# Reading the Cityscape

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THE CITY AS NARRATIVE, the city as space: comics, or, as I also will call them, sequential art, have been instrumental in constructing the narrative and representing the space.

The city as narrative implies a *totality* of some sort. It enables us to literally *think* the city. Totality in this sense should be taken as a hermeneutic term, as a way of conceptualising the city, rather than the ultimate truth about any specific city. It can be construed in a number of ways. Positively, as meaningful interaction and encounters between neighbours, strangers, classes; or negatively, as an anonymous, faceless threat of conflict and fragmentation. The very fear of total fragmentation (through crime, violence, demolition) being the last thing that keeps the idea of the city from splintering and falling

By discussing three comics – *Spirit* by Will Eisner, *Adèle Blanc-Sec* by Jacques Tardi and *Dark Knight* by Frank Miller – this article addresses the issue of representing the city. It stipulates a tension between two modes of representation, namely narration and spatial representation. Narration assumes a temporal flow subjected to a notion of totality. Spatial representation implies a simultaneity of images, symbols and perspectives akin to the experience the city as a fragmented space. Both of these modes merge in comics. Added to this, comics have contributed to and drawn from the mythologisation of the city in 20th century popular culture, not least by linking crime to an urban "essence".

to pieces. An entire mythology, manifested in detective novels, films, comics, etc has evolved around this polarity.

The city as space is, as opposed to the narrative, signified *primarily* by fragmentation. Baudelaire's notion of a "forest of symbols" points precisely to a fragmented urban space in which it is possible to get lost, and whose significance is not fixed but dependent on the city-dweller's ability and desire to bring some order to the jumble of signs. The primary fragmentation of urban space thus tends to *resist* hermeneutic desire, whereas the totality of the narrative *enables* interpretation.

The spatial aspect is symbolically redoubled in the very form of sequential art. Just as the city presents a wealth of simultaneous, fragmented and disparate visual information – people, shopfronts, cars, traffic signals, adver-

tisements – that is granted a momentary semblance of coherence only in the mind of the viewer, so does a comic page, in reduced form, present a wide range of visual information – including writing, pictures and symbols – that is made coherent and placed in a time sequence only by way of reading conventions. One might even suggest that the unique combination in sequential art of narrative (which presumes change over time) and graphic synchronicity, a feature which allows the reader to control the flow of time and focus on marginal detail, presents a symbolic solution to the daily urban frustrations of dispersed attention and visual fatigue. Comics narrativise the urban space.

No one has yet, to my knowledge, paid any sustained attention to this aspect of comics, nor has much general research been done in the field. There are two general theories of sequential art worthy of mention: Román Guberns *El lenguaje de los comics* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*. Göran Ribe has also published a brief but seminal article on the formal aspects of comics. My own readings are indebted mainly to Ribe's concept of *samnärvaro* (a contructed term meaning literally "together-presence"), which I have just referred to as the combination of chronological progression and graphic synchronicity in comics. (Ribe, 108–111)

Two volumes published in Swedish touch tangentially on the issue of the city in comics (and vice versa). These are Horst Schröders *De första serierna* and *Framtiden i serierutor*. Schröder has also published an article on Frank Miller's *Dark Knight*. Finally, I should mention that Kulturhuset in Stockholm

housed an exhibition in 1992 entitled "Seriestaden" ("The Comic City"), which was devoted to representations and visions of cities in comics.

As I investigate three representations of the city in sequential art, I will point to the differences in their treatment of narrative as well as space. My examples are none less than three milestones in the history of comics. Beginning with a few brief observations on Will Eisner's *Spirit* from the late 40's, I move on to Jaques Tardi's portrayal of Paris in *Adèle Blanc-Sec* and Frank Miller's *Dark Knight*, a postmodern version of *Batman*.

In *Spirit*, New York, called Central City, is not the only, but certainly the main scene of action. The seven-page stories (created in the 1940s) are heterogeneous in the extreme, mixing film noir, romantic melodrama, political satire and comedy with a highly innovative narrative style. They rely at every turn on the clichés and conventions of various genres but do not belong to any single, recognisable genre themselves.

Certain constants emerge in the representation of Central City. The physical cityscape of *Spirit* is labyrinthine, cramped and poorly lit. Elevators, subway trains, high rise buildings, dark streets, even darker entrances, small offices and apartments abound. Only rarely do the narratives unfold in more expansive spaces such as the city dump or the cemetery. The cooped-up feeling is reinforced by the condensed mode of storytelling – Eisner packs a great deal of information into each little frame. We are confronted with an unpredictable version of New York where visibility is constantly checked and danger lurks behind each corner. Crime and violence appear to define such a city. This is a

commonplace in super-hero comics, pulp fiction, hard-boiled detective novels etc. but it is only a half-truth. The city in *Spirit* may be labyrinthine, but it is also constantly traversed, deciphered, observed. Closed doors are opened, buildings entered, tunnels explored. Even more important: architecture is never allowed to dominate. Eisner's vision of the big city is, its gloom notwithstanding, humanist. The images consistently focus on people, with architecture in the background. Central City may be contested territory but it is perceived as a *public* space, inhabited not only by perpetrators of violence (of whatever gender) but to an equal degree by alienated, lower middle-class citizens who dutifully endure the throng of pavements and underground platforms. There is a typical split in Central City between a libidinally charged netherworld and a castrated day-time world – the Freudian implications are plain to see – but this split is never absolute or irretrievably sinister. The two worlds share a common space and frequently encounter one another. Thus, a contradiction emerges between the generic image of crime as a metaphysical "urban essence" and Eisner's humanist ethos. In the final analysis, the cramped and threatening spaces of Central City are to an equal degree "intimate", an indication of Eisner's enduring faith in the capacity of people to inhabit their urban space as autonomous subjects. The city becomes its inhabitants.

In Jacques Tardi's *Adèle Blanc-Sec*, created in the 70s, we are presented with something distinctly different. We are now in the Paris of *la belle époque*, ideologically defined as the period of "peace and prosperity" preceding World

Jaques Tardi combines picturesque panoramas with bizarre narratives in *Adéle Blanc-Sec*.

War I. By utilising that peculiar disjuncture in comics between synchronicity and the time-flow of narrative, Tardi is able both to confirm and negate this romantic image of *la belle époque*. The space of Paris in *Adèle Blanc-Sec* is astoundingly beautiful and convincing. Its wide panoramas coincide perfectly with the popular perception of Paris. Tardi even makes a point of placing much of the action in those worn-out icons of Parisian picturesque: the Eiffel tower, Pont Neuf, the Louvre. We find here – as opposed to Eisner's Central City – a certain precedence of architec-

ture over people. Tardi's Paris even gives the impression of being sparsely populated, due the awkward hours at which many events take place. The structures of Paris are ubiquitous and appear to determine their inhabitants rather than the other way around (never are we presented with a view of a building half-finished, not yet constructed). This "architectural", non-humanist version of the city may seem innocent at first, due to the reification of Paris-as-image in contemporary culture. This reified image implies, moreover, that Parisian architecture – and not least of

the jugend era of *la belle époque* – functions in an expressivist mode. It supposedly manifests the hidden truth of human beings, forging the outer landscape with the inner. In like manner, the threat of spatial fragmentation would appear to have been laid to rest in the stable image of Paris. This is, however, severely contradicted as we turn to Tardi's narrative.

In a pastiche of the pulp fiction of the period, Tardi tells the story of sensational occurrences in Paris. In one of the stories, we follow the rise and fall of the fanatical cult of an ancient Assyrian

From Jacques Tardi's *Adéle Blanc-Sec*.

god; in another, the proverbial mad scientist refurbishes the Frankenstein-saga and gives life to a pithecanthropus.

In these bizarre episodes, the pleasing image of Paris is juxtaposed with its repressed other. We see this in the very title of the second album *Le démon de la tour Eiffel* ("The Demon of the Eiffel Tower") – the demon functions as a metaphor for that which the tower, as an icon of modernity, contains but conceals. In the same story, Adèle stumbles upon a meeting of a fanatical cult literally inside and underneath the Pont Neuf. But the cult, the demon, as well as the other avatars of the Other, are not so much sinister as ridiculous. If the subtext of Eisner's *Spirit* defined urbanity as "crime", Tardi's narrative is ironic and satirical. The followers of Pazuzu are citizens of considerable standing in society. In the Frankenstein story, the

mad scientist who wants to create an entire army of aggressive, unthinking monsters is, of course, known as a mild-mannered petit bourgeois. What brings out the bizarre threats in these episodes is not "crime", nor individual malice, but structural hierarchies, scientific reason, the ideologies of progress and respectability – these are the very harbingers of madness and folly. With Adèle Blanc-Sec herself as a laconic centre of seasoned sanity, Tardi gives us a farcical version of the death wish of *la belle époque*.

In Frank Miller's *Dark Knight*, finally, we are confronted with black comedy rather than farce. Madness is no longer concealed here, but manifest and visible. In this version of the Batman story, Gotham city – the epitome of the megalopolis – is best described as a train careening out of control, or, to revert to biological imagery, a feste-

ring sore. In *Dark Knight*, the essence of the city is defined as "crime" and "violence" from the very beginning. "Crime" is utterly dehumanised. It is not represented as having any cause – it is simply "evil" – but has been allowed to grow thanks to the laxity and cowardice of citizens and government officials. The reactionary moral of the story is that the Dark Knight alone, by fighting "crime" with its own methods – that is, with violence and terror – shows the way to a better society. This is an ideology which, incidentally, leads straight into the American right-wing extremism of the 90s.

At a formal level, *Dark Knight* is the most sophisticated and complex of my three examples. The story presents us with a true "forest of symbols" and stretches the possibilities of fragmentation in narrative. Structurally it brings to mind Fredric Jameson's famous description of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles: just as the Hotel lacks the unifying spaces, grand entrances and overview of modernistic architecture, so is the narrative space of *Dark Knight* a far cry from the harmonious transparency of Tardi. (Jameson, 39 f.) The reader who enters *Dark Knight* must abandon all hope of "seeing" the grand design of the narrative – it can only be "performed" through reading. Totality has been sundered, atomised. One last unifying space remains: the non-space of the TV-screen. It is remarkable to note just how many of the story's 200-pages are narrated via tiny images of a TV-screen. This permits the action to move between any place within and beyond Gotham city without any mediation whatsoever. As such, it is one of the most convincing

In *Dark Night*, it is the non-space of the TV-screen that unifies the urban space.

representations of the postmodern hyperspace that I have come across.

This gives us, in conclusion, three different versions of the city. In Eisner's *Spirit*, the city is constituted through person-to-person encounters, which undercut the the sinister and faceless cliché of "crime" as the unifying factor. In *Adèle Blanc-Sec* architecture, the physical cityscape and the social order implied by it, constructs totality, but also produces and contains its irrational negation (which, by implication, leads straight to the abyss of World War I). In the postmodern scenario of *Dark Knight*, the social fabric of the city is all but undone: the last remnant being the simulacra of the TV-image.

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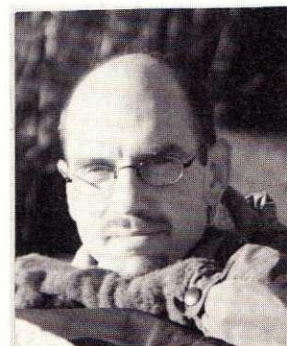
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