

# Worlds of Vision: Thinking Geographically Through Comics

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## Abstract

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

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

## Keywords

Comic geographies; empathy; feminist geography; graphic narrative; visual geography

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WORLDS



OF VISION

*Thinking geographically  
through comics*

## Worlds of vision: thinking geographically through comics

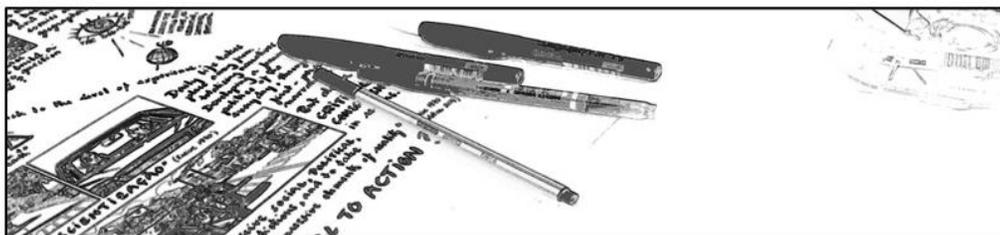
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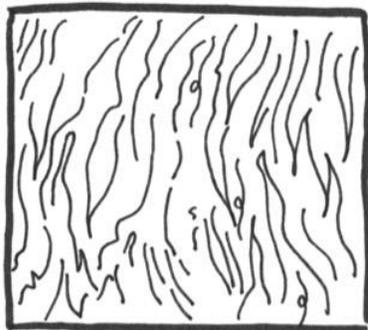


Methodologically, this comic combines two limited corpi: a carefully-chosen scholarly literature review and a limited chosen set of images taken from two recent popular Italian comics. By thinking visually from and with these images, I ground my approach in their *détournement* (Debord & Wolman 1956). These are subsequently redrawn, added to and transformed.

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



# Worlds of vision Thinking geographically through comics



- Maps →
- ← Viewpoints
- Landscapes →
- ← Territories
- Photography →
- ← Panoramas
- Films →
- ← Reportage
- Travelogs →

The world has been made through **REPRESENTATION** made real in images and texts.



An arrogance. Misplaced hubris.



**GEOGRAPHERS** cast themselves as **Master Narrators**

Expecting that the world would listen. But the world did not.

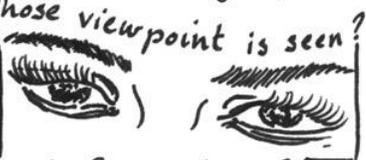


Looking down?

How is viewpoint made invisible?  
Where are politics made?  
Who is telling the story?



Whose viewpoint is seen?



Who looks? Who speaks? Who feels?  
How are these affects visual?

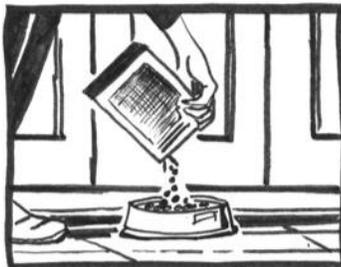
Some images redrawn & modified, in the spirit of Debord & Wolman's détournement (1956) from:

Berardi, G. 2018, La Spada Stregata. Julia, Le Avventure di una criminologa. Milan, S. Bonelli Editore  
Berardi, G. 2018, Super Hero. Julia, Le Avventure di una criminologa. Milan, S. Bonelli Editore



**GEOGRAPHERS** realised the world can only be made by...

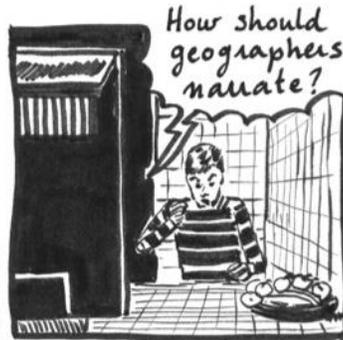
Details  
Points  
of  
View  
Small  
Partial  
Glances.



...**ASSEMBLING**.  
There is no such  
thing as an  
Objective  
Detached  
Apolitical

**DESCRIPTION  
OF THE  
WORLD.**

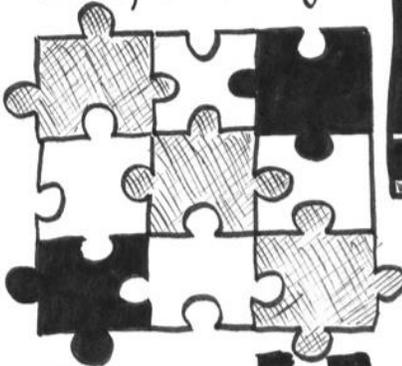
**LOOKING**  
becomes a political  
act of assembling.



How can we  
make sense of  
the diversity  
of viewpoints?

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How can we represent a fragmented world?  
How can we learn to assemble viewpoints?

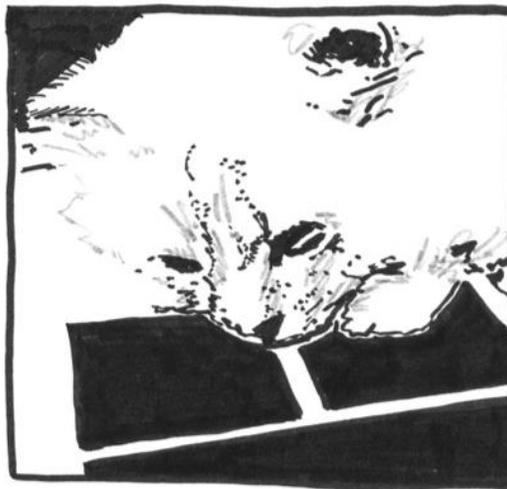


How can we  
assemble a

+  
+  
+

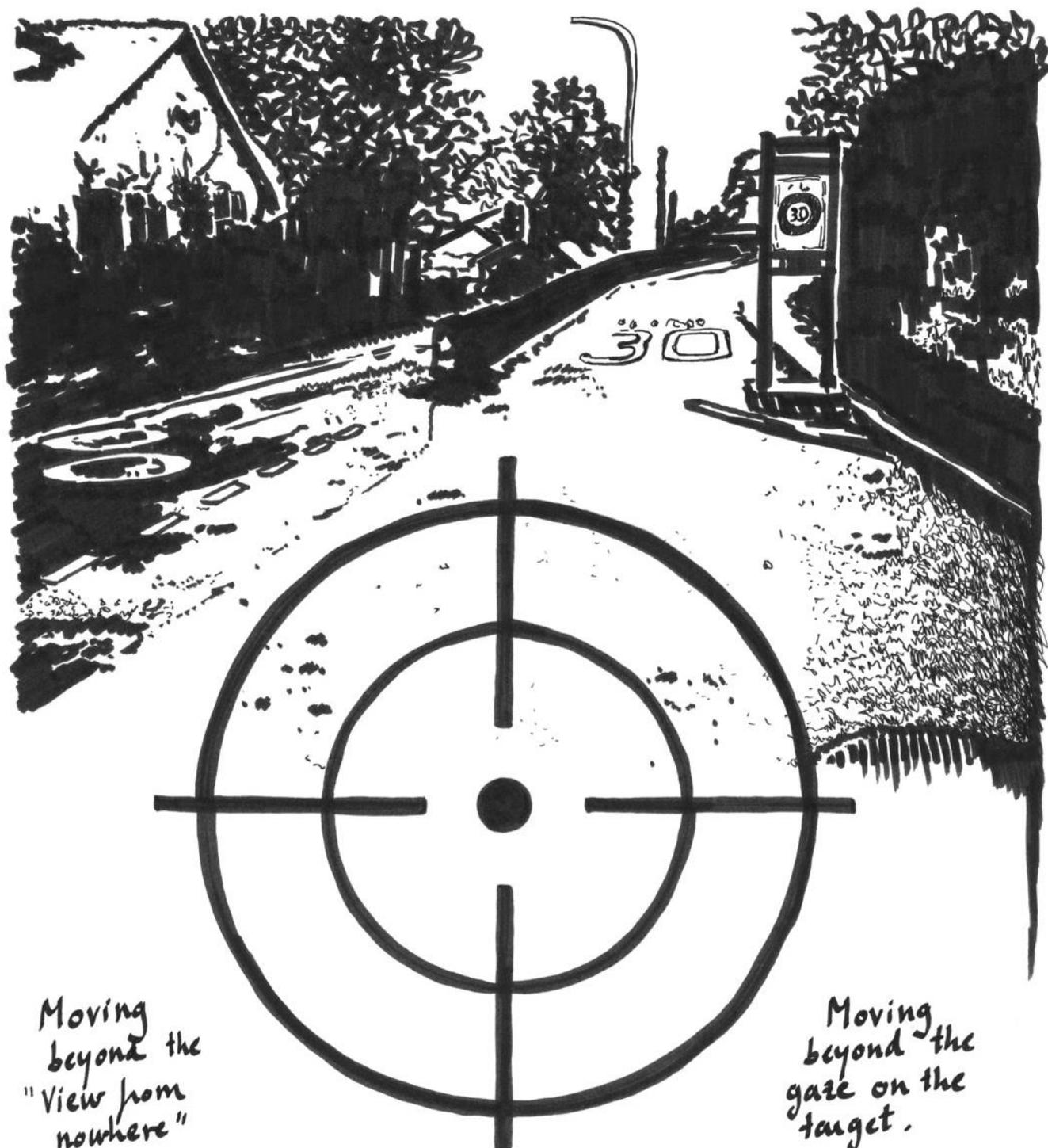
**VISUAL GEOGRAPHY?**

Comics	make	worlds
by assembling		parts
to make	a	story.



**HOW CAN  
WE LEARN  
NEW  
VISUAL  
SKILLS  
from  
COMICS?**

Learning —  
Borrowing —  
Taking —



Moving beyond the "View from nowhere"

Moving beyond the gaze on the target.

A promise to CRAFT alternatives?



Faceless geographies are challenged to become other.

There is a need for new alternatives.

### A DIALOGUE between COMICS and GEOGRAPHY.



Making scholarship beyond words.

Crafting a visual argument through constraints.



Attempting to narrate alternatives visually.

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

\* A first draft using collage from 2 cheap comics.

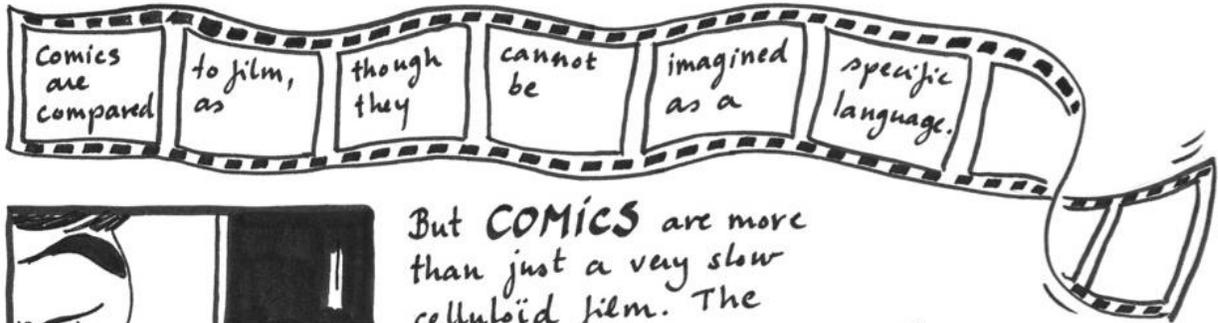
\* A limited scholarly reference list.



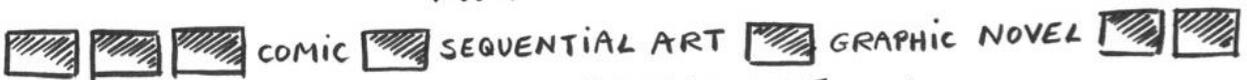
\* A subsequent reworking of the pages to move beyond collage.

Constraints to stimulate alternatives.

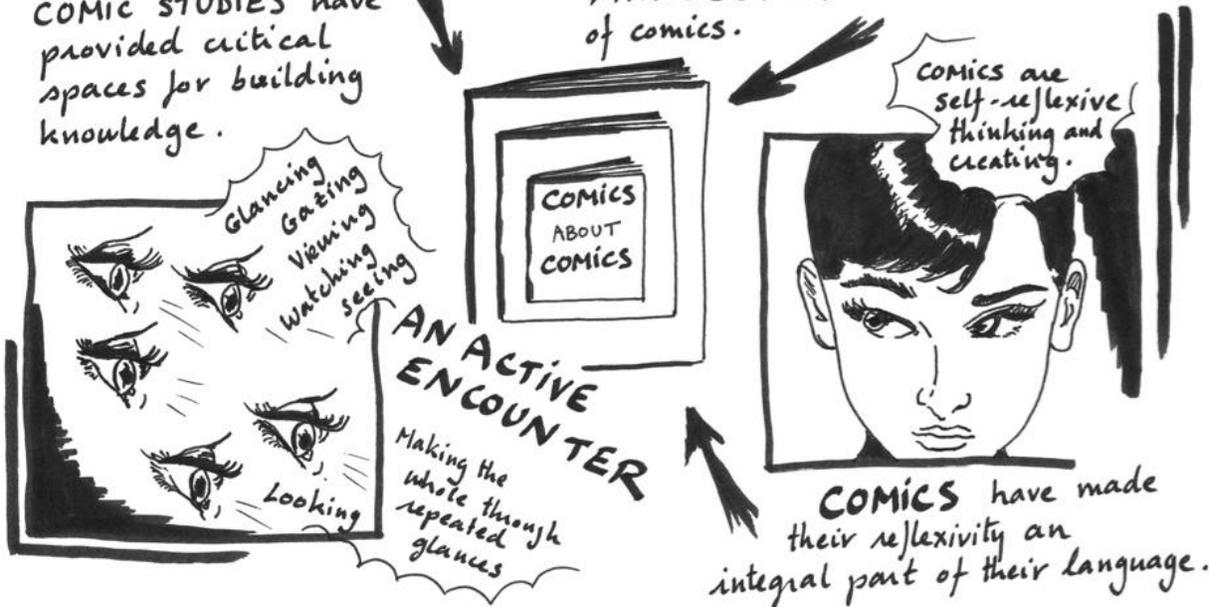
## OPENING UP WORLDS?



But **COMICS** are more than just a very slow celluloid film. The **VIEWING EXPERIENCE** is very different. So how do **COMICS** make their own **WORLDS**?



Authors have written about the **LANGUAGE** and **PHILOSOPHY** of comics. **COMIC STUDIES** have provided critical spaces for building knowledge.





**Inbetween?**  
 Comics play upon first-person narratives and storytelling. What Farish called "between embodied proximity and disembodied detachment" (Farish 2001)  
**COMICS narrate LIVES.**

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



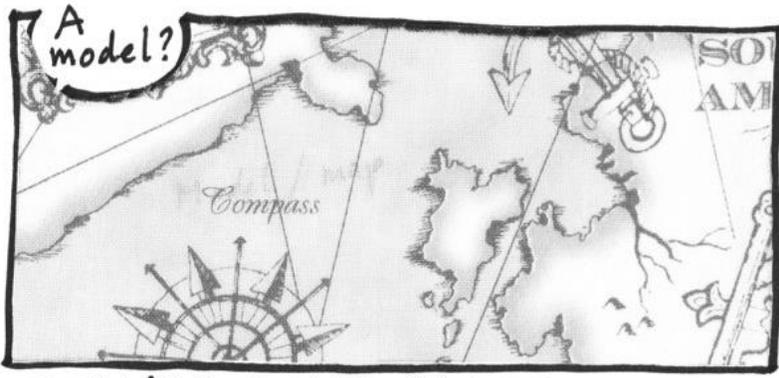
**A WORLD BUILT ON GAPS and VOIDS**, yet that is:



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



**VISIBLE MATERIAL TANGIBLE ENCOUNTERED SEEN FELT ...**



**COMICS** are metonymic geographies: the parts stand in for the whole.

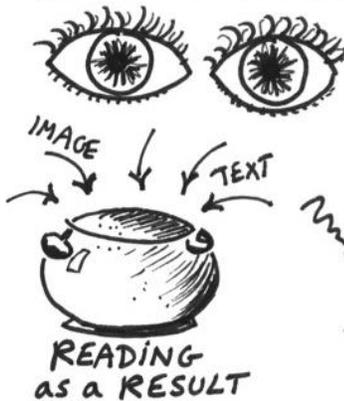
**REDUCED** to a few chosen parts to represent the whole

**COMICS LOVE MAPS.** They speak the same language.



Comics in Geography make us rethink how people have engaged with the visual, how this connects to an embodied human eye engaging with its surroundings.

(Gallacher 2011 in Dittmer 2015)



Monstrous geographies of text and image bonded together through Contingent performances of Alchemic reading that fuse into a composite whole

READING as Embodied + Active

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



SPACE is not so much relative as relational.

SPACE is rather a kind of becoming, emergent through relations.



In this narrative function of comics, space is read as time, produced through readers' Immersion





Deleuze never wrote about comics but by stretching his thoughts on social life, we can think about the role of repetitions in creating meaning.



□ □ Panels are linked, implying that they are part of the same narrative.



"The gutter is where the fun happens" (Wolk in Carleton 2014)

Can't we do the same without Deleuze?

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

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

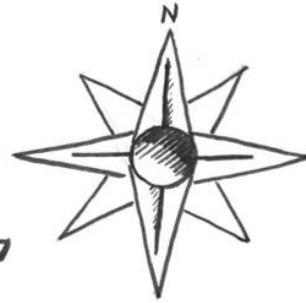


TOPOLOGY helps to understand the spatial operation of:

- Continuity and change
- Repetition and difference.

Relations continue despite CONTINUAL CHANGE.

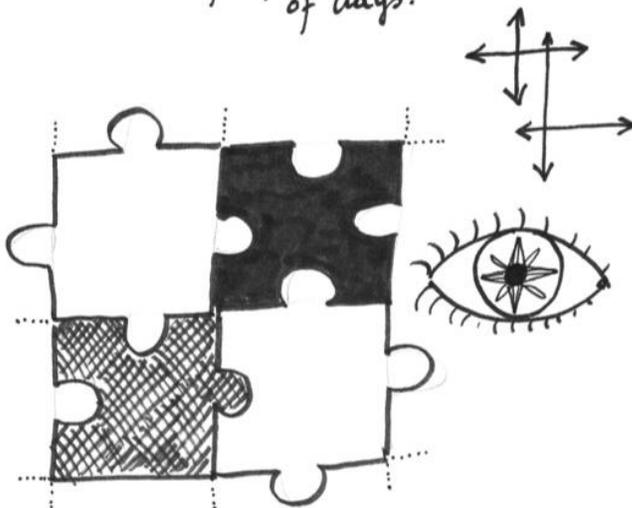
**COMICS** guide readers through each page, navigating the topology of space in a number of ways.



 Navigating the topology of space in a number of ways.



Not all comics guide the reader in a clear manner.



Comics theorists such as Thierry Groensteen have theorised how comics add images to those already seen, revisiting those old images. **PLURIVECTORIAL NARRATION.**  
(Groensteen 2006)



Feminist interventions in underground comics were conscious of their transformational potential.

↳ **Consciousness Raising**



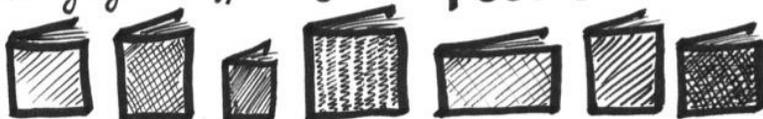
**Comics as Serious INTERVENTIONS**

engaging with historical and contemporary political issues.

↳

**COMICS as Making ALTERNATIVES POSSIBLE**

Not looking at the world from above, as geographers used to do, but imaging it differently.



Since the 1980s there has been an explosion of critical works in comics.

**COMICS** become one tool for conscientization.

But how can **GEOGRAPHERS** contribute to this?

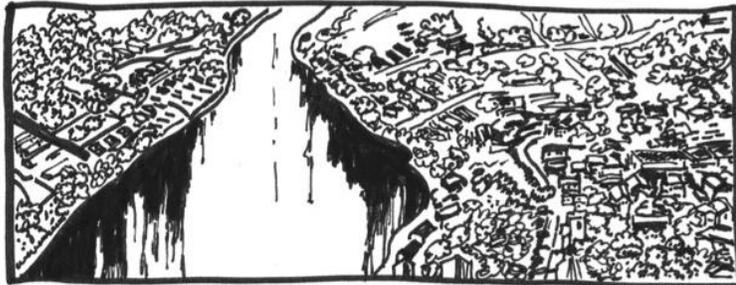


↳ How can geographers actually **CONTRIBUTE** rather than **REPEAT** what **ARTISTS** already are doing alone?

No comic artist needs a geographer to tell her what she is already doing. So what can we actually do?

↳ Comprehend our existence **IN** and **WITH** the world!

We can go further than standpoint theory ---



An understanding of how **Space** and **Time** work in comics only takes geographers so far.

What about thinking about how space and scale are **Represented**? How can we learn about building a critical position from which to **Question the View from Nowhere**?



No longer seeing <sup>of the</sup> world from above as though we could be **OBJECTIVE** **DETACHED** **RATIONAL**



BACK TO EARTH!



Bringing the **GAZE** back to the level of experience



" CONSCIENTIZAÇÃO " (Freire 1970)

**Daily life** takes place away from totalising narratives. Developing a feminist politics of the everyday, through first-person narratives.



Building a **CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS** in readers.

Helping readers to perceive **SOCIAL POLITICAL** and **ECONOMIC CONTRADICTIONS** and to **take action** against oppressive elements of reality (Freire 1970 in Carleton 2014).

**LEARNING** from comics as a **CALL TO ACTION**?

# CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING



as  
**CRITICAL THINKING?**



Piecing meaning together progressively, making reading part of conscientization.



- Authors crafting avatars -  
- in autobiographies -

## AUTOGRAPHICS

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

Through witnessing, first-person comics place moral responsibility.



Lived or narrated tales are placed at specific geographical locations.



Needing to avoid deploying victims as antidotes to heroic tales. Instead grounding **EMPATHY** in specific places, allowing readers to engage with such positions.

This **CONSIDERED RETROSPECT** can specifically highlight **CONTRADICTORY DISCOURSES** **DESTABILISING HEGEMONIES**



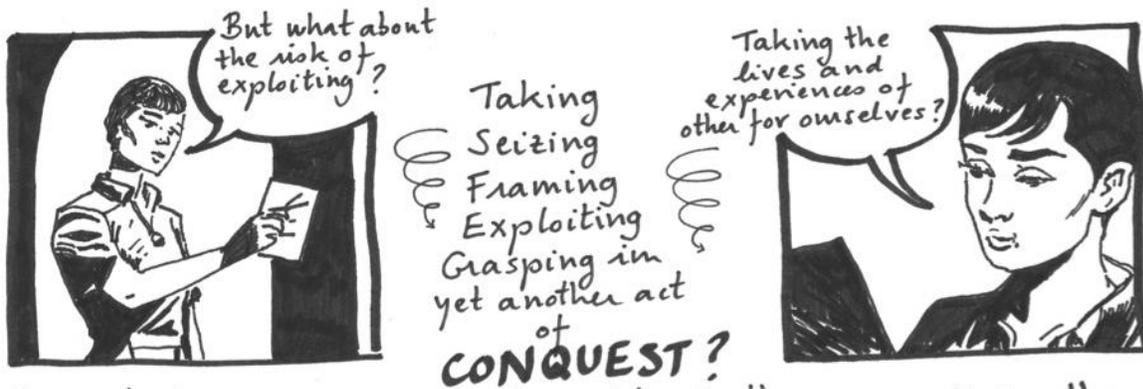
Creating a political basis for critical outrage grounded



in empathy. New meanings generated in the gutters,

Making sense of **SPACES** where others reside.

Constructing **COUNTER GEOPOLITICS.**



- Remembering.
- Feeling.
- Standing beside.
- Reframing.
- Showing empathic concern.
- Taking steps towards connection in a broken world.

Plundering the worlds of others...



OR FRAMING THE WORLD THROUGH EMPATHY?

Using the suffering of others to craft our own tales?

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

MAKING EMPATHETIC GEOGRAPHIES?

NOT trying to only see worlds within comics, or only seeing how comics speak about the world.

NOT being second fiddle to an established art.



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

OPEN to EXPERIMENT that  
 CREATES  
 VISUALISES  
 CRAFTS

Making scholarship open to visual alternatives.

Speaking back to the world and then listening quietly.

— ALTERNATIVE WORLDS —

## Acknowledgements

Many discussions and dialogues led to this comic being finally drawn, but I should like to specially thank Marcello Tanca, Giada Peterle, Laurent Matthey and Karine Duplan for their kind feedback, and the participants of the second *Comics & Geografia* meeting of the Italian Association of Geographers (AGEI) that took place in Bologna in September 2018, organised by Fabio Amato, Alessandra Bonazzi, Emanuele Frixia and Giulia De Spuches.

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