



PLACING TIME, TIMING SPACE

Memory as Border and Line of (Hi)Stories
in Richard McGuire's Graphic Narrative *Here*.

The city [of Zaira consists] of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper's swaying feet; the line strung from the lamppost to the railing opposite and the festoons that decorate the course of the queen's nuptial procession [...]. As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

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The idea of the border is quintessentially American. In 1839, John L. O'Sullivan announced the "manifest destiny" of the United States as "far-reaching, [...] boundless future;" as an "onward march" to which nobody could dare "to set limits" (427). At the turn of the century, Frederick Jackson Turner famously theorized the existence of the American Frontier only when it reached its natural limit, the Pacific Ocean. Thirty years later, Robert Frost meditated on the border as a homey fence, as the limit "walling in and walling out" and he alluded to the Sisyphean task of "mending," together with his neighbor, the stony wall delimiting their properties by placing back, spring after spring, the boulders dropped by the winters (1880). In the second half of the 20th century, the Beat Generation depicted life as an aimless journey and the American, endless roads became at one time setting and metonym of wandering without limits of any sort.

As this briefly sketched scenario suggests, the border defines the American experience only insofar as it initiates its own questioning and ultimate negation. In other words, the border is part of the American state of mind if it does not actively bound this state but, on the contrary, it passively spurs the mind to cross this very border, to perceive itself as unbounded. Thus, the border as a threshold, as a permeable edge, as a tension towards an ideal limit continuously pushed further, renegotiated, crossed. The border is a *praesentia in absentia*, an assertion that oxymoronically denies itself, a condition that is set only to be invalidated, the prerequisite needed to ignite the dynamic of its own transgression. Therefore, despite its many historical, cultural, political and literary formulations, and its ubiquitous presence as a principle of reference in the American imagination, this border is, to a large extent, necessarily ephemeral. In considering the transience of the American border, the topographical aspect is probably the most evident—its prototypical image may be found for instance in the divergence between the twisted boundaries of the Northeastern states and the straight geometry of the Southwestern “Four Corners.” However, it would be ironic for such a comprehension of the border to have strict meta-borders and to be restrained to geography. Cardinal points, extrapolated from the compass, are indeed turned into landmarks that define whole cultural and literary *genres*—the literature of the Frontier and Western movies, for example.

In this article, I will propose a reading of the border that transcends spatiality and enters the realm of temporality, thus uniting these two dimensions in one, composite operative category. This interpretation of the world has its visual and narrative transposition in the work that I mean to analyze, Richard McGuire’s graphic narrative *Here* (2014) that, it seems to me, perfectly outlines the porosity and the ultimate disappearance of the spatiotemporal borders in contemporary reality. *Here* is a 300-page comic book that has only one setting, while the time frame shifts continuously, superimposing on the same page images that range from 3,000,500,000 B.C. to A.D. 22,175 and preventing the construction of a coherent plot. The figurative pattern, as the author himself has suggested, resembles the interface of Microsoft Windows

where the user can see several panels all open at the same time, all displayed on the same screen (Martin 2014).

McGuire envisions the three temporal domains (past, present, and future) as unbound and depicts them without any sequential order, as an unrestrained flow flooding the narrative space.¹ The latter is, instead, both fixed and volatile, always the same and yet changing: a point of Earth that, at the beginning of the 20th century, gets walled off the surrounding space and acquires artificial boundaries that turn it into a specific place, the living room from the author's childhood home in New Jersey.² McGuire elaborates a temporal simultaneity that soaks a particular space in its time and represents the margins of contingency that supposedly separate—but in this work, in fact, unite—what pertains to the magnitude of History, what to peculiar, personal stories and what gets forgotten instead. I also argue that this phenomenology, grounded in the frictions engendered by a stable viewpoint on unstable views, may be profitably read in the light of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's speculations on reality and on the interconnectedness between space and time produced in *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* (1980), with particular reference to their comprehension of memory as the liminal condition between temporal dimensions and as the measure

1. In *Here*, an image set in 2111 depicts the main setting of the book, the living room of McGuire's childhood home, literally flooded by a waterfall from the window; a scene that may be read as a visual metaphor of the flooding of the narrative space throughout the whole graphic novel. In *Here* there are no page numbers, this is the reason why I cannot localize more precisely the aforementioned example and why I will not be able to provide such a reference in the following passages of this article.

2. Despite the difficulty in identifying the main theme of such a heterogeneous and diverse narrative, it is probably safe to state that the extraordinariness of the ordinary and the presence of the universe mirrored in the little, domestic things of everyday life play a key role in the unfolding of the narrative. As McGuire himself states in an interview for the National Public Radio: "It does center around my family in a way, even though it's not a memoir by any means. But I did want to talk to touch on all the universal things that we go through—love and death and the major themes. I was looking at a lot of family photos for reference, but I also looked at the archive of a collector." (Martin 2014)

determining the spatial coordinates of the stories that we come to recognize as ours.

Beyond the pages, McGuire engages with borders on a meta-narrative level as well. *Here* indeed posits itself at the margins of the cultural and literary canon, since it belongs to the relatively young and popular *genre* of comics that has only recently acquired the status of academic field of study. Comics, especially when developed in graphic novels, are more and more challenging the narrative strategies that got to be crystallized through centuries of (more or less) traditional literature, by disputing its constitutional norms and introducing a new form of language where the visual and the textual dimensions merge. As claimed by Will Eisner, one of the first cartoonists who tried to systematize this art, comics are indeed a “language—a literary form, if you will—[whose] disciplined application [...] creates the ‘grammar’ of Sequential Art;” a consequentiality that relies on “a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols.” (8)

Here can be considered as cutting-edge text even within the sphere of comics itself because it expands the *genre*'s expressive potential and radically transforms and enhances its narrative techniques, thus pushing farther the boundaries of conventional graphic representation.³ McGuire succeeds in doing so by revolu-

3. *Here* was first published in 1989 in the ninth issue of the experimental comics magazine *RAW*, edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly; fifteen years on that first appearance, it was published in the format of a graphic novel. This expanded version of the original short story represents a further overcoming of the narrative borders in terms of medium (from magazine to book), as well as of genre (from graphic short story to novel) and plot. There exists also an interactive e-book version, in which the panels (i.e. the pages) are arranged randomly, building on the arbitrariness of the sequential order with reference to memories as well as on the agency of single individuals. McGuire himself explains: “I did toy with the idea of having each book, have the pages of each book shuffled so that each book was a unique experience, but I couldn’t work it out. And then when I was working on the e-book version, I thought to myself that that’s what the e-book is for, to let the e-book be what it does best and let the book be what it does best.” In the same occasion, McGuire always reflects on the different reading experiences conveyed by the different media he has resorted to for his narrative: “The original strip you would have nine panels on a page. So, you’re seeing the room nine times per page. And your

tionizing the key element of comics' textual economy: the panel, whose contours are completely re-conceived. Each book spread serves as the main panel, a domain that is overlaid with smaller panels depicting moments from other times, both past and contemporary and even future, but set in the same spot—the graphic limits of each main panel hence coincide with the book edges. This composition by superimposition calls into question the already mentioned comics' sequential order that, in this work, explodes into dis-ordered units: *Here* does not display classical strips because its panels are not arranged according to a linear progression—in terms of both intelligibility and visualization—but according to simultaneous juxtapositions.

This entangled (cor)relation between panels complicates the conception of the “gutter,” which is the empty space that in comics separates one panel from the other. Actually, this space is not empty at all, in that it is “the limbo [where] human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea”—as pointed out by Scott McCloud (one of the major comics theorists). In other words, the gutter functions both as temporal and spatial fracture that enables the reader “to connect [distinct panels] and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (66–67). This effect of observing the parts but perceiving, imagining, or assuming the whole is called “closure” and in *Here* it becomes exponentially amplified due to the elimination of the main panels' margins and the re-elaboration and re-collocation of the gutter. The latter indeed ceases to be visible and becomes ideal, broadened to the extent of going beyond the inter-panel focus and reaching an inter-page dynamic. The readers are spurred to fill with their own agency a way wider interpretative gap than in traditional graphic narratives, to try to construe images in the light of other images presented throughout the whole book, to create mental associations, albeit flimsy, on the basis of themes that come to be denoted over several pages.

eye can move around that—in a way that it can't in the book. But the book has other strengths to it. And then the e-book has further strengths. And, you know, I can see maybe in another 20 years doing it the virtual reality version of the room where you walk into the room and you're experiencing it. I mean, that's a possibility.” (Martin 2014)

Moreover, McGuire subverts the convention according to which in comics time is perceived spatially only in relation to a linear progression—the graphically longer a panel, the temporally longer the moment it depicts; the longer the horizontal, spatial lines delimiting a panel, the longer the timeline covered by this panel. McCloud provides a brilliant example of this perception by noticing that adjectives such as “short” and “long” can refer both to the first and to the fourth dimension, but in comics this distinction often blurs and vanishes (102).⁴ In *Here*—where some panels do not have boundaries and others are superimposed on the former without any visible gutter—time gets substantiated in and by the space because it acquires a sense in the narrative economy only on condition that it literally “takes place” in that particular space. Time is no longer a line but a square or even a cube of which space is a constitutive part; it breaks the banks of any chronological logic and flows free, without following any progression, only the associations based on spatial coincidence. In my view, “coincidence”—in its both temporal and spatial meaning—is the notion that best conveys the perception of reality that McGuire draws in *Here*. A diachronic synchronicity synthesized in and by one spot, time mapped on space, a simultaneous grasp of vectors pointing in different directions.

This comprehension of the human experience complicates the Modern Era model of a three-dimensional space inevitably related to the fourth dimension of linear time. René Descartes and Isaac Newton described a universe where space and time, albeit inseparable, are distinct units; according to this conception, the individual cannot exist only in space or only in time, they exist in both,

4. Scott McCloud’s discourse on the practice of spatializing time (i.e. the panel’s length conveys the passing of time despite the use of a limited space because its dimension is temporalized) is a classic of comics studies; it particularly pertains to comics strips, and more specifically, to those comics which are forced to rigid editorial limits. This convention emerges in the first superhero strips published in the first half of the 20th century, such as in Will Eisner’s *The Spirit*, and Robert Kane and Bill Finger’s *Batman*. Moreover, in relation to the experimental graphic interpretation of time and space in *Here*, more examples come to mind, for instance Joe Sacco’s *The Great War. July 1, 1916: The First Day of the Battle of the Somme* (2014), a panoramic text which spatially represents 24 hours of battle in the First World War.

in a bijective dimension of space/time where, though feeble, there is a slash between the two. This border disappears in the 1910s due to Albert Einstein's theory of relativity that postulates the existence of only one monad, the "spacetime"—without any slash—composed of what used to be perceived and got to be systematized as two discrete functions: spatiality and temporality. The image suggested by the physicist Brian Greene of the "spacetime loaf of bread" explains the understanding of the universe as a continuum whose length is time, while height and width are space. Greene's analogy goes on to identify the slices cut out of this loaf as moments: time ceases to be represented as an arrow laid out on a Cartesian plane; time is now conceived as a series of blocks intrinsically spatial, subject to the physical law of the time-reversal symmetry that considers time as moving both forward and backward.⁵

Greene's metaphor of the spacetime loaf of bread perfectly applies to the universe of *Here*, the two being different media representations of the same phenomenon; two photos of the same subject taken with two filters; two shapes carved out of the same material. McGuire's panels seem to me to possess the same ontological status and epistemological intent of Greene's slices of bread, informed as they are by the same spatiotemporal reciprocity that triggers the dynamics of "placing time" and "timing space." These two mechanisms are the cornerstones of *Here* and may be better apprehended if analyzed as forms of the two processes that Deleuze and Guattari identify as pivotal in their conceptualization of the rhizome: the re-territorialization and the de-territorialization. These two vectors constitute the mechanism of the spacetime in *Here*: on the one hand, the re-territorialization captures moments scattered in the flow of time, and places them again/back in the space of the present; on the other hand, the de-territorialization transcends spatial contingency and projects space into a temporal continuum.

If we think about it, the experience of remembering functions in the same way. Memory has the power to establish a cognitive

5. The spacetime seems to be the paradigm of contemporaneity, of our everyday experience characterized by shortened and almost nullified spatial distances and temporal instantaneity; it is the epitome of the postmodern (and even more of the post-postmodern) condition of "time and space compression" elaborated by critics such as Fredric Jameson and David Harvey.

and emotional connection between distinct temporal dimensions; it makes distant times and places converge in the *hic et nunc* of the present, thus breaking the spatiotemporal borders. Memory re-territorializes when it abstracts a moment from the past and relocates it into the present; it de-territorializes when the present fades away into its juncture to the past. According to Deleuze and Guattari, memory is the intersection between these two axes, the point that makes “every present refer simultaneously to the horizontal line of the flow of time which goes from an old present to the actual present [re-territorialization]; and the vertical line of the order of time which goes from the present to the past [de-territorialization]” (294).

Therefore, to a certain extent, remembrance seems to both search for and leave a trace in Derridean terms: a mark of the absence of a present, an always-already absent present. Considered in the light of the *déjà-là*, *Here* is a “punctual system” (294) generated and organized by memory that proves to be both the border and the line of the construction of the narrated (hi)stories. On the one hand, memory is the border that determines which moments flow into our narrative and it delimits our story from that of others; it contains and exceptionalizes the content of our past and our perception of history. On the other hand, memory is the line that connects the dots of different moments eventually forming a coherent story; it serves as form and *raison d’être* of the narrative of the past itself. The dynamics of placing time and timing space and the faculty of remembering as both border and line are movements always interconnected, precisely as the Deleuzian de-territorialization and re-territorialization “are caught up in one another” (10) thus merging into one perspective for explicating and assessing the world. These tensions may be imagined as coordinated by a parallax that makes visible and activates a specific mechanism depending on the perspective from which a phenomenon, or a moment, is observed.⁶

6. In his review of *Here* for *The Guardian*, the cartoonist Chris Ware recalls: “Sitting on that couch, I felt time extend infinitely backwards and forwards, with a sense of all the biggest of small moments in between. And it wasn’t just my mind: *Here* blew apart the confines of graphic narrative and expanded its universe in one incendiary flash, introducing a new dimension to visual narrative that radically departed from the traditional up-down and left-right reading of comic strips.” (Ware 2014)

In the last section of this article, I will discuss some panels excerpted from *Here* as examples of de-territorialized or re-territorialized memories and I will try to highlight how these dynamics engage the reader in the construction of a multilayered, synchronic phenomenology. Several main panels from *Here* are set in 1775 and portray Benjamin Franklin (who, before entering the narrative as an historical figure, is presented as Halloween costume and mentioned by a man in 1990) and a lady, from a natural and unbounded point of view (at the time, the McGuire's house was yet to be built). On one of these main panels, a panel from 1998 is overlaid, showing a leaking ceiling from an artificial and bounded position; this superimposition possibly implies the idea of erosion contextualizing the historical disintegration of the British Empire in America. This narrative, based on inter-panel, specular references, goes on for a couple of pages that seem to delineate other related themes: for instance, the intensification of the leaking process in the 1998 living room is counterpointed by the exasperation of the pre-revolution, political situation; a black-out in the house corresponds to the impossibility of seeing others' points, as in others' opinions, in 1775. Analyzed from the perspective of the main panels, the shifts to the superimposed panels perform a re-territorialization, while from the opposite viewpoints the same shifts produce a de-territorializing effect.

Another very interesting example of inter-panel references relating also distant temporal domains can be found on a main panel set in 1986 in which there is a dog barking at the mailman, while in a superimposed, smaller panel from 1954 a man sat in an armchair, comments: "Every day the mailman comes, the dog barks, the mailman goes away. The dog thinks he has protected us once again from an intruder." In the next page, on the book spread set in 1970 there are two minor panels: one is from 1959 and portrays a woman asking a man (presumably the woman's husband) "Do you have your keys? Watch? Wallet?" And he replies: "Check." In the other panel we see the same man in the armchair in 1954 once again commenting on a situation from a dislocated temporal dimension: "It's a symbolic relationship. It's a little ritual they do, a little performance..." The compelling aspect of this juxtaposition of panels is the relevance that the second comment from 1954 may have not only for the scene on the same book spread (that

of the couple), but also for the scene in the previous page, the one depicting the relationship between the barking dog and the mailman. Therefore, the reader's interpretative effort seems to be led to function according to an inter-panel as well as inter-page logic, a dynamic which strengthens the multilayered vision of reality constructed in *Here*.

A scene set in the McGuires' living room in 1986 occupies another main panel; a woman lies on the couch while the doorbell goes "DING. DONG." Next to an armchair there is a panel from 1609 in which two Native Americans interrupt(ed) their sexual intercourse in a forest because one of the two says/d: "I heard something." Superimposed on the panel of a man falling from a chair, a panel from twenty-nine years earlier shows a woman who asked/asks: "Did you lose something?" This book spread is followed by a section dealing with loss, matching panels from different years when people lost wallets, self-control, the hearing, an earring and so on—all against the background of desert wastelands both from Prehistory and a distant (possibly post-apocalyptic) future. After a series of these juxtapositions, there are four main panels without any superimposition: even the very narrative logic of the book seems to be lost but eventually the thematic superimposition returns.

The key role of memory in the development of the narrative and, more specifically, of its spatiotemporal, cubic comprehension of reality is made explicit in *Here* thanks to several passages when/where the theme and the act of remembering are explored. The archetypal struggle of man against Time in order to save moments from its inexorable flow (almost an act of *hubris*) is introduced in a series of seven book spreads: in a main panel set in 1959 four children (presumably siblings) are sat on a couch in the living room, while a woman tells them how to look like and a man (presumably their parents) is ready to take a picture of the four of them. The same scene is presented in the next page, while in the following five book spreads there are minor panels from 1962, 1964, 1969, 1979, and 1983 in which presumably the same children from the photo in 1959 (but with the addition of a new member) are depicted as they grow up, always while being photographed—a detail that the reader understands from

the recurring voice out of the picture: "Smile." The sequence of photographs (themselves the epitome of the human tension towards the preservation of nice, family moments) is correlated by statements in other panels (but on the same main panel) which may function as captions: "You're going to remember this day for the rest of your life;" "What do you want to be remembered for?" "Where did the time go?"⁷

To conclude, I have previously stated that in *Here* "time is no longer a line but a square or even a cube of which space is a constitutive part." However, time and space constitute two of the three dimensions necessary to build a solid, so which is the third dimension of the above-mentioned cube? It is memory. Memory, being at the margins of contingency, pushes farther the limits of experience thus bridging temporal and spatial distances; this comprehension creates a cubic measure, or rather, a three-dimensional lens on reality that allows to isolate previously invisible, unexpected nexuses between phenomena.

These connections broaden our perception of reality and call into question the limits of the narratives we construct out of it, thus producing a peculiar spacetime; a simultaneity which is effectively summed up by an image set in 2213, where/when a tour guide explains: "Through our reconstruction and visualization program we have been able to access that a home built in the twentieth century once stood on this site," while showing a fan projecting several images of the McGuire's living room as it came to look like through the years to a group of tourists. The fan projects a consistent image of the living room (thus showing only one spacetime) that contains the sequence (an occasion in which the reader does experience a sequential order) of the changes undergone by the room; an expedient which hints at the passing of time as spatialized in the everyday life of the author's family.

7. The simultaneity of time(s) in this series of photographs, which is also the cypher of *Here's* narrative economy, may be defined as a Deleuzian line of becoming (although memory per se functions as a punctual system) which "is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle, it runs perpendicular to the points first perceived, transversally to the localizable relation to distant or contiguous points." (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 293)

This distant future seems therefore to resonate with the words pronounced by a woman placing a yellow book on the living room table in 1957,⁸ in the very last panel of the work: "...now I remember;" the epilogue of the spatiotemporal journey, or quest even, through which *Here* takes the reader.

8. Interestingly, 1957 is also the year in which the author was born and McGuire himself seems to be a character in his own narrative: in a panel from 1990, the face of a man that very much resembles him is drawn while stating: "I took a nap, and when I woke I didn't know where I was."

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