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Mediascapes journal 22/2023

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

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).

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Notes

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

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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.

Keywords: comics; media culture; participatory culture; gaze; iconostasis

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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

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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The Color of Paper: Seeing Race in the Comics Medium*

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For uncolored works in the comics medium, ink is paradigmatically black and paper is paradigmatically white, creating conceptually complex relationships for images representing race. When characters are rendered as the negative spaces within lines that frame the interiors of bodies, the actual background color of the page represents skin color. If the actual page is literally white, then that whiteness represents the non-literally white skin of both racially white and nonwhite characters. Whatever its actual color, a page may also be understood as conceptually white: a uniformly blank default background denoting no color. Both page and racial whitenesses are composed of many of the same light-tone colors which are often grouped and conceptualized as a single monolithic metaphorical color treated as an unacknowledged background norm.

Keywords: Race, negative space, color, whiteness, paper

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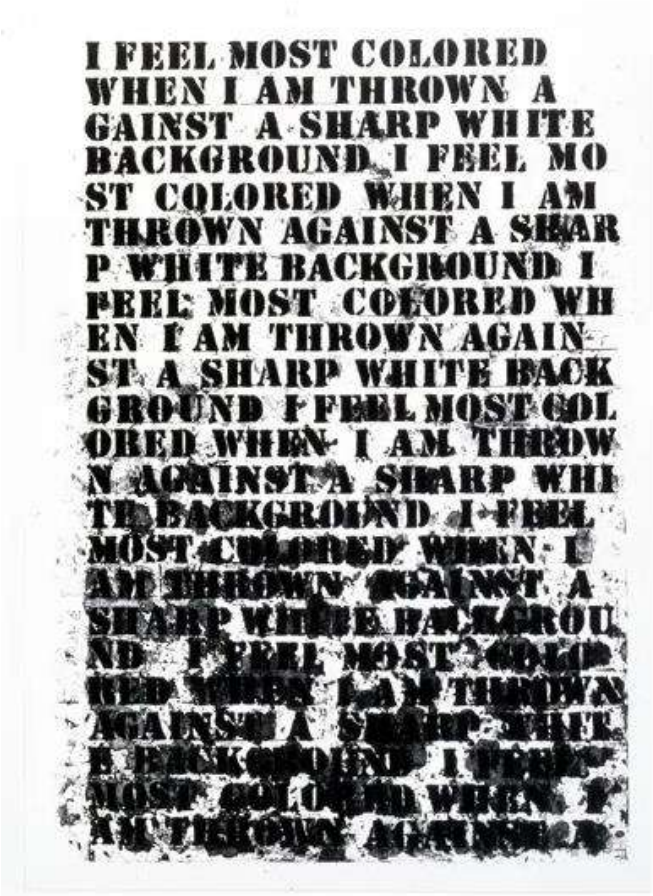

Figure 1 - Glenn Ligon

“I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background,” writes Zora Neale Hurston in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Glenn Ligon literalizes the observation in *Untitled (Four Etchings)*, repeating Hurston’s sentence in black paint on a white canvas. Claudia Rankin includes Ligon’s painting in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, later remarking that the absence of “books on how whiteness works in the art world” allows “whiteness to hold onto universality without questioning how it’s constructed” (Steinhauer, 2016). Hurston’s, Ligon’s, and Rankin’s shared focus draws attention not only to whiteness as a dominating presence in U.S. culture but to visual metaphors of race, especially in black and white images. Sharpening that focus to black and white works in the comics medium, I analyze the significance of paper color by examining examples from a diverse range of graphic novels that illustrate the complex interactions between paper color and racial color.

Though ‘race’ and ‘color’ are often used synonymously, the first is a set of socially-constructed categories, and the second is a synecdoche used to define those categories even though skin tones map onto them inaccurately. Since the actual skin color of white people is a range of colors, none of them white, racial whiteness does not correspond to literal whiteness. While some comics pages are white, Certified Guaranty Company’s page quality scale includes a list of adjectives that also suggests racial whiteness, including cream, light tan, and pink. The visual overlap influences racial thinking. In his study of early African American print culture in the nineteenth-century southern U.S, Jonathan

Senchyne observes that because reading "print relies on making meaning out of the difference between black and white … the black/white dualism underwriting print legibility further naturalized black/white racial dualism" (2012, p. 142), and "the adoption of whiteness as a central metaphor makes paper inextricable from the process by which blackness becomes difference and whiteness the unmarked center" (2012, p. 145).

In the comics medium, ink is paradigmatically black and the background of a page is paradigmatically white. Two conventions are especially pertinent: the representational qualities of paper color to imply skin color, and the normative invisibility of a background color. Attending to these conventions requires reversing a norm of visual analysis: rather than focusing on the marks that comprise an image, attention falls on the negative spaces indirectly constructed by those marks. In comics studies, the negative spaces between black lines that represent frame edges have received a tremendous amount of attention, perhaps most influentially in Scott McCloud's claim that "the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics" (p. 66). The representational qualities of negative spaces between other black lines have gone largely unnoticed.

Often human characters are rendered as the negative space within lines that frame the interiors of bodies, making the actual background color of the page the default color representing any skin color. If the actual page is literally white, then that whiteness represents the non-literally white skin of both racially white and nonwhite characters. If the page is some other color, then that nonwhite color represents the colors of racial whiteness and nonwhiteness instead. Both page and racial whitenesses then are composed of many of the same light-tone colors which are grouped and conceptualized as a single monolithic metaphorical color able to represent all possible skin colors.

Whatever its actual color, a page may also be understood as conceptually white: a uniformly blank default background denoting no color. Colors instead are mixtures of ink added to the page, with no mixture producing either the literal or figurative whiteness of the unmarked paper. Racial whiteness also can be conceptualized as an absence of racially-defined color when other races are identified in contrast to a white norm. Imitating page whiteness, racial whiteness implicitly claims to be uniquely and inherently pure since all additions reduce it and all mixtures require it as a comparative measurement and baseline background.

Comics scholarship has only begun to address these issues. Frederik Byrn Køhlert observes that "to be raced as white in many comics often means to *not* have your outline filled in—to be at once racially invisible and at one with the page" (2020, p. 203), and as a result, "characters are often almost automatically raced as white, and as the universal human form from which other identities must diverge" (2020, pp. 203-204). Jeesham Gazi analyzes the discursive presence of paper color within skin-denoting negative space as diegetically transformative. Gazi identifies a scene in Paul Pope's 2009 comic *100%* that "demonstrates the freedom offered by the destruction of ethnic markers – the embracing of blankness" (2017, p. 134). The protagonist's "skin is screentoned and her features might" appear Puerto Rican or "racially unspecified," leaving her ethnicity "ambiguous," but when she transforms into her stage persona for a dance performance, "she pins back her long black hair and hides it under a long wig, which, in the black and white art, may be deemed

blank rather than blonde. Most strikingly, as she strips herself of her street clothes the screen tones fall away from her body, leaving her skin blank" (2017, p. 134). Gazi describes the "selftransformation" as a "kind of erasure," one

> already afforded to white persons. They are blank in their designation as the opposite of 'coloured' people, as if their skin has no hue at all. Which is really to say that they are blank in terms of the variation of character afforded to white personages, their inherent potential to be anything, anyone, at all, whether in real-life or in fiction. (2017, pp. 133-134).

Charles Hatfield analyzes Yvan Alagbè's use of page background similarly: "his pages pose indistinct or half-completed figures against blank, undifferentiated backgrounds, exploring the tension between positive and negative spaces. Simply put, Alagbe's characters seem constantly on the verge of dissolving into the page itself" (2005, p. 61), "thematizing the blackness and whiteness of ink and paper as signs of ethnic and cultural difference" (2005, p. 63).

Racial whiteness further employs the metaphor of a default background color through a claim of normativeness that obscures a range of characteristics and renders them figuratively invisible. The racial metaphor is common. For example, Andrea Hawkman and Sarah Shear title their edited essay collection *Marking the Invisible: Articulating Whiteness in Social Studies Education*. Other titles include D. W. Sue's *"The Invisible Whiteness of Being: Whiteness, White Supremacy, White Privilege, and Racism" and* Maureen T. Reddy's "Invisibility/Hypervisibility: The Paradox of Normative Whiteness." Scott McCloud uses the same metaphor in the subtitle of his seminal *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. A *Marking the Invisible* chapter employs another of McCloud's central terms: "White Supremacy in the Gaps of Practice." Neither the gaps that are central to McCloud's concept of closure nor the gaps that reveal racial biases in classrooms are literal gaps (even though McCloud's gaps often correspond to undrawn areas of the page). Since comics theory and social studies pedagogy share little else in common, the use of additional identical metaphors further highlights how both whitenesses are similarly constructed.

McCloud accidentally provides an example when he claims that his cartoon version of himself, because of its detail-removing simplification, is a "blank slate" that viewers "fill" with themselves. Jonathan Flowers critiques that assumption, noting that McCloud "fails to recognize that it is his own whiteness that is amplified … It is only because whiteness goes unnoticed … that McCloud can present his avatar as a blank slate," and so "when we question the whiteness of McCloud's avatar, its universality, we begin to question the fundamental nature of a world organized by whiteness and treats whiteness as universal" (2020, pp. 210-211).

By subsuming all skin colors into its representational range, page color is effectively universal and so invisible. Though it is a literal color—the color of the actual paper—it is also conceptually no color because page color is not necessarily perceived as an intended element of the artwork printed on it. Paper choice is likely perceived as a quality of what Christy Mag Uidhir differentiates as "collective production" rather than "collective

authorship." Though "different people are responsible for different production elements" of a comic (Mag Uidhir, 2012, p. 1), the people responsible for selecting paper and therefore paper color are likely not understood to be co-authors. As an element of collective production but not collective authorship, the actual paper of a comic is both present and not present. Racial whiteness operates similarly: white people are both of a specific race and also sometimes conceptualized as though paradoxically belonging to no race if the category of race is constructed in contrast to the unexamined norm of whiteness.

To explore the implications of page whiteness representing multiple skin colors in relation to the invisible-like normativeness of racial whiteness, first consider the drawing convention of delineating a figure's skin as the negative space within contour lines that define the shapes of body parts. The artistic approach is so common both in and outside the comics medium, viewers may not register the fact that such lines are an interpretation of visual information. "In the real world," explain neuroscientists Bildge Sayim and Patrick Cavanagh, "there are no lines around objects," but "lines trigger a neural response that … lets lines stand in for solid edges," providing artists with "an economical and powerful method for representing scenes and objects" (2011, p. 1). The technique was a fine art norm before da Vinci's innovating sfumato technique of borderless edges in fifteenth-century Italy. It remains a pervasive norm in the comics medium.

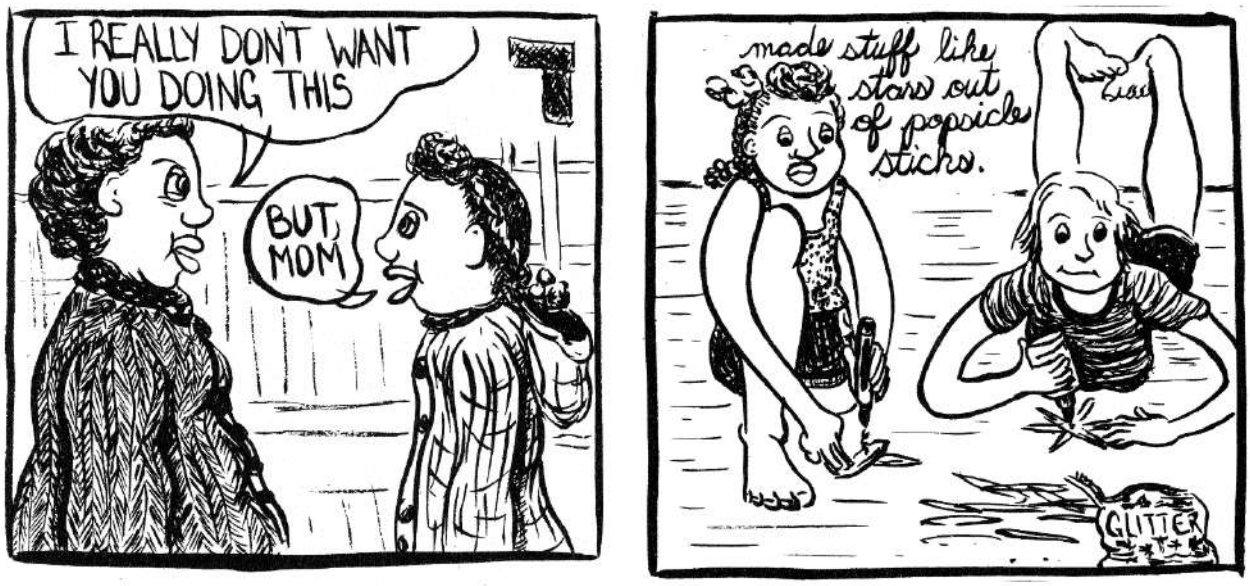

Figure 2 - Ebony Flowers

When Ebony Flowers draws a mother and narrating daughter in the titular comic of her 2020 collection *Hot Comb*, their bodies are shaped by black lines without additional colors or gradations. Because the comic is printed on white paper, that shade of white represents the two characters' skin colors because it is the literal color visible within the body-defining black lines. When the image is reproduced online, those skin colors are the backlit white of each viewer's screen. If the comic were printed on a different shade of paper, that shade would instead represent the same actual skin colors. If "Hot Comb" is understood as a memoir (its status is ambiguous) the representations of Flowers and her mother are likely

perceived as having the same skin color, but whether Flowers and her mother actually have the same skin color is impossible to determine.

Roy T. Cook addressed that ambiguity by proposing the "panel transparency principle," claiming that: "Characters, events, and locations within a fictional world described by a comic appear, within the fictional world, as they are depicted in typical panels within that comic" (2012, p. 134). Since Flowers' and her mother's skin are represented by the same page color, a strict interpretation of the transparency principle might require understanding them both to have paperwhite skin. Alternatively, if paper color is understood to be outside the principle (perhaps because it is selected by the publisher and so beyond Flowers' artistic control), viewers might still conclude that the absence of other differentiating details indicates that Flowers and her mother have the same skin color, one represented by whatever color paper the line art happens to be printed on. Even this less strict interpretation, however, is difficult to support. Cook later rejected his own transparency claim, arguing instead that "our access to the physical appearance of drawn characters in general is indirect, partial, inferential, and imperfect" (2015, p. 25). If so, viewers may understand skin color, along with a range of other details, to be underspecified, meaning the negative spaces within body contour lines lack representational information. The unmarked white of the page does not correspond to complexion or any other character quality.

While Cook's second claim replaces his first, it does not reverse it. Where the panel transparency principle concludes that represented subjects are as they appear, the second claim draws no corresponding conclusion. Represented subjects may, may not, or may partially be as they appear, and a subject's individual qualities may each vary along unknowable spectrums. As a result, the representational nature of a white page varies too. In the cases of Flowers and her mother, viewers likely understand that neither has paperwhite skin and, while their precise skin tones are unknowable, that each is considerably darker than they appear in their representations. However, in the case of Flower's childhood friend, Ellie-Mae, the representational nature of the white background shifts. Because Flowers' text identifies her friend as racially white, viewers likely understand her skin color to be nearer to the whiteness of the page than is Flowers' skin color. While Ellie-Mae's skin color is still unknowable, the page whiteness is more representationally suggestive for the racially white character. Also, for Flowers and her mother, because both are Black and also related, the white page represents an unknowable but possibly similar skin color. The contrast between Flowers and Ellie-Mae is presumably greater. The same whiteness then implies two racially dissimilar skin colors and also two racially similar skin colors simultaneously.

Figure 3 - Yuan Alagbe

Rather than presenting an exception, *Hot Comb* encapsulates a norm. Yuan Alagbe's collection *Yellow Negroes and Other Imaginary Creatures* reveals the same relationship between page color and race. Page whiteness makes the skin colors of an interracial couple indistinguishable, prompting viewers to project colors based on facial and hair features alone (2018, p. 29). Viewed in isolation with hair significantly cropped by the panel frame, the female figure might appear racially ambiguous. Though Alagbe's text previously establishes that the character is white (because her father is shocked to learn that she is in a relationship with a Black man), the text does not account for differences in skin color within and between the racial categories. The connotative quality of the white page, however, may paradoxically increase the perception of contrast between the two figures. Viewers may experience the page whiteness as filling in the body of the racially white character, while also having to perceptually reject that same whiteness from filling in the racially black character. The two figures are conceptually white and nonwhite, even though within the storyworld their skins tones could be similar. Page whiteness then increases perceptions of racial difference.

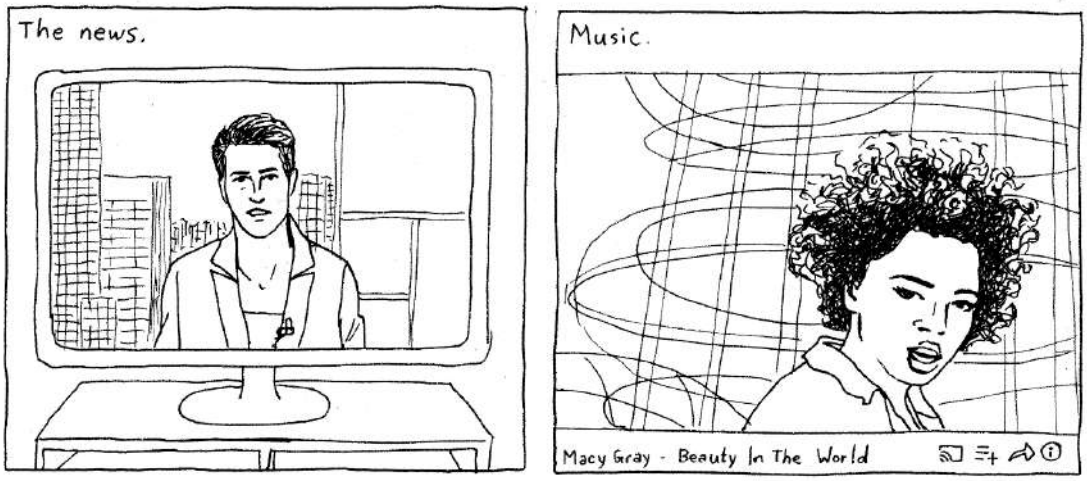

Figure 4 - Keiler Roberts

White artists rely equally on the representational convention. Keiler Roberts' graphic memoir *Rat Time* appears to include only racially white characters, but her portrait of Black singer Macy Gray also consists only of black lines enclosing white space, the same as the unnamed portrait of white political commentator Rachel Maddow on the same page (2019, n.p.). Viewers who do not know the celebrities' appearances must perceive skin color based on assumptions about nose, lip, and hair shapes. Such viewers could mistake either figure's race and therefore experience their skin color accordingly. While photographs of Maddow typically capture a light skin color, and photographs of Gray a darker one, the contrast is not extreme. Viewers familiar with both celebrities may not recall either, but the conceptual influence of page whiteness instead produces a white/nonwhite dichotomy of absolute difference.

Figure 5 - Eleonor Davis

Similarly, Eleanor Davis' graphic novel *The Hard Tomorrow* includes Black secondary characters whose racial identities are suggested through hair and facial features but not by crosshatching or other darkening effects (2019, p. 42). The representational qualities of Davis' ink is further complicated by hair color. She draws the hair of Black characters with black ink to represent what is presumably black hair. Where hair interiors are not opaquely black, Davis' expressive line qualities contribute to an impression of racially Black hair too. The hair of racially white characters, however, may be represented with the white paper enclosed by black contour lines, presumably representing lighter colors such as blonde and light brown. Though Davis draws some white characters' hair with the same black interiors as racially Black dark hair, the White characters' hair might be understood as black, dark brown, or medium brown, meaning the same ink has a greater representational range depending upon the perceived race of the character.

Figure 6 - Jessica Abel

The norm applies similarly to less distinct ethnic differences in skin color. Jessica Abel sets her graphic novel *La Perdita* in Mexico, and while the cast includes Latinx, Asian, and European American characters, all skin colors are equally undifferentiated by page areas enclosed in black lines. Viewed out of context of the graphic novel, the various figures may appear racially and ethnically ambiguous, but if a viewer interprets a facial feature as racially or ethnically defining, perception of the figure's skin could vacillate accordingly – even though the ranges of skin tones of individuals within those socially-constructed categories overlap. Again, page whiteness paradoxically reinforces viewer assumptions of racial differences in color.

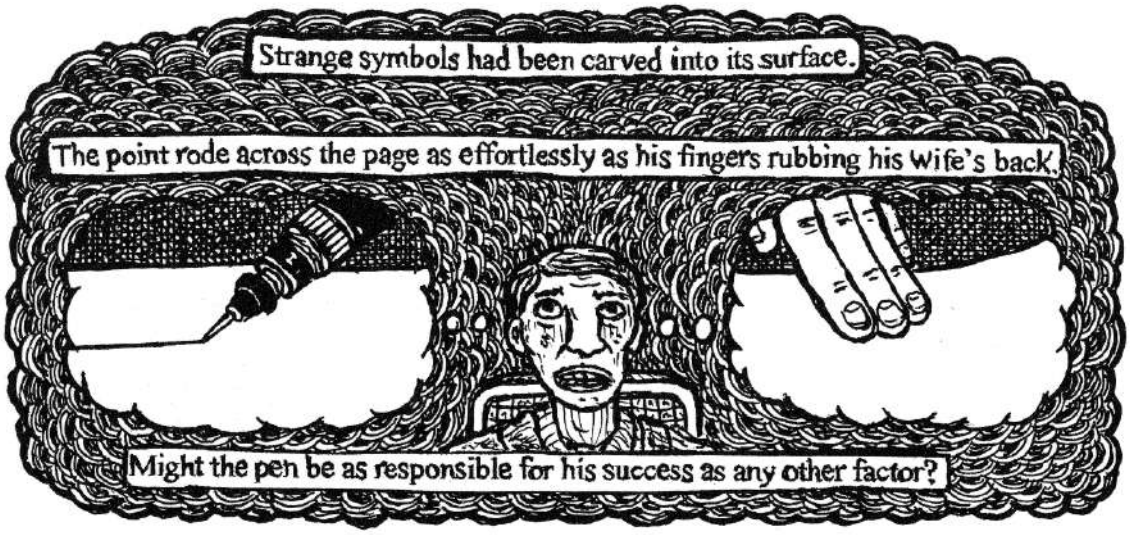

Figure 7 - Theo Ellsworth

Theo Ellsworth makes the conflated relationship between page and skin colors explicit in *Secret Life*, an adaptation of a Jeff VanderMeer story. Ellsworth draws a fountain pen in the white space between two panels, and inside a lower panel, he separately

frames two interior images: the same pen drawing a line across a cropped area of a white piece of paper, and fingers touching a cropped area of a figure's back. Through a Gestalt effect, the black line defining the top edge of the represented paper and the black line defining the top edge of the figure's back seem continuous, as though the two diegetically distant areas are a single area interrupted—which, as ink-framed portions of the same actual piece of paper, they are. Above both images a caption box contains: "The point rode across the page as effortlessly as his fingers rubbing his wife's back" (2021, n.p). The color of "the page" within the represented world and the color of the wife's back are both represented by the actual color of the actual page, which is white.

Though the visually implied assumption that the represented page is a similar color as the actual page may be justified, an assumption that the wife is racially white is not. Ellsworth draws the wife's face four pages later, but his cartooning style is simplified and exaggerated in ways that do not provide sufficient detail for determining ethnicity. Ellsworth follows the image of the two having sex with two caption boxes: "He could not think of the pen without thinking of her soft, hot skin" and "He could not think of the pen without remembering her nakedness, shining in the dark room." The description "soft, hot" suggests nothing about skin color, and "shining" might describe a range, especially when contrasted to the literal darkness of the surrounding room and if the skin is illuminated with sweat as the description of sex might suggest. The white space framed between the two texts is connotative, likely directing viewers to imagine the wife to be very light-skinned—even though nothing in the text suggests that.

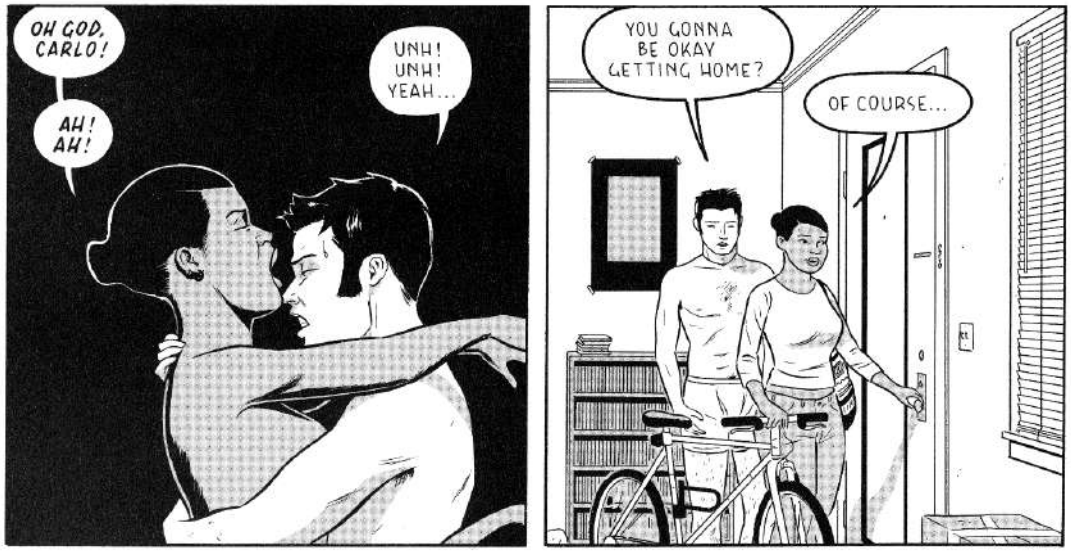

Figure 8 - Adrian Tomine

The above analysis applies to comics consisting of line art only. Many works in the comics medium instead add gray tones to line art or are composed initially in that style, eliminating or at least reducing areas where page color is visible. In those cases, skin color may be represented by a color other than the color of the unmarked page. In Adrian Tomine's *Summer Blonde*, a white character's skin color is represented according to the

norms of line art discussed above, but the interior areas of a Black character's skin are instead shaded opaquely gray (2016, p. 38). The effect is naturalistic because the gray is understood to correspond to the actual darkness of the skin, as though the image were a black and white photograph. The white character's skin—even though still represented by the white of the page—is also naturalistic, because it is now understood as having the same photographic quality as they gray it contrasts. Yet it is unclear in the next panel how closely the color of the white character's skin is to the color of the Black character's shirt also represented by the same page color. While it is possible that the shirt is, for example, beige, neither a beige shirt nor beige skin would appear as purely white in a black and white photograph. The naturalistic effect either collapses or, if unnoticed, employs gray in relationship with page whiteness to produce similar racial impressions.

Figure 9 - gg

In *I'm Not Here*, graphic novelist gg represents the light skin of Asian-Canadian characters with opaque gray shapes only slighter darker than the page background visible in the margins and gutters. The effect again is of actual skin colors altered to gradations by black and white photography, and so the near-white shade is perceived as representationally realistic. This parallel norm further highlights the peculiarity of a similarly light page color in line art representing a range of skin colors, some significantly darker. Similar contrasts can appear within works employing color gradations too. In gg's *Constantly*, she draws black hands and arms to represent a main character's depression as a living being. As a result, the representational qualities of the two colors are opposite. The very light shade is realistic, while the black is only metaphorical since it represents a psychological experience.

Though less common, some works in the comics medium are or are composed in the style of relief art. The printing method is commonly identified with woodcuts, but it includes any surface with two levels so that non-recessed areas leave ink on the paper and recessed areas leave none. Though, like line art, only one color of ink appears on typically

lighter colored paper, the technique and resulting style usually produces two kinds of shapes, one black and one white. Though both may have representational qualities, traditionally white is reserved for skin color.

Figure 10 - Felix Vallotton

The norm originates from outside the comics medium. For example, French woodcut artist Felix Vallotton's1898 woodcut series *Intimates* depicts ten couples in private domestic scenes. Though, as with line art, it is impossible to determine the skin qualities of any of the ten individuals depicted, all are represented by the color of the paper, which, instead of leaving skin color ambiguous, implies that all twenty characters are racially white. The inference occurs despite Vallotton's rendering minimal facial features, as well as orientalist influences of the period. Vallotton also never uses non-recessed areas to represent skin, even though actual skin color may no more resembles black ink than it resembles white paper.

Figure 11 - Frank Miller

Black ink signifying racially white skin is uncommon in the comics medium too. An exception occurs in the opening pages of Frank Miller's 1991 *Sin City*. Avoiding all gradations and adopting a binary style similar to relief art, Miller uses both black shapes of opaque ink and areas of an unmarked page to represent not only skin, but the skin of the same two characters, alternating and reversing the representational qualities of the black ink and the white page. When first drawn, the exposed skin of the character Goldie is represented by white page areas surrounded by black ink. Later, the skin of the same character is represented by areas of black ink surrounded by unmarked areas of the white page. The same is true of the narrating character. The technique could imply silhouettes if the embracing and seemingly merging bodies are understood to obscure a light source, but the seemingly white bed sheets, defined by page areas enclosed by black contour lines, contradict that interpretation. Though neither character is racially identified by Miller's text (except perhaps connotatively by the name "Goldie"), their facial features, the tradition of film noir that defines the work's genre, and the lack of racial diversity in Miller's overall oeuvre suggest that both characters are racially white.

Figure 12 - Sue Coe

The rarity of black ink representing racially non-white skin color emphasizes the near universality of the contrasting norm. Sue Coe reflects similar norms in her two relief images in the 2020 issue of the comics omnibus *World War 3 Illustrated*. In these cases, however, the page is black and the ink white. Despite the reversal, the whiteness of the ink rather than the blackness of the page still carries greater representational qualities. Though the rows of faces in "Doctor MAGA" presumably include a range of racial identities, all skin colors are represented by the same white (2020, 89). Because masks obscure nose and lip shapes and Coe renders hair with little variation, eyes alone are potential racial and ethnic markers, resulting in minimal and ambiguous differentiation. The faces then are perceived as multi-racial only because viewers draw that conclusion based

on the critique of a president infamous for racist remarks. Coe's "Cardboard Coffins" does include a figure whose skin is literally black because it is composed predominately of areas of the black page enclosed by white ink (2020, 124). Since the figure is a corpse, the black likely suggests skin darkened by decomposition and so not racial identity. Again, the minimally rendered facial features and hair shape likely determine race.

Even when thrown on a sharp black background, whiteness retains its normative universality and paradoxical invisibility. Since page whiteness is the predominant norm in the comics medium, it literalizes the assumption of racial whiteness as universal, representing the skin color of all characters, regardless of race. Yet page whiteness is comparatively more representational for racially white characters than for nonwhite characters. If a character is understood to be dark skinned, viewers must see past the contradictory quality of the page color. Since light-skinned characters are also not literally white, viewers must also see past the page color in those cases too, but to a lesser degree. The result is likely increased perceptions of skin color difference between white and nonwhite characters. Moreover, the literal whiteness of the page and the metaphorical whiteness of racial whiteness are aligned and so easily conflated. The statement 'white people are white' seems self-evidently redundant, while 'Black people are white' seems overtly paradoxical. That paradox remains a prominent norm of the comics medium.

Nota biografica

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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.

Keywords: invisible, comics, novel, cinema, semiotics

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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

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).

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Tracing the Invisible: Lynda Barry's Comics*

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Turning to Lynda Barry's distinctive comics which interweave autobiography, fiction, and teaching manuals, this article expands on the different ways in which the invisible is present in Barry's works, encompassing elements that challenge visual representation and those that constitute the backbone of comics expression. The article unpacks Barry's incorporation of collage and its constituents of untutored drawing through considering key theories surrounding the trace and the archive. The valorisation of marginalized and ignored image-making practices (such as children's drawings and untutored drawings) are examined through concepts surrounding animation, possibilities of connecting through drawing and alternative ways of conceptualizing both the making and reception of art.

Keywords: comics, trace, collage, archive, art practice, affect, animation, children's drawing, untutored drawing

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"The thing I call my mind seems to be kind of like a landlord that doesn't know its tenants."
(Barry, 2008, p. 5)

"So where's the comic? The comic is somewhere between the person who made it and the person who's looking at it. It's a relationship."
(Misemer, 2020, p. 174)

Comics Invisibles

In his landmark *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud famously termed comics an invisible art because so much happens outside of the frames and between the panels. Comics, McCloud points out, function largely through all the information that is cut out from the panels and through the blank spaces of the gutters. Cutting away and working with ellipses is part of what McCloud calls the secret labor of comics (see Chute, 2013). While much ink has been devoted to the limits of closure and the soundness of McCloud's claims about comics (see, for instance, Pizzino, 2021; Miller and Worden, 2022), comics studies has perhaps only broached the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the connections between comics and the invisible. This is also evident in the rich variety of artistic responses to the central question of the Invisible Lines project: "How to draw the invisible". Comics invisibles include all that which lies beneath the surface of the line, and the visible limits of its support of page, book, canvas, tablet etc. These invisibles include, on one hand, unsayable and unvisualizable elements of comics. On the other, they also include the invisible elements that are part of the system of comics such as the gutter that does invisible work or the act of braiding (Groensteen 1999). All of these invisibles play a central role in Lynda Barry's comics.

This article traces these different kinds of invisibles discernible in Barry's comics, combining Barry's very distinctive comics vocabulary with medium-specific concerns to show how these invisibles reflect the functioning of the comics medium while testing, and even stretching, the medium's limits. For this, the article adopts two perspectives, that of the graphic trace and the archive and the animated nature of Barry's art and the connections that flow from it. Its final section turns to how Barry's comics teach the invisible.

Although we only infrequently encounter the word "invisible" in Barry's works, accessing and representing the invisible is one of the most recurrent themes in her graphic novels. Since many of her books also interrogate the medium of comics and the act of comics making, the invisible underpinning comics is a key theme. The panoply of comics invisibles is perhaps most evident in her works that function as teaching manuals or have a DIY component such as *One Hundred Demons* (2002), *What It Is* (2008), *Picture This* (2009), *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor* (2014) or, most recently, *Making Comics* (2019). Notably, these books are probably her least comics-like publications and distance themselves from the common notion of what comics are and should be: they skirt the basic

constituents of comics - panels, word balloons, even to a certain extent a recognizable character, because Barry herself shapeshifts and adopts changing personae (as is perhaps most evident in *Syllabus*, in which her professor and past personae appear in varying forms). Nevertheless, all of these elements are implicitly present. While we intuitively categorize these works as comics, they also espouse the form of the diary and the notebook. They therefore have a strong comicitous quality, to take up Colin Beineke's term which allows for identifying how comics-like elements persist beyond traditional forms of comics.

While autobifictionalography (*One Hundred Demons,* p. 5) and manuals have often coexisted in Barry's works, her most recent graphic novel, *Making Comics* seems to suggest a shift towards the drawing manual. These manuals advocate a return to the more hybrid use of images and words that populate children's worlds, but are relegated to the margins of the worlds of older children and adults. This practical but also unusual and distinctively Barry-like guide to making comics (which contrasts, for instance, with Scott McCloud's earlier *Making Comics*) is useful for identifying the comics invisibles that underpin much of Barry's comics work.

A self-proclaimed image-wrangler (Kirtley, 2012), Barry writes about seeking images and visualizing the invisible. She incorporates several of her own and found images that offer a means of getting closer to the invisible. This is evident in the richly collaged pages from *What It Is* and *Picture This*. They perform the work of unpacking and surpassing the tension between idea and form and of self-judgement, aspects which also perform - and shape - much of the invisible work leading to the finished comic. The kinds of images that are invisible or invisibilized in different ways include:

- images that she finds in her imagination, often based on memories (such as the demons emerging from the "One Hundred Demons" exercise);
- images that she cuts out (of magazines, of different objects and materials and her own art);
- images that are thrown away or given to her (such as the images made by her students during class which they didn't want to keep).

The invisibles in Barry's comics, often themes and concerns that are wrangled with and accorded visual form, include: the power of the image for channeling, communicating and even healing; the mystery of image-making and creation; the inexpressibility of childhood; and the aliveness of children's drawing and untutored drawings in general. Additional invisibles engaging in invisible or behind-the-scenes work, influencing the creative processes of the comic include the demons, which play a central role in *One Hundred Demons* and persist in her other works, acquiring both friendly and threatening forms by personifying personal and creative anxieties. Barry also tries to represent other kinds of invisibles that challenge the limits of visual representation, such as music and dancing or smells to creating multisensory experiences. The invisible in Barry's work is therefore located in the universal and transmedia issues of making ideas emerge, and giving ideas

an appropriate form, of the unsaid and the unsayable (as is the case with the demons populating *One Hundred Demons*), the not drawn or the undrawn (drawn and then erased).

Possible methodologies giving form to the invisible in Barry's work include:

- the connections between childhood memories, and childish and untutored drawing styles;
- collages incorporating scraps of the everyday, the ordinary, alongside drawings destined to be thrown away or other archives that are not accorded institutional space, such as the documents stored by the elementary school teacher Doris Mitchell and incorporated by Barry in *What It Is*;
- the importance of drawing by hand and by extension, the affective connections suggested through the artist's implied presence and through the visual forms of communication;
- the role of comics as an accessible means of collaboration and connection.

Although Barry's invisibles are much more tangible than McCloud's, they seem to do comparable work, that of layering the narrative and establishing connections. They play a central role in the teaching philosophies and exercises she interweaves in her books. Barry tries to unpack the secret labor of comics by connecting it to more universal practices of finding images and the stories they harbor individually or in a network.

The pages from *What It Is* exemplify this by asking pertinent questions about the processes of creating and perceiving pictures, including questions about the sources of images (imagination, memory, perception) and their content and evaluation "What is the difference between a ghost and an image?" (Barry, 2008, p. 56), "What is a bad drawing? What is a good drawing?" (p. 76), "What makes something meaningful?" (Barry 2008, p. 96). And of course, the central, interconnected two questions about value judgments, that continue to haunt Barry: "Is it good? Does this suck?" (Barry, 2008, p. 123).

The centrality of this interest in tracing the sources of images, how they are transferred and what they communicate, is also evident in *Syllabus* which combines exercises and material of three years of courses Barry taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison: "What It Is", "Making Comics", "Write What You See" and "Unthinkable Mind", the title of which resembles the first college art class Barry took, "Writing the Unthinkable", taught by Marilyn Frasca (Chute, 2014, p. 60). From these, the title page displays "Unthinkable Mind" more prominently than all the other courses, confirming the influence of Frasca's approach to art education which I will elaborate on later in this article.

Barry's other comics are also on a mission to grasp the "unthinkable" or everything that remains outside the confines of language and are, therefore, invisible. Her quest for a means of communicating the hidden unfolds in an almost obsessive way, filling up single-lined composition books with an energy that expresses a *horror vacui* through their intense, elaborate, but also playful and philosophical pages. Often resembling the exercise

books used in her classes, all of Barry's books tease the boundaries between comics, diaries, sketchbooks and teaching manuals: they combine exercises she uses in her own teaching, and sometimes even her students' materials, autobiographical episodes and meditations.

Chasing Invisibles, Part One: Trace and the Archive

An earlier work of Barry's, *One Hundred Demons* combines the exercise of a sixteenth-century Japanese Zen Buddhist monk with autobiographical episodes. The exercise takes the form of free painting. The artist is encouraged to follow the strokes of the brush to see which demons emerge forth. The graphic novel announces itself as "a book of autobifictionalography": here, and in other Barry books, autobiography and fiction are as inextricable as the acts of interrogating the comics form, remembering through it and teaching it. Originally published in 2002, *One Hundred Demons* had not been an easy book to place at that time because of the hybridity of the form. It was issued by Sasquatch (before it was acquired by Penguin Random House), a publisher of visual books, which paid special attention to the objecthood of the books published.

The monster which accompanies Barry's explanation of the inkbrush exercise is indicative of the mystical powers Barry ascribes to her images (fig. 1). This mysticism is not without its tongue-in-cheek and even self-deprecating, and hence comicitous, humor. The frontispiece with demon, Barry's monkey avatar and a demon creature in the process of becoming in the monster offers a false and even unreadable table of contents, beginning with an introduction and a chapter titled "selfhood" (Barry, 2017). The book is divided according to different demons, also invisibles, listed in the second table of contents which includes: nuisances such as head lice, feelings such as hate and qualities such as resilience. Many of the demons are connected to childhood memories, including "Dancing", "Common Scents", "Lost Worlds" and "Lost and Found", which is both about classified advertisements and the unwanted transition from childhood to adolescence.

As can already be seen from the "Introduction" to *One Hundred Demons*, Barry plays with the very limits of comics in her quest to find lost images (fig. 1). The title, "Introduction" is placed in a speech balloon emerging from the multiple-eyed demon's mouth. The frame seems to work almost as a picture frame and Barry and her demon are almost posing for a family photograph. The double page spread also evokes other graphic arts and forms of picture making: the signature stamps evoke the Japanese art of printmaking; the drolleries adorning the borders evoke medieval art in which the margins offer spaces of improvisation for the manuscript illuminator. The drolleries, comprising monsters, also recall countless doodles that many of us indulge in. The lined notebook page thrusts us into the well-regulated space and time of school. The contrast between the formal, established art practices and everyday, familiar elements shows how Barry works across worlds and frameworks. At the same time, the labels, of "author", "demon" and the

tools used for resurrecting the demons, make the double exercise of creation and exorcism accessible for the reader. Instead of the gap or the gutter between panels, it is the gap, often invisible because it resists visualization, between the artist and the reader that is bridged here: Barry accomplishes this through breaking down the process of creation. While this is comparable to any practical guide book, such as Ivan Brunetti's *Cartooning* or McCloud's meticulous *Understanding Comics* or *Making Comics*, among others, Barry makes this process both personal but also transferrable and reproducible for the reader, because it is based on minimal prerequisites, including minimal artistic skill. Her style reinforces this impression of accessibility. Further, she posits making art as a necessity for self-understanding, and selfhood, in lieu of an expression, and honing, of artistic skill.

Fig. 1: Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, p. 6. Copyright Lynda Barry.

Graphiation (Marion, 1993) and the connected notion of trace (Derrida, 2014) and the concepts surrounding animation, especially animatedness (Ngai, 2017) and animistic media (Kwa, 2023; Ingawanij, 2021) are useful for unpacking the connections between the invisible and Barry's approaches to image-making. Let's begin with unpeeling the layer of drawing which lies at the heart of comics but also connects it to other visual forms (Grennan, 2022; Chute, 2016). Philippe Marion's theory of graphiation or graphic enunciation, which emphasizes the interactive essence of drawing, including how it is situated between artistic and collective styles, transposes Jacques Derrida's notion of trace, which has a strong connection to absences and the archive. Both absences and

archive are key concerns in this mapping of the invisible in Barry's comics and in comics in general:

> La trace […] c'est quelque chose qui part d'une origine mais qui aussitôt se sépare de l'origine et qui reste comme trace dans la mesure où c'est séparé du tracement, de l'origine traçante. C'est là qu'il y a trace et qu'il y a commencement d'archives. Toute trace n'est pas une archive, mais il n'y a pas d'archive sans trace. Donc la trace, ça part toujours de moi et ça se sépare. Quand je dis «reste», la trace part de son origine, moi par exemple, et reste comme trace, ça ne veut pas dire qu'elle l'est substantiellement ou essentiellement ou existentiellement. […] j'essaie de soustraire la sémantique du mot «reste» à l'ontologie, c'est-à-dire que le reste n'est pas une modification de «être» au sens de l'essence, de la substance, de l'existence. La trace reste, mais ça ne veut pas dire qu'elle est, substantiellement, ou qu'elle est essentielle, mais c'est la question de la restance qui m'intéresse, restance de la trace au-delà de toute ontologie. (Derrida, 2015, p. 49)

One of the many dimensions of the invisible in Barry's comics is the power of the image and the mysterious act of image-making itself which, like her stories follow a (seemingly) free, automatist logic as, for instance, in the stories that emerge from found images. As can be seen from the above quote, the notion of trace and what Derrida calls *restance* or what remains beyond the trace, helps track down how drawings and objects that Barry combines are recontextualized while maintaining links with possible, alternative archives built on what would generally be relegated to waste, in particular the waste of cultural memory (Assmann, 2012; for more on comics and their archives, see Crucifix, 2023).

This is evident in the collaged double page spreads separating the demon-stories in *One Hundred Demons* (fig. 2). In the collage preceding the demon of resilience associated with childhood, Barry's presence as graphiateur, a maker of traces elaborates a dialogue between a childhood photograph of hers, a comics drawing, a photograph of a flower, a toy, additional drawings and scraps of fabric.

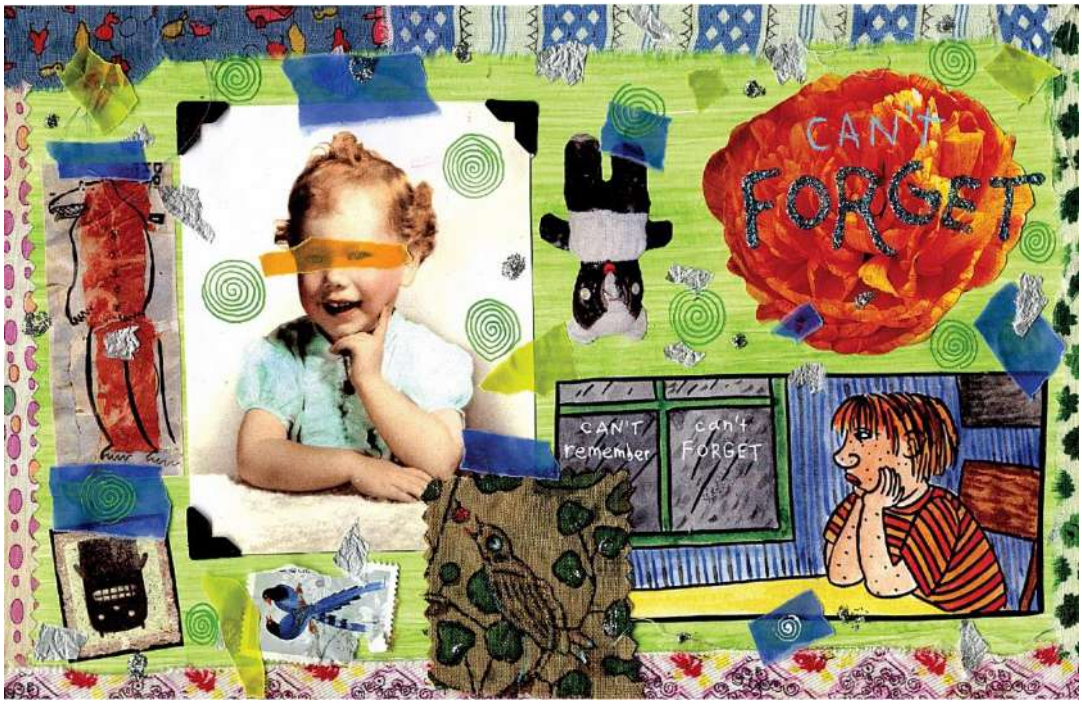

Fig. 2 Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, p. 62. Copyright Lynda Barry.

Exemplifying what Barry calls “bumpiness” (Chute 2010, p. 110) the collage textures complicate the reading process. Chute likens Barry’s use of collage to the Pattern and Decoration movement in the fine arts that emerged in the U.S. in the 1970s and valorized feminine, domestic and handicraft arts. It brings in a specific three-dimensional quality, a *trompe-l’oeil* effect while also destabilizing notions of authorship and authorial genius. In addition to connections with the feminist, grassroots Pattern and Decoration movement, the intensity of the collages also shares affiliations with art brut practices. In particular, the pages recall the *horror vaccui* approach of outsider art and the freeness and disbanding of logic (expressed through the rejection of perspective, reality etc.) associated with both outsider art and children’s drawing.

This all-over and messy quality offers the possibility to incorporate several kinds of invisibles through the textured layering and the avoidance of linearity. In offering multiple possibilities to explore and to weave connections (see Postema, 2013), the messiness of the collage channels the unsaid and sometimes even the unsayable. It reverses the presumed simplicity of comics, imbuing the spaces of the pages, the content of the drawings and the potential narratives with ambiguity. It nevertheless remains comicitous through the drawing of the little girl and even through the words written in the windows, which recall comics panels. In this collage, and elsewhere in Barry’s comics, part of the messy element is connected to the imitation or recuperation of childish and childlike drawing. Thierry Smolderen terms such processes polygraphic gestures and has elaborated on the combination of different graphic voices and styles and the connotations acquired in light of their historical and contextual use (Smolderen, 2014). Barry’s insertions, and copies, of art by children and students challenge the simplicity associated

with comics by pushing untutored, childish drawing into the limelight. This permits Barry to visualize another "invisible" element, that of childhood, moving from her own autobifictional childhoods and other, often anonymous individual's childhoods to notions of collective childhoods created through the juxtaposition of different traces made by different, untraceable authors. Highlighting the power of these drawings also opens up space to allow for non-academic drawings by adults.

The overflowing or messy quality of Barry's pages have additional implications, especially for accessing the invisible or that which challenges possibilities of representation. Messiness helps convey the complexity of experiences but also their tangled and interconnected essence, as Barry points out: "Once a student asked me why I liked 'messed-up' drawings so much. They don't look 'messed-up' to me. There is a realness in them that is hard to come by" (Barry, 2019, p. 50). In collaboration with animation that is discussed further below, messiness helps generate a certain form of punkish truthfulness in Barry's works (see also Szép 2020, pp 53-78). While scholars have often categorized Barry as a feminist cartoonist (see de Jesús, 2004), Susan Kirtley points out that Barry's aesthetic, especially in her early weekly strips is inscribed in "a shared culture of destruction and authenticity" (Kirtley, 2021, p. 107). Kirtley adds that Barry's serialized comic strips, which preceded the graphic novels I mentioned, worked to "constitute a community of punk - an audience that simultaneously sought to destroy mainstream notions of what a comic strip 'should' be, while positing something more authentic, more real in its wake" (Kirtley, 2021, p. 114). The politics of Barry's comics veers towards dismantling mainstream aesthetic and cultural hegemonies rather than gender-based ones. This continues in her bookish and manual work. It is connected to Charles Hatfield's identification of a "working-class strain of autobiography" in alternative comics (Kirtley, 2021, p. 149), which often relies on the technique of "ironic authentication" that sidesteps the necessity of a truthful account or representation (Kirtley, 2021, p. 159-160).

Messiness also has strong connections to the notion of comics as a traumatized medium proposed by Christopher Pizzino in *Arresting Development: Comics at the Boundaries of Literature* and in his *ImageText* article, "Comics and Trauma" (Pizzino, 2017). In this article, Pizzino turns to the "Time Flies" episode opening the second volume of *Maus*, to elaborate on autoclasm or self-breaking as "one of the strongest features of contemporary comics: a deep attunement to, and elaboration of, the complex and often contradictory dynamics of cultural status, and of the way those dynamics, in all their historical and cultural specificity, inexorably shape what the creator draws." The messiness of Barry's comics demonstrates an alternative, even opposite, strategy to autoclasm by unpacking the potential of children's drawings, untutored styles and non-sequential logics to counter the objections of simplicity and childishness that have been levied against comics.

Messiness is closely connected to the unskilled facet which is accorded a central, generative locus of all of Barry's comics. When expressing her doubts about teaching comics especially in the light of criticism levied against her comics - "faux naïve style", too

wordy, crude characters, overflowing panels - Barry emphasizes her aim to transmit “the power of comics as a way of seeing and being in the world and transmitting our experience of it” (Barry, 2019, p. 14; fig. 3). The messiness of her pages conveys the complexity of such experiences through visualizing their tangled, interconnected essence.

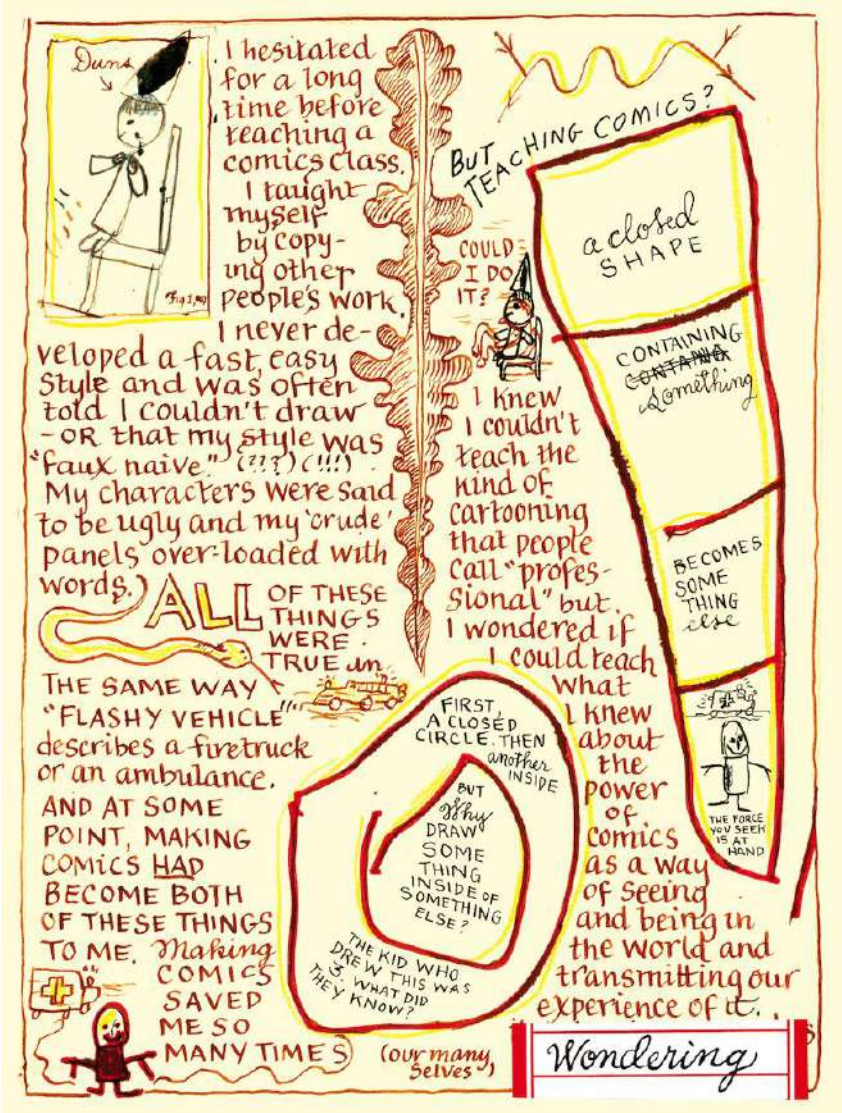

Fig. 3 Lynda Barry, Making Comics, p. 14. Copyright Lynda Barry.

Closed shapes by children dominate the page above. In one of them Barry writes across the separations, treating them as panels: “a closed shape/containing ~~contang~~ something/becomes something else/the force you seek is at hand” (*Making Comics,* p. 14). This force lies not only in the image but in the form and the succession of shapes and the words and images inside them, aspects that are essentially comicitous.

As suggested through the discussion of *trace* above, Barry’s collages of found objects, personal items, student’s drawings and lists, and other elements often rescued from trash

bring in an archival dimension to Barry's graphic novels, simultaneously exemplifying an archival methodology or how to counter traditional archives, an archive-in-the-making given the processual and collaborative nature of the comics, and a curated archive. Questioning notions of the archive and archival policies on one hand, Barry also highlights possibilities of creating with archives and how comics and notebooks can function as archives. In addition to this archival dimension, the acts of recuperating, preserving, (re-)arranging and collaging are also a means of establishing new connections to overlooked works and the individuals behind them. Tracking down the invisible in Barry's works, then, points towards the myriad of ways in which comics connect with, touch and affect their readers, how they draw, braid or weave, connections. This can also be linked to the notions surrounding animation and the communicative facet of trace.

Chasing Invisibles, Part Two: Animation and Connection

In order to expand on the second dimension of tracing invisibles, which builds on the notion of trace and archive, I turn to animation as an umbrella term combining theoretizations of animatedness and animism to unpack the central dynamics behind Barry's image work and its use of invisibles: animation is the act of making images come alive, or resurrecting images but also of making images move through the repetition and braiding that lies at the heart of comics. The energy implied in animation also allows for different kinds of ambiguities and consequently, space, for invisibles to thrive, most notably in the case of marginal and ignored images.

The concept animatedness based on Sianne Ngai's affect-based aesthetic theory and Shiamin Kwa's discussion of comics as an animistic medium complements the notion of trace and contributes to understanding what Barry wants her images to do, beginning with the very search for images. In her chapter on life writing in John Porcellino's comics, Kwa describes Porcellino's comics as functioning as "an animistic medium of uncertainty", requiring the reader to shift positioning and interpretational frameworks, sometimes within the same page (Kwa, 2023, p. 185). I would like to take this line of thought further while also drawing connections with Sianne Ngai's notion of animatedness (which has already been used by Scott Bukatman in his analysis of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*) to highlight the aliveness of the comics form and the uncomfortable subtexts underpinning animation, from the transfer of racialized caricature to the tension between the increasing mechanization of society and stratified and categorical notions of individuality. Heavily racialized, the state of animatedness is relegated to marginalized groups which are portrayed as excessively emotional while lacking power or possibilities to act (Ngai, 2007, pp. 80-125). A marginalized medium in many ways, comics images are animated in a way that often relies on caricatural exaggeration. The strong childish element persisting across Barry's comics reconfigures the notions of animatedness, to acquire different nuances that can be read in light of cultural legitimacy, as pointed out above, and understandings and

uses of drawing and notions of good and bad drawings. In Barry's works, animatedness is also present as expression that cannot be contained within the customary limits of form.

Lynda Barry's latest, unique genre of comics manual, *Making Comics*, begins with an assertion of the untutored style, of drawing the way we once drew as children, which has a certain "aliveness" to it. "Kids speak image," writes Barry (Barry, 2019, p.8) and this is the kind of language that she strives to teach. Such drawings, according to Barry, are impossible to copy or to "animate". Animation is also connected to her strategy for comics which she claims is "not about developing characters …(but) about waiting to see who shows up in certain circumstances" (Barry, 2019, p. 13, my insertion in parentheses). Animation or breathing life into images also plays a role in the many synesthetic experiences Barry generates through her comics, such as the demon of smells in *One Hundred Demons* and the representations of music and dancing that recur in most of her comics and graphic novels.

In *Making Comics*, she illustrates – or animates – a 4K student's fire story and juxtaposes it next to several fire drawings by children (Barry, 2019, pp. 16-17). She also draws over the lines of children's drawings or copies them to capture their affective power, to establish connections through the very act of drawing and through placing all drawing on an equal plane. This shifts preconceptions regarding the persona of the author or artistic genius as a font of originality (which is also comparable to the practices of the Pattern and Decoration movement and to the valorization of art brut as art in its own right).

Expanding on Marion's notion of graphiation, Jan Baetens has pointed out how problematic it is to conflate graphiation with an original personal style because all style is an outcome of several levels of negotiations, between tutored and acquired styles and styles that are deemed appropriate for a certain subject matter or context. Baetens highlights the communicative nature of style itself, present in the nature of the "the trace that both communicates between and connects the graphiater and the reader" ("C'est dans la trace que communiquent - et communient - le graphiateur et le lecteur", Baetens, 1996, p. 232). Barry too emphasizes the relationality of comics and their dependence on the viewer as already suggested by the second quote at the beginning of this article: "Who creates a comic? The person who draws it or the person who sees it?" (Barry, 2019, p. 88) The implied answer is both and more, if we bear in mind the discussions of trace and its connections to official and unofficial archives.

Other forms of connectivity are also discernible in Barry's books. These connections form part of the "sticky" affective quality (Ahmed, 2014) of children's drawings and untutored styles in general. The traced hands that appear in Barry's works are ways of leaving traces in perhaps the most humanly connected manner: it reproduces a shape that is shared by all humans with a gesture that in itself is easily reproducible. These hands concretize the possibility of touching, bypassing fleshy membranes through drawing, forms and textures. They concretize the notion of "haptic visuality" that Rebecca Scherr transposes to comics: "a connective readerly address incorporating sensation and emotion in its communicative reach" that can be activated through the drawn line (Scherr, 2013, p. 21). The traced hands incorporated in Barry's books, which are also one of the first

exercises in her students' notebooks, capture the emotional connections enabled by art, the imprint of the creator and the possibility for everyone to create and to communicate through art. Next to a collaborative drawing made by eight hands and then copied by one, Barry writes: "A drawing may come from you but exists apart from you, in both matter and meaning to others. … When I look at a drawing … I'm meeting something and it's also meeting me… When I copy a drawing, I'm meeting it in a different way" (Barry, 2019, p. 102).

This elaboration on the relationality of lines recalls Tim Ingold's discussion of the line as the ultimate form of connection in his landmark *Life of Lines*:

> since there is no life that is not social – that does not entail an entwining of lines – in a world of blobs there could be no life of any kind. In fact, most if not all life-forms can be most economically described as specific combinations of blob and line, and it could be the combination of their respective properties that allows them to flourish. Blobs have volume, mass, density: they give us materials. Lines have none of these. What they have, which blobs do not, is torsion, flexion and vivacity. They give us life. Life began when lines began to emerge and to escape the monopoly of blobs. (Ingold 2015, p. 4)

Before concluding with the possible invisibles in Barry's comics, I will briefly expand on Barry's mission to teach the invisible, which interweaves the impulses to animate and to connect with instructions and incentives to draw combining comics guidebooks and non-judgemental art theories and practices.

Teaching the Invisible: Making Comics

The contrast between McCloud's and Barry's approaches to comics is most obvious in their books sharing the same title, *Making Comics*. While McCloud offers a practical guide to making comics, emphasizing clarity and clear communication, using a very neat line and minimalist style to do so, Barry fills the pages of her books with drawings and text, opting for a messy and collaged aesthetic discussed above. Storylines and narrative structure are likewise fragmentary, episodic and even secondary, or sometimes completely absent. Barry nevertheless maintains a close connection to drawing manuals such as Ivan Brunetti's *Cartooning*, which she is shown reading and also doing and redoing exercises from, especially in *Syllabus*. Alongside the big questions that punctuate the pages of *What It Is*, Barry, like Brunetti, works with constraints to activate drawing impulses. These include temporal constraints (drawing within two or five minutes), drawing with the non-dominant hand, using crayons, dividing up the pages, drawing certain topics, stories, characters etc. These constraints tackle certain anxieties, which are also invisibles, and include the drawing anxieties of her students, color anxiety and the prejudices associated with certain materials, such as crayons which, like color, are considered childish (Barry, 2014, p. 68). Another major anxiety, often visualized as a monster, an invisible, internalized demon, is self-criticism, based on the ways in which art is perceived and

criticized, which is perhaps most present in *One Hundred Demons* and the "Two Questions" section in *What It Is* (Barry, 2008, pp. 123-136).

Barry offers additional tools to overcome anxieties, which are connected to the art making philosophies that she is inspired by. Towards the end of *Making Comics*, Barry offers a new set of constraints relying on a selection of prompts, thereby moving away from Brunetti's more spatiotemporally regulated exercises. Barry suggests making a "comics kit" comprising six bags: word bag, picture bag, scene bag, camera angle bag, character bag and setting bag. This offers a classic Barry mix, combining practical tools for making comics, some constraints and much that is ultimately left to chance. Barry also encourages copying images, a foundational component of artistic training. She emphasizes how the act of copying impacts thinking: "Copying is good for you because it takes time and – it requires a certain sort of sustained concentration that invites a different sort of thinking" (Barry, 2014, p. 184). Drawing figures not only as an act of "mark making" (Grennan, 2022) but an act that can reveal mysteries, or the invisible: "When we draw a person, along with what Simon Sparrow calls 'the mystery form of that person,' we are also drawing the mystery form of our line and our urge toward composition" (Barry, 2014, p. 70). The central aim of Barry's courses and books is then not so much to produce comics but to use comics to generate images that can provide access to elements that are otherwise inaccessible: "By image I don't mean a visual representation, I mean something that is more like a ghost than a picture; something which feels somehow alive, has no fixed meaning and is contained and transported by something that is not alive – a book, a song, a painting – anything we call an 'art form'" (Barry, 2014, p. 15). Comics become a means of revealing the invisibles behind creation alongside the invisibles within the self and the invisibles contributing towards the creation of selfhood.

Correspondingly, Barry combines more conventional comics and cartooning practices with less conventional notions of art practice. She writes, "I'm after what Marilyn Frasca called 'being present and seeing what's there'" (Barry, 2014, p. 4). For Barry, one of the most important teachings of Frasca was that the work of art cannot be separated from those viewing it. Frasca rarely taught or commented on technique, focusing instead on what the artwork conveyed for the maker and viewer (Chute, 2014, pp. 60-61; Misemer, 2020). Frasca followed courses during the 1950s at the Cooper Union during the heyday of abstract expressionism before moving for a degree to San Francisco. The importance of textures, of spiritual qualities attached to painting, both representational and non-representational, play a strong role in her work. Most importantly, Frasca encouraged her students to look and to make without judging, to be attentive to the artwork in the process of becoming.

Barry also mentions two other psychiatric and psychological theorists which offer possibilities of accessing the unknown, the invisibles within the person making art and ways of visualizing those invisibles: Iain McGilchrist and Marion Milner. In *Syllabus* we see Barry reading McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Barry, 2014, p. 49), which is mandatory reading for her "Unthinkable Mind" class. McGilchrist proposes that the hemispheres (left, Emissary or

right, Master) result in different modes of perception and world views. Awareness of the two contrasting modes of perception contributes towards Barry's aim of "trying to understand how images travel between people, how they move through time, and if there was a way to use writing and picture making to figure out more about how images work" (Barry, 2014, p. 49) In *What It Is*, we see Barry reading artist and psychologist, Marion Milner's *On Not Being Able to Paint* (Barry, 2008, p. 133). Trained in Freudian psychoanalysis and a theorist of art practice in general and art by children, Milner was an advocate of free drawing and considered drawing a means of revealing aspects about the person making it (Milner, 2010, p. 172).

Conclusion

McCloud's claim that "(t)oday's comics do their *dance with the invisible* better than ever before" seems to be especially relevant for Barry's works, which provide the ideal spaces for interrogating notions of comics, comics images and the invisible (McCloud, 1994, p. 208, emphasis in the original). As I have tried to show, the invisible in Barry's comics is closely connected to her concern of tracing the sources of images and how they are transferred and what they communicate. This is often intimately connected to childhood, to childhood memories, children and to children's drawings and, by extension, untutored drawings. While the invisible may in many ways seem out of our reach, images, and in particular comics images, woven together into narratives can help, as Barry's body of work suggests, in attaining glimpses of it and perhaps even glimpses of ourselves or, at least, our demons.

The invisible is also a found space, like the many drawings of Barry's students and images that she rescues from the trash can, finds in coffee stains (Barry, 2019, p. 94) or in her memory (Barry, 2008). The invisible in Barry's works remains closely connected to the specificity of comics, to what makes comics comics, beyond the word balloons, the panels and even the sequentiality, through the potential of creating and recreating hybrid storylines that interweave images and words. In creating stories that mediate between the personal and the collective, Barry's comics acquire a truthfulness through sustaining a reality that resonates on both individual and collective dimensions. Comics images likewise have an intersubjective, communicative function for the maker and the viewer.

Biographical note

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Spirituality and Comics in Hugo Pratt, Alan Moore, and David B.: Esotericism as "Unsettled Knowledge"*

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This article describes the artistic production and intellectual and spiritual life of three of the most important artists in the field of comics and graphic novels: Hugo Pratt, Alan Moore, and David B. These artists share a common interest in esotericism: they have participated in esoteric and alternative spirituality groups, and in their artistic works they reproduce esoteric symbols, narratives, and doctrines. Scholars in religious studies have already described the connections between contemporary art and esotericism, arguing that artists are "spiritual seekers" who represent their spiritual quest. This article goes beyond such a perspective by describing how esotericism has changed in contemporary societies and, in particular, within the frame of comics and graphic novels. Esotericism is generally understood as a "rejected", "absolute", and "stigmatised" form of knowledge, characterised by elitism and secrecy. The esotericism of these artists (both in their life and in their artworks) is not "rejected"; on the contrary, it has become mainstream, with best-seller publications and museum exhibitions. Furthermore, it is not "absolute" or "hidden"; rather, it reveals doubt and deconstructs religion and spirituality, sometimes even challenging or mocking them. 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. It finds its legitimisation in religious texts, revelations, and religious movements, but mainly in the power of storytelling. This article argues that the blurring between reality and narration does not imply a process of disenchantment, nor a "hyper-religion", instead representing another form of spirituality in contemporary societies. Finally, this "unsettled knowledge" is also unsettling for the reader, who is challenged by these artworks and finds in them wondrous, dazzling, and dreamlike experiences.

Key words: popular culture; comics; spirituality; esotericism; Hugo Pratt; Alan Moore; David B.

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Introduction: Esotericism(s), Occulture, and Comics

In this introduction, I will discuss the main definitions of esotericism. The putative father of contemporary esoteric studies is Antoine Faivre (1934–2021), who contributed to reshaping a marginal and stigmatised field in Western academia. Faivre proposed a broad definition of esotericism: a set of currents that have strong similarities and are historically connected, such as Kabbalah, Neoplatonism, Magic, and Rosicrucianism. These currents are characterised by specific "forms of thought", such as correspondence, living nature, imagination, and mediation, and the experience of transmission (Faivre, 1986). Wouter Hanegraaff shifted the focus from esoteric forms to how esoteric knowledge has been constructed and perceived in historiography. He argued that esotericism represents a wastebasket category of knowledge, excluded by the Enlightenment and by both Catholic and Protestant Churches: a "rejected knowledge" (Hanegraaff, 2012). Michael Barkun made a similar argument, asserting that esotericism is a superseded, forgotten, and stigmatised form of knowledge in religion (2003). Other scholars, such as Kocku von Stuckrad and Hugh Urban, offered a different approach, regarding esotericism as a religious discourse, which implies social, cultural, and political outcomes. Esotericism as a form of "absolute knowledge" is hidden, secret, and aristocratic (von Stuckrad, 2008) and can produce elitist politics and sectarianism (Urban, 1997; Piraino, 2019).

With the category "occulture", Christopher Partridge described the diffusion of esoteric and occult ideas, symbols, and narratives in mass cultural production, starting from the countercultural movement of the 1960s. Occulture is a paradigm shift in contemporary Western societies, an expression of the intertwined processes of sacralisation and secularisation. Furthermore, occulture normalises esotericism, which is no longer a secret or absolute knowledge, having become just "ordinary". Occulture is part of late capitalism, another good to consume (Partridge, 2014). Adam Possamai proposed a similar analysis, arguing that esoteric knowledge in contemporary Western societies has become a "McDonaldised Occult culture" (Possamai, 2002, p. 48), a "hyper-religion" with its political and religious values discarded, implying a process of disenchantment.

Nina Kokkinen (2013) developed the category of occulture as an analytical tool, suggesting that it could also be applied in the 19th century and highlighting the process of "religioning" carried out by artists. This artistic exploration of spirituality should not be considered "inauthentic" or "superficial", because artists participate in shaping religion (Kokkinen, 2013, p. 22). Kokkinen's main theoretical frame is the "seekership" or the "new age discourse" (Sutcliffe, 2003), which explains how believers in contemporary societies—and artists, in particular—undertake a spiritual quest characterised by syncretism and anti-dogmatism, focused on personal well-being. For artists and for "spiritual seekers", the self is the ultimate authority and can question institutional religions (Kokkinen, 2021).

In the last twenty years, the literature on comics and religion has grown steadily. Scholars have described how comic artists participate in shaping religious phenomena, thereby innovating in the comics medium (Kraemer and Lewis, 2015; Lewis and Kraemer, 2010) and

how comics represent and misrepresent religions (Lund, 2016). Furthermore, according to Jeffrey Kripal, comics and popular culture are the place for theological innovations and will play a crucial role in the future of religious phenomena. Kripal argued that American popular culture is suffused with mystical mythemes, and "pop-cultural products" are often the results of "private paranormal experiences" (Kripal, 2011, p. 2). In this article, I will not limit my arguments to detecting esoteric narratives in comics, as has been done for the works of Alan Moore (Hanegraaff, 2016) and Grant Morrison (Granholm, 2014). Rather, aligned with Kripal, I will show how comics are a place for religious innovations. I will argue that the main conceptualisations of esotericisms employed by Faivre, Hanegraaff, and von Stuckrad are not effective in describing the esoteric comics of Hugo Pratt, Alan Moore, and David B. Esotericism as "forms of thought" could be applied to comics, but this would not capture their specificity, since this model is too generic and could be applied to very heterogeneous phenomena, thus losing its heuristic force. Esotericism as "stigmatised" or "rejected" knowledge would not apply to a mass medium, such as comics. In fact, what has been stigmatised by contemporary science or institutional religions has been affirmed, by many contemporary artists. In addition, the esotericism of these artists is the opposite of "absolute". It is the display of doubt, wonder, apprehension, and exploration. Finally, I will show that it is not elitist or secret since anyone who can afford a comic book has access to this esotericism.

In my opinion, the category of "occulture" aptly describes the field of art and esotericism, in which we find very different phenomena, in the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Federico Fellini, for example, but also in second-rate movies, books, and comics. Occulture artworks might be masterpieces destined to shape culture and society for decades, or entertaining products to be forgotten in a few months. Furthermore, occulture artworks could be the product of spiritual seekers, who consider art to be a spiritual practice (as argued by Kokkinen), but they could also be the product of "non-seekers", who use esotericism merely as a narrative device. The same could be said of readers, who can read/consume an artistic product with either secular or religious lenses/appetites. Considering the heterogeneous nature of the occulture category, I prefer to think of it as a heterogeneous field, a symbolic space (Bourdieu 1989) composed of different phenomena, rather than as an analytical tool. Furthermore, I will show that the focus on seekership does not capture the specificity of comics and graphic novels nor the social and political dimensions in the artwork of Pratt, Moore, and David B.

To overcome these theoretical dead ends, I propose the idea of esotericism as "unsettled and unsettling knowledge". This form of knowledge is anti-dogmatic and syncretic, not limiting itself to a specific religious or cultural context, but finding its main legitimisation in storytelling and spiritual experience. This "unsettled knowledge" blurs the boundaries of reality and fiction, and it questions, challenges, and sometimes even mocks religions. However, it should not be considered secular, but rather as the display of doubt and endless research. The protagonists of these comics are antiheroes tormented by their uncertainties about what is right and what is wrong, what is real and what is not. The focus of this

"unsettled knowledge" is transcendence, but also humankind, as an exploration of the unconscious and of societies and politics. Finally, this "unsettled knowledge" is also "unsettling" for the reader, who finds, in the boundless worlds depicted by these authors, a space for dazzling, wondrous, and metaphysical and psychological explorations, which lead them to question their own assumptions of reality.

Hugo Pratt

Hugo Pratt was born in Rimini in Italy in 1927, but he grew up in Venice, where his cosmopolitan family lived. His grandparents had French-English and Jewish-Turkish origins. With the exception of his anarchist uncle Ruggero, Pratt's family was Fascist. His grandfather was a leading figure of the Fascist party in Venice and his father, Rolando Pratt, decided to move his family to Ethiopia following the colonial venture. As Pratt wrote, "We were imperialist in order to become bourgeois" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 42). But the colonial and Fascist dream was shattered by the African experience. A teenage Pratt discovered the violence and absurdity of Italian racism. Furthermore, Italy was defeated, and Pratt's family were imprisoned, his father dying a transfer between internment camps. Despite the family's tragedy and the shattering of its Fascist ideals, the young Pratt made his way through the troublesome war period. In several interviews, he narrated how he learnt English, French, and Amharic, working as a handyman in brothels and, later, as a translator. Pratt also learnt to appreciate Ethiopian culture, religion, and language, understanding the fallacy of the supposed superiority of Western civilisation. For example, he understood the superiority of traditional Ethiopic medicine to scientific Western medicine in treating his painful burrowing fleas (Pratt, 2020), thus literally experiencing it in his own flesh. In 1943, Pratt came back to Venice with his mother, where at 16 he participated for a few months in the Fascist Italian Social Republic. He then worked in Venice as a translator for American and British troops and as a promoter of gatherings and concerts.

At the end of the war, Pratt started working in the emerging Italian comics and illustration sector. He participated in the Venetian "Uragano Comics" group. But he flourished artistically and professionally in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he lived for thirteen years, working with established comics publishers and with renowned writers, such as Héctor Oesterheld. In 1967, Pratt returned to Venice, where he published *La ballata del mare salato* (*The Ballad of the Salty Sea)*, in which he introduced the sailor Corto Maltese (Fig. 1), a character who changed Pratt's life and the history of comics (Pratt, 1967). But he was not an instant success. Pratt moved to Paris, where Corto's adventures were more appreciated and better paid by the Communist publisher PIF. Over the years, Pratt's artwork became more and more popular until its consecration with two major exhibitions, in Venice in 1985 and in Paris in 1986 at the Grand Palais. In the same year, the French minister Jack Lang awarded Pratt the honorific title of *Chevalier des arts et des lettres*. This public recognition was a turning

point not only for Pratt, but for comics art, which was accorded the same dignity as other artistic languages.

Fig. 1 © Hugo Pratt, Watercolour of “Corto Maltese”, 1976

In 1983, Pratt retired to a small village on Lake Geneva, where he died in 1995. He, like Corto himself, had lived an adventurous life, with many voyages all over the world. He had played jazz with Dizzy Gillespie in Argentina, had shared experiences with Native Americans in Brazil, with anti-colonial forces in Angola, with Communists and anarchists, but also with former Fascists, Nazis, and Ustashas who had fled to Argentina. He fathered six children with four different wives, including a Native American in the Brazilian Amazonia, where he spent one year in the 1960s.

Pratt, like Corto, was a romantic adventurer who embraced life and humankind in all its forms and contradictions. Pratt epitomised Terence’s aphorism: “*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*”—“I am human and nothing human is alien to me”. The only thing that Pratt refused was middle-class moral conformism (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022). As Corto stated: “I’m not one to judge, only I know that I have a genetic aversion to censors and arbitrators

[*probiviri*, Latin in original]. But, above all, those who I despise the most are the redeemers" (Pratt, 1985).

Pratt was deeply influenced by the comics of Milton Caniff and Héctor Oesterheld and by the literature of Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville, Rudyard Kipling, and Jack London (Barbieri, 2009; Cristante, 2017). A key figure of Pratt's artistic production is the adventurer: elegant, charming, permanently drifting, never at home and always helping outcasts and underdogs. Corto Maltese, Luca Zane, El Muerto, and Sargent Kirk are but a few incarnations of this archetype (Cristante, 2017). The adventurer refuses the conformist distinction between good and evil, and challenges social, religious, and political institutions. Some have even described Corto as an antihero, a "disenchanted" nihilist who gave up on everything (Battaglia, 2017, p. 172). I disagree with this interpretation; in fact, Corto can sound cynical, but he does not back away from the "good" battles. He honours friendship and love, and he shows compassion even to defeated enemies (Affuso, 2013). While there are several battle scenes in Pratt's comics, his message is anti-military and pacifist, condemning violence. "The war destroyed my family; how could I love it? [During the war years] I never felt exaltation", commented Pratt (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 271).

Corto Maltese, as the prototype of the stranger and adventurer, is always helping subalterns, without being patronising. He helps revolutionaries in Ireland, Ethiopia, and New Guinea (Cristante, 2017). Pratt's anthropological curiosity about alterity started in his childhood when he was put in a class of children with disabilities for six months, where he learnt to appreciate diversity. Furthermore, his experiences in Ethiopia, Argentina, Brazil, and Angola forced him to negotiate with several cultures, languages, religions, and classes. Pratt's comics could be described as a form of post-colonial literature *ante-litteram* (Affuso, 2013). His characters question the supposed moral and intellectual superiority of Western civilisations and every form of colonialism. This is particularly noteworthy if we consider the historical period, the 1960s, when colonialism was still a taboo subject in Europe. Furthermore, Pratt depicted subaltern characters, giving them a voice, and thus a subjectivity, a key element of post-colonialism (Bhabha, 2012). The most important example is Cush (Fig. 2), a Black Muslim rebel, who shares in some battles with Corto (Pratt, 1972). Cush is deeply religious and committed to his revolutionary cause, which contrasts with Corto's eternal wandering. Having said that, Cush is not just Corto Maltese's sparring partner, but a resolute co-protagonist. Cush had significant success in Africa, where he represented the first positive Black character in comics. Hence, Pratt was invited as an honoured guest by the president Agostinho Neto to liberated Angola, where he gave drawing classes in 1978. Having said that, in Pratt's comics we can also find stereotypes of Black people, or surreal dialogue where Papuan rebels speak in Venetian dialect (1967). Hence, we should be careful in considering Pratt as post-colonial, especially according to today's sensibilities.

Fig. 2 © Hugo Pratt, Watercolour of “Cush”, 1978

The quest of Pratt and Corto is never ending, and the journey is always more important than the destination. For example, when Corto invites Rasputin to embark on another adventure, Rasputin replies,

A labyrinth in a rebus with an enigma for a solution? Yes, why not, it could be beautiful if there is the hope of finding the same old treasure… but even if we wouldn’t find anything… it’s the arcane, the mystery, the ambiguity, the sphynx, the allegory, the charade… What counts is the symbol, the play, the adventure (Pratt, 1982).

In Pratt's poetics, no one takes himself/herself too seriously. Pratt touches on crucial questions about life, death, politics, and religion, but there is always a sense of playfulness and mockery. Corto is often defeated in his treasure hunt and love quest, but he does not seem overly concerned, as in the case of the beautiful Chinese character, Shanghai Lil, who betrays Corto, snatching the Russian treasure from him and giving it to the needy (Pratt, 1982). Corto's bravado and disdain could also be ascribed to Pratt. For example, in the aftermath of the liberation of Venice in 1945, described by Pratt as a "huge carnival", he created his own uniform, "the individual soldier, who fights only for himself" (Pratt and Petitfaux 2022, p. 85).

This playfulness and disengagement have been key elements of Pratt's poetics. In the 1970s, a historical period of social and political activism, he was accused of being childish and useless. Pratt embraced these charges, taking on the "desire to be useless", the title of his main interview/biography (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022). But this is just one layer of Pratt's art and poetics, which, as we have seen, helped question colonialism. Furthermore, the playfulness and disdain for material life opens onto another dimension, "what might be" (Affuso, 2013, p. 152): a metaphysical and esoteric realm. As Cush says to Corto after saving his life, "Those who play with life, as you do, are foolish… And the fools are sacred in Allah's eyes" (Pratt, 1972).

Pratt's religious education was heterogeneous. On one hand, his parents did not practice Catholicism or Judaism and were openly critical of institutional religions. On the other, Pratt's father Rolando was a Freemason, a Rosicrucian, and his mother Evelina Genero passed some of her interest in Kabbalah down to her son, an interest that was part of her family background. In Argentina, Pratt experimented with hallucinogenic mushrooms, which helped him "go back to his deep self" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 232). In Brazil, he frequented Candomblé syncretic and ecstatic rituals. Back in Venice, in 1976, he became affiliated with the Freemason Hermes Lodge of the Grand Lodge of Italy, one of the A.F.A.M., Ancient Free and Accepted Masons (Prunetti, 2013) depicted in the book *Fable of Venice* (Pratt, 1977).

Pratt represented esoteric practices and doctrines in several artworks. To name just a few examples: the I-Ching and Shamanism (Pratt, 1982), the Holy Grail (Pratt, 1987), Sufism and Yazidism (Pratt, 1982; 1985), and Christian, Jewish, and Islamic esotericisms (Pratt, 1977). Pratt admitted that his work was just a tiny fragment of the esoteric world. With his art, he wished to awaken curiosity in his readers, so they could embark on a new (esoteric) journey.

Drawing on different sources, the esoteric quests of Pratt and Corto are not bound by religious and cultural frontiers. Like many "spiritual seekers", Pratt questioned religious institutions, preferring heterodox and marginalised movements, and gave priority to his freedom and judgment (Kokkinen, 2021; Piraino, 2020; Sutcliffe, 2003). Corto mocked and defied deities in Atlantis (Pratt, 1992), such as the devil and death itself (Pratt, 1987), but he also mocked the same Masonic lodge with which Pratt was affiliated (Pratt, 1977). For example, when a Venetian Freemason asks Corto if he is one of them, he replies, "No, no,

I hope to be merely a free sailor", and later dismisses any religious commitment, saying, "I don't believe in dogmas or flags" (Pratt, 1977). Pratt's spirituality is quintessentially modern, perfectly epitomising the intricate process of sacralisation and secularisation, as a "modern pilgrim" (Hervieu-Léger, 1999).

Fig.3 © Hugo Pratt, "La Favola di Venezia", 1976

Pratt's transcendence remains elusive, incomplete, and out of reach. His religion is the research. "I'm researching the truth, but I know I will never completely reach it" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 255). In the comics universe, Corto explains to the pious Muslim Cush that he is not an infidel; rather, he belongs to the Cainites, a religious movement which is still seeking the lost paradise. Similarly, another character, Robinson, is condemned by the shaman-demon Shamael to pursue "the quest of the unattainable"(Pratt, 1979).

In Pratt's interviews and artworks, we can find several spiritual and esoteric ideas. Pratt believed that reality has a clear, decipherable side, but also a hidden world (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 224). Furthermore, he considered human life to be connected to the universe: "My life began well before my birth, and, I think, will continue without me for a very

long time" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 171). According to Pratt, all his various spiritual experiences, which could be considered irreconcilable, are characterised by "*l'inquiétude*", or unsettledness (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 237). Hence, Pratt never described (nor probably achieved) a coherent religious doctrine, a cosmology, or absolute knowledge; his, in fact, was an "unsettled knowledge". Granted, there are common themes in his artistic production, such as the importance of individual freedom, playfulness, harmony, love, and self-knowledge. For example, in a discussion between Corto and Hipazia on magic, she argues,

> Magic? Do you believe in magic? Ah, Corto, true magic is love and harmony. But what love and what harmony? The love for the eternal beauty and the harmony that embraces the universe. The more a soul is big and deep, the more time it takes to know itself. Achieving self-knowledge, without any shadows, is the most important magic of all (Pratt, 1977).

Pratt's esoteric quest was both transcendent and immanent. His esoteric practices were aimed at "[living] better to live better with others" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 237), which implies that spirituality and esotericism are not reduced to the realm of navel-gazing individualism—they concern humankind as a whole. For example, when an interviewer asked Pratt about the existence of God, he replied,

> For me that turns the problem upside down. I do not wonder about God, but about men. Hence my interest in myths, through which men try to understand, to give meaning to their situation in the universe. My passion for the myths about our origins undoubtedly reflects a metaphysical mindset, but one that is expressed through the human being. I do not question myself on the problem of God, but of Man, and I believe in Man. I want to call "God" the vital force, the evolutionary principle of the universe, but I could not believe in the god that each of the great monotheistic religions offers us (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 254).

What has been said about Pratt's "unsettled spirituality" can also be grasped in his drawings and writing techniques. Pratt's adventures blur reality with dreams, marvels, and nostalgia (Zanotti, 1996). The clouded overlap between dreams and reality can be found in several publications (Pratt 1972; 1977; 1985; 1987; 1992). Pratt himself wrote, "My opinion is that real life is a dream" (Pratt and Petitfaux, 2022, p. 21). As Umberto Eco noted, these drawings are indefinite and blurred. Corto Maltese does not age over time (twenty-nine publications over twenty-four years); he is "angelised", growing younger and younger (Eco, 1996, p. 19). Furthermore, we can also find a playfulness in how Pratt often breaks down the fourth wall, presenting his characters as in a theatre play and questioning their existence. Corto, for example, at the end of *The Fable of Venice*, says, "It's better not to investigate [reality] too much; I might discover that I'm made of the same material as dreams" (Pratt, 1977). Finally, as has been argued by Cristante (2017), Pratt seeks to involve readers, for whom his musings raise questions.

Alan Moore

Alan Moore was born in Northampton in England in 1953 to a working-class family. The young Moore was fascinated by comics, which taught him the “basics of morality” (Parkin, 2013, p. 23). At seventeen, he was expelled from school for dealing LSD, but this episode did not hinder his education. Moore was an autodidact who studied art, history, and politics. Moore’s artistic career started in the London underground scene, where he worked for the journal *2000AD*. Moore realised that he was a better writer than illustrator, so he decided to focus on writing screenplays for comic artists.

In 1983, Moore started working for DC comics, a main actor in the comic entertainment industry that had reinvented American comics (Millidge, 2011). In his long and fruitful career, Moore was able to work with small publishers and daring fringe projects (Moore and Gebbie, 2018) all while creating cult comics, which led to several successful movie adaptations in Hollywood (Moore and Gibbons, 1986–1987; Moore and Lloyd, 1992–1995; Moore and Campbell, 1989–1996). Moore is not only a screenplay writer; since the 1990s he has also written novels and performed with the band “The Moon and Serpent Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels” (Millidge, 2011; Parkin, 2013). Moore has received several prizes for his comics, such as the Hugo, Locus, and Time Magazine awards, and the Bram Stoker award. Furthermore, he has become a “counterculture legend” (Millidge, 2011, p.11), depicted in an episode of *The Simpsons* (Season 19, episode 7). His artistic creations cross the boundaries of the comics world. For example, the Guy Fawkes mask in *V for Vendetta* (Moore and Lloyd, 1982–1995) became the symbol of the Occupy Wall Street movement and of the activist and hacktivist network Anonymous (Fig. 4).

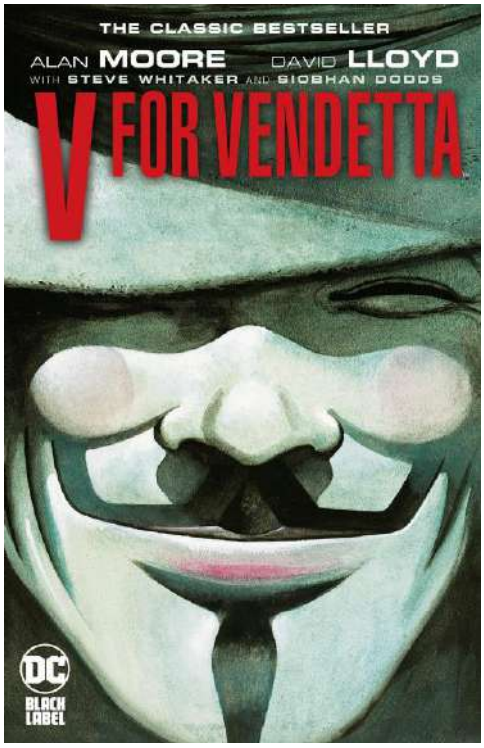

Fig. 4 © Moore and Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* book cover, 1992–1995

Alan Moore's revolution challenged the comics genre, showing the humanity and inhumanity of superheroes. Moore loves to display the good and evil in each character to represent the fragility of humankind, on both the individual-psychological and social-political levels. For example, in *V for Vendetta*, Moore depicts some Fascist-like characters as family men. He did not want to characterise them as monsters, but as persons, also highlighting the banality of evil. "I wanted to present some of the fascists as being ordinary, and in some instances even likeable, human beings" (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 90). By contrast, the good characters are depicted with their doubts and blemishes; they have to make difficult choices, sometimes unsettling their positive values. Today, the deconstruction of superhero morality has become a cliché. Most superheroes in comics and movies are dysfunctional, violent, and narcissistic. According to Moore, this deconstruction has been pushed too far, creating "nihilist" comics, a "dark ages of comic books" (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 185). Moore does not want to blur the frontiers of morality, to argue that "nothing matters"; rather, he wants to do the opposite. In the political period of Thatcherism in the 1980s, Moore wanted to challenge moral and political conformism, to provoke thought, to question the reader's assumptions on good and evil.

> Although the artwork was very black-and-white, with no shades of gray, I thought that one of the most interesting things about the story itself was that morally there was nothing but grey. We were asking the reader to consider some interesting questions (Moore in Millidge, 2011, p. 87).

One of the most important, recurring themes in Moore's poetics is the deconstruction of power and its contradictions. Throughout his career, Moore has engaged with ecology, feminism, LGBTQ rights, Islamophobia, racism, abuse of power, Fascism, and neo-liberalism. While Moore's comics are often dark, violent, and grim visions of dystopias, there is also a bright side, a possible counter-utopia (Carney, 2006) centred on the reader, who is asked not to follow another superhero "whose viewpoint is the right viewpoint" (Moore in Millidge, 2011, p. 132), but to understand for him/her-self what is right.

> [W]e are all responsible. The world is far more complex than our political systems sometimes would make us believe . . . The last line of Watchmen, "I leave it entirely in your hands", was directed at the reader more than Seymour. The fate of the world is undecided: everyone has reasonability. What the reader does in the next ten minutes is as important as everything Ronald Regan does . . . We wanted the reader to make the decision (Moore in Berlatsky, 2011, p. 48).

Moore's dialectic of utopias and dystopias challenges our definitions of good and evil: "To find light, don't ascend, but descend, find the sacred in the profane, hope in hopelessness, redemption in darkness" (Moore in Carney, 2006, p. 67). Moore's utopias are not strictly secular. On the contrary, they demand an ontological leap, a new consciousness of reality. To change politics, we also have to change our perception of the universe, which brings us to the esoteric dimension.

Moore's altered-state experiences started with the use of LSD in his teenage years. He understood that "reality was not a fixed thing" (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 39, 42). Later, he

used mushrooms and hashish, but his spiritual quest came full circle around his fortieth birthday in 1993, when he announced to his family and friends his new magic and esoteric journey. Together with another comics artist—Steve Moore—and with the help of psilocybin mushrooms, Alan Moore practiced rituals evoking spirits and metaphysical entities. During these rituals, he was contacted by the Roman deity Glycon, a snake god with a wig, who became his metaphysical guide (Fig. 5). Glycon, literally "the sweet one", was worshipped by a second-century religious movement founded by Alexander of Abonoteichus. What we know of it comes from Lucian's condemnation, describing this movement as a fraud concocted to steal money from gullible people (Millidge, 2011). Despite this unflattering legacy, Moore was not discouraged from following Glycon; on the contrary, he regarded these allegations as proving his point: spirituality is not a matter of authenticity, but of performance.

> To me, I think that's perfect. If I'm gonna have a god, I prefer it to be a complete hoax, because I'm not likely to start believing that a glove puppet created the universe or anything dangerous like that. To me, the idea of the god is the god. It doesn't matter what form it takes . . . Glyconism . . . there's only me and I'm not looking for members (Moore in Parkin, 2013, pp. 276, 300).

Fig. 5 © Alan Moore, *Glycon*, 1994

Moore is not looking for a religious identity, community, or coherent doctrine, but instead for a truthful religious experience. According to him, Glycon could perfectly well be a hoax, but the archetype of the snake cannot; in fact, it is "a symbol that runs through almost every magical system, every religion" (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 276). The criterion of truth is experience itself, its consequences, and its possible insights into the mundane, ordinary, and artistic dimensions (Fr. I.T.A., 2019). This pragmatic approach to spiritual experience shares several elements with the new age discourse, understood as scattered knowledge across various traditions, centring on the spiritual seeker and suggesting the advent of a new spiritual era (Piraino, 2020; Sutcliffe, 2003). Furthermore, Moore challenges institutional religions which

> corrupted one of the purest, most powerful and sustaining things in the human condition. It has imposed a middle management, not only in our politics, in our finances, but in our spirituality as well . . . Magic is closer to anarchism (Moore in Berlatsky, 2011, p. 94).

That being said, the new age discourse cannot be our only analytical frame. We need to dig deeper into the relationship between esotericism and art. According to Moore, religious and esoteric symbols are the independent expression of a collective unconscious. As argued by the character William Gull aka Jack the Ripper in *From Hell* (Moore and Campbell, 1989–1996): "Their language [of the symbols] speaks directly to our unconscious mind". "Symbols have POWER, Netley… Power enough to turn even a stomach such as yours . . . the one place Gods inarguably exist is in our minds where they are real beyond arguing, in all their grandeur and monstrosity.

The performativity of religion and spirituality does not imply a secularised understanding of reality. Moore believes that there is another ontological dimension, which cannot be reduced to our material world. In fact, according to Moore, "by accepting the idea of endless pantheons of gods, I somehow accept these creatures as being distinct and separate from me, and not as being, to some degree, higher functions of me" (Moore in Berlatsky, 2011, p. 85).

Moore's ontology implies the blurring between art and magical experience, which both offer another perspective of reality, entailing loss of "a sense of self" (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 277). Art, like magic, allows a better understanding of the universe, humankind, and society, but at the same time, this conscious shifting is dangerous. "Going bonkers" is the "occupational hazard" of artists and magicians (Moore in Parkin, 2013, p. 277). Moore pushes the similarity between art and magic to its extreme consequences. For him, language is reality, and mastering language means constructing and understanding the world. Art, religion, and language are the same object.

> Art is, like magic, the science of manipulating symbols, words, or images, to achieve changes in consciousness . . . Indeed, to cast a spell is simply to spell, to manipulate words, to change people's

> consciousness, and this is why I believe that an artist or writer is the closest thing in the contemporary world to a shaman (Moore in Millidge, 2011, p. 6).

Unlike other emic and etic understandings,[1] esotericism and magic, according to Moore, are not instruments of manipulating reality, of imposing the spiritual seeker's will. Moore suggests that the seeker should tune in to the universe, not imposing, but accepting its will. This definition of magic is "less invasive and intrusive" (Moore in Berlatsky, 2011, p. 84) and more positive, bright, and even funny. Moore argues that magic and esotericism should be open to everyone, not a hidden and absolute knowledge reserved for a spiritual or political elite.

> I understand that the word 'occult' means hidden, but surely that is not meant to be the final state of all this information, hidden forever. I don't see why there is any need to further obscure things that are actually lucid and bright. Language and strange terminology—to keep them as some private mystery. I think there is much darkness in magic. I can understand that is part of the theatre. I can understand Aleister Crowley, who I think was a great intellect that was sometimes let down by his own flair of showmanship . . . There are some people who seek evil. I don't think there is such a thing as evil, but there are people who seek it as kind of a Goth thing. … What occultism needs is someone to open the windows. It's too stuffy and it smells. Let's get some fresh air, throw open the curtains . . . I'm not actually trying to look spooky. I dress in black because it makes me look less fat. It's as simple as that . . . Surely, this is about illumination, casting light on things. I'm an illuminist (Moore in Berlatsky, 2011, p. 80–81).

Magic and esotericism permeate several of Moore's books. In *Swamp Thing* (Moore, Bissette, and Woch, 1984–1987), he develops a sort of "holistic ecotheology", where every living thing is connected (Kraemer and Lewis, 2015, p. 221). In *From Hell* (Moore and Campbell, 1989–1996), he narrates the violent esoteric and political fanaticism of William Gull/Jack the Ripper. But it is in *Promethea* (Moore and Williams III, 1999–2005) that Moore develops a sort of spiritual manifesto, which he blends with Kabbalah, Tarot, Alchemy, Islam, Christianity, etc. (Hanegraaff, 2016). Promethea is the incarnation of imagination itself, who is capable of ascending to the divine and coming back to humankind to save it from its materialism, violence, and greed. Promethea embodies all religions and spiritual manifestations, as she is the expression of creative, artistic, and magical language. Promethea is both profane and religious, fleshly and metaphysical, the Madonna and the whore; she is "dialectical epiphany, the substance of history itself" (Carney, 2006, p. 67).

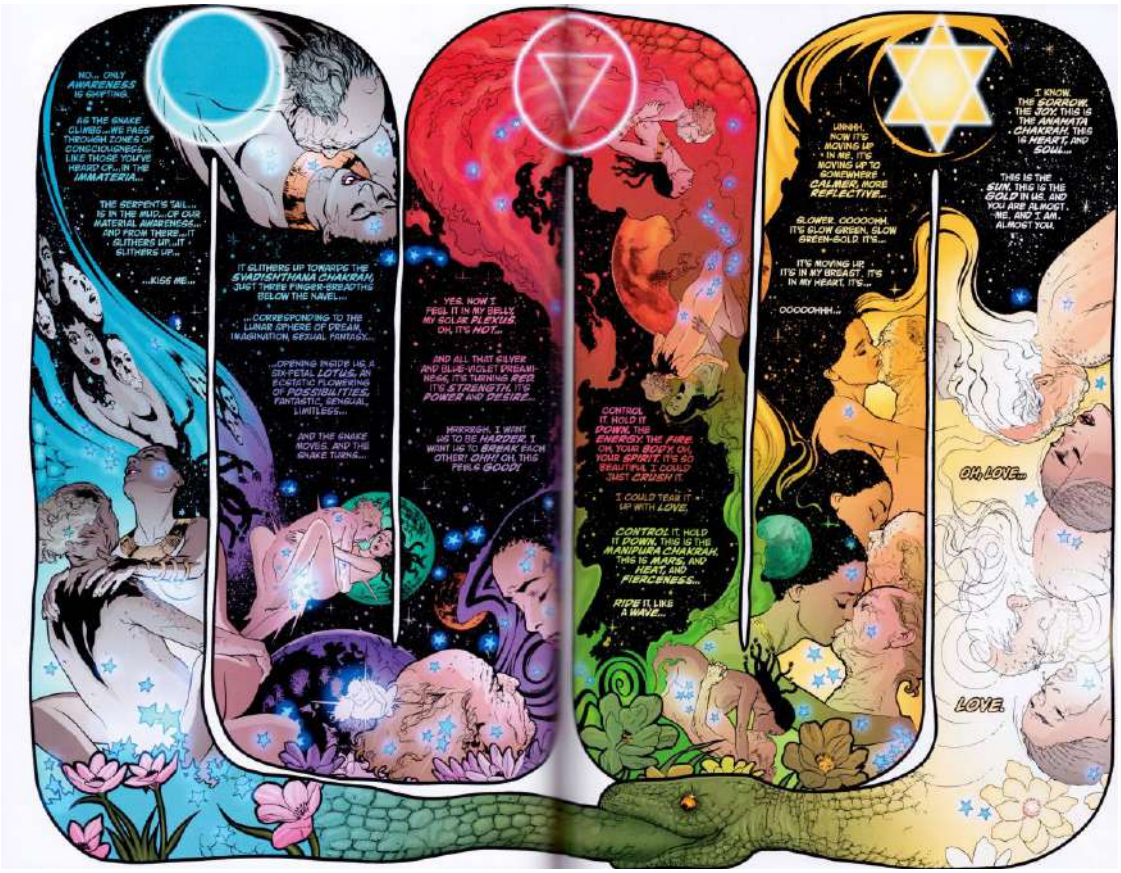

Fig. 6 © Moore and Williams III, *Promethea*, 1995–2005

Moore's unsettled knowledge can also be grasped in his innovative narrative techniques. He is capable of enabling the reader to relate to the stories he tells by playing with different layers of narration and intertextuality, blending music, backgrounds, stories, and voices (Kraemer and Winslade, 2010). Moore's comics are not easy to understand; they often require a second reading. Furthermore, he uses unusual layouts, which require the reader to move the book, changing its position. Finally, in *Promethea*, the reader becomes part of the book itself.

> Promethea many times looks at us directly . . . the reader becomes more frequent, until finally both word and image reflect the readers themselves. Towards the climactic close of the comic series, the character addresses the reader directly (Howell, 2015, p. 391).

David B.

Pierre François Beauchard was born in Nîmes in France in 1959 and studied fine arts at the École Duperré in Paris. As narrated in *L'Ascension du Haut Mal*— translated into English as *Epileptic* (1996-2003)—his artistic name, David B., was a way of separating his personal life from his artistic alter ego. He chose the name that his mother would have liked to have given

him, as she was particularly fascinated by Jewish culture and spirituality, in opposition to her father's antisemitism and conservatism (David B.'s grandfather). In 1990, David B. founded the independent publishing house L'Association together with Jean-Christophe Menu, Lewis Trondheim, Matt Konture, Patrice Killoffer, Stanislas, and Mokeït. This publisher played a key role in promoting innovative graphic novels in French, but with a global impact. The most famous book published by *L'Association* was Marjane Satrapi's autobiography, *Persepolis* (2003), which became a bestseller, leading to a movie adaptation.

Between 1996 and 2003, David B. published his masterpiece, *Epileptic*, which won several prizes, such as the Rodolphe-Töpffer, Ignatz, Angoulême, and Eisner awards. In this autobiographical book, David B. narrates the illness of his brother Jean-Christophe and his family's sorrow, doubts, and social marginalisation. As David B. explains, epilepsy in the 1970s was a mysterious illness with few scientific treatments, which stigmatised its victims. His parents sought out the available scientific remedies, but when they failed, they started exploring alternative religious healing, navigating the esoteric and new age French counterculture, looking for a miraculous cure. This religious quest had deep roots in David B.'s family; David B.'s mother considered herself to be Cathar, while his father was deeply religious and a follower of Rosicrucianism. They both were avid readers of René Guénon, Julius Evola, Raymond Abellio, Robert Charroux, Jacques Bergier, and other esotericists (Pasquier, 2006). The young David B., who was fond of history, was fascinated by this imaginative counter-history all while keeping it at a distance.

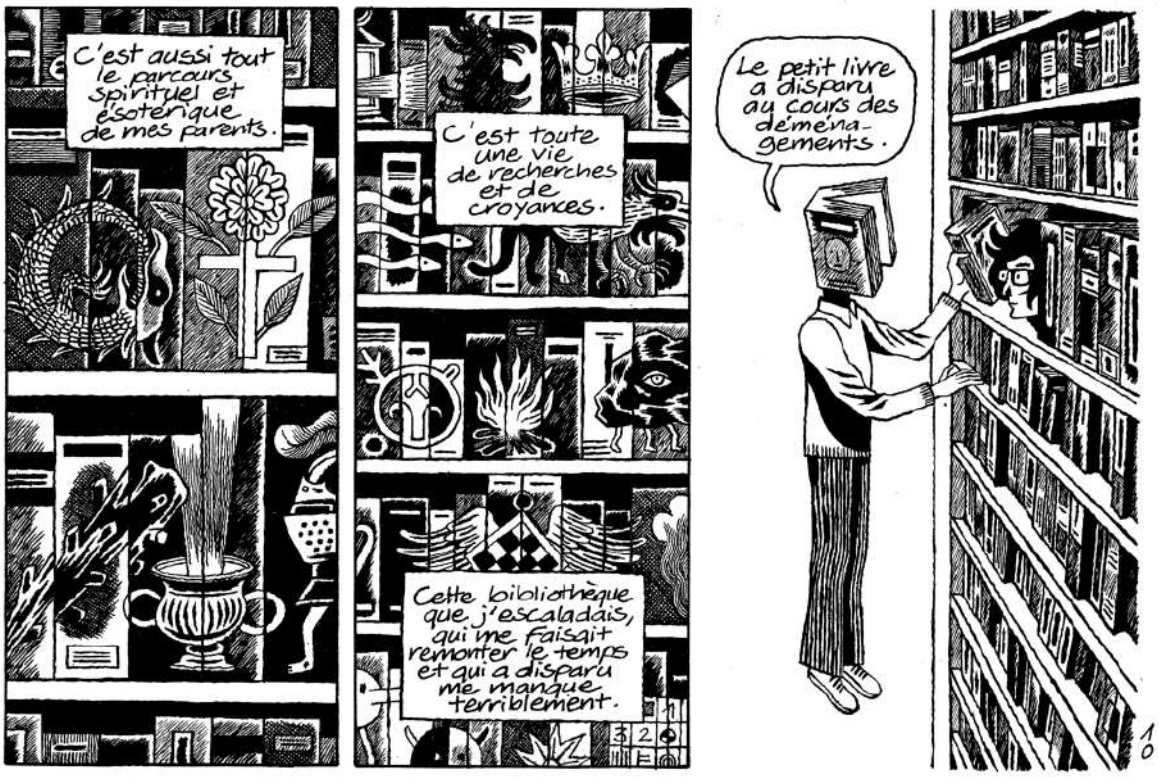

Fig. 7. © David B. "Heterography 2: Bibliothèques", *Religiographies* vol. 1, no. 1, 2023

Unlike Hugo Pratt and Alan Moore, David B. does not belong to a religious movement and does not practice religious rituals. On the contrary, David B.'s involvement with esoteric and new age movements was often negative, involving people who could not help his brother or, even worse, were charlatans who tried to take advantage of his needy family, as was the case of Raymond Abellio, who suggested to David B's mother that she have sex with him as part of her spiritual quest. While the contradictions, hypocrisies, and frauds of esoteric and new age movements have been exposed in David B.'s artistic production, this does not prevent him from exploring esoteric symbols, narratives, and doctrines, which have become a particular aspect of his art. We can find in David B.'s output references to alchemy, Kabbalah, Traditionalism, Islamic esotericism, Swedenborg, etc. Indeed, he has been described as the "master of esoteric novels"[2]. David B.'s esotericism takes different forms: 1) an imaginative language which helped him in exploring and offsetting void and pain, illness and death; 2) a metaphor for expressing his marginalisation; and 3) art itself, serving as an instrument to explore the unconscious and humankind, referring back to surrealist artists (Bauduin, 2014).

David B. started reading esoteric books when he was twelve. He found them in the library of his parents, who were art professors. René Guénon's *Le Roi du Monde* (1927) was a turning point and later became an inspiration for one of his artworks, *Mon frère est le Roi du monde* (2016) [My brother is the King of the world]. In this book, David drew seventy-two images (a Kabbalistic number) juxtaposing thirty-six representations of the king of the world, a mythic, all-powerful figure, and thirty-six images of his brother, who represented the fragility of illness and humanity: "It is the image of the loss of power against omnipotence" (David B., 2016, p. 20). David B. depicted his brother, wincing in pain, disfigured by epileptic attacks. On the other hand, page after page, we witness a magical overlapping: weakness becomes strength, darkness becomes light, his brother becomes the king of the world (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8 © David. B *Mon frère est le Roi du monde*, 2016

Esoteric narratives and imaginings have been an instrument to cope with illness, sorrow, and death for David B. Esoteric symbols and narratives fill the voids, the silences and absences left by epilepsy. In fact, when his brother had epileptic attacks, the young David B. imagined that he was stranded in an inaccessible dimension. That is why masks recur in his work, representing the unspeakable. David B.'s masks are mysterious and difficult to comprehend. They do not represent absence of meaning, but semantic abundance and instability.

One of the most important topics in David B.'s books is death and the impossible fight against it (Pontier, 2010). He described his brother's attacks as "little deaths" (interview at the Festival Bilbolul, 2022). "To see him 'die' daily, we end up having the impression of witnessing a large number of deaths, therefore a kind of massacre"[3]. Sometimes death became an obsession, as when through a character representing David B. himself, he said, "The certainty of having to die one day made me want to die right away" (David B., 1999). But this does not imply gloom; David B. introduces humour even when discussing sensitive topics. Furthermore, the fight against death, represented in several battle scenes with knives, swords, and guns, is surprisingly nonviolent. It does not hurt and darkly praises life.

> At night, nightmares come galloping through our heads. The Pale Horse appeared in the Middle Ages, it is found in different forms: Hacqumart, Chauchemar, Cauchmar. Chaucher means to ride and trample; Mar is the Francization of the Saxon word Mahrt. It designates a nocturnal demon appearing in the form of an emaciated horse that weighs on the sleep of humans. It is a representation of Death or the Devil from which we escape by riding our own mount to embark on a great nocturnal flight that ends when we wake up. Every night I fight and escape death (David B., 1992).

In his artistic production, David B. depicts several heterodox and marginalised religious and political movements, such as the Jewish Sabbatai Sevi community in Venice (David B., 2010), the Adamite, Taborite, and Hussite movements in Bohemia, Hakim al Muqanna's movement in Persia (David B., 2006), and many others. These marginal historical subjects reflect David B.'s perceived and experienced marginality, as argued by Pasquier: "David B. places himself on the side of the freaks, and not as a curious or disgusted observer. Jean-Christophe is a freak, his family becomes one after him, and all this bizarre humanity that they meet during their wanderings is made up of an infinity of freaks" (Pasquier, 2006, p. 4).

> Yes, when my brother got sick we became a minority, we changed position in society. My brother had become a sick person, and we the family members of a sick person. I remember when my brother would have a seizure on the street, people would stop and look at him and say, "Who is that, what's wrong with him? He is a madman, a drug addict, he must be put in jail" (David B. in the Invisible Lines Project 2022, p. 12).

The uses of esotericism (exploring and representing sorrow and marginalisation) are first mentioned in the realm of secularity, but David B.'s artistic quest goes further, exploring the metaphysical dimension, describing his connection with transcendence and the (collective) unconscious. A key topic of David B.'s artistic production is the re-enactment of dreams and

visions he has experienced, which have become for him a source of knowledge and guidance: “I don’t believe in God, but I do believe in dreams” (David B., interview at the Festival Bilbolbul, 2022). Furthermore, sometimes in his visions he grasps something otherworldly, something akin to a protecting angel:

> There were people who were protected by angels and in my opinion, I could believe in a protector angel for me, under the influence of this moment. Maybe also because I was stronger than my brother, I didn’t get sick, I was able to resist better than my sister all the problems my brother’s illness brought and I felt more protected, but now I don’t really know if he was an angel or if it was my personal strength doing this thing, but I’ve always been interested in beliefs and the fact that there can be something above us, I don’t know…(David B., interview at the Festival Bilbolbul, 2022).

Like Alan Moore, David B. does not reduce the transcendent dimension to the physical realm. Dreams, visions, and ecstatic experiences are not simply physiological experiences of the human being; they are the fruit of a connection with another dimension: “I have the impression that in my head, coming from elsewhere, maybe that’s poetry, precisely” (Pontier, 2010, p. 57). This connection between ontological dimensions is perfectly explained in a short story, where David B. depicts himself meeting a professor of surrealism in a café in Venice, who explains the nature of dreams and visions.

> What is the nature of this external element?” asks David B. “Well, of course some of my colleagues immediately decided that it was God! Or at least one of its manifestations. Let’s leave the idea of God aside for now. These elements in their nature are comparable to air, fire, water… This element, penetrating the brain, changes the weather. I am talking about time in the meteorological sense… because in the sleeping mind there is a certain climate.”

This “meteorological” understanding of dreams and visions, which are part of humankind but do not belong to it, leaves many questions about religion and spirituality unanswered. David B.’s complicated and unsettled relationship with the transcendent is a recurrent topic in his artistic production. For example, in *Leonora*, he describes the initiatory quest of a young woman in 15th-century Italy who is looking for the Grail (David B. and Martin, 2004). Leonora meets a hermit, who looks like a saint but is vicious; then a wolf, who looks feral but is a saint. This uncertainty is not meant to deny the distinction between good and evil. Leonora’s quest is successful: she defeats the Devil and finds the Grail, but to do so, she must purify herself and question her understanding of reality. David B.’s unsettled knowledge and uncertain spirituality is well represented by characters such as the “hesitant knight” who, while unsure of his quest, is able to help Leonora. Other interesting characters are the radical Hussite Jan Žižka and his bride (Fig. 9), who are invited by Jesus Christ himself to climb the wall of heaven. But once reached the wall walk, they become trapped in doubt. Which side is right? Žižka asks Jesus, “Are you Christ or the Devil? Is this heaven just an illusion?”. Both questions are left without an answer. Later, Žižka and his wife are invited by the inhabitants of heaven to come down from the wall walk, but they prefer to remain there, entertaining everyone with music (David B., 2006). David B. is the “hesitant

knight", unsettled, who, like the Žižkas, does not embrace religion, preferring a liminal position and cheering his readers through his art.

As with Hugo Pratt and Alan Moore, we can grasp David B.'s spiritual quest in his writing and drawing techniques and in his relationship with the reader. In David B. drawing is crucial and sometimes self-sufficient. In his drawings, we can see the influence of old masters such as Brueghel and Bosch, and of surrealist painters such as René Magritte and Max Ernst. Black is dominant, representing the darkness and the uncharted territories of dreams and visions (Pontier, 2010). Unlike the work of Pratt, who plays with blurriness and the untold, David B.'s drawings are extremely clear and detailed: the unsettledness is not embodied by blurriness but by the abundance of meanings and particulars. Finally, for David B., drawing became a sort of meditative technique.

Tracing a sign with ink sometimes makes me feel present on the paper, and at the same time, I feel the world expand. I feel that the thing I'm doing becomes the world, being part of the world. Drawing helped me to go beyond the pain, beyond the sadness and remorse I had[4].

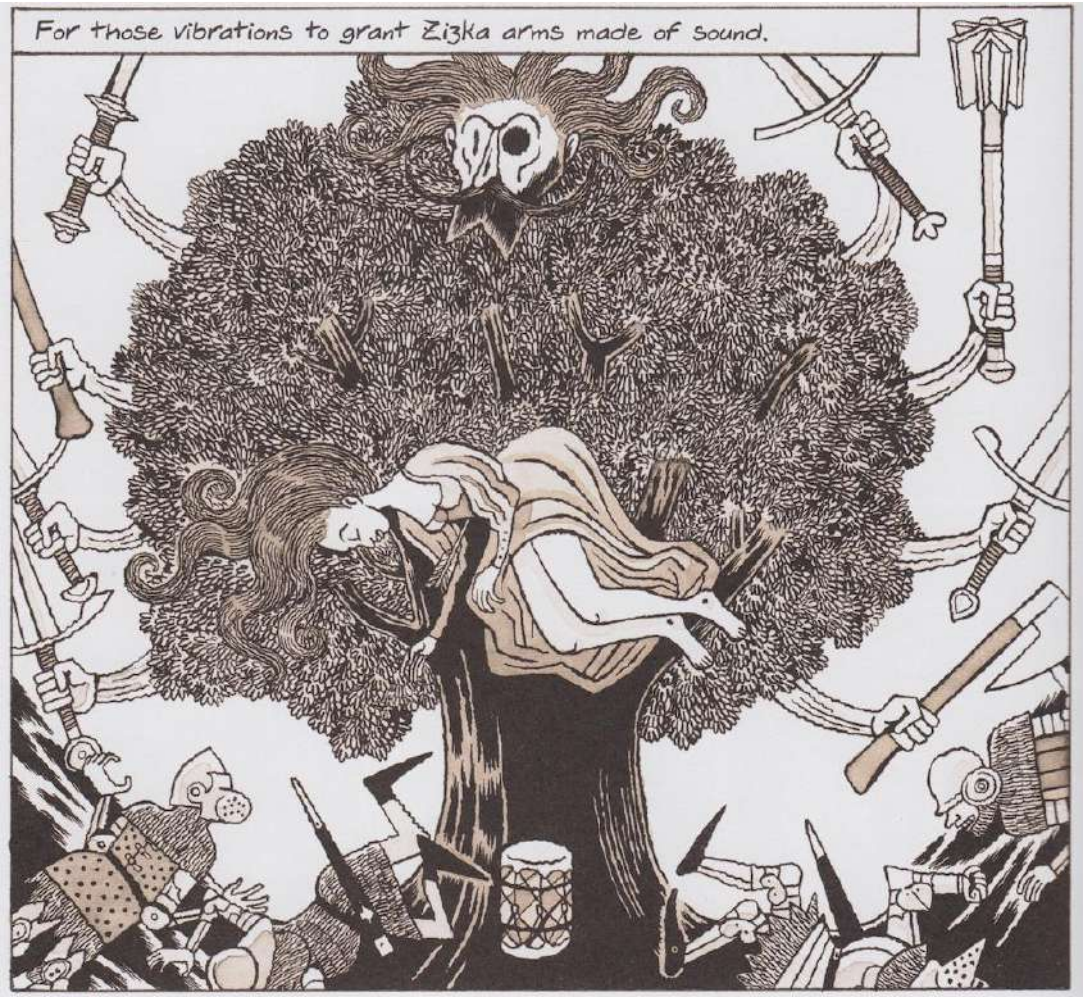

Fig. 9 © David. B ,*The Armed Garden*, 2006

Conclusions

Despite the blurred boundaries between fiction and reality, I do not think these authors can be placed in the realm of "hyper-religion" described by Adam Possamai (2002), which implies a process of commodification, disenchantment, and estrangement from society and culture. Their political battles (against colonialism, neo-liberalism, and Fascism), their religious experiences, and their grief are real and deeply connected to societies. Furthermore, these authors have a cultural and political impact beyond the frontiers of comics and art, impacting the political and religious imaginations of many readers.

Hugo Pratt, Alan Moore, and David B. reproduce in their artistic production esoteric narratives, symbols, and doctrines. These topics are not simply devices of narrative or entertainment but are part of their spiritual and artistic quests. These authors can thus be included in the frame of the new age discourse (Sutcliffe, 2005) and in the frame of the occulture as an analytical tool (Kokkinen, 2013). In fact, these authors, like many spiritual seekers in contemporary societies: 1) put the accent on the individual's understanding to question institutional religions, 2) propose universalist discourses, and 3) blur the boundaries between the religious and the secular.

That said, I find that the frame is not sufficient as it does not offer: 1) an understanding of how spirituality and esotericism have changed or 2) the particularity of the comics medium. In this article, I showed how comics create a place for religious innovation. For these artists, art and spirituality are deeply interconnected; both have the power to explore the unconscious as well as society. These authors are not interested in religious authority, veracity, or tradition, as they believe that the source lies in experience itself, in the capacity of performing the truth, rather than possessing it. These authors propose another way of understanding and experiencing esotericism and spirituality, which cannot be grasped through the main definitions of esotericism (e.g., rejected, stigmatised, absolute, hidden). For these comics artists, esotericism is an unsettled, anti-dogmatic, syncretic knowledge that reveals moral and religious doubts and that blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. Furthermore, this "unsettling knowledge" is meant to "unsettle" the reader, too, who is invited to question his/her prejudices, not to simply take in and shelter a superior or absolute form of knowledge.

One could argue that this "unsettled knowledge" has found in comics the perfect medium, one which "has a unique potential to convey religious concepts—and perhaps even religious experiences—through the unusual vehicle of a visual/textual medium that demands reader participation" (Kraemer and Lewis, 2015, p. 223).

The fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different images, shapes, and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretive options, creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable, and unfixable . . . The very discontinuity of the page urges readers to do the work of inference, to negotiate over and over the passage from submissive reading to active interpreting (Hatfield, 2005, p. 17).

To conclude, the “unsettled knowledge” frame could, in my opinion, be applied to other contexts, such as the literature of Jorge Luis Borges and the cinema of Federico Fellini, and perhaps beyond the frame of art. However, these hypotheses should be empirically tested. In my opinion, this new category may be useful because it helps to shift our focus from ideas (Faivre), historiography (Hanegraaff), and religious authorities (Von Stuckrad) by focusing on practitioners and sympathisers who display their ideas but also their doubts and contradictions. This different perspective is in line with new approaches to religious and esoteric studies, which put the accent on the everyday life experiences and on the agency of its actors (McGuire, 2008; Asprem and Strube, 2020).

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).

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Note

[1] For the emic perspective see Aleister Crowley (Pasi, 2011; Bogdan, 2014) and for the etic perspective see the research project "Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective" https://cas-e.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CAS-E-Project-Outline.pdf
[2] https://www.coconinopress.it/prodotto/dedalus/
[3] http://neuviemeart.citebd.org/spip.php?article231
[4] https://hamelin.net/disegnare-linvisibile-intervista-david-b-invisible-lines/

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Making visible the invisible: representing religious content in manga*

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Ghosts, spirits and ancestors have a central place in the Japanese spiritual imagination and are central to its contemporary popular culture. In visual narratives such as manga, both their way of depiction and their agency are the result of creativity, continuously in the making, at the intersection of the artist's imagination, the work of cultural and linguistic translation and the representation's legibility to the audience. This article delves into the representations of religious content in chosen manga, with a focus on image, text, and panel/frame composition.

Keywords: folk religion, text-image, representation, Japanese comics

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Manga is a Japanese phenomenon, both in terms of its roots and development, however, its spread and influence are certainly not limited to Japan as manga has experienced for decades expanding popularity globally (Berndt, 2014). The world of manga is vast, with an enormous range of publications, themes and narratives, and also exceedingly popular, catering to different publics and feeding an extraordinarily successful industry. Manga with religious themes are no exception. The supernatural, religious and the spiritual are often encountered in manga, to the extent that whole series are devoted to such topics. MacWilliams (2012) made a tentative categorization of religious manga into three categories: first, informational manga that teaches people about religious organizations, religious history or right ways of practice in an easily digestible format. Second, the category of manga used by new religious movements, centered on the message of social change and explaining the specific way the given religious movement sees the world. The third category, in which the manga explored in this article fall, is that of entertainment manga, where humor and leisure are central: here, religious themes are portrayed in a lighthearted and approachable manner.

Most readers visit manga for enjoyment, however, while 'manga are commercially produced for entertainment, they also serve as sources for 'imaginative consumption' for their readers, who use manga ideas and symbols to construct their sense of self, the world, and the sacred' (MacWilliams, 2012, p. 596). This medium makes learning possible and fantasies accessible. Readers learn about interpersonal situations, the appropriate expression of emotions, the proper ways of reaping benefits of lessons in life, dealing with changing social norms, as well as they gain cultural information (Kimbourg and Glassman, 2009). Role-playing, emotional identification and empathy are important mechanisms of how these graphic novels work, as readers can live gregariously through the experiences of the (main) protagonist(s). In the case of manga, enriching one's cultural, social and even linguistic repertoire are important side-effects of enjoyment.

Thematically, religious and spiritual manga tends to circle around dominant religions in Japan: Buddhist, Shinto and Christian elements are common. Moreover, folk religiosity and beliefs are prevalent in most manga. Anthropomorphism and metamorphosis, material things being alive, possessing agency and supernatural power abound (Buljan and Cusack, 2015) and are a loved part of most narratives. This is directly connected to Japanese religiosity (Ellwood and Pilgrim, 2016; Prohl and Nelson, 2012; Roemer, 2012), but also a response to the globally increasing demand for a re-enchanted world.

Methodology

In this article manga are seen as 'cultivated and situated modes of engaging with reality' (Johannsen and Kirsch, 2020) which create and maintain religious world (Jensen, 2017) but can also contest them. The idea that religion is a sensory and mediated practice (Meyer, 2009) but also an 'imaginative practice' which mediates between sensation and

meaning (Traut and Wilke, 2015b in Meyer, 2009) guides our exploration. Learning from narrative approaches to religion we look at how the 'virtual reality' of the story-world (Ryan, 2015) is created, as stories and visual aesthetics have a lasting effect in shaping perceptions of reality (Meyer, 2009; Kreinath, 2019). The exploration of how religious narratives unfold and collapse, are developed, subverted, and blended with the sensation of physical time and space in order to be integrated into our perception of the world (Johannsen and Kirsch, 2020) is here of interest, especially regarding the force of visual aspects – the contemporary dimensions of iconographic efforts, efforts at depicting the beyond as part of the manga experience.

This contribution is based on the close reading of several religiously themed manga with attention given to text, images, backgrounds, frames and composition. The manga have been selected on the base of their explicit religiously themed content, being aware that religious or spiritual imaginary can be present also in not-explicitly religiously themed manga. Knowledge about religious or spiritual manga important to international readers has been acquired through engagement with user posts in the online platforms Quora and Reddit during the summer of 2021. The manga mentioned in these posts and analyzed in this article are: *Saint young men* by Hikaru Nakamura, *Natsume's book of friends* by Yuki Midorikawa, *Kakuriyo: bed & breakfast for spirits* by Midori Yuma & Wako Ioka, *Kamisama kiss* by Julietta Suzuki, *Mushishi* by Yuki Urushibara, *Blue exorcist* by Kazue Kato, *Dororo* by Osamu Tezuka, *Shaman King* by Takei Hiroyuki, *XXXholic* by Clamp and *Yu Yu Hakusho* by Yoshihiro Togashi. This selection is based on the choices of the contributors to the online platform discussions and follows also their reading habits: the manga have been read online on the website manganelo.com in June 2022 in English translation, with a basic knowledge of Japanese. Manganelo is a free web-based library of manga, loved by Quora and Reddit contributors due to its richness, ease in navigating categories and its well-working search engine. The illustrations included in this article are screenshots made from the above-mentioned website. The purpose of the selection of material was based on the wish to understand how global readers of manga are exposed to the topics of interest to this article. Both the selection of material and the methodology used offer only an exploratory glimpse into the world of religious manga, initial steps which should be followed by a more rigorous and extensive inquiry.

In this article the aim is to explore the realm of the religious 'beyond' and the entities inhabiting it as has been made visible in Japanese popular culture through reader selected manga reaching a global audience. It is reflecting on both the technical details and the way the reader is involved into the recognition of an encounter of a different kind, while trying to pinpoint the way mediation, through the manga as a specific type of comic graphic narrative adds to the religious content. The research questions guiding this article are thus: What kind of religious content becomes visible through the medium of manga? What are the visual mechanics of the invisible in manga?

Representing the invisible: concrete cases

Religious beliefs as encountered in manga can be seen as expressions of ‘vernacular religion’ (Kimbourg and Glassman, 2009) as more or less formal worldviews are placed in everyday, mundane contexts. In cultural products such as graphic novels the authors borrow from a so called ‘storehouse of religious concepts’ filtered and used with a certain purpose, which can be artistic, educative or business-minded (Thomas, 2012). Narratives that use religious imaginary do not offer realistic examples of faiths, beliefs or ways of worship – this is both not expected and not necessary, as a free, aesthetic way of depiction and some degree of superficiality and ‘fun’ is incorporated in manga as a medium (Brenner, 2007).

Belting (2005), discussing iconography from the point of view of the anthropology of images explains that depictions ‘do not exist by themselves, but they happen; they take place’ (Belting, 2005, p. 302) both via transmission and reception. That which pertains to the religious realm, the religious invisible is ‘present in their media’ as the media ‘perform the presence of an absence’ (Belting, 2005, p. 312). Media do not only mirror an external world but also makes visible ‘essential structures of our thinking’ (Belting 2005:316). The reader has an active role in making sense of content. Engaging through the visual sense with representation is a direct, embodied way of experiencing. We concur with Meyer when she asserts that ‘pictorial media streamline and sustain religious notions of the visible and the invisible and involve embodied practices of seeing that shape what and how people see’ (Meyer, 2015, p. 333).

Among the analyzed manga recognition based on iconography plays a significant role only in *Saint Young Men,* where Buddha and Jesus attempt to lead inconspicuous, quaint lives in the contemporary world. Although they attempt to remain incognito acting and dressing, their anonymity is jeopardized by moments of unmistakable recognition, such as the bleeding of Jesus's stigmata or Buddha's radiant enlightenment appearing as a halo. Recognizable iconographical details such as the crown of thorns or the hair knot form the basis for recognition and narrative tension, as despite being historical founders of major religions, the characters navigate ordinary existences in Tokyo as young men. In this sense, ‘although the series certainly rewards readers who are familiar with the life stories of Jesus and the Buddha, one does not need extensive background knowledge about either tradition to have a chuckle or even a hearty laugh’ (Thomas, 2020).

Fig. 1 - Saint young men by Hikaru Nakamura

Manga are multileveled media. In Japanese graphic novels text, images, backgrounds, frames and composition have an important role both in constructing the narrative and eliciting intellectual and emotional responses from the reader (Takahashi and MacWilliams, 2008; Shamoon, 2008). In manga storytelling occurs according to the laws of cinematography, with angles, fading in/out and building a visual continuum based upon a sequence. Panels structure both the content and the pace of the story, guiding the eye, but also forming units of meaning in an 'analytical montage' (MacWilliams, 2012, p. 598. Layers of signification are formed by the layout of pages, the rhythm of reading/looking. None of these elements allows comprehension of the manga narrative on its own. This, according to Thomas, is a particular way of viewing which allows the narrative to become 'a reasonable approximation of integral reality' contributing to 'the creation of religious frames of mind by inviting audiences to suppress their awareness of gaps between fictive worlds and empirical reality' (Thomas, 2012, p. 29).

Text is an important element of manga: text can be informative and explanatory, giving context and clarifying images. Explanatory text is directed directly at the reader, and especially important in manga introducing supernatural elements which are not directly recognizable. Most of the manga examined in this article present the religious and spiritual realm of the invisible through textual explanation.

One such manga is *Shaman king*. The main protagonist is a young boy who loves to play gitar and is in all ways ordinary, except being a shaman. Shamans are as 'people that connect this world with the next', while the main character explains: 'I can have spirits possess my body'. Here we encounter the iconography of the ordinary, as the protagonist is both familiar and unfamiliar to the reader, it conforms to norms of youthful behavior yet possesses supernatural skills to be explored through the narrative.

Fig. 2 Shaman king by Takei Hiroyuki

In the case of the *Kakuriko's bed and breakfast for spirits* we see different strategies for using text. The storyline centers on a girl with the ability to perceive spirits called *ayakashi*. She engages in working for them to settle the debt accumulated by her grandfather. Explanatory text frame the supernatural character from both sides. While the image, especially the face of the spirit, conveys emotions, making the reader feel its wrath, the text insists on its calm spiritual power, creating tension through contradiction. In another frame, text is placed in a rectangular inner panel explaining the action taking place, substantiated through speech bubbles. The depiction of all protagonists, including both

spirits and the main human character, features faces without eyes but with a mouth directed towards the explanatory text. The text is emphasized in bold, highlighting the dominance of text in the text-image combination.

Fig.3 - Kakuriyo: bed & breakfast for spirits by Midori Yuma & Wako Ioka

Mushishi explains through text the ontology of the 'other-worldly' entities 'lowly, grotesque, far different from mundane animals and plants' somewhat chaotic, organic and unrecognizable, 'deformed' and names them as *mushi*. In the first panel we are not sure if we see many *mushi* or only one, we cannot really distinguish between the elements of the image: just as the text explains, the image is 'incomprehensible' in terms of identifiable (although visible) entities because humans do not know what to look for.

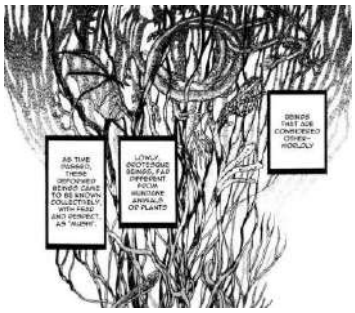

Fig. 4 - Mushishi by Yuki Urushibara

Visibility may depend on the level of attention of the viewer, which can be enhanced through explanatory text. In one panel of *Shaman King* we see two children sitting in a bus stop next to each other. The dialogue bubbles explain that one of the protagonists is a ghost recognizable through a semi-transparent body, allowing the reader to see the text written on the bench. Not only the boy is able to see ghosts (contact with spirits being the skill of the shaman) but also the reader is taught to recognize ghost by connecting text and image.

Fig. 5 - Shaman king by Takei Hiroyuki

The narrative rhythm is influenced by the management of panel orders, where the succession of panels converses with the complexity of images within the panels. In this sense panels can be compared to literal framing devices, which establish the hierarchy between, and the importance of specific bits of information. The layout of pages in manga is formed by panel sequence, determining the rhythm of the narrative. Panels are read from right to left and top to bottom although some artists might choose to change this form. The shape and size of panels differs per manga.

In *Kamisama's kiss* the order of the panel makes visible distinction and separation between different realms of existence which can unified only by (ritual) magic. A wish being made is listened to 'on the other side' through a door, while humans and non-humans remain divided by panels. Only magic (the ink mark left by a calligraphy pen) can create connection. Panel limits act here as boundaries which can be crossed only with certain conditions. We sense visually that we speak of two different dimensions (in this case of consciousness: dream consciousness versus awake consciousness) through images of portal-like round shapes which offer the most contrast in the image and to which the eye is naturally drawn. The panels, their order, shape and the placing of words in specific places in the panels alludes to different states of being and different realms of existence.

Fig. 6 - Kamisama kiss by Julietta Suzuki

Breaking the panel order is a manner of clarifying who does not fit or is beyond the logic of the narrative. In *Yu Yu Hakusho* a non-human entity sits casually on the line of the panels, while a ghost looks from above and beyond at the panels which represent and

contain the human realms of existence. Escaping the order and logic of the panels gives otherworldly, special status to the entities depicted in this story.

Fig. 7 -Yu Yu Hakusho by Yoshihiro Togashi

In *Natsume's book of friends* three different panels are connected visually. If the first panel centers on a non-human figure with one eye, the second panel on one side of the face of the main (human) protagonist, while the third panel presents a nature scene with dialogue bubbles explaining that the main protagonist has seen 'weird things' since childhood. The reader becomes invested in the story and emotions of the protagonist, but also experiences and learns on his own about spirits. Neither the visual information, nor the text can provide this experience on their own: it is the order and visual regime of the panels which makes the involvement of the reader possible.

Fig. 8 - Natsume's book of friends by Yuki Midorikawa

Additionally, in manga there are forms of text have a combined visual and informational value. In this article we will use the term textographs to refer to this important category. These words are mostly onomatopoeia which imitate sounds, refer to different types of sensations or imitate visually the direction of action. Textographs represent 'actions, sensations or facial expressions' (Thomas, 2012, p. 161). The way of writing is important, for example when implying movement or loud sounds, the script is written in a slanted, elongated way. Through differences in size, the intensity of the given sound becomes visible. The translation of words pertaining to the category of textographs depends on the choices of the translator of the foreign editions. If the meaning carried by textographs is considered important, the sounds might be transliterated, if their visual value is seen as important, the original script will appear in translated editions.

Textographs occupy a liminal space through which the religious invisible makes its appearance. They visually signal the presence of something important. For example, in *XXXholic* a wind chime occupies the center of a panel. From the movement of the chime, we imply a strong gust of wind, while the sound, written both Japanese and Latin script reinforces the idea of movement. We are prepared for something extraordinary, which is confirmed by a spirit in female human form appearing in the next panel. The next panel shows the reaction of people to this apparition through textographs. Sounds act as a liminal space where the non-human entities are announced and through which they can make their entry.

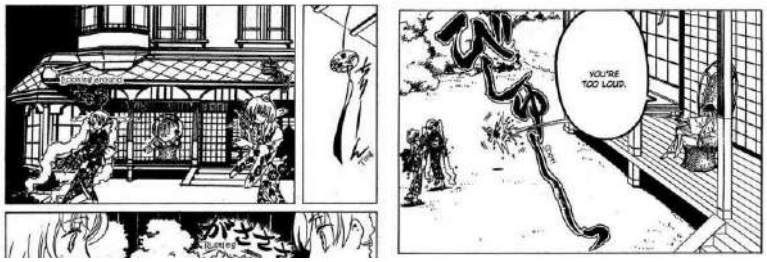

Fig. 9 - Mushishi by Yuki Urushibara

A frame in *Kakuriyo: bed & breakfast for spirits* shows the face of the protagonist, surrounded by textographs which fill the remaining two thirds of the panel. What looks like meaningful script transform in a slur, which at its turn introduces the possibility of something mysterious.

Fig. 10 - Kakuriyo: bed & breakfast for spirits by Midori Yuma & Wako Ioka

In Tezuka's *Dororo* two panels indicate a beyond human presence represented through textographs, written in an elongated way corresponding visually to the rain surrounding them, with translation added. The speech bubble talk about 'signs from the devils', giving the register of interpretation for the beyond-human presence in the panels. The reader enters the dynamic process of sensing, wondering and trying to make sense along with the human protagonist.

Fig. 11 - Dororo by Osamu Tezuka

In *Blue Exorcist*, non-ordinary entities undergo visual transformations. The demon, initially visible in a quasi-human form, dramatically disappears to leave behind textographs that transcend panel boundaries. Barely visible entities are recognized as spirits by the human protagonist. Blurry bodies of different shapes and materiality are surrounded by textographs: the shape of these entities is not entirely visible; they seem to blend in the background and disappear.

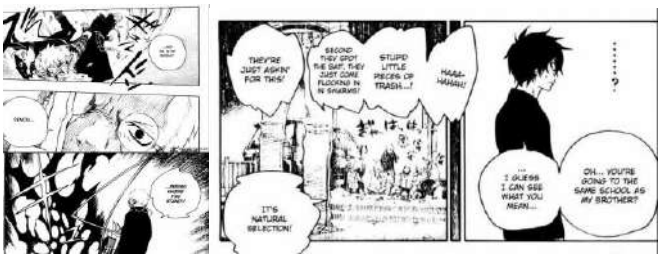

Fig. 12 - Blue exorcist by Kazue Kato

According to Ingulsrud and Allen (2009) we can identify a specific order of ‘reading’ and engaging with manga: most readers begin with reading the speech balloons, thus engaging with explanatory text, then look at images depicting protagonists in action, reading emotion on faces and as last, consider the frame background and other visual elements. The speed of reading is influenced by comprehension, while the specific elements of the story are consulted or neglected according to personal need. When it comes to spiritual or religious elements, there is often an element of surprise or mystery that invites further exploration.

Kakuriko’s bed and breakfast for the spirits maintains mystery through partial visibility. The human protagonist enters a hall filled with spirits wearing (mostly animal) masks, which hide emotions, which for the protagonist and the reader heighten the mystery. A sense of unease is created by the eyes of the spirits closer to the front of the panel which are directly fixed on the reader. Not only the spirits but also the human character look at the viewer, creating a triangle of vision where connection is created across and beyond the lines of the panels.

Fig. 13 - Kakuriyo: bed & breakfast for spirits by Midori Yuma & Wako Ioka

The absence of eyes and characteristics of the body is crucial for creating ambiguity and interpretative possibility. In *Dororo,* a black shape, placed in the middle of the panel directs the gaze: the eyes of the viewer try to read the impenetrable figure. While the existence of this entity is certain, its identity remains hidden until the following panel, when the bodily characteristics are revealed, and recognition is ensured. However, we cannot make contact, the entity's eyes are white, blank and expressionless. This visually plays with the realm of the invisible, where we intuit, then clearly see a non-human being, however, a lot remains unclear – to be explored further in the story.

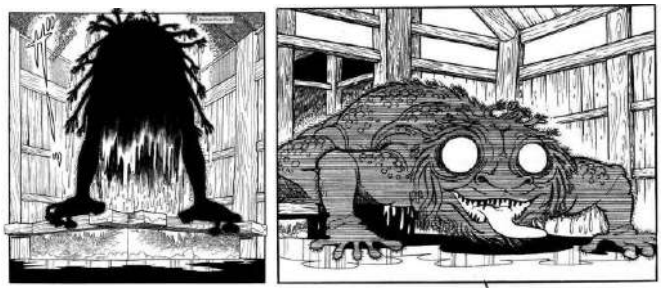

Fig. 14 - Dororo by Osamu Tezuka

Natsume's book of friends plays with visibility and invisibility by using the trope of shapeshifting. Two cats see Natsume 'running away' and follow him: they are only auditorily present through the sounds they make, however, once Natsume becomes conscious of being followed, they 'appear' as spirit women (drawn with a shaky wavy thin line, which stand in contrast to the stronger lines and colors surrounding them) taking the shape of a one-eyed spirit with wild hair and a woman-like form without hands and legs. Their nature changes during three panels from cat to spirit, with an intermediary stage of exclusively auditory presence, in a sequence of recognition, doubt, recognition. Other types of entities appear along exceptionally large animals: they have claws and unusual features, such as extraordinarily large ears, which identify them as non-human. Shapeshifting is a common feature in this manga.

Fig. 15 - Natsume's book of friends by Yuki Midorikawa

The world of *mushi* in *Mushishi* is portrayed as more chaotic and richer in detail than the human world. In it, the *mushi* are difficult to 'see', what is a *mushi* and what is 'background' is at first glance not easy to understand. The last panel isolates *mushi*, making them recognizable and visible: they are small, almost in danger to be stepped upon might one not pay good attention. Another panel develops the idea of formlessness further: a smoke like substance wraps itself around a human shape, to which the human reacts with fright, asking fearfully what this is. The adjacent panel explains that it is a *mushi*, which 'wraps around other *mushi* and doesn't let go'.

Fig 16 - Mushishi by Yuki Urushibara

Conclusions

The relationship between text and image as characteristic of most graphic novels and the theoretical difficulties in reading this connection have already been explored (Spanjers, 2021). In this contribution attention has been given to several elements of manga, such as text, images, backgrounds, frames and composition, in relation to the theme of visibility/invisibility concerning religious and spiritual content. As we have seen, manga complicates the neat distinction between image and text with a third element identified as textographs, which is both visual and textual in nature. Textographs play an important role in leaving content open to interpretation in the narrative and calling for interaction on the part of the reader. Consequently, they act as vehicles for the introduction and expression of religious content, we conclude.

First, religiously themes narratives not only guide the interpretation of experiences, but also discipline the senses, modulating the attention (Honko, 1964 in Johannsen, 2020). One learns to pay attention to how things are 'not quite right' and that might happen

through discontinuities in the 'situational dimension of the narrative' (Johannsen, 2020, p. 76) such as discontinuities in time, space, causality, intentionality and character which can constitute a 'proposition for belief' (Fine, 1992 in Johannsen, 2020). The emphasis on sensory clues is in this most important as information relating to sensory details such as touch, smell, or bodily reactions is crucial. Sensory noise can become a signal, and separating signal from noise is being trained through the narrative. In this mechanism of sensory participation textographs are crucial. When translated, they amplify these sensations, insisting on specific aspects of their complex meaning.

Second, on the level of the image we see the way internal images are called into active participation. Not allowing the full details to be seen allows internal images of the reader to fil in the void of representation. This reminds us of Belting's description of internal and external images which 'may be considered as two sides of the same coin' (Belting, 2014). On the one hand 'in the external case, the image is the very medium of an apparition, and invites an interpretation; and, in the opposite way, the image is the end point of a search for interpreting an original, internal experience' (Morgan, 2012, p. 205). Internal images are stimulated by the visual expressions of protagonists who confront the supernatural and emotionally respond to it. The viewer reacts to the emotions of the protagonist and is invited to make sense of the cause of these emotions by consulting his/her own internal images, which are confirmed or made relatable through the flow of the narrative. What McCloud calls 'the silent dance of the seen and unseen' (McCloud, 1994, p. 92) is crucial for the signification of religious content.

If we look at images only, we can make a distinction between recognizable representations and representations which need explanation. In exploring the role of images in manga, we saw that when religious content is involved iconographic elements can be involved in images. Religious characters are recognized through iconographic characteristics, but the rules of representation are broken to allow the playful and entertaining narrative style of manga to surface. Images play with recognizable content by adding an element of surprise: recognizable protagonists in idiosyncratic or strange situations, seemingly ordinary protagonists whose appearance deceives, protagonists acting 'out of role'. The representations are in the words of Mitchell capable of 'reflection on themselves' (Mitchell, 1995).

On the other hand, lack of recognition, creates visual confusion. Unclarity, ambiguity or partial visibility suggests rather than informs, which might inform a religious frame of mind in the reader (compare with Thomas, 2012). In manga faces add emotional clues to the meaning of the situation and create a link between protagonist and reader. We participate in narratives through the eyes of the protagonists while the face of the protagonist is 'the site where exchange happens as the intermingling of souls' (Morgan, 2012, p. 89). When protagonists are supernatural it is even more valid that 'the face is a depth that ontologically mingles seen and unseen' (Morgan, 2012, p. 90). These representations and attached experiences might need explanation, which mostly happens through explanatory text, also used for setting the scene or explaining the context of narratives and actions.

Third, we see the use of indirect and direct gaze. Many non-human entities are not looking directly at the reader, while this changes during the narrative, as the reader become more familiar with the plot but also with the specific religious content. Proper knowledge is reinforced by the mutual gaze (see Morgan, 2012), allows for a possibility of building a way of relating.

Forth, representation is enhanced by text. At times images are not expected to talk for themselves. In this case a 'montage of both text and image' (Eisner, 1990, p. 8) is taking place. When introducing religious content, we mostly see that text and image support each other with explanatory text helping images. Here McCloud's interdependence between images and text comes to mind: meaning is attained by the relationship between image and text, and in the case of the religious invisible, is enhanced by textographs.

Recognition based on the image can be reinforced of contradicted through the elements of text and background, which can create tension or reinforce a certain register of meaning. At times text enhances graphic details while it also acts as a distractor of attention. Explanatory text allows no doubt about the identity of that which becomes (partly) visible, new entities and realities are introduced and explained to the reader. Size, clarity, the place of different graphic and textual elements within a frame influence that which can be expected. Colors and contrasts attract the eye, while lines allow for eye movement. In contrast to Thomas we did not find the backgrounds of frames of much importance in the indication of important, or supernatural action (Thomas, 2012, p. 45). More important seemed to be the use of panels. Breaking panel order suggest supernatural possibilities or something special going on. Ambiguity is created through unusual placements of entities and objects within, between or above the frames. In this sense panels and their order organize elements of seeing in characteristic fields or gazes.

Finally, textographs play an important role in both introducing and representing the religious invisible: their ambivalent visual/textual nature allows for the suspense and the simultaneous exploration of multiple possibilities. In religiously themes manga, textographs are the first step towards making visible the invisible. They act as hints which are then explored through the narrative. They invite the invisible to appear to the senses and create suspense through their special relation between text and image. Moreover, this mechanism seems to work transculturally as both image and text are present, but meaning is suspended and available in different ways to different audiences, which is one of the specialties of the manga genre and depends heavily on the choices made during translation.

We can conclude that in the manga analyzed, we encounter a continuous process of portrayal of religious content through different techniques. The ways the invisible becomes visible are complex. With the actualization of religious themes through manga we have entered a process of transformation, adaptation and translation. Meaning is not located in particular symbols but is a function created by the connection of different constituents and the interaction among them, connection based on recognition or learning (Varela et al., 2017).

In the case of the manga which deal with religious content in an iconological way we see elements taken out of their specific religious context and are narratively used for exploring the limits and consequences of their religiosity. Images speak for themselves, but together with the different types of text which adds information and action, they develop into a rich narrative. The pictorial culture of the religiously themed manga links the human to the other-than-human and turns the invisible into the visible, bringing it palpable, visible and understandable (recognizable) within one's direct reach and direct experience. The religious invisible once made visible becomes one of the compelling 'sensational forms' (Meyer, 2006; 2011) that enable the experience and materialization of the supernatural in its multiple forms. Graphic novels become part of a reasonable approximation of reality which contributes to the creation of religious frames of mind by ''inviting audiences to suppress their awareness of gaps between fictive worlds and empirical reality' (Thomas, 2012, p. 29). They contribute to the understanding and acknowledgment of the 'beyond' by engaging in direct, experience-based explorations that render the invisible (partially) visible.

Biography

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Giving Up the Artistic Aspect. The invisibility of comics made in extreme conditions of confinement: Charlotte Salomon, Karel Frans Drenthe and Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro*

Erwin Dejasse**
Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) / Belgian Royal Library (KBR)

Leben? Oder Theater? by Charlotte Salomon, *Krankzinnig Verpleging* by K. F. Drenthe and *Historia de Garabato y Florazul y de sus amigos* by Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro have long been ignored within the comics fields but were also created in the loneliness of isolation. Their invisibility is therefore two-fold. The present essay study them from this double perspective and analyse the tension between these two invisibilities. To this end, they will be considered through the concept of 'comicity' that Colin Beineke has forged and through what Jean-Christophe Menu has described as the "hors-champ de la bande dessinée." In doing so, the paper aims to question the reason of the fundamental choice made by the creators from outside the comics field to testify the isolation experience through a story in images. It will study their creation context and the possible influences within and without the comics field. The analyse will then show how their comicitous features are congruent with the urgent need of the authors to express oneself. It will also study the link between the conditions under which these works were made and their characteristics in terms of topics, graphic styles and narrative structures with the aim to establish what a poetics of comics made in extreme conditions of confinement could be.

Keywords: Art Brut, comics, confinement, dictatorship, psychiatry

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Leben? Oder Theater? (*Life? Or Theatre?*) by Charlotte Salomon (1941-1943) [fig. 1 & 2], *Krankzinnig Verpleging* (*Views on the Lunatics*) by Karel Frans Drenthe (1960-61) [fig. 3 & 4] and *Historia de Garabato y Florazul y de sus amigos pisoteados* (*The Story of Garabato and Florazul and of Their Trampled Friends*) by Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro (circa 1981-1982) [fig. 5 & 6] are characterised by a double invisibility. On the one hand, they were made in relative secrecy as their authors were forced to live recluse; in some case these creations could have jeopardise them if they had been discovered by politic, military or institutional "power representatives". On the other hand, despite their great similarities with the devices at work in comics, they do not have been integrated into the historiography of the medium nor having attracted much attention from the comics world – except for Charlotte Salomon's work but this recognition came lately, more than sixty years after it had been made. To my knowledge, it is French comics author, publisher and critic Jean-Christophe Menu who has first consider it as comics in 2006 in the second issue of his journal *L'Éprouvette* (Menu 2006, p. 129-140) before being integrate by Paul Gravett into the 2011 anthology *1001 Comics You Must Read Before You Die* (Gravett 2011).

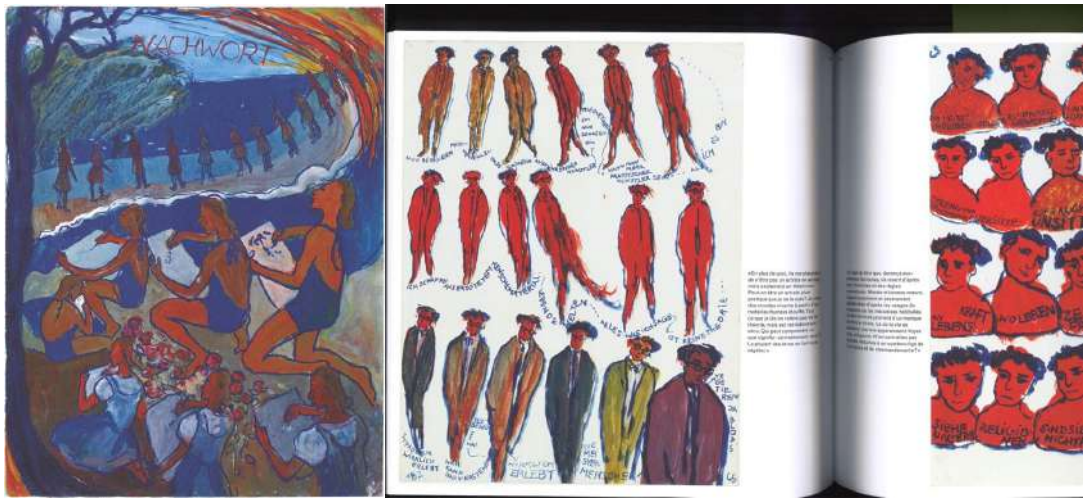

Fig. 1 & 2: Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater?*, 1941-1943.

Fig. 3 & 4: Karel Frans Drenthe, *Krankzinnig Verpleging* (*Views on the Lunatics*, 1960-61.

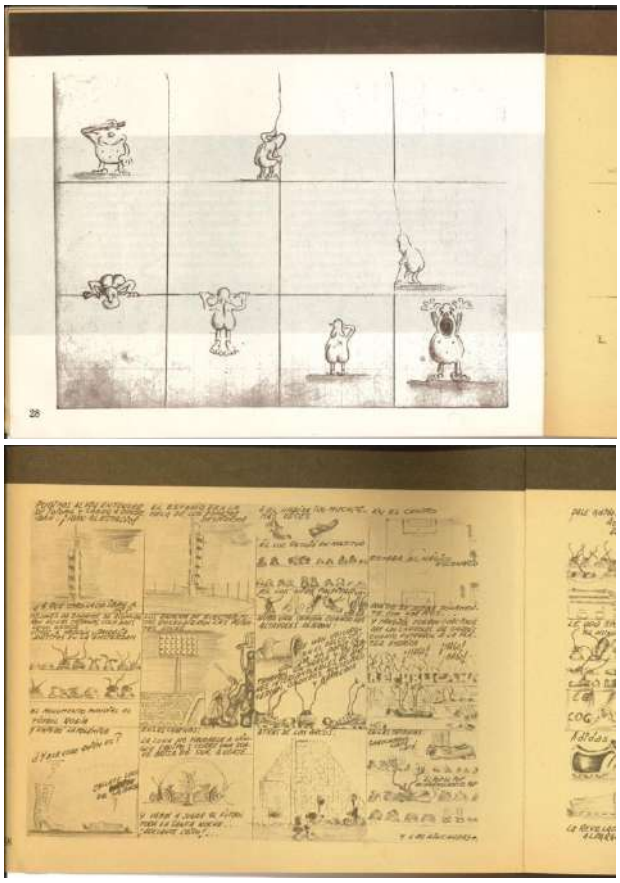

Fig. 5 & 6: Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, *Historia de Garabato y Florazul y de sus amigos pisoteados*, circa 1981-1982.

“Hors-champ” and “comicity”

These three works show simultaneously texts and images and, more significantly, they form a whole of images hinged together to produce sense. They comply with the concept of “iconic solidarity” that Thierry Groensteen considers as a central principle in comics: “independent images that, participating in a series; present the double characteristic of being separated […] and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*” (Groensteen 2006, p. 18).

That said, one might question if they definitively belong to comics, mainly if we see them not only as a set of visual and narrative devices but also as we consider that they form a practice set in a particular social and cultural context. The works that are commonly considered as comics are part of a field of activities with its specific actors and institutions (publishers, critics, bookshops, festivals, prices…) from which Salomon, Drenthe and Fernández Huidobroro have only been integrated very recently. If Salomon had been retrospectively added to this field, mainly thanks to Menu and Gravett, the artist herself had never described *Leben? Oder Theater?* as a comic in the testimonies that she left us. Excerpts from *Krankzinnig Verpleging* were showed in *Art Brut et bande dessinée*, realised by Swiss alternative comics publisher Atrabile (Dejasse 2022, p. 46-49). This book is the catalogue of an exhibition I have curated; I chose to show Drenthe’s work by considering

that its formal particularities and the conditions under which it was made fit perfectly with the exhibition's goal: showing how works kept in Outsider Art and Art Brut collections could fruitfully dialogue with comics. Fernández Huidobro for his part refers to *Historia de Garabato y Florazul* as a comic (Fernández Huidobro 1985, p. 22) but has up to now received no comments from that field and the book was published by a house unlinked with comics.

Obviously, determining if these three works are or not comics can only lead to a conceptual dead end. Once you consider that the uses of the medium are always evolving, there is no definitive criterion that allows to define it. The "hors-champ" and "comicity" notions, provided respectively by Jean-Christophe Menu and Colin Beineke, are here useful and complementary theoretical tools. The first one allows to enlarge the scope by integrating into the field of comics works that were invisible before and the second one offers the opportunity to analyse them without being blocked by *definitional quibbles. Menu describes the "hors-champ" as* "an entire corpus of works that undoubtedly belong to the field [of Comics] but that is not integrated into its History, and hence is not recognised as an integral part of the field" (Menu 2011, p. 432). He mentions as examples *Leben? Oder Theater?* but also the workbook of Villard de Honnecourt, master mason from the thirteenth century or *Poema a fumetti* (*Poem Strip*) by Italian novelist and poet Dino Buzzati. Beineke, for his part, has hammered out the neologism "comicitous" by analogy with "theatrical", "cinematic" or "literary" to qualify a work that present features commonly associated with comics. He states that substantive "comicity" offers "a linguistic alternative to the binary discourse ('this is a comic'/ 'this is not a comic') that plagues the definitional project […] something more critically useful than drawing a formal bordering dividing comics from non-comics." Moreover, the US scholar states that "the theories and methods of comics studies can be utilized in 'non-comics' disciplines" and then puts into practice his statement by studying comicitous works such as Andy Warhol's series by using comics analysis concepts and principles from Thierry Groensteen seminal essay *The System of Comics*. In a related manner, the goal of the present essay is to study the three above mentioned works by showing how their comicitous features are congruent with the urgent need of the authors to express oneself and to consider the link between the conditions under which these works were executed and the aesthetic choices.

Charlotte Salomon

Charlotte Salomon (1917-1943) was a young German-Jewish woman who studied at the prestigious Berlin Academy of Fine Arts. In 1938, she fled to the South of France where her grandparents are already living to escape from Nazi's extermination policies. She witnesses the suicide of her grand-mother and then learns from her grand-father that she is the last from a line of women who all killed themselves since three generations. Charlotte Salomon, who is six months pregnant, dies in 1943 just after she has been arrested and deported to Auschwitz concentration camp.

Between 1941 and 1943, she made a suite of some 850 paintings – almost gouaches – she named *Leben? Oder Theater?* The title could literally be translated by "Life? Or theatre?" but "Is this life or theatre?" is probably closer to the meaning she wanted to give as the book plays on the uncertain status of the world that is depicted; the main protagonist wonders about the tangible nature of what she lives and watches as it often seems to be unreal. Mixing drama with comedy, giving her characters imaginary names, Salomon yet describes her own existence. Moreover, it is also a reflection about the act of creation and its purposes.

In 1943, as she knows she is in great danger of being arrested and deported, she gives the original manuscript to a friend, telling him "This is my whole life!" The making of *Leben? Oder Theater?* appear to be the way to mentally escape from a psychologically unbearable situation, the only alternative to suicide (Menu 2006, p. 130). In two years, Charlotte Salomon made around a thousand paintings suggesting that during that time she has throwed herself headlong into the making of her book.

Nothing allows maintaining that *Leben? Oder Theater?* was inspired by comics. It is quite possible that the similarities are the result of a convergence phenomenon where the artists completely reinvent the codes of comics in a different context. Although, it is neither excluded that she had read or seen stories in pictures published till the end of World War II in widely disseminated German satirical journal: *Fliegende Blätter*, *Kladderadatsch* or *Simplicissimus* or maybe French bandes dessinées or translation of US comics… All this could have influenced her even in an unconscious way. That said, Charlotte Salomon's work also present idiosyncratic characteristics such as music notes that indicate the tunes on which the words spoken by the characters are hummed. The musical dimension of the work is by the way very pervasive; it is significant that the book is subtitled *Ein Singespiel* (*An Operetta*). She also often uses tracing paper covered with texts. These are captions or dialogues related with the drawings on the page put under; the picture can only be seen by transparency before being fully revealed when you turn the tracing paper sheet. Salomon varies the colours and the sizes of the letters and give them the form of elegant arabesques. When most of the comics use seemingly neutral lettering to not overload the visual devices, she enhances the graphic dimension of her calligraphies and thus creates a great homogeneity with the drawing. To use the formulation of Philippe Marion, texts and images are here more than ever "the interdependent extensions of a sole graphic impulsion." (Marion 1993, p. 41).

Leben? Oder Theater? also present great diversities in terms of layouts: full-page images alternate with pages divided into frames or compositions that present a single background where the same character is repeated at different moments, similarly to some medieval paintings or illuminated manuscripts – this foreshadows the device Gianni De Luca will use in his *Trilogia shakesperiana* (*Shakespearean Trilogy*) some thirty-five years later. *Leben? Oder Theater?* also plays on the repetition of images. Among others, when she must represent a long monologue, she repeats the same visage again and again with the text put under each one. By doing so, Charlotte Salomon gives an obsessional presence to these faces in a quite similar way the monologues in Dave McKean's *Cages* (1990-1996). She here implements a principle that according to Benoît Peeters strongly illustrates the high potential of comics: "Through this game of echoes and visual rimes, of tiny or more

pronounced variations, such images acquire a force they would not have if they were isolated" (Peeters 2002, p. 33). Sometimes Salomon – whose stylistic treatment is quite reminiscent of pictural groups such as Die Brücke or Fauvism – progressively dissolve the repeated motives that tend towards abstraction.

As soon as he considers *Leben? Oder Theater?* as a work of comics, Jean-Christophe Menu's excitement is easy to understand since it follows unlike any other his own aspirations as an author, publisher and critic. He describes Salomon's book as "one of the most carnally entrenched autobiographical works" (Menu 2005, p.139) in line with the many texts he wrote where he insists on his will to highlight comics born of *inner necessity* (Menu 2005, p. 25). In his opinion, *Leben? Oder Theater?* is the antithesis of the products promoted by mainstream publishers, characterised by the endless repetition of the same formulas. It sees this work as the epitome of his own aspiration for comics that renew in depth their themes, graphic styles and narrations in comics.

K. F. Drenthe

Information about the life of KF Drenthe is very fragmentary. The few sources we can rely on are therefore very valuable: a short text from 1963 written by Drenthe himself in *Randstad* – a Dutch poetry journal – and an article from the daily *Haagse Post* published the same year that deals with the evolution of psychiatric policies where his experience of confinement is briefly discussed. According to this latter, his real name was Kees Drosse. His testimony in *Randstad* states that he was born in 1921 and was the very first child to play on radio shows in the Netherlands; he would have later worked as a tour guide, stenograph and pianist. Then, he has spent several stays in psychiatric hospital between the mid 50's and the end of the 60's.

Drenthe has devoted much of his time denouncing the conditions of his detention that he describes as inhuman. Among other things, he has written some 2000 letters addressed to Ministers, Judges, Public Health Inspectors… The article from *Haagse Post* mentions that in 1963, a period when he has been freed, the activity that mobilises all his personal energy is the writing of a two million words logbook where he seeks to reveal all the perversions of the psychiatric hospital system.

Krankzinnig Verpleging (*Views on the Lunatics*) for his part presents images with captions drawn during a year and a half between 1960 and 1961 at the Rijks Psychiatrische Inrichting (Royal Psychiatric Facility) in Eindhoven. Drenthe wanted to put them together in a book that should have been published after his dead in four languages. The drawings have been numbered several times. We can therefore make the hypothesis that he has later reorganised the order in which they must be read. The Museum Dr. Guislain in Ghent keeps around hundred drawings from this series, but we cannot exclude that he had drawn more.

Maybe Drenthe was not aware of it, but this follows a long tradition of works that mixes images and texts made by people from insane asylums who denounce their conditions of detention (Jagfeld 2008; von Beyme & Hohnholz 2018; Slobogin 2018). These creations

often bring to the conclusion that the therapy is even more terrible than the illness. Moreover, in the few scattered texts which have come down to us, he considers that it is not so much the internees that are affected by a pathology but the psychiatric institution that is dysfunctional. Specifically, he denounces a tremendous injustice: holding him in prison-like conditions although he is not guilty of any crime. These issues are totally in tune with the writings of Michel Foucault and the doctors behind anti-psychiatry movement that emerge at the same time.

Drenthe's book project aims to show all what is happening "out of sight": straitjackets, electroshocks, forced baths… A patient whose head is covered by a fabric bag is bought to the bathroom, a sectional view of a cemetery shows regular alignments of encasements, a man sleeps on a table; under the drawing a caption: "during 16 years on a table". With a great economy of means, Drenthe describes the sordid reality of the everyday life inside the asylum. He admits: "Although, I am not a real drawer, I am only an amateur who draws by necessity" (Drenthe 1963, p. 101). Yet, the abruptness of the line, cold and disembodied, contributes to strengthen the feeling of malaise which emerges from these images. Drenthe uses a cringe humour when showing the visit of Saint Nicholas and Zwarte Piet under the doubtful eye of the internees or a man who plays chess alone passing alternately from one side of the table to the another.

Museum Dr. Guislain also keeps instructions he has written in view of the publication of *Krankzinnig Verpleging*, he precises that the text must be divided in short segments and put aside the images like in comics. However, each sheet generally presents one autonomous image although they sometimes show micro-sequences of two panels. Like Charlotte Salomon, K. F. Drenthe does not attempt to reuse the canonical codes and devices of comics but enriches his poetics with idiosyncrasies. In particular, he presents collages in some of his compositions that generally come from photographic self-portraits where he exhibits his bodybuilder musculature.

Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro

Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro (1942-2016), a bank clerk from Montevideo, is one of the founders in 1966 of the *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional – Tupamaros* (Tupamaros – National Liberation Movement), a left-wing guerrilla organisation. Because of his activities, he spent some fifteen years in detention centres of Uruguayan dictatorship where he was tortured. After the end of the dictatorship, as Tupamaros became a political party, he was later appointed as Uruguay Minister of the Defence within the government lead by the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) coalition.

Fernández Huidobro never draw before being imprisoned. The book where his comics were published also shows sketches that are testimonies of his self-learning during his imprisonment. In *Historia de Garabato y Florazul y de sus amigos pisoteados* (*The Story of Garabato and Florazul and of Their Trampled Friends*), the characters are, according to their author, "looking for the only place where it is possible to live: the future. The swallows also

run away. You must not forget that this comic had been drawn by somebody without present. Here, I display a part of the past" (Fernández Huidobro 1985, p. 27). The first page shows Garabato – whose name could be translated by "Doodle" – a naked chubby character that plays with the "gutters" that separate each panel. He moves them like he was opening a curtain or clings on them to discover what is inside the frame but sees only empty spaces. The last panel lower right shows Garabato his hands up, wide open mouth as he emits a scream of pain although Fernández Huidobro did not add any letter nor draw an onomatopoeia in order to sonorise the scene. This gives the impression that no sound came from the character's mouth. The page that shows a regular layout has two visual attachment points: the first and the last image. Between them, the sequentiality of the reading is quite perturbate and the reader's gaze wanders rather than apprehending each panel in a predefined order. A priori, one would not expect that a work made in prison in constant fear of receiving violent treatments or even being killed would play with the codes of comics and use metanarrative devices. However, Fernández Huidobro offers here a very convincing metaphor of the confinement; the "grid" is, at the same time, the prototypical device of comics and a set of little cages from which you cannot escape.

Like Salomon and Drenthe, the extremely dramatic creation context does not preclude humour – in the present case, with surrealistic undertones. When the humans are sleeping, flying plates and shoes come to life. The drawer explains that in his mind the shoes where a way to talk about people that were trampled by the dictatorship (Fernández Huidobro 1985, p. 27). Obviously, using metaphors is a way to not put himself more in jeopardy if the guardians would read them. Fernández Huidobro never gives a direct testimony of the bad treatments he suffered in prison but though that as soon as he begun making his comics, he had already in mind that, in case he would once be released, this work could possibly be used as a piece of evidence during a future trial. Talking about *Historia de Garabato y Florazul*, Chilean researcher and poet Jorge Montealegre writes that "When you do not have the opportunity to physically escape, this desire is transformed into an imaginary escape through art creation. […] the collective actions of the people lacking liberty, create a process of resilience that aids survival, thanks, in part, to the consulation brought about by imagination and the utopias it creates" (Montealegre 2009, p. 1).

One can only speculate about Fernández Huidobro possible influences, the fact that each page is self-conclusive with in many cases no background evokes a tradition of comics that do not tell an adventurous story but consists mainly of almost metaphysical monologues or dialogues such as *Peanuts* by Charles M. Schulz in the United States, *Mafalda* by Quino or *Clemente* by Caloi in South America.

The sequence where the rain produced by UFOs make people sleep and where all the shoes invade a football stadium is for its part clearly reminiscent of 1959 Argentinian canonical comic *El Eternauta* (*The Eternaut*) by Francisco Solano López and Héctor Germán Oesterheld. Retrospectively, this appears not only as a nod as both works are intimately linked with the context of their time: the political repression and state terrorism in South America during the second half of the 20th century. Having been assassinated in 1977 or 1978, Oesterheld is one of the 30 000 "desaparecidos" from the Argentinian military regime that took place between 1976 and 1983. Therefore, *El Eternauta* has later been

analysed through a political prism as a metaphor of the writer resistance against the dictatorship.

Making the invisible visible

The three works display a striking level of freedom regarding the plastic and narrative devices. All of them present, on the one hand, comicitous features which suggest that they are hidden germs from the "hors-champ" of the medium and, on the other hand, present idiosyncratic characteristics that sets them apart from the canonical forms of comics. By 'canonical forms', I mean uses that are present in most of the works that are regarded as the standards of the medium: suites of drawings accompanied by balloons that contain texts; the images are spacetime fragments hinged together in order to produce a plot.

However, nothing says that the common uses of comics could have been a point of reference for any of the three creators. Particularly, in the case of Charlotte Salomon who emphasises that she breaks with visual arts practices. In the text at the very beginning of *Leben? Oder Theater?* she makes her fictional double says: "it was necessary in a large part to give up the artistic aspect, which I hope people will forgive, taking into account the work accomplished to penetrate the depths of the soul" (Salomon 2015, non-paged). K. T. Drenthe for his part, states: "I am not a real drawer but just an amateur who draws by necessity" (Drenthe 1963, p. 101). Just as Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, he apparently did not have any visual art background and decided to learn to draw because he was driven by the need to give his testimony the specific form he wanted. Salomon has obviously renounced to get any artistic recognition with *Leben? Oder Theater?* when Drenthe and Fernández Huidobro have never had ambition in that field. Any judgement of taste from outside opinion does not count; the fear of not being recognised or the risk to put their artistic career in jeopardy becomes here insignificant in front of the absolute need to testimony, to keep oneself from sinking definitively into despair or even to survive.

In such a context, the issue of the respective limits between each art form does not appear any more relevant. Creation has long been conditioned – and to some extend is still conditioned – by the narrow divisions between the artistic disciplines inherited from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon*. Salomon, Drenthe and Fernández Huidobro not having to wonder about the specificities of the medium in which they are involved are inclined to opt for devices that mix several semiotic registers: texts, images – but also possibly music scores or collages. This heterogeneity naturally favours the creation of comicitous works.

In 1945, French painter, sculptor and wine merchant Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) invents the concept of Art Brut. Among the numerous definitions he has hammered out, the most famous one states:

> By this [Art Brut] we mean pieces of work executed by people untouched by artistic culture, in which therefore mimicry, contrary to what happens in intellectuals, plays little or no part, so that their authors draw everything […] from their own depths and not from clichés of classical art or art that is fashionable (Dubuffet 1967, p. 202).

This definition focus mainly on the intrinsic nature of the creators. According to it, Art Brut could only be made my people who are not part of the art circles, who have not received any art learning; the Art Brut creator is seen here as the antithesis of the intellectual.

Taking this into account, Charlotte Salomon, who had studied art at Berlin Academy, and Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, who was fully integrated in the social and professional structures of his time and who has finally held an important position in the direction of his country, are indeed excluded from the Art Brut field. Because of the lake of biographical information, it is not clearly possible to settle if K. F. Drenthe could be definitively integrated into Dubuffet's category – among others, his collaboration with *Randstad* journal may suggest that he was in contact with the literary circles.

Both as an essayist and an art collector, Dubuffet has focus on creation made by marginal people, resistant to any form of social integration. Charlotte Salomon, Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro and, possibly, K. F. Drenthe could not be assimilated to the "common man" at the heart of Dubuffet's thinking. We can here observe an aesthetic rupture similar to what he has described. Creations made in dire circumstances could analogously give birth to "an art unfettered by cultural and social conditioning" (*History* undated).

These have long stayed invisible and have only recently – albeit modestely – emerged from that invisibility. The reason could not be understood without taking in account the evolution of the comics publishing structures since the end of the 20th century. Jean-Christophe Menu considers that those who are responsible for the invisibility of the 'hors-champ' as an integral part of the comics field are those he names the 'microcosme BD' ('comics microcosm') (Menu 2011, p. 432). The expression is used to designate several professionals he considers as agent of status quo. Critic and editor Henri Filippini, one of Menu's favourite targets, claims in 2001: "comics are above all a popular art whose aim is to entertain the reader. They must be easy-to-read and avoid messages or this kind of things. I consider the alternative productions, specialised in experimentation, as the exact contrary of what comics should be" (Filippini 2001). This kind of speech rejects de facto comics that do not adopt canonical forms. The rhetoric of Menu is precisely based on the rejection of this type of discourses and the editorial policies in line with them (Caraco 2016). Pushing back the limits of what is possible is an approach that underlies most of the actors from alternative comics: Menu but also publishers such as Atrabile who realised the catalogue *Art Brut et bande dessinée* or Frémok who created 'Knock Outisder!', a collection of books devoted to works made in collaboration with mentally disabled artists. As soon as the works of Salomon, Drenthe and Fernández Huidobro are viewed as comics, they clearly fit with the deepest aspirations of these actors and encourage to make them visible.

Biographical Note

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

Francesca Pietropaolo**
Indipendent scholar

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 Ngangué 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 Ngangué 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 Ngangué 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 *Astrodoubt 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 occurence" (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).

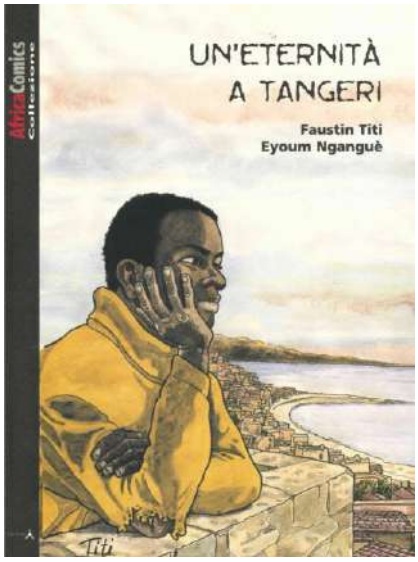

Figure 1: Ngangué E. and Titi F., Une éternité à Tanger, 2004; 2007 Italian edition

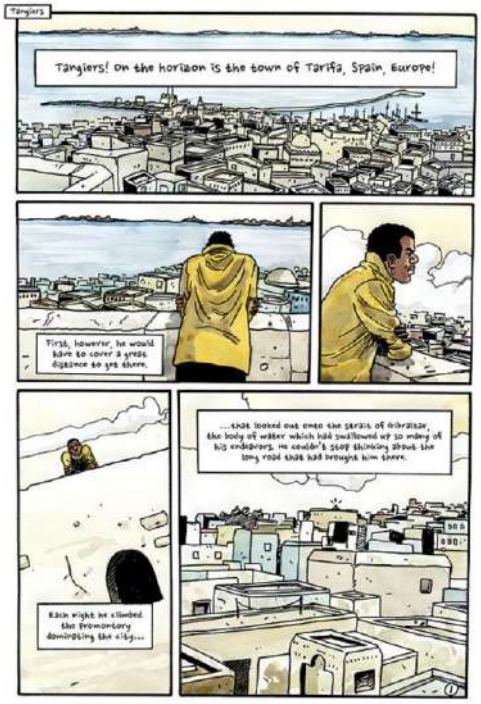

Figure 2: Ngangué E. and Titi F., Une éternité à Tanger, 2004; 2017 English edition

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.

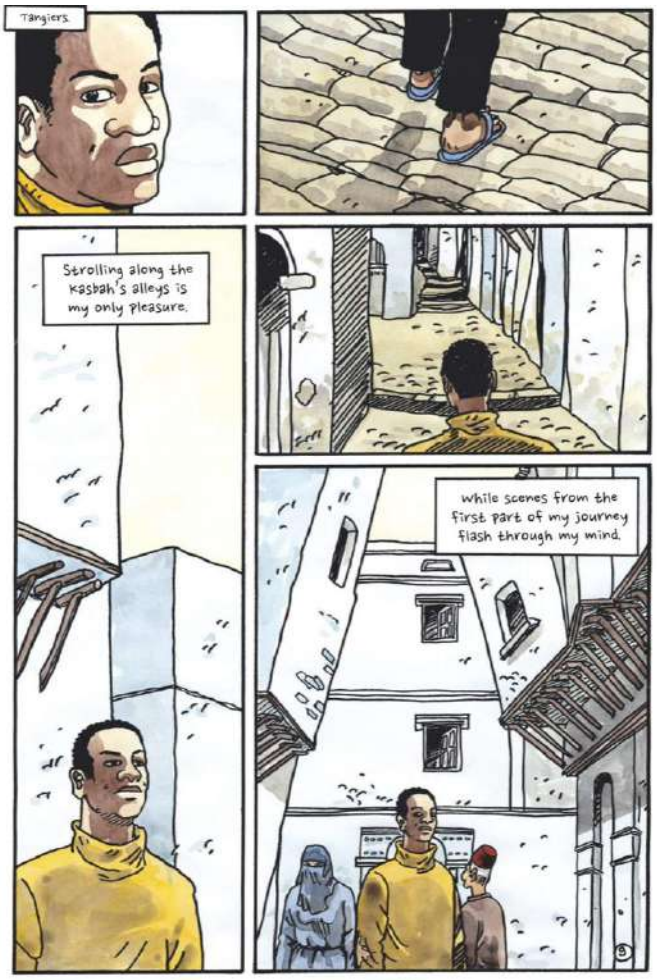

Figure 3: Ngangué E. and Titi F., Une éternité à Tanger, 2004; 2017 English edition

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.

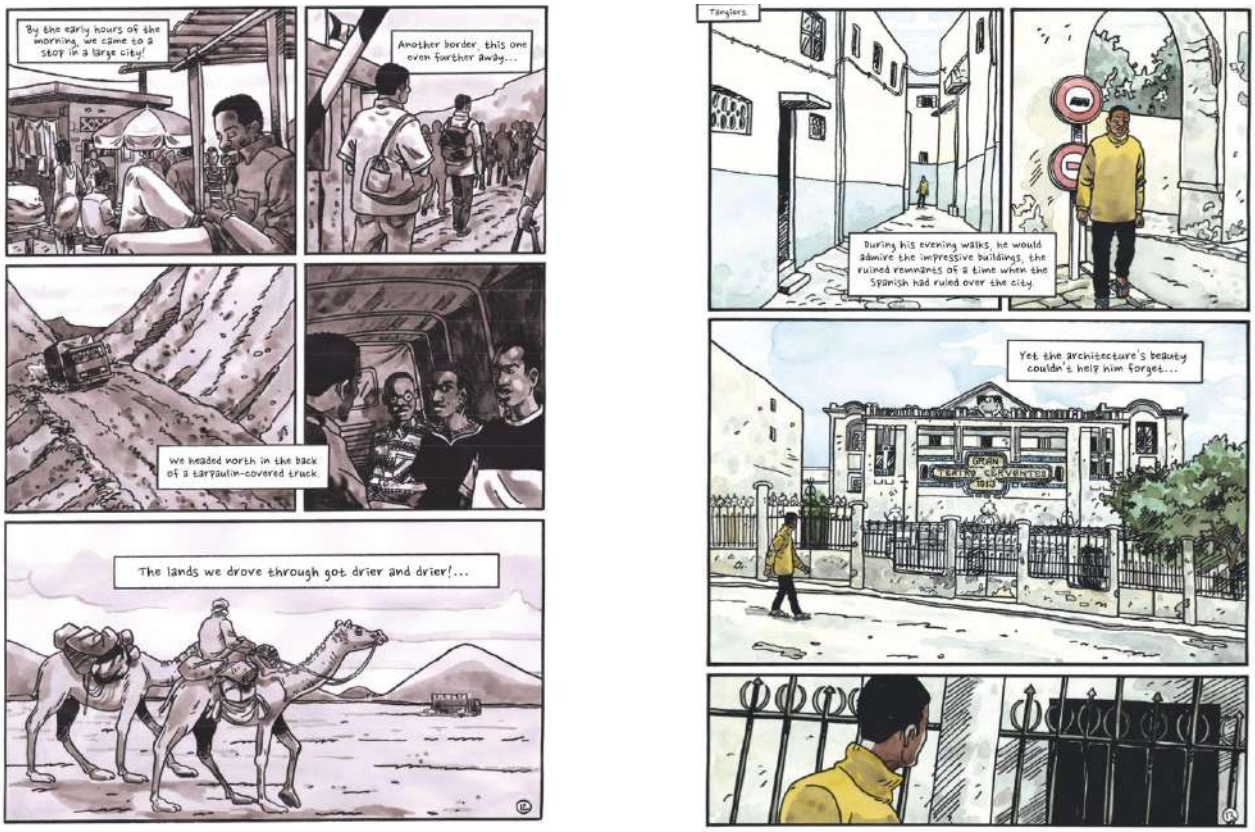

Figure 4: Ngangué E. and Titi F., Une éternité à Tanger, 2004; 2017 English edition, spread

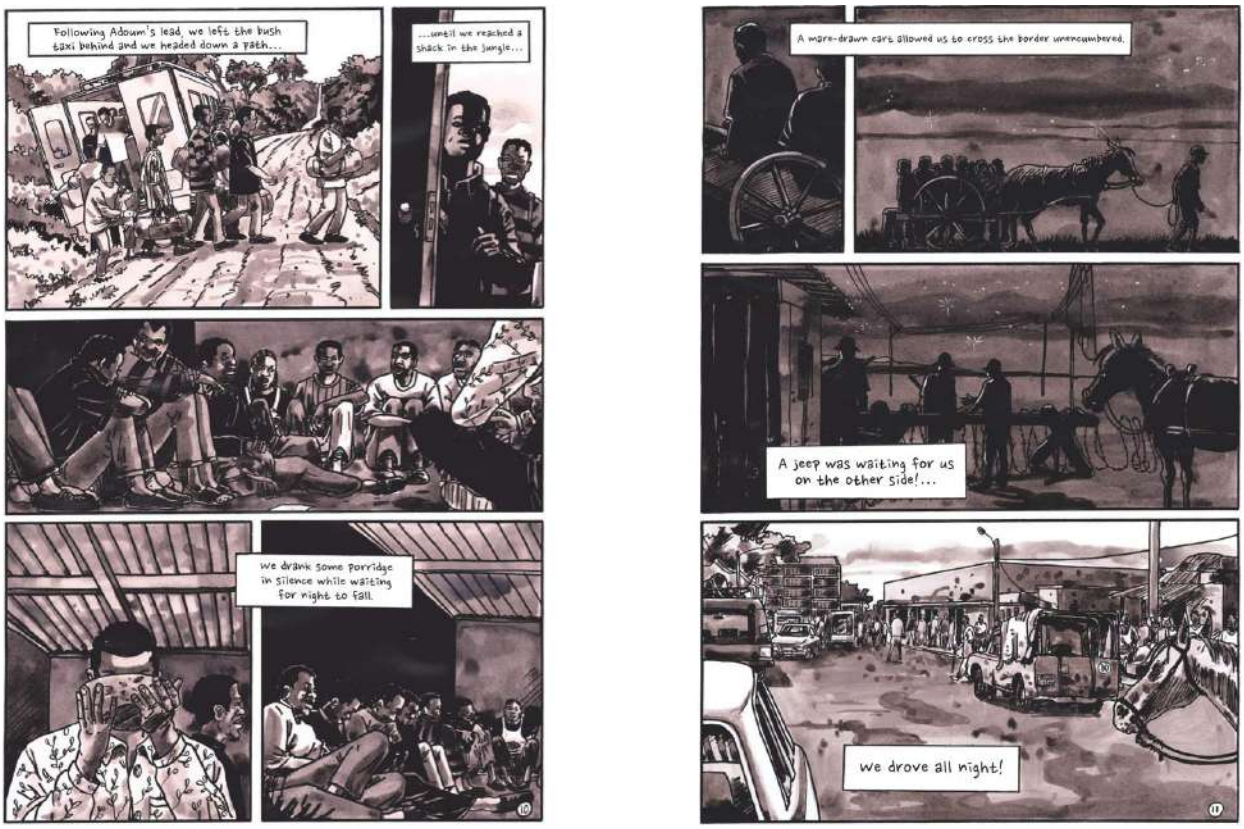

Figure 5: Ngangué E. and Titi F., Une éternité à Tanger, 2004; 2017 English edition, spread

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).

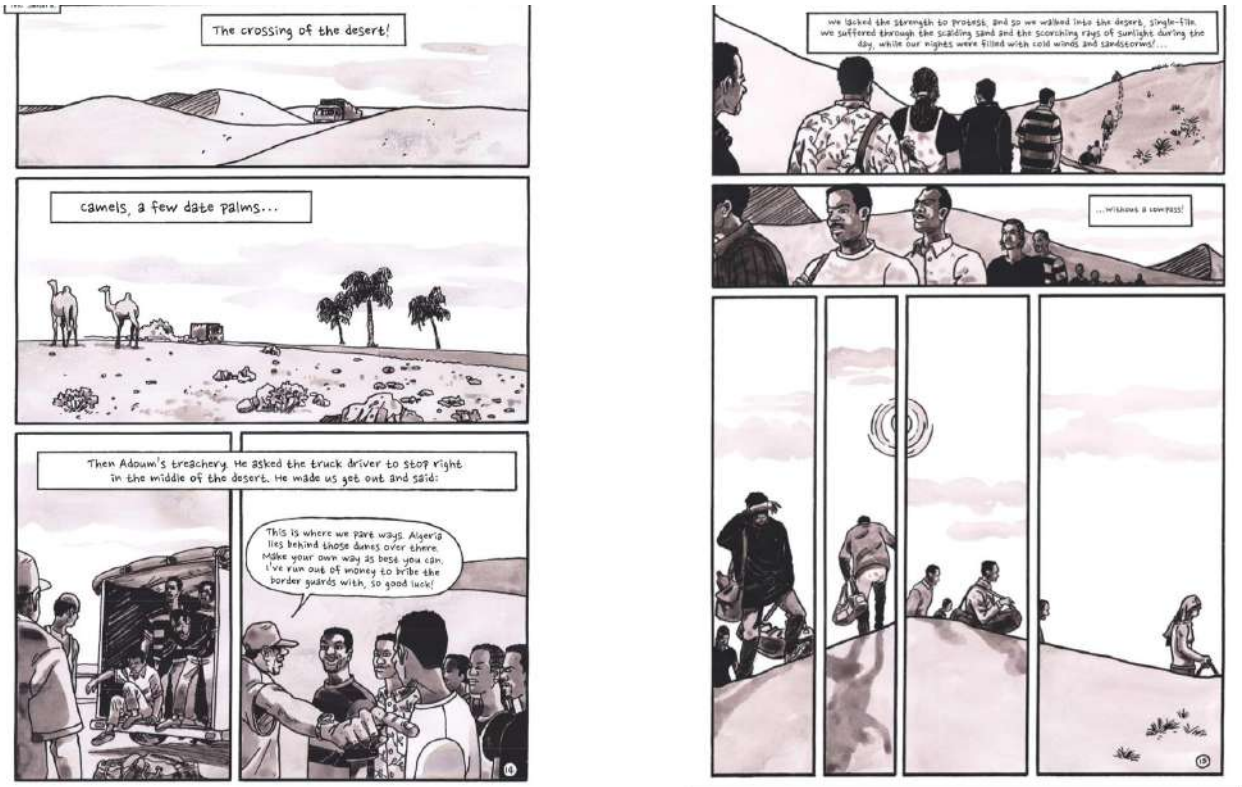

Figure 6: Ngangué E. and Titi F., Une éternité à Tanger, 2004; 2017 English edition, spread

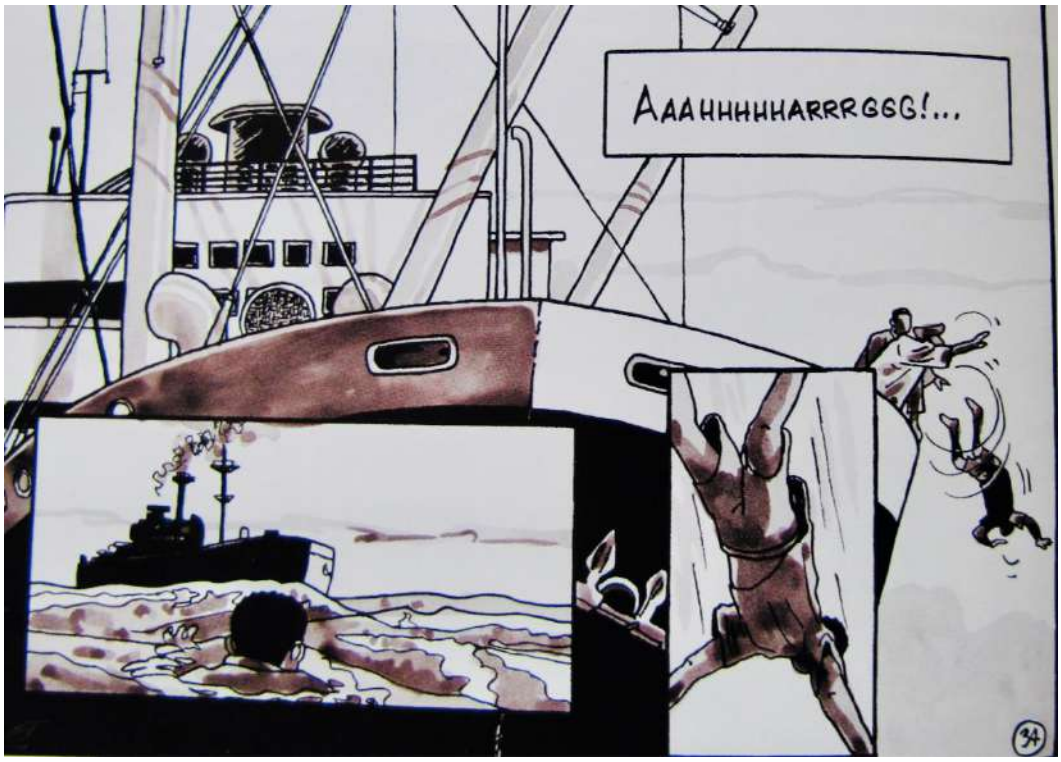

Figure 7: Ngangué E. and Titi F., Une éternité à Tanger, 2004; 2017 English edition (detail)

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 inbetweeness, 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 Afganistan and then Iraq). It was published in the U.S., as an oversized board book, only in 2004 by Viking Books (Fig. 12).

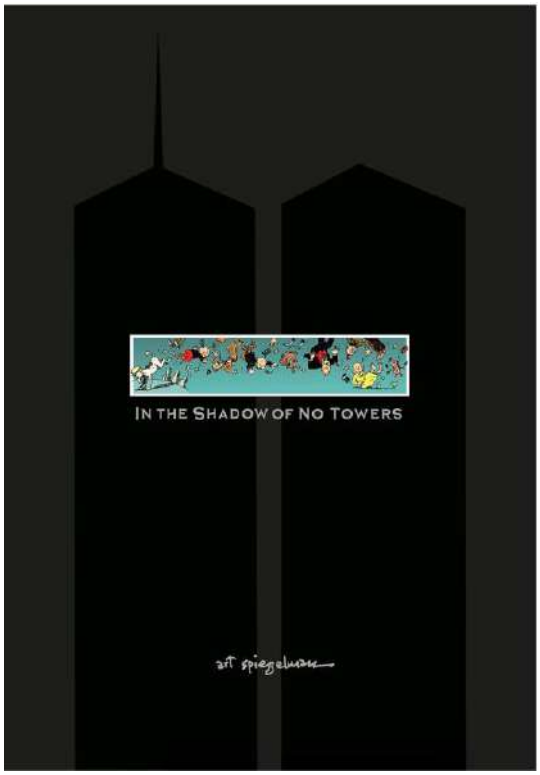

Figure 12: Spiegelman, A., In the Shadow of No Towers, 2004

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 highjacked 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).

Figure 13: Spiegelman, A., In the Shadow of No Towers, 2004 (detail and full page)

Soon after the attacks, the image of the hit towers, watched on TV by people around the world, was turned by the U.S. government into what Spiegelman has aptly called a "war recruiting poster" (Spiegelman, 2004).[2] In this book, the artist critiques the culture of polarization and war which was predominant at the time. In a telling detail, referencing his 1991 graphic novel *Maus*, he portrays himself at his drawing desk, overwhelmed but holding on to his comic art, in a polarized world represented by Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush at each end of the table (Fig. 14).

Figure 14: Spiegelman, A., In the Shadow of No Towers, 2004

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).

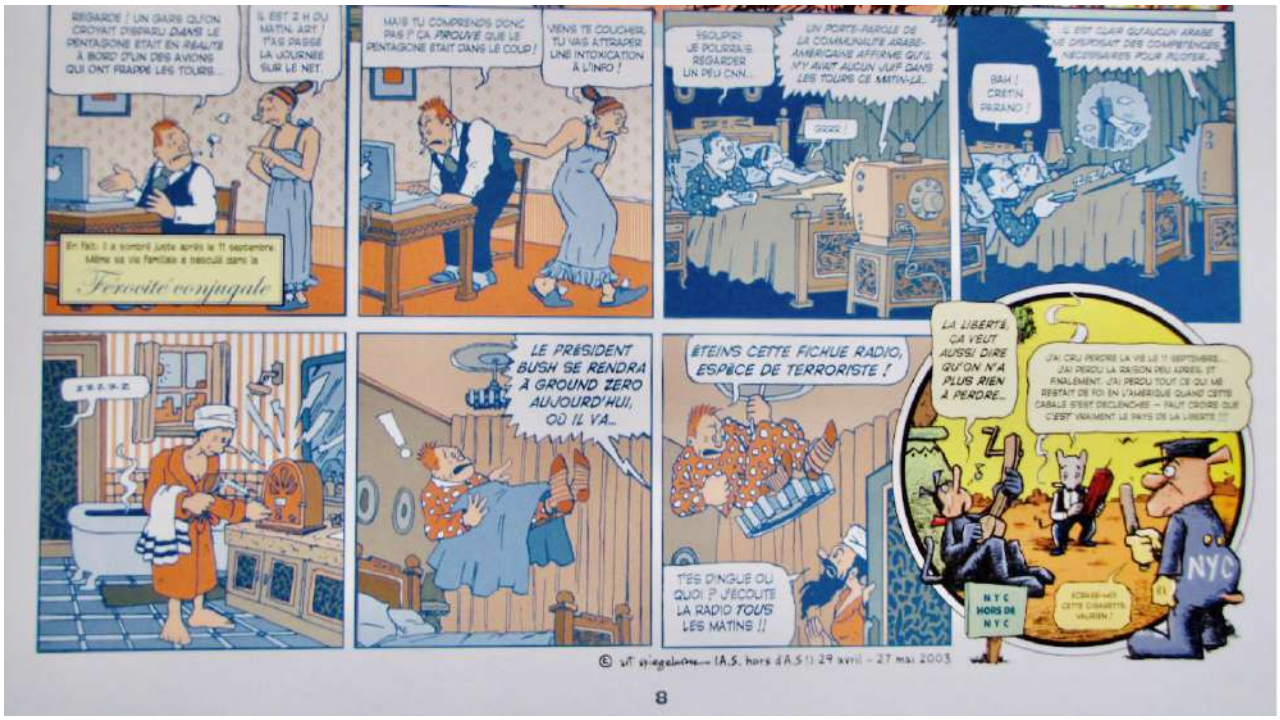

Figure 15: Spiegelman, A., In the Shadow of No Towers, 2004 (detail)

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).

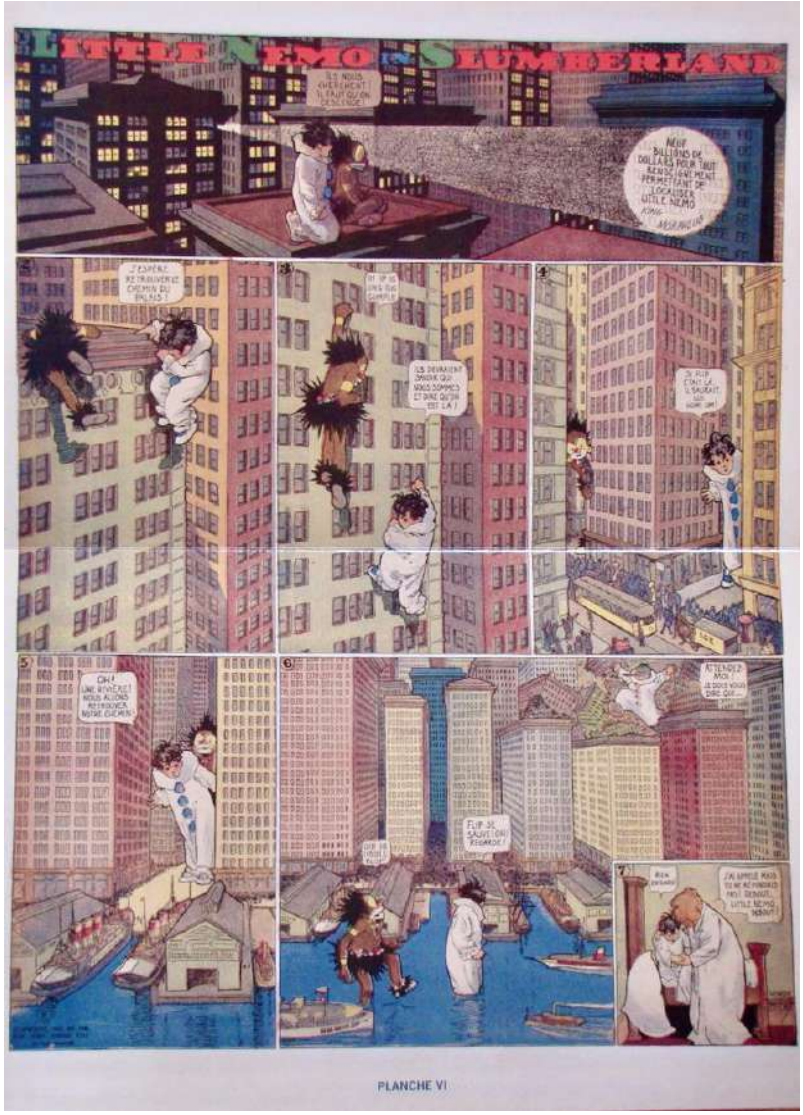

Figure 16: Spiegelman, A., In the Shadow of No Towers, 2004

These old comics attract Spiegelman for their ephemeral nature, but also for their timelessness. Meant to be disposable, printed as they were on news-paper 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).

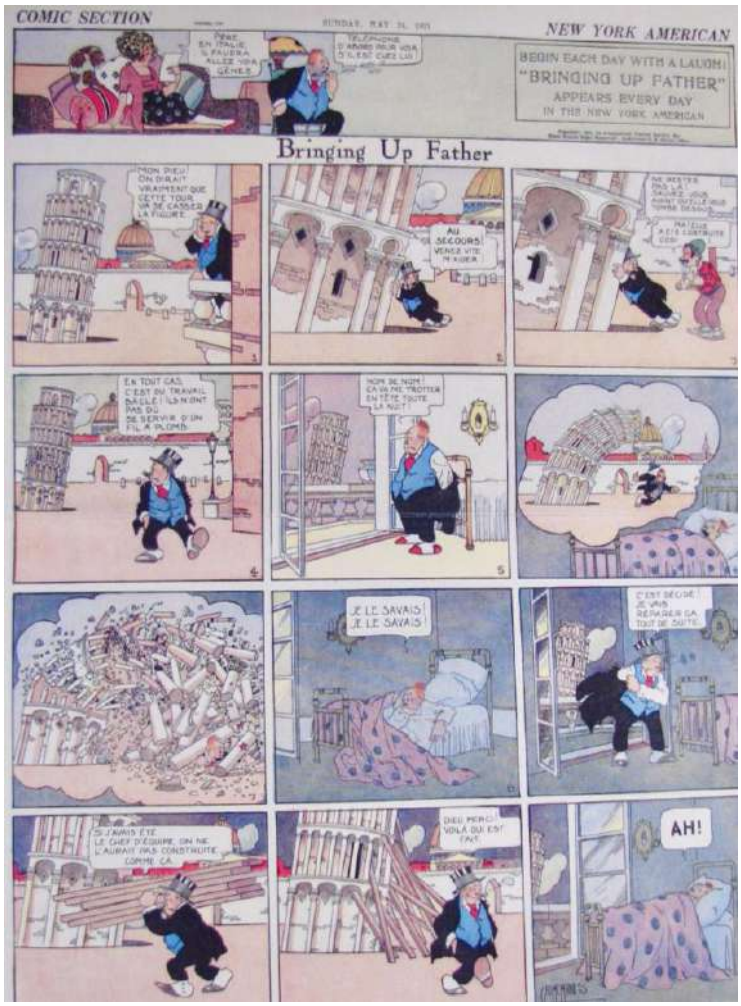

Figure 17: Spiegelman, A., In the Shadow of No Towers, 2004 (detail)

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 eternité à Tangier,* as seen in a powerful detail showing a figure being thrown out of a boat into the sea (Fig. 21).

Figure 21: Ngangué 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).

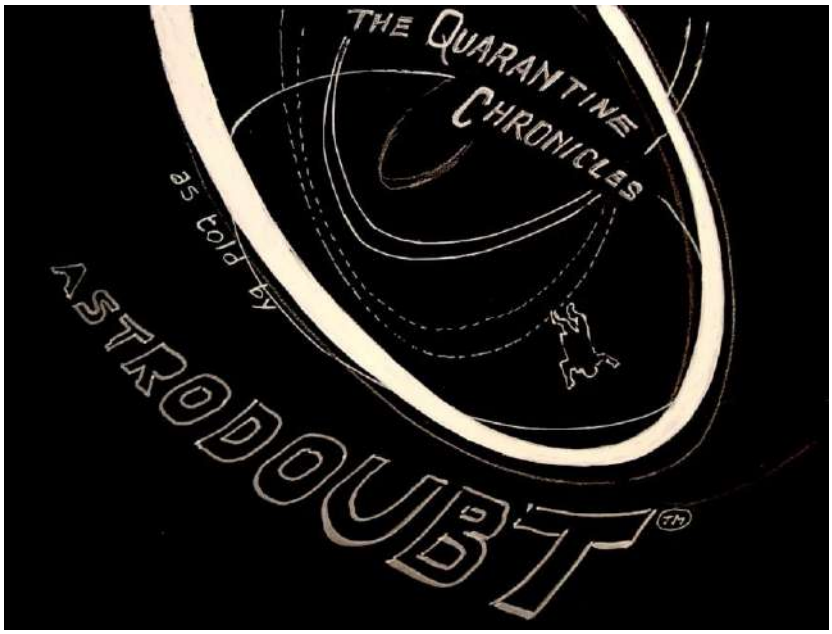

Figure 22: Buvoli, L., The Quarantine Chronicles as Told by Astrodoubt (from Astrodoubt and The Quarantine Chronicles), 2020, gouache, acrylic, and pencil on black paper, 22.8 x 30.4 cm

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 work under investigation the image of free falling is employed as a metaphor for the rupture of trauma, the dramatic plunging into a dimensions outside of reality and life as one knew them before the occurence 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 Astrodoubt 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 eternité à Tangier* and the broad sheet board book format of *In the Shadow of No Towers* considered so far, with *Astrodoubt 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, Astrodoubt 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).

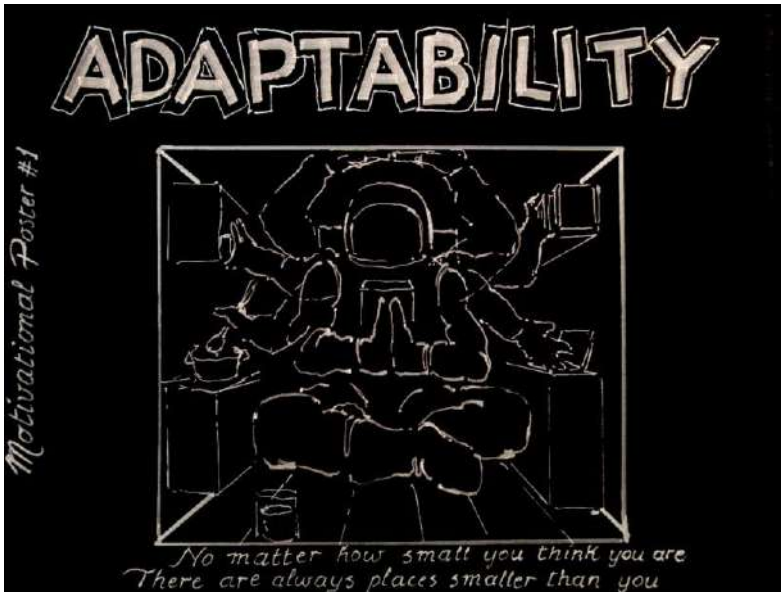

Figure 24: Buvoli, L., Motivational Poster # 1: Adaptability (from Astrodoubt and The Quarantine Chronicles), 2020, gouache, acrylic, and pencil on black paper, 22.8 x 30.4 cm

In Buvoli’s project a feeling of impeding 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 Astrodoubt 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 Ngangué's book. All three selected comics work 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-betweeness 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).

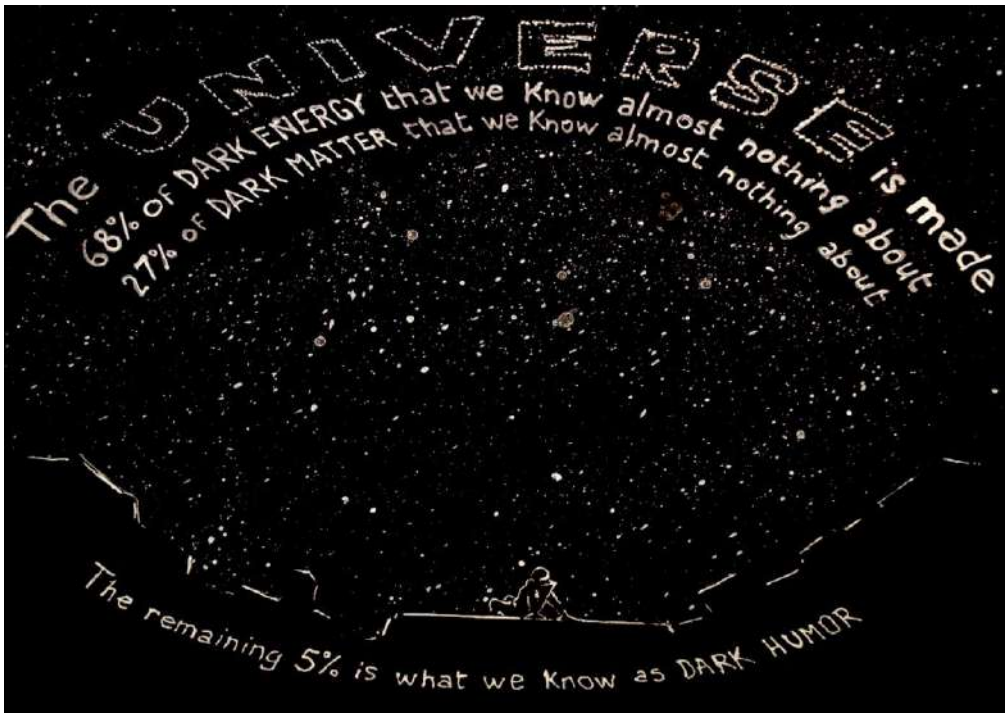

Figure 27: Buvoli, L., The Universe… (from Astrodoubt and The Quarantine Chronicles), 2020, gouache, acrylic, and pencil on black paper, 22.8 x 30.4 cm

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

Mediascapes journal 22/2023

Lived and abandoned spaces: invisibilities in comparison*

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The paper aims to propose a close reading of three non-serial comics, published in Italy after 2019, with a focus on the representation of spaces and the specific invisibilities they convey and communicate. The texts selected for the analysis are *Malibu* by Eliana Albertini, *Padovaland* by Miguel Vila, and *24/7* by Nova, as all three texts tell a story that takes place in a marginal environment such as the Italian province.
The paper will begin by defining the theoretical framework of reference, based on the geocritical perspective to literary texts (Tanca, Peterle) and the notion of *hauntology* proposed by Jacques Derrida and reworked by Mark Fisher. The analysis will begin by considering some general aspects of the representation of the province in the three comics, identifying the main features of that environment considered as a space-time. The paper will then proceed to a comparison between commercial space and abandoned space: the ways in which these are represented will be analyzed, emphasizing the presences-absences that haunt the spaces, according to the *hauntological* perspective. These two typologies were chosen because they are exemplary, both within history and in the imaginary: *non-place* the former (Augé) and characterized by a system of rules, *heterotopia* the latter (Foucault), a place with a history and devoid of a regulating authority. From the analysis it will be possible to define some of their peculiar characteristics: the commercial space will emerge as an environment that seeks to impose a precise temporality that is always the same; on the other hand, the abandoned place will be opposite but still in a dialectical relationship with the former, as it is unregulated and capable of hosting a temporality different from that of the rest of the provincial environment. These presences will be related to the question of visibility: the commercial space will emerge as overseer, endowed with a gaze, while the abandoned place is itself invisibilized and thus capable of hiding those who pass through it from the gaze of the province. This analysis finds its ideal field of study in the comics medium for several reasons: the invisible is an integral part of the grammar of comics (McCloud, Rey) and by its very nature it is forced to carefully select what it includes in its spaces (panels and pages) (Barbieri) leaving ample space for what it excludes, which remains invisible but nonetheless present; on the other hand, comics, as a visual medium, represent the story in a space, more or less mimetic with respect to what we call reality. This characteristic allows us to relate the representations, to map places both physical and belonging to the imaginary (Peterle) and to propose an analysis that is also a comparison of the different forms of invisibility related to the places of our imaginary, lived and visible, abandoned and invisible, and the possibilities that comics offer to tell them.

Keywords: Italian comics, Province, Spaces, Hauntology

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In recent times, the Italian province has often been placed at the center of comic book narratives: works such as Eliana Albertini's *Malibu* (2019), Miguel Vila's *Padovaland* (2020), Francesco Cattani's *Luna del mattino* (2017), Vincenzo Filosa's *Italo* (2019), Luigi Filippelli and Samuele Canestrari's Un *corpo smembrato* (2021), and Fumettibrutti's *P. La mia adolescenza trans* (2019), are just a few examples.

These texts are united by narratives set in a marginal space, which is told through stories and techniques that are also very different from each other. Here I would like to focus on three specific works, analyzing their common traits and divergences: these are *Malibu* by Eliana Albertini (2019), *Padovaland* by Miguel Vila (2020), and *24/7* by Nova (2021). These three texts, like the previous ones mentioned above, are united first and foremost by their format: we are in front of non-serial, self-contained comic works with a strong authorial imprint. They are to all intents and purposes ascribable to the category of *graphic novels,* although it is not always easy to make precise distinctions in this regard (Sebastiani, 2011). On the other hand, in agreement with Baetens and Frey, *graphic novel* today has critical and historical as well as editorial significance, and it is essential to have tools to analyze and discuss it (Baetens and Frey, 2014, p. 4). It is therefore to the categories they indicate and their definition that I refer, aware that these are characteristics that identify a spectrum of variables and nuances and give rise to a context-sensitive and non-essentialist definition (2016, pp. 11-20).

Among the properties of the *graphic novel* would be precisely the attention to space: in a story in which the protagonist grows and evolves, the *setting* is a non-secondary element (2014, p. 167) to which is added, in the specific case of comics, the inherent spatiality of the *medium*, whose images are developed in sequences (Groensteen, 1999; McCloud, 1993). As we have mentioned, in the three selected comics it is the space of the province that is central: in *Padovaland* we see as protagonists a group of friends who, in a choral story moved above all by the development of their relationships, will show the closure and toxicity of the province of Padua; similar case that of *Malibu,* in which a *slice of life* of a series of characters is told in a time segment that, it will turn out, revolves around an accident on the Romea state road, in the Polesine; in *24/7* the young protagonist Dante, recently hired as a clerk in a supermarket, will have to deal with mutant monsters born inside the building as a result of radioactive substances being spilled on a load of tomatoes.

At this point it is important to note that, as Tanca observes, one cannot speak of the centrality of space solely by the fact that the story requires a setting. A work of fiction can be *geographically relevant* for various reasons and through various forms: from the "dynamic character of co-implication between literary and real places" (Tanca, 2020, p. 24), peculiar to a geocritical approach, to the geographical theory of fiction proposed by Tanca himself, whereby in artistic representation we see "the telling and simulation of an experience of territorialization" (p. 59). The characters in a story would thus attempt to inhabit a space, with outcomes that may be more or less successful. It is therefore important to ask what the narrative function of territory is, and this is what will be attempted in this contribution. Giada Peterle, in her study *Comics as a Research Practice* (2021), analyzes the potential of comics

as a tool for mapping a space and of storytelling through images as a "spatial practice" dropped into the present, as an exercise in the narrativization of space. In this sense, comic book storytelling can propose a visual counter-narrative within the image construction of the places we inhabit, posing itself as a "third space" of possibility (p. 36). What will be returned by the comic board will be then "the spirit of place", a map of the imaginary, which maintains a close dialogue with both its spatial referent (explicit or implicit) and the image we have of it.[1] The places represented in the comic strip thus assume a "function" (the same one Tanca questions) that relates: (a) the real space and the way this is reworked in the comic strip; (b) the diegetic spatiality and the role this takes on in the story, with the possibility that it plays a real chronotopic function (Bernardelli, 2018, p. 4); (c) the spatiality of the images on the page and its meanings within the *arthrology,* what for Groensteen constitutes the set of relations in which the images are involved (Groensteen, 1999, p. 21).

Spectres of the Imaginary

Having established these basic premises, we now come to the theme of the conference: telling the invisible. McCloud illustrates that comic is the art in which the visible and invisible dance, speaking of the *closure*, the transition from one panel to the next through white space, in which "the blood of comics flows" (McCloud, 1993, p. 100). The invisible is thus part of the grammar of comics, but not only: we are in 1978 when Alain Rey writes *Les Spectres de la bande* where he describes comics as an art animated by ghosts of the imaginary, an illusionistic technique based on the recognition not only of actions that are completed by *closure,* but of real "cultural semaphores" (Rey, 1978, p. 48).

On the other hand, the ghost as a conceptual metaphor and tool of cultural analysis is not new: there are numerous studies from this perspective, so much so that we speak of a *spectral turn,*[2] and which in some cases have also involved the comic medium. Of these analyses, many draw on a well-known study, Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993) from which a second scholar, Mark Fisher, reworked the notion of *hauntology.* This, which stems from a pun typical of Derridian prose between *ontology* and the verb *to haunt*, focuses on the virtual, that which is no longer or not yet, but haunts contemporaneity with its own presence (Fisher, 2012). *Hauntology* will then be the ontology of the spectral, the manifestation of an absence or removed that precisely *haunts* a space, an epoch or its imaginary. This notion has been applied to various cultural productions, including comics (Fisher, 2013; Busi Rizzi 2018). In this light, *hauntology* focuses on a cultural impasse that manifests itself in the inability to imagine a world other than the present one. What *haunts* then will be the futures promised and never realized combined with a past experienced with nostalgia precisely because it admitted the possibility of a future. Note in this regard how the figure of the spectre manifests a crisis of time that also concerns the erosion of space: the ghost refers to persistence and repetition and consequently to the spread of *non-times* as well as *non-places* (Augé, 1992). Within cultural productions, these erosions generate absences that remain invisible, but it is possible to locate and analyze them precisely

through a spectral ontology: as an art that transforms time (a series of events) into space (the panels on the page), comics are particularly well suited to investigate these invisibilities.

Referring to the selected texts, there are two places on which I want to focus the analysis: the supermarket and the abandoned space. These in fact prove to be a decisive presence insofar as they play a function within the story and in relation to certain characters. On the other hand, these lend themselves to be places in which to investigate the presences of the contemporary also because of the role they play in our imagination: *non-place* par excellence the former, a space of transit with its own rules and languages, strongly anchored in the present, *heterotopia* the latter, a space *other* by definition (Foucault 2006), a place in the past, which is no more, but whose presence remains tangible in the landscapes we inhabit. What unites them is being a place of crisis of time and space in the narrated province, places of invisibility acting on a virtual level.

The province

Before focusing on the two types of places, it is useful to investigate the general representation of the province. We are introduced to the spaces of the story by silent sequences, with views from outside and from above: this expedient immediately makes the landscape the protagonist and uses a type of gaze that suggests the presence of another observer that produces immediate estrangement. It is a *non-embodied* gaze that is superimposed on the subjective gaze of the reader. In all three comics we find special attention to buildings, streets, and outdoor spaces. In *Padovaland* and *Malibu,* these are drawn with a precise, sharp stroke and an unmodulated line that suggests their static nature. Nova in *24/7* also uses a line with a constant thickness, but with a much more flickering and imprecise drawing: this gives the whole comic an accelerated and nervous rhythm, which nevertheless becomes more rigid and precise in depicting the supermarket where the protagonist works (pp. 37 and 86-87).

There are numerous deserted roads, especially in Eliana Albertini's comic: here, in a story revolving around a car accident, the streets take on an ominous, ghostly air, precisely by virtue of their being devoid of human life, full of signs and traffic circles that are repeated and disorienting, giving the idea that they lead nowhere (pp. 7-8, 28-29, 38-39, 48-49, 84-85, 98-99, 122-123). Many of these views consist of *splash pages* and *double splash-pages* that give relevance to the place depicted, with a clear predominance of white (Fig. 1). The street serves as not only a spatial, but also a narrative backdrop to the lives of the characters: in fact, each of these *splash pages* introduces a new chapter, a change of scene.

Figure 1: Albertini E., Malibu*, pp. 112-113.*

In Miguel Vila's comic, on the other hand, we find silent shots of buildings and old water depots: these buildings are featured in montages alternating with close-ups on the characters, thus giving the distinct impression that the former observes and spies on the latter (pp. 10-11, 66, 79, 91) (Fig. 2). Through visual and narrative devices, the places in these comics seem alive, acting on the characters as a disturbing presence; this impression is confirmed in *24/7*: the supermarket leads the protagonist to risk his life, generating monsters that will attempt to devour him, his colleagues and customers. The building is described as an entity that has a life of its own, a "trap" that consumes those who pass through it (pp. 85-86, p. 138).

Furthermore, the three comics propose a circular narrative, whereby the ending recalls the initial situation, emphasized by a return to the same place. In the last pages of *24/7* we return to the countryside with which the story opened, an epilogue sealed by the rhymes of a character who sings "And to get lost here in the middle is just a moment, that there's nothing for miles and then there's a stop sign" (p. 145). The case of *Padovaland* is interesting: the last panel shows the house with which the story opens, but with a difference. If in the opening on the road in front of the house stood the spray-painted inscription "Luisa come back to me please" (p. 9), on the final page the inscription has been erased and replaced by "Luisa slut" (p. 156). In both cases we have an unknown presence that speaks through space, a gaze that sees without being seen and from which there is no escape, indeed: if at first such violent invisibility was masked behind a prayer, in the finale this shows its aggressive nature. In Eliana Albertini's comic, the closure of provincial space also becomes temporal: not only is the place with which the story closes the same as the opening,

but also the moment is the same. Like the roads drawn by the author, the narrative is only seemingly linear and instead takes different directions, rewinding back on itself.

The depiction of the province seems to communicate a sense of imprisonment, of a guarding and oppressive gaze that comes from places. There is no spatial elsewhere. However, it would not be accurate to claim that all spaces and all ways of experiencing time are the same within the province narrated by the three comics: differences can be detected, particularly between sequences set in commercial spaces and those that take place in abandoned places.

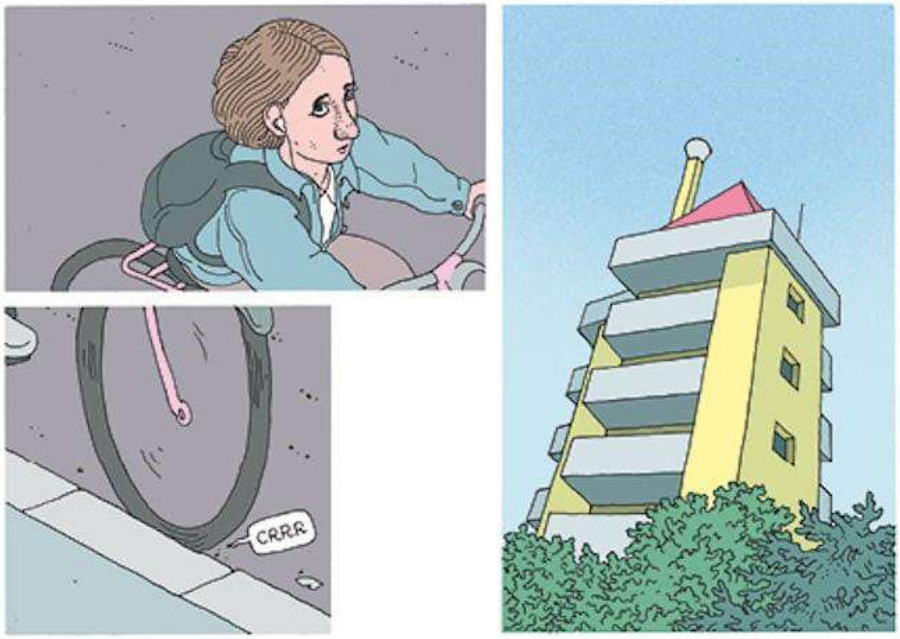

Figure 2: Vila M., Padovaland, *p. 11.*

The commercial space

We have already mentioned the presence of commercial spaces in the three comics. Specifically, in *Padovaland* we find a *shopping mall,* a place where several events in the story are set; in *24/7* Dante works as a cashier in the supermarket that forms the main setting of the story; while in *Malibu* we see the supermarket in a specific sequence, where an elderly couple goes shopping.

In Miguel Vila's comic, the framing on the building is placed before the title itself and, depicted in a wide view within a panel that does not contain it entirely, it seems to loom over the story that is about to begin. In these pages, the figures of people entering and leaving the building are small, featureless and poorly characterized, while at the very center of the frame we see the mall. In *24/7* we do not see the outside of the building until page 37, but again the panel does not fully embrace it and the structure looms over the tiny silhouettes of two characters. In *Malibu* we can see some common traits with respect to the depiction of exteriors: the hypermarket drawn by Eliana Albertini is framed from a distance but without

the panel being able to fully encompass it; it also has smooth surfaces with no signs of texture, which we can interpret as the absence of shadows and wear and tear (Barbieri, 1991, p. 27). In Miguel Vila and Nova we have a similar depiction, with the only difference being the color (Eliana Albertini's comic is in fact the only one of the three in black and white), but even in these two cases the coloring is homogeneous, interrupted only by the glass surfaces of the doors and windows. From the outside, the supermarket is thus represented as a space looming over human figures, with surfaces lacking tangible signs of a past time: the places drawn in the three comics could be recently opened or in operation for several years. Such a description agrees with one of the characteristics identified by Marc Augé to define the *non-place:* indeed, it cannot be said to be *historical, as* well as relational and identity-based (Augé, 1992).

As for the interiors, the representation we see in the three comics seems decidedly mimetic compared to what we would expect to see inside a supermarket: aisles, shelves, the checkout line, clean and well-lit environments. It is therefore important to see what aspects the authors focus on: if in fact on the outside we have an overall view that fails to embrace the entire building, inside the gaze becomes fragmented, focused on individual products. These are the subjects of numerous shots, divided into individual panels: in *Padovaland* we see advertising signs and mannequins (p. 19) or plants and flowers for sale (p. 116); in addition, various everyday products in *Malibu* (p. 104) and *24/7* (pp. 72, 75, 96, 122, 130, Fig. 3), complete with name and price, as in an advertisement. Here, merchandise is a fundamental element not only of the landscape but also of language: in both Nova's and Eliana Albertini's comics, it is possible to read the space through the products for sale.

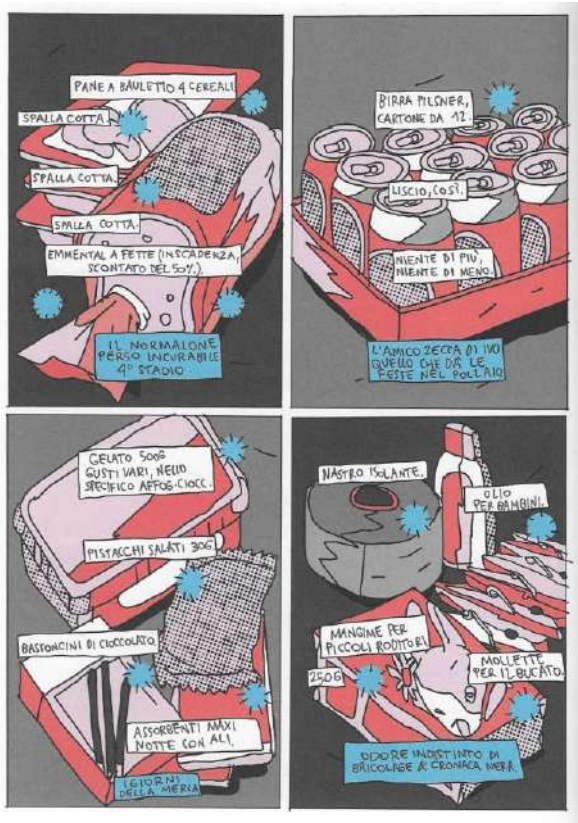

Figure 3: Nova, 24/7, p. 52.

Another striking element of the interior is the silence: the mall spaces are devoid of sound or noise, for several sequences even devoid of the characters' voices. What is read here is the space itself along with the minimal gestures it dictates to those who walk through it: walking through the shelves, taking objects, placing them in the cart. Relationships between characters are kept to a minimum and indeed, in *Padovaland* they are often in contact with someone outside the mall through chats and calls, a virtual relationality that deepens the feeling of estrangement. It is a temporality of transit, as noted again by Augé precisely about advertising, a language made "for those who pass by" (p. 91). A time devoid of history and memory, in which the characters, precisely because they are passing through, fail in the attempt at territorialization that Tanca writes about and which confirm the lack of *relationality* and *identity* of these *non-places*. The representation offered by the three comics is explicit in this sense: the small silhouettes in *Padovaland* are always moving in well-lit spaces whose paths are indicated by arrows (p. 117, Fig. 4); in Nova, the place turns out to be characterized by a constant and homogeneous time of activity (that of 24/7, precisely) that tries to eliminate any alternative temporality, as has been thoroughly analyzed by Jonathan Crary in the eponymous essay *24/7;*[3] while in *Malibu* it is two elderly people who go shopping at the supermarket. Here the shots on the individual gestures, on the individual products, suggest the slowness of their pace, the climax of which is at the moment of driving out of the parking lot, with a queue of nervous drivers ordering them to hurry up. It will be at this very moment that they are run over by a truck, unable to adapt to the speed of the space they are passing through. These are all elements that suggest an absence and an impossibility, that of a space to be inhabited in a context whose temporality of transit

Figure 4: Vila M., Padovaland, *p. 117.*

imposes a present that is always the same: "it's not asparagus season anymore," resentfully notes the elderly man in *Malibu* in front of the asparagus on display in the supermarket (p. 106).

The abandoned place

If within a *slice of life* set in the province the presence of the supermarket (a decidedly everyday place) is not surprising, the same cannot be said for abandoned places. It is therefore significant to note that in all three texts there are scenes set in abandoned places. Let's start with *Malibu*: here some teenagers go to an old, never-completed building, where they chat, flip through pornographic magazines and write on a wall, because "here we can practically do whatever the fuck we want" (p. 43). The building is depicted with large empty spaces, both on the outside surface and inside, and dimly lit, with vast areas of shadow; quite the opposite of the supermarket's overabundance of objects, messages, lights, and lines (Fig. 5). It is precisely by virtue of this empty space that the characters can attempt territorialization: one of the boys writes in large letters "Marco number one" on the wall, imprinting a before and after on the spatial surface. There is then a further development in this territorialization: a second character, Antonio, returns to the site, erases Marco's name and writes his own in it. In the graffiti, not only the inscription "Antonio number one" is now visible, but also the previous mark, Marco's name erased by a line (p. 145).

Figure 5: Albertini E., Malibu*, p. 45.*

Emerges in this way the possibility of a historicity inscribed in the abandoned place, which is also found in *24/7.* Dante draws up a list of the "most abandoned and sad places within 10 km" during a flashback, a moment concerning the processing of the end of a relationship (pp. 60-61). These places are reviewed, each drawn in a horizontal vignette with captions describing their name, date of last use, and a significant feature of them. These are history-related data, some of them related to local rumors, beginning with naming, the first step toward an appropriation of place (note that, on the other hand, the supermarket where Dante

works is never named). Even the setting in a memory, graphically marked by the exclusive use of orange and black colors, links these spaces to a removed that is not only Dante's personal: "This city sometimes seems empty underneath" (p. 63), as if to indicate a detachment from historical materiality, from the passage of time, a denied multi-temporality that Ezio Puglia speaks of regarding theme parks, another *non-place* that attempts to be always the same (Puglia, 2017, p. 84).

What emerges then is the lack of functionality of these places in relation to the environment of the province: already Orlando in his *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination: Ruins, Relics, Rarities, Rubbish, Uninhabited Places*, *and Hidden Treasures* speaks of literary space as a place of return of the antifunctional repressed among which figures, as exemplary images, ruins and abandoned places. These would represent precisely the repressed, something that is sought to be hidden by virtue of its not responding to the functional imperative of the world around it (Orlando, 1993, pp. 17-18). This imperative is based on the imposition of a certain kind of temporality that attempts to eliminate the ruining of things. The abandoned place shows itself as a tangible manifestation of passing time, as a testimony to the inevitable wear and tear of places. In *Padovaland* the abandoned places have an additional function: Giulia, one of the protagonists, is doing research for her dissertation and travels through marginal spaces (fields, brownfields, areas underneath major roads) taking photos. We have seen how through alternating montages the buildings point their invisible gaze at the protagonists. Among them, however, the only one who seems to be able to return the gaze on them is Giulia herself: her walks trace unexpected trajectories and touch hidden places of the provincial environment that allow her to escape the gaze of the buildings and photograph them by returning their gaze. These sequences tell of a different way of experiencing space and time: we could say that the *flâneur* hypothesized by Benjamin, whose last landing place was precisely the *grand magasin* (Benjamin, 1983), emerges from that space that had in turn reduced him to a commodity.

The stroll is a narrative device often used in comics to present a place, but not only that: it is also a form of storytelling, a narrativization of space (Peterle, 2021, p. 15). Famous is de Certeau's argument that strolling is a form of subtraction from the gaze of the city, which can be considered as a "concept" made possible through the creation of its own space and "the substitution of a *non-time*, or synchronic system, for the elusive and stubborn resistances of traditions" (De Certeau, 1990, p. 147). By traversing these spaces (with their own bodies, with memory, or with writing) the characters give rise to a trajectory unforeseen by the functionalism of the places they inhabit in the everyday. These, as places of an imposed temporality, of a work with an accelerated rhythm that is always the same ("it was always yesterday", says Dante in *24/7*, p. 31) are places of boredom, in which the characters caught in a *slice of life* cannot but suffer its monotony, deprived of meaning and perspective: "What balls. There is nothing. There's nothing we can do. Still on scooters we have to ride around. And all our time we use like this. It takes forever" (pp. 40-41), *Malibu* teenagers complain.

In short, the abandoned place, precisely because it is invisibilized and the site of a removed, offers an opportunity to escape the gaze, to make oneself invisible in turn and in this way attempt territorialization. Of course, such a process can only take place through

dialectics with the functional environments of the province, among which commercial space figures. It is no coincidence that the characters in the comic strips under consideration move *between* the two spaces: from the absence of alternatives of the ones, from their constant and always the same temporality, from the overstimulation given by the aura of the commodity, arises the need for a space to be filled, for an emptiness, for a place that can accommodate the signs of time.

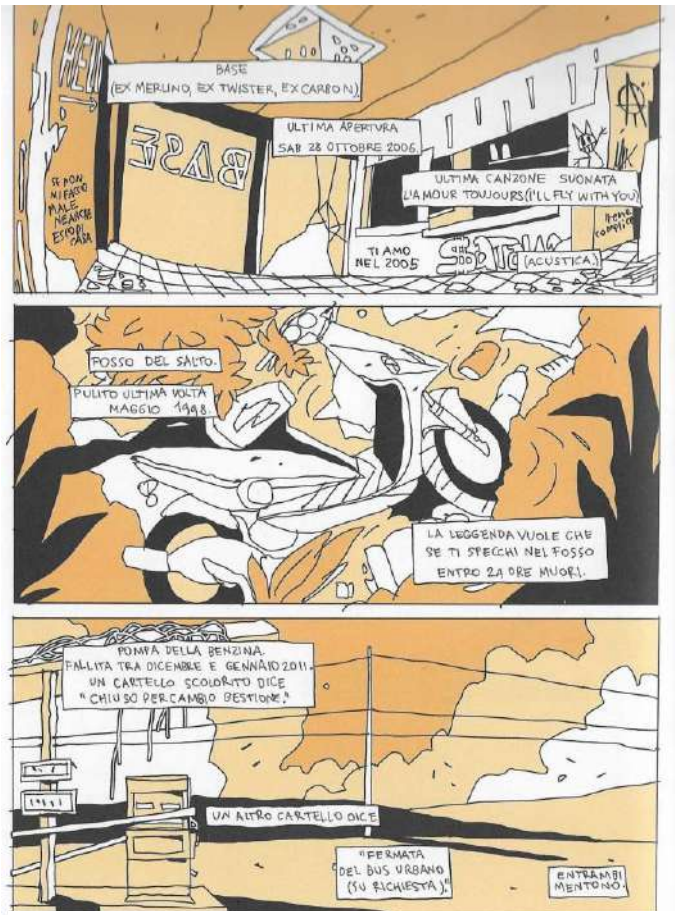

Figure 6: Nova, 24/7, p. 60.

Conclusions: the dialectic between the two spaces

Although represented with opposite characteristics, it would therefore be reductive to consider abandoned places and commercial spaces as completely the opposite of each other. In fact, between them we can identify a dialectical relationship that manifests itself through a process of estrangement (Schneider, 2010, p. 42). This gives a new sense to the everyday and to the boredom that characterizes the province: we have already seen how the supermarket in *Malibu* is linked to the death of two characters, to the violent interruption of a temporality that one would like to be reassuring and always the same; in *Padovaland* on the other hand, familiar places become an unsettling presence in the landscape; while in

24/7 the supermarket generates monsters that end up consuming consumers. In these representations we can notice two strategies peculiar to the production of the *uncanny*: the animation of what should be inanimate and the manifestation of something familiar in an alien or, indeed, alienated form (Freud, 1919, pp. 293-294). The everyday and familiar space of the supermarket thus loses its aura and allows the repressed to emerge: the invisibilities that characterize the space of the province emerge through the unmasking of the commercial space, but this process can only occur after the crossing of the abandoned space, in which their absence can be experienced. In the case of *Padovaland,* the imposition of a diffuse and surveying gaze is made tangible; in *Malibu* within the abandoned space, a territorialization is attempted that manifests the imposition of a temporality that is always the same in the other spaces of the province; in *24/7*, along with similar reflections on a homogeneous and constant temporality, also emerges the fact that the consumers are actually the consumed.

In the latter case, the metaphor is quite explicit and cannot fail to recall Romero's famous film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), in which survivors of a zombie outbreak try to survive inside a *shopping mall.* Here "the mall gradually shifts over the course of the film from a familiar, if strangely antiquated, space of consumer comfort and physical safety to a site of uncanny mystery, suspense, horror, and, ultimately, death" (Bishop, 2010, p. 144). This temporality associated with ruin and death also manifests itself in the abandoned place, but not as a repressed one to be hidden, but rather as a possibility, an unforeseen practice that the protagonists can resort to in order to give voice to the creeping meaninglessness that is produced by 24/7 regulated spaces.

To conclude, it is possible to note how the study of the invisibilities that characterize the spaces represented in these comics reveals the functions of two specific types of places within the narrative: the commercial space and the abandoned place, which, as they are placed in dialectical relationship, are the theater of an everyday in which to produce estrangement, the site of a repressed unconscious, and can be a key element in representing and problematizing the possibility (or impossibility) of alternative spatialities and temporalities of the contemporary.

Biographical note

Rodolfo Dal Canto is PhD student at the University of L'Aquila, with a project investigating the precariousness and the absence of the future in contemporary Italian comics production through the Derridean notion of *hauntology*. He graduated in Italian Studies at the University of Bologna with a thesis on the comics narrative of urban transformation processes. He was among the participants at the Compalit 2022 Conference with a paper titled *A.I. and Unheimlich: the Love Bot case*. He is an editor for the website «Lo Spazio Bianco» and the online magazine «Le Sabbie di Marte». He is also a member of the Italian comics research group SnIF (Studying ’n’ Investigating Fumetti). He is interested in comics studies, cultural studies, literary criticism and *hauntology*.

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[1] Similar reflections regarding the dialogue between sociology and literature can be found in Turnaturi G. (2003). *Immaginazione sociologica e immaginazione letteraria*, Rome-Bari: Laterza.

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Dancing with the (un)seen: problematizing the viewer's gaze through *Mediterraneo*'s visual aesthetics*

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Since the 1990s, international migration has become one of the most pressing socio-political issues in Italy. Subsequently, the topic of undocumented immigration has gained increased visibility in Italian society, making the infamous images of incoming masses of migrants ever more frequent in the mainstream media. At the same time, since the turn of the new millennium and thanks to the enhanced diffusion of the graphic novel format, significant changes also occurred in the Italian comics scene at the start of the 21st century. The *fumetto di realtà* [non-fiction comics] saw a consistent rise in popularity, exemplified by the proliferation of autobiographical comics and graphic reportages focusing attention on both personal experiences and socio-political events. Comics and graphic novels have started addressing the topical events of the present, including the phenomenon of immigration towards Italy from the Mediterranean basin. This study aims at exploring the peculiarities of graphic narratives in portraying experiences of forced migration, by paying particular attention to the specific framing strategies of the medium and the political affordances therein. Through the close reading of the wordless graphic novel *Mediterraneo* (2018), the present contribution analyzes how the inherent problematization of notions of presence and absence in comics' spatial and visual grammar can constitute a call for the active participation of viewers in the narrative, potentially mobilizing the Rancièrian formulation of spectators' emancipation that eschews the long-standing association of viewing with inertia.

Keywords: Migration, *Mediterraneo*, Viewing, Gaze, Aesthetics

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Introduction

Since its formation in October 2022, the Italian government headed by far-right leader Giorgia Meloni has made (undocumented) immigration to Italy one of its major focuses of interest, displaying "restrictive if not hostile positions on migration" (Ceccorulli, 2023). The decision to block two NGO boats carrying shipwrecked migrants to Italian shores in October 2022 triggered the indignation of many European heads of State (Tondo, 2022). A year later, in November 2023, Meloni's government again sparked debate by announcing a pact with Albania to create Italian asylum-seeker centers in the neighboring country (Gozzi, 2023; Tiberio, 2023). These events have contributed to re-centering the public discourse on the topic of undocumented immigration, which, after years of instrumentalization that saw it at the core of heated debates, had slowly subsided to the margins (Diamanti, 2023).

In Italy the topic of undocumented immigration began to receive significant attention in the 1990s, a pivotal decade in which Italy shifted from a country of emigration to one of immigration (Colucci 2018; Comberiati 2010). On the one hand, the phenomenon generated a surge of socio-political reactions, with responses to the changes taking place in the country often characterized by violence and racism (Parati, 1997, p. 169). On the other hand, it led to the first wave of artistic representations of migrant experiences in different media, including film, the performing arts, and literary texts.[1]

The early 2000s have represented a crucial time for the affirmation of non-fictional graphic narratives addressing migration in the Italian scene (Spadaro, 2022; 2023; Tanca, 2022).[2] Conseuquently, the rise of immigration has become a catalyst influencing the narrative and aesthetic evolution of Italian comics authors and practitioners, especially following in the wake of what has been labelled in European discourses as the "migration crisis" of 2015 (Spadaro, 2022; Comberiati & Spadaro, 2023). Interest in migrant experiences appeared, initially, in festivals focusing on the *fumetto di realtà* [non-fictional comics] often moved by ethical and socio-political stances (Spadaro 2022, p. 219). Among the first comics addressing migration there are short stories such as *Muttererde* (2003) by comic author Gipi, the anthology *Fortezza Europa* (2006), a collection of comics by authors of the underground Sherwood Festival, and, five years later, the first biographical account *Etenesh* (2011).[3]

This study aims to explore the narration of migrant experiences in Italian comics through the lens of the wordless graphic novel *Mediterraneo* (2018),[4] a collaboration between journalist Sergio Nazzaro and cartoonist Luca Ferrara. This graphic novel has been purposedly selected for the peculiarity of its narrative and visual strategies in depicting the fictional voyage across the Mediterranean Sea of a migrant girl, Amalia. More specifically, I aim to analyze how the formal and aesthetic properties of comics are strategically employed by *Mediterraneo*'s authors to problematize the positionality of the gaze of the viewer-reader when addressing the harsh experience of a migrants.[5]

My analysis will be filtered through the theoretical lens of the philosopher Jacques Rancière, whose work directs attention toward the intersection of politics and artistic practices. I maintain that Rancière's ideas on the role of spectators in engaging with visual art can be valuable in exploring how the formal and aesthetic features of the comic may

have the potential to arrange, frame, and problematize the viewer's experience. The following questions are addressed: to what extent does *Mediterraneo*'s form and aesthetics, the interplay between seen and unseen, have a role in situating the viewer's gaze? How does the graphic novel use the comic form to raise awareness of the viewer-reader positionality toward the events being portrayed? And how might these formal and aesthetic strategies contribute to raising political awareness?

Since Scott McCloud's seminal work, which famously labelled comics "the invisible art" (1994), comics scholarship has been interested in the interaction between what is graphically presented, the visible, and what remains hidden outside the panel or within the gutter, the invisible (Groensteen, 1999; Chute, 2016). In addressing the questions stated above, I will particularly consider the alternation of presence and absence within the medium not only because it calls upon the active engagement of the creative imagination of readers-viewers, but also as it casts light on the ways in which *Mediterraneo*'s framing strategies situate the reader's gaze in specific ways.[6]

Framing narratives of migration through comics

Following the popularity gained by non-fictional narratives in comic art since the turn of the millennium, genres such as graphic journalism and autobiography have often been employed to address Italy's socio-political issues, making comics an attractive medium for narrating contemporary events. Barbara Spadaro (2022, p. 219) draws attention to how activism for social justice and human rights has become a prevailing feature in the *fumetto di realtà*, particularly in light of the multiple migratory "crises" that have dominated media and political debates in recent years. This has prompted many cartoonists and publishing houses to address migration and migrant experiences to denounce the social injustices suffered by migrants.

Indeed, media regimes bear a crucial role in the hyper-visibility of migrant bodies and in inscribing them within patterns of (in)visibility.[7] Migrant journeys are increasingly mediatized, becoming a spectacle for Italian audiences through television screens and newspapers (De Genova, 2002). Alongside the proliferation of images depicting rammed migrant vessels and the drastic discourses framing the narrative of migrant arrivals as "crisis" (Boletsi, Houwen, & Minnaard, 2020), numbers and statistics have been strategically employed to generate anonymous representations that are "decisive for erasing the individuality and political subjectivity of people on the move as well as effacing their collective struggles and hardships" (New Keywords Collective, 2016, p. 22). Furthermore, the reduction of migrant subjects into the dichotomy of either powerless victims or dangerous invaders, undermining their political agency (Sigona, 2014; Szczepanik, 2016), calls attention to the inherent violence in the asymmetry between

> those with the right to see and represent and those who are excluded from it. We are the ones who monitor the migrants' routes, take the photographs, make the films and documentaries […]. We ceaselessly frame

> them, forcefully positioning their lives, displacements, and desires within our dehumanizing portrayals (Giubilaro, 2018, p. 107).

To counterbalance the portrayal of migrants in mainstream media which depicts them as powerless victims often lacking political agency (Malkki, 1996), graphic narratives have mostly focused on the individual stories of such perilous journeys, highlighting how migrants are conscious architects of their migration journeys, acting as intentional and rational subjects in the process. In promoting more personalized narratives, comics focusing on individual migrant (hi)stories become a "space of visibility" that encourages "a process that aims to put a face on the real actors of the Mediterranean passage" (Mazzara, 2015, p. 452).

Comics scholarship focusing on migration analyzed how the medium has been often employed to portray the singularity of migrant experiences, bringing to the fore migrant subjects as political and agential characters (Rifkind, 2020; McKinney, 2020). Other studies have stressed the formal affordances of the medium to address traumatic (hi)stories (Davies & Rifkind, 2020; Chute 2016), especially forced displacement (Naghibi, Rifkind & Ty, 2020; MacLeod, 2021), yet underscoring the possible ethical issues of appropriation and effacement of migrant voices (Smith, 2011; Mickwitz, 2020). Thus, the formal and aesthetic features of comics may offer an alternative approach to the remediation, and subsequent understanding, of migrant experiences. In particular, the "plenitude, fragmentation, and unruliness" of a comic page can be employed as a site of interruption from the proliferation static and photographic images perpetrated by hegemonic media narratives (Rifkind, 2017, p. 649).

Dominic Davies addresses how comics interrupt a visual culture that feeds on the ubiquitous dissemination of decontextualized images of violence and suffering, challenging through their subjective form a photographic reality to which viewers have become accustomed (2020, p. 182). Stressing the contrast between the proliferation of "objective" photographic images and the more subjective form of the comics' drawn image has been at the core of scholarly attention (Chute, 2016; Mickwitz, 2016; Schmid, 2021), especially when looking at refugee comics (Rifkind, 2017). More recently, Markus Arnold (2023) has pinpointed the tension between the textual and the visual in comics as having an "aesthetic dimension", that when intertwined with politically relevant themes "cannot be dissociated from ethics" (p. 20). Arnold maintains that discussing sensitive topics in writing does not elicit the same sensitive and critical response as drawing them (p. 4). One might question, then, how wordless graphic narratives that do not rely on discursive material exist at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics.

It is precisely the intersection of the ethic and the aesthetic dimension that interests the present analysis. Following Hillary Chute's claim that comic art "literalizes on the page the work of framing and making, and also what framing excludes" (2016, p. 17), I draw attention to the specific formal and aesthetic strategies of *Mediterraneo*. In what ways does the graphic novel situate the viewer-reader, most likely from Europe or the Global North,[8] within what Kate Polak calls "a space of self-reflexive ethical and affective negotiation" (2017, p. 29)? May the graphic novel's framing strategies, on the one hand, participate in destabilizing the viewer-reader's gaze and positionality, and, on the other hand, challenge the

dehumanizing tropes that often characterize hegemonic discourses on (or viewings of) experiences of migration (Sigona, 2014; Spadaro, 2022)?

The politics of comics' aesthetics

In what follows, I draw from Jacques Rancière's theories on the intersection between politics, which he defines as the act through which "the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part" (p. 11), and what the philosopher understands as "aesthetics", namely "a delimitation of space and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (2000, p. 13). For Rancière, the aesthetic dimension entails a particular rearrangement of the perceptible aspects of experience, what he calls a novel "*partage du sensible*" [distribution of the sensible], that makes it possible for those under a pre-existing socio-political order to "be seen and heard as political subjects voicing meaningful grievances when they seek to contest that order of domination" (Davis, 2013, p. 157).

Rancière further explores the political affordances of aesthetics in visual art in the *Emancipated Spectator* (2008), where he reflects on the role of the viewer, what he calls the "spectator",[9] of a work of art. Rancière aims to problematize the notion of the spectator as a passive viewer and consumer of art and develops a concept where the spectator becomes an active and autonomous participant in the artwork (Davis, 2010). The spectator's freedom to understand the work of art and reinterpret it according to his or her personal experience is what ultimately "emancipates" him or her both from the work of art *per se* and from the artist's intention. Aesthetic experience thus has a political effect when the creative act of interpretation of spectators opens up to a "multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible" (Rancière, 2008, p. 72).

Comics scholarship has also underlined the autonomy of readers-viewers in interpreting fragments of verbo-visual information in graphic narratives, and the multiple paths for interpretation opened up by the medium (Ahmed, 2016; Byrn-Køhlert, 2017; Groensteen, 1999; McCloud, 1994; Sousanis, 2015). The peculiar distribution of panels and images in a comic page can be analyzed as a useful example of Rancière's theory. The page a comic therefore allows for a complex network of possibilities for reception (Sousanis, 2015), wherein the panel, carrying a fragment of information, becomes part of a larger 'system of proliferation'" (Groensteen, 1999, p. 5).

Although panels are certainly organized by authors following a logical arrangement, the medium's formal multiplicity and fragmentation, its reliance on gaps and interruptions, opens to a "networked mode that allows each panel to hold privileged relations with any others at any distance" (p. 107), ultimately triggering the viewer's agency in creating an organic narrative in relation to the page's visual presences and absences. In involving the reader in the active effort of deciphering the network of verbo-visual codes, comics expose alternative

interpretative paths and allow for a potential break with the preset configuration of the reading experience. By "becoming unfixed from authoritative models of interpretation" (Byrn-Køhlert, 2017, p. 14), a comics page is thus continually shaped by the participatory collaboration of the reader, creating a dynamic environment.

When thinking with Rancière, this process participates in the act of emancipation of the viewer-reader, wherein viewing is not merely a passive act but can be a transformative action. Therefore, I see the tension between the author's organizing logic of the page and the undoing of that same logic by the viewer as an example of the political potential of comics. In this sense, the medium's form and aesthetics challenges the notion of the viewer as a passive figure:

> The spectator also acts […] She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kind of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her (Rancière, 2008, p. 13).

As Oliver Davis (2010) notes, for Rancière visual art has the aesthetic potential to offer individuals an altered perspective on the world and their role within it, turning them into political actors. However, Rancière underlines how visual art can only accomplish this by respecting the autonomy of the spectators' interpretative act. For this reason, the artist (or the comics' author) must try to avoid taking on a didactic or pedagogic role. Thus, on the one hand there is the essential task of the author in framing, and therefore establishing, an interpretative pattern for the viewer, and on the other hand there is the agential freedom of the viewer-reader in filling in the gaps of information on the page. Graphic narratives "cannot conceal [their] reliance on readers to extrapolate from the limited narrative discourse, making [their] mediatedness especially noticeable" (Schmid, 2021, p. 14). Comic art can be employed to raise viewers' awareness of meaning-making processes, wherein the constructedness of the page cues them to reflect on their own positionality. In comics addressing migration, viewers are invited to question how they are situated with respect to the characters and stories being portrayed, and to negotiate the complexity of their ethical position as (often) privileged subjects witnessing the events from a distance (Polak, 2017; Smith, 2011).

Particularly after the widespread accessibility and distribution of audio-visual media, masses have been confronted with the ubiquitous presence of "intolerable images" (2008, p. 83), whose sight triggers a strong emotional impact on viewers. According to Rancière, the visualization of images about traumatic depictions of past or current atrocities mobilizes the spectator's gaze in specific ways. Nevertheless, Rancière maintains that the spectacularization of atrocities and the discourse on the intolerable image have led to an overall suspicion about the political potential of any image, generated by the disappointed belief in a straight line between artistic production, affective engagement, and the subjective will to act politically.

To restore faith in the political effect of images, namely their ability to build new configurations of thinking and of looking at the world, what needs to be challenged is the presupposition that there is an immediate link between representation, awareness, and call

to action. In fact, artistic images do not supply direct weapons for battle, but, rather, help in sketching "new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible" (p. 103). If, thus, aesthetic experience bears political potential, it seems worth questioning how comics' form and aesthetics may participate in the Rancierian "aesthetic regime".

Rather than seeing the tension between viewer and author in purely oppositional terms, I would stress that this tension can be read as a collaborative relationship between the author's narrative cue and the viewer-reader's autonomous interpretative capabilities. Through the close reading of *Mediterraneo,* I want to consider this collaborative relationship and investigate how, in this qualified and context-specific instance, a wordless graphic novel may be employed to problematize the viewers' way of seeing migrant experiences, especially by encouraging them to question their own positionality towards the events being portrayed.

Mediterraneo: framing and problematizing the viewer's gaze

Mediterraneo was published in 2018, in the aftermath of the so-called "migration crisis" period. The authors' decision not to employ textual dialogue is one of the most striking aspects of this work. *Mediterraneo*, in fact, lacks the juxtaposition of word and image, considered one of the foundational traits of comics. For author Sergio Nazzaro, the lack of the written word enables the graphic novel to cross borders: "può viaggiare al contrario, può migrare al contrario, […] e puoi regalarlo a chiunque non parli la tua lingua" (Nazzaro in Raudino, 2019).[10] Nazzaro's claim on the transnational power of *Mediterraneo* is context-dependent and should be read in light of the fact that the wordless graphic novel mobilizes an imaginary mostly familiar to audiences from the Global North (Groß, 2014).

In another interview, Nazzaro further explains the decision behind the almost total absence of words in the text:

> Del Mediterraneo è rimasto solo un fondale deserto e arido che mostra la realtà. Ci siamo chiesti: 'Dobbiamo spiegarlo o dobbiamo mostrarlo?' C'era la volontà di un testo che attraversasse i confini proprio perché senza parole, solo con la forza delle immagini, perché ormai si è detto tutto e il contrario di tutto (Nazzaro in Cecchini, 2018).[11]

The debate around immigration in the Italian public arena, for Nazzaro, has been overloaded with words. Recalling Arnold (2023), for the author this verbal abundancy should therefore be counterbalanced with ethically nuanced visual elements. Nevertheless, the lack of the written word does not constitute the only noteworthy absence in this graphic novel. The need for a humble silence when faced with the tragedy of many migrant journeys through one of the deadliest sea crossing routes ("Migration within the Mediterranean", 2023) is further enhanced by the lack of the very foundational element of the sea: its waters. The graphic novel narrates the voyage of Amalia, a girl who flees her war-torn country crossing a desertic Mediterranean Sea that "per vergogna ha ritirato le sue stesse acque" and where "le parole

non hanno più forma, ciò che resta è solo dolore" (Nazzaro, 2018).[12] This remark by Nazzaro encapsulates two crucial elements: the transformation of the sea into a desert, showing in full light the horrors that water naturally conceals, and the difficulty for words to convey the tragedy of such dramatic journeys.

Distancing itself from the more common media trope that sees incoming migrants reduced into nameless individuals, *Mediterraneo*, in line with other graphic narratives, pays attention to the individual experience of migration: in following Amalia through her difficult journey, the graphic novel employs its foundational visual element by offering to the reader multiple close-ups of the young girl, underscoring her determination and strength. In the splash-panel below (image 1), for example, Amalia is portrayed immediately after the destruction of her city as she stares into the distant horizon with determination, observing the vastness of the desertic landscape she will have to cross. Here Ferrara skillfully experiments with the form of comics: in the upper part of the page a cloud of pitch-black smoke rises behind the protagonist, suggesting that her city is being crushed by war. The cloud of smoke then ominously expands beyond the frames of the panel, contributing to an overall sense of doomful asphyxiation.

Figure 1 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. Amalia flees her city and exchanges a direct look with the viewer.

In the splash panel, the protagonist's gaze is placed in direct confrontation with that of the viewer-reader. If the upper part of the frame is disrupted by the menacing black smoke, the lower part of the image neatly delimits the young girl, drawing the viewer's focus to her pale face and intense look. Through this direct visual confrontation, the authors are challenging the boundaries between seer and seen, creating a compelling visual strategy that draws attention to the viewer's gaze. The graphic novel attempts to avoid the proliferation of stereotypically dehumanizing images of migration, offering instead a more

complex narrative that plays an important function in problematizing the situatedness of a viewer from the Global North. As Ferrara himself asserts, this work is meant to thoroughly engage the reader: the aim is not to show an exact chronicle of something that happened but to propose suggestions and a moment of reflection in which the reader is an active participant. The overall goal is to make a drawing that would prompt the viewer to fill in the spaces, without imposing the authors' vision but suggesting something that readers complete themselves (Ferrara in Billau, 2018). Recalling Rancière's notion of the emancipated spectator as an active participant in the work of art, the play between seen and seer engages viewers as active participants of *Mediterraneo'*s visual narration rather than passive bystanders. The crucial collaboration between the imagination of the author(s) and that of the viewer-reader who must complete the narrative is once more at the forefront of the medium's formal affordances (McCloud, 1994).

Having the protagonist's gaze directly challenging that of the viewer becomes a recurring visual trope in *Mediterraneo*. The determination and power of Amalia's gaze is shown in other close-up scenes, such as the two double-page spread situated at opposite moments of the day: one depicts a new dawn in the protagonist's journey (image 2), and the other shows Amalia contemplating the desertic Mediterranean horizon at dusk (image 3). In both instances, in the lower part of the page, viewers are faced with a close-up of the protagonist's intense look. These pages constitute both a break from the voyage, and a pause for reflection for the viewer-reader. Amalia's gaze appears to be questioning the position of Global North viewers in following her difficult journey through a deathly space, ultimately destabilizing both their role as privileged viewers (Smith 2011), and that of Amalia as mere object of the viewers' gaze: through the close-up of the protagonist's eyes, the authors ultimately make *us*, as viewers-readers, the object of the migrant's gaze.

Figure 2 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. Amalia's gaze at dawn

Figure 3 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. Amalia simultaneously staring at both desert and viewer

Furthermore, Rancière interestingly points out that images of atrocity foster in spectators from the Global North a feeling of guilty complicity for benefiting from the system perpetuating such inequalities (Rancière, 2008, p. 85). Rancière, however, is critical of the empathetic effect of images of atrocity based on creating a sense of guilt in the viewer, as it banalizes the reality of these horrors and reinforces the consequential link connecting representation, knowledge, and action (p. 96). Framing the viewer's affective engagement through guilt is made even more explicit in another double-page spread, which functions as an interruption in the main unfolding of the plot (image 4). After witnessing another shipwreck in the Mediterranean desert and the subsequent death of its passengers, the viewer is presented with a depiction of a sequence of panels that, compared to the events witnessed just a page earlier, have the function of making viewers once more aware of their privilege. In fact, the use of tropes familiar especially for Italian readers, is meant to instigate a feeling of estrangement - or "defamiliarization" (Shklovsky, 1925) - towards the well-known scenes of everyday life displayed in front of the viewer. The panels depict scenes from popular Italian reality shows such as *Masterchef* or *C'è posta per te*, pets cuddling each other, a football match, or Leonardo Di Caprio's speech at the Oscars. This powerful interruption from the main narrative participates in the guilt-shaming process outlined by Rancière: after visually taking part in the dramatic voyage of Amalia, through this sequence of images viewers are brazenly put in front of their position as "privileged, safe subjects to be enlightened about conditions elsewhere" (Smith, 2011, p. 64).

Figure 4 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. Scenes from daily media exposure in the Global North

I would then claim that if on the one hand *Mediterraneo*'s authors skillfully use the intricacy of comics' networked form and aesthetics to call on the viewer's agency, on the other the choice of questioning the privileged position of the viewer through guilt may somewhat undermine the graphic novel's political work of "emancipation". In relying mostly on the expedient of guilt, *Mediterraneo* eventually runs the risk of freezing viewers in a position of culpability "in being there and doing nothing; about viewing these images of pain and death, rather than struggling against the powers responsible for it" (Rancière, 2008, p. 85).

In contrast with these representations of daily life in the Global North, I would like to draw attention to one last scene in *Mediterraneo* where the question of migrants' visibility and invisibility is at the forefront. One of the most interesting aspects of the graphic novel is that it casts light on the unseen of the Mediterranean crossing: the thousands of nameless individuals lost at sea who are so often anonymized through countless statistics and numbers. The many migrant subjects who disappear in Mediterranean waters become visible in *Mediterraneo* both literally, through macabre panels depicting piles of corpses, and metonymically, through the orange life jacket, an iconic object of the perilous voyage at sea of migrants that Marie Gillespie interprets as a "unique biography" of their individual stories and personal journeys (2017, p. 150). The proportion of the tragedy of the undocumented crossing of the Mediterranean is visualized through the sequence in which the life jackets come back to life as the protagonist is asleep. It is at night that the ghostly life vests revive, indicating the presence of the innumerable migrants who remain among the uncounted, and therefore the most invisible (image 5).

Figure 5 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. The life jackets come to life.

A sequence of panels shows life vests coming together in a spectral dance. One of the vests notices Amalia and decides to become her companion, her protection, therefore undertaking, in an ironic act of redemption, the life-saving duty that it previously failed to perform. The rubber of the inflatable boat, one of many "*ondate di barconi*" [waves of crammed boats] recurring in European media representations (Binotto and Bruno, 2018, p. 26), envelops Amalia in a dark embrace, while a wide blank space divides the vest's interaction with the girl. This gap works both as a temporal shift and to focus the reader's attention on the life vest itself: here the subject of its protection become ambiguous, as the vest seems no longer directed towards Amalia, but is opening its "arms" towards the viewer, who is once again pulled into the narrative and becomes directly absorbed in the actions taking place therein.

The original use of the gutter space by Ferrara materializes here how visual absences can also become an aesthetic interval for self-reflexion, a "material evidence of how the gaze of the readers is situated in specific ways in relation to what is shown" (Polak, 2017, p. 16). After offering the readers an intimate close-up of the sleeping protagonist, the sequence ends with a double page spread of the procession of orange life vests seen from above (image 6). This scene recalls a satellite picture of the Mediterranean Sea, displayed as an "inconceivable passage marked by slavery, drowning, brutality, and the wrecked lives of ferocious migration today" (Chambers, 2010, p. 681). The usually invisible sea bottom is illuminated by thousands of life vests, almost suggesting an orange-toned torchlight procession to commemorate all the anonymous, invisible individuals who remain unseen.

Figure 6 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. An aerial view of the illuminated Mediterranean

Conclusion

To conclude, I maintain that the graphic novel is a welcome attempt to problematize the common, mass-media viewing practices which spectacularize undocumented migration in the Mediterranean. The graphic novel is original in materializing a powerful space of visibility for the otherwise invisible individuals lost at sea. Furthermore, in troubling questions of (in)visibility and the boundaries between viewer (the reader of the comic) and viewed (the migrant subject), *Mediterraneo* creatively employs the formal complexity of the comic to invite viewers to reflect on their role as distant "spectators" of migrant voyages across the Mediterranean Sea. The graphic novel ultimately calls for an act of "critical witnessing" (Whitlock, 2020, p. 499) that ultimately questions who has the right to look and who is responsible for what is being seen.

Biographical note

Silvia Vari is a PhD student in Italian at the University of Warwick. Her previous work focused on narrations of youth precarity in Italian comics and appeared in peer-reviewed journals *Studi Culturali* and *Ticontre*. Her current research explores the experiences of (forced) migration in the Mediterranean area narrated in Italian comics from the past two decades, where she specifically investigates how the medium's formal hybridity and fragmentary aesthetics may embody and convey the transitional experience of migrant subjects. Aiming attention at different forms of migrant storytelling in comics (i.e. autobiography, reportage, and fiction) and their narrative framing strategies, her research analyzes through a Rancièrian lens the potential of comics to challenge mainstream discourses about (forced) migration and displacement.

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Notes

[1] The emergence of migrant literature in Italy dates back to 1990 with the publication of two pivotal co-authored novels *Immigrato* (1990) by Mario Fortunato and Salah Methnani. One of the earliest films addressing undocumented immigration in Italy is Michele Placido's *Pummaro'* (1990), while international acclaim was received by the Berlinale award winner *Fuocoammare* (2016) by Gianfranco Rosi.

[2] Given the heterogenous nature of comics, I employ "graphic narrative" as an inclusive term that encompasses the medium's different formats (i.e. the comic strip, the comic book, the graphic novel, wordless comics, among others). I use the term "graphic novel" specifically when relating to *Mediterraneo* because it is how the authors and the publishing house refer to the work.

[3] For an encompassing overview on Italian transnational comics and graphic narratives on migration please see Barbara Spadaro's '*Fumetto*, transnationalism and migration: an annotated and multilingual bibliography' (2023).

[4] "Wordless" (Jameel, 2023) or "Silent" comics (Postema, 2023) are a specific sub-genre of sequential graphic narratives that almost entirely eschew the use of textual discourse to convey meaning.

[5] Given the particular verbo-visual nature of comics, both the terms "viewer" and "reader" have been consistently used in comics scholarship (see Groensteen, 1999; McCloud, 1994; Mikkonen, 2012; 2017). This distinction results particularly blurred in the case of a predominantly visual comic such as *Mediterraneo*. For terminological clarity, I will employ both terms and the combined term viewer-reader when referring to comics readers.

[6] Following Schmid (2021), the terms “frame” and “framing strategies” refer here to the multiple ways in which different visual, textual, and cognitive phenomena are employed by comics authors to influence the meaning-making processes of readers.
[7] The ‘bodily’ materiality of migrants is highlighted here to stress how migrant subjects – and subjectivities - are de-humanized and made into an unidentifiable, anonymous figure around which various legal, political, and public discourses are inscribed. The bodies of migrants therefore become mere objects of a racialized biopolitical rationality that invests them with economic, legal, and political authority (Chambers, 2012).
[8] By using the term ‘Global North’ I do not refer to a geographical region in the conventional sense. The term rather signifies the relative economic power and wealth of countries across distinct parts of the world such as North America, Europe, and Australia.
[9] In Rancièrian terms the spectator is not necessarily limited to someone viewing a live performance, but the term more broadly refers to whoever is exposed to the aesthetic experience provided by forms of (visual) art.
[10] “It can travel backwards, it can migrate backwards, […] and you can give it to anyone who doesn't speak your language”. This and the following translations of the two authors’ words are mine.
[11] “All that is left of the Mediterranean is a barren, deserted backdrop showing reality. We asked ourselves, 'Do we have to explain it or do we have to show it?' There was a desire for a text that would cross borders precisely because without words, only with the power of images, because by now everything and the opposite of everything has already been said.”
[12] “Out of shame has withdrawn its own waters, words no longer have form, what remains is only pain.”

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On the externalities of news platformization. An assessment of scientific literature*

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The aim of the article is to assess the debate about news platformizations, by means of a wide-scale bibliographical review. Scientific literature has been organized along two axes: the marked or unmarked definition of news platformization; and the strong or weak understanding of its externalities. By weak definition, we mean all cases in which *platform* and *platformization* are used as being synonyms of other categories: namely, social media, websites, digital services; or digitization, remediation, and mediatization. By strong definition, we rather refer to the analyses premised on the specialist literature about platformization, and making space for more peculiar concepts such as, for instance, externalities or multi-sided markets.
Externalities can be defined as weak or strong, then, based on whether or not the effects of the process seriously modify the economic, social, political or cultural assets of the information society. For the sake of simplicity, we will group the scientific clusters in the following order: weak definition and weak externalities effects; weak definition and strong externalities effects; strong definition and weak externalities effects; strong definition and strong externalities effects. The positive/negative effects dyad will be considered too: though it has not been used as a pivotal variable for the drawing of the quadrants, as most cases would fall in the middle of the continuum, and several authors take an uncertain position.

Keywords: news platformization; platform studies; digital journalism; networked journalism

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About news platformization

The technological transformation of news ecosystem has been widely investigated in the last decades and interpreted, as is often the case, along a series of buzzwords. In the 1990s we used to talk about on-line journalism, as the interpenetration between the old and the new media: digital news-making was merely about transferring existing contents into new formats, and the web spaces, conversely, provided a first remediation of the graphic design specific to printed press (Bolter & Grusin 1999, p. 69). After the Nasdaq crisis and the following recovery, the rhetoric about the so-called Web 2.0 made it popular the idea of citizen or participatory journalism. A diverse interpretation came from Castells, who put forward the concept of "networked journalism", thus shifting the core from the replacement of professional reporting to the overall restructuring of the system, resulting in a public arena in which journalists are no longer the sole players (van der Haak, Parks & Castells, 2012).

In the last fifteen years, the popularization of advanced technologies also put to the foreground the notion of cross-media journalism. By and large, the focus is on all practices allowed by new devices – shooting, recording, remixing – able to cross the boundaries between previously separated fields, and between amateur and professional standards. The limit of this theoretical strand was the misunderstood idea of such practices, *per se*, empowering people's agency and fostering participation - as in Jenkins' (2008) convergence culture - which is still to be proved. To put it in one sentence, such idea goes that "cross-media functionality" allows people to publish "news across multiple media platforms", thus bearing with it "an interactive relationship with audiences" and a "lowered threshold for citizens to enter the public sphere" (Deuze, Burns & Neuberger, 2007, p. 323; for a synopsys, see table 3).

News *platformization* is but the last of a series of buzzwords: which nonetheless offers two advantages. Firstly, by *platforms* we can refer to the setting of closed systems, in discontinuity with the first and second-generation web services (Helmond, 2015). Even though the centralization tendency was implied by the evolution of the web hypertext as such, and it has been measured since the late 1990s (Faloutsos, Faloutsos & Faloutsos, 1999; Barabási, 2001), we can now observe this process at its overt and final stage. Secondly, and as a direct consequence, the spatial implication of the concept makes it clear its impact in terms of *sovereignty* (see Bratton, 2016): the rise of mega-structures, able to challenge the institutions in their field.

The proposed review can not be exhaustive, by definition, while being expected to isolate the main findings and the most problematic knots. In order to define a simple framework, the literature has been organized along two axes: the strong or weak definition of news platformization; and the strong or weak understanding of its externalities. By weak definition, we mean all cases in which *platform* and *platformization* are used as being synonyms of other categories: namely, social media, websites, digital services; or digitization, remediation, and mediatization. By strong definition, we rather refer to the analyses premised on the specialist literature about platformization, and making space for more peculiar concepts such as, for instance, externalities or multi-sided markets. By borrowing

an expression already used for describing cultural transnationalism (Hjort, 2010), this is the case of a *marked*, rather than *unmarked* connotation of the keyword.

Externalities can be defined as weak or strong, then, based on whether or not the effects of the process seriously modify the economic, social, political or cultural assets of the information society. For the sake of simplicity, we will group the scientific clusters in the following order: weak definition and weak externalities effects; weak definition and strong externalities effects; strong definition and weak externalities effects; strong definition and strong externalities effects. The positive/negative effects dyad will be considered too: though it has not been used as a pivotal variable for the drawing of the quadrants, as most cases would fall in the middle of the continuum, and several authors take an uncertain position.

We will propose some considerations about the four clusters, and the empirical indications thereof, in the final section of this article. Given the wide-scale nature of this bibliographical research, we adopted a practical criteria for selecting the works to be reviewed. More specifically, we used two major repositories, Google Scholar and JSTOR, searching for the first 50 articles or books related to the keyword “news platformization”. The full list of the hundred works we selected, after the double cases have been eliminated, is included in the bibliographical references below.

In methodological terms, the four quadrants have been identified based on two specific, though basic questions: the definition of platforms put forward; and the magnitude of the effects generated by the news platformization process. In this respect we opted for a “specific”, rather than “broad” research question, as there lies a main distinction between what we can define a *narrative* and a *systematic* literature review (see Cook, Mulrow & Haynes, 1997). As to the two aforementioned research questions, they derive from different sources. The definition of platform, as *strong* or *weak*, is analyzed based on the traditional media theory; and it is ultimately premised in Marshall McLuhan’s radical understanding of the medium itself, or what we might define his *strong program* for communication studies (see McLuhan, 1964). The second dimension – the weak/strong impact of news platformization - is rather grounded in some recent findings in platform economics, as “strong network externality” and “weak network externality” are supposed to be responsible for two very different aftermaths: respectively, a high-price and static market; and a low-price and more dynamic market (see He, Li & Zheng, 2023). To some extent, the news ecosystem is operating under the same splitting conditions, moving in the continuum between two poles: a for-pay market for a selected few and for the qualified users; and a poorly funded but totally new environment, open to endless possibilities.

First cluster: weak definition and weak externalities effects

A first case is that of the Pew Research Center, whose reports use *platform* in the vague sense of *medium* – for instance, it is stated that “the internet has surpassed newspapers and radio in popularity as a news platform on a typical day and now ranks just behind TV”

(Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Olmstead, 2010, p. 3). This is arguably due to its methods dating back to the 1990s-2000s period, when the keyword *platform* was still far from its hype – hence the dichotomy between bad and good "media performance", in place of the current concept of externalities. The main features of on-line news consumption are therefore framed in the same dimension of *openness* which was largely accepted at the time, and in terms of "portable, personalized and participatory" media diet (ibidem, p. 6). No relevant changes could be observed in recent years, as no distinction is drawn between platforms and social media: to the point that the very keyword *platform* only appears one time in their last released report (Walker & Matsa, 2021, p. 3). With this respect, the insistence on a traditional terminology leads to a latent definition of platformization, and to a weak interpretation of its effects.

Weak definition and low effects can be detected in Ju, Jeong and Chyi's paper (2014), who equal platforms to social media: a problem which is largely present in literature, apparently starting with Gillespie (2017, p. 255), who even excludes from the category such services as Uber and AirBnb, due to their business model (2018, p. 41-43). "Digital platforms alias social media", one can read in Trappel and Tomaz's operationalization of the media democracy indicators (2021, pp. 28-29). As to Ju, Jeong and Chyi, the effects of platformization are limited as - on the audience side of the discourse - no correlation pops out between online news consumption and political participation. On the offer side, they measure the use of social networks on the part of classical media outlets, simply stating that "distribution of newspaper content through SNSs has become a common practice" (2014, p. 8).

Along a similar line, Yuan studied the use of news platforms as made by Chinese people living in three major cities, without questioning the nature of the concept itself – not accidentally, in two passages the notion of *platform* is premised in such a traditional work as De Sola Pool's (Yuan, 2011, pp. 999 and 1000). When it comes to media repertoires, which is the main research question, people are familiar with a synergic use of a plurality of platforms for getting news, with no differences whatsoever between traditional and on-line services (Yuan, 2011, pp. 1004-1005). Guo and Sun analyzed 4,151 contents posted by an American local broadcaster on Facebook, with no distinction allowed between *social media* and *platforms*. The rules of engagement they come out with, not surprisingly, are not specific to platforms while being similar to those of traditional media, starting with the importance of visual contents (Guo & Sun, 2020, p. 751). As the authors do not consider the rise of *closed* ecosystems, the externalities of the web - autonomy, freedom of choice and purposiveness (2020, p. 746-749) - recall such concepts as "networked individualism" (Wellman, Hampton, Isla de Diaz & Miyata, p. 2003), or "new social operating system" (Rainie & Wellman, p. 2012). Mellado, Humanes, Scherman and Ovando assume a basic definition of media platforms as well, with the concept of affordance being cited without a thick theoretical articulation (2018, p. 361), as it often happens in the Internet Studies (for a textbook case, see Boyd, 2014, pp. 10-14). Their assessment of 1,591 news published by off line and on-line Chilean press, in a consistent way, detected a few differences between the two sectors, that can be explained upon professional routines, with a limited impact associated to the

platformization process itself – so that none of those differences "can be ascribed to affordances and/or technological characteristics alone" (2018, p. 372).

On the consumption side, Segesten, Bossetta, Holmberg & Nihorster make a reference to platforms being a "third space" (2022, p. 1116), while providing an experimental verification of an already known phenomenon: disagreement and conflictual posts capturing people's attention (Ibidem, p. 1129). Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen calibrate the definition of platforms based on their interest, so that the "second wave of digital disruption" is characterized by "the rise of smartphones, social media platforms, and a video-enabled internet" (2018, p. 2207-2208). By virtue of 26 semi-structured interviews with representative of 19 media outlets in USA, UK and Germany, they present classical findings, with entrepreneurial plans being increasingly focused on video production (2018, p. 2214-2216). Lamot also considers social media and digital platforms as being the same (2022, p. 522), in her analysis of 10,579 posts released by leading Belgian on-line media. The main effect of the feedback provided by audience's metrics, which is a typical feature of the platforms, is the softening of the contents produced for social media, when compared to those published in the official websites: so that those "consuming news exclusively through social media are thus at risk of not being informed sufficiently enough" (2022, p. 529-530). Continuity between old and new media is assessed by Allern and Pollack (2019) in their reflection on the Scandinavian model of journalism as public good, hardly challenged by the platform economy. Here platformization is one with the overall *digitization* process: so that "the Internet and the emergence of social media platforms have given political parties, lobbyists, interest groups and other actors – even legacy media organizations – new channels and platforms for dissemination" (Allern & Pollack, 2019, p. 1431). By measuring the use of platforms – one more time, equaled to social media – on the part of 15 European governments, Bonsón, Royo and Ratkai provide a conventional picture too, with administrations of Southern countries less active in digital space, and platformization engendering moderate consequences, as proved by people's participation being everywhere reduced to the minimum, and namely to liking rather than commenting or posting (2014: 58). Klein's book about polarization can be included in this cluster as well, as the idea of audience-driven media fostering identity politics and radicalization is not specific to platformizatiom per se (2020, pp. 150-158). What is more, according to Klein "negative partisanship" can be codified as a socio-anthropological constant (2020, pp. 60-65), or explained upon the ethnic composition of American society, rather than upon platforms' affordances (2020, pp. 111-112).

Goyanes and Demeter's paper is more ambitious, as it aims at illustrating the "thematic patterns of incidental news", by means of 50 in-depth interviews with Spanish readers (2022, pp. 766). The research is in line with recent academic trends, which are prioritizing the possibility of incidental exposure, over the much talked-about bubbles and confirmation bias (table 2). Vaccari and Valeriani's comparative study provides significant insights, showing how social media use allows people to randomly access various news sources, resulting in a positive correlation with political participation (2021, pp. 86-110, 197-205, 210-211). With their definition of platforms being based on that of social media, in any case, Goyanes and

Demeter (2022, pp. 761-762) fall short in finding concrete evidence, and the positive externalities of news platformization are modest: as confirmed by the fact that unforeseen information "has no impact on participants' ability to make sense of current events and politics" (2022, p. 770), and by people superficially reading it. Positive externalities, premised in a weak definition of platforms, are also addressed by Swart (2021), who studied the behavior of 22 Dutch aged 16-26, and observed a middle-ground situation, with respondents being aware of some aspects of the algorithmic mediation, and totally unaware of some others. In a similar perspective, Mutsvairo and Salgado draw on a traditional idea of "diasporic online platforms" (2022, p. 358) and "online environments allow(ing) for some freedom, which otherwise is not available offline" (2002, p. 364). Starting with this background, which reminds us of some interpretations of "Twitter revolutions", it is no surprise that the expected positive effects of citizen journalism in the considered countries – Mozambique and Zimbabwe – are not confirmed by the observation.

Thorson shares an unmarked conception of platformization, while looking for some effects in terms of people's engagement. She is probably right in stating that the distinction between incidental and intentional exposure is far from being clear, as the two practices are intertwined in the same information loop (2020, p. 1071). What is more, due to companies' restrictions to "individual level data", there is little observational evidence of the phenomenon (Ibidem, p. 1070). At the empirical level, what can rather be assessed is the process of algorithmic inference, based on the well-known pillars of selective exposition, homophily, and customization (Thorson, Cotter, Medeiros & Park, 2021, p. 187). The authors made a survey on 327 undergraduate students, revealing a correlation between the "algorithmically inferred political interest categories" and the "political content exposure on Facebook" (Ibidem, p. 192). As individual choices contribute to the shaping of the algorithm itself, though, the authors conclude that the effects of platformization are moderate, and free will is still with us (Ibidem, p. 193).

Schlesinger and Doyle frame the platformization tendency in the light of the creative destruction category, thus prioritizing the role of media management over the logic of the process itself: as a result, externalities can be intended in terms of "cheap" increasing of digital subscribers and "low marginal costs" (2015, p. 311). Van Erkel and Van Aelst's work is grounded in a similarly simplified notion of platformization: namely, that "recent years have seen the rise of new media platforms and social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter increasingly complement or even replace traditional news media" (2021, p. 410). In order to examine the correlation between access to platforms and civic participation, they realized a survey on 2,179 users, belonging to such different clusters as "low news diet"; "traditional news diet"; "Facebook reliant" diet; and a more various and rich media diet (2021, pp. 413-414). The association between exposure and awareness is not statistically proved, as it appears "clear that news on Facebook does not provide more knowledge", while it can be "even related to slightly less knowledge" (2021, p. 417). Erdal's article is based on classical concepts – cross-media journalism – and the effects of new platforms can be reduced to the likewise classical ideas of spreadability and contents repurposing (2009, p. 192).

Second cluster: Weak definition and strong externalities effects

The discrepancy between a low-profile definition of platformization and a strong impact of the process might require some clarifications. By and large, the academic idea goes that the digital platforms have been replacing traditional agencies, thus replicating a traditional theoretical paradox: working on media without providing an explanation *of what a medium is*, with this concept being the blind-spot in communication studies (Miconi & Serra, 2019). For the most part, and in a similar vein, scientific papers included in this cluster insist on platforms as the new gatekeepers (table 1). In other words, no clear definition of platforms id provided, which could account for the technical differences when compared to such other categories as news digital services, social network sites, social media, and the more. On the other hand, though, the platforms – no matter how the notion is operationalized - are vested with all functions and powers of mediation agencies, therefore taking the center of the stage and acting as main players in the information environment. This imbalance between *form* and *function* - to bring in the key-concepts of the evolutionary theory – is in all likelihood the main shortcoming of media studies, and nowadays of the platform society theory. This is the case of Wallace, who adds the platforms and their algorithms to the list of players carrying on a filtering function (2018, p. 280); and that of Hermida, stating that "digital gatekeeping takes place against a backdrop of algorithmically driven digital platforms, such as Apple, Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube" (2020, p. 473). Coexistence between human and algorithmic gatekeeping has been described also by Napoli, who hardly distinguishes between social media, platforms, and news platforms (2015, p. 757). Schrape puts an emphasis on *platformization*, without providing a detailed description of the process (2021, p. 19), and therefore assuming that the new mediators are plainly the main powers in the domain of public communication. Martin adopts this perspective in a more explicit fashion, when writing that "digital communications platforms have simply stepped into the space they created by undermining legacy mass media influence" (2021, p. 1191). As a consequence,

> rather than the democratization of news, what we chart (…) is a radical transfer of communicative power to major platform companies as user preferences, platform affordances and their algorithms' opaque operations and churn have increasingly governed news visibility to those who primarily consume news on social media (Martin, 2021, p. 1192).

Iosifidis and Nicoli follow the same path, with major disinformation consequences being produced by platforms acting as the new "internet mediators", without any further investigation (2020, pp. 3-5). As a consequence, the proposed strategies for tackling misinformation are conventional, ranging from fact-checking to the role of task forces (2020, pp. 50-65). In a similar vein, Cetina Pensuel and Martínez Sierra's paper points to news

platforms as contemporary regulators, which look for a compromise between the freedom of speech principles and their own business goals (2019, pp. 262). Molyneux and McGregor push forward the same argument, while adding a new dimension: the role of journalists in favoring the transfer of hegemony from traditional outlets to Twitter, and in legitimizing the central role of the platforms (2021, pp. 4-10). Chen and Pain's article follows a perspective akin to those above-mentioned, as they accept a minimalist definition of platforms, which appear to be the same as social media: when compared to the previous analysis, though, they focus on the mutual reinforcement and on the win-win relationship between newspapers and Facebook (2021, pp. 374-377; for the impact of platformization on newsrooms, see table 5). The research team at the Columbia Journalism School moves from an alike statement, as "platform" refers "to technology companies which maintain consumption, distribution, and monetization infrastructure for digital media — though each is distinct in its architecture and business model" (Nushin Rashidian, Brown, Hansen, Bell & Hartstone, 2018, p. 18). More technically, the authors combine a second-hand analysis of quantitative data with first-hand interviews to professionals employed in "platform-related" roles (Ibidem, 2019), and they describe current innovation in terms of a typical disruption effect. Beyond their own recognition, the most significant finding has to do with the impressive frequency of *failed* attempts in the platformization of newsrooms: which, nonetheless, has neither impacted the industrial strategies or reduced the financial investment of media companies (Ibidem, pp. 57-62). Merten endorses a comparable approach to "social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram", that "have become an integral part of online news distribution and consumption" (2021, p. 1018). This being said, her research turns upside down the previous findings, showing the strengthening of people's agency in terms of "personal news curation", which enables users – especially young – to counter-balance the power of algorithmic mediators, by virtue of blocking, friending, or changes of settings (2021, pp. 1026, 1032-1033).

In all cases, the lack of a detailed definition of *what platforms are* makes it difficult a connection between technical configurations and social effects. The main assumption has to do with the rise of *invisible* mediators, such as affordances, news feed, or the platform itself: new agents taking on traditional functions, in a way that we can hardly understand, unlike in the case of human gatekeeping. Foer's critical book belongs to the same tendency, given the imbalance between the magnitude of the changes engendered by platformization – with journalism being destroyed by the algorithm, and Big Tech appropriating the whole sector (2017, p. 77) – and the weak definition of the same process by which it is inspired. Sunstein's influential work on disinformation does provide some interesting insights: for instance, that the circulation of fake news might be only indirectly due to them being fake, while resulting from them *being always new* and therefore more attractive (2021, p. 131). This being said, Sunstein does not provide a real account of the nature of platforms, and also for this reason, he often indulges in political rather than scientific evaluations. Vaidhyanathan pushes this idea to its very limits, by linking the devastating effects of disinformation to the major social platform – Facebook - in an apodictic way (2018, p. 175-186); and even Lanier, despite his former work on the concept of *lock-in* (2010), limits himself to state that social media are "undermining the truth" (2018, pp. 53-61). The same

can be told about the paper released by Bell, Owen, Brown, Hauka and Rashidan, in which the platformization process is hardly defined, and the focus is on the overall role of "search engines and social media" (2017, pp. 13-14), that are actually very different from each other. In any case, the authors agree on platforms replacing traditional media, as it would be testified by the rising advertising expenditure in the digital sector. Pickard shows a similar understanding, with a weak definition of platforms paralleled by destabilizing effects on the information arena, due to Facebook's enormous lobbying power (2022, p. 24).

In a few cases, the unproblematized definition of platformization does not prevent authors from sketching peculiar research designs. Johnson and St. John III, for instance, do not distinguish between platforms and social media or even websites, while focusing on the difficulty of users to tell apart reliable and unreliable sources on Facebook (2020, pp. 762-763). By way of a study on 3,000 Swedish citizens, Bergström and Wadbring hypothesize in this sense a new generational divide, due to youth and elders being diversely affected by the process, as the "establishment of news media, channels or platforms is a slow and time-consuming process", since it is "rooted in everyday life, and "different generations, growing up in different media structures, do have different pre-understandings of and interest in media use" (2012, p. 124). A similar perspective is adopted by Sang, Lee, Park, Fischer and Fuller (2020), in their evaluation of the stratification due to access and use of news platforms; and by Bachman, Kaufhold, Lewis and de Zúñiga (2010), for whom the main consequence of news platformization is triggering political participation of the young adults, with marginal effects on the remaining population. Guess, Aslett, Bonneau, Nagler and Tucker studied the impact of Facebook RSS feed in the USA, with analogous conclusions: youth prove to be more able to make its way, whereas old people – and also conservative people, at that – are more easily attracted by fake news (2021, pp. 23-26).

Dvir-Gvirsman and Tsuriel interviewed 18 social media editors and 24 journalists, narrowing down the discourse to a more subtle problem: with anyone cultivating "semi-autonomous relationship with audience members", new tensions are introduced in the newsroom, showing how platformization – no matter how it is defined – bears not only external but also *internal* effects in terms of competition and restructuring of professional routines (2022, pp. 11-14). Even though Hanusch's definition of platform is basic – "the platforms on which journalists work"; "journalism has become a multi-platform environment" (2017, p. 1574) – his work adds a layer to the previous investigation, by individuating the web analytics as the main factor impacting content creation and distribution, and even the hierarchies within the newsroom (2017, pp. 1579-1581). Chyi and Chadha (2012) worked on "multi-platform consumption", though they basically equal platforms to media – "digitization of news content and processes have led to easy flow and facilitation of data files across various platforms such as print, radio and television" (2012, pp. 432) - while also using, as it was common at the time, the buzzword of *convergence*. This notwithstanding, they come out with a promising concept of "newsfulness", by which they refer to the "likelihood that a device or gadget is used for news" (2012, p. 434), which happens to be different from medium to medium, and calls for a close analysis of the specific affordances of each platform. For sure, the *newsfulness* index proper to any single device may largely depend on both the considered period and the observed US context: where, for instance,

the iPad is topping the weekly statistics, the laptop leads the daily one, and the mobile phone is rather used for sociality purposes (2012, p. 439).

Nelson and Lei (2018) make the same use of the category, mainly referring to “digital platforms”, “news platforms” and “cross-platform”, while they do introduce interesting elements at the stage of the analysis. They propose a distinction between two categories of users, respectively getting news through mobile browsers and through app ecosystems. Though they do not put it explicitly, this second audience cluster has properly to do with the aftermath of a platformization process:

This devoted news app audience suggests that a transition from an ad-supported revenue model that privileges measures of audience size to one that prioritizes other traits like loyalty and attention could very well be a beneficial one for commercial news publishers to make (Nelson & Lei 2018, p. 629).

Given the insistence on gatekeeping power, it is no surprise that the papers belonging to this cluster mostly imagine *negative* social effects – platforms replacing newsrooms, and algorithms taking over from humans. This notwithstanding, a few authors combine a weak definition of platforms with remarkable positive impacts on the media system, or society at large. Strauss, Huber and de Zúñiga (2020, p. 1182) grasp the broadest possible meaning of platform, while talking about “news consumption on various platforms (either traditional, online, or social media)”. Their wide-scale survey on 18 countries, in any case, does produce relevant findings, and underpins the idea of digital consumption favoring accidental exposure to news sources, which in its turn is linked to increasing rates of political interest and participation (2020, pp. 1195-1197). The very same results can be found in Fletcher and Nielsen’s paper, based on a likewise simplified definition of “social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube” (2018, p. 2451). By studying users in Italy, Australia, UK and USA, they show how on-line news consumption is correlated with “incidental exposure”, which seems to be “stronger for young people and those with low interest in news”, and “for users of YouTube and Twitter than for users of Facebook” (2018, p. 2461). That incidental exposure is more frequent in the case of people with low interest in news is a common finding, which nonetheless has a downside: as it has been noticed, the “impact that passive exposure has on individuals who are, otherwise, no greatly interested in searching for political news” (Mukerjee, Majó-Vázquez & González-Bailón 2018, p. 45). Bachman and de Zúñiga do not follow their own intuition of considering media use as a *predictor* of political ideas – also due to platforms being reduced to such basic features as interactivity and simultaneity (2013, pp. 498-499). The results of their survey confirm that “those who consume more news online and offline will tend to participate more than those who pay less attention to public affairs” (2013, p. 506), with regression analysis indicating a more relevant correlation in the case of digital news (2013, p. 505) – though the affordance of the platforms for political engagement is still at the level of a general statement.

Regardless of the definition of news platforms and its complexity, there is no doubt that disinformation is considered as their main negative externality (table 6): especially because – well beyond the contingent content of any *single* fake news – it has a tremendous impact on media trust, and on the overall credibility of institutions (Anstead, 2021, pp. 50-51). Once

again, the review of scientific literature can not be complete, while it helps individuating some relevant tendencies.

While not aptly defining the platformization process, Osatuy and Hughes (2018, pp. 3988-3990) bring in a particular facet: all differences in *tones* and *cognitive* efforts, between fake and reliable news. With no theoretical definition of platforms, and by taking a more empirical stance, Levy assessed the relation between misinformation, with the aid of an experiment on 1,700 users: as a result, "affective polarization" appears the main externality put in motion by platformization (2021, p. 867). Though they refer to "platformization of Arab news" in the very title of their article, Zaid, Ibahrine and Fedtke frame their work in terms of information disorder: which is not specific to the concept of platform, and may easily fit the case of digitization at large. In any case, their study of news websites in Jordan, Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia highlights a strong negative effect in terms of disinformation, with 79% of news not complying with "the imperative of truth", to put it in their words, and 22% of it being totally fabricated (2022, pp. 14, 10). Disinformation also lies at the heart of the works released by Tunstall (2009) and by Bhuiyan, Whitley, Horning, Lee and Mitra (2021), which both reflect on the opacity of contemporary news-making, and on its dramatic impact on the overall state of media *trust*. This lack of contextualization in the framework of the platform society probably explains why all effects are analyzed against the backdrop of classical themes: for instance, the second-generation digital divide (Hargittai 2002), on which the idea of social stratification is probably premised; and the network gatekeeping theory (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008), which paved the way to many works on digital intermediaries.

When it comes to the *remedies* to the proliferation of fake news, there is no agreement in scientific literature. The most complete aggregated analysis is that realized by Pavleska, Školkay, Zankova, Ribeiro and Bechmann (2018) in the context of an EU-funded project. The idea was to collect data from 50 debunking agencies in 27 European countries, though only 15 of them did release some information (Ibidem, p. 15). As a result, major shortcomings emerge, which have to do with limited cooperation, self-referentiality, and some "lack of clarity" about the real political goals of the organizations (2018, p. 22). What is more, a real evaluation of fact checking activities is hardly possible, as the majority of those organizations is not used to self-assessment of any sort, and none of them has laid out well-defined parameters or key-performance indicators (2018, pp. 18-19).

Chung Ng, Tang and Lee analyzed the effect of a common commercial strategy, the flagging of fake news, in their big data analysis of the contents posted on Sina Weibo from June 2012 to May 2014 - more precisely, on 1,514 allegedly fake news, and on the related comments produced by 409,020 users (Chung Ng, Tang & Lee, 2021, p. 909). What is interesting, the authors apply a basic sociological framework – the weak/strong tie dyad – in order to analyze the spreading pattern of fake news, before and after the flagging. The main result is that flagging leads the "dissemination network to be more centralized through direct forwards", rather than "dispersed through indirect forwards". In other words, the flagging changes the *qualitative* topology of network diffusion, rather the *quantitative* impact of the disinformation cascade – how the message reaches the people, but not how many people would be eventually reached by that message (Ibidem, p. 920). Their explanation has to do with the role of major influencers: once the news is flagged as being false, "users

with a large number of followers" will be "expected to behave more cautiously", and therefore embrace the discussion, for the purpose of debunking the unreliable information (Ibidem, pp. 920-921).

Lazer & others (2018) point to "direct government regulation" carrying several risks, "constitutional and otherwise" (2018, p. 1096), and therefore call for a market-driven solution, based on two symmetrical interventions. On the one hand, digital platforms should make themselves available for a cooperation with other institutions. In the other way, individuals need to be empowered, with the goal of taking some power out of fact-checking organizations, whose reports can even happen to be "counterproductive" (Ibidem, p. 1095). Italian data scientists Fabiana Zollo and Walter Quattrociocchi have been applying a "early-warning" approach, due to the ineffectiveness of ex-post interventions, such as debunking or flagging. The goal is that of timely identifying the discussion sub-topics and the digital spaces which, in their combination, are more likely to trigger polarization – a point after which, according to the authors, information cascades and fake news can easily spread (Cinelli & others, 2020; Del Vicario, Quattrociocchi, Scala & Zollo, 2019; Peruzzi, Zollo, Scala, Schmidt, & Quattrociocchi, 2019).

Cooperation between platforms and news organizations is advocated by Ananny in his paper for Columbia. Ananny analyzed the partnership among Facebook, media outlets – Associated Press and ABC News – and fact-checking organizations active in the Unites States: Politi-Fact, FactCheck.org, and Snopes (2018, p. 23). By virtue of interviews, material reviews and direct observation, he individuates the "infrastructure" of the cooperation, to be intended as both a social and a technical space. The main principles behind the initiative are: transparency, translated into a common accessible dashboard; feedback from any participant; availability of the same technological means for all members; and definition of a common lexicon. Despite the good intentions, serious problems are still in place: the disagreement among partners, and the different scale at which they are used to work. The main criticality is the power imbalance between Facebook and its counter-parts: at that, Facebook even proposed a payment to the partners, which was mostly rejected (Ibidem: 35).

The use of blockchain lies at the heart of the work of Gowri Ramachandran, Neville, Zhelezov, Yalçin, Fohrmann and Krishnamachari, bases on a "decentralized and community-driven platform for fake news detection" (2020). *Whistleblower*, how the platform is called, allows each user to circulate information to be checked, and send it to a set of "verifier nodes" (2020l, p. 161). The "smart contracts" protocols randomly forward the information to one of these nodes – at least in the current prototype, though the authors touch on a new version, implementing a non-random selection (2020, p. 160). After the verifier sends back the result to the task owner, the system comes out with a "genuineness score", which can be challenged by each of the nodes. In this sense, two participatory mechanisms are built into the platform: the possibility to "check the algorithm used to compute the score"; and, in case of contested outputs, the option of putting them to the vote (2020, p. 160). As fascinating as the solution might be, it is evident how the system requires active and skilled participants, even able to "reliably curate the algorithms" (2020, p. 8), and can not be scaled up to a wide social application.

The crowdsourcing of fact checking by means of the blockchain has been also proposed by Shae and Tsai, though based on a basic explanation of the confirmation bias (2019, p. 1610). What is relevant, their goal of rebuilding trust through a decentralized system is hardly compatible with the backdrop a "factual dataset": which, once again, would rely on the power of self-affirmed fact checking authorities, such as NewsGuard, OpenSources and MediaCloud (2019, p. 1613). Dhall, Dhar Dwivedi, Pal and Srivastava widen the discourse from the disinformation field to the whole catalogue of "vicious" contents, such as, for instance, those related to drug use – an aspect that they fall short in problematizing, for what concerns the social side of the argument (2021, p. 3). The idea is still that of enabling each node to exercise some control over the information stream: for this to be done, though, their prototypical platform needs to separate two different transactions, the "original messages" and the "forwarded messages" (2021, pp. 22-23). In order to prevent the spread of what they label as vicious contents, "private posts will not be given options to be forwarded by the receiver of such post" (2021, p. 21), and therefore limiting "mass spread" would come at the price of an authoritarian imposition. The same paradox of a radically decentralized idea turning into a control apparatus is present in Christodolou and Christodulou, who expressly refer to a blockchain maneuvered by the governments (2020, p. 138).

Based on scientific literature, the use of blockchain for the outsourcing of fact checking is a popular idea. Similar attempts have been made, with no significant differences in inspiration, by Jing & Murugesan (2018); Erkkilä & Yle (2019); Paul & others (2019); Saad, Ahsar & Mohaisen (2019); Torky, Nabil & Said (2019); Shahbazi & Byun (2021); Waghmare & Patnaik (2021). Fraga-Lamas and Fernández-Caramés support the use of blockchain also for fighting the deepfakes, though their guidelines are not specific to the technical affordances of videos, and focus on conventional parameters: namely, decentralized content moderation and rewards for fact checkers (2020, pp. 55-56).

Third cluster: Strong definition and weak externalities effects

When McLuhan came out with his most famous statement – "the medium is the message" – it was his intention to define a sort of *strong program* in communication studies: the more radical the definition of the media, the more violent their effects on human society, if not on the whole history of civilization (1964, p. 25). As a matter of fact, though, a strong definition of platforms – able to identify their specificities – is not always accompanied by a strong understanding of their externalities.

Masip, Suau, Ruiz-Caballero, Capilla and Zilles properly consider platforms as closed and proprietary systems, in discontinuity with first-generation web services. More precisely, the authors realized six focus groups, with a total of 48 participants, for discussing the effects of WhatsApp affordances, and they came out with conventional findings. Basically, confirmation bias and ideological segregation appear the main effects of news exposure on WhatsApp, due to small groups usually being more uniform: when it gets to bigger groups

and less biased information, in fact, people perceive it as “a noise”, and are rarely engaged (2021, pp.1075-1076).

Diehl, Barnidge and de Zúñiga refer to the literature related to the platform society, while proposing a Multi-Platform News Index, for measuring people’s level of agency (2019, p. 441). By means of a second-hand elaboration on Nielsen data, though, they observe a limited and nuanced effect of news platformization (2019, pp. 443-444). Diakopoulos (2016) draws on Gillespie’s contribution, with the goal of both refining the concept of platform – which is way too “vague” – and applying it to the case of news production, or what he calls “computational journalism”. Starting with such premise, it remains unclear how the effects of platformization may be countered by means of “community development, cross-industry non-content production, and cultural re-orientation”. Myllylahti brings in the concept of *attention*, which is relevant for a few reasons: as a scarce commodity; as a unit of measurement; and as a “source of monetization” (2020, pp. 569-572). The externalities of an attention-driven system are not defined, as the author declares the “urgency to explore attentional reader revenue models” (2020, p. 573), and such exploration is still to come. Zhang and Pérez Tornero reflect on the “inner logic” of platformization, by trying to combine Van Dijck’s idea of platform society, Couldry and Hepp’s mediatization theory (2017), and the contingent role taken on by digital services during the Covid-19 crisis. Despite the authors’ reference to the architecture of platforms (2021, p. 182), the externalities are far from clear, and framed in such generic concepts as “responsiveness” and “flexibility” (2021, p. 183).

An unclear relationship between the relevance of the platform as a theoretical notion and its effects, finally, can be traced back to José van Dijck’s analyses, and therefore to the very macro-text of the platform society. There is no doubt that van Dijck has worked to the articulation of common concepts in the Internet Studies, starting with the taxonomy of various types of social media (2013, p. 8). In a similar way, the distinction between infrastructural and sectorial platforms does shade some light on the new ecosystem (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018, pp. 12-22). With this respect, van Dijck’s definition of platform is *marked*, as it relies on a series of specific characteristics: commodification, selection, personalization, attention capturing, content moderation, and datafication (ibidem, pp. 37-46). The same applies to news platformization – one of van Dijck, Poell and de Waal’s case-studies, along with transports, health and education – which would result in a totally new information ecosystem, based on data-driven production and distribution, and content curation (ibidem, pp. 56-71). A problem with the platform society paradigm, here, is the unstable relation between structure and agency. This is an aspect of the major shortcoming of the theory, which on the one hand supposes platforms to take on a sort of infrastructural sovereignty over the world, somehow replacing the network power defined by Castells (2011). On the other hand, van Dijck prioritizes agency over structure: hence a contradiction between the concept of commodification – which, unlike the generic *commoditization*, is key to Marxist exploitation theory – and the idea of platforms as multi-sided markets, where offer and demand would meet on a free will basis, and balances and counter-balances would be in place (Miconi, 2022). A discrepancy between the structural importance of platforms and the uncertain relevance of their effects is also detectable in the case of news production. As

impactful as the rise of platforms might be, the future is still open, and the new configuration of information systems would depend on what players will do – which is totally acceptable *per se*, while being hardly compatible with the alleged "infrastructural" power of platforms. As an example:

> policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and media and communication scholars concerned with the realization of key journalistic values need to squarely focus on the interplay between the different actors on the contemporary news process (van Dijck, Poeel & de Waal, 2018, p. 71).

Fourth cluster: Strong definition and strong externalities effects

Nieborg and Poell (2018) applied the framework of the platform society to news production, by studying BuzzFeed, Huffington Post and Upworthy, and deriving strong externalities from their marked definition of platformization. News production, the idea goes, "has historically been platform independent", while it has become "progressively dependent on the tools, advertising revenue, and data and governance standards of the GAFAM" (2018, p. 4277). More technically, news is taking the shape of "contingent commodities", as it has moved from following a "linear production process" to being "constantly altered, and optimized for platform monetization" (2018, p. 4282). The ambiguity intrinsic to the platform society model is somehow resolved by Willig, who draws on van Dijck, Poell and de Waal's definition, while eventually prioritizing the concept of commodification over the multi-sided angle of the discourse. In order to assess the externalities of the process, Willig realized semi-structured interviews with news media employees and managers, about their strategies, their services, and their understanding of their audiences (2022, p. 62). As a result, and as also confirmed by the examination of first-hand documents, media agencies reveal to be increasingly engaged in tracking their readers, so that commodification may well be considered as the main effect of platformization (2022, pp. 66-67).

In their report for the European Commission, Martens, Aguiar, Gomez-Herrera and Müller-Langer draw on the same backdrop, by adopting the category of multi-sided market (2018, pp. 15-16). Effects of the process are strong in their turn, as externalities encompass information overload; the logic of advertising-driven contents looping back into the print media sector (2018, p. 42); and the market failure of spillovers due to information monopolies (for the economic effects of news platformization, see table 4). Along the same line, Hurcombe, Burgess and Harrington take an intermediate position, as they consider two features of social media – shareability and sociability (2021, pp. 383-384) – to the detriment of others, which might be more typical of the platformization stage. The main effect of the process is the rise of a new cultural form: the "social news", able to combine the quality of traditional journalism and the informal language of daily life (2021, pp. 389-390). Strong definition and strong effects of platformization coexist in Siapera's article, who proposes the concept of "infomediation", based on three features. While one of them is hardly credible – that of new information ecosystems "liquidating meaning" – the others provide advanced

insights into the organization of news platforms. Firstly, platforms do not simply distribute contents, while they also distribute *roles*, putting people into different categories (2013, p. 1); secondly, new gaps are introduced "in the recently blurred division between producers and consumers", with new intermediaries imposing their own criteria, extraneous to the logic of news production itself (2013, pp. 2-3). The effect of platformization is the displacement of job market – the "de-industrialization" and de-professionalization of journalism (2013, pp. 7-9) - with unpaid labor becoming a main source of value (2013, p. 16): a concept that is largely accepted in critical internet studies, while being absent in the reflection on news platforms.

An effort of operationalizing the *strong* theory of affordances in terms of concrete externalities has been proposed by dos Santos Jr, Lycarião and de Aquino, in their study of 823,184 contents posted on Facebook by 99 media outlets in thirteen countries. When it gets to the concept of affordance, the authors give up some complexity, in order to break it down into material indicators: in the case of Facebook, for instance, such features as length of texts, format of posts, and regularity of updating (2019, p. 399). In terms of externalities, the causality tests allow the authors to state a positive impact and a "virtuous circle" between the above-defined affordances, the compliance of the posts to those affordances, and the sharing practices on the part of users, which might be an indicator of people's agency (2019, pp. 413-414). Meese and Hurcombe made a similar exercise, working on some granular aspects of Facebook's affordances: precisely, the launch of Facebook live statistics; the updating of the algorithm in 2013, which enabled the platform "to boost the posts of news publishers", and therefore attracting their attention and investments (2020, p. 2369); and the new version of the NewsFeed in 2018, giving new centrality to contents posted by one's social circle (2020, p. 2370). In their interviews with representatives of fifteen Australian media outlets, the authors observe the impact of these changes, with news media becoming platform-dependent – as in Nieborg and Poeel – and putting in place their strategies for negotiating with the majors. Jääskeläinen, Yanatma and Ritala face a similar question, by investigating the effects of platformization on the Austrian News Agency (APA). Their definition of platforms is based on the multi-sided model, and therefore assumes them providing "services to two or more sides of the market, using different pricing strategies on different sides"; and, what is telling of a *strong* understanding of their nature, creating "cross-side network effects" (2021, p. 2063). By means of a multi-step data collection (2021, p. 2066), the authors describe the transformation of the APA agency into a "platform organization", based on a three-way market idea and connected to infrastructural platforms (2021, pp. 2069-2070).

Shin, Zaid, Biocca and Rasul define "platformization of news" as the process "whereby the various operations of news editors, news publishers, and digital platforms have become intertwined" (2022, p. 4). Moving from that, they consider "algorithmic datafication" as the paramount feature of platforms: the real "black box" of the system, characterized by a lack of transparency. With a radical idea come radical consequences, as users are challenged by something that they can not understand, in force of their heuristics and cognitive abilities. As people are not "passive recipient", nonetheless, they collect and process the information "via a trust mechanism, resulting in evaluating privacy risks" (2021, p. 16).

Claussen, Peukert and Sen (2019) realized an experiment on the externalities of algorithmic news recommendations, based on a strong understanding of both the news as "different from a standard product", and the algorithm as being "biased towards personal preferences" (2019, p. 12). By setting up an experimental and a control group, they measured the differences between human contents curation and automated recommendations, also with the purpose of identifying the right "mixed strategy", and "investigating which tasks might be suitable for automation" and "where humans would still" be needed (2019, p. 4). As a result, human editing would outperform the algorithm in case of relatively small amount of information, with the automated solutions being more effective at the big data level of scale.

Westlund and Ekström (2018) adopt a marked notion of news platforms, based on their proprietary nature – with non-proprietary spaces often proposed as a counter-measure. Not dissimilarly from Morozov (2011), they suggest a relation between news platformization and the crisis of participation: or "the dark side of participation", the dysfunctional effects brough by the process (2018, pp. 6-7). Lee, Nanz and Heiss share a strong understanding of platforms, to the point that the affordances specific to each of them may engender different effects (2022, p. 2). At the empirical level, they assess the impact of incidental news exposure on a sample of the US population, during the 2020 presidential campaign (2022, p. 5). As to the findings, incidental exposure is not a strong predictor of political knowledge and participation in the case of Twitter and Facebook, thus not confirming the results of previous research; and it is even a predictor of decreasing knowledge in the case of YouTube (2022, p. 6). Their study is part of an emerging scientific strand, taking distance from the much talked-about theory of *bubbles*, which have been repeatedly stated without being empirically confirmed (so that Pariser's seminal book on Google customization (2011) has been probably taken too *literally*).

Smyrnaios and Rebillard put this problem in a longitudinal perspective, by interviewing 51 French media managers and journalists, between 2013 and 2016. Their definition of platformization is by all means strong, as they combine platform theory with the classical critical notion of cultural industries (2019, p. 35). Such radical operationalization of the category is paralleled by heavy effects of news platformization, as they emerged from the in-depth interviews: the unsurprising confirmation of the "dominance of a few players"; the willing or unwilling importation of the GAFAM technical standards; the necessity of keeping people on the website as long as possible; the inevitable interference of the platforms on content production – all in all, the confirmation of the "dual logic of platforms", the seeming decentralization accompanied by their establishing as main hubs (2019, pp. 42-43).

A particular interpretation of this scheme leads us to the very foundation of the platform society theory, starting with José van Dijck. The main dilemma has to do with the ambiguous essence of the platforms themselves: with their "dual nature" of public spaces and business players, or their "Janusfaced status" (van Dijck, 2021b, p. 2814). When it goes down to the information sector, a question arises about the condition of "news consumers", and whether or not they can be considered as the "same as retail consumers" (van Dijck, Nieborg & Poell, 2019, p. 5). In coherence with the areas covered by her previous case studies, van Dijck includes news, along with urban mobility and health care, among the strategic sectors to be

regulated (van Dijck, 2021a, p. 325). In particular, the problem with news platforms is that they have bypassed a fundamental stage, the negotiation of "public values", which was traditionally rooted in professional codes and public debate – among which, for instance, "accuracy and fairness in reporting" (van Dijck, 2020, p. 3). If anything, this makes it clear that platforms can hardly be framed as multi-sided markets, as in van Dijck's theoretical background (Boudreau & Hagiu, 2009; Evans, 2011), due to different players not starting from the same line, and to rent positions and privileges inevitably taking their toll. In any case, van Dijck states, it all depends on the metaphor we use for understanding those platforms: "if cloud services were labeled digital infrastructures they could be held up to certain standards of neutrality and openness; if they were labeled intermediary platforms, they might be subject to content liability" (2021b, pp. 2814-2915).

In a consistent perspective, Salgado links platforms accountability to the adoption of a specific *European* category, that of public service media.

In this logic, both extending public service media top platform communication and integrating mechanisms to ensure the transparency of social media platforms and all news providers in general are key measures (Salgado, 2021, pp. 3-4).

Bonini makes a similar motion, while reframing the platforms as public service media. In this sense, if "traditional media are recognized as gatekeepers of information and cultural industries in general (…), then platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Netflix, and Spotify apparently cannot be considered media" (Bonini, Túñez-López & Barrientos Báez, 2021, p. 51). By shifting the attention from the contents that the media produce "to the position that media occupies in society", though, their definition would fit the case of platforms (ibidem, p. 52). Bonini is aware that such transition can not be easily accomplished, to the point of proposing a sort of "agonistic framework" (Bonini & Mazzoli, 2022, p. 929) for a new definition of the public role of platforms (a concept close to van Dijck's idea of public values). In order to make the platforms a public good, inspired by a "symmetry of power", three conditions are required: their "hackability", or the possibility for users to make changes and modifications; them being based on open software; and what can be defined algorithmic "conviviality", by going back to Ivan Illich, or the decentralization of control functions (ibidem, pp. 931-932).

Conclusions

In this final section, we will draw some outlines based on the literature review. We will start by reflecting on the four clusters that we have identified; and after that, we will single out three major findings, related to state of news platformization and its externalities.

As already stated, the four clusters result from the empirical organization of the collected materials, while also allowing for a broader consideration. As a main insight, we observe that there is no correspondence between the two dimensions we investigated: the strong/weak definition of news platformization; and the strong/weak understanding of its effects. In other words, the individuation of radically new features of the platforms is not necessarily coupled, as it could be expected, with their impactful externalities (and

symmetrically, the other way around). With particular frequency, such is the case of the definition of news platforms as a new intermediaries, which brings with it two implications. Firstly, it prioritizes the function of the platforms over their morphology, or set of affordances: to put it in simple way, it deals with *what platforms do*, more than with *what platforms are*. Secondly, and relatedly, a lack of problematization may be supposed, which would be in line with the latent definition of media, by which media studies have been traditionally affected (see Miconi & Serra, 2019).

When we focus on the evidence showcased by the scientific corpus we examined, three aspects deserve some attention. Firstly, we observed the frequent attention placed to the effects of the process on the newsroom and the organization of journalistic profession. In this respect, the literature we took into exam mostly belongs to a second generation of platform studies, which are characterized by a similar shift: according to which platforms have moved from impacting some aspects of the market competition, such as the pricing, to producing the overall change of the firms and leading to a new definition of their very nature (Rietvild & Schilling, 2021, pp. 1530-1532).

A significant difference between the analyzed corpus and the general platform theory rather pops out at another level of investigation. We refer here to the widely accepted idea of platform *ecosystem*, intended as a "modular and interdependent system of core and complementary components", allowing different participants to take advantage of the cooperation, and to capitalize on "the search and coordination capabilities that enable the matching and interaction between distant and previously unconnected parties" (Kretschmer & others, 2020, pp. 418-420). Such assumption is not alien to the media studies: for instance, an alike pattern of hierarchization and meta-organization has been put forward by Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018), with their distinction between infrastructural platforms, sectorial platforms, and complementors which provide some specific services. If we narrow down the discourse to *news* platformization, on the other hand, this typical network effect is hardly visible, and the cooperation between legacy media and major platforms only goes at the advantage of global players.

A final remark is possible about misinformation and disinformation, which are held – not surprisingly – as the most dangerous negative externalities of the process. Interestingly enough, the spread of fake news is only attributed to the top-down communication, as a consequence of common people speaking up on-line: to the point that a commonly proposed countermeasure, as we saw, would require the cooperation between the platforms and the professional media outlets. Such position, nonetheless, falls short in understanding the problem, for two reasons. To start with, it relies on the juxtaposition between classical news-making and citizen journalism, which appears to be outmoded, when we consider the hybrid configuration of contemporary media landscape, or what we use to define "networked journalism" (Van der Haak, Parks & Castells, 2012). Secondly, it might be questioned the idea of fake news as an *external* menace, as if the conventional media were not responsible, in their turn, for misinformation campaigns and biased coverage of the events. More concretely speaking, for instance, supposedly reliable and supposedly questionable contents follow a very similar rule, in terms of overarching narrative, spreading pattern, and re-posting metrics (see Peruzzi & others, 2020; Cinelli & others, 2020; Del Vicario & others,

2010; Peruzzi & others 2019). With this respect, an integrated approach would be recommendable, which takes into account the interactions between top-down and bottom-up information flows, and between the legacy media and the other players at stake.

Synopsys

Table 1. Systemic effects of news platformization

Externality	**Type of externality: Negative, neutral, or positive**	**Sources**	**Notes**
Rise of new intermediaries	Neutral	Bell, Owen, Brown, Hauka & Rashidan 2017; Cetina Pensuel & Martínez Sierra 2019; Diakopoulos 2016; Hermida 2020; Iosifidis & Nicoli 2020; Martin 2021; Pickard 2022; Schrape 2021; Wallace 2018.	**--**
	Negative	Lazer & others 2016; Napoli 2015; Shin, Zaid, Biocca & Rasul 2022.	--
Dependence of journalism on infrastructural platforms	Negative	Nechustau 2017; Nieborg & Poell 2018; Simon 2022; van Dijck, Nieborg & Poell 2019; van Dijck, Poell & de Waal 2018.	--
Bypassing of social negotiation	Negative	Bonini, Túñez-López & Barrientos Báez 2021; Bonini & Mazzoli 2022; van Dijck 2020; van Dijck 2021a; van Dijck 2021b.	--

Table 2. Effects of news platformization on political knowledge and participation

Externality	**Type of externality: Negative, neutral, or positive**	**Sources**	**Notes**

Correlation between getting news on platforms and political engagement	Negative correlation: platform news do not favor political engagement	Goyanes & Demeter 2022; Klein 2020; Morozov 2o11 Lee, Nanz & Heiss 2022; Westlund & Ekström 2018.	Besides the well—known theoretical interpretations, negative statistical correlation has been found by Goyanes & Demeter 2022; Mukerjee, Majó-Vázquez & González-Bailón 2018; and, in the sole case of YouTube, by Lee, Nanz & Heiss 2022.
	Neutral: no correlation is proved	Bonsón, Royo & Ratkai 2014; Diehl, Barnidge & de Zúñiga 2019; Guo & Sun 2020; Mutsvairo & Salgado 2022; Ju, Jeong & Chyi 2014; Thorson 2020; Van Erkel & Van Aelst's 2021; Yuan 2011.	--
	Positive correlation is proved	Bachman & de Zúñiga 2013; Fletcher & Nielsen 2018; Strauss, Huber & de Zúñiga 2020; Vaccari & Valeriani 2021.	For the most part, the papers focus on the positive correlation between the use of social media platforms and the probability of incidental exposure to the news.

Table 3. Effects of news platformization on audience engagement

Externality	**Type of externality: Negative, neutral, or positive**	**Sources**	**Notes**
Clustering, algorithmic recommendation and people's choice	Negative: algorithmic recommendation is limiting people's experience	Pariser 2011; Qi & others 2021; Wang, Zhang, Xie & Guo 2018.	--
	Positive: people's free will is still there	Diakopoulos 2016; Hurcombe, Burgess & Harrington 2021;	More specifically, Merten proposes the concept of "personal

		Merten 2021; Thorson, Cotter, Medeiros & Park 2021.	new curation"; and Hurcombe, Burgess & Harrington that of "social news".
Audience fragmentation	Negative	Evans 2003; Messina 2011.	--
Audience responsivity and engagement	Positive	Chiy & Chada 2012; Dos Santos Jr, Lycarião and de Aquino 2021; Erdal 2009; Guo & Sun 2020; Jenkins 2007; Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Olmstead 2010; Rainie & Wellman 2021; Walker & Matsa 2021; Yuan 2011; Zhang & Pérez Tornero 2021.	--
	Neutral	Swart 2021.	--
	Negative	Lamot 2022; Myllylahti 2020.	--

Table 4. Economic effects of news platformization

Externality	**Type of externality: Negative, neutral, or positive**	**Sources**	**Notes**
Lowering of marginal costs	Positive	Schlesinger & Doyle 2015.	--
Disruption of information industries	Negative	Bell, Owen, Brown, Hauka & Rashidan 2017; Foer 2017; Nushin Rashidian, Brown, Hansen, Bell & Hartstone 2018; Pickard 2022.	--
Failure of spillovers due to monopolies	Negative	Martens, Aguiar, Gomez-Herrera & Müller-Langer 2018.	--
Deindustrialization of journalism	Negative	Siapera 2013.	--
Win-win relationship between	Positive	Chen & Pain 2021.	--

Facebook and news outlets			

Table 5. Effects of news platformization on professional routines

Externality	**Type of externality: Negative, neutral, or positive**	**Sources**	**Notes**
Weakening of local journalism	Negative	Hepp & Lonse 2019; Nocera, Costantinou, Tran, Kim, Kahan & Shahabi 2021.	--
Imposition of the neutral point of view	Negative	Gallofré Ocaña, Nyre, Opdahl, Tessem, Trattner & Veres 2018; Vaydianathan 2011.	--
Rivalry within the newsroom, due to personalized audiences and web analytics	Negative	Dvir-Gvirsman & Tsuriel 2022; Hanusch 2017.	--
Platformization of the newsrooms	Negative	Ananny 2018; Molyneux & McGregor 2021; Smyrnaios & Rebillard 2019.	Negative interpretations are based on different reasons: for Ananny, the cooperation with Facebook is dangerous, due to its power; Smyrnaios & Rebillard describe the importation of GAFAM standards; and Molyneux & McGregor denounce the role journalists themselves in legitimizing the rise of the platforms.
	Neutral	Allern & Pollack 2019; Bónson, Royo & Ratkai 2014; Meese & Hurcombe 2020; Mellado, Humanes, Scherman & Ovando 2018; Jääskeläinen, Yanatma & Ritala 2021.	These authors see the process as being more balanced, with nor risks for journalistic autonomy.

New standards in news production and packaging	Negative	Andersen 2022; Lamot 2022; Segesten, Bossetta, Holmberg & Nihorster 2022.	In Segesten, Bossetta, Holmberg and Nihorster, the problem is the success of conflictual posts; Andersen works on the rise and failure of slow journalism; Lamot is critical about the softening of the news in social media pages of news outlets.
	Positive	Salgado 2021.	The idea is using the technical affordances of the platforms for providing people with personalized news.
	Neutral	Fraga-Lamas & Fernández-Caramés 2020; Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen 2018.	Both papers insist on the increased relevance of visual communication.
Implementation of the algorithmic curation	Negative	Claussen, Peukert & Sen 2019; Willig 2022.	The algorithm outperforms human curation at the level of big data (Claussen, Peukert and Sen); audience tracking and commodification is increasing (Willig).

Table 6. Effects of news platformization on disinformation and radicalization

Externality	**Type of externality: Negative, neutral, or positive**	**Sources**	**Notes**
Spread of fake news	Negative	Anstead 2021; Christodolou & Christodulou 2020; Dhar Dwivedi, Pal & Srivastava 2021; Erkkilä & Yle 2019; Fraga-Lamas & Fernández-Caramés 2020; Gowri Ramachandran, Neville, Zhelezov, Yalçin, Fohrmann &	--

		Krishnamachari 2020; Jing & Murugesan 2018; Johnson & St. John III 2020; Kim and Yoon 2018; Lanier 2018; Osatuy & Hughes 2018; Paul & others 2019; Saad, Ahsar & Mohaisen 2019; Shae & Tsai 2019; Shahbazi & Byun 2021; Sunstein 2021; Torky, Nabil & Said 2019; Vaidhyanathan 2018; Waghmare & Patnaik 2021; Zaid, Ibahrine & Fedtke 2022.	
Ineffectiveness of common responses to fake news	Negative	Chung Ng, Tang & Lee 2021; Zankova, Ribeiro & Bechmann 2018.	--
Ideological segregation and radicalization	Negative	Klein 2020; Levy 2021; Masip, Suau, Ruiz-Caballero, Capilla & Zilles 2021; Manjoo 2008; Osatuyi & Hughes 2018; Sunstein 2018; Sunstein 2021.	--
Impact on media trust	Negative	Bhuiyan, Whitley, Horning, Lee & Mitra (2021); Tunstall 2009.	

Biographical Note

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Animal care e nuovi media. Una ricerca esplorativa sugli immaginari*

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Gli animali domestici hanno avuto, e continuano ad avere, un ruolo sempre più importante nelle nostre vite, e la comunicazione intorno al settore della cura e del loro benessere è sempre più variegata, ricca, pervasiva. A partire da una piccola rassegna della letteratura volta a mostrare varie tendenze di ricerca, il presente contributo punta a esplorare diversi significati del fenomeno all'interno del contesto italiano, affrontandolo secondo una prospettiva *mixed methods* per illuminarne alcune principali dimensioni e prospettive. Sono stati realizzati dei *focus group* con *petlovers* ed è stato somministrato un questionario online agli utenti di una piattaforma di *e-commerce* dedicata agli animali domestici. È stata inoltre realizzata un'etnografia digitale per esplorare i contenuti sviluppati sulla rete, in particolare all'interno di *community* online e sui profili di *influencer* animali. Lo studio esplorativo mette in luce alcune principali polarizzazioni dei discorsi online e varie possibili frontiere di ricerca per il settore della cura degli animali e la sua comunicazione.

Keywords: animal care; immaginari; mixed methods; pet influencer; post pandemic

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Introduzione

Gli animali, fin dai tempi delle più antiche civiltà, hanno svolto un ruolo cruciale per l'umanità, soddisfacendo una vasta gamma di bisogni primari (ad esempio, l'alimentazione, la forza lavoro, ecc.), simbolici (come la sacralità e il culto) e sociali (come la compagnia). La relazione tra gli esseri umani e gli animali non umani è stata costantemente caratterizzata da un profondo grado di interdipendenza e la pratica della cura degli animali è intrinsecamente radicata nella storia di tutte le società. L'emergenza pandemica recente, originata da una zoonosi, ha inoltre rimarcato l'attualità e la rilevanza di questa relazione complessa, come sottolinea anche la prospettiva del "One Welfare, One World" (Karesh, Cook, 2005), che evidenzia l'intreccio tra benessere umano, ambientale e animale.

Considerando che la letteratura esistente su questa relazione presenta ancora ampi spazi di ricerca inesplorati, lo studio condotto con una impostazione di marketing, ha avuto l'obiettivo di analizzare come viene rappresentata nell'ambiente online la cura degli animali domestici. La ricerca è partita dalla percezione dei cosiddetti "petlovers", all'interno del contesto italiano, adottando un approccio mixed method volto ad identificare alcuni degli elementi che contribuiscono alla costruzione simbolica dell'animal care sul web, facendo riferimento alle prospettive interpretative avanzate dai visual media studies per l'analisi dei social media visivi (Pink, 2007; Leaver et al., 2020; Breckner, Mayer, 2023). Queste prospettive aiutano ad osservare le community e i profili degli influencer come prevalentemente caratterizzati da un flusso incessante di immagini, che circola a un ritmo esponenzialmente crescente, in un ambiente dinamico che offre cornici di senso e aspettative, e che gli utenti stessi contribuiscono a creare, attraverso la narrazione delle loro esperienze personali e personalizzate. I processi di co-creazione e/o co-distruzione si affiancano a processi di comunicazione artificiali, influenzati dagli algoritmi (Esposito, 2022) e risulta certamente molto difficile comprendere le motivazioni che spingono gli utenti a seguire specifici account piuttosto che altri e a fidarsi maggiormente di alcune proposte rispetto ad altre, dato che i livelli di agency dei soggetti sono difficilmente identificabili, in una crescente sovrapposizione tra contesti mediati digitalmente e dinamiche di potere online e offline. È importante considerare che il mondo dell'animal care non è infatti immune da fenomeni come l'influencer marketing (Pedroni, 2023), influenze legate alla moda e alla persuasione politica, oltre a risentire di tendenze culturali più ampie, per esempio nel caso specifico, dell'atteggiamento verso l'ambiente e/o dei discorsi sull'equità sociale.

In tale quadro, il progetto di ricerca ha avuto la finalità di fare emergere alcuni primi temi e atteggiamenti ricorrenti, che possono rappresentare un corpus informativo per un possibile percorso di raccolta dati, analisi e interpretazione, volto ad esplorare connessioni di senso più profonde nell'ambito della costruzione degli immaginari sull'*animal care.*

Uno sguardo alla letteratura recente sulla relazione tra umani e animali

Nel campo della veterinaria e in quello agro alimentare/tecnico sono moltissimi gli studi sulla relazione uomo-animale, mentre appare più rara l'attenzione delle scienze sociali a questa relazione e ai fenomeni ad essa collegati, nonostante la forte crescita economica del settore dell'*animal care*. Per approfondire questi contenuti, si è deciso di effettuare una preliminare review della letteratura; non con l'intento di raggiungere una panoramica definitiva e/o sistematica, ma di fornire un quadro generale sullo sviluppo degli studi del settore. Applicando una stringa di ricerca il più ampia possibile per il topic in questione, "animal OR pet AND influencer OR social media", limitatamente agli ultimi 10 anni sono state identificate 180 risorse, partendo da due motori di ricerca più diffusi, a livello interdisciplinare, *Scopus* e *Google Scholar*,. Circa la metà degli articoli individuati con queste keywords è di natura medico-psicologica, incentrati su pratiche di *pet therapy* e la sua efficacia, anche a livello neurologico (Maber-Aleksandrowicz, , 2016) e rispetto a disabilità (Brooks, Rogers, 2019) e all' aging (Fields et al., 2019); quest'ultimo attraverso un analisi comparata, fornisce per esempio una breve sintesi dell'impatto in termini di rischi e benefici che la proprietà di un animale domestico ha sugli anziani. In altri articoli di carattere psico-sociale (40), sono studiati comportamenti e fenomeni come la criminalità; in alcuni casi vengono esaminate criticamente le diverse culture sul possesso di animali domestici e la cura verso gli animali viene individuata come un potenziale fenomeno protettivo per le persone (Serpell et al., 2016; Signal et al., 2018). Sempre entro quest'area sono studiati gli animali in famiglia e il rapporto tra bambini e animali nelle fasi della crescita e dell'apprendimento (Severson, 2014; Muldoon, Williams, Lawrence, 2015), ma anche il tema del lutto in caso di perdita di un animale da compagnia (Goldberg et al., 2019). Un terzo gruppo di articoli identificati (32) riguarda la sfera legislativa e del diritto (Kymlicka, Donaldson, 2014; Anisimov, Ryzhenkov, 2016; Nurse, 2016; Zdyb, 2021) con alcune riflessioni di natura politica e di natura etico-legale, quali diritto di cittadinanza per gli animali, legittimità della sperimentazione animale, ecc.

Per quanto riguarda l'area più specificatamente sociologica (solo 14 articoli) si identificano prevalentemente tematiche e approcci analitici di ispirazione femminista e post-femminista, concentrate sulle dinamiche di genere e sugli interrogativi etico/morali nella cura degli animali, oltre a diversi articoli sulla comunicazione che saranno presentati nel prossimo paragrafo. Dejmanee (2013) utilizzando un approccio ecofemminista per valutare due immagini della campagna di lunga durata "I'd Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur" di People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) sottolinea un collegamento tra la sessualizzazione della donna e la protezione animale, che perpetua la responsabilità femminile per l'onere della cura. Hird (2016) si concentra sul caso si studio di due femmine di macaco giapponese, vissute insieme per anni, che hanno cresciuto tre giovani scimmie adottate. Partendo da questo episodio, viene avviata una riflessione sulla questione del matrimonio omosessuale e sulla tradizionale associazione tra natura e superiorità morale, su come gli animali siano spesso sovraccaricati dal compito di dare un senso alle relazioni sociali umane. Il lavoro di Cudworth et al. (2023) invece parte dalla teorizzazione e l'attivismo contemporanei all'intersezione tra femminismo e critica della nostra dominazione

e dello sfruttamento degli animali, con lo scopo di affrontare le tematiche della crisi (in particolar modo in relazione alla pandemia) e della relazione tra mondo umano e animale; viene mossa una critica alle attuali dinamiche di dominio e sfruttamento degli animali, tematizzando i temi dell'esclusione, del colonialismo, del razzismo, del classismo e della sessualità.

Media e immaginari dell'*animal care:* il contributo della letteratura

Nelle società contemporanee la relazione con gli animali è certamente influenzata dalle conoscenze tecnico scientifiche, dalle scelte di consumo e dagli immaginari che animano la rete. Gli immaginari rappresentano una specifica visione del mondo di singoli individui e gruppi sociali, e anche tramite la comunicazione mediata sedimentano nel tempo un insieme di stereotipi e archetipi, fornendo cornici di senso e codici narrativi (Callon et al., 2002). L'immaginario sugli animali in questo senso diventa un a priori delle esperienze, dei modi di relazionarsi con loro (Lury, 2004). In particolare, è stata studiata la rappresentazione degli animali nei medium cartacei (giornali, libri, ecc.) (Gil, Manzanal, 2016), il lavoro di Unal (2013), ad esempio, confronta le immagini di animali utilizzate per l'insegnamento linguistico nei libri di testo per ragazzi in Turchia e in Inghilterra, mentre Wang, Kao e Yeh (2017), attraverso un'analisi testuale e narrativa dei giornali taiwanesi (tra il 1950 e il 2014) studiano la rappresentazione degli animali per e l'evoluzione delle strategie narrative. Gli autori identificano un graduale orientamento verso una comunicazione più complessa oltre che emotiva.

Nell'attuale contesto mediale una parte cruciale viene giocata dalle piattaforme di social networking. I *social media*, in particolare quelli "visuali", sono il luogo privilegiato dove diversi attori plasmano immaginari attraverso processi online di co-creation, raccontando le loro esperienze personali (Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2004). Il contributo di Maddox (2022) analizza come lo story telling (prevalentemente visuale) sugli animali abbia per esempio, un ruolo fondamentale nel mantenere e focalizzare gli spazi Internet come spensierati e divertenti, senza, tuttavia, renderli immuni da dinamiche e problemi tipici del web (negatività, "tossicità", ecc.). Svensson et al. (2022) attraverso un'etnografia digitale su Instagram e Tik Tok analizzando come la comunicazione presente online impatti sui consumi e sul desiderio di possesso di animali esotici, dal momento che mostrati in casa appaiono adatti ad essere addomesticati. Carstens (2022) si concentra su dinamiche simili attenzionando la percezione e il comportamento complessivo degli utenti verso gli animali selvatici. La presenza degli animali online e in contesti mediali interconnessi è approfondita anche nel lavoro di Hartama (2021), che si focalizza sull'*influencer marketing*, con l'obiettivo di esplorare come gli utenti percepiscono i "*pet influencer*". Lo studio di Ngai (2022), sempre attraverso un' etnografia digitale e orientato proprio ai *pet influencer*, ha previsto la creazione di un account *Instagram* dedicato a un gatto, con l'intento di indagare questa "comunità affettiva" e come viene co-abitata da umani e non-umani.

Metodologia della ricerca

La ricerca di carattere esplorativo, in quanto non ha sviluppato ipotesi specifiche partendo da studi preesistenti, ha avuto l'obiettivo di studiare la percezione del mondo online (blog, community, social network) del settore dell'*animal care* in Italia e i contenuti comunicativi prevalenti, partendo dall punto di vista e dalle aspettative dei *petlovers* (padroni di animali di cani e/o gatti), identificando alcuni temi della costruzione simbolica presente online. Le infrastrutture digitali di riferimento in questo caso sono principalmente una piattaforma di e-commerce, gli utenti di corsi online, community online localizzate sul social media Facebook e profili di pet influencer su Instagram. Il progetto è stato parzialmente cofinanziato da un brand del settore, Ebano, con finalità orientate allo sviluppo del marketing aziendale[1]. Il disegno di ricerca è stato di tipo *mixed method* parallelo attraverso la realizzazione di tre diverse rilevazioni per rispondere alle domande di ricerca: le prime due a carattere qualitativo, la terza di tipo quantitativo. Il disegno mixed permette di raggiungere una migliore comprensione dell'oggetto di studio, grazie alla complementarietà, la convergenza e l'approfondimento consequenziale dei temi attraverso diverse epistemologie.

Focus group

Sono stati condotti 3 *focus group* con *petlovers* utenti (o potenziali tali) di *community* online dedicate e/o user (o potenziali tali) di store online. Attraverso questi *focus group* sono state indagate: l'esperienza d'uso in relazione ai temi dell'*animal care* online (utilizzo dei *social media*, *community* e rapporto con gli *influencer*); giudizi e suggerimenti sulla comunicazione dell'*animal care* presente online; soddisfazione (punti di forza/debolezza) per alcuni brand, siti e servizi conosciuti; potenzialità di sviluppo di nuove *community* online (es. pagine Facebook). Il corpus è stato analizzato attraverso una prospettiva ermeneutica, cercando di dimenticare la griglia di domande, identificando con un approccio grounded elementi salienti e ricorsivi, categorizzati poi per isotopie.

I focus group, svolti su piattaforma digitale, della durata di circa 1 ora e 30 minuti, sono stati registrati e co-condotti e le verbalizzazioni più salienti sono state trascritte. In particolare, questi sono stati i soggetti coinvolti:

- *Focus group* 1: 29/07/21 padroni di animali, membri di *community* online che usano brand specifici (5 partecipanti, 3 donne, 2 uomini);
- *Focus group* 2: 21/09/21 padroni di animali, membri di *community* online che usano brand specifici (5 partecipanti, 5 donne);
- *Focus group* 3: 04/11/21, padroni di animali utenti di uno store online che usano brand generici (7 partecipanti, 6 donne, 1 uomo).

In tutti i focus prevalgono i proprietari di cani. I partecipanti sono prevalentemente donne, under 35 con un titolo formativo tendenzialmente medio alto. Si segnala comunque una difficoltà nel reperimento del campione di convenienza a causa della situazione pandemica: anche per questo la provenienza geografica e il numero di soggetti coinvolti è limitato.

Netnografia

La *netnografia* si è mossa su due versanti, uno relativo ad alcuni profili di *influencer* animali e uno relativo alle *community* online. La scelta di optare per profili di dimensioni contenute è stata dettata da due fattori: in primo luogo, la carenza di profili italofoni di grandi dimensioni (la maggior parte di questi profili sono principalmente incentrati sui padroni), il secondo motivo è il livello di ingaggio che questi profili più piccoli sono in grado di generare con le audience, rendendo rilevanti, sempre ai fini della presente ricerca, i discorsi e i testi generati con la fan base. Il contesto geografico di interesse è quello nazionale, motivo per cui i soggetti selezionati (fatta eccezione per 2 *influencer* internazionali, che rappresentano due "casi più emblematici", fonte di partenza del campionamento) sono italiani. Lo studio include pertanto 6 profili Instagram di gatti e 6 profili di cani, preservando l'oggetto della ricerca, incentrata sugli animali domestici più comuni. Da questi profili selezionati sono stati campionati tutti i post pubblicati tra metà maggio e fine giugno del 2021, per un totale di 275 post. Il materiale è stato sistematizzato sia in base alle interazioni generate, sia in base al contenuto semantico delle immagini proposte, adottando un approccio *grounded* (Lai, To, 2015), arrivando a un raggruppamento a tre categorie: 1. Animali e padrone; 2. Animali e prodotti di *animal care*; 3. Più di un animale; 4. Animale da solo; 5. Solo prodotti di *animal care*. Una volta codificate le immagini in queste 5 categorie, si è proceduto ad analizzarle in rapporto ai testi ad esse associati, con lo scopo di individuare ricorrenze o dissonanze, tendenze ricorrenti o specifiche.

Per campionare le *community* online, ancora una volta si è proceduto con una selezione a cascata a partire da *Facebook*, piattaforma dove la quantità di utenti è più consistente (pur non mancando altre forme di *community* quali blog, forum, etc.). Con un criterio di massima eterogeneità, sono state campionate 5 *community* di settore, generaliste, ciascuna peculiare per dimensione, interazioni e fan base; su di esse si è effettuata un'osservazione esplorativa. La scelta è stata svolta a partire dalla loro popolarità sulla piattaforma iniziando da una ricerca per hashtag tematici (#animal care, #animal lover, #pet care, #pet lover). Per ragioni di etica della ricerca (Diebel-Fischer, 2017) e di privacy tutti i dati sono stati anonimizzati. I testi sono stati estratti dai post e dai commenti pubblicati tra metà maggio e fine giugno 2021, nella medesima finestra temporale della ricerca svolta sugli influencer sulla piattaforma Instagram. Tutto il materiale è stato codificato con l'ausilio del software Nvivo.

Rilevazione quantitativa

È stata condotta una rilevazione sull'esperienza online degli utenti di alcuni *brand* di *animal care*. In particolare, il questionario è stato inviato, nel mese di novembre 2021 (2 settimane), agli user di uno store online tramite un link, utilizzando la piattaforma per la raccolta dati Surveymonkey, raccogliendo 223 rispondenti (campione non rappresentativo). Gli obiettivi di questo approfondimento erano volti a conoscere la percezione del mondo online

dell'*animal care* e il rapporto con le *community* tra un gruppo di utenti che utilizzano già store online per animali. Le aree indagate dal questionario, oltre ai dati sociodemografici, sono state: l'esperienza con il brand committente, le preferenze per realizzare l'animal care (a chi ti rivolgi, dove trovi informazioni, la fiducia), le opinioni, il gradimento delle community online e degli influencer. Sarà riportata una selezione delle risposte più collegate agli obiettivi dello studio. Considerando l'effetto della pandemia sull'incremento dello shopping online, il tasso di risposta è stato basso. La maggior parte dei rispondenti è di genere femminile, l'età media è 47 anni, la massima 75. Parlando di titolo di studio, la maggior parte del campione ha la maturità. I rispondenti hanno in prevalenza cani e vivono con 1 o 2 animali al massimo.

Principali risultati della ricerca

I focus group sugli immaginari online dell'animal care

I principali contenuti che i soggetti ritrovano online riguardano diverse rappresentazioni del rapporto con gli animali domestici. Mentre i partecipanti delineano una visione di rispetto dell'animale, connotato come un soggetto "adulto", dotato di caratteristiche complesse e specifiche (non da antropomorfizzare), questo approccio è assente nella maggioranza degli ambienti online, dove l'animale è infantilizzato e umanizzato. Gli animali spesso sono visti come figli-famigliari o come soggetti limitati, totalizzati alla sola funzione affettiva.

> La stragrande maggioranza delle persone non li trattano [sic] come dovrebbero essere trattati gli animali (D, + 35)[1]

> Molti proprietari di animali appaiono molto emotivi e poco formati (D, + 35)

> Io ho uno sguardo un po' cinico a riguardo, ma dal mio punto di vista la maggior parte dei proprietari è veramente poco formata, e soprattutto, specialmente in Italia, c'è la piaga degli "animalari", incapaci di comprendere che gli animali non sono umani, c'è tanta emotività e poca formazione scientifica. (D, + 35)

Anche diversi partecipanti si riferiscono agli animali in modo antropomorfizzato: "Spesso le persone si rivolgono agli animali come se fossero delle persone, ancora peggio, come se fossero dei bambini. È sbagliato, è sbagliatissimo" (D, + 35).
Emerge la necessità di dover prendersi cura degli animali in modo competente, non limitandosi all'amore verso di essi.

> Dal momento in cui una persona compra, prende, adotta, un animale, qualsiasi, deve sapere che va accudito, trattato, va fatto ogni singolo passaggio come se fosse un figlio, anzi, forse di più. (D, - 35)

[1] D=Donna, U=Uomo, -35= under 35, +35 = over 35)

> La cura degli animali è attenta […], bisogna saper guardare tutto quello che gli succede, dal pelo che cade al cibo, insomma, l'attenzione è fondamentale per fare in modo che stiano bene. (U, - 35)

> La parola che userei è essere "predisposizione". Spesso attenzione e amore non bastano, serve un minimo di attitudine a stare a contatto anche con le persone, non solo con gli animali. (D, + 35)

Altri temi chiave ritrovati online dai partecipanti dei focus group riguardano la sfera emotiva della coccola, delle emozioni, dell'affetto, ma anche una dimensione più profonda e matura della relazione con l'animale, caratterizzata da::"*sintonia emotiva, divertimento insieme, tempo di qualità, compagnia, intesa"*.

Emerge la metafora della famiglia per descrivere la relazione con gli animali, visti come componenti del nucleo famigliare e dell'ambiente domestico, quasi che siano loro a conoscere meglio i padroni che viceversa: "Amore puro. L'unica persona che mi capisce forse della famiglia" (D, + 35). Alcuni partecipanti dissentono su tale metafora, ribadendo che gli animali non sono umani.

> Riguardo alla metafora della famiglia, credo che per molti sia così, ma lo reputo un transfert pericoloso. Un membro della famiglia sì, ma questo tende a far dimenticare che è un membro della famiglia non umano, questo significa priorità diverse, necessità diverse, longevità diverse. Va bene amare gli animali come parte della famiglia, ma questo non dovrebbe portare a snaturarli, mentre invece è una cosa che spesso succede. (D, - 35)

Il concetto di famiglia, appunto, non è totalmente condiviso da tutti gli intervistati: per molti l'animale è un membro del nucleo famigliare, ma non tutti operano una antropomorfizzazione, che sembra essere diffusa invece online. Per descrivere il mondo online dell'*animal care* sono citate anche altre parole relative a sicurezza, salute, informazione e diversi partecipanti lo ritengono un settore particolarmente complesso e articolato, nel quale identificare chiarezza informativa può risultare complicato. Il tema della sostenibilità ambientale e sociale non appare un punto di interesse centrale per chi si occupa di animali e non viene ritrovato nelle comunicazioni online. Tuttavia, al termine di uno dei focus, I partecipanti sostengono che questo aspetto potrebbe essere trattato maggiormente nei blog e nei pet store, in particolare per quanto riguarda le caratteristiche degli alimenti (e potrebbe rappresentare un utile e possibile leva di marketing per la vendita).

Sempre ispetto alla rappresentazione dell'*animal care* sui *social*, alcuni intervistati fanno notare che i post trovati online dovrebbero comunicare il mood degli animali, il loro comportamento. Gli animali infatti *"non sono soprammobili",* andrebbero valorizzati e comunicati gli aspetti comportamentali e relazionali, quelli che li fanno stare bene, quelli che li fanno essere loro stessi. Pochi tra i partecipanti intervistati usano i social in modo attivo, visualizzano i contenuti sugli animali limitandosi a interazioni immediate e non strutturate, pubblicano raramente, "passivamente", foto dei propri animali, senza produrre contenuti informativi sugli animali e sulla loro cura. Uno degli intervistati ha una pagina *Instagram* dedicata alla sua cagnolina, che gestisce attivamente; secondo lui, contenuti di questo tipo potrebbero essere utili per promuovere accessori e oggettistica più "frivola" (giochi, abbigliamento), non per questioni rilevanti come salute o alimentazione:

> Noi usiamo un sacco i social, soprattutto *Instagram*. Rita ha una pagina sua, per dire dove siamo arrivati. Cerchiamo però di evitare gli *influencer* perché sono pagati per fare determinate cose. […] su tematiche delicate, come può esser l'alimentazione, magari evitiamo, però su cose più frivole magari ti affidi all'esperienza di chi li condivide sui social. (U, - 35)

I partecipanti vengono poi sottoposti ad alcuni stimoli visivi (esempi di post *Instagram* e pagine web di *e-commerce*): molti di loro conoscono alcuni profili social dedicati al settore, ma li considerano eccessivamente emotivi e carenti di basi scientifiche. Gli animali sono visti "come ci ha insegnato a vederli la Disney" (D, - 35) e questo oscura i contenuti meno stereotipati, che spesso sono giudicati più utili e interessanti, rispetto alle comunicazioni più impulsive/emozionali. I contenuti più apprezzati sono quelli in cui sono presenti più animali (in questo caso di specie diverse) senza oggetti o accessori, nel modo più "spontaneo" e naturale possibile. La presenza di messaggi commerciali nei post non viene colta immediatamente, ma quando la brandizzazione è scoperta, funziona quasi da deterrente (fenomeno in contro tendenza rispetto ad altri settori che potrebbe essere approfondito). Tra gli intervistati emergono pareri ambivalenti sui *social media*: lamentano superficialità e mancanza di informazione corretta.

> Un esempio pratico: nel colpo di calore del cane, insistevano fortemente che ci volesse acqua ghiacciata, cosa assolutamente sbagliata. C'era un post su questo cagnolino, un bulldog francese, a cui il proprietario metteva una borsa di ghiaccio sul collo. Non è consigliatissimo in realtà. Girava questo video e la gente diceva "bravo bravo", questi fomentano cose non vere e poi sorgono problemi. (D, + 35)

Viene segnalata una generica mancanza di fiducia verso la maggior parte dei siti, la necessità di effettuare un confronto tra diverse pagine o con esperti veterinari "reali" per verificare le informazioni: "Su Internet leggo, ma lascia il tempo che trova" (U, - 35).

Tutti gli intervistati conoscono e seguono alcuni *pet influencer*, ma lamentano la mancanza di *player* precisi e informati. L'autenticità è considerata un aspetto rilevante; gran parte del campione percepisce le informazioni trasmesse dagli *influencer* come poco credibili, "non disinteressate", alla stregua della pubblicità tradizionale.

> Seguo pagine di alcuni *dogsitter* che conosco, o pagine dedicate alla razza, ma più che altro per vedere le foto. Non ricerco informazioni di prodotto, credo sia una categoria in cui è difficile generalizzare i consigli. (D, - 35)

In relazione allo *shopping* online le principali leve che d'acquisto sono comodità, prezzo, ampiezza della scelta, informazione puntuale (sistema di recensioni peer). *Amazon* è stato segnalato più volte come un sistema facile e comodo, anche se è considerato lacunoso di informazioni puntuali, caratteristica che è invece gradita e si riscontra su *e-commerce* di settore, meno forniti ma più dettagliati a livello informativo: "Nei siti riservati l'informazione è migliore" (D, + 35). Servizi post-vendita, mailing list, eccessive attenzioni dei commessi negli *store* fisici, sono percepite come eccessive: "Mi fa piacere l'assistenza ma non troppa, anche negli store fisici. Si sfora nell'eccesso di attenzioni" (U, - 35).

Sempre parlando degli stimoli visivi, sono state mostrate delle home page di *e-commerce* di settore con loghi e riferimenti testuali rimossi digitalmente. L'unico *store* riconosciuto è una catena multinazionale, i cui colori sono stati segnalati come immediatamente riconoscibili. Altre due pagine sono state invece percepite come eccessivamente simili, confusive, sia per il formato che per i colori.

In ottica proiettiva, volta a indagare la ricchezza della comunicazione online, è stato chiesto quale personaggio famoso oggi rappresenterebbe meglio, per loro, il settore dell'*animal care* online. Viene citato Elton John (eccentrico come le persone che popolano il settore), Brigitte Bardot (che ha rinunciato a tutto per gli animali), Madonna (per la sua ampia fan base e creatività) e Michela Vittoria Brambilla (per il suo attivismo politico). Rispetto al colore/*mood* più frequentemente associato allo storytelling nell'*animal care* viene citato il beige (colore del cane preferito) e il verde (colore della "natura").

Community digitali sull'animal care e pet influencer: risultati della osservazione netnografica

Due casi importanti di animali *influencer*, tra i più longevi e i più seguiti, sono quelli di Jiffpom, cane di piccola taglia, e del gatto Nal, entrambi con milioni di follower, prodotti e accessori brandizzati, sponsorizzati da marchi internazionali. Su *Instagram* sono presenti innumerevoli altri profili di questo tipo, eterogenei per *follower* e modalità comunicative. I *micro influencer* qui selezionati hanno un seguito di gran lunga inferiore, ma mantengono una vocazione comunicativa di tipo "pubblico" e una strategia comunicativa finalizzata all'incremento della *fan base*. Attraverso la ricerca sono stati individuati alcuni fenomeni tipici che possono aiutare a stabilire una categorizzazione preliminare che può essere una base per futuri approfondimenti::

- *Influencer* animali attivi: profili di animali che sono i soli e unici protagonisti. Non ci sono intrusioni da parte dei proprietari/gestori del profilo, saltuariamente possono comparire in compagnia di altri animali, la parte testuale è spesso in prima persona. Sovente in questi profili viene attuata una certa "antropomorfizzazione", l'animale è umanizzato, antropomorfizzato, reso simile all'uomo;
- *Influencer* animali passivi: simili alla precedente categoria, soprattutto per quanto riguarda il contenuto grafico. La differenza principale sta nella parte testuale, in cui non è l'animale a parlare, ma il padrone. L'antropomorfizzazione è sempre presente ma è meno marcata rispetto al primo gruppo;
- Animali "famosi": sono animali che "riflettono" la fama del padrone, di solito un personaggio molto noto (si pensi a Matilda Ferragni, il cane di Chiara Ferragni). Questi profili spesso sono ibridi, compare spesso il padrone in compagnia del proprio animale, e la fan base è spesso "presa in prestito" da quella del padrone-*star* dell'animale (cosa piuttosto evidente dall'abbondare di commenti riguardanti il padrone piuttosto che l'animale domestico).

Pur con le dovute precisazioni, tutti i profili di pet *influencer* possono rientrare in una o

più di queste categorie. La casistica più frequente è la prima, e i contenuti, incentrati principalmente sulla parte grafica, sono sempre più spesso video di pochi secondi. Saltuariamente si trovano contenuti informativi, ma questo è spesso dovuto a collaborazioni di natura commerciale.

La maggioranza delle immagini campionate è caratterizzata dalla sola presenza dell'animale. L'antropomorfizzazione è riscontrabile in tutti i soggetti di studio, con diverse intensità e peculiarità. Una caratteristica interessante di questi profili è l'attenzione che sono in grado di creare: i post hanno un elevato engagement rate, con molti commenti, spesso di natura piuttosto frivola, o semplicemente di ammirazione. Molti fan condividono con i proprietari di questi animali-star la passione per una determinata specie: questo "specismo" presenta risvolti sia positivi (come la possibilità di comunicare in modo efficace le caratteristiche e le esigenze di una determinata specie in modo approfondito) che negativi (etica, moda, specismo, ecc.). I post di natura commerciale sono percepiti in modo più freddo, come mettono in evidenza alcuni commenti e il ridotto flusso di interazioni che suscitano, anche se non è possibile dare interpretazioni specifiche non essendo stato effettuato uno studio analitico e comparativo tra post branded e non. Non si riscontrano, all'interno del materiale analizzato, commenti negativi sotto i contenuti in questione, ma non vengono neppure ingaggiati discorsi, come invece spesso avviene per post di altra natura.

Rispetto alle *community*, le 5 selezionate presentano similitudini per contenuti e discorsi generati. Analizzandole emergono tendenze in parte tipiche delle piattaforme social, in parte caratteristiche del settore dell'*animal care*: vengono privilegiati contenuti di bassa qualità, realizzati con poco tempo e con poca cura, come fotomontaggi amatoriali, spesso rudimentali, immagini contenenti slogan o emoticon, , abbondano *repost* senza aggiunta di informazioni e argomenti, a ridotto *engagement*. Sovente i temi sono inerenti adozioni o associazioni di assistenza agli animali. La qualità dei contenuti, sia a livello informativo che grafico, è bassa; la moderazione è trascurata, o mancante. I contenuti che generano interazioni testuali sono semplici, e spesso il discorso si limita a una serie di commenti piuttosto autoreferenziali (gradimento, emoticon, ecc.). Discussioni più articolate si riscontrano sotto post che suscitano polemiche, tendenzialmente riguardo tematiche pubbliche, scandali, cronaca, ma spesso con una vistosa mancanza di informazione, di moderazione e di conoscenza approfondita degli argomenti trattati. Un discorso ricorrente, particolarmente emergente, è la tendenza a giustificare i comportamenti dei padroni, anche se arbitrari, in quanto mossi da amore per l'animale. Questa concezione diffusa e non controllata può generare non pochi problemi agli animali stessi, spesso dimostrandosi controproducente (eccesso di cura, obesità, ecc.). Anche in questa circostanza, come emerso dalla precedente rilevazione qualitativa, una ragione appare essere l'antropomorfizzazione, l'equiparazione tra bisogni umani e animali, risultando in un eccesso di cura o di zelo non sempre adeguato per i bisogni peculiari degli animali. In generale si può rilevare infatti una generica mancanza di scientificità (materiale divulgativo non comprovato) nelle nozioni espresse all'interno di questi contesti mediali, come già suggerito dai partecipanti ai focus group.

La rilevazione quantitativa con un campione di petlovers

I 233 rispondenti hanno segnalato che per la cura degli animali si fidano soprattutto dei veterinari e, se hanno bisogno e ne hanno disponibilità, di amici/parenti. Si rivolgono prevalentemente al veterinario, raramente ai social, sporadicamente ad associazioni animaliste no-profit o corsi di formazione. Il rapporto con il mondo online, a volte giudicato superficiale, è caratterizzato da confusione e complessità (cfr. Fig.1)

Figura 1 -Word cloud - Pensando alla tua esperienza, prova a definire con una parola il mondo dell'animal care che trovi online (risposte aperte)

I *petlovers* rispondenti per informarsi sulla cura degli animali preferiscono appunto i consigli del veterinario, ma quando sono online utilizzano prevalentemente *Facebook*, visitano varie pagine e alcuni *influencer* di cui apprezzano soprattutto le competenze (34% dei rispondenti). Vengono segnalati vari profili, particolarmente apprezzati,[2] e molti (oltre l'80%) seguono *influencer* che si occupano di '*animal care*:[3] tratti come professionalità e rispetto per gli animali, competenze educative, affidabilità, gratuità, amore, simpatia sono percepiti positivamente.

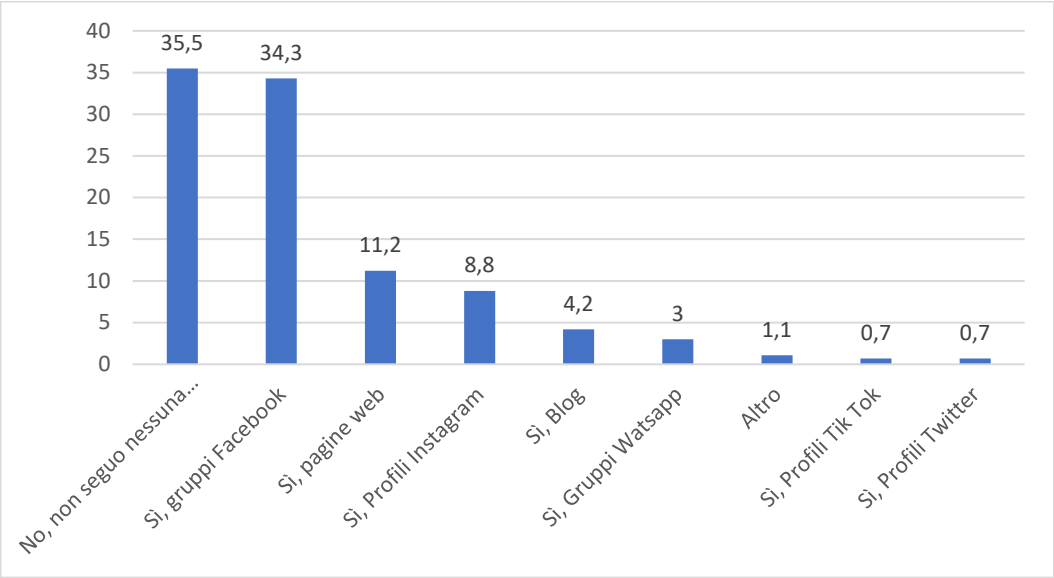

Grafico 1 - Segui alcune pagine web o social network dedicati all'animal care? (valori %, VA 233)

Lo sviluppo di una nuova *community* sui temi dell'*animal care* sarebbe gradito abbastanza-molto dalla maggioranza dei rispondenti (oltre il 50%). Gli *user* vorrebbero trovare soprattutto nuovi consigli sul comportamento animale (24,5%), sui problemi riscontrati con gli animali (19,2%), sull'alimentazione (18,4%), contatti di veterinari per consulti (14,2 %), secondariamente contenuti divertenti/simpatici (6,4%), condivisione di esperienze da parte dei padroni (7,8%), rapporti tra animali diversi o della stessa specie (5,2%) e contenuti ludici (3,1%). Inoltre, il 55% dei casi sarebbero disponibili a partecipare e a condividere informazioni sulla loro esperienza in una nuova *community* dedicata.

Discussione

La presenza online degli animali, specialmente sui *social network*, evidenzia una maggiore attenzione e un aumento delle cure e del denaro investito nella relazione uomo-animali (Negra, 2018), mentre il crescere della dimensione commerciali era già evidente negli aumenti delle vendite di cibo per animali di alta qualità, nella crescita delle industrie di cura e toelettatura degli animali e nella crescita di politiche pubbliche a loro dedicate.

I risultati della ricerca, che esplora l'aumento della visibilità online del fenomeno, hanno messo in luce alcuni elementi inerenti alle caratteristiche dell'animal care online e a come il mondo degli animali domestici viene percepito e rappresentato, cercando di indentificare alcuni indizi di una costruzione simbolica. I contenuti online su questo tema sembrano presentare "miti contingenti" (Morin, 2005) con una caratterizzazione emotiva/affettiva e uno scarso impegno etico nel costruire un legame più rispettoso dei soggetti coinvolti. I partecipanti alla ricerca sottolineano come la relazione non appaia improntata a una vera e propria conoscenza dell'altro da sé, in relazione sia alle dimensioni di somiglianza che diversità tra umano e non-umano. La comunità "affettiva", co-abitata da umani e non-umani, identificata dai partecipanti della ricerca, pur delineando una certa orizzontalità del rapporto,

che assume a volte una declinazione positiva (Karesh, Cook, 2005), trova un nesso con quanto identificato da Ngai (2022) rispetto a una caratterizzazione strumentale ove il rapporto con gli animali, tramite l'affettività, serve all'utente più per costruire una propria identità sociale online. La dimensione relativa alla scientificità (informazioni specialistiche e rispettose delle peculiarità animali) appare invece ancora in costruzione e minoritaria in termini di spazi, con tutti i rischi del caso.

Questa polarizzazione conferma lo scenario evidenziato da Wang, Kao e Yeh (2017) rispetto agli studi sulla rappresentazione degli animali e della loro cura sui media tradizionali, dove le strategie narrative si orientano da un lato verso una comunicazione più emotiva, ma in quel caso anche più complessa. Per quanto riguarda i risultati su quanto presente online, lo spazio per l'approfondimento e la lettura complessa del fenomeno appare invece ancora acerbo, evidenziano possibili margini di miglioramento. I partecipanti ai focus group mettono in luce che i contenuti sugli animali e la loro cura si caratterizzano più per una forte ambiguità che per complessità. L'elemento confusivo è certamente caratterizzante di tutta la società che viviamo (Durand, 1972), ma rispetto al focus della ricerca sembra fare emergere contemporaneamente una doppia identità degli animali che si esprime in prevalenza con due potenzialità diverse: da un lato soggetti quasi umani dall'altro oggetti, ad uso e consumo dell'uomo. La loro esposizione online, orientata verso la generazione di consenso e di contenuti accattivanti, va in questa direzione.

La presenza degli animali online e in contesti mediali interconnessi, secondo i partecipanti al nostro studio è diventata ormai un fenomeno molto legato anche all'*influencer marketing* e diversi dati della ricerca mixed condotta, in coerenza con quanto evidenziato da Maddox (2022), in particolare sugli *influencer*, confermano una visione stereotipizzata degli animali, legata al divertimento/ spensieratezza, ma anche la presenza di contenuti online improntati sulla polemica, lo scandalo e con linguaggi tossici (Paßmann et al., 2022), positivamente correlati all'engagement.

La medialità de-spazializzata e virtuale caratteristica dei nuovi media, rende inoltre difficile focalizzare gli animali nella loro dimensione corporea e identificare una reale interazione tra umano e non umano rendendo ancora più difficile l'investimento etico nel legame. Già Greimas (1983) scriveva che il corpo è il luogo dove troviamo i valori, moderando il rapporto tra soggetto e sé stesso. In questo senso nei social, in particolare quelli visuali, la molteplicità e ricchezza di immagini possono portare facilmente a oggettificare gli animali e agganciarli a stereotipi sociali, pur diversificati a seconda dei diversi contesti mediali in cui sono collocati.

Conclusioni

La ricerca ha permesso di identificare con un approccio grounded alcuni temi delle comunicazioni mediate legati all'*animal care*. In un mondo giudicato molto vasto e confuso, emerge una contrapposizione, non ipotizzata ex ante, tra un modo di comunicare basato sulle competenze di alcuni padroni di animali e degli "esperti"/scienziati, orientato alla

costruzione di una relazione etica e sostenibile con gli animali (si veda l'approccio sopra illustrato del *One Welfare*) e uno più legato agli aspetti emotivi connessi ad una prevalente umanizzazione/antropomorfizzazione dell'animale, che appiattiscono le relazioni intrattenute con loro. I due poli si declinano anche a livello relazionale: su un versante sono rappresentati rapporti più maturi, anche dal punto di vista etico, rispetto alla differenziazione e relazione tra umani e non umani e, dall'altro, relazioni più emotive, declinate nei termini di una orizzontalità che può essere tuttavia associata a significati positivi per il padrone. Per questa polarizzazione la comunicazione online è percepita con un certo sospetto dai *pet lovers* del nostro campione (salvo i profili scelti e connotati come affidabili), se paragonata alle informazioni che si possono trovare nelle interazioni nella vita offline con i professionisti veterinari. La personalità degli animali nei social viene inoltre appiattita da *trend* e *mood* diffusi, legati al *marketing* o alle mode. La maggioranza dei *pet influencer* identificati si caratterizza per la già citata antropomorfizzazione, fenomeno presente e diffuso anche da altri media (Geerdts, 2015), ma che solo nell'attuale contesto mediale è capace di creare forte engagement, ma spesso di natura frivola/emotiva, se non polemica. Nelle *community* online trovano spazio contenuti più informativi e, in particolare su *Facebook*, è facile trovarne alcuni curati e specifici su determinate specie, anche se la maggioranza si caratterizza per bassa qualità e ricorrenti nozioni stereotipate e/o semplicistiche. Assente moderazione e scarsa preparazione delle *fanbase* mettono in luce, comunque, anche un possibile spazio d'azione per nuovi *player* di mercato, come evidenziato dalle risposte del questionario.

Lo studio esplorativo, pur identificando alcune rappresentazioni ricorrenti, presenta certamente alcuni limiti, prima perché non sviluppa un metodo di analisi specifico degli immaginari ma solo una prima disamina di alcuni degli elementi che li strutturano e dall'altra per i problemi di campionamento: i *focus group* in termini di limitata partecipazione e diversificazione dei partecipanti (anche le difficoltà dovute alla pandemia) e l'analisi etnografica per scarsa numerosità di profili (per motivi legati alle risorse della ricerca). Il presente lavoro vuole però offrire una prima utile esplorazione di un settore di forte interesse sociale, tanto inesplorato quanto in crescita, ove si riscontra una mancanza di attenzione specifica della sociologia ed anche l'assenza di una fattiva sinergia tra diverse discipline e professionalità.

Nota biografica

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Note

[1] Il mandato della ricerca esplorativa si è sviluppato in termini di indipendenza dei ricercatori, con la finalità di ottenere una comprensione iniziale delle variabili, dei concetti, delle dinamiche coinvolte, in modo da identificare domande di ricerca specifiche e direzioni future di studio e di sviluppo dei brand del gruppo.

[2] La zampa, Miglior croccantino, Amica veterinaria, Clinica petlife, Le Sfigatte, Protezione Micio, CANC Grugliasco, Clinica Veterinaria Borgo Po, Codine alla riscossa, Amici di poldo, Difesa del cane, Pet residence, Armonie animali, Animal's lover, Amici del Golden Retrievers, Animal angels, Cinofiliaventino, Labrador per la vita, Animali come noi, Beagle italia, Bau cosmesi, Follow the bunny, Scuola per cani, Amici di chicco - psicologia felina, Vita da cane, Dammi una zampa, Amici dei Tabatini, Il mio labrador, Cani per disabili.

[3] Questi i nomi segnalati di pagine *Instagram*: Amica veterinaria, Cristian Costamagna, Giuliano Girelli, Marco Annovi, Cinzia Signoretti, Francesco Facchini, Michela Brambilla, Enrico Rizzi, Amica veterinaria, Pippodeweim, Istruzione cinofila (TikTok), Artibani, Think Dog, Diego Passoni, Dott. Guiggi.

Mediascapes journal 22/2023

Onlife e "salti di specie" nelle nuove ecologie abitative della salute digitale*

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The article explores the effects of digital media on care and health in a new living condition, the so-called *onlife*. Social networks, applications, digital platforms, body sensors, artificial intelligence, big data, and digital therapies are now generating new ecologies of care based on shared information co-produced by human and non-human agencies. These new ecologies of care are associated to a cultural *spillover* into networked, data-driven and trans-organic ways of experiencing illness and disease as well as conceiving health. The reshaping of the traditional care-path that was once featured exclusively within the doctor-patient monad relationship and within the dominion of the hospital/ambulatory setting, but now transformed in favor of a human and non-human ecosystem (social networks, big data, wearables, platforms), is an example of the effects. In social sciences, digital health has been presented as a paradigmatic turn from mechanical medicine into informational medicine and into a new social logic, which "all connect" and require further investigation.
The paper will examine social and medical digital health literature and will present three narratives on the subject: a) associated to a creative destruction of the traditional rituals of care; b) involved in a new data-driven way of considering illness and disease; c) associated to co-producing information and data, which it has been called info and trans-organic care. A comprehensive examination of info and trans-organic care has been carried out in the case of a social network, the Ros1ders. The case has been expounded as a new conformation of social action, no longer a prerogative of the human subject, and no longer presented as a transitive action, which is an externally oriented action. Rather, it is important because it takes place within a web of human and non-human networks (information, data, platforms), mostly as a trans-organic and connective process of care. Digital media is involved in the co-creation of value in the health field, allowing us to move past old dualisms, such as virtual/real, human/artificial, culture/nature, thereby turning toward a new, symbiotic idea of health and a "more than human" social condition.

Key-words: digital-health narratives; info-care; data-driven medicine and health; new rituals of care.

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Dalla comunicazione disseminativa agli ambienti di vita comunicativi

Salute-digitale (*digital-health*) è un concetto ombrello utilizzato a livello multidisciplinare per indicare l'uso dei contemporanei sistemi comunicativi con il fine ultimo di migliorare la salute delle persone (Henwood & Marent, 2019; Lupton, 2014). Con questa interpretazione, dei media digitali (internet, social network, sensori corporali e ambientali, intelligenza artificiale, piattaforme, internet delle cose, telemedicina, ecc.) se ne evidenziano soprattutto le potenzialità tecnologiche, che sono oggi messe a disposizione dei professionisti della cura e dei cittadini-pazienti nella gestione della salute e della malattia. Benché interattivi e oramai sempre più immersivi, in questo caso i media digitali sono ancora considerati sotto il profilo di soli canali di produzione e distribuzione di informazioni, come tecnologia che ha la capacità di potenziare o compensare l'agire umano. È questa una concezione disseminativa della comunicazione, incentrata sulla logica sequenziale della produzione e del consumo di contenuti tra un emittente e un ricevente, tipica dell'immaginario sociologico industriale e positivista (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1948; Shannon & Weaver, 1963).

A ben vedere, però, le riflessioni sul ruolo sociale oggi ricoperto dai media hanno anche saputo allontanarsi dagli approcci incentrati sull'idea di una comunicazione mediale come questione di sola tecnologia trasmissiva. Ne sono un esempio gli studi di Accoto (2022) per il quale

> l'avvento delle tecnologie immersive e saturative di varia forma e senso (dall'internet delle cose alle realtà virtuali e aumentate) hanno cominciato a scardinare una prospettiva primariamente logistica della medialità e della comunicazione (…) una considerazione quest'ultima più strumentale che ambientale della medialità e soprattutto ancora molto umano-centrica (p. 12).

Una interpretazione alternativa è data, infatti, dal considerare le reti digitali e i nuovi media come ambienti di vita comunicativi in costante evoluzione, dove gli utenti generano e scambiano contenuti creando socialità. Le forme comunicative digitali hanno una struttura distribuita di tipo reticolare e permettono a tutti sia di produrre sia di accedere alle informazioni. Inoltre, in quanto interattivi ed immersivi (oltre che connettivi) questi stessi media per essere compresi hanno bisogno di essere abitati.

A tal proposito, Di Felice (2019) definisce le architetture informative digitali come delle forme comunicative dell'abitare reticolari e interattive simili agli ecosistemi. Qua membri umani e non-umani (dati, reti, algoritmi) si associano attraverso dinamiche interdipendenti dando vita a una nuova condizione abitativa: "in quanto tecnologia mediatica i nuovi media cessano di essere "estensione dei sensi" per diventare uno strumento che realizza la socialità e l'abitare" (p. 244).

Come condizione abitativa nuova, i media digitali stanno generando un cambiamento qualitativo sia delle relazioni sociali e comunicative (Pireddu, 2014), sia del nostro modo di pensare e conoscere i fenomeni, sia della nostra sensibilità (Accoto, 2022; Puech, 2018; Henwood & Marent, 2019). Capaci anche di creare nuove forme di azione sociale di tipo

connettivo e trans-organico né totalmente umane né totalmente tecnologiche (Di Felice, 2019).

Se interpretato nell'ottica di un ambiente di vita, anche il più ampio campo della salute-digitale può diventare un interessante terreno di analisi dei cambiamenti sociali che stanno avvenendo nel mondo della cura, nella relazione medico-paziente e nell'organizzazione del sapere scientifico. E questi cambiamenti stanno avvenendo in ragione di nuovi modi di analizzare, interpretare e tracciare i fenomeni nel mondo digitale. Per esempio, in ragione del potere relazionale dei *big data* e dell'intelligenza artificiale. O della capacità di connettere informazioni, persone e territori, come nel caso dell'internet delle cose. Fino alla declinazione di nuove identità per l'organismo umano frutto di complessi sistemi di calcolo digitali che nella contemporanea biologia molecolare si sono polarizzati sulle potenzialità della scienza metagenomica. Qua, l'analisi di enormi quantità di dati sta fornendo una immagine di noi individui nelle vesti di ecosistemi iper-complessi frutto di scambi simbiotici con virus e batteri presenti nel "nostro" organismo in numero addirittura superiore alle cellule umane (Christian, Whitaker & Clay, 2015; Gilbert, Sapp & Tauber, 2012). Oggi è sempre più diffusa l'ipotesi che malattia e salute debbano dipendere dalla natura comunicativa e simpoietica di questo microbioma non solo umano che, prima di ogni cosa, è soprattutto una scoperta tecnologica di avanzato sequenziamento digitale al crocevia fra biologia, medicina e informatica (Leonelli, 2016; Puech, 2008).

Per introdurre il tema dei cambiamenti socio-culturali apportati dai sistemi informativi digitali nel mondo della cura e della salute, inizialmente, si rifletterà sui concetti di *onlife* e di *spillover*. In seguito, si presenterà il dibattito in corso nella letteratura medica e sociologica sulle narrazioni della salute digitale di stampo soprattutto nordamericano. Infine, si presenterà un esempio di nuova ecologia abitativa con il caso dei *Ros1ders*, o gli eroi delle malattie rare, esempio di quanto si connoterà come esperienza di info-cura-datificata, connettiva e trans-organica.

Benché nel mondo del health 2.0 numerose siano le piattaforme con cui dar conto delle dimensioni informative della cura – di cui la più nota a livello internazionale è probabilmente *Patientslikeme* tramite cui le persone scambiano dati e notizie su patologie e cure mentre ricercano supporto emozionale – il caso scelto dei *Ros1ders* arricchisce la riflessione sulle esperienze in rete secondo due diverse prospettive. Se, nella maggior parte dei casi, i pazienti si incontrano on line soprattutto per motivi collegati al contesto della cura, con i *Ros1ders* il coinvolgimento avviene anche per motivi di ricerca scientifica, con uno sguardo al mondo della prevenzione e della salute. Inoltre, questo caso rappresenta un buon esempio di transizione dai media digitali intesi come soli canali distributivi di informazioni (la comunicazione disseminativa) a produttori di nuove condizioni abitative: capaci, cioè, di generare esperienze e socialità trans-organiche (umani, geni, dati, algoritmi, ecc) dove il primo confine che si viene a sfumare è la stessa distinzione tra vita reale e vita virtuale (come suggerito dallo stesso concetto di *onlife*).

Onlife e "salti di specie" nelle nuove ecologie abitative della salute digitale

Onlife. Presentato come parte integrante del più ampio concetto di *infosfera* – lo spazio informativo dell'epoca digitale che coinvolge tutti gli ambiti della vita – *onlife* è il neologismo con cui il filosofo Luciano Floridi descrive la relazione che gli umani intrattengono con il mondo contemporaneo, in cui non ha più "senso chiedersi se si è o non si è connessi alla rete, se si è online o offline" (2015, p. 1) essendo oramai tutti quanti immersi in entrambe le realtà. Tanto che una delle conseguenze dell'*onlife* è lo sbocciare di logiche abitative di tipo connettivo e trans-organico che prospettano la fine della distinzione tra umano, tecnologico e naturale.

In questa nuova condizione abitativa la sfera del virtuale si ibrida con quella del reale in una alterazione reciproca. Cosicché, gli approcci dicotomici al reale – che separano il naturale dall'artificiale, il soggetto dall'oggetto ed anche l'organico dall'inorganico – risultano sempre meno efficaci nel rappresentare il mondo contemporaneo. I processi comunicativi dell'*onlife* – in modo particolare l'internet di tutte le cose (*IofT*) tramite cui è divenuto possibile far dialogare tra loro oggetti diversi – stanno generando nuovi modelli interpretativi del mondo che si snodano attraverso logiche relazionali iper-complesse. E dove è venuta organizzandosi una nuova ecologia informativa che "tutto connette" (Kitchin, 2014; Lovelock, 2019) né organica né inorganica, né naturale né artificiale, né interna né esterna (Di Felice, 2019), simile a un groviglio inscindibile di combinazioni informative, materiali e biologiche (Haraway, 2012). Un esempio è fornito dal fatto che ogni giorno con smartphone e sensori corporali e ambientali co-creiamo dati e informazioni, monitoriamo l'attività fisica, scegliamo cosa mangiare, acquistiamo beni e servizi, veniamo a conoscenza dei livelli di inquinamento atmosferico o dello stato di salute di fiumi e mari.

Bratton (2016) utilizza il concetto di "pila" (*the stack*) per descrivere le dinamiche relazionali della computazione contemporanea che stanno rendendo il mondo programmabile attraverso il codice software. La pila rappresenta l'intrecciarsi di piattaforme digitali che si nutrono di bit e dati e la cui stratificazione in più layer tra loro indipendenti posiziona nella rete e nello spazio oggetti, persone, animali e territori riconfigurando l'intera realtà. Secondo una visione ancora disseminativa della comunicazione, le piattaforme sono configurazioni tecnologiche, economiche e socioculturali indispensabili a gestire l'odierno traffico di dati online (Gillespie, 2010). Ma nella cornice dell'*onlife*, il codice software ci conduce a ripensare queste stesse piattaforme come una nuova condizione abitativa.

A tal proposito, van Dijck, Poell e De Waal (2018) sostengono che le piattaforme non sono da considerarsi né come fenomeni economici né come puri costrutti tecnologici. Per questi autori è preferibile allargare la definizione all'idea di *platform society* in quanto le piattaforme altro non sono che la forma-formante la stessa società. Cosicché, dovendo definire il senso ultimo del termine *platform society* gli autori lo riconducono al fatto che le piattaforme "non riflettono il sociale, bensì esse producono le strutture sociali nelle quali

viviamo" (p. 4). Questa nuova condizione abitativa non è priva di criticità. Ad esempio, esiste il problema etico di quali siano i valori inscritti nelle piattaforme, soprattutto dal momento che queste polarizzano nelle proprie architetture gli interessi di diversi stakeholder sia pubblici che privati. Un caso studio è rappresentato dalla piattaforma *23andMe* che, tramite la spedizione di un campione di saliva, permette ai cittadini di sequenziare il DNA venendo a conoscenza del loro genoma. In questo caso, van Dijck e Poell (2016) si sono interrogati su quali fossero i soggetti che veramente arrivavano a beneficiare del servizio e con quali conflitti di interesse: gli individui, le aziende private, i ricercatori, la società?

Al di là di queste criticità, però, piattaforme, sensori, algoritmi e dati sono oggi attori co-creatori di nuovi scenari relazionali. Per esempio, queste nuove ecologie digitali stanno conducendo a ripensare l'*agency* (chi fa cosa) secondo logiche interpretative reticolari, transpecie e trans-organiche capaci di mettere in crisi la supremazia degli stessi umani (Barabási, Gulbahce & Loscalzo, 2011; Gilbert et al., 2012). Durante la pandemia Covid-19, per esempio, l'autonomia della specie umana è stata sfidata dalla presenza di "altri" abitanti della terra – i virus – che, benché invisibili, hanno però acquisito una loro identità grazie alla possibilità di essere tracciati con i dati, e per questo sorvegliati o digitalmente rappresentati (Tempini, Maturo e Tola, 2022). Dello stesso corona-virus se ne è parlato come di una rete di reti (*virus-assemblage*) (Fox & Alldread, 2020) dal momento che la sua capacità di azione non ha interessato il solo contesto della salute, ma anche quello economico, ambientale, animale e comunicativo. I virus sono entità dalla logica reticolare, interdipendente e interattiva, tipica sia del mondo digitale sia di quello eco-sistemico.

Le tecnologie digitali, oltre ad influenzare il modo in cui ci siamo sempre relazionati con il mondo, stanno anche alterando il nostro modo di sentire, che si sta facendo altrettanto dipendente dai dati. La nostra sensibilità non è più solo percettiva come un tempo, essa è altresì una ex-esperienza capace di unire i dati come modalità di accesso al mondo sensibile e i dati come nuova forma di sensibilità (Accoto, 2017). Non a caso, il sentire contemporaneo è stato definito un sentire trans-organico né esclusivamente umano né esclusivamente tecnologico costruito ecologicamente in un'epoca di connessioni (Di Felice, 2019). Uno studio sull'incorporazione dei dati in donne *self-tracker* (che monitorizzano la propria fertilità con i sensori corporali), ad esempio, ha messo in luce come questa attività sia oramai divenuta parte integrante della loro stessa identità. E come ciò le abbia condotte a percepire il proprio corpo nello scorrere di elementi socio-materiali rappresentati dagli stessi dati e grazie ai quali natura e cultura ritrovano una loro armonia (Zampino, 2019).

I fattori relazionali e sensoriali giocano un ruolo di centrale importanza anche nella cultura medica della cura. Foucault (1963) per primo ha fondato la nascita dell'atto clinico sulla complicità dei sensi del curante: sulla vista e sul tatto del medico al letto del malato. E sempre ai sensi è stata ricondotta la natura multifattoriale della malattia, scomponibile nelle dimensioni dell'*illness*, del *disease* e del *sickness*.[1] È dunque divenuto necessario riflettere su cosa stia accadendo, da un lato, al mondo della medicina e, dall'altro, a quello del paziente, e più in generale all'esperienza della cura, dinanzi alle trasformazioni socio-culturali innescate dalle nuove ecologie digitali, alle quali è possibile ricondurre la nascita

di una nuova condizione abitativa e di una sensibilità nuova. Non a caso, nell'*onlife* si parla di cura come di una esperienza iper-complessa: condivisa cioè con nuove entità non solo umane, regolata a molteplici livelli di esperienza e orientata verso un futuro anticipato (Accoto, 2017). Stessa cosa sta avvenendo nella medicina contemporanea, che nell'*onlife* è divenuta la medicina delle 4p: partecipata, personalizzata, predittiva e preventiva. Interessata alla raccolta di grandi quantità di dati individuali e ambientali attraverso gli ecosistemi digitali, quella delle 4p è una medicina rivolta a generare atteggiamenti di salute proattivi in contesti anche asintomatici (Hood & Friend, 2011).

Spillover. Facendo riferimento a un concetto tipico del mondo biologico e pandemico, si utilizzerà *spillover* (Quammen, 2014) per connotare quel "salto di specie" a cui è stata sottoposta la medicina tradizionale, nonché i più ampi campi della cura e della salute, in conseguenza della diffusione degli attuali ecosistemi digitali. Ciò avverrà soprattutto in relazione al fatto che l'avvento della salute digitale è stato spesso associato ad una alterazione – *a creative destruction* – dei rituali tradizionali della cura e dello *status quo* della disciplina medica (Bashshur, Shannon, Krupinski & Grigsby, 2011; Eysenbach, 2001; Meskó, Drobni, Bényei, Gergely & Györffy, 2017; Topol, 2012). Per portare qualche esempio, gli scenari sulle nuove frontiere della sanità raccontano di avatar medici che risponderanno ai pazienti 24 ore su 24, di organi prodotti con stampati 3D, di un database mondiale al servizio dei pazienti in grado di individuare le cure disponibili e tra queste di sceglierne la più valida, di interventi a distanza con robot comandati da chirurghi che opereranno in continenti distanti da quelli dei pazienti. O, più banalmente, il presente dove il web è oramai divenuto per i cittadini un punto di riferimento per le questioni di salute (Ascione, 2018). In altri termini, il mondo della medicina si trova oggi dinanzi a un "salto di specie" in nuove condizioni abitative generate da ecosistemi digitali che hanno la capacità di sfidare i rituali della cura oltre la monade relazionale del medico e del paziente, delle logiche ospedaliere e del luogo ambulatoriale.

Per illustrare i cambiamenti in atto si farà riferimento al pensiero di autori che in modo più significativo hanno fatto luce sul salto di specie che sta conducendo dalla cura novecentesca – quella in cui il corpo umano è considerato ancora come un insieme di organi tra loro indipendenti da curare con l'impiego di un sapere esperto umano – a quelle che si sono definite come le ecologie connettive della *info-cura-datificata*: ossia i nuovi ambienti di vita interattivi e trans-organici dell'onlife (e perciò non solo umani) che stanno "infettando" il nostro modo di concepire la cura e la salute. Questa transizione è stata altresì descritta con il salto di specie dalla *mechanical medicine* alla *informational medicine* (Nettleton, 2004; Webster, 2002).

Un breve excursus sulla salute-digitale e le sue narrazioni

Henwood e Marent (2019) – nel tentativo di contenere un ampio ventaglio di definizioni e sotto definizioni da attribuire alla salute digitale (che spaziano dalle tecnologie per monitorare la salute delle persone a nuove opportunità per gli utenti fino al potenziamento dei sistemi sanitari) – sono giunti alla conclusione che una buona definizione di salute-

digitale sia anche quella che la collega a un insieme di cambiamenti culturali con cui sfidare i concetti tradizionali di cura e di salute. In linea con questa tendenza, un primo significato di salute digitale riguarda l'avvento di una trasformazione culturale – a *creative destruction* – innescata dalle tecnologie connettive che starebbe conducendo a un nuovo *status quo* per la medicina e per il paziente (Barabási et al., 2011; Eysenbach, 2001; Lupton, 2013; Meskó et al., 2017; Topol, 2012).

Alla digitalizzazione della salute sarebbe, cioè, da ricondurre un processo di democratizzazione della cura dovuto all'accesso e alla produzione di dati e informazioni sia da parte di professionisti sia di pazienti e caregiver principalmente "per il loro *empowerment* (rafforzamento)" (Della Mea, 2001, p. 1). Il protagonismo comunicativo degli utenti-pazienti nel mondo della cura si è realizzato, prima, in concomitanza alla comparsa dei *social media* e, poi, della medicina 2.0. In un primo momento, l'interattività – capacità di cui il Web 2.0 ha dotato gli utenti – è stata considerata come l'elemento comunicativo innovatore e, in un secondo momento, come il fattore democratizzante la cura stessa. Tra i siti di medicina 2.0 maggiormente utilizzati a livello internazionale ci sono *Patientslikeme* e *Hello Health* sulle cui piattaforme gli utenti/pazienti scambiano e creano informazioni e dati sulla propria salute mentre ricercano supporto emozionale. Qua il termine *e-patient* è venuto a connotare quel paziente che – a fronte di informazioni sulle cure oggi maggiormente accessibili rispetto al passato e di un dialogo costante in rete con i compagni di malattia – si percepisce come un soggetto attivo del percorso di cura e, per questo, desideroso di prendere parte al processo decisionale sui propri trattamenti.

Eysenbach (2008) usa il termine di apomediazione per descrivere la perdita di potere di intermediazione resa possibile dai media digitali. Ciò a favore di nuovi modelli di accesso alle informazioni in grado di guidare i consumatori verso notizie e dati attendibili. L'autore ipotizza che in un ambiente apomediato per i consumatori sia indispensabile sentirsi co-creatori di contenuti piuttosto che semplici spettatori. E gli ambienti digitali permettono proprio questo tipo di coinvolgimento chiamando in causa attori sia umani sia tecnologici. Con il digitale, da un lato, si assiste alla presenza di pazienti che si fanno promotori delle loro stesse cure – quando addirittura non si trasformano in *health hero* di gruppi ristretti di *e-patient* – e, dall'altro, alla perdita di potere del medico nei confronti del paziente (Lupton, 2013 e 2016). In alcuni casi, quest'ultimo, in nome delle informazioni ricercate in internet e sui *social media*, può addirittura giungere a relegare il medico al ruolo di guida, o di *health influencer*, nel viaggio verso la guarigione (Mort & Smith, 2009).

Sul versante degli studi culturali sulla comunicazione, però, è stato più volte messo in luce come i processi di democratizzazione della salute non sempre siano realizzabili. A fronte di disparità sociali nell'uso della rete da parte dei gruppi più vulnerabili, come gli anziani o quanti non godono di una buona alfabetizzazione sanitaria, la digitalizzazione può addirittura inibire l'inclusione sociale e l'*empowerment* personale (Borg, Boulet, Smith & Bragge, 2019; Kim, 2018). Inoltre, come dimostrato da uno studio sui social media e i livelli di fiducia percepiti dai cittadini nei confronti delle istituzioni e del sapere esperto degli scienziati durante la pandemia da Covid-19, in alcuni casi il web può dare vita a fenomeni comunicativi inediti e contrastanti. A tal proposito, van Dijck e Alinejad (2020) hanno verificato che social media e piattaforme digitali benchè capaci di alterare la fruizione

istituzionale delle informazioni (da un emittente a un ricevente) a favore di logiche comunicative *networked* – ad esempio con la partecipazione di persone non esperte ai dibattiti scientifici –, in realtà alla fine questi canali durante la pandemia da Covid-19 sono anche risultati di aiuto a policy maker e scienziati ad innalzare la fiducia dei cittadini nelle istituzioni stesse.

Tornando al dibattito sui significati della salute-digitale nella letteratura medica, qua numerose sono invece le narrazioni che collegano l'avvento della salute digitale a nuovi modi di intendere e conoscere i fenomeni naturali, di ibridare il sociale e di riconfigurare l'identità umana, venendo anche a rappresentare un punto di riferimento per le stesse considerazioni sociologiche.

Topol (2012) – Direttore dello *Scripps Research Translational Institute* – ha associato la nascita della salute digitale a un processo di decostruzione degli assunti di base della medicina e della cura attirando l'attenzione sul ruolo oggi ricoperto dai *big data* nel contesto della ricerca medica. L'incontro tra il mondo della biologia e i meccanismi di estrazione dei dati è per questo autore il fatto degno di nota del processo di digitalizzazione della salute. Ed è anche ciò che lo conduce ad affermare che

> il prossimo passo nella ricerca medica non avverrà in laboratorio, ma nascerà da un processo di estrazione dei dati. La convergenza delle tecnologie digitali con la biologia è probabilmente la più grande innovazione nel campo della salute digitale e il suo significato principale (p. 13).

Una innovazione su tutte è fornita dai progressi che stanno avvenendo nel campo della metagenomica, i cui risultati sono oggi indissociabili dagli strumenti di ricerca digitali come i big data, gli algoritmi e l'intelligenza artificiale (Puech, 2008). La metagenomica sta facendo luce sulla natura transorganica del corpo umano con la scoperta di alcune delle funzioni del microbioma intestinale che, essendo composto da una quantità infinita di batteri e virus, sta aprendo la strada a una nuova idea di salute simbiotica, a cui si deve lo sfiorire dei confini tra il mondo esterno e quello interno a noi, tra ciò che è umano e ciò che non lo è.

In *Deep Medicine*, è sempre Topol (2019) a riflettere sulla salute digitale soffermandosi sull'impatto che in futuro l'intelligenza artificiale eserciterà sulla cura e sul benessere delle persone. In questo caso, l'autore riconduce l'elemento di novità alla nascita di una logica multi-scalare con cui si verranno a misurare i cosiddetti fenomeni "naturali". L'intelligenza artificiale, consentendo di studiare il corpo umano a diversi livelli di scala, permetterà di assemblare il biologico con il sociale e con il digitale e di superare quel pensiero occidentale che da sempre separa la cultura dalla natura e dalla tecnologia, così come di transitare da contesti micro a contesti macro sociali. Tutto ciò conduce nuovamente all'idea di una natura trans-organica del mondo impensabile nella modernità analogica dalla logica binaria (Latour, 2005).

Inoltre, per Topol la conoscenza medica del futuro sarà di tipo fenotipico[2] e avverrà attraverso processi di *deep learning* che rispetto al passato consentiranno di formulare diagnosi sempre più accurate, complesse e personalizzate. L'intelligenza artificiale trasformerà la medicina in una pratica predittiva e consoliderà l'idea di una salute

dipendente da fattori socio-genetico-molecolari osservabili sempre più in profondità, proprio grazie alla digitalizzazione: ciò che Topol definisce *deep-medicine*. Un esempio, a tal riguardo, proviene dal sistema sanitario anglosassone che ha sperimentato l'applicazione per smartphone – "*Babylon or the GP at your hand"* – messa a punto con l'ausilio della intelligenza artificiale e di big data estratti da numerose comunità di cura. L'applicazione è capace di ragionare su 100 miliardi di combinazioni di malattie e fattori di rischio, tanto che i medici di *Babylon* formulano diagnosi e forniscono consigli su sintomi e cure farmacologiche utilizzando proprio questa rete di dati.
Sonnier (2017) ha individuato invece il punto di svolta della salute digitale nell'incontro tra le nuove architetture informative digitali, le scoperte scientifiche sul genoma e le condizioni di vita socio-ambientali: "la salute digitale prende le mosse dalla convergenza della rivoluzione digitale e del genoma con la salute, la vita e la società" (p. 8). Per questo autore, il potere della salute digitale è racchiuso nella capacità che questa ha di fare luce sui legami esistenti tra i dati genetici e la natura informazionale della vita: non a caso il codice genetico delle cellule è stato sintetizzato a partire dal codice digitale di un computer. Tutto ciò conduce Sonnier a considerare il DNA come una struttura comunicativa avente natura digitale e a connotare la rivoluzione digitale come una rivoluzione genomica, oltre che genetica, in quanto con la prima si intendono "le interazioni dei geni (genoma) tra loro e con l'ambiente di vita della persona in un cambiamento costante" (p. 14). La salute digitale di Sonnier pone al centro della riflessione l'idea che la genomica sia un contesto di studio ibrido: sviluppatosi dall'incontro tra i codici informativi, i media digitali, l'ambiente e la genetica. Il DNA stesso, lontano dall'essere informazione di tipo analogico, è piuttosto informazione digitale. E lo è soprattutto da quando lo si è osservato avere una natura tridimensionale connessa ad una fitta trama di relazioni e regolazioni a livello genetico ed epigenetico e, dunque, anche ambientale (Pievani, 2019).

Nell'*onlife*, cura e salute sono sempre più rappresentabili come ecosistemi complessi organizzati attorno a social network di pazienti esperti e non, a piattaforme digitali, a applicazioni per smartphone, a *devices* corporali e ambientali, ma anche a robot, a intelligenze artificiali e a terapie digitali. Oggi, ad esempio, sempre più diffusi sono i sensori corporali produttori di dati con cui monitorare il benessere fisico e psichico. Il caso più eclatante è rappresentato dal ben noto *self-quantified-movement* nato a San Francisco nel 2007 i cui rappresentanti fanno uso dell'auto-tracciamento dei parametri vitali, che può essere assunto a movimento esempio di strategia preventiva della salute. L'auto-conoscenza digitale è infatti per questo movimento la premessa implicita alle pratiche di auto-miglioramento del proprio stato di benessere. Deborah Lupton (2020) ha descritto con *data-selves* l'io ibrido (biologico e digitale) di quanti utilizzano i sensori corporali per tracciare le attività quotidiane e il proprio stato di salute. Non diversamente, Di Felice (2019) ha parlato dell'individuo contemporaneo come di un *info-viduo*: ossia come l'insieme indissociabile della persona fisica e di quella digitale di cui la prima organica e la seconda composta da dati e algoritmi.

Riprendendo l'idea dell'*info-viduo*, si è denominato l'ecosistema digitale della cura (e della salute) come *info-cura-datificata* in quanto, oggi, l'esperienza del paziente si sta

sempre più trasformando in una condizione abitativa di tipo informativo-collaborativo con altre entità umane e non-umane (tecnologie, informazioni, dati, cellule, virus, batteri) ben oltre, dunque, il faccia a faccia con gli specialisti nel *setting* spaziale ambulatoriale o ospedaliero.

L'info-cura digitale e i super-eroi della ricerca medica: il caso dei Ros1ders

Alle narrazioni sulla salute-digitale in cui più evidente è il significato di effetto trasformativo dei rituali tradizionali della cura e della medicina e, perciò, di quanto si è denominato come nuovo ecosistema abitativo trans-organico e co-prodotto della salute, è possibile ricondurre il caso-studio dei *Ros1ders*.

Negli Stati Uniti pazienti affetti da una rara mutazione da cui dipende un particolare tipo di tumore del polmone – la *Ros1* – si sono fatti promotori della prima sperimentazione clinica condotta attraverso un network di donatori di campioni di tessuto, che grazie ai social media si è diffusa in tutto il mondo. Il gruppo di pazienti-sperimentatori si è dato il nome di *Ros1ders,* ma si pronuncia *Ross-Wonders* in onore del disegnatore di super eroi, e negli Stati Uniti sono considerati i super-eroi della ricerca e della cura. Loro compito, infatti, è sfidare le gerarchie istituzionalizzate della ricerca medica, rendendosi protagonisti e promotori della propria salute e attirando risorse economiche e nuovo sapere esperto a vantaggio della propria causa.

Vista la fetta limitata di pazienti affetti dalla mutazione Ros1 – negli Stati Uniti il 2% della popolazione – la medicina e la farmacologia ufficiale sono sempre state in difficoltà ad avviare sperimentazioni con cui mettere a punto terapie efficaci a contrastare questo tipo di tumore polmonare. Cosicché tre donne americane affette da questa mutazione hanno deciso di affidarsi alla rete e di fare rete per creare un social network con cui promuovere la ricerca scientifica in questo settore. I *Ros1ders* hanno un sito internet e una pagina *Facebook* di cui fanno parte anche pazienti italiani.

Tra le motivazioni per le quali il mondo scientifico si è sempre dimostrato scarsamente interessato a fare ricerca in questo settore ci sono le difficoltà nel rintracciare e nel raccogliere campioni di tessuto da analizzare. Ma questa è anche la ragione per cui le fondatrici del network si sono rivolte ai social media: ossia ad ambienti di vita connettivi con cui associare persone nel mondo che, oltre ad essere affette da questa mutazione e patologia, fossero anche disposte a fornire campioni di tessuto da impiegare nella ricerca. Una volta trovati i partecipanti, infatti, su questa patologia è stato stabilito un protocollo di ricerca condiviso.

È probabilmente la prima volta che pazienti affetti da una malattia rara decidono di avviare un protocollo di ricerca i cui materiali possono essere valutati e studiati da scienziati di tutto il mondo, e tutto ciò attraverso la rete. D'altronde, oggi la condivisione del sapere passa anche attraverso la condivisione dei dati: pazienti, medici e ricercatori "usano" il network dei *Ros1ders* per ottenere informazioni su questa mutazione genetica,

per richiedere biopsie e tessuti da analizzare o per confrontarsi sull'efficacia dei farmaci. I *Ros1ders* dichiarano di aver dato vita a questo network per condividere le conoscenze su questa patologia rara, per costruire una comunità globale utile ad accelerare la ricerca scientifica, per offrire ai portatori di questa mutazione genetica nuove opportunità di accesso ai trattamenti e, infine, per migliorare i risultati della ricerca scientifica (https://www.facebook/theros1ders.org). D'altronde, nelle ecologie trans-organiche della info-cura, in virtù di nuove condizioni abitative digitalizzate, il cosiddetto *digitally engaged patient* riesce a rendersi promotore della propria salute ben oltre la scienza ufficiale e le logiche sanitarie istituzionali (Lupton, 2013).

Nelle ecologie dell'*onlife*, da un lato, i *Ros1ders* raccolgono informazioni, dati e materiale biologico rendendosi co-produttori della stessa ricerca scientifica. Dall'altro, questo inedito groviglio abitativo – fatto di persone, dati, geni e tessuti informatizzati – altera la scena del laboratorio territoriale arricchendolo di nuovi strumenti di ricerca, anche con la collaborazione degli scienziati (Martínez-Martínez, Roldán-Álvarez, Mártin & Hoppe, 2023). I *Ros1ders* sono un esempio di scienza alla portata dei cittadini esperti e non i quali – collezionando, analizzando e producendo dati – hanno fatto della salute-digitale un ambiente di vita utile allo svolgimento della propria missione di cura e ricerca (Franzoni & Sauermann, 2013). In questo senso, i *Ros1ders* rappresentano un esempio anche di ricerca scientifica partecipata e *open source* meglio conosciuta come *crowd-science* o *citizen-science*: la scienza di tutti dove le ricerche sono condotte con la partecipazione della popolazione. E dove algoritmi, piattaforme digitali e social network agiscono come altrettanti attori dello stesso ecosistema di cura (Franzoni, Poetz & Sauermann, 2022). L'associazione europea per la *citizen-science* (*ECSA*) parla di quest'ultima come di un terreno di ricerca sperimentale capace di adottare modelli alternativi di democrazia e di produzione di conoscenza pubblica (https://www.ecsa.eu).

In definitiva, i *Ros1ders* mettono in pratica un atto comunicativo che si potrebbe definire trans-organico (ossia non solo sociale) e connettivo. Tale poiché avviene in rete con l'interazione di informazioni, algoritmi, dati e persone (Petersen, Schermuly & Anderson, 2019). L'atto sociale è stato qua denominato atto connettivo in quanto prendendo forma in rete, invece che qualificarsi per il suo aspetto transitivo (ossia verso l'esterno), si presenta piuttosto come un atto capace di far co-operare enti diversi – umani e non-umani – e di ibridare l'organico con il non-organico (Di Felice, 2019; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Da questa prospettiva, l'agire in rete non è più espressione di un unico soggetto-attore, ma diviene una azione multi-specie, trans-organica e connettiva né interna né esterna, né naturale né artificiale (Di Felice, 2019).

L'*onlife* sta dando vita a nuove forme di interazione con i dati, con gli umani e i non-umani che consentono "di guardare al nostro corpo come a una co-creazione di frammenti eterogenei socio-organici e tecnologici" (Haraway, 2012, p. 15). I media digitali ci stanno offrendo nuovi modi di monitorare, misurare e visualizzare il corpo e il benessere quotidiano, incoraggiando sia la formazione di nuove parentele info-organiche sia quella di atti comunicativi di tipo connettivo e partecipativo. Per dirla con Donna Haraway, nell'*onlife* è divenuto possibile dare visibilità al fatto che la nostra identità è sempre stata una

companion species: ossia un insieme simbiotico di entità organiche (umane e non-umane come geni, virus, batteri) e inorganiche (come dati, informazioni e algoritmi).

Riflessioni conclusive: quale *spillover*?

Il processo di digitalizzazione – che caratterizza il nostro quotidiano con codici, sensori e algoritmi se inteso come nuova condizione abitativa e come nuova architettura ecologica del sapere – sta qualitativamente trasformando la tipologia del "nostro sociale" facendo dell'attualità un contesto di vita trans-organico. Come dimostrato dal caso presentato, oggi viene ad essere ripensata la natura stessa dell'atto sociale, che da esperienza transitiva sta assumendo caratteristiche sempre più connettive, reticolari e più-che-umane.

Allo stesso modo, in quella che è stata definita come l'*onlife* – o l'epoca degli ibridi digitali – anche il percorso di cura del paziente si presenta sotto forma di una nuova dimensione abitativa di tipo trans-organico. Ossia, un percorso di collaborazione con entità organiche ed inorganiche – come dati e algoritmi – per mezzo del quale vengono a sfumarsi molti dei dualismi tipici della modernità: come la distinzione tra naturale e artificiale, tra umano e non-umano, ecc.

Con la complicità dei social network e dell'internet di tutte le cose stanno emergendo nuove possibilità comunicative che si stanno estendendo a qualsiasi entità capace di produrre informazioni. Sui dati estratti dalle tecnologie indossabili – come i sensori corporali che permettono di raccogliere informazioni biometriche sia individuali (la temperatura, il battito cardiaco, i livelli di glucosio nel sangue) sia ambientali (la qualità dell'aria, l'andamento del traffico) – si stanno anche modellando buona parte delle pratiche di *governance* urbane contemporanee.

Con quella che è stata definita la *info-cura-datificata* si stanno, inoltre, generando esperienze di diagnosi condivise e interattive. Qua l'atto medico inizia a perdere la propria centralità arrivando a costituirsi in funzione di ecosistemi di pazienti, di caregiver, di dati, di algoritmi, di informazioni: in altri termini, in funzione dell'iper-complessità degli ambienti di vita digitali fatti di applicazioni, piattaforme, sensori, ecc. Queste nuove ecologie della cura altro non sono che *agencies* (chi fa cosa) distribuite, non solo umane e non solo organiche, che oggi rappresentano una sfida alla tradizionale monade terapeutica del medico e del paziente così come ai percorsi di salute istituzionalizzati. Se non addirittura all'esclusività e alla superiorità dell'intelligenza umana come nel caso dell'intelligenza virtuale applicata alla diagnostica.

Le stesse narrazioni sulla salute digitale sostengono l'idea di una identità umana trans-organica e informativa che, nell'ottica dell'*onlife*, è rappresentata dall'insieme indissociabile della persona fisica e di quella digitale e da un salto di specie (*spillover*) in quelle che sono state definite le nuove ecologie abitative della info-cura datificata. Stiamo transitando da una concezione di cura di tipo meccanicistico (la visione ospedaliera novecentesca della cura incentrata su sintomi ed organi) ad una info-cura reticolare guidata dai dati che agisce anche in contesti a-sintomatici, come nel caso del monitoraggio dei parametri vitali attraverso i sensori corporali (o ambientali).

Agli ecosistemi abitativi della info-cura trans-organica è possibile associare una nuova idea di medicina che sta organizzando il proprio sapere attorno alle potenzialità dei *big data* e del *deep learning*, e che fa uso di logiche di cura connettive e multi-scalari. Si tratta della *deep-medicine* – o *system medicine* – dove la patologia non è più studiata secondo una logica organo-centrica, ma in funzione di insiemi complessi di reti e di *cluster*. Inoltre, la info-cura, dal momento che produce dati individuali anche in assenza di sintomi, è altresì da considerarsi come una esperienza preventiva, predittiva e personalizzata utile a monitorare non solo l'evoluzione delle malattie, ma anche la qualità ambientale e gli stili di vita delle persone: indispensabile, dunque, alle odierne politiche di prevenzione sanitaria. La digitalizzazione sta rendendo sempre più evidente il rapporto ecologico esistente fra il mondo macroscopico e quello microscopico (e viceversa) tantoché con la salute-digitale sta prendendo piede una nuova idea di salute di tipo reticolare e simbiotico non più solo umano-centrica.

A differenza delle interpretazioni *networked* che si risolvono in un assemblaggio di attori umani e non-umani tra loro connessi, l'*onlife* – superando l'ottica strumentale e disseminativa della comunicazione (quella dell'estensione dei sensi umani) – ripensa la digitalizzazione come una inedita condizione abitativa. Ossia, come una nuova ecologia simbiotica di umani, di dati, di algoritmi, di specie organiche che, ibridandosi a vicenda, alterano il "nostro" stesso vivere in una dimensione né organica né inorganica, né naturale né artificiale, né interna né esterna ben oltre le interpretazioni dicotomiche tipiche del pensiero moderno occidentale.

Nota biografica

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Note

[1] Il vissuto della malattia dal punto di vista del paziente, della scienza e dal punto di vista della società.

[2] Il complesso delle caratteristiche di un organismo che risultano dall'interazione fra la sua costituzione genetica e l'ambiente.

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The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of social media content, according to young people*

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The cultural industries have been greatly affected by the emergence of online user-generated content, often produced by non-professionals. A large amount of literature has been produced in the last two decades on the positive or negative role of such Web 2.0 production. The aim of this paper is to shed light on a "user-generated critique" of online cultural production by providing a qualitative analysis based on 225 young people's evaluations of Web 2.0 content. According to such a sample, there are several good and bad aspects of UGC, therefore there is also a "grey zone" of digital productions, such as content that is liked "despite" being considered awful.The paper aims to explore such positive, negative and grey dimensions of UGC and to stimulate new questions about the cultural appropriation of Web 2.0 content by audiences.

Keywords: cultural industries, user-generated content, social media critics, social media consumption

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The paper aims to share a reflection on the “Web 2.0” cultural industry, trying to analyze, through an empirical analysis of the reflections of 225 students, some of the cultural levers that animate young people’s media tastes and consumption.

Cultural production practices have undergone radical changes in recent decades due to the emergence of platforms for user-generated content (UGC), the transformation of cultural disintermediation models, and related changes in fruition practices (Albarran 2013). An extensive academic literature has accumulated on these issues, highlighting diverse and often conflicting positions (Burgess & Green, 2009; Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2013; Eichhorn, 2022).

Especially in the first phase of the emergence of Web 2.0, user-generated production provoked great enthusiasm, linked to the possibility of democratizing the processes of the cultural industry. Henry Jenkins (2006) sees in this dynamic the definitive emergence of a participatory culture, based on the passions and interests of people who are now able to express and share their positions, and definitively hybridize consumption and production practices within transmedia experiences. Other scholars have hypothesized that digital media may have an inherent egalitarian potential in their ability to foster a sharing economy and for many people to emerge and flourish in their capacities for self-expression (Benkler, 2006; Lessig 2008; Bruns 2008) and civic participation (Bennet, 2008), even in contexts of socio-cultural inequality and disadvantage (Kaskazi & Kitzie, 2023).

However, these enthusiastic views were quickly joined by more critical positions and analyses that highlighted problematic aspects related to both the processes of user-generated production, both its dissemination and, ultimately, the intrinsic quality of the products themselves.

Thus, a number of scholars (Peterson 2008; Morozov, 2014; Keen 2009; Lanier, 2010; Lovink, 2012, 2016), taking up in different ways the cultural tradition of the Frankfurt School, have brought forward a critical approach to Web 2.0 and social media, pointing out how they have generated new dynamics of degradation of the cultural product, the result of uncontrolled disintermediation, unbridled protagonism and obsessive pursuit of clicks and popularity.

Moreover, other scholars have pointed to the criticalities and distortions in the perception of online production work: van Dijck (2009), for example, highlights how, behind the rhetoric of great democratic participation in networked production, there is instead a much more asymmetrical dynamic in which a few creators who are able to achieve visibility and success are flanked by a very large majority of “lurkers”, users who maintain a role of spectator or low interactivity and who support the business models and profits of the platforms that host these contents. Fuchs (2021), on the other hand, from a neo-Marxist theoretical perspective, emphasizes the capitalist exploitation aspects of the labor of so-called prosumers. In this vein, Duffy (2015) conducts an empirical investigation of online creators, analyzing how myths such as amateur production, creative autonomy, and collaboration serve to manage the hierarchical, market-oriented, quantifiable, and self-promotional processes peculiar to the blogosphere and Web 2.0.

Finally, the logic of disintermediation is also problematized. Indeed, it is pointed out that the emergence of these participatory environments, far from erasing the presence and

arbitrary role of cultural intermediaries, has only transformed them through opaque processes of "platformization" (Gillespie 2018). Through the logics of platforms, the supposed democratization of the process of evaluating cultural products is no longer reserved for a minority of human intermediaries (publishers, film producers, record companies, art critics, etc.), but codified through the definition of algorithmic criteria that determine the value of a product, in essence establishing a more or less violent and inescapable equation of quality=popularity (Bruns 2008).

As this brief theoretical reconstruction suggests, Web 2.0 cultural production has attracted lively interest in cultural and academic reflection. However, despite the extensive debate on the topic, research often settles for theoretical approaches that either ignore the empirical interpellation of audiences or rely on a representation of audiences that is quantitatively constructed through social media's own metrics on the most popular content or creators.

Building on these reflections, and seeking to go beyond what the platforms' metrics decry as the "taste" of social users, the approach proposed in the paper aims to return an assessment of the Web 2.0 culture industry "from the inside", that is, through the gaze of the core audiences themselves on such products.

The underlying questions are:

- What are the criteria young people use to judge the quality of online user-generated content?
- Based on these criteria, what content do young people consider useful for their existential and educational journey, and what content do they consider harmful?

Methodology

The work is based on an empirical, qualitative analysis of a sample of 56 reports produced by 225 students enrolled in the second year of the Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies in Turin. The students were divided into groups that worked together for two weeks until the final delivery. Each group was formed voluntarily, by the students themselves: the sample can therefore be defined as one of convenience and self-selected.

The work consisted of analyzing a positive and a negative case of online user-generated content. The analyses were part of an exercise for which the students had been prepared by a theoretical lecture introducing them to the topic of the cultural industry and its developments in the digital context. The choice was therefore made to use these short group reports as action research tools: indeed, the long and sedimented format of the auto-ethnographic report met the dual objective of activating meta-reflective processes while collecting data (Chang 2016). The action research nature of the work also stems from the pedagogical context in which the analysis was embedded: indeed, the purpose of the report production was to stimulate specific media literacy skills in the students, especially those related to the critical analysis of media products (Kellner & Share, 2007). In this sense, the group work, structured in stages (individual research of examples, sharing and comparison

of examples in the group, discussion and drafting of a short report able to summarize the different positions expressed, presentation and discussion in class), had the concrete educational goal of stimulating a practical impact on the students, leading them to exercise, even in their future media consumption, greater skills of analysis, cultural interpretation and criticism of the media products they enjoy.

Far from imposing a normative and moralistic view of one's own online consumption, the auto-ethnographic work aimed to construct a space in which students could explore their pleasure and emotional investment in media and identify its lights and shadows (Buckingham, 2003).

In addition to the theoretical contextualization of the culture industry, the preparatory work also involved field delimitation and a more specific definition of what is meant by user-generated content, identifying some interpretive boundaries between professional and non-professional content within the social production landscape. As the literature itself acknowledges, the line between amateur and professional online production is becoming increasingly blurred. Cunningham and Craig (2021) define online creators, alternately called influencers, Instagrammers, YouTubers, livestreamers, gamers, as those cultural entrepreneurs who receive some form of remuneration from social platforms. However, the criterion of remuneration cannot yet be considered a distinguishing feature in the definition of professional users. In fact, there are many creators who, although they did not start out as professional producers, have reached such a level of consolidation and audience that their online activity is remunerative, in many cases more so than that of a professional journalist, a professional musician in an orchestra, a television scriptwriter, or any other professional belonging to the "classic" fields of the cultural industry.

Similarly, the distinction made by Bordieu, Boschetti and Bottaro (2005) between small-scale producers, who according to the scholars are characterized by low economic capital but greater autonomy and creative independence, and large-scale producers, who instead have economic capital but are forced to use it for a production oriented and directed by market logics, cannot be useful. In fact, although online participatory environments allow users to contribute and start according to small-scale logics-exemplified by the famous "garages" that are assumed to be the internships of very young content creators on Youtube, the supposed "creative independence" and autonomy from market logics that would be ascribed to this category is less self-evident: instead, in many cases, although starting from a small scale, online creators know and deal with market logics directly or indirectly, having introjected them in the form of metrics and algorithmic feedback on their work, coming from the platforms themselves (Abidin, 2018).

Even in the synthesis necessarily proposed here, it is clear that in defining a dividing line between professional and non-professional content producers, it is not possible to use the criterion of remuneration and profit to distinguish the two categories, nor that of creative autonomy from the logic of the market. The criterion offered to the students was therefore to reflect on the organizational nature of creative practice, using a definition provided by the OCSE (2007), which defines User Generated Content (UGC) as

- content published on the Internet

- that reflects some creative effort, and
- Created outside of professional routines.

As a useful tool to distinguish professional from non-professional productions, the idea has therefore been proposed to identify whether content producers have framed their production within an industrial-type organizational structure, as “wage earners”, or have organized their production and eventual revenue model through a direct relationship with digital platforms. Through this categorization, “non-professional online producers” were defined as both amateur-type creators who share content on a daily basis for reasons of identity, passion, or the development of social ties (with little or no economic return), and creators who produce content to achieve economic goals and who seek to professionalize and monetize their practice.

Invited to reflect on this stimulus, students submitted a very diverse set of examples for collective reflection. These examples were then collected in the course's Moodle platform and later analyzed using the method of content analysis.

Content analysis is an empirical-systematic method used to analyze audio, textual, and visual data (Krippendorff, 2004). The techniques of content analysis, as summarized by Tipaldo (2007), are many, depending on the different ways in which the process of breaking down and defining units of classification is implemented: they range from those of a more quantitative type, in which it is possible to identify classification units clearly and unambiguously grammatically (they include, for example, the traditional content analysis developed in the United States since the 1930s, but also co-occurrence analysis or lexicometric analysis), to more qualitative approaches, in which it is not possible to isolate the signifying units at the linguistic level (as, for example, within images), but proceed by identifying topoi or nodes through which to classify the empirical material. This second approach was more useful for the purposes of this research, which interrogated materials of both textual and visual nature.

The content was coded and analyzed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo 13, which is particularly effective in its flexibility of use for tagging and categorizing even audiovisual materials and for the possibility of crossing mixed techniques of analysis (manual coding with the search for specific lexical occurrences or the most frequently used terms, for example).

The main nodes of categorization were:

- type of content;
- values associated with the content;
- values associated with the publisher;
- values associated with potential recipients;
- style of the content;
- function of the content.

From the analysis, despite the heterogeneity of the corpus, some common lines of cultural interpretation of user-generated products emerged, which will be briefly presented in the following paragraphs.

The beauty of User Generated Content, according to young people

From the categorization of the 56 positive examples suggested by the children, three main types of content can be identified:

- Content that provides information, cultural and scientific popularization;
- Content that promotes social values related to women's empowerment, minority rights, and environmental advocacy;
- Pages and profiles of users who, with their testimonies and experiences, broaden the audience's horizons by proposing new topics, places and points of view.

The following sections attempt to elaborate on the characteristics of the different types.

Cultural information and dissemination content

Among the positive examples most often cited by the sample are user-generated online information spaces such as *Will-ita*. Here is one group's description of this profile:

> Will_ita is an active community on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, LinkedIn and YouTube. It has about 1.5 million followers on Mark Zuckerberg's social media. To describe the content Will brings to his profiles, we can use the community's own slogan: "A space for the world's curious. To understand what's around us (and look good at dinner). On the official pages, there are also pills, video presentations, carousels, etc. that bring clarity to a wide variety of topics.

Other often-cited examples in this direction are creators who act as popularizers on scientific, historical, or philosophical topics. The role of these online actors is to provide channels of information and updates that are perceived as reliable and entertaining, enabling informal forms of learning in the interstices of everyday social entertainment (Taddeo 2023a).

Content that promotes social values

A second category of content that young people find constructive and useful is that which advocates and promotes social issues and causes.

For example, creators who promote issues such as environmental protection, minority rights, respect for one's own body and its differences, and gender issues are particularly popular.

As an example, the group cites the *Freeda* collective:

> Freeda stands for women's freedom of expression; its content is meant to inspire women of all generations. (...) On a social level, it promotes the integration of women, since it publishes content and advice that can help those who, at any given time, feel inferior to others with respect to a particularity or issue.

Young people therefore appreciate creators who are strongly linked to social causes, a trend that is also confirmed by the largest studies on cultural trends in the social sphere (Meta 2022). Their trust and affection also concern creators who turn social causes into a blatant business lever, showing how the sphere of values and the sphere of consumption are becoming increasingly intertwined in the new generations.

Content to "broaden horizons" and explore

Finally, a third category may refer to those creators who allow users to step outside their usual interpretive practices to learn about new contexts, viewpoints, or curiosities of the world. These creators stimulate the aspirational sides of young people, projecting them towards the idea of continuous growth and pushing them to explore the world by leaving the local dimension and traveling, at least online, to new horizons. Thus, for example, the reference, among positive examples, to a creator like *Emanuele Malloru*:

> Emanuele Malloru, a young videomaker, recently established himself on YouTube for his motivational content. In this video, together with Alex Bellini (extreme explorer), he navigated 300 kilometers down the Po River to its delta in a raft made entirely of discarded materials. The aim: to look at what surrounds us from a different perspective (in particular the role of rivers), to rediscover the manual “know-how”, the ability to reinvent, to give a second chance to those things that on the surface seem to be just “waste.

The ugliness of User Generated Content, according to young people

On the other hand, examples of content that the sample judged to be negative and likely to lower the general cultural level include:

- profiles of characters that promote harmful lifestyles through the display of vulgarity;
- content such as memes, gifs, stickers that promote the uninhibited use of irony to mock and attack others;
- fake news pages and sites that may promote a culture of misinformation;
- sites that encourage unbridled competition, from seemingly harmless challenges, to pro-ana and pro-mia sites that encourage harmful eating behaviors, to body advice sites that promote an obsessive focus on appearance.

Below are examples of each of these categories.

The trash that anesthetizes

The case of the influencer *Er Faina* was cited by several groups as an example of degrading content on social media. Boys and girls cited this creator for different reasons, but which can be united by the theme of vulgarity and decidedly politically uncorrect comedy. The most harmful element of this character, according to the youngsters, is his ability to penetrate public opinion through crude and immediate comedy, capable of desensitizing the audience, belittling and mocking the most constructive instances of the network. Here is how this influencer is presented by one of the groups:

> Er Faina is a Roman influencer followed by many young people. In particular, this frame was taken from one of his unfortunately famous videos in which he belittles and denies the problem of catcalling in society. Videos of this kind desensitize users to social issues that are still being fought for today. All this leads to a regression in the achievement of collective sensitivity.

Toxic Ironia

Other examples of content deemed harmful involve a more subtle, and therefore more ambiguous and insidious, irony. If, in fact, characters like *Er Faina* seem to face their politically uncorrect role head-on, standing with a certain pride as the Italian banner of "alt-right" culture, many other examples cited operate with more subtle practices, in the folds of seemingly harmless and generalized irony. Here are some examples, identified by the sample, in this regard:

> Alphawoman is a pure trash site. In this case, women are highlighted in an ironic way, and the site is often ridiculed. On a social level, this results in a site where people feel free to make fun of some common female aspects. The logo on a white background gives prominence to a female figure at her trashiest, with a bottle in her hand and her middle finger raised. It is a perfect example of mocking and poking fun at women in a light and ambiguous, yet edgy way.

In this category, we could also include a certain use of memes and stickers, which, according to one group's analysis, "have become viral content, used superficially, inviting to be reinvented by often spreading misconceptions, nastiness, stereotypes".

Under the guise of harmless visual additions, many stickers are identified as elements that, thanks to their viral spread, quietly and transparently spread often harmful social images and values, and through which: "over time, young people have begun to mock strong themes (racism, homophobia), even going so far as to depict scenes of explicit violence (self-mutilation, beheadings)".

The images collected as evidence are clear examples of these trends (Figure 1).

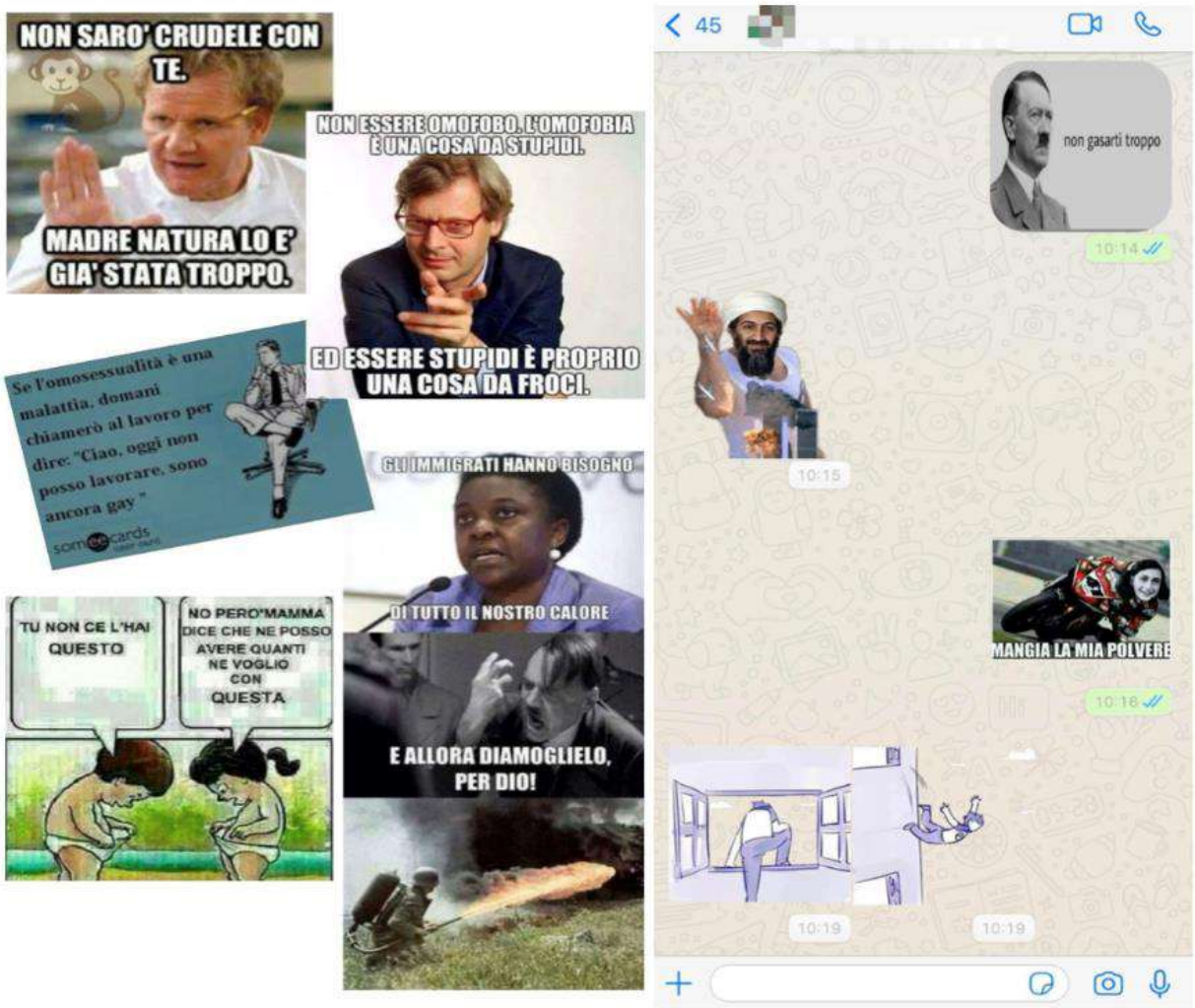

Fig. 1. Examples of stickers and memes collected from the sample through screenshots from their cell phones. Stickers and memes often promote false and dangerous values and ideas, according to the sample, through a seemingly innocuous format such as ironic and satirical

Disinformation and clickbait

Another strand of Web 2.0 content that young people see as harmful and negative for the public are channels that systematically spread misinformation. Here is a reflection of young people on this issue:

> Il Fatto Quotidaino is the classic and representative symbol of a blog dedicated to fake news. The name recalls the masthead of the Travaglio newspaper (Il Fatto Quotidiano), but reverses two letters, deceiving users into believing in its authority. (...). The naivety of users, who often only read the headlines, combined with the carelessness of not checking the seemingly correct link, leads to heated confrontations in the comments, bringing traffic and notoriety to sites that do not deserve it. Low attention threshold + sensational news = clickable content".

Other examples are not so much blatant examples of fake news, but rather information practices that are considered low-level and of little added value, such as those conveyed by the *Webboh* channel:

> Webboh.it is now a reference community in the social world, in fact it is present with a Youtube channel, Twitter and Instagram profiles. Especially on the latter, it has been able to reach more than half a million followers in less than a year (...). Webboh's main activity is to report on various scandals involving different web stars, including gossip about some Youtubers, TikTokers, Instagrammers and Streamers (...) In addition, it can happen that the reported facts involve sensitive issues, such as cyberbullying, which is however trivialized with the aim of creating mere outrage or slacktivism.

Excessive competitiveness

Some groups cited content, such as some challenges, that are supposed to be a format for fun and confrontation, but instead fuel competitive tendencies that are seen as toxic and, in some cases, even self-destructive.

> The Blackout Challenge. The dangerous challenge, depopulated on TikTok, to resist for as long as possible with a tight belt around your neck. The depopulation of this trend, which has become deadly, has a harmful effect on users, especially teenagers.

In any case, competitiveness is not just about overtly challenging and competitive formats, but rather is identified as a toxic and insidious “tone of voice” that permeates all social communication.

> The Instagram page @world_record_egg is an example of digital trash because it creates superfluous competition on trivial topics and shows once again how people tend to follow the masses

Discussion

From the analysis of the examples offered by the 225 students interviewed, it was possible to construct a rather interesting map of the cultural values and meanings that young people attach to content generated in online platforms by “non-professional” users.

The qualitative mapping of the content considered to be of high quality, as opposed to the content considered to be low quality and harmful, made it possible to answer, albeit partially and with some limitations, the research questions posed.

Specifically, with regard to the first research question, i.e. the criteria by which boys and girls judge the quality of content, it emerged that the products judged to be of value generally refer to specific types: content of an informative nature that promotes and deepens social and activism-related issues, or content capable of stimulating curiosity and the desire to explore. Thus, a cross-cutting value attributed to the quality and usefulness of user-

generated online content is that of providing a concrete contribution to the acquisition of skills, information and updates (Taddeo 2023b).

At the same time, it was possible to better focus on what, on the other hand, are the criteria behind negative user-generated reviews of online products.

In this sense, particularly negative is the judgment on content that generates disinformation, but also on certain communicative “styles” such as the use of irony and parody in an aggressive and toxic way, or the pervasive competitive approach often carried out through these production practices.

The collection of examples and their discussion, reported in the words of the students themselves, seemed to me to be particularly useful in answering the second research question, since it returned not so much specific cases in a descriptive way, but rather the cultural, emotional approaches and signifying practices attributed to them.

The work yielded some interpretive insights into youth media consumption and the criteria and values behind judging user-generated content.

Alongside the empirical results, some thoughts and insights can be proposed for further problematization.

At a general level, a first reflection may concern the placement of this content within more or less defined and codified media categories. The analysis shows that young audiences do not use specific coding strategies in this sense. Among the content presented as positive examples, several types emerge: web pages, social profiles, specific posts or memes, YouTube channels, Spotify content and “minor” social media content. The heterogeneity of media and content types shows that there is no “genre” effect that leads to the identification of certain content from certain channels or platforms as naturally invested with more or less cultural value, prestige, credibility or appeal. The attribution and evaluation of the quality of content is made on the basis of very dynamic and fickle subjective parameters.

It is interesting to note, however, that these parameters, according to this research, are only partially influenced by the logics of platformization. For example, the main criterion that regulates and governs the market of the Web 2.0 cultural industry, namely the popularity of the content, based on the logic of celebrity (Marwick, 2013) and the visibility and engagement metrics of each platform, is paradoxically absent from the sample’ evaluations. Indeed, among the negative examples, there is no hesitation to include actors and content - such as *Er Faina* or *Il Masseo*- to which social metrics attribute excellent popularity and visibility.

The numerical “success” on social, achieved through hits of likes and metrics, therefore does not automatically correspond to a recognition of cultural legitimacy on the part of young people: it is what I called in the title of the article "the bad" of social media. The bad of the social media is perceived by young people in an interstitial way in relation to what they like or dislike: it is the gray area that encompasses products and content that they like, while at the same time feeling their poor and somewhat “toxic” value.

Although it is not possible here to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation as to why this short-circuit between popularity and “badness” of social media content is created, we can try to put forward some hypotheses based on the sample’s own reflections, but which would merit further investigation and specific research.

First, one cause of this discrepancy between quality and popularity could be an effect of "algorithmic inertia". Although young people are able to activate a critical view of social content if they are asked to do so in appropriate educational settings, from a pragmatic point of view, in everyday practice they are unwilling to actively carry it out by "resisting" the content proposed by the algorithms and trying to differentiate their consumption from what the newsfeed suggests. Some content is therefore initially created for its ability to surprise and entertain, only to be pushed by the algorithms and find weak defense mechanisms in the audience, which is reluctant to move from a passive critical sense to the direct action of rejecting a content.

A second factor can be related to the widespread use and appreciation of the ironic register: an ingredient that, according to young people's testimonies, is indispensable in the packaging of contemporary cultural products and capable of making them successful beyond the "objective" value of a cultural product. Irony, self-mockery, parody, and political incorrectness emerge as powerful levers of cultural dynamics at the social level (Nagle 2017; Whitney 2013; 2017), capable of activating various psycho-social mechanisms: the possibility to uplift and lighten oneself by smiling in comparison to the everyday; the possibility to exorcise fears and limitations, also glimpsed in one's own experience and to develop a sense of competence and protection by exposing oneself (Taddeo and Tirocchi 2021); and finally, as described by a boy in a group, the possibility to "feel better" in comparison to the ugliness that is shown, exaggerated, and ridiculed online.

While a fairly rich literature has been devoted to the aesthetics of comedians and their role in social culture (Miltner 2014, 2016; Shifman 2014; Phillips and Milner 2017), the analysis proposed here highlights the need to investigate the role of comedians and irony in social media cultural processes as ambivalent and perturbing levers that elicit mechanisms of attraction and repulsion towards online content, and that underlie the mysteries and contradictions of online virality dynamics.

Research limitations and conclusions

Given the food for thought provided by this exploratory study, some limitations of the work should be highlighted, which will require further study and possible integration with different research techniques in the future.

An important limitation is the type of sample involved in the work: certainly a specific target audience, already endowed with its own cultural and educational background on the issues of media cultures. It will therefore be interesting in the future to compare this type of analysis, coming from a somewhat "engaged" audience with media analysis skills, with that of young people from other socio-cultural backgrounds and even other age groups.

A second limitation is related to the format in which the analyses are returned: auto-ethnographic reports, while having the merit of allowing for "settled" and long-term reflection, are often synthetic and thus not always able to return, in a few sentences, the complexity of the thinking behind them. A useful complement to this approach could therefore be the use of individual interviews, which would make it possible to go deeper and explore the issues raised.

However, I would also like to emphasize an element of methodological stimulus that I believe emerges from this research: namely, the possibility of tracing, through young people auto-ethnographic analyses, some critical and meta-reflective digital skills that are often difficult to capture and "measure" with standardized tests and questionnaires. In this sense, research on digital literacy often points out, with disappointment and concern, the absence or lack of critical skills of young generations in dealing with digital consumption on social. From such analysis, however, it seems possible to reaffirm the usefulness of accompanying standardized tools (tests, questionnaires) and consumption metrics (such as those provided annually, for example, by the social media platforms themselves) with a more culturalist and qualitative approach to the analysis of skills, leading to listening to the voice of the users themselves regarding their perceptions and values, distinguishing behaviors and consumption data from the cultural, value and identity elaborations that are superimposed on these consumptions.

Compared to the emerging trend of the flattening and metrification of taste, dictated by the affordances of the platforms themselves, the need to give voice to audiences is thus asserted, restoring three-dimensionality and agency to their consumption practices, which are also often ambiguous and contradictory (Hall, 2012; Picone et al. 2019; Livingstone 2019), and reworking constructs of expertise based on self-perceived cultural meanings beyond data-driven performances.

Nota biografica

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