

# WRITING, NARRATIVE AND READING ROUTE IN COMICS TEXT

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes comics as a writing system, in relation to narration. A writing system is a visual language, potentially endowed with a strong autonomy and not necessarily bound to the same level of sequentiality of the oral word. Often, as in comics, the narrative dimension plays an important role in the texts constructed by a language, a role to analyze closely, especially when we consider that the route of reading of a text can be more meaningful than its possible reduction to a single core of meaning.

**Keywords:** Comics. Writing system. Narrative.

■ In these pages I would like to analyze comics as a writing system, in relation to narration. Although the prevalence of alphabetic writing has accustomed us to think of writing as a simple transcription of the spoken word, there exist and have existed systems of writing that do not have such a direct relationship with the spoken word. A writing system is therefore a language, actually a visual language, potentially endowed with a strong autonomy, and not necessarily bound to the same level of sequentiality of the oral word. Often, however, as also happens in comics, the narrative dimension plays an important role in the texts constructed by a language, a role that asks to be analyzed more closely, especially when we consider that the route of the reading of a text can be more meaningful than its possible reduction to a single core of meaning. Finally, a language is a way (or rather, a set of ways) to organize the world: what kind of organization of the world is proposed by the different ways of organizing the comics texts, from the daily autonomous strip, to the series, up to the graphic novel?

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## WRITING

Not for all cultures writing is, or has been, a transcription of the word. The habit of alphabetic writing leads us to overlook that for a writing system like the Chinese one, for example, the direct reference to the meaning is always as important (and often even more important than) as the reference to the verbal sound. In fact, Chinese speakers of mutually incomprehensible languages, as the northern and the southern people, write in the same way, understanding each other perfectly when writing.

In the archaic writing systems, the direct reference to the meaning was often a normal part of writing signs, a practice of great utility in times when there was no official model of spoken language, but a nebula of related, yet lexically different dialects. For the ancient Egyptians, for example, every hieroglyphic sign (or hieratic or demotic ones, simple graphic variations for more common uses) typically had a phonetic reading and two possible ideographic readings, that is, either as a strictly (and therefore autonomous) ideogram or as a *determinative* one, that is, an ideogram that was associated with phonetic signs to further clarify what they were referring to (see BETRÒ, 1995). The Pre-Columbian Aztec writing system did not even require strict sequencing, and the Aztecs could hardly distinguish two practices that are clearly distinct to us, such as drawing and writing (see PERRI, 2013, p. 21, 26). Drawing was already writing, because each figure was associated with a rather defined set of symbolic, or – sometimes – phonetic values. If we look today at one of the few Aztec codices that escaped the destruction of the missionaries, we could easily take them for books of images or books of figures rather than of writing.

On the other hand, our tradition of writing comes from that of the ancient Greeks, who did not invent the writing, but adopted the Phoenician alphabetic as it was, with few marginal modifications to adapt it to the characteristics of their own language. This adoption had a very particular purpose for the Greeks, that is to preserve the memory of the Homeric poems, constantly endangered by oral transmission (see SVENBRO, 1995, p. 3-4). For this reason, for the Greeks, from the very beginning, writing is nothing but a transcription of the oral word, and later neither them nor the peoples who learned writing from them (especially the Romans) were able to conceive writing differently, continuing to read exclusively aloud for about two millennia (see SVENBRO, 1995; ILLICH, 1993).

It is certainly not disputable that alphabetic writing was a progress, bringing advantages (such as the much simpler alphabetization of people) unknown to previous writings. But no progress is exempt from losses, and the fact that the overall gain has been higher does not make them less significant. The ideographic or pictographic writings, for example, make much more evident that the relationship between writing and orality is anything but linear. For example, we alphabetic literate, are accustomed to value as subsidiary the so-called *expressive* (a word already in itself revealing) traits of the word, such as the intonation, which are not transcribed except in an extremely approximate manner by some sign of exclamatory or interrogative interpolation (and little more). Vice versa, but similarly, we do not consider the idiosyncratic differences at the writing level (different autographs, or different printed fonts) to be relevant for reading aloud.

We know very well, on the other hand, that even uncritically marrying the thesis of equivalence between written and spoken word, none of us speaks as we

write, and who writes as speaks fails at school. The distance between the written and spoken words exists in the field of alphabetic writing systems too, but not alphabetic systems make it more self-evident; up to force us to observe that writing is not a simple transcription of the oral language, but another language in all respects, which competes with that of the oral word for many of its functions, now being less suitable, now much more, now maybe otherwise suitable.

Of course, the language of written word can maintain more or less close relations with that of the oral word. In the worlds of the alphabetic scriptures these relationships are narrow, so narrow as to create the illusion that they are two variants of one and the same language. In other worlds the relationship is looser. In the Aztec writing system, for example, the relationship is very weak, and the same writing can be translated into countless oral versions, just as there are presumably many different written ways of making the same oral report (see PERRI, 2013, p. 21, 26). For this reason, I intend to approach comics in these pages as a form of writing, that is, as an intimately graphic language that maintains a complex relationship with the oral word. Comics are, typically, a writing of narration; or rather, a writing of the sequentiality of events (the one that typically, but not necessarily, is organized into narratives). It is, nevertheless, a visual writing, in which, as in Aztec writing, one cannot separate with certainty writing from drawing<sup>1</sup>.

Since the narration by images, from which in a particular historical moment the comics originated, evolved inside a universe in which verbal writing already existed, there was no need to develop certain aspects that could be much easily borrowed from alphabetic writing. For this reason, since their origin, comics are a mixed writing system, of a verbal-visual nature, where part of the meaning goes through verbal writing and another part through that other writing, which is made up by the sequence of images and the system of their graphic interactions.

We cannot forget that before comics there have been thousands of years of close relationship between the images and the word. Up to the end of the Middle Ages, at least in the Occident, images have always been conceived as something that had always to be accompanied by the word, typically the voice of a preacher for medieval fresco cycles (see BOLZONI, 2002, p. 20-29), but also the written words of a miniated code, or captions and phylacteries in many images up to the Middle Ages. The image emancipates itself extensively from the word with the invention of perspective: the idea of being able to bring an entire image back to a single point of view makes possible to think of the image as a broadly autonomous discourse, where the unitary optical point of view refers implicitly to the unity of the truth that is expressed. Thus, from the Renaissance onwards, painting starts to become a sort of autonomous writing, capable of transmitting discourses without the decisive contribution of the word.

But the unity of the optical point of view also involves the unity of the moment of time. Without ever completely disappearing, the great narrative cycles go out of fashion, and the painting from the 16th century onwards is typically the staging of a single moment. The telling by images that had been so natural in the Middle Ages is now something minor, suitable at the most for the ignorant populace. The sequential narration through images, with its temporal develop-

<sup>1</sup> And this, evidently, makes it a writing system not well suited to active literacy, because knowing how to draw effective figures is a skill that is much more difficult to acquire than to be able to draw legible letters.

ment and a specific relationship with the verbal narrative, ends up in the background of History, to slowly raise the head as the ignorant populace gradually becomes less ignorant. We meet then the cycles of paintings and prints by William Hogart in the eighteenth century of the English Industrial Revolution, the dynamic stories of Rodolphe Töpffer in France-Switzerland of the early nineteenth century, the English illustrated children's books of the early nineteenth century and then the English and French and American illustrated popular magazines during the same century. In all these contexts, the image regains a narrative role, while maintaining a relationship of subjection to the verbal narration that always accompanies and explains it. It is only with the birth of the comic page and strip, in U.S.A. at the turn of the century, that this subjection is overcome, and the relationship is reversed: now it is mainly the sequence of images to tell the story, while the verbal inserts are basically for the words of the characters, and little else.

## SEQUENTIALITY

To the extent that a writing system is linked to the oral word, its sequentiality is an important feature. It is completely so for alphabetic scripts; it is slightly less so for Chinese writing. The Egyptians could afford to write indifferently towards left or right, and this would not change the sequential nature of their writing if this ambivalence were not functional to a very close relationship between writing in the strict sense and images, almost always associated. The Aztec writing is poorly sequential: a series of conceptual bubbles are arranged on the page, without a necessary reading order – while the pages follow each other sequentially (see PERRI, 2013, p. 21, 26).

In comics, the ambivalence between sequence and co-presence is evident since the initial pages of *Hogan's Alley*, in 1895. Originally, in fact, the work of Richard Felton Outcault consisted of unitary Sunday pages, in which diverse scenes coexisted in the same picture and in the same space, each with an implicit internal sequence, provided by the action and/or dialogues. After a few weeks, Outcault switched to the sequence of panels, following the already settled example of the stories that used to appear in the humorous magazines – but without the traditional accompanying verbal narrative.

The sequence of the panels is a sequence in all respects, but each panel is an image, and even the set of panels (the page) constitutes an overall image. The sequential nature of the perception of the single image is rather uncertain, and the lack of any underlying verbal narrative ends up underlining this uncertainty.

When we read verbal writing, the close proximity to the oral word naturally leads us to scroll it sequentially, according to the standard rules left-right and then high-low (except in the special cases of visual poetry, which, incidentally, was re-born in Occident in those very same years, by Mallarmé, Apollinaire and Marinetti). When we read images, our perception is similarly sequential, but the sequence is not predetermined, but at most influenced case by case by what we see. In general, after a first overall look, our attention is drawn to the details of the image, according to a series of recurring principles not necessarily in agreement with each other: for example, the center draws attention before the periphery, the most defined figures (sharper, more contrasted, larger, closer) before

the less defined ones, the human figures before the other figures, and inside them the faces before the bodies. If we are looking at the *Mona Lisa*, where a more contrasted human face is roughly at the center of the image, our attention will presumably be there first of all, and only afterward it will flow on the rest (but in what order?); there are, however, countless images in which the most defined figures are not at the center, or are not human... and the route of attention is uncertainly definable. In comics, the inertia principle induced by the left-right direction of reading the sequence of images (and the words contained in them) must also be added. The panel is an image, with all its sequential undecidability, but the skillful artist is able to lead the reader's attention in order to build a sufficiently stable narrative sequence there as well.

It is a frequent occurrence, for example, that the actions represented in the right part of the image are obvious consequences of those represented on the left side, and this is absolutely the norm when dialogues are in play: the left balloon has to be read before the right one, and therefore the sequence is very clearly defined (with effect also on the temporal perception of the roles of the characters that speak). Rarer and more difficult, but not completely absent, is the sequential exploitation of the *center-periphery* relationship and of the *more defined-less defined* relationship: in these cases, however, it tends not to contradict the dominant left-right direction. In the large panels-pages by Sergio Toppi there are numerous examples in this sense.

Already at this level, even before considering page effects, it becomes evident that the reading flow of comics is different from that of the pure verbal text. When you read a sequence of writing, like the one you have under your eyes at this moment, the temporal succession of the sequence is continuous and constant, punctuated by the succession of words, punctuation marks and syntactic blocks of proposition, period, paragraph, chapter... When reading a sequence of panels, each panel represents a non-sequential whole, to be grasped first of all as a whole, and then eventually to be seen as a sufficiently certain sequence (but never as certain as that of the word).

From this point of view, that writing system that comics is appears much more articulated and complex than the word writing system. This greater complexity makes it at the same time potentially more expressive, but also less precise, less suitable for conveying exact conceptual information (unless it is specifically visual information). It is also presumably for this reason that comics were from the beginning an expressive, artistic form of writing; and that in the rare cases in which comics are used to argue theoretical issues (Scott McCloud, Nick Sousanis) the verbal caption always plays an important role to allow an adequate understanding of the images. There is a second non-sequential dimension in the comic, which is that of the page as a whole (sometimes even double page). If we look at the Sunday tables of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, which Winsor McCay began publishing in the fall of 1905, we can easily see how it would be impossible to deconstruct them by linearizing the sequence of the cartoons. The eye of the reader is captured, at first glance, by the overall impact of the page, and not infrequently the page is designed so that the central or most contrasted elements attract attention before the actual sequential reading has beginning. A visual logic of the overall image, that is, of the page, is accompanied by that traditionally sequential of the series of vignettes.

We add that, precisely because the page is designed in this way, often each panel is connected not only narratively with the one that precedes it and the one that follows it, but also with the other adjacent vignettes (above and below), or with vignettes in other areas of the page, by means of a kind of visual rhymes – and they are not just anaphors or cataphors, as it happens in verbal literature, because here the reference is simultaneous and reciprocal.

McCay discovers, with *Little Nemo*, a potential that comics will then exploit a lot, and that makes it very different from both the novel and the cinema. The communicative potential of the tabular dimension has no correspondence in other languages. When used, it involves a further articulation in reading, in addition to those described above, because each page (or double page, in many cases) constitutes a visual set that hits the reader's attention before any other element, whenever, turning the page, we are faced with a new configuration, which we will then explore according to the trends described above.

## NARRATIVITY

Because of its characteristics as a form of writing or as a language, comics, it was said above, lends itself well to producing texts of an expressive character, particularly narrative texts – something that, with some limitation, can manage to do even without any help of verbal elements. As we have seen, it is not impossible for the comics to construct argumentative texts instead, and there are noteworthy examples in this regard, but in these cases word and image must necessarily interact, collaborating in the efficacy of the discourse.

Generative semiotics conceives the narration as a recurrent pattern, through which we are able to give meaning to sequences of events. According to Greimas (1983), a narration (we could also say more specifically an action) is articulated in four phases, called respectively *Manipulation*, *Acquisition of Competence*, *Performance* and *Sanction*. This is the same as saying that in the description of an action, the necessary elements are *the reasons for doing it*, *the tools* (cognitive and practical) *necessary to carry it out*, *its success or not*, and *the evaluation that it is given about* (which can also be, trivially, the reason why we consider it interesting as an action, worthy of attention or of being told).

The world around us is always full of events, which transform it. The narrative principle is undoubtedly a particularly important way to give meaning to these transformations, coordinating them in a more unitary design. Through the narrative principle, we are able to give logical unity to a series of transformations as elements of a single narration. Important as it may be, the narrative form is not the only one that allows us to give meaning to a series of transformations. The idea (which in the semiotic tradition unites typically opposing authors such as Greimas, 1983 and Eco, 1978) that a text should be brought back to a conceptual nucleus, and that if any transformations are at stake this nucleus is narrative, is essentially based on the analysis of textual forms dominant in the West in the last half millennium. The novel, for example, is its ideal application, as a complex articulation, but ultimately attributable to the action of a subject.

In order to apply the narrative model to myth, it is necessary to perform a textualization that myth, typically oral, did not foresee. The fairy tale of magic is an operation of this kind, as a finished object, with a well-defined beginning and

end – and therefore easily transcribed. If we look instead at Greek myth, with what criteria do we define the point of attack and conclusion of the single stories, when each user knows that they are simply episodes of an overall great saga? When Homer decides to cut the story of the *Iliad* in those specific days of the war, he is doing a (happily) arbitrary operation, counting on the fact that his audience also knows those previous and subsequent events that will not be explicitly recalled by his story, events whose concatenation goes back to the origin of the world (the one that will then be told, with similar operation, by Hesiod) and forward until the present. As if to say that myth is a sort of great reservoir to draw on in order to create narratives in the strict sense (narratives from a structural point of view, certainly not as stories told by a narrator) as those of the tragics of the classical era.

But again, to get much closer to us: what unity can be found in the Italian chivalric poems of the Renaissance? The chivalric poem (just like the soap opera) is not one story, but a series of chained stories, whose overall logic is not that of the narrative-form – otherwise we would have a novel, but we do not have it. In these cases, the overall structure cannot be traced back to the *canonical narrative scheme* of generative semiotics.

Can we still talk about *coherence* in these cases? If we intend *coherence* as being referable to a unitary principle, certainly not. But it is possible (following a suggestion by François Jullien, 2015, p. 95-105) to adopt a weaker notion of coherence, as something that – literally – is held together. In this weak sense, then, the coherence of a work consists in the fact that all its parts can be recalled one another for (Wittgensteinian) *family resemblances*. Even without falling in the strong sense of coherence as a conceptual unity, we will have in a text a more sensitive coherence when the path of fruition exalts these family resemblances, arriving, degree by degree, from one extreme to another, perhaps even far away.

In this regard, music represents an interesting example. The invention of tonal harmony, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, provides music with a crucial instrument of coherence in a strong sense, which will be fundamental, in the following centuries, to allow pure music to progressively become a (autonomous) discourse; a conquest definitively acquired with Viennese Classicism, and then with Romanticism. But even this unity, which holds together a series of transformations, is not narrative.

The polyphony of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was fundamentally *durchkomponiert*, that is, without thematic and harmonic recurrences. It used to be generated around a verbal text, and it was the verbal component that defined some unity. But with the sunset of tonality, the music of the twentieth century musical avant-gardes often returns to be *durchkomponiert*, this time without any verbal support. In no case is the series of musical transformations governed by a narrative structure, whether or not there is any unifying feature. What remains constant instead, before, during and after the long historical tonal interlude, is the fact that a piece of music organizes a fruition path for its listener, whose coherence (in a strong sense) can be built by the attraction towards the tonic, by the words that are sung, or by some other parameter; but which may also not be there, or can be there only in a weak sense, proceeding in the process of fruition from one similarity to another, recalling developments in some familiar, but typically non-narrative way.

Perhaps, then, we should try to generalize, defining specifically as *narrative* all those cases in which the logic of the series of transformations can be recognized as narrative; and instead, defining more generically as *transformative* all the remaining cases, in which other logics rule the sequence, according to principles of coherence that are not necessarily strong. In this sense, music would be a medium substantially transformative and only very occasionally narrative; while in the poem the narrative component is more easily and frequently involved. As I said earlier, the language of comics is mainly one that organizes narrative texts. In fact, it is very difficult to meet comics works that are not based on narrating. However, this narrative core is put into question, in many cases, both at the macro-level and at the micro-level. The logic of seriality, for example, just as for mythology, makes it difficult to identify a narrative scheme in the succession of single narratively structured episodes (as in Marvel superheroes *continuity*). At this level, the narration-form appears rather as a model of structural local reference, able to establish a unity (and therefore a meaning) that will be then denied (and reinterpreted) in the light of developments in the sequence that will prompt new and different unities (and therefore new senses), following a mechanism that goes on and on without ever being closed – because the series is open, and in itself, like the myth, it has no closure.

At the micro-level we can instead meet *transformation* operators who are not necessarily *narrative* operators yet. The white space between the panels conventionally represents in comics a temporal hiatus: in the absence of specific indications in the opposite direction, a panel that follows another according to the classic left-right high-low organization, should be understood as containing a subsequent action to the previous one. The succession of panels corresponds, in short, to an analogous scan of successive moments of time.

This sequence is usually used to construct sequences that are easily interpretable in a narrative sense. Let us not forget that comics, like cinema, is a *presentifying exhibition*, and not a real narrative: there is no voice that tells, but only the direct presentation of a series of events, selected for a sufficiently easy narrative reading.

But the white space is not in itself narrative. It represents the presence of a transformation, and if we intend to build the narration-form, this transformation must be adequate. This means, however, that we could also virtually build the succession of panels according to different logics, a bit like in music, without going through narration. Or we could go through narration, but continually suggesting that the narrative reading is not the most relevant, and that some other strong coherence must be sought, or that a weak coherence is enough.

## INTERPRETATION AND ROUTE

Let's take a classic example of narrative, be it a novel or a graphic novel, or even a movie. Undoubtedly the narrative tensions are what push us forward in the reading: we typically want to know "how it ends". In rarer cases what we want to know concerns the motivations of an action already taken, or the modalities of its preparation. To say it with the terminology of generative semiotics, most of the time we want to know the outcome of the Performance, but in some cases the curiosity concerns the phase of Manipulation, or that of the Acquisi-

tion of competence. In a detective novel, for example, two stories are typically articulated, one of which is centered on the investigation about the other: there was, say, a murder, which is the successful Performance of story B, and the Manipulation of story A; the investigator, Subject in A, must discover the identity of the Subject in B (the guilty), the Manipulation in B (the motivations of the crime) and the Acquisition of competence in B (how the crime was organized).

Although it is the narrative engine that drives us forward, it is not at all certain that the reasons of interest in the text are limited to the narrative elements. In fact, a novel establishes a route that the reader will follow. The quality of the novel is the quality of this route, which is not only made of narrative components, otherwise we could not understand why two different versions of the same story (and therefore with the same narrative tensions) can have quite different effects on their users.

Even when the narration is evidently present, not all the transformations in the text can be traced back to its logic; and there are even cases in which other logics of transformation lead the attention of the reader.

For this reason, the reduction to a unitary cell, proposed (in different forms) both by generative semiotics and by Eco's (1978), does not necessarily do justice to the text, especially if it is an aesthetic text. This reduction assumes that the text is generated, or must be interpreted, in its entirety, from / to a unitary nucleus. It is a methodologically fertile presupposition, undoubtedly, and it has fostered a quantity of discoveries. However, it leads to hiding or marginalizing other phenomena of no less interest.

We therefore appeal to a notion of weak coherence, in the name of a family resemblance, or rather, in the name of a fertile route, which transports the reader through a succession of confirmations and discoveries. Let's take the case of the kind of seriality that characterizes the first forty years of American comics, that of Sunday pages publications and then, since 1907, of daily strips. Until most of the twenties this production is entirely humorous, with some digression towards the fantastic, and only starting from 1929 were born strips and tables of an adventurous character, evidently inspired by the cinema.

This humorous production is made of self-resolved pages and/or strips, linked only by the recurrence of situations and characters, or at most, in some cases, by a temporal continuity that is not a story, but a simple succession of situations, without any claim to unity. Continuity has a dual function, facilitating things both to the author and to the reader: the one can now derive much more from a specific situation, not burning it anymore in a single episode; the other, finding a situation that he already knows, enters more easily, and more quickly understands the situation. The page or strip must in any case remain understandable and enjoyable even to the reader who approaches it for the first time, or for the last time.

Not even the logic of individual pages or strips is necessarily narrative, since their main purpose is humorous, and any narrative component is wholly subservient to the humorous purpose. You do not read, in short, a joke, in order to know how the story ends up: sometimes, yes, it's the way the story ends that provides the humorous solution; but in many other cases the funny ending arrives independently from the narrative conclusion. The narrative tension remains suspended, but the reader does not expect it to arrive at resolution, because it was the humorous tension that characterized the textual situation.

This tension duplicity will be the origin, in the course of the twenties, of a transformation of the comic strip in a more strictly narrative direction. The strips of *Mickey Mouse* from the 1930s, for example, tell complete narratives without stopping to be humorous, cleverly calibrating the wait for laughter (a simple wait, and always in the short term) with the wait for narrative resolution (an expectation articulated on several levels, from the short to the long term). When adventure comics are born, the situation of reading habits is ready to abandon the humorous tension, to concentrate everything on the narrative one.

Yet even so, the periodicity (weekly or daily) of publication does not allow the narrative logic to become completely dominant. Let us not forget that comics, like cinema and audiovisual in general, do not need a narrative voice to report history; rather, events appear before us without narrative mediation, in their direct present, like those of the real world. Of course, unlike the events of the real world, those that comics show us are already chosen as functional to the perception of a narrative consequentiality; but this choice does not ask to be staged, as inevitably happens with the voice of the narrator of a novel.

Thus, the reader of daily strips meets, day after day, the situation of the moment of the characters he is following. In short, they are living a life parallel to his. Certainly it is a more interesting life, not only for the exotic setting, or for the emphasis of the emotional components, but also because we know that it is a story, and therefore, sooner or later, some conclusion, hopefully positive, will be achieved. Again, then, the narrative structure organizes the tensions that push us to move forward, but a good part of the reader's interest lies in this recurrent and daily look at an alternative but familiar reality. This *background* nature (however important this background is) of narration allows any digression, provided it is justified by the situation. For example, it was normal for Christmas to publish one or more strips (or pages) in which characters from the series celebrated Christmas or New Year, even if this had no direct relationship with the story in progress and no narrative consequence.

In the same way, and with a certain frequency, narrative contradictions accumulated. Today, when we read the strips of those years in collection, some contradictions appear to us so striking that we wonder how the audience of those years had tolerated them. But that public used to read a strip a day, a page a week: very rarely they could remember the situation sufficiently in detail to notice the contradiction. And anyway, it was certainly not the narrative coherence (in the strong sense) to constitute the main reason of interest: day by day, strip by strip, each episode constituted each time the new point of view from which to consider the whole story. It was enough that a strong coherence could be hypothesized from that specific point of view, and the mechanism worked: it does not matter that the point of view of a few days before was different, or even incompatible.

Today, in the age of graphic novel, long stories built to be read all in a row, a similar inconsistency would be certainly less tolerable. The narrative coherence seems to have imposed itself also on the universe of comics, as the invention of the novel did in the literary universe, at the expense of the chivalric poem and of the mythical narratives. But not even in the novel itself the reader's tension route is built entirely on the narrative. Where the immediate presence of the image replaces the mediation of the narrator's voice, the perceptive vividness of the present creates further reasons for marginalizing the story.

## LANGUAGE AND CONTROL OF THE WORLD

Each language organizes the world in its own way, as does every verbal language. A graphic language, i.e. a writing system, evidently has characteristics different from a sound language, and also from an audiovisual one, based on photography. The word, for example, oral language per excellence, but also written, tends to give privilege to the events. As sound, it is itself made of events that follow each other, and can only communicate sequentially. Even when it describes *states* of fact, they can only follow each other in some order in the description that we make of them, thus acquiring some sort of event-based nature that the proper use of the verb will try to minimize but cannot exclude altogether.

On the contrary, drawing tends to bring the world back to the *states* of fact, according to their visual dimension. It will somehow transmit events, undoubtedly, but it will do so by showing states of fact known as clearly unbalanced, and then destined for transformation. One drawing by itself cannot tell, even if it can transmit events, and in this way it alludes to stories.

An ordered sequence of drawings can instead narrate, and if words are associated with this sequence, we will already have something like comics, if not comics themselves. But the world narrated by a sequence of drawings is not the same world that is narrated by the word, even if the word appears within them. Word and image have an antithetical basic relationship, for what concerns events and states of fact. They also have an antithetical relationship with respect to the senses that they emphasize: the word is sonorous and visual, but it can make direct reference also to the other senses; the image is visual and that's it – and it plays at most with a synesthetic analogy in order to evoke different perceptions; or, when in comics, cooperates with the word.

You can think of comics as a kind of drawn theater (and then cinema), and this is a useful analogy, provided you understand its limits. As in theater and in cinema, in fact, things and people are not necessarily named, nor reduced to names. To give a name, as the word has to do, means to bring the thing back to the category expressed through the name. The drawing does not necessarily share this level of abstraction; the categories to which the thing represented is reported may be occasional, local: the image of a thing can, for example, share a difficulty of classification with the thing itself, without this difficulty being even expressed.

But in theater and in cinema the flow is unstoppable: states of things and events are equally co-present, as in the real world. The drawing, even in comics, favors instead the states of things (although they can evoke events, and overall even the stories, since the images are in sequence). The presence of the word and of the overall sequencing makes it easier to move from states of things to events (and time, as we have seen, can pass inside single panels too), but the world that emerges from the comics language is inevitably organized as a succession of frames.

Moreover, where comics also play on the organization of the page, a certain level of non-sequentiality bursts into the narrative sequence, producing overall effects and visual relationships between panels that should narrate completely separate events. In short, it creates a sort of temporal nebula effect, in which the relationships between the before and the afterword acquire a certain amount of uncertainty – an effect that bears some resemblance to the use of recurrences in

poetry (rhymes, anaphors, prosodic analogies), except that these games, in poetry, require a continuous temporal reference, and are not perceivable in comprehension but in the written version of the poem – which, in turn, operates a certain criticism of standard verblativity, operating in a modality which finds its most explicit and well-known expressions in visual and concrete poetry.

Comics, in short, writes the world for – let's say – space-time agglomerations, and not for concepts and events as the word does, not for states of fact as simple drawing does, and not even for ordered space-temporal events as theater and cinema do. The work of art builds what we could call simulations of the world. These simulations are sometimes representations (and maybe stories), but not always and not necessarily they are so. If we exclude from the history of music, for example, the Romantic incident, i.e. the era in which the work was supposed to express the emotion of the author, there is no representation and there is no narration in the music by itself (although music lends itself to accompanying representations, of course), yet music builds in its listener an emotional journey that presents similarities with those of real life. It does not *represent* an emotional journey: it *produces* it, just as a lived experience produces an emotional journey in those who experience it.

It is precisely in this sense that the work of art produces simulations of the world, leading its user along an emotional path built *ad hoc*, and no more or less random as those of the world. Along this path, the user can experience emotions and sequences of emotions similar to those that he/she lives in the world, but without paying, or paying only in part, the price that he/she should pay in the real world. The emotion of danger, for example, can be experienced without putting himself directly in danger. From Kant onwards, and from his theorizing of the sublime, this is a fundamental element of artistic experience; but already the Aristotelian idea of *catharsis* is an expression of this principle: Agamemnon pays tragically the consequences of his actions, but we spectators do it much less, yet the experience of Agamemnon, in the tragedies of Aeschylus, teaches us, even without us dying.

We could say that the quality of a work of art, or in general of an aesthetic product, lies in the quality of the emotional route that it produces in its user. As a consequence of this route, art celebrates the values of its era and educates its users. It would be wrong, however, to reduce the artistic text to the values it celebrates: there exist in fact absolutely trivial ways to celebrate values. To *reduce* the aesthetic text to this unity means to misunderstand its own experiential value. In this perspective, it becomes clearer that the role of narrative, in the aesthetic text, is not to provide it with a unity it does not always need, but rather to act as an engine (one of the possible engines; but certainly one of the most effective) to push the reader's attention forward, fueled by the expectations that the story induces and the relative tensions. Then, of course, the narrative can also provide reason for emotional experiences, through the modulation of the expectations that it directly generates; but the narrative can also be, to a more or less sensitive extent, the mobile structure on which tensions of other kinds, with the relative emotions, are supported. If you love Wagner, and you do not know German sufficiently, you will know that – in spite of the author's declared intentions – listening to *Tristan* is deeply enjoyable even without understanding exactly what is the narrative correspondent of the musical sequences that are thrilling you.

## EXAMPLES

I will conclude these pages with some examples of comics texts that, although obviously narrative, are not entirely reducible to the story that carries them forward. *Flash Gordon* is a series of Sunday pages, created by Alex Raymond between 1934 and 1944, and then continued by other authors. Technically it is a saga, in which the story unfolds from one episode to another without interruption, where at most you can find trips that bring the protagonists in a different context, and this provides the opportunity to divide (usefully, but rather artificially) the whole story in narrative episodes with relative autonomy. It is one of the most influential and imitated comics in history, especially thanks to Raymond's extraordinary artistic skills.

The story does not shine for originality: Flash ends up by chance on the planet Mongo, dominated by the fierce tyrant Ming, who will haunt him unnecessarily since the first pages, while our hero, in addition to escaping the traps of Ming, will try to undermine his power as much as he can. After many endless fights, it is rather grotesque that, in 1940, Flash arrives to oust Ming in very few weeks, an acceleration due to the need to send the protagonist back to Earth, to have him winning, with the powerful military means of Mongo, a war that in the meanwhile has broken out in the real world. Once defeated the Red Sword, an obvious metaphor of Hitler's Germany, Flash will return to Mongo to repeat the clash with a new tyrant, in another part of the planet.

Of a different level of complexity were, in the same years, the plots of the other great American comics model, in turn imitated by many authors, *Terry and the Pirates*, by Milton Caniff. The art of Caniff, however, as good and probably even more original than that of Raymond's (he himself will show Caniff's influence in making his next series, the detective *Rip Kirby*, from 1946), is not equally evocative. As a reader, who writes what you are reading now is today one that reads with interest in Caniff's comics, but devours those of Raymond, in spite of having already read and reread them, and despite the quite obvious weakness of the plots, recognizing in his own attitude the probable one of the readers who have assured the success of the series.

As for the specific of these serial readers, who used to run across the *Flash Gordon* pages once a week, six panels at a time (in the period from 1938 onwards, and a few more in previous years), we must also observe that such a trivial plot, with such long intervals between so short particles of narrative development, could not give rise to really strong narrative tensions. That is, it remains difficult to think that the reader of *Flash Gordon* was fond of the series and awaited the next episode starting from the expectation for the development of the story in the following week – as probably happened instead (or occurred to a greater extent) for the reader of *Terry* – because there were not really any narratives novelties to be expected.

What, then, could serve as a source of affection and passion, so powerful as to capture thousands of readers and many other authors? Our hypothesis is that in *Flash Gordon* the narrative structure has substantially the role of a container quite neutral by itself, but suitable to transmit a quantity of evocations (cultural, fabulous, mythical) mainly due to the quality of Raymond's art. From this point of view, Alex Raymond was an extraordinary accumulator and mixer

of suggestions. In the way of dressing his characters, to present their attitudes and the positions of their bodies, to suggest settings and backgrounds (or even their absence, substituted by particular shadings, of obviously emotive value), to visually characterize the situations, the presence of a submerged mythical universe emerges, in which the protagonists seem to live and the readers with them. This is not a unitary universe, on a narrative basis; the sources to which Raymond implicitly refers are the most varied, from Hollywood cinema to Greek statuary, to Baroque painting, to nineteenth-century illustration. Everything goes in *Flash Gordon*, as long as it recalls some kind of elsewhere easily recognizable as fabulous, mythological, whatever the reference myth is.

We could therefore guess that *Flash Gordon's* serial reader would return weekly not so much to know the development of the events, but to live again and again some fragment of this fabulous dimension of elsewhere; to return, at least for a moment, into the myth. The narrative, in short, would have in this situation substantially the function of creating the appropriate context for this evocative modality: it could not be missing, because the images would end up reduced to an unrelated and decontextualized sequence – and it is the story itself that generates the picture, the background, with respect to which they are loaded with meaning; but it could not even be too complex and interesting in itself, because it would attract too much attention to the detriment of mythical references.

In the specific case of *Flash Gordon*, this operation depends to a large extent on the great graphic ability of its artist. Note, in passing, that the art of Raymond in the next series *Rip Kirby*, while graphically magnificent, does not produce the same effects, nor even seeks them out: but *Rip Kirby* is a detective story, not a series of science fiction / fantasy; its spirit is very different, and the narrative structure maintains a crucial role. It is not, therefore, that Raymond's art produces these effects by its nature: it is evidently a result that has been designed and achieved. And just as a result of this kind can be achieved with the evocativeness of the graphic sign, there will presumably be other means of constructing an interest that does not depend, except to a small extent, on the narrative development.

*Dylan Dog* is a monthly horror series published in Italy by the publisher Bonelli since 1986 and invented by Tiziano Sclavi. Sclavi was also the writer of most of the first 90 issues, and still others later. The stories written by him are characterized by a very particular narrative trend, not free from contradictions and inconsistencies. In spite of these alleged defects, the series has conquered a very large audience (up to 500,000 copies per month, during peak periods), has had great recognition by critics (including Umberto Eco, who personally interviewed Sclavi in '98), and has been extremely influential towards other series of the same publishing house, and the Italian comics in general.

*Dylan Dog* is a private investigator who faces up cases that deal with the world of the paranormal, or classic horror. Since it is a matter of detection, the solution of the mystery at the end of the story is mandatory; but not only the mysteries at stake are atypical for a horror series, not only the characterization of the "monster" often reverses the normal epic characterization (and so far we would remain in the line of a classic game of narrative reversal), but often the story takes unpredictable and unjustified, sometimes even narratively inconsistent developments – to the point that the classic detection reader would be justified if he decided to abandon reading and throw the magazine in the trash bin.

But this usually does not happen. It must be added that typically Scavi's screenplays show an open reference to another text, usually a movie. In short, they show up as a kind of rewriting of that specific story, of those situations and of those emotions, in the terms that are typical of *Dylan Dog* series. They are not imitations, because the rewriting has an evident component of originality and the reference is apparent: in this sense *Dylan Dog* is a comic that lives by quotes, and each specific episode becomes (also) as a meditation on a cinema classic (usually horror, but not only).

In addition to the narrative engine, what leads forward in this comic is the desire to see how the parallelism with the story of reference develops. Point by point, the reader's emotion is led not only by the development of the action (or actions), but also by the comparison with the reference model. For this reason, narrative inconsistencies seem to be forgivable, and all in all secondary, or perhaps even appreciable, because they highlight the citations and their deviations.

We should say that *Dylan Dog* works not only because it is made up of narrations, but also because it builds up a discourse on the myth of cinema, and on narrative structures. But we cannot really say this, because this speech is not there. Just as Raymond's art transports us, image after image, to evoke fabulous regions of the imaginary, in the same way Scavi's screenplay works; even if certainly he does it with a different imaginary. However here as there, it is precisely the management of the route created in the reader through these references to generate the reason of interest of the text. Not only narrativity, but unitarity itself is debatable in both cases.

There is no need to make explicit one's references, as Scavi always does, to create screenplays that work in spite of narrative coherence. One of the most beautiful long stories written by Hugo Pratt, for his character Corto Maltese, is *Corte Sconta detta Arcana (Corto Maltese in Siberia, 1974-77)*, practically a proto-graphic novel (but in France, as in Italy, comics had been published as books years before Will Eisner in the USA invented the name and format of publication). In this novel, Corto Maltese is involved, with his friend Rasputin, in a complex affair set between China and Siberia in the years after the Russian Revolution, when the area was dominated by white armies, who opposed the new power of Moscow. Corto must recover, on behalf of a Chinese secret society, the gold carried on an armored train by one of these warlords.

But if this is apparently the mission of the Subject, i.e. is the reason for his efforts, soon the digressions are so many and such as to lead the reader to almost forget it, to the point where, when the gold train precipitates a very deep lake making it impossible to recover it, not only the story does not end, but it continues without difficulty, developing some of what had seemed to be the subplots. It would be very difficult, at the end of the day, to report *Corte Sconta* to one unitary narrative model, to one macro-action. Its logic is, if anything, that of deluding the reader, episode after episode, that we are facing the central branch of the narration, or an immediate branch of it. But the disillusionment to which, after a while, inevitably the reader arrives, remains strongly compensated by the new interests in the meantime aroused, so that not even the excessive recurrence of coincidences (characters who continue to meet again by chance, in a territory that is more extensive than Europe) appears artificial.

In the end, the narrative logic of *Corte Sconta* seems more similar to that of the chivalric poem (with its intertwined and narratively always re-opening dyna-

mics) than with that of the novel with its scheme, whose eventual complexity is after all always referable to a base unity.

It should be noted that the graphic nature of both Scavi's and Pratt's works also contributes to these effects. There is no nebula effect here, because in both cases the sequentiality of the panels do not allow tabular games, but the presence effect remains strong. Since there is no narrative voice, as in the verbal narrative, there is not even a Subject of the enunciation (a Narrator) to ascribe any inconsistencies to. These inconsistencies should then be reported to the primary Subject of the enunciation (i.e. the Author), but the author of an aesthetic text is not committed to its coherence, but only to its enjoyment as an aesthetic text, and coherence is necessary only to the extent in which it builds this enjoyment. But if the text remains enjoyable even with a weak coherence, the Author has nevertheless operated correctly.

The graphic novel *Fuochi* (Fires, 1984), by Lorenzo Mattotti, has a decidedly more cohesive narrative structure than the other examples we have brought, which clearly articulates the text and is equally clearly responsible for many of the tensions brought to the reader and the consequent attention. Although graphic, *Fuochi* is therefore a novel in all respects.

Nevertheless, again, it is not for the narrated story that *Fuochi* is considered among the most important works in the history of comics. Although the narrative is original and engaging, the lion's share is in fact kept by Mattotti's art. It is a situation that has some analogy with that of Raymond's *Flash Gordon* that we have described above, but in that case the narration is not particularly interesting, and Raymond's art refers to a mythological and fabulous imaginary. Here, Mattotti's operation is subtler: the reference is not as well defined, but there is evidently a great deal of the twentieth-century visual culture, from Vallotton to Hopper, to Bacon.

Subtly, working analogous references like a poet, and exploiting the static and graphic nature of the image, Mattotti builds a world that lives off the twentieth century pictorial universes, and off their specific mythology. Of course, the development of the narration remains important here, and yet strongly coherent, but in the end it supports itself the construction of a vision of the world, which is the main reason for the charm of the work, between real feelings and literary, and pictorial feelings.

## PERCURSOS DE ESCRITA, NARRATIVA E LEITURA DE HISTÓRIAS EM QUADRINHOS

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa os quadrinhos como um sistema de escrita em relação à narração. Um sistema de escrita é uma linguagem visual, potencialmente dotada de uma forte autonomia e não necessariamente vinculada ao mesmo nível de sequencialidade da palavra oral. Muitas vezes, como nos quadrinhos, a dimensão narrativa desempenha um papel importante nos textos construídos por uma linguagem, um papel para analisar de perto, principalmente quando consideramos que a rota de leitura de um texto pode ser mais significativa do que a sua possível redução a um único núcleo de significado.

**Palavras-chave:** História em quadrinhos. Sistema de escrita. Narrativa.

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