

Mapping and making visual stories

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Adriano Cancellieri and Giada Peterle, eds. *Quartieri: viaggio al centro delle periferie italiane*, Padova: BeccoGiallo 2019 (127 pages)

ABSTRACT

How can we make our studies socially relevant beyond the academic world? How can we map the results of qualitative studies, making them visible in a manner that is both creative and engaging? In this review essay, the author reads the comic book anthology *Quartieri. Viaggio al centro delle periferie italiane* edited by Adriano Cancellieri and Giada Peterle to reflect on the role of comics as a visual method for research in the social sciences. Indeed, the spatial visuality of comics has received substantial attention from comic book scholars and, more recently, from geographers and other social scientists. The maps drawn by *Quartieri* provide an example of how to mobilise comics to – literally – draw people into taking an interest in left-behind spaces, like the five peripheral neighbourhoods at the centre of this comic book anthology.

Keywords

comics, urban maps, neighbourhoods, social studies

How can social science research be made available to a broader audience? How can we make our studies socially relevant beyond the academic worlds we inhabit? How can we make the results of qualitative studies visible in a manner that is both creative and engaging? How can comics be mobilised to – literally – draw people into taking an interest in left-behind spaces?

Quartieri. Viaggio al centro delle periferie italiane (BeccoGiallo, 2019) provides a beautiful and effective answer through the successful interdisciplinary collaboration and dialogue between people working across and beyond academia, led and inspired by Adriano Cancellieri and Giada Peterle. It uses carefully crafted visual storytelling to showcase five stories and five neighbourhoods in five Italian cities: distinct, contained, and visually different worlds to discover, explore, and inhabit for a few minutes of blissful reading. I found myself completely drawn into each, feeling that I was discovering new places through people, and hearing the voices of people through the worlds they have crafted. By centering the marginal and marginalised, and providing room for their voices to emerge through the talent of those drawing and producing the five short stories, this book provides a powerful example of how

graphic narratives and visual representations can change perceptions and, potentially, shape alternative political futures.



Fig. 1. The cover of *Quartieri. Viaggio al centro delle periferie italiane* is a cartographic mosaic composed with the maps of the five Italian neighbourhoods represented in the collection. If read as a whole, the collection creates an unforeseen urban map (illustration by Giada Peterle).

To achieve this, the authors of each chapter have worked together as part of a broader interdisciplinary network on urban studies called *Tracce Urbane* to combine talents and insights from the graphic arts, sociology, urbanism, anthropology, and geography – at times wearing multiple hats – but each time with one person crafting the actual comic. A short written introduction to each chapter provides a brief presentation of each neighbourhood. These are voluntarily kept free of jargon and are written in an engaging style as a sort of situated tourist description for the discerning, socially aware traveller. An aerial outline map of each neighbourhood reminds the reader that while the visuals and tone of each story are different, they are all part of a broader tableau. Each comic is visually distinct, with a diversity of artistic styles, some use well-behaved strips and frames (Bolognina, Bologna; Zen, Palermo), another erases the frames to give space to particular episodes (San Siro, Milan), another uses images that burst over and across the pages (Tor Bella Monaca, Rome) or a collage of photographs (Zen, Palermo), and one makes full use of the creative format to collapse and recraft scales, spaces, and voices (Arcella, Padova). Readers will prefer the styles of one or the other, but the diversity and multitude of aesthetic voices is impressive, and does much to embody the ideal of multiple, situated voices.

Comics are distinctive in that current practitioners are also their theorists, their historians, and their critics. This is particularly true in the case of this book, as some of the authors, including Giada Peterle and Giuseppe Lo Bocchiaro, have hybrid identities as researchers and artists, building on both to create this new research output. There have been many attempts by English-speaking scholars to coin or use new terms to describe comics, such as sequential narrative, graphic narrative, or comic journalism, partly as a strategy for

requesting respectability for a marginalized and frequently trivialized genre, while French and Italian scholars have not worried so much about supposed respectability and have continued to use their language's respective ordinary names *bande dessinée* and *fumetti*.

There is certainly no need here to apologise for using comics as an integral yet distinct part of careful and rigorous social scientific research. It actually seems to me that a new genre of *fumetti* is emerging here, even if it doesn't need to name itself distinctly: a genre of research-based visual storytelling that owes much to the language of comics but that also draws very effectively on the epistemologies of critical and feminist social sciences that seek to give voice to the marginalised by centring them as experts of their own experiences, while making visible the positionality of those carrying out the research. This is not a standpoint that draws upon dry statistics and stark tales of urban decay, but one that is grounded in daily lives, episodes of acceptance and resistance, and the knowledge gained from surviving the daily grind of social and spatial marginalisation. It is not, as the two main authors note, “da fuori e dall'alto” (from outside and from above) (Cancellieri and Peterle 2019, 7). These are tales whispered on the ground, not those found in grandiose government reports, glossily produced and rapidly ignored; nor are they urban fantasies caricatured by populist political discourse. Crucially, neither are they some sort of aestheticized poverty porn: the varied tales of marginalisation ring true and deep and narrate a worrying and broader tale of urban decay across cities in Italy that needs to be heard, beyond the heart-warming episodes of hope.



Fig. 2. The inside cover of the comic book anthology shows the single maps of the five neighbourhoods represented in *Quartieri*. Like tales of a bigger mosaic, the maps of the neighbourhoods recur in the comic book to give readers a sense of graphic continuity despite the different graphic styles of the single chapters (illustration by Giada Peterle).

These snapshots or fragments of people and places construct a wider landscape through multiple short episodes and encounters. The result is a visually superb exploration from the ground up of places inhabited, shaped, and given life by multiple people who take on shifting roles as tour guides, characters, narrators, and crafters of their own worlds. At the

same time, the places themselves – including the buildings, the streets, and the specific shapes of the urban landscapes – are lovingly portrayed as characters in their own right, not simply reduced to backdrops. These are stories of working-class neighbourhoods, of long-standing inhabitants, of migration and new beginnings. Tales that appear as distinctly Italian as the old men sitting on street benches all day, while reflecting values as distinctly cosmopolitan as the Chinese-owned bar transformed into language classrooms or as the intercultural school parties for extended families.

The spatial visuality of comics has received substantial attention from comic book scholars and, more recently, from geographers and other social scientists. They have pointed out how reading comics is a specifically embodied and learnt activity – as is reading – with unique codes that are learnt and culturally situated. *Quartieri* uses this viewer involvement very effectively to explore complex urban experiences through the distinctive devices, vocabulary and grammar of comics, in which parts are observed while the whole is sensed. Scott McCloud, an American theorist who writes comic books about what he calls sequential art, has noted the power of cartooning to move readers by commanding viewer involvement and identification through these distinctive devices. Readers are engaged, producing meaning in the active task of reading. Likewise, geographer Jason Dittmer has suggested that “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 [...]. 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” (Dittmer 2010, 222). Comics and graphic narratives are certainly more than just a combination of texts and images, like successive PowerPoint slides. Instead, the coming together of the two leads to something more, at times self-aware of its own production, but always created not only by the artist but also by each reader’s own efforts. There is nothing passive about reading a comic, but at the same time it can be skimmed in a way a film cannot, with some passages read more slowly and others lovingly returned to.

This active reader involvement is particularly well-used in the case of the chapter on Arcella (Padova) that fully exploits this rich visual language of comics, drawing upon and playing with maps, orientation, and the embodied act of walking to make sense of place, all narrated by the authors who appear in the comic. This clever *mise-en-abîme* makes excellent use of the potential to create fully situated and truly reflexive research that nevertheless gives voice to others. Another comic chooses to focus just on the story of just one woman, Valentina, struggling to be a good mother in impossible circumstances (Cancellieri and Peterle 2019, 89-100). Other pages are fantastic at condensing and presenting dense information – on the historical evolution of the urban landscape, for example – in a way that makes it immediately accessible (Cancellieri and Peterle 2019, 52-55; 68; 70; 108-109; 112), often narrated through carefully-chosen witnesses. I found myself coming back again and again to

these particular pages and spending longer exploring them after having read the whole book, wishing to know more about each character, but pleased to have understood something of their lives.



Fig. 3. The comics story about Arcella, Padua, starts with a hand-drawn map of the neighbourhood, which metaphorically also represents the starting point of the research process (illustration by Giada Peterle).

This book is really a delight: a creative, clever, subtle reflection of what can happen when scholars take risks, and experiment something new. It is a beautiful invitation to stop writing dry academic prose, and instead grab some pencils, a friend or two, a notebook, and go and listen to the voices around us and invent new ways of making them heard.

References

Dittmer, Jason. 2010. "Comic Book Visualities: A Methodological Manifesto on Geography, Montage and Narration." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35 (2): 222-236.

Juliet J. Fall is a geographer working at the University of Geneva, in Switzerland, researching the intersections between political and feminist geographies. Her recent work on visual culture has led her to publish experimental ethnographic work as comics, suggesting that this medium provides a more open format with increased reader engagement than traditional written work. Her recent comics piece "Fenced In," published in *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, deals with the closures of international borders during the Covid-19 pandemic.