

Architectures from Future-Past. Glimpses of Utopia in Dystopian Italian Comics

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Abstract

While science fiction traditionally serves as an imaginative laboratory for alternative futures, contemporary dystopian narratives paradoxically reveal a cultural stagnation and an inability to envision possibilities beyond existing paradigms. In comics, space assumes an inherent structural significance as it spatializes time, and settings have evolved into central narrative elements throughout the medium's history. This study examines architectural representations in three graphic narratives – Fior's *Celestia*, Bertolini's *Da sola*, and Pinto's *Lo schermo bianco* – where space assumes structural significance beyond setting. Through cognitive estrangement, these works deploy unrealized architectural projects as what Fisher terms architectures of anachronism that create temporal short-circuits. Our analysis employs interdisciplinary methodologies combining philosophy and ecocriticism to examine how these architectures function as heterotopic sites. These works articulate a paradoxical nostalgia for denied futures, creating fragile utopian spaces within dystopian frameworks where characters access modes of posthuman subjectivity that resist the endoapocalyptic condition of our reality.

Keywords

Graphic novel, Hauntology, Architecture, Material ecocriticism

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Introduction¹

This study examines architectural representations in three contemporary Italian graphic narratives: Manuele Fior's *Celestia* (2021)², Percy Bertolini's *Da sola* (2021), and Enrico Pinto's *Lo schermo bianco* (2023). Our analysis centers on architectural elements that reference a "past future" – a concept we define as architectural forms that evoke unrealized or abandoned projects, or reinterpretations of existing structures within the narrative framework. The three works analyzed were selected for their distinctive yet interconnected engagement with dystopian futures and architectural imagination, which makes them particularly revealing case studies for examining how contemporary Italian comics negotiate spatiotemporal disorientation. *Celestia* represents a mature exploration of post-apocalyptic Venice by one of Italy's most internationally recognized comics artists, incorporating actual unrealized architectural projects into its narrative fabric. *Da sola* offers a radical formal and thematic departure through its wordless, experimental approach to depicting a non-binary protagonist navigating brutalist spaces. *Lo schermo bianco* provides a contemporary political thriller framework that explicitly thematizes architectural inaccessibility and urban transformation in a near-future Paris. Together, these works

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² Initially published by Oblomov in two volumes, released in 2019 and 2020 respectively, here we will refer to the 2021 full edition by the same publisher.

span different narrative modes (literary science fiction, experimental picture story, political thriller) while sharing a fundamental engagement with architectural spaces as sites of temporal disruption and utopian possibility within dystopian contexts.

Within the broader landscape of Italian comics production since 2020, these three works participate in what Malvestio (2021b) identifies as a distinctive turn toward eco-dystopian narratives that interrogate present ecological and political crises through speculative frameworks. While other recent Italian graphic novels address similar themes—such as Tuono Pettinato's *Greta. La ragazza che sta cambiando il mondo* (2019) or Zerocalcare's engagement with contemporary precarity—our selected works uniquely foreground architectural elements as narrative and philosophical agents rather than mere settings. This architectural focus allows them to materialize what Fisher calls «hauntological landscapes» (2012: 21) of lost futures with particular spatial and visual precision. These representations establish a significant dialogue with a present condition wherein spatiotemporal relations have become untethered from a future that is perceived as already past (Fisher 2013). These phenomena are particularly significant in fiction texts, given their close connection with contemporary imagery. It is in this relationship that the feeling of impasse³, of living «after the future» (Berardi 2011), which, as we shall discuss, characterizes our present, has a greater chance of being elaborated without the constraint of corresponding to a specific context or event. “For this reason, we selected texts that develop a fictional story and give a significant role to architecture within the comic book narrative.

To grasp the complexities and meaning-making mechanisms of these graphic-textual elements, we employ an interdisciplinary methodology. We begin by examining how contemporary dystopian fiction reflects what Fisher terms a pervasive «sense of an ending» (2009) in our present reality. This condition manifests through estrangement techniques⁴ that highlight environmental disorientation and dysphoria⁵. As theorized by Iovino (2014), such narratives challenge traditional paradigms of subject-space relationships, suggesting instead a porous boundary between subjectivity and environment— a key concept in ecocritical theory. Given this framework, we incorporate geographical theories of fiction and geocritical anal-

³ Cf. Crary 2013.

⁴ Cf. Scaffai 2017.

⁵ Cf. Preciado 2022.

ysis⁶ to explore the significant connections between fictional and actual environments. The protagonists in the comics engage in various attempts to meaningfully inhabit a space in which spatiotemporal relationships to the future have collapsed⁷, creating what Peterle considers a negotiation between diegetic and extradiegetic realms (2021). Our analysis identifies a conceptual tension between nature/culture and semiotic/symbolic dichotomies⁸, a tension that reveals how repressed natural and semiotic elements resurface in urban spaces with layered spatiotemporal meanings, as already theorized by Fisher (2013). The architectures we analyze serve dual functions: they centralize existential questions about human-environment coexistence while simultaneously offering points of utopian resistance against what Frezza (2015) describes as the present “endoapocalyptic” condition — opening dialogues with denied futures where ecological balance might be possible.

Comics and architecture

Comics – a medium that took its distinctive form during the late 19th and early 20th centuries through specific modes of production, distribution, and consumption⁹ – originated within and for urban environments. Due to the medium’s inherent openness to the cultural movements surrounding it, comics quickly developed an intimate connection with urban space. In the medium’s recent developments, space retains its relevance and, indeed, acquires new complexities with the advent of the graphic novel, which increasingly uses space as an inner, internalized landscape, as noted by Baetens and Frey (2014). The graphic novel, indeed, is a format that, among various forms and media transformations it intersects, identifies a renewed attention to the modern subject and its evolution¹⁰, corresponding to a productive resonance relationship with inhabited space. Additionally, comics spatializes time through its very medium-specificity (Spiegelman in Wright 2003, online), thus establishing – via the compositional architectures of layout and pagination – a close dialogue between temporal and

⁶ Cf. Westphal 2007.

⁷ Cf. Tanca 2020.

⁸ Cf. Haraway 2016.

⁹ Cf. Di Paola 2019 and Barbieri 2014.

¹⁰ Cf. Varrà 2023.

spatial registers¹¹. Regarding this representational potential, comics thus positions itself as a medium of imaginative elaboration, a laboratory for experimenting with unusual architectural-narrative solutions that have (or have not) appeared in the contemporary literary landscape¹². This is the operation proposed by the three comics discussed here: the two volumes of *Celestia* by Manuele Fior (2021), set in a dystopian and reimaged Venice; *Da sola* by Percy Bertolini (2021), a picture story in which the reader follows a subjectivity with weird and monstrous traits as they flee through the streets of a dystopian city; and *Lo schermo bianco* by Enrico Pinto (2023), a political thriller revolving around a love story where the architecture of a future Paris plays a major role. These three texts propose narratives that intersect dystopian and post-apocalyptic motifs, thematizing a widespread sentiment regarding a time devoid of future horizons, characterized precisely by its placement in a post-event scenario¹³: in *Celestia*, a «great invasion» has prompted the lagoon's inhabitants to sever ties with the mainland; in *Da sola*, constituted power persecutes the protagonist in an attempt to confine and normalize their fluid identity; in *Lo schermo bianco*, a far-right party holds power and the only opposition movement seems to lack the tools to oppose it, weakened by social, economic, and existential precariousness that primarily affects the two protagonists.

The failure of the future

These three comics are situated within a socio-cultural landscape characterized by what Fisher describes as the «failure of the future» (2012: 16) — a condition resulting from capitalism's dominance over our entire conceptual horizon, as in theorized by Fisher (2009). This contemporary condition has been theorized from multiple philosophical perspectives: from Berardi's (2017) concept of diminished «futurability», to Fisher's propositions in *Capitalist Realism*, to Hartog's (2015) «presentist» temporal regime — focused exclusively on the present — which has replaced the future-oriented «modernist» regime that characterized the late twentieth century. Frezza's (2015) notion of «endoapocalypse» effectively synthesizes this condition, describing an endemic apocalyptic sensation arising

¹¹ Cf. Labio 2015.

¹² Cf. Colonnese 2020.

¹³ Cf. Berardi 2011.

from inhabiting an “endless ending time”¹⁴. This concept intersects with Paul Virilio’s theories of hyperaccelerated stasis (1989) and resonates with Hartmut Rosa’s analysis of «social acceleration» phenomena (2010). In this view, our society actively suppresses prospects of a future, creating a void in our collective imagination that prevents confronting the possibility of systemic collapse. However, as Lino (2014) observes, this repressed future inevitably returns in distorted forms: postmodern culture has co-opted this return, transforming it into spectacular entertainment centered on our fears — apocalyptic scenarios, catastrophes, and death become commodified spectacles rather than genuine engagements with alternative futures. In this context, science fiction becomes a reflective medium revealing our conceptual limitations while expressing cultural self-doubt during periods of profound social transformation¹⁵. These imaginative tensions create a paradox: our culture simultaneously fears the future and consumes representations of its worst possibilities as entertainment. Like a persistent specter, the suppressed future haunts our present — a process analogous to the psychoanalytic concept of “the return of the repressed,” where denied content inevitably resurfaces. Derrida’s 1993 work on Marx’s heritage (*Specters of Marx*, 1994) suggests that such ghosts return from denied futures to demand justice for unrealized possibilities. Fisher extends this conceptualization of “hauntology” (namely, the ontology of a ghost) to the study of how spectral elements from lost futures persist in contemporary culture. According to Fisher, these hauntological remains serve a critical function: they reveal that our present is somehow a time “out of joint” (borrowing Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* phrase quoted by Derrida) (1994), pointing toward different temporal possibilities that have been closed off. By engaging with these ghosts rather than exorcising them, we might find ways to break free from our cultural, social, and temporal impasse. Within narrative contexts, the specter functions as a conceptual metaphor (according to the seminal study by Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), capable of representing otherwise inexpressible absences, like that of a time now lost. An effective strategy for conveying these instances is cognitive estrangement¹⁶ — a technique that defamiliarizes the known, prompting radical reconsideration of our assumptions about reality. This approach is fundamental to science fiction and dystopian genres, as Suvin ([1979] 2016) and more

¹⁴ “Un tempo della fine, senza fine”, our translation.

¹⁵ Cf. Braidotti 2021.

¹⁶ Cf. Scaffai 2017.

recently Malvestio (2021a) have established: in these narratives, certain physical spaces serve as repositories for unrealized futures — architectural specters of unrealized possibilities. DeLillo characterizes these as «ruins of the future» (2001) — sites that combine Orlando's concept of «obsolete objects» (1993) and the (haunting) promise of foreclosed futures. Fisher designates these places as «architectures of anachronism» (2012: 20) — spatial constructs that appear dislocated since they belong to alternative temporal trajectories. Paradoxically, these “impossible” spaces often convey greater authenticity than what has been normalized as “reality”: as we will explain in the next paragraphs, when the protagonists of the three comics run across these architectural anomalies, they access potential connections with alternative futures. As readers following their journeys, we similarly engage with these possibilities, confronting the fundamental proposition that alternative conditions remain possible despite present constraints.

Rethinking dysphoric subjectivity in narrative forms

Today's individuals experience a profound sense of unease or discomfort with the world around them. Paul B. Preciado calls this condition «Dysphoria Mundi» (2022) — an intrinsic and constitutive feeling of distress touching on our very existence as subjects. This dysphoria manifests as a deep-seated disconnection from both spatial and temporal dimensions of existence. Much like Shakespeare's observation that “time is out of joint,” people perceive a fundamental misalignment in their relationship to reality. This creates a significant rupture between subjects and their inherited interpretive frameworks. The conceptual tools, epistemological structures, and ontological categories that have been traditionally employed to comprehend reality have become increasingly inadequate, generating persistent feelings of displacement and alienation from our lived experience. The perceived absence of future — the sense of existing in a terminal epoch where endings have shifted from «immanent to imminent» (Benedetti 2021: 51) — fundamentally disrupts the ontological coordinates and sociopolitical frameworks that have traditionally defined subject-environment relationships. Preciado's concept of dysphoria connects with broader intellectual movements across philosophy, psychoanalysis, ecology, and literary criticism challenging Western anthropocentric paradigm. This reconceptualization transcends theoretical abstraction to transform our understanding of human agency and social change. Dysphoria, re-framed beyond its clinical definition, becomes a generative starting point

for reimagining subjectivity in contemporary contexts. Traditional Western philosophy, grounded in Cartesian dualism, has constructed identity through binary oppositions (mind/body, nature/culture, human/non-human). Moving beyond these dichotomies requires more than theoretical revision; it demands radical reimagination of self-world relationships. Braidotti (2021) contends that these shifts aren't incremental adjustments within existing humanist paradigms but require transforming entire epistemological frameworks, including our conceptions of temporality and spatiality. By examining the limitations of deterministic and anthropocentric categorizations, Braidotti provocatively suggests that future pathways might emerge through artistic creativity rather than scientific rationality. Our understanding of subjectivity is profoundly reflected in narrative construction. As contemporary experience fragments across spatiotemporal dimensions, literature must reconsider its foundational assumptions — particularly its protagonist-centered approach. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh argues that novels typically depict individuals navigating social, technical, and political contexts, but rarely represent humans as embedded within ecological systems. As Wink observes, «stories about people are one of the best technologies we have for understanding what it means to be a person. But what it means to be a person in an age of drastic ecosystemic decline of planetary extinction – is changing» (2022: 7). The crisis of fictional characters mirrors our larger identity crisis. Just as people experiencing dysphoria reject binary categories, literary characters can no longer be portrayed as isolated entities separate from their surroundings but as «ecosystemic bodies» (Hildyard 2017). While concerns about the dissolution of boundaries between figure and background, character and environment, personal and collective history are not unique to contemporary literature – similar dynamics can be observed across various historical contexts and literary traditions – the specific manifestations of these concerns in today's climate crisis and technological transformation create distinctive narrative challenges. The present moment demands that narrative forms reconsider how selfhood is represented, moving beyond traditional dichotomies to account for unprecedented scales of ecological and social interconnection. Drawing on Hildyard, Wink explains this through the concept of “two bodies”:

The two-body problem is another way of thinking about the figure-ground problem. The first body is figure, your figure, the second body is the world formerly known as ground. To be aware of having two bodies is to experience a constant toggling between self and world,

which can be enlightening but can also bring on a sense of horror. Where does the self begin and end? [...] The old feminist adage “the personal is political” applies here [...] It’s that many specific political problems today are due to the fact that planetary systems are more giant and more interconnected than the human brain can grasp, and yet every(first)body knows we are wound up in them. In this situation, making connections across scales through stories is a political project in itself (Wink 2022: 17-18)

What emerges is an interconnected network of meaning founded on permeable boundaries between knowledge domains and what Barad (2007) terms “intra-action” among reality’s components. Ecocriticism, feminist theory, philosophy, and literary studies converge to conceptualize a non-unitary subjectivity in perpetual formation: a «nomadic subject» (Braidotti 1994) not attempting to transcend instability but embracing it as generative potential — a fluid identity that traverses boundaries, inhabits contradictions, and constitutes itself through relational processes rather than isolation. The nomadic subject recognizes that identity formation occurs not through establishing fixed positions but through dynamic movement across conceptual, physical, and experiential territories — making meaning precisely in the spaces between established categories. To fully grasp this conceptual transformation, we must reconsider how bodies relate to space and time as fundamental perceptual frameworks. Material ecocriticism¹⁷ provides an essential theoretical approach, replacing Ghosh’s criticized figure-background model with a subject entangled with its material and discursive environment. The materialist perspective dissolves traditional boundaries between language and physical reality, between meaning and matter. Drawing from Barad’s agential realism (2007), this approach understands phenomena as emerging from “intra-actions” where material and discursive elements co-create each other. Crucially, agency extends beyond human capability — all material forms possess inherent capacity to affect human and non-human existence alike. Reality thus emerges as a non-hierarchical flow of interconnected material and conceptual forces. Ecocritical materialism bridges the nature-culture divide by demonstrating how diverse forms of matter — bodies, elements, spaces, organic and inorganic substances — interact with human experience to create material-semiotic networks in which matter is “readable” and functions as both

¹⁷ Cf. Iovino and Opperman 2014.

text and within texts¹⁸. This approach conceptualizes the material world not as passive but as inherently expressive. Analyzing future-past architectures in our three comics becomes particularly fascinating within this framework. These buildings create what Colonnese calls «short circuits» (2020) between real places and estranged artifacts, an interaction enhanced «through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual» (Alaimo 2008: 238)

Spectral architectures, marginal bodies

In this light, by functioning as bodies in dialogue with another (spatial, architectural, and phantasmatic) corporeality, the protagonists of the three case studies examined generate effects of meaning we aim to explore. Manuele Fior's *Celestia* is certainly the comic richest in these future-past architectures: the author incorporates into the lagoon landscape a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Masieri Memorial on the Grand Canal (2021: 22), a city hospital conceived but never realized by Le Corbusier (107), and finally, when Pierrot and Dora, the two protagonists, flee from *Celestia* (the city in the Venetian lagoon now separated from the rest of the world) and reach the mainland, they enter a labyrinthine castle inspired by Ricardo Bofill's *Muralla Roja* (122). This is not the only castle they encounter: such defensive structures, now semi-abandoned, dot the lagoon and house the few alienated survivors of the "great invasion", the catastrophic event that serves as the backdrop to the narrative. Here, inside this structure, Dora and Pierrot meet a child who guides them to the refuge where new generations gather, who have developed a new telepathic communication mode based on empathy (137-ss.). Shortly before reaching this building, Dora and Pierrot awake on a deserted beach where the protagonist finally relives the trauma of his mother's death, who worked precisely in the hospital designed by Le Corbusier. In *Celestia*, then, these re-imagined spaces within the lagoon landscape enshrine the presence of an unrealized future rooted in an unresolved past: from the new generations developing a new way of communicating, to Pierrot's mother, who disappeared precisely during the explosion of the bridge that separated the city of *Celestia* from the mainland — the act that sanctioned a closure to the characters' future horizon. The connection between abandoned landscapes and unresolved grief is also present in Enrico Pinto's *Lo schermo bianco*. In

¹⁸ Cf. Iovino 2014.

this case, the architecture around which the plot develops is the Bibliothèque Nationale de France: an existing building in Paris, designed by Dominique Perrault and composed of four large library towers at the corners with a central space containing an inaccessible garden (though recently it has become possible to visit it through guided tours). Enrico Pinto constructs an alternative narrative around this building: it was designed by Philippe Legrand, a renowned architect who mysteriously disappeared years earlier, whose daughter, Sistine, works in the same architectural firm as the protagonist, Salvo. The library garden, then, serves as a safe refuge for her, a corner of the city that cannot be colonized by the rampant urbanization processes in the dystopian Paris depicted by Pinto (2023: 90-ss). Indeed, this is a place where Sistine approaches the memory of her missing father. When she disappears in a terrorist attack, Salvo finds himself in a similar dynamic, projecting Sistine's presence into the garden, a space he visits hoping to find her alive. After all, the two characters both recognized the space as a shelter – like Adam and Eve in an inaccessible corner of the urban fabric, outside the space and time of the dystopian city, entertaining the (utopian and paradoxical) idea of moving there to live “come dei selvaggi” (81; to live as wild beings). In *Da sola*, the protagonist refuses any binary oppositions: gender fluid, neither completely human nor animal, neither adult nor child. They escape from the hospital where doctors wanted to study and ‘normalize’ their fluid identity, wandering through deserted brutalist buildings and dancing a *danse macabre* with a group of skeletons in a cemetery (Bertolini 2021: n.p.). The narrative concludes with the creature returning to the doctors’ deflagrating in an explosion of color that invades the city. An initial point of interest is the non-functional aspect of architectural structures depicted by the three authors in opposition to the urban contexts that serve as narrative backgrounds: the city of Celestia in Manuele Fior’s work is isolated from the rest of the world and immobilized in a post-apocalyptic temporality, a situation undermined by the architectures we have mentioned, coming from another time both diegetically (as part of a removed pre-catastrophic past) and extra-diegetically, as recognizable projects never realized within the lagoon landscape. Enrico Pinto’s Paris juxtaposes the secret space of the inaccessible garden against policies of redevelopment and gentrification implemented by the dystopian far-right government – policies epitomized by events surrounding the Les Halles forum, once “le ventre de Paris” and a working-class market district, subsequently surrendered to private interests and became a «monster» (Pinto 2023: 78); and finally, in *Da sola*, the opening dystopian spaces (guarded streets, hospital, mansion) create a stark visual opposition with

the deserted brutalist city depicted in dramatic chiaroscuro, as the protagonist creature traverses the marginal spaces of this urban landscape. The architectures we have identified, consequently, operate as an elsewhere, a heterotopia¹⁹ whose spatio-temporal connotations manifest that anti-functional «repressed» previously identified by Orlando (1993). Only by going through these “architecture of anachronism” do the protagonists dialogue with their own repressed emotions: the loss of the mother in Manuele Fior, significantly linked to the event that establishes a before and after in the history of *Celestia*; Sistine’s father and then Sistine herself in *Lo schermo bianco*, whose disappearance forces Salvo to reflect on the choice of designing a contradictory and inaccessible space — which thematizes the impossible purpose of architecture of building truly habitable spaces, reconciling the opposition between nature and culture, while accepting the inevitable ruin of what had been created; finally, in *Da sola* the creature reaches a graveyard, an archetypal location of Foucault’s non-functional heterotopia, an environment linked to death, to the natural deterioration of humanity and the world, the site of a repression that is both social and urban. Throughout these narratives, protagonists’ interactions with their surroundings establish a tension between two spatial dynamics: failed efforts to claim and inhabit everyday environments versus successful occupation of heterotopic domains where they discover viable dwelling possibilities²⁰. In all three works, protagonists are forced to escape their original settings due to oppressive mechanisms that enhance the dystopian atmosphere — mechanisms specifically targeting their autonomy, self-definition, and temporal horizons. These everyday spaces are characterized by repetition²¹ and self-preservation, that prevent meaningful connection or identification by the main characters, compelling them to explore alternative locations. They seek spaces that accommodate disruption and contingency — environments where temporality remains unfixed and resists pure functionality. Our hypothesis is that in these places, characters can engage in dialogue with a time that has been excluded from the environment they inhabit, composed of those spaces where their «endoapocalyptic» daily life unfolds (Frezza 2015). In *Celestia*, the unrealized architectural projects materialize a future that Venice denied itself, connecting Pierrot’s personal trauma to the collective rupture that isolated the lagoon. The deserted

¹⁹ Cf. Foucault 1986.

²⁰ Cf. Tanca 2020.

²¹ Cf. Schneider 2010.

beach where Pierrot confronts his mother's death operates as a liminal zone where past trauma and foreclosed futures intersect spatially. Similarly, in *Lo schermo bianco*, the inaccessible garden functions as what Pinto's protagonist explicitly recognizes as a temporal refuge – a space where the accelerated temporality of neoliberal urban development cannot penetrate. The brutalist structures in *Da sola* embody a similar temporal contradiction: they are architectural remnants of mid-century welfare state aspirations, now abandoned spaces that provide sanctuary precisely because they have been excluded from productivity and surveillance. This is effectively a missed future: that of a historical temporality that accepts the decay of things, the passage of time, and ultimately, death, also made explicit by the connection of these environments with unresolved grief. To personal trauma, however, is superimposed the social trauma of inhabiting a time "out of joint", homogeneous and alienated, detached from the materiality of nature (as is Celestia, or the shopping center that stands in place of Les Halles). All places linked to a denied future, on the other hand, have a connection with nature: the deserted beach of Manuele Fior, followed by the architecture where children live, it's a promise of a future in which empathic communication ends conflicts, significantly housed in a palace without clear boundaries, composed of terraces as far as the eye can see; the garden of the National Library hosts an untouched and inaccessible garden, a yearning for an impossible future in communion with nature; finally, in *Da sola* not only the cemetery serves as an alternative elsewhere to the city, but the brutalist buildings stand out as architectural residues of an expressive experimentalism that looked to the future and, at the same time, as symbols of welfare and social security policies which in those buildings found form, and that have been progressively erased by the advance of liberalism and its extractive policies²².

Here the non-functionalized time allows an unanticipated transgression of boundaries, a wandering that is also a *rêverie*, «a movement of thought» (Bachelard 1994) that allows characters to identify an 'elsewhere' in space-time. Such a possible future (and this, as we know, is a central node of the conceptual metaphor of the specter) is inextricably linked to the past and, basically, to the passage of time. Pierrot and Dora reveal the presence of new inhabitants on the mainland with whom to make contact, bringing Celestia out of isolation; Salvo processes the grief of Sistine's disappearance and discovers the mystery that hovered around Philippe

²² Cf. Rosa 2010.

Legrand's disappearance; while the creature of *Da sola* explodes in an avalanche of colors, a true attack on the urban space of the city in which they were constrained.

What's particularly striking is how the three protagonists, through their wandering, walking, and ultimately becoming lost and merging with their surroundings, explore a journey of self-discovery that — operating outside deterministic frameworks — embraces disorientation as a path to understanding. This approach recalls de Certeau's (2002) theorization of walking as a spatial practice that creates meaning through bodily movement, transforming abstract urban plans into lived experience. The protagonists' movements through heterotopic spaces enact what Bachelard (1994) describes as a sort of poetic wandering — a mode of engagement that privileges intuitive, affective connections over rational navigation. In *Lo schermo bianco*, the protagonist appears to drift passively, propelled by forces beyond his control. This state prevents him from resolving his political, professional, and existential uncertainties, leaving him disconnected from both space and time. It is only through his encounter with Sistine, followed by his entry into the semi-forbidden "artificial eden" at the BnF, that a dormant wildness within him finally awakens. This is the same place to which Salvo will return and lose himself in search of clues regarding Sistine's disappearance. The entire narrative evokes «il vuoto» (the void) and «lo sparire» (the disappearing) as conditions of escapism from the symbolic regime of reality: «Sarebbe così facile» (How easy it would be) (Pinto 2023: 56), thinks the protagonist while reflecting on «la chiamata del vuoto» (56; The call of the void) that is, the intrusive thought of ending his existence. The void is the element that links the intra-action between character and environment (whose architectural correlative is manifested by the monstrous "ventre de Paris" of Les Halles). The close metaphorical connection between environment and subject is evoked in *Lo schermo bianco* rather explicitly by Sistine's aunt, the architect Legrand who will finally be discovered to be responsible for the terrorist attacks: «Le persone, come gli edifici sono più interessanti quando non sono finite. All'inizio siamo tutti innocenti, pieni di ideali, poi ci consegnamo al tempo, all'usura del quotidiano. Come gli edifici ci facciamo piovere e pisciare addosso, andiamo in rovina!»²³ (305). These words not only evoke architecture's ghostly

²³ «People, like buildings, are most interesting when they are unfinished. In the beginning we are all innocent, full of ideals, then we surrender to time, to the wear and tear of everyday life. Like buildings we get rained on and pissed on, we fall into ruins!», our translation.

qualities but also highlight how both buildings and bodies are porous and subject to natural decay. This suggests a shared materiality between architectural and bodily existence—a connection that recalls forms of existence prior to language. This pre-verbal connection is further reinforced by Sistine's enigmatic words to Salvo, which persistently trouble the protagonist: «Dimmelo tu cos'è più reale. Quello che vedi o quello che senti?»²⁴ (345), a suggestion to get lost in order to find oneself, to abandon meanings and embrace perception that is masterfully represented by Pinto in the closing panels of the comic, in which we follow a last dreamlike walk of the protagonist on the traces of Sistine, in a mutable environment that gradually incorporates the protagonist himself and that from the subway station transforms into the forest of the national library and finally into virtual reality, a mental space in which the protagonist finds Sistine and the two blend with the environment. On the same thematic track, it is interesting to observe how Manuele Fior establishes an illuminating parallel between Venice and the cerebral structure: «Venezia assomiglia sì a un labirinto, ma [...] la struttura non solo di Venezia ma di tutta la laguna, con le sue anse, ricorda una forma cerebrale»²⁵ (Fior in Marzullo 2020, online). The author further highlights how the *vaporetto*, in its defined trajectory, represents «l'unico pensiero razionale che attraversa il mondo del subconscio, del disorientamento e della contraddizione»²⁶ (*ibid.*). This metaphor establishes from the beginning a profound correlation between architectural space and psychic space. Among the various architectures inserted in *Celestia*, Le Corbusier's Venetian hospital becomes a temporary refuge for the protagonists during a stormy night. The biographical dimension intertwines with the architectural one when the professional link between the protagonist's mother and the hospital structure is revealed in a space of emotional resonance, in what is a form of architectural regression to the maternal womb²⁷. As Pierrot and Dora navigate through the maze of Muralla Roja, Fior deliberately challenges traditional mythic storytelling patterns. Rather than confronting a monster at the center of this labyrinth, as classic myths would suggest, Pierrot instead meets a telepathic child who represents a funda-

²⁴ «You tell me what is more real. What you see or what you feel?», our translation.

²⁵ «Venice does resemble a labyrinth, but [...] the structure not only of Venice but of the entire lagoon, with its loops, resembles a brain shape», our translation.

²⁶ «The only rational thought that crosses the world of the subconscious, disorientation and contradiction», our translation.

²⁷ Cf. Colonnese 2020.

mental, primal form of connection. This encounter prompts Pierrot to embark on an internal psychological journey, bringing suppressed emotions to the surface. This emotional transformation is visually symbolized when he loses the tear on his cheek — his defining feature — while bathing in the sea, representing a moment where rigid identity dissolves into something more fluid and connected. The story's color palette gradually shifts from bright, intense colors to softer, more subtle tones, mirroring this evolution toward a new type of consciousness. The telepathic children's community that Pierrot and Dora encounter represents an emerging model of identity that moves beyond individual isolation toward a collective, interconnected form of being: «Il mio nome è bambino, ma nel futuro mi chiameranno uomo e poi con altri nomi alcuni dei quali non sono stati ancora inventati»²⁸ (Fior 2021: 188-189). The «lingua dimenticata» (the forgotten language) that «si diffonderà sulla terra ferma» (will spread to the mainland) pronounced chorally by this new interconnected entity evokes a return to the semiotic that is also a projection towards a post-human future, where the boundaries between individuals, and between human and non-human, dissolve into a new form of collective consciousness. This dimension is evoked in a disruptive manner by the hybrid figure that traverses the pages of *Da sola*, whose words are drawn from the diaries of Vaslav Nijinsky. Similarly to the community of telepathic children, their voice emerges as a manifesto of a new form of bodily and incarnate knowledge: «Io sono semplice non bisogna pensarmi. Bisogna sentirmi e comprendermi attraverso i sentimenti. Io sento prima di vedere. [...] io non sono la trance io sono sentimento in trance. Io sono la carne io sono il sentimento [...] Io sono il sentimento incarnato non l'intelligenza incarnata»²⁹ (Bertolini 2021: n.p.). In this story, the character's search for identity unfolds through a gradual transformation that affects both their physical form and their surroundings. The creature begins by exploring harsh, concrete brutalist buildings, while simultaneously experiencing a breakdown and reconstruction of their own body — a process mirrored by the increasingly fragmented layout of the comic panels themselves. This transformation reaches its climax

²⁸ «My name is child, but in the future they will call me man and then by other names some of which have not been invented yet», our translation.

²⁹ «I am simple one does not have to think me. One has to feel me and understand me through feelings. I feel before I see. [...] I am not trance I am a feeling in trance. I am flesh I am feeling [...] I am feeling embodied not intelligence embodied», our translation.

at a crucial moment: when the character dives from a diving board into an expansive pink pool. When they emerge from this symbolic rebirth, they appear as multiple shadowy figures rather than a single being. This multiplication is reinforced by a repetitive, prayer-like text that blurs the traditional boundaries between the self and everything outside it: «io con te e tu con me noi siamo voi e voi siete in me tu vuoi me e lui sei tu io sono lui e sei in me tu noi siamo voi loro sono te, te, te, te, te»³⁰ (n.p.). Bertolini portrays a sense of self that rejects fixed boundaries and specific shapes, instead growing beyond its normal limits and blending with its environment. This expanded understanding of identity is deeply connected to the concept of death, which is presented not as a final endpoint but as one phase in an ongoing process of physical transformation and renewal. The body becomes part of a larger material cycle rather than a self-contained unit: «So che la terra è calore senza calore non ci sarebbe pane. Capisco che la terra è putrefazione. So che senza putrefazione non c'è pane. Io son terra tu sei terra io son terra e tu sei me [...] con la morte, con la morte ho sconfitto la morte»³¹ (n.p.). Bertolini's revisitation of the medieval *Totentanz* takes on an ecological and posthuman significance here. If in tradition the macabre dance served as a memento of the universality of death, in Bertolini it becomes a metaphor for the deconstruction of anthropocentric exceptionalism. The dancing skeleton is no longer just a symbol of human transience, but a manifestation of the material continuity between bodies and environment, between organic and inorganic. Through this complex orchestration of elements, Bertolini stages not so much the simple dissolution of the self as its expansion into a network of material and semiotic relations. The permeable and ever-changing body presented in these pages represents matter that simultaneously tells stories and becomes the subject of stories, revealing narratives of interconnection and constant transformation. Death itself is thus reconceptualized not as an end but as part of what Haraway (2016) would define as a «becoming-with», a process of co-evolution and co-emergence with other forms of materiality. These imagined buildings and the characters' movements through them invite us to rethink our rela-

³⁰ «Me with you and you with me we are you and you are in me you want me and he is you I am him and you are in me you we are you they are you, you, you, you», our translation.

³¹ «I understand that the earth is heat without heat there would be no bread. I understand that the earth is rot. I know that without putrefaction there is no bread. I am earth you are earth I am earth and you are me [...] with death, with death I defeated death», our translation.

tionship with space and time, using the comic medium's capacity to question accepted reality. Comics are especially effective here because they narrate movement through visual-spatial language. When characters explore these places—following secret routes, dancing, getting lost, or seeking refuge—their physical journeys are visually translated into the reader's own movement across the page layout. In *Celestia*, Fior employs watercolor washes and fluid panel borders that dissolve architectural boundaries, visually enacting the permeable relationship between character and environment. It is no coincidence that, in the sequences outside the city of Celestia, a real revolution develops from a color perspective, with larger panels that enclose endless horizons in light and vivid colors, very different from those with which Manuele Fior painted the narrow alleys of Celestia. In other words, in this case, the space conveys a possibility of openness and dialogue with the characters even in its representative and semiotic elements, such as color and layout. Bertolini's stark black-and-white contrasts in *Da sola* create visual rhythms that mirror the protagonist's physical transformation. The layout, on the other hand, consists of full-page or half-page panels, a device that enhances two aspects of the comic: the dialogue with the spaces, which can develop into large splash pages, and the rhythm, which accompanies the protagonist's dance, allowing them to interact effectively not only with the diegetic space of the buildings, but also with the semiotic space of the page. The character of Percy Bertolini, in fact, travels between the boundaries of the panels, developing shadows, doubles, and projections of himself that multiply in the layered spatiality of the text. On the other hand, Pinto's use of full-page spreads in *Lo schermo bianco* for the BnF garden sequences emphasizes the spatial otherness of these heterotopic refuges. At the same time, his stylistic choice allows for a close dialogue between the protagonists and their context: Pinto uses the same subtle and recognizable line for characters and environments, creating a reinforced and renewed porosity between the two. Salvo's hand, which draws portraits of people he meets on the subway, is the same hand that draws the streets, buildings, and garden of the BnF, and it is the same hand that does not finish the portrait of Sistine, who has disappeared into the city and may even be a secret inhabitant of that garden. In Enrico Pinto's case, the drawing style, rather than the layout, acts as a bridge capable of allowing the characters to fade into the diegetic space and vice versa. Following Giada Peterle's (2021) perspective, comics function as spatial practice — not merely telling stories but offering “counter-narratives” about our spaces and our relationships to them. As readers engage with these comics, they too inhabit and experience these spaces, generating new

meanings that prompt reconsideration of everyday spatial and temporal experiences. This process exemplifies de Certeau's (2002) theory that walking creates space just as speaking creates language. When comic characters move through abandoned or obsolete places—buildings that represent forgotten visions of the future—they acknowledge and meaningfully connect with these spaces. Similarly, as readers move their eyes across the comic page, they too experience and understand the spatial practices, journeys, and negotiations depicted in these visual sequences.

Conclusion

The three works analyzed deploy architecture as «figurations» (Braidotti 1994) — theoretical-political tools that challenge binary thinking and humanist individualism — and create virtually utopian spaces within dystopian frameworks. These spaces function as metaphors for the characters' inner condition, embodying a paradox: they symbolize lost futures while also offering essential tools for opposing contemporary reality. The concept of 'future-past' introduced in the opening section finds its fullest articulation in these heterotopic architectural spaces. In *Celestia*, the unrealized projects of Wright and Le Corbusier materialize as spectral presences that embody what Venice might have become — modernist visions that the city rejected, now returning to haunt its post-catastrophic isolation. These architectures represent futures that were once possible but never actualized, creating what Fisher (2013) describes as hauntological traces that persist precisely because they were denied. Similarly, the brutalist structures in *Da sola* embody a past future of mid-century social democracy — architectural manifestations of welfare state aspirations that have been systematically dismantled under neoliberalism. The inaccessible garden in *Lo schermo bianco* represents an impossible reconciliation between nature and urban development, a utopian space that exists physically but remains functionally excluded from Paris. These 'future-past' architectures operate as temporal anachronisms that reveal the foreclosed possibilities of our present condition. These three works suggest the constitution of a post-dialectical subjectivity through modes of perceiving and traversing space-time that Stacy Alaimo (2016) would define as «ecodelic». The structure of these works—with their open endings that drift into dreamlike territory—actively resists what Baccolini and Moylan (2003) term 'anti-utopian despair.' Instead, they embrace forms of militant, collective, grassroots resistance, thereby embodying the critical and ultimately utopian dimen-

sion that defines contemporary dystopian fiction. Contemporary science fiction, as Braidotti (2021) observes, has evolved from earlier forms that envisioned idealized futures to instead mirror our current disorientation within rapidly shifting social and technological landscapes. This approach makes our present reality seem strange and unfamiliar while generating productive feelings of unease. Building on Foucault's work, De Lauretis (1980) argues that these kinds of narratives transcend simple utopian/dystopian oppositions, moving toward heterotopic spaces where conflicting meaning systems can coexist and challenge singular notions of selfhood. Both the characters and environments in these comics exhibit qualities of openness, permeability, and adaptability. This encourages us to view identity not as fixed but as an ongoing material process, and to imagine connections between fictional worlds, actual environments, and human imagination through what Haraway (2016) describes as «becoming-with». The theoretical framework we have developed – integrating hauntology, material ecocriticism, and geocritical analysis – proves particularly productive when applied to comics as a medium that inherently spatializes time. Our attention shifts away from isolated individual subjects toward the interconnected relationships that have always existed among different forms of being and consciousness.

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