

From the Island to the Border

The Problematization of Space in Contemporary Dystopian Fiction⁸

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to offer a renewed perspective on the topic of dystopian fiction by focusing on its treatment and problematization of space. The origins and transformations of the dystopian genre are outlined from a genealogical standpoint (Jean-Marie Schaeffer, 1989) and related to the dialectic of utopian and dystopian discourse, which is understood as one of the most relevant keys to the interpretation of the formal evolution and meaning of contemporary dystopian works. Using Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope and Lotman's concept of the spatial model, the paper proposes an approach to utopian literature from the model of the island, and to dystopian fiction from the model of the border. Dystopian fiction is therefore regarded as a critical response to the border that used to be invisible and never thematized in utopian literature, by turning the whole world into an endless border which is understood as a space of exception and a lack of rights. Throughout the article, the models of the island and the border are applied to a comparative commentary between several literary and audiovisual dystopian works, taking both classical and contemporary examples. In most contemporary works, we find an interweaving of islands and borders that was not present in previous dystopian fictions. These dialectics are analyzed in order to translate the spatial conflicts they address into a wider political question about current problems regarding borders and governability, security as a contemporary utopia, and the community as a new agent in front of the failure of the states.

KEYWORDS

Dystopia, utopia, literary genres, border, cultural studies, chronotope.

Literature is indissolubly both a science of society and the creation of a new mythology. This is the basis on which the sameness of a poetics and a politics can be defined.

Jacques Rancière (2007, 19)

Junctions: Graduate Journal of the Humanities

Marc Villanueva Mir. 2018.

Vol 3(2): 39-51. ISSN: 2468-8282

<http://junctionsjournal.org/>



⁸ This paper is a shortened revision of an article originally published in Spanish under the title “De la Isla a la frontera. La problematización del espacio en la ficción distópica contemporánea” in the academic journal *Tropelías: Revista de teoría de la literatura y literatura comparada* (2018, 29: 506-21). When not originally written in English, the quotations have been translated by me.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the appearance of novels such as *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932) or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, 1949) was immediately celebrated by critics as

the birth of a new literary genre, which would be defined by the tumultuous political and social reality of the era, and by a strong feeling of insecurity and mistrust towards the upcoming future. Although the World Wars were a key element to this occurrence, the failure of the great utopian projects of the twentieth century contributed most to the emergence of such pessimistic writings. The success reached by the first dystopian fictions led to a quick delimitation of some features of the new dystopian genre: dystopia would appear as a literary expression of the mistrust of utopia, through a prospective fiction that would present an undesirable world settled in the near future. Where topics related to dehumanization or alienation would be invoked, often in post-apocalyptic scenarios, either desolated or overpopulated, either under a strong control or subsumed in a radical anomie (di Minico 2015, 6-7).

Even though these features can be observed in most of the dystopian novels produced during the first half of the twentieth century under the direct influence of Huxley and Orwell – which, as Domingo (2008) suggests, I will call “classical dystopias” – they are too much based on the description of an original model, and therefore prove insufficient to analyze some of the evolutions of the dystopian genre over the last decades. This persistence of the core topics of the genre at the same time produces an outdated portrait of dystopias, which prevents a thorough analysis of the dystopian phenomenon as a whole. To better grasp the shifts and transformations of the dystopian genre in all kinds of media, including movies, comics and videogames, and not only within the narrow boundaries of the novel, I deem it proper to discuss dystopian fiction in a broader sense in this article.

According to Pavel (2003, 46), the skill of every narrative work consists of the introduction of formal innovations that can produce a renewed representation of an ever-changing world. Since the dystopian genre has spread from literature to new media and has therefore produced a new range of problems related to intermediality, approaching our subject from a pure genealogical perspective would prove insufficient. Accordingly, I will complement it with an analogical approach as well. As described by Schaeffer (1989), the analogical approach refuses to take the genre as given, but instead assumes the point of view of the reader and focuses on how different texts and products can be read from a dystopian perspective, even if they do not explicitly showcase any of the formal features of the genre. The formal and methodological differences between media are not an obstruction to this endeavor either, as long as a discourse which binds them together can be produced. This approach enables us to point out the axis from which I

want to observe dystopian fiction, which has to do with the dialogue that it establishes with the utopian thinking through its treatment of space.

The concept of “utopia” was first coined by Thomas More (1516) in his most well-known work, as a denomination for an imaginary island, and meant as a wordplay with οὐ- (negation prefix) and εὖ- (good) added to τόπος (place). Ever since, the concept of utopia is bound to a paradoxical duality that defines the “good place” as a “no place” at the same time, which can only be reached through an “explorative exercise of imagination” (Claeys 2011, 69). The literary visit to these “inexistent countries” (Trousseau 1979) is, however, far from an evasion of reality. If the utopia represents “a dream of social perfection” (López Keller 1991, 8), the logic of the utopian genre consists of the contraposition of that perfection with the imperfection of the society that will read the text. Through this strategy, utopian literature shows the destructive tendencies of the current system, from the confidence that criticism can smooth them, if not erase them. In this sense, the goal of utopian literature is not to create a world outside of the world, but to explore, through a dialectical exercise, the actual space between “what is possible and what is impossible” (Claeys 2011, 15).

The term “dystopia”, which replaces εὖ- with δυς-⁹, appeared much later. While the cultural substrata for the coining of the term “utopia” is the Renaissance, a period characterized by its faith in the emancipatory strength of reason and progress, the concept of dystopia circulates, from the end of the eighteenth century, in the shadows of the French and the Industrial Revolutions, which would lead to nightmarish scenarios forged by the project of the Enlightenment. This literature would rapidly echo the insecurity produced by these events. In the same way that, in a kind of anticipation to the School of Suspicion (Ricoeur 1965), the gothic novel had crowded the nineteenth-century imagination with monsters and supernatural phenomena, science fiction would produce the first dystopian images directly related to the technological progress and the evolution of science.

However, the distinctive trait of the dystopian genre – and of dystopia itself – is the dialectics established with the concept of utopia, as a reflection of the contradictory nature of the Enlightenment project. Close to the dialectics of Horkheimer and Adorno (1969), dystopia traces a direct, almost causal, bond between utopian thinking and the totalitarian and inhuman reality erected by the human being. The actual social structures question the ideal, producing a dialectical operation that inverts the utopian one, opposing the concept of utopia in both its senses: utopia as “good place”, since the present would express itself in terms of “catastrophe” or “barbarism”; and utopia as “no place”, since dystopia points out precisely the material

⁹ Δυς- would mean anormal, painful or harmful (Domingo 2008, 23).

existence of injustice and oppression within the society. In terms of the Frankfurt School, one could say that the idealistic dialectics of utopia are rejected here by negative dialectics, which present the dystopia as an inherent condition of the very utopian dream: the ideas of dystopia as utopia under suspicion (Domingo 2008), as utopia's shadow (Kumar 2013) or as its very essence (Claeys 2013, 15) leads us to the conclusion that the term "dystopia" cannot be understood as a mere antithesis of "utopia".

While utopia seeks to perform a critical function through a position of intellectual authority, dystopia aims at the complicity of its readership through the irony, in order to invite them to recognize the dangers and menaces already existing in their society, and which have been "fast-forwarded" (Jameson 1994, 56) by the novel to explode in a near future. Dystopia works through abstraction and magnification: it picks up a potentially self-destructive aspect in its contemporary society – the logics of capitalist consumerism in *Brave New World*, the totalitarian thinking in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or the patriarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 1985) – and, as Orwell himself explained, follows its development "to their logical consequences" (Claeys 2010, 123).

From Orwell on, a myriad of authors has tried their best to apply this operation to all sorts of topics, from new data technologies to climate change, in order to keep the admonitory character of the genre alive. However, these attempts to innovate in the level of content do not always come together with an evolution of the deployed composition procedures. This has resulted in the common portrayal of the dystopian genre as old-fashioned, and in its critical devaluation. One could point at the exhaustion of the fixed formula of the classical dystopia, which nonetheless, does not necessarily imply that the dystopian genre as such is stuck. Contemporary dystopian fictions introduce innovations and modulations, and occasionally move beyond the genealogical legacy of classical dystopias. The question would be, then, how to articulate a critical reading that allows us to analyze and evaluate the changes experienced in the dystopian phenomenon, from Huxley to *The Walking Dead*, and their connections with contemporary philosophical, political and social discourses, in a time in which, as Jameson (2003, 76) pointed out, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism". From this perspective, I could state that the axis for every dystopian discourse is to be found in the dialectical relationship that it establishes with the utopian thinking of its moment. The problematization of these dialectics can, therefore, be a good guideline to observe the dystopian phenomenon as a whole. It is possible that this problematization can especially be observed in the artistic treatment of space, the τόπος shared by utopia and dystopia.

The bakhtinian concept of the chronotope proves useful to such endeavor. According to Bakhtin (1975), the chronotope is the key element of the construction of every literary genre, which establishes the ruling codes in every fictional world. The chronotope implies an absolutely interdependent bond between time and space, and it is only in the conjunction of these two coordinates that we can really approach it. Of course, neither space nor time should be confused with location or era. Far from being a mere container for the action, the chronotope expresses a series of properties which determine what characters can and cannot do. This is how the chronotope of each fictional world and its regime of verisimilitude become a representation of the human existence.

From this perspective we could say that time, in the classical dystopia, is usually expressed as an artificial and automatized time; the clock “set at thirteen” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or the strict routines of the handmaids in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are good examples of this artificial nature. The characters are immersed in a loop in which different forms of violence are constantly inflicted on them, while social control is set as the narrow grid in which they are allowed to move. Space in classical dystopia can be seen, on the other hand, as a maze. Dystopias present highly ritualized spaces, with a strong opposition between “places” and “transit spaces”. While the indoor environment is set as a safe space for the subject, open spaces meant for transit represent danger and the possibility of getting lost.

While, according to Bakhtin, space is inseparable from time, for Lotman (1970) space cannot be understood without taking the notion of conflict into consideration. Space is always set, from this perspective, in tension with “another” space, although this one is not directly represented. Again, the opposition is not physical, but a difference that can only be understood according to the symbolic value, the psychological perception or the codes of verisimilitude given to each of these spaces. The minimum expression of the spatial model is the binary opposition. In Lotman’s words (1970, 321):

“[...] the basic topological characteristic is the *boundary*. The boundary divides the space of the text in two subspaces that don’t intersect. Its basic property is the impenetrability. How the boundary divides a text is one of the main aspects of a text. It can divide it between own and alien, living and dead, rich and poor.”

Following Lotman, we can state that action in any literary text is triggered through the “crossing of the fundamental topological boundary of its spatial structure” (Lotman 1970, 332). The transgression of the spatial model is not only a dynamic factor to introduce a plot, but also presents the ethical and aesthetic problems of a certain work. As Bakhtin highlights, every literary genre favors the use of a certain chronotope, according to the idea of the world historically deployed by this genre or movement. The vision of the world that the chronotope

represents must, however, be completed with what the chronotope is not; that is, with the tension with other spaces that attempt to invade it. From this point of view, the problematization of the chronotopes or the transgression of codes from different genres can reflect historical moments of crisis or paradigm shifts, which often show their repercussion as much in literature as they do in other discursive fields, such as the perception of spaces and the social value that organizes them (Sennett 1994).

From this combined spatial perspective, I would suggest two main models that underlay utopian and dystopian fictions: the models of the island and the border. The island represents the space par excellence of utopian literature. From More's pivotal work, the hidden, isolated and almost unreachable space has been established as the best place to locate the "no place". Utopian societies can either be located on islands – in the most literal sense – or in regions with insular features: that could be the case of the mountains that surround El Dorado in *Candide* by Voltaire, but also of the utopias located in the future or in an alternative or uchronical time (Vieira 2010, 9-15) – or in the world of dreams. The island motive constitutes a paradigmatic spatial model: delimited by an inviolable boundary, the island is totally separated from its surroundings. At the same time, the island sees the boundary as a foreign body. The exclusion and violence that a border may perform are not acknowledged at all within the utopian genre since it specifically lacks any depiction of conflict. Utopia represents the ideal of perfect governability, an absolute bond between place and project, which cannot contain but its very perfection.

It is interesting to notice how the island model is still used in some of the first literary texts that present dystopian visions. This is especially the case in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Wells 1896). After a shipwreck, the main character Edward Prendick is rescued by a ship that brings him to a remote and, as the prologue points out, unknown island, where he will be hosted by the Doctor Moreau, an exiled scientist, condemned because of his heterodox vivisection practices. The aim of Moreau on the island is to turn animals into human beings. In opposition to the utopian island, the island of Doctor Moreau is crossed by inner boundaries, which divide the space according to a scale from civilization to bestiality: from the main building —where Prendick, Moreau and his partner live— to the primary town of the beastmen and the woods. This also generates a power hierarchy: the control of Moreau is strong in his house, but it slowly fades as he gets into the woods and into the irrational mind of the creatures. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is not as related to the utopian genre as it is to the terror story, but the utopian legacy appears through the election of the island as a setting. Moreau's divine dream can be seen as a private utopia, but it symbolically implicates science as a whole. This island represents a replacement of the scientific ideal of progress by a misuse of science. The opposition is

reinforced by the introduction of a firm boundary at the very core of the house, between Prendick's room and Moureau's lab. The lab, which should be the core of the human pole, appears as a space for torture and suffering, becoming a place for bestiality set in the heart of science.

However, the reeky and overcrowded crevices where the beastmen live, described as a "strange street" (Wells 1896, 104), are what anticipates the typical urban scenario for dystopian fiction. Classical dystopia abandons the island model suggested by Wells and proposes a unique world, which has dissolved its spatial borders (for instance, through the great world blocks of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) but also its temporal frames (through the rewriting or suppressing of the past). In *Brave New World*, extreme specialization keeps everyone ignorant, whereas in *Fahrenheit 451* imagination is systematically hounded, which makes any evasion to another world impossible. Somehow, this figuration of a unique world without an alternative is but a refiguration of the utopian insularity, with the difference that dystopian spaces cannot be seen as unreachable sanctuaries, but as inviolable prisons. In this sense, classical dystopia presents a perverse spatial model, inheriting the urban and demographic transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, through what Italo Calvino (1972) names "continuous cities": an almost infinite extension of urban landscape, in which subjects cannot orient themselves.

We could thus say that, while the utopian model is defined by its isolation and grows sheltered from the border, dystopia is constituted by the absence of external borders. The escape of Montag, the main character in *Fahrenheit 451*, is the only case among those I analyzed in which a character reaches the threshold of the dystopian society and enters into an alternative world. In all others, fleeing attempts not only fail (John's bid to become a hermit in *Brave New World*, or Wilson's attempt to join a resistance movement in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but also in the inability to leave the skyscraper in *High-Rise*), but prevent us from even glimpsing the existence of a threshold. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood offers us one of the most synthetic portraits of this chronotope:

"This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the center, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (Atwood, 1985: 31).

The chronotope of the maze is not only to be found in classical dystopias, where it is related to the idea of an impenetrable state typical of the Cold War but also in dystopias about social collapse: *The Walking Dead* lays out a labyrinthine world as well, from which no escape is possible. But the absence of boundaries does not place the border outside of the dystopian

genre; we can rather observe the opposite phenomenon. The predominant logic in dystopian fiction is the logic of the border, understood as a space of exception and lack of rights. From this perspective, we can consider that the classical dystopia thematized and extended the implicit border in the spatial model of the island, without directly talking about it. In other words, these dystopias call into question how many acts of repression and extermination are to be fulfilled in order to achieve a dream of social perfection. This permanent exception state (Agamben 2003) is explicitly legitimized in dystopias such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *The Handmaid's Tale*, through the reference to an exterior war, whereas in other cases, like *The Walking Dead*, it appears as a result of the fall of the previous social structures.

These two models, which we can identify with classical utopian and dystopian fictions, are not as clearly differentiated in more contemporary works. A first problematization of the dystopian model can be found, for instance, in *The Walking Dead*. We can critically describe it as an audiovisual series, in which a group of privileged characters who do not belong to the space of the border must survive, together with its genuine inhabitants (zombies and looters), which are envisaged as a radical “Other”. The series establishes a strong division between “us” and “them”, between living and undead, as in *The Handmaid's Tale* the term of “unwomen” is used to designate the dissidents in a discriminatory opposition very present within the dystopian discourse. *The Walking Dead* is a series about security, and for good reasons, successful in a time ruled by the fear of terrorism and mistrust towards the protection that states can actually provide. From this perspective, we can understand how the series deploys a return to the insular model of the utopia. After wandering days and days through the hostile world that surrounds them, the characters of *The Walking Dead* discover that the best way to survive consists of abandoning their nomadism, settling and building walls around them. That is the way taken by the group lead by Rick Grimes in Alexandria in the fifth season of the series, but also chosen by other groups like Hilltop or The Kingdom¹⁰. The basic idea that is reinvented in these little islands is the community: against the constant lack of rights that the state of exception represents, the community can perform something close to the ideal of governability that utopias used to lay out. For the characters in *The Walking Dead* this means joining forces against an enemy “other” located at the other side of the wall.

The model of the island appears again in *Soumission*, where Michel Houellebecq presents a hypothetical scenario of a last round in the French election between the National Front of Marine Le Pen and an Islamist party. In *Soumission*, the French Hexagon is understood as a

10 We can observe that the series incorporates certain symbolic elements (the cowboy hat and the sheriff star of Rick Grimes, the smiths in Hilltop or the medieval elements in The Kingdom) that remind us of genres with a strong utopian tradition, such as the western or the chivalric romance.

symbolic receptacle for the tradition and the values attributed to the Western world, and here seen as an incarnation of the utopian island. It is precisely the threat that the Muslim Brotherhood (standing, for instance, for the masculine polygamy and for the patriarchal submission of women) poses towards these values, which introduces the conflict and the possibility of a transgression of the utopian space, from an opposition between the own and the alien. Houellebecq's text turns to the dystopian genre in order to explore the sensation of decadence and loss in the Western world, and diagnoses a secret desire of submission within the Western subject, which explains the "weak and tacit acceptance" (Houellebecq 2015, 204) with which the process of imposition of the Muslim Brotherhood takes place. This process implies an implosion of the utopian island, which relinquishes voluntarily to be administered from the outside.

High-Rise offers us another dystopian revision of the insular model. In this case, J. G. Ballard revisits the myth of Robinson Crusoe, replacing the desert island forgotten by the civilization for a luxurious new skyscraper. *High-Rise* shows how the inequalities between its inhabitants – all of them successful civil servants – evolve into territorial conflicts that confront them according to the height of their apartment, until it becomes an actual war of clans. During the last phase of this conflict, the inhabitants of the high-rise practically become beasts, attacking and killing everyone they run into in their search for food or shelter. The lost civilization is no more the space of security that it used to be for Robinson; *High-Rise* points to civilization as the cause of its own collapse. Unlike Robinson, the characters can't be sheltered by civilization, which has become a pile of empty ruins:

"He gazed up at the derelict washing-machine and refrigerator, now only used as garbage-bins. He found it hard to remember what their original function had been. To some extent they had taken on a new significance, a role that he had yet to understand. Even the run-down nature of the high-rise was a model of the world into which the future was carrying them, a landscape beyond technology where everything was either derelict or, more ambiguously, recombined in unexpected but more meaningful ways. Laing pondered this —sometimes he found it difficult not to believe that they were living in a future that had already taken place, and was now exhausted" (Ballard, 1975: 208).

In *High-Rise*, Ballard lays out two horizons of postmodernity: on one hand, the fear that society is nothing but a simulation (Baudrillard 1990) and that it just survives in the virtuality of abandoned objects. On the other hand, the possibility of returning to a lost idea of truth or authority through a "new social order" (Ballard 1975, 191), even if this is ruled by the assassin groups. This seems to be the horizon towards which the characters of *High-Rise* move, like Laing, who feels "happier now than ever before" (Ballard 1975, 219) and who gazes at the new inhabitants of the neighbor skyscraper with satisfaction, "ready to welcome them to their new

world” (Ballard 1975, 248). Whereas the vertical dimension of the building continues to represent the possibility of an ascension, its interior is progressively invaded by a chaotic superposition of islands and borders, through the proliferation of barricades that increasingly block the movement. Whereas in *The Walking Dead* the walls represented the possibility of founding a new community and having an identity opposed to the outside world, the walls in *High-Rise* trigger the social atomization and the loss of individual and collective values, assuming that force is the only valid criterion. The islands that these barricades trace out are dense, astonishingly close to the ones in the beastmen village in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and more and more senseless as shelters, as defending them becomes more difficult and breaking into them increasingly easier.

In *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, the boundary between a good and a wicked use of science was clear and it was, therefore, possible to isolate the negativity of the scientific body by confining it in an island. In classical dystopias, the idea of the island is devoured by the idea of an endless border, with a distribution of the space that doesn’t allow any kind of evasion or alternative order. Contemporary dystopia seems to be obsessed with the dialectics between island and border, and it performs it through a great variety of spatial conflicts, from the spatial concretion in *The Walking Dead*, where the fences are the paradigmatic defense against the Other, to the own body as a space of conflict, as it happens in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where the female body has been turned into a tool property of the state with reproduction as it’s only mission. This body has actually become a chronotope:

“I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red than black. [...] Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time” (Atwood, 1985: 95-96).

This interest in thinking and rethinking the interactions between the island and border showcases, as a distinctive trait of the dystopian fictions of the last years, a strong return to the utopian idea of the founding of a community. The individual escape from alienation is no longer a concern of dystopia, but only the problems that must be faced in a collective way. We can’t deduce, however, any moral conclusions from it. The contemporary dystopia faces the community as a problematic phenomenon, either in order to talk about the crisis of Western democracy as in *Soumission*, or in order to reinforce the images of fear against the other as in *The Walking Dead*, where the survival of the community needs the violence against those who

are not part of it. From this point of view, José Ovejero (2017) states that “the unconfessed utopia of the 21st century [...] is the security”, whose logic is also central in the current design of residential neighborhoods as “privatopias”, from a “security-obsessed fortress mentality” (MacLeod & Ward 2002, 160).

This connects with a second key aspect: whereas utopia was born as a literary and political discourse with the aim of affecting the reality, dystopia has come up with a similar power of incidence. The study of the formal mechanisms and the problems laid out by dystopian fiction can also be applied to the critical analysis of our current social and political circumstances, where the spaces of exception and lack of rights exist in a non-speculative way. Islands and borders coexist in our present (not from a binary standpoint, but as Nöth (2015, 20) indicates, as “multiplicity of boundaries creating intersecting spaces”), where only the privilege of being born at one side or another of the border can determine our belonging to a regime rather utopian or dystopian. The opposition between “inside” and “outside” that *The Walking Dead* so clearly exposes is the same one that structures the political discourse of Donald Trump (utopian in his ideal of restoring the national greatness, dystopian in his diagnose of reality).

As Rancière says (2000, 62), “politics and art, as the knowledges, build up ‘fictions’, that is to say, material reconfigurations of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done”. But as art detects tensions and poses questions, the dystopian discourse, as applied to politics, has a dangerous performative power.

Throughout this article, I tried to suggest a theoretical and critical approach to the dystopian genre from the point of view of space. This approach could be extremely enriched with its application to close case analysis, either of literary, audiovisual or multimedia works or even of political statements. This encourages me to envisage the possibility of developing a methodology of analysis of the dystopian discourse which, relying on the models laid out by art and literature, might be able to treat political fictions as such and explore their correspondences with reality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Prof. David Viñas i Piquer, who encouraged me to do research on this topic.

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