Comics on the streets of Brussels: three approaches and a description
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Une ville entière qui serait un trompel'oeil!...
Le trompe -l'oeil n'était habituellement qu'une manière de prolonger les dimensions du réel, de doter un mur, un couloir, un plafond d'une profondeur fantôme, ouvrant sur un espace imaginaire.
BENOÎT PEETERS, *Retour à Samario*, epilogue of *Les murailles de Samaris*

Wandering through cold streets tangled like old strings, coming on fountains rigid in the frost, its formula escapes you, it has lost the certainty that constitutes a thing.
W. H. AUDEN, *Brussels in winter*

First approach: the sedentary journeys

In the past, comics, just like adventure-based literature, were above all an economic way of travelling. The characters from comic books travelled the world on transatlantic ships, flew aboard aeroplanes, crossed the American continent on trains. Comic strips transported readers to worlds they would never know, yet ones they had heard about. Journeys were not yet democratized – some would say massified – yet literature was already moving in that direction. Tintin would not have been the same had he remained in Brussels in order to solve his cases – instead tireless masked heroes travelled through tropical forests and faced local savages, while exoticism permeated stories which evoked Salgarian atmospheres.

Yet suddenly television entered our homes, granting us all the gift of ubiquity: it transported us all over the globe without even needing to leave our houses; thus those exotic paper locations began to lose their attractiveness, as fragile surrogates of the apparently realistic image given to us by television: comic book authors began to seek out less easily reachable scenarios, forests were substituted by Jupiter's rings, deserts by the uninhabited surface of Mars. And superpowers were the fuel which allowed our imagination to travel towards places unreached by cameras. The exoticism of action cinema soon also became stale. Since (almost) everyone could travel, we began to think of comic strips featuring non lunar deserts, non intergalactic transportation, exotic-touristic scenes which survived only in the more conservative series, as antiquated –
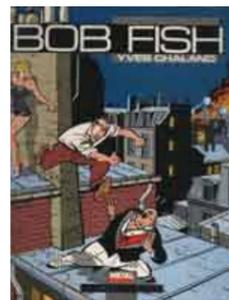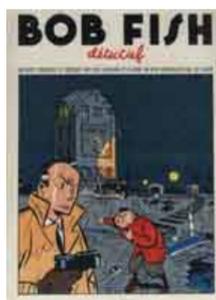

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1. Frank Pé, *Broussaille*, luglio 1991. È il primo affresco realizzato della serie "Parcours BD". La superficie è di 35 mq. circa.

2. Decorazione della facciata del negozio di tessuti "Les tissus du chien vert"

3. Bob de Moor, *Cori le Mousaillon*, 1998, 35 mq.

4. Willy Vandersteen, *Bob et Bobette*, 1995, 25 mq.

5. Stephen Desberg / Enrico Marini, *Le Schorpion*

6. Hermann, *Les rêves de Nic*, 1999, 35 mq.

the same happened in cinema, for example with James Bond, who continued to travel to exotic scenarios as if he had not noticed that they were now out of fashion.
However, not even the universe was infinite. Once we had journeyed to all galaxies, to every dimension of matter and anti-matter, where could we go next? Especially since cameras were now teleporting us to the borders of the Solar System. A television announcement stated: other worlds exist, but they can be found in this one. Our eyes, tired of travelling across universes, returned to what they had in front of them before they had started reading. The city we live in, the places we have seen since childhood, became fascinating and unknown. The same thing happened to comic book artists, who thus decided to reinvent the city before their eyes.

Second approach: a paper Brussels

The conversion of the city into, if not the protagonist – although sometimes it is precisely that –, then into a fundamental reference for comics, is a relatively young affair – I would say it began in the Eighties. Sometimes the chosen city is not the one in which the author is published, but prestigious ones, such as New York, Paris, London and other cities which dictate cultural fashions: without doubt exoticism has slowly been substituted by cosmopolitism. Hergé, the creator of Tintin, drew regions of the world which he did not know and he had no need to be verisimilar, as his readers had never been there either. Yet the characters of new comics no longer travel to remote and unknown

places; on the contrary they move within cities which are well-known by the author and his/her readers alike. There is no cultural shock, as they are all women and men of the world, used to awakening in different continents.

Other authors, upon deciding not to move, look around themselves and recognize their own city as a place worthy of study, turning monuments and streets into their action frame.

One can hardly say Brussels is a prestigious capital. A bureaucratic centre, a city with no grace, a paradise for building speculation, a city of un-mysterious mists. Given its poor fame, it comes as no surprise that very few foreign artists have chosen it as the setting for their fantastic adventures. Obviously some images of Brussels appeared in certain Belgian comics since the very beginnings of comic book art. Tintin, who lived there, would sometimes appear in the Vieux Marché or in the Astronomical Observatory, yet the city remained a background scenario, as interchangeable as the wallpaper of the characters homes. The same thing was done, for example, by Bob de Moor in *Barelli dans Bruxelles bouillonne*, which shows a tourist guide version of Brussels, as if it were drawn for foreigners. On the contrary, a Frenchman who moved to Brussels gave the city a considerable amount of space within his works; that Frenchman was Yves Chaland, who set the adventures of detective Bob Fish [A] in the Belgian capital and also used the city for the *Le jeune Albert* series; Goffin, instead, unveiled – in *Veel Liefs uit Brüssel* and in *Plagïat!* – a far less topical city than in De Moor and a far more modern one than in Chaland.

However the great illustrator of Brussels is certainly François Schuiten, even if he portrays a non-realistic version of the city. In his works the Belgian capital transforms into a thousand other cities which are still Brussels; exaggerated, impossible, perhaps a dream, yet still Brussels, although in order to recognize it we must first rid it of the superstructures which transform it into an invention: within the pages of his books one can see the Palais de Justice – here re-named the Palace of the Three Powers – the house of Cauchi emerging from a cliff, the royal greenhouses extended to the point of becoming cities in themselves, the Waucquez warehouses, the Art Nouveau interiors, the skyscrapers of the northern district… Furthermore one of the themes of his book *Brüsel* [B] is the relentless speculation and the destruction of the urban texture of a city which could be an oneiric distortion of Brussels, yet is also something else.

Schuiten's strips portray a city which is itself a drawing of the city. Some of his cities are unreal on two different levels: they are unreal


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because they are made of paper, yet they are also unreal for the characters which inhabit them; they are optical illusions, deceptions of the senses: the comic book as *trompe l'oeil*. Peeters, who is Schuiten's regular scriptwriter, defines the *trompe l'oeil* "a way to extend the dimensions of the real, to give a wall, a corridor, a roof a ghostly depth, which opens up towards an imaginary space". Schuiten, with his drawings, does the exact opposite: within imaginary walls, he encloses his characters, who – like the protagonist of *Morel's invention* – remain confined to a world created to deceive them, amongst decorated walls or projections, upon a pavement they must tread with care, as they do not know if it will bear their weight.

It is only logical that this play between reality and drawings, between that which the reader can see and the things which characters observe, between paper and construction materials, ultimately gives birth to a new dialogue between illustration and architecture. A dialogue which may continue on the street: instead of paper cities portraying stone ones, there may be stone cities portraying paper ones, with their facades covered in comic strips, painted images and, *in extremis*, a city featuring comics which are themselves drawings of streets and buildings, thus

blurring the borders of streets, lampposts, painted facades and real ones. The city as *trompe l'oeil*.

Third approach:
the building as a comic book

In the beginning, comic strips enjoyed a limited amount of space upon the pages of newspapers; they were not distinguishable from crosswords or horoscopes. Until some characters became famous enough to actually cause an increase in sales of those periodicals featuring them. At that point strips grew to occupy half a page, or even full pages, and soon transformed into series to be read week after week: to be continued. Thus the creation of magazines exclusively dedicated to comic fans was perfectly logical. Furthermore the strips were no longer just entertainment for children, they started to address adults as well: the drawings became more precise, the plots thickened, the surface earned in depth, the strips lost their family demeanour, with lines to be read from left to right, and disassembled into scenes that were distributed across the page in an apparently disorderly fashion. Comic creators began to earn the halo of artists, whose works related to cinema, painting and literature. Hugo Pratt, Manara,
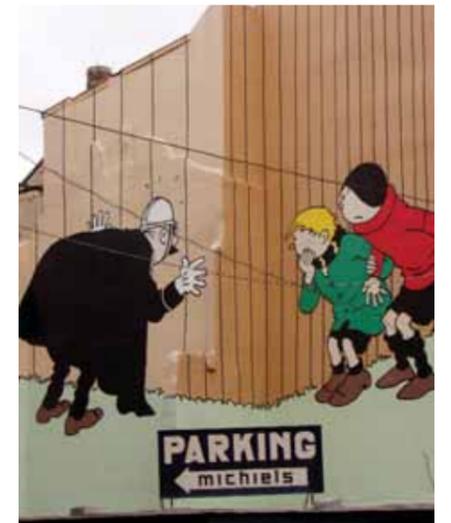
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Moebius's collaborators were serious people, not just canvas-smearers. The next step was equally logical: magazines became experimental laboratories, with the goal of creating independent books. Collective works were over: the ego of the artist now demanded exclusive attention for himself, his closed, circular and complete work. Yet if the complete book is art, are also single scenes to be considered in the same fashion? Now fully convinced of their worth, illustrators became independent from writers, escaped from the yoke and answered yes: every scene, every drawing, can be a work of art. The space they were offered by books – colourful and contaminated by words – now seemed insufficient for proving the value of individual images, and thus they began to create, with in mind exhibitions which could extend their drawings, turning each of them into an artistic object, independent from any form of text. The next step – which might be perceived as megalomanic should it not imply an ironic smeer, should the themes not be so modest, sometimes even infantile – is to abandon the interior of museums to become a monument. There is no longer a need to go to a gallery to admire portable artworks which can now be bought and taken home: comics have adjusted, have become a part of the city we live in, earning an aura of permanence similar to that of churches, palaces, statues… yet when painted on buildings with no particular architectonic value they have not obtained the immortality of great monuments: the jackhammer is always ready to destroy these facades, as has already happened before.

A description: fantasy and reality

It is not by chance that Brussels is the city where comics appear and spread out on the facades of buildings. In Belgium, the passion for comics is a long-lived one – this is not the appropriate space to tell its story – and is behind the abundance of specialized bookstores, the existence of a comic museum and library, a famous drawing school, periodicals… and the fact that in the capital comic book characters furnish the interior spaces of restaurants, hotels and underground stations.

In this city, humble or perhaps slow in self-promoting itself, finding information in guide books can often be tricky: no Brussels comic book itineraries are announced, no one seems to have noticed more than three or four frescoes featuring comic book characters. Yet there are circa thirty, thanks to the initiative promoted in 1991 by the Public Spaces and Environment Council of the City of Brussels – render unto Caesar… – with the collaboration of the Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée [www.brusselsbdtour.com] .

Brussels is known as a grey city: the sky, the streets, including – unjustly – its culture. "To face the grey of this sky, I painted in yellow…", thus begins one of my poems, and probably the same thought was shared by the people who encouraged the project of beautifying certain buildings of the city with comic book art. To break the grey by using colour and surprise, sense of humour and memories from colourful pages. "To transform ugliness into beauty", this is the wish expressed by one of the members of Art Mural, the society which manages the realization of the frescoes.

Most of the urban comics of Brussels can be found in degraded areas: a coloured facade amongst one hundred grey ones, an artwork against entire streets featuring no space for creation and where ancient buildings were torn down in order to build beehives of cement and brick or where hardly healthy little houses stand, lacking more in terms of piping systems than in terms of art. "To transform ugliness into beauty" is a great goal, which will not be achieved by simply modifying appearances, or by distracting the eyes from the sight of reality. However this is no moment for me to dwell on urbanism and social politics. Let us return to the artworks.

In certain cases the facade is no more than the extension of a page; as on the page itself, space is divided into various scenes, in a succession of multiple spaces and perspectives; various spaces are represented, not just one. In rue des Fabriques [3], for example, Bob de Moor uses the protrusion of a building and opens it onto the sea. And here we discover a sailing vessel, a young sailor, blue water, the creation of a fragmented space, not just because of the scenes but because it is evident that what we are observing is a fragment from a story – some of the scenes are incomplete because they could not fit in the available space – in other words there are further pages, actions, stories that we will need to follow by reading them elsewhere. Reality can be limited, but the world of imagination is infinite.

Although the work I am about to describe was not a part of the same project and was not even created by a comic book author, de Moor's façade should be compared to the one we can observe in Quai des Charbonnages [2], a large ship, travelling upon a greenish sea, which covers the facades of two buildings on a corner. Here the marine theme is treated differently: there is no separation into scenes, no reference to a story which continues elsewhere: the painted building becomes an object that closes upon its own self, limited, like a monument, separated from the urban environment which surrounds it: in this particular case a degraded area dominated by a strong immigration from Northern

Africa. A single contact with the surrounding reality: a few steps from the painted sea and the ship is the channel which once represented the access route for the city's sea trades.

The surface of some works is used as if made of paper, and this stops them from integrating with the surrounding environment. We can read a comic book in different places and the book will always remain the same, and this may be said about the drawing chosen for a new façade and the surrounding houses and streets: there is not an inexorable relationship between such elements. The works are mere decorative covers, references to works by an author, in the same way that advertisements on buildings refer to products we can buy and use elsewhere. However in this case we are speaking about permanent additions to a location. Let us view, for example, *Les rêves de Nic* in rue de la Senne [6], where children, elephants and plush animals float in an unreal space in no relation of continuity with the street the building is on, or with the Dalton brothers exiting a bank after a robbery, unaware that Lucky Luke [7] is watching them all upon an insignificant facade – it would have been far more interesting if they had been painted on the wall of a true bank -; also the swordsman in rue Treurenberg [5], on guard and showing us his unsheathed foil, could actually be on another street, in another city.

Taymans [9] presents a more ambiguous relation between the artwork and its support, in a painting which develops across a whole facade featuring various rows of blind windows; in each of the windows we find a series of characters as if they were looking out from inside the building, women dancing, a trumpet player, etc., yet the perspective and proportions are not real: we could never be under the impression that we are actually observing a party within the building; especially given the fact that the windows are surrounded by a star-ridden blue, and one features the moon, so we no longer know if we are looking onto an interior or at various fragments of an open air night party. In this game on the brink between reality and appearance, in this juxtaposition between support and context on one side, and painting on the other, one may meet unexpected situations: for example, it is unclear whether the relation with the surroundings is deliberate or casual in the case of the drawing by Vandersteen [4] in which a series of characters climb up a façade: the lowest one sustains the one above him and so on, a human column with its own equilibrium; yet when observed from a certain perspective one no longer knows if they are holding each other or climbing up a lamppost in front of the image: was the lamppost already there when the author vertically arranged his characters? If it was, did he notice the eventual visual deception?

Other authors, perhaps the most interesting ones, deliberately bind the works to their surroundings, thus adding a sometimes inexorable further reading. Roba [8], for example, plays with perspective, extending a street on one of its houses and portraying characters descending it exactly like those who, on Sunday mornings, are returning from their shopping in the near flea market of Place du Jeu de Balle. There is no realistic intent, nor the spirit of authentic artifice; on the contrary the work is based on a playful parallelism: the coexistence of comic book characters and real ones, just like cartoons and real actors have blended together in nowadays cinema, playing on the fact that the imagination of the reader or viewer is capable of instilling a spirit within a series of anthropomorphic signs on paper… or on cement.

Equally enjoyable, even if more realistic, is the drawing of the Ric Hochet [14] series which may be found on a little street close to Boulevard Anspach. We see a character who has just left his house, and above whom such a surprising scene is taking place that he could not avoid dropping his pipe: the character has a shadow, the painted façade appears to perfectly continue the adjacent surface along a ninety degree angle and, at least in photographs, one has to look twice to distinguish the painted parts from the real façade.

Even more interesting is the work by Schuiten near Grande Place. This inventor of imaginary cities emerging amongst real ones has created, upon a tight protrusion, an interesting dialogue with the surroundings: the half-classical, half-utopian architecture of the upper part is opposed to the surrounding Gothic and Baroque, and the passers-by painted upon the lower part appear to belong to the same world as the citizens walking along the street – or at least to the world of their shadows [13].

And now that I am about to finish my itinerary, I feel as if I were the one who has to paint a fresco; yet I am lacking the space to do so, my figures don't fit, I am forced to limit myself to a fragmented vision of the action. For example I have not mentioned the dialogue – sometimes confrontation – between official frescoes and graffiti, between anarchic and illegal artistic expressions and programmed embellishments of the city's walls.

However something will always be left out, given that this is a potentially interminable project: there will always be facades to be decorated and authors who are willing to do so. To tell the truth, every year a new one seems to add on to the collection. Thus let us conclude in comic book fashion. To be continued.

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