

*“Transmetropolitan”.*  
*Dystopia, Hyperbole, and the Superhero*

JUSTYNA GALANT

## Introduction

The comic book series *Transmetropolitan* written by Warren Ellis, pencilled by Darick Robertson and published by DC Comics between 1997 and 2002, is an acclaimed futuristic vision of an American metropolis and its notorious journalist, Spider Jerusalem, who returns to the city after a long absence to publish a series of articles headlined “I Hate It Here”. In the symbiotic relationship, the urban space allows the man to find the Anger and the battle spirit to fight for the revelation of the constantly obscured Truth, while the city, the nurturer of his journalistic passion, uses him as a voice, a means of expression, and a medium.

Crucially, in its lack of hope for the improvement of humanity’s capacity to make informed choices, *Transmetropolitan* is a text with a strong dystopian undertone which offers a vision of a rampantly consumerist high-tech city. Essentially a hyperbole of some of today’s problems, it contains a message with a warning against the forgetfulness and the intellectual laziness that come with comfort and escapist media culture, and chastises its readers for the sins they are certain to continue committing. Importantly, the dystopian ambience of the comics is constructed through carnivalization, *sensu* Bakhtin (1968: 273), here a process which elevates the category of excess to the status of a crucial defining feature of the locus, the protagonist, and the artistic means of expression.

Characterised by the levelling of the various social classes, the degradation and violence inflicted on the mighty, general atmosphere of permissiveness, laughter, and the concentration on the excessive body, the Bakhtinian carnival compromises also the importance of the individual as she or he becomes valid only as part of the larger, reigning, temporal space of carnival. As he explains:

the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed (Bakhtin 1968: 19).

Constructed around the common trope of an urban dystopia<sup>1</sup>, ultimately and permanently established in the era of the Industrial Revolution, Ellis and Robertson's work combines an important aspect of the dystopian tradition with the medium-specific<sup>2</sup> comic book figure of a superhero bound to his city, as exemplified by the relationship of Batman and Gotham, or New York and Spider-Man, The Fantastic Four or The Avengers. Transcending the familiar superhero—metropolis correlation, *Transmetropolitan* offers a story where the superhero is not presented "from the worm's-eye view of ordinary citizens watching [him] fly and fight between skyscrapers" (Ahrens and Meteling 2010: 135), as the dystopian city itself lives up to the prefix "trans-" in its progression away from the function of a setting and towards a personified, carnivalized heroic entity.

## The Carnivalized Metropolis: Contradiction and Excess

Transmetropolis is depicted as an overbearing and oppressive creature, a sensual, bordering on sentient, being, immanently characterised by excess and greed. As Spider Jerusalem observes upon his return, "The city never allowed itself to decay or degrade. It's wildly, intensely growing. It's a loud, stinking mess" (Ellis, Robertson 2009a: 18). The primeval soup of transhumanity, "containing the dregs of every gene pool on Earth" (Ellis, Robertson 2011: 172), accommodates abundant variations of humanoid beings: Transients—people partially transformed into aliens, and Cryogenic

<sup>1</sup> The development of the motif of an urban dystopia in the history of utopian writing is discussed, for example, by Brain Stableford in *Ecology and Dystopia* (2010).

<sup>2</sup> As Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling comment, "In no other media or culture has a character like the superhero been invented, and he is always related to a city" (2010: 10).

revivals—the unwanted, future-shocked humans defrosted after lasting for centuries in a deep freeze and fully downloaded, immaterial beings. Spider Jerusalem’s comments on the city are truly Bakhtinian assertions of its vivacity: “It takes strength from its thousands of cultures. And the thousands more that grow anew each day. It isn’t perfect. It lies and cheats. It’s no utopia [...] but it’s alive. I can’t argue that” (Ellis, Robertson 2009a: 18). Well-nourished by the sheer number and the variety of people, deriving strength from the multitude of cultures they create, the city flourishes.

Crucially, the state is a democracy where presidential candidates still compete for votes, omnipresent media broadcast news and diversified opinions, and countless variations on political convictions, sexuality, race and religion openly co-exist in an ultimately permissive atmosphere. The carnivalistic excess of liberalism, the defining feature of locus, is highlighted by the omnipresence of sex pubs, “sit ‘n sin machines”, shops advertising animal traits with a “Be Yourself” slogan, the unashamedly fascist campaign of the presidential candidate Heller, and the fact that “one new religion [is] invested every hour” (Ellis, Robertson 2009a: 126).

## The Utopian within the Urban Jungle

The complex urban entity contains vestiges of idealism which Spider faithfully traces. Although the city abounds in passive individuals, is packed with diners serving cloned human meat, advertisements of porn puppet shows, it contains people capable of opposing abuses of power and idealists inspired by the immense possibilities the present offers. Notably, the utopian schemes tend to fail, sometimes spectacularly, reinforcing the image of the city as both a space for hope and bold planning, and a locus which retains its dystopian *status quo* of chaos while accommodating the impulses towards improvement.

Thus, one of missionary city projects concentrates on the preservation of ancient cultures in sealed reservations, complete with the recreation of the original setting, beliefs and living conditions. As no information is available from the outside, the sheltered civilisations are free to live a life at their own pace and solve their own problems independently. As a result, dedicated to “[p]reserving past cultures honestly” (Ellis, Robertson 2009b: 51), the management of the reservations finds itself re-establishing the Tikal culture for the fifth time, after the civilisation yet again fails to establish the association between the sacrificial offerings thrown into the river and the spread of a decimating disease.

The irony of the well-intentioned designs is pushed further in the almost forgotten story of a visionary scientist which is briefly retold in the seventh volume of the comic book series. Working persistently for years on developing the "Mathematical expressions of ethics, and love, and dignity" (Ellis, Robertson 2010: 134), the utopia eventually disappears after fire consumes the building the scientist inhabits, leaving only his office intact.

Nonetheless, idealism exists in *Transmetropolitan* also in the form of realised utopian dreams: humanity enjoys a significantly prolonged lifespan and the immunity to a number of previously lethal diseases, nano-machines—"foglets"—comprise the immortal disembodied downloaded people who now need only to entertain themselves, "work miracles and play forever in the fields of the city" (Ellis, Robertson 2009b: 18). Based on the same technology, household appliances called "makers" can create something out of "nothing", re-connecting atoms or garbage or air into desired shapes.

## The City as a Carnivalized Dystopia

Significantly, these achievements do not change the dystopian ambience of Transmetropolis. Jerusalem bleakly notices that centuries in the future people still constitute a "zero society" (Ellis, Robertson 2009c: 93) where advancements in science have not been equalled by the betterment of the human nature. As he comments, "[w]e can make magic with engines smaller than a virus. And yet, just today, twenty-four people in this city alone will die from having walked into the wrong district or community" (Ellis, Robertson 2009c: 93). Moreover, another dystopian message of the text is related to the actual decision-makers, the inhabitants of the country who have "earned" the present state of affairs "with their silence" (Ellis, Robertson 2009a: 67).

Violent and dangerous, the city is likened to a jungle ruled by alpha animals, the politicians, and state entities often described by Jerusalem as feral creatures. The serving president, notoriously nicknamed The Beast, is later replaced by a far more cynical skilful manipulator of social sentiments, The Smiler (infamously modelled on Tony Blair)—a sadistic misanthrope who cuts the constitution and masturbates into the American flag. One of the organs of the state, the civic centre, is compared to a dumb animal (Ellis, Robertson 2009a: 61), a bloodthirsty monster, sexually aroused by its power and the violence it performs—"I can see a blatantly unarmed Transient man with half his face hanging off, and there are three cops working him

over anyway. One of them is groping his own erection” (Ellis, Robertson 2009a: 65). In the same line, the state-orchestrated clash between the police and the rioting Transients—people partially transformed into aliens—is described sensually, as a bloody, loud, violent event. Observing the dramatic developments from a rooftop, Jerusalem comments: “There’s a jungle rhythm beating out below me; the sound of truncheons hammering on riot shields, police tradition when the streets get nasty” (Ellis, Robertson 2009a: 63).

Corruption and self-interest of the mighty reach impressive proportions in the dystopian ambience of *Transmetropolitan*, where the political survival instinct is aided by the technological advances. Growing human clones allows conjuring up a political candidate without a trace of a shameful past, victimbots—robots playing the roles of grateful victims—cling tearful and hopeful to the President in the wake of a disaster. In a Gordian-Knot solution, poverty-stricken areas of the city are erased to avoid addressing the problems of misery and overpopulation.

The carnival state of existence described by Mikhail Bakhtin is present, in its modified form, in the metropolis: in an ultimately permissive world of hedonism the authorities, while retaining the discourse of order and officialdom, seem to be involved in a topsy-turvy game of their own—politicians are murderers and puppet-masters, both threatening and clownish, who cannot exist outside of the all-embracing ambience of the carnival. In effect, *Transmetropolitan* depicts a reality without a clear division into the official and the carnivalised, where rule-breaking is the universal foundation and a guarantee of the universe’s permanence, producing the subversive energy which “revives and renews at the same time” (Bakhtin 1968: 11).

## Spider Jerusalem as Lord of Misrule: the Epitome and the Voice of the Metropolis

The hero—Spider Jerusalem—both epitomises the carnivalesque qualities of his metropolis and attempts to change the city by raising the awareness of its citizens, educating them in matters of justice and ethics. By evoking the association with New

Jerusalem, the protagonist's surname hints that the character may represent the utopian impulse<sup>3</sup> in the urban setting, a connection enhanced by his profession of a journalist, which he recognises as a hopeless mission to enlighten the people. Simultaneously, his methods often serve to remind the mighty of their inclusion in the permanent carnival; his attacks on politicians with a bowel disruptor serve as a reaffirmation that Spider Jerusalem is, above all, a creature of the time and place he inhabits.

As a highly successful artistic creation, the hero holds our attention throughout the work, amusing the readers with his unorthodox violent behaviour and memorable lines, and garnering respect for his devotion in the pursuit of the story. As the nemesis of the powerful corrupt, the fear-provoking challenger of the degenerate politicians and fighter for The Truth, Jerusalem has much in common with the justice-seeking superheroes who dare the system and punish the mightiest. His off-beat, two-shaped, two-coloured mirror shades and the customised black suit with a jacket worn over a bare chest constitute a trademark costume (Reynolds 1992: 26) which places him within the tradition of the image-conscious superheroes<sup>4</sup>. As a journalist, however, his influence on the shape of the world he inhabits is limited and he becomes repeatedly frustrated by the ignorant masses slow to take interest in the matters of the state.

Notably, the protagonist always needs to be considered as a collective character in conjunction with the city, a conclusion reinforced by the depiction of his ecstatic, hyper-energising reunion with the metropolis after he leaves his mountain retreat. Abandoning his vehicle on a motorway, Spider Jerusalem runs on roofs of the cars immobilised in traffic jams, thrusting his arms in the air and yelling at the city, experiencing a "home-again" (Ellis, Robertson 2009a: 27) feeling which translates into the sensation of "[f]inding yourself naked on a busy freeway [...]. With mice up your ass" (Ellis, Robertson 2009a: 17). Contact with the city comes across as an extreme and confusing multi-sensual encounter; Spider Jerusalem smells "[s]atay, and guarana... Cooking ribs, and arabica coffee... Marijuana and cherries" (Ellis, Robertson

<sup>3</sup> An in-depth explication of the anticipatory nature of human consciousness can be found in Ernst Bloch's monumental *The Principle of Hope* (1964).

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion on the significance of the superhero costume and its relation to the superhero identity see, for example, Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992), and Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (2000).

2009a: 17) and hears the “chattering and laughing and screaming [...] lots of screaming” (Ellis, Robertson 2009a: 16).

As a professional and a citizen through and through, the protagonist immerses himself in the urban space for inspiration: the city reaches his senses and provokes him. His journalism is fed by the stories he hears and investigates, yet the essential spirit of his professional experience seems to be bolstered by the sheer interaction with the city. In his work *Spider Jerusalem* purposefully alternates a bird's eye view perspective with the ground-level involvement with the street life. We see him writing while observing riots from a rooftop, looking down at the city while perched on a neon sign high above street level, gazing down from a skyscraper. At the same time, the comics contain a number of full-page panels without speech bubbles or commentaries, in which the all detailed art concentrates solely on depicting Spider in a throng of citizens, walking on pavements covered with tell-tale trash, constituting the hyper-conscious, absorbent presence, taking in the energy of the city, digesting it into a story.

His behaviour seems to reflect the two epistemic approaches to the city, as discussed by Michel de Certeau and commented on by Ole Frahm:

The walking-writing of the passersby is [...] set in opposition to the seeing-reading of the panoptic gaze. While the panoptic gaze is seeing-reading the swell of verticals as a unified surface, the spatial practice of walking transforms this order to a perforated surface. While the panoptic gaze is transparent to itself, walking is opaque to itself, nearly blind, always irritated by the entangled coexistence of heterogenous elements of the city (de Certeau 2010: 32).

The oscillation between the two modes of perception foregrounds the duality of *Spider Jerusalem's* character, who is simultaneously a larger-than-life hero and a citizen with a job at the local newspaper, an avid observer of the lives of others.

Importantly, the city's life coagulates in the spot-on journalism of *Spider Jerusalem* as its stories take the material form of words—the raw events of *Transmetropolis* are translated into columns of text with a potential to reach everyone in the city. The text is printed, sometimes displayed on omnipresent TV screens, read out loud by its recipients—the stories of the city become present in multiple forms in the urban space. In this manner, through *Spider Jerusalem*, the city is fed back to itself, its existence reaffirmed.

Although *Spider Jerusalem* occasionally comes across as a Jesus Christ suffering for the sins of humanity and working hard and hopelessly towards its salvation, he is no match for the metropolis, and his function is that of a medium which, while giving

voice to the city, emulates its characteristics. From the beginning, his qualities—the abuse of drugs, predilection to violence, obscenity and scatology, the capacity for mercy and greatness—are all reflections of the daily life of Transmetropolis. Although Spider Jerusalem may declare his weapon is a typewriter—the metaphorical mighty pen of journalism—he also carries with him a bowel disruptor, using it liberally on enemies and bodyguards barring his way to The Truth. Violent and vulgar, he searches for the reality behind politics, following the ways of the urban jungle. Appropriately, his vision of a better future offers a scatological carnivalesque twist to the apocalyptic imagery where, in a carnivalesque fashion, he sees himself multiplied into a many-bodied herald of a hierarchy-threatening new order which expresses itself in the language of rampant sexuality typical of Bakhtin's grotesque:

I want to see people like ME, rising up with hate, laying about them with fiery eyes and steaming genitalia—[...] waving their breasts and improbable penises at the secret chiefs of the world—naked glowing god-journalists brown-trousering the naughty twenty-four hours a day, a new planet Earth (Ellis, Robertson 2009d: 69).

With the subversive and the obscene as his distinguishing features, Spider Jerusalem comes across as a carnivalesque Lord of Misrule, a function which connects him with the depiction of the City as a space in a permanent state of carnival. Simultaneously, a voice of reason and a participant in the highly disordered city life, he combines the instinct for lawfulness with the spirit of permanent creative chaos of his metropolis. When, in the third volume, we see him urinating onto the street from the top of a skyscraper, the panoptic perspective is compromised by the association with an animal marking its territory—Spider, even in his superheroic mode, very much remains a creature in an urban jungle.

## The Medium of the Comics and the Question of Perception

The tensions inherent in the medium of the comics—its long-standing tradition of a superhero and its revisionist<sup>5</sup> aspirations are intrinsically a subject worth exploring, adding another interpretative layer to the text, drawing our attention to the interplay of the graphic novel medium with the features of dystopian writing.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of revisionist developments in superhero comics see, for example, Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (2002) or Terrence R. Wandtke, *The Meaning of Super-hero Comic Books* (2012).

On close reading, along the evils included and commented on in the text, one finds the seeds of many more—on the margins of the pages, sometimes half-hidden in the carefully-drawn details of the background, there are the germs of trouble-to-come which bring home the awareness that the City indeed evolves, and the future will be at least as hard as the present. Snippets of stories and episodes which remain undeveloped constitute the easily-disregarded layer of the text. We hear of a “Viking funeral for the courier boy who sold his skin as adspace” (Ellis, Robertson 2009a: 16), we may spot a warning on a supermarket trolley which threatens to “release an Ebola level virus” if not returned to the shop (Ellis, Robertson 2009d: 43), “Liquid Holy Thoughts” are available to be administered directly to the brain from a portable appliance.

Significantly, the excess-loving, manipulable, intellectually lazy “New Scum” of *Transmetropolitan* refers directly to the social environment of the comics’ readers. As Spider Jerusalem blatantly states: “Just a little reminder: when I talk about the doomed, the scum, the people who no longer give a shit, the people who look away from pain in the streets, the people who don’t care who runs the country [...] When I talk about the filth of the city [...]. I’m talking about you” (Ellis, Robertson 2011: 242).

Paradoxically, in this context, the choice of the comics as the medium and the focus on the central charismatic character both encourage the re-enactment of the civic blindness, as the readers may be inclined to scan the text for the sake of entertainment provided by the protagonist and overlook much of the background detail or implicit messages. What becomes particularly relevant is the fact that comics, as a visual medium, are particularly successful in re-enacting the experience of being exposed to the city. As Ahrens and Meteling notice, “comics and the cityscape are very much alike in terms of their semiotics and their hybrid mixing of words and pictures” (2010: 14). Eventually, the readers are faced with a choice how much background detail they discern, and whether the imposing character of Spider shifts their focus away from the problems he is investigating, from the story onto the storyteller. Consequently, taking a walk through Transmetropolis, the readers might suffer from the opacity of vision due to the amount of graphic details—an experience which mimics exposure to any real-life metropolis.

While the medium re-creates the experience of fragmentary perception which can be linked to the dystopian experience of lack of control, it is the city’s overwhelming variety—its oversaturation with detail and multitude of signs—which exclude the possibility of order and improvement. Ultimately, the city’s fundamental

characteristics determine not only its dystopian nature, but also the feeling of impotence in the face of a gargantuan spatial being which overproduces stimuli.

## Concluding Remarks: the City as a Trans-heroic Bakhtinian Dystopian Entity

More than an object of journalistic scrutiny and a scenery for Spider Jerusalem's adventures, the city can be seen as a heroic textual presence with the protagonist as its medium. Similarly to an animal, it is neither bad nor good, the feature which foregrounds the fact of its existence as such. The readers are invited to embrace its complexity wholesale, in a carnivalesque manner, as they admire and cringe at the parades of freak-humanity, the displays of bizarre creatures and rubbish—the shreds of the city life. In this respect, the city is trans-heroic, going beyond the concept of heroism associated with positive values, and offering an amalgamation of characteristics and a range of ethical stances instead. It is also trans-heroic in its departure from the concept of a hero as a human being and an affirmation of the urban space as the dominant "force of nature".

Instead of an individual constituting the superego of humanity, the readers are offered a central, focalising dystopian space which is a repository of what constitutes humanity, a composite of urban tales, beasts, cityscapes and energies. In effect, the text proposes a city as a post-human hero unfathomable, on account of its extreme diversity, existing beyond good and evil, whose undeniable attractiveness lies in its excess and vitality. The superheroic space of the future is a carnivalesque vivacious, primeval, all-inclusive locus, capable of containing both utopia and dystopia, an always-transforming dynamic space "in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future" (de Certeau 1984: 91), as well as "a universe that is constantly exploding" (1984: 91). Noticeably, the category of excess becomes an aesthetic and ideological choice which determines all crucial levels of *Transmetropolitan*; the characterisation of the protagonist, the depiction of the city, and the style of the art, resulting in a carnivalised dystopia where the hero-city, as the "ever unfinished, ever creating body" (Bakhtin 1968: 26), thrives and, evolving, indiscriminately incorporates all forms of modernity—a feature which determines its character as a dominant unmanageable entity driven by the forces of chaos and change.

## Works Cited

- Ahrens Jörn, Arno Meteling, eds. (2010), *Comics and the City. Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*, New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.
- Ahrens, Jörn, Arno Meteling (2010), 'Introduction', in: Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling (eds.), *Comics and the City. Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*, New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., pp. 1-16.
- Bakhtin Mikhail (1968), *Rebels and His World*, transl. by Hélène Iswolsky. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- de Certeau Michel (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. by Steven Rendall. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ellis, Warren, Darick Robertson (2009a), *Transmetropolitan: Back on the Street*, vol. 1, Vertigo: DC Comics.
- Ellis, Warren, Darick Robertson (2009b), *Transmetropolitan: Lust for Life*, vol. 2, Vertigo: DC Comics.
- Ellis, Warren, Darick Robertson (2009c), *Transmetropolitan: The New Scum*, vol. 4, Vertigo: DC Comics.
- Ellis, Warren, Darick Robertson (2009d), *Transmetropolitan: Lonely City*, vol. 5, Vertigo: DC Comics.
- Ellis, Warren, Darick Robertson (2010), *Transmetropolitan: Spider's Trash*, vol. 7, Vertigo: DC Comics.
- Ellis, Warren, Darick Robertson (2011), *Transmetropolitan: One More Time*, vol. 10, Vertigo: DC Comics.
- Frahm, Ole (2010), 'Every Window Tells a Story: Remarks on the Urbanity of Early Comic Strip', in: Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling (eds.), *Comics and the City. Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*, New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., pp. 32-44.
- Reynolds, Richard (1992), *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd.