Immersive marginality.
Comics and the cultural power of (its) invisibility[*]

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Among media cultures, invisibility has been more than a recurring narrative topic in comics: it has been one of the underlying forces that have shaped and driven its own cultural development. This paper propose to frame the topic of invisibility in comics both in sociological terms, as social marginality, and in textual terms, as part of comics' visualization device. From the first point of view, comics has largely evolved during XX century as a subculture, shaped by its social invisibility within the public sphere as both a limit in social capital growth for their stakeholders, but also as a leveraging force to build up a community strongly based on participatory culture. From the second point of view, as a visual medium comics has dealt with the boundaries set by print culture's visualization devices: the linguistic affordances of the gutter and layout design, but also the specificity of hand-drawn images. In the light of a media studies perspective, the paper will discuss the two-sided dimension of invisibility as a foundational force within comics history, leading to what we can call as the « immersive marginality » of comics culture.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to articulate the idea of invisibility within comics culture, in the light of a media studies perspective. The paper was inspired and developed by the design of the educational international project "Invisible Lines" (2020-2022), co-financed by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union and operated by four European partners from the artistic, academic and educational sectors. Mentoring artists with inspirational questions around some geographically, socially, spiritually defined ideas of invisibility in comics, was an intellectual challenge for every participant. And the workshop and discussions led me to the convincement that the visible/invisible nexus, within comics history, has been one of the conceptual "forces" that have shaped its cultural development. So this paper could be an opportunity to discuss - and maybe challenge - some of the core issues around comics as a cultural form and media experience.

To do this, I have retraced some historical and theoretical notions of comics culture, both at the sociological level (from classic Bourdieusian theories on the accumulation of cultural capital to the most recent media theories on public participation) and in its semiotic and aesthetic dimensions (where the passionate arguments of Scott McCloud have been reinforced in his landmark graphic novel entitled, not surprisingly, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*), also bringing some more recent sociological research and textual analyses. The purpose of this text is not to present a comprehensive theory on the connection between comics and invisibility, but rather to suggest potential areas of research, by adopting a systemic approach from the field media studies, exploring this relationship in both the textual and contextual dimensions, often overlooked in their interrelationship. Like all media, comics are shaped as much by the evolution of social processes as by its communicative (technological and linguistic) affordances, and this article builds on that, aiming to provide a fresh perspective on the concept of 'invisibility' and its impact on comics through these two dimensions. As a conceptual force capable of influencing both its social status and visual communication, I think we can say today that invisibility has provided unique opportunities and shaped the cultural identity of comics as a field (and audience community) and as an experience (and visual language). In some ways, as I will try to argue, it has even paradoxically benefited comics by endowing the medium with characteristics that have proven to be particularly favorable resources in the current media landscape, that can foster its stronger presence and more influential cultural position.

The contexts of invisibility: comics (beyond) subculture

The first part of the invisibility concept I would like to address is about the sociological dimension of comics culture. The assumption here is a pretty basic one, a "classic" in Comics Studies: comics has been a marginal form of popular culture within late modern society, even if something has changed in the most recent decades, sort of reshaping its

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perceived value and, ultimately, its cultural legitimacy. Thierry Groensteen was among the clearest and most polemical in articulating such historical weakness of comics within the system of modern cultural industry, still in the early 2000s, speaking of comics as a "cultural unidentified object" (Groensteen 2006).

This marginal position has been fairly widely discussed, studied, and explained. Some scholars and cultural critics had recognized - even partially challenged - it as early as a century ago (Seldes 1924), and in the 1960s and 1970s personalities such as Umberto Eco or Luc Boltanski had contributed to frame it as a sort of "drag effect" of a pre-modern vision of cultural processes and products. Subsequent studies have offered fresh theoretical perspectives and more structured methodologies around the relationship between mainstream and non-mainstream media, framing the issue of comics production and consumption in the perspective of cultural studies on subcultures (Brown 1997, Pustz 1999), or, echoing Goffman, observing as even in the more recent context, comics are a field in which a series of stigmatization processes remain active (Lopes 2006). My point, however, is a different one. I think it is useful in general, and illuminating for our discourse, to try to reverse the perspective: to move from the idea that social marginality has been a purely negative burden, to the idea that it has been a strategic resource for the development of comics.

In fact, this condition has allowed comics to develop a strong identity such that it has fueled a particular social circulation, rich not only in limitations but also in opportunities. Let us look briefly at some of these, and then get to the heart of the analysis of this first dimension: understanding how, in the last two decades, these opportunities have been (almost) fully materialized, thanks to a systemic condition of media cultures, increasingly fortunate for comics.

The social marginality of comics as a cultural force

For cultural forms, marginalization does not entail eradication. In the case of comics, its perceived restricted success as a popular (sub)cultural form - and later, as a mass medium - has led to a variety of processes that have contributed to shape its identity: Processes of "resilience" refer to the community's self-organization against marginalization from mainstream cultural forms and their stakeholders; Processes of "resistant use" have discovered comics as an effective anti-institutional tool for subversive social groups and practices that were often unrelated to comics; Processes of "mediation" involve the appropriation of comics by creative sectors and companies, also unrelated to comics, for conveying messages using comics as simplified communication.

1) Resilience. The first process was examined in accordance with Bourdieu by Luc Boltanski (1975), who explained how the comics industry in the 1960s and 1970s constructed itself as a vibrant social arena, emulating already established cultural worlds such as literature, art, cinema. That resulted in the creation of a «celebratory apparatus» (exhibitions, festivals, awards, conferences…) along with the emergence of more structured internal dynamics, including the development of a vertical business ecosystem,

and the increasing cultural distinctions between artisans, commercial artists and auteurs practices. A different view was brought in, for example, by Eric Maigret, who trough field research discussed how manga and anime «made possible a new intra- and inter-generational differentiation game among young and adult audiences […] during a time where declining media, such as television and [French] comics, were generally losing their identity and protest power for young people who were accustomed to being side by side with them in the family context, and knowing they were being consumed by adults» (Maigret 1999, p. 243).

2) Resistant use. The second process have seen comics, perceived as a popular and less or even anti-institutional form of visual art, almost "naturally" exploited by actors engaged in different forms of social activism, as a device for conveying countercultural messages or to offer de-structuring challenges. Many examples should be cited: the presence of comics within the rock, punk, indie music fanzine scenes; some famous Situationist movement posters and flyers using comics detournements; even some of the early exponents of pop art found comics a suitable resource to convey an anti-establishment message around the symbolic status of the visual arts. And what about porn? "Tijuana bibles", the (in)famous palm-sized pornographic comic books produced in the USA since the 1920s, especially popular during the Great Depression era, were ancestors of the 60s underground comix. Illegally marketed but tolerated, they were instrumental in helping comics shape porn culture before the videotape era, as a non mainstream medium, cheap, pocket-sized, and "less explicit" than photographic magazines. In Europe too, from 60s to early 80s, the video porn industry was still niche comparing to the mass extent of porn comic books, mainly produced in Italy and Spain and marketed in France, Germany and elsewhere.

3) Mediation. The third process involves comics as a communication medium, which, due to its specificities, was able to convey the most varied propaganda or corporate communication messages. Perceived and understood as a "simpler" visual language, and/or cultural environment (in terms of target audiences) - easy, light-hearted, youthful - comics has been appropriated by entities and organizations that, on the one hand, have exploited it opportunistically, but, on the other hand, have promoted its dissemination and diversity, with examples of fruitful effects on the supply chain and even on creativity. Among countless examples, I think of the comics in the trench magazines of the Italian army during the First World War, including the double-page spreads created by Antonio Rubino, terrible for war-mongering rhetoric but amazing for graphic composition. A fate not unlike that of Will Eisner's comics from 1951 until 1971 for PS Magazine, The Preventive Maintenance Monthly, a magazine about the maintenance of U.S. Army vehicles, very limited in its functional purpose but filled with narrative gems. Another example is the famous Classics Illustrated collection, which in the post-World War II period, even if sometimes of very poor quality, offered the chance to bring literature closer to millions of readers; in addition, it enabled the U.S. comics industry to endure during an era of moral campaigns against genre comics, which were considered uneducational and dangerous. Among the most prominent Asian examples, I just mention the manga *Yoku wakaru!*, published in 2006 as a pamphlet by the Japanese Supreme Court to explain the national

legal system. It was an example of *joho manga* (information manga), not surprisingly cited among the most relevant cases in studies on "invisible mangas" – as a conference was titled in 2006 – or works that are mostly educational, promotional or informational in nature, and distributed for free or outside the established commercial circuits (Morita 2009).

As with all forms of media, if the comics field was shaped by different social agents (White & Abel 1963, Boltanski 1975, Gabilliet 2005), so was its "invisibility". The notion of comics being an "unidentified cultural object", as Groensteen puts it, is a result of the intricate dynamics of socialization that are influenced by significant social agencies such as family, institutions, and school. The processes I outlined earlier are only a fraction of the bigger picture. They are just a few of the dynamics that have shaped the overall identity of comics, taking advantage of its status as a socially marginal art form for productive, occasionally groundbreaking results (such as the generation-defining adoption of manga; comics' frequent use within underground subcultures; or the significance of "mundane" PS Magazine comics in funding Eisner's career after *The Spirit*). As previously discussed, comics have evolved by exploiting their "strategic marginality" (Stefanelli 2012).

The subcultural, socially marginalized status of comics has been so long-lived and so deep that nowadays, in a very different era of comics culture - less marginalized and more self-reflexive - the notion of the invisibility of comics in the past has become a recurring topic, in critical and artistic discourses. With the result that it ends up being fictionalized in more and more comic books, historical and biographical, designed to put the differences between the present and the past into perspective. I am thinking of Paco Roca's historical graphic novel *El invierno del dibujante* (2010), about the group of "cartoon workers" who, in the years of Francisco Franco's dictatorship, left the publishing house Bruguera to found a new magazine, Tío Vivo, in search of creative and personal freedom. Or I think of Masahiko Matsumoto's autobiography, *Gekiga fanatics* (1984), which focuses on the context in which three unknown and penniless young authors revolutionized the narrative and stylistic landscape of manga in the late 1950s with their "gekiga" approach.

Participatory culture and the new cultural visibility of comics

However, the single social aspect of comics that significantly influenced its development as a distinctive form of media consumption, beyond its subcultural status (along with collecting: see Jenkins 2020) has been the participatory dimension.

After decades of media and audience studies, we are perfectly aware that participation is acknowledged as a strategic feature in contemporary media cultures. In a broad media environment where traditional hierarchies, as defined by the elite culture of the modern age, have been dismantled in favor of the multiplicity and "loss of the center" of digital culture (Bolter 2019), audience participation has become more than a habit - it is the very central mechanism of convergent culture (Jenkins 2006). And the centrality of audience participation in the cultural system of comics, often interpreted as clear example of a fandom-friendly culture (Hills 2002), can be easily observed: 1) it's an old condition; 2) it's widespread in the industry; 3) it's a common awareness shared by community members.

1) It is old, because readers of comics were among the first, along with those of science-fiction literature, to appropriate the horizontal communication form of the fanzine, taking advantage of the democratization of industrial printing technologies. Since the 1930s, in fact, comics culture has been fueled by readers' contributions to improving the circulation of information and developing their own reflexive discourses: the first version of Superman appeared in a fanzine by authors Siegel and Shuster, Science Fiction (1933); critical and theoretical discourse on comics owed more to the fanzines of the 1960s than to the institutional spaces of journalistic and intellectual debate.

2) It is widespread within the industry, because the readers' desire to communicate, exchange material and produce discourse has influenced the development of the comics ecosystem: the structuring of certain crucial distribution chains (the specialized comic stores), the development of dedicated cultural events (festivals and conventions), the establishment of training facilities (comic book schools), the recurring centrality of self-publishing (from the underground comics of the 60s, to the boom in doujinshi manga, to the success of "independent" publishers in the 1990s).

3) Finally, participation is a condition of which the regular comics audience is well aware and which has defined numerous practices of it: letters to the editor as a direct contact between production and consumption, widespread collecting, the ritual of conventions as a key event for the socialization of the comicsphilìa, commissions and *dédicaces* as an individualization of the author-reader relationship, up to the spectacular staging of active reception in the performative practice of cosplay.

How can we interpret the deep effect of shaping the identity of an entire medium environment, for generations, from such an extensive participatory culture? According to McLuhan (1964), the technology of comics already contained everything within it: the audience work was predetermined by its nature as a *cold* medium, which due to its "low definition" (the drawn image, reproduced on paper) necessitates an excess of involvement. As a result, comics have seen significant development, especially since the 1930s, due to the very proactive fanbase that has given rise to some of the most long-lasting and intense phenomena of active reception.

Henry Jenkins has been especially clear about this (2020, p. 15): «The revaluing of comics can be understood as an extension of larger logics shaping how today's consumer culture operates». Today, in an era where fan engagement is a crucial factor in measuring the cultural significance of products and building consumer loyalty, the marginalized cultural model that comics have traditionally inhabited is being recognized as a perfect fit for the "participatory economy". In the current market of post-mass media niches, the focus is no longer on (merely quantitative) aspects like market penetration, but rather on (qualitative) measures of consumer involvement. Therefore, the Hollywood "superhero movie" genre success, or the unexpected traffic boom on comics blogs and webtoons, all demonstrate the contemporary power of comics. For Eric Maigret (2012, p. 146): «At a time when digital participatory culture is blurring the lines between creation and reception, and artistic activities are breaking free from their historically constituted boundaries, it is pointless to assert the creation of an autonomous field of comics in a rigid nineteenth-century format». In Stuart Hall's terms, comics has moved "from margins to the center": «a

historically marginal form of culture has moved closer to the field of power, represented by cultural legitimacy» (Beaty 2007, p. 9).

Textuality and invisibility: comics reading (beyond) the gaze

To address the topic of invisibility from an aesthetic point of view, we can examine its portrayal since comics culture origins in the mid-XIX century, thanks to the "Father of comics strip"'s conceptualization (Kunzle 2007). In 1837, presenting his album *Monsieur Jabot*, Rodolphe Töpffer wrote about the semiotic ambiguity of such a new visual form: «This little book is of a mixed nature. It consists of a series of drawings accompanied by one or two lines of text. The drawings, without this text, would have only an obscure meaning; the text without the drawings would mean nothing. The whole thing together forms a kind of novel, all the more original as it looks no better than a novel than anything else».

Subsequently, the linguistic status of comics was addressed by Scott McCloud (1993) in his successful comics essay, in which his influential definition of *sequential art* was based on a very precise assumption: comics interpreted as a two-dimensional, essentially narrative language. However, his definition has been progressively criticized. Categories such as *sequentiality*, or the older *tabularity* (Fresnault-Deruelle 1977), are historically and culturally embedded in what I have called a "cinema-centric" way of conceiving the syntax of drawn images (Stefanelli 2010). The primary consequence of this perspective was to emphasize the role of visual ellipses, "closures" in McCloud's terms. This approach can be problematic for understanding the full range of possibilities in comics' drawn images and, therefore, fails to consider the significance of the gaze and the interplay between the visible and invisible dimensions.

The plural, non-sequential regimes of (in)visibility in comics

I can provide an example from my own personal research. While analyzing Sergio Toppi's comics, I encountered the spiritual aspect of his storytelling. In addition to his unique blend of history, fantasy, and "magic realism", I found another layer of meaning present in his work that I called the "animistic" facet, that is linked to the recurring, mysterious objects that guide the protagonist's quests throughout "The Collector" series, which are lost in time and space. Moreover, the visual sense was also induced through a "totemic" layout composition of panels. These pages often feature only hieratic figures, facing the reader, without any background. This was an atypical approach to designing the comic book reading experience, seemingly unconcerned with sequentiality and instead focused on providing captivating individual pages (or vignettes) with near independent meanings: they were visual elements intended for contemplation, rather than mere perusal or cursory viewing.

As Scott Bukatman (2016) brilliantly illustrates in his analysis of Mike Mignola's approach, iconostasis has a significant role in comics. Readers can have an immersive experience of comics not only due to the story, but because of the contemplative experience they offer to us. When working on the late Gianni De Luca's masterpieces (such as his well-known trilogy of Shakespeare adaptations), I discovered something more. His pages contain a rich interplay of different gaze experiences. If we look at any page of his *Hamlet*, we observe a single, theatrical space to contemplate in one shot but, additionally, there are various fragments and directions, including both iconostasis and action/movement. This is because De Luca's masterpieces utilize each page not only as a fictional space in which to place the drawn representation of people and scenes, but makes it a partial and temporary (two-dimensional) space, inviting the reader to move within a larger system of spaces and acts of vision. The page is an interface between many implied spaces, both inside and outside of every panel/page, where the reader's gaze can play the visual game of comics, assisted by a narrative and activated by the peculiar design - orthogonal perspective – of every single page (Stefanelli 2010).

Reading comics implies performing complex visual actions: we simultaneously look on the single panel, on the page, we follow the very sequential actions, we scan the compositional relations between images, and we see beyond the panels through our own act of vision. We perform this making use of a visual device that, even if materially confined to bidimensionality, engages us in ongoing challenges, large and small, to our perception of two-dimensional reality. An important point for a critique of McCloud's conceptualization, is that the idea of a sequentially bidimensional experience is just conventional, more of a possibility than a necessity. And what we really see thanks to comics is "of mixed nature": it is visible within the representation, but it can also be… elsewhere.

Comics, representation and drawing "from the invisible"

The field of autobiographic comics, particularly in its intersection with the "graphic medicine" genre, might better suggest another part of the answer, some sort of (Chaney 2011, La Cour & Poletti 2022). In the latter works, generally focused on illness narratives, some artists use comics to convey a specially unspeakable, unsharable mystery: the very deep feelings generated by a peculiar experience of illness, mental illness. Those artists find in comics some kind of methodological opportunity, a way to give a visible form not the wounded bodies, not the anecdotal episodes of everyday life, but the invisible emotions of their very singular state of mind.

In works such as *Stitches: a memoir* by David Small or *Pilules bleues* de Frederik Peeters, drawing provides the artist with a significant opportunity: to visualize the bodily changes caused by illness, not only through observation but also filtered through self-perception and the deeper implications it carries. This results in a wealth of graphic details and metaphors that attempt to express the inexpressible - feelings, intuitions, and fears.

Some works, however, appear to push the boundaries even further. In Elodie Durand's *La parenthèse* or Ellen Forney's *Marbles*, certain pivotal sequences in the illness narrative are intertwined with the act of drawing itself. Drawing - regardless of its uncertainty, "ugliness" or abstract nature - serves as an echo or perhaps even an authentic record of the disorders. Pushed to the extreme under the blows of stress, physical, cognitive, and emotional, the challenge for sick/patient cartoonists is how to continue drawing. How can one successfully convey one's condition on paper? Is the drawing line of one's sick self the same as one's healthy self? How can a different self, affected by physical and especially psychological or emotional changes, be accurately portrayed? Drawing can serve as a tool to observe, reinterpret, and communicate personal experiences, and it can also make visible the somewhat invisible forces that cannot be easily expressed through words.

The question seems to me to be crucial for the understanding of comics and its practices of narration and visualization, and it refers to the problem of enunciation: in comics there is a "mixed" enunciator: a verbal or narrative enunciator and a graphic enunciator. Philippe Marion (1993), who proposes to call the graphic enunciation *graphiation*, points out how it brings with it a "signature effect", an imprint, an inevitably idiosyncratic trace, which refers to the irreducible relationship with the subjective expression of the drawing-body. The drawing, produced by the gesture of a hand, questions a body: that of the author. John Berger (1953) wrote: "In front of a painting or a statue, the spectator tends to identify with the subject, to interpret the images for their own sake; in front of a drawing, he identifies himself with the artist, using the images to gain the conscious experience of seeing as though through the artist's own eyes." Comics, therefore, offer the possibility, through drawing, of adopting the gaze of the artist and, thanks to this unreal, mental gaze, of participating in a somewhat unattainable experience: perceiving the enigma of the gaze itself and its ghostly relationship to the body. In its capacity as a visual medium, comics activates an immersive act of seeing, projecting the reader towards the otherness of the artist. The dialectic between what's visible and what's invisible is there, again, shaping comics reading as an almost inevitably immersive experience.

Conclusion

In the recent scholarly debate on comics, in an era marked by a boom in interest from literary studies - one of the many effects of the success of the graphic novel - there is no shortage of studies underscoring the limits of recourse to traditional literary categories. Bart Beaty and Bejamin Woo (2016) have shown this with irony, in the cases of various caricatured interpretations of Robert Crumb's comics, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, or Alan Moore's novels. One cannot fail to agree with the need to update the existing set of theories available - even in the field of media studies - on comics. What I would like to add is that in the nexus between the visible and the invisible, as I have tried to argue, lies a large amount of possibilities for refining these intellectual and analytical resources.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, recognizing that comics culture has developed drawing strength from the dialectic between visibility and invisibility allows us to rethink some old ideas about the medium. To recognize that this dialectic has influenced both the social and aesthetic development of the medium is to recognize that, in comics, the limits of the visible have borne very fertile fruits: the social marginality of its products has cemented the participatory power of the participants, both within that field and beyond, in similar fields of serial content production and fandom; the affordances of the visual device have trained readers to mobilize their gaze between diegetic and extradiegetic spaces, creating an immersive visual experience in an era preceding interactive textual forms. That condition of comics culture, which I temporarily name "immersive marginality", is therefore a profound implication, if not a true mediological consequence, of the peculiar relevance that the concept of invisibility has offered to the Ninth Art. A new opportunity to investigate a peculiar subset of modern visual culture, comics, which has based its identity on the border between showing and not showing, seeing and not seeing, telling and not telling.

Biographical note

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