Spatiotemporal modality in *Here*, by McGuire:
intermedial connections between graphic novel and architecture[1]

Modalidade espaço-temporal em Aqui*, de McGuire:*
conecções intermidiais entre graphic novels e arquitetura

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Abstract

Time is one of the most enduring themes in art, explored not as an abstract concept but through its profound effects on human existence. In Richard McGuire's graphic novel *Here* (2017), time intersects with space to emerge as a narrative force, as a narrator-character. McGuire's work defies conventional spatiotemporal logic, blending intermedial studies with perspective, under the light of architecture. The narrative unfolds through layered temporalities presented within static frames, reflecting a nonlinear storytelling approach. This visual complexity resonates with Lars Elleström's modalities (2021), highlighting how the graphic novel uniquely transmediates temporal and spatial dimensions. Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to discuss how the narrator shows itself as a camera fixed by time, while the corner of a house's living room becomes a character-witness throughout history. Besides, the essay explores the material and sensorial modalities of *Here*, considering its intermedial relations to cinematic and technological paradigms. By situating *Here* at the intersection of graphic novels, architecture, and time, we also argue that McGuire's innovative use of static space and dynamic temporality redefines narrative possibilities in sequential art.

Keywords: Intermediality – Spatiotemporal modality – Graphic novel – Architecture – Richard McGuire

Resumo

O tempo é um dos grandes temas da arte, explorado não como um conceito abstrato, mas por seus profundos efeitos na existência humana. Na *graphic novel Here* (2017), de Richard McGuire, o tempo interage com o espaço e emerge como uma força narrativa, atuando como narrador-personagem. A obra de McGuire desafia a lógica espaço-temporal convencional,

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integrando a intermidialidade e perspectiva, à luz da arquitetura. A narrativa se desenrola por meio de temporalidades sobrepostas em quadros estáticos, não lineares. Essa complexidade visual ressoa com as modalidades de Lars Elleström. Assim, o objetivo do artigo é discutir como o narrador se revela como uma câmera fixada pelo tempo, enquanto a quina de uma sala de estar se torna personagem-testemunha de uma longa história. Ao situar *Here* na interseção entre *graphic novels* e arquitetura, o uso inovador do espaço estático e da temporalidade dinâmica redefine as possibilidades narrativas na arte sequencial.

Palavras-chave: Intermedialidade – Modalidade espaço-temporal – *Graphic novel* – Arquitetura – Richard McGuire

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| Introduction

Time is one of the greatest themes of art in its interplay with human existence. In *Here*, a graphic novel by Richard McGuire (2017), time becomes a sort of narrator-character, in its intersection with space. Grounded on Lars Elleström's notion of spatiotemporal modality (2021) as one of the main narrative elements, we focus on the ways the narrator shows himself as a camera, while the corner of a house becomes a character-witness throughout history. For this purpose, we converge theories of intermediality, fiction and comics, in relation to architecture.

The cover of the graphic novel[2] features a window [Fig. 1], as if, by approaching it, the reader could peek into the interior of the house. This is the framing used on the entire graphic novel, taking into account the peculiarities of the book as a technical medium of display by positioning the corner right at the centerline of the spine, within the confines of a house in which various generations are seen living. Getting rid of the logic behind spatiotemporal relations, the musician, cinematographer and designer Richard McGuire materialized several different times within the same place, in a sort of artist book disguised as a graphic novel.

The curiously experimental narrative focalizes events from a very specific space: a corner of the living room in the house where the author grew up. But, from the perspective of architecture, this seems to be an imaginary viewpoint, authorized by the omniscience of time that works for us as the narrator of the story.

In the graphic novel *Here*, Richard McGuire decided to get rid of the logic behind spatiotemporal relations. The initial idea was published in 1980 in the second volume of *RAW* magazine, edited by Françoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman, in a minimalist comic strip composed of six pages with 36 panels in black and white alongside a chapter of *Maus*, by Spiegelman, and a work by Charles Burns and Basil Wolverton. In a transmediation of the comic strip from 1980, the 320-page colored volume was published by Hamish Hamilton (today Random House) in 2014. The author considered the chronological time of his own narrative to be the duration of his existence and his family's presence in that space, but the story spans from 500,000 BC to 22,175 AD. The framing of this corner accommodates smaller frames with snippets of both flashbacks and flashforwards, in an unusual nonlinear back-and-forth narrative. For the record, *Here* has been adapted to cinema by Eric Roth, Robert Zemeckis, and Richard McGuire himself, in a Playtone and ImageMovers production released in November 2024 in U.S.A and in January 2025 in Brazil. By taking great advantage of AI technology to manipulate actors' physical appearance throughout different phases of life, the adaptation is directed by Zemeckis, starring Tom Hanks, Robin Wright, Paul Bettany, Kelly Reilly.[3]

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[2] The cover and other images of *Here* are available on Richard McGuire's webpage, at https://www.richard-mcguire.com/new-page-4. Accessed March 27, 2023.

[3] Trailer available at IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt18272208/. Accessed April 28, 2025.

Figure 1 – eBook cover of *Aqui* [*Here*], McGuire 2017
Source: Richard McGuire Website.

Although the narrative spans millennia, the living room becomes the setting for the narrative events. *Here* was conceived shortly after the release of the Windows Operating System, so the various temporal cutouts that appear in concurrent frames resemble panels within other panels on a computer screen. Through "shifts in customs and technologies, different ways of occupying spaces emerge" (Bueno 2017, par. 6, our translation). To guide the reader through this fragmented reading, McGuire takes advantage of various illustration techniques, ranging from blurred coloring and textures crafted with pastels, watercolors, and colored pencils, to clinically uniform ones created through computer programs and photographic archives. These techniques not only identify each time period portrayed but also connect different situations within the same space. According to Alex Fitch (2017, 36), the augmentation of reality in *Here* is heightened through layers of time, revealing how a medium such as the graphic novel can transport the reader from one place to another immediately and effectively, much like film does.

Time is one of the inherent elements of fiction: it is within its horizontality that events unfold into narratives. When thinking of fictional narratives—be they literary, cinematic, graphic, or others—one is aware that some intrinsic elements need to be present: character actions occurring in a specific space and time, told by someone. According to Roy Cook (2017,

12-13), *Here* is a journey through time that paradoxically remains static in space in a first-person narrative that does not deal with people but with a place (2017, 20), and it is this *here* that is set in motion by the characters.

| **Expanding Spatiotemporal Relations**

In accordance with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's distinction between painting and poetry (1998 [originally 1766]). Lars Elleström discusses the idiosyncrasies of different media based on the notion of modality and how they share similar traits while maintaining distinctions. For Elleström, all media can be observed through four modalities: the pre-semiotic – material, spatiotemporal, sensorial–; and the semiotic. The differences and similarities between media lie in the ways they mediate each of these modalities. Roughly, a mode is any of the traits of the four modalities. First, the material modality pertains to the concrete aspect of the media's form, which is directly related to the technical media employed to display a media product. This may be, for example, a flat surface as well as an organic mode, such as the paper sheet of a printed comic book; or the mode of a flat but inorganic surface of an e-ink, LCD or LED screen of e-readers and tablets. Second, the sensorial modality encompasses the modes through which the perceiver perceives the media product by means of the five exteroceptive senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. A graphic novel, regardless of its materiality, is primarily sensed through vision. Third, the spatiotemporal modality entails that "space and time form a four-dimensional spatiotemporal entity consisting of width, height, depth, and time" (Elleström 2021, 48). This is the one which matters the most for our argument in this essay. These three pre-semiotic modalities make sense in the mediation of media products, as they help in the perception of their qualities. The fourth modality is the semiotic one, which relates to the representation of the cognitive import of media products. Elleström categorizes the modes of this modality based on Charles Sanders Peirce's sign triad: Indication, for indexical representations; Illustration, for iconic ones; and Description, for symbolic ones.

As explained by Elleström:

> [...] some media types, such as visual, verbal (symbolic) signs on a flat but static surface (such as printed texts) are conventionally decoded in a fixed sequence, which makes them second-order temporal, so to speak: sequential but not actually temporal, because the physical matter of the media product does not change in time (2021, 49).

That is, in spite of being mediated by a flat surface of paper or screen, verbal text in written form and graphic image are perceived by the same materiality of graphic novels. The

differences are neither material nor sensorial. They are likely to be spatiotemporal, and in certain aspects semiotic because graphic images are seen simultaneously, in their entirety. Meanwhile, written verbal media is perceived sequentially.

In the semiotic modality, this difference is established by the fact that the graphic image iconically represents the object, while writing is a symbolic, conventional representation of the object to which it refers. However, it is important to note that graphic novels combine words and images, therefore also presenting the Description mode. Furthermore, regarding the spatiotemporal issue, which is the modality that concerns us, Ellestrom shows that through cross-modality the modes of perception of a media product intersect based on our experiences, as well as by the way our bodies share sensations, even if perceived by different senses. This means that dialogues—the words in the speech bubbles—in comics can be perceived as temporal since, in a cross-modal mode, the perceiver *hears* their extension in time.

The diegetic space of the story is materialized through the realization of the comic artist's imagination. Graphic images not only present this materialized imagination to the reader's eyes but also serve as an expression of style. From the choice of creation technique to the color palette, the graphic image is a language with as many dialects as there are artists. Although media such as graphic novels and comics adhere to conventions, the graphic image is primarily iconic, unlike verbal language, which is truly conventionalized because of its symbolic nature. This iconicity creates infinite possibilities for representing, for example, a dog or a wall. The wall, a word that in literary narrative is sufficient to represent the place where the character leaned, in the graphic novel needs to be visually concretized, which means it needs to show its visual characteristics (which may be absent in literary narrative). In the epigraph of the novel *Em teu ventre*, José Luís Peixoto (2017) tells us that "Words are transparent bodies waiting for color."[4] In a graphic novel, its graphic images are this expected color. Their polysemy lies, therefore, in this power of signification, which appears as narrative elements are characterized iconically, in interaction with words, thus erecting empty spaces symbolically through the characteristics of such images. Additionally, the indexical element can be a matter of interpretation when the representation of reality leads to the reader's recognition.

As an example, to write *Holandeses* André Toral (2017) not only researched Brazilian historical narrative from the 17th century, but also conducted iconographic research of that

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[4] In the original: "Palavras são corpos transparentes à espera de uma cor". The title, *Em teu ventre*, can be freely translated as *In your womb*.

century's architecture, fauna, flora, and clothing. A very important detail in this representation of Maurício de Nassau's residence in Recife, Brazil —*Palácio do Friburgo*—is the perspective: seen from the sea, the inclination suggests that the landscape is being observed from a ship swaying on the waves. Thus, despite the image being static, the representation of space through the graphic image suggests movement and, consequently, the passage of time. It is this interaction that Mikhail Bakhtin names chronotope: the fundamental interconnection of temporal and spatial relationships, artistically assimilated in literature (Bakhtin 2014, 211).

Drawing on the inseparability between time and space proposed by Albert Einstein's in his Theory of Relativity,[5] Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) shows how the association between these two elements may be observed and compared across different genres as an idiosyncratic marker of narrative modes as well as the cornerstone of the dramatic foundation that is the structure of narratives:

> What is the significance of all these chronotopes? What is most obvious is their meaning for narrative. They are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narratives. (Bakhtin 250)

Bakhtin points out that different narrative genres and their subgenres (such as adventure novels, for example) have their own chronotopes. In graphic novels, the chronotope is constructed through the association between paneling and the differences or similarities / permanence between the panels.

Will Eisner demonstrates how a graphic novel panel makes Einstein's postulate a reality: "The act of framing or framing the action not only defines its perimeter but establishes the reader's position in relation to the scene and indicates the duration of the event. In fact, it 'communicates time.'" (1981, 28). Agreeing with how the reader's position—i.e. the awareness of reading a specific way of treating time—is important for meaning making, Scott McCloud (1995) discusses the operation of time in comics and graphic novels through the very language of comics, showing that they can defy the logic of the reader's gaze, especially that built by photography. Just like in a photograph, the static image simultaneously presents the actions of various characters, crystallizing them in space-time, but both media are different.

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[5] Einstein's theory, published in 1905 and expanded in 1915, revolutionised physics by demonstrating that space and time are not separate entities but are interwoven in what is known as space-time.

In the sequential art of comics and graphic novels, the fact that the cartoonist chooses to represent different actions in time within the same space is also significant inasmuch as it draws attention to time itself as a semantic element. In the relationship between each panel, and even in their size and association with the gutters, time can be relativized, by being accelerated, decelerated, compressed, stretched. However, it should be noted that the verbal language—in the speech bubbles—is a way to give the dimension of time passing. Scott McCloud (1995) points out that sound contributes to setting the scene in motion because it unfolds over time (diachronically), unlike visual elements that are perceived instantaneously (synchronously). That is, in comics, sound is represented through sequential devices such as onomatopoeia or speech balloons, which guide the reader through a temporal experience, mediated by the rhythm of panels and page layout.

| Architectural (fixed) perspective in *Here*

The relationship between space and time is a vastly investigated matter in the field of Architecture. Some scholars have even divided the Arts based on this very interaction. We have realized that in *Here* graphic arts may become representative of time. It is as if time is telling the story, since it visually sets the narration in motion through panels from different eras shown through the windows inspired by the logo of the trademark Windows**.** The corner of the living room, always in the same static place, may be understood as a character of the story, as suggested by the title *Here*. As a spatial element, this corner is featured in each panel, crystallized in a photographic instant depicted from the same perspective, like a still and mute witnessing character, the vibrancy of the human element revealing, in a cross-modal way, movement and change, which are temporal elements that also have counterparts in viewpoints.

In architecture, communication and human experience do not occur virtually, they happen effectively within a materialized space. Unlike cultural expressions such as graphic arts, music, and cinema, which can be preserved through technical, digital, or virtual reproduction and even through constant mediation by new storage technologies, an architectural environment never reaches the status of a final product because its materiality is permanently vulnerable to climatic and socio-economic variations. In *Here*, this materiality is always connected to human movement [Fig. 2].

Figure 2 – The architectural process materializes in *Here* as simultaneous human space in the 1907 panel. Source: McGuire 2017.

Architect Steen Rasmussen (1957) argues that the relationship between space and time is one of the greatest challenges faced in the development of an architectural project. Intended to endure into a distant future, an architectural site should preferably be ahead of its time when designed, so that it can keep pace with changes triggered by the environment and changes in its usage while the construction is standing. After all, one of the proofs of good architecture is being able to maintain the use of space over the years just as the architect planned it. However, for Rasmussen, the building must also be adaptable enough to accommodate unforeseen circumstances, much like what happens in the corner space in *Here*, where adaptations to the house were necessary in view of transformations, such as installing electrical outlets to accommodate the television and other electronic devices.

Lars Elleström (2021) proposed his model for understanding media as a starting point of research, i.e., it is an irreducible model to which elements and categories may be added. Thus, the experience of the inhabitants in the spatiotemporal modality of the living room corner requires that our analysis includes notions of perspective and embodiment. In a single graphic image, the simultaneity of different times also multiplies into different perspectives, as if time were telling the story of the corner, the protagonist, so to speak. In this matter, it is possible to understand that time in *Here* is not only represented but actively organizes the sequence and meaning of events.

Rudolph Arnheim (1988) explains that the architectural experience consists of a timeless existence of the building in space and compares the experience of entering, traversing, and using a building to the cinematic tracking shot. In *Here* the perspective is analogous to that of a camera stationary at an imaginary window, depicted on the cover of the book, whence it offers several perspectives and suggests that each panel was recorded by time, the narrator, in its different moments.

It is worth noting here that the term "perspective" carries different connotations in architecture, visual arts, and narratology. James Elkins explains that "perspective directs our eyes and orders our thoughts […] it seems to control not only what I see, but how I see and how I describe what I see" (1994, 212). This argument in favor of an individualized point of view in the visual arts resonates with the notion of focalization developed by narratology, but is deconstructed in *Here*. According to Monica Fludernik (2014), from a narratological position, the focalization of passages fills gaps regarding the function within the plot of narrative works, in this case, a verbal-visual one. This perspective game that triggers multiple senses allows readers to simultaneously glimpse into the various generations of inhabitants of the corner [Fig. 3].
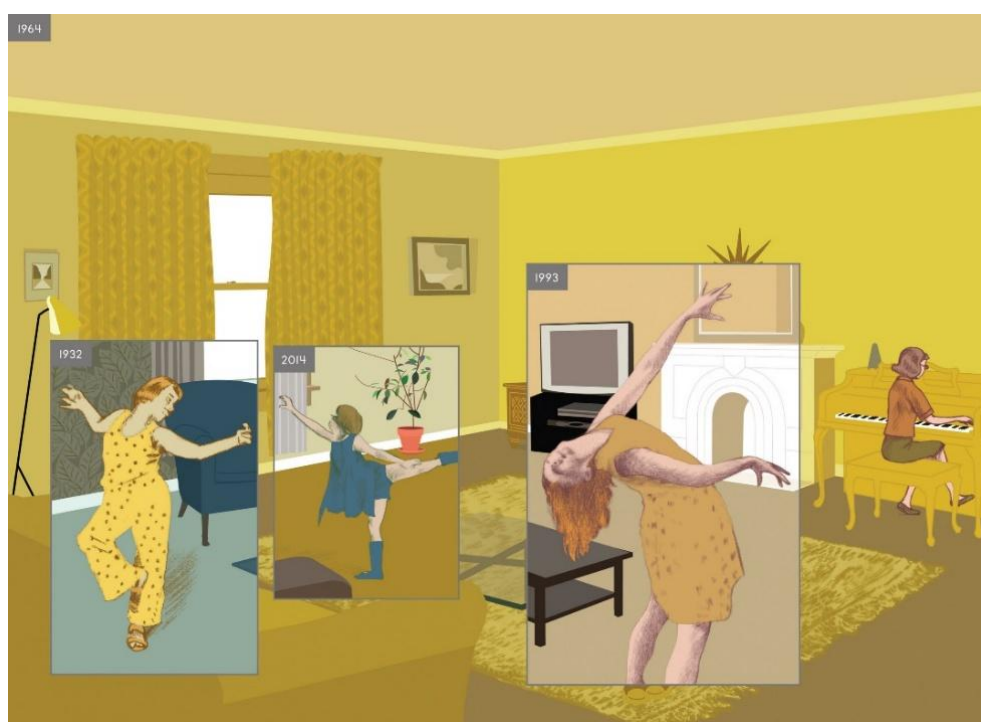

Figure 3 – Four generations simultaneously represented in the same space in the 1964 panel.
Source: McGuire 2017

One may consider this simultaneous presence of multiple generations of characters as departing from the notion of embodiment proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), who

includes the body, as well as the mind, in acts of perception, experience, and representation of the world. Since consciousness does not solely arise from the mind, embodiment serves to guarantee the central role played by the body in experiencing the world. Body and mind have an inextricable connection, and thus cannot be dissociated. Unlike the duality proposed by Cartesian thought, in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology subject and object form a single unit and, therefore, should be treated as two facets of the same entity (Vieira 2020, 67-68). This notion supports the premise as advanced by architect Steen Rasmussen that "it is not enough to see architecture; you must experience it [...] you must dwell in the rooms, feel how they close about you, observe how you are naturally led from one to the other" (1957, 33). Thus, the notion of embodiment allows us to perceive the effect of the inhabitants' bodies occupying the space of the corner of the house. At this point, we hope it is clear that the chosen framing to narrate *Here* is physically experienced by its occupants through generations, meaning it is their vivid occupation, even without the details of each one's story, that makes the narrative about a corner of a living room into a story of humankind.

There are many references to the passage of time and loss in the narrative, culminating in the scene when a character finds a book she was searching at the beginning of McGuire's work. The narrative, in its passage through various millennia, also addresses life on Earth as a theme allowing the reader to imagine the possibility of a final catastrophe. Some indexical signs place the house in reference to the space-time of the extradiegetic reality, such as Benjamin Franklin appearing as one of the characters, a neighbor to the house. Through details of the story and author's interviews, the actual location of the house in the United States is not difficult to establish. This does not change its fictional significance, which lies in the invention of lives crossing the same space that we, readers, inhabit. For instance, some pages transmediate works by the Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer to the graphic language: *Woman Reading a Letter* (1663-1665) (McGuire 2017, loc. 23 of 152) and *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (c.1657-59) (McGuire 2017, loc. 22 of 152). This reference to the extra-diegetic reality, somehow, reminds the reader of the permanence of the arts over time.

Vermeer (1632-1675) is known for his pioneering use of perspectival techniques and manipulation of light, often depicted through a window located at a corner of his studio. His trademark scenes feature static depictions of women engaged in domestic activities. Therefore, it does not seem coincidental that the paintings of the young ladies reading letters, both framed within the very corner of the room, are transmediated into the graphic language and aligned with the central gutter of the printed book, as if they were windows to the timelessness of the

arts. Through an interplay between the act of reading correspondence and the concept of perspective —depicted on the canvases in visual arts; represented by the house in architecture; and contained in the verbal-visual storytelling as narrative focalization— McGuire seems to convey a message to the reader.

In addition to understanding the four modalities of transferring characteristics between media, it is important to point, in our argument, to the relevance of the contextual and operational qualifying aspects of architecture within the graphic novel. From a corner of the house, *Here* masterfully reveals the origin, delimitation, and use of that space over time. Historical, cultural, and social circumstances manifest themselves in the interplay of panels within panels to frame temporal excerpts simultaneously. The operational qualifying aspects can be observed both through the aesthetic choices of illustration techniques to represent each historical period intra-diegetically, and through the choices made by the occupants of the building, which are also manifestations of cultural transformations. Architectural spaces constitute a very specific type of communication that acts as framing premises and priming invitations for (face to face) communicative interaction between people co-present in space (Schumacher 2011, 1).
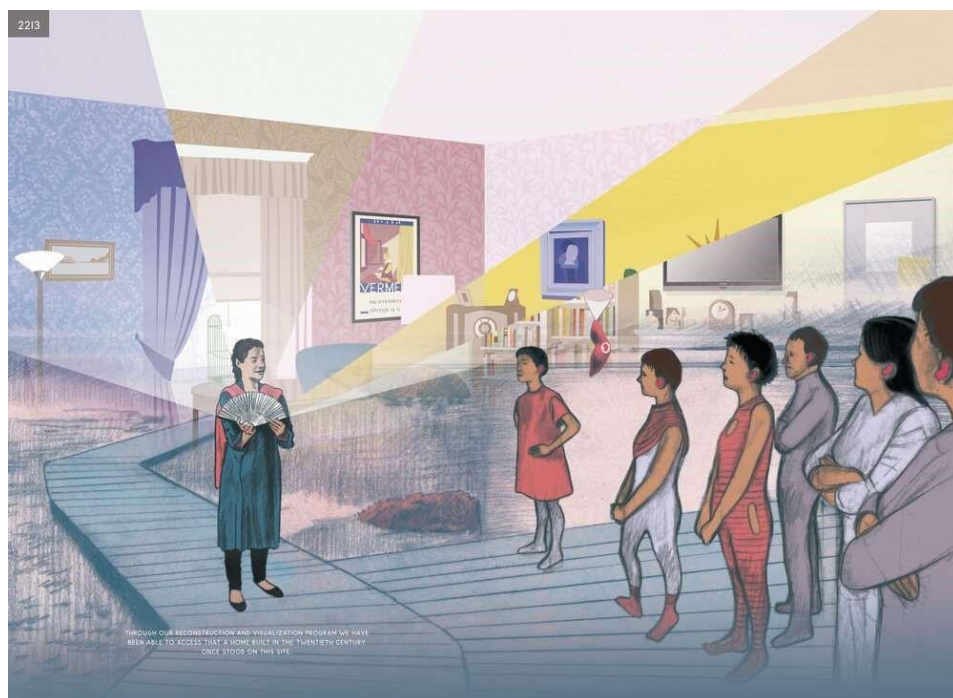

Figure 4 – The radiant streaks splitting the architectural space telling its story in the 2213 panel. Source: McGuire 2017

The spatiotemporal mode is modified as the windows are replaced by the array of images, as if a future technology allowed the character to bring, through the fan, images from different epochs, all seemingly part of the same diegesis [Fig. 4]. This temporal conjunction, which evokes an immersive experience, insists on the permanence of art in a dialogue among different epochs.

In sum, the characters are so numerous, appearing only in flashes, that they do not become complex, and the micro-subplots can be understood as mere photographs in the story of this spatiotemporal protagonist, the corner of the living room. At the same time, this place reveals itself as a human space(time), albeit within the premise of an architecture of the imagination. Separated by chronological time throughout human history, these characters are brought together by what they have in common: the corner of the living room glimpsed through the window, as if composing a unique embodiment that, in the end, consists of human existence itself.

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