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Popping Up: Cities and Comics as Common Place

London is haunted by constant apparitions of the ghosts of comics that never were

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Part of the Cluster:

**The Multimodality of Comics
in Everyday Life**

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Like the names and terminology of some renowned cultural theorists, the so-called "language" of comics (Varnum and Gibbons 2001) is today, perhaps more than ever before, a common place.

Cities are, of course, the quintaessential common places, visited and revisited by even those who have never set foot on them. London is one of those common places, a hyper and meta common place if you will, like many other cities populated by other common places, the red-and-white of its London Underground, buses and now merely-symbolic phone boxes known and recognised worldwide.

A common place is not only a cliché, like Nietzsche's [eroded coin](#),

an expression, idea, or element [...] which has become overused to the point of losing its original meaning, or effect, and even, to the point of being trite or irritating, especially when at some earlier time it was considered meaningful or novel ([Wikipedia entry](#)).

Common places are also charged with psychological effects. They can become subjective, often ephemeral landmarks. Guy Debord's use of terms such as "psychogeography" and [dérive](#), or drift, are one of those common places (name, term) to which we often fall back to. In his Introduction to a *Critique of Urban Geography* (1955), Debord borrows from an "illiterate [Kabyle](#)" the term "Psychogeography", to express a pattern of "emotive force-fields" in the urban landscape.

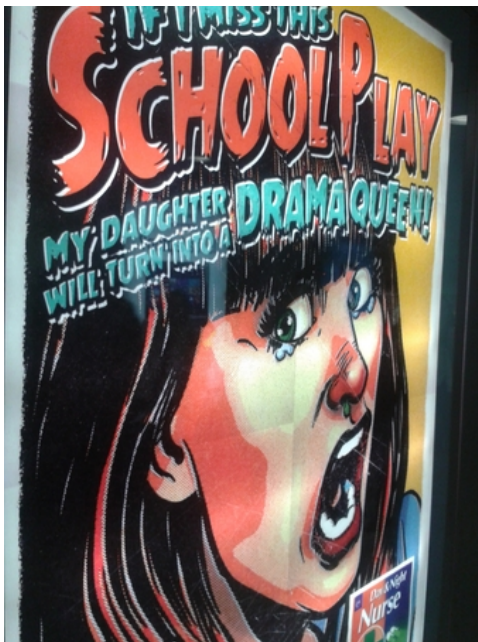
Unlike other geographical locations such as Brussels or Angoulême, which have ephemeral but very much concrete references to their comic book tradition in the form of street art of all kinds, London is haunted by constant apparitions of the ghosts of comics that never were.

Traces of the language of comics -that is to say, to visual messages that are meant to be identified by the spectator as somehow associated to the appearance, contents and messages once mostly contained and expressed as comic books- appear and disappear, casually, and not surprisingly, decontextualised and defined by the spirit of capitalism, or, at the very least, of marketing. They pop up on the urban landscape like unconscious manifestations of an era quickly fading away.

An unplanned journey through the urban landscape of London reveals to the everyday commuter the pervasiveness of these spectral traces, commercial messages that explicitly incorporate the iconography of a certain kind of comics, as well as other elements almost universally associated to the "language" of comic books: speech balloons, caption boxes and the emulation of hand lettering and four-colour printing processes.

It is striking that two different cold and flu-related remedies had two very visible, expensive simultaneous advertising campaigns of different formats on London Underground platforms (Night Nurse) and telephone boxes (Benylin). Whereas the Night Nurse employed large splash panels (no sequences involved), Benylin presented a page-like layout with three panels depicting characters and a fourth one showing the actual product:





Unlike the apparitions of comics themes and comic book characters on the walls of buildings in Brussels and Angoulême, these visual representations on the streets and public transport of the British capital lack an objective comic book referent. They synthesise a popular definition of the essence of comics, and populate the city with these signifiers of an art form that no longer exists in the same way.

Due to their size and location, these adverts are difficult to avoid, and seem to be designed to enter the Londoner's psyche "naturally". The referenceless referent (tautological signifier to evoke another well-known common place) is clear, interpreted without complications. What is it really that these adverts refer to if not the essence of comics?

These adverts place this whatever-it-is-that-comics-is as urban furniture, an ephemeral presence full of meaning beyond the products they pretend to sell. They offer a plethora of questions about the meaning of comics and about the now-long and indeed common-place relationship between comics, pop art, commerce and the way we both locate ourselves and locate what we see and read.

Walking around the city, one only has to look up to find traces of our object of study. It becomes obvious that the dominant iconography is (horror, 'weird science', romance -EC comics?) the mid-20th century style that Lichtenstein so shamelessly stole in order to donate to the collective unconscious.

The new paradigm is not the smooth surface-obsessed digital pervasiveness of today, but mechanical reproduction, de-personalised, rough four colour processes, cheap paper, warehouses of anonymous enslaved artists doing commercial art to be sold to children in pharmacies along chewing gum. Frames, echoes and reflections everywhere, a multimodality of reverberations and emotions from a disembodied, dematerialised past; the essence of an expression distilled and extracted out from the page and recreated, manipulated and resignified.



After taking the photos above I crossed the ocean. Mexico City. In a different time zone and different city, speaking a different language, I walk into a bar. There, the paper placemats (kept by customers as mementos, I'm told) bear the silent, spectral signature of the same frozen aesthetics, the same iconography of mid-20th century comics that pop art disembodied from the boundaries of printed publications and paradoxically inserted in the mainstream visual consciousness.



Once one starts looking around, comics appear everywhere in contemporary cities. Not necessarily as publications or stories, but as some kind of remnant, a faded memory of something that once was.

It remains surprising that neither Groensteen (*The System of Comics*, 2007) Cohn (*The Visual Language of Comics*), nor any of the authors whose essays are contained in *The Language of Comics* (2001) discuss the appearance of whatever-it-is-that-comics-is in other platforms other than comics (and, in most cases, other than the comic book page and film). Too much emphasis has been placed on the [printed] page as "the technical unit" (Groensteen) of comics, and the "visual language" of comics has been limited to "the sequential images" used in them (Cohn).

What if, as seen in these popular representations identified by the everyday urban dweller as most-obviously referring to comics, the "page" and the "sequence" were not limited to one given "social object"? What about these echoes, traces, spectres or ghosts, appropriations or adaptations, whatever you want to call it, that unavoidably refer to comics to the popular psyche, and which establish sequences and narratives with other social objects outside the limited borders of the paper page?

This is not to deny that these expressions are clichéd, fragmented, fractured and lacking in the literary and artistic coherence, integrity and richness of published stories. Nevertheless we might perhaps be clinging to an idea of comics (and stories past), and a certain elitism that limits "comics" (and even more its pretentious near-synonym "graphic novels") to culturally and socially-determined objects. What if comics today are also elsewhere, beyond the book shop and the library, even beyond our Web browsers?

More and more questions. What is a language (visual or not) if not its expressions (*parole*)? If comics as referent is clear in these expressions, aren't they speaking the language of comics too? What is the narrative in these ephemeral, fragmentary expressions, and what do they tell us about how comics could be defined in the future? Must comics be restricted to a particular kind of sequential layout, and to specific platforms, or can multimodality be the defining factor?

Are comics today, in everyday life, not also these traces of comics that mostly exist as collective -often merely borrowed- memories? The presence of these expressions with the concept "comics" emblazoned all over themselves further insert comics as a form of immersive textuality, existing nowhere yet present and recognisable everywhere they pop up.

To the comics reader, the city is permeated by the ubiquitous imagery of comics. The commuter gets lost in the public transport grid like a reader gets lost in the layout of the comics page.

There is no denying the complex specificity of what-we-collectively-understand-as-comics. Whatever-it-is-that-comics-is remains somehow almost mysteriously unique, excluding other forms that are to the average interpreter clearly not-comics. And yet, as Damon Herd suggests in his contribution to this cluster, to the comics scholar "it's all comics": from the most-explicit manifestations of the spectre or aura of comics never made as in the examples presented above, to the paneled windows of a modern building or the stained-glass windows of a medieval cathedral, whatever-it-is-that-comics-is appears uncannily as that most-familiar recognition of what very clever people are still trying to pin down.

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