Comic book visualities: a methodological manifesto on geography, montage and narration

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This paper deals with comic books as both a textual and visual form, arguing that the present literatures on the geographies of reading and visuality neglect this kind of hybrid. Comic book producers’ discursive construction of their audience is key to the way in which comic book visuality becomes a set of ‘conventions’ that are materialised through the printing process. These conventions are linked to cinematic visuality through their use of montage, but differ in several key ways, including the elasticity of drawn panels and the lack of an intended ‘reality effect’. Drawing on the comics semiotics of Thierry Groensteen and supplementing his work with a heightened appreciation of the expected role of readers in constructing narrative, the empirical section illustrates how comics literacy is understood to work via micro-geographies of the page, highlighting aspects distinct to the form such as plurivectorial narration and simultaneity. These narrative possibilities invite readers to imagine time and space in quite unique ways that other forms of textual consumption do not. This paper concludes that comic book visuality, with inherent possibilities for plurivectorial narration and shifting temporalities, can provide geographers with the metaphoric tools to apprehend and communicate relationships of emergent causality that are central to recent political theory.

**key words** comic books visuality reading montage narration emergent causality

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In learning to read comics we all learned to perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same.

(McCloud 1993, 100)

**Introduction**

While space and time have long been connected in human geography, in comic books they are linked in a unique fashion. Seemingly ‘obvious’, reading comic books requires the internalisation of a specific visuality involving the ability to translate the spatiality of two-dimensional sequential images into four-dimensional narrative (or narratives, as this paper will demonstrate). Indeed, ‘a comic strip is literally a map of time’ in that its producers are attempting to render the passage of time visible through the use of static, sequential images (Raeburn 2004, 11).

This paper seeks to extend the literature on geographies of reading to incorporate the visual texts of comic books, arguing that recent work on the geographies of reading has been dominated by textuality and has neglected the visual field. This argument is more than the highlighting of an empirical oversight (although it is that too); the analysis of comic book visualities provides a space for the further theorisation of the distinction between the ‘audience’ (the imagined readership, which is a discursive construction of authors and institutions) and the readership (the near-infinite ways in which readers and text intersect in various lived contexts).
Most importantly, however, comic book visualities hold out the possibility of introducing a new ‘optical unconscious’ to geography, one that holds open opportunities for more plural, flexible narratives to emerge from a singular montage. The present cinematic unconscious emphasises the tools of the cinematographer in our cognitive assembly and recall of everyday experience (see Doel and Clarke 2007). While this enables space-time to be manipulated in ways that allow for experience to be rendered more explicit (e.g. through framing, slow-motion effects and zooming in), it does so at the cost of structuring the human experience in ways associated with film’s limitations – a certain rigidity of form and standardisation of film speed. Comic book visualities defy these structuring elements, holding forth possibilities of simultaneity and polyphony.

This paper deals with comic books as both a textual and a visual form. It begins with a review of the literature in cultural geography on reading and processes of meaning-making with traditional texts, before delving into recent theorisations of the media ‘audience’ as a discursive construction of cultural producers. Expectations of ‘audience’ reading practices serve as the basis for producers’ attempts to convey visual narratives. The next section of the paper compares and contrasts the visual language of comics with that of cinema, illustrating points of contact between the literature on cinematic geographies and this paper. The empirical section of the paper draws together the insights from these two literatures along with work from comics semiotics to argue that the visualities of comic books are profoundly spatial in both representational and non-representational ways. This section will draw on a critical reading of Thierry Groensteen’s recently translated seminal work in comics semiotics, The System of Comics (2007), to illustrate how comic book conventions are rooted in certain expectations of reading practices; these conventions serve as a potential source of disruption to the cinematic unconscious, offering new possibilities for comprehending the human experience. These new possibilities are the subject of this paper’s concluding remarks, which highlight the utility of comic book visuality as a language for understanding emergent causality.

**Cultural geographies of readers and audiences**

Academic geography’s continued encounter with reading has lasted several decades and has fairly regularly morphed into new types of engagement. Pocock (1988) argues that the focus on literary geographies emerged as a rejection of geography’s increasingly scientific outlook during the 1960s. This humanist approach to literary geography resulted in a particular engagement with novels’ settings, probing both sense of place and the role of place in defining literary characters. In both cases humanists argued for a context-sensitive academic reading but one not limited by ideological perspective (for a Marxist counterpoint, see Silk 1984). Brosseau locates this previous generation of work on literary geography within a broader movement associated with the ‘rehabilitation of subjectivity’ (1994, 334).

This body of work, however, was deemed insufficiently focused on the text itself (Thrift 1978), with critics instead positing that genre conventions and other, more unique particularities of the text could be productive of their own geographies. Joanne Sharp continued this critique when she wrote:

Many who use literature in geography display a naïveté about the form of literary writing: it is seen as unproblematic and self evident in its immediate beauty.

(2000, 328)

Drawing on literary theory, she proposes instead that geographers study literature as a form of knowledge which involves the aspects of voice, examined through critical reading, discourse explored through the context of writing, and reception.

(2000, 331)

This final aspect, reception, is key in introducing the role of audiences within literary geographies (see also Kneale 1999). Audiences’ reading practices have emerged in the literature more frequently in the intervening years, with Ogborn noting that

In a more empirical and historical vein, the history of reading has begun to knit together concerns for texts, spaces and embodied practices in pursuit of the making of meaning. Indeed, as steps towards a geography of reading, works such as Jim Secord’s Victorian Sensation (2000) are beginning to show how reading is undertaken in fundamentally different ways in different places. The same text takes on quite different meanings, and is put to very different uses, as readers interpret and appropriate texts through distinct reading practices. In this way both texts and spaces are connected (in the place of reading) and opened (in their enactment in practice) to a range of appropriations.

(2005, 146)
Similarly, Hones (2008) notes that the change in focus to include consumption within the study of literary geographies enables a theoretical shift towards the consideration of the encounter between reader and text as a performative event that is literally placed within numerous contextual factors. Attempting to situate these sites of reading, Livingstone (2005) has argued in the context of ‘travelling theory’ for analysis to attend to what he terms spaces of textual circulation, sites of textual hybridity, cartographies of textual reception and cultural geographies of reading.

These four cuts at the project of developing a geography of reading are intended to highlight the spatiality of textual meaning. But they also disturb any assumption that a clear boundary line can be charted between acts of production and consumption.

(Livingstone 2005, 395)

This blurring of the processes of textual production and consumption is central to the purpose of this paper. The audience is a notoriously slippery concept, and the history of cultural studies is rife with various formulations that have succeeded each other and eventually been discarded as unsatisfactory (e.g. Radway 1984; Allor 1988; Ang 1991; Silverstone 1996). Subsequently, many in the field of audience studies have embraced the notion that audiences themselves can never be studied as such because audiences’ practices are too variegated as a result of increasingly ‘nomadic’ subjectivities (Radway 1988). A useful distinction might be made between readers, the nomadic and ultimately unknowable multitude that physically engage with mass media, and the ‘audience’, which is the idea of these masses (this is similar to the distinction in Hones (2008) made between authorial and narrative audience, respectively). Audience studies has turned towards analysis of the ways in which these ‘audiences’ are constituted by those with a vested interest in their reification and analysis.

[Audiences] may be imagined empirically, theoretically or politically, but in all cases the product is a fiction that serves the imagining institutions. In no case is the audience ‘real’ or external to its discursive construction. (Hartley 1992, 105)

Jack Bratich (2005) argues, following Foucault, that ‘audiences’ are reified through discourse and performance as a result of institutional anxiety and concern. The construction of ‘audiences’ is a necessary operationalisation for these institutions so that policies and practices can be implemented.

Problematizing audiences constitutes a fundamental part of public policy, educational initiatives, corporate production, cultural programming, research funding, even the interpersonal protocols of families in the domestic sphere. (Bratich 2005, 244)

This anxiety and concern, Bratich argues, results from the disparity in power relations between institutions and readers. Drawing on Hardt and Negri (2000 2004), Bratich (2005, 246) postulates ‘audience power’ – the ‘creative processes of meaning making, the appropriation and circulation of affects, and the enhancement of these very capacities’ – which is immanent prior to exposure to the mass media; only after this point are readers able to be problematised by institutions into ‘audiences’.

Ultimately, media industries, and the problematizing discourses, need the audience. Consumers [readers], as mediated multitude, do not need media industries in order to produce culture, nor the problematizing discourses in order to produce value.

(Bratich 2005, 262)

Producers, then, anxiously try to anticipate how their cultural products will be encountered by consumers in order to keep consumers coming back for more.

Anticipating comics’ readership

In literary geography, the recent focus on textual encounters leads to a taken-for-granted quality of the words themselves; there may be problems in translation from one language to another, or there may be problems with technical jargon, but the greatest diversity of meanings emerge from the contextual factors or subjectivity of the reader. With comic books, however, the visual dimension adds a further element of instability to any reading (see El Refaie 2009). Comic books (as well as similar forms such as cartoons and ‘comic strips’) incorporate a visual image and usually (but not always) text, either in the form of speech or thought balloons or an ‘anchoring’ caption (Berona 2001). While the relative importance of text and image in comic books is a subject of debate, it is possible to imagine a comic without words, but it is impossible to imagine one without images (Kunzle 2001). ‘[W]hen an image is combined with words as in a comic strip, the words become secondary but the language of images becomes primary’ (Barry 1997, 78). While the image-text may appear at first glance simpler and easier to de-code than the more abstract word-text, this is not necessarily
This example shows that attempts to violate the visual semiotic ‘rules’ of comics by aspiring to representational ‘validity’ led to a failure of narration; a reliance on the overly-explicit pornography of detail, rather than a reduction in complexity such that readers’ eyes were drawn to the ‘action’. This phenomenon has been referred to by McCloud as ‘amplification through simplification’ (1993, 30). The construction of an ‘audience’ and their assumed reading practices must precede production.

Once focused upon, this anxiety among producers to connect with readers is evident. In the case of comic books, this is perhaps most evident in the historical role of letters-to-the-editor as a feedback device from which editors, artists and writers can construct and come to know their ‘audience’. For example, Marvel Comics has historically attempted to engage with readers by emphasising a sense of fellowship with the ‘audience’. From the 1970s on, fan culture became a critical element of the comic book industry. The rise of ComicCon (massive conventions devoted to comics, sci-fi and fantasy) provided a key node for face-to-face meetings among fans and the producers of comics who had previously only been able to correspond via letters. ‘Fanzines’ provide forums for critical reviews by these ardent fans, and some argue that it is these fans who have led the comic book industry away from mainstream, newsstand marketing and into the world of direct market distribution (comic book shops run by fans and mail-order subscriptions):

While hardcore fans constituted only a minority of the comic book audience, their loyalty and longevity (many remained avid readers well into adulthood) made them a significant market. As publishers looked for a way out of their own financial malaise in the late 1970s, they came to appreciate more and more the wisdom of selling comic book fantasies directly to those who dreamed about them the most.

(Wright 2001, 253)

Because comic book shop owners are fans themselves, they are directly embedded in webs of social interaction with other readers and have particular understandings of readers’ interests and responses. The specific titles and numbers of comic books ordered by these independent proprietors thus reflect the interests of the ‘audience’ as constituted by their social networks. The comics industry effectively outsourced their ‘audience research’ to the fans themselves (this is true of several other industries with close links to fandom, such as science fiction and fantasy).

The ‘audience’ is thus constituted as an object by comics producers in an effort to maintain their market share (or expand it). Fears over being replaced by newer media such as television, cinema and video games fuels this anxiety, and further the characteristics of the ‘audience’ must be known in order to sell advertising in an increasingly niche-minded and fragmented advertising environment. In short, the ‘audience’ is a prerequisite for not only writers and artists who need to know how their work will be read by readers, but also for the companies who physically manifest the comic narratives.

The remainder of this paper, however, focuses on the first of these by analysing the spatial elements of comic book visuality, illustrating how writers’ and artists’ understandings of readership practices structure the pages and illustrations they produce. Reading comic books is a learned cultural practice that nevertheless incorporates a great deal of openness and ambiguity, and producers’ expectations for clear transmission of narrative are often unmet, with the potential existing for readers to
consume comics in any number of ways in large part because of comics’ symbolic openness. It is to comics as a visual form that this paper now turns.

**Visuality, cinema and comic books**

As specified earlier, while comic books incorporate both text and the visual, they are perhaps best understood as a fundamentally visual phenomenon. Visualities can be understood as learned visual literacies that enable an audience to be active readers of a particular visual culture (Rose 2007). These visualities are specific to particular spaces and times. Marcus Doel and David Clarke (2002) argue that the dominant visuality today is cinematic, resulting from (and producing) the expansive film-based culture that we inhabit. Our proclivity for describing the world through cinematic metaphor, such as focusing and framing, panning and zooming, illustrates the dominance of this form of visuality in what Doel and Clarke, borrowing from Benjamin, have referred to as our ‘optical unconscious’ (2007, 893). This notion describes our tendency to reconstruct past experiences by visualising them through the cinematographers’ bag of tricks – slow motion, sepia tones, and the like.

As a result of this reliance on cinematic visuality, other media such as video games and comic books are now often judged as more realistic if they adhere to cinematic norms (note the use of depth of field in Figure 1 to distinguish between two frames). Nevertheless, there are key differences between the visualities associated with these media. It is worth briefly considering the relative visual and narrative flexibility of cinema and comic books. Even at the simple level of framing, there are key distinctions:

The flexibility afforded to comics with regard to the form of its frames, the ‘elasticity’ of the drawn panels, highlights the rigidity of the cinematographic apparatus, which is practically condemned to equip the projected image with a fixed and constant form.

(Groensteen 2007, 40)

While it is of course possible for cinema to utilise different frame sizes, this is in practice quite expensive and is almost never attempted (excepting split screens and other effects produced in post-production). Comic books can be, and are, printed in a variety of different sizes and shapes and the frames within vary quite widely (e.g. Spiegelman 2008). Similarly, cinema is technically constrained in another way that comics are not. Bredehoft (2006, 871) has argued that the sequencing of filmic frames is determined by the technology used to project them:

[The two-dimensional screen of the cinematic film, while [...] presenting a sequence of two-dimensional images to the viewer, is powerfully constrained by the logic of sequentiality: if filmic images cease to be presented in time-sequence, the image freezes or the film itself stops. In this sense, the time-sequencing of images appears to be an unavoidable characteristic of the architecture of film itself.]

Of course, films often show the narrative out of order, using flashbacks and the like, as do comic books. However, the practice of reading comic books, as we will see, enables a variety of image-sequences to be produced from the same images by the reader.

A further difference can be found in the intended reality effect of cinema:

We need to recognize film as being first and foremost a ‘literalist medium’ whose nature is to make things explicit – to reveal or display the world in an evidentiary sense that is beyond the capability of traditional representational or art media. (Black 2002, 8)

This is not to say that cinema (particularly the art house, sci-fi and fantasy genres) does not attempt to portray experiences in an anti-realist way, such as the passage of vast amounts of time (see Clarke and Doel 2005), but only that cinematic visuality has the expectation of looking ‘real’ as a result of the persistence of vision that stitches together the rapidly flickering frames. Comic books have no such persistence, and so maintain a heavy reliance on readers’ imaginations to fill in the gaps between frames. As an example of the effect of this phenomenon on the cultural economy, consider the relatively recent boom in superhero movies. Most of these movies are drawing on heroes and narratives written decades ago in comic books, but are only now marketable films because the special effects technology is just now capable of rendering these stories as the visual spectacles they were intended, and imagined, to be by readers. This paper does not seek to argue that comic books require reader imaginations and cinematic films do not; rather the argument is that readers enact a particular visuality in the consumption of comic books that is unique from that performed in regard to film.

In what follows, this paper will unpack the practice of reading comic books, hoping to de-naturalise
Figure 1  British superhero Union Jack crosses London and confronts a threat in the Natural History Museum

Source: © 2009 Marvel Characters, Inc. Used with permission
this particular visuality and therefore illustrate the ways in which readers are expected to behave within producers’ constructions of the ‘audience’. Comic books rely both on mutual visual semiotic understandings and, crucially, on expectations of readers’ practices to fill in the narrative gaps.

Comic book montages of space and time

Marcus Doel and David Clarke argue that montage is central to contemporary human geography. Defined as ‘the process of selecting, editing, and piecing together separate sections of imagery for a calculated affect, and the technique of producing a new composite whole from fragments of imagery’ (2007, 890), montage is key to the production of meaning; by juxtaposing dissimilar images, new meanings are produced that are only understandable relationally. This is clearly the case in comics as well as in cinema; as Thierry Groensteen notes, comics are ‘the relational play of a plurality of interdependent images’ (2007, 17).

Doel and Clarke emphasise the non-representational aspects of montage.

Every combination of images exceeds the calculus of the real and the rational. Photomontage reveals not only that actuality is constructed, that sense is produced, and that consent is manufactured, but also that they are fixated by formlessness, non-sense, and eventfulness. (2007, 899)

In this way, a focus on readers’ consumption practices moves away from strictly representational understandings of texts and towards understandings of consumption as an event (Hones 2008), fundamentally under-determined.

No matter how much it may be burdened with sense, every combination of images bears witness to the Open. So, despite being put in the service of so many ends, montage is essentially a means without ends. While sense and reference are temporarily withdrawn from the Open, what return eternally with the cut of montage are chance, divergence, and the improbable. (Doel and Clarke 2007, 899)

It is through this fundamental Openness that the reader can be seen playing a particular role in the construction of meaning from comics. The visual semiotics of comics attempt to burden the comics with sense and meaning, but the situated consumption of comics is a unique event.

This section of the paper addresses the learned visuality of comics-reading, drawing on the work of Thierry Groensteen. However, this reading of his work will emphasise the expected role of readers in composing narrative(s) and producing meaning(s) to a degree that Groensteen does not. This adaptation of his work will be supplemented by examples of comic art that ‘illustrate’ and challenge the understanding of comic book visuality as natural or taken-for-granted, drawn from superhero comics and the biographical work of Chris Ware. Through this analysis the interplay of what is on the page (the visual) and what is not (the anti-optical) will be seen as key to readers’ practices of meaning-making.

Panel, strip and page: the rhythm of reading

The panel is the foundational unit of comic book storytelling. It consists of a singular image (although it can be quite complex), set apart from other images by a frame (described below). Groensteen (2007) identifies three characteristics to any panel. The first, form, refers to the geometric shape of the panel, while the second, area, refers to the proportion of the page it occupies. Both of these are identifiable through reference to the frame. The third characteristic of a panel is its site, or location on the page, and indeed, in the larger work of which it is a part. However, none of these characteristics speaks specifically to how images should be interpreted and meanings produced, and authors and artists often toy with readers’ expectations, which are often formed through the iterative practice of reading itself.

Reading practices associated with comic books follow some conventions taken from the reading of text. In comics produced in countries that read from left-to-right and from top-to-bottom, the same general pattern prevails in the author’s intended ordering of panels. In Japanese Manga comic books, however, narratives typically unfold from right-to-left (but still from top-to-bottom). The panel’s form, area and site serve as clues to readers as to that panel’s location in a narrative relative to the other panels. This then is key to two temporalities: (1) the virtual temporality of the narrative unfolding and (2) the rhythm of reading, in which a panel is looked at and read (two separate processes, seemingly impossible to combine, see Cioffi 2001), digested, and then abandoned for the next panel. Famed Belgian comics writer/artist Hergé commented on how the embodied aspects of reading practice influenced his production:
When I show a character who is running, he generally goes from the left to the right […]; and then, that corresponds to a habit of eye, which follows the movement and which I accentuate: from left to right, the speed appears faster than from right to left. I use the other direction when a character returns on his footsteps. If I always make him run from right to left, he will have the air, in each drawing, of returning, of chasing himself. (quoted in Groensteen 2007, 48)

Groensteen, and many others, argue that the breakdown is integral to expected reading practice. The breakdown is the composite effect of every panel’s form, area and site. First, the breakdown must be ‘legible’, that is, clear to readers in regard to the ordering of panels (although, as we shall see, this is sometimes left intentionally difficult). Because the page is usually rectangular, and because squares and rectangles neatly stack to maximise page space, panels tend to be quadrilaterals, although often of varying sizes. If these generalities hold, as they often do in ‘mainstream’ comics genres, then the reader’s eyes are swept across the page in a series of strips. The strip, then, forms the next unit of narrative after the panel, if only because at the end of a strip the reader’s eyes must lift from the page and return to the left-hand side of the next lowest strip. Similarly, the bottom-right panel serves as another disjunction, as the eyes lift to the top-left of the next page. This effect is enhanced if the page in question is the right-hand page, as this involves an even bigger disjunction as the page is physically turned.

Authors and artists use this spatial and embodied element of reading to structure their narrative according to readers’ proclivities – by using these disjunctions as a form of montage to illustrate disjunctions in the narrative (e.g. by shifting location and time at the end of a strip or page) or alternatively by dragging out critical moments in the narrative across the disjunction (e.g. making readers wait for a key event across the act of page-turning – see bottom of Figure 1). Of course many breakdowns are not quite as ‘regular’ as the bricks-across-wall version described above. In those cases, it often reflects a writer and artist’s intention to disrupt the act of reading, perhaps because the narrative moment maps onto disorientation or because there are details in the image that might be glossed over by an unencumbered reading.

This appreciation by the producers of comic books of the physical process of reading is described by several commentators using the language of embodied musical affect. Groensteen uses the musical language of ‘beats’, ‘sighs’, ‘pauses’ and ‘measures’ to describe the reading of comic books as ‘a natural rhythm, a breathing aroused by its discrete apparatus of enunciation, which, discontinuous, is laid out in strips and tabular’ (2007, 60–1). Similarly, Chris Ware, writer/artist of the work used as an example in the following section of this paper, has said that:

In comics you can make the beat come alive by reading it, by experiencing it beat by beat as you would playing music. So that’s one way to aesthetically experience comics. Another way is to pull back and consider the composition all at once, as you would the facade of a building. You can look at a structure that you could turn around in your mind and see all sides of at once. (quoted in Raeburn 2004, 25)

Ware’s transition from a linear understanding of comics, as a set of panels rhythmically following each other like breaths, to a larger understanding of the whole that they compose, mirrors the next shift in this paper. Where this sub-section detailed the rhythmic spatio-temporality of reading comics, the following sub-section will describe the virtual spatio-temporality within comic book narratives.

The anti-optical gutter: imagining time and meaning

The frame, as stated above, encloses a panel and separates it from other panels. For those raised in a culture dominated by a cinematic visuality, it is common to initially consider the panel the cognate of the filmic frame. However, this is not true (Groensteen 2007). The filmic frame represents a singular moment in time (or nearly singular, usually 1⁄24 of a second). The comics frame encloses a panel, which itself is of indeterminate duration. As proof we need look no further than Figure 1, which comes from Union Jack, a comic book about a British nationalist superhero. The only panel with actual spoken dialogue (‘Enjoy it while you can ~’) has both Union Jack’s thoughts in a box and the speech balloon coming in from out of frame. Readers know that the thought and the dialogue are not occurring simultaneously, as would be true if this were a cinematic snapshot in time. Instead, the image represents at least a few seconds of time in a single image as Union Jack’s thought is interrupted by speech. Part of gaining the visual literacy of comic books is intuitively knowing this and sorting for a rational ordering of dialogue within the
frame, just as readers’ arranging the panels into narrative order usually exists below the level of conscious thought (and in fact usually following the left-to-right, top-to-bottom convention, at least in the Anglophone world).

Further, time unspools within the breakdown of the page, specifically in the spaces on the page known as the gutter. The gutter is the space in between panels and can be either literal (un-drawn space in between the frames) or can be metaphorical (if frames directly abut). Either way, the gutter becomes important as a topological connection between those two panels. The gutter is the symbolic site of narrative development that must take place in order for the two juxtaposed panels to make sense. This development is necessary because comic book storytelling is necessarily minimalist, limited to a few dozen images with accompanying text to narrate a complete episode (at least in a traditional comic book, some formats are much longer). Groensteen expands on this:

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. (2007, 10)

The relationship between adjacent images is often provided by iconic solidarity, in which there is an icon that can be visually identified in each panel, linking them. It is a mistake to imagine the gutter as a missing set of panels that would explain the action – this is far too cinematic an understanding. Indeed, all that understanding does is push the gutter into smaller and smaller portions of the narrative (indeed, persistence of vision does not spare cinema from the same phenomenon, especially in cuts between scenes – but only in comics are these absences integral to this degree). Rather, gutters should be thought of as an anti-optical void – there is no story to reconstitute in that space, no missing images, only a relationship to be formed in the reader’s mind. Doel and Clarke describe this ‘imagelessness’ in a way that could be applied to comics as well as film:

the frame also refers to the absolute proximity of non-contiguous spaces and times, a manifold and inexhaustible ‘unseen’ that can never be actualized as a framed scene, but which nevertheless is pullulated and ramified to infinity. (2007, 906)

Again, looking at Figure 1, this non-representational element of comics is apparent. The top-most panel is an image of Union Jack running down the support for Tower Bridge. The dialogue boxes represent his thoughts, which would take most of ten seconds to pass through his mind, while running down the support would take much more than that. In the next strip below, images of the Natural History Museum and the Holy Grail are juxtaposed with the continuation of Union Jack’s thoughts from the first panel (at the risk of being a geographic pedant, he has covered a distance of four and a half miles – without super powers – in a single thought). The third strip shows that Union Jack is there, concluding his thought. It is difficult to envisage a scenario in which a narrative imagined ‘in the gutter’ could explain how one thought could take so long to develop. Rather, the sequence of images are not meant to be literalist, it is up to the reader to stitch them together into a meaningful narrative via the topology of images and absences.

Groensteen (2007, 108) argues that the comic book narrative is formed through what he calls ‘plurivectorial narration’, which itself occurs on three different planes. The first plane, observation, is a process of recognition, in which the reductionist icons are associated with people, objects and concepts. The second plane, syntagm, incorporates an understanding of the icons based on the panels immediately preceding and following. It is here that the term ‘plurivectorial’ is attached to the process, because the reader must continually shuffle back and forth across the page to draw on previous images in the interpretation of the current one (and equally often to re-interpret previous panels). Further, many readers ‘cheat’ by looking ahead in order to understand the ‘current’ panel. This further illustrates the point that comic book readers actively produce narrative, gathering resources from the page from which to constitute a coherent tale. The third plane of meaning, sequence, expands the linkages under analysis to include all the panels that are linked through iconic solidarity (usually a ‘scene’ or the events transpiring around a single character).

In recent years there has been a great deal of experimentation with comic book narration, much of which has pressed hard on Groensteen’s visual
semitic understanding of comic books. For example, his insights tend to limit the narrative to a singular thread that readers have some role in constructing. For example, even in his notion of plurivectorial narration, there is one ‘correct’ ordering of the panels, even if you read back and forth along that ordering. Recent work, however, challenges this understanding of narrative – utilising the openness of montage, and consequently of comic books as a medium, to ‘illustrate’ different relationships between narrative, page, and temporality than those so aptly described by Groensteen. As Thomas Bredehoft explains:

The underlying metaphor [of language and cinema] is that time functions like one dimension of space: the narrative line is linear, precisely because language itself (or the procession of images that we see in film) is sequenced unidirectionally in time. In contrast to film or language-based narration, however, the medium of comics offers the possibility of a narrative mode that disrupts time-sequencing itself, and it appears to be the case that it is the specifically two-dimensional architecture of the comics page that allows comics to break the linearity of a time-sequenced narrative line. (2006, 872)

This new form of ‘plurivectorial narration’ is perhaps best found in the work of Chris Ware. One of the most award-winning comics writer/artists of the past 20 years, Ware is perhaps most famous for *Jimmy Corrigan: the smartest kid on Earth* (2000), which juxtaposes the story of a middle-aged man meeting his father for the first time as an adult (only to have him die) with the life story of that middle-aged man’s grandfather (both are named Jimmy Corrigan). As an example of this plurivectorial narration and the challenges it poses to comics’ visuality as commonly practised, please read Figures 2a and 2b now before continuing with this article.

Figures 2a and 2b appear in *Jimmy Corrigan* as a visually challenging two-page spread, with Figure 2a on the left and 2b on the right. Together they tell the family history of the younger Jimmy’s adopted half-sister, Amy, through a montage of images, including people, objects and places. For readers, these two pages pose a narrative challenge – where to begin? Chronologically, the earliest panel is actually in Figure 2b in the bottom-centre of the page. In these panels we are introduced to Amy’s biological great-great grandmother and father, on her mother’s side. Through the schematic drawing which moves upward from the initial images, we learn of their child – Amy’s great grandmother, who is the same girl shown picking flowers outside the house in panels to the left of this initial upward-vectored strip. In another upward-vectored strip, beginning with the image of the girl picking flowers, we see the girl press the flower in a Bible which she still has as an adult (centre panel, Figure 2b). From the centre panel of Figure 2b we see that the son of Amy’s great grandmother grows up to father a child before dying in (presumably) World War II. That child, Amy’s mother, is shown grown up, lying in a hospital with her mother by her side in a right-to-left vectored strip that concludes in the upper-left portion of the page, which usual reading practice would indicate is the starting point. Thus, Figure 2b alone represents four generations of Amy’s ancestry.

Figure 2a focuses on Amy’s life, with a series of small photos in reverse chronological order across the centre of the page serving as indicators of her age in the various panels. Again, the page begins chronologically in the bottom-left of the page, with Amy’s mother in high school walking hand-in-hand with her father; their biological relationship to Amy is established through the mediation of the 1964 secondary school yearbook, an American tradition in which each student is photographed. As the strip progresses from left-to-right, Amy’s mother is left by her boyfriend and she is pregnant. At this point the narrative connects with that of Figure 2b, based on the iconic solidarity of both Amy’s mother and grandmother, who are visible in the hospital room. A new, upwardly-vectored strip begins which shows Amy’s adoption certificate carried into the hospital room and then transferred into the pocket of a woman. This woman is then revealed to be the woman who marries the younger Jimmy’s father in a strip moving from right-to-left across the top of the page. The ‘current’ Amy is then shown in her house.

Of course, in practice reading these pages is not as straightforward as the description given above. Readers more than likely do not initially begin at the bottom-centre of Figure 2b, as this defies most genre conventions (compare with the relative ease of reading Figure 1). Instead, readers begin in the top-left of Figure 2a and read forward and backward, up and down, in an effort to connect the schematics and panels into a coherent story. In what can initially be a very frustrating process, readers assume that there must be meaning here, inscribed by producers. However, while Chris Ware has produced the comic, he has not produced
a definitive meaning. Different readers will produce different narratives as they wind their way through the panels and the anti-optical gutters in their own unique fashion. Reading in traditional left-to-right and top-to-bottom fashion, by starting with the image of a middle-aged woman seemingly alone in a big house and then seeing all the people implicated in her arrival in that moment, potentially produces different understandings of her meaning to the narrative than does the chronological narrative presented earlier in this section. The individual’s experience of how to read these pages alters the experience of the medium, and consequently the kinds of meaning produced by readers.

In his work Ware has used montage (combining traditional comics storytelling with blueprints, maps and other artefacts of modern visual culture) to explore simultaneity and the polyphonic experience of life (Kannenberg 2001). Ware describes his reasoning thus:

It seems like comics are the perfect place to […] recreate how those words in your mind superimpose or affect the perceived experience. In comics it can be done almost synthetically in a way that’s more immediate than writing. You’re always in one point with writing. As you read, you can’t simultaneously be in two places, the way you can be in a comic, with a word and a picture. (quoted in Groth 1997, 161–2; emphasis added)

This simultaneity can be seen in Figure 3, which illustrates the elder Jimmy Corrigan as a young man, following a girl onto the rooftop of the Chicago Exposition of 1893. These panels follow a more traditional pattern, from top-left to bottom-right. However, some panels, especially in the upper-left and bottom-right, seem to hold time still in order to enable a doubling between the spoken

Figure 2  Unconventional comic montage that challenges dominant visualities of reading comic books
(a) Amy’s life
Source: From Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan: the smartest kid on Earth (2000)
dialogue and the inner monologue of the narrator, especially in the top-left and the bottom-right of the page. Thus, comic book temporality can accelerate or stop within and between panels. Montage and the gutter provide disruption and reconfiguration of meaning through their radical Openness; they literally create geographical space for the reader to produce their own narrative.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that the visuality of comic books is reliant on a particular understanding of readers’ practices that producers employ when constructing their tales. Nevertheless, these montages of representations (within the frames) and non-representations (the gutters) allow for the disjunction between this discursively-produced ‘audience’ and the actual readers’ practices to foster divergences in understandings of the work itself. Of course, this possibility (some would even say necessity) of divergent understandings is not particular to comic books; rather, this paper argues the medium of comic books requires a particular symbolic and visual literacy that multiplies the opportunities for disjuncture. As El Refaie has argued, ‘The greater the degree of iconic abstraction, the more interpretative work and knowledge of cultural conventions are required on the part of the viewer’ (2009, 183).

That this understanding is enacted spatially on the page makes this of particular interest for geographers, especially those who have been arguing for heightened attention to the material elements of texts (e.g. Ogborn 2002). This connection may seem counter-intuitive given the focus in this paper on representational elements of text such as icons, panels and strips. However, the key differences

Figure 2  Unconventional comic montage that challenges dominant visualities of reading comic books
(b) Amy’s ancestry

Source: From Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan: the smartest kid on Earth (2000)
between cinematic and comic book visualities result from differences in physical form—the cinematic ‘reality effect’ is itself an artifact of early 20th-century technical improvements in projection, thus overcoming the flickering of filmic frames (Gunning 2004, cited in Doel and Clarke 2007). Similarly, the possibilities of comic book visualities are inherent to the material form of the medium, limited by elements such as page size, shape and number. It is this materiality that comic book producers begin with and imagine their audience to be reading.

This paper’s focus on comic books has served as a corrective to literary geography’s over-focus on textual reading and visual culture’s emphasis on photography, cinema and other forms that bear the ‘reality effect’. Comic books are a unique form that merit and require scholarship specific to the medium. This is demonstrable through the possibilities of plurivectorial narration and simultaneity described above, which are unique to the form. Further if, as Doel and Clarke (2007) argue, cinematic montage is the foundation of academic geography’s ‘optical unconscious’, what insights might be gained by emphasising the specific qualities of comic books’ montage? ‘Through the acceleration, deceleration, and reversal of action, film made the relativity and plasticity of space–time tangible’ (Doel and Clarke 2007, 895). What new geographies can the possibilities of simultaneity and plurivectorial narration of comics help us envision?

Simply put, comic book visualities open geographers up to uncertainty, tangentiality and contingency by picking apart the linear montage of film

**Figure 3** An example of visual techniques of simultaneity and polyphony

*Source: From Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan: the smartest kid on Earth (2000)*

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(and consequently the cinematic unconscious) and replacing this linearity with the more open comics page and the multiple paths through its frames – and consequently opening us to its multiple possible narratives. Similarly, the mechanised and standardised temporality of filmic projection can be replaced with the forward-and-back temporality of plurivectorial reading practices and comics’ potential for simultaneity in thought and speech. Utilising the spatial grammar of the comics page can open geography up to new understandings of phenomena, replacing the seemingly ‘correct’ succession of images and meanings with a more contingent and provisional ‘event’, highlighting the importance of the ‘readers’ of phenomena in producing those very phenomena.

The utility of such a methodological approach can be found when considering political theorist William Connolly’s notion of emergent causality:

Efficient causality sometimes operates. But we need a concept of emergent causality, applicable when previously stabilized systems enter a period of heightened disequilibrium. Emergence, when it occurs, is causal (rather than merely a web of definitional relations) in that a movement at one level (or system) induces effects on another. [...] The emergent condition is altered by external forces that become imparted into it, by forces that impinge upon it, and by activation of its own previously undertapped capacities for self-organization. The emergent is the effect of spiralling movements back and forth between these elements. [...] Emergent causation produces real effects without being susceptible to full explanation in a classic sense, partly because what has been produced was not adequately conceptualized before its production and partly because of the element of real uncertainty in these movements back and forth.

(2008, 82)

Connolly’s description indicates that a methodology taking the nature of emergent causality seriously must be capable of apprehending and producing meaning from a montage of seemingly disconnected elements, linked only through their deployment by external forces but capable of organisation in ways that are either resonant or dissonant.

Comic books can provide the visual grammar for this kind of philosophy. As we have seen in the above, meaning in comic book visuality is produced through an emergent process of plurivectorial narration, which mirrors Connolly’s ‘spiralling movements back and forth between […] elements’. The possibilities for new meaning to emerge in the eventful encounter between comic and reader exceed a purely semiotic reading of the comic itself, ‘partly because what has been produced was not adequately conceptualized before its production and partly because of the element of real uncertainty in these movements back and forth’ (2008, 82).

As emergence becomes an increasingly significant influence in geography (see Bergmann et al. 2009; Bialasiewicz et al. 2007; Gibson-Graham 2006) the discipline will need to develop the metaphors and imaginaries to cope with this complex, non-linear form of causation. Because of this need, it is critical for geographers who otherwise would never pick up a comic book to start thinking about this form of visuality – it could provide the language for comprehending and communicating a variety of phenomena across the discipline.

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