Program of the Conference

Comics and the Invisible: Intertwining Academic and Artistic perspectives

Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, 03-04 June 2022
Centro di Studi di Civiltà e Spiritualità Comparate

Friday, 03 June 2022

09:15 – 09:30 Welcome greetings

◊ **Francesco Piraino**, Director of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities

◊ **Matteo Stefanelli,** Catholic University of Milan

◊ **Emilio Varrà,** Academy of Fine Arts of Bologna

09:30 – 11:00

◊ **Maaheen Ahmed,** Ghent University, "Tracking and Teaching the Invisible: Lynda Barry's comics"

◊ **Daniele Barbieri,** Academy of Fine Arts of Bologna, "Playing with the Invisible: Novel, Movies, Comics"

11:00 – 11:30 Coffee break

11:30 – 13:00

◊ **Francesca Pietropaolo,** Art Critic and Curator, "How to Make the Invisible Visible? Some Innovative Approaches in 21st-Century Comic Art"

◊ **David Pinho Barros**, University of Porto / ILCML, "The color next door: Forms, functions, and politics of the chromatic hypallage in clear line comics"

13:00 – 14:30 Lunch

14:30 – 15:15

◊ **Carolina Ivanescu**, University of Amsterdam, "Making visible the invisible: representations of the spiritual in religiously themed Japanese manga"

15:15- 16:15

◊ Artists' round table 1: **Dominique Goblet, Stefano Ricci, and Yvan Alagbé,** moderator Ilaria Tontardini **(In French translated in English)**

16:30- 17:30

◊ Artists' round table 2: **Lorenzo Mattotti and Manuele Fior** moderator **Emilio Varrà (In Italian translated in English)**

18:30 – 19:30

◊ Concert-Performance: **Stefano Ricci and Manuele Fior** (illustrations) / **Giacomo Piermatti and Daniele Roccato** (music)

Saturday, 04 June 2022

09:30 – 11:00
◊ **José   Alaniz,** University of Washington, "'I Envy the Lichen': Yulia Nikitina's Landscapes of the Russian Soul"
◊ **Rodolfo Dal Canto**, University of L'Aquila, "Lived and abandoned spaces: invisibilities in comparison"

11:00 – 11:30 Coffee break

11:30 – 13:00
◊ **Chris Gavaler,** Washington & Lee University, "The Color of Paper: Racial Invisibility in the Comics Medium"
◊ **Erwin Dejasse**, Université Libre de Bruxelles, "The invisibility of comics made in isolation: Charlotte Salomon, Karel Frans Drenthe and Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro"

13:00 – 14:30 Lunch

14:30 - 16:00
◊ **Silvia Vari**, University of Warwick, "Dancing with the (in)visibile: graphic fragments of forced migration from the Mediterranean"
◊ **Matteo Stefanelli,** Catholic University of Milan, "Immersive marginality. Comics and the cultural power of (its) invisibility"

16:15 – 17:00
◊ Lectio magistralis: **Juraj Horváth (In English)**.

17:15 – 18:00
◊ Lectio magistralis: **David B. (In Italian translated in English)**

Abstracts

Tracking and Teaching the Invisible: Lynda Barry's comics, Maaheen Ahmed, Ghent University

"The thing I call my mind seems to be kind of landlord that doesn't know its tenants"
(Lynda Barry, What It Is, p. 5)
"So where's the comic? The comic is somewhere between the person who made it and the person who's looking at it. It's a relationship." Lynda Barry in an interview
(Misemer, p. 174)

As suggested by its title, What It Is is full of pertinent questions about the processes of creating and
perceiving pictures, beginning with the question, "What is an image?" and eventually, the roots of
imagination. The questions continue: "What is the difference between a ghost and a image?" (p. 56), "What is a bad drawing? What is a good drawing?" (p. 76), "What makes something meaningful?" (p. 96). And of course, the central, interconnected two questions about value judgments, that continue to haunt Barry: "Is it good? Does this suck?" (p. 123)
Such fundamental questions recur in Barry's other comics, most of which are on a mission to tackle the "unthinkable", everything that remains outside the confines of language and, therefore, invisible. Her quest for a means of communicating the hidden unfolds in an almost obsessive way, filling up single lined composition books with an energy that expresses a horror vacui through their intense, elaborate but also playful and philosophical pages. Often resembling the exercise books used in her classes, all of Barry's books tease the boundaries between comics, diaries, sketchbooks and educational manuals: they combine exercises she uses in her own teaching, and sometimes even her students' materials, autobiographical episodes and meditations.
One! Hundred! Demons!, for instance, is named after a painting exercise by a 16th century Japanese Zen monk, announces itself as "a book of autofictionalbiography". In Barry's work, autobiography and fiction are as inextricable as the acts of interrogating the comics form, remembering through it and teaching it. Beyond the monsters that Lynda Barry visualizes while encouraging her readers to do the same, One! Hundred! Demons! identifies many elements that fall under the umbrella of the invisible, such as childhood or scents. In elaborating on these possible constituents and methodologies of visualizing the invisible in Barry's work, my paper will focus on: 1) the connections between childhood memories and childish and untutored drawing styles; 2) the importance of drawing by hand and by extension, the affective connections suggested through the artist's implied presence and through the visual forms of communicating; and 3) the role of comics as an accessible means of collaborating and connecting. While the invisible may in many ways seem out of our reach, images, and in particular comics images, woven together into narratives can help, as Barry's body of work suggests, in attaining glimpses of it and perhaps even glimpses of ourselves or, at least, our demons.

'I Envy the Lichen': Yulia Nikitina's Landscapes of the Russian Soul, José Alaniz, University of Washington

In her graphic memoir/travel narrative Storm Diary (Дневник штормов, 2019), Salekhard/St. Petersburg artist Yulia Nikitina deploys the text/image capacities of the comics medium to explore the Russian landscape, reflective of an inner journey to grapple with personal trauma. Nikitina's travels take her along the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous okrug, on the Yamal peninsula of northwest Siberia to Vorkuta and the Kara Sea (regions never previously committed to comics representation), while her visual diary details encounters with the rugged beauty of the arctic tundra and its decrepit infrastructure, including abandoned Soviet-era structures. But Nikitina's ultimate subject is her own profound social anxiety disorder and other disabilities, which she must manage and accommodate along the way. As she puts it:

> "Since the age of 16 I have been living with anxiety, constant nervousness and fears related to social interactions. For me the possibility of traveling means a lot, because many of my fears are connected to the use of different kinds of public transportation, of traveling together with other people. Before I used to think that there was no way I could go off somewhere far away and that I would never get to see the world. That's why I wanted to share what I learned in this particular journey and my experiences as a whole."

The subjective states and personal traumatic experiences she undergoes, often resistant to visual representation, take up much of the narrative, to some extent finding their correlative in the sublime natural and decrepit industrialized landscapes she traverses (recalling the work of German Romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich). At times she resorts to visual metaphors, as when signaling deep embarrassment through a snake motif – drawing comparisons to David B.'s use of a dragon figure as a marker of his brother's epilepsy in Epileptic ("L'Ascension du haut mal, 2000). The proposed paper examines Nikitina's works through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing from Ecocriticism, Disability Studies and Comics Studies, for example Ezster Szép's insight in Comics and The Body: Drawing, Reading and Vulnerability (2020) that: "the embodied processes of drawing and the embodied processes of interpretation can be related in dialogical engagement" through the common anchor of human vulnerability (4-5). The paper resonates in particular with three of the conference's topics: "Bodily, inner, or psychic spaces and visual representation"; "Geographical invisibility: hidden places, forgotten spaces"; and "Communities' invisibility: underrepresented local or sub/cultural communities."

Playing with the Invisible: Novel, Movies, Comics, Daniele Barbieri, Academy of Fine Arts of Bologna

The told/untold dialectic is not entirely coincident with the shown/unshown. What is told presupposes (and therefore implies) an enunciant voice (i.e. a narrator); what is shown, only and sometimes, a point of view. What is untold simply is not: it is just an absence. What is unshown, instead, can be white: the presence of an absence. In comics, a white space or field can represent the missing action between one panel and the following one; or it can represent the background that is missing within a panel. In any case, the unshown, exactly like the untold, consists of what is not necessary to show (or tell) either because it is irrelevant, or because it is very easily inferable from what is shown (or told). But the unshown, unlike the untold, can appear before us, making visible the invisibility of what is not shown.

In verbal discourse, i.e. in the novel, nothing is actually visible. Everything is mediated by the story made by a narrator who takes all responsibility for truth and point of view. In visual discourse, and in particular in comics, what is seen, and therefore visible, is crucial, but the gaze that makes things visible cannot in turn be seen, only inferred.

The word focuses by naming, image by representing. However, while the narrator of a novel, unless proven otherwise, is always one and the same throughout the whole course of the text, the observer of a story in comics, like that of a movie, can change at any shot. Her/his invisibility is not compensated by any convention of sameness. An indeterminate observer is therefore accompanied, in comics, by an absence made visible. Cinema can make absence present by mean of the voice, but it cannot make absence visible. In comics, everything, except the gaze, can be shown, even invisibility.

The colour next door: Forms, functions, and politics of the chromatic hypallage in clear line comics, David Pinho Barros, University of Porto / ILCML

Formal invisibility may be a matter of absence, but also one of displacement, as when an element is invisible where it is expected to appear but is nonetheless present in an adjoining space. Such is the case, this paper will argue, of what I have termed elsewhere as the chromatic hypallage, a concept imported from literary studies. In this field, "hypallage" is the designation of a figure of speech in which a modifier is syntactically connected to an item other than the one that it is semantically modifying. A commonly cited illustration of this resource is a sentence from the Portuguese naturalist novel O Crime do Padre Amaro, by Eça de Queirós: "The man would nevertheless sit down, his hateful umbrella between his knees". If, in this example, "the man" is the one who is hateful, not the umbrella, in a chromatic hypallage a certain colour pertaining to a character or compositional form is attributed instead to an object or background element related to it. This attributive shift of colour can be motivated by a number of reasons — mostly linked to aesthetic concerns, moral determinations or editorial restrictions —, and was particularly common in certain periods of comics history, such as in the golden age of the youth press in France and Belgium where the clear line style prospered. This paper intends to explore the forms, functions, and politics of the chromatic hypallage in classical and contemporary clear lines comics, exposing the fundamental role it has played in the graphic and diegetic construction of narratives produced in this visual and verbal style,

and adding a further argument to the understanding of comics as an art of the invisible, in which much of the production of meaning happens through absent — or, in this case —, dislocated representation.

Lived and abandoned spaces: invisibilities in comparison, Rodolfo Dal Canto, University of L'Aquila

The paper aims to propose a close reading of three non-serial comics works, published in Italy after 2019, with a focus on the representation of spaces and the specific invisibilities they convey and communicate. The texts selected for the analysis are: Malibu by Eliana Albertini (2019), Padovaland by Miguel Vila (2020), and 24/7 by Nova (2021), as all three texts tell a story that takes place in a marginal environment such as the Italian province. The paper will start from a comparison between lived space and abandoned space: the ways in which these are represented will be analyzed, emphasizing the presences-absences that haunt the spaces, according to a hauntological perspective. The latter, based on the reworking of Mark Fisher (2012) that takes its cue from Jacques Derrida's Spectres de Marx (1993), focuses on the virtual, what is no longer or not yet, but haunts the contemporary with its presence. Hauntology can therefore be a suitable tool to investigate the invisibilities of a text, both literary and visual, and it has already been effectively applied to comics in several contributions (Busi Rizzi 2018, Hunter 2019, Fisher 2013). I will hence propose a path that moves from the invisibility present in places, investigating: 1) the rules and laws that are unwritten but inscribed in the lived space, which is enforced through technological and visual devices and that therefore express a power (Berardi 2017). I will highlight how the absence of these rules is part of the charm of abandoned places, the very element that allows them to contain possibilities. 2) The gaze and the action of places, as supervising entities that, through a gaze that sees without being seen (Foucault 1975), maintain system of rules mentioned in point 1. The absence of this kind of gaze in invisibilized places (such as abandoned ones) thus opens up the possibility of a re-signification of space, and therefore invites a comparison between the visual languages used within these types of places and those inhabited, such as
advertising or indications (in the latter) and graffiti (in the former).Such an investigation finds its ideal case study in the comics medium for several reasons: the invisible is an intrinsic part of the grammar of comics (McCloud 1993, Rey 1978), which by its very
nature prompts the author to carefully select what is included in its spaces (panels and pages) (Barbieri 1991) in a dialectic with what is excluded; on the other hand, comics, as a visual medium, represent the story in a space, more or less mimetic with respect to what we call reality. This characteristic allows me to relate to representations, to map places that can both be physical and belonging to the imaginary (Peterle 2021), and to propose an analysis that is also a comparison of the different forms of invisibility related to the places of our imaginary - lived and visible, abandoned and invisible - and the possibilities that comics offer to represent them.

The invisibility of comics made in isolation: Charlotte Salomon, Karel Frans Drenthe and Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, Erwin Dejasse, Université Libre de Bruxelles

Between 1940 and 1942, when living with the threat of being deported to an extermination camp, the young German-Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon painted some 1000 gouaches she had described as the "story of her whole life". In a never published book consisting of sequences of drawings with texts, Karel Frans Drenthe has described the daily life in the psychiatric hospital in Eindhoven where he was interned from the mid-50s till the end of 60s; his goal was to publicly expose the inhumane conditions of confinement. Before becoming Minister of Defence, Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro has spent 12 years in military centres of the Uruguayan 70s dictatorship. There, he made a comics "drawn by somebody without present"; a metaphorical description of what had happened before his detention.

These creations have close ties with comics from the latest decades as they share with them two major tendencies: their testimonial value and their reinvention of the comics canonical devices. Although, during a long time, they were never associated with the comics field – only Salomon book was acclaimed by comics critics some 65 years after it had been made. These three works have long stayed outside the comics fields but were also created in the loneliness of isolation. Their invisibility is therefore two-fold. The paper will study them from this double perspective and analyse the tension between these two invisibilities. To this end, they will be considered through the concept of 'comicity' that Colin Beineke has forged to name works that have "comics-like attributes" and through what Jean-Christophe Menu has described as the 'hors-champ de la bande dessinée' to designate "an entire corpus of works that undoubtedly belong to the field [of comics] but is not integrated into its History, and hence is not recognised as an integral part of the field". In doing so, the paper aims to question the reason of the fundamental choice made by the creators from outside the comics field to testify the isolation experience through a story in images.

The Color of Paper: Racial Invisibility in the Comics Medium, Chris Gavaler, Washington & Lee University

Parallels between whiteness as the color of paper used in the production of comics and whiteness as a racial category represented in the artwork of comics reveal the normative invisibility of a comics page's background color and the representational qualities of that color to represent multiple skin tones and so multiple racial identities. Comics make images legible by placing dark marks on light surfaces. Often characters' bodies are rendered as the negative spaces within lines that frame their mostly unmarked interiors, making the actual background color of a page the default color representing any individual's skin color. If the actual page is literally white, then that whiteness represents the non-literally white skin of both racially white and non-white characters. If the page is some other color, then that non-white color represents the skin tones of racial whiteness and non-whiteness instead. Moreover, whatever its actual color, a page may be understood as conceptually white: a uniformly blank default background denoting no color. Colors instead are mixtures of ink added to the page, with no mixture producing either the literal

or figurative whiteness of the unmarked page. Racial whiteness also can be conceptualized as an absence of racially-defined color when race is identified in contrast to a white norm. Imitating page whiteness, racial whiteness implicitly claims to be uniquely and inherently pure since all additions reduce it and all mixtures require it as a comparative measurement and baseline background. Racial whiteness employs the metaphor of a default background color through a claim of normativeness that obscures a range of characteristics and renders them figuratively invisible.

Making visible the invisible: representations of the spiritual in religiously themed Japanese manga, Carolina Ivanescu

Ghosts, spirits and ancestors have a central place in the Japanese spiritual imagination and are central to its contemporary popular culture. In visual narratives such as mangas, both their way of depiction and their agency are the result of what Ingold calls improvisational creativity, a crescent world continuously in the making (2021) at the intersection of the artist's imagination and the text-image unit's legibility to its audience. This moves along the dynamic of tradition and innovation: in order to be recognized the spiritual must be made visible by already existing tropes which relate to tradition, but as new creative medium it must contain something new, innovative, either in content or in form. The three religious mangas explored in this contribution are targeted towards adolescent boys (shonen manga), but are read widely by a variety of Japanese and global publics. Furthermore, once well-known, these comics serve as starting point to the development of diverse popular culture products, such as cartoons, series and merchandise, further popularizing their characters and narratives even wider. For example: manga's such as "Shaman king" point out tensions which are worthy of attention: becoming a shaman is based on competition and not on 'being chosen' and boys compete for a title reserved traditionally to women engaging spirits visible in the form of old samurai, but not as spirits of ancestors. In "Saint young men", Buddha and Jesus both superheroes and good high-school friends, make selfies under blooming cherry trees. The god of the mountain, in "Otaku and Mr. Taoist" also engages in everyday human endeavor, but to a different goal – keeping the world in balance means engaging, and directly being part of it. However, what does the world of a mountain god look like? Graphic novels become part of a reasonable approximation of reality which contributes to the creation of religious frames of mind by "inviting audiences to suppress their awareness of gaps between fictive worlds and empirical reality' (Thomas 2012: 29). . The questions asked are: in which way is the spiritual made visible in the textual and contextual (visual) information contemporary mangas present to the reader and how do current visibilities relate to traditional understandings of religion/spirituality in Japan and beyond.

Thomas, J. B. (2012). Drawing on Tradition. University of Hawaii Press.
Ingold, T., & Hallam, E. (2021). Creativity and cultural improvisation: An introduction (pp. 1-24). Routledge.

How to Make the Invisible Visible? Some Innovative Approaches in 21st-Century Comic Art, Francesca Pietropaolo, Art Critic and Curator

This study aims to analyze the methodologies of three cutting-edge works employing comics to give form and voice to the invisibility of trauma in 21st-century history and culture: In the Shadow of No Towers (2004) by North American cartoonist Art Spiegelman on the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States; Une éternité à Tanger (2004) by the African illustrator Faustin Titi and African journalist Eyoum Ngangué on the overlooked tragedy of immigration from Africa to Europe; and A Brief History of Time (Under Covid) – in 7 Lessons (2020-ongoing) by the Italian artist Luca Buvoli on the Covid-19 pandemic which broke out in 2020. These works share the impulse to visualize the invisible and narrate what resists narrative articulation, and raise awareness. The shadow silhouette of two towers no longer standing, New York's Twin Towers, is the key image with which Spiegelman's book opens: the presence of an absence. Blending the personal and the political as it addresses the trauma of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, the book comprises ten strips on memory and loss, and includes references to Spiegelman's own Maus book on the Holocaust, as well as reprints of turn-of-the-20th-century comic strips. Published the same year as Spiegelman's work, the comic book Une éternité à Tanger is about the trauma of displacement. It depicts the failed crossing of a young African boy, Gawa, from Tangiers to Europe seeking a brighter future. Leaving his native West African city, Gawa hopes to escape the turmoil of his home country but, following a journey fraught with dangers and betrayals, he is stranded in Tangiers, just in sight of his final goal. There he begins to tell his story, emblematic of thousands of immigrants. Narrating from an African perspective the story of the many invisibles like Gawa, Titi and Ngangué offer an intimate account of one of the great sociopolitical tragedies of our time. Since spring 2020, Buvoli has created a series of tragicomic visual narratives, originally presented on Instagram, where the mediums of comics, painting, and the digital blend. Their protagonist is the astronaut Astrodoubt, an individual of unspecified gender, race, and age, grounded by the pandemic. Focusing on Lesson 5 from the series, an episode first published in the Brooklyn Rail magazine in 2021, this study wishes to analyze the innovative ways in which Buvoli's work explores the expressive and formal possibilities of the ninth art and sequential narratives in the context of a multi-media and multi-disciplinary artistic inquiry on vulnerability, trauma, time and space, from the cosmos to life on Earth. Challenging the boundaries of visual and narrative dimensions in contemporary culture, these works of comics offer a rich material for reflecting on the ways in which the medium affords groundbreaking explorations of the invisible, time, memory and space with a great impact on urgent existential, social, and cultural issues of our time.

Immersive marginality. Comics and the cultural power of (its) invisibility, Matteo Stefanelli, Catholic University of Milan

Throughout the history of comics, the visible/invisible dialectic has been more than a recurring presence: it has been one of the forces that have shaped and driven its own cultural status. This paper proposes to frame the visibility/invisibility dialectic as both a

sociological and an aesthetic issue. From the first point of view, comics has largely evolved during 20th century as a subculture, shaped by its marginality within the public sphere - its « social invisibility » debated by Thierry Groensteen or Scott McCloud - as both a limit in terms of social capital development for their stakeholders, but also as a leveraging force to build up a community strongly based on participatory culture. From the aesthetic point of view, as a visual medium comics has dealt with the many boundaries set by the semiotic potential of print culture's visualization devices: the linguistic affordances of the gutter and layout design, but also the specificity of hand-drawn images. In the light of a sociological and mediological perspective, the paper will discuss the two-sided dimension of invisibility as a foundational force within comics history, leading to what we can call as the « immersive marginality » of comics culture.

Dancing with the (in)visibile: graphic fragments of forced migration from the Mediterranean, Silvia Vari, University of Warwick

In recent years, comics have become a popular medium to convey stories of forced migration, offering a space of resistance through which migrants can voice and enact their (contested) presence. Through its multimodal narrative form, in which both author and reader are primary agents, the so-called Ninth Art may offer an escape from normative discourses. In particular, comics storytelling relies on the alternation of presence and absence, asking readers to actively engage in the process of meaning-making and to participate in building the visual fragments into a cohesive narrative whole. The interplay between what is graphically presented, the seen, and what remains hidden in the gutter, the unseen, opens to readers' creative imagination and becomes a crucial constituent of comics' peculiar narrative. Through a formalist analysis of the medium, specifically focusing on the creative affordances of comics' fractured aesthetics and their multiple formal tensions, the paper investigates how comics may enhance more inclusive understandings of migrant experiences. The paper aims to examine how the medium's formal complexity and fragmentary nature can be particularly suited to convey stories of Otherness, focusing on the experiences and life stories of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Conceived as "a silent dance between the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible" (McCloud 1994), comics problematize notions of visibility and invisibility and can potentially unsettle the political normative space within which migrant discourses are produced and reiterated. Following Jacques Rancière's theorization of aesthetic practices as actively re-configuring the perception of sensory experience - inducing novel forms of political subjectivity - the paper ultimately seeks to contribute to situating comics' fractured aesthetics as productive in reaffirming migrants' individual agency and political voice