

Conceptualizing Comics: Studies on the Nature of Spatiality

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This thesis attempts to conceptualize a certain problem of spatiality from the formal specificity of the medium of comics. The thesis is not a historical or taxonomic study of comics, that is, it does not seek to provide a historical account of the development of comics as media, nor is it focused on a classification of the genres and movements of comics. Neither does it go into a close reading of a variety of comic books – furnishing a plethora of empirical instances of the medium of comics. Rather, what this thesis aims at, is to articulate and conceptually investigate an aporia relating to spatiality that is inherent to comics as a medium, and argues that this spatial problem is not restricted to comics, but is rather a *general ontological problem* that refers to an aporia of our most general suppositions regarding space and time – and also, along with it, to our suppositions regarding being in general. And further this thesis holds that this ontological aporia – this spatial problem that we find in the specificity of the medium of comics – holds a conceptual relevance for the theoretical discourse of decoloniality.

In comics, the problem relating to spatiality emerges from the fact that any ‘movement’ of time in the medium – the ‘passage’ of the narrative from moment to moment, from panel to panel, which must also be a ‘movement’ of time from the past to the future – must also be ‘simultaneous’, the dimensions of time, the past, the present, and the future, must appear simultaneously on the singular dimension of the space of the comic book page. The dynamism of time, where each element or ‘moment’ can only appear through the annihilation of other moments – where each ‘present’ moment only appears by annihilating the ‘past’ moment and anticipating its own destruction by a ‘future’ moment – must appear in comics through the stasis of the spatial, a holding together or simultaneity which refers to the static discreteness of space. And perhaps this problem cannot be resolved, cannot be fully explained, through either the image of a ‘dialectical’, eternal ‘now’ *within* which the becoming of time takes place, *or* the absolute otherness of the other, the trace of the other which hollows from *without*, the ‘inside’ of the present. It calls for us to stay with its difficulty, to keep thinking further.

Moreover, in this thesis we forward that this conceptualization of the spatial that we find in comics holds a certain relevance in the theorization of the decolonial. Any attempt at a

decolonial act must encounter – at an epistemological level – the universal and universalizing force of the colonizer, which the decolonial must resist through an opposition, by taking up an anticolonial or decolonial position. Yet, it soon becomes apparent that such a discrete opposition remains within the ‘logic’ of the colonizer, it repeats the universalizing logic of the One – here as a one opposed to another one. Here, the decolonial has to perhaps try to take up the position of the ‘other’, an other which is always entangled with the universal, but also constantly moving away, always dissipating vis-a-vis the universal. Yet the decolonial must attempt to take up the ‘position’ of this other, to think of an impossible ‘presence’ of the other. We find a similar ‘movement’ in comics. In comics, any element only comes into being through its relation to another, through a juxtaposition which is constitutive of the medium of comics – this means that any ‘present’ element in comics (any element which one ‘presently’ perceives) is always related to its ‘past’ or ‘future’ element, such that the ‘presence’ of the present is spoiled by the necessary trace of the other, by this opening towards its others that is *within* it. Yet, in comics, this ‘movement’ between the present and the past/future, the ‘difference’ between the present and its others, is *also* a simultaneity, a spatial continuity that must also imply a ‘same’. The open-present, as open, must also bring the ‘other’ *inside* as the ‘same’ – and here we must not only think of a disappearing, dissipating other, but also of an impossible ‘presence’ of the other, which cannot be thought of without the ‘effect’ of the spatial, and we argue in this thesis that the specificity of comics lies in the fact that it forcefully expresses such spatiality – and that this spatiality that comics expresses holds relevance in the thinking of the decolonial.

We should clarify here that in describing comics as a ‘medium’, we do not mean to refer to comics as something that simply stands in between the observer and observed, subject and object, as a provisional substitute that re-presents the ‘presence’ of a world ‘out there’. Rather, we hold the view that the difference, between medium and presence, between subject and object, is not provisional but *necessary* – and that any ‘act’ of representation (and this act may be just as passive as it is active) must function in a field marked by such irreducible difference. This implies, on the one hand, that we do not possess any means of direct access to, or any direct intuition of, the world or ‘reality’, that we must experience the world *itself* as representation – and on the other hand, that the autonomy of notions of subject and object, self and world, etc. is dependent on a *relation of difference* between them, that the *itself* of the world as representation is not necessarily subjective or objective, ideal or real – it is not possible to determine whether

the ‘world’ (‘as medium’) is an effect of subjective or objective forces. And since ‘reality’ or ‘world’ itself must appear within a field of differences *as* a ‘medium’, or representation, differences among mediums – such as cinema, writing, and comics – must impose on us different ‘aspects’ or senses of reality. Not a ‘primary’ reality which appears in different ‘modes’, but rather *reality itself* must differ, must be displaced between each medium – this would not mean we have separate, discrete realities, but rather that the ‘same’ reality must nevertheless go through an impossible, irreducible displacement with each representation – that it must be real *qua* this difference.

We hope to pursue, in the thesis, this opening that must be given in comics – that comics must bring to the surface, that it must articulate a certain difference, a certain ‘aspect’ of reality or the world, and that this ‘aspect’ must have a fundamental, ontological import. We are not arguing here that the ‘aspect’ of reality that appears in comics, that is expressed in its specificity as a medium, is a specific ‘representation’ of the world. Rather, we are arguing that the experience of ‘reality’ or world itself is produced ‘through’ a medium – and this applies both to ‘representational’ and ‘non-representational’ comics. And it does not escape our notice that our work must be an act of *translation*, that in our thesis we will be translating this ‘aspect’ of comics into writing, into the language of philosophy and the theoretical social sciences – we will attempt to suture this difference ‘within’ the real that comics expresses, and we will try to articulate it as a general ontological question, and also as a problem that is valuable in thinking the decolonial.

The ‘opening’ that we hope to pursue in comics – the ‘aspect’ or ‘difference’ of reality that is brought to the surface in it – is a *spatial problem* that is inherent to comics in its formal specificity as a medium. We derive this problem from a tradition of scholarship in comics studies that attempts to provide a strict definition of comics – especially from the work of Scott McCloud, Thierry Groensteen, and Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt, and we observe that these attempts to define comics are forced to take into account the explicitly spatial nature of comics. This is most evident in the work of Hayman and Pratt, who define comics as a ‘sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures’ and then proceed to distinguish comics from other mediums, such as film or animated shows, by qualifying this juxtaposition as a *spatial juxtaposition*.¹ That

¹ Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt, “What Are Comics?,” In *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, eds. David Goldblatt and Lee B. Brown (New Jersey: Pearson, 2005), 423.

is, in films, ‘pictures’ or frames are juxtaposed in time, they appear successively one after another, thus creating the ‘illusion’ of time, but in comics, images are juxtaposed spatially, one panel is placed side-by-side with another panel and they appear simultaneously with each other on the same surface of the comic book page – so much so that one could conceivably imagine the entirety of the comic to be laid out in one single surface. But here we may ask: What does it mean for a temporal narrative to occur in space? The panels in a comic, which represent moments in time, must also appear simultaneously – a strange functioning of time impinges upon us here, an unfolding or repetition that must occur *together*, in space. How should we conceptualize such spatiality?

Hayman and Pratt do not ask these questions. For them, what is important is that the notion of spatial juxtaposition should be able to distinguish comics from other mediums of representation, and perhaps it is enough to conceive of the spatial as the space of the comic book page. But what concerns us here is that the *spatiality* of juxtaposition is what ‘produces’ comics *as* comics – before juxtaposition, the space of comics does not exist, rather it comes into being through this act, which is itself spatial. A certain space, then – the *spatiality* of spatial juxtaposition – ‘produces’ the time and space of comics, ‘precedes’ the existence of the space of the comic book page while also being derived from it. And this phenomena is not just restricted to comics, but is a constituent feature of our ‘real’ experience of time and space. Any ‘empirical’ experience of space is necessarily temporal – that is, we must experience any space as a series of temporal experiences rather than as a ‘singular’ dimension – this is an irreducible aspect of our cognition of space, the ‘continuity’ of space is not a given fact but a consistency of the endurance of certain elements in time which are also constantly ‘lost’ in the past and ‘arriving’ from the future. Our general supposition of the nature of empirical space – that of a pre-existing being or object that is simply ‘given’ in time – is not fully guaranteed by experience. Yet, as we saw before, this ‘movement’ or ‘succession’ of time must also indicate a ‘simultaneity’, a spatial coexistence between moments without which time would not ‘pass’. This *spatial* is not reducible to empirical space, although it is in a certain way derived from it – the ‘passage’ or consistency of time is derived from the ‘continuity’ or sameness of space, but the spatial that we are attempting to conceptualize here is not the empirical space that pre-exists time but a simultaneity that makes the functioning of time possible. Not a pre-given element that is then ‘submitted’ to time and temporal ‘changes’, but rather a strange continuity that holds together the divisibility of

time *as* divisibility. In our thesis we will attempt to conceptualize this strange continuity, this *spatial* which ‘produces’ empirical time and space.

Thus, even though we derive the problem of spatality from a certain scholarship in the field of comics studies, we distinguish our project from theirs in that we differentiate between the spatial and empirical space, and also that we see this spatality as indicating a general ontological problem, and not simply a means of defining the medium of comics. The second way in which we deviate from this scholarship is in the fact that we do not attempt to provide a definition of comics. The problems related to such attempts at definition are well known – as Aaron Meskin shows, any formal definition of comics like that of Hayman and Pratt suffer from a number of problems, especially that of ahistoricity. Simply put, spatially juxtaposed graphic narratives existed much before the ‘birth’ of comics in the nineteenth century, and to define comics in this way is to allow for the inclusion of a number of anachronistic instances, such as that of the Bayeux Tapestry, and picture manuscripts from eleventh-century Mexico. Meskin proposes that we use the term ‘comics’ as a historical category that refers to an artform that developed out of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century caricature and humor magazines such as *Punch*.² Yet this historical reference runs into its own set of problems – as John Holbo demonstrates, employing the term ‘comics’ historically restricts the reference to Anglo-American and European forms of comics, and other traditions of ‘comics’ such as the Japanese *manga* are left out. And even more, it leaves out a growing number of works that exist in the margins of representational genres, such as concrete poetry and calligrams, which are being taken up by a number of experimental ‘comic’ artists such as William Craghead or Aidan Koch. Holbo prescribes that the two approaches to the use of the term ‘comics’ – the historical and the formal – should be considered complementary.³

What is important to us in this thesis, is not the formal conditions of defining comics or the historical parameters through which the reference to ‘comics’ can be restricted to a specific class of objects, but rather that it is *through* the study of comics that the problem of spatiality is brought forcefully forward. We will use the term ‘comics’ broadly, and flexibly – perhaps in the

² Aaron Meskin, “Defining Comics?,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Volume 65, Issue 4 (Fall 2007): 369-79.

³ John Holbo, “Redefining Comics,” in Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook eds., *The Art of Comics: A philosophical Approach* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 5-25.

manner of a ‘complementary approach’ that Holbo prescribes. But let us note that, for us, the specificity of ‘comics’ as a medium lies in its relation with the problem of spatiality and spatial juxtaposition. We believe that it is comics which expresses this problem most forcefully. Certainly, the problem of spatiality is not restricted to comics – it is a general feature of all experience and all other mediums of representation – but it is ‘comics’ which creates the ‘illusion’ of an empirical space populated by objects or images, where each ‘object’ – each panel – also explicitly represents a ‘moment’ in time.

Each page in comics forcefully confronts us with an ‘image’ of the simultaneous occurrence of discrete ‘moments’ of time in a way that, say writing, or cinema, does not. In novels, the ‘rules’ of decoding the text takes precedence over its appearance as a populated, static space, and in cinema, each ‘moment’ (frame) appears only by annihilating other moments, and the diegetic space that is created therein does not produce the effect of the simultaneous coexistence of these ‘moments’. And it is the proliferation of comic books, and the burgeoning scholarship on the medium, that brings to our notice the problem of spatiality which we have attempted to conceptualize in our thesis – as an ontological problem that demands conceptual work, which informs all of experience including that of other mediums of representation, and of ‘counterexamples’ such as the Bayeux Tapestry or picture manuscripts from Mexico. It is in this sense that the term ‘comics’ remains relevant for us.

This thesis is divided into two parts: the first part is titled ‘Comics and General Ontology’, and it develops the problem of spatiality in comics and attempts to pursue its strange ‘logic’ at an ontological level, it tries to find philosophical figures or concepts which may help to elaborate the stakes of this aporia, and develops these concepts in relation to comics. In the second part of this thesis, ‘Comics and the Decolonial’, we find the conceptual elaboration of this spatial aporia to be valuable in the theorization of the decolonial, especially in developing the notion of a ‘presence’ of the other – we study a three-page spread in the comic book *The River of Stories*, where a call for decolonization is made, and represented through an aporia of space and time. The two parts are further divided into two chapters each, making a total of four chapters in the thesis.

The first chapter, ‘The Problem of Spatiality in Comics’, begins with a reading of Scott McCloud’s celebrated text *Understanding Comics*, from a passage where McCloud runs into a

problem of space as soon as he tries to analyze the function of time in comics. We find that this problem emerges from McCloud's concept of 'closure' – which is the name McCloud gives to the act of 'stitching together' fragments of reality in perception into a continuous whole. For McCloud, such an act of 'closure' is necessary in the reading of comics, where the 'movement' of time between panels have to be sutured in perception – if each panel in a comic represents a moment in time, then they must contain between them a spatial 'gap', called the 'gutter', and the temporal flow of the narrative must be grasped *through* and *despite* this spatial gap between moments. It is because of this that McCloud conjectures, that in comics, *time has to be perceived spatially*.⁴ This insinuation of the spatial, which we might call a certain preeminence of the spatial in the functioning of time in comics, is taken up further by Thierry Groensteen, and Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt. As we have seen before, they attempt to employ spatiality as a characteristic that defines the nature of comics, and in the elaboration of their definition they forward two interconnected claims: first, that comics is to be defined through a *spatial juxtaposition* of images, that is, each element in a comic that represents a 'moment' in time must also appear 'simultaneously' in space; and second, that the 'repetition' of elements in comics must happen on a 'singular' spatial surface.⁵

We take this to imply that *spatial juxtaposition* must imply a *spatial repetition*, that is, the 'repetition' between moments in time – between the 'dimensions' of time that is the past, present, and the future – must also suppose a continuity, an overlap of a 'single' dimension, an impossible coexistence in the manner of the spatial which must nevertheless maintain the temporal divisibility of moments. This refers, not only to a problem of space and time within the medium of comics, but rather a general problem of spatiality that must be addressed at an ontological level. *Both* the divisibility of repetition, *and* the singularity of the spatial have to be maintained, and this strange 'logic' or 'problem' is the *condition* of experience, it constitutes and 'produces' the experience of empirical time and space as we conceive them – and any simple notion of continuity and difference, any notion of the one and many, part and whole, will not suffice to 'explain' this problem – and neither can we reduce this spatial to the idea of empirical space although we must derive the spatial from it. How should we conceive of this strange

⁴ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (HarperPerennial: 1994), 94-100.

⁵ Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Ngyuen (University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 21-22; and Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?," 423.

continuity, a continuity which we may only conceive *qua* its divisibility but which nevertheless makes the divisible intelligible *as* the divisible? How should we conceptualize the ‘logic’ of this problem, this aporia which is at the heart of all experience, all worlding of the world, which ‘constitutes’ the notions of time, space, and being as we generally understand them?

In the chapter we look towards two figures, two potential articulations which may elucidate the stakes of our problem – both taking the form of the eternal presence of a Now, or the perpetual presence of the present. The first articulation comes from McCloud’s own text, where McCloud claims that in comics, like all reality, everything takes place in the everlasting Now. For McCloud, the Now makes itself felt in comics when, in focusing on a specific element in a comic, one has to ‘take in’ the surrounding elements – the ‘present’ is also surrounded by a ‘simultaneous’ ‘past’ and ‘future’ – moments in time are simultaneous and exist in comics together, they appear at the same time.⁶ Yet in McCloud it seems that the simultaneity and divisibility of moments remain themselves divided, distinguished as if into two ‘moments’ – the ‘past’ and ‘future’ are simultaneous with the ‘present’, but they also remain *outside*, as elements that must be ‘taken in’. Further, McCloud does not describe this as an ontological problem, but rather as the basis for multiple directionality of reading that is made possible in comics. To address these issues in McCloud – in order to find a figure of the Now that addresses the problem at a general ontological level, while retaining the co-IMPLIED tension between the present and its others – we turn to *The Philosophy of Nature* by Georg W.F. Hegel, where Hegel articulates the Now as a result of the ‘dialectical’ movement between space and time, where a certain spatial ‘enveloping’ of the temporal takes place.

In *The Philosophy of Nature* Hegel describes space as that abstract universality and indifference which expresses the self-externality of Nature, and as the expression of self-externality it develops difference within itself, in the figure of the point. Yet this point – this abstract, minimum figure of difference ‘within’ space – is itself spatial, and must also dissolve into the indifferent unity of space. To develop self-externality *proper*, that is, to develop an externality from itself, space must develop a point which absolutely annihilates all other points, whose coming into being must refer to a wholly separate dimension for itself – and this, for Hegel, is the logic of time, where each individual present must only appear by annihilating the

⁶ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 104-6.

earlier, ‘past’ moment and by anticipating its own annihilation by the next, ‘future’ moment. There is no individual moment that is also not passing away, already not in the temporal unrest of becoming – the present *itself* is this passing – yet the separate dimensions of time must also imply a continuity, the eternal presence of Now that indicates a singular dimension. All of the dynamism and becoming of time, all of the passing of present moments happens in a Now, within an eternal presence which is always present. The eternity of Now is not to be equated to the individual present, but rather it is the *presence* that ‘envelops’ the unrest of time – constant becoming and dynamism is experienced *within* an eternal Now, always ‘occurring’ in the Now which persists through time.⁷

In the Hegelian Now we seem to come across a figure which ‘contains’ the tension between the divisibility of time, and the continuity of space which must be *given in* time. Yet the Hegelian dialectical figure comes into being through an ‘enveloping’ of the otherness of time – it develops the point as that Eternity which appropriates temporal unrest. In a certain way, the spatial in time, the strange continuity or overlap which must be constitutive of time, takes on the image of given space, a place *within* which the elements of time subsist as if as ‘objects’ in empirical space, no matter how dynamic, and Hegel himself writes of the Now as that point which develops itself into Place. To think of this in terms of comics, it would be to conceptualize the spatial in comics in terms of the space of the comic book page which ‘holds’ together its elements – but the problem that we are pursuing in comics is not that of this space, but the *spatial* which ‘produces’ this space. Even though this spatial is derived from space, from the fact that panels in comics, which represent ‘moments’ in time, appear simultaneously on the surface of a comic book page, this spatial is not reducible to this space. To think of the spatial as this space would be to reduce these ‘moments’ to ‘objects’ – but moments in time are not simply present together like objects, they necessarily and irreducibly refer to otherness, a divisibility and negation which must be taken into account – the task is to conceptualize a spatiality that maintains the otherness of temporal moments, not to ‘envelop’ moments of time within a space which reduces them to present objects. And to maintain the otherness of time, is to conceive of a spatial that cannot appropriate the other within itself, even if the other *within* is endlessly dynamic, endlessly becoming-other *inside* a dialectical Now. It is to pursue the ‘logic’ of a strange continuity that persists with and makes possible the divisibility of time.

⁷ Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A.V. Miller (Clarendon Press, 2004), 15, 28-40.

In the second chapter, 'Spatiality and the Trace of Difference', we attempt to follow the stakes of this 'logic' in the work of Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, the Hegelian dialectical sublation of space and time only develops another present – the Hegelian Now, in this sense, is not the synthesis of the past and the future but simply another present (as the past-retained uplifted). The distinction that Hegel posits, between the individual present and the Now as presence of the present, does not ultimately hold – the sublated Now is also developed as a 'concrete Present' or Place, it takes us to the site of another present. Derrida's own description of the 'scene of presence' differs significantly from that of Hegel: Derrida shows that for the present to be itself, for the present to be present, it *must* necessarily be differentiated from the past and the future, a gap or '*spacing*' must separate them from each other. And here it is not a matter of being otherwise – being otherwise than the present in its continuity with the past and the future – but rather that the effect of being *not otherwise*, this relation of difference, which hollows the present from within. Since the relation of difference with the past and the future is necessary for the present to be itself, this difference must be *constitutive* of the present. The present is already vitiated by the trace of the past and the future, it appears on the scene of presence only as a synthesis of marks, of traces of the other (past and present) which are maintained *as* the other.⁸

For both Hegel and Derrida, the present must be in a certain continuity with the past and the future, in that in its very being it must imply the being of others. For Hegel this means a spatial simultaneity, a coexistence of dimensions of time in the singularity of the Now, which is the sublated presence of the present, a point which 'envelops' the unrest of time – this does not cease time but rather indicates a place *within* which the becoming of time takes place. For Derrida, on the other hand, this implies the trace of the past and the future – he *maintains* the otherness of the other, formulates a co-implication which nevertheless holds on to the irreducible otherness of the past and the future. Derrida calls this economy of traces *differance*: that is, any element which appears on the scene of presence, any 'present' element, must appear only by virtue of its difference or a '*spacing*' from other elements, and that its own identity must not be fully present but constantly *deferred*. This '*temporizing*' principle of deferral means that the fulfillment of any 'desire' or 'will' must be submitted to a temporal detour, a taking into account of time which defers its fulfillment, and this also defers the appearance of any 'full' identity of

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (The Harvester Press, 1982), 13.

space and time – that is, *temporization* ‘constitutes’ space and time in a process of constant becoming, the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time.⁹

But here we may ask: what ‘becomes’ of the spatial in Derrida? On the one hand, it seems that ‘spacing’ in Derrida only refers to a gap, a difference, and the implication of this *spacing* is entirely assumed within *temporization*, within the economy of deferral which could not function without already having assumed this gap. And on the other hand, space is submitted to a deferral, a ‘becoming’ which entangles space and time – where space and time are constantly ‘becoming’ each other *within* the economy of temporization. But should this deferral of the presence of space and time be thought only in terms of becoming? To push this ‘logic’ further, can it be thought strictly on the basis of temporal deferral? Would not the ‘becoming’ of this entanglement also imply a ‘simultaneity’, a certain bringing together or contraction of moments of time in the manner of the spatial? Could we think the co-implication of space and time as a co-implication of becoming and simultaneity, a certain imagining of the Hegelian ‘return’ alongside Derridean deferral? Yet this is precisely what is forbidden by Derrida – the only ‘forbiddance’ that appears in Derrida’s description of the economy of difference. The ‘logic of delay’ – *temporization* – forbids that the trace be made into a dialectical synthesis, the kind that would gather back on itself. Difference takes us to a general economy where ‘presence’ suffers an irreducible loss, it marks the trace of an excess that cannot be recovered, made a profit of – which is what the Hegelian sublation attempts to do, it conceptualizes the other as another self, the other *of* the self becomes another self, the past becomes that which is continuous with the present, and hence everything which is surreptitiously derived from the present must return to the present. The trace, on the other hand, is a ‘past that has never been present’, not even as a modified present – it refers to the otherness of the past that is wholly other, it *maintains* this otherness.¹⁰

But how can we think of a past that has never been present? Even common sense will tell us, that for the past to be past, it must have been present – and this is not simply a naive notion. If we do conceive of a past that has never been present, we run the immediate risk of posing a ‘present’ past, a discrete past whose borders can be defined. To put it in other words: if the full sense of any element is deferred, then how do we know that the past has never been present?

⁹ Derrida, *Margins*, 7-8.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Margins*, 19-21.

Would not the absoluteness of this absolute past itself be deferred? And even more importantly, to turn deferral back on itself, how would we fully forbid the Hegelian return or even a full presence of the present? Would deferral not defer itself? Would it not defer, along with full presence, that which would defer full presence as well? Would it be possible at this point, to think of presence, not only a deferred presence but also an enveloping presence, *within* or *alongside* the logic of differance?

Here our theorization must remain tentative. We are attempting to think Hegel and Derrida together, precisely at a point where this thinking appears to be forbidden. We are attempting to think the absolute past of difference along with that of continuity. And perhaps we are approaching the ground, not of the trace but in terms of the trace, of an *indeterminate indifference* between presence and absence, where the otherness of the other is maintained, but also simultaneously annihilated. What we are posing here is not necessarily a concept but an opening – and we have derived this ontological opening from our conceptualization of comics. To think of a ‘moment’ in comics, a panel that represents this moment in time, one must also ‘take in’ the panels around it – as McCloud claims, the ‘present’ panel is always constituted by a simultaneous ‘presence’ of the ‘past’ and ‘future’ panels. And any present element in comics must be read through this trace of the other, it is constituted by its co-existence with its other – any perception of a panel must be hollowed out by the trace of the other. And yet, in its coexistence with other panels, it also refers to a simultaneity, any ‘present’ panel is *simultaneous* with the ‘presence’ of the entirety of the spatial surface of a comic – which is conceivably the entire comic, and which ‘contains’ its ‘others’ in the singular spatiality of the ‘same’. The deferral of the ‘present’ – any deferred-object or -identity – must appear, *impossibly, together* with a kind of ‘return’ of its ‘other’, an impossible ‘presencing’ of the same.

A phenomena of *transadequation* must accompany deferral. Any deferred object must be elaborated over time, that is, any X must be elaborated as an infinite series (X1, X2, X3, ...), and even though this series will never exhaust the sense of X, the series also *is* X and X must be understood as this series rather than in-itself as X. *X-itself is this elaboration over time*. And within this series, each element, like X1, must be a deferred-X, not adequate to either X or the X-series. Yet, each deferred-X must also refer to the entirety of X, otherwise it would not be a deferred-X but simply another discrete object – *X1 must be impossibly adequate to X* and also the

entire X-series. Each ‘stringing’ of the X-series must also happen ‘within’ a deferred-X, that is, the sense of the X-series must also be reconstituted each time in a ‘deferred’ moment. A certain ‘logic’ of temporality divides X, it *must* be conceived of as an X-series – X-itself has to be conceptualized *qua* this difference between deferred-Xs in an X-series – yet simultaneously, a spatial ‘logic’ overdetermines this ‘system’, each element must also be in an impossible continuity with the whole, it must ‘envelop’ its difference with others. A strange ‘logic’ of spatial continuity must co-exist with the trace of difference – the deferred-object, that which is eternally to-come, must also impossibly ‘arrive’ at the same time, not only as an other-arrivant but *itself* as this other-arrivant.

We have not presented a concrete concept for this in our thesis – rather our attempt has been to follow the strange ‘logic’ of continuity that we find in the spatial problem expressed in comics, and we have focused on the conceptual work that is required to elaborate the stakes of this ‘logic’. The tentative ‘concepts’ which we have posed – such as *spatial repetition* or *transadequation* – are meant to further this conceptual work rather than provide any ‘final’ conceptual ground. We contend that the problem of spatiality that we encounter in comics takes us to the ground of a general ontological problem – that of the general notions of space, time, and being itself – and that it gestures towards an opening, a difficulty which is perhaps not fully exhausted either by the figure of dialectical sublation or that of the trace as deferral. It provokes us to think further, to remain with its difficulty.

In the second part of our thesis (‘Comics and the Decolonial’), we attempt to relate this problem of spatiality that we find in comics, with the theoretical discourse of decoloniality. We contend that any thinking of decolonization must grapple with the impossible demand to conceptualize the ‘presence’ of other – and that perhaps the ontological spatiality that we find in comics indicates one way of imagining this impossible presence. In the third chapter, titled ‘The space/time of decoloniality and *The River of Stories*’, we attempt to pursue this intersection of comics and the decolonial through a reading of a three-page spread in the comic book, *The River of Stories*. The spread appears near the end of the comic book, and is designed as a map, a map of the valley of River Rewa – which is the site for a massive dam construction project that threatens to displace a large population of *adivasis*, the original inhabitants of the land. Embedded within the map, there appears two sets of panels, one depicting a large protest march

that took place at Manigram against the dam construction project, and the other depicting Malgu Gayan, the legendary singer of the adivasis, who according to adivasi legends, chased away beasts from the valley in the past and allowed Rewa to flow to the sea.¹¹ The two sets of panels depict discrete narratives, two ‘flows’ or ‘moments’ of time – the ‘present’ protest movement and the cosmological ‘past’ – and yet by embedding them *within* the design of the map, these ‘moments’ are also represented as ‘objects’ on the map. A spatial ‘logic’ overdetermines their temporal discreteness and dynamism, they are at once made ‘static’, but also held together – they are made to co-exist *at the same time*. Two temporalities are made simultaneous where a call for decolonization is made, the present demand for decolonization is made to co-incide with the legendary past where the land was made free – and perhaps the ontological impassage of space/time that appears here is not simply a ‘vehicle’ meant to illustrate decolonization but an impassage that illuminates the stakes of decolonization itself.

In our readings we find that this impassage cannot simply be ‘solved’ – the spread does not lend itself to any easy interpretation. Any attempt to ‘resolve’ the tension, such as reading the spread as an analogy between the past and the present, or a bearing of the past on the present, is spoiled by the spatial ‘logic’ at work in the spread – the simultaneity makes it such that any one-sided interpretation appears inadequate. We then turn to the notion of ‘re-emergence’ in Walter Mignolo’s decolonial theory – which refers to an act of re-constituting a pre-colonial past, where a decolonial act ‘delinks’ from the immediate past of Western modernity, to reach to, and enact an abrupt re-emergence of a much distant past. For Mignolo, such an act breaks radically from Western unilinear concept of time, which functions on an entity-based ontology, and is unable to articulate the non-linear nature of the world which is in flux. Entity-based ontology allows the West to pose itself as the universal, and to project the Western rhetoric of modernity without taking into account its necessary entanglement with the logic of coloniality. The task of decoloniality is to ‘delink’ from this network of modernity/coloniality – to enact a re-emergence of a much distant, pre-colonial past.¹² We could read the three-page spread as such an act of re-emergence, where a call is made to re-enact the legend of Malgu Gayan, to chase away the

¹¹ Orijit Sen, *The River of Stories*, (Kalpavriksha, 1994), 48-9.

¹² Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts Analytics Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018), 135-9; and Walter D. Mignolo, “Interview - Walter Mignolo/Part 2: Key Concepts,” Interview by Alvina Hoffmann, *E-International Relations*, January 21, 2017, <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/21/interview-walter-mignolopart-2-key-concepts>.

beasts of the dam construction project from the Rewa valley – but we quickly see that this reading does not exhaust the possibilities opened up by the spread. For a much-distant ‘past’ to appear in the ‘present’, a certain *continuity* must be supposed between the two, a necessary continuity that does not only follow the logic of ‘delinking’ or a radical break. For the past to re-emerge, a certain re-petition has to be made, a *futural movement* must accompany the movement towards the past – and this ‘double movement’ makes it such that ‘re-emergence’ is as much a movement towards the future as it is a reaching out to the past. Empirically, this becomes evident in the fact that the legend of Malgu Gayan is appropriated creatively by the present, in certain ways it is altered and reinterpreted to ‘fit’ the narrative of the Rewa valley protests.

None of the narratives – neither the cosmological ‘past’ nor the contemporary ‘present’ – can be thought to give access to a pure subjectivity ‘outside’ the Western modern, a ‘delinked’ presence of the decolonial. Yet this does not mean that they remain ‘inside’ the Western modern – inside a ‘pure’ Western modernity which itself is an impossibility – rather they appear as entangled subjectivities, they emerge as contingent, particular forms marked by the othering of the universal modern. Yet this ‘universal’ itself must appear only through this othering, through a constitutive relation of difference with its others – the universal itself must be a particular form, which has assumed the status of a universal. Conversely, any particular subjectivity, any contingent other, must also contain ‘within’ itself the power to be raised to a universal. This structure, this possibility of an impossible universality and ‘presence’, is forcefully expressed in the medium of comics, it is made possible through the work of spatiality which makes the deferred, traced present *simultaneous* with others, enacting an impossible ‘return’ of the ‘other’ to presence. And perhaps this ‘logic’ of spatiality holds relevance for the thinking of decolonization, which must try to imagine such an impossible ‘presence’ of the other.

In the fourth chapter, ‘Spatiality, Decoloniality and Decolonization’, we try to conceptualize the movement of the much-distant past through a reading of the ‘deferred-effect’ in Derrida, where a past, similarly to decolonial re-emergence, comes to affect the present – as if ‘skipping over’ any immediate past that lies behind the present.¹³ But unlike in Mignolo, the deferred-effect takes place because of the logic of the trace, a certain mark or synthesis that defers the fullness of the present and its relationship to the past – and we hold that this deferral

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2002), 65-7.

must also imply a continuity, a spatial overdetermination or simultaneity of the present with the past, which co-implies the present-itself with its other. This continuity must accompany the ‘break’ that decolonial re-emergence seeks to enact, and this tension between continuity and divisibility underlies the very attempt at ‘delinking’ in decolonial discourse. On the one hand, decoloniality seeks to remain with becoming, a non-linear flux that is capable of describing the world as entangled, as in the case of the co-implication of modernity/coloniality – yet on the other hand, it wants to enact a radical break, a clean ‘delinking’ with the modern (and the colonial) to ‘return’ to a ‘pure’ pre-colonial past. But to enact a ‘break’, is to risk a return to Western notions of entity-based ontology and universality, it is to imagine the world in terms of discreteness and not in terms of a decolonial flux or belonging. In a certain sense, it is to pose one totality against another – to be in the logic of the one and the many, one and the other one.

And this tension of the continuous and the discrete, of the spatial and the temporal, must inform any thought or act of decolonization. Any attempt at decolonization must begin with the impulse to overturn the colonizer, to oppose the colonial and its oppressive force – this is the first step that animates decolonization. Yet soon it becomes apparent that this does not ‘complete’ the process, that to pose a simple anti-colonial opposition to the colonizer is to remain within the epistemic stakes of the colonizer – to simply overturn the colonizer is to move from one power to another. To imagine a future of decolonization, there is a need to think in totally different terms altogether; the task is to imagine *an-other* paradigm, where otherness cannot simply be thought in terms of opposition. This is the task that thinkers of decolonization have tried to pursue, to imagine the world not simply populated by discrete entities or subjectivities, but to conceive of it through entanglements – and here it is no longer possible to access a ‘pure’ pre-colonial, but any imagining of the pre-colonial has to always take into account the subject-position of the modern, that our imagination of any pre-modern or indigenous is also already modern, in certain ways entangled with and ‘produced’ by Western modernity. And this holds true for modernity itself, which is not a monolith but is rather ‘produced’ by its entanglement with the ‘non-modern’, already hollowed out in its claim to totality. And yet this entanglement, imagining the world in this way, risks dissipating the charge of anti-colonial opposition – there is a need to pose a discrete opposition, a ‘presence’, but this cannot be the presence of a discrete present, the reiteration of the colonizer’s episteme. This ‘presence’ must gesture towards the presence of an other, an impossible ‘presence’ of a dissipating figure.

Perhaps the decolonial call to ‘delink’ indicates the need to think of such a presence. Here we follow a question posed by Anirban Das in pursuing the ‘logic’ of the decolonial: that is, how is politics possible in a dissipated field? The thought of ‘delinking’ forces us to consider another paradigm, to imagine an ‘alternative’ to the Western modern – if the entirety of the field is entangled and dissipated, then how can we imagine this alternative? Das conjectures that it might move us towards a logic of the two – not that of the two as two ones, but rather the two-one, which retains the difference of the two within each one.¹⁴ We follow a similar logic, but we conceive of this difference through our reading of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s notion of hegemony and the democratic invention, where each hegemonic universal – and we consider the Western modern as *the* hegemonic universal – is also necessarily a particular social formation, that any universal itself *must* also simultaneously be a concrete formation, necessarily functioning in a field of differences with other formations.¹⁵ And we hold that, each concrete formation must also necessarily be impossibly universal – it must suffer this im-possibility – that in a certain way, it must be *transadequate* to itself, spatially implied with the whole field that it finds itself in. In the same way that it must be contextualized, concretely ‘within’ the field, it must also be possible to contextualize the field ‘within’ or ‘through’ it. We argue that such a field might be thought of as a pluriversal – not the decolonial pluriversal, where each ‘universal’ is delinked or discrete – but rather an entangled field where each concrete element or subjectivity is capable of assuming the status of a universal.

And this ‘logic’ of spatiality appears forcefully in comics, it marks the formal specificity of the medium. In comics, each ‘present’ element must appear only through a relation of juxtaposition, through a relation of difference with other ‘past’ and ‘future’ elements – and this *constitutive* relation of difference marks an opening toward its others, it defers the presence of any ‘present’ element. Yet, at the same time, this ‘present’ element in comics must also be *simultaneous* with the ‘past’ and the ‘future’ – it must bring these ‘others’ *inside* in the spatiality of the ‘same’. It must maintain a logic of strange continuity and ‘presence’, an impossible ‘presence’ of a deferred-present which is effected through the ‘presence’ of its ‘other’ in the

¹⁴ Anirban Das, “Twoness and Difference: In Search of a Logic for the Decolonial,” at the lecture series “After the Colonial: Critical Responses,” The Center for Comparative Social Theory, West Bengal State University, 9 August 2024.

¹⁵ Ernesto Laclau, “The Politics of Rhetoric,” at the conference “Culture and Materiality,” University of California, Davis, 23-25 April 1998.

‘same’. The three-page spread in *The River of Stories* reinforces the strange ‘logic’ of continuity and presence. The two ‘temporalities’ – the contemporary ‘present’ and a much-distant ‘past’ – are submitted to a ‘double movement’, a re-emergence of the past which is simultaneously a movement towards the future, the past animates the present just as the present animates the past. Yet neither of these ‘movements’ explain or exhaust the aporia of space and time in the spread, the simultaneity or ‘spatial’ continuity of the two ‘temporalities’ makes it such that both ‘movements’ must refer to this ‘ground’ – this opening or problem given in the non-passage of the text. At the same time, each ‘movement’ must also imply the whole, must be made possible by the generative force of the problem or aporia that ‘grounds’ it – and this ‘ground’ is nothing by itself, it must be demonstrated, articulated each time *through* a movement, either as dynamic or static, either as the futurity of the past, the pastness of the future, and so on. It must be reconstructed contingently, understood and grasped *qua* this difference, where each difference must nevertheless refer to the whole, it must be ‘caught’ in this strange ‘logic’ of continuity.

In this thesis, we attempt to conceptualize the ‘logic’ of the spatial in this way, and we find that this spatial is powerfully brought forward by comics: for us the specificity of comics lies in the expression of this spatial ‘logic’. And we find, on the one hand, that conceptualization of this ‘logic’ of the spatial allows us to address an ontological problem – that the precarious existence of temporal entities, the deferred-presence of any identity in the world, must also imply an impossible ‘continuity’ or ‘presence’, that the ‘otherness’ of time must also be given in the ‘sameness’ of the spatial; and on the other hand, we find that this spatial ‘logic’ allowed us to conceptualize an impossible ‘presence’ of the other, not in the sense of the discrete presence of the present, but in the spatial simultaneity of the other with the self, which might allow us to imagine the ‘universal’ power of decolonizational subjectivities. Consequently, our thesis is organized, or divided, into two parts – addressing the ontological and decolonial, respectively – but let us note that both ‘halves’ are animated by a ‘problem’ or strange ‘logic’ of spatiality that we derive from the medium of comics. And even more so, that we find the specificity of comics to be given in this spatiality, that it is in comics that we find the most explicit, powerful expression of this spatiality.