Playing with the Invisible: Novel, Movies, Comics*

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The *told/untold* dialectic is not entirely coincident with the *shown/unshown*. What is told presupposes (and therefore implies) an *enunciator voice* (i.e. a narrator); what is shown, only and sometimes, a *point of view*. What is untold simply is not: it is just an absence. What is unshown, instead, can be blank/white: the presence of an absence. In comics, a blank/white space or field can represent the missing action between one panel and the following one; or it can represent the background that is missing within a panel. In any case, the unshown, exactly like the untold, consists of what is not necessary to show (or tell) either because it is irrelevant, or because it is very easily inferable from what is shown (or told). But the unshown, unlike the untold, *can appear* before us, making *visible* the invisibility of what is not shown. In verbal discourse, i.e. in the novel, nothing is actually *visible*. Everything is mediated by the story made by a narrator who takes all responsibility for truth and point of view. In visual discourse, and particularly in comics, what is seen, and therefore visible, is crucial, but the gaze that makes things visible cannot in turn be seen, only inferred. The word focuses by naming, image by representing. However, while the narrator of a novel, unless proven otherwise, is always one and the same throughout the whole course of the text, the observer of a story in comics, like that of a movie, can change at any shot. Her/his invisibility is not compensated by any convention of sameness. An indeterminate observer is therefore accompanied, in comics, by an absence made visible. Cinema can make absence present by mean of the voice, but it cannot make absence visible. In comics, everything, except the gaze, can be shown, even invisibility.

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The theme of the invisible invites us to focus our discussion on two crucial oppositions. The first is that between *said/unsaid* on the one hand and *shown/unshown* on the other. On the first horn of the opposition is verbal narrative (which from now on, for the sake of simplicity, we will refer to with the word *novel*, somewhat improperly enlarging its scope also to short forms of narrative), while on the second we find together cinema and comics, which are narratives through images, where any accompanying verbal narration is not obligatory, and is often absent.

The second opposition is that between temporal development (cinema) and spatial development (comics). In both cases time passes, but in the first case it is linked to a temporal sliding of the film, while in the second to a planar development on the space of the pages.

In the novel, strictly speaking, everything is invisible, except the words that compose it. But the discursive/narrative construction nevertheless builds a world that is somehow made visible through words. In a way, we could say the same thing about visual narratives: what we see is not the world, but a representation of it (just like the verbal one) through which we reconstruct the world (according to different principles than those of the word). However, the word does not refer to the world as the image does: for example, I cannot leave white spaces between words (beyond the standard spacing of writing): the novel neutralizes the graphic-visual aspects, based on a conventional equivalence with its read aloud version. The cases in which this rule is violated are very rare. *Said* and *written* are essentially synonymous in the novel.

The words of a novel construct the world of reference, either because they describe directly or because what they describe implies or suggests something else. The reader "sees" what the words describe or suggest, and everything else remains essentially invisible, as an undifferentiated and irrelevant background. Of course, the novel can deal with the invisible by saying that something was not seen or (apparently) was not there: but in this way the invisible is also treated as the visible, and, as named, belongs to the same dimension.

In comics, the blank/white space between panels plays a similar role to the blank space between words in writing, separating meaningful atoms from each other: the words in one case, the events in the other. But this resemblance is actually very slight. For example, in the oral version of verbal language, there is no hiatus between words that corresponds to the space that separates them in writing (unless you want to explicitly emphasize it): we speak fluently, even when reading aloud. The blank space between words, in particular, does not correspond to the passage of time, made up much more by the succession of graphemes that correspond to phonemes that actually have a duration that the blank space itself does not have. Its role is, if anything, purely optical/perceptive, allowing us to distinguish words more easily and thus making a silent, inner, non-vocalised reading easier. Not surprisingly, as we know, the ancient Romans and Greeks did not use white space and only read aloud.

In cinema, which is oral by nature, the sequence of shots is fluid, and there is no empty space (that is, no empty time) between them, except for marked and infrequent events such as fades, freeze frames, and black screens.

In comics, blank space basically serves as a separator and an "and then." But its role is far from exhausted in this. Even before being a narrative sequence, in fact, a page is a plastic organism, in which blank spaces (and black border lines) have a significant compositional role. From this point of view, the white that separates the panels is not dissimilar from any white that can be found inside them, and interacts with it by plastically constructing the page. But the white found within panels does not necessarily refer to the whiteness of the figures depicted: its role is extremely varied, ranging from the representation of whiteness to the simple absence of representation, or the invisibilization of something (e.g. backgrounds). Similarly, white on the outside of the panels can take on roles other than that of a separator, such as emphasizing the content of a panel through a larger margin.

In any case, although the overall plastic composition of the page affects the meaning of the narrated story (and thus white has its function in this), white also acts in relation to individual panels, that is, even in relation to individual narrative atoms (events). In both cases, however, it indicates the presence of an absence, without necessarily thematizing it (as the word is forced to do – to say "it is not there").

Particularly interesting is the play with the ambiguity of white by authors such as the later Will Eisner (from the 1970s onwards) or Dino Battaglia. Eisner often eliminates the black border of the panel, letting the group of figures that make up the event/panel stand on the white of the page, sufficiently separated from the next group to make it clear that they are different events/panels. In this way, however, the line between white as irrelevance (the invisible background against which the relevant event stands out) and white as the temporal separator between the events/vignette is blurred. Thus, white expresses the invisible (or more generally the imperceptible) as doubly irrelevant: spatially irrelevant because what is not shown plays no role in the action, temporally irrelevant because it represents empty times, those that can be overlooked in the rendering of the action (except for the only necessary awareness, which is that they exist and that time still flows).

Battaglia sometimes plays the same game, but in many cases the spillover of the internal white onto the external one takes place on only one side of the vignette, with an effect of indeterminacy that suggests *mystery* rather than irrelevance[1]. The white of the image, which continues into the white of the page, seems to allude to something that, like darkness, can hide anything, or any development. And it is no coincidence that white is often used in Battaglia to indicate dense shadows, blackness tending toward the absolute, the complete absence of visibility. It should be noted that neither Eisner nor Battaglia addresses the invisible in the way a novelist would be forced to do: the graphic (and non-verbal) nature of comics allows them to play more subtly with the presence of absence, to suggest without declaring.

This difference is connected to the different enunciative nature of novel and comics[2]. The novel necessarily has a narrator, be it concrete and intradiegetic (if not outright homodiegetic[3]) or abstract and extradiegetic. And the narrator has full responsibility for what is said or not said. Having multiple narrators is not impossible, of course, in the novel; but it is a possibility that is in fact little exploited[4]. It is more common for the narrator to tell

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of several narrators and their different versions of the same event; but in such a case there remains only one first-level narrator, while those who multiply are the second-level narrators, already within the main story.

Cinema and comics don't necessarily have a narrator[5]. Of course they *can* have it, but often (especially cinema) they don't have it. This difference is based on the fact that while the presence of the word (in verbal narration) implies the presence of someone who enunciates it, the presence of the image implies nothing, because the world around us is full of images that no one is enunciating. Then, of course, both the written word and the drawn image imply someone who creates them, but this will be the *author*, an enunciational figure different from the *narrator*.

When it has representative nature (as usually in comics and cinema) the image involves a more or less well-defined point of view: very well-defined, as in film and in Renaissance perspective drawings (as is usually the case in comics) or ill-defined, as is sometimes the case in comics, especially those in the humor genre. The point of view in pictorial narrative comes closest to that of the narrator in the novel, but the resemblance is actually rather tenuous.

Although the point of view is subjective, what it organizes is usually perceived as objective: indeed, other markers are needed to declare that the content of the image must also be understood as subjective, that is, as a product of the subject's imagination or altered perception. By contrast, the novel's narrator can legitimately lie, although this immediately qualifies him as intradiegetic. Indeed, the novel's narrator can refer to himself by saying "I", while the subject of the point of view has no way of doing the same (unless he uses the word, that is, he adds a narrator similar to that of the novel to the narration through images).

Using the ego, the narrator of the novel makes her/himself visible no more or less than any other character or narrated object; whereas the subject of the point of view in comics and film inevitably remains invisible. Of course, she/he can place her/himself in front of a mirror, as the king and queen do in Diego Velazquez's *Las meninas*, but this is not a way of saying *I*: if anything, it is a way of referring to oneself in the third person: in the mirror we do not really see the subject of the point of view, but only his reflection.

For this reason, cinema and comics can play with framing more than the novel can play with the variability of the narrator. Framing is an effect of point of view, and since its subject is necessarily invisible, it becomes very easy to allude to his/her identity without declaring it. It's not just about the clearly *subjective* shots, through which the spectator/reader finds him/herself in the eyes of a character currently on stage. Every framing implies a gaze, even if the subjectivity associated with it can be completely neutralized.

An eye-level shot taken from a roughly optimal distance to express events (a long shot for a sword fight, a full-length or half-length shot for a kiss…) is perceived as objective, neutral; while the more one moves away from this ideal condition (raising or lowering the point of view, enlarging or narrowing the field) and the stronger the evocation of the gaze appears, making the sensation of subjectivity grow. If there is not an intradiegetic subject to whom gaze and point of view can be attributed, what we could define as *emotional* or

psychological subjectives are produced: it is not the subjectivity of the gaze that is attributed, but that of the emotionality that it expresses through the kind of attention it demonstrates. A very close-up of a moved person expresses an attention to the interiority of the person her/himself, which suggests her/his momentary isolation from the world by virtue of the emotion itself. The invisibility of the subject of the point of view makes possible its inapplicability to a real gaze (in the world of history); but the strong effect of subjectivity is not lost, rather having repercussions on the subject on stage, who naturally cannot see him/herself in this way, but is represented as if she/he were seen.

In other cases it is possible, conversely, to suggest the presence of other subjects, who may be spying on the scene. The invisibility of the subject of the point of view alludes to someone not being seen.

For this reason, in general, the framing is a formidable tool for storytelling in cinema and comics, suggesting subjective visions without having to declare them, and being able to represent the point of view of a declared subject, but also of a mysterious subject, of the framed subject him/herself (in an emotional/psychological way), and even of no subject. The modulation of this system of possibilities constitutes a good part of the filmic and comics specificity.

While in movies, however, the perspective visual organization is entailed by the photographic nature of the image, in comics (and in animation movies too) it is also possible to do without such an equally well-defined point of view. This happens in humorous comics such as *Peanuts*, but also in more epic contexts, such as the works of David B. David B., for example, sometimes organizes his panels according to oriental (for example Indian) spatial models which elude the rules of Renaissance perspective, making the point of view uncertain and tendentially objective. The subject of the point of view is no longer invisible, but simply absent. The apparent (partial) renunciation of a powerful tool such as the modulation of the point of view makes the narration more detached, at times more ironic, binding it closely to the contrast with the strong subjectivity of the accompanying verbal narrative, always crucial in this author.

Which leads us to consider the relationship between verbal narration and narration through images, but now inside comics themselves (and also inside cinema, obviously, which however makes more rare use of it). In fact, both modalities can act in a comics text, with their own specific enunciative characteristics, which however, now put in interaction, produce new effects: the subject of the point of view, while not being able to be shown by the image, can reveal itself through the word, for example by saying *I*. In other words, the diversity between the *said/unsaid* dialectic and that *shown/unshown* can become, in comics, a source of polyphonic effects, building different and parallel visibilities, in reciprocal interaction: different is, on the one hand, showing an absence through the use of white, while the word thematizes it, and, on the other hand, using white in the same way without any verbal intervention; and it is still different to verbally declare an absence while the image shows what is absent, or still does not show anything pertinent, thematizing something else.

Flowing through time, the cinematic scene inevitably declares its duration, and its projection space is fixed. In comics, the framed space of the panel is instead variable and

may not be expressed graphically by a line: since time is expressed through space, time and space may have areas of coincidence. The white can be used to indicate what is invisible not only because it is not visible in space, but also because is not visible in time, without necessarily distinguishing the two cases: an ambiguous or ambivalent lack that the white stages. Of course, even cinema can be elliptical, not showing us something we know is happening; but in place of what is missing there will inevitably be something else (a new scene, new figures). Comics have one more chance to play with the invisible, which comes exactly from its spatial nature, together with the (equally spatial) expression of the passage of time.

Biographical Note

Daniele Barbieri, semiologist, works on comics and visual communication, but also on poetry and music. He teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, the ISIA in Urbino, the University of San Marino. He is among the leading scholars of comics in Italy. Among his books: *Valvoforme valvocolori* (Idea Books 1990), *I linguaggi del fumetto* (Bompiani 1991), *Questioni di ritmo. L'analisi tensiva dei testi televisivi* (Eri/Rai 1996), *Nel corso del testo. Una teoria della tensione e del ritmo* (Bompiani 2004), *Tensioni, interpretazione, protonarratività* (edited by, monographic issue of VS, 98-99, 2004), *Breve storia della letteratura a fumetti* (Carocci 2009, new ed. 2014), *Il pensiero disegnato. Saggi sulla letteratura a fumetti europea* (Coniglio 2010), *Guardare e leggere. La comunicazione visiva dalla pittura alla tipografia* (Carocci 2011), *Il linguaggio della poesia* (Bompiani 2011), *Maestri del fumetto* (Tunuè 2012), *Semiotica del fumetto* (Carocci 2017), *Letteratura a fumetti? Le impreviste avventure del racconto* (ComicOut 2019), *Testo e processo. Pratica di analisi e teoria di una semiotica processuale* (Esculapio 2020).

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Notes

[1] On the white in Battaglia see Barbieri (1984).
[2] On enunciation in semiotics, see for instance Greimas & Courtes (1979), voice *Énunciation.*
[3] See Genette (1972).
[4] For instance, in epistolary novels.
[5] See. Barbieri (2017).