

2001

BATMAN VS. GOTHAM CITY

A squatter's eye view of the dystropolis

"I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's"
(William Blake)

The publication of *Speechless* (2001), an intriguing anthology of the work of comic-strip artists and illustrator Peter Kuper, reaffirms that the comic strip is an ideal medium for disclosing the world-view of the squatter. The Dutch squatting movement spawned some celebrated strip cartoons like *Red Rat* and *Tuinstoelen Pietje*, while international squatterdom eagerly devoured *World War 3 Illustrated*, a magazine founded in 1979 by the activists Peter Kuper and Seth Tobocman. Kuper, who also lectures at the School of Visual Arts in New York, has emerged as one of today's most interesting comic strip artists and his work currently adorns the pages of news magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker* and *The Village Voice*. His oeuvre also includes the original comics *Bleeding Heart* (1991), *Kafka: Give It Up* (1993), *Stripped* (1995), *Eye Of The Beholder* (1996) and *Urban Encounters* (1999). The legendary magazine *World War 3 Illustrated* poured scorn on US domestic and foreign policy, was scathing about the ill-fated incursion into Iran, poked fun at Ronald Reagan and opposed unbridled capitalism with its globally advancing tentacles. That the magazine became a mouthpiece of the squatting movement was unexpected. Kupers was interviewed at length in *The Comic Journal* in 1992. The idea of *WW3*, Kupers explained, was to bear witness to "what's going on that is often not recorded in any mainstream form, and that it is hopefully exposing information to a wider audience. (...) For example, we got a letter from Australia that said that the very same squatters' movement was going on there, very similar to the lower East Side. We got a letter from Hamburg where there was a park eviction going on that was just about exactly like what happened to Tompkins Square Park. There was a piece about squatters in Kenya. One intended hope on our part is that it creates somewhat of a solidarity through comparisons of situations." The establishment of *World War 3 Illustrated* was motivated by the lack of opportunities to publish political cartoons and commentaries in the existing media. Eventually, distribution of *World War 3 Illustrated* was taken over by Ruth Schwartz, who made her name as a distributor of records and fanzines for punk groups such as The Dead Kennedys.

Comics often function as a channel for dissident views in an information-and-entertainment society which is dominated by the corporate media. Comics, zines and fanzines still make up a motley media landscape addressing a widely diverse audience. Like pirate radio stations and squatters' zines, comics are an ideal medium for nonconformist groups to air their doubts about a political and economic system - a system which Francis Fukuyama once claimed made all alternatives superfluous. A good comic has an air of distrust and paranoia about it, and conspiracy theories form the basis for countless thrilling scenarios. "There's nothing healthier than a little paranoia", says a resident of *Dark City* in the similarly titled comic film by Alex Proyas (1998).

The Amsterdam squatters' magazine *Ravage* issued a plump special number

in 1998 reviewing the close relations between comics, squatting and political activism. It has articles about the influence of *Anarchy Comics*, *World War 3 Illustrated*, *Transmetropolitan*, *Rat Bastard* and *Channel Zero* on the culture of squatting and activism. There are also interviews with representative Dutch comic artists such as Barbara Stok (*Barbaraal*), Wout Lipper (*Nixnut*) and JoostJoost (*Super-anti-imp*). According to the magazine's contributor Marc Hurkmans, *World War 3 Illustrated* always addressed itself to "people who were continually getting screwed over, then getting back on their feet by their own exertions or with the help of others".

Following *World War 3 Illustrated*, Kuper shifted his interest from political critique to more personal commentaries; but his hallmark was still an intense emotional involvement. He travelled through every continent, noted his experiences, and maintained a certain pessimism and suspicion towards the exploitative, exclusive mechanisms of global capitalism in which the hand of America was so clearly visible. "Kuper's main message," wrote Gahan Wilson in his introduction to *Speechless*, is "... that we should open our eyes and keep alert since this is a very dangerous world."

Long after the heyday of *World War 3 Illustrated*, I came into contact with Kuper's work once again. In the winter of 1996, I stayed in a squat in the London borough of Hackney as the guest of a friend, the DJ Zamorra, for a couple of weeks. The district enjoyed a thriving round-the-clock economy, and my biological rhythms were in a mess because the floor of my bedroom would shake with Drum&Bass at all hours. I gradually fell into a pattern in which I could work most efficiently late at night. The squat housed a huge collection of comics, in which I was free to indulge myself for the whole fortnight. I devoured *The Preacher*, *The Dreaming*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, *The System*, *Gangland*, *The Jungle*, *Sin City* and countless other comics, in which conspiracies, paranoid fantasies and vice-ridden cities lambasted the alleged merits of civilization and enlightenment.

Among the most impressive of these was Peter Kuper's three-volume comic *The System* (DC Comics 1996). This filmic, textless and almost psychedelic *dérive* through night-time New York gave an astonishing feeling of recognition. Kuper does not present a picture of New York like the image shamelessly reiterated in tourist brochures and funky rock videos, but interprets the city at the level of its everyday user - from within, in terms of individual and collective experiences. New York is here a living, organic, but not particularly happy entity - an urban conspiracy of corrupt police officers, shady businessmen, screwball politicians, ruthless drug dealers and traumatized serial killers. They are jointly responsible for the grim everyday environment, where citizens hastily and neurotically squirm through a treacherous jungle.

Reading *The System* is moreover a cross-medium experience: the comic is 'speechless' but you can hear the local Drum&Bass of PishPosh and Brooklyn Jungle Sound System as a multi-layered soundtrack, as a blanket spreading over the noise of the street. You come across locations that could be good venues for clandestine raves, and good points for urban explorers to start their *dérives*. Then suddenly you find yourself in an acid trip: the gaping mouth of a screaming woman morphs into the sterile architecture of a subway entrance. A skateboard rider

accompanies you in a dizzying plunge through Manhattan, and as the architectural elements flash by you hardly even have time to notice two stressed-out cops lamming into a black drugs dealer in an alley. Kuper sends out a narrative rhizome from which shreds of stories, images and experiences sprout at intervals, forming a permanent remix. By the time you have read about three issues, the wind is knocked out of you. You toss the comic away and dream of revisiting the Big Apple.

Kuper's cartography of New York seems closely related to the theory of the cut-up and the *dérive*. "I didn't have to write to cook up *The System*. Instead, I just took stories I'd read in the newspapers and put them in a pot together. One tablespoon of missing woman, a dash of police corruption, a cup of the bombing of the World Trade Centre; all spiced up with some insider trading. Mix in a broth of corporate takeovers and political scandals, then boil together over a high flame for six months with some secret ingredients of my first hand experiences: the woman I saw singing in the subway, the homeless guys I've seen on a daily basis, a crack dealer on my block, and a strip club I once visited."

The System portrays New York as a vast conspiracy against humanity - perhaps this is the main feature of the squatter's-eye view of the world. Back in 1988, New York squatters were the first to raise the alarm about the 'sell-out' of the metropolis. Gentrification, sharpened law enforcement, an ill-disciplined police force with racist tendencies and the eviction of the homeless from Manhattan were all processes which, together with a dwindling supply of affordable homes and lofts, were transforming New York into a universal trans-touristic paradise which is now almost indistinguishable from other uniform A-class cities like London, Paris or Amsterdam. Everywhere, we find the same gleaming office skyscrapers, the same silver-lined commercial rat-runs, and the same uniform museums, which purvey the same 'glocal' goods and services to the willing consumer. *The System* dispenses with the myth of 'delirious New York' (to use the phrase of architect-author Rem Koolhaas). The squatters' riots of Tompkins Square Park (1988) spawned outstanding comic magazines such as *The Shadow* and compilations like *Squatter Comics*, in which super-squatters like Squat Man and Sledgehammer Sue provided more insight into the vicissitudes and frustrations of the New York squatting movement.

The terms 'squatter' and 'squatting' have a respectable tradition behind them. Milestones were the illegal occupation of farmland belonging to large landowners, the clandestine construction of favellas and the appropriation of empty homes. The Dutch artist and situationist Constant unintentionally gave a good definition of the phenomenon when he set down his theory of a 'New Babylon', some forty years ago: the misappropriation of meaning and of use. Every form of squatting presupposes some denial or infringement of copyrights or property entitlements. This adventurous illegality leads to a mode of existence in which the meaning and the use of landed property, urbanism and architecture are 'misappropriated' and then redefined.

But squatting presupposes not only existential motives or sheer adventurism, but also a theoretical justification. The misappropriation of meaning and use always takes place within a web of conspiracy theories which are brought forward to legitimise the new meanings and the new outlook on entitlement to use. The squatters of revolutionary Spain and South America fought against a conspiracy of

wealthy landowners, the military elite and Fascism. The squatters of Amsterdam and Berlin organized themselves to battle the conniving of slum landlords, property speculators and developers. Constant's New Babylon was similarly a response to the complot of Capital and Architecture which was responsible for 'frozen time', a matrix of deadly dull, functionalist, repressive cities packaged in advertising, entertainment and amusement. The outcome was a Society of the Spectacle, a global amusement park in which emotion, mood, commitment and creativity serve merely as consumer goods.

Squatters see the city as a conspiracy. It is a sombre view of the modern metropolis which was given a visual expression as long ago as 1926 in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*, and which has rooted itself deeply in the collective conscious. Like the squatters, a considerable part of the 20th century avant-garde drew inspiration from the notion of the city as a conspiracy. Artists and authors ranging from Francis Picabia to László Moholy-Nagy, from Guy Debord to Constant, and from Ivan Chitchevlov to Alexander Trocchi, recapitulated the theme that cities must be liberated from their straitjacket of planning, functionalism, bureaucracy, labour and commercialism. 'Frozen time' had to be made 'fluid'. A whole vocabulary emerged in which practices like 'dérive', 'détournement' and 'psycho-geography' were required to undermine the complot of the city.

However revolutionary or paranoid these avant-garde ideas may seem, popular culture has developed its own version of the conspiratorial urbs - Gotham City. The home town of Batman and Robin is a shadow counterpart of New York. In contrast to the much-vaunted splendour and elegance of Manhattan, Gotham city houses a slave society dominated by a grim, ruthless capitalism. The inhabitants are caught up in a repressive web of bureaucracy, corruption, crime and terrorism. The autonomous, telegenic picture of New York which is burned into the collective retina by CNN and MTV is here replaced by the horrifying prospect of a drab metropolis whose grotesque architecture is an unfeeling backdrop to the miserable day-to-day life of its citizens. Gotham city is the Society of the Spectacle of Guy Debord, the Babylon of the Rastafari, the System of Peter Kuper and the anarcho-punks, and the Empire of Toni Negri and Michael Hardt. It is an urban node in a global political and economic system that thrives on extortion, exclusion, racism and terrorism. Gotham City is the archetype by which squatters justify their existence. The black squatters' flag, with its symbol of a circle cleft by a zigzag lightning flash, represents the sundering of the conspiracy we call the city. "The city belongs to us!"

In Gotham City, the Bat Signal functions like a squatters' flag. Batman fights a perverse complot of multinational companies, politicians and terrorists. He is a super-squatter. The conspiracy that grips the dark, depressing metropolis not only gives the caped crusader a license to treat the law with disdain, but it guarantees him an adventure-filled lifestyle. Batman is not only an activist but an urban explorer, who shows us that it is quite possible to live in dim grottos, underground sewer systems and abandoned zoos; that swooping over the roofs on a network of steel cables or on a supersonic skateboard is more exciting than waiting for the bus; that skyscrapers are there to be climbed; and that a labyrinth of narrow streets is ideal for aimless wanderings.

This dark but intriguing view of the city, which elevates the flouting of

prescriptions and prohibitions into a virtue, brings us closer to the archetype of the squatter. Dozens of artists since the Second World War have persistently sought a definitive emblem for the conspiratorial city. In *The System*, Kuper created one of the most fascinating comics since the 1990s; but we can also read it as an attempt to make the public at large aware of the antitheses between the American Dream and the Society of the Spectacle. The context within which *The System* was designed confirms this critical standpoint.

Lou Stathis, the publisher of DC Comics, invited Kuper to design a comic for DC in 1996. Kuper eagerly accepted and was determined to create a comic that would do justice to DC's illustrious past. From its early days, at a time when the entertainment industry was one of the few areas where Jewish immigrants could make their mark, DC had employed many Jewish artists, often refugees from Europe who sought a medium to ventilate their revulsion for Nazism and terrorism. Besides the famous artist Will Eisner (*The Spirit*) they included Joel Schuster and Jerry Siegel, who designed the first issue of *Superman* in 1938. The superhero genre, which DC Comics and later Marvel Comics (*Spiderman*, *The Hulk*, *The X-Men*) were to make world famous, was a product of the Jewish protest against a form of terrorism with global ambitions. Superman is pent-up rage become flesh, sublimated into a popular hero who protects the defenceless public against terrorism, racism, organized crime and political hypocrisy. The superhero had cultural origins, Pulitzer Prizewinner Michael Chabon recently observed, for there is something in Jewish culture that gave rise to Superman: the old myth of the Golem, the artificial being fashioned from clay by Rabbi Löwi in sixteenth-century Prague to punish the enemies of the Jews.

Intriguing though the background to Superman may be, the adventures of this superhero have something pathetic about them. Superman is in daily life the insecure, not particularly talented newspaper reporter Clark Kent - a soft and hopelessly shy good guy whose chief aim in life is to win the heart of the prettiest girl in the office, Lois Lane. At the first hint of catastrophe or menace, however, his superpowers materialize. He instantly sheds his loser role, slips into a tight-fitting blue leotard with a red cape, and deploys his superhuman powers to root out evil and restore law and order.

The winsome personage of Superman was however soon passed on the inside bend by a much less approachable and exceptionally sinister rival who was to earn the honorific synonym 'The Dark Knight': Batman. The first instalment of this creation by Bob Kane appeared in 1938 in the famous *Detective Comics*, in which the callous crime-fighters proved scarcely more humane or endearing than the vile rabble that crawled the underworld. The image of the modern metropolis was here moreover a grim, repressive, frightening and pessimistic one. Batman betrays not a trace of the naivety of the Superman character. In day-to-day existence, he is a reasonably wealthy businessman, Bruce Wayne, who was witness when a small boy to the gruesome murder of his parents. Embittered and vengeful, he determines to exact retribution on the killers. Wayne is not a particularly likeable character; he has few friends or relatives, is devoid of romantic entanglements, and is tortured daily by traumatic reminiscences of a childhood so brutally cut short. Like Superman, he springs to the aid of his city whenever terrorism threatens to disrupt everyday life; but unlike Superman, Batman draws pleasure from the moments when he can act with

ostensibly justified violence against the world that has stolen his happiness.

The need for anarchist stereotypes like Batman vanished in the suffocating mist of the Cold War, and the superhuman being dwindled into a paltry kids' hero. The decline culminated in the film *Batman* (Leslie Martinson, 1966) and the charming if moralistic TV series of the same name in which Adam West and Burt Ward filled the leading roles of Batman and his youthful sidekick Robin. Batman became a good-natured city detective in a rather too tight-fitting costume, and was celebrated in gay circles as a cult figure.

In 1986, DC Comics struck back. The publishers commissioned the talented draughtsman, Frank Miller, to devise a new series of Batman adventures. Miller had been addicted to comics since childhood but found he had to kick the habit before he could start drawing: "Henceforth I wanted to hang onto the real world." Miller's real world proved however to be very similar indeed to that of the comics he had devoured in his youth, and his most famous product *Sin City* offers an uncamouflaged critique of the modern metropolis. Crime, terrorism and corruption are more normal in his city than are love, respect or integrity. *The Dark Knight Returns*, which he drew for DC Comics, is similarly a masterpiece of pessimism and paranoia which is still unsurpassed in this genre. Miller revived the 'forgotten', sinister Batman and the murky Gotham City of former times. Batman seemed indeed more tortured and embittered than ever, while Gotham City was far more daunting and intimidating than in the days of *Detective Comics*. Never before had a superhero so closely resembled the terrorists who opposed him. "Sickos don't scare me," says Catwoman in the 1992 film *Batman Returns*, which was based on Frank Miller's world, "at least they're committed." In the same film, Batman fights The Penguin, a monstrously misshapen terrorist who, like Batman, grew up without parents. As they duel, The Penguin whispers sweetly in Batman's ear, "You're jealous of me, 'cos I'm a genuine freak and you have to wear a mask."

Batman, wrote Bob Callahan in *Father Of Urban Darkness* (1998), was not only the most sinister, obscure antihero in the history of the comic book but also "our own urban terrorist", the conscience of Late Capitalist society. Batman made us aware of the downside of the American Dream, in which the chief ingredients are hypocrisy, political corruption, organized crime and global terrorism. Frank Miller's Batman is a creation in which every kind of dissidence is concentrated into a single reluctant hero, who wrestles constantly with his own identity and can never really come to rest. That is why Batman is more bat than man, and why he embodies the doubts and the criticisms of dissidents from many quarters. It cannot be mere chance that the success of *The Dark Knight Returns* coincided with that of another comic-book best-seller, *Maus*, Art Spiegelman's mordant personal account of the holocaust. Besides squatters, dissidents and anti-fascists, homosexuals were among those ready to claim the reanimated Batman as their hero. The countless Batman sites on the Internet include several which are dedicated to homoerotic stories and drawings in which Batman and Robin are almost invariably lovers.

Finally Batman - and, in his wake, the other superheroes, mutants and cyborgs of DC and Marvel Comics - is more closely related to the post-humanist 'alien' than to 'man'. The superhero genre finds a wide following in popular black culture, an audience that more readily identifies with green or red-coloured warriors,

cyborgs, transformers and aliens, than with a clean-cut white-skinned hero modelled on the Hollywood cowboy or detective. By the end of the eighties, when the Hip Hop baseball cap gave way to an explosion of eccentric hairstyles, only one cap kept its cult status: the cap with a Batman symbol (according to Nelson George in *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps & Boho's. Notes On Post-Soul Black Culture*, 2001.) Gotham City or The System stands here for the white, post-colonial capitalist machine which produces economic exploitation and racial injustice.

More Brilliant Than The Sun. Adventures in Sonic Fiction (1988) by Kodwo Eshun offers a dazzling demonstration of the influence of comics and superheroes on the design idioms of Space Jazz (Sun Ra), Dub (Lee 'Scratch' Perry), Funk (George Clinton) and Hip Hop (Dr. Octagon). Since aliens, mutants and superheroes - all of them outsiders, just like ethnic and social minorities - were invariably identified with a post-racial and planetary-humanist perspective, Futurism and science fiction have always been important to the black diaspora. Sun Ra, for example, brought out a record with a soundtrack homage to Batman back in 1966 (*Sun Ra vs. Dan & Dale*, Magic City Records, Newark, New Jersey). Similarly, the AfroFuturist Zone, a network of artists, musicians and authors set up by Paul D. Miller (alias DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid) made this theme the spearhead of its research.

Until recently, the themes of this comic-book genre even formed part of the official theology of The Nation Of Islam, the largest faction within the Black Muslim movement in the United States. Elijah Muhammed, their founder, claimed to have been abducted by aliens, who warned him of a conspiracy against Planet Earth and, in particular, against the capitalist world system based on white supremacy. An alien mother ship was about to approach The Earth with 1,500 smaller fighters in its belly, and these would devastate the planet, starting with New York and London. Or with Gotham City, perhaps. This is a scenario which is recapitulated constantly in contemporary pop culture, by inspired rappers like Killah Priest and by cinematographers like Roland Emmerich (*Independence Day*, 1996) and Barry Sonnenfeld (*Men In Black*, 1997). The New York posse The Coup was forced to withdraw its latest CD (*Party Music*, 2001) from sale because the cover depicted an eerily realistic image of the exploding twin towers of the World Trade Centre; it had been drawn two weeks before the attacks of 11 September. The trailer of *Spiderman* (2001) was taken out of circulation for similar reasons: one scene showed the arachnoid superhero weaving a web between the WTC towers. Previously, a villain in *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995) had used a helicopter as a Molotov cocktail to blow up the Statue of Liberty - with success. Squatters worldwide must have rubbed their eyes in amazement when Gotham City filled the screens of CNN on September 11, 2001.

The parallels between Gotham City and world events continue to fascinate. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and people started announcing the End of History, the Warner Bros. studios were working on the biggest architectural set since Joseph L. Mankiewicz made the spectacle *Cleopatra* in 1963. Director Tim Burton and the British artists Anton Furst, both devotees of comics and of architecture, were in the process of designing Gotham City - the great shadow metropolis, the arch enemy of squatters, anti-globalists, psychedelics and other dissidents. The success of *Batman* (1989) and its sequel *Batman Returns* (1992) could not be credited to the narrative structure of the scenario or the adventures of the winged superhero; rather, it was

due to the overwhelmingly intimidating character of 'Gotham City'. There is no question of *Batman* reflecting the postmural euphoria 1989. Gotham city is not history's goodbye party, but a blend of all the abhorrent aspects of neo-liberal free trade and of Stalinist bureaucracy which squatters so detest. Tim Burton's Gotham City is a forbidding, bleak domain where it is always dark, and where huge Communist or Fascist style works of art serve as 'corporate' logos, to express the glorious triumph of civilization. Amid this conspiracy against humanity, incarnate in terrorists like The Joker and The Penguin, Batman must exert all his powers to save the Earth from its downfall.

Burton and Furst employed over 250 builders and artists, who worked in shifts continuously for five weeks, for the construction of the quarter-mile long Broad Avenue and Gotham City Square. Anton Furst had already made his name as the art director of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). He was also a connoisseur of architecture, and shared Burton's morbid outlook on the universe. In designing Gotham City, Furst took a *dérive* through existing world architecture. Cities are not designed by one person, he argued. Only a remix of styles, genres and perceptions could evoke timelessness and project the image of a metropolis which was different but still credible. Credible the result certainly is. Gotham City is a remix of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and the ghostly city of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). And, of course, there is an unmistakable presence of the spirit of Frank Miller (who is undeservedly absent from the credits because copyright on the Batman character is still held by Bob Kane, an inferior draughtsman and an unconvincing scenarist). Furst, finally, distilled his favourite elements from art history: the skyscrapers of the 1930s, medieval Japanese forts, Gaudi's cathedral in Barcelona, the stories of Kafka, the studio architecture of Hitchcock, and the Comic Book Modern genre of the thirties.

The popularity of *Batman* was almost entirely due to the way Gotham City was visualized. Never before had such a intensely urban atmosphere been projected on the silver screen, wrote film critic Roger Ebert, who considered the film "a triumph of design over narrative structure". Another critic, David Butterworth, agreed that the film gave architecture an intimidating role which surpassed anything else in the history of film. The streets of Gotham City were lined by immense, arrogant, bizarre skyscrapers, which thrust contemptuously towards the stars, separated - or perhaps held together - by an ingenious mesh of elevated bridges and other steel structures. A gigantic network - a web of conspiracy - was woven beneath the sky. It was an ideal haunt for squatters, terrorists, psychopaths and urban explorers, who were surrounded by a "guilty architecture" that justified its apocalyptic downfall. Bomb attacks on banks and multinational company offices, the terrorizing of politicians and citizens, the destruction of the Statue of Liberty. Although insiders considered Furst a genius, no new commissions for feature films followed. In 1991, completely disillusioned, he took his own life; a tragic end but one which accords remarkably well with the dismal mores of Gotham City.

A equally convincing dystropolis, provisionally at least, is Alex Proyas' *Dark City* (1998), although we miss the hand of Anton Furst. *Dark City* is a classic comic *noire*, of the same calibre as *The Dreaming* and *Sandman*, in which architectural paranoia is now taken to an insane extreme. This metropolis, where you can never really escape reminiscences of Gotham City, is home to a secret coterie of aliens

called The Strangers who possess a telepathic power called 'tuning'. At moments of 'tuning', the city mushrooms from the ground while the drugged citizens doze. Ideas are transformed plastically and almost instantly into architecture, which may grow, shrink, bud off, rear up or vanish to make way for new buildings, infrastructure or even whole districts. The Dark City, like Gotham City, is a remix. "The city belongs to us," a Stranger says (coincidentally recalling the slogan of the Amsterdam squatters), "We built it from stolen memories, different times, different pasts, all combined. Every night, we revise and refine our city." As their raw material for 'tuning', The Strangers use downloaded memories stolen from the citizens, who are then fed with new, false memories until they are sufficiently stupefied and stripped of identity to submit to the slavish daily routine.

Dark City, like Gotham City and the society of the spectacle, conveys a resounding criticism and a pessimistic outlook on a contemporary global capitalism, which can apparently be dismantled only by violence. *Dark City*, too, degenerates into an orgy of violence. One day, the hero, John Murdoch, does not get his shot of tranquilizer and the process of downloading and uploading goes wrong. After a spell of amnesia, he realizes that he has become an apathetic tool in the schemes of The Strangers. A chase sequence follows in which the viewer is dragged along in a wild *dérive* through a metropolis founded on schizophrenia. The ultimate revenge comes when Murdoch turns out to possess the power of 'tuning' himself, and uses it to rescue the city from its grim paranoia.

It is in this tradition of Gotham City, of guilty architecture and political paranoia, that *The System* was born. It was obvious to Kuper that he had to respond to DC's invitation by giving them a comic about New York, which he sees as a typical urban node in an increasingly globalized matrix "that the flap of a butterfly's wings in China can cause a storm in Manhattan; that seemingly small actions can ripple into tidal waves" - as has been all too painfully confirmed by the events of 11 September 2001. The newly published retrospective *Speechless* shows moreover that much of Kupers' work is basically about the System. The city is omnipresent in his oeuvre and it is never reduced to mere clusters of architectural objects. His intimidating cityscapes rivet your attention onto your living environment and challenge you to interact with it more intensely.

Kupers' comics are always political in nature. "OK, the names of the politicians and the criminals change all the time, but I still find myself enraged at the lust for power and the abuse of power. The philosophy behind my comics is one of communicating, sensitizing and irritating." Steef Davidson, author of the 1976 Dutch classic *Beeldenstorm. De Ontwikkeling van de politieke strip: 1965-1975* ('Iconoclasm. The development of the political strip cartoon: 1965-1975'), similarly repeated his earlier conclusions in an interview with *Ravage* in 1998: "The more complex society grows, the need there is for simple information. This applies as much today as it has perhaps ever done. The comic lends itself perfectly to disseminating ideas and making propaganda. Where a political text would fail to make its point by being too theoretical, an image allows instant recognition."

The lack of good literature by and about squatters is an often heard complaint. Perhaps we have been looking in the wrong places, for "Fuck The System" is not a political manifesto but merely the squatter's eye view of the dystropolis. The city may

be a locus of guilty architecture and hazy public space, however, Batman and the squatters also unveil the city as a breeding-place of adventure and creativity. To design one's life on this cutting edge requires dedication and imagination – not coincidentally the extra-human powers of any superhero.

Translated by Victor Joseph. This article was an illegal contribution to the exhibition 'Squatters' at Contemporary Art Centre Witte de With at Rotterdam, The Netherlands (2001-2002).