

How to Make the Invisible Visible? Some Innovative Approaches in 21st-Century Comic Art*

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This study aims to analyze the conceptual and aesthetic strategies of three cutting-edge works employing comics to give form to the invisibility of trauma in 21st-century history and culture: *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) by North American cartoonist Art Spiegelman on the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States; *Une éternité à Tanger* (2004) by the African illustrator Faustin Titi and African journalist Eyoum Nangué on the overlooked tragedy of immigration from Africa to Europe; and *Astrodoubt and The Quarantine Chronicles* (2020-ongoing) by the Italian artist Luca Buvoli on the Covid-19 pandemic which broke out in early 2020. These works share the impulse to visualize the invisible and narrate what resists narrative articulation and raise awareness. They encapsulate what can be described as the “daring of imagination” in the face of trauma. The shadow silhouette of two towers no longer standing, New York’s Twin Towers, is the key image with which Spiegelman’s book opens: the presence of an absence. Blending the personal and the political as it addresses the trauma of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, the book comprises ten strips on memory and loss, and includes references to Spiegelman’s own *Maus* book on the Holocaust, as well as reprints of turn-of-the-20th-century comic strips. Published the same year as Spiegelman’s work, the comic book *Une éternité à Tanger* is about the trauma of displacement. It depicts the failed crossing of a young African boy, Gawa, from Tangiers to Europe seeking a brighter future. Leaving his native West African city, Gawa hopes to escape the turmoil of his home country but, following a journey fraught with dangers and betrayals, he is stranded in Tangiers, just in sight of his final goal. There he begins to tell his story, emblematic of thousands of immigrants. Narrating from an African perspective the story of the many invisibles like Gawa, Titi and Nangué offer an intimate account of one of the great sociopolitical tragedies of our time. Since spring 2020, Buvoli has created a series of tragicomic visual narratives, presented on Instagram, where the mediums of comics, painting, and the digital blend. Their protagonist is the astronaut Astrodoubt, an individual of unspecified gender, race, and age, grounded by the pandemic. This study wishes to analyze how Buvoli’s work explores the expressive and formal possibilities of the ninth art and sequential narratives in the context of a multi-media and multi-disciplinary artistic inquiry on vulnerability, trauma, time and space, from the cosmos to life on Earth. In the analysis of these three projects, the notion of empathy will be addressed, investigating the works’ ability to mobilize conscience. Challenging the boundaries of visual and narrative dimensions in contemporary culture, these works of comics offer a rich material for reflecting on the ways in which the medium affords groundbreaking explorations of the invisible, time, memory and space with a great impact on urgent existential, social, and cultural issues of our time.

Keywords: comics, digital comic art, the invisible, trauma, empathy

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The art of comics brings together text and image in a tension of unique immediacy and, at its best, gives rise to works of sophisticated complexity employing the language of comics to innovative ends. This study aims to explore the conceptual and aesthetic approaches of three cutting-edge works which, each in its distinctive way, attempt to give form to the invisible, and more precisely to the invisibility of trauma in 21st-century history and culture. The works taken into consideration are the 2004 comic book *Une éternité à Tanger* (An Eternity in Tangiers), the collaborative work of the Ivorian illustrator Faustin Titi and the Cameroonian journalist Eyoum Nangué on the overlooked tragedy of immigration from Africa to Europe; the comic book *In the Shadow of No Towers* (also from 2004) by the North American cartoonist Art Spiegelman on the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City; and the comic digital project *Astro doubt and The Quarantine Chronicles* (2020-ongoing) by the Italian artist Luca Buvoli which, released on Instagram as a series, comes to terms with the Covid-19 pandemic.¹

These three works, while differing in terms of style, theme, and poetics, all share the impulse to narrate what *resists* narrative articulation and visual representation. As such, they offer a rich material for reflecting on the ways in which the medium of comics affords groundbreaking explorations of the invisible, of time, memory and space while probing some of the most urgent existential, cultural, and social issues of our time.

Each in its own way, these projects explore the experience of dislocation caused by the shock of a traumatic event, that is, of a physical and psychological wound whose trace forever etches the survivor/witness's unconscious. They illuminate the complexities of traumas which are simultaneously personal and of collective magnitude and, as such, mark individual life as well as contemporary culture. As pointed out by Roger Luckhurst, trauma has a paradoxical nature in that it is "a critical instant of a defining yet unknowable memory lodged in the mind" (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 4). Drawing from this paradox and from the notion of inaccessibility put forward by Cathy Caruth who has observed that under the sign of trauma "a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (Caruth, 1991, p. 7), this study interrogates the ways in which the selected comic works probe the unknowable. Moreover, how do they counter the tendency of society to neutralize traumatic shock by way of overexposure and image saturation, or through censorship or ideological distortion? How do they confront the oblivion engendered by the unfulfillable quest for the "newer new" that mass and social media fuel, in the digital era where we live under a perceived reality that incessantly vanishes?

Countering the mono-dimensional narratives imposed by our increasingly polarized societies and cultures, the case studies of this article propose narratives and visual encounters to the reader/viewer that point at the multi-dimensional complexities of reality and its 'double', the invisible. They do so through the image-text alchemy that characterizes comics as a language.

Une éternité à Tanger and the Trauma of Displacement

Une éternité à Tanger (Fig. 1) is about the trauma of displacement. It depicts the failed crossing of a young West African man, Gawa, from Tangiers to Europe seeking a brighter future. Leaving his native city – in the book, the imaginary city of Gnasville – Gawa hopes to escape the turmoil of his home country but, following a journey fraught with dangers and betrayals, he is stranded in Tangiers, just in sight of his final goal. There he begins to tell his story, emblematic of thousands of migrants. The opening page of the book portrays the protagonist as he looks out at the sea connecting North Africa and Europe (Fig. 2).

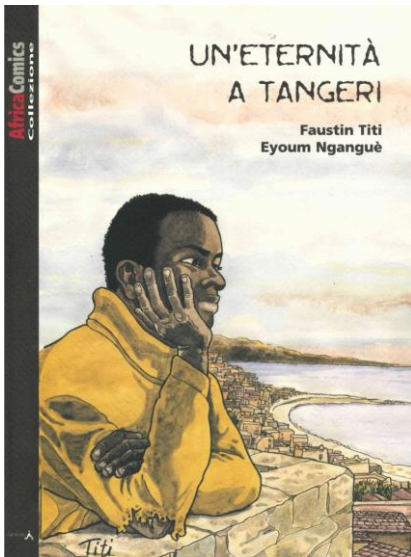


Figure 1: Nangué E. and Titi F., *Une éternité à Tanger*, 2004; 2007 Italian edition

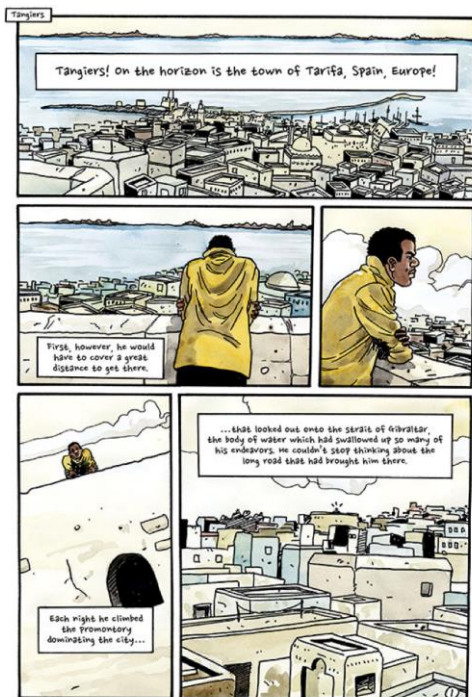


Figure 2: Nangué E. and Titi F., *Une éternité à Tanger*, 2004; 2017 English edition

Narrating from an *African* perspective the story of the many invisibles like Gawa, Titi and Ngangué offer an intimate account of one of the great sociopolitical tragedies of our time. Countering the spectacularization of violence and suffering that mass media images bring forward, particularly in reporting on the African continent, the authors choose the ‘plainness’ of a documentary style that does not “scream out” but is intentionally self-restrained, its economy of means amplifying the affective connection for the reader/viewer. Their strategy bridges faithfulness to reality and the “daring of imagination”. Made in watercolor and marker on paper, the drawings are detailed and highly realistic and at the same time they retain, through the use of ink wash, a dimension invoking the imaginative, dreams or nightmares. The style is knowingly spare, sober, its reduction to the essential a magnifying vessel for the book’s dramatic content.

At the beginning of the volume, the horizon, at which the protagonist looks out, dominates as compositional element. Vertical panels are soon introduced, here and there (Fig. 3), creating a beautiful dynamic dialogue with the placid horizontal panels.



Figure 3: Ngangué E. and Titi F., *Une éternité à Tanger*, 2004; 2017 English edition

Some panels are bigger in size than others and this aspect accentuates the psychological depth to the drawings and the story they carry on. Moreover, expanses of temporal suspension, of excruciating waiting (or endless wandering) alternate with sudden

moments of acceleration in the visual rhythm. The apparent calmness of frozen time is often counterpointed by the zooming in on a detail, or by the introduction of a surprising compositional angle and a dynamic perspective. Some panels point at an almost cinematic dimension. As readers, we feel drawn *inside* the story. This story is *our* story, that is, it concerns everyone.

Through the use of color, a continuous overlapping of time-past and time-present takes place, defying any expectation for a narrative linearity, throughout the book. Multi-colored panels speak of Gawa's present time in Tangiers, while sepia tones, blacks and ranges of grey dominate the re-telling/re-living of past experiences, plunging us in their monochromatic existential darkness (Fig. 4). Sometimes the different temporal dimensions coexist on the same individual page; sometimes they appear next to each other in a spread, as shown in the pages where the desert is juxtaposed to the urban environment of Tangiers (Fig. 5). The memory of traumatic experiences resurfaces, over and over again, materializing the process of dislocation, the recurring experience of rupture originating in trauma.

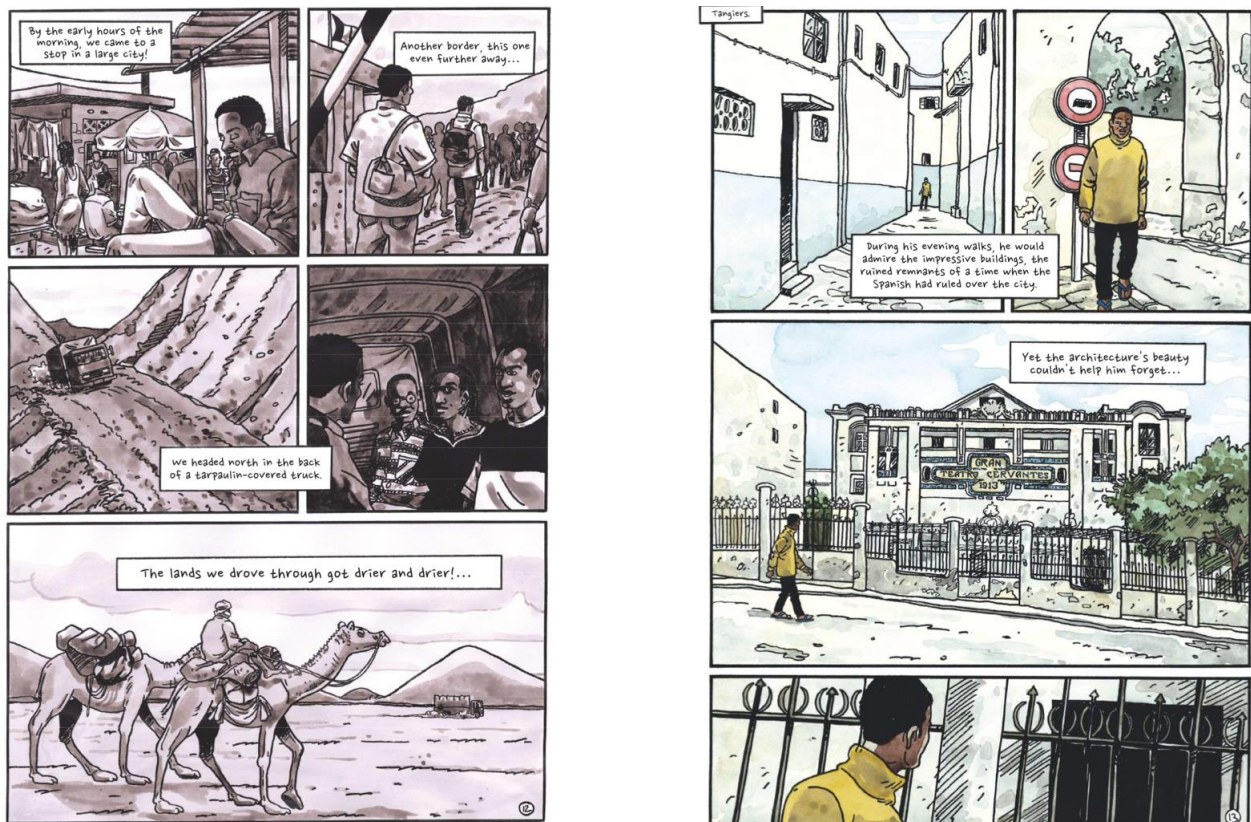


Figure 4: Ngangué E. and Titi F., *Une éternité à Tanger*, 2004; 2017 English edition, spread



Figure 5: Nangué E. and Titi F., *Une éternité à Tanger*, 2004; 2017 English edition, spread

The wash of the ink gives memories an evocative dimension. In the multi-colored panels, the chromatic palette is also reduced to an essential vocabulary and it repeats itself, lending the narration in the present tense its aesthetic unity: light tones of blues, greens, browns, and gray predominate together with white. In this context, the warm yellow of the protagonist's jumper stands out – as does, once in a while, the solid red of another character's hat or dress. The yellow of Gawa's jumper traverses the panels and the pages as a lasting visual marker, a sign of identity. It embodies a quiet but tenacious resistance to invisibility, Gawa's invisibility in his forced exile, forever caught as he is in a space "in between".

Furthermore, the fact that the narrating voice *is* Gawa's is an act of empowerment effectively put forward by the authors. In the book, Gawa recounts the difficult journey through the Sahara Desert and a previous attempt at leaving his native city by hiding on a ship for Europe (Fig. 6). Discovered on the ship, he is thrown at sea, and miraculously saved by a fisher boat (Fig. 7).



Figure 6: Nangué E. and Titi F., *Une éternité à Tanger*, 2004; 2017 English edition, spread

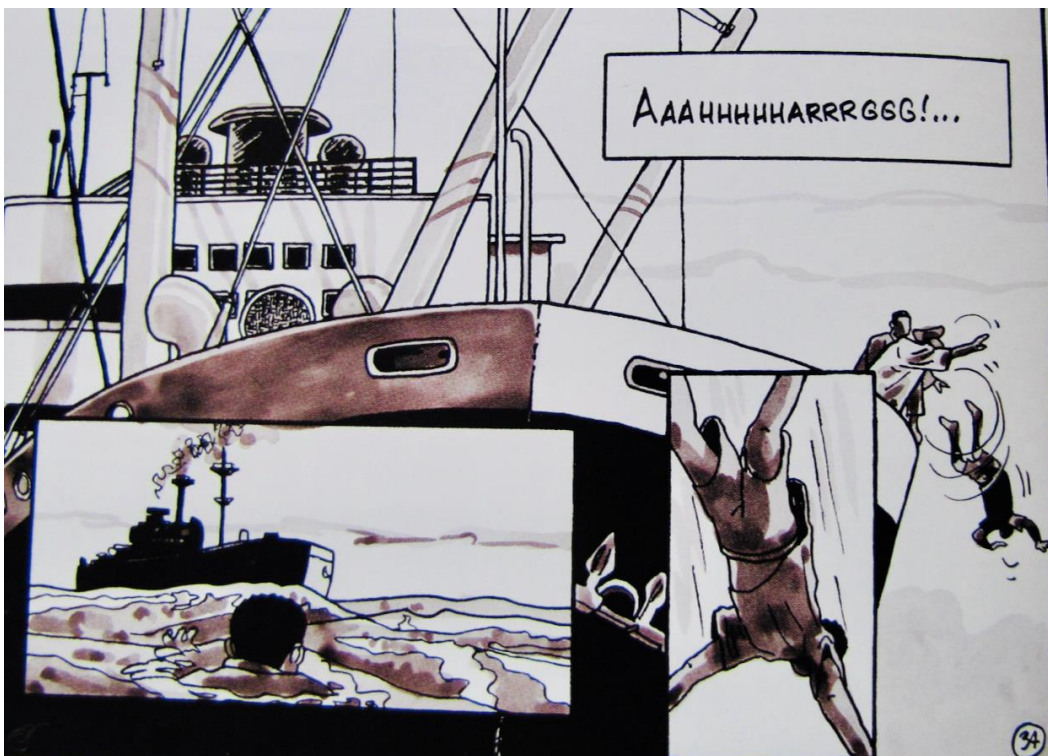


Figure 7: Nangué E. and Titi F., *Une éternité à Tanger*, 2004; 2017 English edition (detail)

Images of African migrants who lost their life in the Mediterranean, their bodies floating at sea (Fig. 8), hunt Gawa and hunt us as readers. Made in 2004, these comics remain timely, and speak of an ongoing human tragedy.



Figure 8: Ngangué E. and Titi F., *Une éternité à Tanger*, 2004; the 2017 English edition

The ending page of Titi and Ngangué's comics is a cry against colonization and the impoverishment of the African continent exploited of its own natural resources for the profit of the same European countries that today reject African migrants. This page is structured in a minimal composition of three horizontal panels of varying sizes. As the reader is left with the image of Gawa's life forever suspended in space and time, the horizon, a metaphor of the desire for the unattainable, pervades the very structure of things, and it poignantly becomes the very element that "sustains", as a skeleton, the comics layout (Fig. 9).



Figure 9: Ngangué E. and Titi F., *Une éternité à Tanger*, 2004; the 2017 English edition

This horizontal element bespeaks of both hope and disillusionment. In telling the experience of displacement lived by African people fleeing their home countries to escape economic, political, or social ordeals, *Une éternité à Tanger* speaks of Africa from the African point of view, and in doing so it subverts the stereotyping gaze and the exoticized images of the *bande dessinée* tradition exemplified by Hergé's *Tintin in the Congo* (1930-31).

The book's ending page calls to mind a poignant image from the 1939 poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to my Native Land) by the Martinique poet Aimé Césaire: "At the end of the wee hours, the wind of long ago – of betrayed trusts, of uncertain evasive duty and that other dawn in Europe – arises . . ." In particular, the following verse from that poem seems to rhyme with the image of Gawa's forever-postponed dream: "There still remains one sea to cross / oh still one sea to cross". Gawa's story of unfulfillment defies the longing for closure typical of comics, conveying to the reader the frustration of unattainable happiness. Unlike what happens in real-life, in this volume the powers of imagination make the traumatic affect tangible.

The eternity Gawa's finds in Tangiers is one of painful uncertainty. He is trapped in a state of perpetual absence and desire. This liminal space, this state of inbetweenness, invites potential agency in the reader through empathic identification with the protagonist. In this regard, the book's ending holds a sense of open-ended possibility, proving that a desire crystallized in the form of an image can turn into a potent agent.

In the Shadow of No Towers: A Poetics of Absence and Dislocation

The difficult task of giving representation to absence is also at the core of Art Spiegelman's comic book *In the Shadow of No Towers*. The shadow silhouette of New York's Twin Towers no longer standing is the key image with which the book opens: the presence of an absence. It addresses the trauma of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, of which the author was direct witness, together with his wife and daughter. It is worth noting that in the French edition of the book the title is translated *À l'ombre des tours mortes*. Spiegelman's careful word choice in the case of the original English title is telling: as opposed to "*tours mortes*," "No Towers" effectively announces the nature of the artist's endeavor and its difficulty, that is, the challenge of putting into words and images the invisible, a shadow with no substance (incidentally, the Italian edition, from 2004 by Einaudi, more aptly translated the title as "L'Ombra delle Torri").

Soon after the terrorist attacks, Spiegelman made a drawing for the cover of *The New Yorker* (published on 24 September 2001), where the black-on-black image of the towers first appeared (Fig. 10). It is like "an after-image". The book cover quotes the magazine cover, with some relevant differences. In the book, the background black is lighter, and the phantom image of the towers comes out more, *out of pure invisibility*. The nuances in blackness with which Spiegelman plays seem to reference American artist Ad Reinhardt's black monochrome paintings, which masterfully explore the territories of quasi-invisibility and both the limits and the possibilities of image-making.



Figure 10: Spiegelman, A., Cover for *The New Yorker* (24 September 2001)

Moreover, on the book cover Spiegelman adds a significant detail: the colored image of a host of early-20th-century comic characters who are being kicked out of planet Earth (with the New York skyline featured on it) by an angry male sheep whose long beard and hat turn it into an Osama Bin Laden figure. These characters seem to stand in for humanity and for culture at large, and, in their reference to the rich history of the ninth art, they can be collectively interpreted as a “stand-in” for the comic artist, Spiegelman himself (Fig. 11).



Figure 11: Spiegelman, A., *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 2004 (cover detail)

Originally, *In the Shadow of No Towers* appeared as a comic strip in the German newspaper *Die Zeit* (from 2002 until 2004), for Spiegelman could not secure publication in any major North American outlet at the time, as the cultural and political climate in the U.S. was extremely polarized on the subject (the country was then at war against Afghanistan and then Iraq). It was published in the U.S., as an oversized board book, only in 2004 by Viking Books (Fig. 12).

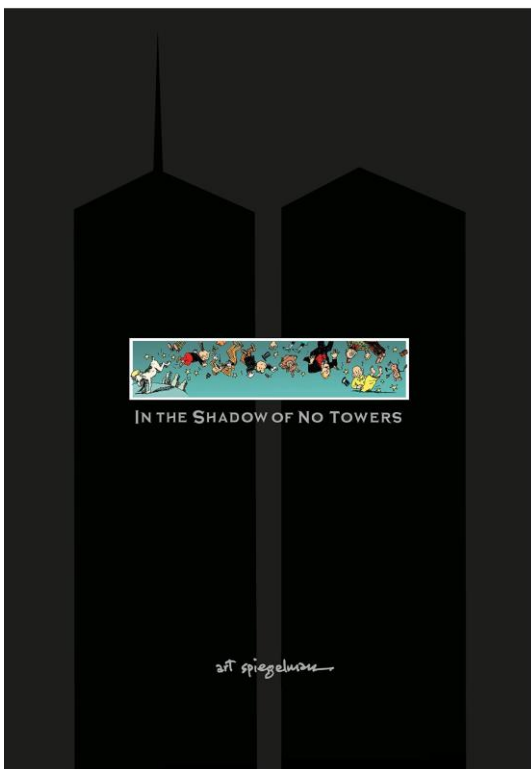


Figure 12: Spiegelman, A., *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 2004

The book is on cardboard pages. Opened, it plays with the format of the turn-of-20th-century American comics – that is, Sunday newspaper comics, published on broad sheets. It also plays with the format of the children board book.

The format allows Spiegelman to experiment with layout, variations of scale and perspective. The book comprises ten board sheets, which are “diaries”, generally produced on a monthly basis, from 2001 to 2003 (the dates are specified by the author, on each board sheet). In them, Spiegelman comes to terms with the out-of-scale suffering and terror experienced both personally and collectively. Following these board sheets dealing with contemporary history, comes a “Comic Supplement” sheet made by Spiegelman which introduces the importance of seven reprints of turn-of-the-20th-century American comic strips featured in the book – *The Yellow Kid*, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, *Bringing up Father*, and *Happy Hooligan*, among others.

The image of the burning tower is the fil rouge of the whole book. It is a memento mori that haunts the artist. On September 11, he witnessed one of the towers turning into the glowing bone of itself for a moment, before coming down. This haunting memory produces thoughts and associations explored in the book. The image of the tower on fire – the fire caused by the terrifying impact of the hijacked planes on the Twin Towers – appears along the edges of the pages, or in surprising placements that disrupt any narrative linearity. A visual sign of the trauma, the image repeats itself obsessively. Embodying a paradox, the book is somehow “supported” by the structure pictured in this recurring drawing, thus resting on the tenuous substance of a ghostly image.

Furthermore, in his innovative approach to the medium, Spiegelman subverts the conventional grid of comics, the panel-to-panel sequence read from left to right. His story tends to extend in multiple directions, and visually dense collages take over. The composition of this series of visual/textual fragments effectively mirrors the shattering of existence and civilization brought about by the terrorist attacks. To grasp this complex syntax the reader/viewer goes through an experience of *dislocation*. One must constantly readjust one’s gaze, jumping often from one extreme of vision to another and then back to panels/images too hastily scanned in the process. In this respect, one experiences a uniquely active visual and intellectual engagement. In this book, Spiegelman experiments a new formal structure, giving life to a new “history comics”.

Moreover, *In the Shadow of No Tower* articulates a biting satire of the American media-driven society, as exemplified by several panels critiquing the overbearing power of TV coverage and propaganda (Fig. 13).

In response to the sense of uncertainty and impending death following the terrorist attacks, Spiegelman turned to his art, *making comics*. Fearing another attack or the end of the world, he started drawing a page a day, hoping that the end of the world would be postponed of yet another day. To come to terms with trauma, he goes back to the origin of comics in America, to those early Sunday comics which were produced right next to Ground Zero on newspaper roll in the early twentieth century. He delves into a sort of "degree zero" of the genre. What he had witnessed that morning felt "too unreal" for him to take. The cartoonist has recounted: "I couldn't use reality. I found myself drawing me and my wife quarreling not like us, but as Maggie and Jiggs." Maggie and Jiggs are the signature characters of George McManus' *Bringing Up Father* (1913-2000), and in his book Spiegelman portrays himself and his wife disguised as them, while including on the same board sheet also references to *Maus* and *Krazy Cat* (Fig. 15).



Figure 15: Spiegelman, A., *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 2004 (detail)

Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* is yet another important source for inspiration. The board sheet featuring a *Little Nemo* reprint encapsulates a sweet recollection of the New York skyline in the early twentieth century before the Twin Towers were even imagined (Fig. 16).



Figure 16: Spiegelman, A., *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 2004

These old comics attract Spiegelman for their ephemeral nature, but also for their timelessness. Meant to be disposable, printed as they were on newspaper which would often be re-used after the comic strips had been read (for example, as wrapping paper), they nevertheless retain a timeless quality. In Spiegelman's mind, they share with the towers this coexistence of being ephemeral *and* timeless. By looking towards these old, ephemeral comics the artist found the courage to make new ones, as though the feeling of disorientation that he experienced allowed the past to be his future.

The concluding reprint in the book is from *Bringing Up Father*. This comic strip brings a refreshing sense of humor to Spiegelman's book and provides temporary solace. The image of the burning tower has given way to that of the leaning tower of Pisa, whose falling to the ground is prevented by the protagonist who, woken up in the middle of the night by a nightmare on the tower's destruction, goes out and places wooden planks to keep the building in position (Fig. 17).

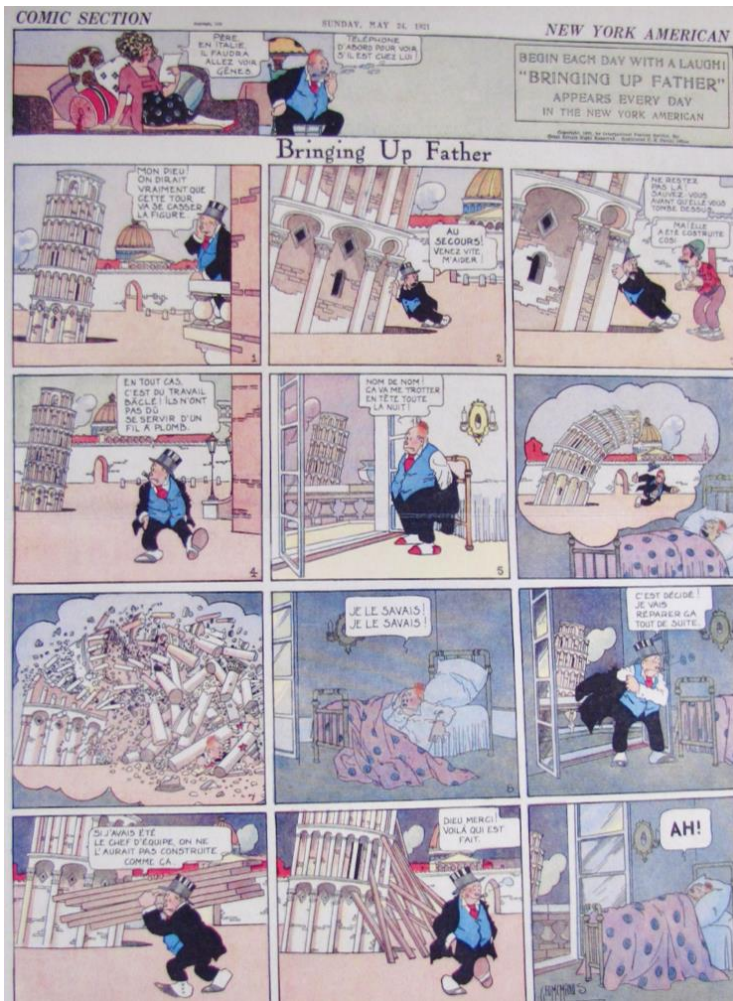


Figure 17: Spiegelman, A., *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 2004 (detail)

Spiegelman writes in the book that, while people in New York, after September 11, largely found solace in poetry, he did so in these kind of comics. This is beautifully exemplified by a sheet in his book where references to Little Nemo meet with Gary Panter's comic vocabulary and with *Maus*. Yet, in the same page, attention is drawn to the detail of a figure, Spiegelman himself, falling from the tower, depicted in a vertical panel running through the whole left edge of the sheet. This poignant image brings the viewer back to the tragedy of the people trapped in the towers, many of whom were seen falling into the void as the terrorist attack and its aftermath unfolded live on TV. The image also encapsulates Spiegelman's psychological and cultural dislocation after the attacks. In a single picture, world history and personal history collide (Fig. 18).



Figure 18: Spiegelman, A., *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 2004

The image of plunging, of falling down recurs in the book. One finds it in the colored detail on the book's front cover, and it also pervades the surface of the back cover where black-on-black comics characters plunge, their fall caused by the same male sheep figure, referencing Osama Bin Laden, which readers first encountered on the front cover (Fig. 19 and Fig. 20).



Figure 19: Spiegelman, A., *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 2004 (detail, front cover)



Figure 20: Spiegelman, A., *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 2004 (detail, back cover)

The image of plunging as extreme dramatization of dislocation — a plunging into invisibility/death — is also present in *Une éternité à Tanger*, as seen in a powerful detail showing a figure being thrown out of a boat into the sea (Fig. 21).



Figure 21: Nguangé E. and Titi F., *Une éternité à Tanger*, 2004 (detail)

At the Crossroads of Comics and Visual Arts: Luca Buvoli's *Astrodoubt*

In the digital comics project *Astrodoubt and The Quarantine Chronicles* by Luca Buvoli, dislocation is also a central element, as exemplified, in particular, by its opening image (Fig. 22).

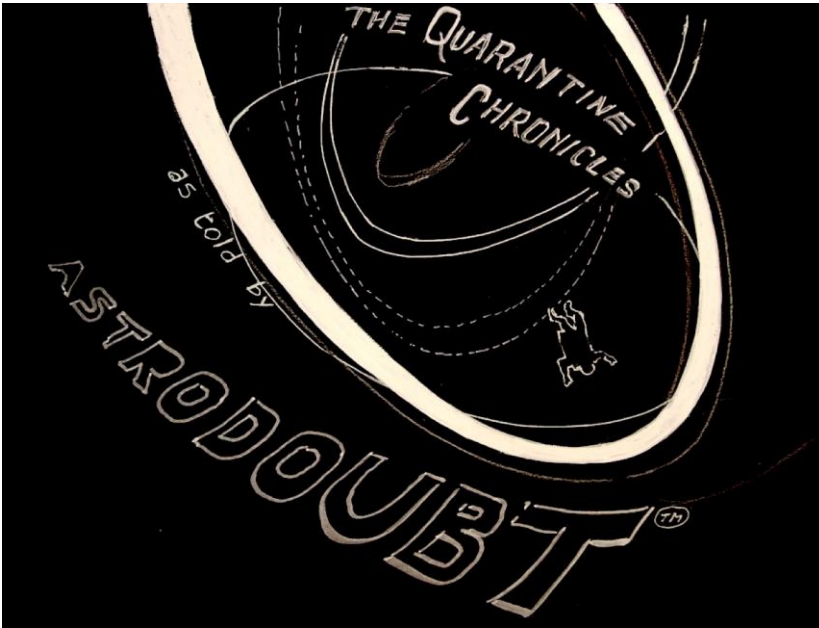


Figure 22: Buvoli, L., *The Quarantine Chronicles as Told by Astrodoubt* (from *Astrodoubt and The Quarantine Chronicles*), 2020, gouache, acrylic, and pencil on black paper, 22.8 x 30.4 cm

Buvoli is an Italian-born multi-media artist, who lives and works in New York. During the first lockdown in 2020 he began producing a series of visual and textual narratives commenting on the Covid-19 health and social crisis, and he decided to share them on Instagram. This comic project is ongoing. Using the form of the graphic novel, it occupies an unnamed space at the crossroads of comics, drawing, painting, and the digital. Drawn in white gouache and acrylic on black paper, the protagonist – the imaginary astronaut Astrodoubt, a counterpoint to the mythology of the super-hero of American comics with which the artist grew up – is pictured in the opening image of the series as a figure in free fall in the immensity of the universe or, better, of the dark unknown space we entered with the breaking of the pandemic in 2020.

Hence, in all three comics works under investigation the image of free falling is employed as a metaphor for the rupture of trauma, the dramatic plunging into a dimension outside of reality and life as one knew them before the occurrence of the traumatic event.

Astrodoubt is an individual of unspecified gender, race, and age. An astronaut grounded by the pandemic, he wanders and daydreams, transforming the new health and social restrictions and domestic routines during the pandemic into fanciful astronomical journeys. Abstraction and figuration meet in this work. A recurring abstract motif is that of the spiral, a metaphor for circular time (Fig. 23). While invoking connectivity with cosmic energies, the spiral can also symbolize the expansion of consciousness and, by extension, indicate knowledge and perseverance.



Figure 23: Buvoli, L., *Are We Alone in This Apartment?* (from *Astro doubt and The Quarantine Chronicles*), 2020, gouache, acrylic, and pencil on black paper, 22.8 x 30.4 cm

Moving away from the A3 book format of *Une éternité à Tangier* and the broad sheet board book format of *In the Shadow of No Towers* considered so far, with *Astro doubt and The Quarantine Chronicles* we venture into the realm of digital comics, whose episodes are read and looked at on a small phone screen (phones being generally preferred to computers by Instagram users). At the beginning, the artist posted a drawing a day. Then the interval stretched, in relation also to the evolution of life under Covid and the gradual reopening of activities. With the unfolding of the project, the time lapse varies. So far, the project has over 1,200 followers. Readers respond to it with Instagram messages, entering in direct dialogue with the artist and among themselves. Prompting an active engagement, these comics convene a provisional community. They invoke a relational affect and a participatory engagement on the part of readers/viewers, in the specificity of social media circulation. Employing for the first time the Instagram tool for the presentation and dissemination of his work, Buvoli has also explored the dimension, new to him, of “giving the works away online – for free – to whomever would use them in their life or work.” (Buvoli, 2021, online). This way, he has also reached out to a broader audience, beyond the art world and the comics world. Moreover, in this work the artist explores the relation between the so-called “slow media” (painting, drawing, artist book, etc.) and digital social media with their expectation of immediate response and also the promise of quick oblivion. Made in response to uncertainty and isolation – the dramatic social isolation imposed by COVID-19 the world over and, later in the pandemic, the ubiquitous “social distancing” – Buvoli’s work is a meditation on the fragility of life. Echoing this subject, it employs a sequential and yet constantly-interrupted format, where narrative linearity is replaced by a succession of self-contained moments that tend to emphasize the circularity of time.

Interestingly, throughout the project there is a balance between melancholy and dry humor. As a fitting example, consider the drawing *Motivational Poster # 1* (2020) in which the notion of scale – from the immensity of the universe to the smallness of a cramped

apartment room – sets in motion a humorous take on life in isolation under Covid-19. Meeting the challenge of adapting to its living spaces, Astro doubt shares with the readers a biting consideration, “Adaptability. No matter how small you think you are, there are always places smaller than you” (Fig. 24).

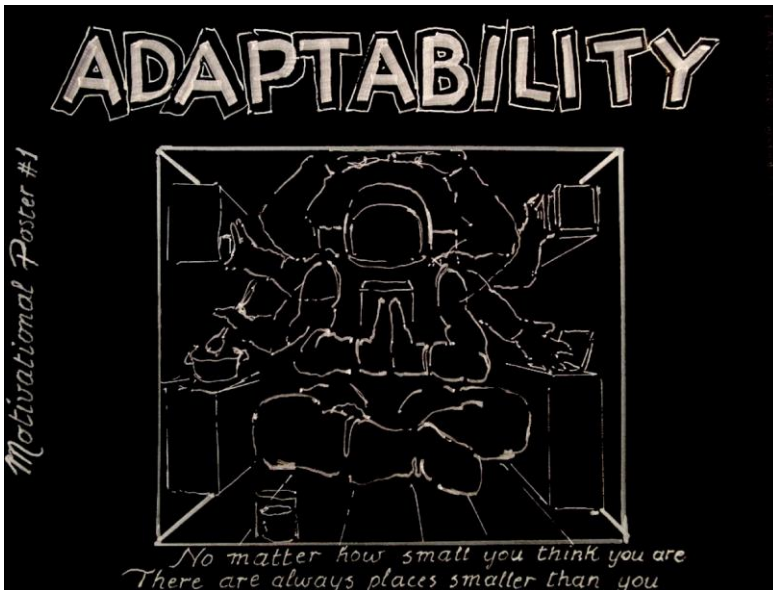


Figure 24: Buvoli, L., Motivational Poster # 1: Adaptability (from *Astro doubt and The Quarantine Chronicles*), 2020, gouache, acrylic, and pencil on black paper, 22.8 x 30.4 cm

In Buvoli's project a feeling of impending disaster and fear for a possible end of the world dominate. The looming question is “What's Going to Happen Today?” (Fig. 25).

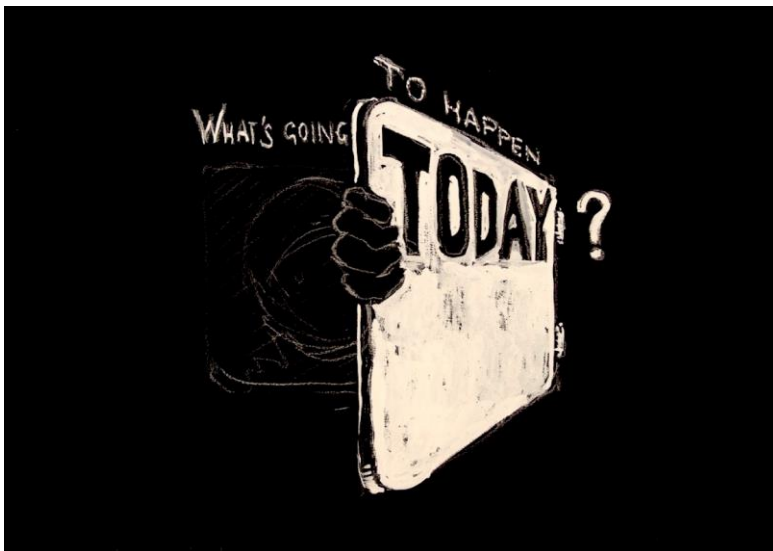


Figure 25: Buvoli, L., What's Going to Happen Today? (from *Astro doubt and The Quarantine Chronicles*), 2020, gouache, acrylic, and pencil on black paper, 22.8 x 30.4 cm

Such an inescapable trace of the experience of trauma pervades also Spiegelman's work and even though under a different expressive register – a more restrained one – Titi

and Nguangé's book. All three selected comics works address an unsettling fear of the immediate future. In particular, Buvoli and Spiegelman recur to dark humor as a means to come to terms with historical rupture. All three projects contemplate the fragility of life projecting it against the background of timelessness – the timelessness in which Gawa is frozen, looking out at sea, or that of the universe enveloping *Astrodoubt*, or the timelessness of Spiegelman's favorite comics.

For Buvoli, the language of comics is a “space of resistance” against alienation. Similarly to Spiegelman, who finds the strength to continue to go on with life and his creative work after the terrorist attacks by delving back into the rich history of American comics, Buvoli, in order to grapple with the new reality created by the pandemic (during which there was a huge loss of life), returns to comics, a medium that he had employed in the 1990s in a series of comics-based works – sculptures, videos, and artist's books – devoted to the figure of his imaginary *Not-a-Superhero* character. For both Spiegelman and Buvoli, the past is rediscovered as a source for the future. With *Astrodoubt* and *The Quarantine Chronicles*, the Italian artist experiments within the realm of comics and at the same time “beyond it” in a multimedia approach that has long characterized his practice. He creates a hybrid territory where boundaries of genres blur and the media of digital art, painting, drawing, and comics intersect. This hybridity opens up a “site of struggle” – the struggle to give form to the unknowable – where fluidity, a movement *across* multiple spaces simultaneously, superexceeds the dimension of in-betweenness that one can find, crystallized, in *Une éternité à Tanger*.

Text and image are equally important in the episodes of *Astrodoubt* and *The Quarantine Chronicles*. In the texts, Buvoli plays with a variety of graphic styles. His texts are effectively short, with an eye to the expectations of the Instagram audience in addition to those inherent to comics tradition. The *Astrodoubt* series is predominantly in black and white, a chromatic choice that, while suiting well the depiction of outer space, symbolically evokes the darkness of the traumatic experience of the pandemic. Moreover, this choice allows the artist to comment on the current polarization in American culture and society, which the pandemic exacerbated. It is worth underlining that the Trump presidency enacted a negation of the COVID-19 health crisis for political ends, and in that context Buvoli's strategy of bringing the invisible into visibility voices a critical stance against censorship.

Progressively, Buvoli has introduced color in the series, breaking the self-imposed black-and-white rule and introducing an increasing sense of hope (sustained by the vaccine discovery and the vaccination campaign). This is exemplified by the work *Lesson 5* (2021), first published in print as a sequence of drawings in New York's *Brooklyn Rail* art magazine in September 2021 and later posted on Instagram as part of the *Astrodoubt* project. It is part of an episode in the character's life where *Astrodoubt* gives seven lessons in one day on different notions of time, in light of the pandemic era. The overall episode to which *Lesson 5* pertains is titled *A Brief History of Time (Under Covid) – in 7 Lessons* and it pays homage to the studies of English physicist Stephen Hawking and those of the Italian physicist Carlo Rovelli, in an interesting dialogue between art and science.

In *Lesson 5*, Buvoli draws an evocative cityscape seen from outside planet Earth. Astrodoubt is pictured biking around the city – an oneiric version of New York – where everything is shut down due to the lockdown. The text in the drawings reads: “Some interpret the nature of time... as cyclical... when all events repeat themselves in the same sequence... in an eternal return. Oh, no! I am trapped in a virus loop!” (Fig. 26).



Figure 26: Buvoli, L., *A Brief History of Time (Under Covid) – Lesson 5* (pages 1-6), 2021, gouache and pen on black acid paper, digital media, for *The Brooklyn Rail* (September 2021)

In yet another captivating drawing from *Astrodoubt and The Quarantine Chronicles*, titled *The Universe...* art nods to science with humor. The protagonist is depicted as a tiny figure confronted by the immensity of a deep-black starry sky (Fig. 27).

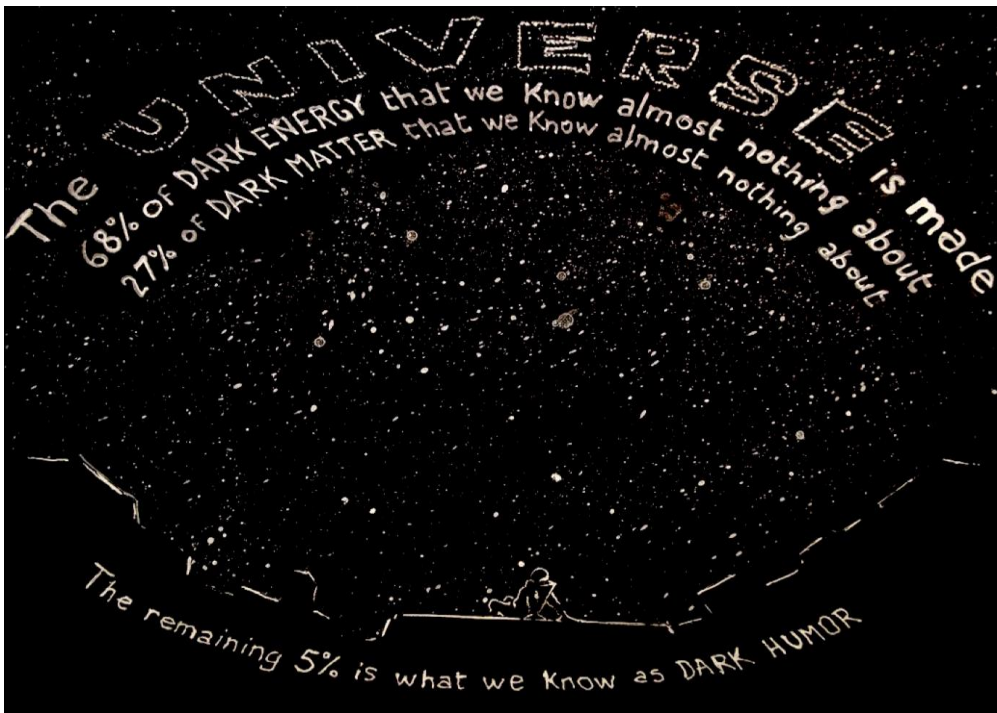


Figure 27: Buvoli, L., *The Universe...* (from *Astrodoubt* and *The Quarantine Chronicles*), 2020, gouache, acrylic, and pencil on black paper, 22.8 x 30.4 cm

This image encapsulates the experience of the Sublime (with its synthesis of Beauty and Terror), calling to mind iconic images of it in the history of painting, chief among them Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). And yet, Buvoli's sublime is of a "disenchanted" nature far from the Romantic tradition. The text accompanying this image exemplifies the artist's approach to the sublime and trauma. Merging the poetic and the humorous, it brings the reader, paradoxically, "back to earth", so to speak, and makes the unknowable *present* by convening a laughter, a moment of humorous release shared with the reader/viewer. The text reads, "The Universe is made 68% of dark energy that we know almost nothing about; 27% of dark matter that we know almost nothing about. The remaining 5% is what we know as Dark Humor."

This drawing seems to deeply resonate with the notion of lightness described by the Italian writer Italo Calvino in his *Six Memos for the Next Millenium* (posthumously published in 1988), where he points out that "As melancholy is sadness that has taken on lightness, so humor is comedy that has lost its bodily weight" (Calvino, 1988, p. 19).

Buvoli draws attention to the inaccessibility of the unknowable by way of a visual tension between the abstract and the figurative that runs through the work, as well as through a strategy that brings together, in an apparent paradox, the humorous, the poetic, and the seemingly light-hearted in order to tackle trauma.

It is through a sense of "lightness" or the "subtraction of weight," intended in Calvino's terms, that Buvoli's work powerfully re-affirms the resilience of hope and, ultimately, the resilience of art in the face of suffering.

The Daring of Imagination and the Transmission of Memory through Empathy

Addressing loss, anguish, vulnerability, and uncertainty, the comic works created by Ngangue and Titi, Spiegelman, and Buvoli, each in its own way, articulate the struggle to give visible form to the invisible. In them, dreams, or nightmares, and reality blend - albeit to different degrees in each work – and narration bespeaks of a fractured subjectivity. Their exploration of traumatic histories contributes to raise fundamental questions: who gets to tell the story? Who owns history? Who shapes the future?

The works under investigation embody what can be described as “the daring of imagination” in the face of the unknowable, countering the numbness of oblivion that our image-saturated culture too often encourages. The process of creatively *weaving together* a story about a shock, that is, a rupture in the fabric of life, is in and of itself a form of repair. Moreover, by asserting the humanity of the survivor/first witness of trauma, the selected works invite an identification of the reader with the subject, an empathic connection. Empathy insures a transmission of memory, also to future generations. As Marianne Hirsch’s investigation of the notion of postmemory has shown addressing the experience of secondary witnessing, memories of traumatic events *live on* to leave their trace on the lives of those who were not there to experience them (Hirsch 2012). Shaking through empathy the passivity of the beholder prevailing in contemporary culture, the works of Ngangue and Titi, Spiegelman, and Buvoli open up new avenues to foster awareness and potential human agency. In the process, they tackle timely issues surrounding trauma, democracy, audience, resistance, and aesthetics.

The fact that all three projects explore traumas of great collective magnitude through the lens of the personal and the intimate accentuates their ability to elicit empathy. As a result, they underscore that the comic is a *relationship*, a dialogical engagement, thus successfully providing a counterpoint to the de-humanization that tends to pervade today’s technologically driven societies. As Suzanne Keen aptly defines it, narrative empathy is “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing...or imaginative narratives of another’s situation and condition” (Keen 2013). In the case of the selected comics works, the fictional and the factual interweave: real life is re-counted, and thus transformed to greater or lesser degrees, in the form of a story materializing in a unique tension between text and image. This blend of non-fiction and fiction effectively contributes to amplify character identification, empathy, and co-creative reading/viewing.

Embodying the tension to draw the unrepresentable and to speak of the unspeakable, these works celebrate comics’s experimental impulse. In the process, as they investigate invisibility in its existential, social, political, and cultural dimensions, they push the boundaries of the ninth art and underscore its ability to deconstruct stereotypes, challenge received representations and mobilize conscience.

Biographical Note

Dr. Francesca Pietropaolo is an art historian, curator, and critic based in Venice and New York. Her research focuses on postwar European and American art, international contemporary art and comics. She has held curatorial positions at the Walker Art Center, MoMA, and the Fondation Louis Vuitton. She has lectured at, among others, MoMA, New York's School of Visual Arts, Fondazione Cini, and Accademia di San Luca. Among her publications: *Y.Z. Kami* (Art Press, 2023); *Luisa Gardini* (New York University, 2016) and numerous essays in publications for, among others, MoMA, Fondation François Pinault, and Académie de France à Rome. She is the editor of *Robert Storr. Writings on Art, 1980-2021*, 2 vols. (Heni, London, 2021). She serves on the jury of The College Art Association's Alfred H. Barr Award for Distinction in Publication (2022-25). She has contributed to *ARTnews*, *Art in America*, *Art Press* (Paris), and is editor-at-large at *The Brooklyn Rail*.

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Notes

¹ It can be viewed at https://www.instagram.com/astrodoubt_/?hl=en

² This and all other quotes by Spiegelman in this article are taken from the televised interview with the artist recorded at Strand Bookstore in New York on 5 September 2004 and aired on C-SPAN 2. It can be accessed at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?183313-1/depth-strand-book-store>