



# Jason Dittmer

Comics and  
the Urban Unreal

FallSemester

## **Comics and the Urban Unreal**

Jason Dittmer

In this brief essay I reflect on the interactions between the real and the unreal, with a particular emphasis on comics and the city. Comics originate in the emerging city of modernity, and are shot through with both actual cities (in their sites of production and, often, consumption) and virtual ones. Further, few media are as useful for considering the role of the unreal, the held back, the around-the-corner-but-never-in-view, as comics. This reticence is productive, not only of narratives but also of the subjects who read them. Practices of reading comics, when applied to the city itself, highlight the unreal lines of flight that offer potential to see the city anew. From the panels on the page to the bricks of the city we can assemble something unexpected. The first part of this essay traces the early twentieth century emergence of comics in the modern city, and then highlights the multiplication of the city that occurs through its portrayal in comics. This multiplicity is generative of a range of possible narratives, both in the actual city and in its virtual doppelgangers. The second part of the essay turns to an examination of the comics form itself, examining how an interplay between the presented and withheld – the real and the unreal – produces an open-ended narrative that requires constant policing by comics creators. Nevertheless the excess of narrative invariably produces

rogue readings. The final part of the essay returns to the city with these insights about comics, and via a reading of Chris Ware's *Building Stories* it demonstrates the political potential of reading the city as a comic.

## Metropolises

Newspaper comic strips, their stapled brethren comic books, and their more literary cousins 'graphic novels' all have their origins in the early twentieth-century city of modernity. Single panel cartoons date slightly further back to British magazines such as *Punch*, but the technology of juxtaposed images for the purpose of producing narrative (a common definition of comics) is usually dated to the emergence of *Hogan's Alley*, the *Katzenjammer Kids*, and *Krazy Kat* in pre-World War 1 newspapers like the *New York Herald*. The speed and rhythm of these comics owed a lot to the modernity of the cities in which they were produced and read; even the origin story of the 'comic book' itself speaks to the new pace of life, the spaces of flow that were slowly emerging (Castells, 2010).

Comic strips had been a feature of daily newspapers for many years, and with their rapid-fire production a huge reservoir of 'used once' comic strips soon emerged. During Prohibition, those smuggling alcohol into the United States needed a cheap, bulky product to import with which they could hide their illicit wares. They alighted on Canadian wood pulp, which New York entrepreneurs then paired with the backlog of comics to produce a cheap kid's book that could be tucked in with other goods as an incentive for female shoppers. Equally, it could be tucked in with other magazines at almost no cost – 'something for the kids'. These proved a good revenue stream, and so more publishers got in the game, and eventually new material had to be commissioned (Jones, 2004). From these castoff by-products

– pulp and used comic strips – a new medium was born. The unreal is always only ever invisible, not un-present. It waits, just out of sight, to be actualized.

The creators behind these early comics were themselves of the city; the New York of the publishing world proliferated into a multiplicity of New Yorks:

Aspects of New York appear in Will Eisner's stylized Central City in *The Spirit*, in Batman's Gotham City wrapped around letters and right angles, in Scrooge McDuck's Duckberg, dotted with oversized typewriters and billboards, in Flash's Central City, Green Lantern's Coast City, and Superman's Metropolis; indeed as has been attributed to everyone from Frank Miller to John Byrne, Metropolis is often referred to as New York by day and Gotham City as New York by night. (Bainbridge, 2010, p. 163)

If superheroes and their cities dominate that list, that is because the superhero genre has dominated American comics (at least commercially). The vertical city of modernity provided a backdrop for heroic action – think of how boring Spider-man would be in a strip mall – and also raised the stakes of heroic conflict. Superheroes require super-villains, which in turn require a certain density of population (Bukatman, 2003). The difference between Lex Luthor and a neighborhood criminal is in the scale of their ambition: one knocks off a convenience store or a bank branch, the other threatens to nuke a football stadium at halftime.

The verticality of New York itself introduces a permanent precariousness to the equation; precariousness brought home on 11 September 2001 when a plot as grandiose as any of Lex Luthor's was brought to terrifying completion.

This movement back and forth between the actual New York and the virtual Metropolis is generative of geopolitical lines of flight; of course there is no evidence of Bin Laden drawing inspiration

from the depthless toolbox of fictional supervillains' plots (equally, he was undoubtedly aware of this aspect of Western culture). But what we do have is our own experience of this doubleness. Those watching *The Avengers* (2012), for instance, witnessed an alien invasion of New York City, with catastrophic implications for whole blocks, and countless thousands of citizens. The visceral thrills come not only from the heroic action, but also from the recognition that *that* New York City is *our* New York City, even as we also recognize that it is *not*. We do not have superheroes, nor alien invaders, and those buildings are entirely intact in the actual New York. But we can imagine it to be our New York City, and it is through this movement between the actual and the virtual that generates the affective power of the scene/seen. This doubleness is exaggerated (but no more or less present) with comics in comparison to the computer-generated images (CGI) of today's action films:

The broader philosophical implication of many comics, to one extent or another, is: *there is another world, which is this world*. The places that cartoonists draw are very different from the ones where readers live; every element of the comics world is created by the artist's hands. The cartoonist's image-world is a metaphorical representation of our own, though, and it can be mapped onto ours.

(Wolk, 2007, p. 134)

The hand-drawn nature of the comic's world sets it apart; it has no pretensions to reality, even as it generates its energy from 'reality'. Rather, it is about holding something of the real back, in the hope of bringing forth something new.

## Down in the gutter

Comics semiotician Thierry Groensteen describes the basis of comics thus:

Comics is a genre founded on reticence. Not only do the silent and immobile images lack the illusionist power of the filmic image, but their connections, far from producing a continuity that mimics reality, offer the reader a story that is full of holes, which appear as gaps in the meaning. [ . . . ] Every comics reader knows that, from the instant he is projected into the fiction (the diegetic universe), he forgets, up to a certain point, the fragmented character and discontinuity of the enunciation. (Groensteen, 2007, p. 10)

The “fragmented character and discontinuity of the enunciation” can be understood both in terms of the visual intensity of the image and in its relations to other images.

With regard to the former, images within comics withhold from the eye a great deal, in some cases achieving an almost iconic nature (McCloud, 1993). In fact, it is this withdrawal of the real that enables an accentuation of the narrative dimension of the image; consider this quote from cartoonist Jim Tierney’s blog:

For the longest time, I’ve been hung up with rendering. I always thought the most important thing was how well something was drawn. I would always compulsively ‘fill the space’ whenever making any cartoon, and I’d draw everything in the cartoon with equal care to make it look as good as possible. This led to some nice looking comics, some nice looking, utterly incomprehensible comics. People would look at my comics, and say ‘they look good’, followed with, ‘I don’t get it.’ I often found myself explaining things. It’s because you could look at a single panel, and have no idea what was important, or what I was trying to communicate (but they looked sharp). (Tierney, 2007, p. n.p.)

The greater the intensity of the image, the more ‘real’ it was and yet the less comprehensible it was. Comics rely on the unreality

of the image to focus attention, to provide space for narrative to emerge. However, the unreal also features in other ways. The visual form of comics is itself based on a movement back and forth from the actual to the actual, across the void of the virtual. This can be seen at multiple scales. Consider the comics page: usually composed of several panels (or images) co-existing on the page. The ordering of the panels is usually hinted at by their physical location on the page; with Western habits of reading hinting that usually panels in the top left precede elements below or to the right (this is reversed in Japanese-influenced Manga). This coding of 'expected' reading practices enables a common set of expectations regarding reading practices to exist between comics artists and readers. The artist embeds visual clues as to the ordering of panels, and the reader is meant to pick up on them and read as the artist intended. Some have even posited the intended narrative line connecting the panels to be what defines comics – 'the sequential art' (McCloud, 1993). Crucially, comics are not merely a space of the actualized panels: the space *between* panels is known as 'the gutter', a quintessential space of the unreal. In the gutter, no story is presented, but the artist's and reader's improvised dance of meaning-making produces topological connections between the panels. From disparate panels, a comic narrative is assembled. Therefore, it is not only the unreality of the images, but also the unreality in *between* the images, that is necessary for the production of narrative. However, this idealized vision of comics – in which artists and readers are in perfect harmony – ignores a range of 'deviant' practices: sometimes artists will make the ordering of panels spatially ambiguous, hoping to inculcate disorientation in the reader for narrative purposes. Other times artists will simply deploy a more plural spatial imagination in their page layouts, showing multiple connections between and among panels,

defying any linear sense of sequence. Equally, sometimes readers will pluck panels out of the 'intended' order of the artists, and juxtapose them in new ways.

If we consider the gutter as the rupture between panels that enables the space of the page to be converted into the time of narrative, then gutters of a sort can also be understood to exist within images. Each panel might be understood as a single moment – like a photograph purports to represent – but more often it should be understood as a visual distillation of an unknown duration of time. For instance, if even a single speech balloon intrudes, the reader can infer the 'scene' must last at least as long as it takes to say that line (but at what pace? Even this is indeterminate). Further, it is unlikely that everyone in the 'scene' remained motionless for that entire time, so we can infer that the image attempts to portray the physical distribution of bodies and things in the 'scene' in some expressive, or somehow representative, form. And if there is a second speech balloon attached to another character, then here we have a second 'event' in the panel, with an indeterminate period of time between the two. The visual codes within panels mirror those among panels; usually speech bubbles are read from top left to bottom right, and the space between those bubbles (and other 'events' in the panel, such as physical actions indicated by the image) is striated with invisible gutters: the reader sees these events and organizes them into topological relations in space and time.

To sum up, comics rely not only on the unreality of the image (to accentuate narrative elements), but also on the fragmentation both within and of panels. The artist draws on existing codes of reading practice to try and convey a desired set of topological relations among panels, but this may or may not be mirrored by the actual practices of the reader. The narrative potential of the images materialized on the page far



exceeds the disciplinary ability of artists. The unreal spaces of the gutter are blank, but they are filled with potential.

## Reading the city as a comic

Just as a comic is the materialization of deterritorialized creative potential into a tangible form, the city is the mineralized exoskeleton of human activities over time (DeLanda, 2000). As such, it serves as an archive of the past – which can be both stultifying (the oppressive feeling of ‘heritage’) and a resource from which political entrepreneurs can draw. Uncovering the hidden possibilities latent within the urban archive – drawing on the unreal, some might say – was Walter Benjamin’s objective, for instance in his *Arcades* project (Benjamin, 1999). This objective was connected to his argument that writers need to “transcend [ . . . ] the barrier between writing and image” (Benjamin, 1978, p. 230). This desire to fragment the text by juxtaposing incommensurable things (text and image), parallels his desire to fragment the city: disassembling it in favor of single elements that might be re-ordered and re-composed. As Anthony Enns has argued,

Instead of isolating these historical events and arranging them in a coherent narrative sequence, in other words, materialist historiography reaffirms the possibility that every historical event retains its own immanent past and future, and its goal is not to provide an account of the past but rather to rekindle a sense of hope. (Enns, 2010, p. 46)

Thus, just as every comics panel could be read as in multiple possible relations with other panels thereby unspooling the author’s preferred narrative and enabling a multiplicity of narratives to take flight, historical events (and their material form in the city) can be liberated from the dominant interpretation of the city and rendered anew.

Perhaps the best reflection of this doubling of the comic and the

city is the work of comics writer/artist Chris Ware. His work has been strongly shaped by his sustained interest in Chicago and its history. Further, “Ware’s portrayal of a city qua multiplicity discloses something about the nature of the pictorial language it deploys, and about the nature of language per se,” (Doel & Clarke, 2010, p. n.p.). Of particular interest here is Ware’s 2012 masterpiece, *Building Stories* (Figure X). Not so much a comic as a graphic narrative printed across a range of media, from comic books to broadsheet newspaper to a Little Golden Book. Importantly, the fourteen elements to *Building Stories* are not numbered, offering a range of entry points into the narrative. Like all comics and cities, the assembling of narrative is contingent on the way in which the ‘reader’ goes about it – but Ware has highlighted this feature by refusing to signpost a starting point or even a general ordering.

It is impossible to do justice to *Building Stories* in the space remaining, but a couple of quick points will suffice. First, the double entendre of the work’s name hints at Ware’s objectives – to narrate the city and to emphasize how narratives are built. Ware centers several of the elements of *Building Stories* on a single building, shifting the focus from any particular resident to the ‘life’ of the building itself, to whom any particular resident was only a blip in time. By shifting back and forth between the perspectives of human and building protagonists, Ware offers us multiple temporal frames through which to examine the life of the city. Going further, some of the elements of *Building Stories* tell the story of Branford the Bee, a honeybee living in Chicago alongside the humans and the buildings. His entire life is narrated; this is mere weeks, alongside the longer durations of the human-centric story and that of the building and the neighborhood in which it is situated. By picking out these elements of the city – by making them iconic for a time – Ware encourages the reader to see the

narratives of the city that are unreal to most of us, but which with help and practice we might actualize:

I think people 100 years ago saw the world better than we see the world. We're so used to not really looking at anything any more. We get out of the way of things heading towards us but that's really about all we do. We look but we don't see. I think 100 years ago people saw the texture of life that much more finely. You look at newspapers from 100 years ago, and the type is so small it's almost unreadable to our eyes. (Ware, quoted in Jamieson, 2012, p. n.p.)

With regard to the building of narrative, Ware's production of everything from bees to buildings as urban subjects effectively points to the multiplicity of potential narrators of any city. Each element of the urban has stories to tell. But crucially, Ware also illustrates how the memories of these narrators are not independent, but rely on other elements of the city. In one scene Ware imagines the Chicago of 2156, in which people use a Google Glass-like device to perceive past events that occurred 'in place'. Memory occurs in the relation between those remembering and the material context in which remembering occurs. Ware embeds this notion in the layout of several of the elements:

*Building Stories* often forces us to instead consider the thematic relations between the various sequences that make up each of these spreads, as well as their mutual bond to the central image that holds them together. Instead of making historicity visible as comics typically do, these sequences model something more like the contingencies of mnemonic reflection, wherein a particular experience or idea will summon up unbidden a host of others that came before. (Brogan, 2012, p. n.p.)

In other words, some panels do not reflect actual events within

the narrative, but instead are organizing images (e.g., a baby, a dollar bill) that provide a link between various parts of the narrative that are otherwise disconnected. The effect of Ware's effort is to not only de-center the narrative among many elements of the city, but also to de-center the memories – and therefore subjectivities – of the narrators, dispersing memory across the twin topological spaces of the city and the comic.

## Conclusion

In this brief essay I have tried to indicate how comics and the city can both be understood as topological spaces that – while always actualized in particular ways – nevertheless are excessive and irrepressible. The unreal dimensions of comics (e.g., the gutters) carry within them the seeds of narrative multiplicity, as readers produce counter-orderings of the panels (intentionally or not). Similarly, the urban real is always haunted by the urban unreal; “*there is another world, which is this world*”. The urban real is itself a fragile thing, necessarily buffeted by the movement between its reality and all the unrealities that can be remembered or imagined. Politically, this is something for which we should all be grateful.

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