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The Social Genres of Comics

Impact and Innovation of Comics in Social Sciences

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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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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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