely a function of belonging to a specific neighbourhood, to a cultural tribe or to an urban enclave. The city as a whole is a badge of identity. In DMZ, urban life, with its potential for the creation of grassroots movements and spontaneous connections based on shared interests, is offered as an antidote for the rampant individualism of contemporary society.
But all this is fragile. The last two pages of DMZ offer a single dazzling image of the reconstructed Manhattan skyline after the final invasion by the US army that leads to the end of the war. In stark opposition to the first two pages of the narrative, the picture is clear and bright, and it indicates unity rather than fragmentation. On a superficial level, it is an emblem for peace – even the obligatory white doves are present. But the very banality of the cliché shows that there is something wrong with this picture. As Lund points out, “DMZ’s NYC of the future is a mass of gleaming glass and steel towers, symbols of capital and corporate power, which has the effect of re-establishing the broken system DMZ critiqued for years” (2017, 252). The point is not so much that a return to the old system is inevitable, as Lund argues, and even less that it is desirable. It is questionable whether this conventional image of utopia is enough to effectively contain the energies associated with the DMZ in the rest of the narrative, which still appears as a more attractive alternative. The point seems rather to reinforce the idea that utopia is always under the risk of falling against the historical forces from which it tried to remain independent. Suvin argues that in their drive to imagine a future that would offer a way out from “the closure inside the belly of the beast”, critical dystopias often stress the matter of personal choice:

In the pragmatic absence and indeed breakdown of collective agencies, such as centralized parties, the writings focus on the choices by one or more focal agents, themselves endangered and fallible, who undergo a heuristic awakening to be followed by the reader – not least toward new collective agencies from the bottom up. (Suvin 2010, 396-397)

In DMZ, the substitution of an illusory utopia, connected to the corporate interests involved in urban renewal, for the more dynamic utopian energies outlined in the rest of the narrative is closely connected to the choices made by Matty when he intervenes in the outcome of the war, as we are going to see in the next section. His voice nevertheless dominates the last issue of the series. The text that overlays the last image of DMZ and the panels on the preceding pages is a passage from the book Matty wrote after leaving the DMZ. There, he urges the reader to look past the steel and glass of the new buildings in Manhattan to find the city he describes in his book, to fix it in her mind and never let it go. Living the dream of the DMZ requires a personal commitment to the imagined city.

**Being nobody in the city**

One of the stops in Matty’s first tour of the city is the improvised clinic where Zee, who was a medical student before the war, tends the sick. There, he sees children wounded during the bombing carried out by the military in an attempt to rescue him after his helicopter had crashed. The scene is highly charged, one of the instances in which DMZ uses violent imagery to manipulate the emotions of the reader (Nurse 2017, 9-11); it is also the moment in which Matty fully assumes his role as journalist. He does not interview the children or their caretakers; instead, he photographs them. As Susan Sontag argues in Regarding the Pain of Others, photographs of the victims of war are in themselves a species of rhetoric (2004, loc. 60). What we have in DMZ is a sort of double exposure, in which we first see the wounded children as Matty enters the clinic and then see them anew in the photographs he takes, as if the full significance of the spectacle of violence could only be perceived through the photographic medium, or as if it could only be imagined and represented through the
visual repository of war photographs that circulate in the media. As Sontag notes, the “understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images” (loc. 201).

While this formal choice may create an effect of familiarity in the reader, who is able to see in these images echoes of similar scenes from actual armed conflicts all over the world, lending them an aura of truth and making them reverberate with the pathos of the accumulated memory of the cruelty of war, it also involves some risks. The reproduction of the style and aesthetics of war photography in these images may lead the reader instead to see them as yet another object of consumption in a culture where shock has a strong appeal and where similar pictures have been reproduced to exhaustion; alternately, shock can become familiar due to its repetition, and simply wear off – the “image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence” (Sontag 2004, loc. 216, 221, 763). In DMZ, more specifically, showing the horrors of war through the repertoire of angles, poses, imagery and symbols produced by the media is problematic because the latter is consistently represented as untrustworthy and manipulative. Reproducing the imagery of foreign wars is part of the effort in DMZ to make the reader aware of the impact of war on citizens like themselves (Nurse 2017, 11), and at the same time to explode the idea of the local, which is replaced by what Paul Virilio calls a City-World besieged by the horrors of the images broadcast by the media, a “terminal neo-colonial empire” in which “ELSEWHERE BEGINS HERE” (2005, 85-111; emphasis in the original). Then again, it may have the opposite effect of turning “us” into “them”, the people from “exotic” countries who are more commonly the object of war photography, and who are “regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees” (Sontag 2004, loc. 681).

In taking up his camera, Matty becomes an agent of the media, potentially reproducing their objectifying logic – it is the impersonal gaze of the camera that is displayed in the large panel immediately above the images that it “sees” and captures (Fig. 5). Initially, then, this sequence emphasizes the indifferent or even intrusive presence of the machine. But as Sontag points out, while photographs are an objective record of the real, they also necessarily have a point of view, since they are taken by a person, and so they bear witness to the real (Sontag 2004, loc. 241-46). As many of the war comics discussed by Hillary Chute in Disaster Drawn (2016, 14), the scene displayed here is about the act of witnessing. It is Matty’s presence behind the camera, his personal connection with what he sees, that saves the pictures he takes from being a detached, objectifying record. Indeed, the photographs of the wounded children are overlaid by Matty’s immediate thoughts on them, which point to his revulsion, his sympathy, and his guilt. While they retain their potential for shock as isolated images, the way they are supposed to be read is guided by their position on the page as panels that are part of a sequence: comics call attention to “the relationship of part to whole, to the self-conscious buildup of information that may or may not coalesce into meaning” (Chute 2016, 17). The potentially alienating disjunction of these pictures is therefore alleviated or anticipated by the medium of comics itself. As Baetens and Frey argue, the visual logic of comics is less syntagmatic than paradigmatic:

What it shows is in the first place a series of variations on the face. Even if graphic novels do tell stories, their first concern is not infrequently the portrait of the characters and the multiperspectival representation of their bodies. (Baetens and Frey 2015, 176)
The display of the suffering bodies of the children demands a moral commitment from Matty and also from the reader, the kind of ethical gaze that Leonidas Donskis (2013, 9) offers as a remedy for the insensitivity, which he associates with instrumental reason. As a journalist, Matty is expected to take a double stance. He is supposed to become an extension of the camera and record faithfully what he witnesses, but he must also display the appropriate response as a spectator. He must be impartial and involved at the same time. Despite the importance attributed to the photographic image and to witness accounts as a means of access to the atrocities of the war, there is still a belief in the reality of the facts in DMZ, even though they may be subjected to interpretation and political manipulation. A central moral choice in the narrative is what to do with these facts, including whether to reveal them or not. Zee’s main concern in helping Matty when he arrives in the DMZ is not only to show the reality of the war, but above all to make the inhabitants of Manhattan visible as living human beings. This is already a moral injunction that could serve as a general guideline for the choices Matty must make once he decides to become a journalist: to protect the people in the DMZ, to assure not only their bare survival, but also the lifestyle they are trying to build. But this general guideline is not enough to assure that the appropriate choice is always made. The instability of the war – which is, to a great extent, the instability of city life itself, with its shifting alliances and the ever present danger of being manipulated by the dominant forces in society – makes the DMZ a morally slippery ground. The early pages of the narrative show the moral example of
Zee’s dedication to the wounded children in the improvised clinic, but this is preceded by the gruesome spectacle of the bodies of American soldiers hanging in bags from a fire escape (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, 1: 25). Siding with the locals is a complex proposition, for they can also commit atrocities.

Some distance seems to be required, and this is provided by the fact that Matty is an outsider. This creates some barriers – he is usually considered a “tourist” by the inhabitants of Manhattan – but also keeps him free from an alliance with specific power groups, and allows him to see the DMZ with fresh eyes, as an essentially new experience. Although he comes from a territory controlled by the US government, his allegiance to the nation is shaky at best, and his lack of concern for the war, which borders on alienation, keeps him from backing either of the two sides in the conflict. But he is an outsider in a more fundamental way. As Nurse points out, Matty “is established early on as an intern who has yet to be fully accepted within the broadcast media industry; thus his impartiality and freedom from corruption is implied from the outset” (2017, 7). On the other hand, he joins Viktor Ferguson in his assignment in the DMZ because of his father’s influence in the network (Nurse 2017, 7). Matty is caught up between discredit and privilege. His dislocation to the DMZ reinforces his initial position as an outsider in the game of hierarchy – or rather his ambivalent status as a participant in this game and someone who is left out from its decisions. As such, he already belongs to the DMZ, which is also caught up in the system at the same time that it is excluded from it. Besides, just as Zee and her friend Jamal – who become a doctor and an architect in the DMZ, although they were only students before the war – Matty finds himself practicing a profession for which he had no formal training. As most of the people in the DMZ, he improvises. He is a nobody feeling his way towards being somebody.

For Virilio (2005, 90-109), the contemporary city is a locus of disaster, an extraterritorial representation of the tensions of globalization, where everyone is excluded from a multipolar internationality and from the decisions of power. On the other hand, he also argues that the experience of urban space is part of the process of self-construction (8). But what identity can be constructed in a city already in ruins? The answer in DMZ seems to be to take up its precariousness, to identify with its inhabitants as the powerless and excluded, to be somebody while being aware that ultimately one is nobody – in other words, to embrace its in-betweenness, and, by doing that, be one with the city. After drawing the outline of a few buildings on the wall of the prison cell where he is locked, the urban artist Decade Later declares: “It’s my identity. It might as well be my self-portrait” (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, vol. 4, 331). That this is a model to be followed becomes clear in the representation of Zee, the most unambiguously positive character in the narrative, whose identification with the inhabitants of Manhattan and commitment to protect them render her the moral centre of DMZ. As Brian Wood succinctly declares in the interview that closes the first volume of the collected edition of DMZ, “Zee is the city” (vol. 1, 292). Zee preserves her life and her integrity by avoiding the “sinners;” this does not imply a search for purity, exactly, but rather an attempt to stay apart from the sides that actively take part in a conflict, to understand people’s complex motivations, to avoid violent action, to stay in the grey area “in between [...] binary points of view” (vol. 3, 303-4).

The independence this position brings may be similar to Matty’s sense of freedom at a point in DMZ in which he is temporarily declared dead by the US army. In this
moment, he feels invulnerable, and believes that he can actually do something to protect the city (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, vol. 1, 203). As the rest of the people in the DMZ, he is *homo sacer*, his growing fame as the only embedded journalist in the DMZ offering only a precarious protection from his being killed by the government whenever this becomes more convenient than keeping him alive. His strength, however, seems to come from belonging and not belonging at the same time. His downfall happens precisely when he takes sides by allying himself with Parco Delgado in his bid to become governor of Manhattan through the official political channels. This leads not only to Matty’s losing his credibility as an independent observer, but also to a series of morally questionable actions, culminating in the death of fourteen civilians under his orders, mistakenly killed instead of a group of US soldiers who had attacked him earlier. This is a direct consequence of Matty demanding from Parco his own security detail in an attempt to have his own autonomy and become an "enclave of one" (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, vol. 3, 281).

Matty’s involvement with Parco, which Zee disapprovingly sees as his picking up a weapon (vol. 3, 304), brings not only his own downfall, but also the destruction of the DMZ as an alternative social experiment. It is the explosion of a clandestine nuclear device in Parco’s possession, somewhere upriver from New York – an explosion actually caused by the US military – that provides the American government with the justification for a final invasion of Manhattan which virtually obliterates the city. Matty, however, manages to avoid an even greater carnage by threatening to expose the US government’s involvement in the atomic explosion and forcing it to sign a peace treaty. This is also an attempt at redemption, since Matty had been Parco’s agent in the acquisition of the nuclear device in the first place. His final atonement, however, comes after the war ends, and it involves a radical form of exclusion: his delivering himself for a life sentence in prison by declaring himself guilty of treason against the American government.

Matty’s embroilment in a project to gain personal power and his excessive individualism in trying to become an “enclave of one” lead to disaster; his reparation begins with a reconciliation with the city. Towards the end of the narrative, he is confronted with a moral dilemma: he must choose between exposing the involvement of the US army in the explosion of the nuclear device, or protecting the lives of the inhabitants of the DMZ by hiding the truth and allowing the invasion of Manhattan to consolidate peace. After a long period of alienation from Zee during his adventure with Parco, she surfaces again to have a conversation with Matty in a scene that may actually have happened, but which might just as well have taken place only in his imagination. It is because of her advice that he decides to hide the truth in order to achieve peace (Wood, Burchielli et al. 2013-15, vol. 5, 126-29). Abstract moral principles, such as a respect for truth above all else, are left behind in favour of the well-being of the city. At this point, Zee, the living representation of the city, has been internalized as Matty’s moral conscience. The utopian experimentation of the DMZ may have been destroyed by the system it tried to resist – arguably an unavoidable outcome, since it was largely based on its own fragility, on its precarious position between opposing forces, on its own indefiniteness. It was also betrayed by Matty’s allegiance with the traditional structure of power. But something of it remains ingrained in the individual both as memory and desire. It also informs the idea that the moral self takes shape in the conciliation between individual freedom and a sense of community, in a personal identification with the city.
Works Cited


