

## “I Have Been Reading Your Adventures for Years!”: Explicit and Implicit Metatextuality in Comic Books

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Résumé de l'article

Il s'agira dans cet article d'étudier la mise en avant par la bande dessinée de son propre mode de discours, par le biais de métatextualités implicites ou explicites. Dans le premier cas, c'est d'abord d'une relation à l'architecture dont il est question : on étudiera, par des exemples choisis, la façon dont une porte, une fenêtre, la façade d'un immeuble renvoient discrètement au découpage en planches et cases d'une bande dessinée. Dans le second cas, on se penchera sur les cas où une bande dessinée est représentée à l'intérieur de la fiction, généralement par le truchement d'un personnage qui fait office de lecteur à l'intérieur de la diégèse.

Dans les deux cas, l'emploi de la métatextualité permet de remettre au centre du discours la problématique du fonctionnement de la bande dessinée et de ses spécificités, en premier lieu desquelles son ergodicité et son caractère fragmentaire.

# “I Have Been Reading Your Adventures for Years!” : Explicit and Implicit Metatextuality in Comic Books

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From their early years on, comics have always been a reflexive medium : it's no coincidence that Rodolphe Töpffer, who is considered the first cartoonist, has also written what is considered the first treatise on drawing and comics. It is also very telling that even in early comics like Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, to take a famous example, cartoonists showed an acute sense of what their medium was and how its conventions could be played with. Many pages in *Little Nemo* display a playfulness that would later resonate with the members of the OuBaPo, dedicated to follow this custom of breaking down what makes comics and rearrange them in a different, but still recognizable, way.

One element that doesn't feature in McCay's works – but which does in many others – is the comics page itself : never are Nemo, Little Sammy Sneezee or Hungry Henrietta shown reading the Sunday pages. Yet this *mise en abyme* would eventually become a comic book trope, even before the start of postmodernism and the prolific use of this device by *Nouveau Roman* authors. The *mise en abyme*, defined by Lucien Dällenbach as “any enclave having a relation of similarity with the work that contains it” (1977 : 18), can also be considered as a dual movement, “the construction of a fictional illusion [...] and the laying bare of that illusion” (See Waugh 1984 : 6). This is true of literary *mises en abyme*, but what happens when it is displayed in comics, a visual and arguably more active medium?

There are different types of metatextuality in comics : by studying the relations between comics and architecture, one may distinguish a discreet mode of metatextuality, subtly emphasizing the structural

common points between the two. Comics are not necessarily always explicitly using architecture as a metonymy for their own medium, but the few authors who do so insist in particular on the bidimensional representation of a tridimensional world, and the use of selective framing. In *Metafiction*, Patrica Waugh writes that “contemporary metafiction, in particular, foregrounds ‘framing’ as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels” (1984 : 28). This is particularly true for comics, in which the separation of images in disjointed panels, bordered by a frame, is sometimes seen as the medium’s defining characteristic. When put in relation with architecture, framing becomes a method of construction, which reveals by “laying bare [the] illusion”.

After a study of the relations between architecture and comics, I will analyze several comic books in which the medium reflects itself, bringing together many if not all of the different modalities Thierry Groensteen lists as the five main reflexive processes :

There is objectivation of the code every time a comics puts comics itself at the centre of the story; distortion of the code when comics *falsely* objectivizes comics, giving a wrongful perception of the code; denudation of the code when a comics *explicitly* signals itself as comics; metaphorisation of the code when there is a similar designation but in the implicit mode of analogy; finally, egospection of the code as soon as a comics anticipates the act of reading in any given way, either by manifesting its ‘conscience’ of being looked at, or welcoming inside the diegesis a copy of the reading body, a character standing for the reader”. (1990 : 132)

In short, by studying implicit and explicit metatextuality in comics, I want to lay to rest the idea that such a device would only be playful and non-constructive, that “comics, when it deals with its mode of production, prefers [...] *to reflect* [*réfléter*] rather than *to think* [*réfléchir*] [...] But this self-representation of the medium never really leads to a constructive *mise en abyme*” (1990 : 65). On the contrary, it is precisely *through* these devices that cartoonists show an astute awareness of the possibilities of their medium, of what defines it and of the types of fictions it allows.

Lucien Dällenbach writes of *mise en abyme* that “its core property is to make the intelligibility and the formal structure of the work jut out” (1977 : 16); this is precisely what the presence of architecture in comics does, by reminding the reader that to read comics, like any other book, is to manipulate an object in space, to never lose sight “of the ontological ‘cut’ between the projected world and the material book” (McHale 1987 : 192). A book is an object, but it is also a place, a fictional space where characters evolve. To quote William Gass : “The printed text exists as a whole, all at once, as the rooms, stairways, and floors of a building do [...] Novels are books and books are buildings, and therefore they exist like other built objects—they are a space in space” (1985 : 153).

What is true for literature is also true for comics;<sup>1</sup> it was thus quite

logical for the Cité de l’architecture & du patrimoine in Paris to host in 2010 the exhibition *Archi & BD – La ville dessinée*, in which numerous comics pages featuring cities and architecture were shown. The aim of the exhibition was not only to highlight the structural similarities between the two media, although it was a point made by several of the essays in the exhibition catalogue. For instance, architect Jean-Marc Thévenet writes : “Both cartoonists and architects work on the board. The scale and the stakes are not the same, but everything is a matter of scenario, of putting life inside a built space” (see Trelcat 2010 : 12). Philippe Morin shares such an opinion and comments on the structural similarities between a building and a comics page :

When you look at it closely, the comics page, with its vertical and rectangular shape, its horizontal strips and its panels, evokes the schematic aspect of a building façade, with its floors and windows. And when strips and panels are regular, the resemblance with a 3- or 4-floor building façade is even more striking! [...] Each in their own way, architects and cartoonists, with their grids and matrices, build frames which support a story, a narration. (2010 : 208)

While architects have sometimes used comics to express their ideas,<sup>2</sup> I am here interested in the opposite situation. Many cartoonists have made a point of stressing the similarities between a building façade and a comics page. Thierry Groensteen, while noting that truly significant examples are rare, analyzes page 21 of Will Eisner’s *The Dreamers* (1986) :

[It] shows part of the Eyron & Samson comics studios through a large window whose uprights frame divides the layout in eight equal sized squares stand clearly as a metaphor for two overlaid strips each composed of four panels. What validates the metaphor in this example is first the fact that on the same page, in the bottom left corner, the hero is waving a comics page with only panel frames drawn; secondly, and most importantly, is the fact that the assimilation between window and panel is a recurrent stylistic device in Eisner’s works. (1990 : 162)

Groensteen is right in being skeptical and in wishing to avoid any systematic assimilation between architecture and comics; Erwin Dejasse agrees when he writes that both architecture and comics are “utilitarian arts”, where form should not be favored over substance (2007 : 116-117). This utilitarian view is surely shared by cartoonist Chris Ware, who has time and again expressed his disgust for modern architecture and who, in works like *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000) and *Building Stories* (2014), nonetheless uses architecture both as a subject and as an underlying principle structuring his narratives. More importantly, he stresses the fact that architecture and comics are both fragmentary and, at least partially, acts of reconstruction, as Michelle Gamboa explains :

Just as the characters struggle to (re)build lost hopes and ideals, the readers, too, are forced to participate in a similar act of assembly. [...] By invoking the architecture of comics, Ware underlines two important aspects of the

medium: first, that within comics, readers are engaged in an act of construction, and second, that readers may participate and interact with comics, just as they would with an architectural structure. Specifically, the striking inclusion of cut-out toys further draws the readers into the Corrigan world, allowing them to take part in the narrative. Ware maximizes the architectural features of the narrative in order to emphasize the fragmentary nature of the medium and the audience participation necessary to the act of reading comics. (2009 : 12-13)

Thus Ware adds a third layer to the comparison between architecture and comics : not only is architecture both a subject and a structural principle, it can also serve to reveal the characters' complex feelings and personalities. Windows and doors are a prominent motif in *Jimmy Corrigan*, and are almost systematically associated either with the protagonists' loneliness, the fact that he sleeps alone in double beds or his staring at a rainy landscape. This is particularly obvious in the book's last pages, in which Jimmy comes back from his failed reunion with his long-lost father and contemplates suicide by imagining himself jumping from the top of a building. Critics have often commented on the depressing nature of Ware's stories and drawing style, hence the strong parallel one can see between the frames of panels and windows in *Jimmy Corrigan*. The connection between architecture and comics is even more obvious in *Building Stories*, whose very title hints at the similarity and which features, at some point, a talking building whose open rooms are obvious stand-ins for panels.<sup>3</sup> Taking a page from *Life, A User's Manual*, Ware divides his narrative between the residents of a three-story building, and it should be noted that the larger format of some chapters, as well as a move to Oak Park in the case of one of the protagonists, allows for a less claustrophobic view on life in general and urban life in particular.

Another relevant example of the link between comics and architecture is the comics adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* by Paul Karasik and David Mazzuchelli. Its black and white pages and meta-physical narrative at times remind one of the works of Marc-Antoine Mathieu, in which there are frequent "zooms" through windows and mutating buildings, to better reflect the unpredictability of the narrative and its manipulation of comics codes. Likewise, *City of Glass* (in comics form) opens on a partially seen window, through which a building façade "slowly morphs" into a labyrinth, as if to signal to readers the instability of the story they are about to read. The story of *City of Glass*, among other things, deals with the unreliability of human language and the ways failure to communicate can entrap one inside one's mind. This claustrophobic entrapment is reflected by the use of the "Ur-language of Comics" as Art Spiegelman calls it, the regular grid of nine panels per page, save a few adjustments here and there. Very soon, every "window, prison door, city block" (2004 : iii) becomes an equivalent of the comics page. Examples abound, as David Coughlan notes :

Quinn is shown to work at a desk by a nine-paned window [...] and on one page the view of Quinn working is given in through this window, with each pane forming one panel, and the gutters between the panels forming the window's frame. Is the comic's page of panels, then, a window onto another world, visual narrative more transparent, more immediate, more true, than the non-visual, and visual language the one, universal language? (2006 : 845)

Though it is true that grid-like motifs are sometimes represented by windows and doors, there isn't any means of escaping the page's prison. At the end of the story, Peter Quinn starts to lose his grasp on reality and the page's structure becomes looser, before disintegrating entirely. The very last panel of the book features a fire which could signify many things; it is nonetheless tempting to see it as a literal destruction of the world Quinn and the other protagonists live in, the only means through which their rigid universe can be escaped, an interpretation permitted by a similar fate for the protagonists of Marc-Antoine Mathieu's *L'Origine*, which will be analyzed below.

Labyrinthine architecture and similar-looking buildings can thus evoke both the structure of a comics page and the mental world of characters, a discreet metatextual comment on the nature of visual fictional worlds. Such metatextual devices often feature in ambitious comic books, set on redefining the medium or at least broadening its possibilities, as is the case in several works by Alan Moore, notably *Promethea* and *Watchmen*. In her PhD on what she calls “metacomics”, Camille Baurin comments on a spread in *Promethea*'s first issue :

A building encircled by two spiral staircases through which the heroine goes up and down is shown. The building's façade is not drawn but suggested by the shape of a comics page, internal to the representation. What is interesting in this page spread is the contrast between the exterior of the building and what happens inside it: the outside is used as a background, almost a margin to the scene – the heroine going up and down the stairs is not sequenced. On the contrary, the meeting [inside the building] is foregrounded and paced by a juxtaposition of panels; the shape of the building serves as a frame for the sequence. Thus, an intradiegetic shape structures the narration, a metaleptic movement since it also gains structural and thus extradiegetic value. (2012: 162)

*Promethea* is known for its audacious and nonconventional layouts, and it is thus interesting that the most conventional layout of this first issue is used precisely when a link with architecture is foregrounded. But one might also consider this example, and the whole of *Watchmen*, through another architecture, that of the page, by using what Groensteen calls the “multiframe”, “the sum of the frames that compose a given comic” (2009 : 31). Indeed, for Baurin such metaleptic examples

make ostentatious the multiframe [...] The multiframe allows us to imagine a ‘contentless’ comics, ‘cleansed of its iconic and verbal contents, and constructed as a finished series of supporting frames’.<sup>4</sup> [...] Its construction has to do with architecture, the structural form that the page, the chapter and the whole work adopt, and whose dynamism revolves around the interac-

tions between different panels. (2012 : 146)

Thus what is interesting in the page spread of *Promethea* is not so much the spread itself but its relation with the other pages : it stands out precisely because of its regularity, or because of its absence of irregularity. What Baurin writes a few lines later about *Watchmen* is equally true here : “The book’s ostentatious architecture becomes a clue towards its materiality and its artifice” (*ibid.*). Once more, by making these links explicit, *Promethea* lays bare the artificiality of its narrative world.

Though less claustrophobic than *City of Glass* or Chris Ware’s work, *Watchmen* is built on the same nine-panel scheme as Karasik’s and Mazzuchelli’s adaptation, which produces a certain type of narration. About this grid, Baurin writes that

this disposition is metaleptic since it implies a narrative crossing where the multiframe’s architecture creates the narration, like a character who would bang into the panel’s limits. It is the very spatialization of this figure which is at play : the configuration of the layout expresses its transgressive nature, a place where the motifs internal to the narration and the extradiegetic format meet. (2012 : 163-164)

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the many ways *Watchmen* manipulates and reinvents the structure of comics through a very rigid nine-panel grid, though one only needs to reread its fifth chapter, “Fearful Symmetry”, where this logic is taken to its extreme. It is also necessary to note that this chapter takes place mostly indoors, and features a very high number of thresholds such as open and closed windows and doors. The chapter ends with Rorschach jumping through a window which was considered a “dead end” by one of the characters, after, like in *City of Glass*, a building is set on fire : what better metaphor for a comic book set on shaking the very foundations of its medium?

Another example of metatextuality in comics, albeit a more explicit one, is when a comic book is represented within the narrative – usually with a character reading a comic book, although as we will see there are more complex cases. It is not uncommon for comics to poke at their materiality this way; examples of cartoonists having done so go back, at least, to the beginning of the 20th century, with Tintin’s adventure *The Cigars of the Pharaoh* offering an interesting example of this for several reasons. First of all, its publication coincides with the democratization of *albums* in France; as such, metatextuality in *Tintin*, as Sylvain Lesage writes, is thus both a nod to the series’s internal logic, and a way to promote the medium itself and encourage readers to buy more comic books – in particular, the entire run of Tintin’s adventures (2011 : 7). In *The Cigars of the Pharaoh*, Tintin gets captured by a Sheik who sets him free when he recognizes the famous reporter – from the comic books he reads! “I have been reading your adventures for years!” he says to Tintin, while a servant brings a comic book, whose cover makes it clear it’s one from the series.



What is interesting is that *The Cigars of the Pharaoh* has been published in three different versions. In the original edition, published in black and white in 1934, the servant shows the hero *Tintin in America*, the previous volume in the series. In the first color edition, in 1955, he shows him *Tintin in Congo*, the second episode of Tintin’s adventures; and in the 1964 edition, the servant shows *Destination Moon*, which in the internal diegetic chronology of the series has not even happened yet! Lesage doesn’t think this is an error by Hergé :

Hergé’s finicky precision in all things, copiously illustrated by his private archives, can only indicate a deliberate choice from his part. This paradoxical reference to a future album then becomes a way of breaking the strict chronological continuity of the albums, and to suggest that if they have been created in a certain order, readers for their part are free to read them in any order they wish. The album’s presence in this panel is thus much more than a facetious wink to the attentive reader : it’s a way for Hergé to define a reading contract for his works, a contract he never stopped revisiting and harmonizing. (2011 : 7-8)

An explicit *mise en abyme* can thus go beyond its playful nature and become a commentary on the most famous French language comic books series : through this metalepsis, Hergé redefines the rules of Tintin’s fictional universe and comments on the fragmented and achronological nature of the series. Each volume becomes part of a loose structure, not unrelated to what Dällenbach says of the *mise en abyme* :

Among emblematic metaphors of the text which, through them, reactivates its etymology, that of the fabric [*tissu*] is obviously privileged. If this is a true *topos* [...] it is because the text shares with the textile the fact of being weaved [...] and thus forms a *texture*, in other words a reciprocal layout of elements, a relational web or, if one prefers, a *structure*. (1977 : 125)

This concept of texture is close to what Groensteen calls the “braiding” of comics, explaining how panels resonate visually and narratively not only with adjacent panels but, in fact, with any panel in a given book (2009 : 173). In Tintin’s case, braiding would thus also function on the level of the album itself, its cover a visual resonance over the entire series.

*Watchmen*’s prominence of motifs, among which the yellow “smiley” badge and circles in general, is for Groensteen a typical example of braiding, which gives thematic coherence to the work as a whole and brings together its various parts. “Everything’s connected”, says a street vendor to the teenager reading a comic; indeed, like the *mise en abyme* in *The Cigars of the Pharaoh*, the presence of a fictional comic book series in *Watchmen*, “Tales of the Black Freighter” moves far beyond the simple nod to the reader and weaves or braids together several otherwise isolated strands.<sup>5</sup>

The inclusion of “Tales of the Black Freighter” in *Watchmen* is remarkable as it provides the reader with a stand-alone narrative (panels excerpted directly from the “Tales” are often mingled with *Watchmen*’s



main narrative, up to a whole page in one or two instances), in which a sailor who has survived to the attack of a pirate ship tries to reach his village by any means, to warn the inhabitants of an incoming attack. When he finally reaches the village, his madness causes him to attack his loved ones; devastated by what he has done, he finally turns back and joins the pirate crew, now that he has become like them. This stand-alone story bleeds in the main narrative, because it visually alternates with it but also because text boxes from the “Tales” are included in some panels of *Watchmen*, highlighting the parallels between the two stories. Indeed, the sailor’s story can be compared to three of *Watchmen*’s main characters : Ozymandias, who has noble intentions but organizes a slaughter to achieve his ends;<sup>6</sup> Rorschach, who fights for justice but who becomes mentally unstable after witnessing too many horrors; and Dr. Manhattan, who goes into exile once he realizes the terrible things he has done (in his case, giving people cancer). Thus the “Tales” can be seen as a commentary on the main narrative; they also anticipate its conclusion since the end of the “Tales” is given in the interlude between chapters V and VI. The attentive reader can thus very early guess that *Watchmen* will end in massacre and desolation. Though this operates differently than in *The Cigars of the Pharaoh*, the “tales” can also be seen as a comment on how *Watchmen* should be read : as a relentless march towards doom, something that also echoes real-life historical concerns of post-war era.

The metatextual aspects of Marc-Antoine Mathieu’s *L’Origine* are far less pessimistic but still convey a similar feeling of entrapment and inexorability for the characters. The first volume in a series of six, *L’Origine* begins with its protagonist dreaming of walking on a flat and empty grid that gradually turns into a sphere, from which he gets ejected. For Sylvain Lesage, the end of this dream (Julius, the protagonist, wakes up and falls from his bed) is a first metatextual reference to, among other things, similar panels in Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (2011 : 20). Thus, from the start Julius’s world is implicitly defined as wavering between dream and comics. Isabelle Martin, for her part, notes that this grid-like world evokes the layout of a comics page, a similar metatextual device as the architectural ones discussed above. This a recurring motif in *L’Origine* : Julius’s pajamas are checkered, and so are the bathroom tiles, windows, floor tiles and so on. The motif is almost everywhere, which is only fitting in a narrative where Julius receives comic pages foretelling his own story.

Mirrors are also omnipresent, and it is well-known that they are the motif *par excellence* of *mise en abyme*. Interestingly, in Marc-Antoine Mathieu’s story, the word “origin” (which is the title of the story and features on top of every comics page Julius mysteriously receives) doesn’t exist : it is absent from the dictionary.

The last prominent motif of *L’Origine* is the book, which is again

not a surprise since the story ends with Julius realizing that he lives inside a comic book. He ends up visiting a research centre, in which scientists try to recreate the conditions of their world's *apparition*; but, as Sylvain Lesage writes, “instead of using a particle accelerator, the scientists, quite logically, use a printer” (2011 : 22). Their world, the book, is bidimensional, controlled by a higher being (the author) who lives in a tridimensional world. Thus *L'Origine* takes metatextuality to its extremes : the book is the only world existing for those characters, and their life ends when the reader finishes the story. The narrative ends on an apocalyptic note, with the author burning the book's last page; but at the very end of *L'Origine*, a teaser hints that Julius might revive (or escape death) if a second volume is ever released,<sup>7</sup> which was eventually the case : Julius's world was expanded into a universe of six volumes, each containing their own enclosed world, a slightly distorted reflection of the previous one.

The last, and perhaps most complex example of an explicit metatextuality is Charles Burns's latest trilogy, collected under the title *Love Nest*. Its metatextuality is obvious before one even opens the first volume, *X'ed Out* : the egg on the cover is strongly reminiscent of the mushroom on the cover of *The Shooting Star*, Tintin's tenth adventure. Hergé's influence on Burns in *Love Nest* is also visible in the material aspect of the albums, which share with the Tintin albums a colored stripe on their backs. Burns's drawing style for these albums is also closer to the *ligne claire* than in his previous works; add to this that Dong's *alter ego* – the persona he assumes when doing shows and looks like “Nit Nit” (an anagram of Tintin) or else like “Johnny 23” – sports a quiff, and it becomes quite clear that Burns intends his trilogy to mirror or pay homage to Hergé's works, at least partially.

The story of *Love Nest* is difficult to unpack because it is presented to the reader in a very fragmented and non-chronological fashion; this is because Burns organizes the story around the concept of the *cut-up*, the writing technique prominently used by William S. Burroughs and which consists in shuffling and rearranging a pre-existing text to give it new meaning(s). Benoit Crucifix rightfully notes that :

The episodes which push the story forward are strewn with panels which 'say nothing' but add to [a] catalog of recurring images, and whose links with the story have to be constructed by the reader. This archive thus introduces a translinear organization, a 'braiding' in Thierry Groensteen's term which urges rereading, re-arranging the story's elements [...] By leafing through the three albums, the reader produces his own cut-up. (2014: n. pag.)

The sense of familiarity given by the use of *ligne claire* drawings is therefore undercut by the recurrence of uncanny images haunting the three volumes.

One of the story's recurring motifs which opens volume two, *The Hive*, is the romance comic. Nit Nit is seen reading those familiar but

unusual stories: their drawing style and the stereotypical postures of its characters clash with the alien language used in the speech balloons. Just like Burns's allusions to Tintin can attract and alienate readers all at once, "Ladies' Special Dream Man" (the name of the romance comic) draws readers in while repelling them. Unlike "The Tales of the Black Freighter", "Ladies' Special Dream Man" doesn't share many narrative elements with the main story, rather it is its visual quality which is important. For instance, the kiss opening *The Hive* comes back towards the middle of the book, for instance, when Doug and Sarah buy romance comics at a yard sale. "Here's where you stop and kiss me... just like they do in the comics", Sarah says before they repeat the stereotypical panel. The sequence could be read as touchingly ironic, but it is probably more accurate to see it as representative of the characters' entrapment: like other recurrent elements of *Love Nest*, it drives home the fact that they are doomed to repeat their past mistakes, never really free in their actions and unsure of the stability or reality of their existence. Right before the end of *The Hive*, Doug complains that the images of the romance comics "won't hold..."; their maze-like structure is juxtaposed with ripped pages from "Ladies' Special Dream Man". Again, this is representative of the way Doug's and Nit Nit's realities collide in the three volumes: it is probable that one is dreaming the other, but it is never made entirely clear which downward, spiral direction the *mise en abyme* follows.

Despite using different metatextual techniques, all the comics discussed here offer readers a glimpse into a closed world, almost claustrophobic at times. This is not a necessary consequence of *mise en abyme*, but it could be considered a byproduct of it: by holding up a mirror to itself, the fiction becomes incapable of looking outside itself. Even comics that do reference external works – *L'Origine* with Little Nemo, *Love Nest* with Tintin – offer only distorted versions of reversals of their references. From *Jimmy Corrigan* to *City of Glass* to *Watchmen*, mirrors abound and call attention to the closed nature of those fictional worlds, perhaps more so than in written metafiction. In metatextual novels, as Eszter Szép notes, "the author or narrator needs to call attention to the devices they are using, and needs to highlight their presence and decisions" for metatextuality to function. Comics, in contrast, always foreground *all* their narrative tools to readers, metatextual or not. Though Szép writes that reading comics is "most of the time" an "automatic" process (2014: 93), even discreet metatextual devices such as the appearance of a particular building can hinder or slow down reading, even when its metatextual functions is not explicitly pointed out by the fiction, since in comics, every detail is immediately available for attention; one could almost say that there is no real backdrop in comics.

Consequently, comics metatextuality is also a means of revealing the hidden structure underlying a narrative. The latter is put into the limelight to the point of often becoming (one of) the story's subject(s), an effect which is also common to OuBaPo comics. Comics is a malleable

medium, and it is easy, perhaps even tempting for willing cartoonists to push its boundaries and play with its conventions. Metatextual comics thus reveal the architecture of comics' narrativity, and one of its most commonly highlighted aspects is its fragmentary nature. In *Lire la bande dessinée*, Benoit Peeters insists that this is one of the panel's fundamental traits (2010 : 27), and works such as *Watchmen* or *Love Nest* apply this trait to their overall structuring and aspect. If metatextual comics reveal a self-concerned architecture, it is worth noting that its girders and footings are deliberately left incomplete, hinting at further buildings to come, perhaps erected with the help of the reader. As metatextual comics purposely point out, those are artificial construction sites, but it is precisely because cartoonists embrace the artificiality of the worlds they depict that they acquire depth and significance. The instability of metatextual comics can only be partially nullified through an “act of reconstruction” from the reader, perhaps the only instance capable of freeing the characters from their worlds' repeated destruction.

## Notes

1. Many books and articles exist on the subject; see for instance James Benedict Brown's *The Comic Architect : Words and Pictures Along the Line Between Architecture and Comics*, or the exhibition catalogue *Archi & BD – La ville dessinée*, which posits 1905 and Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* as the starting points of the links between comics and architecture (Thévenet & Rambert 2010).
2. For instance, in the 1960s, Archigram, an avant-garde group of architects, have used comics in issue 4 of their journal.
3. The back of *Building Stories*'s box distributes the fourteen chapters of the narratives in various rooms of an apartment, further insisting on the similarities.
4. Baurin quotes Groensteen (2009 : 24).
5. It also posits, incidentally, that in a world with superheroes pirate comics would have risen to prominence, whereas in the real world they lost their popularity after the 1950s.
6. In Chapter XII, Ozymandias says to Dr. Manhattan : “I dream about swimming towards a hideous... No. Never mind. It isn't significant”, further stressing the parallel between to two stories.
7. Obviously this teaser only features in the album's first editions.

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## Résumé

Il s'agira dans cet article d'étudier la mise en avant par la bande dessinée de son propre mode de discours, par le biais de métatextualités implicites ou explicites. Dans le premier cas, c'est d'abord d'une relation à l'architecture dont il est question : on étudiera, par des exemples choisis, la façon dont une porte, une fenêtre, la façade d'un immeuble renvoient discrètement au découpage en planches et cases d'une bande dessinée. Dans le second cas, on se penchera sur les cas où une bande dessinée est représentée à l'intérieur de la fiction, généralement par le truchement d'un personnage qui fait office de lecteur à l'intérieur de la diégèse.

Dans les deux cas, l'emploi de la métatextualité permet de remettre au centre du discours la problématique du fonctionnement de la bande dessinée et de ses spécificités, en premier lieu desquelles son ergodicité et son caractère fragmentaire.

**Mots-clés** : Architecture; Chris Ware; Hergé; Marc-Antoine Mathieu; métatextualité; mise en abyme.

## Abstract

This article aims to analyze the ways comics can represent their own mode of discourse, through the use of implicit or explicit metatextual devices. I begin by examining the relation of comics with architecture. Through a few selected examples, I show how a door, a window, or the façade of a building can serve as discreet metonymies for the layout of a comic book's pages and panels. I follow up by considering instances where a comic book is represented within the fictional world of the narrative, usually through a character who serves as surrogate reader within the diegesis.

In both cases, the use of metatextuality foregrounds how comics work and what

their specificities are, starting with their ergodic and fragmentary character.

**Keywords** : Architecture; Chris Ware; Hergé; Marc-Antoine Mathieu; Metatextuality; Mise en abyme.

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