

Spaced out. Telling the space by images¹

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1. With the issue you are about to read, *Between* ventures into the vast and treacherous field of comics studies. It does so by giving space, for the design and editing of the magazine, to the collaboration between scholars from the University of Cagliari, the University of Bologna, the Université Paris Nanterre and the Accademia delle Belle Arti of Bologna, active since 2015 in this field of research. Sharing objects of study, research perspectives and creative practices, the members of this small association have been able to organise some lively opportunities of meeting and discussion dedicated to comics, such as the research seminars *Storie lievi*, in 2015 and 2016, and the international conference *Spaced out*, in 2017. The activities of the research group were subsequently integrated through a call for papers with new contributions for the realisation of this international volume.

It would be anachronistic to claim for these researches, as well as for *Between's* interest in comics studies, the palm of a groundbreaking initiative, aimed at sanctioning the dignity and authority of comics as a 'serious' subject for academic study. In fact, the study of comics in academic research – projects and research groups, conferences, publications – and institutional activities – courses and teaching, libraries and other conservation and dissemination activities – is today (also) in Italy a well established reality.

The essays collected in this issue demonstrate the close relevance of the study of comics to comparative literature, 'constitutionally' devoted to a broad horizon of research objects and methodological approaches. Relevant aspects, at the intersection between comics studies and comparative literature include (but are not limited to):

¹ This introduction must be considered the fruit of a common work; in any case the first and fourth parts were written by Giovanni Vito Distefano, the second by Lucia Quaquarelli, the third by Marina Guglielmi.

- open theoretical problems, regarding both the semiotics of comics (how is the page space semiotized? Are there alternative paradigms to the one based on cartoons sequences?), and the system of genres and forms (the long-standing debate on the definition of graphic novels; the rigid or fluid configuration of a system of comic genres);
- the frequency of cross- and trans-media practices of adaptive, intertextual or interdiscursive type between comics and literary, cinematographic and visual works;
- the usefulness in the study of comics of 'classic' comparative studies approaches, such as thematology, narratology, and the investigation of the spatial dimension of representation, which has been chosen as the monographic topic of this issue.

If comparative studies can be assumed as a privileged gateway to comics studies, other disciplines and other points of view participate to the inquiry of the space in/of comics. Firstly because the investigation of space, even in its discursive and graphic-pictorial dimension, necessarily involves other fields and other forms of knowledge. Secondly because, now more than ever, comics integrate into a complex transmedia landscape, incessantly renegotiating the existing relationships between media, which asks for an update of common analytical tools and for the breaking of disciplinary barriers.

In an essay from 1984, less known than others but capable of foreseeing the recent development of comics studies in few precise hints, Umberto Eco outlined the essential features for a critical study of comics that would eventually come of age – once passed, or discarded, the “pioneering” and “apologetic” fascination for the ‘medium’ and the interest on comics as a mere sociological document of the time. A mature critique, Eco hoped, will practice a “fourth type” of writing, and would examine comics without «discussing the virtues or vices of the medium» and focusing its «attention on the genre (within the medium: lyric, historical novel, tragedy...) and, beyond the genre, on the single work» (Eco 1983, my translation). «Forget that there is a genre called comics – Eco invited – and go in search of the evolution of genres, themes, techniques and motifs in the universe of the medium-comics» (*ibid.*). The horizon of a “fourth type” critique, which naturally welcomes a plurality of different perspectives of investigation, methods and disciplinary suggestions, is also the horizon of the contributions included in this special issue.

The studies we present will test on comics theoretical and critical approaches traditionally applied to other subjects of investigation,

rooted in literary studies as well as in semiotic and geocritical ones. These are key concepts such as chronotope, rhizome, genre or series, to name just a few, which coexist here with intermodal and transmedial approaches, giving life to a rich panorama of possibilities for the study of the universe of comics, open to the complex of cultural systems and to the depth of their historical evolution. The 'test' is expected to measure the actual effectiveness of these methodological tools in opening further levels of interpretation.

In some cases, the heuristic potential of this methodological attitude – rigorous, plural, open – has proved decisive for the theoretical-methodological reflection itself. The investigation of comics characterized by rich polysemy and substantial semiotical experimentation provided the study with formidable opportunities for a careful verification of the theoretical assumptions implicit in the research, as well as for a refinement of current critical tools. This has been the case with the experimental paginal occupation in some works by Gianni De Luca, whose semiotic mechanisms actively exceeds McCloudian theory of the language of comics; or, to mention just two other examples, with two works in which comics in the strict sense are only part of a more complex and fully transmedia planning, as in *Sens* by Marc-Antoine Mathieu and in *Building Stories* by Chris Ware.

2. Testing and updating current reading tools, and assuming new objects of study within the broad framework of themes, forms and narrative nuclei in the current landscape of stories, Matthieu Letourneux could trace the presence of "espaces-types" characteristic of the western genre. Espaces-types build on a fixed repertoire of spatial stereotypes that set up and strengthen the serial pact, sanctioning its autonomy with respect to 'real' space, and cross different media (comics, cinema, television, novel) shaping a heterogeneous narrative universe.

Sens by Marc-Antoine Mathieu (2014) is examined by Adrien Frenay in his diegetic, formal and epistemological relations with the video game *SENSvr*, which is both a sequel and an expansion of the comic. The study testifies to the ability of this work to question the conventional dimension of space representation, and exposes its graphic-discursive strategies. The recurrent motif of the arrow is given particular consideration, showing how it carries out different functions (as title, time indicator, spatial direction indicator, linguistic code), and how it extends its disorienting action in the enlarged dimension of the videogame. It becomes the sign of an interrogation of the optical (and cultural) mechanisms that guide, mediate and shape our perception of space and our way of describing it.

Many works tend not only to question, but also to deconstruct and rewrite the ‘representational’ coordinates of space. Mario Tirino and Lorenzo di Paola inquire *Building Stories* (2012) by Chris Ware, highlighting the material, corporeal, participatory and multidirectional aspects of the work, which tend to overturn the usual habits of reading. The reader is forced to deal with a variety of formats and ways of access to the story(s), apparently checkmating one of the distinctive traits of narration by images: sequentiality.

The sequential nature of graphic narration is problematized by Paul Fisher Davis too. Assuming a methodological perspective derived from social semiotics, he investigates various contemporary works in order to show how the narrative basis which allows comics to describe and tell spaces is rather ensured by stratification and repetition (recurrence) of graphic marks than by sequentiality. His view resonates with the usage that neuroscience makes of comics to investigate the functioning of the human brain, as Micaela Morelli explains. The verbal-visual nature of comics narration displays, in fact, a close affinity with the cognitive processes of the human brain, participating in a joint and recursive way to the larger network of semantic memory.

3. The heterotopic spaces theorized by Michel Foucault recur in several essays as a key-concept to interpret the representations of places of “crisis”, a case in which it is especially complex to distinguish between the state of separation from the world which defines heterotopy and the emotional state of the characters that recognize in those places their home.

The representation of space in comics intersects both with thematic elements and with literary genre issues. A paradigmatic example of creative synergy between French comics, war themes and autobiography are the works by Lebanese-born author Zeina Abirached, investigated by Margareth Amatulli. In Abirached’s works space is read in the tragic perspective of war and becomes a visual and narrative resource to convey different messages. The domestic microcosm appears as a life-saving space for the people who live there and face the progressive reduction of habitable areas, in the house, and of open areas, in the city. The map of the house and that of the city is change continuously, according to criterion of safety and survival from snipers. Abirached’s works (*38, rue Youssef Semaan*, 2006; *(Beyrouth) Catharsis*, 2006; *Mourir partir revenir. Le Jeu des hirondelles*, 2007; *Je me souviens. Beyrouth*, 2009; *Le piano oriental*, 2015) well represent how a reduction in space is directly proportional to survival possibility: the smaller the space, the lower the risk of dying. Conversely, the

rarefaction of rooms and streets, replaced by white spaces, emphasizes the narrative and evocative potential of images.

Drawn – and mutilated – maps acquire in graphic narratives a high symbolic and narrative value, which Giada Peterle investigates in her contribution. She focuses on the reception process that makes the reader proceed into the visual language of comics as through the reading of a map. Different theoretical approaches coexist in the inquiry, which aims at the intersection between comic studies and cartographic studies. The research field of ‘comic book geographies’ proves to be profitable for the study of both geographies in comics and of comics. Next to this perspective, the ‘comic book cartographies’ and the ‘cartocritics of comics’ approaches recognize the “mapping” nature of the practices of writing and reading comics. Among the various works taken into consideration in Peterle’s study, those by Claudio Calia (*Kurdistan. Dispatches from the Iraqi front*, 2017), Marco Tabilio (*Marco Polo. The silk road*, 2015) and David Mazzucchelli (*Discovering America*, 2017) cast a critical look at the relationship between the apparent fixity of the map and the fluidity of the existences represented there.

Ana Micaela Chua Manansala also deals with the relationship between space and autobiography, in her study of the connections established in the Filipino graphic novel *Trese* (2008-2017) between some specific places, the whole urban reality of Manila and the interactions of characters with space. Three types of heterotopia are critically identified: the cemetery, inhabited by humans and zombies, student accommodation and sophisticated residential neighborhoods. In all these situations/places, the environment is configured by the social tension between the private and the public, symbolically depicted in the opposition between upwards and downwards verticalities. The peculiar marginality of heterotopias coexists in the *Trese* series with a demand for collective life that involves all the social classes.

The private heterotopic space of the rooms where ‘hikikomori’ and NEET voluntarily lock themselves is investigated in Lisa Maya Quaianni and Simone Marchisano exploration of the contemporary adolescent world. Here again, the depiction of domestic space raises problematic issues concerning its correspondence with the extra-diegetic reality, re-presenting at the microworld level the complexity encountered in the general discourse on narration and cartography. On the one hand, the domestic spaces represented by Japanese authors (Oiwa Kendi; Oku Hiroya; Asanio Ino) and Italian ones (Zerocalcare; Raffaele Sorrentino) determine the relationships between the inside/outside of the places where characters live; on the other, those

spaces are the containers of many youth issues, from sexuality to job insecurity and identity uncertainty, and establish the state of separation as a symbolic threshold with what lies beyond the protective barrier of the house.

Beatrice Seligardi dedicates her paper to urban environment, viewed as a geography demanding to be acquired rather than as an implicit right. The social conquest of urban spaces by first female travelers in the late nineteenth century raises issues concerning the recognition of the potential of being able to 'go' freely into the world. The 'flâneuse' can thus be acknowledged as the transgressive explorer of 'unsuitable' places, through which she proceeds by means of a haptic sensory practice, essentially based on touch, rather than on sight. In a peculiar tension between collective history and author's personal experience, Trieste and Paris emerges as the symbolic cities of female exploration in the two graphic novels by Vanna Vinci (*Aida al confine*, 2001; *Chats Noirs, Chiens Blancs*, 2009) investigated by Seligardi.

The autobiographical genre, in relation to the structural value of the notion of space, is also the research object of Thomas Faye. He focuses on the graphic 'Bildungsroman' *Historias del barrio* (2011) by Beltran and Seguy. Faye investigates the graphic and diegetic modalities in which the authors develop a 'narrative of space', where the protagonist's rites of passage, from adolescence to adulthood, are placed within precise topographic coordinates, extending over both the outside world and the personal architecture of intimacy.

4. An issue on space in comics naturally has to host a group of contributions dedicated to the geographical imagery of one of the most famous homelands of world comics. Realistically pictured or freely reinterpreted, some key places of United States topological self-representation are investigated in the essays by Nicola Paladin and Giorgio Busi Rizzi, on urban spaces, and in those by Marco Petrelli and Matteo Pollone, on the frontier and the mythical space of the West.

Nicola Paladin examines the narratological dimension of Eisner's works (*The Spirit*, 1940-1952; *Dropsie Avenue*, 1995) in a rigorous application of the Bakhtinian chronotope. He finds in this concept the most suitable methodological tool to show how in the passage from New York to Central City, the city is reconfigured in terms of «an abstract spatial extensiveness». The reconfiguration endows the city with a twofold function: as a highly flexible narrative scenario and as a living and ever-changing protagonist of the narration.

Two other 'strong' chronotypical devices are identified by Andrea Bernardelli in Gipi's *astory* (2013). The first, a large and leafy tree, constitutes a «space-time bridge» that allows the two main threads of

the graphic novel to sew themselves in a space of nature and of survival. The second, a petrol station, seems to give rhythm to the moments of identity crisis of the protagonist and refers, symbolically and as in mirror game, to modernity and technology.

The indistinct 'sprawl' of *Ghost World* (Daniel Clowes, 1997) is the target of the study by Giorgio Busi Rizzi, who highlights its growing symbolic value within the contemporary imagination. His article attempts to eclectically consider the numerous expressive choices that make for a graphic novel of great value. With this in mind, the analysis moves on different levels, from the editorial (formats, editions, translation) to the visual one (covers, frames, drawing, colors), from diegetic to thematological analysis, according to a methodological approach close to that of Micheal Chaney (see Chaney 1917), keynote speaker at the Cagliari conference .

On the basis of a very solid historical reconstruction – rich in information on multimedia collective imagery, from cinema to literature and to opera – Matteo Pollone inquires the slow emergence, in the Italian Western production, of a spatial sensitivity that no longer subordinates place to story, considering it as a mere setting, devoid of details and stereotyped. The mythological spaces of the American West, with the ideals and nightmares of US national consciousness it symbolizes, are the focus of the contribution that Marco Petrelli dedicates to *Manifest Destiny* (Dingess, Roberts, Gieni, 2013-2018).

The last group of studies is homogeneous in presenting cases of intertwining between comics and literature, according to more established investigative perspectives as the study of intersemiotic adaptations or the investigation of multiple talents. A couple of contributions is dedicated to the Shakespearean production of Gianni De Luca, by Eleonora Fois and Matteo Rima. They address a wide variety of issues, from those on Shakespeare's canonicity and the cultural function of adaptations, to the mediological ones on the relationship between the semiotic structures of theatrical representation and that of comics. Both studies profitably cross reflections of general scope and passages of close critical reading. In their conclusions, the two essays highlight the urgency of a full recognition of De Luca's works, in consideration of the experimental value of his usage of the language of comics, far beyond the common devices of the grid and of "closure".

Finally, the protean category of the 'threshold' unites the two contributions on Dino Buzzati's ante literam graphic novel (*Poema a fumetti*, 1969), by Roberta Coglitore and Andrea Cannas. In the rich polysemy of the conception of space, thresholds of different orders operate by delimiting and structuring the places of the story, making

them accessible or inaccessible, continuous or discontinuous. The heuristic potential of threshold is manifested in the “concentric frames” structuring Buzzati’s diegesis, investigated by Roberta Coglitore. Thresholds of a different kind, bounding the border of intertextuality, are investigated by Andrea Cannas. He is able to follow the numerous views that they open in the direction of a plurality of literary, cinematographic and musical works.

At last, we are delighted to present a reflection by images which explores, with a truly essential trait, the relationships existing between space and the deepest secrets of great narratives, their sempiternal characters and the strength of a mythopoiesis that began in who knows which Greek island thousands of years ago and that a short comic of few intense pages is able to regenerate here and now. “Il posto” is the gift that Sara Colaone, a well established author and a scholar active in teaching and research on comics, wanted, for her part, to present to the editorial staff and readers of *Between*.

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