Worlds of Vision:
Thinking Geographically Through Comics

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Abstract

The spatial visuality of comics has received substantial attention from comics’ scholars and, more recently, from cultural and political geographers. These have shown how reading comics is an embodied, codified, learnt and culturally-situated activity. Viewer involvement takes place through the distinctive devices, vocabulary and grammar of comics: parts are observed while the whole is sensed and constructed. In this experimental academic comic, I explore how this active involvement might help orient critical geographical practices. Comics’ specific visuality makes readers labour to produce meaning, translating the spatiality of two-dimensional sequential images into four-dimensional narrative, what Dittmer has called ‘a map of time’ (2010).

Methodologically, I use détournement (Debord 1956) to build a visual argument that combines a text-based scholarly literature review with a limited corpus of pre-existing images taken from two recent popular Italian comics to tell a story. Reading between images, texts and gutters makes concrete the paradoxical materiality of words and discursivity of images, while building upon a purposefully limited visual corpus. This dialogue of images and words results in a call for an empathic geography, connecting bodies and experiences visually, suitable for representing a fragmented world built upon making sense of a diversity of viewpoints.

Keywords

Comic geographies; empathy; feminist geography; graphic narrative; visual geography
Thinking geographically through comics
Worlds of vision: thinking geographically through comics

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In this experimental academic comic, I explore how this active involvement might help orient critical geographical practices. Comics’ specific visuality makes readers labour to produce meaning, translating the spatiality of two-dimensional sequential images into four-dimensional narrative, what Dittmer has called ‘a map of time’ (2010).

Methodologically, this comic combines two limited corps: a carefully-chosen scholarly literature review and a limited chosen set of images taken from two recent popular Italian comics. By thinking visually from and with these images, I ground my approach in their détournement (Debord & Wolman 1966). These are subsequently redrawn, added to and transformed.

Reading between images, texts and gutters makes concrete the paradoxical materiality of words and the discursivity of images. I call for reimagining an empathic and visual geography that connects bodies and experiences, and that might be more suitable than simple text for representing a fragmented world by making sense of a diversity of viewpoints.
Worlds of Vision

Thinking geographically through comics

Some images redrawn & modified, in the spirit of Debord & Volman's détournement (1966) from:

Berardi, G. 2018, La Spada Stregata, Italia, Le Avventure di una criminologa, Milan, S. Bonelli Editore
Berardi, G. 2018, Super Hero, Italia, Le Avventure di una criminologa, Milan, S. Bonelli Editore
GEOGRAPHERS realised the world can only be made by...

Details Points of View Small Partial Glances.

LOOKING becomes a political act of assembling.

How should geographers narrate?
How can we make sense of the diversity of viewpoints?
How can we represent a fragmented world?
How can we learn to assemble viewpoints?

How can we assemble a VISUAL GEOGRAPHY?

Comics make worlds by assembling pasts, to make a story.

...ASSEMBLING. There is no such thing as an Objective Detached Apolitical DESCRIPTION OF THE WORLD.

How can we learn new visual skills from COMICS?
Moving beyond the "View from nowhere"

Moving beyond the gate on the target.
A promise to CRAFT alternatives?

Faceless geographies are challenged to become other.
There is a need for new alternatives.

A DIALOGUE between COMICS and GEOGRAPHY.

Comics as "hybrid art of multiples" (Peteale 2016)
Spatial by essence.

Comics ... comics ... are constructed through narrative
Made through reading

Making scholarship beyond words.
Crafting a visual argument through constraints.

Comics
Geogr!

Attempting to narrate alternatives visually.

Inspired by Sousanis’ (2015) "Unflattening" that develops a subtle proposal on knowledge, transmission, thinking through visual Alternatives.

x A subsequent reworking of the pages to move beyond collage.

Opening up worlds?
Words and images? Screens talk to us? They combine words and images too.

Comics are compared to film, as though they cannot be imagined as a specific language.

But the viewer does not control time.

But COMICS are more than just a very slow celluloid film. The Viewing Experience is very different.

So how do COMICS make their own WORLDS?

Authors have written about the LANGUAGE and PHILOSOPHY of comics.

Comic studies have provided critical spaces for building knowledge.

Glancing, Gazing, Viewing, Watching, seeing.

AN ACTIVE ENCOUNTER

Making the whole through repeated glances.

Comics have made their reflexivity an integral part of their language.
Feminist geographers helped us to connect bodies with EXPERIENCE. Comics do so VISUALLY. But they also describe and create places. Places that we actively engage with and draw in our MINDS. We build a COMPLETE WORLD from the fragmented spaces between the squares.

A WORLD BUILT ON GAPS and VOIDS, yet that is:

- We are used to dividing up the world. But in a comic, it is by starting with divisions or fragments that the whole is made.

**COMICS LOVE MAPS.** They speak the same language.
Comics in Geography make us rethink how people have engaged with the visual, how this connects to an embodied human eye engaging with its surroundings.

(Gallacher 2011 in Dittmer 2015)

Monstrous geographies of text and image bonded together through contingent performances of alchemic reading that fuse into a composite whole.

Space and Time can be usefully thought of as not always:
- defined
- fixed
- delineated

Both abstract and relative

Space is not so much relative as relational.

In this narrative, function of comics, space is read as time, produced through readers' immersion.
Deleuze never wrote about comics but by stretching his thoughts on social life, we can think about the role of repetitions in creating meaning.

Panels are linked, implying that they are part of the same narrative. But what about the GUTTER?

A site of Differentiation

A topological gulf

"The gutter is where the fun happens." (Walk in Cailton 2011)

The gutter is a space, or a non-space, where reader engagement produces CLOSURE.

A unique spatial arrangement that enables the production of affects and intensities through the simultaneous presence of elements in relation to each other.

TOPOLOGY helps to understand the spatial operation of:
- Continuity and change
- Repetition and difference.

Relations continue despite CONTINUAL CHANGE.
Comics guide readers through each page, navigating the topology of space in a number of ways.

Comics are designed...
... to guide readers across spaces...
... viewing the parts within the whole.

Exploring each page like a library...
... of treats.

Navigating the topology of space in a number of ways.

Not all comics guide the reader in a clear manner.

Comics theorists such as Thierry Groensteen have theorised how comics add images to those already seen, revisiting those old images. **PLURIVECTORIAL NARRATION.**

(Groensteen 2006)
Feminist interventions in underground comics were conscious of their transformational potential.

Comics as Serious Interventions engaging with historical and contemporary political issues.

Comics as Making Alternatives Possible

Since the 1980s there has been an explosion of critical works in comics. COMICS become one tool for conscientization. But how can GEOGRAPHERS contribute to this?

Creating critical geographies

How can geographers actually CONTRIBUTE rather than REPEAT what ARTISTS already are doing alone?

No comic artist needs a geographer to tell her what she is already doing. So what can we actually do?
We can go further than standpoint theory...

An understanding of how space and time work in comics only takes geographers so far.

What about thinking about how space and scale are represented? How can we learn about building a critical position from which to question the view from nowhere?

Bringing the gaze back to the level of experience.

Daily life takes place away from totalising narratives. Developing a feminist politics of the everyday, through first-person narratives. Building a critical consciousness in readers.

Helping readers to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against oppressive elements of reality (Figueirêdo 1970 is Cauetan 2014).

Learning from comics as a call to action?
CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

as
CRITICAL THINKING?

Calls to action?

Taking affect seriously.

AUTOGRAFICS
Crafting selfhood through narrative. Authors and readers active in making sense of experience and emotions.

Through witnessing, first-person comics place moral responsibility.

Lived or narrated tales are placed at specific geographical locations.

This CONSIDERED RETROSPECT can specifically highlight CONTRADICTORY DISCOURSES DESTABILISING HEGEMONIES

Creating a political basis for critical outrage grounded in empathy.

New meanings generated in the gutters, Making sense of SPACES where others reside.

Constructing COUNTER GEOPOLITICS,
Piecing meaning together progressively, making reading part of conscientization.
But what about the risk of exploiting? Taking the lives and experiences of others for ourselves? Plundering the worlds of others...


Taking Seizing Framing Exploiting Grasping in yet another act of CONQUEST?

OR Framing the world through empathy?

MAKING EMPATHETIC GEOGRAPHIES?

Not trying to only see worlds within comics, or only seeing how comics speak about the world. Not being second fiddle to an established art.

OPEN to EXPERIMENT that Creates Visualises Crafts ALTERNATIVE WORLDS

Using the suffering of others to craft our own tales? Or...

Moving affective approaches away from the self, towards distant or close others. Aware of the dialogue taking place with the reader.

But rather transforming our own geographical practices to be more like comics in how we craft, encounter and narrate social life.
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