Comics and the Invisible. Introduction to the Special Issue

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In contemporary visual culture, comics offer a curiously contradictory experience that is both ancient and hypermodern. It is a medium that predates film and television, and belongs to the declining circuits of print publishing, yet its market has been steadily expanding for more than two decades. It is anchored in a pre-modern and even archaic communicative practice such as drawing, yet it has been the main reservoir of ideas for major motion picture hits for more than a decade. Comics are experiencing a resurgence in consumption, institutional legitimacy, and industrial success in today's media landscape. Some even refer to it as a Renaissance or a new golden age of the Ninth Art. This is evident in the press and cultural institutions. But scholars face a dilemma: how can a medium with over a century and a half of history change so profoundly as to be "reborn" and find a new, more poignant attunement to the cultural context of an era?

The interpretive challenges posed by such a media evolution/revolution are evidently complex. During the years when the medium's contemporary ecosystem was taking shape, Scott McCloud's seminal and almost-theoretical text, *Understanding Comics* (1993), referred to it as "The Invisible Art". McCloud's reference to the idea of invisibility had a twofold purpose. Firstly, he aimed to describe the functioning of comics as a visual language. He demonstrated that the fundamental information conveyed by comics does not belong to the figures depicted but to the spaces outside the individual case, primarily the inter-iconic blank space of the gutters. On the other hand, McCloud aimed to defeat and overcome the historical socio-cultural marginalisation of the Ninth Art. He offered a set of notions that could demonstrate how a vast wealth of content and communicative forms lurked in this corner of the cultural industry. However, the many implications of the relationship between the visible and the invisible in comics have only been touched upon in McCloud's work. Yet, interrogating these issues might be useful precisely today, in order to answer questions about the evolution of contemporary comics,

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its renewed fortunes, and our awareness of such a unique visual media experience, that is both ancient and hypermodern.

In which terms comics can be understood as an invisible art or, from a very different perspective, as an art of the invisible? How can it be a tool for telling stories and visualise ideas that rarely find space within the ordinary ecology of visual media? Is this art of the invisible an instrument to connect with other dimensions (mental, psychological, spiritual, ontological)? Such set of questions guided the international conference "Comics and the Invisible", organised in Venice in June 2022 by the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities[1] of the Giorgio Cini Foundation. This conference lead to this issue of *Mediascapes Journal*, and represented the last step of the Creative Europe project called "Invisible Lines"[2], that aimed to promote the production, circulation and internationalisation of comics, graphic novels and illustration. The project was co-financed by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union and carried out by four European partners (Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Italy; Central Vapeur, France; Hamelin, Italy; Baobab Books, Czechia).

The conference aimed to explore the relationship between the visible and invisible in comics and illustration by taking a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses socio-cultural, linguistic and even spiritual dimensions. It goes beyond Scott McCloud's limited textualist perspective and reflects on the representation of identities and imaginaries, as well as the processes of the media system of which comics are a part. We brought together the sensibilities of Comics studies, Media studies, Religious studies, Art history, and Literary studies to open up some avenues for further research.

Several articles in this issue of *Mediascapes Journal* explore the theme of invisibility in comics in a systematic manner, providing fresh perspectives on how the interplay between the visible and invisible is a fundamental characteristic of this medium across various domains: linguistic, sociological, aesthetic, and technological. Matteo Stefanelli proposes considering invisibility as a useful notion for understanding the peculiarities of comics culture. This applies to both the social processes that have shaped its condition as a participatory medium, and the specific experience of comics reading as a relationship between the gaze and the drawn image. Using the semiotic approach, Daniele Barbieri analyses certain categories of the textual dimension that are typical of comics, such as the blank space between the gutters, the shot's viewpoint, and the page layout. This analysis helps to better understand the different relationships between what is told/untold and what is shown/unshown in comics, as compared to cinema or the novel. Chris Gavaler focuses on the technical dimension, revealing the semantic poignancy of seemingly "visually neutral" elements such as ink and paper. In uncoloured comics, typically, ink is black and paper is white, creating conceptually complex relationships for images representing race. Maheen Ahmed identifies Lynda Barry as one of the rare authors who questions and plays with the sources of images: particularly in her works focused on the pedagogy of comics, Barry explores the relationship between the invisible and visible, tracing it back to childhood and children's drawings.

Other articles identify works and themes that bring configurations of this dialectic into play. In this sense, Erwin Dejasse focuses on three works created by "invisible artists" who

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have operated under extreme conditions of confinement: Charlotte Salomon, Karel Frans Drenthe and Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro. They embody the proximity between comics and art brut, and the possibility of understanding this medium as a practice able of challenging the most singular situations of self-representation. The issue of comics as a means of representation and reflection on the spiritual dimension is addressed by two contributions. Francesco Piraino analyses the presence of esoteric themes in the works of Hugo Pratt, Alan Moore and David B. The esotericism of these artists is not "hidden", "rejected" or "absolute", rather it reveals doubt and deconstructs religion and spirituality. For these artists, esotericism is a form of "unsettled knowledge", a never-ending quest for transcendence and a means of learning about the unconscious and humankind. Carolina Ivanescu discusses the representations of religious content manga, with a focus on image, text, and panel/frame composition. She argues that manga complicates the neat distinction between image and text with a third element identified as textographs, which is both visual and textual in nature and act as vehicle for the introduction and expression of religious content.

Finally, three articles deal with comics as a tool for representing current social issues, such as traumatic historical events, migration phenomena, and the dialectic between urban spaces and social marginality. Francesca Pietropaolo discusses three comic works that deal with collective and individual traumas (the attack on the Twin Towers, the pandemic, the journey of an African migrant to Europe), using narrative solutions that employ various techniques to make the invisible visible. Rodolfo Dal Canto focuses on the representation of places in three Italian graphic novels to show how the narrative of the province is strongly influenced by the dialectic between the visible and the invisible, evident in the visualisation of abandoned and commercial spaces. Silvia Vari's close reading of a single wordless graphic novel, dedicated to the fictional journey of a migrant girl, explores how notions of presence and absence are problematised by the interplay between storytelling and the visual grammar of comics.

Biographical Note

Francesco Piraino is a sociologist of religion, culture, and art. He obtained his PhD in Sociology in 2016 at the Scuola Normale Superiore (Florence) and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris), and was a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow at KU Leuven. He is currently a research associate at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School and director of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilizations and Spiritualities at the Cini Foundation in Venice. Piraino works on spirituality, esotericism, mysticism, and the relationship between art and religion, especially, but not exclusively, in the Islamic and Sufi frame. He recently published *Le soufisme en Europe : islam, ésotérisme et new age* (Karthala, 2023) and edited *Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories Comparing and Connecting Old and New Trends* (with Marco Pasi and Egil Asprem, Routledge 2022).

Matteo Stefanelli, Ph.D., is Adjunct professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences of the Catholic University of Milan, where he teaches Visual and audiovisual communication. His interests concern the social history of the media, comics theories, and relations between pop culture and content industries. He has published extensively on comics and graphic novel. Among his books, he co-edited with Eric Maigret *Bande dessinée: une médiaculture* (Armand Colin, 2012), and with Gianni Bono *Fumetto! 150 anni di storie italiane* (Rizzoli, 2016).

References

McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art.* Northampton: Tundra Publishing.

Notes

[1] https://www.cini.it/en/institutes-and-centres/civilta-e-spiritualita-comparate
[2] https://invisiblelines.eu