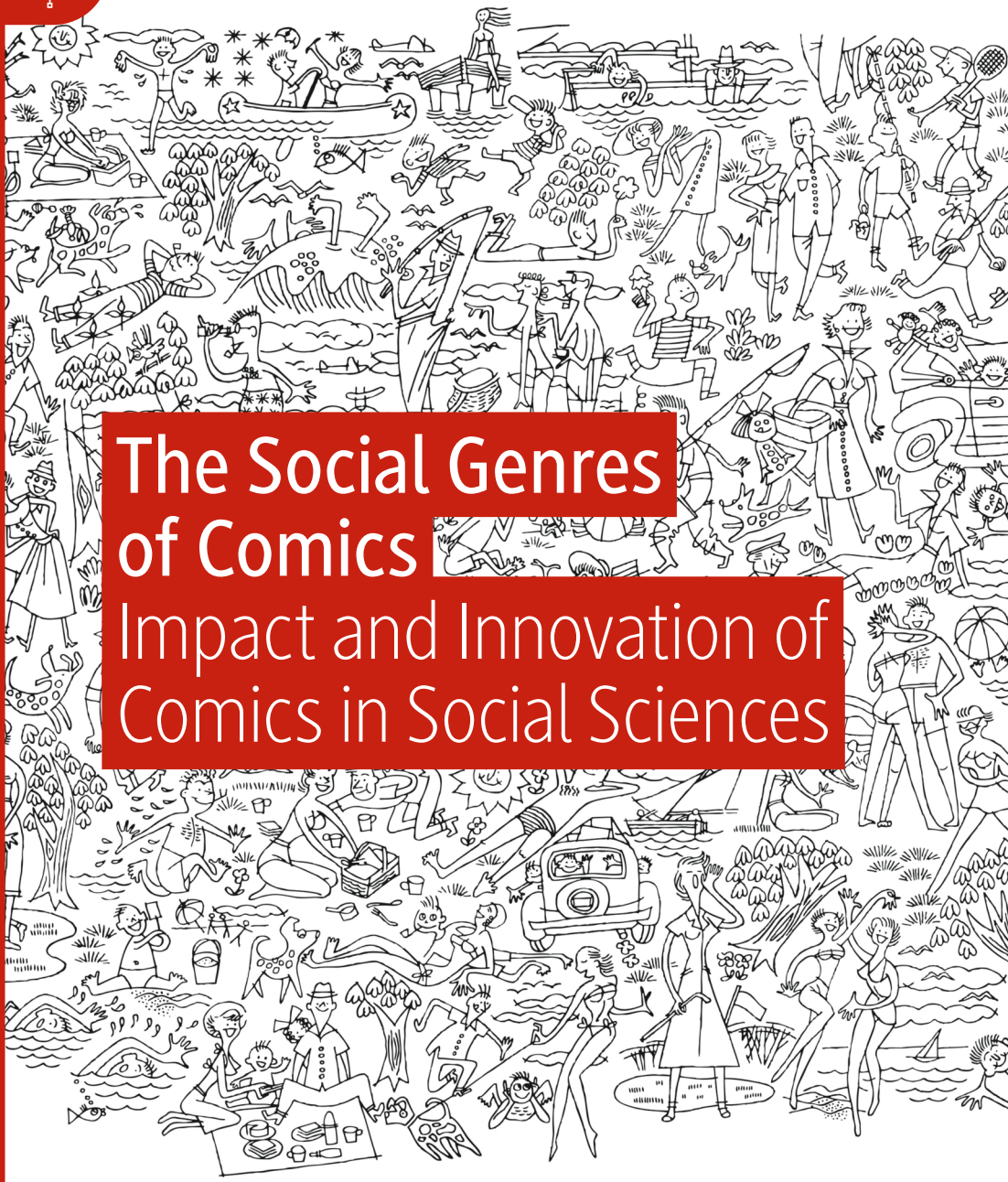
SOCIOLOGY OF THE ARTS



The Social Genres of Comics

Impact and Innovation of Comics in Social Sciences

Edited by Veronica Moretti
Francesco Della Puppa

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Sociology of the Arts

This series brings together academic work which considers the production and consumption of the arts, the social value of the arts, and analyses and critiques the impact and role of cultural policy and arts management.By exploring the ways in which the arts are produced and consumed, the series offers further understandings of social inequalities, power relationships and opportunities for social resistance and agency. It highlights the important relationship between individual, social and political attitudes, and offers significant insights into the ways in which the arts are developing and changing. Moreover, in a globalised society, the nature of arts production, consumption and policy making is increasingly cosmopolitan, and arts are an important means for building social networks, challenging political regimes, and reaffirming and subverting social values across the globe.

Veronica Moretti • Francesco Della Puppa
Editors

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To the Palestinian populations in struggle who, through their rich tradition of comics, have shown the world that comics, too, can be a means of resistance

Foreword

For more than half a century, starting from 1965, comics have been taken seriously as an activity and space of artistic creation, and as a means of expression and communication. One of the clear merits of the comics form is the way in which its various languages are configured within it.

Combining writing and images in original ways, one of the most interesting characteristics of the medium is the clear paradox within them: although silent, their sequential drawings show a perception of sound. This is done through words written in speech bubbles or onomatopoeias drawn in special characters. And while the drawings remain fixed on the printed page, their sequential arrangement allows readers to perceive the images as dynamic (like a sort of visual and audio watermark of a cinema that is made unpredictable).

But what is also striking is the ability of comics to impact social and knowledge processes in specific ways. Comics are able to reach thousands (or even millions) of readers and can accompany, or even trigger, the identity processes of small and large communities. Already in the early postwar period, sociology was the first science to note the widespread and significant role played by comics in the construction of a collective culture (albeit from a predominantly quantitative perspective).

In the early postwar period, sociologists pointed out that "ideologies" took root in comics, in the same way as the symptomatic and representative behaviours of the identities promulgated by social organizations were structured. American sociology was more interested in this than European sociology. Until the 1970s (when things began to change), American sociologists understood how different universes with major theoretical and

analytical significance emerged from the cultural consumption of comics and the social processes that accompanied that consumption.

Sociology was not the only science to take an interest in comics. Shortly afterwards, semiotics became interested in this simultaneously traditional and innovative form of communication. Studies in semiotics explored how textual writing and images were recomposed in comics, changing their traditional modes of meaning, and interacting to produce new forms of communication and to create "sense".

The decision to engage in the theoretical elaboration of comics from within semiotics had wider implications on the status of the discipline. Comics (like cinema) posed a major challenge to semiotics (a challenge it has not always been capable of meeting), as it required the clear formulation of image theory.

Next came the educational sciences, which included various different, and sometimes opposing, approaches to the subject.

The first approach looked at the possibilities that comics could offer in guiding educational systems and practices, both at a primary level (in the early years' transition from thought to verbal language) and at higher levels (providing multipurpose cognitive maps, capable of improving the readers' knowledge of reality). This approach is fairly instrumental, understanding comics more as an intermediate stage towards something else or as a *support,* rather than as an autonomous universe with value in itself.

The second approach was more careful, performing a dual role: on the one hand, it returned to the "historical" relationship of comics with traditional forms of illustration and the visual arts in general; and, on the other, it reconstructed many of the creative spaces that comics have occupied in different historical modes in the passage from a stage of playful innocence to that of trained critical awareness and maturity. Or, in other words, from the phase of "spontaneous" creation to that of *critical* invention. Comics are thus a decidedly modern tool.

This second approach has made several contributions to our understanding of comics, changing how the comics medium has historically defined itself, through its own communication mechanisms and through its social diffusion. And it also closely analysed the role of comics as a space of cultural elaboration, capable of marking eras in terms of both individual and social identity.

Since the 1970s, scientific interest in comics has changed radically. The sociology of media, which developed during the transition from postmodernism to today's digital society, has taken comics seriously as a field of

general interest from the start. Among other things, various studies have noted the specific intersections of comics with other media (from cinema to television to videogames and computer science). They have grasped how comics interface with local cultures and with developments in terms of customs and social identity. But they have also recognized that comics are not merely cultural *vehicles* (i.e. only transmission supports) but are instead distinctive procedures for the *creation* of meaning. Sometimes they are a social and civil testimony of great *historical* and *political* significance.

The disciplines of semiotics and pedagogy have also made further qualitative leaps in their approaches to this subject. For example, by studying comics and the complexity and variety of their applications for educational purposes in relation to neuroscience, they have revealed that human thought (that of children, especially) is organized in ways that reflect how the language of comics associates and intertwines words and images.

With the development of scientific interest in comics, especially in Europe, most studies on comics have analysed them through philosophy and disciplines that explore the close connection between media structures and social change (Walter Benjamin, especially, but also Edgar Morin, and, later, Marshall McLuhan); just as technological innovation, consequently, recomposes the links between forms of production and modes of consumption; between social behaviours, orienting ideas about the world, life horizons; between legal systems and political approaches; between recognized and legitimized identities, and not yet accepted or shared new identities.

With the strengthening and global spread of the digital society (which first emerged in embryonic form in late twentieth-century postmodern society, and has now been rearticulated and rearranged), every scientific perspective is today confronted with a variety of specific dynamics: differences in terms of gender and sex; the quality and orientations of consumption (selective consumption, in particular); the emergence of new cultural paradigms which create fundamental changes in worldviews; and wide-ranging intersections between global and local, North and South, and East and West.

These major external transformations are also internal to the world of comics, which have themselves changed substantially, and, I would say, irreversibly, since the era of so-called *mass culture*. Production systems have changed, publishing houses have decreased in size, the methods for recruiting authors have changed, and the possibilities for professionals to

work internationally have also increased. However, the level of consumption and spread of comics have decreased in the last few decades. The set of factors around which readers orient their tastes and interests has also changed. Today readers of comics have a different focus on the basis of imaginaries that are different from those of earlier decades.

While the quantitative production and consumption of comics have decreased, their artistic quality has increased, resulting in some truly outstanding artistic work. The mass culture of past eras (from the late nineteenth century to the 1990s) has fragmented into a multiplicity of systems, in which the collective and individual feed into each other, combining in new ways. Digital networks have inscribed the modalities of old media into those of new media but have also shifted and changed them (we might say *re-mediated* them) through connections and mobilities that are not always traceable and calculable (despite the *big data* collected and managed by large networks and agencies).

This social context of showy and, at the same time, small dimensions through which the media themselves are subjected to advances and changes that are not always sustainable. Among them, comics are the least technologically aggressive. But, on the contrary, it is not the culturally most deprived of options and *creative* habits.

Sociology (both in general and that specializing in media systems and communication processes) must respond to these changes with new theories and criteria—and comics are reacting. Comic makers are attempting to preserve, and at least not lose, their (young and not-so-young) readership.

Comic makers are now having to question their methods, at a time when their readership seems to be dwindling. This is neither a good nor a bad thing, it is simply a fact.

This is perhaps the key challenge for comics today. It is thus even more urgent than ever for social sciences and the sciences of media and communication to review the categories that have long been used in the discussion of the effects and connections between different media and publics, between widespread cultures, values, and practices. We must now explain how practices of education and culture in the current digital society have become multipolar, decentralized, and accelerated on every level.

This requires us to orient our knowledge through careful analyses of the new panoramas emerging in society. Many of these can be recognized and reconstructed through the multiple practices used in the fields of comics production and consumption. And here is the important fact

assumed by the point of view expressed in the articles contained in this book, which reconstruct different aspects of how comics can support both research in the sociological field and the emergence of widespread social situations connected to identity phenomena (some new and others that adapt previous behaviours and attitudes).

A significant contribution of this book is its assessment of how comics (could) contribute to the promotion and development of research in the human sciences. If not, even, to make it possible, *innervated* in (therefore, not separated from) the processes investigated, thanks to its languages and how it correlates (or corresponds) with the ways of being, living, and thinking in the observed social fields.

This is not an isolated result, nor a solitary or unique attention, in the various reflections that comics have given rise to in the last decade. It happened on the part of communication theories, which have detected its complex endowment of elements such as to be spontaneously *trans-medial*.

Some comics theorists have pointed out that comics are uniquely capable of corresponding to feelings and knowledge situated in the present social scenario. University groups from various countries have stressed the strong values of comics, which are capable of giving impetus to research in heterogeneous sectors (e.g. in linguistic education and education in the "hard" sciences—physics, chemistry, astronomy, and cosmology, architecture, engineering—as well as in the formation of historical or literary skills or in the practices of treatment of certain types of mental distress).

For those of us who know how hard it has been for comics to be given the recognition they deserve, after various socially unjustified attacks on the medium in the twentieth century, it is particularly rewarding to note that the comics form is now looked upon favourably, and its medial skills have been valorised, allowing for it to realize its full educational potential.

Naples
4th January 2025

Gino Frezza

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CHAPTER 1

Social Research and Genres in Comics: An Introduction

Veronica Moretti and Francesco Della Puppa

In recent decades, comics have become a vibrant object of academic inquiry, crossing disciplinary boundaries and gaining legitimacy within fields such as cultural studies, media theory, education, and health humanities (Chute, 2011; Griffin, 2019). Despite this, much of the scholarly work has tended to focus on the formal features of comics—visual grammar, multimodal narration, and genre typologies—or on the analysis of iconic figures and mainstream productions (Groensteen, 2008; Eisner, 1996; McCloud, 1994). This edited collection instead aims to offer a distinct and timely perspective by examining comics through the lens of social genres, a conceptual framework that foregrounds the entanglements between comics and the socio-political realities they narrate, reflect, and contest.

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The communicative framework of comics exhibits significant diversity and complexity, resisting any uniform categorization. Similar to other cultural forms—such as print media, cinema, and literature—comics are distinguished by the thematic content they explore, the archetypes and characters they present, and the specific audiences they target (Barbieri, 2010, 2017; D'Andrea et al., 2024; Della Puppa, 2022, 2023; Della Puppa & Moretti, 2024; Eco, 1964; Eisner, 1996; Groensteen, 2011; Marston, 1943; Singsen, 2022; Visentin & Giancola, 2011). Collectively, these defining features constitute what is commonly referred to as a genre. The classification of graphic novels spans an almost infinite spectrum, with genres and subgenres in this medium reflecting the breadth found in traditional fiction and nonfiction (Della Puppa & Moretti, 2024; Moretti, 2023).

Historically, comics were a vehicle for social critique and lighthearted entertainment for younger readers. However, their appeal quickly expanded, captivating a diverse and enthusiastic readership eager for innovative and imaginative storytelling (D'Andrea et al., 2024; Dorfles, 2005; Eisner, 1996; Giannetto, 2005; Marston, 1943; Steimberg, 2013). The postwar period, in particular, marked a pivotal shift, with the exponential growth of comic book production fostering a proliferation of genres and a corresponding diversification in artistic styles and narrative forms.

Among the most iconic genres is the superhero comic, often regarded as the quintessential form of the medium. This genre, rooted in the United States, has transformed episodic and often simplistic adventures into expansive sagas of heroism and identity. Characterized by protagonists endowed with extraordinary powers, enhanced physical or intellectual capabilities, or fantastical technology, these stories derive their impact not only from their striking visual elements and dialogue but also from the compelling personalities of their heroes. Superman, who first appeared in 1938, stands as the archetype of this genre, which remains dominated by publishers such as Marvel and DC Comics (Daniels, 2004; Finn, 2014; Giancola, 2021; Reynolds, 1992).

During the late 1940s, the horror comics genre surged in popularity, using macabre and unsettling narratives that often featured grotesque or supernatural beings such as zombies. These tales evolved from earlier detective and thriller comics, which had gradually incorporated darker, more chilling themes (Marston, 1943). The advent of the underground comics movement (commonly known as "comix") further diversified the landscape, introducing a bold and countercultural approach to both

content and distribution. Eschewing mainstream publication channels, comix artists challenged societal norms and addressed taboo subjects including substance use, mental health, and nonconventional expressions of sexuality (Aldama, 2020; Fernandez L'Hoeste, 2006; Gibson, 2014, 2017; Galvan, 2024; Halsall & Warren, 2022; Kukkonen, 2013; Mance, 2017; Scott, 2013; Scott & Fawaz, 2018). Their work was a direct critique of the status quo, blending avant-garde aesthetics with provocative storytelling.

Another noteworthy genre is the romance comic, which emerged in the postwar period to cater to young people and adults. These narratives often centred on emotional and dramatic plots set in contemporary urban or rural environments, reflecting the evolving social dynamics of the time. Together, these genres illustrate the breadth of comics as a medium, highlighting their capacity to resonate across diverse cultural and demographic contexts.

When discussing the concept of genre in comics, it is essential to address the multifaceted realm of manga, while also providing an important clarification (En-Yi Ting, 2019; Kinsella, 2020; La Marca, 2022): whereas in Japanese the term manga is a broad descriptor encompassing all forms of comics, irrespective of their intended audience, thematic content, or country of origin, in Western contexts, particularly in the United States, the term has evolved to signify a distinctive style marked by its unique graphic aesthetic and an emphasis on character-driven narratives. These stories often delve into the emotional experiences of their protagonists, frequently focusing on youthful and sentimental themes set within high school environments—a hallmark of shōjo manga. In other instances, manga ventures into the domain of science fiction, crafting futuristic tales that explore space exploration and advanced technologies, showcasing the genre's narrative versatility.

Another noteworthy genre is that of personal narratives, commonly referred to as "perzines". This term describes a specific subset of zines that engage in intimate reflections, autobiographical accounts, and subjective experiences, often presented in a confessional tone. Perzines allow authors to engage with a range of topics drawn from their own lives, providing a deeply personal lens through which broader social or cultural issues may be explored. Their narratives highlight the capacity of comics to act as both a personal and universal medium, bridging individual perspectives through collective understanding (Chidgey, 2014, 2020; Comstock, 2001; Duncombe, 1997; Guerra & López, 2021; Karpp, 2019; Koerth, 2022).

As highlighted above, comics fulfil a wide array of functions that extend beyond entertainment. They can be used to enhance literacy, facilitating the comprehension of complex topics (Hutchinson, 1949), to foster sociological imagination (Cary, 2004), to promote understanding of diverse social and cultural values (Bitz, 2010; Ravelo, 2013), and to cultivate critical thinking skills (Yang, 2008). These multifaceted roles are made possible by the unique capability of comics to represent reality through a combination of visual and verbal languages that can be symbolic, fictional, or rooted in fact.

When employed as a medium of communication, comics utilize their iconic representations and visual metaphors to convey profound social messages. This ability to distill and express intricate societal dynamics allows comics to act as powerful tools for education and cultural exchange (Creasap., 2014). Through reading and engaging with comics, individuals can develop multilingual competencies (Winch et al., 2010) and gain deeper insights into the values, norms, and subtleties of a given society. In this way, genres within comics become dynamic agents of social discourse, providing a platform for addressing pressing social issues and fostering a greater understanding of the human experience.

Nicolas Labarre, in his seminal work *Understanding Genres in Comics* (2020), explores the defining characteristics of various currents within the world of comics. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from film studies, Labarre approaches the concept of genre not as a rigid or singular category but as a multifaceted construct. He argues that a genre can simultaneously function as a creative project, a market-oriented label, and even a form of implicit contract between the creator and the reader. Rather than offering a catalogue of specific comics genres, Labarre's study focuses on the broader conceptual dimensions of genre itself, inviting readers to reconsider its role as a dynamic and evolving framework.

Labarre's insights reveal the importance of examining the function of genre within a particular social context and gives us a deeper understanding of how the medium of comics evolves to reflect and respond to the cultural and historical conditions of its time. His analysis is not without precedent, for example, in their landmark text *The Power of Comics* (2009), Duncan and Smith, devote significant attention to the role of superhero narratives and historical memories in revealing the conventions and values embedded within a given social milieu. For these authors, genres represent historically durable and collectively recognized sets of characteristics—including characters, settings, thematic concerns, and narrative

structures—that establish a shared taxonomy between creators, publishers, and audiences. Within this framework, genres serve as an organizational tool, offering a kind of "catalogue" in which each entry encapsulates the socio-cultural and historical elements surrounding its creation. This catalogue provides insights into the broader "social mission" of comics as a medium capable of addressing and interpreting complex societal phenomena. The genre thus acts as both a map for navigating intricate social issues and a mechanism for making these issues accessible to a wide and diverse audience through the medium's use of both visual and textual communication.

In *Reading Graphic Novels, Genre and Narration* (2016), Achim Hescher further enriches the discussion by proposing that the term "genre" operates as a circular and interconnected concept within comics studies. He argues that genre encompasses a whole range of elements—discourses, textual forms, and visual representations—that collectively transform it into a distinct social product. This integrative approach highlights the symbiotic relationship between genre and its cultural context, emphasizing that genres are not static categories but rather fluid constructs that adapt to societal shifts and creative innovations.

Media theorists more broadly have emphasized the utility of genre as both a "guide to consumption" and a horizon of expectations for audiences (Förster & von Königslöw, 2016; Smith & Phillips, 2006). Genre conventions serve to orient readers, providing them with cognitive and emotional frameworks that shape their engagement with a narrative. At the same time, these conventions offer creators the opportunity to innovate by introducing new narrative patterns or subverting established norms. In this way, genres operate on multiple levels—as tools for structuring creative expression, mechanisms for shaping audience reception, and mirrors reflecting the evolving cultural and social realities in which they are situated.

Although far from exhaustive, this brief overview serves as a foundational framework for introducing what we call "social genres" (Moretti, 2023), which will be analysed in the following chapters. The different comics genres, as this discussion illustrates, are not merely defined by their visual style, narrative structures, or thematic concerns, but can also be categorized based on their societal relevance and the roles they play in engaging with and reflecting social realities.

In this edited collection, we will address social research on comics and genres of comics with reference to their specific affordances, their cultural

and economic configurations, the themes they address, and the context in which they are produced and read.

Additionally, the notion of social genres, as developed in this volume, draws on interdisciplinary contributions that see genre not simply as a classificatory system based on recurring tropes, but as a socially situated and ideologically charged practice (Labarre, 2020; Hescher, 2016). Rather than viewing genres as static or intrinsic properties of texts, we explore them as fluid and relational configurations—assemblages of narrative forms, visual styles, and cultural expectations shaped by their historical moment and by the communities that produce and consume them. This approach also implies a repositioning of comics studies itself: away from a solely textual or aesthetic orientation, and towards a critical sociological perspective that foregrounds the role of comics as symbolic and material artefacts embedded in broader networks of production, circulation, and reception. We do not aim to propose yet another taxonomy of comics genres, but to interrogate how they operate as cultural technologies—tools for organizing narratives and experiences in ways that are politically and socially meaningful. In this sense, the concept of social genres serves both as an analytical category and as a methodological provocation. It invites us to consider comics not merely as reflections of the social, but as agents in its construction: capable of intervening in public debates, of amplifying marginal voices, and of imagining alternative futures. This volume thus contributes to rethinking the role of comics in contemporary culture, while offering new conceptual tools for understanding the relationship between genre, representation, and society.

The chapters in this book follow an interconnected trajectory, weaving through themes of health, migration, gender, deviance, environmental change, and labour, together forming a cohesive narrative about the power of comics to reveal and challenge the human condition in all its complexity.

The opening chapter is entitled ‘Engaging the Publics: Co-Creating Comics to Foster Public Engagement in Research and Innovation’. Drawing on participatory methods, this chapter demonstrates how comics can foster dialogue between scientific communities and society. Its case study of co-created comics narratives reveals the ability of comics to democratize complex knowledge, making it accessible and relatable. This participatory approach aligns with the collaborative ethos discussed in the chapters on migration and gender, where comics serve as platforms for shared storytelling and mutual understanding.

Building on the theme of personal and collective journeys, the second chapter, 'Playing with Gender and Sexuality in Comics and Zines', highlights the historical erasure and misrepresentation of non-hegemonic identities in mainstream comics, contrasting this with the vibrant counter-narratives created by feminist and queer artists. Through their multimodal storytelling, comics not only challenge patriarchal norms and heteronormativity but also reimagine spaces for identity exploration and resistance. This chapter's thematic continuity with previous chapters lies in its emphasis on visibility and representation. Just as migration comics foreground marginalized voices, gender-focused comics dismantle exclusionary frameworks, reinforcing the idea that comics are a site for reclaiming identities and challenging societal power structures.

The third chapter, 'When Comics Meets Health: Graphic Medicine', investigates the potential of comics in healthcare narratives, focusing on the interplay between Narrative-Based Medicine (NBM) and Graphic Medicine (GM). This chapter argues that while traditional medical discourse often prioritizes clinical objectivity, comics allow for a deeper engagement with the lived experiences of patients and caregivers. Through their hybrid nature—fusing text and image—comics transcend the limitations of verbal language, capturing the emotional, sensory, and relational dimensions of illness. This chapter introduces a recurring theme of this volume: the capacity of comics to humanize complex issues and to serve as a bridge between individual experiences and broader social systems. The discussion on the visual articulation of illness paves the way for subsequent explorations of how comics depict other dimensions of vulnerability and resilience.

The next chapter, 'Illustrating Labour: The Role of Graphic Social Science in Labour Sociology' examines the sociology of work, exploring how comics illuminate the complexities of labour in contemporary societies. By addressing themes of alienation, exploitation, and precarity, the chapter continues the themes of earlier discussions on systemic inequalities and individual agency. The focus on the intersection of labour and identity—how race, gender, and class shape workplace experiences—ties back to the broader themes of this volume. As this chapter argues, comics do not merely depict work but critically interrogate its structures and human consequences, offering new avenues for scholarly and public engagement.

The chapter 'Comics in Migration, Migration in Comics: Methodological Reflections and Theoretical Perspectives from Two Case Studies' shows how, like illness, migration is deeply personal yet profoundly shaped by

structural forces. The ability of comics to simultaneously represent individual stories and systemic complexities makes them an ideal medium for portraying the multifaceted realities of migration. Through case studies of comics addressing displacement, the chapter reveals how the medium captures the emotional toll of uprooted lives, the bureaucratic labyrinths migrants navigate, and the socio-political contexts that shape their experiences. The narratives discussed here resonate with the themes of empathy and agency introduced earlier, emphasizing how comics can counter dehumanizing discourses by amplifying the voices of those who are often silenced or stereotyped.

From migration, the discussion flows seamlessly into deviance. 'Criminology in the Frame: Graphic Narratives and the Study of Crime' extends these themes into the realm of criminology, exploring how comics engage with representations of crime, justice, and social control. This chapter uncovers how comics have historically shaped, and been shaped by, societal fears and moral panics, while also offering critical perspectives on the institutions tasked with maintaining order. The chapter's analysis of superheroes and antiheroes echoes the tension between personal agency and structural forces seen in the previous chapters on migration and gender. Moreover, it shows the pedagogical potential of comics to foster critical engagement.

In 'Seeing the Unseen: Illustrating Climate Change Through Graphic', the focus shifts to the climate crisis, a pressing issue of our times. The authors analyse how graphic journalism navigates the challenge of representing the slow and often abstract processes of climate change. By visualizing causes, impacts, and solutions, comics help audiences connect the global and the local, the systemic and the individual. This chapter continues the thread of societal critique, showing how comics reveal the intersection between environmental degradation and social justice. The engagement of comics with marginalized communities—those disproportionately affected by climate change—also reiterates the medium's commitment to amplifying underrepresented voices.

Finally, 'Comics as a Lens for Urban Research? Challenges and Potential of a Representational and Analytical Tool' closes the volume. This chapter understands comics as tools for analysing and representing the lived realities of urban environments. By combining textual and visual narratives, comics capture the sensory, temporal, and political dimensions of city life. This chapter echoes earlier chapters on migration and identity, demonstrating how comics navigate the tension between top-down urban

planning and bottom-up lived experiences. The chapter's analysis of graphic works that depict urban inequality, resilience, and transformation highlights the medium's ability to engage with both the macro-structural and micro-personal dimensions of space.

Together, these chapters form a tapestry of interconnected insights, illustrating the power of comics to transcend disciplinary boundaries and address the urgent issues of our time. By exploring topics as diverse as health, migration, gender, justice, science, climate change, urban life, and labour, this volume reveals the versatility of comics as a social genre, uniquely positioned to bridge personal narratives and collective realities. By intertwining individual experiences with broader societal frameworks, it shows how comics foster critical reflection and transformative engagement with pressing cultural and social issues.

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CHAPTER 2

Engaging the Publics: Co-Creating Comics to Foster Public Engagement in Research and Innovation

Simone Arnaldi, Stefano Crabu, and Paolo Magaudda

Introduction: Exploring the Use of Comics in Public Communication of Science and Technology

In the rapidly evolving landscape of science communication and public engagement, innovative approaches are crucial for fostering new paths for connecting scientific knowledge and diverse public audiences. In recent decades, the field of Public Communication of Science and Technology (PCST) has emerged as a critical area of study, reflecting a growing recognition of the need to bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and public understanding. Traditional methods, often characterised by a one-way dissemination of information guided by the "deficit model" (Wynne,

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1992; Irwin & Wynne, 1996), have proven insufficient in addressing the multifaceted nature of scientific discourse and the varying needs and interests of different stakeholder groups. Against this backdrop, the integration of artistic expression into scientific endeavours has emerged as a promising strategy, offering fresh perspectives and creative avenues for engaging the public in scientific research and technological developments (Lesen et al., 2016; Tatalovic, 2009).

Among the various artistic forms that have gained traction in this domain, comics and graphic novels have emerged as a powerful medium for communicating complex scientific concepts in an accessible and engaging manner. By blending visual representation with narrative storytelling, comics possess a unique ability to simplify intricate ideas, contextualise learning within relatable scenarios, and foster emotional connections with scientific topics (McDermott et al., 2018). Moreover, visual narratives are considered an important strategy for supporting transparency and public accountability of science, engagement, and emotional resonance, making them particularly effective in communicating complex scientific concepts to diverse audiences. Comics can contextualise scientific knowledge, make abstract concepts tangible, and foster critical thinking about the societal implications of technoscientific developments (Lin et al., 2014). The inherent qualities of comics, such as their capacity for humour, their ability to visualise abstract concepts, and their narrative-driven nature, make them well-suited for captivating audiences who might not typically engage with scientific content through traditional channels. By tapping into these strengths, comics offer a powerful platform for sparking discussions, challenging preconceptions, and fostering a deeper appreciation for the relevance and impact of scientific research on everyday life (Farinella, 2018).

While the potential of comics in science communication has been acknowledged, their integration into the core practices of scientific research and public engagement remains largely unexplored. This chapter presents a pioneering case study that explores the innovative use of comics as a means of directly involving stakeholders and the public in scientific endeavours, moving beyond the traditional role of comics as a mere dissemination tool. The study centres on the EnRRI project (Enhancing Responsible Research and Innovation in the Bottom-up Co-creation of Science and Technology), which aimed to explore the potential of co-creation methodologies in fostering responsible and socially desirable innovation processes (Crabu et al., 2022; Felt & Fochler, 2010; Jasanoff, 2004). To do this, the project embedded a graphic designer with

experience in science communication within the research team, facilitating a collaborative process of co-creating comic stories that would disseminate the project's findings and insights. By integrating the graphic designer into the research process, the EnRRI project had the aim of overcoming the conventional boundaries between scientific research, science communication and artistic production, fostering a mutual learning exchange of knowledge and perspectives. This innovative approach not only enabled the co-creation of engaging comic narratives but also facilitated a deeper understanding of how participatory processes can shape technoscientific innovation to better align it with societal needs and values (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2016; Stilgoe et al., 2013).

In order to present this innovative use of comics in science communication and public engagement activities, the chapter delves into the EnRRI project's experience, providing insights into the methodological approach adopted, the collaborative dynamics between researchers and the graphic designer, and the narratives developed through the co-created comic stories. The overall aim is to highlight the potential of comics as a powerful medium for fostering public understanding, dialogue, and participation in scientific research, while also exploring the broader implications of integrating artistic practices into the core activities of scientific endeavours (Born & Barry, 2010; Wilson, 2002). By presenting this case study, the chapter contributes to the growing body of literature on innovative approaches to science communication and public engagement, and, ultimately, it offers a compelling example of how comics can be leveraged to bridge the gap between scientific communities and diverse public audiences, fostering a more inclusive and participatory approach to scientific research and technological innovation.

Science Communication, Public Engagement, and Responsibility in Research and Innovation

The field of Public Communication of Science and Technology (PCST) has emerged as a relevant area of study over the past two decades, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of facilitating a connection between scientific knowledge and public understanding of scientific culture. Today's PCST represents an interdisciplinary field that encompasses a wide range of activities, including science journalism, museum exhibitions, citizen science initiatives, and social media engagement (Bucchi & Trench, 2021).

The origins of modern science communication can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century, with the publication of seminal works such as Snow's "The Two Cultures" (Snow, 1959), which critically explored the epistemic and cultural divide between scientific and humanistic knowledge. To cope with this divide, science communication has undergone a notable evolution, progressing from a "deficit model of communication" (which presumed that public scepticism towards science was attributable to a deficiency in knowledge) to more sophisticated approaches that acknowledge the intricate interrelationship between scientific information, social context, and individual values (Brossard & Lewenstein, 2010). Science studies scholars such as Wynne (1992) and Irwin and Wynne (1996) have been pivotal in critiquing the deficit model and advocating for a more contextual understanding of public responses to science.

One of the most significant challenges in the public communication of science and technology is the pressure to address the diverse needs and interests of different audiences, who may have varying cultural backgrounds, levels of scientific literacy, and motivations. Consequently, a number of distinct publics for science have been identified, each exhibiting a distinct level of engagement, prior knowledge, and attitudes towards scientific issues (Burns et al., 2003). This has led to the recognition of the necessity for more targeted and participatory approaches to science communication, such as dialogue-based models and co-production of knowledge (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2016).

More recently, the growing relevance acquired by digital media has had a profound impact on the landscape of PCST, offering new opportunities for engagement but also presenting challenges in terms of information quality and the spread of misinformation (Scheufele & Krause, 2019). Online science communication has given rise to a plethora of new genres and forms, including science blogs, podcasts, and YouTube channels, which expanded the range of voices engaged in science communication and challenged traditional gatekeeping roles (Fahy & Nisbet, 2011). Social media platforms have become a significant space for science communication, enabling direct interaction between scientists and the public. However, this democratisation of science communication, facilitated by the diffusion of digital communication, also raises concerns about credibility, expertise, and the potential for echo chambers and polarisation (Yeo et al., 2017; Neresini et al., 2024). Furthermore, social media has the capacity to disseminate both accurate and inaccurate information at a rapid pace (Brossard, 2013).

The perspectives characterising PCST have undergone a constant evolution, with emerging areas of research including the study of science communication in non-Western contexts, the role of emotions and narratives in science engagement, and the impact of new technologies such as virtual and augmented reality on science learning experiences (Davies & Horst, 2016). Furthermore, researchers are investigating the potential of arts-based approaches to science communication, acknowledging the efficacy of creative and affective engagement in cultivating public understanding and appreciation of science, including the utilisation of comics for scientific communication (Tatalovic, 2009; Lesen et al., 2016).

A significant advancement in the evolution of PCST has been the growing prominence of the concept of "public engagement". This has gained considerable traction within academic circles, signifying a shift in how scientific institutions interact with society at large. The term "public engagement" encompasses the various methods through which the outcomes and implications of scientific research are disseminated to the general public: from the straightforward dissemination of scientific knowledge to more active forms of dialogue and collaboration between researchers and different publics. "Public engagement" as a multifaceted concept is designed to facilitate mutual learning, foster trust, and ensure that scientific endeavours are responsive to societal needs and values, thereby enhancing the societal impact and relevance of research (Bauer & Jensen, 2011).

The origins of public engagement in academia can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century, with the initial initiatives focusing on science communication and adult education (Bauer & Jensen, 2011). However, the contemporary conceptualisation of public engagement as a multifaceted, dialogic process emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This shift was partly driven by critiques of the aforementioned "deficit model" of public understanding of science, which assumed that public scepticism or hostility towards scientific advances was primarily due to a lack of knowledge (Wynne, 1992).

The advent of the concept of public engagement as a pivotal element in scientific endeavours reflects a growing acknowledgement of the necessity for universities and research institutions to transcend conventional "ivory tower" models and proactively engage the public in the generation, dissemination, and utilisation of knowledge (Watermeyer, 2015). The advent of public engagement as a central tenet of academic practice reflects a

response to evolving societal expectations, funding constraints, and a reimagining of the role of higher education in the twenty-first century.

As public engagement practices have developed, so too has the conceptual understanding of what constitutes effective engagement, thus advocating for a genuine two-way dialogue and the "co-production of knowledge" (Irwin, 2008). This shift is reflected in the transition from terms like "public understanding of science" (PUS) to "public engagement with science and technology" (PEST), which emphasises active participation rather than passive reception (Bauer et al., 2007). The concept of "Mode 2" of knowledge production, as outlined by Gibbons et al. (1994), has been instrumental in framing public engagement as an intrinsic aspect of the research process. This model proposes that knowledge is increasingly produced in the context of application, with greater emphasis on transdisciplinarity and social accountability. In this context, public engagement serves to guarantee the relevance and responsiveness of research to societal needs (Nowotny et al., 2001).

Several factors have contributed to the growing prominence of public engagement in academia, first of all the increasing pressure from funders and policymakers for researchers to demonstrate the societal impact and relevance of their work (Watermeyer, 2012). There is also a growing recognition of the value of diverse perspectives and the need to involve a wider range of stakeholders in knowledge production (Felt & Fochler, 2008). Efforts to address public scepticism towards scientific institutions and rebuild trust in expert knowledge have further underscored the importance of engagement (Wynne, 2006). Moreover, ethical considerations have also played a role, with growing awareness of the ethical implications of research and the need for public input on contentious issues (Stilgoe et al., 2013). Additionally, the inclusion of public engagement requirements in research grants and institutional funding mechanisms has provided a practical impetus for academics to prioritise these activities (Grand et al., 2015).

Today, public engagement in academia encompasses a wide and differentiated range of activities, from public lectures and science festivals to participatory research projects and citizen science initiatives (Jensen & Holliman, 2016). Digital technologies have further expanded the possibilities for engagement, enabling new forms of online collaboration and dialogue (Holliman et al., 2015). However, the implementation of public engagement practices faces several challenges, starting from institutional barriers, such as reward structures that prioritise traditional academic

outputs over engagement activities, can hinder widespread adoption (Watermeyer, 2015). There are also methodological challenges in evaluating the impact and effectiveness of public engagement initiatives (King et al., 2015). Moreover, critics have raised concerns about the potential instrumentalisation of public engagement, warning against its use as a mere public relations exercise or a means of manufacturing consent for predetermined research agendas (Irwin et al., 2013). As the field continues to evolve, key areas for future development include the refining of key theoretical frameworks, developing robust evaluation methodologies, and addressing institutional barriers to engagement. Furthermore, there is a need to ensure that public engagement practices are truly inclusive and representative, avoiding the perpetuation of existing power imbalances in knowledge production (Dawson, 2018).

In this context, public engagement has been viewed as a tool to contribute to knowledge policies and innovation processes along the lines of social desirability and socio-environmental sustainability, a set of concerns that have been integrated into the framework for Responsible Research & Innovation (RRI) approach that emerged in the context of the European Union science governance initiatives (Owen et al., 2013; Grunwald, 2016). With its ambition to redesign the relationships between science, technology, and society (Owen et al., 2012; Stilgoe et al., 2013), the concept of RRI is indicative of a change in the way innovation is considered, which is thus understood as a complex and ambivalent phenomenon, capable of generating not only benefits but also ethical contradictions and risks on social, environmental, economic, and political levels.

The centrality attributed to responsibility, typical but not exclusive to RRI (Arnaldi & Bianchi, 2016; Arnaldi et al., 2015), emphasises the "potential futures" that are socially and ethically desirable, which innovations are supposed to produce and for which the actors involved in innovative processes voluntarily take charge, according to a logic of mutual accountability (Adam & Groves, 2011; von Schomberg, 2013). With the aim of aligning innovation trajectories with these values and demands, the various approaches to "responsible innovation" promote the inclusion of heterogeneous actors, bearers of often different interests and priorities, implementing initiatives of "consultation" and "deliberative democracy" (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Within this framework, public engagement practices and activities have acquired a crucial role for their potential to involve citizens and non-experts in processes of consultation and deliberation, and

consequently in the collective definition of responsibility and social accountability of scientific work and innovation processes.

Engaging Society in Science Through Artistic Production: The Case of Comics and Graphic Novels

As argued in the previous section, the well-established asymmetry in science policy and communication between the public and experts has been increasingly challenged, both in academic circles and among policymakers. This shift recognises that citizens and societal stakeholders can be actively involved in collective decision-making initiatives and innovation processes related to scientific and technological developments. In recent years, significant efforts have been made to innovate public communication of science practices, particularly with the aim of moving beyond what can be called a "service-subordination model" of public engagement in managing the relationship between science and society (Born & Barry, 2010).

According to this model, which finds its roots in the aforementioned deficit model of public communication of science, engagement practices are inherently subordinated to science, with the primary aim of educating an allegedly scientifically hostile and illiterate public to serve scientific interests and secure broad social acceptance of technoscientific developments. While social acceptability of science and technology can be, in principle, a legitimate aspiration, there is now a recognition that the public should be engaged in a more active and meaningful way, particularly those underserved by traditional science communication instruments, such as print media, TV, radio and science museums.

Against this backdrop, arts-based initiatives have been acknowledged as pivotal by both scientific communities and funding agencies, who view artistic expression as a powerful tool for sparking discussions and involving the public in scientific research, technological developments, and science-society democratic governance (see Catanzaro, 2014; Concannon & Grenon, 2016). These initiatives may encompass a variety of art forms—such as visual arts, graphic novels, music, film, literature, stand-up comedies and theatre—which are recognised for their potential to attract individuals who might not typically engage with scientific topics. Accordingly, collaborations between artists and scientists are intended to offer fresh insights to both fields, while also better aligning scientific research agendas and technological developments with the expectations of social groups concerned about the implications of these advancements.

(Wilson, 2002). Under this perspective, art is seen as providing innovative approaches to disseminating scientific knowledge and fostering public debate about the relationship between science, technology, and democracy. Consequently, there is a growing consensus among funding bodies, scientific communities, and science communicators that the integration of art and science, alongside other public communication of science and engagement strategies, could shape how the public develops multifaceted connections with scientific endeavours—not just cognitively, but also in terms of political, cultural, and emotional stances.

In this regard, the emerging field of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) is a paradigmatic example of the effort to build interdisciplinary connections between science and society (see Mejias et al., 2021). It aims to bring together educational researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to understand and potentially institutionalise the role of the arts in engaging the public, disseminating expert knowledge, and involving citizens in discussions around potentially controversial technoscientific issues. It has been acknowledged that the integration of arts and STEM fields can foster new ways of knowing by merging aspects of scientific inquiry, societal challenges, design, engineering, and artistic expression (Root-Bernstein et al., 2011). This perspective emphasises the importance of interconnections between various scientific and cultural domains, challenging traditional disciplinary boundaries. By utilising the cross-disciplinary nature of public interventions and exploration, it bridges the gap between scientific communities, research institutions, and society, while opening public discussions on socially significant technoscientific issues. Some artists, in their work, address the concerns, fears, and inquiries of our contemporary societies related to science, employing scientific concepts as both the means and the subject of their art. An example is Ryoji Ikeda's 2019 *Dataverse* (https://www.ryojiikeda.com/project/x_verse/), a video installation depicting data flows and medical imagery aimed at prompting the public to reflect on the extent to which human experience, both cognitively and, is embedded in a data-centric world.

Recently, comics and graphic novels emerged as a relevant strategy for merging art and science with the aim to align the public's aspirations, expectations, political perspectives, societal needs, and passions with the goals and methodologies of research institutions. Such visual productions are envisioned as a means of making science more transparent and accessible to the public, either by attracting people to science through its

aesthetic appeal or by incorporating emotional and expressive experiences into the realm of scientific inquiry. One of the most recent and significant endeavours in utilising comics as a medium for scientific communication to diverse audiences is the "Comics&Science"[1] project. This initiative encompasses a broad spectrum of topics, ranging from physics to life sciences, with the aim to bridge the gap between complex scientific concepts and public understanding, thereby fostering scientific literacy across various target audiences.

Historically, comics have been viewed primarily as entertainment, with their educational potential often underestimated or dismissed. However, scholars, educators, and science communicators have begun to acknowledge the capabilities of comics to engage audiences, simplify complex topics, and foster a deeper emotional and cognitive connection to the subject matter.

This shift in perception positions comics and graphic novels as a valuable medium for the public communication of science (Lin et al., 2014). By combining visual representation with narrative storytelling, science comics present complex scientific concepts in a format that blends text and images, making it easier for readers to understand and retain information (McDermott et al., 2018). This multimodal approach has been highlighted as particularly effective in facilitating learning, as it allows for the simultaneous processing of verbal and visual stimuli (Eilam & Poyas, 2010). In this regard, comics offer an emotionally engaging visual platform, often relying on characters, story arcs, and situations that elicit self-reflexion and emotional attachment from readers. This emotional connection is critical for fostering deeper learning, as individuals tend to retain information more effectively when it is associated with personal or emotional experiences.

More in detail, the potential of comics to enhance public communication practices is rooted in three key dimensions (see Lin et al., 2014), that is: (1) humour; (2) contextualised learning; and (3) visualised learning. First, humour is a distinct feature of comics that can spark readers' interest, increase engagement, and enhance learning outcomes. It can evoke positive emotions, encouraging efforts to learn and promoting more creative thinking. Hence, by incorporating humour, comics can make scientific concepts more accessible and enjoyable, breaking down the

[1] More information about the project is available at this web address: https://www.comicsandscience.it/ (Last accessed 2024-12-10).

perceived complex nature of topics such as physics, biology, or chemistry. This is especially important in science communication, where traditional methods of conveying information can often seem dry or abstract. The second dimension concerns the relevance of comics in contextualising and situating scientific concepts and abstract models of explanations within real-life scenarios, bridging the gap between knowledge and its potential practical applications. In this regard, it has been noted that one of the common challenges in science communication is the difficulty public face in understanding the relevance of fundamental research for addressing everyday challenges (see De Jong et al., 2007). Decontextualised learning and communication materials often contribute to this issue, as they fail to show how scientific principles apply outside of the academic settings. Comics, by contrast, are inherently narrative-driven, which makes them well-suited for contextualising science and technology in a way that is relatable and meaningful. For example, a comic could depict a character applying principles of chemistry or physics in their daily life, helping readers understand how these concepts relate to existing technologies or everyday phenomena (see Weinstein, 2006; Tatalovic, 2009). Third, the visual nature of comics is another crucial dimension in their efficacy as a tool for public communication of science. The combination of visual and verbal representations helps reinforce understanding and retention of scientific concepts and abstract knowledge by integrating multiple visual modes, such as gestural, verbal, and symbolic representations (see Roesky & Kennepohl, 2008). This ability to visualise abstract or difficult-to-grasp concepts is particularly important in fields such as biology, chemistry, and physics, where diagrams, formal procedures, and models can be often seen as complex or obscure depictions of natural occurrences, which might be difficult for non-experts to interpret. For example, comics can illustrate molecular structures or biological processes in a way that is more engaging and easier to comprehend than static textbook images.

While these dimensions concern both fictional and non-fictional comics that have been used to communicate science, each offers distinct advantages and challenges. Fictional comics, such as superhero stories, often contain references to scientific ideas, even if the science is exaggerated or sometimes not necessarily grounded on scientific evidence. These stories provide a cultural arena where the public meaning of science is actively worked out (Locke, 2005). In superhero comics, for instance, authors often attempt to give scientific legitimacy to fantastical superpowers, using

science as a foundation for their narratives. This can inspire curiosity about the real science behind these fictional elements.

Fictional comics have been effectively used in formal educational settings to engage students with scientific principles. For example, teachers have used excerpts from manga to help students memorise biochemistry concepts (Nagata, 1999), while superhero comics have inspired science museum exhibitions that explore the scientific principles behind superpowers (Locke, 2005). While these fictional narratives may not always mobilise evidence-based knowledge, they serve as a starting point for discussion and critical thinking, allowing educators and science communicator practitioners to highlight what is scientifically plausible and what is not.

In contrast, non-fiction science comics are specifically designed to introduce readers to real-life scientific phenomena and concepts, often using fictional techniques to enhance enjoyment and comprehension. The challenge with non-fiction comics lies in balancing the need for scientific accuracy with the entertainment value of the comic. As Tatalovic (2009) points out, if too much emphasis is placed on the scientific message, the quality of the comic's storytelling and artwork may suffer. Conversely, if the comic is too focused on being entertaining, it may dilute the scientific content, reducing its educational impact. This delicate balance is essential for non-fiction comics to be both informative and engaging.

Overall, comics and graphic novels offer a valuable medium for public science communication, blending humour, narrative, and visual learning to engage diverse audiences. However, it has been noted that the dominant approach to producing these works often focuses solely on educational goals, potentially reinforcing the deficit model of communication (Meyer, 2016). In fact, more empirical research and practical experience are needed to fully understand the potential of comics and graphic novels as innovative tools for public engagement in science, using interactive and participatory models beyond a purely educational focus (Farinella, 2018). This objective was pursued in the research project *En-RRI—Enhancing RRI in the Bottom-up Co-creation of Science and Technology*, which aimed to steer innovation processes towards a more participatory approach, enhancing innovation's ethical acceptability, sustainability, and societal desirability. As part of this effort, the project envisioned co-creating three comic stories, engaging concerned stakeholder groups not as passive recipients of communication strategies, but as active participants in the storytelling process and in their co-design.

Enhancing RRI in the Bottom-Up Co-Creation of Science and Technology: The EnRRI Project

In contemporary society, technoscientific innovation increasingly involves interactions between experts and citizens. This growing phenomenon has captured the attention of social studies of innovation, particularly Science and Technology Studies (STS), aiming to understand how collaborative practices between scientific communities, technologists, citizens, and stakeholders can co-define specific innovation trajectories and promote the democratisation of technological developments. This is particularly evident in co-creation initiatives driven by citizen groups (Hyysalo, 2021).

Co-creation can be understood as a set of methodologies and tools that foster collaboration from the early stages of innovation projects among researchers, scientific communities, citizens, and stakeholders. It plays a crucial role in producing social benefits and economic value by shaping and sharing economic, social, experiential, and ethical values among groups and communities, thus supporting technoscientific innovation. Whether aimed at building new knowledge or new technological devices, co-creation offers a means to co-produce solutions to collective challenges. As emphasised by the European Commission (2016) and researchers in STS and innovation studies (Felt & Fochler, 2010; Hochgerner, 2018), co-creation can serve as a practical tool for articulating more socially responsible approaches to technoscientific innovation, such as RRI (see section "Engaging Society in Science Through Artistic Production: The Case of Comics and Graphic Novels"). Co-creation is also relevant for highlighting the societal value of technoscience beyond merely managing risks and unforeseen consequences in innovation processes. Indeed, supporting co-creation initiatives can make research and innovation more ethically and socially responsible while also improving public understanding of technoscience, aligning it with the specific social needs of citizens (Göbel et al., 2017), with a special attention to socially relevant issues that are often overlooked by established research organisations, industry and public authorities.

In this context, the experiential knowledge of citizens and stakeholders—knowledge developed independently and based on personal experiences, such as in the case of biomedical research guided by patient associations—should be considered complementary to the scientific knowledge of research communities. Together, both expert and

experiential knowledge can co-design and co-produce innovative solutions to problems of collective importance.

In this context, the EnRRI project drew on the concept of co-production, as developed by Sheila Jasanoff and colleagues (Jasanoff, 2004), to analyse and understand the relationships between social groups with different expertise in co-creation processes. This concept advocates for the removal of any a priori distinctions between the social and the material, or between science and technology, emphasising their mutual production. Co-production asserts that the ways we understand and represent the world—whether natural or societal—are inseparable from how individuals experience it. Both theoretical knowledge and technological manifestations are products of collective work and fundamental components of social life. Society is shaped by knowledge and technologies, which in turn depend on the social structures necessary for their shaping. Thus, knowledge and technologies are not transcendent entities detached from reality; rather, technoscience is deeply embedded in norms, discourses, identities, social practices, and institutions—all of which constitute society.

Accordingly, the concept of co-production in the EnRRI project has been particularly relevant to question the dichotomy between "expert professionals" and "non-expert citizens", which posits that the latter can only participate in technological innovation in its final stages, as potential "end users" (Callon et al., 2009; Crabu & Magaudda, 2018). Co-production highlights the epistemic diversity of knowledge contributions in participatory technoscientific innovation, especially in bottom-up innovation processes where citizens, associations, or informal groups play a leading role. This becomes even more problematic when considering that STS has shown how technoscientific innovation increasingly occurs outside traditional R&I institutions and organisations, reflecting independent, self-organised processes (Söderberg, 2017). Recent examples include grassroots interventions in environmental epidemiology (De Marchi et al., 2017) and the development of digital infrastructures for democratising online communications and internet usage (Crabu et al., 2016). The actors involved in these initiatives not only support R&I agencies and organisations but also drive the generation of new knowledge, products, and technologically advanced services.

Against this backdrop, the EnRRI project aimed to explore the organisational dynamics, cultures, and socio-technical contexts specific to co-creation initiatives led by Italian informal groups, associations, and citizen

organisations, which often exhibit high spontaneity and low institutionalisation. In doing so, the project sought to deepen understanding of how citizen-led co-creation initiatives can contribute to a substantial redefinition of technoscientific innovation models, fostering greater responsibility and alignment with the social values and needs of the communities they serve. In general terms, the research strategy was based on the idea that, in order to reconstruct the practices of co-creation and their relationships with emerging forms of "de facto" responsibility in detail, the most appropriate approach was to develop case studies. The case study method allows for a focus on emblematic examples, from which it is possible to learn specific aspects that enable the testing of hypotheses and the collection of significant data and information within a particular context. To conduct these case studies, qualitative investigation techniques were developed, including the collection and analysis of various types of documents and the conducting of interviews with key informants for each project.

Doing Responsible Co-Creation Through Comics: The EnRRI Experience

As part of its activities and with the aim of moving from analysis to the diffusion of co-creation, EnRRI undertook the innovative step of producing three comic stories focused on bottom-up, socially responsible innovation. The primary goal of these comics was to communicate, in a way that was both accessible and engaging, how innovation processes, when shaped collaboratively, can more effectively address the needs and concerns of citizens. It is important to say that this activity was not intended merely as an outreach effort, but rather a fully integrated component of the project itself. Moreover, the creation of the comics was a co-creation exercise in itself, reflecting the same approach that the project aimed to promote.

The comics were not a separate deliverable, isolated from the core research outputs of the project. Instead, they were embedded within a broader "Responsible Research and Innovation Toolkit",[2] which was designed for a diverse array of stakeholders, including researchers, policymakers, civil society organisations. This toolkit was intended to serve as a resource for those who sought to initiate and manage co-creative

[2] The toolkit is available at the following link: https://www.enrri.polimi.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ENRRI_fare-e-raccontare-la-co-creazione.pdf (Last accessed 2024-10-18).

innovation efforts, offering practical guidance based on the key findings of the EnRRI project.

In addition to the comic stories, the toolkit featured a set of guiding principles which were designed to provide a framework for implementing bottom-up responsible innovation processes. These principles were drawn from EnRRI's core research insights and included: knowledge and listening, dialogue, reflection, support, and collaboration, all of which are critical to ensuring that co-creation processes are both inclusive and effective.

Accompanying these principles were specific guidelines tailored to the various actors involved in the innovation process and were structured to help each group understand its role and responsibilities in driving co-creation. Furthermore, the toolkit included a repository of practical tools that could be employed in real-world co-creation initiatives. These tools were aimed at helping participants translate the principles and guidelines into concrete actions, enabling them to actively engage in participatory innovation processes.

The drafting of the comic stories themselves was an exercise in co-creation. A graphic designer with experience in science communication was embedded into the research team for a period of seven months. This prolonged period of engagement with the research team and with the project allowed the designer to gain a deep understanding of the project's aims and findings, and to become an active participant in the research process. She attended research meetings, engaged with project advisors, and participated in discussions with the research team.

The process of creating the comics was iterative and highly collaborative, following a logic of co-design. Initially, the researchers drafted basic scenarios, with each scenario corresponding to one of the comic stories. These scenarios were then discussed and refined in multiple rounds of feedback, both within the research group, the members of the co-creation initiatives explored during the research phase of the project, and with the graphic designer. This dialogue between the researchers, the members of the co-creation initiatives and the designer led to the co-production of the scripts. Once the scripts were finalised, the graphic designer created draft storyboards, which were uploaded to an online platform. The research team then provided additional comments and suggestions, allowing for further refinement. This iterative process helped ensure that the final comics would accurately reflect the project's key insights while also being engaging and accessible to a broader audience.

One of the reasons the comic stories were accurate in reflecting the project's insights was their direct connection to the real-world case studies that the EnRRI project had examined. The stories were inspired by the key case studies the research team had analysed, allowing them to incorporate, albeit indirectly, the experiences and perspectives of the social actors involved in the co-creation initiatives that were studied. In this way, the stories were able to present an empirically robust view of how participatory, responsible innovation can work in practice. This approach ensured that the comics did not merely present an abstract or idealised version of co-creation but instead reflected the lived experiences of those who had engaged in these processes.

Moreover, the narrative format, combined with the visual appeal of comics, was meant to reach a wider audience, including individuals who might not engage with academic or policy papers, thus helping to foster a more widespread awareness and understanding of socially responsible innovation practices (Fig. 2.1).

Narrating Co-Creation: EnRRI's Comics About Bottom-Up, Responsible Innovation

As elaborated in the preceding section, the comic stories produced as part of the EnRRI project were inspired directly by the project's case studies and closely mirrored the research results in the three thematic areas examined: healthcare, digital technologies, and the environment. Each comic story serves as a fictional narrative that illustrates a "story of co-creation", highlighting how participatory innovation can create technologies and services that are socially responsible, and address stakeholder needs more effectively than in traditional market-driven processes, ensuring that voices that are otherwise marginalised are heard.

The first story focuses on the concept of digital craftsmanship—a form of production characterised by the use of technologies such as 3D printers, microcomputers for DIY electronics, and online platforms that facilitate the collaborative development of hardware and software. Digital technologies have generated significant expectations regarding the transformation of individuals into "digital craftsmen" possessing the skills to create the products they need independently and fostering innovation from the bottom up. While this transformation is still evolving, the diffusion of digital craftsmanship has been remarkably successful in amplifying perspectives and constituencies that are typically overlooked in conventional,

Fig. 2.1 Comic stories for science and technology co-creation

market-driven innovation frameworks. In this first comic story, we meet Aldo, a small farmer, along with Gino and Tiziana, two open-source hardware enthusiasts who are members of an informal collective dedicated to non-proprietary innovation. Together, they embark on a project to develop a DIY, low-cost sensor network aimed at optimising irrigation systems in the drought-stricken Italian countryside. The story demonstrates how their collective expertise and collaboration lead to the creation of a practical solution that not only addresses Aldo's agricultural needs but also empowers him by providing him with the tools to manage this

resource sustainably. This story encapsulates the essence of digital craftsmanship—challenging traditional economic models that often exclude local knowledge and needs, thereby enabling individuals to leverage technology for social good (Fig. 2.2).

The second comic story shifts focus to the increasing role of civil society organisations in advancing research and innovation in healthcare. This shift occurs against the backdrop of a broader economic and social context characterised by a rising demand for medical care coupled with

Fig. 2.2 Storytelling bottom-up co-creation through comics: Digital craftsmanship

diminishing financial resources available to healthcare systems. The comic narrates the experiences of Annalisa and her son Marco, who suffers from a congenital heart disease. Thanks to the support of a patients' association, they participate in an innovation project aimed at developing a remote health monitoring device tailored specifically to their situation. Through collaboration with others who have firsthand experience with similar health issues, Annalisa and Marco actively engage in the innovation process, which not only empowers them but also results in a technology that meets their specific needs. This engagement fosters a sense of ownership and advocacy, enabling patients to become active participants rather than passive recipients in the healthcare system. The story underlines the importance of integrating the perspectives of those directly affected by health challenges into the innovation process, thereby facilitating the development of solutions that genuinely improve quality of life (Fig. 2.3).

The third and final comic story addresses pressing environmental and sustainability issues related to fossil fuel usage and the consequent need to transition to renewable energy sources. The growing acknowledgement of this necessity has spurred significant interest in alternative, environmentally friendly models of energy production, management, and distribution. In this context, civil society has assumed a crucial role in facilitating this energy transition through the establishment of energy communities. Energy communities consist of local associations made up of diverse stakeholders, including citizens, businesses, public administrations, and small- and medium-sized enterprises. These groups collaboratively produce and share renewable energy, managing green energy autonomously and contributing to the reduction of CO2 emissions and energy waste. The comic features Marco and his aunt Lucia, who actively participate in local discussions to establish an energy community within Lucia's apartment block. Through this participatory process, they share their motivations and concerns with other tenants and owners about creating an energy community to manage a photovoltaic plant installed on their building. The story highlights how local communities can take responsibility for their energy production and learn to adopt more sustainable practices in their daily lives. As Marco and Lucia engage with their neighbours, they explore collective goals, address challenges, and forge stronger community bonds through their shared commitment to sustainability. This narrative serves as a powerful example of how grassroots initiatives can lead to meaningful environmental change (Fig. 2.4).

Fig. 2.3 Storytelling bottom-up co-creation through comics: healthcare technology

Overall, these comic stories provide valuable insights into the key ingredients necessary for successful co-creation and bottom-up innovation, following the logic of principles and guidelines that have been developed by EnRRI. They emphasise the importance of actively listening to users and citizens while valuing their knowledge and experiences. They illustrate the significance of sustaining opportunities for stakeholder dialogue. They highlight the relevance of nurturing a reflective attitude among the

Fig. 2.4 Storytelling bottom-up co-creation through comics: environment and sustainability

involved actors regarding their relationships and the ways these relationships influence the innovation process. Moreover, the narratives underscore the need for developing both formal and informal ties to mobilise the resources and expertise essential for successfully creating infrastructures, devices, and services that cater to the needs of individuals and communities. Each story exemplifies the transformative potential of co-creation, demonstrating how participatory processes can lead to the development of innovations that are responsive to the challenges faced by the different

social actors involved but also contribute to their empowerment and engagement in pursuing shared objectives and goals.

Conclusions

The EnRRI project's innovative approach to co-creating comic narratives as a means of public engagement with scientific research offers valuable insights into the potential of integrating artistic practices into the core activities of scientific endeavour. Firstly, by embedding a graphic designer within the research team, the project transcended traditional boundaries and fostered a synergistic exchange of knowledge and perspectives between science and the arts. This collaborative process not only resulted in engaging comic stories, but also provided a unique opportunity to explore the broader implications of participatory approaches in shaping technoscientific innovation.

Another key lesson to be drawn from EnRRI's experience is the power of comics as a medium for fostering public understanding, dialogue, and participation in scientific research. The comic narratives developed within the project effectively communicated complex concepts and real-world case studies in an accessible and relatable way. By exploiting the strengths of the comic medium, such as its ability to combine visuals, narrative and humour, the project demonstrated how artistic expression can reach audiences who might not normally engage with scientific content through traditional channels. Moreover, the co-creation process itself served as a testament to the value of interdisciplinary collaboration and the integration of different perspectives. By effectively involving stakeholders, citizens and a graphic designer in the research process, the EnRRI project challenged traditional top-down models of science communication and provided a concrete case for experimenting with new models of interaction between the different actors involved.

The experience of the EnRRI project also highlights the potential of comics as a tool for bridging the gap between scientific communities and their audiences. The adopted participatory approach not only enriched the narratives with lived experience and contextual knowledge, but also fostered a sense of empowerment among participants, aligning the innovation process with societal needs and values. The approach adopted by the EnRRI project could inform wider discussions on the democratisation of scientific knowledge production and the co-construction of socially responsible innovation pathways, in line with the pressure on researchers

and scientists to make their activities more accountable and responsive to societal needs, as outlined by the open science framework, particularly in the European research context. By recognising the value of different forms of expertise and promoting inclusive participatory processes, scientific research can be better aligned with societal needs and the different forms of responsibility that characterise the relationship between scientific work and the wider social context.

Overall, the project's findings contribute to the growing body of literature on the role of arts-based approaches in science communication and public engagement. By demonstrating the effectiveness of comics as a medium for disseminating scientific knowledge and facilitating public engagement, the EnRRI project highlights the importance of exploring innovative and interdisciplinary strategies that challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries and communication models. By fostering interdisciplinary collaborations, participatory processes and innovative communication strategies, the approach presented in this chapter not only offers an example of public communication of science in society with comics, but also contributes to the broader goal of exploring new ways of shaping techno-scientific innovation in a participatory and socially responsible way.

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CHAPTER 3

Playing with Gender and Sexuality in Comics and Zines

Rachele Reschiglian and Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

> *At* every moment in their cultural history, comic books have been linked to queerness or to broader questions of sexuality and sexual identity in US society.
> —*D. Scott & Fawaz (2018, p. 198)*

Gender, Sexuality, and Comics: The Intricate Connection Between Representation, Creation, and Consumption

The interplay between gender and comics is intricate and deeply intertwined with various components of the medium itself, from the multimodal representation of specific characters to the creators behind comics as well as the audience that consumes them.

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Mainstream and conventional comics, particularly those in the superhero genre (as Superman, Batman, Spiderman, etc.), were portraying mainly men, strong and invincible figures, reflecting the needs, values, and experiences of a male readership, and the same world of comics was dominated by male creators, with specific characteristics, from a specified race to a clear sexual orientation (Eco, 1964; Gibson, 2017; Mance, 2017). The erasure and superficial representation of non-hegemonic identities, such as women, transgender, and non-binary people, as well as non-normative sexual identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual people, etc., serve to reinforce the straight male imperative and its societal status quo (Gibson, 2017; Mance, 2017).

In the original understanding of comics, as seen in the US and UK production, they were seen as a blueprint for young readers on what it means to be male or female and how to conform to traditional gender roles, a reflection of societal values (Gibson, 2017; Kukkonen, 2013). Due to this, particular attention has been paid to the impact of the gendered representation of the characters involved in the narratives.

Gender representation in comics has historically mirrored dominant societal and cultural stereotypes. The way masculinity is portrayed in popular mainstream comics, as well as femininity and gender nonconformity, both exhibit limitations. These representations often reinforce hegemonic patriarchal and national norms by endorsing a particular set of values and traits that are seen as desirable and acceptable. For example, superhero genre comics were characterised by heteronormative and patriarchal representations of gender, as, for example, it could be perceived in the muscular power representation of superheroes and the over-sexualised illustrations of superheroines (Gibson, 2017).

Focussing on the portrayal of women, it can be seen as existing on a spectrum that changes over time, where some characters challenge traditional gender expectations, while others reinforce societal norms that maintain male dominance. Even the same female comics superhero was undergoing this dual reading. On the one hand, Wonder Woman was first pointed out to be of great inspiration to the audience (Marston, 1943) and was used as a feminist icon from the 1960s (Finn, 2014; Gibson, 2014; Knaff, 2014). On the other hand, other scholars agree that Wonder Woman is a pornographic representation of femininity, rather than a first step towards an emancipated portrayal of women or the deconstruction of gender roles and expectations (Daniels, 2004; Reynolds, 1992).

Expanding on the portrayal of female figures in comics, Gail Simone (1999) compiled in an appointed website "Women in Refrigerators", a long list of representations of female superheroes, who were drawn to death. In fact, Simone wanted to underline this literary trope in which female superheroes in comic books have often been subjected to violent and demeaning plot devices, including sexual assault, and ferocious physical harm, frequently resulting in their deaths or incapacitation. This phenomenon, often referred to as "fridging", raises significant questions about the motivations behind such narrative choices and the impact they have on the representation of female characters in superhero comics. Despite some instances of revivals or reimagining, the prevalence of these tropes remains a concern, highlighting the need for critical examination of the underlying power dynamics and cultural attitudes that perpetuate such portrayals. In fact, such representations of female characters, as also exemplified by Wonder Woman, reflect gendered stereotypical understandings that have been present throughout the history of comics. Rather than challenging male hegemony, these representations reinforce and reproduce it. The collection was made by Simon to draw attention to the portrayal of gendered violence upon women's bodies and characters, pointing out the necessity for advocacy for women in comics, from a more equal representation to their stronger participation in comic creation.

It should be noted that the domination of male creators reigned for a long period during the history of (mainstream) comics, which were not aiming to challenge the heteronormative system (Aldama, 2020). Slowly over time, the world of comics started listening to the voices of women, non-binary, and transgender humans who took roles as authors, illustrators, and scriptwriters. The original and various perspectives given increased the diversity in representation, throwing light on new themes, new genres to unpack in comics, new stories and narratives to be told, pushing the societal and cultural boundaries and challenging the patriarchal and heteronormative system upon gender and sexuality (from gender-based and sexual violence episodes to accounts of gender transition journeys). The freshness of such insights highlights how comics can become sites of exploration of gender and sexuality and much more. Women started showcasing in comics through women's stories; in fact, themes of vulnerability and sexuality suppressed by social norms were illustrated simultaneously, resisting the same social expectations through the portrayal of independence and autonomy (Moretti, 2023).

As collected in the work of Chute (2010), women creators embraced the creative multimodal tools of comics to validate bodies that were neglected and to share their individual, yet collective, experiences. In particular, Chute recognises how the comics genre gained momentum from the access of female comic artists. A new aesthetic in self-representation emerged where contemporary women use graphic narratives to convey powerful nonfiction stories combining visual and verbal elements to represent personal and collective experiences, addressing themes like hybridity, trauma, and the body. The scholar moreover considers these graphic narratives as feminist, as they explore issues often kept private, especially around sexuality and childhood trauma (Chute, 2010, p. 2).

In "*Pretty in Ink: North American Cartoonists, 1896–2013*" (2013), the comics creator Trine Robbins anthologies the endeavours, struggles, and strengths of female authorship of printed comics, presenting their participation in the evolution of genres, themes, and styles of comics. At the beginning of the history of comics, many women had to cover their identity through pseudonyms to hack the industry, others needed to abandon their comic careers to take care of their families, accordingly to the cultural and social norms imposed by the contemporary hegemonic patriarchal system. Throughout the whole volume, Robbins presents the impact of both the presence of female creators and the political efforts of feminism on gender representation in comics. Indeed, she exhibits how with the advent of underground and alternative comix, women cartoonists found their "freer" space to explore the diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.

Moretti (2023) collects some examples of comics that became platforms for challenging female oppression and the same stereotypical representation of women: from the US to Latin America, in which the depiction of the struggles of independent women against the double threat of military tyranny and the cultural patriarchy is shown; from Japan where female representation broke the hegemonic gender rules and explored non-binary identities and addressed real-life issues such as addictions and suicides, to the Middle East where the hijab-wearing superheroine fights against male violence and challenges sexist norms. Furthermore, Fernandez L'Hoeste (2006) emphasises how Maitena's comic strips effectively depitc intersectional struggles. Along with tackling racial and class issues, they delve into intricate sexual themes and challenge traditional gender norms for young women in Argentina.

The growing personal agency of women in both comic representation and creation is closely tied to the gender dynamics of the audience of the same graphic media. Although comic consumption was never intended or designed to exclusively encompass men, historically it has been dominated by male readers, largely due to the industry's focus on genres and narratives that suited heteronormative masculine interests and social expectations (Gibson, 2017; Mance, 2017).

Although the shift towards more nuanced and empowered female characters and involvement of women creators was gradual, it mirrored the broader social transformation led by feminist social movements, aiming for societal and cultural gender equality, as also thoroughly shown by the study of Streeten (2020) for the UK context. This leads to a more inclusive audience that signals a first disruption of the traditionally male-dominated culture of comics, challenging the underlying assumptions of comics seen as a heteronormative male-centric medium.

Even academia played an important role in reaffirming these assumptions about the gendered realm of comics. As a matter of fact, Suzanne Scott, building on Gail Simone's metaphor of "Women in Refrigerators", coined the phrase "Fangirls in refrigerators" to highlight the overlooked and marginalised female readership. Her work sheds light on how female fans, despite their increasing numbers and influence, have often been disregarded or stereotyped by both the comic industry and academia. In fact, in her study, she argues that for a long time, even scholars have reinforced the gendered comic book readership, treating it as predominantly male and overlooking the diverse community of female creators and readers (2013).

This critical analysis highlights a larger cultural shift. As more female creators and audiences assert their presence in the comic world, the content, themes, and genres begin to evolve, reflecting an extensive array of experiences and identities. This turn has been significant in expanding the appeal of comics to a broader public, reshaping the industry, and challenging the long-standing gendered assumptions that have shaped both production and consumption.

Nonetheless, Scott and Fawaz (2018, p. 199) advance the idea of viewing the history of sexuality (and gender understanding) and the evolution of comics as mutually shaping each other, rather than being merely coincidental or reflective, to understand better how the multimodal structures of comic books not only engage with questions of sexuality and sexual/gender identity, but have also evolved in response to shifts in the history

of sexuality itself. Moreover, recognising the social genre of comics in relation to gender qualifies the same medium as a space for feminist, queer, and even intersectional issues to be finally portrayed and exposed, where unspoken themes such as female victimisation can find a powerful tool to be shared or everyday gendered struggles can be illustrated and made as a tool for questioning the hegemonic heteronormative sexist culture.

Enriching the discourse about representation, creators, and audience of comics to the non-heterosexual and non-normative identities such as queer and trans (often recognised by the acronym LGBTQ+) creates opportunities to further discuss the social genre of comics in relation to gender and sexuality. To begin with, the binary representation of characters was for a long time seen as a non-inclusive representation of gender-diverse individuals, but:

> Ask comics readers […] about LGBTQ+ comics, and you are more likely than not to hear back about comics that depict LGBTQ+ characters and experiences or that otherwise acknowledge the existence of queer people, if the readers you asked can think of any. (Warren, 2022, p. 265)

In fact, navigating mainstream comics allows and gives space for the audience to personally reframe and signify what is normally being portrayed by the creators, resonating with the semiotic understanding of Eco (1976). Here, the collision between the agency of the audience and the gendered representation in comics creates a great opportunity to play around gender and sexuality on several occasions, even before the advent of queer and trans comic creators.

In comics, LGBTQ+ representations have not been of exclusive prerogative for trans and queer comics artists. Rather, trans and queer personae and narratives were first introduced in the mainstream comics by heterosexual, cisgender, male cartoonists, as they were the largest community of creators. In mainstream comics, queer sexualities and non-normative gender identities were not portrayed explicitly, but subtly (Mance, 2017). In the US, a huge impact on the scope of gender nonconformity and queer sexuality representation occurred after the publication of the Code by the Comics Code Authority in 1954 (CCA, the controlling organ of the Comics Magazine Association of America, formed by the greatest US publishers). The Code was ruling on the standard of representation, calling for decorum and tastefulness, restricting the possibility for comics creators to portray mainly heteronormative, monogamous

relationships (*The Comics Code of 1954—Comic Book Legal Defense Fund*, n.d.). This lasted for more than 35 years, and only in 1989 the CCA revised the Code to lift the prohibition of portraying queer and trans characters, while still avoiding the explicit representation of sexual activities (*Comics Code Revision of 1989—Comic Book Legal Defense Fund*, n.d.). During the prohibition, there were still subtle depictions of queerness, from non-heterosexual attraction, to gender reassignment themes (Mance, 2017).

Halsall and Warren (2022) thoroughly mark the historical milestones of LGBTQ+ comics as a unique, evolving subgenre in comics scholarship. More and more queer and transgender artists have accessed comics to portray and share their experiences, using the flexibility of the medium and its potential visualities and narratives. Galvan (2024) highlights how comics can challenge traditional gender norms, providing a platform for non-binary and trans identities. Moreover, Galvan emphasises the agency and role of trans creators in shaping the same narratives, crucial in reflecting the nuanced realities of trans lives through both the art and storytelling opportunities of comics.

From their origins to their future path, LGBTQ+ comics serve as powerful tools for visibility and transformation in queer culture, not only engaging with cultural representational and curational issues but fostering community and activism, breaking the traditional boundaries of comic production and readership (Halsall & Warren, 2022).

Indeed, alongside the experimentation of the depiction of masculinity and femininity, LGBTQ+ representations were to be seen in the scenes of comics from the mainstream ones to the more underground alternatives. Wider space, liberty, and recognition of such non-normative identities were given to the same LGBTQ+ creators in independent, alternative, underground comic industries which can be traced back to the mid-1960s (Chute, 2019; Mance, 2017; Watson, 2023).

Nevertheless, Scott and Fawaz (2018) critically reflect upon the need to deconstruct the analytical eye to navigate queerness and gender diversity even in comic spaces which might initially reflect a more homonormative understanding, avoiding the complete discharge of mainstream comics as valuable sites of identity and sexual exploration:

> The prevailing assumption that mainstream comics (namely, the superhero genre) embody nationalistic, sexist, and homophobic ideologies has led many queer theorists to dismiss comics altogether or else to celebrate a lim-

> ited sample of politically palatable alternative comics as exemplars of queer visual culture. In this logic, "Queer zines, yes! Superhero comics, no". (Scott & Fawaz, 2018, p. 197)

According to Scott and Fawaz (2018), comics provide the best environment to disrupt and explore gender and sexualities norms, queering the heteronormative understanding of them, powerfully. As said by these scholars, comics have been long seen as a marginal art, not worthy of social recognition due to the "childish" nature of the visual and textual modes that craft it, attracting readers who identify as social outcasts or minorities. The audiences connect with the graphic text because of the outcasted nature of the same medium, which serves as a space for counterpublics, where non-normative groups find resonance and community, as it can be found in "The Girl From The Sea" (2021) by Molly Knox Ostertag, a coming of age fantasy fiction comic in which Morgan, a teen girl, discovers her attraction to a Keltie, a mysterious selkie, and "Nimona" (2012) by ND Stevenson, a fantasy/science fiction graphic novel on the adventures of Nimona, a gender-bending shapeshifter who becomes the sidekick of Lord Ballister Blackheart, a disgraced villain determined to expose the corruption of the heroic institution of the country.

Secondly, the multimodal low-tech crafts of comics allow for an expansive representation of freedom. Comics can represent anything that can be drawn, freed from the concern for realism, making it ideal for portraying fantastical characters and non-normative gender and sexual expressions. This flexibility has allowed comics to explore a wide range of queer and trans identities and relationships, both metaphorically and literally, offering readers alternative social and political possibilities. Many scholars and comic artists use the tool to also portray the evolution and provide some guides to the journey of queerness, gender and sexual exploration, as the works of Meg-John Barker with Julia Scheele "Queer: A Graphic History" (2016), "Gender: A Graphic Guide" (2019), and "Sexuality: A Graphic Guide" (2021). These comic essays use accessible and visually engaging formats to break down complex theories, historical contexts, and lived experiences surrounding queerness, gender identity, and sexuality. Barker and Scheele explore the social constructs surrounding identity and how queerness challenges normative frameworks of sexuality and gender, and how sexuality has been historically shaped by humans and cultures, while unpacking topics like consent, desire, and sexual politics. Being more than educational tools, these guides are acts of representation that bring

visibility to marginalised and complex perspectives. It highlights the power of comics as a medium for deconstructing stereotypes, fostering empathy, and sparking conversations about identity.

Lastly, the structure of comics reflects the liberation from the fixed narrative possibilities, opening to unpredictability of the plot, and mirroring how fantasy can shape our understanding of reality in fluid ways. This openness to change and reinterpretation allows comics to explore diverse opportunities and realities.

The Potentials of Alternative Forms of Comics for the Exploration of Gender and Sexuality: The Case of Zines

Even though comics can be considered as intrinsic loci of fluid, freed exploration in relation to identities (and to gender), the comic industries were pushing towards editorial narrative rules and publication/censorship choices, constraining severely the liberties of creators in their creative representations, and crafting normative audiences for their products.

Therefore, during the 1970s and 1980s, alternative forms of graphic media emerged as a response to these mainstream conceptions of comics (Hatfield, 2005). Alternative comics (or underground comix) reflect the construction of unconventional forms of comics, which could refer to different qualities such as the themes portrayed, the genre, the style used, but also the audience expected and their production and distribution processes (Rose, 2022). The underground and alternative production of comics was also strongly rooted in the need for feminist and LGBTQ+ subjectivities to find a space for identity discovery and community creation. Moreover, the evasive nature of underground comics permitted the publication of openly queer and trans subjects, while resisting the conventional urge to control gender representation within the comic media production.

Among these was the rise of minicomics, which are small, self-published comic books produced in limited quantities and often distributed directly by their creators. These works catered to niche audiences, typically composed of subcultures with distinct tastes and interests (Singsen, 2022). By rejecting conventional comic genres and experimenting with avant-garde styles, minicomics appealed to readers who sought alternatives to the dominant trends in the comic book industry. This direct, creator-to-reader distribution model not only fostered intimate connections between artists

and their audiences but also positioned minicomics as a site of creative resistance, where artistic boundaries could be pushed without the constraints of commercial publishing.

Minicomics share the same political, cultural, and ideological stances as (fan)zines. With deep roots in the tradition of independent publishing, zines have evolved over the past century into important cultural artefacts and unique multimodal forms of communication.

Already the definition of (fan)zines troubled even the zinesters (their same creators) as their nature is rebelling against the boundaries of the genre, styles, themes, and modalities (Duncombe, 1997; Triggs, 2010).

Settling for a simpler and broader definition to embrace the whole, zines are to be outlined roughly as unruly self-published and DIY publications that are vehicles for personal expression, community making, and/or societal transformation (Creasap, 2014; Duncombe, 1997; Triggs, 2010). According to Bartel (2004), the definition of zines as being self-published, small-circulation periodicals that are typically created by individuals or collectives, often driven by personal passion rather than commercial motivations is rather compressing the liberating potential of the same means. In fact, while this definition provides a general understanding of the medium, it fails to capture the complexity and diversity of zine culture. The lack of standardised guidelines, regulations, and definitions in the world of zines can be unsettling, as it challenges traditional notions of media production and consumption. The inherent DIY ethos and anti-commercial nature of zines resist categorisation, making it difficult to establish a precise and comprehensive definition of the medium. Instead, zines exist on a continuum, defying rigid boundaries and embracing a fluid, heterogeneous identity. Zine culture embraces even more variety, complexity, and messiness than the same "definition" of zines (Bartel, 2004; Cooper, n.d.; Duncombe, 1997).

In the world of comics, the first fanzines emerged in the 1930s as a product of science fiction fandom in the US, but their origins and understandings have been multiple and even before that same historical moment (as portrayed in Fig. 3.1). These self-published DIY magazines covered a range of topics, including science fiction and comics, and were produced by fans for fans, providing a platform for enthusiasts to share their interests and connect with like-minded individuals (Triggs, 2006).

As shown by the zine taxonomy provided by Duncombe (1997) and the depiction of Meg-John Barker (Fig. 3.1), (fan)zines engage with several different themes and modalities. In fact, zines were initially embraced

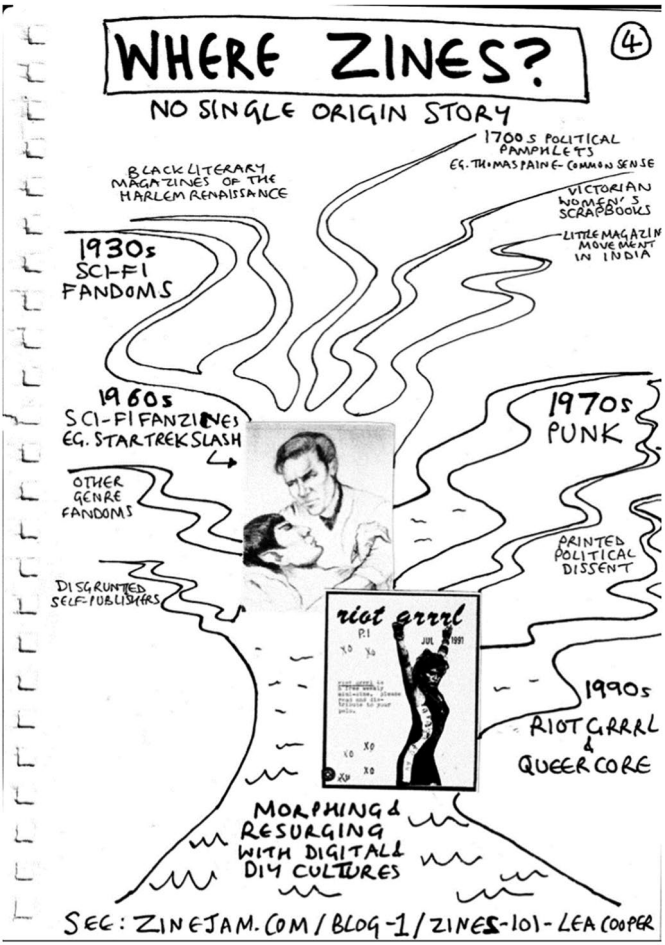


Fig. 3.1 'Where Zines? No Single Origin Story' from Meg-John Barker's zine "Zine-maker—A Zine about Zining" (retrieved on https://www.rewriting-the-rules.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ZineMaker-1.pdf)

by not only sci-fi enthusiasts, but also music fans, and political activists, such as feminist movements and punk/alternative subcultures.

Many studies on punk, queer, and DIY cultures show that zine-making is a common practice and zines are often seen as important cultural

artefacts (Downes et al., 2013; Guerra & López, 2021). Guerra and López (2021) explain that they create emotional connections and encourage critical self-reflection, acting both as spaces for expression and as meaningful objects. They also point out that

> queer and feminist fanzines emerged from an individual frustration towards the misconstruction that mainstream media was doing around their messages and claims. Since then, DIY has emerged as a weapon to combat these conceptions. It asserted itself as a weapon and a revolt, and it gained proportions never seen before, especially where alternative media were concerned. (Guerra & López, 2021, p. 5)

In fact, these self-produced, often handmade publications serve as platforms for marginalised voices, fostering networks of shared interests, ideologies, and personal accounts outside of conventional media.

As Triggs (2010, p. 9) strongly portrays in her book. Contemporary zinesters remain devoted to the fanzine format as a means of articulating their personal perspectives, opinions, and experiences, which often intersect with broader social and political issues. The authenticity of zines lies in their authorial voice, where the personal and the political converge, unencumbered by the commercial imperatives of mainstream media. By operating on the periphery of dominant cultural institutions, zinesters reject the conventions of professional design and literary publishing, instead forging their own distinctive identities through their writing and DIY aesthetics. Through this DIY ethos, zines acquire a unique value, contributing to and reflecting the everyday cultural experiences of their creators and audiences, and thus offering a distinctive counterpoint to mainstream cultural narratives.

Whether focusing on subcultures or political dissent, zines have continually offered a valuable alternative space for grassroots expression and community-building, playing a crucial role in the dissemination of radical ideas, and countercultural narratives, and combatting moral panics (Watson, 2023).

Zines and Minicomics as Tools for Social Change

Duncombe (1997) already pointed out the importance of zines as tools for inhabiting the personal politics and its relevance for the underdogs, the losers, the everyperson for finding a space to be human. Although their

marginal status, the themes, and concerns that animate the world of zines are remarkably universal. At their core, zines grapple with fundamental human questions that transcend their marginalised context: the quest for individual identity and self-expression, the importance of community and social support, the pursuit of meaningful existence, and the desire for creative agency and self-authorship. These fundamental concerns are shared across cultures and societies, and the zine movement's engagement with them underscores the medium's capacity to tap into and reflect broader human experiences and aspirations.

The same zine culture is rooted in the fact that there is a shared belief that the individual can make the difference, has the power to be part of a societal change and that "the act of publishing a zine is, to some extent, a political act in and of itself, and I think many zinesters are very conscious of this fact" (Bartel, 2004, p. 19). Such alternative communicative and self-reflexive tools were providing spaces and fluid networks that could connect and unite humans with shared interests, passions, politics, as "a site of uncensored imagination and creativity" (Chidgey, 2020, p. 1).

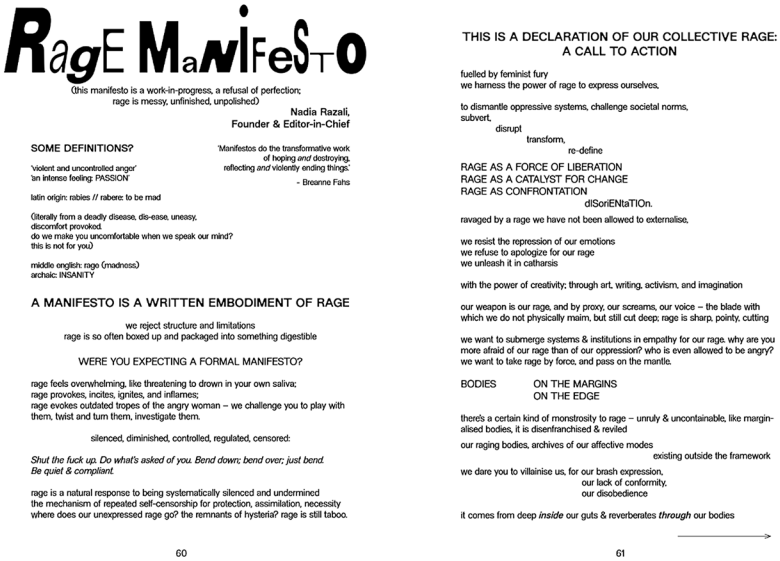
Zines and underground comix are not just cultural and artistic products, but they are used by the same makers as a "political mode of engagement and creates new forms of active citizenship practices. Zines operate as an affective site for sharing information and encouraging autonomous cultural production, whether this means making your own menstruation cloth pads, supporting others in creating their own media, or setting up groups or cultural events" (Chidgey, 2020, p. 4). Besides, the connection between gender and sexual exploration, queerness, and zine and minicomics cultures is significant because all three are deeply rooted in performativity. In fanzines, this performative aspect creates a space where resistance to heteronormative structures can take shape (Guerra & López, 2021; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). Zine-making is more than a creative endeavour—a powerful form of self-assertion, offering creators the opportunity to challenge mainstream narratives and reimagine both personal and collective identities. For marginalised groups, particularly within feminist and queer communities, zines serve as a platform to express frustrations, hopes, and critiques of oppressive societal norms. In this way, zine-making transcends mere self-expression, evolving into a form of activism that empowers individuals to take bold, provocative stances against the systems of power they confront, as a form of everyday activism (Chidgey, 2014). This process underscores the potential for creative rebellion and meaningful dialogue within feminist and queer movements.

Zines and underground comics become sites for social change, from being acts of resistance (Chidgey, 2014; Nijsten, 2017) to pedagogy (Chidgey, 2014; Creasap, 2014), from tools of empowerment (Ross & Pears, 2022) and for organising within social movements (Matich et al., 2024) to community archives (Baker & Cantillon, 2022).

Zines function as sites of resistance, particularly against heteronormative and patriarchal gender and sexuality expectations, as well as societal body norms (Piepmeier, 2009). Nijsten (2017) explores how zine creators use this DIY medium to challenge mainstream ideals around bodies, beauty standards, and identity, emphasising that zines empower marginalised individuals, allowing them to subvert the harmful narratives perpetuated by mass media and foster a more inclusive, body awareness culture, with individual and collective strategies. Zines are tools for education and awareness-raising around breaking the gender and sexuality norms, as an alternative source of information, but also tools for self-care and healing, while creating communities and support networks (Nijsten, 2017). By disrupting traditional ideas of beauty and gender, zines act as tools of rebellion, in their materiality enabling individuals to reclaim autonomy over their bodies and identities while building solidarity as "it creates pleasure, affection, allegiance, and vulnerability" (Piepmeier, 2008, p. 230) within marginalised communities (D. Ross & Pears, 2022). Through personal stories, artwork, and critical commentary, zine-makers reject normative expectations of body image, gender, and sexuality, creating a space where alternative representations of bodies can flourish. Zines, in this context and the ones presented before, become powerful forms of resistance, challenging dominant discourses and creating room for diverse, non-normative bodies and experiences (Figs. 3.2 and 3.3).

Zines, due to their DIY, multimodal, and flexible nature, become important tools for creating pedagogical opportunities and processes (Chidgey, 2014; Creasap, 2014). In educational contexts, zines bridge the gap between theory and practice, enabling participants to engage with complex ideas through personal expression. They provide self-reflexive spaces that align with the feminist slogan "the personal is political", allowing learners to explore political and social issues through personal narratives and creative formats. This promotes critical thinking and links individual experiences with broader societal movements, fostering deeper engagement in the learning process (Creasap, 2014) (Fig. 3.4).

Particularly in relation to contemporary feminist groups (and queer ones), Matich et al. (2024) recognise in zines and their relational and



RagE MaNIFeSTo

(this manifesto is a work-in-progress, a refusal of perfection;
rage is messy, unfinished, unpolished.)

Nadia Razali,
Founder & Editor-in-Chief

SOME DEFINITIONS?

'violent and uncontrolled anger'
'an intense feeling: PASSION'

'Manifestos do the transformative work of hoping *and* destroying, reflecting *and* violently ending things.'
- Breanne Fahs

latin origin: rabies // rabere: to be mad

(literally from a deadly disease, dis-ease, uneasy,
discomfort provoked.
do we make you uncomfortable when we speak our mind?
this is not for you)

middle english: rage (madness)
archaic: INSANITY

A MANIFESTO IS A WRITTEN EMBODIMENT OF RAGE

we reject structure and limitations
rage is so often boxed up and packaged into something digestible

WERE YOU EXPECTING A FORMAL MANIFESTO?

rage feels overwhelming, like threatening to drown in your own saliva;
rage provokes, incites, ignites, and inflames;
rage evokes outdated tropes of the angry woman – we challenge you to play with them, twist and turn them, investigate them.

silenced, diminished, controlled, regulated, censored:

Shut the fuck up. Do what's asked of you. Bend down; bend over; just bend. Be quiet & compliant.

rage is a natural response to being systematically silenced and undermined
the mechanism of repeated self-censorship for protection, assimilation, necessity
where does our unexpressed rage go? the remnants of hysteria? rage is still taboo.

60

THIS IS A DECLARATION OF OUR COLLECTIVE RAGE:
A CALL TO ACTION

fuelled by feminist fury
we harness the power of rage to express ourselves,

to dismantle oppressive systems, challenge societal norms,
subvert,
disrupt
transform,
re-define

RAGE AS A FORCE OF LIBERATION
RAGE AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE
RAGE AS CONFRONTATION
dISoriENtaTIOn.

ravaged by a rage we have not been allowed to externalise,

we resist the repression of our emotions
we refuse to apologize for our rage
we unleash it in catharsis

with the power of creativity; through art, writing, activism, and imagination

our weapon is our rage, and by proxy, our screams, our voice – the blade with which we do not physically maim, but still cut deep; rage is sharp, pointy, cutting

we want to submerge systems & institutions in empathy for our rage. why are you more afraid of our rage than of our oppression? who is even allowed to be angry? we want to take rage by force, and pass on the mantle.

BODIES ON THE MARGINS
ON THE EDGE

there's a certain kind of monstrosity to rage – unruly & uncontainable, like marginalised bodies, it is disenfranchised & reviled

our raging bodies, archives of our affective modes
existing outside the framework

we dare you to villainise us, for our brash expression,
our lack of conformity,
our disobedience

it comes from deep *inside* our guts & reverberates *through* our bodies

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Fig. 3.2 Rage Manifesto from Rage Zine (@ragezine) retrieved at https://issuu.com/ragezine/docs/ragezinevolume1

dissident nature a beneficial contribution in organising dissent and (feminist) social movements. Through underground, multimodal self-production, zines foster an alternative space for self-expression, collective memory, and social change, while connecting people. The DIY nature of zines also enhances grassroots mobilisation, creating a dynamic and accessible platform for building networks of resistance, encouraging direct action, and sustaining feminist and queer movements.

The transgression of the rules of (self-)representation and queer politics in zines flourished in the numerous accounts of zines and alternative comix that are collected in several physical and digital queer archives such as the QZAP (Queer Zine Archive Project[1]), Sherwood Forest Zine Library,[2]

[1] https://gittings.qzap.org/ (Lastly retrieved 19/10/2024).
[2] https://www.sherwoodforestzinelibrary.org/virtual-zine-library-recently-added / (Lastly retrieved 20/10/2024).

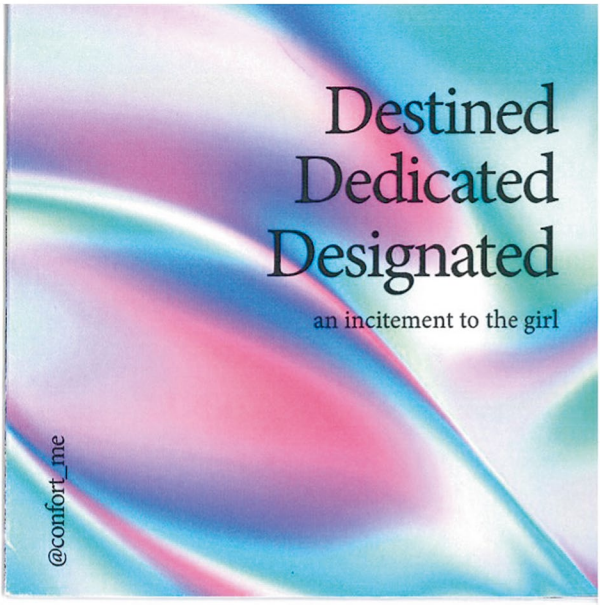

Fig. 3.3 Destined, Dedicated, Designated (@confort_me): cover of a multimodal zine about resisting and enraging women's social expectations

and many more. Following the definitions of archive offered by Ahmed[3] (2019, p. 20), it is important to remember that zines act as alternative knowledge sites, collecting personal accounts and expertise of marginalised individuals throughout the last decades, for self-help and accounts of resisting practices. In their nature, they are repositories of the histories of cultures that exist, while the hegemonic one tends to erase them (Baker & Cantillon, 2022).

[3] An archive too can be built; we can be more or less at home there, even if we assemble our own archives from bits and pieces that are available because of where we have been. A useful archive could be thought of as a form of memory, a way of holding onto things. To use an object is to create a memory that is shared. Each time something is used, we accumulate more stuff to remember with. And to create an archive is to make a body, each part being of use to that body, although how a part is to be of use remains to be known. The act of building such an archive is not exhausted or exhaustive; there are things forgotten, paths not followed. (Ahmed, 2019, p. 20)

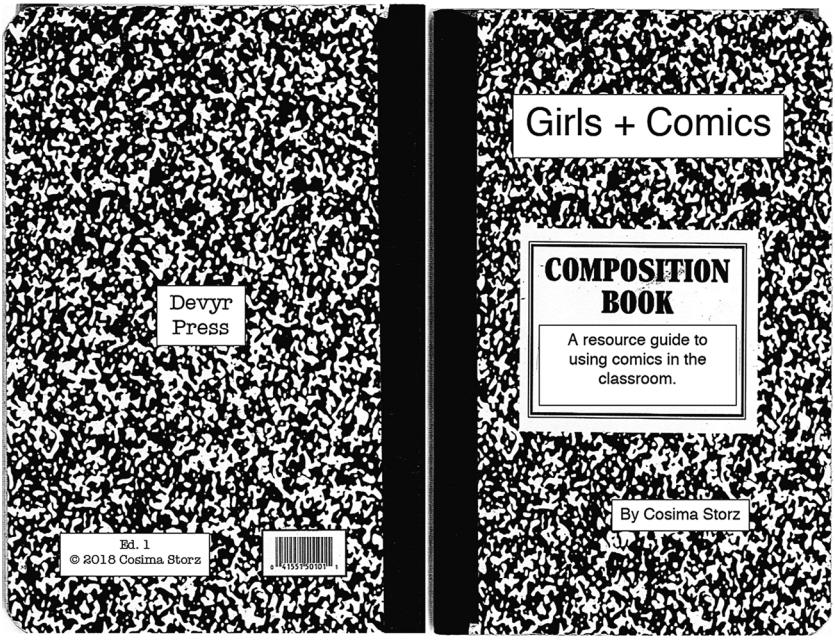

Fig. 3.4 Cover of Girls+Comics—an educational zine about the use of comics (by and for girls) in classrooms. Retrieved https://www.sherwoodforestzinelibrary.org/_files/ugd/8c0bf9_3e1ab5904ff9405bb09a335849e478a9.pdf

Grrrls and Feminist Fanzines

Focusing more on feminist and queer fanzines, we can find an important turning point in the '90s. From the birth in Olympia and Washington D.C. of the punk feminist political and musical movement Riot Grrrl (Piepmeier, 2009) as a response to the male-dominated world of music and punk (Triggs, 2010), the gender exploration and revolution against the systematic patriarchal and hegemonic societal order has been lived and embodied through the use of zines and their politics (Chidgey, 2020). The movement is creating new spaces for postfeminist authorship, as portrayed by Comstock (2001), which are characterised by a dynamic and adaptive nature, encompassing shifting spatialities, purposes, imagined audiences, contents, and political effects. This phenomenon offers a unique perspective into the evolving boundaries of contemporary

authorship and countercultural production. Notably, the movement is also engaging with critical discourses surrounding feminism and girlhood in the US context, while concurrently responding to the patriarchal underpinnings of the punk and zine scenes. By doing so, the movement was contributing to a redefinition of feminist praxis and challenging the dominant power structures that have historically marginalised women's voices in these cultural spheres (Comstock, 2001).

Starting as political projects, zines provide a critical platform for exploring and challenging various forms of social and cultural oppression, facilitating a critical examination of the intersections of everyday sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, and ableism, allowing authors to navigate and challenge these forms of oppression in a personal and collective manner. As descripted by Chidgey (2020), through these self-published texts, women are able to engage in nuanced discussions of critical issues, including the societal construction of body image and the perpetuation of unattainable beauty standards. Moreover, zines offer a space for survivors to share their experiences of sexual violence and harassment, and for individuals to document their struggles with and recovery from eating disorders and self-harming behaviours (Chidgey, 2020).

Furthermore, feminists used the power of zine as a way to portray diverse topics, which were related to cultural gendered taboos or untold stories, without the fear of censorship. In fact, it is important to note that most of the accounts in feminist and grrrl zines are adopting "a women's autobiographical approach (such as diaries and storytelling narratives) reflecting personal opinions and aspirations that were by their very nature a critique of the punk zines that had come before" (Triggs, 2010, p. 131). The slogan "Personal is Political" is taken to another level in the world of alternative multimodal media, such as minicomics and zines (Chidgey, 2020; Duncombe, 1997; Piepmeier, 2009), as a form of life writing (Poletti, 2008). Following Piepmeier (2009, p. 36), the creative endeavours of girls and women in and through zines may appear to be intensely personal, but they are, in fact, embedded in a broader theoretical framework that underscores the transformative potential of grrrl zines. These zines offer a vision of a future feminist praxis that is adaptable, responsive, and inclusive. By documenting the evolution of feminist thought and action, grrrl zines demonstrate the capacity of feminism to reinvent itself in response to shifting cultural contexts. Furthermore, they provide a platform for girls and women to construct and negotiate their social identities, as well as to develop innovative and interventionist approaches to political

activism. In this sense, grrrl zines represent a vital site of feminist experimentation and innovation, one that holds significant promise for the future of feminist theory and practice.

The iconicity of Riot grrrl fanzines is reflecting the relationship between the personal and visual identity of such products. In fact, the adoption of punk aesthetics—like photo-booth images, hand-drawn comics, collages, and ransom-note lettering—was combined with individual DIY style, visuals, and icons associated with femininity. The combination of such visuals reinforced the message that riot grrrls could choose and embrace both feminism and femininity (Triggs, 2010). Moreover, riot grrrl zines often play with the contrast between "feminine" and "masculine" symbols, creating iconic, paradoxical imagery. Triggs (2010, p. 132) portrays the example of the appropriation of the Japanese character Hello Kitty by third-wave feminist groups, specifically the riot grrrl movement, which serves as a notable example of cultural subversion. Hello Kitty was recontextualised by riot grrrls as a symbol of both femininity and commodity fetishism, highlighting the complex and often contradictory nature of feminine identity. Within the context of riot grrrl fanzines, Hello Kitty was reimagined as a radical icon, reclaiming the term "girly" and challenging traditional notions of femininity. This recontextualisation was achieved through a post-punk aesthetic characterised by high-contrast photocopied imagery, deliberate degradation of text, and collage-like layering of cut-out texts, which served to disrupt and subvert the original meaning of the character. By reappropriating and reinterpreting Hello Kitty, riot grrrls were able to create a new, feminist iconography that simultaneously critiqued and celebrated feminine identity.

In the work "Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism" (2009), Piepmeier understands zines as resisting spaces for gender play, in which *third wave subjectivities* are created in their complexity and creativity. In fact, these zines capture the challenges of female embodiment, redefine rebellious models of womanhood, and foster communities centred on joy and empowerment, while portraying fragmented and incomplete self-representations that are tentative, multilayered, and sometimes contradictory, reflecting the complexities of a late-capitalist, postmodern world.

Both Piepmeier (2009) and Triggs (2010) recollect the efforts of third wave feminists to use zines and minicomics as tools to question and challenge the concepts of identity, sexuality and their representation, queer politics and gender equality in every aspect of the everyday experience, articulating theory and creating community.

Queer Experiences in Alternative Forms of Comics and Zines

Following the same path as feminist punk movements, the political liberty offered by alternative communicative means were strongly embraced also by queers from the advent of punk and subcultural movements, namely the evolution from Homocore to Queercore. In particular, "'Queercore' invokes a movement that is by and for not only homosexuals, but genderqueers, transgender folks and all those whose gender and/or sexual identities fall outside restrictive male/female, heterosexual/homosexual binaries" (Nault, 2017). The scope of the topics, (self-)representations, issues are enlarged by the same complexity that queerness embraces: transness, gender diversity, non-normative sexuality, sexual health, and more. Some examples can be found in "Corpi Invisibili" (2024) edited by Antonia Caruso, an anthology that amplifies the voices of trans and non-binary creators in Italy, touching on themes such as dysphoria, euphoria, and the resilience found in trans joy; "Gender Queer: A Memoir" (2019) of Maia Kobabe, a personal work that navigates the complexities of non-binary and asexual identities navigating a word structured around binary norms; "Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic" (2006) by Alison Bechdel, a graphic memoir that explores themes of queerness, family dynamics, and identity through the lens of Bechdel's own life; and "Queeranta" (2024) by Chiaralascura, a tragi-comic memoir/fiction of a middle age fat woman, an exploration of queer life and ageing, offering a perspective that challenges the often youth-centric narratives of LGBTQ+ representation.

The contemporary alternative experiences of queer, transgender, and gender diverse artists find space to cultivate transgender subjectivities in the conjunction of comics and zine languages and strategies, complexifying the landscape of indented underground movements, as they enabled queers comics to emerge (Jackson, 2022).

Focussing on gender diverse experiences, the tools of minicomics, alternative personal graphic novels, and comic zines are strongly used to portray, discuss and challenge the narratives and personal accounts about transgender bodies, subjectivities, and transgender issues (Jackson, 2022). In the specific account of transgender and gender diverse subjects, the questions about gender and sexuality are intertwined and cross the limitations of labels imposed by heteronormative societies. Many explored the potential of such media, as "Transgender Homebody" (2023) by Nuka Horvat, a personal and introspective minicomic that explores the complexities of navigating gender dysphoria while embracing the healing

power of mundane, everyday activities, as cooking, cleaning, and existing in a space where one feels safe. Another example can be found in "I'm Fine I'm Fine Just Understand" (2021) by ND Stevenson, a e-minicomic that collects personal challenges and triumphs of ND Stevenson's transition, mental health, and the gender identity evolution, shedding light on the complexities of self-discovery and acceptance within the transgender community.

The specificity of the autobiographical stories of transgender experiences, as the above presented, can report accounts of gender dysphoria and euphoria in trans/nonbinary subjects in new multimodal ways that can represent the conflicts with the societal lived experience by subjects. The possibility offered by the medium and the liberty to move across the comic industries' boundaries provide space for the recognition of specific personal lived experiences, as the diverse and freed tools can portray a wide array of experiences of transforming bodies and sexualities, liberated from the constraint of normative visual and editorial languages of comics.

Examples of such can be found in the alternative/underground work of transgender and gender diverse artists in Italy as Fumettibrutti, Nicky Daigoro, and Mx. Jona (Mush).

Fumettibrutti made her debut in the alternative comix scene with a series of biographical graphic novels that candidly chronicle her experiences as a trans teenager. Her raw, unapologetic, sexually explicit storytelling invites readers into the emotional and physical complexities of her journey, shedding light on both the painful and uplifting aspects of navigating gender identity. Throughout her work, representations of gender dysphoria and euphoria are vividly depicted, offering a nuanced portrayal of the contrasting emotional states many trans individuals experience, in particular as a transwoman herself. These themes are seamlessly woven into her visual narrative, allowing readers to witness the highs and lows of self-discovery and affirmation (Fumettibrutti, 2023).

Nicky Daigoro (@nickydaigoro on Instagram) is a self-published comic artist who skilfully blends the visual language of traditional comics with deeply personal narratives. In his works, he delves into themes central to his transness journey, using storytelling to explore the complexities of gender identity and self-discovery. Through his art, he brings to life two symbolic characters: Gender Euphoria, a heroic figure representing moments of self-affirmation and empowerment, and Gender Dysphoria, an antihero embodying the struggles, the ennui, and apathy that often accompany gender exploration (Fig. 3.5). These characters accompany Daigoro

Fig. 3.5 Nicky Daigoro @nickydaigoro—From the self-published work "DAIGORO alla ricerca del giusto equilibrio"

on an ongoing, metaphorical adventure, as he navigates the delicate balance between embracing his true self and confronting the challenges of societal and personal expectations surrounding gender and sexuality.

Mx. Jona (Mush, on Instagram @transmush) is an artivist who uses graphic mediums, such as zines, to narrate their nonbinary experience while also supporting the queer community in Italy and across Europe. Through these zines, Mx. Jona not only shares their personal journey but also provides valuable resources about sexual health, sexual pleasure, and queer rights. Their work bridges the gap between personal expression and community activism, blending creativity with advocacy. By producing a

range of materials—from informative and political zines to independent graphic novels and comic zines—Mush taps into the power of self-published, accessible art to challenge societal norms and promote awareness. The choice of zines as a medium is deeply intentional, reflecting their belief in the potential of grassroots publishing as a powerful political statement and a tool for community-building. In Metamorphosis, Mx. Jona narrates the difficult path of medical gatekeeping, fatphobia, and transphobia that gender diverse bodies have to face in everyday situations. In Fig. 3.6, Mx. Jona portrays a powerful representation of gender euphoria, in a transforming body that longs for its liberty and its full potential, freed by a normative perspective.

As seen in the work of these artists, alternative comix and zines serve as vital platforms for transgender and gender diverse individuals to express their experiences outside the mainstream narrative. Through the freedom and flexibility of such modalities, queer creators craft intimate, multimodal stories that honour the complexity of queer and trans subjectivities, and in doing so, contribute to the evolving landscape of comics' cultural production.

Fig. 3.6 From Metamorphosis by Queer Mush (Mx. Jona—@transmush)

Sexualities and Self-Help Sex Education in Underground Comics and Zines

Zines and minicomics also serve as crucial tools for validating the personal and autobiographical accounts of sexually diverse individuals, documenting kinky experiences, and offering alternative forms of sex education for the community (Koerth, 2022). These mediums enable the dissemination of information while circumventing the censorship and control of patriarchal views. Recent good examples of such can be seen in the work of Maia Kobabe and Sarah Peitzmeier "Breathe: Journey to Healthy Biding" (2024), that provides with comic accounts important research-based resources and experiences for folks who consider chest binding as gender-affirming care; "Sex Is a Funny Word: A Book about Bodies, Feelings, and YOU" (2015) and "You Know, Sex: Bodies, Gender, Puberty, and Other Things" (2022) by Cory Silverberg and Fiona Smyth, a comic book for kids and teens that build the discourses around sex education in a more comprehensive way of orientations and gender identities, disabilities, and race, opening up conversations around boundaries, safety, and joy, while navigating adolescence. The DIY ethos and anarchist principles central to zine and punk cultures were instrumental in dismantling heteronormative and patriarchal conceptions of sex and sexuality. Moreover, zines function as archival records of practices and self-help guides, prompting ongoing reflection and discourse about one's sexuality and health.

This movement began in the 1970s and has experienced a resurgence, particularly with the "sexual turn" (Karpp, 2019), which saw homocore and queercore cultures evolve into countercultures that not only addressed human rights but also expanded the discourse to include sexual rights for non-heteronormative individuals. Zines not only challenged sexual representations but also collected and disseminated information about gay sexual health and safer sex practices, notably offering counter-narratives during the HIV/AIDS crisis (Brouwer, 2005) in publications like Yell zine #1.[4] Discussions of sexual health broadened in feminist and anarchist zines to cover menstruation, gynaecological health, abortion, and consent, as well as desire, intimacy, and (self-)pleasure for women and individuals with a uterus (Piepmeier, 2009).

[4] https://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/187 (Lastly retrieved 20/10/2024).

Trans individuals and collectives also began using zines to share DIY hormone guides and peer-to-peer knowledge on sexual health and pleasure practices, helping transgender people navigate a self-determined, healthier sexual life—such as transgender cancer patients[5] and the *Queer Forest* zines,[6] which address hormones and the use of sex toys for those undergoing hormone therapy.

Indeed, zines and minicomics have emerged as spaces for sharing perspectives on sexuality and exploring queer and gender theories. For example, the zine "Mapping your sexuality[7]" by Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi, or the comics "Orgasmbogen" by Kristine Tiedt, use the comics medium and the liberated language of underground publications to make scientific knowledge more accessible to broader audiences.

Lastly, personal and autobiographical zines offer unrestricted exploration of non-vanilla and kinky sexual relationships, free from nudity censorship, thereby challenging and expanding societal conceptions of sexual intercourse and intimacy. These publications push boundaries, offering an uncensored space for sharing diverse sexual experiences and even their digital intimacies (as digital nudes, Fig. 3.7, or digital erotic novels).

Conclusion

As seen throughout the whole chapter, the historical evolution of comics and their underground versions represent and reconceptualise gender and sexuality. From the early days of heteronormative and patriarchal portrayals in mainstream comics, to the subtle depictions of queerness and non-normative identities in the 1970s and 1980s, and finally to the current diverse and inclusive landscape, comics have proven to be a dynamic and adaptive medium for exploring and expressing identity. The revision of the Comics Code Authority's guidelines in 1989 marked a turning point, allowing for more explicit representation of queer and trans characters, and paving the way for a new wave of creators who sought to challenge traditional norms and represent diverse experiences.

The emergence of alternative comix and zines in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the context of punk and queercore cultures, further

[5] https://www.transcancerzine.com/zine-library (Lastly retrieved 20/10/2024).

[6] https://queermushroomforest.weebly.com/eng.html (Lastly retrieved 20/10/2024).

[7] https://www.rewriting-the-rules.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/MappingYourSexuality.pdf (Lastly retrieved 20/10/2024).

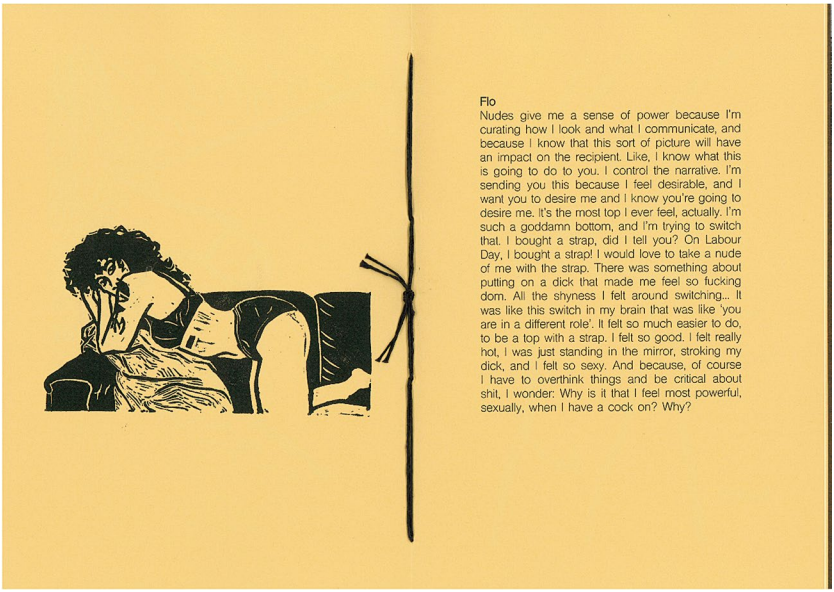

Fig. 3.7 From the zine "NØGEN" by Max Mailund (@_maxgenial_)

accelerated this evolution. These DIY publications, often created by marginalised individuals and communities, provided a platform for self-expression and self-representation, free from the constraints of mainstream publishing. The Riot Grrrl movement, queercore, and other underground cultures have leveraged zines as a means of articulating personal opinions, experiences, and aspirations, creating a powerful counter-narrative to dominant discourses.

Collecting the efforts of non-normative and trans-feminist people in the recent decades, the comics scene has been supplemented by narrative worlds and modes described by women, gays, lesbians, and transgender people who have taken on different themes (from gender role expectations to sexual transition) to challenge a patriarchal and heteronormative status quo. Indeed, these are just some of the potentialities offered by underground and alternative multimodal products, such as zines and minicomics. Resistance and social change have historically been shaped by the needs of discriminated communities and individuals.

Today, comics and zines continue to push the boundaries of identity exploration, offering a unique platform for creators to experiment with new forms of representation and challenge societal norms. The work of transgender and gender diverse artists demonstrates the potential of alternative comix and zines to narrate complex and nuanced experiences of gender identity and self-discovery. As such, these mediums hold immense potential for furthering the exploration of identity, particularly for marginalised communities, and for fostering a culture of inclusivity and acceptance.

The political legacy of comics and zines as tools for social change and activism cannot be overstated. These mediums have provided a platform for marginalised voices to be heard and have played a crucial role in shaping and amplifying social movements, from feminism and queer rights to anti-racism and anti-capitalism. As we look to the future, it is clear that comics and zines will continue to be vital tools for identity exploration, social commentary, and activism, offering a powerful means for creators and communities to challenge dominant discourses and forge new paths towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

Indeed, it should be noted that comics, although normally dismissed by mainstream broader cultural perspectives as an art unworthy of serious attention, exhibit a hierarchical structure that emphasises the value of mainstream comics over underground productions. This implies that several frictions can be faced by non-mainstream graphic contents to challenge the status quo of gender and sexuality representations in society.

In fact, fanzines and comix, often characterised by their dynamic and innovative qualities in comparison to mainstream comics, embody a tension between emancipation and recognition of non-normative gender and sexualities as legitimate forms of representation, yet they remain confined to niche spaces. This marginalisation prevents them from being widely seen or subjected to the spectacle and fetishisation of such often associated with mainstream media. While this niche status allows fanzines to retain their authenticity and critical edge, it also raises the question of whether aiming for mainstream recognition could enable them to reach a broader audience. The diverse expressive modalities found within fanzines and comix highlight these tensions, offering a fertile ground for exploring their potential impact. These alternative forms may remain confined to the niche, yet they also have the potential to influence and transform mainstream cultural production. This invites reflection on whether the contributions of fanzines and comix are limited to representational practices or have the capacity to permeate the broader social fabric.

Nevertheless, through the multifaceted accounts of evolving gender and sexuality representations in mainstream comics and zine culture, Comics Studies should engage with the fluidity and challenging (un)definition of queer theoretical concepts and non-normative gender experiences, questioning the politics of defining and labelling in both academic and public discourse.

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CHAPTER 4

When Comics Meet Health: Graphic Medicine

Veronica Moretti

Introduction to Visual Stories: Bridging Narrative-Based Medicine with Graphic Medicine

The illness narrative has traditionally been dominated by the perspective of health professionals and researchers, offering an account described using clinical parameters and medical metrics and diagnoses. Essential though it is for scientific progress, this 'top-down' approach (Maturo & Moretti, 2024) is often distant from the daily experience of patients and their caregivers. Recent decades have witnessed a shift in this approach, with medicine recognising the crucial importance of the patient's voice in the care pathway, highlighting that it is imperative to integrate individual narratives into clinical practices. This is the origin of *Narrative-Based Medicine* (NBM), theorised by Charon in 2006, an approach that seeks to bridge this gap by valorising patients' individual experiences through their narratives, with a view to enabling an understanding of health that is human, cultural and multidimensional rather than exclusively biological.

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According to Charon (2006), patients' stories—i.e. the narratives of how they experience illness—are a crucial element in grasping the complexity of their condition. Storytelling enables people to articulate not only their physical symptoms, but also the emotional, social and psychological dimensions that have a bearing on their health.

This view is also corroborated by Frank (1995), in his work on 'illness narratives', where he explores how patient narratives provide a framework for understanding the subjective experience of suffering, and for constructing shared meanings between patient and physician. Similarly, Kleinman (1988) highlights how storytelling bridges the gap between 'illness' (i.e. the experience undergone by the patient) and 'disease' (i.e. the biological disorder objectively described in medicine), contributing to a more holistic understanding of health. In addition, according to Montgomery Hunter (1991), medicine itself can be seen as a form of 'narrative practice', in which physicians, by listening to and interpreting the patient's stories, construct diagnostic hypotheses based not only on objective data, but also on the narrative context. In this sense, listening to stories becomes a fundamental clinical practice, able to humanise treatment and build an empathic bond between doctor and patient.

This growing attention paid to storytelling in medicine reflects a paradigm shift away from the exclusively central position occupied by the sick body towards the inclusion of the human experience of illness, and thus towards clinical practice that is more empathic and centred on the individual patient. Empathic listening and the inclusion of personal narratives not only improve patient satisfaction, but also help to create a climate of trust and mutual understanding. These elements are often decisive for improved patient adherence to the treatments proposed (Greenhalgh, 1999; Epstein & Street, 2011).

Although Narrative-Based Medicine is effective in according key importance to patients' stories, some dimensions of illness—particularly those related to its visual, emotional and sensory components—risk remaining unexplored when the narrative medium is exclusively verbal. Verbal language, however powerful, cannot always capture the complexity of an experience made up of such a profound—and interconnected—involvement of the body, the emotions and relationships.

With this in mind, I propose to align NBM with an approach that in recent years has offered a new channel for telling and visualising stories of illness: Graphic Medicine (GM). Conceptualised by Ian Williams (2012), GM is an interdisciplinary field that uses comics and graphic narratives to

explore themes related to health, illness, treatment and care, combining the evocative potential of images with the narrative power of personal stories. This approach makes it possible to offer an accessible, empathic and multidimensional representation of how illness is experienced, extending a bridge between medicine, visual arts and human sciences. It is becoming established as an innovative, necessary element able to integrate visual expression with textual narration to offer a more articulate and inclusive representation of illness. What is singular about these comic stories is that they are all true. From the story of a father with a disabled daughter—told in a tone that is in no way self-pitying—or the vicissitudes of a young woman with bipolar disorder, these 'pathographies' (Green & Myers, 2010) seek to break away from the isolation an illness often entails for the person living with it.

In some graphic novels, the strategy of engaging with the reader is structured by alternating different colour registers that depict various states of the illness. Each colour is carefully chosen and is associated with different phases (diagnosis, treatment, acceptance). The story is approached from various perspectives (narrated in the first person or told through the eyes of someone close to the patient) and different styles and expressions reflect the intensity of the individual frames. The subjective illness narrative is further bolstered by the cameo appearances of health professionals who interact with the patient in different ways—as indeed they do in everyday life.

This evolution is in response to a growing need in the field of medicine and human sciences to approach patients using not only the language of science, but also through means of expression able to capture the human experience as a whole. Images can convey nuances of meanings and emotion that the written word alone may not always be able to transmit with the same intensity, and in this sense, GM offers a narrative space that allows these dynamics to emerge and be shared, treating illness not only as a biological phenomenon, but also, as Byron Good reminds us in his work *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience* (Good, 1994), as a socially constructed and experienced reality.

Together with this, visual narratives are emerging as a key tool in health communication, especially with patients who have a low level of health literacy or have difficulty understanding traditional medical information. Several studies have shown that visual narratives have a significant impact on patients' understanding of care pathways and their involvement in decision-making, especially where language barriers are present.

Jibaja-Weiss et al. (2011) showed how visual narratives improve not only understanding of health information, but also treatment adherence, especially in health emergency and complex disease situations.

The research by Brand et al. (2019) also showed that integrating graphic narratives into informed consent forms can reduce preprocedural anxiety and patient comprehension of the details and risks associated with surgeries. This impact is particularly significant, since a clear understanding of consent is a fundamental element in building a relationship of trust between doctor and patient. In essence, comic book images allow information to be conveyed concisely, immediately, clearly and expressively. These unique qualities are essential to free patients from the constrictions frequently imposed by academic prose, transforming sectoral and often abstruse information into something universally comprehensible.

Based on these premises, this chapter aims to analyse comics as a narrative tool in the representation of illness. The first paragraph will explore the affordances of comics, i.e. the intrinsic characteristics that make them particularly suitable for representing complex experiences, such as those related to illness. The aspects that will be discussed include narrative nonlinearity, the blending of visual and textual elements, and the ability to represent emotional, corporeal and temporal dimensions through symbolic and multi-layered languages.

The chapter will then focus on four specific types of comic book narratives, exemplifying how the medium can be used to represent illness from different perspectives. An analysis will be conducted of the following scenarios: (1) when the artist is also the patient, and the comic strip becomes a tool for introspection and personal testimony; (2) when the artist is a caregiver, offering the illness narrative through his or her experience of caring for and assisting the patient; (3) when the artist is a healthcare professional, and uses the comic strip to depict the complexity of the clinical work, his or her personal experience and communication with patients or colleagues; (4) when the artist represents a scientific community, and uses the comic strip as a means of disseminating complex content in a way that is accessible and engaging.

Finally, the last paragraph of the chapter will focus on the limits and criticalities of the medium, raising questions regarding ethical, methodological and representational issues. An analysis will be conducted of issues such as the reduction of narrative complexity, the risks of stereotyping and the challenge of maintaining a balance between scientific accuracy and accessible communication.

Using these analyses, the chapter aims to offer a critical tool for understanding not only the potential of comics in the illness narrative, but also its theoretical, practical and ethical implications.

The Affordances of Comics in the Representation of Illness

Due to their hybrid nature and narrative versatility, comics offer a unique perspective that combines visual and textual elements to recount experiences that are often difficult to express using other narrative languages. It is in this context that the concept of affordances, originally developed by Gibson (1966), takes on a fundamental role in studying the expressive potential of comics as applied to the representation of illness. Gibson defined affordances as the opportunities for action an environment provides to a living being, regardless of whether these opportunities are actually perceived or utilised. For example, a chair 'offers' the opportunity to sit for anyone with the physical ability to do so. The central idea is that these opportunities are intrinsic to objects, and depend on the relationship between the properties of those objects and the capabilities of the individual. In the context of comics, affordances refer to the specific properties of the medium that enable certain forms of narration or representation. The affordances of comics include their distinctive characteristics, such as multi-temporality, fragmented spatiality, the ability to represent bodily gestures and emotions, and the unique integration of images with text. These aspects allow the medium to handle the complexity of the illness experience empathetically and in depth, offering visual and narrative tools that transcend the limitations of words alone, or images alone.

Focusing on the specific affordances of comics, one of their main characteristics is an ability to transcend the linear narrative, offering the reader a simultaneous view of the past, present and future, as highlighted by McCloud (1994) and Lefevre (Lefèvre, 2011). This multi-temporality proves particularly useful in the representation of illness, where the patient's experience is intertwined with their memories of a healthy body and their expectations for the future.

In *Invisible Difference*s by Mademoiselle Caroline and Julie Dachez, the main character Marguerite's journey of awareness is visualised through the use of colour, an aesthetic choice that reflects the emotional and identity transition from disorientation to understanding. This visual device is an instance of the 'braiding' described by Groensteen (2007), a process in which the narrative is enriched by repeated visual elements. In the case of

Marguerite, colour becomes a means to represent the transition from a confused situation to a more solid awareness, offering the reader a more immediate perception of the emotional and cognitive nuances of her journey of acceptance. The function of graphic representation is therefore not only decorative; it is an integral part of how knowledge and narrative are constructed. As observed by Drucker (2008), handwriting in comics is not only a means of communication, but also a graphic device that conveys the author's emotion and identity. With reference to the representation of illness, handwriting is often a key element in visualising the physical or cognitive deterioration of a patient.

In sociological terms, this practice is consistent with the theory developed by Garland-Thomson (2016) on the potential of visual narratives to challenge and reformulate problematic tropes associated with disability. Comics can subvert the 'normalisation' implicit in medical representation, while offering an aesthetic and empathic experience that stimulates the critical understanding of disability as a social construction (Goodley, 2016). This approach is further reinforced by the perspective of the neurodiversity movement (Singer, 1998), which recognises autism and other neurological conditions as cognitive variations rather than deficits.

The depiction of Marguerite in the graphic novel also reflects the importance of the relationship between social context and diagnosis. Colour not only marks the turning point in Margeurite's life; it is also a visual revelation of the complex interaction between the individual and an environment that is not designed to accommodate sensory and cognitive diversity (Scavarda & Moretti, 2024). This dimension is central to the critique of the medical model of disability, as observed by Squier (2008), who emphasises how comics can illustrate the subjective experience of illness.

The way gestures and the body are depicted is another particularly powerful affordance of comics, especially in the illness narrative, in which the body becomes the vehicle for expressing the ineffable. Eisner (2008) highlights how, in comics, the body is not merely a container, but an actual visual language capable of communicating emotions, pain and inner conflicts that often cannot be expressed in words. In *My Degeneration: A Journey Through Parkinson's* by Peter Dunlap-Shohl, this dimension is taken to the extreme, making the subject's experience tangible through the expressive use of graphic lines and visual distortions: the flickering lines that characterise Dunlap-Shohl's drawings turn the tremors of

Parkinson's into a visual and almost tactile experience that engages the reader on an emotional and physical level.

This technique does not only represent a symptom of the disease; it builds an empathic bridge between the experience of the patient and the perception of the reader. According to Chute (2010), comics possess a unique ability to represent time and emotion through visual fragmentation, allowing readers to immerse themselves in experiences that would otherwise be inaccessible to them.

Another significant aspect in *My Degeneration* is how the progressive loss of control over the body is depicted. The illustrations do not follow a stable, linear pattern, with their deformation and compression reflecting the confusion and vulnerability that accompany illness. This approach resonates with the theories postulated by Barthes (1964), which suggested that the image is an open text from which multiple interpretations and meanings can be drawn.

Although she wrote mainly about photography, Susan Sontag (1978) offers a further theoretical insight into the visual impact of representations of the body during illness. Sontag argues that images can act as a vehicle to express experiences that would otherwise be indescribable. The graphic representation of the gestures and postures in *My Degeneration* not only illustrates the struggle against Parkinson's; it invites the reader to enter the inner world of the patient and to explore the emotional and psychological conflict at play there. The use of graphic distortions also recalls the observations made by Butler (1993) on the importance of the body as a place where identity is constructed and deconstructed. On the occasions that illustrate attempts to perform everyday actions such as getting dressed or holding a glass, the graphics depict the body as a battlefield, where identity clashes with the physical limitations imposed by the disease. This is more than just a personal account: it is a political act that lends visibility to the silent struggles faced by those living with chronic conditions.

As pointed out by Groensteen (1999), comics offer a 'rhetoric of the page', in which each visual and textual element contributes to the construction of a layered meaning, in which text integrates with images to build an internal dialogue that reflects both the despair and the resilience of the subject. This duality is crucial to understanding how the medium of the comic deals with the dynamics of illness, conceiving it not as a static condition, but as an on-going process of adaptation and resistance.

The fragmented arrangement of the illustrations, a distinctive feature of comics, is particularly conducive to the representation of illness, reflecting

the chaos and discontinuity often experienced by patients. According to Barry (2008), fragmentation enables access to levels of meaning that could not be reached through linear narratives, making comics a powerful tool for exploring the complexities of human experience, including illness.

This fragmentation, as indicated by McCloud (1994), requires the reader to actively participate in the process of signification through 'closure', i.e. the interpretation of the gaps between the illustrations. In the case of illness, these gaps are metaphors for the gaps in the understanding of the condition on the part of both the patient and his or her support network. Closure refers to the mental process by which the reader connects the gaps, or 'gutters' between the illustrations, constructing a coherent narrative from visual fragments. This active involvement makes it possible to give meaning to what is not explicitly represented, rendering the reader co-creator of the story.

In illness narratives, the 'gutter' takes on a symbolic role, often representing the gaps and the silences associated with the very experience of illness. This dynamic linking the visible with the implicit is particularly effective in representing the multifaceted nature of illness. As noted by Wallner (2019), the 'gutter' serves as a dynamic space for the co-construction of the narrative, where meaning is negotiated through the interaction between the frames.

As observed by several academics (Muzumdar, 2016; McCloud, 1994), the combination of closure and gutter not only stimulates cognitive engagement, but also offers a unique way to represent fragmented and complex experiences, such as those bound up with illness. These mechanisms do more than tell a story; they give shape to the pauses, empty spaces and ambiguities that often characterise the human experience of suffering, making comics a powerful tool for the representation and exploration of issues related to health and illness.

When the Artist Is Also the Patient

Another distinguishing feature of comics is their ability to provide a setting in which the patient, who is often also the artist, can take complete creative control over how his or her condition is depicted. When the hand holding the pen is the hand of the person experiencing the illness, the medium not only becomes a tool for self-representation, but also offers an accessible, shared platform for the expression of intimate experiences that cannot be put into words. This form of storytelling makes it possible to

explore not only the physical symptoms of a condition, but also its emotional, social and cultural repercussions.

The fragmented and visually layered structure of comics allows for a narrative able to capture the discontinuity and chaos that often accompany the experience of illness (Beatty, 2012). In addition, the combination of images and text facilitates emotional involvement on the part of the reader, who can empathise not only with the content of the narrative, but also with its visual style (Sabin, 2001). This is particularly evident in the graphic autobiographies of artist-patients, in which the comic medium not only documents their condition, but indeed becomes an integral part of how trauma is processed and how meaning is constructed (Cordingly, 2014).

The narrative structure of comics allows for a significant degree of fluidity, and can be used to challenge conventional ideas of what is normal and what is pathological. For example, stories can show how people with mental disorders find creative and adaptive ways to live their lives, suggesting that what is 'normal' is often a matter of context and perception. Through the use of humour and the juxtaposition of different language registers and dimensions, comics can document how the social context renders impairment abnormal, challenging the neutral and objective representation of the patient typical of the medical model, and allowing the subjective experience of illness and suffering to emerge. Comics also offer narrative mechanisms able to represent places of potential liberation or alienation, reflecting the tensions between personal and collective identity, and between the healthy and the sick. Illustrations are also unique in their potential to represent diverse and dissimilar bodies more freely and more openly, expanding and challenging traditional norms.

This makes it possible to challenge the conventional narratives of illness, which are often dominated by the medical or social perspective, allowing the individual to choose how to communicate their experience to 'healthy' society. The capacity for self-representation thus becomes an act of resistance and re-appropriation, in which the subjective experience of the artist-patient is placed at the centre of the narrative.

This dynamic is amplified further in the case of mental disorders. Comics offer a medium through which patient-artists can express the complexities and nuances of conditions that are often stigmatised or misunderstood. As pointed out by Leavitt (2019), visual and textual language enables the representation of emotional and cognitive states that are difficult to express through purely verbal media. Through images that deform, amplify or distort, the comic becomes a lens through which to

investigate the inner world of the patient, engaging the reader in a direct empathic experience (El Refaie, 2012).

The ability to manoeuvre time, space and emotional intensity makes comics an ideal medium for tackling issues such as anxiety, depression or trauma. This approach not only aids understanding of experiences undergone, but also helps to reduce stigma, as underlined by Gravett (2004). In this sense, comics do more than just tell a story; they become an educational and transformative tool that allows the reader to explore new and often marginalised perspectives.

An example in point is the graphic memoir *Marbles*: *Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*, in which Ellen Forney (2012) illustrates her battle with bipolar disorder. The pages of the memoir allow the reader to experience the emotional rollercoaster of the author's journey, from the peaks of euphoria to the depths of despair, in ways that the text alone could never fully capture. The images presented in the pages are metonyms of the mood disorder depicted, providing an emotional trace of it and inviting the reader to empathise with the author. As Wittgenstein might have put it, the graphic medium helps convey what cannot be expressed using verbal language, and can only be rendered through the non-verbal and metaphorical language of images.

Images are effective here not only because they enrich the narrative, but also because they awaken empathy and understanding, helping to narrow the gap between those who suffer from mental disorders and those without direct experience of them. This visual approach demonstrates the potential of comics to act as a communicative bridge, making emotional states that are otherwise difficult to convey more tangible and readily comprehensible. *Marbles* also provides an accurate depiction of the regular sessions with the psychiatrist, during which the various psychological and pharmacological therapies are evaluated. Forney adopts a precise, scientific approach to presenting these interactions, including the benefits and the side effects of the treatments. One particular example is the detailed description of the rare, but severe, epidermal necrosis, or Steven-Johnson syndrome, induced by the mood stabiliser lamotrigine. From the long and exhausting attempt to balance medication to the search for an improvement in Forney's lifestyle (avoiding drugs or practising yoga), the comic reflects the desire for stability that requires a process of self-observation and awareness of the patient's psychic reactions when faced with certain stimuli.

Fig. 4.1 The diagnosis

Another emblematic example of how graphic narratives can represent the trauma and biographical fracture induced by illness can be found in a sequence of four frames from Marisa Acocella Marchetto's (2006) *Cancer Vixen*. In this scene (Fig. 4.1), Marisa receives a cancer diagnosis from her doctor: a moment that is not only a dramatic turning point in her life, but also a clear break in the continuity of her identity. The visual narrative uses a combination of images and words to mark this critical event and amplify the emotional impact of the moment.

The seemingly neutral words of the doctor, illustrated with temporal precision ('10:12 a.m.'), take on an extraordinarily dramatic significance in the visual context. The woman is depicted with her mouth wide open in an expression of horror, her hand covering her eyes and her hair appearing to stand up in the background: this image visually embodies the shock and sense of falling apart that she feels. The last caption, 'My world came to an end', crystallises the moment of diagnosis as an existential caesura, showing how visual and textual language combine to render the experience of trauma tangible. This break in her personal biography, to quote the concept famously expressed by Bury (1982), is also reflected in her plans for her private life, where cancer is a shattering reminder of the incompatibility between her illness and marriage (Fig. 4.2).

Another important element to focus on regards communication between patient and health professional. Although clinically appropriate, a doctor's words can take on a devastating meaning for the patient, as shown in Fig. 4.3, in which the medical professional conveys their impressions without taking account of the impact those words are destined to have on the woman's life.

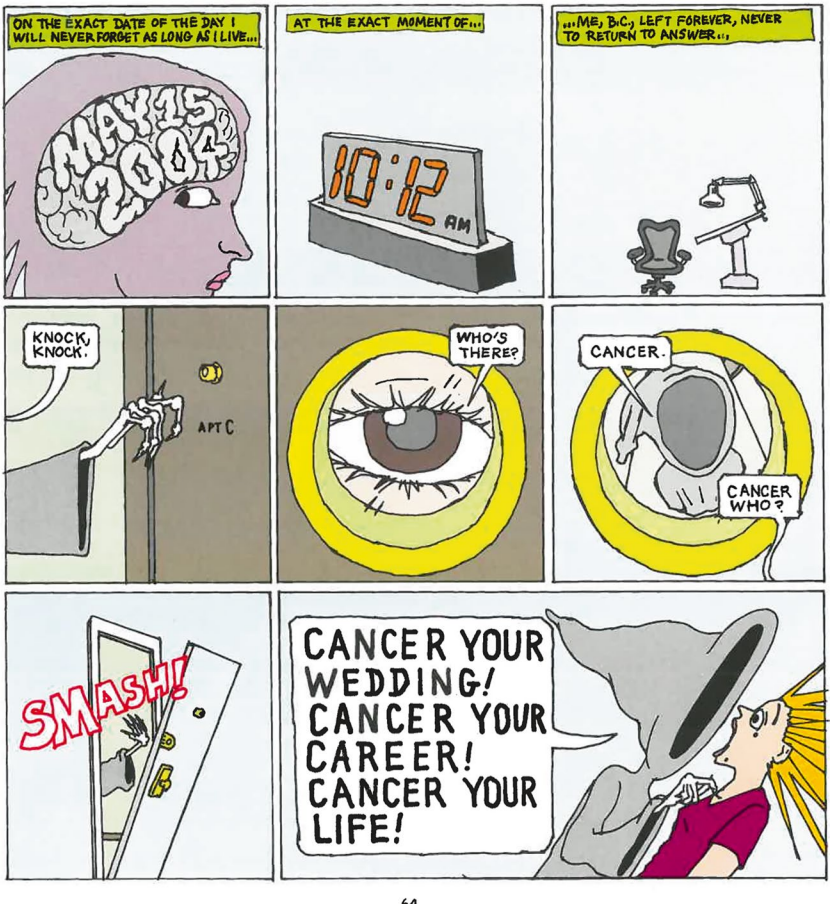

Fig. 4.2 Cancer and personal life

Examining visual narratives like these can help aspiring doctors make more informed communication decisions by recognising the emotional weight their language carries along the care pathway. These representations not only offer the reader empathetic access to the patient's experience, but also represent a valuable teaching tool for medical training. As observed by Green (2015), analysing sequences like this can heighten

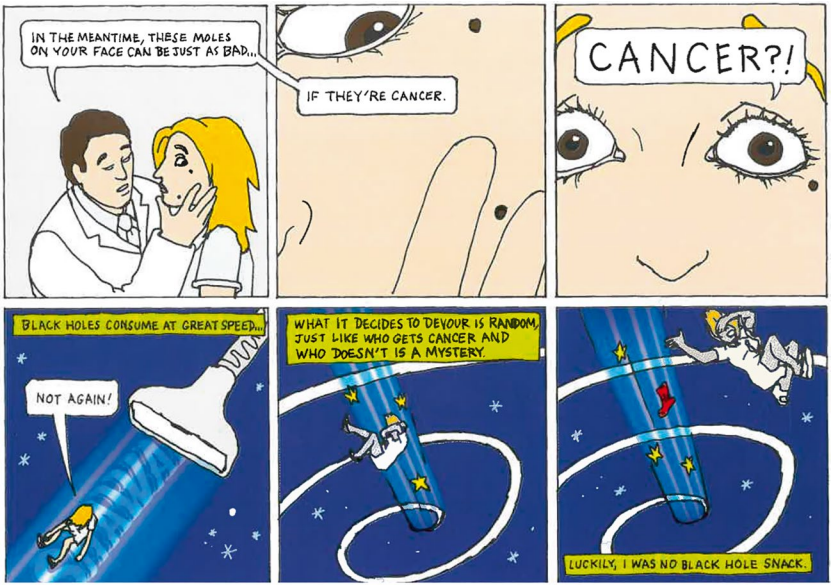

Fig. 4.3 Words, doctor and patient

awareness among medical students and health professionals regarding the implications of their communication choices.

Furthermore, on a sociological level, this scene illustrates the potential of graphic narratives in highlighting the role of the power relations that exist between doctor and patient, in which verbal and non-verbal communication can either reinforce or alleviate a sense of vulnerability. As shown by Calabrese (2019), graphic medicine enables a physicalisation of emotions that amplifies empathic understanding and fosters greater awareness of the psychological impact of healthcare practices.

When the Artist Is Also a Health Professional

Comics as a narrative tool are not only a resource for patients. They are also fertile terrain for healthcare professionals wishing to offer an account of the challenges, contradictions and experiences that form part of their role. When doctors, nurses or healthcare workers become storytellers and artists, comics offer a means of exploring and communicating dimensions

of medical practice that frequently remain unseen. This approach can be placed within the framework of the medical humanities, which promote the use of the arts and storytelling as tools to humanise medicine, develop empathic skills and reflect on professional dynamics (Bleakley, 2015).

GM offers medical professionals an opportunity to question their own identities and deconstruct metaphors that portray them as solid, impassive individuals, devoid of fragility (Humphrey, 2022). These visual narratives present a more nuanced, more human portrayal of the healthcare professional, challenging the traditional image of a distant, emotionally impenetrable figure. In this regard, Frank (1995) argues that the illness narrative is the preserve not only of patients, but also of those involved in their care, because both parties experience a narrative dimension that binds them together in a relationship of reciprocity and vulnerability.

The sense of isolation often felt in the medical profession is a recurring theme addressed through comics. Graphic narratives make it possible to portray the emotional and psychological burden of healthcare work, offering a safe space to explore burnout, loneliness and inner conflict. These narratives offer a means to break away from the myth of the 'invincible' doctor, replacing it with a more realistic and compassionate representation. In essence, comics provide a useful tool for tackling the emotional and psychological challenges of the healthcare profession. In this regard, the example I intend to present is a GM classic, *The Bad Doctor*, by Ian Williams (2014), with the aim of illustrating how comics can offer a unique perspective on the medical profession, exploring its emotional challenges, relationships with patients and the complexities of professional identity.

The Bad Doctor by Ian Williams is a graphic novel that offers an in-depth exploration of the personal and professional challenges of Iwan James, a GP living with an obsessive-compulsive disorder. The narrative interweaves moments from his private life with his daily work, highlighting the delicate balance between caring for others and the need for the doctor to deal with his own vulnerabilities. Williams uses the comic medium to represent not only Iwan's patients—who are dealing with problems such as depressive crises and suicidal thoughts (Fig. 4.4)—but also the doctor's inner dialogue, pervaded by anxiety and a sense of inadequacy (Fig. 4.5).

From a narrative point of view, the graphic novel challenges the stereotype of the infallible doctor, showing how Iwan struggles with the weight of social and professional expectations. Williams uses the graphic medium to move beyond the limits of traditional storytelling, combining images

Fig. 4.4 Dealing with patient's problem

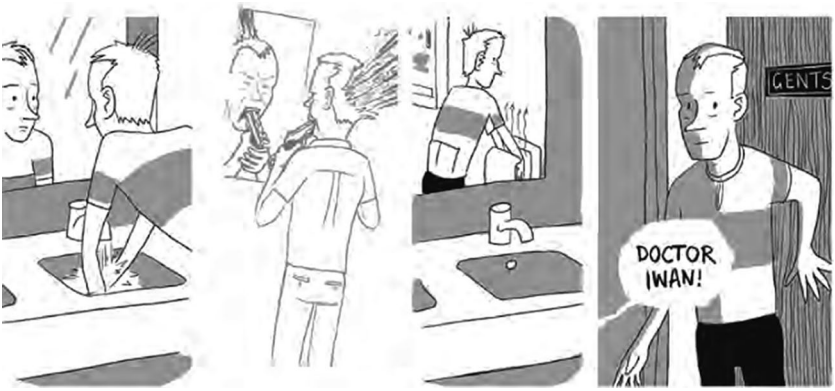

Fig. 4.5 Sense of inadequacy

and text to create an empathetic and multifaceted representation. This is evident in the sequences illustrating Iwan's obsessive rituals, in which the reader is guided through the visual stream of his obsessive thoughts from when he was a child, accentuating the sense of entrapment and anxiety (Fig. 4.6).

The graphic novel also addresses the question of the social stigma attached to mental health, an aspect that Sontag (1978) and Lupton (2012) identify as central to the cultural construction of illness. Iwan's

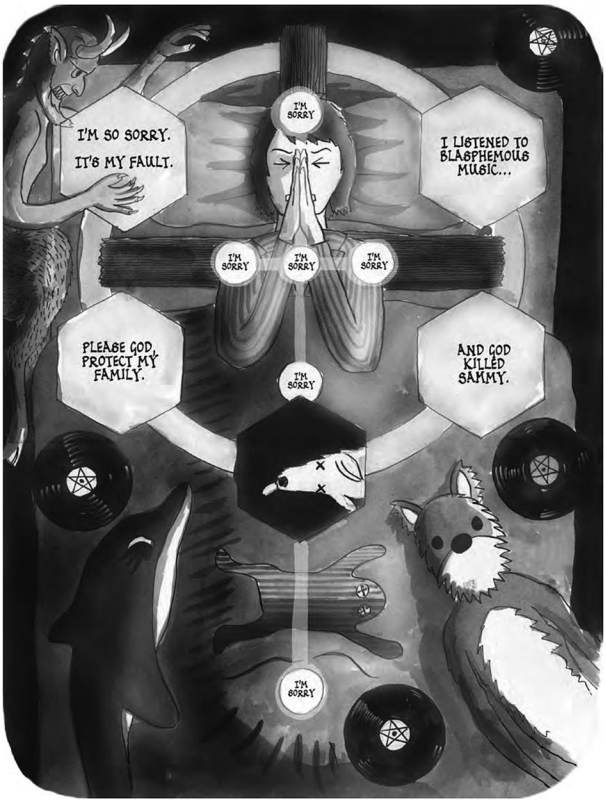

Fig. 4.6 Obsessive thoughts

interactions with his patients, such as a teenager with suicidal thoughts or an elderly man coping with loneliness, illustrate the complexity of the doctor-patient relationship and the difficulty of reconciling empathy with professional detachment.

Comics can also take us into the physical spaces of care and treatment, described by Foucault[1] as the counter-emplacements of society: the heterotopias. Psychiatric internment facilities are spaces of deviation, realities

[1] During a lecture at the *Cercle d'études architecturales* on 14 March 1967, Foucault outlined the concept that, in every civilisation, there are spaces that straddle the real and the utopian, which can be identified with the term heterotopias.

designed to accommodate all those whose behaviour deviates from the average, from the required norm, such as psychiatric clinics and prisons: places where an attempt is made to apply restorative discipline where external institutions have failed. Foucault returns to this theme in 1975 in his course on the History of Systems of Thought, dealing with the topic of 'abnormality' and analysing the colonisation of legal and psychiatric discourse on the part of the 'normalising power' that 'has extended its sovereignty in our society'.

A comic strip that takes us into heterotopic space is *Psychiatric Tales*, written and illustrated by Darryl Cunningham (2010), a former psychiatric nurse struggling with his own mental health problems. The illustrated work consists of eleven short stories that explore the lives of individuals suffering from various psychiatric conditions, including schizophrenia, depression and antisocial personality disorder (Moretti & Scavarda, 2021). Through these stories, Cunningham highlights the reality of misunderstanding and discrimination these individuals experience on a daily basis, with external reactions that often swing back and forth between underestimation, denial and rejection.

In outlining the stigma attached to mental illness, the author describes it as Janus-like: on the one hand, this stigma tends to refute the pathological reality of the condition, which is primarily visible through the pain it causes in the subject; on the other, it portrays it as a permanently disabling and irreversible condition. Cunningham's work seeks to portray mental suffering as a disabling and definitive condition that is an obstacle to a fulfilling life. This collection of psychiatric narratives therefore aims to valorise suffering and to give a tangible form to such conditions and their serious consequences, including suicide, for those affected by them. As shown in Fig. 4.7, the initial metaphorical representations visualise the emotional state of the individuals suffering from mental disorders, while the concluding frames highlight the difficulties involved in recognising and accepting this suffering, which is often mistaken for laziness or lack of willpower.

The author uses biological explanations typical of modern psychiatry to lend legitimacy and credibility to mental illness, interpreting it as a dysfunction of the brain's biochemical mechanisms, similar to other neurological conditions. Associating mental illness with other brain pathologies, effectively represented by the figure of the brain, the *locus* where all forms of suffering considered are contained, has a de-stigmatising function: not

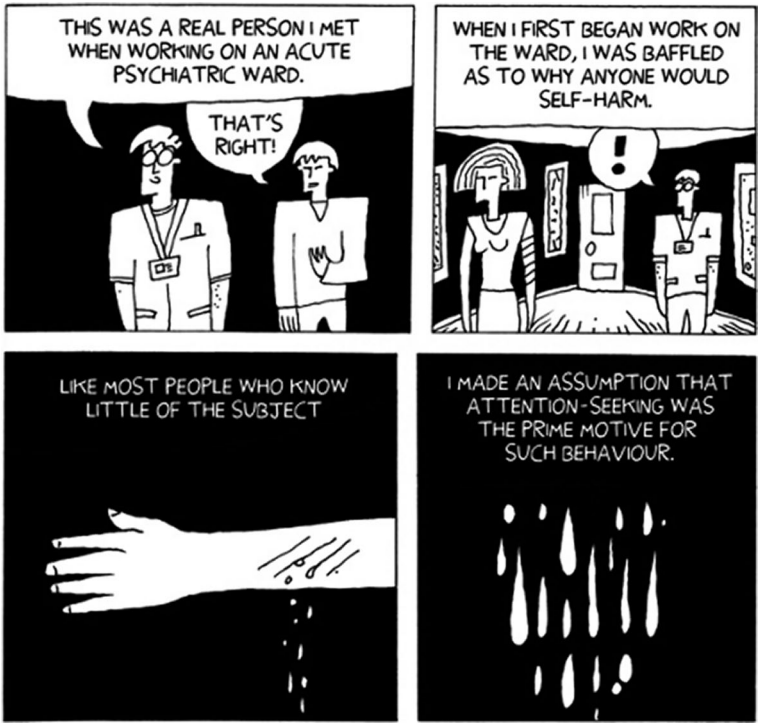

Fig. 4.7 Using metaphors to frame mental disorder

unlike a brain tumour or a stroke, mental illness is a disease and as such can be treated (Fig. 4.8).

Another particularly significant example of how comics are able to illustrate the professional experience of a health worker and, at the same time explore the emotional and relational dimensions of medical practice, is the work by MK Czerwiec (2017). Her graphic memoir, *Taking Turns*: *Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371*, recounts her experiences as a nurse in a unit dedicated to the care of HIV/AIDS patients. The narrative spans both the most critical period of the epidemic crisis and the period following the introduction of antiretroviral therapies (Fig. 4.9).

Through her work, Czerwiec embodies the concept of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983), who sees the practice of healthcare not only as a technical activity, but also a creative and reflective process. Through

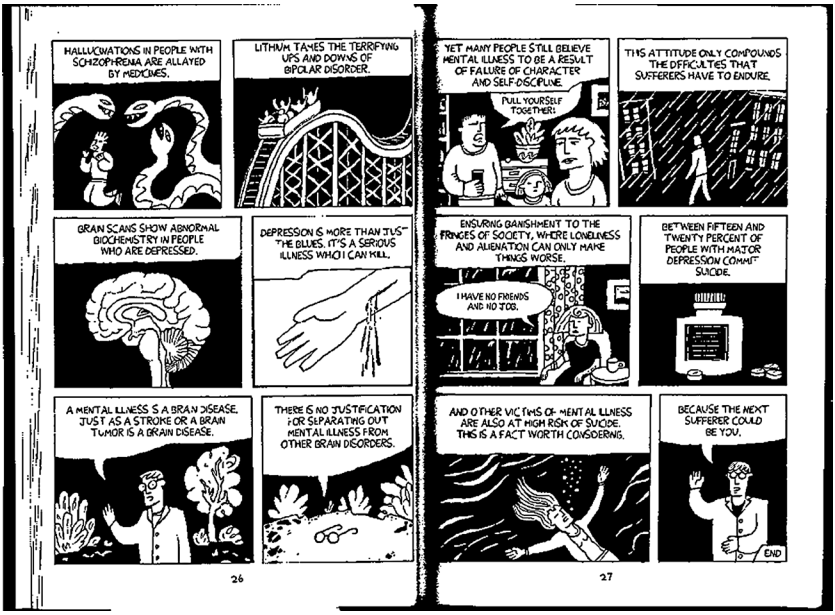

Fig. 4.8 Brain

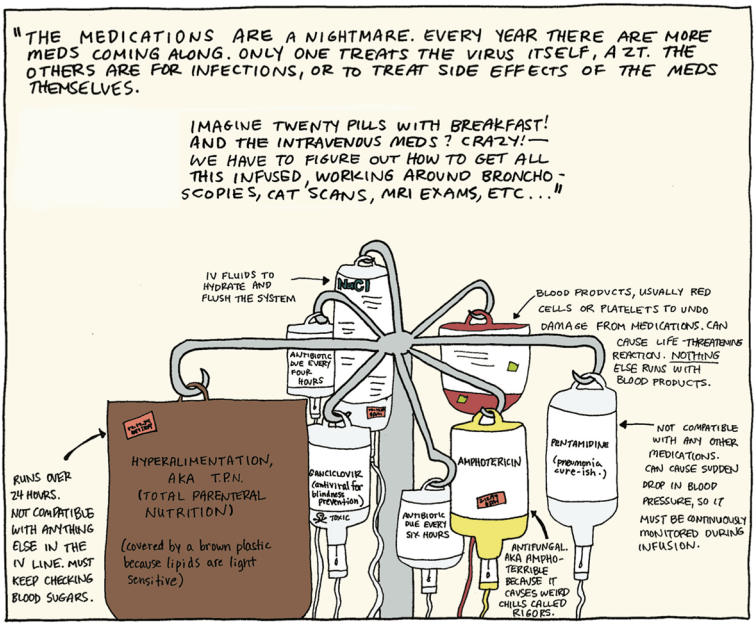

Fig. 4.9 Antiretroviral therapies

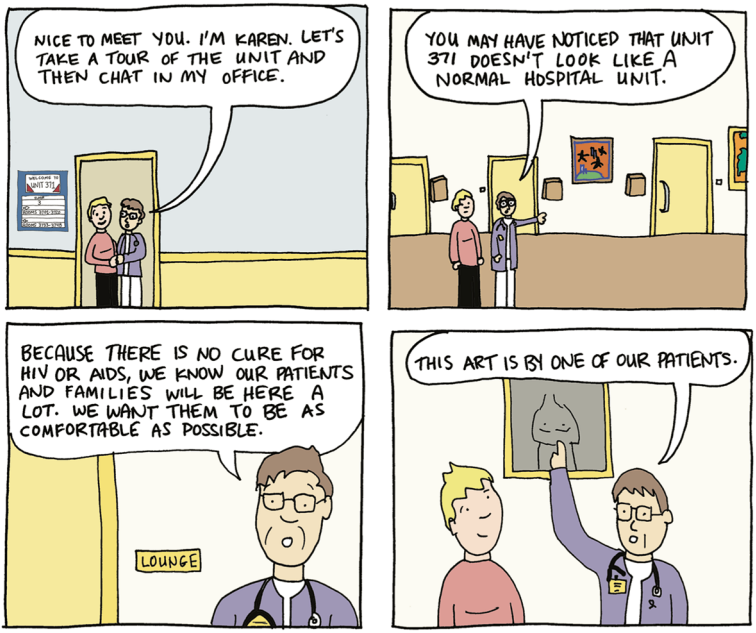

Fig. 4.10 Approaching the new profession

the comic medium, the author explores the emotional and social experience of health professionals, using art to give form and meaning to the care experience, especially in dealing with conditions for which a cure is not yet on the horizon. Figure 4.10 specifically shows the sensitivity with which Czerwiec describes her approach to the profession.

This approach reflects the theories presented by Lupton (2012), according to which medicine is also a cultural phenomenon, in which visual narratives can help deconstruct and reinterpret the meaning of illness. The role of the nurse-artist highlights the idea that care is not only a technical act, but also an aesthetic practice, as suggested by Mol (2008) in his theory of the 'logic of care'. Czerwiec uses comics to describe the complexities of the relationship between caregivers and patients, highlighting how art can facilitate a more empathetic understanding of the difficulties faced by both, as shown in frame no 11 (Fig. 4.11).

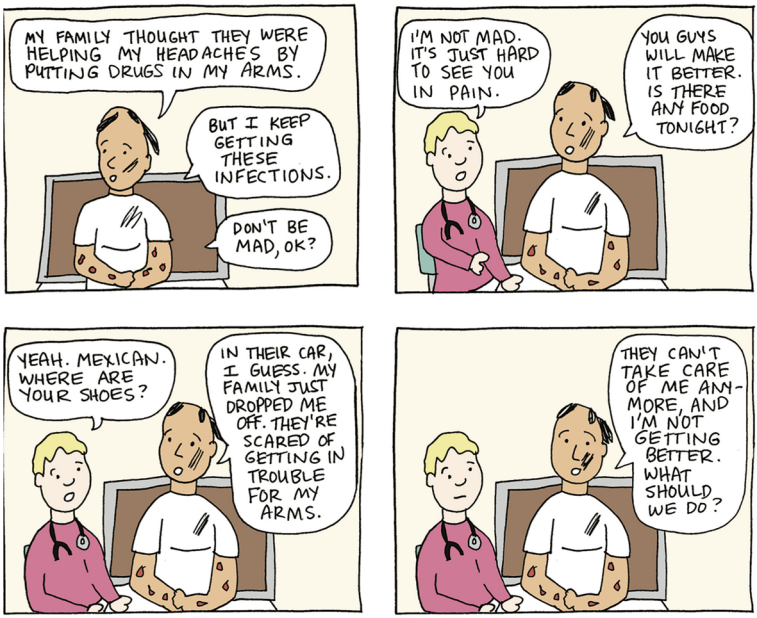

Fig. 4.11 Difficult communication

The identity of healthcare professionals is redefined through the experience of graphic medicine, which enables them to articulate emotions and conflicts that often go unexpressed in the clinical setting. Through her illustrations, Czerwiec addresses the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, following Goffman's (1963) perspective on social stigmatisation. Comics are able to render the experiences of patients and health professionals visible, promoting a narrative that challenges stereotypical and reductive representations of illness and care.

These examples highlight how, when they are created by health professionals, comics can become a tool for reflection that interweaves the personal with the professional dimension, enriching understanding of the dynamics of care and professional identities. As noted by Bleakley (2020), graphic storytelling makes the emotional and relational complexities often concealed within healthcare visible, facilitating a deeper understanding of the professional experience. Additionally, according to Jones et al. (2014), the

transformative potential of storytelling lies in its ability to foster greater awareness of the emotional experience of professionals and their relationship with patients, contributing to more empathetic and reflective care practice.

When the Artist Is Also a Caregiver

Comics are a powerful tool for describing the experience of caregiving, a role that often comes with particularly intense emotional, moral and practical challenges. The experience of the caregiver—family member, friend or professional—is often invisible, characterised by a combination of gratification and sacrifice. When the caregiver is the author, comics offer a unique platform to explore and depict the nuances that make up this experience, lending visibility to what is difficult to express in words.

Through the combination of text and images, the graphic memoirs of caregivers manage to capture the multidimensional nature of caregiving, bringing everyday challenges to light. As noted by Kalman et al. (2022), comics allow for a layered narrative, where visual and textual elements work together to evoke complex emotions and make understanding the human experience more accessible. In addition, the structural features of the comic strip mentioned earlier, such as narrative fragmentation and the use of 'gutters' (the spaces between the frames), boost the author's ability to represent the moments of emptiness, silence or inner conflict that are often a part of caregiving.

In *Mom*'s *Cancer,* Brian Fies (2006) tells the story of his mother's struggle with cancer, offering an extraordinarily intimate and detailed portrait of the caregiving experience. This graphic memoir not only explores the emotional and practical complexities of caring for a sick parent; it also illustrates the transformative role of comics in telling stories of vulnerability and resilience. As indicated by Lefèvre and Delorme (2020), comics provide a discursive space where the visual and the narrative intertwine, offering the reader an insight into otherwise inaccessible dimensions of experience. In this case, Fies uses the medium to transform the private experience of caregiving into a shared narrative, breaking the silence often associated with caregiving (Fig. 4.12).

Mom's Cancer also highlights how caregiving is often an invisible form of work. According to Hochschild (1983), the emotional work performed by caregivers—often unrecognised and unvalued—involves the ongoing management of their own emotions and those of others. This is a central theme in Fies' memoir.

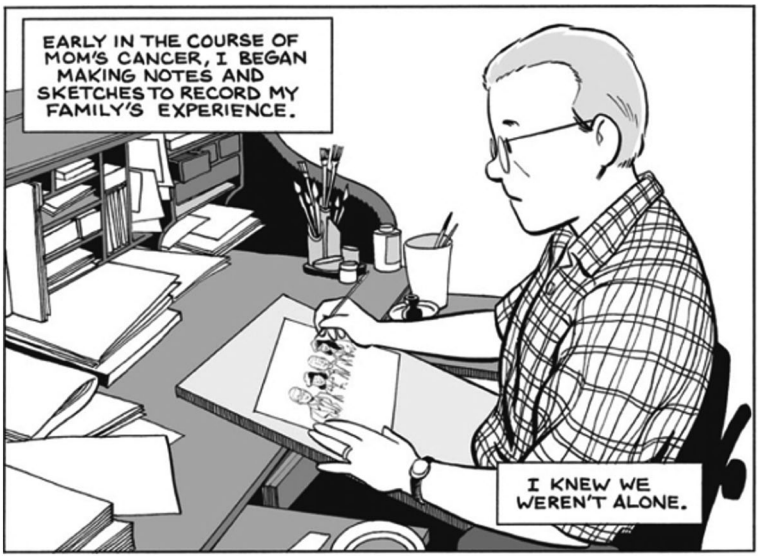

Fig. 4.12 Drawing family's experience

Images of stress, frustration and unconditional love illustrate not only the physical fatigue, but also the emotional and moral strain that accompanies caregiving. In this sense, the comic book not only documents this experience, but also invites readers to empathise with the daily challenges faced by caregivers, who are often seen as having super powers (Fig. 4.13)

Finally, the use of limited colour and the stylised representation in *Mom's Cancer* effectively convey the universal nature of the story, inviting the reader to identify with the caregiving experience. As noted by Couser (2009), graphic memoirs of caregiving often function as advocacy tools, raising public awareness of the importance of social support and inclusive health policies. In this context, Fies' work is not just an artistic endeavour, offering a contribution to the public discourse on healing and challenging the dominant narratives of strength and individualism often associated with illness and healing.

The caregiving experience is fertile terrain for narrative exploration through the medium of comics. As shown in the study by Haan et al. (2022), graphic novels offer a unique means to lend visibility to the emotional and practical experiences of caregiving, which are often overlooked

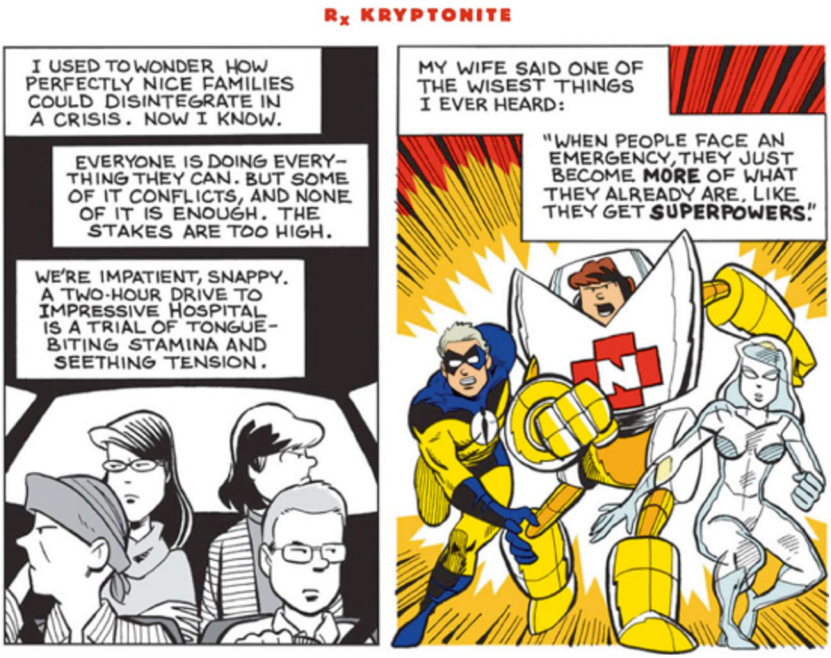

Fig. 4.13 Family caregivers as superheroes

or invisible in traditional clinical settings. By combining words and images, they are able to capture the complexity of emotions and situations that caregivers have to cope with on a daily basis, allowing for a layered narrative that engages the reader in a deeper understanding.

The graphic memoir *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant*, by Roz Chast (2014), offers an in-depth exploration of the caregiving experience, addressing a universal theme that takes on a singular dimension through the use of comics. Focusing on the author's relationship with her elderly parents and their physical and mental decline, the comic not only tells a personal story, but also highlights broader issues related to old age, death and the role of caregivers.

The use of comics as a medium allows Chast to illustrate the multiple challenges of caregiving, an experience made up of an intense combination of emotional, physical and logistical responsibilities. Through a narrative that weaves together intimate moments and personal reflections, the

author constructs a layered account that captures the complexity of caring for elderly parents. This graphic memoir can be seen as a form of 'visual autoethnography' (Couser, 2009), in which the caregiver-author explores his or her role and reflects on the dynamics of power and vulnerability inherent in this kind of relationship.

One of the distinctive features of comics is their ability to represent time and space in ways that reflect the fragmented and complex experience of caregiving. In *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, time does not follow a rigid chronological structure; it is organised in a narrative that interweaves flashbacks, present observations and personal reflections. This narrative choice creates a layered representation of memory, allowing the reader to perceive how the past is interwoven with the present, and to experience the story in an emotionally engaging way.

Chast's caricature drawings and attention to visual details—such as the gestures and body expressions of the characters—also accentuate the absurdity and complexity of everyday life with elderly parents, giving a tangible form to emotions that are difficult to express in words and making them more accessible for the reader.

Chast's narrative also deconstructs some of the cultural expectations associated with caregiving. The story questions the romantic ideal of the 'good son/daughter', showing a more complex reality, made up of love and guilt, of moral obligations and personal desires. This representation challenges the cultural norms that often render care work invisible and show caregivers as one-dimensional figures.

Another example can be found in *Aliceheimer's*: *Alzheimer's Through the Looking Glass*, by Dana Walrath (2016), one of the most evocative graphic memoirs on caregiving for people with Alzheimer's disease. Through a combination of text and oneiric images, Walrath transforms her mother's experience of Alzheimer's into a layered and deeply symbolic narrative (Fig. 4.14). This approach makes it possible not only to illustrate the fragmentation of memory, but also to build an emotional bridge between the subjective dimension of the illness and the reader.

As observed by Walden (2021), comics are powerful tools for exploring memory and its failures, using the interplay between text and images to bring out the fragmented experience of the dementia mind.

Walrath's work is a clear example of how comics can be a particularly suitable medium for portraying dementia, using visual elements to illustrate the alteration of perception and time. Levine (2019) emphasises how graphic memoirs are a unique medium for rendering the complexity of the

Fig. 4.14 Losing her

experience of those living with Alzheimer's, offering a perspective that transcends the limits of purely verbal narration. For example, in *Aliceheimer's*, images often blur the boundaries between reality and imagination, creating an effect that simulates the mother's altered cognitive experience (Fig. 4.15).

Another significant aspect of *Aliceheimer's* is the way in which the narrative challenges stereotypes related to caregiving. Walrath not only documents moments of difficulty, but also celebrates the resilience and creativity that emerge during the care process. In this regard, McNicol (2023) highlights how comics can foster empathy, by offering a deeper understanding of the dynamics between caregiver and patient. Walrath is particularly able at portraying caregiving not only as an act of sacrifice, but also as an opportunity to redefine family relationships.

These works can be situated within a broader area of graphic medicine that includes works such as those analysed by Smith (2022), which use

Fig. 4.15 Alice between reality and imagination

comics to explore the emotional and practical dimensions of caregiving for those in need of care.

When the Artist Is the Scientific Community

In recent years, there has been an interesting convergence between artistic practices and scientific communication, especially in the field of medicine and public health. This integration marks a paradigm shift in the way scientific knowledge is conveyed and disclosed. Visual tools such as comics and graphic novels, traditionally associated with entertainment or popular culture, have proven to be powerful means to make even the most complex concepts accessible and engaging. What makes the difference is that the artist is frequently no longer an external observer called upon to interpret the scientific world: today, researchers, clinicians and educators

themselves take on the role of creators, using visual language to build bridges between science and society.

It should be made clear that this approach goes beyond an aestheticisation of science, and is rooted in an educational, communicative and indeed transformative requirement. Comics are more than just a medium for the transfer of information; they are a catalyst for social and cultural change, able to give a voice to marginal issues, break taboos and give rise to profound reflections. Several recent works show how GM has become an established, interdisciplinary field able to combine scientific research with artistic practices and social engagement. An emblematic example of this convergence is 'Are Older LGBT Adults Falling Behind on Vaccinations?', a work that looks into the disparities in access to influenza, shingles and pneumococcal vaccinations among the older LGBT community in the United States. The comic by Andrea N. Polonijo and Matteo Farinella (2024) is based on research published by Polonijo and Vogelsang (2023) in LGBT Health. The work does not merely convey information, but also explores the social, cultural and systemic factors that perpetuate such inequalities.

As shown in Fig. 4.16, Farinella uses characters representative of the diversity within the LGBT community and places them in everyday situations that highlight the psychological and material barriers faced when accessing vaccines. The stylistic choice of soft colours and lines makes the content accessible without trivialising a serious question, demonstrating how comics can take a tactful, profound approach to dealing with complex issues. This example underlines the dual role of graphic medicine: on the one hand, to inform the public, and on the other, to stimulate debate on more inclusive health policies.

This ability to combine narrative and social impact also emerges in the project *Il primo paziente*, (The First Patient), a collective work created at the University of Bologna that addresses a culturally and socially sensitive issue: the donation of bodies to science.

The starting point is that dissection of human bodies is an essential practice for medical training, providing technical skills and a direct understanding of anatomy that cannot be replaced by other methods. However, in countries such as Italy, body donation is limited by cultural, religious and social barriers. The work aims to narrow this gap, by making the process of donation more readily understandable and acceptable for the general public.

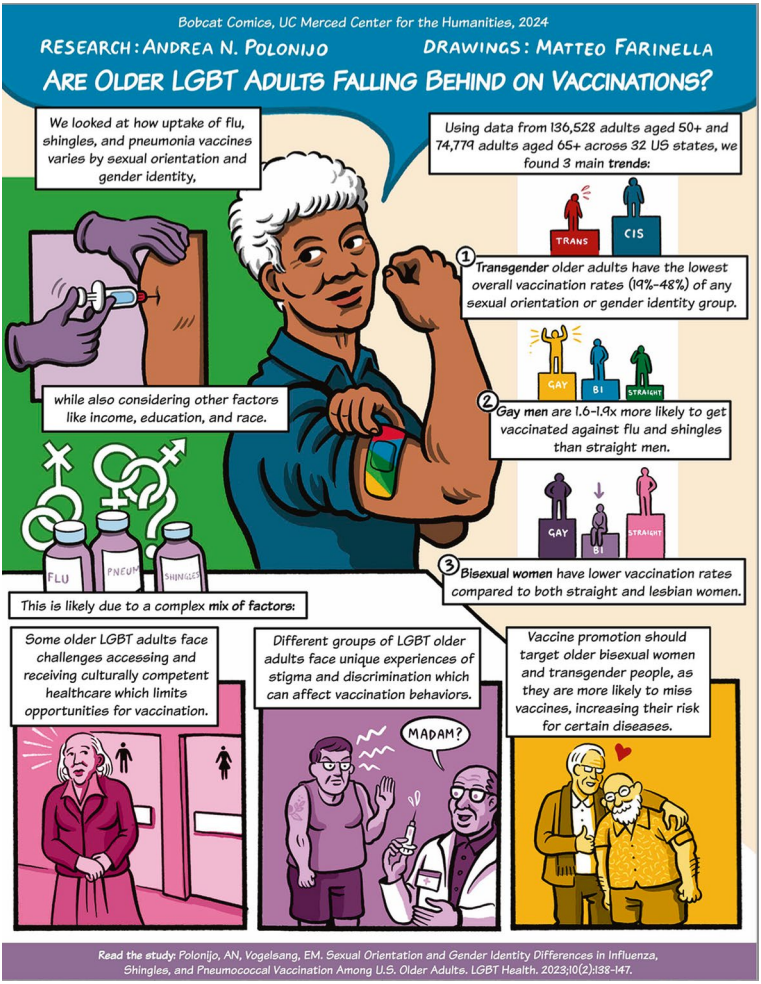

Fig. 4.16 LGBT health

The methodology behind this comic, based on an ethnographic investigation at the Institute of Human Anatomy, highlights how collaboration between various disciplines—sociology, medicine and art—can create works able to push back the boundaries of traditional science communication. In this context, graphic medicine is not only an educational tool, but indeed a means to change behaviour and cultural perspectives.

Through six stories that interweave the perspectives of donors, their families, and medical students, the work illustrates the value of donation not only as an altruistic gesture, but as a transformative event for those who experience it indirectly. For example, in the story 'Breath', the heart becomes a symbol of the emotional and technical challenges faced by the students during anatomical dissection, while in 'Loving Bodies', the lungs become a metaphor for the gift of life. These stories, supported by data sheets, combine an educational approach with a narrative sensibility that seeks to combat prejudice and raise awareness on the subject (Fig. 4.17).

In recent years, visual communication has acquired a crucial role in addressing complex, global issues such as climate change and its repercussions on public health. A significant example of this trend is the Graphic Public Health project 'Illustrating the Impact of Climate Change on Health', which uses comics as an innovative medium to turn scientific data into accessible, engaging visual narratives. This project aims to raise awareness of how the climate crisis intersects with health issues, focusing on three main areas: respiratory diseases, food security and safety, and natural disasters.

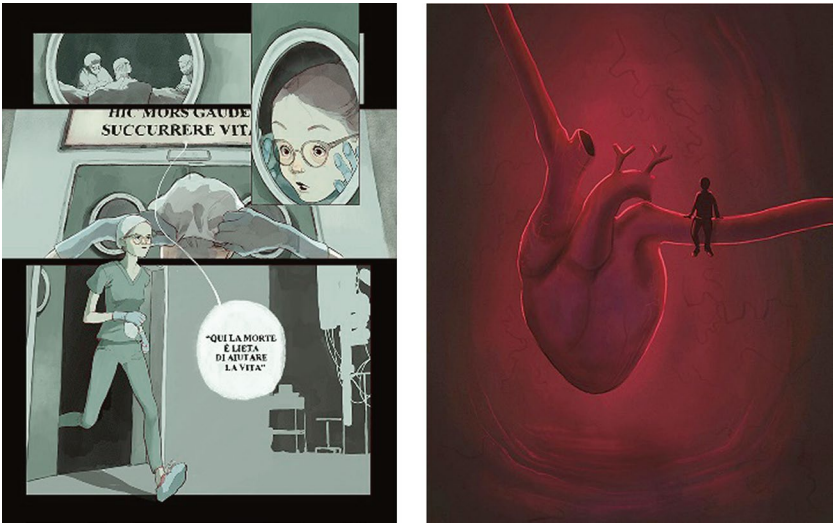

Fig. 4.17 Breath

Through the use of schematic images and visual metaphors, the project offers a tangible expression of complex phenomena, such as the worsening of respiratory diseases due to air pollution, or the impact of climate change on agricultural crops and food security and safety. For example, one of the frames depicts a fragile lung surrounded by toxic fumes, symbolising the effects of global warming on respiratory health. Other episodes illustrate the daily difficulties of families struggling with the effects of extreme weather events, such as floods or hurricanes, highlighting the structural inequalities that make some communities especially vulnerable.

To understand the deeper meaning of these visual narratives, it is useful to look at them through the prism of social vulnerability theory. This perspective, developed by authors such as Cutter et al. (2003), focuses on how economic, cultural and structural factors determine the ability of individuals and communities to respond to environmental risks. In particular, the theory highlights how the impact of extreme weather events is unevenly distributed: while some communities can draw on financial and infrastructural resources to mitigate the damage, others—which are often already marginalised—find themselves exposed to more severe and lasting consequences.

Comics are not just communication tools; they are catalysts for social and cultural change. As the examples analysed show, GM offers an innovative and inclusive approach to explore issues regarding public health, medical education and social inequalities. This medium, which is able to integrate visual narrative with scientific evidence, has the potential to transform not only how we communicate science, but also how we experience and understand it.

The challenge for the future is to expand this approach further, increasingly engaging communities, artists and scientists in a dialogue that makes science accessible, participatory and profoundly human.

Reflections on the Limits and Potential of the Medium

In recent years, comics have acquired an increasingly central role in the illness narrative, becoming a powerful tool for communicating human experiences, scientific data and health complexities. The use of this medium is not without limitations and critical issues, however. This final section explores the main ethical, methodological and representational challenges posed by the medium, with the aim of offering a critical, structured reflection on its implications.

By their very nature, comics turn complex concepts into images and words, making them accessible to a wide audience. However, this simplification can sometimes result in a loss of narrative depth. The sociology of storytelling, as theorised by Polletta (2006), emphasises that every narrative is the result of a selection of events and perspectives. In the case of comics, this selection risks reducing the complexity of individual and collective experiences, depriving them of their social, cultural and emotional nuances.

A practical example of this is the representation of chronic or mental illness, where the need to summarise may obscure intersectional factors—such as class, gender, ethnicity—that influence the experience of the patient. Urry's social complexity theory (2006) offers a further framework for understanding these dynamics: interactions between biological, cultural, and social systems are difficult to capture in a visual medium without important connections being lost.

In addition, comics may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or perpetuate hegemonic narratives. This risk is particularly evident in representations of vulnerable or minority groups. For example, the concept of 'distorted representation' (Said, 1978), developed in the context of postcolonialism studies, can be applied to analyse how certain groups are represented through a cultural filter that reflects the prejudices of the author or editorial context rather than the reality experienced.

The 'critical representation' theory developed by Mirzoeff (2002) also invites us to consider the role of images as acts of power. In comics, choosing to depict a patient with a fragile or subordinate appearance may reinforce a passive perception of illness, impinging on the dignity of the subject depicted. Avoiding these risks requires critical awareness and interdisciplinary collaboration between artists, researchers and members of the communities represented. This is especially important when comics are used in ethnographic contexts where the researcher holds significant interpretative and decision-making power. Criticism of the lack of adaptation of the comic method to the needs of the field, as noted by Wiles et al. (2012), suggests that comics risk reproducing asymmetrical power dynamics. In this sense, choosing to use comics as a narrative tool often does not stem from a participatory process, and is instead imposed by the researcher; this limits the emancipatory potential of the medium.

Another challenge regards the ethical implications of visualising human suffering. Visual storytelling is, by its very nature, highly evocative, and may risk turning illness into entertainment rather than acting as a tool for

awareness. In her famous essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Sontag, 2003), Susan Sontag warns against the voyeurism implicit in the visual representation of suffering, pointing out that the audience may be driven more towards superficial empathy than an authentic understanding of the phenomenon. This challenge becomes particularly evident when comics are used to raise awareness of sensitive issues, such as disability or the end of life. Chouliaraki's theory of the 'pornography of suffering' (Chouliaraki, 2006) suggests that the representation of suffering can easily slip towards a form of exoticism or pietism, rather than acting as a driver for effective social action.

Comics enable an immediate, intuitive visual representation, able to summarise complex concepts and present them in an accessible form. As noted by Drucker (2008), the epistemological value of this language lies in its ability to simultaneously represent different temporal dimensions, multiple places and global phenomena. Graphic storytelling is particularly suited to capturing multi-sited dynamics, as proposed by the multi-sited ethnography theory developed by Marcus (1995). For example, the frames in a comic can show how inequalities manifest themselves on a global scale, relating the local circumstances to macro-social processes.

However, this immediacy poses the risk of oversimplifying narrative and cultural complexity, as Rainford (2021) also noted. The ability to represent the body, social practices and relationships concisely can result in a reduction in nuances of interpretation and thus in the analytical depth required in more complex research contexts.

The tension between scientific accuracy and empathetic storytelling is one of the most complex challenges faced by the medium. The comic must remain faithful to scientific data, yet at the same time it must be able to capture the reader's attention and stir their emotions. The 'engaged scholarship' theory developed by Van de Ven (2007) offers a useful perspective here: comics can be seen as a space in which science and society communicate with one another, creating a shared narrative that combines scientific rigour with emotional engagement.

This approach requires active co-creation between scientific experts, patients and artists, striking a balance between accuracy and the ability to awaken emotions and foster change. A practical example can be observed in comics dealing with climate change and its implications for health, where visual storytelling has been used to combine scientific rigour with social action.

In this context, comics are not only a communication tool, but also a cultural and social laboratory in which new meanings and practices are negotiated. The future of the medium will depend on its ability to overcome its current limitations by bringing on board ethical and critical practices able to foster a more inclusive, accurate and transformative narrative. For a better understanding of the impact of comics as a research tool, the participatory approach theory developed by Freire (1970) may be useful. If used in a genuinely collaborative way, comics can become a space for dialogue and the shared construction of knowledge. This approach requires the researcher to relinquish sole control over the narrative, and to work together with the participants to create a product that is an accurate reflection of their experiences, perspectives and stories.

Conclusions

In conclusion, because space is now at a premium: through the expressive medium of comics, art acts as a catalyst for both the social construction and the internalisation of illness, offering a means to visualise, interpret and ultimately transform society's understanding of illness. This makes art not only a reflection of medical reality, but also an active agent in shaping the way illness is conceived and experienced.

Comics play a crucial role in the demystification of a variety of health conditions. By humanising the individuals facing these challenges, they are able to break up stereotypes and distorted ideas, bringing illness out of the shadows and into the realm of open dialogue, and creating a safe space for discussion, dialogue and debate. This visual medium not only reflects the power dynamics of the reality we live in; it also offers unique scope to challenge those dynamics, to visualise resistance and to experience temporary utopias. Like the heterotopias described by Foucault (1967), comics can thus be seen as spaces where norms are turned upside down and where power can be examined, criticised and sometimes reconfigured.

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CHAPTER 5

Illustrating Labour: The Role of Graphic Social Science in Labour Sociology

Giorgio Pirina and Francesco Pontarelli

Introduction

In recent years, the use of comics in social research has gained considerable attention, particularly within the framework of visual-qualitative methodologies. Often referred to as "graphic social science" this medium blends images with narrative to convey complex sociological phenomena in a manner that is accessible to both academic and non-academic audiences. Comics have emerged as a valuable tool for illustrating personal and collective experiences, making them particularly relevant to fields like

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the sociology of work. Beyond serving as a communicative tool, comics stand as a distinct medium of expression with their own visual grammar, offering a broader spectrum of possibilities for scholars seeking to explore and disseminate topics related to the labour field. Additionally, comics contribute to societal debates by bridging academic insights with public discourse.

As a medium of communication employed by scholars conducting sociological research, comics respond to the urgent need to move beyond the confines of the academic ivory tower as their capacity to influence public common sense is widely acknowledged. Historically, comics have been deployed as tools of propaganda, cultural commentary, and social and political intervention. A classic example is the iconic nationalist superhero Capitan America—supporting its country's cause during the second world war—punching Adolf Hitler in his first appearance in 1941—only to become, a few years later in a difference political climate during the McCarthy era, a "commie smasher". Similarly, the case of the Italian fascist minister of popular culture Dino Alfieri—showing the awareness of comics influence on people's common sense—in 1937 instructed magazine editors to include racist cartoons that promoted the fascist regime's colonial policies (Gadducci et al., 2011). These historical examples underscore the powerful role of comics in shaping societal ideologies, a role they continue to play in contemporary sociological debate. Consider the emergence of superheroes like Black Panther, a character representing racialised communities that had long been marginalised in Western comics. Such representations—as a reflection of broader movements but also a piece of that same fabric—exemplify comics' potential to provoke public reflection and contribute to broader societal discourse.

Comics as a form of visual sociology provide a compelling medium for illustrating sociological ideas and concepts through a blend of visual imagery and text. The sociology of work can particularly benefit from this medium and type of language, as it enables, for instance, the representation of forms of labour that are often hidden, overlooked, or insufficiently understood in conventional discourse. Comics can portray these complex realities in ways that offer nuanced and multilayered entry point for diverse audiences. Depending on the reader's background, these representations may either resonate familiar or introduce new perspectives, fostering deeper understanding and expanding knowledge and awareness. Within sociology of work, comics are uniquely suited to depicting a wide range of labour forms—standard and non-standard, precarious, forced, and

informal—while shedding light on the often unrecognised experiences of those engaged in these forms of work.

This chapter explores how comics and an innovative narrative tool—the ethnographic pop-up—can deepen our understanding of work and labour. By offering the possibility to stimulate a multilayered emotional and sensory engagement, both comics and ethnographic pop-ups allow researchers to explore the nuanced and often invisible aspects of workers' lives. These tools expand the possibilities of sociology of labour providing new ways to connect with audiences and to engage with the complexities of labour relations and power dynamics in our societies.

The Role of Comics and Graphic Novels in the Labour Sociology

Comics and graphic novels, traditionally seen as entertainment, have increasingly gained recognition as powerful mediums for exploring complex sociological themes, including the sociology of work. By blending visual storytelling with textual narratives, they offer a distinctive ability to depict the nuanced experiences of labour, organisational dynamics, and the socio-economic structures shaping workplaces. Their accessibility and emotional depth allow these works to reach audiences beyond academic circles, broadening discussions about the evolving nature of work in contemporary societies (McCloud, 1993).

One of the most notable contributions of comics to the sociology of work is their ability to humanise labour portraying the nuanced lived experiences of workers. By focusing on individual workers' lives, they make abstract sociological theories relatable. For instance, Joe Sacco's *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* delves into the struggles of precarious workers in deindustrialised areas, highlighting the human cost of economic decline and inequitable policies (Sacco & Hedges, 2012). These narratives reveal the psychological and physical toll of employment practices and systemic inequalities, fostering empathy and critical thought about labour relations and workplace conditions.

Comics are also a powerful instrument and language to effectively address the intersections of identity and labour. Issues such as race, gender, and class, which fundamentally influence workplace relations and dynamics, are often presented with a richness that traditional sociological texts may lack. For example, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* explores the interplay between personal identity and professional life, revealing how societal and familial expectations shape individual experiences (Warhol &

Warhol-Down, 2011). By visually representing workplace hierarchies and personal struggles, these stories compel readers to consider how systemic biases manifest in professional settings.

Emblematic example of the capacity of comics to convey a complex societal dynamic, exploring the influence of race and international migration processes in the context of unequal international division of labour is Giuseppe Zambon and Paolo De Marchi's *Ismael e gli Altri* (2023). Its vivid narrative powerfully portrays on paper the complex dynamics of migration and illegal labour brokering through the story of a group of friends migrating from Pakistan to Italy in search of work. The narrative unveils the shattered and sometimes betrayed, hopes of migrants, exposing various facets of exploitation and violence they endure. It also highlights the risks they face, and the forms of oppression and control imposed by employers and intermediaries. At the same time, the story captures moments of hope and solidarity among the exploited, brought to life through striking and evocative illustrations.

Moreover, graphic novels can examine the historical and cultural evolution of work. Titles like *Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics* even dissect the creative processes behind comics production, shedding light on the realities of creative industries and freelance work (McCloud, 1993). Similarly, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* documents the economic impacts of political and corporate decision-making on labour markets, providing a critical lens on structural inequalities (Sacco & Hedges, 2012).

The visual nature of comics enhances their capacity to depict the physical and spatial dimensions of work. The layout of panels can reflect the monotony or chaos of particular jobs, while metaphoric imagery captures emotions like frustration, fatigue, or aspiration. This multidimensional storytelling facilitates a deeper understanding of the workplace's influence on workers' mental and emotional well-being (Versaci, 2007).

Furthermore, the increasing recognition of comics as scholarly texts opens new possibilities for their integration into education and research. By presenting complex sociological concepts in accessible forms, they demystify academic jargon and engage students and non-specialists in critical discussions about work. As labour becomes increasingly fragmented in the twenty-first century, comics' ability to reflect and critique such trends makes them invaluable for sociological inquiry and public engagement.

The following section delves into three major themes that comics can effectively illustrate: alienation, exploitation, and precarity. Rooted in

Marxist theory and other sociological frameworks, these concepts have long been central to labour studies. Comics, with their multidimensional and dynamic narrative potential, provide a compelling medium to visualise, analyse, and disseminate the material realities of these topics and their impacts on workers.

Alienation

Alienation, a cornerstone of Karl Marx's critique of capitalist labour, captures the estrangement workers experience from their labour, its products, their colleagues, and ultimately, themselves (Marx, 1994; Fuchs, 2014; Musto, 2018). This concept, while abstract, finds vivid and tangible representation in the medium of comics. Through the synergy of visual and textual storytelling, comics effectively depict alienation in ways that traditional academic texts often cannot. Workers are frequently portrayed as small, isolated figures dwarfed by the vast, oppressive environments of factories or corporate office cubicles. These dehumanising landscapes visually articulate the alienation workers feel from the production process and the products of their labour.

The fragmentation of work is another crucial aspect of alienation, and comics excel at depicting this through repeated, disconnected panels. Each frame can portray the monotony of repetitive tasks, symbolising the erosion of individuality and autonomy in modern labour systems. The medium's use of visual repetition mirrors the mind-numbing cycle of capitalist work, driving home the emotional and psychological toll on workers. Furthermore, alienation from the self—a key component of Marx's theory—is depicted through thought bubbles or internal dialogues. These narrative tools reveal a worker's inner dissatisfaction, their daydreams of escape, or their reflections on a life confined by professional obligations. By juxtaposing scenes of personal aspirations or memories with the stark realities of oppressive work conditions, comics illuminate the profound disconnect between workers' internal worlds and external realities.

Joe Sacco's *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* serves as a prime example of how alienation can be captured in graphic storytelling (Sacco & Hedges, 2012). Through meticulous illustrations of barren industrial landscapes and the repetitive, isolating tasks that define low-wage work, Sacco highlights the disconnection and powerlessness that characterise alienation. Sacco's work blends journalistic detail with visual metaphors, portraying alienation not merely as an abstract condition but as a visceral, lived experience shaped by economic systems. This approach bridges the

gap between sociological theory and lived experience, making the abstract concept of alienation profoundly relatable and compelling (McCloud, 1993; Warhol & Warhol-Down, 2011). A similar ability to convey alienation through both narrative and visual elements, capturing the protagonist's sense of disconnection from her labour, is evident in Daria Bogdanska's *Wage Slaves* (2019). The book narrates the life of a young migrant woman navigating the challenges of Swedish bureaucracy and employment law, ultimately finding herself in a precarious informal job. This story of exploitation, alienation, and resistance mirrors the experiences of many young migrant workers across the European continent, making it both relatable and accessible to a broad audience.

Exploitation

Exploitation, another critical theme in Marxist labour theory, refers to the power imbalance wherein workers produce more value than they receive, with surplus value appropriated by capitalists (Marx, 1994). Comics provide a uniquely effective medium for exposing these dynamics, revealing the hidden mechanisms of exploitation in ways that resonate emotionally and intellectually. Exploitation is frequently depicted through stark contrasts: drained, weary workers are juxtaposed with faceless, abstract figures representing corporations, CEOs, or bureaucrats who profit from their labour. These faceless entities underscore the impersonal nature of exploitation, portraying a system that prioritises profit over human welfare.

Symbolism plays a crucial role in representing exploitation. Chains, gears, and assembly lines often recur in comics as metaphors for the oppressive cycles of capitalist labour. Such imagery evokes a sense of entrapment, illustrating how workers are locked into exploitative systems with little agency. Dialogue and narrative voice further emphasise this imbalance. Workers' frustrations are often articulated in speech or thought bubbles, where they voice concerns that are ignored or dismissed by those in power. This narrative framing allows readers to witness exploitation not only as a structural phenomenon but also as a deeply personal and emotional experience.

Joe Sacco's *Tributo alla Terra* (Tribute to the Earth) exemplifies how graphic novels explore the broader socio-economic dimensions of exploitation (Sacco, 2020). Set in Northern Canada, the novel highlights the struggles of the Dene people against extractive industries like hydraulic fracturing (fracking), which devastates their lands while enriching multinational corporations. Sacco's intricate illustrations contrast the natural

beauty of the Dene's territories with the environmental destruction wrought by industrialisation. This juxtaposition visually conveys the exploitative dynamics of capitalism, where land and labour are commodified for profit. The narrative also delves into the complicity of governmental systems, which facilitate the exploitation of Indigenous communities while eroding their cultural practices and traditional knowledge. Sacco's interviews with the Dene reveal internal divisions, with some resisting industrialisation outright while others reluctantly accept it due to economic pressures. This nuanced portrayal underscores the complexity of exploitation, highlighting how colonial histories and socio-economic inequalities compound the struggles of marginalised groups (McCloud, 1993; Duncan & Smith, 2009). Sacco's work demonstrates how comics can expose exploitation's systemic and emotional dimensions, offering readers a lens to critically examine its pervasive effects.

A distinct and yet equally effective and impactful style of narration, characteristic of creative non-fiction working-class narrative genre, is employed in *Ismael e gli Altri* (Zambon et al., 2023). The story follows the journey of workers travelling from Pakistan to Italy, offering a step-by-step depiction of the various forms of exploitation they endure. These forms of exploitation are portrayed in the workers' country of origin, in the one in transit, and finally in their destination, providing a holistic view of how the system of illegal labour brokering (*caporalato*) operates. This is described with indirect references to an international context marked by a racialised division of labour and unequal relations among states. The scenes depicting interactions with intermediaries and the representations of employers' practices starkly convey the material realities of migrant labour and the layered forms of exploitation throughout the migration process. The imagery of workers engaged in various occupations—from cleaning tasks to the strenuous handling of heavy loads in the paper industry—alongside instances of discrimination based on their origins, vividly illustrates the intersection of toil, exploitation, and racialisation. Additionally, the narrative offers insights into the intricate dynamics of internal divisions within workplaces and immigrant communities, providing a nuanced portrayal of how these dynamics facilitate exploitation in their lived experiences.

Precarity

Precarity, the pervasive instability of work in a globalised economy, has become a defining feature of contemporary labour. Workers in precarious

jobs often contend with low wages, short-term contracts, and uncertain futures, leaving them vulnerable to financial insecurity and psychological distress. Comics, with their narrative flexibility and visual symbolism, are particularly adept at portraying the erratic and unstable nature of precarious labour. The medium's ability to rapidly shift between scenes and timelines can mirror the fluctuating states of employment and unemployment that precarious workers endure.

Visual metaphors are frequently employed to capture the anxiety and instability inherent in precarity. Characters may be depicted balancing on tightropes, juggling multiple jobs, or sinking under the weight of bills and responsibilities. These images effectively convey the emotional toll of precarious work, translating abstract economic concepts into tangible, relatable experiences. Additionally, the fragmented panel structures of comics can reflect the disrupted lives of precarious workers, with narrative interruptions and sudden changes underscoring the unpredictable nature of gig and freelance economies.

Dialogue and inner monologues are also instrumental in revealing the human cost of precarity. Workers' thoughts and conversations frequently revolve around their fears of financial insecurity, struggles to secure stable employment, or inability to plan for the future. These narrative elements personalise the abstract notion of precarity, providing a human face to the systemic issues affecting millions of workers worldwide.

The Gig Economy, featured in *The Nib*, is a striking example of how comics depict precarity. Through short, poignant stories, this comic series captures the unstable lives of gig workers, illustrating their constant struggle to balance low-paying jobs with the demands of everyday life. The fluctuating panel layouts reflect the unpredictability of gig work, where stability is elusive, and workers are at the mercy of market forces. By focusing on individual narratives, *The Nib* highlights the broader socioeconomic structures that perpetuate precarity, while also fostering empathy for those caught in its grasp (Duncan & Smith, 2009; Versaci, 2007).

The graphic novel *La linea dell'orizzonte* by Francesco Della Puppa, et al. (2021) provides an important lens for understanding precarity through the intersection of work and migration. By focusing on the experiences of migrant workers in Italy, it portrays how precarity is intensified for individuals navigating exploitative labour systems while grappling with social exclusion and cultural dislocation. Migrants are depicted in precarious roles, such as agricultural or construction work, often under conditions that deny them legal protections or job security. The work highlights

how systemic inequalities and economic pressures compound the instability of migrant workers, leaving them trapped in cycles of vulnerability and exploitation.

Della Puppa and colleagues' visual narrative intertwines structural and personal dimensions of precarity. It juxtaposes moments of hope and aspiration with harsh realities, illustrating how precarious labour undermines not only material stability but also individual and collective well-being. Migrant workers' lives are shown as fragmented, their futures perpetually deferred, and their sense of self shaped by a struggle for dignity within exploitative systems. This perspective aligns with broader sociological insights into the intersection of precarity, migration, and neoliberal labour markets, revealing how precarity disproportionately affects marginalised groups.

Comics as a Tool and a Language for Inclusive Science Communication

One of the key strengths of comics and graphic novels is their ability to communicate complex scientific and sociological ideas in a way that is accessible and inclusive to diverse audiences. The combination of visual elements and narrative storytelling breaks down barriers to understanding, making scientific knowledge more approachable to individuals who may not be familiar with academic jargon or traditional scholarly formats. This inclusive approach is particularly significant in sociology, where the lived experiences of marginalised communities, workers, and underrepresented groups are often the focus of research.

Several studies have demonstrated the value of comics in communicating science to a wider audience. For example, Sousanis (2015) in his seminal work *Unflattening* explores how comics can challenge traditional modes of thinking and represent complex ideas in new ways, making them accessible to non-specialist audiences. Additionally, McCloud (1993) in *Understanding Comics* articulates how the sequential nature of comics fosters a unique cognitive engagement, helping readers to process and understand abstract concepts visually. These works underscore the effectiveness of comics in breaking down complex ideas into more manageable, engaging forms.

Comics also have the potential to reach audiences that might otherwise be excluded from academic discourse due to language barriers, educational background, or a lack of access to academic journals. Research by

Tatalovic (2009) in *Science Communication via Comics* discusses how comics can bridge these gaps, as visual storytelling transcends linguistic and cultural differences, allowing for the universal communication of scientific concepts. By blending images with concise, engaging text, comics make abstract sociological concepts such as alienation, exploitation, and precarity more tangible and relatable to readers from various walks of life.

Moreover, comics encourage emotional and cognitive engagement, enhancing both comprehension and retention of scientific content. This has been demonstrated by Farinella (2018), who argues that comics are a powerful medium for science communication because they allow for a more inclusive form of storytelling that can capture the attention of broader audiences, including those who are typically underrepresented in academic discussions. Farinella's work, *The Synthesis of Comic and Science Communication*, showcases how comics can distill scientific research into engaging, visually driven narratives, making science more accessible.

In community-based or participatory research, comics can serve as a valuable tool for knowledge dissemination. By using comics, researchers can ensure that findings are presented in an understandable and impactful way to those directly affected by the research. This promotes inclusivity by encouraging engagement and feedback from participants who might not otherwise feel comfortable engaging with traditional academic texts. Comics thus not only democratise knowledge but also empower individuals from diverse backgrounds to contribute to scientific dialogue, as highlighted in studies such as *The Role of Comics in Engaging Underrepresented Audiences in Science* (Negrete & Lartigue, 2004).

In conclusion, comics and graphic novels are powerful tools for promoting inclusivity in science communication, as they engage diverse audiences, break down complex ideas into accessible formats, and encourage emotional and intellectual engagement with the material. By expanding the reach of academic discourse to include non-specialist readers, comics help bridge the gap between science and society, fostering a more inclusive and participatory scientific conversation.

Communicating the Subjects of the Sociology of Work

The inclusive potential of comics can be seen in several notable works that communicate the sociology of work to a wider audience. For example, Joe Sacco's *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* provides a vivid, emotionally engaging account of the lives of workers in America's most impoverished areas. The graphic novel combines Sacco's detailed illustrations with

journalist Chris Hedges' powerful narrative to depict the alienation, exploitation, and precarity faced by these workers. The visual nature of the graphic novel allows readers to see the physical environments of these workers, their struggles, and the broader socio-economic structures that contribute to their exploitation. By using the comic format, Sacco and Hedges are able to reach readers who might not typically engage with sociological research, making the complex realities of labour inequality more accessible and relatable.

Another example is the work published by the International Labour Organization (ILO), titled *Through Their Eyes—Visions of Forced Labour*. This comic publication highlights the experiences of workers subjected to forced labour, using powerful imagery and personal stories to illustrate the harsh realities these individuals face. Forced labour is a difficult concept to communicate through words alone, as it often involves hidden or invisible dynamics. By using the comic format, the ILO makes these invisible forms of labour visible, giving voice to those whose stories are often unheard. The comic book format also allows for a more emotional connection with the reader, making the issue of forced labour more real and urgent. This approach demonstrates how comics can serve as an effective tool for raising awareness about serious global issues like labour exploitation, while still being accessible to non-specialists.

La Linea dell'Orizzonte (Della Puppa et al., 2021) serves as a compelling example of how sociological academic work can be articulated and disseminated in the form of an ethnographic novel, and convey part of the findings of years of research on migration—and thus labour—processes within the Bangladeshi community in Italy (and in the UK). On a related yet distinct topic, *Ismael and gli Altri* (Zambon et al., 2023) explores the intersection of migration and labour, offering a detailed description of labour brokering mechanisms and their related forms of exploitation connecting workers in Pakistan and Italy. This latter work stands out for its collaboration with a labour organisation, the trade union ADL Cobas, which contributed a section to the book. This contribution adds significant value by including trade unionists' reflections on a specific case of a labour struggle that highlighted a concrete instance of labour brokering and the complex dynamics surrounding this experience.

This is just one example of how labour organisations can be involved in a comics-based project. In some cases, trade unions themselves adopt this visual and communicative medium and language to disseminate information to their members effectively. A notable example is the National Union

of Metalworkers of South Africa, the largest trade union on the African continent. In 2013, the union published a comic pamphlet to critique the government's market-driven National Development Plan. On one side the pamphlet critically analysed the policies package promoted by the government, while on the other, it vividly and satirically portrayed government officials as an elite disconnected from the needs and concerns of the South African people (NUMSA, 2013).

Furthermore, *The Nib*, a well-known platform for political cartoons, as mentioned in the previous section, has also explored labour issues through its Gig Economy Comics series.[1] These webcomics depict the precarious conditions of gig workers, such as food delivery drivers and Uber drivers, who operate in unstable work environments without the security of full-time employment or worker protections. Through simple, yet impactful illustrations, these comics highlight the everyday challenges faced by gig workers, including financial insecurity, lack of benefits, and the power imbalances between workers and the tech companies they rely on for work. The series is not only accessible in its presentation but also inclusive in its reach, as it can be easily shared online, thus engaging a global audience with contemporary issues in the sociology of work. By portraying gig workers' struggles visually, these comics help demystify the structural issues underpinning precarious employment, making them easier for readers to grasp and empathise with.

Visual Storytelling in Ethnography

To fully utilise the potential of comics and ethnographic pop-ups in the sociology of work, it is essential to apply appropriate sociological methodologies to both the visual and narrative components. For instance, semiotic analysis offers a way to decode the symbols and visual metaphors that comics use to represent deeper sociological meanings. Recurring imagery such as chains symbolising exploitation or isolated figures denoting alienation reveals how comics articulate structural inequalities and power dynamics. Additionally, discourse analysis can be employed to scrutinise the textual elements within comics, such as dialogue and thought bubbles. This approach uncovers the ideologies surrounding work and labour, revealing how power is articulated, how workers' voices are marginalised, and how labour is framed within broader socio-economic contexts. By

[1] For example, https://thenib.com/gig-economy-response-19-871/. Last access: 30/11/2024.

integrating these methodologies, researchers can uncover the multilayered narratives that comics construct around work.

Visual ethnography provides another lens through which comics and ethnographic pop-ups can be examined. These methods document the daily routines, emotions, and physical environments of workers in ways that extend beyond traditional textual descriptions. For example, comics vividly capture non-verbal cues—body language, spatial arrangements, and facial expressions—that written accounts may overlook.

The term "ethnographic pop-up"[2] emerged during participant observations conducted as part of previous research. The concept of the ethnographic pop-up is designed as a tool to capture and express, in written, oral, or—for those with the ability—illustrated form, the sensations, emotions, and perceptions arising within a particular space and time.

This approach took shape during a reflective pause amidst participant observation: seated on a bench, watching a sunset over the sea, surrounded by historic buildings, and immersed in the sounds of waves lapping, the cries of seagulls, and the murmur of passing people. What followed was an impressionistic-descriptive text, woven with a narrative of the spectrum of emotions evoked by the setting.

As in photovoice it's the photographs produced by research participants, related to a specific theme, that activate and enhance discussion. In the case of the ethnographic pop-up, the expressive form is writing or drawning (or both).

The ethnographic pop-up, true to its nature, can serve a dual function. On the one hand, as a tool for active listening, it can allow the detection of information and situations otherwise overlooked or unexplored. On the other hand, with its simple structure and brief form, it represents a method for dissemination and engagement with those who are not interested in reading an academic text.

[2] The choice to use the term "pop-up" stems from the search for a word that immediately conveys the purpose of this narrative tool, that is, something that emerges or appears suddenly. The origin of the term is twofold and equally valid: one comes from the field of computing, and the other from children's literature. In the former case, a pop-up refers to an informational or advertising window that appears on a browser during internet navigation. In the latter case, it refers to books that include three-dimensional images that appear as the pages are turned.

Comics and Ethnographic Pop-Ups

Comics and ethnographic pop-ups are connected as complementary tools within visual and narrative methodologies, particularly in the context of sociological research. Both mediums leverage the power of storytelling to convey complex ideas and emotions, bridging the gap between abstract theoretical concepts and lived experiences. This connection is particularly valuable in the sociology of work, where the nuanced realities of labour practices, organisational structures, and worker experiences often require innovative approaches to be fully understood.

Comics and ethnographic pop-ups share a foundational reliance on visual storytelling to communicate information. Comics combine sequential imagery with text to create layered narratives that engage readers on multiple cognitive and emotional levels. Similarly, ethnographic pop-ups incorporate descriptive narratives with visual or sensory cues, such as sketches, maps, or spatial layouts, to encapsulate the immediacy and emotional resonance of a particular moment or setting. This visual dimension allows both mediums to capture and represent aspects of human experience—such as body language, spatial arrangements, and sensory details—that might be overlooked or underexplored in traditional written accounts.

Both comics and ethnographic pop-ups foreground the subjectivity of their creators, making reflexivity an integral part of their narratives. Comics often feature the perspectives of their authors or protagonists, using visual elements to illustrate personal emotions, internal conflicts, or subjective interpretations of events. Ethnographic pop-ups similarly emphasise the researcher's or participant's perspective, inviting them to reflect on their sensory and emotional experiences within a specific context. This shared focus on subjectivity allows both tools to explore the personal dimensions of sociological themes, such as workers' feelings of alienation or empowerment in their environments.

For example, a comic about factory labour might depict the oppressive monotony of repetitive tasks through repetitive panel layouts, while an ethnographic pop-up created during fieldwork in the same setting might capture the researcher's observations of workers' facial expressions or the sounds of machinery. Together, these mediums provide a holistic view of the environment, blending subjective impressions with structural analysis.

Both comics and ethnographic pop-ups excel in representing the complexity of social phenomena by combining multiple modalities: visual, textual, and sometimes even tactile or sensory. Comics use this multimodality

to layer meaning, incorporating visual metaphors, dialogue, and captions to present multifaceted narratives. Ethnographic pop-ups achieve a similar effect by blending written descriptions with sensory and emotional details, creating a rich, immersive account of a specific moment or interaction.

In the sociology of work, this multimodal approach is especially effective in addressing themes like alienation, exploitation, and precarity. A comic might show a worker performing a repetitive task under the watchful gaze of a supervisor, visually symbolising power dynamics and alienation. Meanwhile, an ethnographic pop-up created in the same setting could describe the researcher's sensory impressions, such as the worker's subdued tone or the overwhelming noise of the factory floor, adding depth to the analysis. Together, these tools provide complementary perspectives that enrich our understanding of the subject.

Both comics and ethnographic pop-ups are tools that empower marginalised voices by making their experiences accessible and relatable to diverse audiences. Comics achieve this through their visual-narrative format, which can simplify complex sociological concepts without losing depth, thereby reaching non-specialist audiences. Ethnographic pop-ups, on the other hand, allow participants to actively contribute to the research process by documenting their own experiences and emotions. This participatory element ensures that the voices of workers—particularly those in precarious or marginalised roles—are not only included but also foregrounded in sociological analysis.

When combined, comics and ethnographic pop-ups create a participatory and inclusive methodology. For instance, participants might use ethnographic pop-ups to document their daily routines or reflections, which could then be adapted into a comic format to communicate their experiences to a broader audience. This process not only validates the participants' perspectives but also enhances the impact of the research by making it more engaging and widely disseminated.

Both mediums are effective tools for disseminating research findings to diverse audiences, bridging the gap between academic and public discourse. Comics have long been used to simplify and visualise complex academic ideas, making them accessible to readers outside the academy. Ethnographic pop-ups, with their concise and visually rich format, similarly translate academic insights into narratives that are both engaging and understandable. When used together, these tools amplify the reach of sociological research, ensuring that findings resonate with workers, policymakers, and community members alike.

For example, a study on gig economy workers could include ethnographic pop-ups documenting participants' reflections on their precarious roles. These reflections could then inform a comic that visually represents the systemic issues and personal struggles associated with gig work. This combined approach ensures that the research not only analyses labour practices but also communicates its findings in a way that drives awareness and action.

Conclusion

The integration of comics and the ethnographic pop-up into the sociology of work represents an innovative expansion of methodological tools and approaches. These tools bring a unique and powerful emotional and sensory dimension to the study of labour, allowing researchers to delve into the subjective experiences of workers in a way that traditional methods often overlook. As highlighted in this chapter, the use of comics has proven particularly valuable for scholars seeking to contribute to public debate and to influence common sense challenging dominant narratives. By leveraging the visual and narrative strengths of graphic social science, sociological research becomes more accessible and engaging, fostering a deeper connection with both academic and non-academic communities.

In an era of rapid societal transformation, graphic novels offer a compelling medium to examine the power relations in society, offering an innovative and effective insight into the systemic dynamics of alienation, exploitation, and precarity. These narratives not only document the continuously changing nature of labour but also critique the socio-economic structures that perpetuate unstable and exploitative precarious social relations. By bridging individual stories with broader systemic analysis, such works enhance our understanding of precarity as a central feature of contemporary labour. Such approaches enrich the sociology of labour by providing innovative ways to disseminate and examine the complexities of workplace and societal relations, as well as resistance and struggle.

As graphic social science continues to develop, its potential to transcend the academic tower becomes increasingly apparent. By narrating the diverse forms of labour relations and their intersections with power and resistance, these methods not only enhance sociological inquiry but also contribute meaningfully to public discourse.

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CHAPTER 6

Comics in Migration, Migration in Comics: Methodological Reflections and Theoretical Perspectives Emerging from the Analysis of Two Case Studies

Francesco Della Puppa and Sarah Walker

Introduction

Comics about migrations have been shaped across languages, cultures, and time by the diverse socio-political stances and today migration comic research and migration studies by comics are developing research and methodological fields. The language of comics is characterised by its ability to convey movements, mobilities, and transformations across time and space (McCloud, 1993; Kauranen et al., 2023). As such, it represents a medium particularly well-suited to narrating migration. Through the

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skilful use of images, colours, and a combination of text and visuals, comics can express emotions and atmospheres while connecting phenomena distant in time and space—something that text alone often struggles to achieve with equivalent immediacy and effectiveness. Drawing, in this sense, transcends boundaries (Busi Rizzi et al., 2022), enabling the construction of realities and memories that span nations (Kauranen et al., 2023; Spadaro, 2023a). Furthermore, it is important to note that many comic book authors are themselves migrants or come from migratory family backgrounds (Sanfilippo, 2024). This explains why this medium frequently centres on narratives of human mobility and its social implications. In what follows, we will reflect on how comics narrate migration. After an initial bibliographic overview of comic works that 'depict international migration through panels and speech bubble' (Della Puppa, 2023), we will focus on two examples of socio-anthropological storytelling in comics (Della Puppa et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2024). Finally, we propose a section of reflection on the strengths and limitations of the visual and graphic dimension of comics in social research on migration phenomena, particularly when compared to more 'traditional' narrative approaches.

Narrating International Migrations through Panels and Balloons

There is a substantial body of reflections on the narration of migrations and migration studies through the medium of comics, produced both by authors (Cancellieri, 2023; Della Puppa, 2023; Tonfoni et al., 2022) and by scholars (Arioli, 2022; Bandirali & Cristante, 2020; Bedin, 2022; Busi Rizzi et al., 2022; Davies, 2019, 2022; Favaro, 2022; Kauranen et al., 2023; Landi & D'Alessandro, 2022; Pezzarossa, 2022; Rifkind, 2017; Righini, 2022; Sébastien, 2022; Smith, 2011; Spadaro, 2023a, 2023b; Tanca, 2022; Vari, 2023). In particular, some studies have focused on comic narratives as a new way to represent mobility and, above all, the creation of 'transnational' spaces (Della Puppa, 2023; Ẹgẹdẹ, 2020; Mangiavillano, 2023; Spadaro, 2023b; Spadaro & Stamboulis, 2023) or to capture the human experience of migration. Regarding this second theme, Shaun Tan's (2006) *The Arrival* serves as an exemplary work. The graphic novel depicts a 'universal' migration experience through the story of a labourer, father, and husband navigating emigration, immigration, and eventual family reunification. Significantly, the volume contains no written text, making it accessible across diverse linguistic, national, and

cultural contexts. It narrates the protagonist's inner struggles—marked by suffering and loneliness—alongside external challenges such as housing difficulties, bureaucratic and regulatory hurdles, and labour exploitation. At the same time, it conveys hope for the future and solidarity with other workers and migrants—immigrants and refugees fleeing slavery and armed conflict—who share parts of his life journey (Tonfoni et al., 2022). Olivier Kugler's *Escaping Wars and Waves* (2018) documents the experiences of Syrian refugees across the globe. Drawing on many interviews, and hundreds of reference photos, through his drawings of the everyday life of his interviewees while working for Médecins Sans Frontières, Kugler brings to life their location, and renders the extraordinary ordinary (Davies, 2022).

Given the significant focus in the literature on Anglophone comics (Kauranen et al., 2023), we here focus in upon Italian language comics, a growing field, particularly as Silvia Vari (2023) also observes since the 2000s, following a shift in Italy as a country of emigration to one of immigration, with a concurrent increase in migration discourses. An author who has extensively explored the narration of migrations through the language of comics is Barbara Spadaro (2022). Her work focuses particularly on migrations to and from Italy, emphasising *the mobility and the multilingualism of Italian comics culture* and contributing to the theorisation of *the emerging field of Transnational Italian Comics Studies* (Comberiati & Spadaro, 2023):

> [t]wo elements have been key in such an endeavour: a transnational perspective that embraces the mobility of Italian (comics) culture across geographical and linguistic borders (Burdett et al., 2020; Spadaro, 2022) and the engagement of contributors from different academic backgrounds related to Comics and Italian Studies. In this framework, memory and migration have emerged as powerful narrative themes in production and simultaneously as avenues of research in Comics Studies. (Comberiati & Spadaro, 2023, p. 489)

In her exploration of the intersection between Italian comics, transnationalism, and memory, Spadaro (2023b) identifies four main research strands: (1) **'Italian cartoonists in emigration'**—focusing on works such as Fior (2010) and Tota (2010), which explore the "new" emigration of young Italian cartoonists to France; (2) **'History and (post)memory of Italian emigration'**—examining, among others, Baru's trilogy (2021, 2022, 2023), as well as works by Campi and Zabus (2018), Carrara (2005), Colaone (2010), Marchese and Patané (2009), Otero (2020), Salma

(2013), Santospirito (2015), and Valentinis (2014). These narratives address various social, labour, identity, familial, and generational aspects of historical Italian emigration to Europe, the Americas, and Australia; (3) **'Toward Europe: Reality comics and refugee comics'**—including works such as Bernardi and Sio (2019), on the complex relationships within refugee and asylum seeker reception centres; Castaldi (2017), capturing the testimonies of Eritrean refugees; Cripsta and Bonaiuti's exploration of hosting asylum seekers in private homes; Girardi (2009), on Kurdish emigrants fleeing political violence; and Niccolini and Bonaffino (2014), on the shipwreck of an Albanian migrant vessel caused by an Italian patrol boat's ramming; (4) **'Migrant stories, transnational lives: Children of migration'**—including volumes by Takoua (2016, 2018, 2021), which explore emigration after the Tunisian uprising, as well as racism and resistance experienced by Tunisian immigrants in Italy. Also included are Cajelli and Genovesi's *noir* series (2013–2020), inspired by 1970s Kung-Fu movies, to depict Chinese immigration to Italy and reflect on related stereotypes and discrimination; *Ti sto cercando* by Marchese and Patané (2008), which interrogates colonial histories, exploitation, and racism through the memories of immigrant fathers and their children in Italy; and the trilogy by Rocchi and Demonte (2015, 2017, 2021), which also examines Chinese immigration to Italy.

In line with the evolution of migratory patterns and the intensification of asylum channels—paralleled by the proliferation and worsening of armed conflicts, climate catastrophes, and environmental crises—there has been a growing focus in comics on the themes of asylum seekers and refugees (Davies & Rifkind, 2025). Notable works in this area include *In fuga* by Bissattini et al. (2023), which examines the refugee experience and the Italian asylum system; Marco Rizzo and Lelio Bonaccorso's *Salvezza* (2018), which depicts the work of ship crews rescuing migrants off the Libyan coast on the Mediterranean route. The authors drew from their direct experience aboard the *Aquarius*, a vessel used by SOS Méditerranée and Médecins Sans Frontières to rescue men, women, and children risking death for a better life in Europe. Rizzo and Bonaccorso also authored *A casa nostra: Cronache da Riace* (2019), focusing on the reception phase, specifically the grassroots and successful solidarity efforts in Riace, later dismantled by systemic racism in the Italian state. Meanwhile, Francesca Mannocchi and Gianluca Costantini's *Libia* (2019) uses a journalistic style to depict Libya as a transit hub for migrants travelling from Africa to Europe, highlighting the atrocities in Libyan detention camps, where

armed militias funded by the European Union and Italian governments torture and exploit migrants.

In *I disconosciuti* (2024), Della Puppa et al. present an ethnographic and sociological analysis of refugees and asylum seekers living outside the formal reception system. The protagonists include a young researcher and three migrants with diverse trajectories, navigating the "Mediterranean route" through the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea, and the "Balkan route" via former Yugoslav countries. Similarly, the protagonists of *Threads from the Refugee Crisis* (2017) by Kate Evans and *Les nouvelles de la jungle de Calais* (2017) by Lisa Mandel and Yasmine Bouagga endured dangerous journeys across nations and continents. Both volumes adopt an ethnographic and self-reflective perspective to depict 'the Calais Jungle'—the informal migrant camps in the French city established since the late 1990s by non-European migrants attempting to reach the UK via the Channel Tunnel or improvised crossings. They also analyse the relationships among migrants within the camp and between migrants and locals outside the camp (Sébastien, 2022).

Finally, both works examine the violence resulting from segregation into specific sites, a theme echoed by other authors (Nabizadeh, 2016; Humphrey, 2016; Rifkind, 2017; Davies, 2022), who have studied the architecture of detention and reception centres as examples of spaces for confinement and dehumanisation. Much of this graphic literature draws from Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, which, as Dominic Davies observes 'has arguably become the refugee comics' archetype' (2022, p. 5). In capturing the everyday rhythms of Palestinian life, Sacco reclaims the humanity of these refugees whilst visibilising the carceral violence they are exposed to (2022). Hence, just as other scholars (Nabizadeh, 2016) also argue, comics can allow for new spaces of visibility to be carved out.

The theme of the difficult emigration of unaccompanied foreign minors along the dangerous 'Mediterranean route' is at the heart of *4 vite che sono la mia* (4 Lives that are Mine), which, through a 'choose-your-own-adventure' narrative, illustrates the trajectories and the winding paths of a young Gambian heading to Europe. The title *4 vite* refers to the multiple choices the reader must make through a coin toss—heads or tails? Each result leads to a different turn in the life of Abdel, the young Gambian protagonist, inviting the reader to jump forward or backward in the comic, exploring the endless possibilities that fate might reserve.

This phenomenon is also addressed in *Il Gioco dell'Oca: storie di crescita e migrazione in un tiro di dadi* (Snakes and Ladders: a tale about growing

up and migration by the throw of a dice) (Walker et al., 2024), which, however, primarily focuses on the labyrinthine legal and social journey that unaccompanied foreign minors must face upon their arrival in Italy. *Ismael e gli altri* (Ismael and the Others), on the other hand, masterfully provides a socio-legal investigation into the reality of the exploitative labour system, or 'caporalato' (gangmaster), used by many Italian businesses, which ties the 'legal' economy to the 'criminal' economy in the exploitation of immigrant workers in Italy. The volume also clearly exposes the mechanisms of indebtedness that chain immigrant workers to their exploiters in Italy, as well as the reality of the 'Balkan route', experienced by many emigrants from the so-called 'Middle East' and 'Indian Subcontinen' (Zambon & De Marchi, 2023). Similarly, in placing focus upon the fictional voyage across the Mediterranean Sea of a migrant girl, Amalia, Silvia Vari argues that the wordless graphic novel *Mediterraneo* (2018), visualises what is usually invisible, and at the same time problematises the positionality of the gaze of the viewer-reader when addressing the border violence migrants are exposed to.

As previously mentioned, many comic book authors are themselves migrants or come from migrant family and share a migrant background (Sanfilippo, 2024; Spadaro, 2020), or alternatively, they observe international migration from the countries of origin (Jẹgẹdẹ, 2020). Consider, for example, the previously mentioned works by Rocchi and Demonte on Chinese immigration to Italy and Milan (2015; Rocchi & Demonte, 2017), or *Marmellata con Laban (come mia madre è diventata libanese)* [Jam with Laban (how my mother became Lebanese)] by Lena Merhej, which tells, in the style of a memoir, the personal and family migration experience of her mother from Germany to Lebanon (2021). The graphic *memoir* form is also adopted to narrate painful experiences in the border zone between Mexico and the United States in *La cicatrice* by Ferraris and Chiocca (2017), which critiques the socio-political construction of borders and the violence they entail (Favaro, 2022). Furthermore, among authors of immigrant origin or immigrants themselves, we can also point to Italian authors in France and, especially, Belgium, who are still active in the production of these countries (Comberiati, 2018; Salma, 2013; Cossu & Druart, 2019), as well as Argentine or Latin American authors in the last third of the twentieth century (D'Andrea et al., 2024).

Looking at our most recent work and the evolution of Italian emigration, it is important to emphasise the growing significance of female migration, which, similar to foreign immigration to Italy, is numerically

larger than male migration and often more qualified (Perillo, 2022; Sanfilippo, 2024). In recent years, the comic book landscape has increasingly highlighted migrant women. Consider the acclaimed *Chez toi. Athènes 2016* by Sandrine Martin, which tells the Mediterranean crisis through the encounter of a Syrian refugee and midwife Monika in a Greek refugee centre. The point here is that, beyond some now-predictable figures, we are witnessing new narratives. In the past decade, we have had the Eritrean refugees in *Etenesh: l'odissea di una migrante* (The Odyssey of a Migrant) by the already mentioned Paolo Castaldi (2017), and Nigerian women victims of trafficking and prostitution in *Trattate male: sogni e paure delle più belle del reame* (Mistreated: Dreams and Fears of the Most Beautiful in the Kingdom) by Laura Bastianetto and Valerio Chiola (2014). Moreover, we have additional figures: Takoua Ben Mohamed, also cited by Spadaro (2023b), had already narrated her own biographical experience and transition from school to the world of work in the trilogy *Sotto il velo* (Under the Veil) (2016), *La rivoluzione dei gelsomini* (The Jasmine Revolution) (2018), and *Il mio migliore amico è un fascista* (My Best Friend is a Fascist) (2021). Tiziana Francesca Vaccaro and Elena Mistrello (2021), seeking to adopt the perspective of migrant women, narrate the reality of immigrant care workers in their work *Sindrome Italia. Storia delle nostre badanti* (Syndrome Italy: The Story of Our Caregivers). Cristiano Bedin (2022) analyses this work, focusing on the psychological distress experienced by Eastern European women who come to Italy to care for elderly people with disabilities (Della Puppa, 2012). Mental health disorders related to the so-called Syndrome Italia often manifest only when these women, after a more or less long stay in Italy, return to their home countries and must face children and relatives after a long absence. Vaccaro and Mistrello, through a stream-of-consciousness narrative, convey the experience of the protagonist, including the violence suffered by Vasilica in Italian households, and also the long-term impact of the migration experience on her life. The theme of dequalification and downgrading, which immigrants and, even more so, immigrant women like Vasilica, are subjected to, is also addressed in the recent work edited by Perillo on female emigration and immigration from Italy to Australia and, especially, from Latin America to Italy (2024), with the intertwined biographies of two protagonists. Similarly, in *La linea dell'orizzonte* (The Horizon Line) (Della Puppa et al., 2022), the narrative, moving between autobiographical writing and bildungsroman (Mazzola, 2022), weaves together a "double biographical thread": that of Bangladeshi immigrants in Italy who,

after acquiring Italian citizenship and thus a European passport, use this status and document to embark on a new emigration to the UK, and that of the researcher who travels to the UK to conduct an ethnography on this emerging phenomenon (Gusmeroli, 2022).

Some studies have focused on the representation of migrants and related themes, such as the issue of cultural memory at the individual level (Lanslots, 2021; Serrano, 2021), the aesthetic strategies used for this representation, and the issues it brings to light, from the political sphere (Earle, 2020) to anthropological aspects (Dix et al., 2019) and autoethnographic approaches. Others have focused on "braided geographies" or counter-geographies, mapped by the memory of migrants (Davies, 2019), and experiences of exile and diaspora in graphic life narratives (Naghibi et al., 2020).

Of particular note in relation to attempts to change the narrative around migration is the British organisation *PositiveNegatives*[1] which researches, produces, and disseminates graphic narratives around migration, conflict, and asylum through participatory methodologies. Where possible, PositiveNegatives 'works with people to tell their own stories, placing the participants at the heart of the creative process' (Wong et al., 2020, p. 313). One moving example of this is the short animation *Dear Habib,* which illustrates the true story of a young unaccompanied migrant and his life in Britain. Habib's own testimony underpins the animation, and he was both a participant and a researcher on the project (Wong et al., 2020). We turn now to our own two case studies as sociologists working on migration to open up the discussion.

Snakes and Ladders: Stories of Migration and Growing up by the Throw of the Dice

We here discuss the short Italian language comic, *Il Gioco dell'Oca: storie di crescita e migrazione in un tiro di dadi* (Snakes and Ladders: a tale about growing up and migration by the throw of a dice) (hereafter Snakes and Ladders) that Sarah created with two Italian comic artists, Antonio Mirizzi and Chiara Suanno and in collaboration with one of her research participants, Amadou,[2] a young man from The Gambia who sought asylum in Italy as an 'unaccompanied minor'. The title of the comic draws on

[1] Visit www.positivenegatives.org to see the full portfolio

[2] This is a pseudonym.

the analogy of the Italian board game *Il Gioco Dell'Oca*, similar in concept to the English game of S*nakes and Ladders*; games in which everything is down to chance, to the throw of the dice. Just as in these children's board games, life on the margins is precarious and open to slippage back to where you started from, at any time.

The comic draws upon this analogy to understand young men like Amadou's attempts to create a life for themselves in the northern Italian city of Bologna, examining how the system replicates this board game. It is a visual representation of how, as Melanie Griffiths (2013) has shown, immigration controls function by governing through uncertainty, which impacts upon futures. Its very visuality, captured in the form of the children's board game, brings the arbitrariness of immigration controls to the fore; allowing the reader to feel the uncertain nature of the journey that continues for these young migrants, even after they have reached the shores of Italy. This work is based upon over five years of ethnographic research conducted by Sarah Walker between 2017 and 2023 with young men from Africa who sought asylum in Italy as 'minors'. This included eight months of participant observation in 2018 in a reception centre for (male) unaccompanied minors in Bologna named 'Giallo'. Repeat qualitative interviews were also carried out with twelve young African men housed in Giallo, two of whom had refugee status while the others possessed humanitarian protection.[3] Sarah then conducted follow-up interviews in 2022 with eight young men still living in Bologna to establish how they were faring as 'adults' outside the reception system (for more details on research methods see Walker, 2023).

Snakes and Ladders can then be understood as a 'research-based comic' (Sassatelli, 2021), in which Sarah's research was shared and transformed into comic form by the comic artist Antonio Mirizzi and then discussed and amended through conversations with 'Amadou' one of the research participants from The Gambia. A form of what Charlie Rumsby (2020) calls 'retrospective (re)presentation': using the visual to offer alternative modes of (re)presentation to the written ethnographic text. In Snakes and Ladders, the decision was collectively made to present the young men's stories through three fictionalised characters. This was a means to avoid direct representation and to capture some of those elements that were common to the young men: the tensions and frictions of being an

[3] Humanitarian Protection (a two-year renewable status) was widely granted to protect unaccompanied minors who did not meet the conditions for refugee status.

'unaccompanied minor' and subject to the constraints this entails in a reception centre, a place that is at once both 'very good and very difficult'; the desire for education and training in order to set themselves up for a better future; the transition to eighteen as a moment of joy, as opposed to a moment of fear as often occurs in other EU states, or elsewhere in Italy (see Walker and Gunaratnam, 2021). In particular, the aim was to highlight the importance of this lack of fear for young migrants' aspirations and sense of belonging, and how this belonging is destabilised by the borders of race and constructs of otherness that pervade the hostile environment racialised migrants are exposed to, yet how spaces of hospitality may also contemporaneously exist.

Discussions of the migrant 'crisis' have been primarily concerned with the act of crossing/ the journey to, and less attention has been paid to the processes of settlement. Yet this is a journey that continues, and in using the frame of Snakes and Ladders, the comic shows how migrants must still employ their wits against ongoing border violence that manifests in a variety of ways and locations as they seek to make space and place to belong.

In addition to providing a visualisation for the temporariness of immigration controls, the comic also aims to challenge the binary logics inherent in such controls. As Sarah's research shows, unaccompanied minors are viewed through a bifurcated lens which embodies fixed categories of age as a border control mechanism (Walker, 2023; Walker & Gunaratnam, 2021). This rigid age binary is reproduced in research and policy on unaccompanied minors, reducing those over eighteen to an invisibilised category. Yet, it is at this moment that the rights they are accorded as children, including the right to stay in the host country, may be lost, thus they are at risk of ending up in limbo, without status. Unaccompanied minors who turn eighteen are then hidden from migration narratives and their particular experiences of the rupture from their moment of belonging whilst children, are invisibilised. Through focusing on an 'invisibilised', heterogeneous group of young people, the research draws attention to the 'sociology of absences' (Santos, 2016), something that the visual element of the comic can draw out well, perhaps more so than text.

The helplessness through which the de-racialised, de-gendered subject of the hapless unaccompanied minor is constructed, implies a need for others to protect them and hence speak for them, silencing their own individual narratives (Malkki, 1996). In drawing out the narratives of the young men, the comic aims to counteract such silencing forces whilst placing attention on race and gender dimensions. The plural narrative of comic

allows for the capturing of these tensions and ambiguities. As Allsopp (2017) has shown, the migration regime enforces a problematic 'binary portrait of masculinity' whereby the 'vulnerable' child must, upon turning eighteen, then internalise and enact traits of the 'strong young male' stereotype, which fails to recognise the multiplicities and intersectionalities of young men's identities. The shift from child to man within the racialised migration regime remains fraught. The comic aims to be mindful of the politics of representation, and act as a means to problematise overly binary portraits of 'unaccompanied minors'. Through the comic, we are given perspectives in which the vulnerable subject position imposed by the 'unaccompanied minor' label is contested; revealed as far more complex, playful, political, and critical than the label suggests. The comic functions to reveal different fragments of the young men, allowing for some of their complexities and politicised identities to be made visible. Thus, the comic form enabled the capturing of the more complex subjectivities of the young men.

Drawings by Amadou are incorporated in the comic. For example, the 'wrestler', a self-portrait he shared as part of the research which represents both strength and entitlement. The 'wrestler' reveals the subject of a young man engaging in mobility to improve his life chances, with the 'right to see the world', just as many of his peers do. Save that those with the right citizenship status can access legal channels. Channels which are not open to Amadou. He is portrayed as a strong political subject with rights, not a victim seeking salvation. The wrestler figure also contrasts sharply with that of the vulnerabilised minor—a label often attached to young migrants who travel alone. It is also a hegemonic portrait of masculinity. This drawing is included in the comic, as well as Amadou's description of it in the text, to connect with Amadou's self-representation and rejection of the derogatory term of 'immigrant', instead framing his movement in terms of justice and rights.

Migrants do not arrive in an empty or neutral space, but rather a space of power relations that is already informed and constituted by coloniality (Grosfoguel et al., 2015, p. 641). Hierarchies of mobility and belonging are then produced by migration regimes, themselves based on racialised colonial histories (Back et al., 2012). Hence, upon entering Italian society, not only do they become 'unaccompanied minors', contemporaneously they must also confront Italian ideas of Blackness—a racial taxonomy infused with colonial tropes (Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013). These mediated intimacies in the research were marked by a Duboisian

double-consciousness in which the participants' spoken and visual narratives were alert to how they were perceived and measured 'by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity'. To reflect this, the choice was made to use colour in the comic in an unrealistic manner. Even the complexions were coloured according to criteria of graphic pleasantness—another choice that could certainly seem ironic for a story conceptually based on the real problem of the inequalities in Italy between 'white' people and people 'of colour' (Walker and Mirizzi, 2024 forthcoming). The racialised experiences of the young men are brought to the fore in the difference in treatment between them and Sarah as a white British migrant in Italy.

Sarah's experience of the rental market is very different to that of the young men. Whilst they are told 'the landlord doesn't rent to foreigners', in response to Sarah's (acceptable) 'migrancy', the landlord is portrayed as 'a man of the world'—able to connect with those from elsewhere. In including this experience in the comic, attention is drawn to these contrasting experiences to highlight how the 'migrant' is a racialised subject, derived from migration regimes based on historical colonial frames of reference and cultural norms (Back et al., 2012).

In visualising the experiences of the young men in the research project, the aim was to bring the reader into the space of the reception centre for the unaccompanied minor, to share experiences of growing up and becoming adults, to render these experiences more 'ordinary' and less exceptional. In line with Nabizadeh, through the comic, 'the reading process illuminates repressed elements' (Ibidem: 349) of the lives of these young men within the reception centre space. It thus draws attention to this invisibilised space and the experiences of the young men within it. In doing so, it responds to Bruno Riccio's (2023) call to take into account the perspectives of migrants themselves on the reception system that hosted them. It then foregrounds the humanity of young migrants often obfuscated by rhetorical labels of 'threats'.

Finally, another key aim of the comic was to reach a diverse audience, as discussed above, something others have identified in academic comics (Della Puppa, 2022; Lancione, 2017). The comic is a short (16-page) graphic pamphlet, also available in PDF format. In this way, working as a more versatile product that may also be used as a teaching resource and, potentially, for local NGO campaigns, thus enabling the dissemination of the research outside academia and to reach alternative audiences; a useful potential (Kuttner, 2021). To date, it has been used as an Italian language

teaching tool for young men currently residing in Giallo, a teaching resource for aspiring social workers, a pedagogic tool for school teachers, as well as presented and shared at a variety of academic and non-academic conferences and seminars and will be published in its entirety in the journal for social workers *Animazione Sociale* (Walker et al., 2024). As such, its potential to reach a more diverse public (particularly when compared to academic articles) is evident.

The Line of the Horizon

The line of the horizon is an 'ethnographic novel' presenting the results of a multi-sited ethnography carried out in Italy and London. This qualitative research explored the motives and hopes, disappointments, and living conditions of male migrants from Bangladesh who, after spending more than half of their lives in Italy—arriving there between the 1990s and the 2000s to subsequently be joined by their wives, have children there, and, most importantly, become Italian citizens—had decided to emigrate to London with their families.

Until the mid-1970s, Italy was largely a country of emigration: the number of Italians leaving the country to live and work abroad was higher than the number of foreigners moving to Italy. But since around 1976, the number of people immigrating to Italy has increased, exceeding the number of Italians emigrating, although emigration has also continued. However, in the last decade or so a new phenomenon has emerged, not only in Italy, but throughout Mediterranean Europe, that we could define as "onward migration". In the case of Italy, these are immigrants of foreign origin who, after almost twenty years in the country, acquire Italian citizenship and emigrate to other countries. They use their European passports to move around the European (and sometimes global) space without major bureaucratic problems or the need for entry visas.

The line of the horizon: an ethnographic novel on migration between Bangladesh, Italy, and London shows the lighter and darker sides of this migration experience, thus revealing the dynamism of these 'new Italian citizens', as well as giving insight into a migration route that is shaped by continuous global transformations and the social, political, and economic situations of Italy and Southern Europe in general. It would also be useful for highlighting the difficulties and critical moments of ethnographic research. The language of comics may help to reach a wider audience of

non-experts, beyond the usual readership of social scientists and migration scholars.

Collaborating with professional cartoonists push sociologists to reflect on various aspects of language and narrative styles. In order to create an ethnography using the language of comics a social scientist has to learn—at least at a basic level—how to use this language and to construct a narrative that was adapted to it: how to write a coherent and complete script; how to write fluent dialogue that is spontaneous, clear and concise; how to exploit the communicative capacity of drawing to ensure that each panel functions effectively without long sections of written text; and how to divide up, frame, and organise the various panels on the page.

In order to make the sociological and ethnographic contents of the sociological work accessible to a wider audience, the authors (researcher, screenwriter, illustrator) have to make sure it was an enjoyable and engaging read. In other words, the team had to choose specific narrative strategies that allowed to lead the reader organically through the various spheres of the *onward migration* of Bangladeshi-Italians from Italy to London, demonstrating the ambivalence of their experience and the multi-faceted nature of the 'migratory prism'.

Focusing on the individual, family and migratory biographies of a single Italian-Bangladeshi protagonist would have meant gathering different and sometimes contradictory situations, dynamics, points of view, and experiences into one story, creating a narrative that would have seemed unrealistic and forced. The researcher and his co-authors also discarded the idea of devoting each chapter to a different protagonist, as this would have resulted in a fragmented narrative, much like an academic essay, making it a difficult read for those not socialised in the 'traditional' styles of the social sciences. The researcher and his co-authors, thus, opted to pivot the ethnographic narrative around the protagonist generated by this narrative: the researcher. Putting the researcher and his movements at centre stage allowed the researcher himself and his co-authors to bring together the sometimes divergent trajectories of the Italian-Bangladeshi interviewees, thus creating a choral narrative of their onward migration. It also meant the researcher could show the often uncertain developments of ethnographic research "in the making" with its inevitable setbacks and unexpected accelerations, the obstacles encountered and the strategies adopted to get around them. In other words, it depicted the ethnographer "in the field": his body and emotions, his experiences and feelings, his

gaffes and embarrassment, his idiosyncrasies and excitement, and his rigidity and transformation.

Placing the figure of the researcher at the centre of the comic's narrative thus allowed the qualitative researcher to restore the ironies and poetics of ethnographic work, its prosaic nature, its problems, and even, perhaps, its allure. At the same time it enabled the desacralisation and demystification of both ethnographic practice and academic canons.

While, as said above, the language of comics forced the researcher and his co-authors to reduce the amount of words, to cut down the essayistic component of the text and free up the dialogue, it also allowed them to visually represent the fieldwork meeting places, the multiplicity of bodily *hexis,* and their interaction within physical, social, and cultural spaces. It also permitted the researcher to illustrate the betrayal of emotional reactions with an immediacy that is unattainable in a 'traditional' socio-anthropological text, which is forced to recount such moments in redundant glosses and lengthy clarifications.

The visual language of comics allowed the ethnographer to present his interviews with Bangladeshi-Italians in London whilst also representing their migratory, family, and socio-material trajectories on the page. It also helped the sociologist to temporally interweave the historical, structural, collective, and macro spheres with the subjective and micro spheres of individual stories and choices.

Again, in comparison with 'traditional' sociological writing, the illustrated ethnographic form was better able to demonstrate the social connection between different places (Bangladesh, Italy, and London) and between multiple temporalities and life events (their childhoods in Bangladesh, their early years in Italy, being reunited with their families, becoming parents, another emigration, old age, and death).

This interweaving of the spatial and the temporal was translated through the use of different colour tones, showing that every moment of the present contains the past and is already projected into the future. The researcher and his co-authors chose warm and reassuring colours to communicate the nostalgia of the years spent in Italy, cold and unwelcoming colours to convey the difficulty of integrating into the socio-territorial context of London, and sepia-brown tones, borrowed from the language of cinema, for biographical and historical flashbacks to the distant past. In fact, a limited colour palette must be chosen to ensure the work looks harmonious and coherent.

Most importantly, the language of comics meant that the methodology of ethnographic practice could be represented in all its reflexivity and emotional bearing. It allowed the sociologist to demonstrate a variety of factors that would be harder to address in a traditional academic article: the various different manners in which the field can be accessed, with their attached and inevitable worries and awkwardnesses; the interweaving of rituals of hospitality and empirical activity; the way in which ethnographic activity is traversed by continuous redefinitions and recombinations of power relations between the researcher and the research protagonists, which results in the ethnographer feeling a sense of inadequacy and anxiety, and the sensation that they have become the subject of criticism by those who are meant to be "their" interviewees; the fear of feeling out of place, of being intrusive, of assuming a colonial and/or objectifying gaze, of not being understood, of not being able to fully grasp what we are being told in the field, of wasting time and not having enough of it, and of not having slavishly followed the rigid models of collecting and organising qualitative data.

The canonical sociological and anthropological literature often seems autopoietic or, at most, developed by a deus ex machina who has been dropped 'into' the field, confident in their bibliographic research, and free of hesitations or uncertainties. It often simply ignores unforeseen events or failures, and disregards the cognitive curiosity and proactivity of interviewees in their attempts to interview the interviewer.

If ethnography is a life posture, ethnographic works must explore what accounts by social scientists usually hide, such as their lack of control over research trajectories, the challenges posed by unforeseen events that impose new strategies, possible failures, or the reading of an apparent failure as a research result. Above all, as a life posture, ethnography can help the researcher to understand the relations between different points of view, feelings, personal issues, and biographical (im)mobilities, creating moments of catharsis and encouraging processes of reflexivity. Through the ethnographic novel, it has been possible to show the interiority of the researcher, allowing the reader to glimpse the processes of reflexivity that ethnographic and interpretative research set in motion, not only in those on whom the research is centred, but also and above all on those who conduct the research. Indeed, at the end of his geographical, ethnographic and biographical journey, the protagonist of *The line of the horizon*, like all those who have carried out a successful ethnography, is "transformed" by his immersion in the social world he has been studying, since

understanding others inevitably leads to understanding—or revealing?—something about yourself. In other words, a dual biographical tension and reciprocal reflexivity runs through the pages of the comic, linking the researcher with the other research protagonists.

This way of doing ethnographic writing—or this literary activity—has unconsciously borrowed elements from the macro-categories of writing on the self. The formula of the *Bildungsroman* is present as much for the Italo-Bangladeshi who pursues a multidimensional and polysemous horizon that becomes increasingly global, as for the researcher who, in a game of mirrors, places their research activity alongside their personal life. This individual and collective growth takes place through a 'journey', a dynamic that recalls the literary genre of *reportage,* although in this case the photographs are replaced by pencils and watercolour.

Qualitative research has a 'spiral' movement—constantly oscillating between empirical activity and theory—but inevitably also involves the "overspill" of analytical reflection into the researcher's daily life. Sometimes the "instrusiveness" of ethnography into the everyday arises in those moments in which the researcher seeks a spatio-temporal dimension "for themselves", for instance in the practice of a sport, a discipline, or a creative activity. In *The line of the horizon* the practice of running has been chosen as a space of reflexivity in which to return to theory and facilitate dialogue between the empirical moment, the analytical moment, and the scientific literature, and, of course, as a time in which the researcher has the opportunity to understand *himselves* on their journey to understanding.

However, visual representation raises difficult questions that the social sciences had learnt to 'manage' in their 'traditional' forms of writing and presentation, but which now forcefully re-emerge: those relating, for example, to how to avoid stereotypes and simplifications in the representations of the class position and racialisation of subjects, of bodily *hexis* and internalised social *habitus*.

At the same time, perhaps the re-emergence of these problems can help to reveal, in an unhypocritical manner, the positions, categories, and censorship that social scientists more or less consciously camouflage between the more canonical lines of their texts. The language of comics and the visual representation of social-anthropological work thus oblige social scientists to put themselves on the line, stepping out of a comfort zone in which academic modes of discourse are rarely challenged. Those who have the courage to do this can contribute to the creation of truly 'public' knowledge.

Discussion

As we have argued in the preceding, potentially, comics and their visual representation can play a key role in providing more complex narratives and contrasting singular 'crisis' narratives. In the overly politicised domain of discourses around migration, there is a clear and evident need to counteract the historical and geographical exceptionalism through which the 'migrant crisis' in Europe is framed. The proliferation of borders around the EU is such that people wishing to seek asylum now have 'no other option than to cross borders irregularly' (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023, p. 142). Indeed, terminology has political consequences. This has been particularly evident in recent media and civil society debates as to whether to use the term 'refugee' or 'migrant' in the European 'crisis'.

The construct of the migrant is inherently racialised, deriving from migration regimes based upon historical colonial frames of reference and cultural norms (Back et al., 2012). As Sinha and Back remind us, it is 'worth re-examining the ways in which the frameworks for understanding migration and in which the *figure of the migrant* is produced in debate have become part of the problem itself' (2014, p. 475, emphasis in original). If we take Italy in particular, a country which has become a site of the 'spectacle' at the border (De Genova, 2013) of the "migrant crisis" currently affecting Europe, where migrants are discussed in a negative manner, and predominantly as invasion, inferior, and/ or threat (Perocco & Della Puppa, 2023). It is then of even more paramount importance to provide counternarratives. As the work of Barbara Spadaro (2022) in particular in relation to Italian migration shows, comics have the potential to play a key role in this.

Comics can portray ambiguity, uncertainty, and multiple perspectives via the tension between images and words in a way that academic prose cannot (Kuttner, 2021). As Dominic Davies (2022) observes, in relation to Oliver Kugler's work, his technique of overlaying panels on top of one another rather than in a linear succession, creates a resulting paradox of temporal simultaneity allowing for a story of both 'displacement and emplacement', which would be difficult to create through text alone. A form of 'retrospective (re)presentation' (Rumsby, 2020).

Comics also have the important ability to render the extraordinary ordinary (Davies, 2022), which the comic form can enable more easily than text alone. Indeed, for Charlie Rumsby (2020), a potential humanising strength of the comic is to move the viewer beyond a stark assessment

of what is lacking and instead to reveal the details of their daily lives. This enables viewers of the comic to empathise with a variety of experiences that are not directly correlated solely to migrancy status. It is this ability of the comic, as Shannon Sandford argues, to make visible plural and diverse lives which can then 'contests official policies predicated on erasure and silence' (Sandford, 2024, p. 200). Similarly, Golnar Nabizadeh argues that comics can 'carve new spaces of visibility' (Nabizadeh, 2016, p. 355) through graphically depicting those places that are kept out of public view and where entry is difficult for those who do not work or live there.

For Wong and colleagues (2020), the comic allows for 'imagin[ing] or *visualis[ing]* alternative[s]' (315) which can 'challenge the assumptions underpinning both government policies and public opinion' (316). Nonetheless, they flag some of the difficulties with, as they put it, 'ethically mind[ing] the gap between subject and representation' (Ibidem: 320). Anna Vuorinne and Ralf Kauranen et al. (2023) observe how representations of suffering may also victimise migrants, making their helplessness and powerlessness appear as (essential) properties of their subjectivity rather than structural circumstances deriving from unequal legal-political frameworks. This is why Sidonie Smith has defined many comics depicting refugee or migrant stories as 'crisis comics', or comics whose reading 'rehearses a form of rescue of the other' (Smith, 2011, p. 64).

Indeed, Vuorinne and Kauranen caution that whilst comics have been seen as purveyors of alternatives to anonymising, dehumanising, sensationalist, and scaremongering media representations, their history nonetheless also points to the opposite use in which stereotypes are both purposefully manipulated to, or inadvertently, provide anti-migrant representation (Vuorinne & Kauranen, 2023, p. 10). Nina Mickwitz contends that 'graphic narrative does offer a capacity for narrative complexity, temporal simultaneity, shifting focalization, visual metaphors, and rhetorical opportunities, such as the deliberate incongruity between text and image' (Mickwitz, 2020, p. 459). However, she cautions, 'such qualities require consideration on a case-by-case basis, rather than being presumed to be characterising traits of all comics, or even comics addressing social inequalities' (ivi). It needs to be remembered that 'graphic narrative is as capable of crudity' (ivi) as examples show.

Nonetheless, as Smith herself recognises, the comic form does offer possibilities for 'diverse representations to emerge and to unsettle commonplace frames of difference' (Smith, 2011, p. 65). Here we see Dittmer's argument that 'comic book visualities' can 'open opportunities

for more plural, flexible narratives to emerge' (2010, p. 223). In the case of Snakes and Ladders, the comic was shared with participants for feedback, the 'ironic perspective' that Groglopo and Alvarez (2023) argue comics can bring to academic work was recognised and appreciated by the participants when they viewed the comic. They appreciated the humour in the comic and felt it reflected well their experiences. The ability to share and gain feedback on the research is also something the comic form offers that the academic text cannot.

In both case studies we discuss in this chapter, the comic form, particularly in the longer work of *The line of the horizon*, helped the sociologist to temporally interweave the historical, structural, collective, and macro spheres with the subjective and micro spheres of individual stories and choices. Further comics may offer social scientists greater space within which to reflect on their own practices and methodologies. Collaborating with professional cartoonists can push sociologists to reflect on various aspects of language and narrative styles. In order to create an ethnography using the language of comics academics are compelled to learn—at least at a basic level—how to use this language and to construct a narrative that was adapted to it: how to write a coherent and complete script; how to write fluent dialogue that is spontaneous, clear and concise; how to exploit the communicative capacity of drawing to ensure that each panel functions effectively without long sections of written text; and how to divide up, frame, and organise the various panels on the page. In order to make the sociological and ethnographic contents of the sociological work accessible to a wider audience, the authors are compelled to make sure it is an engaging and enjoyable read. Thus, we agree with Wong et al. who argue that comics can allow for complex academic research to be translated into a visual narrative, widening the accessibility of this work by reaching out to audiences beyond academia and enabling these audiences to 'imagine better worlds' through the visualisation of alternatives (2020, p. 313). Their capacity to reach a broader, more diverse audience is recognised (Della Puppa, 2022; Kuttner, 2021; Lancione, 2017).

As deftly detailed in the in *The line of the horizon*, in contrast to 'traditional' sociological writing, the illustrated ethnographic form was better able to demonstrate the social connection between different locations (Bangladesh, Italy, and London) and between multiple temporalities and

life events. The language of comics and the visual representation of social-anthropological work thus obliges social scientists to put themselves on the line, to think more deeply about questions of representation, such as how to avoid reproducing racialised categories in the process.

Simple techniques can be put to complex use: the construction of space in a sequence can be relevant to visually present the traumatic experience of the migration journey; colours or lack thereof might represent feelings (fear, hope, desperation) of migrants once in the new place; thought bubbles can express hurtful memories; speech bubbles can show the frustration of being a foreigner. Furthermore, the strategic use of colours, the positioning and the shape of strips, cartoons and balloons are particularly meaningful for multi-sited ethnographies, for research that delves into global phenomena, and for diachronic and long-term research endeavours, that is, theoretical aspects, methodological perspectives, empirical approaches, and analytical positionings that cross and characterise migration studies.

However, on the other hand, graphing invites us to ask relevant questions that—as sociologist of migration and migration scholars—we have somehow learned to handle with regard to the practice of writing. On the other hand, if every social research reflects an operation of cultural politics, the same can also be said for the choice of language with which it is reported, or disclosed. Therefore, how to represent "ethnic" or "cultural" belonging without eliminating it or reproducing its stereotypes? How to deconstruct, without removing, the 'color line' (Du Bois, 1973), the cultural difference or the naturalisation of gender corporality? It might be wondered in how many different ways ethnographic practice can be translated into images, but above all with what effects on the discourse that is produced (Gusmeroli, 2022).

Graphic experimentation in ethnography is enhancing reflexivity, collaboration, and public dissemination (Theodossopoulos, 2022) and this is an important part of pushing social scientists to reflect further on these elements. The graphic novel has the potential to materialise a powerful space of visibility for what may otherwise be invisible, and in the hostile environment towards migrants, it is increasingly more urgent that the work of sociologists focusing upon migration is made more 'public'.

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CHAPTER 7

Criminology in the Frame: Graphic Narratives and the Study of Crime

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Introduction

This chapter will look at the links between criminology and comics. On the one hand, it will highlight the way in which comics have contributed to the construction of social representations of crime, criminals, and the institutions responsible for dealing with them (police, courts, prisons). Like movies and literature, comics have rapidly begun to deal with some of the issues specific to the field of criminology and have therefore played a direct part in shaping the collective imagination about these issues. In this context, this contribution delves into crime and social control through the prism of culture (Ferrell et al., 2008). Specifically, it examines comic

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books and their symbolic significance in interpreting criminality and societal responses, exploring how they incorporate, resist, expand, or challenge conventional criminological models. Secondly, we will discuss the way in which comics have documented criminological knowledge, in particular by dealing with specific forms of crime in a journalistic and/or biographical mode. Finally, we will discuss a much more recent trend to use the medium of comics on a more pedagogical level, by disseminating criminological knowledge. In other words, we can say that there are three types of knowledge produced by comics that will be discussed here: popular knowledge about the topics of criminology, documentary knowledge about these same issues, and pedagogical knowledge for (aspiring) criminologists themselves.

Before we begin, however, we need to shed some light on the first connections that may have existed historically between comics and criminology, links that go back further than one might think.

And in the Beginning Was Phrenology

An unlikely connection between comics and criminology lies in phrenology—a pseudoscience that aimed to associate skull shapes with personality traits. Popular in the nineteenth century, this practice appears to have significantly influenced both the early development of criminology and the evolution of the comic art form.

Criminology, it must be acknowledged, got off to a bad start. Cesare Lombroso, often regarded as the founder of criminal anthropology, author of the famous *L'Uomo Delinquente* (*Criminal Man*, 1874), and coiner of the term 'criminology,' is now rightfully criticized for his unscientific methods and outlandish theories, as well as his racist, antisemitic, and sexist views. Deeply influenced by physiognomy[1] and phrenology, Lombroso sought to demonstrate that some people were born criminals, with their criminality so innate that it could be detected through their physical features, especially through the shape of their skulls. His works gained significant popularity in the nineteenth century before eventually being discredited as pseudoscience and cultural folklore. Although phrenology

[1] Physiognomy is the study or practice of assessing a person's character or personality based on their outward appearance, especially their facial features.

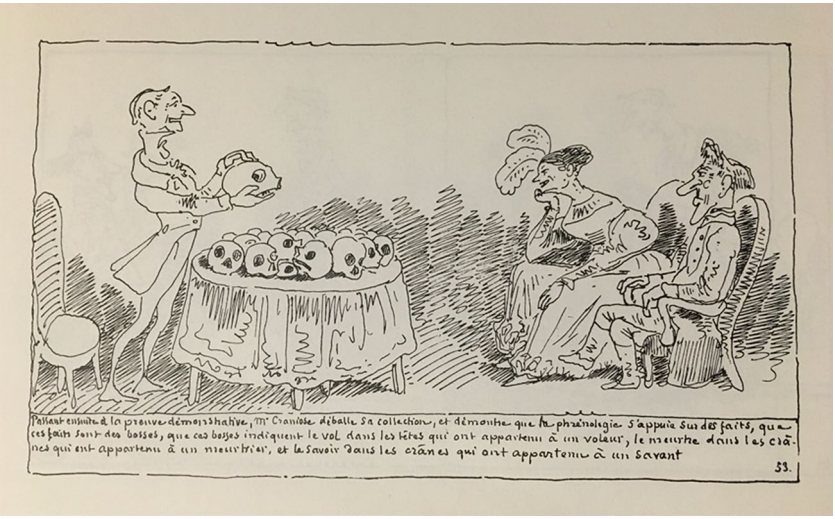
and physiognomy were thoroughly debunked by twentieth-century criminologists, many modern researchers still grapple with a similar question: what traits, what characteristics distinguish a criminal from a non-criminal? How can we differentiate between them? This remains one of the core questions of criminology, and likely a key reason for its institutionalization (Foucault, 1975).

It is interesting to note that one of the contemporary critic of phrenology and of criminal anthropology was one of the precursors of the comic strip, Rodolphe Töpffer.[2] In fact, in his book *Monsieur Crépin*, one of the 7 'literature in prints' he authored between 1827 and 1844 (Töpffer, 1837a), we find a certain Doctor Crâniose, a phrenologist by profession and a distant relative (and precursor) of Cesare Lombroso.[3] Töpffer not only ridicules Dr. Crâniose but also derides the scientific legitimacy of his practice, particularly the idea that criminality can be detected through it.[4]

[2] While the date of the birth of 9th Art is a controversial subject whose debates have been widely documented and which we don't really want to get involved in (see for example, Groensteen, 2006; Kunzle, 2007), everyone agrees that Rodolphe Töpffer, a nineteenth-century writer, cartoonist and theoretician from Geneva, was one of the pioneers of comic strips and graphic novels. Firstly, because in the mid-nineteenth century he produced 7 comic stories that were among the first comic strips ever made (1837b). While combining drawing and writing was not necessarily new, Töpffer's artistic productions stand out for their format (they are books) and their nature (they are fictions and not stories illustrating some historical or religious fact) (Groensteen, 2003). Additionally, Töpffer wrote a short book, *Essai de Physiognomonie* (published in 1845), which is particularly notable for being the first theoretical essay on comic strips. In this work, he introduced the idea that combining images and text created a new art form—distinct from both drawing and literature—which he coined 'littérature en estampes,' or 'literature in prints.'

[3] The term 'Crâniose' comes from the contraction of 'crâne' (cranium in English) and the suffix -ose (-osis in English) meaning 'disease.' Crâniose is the doctor who deals with diseases of the cranium. Alternatively, it could be understood as being himself a form of disease of the head, a way of mocking him and calling him stupid.

[4] Töpffer (1837a, p. 53). The text under the image can be translated as "Moving on to demonstrative proof, Mr. Crâniose unpacked his collection and demonstrated that phrenology is based on facts, that these facts are bumps, that these bumps indicate theft in heads that belonged to a thief, murder in skulls that belonged to a murderer, and knowledge in skulls that belonged to a scientist."



Moreover, in a trial scene, Töpffer uses the defense lawyer's argument to highlight a fundamental flaw in the born-criminal theory: biological determinism absolves individuals of responsibility for their actions, making them unaccountable and thus beyond punishment. In fact, the accused is acquitted based on this reasoning. While Töpffer satirized phrenology, he celebrated physiognomy—not for its scientific merit, but as a foundational element of comic storytelling. In his *Essai de Physiognomonie* (1837b), the Swiss author explains that to create 'literature in prints,' one should avoid using realistic drawing, but instead rely on physiognomic principles that allow the simplest variations in the most basic features to communicate a wide variety of information. Indeed, by simply changing the shape of the nose on a face, the characteristic traits that the reader will attribute to the character drawn will vary. From then on, linking personality traits to physical traits (physiognomy, in other words) was seen as absolutely fundamental to comic strip art, producing a series of characters whose 'moral value' could easily be inferred by the reader (something that a hyper-realistic drawing would fail to do): the villain, the miser, the deceiver, the innocent, the just, the brave, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Thus, physiognomy served as a fundamental principle in the new medium Töpffer was theorizing. And it played a pivotal role in shaping both the earliest comic strips and the field of criminology, though with varying degrees of 'success.'

Reading Comics, Doing Crime

While the connection between comics and criminology through physiognomy might seem anecdotal, the first half of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of a new concern: experts and politicians began to fear the criminogenic potential of comic books. As the illustrated press increasingly targeted children, parents, politicians, and psychiatrists grew alarmed about the potentially harmful effects of such reading material on young, impressionable minds. Criticism came from both progressive circles—particularly worried about the impact of racist and misogynistic content on readers (Sadoul, 1938)—and more conservative segments of society. Both groups agreed that exposure to this 'sub-literature,' seen as morally corrupt and violent, posed a threat, especially to young people, who were deemed more vulnerable to negative influences. Crime and horror comics were singled out as particularly dangerous, believed to potentially lead young readers toward criminal behavior and violence (Morgan, 2003). Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist and author of the influential book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), became a prominent figure in this puritanical campaign. During the 1940s and 1950s, Wertham played a key role in fueling fears about the disastrous impact comic books could have on young minds. Some criminologists attempted to investigate the correlation between comics and criminal behavior, but their results were inconclusive, and the scientific community quickly dismissed these concerns (see Thrasher, 1949; Pfuhl, 1956; Lovibond, 1967).

Although the scientific validity of the causal link between 'reading comics' and 'committing crimes' was very quickly called into question by the scientific community itself (from which this dubious connection did not really originate; Thrasher, 1949), it did not prevent the moral panic from spreading and having very concrete consequences for the comic-book industry (to understand the nature of this moral panic, see for example the TV show *Confidential File* on the topic of Horror Comic Books, aired on October the 9th 1955[5]). Indeed, concerns about comics gained growing legitimacy in the public arena, leading to the passage of laws regulating and censoring comic production, despite the lack of scientific proof supporting such causality. These laws restricted the distribution, content, and accessibility of comics, forcing the industry to adapt for survival (Tilley, 2012). In 1954, in the United States, a Senate committee established the

[5] Available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GI8IJA8kdkI

Comics Code Authority (CCA) with the explicit aim "to determine the possible criminogenic effects on children of certain detective and fantasy illustrations" (Gabillet, 2020, p. 66; our translation). Some of their recommendations were directly focused on achieving this objective. For example, the CCA stated that:

1. *Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.*
2. *No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime.*
3. *Policemen, judges, Government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.*
4. *If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity.*
5. *Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates a desire for emulation.* (Greenberg, 2022, p. 126)

While the positive impact of these measures on crime rates and prevention remains unproven, the CCA had a tangible effect on the comics industry, which had to adapt to survive (Greenberg, 2022). A similar process occurred in France with the adoption the 49-956 Bill of July 16th, 1949, on the publications aimed at young people (*Loi n°49-956 du 16 juillet 1949 sur les publications destinées à la Jeunesse*; Groensteen, 1999). French censors, alarmed by the perceived harmful influence of comics on young minds, enforced strict regulations on content. This led to industry repression, significantly impacting its various forms of production (Crépin, 1999; Joubert, 1999). Notably, the history of comics—particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century—was shaped in part by censorship efforts targeting the 9th Art, motivated largely by the fear that reading comics would drive children to crime and other "perversions."

Admittedly, debates about the criminogenic effects of reading comics may seem distant from the concerns of contemporary criminologists (though concerns still exist about the impact of certain content—whether in comics, cartoons, or other media—especially when aimed at children). Today, when criminologists examine these visual stories, it is more to understand how they inform us about crime, criminals, and the social reactions associated with them. This will be the focus of the rest of the chapter.

The Superhero Dilemma: Determinism, Vigilantism, and Retribution in Mainstream Comics

In the world of mainstream comics, superheroes often find themselves entangled in a moral tug-of-war—trapped between their predetermined roles, the urge to take justice into their own hands, and the *lure* of retribution. They're not just fighting villains—they're grappling with bigger questions about morality, law, and what it means to personally enforce justice. From predestined heroes to those who challenge the system (anti-hero), these figures force us to reflect on the fine line between upholding order and breaking the rules to achieve it. Legendary figures like *Batman* and *Rorschach* (*Watchmen*) embody this struggle: Batman's relentless pursuit of vigilante justice frequently pushes the limits of legality, while Rorschach's rigid, uncompromising stance on punishment blurs the line between hero and authoritarian (Koros, 2022). This section tries to unpack these tensions, revealing how mainstream superheroes in comics reflect and challenge society's deeper anxieties about crime, punishment, and justice. Consequently, this part section explores key criminological themes that arise from reading comics featuring iconic superheroes. While not aiming for exhaustiveness, it takes a closer look at some of the most popular and widely recognized comics in North America and the Western world. It is for this reason that this section will focus only on certain superhero comics, as they are the most common and widely circulated, reaching a significantly larger audience compared to other productions, and where the themes of justice and crime are the central focus of the stories they tell. This is undeniably a Western market, with characters that mirror their creators (mostly white men) and the cultural industry that shaped them. That said, these characters have become cultural icons, known across the globe. From a pop criminology perspective (Rafter & Brown, 2011), the themes they present are not only relevant but worth exploring. The focus will primarily be on *Batman, Superman, Spiderman, The Punisher, Watchmen,* and graphic novels like *Sin City* among others.

Lombrosian Determinism Is Hard to Kill, the Figure of the 'Villain'

The representation of crime and criminals is not what one might expect. Typically, petty crime or street-level offenses take a backseat to large criminal organizations, terrorism or government corruption, where the 'villains' are highly recognizable figures characterized by embodying pure evil (Phillips & Strob, 2006). In popular culture, the phrase "Lombroso was

right!" is often heard when encountering the so-called criminal-looking person, even though this has been (fortunately) debunked by empirical scientific research. Yet, some modern criminological studies with a genetic basis still attempt (unsuccessfully) to analyze biological and genetic factors in search of a mythical 'evil gene' (Mednick et al., 1984, Beaver et al., 2008). Comic book representations are no different, and the deterministic issue of a 'biological flaw' remains present in these narratives. Lombroso's 'aha moment' came when he examined the skull of the bandit Villella and noticed what he called the 'anomalous occipital fossa.' He believed this biological feature was the key to Villella's criminal nature. The idea that biological defects drive evil behavior is a theme that pops up frequently, even in superhero comic narratives. The villain's outward monstrosity mirrors their deep-rooted drive toward crime, violence, and moral emptiness. These criminals morph into grotesque figures, ugly, deformed, visually and unmistakably representing evil to the point of becoming disturbingly unsettling (Fried, 2010). As Phillips and Strobl (2013) point out, certain villains in mainstream comics, such as Two-Face (Harvey Dent, *Batman*) and especially Dr. Octopus (*Spiderman*), develop their propensity for evil in direct connection to a physical defect that triggers their irreversible criminal tendencies. In the Spider-Man universe, one of the most iconic antagonists is *Venom*, an alien symbiote introduced in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1984). When it bonds with its host, it not only turns them into a monstrous figure but also amplifies their darkest and most sinister traits. As for Batman, in addition to Two-Face, who represents the dichotomous struggle between good and evil, another character with extremely monstrous traits is *Man-Bat*. A zoologist (Kirk Langstrom) experimenting on bats, he tests a serum on himself that temporarily transforms him into a terrifying human-bat hybrid, with frightening features that terrorize Gotham City (Fig. 7.1).

These characters are not only visually monstrous, but their physical deformities often symbolize their moral or psychological corruption, making aesthetics a key part of their characterization.

Another related aspect is the non-visible biological defect linked to mental illness—especially psychopathy[6]—a recurring theme that

[6]There is a long-standing and erroneous belief that mental illness is inherently linked to a propensity for crime, particularly in relation to disorders such as psychopathy and schizophrenia. This misconception perpetuates the idea that individuals with mental health conditions are more prone to violent or criminal behavior. Link et al. (1992) demonstrated that

Fig. 7.1 Man-Bat, Volume 4, Cover page, April – 2021, August – 2021, Dave Wielgosz · Sumit Kumar, © DC Comics)

individuals with mental disorders are not more prone to violence than the general population, despite persistent stereotypes in media and culture. Corrigan (2005) further argues that this stigma contributes to the marginalization of mentally ill individuals, making access to proper care more difficult. Moreover, Monahan (1992) highlights how the media, including films and comics, reinforce the false association between mental illness and violence, perpetuating harmful myths. For example, recent films like *Split* (2016) have been criticized for perpetuating the idea that mental illness, in this case, dissociative identity disorder, is inher-

contributes to reinforcing the (misleading) association between mental illness and social danger. This erroneous connection, rooted in historical and cultural biases, continues to fuel misconceptions about mental illness and its relation to crime, despite lacking empirical support. An emblem of madness, and perhaps the most universally representative character of this theme, is the Joker[7] (*Batman*). His insanity is portrayed as inner evil and a lack of morality, driving him to commit horrific and unspeakable acts. In this sense, villains in comics are not only portrayed as the opposites of heroes but also as individuals with pathological issues. Their evil is often explained as the result of psychopathology or social dysfunction, contributing to a simplified view of crime as individual deviance rather than a systemic issue. In particular, in some of the most popular superhero comics, there is an emphasis on crime as a moral and individual problem, rather than a product of broader social issues.

These portrayals promote the idea that criminality stems from personal moral failure or psychological defects, reinforcing the misconception that social danger is rooted solely in individual pathology (inner or external). The 'evil' teacher Lombroso is (unfortunately) still with us, especially in popular culture.

Police Alone Won't Cut It!

One of the standout traits in superhero comic series is the pivotal role these characters play in society. They often step in where law enforcement falls short—whether due to incompetence, corruption, or sheer inability to handle the kind of evil that saturates their world. Superheroes are the ultimate vigilantes. In criminology, we know well that policing doesn't start with the police (Rawlings, 2003; Mulone, 2019); *proto-policing figures* have existed since the Middle Ages, with roles like constables and

ently linked to criminal behavior. This portrayal has drawn backlash from mental health advocates and experts who argue that such representations reinforce harmful stereotypes about people with mental disorders (see further: https://www.healthline.com/health-news/movie-split-harms-people-with-dissociative-identity-disorder).

[7] In the recent cinematic adaptations by Todd Phillips (*Joker*, 2019 and *Joker: Folie à Deux*, 2024), this character significantly departs from his traditional portrayals, becoming far more human and almost a victim of the social and familial context that isolates him due to his mental illness. This version of the Joker is much more multifaceted and less inclined toward pure evil. This portrayal has faced some criticism, especially from fans of the canonic comic book character, and even more so in the second film, where the Joker doesn't commit a murder and isn't the villain of the story (see further: https://variety.com/2024/film/columns/joker-2-todd-phillips-turns-on-fans-folie-a-deux-flop-1236170558/).

night watchmen stepping in long before formal law enforcement took shape. Superhero comics bring us back to characters who operate on the fringes of the law—often clashing with the police and using force that's not just illegitimate but sometimes deadly (Phillips & Strobl, 2006; 2013; Reyns & Henson, 2010; Iouchkov & Mcguire, 2020). It's as if these stories suggest that the justice system can't function without a super-powered figure intervening, a rogue leader who breaks the rules to get results. This paints a deeply pessimistic picture of society.

When it comes to illegitimate force (versus the lawful use by the police), superhero comics offer different takes. Superman, Spiderman, and Batman have ties with law enforcement and occasionally work alongside them—the iconic Bat-Signal—but the way they handle criminals varies. Superman and Spiderman generally avoid going too hard, steering clear of killing and leaving crooks to the justice system. Batman, on the contrary, frequently takes the law into his own hands, using violent and illegal methods to bring criminals to justice, which undermines the traditional idea of a lawful society (Reyns & Henson, 2010). This character, also, wrestles with moral dilemmas over force, and in some storylines (like *The dark knight*), he even crosses the line, using lethal force under the belief that 'the ends justify the means.' Other comic book characters who have no moral hang-ups when it comes to punishment include The Punisher[8] (fittingly named) and several figures from the *Watchmen* series[9] (those medieval figures mentioned earlier). The Punisher deals out lethal justice without blinking, while *Watchmen* characters navigate moral grey zones, often crossing the line between heroism and brutality. In fact, in Alan Moore's graphic novel *Watchmen*, the use of force plays a central role. In an interesting analysis

[8] Regarding this comic, Marvel recently changed the logo of The Punisher due to its appropriation by extremist groups, paramilitary organizations, and some police forces, including pro-police extremists using it against the BLM movement in their actions. The iconic skull emblem had become a symbol associated with vigilantism and excessive use of force, which conflicted with Marvel's values. The new logo reflects Marvel's effort to distance the character from these controversial associations. Gerry Conway, co-creator of the comic, stated: "Any 'cop' who wears a Punisher logo in his official capacity is identifying law enforcement with an outlaw. These 'cops' are a disgrace to serious police officers everywhere. They show an imbecilic level of irresponsibility and should be fired immediately." See further: https://www.cbr.com/marvel-replaced-punishers-skull-logo/

[9] Although this graphic novel was created with the intent of criticizing the entire masked vigilante universe, the impact it had on the general public didn't always fully capture this nuance and ultimately came to be interpreted as serious and in line with other comics on the subject.

by Koros (2022), this critical criminology approach highlights how certain characters in the comic embody a Foucaultian concept of total control over bodies. Just like Foucault's idea of biopolitics (2006), where power disciplines bodies, we see this taken to the extreme with the character *Veidt* (a rich megalomaniac with the noble goal of saving humanity by killing part of it). He represents the ultimate form of discipline, asserting the right of life and death over individuals.

One Path to Justice: Retribution

When it comes to *Watchmen* (and beyond), one recurring theme in mainstream comics is how justice is portrayed. In most cases, it's all about retribution[10] and incapacitation—no room for redemption or rehabilitation. The '*eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth*' mentality rules the narrative. Coming back to *Watchmen*, another standout character is definitely *Rorschach*. He's the embodiment of a rigid, no-nonsense take on justice. His ever-shifting inkblot mask perfectly mirrors his black-and-white worldview—no compromises, no shades of grey. Rorschach's character is portrayed as a vigilante who seeks revenge and retribution at all costs. His absolutist beliefs in justice, combined with his violent and authoritarian methods, align with *fascist principles* (Fig. 7.2).

Koros (2022) suggests that Rorschach's behavior reflects the extreme retributivist ideology that bypasses moral and ethical boundaries, often resulting in violence and harm rather than true justice. His character represents the dangers of vigilante justice and the distortion of punishment when it is removed from legal frameworks. Not just Rorschach, but other characters like Batman and The Punisher also embody a hardcore, punitive approach to justice—where punishment and swift retribution take priority over due process or rehabilitation. This depiction drives home the idea that crime deserves harsh, immediate action, often bypassing the legal system altogether, influencing how readers perceive justice should be carried out (Reyns & Henson, 2010). However, it's important to note some

[10] In the justice system, retribution refers to the idea that punishment should be proportional to the crime committed. It's based on the principle of 'just deserts,' meaning that offenders deserve to be punished in a way that fits the severity of their wrongdoing. Retribution focuses on the concept of moral accountability, where the punishment is seen as a way to restore balance and ensure that justice is served, without necessarily aiming at rehabilitation or deterrence. The idea is less about preventing future crime and more about delivering a response to the harm caused.

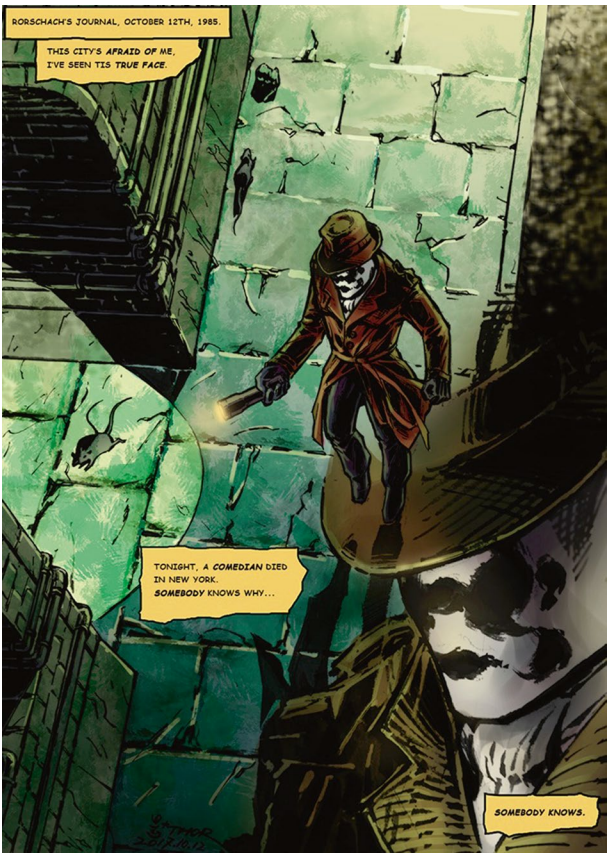


Fig. 7.2 Watchmen Rorschach, Oct. 12th, 2017, By DreamerThor on DeviantArt, Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial—No Derivatives Works 3.0 License

significant exceptions. Characters like Superman and Spider-Man[11] have a less antagonistic relationship with the justice system and a less vengeful stance toward crime. They're more willing to collaborate and don't challenge the rule of law in the same way.

[11] Spider-Man, with its emphasis on power and responsibility, embodies a 'slightly counter-hegemonic' hero capable of questioning the legitimacy of the criminal justice system while still supporting its central role in society (Adkinson, 2008).

It's worth noting that, more than shaping public opinion on justice, these comics reflect the American society in which they were created (Fried, 2010; Phillips & Strobl, 2013). Their rise must be contextualized within a social backdrop dominated by fear, security-driven policies, and a cultural shift to the right (Beck, 1986; Wacquant, 1999; Garland, 2001; Simon, 2007). Crime, both in popular discourse and criminology, is viewed purely through the lens of punishment (zero tolerance, law and order, and so on[12]…)—there's little concern for the roots of inequality or collective motivations. Instead, crime is seen as an individual issue to be incapacitated and minimized. Superheroes merely bring these interpretations to life in illustrated panels, reflecting the societal unease that spanned the late '80s, '90s, and 2000s—where the events of 9/11 played a pivotal role in further shaping this narrative. This reflects a broader cultural tendency to view crime as an existential threat to be neutralized with extreme measures, rather than a social issue that could be addressed through reform. This approach reflects also a conservative, borderline libertarian ideology: the State has failed, and only the strong can bring the 'bad' to justice by force.[13] This perspective not only shaped public perception but also influenced realist criminology of the time, which became more focused on recommending intervention tools for neutralizing criminals rather than understanding the root causes of criminal behavior.

[12] In the 1990s, zero tolerance and law and order policies in the United States emphasized strict punishment for even minor offenses, aiming to deter more serious crimes. Rooted in the 'broken windows' theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), these policies sought to control crime through aggressive policing of small infractions. They contributed to increased incarceration rates, particularly affecting marginalized communities, as seen in cities like New York under Mayor Rudy Giuliani's administration. These approaches prioritized public order over rehabilitation.

[13] This law-and-order ideology is also reflected in television productions. For example, Aaron Doyle examines the reality show Cops in his work 'Cops: Television Policing as Policing Reality' (1998), analyzing how the program has shaped public perceptions of police work in the United States and beyond. Doyle argues that Cops promotes an idea of "real" policing by showcasing the day-to-day activities of law enforcement, often presenting a sensationalized and simplified view of crime and public order. Doyle discusses how Cops uses a visual and narrative style that emphasizes intense action, suspense, and drama, portraying officers as heroes and suspects as 'guilty' from their first appearance on screen. This type of portrayal reinforces stereotypes about criminals, especially regarding social classes and ethnic minorities, and perpetuates an image of policing as a necessary force in a high-risk world. Doyle contends that this approach has significant social consequences, reducing the complexity of justice and legitimizing more aggressive policing methods.

… Wait, There's More: Beyond Gender Stereotypes, Sexism, and Racism

In 1991, Frank Miller dropped a black-and-white, noir-style comic that would later hit the big screen. The title? *Sin City*—and it went on to become a global sensation. The issue with this noir tale lies mainly in its portrayal of female characters, who are almost always[14] depicted as victim, weak, in need of saving and mostly naked. At its core, it's all about objectifying women, even *Lucille*, the story's only gay character, a capable parole officer and lawyer, gets boiled down to nothing more than her sexuality.

Perhaps more significant than the portrayal of female roles is the fact that, for a long time, the superhero world made little room for a true female heroine. The case of *Wonder Woman* is particularly interesting. Despite being a super-powered heroine, she was still created in a highly sexualized way. She wears two bracelets and carries a lasso—sources of her power—which evoke a bondage and fetishistic imagery, and she is often depicted in chains or scantily dressed. While Wonder Woman inherently represents a figure for emerging feminism (Diana Prince, created by Marston in 1941, came about in a time when women had limited agency), an intriguing analysis by Hanley (2022) points out that feminism and fetishism in *Wonder Woman* have always been closely intertwined. The author, in fact, emphasizes: "*Wonder Woman represented female power, but she was deeply rooted in her creator's own sexual fetishes. All of this has carried on in various forms ever since*" (Hanley, 2022, p. 12) (Fig. 7.3).

Mainstream superhero comics thrive on simplifications and stereotypes. It's not just sexism, ethnic minorities and LGBTQI+ characters also get the short end of the stick, often reduced to flat, two-dimensional roles (pun intended) and seriously underrepresented.[15] As some authors note, comics hold a unique power to shape public perception, as readers choose what resonates with them and what to disregard (Grunzke, 2021). When certain groups are underrepresented (Brunet & Blair, 2022) or depicted in simplistic, one-dimensional ways, these portrayals can deepen and

[14] Even though there's the group of sex workers who control part of the city and are portrayed as strong and independent, they too fall into the stereotype of women needing to be saved by the hero of the moment (Lippitz, 2017).

[15] This was also due to the fact that, in the North American context after World War II, the Comics Code was highly restrictive, and the idea took root—both in public opinion and in parliamentary actions—that comics had a 'negative seduction' on youth. As a result, themes related to sexual orientation were banned from comics to protect young readers (Grunzke, 2021).

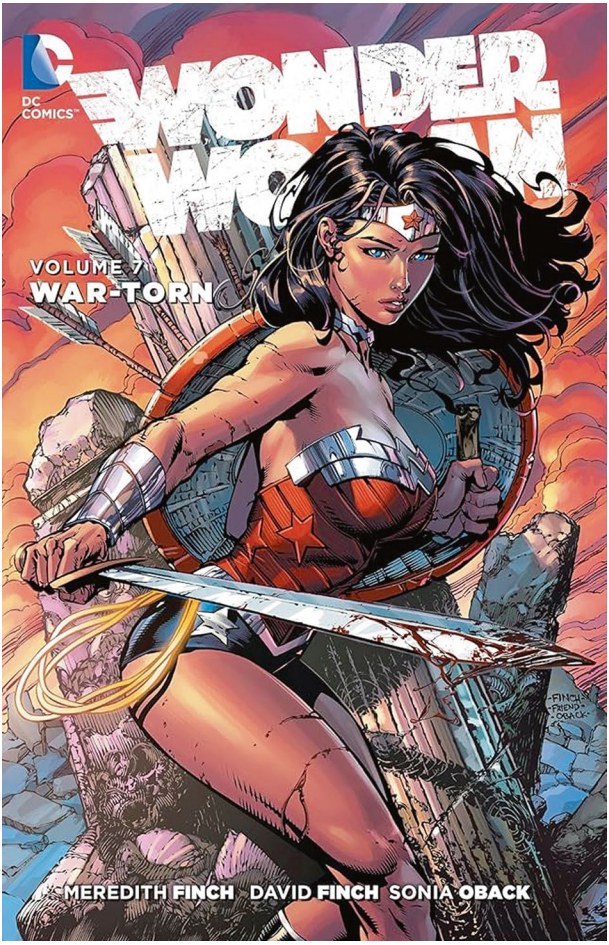


Fig. 7.3 Wonder Woman, Volume 7 War-Torn, September 2015, Meredith Finch, David Finch, Sonia Oback, © DC Comics

reinforce negative stereotypes. While the goal here isn't to give a moral lesson on issues like the portrayal of women as objects or the ongoing discrimination faced by LGBTQI+ or racialized individuals, it's essential to reflect on these representations in comics. These depictions influence not only cultural perspectives but also our understanding of crime and violence, making this not merely a cultural issue, but a key criminological one as well. Comics, as a cultural expression of the society they reflect, have become (fortunately) more mindful of telling inclusive stories and featuring characters from diverse backgrounds. However, as some researchers point out, efforts to introduce openly gay characters (like *Northstar*[16] in Marvel comics) are often more performative than substantive, with those characters remaining underdeveloped and used as token representations rather than fully fleshed-out individuals (Phillips & Strolb, 2016). A similar issue exists for people of African descent. Often portrayed as the villain, they still struggle to be adequately represented, even when cast as heroes, and are frequently relegated to supporting roles. To this day, white, cisgender, heterosexual males dominate the roster of mainstream superhero comics (Brunet & Davis, 2022). While there are notable exceptions, like Black Panther (*T'Challa*, who first appeared in *Fantastic Four* in 1966), it's not enough to dismantle a narrative that reinforces the idea that heroism is tied to whiteness,[17] while characters of other ethnicities are more often depicted as either victims or perpetrators of crime (Phillips & Strobl, 2013).

In this section, the focus has been on how mainstream American comics handle themes of justice, vigilantism, and representation. Villains are often painted as inherently evil, seemingly destined for a life of crime with little exploration of the societal factors that shaped them. This black-and-white portrayal feeds into the recurring theme of vigilantism, where heroes

[16] A Marvel Comics character notable for being one of the first openly gay superheroes in mainstream comics. Introduced in 1979 as part of the Alpha Flight team, Northstar (Jean-Paul Beaubier) possesses superhuman speed and flight abilities. His coming out in 1992 was a landmark moment in comic book history, marking a significant step forward for LGBTQ+ representation in the superhero genre.

[17] For example, as noted by Lackaff and Sales (2013, p. 68), Black Panther, the sovereign of Black monarch of an advanced civilization, is seldom granted the opportunity to fully wield his power and authority over his white counterparts, diminishing the sense of pride that comes with his character. Despite possessing advanced technology and immense wealth, the royal presence and the global influence, Black Panther was consistently sidelined, never given a leading role in any major Marvel storyline, and ultimately had little influence on the broader narrative within the Marvel universe.

take matters into their own hands, sidestepping legal processes in favor of swift, personal retribution. The justice system in these stories leans heavily on a retributive model—punishment takes priority over rehabilitation, with little space for nuance. Crime is viewed as an individual failure that demands immediate correction, rather than a symptom of larger societal issues. Representation follows a similar pattern. Women, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ characters are often reduced to oversimplified, stereotypical roles. Even *Black Panther,* a powerful, sovereign figure, rarely takes center stage, as white, cisgender, heterosexual males continue to dominate the narrative, while others remain on the periphery.

Now, shifting gears, the next section will focus on graphic narratives based on true stories. These comics move beyond the superhero genre to tackle real-world issues, offering important criminological insights.

A Different Perspective on the World of Comics: From True Crime to Graphic Journalism

The world of comics has not long been unaffected by the influence of true crime, especially in American popular culture. Detective comics, for instance, gained notoriety as early as 1942 with the publication of *Crime Does Not Pay*, a U.S. comic book series primarily edited and written by Charles Biro, considered the first true crime comic strip. These stories, drawn from news reports, history books, and police files, were often interwoven with intricate graphic details (Earle, 2017).

A few years later, in 1947, *True Crime Comics* emerged. One of its issues contained Jack Cole's infamous "injury to eye" illustration, later cited in psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), an indictment that led to the establishment of the Comics Code Authority (Fig. 7.4).

Consequently, crime-themed comics, unable to obtain the certification required for sale, experienced a rapid decline. They only re-emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, spurred by the underground comics movement (Earle, 2017). By the mid-1960s, a new style of comics appeared, often openly criticizing the Comics Code through violent or sexually explicit imagery (Arffman, 2019). Today, crime or detective comics—whether grounded in reality or fiction—remain a popular genre. The worldwide success of Frank Miller's *Sin City*, a quintessential noir, exemplifies this popularity.

One recurring theme that captures the public's interest across various media is that of serial killers and their biographies. This comic book form,

Fig. 7.4 Jack Cole's "Murder, Morphine and Me" (*True Crime Comics* #2, 1947 [Detail of a frame from the comic available on the Italian website fumettologica.it and accessible at the following address: https://fumettologica.it/2013/11/jack-cole-tra-leggenda-e-suicidio-parte-1/])

as Earle (2017) notes, is uniquely suited to portray violent narratives in ways that heighten reader engagement and deliver a gripping chronicle of crime. Notable examples include *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf, chronicling Jeffrey Dahmer's story, and *Green River Killer* by Jeff Jensen and Jonathan Case, exploring Arthur Shawcross's life. In Italy, *The Real Cannibal*, a four-volume series by Inkiostro, explores cases involving Andrej Chikatilo, Charles Manson, Ted Bundy, and Ed Gein, catering to readers' often morbid fascination with such figures.

From the broader genre of the graphic novel, a significant sub-genre known as graphic journalism has gained traction, described as "(…) an emerging form with a colorful mishmash of influences that includes comix, infographics, film, and autobiography" (Mentan, 2022, p. 179). One of the pioneers of the genre remains Joe Sacco, whose works on the crimes

perpetrated in Bosnia and in Palestine are still amongst the stronger ones, an example to follow on the crossroads of journalism and graphic novels. It must be said that war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide—among the worst crimes one could ever imagine—have fueled a series of compelling works: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*—which depicts Holocaust and the weight of its memory; *Hadashi No Gen*, by Keiji Nakazawa, a story about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, a crime against humanity the author witnessed by himself; the books of Park Kun-woong which tackle the war crimes committed during the Korean War, to name but a few. These artworks—which lean more on autobiography than journalism, we must say—are especially impressive because they deal with the extremely complex task of drawing images of the most terrible horrors humans can commit. Experimenting with the limits of representation (what can we draw and what should we refrain to draw? How to represent an atrocity and their victims?), they question both graphic novels and criminology, and how they address such topics.

Since the 2000s, graphic journalism has grown globally, bringing renewed vigor to graphic storytelling of real-life events. Alongside superhero tales, graphic journalists now engage with political and sociocultural topics, transporting readers to war-torn regions, analyzing crimes, and depicting urban struggles (Koch et al., 2023). This rise of graphic journalism reflects broader social transformations and challenges within traditional journalism, such as readership decline and eroding trust, which demand authentic and high-quality content (Schlichting & Schmid, 2018).

Graphic journalism's subject matter includes contemporary or historical news, as well as individual biographies. According to Gianluca Costantini, graphic journalists not only inform but also immerse readers in unique perspectives of documented reality (Cortelazzo, 2024). Readers thus become drawn into narratives, often sharing a sense of complicity with both the crime and its investigation (Earle, 2017). In Italy, BeccoGiallo, a renowned publisher in the field, has dedicated considerable effort to graphic adaptations of real stories and notable news events. Their focus includes criminological themes such as terrorist-based massacres (e.g., the Bologna and Piazza della Loggia bombings), innocent victims of the mafia (e.g., *Lea Garofalo: A Mother Against the 'Ndrangheta*, *Falcone and Borsellino*, *Peppino Impastato*), and notorious criminal cases that have impacted Italian public opinion (e.g., *The Circeo Massacre*, *Rina Fort*). Italian comics of social critique also address issues significant to criminology, such as the depiction of prison life in Zerocalcare's works.

Internationally, works like *Keimusho no naka* by Kazuichi Hanawa, where the author describes its own experience of imprisonment in Japan, must be noted. *The Hunting Accident* by David Carlson and Landis Blair (2017) draws from true events, retelling the story of Nathan Leopold Jr. and Richard A. Loeb, who planned the murder of a young boy as the "perfect crime." Another notable work is *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015), which weaves themes of gender violence, rape culture, slut-shaming, and victim-blaming against the backdrop of the Yorkshire Ripper's reign of terror.

The decision to tackle complex themes visually recalls Umberto Eco's famous quote, "When I feel like relaxing, I read an essay by Engels; when I feel like engaging, I read *Corto Maltese*." Eco's words emphasize the cultural validity of comics, showcasing them as not only an accessible medium for discussing complex social phenomena but also a powerful vehicle for in-depth analysis (Cancellieri, 2023). In criminology, graphic journalism combines visual immediacy with emotional impact, with the interplay of images and text often producing a compelling, sometimes intense experience (Schack, 2014). Additionally, comics cultivate "communities of memory," both as historical recollection and as new memory communities through artivist practices (Comberiati & Spadaro, 2023). Artivism, the fusion of political activism and art, generates meaningful expressions within the realm of comics. In criminology, graphic novels and comics can become an important resource for new explorations even on well-known but never quite widespread topics such as gender-based violence.[18] Mandolini's recent study examining four artivist comics underscores that "(...) deeper engagement by artivists with transnational intersectional feminist movements generally corresponds to a more inclusive, effective, and participatory artivist product" (Mandolini, 2022, pp. 536–537). Blending creativity with prose, graphic storytelling has proven its ability to reach broad audiences, informing and raising awareness on complex issues. Future research may further reveal how graphic journalism, also coupled with digital technologies, will drive sociocultural modernization in contemporary contexts (Schlichting, 2016).

Comics and Academic Knowledge

In recent years, the world of comics has seen a growing interaction with criminology, marking a closer relationship between social scientists and

[18] Mandolini, site: https://www.sketchthatstory.com

the 9th art,[19] primarily for the purpose of disseminating knowledge. This trend takes various forms.

First, there are publications aimed at student audiences, designed to make criminological knowledge—often seen as daunting in its traditional written form—more accessible. The *CrimComics Issues* series by Krista S. Gehring and Michael R. Batista, published by Oxford University Press, exemplifies this approach. Each of the 12 issues focuses on a specific topic in the history of criminological thought (e.g., the Origins of Criminology, Subcultural Theories, Classical and Neoclassical Criminology) and is explicitly developed as a teaching tool for university students.

Other initiatives aimed at increasing accessibility target the general public by adapting academic research into comic strips. In France, for example, the publishing house Casterman has launched the *Sociorama* collection, which is dedicated to this effort. These publications are the result of partnerships between researchers and comic book artists, allowing researchers to reach a wider audience "in comic form." They are generally based on pre-existing research that has already been published in more traditional academic formats, but these works offer something additional by involving the researcher directly, often featuring them during their fieldwork. This provides a dual perspective, both on the results of the research (on the knowledge produced) and on the research process (Berthaut et al., 2023). A book like *Se battre contre les murs: Un sociologue en centre jeunesse* by Nicolas Sallée and Alexandra Dion-Fortin (2022) is another example of the academic world's growing interest in using new formats—such as comics—rather than traditional scientific articles or books for publishing and disseminating knowledge. At the intersection of these two popularization trends are works such as *Global Police*, by Fabien Jobard and Florent Calvez (2023), which is both a scholarly introduction to the history of the police and associated knowledge (and as such can be used as a teaching tool in a class dedicated to these issues) and a comic strip that gives the general public access to what police research has enabled us to understand about this institution.

[19] The 9th art, a term coined by critic Claude Beylie in 1964, refers to comics as an autonomous and culturally significant art form. The concept draws inspiration from Ricciotto Canudo, who, in his *Manifesto of the Seven Arts* (1923), identified cinema as the seventh art, a synthesis of traditional artistic forms. Later classifications included photography as the eighth art and comics as the ninth, highlighting the medium's unique ability to merge text and images into a complex narrative and visual experience (Canudo, 1923; Beylie, 1964).

Two dynamics are at play here: on one hand, researchers are increasingly interested in disseminating their knowledge through new formats, including those aimed at broader audiences; on the other, comics publishers are showing interest in collaborating with social science researchers to produce documentary-style comics on societal issues. Both trends reflect the growing legitimization of comics as a valid art form, a development we—both as fans of comics and as researchers—can welcome. Indeed, long regarded as a minor art form, often dismissed as suitable only for children or, worse, for adults who shy away from "real" literature, comics have been slow to gain cultural recognition. Graphic novels enable students to develop a deeper understanding of human experiences, particularly where social identities, diversity, social justice challenges, and the effects of policies and practices intersect (Domyancich-Lee et al., 2022). Even though educators themselves display conflicting attitudes—since, for some, comics are nothing more than distractions (Dale, 2020)—it is possible to enhance the pedagogical approach of comics in educational pathways. While they may be complex to understand due to the juxtaposition of images and text, comics enable identification with the characters and allow for the exploration of sensitive sociocultural issues such as racism, immigration, conflicts, and social injustice. In fact, they offer a particularly engaging and innovative tool for learning (Domyancich-Lee et al., 2022).

Yet, the use of comics as a tool for popularization and education can also be seen as problematic, as it reinforces the notion that they are a more accessible, and perhaps overly simplified, form of reading. Prioritizing words over drawings is a common mistake when appreciating the medium of comics. The assumption that reading words is more challenging than interpreting drawings leads to the perception that comics are less demanding than literature or other purely written forms. In reality, this reflects a widespread lack of literacy in reading comics. Interpreting a sequence of drawings in relation to each other is far more complex than it might seem at first sight. It's not merely about illustrating—putting words into images—but about writing through images, a skill that, unlike reading, is not taught in school. The ability to write and read in the language of comics, especially to communicate scientific ideas through it, is still an emerging practice who could benefit to be incorporated in academic institutions. And we have yet to reach the day when such institutions will fully recognize this form of writing as a legitimate scientific production.

Conclusion

Comic books have long been more than entertainment; they're cultural mirrors that capture society's deepest fears, hopes, and fantasies about crime, justice, and moral boundaries. This chapter traces the journey from the gritty, true-crime stories of early comics—like *Crime Does Not Pay*, which captivated post-war America—to today's graphic journalism, showing how comics continue to frame society's complex relationship with crime and social control.

These narratives blur the line between law and personal justice, and through them, readers confront questions about the limits and power of punishment outside formal systems. At the same time, the *criminogenic* perception of comics—seen as capable of influencing criminal behavior, particularly in youth—has led to decades of censorship, such as the strict Comics Code Authority regulations. Through these layers of control and controversy, comics have shaped public perceptions of criminality, sometimes leaning into simplified portrayals that flatten the complexities of crime. Although more diverse stories have appeared in recent years, the challenge of moving beyond tokenism persists.

Ultimately, comics wield a powerful influence over society's understanding of crime and justice, blending fantasy with social commentary in ways that resonate widely. They place *Criminology in the Frame*, offering us a fresh lens on crime, justice, and the societal forces that shape these ideas. As we peer into this frame, we're invited to examine justice from every angle, questioning what we know and discovering new ways to understand the boundaries of crime and control.

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CHAPTER 8

Seeing the Unseen: Illustrating Climate Change Through Graphic Journalism

Valentina Cappi and Emanuele Leonardi

Introduction

Thousands of climate scientists have demonstrated the existence of climate change, its anthropogenic causes and its impacts, and have also identified a range of mitigation and adaptation strategies that are already available for implementation (IPCC, 2023), yet not adopted—or only partially so—at the time of writing. The speed and intensity of global warming as it has been occurring since the mid-twentieth century is caused by huge amounts of greenhouse gas emissions due to industrial activity (Lynas et al., 2021). The increase in Earth's temperature surface is accompanied as much by an intense reduction in biodiversity and alteration of marine, terrestrial, and river ecosystems (WMO, 2024), and by the exacerbation of social inequalities (Barca, 2020).

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However, «as long as this is not communicated it does not have any effect on society» (Luhmann, 1989, p. 29).

Effectively communicating climate change, i.e. making it understandable, tangible and close to people's everyday concerns, is crucial to allow diverse audiences to understand social implications—and cultural reproduction—of climate change, develop awareness, and potentially act in ways that collectively result in more sustainable practices and policies (Lindenfeld & McGreavy, 2014; Cappi, 2023).

Climate change has structural characteristics that make it a particularly complex phenomenon to grasp (and consequently to communicate), to the point that it has been defined a "hyperobject", or an entity of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that it defeats human cognitive categories (Morton, 2013).

The difficulty of visibilizing climate change calls into question first of all the notions of space and time. Climate change, in fact, has a slow drift, which is difficult to perceive in a human being's lifetime. Moreover, climate, unlike weather, cannot be seen or perceived, but only calculated and extrapolated from statistics and models. In other words, it requires cognitive infrastructures (Edwards, 2010). There is also a temporal and geographical distance between causes and effects, which means that the link between greenhouse gas emissions generated by human activities and the Earth System's reaction cannot be caught in one glance (Moser, 2010). Emissions are invisible to the naked eye and the data commonly used to report them are not relatable to the general public on a daily life scale (Van Aken, 2020).

Partly because it was considered too technical and unnewsworthy, and partly because of an intentional concealment operated by the fossil fuel industry (Oreskes & Conway, 2012), climate change has been poorly thematized in public and media discourse until the late 1980s. Even today mainstream media tend to report more often on the environmental impacts of climate change than on its social impacts, or on its causes and possible solutions (Vu et al., 2019; Osservatorio di Pavia, 2024) paving the way for the depoliticization of the issue, and preventing people from understanding what they can do individually and collectively to address this threat. Moreover, climate change has been mostly narrated through apocalyptic frames, as a disaster that can only be met with loss, sacrifice, and costs, generating feelings of anxiety and helplessness that have fostered public's denial as a self-defense mechanism (Nerlich et al., 2010; Norgaard, 2011).

Today, the arts also participate in climate change communication,[1] and their role concerns on the one hand the possibility of imagining a reality otherwise not accessible to the senses, and on the other hand an "affective" or "moral" understanding of the issue (Bartosch, 2020).

Indeed, climate change now finds expression in high and popular culture, in novels, movies, art exhibitions, video games, TV series, and graphic novels. The reporting of climate change has thus changed over time, especially as the topic moved from the scientific domain to encompass also the political, social, legal, and economic realms, to the extent of recognizing that there is nothing natural in the Earth's current temperature, since the processes that triggered it are deeply rooted in capitalist culture (Barca, 2024).

If the media, and particularly journalism, have been identified as key actors in informing and increasing public concern and public engagement (Appelgren & Jönsson, 2021; Nisbet, 2009), research has shown that more or supposedly better information and knowledge alone is not powerful enough to engage the public and produce action and «the arts and humanities hold much potential for presenting climate change and its social consequences in ways that allow people to see and feel them, forging intimate personal and social connections that inspire action» (Corbett & Clark, 2017, p. 5). Indeed, engagement in relation to climate change involves a combination of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors (Ockwell et al., 2009).

Scientific research over the years has identified some possible strategies for achieving these goals and overcoming the communication obstacles mentioned above. For the message to reach people with varying degrees of expertise and knowledge, but especially for it to be rooted in their concrete experience, it is necessary not to use specialized language, but to translate scientific data through metaphors and analogies with elements of everyday experience and to convey this information in narrative form (Corner et al., 2018). Some research emphasizes the importance of adopting positive frames that reinforce a sense of individual and collective self-efficacy in combating climate change. This means making solutions explicit and explaining the co-benefits of climate action, that is, the opportunities

[1] Climate change communication refers to all those forms of communication that, through different media, channels, and genres are addressed to inform, educate, raise awareness, promote better understanding, encourage greater engagement or mobilizedifferent audiences in response to climate change.

for greater health, technological innovation, economic advantages, and social cohesion that acting for the environment would enable, rather than talking about the sacrifices or costs involved (Stoknes, 2015). This aspect is key to grasp the specific character of climate justice mobilizations, namely the seemingly contradictory articulation between a deep sense of urgency ("we're running out of time!") and the viability of an alternative, environmentally desirable future ("it's not too late!").

Because the language and images used in the climate change narrative have so far conveyed the idea that it is a future threat, there is a need to make visible the causes and consequences of climate change and illustrate existing solutions "at scale", by connecting the local and global levels.

These narratives will be all the more effective the more they are accompanied, or expressed, by images (Corner et al., 2015).

Given the just-mentioned opportunities, in this chapter we aim at analyzing how climate change has been reported within *La Revue Dessinée Italia*, an Italian magazine of graphic journalism, which is being published since 2022 and which has changed its name into *La Revue* starting with issue 11, in December 2024.

Graphic journalism, as we will illustrate in a while, is an emerging field that combines the journalistic approach with comics to produce news stories (Weber & Rall, 2017).

This combination, as observed by comics journalist Dan Archer, should «give the reader a unique reading experience while simultaneously moving, informing and entertaining them in equal shake» (JSK, 2013).

In terms of content, are labeled as "graphic journalism" both the reporting of events related to current socio-political situation in this or that country, the reconstruction of controversial events or struggles of civic engagement in the most recent history, travel reportages, and biographies (Santoro, 2012).

In the case of *La Revue Dessinée Italia*, most of the articles are based on investigative journalism.

After focusing on the characteristics of graphic journalism and outlining the main coordinates of the case study examined and the methodology of investigation, this chapter will explore the representation of climate change within all existing issues of the magazine under review, in light of the recommendations offered by scientific literature on effective communication of the phenomenon, to finally delve into the ways in which the journal addresses climate justice, that is, the more purely social—and most often silenced—aspects of climate change.

Communicating Climate Change Through Graphic Journalism

The distinctive language, syntax, and form of comics and graphic novels[2] provide several opportunities for representation and communication of climate change that are unique to this art form (Sou, 2023).

In particular, there are three elements that make comics of special interest in communicating climate change: (1) the use of pictorial images, which not only accompany the text, but contribute fully to the reader's construction of meanings, understanding and memorization of complex phenomena, as well as to the imagination of future scenarios, in ways that linguistic text alone could not; (2) the dialectic between simultaneity and sequence, provided by the juxtaposition of panels, which prompts the drawing of connections between different scales and times and fosters the representation of human action as a socially embodied and politically situated practice; (3) comics' ability to allow for empathic/emotional involvement and "affective knowledge" (Cancellieri, 2023; Kuttner et al., 2021).

All these opportunities stem fundamentally from the peculiarity of comics being a "bilingual" medium, that is, to construct meanings by tensioning visual and textual elements (Cancellieri, 2023).

As observed by Bertagni and Salvetti (2015), images «communicate faster than words and can be understood by audiences of different age, cultures and language», and they are powerful since «people tend to remember about 10% of what they hear, about 20% of what they read, about 80% of what they see and do» (203).

For these reasons, the chief opportunity offered in the field of climate change communication by comics is their ability «to help readers digest a vast amount of information in a very short span of time, without actually taking anything from the information but rather making it more engaging» (Afshana & Din, 2018, p. 527).

Comics are recognized as a particularly suitable tool for representing the simultaneity of the interweaving of daily life between different places,

[2] Throughout this chapter we will refer indiscriminately to comics and graphic novels, because they are essentially the same art form. Following Duncan et al. (2023), comics and graphic novels «have become distinct mediums due to differences in production, readership, and marketing» (227). At the production level, graphic novels may be longer than the typical comic book and most often feature self-contained rather than continuing stories, thus allowing creators «to distance themselves from the commercial and periodical connotations associated with comics books» (4). But the difference between the two relies mostly in how they are marketed and in their distribution channels.

stories and scales (Forde, 2022) acting as a "scaling" or "focusing" device, «whereby the imperceptible can be made 'visceral' by coming into contact with human characters» (Perry, 2018, p. 2). Moreover, since representing disparate time scales is a central aspects of comic form, «the aesthetics of time in the form of the graphic novel address representational challenges central to the Anthropocene, environmental justice, and slow violence, in particular, the mediation between the planetary and the domestic» (ibid., p. 3).

Comics' ability to manipulate time, temporality, and timescales also opens possibilities for the reimagination—and the visualization—of climate change futures (Sou, 2023).

According to Ibarra-Rius and Pons (2024), who conducted an analysis of the evolution of ecocritical themes in comics from 1957 to 2023, the first comics focusing on climate change caused by humans date back to 1960s and they firstly addressed apocalyptic fears following the use of the atomic bomb. After the first World Climate Conference in 1979 and the creation of the IPCC in 1988, and especially from the 1990s, «themes of environmental commitment began to proliferate in popular culture specifically aimed at a young audience» (Ibarra-Rius & Pons, 2024, p. 6), mostly in fiction format, such as superhero comics genres, and in didactic materials. The increase in the production of non-fiction comics about climate change, from a documentary or journalistic perspective, followed the success of Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006).

However, it should be mentioned that the journalistic—non-ludic—use of comics is not a recent phenomenon. Although historically the evolution of comics occurred «in the direction of fiction, with generalist entertainment strategies for family use and flanking the domestic penetration of print media information» (Brancato, 2020, p. 230), the use of graphics, in its many forms, has always accompanied the press and has been central to this field «until the advent of photography as a technology for objectifying news rearranged the entire media system around a new culture of communication» (ibid., p. 227).

The emergence of graphic journalism, in the 1990s, originated on the one hand from the progressive diversification of comics supply toward non-fiction comics, i.e. the authorial graphic novel, which disengages itself from the mechanisms of seriality, and on the other hand from the New Journalism movement of the 1960s and 1970s, a journalism that adopts a writing style closer to the canons of literature.

Graphic journalism is a slow and mostly long-form journalism, based on multiple sources and testimonies, that does not privilege interpretations, but rather the illustration of facts. This kind of journalism is not interested in breaking news or daily reports but is aimed at exploring important hard news topics by means of a narrative structure[3] and of the visual power of comics (Duncan et al. 2016).

According to Versaci (2007, p. 111), comics journalists «achieve layers of meaning inaccessible to prose journalism alone because of comics' graphic language that blends words and images».

As observed by Schack (2013), these layers concern at least: (a) an emotional immediacy, created by "atmospheric" content and provided by the ability of the comics to accomplish the primary rule of literary journalism, which is "show, don't tell"; (b) the "stickiness" provided by the formal aspects of the genre, which also require the audience to stay "tuned in"; (c) the mnemonic value given by words and images informing and enhancing each other letting the audience to simultaneously understand on an intellectual level and feel on an emotional one.

Graphic journalism thus becomes another option for reading comics and, at the same time, a new practice of news consumption (Syeda & Heeba, 2018).

As insightfully expressed by Brancato (2020) graphic journalism «presents itself, on the one hand, as a response to the need for linguistic evolution of comics, taking them from serial entertainment to a de-massified model of consumption with more current characters; on the other hand, it incorporates the crisis of the mass devices that have made the history of industrial modernity (in which a neuralgic role is historically played by the news press), elaborating new connections between the subject and the medial construction of reality» (35).

Looking at graphic journalism covering ecocritical themes, at least three Italian publishing experiences should be mentioned: *Becco Giallo* publisher, which has been publishing graphic reportage and comic book dossiers since 2005, also addressing issues of the climate crisis, as evidenced—among others—by the volume "*Il grande squilibrio. The great imbalance. The climate emergency told in comics*" (Susa et al., 2022); *Terra*,

[3] This structure is the one of feature articles, i.e. «articles that inform about actual events by going beyond news data and constructing a story from which one can also capture the atmosphere, and seemingly unrecordable and unmeasurable elements such as emotions, passions, psychological reactions, and symbolic meanings» (Papuzzi, 2010, p. 165).

the official newspaper of the Green Party Federation, which between 2009 and 2012 offered comics reportages that mostly dealt with environmental issues; finally, *La Revue Dessinée Italia*, the first magazine of graphic journalism in Italy that, in each issue since 2022, hosts at least one investigation of issues related to the eco-climate crisis.

This quarterly magazine, our case study, was born in the wake of the experience of the French *La Revue Dessinée*, launched in 2013. As observed by Baudry (2017, p. 2), *La Revue Dessinée* «is an independent magazine which appears as a singular cultural object, whether viewed from the field of journalism or from that of comics. As a graphic magazine, it is the first to be composed entirely of comics reportage; as a news and current affairs magazine, it is the first to contain only articles in the form of comics». The editorial project appears to be the most accomplished form of this convergence between mook and documentary comic strip: «It comes close to mooks in its choice of a format that is reminiscent of a book, in contrast to the dominant model of current comics magazines, which prefer a more flexible format. Its content places particular emphasis on journalistic reporting, although it is not limited to it» (Baudry, 2017, p. 5).

As for the Italian "branch", issue #6 hosts a 2-pages descriptive story titled "What is *La Revue Dessinée Italia*?" (Colella & Palloni, 2023) which is extremely instructive. It first acknowledges the affiliation to the French mother-magazine; subsequently, it defines graphic journalism; stresses the total absence of advertisement and underlines the role of readers as exclusive source of economic revenue (Figs. 8.1 and 8.2).

Subsequently, it reclaims the freedom to touch upon all issues; emphasizes an intersectional approach which links «ecology, women's rights, migrations, marginality» (p. 7) and is openly attributed to Greta Thunberg: "It's true that in the *Revue*, along with ecology, we also talk about autism" (Fig. 8.3)

Finally, it declares "adequate payments" for authors ("real money, not visibility"); it discloses how costs are distributed (mostly payments for authors and printing, then logistics & shipping, marketing and fairs); it insists on the need to find as many subscribers as possible to *(r)esistere* [resist & exist].

Asked about the creative process, editor-in-chief Massimo Colella has explained to us what follows: «When the journalist sends us the pitch, his proposal, we ask him to write the 'treatment', an extended article that is descriptive of characters, places, and give as many elements as possible to the illustrator. And from there we help him structure the treatment in

Fig. 8.1 What is *La Revue Dessinée Italia?*, #6/2023, p. 6

Fig. 8.2 What is *La Revue Dessinée Italia?*, #6/2023, p. 6

pages, and we also start working with the illustrators, we pair them up, we get them talking, and we as editors are always there to check all the phases of the elaboration of the story. It's a long phase of work, in general it takes us 9 months to elaborate a single investigation, from the beginning to the

Fig. 8.3 What is *La Revue Dessinée Italia*?, #6/2023, p. 6

treatment, then to the final phase. There are investigations that have taken us 18 months, but the idea is to do things slowly but do them well, and when they are mature, then we publish them».[4]

With specific regard to their approach to the climate emergency, the editorial to issue #6 is very explicit: «There are two options: one can choose to run and get there first, following each and every news to inundate social networks: either irony or indignation, but always *in the moment*. Contrarily, one can choose to slow down and get there last, as we do, avoiding to talk about each and every fragment of news but connecting the dots, highlighting the contexts and telling stories which don't get old in 24 hours» (p. 3).

[4] Interview with the editor-in-chief, 09/17/2024.

Methodology

In order to explore how the *Revue Dessinée Italia* reports on issues related to climate change, we adopted a combined methods approach, analyzing content as well as producers' perspective (Appelgren & Jönsson, 2021).

Producers' perspective was captured through the editorials that introduce each issue, and through an online interview with the managing editor and founder of the magazine, conducted on September 17, 2024.

During the interview, we asked the editor to tell us about the birth of the magazine, its vision and mission, the organization of the production chain, from issue composition to distribution, the composition of the editorial staff and target audience, the link with associations or social movements, and the kind of scientific consultancy they use.

For what concerns content analysis, first we constructed the corpus of analysis by identifying the articles that most directly dealt with aspects related to the climate crisis in all ten existing issues of *Revue Dessinée Italia*, published between 2022 and 2024. This corpus was designed according to content-based criteria: in all of the selected articles, the words "climate change", "climate warming", "global warming", "climate crisis", or "fossil fuels" are mentioned at least once. Some of these articles were already classified, in the magazine's index, within the "Ecosystem" section, marked by a drawn green leaf, and in all issues, they take the title "Domino Effect". These articles constitute a sort of serialized reportage on different aspects related to the eco-climatic crisis and most often are Italian translations of original articles previously published in the French *Revue Dessinée*.

Other articles selected for our corpus are not inserted within this section but, like those that do fall under it, nevertheless report events and situations that illustrate different aspects of the climate crisis.[5]

In total, the articles examined are 16.

We then conducted a qualitative content analysis on this *corpus*, to the aim of exploring how the interaction between specific visuals and texts assign meaning and help visualizing causes, consequences, and solutions

[5] Although our *corpus* consists of articles written by different journalists and presenting a variety of narrative-expository styles of illustration, we considered it as a whole, with the idea that *Revue* readers, who are—as reported by the editor—mostly subscribers, will gain an overall view of the issue that is composed of the different pieces represented by the individual articles. Moreover, after reading all the articles, we did not notice obvious contradictions in the way the issue is represented, rather common trends.

to climate change (Koteyko & Atanasova, 2016; DiFrancesco & Young, 2011).

Qualitative content analysis can be defined as «a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through systematic coding and identification of themes or patterns» (Appelgren & Jönsson, 2021, p. 761).

In our case, we coded text or visual data deductively, that is by searching, within the considered articles, for the presence or absence of selected elements, providing a theoretically informed interpretation of them. Methods from both framing analysis and discourse analysis are used to address this objective.[6] The elements taken into consideration draw on existing theory and research about framing and public engagement toward climate change and can be summarized as follows:[7]

- Show (visual), don't tell;
- Show real people, use real images, personal stories, and testimony;
- Use verified and qualified scientific sources;
- Don't present data or numbers, tell a story (tell new stories);
- Show climate change causes (and solutions) at scale;
- Show local impacts at scale, striking a balance between the local and the global;
- Promote a 'systemic' view of climate change;[8]
- Tell your audience what specific actions they can take;
- Use positive framings and avoid apocalyptic ones.

Only with regard to our second research question, that is, how do issues related to climate justice emerge within the *corpus*' articles, we proceeded to analyze the articles inductively, in a predominantly interpretive

[6] Message framing «uses words, images and phrases to relay information […] and may provide problem definition, attribute responsibility and provide solutions» (Léon et al., 2018, p. 108).

[7] The checklist of recommendations was collected throughout scientific literature regarding effective climate change communication, which points out recurring suggestions provided by: CRED (2009); Clarke et al. (2020); Corner and Clarke (2016); Corner et al. (2018); Corner et al. (2015); Nerlich et al. (2010); Stoknes (2015).

[8] Promoting a systemic (sometimes called 'synergistic') view of climate change means adopting a perspective that considers the complexity, historical depth, and ecosystem interconnections of the phenomenon. Concretely, it means, for example, illuminating those apparently independent but related aspects of climate change that are often treated separately, to reveal their complimentary influences (Gutsche & Pinto, 2022, p. 238).

way. An overall discussion of climate change representation will be provided in the next paragraph, whereas in the following one we will explore the issues of climate governance and climate justice.

Shedding Light on La Revue Dessinée Italia*'s Climate Change Narratives*

Show, Don't Tell

Some of the recommendations for effective climate change communication, particularly those related to the value of showing through visuals rather than (only) through words, and of doing so through a story rather than through data or numbers, are somewhat inherent in the comics genre and in comics' graphic language, that blends words and images.

However, the interaction between words and images can unfold in a relationship of redundancy, when words amplify or elaborate what is expressed by the images, or in one of complementarity, when words and images proceed together to communicate an idea that they could not communicate alone (McCloud, 2018).

In our *corpus,* we can observe both modes: the article "So They Knew" (Rossi & Pandiani, #1/2022) presents images that reiterate the words [Fig. 8.4]. The article's didactic slant, whose explicit aim is «to trace the history of global warming» (p. 83), makes it suitable for reaching audiences of different ages.

The article, in fact, traces the scientific coordinates of a narrative that in later issues becomes more localized, sometimes intimate, and more politicized. The editor-in-chief confirms to us that the «very didactic, very explanatory» approach of this article was strongly intended «because it seemed necessary to put the basics, the *abc* precisely, to explain to the many who still do not understand what global warming is, where it comes from, what the consequences may be, what possible solutions. In fact, this article is extensively used by many professors, especially teachers in schools».[9] However, for readers already familiar with the issue, such a "textbook" story risks being less engaging than other articles that tell more original micro-stories concerning individual or community experience of climate change effects and mitigation strategies.

[9] Interview with the editor-in-chief, 09/17/2024.

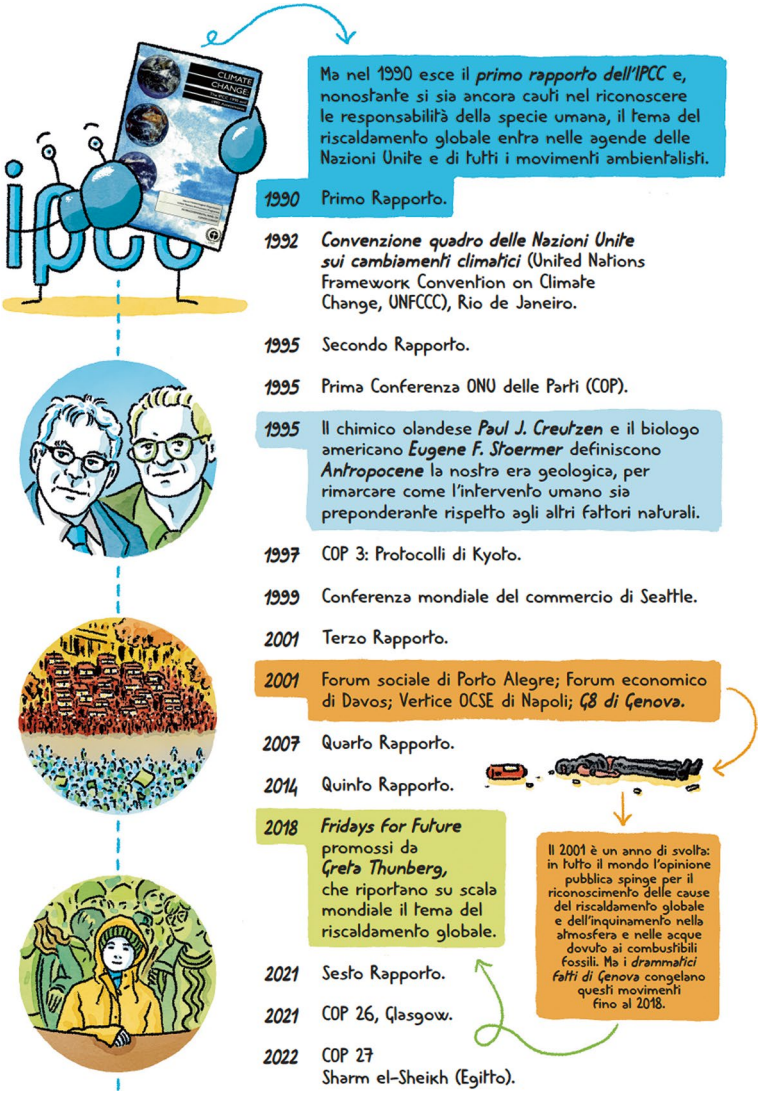

Fig. 8.4 So They Knew, #1/2022, p. 99

Similarly, in the article "Domino Effect" (Cazenave & Puvilland, #5/2023), the images reiterate and amplify the roller coaster metaphor already expressed by the text for describing humanity, which in a rush toward economic growth has already exceeded six of the nine planetary limits that condition the stable functioning of the Earth System. In this case, the article rather than didactic is divulgative, and it aims at taking stock of the Meadows Report on "The Limits to Growth" (1972) more than 50 years later, pointing out the impacts of uncontrolled growth in world population, energy consumption, and industrial production. The images here achieve the goal of putting the text in motion, making one feel the sense of vertigo and out-of-control run that the roller coaster metaphor is meant to raise.

Other articles, instead, show complementarity between text and images: the articles "Domino Effect" (Cazenave & Capanna, #2/2022) and "Blasphemous fire" (Rizzo & La Tram, #6/2023) add elements that are not discussed in the text, also opening up alternative points of view to that of the story's main protagonists and narrators: the perspective (or the presence) of non-humans. In #6 the investigation of wildfires in Sicily begins with the close-up of a horse, in whose eye we see flames reflected, as well as in #2 the illustrator reminds us that under the surface of the sea (as under that of the earth) live many creatures that also suffer, in different ways, from the impacts of climate change [Fig. 8.5].

The value added by the graphics is evident in all cases: on the one hand, it allows certain elements evoked by the text to be fixed in the visual memory; on the other hand, it allows the authors to connect to the main discourse elements of the overall picture that are often overlooked or regarded as independent.

From a visual point of view, graphic journalism is characterized by inevitably being a reconstruction of landscapes, situations, and people, and thus challenges the suggestion to use "real" images, i.e. photographs. On the one hand, the images that graphic journalists create «are not beholden to the same standards of objective truth as are photojournalists—the audience of a graphic non-fiction work can simultaneously entertain the contradictory notion that drawn images are at once true, but not actual» (Schack, 2013, p. 114). On the other, graphic journalism has the distinct advantage that the artist can "control the shot" and can therefore visibilize details or elements that would be difficult to show with the photographic tool. This is something the magazine's editor-in-chief emphasizes as an added value of graphic journalism, related to the goals of investigative

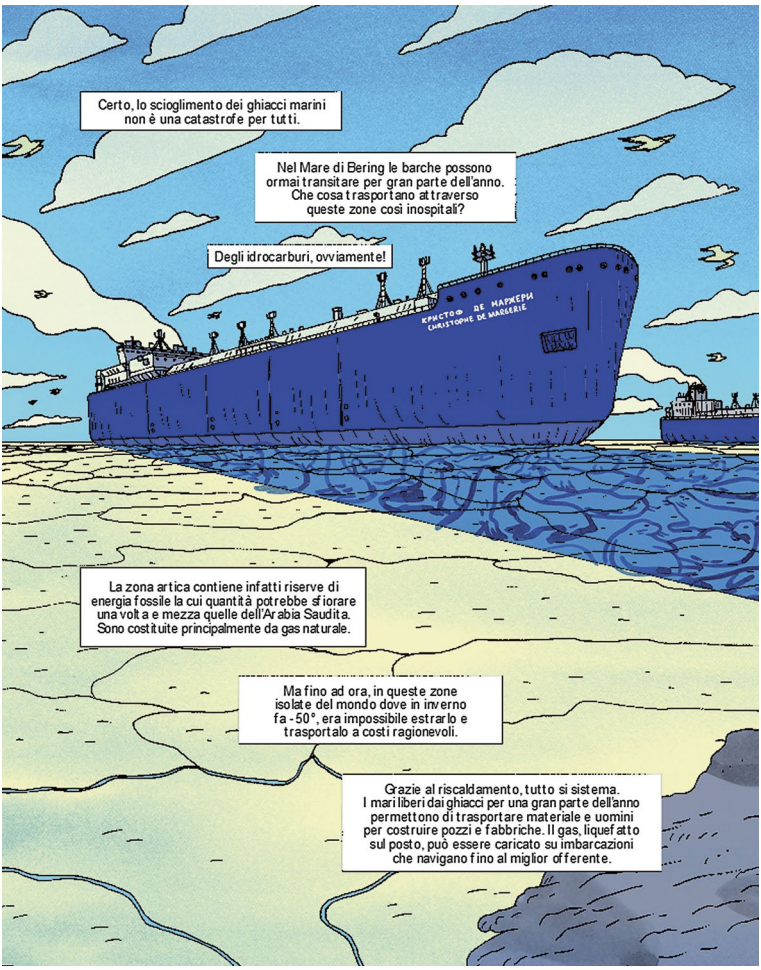

Fig. 8.5 Domino Effect, #2/2022, p. 34

journalism: «with comics you can talk about anything, deal with any topic, any era, you can talk about the past, the future, you can imagine things… the potential of comics is that it has no limits. When you do an investigation you can go into inaccessible places, you can describe them from the inside without ever having been there, you can change the appearance of the interviewees: most of the people we interview don't want to appear so

we change their features, we change their names. Graphic has this potential that a video doesn't have, can't have».[10]

Use Verified and Qualified Sources

Numerous scientific sources are mentioned in the various articles. They are reported through intra-textual elements, such as captions, or footnotes, and extra-textual, such as non-illustrated journalistic pages that accompany the article. As D'Andrea (2017) reminds us, the inclusion of these apparatuses to accompany the comic is a way of anchoring the representation to reality, graphic journalism still being a genre of journalism that is little known and that, due to the wider spread of fiction graphic novel, risks being misinterpreted by a reader who finds himself or herself on the hands of this product for the first time. By way of example, in issues #1 and #2, the IPCC reports are cited, while in #1 and #3 (Patriarca & Guillard, #3/2022) academic scholars or experts are introduced among the characters as spokesmen for their scientific disciplines, with first and last names. Among others, in issue #1 we find cited Elisa Palazzi, Professor of Physics at Turin University, and Giorgio Vacchiano, researcher in Forest management and planning at Milan State University, and in issue #3 Ludovic Ravanel, geomorphologist of the French CNRS.

As for verifying sources more generally, the editor-in-chief tells us that «it is the journalist's job to verify sources, then our editor-in-chief does fact-checking work before going to press, however, the first person who has to verify where the news comes from is the journalist. And in any case we follow the whole processing stage from beginning to end».[11]

Show Climate Change Causes, Local Impacts and Solutions at Scale, Striking a Balance Between the Local and the Global

Other kinds of experts also appear in the *La Revue Dessinée Italia*'s articles, acting as interpreters of a more personal translation of climate change. They are not scientists but ordinary people, "experts by experience" who tell what signs of climate change they are already grasping in their daily lives, in their work, or what adaptation or mitigation strategies they are practicing: «I have been mountaineering since 2007 and have been a guide since 2014. Even though I am young, looking back a little bit, I notice the change. When I was a child, I saw the mountain blue and white; now the

[10] Interview with the editor-in-chief, 09/17/2024.
[11] Interview with the editor-in-chief, 09/17/2024.

glaciers are gray and dry» (#3/2022, p. 71), reports the mountain guide featured in "Pending Guides" in 3#. And again: «Before, there were times of rest between winter and summer. Now in May-June people go straight from downhill skiing to climbing crampons. The first people to hike Mont Blanc cross the last people skiing» (#3/2022, p. 72). As the caption at the bottom of [Fig. 8.6] states, high mountain guides were among the first to notice, and feel, the effects of global warming.

In the face of increasingly frequent rock collapses as a result of melting ice, the comic emphasizes the need for mountaineering to adapt, narrating and suggesting strategies for a necessary transformation of the profession: «for years I haven't made any summer hut reservations. I decide at the last minute where to go, depending on the weather» or «more and more guides are looking for an alternative activity for the month of August: canyoning, paragliding, carpentry work...» (#3/2022, p. 81).

Fig. 8.6 Pending Guides, #3/2022, p. 72

The article provides numerous examples of the environmental impacts of climate change,[12] as well as the economic and logistical impacts of practicing mountain guiding in a changed climate. However, references to the causes of climate warming and possible mitigation strategies are lacking.

It is more precise, in this sense, the article "The Animal Lottery" (Simpere & Chico, #3.1/2022), in the same issue, which links the sixth mass extinction and the current massive biodiversity crisis to human activity, pollution, global warming, and space colonization. After reviewing various criteria by which the preservation of certain animal species is prioritized, the article comes to the conclusion that «one cannot be satisfied with saying that one does not have enough means to save everything. One must also stop destroying and pushing species to extinction» (#3.1/2022, p. 152), thus also suggesting remedies, albeit general ones.

To the causes and political responsibilities of climate change is dedicated the article entitled "The ENI Case" (Garavoglia & La Bella, #7/2023), which—from the very first page—reproduces the logos and states the names of companies and entrepreneurs in the fossil industry.

The article—which reports on an investigation conducted by the ReCommon Association—identifies the fossil corporation ENI (and other banks and insurance companies such as Intesa Sanpaolo, Sace, and Snam) as the stabilizing element in political relations between Italy and Egypt, despite the fact that Egypt has never cooperated in the investigation into the murder of Giulio Regeni, the Italian student arrested and tortured in 2016 by Egyptian intelligence services for his research on the hawkers' union. The network visibilized by the article aims to highlight strategic and economic interests, as well as relationships between governments and private companies, in continuing interstate collaboration and repression of activists and opponents to the al-Sisi regime. In short, the authors make evident a network of actors that promotes well-organized efforts to obstruct climate action (Brulle et al., 2024).

The article "Domino Effect" (#2/2022) also sheds light on the economic interests of fossil fuel companies, for whom some effects of climate change, such as the melting of Arctic ice, is merely a new opportunity to

[12] To make this story, set in the vicinity of Chamonix, closer and more relevant to Italian readers, a few pages of non-comics follow the article, calling to mind the July 3, 2022, collapse of a serac on the Marmolada. Even here, however, there is no reference to causes or mitigation strategies, so it is difficult to grasp the link between the local and global scales of climate change and its possible solutions.

expand their business. The article narrates how the melting of the permafrost is threatening 4 million people living in the Arctic region, who have already begun to relocate due to the sinking of the ground. While this is a local story, the article highlights that this melting will affect everyone on the planet, since permafrost holds large amounts of imprisoned organic matter, which contains twice as much carbon as the atmosphere. If they were to leak out, these would help amplify global warming. The graphics are not alarmist, and blue and azure tones are dominant, as if to make the reader feel immersed in the great sea and to remind that the Earth is not, indeed, made up only of landmasses (half the page, in fact, is taken up by what lies beneath the water). The Arctic, mostly recounted as a wasteland (and therefore far removed from the daily concerns of the majority of planet's inhabitants), is framed first and foremost as an area inhabited by humans and non-humans, but also as a crossroads of fruitful trade routes, which make the melting ice a business ground for companies that extract and trade hydrocarbons [Fig. 8.5].

The responsibilities of the Exxon Corporation not only in the extraction and trade of fossil fuels but also in the concealment of early evidence on the incontrovertible relationship between fossil fuels, greenhouse gas production and global warming, form the starting point of the aforementioned "So They Knew" (#1). In addition to the scientific explanation of the role of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the risks of an increase in its concentration, the article illustrates the impacts on the planet of climate warming, giving examples both at the global and local level in Italy, such as Vaia storm in 2016, or the change in the seasonality of the grape harvest, from early November to mid-August. In addition, it traces the evolution of climate governance and the emergence of climate movements, flanking policy measures with viable or already ongoing mitigation and adaptation strategies in Europe and Italy by citing virtuous examples of associations or entities that are already applying solutions, such as *Reteclima*, a nonprofit organization that implements new forestry projects, or *Ènostra*, a renewable energy provider that functions as a cooperative, and other.

The role of intensive livestock farming in producing greenhouse gas emissions and their water footprint is also rightly mentioned among the causes of climate change [Fig. 8.7]. "Food Cages" (D'Isa & Allegri, #4/2023) reports on an undercover investigation conducted by a member of the "Being Animals" association, which works to raise awareness of the ethical, environmental and health impacts of the meat industry.

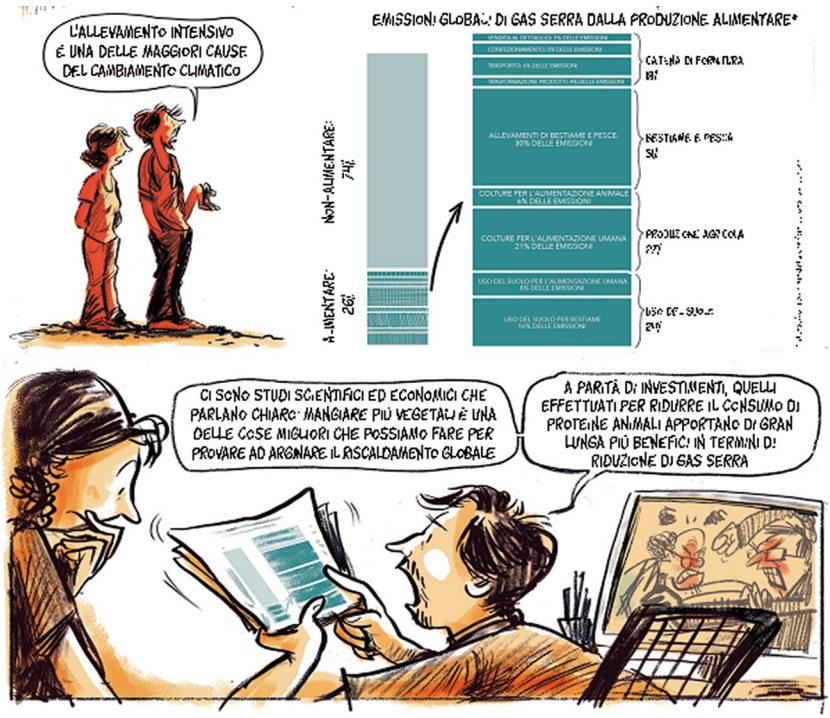

Fig. 8.7 Food Cages, #4/2023, p. 20

This article documents the living conditions of animals on intensive farms, but also the working conditions of the humans who work there, and mentions the resistance that exists to reducing meat consumption, interweaving ecological arguments with anti-speciesist ones.

In terms of mentioning possible mitigation or adaptation solutions, the spectrum presented by the different articles is also quite broad.

Local community experiences—also benefiting the wider community—are discussed in the article "Little Harbingers of Revolution" (Liberti & Rauso, #7.1/2023), that reports on the experience of the construction of a renewable energy community based on photovoltaic systems in San Giovanni a Teduccio, in the eastern suburbs of Naples (Italy). Conveying a sense of positivity and hope, also through the pastel colors of the accompanying drawing, this article looks directly at solutions, without going

through impacts or causes, and shows the co-benefits of integration and social innovation produced by building the energy community in a neighborhood considered vulnerable to educational poverty.

The article "The End of a World" (Bolis & Erre, #5.1/2023) opens with a course on collective survival to natural disasters as a response to the predictions of collapsology and closes on the consideration that while the world's richest people are buying private shelters, the poorest are already experiencing the lack of drinking water, food supply, and public services. The authors explore in an original manner the experience of preppers, or neo-survivalist groups, and their adaptation strategies, while raising an issue of climate justice posed in terms of "private heaven vs. collective hell". The article reports on some experiences of community preppers, such as that of a permaculture eco-village in the Drome Valley, France, and the Extinction Rebellion movement, born in the United Kingdom in 2018, which calls for «recognition of the urgency of ecological crises; immediate reductions in Co2 emissions; suspension of all biodiversity-destroying activities; and the creation of citizen assemblies with decision-making powers» (#5.1/2023, p. 148).

The article has the merit of synergistically connecting the different manifestations of the eco-climate crisis, emphasizing above all its impacts on human life, as well as on the surrounding environment: «before, I used to see only pieces of the problem, oil, climate … but when you see the whole picture, you tell yourself that you have to do something» (#5.1/2023, p. 139), says the manager of a small business, who is part of the preppers.

We therefore read in the stories offered by *Revue Dessinée Italia* the intention of always proposing some sort of solution to the reader, not merely suggesting individual actions that, while important, alone are not enough to counter climate change. As we have seen, if responsibilities for climate change—in different articles—are attributed to lobbying and national interests, as well as to consumerist culture and the capitalist system, tackling climate change requires a multidimensional approach that integrates individual actions, public policies, and institutional interventions at the national and international level.

Use Positive Framings and Avoid Apocalyptic Ones

Although #5.1 still portrays "local resilient communities" as ecological utopias, and proposes the collapse frame that—like any apocalyptic frame—risks paralyzing audiences into disillusioned helplessness, its

stories allow authors to raise the issue of the transformation of the imaginary as a necessary practice for political and social transformation: «One cannot live in a world where the monopoly of utopia is in the hands of Google, hypertechnologization and transhumanism. And the rest will be nothing but a very dark, blocky, distressing dystopia … we wanted to work on an imaginary of the possible, to reinvent a habitable living place … a desirable future» (#5.1, p. 151).

The magazine's editor-in-chief reveals that it is also through a particular association between the journalist and the illustrator that they try to avoid apocalyptic tones or registers: «the pairing we make between journalist and cartoonist depends a lot on the drawing style. For example, if we have a particularly problematic issue, we tend to associate it with a cartoonist who has a lighter, more ironic style, to try precisely to lighten the tone.[13] I think of the comic about factory farms, we chose an illustrator who has a humorous drawing style, because it was so heavy as a theme. And representing animal cruelty in a realistic style would have been too repulsive a layer». And again: «Even though they are not all negative stories, they are tough stories however we always try to show ways out, a note of 'hope,' as well as small initiatives by people who are giving their all, beautiful initatives. […] We go against that journalism that wants to shock, that throw in your face poignant images of murdered children. You won't find these things with us, and if you do find them, they will be treated with such delicacy that precisely allows you to read the story without freezing».[14]

Rather emblematic of this attitude is the comic strip "Alternative Future" (Pandiani, #2.1/2022), which contrasts in two side-by-side pictures two different future scenarios from 2021 to 2030: on the one hand, colored red reminiscent of emergency and catastrophe, apocalyptic scenarios; on the other, with shades of green, regeneration scenarios that bear

[13] An exception to this statement seems to us to be the article "Domino Effect" (Cazenave & Burniat, #4.1/2023), which recounts the invention of plastics and their uncontrolled production and spread after 2000. Although the article presents a hint of climate justice issues, relating for example to the use of plastics in different regions of the world, and connects plastic production to emissions from the petrochemical industry, the narrative seems squashed on impacts and, beyond the tacit suggestion to stop producing so much of it, does not offer alternative solutions regarding, for example, materials that could replace current uses. The effect of the narrative, but especially of the illustrations, however, is "overwhelming": despite the pastel colors, the final pages offer no way out and make the reader feel overwhelmed by the presence everywhere of plastics and microplastics that it is not clear how to put an end to.

[14] Interview with the editor-in-chief, 09/17/2024.

an indication of how it was possible to build them (e.g., prohibition of oil drilling, promotion of reduced meat consumption, free electric public transportation, changes in production processes, and separate waste collection) [Fig. 8.8]. The beginning of the new world is made to coincide with the outrage and protest mobilization in the face of information about the renewal of funding for fossil fuel extraction, thus suggesting what may be political action from below, as well as policies and technical solutions from above.

Climate Governance and Climate Justice

So far, our content analysis has focused on those articles which explicitly deal with climate change, in every single issue. In this section, such investigation is supplemented with a transversal reference to the magazine as an *intersectional narrative ecosystem*. The idea, here, is not only to show how the didactic "trust" to climate governance expressed in the article "So They Knew" (Rossi & Pandiani, #1/2022) evolved into a radical "skepticism" in the article "The ENI Case" (Garavoglia & La Bella, #7/2023), but to acknowledge that the context in which global warming-related stories are rooted is in itself a mirror of the trajectory of climate justice movements toward so-called *eco-social convergence of struggles (Leonardi & Manconi, 2025)*. [15] Hence, our interpretation follows a twofold argumentative line: first, we need to briefly explore the intersectionality of *La Revue Dessinée Italia*; second, we need to trace implicit links among articles which "resonate" with the recent, and unexpected to many, encounter between climate advocacy and labor unrest in Italy.

Before doing that, however, it is important that we provide preliminary definitions for our main categories (Imperatore & Leonardi, 2023). By *climate governance*, we mean the United Nations' institutional attempt to tackle global warming by turning it into a business opportunity. Such policy framework is also referred to as the COP [Conferences of Parties] System, and its conceptual pillars rest on the notion of *green economy*, whose disruptive kernel—elaborated in the early 1990s, is the idea that

[15] It is important to acknowledge that such trajectory has found a way to retroact on theoretical debates that have marked Modernity. Kohei Saito's bestseller *Slow Down. How Degrowth Communism Can Save the Earth* (2024) is the obvious example when it comes to climate justice reviving Marxism, but similar considerations could be addressed to other revolutionary traditions.

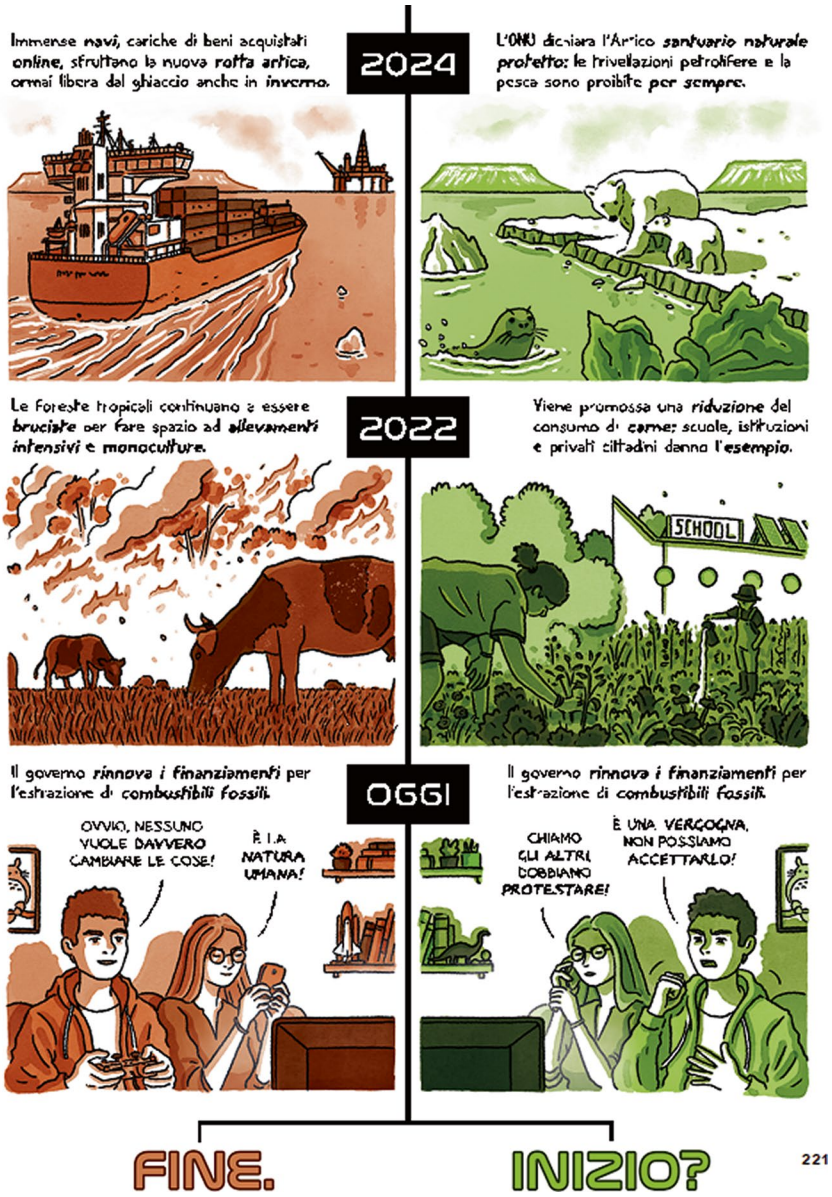

Fig. 8.8 Where will we be in 2030?, #2.1/2022, p. 221

what was once conceived as crisis *of* capitalism (i.e., the ecological crisis) should from that moment on be regarded as a crisis *for* capital. In other words, the key postulate is that the internalization of environmental limits does not constitute a burden but, rather, opens up a new strategy for market-led valorization (Pellizzoni et al. 2022). A brief glance at the historical development of climate governance can show the connection between the emergence of the green economy and the governmental design of market-based schemes. The Kyoto Protocol (1997) is the first legally binding agreement on climate change and its main tenet is undoubtedly the beginning of *carbon trading*, for which it unmistakably represents an official date of birth. The basic economic rationale which frames the so-called flexibility mechanisms is that trading emissions permits and credits on dedicated markets would simultaneously reduce the aggregate cost of meeting the targets, foster sustainable development in non-industrialized countries, and create profitable opportunities for green business. In a nutshell, this formula indicates that the global reliance on specifically dedicated markets as an exclusive policy option is connected to an extremely entrenched political belief according to which climate change, although a historical market failure (since negative externalities were not accounted for), could be viably solved only by further marketization. Such an assumption has represented the red thread of climate governance as a whole and remained intact in the much-celebrated *Paris Agreement* (signed at COP 21, in 2015).

By *climate justice*, instead, we mean a perspective—first elaborated in the late 1990s—that sees global heating as a symptom of inequality on a planetary level. Such inequality can take two forms: between the Global North and South (i.e., between those States that have more responsibilities for creating the problem and those States that are most exposed to its detrimental consequences) and between social classes (the responsibilities for investments in fossil fuels, similarly to their impacts, are not equally distributed in this respect too). The earliest versions of climate justice emphasized the first type of form. Since 2019, however, there have been more attempts to articulate both instances in an international and social critique of fossil capital (Malm, 2016).

Simplifying a little, we argue that the relationship between climate governance and climate justice developed through three stages: at first, in close connection with the *Kyoto Protocol* and the social hype it generated, the disruptive nature of the green economy was deeply felt also on social movements' side. Our main point is that, throughout the 2000s, the

policy framework aimed at posing global warming as a driver of capital accumulation had attracted even radical imaginaries, as it ostracized denialists of various forms. The United Nations' Framework Convention for Climate Change (1992/94: the birthdate of the COP System)[16] is a good case in point, as it progressively became a centripetal force for social advocacy and attracted most climate justice actors, who ended up playing as legitimacy providers for climate governance. Subsequently, after the turning point represented by the *Paris Agreement* (2015), where the UN-led process was politically relaunched but practically demoted to the register of adaptation (whereas the great wager of Kyoto was to make profits *by* reducing emissions, hence by mitigating global warming), climate movements started to question their role, which began to change. Deep critiques of the COP System, on account of its inability to slow down not so much *absolute* emissions, but even the *rate* at which tons of CO2-equivalent were released in the atmosphere, rapidly spread. It was in this context that Greta Thunberg—whose face we encountered more than once in the *La Revue Dessinée Italia*—made her appearance at the COP 24 in Poland, 2018, quickly becoming a global icon. Her main function was to put an end to the UNFCCC as the *centripetal force for climate-related imagination*, as the main attractor of carbon-reducing policy efforts. This is what, in essence, marks stage 2. Such disruptive character does not mean, however, that post-Greta climate justice is entirely unprecedented: many features of Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion were certainly present in previous mobilizations, especially those of the alter-globalization cycle of the early 2000s. Yet, what we believe is important to emphasize is the progressive disintegration—endogenous as well as exogenous—of the UN-led process, which represents a moment of discontinuity both from an institutional perspective and a social movements' one.

Eventually, after a failed attempt to institutionalize the radical claims put forward by climate strikes from 2019 onward, stage 3 occurred: the COP System and socio-ecological movements parted ways. While the

[16]The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) established an international environmental treaty to tackle 'dangerous human interference with the climate system'. It was signed by 154 states at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), informally known as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. It established a Secretariat headquartered in Bonn and entered into force in March 1994. The treaty called for ongoing scientific research and regular meetings, negotiations, and future policy agreements designed to both reduce GHGs and allow ecosystems to adapt to climate change.

former abandoned its original character—that of being simultaneously *multilateral* and *participatory* (i.e., constitutively inclusive toward civil society organizations)—and will once again be hosted in an authoritarian petro-State (COP 27 in Egypt, 2022; COP 28 in the United Arab Emirates, 2023; COP 29 in Azerbaijan, 2024), the latter is morphing into a plural political subject in which the claim for effective climate action immediately entails a reduction of inequalities, at all levels and on a global scale (Benegiamo et al. 2023). Insofar as the Italian situation is concerned, particular emphasis needs to be devoted to the convergence between climate movements and conflictual trade unions (Andretta and Imperatore 2024).

Let's now go back to *La Revue Dessinée Italia*: we argue that while "So They Knew" encapsulates stage 1 of our reconstruction, "The ENI Case" captures stage 3, in particularly from the perspective of political repression of dissent.

As for the first article, please recall Fig. 8.4: what at a first glance may seem a simple chronological list is, more fundamentally, the establishment of a link between the *discovery* of climate change as a scientific matter of concern and its *political articulation* at both the institutional and grassroots level. In this interpretation, an advancement in knowledge (1990, first IPCC report) is followed by an institutional arrangement (1992, UNFCCC); in turn, this unleashes other scientific achievements (1995, the Anthropocene) which foster social awareness and mobilization (2001: World Social Forum in Porto Alegre). Up to this point, if we really wanted to be picky, we may reproach journalist Sergio Rossi and artist Giorgio Pandiani for having been a little too didactic, or for having avoided to emphasize the elective affinity between the COP System and market centrality, but the storyline is solid and informative. Where things get messier, in our view, is with the subsequent connection, that between the critical stance of the alter-globalization movement (1999, anti-WTO in Seattle; 2001, anti-OECD global forum in Naples and Carlo Giuliani's assassination during anti-G8 demos in Genoa) and the radical mutiny performed by Greta Thunberg (2018, which would spur the Fridays for Future in 2019). What gets lost, in this juxtaposition, is that what Thunberg inaugurates is a political process which situates climate justice *beyond* (if not straightforwardly *against*) the market logic. Because of this, the COP System would eventually expel not only the Swedish activist, but the movements and NGOs that had made the 20+ Conferences of Parties simultaneously *multilateral* and *participatory*.

It is not by chance, in fact, that in a very recent interview to OC Media Thunberg stated: "Azerbaijan is a country deeply reliant on fossil fuels, and the Azerbaijani regime has plans to further expand its fossil fuel production. It's shocking that an authoritarian, oil-dependent State like Azerbaijan is being allowed to host a global climate event like a COP. This decision not only affects the climate but is also an insult to those suffering from environmental and human rights abuses. I am not going to COP29 in Azerbaijan".[17] She then continued that this conference will be taking place in a country whose regime oppresses its people, continues ethnic cleansing against Armenians, and disregards the climate crisis by prioritizing fossil fuel expansion.

We can find trace of this interpretive line, centered around the issue of political repression, in "The ENI Case" (Garavoglia and La Bella, #7; written in collaboration with climate justice NGO *ReCommon*). The key passage, here, is the following (Fig. 8.9):

The main character, Egyptian human rights activist Ahmad Abdallah, which in the previous pages reflects on how—in his country—social justice and political freedom are systematically downplayed in favor of economic interests linked to fossil fuels, is entering the COP 27 venue in Sharm El Sheik and receives a phone call by his friend Rachid. Speaking from Cairo, Rachid informs Ahmad that the situation there is turning very bad for activists, and that many of them have been preemptively arrested to prevent significant participation in the demo organized for the following Friday. The story proceeds to analyze how the involvement of Italian fossil juggernaut ENI in COP 27 has provided the sort of *climate washing* the Thunberg criticizes with specific reference to COP 29 in Baku.

However, our argument goes further than this: we believe that the *intersectional ecosystem* provided by the magazine mirrors the main tenet of the shift from stage 2 to stage 3, namely the eco-social convergence between climate movements and ecological labor struggles. Here, the key story is that of the GKN Workers' Collective—of how it stopped an offshoring project by occupying the factory and how it galvanized labor and social movements in Italy. Such dispute has already been narrated, in English, by Francesca Gabbriellini and Giacomo Gabbuti.[18] Of particular relevance, for our purposes, is the relationship between labor mobilizations (especially the occupation at GKN) and climate justice. In practical

[17] https://en.armradio.am/2024/11/05/climate-activist-greta-thunberg-boycotts-cop29-in-baku/
[18] https://jacobin.com/2022/08/gkn-driveline-florence-factory-collective-strike

Fig. 8.9 The ENI Case, #7/2023, p. 182

terms, this issue started to be posed in September 2021 at the Milan Climate Camp—the radical opposition to the Pre-COP 26 (where Greta Thunberg famously uttered her *blah blah blah* speech)—and continued, with some difficulties, during the protests against the G20-Environment meeting in Rome, on October 20, 2021. Misunderstandings and different approaches notwithstanding, both the Italian branch of Fridays for Future and the GKN Workers' Collective kept framing their alliance as a strategic horizon, and finally things clicked on March 25–26, 2022: the first 'joint appointments' of struggles—climate strikes everywhere in Italy on Friday, commonly organized demo in Florence on Saturday. In terms of numbers, it was a huge success—replicated and expanded to new actors in Bologna (October 22) and Naples (November 5). More importantly, though, is the fundamental political convergence between workers' struggles and pro-climate advocacy. Such convergence is best appreciated in the first (of many) GKN-FFF 'joint declarations':

«We will never again allow relocations, layoffs, precariousness to be justified with the excuse of the climate crisis. Nor will we allow a slow-down or detour in the ecological and climate transition to be justified with the defense of existing jobs. The ecological transition, if real, must also measure its effectiveness on time, and slowdown is no longer conceivable. The planet is on fire, from every point of view, and every second wasted is a crime […] A real climate, environmental, and social transition cannot disregard society's ability to equip itself with comprehensive and eco-sustainable forms of planning. And such planning is not generated in blackmail, in the hierarchy of workplaces, in the oppression and repression of territories as has been happening for years for example in the Susa Valley [where a high-speed train has been resisted by local populations since 1991], but in the awakening of participatory and direct democracy».[19]

The last example, probably the most meaningful, of this eco-social convergence is the visit Greta Thunberg paid to the occupied factory on October 13, in support of the climate-sensitive reindustrialization plan proposed by workers through a successful popular shareholding campaign. On that occasion, Thunberg and the GKN Workers' Collective released a short video (77 seconds) which neatly encapsulates the development of what we referred to as stage 3. Let us transcribe it, in full:

[19] https://projectpppr.org/populisms/emanuele-leonardi-amp-mimmo-perrotta-interview-dario-salvetti

Thunberg: «Workers from many different sectors, from all over the world are gathering to show what a just and sustainable transition can look like in practice, from the bottom up».

GKN worker: «Here we were producing axle shafts for the whole automotive industry, but in 2021 they decided to close our factory. We fought back and got together with the climate movement and the universities in our region. We developed a plan for a social production of sustainable goods».

Thunberg: «If we want to achieve climate justice, we have to stop the speculation happening in factories like these [pointing to the facility in Campi Bisenzio, near Florence], or all over the world, that threatens the livelihoods and future of the workers and communities».

GKN group of workers: «For decades, the owners, the big bosses of the automotive have done whatever they wanted in Europe, making profits, big profits on our lives, on our jobs. Now they want to blame the climate transition in order to cut jobs and to make even more profits».

Thunberg: «Climate justice means that the green transition does not happen at the expense of workers—or any marginalized groups. A just and sustainable transition is about putting power back in the hands of the workers».

Overvoice: «Workers of the world, united—and united with the climate movement—will never be defeated».[20]

To go back to our argument, one may ask: since the GKN story is (as of yet) untold in the ten issues of *La Revue Dessinée Italia*, where should we find elements of such *eco-social convergence*? Our answer is: in the magazine's *intersectional narrative ecosystem*. Here, we will provide a little overview, with images to support our claim. To start with, the foundational territorial struggle to which both Fridays for Future and the GKN Workers' Collective referred to in their first 'joint declaration', that of the Susa Valley, is narrated in "Between Trains and Mountains" (Canottiere et al., #1/2022) (Fig. 8.10):

In this image, historical NO TAV leader Alberto Perino (recently passed away) reflects on the importance of *presidi* [garrisons] as a practice of struggle which allows activists to experiment with new forms of sociality. It is not by chance, in fact, that the same practice is at the very core of the GKN occupation.

[20] https://fb.watch/vTfqaU7Ar-/

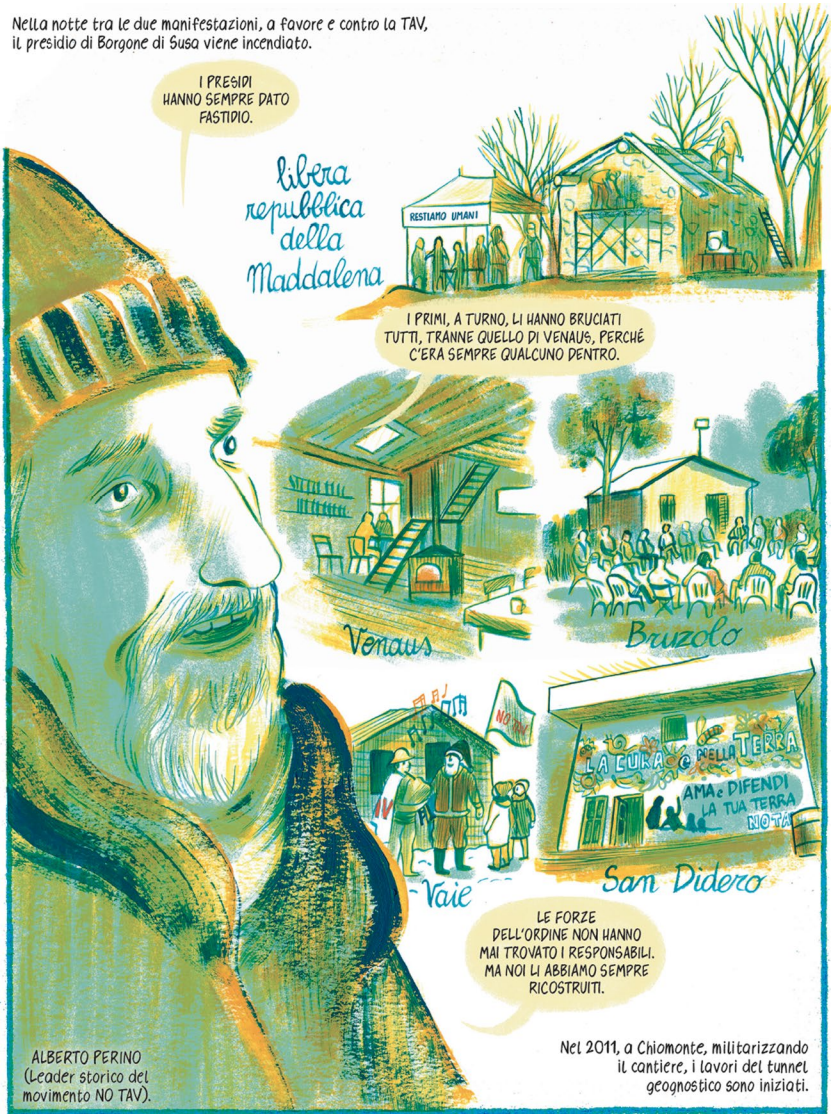

Fig. 8.10 Between Trains and Mountains, #1/2022, p. 58

Fig. 8.11 Furious Girls, #6/2023, p. 194

Another element of the *convergent gaze* can be found in "Furious Girls" (Benarrosh-Orsoni & Maupré, #6/2023), where the history of the #*me too* movement in Corsica is compellingly narrated (Fig. 8.11).

The same can be said of "Universal Language" (Simpere & Silki, #9/2024), where the issue of repression is analyzed as a common threat to plural instances of social unrest (Fig. 8.12).

In this way, the restriction of political agency for climate justice movements is framed as one piece of a bigger mosaic, where social struggles (i.e., the *Gilets Jaunes*), transfeminism, anti-racism (i.e., *Black Lives Matter*), pacifism and radical ecologism (i.e., *Les Soulèvements de la terre*) join forces into a process of political merging, as different voices unite in a common claim: expanding freedom. Significantly enough, in our view, the attempt to empower such voices has been carried out at GKN through the "Cultural Convergence" series of events, that is to say monthly seminars which, throughout 2022, were dedicated to all of the above-mentioned instances, including climate justice (September 2022).

Labor mobilizations play a pivotal role in the creation of such a multifarious terrain for alliance-building. In "A Gangmaster's Land" (Cruciata & Neri, #2/2022) what is at stake is the intersection between migrants' marginalization and exploitation in agriculture and processes of unionization, which would eventually bring about the first Sikh strike in Italy (Fig. 8.13).

Fig. 8.12 Universal Language, #9/2024, p. 129

While climate change is not directly assessed, ecological issues are raised with regard to illegal landfills of toxic waste. Moreover, precisely the summer of 2022 would see a significant expansion of the very notion of *climate strike*: not only a student form of struggle, but also the refusal to keep working in conditions of extreme heat, both in non-refrigerated factories and in fields such as those described in the story, in the Lazio region.

Finally, it is worth noting that in "Fashion's Slaves" (Gallina & Nincheri, #6/2023), the focus is once again on a labor dispute: this time, it is led by Pakistani workers in the textile sector of Prato (near Florence), to demand *8x5*, namely to work 8 hours for 5 days, rather than 70 hours with no day off (Fig. 8.14).

The story is particularly interesting, for our purposes, because it takes place in an area which is very close by the GKN occupied factory: for this reason, the solidarity between workers has been operative from the very beginning. Moreover, in May 2022 the campaign organized a "8x5" conference, which gave prominent space to climate justice precisely in

Fig. 8.13 A Gangmaster's Land, #2/2022, p. 49

connection with the GKN Workers' Collective and their ability to establish an alliance with the European socio-ecological movements.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis just outlined, it seems to us that the climate change narrative that emerges from the various issues of *La Revue Dessinée Italia* is particularly effective, for at least three reasons: (1) for the accuracy with which it illustrates causes, consequences, and solutions to climate change without allowing technicalities or more didactic approaches to prevail over the reader's capacity for involvement and autonomous construction of overall meaning; (2) for the balance that the *Revue* manages to maintain

Fig. 8.14 Fashion's Slaves, #6/2023, p. 90

between micro-histories and macro-histories of climate change, thus bringing the local level into dialogue with the global level, and alternating socially consensual viewpoints with more radical visions; (3) for the ability to narrate the connections between the environmental, economic, political, and social aspects of the climate crisis in an intersectional manner.

These outcomes, in our analysis, are attributable to intra- and extra-textual dynamics, in which *La Revue Dessiné Italia* is a participant, or a promoter. These dynamics concern, on the one hand, the *Revue* editors' desire to revamp, through graphic investigations, snack-news journalism, which is deemed incapable of thoroughly informing people and sustaining the very production of news by professionals: «with comics you can reach an audience that maybe is not used to reading newspapers, and I'm thinking of young people but not only. With comics you get there more easily and you interest them in issues that they otherwise would not deal with because they have distrust of information, mainstream media, etc. The whole current generation is growing up with the information that

circulates on social media, they are used then to absolute superficiality. And why do we get so many submissions from journalists? Because they no longer have outlets to do real information, as it used to be done, so we are one of the ways to...», the editor-in-chief tells us.

Indeed, the pluriautoriality and consequent variety of narrative and illustration styles that make up the *Revue*'s intersectional ecosystem makes the magazine a suitable tool for meeting audiences that are differentially positioned with respect to a topic as polarizing as climate change.

The challenge facing climate change communication, in fact, «is not to overturn people's values, but to diversify the social and cultural meaning of energy and climate change, so that the issue is 'owned' by people with a diverse range of values» (Corner & Clarke, 2016, p. 59). This is, of course, not only with respect to the narrative style, but also with respect to the graphic style of the illustrations, which, because of the inherent characteristics of comics as a medium and as an art form, «allows learners to have a first understanding, that stimulates curiosity, shows relations between topics, activates involvement, generates questions they didn't think of before and that facilitates memory retention» (Bertagni & Salvetti, 2015, p. 204).

The journalistic investigations conducted within *La Revue*, appear to be in dialogue with the flow of conterminous newsmaking—as evidenced by the thematization of COPs or extreme weather events that have affected Italy in recent years, which are the most covered topics in mainstream climate change news in Italy (Osservatorio di Pavia, 2024)—without wishing to set out in pursuit of the latter. Unlike mainstream news in Italy, however, the articles provided by *La Revue Dessinée Italia* thematize much more often the causes of climate change, not merely mentioning fossil fuels, but giving full names to the individual or collective actors who are identified as responsible. Moreover, while in mainstream news the subjects who take the floor on the climate crisis are more often representatives of the political institutional world and representatives of companies or the business world, in *La Revue* we find more often other sort of "experts", whether they are academic experts in different scientific disciplines, experts by experience, or ordinary people and social movements who have become knowledgeable in climate crisis mitigation and adaptation strategies because they have had to deal with its effects on the front lines.

Sheltered from the superficiality of the snack-news, the *Revue Dessinée Italia*'s inquiries seem to be able to arouse the interest of readers who are now more involved with the environmental aspects of climate change,

now with its more political implications. While it is clear that original inquiries appeal more to an Italian reader (by a trivial criterion of proximity) than those translated from the French *Revue Dessinée*—which account for almost half of the articles devoted to this issue—it is also true that knowing what kind of mobilizations or solutions are being put in place in the European context, creates a reinforcing circuit with respect to the effectiveness of certain struggles or policies, just as it allows transnational networks of climate obstructionism to be highlighted.

While we can see, in the landscape of information in Italy regarding climate change, a gradual increase in recent years of advertisements from companies classified as polluting (fossil fuel companies, automotive companies, cruise companies, and airlines) (Osservatorio di Pavia, 2024), it is precisely in a context of erosion of independent spaces disconnected from large proprietary interests that, according to Stramboulis (2017), graphic journalism is developing in Italy, an element that is also emphasized by the editor-in-chief of the *Revue Dessinée Italia* during the interview: «things like the ENI case are issues that no one can talk about in Italy because these companies sponsor all the events and block everything. We can talk about it because nobody can tell us anything. Not having advertisement serves this purpose, to have no limits to the issues we can address».[21]

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CHAPTER 9

Comics as a Lens for Urban Research? Challenges and Potential of a Representational and Analytical Tool

Adriano Cancellieri

Introduction

In recent years, comics have received considerable attention in academia as a versatile medium that bridges artistic and scholarly endeavours. The cultural legitimation of what has been dubbed the 'ninth art' has grown exponentially. This newfound legitimacy has spurred a proliferation of graphic works in disciplines such as anthropology (Ingold, 2011; Causey, 2017), graphic medicine (Czerwiec et al., 2015), and sociology (Nocerino, 2016). Collectively, these diverse experiences are shaping a plural field of emerging practices consisting of new publishing series (such as *ethnoGRAPHIC* and *Sociorama*), conferences and seminars, and special issues in existing academic journals (Whitson & Salter, 2015; Barberis & Grüning, 2021). Within this interdisciplinary wave, urban studies in

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comics remains an underexplored but promising frontier. Urban studies have long struggled to represent the complexity of social phenomena embedded in spatial and temporal contexts. Comics, with their unique ability to blend text and visuals, offer a compelling medium for addressing these challenges.

Few academic comics have focused directly on urban issues. Two notable exceptions that analyse the relationship between comics and the urban environment are Dominic Davies' *Urban Comics: Infrastructure and the Global City in Contemporary Graphic Narratives* (2019) and Benjamin Fraser's *Visible Cities, Global Comics: Urban Images and Spatial Form* (2019). Dominic Davies focused on contemporary graphic narratives set in many 'global cities', such as Cairo, Cape Town, Delhi, and Beirut. These works repeatedly depicted spatial discrimination and violence—social and spatial injustices—while also offering models of cultural and political resistance and proposing alternative ways of inhabiting urban space. Davies showed how urban spaces are not static, banal, or depoliticized, but highly charged material spaces that enable some forms of social life and prohibit others.

Fraser explored the representation of the city in a series of comics from around the world. Rather than an academic reflection on the scholarly use of comics, this work offered an academic analysis of *traditional* comics that can nonetheless have a strong impact on academic production. The selected works included a variety of international, alternative and independent small-press comics, from engravings and early comics to single-panel works, graphic novels, manga and collectible cards, by artists such as Will Eisner, Tsutomu Nihei, Hariton Pushwagner, Julie Doucet, Frans Masereel, and Chris Ware. The themes addressed in these works are typical of urban sociology and urban studies more broadly, such as activism, alienation, consumerism, flânerie, and gentrification, with a consistent focus on urban contexts.

In recent years some comics have emerged within the field of urban studies. A notable example is the comic anthology *Quartieri: Viaggio al centro delle periferie italiane* (Neighbourhoods: A Journey to the Centre of Italian Suburbs), co-created and edited by myself and geographer Giada Peterle (Cancellieri & Peterle, 2019), who also illustrated one of the book's five stories. This collaborative project, involving five research groups and five Italian cartoonists, aims to analyse and represent five Italian neighbourhoods affected by territorial stigmatization. The idea of *Quartieri* was to test comics as a tool to promote the wider dissemination

of years of research on five stigmatized areas, to contribute to the construction of *counter-scripts* (Wacquant et al., 2014) and thus to counter the negative symbolic capital associated with these places. Another significant work is *The King of Bangkok* by Claudio Sopranzetti et al. (2021). Based on Sopranzetti's decade-long ethnographic research, the graphic novel traces Bangkok's evolution through the life of Nok, a retired taxi driver. The work interweaves personal stories with broader historical events, offering a possible portrayal of Thailand's capital from the 1950s to the present day. Through its illustrations and layered storytelling, the book addresses crucial urban themes such as rural-urban migration, informal economies, political upheavals, and the impact of rapid urbanization on individual lives.

Finally, a more recent noteworthy experience is represented by the *Quartieri* series published by BeccoGiallo. This collection includes works such as *La Linea dell'Orizzonte* (Della Puppa et al. 2021), *La Città di Cap* (Iovine & Maccariello, 2022), *I Disconosciuti* (Della Puppa et al., 2024), and *Il Muro di Via Anelli* (Zamboni & De Marchi, 2024). These works aim to leverage the comic medium to enhance public understanding of complex urban issues, including migration, segregation, and modern labour exploitation. By combining visual narratives with rigorous academic and journalistic investigation, the *Quartieri* series offers fresh perspectives on urban dynamics and social challenges in different Italian cities.

If we extend our view to the wider field of so-called graphic novels, there are numerous contributions that can be considered significant for urban studies. Fraser (2019) notes that comics emerged parallel to, and in many ways intertwined with, the development of modern urban mass societies in the early twentieth century. The graphic novel was born precisely to tell the stories and transformations of New York City, as seen in classic works by Will Eisner such as *Dropsie Avenue* (Eisner, 1995), which skilfully analyses the transformation of an imaginary neighbourhood of the Big Apple through alternating cycles of migration, development, ethnic conflict, and struggles for integration. Eisner's meticulous depictions of urban landscapes capture the cycles of immigration, gentrification, and social conflict that shape urban spaces. His work illustrates how material and symbolic dimensions intertwine to create a *memoryscape* that bears witness to historical change. More recently, Seth Tobocman's *War in the Neighbourhood* (1999) offers a partly autobiographical graphic novel set in the Lower East Side that explores urban issues such as gentrification, poverty and police brutality, as well as community activism.

Building on these foundational examples, this essay explores the ways in which comics can function as representational and analytical tools for urban sociology. Drawing primarily on a selection of graphic novels that, over the last few decades, have brought to light the unique potential of comics for urban research. In the first section, called *Spaces of Everyday Life*, the essay examines how comics' combination of text and visuals allows for rich representations of the multisensory, material dimensions of everyday urban experiences. Works like Will Eisner's *Dropsie Avenue* and Jimenez Lai's *Citizen of No Place* (2012) are analysed to show comics' capacity for grounding the reader's gaze in the lived realities of city spaces. The next section, *Different Temporalities*, then explores how the comic book page enables the juxtaposition of multiple temporal frames, making comics well-suited for analysing the interaction between historical processes, everyday practices, and urban materialities. Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014) and Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012) are highlighted as examples. The section *Top-Down and Bottom-Up* examines how comics can depict the duality of urban spaces by interweaving personal narratives with broader structural forces. Works like Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1996) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) reveal this intersection of subjective experiences and socio-political realities. The *Researcher's Reflexivity* section discusses how the framed, sequential structure of comics encourages researchers to be self-reflexive about the partiality and constructed nature of their observations, as seen in the works of some of the most important graphic journalists such as Joe Sacco and Guy Delisle. Finally, the *Limits and Challenges* section focuses on the risk of romanticizing and oversimplifying the use of comics in urban research, highlighting some key issues such that need to be addressed if comics are to realize their full potential as an urban research methodology.

Spaces of Everyday Life

Comics are fully in line with the new wave of creative methodologies (Gauntlett, 2007) or art-based (Leavy, 2018), characterized by new interdisciplinary research practices, particularly suited to exploring the sensory and material aspects of everyday life. However, if comics share the centrality of visual elements with other narrative and artistic modes of inquiry, from drawing to video (Kara, 2015), it is perhaps the medium that best combines images and words (Dittmer, 2010). Indeed, the peculiarity of comics is that they are dual, i.e. they construct meaning by placing textual

and visual elements in tension. This is a dialectic that can produce the most varied combinations, as McCloud (1993a) masterfully points out: from word-specific comics, in which the images illustrate the text but do not add any particular meaning to it, to those in which words and images generate essentially the same message, to works in which the tension between words and images is more generative and has greater representational power because these two elements "behave like dance partners, each leading the other" (ibid., p. 156, p. 5).

In this way, comics, with their structure that simultaneously brings together visual and textual elements, to which must be added a whole set of communicative conventions capable of indicating flavours, smells and sounds, seem particularly suited to recreating the three-dimensionality and multisensoriality of experience in everyday life (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010). As Nocerino (2016) reminds us, their language urges us to pay attention to the material dimension of the field studied, to make explicit and provide very rich information about places, objects, the relationship between actors and spaces/environments, bodies and the expression of emotions, all dimensions that are more difficult to represent in the textual form of a social analysis. This can be seen in Eisner's magnificent works on urban infrastructure, particularly *Dropsie Avenue*, which tells the story of the transformation of a fictional New York neighbourhood. Through comics, Eisner explores the cycles of urban development: from mass immigration to ethnic conflict, from the struggle for integration to gentrification. Each panel is a window into the social dynamics that shape the city, and each character represents an archetype of the different social groups that succeed each other in the same area. The strength of *Dropsie Avenue* lies in its ability to illustrate complex issues such as social stratification, institutionalized racism and the power dynamics that determine the use of urban space. Eisner succeeds in highlighting the concept of 'urban memory', showing how historical events and collective experiences leave indelible traces in the physical and social fabric of the city. Eisner's artistic style, characterized by expressive black and white and an almost manic attention to architectural detail, reinforces the narrative, creating a tangible and vivid environment. Each page is constructed with almost documentary precision, but is also imbued with a strong sense of emotion, making reading an immersive and reflective experience.

Another example of this is Jimenez Lai's *Citizen of No Place* a collection of ten short stories. One of the central themes of this work is the crisis of identity in an era of increasing mobility and change. In this graphic novel,

Lai explores how people navigate their experiences in spaces that often do not offer a sense of belonging. His work invites reflection on urban policy and the importance of designing spaces that promote inclusion and community. Through his visual approach, Lai is able to convey the complexity of human experience in urban contexts. His images are rich in detail and vibrant colours, creating an immersive atmosphere that captures the reader's attention. Each page is carefully designed, both in architectural and narrative context.

Both are examples of how comics can force us to keep our gaze grounded in order to understand how different phenomena are concretely experienced by subjects in the spatio-temporal situations and contexts of everyday life (Loon, 2017). It is therefore not surprising that research on comics has grown more rapidly in fields such as anthropology and qualitative sociology, where the use of ethnographic methods is particularly relevant. As Pierre Nocerino (2016) points out when talking about *ethnographies dessinées*, these techniques require immersion in a particular social world.

This does not mean that the comic medium is automatically or inherently equipped to fully immerse the reader in the everyday social worlds of the social actors it depicts, nor does it guarantee or facilitate a comprehensive analysis of how these actors engage with, navigate, or interact within physical and social spaces. The act of using comics in academic or sociological work is not deterministic in any sense; instead, it is a dynamic, contingent, and often experimental process shaped by the collaboration of individuals and actors who come from vastly different and sometimes conflicting social, professional, and cultural fields. These actors may include researchers rooted in the world of academic scholarship, creators and illustrators operating in the comic art industry, and professionals from publishing or editorial domains. Each of these contributors brings with them distinct sets of challenges, priorities, norms, methods, working conditions, pressures, and systems of evaluation, legitimation, and constraints, all of which influence the final product in significant ways (Alam & Bué, 2024). Furthermore, the medium of comics itself is highly diverse and flexible: there are numerous styles, genres, and approaches to writing and illustrating comics, just as there exist myriad methods, traditions, and stylistic variations for writing non-comic texts, including academic works. Consequently, the practice of sociological storytelling through comics also displays a wide range of styles, methods, and tones, reflecting the diversity of sociological perspectives and theories. Moreover, the process of

combining the evaluative and aesthetic criteria specific to the medium of comics with those of sociology is anything but straightforward; it opens up a variety of creative pathways and challenges that require balancing artistic and analytical priorities, finding ways to harmonize narrative clarity, visual storytelling, and sociological rigour.

Different Temporalities

Comics are not only important tools for representing the richness of spatial and material contexts of social actors, but they also offer a unique medium for examining the intricate interplay between space and time—an essential focus for urban studies. As Kuttner et al. (2018, p. 401) highlight, "the comics page is a unique place where time and space are blurred, where multiple temporal frames and places can coexist". Through the dialectical relationship between simultaneity (the here and now of a single panel) and narrative sequence (Dittmer, 2010; Kuttner et al., 2021), comics provide a framework that encourages us to analyse, represent, and connect different temporal and spatial scales (Hamdy & Nye, 2017). This capacity to collapse and layer temporalities within spatial forms makes comics particularly valuable for urban research, where understanding the interaction between historical processes, everyday practices, and the materiality of space is crucial.

Richard McGuire's graphic novel *Here* serves as a powerful demonstration of how comics can act as an innovative and effective medium for urban studies, particularly in representing the interplay between space, time, and history. The narrative unfolds through a series of two-tiered pages, all depicting the same room from the same fixed perspective. However, while the spatial setting remains constant, the temporal dimensions shift dramatically, spanning from 500 million years in the past to a distant, speculative future. McGuire's visual strategy—using inset panels to depict different moments within the same space—effectively juxtaposes multiple temporalities. Actions, events, and traces of human (or non-human) presence that are separated by decades, centuries, or millennia are brought together on a single page. This fragmented yet cohesive approach transforms the room into a palimpsest of temporal layers, illustrating how a single space can bear witness to natural evolution, human activity, and historical transformation. Through its spatialized depiction of time, *Here* challenges the linearity of traditional narratives and instead reveals time as interconnected, simultaneous, and recursive. Such an approach resonates

strongly with urban studies, where the interplay of spatial and temporal dimensions is central to understanding how history, action, and space interact to shape urban environments.

Chris Ware's *Building Stories* similarly underscores the relevance of comics for urban research by engaging with multiple temporalities and focusing on the complexities of urban life. Set within a single Chicago apartment building, Ware's graphic novel explores the fragmented and layered experiences of the residents, highlighting how urban spaces are containers of individual and collective histories. The building serves both as a physical structure and a symbolic node through which different temporalities intersect, reflecting the dynamism and simultaneity of urban processes. Ware's refusal of a singular perspective or temporality mirrors the non-linear rhythms of urban life, where memories, desires, and struggles coexist within shared spaces. What distinguishes *Building Stories* is its unconventional format: a collection of booklets, pamphlets, and posters that can be read in any order. This physical fragmentation mirrors the disjointed, episodic nature of urban experience, while also granting readers agency to assemble the narrative as they choose. In this way, Ware captures the essence of urban temporalities—fluid, fragmented, and resonant across time and space—making his work a valuable reference for urban scholars seeking to understand the dynamic interactions between people, places, and histories.

Both *Here* and *Building Stories* demonstrate how comics can enrich urban studies by offering an interesting tool for the simultaneous representation of space and time. Unlike other media, comics have the capacity to depict temporal layers visually and spatially on a single page or across multiple frames. This allows for the exploration of subjective and social temporalities alongside objective time, creating a visual *time machine* that moves fluidly across different moments while remaining anchored to a single space (Berthaut et al., 2021; Venkatesan & Saji, 2016). By representing these temporal tensions, comics reveal how urban spaces are shaped by overlapping histories, memories, and lived experiences. As Bakhtin (1981, p. 84) argues, the chronotope enables time to become tangible and artistically visible, while space is infused with meaning and shaped by the dynamics of time, action, and history. This concept aligns closely with the demands of urban research, where, as Wacquant (2018) emphasizes, it is crucial to reintroduce history and territorialities into the

analysis of urban processes. Wacquant identifies the need to consider multiple temporalities simultaneously: from the *longue durée* of macro-social structures to the medium-term cycles of political and institutional change, and down to the phenomenological, short-term experiences of individuals on the ground (ibidem, pp. 62–63). Comics facilitate precisely this form of synchronic and diachronic analysis, offering urban scholars a visual method to integrate various temporal layers into a single spatial frame.

Top-Down and Bottom-Up: Between Structural Factors and Contextual Resources

The potential of comics in urban research lies in their ability to represent actors within their social, temporal, and spatial worlds, offering a tool that can help avoid both abstractionism and determinism. This enables the depiction of human action as (embodied) socially and politically situated practice (Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). Comics' dual language, consisting of both images and text, creates a space for tension between the two, allowing researchers to highlight ambiguities, uncertainties, and multiple perspectives. One of the key features of comics is their ability to adopt a multiscalar gaze, blending different levels of representation. This dynamic perspective allows for both a panoptic, holistic view and an intimate, on-the-ground perspective, with readers able to decide where to focus their gaze. This adjustable zoom lens allows comics to move seamlessly between the micro and the macro, the subjective and the structural. Several works demonstrate this potential and provide insightful examples of how comics can capture the complexity of urban environments.

Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1996) exemplifies how comics can visually depict the dual nature of urban spaces, particularly in environments marked by conflict and oppression. Set during the first intifada, *Palestine* documents Sacco's personal experiences in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, offering a deeply human perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sacco's art juxtaposes the dire conditions in Palestinian refugee camps, such as the Jabalia camp, with moments of everyday resilience and community life. The art reflects a cityscape where infrastructure is decaying—muddy streets, overflowing garbage bins, and makeshift housing—yet there are still vibrant social scenes, with children walking to school, bustling markets, and families finding ways to rebuild their lives amidst the ruins. This

juxtaposition of deprivation and creativity underscores the contradictory nature of urban environments, where hardship is coupled with human ingenuity and determination. *Palestine* also highlights the struggles and agency of individuals in a context where their everyday lives are shaped by broader political forces. Through comics, Sacco captures not only the immediate physical realities of the refugee camps but also the emotional and social dynamics of a population living under occupation. This use of visual storytelling to represent both micro-level experiences and macro-level political conditions illustrates how comics can offer an intimate yet comprehensive view of urban conflict zones.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) similarly uses comics to intertwine personal narrative with broader socio-political dynamics, but in the context of post-revolutionary Iran. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi reflects on her childhood and adolescence in Teheran during and after the Islamic Revolution, using simple yet evocative black-and-white illustrations to convey complex social and political issues. The city of Teheran in *Persepolis* is not just a passive setting but becomes an active character that shapes the experiences and identities of the people within it. Through her personal story, Satrapi illustrates how the urban environment becomes a site of tension between modernity and tradition, freedom and repression, particularly in the lives of women. The stark black-and-white art style emphasizes the contrasts between these forces, while also highlighting the personal impact of larger political changes. Satrapi's work captures the intersection of private and public lives, where personal identity is deeply intertwined with the socio-political forces of the time. By blending autobiography with social critique, *Persepolis* shows how comics can bridge the gap between individual experiences and structural forces, offering a nuanced view of urban life under authoritarian regimes. The city itself, with its shifting power dynamics, becomes a lens through which readers can better understand the tensions that shape personal and collective identities.

These examples show how comics can help to explore and represent the intersection between complex subjective experiences and broader socio-political realities (Carrier-Moisan, 2020). As Fall (2014, pp. 105–106) points out, comics can represent and emphasize the vulnerability of individuals, highlighting their agency and autonomy rather than simply portraying them as victims. Furthermore, comics move beyond merely acknowledging precariousness to providing a political foundation for critical indignation rooted in empathy, making them an effective means of addressing social issues within urban contexts.

The Researcher's Reflexivity

An important element of the comic language is its structure, which is characterized by a sequence of images enclosed by frames. This feature of comics grammar allows a clear understanding of how the narrative presupposes a positionality of staging and a crucial work of montage (Nocerino 2016). It is also because of this characteristic that some of the greatest cartoonists of so-called graphic journalism, such as Guy Delisle and Joe Sacco, have masterfully used comics to present not only the results of their reportage but also their fieldwork, consisting of interviews, observations, reflections, failed attempts, and doubts.

Joe Sacco, in particular, has revolutionized the field of comics journalism with his groundbreaking works such as *Palestine* (1996) and *Safe Area Goražde* (2000). Sacco's approach is deeply rooted in the traditions of investigative journalism and ethnographic research. In *Palestine* Sacco presents a nuanced portrayal of life in the occupied territories, interweaving personal narratives with historical context. His meticulous attention to detail, both in his drawings and in his reporting, creates a rich, multifaceted account of the conflict. Sacco's work is particularly notable for its self-reflexivity; he often includes himself in the panels, acknowledging his role as an observer and interpreter of events. This approach aligns closely with the ethnographic practice of reflexivity, where researchers critically examine their own positionality and its impact on their findings. Guy Delisle, on the other hand, offers a different perspective in his travelogue-style graphic novels such as *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* (2003) and *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City* (2012). Delisle's works are more personal and observational, often focusing on the everyday experiences of living in unfamiliar and sometimes politically charged environments. His style is characterized by a lighter, more humorous tone compared to Sacco's, but it is no less insightful. Delisle's comics excel at capturing the subtle cultural differences and social dynamics he encounters, offering readers a unique window into societies that are often misunderstood or misrepresented in mainstream media. His work demonstrates how comics can effectively communicate the nuances of cross-cultural experiences and the challenges of navigating unfamiliar social landscapes. Both Sacco and Delisle's works highlight how the comic form draws attention to the fact that research data is not given, but constructed, collected, and selected by researchers through situated and embodied points of observation (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007; Cefaï, 2010). Their comics

invite the reader to critically analyse what they see, acting as a kind of dialogic and open tool (Forde, 2022).

This reflexive work is significantly enhanced by the structure of comics, with its frames that traditionally delimit and separate situations, spaces, and times, which encourages the researcher to critically reflect on the inherent partiality and fragmentary nature of observation. Comics push the researcher to think carefully about their choices of framing, considering what is placed within the field and what lies beyond it, and to decide what should be included or excluded from the narrative. Additionally, the medium prompts reflection on which perspective to privilege, whether focusing on one character's point of view or offering a more collective representation (Nocerino, 2016). These structural decisions shape the way the researcher engages with and presents their findings.

In this context, the words of Forde (2022, p. 649) are particularly revealing, as she describes her experience with sequential art in research: "The comics I created forced me to reflect on my research and constantly make decisions about how to frame my observations. I had to ask myself: which dialogues and points of view should I present; how do my observations relate to each other; and how do I position images and words in a sequence that adequately represents my work?" Forde's reflection underscores how the comics format not only facilitates an ongoing dialogue between image and text but also encourages a continual process of critical self-reflection, shaping the researcher's methodological approach and allowing for a more nuanced and dynamic representation of their subject matter.

Limits and Challenges

Despite their creative and communicative potential, the use of comics in research contexts reveals significant limitations and challenges that researchers must carefully consider. Although comics can complement traditional academic texts, their potential as a primary research medium remains largely underexplored. This reluctance is partly due to misconceptions about the accessibility and effectiveness of the medium. While comics are often perceived as a simple, popular means of communication, they are far from universally accessible. As McCloud (1993b) explains, understanding comics requires specific interpretive skills, and their reliance on visual literacy means that comics are not inherently easy to read. This limits their broad applicability, as comic book readers often belong to a

cultural elite, which can exclude large sections of the population from fully engaging with comics-based research. This was particularly evident in France, where despite the broad popularity of comics, the *Sociorama* series—an ambitious collaboration between sociologists and cartoonists—was cancelled largely due to insufficient sales. Although there have been notable successes, such as Montaigne et al. (2013), most academic comics achieve only modest commercial results (Alam & Bué, 2024), illustrating the market constraints that hinder further development in the field.

Another major challenge is the economic and logistical cost of producing comics-based research. As Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (2022) notes, drawing is more time-consuming than writing. Creating even a single page of comics requires significant time and resources, especially when working with professional artists whose labour demands fair payment and recognition. This adds a financial strain on projects that depend on the collaboration between researchers and cartoonists. In many cases these projects rely on the unpaid or underpaid work of artists, reflecting a wider systemic issue within the academic comics sector. The weak market for academic comics limits publishers' willingness to invest in experimental projects, which in turn limits opportunities for sustainable development. As a result, the fragility of the comics market, particularly in terms of economic viability, becomes a pressing concern for researchers who wish to pursue this medium.

Comics also present methodological constraints that can affect their effectiveness in conveying complex urban research. One limitation is the inherent selectivity involved in choosing which aspects of research can be represented visually. Due to the high production costs associated with comics, there is often a need to focus on specific topics or narratives, leading to a reduction in the complexity of the original research. While this approach allows for a compelling and focused narrative, it risks oversimplifying the rich, multifaceted realities of the original research, potentially omitting important nuances and complicating factors.

Moreover, the transformation of research data into a narrative format raises significant methodological questions. The process often involves *emplotment*, where characters are constructed to represent sociologically significant traits. While this method can effectively communicate broader social phenomena, it carries the risk of reinforcing stereotypes. As Berthaut et al. (2021, p. 282) highlight, the 'reality effect' created by narrative comics can inadvertently turn ideal types into caricatures or archetypes. These challenges highlight the importance of clear and transparent

methodological practices in comics-based research. As Rabbiosi and Vanolo (2017, p. 272) argue, the creation of fictionalized vignettes must be grounded in a well-defined logic, with the balance between fictionalized and observed data explicitly addressed. Researchers must carefully navigate the tension between narrative accessibility and analytical rigour, ensuring that the simplifications inherent in the comic medium do not undermine the integrity of the research. Striking this balance is essential for maintaining the scholarly value of comics as a research tool.

Conclusion

This chapter has delved into the potential of comics as both a methodological and representational tool in urban research. By weaving together text and visuals, comics provide a multisensory medium that enables rich, grounded depictions of urban spaces and everyday life. This unique format offers researchers a powerful means of capturing the material and embodied realities of urban environments. In doing so, comics enrich the urban researcher's toolkit, allowing for innovative representations of the multifaceted nature of city life—integrating spatial, temporal, and experiential dimensions in ways that can be more accessible and deeply resonant.

A key strength of comics lies in their sequential structure, which facilitates the juxtaposition of multiple temporalities. This quality allows researchers to explore how historical processes, daily practices, and urban materialities intersect, evolve, and influence one another over time. Comics excel at portraying the complex layering of urban life, where past, present, and future coexist and interact. By combining words and images, the medium creates a dynamic tension that reflects the dualities of urban environments. Personal narratives and individual experiences are seamlessly interwoven with broader socio-political forces, enabling researchers to bridge micro and macro scales of analysis. This capacity to represent the intersection of subjective realities with systemic conditions is particularly valuable in urban research, where capturing the interplay of agency and structure is crucial. By doing so, comics not only give voice to underrepresented communities but also can allow to highlight the structural forces that shape their lived realities, fostering a deeper understanding of urban phenomena.

Moreover, the medium's inherent reflexivity makes it particularly well-suited for academic research. The framed and sequential nature of comics prompts researchers to critically engage with their own processes of data

construction and interpretation. By visually demarcating the boundaries of panels and sequences, comics make visible the decisions involved in framing, inclusion, and perspective. This explicit acknowledgement of the researcher's role aligns with ethnographic traditions that emphasize the importance of positionality, transparency, and critical self-awareness in the research process. As exemplified in the works of graphic journalists like Joe Sacco and Guy Delisle, comics can illuminate the contingencies, subjectivities, and embodied presence of the researcher, inviting readers to engage more critically and empathetically with the research.

Despite these strengths, the adoption of comics as a research tool is not without challenges. Issues of accessibility—both in terms of production costs and the visual literacy required to engage with comics—can limit the reach and impact of comics-based research. The time-intensive nature of comic production, coupled with the economic constraints of the comics market, poses significant barriers to wider adoption. Collaborative projects like the *Sociorama* series in France illustrate these difficulties, highlighting the precariousness of academic comics endeavours even when supported by ambitious efforts. These challenges underscore the need for institutional support and creative solutions to make comics a viable and sustainable methodology within urban research.

Another critical consideration is the inherent tension between narrative clarity and analytical depth. The process of translating complex urban research into the narrative form of comics inevitably involves selectivity and simplification. Researchers must carefully navigate these reductions to avoid undermining the rigour and nuance of their work. The risk of oversimplification, stereotyping, or reinforcing archetypes must be mitigated through meticulous methodological practices. Transparency about the relationship between fictionalized elements and empirical data is essential to ensure the integrity of comics-based research and to build trust with readers and participants alike.

As the field of comics-based research continues to develop, urban scholars must approach this medium with both critical awareness and a willingness to experiment. Rather than romanticizing comics as a universal solution or dismissing them as a mere novelty, researchers should recognize their unique affordances and limitations. Comics should be seen as a complementary tool within a broader methodological repertoire, capable of enhancing traditional approaches but not replacing them. Engaging with the medium requires urban scholars to adopt new forms of knowledge production and dissemination while maintaining rigorous standards of methodological transparency and analytical rigour.

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CHAPTER 10

Conclusion

Francesco Della Puppa and Veronica Moretti

The social genres of comics represent a novel epistemological and methodological configuration within the field of social sciences, one that goes beyond a mere medial shift and instead necessitates a redefinition of the boundaries of scientific knowledge, its form, its publics, and its purposes.

The convergence between visual narrative and scientific representation, between panel and theory, between drawing and method, opens an unprecedented space of hybridity and experimentation that challenges both canonical research paradigms and entrenched hierarchies between expert knowledge and lived experience (Della Puppa & Moretti, 2024; Grüning & Scavarda, 2025). Addressing the impact and innovation of comics within social sciences does not simply mean highlighting the medium's potential for dissemination or its role in making complex concepts more accessible. Rather, its impact and innovation lie in the comic's capacity to intervene in knowledge production processes, to redefine the

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coordinates of scientific subjectivity, and to expand the epistemic scope of social inquiry. Comics, thus, are not merely a communication medium, but a cognitive and political device that acts upon both the object and the subject of research (Della Puppa & Moretti, 2024; Moretti, 2023). What renders comics socially and scientifically innovative is their inherently relational, dialogical, and performative nature.

The combination of text and image, word and sign, allows for the articulation of multiple temporalities, enabling the simultaneous representation of structures and experiences, the interweaving of the micro and the macro, the individual and the collective, the emotional and the cognitive (Della Puppa & Moretti, 2024; Moretti & Della Puppa, 2025). This multidimensionality translates into a unique ability to represent complex social phenomena, wherein sensorial, affective, spatial, and symbolic dimensions intersect. The integration of comics into research and public dissemination processes thus enables a form of "epistemic translation" that makes those elements which traditional scientific language often struggles to capture visible, thinkable, and communicable.

Yet the innovation that comics introduce into social sciences is not limited to representation. It also transforms the practices of knowledge production (Moretti, 2023). Where comics are employed as co-creative tools, as in participatory or collaborative research settings, they allow for the redistribution of epistemic authority among researchers, social actors, and artists. In this way, comics operate as catalysts for the democratization of knowledge, helping to reduce asymmetries between observer and observed, between the writer and the written. From this perspective, social sciences open themselves to a new research ethics that privileges listening, empathy, reciprocity, and accountability toward the contexts and subjectivities involved. Thereby the question of impact—central to current research policy discourse—acquires a deeper and more radical meaning. Impact is no longer merely about metrics or audiences, but becomes a question of transforming social relations, fostering collective agency, and shaping forms of common life. In this regard, comics enable social sciences to articulate a public and political dimension that is not ancillary, but constitutive (Della Puppa, 2023).

The methodological innovation, introduced by comics, also prompts a redefinition of disciplinary codes. The introduction of drawing as a mode of scholarly writing necessitates a rethinking of categories such as authorship, validity, citation, peer review, and archiving. It exposes research to a form of vulnerability that is also openness, to an exposure that entails a

willingness to be read, contested, and questioned by plural publics. Scholarly comics challenge canonical formats of academic production, problematizing the linearity of discourse, disrupting textual sequentiality to open up a polyphony of voices, perspectives, and registers. In doing so, they contribute to the deconstruction of epistemic authoritarianism often associated with orthodox forms of scientific writing (Grüning & Scavarda, 2025). Thus, comics allow social sciences to interrogate their own language, truth claims, and epistemological assumptions (Alam & Bué, 2024). They introduce a principle of uncertainty that is also a principle of openness, of shared inquiry, of situated and contextual truths.

However, this does not imply a disengaged relativism, on the contrary: it demands greater rigor, greater attentiveness to the positionality of the researcher, to the relationships established through the research process, and to the responsibility owed to the subjects and contexts involved. From this perspective, comics are not merely a language, but a posture: a form of attention, relation, and presence. This posture positions the researcher not only as an analyst, but also as author, narrator, and witness. The impact of comics within the social sciences lies precisely in their capacity to disrupt established epistemic postures, to reconfigure perspectives, and to render visible what is often marginalized or erased—making the invisible visible and the unspeakable articulable. This transformation also carries significant pedagogical and formative implications. The introduction of comics in educational contexts within the social sciences enables the development of more inclusive learning forms, more attuned to diverse cognitive styles and more open to creativity (Grüning & Scavarda, 2025). Comics become a formative device capable of combining analytical rigor and imagination, theoretical reflection and lived experience. They promote an embodied knowledge that engages the body, emotions, and imagination, and is thus more capable of producing lasting transformations in ways of thinking and acting.

At the same time, the use of comics in educational contexts raises crucial questions about the evaluation of knowledge, the hierarchy of languages, and the epistemic legitimacy of the image. In this sense, comics are also a space of conflict, a site of tension where symbolic struggles for the recognition and valorization of alternative forms of knowledge are played out. Therefore, to speak of the innovation of comics within social sciences is also to acknowledge their critical potential, their capacity to disarticulate the power structures that govern the production and circulation of knowledge. As a popular and accessible language, rooted in

material culture, comics unsettle the rhetorics of objectivity and neutrality, restoring to knowledge its situated, embodied, and political dimensions. Far from being a mere medium, comics emerge as a true social genre: an expressive form that conveys, structures, and transforms social relations.

As a social genre, comics do not merely represent the social, but actively produce, stage, and problematize it. Hence their capacity to innovate social sciences not only in terms of content or methodology but above all in terms of purpose: to conduct research not only to describe or explain the world but to transform it. In conclusion, we tried not merely to offer a thematic or applied exploration, but rather issue an invitation to radically rethink the relationship between science and narrative, between knowledge and society, between representation and transformation. Comics, as a social genre, constitute a bridge between worlds, a laboratory for methodological experimentation, and a critical tool for reimagining the social sciences in their public, democratic, and transformative function (Cohn, 2013). Impact and innovation are not just keywords: they are trajectories, processes, and openings that we have sought to map, demonstrating how comics can become at vital, accessible, and radical forms of social knowledge.

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