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The Social, Political, and Ideological Semiotics of Comics and Cartoons

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Stephan Packard and Lukas R.A. Wilde

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What more can semiotics do for comics?

Looking at their social, political, and ideological significations

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BY: **Stephan Packard** and **Lukas R.A. Wilde**, Guest Editors

ABSTRACT

As early as the 1960s and through to the first decades of the 21st century, comics studies have attracted a large and perhaps disproportionate amount of attention from analytical semiotic approaches that foreground description and theory building. Many of them, culminating in McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993), have been accused of treating their subject with arbitrary abstraction and an overload of theory, and of engaging in a semiotic metaphysics that posits the reality of the sign apart from the social reality of each reading. But such opposition of content-oriented criticism and formally abstract semiotics, the accusation of *social myopia*, does not hold under closer inspection. This introduction to the present Punctum special issue on *The Social, Political, and Ideological Semiotics of Comics and Cartoons* traces some of the overlooked and often oversimplified concerns within semiotic traditions to comic book scholarship that can and often did investigate the historical setting of each sign used in comics in various ways. From this point of view, the social condition of communication is always already in its signs.

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There has been a time when studying comics seemed to be almost synonymous with studying their semiotic structure. As early as the 1960s – spearheaded by “two figures [...] of primordial importance to the rise of comics as a subject fit for academic study: Umberto Eco and Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle” (Meesters 2017:100) – and through to the first decades of the 21st century,

comics studies have attracted a large and perhaps disproportionate amount of attention from analytical semiotic approaches that foreground description and theory building: Their combination of pictorial and scriptural resources offered a challenge to any attempt towards a systematic theory of signs, and their experimental treatment of their semiotic inventory as well as the genres, imageries, narrative structures, and conventions of other media and art forms invited descriptive scrutiny as well as playful engagement.

That approach took a more or less explicit departure from at least two older writing styles about looking at comic books, those arising from cultural criticism and those appearing in artistic instruction (cf. Woo 2020). Neither of these amounted to a systematic or encompassing study of comics, but for different reasons. As for the former, semiotics allowed research to turn away from the condemnation of comics prevalent in pedagogical and sociological as well as more deeply engaged culturally critical appraisals of the form. Frederic Wertham's infamous *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) had convinced if not a comic-reading public, then at least a comic-fearing US Congress that there was something about the *funnies*, especially in those prevalent genres that depicted crime, horror, and homosocial relationships, that would indoctrinate youths and influence them towards the associated vices of larceny, violence, and homosexuality. The comics industry re-invented itself as a safe space for innocents by operating a self-muzzling Comics Code that recommended avoiding these and other adult topics so as not to mistreat them, thus rendering the ideal of the uninfluenced child as one supposedly, preciously, and unrealistically, unaware of most social, political, and ideological issues.

One might be tempted to read the later attention towards a theory of signs in comics partly as driven by a wish to embrace the art form while ignoring those struggles over the content. For example, Fresnault-Deruelle's series of seminal texts (e.g., *La bande dessinée, essai d'analyse sémiotique*, 1972, or *Récits et discours par la bande dessinée*, 1977) was undoubtedly profoundly embedded in a tradition of strictly formalist structural semiotics (cf. Wildfeuer and Bateman 2016) largely unconcerned with 'social contexts.' In the anglophone world, Scott McCloud's famous *Understanding Comics* (1993) has been hailed and criticized for its essentially semiotic approach, which it imparted to a large portion of the modern comics studies to which it had helped give rise. For McCloud, the attempt to formalize an understanding of comics purely as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1993:9) explicitly pours out topics such as writers, artists, trends, genres, styles, subject matters, and themes, declaring: "the trick is never to never mistake the message for the messenger!" (6). This bold stance is itself, however, pictorially juxtaposed to a view of the history of the art form that is as vast as it is fast – in a few pages, McCloud covers stone age cave drawings, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Roman frieze, and medieval tapestries, all brought together against their topical heterogeneity through that semiotic abstraction, bordering on

the ideal. In as much as the historical expansion of the Ninth Art goes along with its apology as more than the mere messenger of popular and funny entertainment born in the restricted mass media setting of 1890s New York newspapers, the abstraction might itself take on some of that apologetic tone. By being less about its established subject matters and genres, comics might be more than had initially met the eye.

Such an apology is, of course, not McCloud's intention (even though his comic's avatar does literally choke on the assorted contents vacated from the studied purity of the art form, Figure 1). But his semiological turn might have, despite himself, become innocently seductive towards scholars unwilling to engage yet again with the



Figure 1. Scott McCloud Chokes on Content. *Understanding Comics* (1993:6)

condemnation of a cultural establishment and their established academic peers. This is undoubtedly the context in which a generation earlier, Umberto Eco's continental and fundamentally structuralist treatment of "Il Mito di Superman," and similar engagements with *Steve Canyon* and the *Peanuts*, were collected in his volume *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964). The opposition of cultural critics warning of the barbarian apocalypse and acquiescent ideologues willingly integrating themselves into existing power hierarchies framed this semiotic approach and its emphatic interest in the structures of plot, the semantics of political content, and the modern mythology of the comics, as a detailed close reading that promised a way out from the intellectual aporia of loving the comics while finding so many reasons to hate them.

But such opposition of content-oriented criticism and formally abstract semiotics does not hold under closer inspection. The second extant tradition of comics scholarship was in the self-descriptions of artists and studios instructing newcomers and enlightening audiences with reflections upon their devices (cf. Wirag 2016, Jenkins 2017). And these were, if more or less explicitly, necessarily fundamentally semiotic themselves. The much more practice-based work of Will Eisner (*Comics & sequential Art*, 1985), on which McCloud essentially builds, focuses on describing formal semiotic and semantic relationships. Ten years later, Thierry Groensteen's *Système de la bande dessinée* (1999) elaborated a semiological approach to the 'iconic solidarity' of images on the page that found the art of comics, in parallel to the literariness or poeticity of poetry as described by the formalists, to be fundamental to the very cohesion of images collocated on the page and across the many pages of a BD album (cf. Miller 2017).

Vice versa, for all its ideological faults, Wertham's reading of comic books was one of the first published treatises to engage with somewhat detailed semiotic descriptions of what could be found on the page. Creating his own version of the metaphor of 'close reading,' Wertham employs an ambivalent idea of *myopism* in his marriage of close attention to and abject judgment of comic art. On the one hand, he finds that parents who find nothing objectionable in comics cannot see them correctly: "[s]uch arguments are so superficial, and so evidently special pleading, that the only thing worth noting about them is that so many adults are naive enough to give them credence" (1954:86). Comics' proper readers discover more on the page than these short-sighted adults: "the parents, teachers, and doctors who asked discussion questions spoke of comic books as if they were fairy tales or stories of folklore. Children, however, do know what comic books are. [... A]dults are more readily deceived than children" (18). Wertham joins the children with whom he works and talks to them about the comics as they read them with him at their side. He is thus brought to the first inventory of stylistic and signifying elements, listing color schemes, types of bodily depiction and pose, panel sizes and structures, and relational page layouts.

But while this closer look avoids being deceived as adults would, it merely restages a different kind of gaze led astray, for those same children are regularly described by Wertham as blinded or blindfolded, unseeing, or unable to clearly distinguish what they see. In one emphatic case study, Wertham discusses 13-year-old Willie, from whom Wertham learns a lot about how to read comics: “He had difficulty with his eyes and had to wear glasses which needed changing. According to his aunt, he had occasionally suffered from sleepwalking which started when he was six or seven. [...] Willie was always a rabid comic-book reader” (7-8). There is an interesting diagnosis not just of comics but of their semiotic study in this contradiction. From this point of view, the semiotic approach recreates one kind of myopism as it avoids another. The antithesis makes sense from a place of semiological suspicion: Whoever reads comics best gives them the greatest power to disrupt and pervert. Whoever fails to understand their signs misses their dangerous content. Wertham’s way out of the conundrum lies in situating the close attention to the page with equal attention to its social, political, and ideological position: “It is necessary to analyze the comic books themselves, the children in relation to them and the social conditions under which these children live” (50-51).

Rid of its ideological short-sightedness, such a three-fold tension between semiotic naiveté, successfully blinding semiosis, and socially embedded sign processes might yet prove key to a proper understanding of the critical power of semiotic comics scholarship. The plethora of early international contributions to the semiotic study of comics, including Ulrich Krafft’s *Comics lesen* (1978), Ursula Oomen’s *Wort - Bild - Nachricht* (1975), Daniele Barbieri’s *Il linguaggio del fumetto* (1990), and Anne Magnusen’s Peircean approach in *Comics & Culture* (2000, with Hans-Christian Christiansen), among many others, have been criticized – wrongly, we believe – for engaging in a semiotic metaphysics that posits the reality of the sign apart from the social reality of each reading (cf. Frahm 2010:20). Many of these approaches have been accused of treating their subjects with arbitrary abstraction and an overload of theory, neglecting political and material conditions of comics production, contents, distribution, and fandom, and reproducing distinctions of class, race, and gender by elevating the body depictions of a popular genre to the metaphysical dignity of seemingly ahistorical semiotic principles (cf. Horrocks 2001). If the same criticism has been spared other approaches, it might be because they hardly reach the same audiences: Natsume Fusanosuke’s and Takekuma Kentarō’s collection *Manga no yomikata* (漫画の読み方, 1995, roughly: *How to Read Manga*) inspired a similar Japanese tradition of formal-aesthetic and semiotic reflections of writing, images, and abstract line-art in manga, although this has hardly been noticed internationally due to a lack of translations (cf. Theisen 2017). More recently, the multimodal linguistics and semiotics of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) have given rise to new methods, such as Janina Wildfeuer’s empirical discourse analysis of comics (e.g., 2019) as well as related annotation schemes (Bateman

et al. 2016), Paul Fisher Davies' multimodal systemic-functional linguistics (2019), or large-scale formal corpus analytics (cf. Alexander Dunst, Jochen Laubrock, and Janina Wildfeuer's *Quantitative Analysis of Comics*, 2018) – and the combination of semiotics and cognitive linguistics has opened new venues, such as Neil Cohn's description of comics' distinct visual language (Cohn 2013, 2016).

In the face of the criticism that would accuse some of these studies of social myopia, and perhaps as a suggestion to those studies that most clearly focus on the sign on the page apart from its social setting, we contend that a semiotic approach to comics studies always has and can continue to engender a thorough and critical engagement with the social, political, and ideological dimensions of comic books. The naturalization of 'improper,' comical, and deformed shapes in comics can be exposed at the very heart of its ideological tendencies and implicit traditions. Carefully examining the cartoonish depiction of bodies and stereotypes against the political history of caricature offers insight into the processes of reproduction that structure these comical signs. The formation and transformation of plot and figural schemata in serial storytelling invites closer looks at the currents shaping and tearing at the conventions of the popular and the experiments of the art form's avantgarde. The freedom of the drawing pen inevitably leads to a pictorial database in which all aspects of the depicted world are specifically appropriated and thus inviting interpretation. The reinvention of panels, pages, habits, and means of inferences in web-comics demand specific formal scrutiny alongside the social implications of their extended and postdigital usages. And if we are to see transnational mainstream comics enter a "Blue Age," as Adrienne Resha has recently argued (2020), it is not least in the reordering of code, address, and communicative situation that the expansion of topics and reader bases has to take place.

More fundamentally, what might have been neglected in much of existing comics scholarship, and has undoubtedly been overlooked by its apocalyptic critics, are the social implications of a theory of signs that must always already be understood as the examination of an inherently social process of "unlimited community," as Charles Sanders Peirce (1878:606) argued in his conception of the probability-oriented continuum that takes us from each individual reading to the collective or code-bound conditions of its possibility, the alternatives offered by other interpretants, and the dramatic variety of the consequences suggested by its not well-defined and never endless but multitudinous readings. Equally, a structuralist account has to live up to Ferdinand de Saussure's demands for a "science of the life of signs in society" (Saussure quoted in Hodge and Kress 1988:v).

Semiotics thus understood will engage with the historical setting of each sign use, and each semiotic structure in comics, in at least three ways: By differentiating collective and individual conditions of each reading and hermeneutic process, detailing

a social situation inscribed into a comic as its condition of possibility as well as the grounds of its interpretation; by detailing the political affordances assumed to hold by the production and distribution as well as by the communication through, about, and with comics, as each actor involved in those processes posit themselves within the power relations that in turn inform the semioses they drive; and perhaps most importantly of all, by tracing the emergence as well as the apology of false naturalization through a criticism of the ideology attached to whatever is seemingly evident in the apparent mere visual representation of ultimately invisible ascriptions. If there is one thing the cartoonish aesthetics cannot help but expose in every panel, it is the misleading but ubiquitous tendency to think that we know what we are looking at because we can see what it looks like (cf. Packard 2006, 2017; Wilde 2020), even though we are unable to accomplish either. From this point of view, the social condition of communication is always already in its signs.

It is then perhaps no surprise that one of the most-quoted traditional sources in the contributions to this issue is Roland Barthes' 'Rhetorique de l'image' (1977). Sometimes unnoticed by its more technically-minded epigones, Barthes' distinction of denotation and connotation across verbal and visual messages does not stop with the classification of these different components of the semiotic structure of modern pictorial communication but goes on to pinpoint the ideological nature of their confounding readings: We wrongly assume that what we have seen justifies our description of it. At the same time, these contributions bring together re-discovered semiotic concepts as well as continue to develop recent approaches to multimodal analysis, all of which go beyond dealing with the provocation of cartoonish images in sequence and assorted scripts on the page, and move into the analysis of semantics, of multi-dimensional modal complexities, and the focused examination and expanded scope of a linguistic tradition turned towards an art form that has historically served as a laboratory for the encounters and deviations between language and other means of expression.

One such re-discovered concept is the structuralist view of semantic isotopies, which **Chiara Polli** turns to one of the most promising and complex studies of signs: The art of translation involved in several versions of Gilbert Shelton's *Freak Brothers* (e.g., 2008). Rather than distracting from the careful semantic analysis of the shifts of meanings and connotations involved she draws our attention onto the changing political situation of the original and its various transformations that cannot help but become appropriations to the assumptions of later translators and editors, and the actual affordances of their reading publics.

Following the detailed technique of this examination, **Nicholas Wirtz** argues against a too simple understanding, and apotheosis of the 'handmade mark' as an entry point to understanding the aesthetic of autobiographically inspired comics. Rather than following an easy assumption of automatic authenticity and immediacy

guaranteed by the work of the artist's hand on the page, Wirtz showcases effects of quite different devices from digital hand-lettering and repeated means of body depiction and pose that arrive at ethically forceful and aesthetic risky versions of artistic autonomy in Mira Jacob's *Good Talk. A Memoir in Conversations* (2019). The question of autobiographical signification is taken up again by **Adam Whybray**, who re-examines critiques of the objectification of female characters by looking at the visual language in autobiographically oriented comics by Chester Brown (2011), Joe Matt (1997), and David Heatley (2008) – and by Ariel Schrag (2018), whose artwork goes beyond the appropriation of such ostentatiously restrictive graphic patterns. Continuing the look at intimate body depictions while moving far away from the intimacy of autobiography, **Caitlin Casiello** presents a semiotic catalog of the pages, the bodies, and the sighs transported in Japanese *eromanga*, a battleground for questions about freedom of expression or about defending youth and women from symbolic, or rather visual forms of sexual violence. Casiello investigates how the surfeit of visual information moves the reader into an imaginative relationship for fantasies which, in turn, allows us to reexamine other genres of manga in related, more informed terms, rather than singling eromanga out as an exception.

Moving towards more explicitly political topics, **Martin Foret** compares the depiction of abstract ideas through various visual devices in the comic book versions (e.g., Kosatík and Ticho 762:2013) of the historiographical and political Czech TV serial *The Czechs*. His close reading of several volumes and their specific artistic inventions is framed by, and illustrates, a comprehensive approach to reformulating the very semiotic nature of comics as a whole, preparing an innovative use of the concept of *code* to cut through problems of concepts of media, art forms, genre, or the sometimes metaphorical 'language' that comics may consist of. **Roula Kitsiou** and **Maria Papadopoulou** use Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Metaphor Analysis to examine and appraise a large corpus of caricatures depicting, framing, interpreting, and judging the recent so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 in Europe. Their careful analysis reveals how artists use cartoons as 'perspectivisation devices' (Silaški 2012:216) for covert framings, not merely reproducing but also challenging persistent (verbal) metaphors through pictorial, or rather multimodal means that dehumanize immigrants throughout the 20th century.

Finally, **Eirini Papadaki** brings together a similarly large array of Disney animations from 1937 to the present to examine the myths and ideologies about the tourist industry and the concept of tourism in the depictions and narratives about Mickey Mouse either as such a tourist or as the native inhabitant of a beckoning destination. In her application of Greimas' (1983) semiotic square and Barthes' (1993) ideological critique, her contribution closes the circle by rediscovering established semiotic concepts for new applications in scholarship about comics and animation.

As editors, we are greatly indebted to all our contributors for the vast array and the close examination presented in their articles. We would also like to thank our assistant Marcel Lemmes for his tireless efforts in putting the results together. The work on this issue could not help but be impacted by the pandemic working conditions of everyone involved. We wish to thank our authors and readers for their patience with the delay in this publication. We hope it has been worth the wait.

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Isotopy as a tool for the analysis of comics in translation: The Italian ‘rip-off’ of Gilbert Shelton’s *Freak Brothers*

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BY: Chiara Polli

ABSTRACT

This article examines a corpus of selected Italian translations of Gilbert Shelton’s underground comic strip *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* (initially collected in 13 issues by Rip Off Press, 1971–1997) using isotopies as a key tool in the analysis of comics in translation. After discussing the role and potential applications of isotopies (cf. Bertrand 2000; Greimas 1966b; Rastier 1972; Greimas and Courtés 1979), we argue that the act of translating comics inherently entails the selection, magnification, narcotization, and even erasure of the isotopies of the source text as well as the creation of new ones belonging exclusively to the target culture. Subsequently, Shelton’s works are analyzed as an example of politically-committed, subversive social satire, which can be considered the epitome of the 1960–70s’ US-countercultural zeitgeist. In Italy, Shelton’s comic strips received multiple translations from both alternative, militant publishers (Arcana and Stampa Alternativa) and mainstream houses (Mondadori and Comicon) at different times (from Arcana’s early anthology in 1974 to Comicon’s latest issue in 2019). This allows for a diachronic comparison of multiple translations of the same comics, each showing the signs of changing translational approaches, editorial policies, and target audiences. Finally, the contrastive analysis of original works and translations may provide insight into the negotiation and communication of cultural, social, and political identities through the medium of comics. In this respect, we employ a semiotic approach that disentangles the ideological and culture-bound premises and the hermeneutic frames that intervene in the process of translating comics of such deep (counter-)cultural value as Shelton’s *Freak Brothers*.

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1. Introduction

Since its early manifestations, the history of the comic medium has been closely connected with social and political narratives – suffice to mention the grandfather of all comics, *The Yellow Kid*, created by Richard F. Outcault as early as 1895. Comics have been a mirror and a multimodal narrator for changing cultural models, both influenced by and influencing their sociocultural environments. In this respect, translation has always been at the core of comics development and spread.

Zanettin (2018) maintained that, since the early nineteenth-century (proto)comics, translation had played a significant role in shaping the different cultures and traditions of the comic medium worldwide. The translation of comics favored the circulation of imageries and conventions, thus contributing to the contamination between national schools such as U.S. comics, French BDs, Italian *fumetti*, Spanish *tebeos/historietas*, and Japanese *manga*.

In reflecting on how translation processes partake in the negotiation and communication of cultural, social, and political identities through the comics medium, we employ the semiotic notion of isotopy, first postulated by Greimas (1966a, 1966b). After introducing this analysis tool (Section 2), we explore comics translation studies and discuss how isotopies may adapt to this field of investigation (Section 3). Next, we apply isotopic analysis to the Italian translations of Gilbert Shelton's *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* (1971–1997) (Section 4) to substantiate this. Shelton's comics exemplify politically-committed works, imbued with the 1960–70s' U.S. *countercultural* values and themes. These were translated and adapted to an utterly different Italian context and by various publishers at other times. Whether used as a militant flag by Italian radicals or canonized as icons of the 'Fabled Sixties' by mainstream publications, the adventures of Shelton's *fabulous* trio enable a diachronic study of the evolution of the isotopic pathways taken throughout the translation process. By following these pathways, we highlight how the application of isotopic analysis to comics translations may unveil the signs of changing ideologies and translational approaches, editorial policies, and target audiences.

2. Isotopies and comics: An introduction

According to Greimas (1966a, 1966b),¹ *isotopy* refers to the iteration of units of signification (or *semes*) throughout a text or discourse, which guarantees semantic cohesion and homogeneity. Greimas argued that, before their actualization, lexemes are polysemous by their very nature. Whenever a lexeme is actualized in a discourse, a potentially different *sememe*, i.e., a manifestation of sense, is produced by combining different

¹ On isotopies, see also Rastier (1972), Klinkenberg (1973) and Groupe μ (1976).

semes. Thus, sememes change according to texts and communication contexts. Greimas distinguished between two types of semes: nuclear semes are invariable, permanent, specific, and context-independent; classemes are variable, contextual, and generic. While nuclear semes are always part of the sememe, the classemes are either present or absent, depending on the context. Each time a seme is reiterated, it becomes more redundant, and the level of intelligibility and disambiguation increases. Such semantic redundancy is called isotopy.

Isotopies are thus conceived of creations starting from the basic units of signification, the semes, through to their cumulation, concatenation, and hierarchization. The coherence relationship among such semic elements constitutes the deep semantic structure of texts (cf. van Dijk 1972). In this context, the isotopies inhabiting a text can act as maps or gravitational centers (cf. Binelli 2013) that guide the process of interpretation of such discursive manifestations.

The isotopic analysis focuses not only on single terms but also on their relation and recurrence within discourse as a whole, including its figures (actors, time, space) and their thematization (cf. Bertrand 2000). Greimas and Courtés argued (1979) that figures acquire sense when they are thematized in the context of a more general and abstract interpretive framework. Thus, thematic isotopies result from a hermeneutic act where figures are correlated and provided with a narrative value. At the same time, content is explored on a deeper level, beyond the surface of the text, often based on a predetermined reading level (e.g., religious, Catholic, political, Marxist, artistic, Expressionist, Freudian, etc.).

The selection of figures and their association to a theme depends on adopting a given hermeneutic frame. According to the influential theories by Minsky (1980) and Fillmore (1976), frames guide knowledge representations and reasoning schemes – functioning like Eco's (1976) encyclopedic knowledge. Encountering a new situation, we categorize it drawing from our personal 'memory boxes' a predetermined structure derived from semantic networks and experiences stored in our memory. Thanks to such intertextual scripts, a text is positioned within a given context and frame and interpreted accordingly.

Such a hermeneutic process entails a selection of the isotopic nuclei to trace. Indeed, polysemic terms and other items may also participate in different isotopies (shifters or *embrayeurs*), and, given the multiplicity of isotopies within a text, hierarchies of isotopies may exist (cf. Greimas and Courtés 1979). To discern dominant isotopies, qualitative and quantitative analyses are required. For instance, we might look for relevant sememes in salient positions, such as a text's beginning or conclusion (cf. Eco 1979:91), or classemes recurring in many sememes (cf. Arrivé 1973; van Dijk 1972). Choosing the dominant isotopies is crucial as this influences the text's thematization and final interpretation.

In translation, such processes of selection and hierarchization, as well as the choice of the context in which a given sememe expresses its full potential and highlights the corresponding isotopies, may result in the “magnification” or the “narcotization” of semantic elements (Eco 2003:139). For example, some secondary isotopies may become dominant, while other dominant isotopies may be downgraded; some isotopies may be added and others erased. Just as for the author of a text, the creation of isotopies may be conscious or unconscious; the choice to translate them may be deliberate or not. In some cases, misunderstanding specific polysemous terms or the lack of certain classemes within the target language and culture may account for the loss of a given isotopy. Some choices may respond to the belief that the receiving audience prefers some themes and cannot recognize others because of a lack of familiarity. In several cases, the selection of isotopies is inherently ideological, just as the choices that orient the hermeneutic reading of a given text.

As a semiotic category and not merely a verbal one, isotopy can be applied to the analysis of all codes and proves a highly effective tool when working on case studies in different fields (cinema, theater, and advertising, among others). Here, we apply isotopy to comics translation as a peculiar hermeneutic process involving the passage to another visual culture and comics tradition. In this respect, the following subsection provides a brief account of comics translation studies in which isotopy may prove a valuable analysis tool.

3. Comics and translation: A state of the art

Although comics represent a high-volume translation segment (cf. D’Arcangelo and Zanettin 2004; Rota 2003; Zanettin 2008b, 2018), comics remain an under-investigated topic within translation studies. Only one notable monograph in German (i.e., Kaindl 2004a) and a few collected volumes (e.g., Mälzer 2015; Zanettin 2008a) are devoted to the topic.

According to Kaindl (1999, 2004b), comics studies have long suffered from methodological problems as monomodal disciplines traditionally segment comics and investigate single components, thus overlooking their whole. D’Arcangelo and Zanettin (2004) argue that traditionally research on comics translation almost exclusively looked at U.S. comic strips (e.g., *Calvin and Hobbes* and Disney comics) and Franco-Belgian works (e.g., *Astérix* and *Tintin*) focusing on specific verbal problems (e.g., humor, puns, metaphors, onomatopoeias, proper names, interjections). The aim was to establish normative guidelines for comics translation, which only rarely included consideration of the interaction between words and images, the editorial dimension of the comics industry, and the sociocultural context in which these

works were produced and exported. Comics were also investigated as a form of 'constrained' translation (e.g., Grun and Dollerup 2003) since panels and speech balloons represent a limit to the possibilities of the translator from a spatial viewpoint. Images were either disregarded or considered a universal code, shared by the source and target cultures, imposing further limitations to the verbal component (e.g., Rabadàn 1991). Finally, Celotti (2008) contested the notion of constrained translation in comics and argued that the translator of comics should be a "semiotic investigator" (47) who is conscious of the word/image interdependence.

Semiotics pioneered the appreciation of the comics' potential as a medium. As early as 1964, Umberto Eco laid the foundation for an integrated study of the language of comics in some of the essays collected in his seminal *Apocalittici e Integrati*. Other pioneering semiotic investigations followed dealing with the syncretism of comics, i.e., the emergence of sense through the interplay of verbal and pictorial elements (cf., for example, Barbieri 1991, 2017; Floch 1997; Fresnault-Deruelle 1972; Groensteen 1999, 2011; Peeters 1991, 1993). In this respect, the influential works by comic authors and scholars Will Eisner (1985) and Scott McCloud (1993) also relied on a solid semiotic approach.

In recent years, several studies also emphasized how comics translation may entail a change in publication format (page size, layout, panel arrangement, reading direction, color/black and white), genre, readership, form of production, and distribution according to country-specific and culture-bound conventions (e.g., Ficarra 2012; Gonsalves de Assis 2015; Jüngst 2008; Kaindl 2010; Rota 2008; Zanettin 2008a, 2014). In this respect, the study of comics translation can effectively support the analysis of how cultural and political identities and ideologies are constructed, negotiated, and communicated by comics. For example, Brems (2013) used different translations of Hergé's *Quick & Flupke* comic strips to pinpoint economic, cultural, and political factors informing the francophone and the Flemish Belgian identities. Likewise, Mohamed (2016) reflected on the self-translation of her webcomic *Qahera* from English into Arabic, showing the transformations that the original work underwent to adapt the adventures of her Muslim superheroine who was fighting against Islamophobia and misogyny to a different culture and audience.

Other studies explored the history of comics translation by focusing, for instance, on the role of publishers and other mediators such as Zanettin (2017) on the Italian Lotario or Balteiro (2010) and Valencia-Garcia (2012) on the Spanish *Hispano Americana de Ediciones*. Zanettin (2017, 2018) investigated how comics' translation often entails processes of explicit, institutional censorship (e.g., under dictatorships such as Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, Fascist Italy, Francoist Spain) and self-censorship motivated by religious, moral, economic, ideological, and political reasons; for example, the infamous Comics Code Authority established in 1954 by the U.S. comics industry itself.



Figure 1. Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, 1969 (2008:61), panel 13.

Thus, when dealing with the study of comics translation, it is imperative to adopt a more integrated approach that cuts across verbal communication and encompasses both a sociocultural and a semiotic stance. Research on such media as comics and cartoons benefited from the increasing interest in visual communication and multimodality (cf., for example, Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014; Davies 2019; Polli and Berti 2020; Tsakona 2009), marking a shift from investigations on language and grammar to graphic-oriented inquiries into the *ninth art*.

Made popular by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006), the study of multimodality recently gained a foothold in several fields, advancing the premise that communication is formed by a multimodal ensemble whereby meanings are conveyed through a combination of heterogeneous semiotic resources (images, gesture, posture, and so on). Just as in language, these resources are shaped through historical, social, and cultural contexts of use – against any claim of universalistic codes.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) elaborated their visual grammar on the premise that images are organized according to specific forms and structures. In a multimodal text, visual elements are connected to but not dependent on verbal ones in meaning construction. This is consistent with Celotti's (2008) definition of comics diegesis, which is generated by "the simultaneity of the visual and the verbal languages" (34). In this context, many studies adopted a multimodal approach in analyzing comics translation (cf., e.g., Borodo 2015; Kaindl 2004b; Weissbrod and Kohm 2015; Yuste Frías 2011).

The present article aims to join the ranks of studies adopting a more holistic approach to the investigation of comics by using a structuralist concept of isotopies as a critical instrument to carry out a comparative analysis of comics in translation. In comics, isotopies can be – and often are – the outcome of semantic coherence among verbal and visual elements, which share some relevant classemes and suggest a homogeneous understanding of these syncretic texts.

A brief example of such interplay can be found in Figure 1, taken from one of Shelton's (2008:61) *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* strips, initially published in 1969. The panel shows a man with a porcine face revealed to be an undercover agent in the story. Here, he is tied up inside a car trunk, displaying the writing "Death to Pigs." In this panel, the isotopy of animality is created by the redundancy of the classeme 'animality' in visual (the porcine, chubby face of the policeman with a snout and a feral mouth) and verbal items (the sememe 'Pigs' in the slogan "Death to Pigs"). In this respect, the isotopy of animality comes to define – and dehumanize – the political enemy. Such isotopy is fundamental to understanding Shelton's strip. During the 1960s–70s U.S. counterculture, the derogatory term 'pig' was often used



Figure 2. Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, 1971 (2008:86), panels 4-9.

to refer to police officers. As a member of this countercultural milieu, Sheldon adds slogans such as 'Death to Pigs' in his strips and frequently portrays police officers as pigs (Figure 2).

The effective interpretation of such panels and their subversive message requires (1) recognizing the words/images interplay and (2) adopting a specific – in this case, political – frame. However, as the following subsection demonstrates, this is not always the case. For example, word-image interplay may be misread or purposefully used to modify the original material and engender new signification processes. In addition, when translating a text, different hermeneutic frames may come into play. As the next section shows, isotopic analysis proves helpful to look at how the original (counter)culture-bound materials can be modified and even 'ripped off' in translation.

4. Gilbert Shelton's translations: A case of italian Rip-Off?

Gilbert Shelton is often credited as the most politically effective cartoonist among the handful of artists that gave life to the underground comix phenomenon (cf. Danky and Kitchen 2009; Estren 1974; Rosenkranz 2002; Skinn 2004), which boomed during the

U.S. 1960s–70s counterculture.² Although differing in style and quality, underground authors shared a desire to revolutionize the comics medium, pushing the boundaries of freedom of expression to challenge authorities, 'square' society's dogmas, and the grip of (self-)censorship which had bent U.S. comic industry since 1954.³

Shelton's *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* (hereafter *TFFFB*)⁴ strips, first published in *The Rag* in May 1968 and then re-issued by Rip Off Press, represent one of the most prominent examples of a successful marriage between witty satire, radical politics, and underground comix. In *TFFFB*, the dope-addled adventures of three freaks – Free-wheelin' Franklin, Phineas, and Fat Freddy – serve as a device to narrate a world of squatters, student protests, and brawls with the police from an endogenous position. Far from any stereotypical hippie ideal, the three freaks expressed a sort of anarchic insurrectionism and its intransigent and refractory attitude towards the establishment.

TFFFB's strips were (and still are) among the most acclaimed and widely translated underground comix because of their successful blending of witticism and apparent flippancy. In Italy, at first, *TFFFB* stories were published exclusively by alternative and independent publishers, namely Arcana Press (1974) and Stampa Alternativa. The latter dedicated seven volumes (published between 1981 and 1998) to the three brothers, not counting the reprints. Moreover, radical activist Angelo Quattrocchi also included two stories in his magazine *Riso Amaro 1* and *Risamaro Comix*.

These publishers relied on non-professional translators who shared a common countercultural background with the author. Despite this connection, the earliest issues of *TFFFB* strips suffer from a general inconsistency in the quality of translation. The fact that Arcana's and Stampa Alternativa's anthologies included works by different translators and editors with varying degrees of expertise and sensibilities is evident as the style changes from volume to volume and strip to strip. Frequent cases of faulty pagination (e.g., in Stampa Alternativa's issue *Odissea Mexicana* page 2 and 7 are inverted, and page 21 is printed back to front), omissions, extreme condensation, and the qualitative impoverishment of the original stylistic and linguistic complexity are essentially the outcome of translators 'and editors' negligence and incompetence. All these are accompanied with an extreme form of domestication (cf. Venuti 1995) of textual elements such as toponyms ('Council Bluffs' in Iowa becomes 'Roccasecca'), proper names ('Fat Freddy' is intermittently called 'Fat Freddie,' 'Ciccio Freddie,' 'Freddy Lardo,' 'Freddie Lardo,' 'Freddi,' and 'Freddie,' even within the same strip), and regionalisms (Arcana's and Stampa Alternativa's anthologies frequently use expressions from Milan's and Rome's dialect, respectively).

²For a historical overview of the counterculture and the Sixties, cf. Gitlin (1993) and Anderson (1995).

³On the U.S. Comic Code Authority and (self)censorship, cf. Hajdu (2008).

⁴Knockabout Comics collected all of *TFFFB*'s stories mentioned in this paper in the volume *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers Omnibus* (2008). Hereafter, page numbers of original texts refer to this volume.

For decades Shelton's *Freak Brothers* remained exclusive to the Italian independent circuit, except for two comic strips included in the newsstand magazines *Totem Comic* (March 1988) and *Totem* (September 1998). However, the largest Italian publisher, Mondadori, recently decided to publish an anthology dedicated to the trio. The volume *Gilbert Shelton. Freak Brothers* (2009) was part of the collection "I maestri del fumetto" ('Masters of Comics') and included an introductory essay by prominent Italian comics scholar Daniele Barbieri. This interest in Shelton's comics would have been unthinkable back in the 1960s and pointed to Shelton's full canonization as a master of the comic art, which is also evident in the light of Comicon's subsequent choice to include *TFFFB* in the series *I fondamentali*, issuing three volumes in 2014, 2016, and 2019. Comicon aimed to provide a philologically accurate translation work, even adding an appendix to explain several cultural gaps that seemed untranslatable into Italian or hard to understand.

Besides the considerations regarding the varying quality of Shelton's Italian translations, it is interesting to note how significantly the selection of strips in each collection differs, reflecting different times and audiences. For example, anthologies by militant publishers such as Arcana and Stampa Alternativa are imbued with the turmoil of the Italian *Anni di Piombo* (literally, 'Years of Lead,' meaning the late 1960s up to the early 1980s).⁵ It is no coincidence that these publishing houses chose to translate Shelton's most subversive, politically committed adventures that hailed directly from the counterculture years (the mid-1960s to 1970s), aiming to reach an audience within the Italian underground milieu.

Conversely, Mondadori did not translate the strips belonging to the first, more radical phase of Shelton's work and focused instead on his subsequent production. However, commercial considerations may have dictated this choice, given the success of picaresque stories such as *Idiots Abroad* (issued initially between the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s) and the desire to present Shelton as a canonized author to a broader target audience. Likewise, in the case of Comicon, although a selection of Shelton's early comic strips is included in the 2016 volume (146-193), post-counterculture works from the late 1970s onwards clearly outnumber them.

Still, it is possible to compare two or more translations of the same stories in several cases. As the following examples highlight, this comparison enables us to show how this a priori selection of contents connects to a change of frames adopted in the interpretation of Shelton's works, leading to processes of narcotization and magnification of the original isotopies. We will examine, in particular, four excerpts from Shelton's strips, focusing on the translation of such themes as the overt antagonism towards the police (4.1), humorous (4.2) as well as politically charged contents (4.3)

⁵ For an overview of the Italian political situation during the 'Years of Lead,' see Lazar and Matard-Bonucci (2010).

and profanity (4.4). Finally, the Italian translations of the panels selected are compared with regards to changes that occurred on a semic level as well as to the different approaches and ideological premises that may have influenced certain choices.

4.1 "Those Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers Acquire a Groupie"

The 1969 four-page story "Those Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers Acquire a Groupie" (6-9 in original; 56-59 in *Arcana*; 148-151 in *Comicon*) invites a contrastive analysis between the translations of *Arcana*'s very first anthology dedicated to the trio and one of the latest, by *Comicon* in 2016. The story revolves around the encounter of the trio of squatters with a teenage drop-out girl who wants to join their group. The girl's arrival breaks the brothers' routine. Her behavior clashes with the trio's habits provoking a series of humorous gags, while her gullibility leads an undercover narcotics agent, the recurring character Norbert the Nark, into the house. Figure 3 shows the panel in which, once exposed, the three freaks defenestrate the policeman. Viewers see the trio's arms sticking out of the window and Norbert's body falling while the freaks exclaim in chorus: "It's Norbert the nark! Time for Norbert's flyin' lesson!" (8).

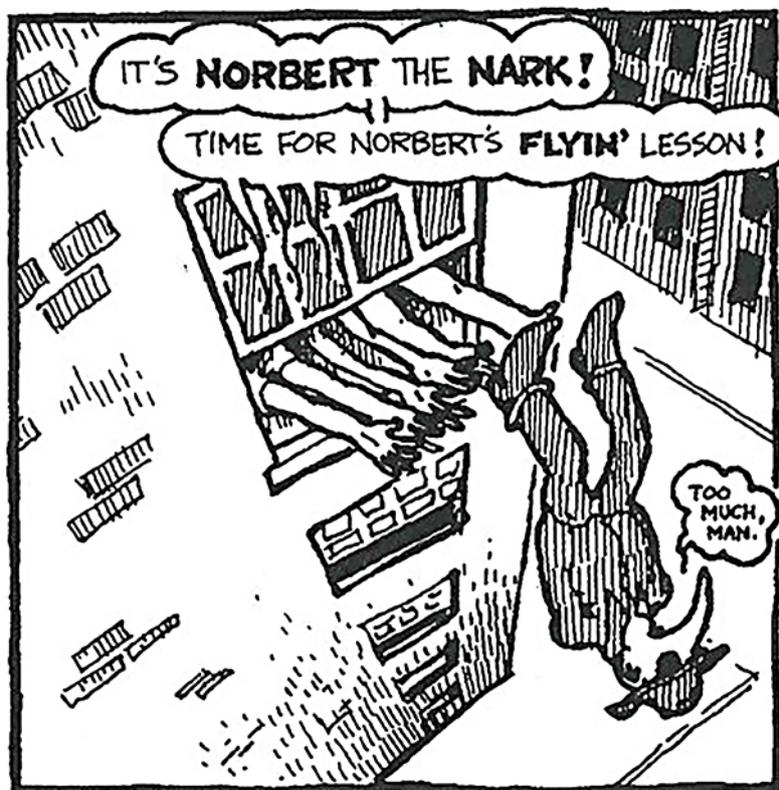


Figure 3. Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, 1969 (2008: 8), panel 6.

The isotopy of flight is created by the redundancy of the repeated, corresponding classeme ‘flight,’ which is verbally conveyed by the sememe ‘flying,’ the figure of Norbert’s falling body, and the vertical construction of the scene, which uses a high angle shot to emphasize the height of the building the body is thrown out of.

Such perspective also informs about power dynamics, as viewers gaze at the policeman’s falling in a top-down movement. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006:140), “if a represented participant is seen from a high angle, then the relation between the interactive participants (the producers of the image and hence also the viewer) and the represented participant is depicted as one in which the interactive participant has power over the represented participant – the represented participant is seen from a point of view of power.” In this light, the author and his readers (i.e., the ‘interactive participants’) have power over Norbert (i.e., the ‘represented participant’), who finds himself in a vulnerable position. This is consistent with the countercultural desire to subvert power relations and demean all forms of authority, particularly police forces.

In the original, the classeme ‘learning’ is also present as the defenestration act is ironically called “flyin’ lesson” by the three brothers. By connotation, the term ‘lesson’ may indicate how Norbert is learning not to mess with the trio.

Table 1 shows how Arcana’s translation, influenced by Italy’s ‘Years of Lead’ (anni di piombo), led to a (counter)cultural adaptation of the source text. Indeed, in addition to changing the proper name of the policeman (i.e., ‘Norbert’ becomes ‘Esposito’), which may be an inside joke incomprehensible today or an opaque reference to a real-life person, a comparison with anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli is established.

Along with other anarchists, railroad worker Giuseppe Pinelli was suspected of being involved in the Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan on December 12, 1969, causing the death of seventeen people and injuring eighty-eight. While being held in custody for questioning for more than forty-eight hours (i.e., more than the time normally allowed for detention without a charge), he fell to his death from a fourth-floor window

Table 1. Norbert’s Fall in Translation⁶

Original (8)	Arcana (58)	Comicon (150)
“It’s <i>Norbert</i> the <i>nark</i> ! Time for Norbert’s <i>flyin’</i> lesson!”	“È Esposito della <i>Narco</i> ! Lo facciamo volare come Pinelli!” (Literally: ‘It’s Esposito from the Narcs! We make him fly like Pinelli!’)	“ <i>Norbert</i> della <i>Narcotici</i> ! È ora della sua lezione di <i>volo</i> !” (Literally: ‘It’s time for his flying lesson!’)

⁶ Bold font is used for emphasis in the original, represented here in italics.

of the Milan police station on December 15. Policemen first claimed that he had died due to a suicide attempt, but they soon retracted, and the case was filed as an accidental death. The Piazza Fontana bombing, planned by the neo-fascist group Ordine Nuovo, marked the beginning of the 'Years of Lead.' At the same time, the mysteries and lies regarding Pinelli's death and the role of law enforcement officers in the supposed accident became the topic of debates and protests of radical extra-parliamentary groups.

Arcana published Shelton's anthology in 1974, at a time dominated by debates regarding Pinelli's death and the climate of guerrilla warfare between authorities and extra-parliamentary groups. The adopted hermeneutic frame is overtly influenced by the resultant cultural turmoil, which reverberates in the choice to manipulate Shelton's original lines. The isotopy of flight is crucial, as it triggers a simile with Pinelli's death. In this, the translator likely saw an opportunity to reverse Italian political events: this time, it is a policeman who is thrown out of a window by counterculture members. In this respect, Shelton's use of perspective also reinforces the overturning of power relations as the panel shows a policeman being overpowered.

On a connotative level, the balloon also implies that the trio *makes* Norbert fly ("Lo facciamo volare come..."), just as somebody else *made* Pinelli fly. The translator is expressing a strong personal opinion widely shared within the Italian underground milieu, likely including Arcana's readers who certainly recognized the simile and endorsed its assumption. In Italian, the *classeme* 'learning' is not included as this is not a flying lesson but rather a political act of virtual retaliation. Conversely, we have the addition of the *classeme* 'coercion' (in the *sememe* 'facciamolo') and 'anarchy' (in the *sememe* "Pinelli").

Comicon's version of the same passage follows the source text without cultural adaptation. Arcana's domestication policy is now obsolete in translation practice (Cavagnoli 2010). Besides betraying an evident lack of professionalism, it was also the by-product of the prominent role that comix took on as a means to transmit countercultural thought, experience, and values. The ideology-based cultural adaptation of the American experience into the Italian context was plausible for the translator, who perceived a contact point between the two incidents. On these premises, the translator re-coded the foreign text in a hermeneutic frame which may no longer be so intuitive for 2010s Comicon's readership after almost fifty years and a drastic change in cultural and ideological references. In this respect, while the antagonism towards the police shines through the pages of the first militant translations, mainstream publications display a somewhat neutral position towards law enforcement. These stances are reflected in opposite approaches towards the seditious and irreverent anti-police argot of the *Freak Brothers*.

The example included in Section 3 showed how policemen were often called 'pigs,' which Arcana's and *Stampa Alternativa*'s translations often kept in English (even as a part of slurs, such as 'Fuck you pig!', 'Kill pigs,' 'Off the pigs,' 'Death to pigs'). This

indicates the widespread use of this derogatory term among the target readership. Its understanding may also be supported by the presence of the images showing police officers with chubby faces and stylized snouts, resembling actual pigs (for example, in Figures 1 and 2, translated on page 1 of *Stampa Alternativa's L'Erba del Vicino* and page 41 of *Arcana*, respectively).

No mainstream volume included stories referring to police officers by such slurs. Therefore, one cannot compare this key term between mainstream and alternative publications. However, two opposite trends are notable in the adaptation of such terms as 'cop' and 'bust.' In Italian militant publications, the noun 'bust' is translated as 'perquisa,' a contraction of 'perquisizione,' widely employed as a slang term by Italian radical Leftists. Alternative publishers treated 'perquisa' as a keyword referring to the 'enemy.' Even in English, the very concept of 'bust' is crucial to understanding *TFFFB's* narrative, as it represents the moment of a clash between counterculture and establishment framed in the 'Us vs. Them' logic which defined the whole countercultural movement.

As for the term 'cop,' militant publishers' anthologies domesticate this noun into the radical Leftists' slang term 'pulotto,' a (counter)culturally connoted nickname used within the anti-establishment Italian milieu and easily understood by its supporters. This noun is frequently used in *Arcana's* anthology to refer to policemen, while *Stampa Alternativa's* and *Riso Amaro's* translations sometimes alternate it with the slang term 'pula.'

Such terms as 'bust' and 'cop' in English, or 'perquisa,' 'pulotto,' and 'pula' in Italian, perform a societal function by forming a sort of private code which acts as an emblem of belonging for the members of a given group (cf. Coleman 2012). They all share the *classeme* 'dissidence,' which is entirely lost in most recent translations. When translating these terms from Shelton's original texts, both Mondadori and Comicon adopted more neutral solutions such as 'poliziotto' and 'retata,' which are regularly used in today's subcultural context and by everybody outside that context, including the police itself. In this respect, they convey neither a sense of exclusiveness, of *belonging* to a given subgroup, nor a seditious undertone.

Moreover, in the most recent publication by Comicon (2019), besides 'poliziotto,' the term 'cop' is translated as 'piedipiatti,' a *de facto* mocking address for the police, though one borrowed from noir and comedy and not from Italian countercultural slang. No radical would call a policeman 'piedipiatti' since it is a term connoted within the same comical frame of films like Carlo Vanzina's homonymous *Piedipiatti* (1991). The *classeme* 'ridicule' rather than 'dissidence' is conveyed.

As the following examples illustrate, mainstream publishers' tendency towards a neutralizing approach often connects to the banalization of the original materials and the adoption of comical and trivializing hermeneutic frames.

4.2 "The Parakeet that Outwitted the D.E.A."

The tendency towards magnifying Shelton's light humor is often coupled with the creation of new isotopic paths that exploit word-image interplay. An example is "The parakeet that outwitted the D.E.A." (333-348), initially published in 1977 and translated by *Riso Amaro* 1 (1979a:26-41), Mondadori (2009:115-130), and Comicon (2016:52-67).

The adventure features Fat Freddy's uncle Artie who was turned into a parakeet by his wife, Sally. Once returned to human form, the man takes his revenge: In the final panel, he explains how, while Sally was under opiates, he turned her into a chicken. Artie then offers her to the three brothers as a gift. The three translations of Artie's closing line are summarized in Table 2.

In this excerpt, Mondadori's modification of the punch line stands out. While *Riso Amaro* and Comicon's translations follow the source text, Mondadori erases the scatological joke and replaces it with a pun based on the polysemy of the noun 'pollastrella' ('chick'). In Italian, as in English, the lexeme may refer to a small hen and a beautiful but gullible woman with a clear sexist undertone.

In Mondadori's text, the sememe, also emphasized by the use of bold font, conveys the classemes 'animality,' 'female,' and 'sex.' The first two classemes are present in the original as well: 'animality' is conveyed by the sememe 'chicken,' the clucks of the hen as well as by its visual representation while the repeated use of the pronoun 'her' reiterates the classeme 'female.' Mondadori's translation magnifies this twofold isotopic pathway and adds the classeme 'sex' by exploiting the polysemy of the term to create a new pun which is absent in the source text. Aunt Sally is literally (and visually) a chicken in this double entendre. Still, she is also mocked and sexually objectified by her husband, who first deceived her and then offered her to the three brothers.

Table 2. The translation of Artie's punch line

Original (348)	<i>Riso Amaro</i> (41)	Mondadori (130)	Comicon (67)
" <i>Haw haw!</i> Caught her asleep from too much opium and turned her into a <i>chicken!</i> The eggs are grade B, but the <i>shit is pure gold!</i> "	"Ha ha! Dormiva fatta d'oppio e l'ho trasformata in gallina! Le uova sono piccole ma la sua cacca è di oro puro!" (Literally: 'The eggs are small, but her poop is pure gold!')	" <i>Hah hah!</i> L'ho beccata mentre dormiva stesa dall'oppio e l'ho trasformata in un <i>pollo!</i> Le uova sono di categoria B, media, ma <i>che pollastrella!</i> " (Literally: 'The eggs are of category B, medium, but <i>what a chick!</i> '	" <i>Ah ah!</i> L'ho colta alla sprovvista <i>addormentata</i> dall'oppio e l'ho trasformata in <i>pollo!</i> Le uova sono appena di categoria B ma la <i>merda è oro puro!</i> " (Literally: 'The eggs are just category B, but the <i>shit is pure gold!</i> ')



Figure 4. Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, 1977 (2009:130), panel 6.

On a visual level, Figure 4 shows how Sally's figure (in the shape of a chicken) occupies a salient position at the center of the panel. As a represented participant, she is connected to the husband and the freak trio by two vectors: one is established by Artie's hands holding her cage, the other by the gaze she exchanges with the three brothers. However, in terms of power dynamics, the brothers look down on Sally, who is in a weaker position. Moreover, Sally is also isolated by the presence of the cage in which she is imprisoned. The cage acts as a visual framing device emphasizing her segregation with respect to the other represented participants. As such, image construction conveys a sense of vulnerability and confinement of the female character, with a clear power imbalance between her and the male characters. Mondadori's double entendre further magnifies this aspect by adding a sexist exclamation and creating a pun which underlies a male chauvinist attitude. In this respect, the hermeneutic frame adopted is utterly different from the original, as Shelton's comix are devoid of sexist remarks and mock what is perceived as patriarchal legacies.

The adoption of a chauvinist hermeneutic frame to reinterpret Shelton's source text is reminiscent of the combined magnification and trivialization of Robert Crumb's comix concerning the theme of sex. In most Italian translations, they were domesticated to fit a 'commedia sexy all' italiana' frame. *TFFFB's* adventures are humorous and

arguably exemplify one of the cleverest uses of comical devices among underground comix. Yet here, Mondadori's modification seems to indicate an attempt to magnify a male-centered type of humor by adding a vaguely naughty undertone, which is absent in the original and the other translations of the same story.

4.3 "The Fabolous Furry Freak Brothers Go to College"

Another type of modification recurring in Shelton's comix regards vital terms charged with a political value in the original. We can find an example in the translation of "The Fabolous Furry Freak Brothers Go to College," initially published in 1969 (38-41 in original; 13-16 in Arcana; 190-194 in Comicon). In this *TFFFB*'s episode, Fat Freddy decides to join a radical college occupation on the premise that: "I'm gonna show them boojwah campus radicals just what revolution's all about!" (38). The story thematizes, at least in its premises, the real-life endogenous opposition between radical college associations within the New Left, such as the Students for a Democratic Society (S.D.S.), and other countercultural groupings with no overt political affiliation, such as the hippies and the 'freaks.' While the latter were criticized for their lack of commitment, the former were often accused of displaying a bourgeois attitude. This fracture within the counterculture was also familiar to the Italian underground milieu.

Arcana's translation of the balloon preserves the original reference to 'boojwah,' i.e., the lexicalized pronunciation of 'bourgeois,' whereas Comicon's translation performs a neutralizing form of cultural adaptation. As a sign of the 42 years between Arcana's and Comicon's translations and the change of hermeneutic frames adopted when approaching this type of works, the Marxist-connoted sememe 'borghesucci' is replaced by 'fighetti,' a term whose meaning is closer to 'posh.'

The charge of being a bourgeois during the 1970s had a more powerful socio-political implication, which the adjective 'fighetti' irredeemably fails to replicate. The cl-assemes 'politics' and 'class,' present in the words 'boojwah' and 'borghesucci,' are not

Table 3. Fat Freddy's anti-*boojwah* speech

Original (38)	Arcana (13)	Comicon (190)
"I'm gonna show them boojwah campus radicals just what <i>revolution's all about!</i> "	"Faccio vedere io a quei borghesucci radicali accademici <i>cosa vuol dire rivoluzione!</i> " (Literally: 'I am gonna show those little bourgeois academic radicals what <i>revolution means!</i> ').	"Ora vado e faccio vedere a quei fighetti di studenti radicali che cos'è davvero la <i>rivoluzione!</i> " (Literally: 'I am gonna show those little posh radical students what <i>revolution is truly about!</i> ').

conveyed by ‘fighetti,’ which, in juvenile slang, is instead linked to young people’s outlook, fashion, and a certain ostentation of a wealthy lifestyle – frequently with right-wing and indeed not radical sympathies. By using ‘fighetti,’ Comicon’s translation is likely turning Fat Freddy’s acrimony towards wannabe-campus radicals with a middle-class background into a critique of what nowadays may be considered as ‘radical chic’ left – an expression often used as a slur in (far) right-wing and populist communication.

Within the countercultural milieu, being a ‘bourgeois’ meant being part of the society that radicals wanted to tear down – even though it was also the society some of them belonged to. The stigma of being ‘bourgeois’ is one of the contradictions of the counterculture, and Fat Freddy’s remark accordingly sounds particularly tough. When Arcana translated the text, readers were supposed to share the same frames and feelings towards the Italian middle class and understand the connotative meaning behind this offense. In the case of Comicon, the slur is erased. Among the readers that Comicon targets, some would belong to the middle-class without feeling either shame or resentment for their social position. Comicon’s translation arguably does not entail deliberate censorship of the original text, though its different sensibility erases the politically committed connotation in favor of a more generalized derogatory term.

Conversely, Arcana’s commitment is also shown in manipulating the original material (Figure 5) by adding the paratexts: “Potere agli studenti” and “W la Rivoluzione” on the top of the college walls drawn in another panel.⁷

Arcana’s additions reinforce (and magnify) the isotopy of politics and dissent, displaying a form of endorsement to the revolutionary cause that the translator or editor felt the need to express. These isotopies are narcotized by Comicon’s version, though not entirely erased if the images (such as the panels showing the campus occupations) are deemed sufficient to convey them.

4.4 “The Death of Fat Freddy”

In addition to the magnification of political and seditious isotopic pathways, in translations edited by publishers such as Stampa Alternativa, *TFFFB*’s stories often turn into an opportunity to add blasphemous undertones with provocative intents. A good example is “The Death of Fat Freddy” (375-380), initially published in 1980. The story counts three Italian translations, all entitled “La Morte di Fat Freddy,” by Stampa Alternativa (1981:23-28), Mondadori (2009:157-162), and Comicon (2016:95-100). Table 4 summarizes the different translational approaches of the three publishers concerning profanity.

In the first two sentences, the phrases ‘Oh my God!’ or simply ‘God!’ like their Italian equivalents ‘Oddio!’ and ‘Dio!’ may have sounded profane to the conservative

⁷ The former addition translates a banner hanging from a window (retained in English), while the latter comes from the translator’s (or the editor’s) initiative.



Figure 5. Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, 1969 (1974:13), panels 10-14.

Table 4. The translation of profanities

Original	Stampa Alternativa	Mondadori	Comicon
"Oh my Ghod! Franklin!" (376)	"Dio cane! Franklin!" (24) (Literally: 'God (is a) dog! Franklin!')	"Oh mio Dio! Franklin!" (158) (Literally, 'Oh my God! Franklin!')	"Oddio oddio! Franklin!" (96) (Literally: 'Oh God! Franklin!')
"Oh, God, I'll never smoke that stuff again! I promise!" (380)	"Dio cane, non fumerò più di quella roba! Lo giuro!" (28) (Literally: 'God (is a) dog! I'll never smoke that stuff again! I swear!')	"Oh, Dio, non fumerò mai più quella roba! Lo prometto!" (162) (Literally: 'Oh, God, I'll never smoke that stuff again! I promise!')	"Dio, te lo giuro! Non fumerò più quella roba!" (100) (Literally: 'God, I swear! I'll never smoke that stuff again!')
"He's deader'n fucking Hell, all right!" (376)	"Porcoddio! È proprio secco!" (24) (Literally: 'God (is a) pig! He's stone-dead!')	"È più morto del dannatissimo inferno!" (158) (Literally: 'He's deader than the damnest Hell!')	"Eh, sì, più morto di così non si può!" (96) (Literally: 'Oh, yes, he cannot be deader than this!')

political discourse but were not as strong as the blasphemous exclamations added in *Stampa Alternativa*'s translation. In all the excerpts from *Stampa Alternativa* included in Table 4, the blasphemy is prominently positioned at the beginning of the sentence. By using blasphemy ('Dio cane' and 'Porcoddio'), the classeme 'deity' couples with 'animality' and, thus, 'profanity.' Conversely, Mondadori and Comicon provide more literal translations. Interestingly, in the third passage, while Mondadori's version reproduces the original hyperbole with the profanity 'dannatissimo inferno' (which in Italian does not have any particularly offensive meaning), Comicon wholly narcotizes the profane reference, which is nevertheless present in the original.

As for the two mainstream translations, *Stampa Alternativa*'s choices aim to heighten the anti-clerical sentiment and make the original satire even more provocative. *Stampa Alternativa*'s additions in terms of blasphemy seem to be motivated by the influence of the Italian cultural context. In Italy, the long-lasting Catholic heritage influenced the perception of religious offenses, counted as the worst type of insults and cultural taboos (cf. Nobili 2007). This is crucial to understand how religious swearwords are used in the case of *Stampa Alternativa*'s translation, even though they are more or less absent in the source text. Blasphemy has the power to engender opposite reactions and polarize readers; it generates indignation in a conservative audience and laughter in those who share *Stampa Alternativa*'s sensibilities. And precisely because religious swearwords can trigger a reaction in both believers and atheists, the translator decided to magnify this aspect in the translation of underground comix.

We need to stress that Shelton's position towards religion is not particularly harsh. Religion certainly is the topic of goliardic reprises (for example, "Phineas' Big Show," 566-571). Still, Shelton seems to mock sanctimonious attitudes, religious hysteria, and exploitation of people's faith rather than religion and spirituality per se. The story of Fat Freddy's funeral, for example, provides the opportunity to include such characters as the fake – and freak – priest John the Blabtist, who is the protagonist of several humorous gags linked to religion. For example, he reads the Bible upside down or confuses it with Shakespeare's *Henry IV*).

In translation, the character is called 'Giovanni Sbattista' (*Stampa Alternativa*), 'John il Battista' (Mondadori), and 'Giovanni Fattista' (Comicon). Interestingly, *Stampa Alternativa* added the prefix 'S-' to the Biblical reference to 'Giovanni Battista,' which conveys a contrary action and adds the classeme 'profanity': just as the Biblical John baptizes, the freak John deconsecrates. Conversely, Mondadori opts for preserving the English name 'John,' thus making the Biblical reference less obvious to Italian readers. Likely due to the influence of the theme of drugs and the dominant isotopy of addiction in *TFFFB*, Comicon emphasized dope-related humor with 'Sfattista,' by adding the classeme 'intoxication' concerning the 'stoned' condition of the celebrant.

Even in this case, on the one hand, publishers aiming at canonizing underground authors through mainstream circuits relied on a light-hearted hermeneutic reading. In effect, they tried to level what they perceived as an excess. On the other hand, faced with the possibility offered by Shelton's story, anti-clerical publishers could not resist the temptation to express their angst with vigor, laughing not just at religious institutions but at the deity itself.

5. Conclusions

This paper employed isotopies as a critical analysis tool to delve into the study of comics in translation. Translation, by nature, entails the negotiation and the choice of the meanings which should be transferred or left dormant. In this respect, it may trigger processes of magnification, narcotization, and even censure of specific isotopic pathways due to the relative importance given by translators to semic elements that sometimes go unnoticed, even as some others may be willingly exaggerated or marginalized.

Berman (1999) argued that texts do not require a literal rendering but a quest beyond words to give a concrete shape to conjectures and hermeneutic hypotheses, thus reproducing the author's style. In this understanding, Berman lamented the ethnocentrism of translations in interpreting what is foreign through one's categories.

This is precisely what happened in the Italian translations of Shelton's *TFFFB*. On the one hand, in militant publications, the magnification of such isotopies as blasphemy and dissent was coupled with an overt cultural adaptation of the original materials. On the other hand, the early independent collections seem to share the adoption of a political frame – clearly influenced by the political unrest of the Italian 'Years of Lead' – which prompted the adaptation of the original text to the Italian context. Verbal texts seem to be modified on account of the premise that a one-to-one relationship between the original and its translations exists on an ideological level. On the other hand, the migration of ideas across linguistic and cultural borders seems to be at the core of the translation process before the qualitatively and philologically correct rendering of texts. Still, this led to the modification of the original contents and the creation of new ones, often disregarding the actual meanings conveyed by the source texts and the isotopic coherence of the word / image syncretism.

As a result, translations sometimes were either wholly detached from the original texts or exaggerated certain isotopies to increase the comic strips' subversive value. This led to the addition of extra-textual references to real-life events (for example, Pinelli's death) and the magnification of the political, dissident, and blasphemous isotopies.

In the cases in which professional translators came into play, i.e., with the publications edited by Mondadori and Comicon, the shared networks of significations and

experiences between source (counter)culture and target culture are certainly weaker. Despite the increased quality of the professional work behind these publications, translation ultimately seems to have added even more distance. Indeed, Comicon's and Mondadori's translation choices often resonate much less with the countercultural jargon than Arcana's and Stampa Alternativa's translations.

Contrary to the political emphasis added to Shelton's texts in alternative publications, the translations published by both houses show no sign of militant undertones. This is likely the consequence of a change in translation practices during the years, which no longer permitted such an extreme form of domestication of the foreign text as the one implemented by Arcana and the early volumes by Stampa Alternativa. The chronological gap only partially accounts for this difference, which also owes a lot to the distance between the latter's target, its readership often overlapping subcultural communities, and the former's wider and 'normalized' readership.

Comicon and Mondadori arguably comply with more conventional, popular, though preferably middle-class attitudes and practices, typical of established mainstream publishers. Consequently, their translation approach tended to mitigate the underground jargon in an attempt to popularize its already selected contents. Both houses opted for a narcotization of seditious contents and slang (for example, the normalization of 'cops' and 'bust'). This does not mean that Comicon's and Mondadori's translations adopt overtly censorious approaches. Still, they do not attempt to recreate Shelton's comix (counter)cultural specificities and even level out their subversive and politically charged meanings. In this respect, rather than their political value, both editions seem to emphasize Shelton's stories' light-hearted comical strain, undoubtedly the most immediately and widely appreciable aspect of his works. This often coupled with the adoption of inappropriate cultural frames, hermeneutically rerouting Shelton's comics towards naughty comedy (for example, Mondadori's addition of 'pollastrella') or by erasing certain key notions (for instance, Comicon's translation of 'boojwah' with 'fighetti' and 'cops' with 'piedipiatti').

In this respect, by relying on the comparative study of comics in translation grounded on isotopic analysis, we highlighted how the adoption of different hermeneutic frames affected the process of interpretation of semantic items and, therefore, the final rendering of the source texts within another culture and, in this case, counterculture. Given their identity value on a social and political level, Shelton's comics represented a meaningful case-study. *TFFFB*'s stories are imbued with the ideological and countercultural system of the U.S. underground values, which challenges the translators with a labyrinth of multi-layered readings. The risk of exceeding, overlooking, or reducing the linguistic and cultural essence of the possible worlds created by Shelton's comics is high. It may ultimately result in a form of censorship, although not a deliberate one. Indeed, though no episodes of overt censorship were encountered in this analysis,

neglecting the original signification patterns and forcing them into the interpretative frames of the target culture may have similar outcomes. In this respect, future research may test the validity of isotopic analysis in the study of deliberate acts of censorship, particularly in the cases where visual manipulation accompanies the verbal. Though initially conceived in relation to verbal texts, isotopic analysis proves extremely useful for the in-depth study of such multimodal texts as comics, where both verbal and visual components participate in meaning-making processes.

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The repeatable hand and the mediated self in Mira Jacob's *Good Talk*

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ABSTRACT

The handmade mark is privileged in non-fiction comics studies, the reproduced hand offering embodied, subjective immediacy. In *Good Talk*, Mira Jacob digitally collages vector-drawn 'paper dolls' with various media, presenting an authorial subject unaccounted for by such scholarship. What is at stake in this article, then, is the relationship of the hand to the subject. Considering this relationship through a departure from a too facile semiotic distinction of indexical as opposed to merely iconic and symbolic signs, this article reconsiders indexicalities beyond the ostentatiously handcrafted aesthetics of some graphic memoirs to examine the effects of digital lettering, of re-contextualized photographs, and of other interventions to examine and move beyond some media-specific associations of immediacy and authenticity with the individualized gesture. Examining Jacob's decontextualization and repudiation of such forms on the terms of her refusal to perform a subjectivity expected from a racialized subject, it explores instead the possibilities of re-contextualizations of 'paper-dolls' in the conversations opened by her 'scrapbook' aesthetics. Shifting much of the intersubjective emotional work from the autobiographer to the reader, Jacob's innovative digital mode presents a risky but ethically productive formal invitation to read off and see the other's experience without the illusion of subjective equivalence.

Hence, this article reinterprets non-fiction comics' representation of reality beginning with the underappreciated material mark, not as a semantically conventionalized unit but as the material grounds of any such signification. In this

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perspective, it addresses the materialist discourses implicit in the handmade mark by entering into a conversation with Hillary Chute, Aaron Kashtan, and Hannah Miodrag's discussions of comics marks as media indexing process and instantiating meaning as well as Ariella Azoulay, Friedrich Kittler, and John Berger's writings on the subjective presence and Susan Kirtley's discussion of scrapbooking in comics.

I'm not going to make sense of my humanity for you. Because, on some level, you don't want my humanity to make sense to you, and I can't argue against that, so I'm just going to show it to you. You see it if you want.

Mira Jacob (2019a)

Introduction

In *Good Talk. A Memoir in Conversation*, Mira Jacob articulates her experiences as an Indian-American woman in the twentieth and twenty-first century United States through dialogues between vector-drawn 'paper doll' figures layered with personal or cultural objects and stock photographs. She accentuates this digitally scrapbooked aesthetic through characters' abstracted forms and static expressions and by insistently reusing illustrations. These repeating faces also visually structure the reader's relationship to Jacob and her material. Jacob eschews shot/reverse shot and naturalistic compositions, which might allow the reader to act as an unseen observer, opting to illustrate all her interlocutors as making eye contact with them. Through these techniques, Jacob details her personal and professional life, including her parents' marriage and immigration, her upbringing in New Mexico, her marriage with documentary director Jed Rothstein, and her successful novel *The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing*. Responding to the divisive 2016 election, Jacob nuances American racial politics through personal accounts, insight, and wit while underscoring her memoir's specificity as only one among many heterogeneous non-White American experiences.

Jacob's remarkable techniques shape her text and this article. Jacob first developed *Good Talk's* format in "37 Difficult Questions from My Mixed-Race Son," in which she depicts their conversations through arranging and photographing two cut-out drawings. This short comic reappears, digitally recreated, as *Good Talk's* first chapter. Jacob's turn from pen drawing and improvisational collaging that visually evidence her manual creative practice (Figure 1) to more restrained tablet drawing, digitally compositing, and lettering in font developed for the project (2019b) might be mistaken as only rationalizing her process, imitating her prior collaged materiality. However, her altered techniques – her remediating, or as Paul Reyes describes it, "translate[d...] skills" (2017:n.pag.) – are better approached not as distancing from earlier practices but as productively transforming them. Jacob employs material, aesthetic, and rhetorical resources of analog and digital techniques in a hybrid fashion to compound and complicate their respective effects at an intimate, subjective distance.

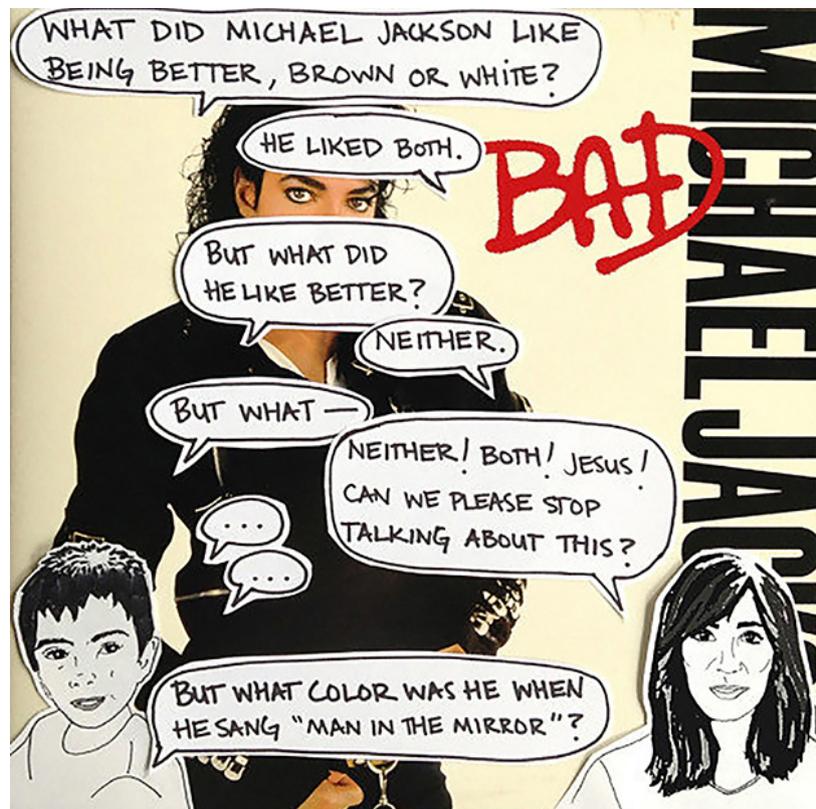


Figure 1. Mira Jacob, 37 Difficult Questions from My Mixed-Race Son, panel 11.

Once we recognize *Good Talk* as hybrid rather than merely imitative in its remediation, employing *both* analog and digital techniques, Jacob's compositions remind us that, as a mass medium, seemingly handmade comics are already mechanically reproduced: they always respond to reproductive conditions, be they digital raster resolution, xerographic contrast thresholds, or lithographic line fidelity. Jacob's practices present a valuable opportunity to investigate techniques often overlooked in non-fiction comics scholarship and to reconsider more commonly discussed analog materiality. Exploring Jacob's digital fabrication and collage aesthetics, I address materialist discourses on the handmade mark and consider other subjective traces in the discretized sign, the photographed index and the vectorized mark, and their composition and recomposition on the page.

I contextualize Jacob's representational strategies in *Good Talk* through the hand's relationship to the authorial subject within discourses on handwriting and comics materiality, exemplified by Hillary Chute's significant contributions to formal non-fiction analyzes which emphasize alternative cartoonists' handmade material experimentation. Foundational authors Thierry Groensteen and Scott McCloud underrecognize these marks' function: in attempting to systematize comics' communicative processes

through analogies with natural language, they pursue semantic stability. Groensteen dismisses marks as an “inferior standard” of semantic units (2007:3), while McCloud – in his McLuhanesque aspirations to universal visual communication – emphasizes the ways in which conventionalized marks approach symbolic writing (1994). Rather than accepting these fraught comparisons to *langue* which, in their abstracting emphasis on semantics, foreclose the unique mark’s value, I read Chute’s (2010) materialist understanding alongside Hannah Miodrag’s discussion of visual *parole* (2013) to consider these marks’ semiotic role as material indices towards their authorship, beyond their mere signification of depicted objects and events. To consign the mark to expressive style is to reduce medium to surface and meaning to abstraction. In non-fiction, such a separation of material support and semiotic content ignores the roles of convention and causation in signifying reality.

Although the embodied mark presents a valuable intersection between media studies and semiotics, focusing on a single practice risks prescriptivism. Departing from a too facile semiotic distinction of indexical as opposed to merely iconic and symbolic signs, through Jacob’s innovative, decontextualizing uses of lettering, photography, and image repetition, I reconsider indexicalities beyond ostentatiously handcrafted aesthetics foregrounding embodied specificity, to consider mechanical and digital practices. Drawing on Ariella Azoulay, Friedrich Kittler, and John Berger’s writings on subjective presence, this article considers the event of photography, the typed hand, and the seeing of drawing to approach the materiality of signified documentation and subjectivity. I introduce Jacob’s departures from more familiar representational techniques which often focus on discursive contexts to which *Good Talk* refuses to conform. I then approach how these formal departures in their repeatability challenge not only indexical causation but also iconic resemblance. Through these departures, Jacob denaturalizes and thereby politicizes the relationship between the non-fictional cartooned sign and referent reality, offering critical insights into the possibilities of representing minority experiences in comic form. Finally, I draw on Sara Ahmed’s account of subjectivity dependent on the encounter with the other and Susan Kirtley’s analysis of cartoonist Lynda Barry’s scrapbooking as techniques that assemble and describe, but incompletely reveal, memory, and subject. Informed by these accounts and Jacob’s descriptions of her process, *Good Talk* is interpretable through this idiom of subjective representation, which does not rely on the intimacy signified by the cartooned or lettered diaristic mark. Employing these techniques, Jacob may speak through alterity rather than identity: by disentangling self-consciously expressed subjectivity from the subjective mark, Jacob’s explicitly mediated and withheld, even alienating, public subjectivity allows her to represent experiences while refusing to perform identification. Shifting much of the intersubjective emotional work from the autobiographer to the reader, Jacob’s alternative digital mode presents a risky but ethically productive formal invitation to encounter the other’s experience without the illusion of subjective equivalence.

1. Textu(r)al rhythms

Creators and scholars of non-fiction comics often emphasize their conspicuously hand-drawn creation that effects an embodied intimacy. Aaron Kashtan perhaps overstates the effects of comics studies' emergent canon when he claims that such North American scholarship on alternative auteurs has "distorted views of the field, causing scholars to identify comics as a whole with one particular genre of comics. Almost all the works in the academic canon are graphic memoirs or works of graphic journalism" (2018:12-13); this overemphasis, he argues, has limited research and

provides an incomplete account of materiality that is frequently biased by a focus on non-fiction genres. For example, Hillary Chute's work on Alison Bechdel and Lynda Barry is based on the naive assumption that printed comics are literal replications of the author's handwriting. (Kashtan 2018: 14)

Kashtan, drawing on Emma Tinker's writing on production methods and publication formats, later juxtaposes the alternative comics community's "fetishiz[ation]" (2018:27) of handcrafted books' perceived value as "strong enough to create the impression that comics produced or distributed by other means are somehow *devoid* of materiality, or materially impoverished" (2018:27). My conversations with comics scholars, creators, and editors anecdotally affirm these perceptions. Despite his borderline polemical tone, Kashtan's sketch of Chute as exemplifying comics studies' emphasis on the handwritten as responding to – and therefore best suited to interpreting – certain expressive modes is valuable as it frames my investigation which similarly attempts to broaden accounts to address the mechanical and the digital.

When Chute responds to Art Spiegelman's observation that "James Joyce and Jacqueline Susann can both be set in Times New Roman" (2010:11) to argue

what feels so intimate about comics is that *it looks like what it is*; handwriting is an irreducible part of its instantiation. The subjective mark of the body is not retranslated through type, but, rather, the bodily mark of handwriting both provides a visual quality and texture and is also extrasemantic [; ... it] cannot be "reflowed." (Chute 2010:11, original emphasis¹)

she emphasizes comics' "extrasemantic" and materially specific immediacy but denies that of typeset media. This opposition elides comics' digital and print mass media contexts as well as digital techniques' challenges to such a dichotomy. In undermining the binary opposition of mechanical and digital repeatable equivalence and modularity

¹ Note: In the following, all quoted emphasis is original, except where specified otherwise.

with embodied, uniquely instantiated marks, digital lettering allows us to reconsider type's medium-specific expressive potential. N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman note writing's materiality when they argue that our postprint, multimodal, and often no-longer-discrete media production methods underscore that print itself is a medium: when writing media were only

quill pen, inkpot, and paper, it was possible to fantasize that writing was simple and straightforward, a means by which the writer's thoughts could be transferred [...] into the reader's mind. With the proliferation of technical media in the latter half of the nineteenth century, that illusion became more difficult to maintain. (Hayles and Pressman 2013: ix)

Jacob's methods and influences refute any similar expectation that typed lettering conforms, in its discrete regularity and modularity, to this fantasy of a neutral, immediate channel, instead evidencing its affective and expressive qualities. Jacob conveys her admiration of Barry's work, not only describing a sense of affinity between Barry's creative processes and her own but also noting that she discovered Barry's *What It Is* (2008) when first exploring graphic narratives and that the book's writing exercises and conceptual inquiries encouraged her own work (cf. Jacob 2019a, 2019c). Of Barry's idiosyncratic lettering that seemingly arbitrarily alternates between uppercase print and lowercase cursive, Chute writes that denotative interpretations are insufficient and that this "ruffling of the visual surface of the book – this inscription of irregularity – slows one down and also works to establish an extrasemantic visual rhythm through the presentation of words" (2010:111). Without overstating Barry's influence, *Good Talk's* consistent lettering is best contextualized by Jacob's awareness of Barry's material practices, perhaps in addition to Jacob's own experiences writing prose from which she departs in *Good Talk*. Rather than as non-reflexively neutral or driven by efficiency, Jacob's lettering should be understood as an aesthetic technique in its own right. If irregularity may be expressive, so, too, may regularity.

One might recognize an opposite effect to Barry's ruffling in *Good Talk's* legible consistency that matches Jacob's dialogic wit and speed. Also, one might further read for regularity as accentuating difference. Jacob represents her fifth-grade teacher's dialogue in a double-spaced, slab-serif faux-typewritten font that lends her voice conservative rigidity and authority, echoing her role and her stiff, grimacing illustration that is juxtaposed by young Mira's unselfconscious smile and 'naturally' articulated (lettered) voice (cf. Jacob 2019d:49). When Mira's father, dying of cancer, smokes to relieve his discomfort, his stoned voice achieves its visual gag due to its wandering difference from Jacob's standard font treatment (Figure 2, Jacob 2019d:236). Jacob also sometimes adjusts her font size, suggesting dialogic volume. Speed and sometimes-underscored dissonance cannot account for Jacob's insistent

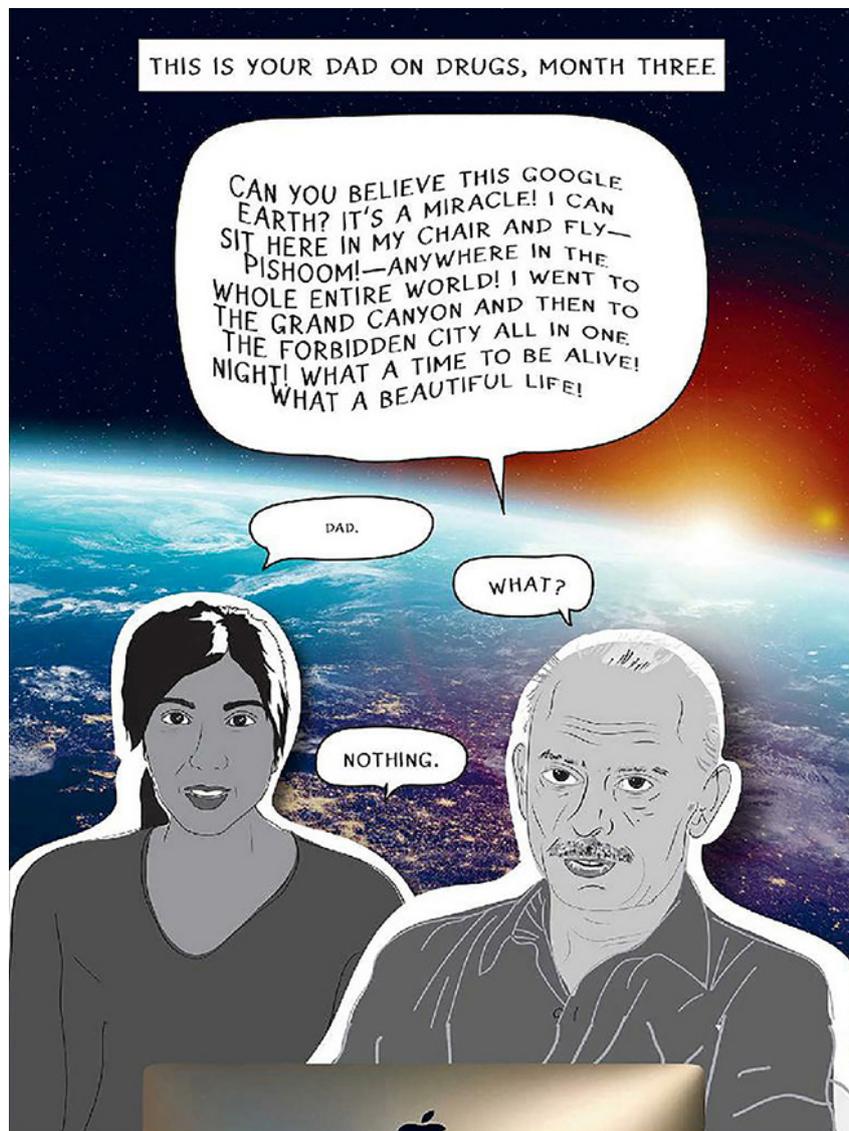


Figure 2. Mira Jacob, *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations*, 236.

regularity; neither effect is so dramatic as to demand consistency, and her short comics are not so typographically restricted.² Furthermore, while letterers often rely on linguistic texture (for example, bold denoting emphasis), *Good Talk* Jacob implements no such sentence-level lettering variations. In accord with her unchanging paper-doll faces that similarly visually deny emotive context (sections 4-5), Jacob rather offers few typographical tonal aids, placing such demands on the reader. Where, as Chute describes, Barry's text demonstrates an extrasemantic rhythmic irregularity in her

² Jacob's 2017 "From His Corner, A Bodega Owner Watches Brooklyn Change" and 2018 "Whereby I Tell My Past Self Future Things," both stylistically similar to *Good Talk* and published in the same period, typographically vary more.

comics, Jacob's very lack of textural variation or emphasis performs an equivalent role by denying her reader recourse to any such expressive support.

These constituent, materially affective marks acquire particular significance in non-fiction cartoonists' distinctly subjective modes of visual witnessing. The twentieth century saw photojournalism's rise, and with it debates on the technical medium's claims of mechanistic truth and objectivity. Integrating comics into the historical tension between photographic and drawn documentary, Chute asserts that comics, as a form "which rejects the verisimilitude of mechanical objectivity and presents in turn a succession of little drawn boxes, reveals its own process of making [... and yet] is also forcefully invested in detailed documentation – of place, of duration, of perspective, of material specificity, of embodiment" (2016:18). Here, Chute asserts that handmade expressions' unique, subjective embodiment accords with a unique experience – once again opposing mechanical processes and reflecting material practices frequently employed in non-fiction comics' creation and interpretation. Renouncing mechanical documentation's false transparency, cartoonists materialize their reflexive subjectivity in the embodied hand.

Cartoonists' drawn opposition to verisimilitude, however, cannot be reduced to abandoning a mechanical form for a subjective one: in a non-fiction context, the truth claims of these media demand consideration. Elisabeth El Refaie draws on Peircean semiotic typology, contrasting photographs' seeming immediacy, iconic in their resemblance and indexical in their dependence on photochemical processes to produce an image, with iconic cartoons which, despite their resemblance, lack an indexical relationship to their content and may in their abstraction tend towards symbolic convention (cf. El Refaie 2012:152). She then approaches non-fiction illustration through Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's social semiotic assertions that visual conventions form the basis of truth values, underscoring naturalism's historical specificity that "there are no necessary or sufficient rules of correspondence between pictures and their real-world referents" (2012:153). Having undermined realism's truth claims and attempting to justify amateur non-fictional style, El Refaie describes an "authentic intention" (2012:155) stylistically characterized by an untrained "aura of the authentic and personal" (2012:155) and suggests that individual style somehow produces a reality effect unaccounted for by Kress or van Leeuwen's cultural conventions. El Refaie briefly considers the stylizing, cartooning hand but, when describing that documentary photographs "redrawn by the hand" retain "some of the[ir] aura of authenticity" (2012:164-165), she treats the hand only as remediating, weakening their indexical relationship. In non-fiction, however, the stakes of connoting truth value are too great to account for differences between photographic immediacy and a cartooned lack thereof only through this gesture towards authenticity or intention.

Hannah Miodrag's comparisons of iconic and symbolic modes offer another account of medium-specific representation. Miodrag describes Umberto Eco's example of "a semicircle and a dot that, in drawing a human face, might represent a smile and

eye, while the exact same forms within the depiction of a bowl of fruit might signify a banana and a grape seed" (Miodrag 2013:9), and further differentiates between figuration that is necessarily instantiated in the *parole* of specific utterances and linguistic combinatory reliance on "a preexistent *langue* – the abstract differential system of language" (2013:9). Here, Miodrag deftly refutes any homology between the constituent, motivated marks of drawing that lack stable semantic iconic value and the arbitrary morphemes of language defined by their semantic value. But in discussing spacing and lexical form, Miodrag notes that such visual configurations,

chiefly looked at here in terms of how they mold the reception of *text*, are vital elements in comics' visual arsenal, but do not operate as signs standing in for an identifiable signified. These devices cannot be considered in isolation from the signifiers they materialize. They constitute the *material* contextual effects that distinguish *parole* from the repeatable conceptual signifiers that constitute the *langue* (2013:79).

Unlike El Refaie's account, which divides style and medium from signification, Miodrag acknowledges the *necessary interdependence* of the sign with its formal and material expression.

Comparing Peirce's indexical-iconic photograph to Chute's description of autobiographical writing and cartooning mark as "forcefully invested in detailed documentation [...] of embodiment" (2016:18) shows both representational forms' material dependence on arising from – and thereby also documenting – their processes of creation upon which their relationship to their objects depends. Externalizing signs' traced conditions of expression from their signification in order to only consider the abstract semantic relationship of signs to conceptual content would ignore their causal relationships to their creation and, by extension, their qualities as a sign. The specific qualities of the material medium and materialized sign are, in practice, interdependent: the documentary sign's indexical connotation of the reality it stands in for would be severed without its material expression. These are stakes of the material trace as connoting the sign's reality, which are precisely the relationships Jacob challenges through her unconventional techniques.

2. Objective and subjective traces

In order to consider Jacob's broader challenges, I turn to her photographs. As she subverts manual-mechanical binaries through her font, so, too, does Jacob unsettle conventional photographic indexicality. Ariella Azoulay's description of the interplay between subjective and objective inscriptions offers one way of interpreting Jacob's strategies.

Azoulay argues

the appearance and disappearance of objects in the gaze of photography do not attest to the essential unreliability of the photograph. They attest, rather, and first and foremost, to the fact that a photograph does not possess a single sovereign, stable point of view [. A] photograph is the product of an encounter of several protagonists, mainly photographer and photographed, camera and spectator. (2010:10-11)

Azoulay rejects the single photographer-subject in favor of a multiple, intersubjective encounter. These implied conditions are potentially “reconstruct[ed]” (2012:121) by the audience’s gaze and imagination, who by recognizing these conditions’ traces may extend their “awareness to all those who took part in the production of the visible, [...] allowing all participants to meet on the same plane, even if momentarily” (2012:121) in what Azoulay calls the audience’s “civil imagination” (2012:121). Azoulay asserts that such traces necessarily include technical media that “inscribe a certain inalienable point of view in arenas where people encounter each other” (2012:27): the camera’s, the mediating object-protagonist that “nobody can identify with” (2012:27) and which thereby denies spectators’ ownership. The encounter’s necessarily incomplete subjective access (as its mechanical protagonist is unknowable) encourages imaginative engagement to subjectively interpret incompletely inscribed encounters, but this trace’s incompleteness also resists total subjective assimilation. Azoulay’s visual trace evidence and subjective recognition aligns with Chute’s reflexive manual documentation, encouraging photographic evidence’s interpretation not in opposition to the manual in its mechanical objectivity but as another documentary trace that also inscribes subjective presence in addition to its visual representation – less ostentatiously than the hand and complicated by its mechanical mediation. Jacob’s iterable font that removes her hand from its unique embodiment encourages us to consider how she employs material remediation in both writing and photography to challenge subjective identification. As the experience of Jacob’s hand becomes independent from any embodied event, so, too, is her photography agnostic to any indexed encounter.

While Jacob sometimes employs documentary photography, her photographic backgrounds often subvert any verifying index by compounding photography’s incomplete subjectivity. Responding to an interviewer describing fictional “world-building” techniques, Jacob states that she “enjoyed placing a character in a certain setting, looking for the right photograph until it said exactly what I needed it to. And I got the same relief doing it that I get writing a good scene in fiction” (2019a: n.pag.). Jacob documents over 250 times she employs others’ photography, accounting for the bulk of her photographic backgrounds. Underscoring world-building

narrative use over verification of, or fidelity to, an event's appearance, Jacob renders the latter suspect through her image-crediting postscriptual index.

For example, Jacob captions a photograph: "I was living in Williamsburg, where the rents were still low and you could see all of glittering Manhattan if you walked down to the East River" (Figure 3, 2019d:126). Juxtaposed with the previous page's technically proficient pre-9/11 New York City skyline, this photograph's reciprocity failure and unassuming content invite the reader to imagine Jacob's repurposed memento or return to her old home to reanimate her past, an intimate moment as we imagine seeing through her camera lens. As Roland Barthes describes the grain of the voice or the hand as the material mark of a subject's embodied effort (1988), this noise might be extended to the mark of an individual photographer's effort as well, the evidence of deviation from technical standards indexed, as Azoulay might agree,



Figure 3. Mira Jacob, *Good Talk*, 126.

simultaneously with its visual content. Jacob, however, attributes this photograph to “Adobe Stock/Bruno Passigatti” (2019d:354). She undermines even her own photographic record, presenting the possibility of subjective insight through intersubjective imagination but then denying it. While her parents’ contextualizing oak kitchen cabinetry bear no external photo credit and therefore indicate that the photographs are Jacob’s, the reader cannot assume that they index or iconically resemble such an experience. Through hyperreal play, the contexts of her often-intimate conversations and revelations, and by extension, the events themselves, remain foreign to us and underscore their function as only *symbolic relays* for experience. Whatever Jacob shows us of her domestic world is a product of world-building, assembled for our benefit, so her reality remains private.

3. Marking oneself

As Jacob subverts photographic expectations, her manipulation of handmade marks – drawing and writing’s material basis – invites a similar exploration into manual and digital connotations. Since the hand’s emotive trace and the photograph’s optical trace also document subjective presences, we may approach Jacob’s digitized hand as it bespeaks the dynamics of presence and disclosure. Friedrich Kittler quotes German nineteenth century journal *Vom Fels zum Meer*’s commentary on the popularization of the typewriter, expressing their anxiety over the lost “intimacy of handwritten expressions” (1999:186) and remarking that, “after the engineer had deprived woman’s tender hand of the actual symbol of female industriousness [weaving], one of his colleagues hit upon replacing the quill, the actual symbol of male intellectual activity, with a machine” (Kittler 1999:186). Rather than exploring gender dualism here, I draw attention to Kittler’s reminder that “[t]he literal meaning of text is tissue” (1999:186)³: the mark, in its embodiment, comes to signify the body itself. Kittler later references Martin Heidegger’s *Parmenides* (1950) comments rejecting the typewriter. Heidegger’s similar unease at type remediating the human hand is most illuminating in his assertion that, without the hand, the “signless cloud” (quoted in Kittler 1999: 199) of the typewritten word is withdrawn from the physical evidence of the writing hand that exists “only where there is [both] disclosure and concealment” (quoted in Kittler 1999:198). Heidegger, like Barthes, deems type’s standardized noiselessness – that only hides its embodied production – lacking. Chute more forcefully defends this originary mark: instead of Heidegger’s suspicions that typing is changing writing, she implies that

³ Referencing the Latin *textus*, tissue or literary style, from “to weave.”

there is some more-authentic *manuscript* when she positions handwriting as closer to the author's body than "retranslated" (2010:11) type (section 1). Preceding her and Spiegelman's comments on Times New Roman, Chute writes,

That the same hand is both writing and drawing in the narrative in comics leads to a sense of the form as diaristic; there is an intimacy to reading handwritten marks on the printed page, an intimacy that works in tandem with the sometimes visceral effects of presenting "private" images.

Handwriting underscores the subjective positionality of the author. Emphasizing the handmade aspect of comics, Spiegelman explains that comics is "as close to getting a clear copy of one's diary or journal as one could have. It's more intimate than a book of prose that's set in type [...]. The quirks of penmanship that make up comics have a much more immediate bridge to somebody [...]. You're getting an incredible amount of information about the maker." (2010:10-11, cf. Spiegelman 1994)

Good Talk pressures the binary of standardized type and grainy handwriting. Having created a repeatable but also unique font from her handwriting, Jacob types in her own hand's discretized image. Although it traces her (vectorized) embodied gesture, and it is through these gestures that her characters speak, her written voice is simultaneously distanced, only the standardized mark mediating the 'bridge' between subjects.

Kashtan likewise challenges the opposition of the hand's 'diaristic' visibility and type's 'concealing' remediation, noting that Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* – diaristic and painstakingly attentive to subjects' handwriting – is (like *Good Talk*) typed by the author in her own hand when not representing documents. He asserts that the presumed material concealment or visibility of the writer's identity is dependent on the graphological optimism that the hand's gesture could unconsciously reveal a stable self rather than socially fluid personae: the "ostensible purpose of graphology was to give its subject an insight into his or her innermost self, but its deeper effect was to reassure the subject that he or she *had* a singular, stable core of selfhood" (Kashtan 2018:34). Kashtan argues that they reveal only the "connotations of personality and intimacy which typewriting lacks" (2018:35) and argues that both graphologists' methods and Chute's diaristic 'sense' reveal their medium bias, a "preference for manual over mechanical labor" in materially claiming authenticity (Kashtan 2018:40). Kashtan describes Bechdel's typed hand as "personal and distinctive, but also reserved and reticent. It exposes itself to a limited degree [...] Bechdel embraces and partially rejects the graphological myth [...]. Alison's depiction of her/self is to some extent a façade" (2018:41). Here, Kashtan might nearly be writing on Jacob's textual practices as well.

Contextualized by Jacob's photographic hyperreal subversion of any disclosed presence, the urgency of materially persuading truth recedes, revealing the limits of Kashtan's interpretive corrections. For all his attention critiquing *historical* graphological connotations of immediacy, Kashtan hazards reducing *formal* mediatic differences to rhetorical performances across media. His account nearly reduces each textual medium's aesthetic specificity to culturally informed material signification, which comes at the expense of recognizing media as formally distinct expressive resources. The expressive and affective connotational differences between Barry's idiosyncratic handwriting and Jacob's almost Comic Sans conspicuousness as a non-connecting script font cannot be reduced to medium-specific socially predetermined conceptualizations of selfhood: we must consider the actual informational legibility of such textual forms. Jacob's font eschews the "incredible amount of information" (1994: n.pag.) Spiegelman ascribes to the hand, not only on the author's supposed *identity* but on her *emotional* state or performance: in her font's typographical flatness, Jacob literally denies access to visual information that emotive lettering might offer. If Bechdel's script speaks to her narrative's partially withheld authenticity, Jacob's, in its photographic context that already denies assurances of reality or experiential access, confirms its distance through its visual informational paucity that forecloses a notable expressive resource in comics. In her chirographic flatness that is contextualized by comics' lettering conventions, Jacob represents her subjectivity neither through materially unreflective myths of textual transparency nor intimate expressive opposition to modular type but rather in writing that in its non-expressivity suggests the formal and semiotic mediating distance between her lived experience and its representation to the reader.

Good Talk's intimate content but materially signified and affectively asserted distance speaks not only to diaristic texture but to specifically diaristic comics. Susan Kirtley describes the tension activated by these comics' telling that "blurs lines between public and private, the diary implying a hidden, secret tale, while the direct address breaks the frame and argues for an implied, decidedly public audience. This [...] *metalepsis* positions the reader as witness, confidante, and friend" (2012:89-90). It is this subjective privacy found in Kirtley's diaristic comics and Chute's embodied hand that *Good Talk* withholds. Texturally, Jacob's figures are incongruous with their photographic backdrops, and repeating vector-drawn caption frames and word balloons draw attention more to their regulated curves than to Jacob's unique hand. Within grey-bordered chapters recalling more distant moments, Jacob's captions situate encounters in time and place and describe intervening events retrospectively and externally. Jacob's verbal pithiness announces its performance for her public audience: Mira's suspended verbal interjection, "Dad. [...] Nothing." (Figure 2), suggests her honest discomfort at her father's uncharacteristic behavior, but Jacob's narration, "This is Your Dad on Drugs" (2019d:236), resists deeper intimacy through its

pop-cultural, jokingly citational tone. In her faster-paced white-bordered chapters set during 2016 and Donald Trump's election, Jacob's interventions are sparser. Typically limited to initial contextualization, if even present, her comments further avoid diaristic revelation, placing the explanatory onus on the depicted encounters themselves. Jacob underscores her captions' descriptive rather than emotionally revealing quality, forgoing even limited text scaling. As with her photographic backgrounds that present the possibility of, but then deny, intimate experiential connections, by articulating her private account through her subjectively unique hand but denying unique visual indexicality, Jacob alters the private-public tension, indicating the former's existence but asserting its subjective absence from the latter address or content. Despite its telling, much of Jacob's experience remains secret: The publicly addressed reader is not Jacob's confidante.

4. Marked experience

I have considered the unique gesture and the repeatable form as visual media supporting the written communication they make possible, and how such marks might affect the reader's perception of authorial subjectivity and expression. Once we have investigated their effects within a restricted scope, it is valuable to explore Jacob's techniques in *Good Talk's* other representational forms constituted by repeated or non-repeated marks, namely, human figures. Considering the mark's subjectivity again, I turn to John Berger's discussion of life drawing's practices and effects. Berger writes, where paintings often disguise their practice by emphasizing mimetic acumen, drawings materially "reveal the process of their own making, their own looking" (2006:43). Berger's claims here underscore embodied marks' temporality. Where Azoulay describes the photographed image's evidencing multiple protagonists' *encounters*, Berger asserts that drawing evidences its necessarily sustained process, a multiplicity of *experiences*. He writes,

A drawing of a tree shows not a tree, but a tree being-looked-at. Whereas the sight of a tree is registered almost instantaneously, the examination of the sight of a tree (a tree being-looked-at) not only takes minutes or hours instead of a fraction of a second, it also involves, derives from, and refers back to, much previous experience of looking. Within the instant of the sight of a tree is established a life-experience. [...] From each glance a drawing assembles a little evidence, but it consists of the evidence of many glances which can be seen together [, ...] so many assembled moments that they constitute a totality rather than a fragment. (Berger 2006:43-44)

Berger asserts the temporal connections between experience, a multiplicity of subjective observations, and their inscription in marks through cyclic glance and gesture. Considered alongside her typed hand, Jacob's explicitly repeated but hand-drawn gestures reveal that they, too, demonstrate her subjective presence while resisting any illusion of experiential transparency or necessary iconic resemblance. Jacob's drawn portraits (derived in some manner from observation) evoke Berger's temporalizing assertions that, in observational drawing, such marks inevitably also evidence the accumulation of experience over time. Susan Stewart similarly asserts the signature's temporality that, like the voice, suggests the personal in its embodiment because it necessarily documents the body over time (cf. Kashtan 2018:28). However, as Jacob eschews her handwriting's unique temporal embodiment through its repetition and as she undermines the photograph's relationship to its documented encounter, she likewise renounces any certainty that her drawings reveal in their resemblance to an observation or memory of the unique experienced event they illustrate. Jacob extensively reuses her small cast of 'paper dolls' that she digitally drew for *Good Talk*, often transplanting complete figures, including their simulated cuts, between panels. Even when hair or clothing changes, poses and expressions – staring at the reader, mouth slightly ajar – typically remain. Although Mira, her husband Jed, and their son Z's expressions change over time, their expressions are consistent within each period, and her parents and brother retain theirs even as they age. Outside of Mira's immediate family and closest friends, this decontextualizing repetition is more pronounced as figures often become iterable categories: her teenage boyfriend returns as a teenage witness alongside adult Mira and a decade later reappears as a fellow passenger. Jacob severs the relationship between these figures and her experiences of individual events or people. To undermine not only index but resemblance questions both objective and subjective access and experiential identification, reducing experiences and figures to their abstracted type as well as emphasizing their role as only (potentially arbitrary) relays in service of merely telling rather than iconically or indexically reflecting or recording her experience.

Jacob's repudiation of the individual gesture or experience is not absolute. As Berger's drawings pull in lived experience, Jacob's do as well. Her rare diagrams illuminate this capacity. Often denoted by graph or lined paper, when Jacob depicts thoughts or summarizes complex events she does so by diagramming and illustrating (Figure 4, Jacob 2019d:38.2). By foregrounding her drawings' decontextualization and iterability, Jacob refuses to guarantee any iconic resemblance to their referents and can draw attention to cartooning as abstraction. Instead of denying the complex depth of their referents, her cartooning materially draws attention to its limits as a signifier that only references such depth. Jacob states,

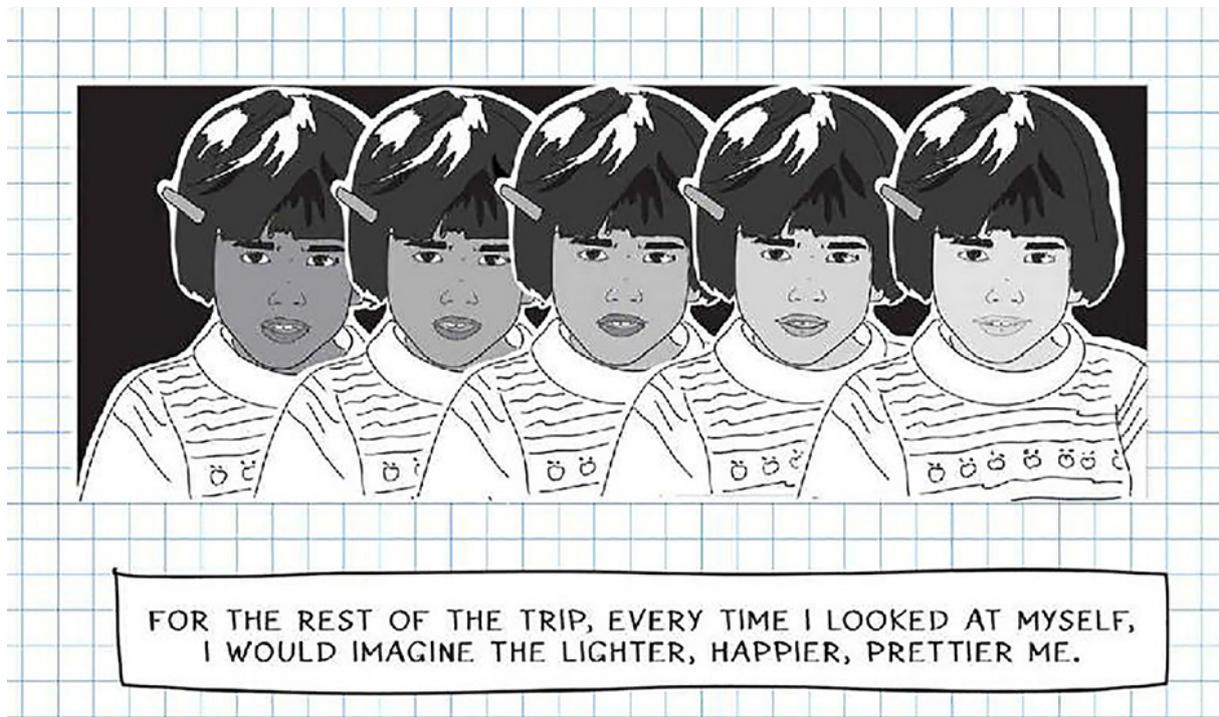


Figure 4. Mira Jacob, *Good Talk*, 38.2.

I imagine that my mother is much more complicated than she appears on the panels in the book, and so are my in-laws and my husband and my child – and so am I. This is a portion of us, and it's never going to be all of us. (2019e)

Ironically, it is Jacob's refusal to represent a moment through precise visual description – for instance a particular expression or a stranger's individuated face – that implies the complexity of represented individuals in her figures' representational insufficiency. Jacob's invocation of imagination as necessarily speculative supposition evokes Azoulay's civil imagination in this recognized complexity that denies certain knowledge in its interruptions.

In accordance with his *tressage* argument, describing nonlinear visual series within linear comics narratives, Thierry Groensteen argues that

once the same motif is represented several times it transports all of its attributes (its predicates) along with it. If we want to provide recognition to the descriptive properties of the drawing, we must therefore admit that it is a description that is infinitely restarted, to which we cannot assign a particular site. (2007:124)

Denied of their unique instantiation in the embodied gesture and of a moment, Jacob's 'paper dolls' resist stable experiential identification and necessarily foreground their abstracted role as such 'infinitely restarting' networked relays of accumulated meaning. I employ Jacob's 'paper dolls' terminology in part to articulate their connection to her prototypical collages but also to reflect their significance to her process. Jacob describes realizing the "urgency" she could effect if she "let the paper dolls speak and if [she] couldn't rely on expressions but [she] also couldn't rely on action. Right. Nobody ever moves. [...] They're just holding the space of basically a brain or a psyche on the page" (2020a; transcription amended according to audio). Whether articulating Jacob's complicated memories of herself and her family in their networked proliferation or as figural palimpsests evidencing their visual and psychic representational insufficiency, these forms' iterable, non-expressive flatness again encourages the reader's imagination of their subjective existence.

Through these interruptions, Jacob denies the reader the sight of her sight and resists their illusions of knowing her experience.

5. Positioned subjects

Jacob's networked repeated forms are not geometric abstractions but representations of other humans addressing the reader through their gaze. Drawing attention to the reader's encounters with her figures through positioning and simulated gazes, Jacob socially charges the experience of sight and space. In writing on the vanishing point's cultural development, Erwin Panofsky notes that linear perspective has rationalized the "subjective visual impression" (1991:66) such that "this very impression could itself become the foundation for a solidly grounded [...] experiential world," (1991:66) perspectively producing a "subjective standpoint of a beholder" (1991:66) in such an intimately experienced space. When Panofsky cites Albrecht Dürer's commentary that "'Perspectiva' is a Latin word which means 'seeing through,'" (Panofsky 1991:27) he evokes the doubled experience of the picture plane as both material surface and illusionistic window. In considering Jacob's compositions within graphic memoir, one might extend Panofsky's argument to 'seeing through' another's unique perspective and experience. If the 'subjective standpoint of the beholder' may imbricate the art-beholding audience's position with that of the event-beholding subjective photographer/drawer, Jacob's subversion of both the photographic index and the observational or mnemonic assembly also representationally subverts her audience's identification with her observing perspective: she denies the fantasy of a shared position and visual experience.

Jacob does not wholly eschew perspectival positioning but instead precisely and often uncomfortably situates her reader through it. As her paper dolls' placement and

scale accords with their photographic perspectival environments, the dolls' persistently returned gazes are necessarily directed towards the reader's position relative to the picture plane. As figures talk to one another while facing the reader in these encounters, Jacob metaleptically positions us as addressees as much as she positions any character. Jacob describes her emotional exhaustion trying to express herself during Trump's rise, throughout which her and other non-White Americans' "White liberal friends were saying, 'This identity politics is really what's the problem.' In the moment that we're feeling the anxiety for real things that are happening, our friends are saying [,] 'Part of the problem is that you're feeling the anxiety'" (2019b: n.pag.). Jacob's subsequent question, "How the fuck do you *look* at someone and say that?" (2019b: n.pag., emphasis added) in her anger and disbelief also implies her belief or hope that the encounter with another should effect solidarity. Responding to this emotionally unreceptive White denial, Jacob describes that her 'paper dolls'

helped me skip [...] the step where I felt all the disbelief. [...] It] became a question of eavesdropping. People can listen or they can not. I just kept moving our unchanging expressions from album cover to album cover [... It] felt like such a relief to do that. [...] To not engage with those voices of doubt, to give them nothing – no part of my emotion, no part of my pain beyond the conversation itself.

My first editor commented and said, "It's jarring when you're having these emotional passages and nobody's face moves, do you think you want to make one or two expressions? A consternation face, or when something's really sad, a little hint of a tear?" And I said, No. I'm not performing this. And that thing that you're feeling when you're uncomfortable because you have to hold the emotion that my face won't? I want that. Because when you stop looking to the characters to emote, the feelings land on you, and you have to make sense of it. The whole reason I wrote this book is because I think America has this kind of insatiable hunger for witnessing racial pain, and then denying it. Demanding the details from bodies of color and then using them to deny all the ways in which those experiences could possibly be true. (Jacob 2020b: n.pag.)

I quote Jacob at length here to underscore the emotional and political commitments underlying her reticence. She politicizes comics' frequently described informational paucity and resultant participatory demands of reader inference: by refusing to emotionally perform the embodied mark – refusing to do the labor of easing the reader's access by performing under their gaze – she instead subjects them to her characters' unemotive script and stares.

It is also through these looks that Jacob asserts the subjectivity that she refuses to perform. A reader's discomfort under simulated gazes is not provoked by their unknowable *distance* from the other but by their *contact* with the other and the emotional work that it demands. Sarah Ahmed's understanding of the intersubjective social encounter as the event through which the subject itself is constituted (2000:23) is particularly relevant to Jacob's explicitly social aesthetic that invites Azoulay's civil imagination. Ahmed argues that "there is no body as such that is given in the world" (2000:40) that instead "bodies materialise in a complex set of temporal and spatial relations to other bodies, including bodies that are recognized as familiar [...] and those that are considered strange" (2000:40). Through Elizabeth Grosz' physically, disciplinarily inscribed body, Jacques Lacan's misrecognizing identification, and Frantz Fanon's racially specific reworking of Lacan's theories, Ahmed argues the contingency of the embodied subject and its contingency on identifying itself relative to specific, rather than abstract, others (2000:42-44). She privileges the skin as the site of this contact: along with its immediate visual signs of difference, Ahmed describes skin as

a border or boundary, supposedly holding or containing the subject within a certain contour, keeping the subject inside, and the other outside; or in Frantz Fanon's terms, the skin becomes *a seal* [... But] Jean-Luc Nancy discusses the skin as an *exposure* to the other, as always passing from one to the other [... If] the skin is a border, then it is *a border that feels*. [... While] the skin appears to be the matter which separates the body, it rather allows us to think of how the materialization of our bodies involves, not containment, but an affective opening out of bodies to other bodies, in the sense that the skin registers how bodies are touched by others. Sue Cataldi's concern with skin as an 'ambiguous, shifting border' centres on the question of how our skin 'paradoxically protects us from others and exposes us to them.' (Ahmed 2000:44-5)

Ahmed's description of this intersubjective barrier and contact resonates with the limning cuts of Jacob's 'paper dolls.' These borders, which cast their digital shadows and obscure other forms behind them, more clearly define their contained figures through the same space that isolates their contents. But it is also only through these mediating spaces that their contained subjects have any contact with their reality. Occasionally – most often between family – these distinctions dissolve as their white trim space exists contiguously with their neighbors'. These spaces, neither static, iconic, nor impenetrable, may be best understood through Ahmed and Cataldi's paradoxical border.

6. Scrapbooked conversations

As much as they isolate figures, these white spaces perform a more literal role, clarified by Jacob's term, 'paper dolls': they identify and differentiate themselves as objects within their page's composition. Jacob's scrapbooked object fulfills a similar role to the conventional cartooned mark that evidences the autobiographer's subjective presence. I distinguish scrapbooking from broader collage techniques through Jacob's gendered description of her cut-outs and their explicitly autobiographical function in her work. Jacob invites her work's gendered reading when describing *Good Talk*'s influences that Barry creates "stories that are both domestic and feral, and that's the space that I was living in with this [book]" (2020b: n.pag.). Jacob's objectification of personal experiences in digital distance, similarly to Ahmed's inside-outside border that both contains and exposes as well as Barry's conjoined domestic-feral narrative structures, maybe better interpreted not in opposition to handmade intimacy but in continuity with it. As Barry's idiosyncratic expressive lettering helps illuminate Jacob's digitally reticent fonts, Barry's collages aid in interpreting Jacob's digital forms.

Despite their materially distinct styles (superficially, Jacob's digitally proliferating objects bear little resemblance to Barry's handmade pages), these artists share underlying scrapbooked compositional practices. Kirtley, introducing Barry's cartooned and collaged "autobifictionalography" (Barry 2002: unpaginated indicia) *One! Hundred! Demons!*, writes that

Barry fashions a scrapbook of sorts, employing this gendered, domestic form to frame her life stories with ephemera from childhood and artistic collages [...] These shaped and constructed images of Barry's life focus on girlhood as mediated through her memory and her skills [...] suggesting a vision that stresses an archival record of personal history through interposing lenses of time and technology. (Kirtley 2012:148)

This archive presents a self that, Kirtley writes, "incorporates artistic renditions of identity along with photographic evidence and mass-produced artifacts, blending an inner vision of character with historical documentation. Through this method, the creator herself remains essentially obscure, revealing her soul while retaining some measure of privacy" (2012:153). Contextualized by Barry's influence on Jacob and my refutation of manual and mechanical oppositions, Barry's manual composition of a physical archive becomes less relevant, and Kirtley's account of materially arranged subjectivity is revealed as equally applicable to *Good Talk*. Reading Jacob's mediation only as more mediated, non-manual, and therefore less immediately available would be reductive. Instead, I find Jacob's digital construction compelling because this arrangement *also* exposes her subjective archive: her "scrapbooking" is simultaneously reticent and intimate. I now explore this latter intimacy.

Z's Michael Jackson album covers compose three-quarters of Jacob's "37 Questions" backgrounds, which *Good Talk's* first chapter retains. Z's questions and Mira's answers address Z's biracial identity, his favorite singer's appearance over time, and tensions around racial police violence and the emergent Black Lives Matter movement, so the unmentioned albums naturally imply intertextual conversation with the narrative (Figure 1, 2015). These dialogues between mother and son, written and drawn in her hand and using his objects of identification, somewhat inexpertly photographed by her on their table (2019e) return in *Good Talk*. This reveals, beneath its disembodied digitality, its intimate archival practice akin to Barry's discussed above. While Jackson's album covers are photographs, Jacob treats them as objects as much as she does her 'paper dolls' or cut-out word balloons. Similarly, *Good Talk's* photographs may be understood first as composed objects rather than as indexing encounters prior to their repurposing by Jacob. Her discrete hand and her roughly cut and repeated dolls, like her photographic backgrounds, communicate meaning as arranged mnemonic symbols and relays which are denied iconicity and indexicality. Like Berger's drawn rather than painted mark, Jacob's objects reflexively account for their subjective creation through their insistent (if digital) materiality.

Recognizing formal similarities between Jacob and Barry's practices, Kirtley's writing on Barry offers another way of reading Jacob's compositions. On Barry's work, Kirtley cites *The Scrapbook in American History*, that "Scrapbooks shuffle and recombine the coordinates of time, space, location, voice, and memory" and later argues that they "are a material manifestation of memory – the memory of the compiler and the memory of the cultural moment in which they were made. [...] They are but partial, coded, accounts – very small tellings of memory" (quoted in Kirtley 2012:173). Recalling Jacob's comment that her 'paper dolls' substitute for "a brain or a psyche on the page" (2020a) and recognizing that they still are, regardless of vectored regulation, the materialization of people being-looked-at, these objectified relays which preserve fragmentary conversations may be understood as Jacob's encoded, 'material manifestation of memory' as much as any ephemera might. Jacob describes,

I think we all have those conversations that just live in our brains forever, because they have informed some part of us so deeply. [...] I gave the book to my family and in-laws before I published it. I said, "This is what's in there and let's talk." (Jacob 2019e: n.pag.)

Jacob's paired deictics are ambiguous: she may mean 'this,' the book's contents, and 'there,' the book-object but, contextualized by her prior statement, 'this' may be as much her memory – as materially relayed through her book – held 'there,' in her

consciousness. Describing a memoir, this polysemy may seem redundant. However, contextualized by Jacob's emphatic refusal to perform her pain, in the face of White American denial of such pain, this materialization is significant. When she refuses to perform, Jacob neither denies her vulnerability nor subjective archival/mnemonic exposure; she only resists easily available identification. Through this exclusion and structuring of her memoir entirely 'in Conversations' in which depicted subjects perpetually address us, we are implicated and asked to interpret these encounters that compose her memoir. We, too, are involved, even if only as 'eavesdroppers.'

In this understanding, the page's surface itself repeats the skin's paradoxical border. Jacob's emotional reticence and placement of the intersubjective onus on us is also her invitation to participate in Azoulay's civil imagination and interpretive labor. Unlike the embodied materiality of graphic memoirs which employ the intimate hand, or that of anxiously performative confessions that Charles Hatfield traces from Justin Green's genre-defining *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (2005),⁴ *Good Talk*'s digital materiality is better understood through Kirtley's arranged, archival scrapbook. Recalling the typewriter's severing of the word from the noisy and embodied tissue of the hand, Jacob severs her memoir from the emotively embodied mark in favor of the objectified and composed, discrete form.

Jacob, through this alternative material subjectivity that announces our difference, also sometimes more intimately addresses and includes us. When Jacob relents from this layered density, she allows our limited inclusion in her conversations. She most often signals this by forgoing the visual framing that divides her textual narration (denoted by caption boxes) from the past Mira (whose enunciations are contained by conversational word balloons). Instead, she presents a free-floating and unframed text. Jacob most personally and directly addresses the reader in conversation in this infrequent unbounded format, for instance when she writes over her family album-like pages and for a moment returns intersubjectivity to the event of photography, allowing us to position ourselves *with* her family. In this mode, she allows us to view discrepancies between her enclosed spoken dialogue and her unframed internal monologue. In this register, Jacob shares her hope listening to Barack Obama's campaign speech; addresses us, too, in her aspirational letter to Z that her son has not yet read; admits to morally failing the mother whose grief she did not recognize. Stripped of the dense network of filial expectations, comics conventions, wit, and protective 'paper doll' limning, it is also in this unbounded form that she illustrates her and her father's

⁴ While Green's underground comix autobiography is justifiably recognized for its influence, in considering non-White American non-fiction and comics subjectivity, I draw attention to Miné Okubo's precedent graphic memoir *Citizen 13660* (1946) that expressionistically documents the Japanese-American incarceration alongside her unemotional typed captions. Ho Che Anderson's *King. A Comics Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr* (2005), like *Good Talk*, formally foregrounds experience's mediation and assembly.



Figure 5. Mira Jacob, *Good Talk*, 240-241.

shared recognition of his impending death (Figure 5, 2019d:240-241). No longer contained by discrete cuts or protective skins, it becomes irrelevant that Mira and her father's marks are not unique, that they neither depend upon nor express the likeness of the moment. They are still *Jacob's* marks, and they address us as seeing and seen in their drawing as much as they, in their depicted gazes and mirrored across the book gutter, address and see each other.

Interpreting Jacob's innovative book, I have reconsidered interrelated material and semiotic associations of truth value with causation and resemblance, modeling how authorial and readerly attention to non-fiction materials and textures might likewise foster ethical attention to communicative and representational processes and, by extension, to the represented experiences. By manipulating and subverting causal and socially expected relationships between signs' material characteristics and their conceptual and experiential content, *Good Talk* presents alternative symbolic, interrupted, reticent, and hyperreal practices and ethics of non-fiction founded on demonstrating its communicative and intersubjective limits to invite more meaningful recognition. Jacob's gazes, these invitations – not to embody another's gesture but to see another's subjectivity and to be seen – evoke this article's epigraph, in which Jacob so succinctly offers her humanity but refuses to implore her audience to accept it and refuses to do

the work of performing it for them, “You see it if you want” (2019a). But these invitations are also recognizable in her closing letter to Z in which she writes, “I hope that you will remember that your heart is a good one, and that your capacity to feel love, in all its complexity, is a gift” (2019d:346). Between these two addresses, one confrontational and the other crucially sharing a letter that, despite its publicity, undeniably addresses Z, we might recognize Jacob’s aspiration that, despite her doubt, such a love that she wishes for is one made richer by encountering and recognizing others’ complexity. As non-fiction manually embodied cartooning risks reader narcissism in the same lines through which it invites empathetic identification, so, too, do Jacob’s ‘paper dolls’ risk depthless legibility as dimensionless signs through the same structures that invites meaningful conversation, but this is a worthy risk.

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Objectifying visual language in autobiographical comics

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ABSTRACT

Critiques of the objectification of female characters in comics have often focused upon depictions within the superhero genre (cf. Avery-Natale 2013; Cocca 2014; Nelson 2015). Such arguments adopt the framework of Laura Mulvey's 'Male Gaze' (1975) to assess the costuming, physical physique, and narrative role given to such characters. In one comment on similar controversies, Neil Cohn (2014) has argued for a greater emphasis upon the visual language used in objectifying depictions that does not get caught up in debates over realism since, he argues, comics are unconcerned with reality. Autobiographical comics, however, now form a significant part of the comics market and scholarship (cf. Schlichting and Schmid 2019). A tension exists between the rhetorical mode of visual metaphor exploited by comics (cf. Venkatesan and Saji 2021) and the appeal to authenticity made by non-fiction (cf. El Refaie 2012). Focusing on autobiographical comics – here, some published between 1991 and 2018 – allows us to assess how sexual objectification operates within comics without the issue being clouded by irresolvable appeals to reality in the fundamentally escapist/fantastic superhero genre. The visual language in comics by Chester Brown, Joe Matt, and David Heatley are critiqued for reducing the 'other' to a series of more stagnant, occluded, and restrictive graphic patterns than afforded to their author surrogates. Ariel Schrag's work, meanwhile, points towards possible means of avoiding such tendencies in future autobiographical comics.

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In 2001, three years after the release of Joe Matt's *The Poor Bastard* (1997), which collects issues #1 to #6 of his autobiographical comic *Peepshow*, Rick Tremblee interviewed Dani, the woman who had inspired the character of 'Frankie' in Matt's comic. She was the object of his sexual desire across 1989/1990 – a desire recounted in neurotic, obsessive detail. The interview is fascinating for the light it throws upon the ethics of representation in autobiographical comics, especially in terms of male comics book author representing a woman treated as an object of his gaze. In the interview, Tremblee asks Dani specifically about a fantasy sequence in the comic in which Joe pictures Frankie undressing but then forgoes masturbating, telling her that she is too perfect to degrade herself for his "cheap fantasies" (Tremblee and Dani 2001:17). Tremblee asks Dani whether this reassured her; she replies that it did not because the scene deliberately mirrors an earlier fantasy sequence in which Joe does imagine going "all the way" with other women – as such, it conveniently takes "some of the luridity out of *him*" (2001:n.pag., original emphasis). Dani perceptively notes here that it is not merely the straightforward visual portrayal of Frankie in each panel that determines whether she is being objectified but how such representation functions within the broader context of the comic. We need not merely to look at how her character model is posed, how she is costumed, how much skin is exposed, and so on, but how this objectifying visual language works grammatically, spatially, and temporally.

Previous critiques of objectification in comics

Critiques of the objectification of female characters in comics have often focused upon depictions within the superhero genre (cf. Avery-Natale 2013; Cocca 2014; Nelson 2015). Such arguments adopt the framework of Laura Mulvey's 'Male Gaze' – a concept formulated in her 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" – to assess the costuming, physique, and narrative role given to such characters. Bloggers and internet journalists writing outside of academia (cf. Hudson 2011; Romano 2015; Jusino 2016) do not always adopt the structural feminist approach pioneered by Mulvey in their critique of objectification in comics. Instead, they single out scanty or revealing costumes, exaggerated breasts and hips, and passive or victimized roles for condemnation. They take these characteristics as indicative of individual misogynist attitudes on the part of artists and creators (Frank Miller; Milo Manara), companies (Marvel; DC), or Western European and American society, rather than as symptomatic of the underlying ideology that structures superhero

comics. An ideology which, according to Chris Gavalier (2015), is fundamentally eugenicist, Nietzschean, and mythic. The tendency of critics to apply Mulvey's structuralist framework non-structurally when writing about comics is due to a formal mismatch between the two mediums. Since Mulvey's argument was formulated specifically about cinema's mechanics and subject formations, these critiques rarely engage with the formal semiotics of comics language. According to Mulvey's tripartite structure of the gaze, the camera's lens is synonymous with the eye of the cinematographer/director, of the audience prefigured as male even if it consists of women, and one of the film's male characters. However, this does not directly apply to the interstitial and multimodal comic medium.

In *The Visual Language of Comics* (2013), Neil Cohn argues that comics are an iconographic system of graphic patterns. In a 2014 blog article, he tries to move the argument over female objectification in comics in a more semiotic direction by arguing for a greater focus on the visual language used in such depictions that does not get caught up in debates over realism. Cohn is correct in that making recourse to comparisons of male/female body proportions to ascertain when a given representation is objectionable or not is reductive. The fact that the comics of the Hernandez Brothers are roundly celebrated as feminist illustrates this, as do the graphic representations of female bodies in the autobiographical works of women like Julie Doucet (2011) and Phoebe Gloeckner (2001). However, Cohn's argument that male and female figures in comics are equally objectified – evidenced by male superheroes having bulging muscles at a similar rate to female superheroes having large breasts – falls victim to a similar reductionism. The objectification of men and women cannot be straightforwardly analogized because such objectification exists within different contexts and structures of meaning. Even if we were to accept Cohn's equation of the comics medium with fantasy, the fantasy genre does not come to us always already set in stone as a static set of myths and legends but as a flux of conventions inextricably entangled with socio-cultural and political discourses. In *Understanding Comics* (1993:4-9), Scott McCloud cautions against mistaking genre for medium when discussing comics, which Cohn risks doing in his account. Cohn's resistance to the so-called "perceptual viewpoint" (2013:143), which privileges 'realistic' images over more iconic or abstract ones, leads him to assert that "[th]e idea that drawings should somehow mimic our perception and align with 'the way things are in the world' is pure fallacy" (Cohn 2014:n.pag.). For Cohn, existing at the intersection of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, comics are unconcerned with 'real life' – reflecting the misogyny of the American/European Imaginary through their symbolic systems but ultimately disconnected from embodied, quotidian reality.

Autobiographical comics – definition and problematics

Nancy Pedri asserts that “much can be said to weaken claims that fictionality is inherent to the medium of comics” (2015:129). While Pedri does not follow this claim with examples, the fact that she makes her assertion in a chapter on autobiographical comics implies that the genre challenges any associations between the medium and fiction that might otherwise be taken for granted. Autobiographical comics – increasingly important as a narrative form – necessarily problematize this assertion that comics are inherently concerned with the fantastic since we approach them as a reader – often primed by the book jacket, blurb, and pull quotes (cf. El Refaie 2012:249) – expecting them to align, on some level, with everyday reality. Philippe Lejeune famously referred to this as the “autobiographical pact” (1989:3-30), by which the author gives the narrator and central character of their work their own name and, in doing so, enters an agreement with the reader that there is no essential difference between themselves as an author, narrator, and central character. However, applying to comics Lejeune’s definition of autobiography – which is founded upon this key referential truth claim – is problematic given the tension between the comics’ rhetorical mode of visual metaphor (cf. Venkatesan and Saji 2021) and autobiography’s appeal to authenticity (supposedly) rooted in the author’s everyday life.

Focusing upon autobiographical comics allows us to assess how sexual objectification operates within comics language while avoiding irresolvable appeals to reality within more fundamentally escapist genres such as superhero comics. The visual language in comics by autobiographical comic book writers such as Chester Brown (2011), Joe Matt (1997), and David Heatley (2008) can be critiqued for their reduction of ‘the other’ to a series of more stagnant, occluded, and restrictive graphic patterns than afforded to their author surrogates, while we can witness more progressive tendencies in Ariel Schrag’s recent work (2018). Brown, Matt, and Heatley all represent a tradition of white, male, North American autobiographical comics writers published by Drawn & Quarterly and, as such, belong to a relatively unified group. Schrag, meanwhile, works at a similar level of accessible formal experimentation and narrative invention to those creators so that productive comparisons can be drawn between their varied outputs. To use Hillary Chute’s terminology, her works (like theirs) “model a post-avant-garde praxis” (2010:11), which combines formal self-reflexive techniques with a broadly commercial reach. She also draws inspiration from Robert Crumb, one of the most influential of the original 1960s wave of autobiographical comix artists, alongside his wife, Aline Kominsky-Crumb.

Although limitations of space do not allow appraising the work of other female comics artists to the same extent, the selection of Schrag as a case study has not been arbitrary. Her work is in the same slice-of-life vein as Matt, Brown, and Heatley’s – unlike Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) or *Are You My Mother* (2012), which as graphic

novels are closer to literary memoirs. It is also of a similar level of formal experimentation, not reworking the form in ways as radical as Phoebe Gloeckner's or Lynda Barry's work. Neither it is as sexually explicit or challenging as Gloeckner's *A Child's Life and Other Stories* (1998) or Debbie Drechsler's *Daddy's Girl* (1996). In choosing Schrag over other female comic artists, the aim was to compare like with like, ensuring that her approach's ethical and aesthetic differences are more clearly emphasized.

Andrew Kunka, in *Autobiographical Comics*, references Lejeune's definition of autobiography as "[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own experience, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (Lejeune 1989:4). He notes that this definition is "problematic" for comics due to their multimodal nature often requiring multiple contributors (Kunka 2018:6). The difficulty of settling upon a single coherent definition for autobiographical comics is convincingly explained by Michael A. Chaney as being due to the "pictorial presence of the autobiographical subject of comics," undermining the "seemingly substantial" 'I' of written autobiographies (Chaney 2011:7). Chute situates autobiographical comics amid a similar dialectic of embodiment/fragmentation by insisting upon the stubborn materiality of the comics creator via the on-page presence of her self-drawings (Chute 2010:2) and perceiving comics as a "hybrid and spatial form" suited to "narratives of development [which] present and underscore hybrid subjectivities" (5). Chaney doubles down on this argument in his later 2017 monograph when he posits that "aspects specific to the [comics] form complicate any such thing as an autobiographical authority and enable productive variations on the theme of the split or fragmented subject" (2017:9-10). This does not prevent, of course, consistent self-stylization and a coherent mapping of space/place from providing a decent illusion of a continuous subject. For instance, in the twenty-five-year retrospective anthology of *Drawn & Quarterly*, Michael DeForge reflects that during the eight years in which he graduated, he went to college, had his first relationship, and so on. Still, each new release of *Peepshow* found Joe Matt "still the same, still editing porn and peeing into jars and jacking off in his room. It was very comforting, almost like an anchor" (DeForge and Matt 2015:636).

Autobiographers drawing each other

In the anthology, there are several full-color reproductions of photographs of Matt alongside Chester Brown and Seth/Gregory Gallant (DeForge and Matt 2015:9-11, 16-19, etc.). All three have a similar build and complexion, with prominent chins and foreheads; they wear round spectacles, are shaven, and tend to smile with their mouths closed. In the 1990s, all three cartoonists lived in Toronto and would represent themselves and each other in their autobiographical strips. In Matt's *The Poor Bastard*, Brown is depicted with a long, teardrop-shaped head that draws the eye

downwards to the curved near-horizontal line of his chin (cf. Matt 1997:7, 22, 59, etc.). More often than any other secondary character – excepting Matt’s landlady and his comics book dealer – his eyes are depicted as two convex curves (cf. Matt 1997:6-7, 24, 60, etc.), indicating that they are closed. The radial lines at the sides of the two curves of the landlady’s eyes (cf. Matt 1997:91, 111, etc.) give her drawing the impression of squinting. By contrast, Steve, who runs the comic book shop, has two thick downwards curved eyebrow lines, giving him the impression of anger, impatience, or malevolence (cf. Matt 1997:62-63, 123, etc.). Brown, however, is otherwise given very little detail on his face. This, combined with the fact that his face is often shown angled slanting downwards (cf. Matt 1997:17, 60, 63, 98, etc.), gives Matt’s rendering of Brown an impression of passivity, even blankness. When placed in conjunction with the infantilizing laugh Matt gives Brown – “TEE HEE” (Matt 1997:76) – he even seems child-like, innocent.

In stark contrast, Matt depicts himself – or, at least, the avatar of himself used for authorial insertion (from here on referred to as ‘Joe’) – through grotesque and stylized caricature. On almost every page of *Peepshow*, he is rendered more dynamic than surrounding characters through motion lines (cf. Matt 1997:8-9, 23-24, 39-40, etc.) and sweat beads (cf. Matt 1997:3, 6-10, 12-15, etc.). Often, panels are pushed into full-blown expressionism. When Joe orgasms while masturbating, wavy radial lines almost fill the entire background (cf. Matt 1997:3 and 78); the wall of his comics studio is obscured by black ink that frames a bright burst of anger before he gives his girlfriend Trish a black eye (cf. Matt 1997:10); and when he rushes up the stairs in his eagerness to plug in a VCR for watching pornography, a zigzagged diagonal line accentuates his eagerness and haste (cf. Matt 1997:92). In his seminal text *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud asserts that distorted panel backgrounds can produce physiological effects in the reader, but the reader “will ascribe those feelings, not to *themselves*, but to the characters they *identify* with” (1993:132, original emphasis). Matt thus engineers audience identification with his authorial avatar, even while he seemingly undercuts this sympathetic alignment through bathos and self-deprecating humor.

Meanwhile, Chester Brown in *Paying for It* (2011) – his account of paying for sex with prostitutes from the late 1990s to the 2010s – depicts Joe Matt with round, soft curves which make him look boyish and paunchy (cf. Brown 2011:17-19, 50-53, 79, etc.). Brown’s lines are steady and precise compared to Matt’s neurotic, noodling lines. When combined with the rectilinear lines and angles with which Brown draws his authorial avatar, the character ‘Chester Brown’ looks less than passive, almost *impassive*. Brown draws his mouth as a straight horizontal line. In an interview with Sean Rogers for *The Comics Journal*, Brown states that his tendency not to show himself smiling was a deliberate stylistic choice which reflects his tendency to

“drain emotion from [his] drawing style” (Brown and Rogers 2011:1). This chimes with Seth’s reflection in his notes in the appendix of *Paying for It* that Brown “seems to have a minimal emotional range compared to most people” (quoted in Brown 2011:255). However, while this limited emotional range leads his friend Joe to depict him as enigmatic and introverted, this limited emotional range is depicted as rational, even elevated in Chester’s comics. As made clear above, this is communicated as much by linework as by dialogue.

Lines of empathy

In chapter five of *Understanding Comics*, “Living in Line,” McCloud declares great faith in the power of linework, asserting that “all lines carry with them an expressive potential” (McCloud 1993:124). McCloud’s rhetorical maneuver shifts the reader’s focus from the present physicality of the line as a mark upon the paper to the expressive potentiality of the line as experienced by an unseen, imagined reader, reflecting McCloud’s tendency towards Platonic idealism. Cohn’s writing (2013; 2014) also presents a similar shift due to his structuralist insistence upon form over content. Vincent Haddad notes – though not disapprovingly – that Cohn focuses upon “the shared language of comics artists, rather than on their idiosyncratic differences” (Haddad 2015:295). This allows for an approach to the comics form, which is as systematic as McCloud’s but neglects the *affective* quality of comics captured as much by McCloud’s art as by his writing. An ear as drawn by Scott McCloud may function as a morpheme identically to an ear as drawn by Chester Brown. However, the energy and purpose expended into that drawing also register through the reader’s sense of how steady the line is, how fast it was drawn, how hard the pen or pencil was pushed against the paper, etc. This is partly what Chute means when she refers to handwriting as “a trace of autobiography in the mark of its maker” (Chute 2010:10) that “underscores the subjective positionality of the author” (Chute 2010:11). This sense of the metonymic authenticity of the comics artist’s handwriting is expressed brilliantly in a passage from Jan Baetens’ and Hugo Frey’s *The Graphic Novel. An Introduction*:

Lines display a story world in which the act of drawing cannot be separated from the drawn result. And lines [...] inevitably manifest themselves as narrative agents and vehicles of storytelling. To an extent, one does not have to study anything other than the line to see how a world is constructed, a story told, a character sketched. And behind or beyond each line emerges the source of any storytelling whatsoever: the narrator. The very singularities of

the line can teach us a lot about the actual presence of the storyteller, his or her involvement in the fictional world, and his or her moral stance towards it. By linking the materiality of the line to the hand and the mind producing it [...] we better understand which kind of narrator is doing the telling and how we are supposed to make meaning of the narrative act. (2014:165)

In one of the chapters in Cohn's book, Marilyn Lewis writes that reading it "will not provide the key to understanding graphics any more than reading a book *about* grammar or vocabulary would turn someone into a fluent reader" (Lewis 2015:634). However, a reader of autobiographical comics is not merely dispassionately reading *about* the author's life but is interpolated *into* a story that – in the case of serialized comics like Joe Matt's *Peepshow* – may still be playing out. The pact the reader of fiction makes usually involves a suspension of disbelief by which they recognize the emotional truth of a story. Lejeune argues that the truth of the autobiographical form exists in dialectical relationship to the truth of the fictional form, i.e., an author's autobiography will generally contain an insufficiency of artistic complexity and ambiguity in contrast with their fictional writing/s. However, this very insufficiency makes the autobiography appear even more *accurate* (cf. Lejeune 1989:27). This requires the presence of the contractual agreement (cf. Lejeune 1989:29) between the author and his/her reader, which – as per contract – requires the author's signature (cf. Lejeune 1989:14).

For the autobiographical comic book artist who draws as well as writes their comics, this authenticating signature is, as noted by Baetens and Frey above, embodied in the very line of the comic, metonymically linked to the hand of the comic book artist who exists within the same world as the reader.

Elisabeth El Refaie dedicates the whole fourth chapter of her *Autobiographical Comics. Life Writing in Pictures* (El Refaie 2012:1876-2499), to the issue of authenticity in autobiographical comics. El Refaie, however, makes it clear that the perceptual viewpoint need not be privileged when it comes to comic book artists making truth claims that we take to align with the reality outside of the comic book. She notes that "stylistic realism" does not always ensure authenticity; in fact, "comics creators sometimes try to enhance the perceived genuineness of their accounts by adopting an ostentatiously *naïve* cartoonish drawing style" (El Refaie 2012:1917, original emphasis). This is in accord with McCloud's assertion that a realistic drawing style can make a story told through the comics medium feel less real, less *lived-in* than a comic drawn in a more iconographic style (cf. McCloud 1993:35-37). McCloud frames his argument in terms of identification, writing: "[W]hen you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face [...] you see

it as the face of *another*. But when you enter the world of the *cartoon* [...] you see *yourself*" (McCloud 1993:36, original emphases).

So, if McCloud is correct that the iconographic style of most comics elicits reader identification, this acquires an especially potent ethical dimension when dealing with autobiographical comics. Indeed, El Refaie devotes the entirety of the last chapter of *Autobiographical Comics* to the question of 'Drawing in the Reader' (cf. El Refaie 2012:2505-3091). In line with reader-response theory, she points out that the reader of comics is an active participant who imaginatively engages with the text and its implied author (cf. El Refaie 2012:2520-2529), identifying two processes by which this occurs, 'involvement' and 'affiliation' (El Refaie 2012:2529). The primary example El Refaie gives to explain involvement is that of the 'ellipsis,' by which gaps in the information provided by the comic are imaginatively filled in by the reader, drawing them into the experience of reading (cf. El Refaie 2012:2555-2591). By contrast, she uses 'affiliation' to refer to "the act of connecting emotionally" to a character in a comic (cf. El Refaie 2012:2614). McCloud's valuation of the ellipsis leads him to emphasize involvement over affiliation. To achieve the latter, a comics author may not adopt a starkly iconographic style but rather a highly expressive one that bears body traces (cf. Chute 2010). This can be a form of presence that draws in and involves the reader. Eszter Szép puts this convincingly and straightforwardly when she states that "[c]omics are made by expressive lines that mark the union of movement and thinking, and they are interpreted not simply visually, but also by and via the reader's body" (Szép 2020:2).

It is concerning such reciprocity that El Refaie critiques the notion that the visual presence of the authorial surrogate in a comic distances the reader, arguing, "readers of comics are always aware of the embodied presence of the autobiographer, but I believe that this does not necessarily discourage readers from identifying with him or her" (El Refaie 2012:2726). She reflects that it tends to be the character that the reader follows on their journeys through time and space that the reader will primarily identify with: "If a graphic narrative follows the autobiographical protagonist around, showing all the events, people, and places as she experiences them, the reader is probably more likely to align with her perspective than that of the other characters" (El Refaie 2012:2735). This is true for Chester Brown's, Joe Matt's, and David Heatley's work, but less so for Debbie Drechsler's or Alison Bechdel's, which sometimes contain digressive speculations related to family members. Phoebe Gloeckner and Ariel Schrag sometimes momentarily shift their focus to the interior lives of others. However, their authorial surrogates are rarely entirely absent from the frame, showing that there is not a clear gender divide in the narratological tendencies at play in autobiographical comics.

Joe Matt's elision of Trish

In *The Poor Bastard*, there are no scenes that do not feature Joe Matt as either present in 'the real world' or dreaming. We move through time and space with him, through both inner and outer states, across periods of days, months, and years. In the scene in which Joe gives his girlfriend Trish a black eye, the assault exists as an ellipsis within the gutter between panels. The brute materiality of the violence is withheld from the viewer. Moreover, the next panel featuring Trish comes after a panel of Joe informing fellow cartoonist Seth about his actions (cf. Matt 1997:11). As such, Matt withholds an externalizing visual depiction of the assault while providing his authorial proxy a speech balloon with which to justify his internal motivation for the act. Despite the font used for Seth's exclamation of "THEN YOU WHAT?!" being larger, Joe's word balloon still fills more of the panel. The following panel shows Joe and Trish in bed with the back of Trish's head drawn facing the reader, preventing identification. It is only in the next panel again that the reader is finally shown Trish with a black eye. She is depicted smiling, in front of a white background, in visual symmetry with the also smiling Joe presented in front of a black background. This harmonious composition helps reassure the reader that Trish has not been traumatized by her experience, deflating their potential adverse emotional reaction and judgment of Matt.

Additionally, Trish is shown with her bicycle and proceeds to talk about her day at work, subtly inflating the reader's sense of her agency and freedom. Her body language looks relaxed, even casual. Indeed, it is Joe who is next shown looking stressed and contorted, his left hand splayed apart, surrounded by vibration lines, his cheeks bulging, with spittle flying from his mouth. This is how he reacts to Trish informing him that Frankie, the girl upon whom he is fixated, works at the same day center as herself. Joe's emotions are privileged, and the comically exaggerated way in which they are visually depicted is a mechanism of reader affiliation.

Matt's use of self-deprecating humor and self-caricature certainly problematizes Joe as a figure for reader identification, leading to moments in *Peepshow* in which the reader is complicit in the events of the comic, or a co-conspirator – partly since Matt's writing of *Peepshow* ends up not only depicted within the comic itself but is also impacting his relationship with Trish, eventually leading to their breakup. Trish is only present in a brief flashback in the latter two-thirds of *The Poor Bastard*. She continues to be talked about a great deal by Joe and other men (such as Seth) but is denied a voice herself, undepicted and unseen.

Objectification and abstraction in *Paying for It*

The erasure of female suffering and subjectivity is even more pronounced in Chester Brown's *Paying for It*. In his review of the comic, Chris Mautner remarks that, while Brown may have intended to protect the identity of the sex workers he visited by obscuring their faces (with word balloons or hair, or cropping them out of the panel), this leads to "a palpable sense of something missing, an experience or emotional hole that needs to be filled" (Mautner 2011:2011). El Refaie makes a similar observation about Brown's earlier *I Never Liked You* (1994). She suggests that Brown's use of high angles and distant staging, as well as his tendency to draw his characters with blank, expressionless faces, "creates a sense of emotional disengagement" (El Refaie 2012:2768). This sense is intensified in *Paying for It* by the sheer length of the voluminous endnotes, which span almost fifty pages (Brown 2011:231-280). The impression of academic authority provided by these is at the expense of sustained emotional and empathetic engagement, perhaps due to the disembodied nature of the endnotes in contrast to the comics. In the case of *I Never Liked You*, the lack of emotional and empathetic engagement only concerns Chester and his immediate social and familial circles. However, *Paying for It* builds upon the sexual labor of young women (at least one of whom is implied to have been trafficked) who, for the most part, were unaware that these sexual encounters were going to be visually represented to a mass audience for Brown's profit (rather than themselves).

Due to this, Matt Seneca subtitles his review of the comic with the alternative title of *He Fucks Them Twice* (2011). Seneca resists the comic's academic abstractions by insisting upon the stubborn materiality of the comic book as a consumer object linked to Brown's solicitation of prostitutes in a chain of capitalist exchange and exploitation.

Interestingly, Seneca's review is the only review of his book that Brown singles out for disapprobation in a 2016 interview with Peter Bagge for *The Comics Journal*, with Brown dismissing Seneca's critique as "[o]ne of the silliest examples [of whorephobia]" (Brown and Bagge 2016:n.pag.) he had come across. The only other negative review Brown mentions explicitly is by sex worker and critic Charlotte Shane (2011). Both Shane and Seneca are particularly morally troubled by an episode in which Chester repeatedly pays for sex with a girl, "Anne", whom he suspects might be under eighteen (cf. Brown 2011:77-84) and a secondary episode in which he pays for sex with another girl, "Arlene", who cries out in pain during intercourse, further arousing Chester until orgasm (cf. Brown 2011:185-188). Therefore, it is worth analyzing the formal semiotics of these sequences to discern their patterns of objectification.

When Chester first walks through the door into the apartment where Anne lives, she is placed standing statically next to the door and her right arm extended at a right angle to visually mirror the door handle (cf. Brown 2011:78). This visual rhyme creates a metonymic association between Anne and the room which Chester has paid to enter and occupy. Indeed, in six out of the seven panels in which Anne is shown in this introductory sequence, she stands next to a door or doors. These borders demarcate space in much the same way as the comics panels. In *Frames and Framing in Documentary Comics*, Johannes Schmid reflects that the spatial language of comics allows the writer-artist to arrange “bodies, objects, and environments in relation to borders of an image [...] framing the respective conflicts through the rendering of the represented actors” (Schmid 2021:124). He reflects that, in the case of documentary comics, experimentation with the shape of the frame is rare, creators regularly relying upon rectangular patterns (cf. Schmid 2021:157).

Therefore, it perhaps speaks to Brown’s attempt to engage in (or even imitate) a more documentary mode of autobiographical storytelling. He adheres strictly to a two-by-four layout of rectangular panels on almost every page of *Paying for It*. Brown regularly places his authorial avatar two-thirds of the way along the horizontal of the rectangular frame, often against a blank wall with his shadow drawn cast against it in black ink (cf. Brown 2011:78, 99-101, 111, 116-117, etc.). This visually anchors Chester within the frame while also giving him the slightly detached position of an observer – a third-person narrator in his own autobiographical comic. By contrast, Anne’s head (and interiority) is often *outside* the space of the comic, severed by the panel border or literally obscured by Chester’s thoughts. For instance, in the third panel of the page in which Anne is introduced, Chester’s thought bubble occupies the entire top left third of the frame, completely obscuring Anne’s face with the thought, ‘She *could* be 18, but she could also be younger. It’s hard to tell’ (Brown 2011:78, original emphasis). Visually, the reader can only assess Anne’s age by reference to the lower half of her body. We are given no access to her facial response to the situation.

As the chapters continue, Anne is provided with more speech and agency, though her face continues to be obscured by the black ink of her hair. More straightforwardly problematic is the chapter concerning Chester’s encounter with Arlene, who is configured as private property temporarily loaned to Chester by an unseen pimp. After being introduced, Arlene is shown not to be a native English Canadian speaker. This is indicated by her speech bubble being filled with vertical dashes all the same size and thickness, with an asterisk connected to a footnote that reads “A foreign language” (Brown 2011:187). While “foreign” might simply mean “foreign to Chester” or “foreign to the reader,” the visual monotony of the dashes provides no symbolic attempt to replicate cadence or intonation. The otherness of Arlene’s native language

is thus reinforced. In five of the six panels in which Arlene is shown, she takes up a tiny amount of the frame and is mostly obscured by Chester's heaving body. Indeed, in some frames, her speech bubbles of "ow!" "ow!" "ow!" take up more space than she does, but the use of lowercase renders them non-authoritative in contrast to her uppercase reply of "No." (Brown 2011:187) when Chester asks if he is hurting her and "Yes." (Brown 2011:187) when he asks whether she is really eighteen. The fact that Arlene's body is drawn as completely untextured compared to Chester's emphasizes her youth, but it also renders her statuesque and doll-like. Removing the texture of skin and flesh reduces the corporeality of the act and thus the felt sensation of Arlene's physical pain. Likewise, providing only medium-close ups of Chester's face and not hers means that Chester remains our point of identification throughout. Two-thirds of the last panel is taken up with his thought "That she seems to be in pain is kind of a turn-on for me, but I also feel bad for her. I'm going to cut this short and come quickly" (Brown 2011:188) rather than a depiction of Arlene's experience.

The obfuscation of material violence (and the materialist flows of power and capital that enable this violence) is reflected clearly in Chester's exchange in the previous chapter with a female friend. Defending johns – men who pay for sex – Chester argues that "Just 'cause a guy pays for sex, that doesn't make him a pedophile or a rapist. I'll bet I'm close to what the typical john is like. I'll bet a lot of johns are mild-mannered introverts [...] guys who would never even consider assaulting anyone" (Brown 2011:179). Here, Chester/Brown makes recourse to what criminologist Tony G. Poveda referred to as the "myth of the law-abiding citizen" (Poveda 1970:63), which divides the world into delinquent criminals and ordinary citizens who follow the laws, sharply demarcated by class. This is in spite of the fact that the middle-aged Chester has pursued sex with girls he believes might be children and at least one who was likely a victim of sex trafficking. However, Brown's libertarian framework reduces all interactions to those between free consumer agents who can state "Yes" and "No" clearly in business-like negotiations. Brown's footnote references to libertarian political commentary support this reductive philosophy of economic abstraction just as his sparse, starkly iconographic drawings simplify and quantify human emotions. Brown's art thus functions in the opposite way to the more excessive, embodied art of the female comics creators praised by Hillary Chute. Finally, Chute argues that "[a]gainst a valorization of absence and aporia," these women's stories assert "the value of presence, however complex and contingent" (Chute 2010:2). This presence – in the form of embodied drawings – allows the survivor-creator to "literally reappear – in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page – at the site of her inscriptional effacement" (Chute 2010:3). By contrast, Brown disappears the women in *Paying for It*, absenting them from the site of what often appear to have been traumatic or painful encounters.

In *Serial Selves*, Frederik Byrn Køhlert praises the comics of Julie Doucet for challenging an objectifying gaze through a busy (and sometimes grotesque) attentiveness to the materiality of both the external world and the drawn line (which not only demarcates and shapes the world but is *of* it too). In terms of the external world, Køhlert claims that the unevenness of Doucet's lines "drawn with an attention to the creases, folds, and dents of the used and the everyday, give each object a materiality that further democratizes the visual field" (Køhlert 2019:47) – a comment that could equally be made about Kominsky-Crumb's work and that of many underground female artists. He reflects that "the materiality of Doucet's unsteady line resists the smooth surfaces associated with traditional representations of women in comics art" (Køhlert 2019:47). These smooth surfaces are present in Brown's *Paying for It*, but a materialist line does not ensure a lack of objectification as in Doucet's comics.

Ossifying seriality in David Heatley's comics

Uneven and unsteady could effectively describe David Heatley's linework in *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down* (2008), an autobiographical collection that divides Heatley's life into different categories. The book's opening chapter, "Sex" (Heatley 2008:12-27), is an exhaustive chronicle of Heatley's entire sexual history. In contrast to the (sometimes over-insistent) heterosexuality of Joe Matt and Chester Brown, Heatley depicts his/David's encounters with boys and girls through his childhood and adolescence with no obvious visual differentiation. Heatley's pacing is highly staccato, with panels sometimes matching on actions but often jumping forward through time and space dramatically. This, in effect, ossifies moments of time, which is an effect that is reinforced by the thematic structure of the comic. Outside of Heatley's family, all the characters present in the "Sex" chapter only exist in relation to David's sexual interaction with them. This mirrors the solipsistic logic of a collector who, Jean Baudrillard reflects, morbidly stages – while disavowing – his/her death through obsessive, endlessly deferred serialization (cf. Baudrillard 1996:97). Baudrillard himself draws an explicit comparison between the collection of objects and the collection of sexual partners. Concerning the former, he states: "[I]n the passionate abstractness of possession all objects are equivalent. And just one object no longer suffices: the fulfillment of the project of possession always means a succession or even a complete series of objects" (Baudrillard 1996:86). Similarly, he writes: "[T]he need to possess the love object can be satisfied only by a succession of objects, by repetition, or, alternatively, by making the assumption that all possible objects are somehow present" (Baudrillard 1996:86). As such, the unique

qualities of the love object are collapsed into sameness, the subject's sexual relations defined quantitatively rather than qualitatively (cf. Baudrillard 1996:88).

This ossification is reflected in teenage David's repeated decision to molest sleeping girls and ignore spoken boundaries of consent. At summer camp as a teenager, the girlfriend of David's brother, Michele, sits down upon his lap, and David thinks, "I guess I'll feel her up... Tomorrow I'll pretend I was too fucked up to know what I was doing!" (Heatley 2008:16). Michele, with upward slanted eyebrows indicating anxiety, tells David, "I want to, just not here... Let's go someplace." (Heatley 2008:16). The background lines are harshly cross-hatched and streaky. The next panel shows David and Michele illuminated in the spotlight of a torch beam while a speech bubble belonging to someone off-page reads "What's going on over there??", with David replying, "Cut it out!" (Heatley 2008:16). The next panel has a caption in the top-left of the frame, which reads "Minutes later" with a drawing of David fingering Michele from an aerial perspective (cf. Heatley 2008:16). The cut forward in time elides any navigation of consent. We know that David did not respect Michele's wish to move someplace else and not be touched in the tent in front of the other teenagers. While David's demand of "Cut it out!" denies these children a voyeuristic perspective, it is provided to the reader in a God's eye view, providing an omniscient mastery decidedly more empowered than Michele's experience. Likewise, the reader is given an x-ray perspective of David's hand groping Michele's breast. These visual strategies ensure the objectification of Michele, with David's mastery shared with the voyeuristic reader of the comic (but not the contemporaneous teenagers in the tent). Unless we have shoplifted the book or borrowed it from a public library, we have paid for access like Chester Brown.

It is not clear in *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down* whether Heatley asked any of the other people featured in his comic if he was allowed to record their shared experiences. Heatley may be inscribing moments of violation or trauma experienced by others at his hands on the page, freezing them within his invariably rectilinear panels. The only exception to this rule is David's wife, Rebecca. Compared to the other girls, women, and boys with whom David interacts sexually in the chapter, David's sexual history with Rebecca is kept from the page. The narration reads: "I don't want to embarrass her or cheapen the potent sexual memories I have of all our years together" (Heatley 2008:17). In keeping with this, a censorship bar obscures Rebecca's breasts in a full-page portrait of her.

Baudrillard explains that the endpoint of the collecting impulse is "pure jealousy," in which the subject gains pleasure in "the value that objects can have for others and from the fact of depriving them thereof" (Baudrillard 1996:98). The narrator's assertion that intimate representations of Rebecca are withheld due to

respect for the real Rebecca's privacy is undermined by the fact that the heliographic-style portrait of her is implied by shading lines to be completely naked (cf. Heatley 2008:17). Baudrillard calls pleasure taken in withholding the desired object to be "anal-sadistic" (Baudrillard 1996:98), so it is interesting to note that the numerous panels of David pleasuring himself anally (cf. Heatley 2008:15, 22, 23, etc.) tend to radiate streaky angry lines and have David's exclamations of orgasmic release rendered in jagged, scribbled, angry capital letters.

In his review of Heatley's 2019 graphic memoir *Qualification*, Austin Price (2020) convincingly argues that the lack of self-aware interiority in Heatley's work is evident not only in his reductive (and often caricatured) art but also in the very narrative structure of *Qualification*. He suggests that it is "not that [Heatley] is bad about identifying the emotions he was feeling at the time or explaining them; the book is all explanation, box after box after box after box cataloguing his every shame, disappointment, frustration or fear" (Price 2020:n.pag.). Price's criticism repeatedly refers to the sheer scale of Heatley's book and the number of panels – "page after page"; "two -hundred pages"; "the thousand episodes he chose to fill the book," etc. (Price 2020:n.pag.). This reflects the lack of qualitative reflection in favor of quantitative description that characterizes Heatley's work. It is not only that such an approach ossifies the past and objectifies seemingly real people (and their experiences) but that the reader is also in danger of being objectified in the experience of reading due to the lack of a transformative dialogue that such a numbing litany produces. Rather than another 'notch on the bedpost,' the reader becomes another sales figure. Finally, it is apposite that the only art of Heatley's that impresses, both formally and emotionally, are his heliographic-style portraits and tableaux. Here, the ossification of life is complete, with family members and loved ones transformed, ultimately, into collectibles.

Ariel Schrag's queer transformations

The early comics of Ariel Schrag, *Awkward and Definition* (2008a), *Potential* (2008b), and *Likewise* (2009) are not entirely free from objectification. Schrag's cartooning as an adolescent was loose and sometimes improvisatory in appearance. As such, figures (including her own) could be characterized by unflattering visual distortions, even caricature. Moreover, in the comics, Ariel's then-girlfriend Sally is often shown to object to Ariel's obsessive recording (and, later, publication) of the intimate aspects of their relationship – objections which, in turn, are enfolded into the diegesis. However, these arguably problematic aspects of Schrag's early comics gesture towards later strengths. A loose, improvisatory style evolves into more considered respect for change and transformation, internal growth in both Ariel and others external-

ized through shifting stylistic techniques. Meanwhile, the self-reflexivity becomes increasingly sophisticated, allowing for Schrag to foreground the materiality of her work and emphasizing comics creation as a process of artistic becoming rather than an always already completed commercial product.

In a short comic anthologized in *Part of It. Comics and Confessions* (2018), written when she was seventeen, “The Truth,” Ariel argues with a male friend about depicting their sexual relationship in her comic. Defending her decision to represent the encounter, Ariel proclaims: “[Y]ou know how important the comic book is to me, I mean it’s my *life* [...] *that’s why we* [...] excessively talked about it before it happened and you knew I was going to write about you” (Schrag 2018:53, original emphases), indicating that Ariel had explicitly sought and gained her friend’s consent. Ariel is shown in close-up, meeting the gaze of the reader. Her assertion of selfhood implicates the reader in a mutual recognition that – in reading the comic – they/we are engaging with the everyday material of her life. Ariel and her friend decide upon a compromise by which his name will be disguised, but then, in the next panel, Ariel is shown looking up towards the top right, where the panel meets the gutter, next to which we see the following panel. The reader’s gaze is moved further outwards, revealing more of the preceding and subsequent panels. Ariel, now meta-diegetically placed within the comic, sighs “fine” and reaches outside the panel to grasp the border itself (Schrag 2018:55). What should be the next panel in sequence does not have a border at all but is instead a borderless drawing of the comic crumpled up into a ball of paper. Ariel thus disavows the comic’s existence, even while the ‘real’ Schrag preserves it some two decades later in an anthology. This dramatization of the author’s process of mediating her own life – its dramatic reconstruction and then (fictive?) destruction – helps the reader recognize the constructedness of the truth on display, providing a sense of authenticity while also puncturing the omnipotence of the author-subject. This puncturing is reinforced by how Schrag draws herself with large manga-style eyes often caught in an expression of confusion or dismay. Her linework is craggy; bodies often obscured beneath baggy, shapeless clothing. A sketchbook quality to her art makes each of her comics look like a work in progress rather than a finished product.

“The Truth” is set (and was initially written) in a period in which Schrag was only tentatively embracing her queer identity, which becomes more pronounced as her comics evolve. Køhlert supports this view, reflecting:

As Schrag’s narrative becomes increasingly sophisticated in both storytelling and imagery with each new instalment, it is evident that the multiple narrative and visual possibilities of the comics form are essential to her personal and artistic development and their implications for her depiction of a constantly

changing, growing, and maturing self. For a young, queer, and female artist, this radical [...] act of depicting both her exterior and interior realities constitutes a counterdiscourse [to mainstream heteronormativity]. (Køhlert 2019:87-88)

In “*Dyke March*” (Schrag 2018:135-138), for instance, a dancing topless woman is not frozen in a state of voyeuristic objectification but is rendered fluid, even amorphous between panels (Schrag 2018:137-138), emphasizing her sense of freedom and movement rather than – for instance – her physical dimensions (as would be emphasized in *Joe Matt*). When, by contrast, a gay man with “the world’s smallest penis” (Schrag 2018:138) is shown, though his physiognomy is objectified, he is drawn in a loose, naturalistic style, with his easy body language showing how unconcerned he is by Ariel’s spectatorship. Indeed, Ariel’s cartoon staring eyes render her (rather than him) visually ridiculous.

This generosity of representation is especially apparent in “*Plan on the Number 7 Bus*” (Schrag 2018:23-42), where a young Ariel and her friend Ronica chat disparagingly about two girls, called Hope and Rosie, who they refer to as “*The Seaweeds*” (Schrag 2018:27) on account of their undeveloped chests. While the comparison made by the diegetic thirteen-year-old Ariel is objectifying and caricatured, Schrag then provides a cut-away panel depicting Hope and Rosie standing next to two realistically drawn strands of seaweed. The drawing’s neutrality undercuts the comparison, not least between the two girls, which are drawn naturalistically in comparison to the more vividly exaggerated Ariel and Ronica, who are giggling manically. Later, when a scared and upset Ariel thinks that she wishes she was at Hope’s house rather than with Ronica because “*Hope is good*” (Schrag 2018:39), this impression has already been reinforced by the pleasant drawing of Hope which makes her appear nice and friendly in comparison to Ronica.

However, instead of transferring the reader’s sympathies away from Ronica, making her appear as the uncomplicated villain, unproblematically categorizing her as a ‘bully’ and thus undeserving of further humanization, Schrag shows that she is just as upset and scared as Ariel. Lost in an unknown part of town at the end of the bus line, Ariel is shown on the left, bottom-most panel, sitting alone on a bench. Also, in the right-most panel at the bottom of the page, Ronica is shown standing alone, isolated within the frame, equally lonely and afraid. A middle panel featuring a phone box and a couple of strangers separates the two panels and thus the two girls, switching from the temporal separation that tends to characterise comics to a purely spatial one. This frozen moment of time thus exists separately for the two girls. However, the balanced composition, which does not privilege one girl over the other, shows a commonality of experience between them.. Such formal strategies are common to Schrag’s comics, and they are often in the service of mutual subjectivization, which expands the scope of the reader’s empathetic engagement.

A Crumb-y conclusion

In “Volume 10: June 1975 – February 1977” of Robert Crumb’s *Sketchbook* (2005), Crumb depicts an interaction between a bohemian artist called “Mr. Snoid” and his girlfriend Beverly. Repeatedly verbally assaulting Beverly as a “bitch” (Crumb 2005:80), Snoid instructs her to stick his head between her legs, with her buttocks in the air. He then sits on her while painting until she collapses, his artistry enabled by her objectification. With Beverly collapsed on the floor, Snoid squirts white seminal paint into her face obscured over the comic’s last six panels (cf. Crumb 2005:80-81).

This embodied metaphor could also symbolize how male Drawn & Quarterly autobiographical comics artists – Joe Matt, Chester Brown, and David Heatley – have used women to create their work. Brown, like Snoid, literally obscures the faces of the women he paid for sex in *Paying for It*. Matt multiplies the bodies of the women in his comics – the collecting impulse seemingly playing out in both his life and art – rendering those he finds attractive static, ossified. Heatley hides violence in the gutter between panels, restricting the agency of the women and young girls depicted in his comics through a devitalizing conversion of time into space. Therefore, it is unsurprising that all three creators have explicitly been linked to, or inspired by, Crumb. In Matt’s strip “Hollywood, California. March 2013,” anthologized in the Drawn & Quarterly twenty-five-year retrospective, Matt refers to Crumb as his “single greatest role model” whom he has idolized for thirty years (Matt 2015:647). *Paying for It* opens with an introduction from Crumb (Brown 2011:v-vi), whose work Scott Grammel situates in relation to Brown’s in the opening paragraph of an interview anthologized in *Chester Brown: Conversations* (2013:24). *David Heatley’s Qualification* (2020) has a blurb on its back cover from Crumb, while Heatley himself namechecks Crumb as an influence in a 2008 interview with Simon Willis.

In Price’s 2020 review of Heatley’s *Qualification*, he charts the history of autobiographical comics as one of aesthetic, formal, and moral decline. For Price, while Crumb’s view of the world was “offensive and repulsive,” the “charm,” “wit,” and “care” (Price 2020:n.pag.) put into the art at least enabled his comics to “to play as earned observation and not as loathsome self-pity” (Price 2020:n.pag.). By contrast, his successors – Joe Matt and Chester Brown among them – “were so monomaniacally fixated on their sexual and romantic frustrations that it was as if they had little effort left to spare for their art. Their work was every bit as grotesque as the comics of their predecessors [...] but lacked for spark or originality” (Price 2020:n.pag.). Their tendency towards self-caricature could be indulgent. However, it evidenced an attempt to transform their subjectivity on the page, using stylization to “make sense out of” (Price 2020:n.pag.) their identity as white, male comics creators. Finally, Heatley “roundly rejects engaging with interior in any meaningful way” (Price 2020:n.pag.). Not only is the visual presentation of his authorial avatar bland, even “blank” (Price 2020:n.pag.),

he describes the world through caricaturing others rather than himself, reducing the other participants in his life to mere objects cataloged and serialized as part of his journey to self-discovery which Price critiques as fundamentally shallow.

Price does not mention Ariel Schrag. However, her work circumvents the failures and limitations of Heatley's, Matt's, and Brown's – even Crumb's – output due to her general refusal to ossify or objectify her identity or others', showing them in states of becoming and transformation as well as her insistence upon the materiality inherent in the act of making comics.

There are, of course, exceptions in all these comics artists' work. Joe Matt's Instagram account showcases his art that has been commissioned by fans, which often forces him to focus upon subjects outside himself to which he brings a seemingly earnest care and attentiveness sometimes lacking in his comics. Brown's more surrealist, fictional comics, such as *Underwater* (1994-1997), have a fluidity of style and a willingness to engage with ambiguities and liminality, mostly absent in his autobiographical works. While more stylistically limited, Heatley has produced collaborative comics with his wife Rebecca in the form of illustrated *Medium* articles that recall some of Crumb's work with his wife, Aline Kominsky-Crumb. Schrag, meanwhile, can indulge her narcissism and prejudices in comics in *Comics and Confessions* such as "The Experiment" (2018:145-157), which cruelly caricatures a woman Ariel refers to as "Acid Casualty" (Schrag 2018:147). However, all autobiographical comics creators have the ability and means to resist objectification of others by expanding their approach to representation, ensuring that they recognize that every person in addition to themselves is a subject in a process of becoming.

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Drawing sex: Pages, bodies, and sighs in Japanese eromanga

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes *eromanga*, Japanese pornographic comic books, in terms of the semiotic power of images to create an erotic fantasy space for the reader. Manga are a central part of media culture in Japan. Alongside and closely connected to mainstream manga, eromanga have risen in importance as a space of negotiation for new semiotic methods of expression. At the same time, they have become a battleground for questions of freedom of expression and defending youth and women from sexual violence, especially as manga 'otaku' fan culture becomes increasingly globalized. Focusing on a selection of contemporary eromanga artists, we explore the visual imaginary central to eromanga, a system of visual techniques which stretches the boundaries of the comic panel and the human body into new shapes and forms. Drawing from Thierry Groensteen's and Natsume Fusanosuke's theories of comic semiotics and Nagayama Kaoru's and Kimi Ritodrawing's work in the developing field of eromanga studies, we argue that eromanga portray sexuality by intensifying the on-page material – layout, bodies, and sighs (sounds as drawn images) – creating a multiple layering of time and fantasy for the reader. Eromanga often employs techniques and ideas that estrange the boundaries of the human body as we usually conceive it. Eromanga artists draw on erotic fantasies subtextual to anime and manga as a whole, making them explicit. At the same time, eromanga feeds into the broader mainstream world of manga, making thus the analysis of eromanga's semiotics essential to a more comprehensive understanding of manga.

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Japanese pornographic comic books or *eromanga* – more on the terminology and connotations of ‘pornography’ in Japanese and Western contexts in the next section – comprise an essential part of the manga publishing world. These often-overlooked works produce innovations in manga art and are fully integrated into the subculture of anime/manga/games fandom. As *eromanga* focus on sex in forms so explicit as to be pushed out of the ‘mainstream’ (i.e., *ippan* ‘general audiences,’ a clumsy catch-all for non-*eromanga*) manga depictions, their analysis offers an opportunity for looking at manga expressions of desire in their most intense form. Through a semiotic analysis of *eromanga*, based on Thierry Groensteen’s approach to comics as a system founded on “iconic solidarity,” which “constitutes an organic totality that associates a complex combination of elements, parameters, and multiple procedures” (Groensteen 2007:159), this article offers an analysis of contemporary *eromanga* works via trends in page structure (‘pages’), transformations of bodies away from a normative realism (‘bodies’), and the use of word-image-sound effects (‘sighs’) to investigate how *eromanga* create layered spaces of pornographic fantasy for the reader. On the pornographic manga page, sex becomes images layered in series. Bodies jostle against each other across panel frames. Dialogue and sound, drawn, visually interrupt the space.

The dominant form of *eromanga* analysis in Japanese criticism is a combined semiotic and historical approach to particular styles and forms of signification. Manga critic Nagayama Kaoru¹ discusses these signs as ‘memes’ (in Richard Dawkins’ sense), cultural elements that make up the ‘gene pools’ of *eromanga* and mainstream manga alike (cf. Nagayama 2014:20). Manga researcher Kimi Rito similarly approaches *eromanga* history through the process of *kigōka* (記号化), ‘signification’ (the changing into signs, using the same word for ‘sign’ as in *kigōgaku* (記号学), ‘semiotics’) in the development of expressions such as large breasts, nipple movement, and tentacles (cf. Kimi 2017:6). This article builds upon their approach of looking at expressions common in *eromanga*, but instead of a focus on the historical origins of a sign or a discussion of creators’ intent in using it, I show how these signs work within the system of *eromanga* to affect readers’ experiences of erotic fantasy. Essential to this work is the contextualization of *eromanga* as part of a system of manga meaning-making beyond the legally-defined structure of ‘adult manga.’ Most manga contain elements of eroticism, but it is in *eromanga* that these elements prevail and are fully developed. Given the importance of debates on Japanese anime and manga concerning sexual expression, a semiotic approach to *eromanga* allows us to understand how these texts work and how their audiences could read them.

¹ Japanese names for authors originally published in Japanese are given in Japanese order of family name before given name

1. What is eromanga?

1.1. Labels

'Eromanga' is a portmanteau of *eroi* (エロい, 'sexy' or 'sexual' from 'erotic' but without the literary pretensions often afforded to that word in English) and *manga* ('comic book'). It refers to manga restricted to adult readers and whose central focus of plot and design is on sexual scenes. Generally, discussions of eromanga restrict their respective definitions to pornographic manga aimed at heterosexual men, but eromanga's gender dynamics are more complex in practice. Other terms for this body of work include 'adult manga' (アダルト漫画), '*seijin manga*' (成人漫画, also literally 'adult manga'), and '*seinen manga*' (成年漫画, again 'adult manga'; differentiated from the homonymous seinen manga 青年漫画, the non-pornographic genre aimed at young men). These labels indicate that the respective works cannot be sold to customers under eighteen. Works are labeled with this mark according to the directives of the Publishing Ethics Committee (出版倫理協議会), established in 1963, which initially worked with government reports on works harmful to young people. The marks became standard in 1992 after a movement to regulate adult manga in response to the murder of four young children by supposed manga fan Miyazaki Tsutomu in 1989 (cf. Kinsella 2000:149). This reliance on industry self-regulation, in which works are screened by reviewers internal to the industry to protect publishers from obscenity charges or direct government censorship, is similar to the process for film review by the Film Classification and Rating Organization (映画倫理機構) or *Eirin* (映倫), founded in 1949, which was also the basis for *Biderin* (ビデ倫) which reviews adult video (i.e., live-action pornography.) For creators who self-publish online or in *dōjinshi* (同人誌, independent publications similar to fanzines), the label R-18 (restricted to those over eighteen) is often used to mark pornographic works. Creators selling their works directly are expected to demand age identification from their customers before making a sale. Because explicit depictions of genitalia are still considered obscene in Japan, all eromanga censor their depictions to some degree, using black bars or mosaic effects to partially obscure genitalia in the drawings.

But to define eromanga by their legal definitions is to limit them to a publication status, rather than a group of works that share styles and themes and a reader community. Nagayama Kaoru defines eromanga initially as "manga that include erotic elements" (Nagayama 2014:6)² but points out that all manga contain erotic elements in some form and that what is considered erotic depends on the reader. Considering this,

² All translations from Japanese are by the author, Caitlin Casiello.

he offers these potentially narrower definitions: “works drawn with sexual or erotic themes” or “works that occupy a position where sexual or erotic motifs are required” (Nagayama 2014:6). Kimi Rito insists on the necessity of a broad definition. Nonetheless, she produces one even narrower than Nagayama’s: “a general term for the manga genre focusing on sexual stories drawn in order to excite and release sexual arousal for adult readers” (Kimi 2017:359). This definition characterizes eromanga by their use. The next sentence specifically mentions masturbation, tying it to a history of defining pornography as works intended for masturbation despite the potential for numerous other reader responses.

This opens up the perpetual problem of Porn Studies: the definition of pornography and its difficult distinction from different, more publicly acceptable modes of erotic production (e.g. ‘erotica’). By calling eromanga ‘pornography,’ our goal is not to malign them as unacceptable or obscene, but instead to position them as forms of media that depict that which is beyond the limits of representability – eromanga “go[] too far” in Zizek’s definition (Zizek 1989:37), but we follow Linda Williams in rejecting the categorization of sexually-themed works into “good” and “bad” since “one person’s pornography is another person’s erotica” (Williams 1989:6). Pornography, existing at the limits of representability, frequently becomes a battleground for debates on the social acceptability of sexuality in media because any limit can be defined by what is outside of it. Because eromanga are structured around sexual content (Nagayama’s “sexual (...) motifs are required,” 2014:6 – the narrative logic of the plot is subordinated to a demand to show sexual scenes) and depict sexuality usually pushed outside of normative representation, I use the term pornographic to describe them, though there are a number of possible distinctions between eromanga and live-action film or photographic pornography.

1.2. Eromanga history

Eromanga are also often defined through their historical evolution and publishing contexts. Manga historian Yonezawa Yoshihiro defines both eromanga and manga broadly, allowing his history to include eromanga within a legacy of works dating back to 17th-century erotic prints in the *ukiyo-e* style, known as *shunga*. However, any actual traces for a descent from *shunga* to eromanga might pale in the face of its discursive use, as proponents of eromanga connect the two to place their genre in an artistic tradition and afford it the import of Japanese history: such as the defense attorneys did during the 2002–2007 *Honey Room* (蜜室) eromanga obscenity trial (cf. Cather 2012:249). Eromanga history, as it is usually understood, starts with post-1945 *kasutori* magazines (カストリ雑誌); entertainment magazines printed on cheap paper made available after wartime paper shortages led to the suspension

of many magazines (cf. Yonezawa 2010:8). The art style of illustrated stories from *kasutori* led to *gekiga* (劇画) comics of the 1950s, comics with a realistic style often contrasted with the more Disney-like cartoonish style of manga for children, typified at this time by the works of Tezuka Osamu (cf. Nagayama 2014:32). *Gekiga* included works that were ‘adult’ in terms of their erotic or other thematic and political content, associated with leftist students and workers, making them a frequent target of government pressure and right-wing boycotts (cf. Kinsella 2000:143).

As *gekiga* styles were subsumed into manga more generally in the 1970s, eromanga became an important area of identity formation and subcultural negotiation for anime and manga fan culture. In 1975, a group of fans of *shōjo* (少女), ‘girls’ manga artist Moto Hagio founded the Comic Market, a space for *dōjinshi* trading including media research, fanworks, comics, and art. Comic Market became a haven for the subculture group known as *otaku* (オタク). As coined in the magazine *Manga Burikko* in 1983, the term refers to obsessive fans of niche media, most often anime/manga/games. Though originally considered socially backward in dangerous and disruptive ways, *otaku* – as consumers and as creators – increasingly began to drive the formal development of the anime/manga in production. Through the influence of *otaku* tastes and creation, the *gekiga*-style of realism in eromanga was slowly replaced by the *bishōjo* (美少女), ‘pretty girl’ style in the 1980s, which uses more cartoon-like aesthetics associated with anime/manga today.

1.3. Eromanga as *Otaku* culture

Within the large Japanese and global market for manga, pornographic manga had a significant, underexplored influence on the history of the development of the anime/manga/games fan culture. These pop culture media comprise the form of *otaku* culture adopted as an exportable and marketable commodity in service of nationalistic soft power under the government’s early 2000s “Cool Japan” program (cf. McLelland 2017:6). Though the pornographic aspects of *otaku* culture are considered less desirable for the national image than Studio Ghibli and Hello Kitty, eroticism has always been a part of the conversation of artists and readers involved in the development of manga styles. The cutesy rounded characters of children’s anime are inherently tied to an unspoken adult eroticism. Famed anime director Miyazaki Hayao of Studio Ghibli, known for his adventurous young girl characters, notes an erotic connection he felt as a teen with the princess character from Toei’s animated feature film *Legend of the White Snake* (白蛇伝, dir. 1958) as one of the origins of his desire to create manga/anime (cf. Galbraith 2019:96). Desire, in a flash of an animated character’s body, moves the shapes, genres, and themes of the media which came to define Japan’s most globally distinctive form of contemporary media.

As a part of the ecology of manga/anime fandom, eromanga serve as an experimental space drawing on the subtextual sexuality of non-pornographic manga/anime – *Legend of the White Snake's* sexy princess transformed into a Miyazaki girl character now actually having sex. Nagayama uses the cultural genetics of memes to distinguish this misreading from a more straightforward model of cultural influence: “Memes, to use a term from Azuma Hiroki, are misdelivered in a way which betrays the intentions of their creators, and the genetic code is misread, replicated, recombined, formed into linkages, and bundled only to be again misread” (Nagayama 2014:20). Rather than a sexualization of non-erotic content, the sexual versions of common manga/anime tropes found in eromanga are one manifestation of the affective connection manga/anime fans form with the works they read. Erotic fanworks such as *dōjinshi* and fanfiction fill this void for specific series, allowing readers to reverse the paradigm in mainstream works, where sexuality remains hidden, into one where sexuality is prominent and ready to be enjoyed for a particular character or couple. Considering this function of fanworks, eromanga serve as sexually-explicit fanwork for the entire universe of manga/anime conventions, relying on the readers’ knowledge of the intertextual world of manga/anime to create works where the sexuality implicit in that world is now explicit and central. In Azuma Hiroki’s model of database consumption, otaku consume anime/manga/games not as individual works but as compilations from a ‘database’ which contains various tropes and elements (cf. Azuma 2009:54); eromanga are where the sexually-explicit elements from the database can be expressed. An eromanga where a boy has sex with his little sister may not be based on a specific set of characters or series, but it is engaged in conversation with a number of manga, anime, light novels, and games which thematize the close, protective, frustrated feelings a boy feels for his younger sister. Moreover, eromanga are extremely influential on boys’ and young men’s manga, which in turn integrate new tropes emerging from eromanga. This close interaction between pornographic manga and its non-pornographic counterpart means that eromanga are essential to understanding manga/anime fandom and the ways in which desire is represented on manga pages.

1.4. Eromanga studies

Japanese research on eromanga, exemplified by Nagayama Kaoru’s *Eromanga Studies エロ漫画スタディーズ* (2014, translated in 2021 as *Erotic Comics in Japan* by Patrick W. Galbraith and Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto) and Kimi Rito’s *Expression History of Eromanga エロ漫画表現史* (2017, translated in 2021 as *The History of Hentai Manga: An Expressionist Examination of Eromanga* by Molly Rabbit), focuses on tracing trends in the works themselves similar to the approach of analyzing particular techniques in terms of their history and readerly effects used by Natsume Fusanosuke (1997) and other

manga scholars. Manga historian Yonezawa Yoshihiro also wrote a comprehensive *History of Postwar Eromanga* (2010) covering the industry's transformations from the postwar *kasutori* pulp magazines to the realistic adult *gekiga* comics to the shift towards *bishōjo* eromanga, which still dominate today.

English language scholarship tends towards industrial or anthropological analysis. One of the most substantive analyses of eromanga as a visual medium comes from a discussion of the major obscenity trial (2002-2007) regarding the eromanga *Honey Room* (蜜室 in Kirsten Cather's *The Art of Censorship in Post-War Japan* (2012); the legal interest in what eromanga *show* and *do* for the reader (especially the young reader) turned the courtroom into an ad hoc media theory conference. In *Adult Manga* (2000), Sharon Kinsella analyzes the history of the manga industry to examine the nature of manga for adults – not just eromanga but political manga, business manga, and manga for anyone older than the key manga demographics of *shōnen* and *shōjo*. Focused more specifically on sexual content, Anne Allison's *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan* (2000) offers a critical Freudian analysis of eromanga as a symptom of embedded misogyny in Japanese media. On the other end of the spectrum, Patrick W. Galbraith, in *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan* (2019) and numerous articles, examines the development of pornographic styles in otaku culture as a potentially liberatory form working against the demands placed on men by a patriarchal society. Work by Setsu Shigematsu on eromanga toes the line between the condemnation and celebration of eromanga; though sexual fluidity is not in and of itself liberatory, manga can “throw into relief prevailing views about the proper uses and places for sex [...] demonstrate different ways in which sexual fantasy and fetish are imagined and configured, and [...] give visibility to [...] the malleabilities and fluidities of sex” (Shigematsu 1999:129). Beyond these, most analyses of sexually-themed manga in English have focused on the genres of *boys love* (BL), and *ladies comics*, erotic genres aimed at female readers focused on male/male romance and male/female romance, respectively. The popularity of queer and feminist frameworks for academics makes BL and ladies comics a topic with a pre-existing degree of interest – how do women living under patriarchy find a way to express their sexual desires? Scholarly work by Mizoguchi Akiko (2015), James Welker (2019), Mark McLelland (2017), Edo Ernest dit Alban (2020), and Kristine Santos (2020) has addressed BL as a global genre for the exploration of queer desire and community through comics.

1.5. The Gender of eromanga

This also opens the question of the gender of eromanga readers and creators. Broad definitions of eromanga allow flexibility in what is included under the term for research purposes. Still, they belie the fact that there are notable genres of sexually-themed

manga treated separately from the 'eromanga' of 'eromanga studies' like 'boys love' and 'ladies comics' aimed at women. By the broadest of definitions, these genres are also eromanga in the literal sense of 'comics with sexual themes' even though their publication contexts, dedicated magazines, and targeted demographics differ from the popular associations with the term 'eromanga'; many do receive the 'adult manga' label which prevents sale to those under eighteen. However, eromanga researchers tend to retain the differentiation between eromanga and genres with sexual themes aimed at women in their selection of works if not their definition. Nagayama includes women-aimed genres in his definition but generally does not analyze 'boys love' works alongside eromanga works. Kimi goes so far as to define out erotic comics of the genres aimed at women – ladies comics, boys love comics, and teens love (male/female romance aimed at teenage girls) – by claiming these genres have more complex priorities beyond sexual arousal and masturbation compared to eromanga (Kimi 2017:359.) This is not to say that 'boys love' should be analyzed with men's eromanga, but that there is an unspoken assumption regarding who gets to be 'ero' – the default is men sexually interested in women, and the exceptional cases are marked. In a shift against this tendency, Kristine Michelle L. Santos discusses the rising trend of *ero*-BL as "an indication of an increasingly intertextual sexual media landscape where boundaries of sexual expression move between normative [heterosexual/eromanga] and non-normative [queer/BL] sexual spaces" (Santos 2020:287). There is also significant overlap in publishers, spaces for sale/trade, and creators of eromanga and BL, indicating a shared community across gender/genre lines which becomes particularly important when legal restrictions threaten sexual expression.

In this vein, Nagayama argues that women creators and readers are more involved in eromanga creation than is popularly considered to be true. For example, Nagayama (2014:104) discusses the prominence of women artists and BL publishing in conjunction with the import of the meme of *shota* (シヨタ), young boy characters in the mid-1990s. In the translators' introduction to the English edition of *Eromanga Studies*, Galbraith and Bauwens-Sugimoto refer to "a head-spinning sense of gender mayhem" (quoted in Nagayama 2021:26) in the eromanga world that Nagayama describes. We must offer this with a caveat: I have been a woman in eromanga spaces, bumping elbows in the lines at 'men's day' at Comic Market or digging for a specific eromanga author at stores like Mandarake, and these are certainly, noticeably, spaces filled with male bodies. In any analysis of eromanga's 'gender mayhem,' it is necessary to juggle the real presence of diverse genders, a nonetheless dominant presence of male bodies, and the imagined audience of men, which informs how works are marketed and designed as separate but overlapping elements of eromanga's gendered audience. Despite the actuality of women's involvement and connections with genres aimed at women, the

works discussed as eromanga are often thought of as “pornographic comics for men” (e.g., Nagayama 2021:14, note 3). Similar to how genres of manga such as *shōjo* (girls) and *shōnen* (boys) often attract adult readers of many genders while also being aimed at a particular demographic of young girls or young boys, eromanga therefore involve an imaginary man, a demographic man whose desires meld into marketing research on the individual and diverse desires of actual readers. Living readers with individual gendered experiences are therefore always, to some extent, at a remove from this imagined reader. This imaginary male reader reinforces an image of eromanga as works eroticizing the (imagined) female body oriented towards stimulating (imagined) male arousal and orgasm. While saying eromanga is pornographic comics for straight men is an oversimplification, this imagined gendered audience clarifies the type of works most often included in the definition of eromanga.

2. Methodology

As eromanga contain a wide range of styles and genres, it is impossible to describe all eromanga in any space. To focus on elements of eromanga which might be considered representative rather than the innovations of an individual artist, I analyzed a broad range of contemporary works. The works reviewed for this project were collected from lists of recommended and bestselling artists between 2014 and 2015 on eromanga market sites and forums. A wide variety of artists were selected to represent the current styles popular amongst the community of connoisseurs who consume these works. For the analysis, we avoided relying heavily on some of the specific fetishes that have become famous in Western discussions of eromanga, such as tentacle/monster scenes and lolicon, to retain a focus on widely used visual/formal elements rather than narrative/fetish content. The full list of artists reviewed contained over 600 works, but ultimately the focus is on 52 artists (see APPENDIX) chosen for popularity based on Twitter/pixiv followers and whether or not they were actively working/publishing during the time of this research.

2.1. Pages and panels

Like mainstream manga, eromanga can consist of stories continued over many chapters or short stories contained within one or two chapters. Stories are often published in dedicated magazines and then, if an artist has enough material, collected into stand-alone volumes called *tankōbon* (単行本). For example, the volume *Juicy* (ジューシー) by the artist Cuvie (キューヴィー), published in 2011 by Fujimi Comics, collects thirteen chapters comprising nine separate stories; these chapters were originally published in Fujimi’s adult comic magazines *Comic Momohime* and

Penguin Club between 2004 and 2009. A similar volume collects all the chapters in the *Sister Control* (姉 (シスター) コントロール) series by YuzukiN' (柚木N') (pronounced Yuzuki-en-dash), which was published in the magazine *Comic MUJIN* between 2010 and 2011, along with three additional bonus stories. Due to the expectations of the genre, every chapter in serialization contains some sort of sexual encounter; the plot advances in increments leading up to a sex scene (or, often, to explain a sex scene shown in *medias res* at the beginning of the chapter). This structure forms the expectations for each chapter; while reading, the awareness of the coming sex scene is in the back of the reader's mind.

Within a single chapter, a manga is divided into pages (viewed as a double-page spread) and within pages into panels. According to Thierry Groensteen, the panel is the smallest distinguishable unit in a comic (cf. Groensteen 2007:27); though the panel can be expanded and divided, it loses any meaning if broken down further into lines or shapes. The panel, however, gains its meaning from its relation to other panels on the page, and the page exists in relation to the book as a whole. As a single *eromanga* chapter continues, the page design shifts according to the scene; as stated previously, there is a particular contrast between the sexual and the non-sexual scenes. The non-sexual scenes for the most part look like any other manga, but as the plot builds to the sexual encounter at the heart of the chapter, the panel layouts intensify. While a page depicting a non-sexual scene might feature a simple three or four panels layout, as the sex scene starts we have six, seven, eight divisions centered around a larger tableau. The panels seem to depict a variety of moments either with no connection to each other (sudden position shifts for the characters) or with moment-to-moment detail that exceeds the necessary information for simply understanding what is happening. This format lives within the 'network' of *eromanga* which Groensteen defines as general 'arthrology': "[W]ithin the paged multiframe that constitutes a complete comic, every panel exists, potentially if not actually, in relation with each of the others" (Groensteen 2007:146).

Natsume Fusanosuke outlines three basic functions of a panel: to structure time, to guide the reader psychologically through expansion/contraction, and to express space by limiting the frame of the image (cf. Natsume 1997:152). The function I want to highlight here is the role of the panel in organizing and creating temporality within a comic; particularly in *shōjo* manga, the structure of time is more often psychological rather than strictly linear in progression (cf. Natsume 1997:158). Panels do not impose a particular time duration, but they visually create a sequence and cue the viewer into a particular temporal rhythm (cf. Groensteen 2007:46). Panels in a manga do not necessarily equate to a single shot in a film, though the comparison is sometimes apt (cf. Groensteen 2007:26);. However, panels may happen in sequence when 'read' or understood as part of the story, their first impact is visual, and, initially,

they are seen all at once. When the reader opens a comic book to see a two-page layout of material, all of the time represented in the sequence of panels therein occurs at once in front of the eye. When the eromanga reader opens a book or a magazine, a sexual scene occurs in front of the eye, with the great variety of panels representing the moments which, in a film, would have to happen in sequence; here they can happen all at once for the reader. As the chapter and the characters head towards their climax, the mechanics of how they move from moment to moment become unnecessary; what becomes important, instead, is a multiplicity of moments arranged on the page so that the eye may rest on all at once – or choose the ones most affecting.

The example here comes from a collected volume called *JC Ecchi* (JCエッチ) by Shiwasu no Okina (師走の翁), published in 2009. Below is a sequence of eight pages (Figures 1-4) comprising the foursome that occurs while the main characters (a teacher and his three students) visit Disneyland. On the first double-page spread (Figure 1), we have a pattern of four panels (top right, girl A penetrated from behind); then three panels (bottom right, girl B penetrated against a window); then several panels that overlap each other – fellatio, armpit, three that proceed down the top left zeroing in on the reaction of girl C – before culminating in a tableau of girls A and B lying down in front of girl C and the man. The next page continues this trend wherein separate sexual acts are given only a panel or two to be completed and moved on from (Figure 2); in the course of four pages, thirteen different sexual positions are drawn and sequenced into twenty-four panels. Many of these panel transitions represent changes in point of view, from the man's perspective to an outsider's perspective.

Following this excessive amount of activity, the manga shifts into showing tableau pages of the post-coitus scene (Figure 3): a single page of each girl, alone, looking up at the man. In two of these, she is also looking up at the reader; in the second one, the reader seems to be peering in at the scene as a third party. These single-panel pages shift to the opposite extreme from the previous pages, a pause that allows space to process the earlier pages while visually enjoying their effects in greater detail. Finally, the sequence ends with a serene image of the four characters asleep as the manga returns to a more standard panel layout (Figure 4). Through the variety of images, the seeming 'speed' at which the actions develop, represented by an increased number of panels, and through the shifts in point of view, the reader has the option of visually selecting the most pleasing or arousing moments to form a fantasy space. The inclusion of multiple women characters also courts this element of reader choice in experiencing the comic: the imagined heterosexual male reading can pick the girl he finds most appealing to focus his fantasy attention on. All pornography allows the viewer to fantasize about its contents selectively; eromanga are not alone in building this quality of selection into their design, but the inclusion of this multiplicity of panels creates a space easily inviting to imaginative projection.



Figure 1. *JC Ecchi* by Shiwasu no Okina (2009:108-109); please note throughout that two-page spreads are in Japanese page order from left (here, p. 108) to right (here, p. 109).



Figure 2. *JC Ecchi* by Shiwasu no Okina (2009:110-111)



Figure 3. JC Ecchi by Shiwasu no Okina (2009:112-113)

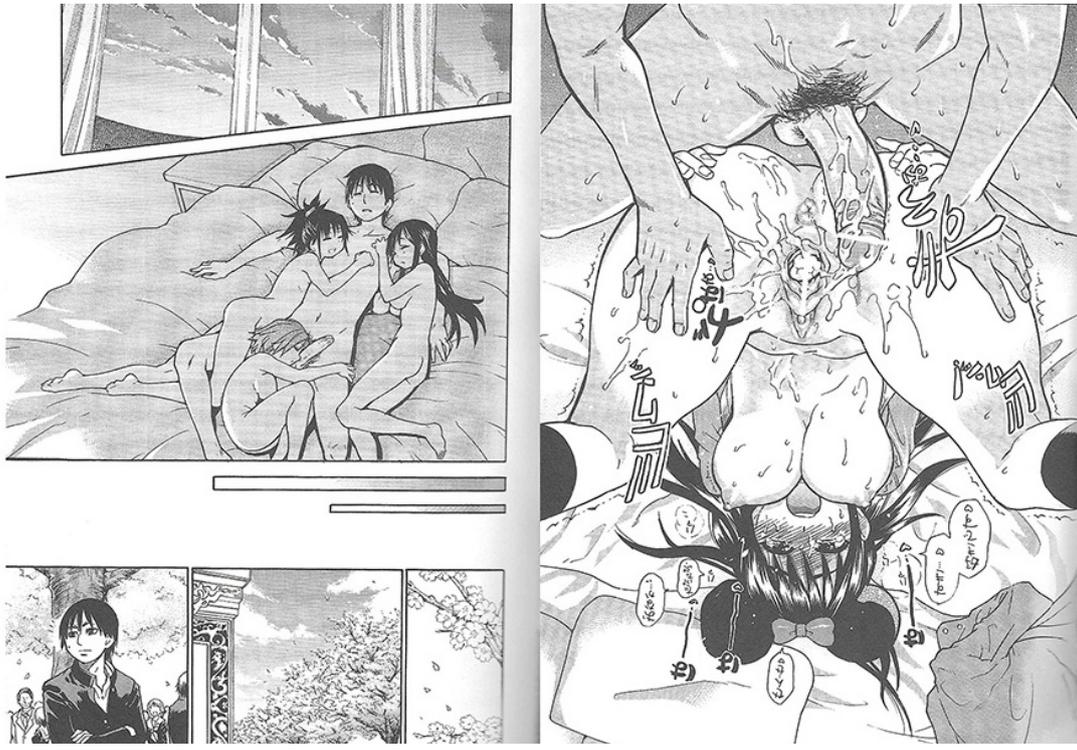


Figure 4. JC Ecchi by Shiwasu no Okina (2009:114-115)

The imaginative capacity given to the reader as they move from panel to panel is considered a unique part of manga and comics as an art form. The dangers of this imaginative potential became a significant point in the obscenity trial of the eromanga *Honey Room* (蜜室) by Beauty Hair (ビューティ・ヘア). The court, in this case, indicated that manga are particularly erotic because the panel arrangement of drawn images pulls the reader in as an imaginative collaborator who must fill in the gaps from panel to panel: "In the judges' minds, this invitation to read the invisible 'space between the lines' or behind faint maskings was no testament to the artistry of the medium but rather evidence of its obscenity" (Cather 2012:254). Part of eromanga's capacity to affect is found in this design by which a reader, moving from panel to panel, must bridge the gutters by imagining the interceding moments, contributing their sexual fantasies to the one on the page.

2.2. Bodies

So what fits into these complex panel arrangements? As the example shows, the majority of the page is filled with bodies during the sex scenes: moving bodies, naked bodies, contorted bodies. The constant repetition of the body in fractured portions through the juxtaposition of panels already creates a feeling of duplication, a layering of angles, and a sense that the body associated with one character is multiplied many times throughout the page. Looking at the *JC Ecchi* example again, it becomes almost confusing that there are three women but only one man; surely, surely there is more than one penis doing all that work? The multiplicity of panels therefore suggests another key element of the sexual-visual space of eromanga: the definitions and identity of the bodies on the page are not fixed.

Drawn lines allow a body to become malleable, creating pornographic expressions impossible in live action photographic or filmic pornography. This category of body transformation in fact covers a number of the expressions covered by Kimi and Nagayama, such as large breasts, male sexual organs on otherwise female bodies, the sexual intercourse cross-sections, and tentacles. I will subsume these under one category through a perhaps unexpected concept: the body that emerges in eromanga is defined by the particular quality of permeability. Central to this is the penetration of the body in coitus. But the concept of permeability applies to many other aspects of the bodies seen in eromanga, often making the body strange, unnatural to a degree beyond the usual dehumanization of manga character design. The mechanics of the bodies operate differently as their defining boundaries become permeable and changeable. To explore this permeability, we can divide its manifestations into two groups. First of all, there are the things that come out of the body: sweat, semen, and vaginal fluids, as well as organs, particularly the penis and the breasts. Second, there are the things that go into the body: the penis and the eye of the readers.

Sweat and moisture feature prominently in many eromanga scenes. Like the panel angles becoming more frenzied as the action intensifies, sweat and moisture covering the body are markers of intensifying action. Sometimes the sweat is sweat, sometimes water, but it covers the drawn body in small markings that suggest an internal state of arousal, if not necessarily sexual. One book, Hisasi's collected volume *Porno Switch* (ポルノスイッチ 2012), declares on the cover: "Please get me soaked!" (「ずぶ濡れにしてください」), also "Please make me wet!" The book eroticizes water in a variety of ways; the scene pictured here, for example, features a bathtub scene where both the water and the heat of the room coat the bodies of the character in a sheen of moisture (Figure 5). The amount of water is suggestive here of movement – it seems to shake and slide – and the fluids more overtly associated with sex, as the moisture lines in the bottom left panel seem to extend from the point of penetration.

Sweat and moisture on the skin are the first levels on a spectrum of bodily fluids. Eromanga also uses urine, breast milk, and blood as elements of design and eroticism. However, the most important fluids in eromanga are precisely those one would expect, i.e., vaginal fluids and semen. Both these fluids serve as symbols of sexual



Figure 5. *Porno Switch* by Hisasi (2012:200-201)

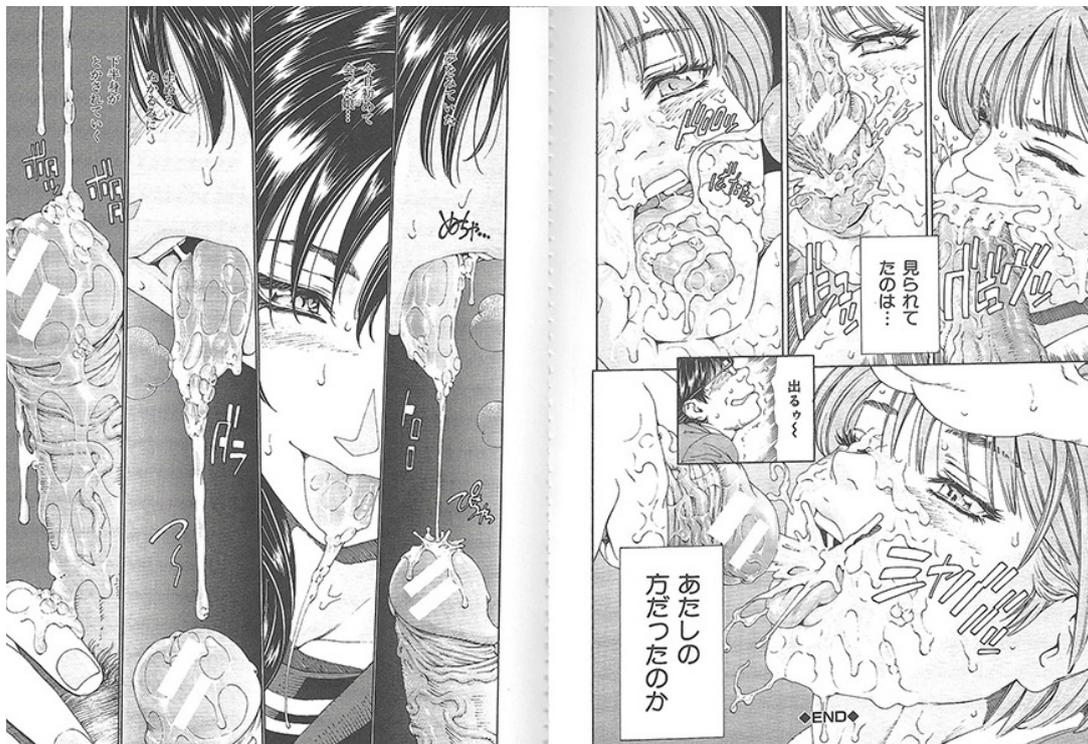


Figure 6. *Accelerando* by Seto Yūki (2004:94-95).

arousal and sexual completion, similar to the 'money shot' in filmed pornography (cf. Williams 1989:94). The money shot is designed to prove that the performer involved did achieve orgasm (whether he did or not); however, in eromanga, there is no performer. Instead, what is demonstrated semiotically through the emphasis on semen and vaginal secretions is the eromanga body's excessive ability to produce arousal. Semen also functions as final proof of possession over the women's bodies.

This double page spread from *Accelerando* (アツチェランド) by Seto Yūki (世徒ゆうき) (2004) (Figure 6) is actually the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next, but they work well together as a set. The righthand side shows a woman completing fellatio in a group sex scene. This final culmination features her being covered in semen to an excessive degree marks her as having been used to their satisfaction (and to her own). The lefthand side is the beginning of another fellatio scene: the dripping down of saliva mirrors the ejaculation coming out on the other side of the page.

Extending from this ejection of fluids comes the protrusion of parts of the body itself; the ability of the body to exceed out from its expected limits is shown in eromanga through the enlargement or transformation of body parts as they become objects of sexual fixation. This applies primarily to penises and breasts but extends into a spectrum of bodily deformation that becomes the monstrosity seen in eromanga focused on encounters with aliens, demons, and tentacles.



Figure 7. *TiTIKEI* by Ishikei (2013:42-43)



Figure 8. *TiTIKEI* by Ishikei (2013:46)

Though these monster figures are more grotesque, the deformation tendency in eromanga starts with a type of idealization that takes the body parts of sexual fixation and makes them larger or multiplies them. In this selection of pages from *TiTIKEI* ちちけい by Ishikei 石恵 (2013) (Figures 7-8), an artist known particularly for uniquely lively breasts, for example, the breasts of the main character are enlarged to the point of absurdity. They take over entire panels, dwarfing her hands and her face. In Figure 8, they even move independently, one going up and the other going down. Ishikei's approach expresses a desire to create beautiful lifelike breasts through highlighting and movement (cf. Kimi 2017:60). However, the result is breasts that surpass physical believability.



Figure 9. Sister Control by YuzukiN' (2011:129, partial)

Eromanga also prominently focuses on penetration into the body but in ways beyond simply showing a penis going into an orifice. One of the most typical ways of maximizing the amount of page space given to the woman's body is by simply drawing the man as invisible even while he penetrates her. Figure 9, from *Sister Control* by artist YuzukiN', shows the penis becoming transparent as it enters the woman, simultaneously giving the reader the full view of the woman and a peek into her vagina. Another common technique takes this view one step further by showing a cross-section of the woman's body as the penis enters her, called *seikō danmenzu* (性交断面図), a 'sexual intercourse cross-section diagram.' This is an example of an eromanga expression rarely seen in mainstream manga (cf. Kimi 2017:176). It is as if, by its very nature, as a demonstration of sexual intercourse,



Figure 10. Shindo Eru no bunka jinruigaku by ShindoL (2013:186-187)

this expression raises the manga to the level of ‘adult’ material. Often, this view includes the vaginal canal, the cervix, and the uterus, as the penis ejaculates inside (Figures 10 & 11 from *ShindoL’s Cultural Anthropology*, 新堂エルの文化人類学, by ShindoL, 新堂エル). This technique oddly medicalizes the pornographic aspects, making the reader a type of X-ray that can peer through the skin. With these techniques, the bodies in eromanga are not penetrated simply by the penis but also by the reader’s eye – here, in particular, a medical eye that crosses boundaries beyond the physically possible.



Figure 11. Shindo Eru no bunka jinruigaku by ShindoL (2013:191, partial)

2.3. Sighs

Manga are, undeniably, an image-based visual form of media; the images are almost always primary over the textual aspects since the reader, glancing at a page, first takes in at least the general layout of the images before reading the narration or dialogue (cf. Groensteen 2007:68). Text, however, often remains central to the understanding and organization of the plot and is often undeniably a part of the image. What essentially occurs in the soundscape of eromanga is a layering of additional information about the action. We have visual information (script) creating an imagined auditive environment in the reader’s mind. In the drawn space of manga, sound is depicted on the page mainly through two vehicles: the onomatopoeia drawn on the page to indicate something making a sound (sound effects) and the words spoken by the characters (dialogue).

Similar to the way sweat appears on the bodies drawn, the manga page is covered in sound effects. Japanese has several concepts which are insufficiently rendered as ‘onomatopoeia’ in English: *giongo* (擬音語), words mimicking actual sounds; sometimes *giseigo* (擬声語) is used for mimicking sounds from animate objects; *gitaigo* (擬態語), non-literal

‘sounds’ indicating a physical-material condition, and *gijōgo* (擬情語), non-literal ‘sounds’ representing a psychological state. Given these categories and their sometimes complex overlap, the potential for sound effects of all types to create meaning beyond an actual sound, including showing psychological states, is inherent in their use in manga. Sound effects in eromanga are numerous, and their application to a particular imagined sound is more art than science. Still, the drawing of sound into a page design builds a soundscape beyond the level of dialogue alone. “In other words, words as ‘pictures’ become tools to describe the scene and supplement it with detailed, overflowing information that can’t be completely conveyed through literal word meaning” (Kimi 2017:246). I want to call attention to this aspect because, like sweat on bodies, sound effects add more lines to the page in an aesthetic that intensifies the action on the page; their selection, placement, and design work to multiply the central act depicted. Onomatopoeia function as both words and art, serving as the characters’ “psychological description” (Natsume 1997:118.)

In this page (Figure 12) from *The Shape of the Girl You Love* (君の好きな女の子の形) by MARUTA (2008), a couple having sex outside are written over with sound: “gupyu,” “gish,” etc. The heavy dark ink with which the sound effects are rendered contrasts with the gray tones that make up the scene. Sound effects cross panel borders and exist both within and outside speech bubbles, also connecting to the dialogue, as the characters reach the point where they are speaking



Figure 12. *The Shape of the Girl You Love* by MARUTA (2008:21)

in stops and starts such as “naa,” “aaa,” “fu,” “ha...” that are closer to sound effects than words. Surrounding the couple with moans, the sound effects are almost more evocative of meaning: they indicate the action that causes the characters to lose their ability to speak without stuttering. This action, of course, is penetration, and the sound effects indicate this in terms of both being the sounds made in the course of the action and by framing the action on the page. In the center and the bottom left panels, the act of penetration is surrounded by the sounds it causes in visual form, framing the area of visual interest while creating the sound in the reader’s mind.

Dialogue also often serves to call attention to the sexual acts being performed. It also clarifies what is happening amid the complicated panel layouts discussed above. A female eromanga character will often engage in a narration of

3. Conclusion

By portraying sex in the manner described, eromanga stylizes sex into a layering of multiple signifiers of sexuality that overcome what one might imagine to be the limitations of a static, drawn form. The use of a surfeit of visual information – too many panels, too many bodies, too many sounds – suggests the scene’s intensity and creates a space of extremity that can move the body and the reader into an imaginative relationship that allows for fantasy. The disruption of panel linearity in favor of visual multiplicity, the undermining of bodily coherence, and the subordination of text to support the image is central to a genre where the fantasy experience is primary over the consumption of narrative information. These insights from eromanga also allow us to reexamine other manga genres in terms of how they operate to allow the reader to fantasize within the manga pages – as long as we accept that pornographic works are always integral to the media culture, which otherwise pushes them out of sight.

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APPENDIX – List of Artists

English Name	Japanese name
Ishikei	石恵
Yamatogawa	大和川
Yuzuki N Dash	柚木N'
Seto Yuuki	世徒ゆうき
Shiwasu No Okina	師走の翁
Gunma Kisaragi	如月群真
Meme-50	メメ50
Hisasi	Hisasi
Bosshi	ぼっしい
Inuboshi	犬星
Odanon	織田non
shindol	新堂エル
Mochi	モチ
cuvie	Cuvie
Maruta	MARUTA
Kamino Ryu-ya	上乃龍也
Homunculus	ホムンクルス
Hanaharu Naruko	鳴子ハナハル
Takeda Hiromitsu aka Shinjugai	武田弘光 真珠貝
Tsukino Jyogi	月野定規
Erect Sawaru	エレクトさわる
DISTANCE	DISTANCE
Fuuga	楓牙
Noise Noise	(のいす)
MTSP	MTSP
Iimus Aki	いーむす・アキ
Chihiro Harumi	ハルミチヒロ
Hokama Mitsuri	ほかまみつり
Miyabi Tsuzuru	みやびつづる
Doi Sakazaki	土居坂崎
Ohtomo Takuji	大友卓二
Amatarou	天太郎

English Name	Japanese name
Nagare Ippon	流一本
Nishiiori	西安
Onizuki Aruchu / Udon-ya	鬼月あるちゅ / うどん屋
Onizuka Naoshi	鬼束直
Ffkkddddd / Fukudaada	フクダーダ
Okada Kou	岡田コウ
Ki no Hitoshi	鬼ノ仁
Sameda Koban	さめだ小判
JingRock	甚六
Natsu Iori	夏庵
Bareisho	馬鈴薯
Fuetakishi	フエタキシ
Fue	Fue
Sena Youtarou	瀬奈陽太郎
Kishizuka Kenji	木静謙二
Higena Muchi	ひげなむち
Senke Kagero	千家カゲロー
Hakaba	墓場
Hori Hiroaki	堀博昭
Makinosaka Shinichi	牧野坂シンイチ

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Signs of disintegration: Subversive visual expressions of processes of social transformation and ideological clashes in a Czech graphic novel series about political history

punctum.gr

BY: **Martin Foret**

ABSTRACT

The article deals with (re)presentations of conceptual – political and ideological – content in the form of comics and how the semiotic potentials of non-representational ideas associated with social upheaval and political crises are expressed. After considering the possibilities offered by the code of comics for the expression of abstract (non-depictive) concepts we examine three Czech graphic novels, which concern crucial moments in Czech political history: the Austrian-Hungarian Empire’s collapse and the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918; the disintegration of Czechoslovakia after the Nazi occupation in 1938; and the reformists’ defeat by the invading Warsaw pact armies in the Prague Spring of 1968. In each case, we investigate the semiotic resources chosen by the individual artists to present these concepts. Finally, we describe how the selected historiographical graphic novels reflect the ideology of a transforming nation and express a sense of non-self-evidentness for the nation and its own independent state.

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KEYWORDS:

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Introduction¹

Comics, including its perhaps more complex and ‘adult’ form known as the graphic novel, is a purely visual phenomenon communicating with its audience through visually perceptible

¹ This study was supported by the Faculty of Arts, Palacký University Olomouc (FPVC2016/07).

semiotic resources, i.e., it constitutes “a visual semiotic system” (Bramlett 2020:33). Firstly, obligatorily, it consists of pictorial signs, artistically (by drawing, painting, etc.) represented images arranged in sequences. Secondly, written, verbal signs contribute a facultative but empirically widespread form of expression. When it comes to the representation of qualities that are usually (in common everyday communication) perceived by senses other than the visual, comics relies on the construction of a specific ‘visual synesthesia’: It seeks out, for instance, expressive means to convey the intensity of sound, the quality of music, or the olfactory characteristics of depicted objects through visual signification. Some of these signs are fully conventionalized as part of a widely familiar and understandable code.²

However, what about conceptual – political and ideological – content, not exclusively expressed verbally? What possibilities does comics offer for expressing these non-representational (non-depictive) ideas? Our study examines these questions by focusing on a corpus of Czech graphic novels that deal with foundational moments in the political history of Czechoslovakia, moments associated with social upheaval, and political crises.

1. The code of comics and its affordances for expressing non-representational ideas

The editors of the *Comics Studies Reader* have described the focus of theoreticians of comics on the formal aspects of comics as part of a *formalist turn* (cf. Heer and Worchester 2009: xiv). This includes the notion that every work of comics is seen to fulfill some formal requirements typical of comics *per se*. One of the manifestations of this belief is the conceptualization of comics as a specific *medium*. While one of its origins lies in the work of the ‘theorizing practitioner’ Will Eisner (1985),³ it was later explicitly summarized in the phrase “the *medium* – known as comics” by Scott McCloud (1994:6, original emphasis) as part of his (naively semiotic) approach. As a ‘theorizing practitioner’ himself, he petrified this concept in his highly successful and influential treatise, the ‘metacomics’ *Understanding Comics*. The figurative comparison of ‘pure form’ to an empty jar that contains the topics of the various comics like a fluid, apparently ‘distilled’ from all kinds of genres and content ‘additives,’ illustrates the core of this idea, which *Understanding Comics* popularized far beyond the boundaries of emerging (academic) comics studies.

This shift towards an understanding of comics as a medium, which is nowadays widely accepted and foundational of contemporary comics studies, is reflected in the gradual acceptance of the usage of the singular form of the word ‘comics’ as opposed to the previous plural form in American English (cf. Witek 1992:73). The conception of comics as a medium has already been present (at least implicitly) in the semiotically

² The question of synesthesia in comics is a research area that exceeds this study’s scope. For more on this, see Salgueiro (2008).

³ Lawrence L. Abbott (1986) also uses ‘medium’ when referring to comics as a ‘*narrative medium*.’

oriented Francophone studies in communication, which turned to comics since the 1970s (cf. Miller and Beaty 2014:63). Here, there has been a similar tendency to examine not only specific works of comics but also comics *per se*. Thierry Groensteen, whose *Système de la bande dessinée* (1999, published in English as *The System of Comics* eight years later) represented in some ways the (temporary) culmination of a French ‘general theory’ of comics, defines his ambitious system primarily as a kind of “conceptual frame in which all of the actualizations of the ‘ninth art’ can find their place and be thought of in relation to each other, taking into account their differences and their commonalities within the same *medium*” (Groensteen 2007:20, emphasis added).

However, from the semiotic point of view, it is very difficult to give any specific meaning to the concept of ‘medium’ in relation to comics terminologically. Comics is not a medium in the sense of a specific technology or one specific apparatus (cf. Aumont 1997) – unlike, for example, film or television (for a discussion of the issues of the mediality of comics cf. Wilde 2014, 2015).

Some theorists have worked instead with the concept of a ‘language’ when describing comics (cf. Saraceni 2003; Varnum and Gibbons 2001; Frahm 2010). The metaphor of a ‘language of comics’ has seen many shifts, from a general comparison, analogy, or parable to an ambitious, cognitively based concept and empirical research into ‘visual language’ (cf. especially Cohn 2013). The derived analogy of several co-existent ‘dialects’ is also inspiring: comics, BD, and manga are subsequently construed as ‘dialects’ within the ‘language’ of comics. While Cohn considers this an empirically grounded description, others have insisted that comics can only be considered a language through a metaphor (cf. Bramlett 2012:1). Although functional in many ways, this is inaccurate and could be misleading as a theoretical concept (seeming even “mystical,” Davies 2019:5).⁴ We might enforce a distinction by reserving the designation ‘language’ as a term for codes that involve speech, for which the term holds a certain exclusivity – in which case “comics cannot be a language” (Bramlett 2020:34). However, language metaphor is undoubtedly very tempting, and even Groensteen refers to his proposed system in some parts of his book as “the *language* of the ninth art” (2007:23; emphasis added). From the point of view of social semiotics, comics are a kind of “communicative action” (Davies 2019:2), a “pictorial utterance” with “language-like functions” (4). Davies, therefore, proposes “to use a model of linguistics that will be appropriate to describing the resources comics use” (5). We will summarize these aspects by referring to the *code* of comics instead.

Along these lines, through a comparison with purely verbal expressions (texts), comics do not appear as a ‘language’ but rather as ‘literature’ if we remain with metaphors, i.e., as a specific (‘artistic’) usage of language (cf. Groensteen 2007:18). A particular work

⁴ Cf. “The metaphor of ‘comics as a language’ is powerful and very common, but comics studies must evolve away from this metaphor because it unnecessarily limits our vision of what comics are. While no definition is perfect, the idea of ‘comics as a language’ is flawed” (Bramlett 2020:34).

of comics is always artistic (or at the very least an artifact, a work of craft). The degree to which its systemic features and means are binding varies widely but is always fundamentally less than the binding power of the natural language rules and determined by creative, artistic intentions and decisions. On the one hand, any one work of comics can never exhaust all the systemic elements offered by the code. On the other hand, in each particular work of comics the rules of the 'language' might not only always be renegotiated, but are in fact always re-established.

The terminology of semiotics offers a more appropriate concept to accurately describe the nature of comics: the concept of *code* – even though it has never been defined consensually (cf. Nöth 1995). Yet, for a semiotic approach it seems most precise and useful to treat comics as one specific *kind of code* (alongside other codes, 'media,' 'languages,' or 'art forms': such as literature, visual arts, film, theatre, etc.). The concept of the code intended here is to be defined not only as "a system of organization of signs" (Bignell 2002:10) but more precisely as something that "provide[s] the rules which generate signs as concrete occurrences in communicative intercourse" (Eco 1976:55), i.e., something that goes beyond specific rules and towards a more general 'framework.'

Strictly speaking, comics constitutes a *meta-code*, because it includes other (primary) codes, which it more or less integrates into itself. Davis, for example, talks about the "complex set of codes that comprise comics" (2019:5). In the most general sense (and one most frequently treated in theory), comics is a specific combination of 'images' and 'words,' i.e., a pictorial code (images, 'art') and a verbal code (words, 'literature'), an 'imagetext.'⁵ It is an intertwined, specific combination of verbal and pictorial signs. Although comics as a (meta-)code uses resources from these two basic semiotic systems, it is unified in its duality, leading to a significant blurring of the lines between these 'source codes.' At the same time, however, what makes the code of comics specific is "on the one hand, the simultaneous mobilization of the entirety of codes (visual and discursive) that constitute it, and, at the same time, the fact that none of these codes probably belongs purely to it" (Groensteen 2007:3).

Moreover, the usage and combination of these two codes are far from capturing the entire nature of the (meta-)code of comics. In particular texts, we can find a range of different codes: a graphic code (in the way images and words are designed, especially in the case of lettering); a typographic code (from the form of the lettering to the layout/composition of the pages, etc.); visual artistic codes (various formal procedures, techniques, styles, etc., which further differentiate the pictorial elements); quasi-nonverbal codes (representation of conventional facial expressions, gestures, etc., in a transformed, artistically

⁵ We may leave aside a certain number of wordless comics in this context. From a semiotic point of view, it seems appropriate to consider the presence of verbal code in the meta-code of comics as optional (facultative): "[S]ilent comics operate in the same ways we see in the verbal/visual texts; that the same operations and functions occur, but with the images alone now handling all of the work" (Davies 2019:6). Groensteen (2007:3), however, argues for the "primacy of the image and, therefore, the necessity to accord a theoretical precedence to that which, provisionally, I designate under the generic term of 'visual codes.'"

expressed form); the use of colors, as well as literary, narrative, aesthetic, but also stylistic, rhetorical, genre codes, etc. The proposed specific (meta-)code of comics works with (even more than) the codes mentioned above as its sub-codes and structures them according to its own rules. These codes intertwine in a specific way determined by the formal characteristics of comics. The usage of the same codes differs more or less in other forms/meta-codes (e.g., animation, picture books, advertising, etc.). For example, even though animation combines pictorial and verbal messages as comics do, they do so differently (in a dynamic mode instead of a static one, with spoken words instead of written ones, etc.). Moreover, since works of comics are 'literary' rather than 'non-literary' (see above), their components can take various forms, being the products not of some 'common language user,' but of the creative activity of the author, the 'artist.' Knowing (and describing) the primary system, which is of course open to disruptions and innovations, can make it possible to understand, describe, and analyze how comics as a form of expression (a metaphorically understood 'medium' or 'language') has developed and continues to do so.

Suppose we need to express some conceptual content (e.g., non-representational ideas) in the comics code. This is possible through a verbal component or a pictorial component. The verbal code uses its means, words, to express concepts (explicitly or implicitly), similarly to literature or everyday speech, which also operate with a verbal code. The dominant part and a particularly privileged position in the code of comics is held by pictorial messages (images in panels), which is how the (meta-)code of comics differs from the code of literature (with which it otherwise shares some modalities/media). It is the pictorial component of the (meta-)code of comics that is fundamental since the recipient "has access to the formal system of the comics through his visual sense" (Lefèvre 2000:n.pag.). Within the pictorial code, the abstract (non-depictive) content can then be expressed either by conventionalized forms of expressions (part of the code or sub-code) or by devices created ad hoc. Its design falls entirely under the authority of the author (artist), and its function and validity are established within the particular work.

When political concepts are visualized in this way, it should not be forgotten that understanding the rhetoric of sign usage requires an adequate description of its ideological dimension (cf. Barthes 1972). The following analysis finds how the chosen comics artists express these political and ideological concepts and whether or how these authors' choices carry an ideological message. Individual creative choices in the representation of historical events carry not only clearly identifiable historical references (denotations) and the meanings associated with them because of the particular context and presentation (connotations), but also more general ideological (or mythological) meanings associated with a general perception of national history that becomes naturalized through their signification. As Barthes argues, these meanings are often alluded to indirectly, through secondary signification, and can only be paraphrased through neologism in the general code. The case of the Czech nation's 'non-self-evidentness' is very much in point.

2. Code transpositions of *The Czech Century*

In the context of exploring the semiotics of politics and ideology, the series of nine separate graphic novels *Češi* [*The Czechs*] (2013–2017) is doubly interesting. Firstly, due to the specifics of its genesis: The comic is a creative re-coding of a given source material, the scripts written for the TV series *České století* [*The Czech Century*] (2013–2014), for a form (or medium) different than originally intended. Thus, the creators had to deal with decisive differences in terms of code/sign dispositions of the two forms involved. Secondly, the series' themes are rather non-representational (non-depictive) since the main content communicated here concerns political theses and considerations.

2.1. Czech comics, *The Czechs*, *The Czech Century*, and the changes of codes

Czech(oslovak) comics had a rather complicated history during the 20th century, mainly due to totalitarian political systems: first, the occupation by Nazi Germany, then four decades of Communist rule as a satellite state under the Soviet Union (whose close power surveillance is the topic of one of the graphic novels discussed below), as well as ideological objections to the format of comics as such (cf. Alaniz 2017), leading to some specific self-defensive strategies of Czech comics during communism, both at the level of form and content (cf. Kořínek 2020). In the current phase of its development, beginning after the year 2000, Czech comics seems to be in good shape and continuously developing. Above all, the domestication of the genre of graphic novels has produced several remarkable works (for this, cf. Foret 2012), some of which have already been translated into some neighboring and major world languages with more added with increasing frequency. Together with the natural generational changes of audiences and the related change in cultural preferences, the position and perception of comics in Czech society have changed fundamentally because of recent Czech works in addition to a substantial amount of translated works. Finally, Czech comics also became significantly focused on social, historical, and political themes, which now represent a substantial – and commercially quite successful – segment within the domestic production of comics.

However, the 824-page series entitled *Češi* [*The Czechs*] represents an unmissable, ambitious, and significant project even in this context. This is despite the fact that it was created as a by-product of another, even more ambitious, project: a series of nine television films entitled *České století* [*The Czech Century*] (2013–2014), mapping out critical political events or defining decisions in Czechoslovak history (the 'big,' political moments), set in 1918, 1938, 1941, 1948, 1951, 1968, 1976, 1989, and 1992.

From a social semiotics point of view, the very names of the twin projects imply an ideological shift. Their subject matter is the history of *Czechoslovakia*, i.e., the joint nation-building project of Czechs and Slovaks. The series starts with the invention,

negotiation, and creation of the state and ends with the state's disintegration and dissolution. However, the TV series is called "The Czech Century," and the comics series is called "The Czechs," although the protagonist of at least one of the episodes or volumes is a Slovak, i.e., a politician of Slovak nationality. Of course, the 'Czech voice' is dominant in this project produced by Czech Television, the national public service broadcaster. The naming implies a powerful statement and brings with it several meanings (denotative, connotative, and mythical, to use Roland Barthes' terms), and says a great deal about the perception of the shared state as a primarily Czech project (for better or for worse). After all, the last episode of the TV series is called *Ať si jdou* [Let Them Go] (2014), 'them' meaning the Slovaks, as opposed to 'our' common state.

The individual volumes also have different titles from the TV episodes. On TV, the titles comprised two to four words and mainly expressed some kind of statement (e.g., *Velké bourání* [The Great Demolition] for 1918 and the end of the Austria-Hungarian Empire, or *Musíme se dohodnout* [We Have to Make a Deal] for 1968 and the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union led Warsaw Pact armies). The titles of the individual volumes of the series of graphic novels follow a unified form, namely 'how someone did something' (from the first *Jak Masaryk vymyslel Československo* [How Masaryk Invented Czechoslovakia] to the ninth *Jak Mečiar s Klausem rozdělili stát* [How Mečiar and Klaus Divided the State]). This form perhaps refers to the creators' intention to focus on the thoughts and motives of the protagonists.

2.2. Specifics of TV coding

The entire project and the individual television films were presented as a powerfully creative project and an authorial vision or interpretation of the events they portrayed. The opening credits introduced each episode as part of the cycle "The Czech Century According to Pavel Kosatík and Robert Sedláček" (emphasis added). Both creators, the scriptwriter, and the director, presented their collaborative work as the outcome of their discussions and interpretation of the events in question.

The individual episodes of the series were weekly broadcast over two periods: the first five episodes between October 27 (topically fitting on the eve of the national holiday for the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic) and November 17, 2013, and the remaining four episodes a year later, between November 16 (again on the eve of a national holiday, this time not directly related to the theme of the episode) and December 7, 2014. The individual episodes vary considerably in terms of the period they cover. Some take place over a few days (a week or two), while others encompass several months or even several years (more rarely, as in the case of the first episode).

The television project, like the comics series, is based primarily on reimagining (not necessarily on an accurate or adequate reconstruction) the conversations between

the protagonists of 'grand' (political) history, especially leading politicians, which proved decisive for the given historical turning points in Czech(oslovak) history. These specific dialogues of specific individuals are what the scriptwriter presents as decisive moments through which 'history has been made.' The declared aim was to look 'inside the minds' of the individual protagonists, their motivations, and the thought processes which led to those truly historical decisions and actions. These were made in tense situations that would fundamentally affect their lives and their loved ones, and the entire state or nation. Often, the protagonists were aware of this when they took these actions. The series seeks to portray their doubts, conflicts, painful deliberations, and impulsive decisions.

This intention fits well with the chosen form of principally feature-length films (between 65 and 83 minutes) and, above all, with the made-for-television film format. The creators referred to Frank Pierson's television film *Conspiracy* (2001) about the Wannsee Conference and Sidney Lumet's film classic *12 Angry Men* (1957) as their sources of inspiration. Concerning the cinematographic codes used, the film relies primarily on the signifying resources of the actor's expression and action, which can dynamize and emotionally color even the thesis-like dialogue. Television production is also best able to cope with the genre of 'talking heads,' traditionally used in television (despite the development of quality television and the formal innovations associated with it) and still quite widespread (at least in some of the major television genres).

For the given intention, i.e., the (re)presentation of foundational historical conversations, the casting of the individual parts was crucial and decisive for the message; these long dialogues had to be *acted out* to avoid a simple declamation of theses. The casting of particular actors was also essential, made even more complicated (and discussed in public even before the films were released) for the more recent historical periods, as the audience still remembers the figures in question from contemporary factual genres (especially the news). In the case of a historical film, "audiences recognize the existence of a system of knowledge that is already clearly defined – historical knowledge, from which filmmakers take their material" (Sorlin 2000:37). Even for individuals from earlier historical periods, who no longer exist in the living memory of the audience, their image is given, fixed, and considered to a large extent obligatory, even canonical. The filmmakers had to take this canonical presentation into account.

2.3. Code limits of the 'Derivative' graphic novel series

The companion series of graphic novels began publication when the first episode was broadcast, but the synchrony broke down immediately after the first volume was published. The following volumes were published significantly later than the broadcasting time and in non-chronological order. The second volume was thus one

of those published last, three years after broadcasting the related TV episode. Due to the different production conditions, the books' publication pace was different and significantly less frequent than that of the TV series' broadcasting. Although the publisher intended to publish the remaining volumes in chronological order, the production requirements and the artists' capabilities made this impossible.

Some artists could not see how the film director and his crew realized the script. Nevertheless, according to scriptwriter Kosatík (2013b), some often chose similar solutions as the director. Others only worked after the television adaptation had already been broadcast. They and their readers could be familiar with the television version and compare the two 'incarnations' of the story. All artists had the same source material for their work as the director, i.e., the original script created to produce the episode of the TV series (cf. D'Amico 2016). The scriptwriter did not adapt his scripts for the different medium of comics with its different means of expression.

Although this placed artists in an uncomfortable position, they were somewhat compensated by their absolute creative freedom. All nine artists had to reduce the dialogue parts, which were unacceptably extensive for comics, and present them in a 'media-appropriate' way. More importantly, they had to find the semiotic resources by which to express some of the abstract (non-representational or non-depictive) theses and processes associated with the social upheavals and political crises that are the dominant topics of the series.

The scriptwriter also stated that the television and comics adaptations targeted different audiences, even demographically (cf. Kosatík 2013a, 2013b). The comics project was intended, right from the very beginning, for a younger audience than the TV series, mainly because younger viewers do not watch as much television, either in general or for this format specifically. At the same time, older Czech audiences do not read comics as much for historical reasons. Therefore, the look of a comics project must "correspond with the times and the speed of the reception of information" (Kosatík 2013b:n.pag., translation by the author). He also mentioned that the comics version has a "less serious" tone than the film version, not only because of the target group mentioned above and the younger participating artists but also because "drawing is evaluative, drawing is always an opinion" (2013b:n.pag.). Since a drawing always omits something and (thereby) emphasizes something else (cf. Barthes 1977), it tends (especially in comics) towards the mode of caricature. The examples analyzed below range on a scale from simply capturing pertinent features that "must be *expressed*" (cf. Eco 1976:206; original emphasis) to recognizing the depicted objects, especially historical persons, to express no more than a particular artist's opinion about them.

While the director of this kind of (television) film works with a particular actor, his acting type, and the degree of his resemblance to a historical figure as a means of expression (not only in visual form, but especially in gestures, diction, and other

non-verbal expressions typical for each individual), the comics artist has to choose completely different means. At the same time, as far as the similarity ('recognizability') of a real historical person prefiguring a character is concerned, the comics artist is limited only by his drawing style. In contrast, an actor too different from the figure portrayed may fail. This challenge includes many components of expression that the (meta-)code of comics does not cover (and is not expected to), such as the difficult phase of 'likening' an actor to a perceived original. Here, the difference should not be distracting but balanced, so that overstated resemblance does not cross into imitation or parody.⁶

Apart from depicting actual historical figures whose appearance is familiar to the readers, the realization in the form of comics makes specific demands of the artists in terms of visualizing those mentioned above, primarily non-representational, or non-depictive processes. Each artist coped with this task differently. Some modified the original script for their own needs as authors and the needs of the comics form. In some cases, moreover, they added material entirely of their own making, such as non-script-based scenes and additional plot lines that provided a framework and interpretation for the scripted historical moment or process. Thus, in the volume *1992 – Jak Mečiar s Klausom rozdělili stát* [How Mečiar and Klaus Divided the State] – Dan Černý incorporated into Kosatík's story segments which represent the experience of his generation; an age group which perceived the events presented, i.e., the actions of politicians regarding the dissolution of the shared state, as children. In this way, the comic tries to understand the impact of these events on children's lives. Karel Osoha also worked with a micro collective of children in the volume *1948 – Jak se KSČ chopila moci* [How the Communist Party Seized Power], a story about the Communist coup and the seizing of power over the entire state. He not only frames the situations written by Kosatík, but he creates a semantic parallel in the children's world. On the one hand, he thematizes the competition between the individual parties (for control of the territory and about who will win in the announced race); on the other hand, he depicts the bewitchment of power offered by the mysterious 'sorcerer' Klement Gottwald who controls people in irrational ways. In *1952 – Jak Gottwald zavraždil Slánského* [How Gottwald Murdered Slánský], Vojtěch Mašek does not add other plot lines but fundamentally transforms the whole ambiance of the volume following the poetics of his creative work (cf. Kuhlman 2020). On the other hand, while this narrative appears as a kind of political thriller about the struggle for power in the script and the television adaptation, in Mašek's work, the story takes on a much more paranoid and bizarre form, which is delivered in a manner significantly different to the film.

⁶ An example is the rhotacism in the speech of the dissident and later President Václav Havel.

3. Different semiotics of disintegration: The (meta-)code of comics and the expression of political ideas

In the context of this study, we selected three volumes of the series for a more detailed analysis, all of which are linked by the theme of disintegration: the collapse of the Austria-Hungarian Empire and the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, the disintegration of Czechoslovakia after the occupation by Nazi Germany in 1938, and the disintegration of the efforts of the reformists within the Communist regime during the Prague Spring of 1968, after the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact under the leadership of the Soviet Union. In the context mentioned above, the analysis aimed to identify, describe, and interpret how these abstract political processes are expressed in the graphic novels of the series.

3.1. Visualizing the duel of ideas

The opening volume of the series concerns the earliest historical events. It is entitled *Jak Masaryk vymyslel Československo* [How Masaryk Invented Czechoslovakia] and refers to 1918. However, only a marginal part of the story occurs in that year, comprising mainly of the last scene in which Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk arrives in the already established independent state as its president. Otherwise, the volume deals with Masaryk's activities between 1914 and 1916, emphasizing the events of 1914 and the beginning of his campaign. The keyword in the title is 'invented' – the corresponding scenes show Masaryk convincing his contacts of the importance of the Czechoslovak question and its global significance and explaining the ideological context of his political concept against the background of the ongoing World War between the European powers. Consistent with the entire project's character as mentioned above, the book's main content consists of presentations of situations in which Masaryk converses with someone (or gives a speech). The content of his speeches is primarily abstract, and the aim is to convince an individual or large audience of the claims presented.

Conveying such content through the semiotic means of the (meta-)code of comics is somewhat complicated. The artist of this volume, Petr Novák, working under the moniker Ticho762, with the assistance of the scriptwriter Martin Šinkovský hence added a parallel plotline about the army boxer Josef Vávra to the narrative of Masaryk's negotiations. Vávra's fights intertwine with Masaryk's critical conversations. These negotiations are performed through a physical, literal fight – the battle of ideas becomes a boxing match; the authors referred to this sport's popularity at the time. In the panels, the graphic depiction of punches in the ring between Vávra and his opponents are accompanied by speech balloons and by alternating images of Masaryk

and his interlocutors, depicted while in conversation (Figure 1). While these dialogues take place in the opulent spaces of the mansions inhabited by these persons of high status, Vávra's duels are set in the small space of the ring. Both scenes are connected by a chain of linked speech balloons presenting the ongoing conversations, which run across the (double) pages, floating freely through the space, and referring with their pointers to figures depicted in panels and pages before or after. The chosen signifying resources represent situations that show conflict more vividly – which the merely reported dialogue would not allow within the (meta-)code of comics.

Hermeneutically, it seems somewhat surprising that the last conversation and match presented, the story's conclusion for the comics reader, does not end with victory for Masaryk or Vávra. Instead, Masaryk failed to convince David Lloyd George, United Kingdom's Prime Minister, of his conception of the Czechoslovak question. Unable to refute George's arguments, he leaves the meeting defeated in the same way that Vávra, unable to deflect his opponent's hard punches, leaves the ring to the victor. While in the script and the television film, the dialogue between Masaryk and David Lloyd George ends as the argument is won, the comics end on showing Vávra being knocked out by 'The Limey,' his opponent. However, the theme of the subse-



Figure 1. Masaryk is persuading Vávra is boxing. (Kosatík and Ticho 762 2013:[50])

quent final scene of both the graphic novel and the film is Masaryk's triumphant arrival at Prague, already Czechoslovakia, as president of the newly proclaimed state. This happens ahead of an epilogue describing Masaryk's meeting with his wife in a sanatorium after a long separation, also included in both versions.

The metaphor of the physical fight in the comics thus magnifies a semantic moment in the script and its television adaptation: failure is rewarded with success. However, this is a kind of dramaturgical error or a signal towards an interpretation that the victory was not the result of Masaryk's work or arguments but a constellation of the wills of the representatives of the Great Powers? For many Czechs, this is a strong view of the 20th-century developments and reinforces the impression of Czech(oslovak) state formation as 'non-self-evident.' As Vlachová and Řeháková argue (2009:258): "An important factor in this regard is the 'non-self-evident' nature of the existence of the Czech state [...] following the contingency of its foundation." Via Klimek (2001), this idea refers to Milan Kundera, who in his remarkable speech at the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers in 1967 declared: "For there has never been anything self-evident about the existence of the Czech nation and one of its most distinctive traits, in fact, has been the unobviousness of that existence" (1971:172). He repeats this idea later: "[F]or them their existence is not a self-evident certainty but always a question, a wager, a risk; they are on the defensive against History, that force is bigger than they, that does not take them into account, that does not even notice them" (2007:33). Kundera, in turn, is explicitly referring to the ideas of Hubert Gordon Schauer, published three decades before the founding of Czechoslovakia (cf. Orság 2019). So, this victory is not presented to the reader as deserved but rather as 'given from above': it did not have to turn out this way, and it is not clear to the reader why it turned out this way – depicted is only the fiasco.

It is interesting that, throughout the graphic novel, this juxtaposition between Masaryk's ideological duels and Vávra's physical fights does not always work in a strict parallel in terms of the presented relevance of each argument and punch. In the first conversation between Masaryk and Prince Franz Anton von Thun, the Habsburg monarchy's governor of Bohemia, Masaryk's argumentative superiority was certainly less convincing than Vávra's physical fight in the ring. However, in the dialogue with David Lloyd George, the visual metaphor is accurate. Every argument presented in the text in the speech balloon undermining Masaryk's propositions is precisely mirrored by a punch that Vávra takes from his opponent in the corresponding panel. While in the first case, Masaryk leaves the conversation with Thun with the conclusion that they have not found common ground because they live in different worlds and fundamentally differ in their beliefs and mindsets, in the second case, Masaryk leaves the dialogue with George defeated in a genuine sense (by arguments); thus, the visual metaphor works precisely.

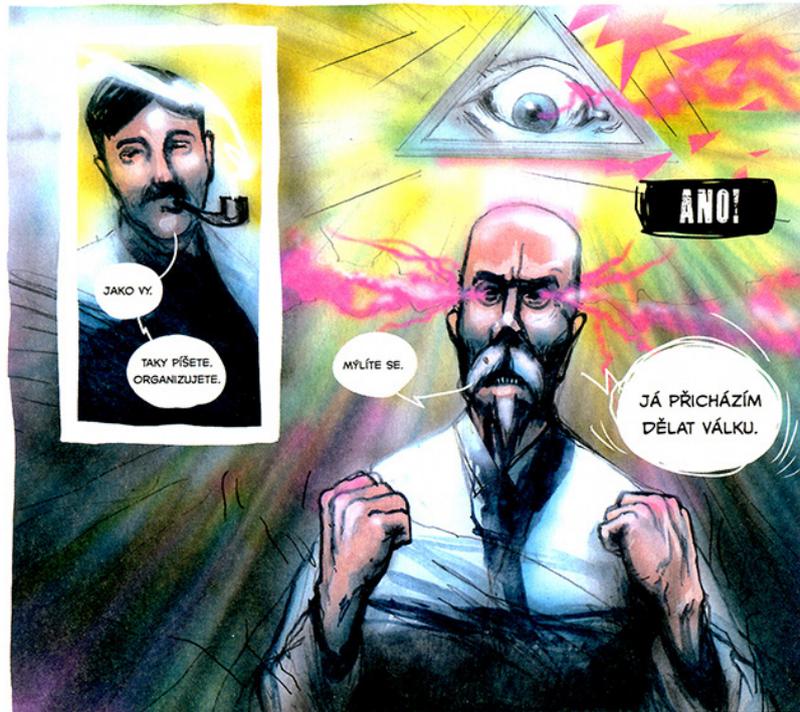


Figure 2. Presence of The Providence with the discussant Masaryk. (Kosatík and Ticho 762 2013:[35])



Figure 3. Providence stands behind/for Masaryk. (Kosatík and Ticho 762 2013:[34])

Apart from presenting the duel of ideas or concepts as a physical fight, the artist uses another significant way to visualize an abstract idea through pictorial means. In an interview with British journalist Wickham Steed and historian Robert William Seton-Watson, the character of Masaryk says: “I am an instrument [...] of Providence.” Furthermore, when questioned, he adds: “I believe it guides us all. That I am here now, talking to you, is by the will of Providence” (Kosatík and Ticho 762 2013:[34]). The dialogue line draws on a statement from Masaryk’s biographical book *Hovory s T.G.M.* [Talks with T. G. Masaryk]. It was initially published in three volumes and based on Karel Čapek’s interviews with the first Czechoslovak president in 1928–1935, authorized by Masaryk: “I believe in teleology, that is, I believe that each of us is led by Providence,” as recorded by Čapek (1995:146). The concept of Providence is not necessarily political. However, for Masaryk, who referred to the concept frequently, it had this dimension (cf. Čapek 1990:184, 1995:193). In his system of thought as well as his policies, it played a fundamental role – as it did in the ‘Czechoslovak question’ itself, of which he persuaded politicians. Masaryk’s Providence is presented in the comics in two ways: conventionally, with a traditional symbol such as the Eye of God (Figure 2), or inventively, with an artistic symbol as a female figure, a nude with animal-like ears and horns. Using black captions entering the panels from a different space, the authors additionally connect Providence with the figure of Masaryk’s wife Charlotte (Figure 3), whom Masaryk leaves behind in his homeland in the prologue to return to her in the epilogue. Moreover, when Providence is present during Masaryk’s decisive moments, a purple glow is drawn around Masaryk’s figure, which the artist depicts inside and between the panels, presenting Masaryk in a trance-like state (he is proverbially “called by Providence”). This combination of means of expression thus allows the artist to express the connection of the figure of Masaryk with God, his homeland, and his wife left behind in his homeland (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Charlotte and Providence, identification of voices. (Kosatík and Ticho 762 2013:[69])

3.2. Visualizing the disintegration of the state

The second volume in terms of historical chronology was published second to last. Entitled *Jak Beneš ustoupil Hitlerovi* [How Beneš Gave in to Hitler], it focuses on 1938, the year of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia as understood in the context of Masaryk's project, which was the climax of the previous volume. The events presented here take place over two weeks, between September 21 and October 5, 1938. The episode concerns the Czechoslovak state representatives dealing with the ultimatum demanding the cession of the territories on the border to Nazi Germany and the subsequent dictate at the Munich Conference, where the representatives of Great Britain, France, and Italy reached an agreement with Adolf Hitler on the future situation of Czechoslovakia. The central figure is Czechoslovak President Edvard Beneš, also mentioned in the title. This time, the conversations depicted happen between him and his generals who represent the Czechoslovak army, with the central dramatic conflict occurring between Beneš and Colonel Emanuel Moravec.

Artist Štěpánka Jislová depicts the rapid change of the situation both in terms of the geopolitical position of Czechoslovakia and the position of President Beneš as the leading politician of the state through the graphic conception of a scene in which the escalating dialogues take place. First, she uses symptomatic colors as a means of meaning-making. While Beneš's first conversation takes place in the president's office, depicted in vivid colors, the second conversation takes place in an exterior setting where the colors are toned down. Finally, the third conversation is designed only in black and white.

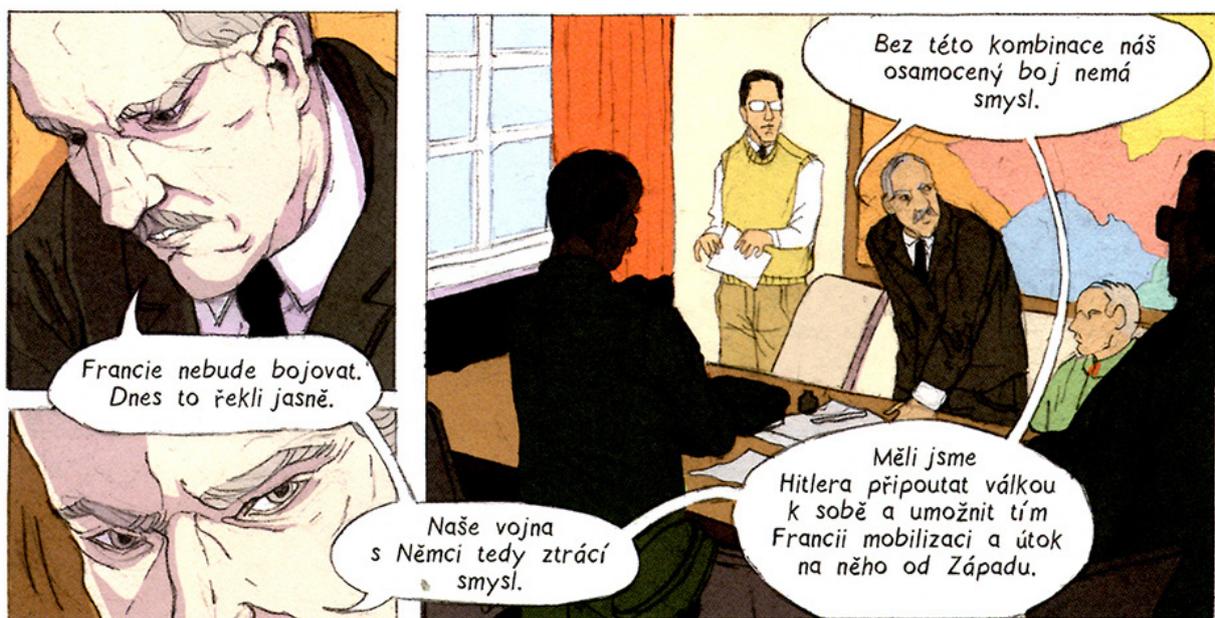


Figure 5. Beneš is having a meeting with the generals in the standard office... (Kosatík and Jislová 2016:[8])

Accompanying this change of color, the artist uses the gradual disintegration of space to express the nature of the situation. Whereas the first meeting between the president and the generals is depicted in a sparse but still fully equipped room (Figure 5), in the second meeting, the space appears somewhat dilapidated, with cracks on the walls and floors, plaster falling from the walls, and the room furnishings evoking a provisional space such as a field headquarters (Figure 6). There is no longer a conference table in the third conversation, and all the figures are depicted standing in a makeshift environment (Figure 7). After hearing Beneš's decision that the Munich dictate should be accepted,



Figure 6. ... in the room depicted as the 'field office'... (Kosatík and Jislová 2016:[32])



Figure 7. ... in completely emptied room. (Kosatík and Jislová 2016:[40])

and the army be demobilized, half-collapsed walls are depicted behind the generals. The critical schism of opinion between President Beneš and Colonel Moravec is explicitly expressed by depicting the rupture between the two figures, which grows larger and larger as the number of panels increases and the conversation continues. As the debate progresses, the walls gradually collapse; pieces of falling plaster are drawn around the figures until finally, the figures are depicted on the remains of a plank floor surrounded by the black-colored surface of the panel (representing mere darkness, Figure 8). In the final scene, the rupture between the two protagonists widens until the remains of the floor beneath the figure of Moravec crumbles, and he falls into a dark abyss (Figure 9). The epilogue then depicts Moravec as a loyal servant of the Nazi occupants in 1942.



Figure 8. The world of Beneš and Moravec is sinking into darkness. (Kosatík and Jislová 2016:[58])

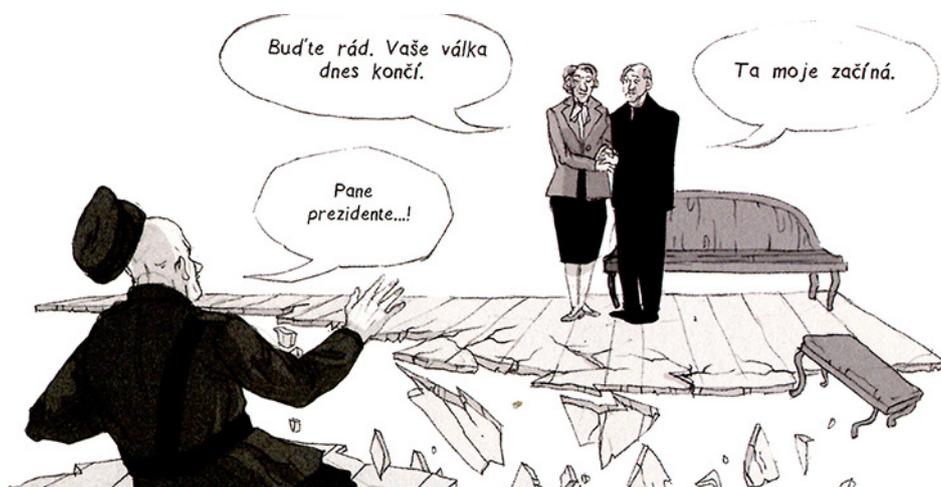


Figure 9. Moravec's world has fallen apart and he has lost ground beneath his feet. (Kosatík and Jislová 2016:[59])

Escalated geopolitical issues, such as the annexation of border areas by the Nazi German Reich, i.e., the loss of the territory of the Czechoslovak Republic, usually depicted in the symbolic form on the map, is thus visualized through the absence of specific spatial attributes of the depicted rooms. Regarding the central figures of President Beneš and Colonel Moravec, the means of expression used become a direct visualization of idioms that similarly express a particular liminal and hopeless situation – from ‘being cornered,’ through ‘standing at the abyss,’ to ‘his world has fallen apart,’ and ‘he is losing ground.’ Both protagonists are thus presented as having been forced by external circumstances into a situation in which their space for decision-making is fundamentally diminished. Their actions are determined from the outside by other, larger states. In the new situation, the powers that had supported the creation of the independent state left it at the mercy of an expansionist neighboring state (Nazi Germany). The figures themselves, who represent opposing opinions of Czechoslovak society, are presented in a way that does not allow for any action other than accepting an externally forced decision.

3.3. Visualizing the clash of political doctrines

The sixth volume in the order of historical events, entitled *Jak Dubček v Moskvě kapituloval* [How Dubček Capitulated in Moscow], deals with the political crisis in socialist Czechoslovakia in 1968 when the intervention of the Soviet Union ended the reformist efforts of some Czechoslovak Communists. At that time, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was undergoing a so-called ‘process of revival,’ accompanied by a gradual liberalization of the existing rules and sentiments throughout Czechoslovak society (e.g., the abolition of censorship). As a result, leading reformist politicians received unusual and very strong support from the population. However, the leaders of other states in the Soviet sphere of influence observed this process with extreme skepticism and concern, especially as Czechoslovakia was on the geographical edge of the Soviet sphere of influence at its border with the West. This eventually led to military intervention. The story of the volume takes place over one week, between August 20 and 27, 1968. It begins with the night the territory of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was occupied by the Soviet Union led Warsaw Pact armies and ends with the return from Moscow of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia representatives led by its First Secretary, Alexander Dubček, whereto they had been abducted after their internment on that first night. At the center of the volume’s plot are the negotiations between the abducted Czechoslovak politicians and the representatives of the Soviet Union, led by Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The negotiations between the abductees and their abductors, the representatives of the satellite state, and the party leaders of the hegemonic Eastern bloc took place in an environment of fundamental inequality and under coercion. These

were not dialogues in the true sense of the word but the power dictates of one side and the coming to terms – personal and political – with these dictates by the other side.

Artist Karel Jerie's concept once again employs a powerful visual metaphor. Here, unlike the symbolic parallelism of conversation and boxing match in the volume designed by Ticho762, or the symbolic representation of disintegration through a crumbling environment created by Jislová, the main protagonists are depicted as animals, more precisely as prehistoric dinosaurs.

Depicting people as animals or at least with animal features (usually in the face or the whole head) has a long tradition as a specific code of caricature at least since the work of Grandville, who, in his metamorphoses of the late 1820s, 'puts a dog's head' on his figures. This code was subsequently transferred to comics and applied in various modifications and meanings in different comics works, from Art Spiegelman's *Maus* to Juan Guarnido's and scriptwriter Juan Díaz Canales *Blacksad* (cf. Herman 2017). Jerie puts a dinosaur's head on the Communist figures, expressing human characteristics through animal facial features like Grandville but now in a sequential narrative.

Apart from the fact that dinosaurs featured significantly in his paintings, Jerie (2016) stated that his primary motivation for this creative device was that the late 1960s was already a kind of distant 'prehistory' for the comics' anticipated readership. In addition, the image of politicians as dinosaurs and their interactions, according to him, enables reference to "the strong eating the weak" as a principle persisting in politics. Jerie's visual metaphor, however, is even more meaningful than that.

Considering the genre of historical comics, the primary and essential similarity and recognizability of the depicted figures to the actual historical protagonists is



Figure 10. Different kinds of communists, different types of dinosaurs. (Kosatík and Jerie 2016:[14])

of crucial importance. Jerie is a skilled cartoonist who draws on the physiognomic features of individual figures. The image of the individual characters is easily recognizable despite the specific stylization, as he approximates these features in his caricature into the features of various kinds of dinosaurs. These hybrid significations allow him to visually depict the personality of specific figures or their outsized role in the story and indicate their motives. Moreover, they allow him to work more expressively with facial expressions. The general dimension of ‘dinosaur-ness’ was crucial for him – another instance of a visual device expressing an ideological idea only representable by neologisms. However, there is another symbolic meaning that we can trace besides this, which is a visual expression of the conflict between Czechoslovaks and the Soviets, or between reformist and conservative Communists, as some figures evoke herbivorous, others carnivorous dinosaurs (Figure 10).

The conflict between two political doctrines is thus expressed as a conflict between two different types of these prehistorical species. While the general ‘dinosaur-ness’ was clearly primary, and it is impossible to relate the image of each of the figures to specific types of dinosaurs, the essential distinction between herbivores (reformist, defensive, Czechoslovak, ultimately defeated) and carnivores (conservative, offensive, Soviet, or pro-Soviet, ultimately victorious) is obvious.

For the main protagonists, it is even possible to specify their particular species. For example, Dubček takes a parasaurolophus-like form, which connotes herd-mindedness and unassertiveness. In contrast, Brezhnev takes a tyrannosaurus-like form, which refers to one of the most dangerous, predatory dinosaurs (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Politicians with dinosaur features... (Kosatík and Jerie 2016:[63])

This contrast is most clearly expressed in two double-page scenes Jerie added to the script's plot. In them, we no longer see politicians with mere dinosaur-like features but whole dinosaur bodies that retain some of the features of the politicians in question (Figure 12). The first represents a dream that a stressed Dubček has on a plane during his abduction to Moscow and depicts an attack on Parasaurolophus-Dubček (and, metaphorically, Czechoslovakia) by a much larger Tyrannosaurus-Brezhnev. In the second, Dubček then sees himself as a meal for the carnivorous Soviet Communists dinosaurs at the final reception after the signing of the Moscow Protocol. This visual metaphor expresses not only the feelings of a politician who has failed but also the situation of the state under occupation. Like the situation with the Munich Agreement, the interpretation suggested is that it was a foreign power that authoritatively decided on the subsequent development of the Czechoslovak state's domestic policy.



Figure 12. ... and dinosaurs with features of the politicians. (Kosatík and Jerie 2016:[30-31])

Conclusion

The analyzed material demonstrates that while the television (meta-)code (ultimately a cinematographic code but bent towards a specific audience) can cope with mere quasi-dialogical interaction, the comics adaptations tend to use pictorial means to highlight some inherent meanings. For example, in the selected graphic novels, the artists' primary strategy in depicting abstract historical processes and political concepts is choosing visual metaphors that have a more general meaning – each represents one general idea applied throughout the story. In the first case, the metaphor of political conversations, i.e., ideological contests, as boxing matches or physical fights; in the second case, the metaphor of a collapsing structure and the gradual loss of national and state ground beneath one's feet in political negotiations and decision-making; and in the third case, the metaphor of the conflict between two variants of one ideology, reformist and conservative, as two types of one group of animals, more radical and aggressive (carnivorous) and more moderate and defensive (herbivorous). In all three cases, these are means expressions that do not come from the script and are not present in the script's TV adaptation.

These visual metaphors do not belong to the inherent systematic resources of the (meta-)code of comics but rather hail from more general artistic and graphic means. For example, it is easy to imagine using the same semiotic resources of visualization in another pictorially based medium or form – especially in animation, where these described visual metaphors could be used in the same way, and to a considerable extent also in single drawings and paintings. Perhaps the only device discussed above that does not lend itself to any form besides the comics is the symbolic connection between the Providence to which Masaryk felt called and his wife Charlotte, whom he left behind in his homeland. The code of comics allows the representation of verbal messages in neutral typeset, which can visually merge several voices into one. At the same time, the speech of a particular character would have specific individual characteristics in an audiovisual medium that would uniquely identify that character; neutral typesetting obstructs this possibility of symbolic identification.

The primary carrier of conceptual – political and ideological – content in the graphic novels in question is the written word, usually presented in a neutral, featureless manner. Because their main task was to present or adapt lengthy dialogue exchanges through comics, it is quite surprising how minimally the artists of all three volumes work with the possibilities of the signifying resources that the code of comics offers in terms of presenting the paralinguistic components of dialogues, i.e., capturing the sound characteristics of the presented speech (volume, intonation, tone, speed, and tempo of speech). In these comics, the speech balloons are almost always standardized. They have the style consistently used throughout the particular graphic novel, and consequently, the individual realizations of specific dialogue segments do not differ; the artists do not work much with their shape and size.

In the same way, the dialogue form does not work all that much with the possibilities of lettering. There are almost no highlighted or otherwise emphasized parts to the text. However, the font size is primarily standardized, and featureless, and different parts of the dialogue are hardly differentiated. It is noteworthy that in the rare cases where a dialogue line is visually emphasized in the graphic novel, the TV actors deliver the same sentences without any emphasis.

Through the visual metaphors used, all three analyzed graphic novels then express and reinforce the mythical idea of Czech(oslovak) history as a process in which historical figures from among Czech politicians only play the role of extras; the development of the Czechoslovak state is decided elsewhere, outside the territory, and by other, non-Czech politicians. This mythological reading may thus reinforce the Czech audience's perception of the non-self-evidentness of an independent Czech state of its own.

At present, or more precisely for the last ten years or so, graphic novels of the historical genre dominate Czech comics. This is true in terms of the number of titles published and their commercial success. However, most of them are intended to serve remembrance or education with little artistic ambitions or features. They work with the possibilities of the code of comics in a relatively limited or subdued way – and where they do deal with more general political or ideological concepts, it is purely in terms of the written word. The three titles analyzed above thus represent an exception, both in the context of the entire nine-volume series of graphic novels and, more generally, within the Czech comics production. Within European comics, the genre under study is not as dominant, although undoubtedly abundantly represented, and even more so on a global scale. The findings obtained based on this material could thus be interesting for further comparisons with graphic novels from other traditions.

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Mapping Europe's attitudes towards refugees in political cartoons through CMT and CMA

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ABSTRACT

Perceiving the 'refugee crisis' as a construct shaped, among others, by contemporary political cartooning, we examine how cartoonists have represented European attitudes towards refugees by focusing on the metaphorical representation of 'Europe' and the 'refugee.' Specifically, we identify the conceptual metaphors used to depict Europe and refugees, and how political cartoons framed the 'refugee crisis' by applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory – CMT (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980) – and Critical Metaphor Analysis – CMA (cf. Charteris-Black 2004, Musolff 2012). Our analysis reveals that cartoonists re-frame the migration phenomenon according to the emphasis they put on: (a) Europe's role in the Syrian conflict; (b) Europe's policies concerning the reception of refugees in Europe; (c) the implications of Europe's policies for refugees; (d) implications of receiving refugees for Europe; and (e) refugees' expectations from Europe. Political cartoons thus serve as "perspectivisation devices" (Silaški 2012:216) that construct the 'refugee crisis' as 'the Syrian refugee crisis,' a 'humanitarian crisis,' a 'crisis of European governance,' and a 'European identity crisis,' reproducing dominant narratives around migration.

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1. Introduction

The civil war in Syria is a geopolitical and humanitarian issue that has caused massive movements of people since 2011. Although Syrians mainly found refuge in neighboring countries (approximately 5.5 million refugees), over one million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers headed to Europe through dangerous and exhausting routes (cf. UNHCR 2021). This condition has been a great challenge for the EU nation-states and

governments and the normative-regulative framework of the EU, mainly the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) (cf. Pries 2019), especially after the gradual forced migratory surge in early 2015. Since the EU appeared unable to manage this massive influx of people, the 'refugee crisis' has become a common term of the European political and media discourse for describing extended migration processes (cf. Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Triandafyllidou 2017). A growing academic literature mediating the idea of the crisis has emerged, and part of it has been critical toward the notion of the 'refugee crisis' in current political discourse (see Section 2.1).

Political cartoons position themselves within the historical process by embracing and reproducing discourses about an issue, in this case, the 'refugee crisis,' and/or by omitting or questioning others. Therefore, we can only make sense of political cartoons and their metaphors in specific sociopolitical contexts. Their meanings are provisional and transitional since their audiences interpret them within such a context from which they draw arguments and the dominant discursive elements they reproduce in turn. Moreover, we approach the discourse of political cartoons as a form of satirical journalism and a type of visual public opinion or news discourse (cf. Greenberg 2002). By acknowledging the role of political cartoons in challenging political power through counter-narratives and acting as vehicles of persuasion (cf. Marín-Arrese 2019), we have attempted to raise awareness for covert meanings in visual argumentation to reproduce dominant discourses around forced migration.

Given political cartoons' ability to influence public political discourse, we took their representations of the 'refugee crisis' as performed conceptual metaphors. Besides, metaphor's power to persuade and shape our conception of a given topic is well documented (cf., for example, Silaški 2012). Political cartoons appear to reproduce dominant discourses of the migration phenomenon or challenge them. Therefore, it is crucial to uncover representations of social phenomena by following the diverse paths of their metaphorical construction.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Dominant 'refugee crisis' framings

During the last decade, the expression 'refugee crisis' has been extensively used in everyday political and media discourse and has been integrated into our mental lexicon as an established concept. However, relevant studies have raised concerns about this working term, treating it as a construct whose use has imperceptible implications for how we perceive various aspects of the migration phenomenon. Therefore, alternative phrases have been proposed such as 'crisis of legitimacy' (Castelli Gattinara 2017), 'crisis of solidarity' (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2016), 'crisis of European borders' (de Genova 2016), or 'reception crisis' (Christopoulos 2017).

The complex emergency following the war in Syria since 2011 has been presented as the 'Syrian crisis' (e.g., Nas 2019; Pierini 2016; Turkmani and Haid 2016) or 'Syrian refugee crisis' (e.g., Balsari et al. 2015; Crețu 2015). Drawing on Habermas' (1976) definition of crisis as a rarely occurring situation that can destabilize citizens' beliefs and, more generally, the status quo, Stockemer et al. (2019:3) recognize the 'European refugee crisis' as a 'milestone event.' They use this term to refer to two dimensions of the crisis: (a) a 'humanitarian crisis' of people fleeing from war, oppression, or disastrous economic circumstances to EU member states since 2015, and (b) a 'crisis of European governance.'

Concerning the second dimension, Postelnicescu's (2016) description of Europe's internal conflict points out that the 'refugee crisis' triggered the acceleration of an underlying conflict of visions among the EU states and even states outside the European Union. This pressure within the EU has revealed the Western socio-economic order's economic, financial, fiscal, macroeconomic, and political weaknesses. This development has also been addressed as an 'existential crisis' (e.g., Menéndez 2013). Ammaturo (2018:2), on the other hand, argues that the 'refugees/migrants crisis,' referred to as an 'existential crisis,' is an 'ontological' and 'epistemological crisis' that Europe and European citizenship are undergoing "because the dominant narrative on Europe and Europeanness seems to be a 'narrative of coherence.'" What underlies this imagined entity of European consciousness is a cartographic definition of Europe, which in turn raises the ontological question of what constitutes Europe (cf. Delanty 2006:183), as well as of "border practices" (Dell' Agnese and Amilhat Szary 2015:8) and "their roles in 'suturing' and knitting adjacent spaces" (Makarychev 2018:747).

Acknowledging, thus, the multiplicity of the term as discussed above, we have adopted Stockemer et al.'s (2019) approach to the 'refugee crisis' integrating several framings such as 'solidarity crisis,' 'reception crisis,' and 'European border crisis.' Moreover, we have added two more literature-driven dimensions that are perceived and applied in this study as follows: 'Syrian crisis/Syrian refugee crisis,' with regards to Europe's role in dealing with the Syrian conflict as a foreign policy issue (e.g., Crețu 2015, Pierini 2016); and 'European identity crisis,' integrating the perspectives of an 'existential crisis' (cf. Menéndez 2013) as well as 'an ontological and epistemological crisis' (cf. Ammaturo 2018) that both refer to the quality of 'Europeanness' as an imagined property of the European citizen.

2.2. Migration metaphors, political cartoons discourse and metaphor research

Many recent studies have explored metaphors that have shaped political discourse in Europe and the USA (cf., for example, Bratanova and Ishpekova 2019; Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti 2016; Musolff 2016). Castaño Castaño, Laso Martín, and Verdaguer

Clavera (2017) point out that the dominant representation of immigration in public discourse since the early 20th century includes dehumanizing metaphors. More recently, Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) revealed the symbolic instability of the 'refugee,' which shifts between 'speechless victim' and 'evil-doing terrorist,' and proposed a typology of 'refugee' visibilities' each of which construes different forms of civic agency and responsibility towards refugees.

Immigration is often described as a threat, a natural force, an uncontrollable flood with devastating consequences for host communities conceptualized as bodies and organisms (cf., for example, Santa Ana 1999; Cisneros 2008; Strom and Alcock 2017). Immigration is also represented as a risk for a country's internal welfare; thus, controlling immigration appears as a battle to protect the country's interests (cf. Castaño, Martín, and Clavera 2017). When the nation is conceptualized as a house or a fortress (cf. Charteris-Black 2006, Cisneros 2008), its physical or symbolic boundaries facilitate the reproduction of the Us/Them dipole in public discourse (cf. van Dijk 2000). Thus, the government emerges as a heroic agent responsible for protecting the country (cf. Binotto 2015, Musolff 2011) from 'invaders,' 'criminals,' or 'illegal aliens' (cf. Binotto 201, Flores 2003).

This metaphorical construction of immigration as a security problem renders the protection of the citizens as a government's duty, compared here to the responsibilities of a father, reflecting thus Lakoff's 'strict father model' (cf. Lakoff 1996, 2006). At the same time, it discursively reproduces the conception of immigration as a threat. In this way, political metaphors frame arguments and suggest context-specific value-laden readings of the sociopolitical realities (e.g., Abdel-Raheem 2014, Charteris-Black 2005, Kjeldsen 2015, Tseronis 2013).

In their Conceptual Metaphor Theory (hereafter CMT), Lakoff and Johnson (1980) approached metaphor as a part of the sphere of thought, rather than that of language, introducing thus a paradigm shift in metaphor studies. Many metaphors involve the mediation of visual sensory information contained in image schemas or the re-visualization of conventional verbal metaphors, a practice extensively used by cartoonists (cf. Yus 2009:167-168). Among the various methods used to identify metaphors in written or multimodal discourse, the Visual Metaphor Identification Procedure (VisMIP) is especially recommended for visual and multimodal discourse (cf. Šorm and Steen 2018).

Considering the parallel cognitive-semiotic premise that argumentation is a cognitive category, it is more accurate to take a text as instructing the reader to construct argumentative meaning than containing argumentation (cf. van den Hoven 2015:157). Thus, the meaning-making process presupposes situating the cartoon in the macro-contextual socio-political reality it addresses and guiding the reader to grasp its evaluative stance and argumentative value (cf. van den Hoven and Schilperoord 2017). To identify how visual language, and specifically cartoons, place readers

on an argumentative track in relation to preexisting frames and shared values, Critical Metaphor Analysis (cf. Charteris-Black 2004, hereafter CMA) tracing the stages of identification, interpretation, and explanation, may prove to be a helpful approach.

Although there are studies that have applied CMA (e.g., Musolff 2012), Muelas-Gil (2018:26) claims that, to her knowledge, “there is no reference to multimodal metaphors as a critical tool in discourse,”¹ pointing out the need for a new approach to political metaphor and multimodality which can be called Critical Multimodal Metaphor Analysis (hereafter CMMA). In the following section, we present in detail how we have identified and analyzed the pair ‘Europe – Refugees’ as visual metaphors in each political cartoon, exploring their argumentative value that draws on and re-/produces diverse dimensions of the ‘refugee crisis’ concept.

3. Methodological notes

Our primary research question in this study is *how do political cartoon(ist)s address the concept of ‘refugee crisis’?* To address it, and after taking into consideration Negro, Šorm, and Steen’s (2017) as well as Šorm and Steen’s (2018) work on visual metaphor identification, we employed an integrative approach of CMT (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and CMA (Charteris-Black 2004). According to CMT, there are two types of conceptual domains: a) the source domain, from which we draw metaphorical expressions (e.g., *learning is/as/a journey*), and b) the target domain that we try to understand (e.g., *learning is/as a journey*). *Mapping* is, then, a set of correspondences between the source and the target domain elements. To know a conceptual metaphor is to know the set of mappings that applies to a given source-target pair.

Our analysis focused on the metaphorical use of the concepts ‘Europe’ and ‘refugee,’ mapping the relation of the target and the source domains used for the semiotic construction of the political cartoon. We first identified visual metaphors used to depict Europe and refugees, respectively, reconstructing visual information in terms of verbal (or propositional) premises. Secondly, we identified the relation of the two conceptual metaphors used in each cartoon to create a particular framing of the ‘refugee crisis,’ forming a conclusion. Here, we roughly follow the rules that Govier (2010:31ff.) summarizes as “standardizing” an argument, i.e., clearly stating, arranging in a logical order, and enumerating premises and conclusions. Thirdly, we aimed at exploring how the particular metaphors chosen in those specific discourse contexts, political cartoons, relate to dominant narratives about the ‘refugee crisis.’

¹ Her argument probably relates to the specific genre of political discourse since there are studies applying critical frameworks, such as a critical feminist discourse perspective, to explore multimodal metaphors in other genres like advertising (e.g., Lazar 2009).

All target domains of the visual metaphors identified in the cartoons of our sample refer to Europe and refugees, respectively. In order to code and analyze the data of our corpus, we have used the following codification: (a) Data Item (DI), (b) Target Domain (TD), (c) Source Domain (SD), (d) Mapping (MAP), with a verbal or codified subscript, e.g., SD_{Europe} , SD_{Refugees} , $DIS_{1.12}$, that refers to specific cartoons we analyze each time. The following process was used for analyzing each data item (DI), each political cartoon.

Premise (1) refers to mapping the concept of Europe, *Premise (2)* refers to mapping the concept of the refugee to reach an *Overt (propositional) Conclusion* that maps Europe's attitudes towards refugees relating the pairs of conceptual metaphors. Through this process, we identified the cartoon's argumentative meaning. Then, using critical metaphor analysis, we identified the macro-contextual influence of the dominant narratives that relate to the construction and communication of the 'refugee crisis,' situating the cartoonist's perspective within the four-dimensional framing of 'refugee crisis' as presented in the theoretical background section (*Covert Conclusion*).

Premise (1) $MAP_{\text{EUROPE}} (TD_{\text{EUROPE}} \cap SD_{\text{EUROPE}})$ Premise (2) $MAP_{\text{REFUGEES}} (TD_{\text{REFUGEES}} \cap SD_{\text{REFUGEES}})$
<hr/> Overt Conclusion (micro-context): cartoon's argumentative meaning Covert Conclusion (macro-context): cartoonist's framing of 'refugee crisis'

Following the three stages of CMA, we worked through the analysis of each cartoon as follows:

- a) identification of the domain(s) describing the content of the political cartoon with CMT propositions: $TD_{\text{EUROPE}} \cap SD_{\text{EUROPE}}$, $TD_{\text{REFUGEES}} \cap SD_{\text{REFUGEES}}$,
- b) interpretation of the cartoon's meaning that corresponds to the Overt Conclusion of the visual argument about Europe's attitudes towards refugees through relating the conceptual metaphors for *Europe* and *refugees* with IF...THEN propositions, and
- c) explanation of the cartoon's argumentative value, identifying the cartoonist's positioning concerning the framing of the 'refugee crisis' as a Covert Conclusion of the visual argument drawing from an explicitly determined 'repertoire of framings.'

Our corpus consists of cartoons published between April 11, 2012, and November 19, 2018, drawn from the dynamic database *Cartoon Movement* and specifically the 'Migration and Refugees' collection (cf. Cartoon Movement n.d.). *Cartoon Movement* is an online community of international editorial cartoonists and fans of political satire that uses the motto "There is more than one truth." Since the database is dynamic, our initial corpus comprised 79 data items until November 2018. After refinement, we retained 41 data items, including only those referring to Europe, an initial analysis

of which was presented at the 12th International Conference of Semiotics in Thessaloniki (November 2019). In the present study, we have chosen to discuss 5 data items that correspond to the five 'force schemata' of the Purposive Activity conceptual domain (cf. Forceville and Jeulink 2011) that were found to be used in the cartoons to reconstruct four framings of the 'refugee crisis' concept presented in the previous section.

4. Metaphor identification and analysis: results

4.1. Framing 1: 'refugee crisis' AS 'the Syrian refugee crisis' identification of visual metaphors

In terms of its referential meaning, Figure 1 is an example of Europe represented as land bordered by water/the sea on a map. There are no borders between states on this map. A water-wheel that carries containers and boats serves as a mechanism of transferring objects and people instead of water. The direction indicated by a white line is left to right and implies that the water-wheel is moving; therefore, people are moving. More specifically, a truck loads the first container with rockets subsequently unloaded

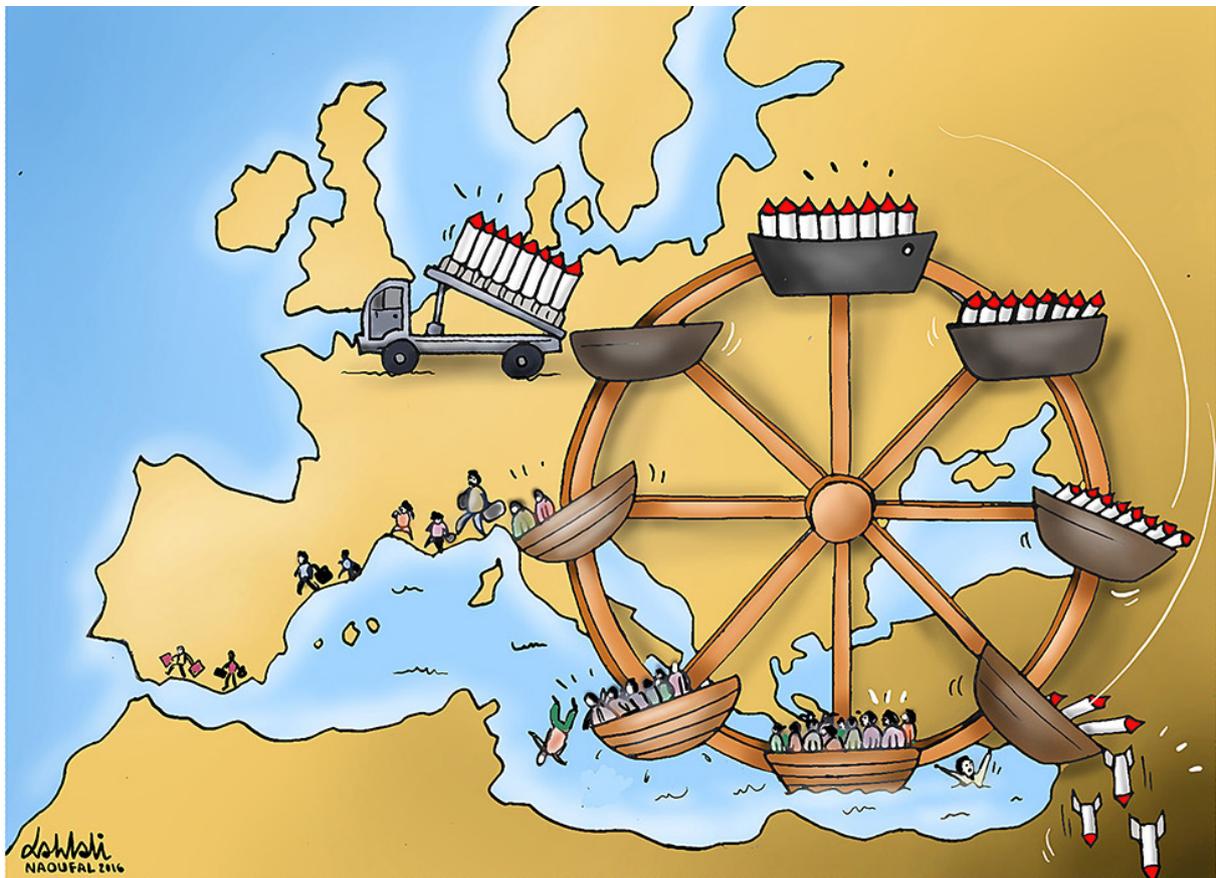


Figure 1. "Cause & Effect" [DI S1.13], Naoufal Lahlali, Morocco, May 12, 2016

to non-European countries (the East). Then, the containers become boats of a different color that transport people to Europe by sea. A person is drowning in the sea, waving their hands for help, while another falls off the boat as the water-wheel moves to reach Europe. People land on the coasts of Europe and continue on foot, carrying luggage and holding children. Therefore, the main source domain here is Technology/Device (water-wheel). Europe sets the water-wheel in motion in order to move military devices. Europe is the cause of the war (weapons provider), and migration is its effect. Thus, Europe as a source of military devices and refugees as cargo are in the same water-wheel (cycle of migration), and the water-wheel in motion is forced migration.

Interpretation

This political cartoon presents a cause-and-effect process (as also indicated in the title) that results in people becoming refugees through the metaphor of the water wheel. The Mediterranean is literally water and one of the deadliest migrant routes in the world; approximately 2,000 refugees have lost their lives trying to reach Europe in 2015 only (cf. Crețu 2015:255). Just as the water-wheel produces energy, Europe is presented as a mechanism producing conflict and forced migration. The water-wheel metaphor implies that as long as Europe provides arms, it will receive refugees. If migration is a water-wheel in motion (the transfer of weapons as the cause, that of refugees as effect), then Europe is identified with the military devices that encourage this.

Explanation

The Syrian refugee crisis is depicted as a cycle, with Europe being an active agent in the conflict. This cycle gives rise to death, loss, and the need to seek refuge. The territory of Europe is depicted as a laboratory for supplying conflict/war and creating the need for refuge. The cartoonist's framing of the refugee crisis here seems to be the Syrian refugee crisis. Presenting the "The cycle of migration & violence" (the respective caption from the database under the political cartoon), the cartoonist attempts to explain the Syrian refugee crisis and show Europe's involvement. The focus is on Europe's role in terms of external politics and international affairs, as indicated by the borderless map, the European territory as an entity representing the West and its interference in the Syrian conflict (cf. Pierini 2016; as well as Turkmani and Haid 2016, concerning the provision of arms and its embargo during 2012–2013).

The aforementioned motive may also reflect the concept of the 'vicious circle' used in relevant literature to question the EU's problem solving-capacity and legitimacy in a crisis context (cf. Falkner 2016). It may even refer to the asylum-seeking vicious cycle (cf. Castle-Kanerova 2003) that generates discrimination against migrants (cf., for example, da Silva Rebelo, Fernandez, and Meneses 2020). In all cases, it indexes qualities of endless repetition, pointlessness, and unwillingness to learn.

Premise (1) MAP_{EUROPE} : Europe is a military device / water-wheel motion mechanism
($TD_{EUROPE} : EUROPE \cap SD_{EUROPE} : TECHNOLOGY / ENERGY$)

Premise (2) $MAP_{REFUGEES}$: Refugees are cargo of the water-wheel < goods < energy
($TD_{REFUGEES} : REFUGEES \cap SD_{REFUGEES} : GOODS / ENERGY$)

Overt Conclusion (micro-context): People are shipped < cargo \Rightarrow
Europe is a military device \Rightarrow

Europe as responsible for the forced migration cycle

Covert Conclusion (macro-context): 'Refugee crisis' as the Syrian refugee crisis

4.2. Framing 2: 'REFUGEE CRISIS' AS A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Identification of visual metaphors

In Figure 2, Europe is symbolized by the European Union flag in the background. The flag's placement in the horizon's position implies that Europe is the horizon. A woman is wearing a black headscarf and carrying luggage in her left hand while holding on to her child with her right hand. The two refugees, mother, and boy, are walking on railway tracks headed towards the European Union. The conceptual metaphor identified here draws from the domain of Transportation/Travel, i.e., refugees as the train.

Interpretation

The flag of the European Union stands for Europe. The circle of stars looks like the sun and may imply hope. In another reading, the stars indicate that this scene occurs during the night. This political cartoon has no train to Europe, which is contradictory to the cartoon's title, making refugees' path to Europe more difficult. The picture is divided into two parts by its colors: a black and white part representing the route to Europe (present) and the colorful part that relates to refugees' destination (future). Therefore, Europe (represented by the flag of the European Union) appears to be the hopeful horizon, the hopeful future for refugees. In contrast, refugees' travel to Europe on foot without a train is the difficult black and white present.



Figure 2. "Train to Europe" [DI S1.12], Paolo Lombardi, Italy, May 26, 2016

IF Europe is the horizon, THEN the empty railway that leads to Europe is a walking route for refugees.

Explanation

Considering the caption, “Greece is evicting more than 8,000 refugees and migrants from the makeshift Idomeni camp. Where will they go?” this cartoon points out the next step for the refugees after reaching Europe. Greece serves as a frontline passage for refugees. They look for hope on the horizon, which appears to be in the hands of other European Union members. This political cartoon points out the condition of the here-and-now of the refugees as a path to a safe future that is, however, very difficult to reach. Instead of using the train, they are walking to find refuge. Considering the title of the cartoon, “Train to Europe,” we observe an antithesis with the refugees’ movement on foot. More specifically, the first part of the cartoon’s title, which reads “train,” guides the viewer to notice the act of moving as an ironic statement or a paradox that refers to the apparent absence of a train; the mother-child entity is moving on foot on an empty railway track. The second part of the title, “to Europe,” emphasizes the direction of the movement, and we could identify some antithesis between the hopeful horizon (refugees’ expectations from Europe) and the lack of provision for safe transportation within Europe (no train *to* Europe while already *in* Europe).

This framing of the ‘refugee crisis’ is identified as a humanitarian crisis since the focus is on the people acting now (walking towards Europe, fleeing from war). The point of departure or the reason for their movement (Syria, Syrian war) does not immediately appear here. Instead, the focus is on Europe’s role as a refuge through the eyes of those heading towards the EU, which does not have an active role but is part of the environment representing the refugees’ expectations (horizon). The horizon in the background of the cartoon (the ‘sun’ of EU stars) could then be perceived as hope or as the journey towards the unknown reflected in the concern expressed under the cartoon: “Where will they go?”

Premise (1) MAP_{EUROPE} : Europe is the horizon < destination < transportation < travel/journey

TD_{EUROPE} : EUROPE \cap SD_{EUROPE} : TRANSPORTATION/TRAVEL)

Premise (2) $MAP_{REFUGEES}$: Refugees as a walking entity on railway

($TD_{REFUGEES}$: REFUGEES \cap $SD_{REFUGEES}$: TRANSPORTATION/TRAVEL)

Overt Conclusion (micro-context): Refugees walk towards < travel to Europe \Rightarrow

Europe is a destination for refugees \Rightarrow

Europe is the sun to refugees < hope

Covert Conclusion (macro-context): ‘Refugee crisis’ is a humanitarian crisis

4.3. Framing 3: 'REFUGEE CRISIS' AS A CRISIS OF EUROPEAN GOVERNANCE

Identification of visual metaphors

The flag symbol in Figure 3 represents Europe. More specifically, the stars representing each member state are anthropomorphized and appear to hold rackets and play a game with balls around a blue table. The anthropomorphized stars as players are portrayed hitting four balls – people, one with a backpack and one with a bundle on a stick – back and forth across the table. Their facial expressions depict them as unhappy, arguing, and pointing at one another. One holds something like a fishnet or a lacrosse racket, while another stretches their hands in the air with an open mouth as if saying something. The balls are rendered as miniature human beings identified as refugees by the luggage they are carrying as well as by the cartoon's macro-contextual features. They appear to be flying above the table.

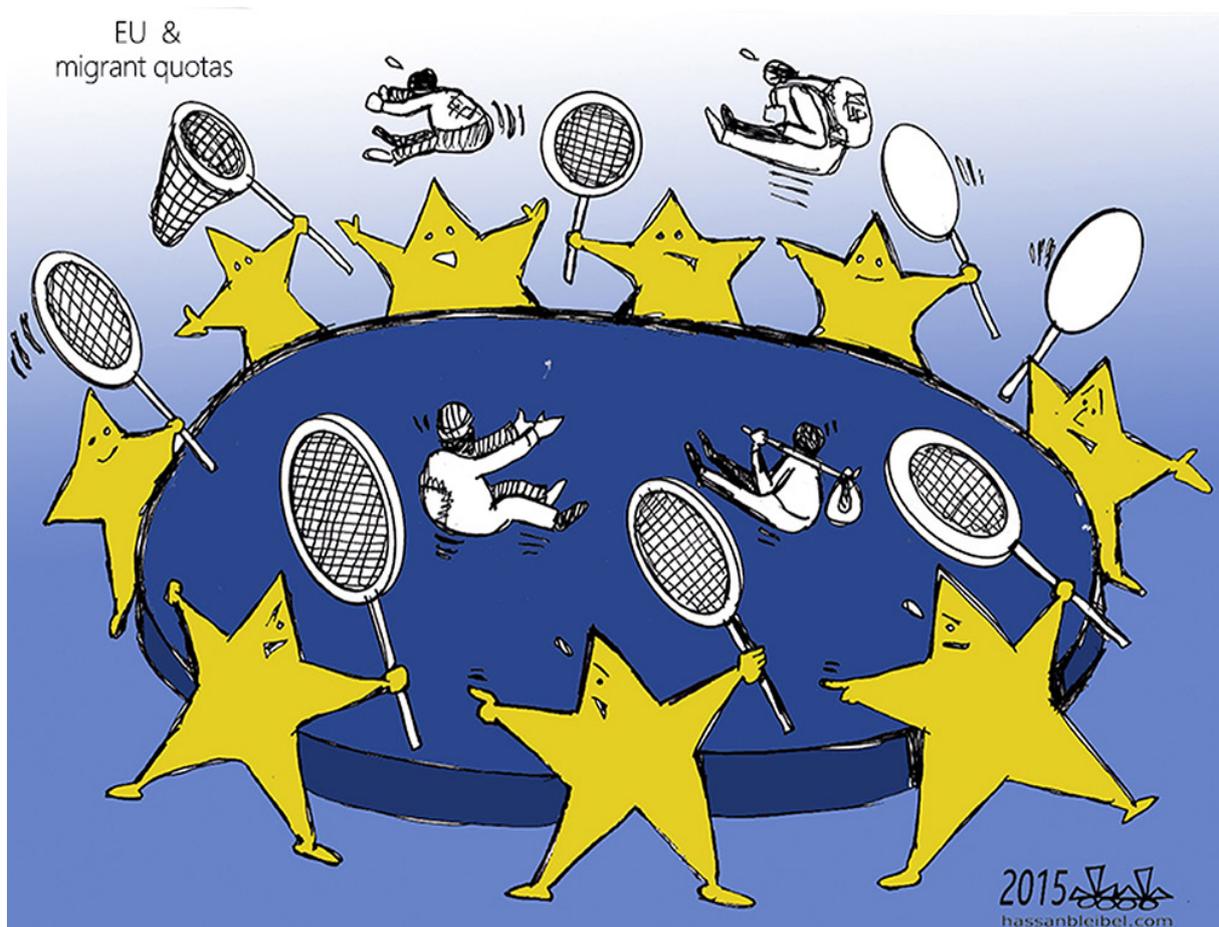


Figure 3. "Migrant Talks" [DI S1.23], Hassan Bleibel, Lebanon, October 25, 2015

Europe is identified by a) the players' star shape and b) the color combination of the stars and the game table. The source domain from which the conceptual metaphors draw is Sports/Game; in other words, the EU member-states are players, Europe is a game field, and the refugees are the balls.

Interpretation

The European Union members are playing a game of negotiations about the issue of migration. Nine stars are positioned around the table, while eight players participate holding a racket, so there is not enough room to play the game. This crowding also represents the competing policies and practices of the EU member states. They are arguing about how to deal with refugees (e.g., who should receive refugees and in what numbers), pointing at one another. Nobody seems to be willing to accept refugees. Refugees as miniature people are in the hands of European politics, fleeing war but flying over the heads of Europeans as unwanted in Europe. The emphasis here is on the difficulty European Union members have in reaching a unanimous plan of action on provisions and support for refugees. "Migrant talks," the cartoon title, appears as an ironic commentary indexing the general EU policies on the migration phenomenon.

IF Europe is a sports team and its terrain is a game table, then handling the migration phenomenon is a game.

Explanation

The cartoonist uses the conceptual metaphor of the sports game to represent Europe as indifferent and unable to make decisions and find solutions to the refugee issue communally. The criticism targets European governance; how European member states handle the refugee issue. The game metaphor contrasts openly with the gravity of the situation that has led people to seek refuge in Europe. Treating war-affected populations as passive participants in a game thus points out the weaknesses and failures of European politics. The inner conflict of the member states renders them incapable of dealing with the refugee issue.

The cartoon caption reads: "EU emergency talks are underway to address the migrant crisis in the Balkans. Some member states even warn that an inability to find the answer to the migrant crisis might mean the end of the EU," highlighting the consequences of the EU members' inability to address the problem. However, the warning about the EU's existential problem does not appear straightforwardly in the cartoon. Instead, the cartoon's elements seem to capture how negotiations of the EU members occur, while fears and warnings concerning the consequences of a failed approach to the refugee issue are only implied. They mostly appear in the extra-cartoon context, and therefore the framing of the refugee crisis recognized here is that of the European governance crisis.

Premise (1) MAP_{EUROPE} : Europe is a table game
(TD_{EUROPE} : EUROPE \cap SD_{EUROPE} : SPORTS / GAME)
Premise (2) $MAP_{REFUGEES}$: Refugees are balls
($TD_{REFUGEES}$: REFUGEES \cap $SD_{REFUGEES}$: SPORTS / GAME)

Overt Conclusion (micro-context): Refugees are played / pushed away \Rightarrow
EU members disagree on the refugee issue \Rightarrow
Europe plays with refugees < Europe is in internal conflict concerning refugees
Covert Conclusion (macro-context): 'Refugee crisis' is a European governance crisis

4.4. Framing 2: 'REFUGEE CRISIS' AS A EUROPEAN IDENTITY CRISIS

Framing 4 is the only case that includes two (2) data items since two patterns have been identified in our corpus as indicative of the European-identity-crisis framing pointing out different identity aspects (aging / weak / tired, xenophobic) and therefore stances of Europe towards refugees through an anthropomorphous (older man) and mythical / monstrous entity (dragon) respectively.



Figure 4. "Old Man Europe" [DI S1.16], Osama Hajjaj, Jordan, July 11, 2017

Example 4.4.1: Aging Europe – Europe as an old man

Identification of visual metaphors

In this cartoon (Figure 4), Europe is an older man wearing a beret, a headscarf, glasses, and a long gray coat with a European Union flag button on his left lapel. He has a long white beard and skinny legs. He looks tired and weak and is stooped over, and his face is turned to the ground and cannot be seen. He holds a supporting walking stick in his right hand, which also serves as a downward-pointing arrow that appears broken at one juncture due to the pressure exerted on it by the man's weight. With his left hand, he is probably holding a breathing inhaler. He uses the downward-pointing walking stick to move his left leg, which is slightly in the air. In addition, he has a hump on his back and is carrying miniature gray people, men and women, the latter wearing headscarves. The miniature people can be identified as refugees due to the women's scarves and the inscription "migrants" in capital letters on six lifeboats full of people, depicted on the sea at varying distances from the shore. One has just reached the shore, and a person has debarked and is trying to pull the boat ashore. There is also a second one just arriving. The source domain's conceptual metaphors drawn from here are Human Life/Human and Physical Quantity/Gravity. Therefore, Europe is an older man, refugees are miniature people, and they are burdens.

Interpretation

Europe is personified here as a human entity. Refugees are represented as additional weight on the back of Europe, which results in a burden on the walking stick that finally breaks. The walking stick also resembles a downward pointing arrow used in stock market diagrams. It thus may be considered a symbol of Europe's economic decline (aging as economic downfall). An alternative secondary reading would suggest the stick's relation to a Jovian lightning bolt, indexing the Jupiter/Europa myth, which is also about arriving on Europe's shore, despite its different perspective and connotations as an abduction or seduction story. When arriving in Europe, refugees' quantity and size are represented as inversely proportional qualities (more people-smaller size). The difference in the size of the human beings depicted in this cartoon may also be interpreted as a difference in the value of human life; European citizens as part of a unique human body that is aged and suffering, compared to miniature people, a small unidentifiable mass, arriving in Europe as refugees.

IF Europe is a weak older man, THEN refugees are burdens on his shoulders weighing him down.

Explanation

Refugees appear here as a threatening burden on a declining Europe. Considering the complementary comment of the cartoon on the platform, "Many Europeans consider

migrants a burden Europe cannot bear, but we can also see them as a vital invigoration of a graying continent," the argumentative meaning of the political cartoon appears explicitly. However, the second part of the comment referring to a counter-perspective on refugees (cf., for example, Crețu 2015:259) does not appear in the visual argument. Instead, the Weight or Burden metaphor has been identified as a typical pattern to denote refugees and migrants. According to Taylor's (2021:475-476) historical discourse analysis of migration metaphors, it occurs in conventionalized form only in the 1980s and the 2010s with two lexicalizations (strain, burden).

The tendency to attribute human qualities to nations representing them as bodies or organisms has been well documented (cf., for example, Strom and Alcock 2017). Gender and age chosen to depict Europe in this cartoon are also interesting aspects that differentiate this cartoon from others in our corpus (e.g., compared to the representation of Europe as a young or middle-aged woman dressed up in ancient Greek clothing that draws on Greek mythology²). Europe as an aged man represents the 'graying continent' that could also indicate the 'political aging' of the European Union as a set of tired nations that are confronted with migration.

On the one hand, the cartoonist seems to visually represent one of the dominant discourses around the refugee issue. By adding the comment that refugees may be seen as a 'vital invigoration' for Europe, he distances himself from this framing of the refugee crisis. Therefore, he visually presents one of the dominant framings of the (European) refugee 'crisis' as an existential crisis for Europe, a crisis that affects its identity. On the other hand, the broken walking stick/ downturned arrow implies the overload in an already aged organism. An alternative reading of this cartoon could suggest that Europe is old (a graying continent) and therefore cannot cope with migrants effectively, explaining thus the reason for the crisis and representing the 'reception crisis' pattern (cf. Christopoulos 2017).

<p>Premise (1) MAP_{EUROPE}: Europe is an old man $(TD_{EUROPE}: EUROPE \cap SD_{EUROPE}: HUMAN LIFE/HUMANS)$</p> <p>Premise (2) $MAP_{REFUGEES}$: Refugees are weight/load $(TD_{REFUGEES}: REFUGEES \cap SD_{REFUGEES}: PHYSICAL QUANTITY/GRAVITY)$</p> <hr style="width: 80%; margin: 10px auto;"/> <p>Overt Conclusion (micro-context): Refugees are load on the shoulders of Europe \Rightarrow Refugees weigh Europe down < threaten Europe's health/progress \Rightarrow Europe is overloaded with refugees < Europe is suffering due to refugees</p> <p>Covert Conclusion (macro-context): 'Refugee crisis' is a European identity crisis</p>

² However, let us consider the alternative reading of the walking stick as Jupiter's lightning bolt. We can identify a similar pattern that draws on Greek mythology elements, especially to represent the arrival stage of refugees in Greece or Europe as a human body (entity).



Figure 5. “Xenophobia” [DI S1.20], Nayer Tabal, Sudan, February 17, 2016

Example 4.4.2: Xenophobic Europe – Europe as a mythical monster

Identification of visual metaphors

Europe is indicated cartographically and verbally in Figure 5. The map has the shape of an aggressive grey face – we mostly read here a dragon’s face³ – threatening a slender black figure with its mouth gaping and carrying a suitcase. The figure has emaciated limbs, a leaning backward/retreating posture, and is identified as a “Refugee” by the corresponding script. A cloud of smoke appears from the creature’s nostrils with an inscription in red capital letters (the red threat here is identified as indexing fire): “Go Home.” The creature is thus personified with human-like properties such as the ability

³ Alternative readings of the cartoon have identified the creature as a carnivorous dinosaur or an angry dog. We read the creature more like a dragon, both due to its semiotic construction (gaping mouth, ‘Go Home’ in red as fire coming out of nostrils within a cloud of white smoke) and the reappearance of mythology patterns in our corpus as a source domain to depict monstrous/negative aspects of Europe. Additionally, the mythical monster could also symbolize the mythical/imaginary unitary nature of the European Union. Compared to the EU game table cartoon where EU members were identified as separate ‘stars-players’ repelling refugees *from one to another*, EU members with a common xenophobic strategy are a monstrous unity repelling refugees *out of Europe*.

of speech, whereas the refugee receives skeletal properties in the threshold of safety/life and threat/death. Therefore, the source domain here is Mythical Creatures/Mythology and Natural Creatures/Human Life (Death). On the cartoon's upper left part is the word "Xenophobia." The word "Refugee" is placed over the head of the slender figure whose size is tiny compared to the creature threatening it. The conceptual metaphors identified here are: Europe is a scary creature, Europe is a (mythical) monster, and refugees are intimidated emaciated creatures.

Interpretation

In this political cartoon, if we accept its proposed identification as a dragon, Europe is portrayed as a mythical fire-breathing creature that appears to threaten the slender figure heading towards it. The dragon is scary, aggressive, and explicitly displays the message "GO HOME." Europe is depicted here as a gigantic unified body that expresses xenophobic attitudes towards refugees. It tries to maintain its territory, developing xenophobia and appearing indifferent, cruel, and cold-blooded in the face of the situation the emaciated figure confronts. Therefore, in the cartoon, Europe's indifferent stance towards refugees is transformed into aggression that receives mythical proportions and, in this context, could be characterized as 'monstrous.' The emaciated slender refugee reminds the viewer of how detrimental (monstrous) it will be to refuse to help or even to turn away the people that have suffered mainly after leaving home due to the 'ugly face' of war.

IF Europe is an attacking dragon, THEN emaciated refugees are threatened to go back home due to xenophobia.

Explanation

Dragons are usually represented as breathing fire, having a reptilian body (and sometimes wings), and being part of Europe's tradition; they could be associated with Teutonic and Greek mythology, in this context. The cartoonist calls this: "The ugly face of xenophobia" in their caption to this cartoon, pointing out the 'ugly' picture of Europe exercising anti-refugee policies and discourses. The "GO HOME" slogan seems to be one of the dominant narratives of far-right anti-immigration discourses (cf. Taggart 2004). In addition, it reflects concerns of a domestic self ('local,' 'national,' or 'European'), one that is threatened by external others ('alien,' 'foreign,' 'unwelcome') (cf. Makarychev 2018:747).

The cartoonist positions himself against this discourse, labeling it as xenophobic and attempting to show the 'ugly face of xenophobia' – as an antithesis of the repelling face of Europe towards a retreating/intimidated person looking for a safe passage to Europe, a refuge. Through this contrast of the powerful/powerless, strong/weak, attacking/retreating binaries, the cartoonist frames the refugee crisis as a European identity crisis that gives rise to xenophobic attitudes and helps raise a counter-narrative by making visible the ugly reality of employing such practices.

Premise (1) MAP_{EUROPE} : Europe is a dragon < Europe breaths 'go home' fire
 (TD_{EUROPE} : EUROPE \cap SD_{EUROPE} : MYTHOLOGY/MYTHICAL CREATURES)
 Premise (2) $MAP_{REFUGEES}$: Refugees are emaciated < Refugees are threatened
 ($TD_{REFUGEES}$: REFUGEES \cap $SD_{REFUGEES}$: HUMAN LIFE/NATURAL CREATURES)

Overt Conclusion (micro-context): Refugees are threatened \Rightarrow
 Refugees are retreating emaciated creatures \Rightarrow
 Europe repels refugees < Europe is xenophobic
 Covert Conclusion (macro-context): The 'refugee crisis' is a European identity crisis.

5. Discussion

Based on our research data, four dominant framings of the 'refugee crisis' have been identified in academic and political discourse: (a) a Syrian refugee crisis; (b) a humanitarian crisis; (c) a European governance crisis; (d) a European identity crisis. Applying CMA that aims precisely to "demonstrate how particular discursive practices reflect socio-political power structures" (Charteris-Black 2004:29), our overall aim was to reveal covert framings of the phenomena studied. The analysis thus served to identify the focal point of the visual or multimodal argument in the political cartoon concerning 'refugee crisis' framings.

In our corpus, cartoonists a) describing, b) explaining, c) foreseeing processes related to aspects of forced migration applied a cause-and-effect or here-and-now perspective in their cartoons. Specifically, they re-framed the migration phenomenon according to the emphasis they put on a) Europe's role in the Syrian conflict (responsibility, positioning, active/passive role), b) Europe's policies concerning the reception of refugees in the European territory (game, xenophobia), c) the implications of Europe's policies for refugees (emaciated figures, drowning in the Mediterranean, part of a game), d) implications of receiving refugees for Europe (weighing down, reviving), and e) refugees' expectations from Europe (refuge, hope, future).

Despite all cross-cultural variations, immigration as it has been mainly treated in public discourse since the early 20th century, as Castaño Castaño, Laso Martín, and Verdaguer Clavera (2017) reported in their literature review, has been chiefly portrayed through metaphors that dehumanize immigrants (e.g., representations of immigrants as animals, debased persons, weeds or disease, cf. Santa Ana 1999) or that describe them as a threat to host countries (cf., for example, Teo 2000). These notions have also appeared in our data (see Europe as an aging man). In our corpus, refugees appeared as debased tiny people, emaciated figures, or miniature individuals. In huge groups or individually, they have been depicted to be in transition,

moving forwards or backward (cf. Abdel-Raheem 2014 who explores the conceptual metaphor of JOURNEY in moral and political cognition, which is most relevant to this study). This SOURCE-PATH-GOAL (SPG) image-schema as a central concept in human cognition (cf. Johnson 1993:166) underlies the human understanding of physical movement but also of all purposive activity (cf. Forceville and Jeulink 2011:40).

Based on Johnson's (1987:45-48) experiential (image-schematic) gestalts for the force that plays a central role in the movement, the political cartoons examined in this study draw on the conceptual domain of the Purposive Activity (cf. Forceville and Jeulink 2011:40). In mapping Europe's attitudes towards refugees, they reconstruct the phenomenon of the 'refugee crisis' through the force schemata of 'compulsion' (Europe as a war-wheel 'forcing' people to move, creating the person-on-the-forced-move, the refugee); 'attraction' (Europe as the horizon of refuge 'attracting' refugees); 'diversion' (Europe as a game field 'diverting' refugees' routes among 'players'); 'enablement' (Europe as an old man 'enabling' refugees to reach a safe land while weakening), and 'counterforce' or 'blockage' (Europe as a mythical monster intimidating refugees to draw back or blocking refugees' entrance to European land). In this context, our understanding of 'purposive activity' is construed as 'seeking refuge' through the Source-Path-Goal (SPG) image-schema contextualized in a forced migration context, where the movement is forced, and the traveler is the refugee.

The main qualities of the visual metaphors used to compare 'Europe' and 'refugee' as actors constructing the migration phenomenon as a 'refugee crisis' could be summarized as follows: i. *size* (e.g., dragon vs. skeleton-thin figure, old man vs. tiny women/men); ii. *quantity* (e.g., Europe as one entity, a borderless map, a dragon, one older man vs. many refugees); iii. *color* (e.g., black and white vs. multicolored); and iv. *the direction of the viewer's gaze* (e.g., refugee confronting Europe in the skeleton-thin figure-dragon antithesis; following the refugee towards Europe on the EU flag horizon route; Europe and refugees heading towards viewers in the old man metaphor). These qualities allow for identifying the central positioning of the cartoonists with regard to the arguments of their cartoons. These arguments appear to construct the 'refugee crisis' in a multimodal discourse through different refugee 'visibilities' that construe varying levels of civic agency and responsibility towards refugees, reflecting a broad range of practices of a responsible agent, from monitorial to empathetic to self-reflexive citizenship (cf. Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017).

Castaño Castaño, Laso Martín, and Verdaguer Clavera (2017) observe that when the perspective shifts away from the 'devastating' effects of immigration on nations and focuses instead on the immigrants themselves, we see the emergence of the figure of nations as protective hosts. In our case, when turning to refugees, the figure of nations as the protective host appears only as an imaginary perception of the refugee envisioning hope through Europe as a territory of refuge. On the contrary, European

nations become integrated into a monstrous united entity with xenophobic attitudes in a cartographic definition of Europe that reflects an imagined entity of European consciousness (cf. Delanty 2006). They also appear as a cold-blooded war machine responsible for migration, a multi-actor terrain that questions this dominant 'narrative of coherence' (cf. Ammaturo 2018), or an already weakened / aging body with limited potential to ensure a better future for refugees (arrow of decline). These representations thus challenge the European governance validity and effectiveness and question the European identity values. Finally, perceiving the political cartoon as both a process and a product of argumentation, this study tried to contribute to the discussion surrounding political metaphors as agents of argumentative meanings that may serve as "perspectivization and attention-grabbing devices" (Silaški 2012:216).

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The synergy of animation and tourism industry: Myths and ideologies in Mickey Mouse's traveling adventures

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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry circulates signs through its synergies with other cultural industries, such as film, music, museum, video gaming, and the sports industry, to name but a few. This paper aims at exploring the creation or preservation of tourist myths and ideologies through the cartoon industry following the travel experiences of one of the first and most widely known animation characters, Mickey Mouse, in animated films such as the *Hawaiian Holiday* (1937), *Mickey's Trailer* (1938), *Mr. Mouse Takes a Trip* (1940), *On Vacation with Mickey Mouse and Friends* (1956), *Croissant de Triomphe* (2013), *Tokyo Go* (2013), *Yodelberg* (2013), *O Sole Minnie* (2013), *Panda-monium* (2013), *Mumbai Madness* (2014), *O FutebolClássico* (2014), *¡FelizCumpleaños!* (2015), *Al Rojo Vivo* (2015), *Turkish Delights* (2016), *Entombed* (2016), *Dancevidaniya* (2016), *Locked in Love* (2017), or *Shipped Out* (2017). In terms of methodology, this study of animated films and images will be conducted with the help of Greimas' semiotic square combined with Roland Barthes' writings on myth. The main objective of such research is to trace the tourist myths and ideologies that the animation industry proposes and highlights. The focus will therefore be on outlining any simplifications, stereotypes, and boundaries regarding tourist image-brand production, as well as foregrounding the creative practices and invitations to co-productions of meaning offered to young gazes, that is, those of future travelers.

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Introduction

Many studies suggest that tourist imagery – be it in photographs, postcards, tourist brochures, or posters, television programs and documentaries, film, or social media images – constructs specific identities of places and locations, while producing and privileging narratives that forward oversimplifications, or even stereotypes, of the destinations depicted in those images. Commodification molds location images in ways that would make them suitable for the ‘tourist gaze’ (cf. Urry 1990), making sure that as many potential audiences’ gazes as possible will be beckoned into visiting the portrayed destinations. To that end, Edward Bruner argues that tourism searches for new locations to tell the same stories, “possibly because those stories are the ones that the tourist is willing to buy” (2005: 22).

However, there are indications that such marketing techniques could kindle local interest in abandoned traditions (cf. Medina 2003) or even create new tourist possibilities (e.g. cinematic tourism). Dean MacCannell’s (1976) notion of tourism ‘markers’ as signs that need interpretation, as well as the semiology of tourism, underline the importance of personal perception along with audience members’ and potential visitors’ interests, knowledge, desires, and personal anticipations. Other anthropologists use more emphatic language (cf. Greenwood 2004; Scarles 2004), arguing that tourism is co-created by tourist operators, local inhabitants, and tourists alike, and that this form of cooperation needs to be studied as a whole.

This paper examines the ways in which a tourist destination image is shaped through a number of animated films starring Mickey Mouse, the well-known Disney character. More specifically, the aim of this study is to trace the tourist myths and its ideologies that the animation industry proposes and highlights, as well as point out the ways in which the phenomenon of tourism was mediated through specific animation films over a period of 80 years, that is, from 1937 to 2017.

1. Cultural and creative industries: signs and synergies

In order to reach the best possible understanding of the animation and tourism industries, as well as their synergies, it will be helpful to outline the general notion and common practices of cultural and creative industries. Occupying a large part of contemporary people’s free time, cultural and creative industries produce, promote, and circulate texts that influence people’s knowledge and experiences (cf. Hesmondhalgh 1982). In effect, they manage symbolic goods, the economic value of which stems from their cultural value (cf. O’ Connor 2000:18). Therefore, the contribution of cultural and creative industries to shaping people’s cultural capital, their perception of self,

of otherness, and of various types of social collectivities is crucial, and increasingly so as technological advances change our daily communication practices and cultural resources flood into our houses through bigger or smaller screens every day.

Cultural and creative industries have long been interconnected, forming persistent formations inhabiting various and complex networks of collaboration. Many synergies have thus been created and retain a considerably strong and inspiring role, such as those between the literature and film industry (cf. Borwell 1988; Dudley 1992; McFarlane 1996; Stam 1992), the music and sports industry (cf. Papadaki 2019), the heritage and tourism industry, as well as many more such alliances which, nowadays, shape cultural practices in ways considered obvious and unsurprising.

The notion of 'film tourism,' identified as yet another synergy and a new type of tourism, is attributed to the success of films in place marking (cf. Edensor 2001), which in turn stems from a specific arrangement of signs that can even inspire new tourist performances in new film-tourist destinations (cf. Reijnders 2010). The "imaginative geographies" (Urry and Larsen 2011:116) that a film can create, the connection of specific landmarks and landscapes with a specific plot, the characters of the story, and the musical soundtrack all add up to a filmic 'sign industry' which assigns new tourist meaning to banal locales and practices (cf. Tzanelli and Yar 2014).

1.1. The tourism industry and its myths

As one of the biggest cultural industries, the tourism industry is structured upon specific myths and ideologies. The power of certain cultural resources and objects, many of which are structured as powerful signs, and the communicative acts that found the uniqueness of a place on such objects, is part of what Roland Barthes has described as myth: There are certain elements in each tourist destination that all tourists are familiar with, as they are included in the 'language of travel' (cf. Barthes 1983).

Myths create or stress existing ideologies. Myths and their denotative values are formed according to specific ideologies and consist of their forms (Fiske 1989). Ideology is a set of beliefs and ideas that stem from a political stance or characterize a particular culture and guide people's way of thinking. For Barthes, myths are closely related to ideology. Both serve the interests of specific social groups and empower certain relationships. Being an *-ism* itself, tourism is by definition seen as a distinctive system of ideas and practices. Cities, places, and entire countries are re-invented, re-packaged, and promoted as attractive holiday destinations, becoming brands, that is, "complex identities that exist in the minds of consumers" (De Chernatony and McDonald 1992:3). Political and local authorities as well as people working in the tourist business create seductive images for the desired tourist gaze to rest upon. According to John Urry,

places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered. Such anticipation is constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist-practices, such as film, TV, literature, magazines, records and videos, which construct and reinforce that gaze. (1990:3)

Disseminating, distributing, and packaging these images for mass consumption results in the reconceptualization of structures, spaces, cities, and identities (cf. Lasansky 2004), forming the myths and “narratives of place” (Bruner 2005:19-27) as well as shaping the expectations that tourists have of the visited place while conditioning their perception of it (cf. Lasansky 2004).

For Caroline Scarles (2009: 467), “visuals and visual practice are not mere aides in the tourist experience, but emerge through fluid interplays that light up the process of becoming by instilling life and mobilising deeper affiliations between self and other.” From her point of view, the circulation of images through various media “frame destinations according to preferred discourses” and “reinforce the collective gaze.” (Scarles 2009:469) This practice is regarded as a politicization of tourism. Alternative narratives are hard to find (cf. Morgan and Pritchard 1998), since mass media circulate images, narratives, and myths, rendering them widely known and acceptable to the largest possible audience. Nigel Morgan and Annette Pritchard (1998) have stressed the interconnection between power and tourism along with several other researchers (cf., for example, Cheong and Miller 2000; Hollinshead 1999; Picard and Wood 1997).

1.2. The cartoon animation industry

Following the film industry, the animation industry can be seen as one of the largest cultural industries, both in terms of numbers (economic growth, number of workers and studios, etc.), as well as in terms of its symbolic cultural influence, especially upon young audiences. Often overlapping with other forms of media, such as film, television or software (cf. Greenberg 2011), animation is a form of expression mostly based on drawing, recording, and projecting movement (cf. Cholodenko 1991), and this aspect has led animation studios such as Halas and Bachelor to discuss its ‘metaphysical reality,’ rather than the ‘physical reality’ of the action film (cf. Kracauer 1973). As current technological advances make it possible for animated subjects to perfectly mimic physical reality, albeit perhaps a reality with no physical existence, animation can be seen as a tool that blurs the boundaries between reality and its interpretation (cf. Greenberg 2011), stressing its value and power as a semantic universe. Contemporary digital technologies and practices, such as haptic experiences

and immersion, widely known among teenagers and young audiences through their preoccupation with video games, have transformed the formerly distinctive animation experience into an everyday routine, at once helping users to identify with animated characters and avatars. The creation and use of one's own avatar in social media applications has further blurred the boundaries between animated representation and real-life presence.

Within this framework, it should be noted that it is true that "animated films functioning themselves as an 'Other' within a production practice dominated by live-action films, serve as an ideal place to portray a cultural, ethnic 'Other'" (Smoodin 1994:12). Cartoons are about the irrational and the simulation of reality through mass media, and they might as well portray exoticism and otherness. In addition, it is important to stress that these texts are available to young audiences, "constructing the social imaginary, the place where kids situate themselves in their emotional life" (Aronowitz 1992:195), and showing future travelers how to place themselves in particular tourist settings and narratives.

1.3. Mickey Mouse, Disney, and their myths

Disney's most popular character, Mickey Mouse, can be seen as a symbol of American popular culture, reproduced and received on a global scale. Young audiences seem familiar with Mickey, a cartoon star and, at the same time, a best friend. Kids worldwide seem to sleep with a soft toy that looks like Mickey, watch the films he stars in, wear T-shirts or hold school bags with Mickey, and dress up like Mickey when attending carnivals. His big black ears can often be seen on headbands, as children try to imitate their favorite cartoon character, and even literally walk a mile in his shoes.

Starting as a small cartoon-making business back in the 1920s, the Walt Disney Studios has long become one of the biggest contemporary corporations, managing vast theme parks alongside the cartoon animation industry of numerous films and comics, selling commodities and influencing the lives of millions of children and their parents worldwide. Books like Dorfman and Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck. Imperialism Ideology in the Disney Comic* (1975), Marin's *Disneyland as a Degenerate Utopia* (1977), and Schiller's *The Mind Managers* (1975) were among the first to portray Disney animation entertainment as intertwined with international politics.

By the 1930s, Disney films had become global, while by the 1940s US public discourse had framed that international success as 'the Disney miracle.' In the years since, Disney has produced multiple cultural discourses and has given rise to considerable research on the connection between cultural production and cultural imperialism, as well as on the various power networks that shape the company's choices, despite its apparent fairytale-like innocence. Audiences might often be less willing to

entertain the idea that animation films could be ideologically charged, a reluctance that only increases the power these films have to construct the social world for audiences from early childhood on. The perfect combination of the corporate and the creative (cf. Smoodin 1994), of commercial concern and cultural production, Disney films tend to strike a balance, in the relevant bibliography (Bell et al 1995; Rojek 1993; Smoodin 1994; Wasko 2001), between commodification and educational entertainment, homogenization and inspirational uniqueness.

For social scientists, it is obvious that the Walt Disney company has contributed to shaping the way people view the world and is responsible for much of the myth-making that takes place in contemporary American culture, including the American way of life portrayed in idealized terms (cf. Rojek 1993). One might even say that Disney has become a metonym for America and has created the “dominant cultural myths of U.S. ideology” (Bell et al. 1995: 5).

2. Methodology

This paper examines the connection between the animation and tourism industries in an attempt to underline the tourist motifs circulated via Disney animation films, focusing on Mickey Mouse and his adventures either as a tourist or as an inhabitant of a popular tourist destination. The films to be discussed were gathered from a period of 80 years from 1937 to 2017, that is, from the so-called golden age of travel to the contemporary phenomenon of mass tourism, including all the short films that were created during that time by Walt Disney Studios. On the basis of their portrayal of Mickey Mouse, these eighteen short films can be separated into two large corpora: *Hawaiian Holiday* (1937), *Mickey's Trailer* (1938), *Mr. Mouse Takes a Trip* (1940), *On Vacation with Mickey Mouse and Friends* (1956) from the first two decades, in which Mickey consistently appears as a tourist; and *Croissant de Triomphe* (2013), *Tokyo Go* (2013), *Yodelberg* (2013), *O Sole Mio* (2013), *Panda-monium* (2013), *Mumbai Madness* (2014), *O Futebal Clássico* (2014), *¡Feliz Cumpleaños!* (2015), *Al Rojo Vivo* (2015), *Turkish Delights* (2016), *Entombed* (2016), *Dancevidaniya* (2016), *Locked in Love* (2017), and *Shipped Out* (2017) from the last two decades, in which Mickey is mostly interpreted as a local inhabitant of a tourist destination but is returned to the role of a tourist in some of the most recent productions.²

This paper will focus on tracing tourist myths and creative suggestions in the selected animated films. More specifically, as multimodal texts, animated cartoon

² The film *Clogged* (2015) was not included in this study despite its abundant symbolism (the story is set in the Netherlands, among windmills and tulips) as Mickey Mouse does not appear on screen, the protagonist in this case being Minnie Mouse.

films bring together various semiotic systems, such as linguistic, musical, visual, as well as iconographic and spatial ones, through which certain sociocultural codes and myths are presented. Many signs, codes and their structures and interrelations are interwoven into these systems which connect through complex networks in order to finally shape each film's syntagma. As the focus of this paper is presenting tourists and tourist practices through Disney films in the period between 1937 and 2017, the signs, codes, and myths that will be examined pertain to these practices, without disregarding, however, that there are various other cultural values presented or implied. What Real (1937:13) called the "identifiable universe of semantic meaning", Disney's multiverse – that is, the totality of Disney or its many universes, according to Janet Wasko (2001) – will be examined with the help of Barthes' writings on myth as well as Algirdas Julien Greimas' semiotic square.

2.1. Barthes' myths and Greimas' square

Barthes' view of the signification process in modern myths famously entails two orders of meaning. Firstly, each sign is composed of a denotative form and a concept. The form is the explicit image of the sign – the actual word or image – that he names the denotation. The mythic, secondary concept constitutes an additional meaning, mostly associated with ideas or values. With respect to the second order of the signification process, Barthes maintains that certain signs represent social, shared values of a certain culture, that is, more complex concepts he calls myths. Therefore, certain words, objects, and images encode specific cultural myths.

Barthes' model of signification will be used in this paper in order to unravel the myths and ideologies that the selected animation films shape. The analysis will focus on the myths associated with tourism and that are usually taken for granted by most viewers, as the signification of certain definitions helps naturalize the values associated with certain ideologies (cf. Barthes 1993).

The main oppositional myths found by the application of Barthes' signification model to the selected animation films will be further analyzed with the help of Greimas' "semiotic square" (Greimas 1983; Greimas and Courtés 1979). Inspired by the Aristotelian square of logical oppositions, the Greimas square is a useful tool for the analysis of the opposition of signs, concepts, or, in the case of this paper, myths, as it represents the logical structure of any opposition (cf. Courtés 1991:152). Two oppositional myths will form the basis of the square, while the other two terms in the square will be the negations of each myth. As shown in Figure 1, apart from the four terms, six metaterms will arise.

According to Greimas, the square draws upon the structure of human culture and is therefore fundamental for our understanding of contrast and opposition.

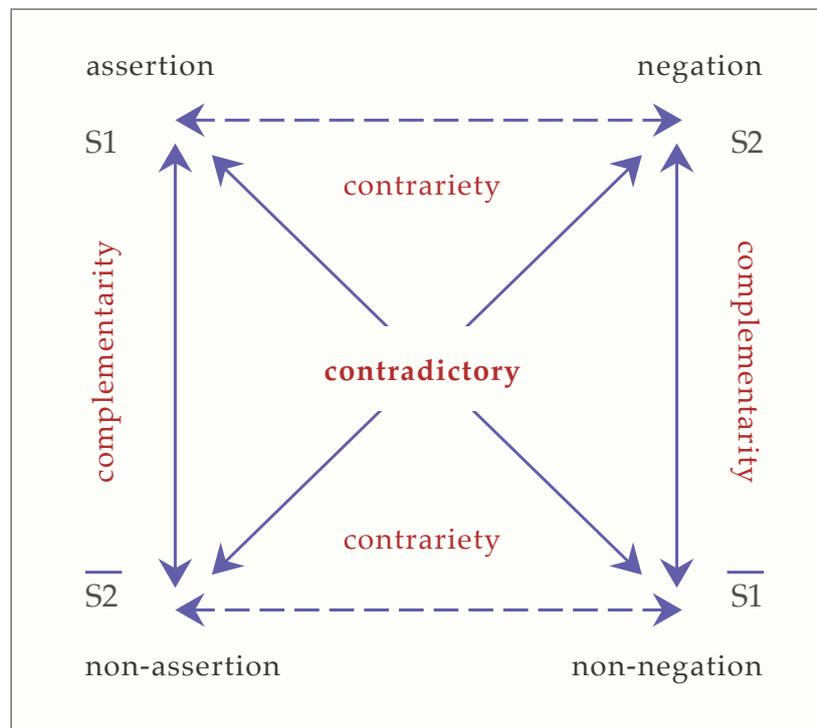


Figure 1. The Greimas semiotic square.

2.2. The films

My content analysis has revealed that, among the numerous films produced by Walt Disney Studios between 1937 and 2017, there are eighteen films starring Mickey Mouse whose main themes are tourism and tourist habits and practices. It is interesting to point out that there are two roles which Mickey Mouse can be seen inhabiting in order to mediate touristic practices: the role of the tourist as a foreigner in a newly-visited land, and the role of the local inhabitant of a well-known tourist destination. There are eight films where Mickey is presented as a tourist and ten films where Mickey sets on an adventure as a local. The viewers watch Mickey wandering through eighteen different cultural settings in total. More specifically, the films directed from 1937 to 1956 [*Hawaiian Holiday* (1937), *Mickey's Trailer* (1938), *Mr. Mouse Takes a Trip* (1940), *On Vacation with Mickey Mouse and Friends* (1956)] present Mickey and his friends as tourists, depicting the image of the tourist at the time. Conversely, during the short period of four years, between 2013 and 2017, ten films were made as episodes of the Mickey Mouse short film series, portraying Mickey Mouse as a local inhabitant of some of the most identifiable tourist destinations, such as Paris, Tokyo, the Swiss Alps, Venice, Mumbai, Mexico, Pamplona, Moscow, Istanbul, and Seoul. These films encompass *Croissant de Triomphe* (2013), *Tokyo Go* (2013), *Yodelberg* (2013), *O Sole Mio* (2013), *Mumbai Madness* (2014),

¡FelizCumpleaños! (2015), *Al Rojo Vivo* (2015), *Dancevidaniya* (2016), *Turkish Delights* (2016) and *Locked in Love* (2017). They showcase a completely different point of view, bearing, however, common signification structures with the other category of films, as shown in the analysis that follows. The last four films this study examines – *Panda-monium* (2013), *O Futebal Clássico* (2014), *Entombed* (2016) and *Shipped Out* (2017) – once again present Mickey (sometimes accompanied by Minnie) as a tourist in Beijing, Brazil, Egypt, and on a cruise ship respectively, signaling a return to Disney's first attempts at portraying tourist practices.

For the purposes of this study, the corpus of the films will be divided into two broad categories, the basic criterion being the status of the character of Mickey Mouse in them: a tourist in a foreign land (category A) or a local inhabitant in a well-known tourist destination (category B).

3. Category A: Mickey Mouse as a tourist

There are certain easily recognizable significations of tourism in all of the films that portray Mickey Mouse as a tourist, in the sense that the films depict stereotypical aspects of touristic practices. Minnie, for instance, wears a grass skirt, associated with Hawaiian hula dancing, both in *Hawaiian Holiday* (1937) and in *On Vacation with Mickey Mouse and Friends* (1956). In *Entombed* (2016), Mickey finds lost treasures, ancient artifacts, and antiquities, while Minnie wears a traditional headpiece resembling pharaonic jewelry. Such landmarks as the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx, underline the rich history of Egypt. The film introduces young audiences to travelling by camels, to mummies, sarcophaguses, and various other widely known Egyptian historic motifs and archaeological findings. This points to the significance of what Gregory J. Ashworth and John E. Tunbridge (1990) refer to as “heritage tourism”, when explaining the use of history as “a key component in constructing a marketable image for cities” (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990 quoted in Lasansky 2004: xxiii).

In *Mr. Mouse Takes a Trip* (1940), the character of Mickey Mouse offers a sketch of the tourist: An excited person with a hat and a suitcase, traveling with his dog, reading a tourist poster (“Visit the Great Redwoods”) which guides his gaze and his travel choices. The camera is shown as a valuable tool for any tourist in *Panda-monium* (2013), where Mickey tries to photograph a baby panda at the Beijing Zoo. In *O Futebal Clássico* (2014), Mickey tries to find the perfect seat for the World Cup Final in Brazil, as any tourist wishing to watch a spectacle like that would do. The film *On Vacation with Mickey Mouse and Friends* (1956) clearly states everybody's need for vacation and for taking time away from work and one's everyday routine, by showing the protagonists enjoying their hobbies during holiday and

refusing to return to work, even when asked to. Tourist souvenirs or mementos, such as photographs and postcards, are also included in the film, as Minnie sends those from Hawaii to her friends. Specific types of tourism are portrayed in films like *Mickey's Trailer* (1938), *O Futeball Clássico* (2014) and *Shipped Out* (2017), camping, event and cruise tourism respectively.

The above films represent certain tourist myths such as summer holidays by the sea, in exotic places, or in search of something different and 'authentic' (*Hawaiian Holiday* [1937]). Every film that falls in this category adds a piece to the tourist puzzle: sunglasses and cocktails in *Shipped Out*; hat, suitcase, and lots of enthusiasm in *Mr. Mouse Takes a Trip*; the desire to photograph everything in *Panda-monium*, etc. Various means of transportation are also depicted in the films (for example, the trailer in *Mickey's Trailer*, the train in *Mr. Mouse Takes a Trip*, camels in *Entombed*, and the cruise ship in *Shipped Out*). Additionally, in these films the protagonist-tourists do not come into contact with the locals. In fact, no local people appear on our screen at all. Holidays, then, are represented as a happy period with friends or one's loved ones in a foreign land during which people get to know 'authentic' habits of the place visited without, however, encountering local people. Mediated through the travel experience depicted in these films, widely known holiday images are shown (holidays by the sea, holidays with friends or one's partner, camping, etc.), as well as internationally recognizable signs and sign-myths of the places shown (clothing and accessories like Hawaiian leis, music and dance, or even famous landmarks, such as the Pyramids in *Entombed* [2016]). Other signs that signify contemporary global tourist practices include cocktails and the beach (cf. Lencek and Bosker 1998), as well as Hula dancing, which reproduce on film what MacCannell (1984) terms reconstructed ethnicity. Such dancing is nowadays performed for the sake of tourists, some of whom might view it as unmediated, genuine performances of age-old traditions and globally recognizable signifiers of the Hawaiian culture itself.

3.1. Commoditization, staged authenticity, and invented tradition in tourism

There are many examples of local feasts or customs being performed before the tourist gaze. Erik Cohen (1988:372) argues that "colorful local costumes and customs, rituals and feasts, and folk and ethnic arts become tourist services or commodities, as they come to be performed or produced for tourist consumption." In other words, the once sacred ritual has become a meaningless performance, a "cultural commodity," staged for the price of a ticket. The commoditization of locality is, according to Cohen, responsible for the destruction of authenticity of a place, and the emergence of staged authenticity, as MacCannell (1973) puts it in his homonymous paper. In the films mentioned above, Mickey is portrayed as a tourist who discovers

and experiences remote, authentic places, playing local music on his guitar while Minnie dances in traditional costumes. The truth is, however, both for the animated characters and the cinematic tourists—the viewers—(Tzanelli 2004), that the setting was staged, set up in advance, pre-formed for the visit of tourists. Leis appear in various cultures across the world. Grass skirts were, in fact, introduced to Hawaii by immigrants from the Gilbert Islands, though they are now widely considered a marker of Hawaiian culture and are presented to tourists as authentic Hawaiian products. The media, including the animated films studied in this paper, play an important role in creating, disseminating, and preserving this “false tourist consciousness” (Cohen, 1988:373). This serves as an attempt to satisfy the modern tourist's wish for authenticity, considered to be the natural, distant, and distinctively local uniqueness of a place.

Following Cohen, there are five “modes of tourist experience” (1979: 376), which accord to the individual needs and desires of each tourist. From the “existential” tourist who searches for more spontaneous experiences in the place visited, to the “diversionary” tourist (Cohen 1979: 377) who is not concerned with authenticity; according to Cohen both fall prey to MacCannell's staged authenticity (1973) in a more or less sophisticated form. He claims that, moving from “existential” to “authenticity-eager,” “experimental,” “recreational,” and, finally, “diversionary” tourists (Cohen 1979: 378), the criteria for authenticity grow more vague and tourists more eager to accept the staging of authenticity. One could argue that this staging is accepted by recreational and diversionary tourists as a metonymy of the authenticity of the tourist-oriented cultural product as a whole (cf. Cohen 1988:378). This further implies that a hint of ‘authenticity’ or an implication of ‘genuineness’ might be enough for a tourist to imagine the ‘real thing,’ even though they know that its reproduction was staged in order to attract their own gaze. Any tourist nowadays seems “content with [their] obvious inauthentic experiences” (MacCannel 1973:592). In addition, staging local cultural practices does not necessarily deprive a practice of the meaning or aura it might bear but it might as well help a practice declining in strength to become a significant cultural resource or give rise to a whole new custom. In effect, for many sociologists authenticity can be “manifested in cultural evolution and not just strict preservation” (Chhabra, Healy and Sills 2003:709), even if such evolution includes staging or recreation.

Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) have suggested that, over time, performances of staged local feasts or customs can become accepted as authentic and have therefore introduced the term ‘invented tradition.’ Bearing in mind that tradition is a dynamic phenomenon, adjustable to historical conditions, and constantly evolving, they argue that certain recreations of past habits or references to old situations are eventually perceived as ‘genuine’ traditions, even in the eyes of the

local inhabitants of a place. What Hobsbawm called “the greatest mass generation of traditions” (Hobsbawm 1983: 2) emerged as a phenomenon forty years after World War I in an attempt to shape notions such as nation, nationalism, and national identity. According to Crick (1989:65), “cultures are invented, remade and the elements reorganized,” or, in Cohen’s words (1988:279-280), “a cultural product [...] which is at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic may, in the course of time, become generally recognized as authentic.” These thoughts have helped Cohen envisage the notion of ‘emergent authenticity,’ an example of which may be seen in the current portrayal of Hawaiian leis.

3.2. *Shipped Out*

The following section focuses on analyzing one of the films in category A more closely, keeping in mind Barthes’ two levels of the signification process. *Shipped Out* (2017), seen as an archetypical example of its category here, is a film that portrays the all-inclusive tourist experience as a practice that leaves no room for holiday-makers to experience or discover anything by themselves. Tourists feel they should follow the tourist ‘program’ set by the tourist provider, in this case the cruise organizer. The cruise ship seems like a parody of *Harmony of the Seas*, a cruise ship launched in 2016 by Royal Caribbean International. The film makes a statement on contemporary tourist practices: simplified, staged traditions appear removed from their original setting. (For instance, Mickey and Minnie are given Hawaiian flower garlands on board, representing a lei greeting.) The tourist experience is reduced to the image of the protagonists lying on sunbeds, with sunglasses and cocktails at hand. However, as soon as the cruise director understands that Mickey and Minnie have paid for ‘the VIP experience,’ everything changes. The viewers hear the director say to the protagonists: “We don’t have a moment to spare!” Mickey and Minnie are thrown into the pool and onto water slides, we see them do body jumping and play volleyball. They are fed, they watch ballet shows, and they are never allowed a break. At some point, we even hear them say: “They are killing us with fun!” and: “Forget the VIP experience, we’ve got to get out of here!” After many more images of organized fun, they end up landing on a small island. There, they finally seem relaxed, drinking from coconuts, as Minnie exclaims: “This is the VIP experience!” Of course, the image of a couple holding coconuts on sunbeds on a clichéd tropical island is one of the most widely established Western images of exotic tourism, promoted as ‘authentic’ through the widespread dissemination of such images through the media. It is indeed part of the tourism industry discourse, seen on tourist leaflets and posters worldwide, in many cases featured as the ideal honeymoon experience.

Following Barthes' theory of the signification process, the film signifies cruise tourism as a package of specific tourist practices offering relaxing and fun moments (for example, sunbeds, cocktails, organized activities, etc.). At the second level of signification and as a simple signifier, cruise tourism interacts with myth. In essence, signification is the myth itself, the very distortion it causes. The specific film establishes a myth that implies the need for self-discovery and the search for authenticity in a foreign land. It normalizes the tourist activities of sunbathing on a sunbed, and drinking cocktails under a palm tree, all symbols of a relaxing time, and labels such activities 'authentic' because they are not offered through an organized tourist package. Reality is, therefore, distorted because, as shown in the previous sections of this paper, such 'authenticity' is no less staged, pre-formed, and disseminated through media screens and tourist posters worldwide, and thus cannot account for self-discovery. Regarding power and ideology, this film could be interpreted as Disney's attempt to comment on the new cruise ship of Royal Caribbean Cruises, one of the most competitive rivals of Disney Cruise Line.

Although, as Barthes argues, myth is always motivated, the fact that their motivation remains invisible makes myths appear as natural (Barthes 1993: 117). Spreading images of couples drinking cocktails on sunbeds under palm trees through the media has been such an extensive practice that people believe this is the definition of tropical holidays. However, what seems 'natural' or 'universal' in these images encompasses connotations that normalize the 'American dream' of summer holidays as charted out by tourist agents through media screens (see Table 1). That interpretation alone transforms semiology into ideology, as myth "transforms history into nature" (Barthes 1993:129), making it the subject of an "immediate impression" as it has an "imperfectible" and "unquestionable" character (130). For Barthes, "[m]yth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system" (131).

Table 1. Barthes' model of signification as applied to *Shipped Out*

1. Signifier TOURIST PRACTISES SHOWN ON FILM	2. Signified HAPPY HOLIDAYS
3. Sign I. SIGNIFIER (happy holidays)	II. SIGNIFIED self-discovery/authenticity
III. SIGNIFICATION Ideology: The American dream regarding summer holidays	

4. Category B: Mickey Mouse as a local inhabitant in a famous tourist destination

The films that depict Mickey Mouse as a local inhabitant in a well-known tourist destination convey a different approach: Dialogue – even the opening titles in half of the films – is in the language of the featuring country, the music is always intended as indicative of the specific culture, and the distinctiveness of the place depicted is stressed through the wanderings and activities that the protagonists engage in. All of these films use a variety of semiotic systems (linguistic, musical, and visual) in order to illustrate supposed specificity and uniqueness: Native language, traditional music, widely recognizable landscapes, habits, and distinct lifestyle traits are depicted in various national settings. Joanne Connell (2012) has stressed the significance of landscape images in cinema and film-induced tourism for their value as identifiers, ‘markers’ or promoters of the distinctiveness of a place. In tourism, the greatest value is the value of difference, and in these films the viewers are ‘overwhelmed with evidence,’ as Barthes would say: no one can doubt that the characters are in Paris, Tokyo, Bern, Venice, Mumbai, Mexico, Pamplona, Moscow, Istanbul, or Seoul. These films feature locals on screen – Mickey among them – participating in the everyday practices of the place shown, rather than tourists.

Croissant de Triomphe (2013), for instance, is set in Paris. The story revolves around Minnie’s need to get more croissants for her café. Croissants are pastries mostly associated with France (despite the fact that they are of Austrian origin). Apart from the Parisian cafés and patisseries, the audience can spot many well-known landmarks of Paris, such as Notre-Dame and Moulin Rouge, as well as signs of French nationality. For instance, birds in this film wear black berets, which is considered typical of Frenchmen, as the mass production of berets began in France; for many Western countries a beret is thus the national hat of France. Mickey is chased by the French police, he runs past Cinderella’s palace, where the viewers see the prince putting a glass slipper on Cinderella’s foot; he goes through a French barn and a carousel with children. All these images are considered highly connected to France: For the English-speaking world, the most well-known literary version of the Cinderella story was written by Charles Perrault in French; a French barn has a distinct architecture; the carousel was historically popular in France, as one of the first carousels with wooden horses was set up at the Place du Carrousel in Paris in the 17th century, and one of the first carousel manufacturers was French. At the end of the film, Mickey wears an armor – reinforcing the myth of the Romantic knight fighting for his beloved one –, uses a baguette – a type of bread of French origin –, as his sword, and collects the croissants, earning Minnie’s kiss.

Just like *Croissant de Triomphe* does with Paris, *Tokyo Go* (2013) represents Tokyo, and some of its well-known aspects of otherness. Japanese music is heard over the

sound and images of heavy traffic, images of bridges and of tall buildings abound, people are seen crammed in a train, and there is a sumo match, representing this sport as a Japanese peculiarity for American audiences. There are also scenes from a video game, that is, a cultural reference to Akihabara, a hot spot for gamers, while the film features sounds from the 1985 Nintendo video game *Super Mario Bros*. The train eventually reaches a station that looks like a typical Japanese pagoda. Mickey starts his work in a park with children's trains, reminiscent of Disneyland Railroad, while the sound the train makes resembles that from TIE fighters in *Star Wars*. The film is in Japanese, and underlines basic widely recognizable Japanese metonymies, that is, technology, video games, sumo, traditional architecture (pagoda), and heavy traffic.

In a similar manner, *Yodelberg* (2013) is set in a winter location, a snowy Swiss mountain landscape, and includes easily identifiable signs of Swiss winter tourism, while the music featured is *Swisskapolka*. *O Sole Minnie* (2013) is set in Venice, where Mickey Mouse is a gondolier. Apart from the Venetian canals, Italian spaghetti, and some landscapes, the Italian atmosphere is enhanced by the sound of a Venetian serenade. The story is about Mickey winning the heart of Minnie the waitress, reinforcing the stereotype of romance born in Venice. Similarly, in *¡Feliz Cumpleaños!* (2015), the heroes are dressed in colorful 'traditional' Mexican clothing, with Goofy wearing a sombrero, Mickey wearing a poncho, while Minnie and Daisy are singing and dancing with flowers in their hair and long skirts, just like Mexican women. The film is about Mickey's birthday, as the Spanish title of the film suggests. Here, some hostile piñatas attack Mickey, as in Mexican culture the piñata symbolizes the struggle of man against temptation. Moving on, *Al Rojo Vivo* (2015) is set in Pamplona, where Mickey is chased by a bull. Many signs of 'Spanish-ness' are featured in the film, such as traditional clothing, the flamenco guitar, music and dance, the "La Tomatina" food fight festival, and the Pamplona Bull Run. Furthermore, *Dancevidaniya* (2016) shows Mickey trying to rescue Minnie from Pete through a Russian folk-dance battle. Signs of 'Russian-ness' include the Bolshoi Theater, a Fabergé egg, a Russian nesting doll, the folk tune "Kalinka," as well as the Russian fur hats or ushanka, which Mickey and Minnie wear on their way out of the theater. The next film, *Turkish Delights* (2016), is about selling goods in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar. The bazaar is portrayed as a vivid, colorful place where vendors advertise their merchandise with loud cries, amidst children running in the market. The film shows the Grand Bazaar and its Nuruosmaniye Gate, carpets and kilims – as historically the Turks were among the first carpet weavers –, Turkish famous desserts, as well as other landmarks, like the Bosphorus Bridge, the Sultan Ahmed Mosque – also known as the Blue Mosque – and the Galata Tower. It is interesting to point out that Goofy plays various Turkish string instruments (e.g. yayli tambur), while both Goofy and Donald wear a moustache. Finally, *Locked in Love* (2017) is set in Seoul, near the town's most

iconic symbol, the Seoul Tower, a popular spot for couples who wish to lock their 'padlock of love' onto the fence around the Tower. The film tells the story of Mickey and Minnie who try to lock their heart-shaped padlock onto the railings.

4.1. *Mumbai Madness*

Analyzing the film *Mumbai Madness* (2014) using Barthes' two-level signification process, one comes to conclusions similar to those pertaining to *Shipped Out* (2017). Traditional music, the Hindi language, and a scene from a day in an autorickshaw taxi are the first images viewers see when watching *Mumbai Madness*, a film rich in symbolism. The story is about an elephant trying to go to an Indian temple using Mickey's taxi. The elephant wears an Indian kurta, a loose knee-length shirt. The taxi is seen going through small streets, with kilims hanging above. As the journey unfolds, the viewers encounter a Bollywood show—where Mickey stops the taxi to participate—, cows in silk saris – Indian women's clothing – dancing traditional dances, a snake charmer holding a pungi and sitting next to the basket where one would expect a snake to appear, spicy curry used as gas for the taxi, Indian motifs and patterns. Mickey, of course, stops every time he sees a cow on the street, as cows are sacred animals in Mumbai. They arrive at a place full of flowers, a symbol of strength and purity in Indian culture. Moreover, there is a temple and elephant sculptures appear all over the place, decorated with a variety of ornaments and caparisons, as represented in Indian history. Elephants are known as animals that some Indian peoples admire, as they are connected to mythological and cultural Hindu beliefs and function as sacred symbols of peace, divinity, and power. Moreover, the elephant featured in the film gives Mickey a small Indian lotus, a flower which is an emblem of Buddhism, a sign of wealth and fortune in India associated with the goddess Laxmi who usually is depicted holding lotus flowers. The lotus that Mickey is given travels in the air, lands on water, blossoms, and a golden three-wheeled flying taxi appears. Mickey rides it and flies away.

Moving back to Barthes, we might reconsider his example of a front cover from *Paris Match* (a French illustrated weekly magazine, published in July 1955), which shows a young black soldier in French uniform saluting and thus reproducing the myth of France as a multi-ethnic empire. Barthes' argument is that myth works to present bourgeois normality as ahistorical. In the same sense, Indian culture is seen in *Mumbai Madness* (2014) as static, ahistorical, but remote. We are not allowed to see how Indian culture has intermingled with the American way of life in so many ways: from food, dancing, and film to technology and science. David Hesmondalgh (1982) notes that the increase of Indian population in the USA and the recent developments in media technology have long given rise to a demand for Hindi-language films. Bearing this fact in mind, it is interesting to point out that twenty-two years after Hesmondalgh's book, Walt Disney Studios have chosen to mediate only colorfully exotic aspects of Indian

culture, leaving aside India's rapidly increasing economic strength and technological innovation. This oversimplified iconography, which is restricted to highly distinctive, even stereotypical images of India, follows a communication strategy which aims at making a clear distinction among various tourist destinations, so that they are easily recognizable for most audiences. By creating and/or reinforcing certain myths of Otherness, common to certain cultural groups or "interpretive communities" (Fish 1990), the films manage to attract both the cinematic and the tourist gaze.

5. The myth of the tourist

Within this framework and over a short period of time (from 2013 to 2017), the films discussed above present many different locations hosting unique cultures, encouraging young audiences to engage in a reciprocal relation with each other and/or their own sociocultural attributes, and so in fact negotiating their identity with others (cf. Urry 2000). This kind of image construction regarding a specific culture forms a differentiated cultural matrix for each place featured in the films. Viewers assign meaning according to the values of their own society or the mediated tourist discourse, and, just like tourists, they examine every destination image as a concept, in the way explained by Barthes. They 'read' the signs in the films (a bird wearing a beret, a crowded train, etc.) such that they become forms for the concepts at the second order of signification, connoting 'French-ness,' 'Japanese-ness,' 'Swiss-ness,' 'Italian-ness,' 'Indian-ness,' 'Mexican-ness,' 'Spanish-ness,' 'Russian-ness,' 'Turkishness,' and 'Korean-ness' respectively. Just like tourists, film viewers 'read' "cities, landscapes and cultures as sign systems" (Culler 1981:127).

This procedure is an important factor in the creation or promotion of the location branding of a place, a fundamental step in destination marketing, as it helps future travelers make a clear distinction among places, and tell one location brand from another. After watching the specific films, for example, one can identify classy lifestyle with France, technological advances with Japan, snowy mountains with Switzerland, romantic atmosphere with Italy, Hindu traditions with India, big fiestas with Mexico, passion and adventure with Spain, folk tradition with Russia, and special delights with the eastern cuisine in Turkey. These easily distinguishable brands are shaped, however, according to Jonathan Culler's (1981) "false tourist consciousness" taking into account specific aspects of the history and identity of a place, and excluding others. In essence, this is the cycle of the tourism industry's marketing strategy: selecting specific, stageable aspects of the cultural resources of a place, attracting the gaze of tourists, familiarizing tourists specifically with those mediated aspects, transforming those identifiable aspects into dominant local iconography, disseminating them through mass and new media, and attracting the

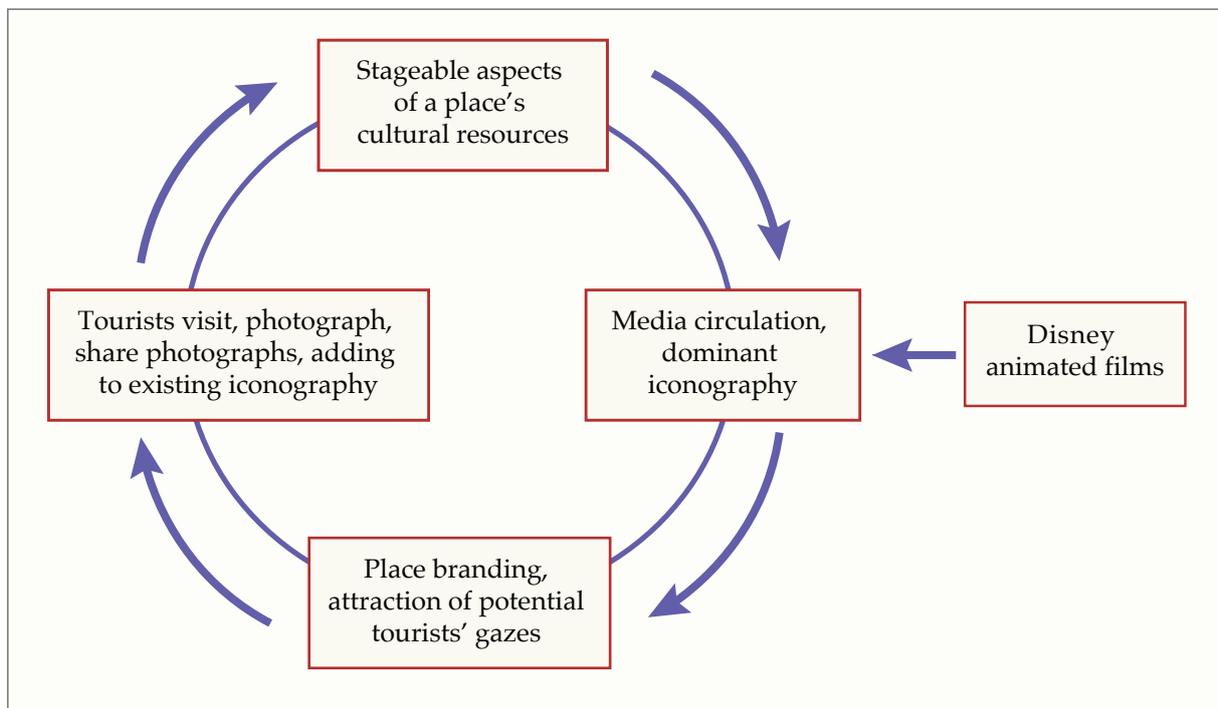


Figure 2. The circle of tourist industry's marketing strategy.

gaze of potential tourists who may visit those destinations, photograph themselves in front of the most well-known spots, upload the photos on their social media accounts, attracting more gazes, and so on so forth, as proposed in Figure 2.

Just like in the case of the films in category A, the tourist myth that is hidden behind the images of the films grouped under category B follows precisely the procedure of formulating the whole identity brand of a place based on a few selected signs, in order to create an identifiable location brand. The iconography of those Disney films is filtered, that is, the signifiers are chosen so as for them to be included in the tourism industry discourse. Moreover, such specific iconography bears a certain ideological weight, as the images shown are meant to satisfy the American wish for holidays in Europe, the Far East, and places such as Mumbai. Four of the destinations depicted in category B are European (Paris, the Swiss Alps, Venice, Pamplona), two of the destinations are regarded as belonging to the Far East (Tokyo, Seoul), while the films discussed also include destinations such as Istanbul, Russia and Mumbai, as well as one American destination: Mexico.

The way the viewers of the films 'read' the myths presented in them is crucial here. With respect to Barthes' three types of reading of the myth as described in *Mythologies*, children, the vast audience of cartoon animated films, might "focus on the empty signifier" (Barthes 1993: 128), and perceive a simple system of signification. If this is the case, then all those scenes of Mickey traveling as a tourist or wandering as a

local in foreign settings are just examples of tourist experiences, and of other cultures respectively. If the viewers perceive the “full signifier” (128) – that is, its meaning and form – and realize the distortion involved, then the deception is clear: Mickey’s tourist wanderings are seen as an alibi, an oversimplification of the ‘Other’s’ habits, rituals, and historic narratives, an act of transforming values and dynamic traditions into static, laughable scenes, offered to the audience’s as much as to a tourist’s gaze. If, in the end, the film viewers grasp Barthes’ mythical signifier, then it would become obvious for them that those films try to naturalize tourism, and present it as a human need. Tourist myths then, seen as values, naturalize tourism, distorting its intention (be it social, historical, or economic) into a natural justification. To this end, the plot of the films in category A revolves around a specific myth: the motivated myth of tourists wandering in authentic cultural settings, formed by a mixture of pre-selected signs, while, in fact, the tourism industry commodifies the cultures of both hosts and guests (cf. Selwyn 1996). This wandering is promoted as essential for humans (see, for example, the film *On Vacation with Mickey Mouse and Friends* (1956), where tourism is seen as an important human need, in order for one to escape everyday routine, or the film *Shipped Out* (2017), where tourism is seen as a search for authenticity one cannot find in their homeland). The films in category B are meant to be seen as open windows to the Other’s cultural setting and way of life (empty signifier), filtered and legitimized (full signifier), naturalizing the need for cinematic escapelands from the everyday routine (mythical signifier) and underlying the need for visiting and discovering the portrayed destinations as future tourists.

6. The animation industry and its myths

In order to fully grasp the interrelation between the tourist and the animation industry, it is necessary to outline the cartoon myth, apart from that of the tourist. The form of animated films, their denotation, is structured upon the movement of the drawn images we see on screen. The connotation of such films stems from the ideas and meanings they suggest (for example, their comments on tourist practices in the case of the films discussed in this paper). Animation films, however, just like all kinds of still and moving images, include myths that conceal certain ideologies. Disney is the most well-known example of an animation universe propagating such myths. The American way of life and consumerism form the basis of this ideological framework, as stated above.

In animation, just like in any image, one can search for Barthes’ *studium* and *punctum*. The *studium* includes the fragments of reality presented in images. The *punctum* refers to the photography’s indication of human mortality—something or someone ‘has been’ and will not appear again—that may cause a sentimental wound to some of the viewers. The *studium* refers to knowledge, while the *punctum* refers to sentiment,

feeling, and imagination. Eric Jenkins (2013) proposes a punctum unique to animated films. Animation's punctum demonstrates, in his view, the potential existence of life in imagination. In this sense, one might say that myth in animation films is connected to a simulated reality set in the imagination of the viewers, which is, therefore, untouched by social motives. Indeed, it is not merely the case that Disney films encourage consumerist behavior but rather that "they are a direct commercial appeal, a demonstration of the potential desirability of being a consumer" (Jenkins 2013:590).

This imaginative simulated reality that animated films display might explain the fact that, despite Mickey's malleable identity – featuring in some films an American tourist and in others as a native Indian, a Japanese or European citizen, etc. – his ideological function does not change: he is still children's trustworthy friend who can magically transfer to various places, bearing variable identities, and he, therefore, never seems estranged.

7. Tourist contradictions in Disney films: The semiotic square

In this section, I will use Greimas' semiotic square (Greimas and Courtés 1979) in an attempt to reaffirm the elementary structure of signification in the animation films discussed. There are a number of contradictions that could be used in this square with reference to each film, such as 'touristy' versus 'natural,' or 'staged experience' versus 'self-exploration.' This analysis, however, focuses on the contradiction between 'tourist/visitor' and 'local inhabitant/exotic Other' (see Figure 3).

The Greimas square offers a heuristic, structuralist mechanism for the semiotic analysis of the aforementioned films and their mediation of tourism, and cannot be regarded as a holistic approach. The basic contrasting semes or the binary opposition in the square shown in Figure 2 are the hyponyms 'tourist' and 'local inhabitant.' These are actually the basic criteria for listing the films under category A or B, as mentioned above. These disjunctive relationships reveal a strong tourist dichotomy, namely, the 'inauthentic' versus the (staged) 'authentic,' or the 'invented' versus the 'genuine but dynamic' tradition. Schema 2 contradicts schema 1. As deixis 1 suggests, T1 implies negative T1, so the term 'tourist' implies a 'non-local,' a 'foreigner.' A tourist can be defined as a non-local inhabitant but not the other way around. Undoubtedly, as Greimas and Courtés note (1979), there is no 'objective' content, as the placement of each seme in the square depends on the knowledge and interpretation of the researcher.

Similarly, if multiple squares were drawn (for example, social, economic, individual, etc.), their hierarchy would depend on the author's individual choices, as well as on the collective values they are raised into, by a specific society and culture. The types of connections and the homologies and balances created when squares overlap, as well as the

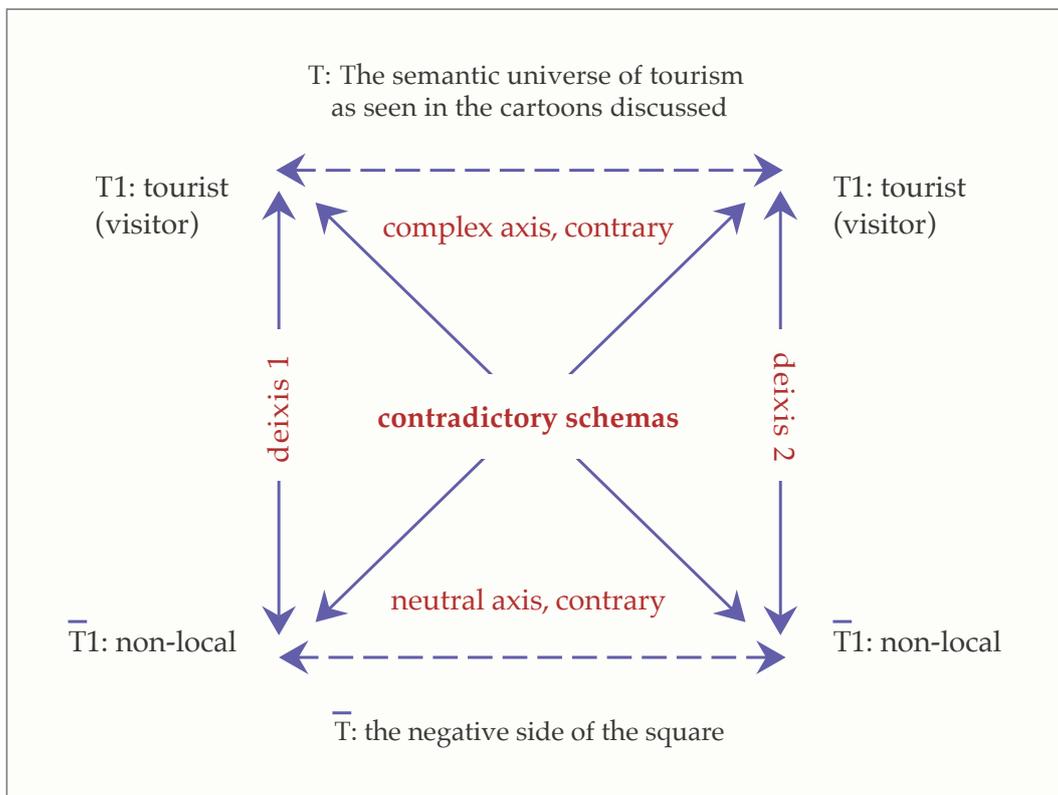


Figure 3. The use of the Greimas Square for the interpretation of the tourist phenomenon as portrayed in Disney short animation films.

compatibilities and conflicts of the various deixes and schemata are culturally defined and heavily influenced by certain types of gazes (Western, Eastern, European, American, etc.), which exclude certain aspects—such as the less recognizable or less attractive ones—and simplify the richness of tourist experience. In the semiotic square, the upper left-hand corner hosts notions that can be prescribed, while the upper right-hand corner can rather be seen as a space for interdictions. Tourism is a contemporary prescription, then, against the noise and frenzy of everyday life, while locality and by extension nationality are strict notions acquired by birth and difficult to attain otherwise.

If one draws a semiotic square inspired by *Hawaiian Holiday* (1937), the term 'nature' could replace the term 'local,' while the term 'culture' would stand in for the term 'tourism,' indicating that, in contrast to nature, tourism is actually a cultural, socially-defined activity. If one were to use the same methodological tool for the interpretation of *Shipped Out* (2017), the two contradictory terms would be 'tourist packages' versus 'travelling alone.' Of course, each film should be studied within its own historical setting. As *Hawaiian Holiday* was produced in 1937 and *Shipped Out* eighty years later in 2017 it is evident that the travelers of the 1930s were worried about different aspects of tourism than those of the 21st century who have already experienced

the all-inclusive tourism option. There are many researchers who have pointed out the difference between the highly energetic traveler of the early 20th century and the contemporary almost passive tourist. Unfortunately, due to length restrictions, these kinds of historical considerations cannot be discussed in this paper.

According to Culler, “the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic, the natural and the touristy, is a powerful semiotic operator within tourism” (1981:128). The same distinction seems to become apparent through the Disney films explored in this study, as the films in category A present the staged, touristy experience while the films in category B show the presumed everyday practices of the ‘exotic’ Other, stereotypically stressing the uniqueness of each destination through native language, traditional music – and in some cases even local instruments, like the sitar, the bansuri and the shehnai in *Mumbai Madness* (2014), the yayli tambur in *Turkish Delights* (2016), and the flamenco guitar in *Al Rojo Vivo* (2015) – through folk dancing and clothing, iconic landmarks, and other cultural resources, signs and symbolisms, all carefully selected so as to be included in the tourist discourse. Following MacCannell (1973) and Culler (1981), even the ‘real thing,’ therefore, appears to be ‘marked’ as authentic, semiotically articulated, and enriched with connotations of ‘French-ness,’ ‘Japanese-ness,’ ‘Swiss-ness,’ ‘Italian-ness,’ ‘Indian-ness,’ ‘Mexican-ness,’ ‘Spanish-ness,’ ‘Russian-ness,’ ‘Turkish-ness,’ or ‘Korean-ness,’ as stated above. Thus, even in cartoon animated films mediation marks the authentic, codes it into clichéd versions of cultural spectacles, and then offers it to future tourists. The moment film viewers become on-site tourists they would “measure up [...] the thing to the criterion of the preformed symbolic complex” (Percy 1975:47). It is the ritual of the contemporary and future tourist first to experience the sign and then, if ever, the site itself, co-creating tourist experiences and meaning. This co-creation of meaning might take the form of tourist selfies on social media accounts, richer texts in tourist blogs, or even personal websites. Whatever form it assumes, the input of tourists finds its way into the cycle of the marketing strategy of tourism industry, adding new images to the tourist discourse or reinforcing the existing dominant iconography.

Following MacCannell, Culler (1981) makes some interesting remarks concerning the value of the tourist code in recent societies as a widespread modern consensus, a systematized knowledge of the world, a stabilizing force in Western society. Each society creates a series of signs and mediating its landscapes, monuments, lifestyle, traditions and contemporary practices as a series of spectacles helps one understand the world. These animated tourist experiences, narrated by a trustworthy friend such as Mickey Mouse, may also help young audiences shape their tourist ‘habitus,’ (Bourdieu 1996 [1984]) the ‘smallest common culture’ required in Baudrillard’s (1999) consumer society, one that would guide them through their future tourist gazing, be it physical, corporeal, imaginative or virtual. Mediating and disseminating images of various destinations through animation films expand, therefore, Urry’s (2008) ‘economy of signs,’

the variety of which was evident in the analysis of the Disney films discussed in this paper: Images of global tourist sites, of global icons (like Notre-Dame), of iconic types (like the global beach or cruise trip), of railway transportation (implying mass tourism), vernacular icons (like Hula dancing), etc.

8. Conclusion

The visualization of the experience of traveling has inspired many academic writings, from Judith Adler's (1989) ideas regarding the origins of sightseeing to Urry's (1990) notion of the construction and authorization of 'the tourist gaze,' as well as Mark Neumann's (1999) 'culturally created spectacles' and Scarles' (2004) 'imaginative voyagers' and 'embodied visualities,' which could be applied to digital web and social media images or even to recent distant, virtual tourist wanderings which saw a tremendous increase during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gazing at tourist photography has given rise to such notions, which also apply in the case of film and animated tourist stories, since the mechanisms of identification in these media are even stronger and the sense of familiarity with the film's protagonists carefully choreographed.

This paper has underlined the importance of portraying tourist practices through cartoon animated films, especially in the case of those film productions which are seen worldwide and are highly influencing for young gazes such as Disney cartoons. It has become clear that Disney films try to foreground the uniqueness of specific destinations in order to co-create, along with young and other gazes, the puzzle of world tourism. At the same time, such films promote tourist practices and reinforce the myth of tourism as a natural activity, masking the ideological input of the tourist and the cartoon industry.

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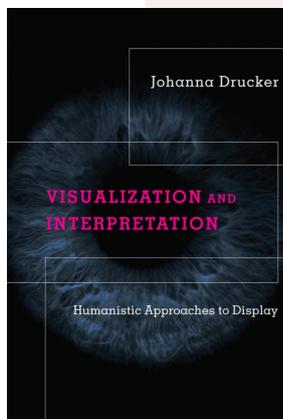
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Materiality, data epistemology and enunciation

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BY: Maria Giulia Dondero



Johanna Drucker

Visualization and interpretation. Humanistic approaches to display

Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2020 208 pp., \$ 30.00 (Hbk, ISBN 9780262044738).

Immediately upon its publication, I rushed to read the latest book by Johanna Drucker, Martin and Bernard Breslauer Professor at the Department of Information Studies at UCLA. As I expected, it represents the culmination of her enduring work on the epistemology of images and visualization design. The book's organization reveals Drucker's vast experience in visual epistemology and the interpretation and *production* of visual artifacts. Moreover, it shows the connection between her approach and semiotics, especially concerning enunciation theory. I specifically emphasize the word 'production' because Johanna is not only a well-known scholar in various fields of humanistic research but also a designer in the art world.

Her main research field is visual culture, to which she contributes in forging both with her epistemological interventions, and her artworks.¹ Her theories on visual knowledge have always found a field of experimentation, observation and theorization in experimental typography, visual poetry, and letterforms, fields in which she operates as a book and

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¹ A retrospective of her work as an artist, titled *Druckworks: 40 Years of Books and Projects by Johanna Drucker*, is partly viewable on the Internet: <https://jacket2.org/commentary/druckworks-40-year-books-and-projects-johanna-drucker-catalog>.

sketch artist. Her work as a book artist, exhibited in universities, libraries, galleries, and museums worldwide, has established her as an original theorist of writing and materiality in prose, poetry, and the fine arts,² and in computer code *as regards its nature as writing*.

For semioticians, her work is essential for many reasons. The focus on materiality in every kind of writing, from visual poetry to digital code, is crucial for the path that semiotics is pursuing today, steering it from structuralism towards the Material Turn.³ Drucker's book is critical in understanding that the digital code is not abstract or pure but a kind of writing inscribed in the materialities of recording media and substrates. In this sense, Drucker's work follows in the steps of Nelson Goodman's constructivist epistemology (Goodman 1968), whose work she continues⁴ by proposing a middle ground between autography and allography to describe writing systems. And by writing, I mean the inscription of visual forms in art *and* as computer coding. Generally, she tries to demonstrate that *literature also works as an autographic system* because of its singular page organization, letterforms, and so on and that digital code is not only allographic because every time it is inscribed on the substrate, which is the computer, it becomes unique and specific, that is, autographic.

Visualization and Interpretation is a crucial book firstly because of Drucker's in-depth analysis of all kinds of visual documents – from painting to data visualization. In fact, in this book, she also takes ancient fine art production and especially Rembrandt's work into account and demonstrates that in his paintings *we can find different theorizations of what the painter's view on painting was* through the use of various degrees of precision, and zones of blurring.⁵ Secondly, because it makes propositions about how it's possible to introduce, in the visual discourse regarding data, an *epistemic comment about these data* (Drucker calls the data "capta" to underline that data always originate in *experience* and in its manipulation). So, this book contains not only theory and analysis but also a concrete proposition to change the culture of data visualization through visual devices described in the Appendix (pp. 139-175) containing design prototypes.

² This diversity of her fields of research can also be seen in her book *Graphesis* (2014).

³ In Dondero (2020), I have described and criticized the development of visual semiotics from the structuralist period to the dawn of the age when the materiality of language became relevant in semiotic analysis. For a specific reflection on photographic materiality, see Basso and Dondero (2006) in Italian and for a revised and augmented version in French, see Basso and Dondero (2011). For a general theory and some examples in the anthropology of photographic objects, see the seminal book by Edwards and Hart (eds. 2004).

⁴ See p. 31, where Drucker states that the distinction between autographic and allographic systems is not so definite. For instance, she takes the typewriter as an example of allographic system. If the distinction between forms in letter code is typically allographic, she points out that changing the font reveals that "the specific properties of instantiation are not just embodied in the letter code, but in the inscriptional form of the characters" (p. 31) and that "a system may be allographic at a formal level, as a notation system, but never at an inscriptional level where an image is produced as a material trace" (p. 31).

⁵ See pages 20-22.

In this review, I'll explain why Drucker's book and her work, in general, are so crucial for semiotics and especially for French structuralist semiotics, and not only for the Digital Humanities community which her book primarily addresses. Firstly, I will describe what Drucker's work and our work in semiotics have in common, notably regarding enunciation theory and the conception of textuality. Secondly, I will address the questions raised in her work that are crucial to make semiotics evolve and enable it to handle the issue of digital displays, that is, digital materiality.

1. Visual epistemology, enunciation and interpretation

Many of the topics and epistemological issues discussed in Johanna's book are fundamental in the French visual semiotics tradition. For instance, the possibility of modeling and interpreting knowledge *by manipulating graphical signs*,⁶ the latter having a *specific* substance of expression, which inscribes knowledge differently from numeric and verbal expressions.

The semiotics which came after Roland Barthes (1977a, 1977b), via the work of Algirdas Julien Greimas (1989), tried to make the humanities and especially language sciences aware of the fact that visual signs can argue, negate,⁷ and reveal contradictions, sensible instability or epistemological uncertainty. Contemporary French semiotics has already described the epistemic instability of fine art and scientific images⁸ and the fact that images can propose to the observer a conflict between multiple positions of observation. Moreover, many semiotic scholars working on scientific images demonstrate that such images may introduce uncertainty or contradiction in human observation through blurring or other visual devices. Still, nobody addressed the question of studying and explaining the utility of inscribing epistemic uncertainty into digital design and data visualization. Semioticians are certainly experts in representational conventions and *nonrepresentational images*, that is, *generative images* – as Drucker calls the images that are themselves arguments about knowledge and belief through forms and traces. However, they have not sufficiently engaged critically and analytically with data visualization.

For Drucker, data visualization must definitely be conceived of as “an enunciative system” (p. 80). However, nonrepresentational images do not merely illustrate already available information. On the contrary, they contain the information at one level and the *comments on this information* at another level. What Johanna calls nonrepresentational

⁶ For an overview on the production of mathematic and artistic knowledge in diagrammatic reasoning, see Dondero and La Mantia (eds) 2021.

⁷ On the relation between enunciation and negation in the visual world, see Dondero (2015). For a critical insight on visual language in Barthesian and Greimasian theory, see Fabbri (1998).

⁸ On this topic, see Dondero and Fontanille (2014).

images, Louis Marin (1989) would have called “presentation of the representation,” the *non-transitive level of communication: the reflective level* in image discourse. In Drucker’s thinking, it could be described as the act of inscription in the visualization of *how we know when we know*, that is, of how we know when we produce or look at a visual artifact. The reflective level can be described as the *how* of the representation act, i.e., as the level of epistemic and ethical responsibility inscribed in the images themselves, reflecting on their composition and, notably, *on their future use in observers’ hands*.

We now reach the core of the discussion on visual enunciation: Who is doing the inscribing? To communicate what? In which way, from what perspective, and with what objective? I wish to insist on this topic by saying that Drucker is, to my knowledge, the only visual theorist who explains the workings of images through enunciation theory, except, of course, for a few French-speaking visual semioticians. In her conception of textuality, every textual system predisposes a particular type of reading because every text models a specific kind of reaction and interpretation. The text itself, on the other hand, according to the critical hermeneutics she embraces, *is changed at every reading*; there is a co-dependency between the text and its readings. In this case, Drucker proposes a *probabilistic* way of understanding the diversity of readings, one that I would define as a middle way between the awareness of the peculiarity of readings depending on culture, personal experiences, and so on, and the static determinism of textual distribution of reader positions that characterized the early period of structuralism in semiotics. On this subject, she states that the approach of the *non-deterministic probabilistic nature of reading practices* “suggests that readings are *interventions within the field of provocation provided by the text*. Here, a text (or work of any kind) is considered a *provocation*, a field of potential or possibility, in which a reading or interpretation is an *intervention*” (p. 4, my emphasis).⁹

2. The lifecycle of data in visualization and the materiality of languages

The second point I want to address concerns Drucker’s proposal to enhance the awareness of the shaping of data and notably of the *lifecycle* of data through a new

⁹ To go deeper into this idea: “The range of probability of a reading fits the normal bell curve in many instances – readings of a work will tend to cluster around a consensual understanding” (p. 4). And: “How these probabilities emerge – how certain acts of interpretation gain authority – is a problem that will have to be addressed by studying the normative dimensions of textual fields [...]. This probabilistic approach to interpretation extended reader-response theory into a dialogue with indeterminacy as conceived in early twentieth-century theoretical physics.” (p. 51). For a global insight about the relation between data visualization and enunciation system, see the chapter “Interface and Enunciation, or, Who Is Speaking?” (pp. 91-110).

conception of visualization, which she calls “modeling interpretation,” as opposed to the current practices of data visualization, which she calls “data display.” She argues that contemporary data visualization culture makes data manipulation disappear from the final visualization to convey an idea of *user-independent* knowledge of data. As a result, data presentation stands unquestioned. This lack of problematization finally coincides with a false idea of equivalence between phenomena (the experience), data, and their display. This path, made through translation, manipulation, and structuration, that is, the *lifecycle* of data I mentioned before, is completely ignored and concealed in current data visualization. Drucker’s proposition is to introduce *inflections* in data visualization to introduce the epistemic, enunciative level in visualization through “graphical forms capable of expressing ambiguity, contradiction, nuance, change and other aspects of critical consideration” (p. 3), that is, *images capable of performing epistemological work*.¹⁰

Drucker’s book contrasts with the positivistic (and dangerous!), user-independent knowledge model of current data visualization (data display) through an inventory of techniques able to integrate the possibility of showing the degrees of knowledge and certainty about data *inside* the visualization itself – what she calls “modeling interpretation.” She proposes a series of activators, inflectors that express “affective emotionally charged values” (p. 85) and other schematizations of relations between multiple points of view that enables us to indicate that a certain visualization displays data of unequal degree of certainty; some elements are surer, some others are projected, while others are only possible: “Thus, salience might be indicated by glow and luminosity, ambiguity by tonal value and vague boundaries, contradiction by lines of force and so on” (p. 85). In this sense, it’s not only a matter of including enunciation in visualization but also of what we call in semiotics “the veridiction modalities”: what is only possible has to be visually differentiated from the probable and the certain.

Here are some very useful exemplifications (Figures 1, 2, 3), which use graphic contrast to reveal how visualization changes if any single parameter were altered or simply reduced to uncertainty: the model of interpretation would change and readers could become aware that the visualization presented to them is only one possible perspective on the data and not the only valid statement about it.

¹⁰ Another proposition by Drucker addressed to data visualization designers is to use more complex mathematical models than the ones currently used in bar diagrams, flow charts and so on: topological models that are able to describe events in chaos and complexity. See p. 71f. on concept modeling that includes the possibility of expressing events through “relations of before and after, simultaneity, duration, slow and fast time spans, and variable models of historical chronology” (p. 80) rather than doing so through abstract points that are unable to express the density of time.

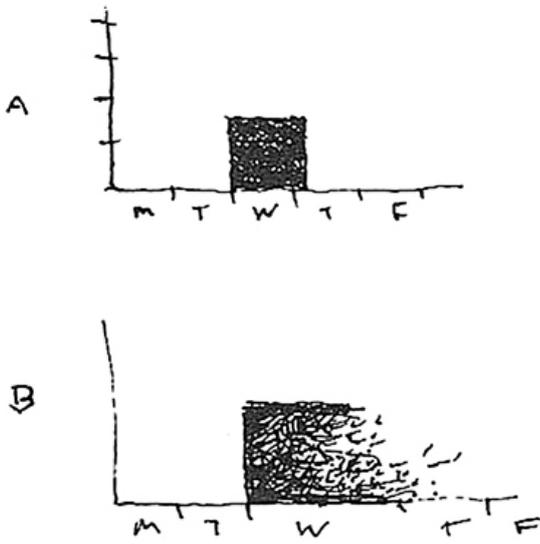


Figure 1. J. Drucker, *Visualization and Interpretation*, page 140.

All these suggestions regarding alternative data visualizations reveal not only the epistemic complexity of data (the fact that every cluster of data depends on a particular degree of knowledge stabilization and on different experience domains that need to be translated into a global vision) but also place the viewer in the perspective of the ‘present’ of the point of view (the position of “now”) concerning past and future positions (developments, possible transformations and so on) through depthwise stratification and perspective devices. Figure 3, especially, makes evident, through the difference between a frontal standard interface and a ‘popped-out’ alternative interface, “the point-of-view system, its alignments, its changes of scale, and its indexical connection to provenance information” (p. 165, my italics).

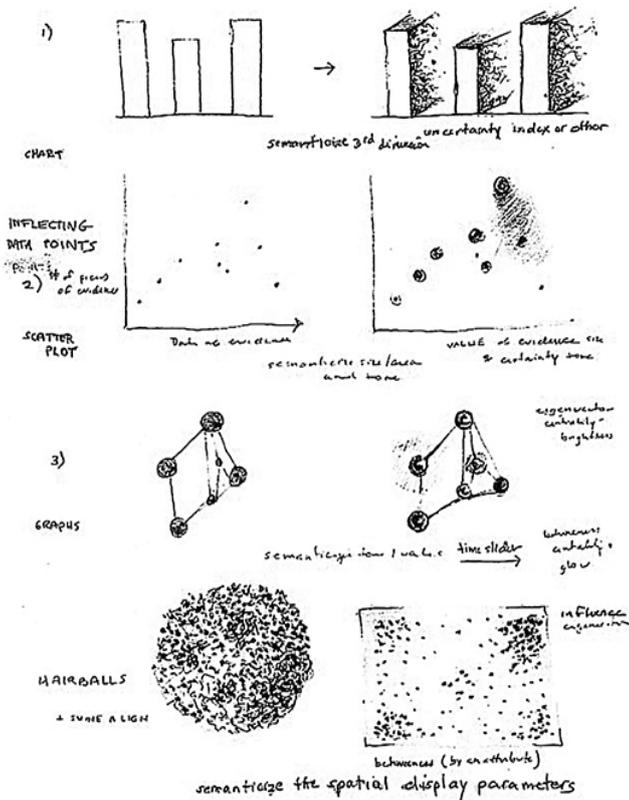


Figure 2. J. Drucker, *Visualization and Interpretation*, page 148.

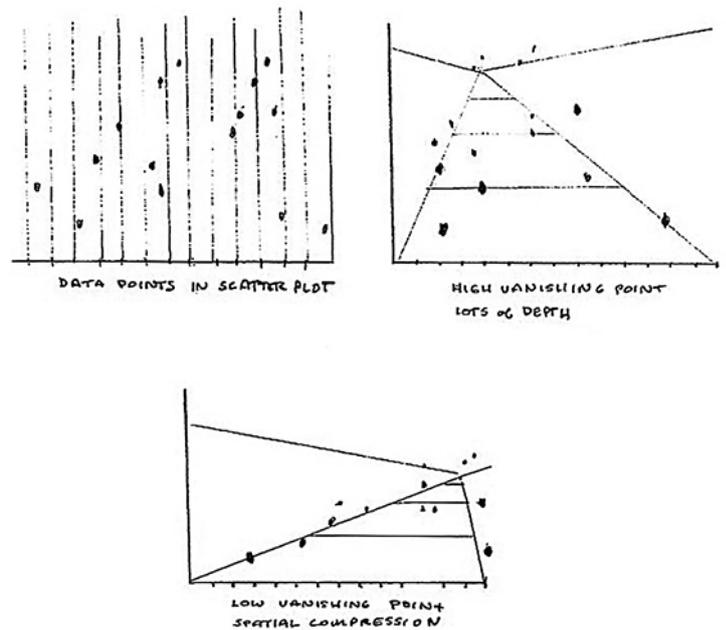


Figure 3. J. Drucker, *Visualization and Interpretation*, page 166.

In this sense, Drucker tries to make visualizations that help readers realize the ‘what if’ and not the ‘this is’ of a visualization: “One potent critical tool for deconstructing the singularity and invisible authority of any statement is contrast (...) No statement, taken as a single, self-evident expression of data, or of features of phenomena expressed as data, can provide this reflection on the process of this production” (p. 54-55).¹¹

The devices proposed by Drucker show that “every presentation of data is the outcome of a probabilistic inquiry, a ‘what if’ proposition, not a ‘what is’ statement” (p. 57). She uses them to demonstrate that the distinction between *mathesis* (the knowledge system privileging lack of ambiguity and formal explicitness such as in mathematics and computing) and *graphesis* (the knowledge system where “every instantiation is specific, characterized (however minutely) by individual differences” (p. 22) is not the same as the distinction between digital and analog systems. Computer systems as well are able “to inscribe the specificity and particularity that are inherent features of visual knowledge production” (p. 27). Indeed, digital images are not equivalent to digital encoding, which has an unambiguous character. Between the two, some translation processes (which Drucker calls “indexical chain,” p. 33) are such that they differentiate every image in every instant of its manifestation on display. Even if the code string can be repeated, “Every digital trace is unique by virtue of its physical materiality” (p. 32).

Drucker shows the passages between one mode of existence and another to draw readers’ attention to these processes of translation and remediation from code to display. Similarly, in semiotics, we try to describe this process through the modes of existence,¹² that is, from the virtualization of the code to the realization of an image in its printed version, with the intermediary stage of actualization, that is, the stage of processing and inscribing the general instructions and unambiguous code into a unique, rooted trace.

In my view, it’s possible to draw a parallel between this process of mediation between the level of the unambiguous sign and the level of rootedness with Peirce’s diagrammatic stage and Nelson Goodman’s diagrammatic system. For Peirce, diagrammatization is the process between generality and specificity, between what can be iterated and what is unique. For Goodman, a diagram does not belong to the purely allographic system, where the visualization loses any relation to its recording medium and to the local situation it is supposed to represent. A *diagram* would

¹¹ This idea according to which the contrast allows to relativize a statement has been developed in Dondero & Fontanille (2014): no single image can be considered scientific if it is not “completed” (preceded or followed) by other images that test its validity or invalidity.

¹² On modes of existence in semiotics, see Fontanille (2006).

at least partially belong to the autographic system, with the degree of belongingness to be determined. The autographic system covers a broad range, from pictoriality, characterized by a high degree of syntactic and semantic density of the elements composing the image, to diagrammaticity, defined by a low syntactic and semantic density level. Because of this low-density level, the *diagram* can bridge the transitional area between the establishment of the imprint (in autography) and the notational and unambiguous character of the signs (in allography). In other words, the *diagram* combines the inherence of the recording medium with the transposability of the code.

At the end of this text, I'd like to suggest that it will be heuristic to use the notion and methodological operability of the diagram to describe the relation between *mathesis* and *graphesis*, especially their association, in data visualization and, more generally, in interface systems. Thus, the concepts of enunciation and diagrammaticity (defined as a tool for reasoning through the manipulation of material objects) can help interpret and produce more ethical and epistemic-dependent interface devices that make subjects conscious of their critical position within the system of the current distribution of power.

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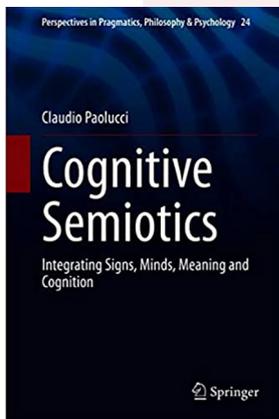




Can enactivism and semiotics be together?

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BY: Antonis Iliopoulos



Claudio Paolucci

Cognitive semiotics: Integrating signs, minds, meaning, and cognition

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“Claudio, enactivism is the attempt to think about cognition in a non-representational way, but semiotics is intrinsically representationalist. So they cannot be together.” These words by Jean Petitot have stuck with Claudio Paolucci ever since 2003, when he was working under the former’s mentorship at the CRÉA, the Centre de Recherche en Épistémologie Appliquée. In Paris, Petitot had been a close collaborator of Francisco Varela, and Paolucci could definitely see the merit of their enactivist ideas, but doing away with semiotics was out of the question, especially for one of Umberto Eco’s last students. Having reflected on those words for almost two decades, Paolucci (2021) is now ready to assertively proclaim that “Yes, semiotics and enactivists *can* be together and they *have* to be together.” Such is the author’s confidence in this union that he recently spearheaded the establishment, in Bologna, of the International Centre for Enactivism and Cognitive Semiotics. His latest book thus comes not as a self-standing monograph concerned with its author’s idiosyncratic interests, but as a manifesto of sorts for the now institutionally enshrined idea that enactivism and semiotics belong together. Yet, putting the representational and anti-representational together is no small feat. It takes

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significant effort and skill on the part of the author, who does away with concepts he finds unhelpful, before molding the ones retained so that they fit each other well, thus turning them into the coherent whole that is his cognitive semiotics. There is a recurring pattern here that we can start teasing out in the following overview of the book, since, as we shall eventually see, the strategy followed throughout its chapters is one that makes this a treatise worth reading.

Overview

The author opens with a bold move: he eschews the commonplace belief that there is a clear-cut threshold between nature and culture and that the job of semiotics is to study only what is on the cultural side of this division. Given that semiosis can be found in so-called 'natural' systems of communication, Paolucci drops the commonplace idea of semiotics as a *logic of culture*. Instead, he espouses Eco's (1976) other definition of semiotics as a *theory of the lie*, which wants organisms to use sign systems deceptively, as a means for effective action. As he points out, effective action often requires hiding (whether advertently or inadvertently) rather than representing the true object of the sign. If we are to conceive signs based on their role in actual living, rather than as soulless pieces of some encyclopedia, then Paolucci's seems a reasonable choice. From this, what emerges is a theoretical framework suitably geared to studying how signs partake in acting and (by extension) thinking. The author specifically puts together a composite theory comprised of *Radical Enactivism, Peircean Pragmatism, and Material Engagement Theory*. The first helps him show that "meaning is not thought as content representing the world as being a certain way", while the second lets him replace the popular notion of truth conditions with the idea that "meaning is identified with habits and with sense-making" (6). As for the theory of material engagement, it is included in the toolkit for its sensitivity towards the scaffolding that materials provide to cognition and semiotic systems. With these tools in hand, Paolucci is able to reframe sense-making as "*the activity of adding subtractions which carves out a world of values and meanings (an "environmental world")*" from the starting point of many other possible environments and worlds" (14, emphasis in original). Otherwise seen, sense-making is an "act of enunciating" – though in this case, the expression token is not determined by a disembodied expression-type; it is instead shaped through its intimate and direct relation with the plane of content.

After sketching a solid theoretical position about the synergism of signs and action, the author goes on to tackle a number of issues faced by semioticians and enactivists alike, starting with subjectivity in Chapter 2. From where he stands, "[s]ubjectivity is not born of the linguistic "I", but of the semiotic ability to lie, to

construct signifier surfaces which build worlds that are alternative to the real one and place fictional objects within them” (36). He argues that deception entails making oneself an object of reflection because it involves splitting the self into a subject that acts and a subject that evaluates the effects of its actions. To pave the way for an enactive semiotics of subjectivity, he draws upon Hjelmslev’s (1935) concept of *pre-logical mind*, which is founded on the *law of participation* and the distinction between *intensive* (i.e., simple, precise) and *extensive* (i.e., complex, vague) terms. And here is the crux of his recovery: he argues that it is the third person, rather than the first, that has priority over the others because of its extensiveness compared to the intensiveness of the other two. As he is keen to point out, the third term no doubt refers to a person, but at the same time, it also refers to what is spoken of. Though, upon closer inspection, the same could be said about the first two persons when the enunciator treats them as enunciated. According to Paolucci, it is through these very acts of enunciation that we effectively achieve a kind of short-circuit between subject and object, an abridgment through which subjectivity emerges for both self and others. On the face of this, the author ultimately calls for replacing the commonplace Ego-centric model of Benveniste with the Levinasian concept of illeity (after the French ‘il’ in cases such as ‘il pleut’) in order to denote “the impersonal event which opens up subject positions” (52).

In Chapter 3, Paolucci shifts his attention to the semiotic mind and the issues of belief and habit. Again, the chapter begins by challenging the dominant paradigm – in this case, the usual conception of interpretation as a private process through which a person makes sense of the extra-personal world. In Paolucci’s model, community plays a fundamental role in interpretation, as sense-making is about evaluating our own sensory engagement with the world against the impersonal takes already circulating in the community. According to the author, the determination of value, the meaning that things have for oneself when mediating between world and community, is the very definition of a semiotic mind’s activity. In working toward an anti-Cartesian semiotics, he specifically combines the Peircean concept of *belief* and the radical new theory of *extended mind* (as framed in the theory of material engagement; Malafouris 2013). The first lets Paolucci tie actions and habits to the euphoric state of stability reached through inquiry when attempting to appease the dysphoric state of doubt and instability; the second allows him to highlight the importance of the material substrate for the emergence of meaning in non-propositional and strongly embodied kinds of thinking. What comes out of this coalition is the *semiotic extended mind* – an idea built on two main pillars, one metaphysical and the other phenomenological. The former entails assuming that everything is continuous (as per Peirce’s synechism), which in turn means that the mind runs through matter, rather than inside it; while the latter involves treating the self as a correlate of consciousness

(as per Peirce's phaneroscopy), rather than submitting to the ontological priority usually granted to the subject. By making this double pragmatist turn, Paolucci is effectively setting himself up for concluding the third chapter with an essential step towards the combination of enactivism and semiotics: he 'naturalizes' representation by framing it as the inward effect of the externally circulating signs that make up the communal mind – hence the term *semiotic representation*.

Next up in Paolucci's agenda is social cognition. Here too, we find the dominant school of thought being challenged. The usual approach in early mindreading studies involves attributing the mindreading abilities that children eventually develop to the expression of a genetically predetermined capacity known as *theory of mind*. But the author thinks otherwise. He posits that pre-linguistic children make sense of their own and others' actions by organizing them in narrative frameworks – albeit in a technical rather than representational manner. Paolucci builds his radical approach to social cognition in three steps. The first involves drawing upon the discovery of mirror neurons, which have been implicated by Gallese (2005) in the long-term process through which children learn how to use folk psychology. According to Paolucci, the biological, 'low' level of social cognition on which we rely during our first couple of years can be tied to the activation of mirror neurons in certain areas of the brain when triggered by the actions of others in intersubjective contexts. The second step involves giving a semiotic spin to the enactivist proposal known as the *Narrative Practice Hypothesis*. Defended by Gallagher and Hutto (2008), this hypothesis attributes the eventual grasping of mental states, such as beliefs and desires, to the narration of stories by caregivers. Yet as Paolucci points out, children are able to organize their experience before they become capable of understanding language, which is why he shifts his attention from narratives to narrativity – namely, semiotic narrativity. According to what he fittingly calls the *Narrative Practice Semiotic Hypothesis*, "*narrativity is the deep structure of meaning*" (102, emphasis in original) that characterizes the 'high' level of social cognition in his two-level model. As for the third step that the author takes on his way toward a radical semiotics of social cognition, this concerns the place of narrativity in developmental trajectories, when children become capable of building their own stories and using them to cheat others – though the development of full-blown narrativity also encourages pretend play, besides just deception.

Last but not least, in Paolucci's list of issues under consideration, is perception. Once again, he goes against the grain: rather than attributing perceptions to world-to-mind processes, he ascribes them to mind-to-world processes. The author dismisses the mainstream view according to which the world is passively imprinted onto our senses and brain. Prompted by the problem of perceiving something for which there is no prior concept, Paolucci calls upon Clark's (2016)

Predictive Processing, a top-down approach to perception. As the author points out, this idea of drawing on interpretants and habits in order to make predictions about incoming signals is one we encounter in the work of Clark (2016) as well as Eco (1999). However, Paolucci differentiates his approach from Eco's in some crucial ways: he replaces the Kantian *schema* with the Peircean *diagram* when referring to what mediates between inference and perception, and grants habit a more critical role in perception. Laws and regularities, he argues, provide the background against which singularities emerge when differentiations are triggered by instability effects. Habits also let us 'see' mental images lying nascent in diagrams. But of course, besides relying on habits, the generation of diagrams also depends on the *Laws of Imagination*, which Paolucci borrows from *Gestalttheorie*. In building a semiotics of perception grounded on imagination, he characteristically frames perception as a *controlled hallucination*. Following Koenderink (2010), he uses the term to describe the general functioning of a controlled perceptual process that tends to minimize disorder and surprise by drawing upon previous knowledge and constructing the future, rather than simply observing the present – this is a process of perception that involves anticipating and (to an extent) experiencing the next thread of sensory information even when the expected signal never registers, as in the case of hallucination. So how does the imagined meet the actual? It is through the Gestalt property of semiotic narrativity, concludes Paolucci, that the hallucination of imagination is matched to the control of the world.

Thoughts and impressions

By closing with a story- rather than environment-driven take on perception, the author is admittedly distancing himself from the mainstream notion of *veridicality*, according to which percepts coincide with reality. Needless to say, this comes as no surprise if we consider that Paolucci opens the first chapter by tying signs to lying and efficacious behavior. In a way, it feels as if the book ends back where it started.

What is especially noteworthy, though, is that this sense of circularity does not come through a concluding chapter with the dedicated purpose of wrapping things up. If we were to put it in the Greimasian terms that the author employs in Chapter 4 in order to describe the prototypical structure of narrativity, the book seems to be telling us a story that remains incomplete or – to use a better word – ongoing. The first three of the story's four interrelated positions seem perfectly clear: the *contract* was probably established a long time ago, when Paolucci recognized the development of enactive cognitive semiotics as something worth acting for; *competence* is for the most part established in Chapter 1, where the author prepares himself epistemically for the upcoming task by drawing on other theories;

and *performance* is established in the following four Chapters, 2 through 5, where Paolucci transforms our views on subjectivity, the semiotic mind, social cognition, and perception from an undesired to a desired state. But what about *sanction*, the fourth and final stage of a story?

Perhaps the success or failure of the author's cognitive semiotics is something to be empirically validated when theory meets practice. Interestingly, Paolucci closes Chapter 4 by telling us about a project on Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) currently being run by the Cognitive Semiotics Unit at the University of Bologna. Maybe then, we can wait and see whether the theoretical approach developed in this book can help pre-primary teachers, families, and caregivers identify the onset of a neurodevelopment disorder much earlier than the 2-year mark when a delay in language acquisition signals the presence of ASD. If this is what remains for sanctioning the story told here, even if preliminarily and partially so, then the lack of a proper conclusion seems fitting.

Curiously, there is at least one more way to explain the structure of the book through its own terms, one relating to the genesis and transformation of its writer's subjectivity over the course of the treatise. Not long after reading Chapter 2, I noticed that Paolucci maintains a delicate balance between outward and inward-looking. It felt as if the author is weaving the chapters in the inverted person hierarchy motif that starts from the *delocutive* chapter which identifies sense-making and cognitive semiotics as what is spoken of (Chapter 1), before alternating between the perspectives of interlocutor and locutor, with subjectivity (Chapter 2) and social cognition (Chapter 4) being the *allocutive* stages of empathy with self and others, and mind (Chapter 3) and perception (Chapter 5) being the *locutive* ones of belief and sense. While the first chapter focuses on the object of discourse (i.e., doing enactive cognitive semiotics), the following four chapters concern objects of discourse and subjects spoken of at the same time – 'subjects spoken of' in being about subjectivity, mind, social cognition, and perception; and 'objects of discourse' in being about framing them in cognitive semiotic terms. I think it would be fair to say that, if 'subjectivity' were a subject, it would be a 'you' given that it springs from intersubjectivity, and of course, the same would go for 'social cognition'. As for 'belief' and 'perception', an 'I' would probably be more fitting, given that both are personal evaluations.

Strictly speaking, of course, neither of the last two terms is an exclusively private affair, as this book clearly demonstrates. And likewise 'subjectivity' and 'social cognition' are not exclusively communal either. These concepts, then, seem to resist compartmentalization, and this is something that the author recognizes well about the relation between our faculties, as can be seen for example when he uses diagrams to frame perception and inference as two sides of the same coin. And yet the pattern of the chapters still *looks* and *feels* like a motif that unfolds as such: 'he-you-I-you-I'.

Perhaps, the reason for seeing it this way is my pre-logical mind (to borrow another term from Chapter 2). From this Hjelmslevian point of view, one could say that the book's opening chapter works as an extensive term that embodies the intensive terms *subjectivity*, *mind*, *social cognition*, and *perception*, thus enabling Paolucci to expound his own approach by speaking in turns about the participative categories of cognitive semiotics. Of course, I may be 'hallucinating' pattern where there is none, in which case all one should keep from this is the power that priors have over the process of 'seeing'. And yet there is always the chance that the inverted pyramid is somehow actually there, but its presence was entirely unintentional, in which case its pragmatic effects on sense-making are still exerted. I leave it up to readers to decide.

Now as far as its contents are concerned, it is safe to say that the book does exactly what it says on the cover. If we were to go with Zlatev's (2015) understanding of *cognitive semiotics*, then the treatise at hand exhibits all five of its defining features: i) it emphasizes the conceptual-empirical loop (e.g., in the interplay between inference and percepts), ii) it involves the methodological triangulation of first-, second-, and third-person perspectives (e.g., by combining the 'subjective' perspective of philosophy, the 'intersubjective' perspective of infant research, and the 'objective' perspective of neuroscience); iii) it is influenced by phenomenology (Peircean phaneroscopy, to be precise); iv) it conceives meaning as dynamic rather than static (the existence of meaning as a habit is marked as a founding principle), and iv) it is trans-disciplinary (since Paolucci's main goal is to show how the study of meaning and cognition cuts 'between and across' disciplines).

Yet the strength of this book lies not in its conventionality, but in its *unconventionality*, or dare I say, its subversiveness: it challenges the logic of culture; it overturns Benveniste's person hierarchy; it renounces the internalist approach to the mind, the equation of sign with representation, and the Analytic approach to representation; it does away with theory of mind, and it refutes the bottom-up take on perception.

Not without good reason though: signs emerge in the context of nature and life; subject positions are opened up by impersonal events that allow us to enunciate ourselves and others as enunciates within; the mind is enacted and extended in that it entails actively engaging with the world; signs are non-representational when operating at the level of perceptual presentation; representation can be framed in content-less ways since basic minds produce meaning through bearing interpretants, habits, and dispositions to act; the intentions and values of others can be gleaned by placing their actions in non-linguistic narratives, and percepts are built in anticipation of what is to follow.

If one were to accept these radical points of view, they would find before them new ways of studying the relationship between human minds and semiotic systems:

sense-making can be treated as the singular act of cutting down the possibilities afforded by a system, on the basis of schemas brought forth through recourse to already established uses and norms; subjectivity can be seen as the emergent product of events that open up positions for meaningful action; the semiotic mind can be viewed as the constitutive intertwining of brains, bodies, and things; signs can be seen as impersonal public interpretants circulating in the community; representation can be seen as the inward effect of an external mind; social cognition can be seen as the emergent product of organizing the actions of self and others in technical narratives, and perception can be framed as a top-down mechanism of predictive processing that is driven by our diagrammatic engagement with the material world.

To help us conceptualize these ideas, Paolucci composes a vocabulary that includes a number of creative concepts, such as *theory of lie*, *adding subtractions*, *illeity*, *semiotic extended mind*, *semiotic representations*, *semiotic narrativity*, *controlled hallucination*, and *diagram*, spurring our thoughts across different lines of flight depending on personal priors and encyclopedic background. Several ideas come to mind about ways to follow these leads, though our discussion shall be restricted here to just a couple.

The first concerns the difference between signs, representations, and deception-capable sign systems, in terms of Peirce's semiotic phaneroscopy. It seems to me that these correspond to the second, third, and fourth levels of Peirce's *phaneron*, as Romanini (2006) describes it. Starting from the *grounding* stage of the immediate object and immediate interpretant, we move upwards to find the second period, that of *presentation*, where we first encounter the sign, along with the dynamic object, the dynamic interpretant, and the final interpretant. It is at this level, characterized by Romanini (2006: 121) as that of "material implication," within which we find the non-representational signs that Paolucci associates with basic minds. One level further up is where we find "the representative property of the sign: the way it relates to its dynamic object, how this representation is effectively interpreted by the dynamic interpretant, and the how this representation projects itself towards a representative ideal expressed in the relation between sign and final interpretant" (Romanini 2006: 123). It is at this third stage, that of *representation*, where we find the semiotic representations associated by Paolucci with technical narratives. That representation is not the epitome of semiosis is something Romanini's model demonstrates clearly, for the fourth and topmost period of the *phaneron* is occupied by *communication*. This, as he puts it, "is the level in which sign, object, and interpretant get into effective communion, creating a non-reducible triadic relation able to produce a final communicative effect" (Romanini 2006: 121). As I see it, the deceptive use of sign systems that Paolucci ties to efficacious action can be associated with this uppermost level of the *phaneron*, given that deceiving is communicating, dishonestly but skilfully so.

The autopoietic actions of humans and higher-order animals could thus be attributed to mastering the relations between a sign, a dynamic object, and its dynamic and final interpretants.

The second point I would like to raise concerns the place of making mistakes for making sense, as well as the importance of the most error-prone of inferences. Being deceiving in the context of a communicative event is an act that obviously implies the presence of someone being deceived. A theory of lie is therefore nicely tied to Peirce's *fallibilism*. From the vantage point of pragmatism, "the study of signs and the action of signs, semiotics, is *eo ipso* the study of the possibility of being mistaken" (Deely 2001: 637). And to speak of the most fallible of inferences means speaking of *abduction*, an iconically supported kind of thinking that is most compatible with the Peircean concept of diagram that Paolucci introduces in the chapter on perception. As Peirce points out, "abductive inference shades into perceptual judgment without any sharp line of demarcation between them; or, in other words, our first premisses, the perceptual judgments, are to be regarded as an extreme case of abductive inferences, from which they differ in being absolutely beyond criticism" (CP 5.181). Clearly then, the abductive generation of hypotheses is key in any Peircean discussion on perception. In fact, Paolucci's idea of 'thinking through doing' can be nicely framed as *manipulative abduction*, to borrow a term from Magnani (2009, section 1.6). And while on the topic of abduction, we might as well point out the connection between the idea of sense-making as an activity of adding subtractions and what Magnani (2017, section 1.2) calls the *shutdown problem* – that is, finding criteria for hypothesis selection. Such a connection would of course entail recognizing the prior problem of specifying the conditions for coming up with possible candidates for selection – namely, the *fill-up problem*. From what I garner, tackling this set of problems means addressing the crucial semiotic problem of perceiving that which has yet to be conceived.

All in all, then, is this book worthwhile? Well, if the following definition by Deleuze is to be taken as any measure, then the answer is certainly "yes." From a Deleuzian standpoint, worthy is a book that (1) claims to correct an error, (2) wants to correct an oversight, and (3) creates a new concept (qtd. Dosse 2010: 112). What this review aimed to demonstrate is that all three of these functions are repeatedly performed throughout its pages: the polemical, the inventive, and the creative alike. Chapter-by-chapter Paolucci challenges the usual tendency of studies on an issue, before showing us what has been left overlooked and proposing a new way of conceiving it. Of course, whether one agrees with his line of thought, in the end, depends on prior inclinations and openness to change – so it's a matter of perspective. As far as my own is concerned, Paolucci's mission certainly finds me in agreement. The disbelief expressed in the opening quote is something I encountered myself

some time ago when merging Peircean semiotics with the enactive theory of material engagement for the purpose of elucidating the origins of our sapient mind. But I think the time is now ripe to accept a two-fold proposal about the connection between mind and meaning: that action and cognition take place through the semiotic filter of encyclopedias, and that signs are meaningful due to their place as habits in the world. This is precisely why enactivism and semiotics should work together towards *cognitive semiotics*, a common goal that this homonymous book serves well to recognize.

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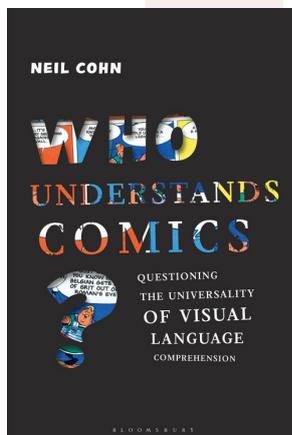




Reading visual narratives across cultures

BY: Federico Zanettin

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Neil Cohn

Who understands comics? Questioning the universality of visual language comprehension.

London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2021, 242 pp., ISBN 978-1-78728-439-5.

Neil Cohn's latest book can be seen as a sequel to his previous volume, *The visual language of comics* (Cohn 2013), which offered a long-needed analysis of visual narratives from a cognitive perspective. In this new work, Cohn starts by questioning the widespread assumption that the meaning of sequential images is transparent and universally comprehended. He calls this idea Sequential Image Transparency Assumption (SITA) and suggests that it is probably derived from the intuitions of adults who are familiar with visual narratives. In contrast, it is generally agreed that verbal languages need to be learned for understanding and communication to occur. Cohn argues that the cognitive processes involved in "creating and understanding graphic images, particularly those in sequence" (p. 4) are analogous to verbal cognitive processes and sets out to test the extent to which the theory is upheld or contradicted by experimental and data-driven research. Finally, Cohn considers extensive literature involving sequential visual reading tasks that show that sequential reading fluency is also acquired through practice and the interpretation of visual narratives varies depending on cognitive and cultural factors.

The book, which is a "substantially expanded and supplemented account of ideas" (pp. xiii-xiv) that first appeared

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in a previous article (Cohn 2020) is organized into nine chapters. In the first chapter, Cohn sketches out the book's rationale and outline, while the remaining chapters offer evidence that the SITA is not supported and that we can explain the cognitive processes involved in understanding sequential narratives in terms similar to those used in language processing. Findings include cases in which sequences of images could not be construed by participants in a test, for instance, by individuals unfamiliar with Western-style visual narratives and children under the age of 4. These findings demonstrate that comprehension varies depending on fluency, defined as "a proficiency acquired through exposure to and practice with a system of visual narrative" (p. 34).

In the first chapter, the author provides a summary of his own Visual Language Theory (VLT), which is based on a detailed analysis of the componential units of visual narration, and which considers the comprehension of the components of the visual lexicon of individual images as well as the comprehension of images in sequence. Cohn defines language, whether spoken, signed, or visual, as "a set of patterns in a person's mind/brain" (p. 4) developed through exposure and practice. These patterns constitute a person's idiolect, and people share a common language only "[t]o the extent that a person's idiolect aligns with those of other people" (ibid.). Thus visual languages vary across the world like spoken and signed languages. For example, Japanese manga and American comics use different visual languages, defined as "the systems" behind the production and comprehension of sequences of drawings. Cohn contends that we can analyze these systems according to categories and units similar to those used to analyze verbal languages. For example, visual language's 'visual vocabularies' are created by patterned graphics, i.e., "configurations of lines and shapes with regular and repeatable forms" (p. 36). These include morphemes such as balloons, motion lines, etc., whose symbolic meaning is opaque when unfamiliar with conventions. Different drawing styles reflect different cultures and functional purposes (e.g., superhero comics vs. instruction manuals) and testify to the systematic nature of patterned visual lexicons. A grammar organizes these in a combinatorial system with a culture-specific morphology. Finally, different visual languages have a culture-specific compositional structure, i.e., an expected arrangement of panels on the canvas, sequential reading order, and specific narrative, conceptual and event structures.

Chapters 2 and 3 are based on experimental process data and corpus data. Chapter 2 investigates the cognitive mechanisms involved in processes related to comprehending the layout, semantics, and narrative structure of visual narrative sequences. It reviews neurocognitive experiments that examine brain activity, as measured by brainwaves and eye movements, during cognitive processes involved in reading sequential images. The results of the studies surveyed, several of which, here and in other chapters, were carried out by Cohn and his associates, support the author's

VLT proposal of a similarity between the mechanisms involved in processing visual narrative sequences of verbal language. Similar to what happens to spoken language, individuals go through cyclic stages of knowledge access, prediction, confirmation, and updating. Comic readers negotiate bottom-up information and top-down stored knowledge as visual information flows are processed across layouts, semantic and narrative structures. These experimental studies show, for instance, that participants tend to order panels interpreted as sequences according to regular patterns and that more experienced readers have smoother eye movements through page layouts. Thus, we may hypothesize that, like for spoken languages, the acquisition of fluency in a visual language depends on “exposure to cultural systems across a developmental trajectory” (p. 56).

Chapter 3 examines sequencing structures in a corpus of 290 annotated comics from different countries, genres, and publication dates to investigate whether methods of sequencing visual narratives vary or are uniform across cultures. The roughly 36,000 panels in the over 6,000 pages of the Visual Language Research Corpus (VLRC) used as data in this chapter were coded according to page layout, attentional framing, and the relation between panels. Quantitative analyses of the corpus point to variant patterns across European, American, and Japanese comics. These differ in the proportion of “macros” (panels with a group of “active entities”), “monos” (panels focusing on one “active entity”), “micros” (panels focusing on detail), and “amorphic” frames (panels without “active entities”), as well as in the type of transition between panels, which may represent a change between characters, between spatial locations or between states of time. Compared to Japanese manga, comics from Europe and the United States have a greater proportion of mono than macro panels and “more changes in time than those between characters or spatial locations” (p. 76).

Quantitative results also testify that conventions change not only across cultural spaces but also over time. For instance, while the number of panels per page in US mainstream superhero comics has decreased over time, European comics have remained essentially unchanged. On the other hand, American Visual Language (AVL) has increasingly been influenced by Japanese Visual Language (JVL): visual patterns of recent American comics have moved closer to those of manga. In contrast, Original English Language (OEL) manga from the United States have framing types halfway between American and Asian comics. Different framing conventions may demand different inferential paths that challenge readers not used to a specific visual language. For instance, a panel sequence on a manga page depicting only single characters (monos), close-ups (micros), or environmental information (amorphic panels), requiring us to infer the broader scene, may be disorienting for readers of more traditional American or European comics, who will probably perceive this as poor storytelling because of their lack of fluency in Japanese visual language.

These results suggest that visual languages used in comics across the world “have distinct structures that differ from each other in measurable ways” (p. 78), though they influence each other and are not uniform. On account of their iconic character, visual narratives may often be more easily understandable across cultures than verbal languages. However, variation between different comic languages appears to be systematic. Moreover, other visual languages (e.g., the sand drawings of Australian Aboriginals or the medieval European imagery on the Bayeux Tapestry) differ even further. Cohn concludes that the diversity of visual languages “calls into question the utility of referring to a monolithic notion of a ‘comics medium’ at all” (p. 88).

The following four chapters review groups of studies that put to the test, each from a different perspective, the idea that visual narratives are universally comprehensible. Chapter 4 reviews cross-cultural findings, according to which people from specific cultural backgrounds may not spontaneously interpret images as sequential and may not understand spatially sequential visual narratives. The studies surveyed consider experimental tasks with wordless visual narratives and tasks in which sequential images are used to study aspects of cognition such as IQ, temporal cognition, and Theory of Mind. Results show that participants often did not construe sequences of images as sequential but rather interpreted them as isolated scenes. Isolated images were generally arranged in a layout paralleling the participant’s writing system. The research survey in this chapter suggests that the ability to understand a sequence of images as a narrative, or indeed as a sequence, is not innate nor universal; instead, it has to be learned.

This topic is taken up in Chapter 5, which surveys findings from developmental research, mainly looking at other aspects of cognition. It shows that sequences of images are understood and produced over time with age and experience. Children first learn to recognize referential information within individual images; subsequently, the events those entities undertake, and eventually, a continuity constraint takes hold as children learn to make inferences across images. These studies show that a significant shift in the comprehension of visual narratives occurs between 4 and 6 years of age when children learn to understand individual images as part of a sequence. Moreover, studies that consider the ability to produce rather than read a sequence of images suggest “a strong role of exposure in creating conditions for proficiency at younger ages” (p. 113).

Chapter 6 focuses on reading fluency and proficiency and examines how the comprehension of sequential images varies depending on reading frequency. It examines the level of comprehension among people who receive exposure to visual narratives like comics and whether fluency is stable once a certain threshold of exposure has been reached. Cohn reports on two procedures for examining visual narrative proficiency: the Chiba University Comic Comprehension Test (CCCT), a series

of tasks that consistently showed that comprehension of sequential images increases with age, and the Visual Language Fluency Index (VLFI), a proficiency score devised by the author himself and based on self-rated assessments. Participants answer a questionnaire asking about their frequency of reading and drawing comics both currently and while growing up. By looking at both conscious decisions (ratings, segmentation) and unconscious actions (accuracy, response times, reading times), the VLFI allows for correlations between experience/exposure to comics reading/drawing and fluency in visual narrative processing.

Chapter 7 reviews research involving sequential images carried out on neurodiverse populations of individuals diagnosed with a cognitive disorder such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Schizophrenia Spectrum Disorders (SSD), and Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), as well as on individuals with brain damage (e.g., aphasia). Research in this area has been motivated by the Visual Ease Assumption (VEA), according to which wordless visual narratives are supposed to circumvent a language deficit. Overall, the results of research with neurodiverse populations suggest that proficiency in visual narratives is impaired in individuals with neurological damage and that mechanisms of verbal and visual narrative systems overlap. Cohn argues that, while these studies may be helpful in diagnoses of clinical conditions, they are not testing uniform aspects of neurocognition. Instead, he suggests the need for dedicated research on visual narratives rather than using visual narratives as a proxy for investigating other aspects of cognition.

Chapter 8 compares drawn visual narratives and film visual narratives, investigating whether comprehension mechanisms in the latter may be transferable to the former. Cohn discusses the similarities between films and visual narratives like comics, which are divided into sequencing patterns instead of the experience of events in real life. While comics are structured by panels, film narratives are structured by shots edited together in a temporal sequence. However, films use natural percepts rather than the visual vocabulary and conventionalized morphological elements of comics and motion across a temporal dimension rather than spatially juxtaposed units. Extensive empirical literature implies that the understanding of film narratives is acquired as part of a developmental trajectory, like fluency in reading drawn visual sequences. On the other hand, referential continuity seems essential for the comprehension of sequential images, whereas in film sequences, visual incongruities seem to go easily unnoticed. Finally, Chapter 9 summarizes the findings emerging from the ample literature surveyed and sketches out their implications for the use of comics and visual narratives in education, communication, and psychology.

This important book sums up research undertaken by Cohn and his associates since the publication of his previous monograph and further contributes to an understanding of the cognitive mechanisms involved in the processing of comics and,

more generally, visual narratives. Cohn shows how we can apply psycholinguistic principles and concepts such as developmental trajectory, acquisition, fluency, and proficiency to analyzing sequential narratives and describe the cognitive processing of visual images and verbal language in similar terms. The studies surveyed indeed offer support for his concept of visual language as a rule-governed system that, like verbal and signed languages, is subject to cultural and cognitive variation.

The work has a limit, of which the author is aware. It focuses on sequential reading at the expense of reading individual images and the multimodal experience of understanding comics, where visual language mixes and combines with verbal language. However, the limit of the work is also its strength. The focus on sequential images allows the author to isolate and dissect this aspect of visual narratives throughout a vast range of experimental and empirical studies. Cohn seems to share with psycholinguistic research a penchant for acronyms and quantification. At times, the richness of detail and some repetitions and close reformulations may prove taxing for a reader interested in comics studies more than in neurocognitive research. However, the author's scholarly and disciplined approach makes for systematic and solid research, and indeed, this work proves the robustness of Cohn's theory of visual language(s).

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