

# Comics and Maps? A CartoGraphic Essay

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Over the last decade different forms of narration have been taken up as useful tools for geographic, even cartographic, research. Literary geographies have witnessed a kind of renaissance, and geographers have recognised the ‘force of representations’<sup>1</sup> in terms of their ability to affect and move, to shape and signify beyond simply representing spaces. Textual, visual, and verbo-visual representations all have the ability to activate spatial practices and stimulate new spatial imaginaries and understandings. Nowadays, there are (touristic) itineraries traced along literary plots. Even books themselves, as mobile objects, travel across space while further inviting us to visit places in person in order to interpret and experience landscapes and to construct new paths of meaning. Beyond this, narratives affect the way in which we both experience and interpret spaces, places, landscapes, and even maps, they offer possibilities for memories to emerge and for feelings to be shared. Furthermore, the page itself, be it textual or visual, has been recognised as a cartographic space in its own right, a kind of a narrative map that offers the readers spatial experiences connected to orientation, movement and embodied practices. All this is part of the ‘force’ and the cartographic potential of narratives.

In the meantime, cartographers and cartographic theorists, writers and art practitioners have been thinking about the entanglements between maps and narratives.<sup>2</sup> They have explored the capability of maps to visualise stories, by mapping the plot as well as the characters’ lifelines and trajectories, but they have also recognised the intrinsic narrative dimension of maps and their capacity to tell and unfold stories themselves. There is a cartographic, mapping potential in stories because they construct projections of spaces and landscapes and are able to reproduce and restore the three-dimensionality of places. But, in the same way, there is also a narrative dimension in maps, which could be read as stories that are available to different users/readers: users’ manifold orientation lines develop reading paths that move across space and time.

In this research scenario, not simply works of literature but also comics and graphic novels have become part of the academic discussion in many disciplines, such as anthropology, literary studies, media and urban studies, cultural geography and cartographic theory, among many others. Scholars in all these disciplines have started to engage with comics as objects of analysis, certainly stimulated by the fact that, beyond the academic boundaries, there has been a renewed interest in comics that has involved a broader readership. Thanks to the works of well-known *graphic journalists* like Joe Sacco and Marjane Satrapi among others – who are using the comic book format to produce reportage, chronicles and autobiographies and to represent historical, geopolitical, social and economic contexts – comics are now read and taken seriously by wider (and older) audiences. These readers do find, at least partially, in comics the force and ability of literary texts and other forms of narration to both represent reality and, at the same time, to shape new imaginaries that go beyond our everyday life experiences.

If comics are now taken seriously, the assonances, common features and entanglements between cartographic language and comics grammar, between comic books and maps should be taken even more seriously. Stories and maps have something in common, as has been contended by many scholars working in the field of literary cartography. Comics and

maps share something as well. For example, they both (almost always) merge visual and textual parts. Whereas toponyms and various forms of spatial information are provided through texts embedded in maps and in their legends, words are similarly included in comics' panels alongside the images. Moreover, both comics and maps are only apparently finished representations, static objects whose meaning is fixed, transparent and flat once they have been written and drawn by either the comics author or the cartographer. In truth, comic books ask the readers to be engaged and performed, not simply to be read. Moving the gaze from one panel to another, comic book readers trace reading lines in the space of the page that are similar to orientation paths, comparing the movement from one panel to another as if carrying out a proper sequence of steps. Moreover, as in maps, these sequences of steps do not move in just one, linear direction; instead, readers' gazes can move back and forth in the space of the page in order to refocus on previous panels and to find new elements for the construction of the meaning. Readers literally make sense of the story through a 'plurivectorial' reading experience, as if each page were a map.<sup>3</sup>

This cartoGraphic essay – in the form of a short story in five comic-book pages – has been inspired by the works of both academic scholars and comics authors, with neither academic nor comics sources playing a prevalent role in the composition of the story. On the contrary, they merged naturally, inspiring the ideation of the panels, the contents of both the texts and the drawings. The essay draws on years of bibliographical research in the interdisciplinary fields of literary geography and cartography and comic book geographies. It is informed by creative approaches to maps and by the post-representational and emergent theories in cartography. Comic book geographies have, indeed, demonstrated how comics can actually become an object of interest for spatial analysis and also – as I have tried to explain more thoroughly elsewhere<sup>4</sup> – for cartographic theorists.

Meanwhile, emergent cartographic theory has suggested a creative engagement with maps as objects that are always in the process of mapping, as spatial practices that unfold in the hands of different users. Through context-dependent practices, maps are performed and embodied, created and re-signified every time someone engages with them. Here is the starting point from which many theorists have begun to rethink maps, following the suggestion by Dodge, Kitchin and Perkins. And precisely here, in their seminal volume *Rethinking Maps: New Frontiers in Cartographic Theory*<sup>5</sup>, I have found the prime example that actually encouraged me – together with the works by Nick Sousanis and Juliet J. Fall<sup>6</sup> – to go on trying to *do* cartographic theory with comics instead of merely speaking of their interconnections with maps by analysing ready-made comic books. The chapter *Ce n'est pas le monde (This is Not the World)* by Krygier and Wood<sup>7</sup> has revealed the possibility of exploring the interconnections between maps and comics by merging these two verbo-visual languages: the chapter is presented in the form of a short comics story in which different maps present themselves as propositions. As the authors affirm, '*Ce n'est pas le monde* is an experiment in rethinking maps and discourse about maps: a proposition about maps as propositions and about comic books as academic discourse in the form of a comic book of propositional maps'.<sup>8</sup> Comics can be treated as academic discourse and, thus, not simply as objects of analysis but rather as a way of doing research, presenting its results, posing its questions and explaining its arguments.

As a cultural geographer interested in creative mapping practices and a comics author myself, I am particularly intrigued by the potentialities of this encounter. This is the reason 'for a carto-criticism of comics in comics form'. This is the reason for the many comics pages and academic works that I have read over the years to contribute to the same cartoGraphic essay, informing each other. Whereas the texts in this essay are mostly inspired by academic works, in the following pages, on the other hand, images and drawings are inspired by many comics and graphic novels by Italian and international authors. For example, Karasik, Mazzucchelli and Auster with their *City of Glass*<sup>9</sup> inspire the first panels, whereas the main character of *Discovering America*<sup>10</sup> inspires the last panel of Image 2. Like

the cartographer protagonist of Mazzucchelli's story, who tries to escape his failures by crushing his world map into pieces while trying to find a different way to represent the world, in the carto-graphic essay I myself try to escape the limits of traditional cartographic artefacts, in this case the globe, to experiment with the liberation from some of the restraints of cartographic theories. Traditional cartographic representations, for example the reproduction of a simplified version of the Mercator chart projection or of a three-dimensional representation of what contour lines are (as it is often used in teaching materials and handbooks), appear throughout the pages, especially in Images 3 and 4. Nevertheless, hands play a significant role in negotiating a new meaning for these cartographic projections – in fact, hands holding the map or touching the three-dimensional projection of the contour lines symbolize an attempt to place the body and its materiality at the centre and also to stress the position of the reader or map user as a subject who is as central as the map itself for the mapping process to occur. Starting from the two-dimensional map on Image 3, inspired by the travels narrated by the Italian graphic journalist Claudio Calia in his *Kurdistan. Dispacci dal fronte iracheno (Kurdistan. Dispatches from the Iraqi Front)*,<sup>11</sup> throughout the reading path comics seem to offer more than just a flat surface for the reader to explore. Therefore, in Image 5, the comics page becomes a three-dimensional map that, as an author and reader, I can myself contribute to build.

Yet, this is something you should experience yourself, by reading this short carto-graphic essay, which is nothing more than an essay on cartography in graphic (comics) form.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, Ben. 2019. "Cultural geography II: The force of representations." *Progress in Human Geography* 43: 1120-1132.

<sup>2</sup> Caquard, Sébastien, and William Cartwright. 2014. "Narrative cartography: From mapping stories to the narrative of maps and mapping." *The Cartographic Journal* 51: 101-106.

<sup>3</sup> See: Dittmer, Jason. 2010. "Comic book visualities: a methodological manifesto on geography, montage and narration." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35: 222-236. And the seminal volume on comics as a spatial grammar: Groensteen, Thierry. 2007. *The system of comics*. Univ. Press of Mississippi.

<sup>4</sup> For my previous works with a more theoretical and methodological focus on the relationship and exchange between comics and maps, see: Peterle, Giada. 2015. "Teaching Cartography with Comics: Some Examples from BeccoGiallo's Graphic Novel Series." *J-Reading-Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography* 4: 69-78; Peterle, Giada. 2017. "Comic book cartographies: a cartocentred reading of *City of Glass*, the graphic novel." *Cultural Geographies* 24: 43-68.

<sup>5</sup> Dodge, Martin, Rob Kitchin, and Chris Perkins, eds. 2011. *Rethinking maps: new frontiers in cartographic theory*. Routledge. See also: Kitchin, Rob, and Martin Dodge. 2007. "Rethinking maps." *Progress in human geography* 31: 331-344.

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<sup>6</sup> Nick Sousanis has realised his entire PhD thesis in a graphic novel form, where words and images inform each other and are inextricably linked: Sousanis, Nick. 2015. *Unflattening*. Harvard University Press, 2015. Cultural Geographer Juliet J. Fall has been working for more than a decade *on* and *with* comics as a source for doing geographical research differently, especially from a geopolitical perspective. See: Fall, Juliet Jane. 2014. "Put your body on the line: autobiographical comics, empathy and plurivocality." In: Jason Dittmer. *Comic Book Geographies*. Franz Steiner Verlag: 91-108; Fall, Juliet Jane. 2015. "Resisting through and with comics." *Environment and Planning. D, Society and Space*.

<sup>7</sup> Krygier, John, and Denis Wood. 2011. "Ce n'est pas le monde (This is not the world)." In Martin Dodge, Rob Kitchin, and Chris Perkins, eds. *Rethinking maps*. Routledge: 207-237.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>9</sup> Karasik, Paul, Mazzucchelli, David, Auster, Paul, and Spiegelman, Art. 2004. *City of glass*. Picador.

<sup>10</sup> Mazzucchelli, David. 2001. *Discovering America*. Fandango.

<sup>11</sup> Calia, Claudio. 2017. *Kurdistan. Disparci dal fronte iracheno*. BeccoGiallo. Another comic book that inspired my drawings, especially the last one is: Pantaleo, Raul, Gerardi, Marta, and Molinari, Luca. 2015. *Terre perse. Viaggio nell'Italia del dissesto e della speranza*. BeccoGiallo.



**FOR A  
CARTO-CRITICISM  
OF <sup>IN</sup> COMICS  
FORM**

**A  
CARTOGRAPHIC  
ESSAY  
BY GIADA  
PETERLE**

POST-REPRESENTATIONAL  
THEORIES IN CARTOGRAPHY SPEAK OF  
MAPS AS MAPPING PRACTICES...

BUT HOW CAN WE  
SAY THIS IN  
WORDS?



FOR THIS  
JOURNEY ACROSS  
MAPS AS PRACTICES  
WE NEED A  
DIFFERENT  
PERSPECTIVE!



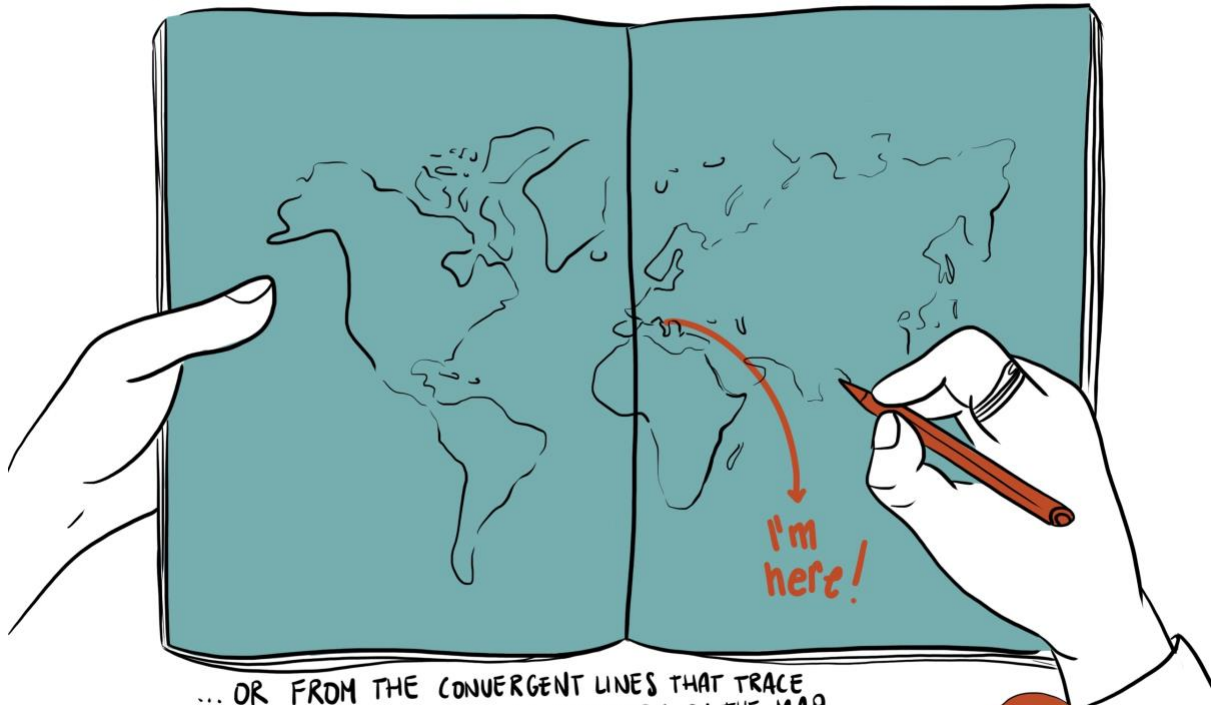
IT'S BETTER TO  
**BREAK** WITH  
THE PAST...



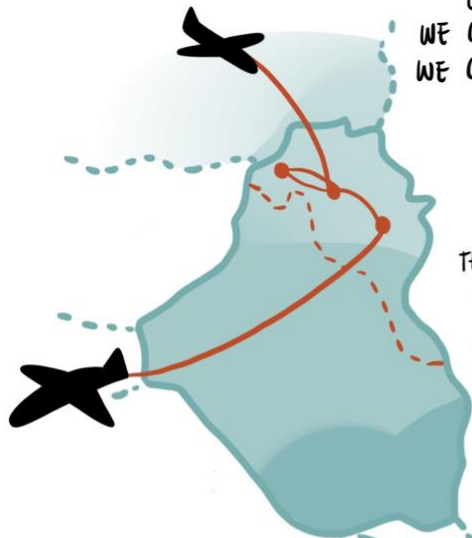
... AND THE  
OLD FORMS  
OF REPRESENTATION.

**CRASH**

WE COULD JUST START FROM OUR OWN EXPERIENCE, AND WITH OUR HANDS...



... OR FROM THE CONVERGENT LINES THAT TRACE  
OUR POSITION ON THE MAP.  
WE COULD START WITH WORDS AND IMAGES.  
WE COULD SIMPLY START FROM COMICS.



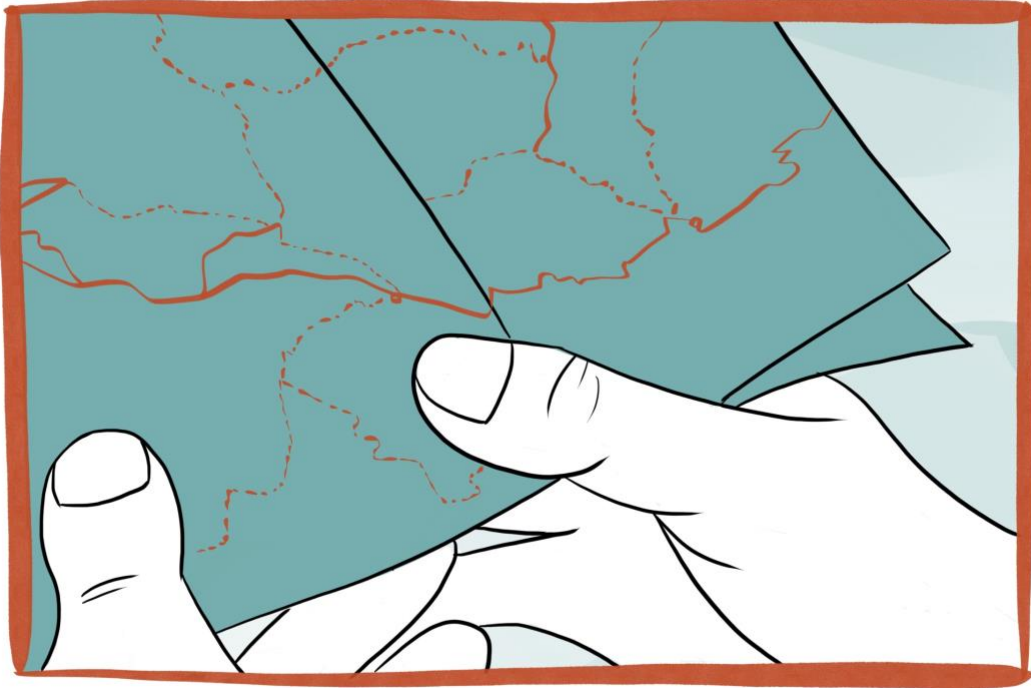
COMICS SPEAK  
THROUGH IMAGES WHAT  
WORDS DON'T SAY.  
FOR THIS REASON  
THEY ARE FULL OF MAPS!

MAPS THAT ARE JUST  
A SETTING  
FOR THE PLOT...  
... THAT TRACE  
THE JOURNEY  
OF THE PROTAGONISTS...  
... OR THAT EXPRESS  
THEIR EMOTIONS.

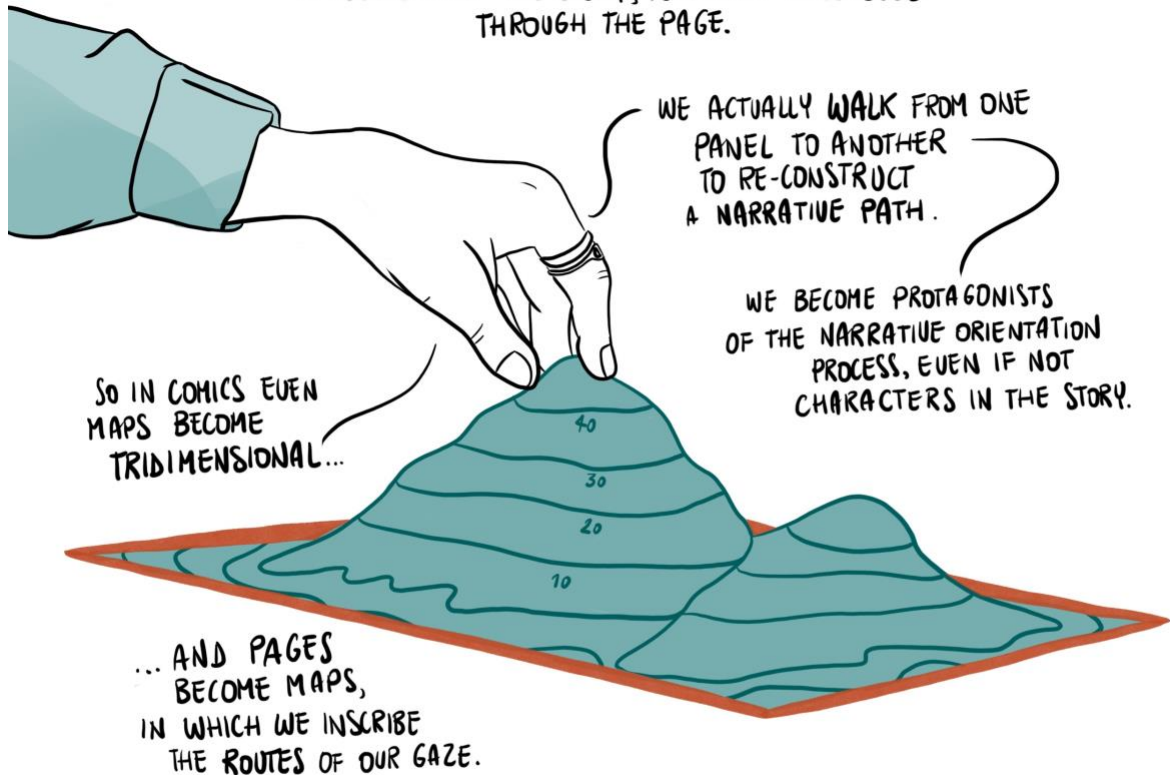
BUT THIS IS NOT THE POINT.  
LITERARY CARTOGRAPHY  
HAS ALREADY THOUGHT ABOUT ALL THIS.



WHEN READING COMICS, AS READERS WE PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE...



... LIKE WITH MAPS, WE'RE INVITED TO FILL IN THE GAPS,  
TO RECONSTRUCT THE STORY, TO ORIENT OURSELVES  
THROUGH THE PAGE.



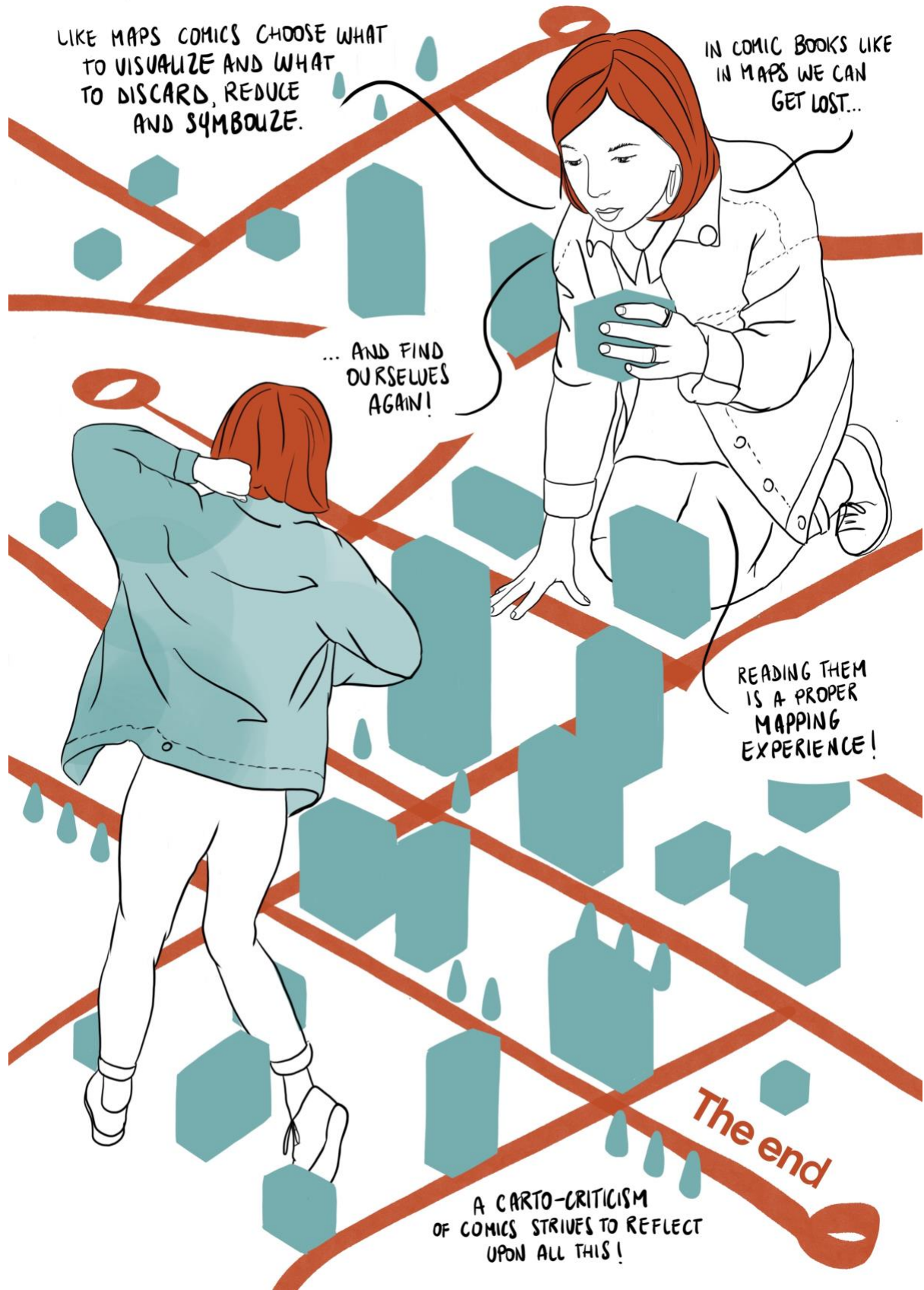
WE ACTUALLY WALK FROM ONE  
PANEL TO ANOTHER  
TO RE-CONSTRUCT  
A NARRATIVE PATH.

WE BECOME PROTAGONISTS  
OF THE NARRATIVE ORIENTATION  
PROCESS, EVEN IF NOT  
CHARACTERS IN THE STORY.

SO IN COMICS EVEN  
MAPS BECOME  
TRIDIMENSIONAL...

... AND PAGES  
BECOME MAPS,  
IN WHICH WE INSCRIBE  
THE ROUTES OF OUR GAZE.





LIKE MAPS COMICS CHOOSE WHAT TO VISUALIZE AND WHAT TO DISCARD, REDUCE AND SYMBOLIZE.

IN COMIC BOOKS LIKE IN MAPS WE CAN GET LOST...

... AND FIND OURSELVES AGAIN!

READING THEM IS A PROPER MAPPING EXPERIENCE!

The end

A CARTO-CRITICISM OF COMICS STRIVES TO REFLECT UPON ALL THIS!