Comics and the democratization of knowledge
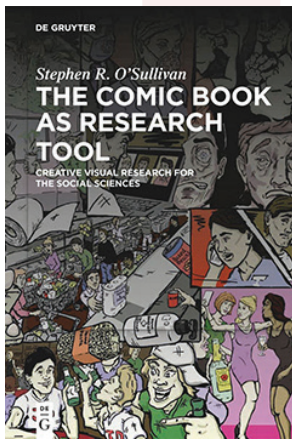
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Stephen R. O'Sullivan

The Comic Book as Research Tool: Creative Visual Research for the Social Sciences

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Since Umberto Eco's (1964) ground-breaking study *Apocalittici e Integrati*, which first presented comics as a medium worthy of academic attention, research on comics has slowly but steadily increased in different areas. In the field of semiotics, several studies unpacked the meaning-making processes and communicative potential of comics (see Barbieri 2017, Groensteen 2007, Floch 2002, among others). The publication of Scott McCloud's (1993) *Understanding Comics* also paved the way for a new application of the comic medium, which is considered a research topic and a legitimate academic platform through which knowledge is produced and disseminated. Although the comic book format has also been employed by other researchers (e.g., Cabero et al. 2021) in the wake of McCloud's seminal work, research through comics is still underutilized and underinvestigated in academia.

In this context, Stephen O'Sullivan's *The Comic Book as Research Tool* (2023) represents an invaluable addition to the debate on the potentially innovative and interdisciplinary use of comic books to conduct and present academic research. The author contends that integrating visual and verbal elements enables the creation of rich and compelling multimodal narratives that can enhance knowledge dissemination and engage a broad, diverse audience. In this respect,

one of the focal arguments of O'Sullivan's book is the democratization of knowledge. Throughout the volume, the author describes how the comic medium can effectively increase the accessibility of scholarly research even to non-specialists since complex concepts can be broken down into more easily digestible, creative, and visually stimulating storytelling.

Following an introduction that outlines the scope and contents of the volume, O'Sullivan's study is structured into ten chapters. Chapters 1-4 provide the theoretical background of the research. Chapter 1 delves into visual culture and media studies by focusing on the impact of communication technology on culture, society, and human behavior. To do so, O'Sullivan grounds his reflection on the so-called "socio-cultural media spiral" (p. 7), which summarizes four fluid stages of media progression and the corresponding impact on a socio-cultural level: artistic narrative (i.e., prehistoric and pre-printing press creative art), modern order (i.e., the changes brought by printing press invention), illusion of life (i.e., the advent of photography, radio, cinema, and television), and digital claustrum (i.e., the advent of the Internet and AI technology). O'Sullivan maintains that "human intelligence and creativity are moving towards passive dimensions" and digital media fostered "societal apathy" and "passive indifference" (p. 21).

In front of a "crisis of creativity" (ibid.), the author advocates a significant involvement in visual narrative tasks and devotes Chapter 2 to a discussion of a "creative visual research agenda" (p. 29). The chapter opens with an overview of visual research areas, methodologies, and tools, especially in relation to social sciences and ethnography. O'Sullivan advocates a more art-based approach to research and the creation of alternative scientific narratives aimed at the methodological revitalization and democratization of knowledge production. In this context, the comic book is introduced as a powerful means to achieve such goals, being a "vivid, emotive, democratic, collaborative, and imaginative narrative tool" (p. 54).

Chapter 3 is dedicated to exploring the comic medium from a historical perspective, from the early antecedents of illustrated narratives to contemporary graphic novels. The chapter summarizes the salient stages of the evolution of comic forms, contents, and industry, including references to cartoonists, events, and works that shaped this medium. As the author himself recognizes, the chapter is centered on the Anglo-American comics tradition, and little is said about other comics schools. Still, the aim of the volume is not to offer an all-encompassing history of the comic medium from a global perspective but rather to corroborate the thesis that this medium can engage a broad and diverse audience and "foster an imaginative agency" (p. 81) by challenging the primacy of word and linear thinking.

This point is further developed in Chapter 4, where the anatomy of comics is investigated in semiotic terms with the support of theories from comics scholars such as Barbieri (1991), McCloud (1993), Groensteen (2007), Cohn (2013), and Zanettin (2015).

The chapter discusses the specificities of the 'language' of comics (mechanisms such as frames, panels, braiding, and splash pages) and how meaning-making processes depend on word-image interactions. In so doing, O'Sullivan anchors the discussion to studies on multimodality, which de facto is the field of inquiry that prompted a novel interest in comics research in recent years (see, for example, Dunst et al. 2019) as well as the shift of paradigms from the primacy of word to the idea of communication as an interplay between multiple socially constructed semiotic resources (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2020[1996], among others).

Chapters 5-9 shift from theory to practice and show how the specificities of the comic medium can serve the purposes of O'Sullivan's creative agenda. Chapter 5 focuses on research design and data generation, thus challenging the "rigidness of academic writing" (p. 94). The chapter lists a set of exercises for researchers tailored to stimulate their creative abilities. Exercises progress in complexity (from drawing creative shapes to collage and decoupage; from seen to unseen narratives) as well as in the level of narrative research engagement, including group reflection and participatory knowledge production. The process of producing a research narrative is equated to that of creating a comic book.

Chapter 6 discusses how the comic book structure can assist the process of creative inference, particularly data management, manipulation, and interpretation. It details the steps of creating analytical comics that integrate traditional inductive and deductive methods. While this chapter explains how comics can aid the 'coming to know' phase of research, Chapter 7 offers a practical analysis of comics as knowledge representation and dissemination tools. O'Sullivan explains how comics can make social science research resonate with a broader audience by overcoming the crisis of traditional communications of science. To do so, he details the step-by-step procedure that led to the creation of his original ethnographic comic book *Toxic Play* (see Appendix 1 of the book), based on data gathered from his fieldwork on the professional beer pong community.

Chapter 8 discusses another original work by the author, *10 Business Days* (see Appendix 2 of the book), as a case study on comics as a method. This approach aligns with visual anthropology and ethnography. While *Toxic Play* is an example of support for data representation, *10 Business Days* is the outcome of a study on the COVID-19 experience designed as a comic book since the beginning. The flexibility and adaptability of the comic format enabled the integration between traditional scientific approaches to data analysis and novel emotionally invested narratives to account for the changes brought on a societal level by the pandemic.

Chapter 9 explores comic books as a means of knowledge transfer in interdisciplinary research. It stems from a theoretical reflection on the translation turn in social science, including processes such as transmutation, transmediation, and intersemiotic translation. The tools and exercises O'Sullivan introduced in Chapters 6-8 are

employed here to create multi-representational knowledge translations to engender different "shapes of knowledge" (p. 175) according to the diverse composition of the audience and contexts. Humor and satire are also introduced as contemporary forms of public intellectual translations of knowledge about complex social and cultural practices into more accessible forms. The role of the public as semiotic investigator and co-creator of meanings is also considered, thus paving the way for the final discussion on the liberation of knowledge and creative knowledge translation, developed in Chapter 10. The idea of using the comic book medium to create alternative shapes of knowledge is a response to the aforementioned passivity of the digital world, the crisis of creativity in academia, the rigidity of traditional knowledge production and dissemination methods, and the fracture between the self-enclosed academic sphere and the public audiences.

O'Sullivan's argument for including comics in academic research is persuasive and well-supported, drawing on a wide range of theoretical studies, personal experiences, and practical case studies. The reasons why the comic book format is deemed the ideal tool to achieve these goals are clearly stated in the book. However, such advocacy may be perceived as somewhat idealistic since potential limitations and criticalities of creating research comics are often overlooked in favor of a thorough discussion of successful examples and applications. Rather than a limit, the critical examination of the challenges of research *through* comics may represent a future area of investigation that encompasses, for instance, how to overcome the risk of over-simplification, the potential biases introduced by the visual mode or by the comic medium in general, and the need for collaborations, novel platforms, and resources to create and disseminate research comics.

Overall, O'Sullivan's book is compelling and thought-provoking. It challenges traditional notions of academic publishing and research communication, rekindling a much-needed debate on the potential for reviving academia. It opens new possibilities for researchers, practitioners, and educators looking for innovative methods to research social sciences and engage with wider audiences.

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