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Diversity in comics: drawings, characters, stories and paths
Diversidad en los cómics: dibujos, personajes, historias y recorridos

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Abstract

Between comics and diversity - as between diversity, cartoons and comic films - there is an almost direct link of concordance and overlapping or, also, of inextricable intertwining. There are bases of historical affirmation of the medium, since the end of the 19th century, which testify to the existence of this trend, but there are also others of a structural nature through which comics reveal the perimeter of perceptual as well as anthropological and cultural diversity that designates the everyday and peculiar life of modern, technological, bourgeois, capitalist society (in the discards or in the links of continuity and rupture - sometimes small or great revolutions - that frame its advances and internal changes). It presents a reflexive analysis of the diversity of comics from different study variables.

Keywords: Comics; diversity; content analysis; reflection.

Resumen

Entre los cómics y la diversidad -al igual que entre diversidad, dibujos animados y películas cómicas- existe una corriente casi directa de concordancia y superposición o, también, de entrelazado inextricable. Existen bases de afirmación histórica del medio, desde finales del siglo XIX, que atestiguan la existencia de dicha corriente, pero también hay otras de carácter estructural a través de las cuales los cómics revelan el perímetro de diversidad tanto perceptiva como antropológica y cultural que designa la vida cotidiana y peculiar de la sociedad moderna, tecnológica, burguesa, capitalista (en los descartes o en los lazos de continuidad y ruptura -a veces pequeñas o grandes revoluciones- que enmarcan sus avances y cambios internos). Se presenta un análisis reflexivo de la diversidad del cómic desde diferentes variables de estudio.

Palabras clave: Cómic; diversidad; análisis de contenido; reflexión.

DRAWINGS AND DIVERSITY

It is above all the drawings - arranged in comics in an articulated continuity-discontinuity, including within (or near) them the text, with which they interact - that give

this link between comics and diversity its primary raison d'être. Pictures in comics are almost always drawn, except a very few cases in which a photograph is used or manipulated, in a symbiosis that risks extending to that specific medium that the Italians call fotoromanzo ("photonovel"), already dealt with by Abruzzese (1989), Bravo (2003) and Turzio (2019).

Pictures are the product of a (potentially artistic) competence where mind, vision and hand skill converge, giving the latter the fully individual ability to trace the mark on the blank page, thus creating figures, environments, objects, characters, actions, settings... in other words, worlds.

Any comic author can be recognised by this particular diversity of the mark, which allows the immediate and completely individual delimitation of the stroke, the line, the corporeality of the figures, the arrangement of the poses, the contrast between light and shade, or between backgrounds (woven or otherwise) and lines in the foreground. In short, linking the visual mark to that particular and distinct quality of the drawing itself which - almost immediately - (an almost not direct, but subject to the mental-cultural decoding operations of the reader), makes it possible to recognise who the author is. Recognition between drawing and author's signature also occurs where the visual figures are marked by technical-expressive "school" matrices that unite them in the same field, as, for example, between authors such as Milton Caniff and Frank Robbins, teacher and pupil whose drawings, despite the enormous similarity, we can detect minimal differences that allow us to identify, quite precisely, which are Caniff's and which are by Robbins'.

In the beautiful final essay devoted to children's drawing in *The Prose of the World*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty underlines how drawings show the most secret essence of the self, the child subject's intimate way of perceiving things and representing them (Merleau-Ponty, 1969). Following the French philosopher's assertions, drawings in comics express the intimate diversity (in an almost always dynamic relationship between interior and exterior) of both the author thereof- who projects onto it his individual disposition to capture the things of the world and channel them into the drawings themselves- and the reader. Should the latter not reject drawings and or not recognise them in a radical gesture of negation of the relationship with drawings themselves, he reconnects the author's individual disposition with his own, superimposing both, or (more frequently) also including the author's in his own and treating them (or, rather, perceiving and considering them) as equal.

Therefore, comics can be seen as visual journeys in which the original diversity of the author-individuals is expressed through drawing, composing worlds in which diversity (the primary one from which the drawing itself starts) is welcomed in an environment where everything is possible, where the structured normality of the rules can become the exception rather than the rule, and where what seems normal becomes different and vice versa. In short, diversity runs along the very line of the drawing and overlaps it, projecting it towards that infinite set of adventures of the imagination for which diversity does not encounter obstacles, mistrust or prejudice, but living spaces (those of the drawn pages) ready to recognise it, form it, legitimise it and integrate it, as well as educate it in the paradox of the ordinary world of the technical-modern society.

CHILDREN'S DIVERSITY

In the early comics (late 19th and early 20th century), according to a historiography that has already been proven and validated, diversity issues in Western (American and European) comics are shown through the action relationship and according to the internal affective disposition of the children's characters. The drawings of the first comics show how children's gazes project onto the images their different way of being in the world, of perceiving the arrangement - often understood in a subversive way and unleashing uncontrolled hilarity - between objects, figures and environments. Thanks to the diversity expressed by the drawings, the children of the early comics almost always turn the order of reality on its head, or demonstrate their cultural configuration based on forms subject to being reconfigured in other ways. In these comics, children and diversity are integrated together. It is a masterclass that cannot be overlooked.

From *Yellow Kid* (the original diversity of the bald Chinese boy whose word is written on his yellow shirt!) to the *Katzenjammer Kids* (different not only because they are mischievous or inventors of mockery of the evils of adults, but also because they speak English that is hampered by the pronunciation of German immigrants in the United States), from *Buster Brown* to *Little Nemo* and the *Kin-der-Kids* (in American comics), or from the *Pieds Nickelés* in France to the Italians *Bilbolbul* and *Quadratino*, children drawn by master authors (ranging from Richard Outcault to Rudolph Dirks and Harold Knerr, from Winsor McCay to Lyonel Feininger, or from the French Louis Forton to the Italians Attilio Mussino and Antonio Rubino) serve as testimonies to how comics can express a radical diversity of the human spirit in relation to the organisations of social reality.

This diversity that can be introduced in the ethnic-empathic (in Mussino's *Bilbobul*, for example, by the particular way in which the character of the African child literally shows in his small body every expression of language or changes his body to reflect in it everything he finds) or a diversity that goes back to the unstoppable curiosity of children to explore all the dimensions of reality, on the border of those of fantasy or behavioural transgression (in *Buster Brown* and *Katzenjammer Kids*) or on the perceptible limits between image and reality (in *Little Nemo* and *Kin-der-Kids*).

On the one hand, the transgressive children express a diversity that helps to put "in order" - after countless modifications, tests and experiments opened up precisely by the strips and adventures of the children's characters - the sequential narrative order structures of comics through pictures. Therefore, this medium stabilises its communicative functions (Frezza, 2017, pp. 39-44; Sáez de Adana, 2021, pp. 23-45) through these vibrant adventures. On the other hand, when children, rather than transgressing, demonstrate seeing and perceiving an enchanted world according to their particular fantasy (another remarkable and important quality of their diversity, appreciable not only in McCay's *Little Nemo*, but also in Feininger's *Wee Willie Winkie's World*, as Frezza, 2017, pp. 44-51), diversity is revealed by mixing the subjective gaze of the character with the objectified gaze in the strip, arranged in such a way as to repeat and recede in the reader's gaze (i.e., coming from the inside and reaching outwards to an exterior specified by the page itself in the Sunday publication of the early twentieth century).

Antonio Rubinos character of *Quadratino* (published in Italy in the pages of the *Corriere dei Piccoli* between 1910 and 1911; Surdi, 2015) is especially noteworthy, because the character's diversity is strikingly shown in his completely square head. The fact that comic pictures highlight the diversity of this form (a little boys body with a head

that has the geometric shape of a square) is theoretically significant to grasp how diversity can be consubstantial to the image itself and to see how the two are intertwined in an incontrovertible embrace. Rubino's strips "play" throughout the series with whatever can express the diversity of the child: from the variation of the geometric figures that his head transforms into (angular, triangular, rectangular, etc.) to the emotional disposition with which Quadratino faces his adventures. They all reveal a very particular capacity by which reality reveals itself to him or, sometimes, comes upon him. In the end, his existential condition is put back "in its place" (with the contribution of his grandmother Mathematics or his tutor Trigonometry, who help him to reconfigure his square head after several transformations - sometimes dramatic, sometimes paradoxical - into other geometrical figures). The adventures of Quadratino are an expressive manifestation of the cultural theme of diversity - even in the concrete form of the child's square head, which is evidently only an apparent symbol of the general and generic diversity present in the lives of children - in early 20th century Italy, a country then very closed in the formality of the behavioural and cultural structures of a still-forming bourgeoisie.

A LUNATIC, MELANCHOLIC DIVERSITY

George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (1910-1944) is a rich poetic anthology - visually and narratively, full of humour, melancholy, suspension of gesture and image-time - of gender and species difference: what could be more diverse than predicting the instinctive behaviours of a male cat (or female cat? In Krazy it is a real question of radical gender diversity[1]) who falls in love with a mouse (Ignatz) who can only throw a brick at the cat? Therefore, in this major work of comics from the first half of the 20th century, even gender is somewhat subverted: between strong and weak, this time the roles are reversed and assume the domains of the feminine (i.e. the tender, melancholic, desirous, affectionate and generous cat/cat instead of aggressive, deadly, biting and calculating) and the masculine (the mouse, who here is shown as a scoundrel, cheating, intimidating and provocative instead of flighty, minor or prey).

The setting of the amusing stories of Krazy Kat and Ignatz portrays a universe with desert and lunar elements, those of Coconico, Arizona. The comedy is suspended in pauses and slowdowns, as well as in sudden accelerations, moves, thanks to Herriman's mark, from the domestic urban environment to landscapes that reveal themselves to be imaginary projections, rather than purported realistic environments. It is a difference in itself, as opposed to domestic or metropolitan settings, and for Herriman it is the ideal place to set in motion a relational dynamic between the characters that, as a whole, is extraordinarily repeated from strip to strip and effectively renewed and relaunched in each episode of Krazy and Ignatz's boisterous adventures (Sáez de Adana, 2021, pp. 45-50). The decidedly lunar mark of the environment is reflected in the extreme diversity of meaning that each of Herriman's strips presents to the reader. It is no longer a love story between disappointment or hope, interwoven between the two characters of the cat and the mouse, but a general metaphor of existence without any limits, free as air, to be placed along a faint trail (the gesture of throwing the brick, a final and forceful gesture, so often replicated that it can often be outside the image, that is, outside the frame of the drawn vignette). This way, Herriman conquers an expressive territory - difficult to capture not only in the field of comics, but in any medium with narrative purposes - in which diversity (whether represented by the story or the setting, or even the moral intention of the

expression, or the apologist and comic fabulation, or allegorical-political representation) is highly legitimised and can, in the end, be expressed without any impossibility, prohibition or taboo[2].

ANTHROPOMORPHIC DIVERSITY

Comics published around the 1930s that witnessed the rebirth in the narrative sequentially of the strips and Sunday strips in the pages of newspapers (and later in weekly comics) of the anthropomorphic figures of Disney characters (from Mickey Mouse to Donald Duck including Scrooge and the whole gallery of animals humanised by the film-cartoon imaginary of Walt Disney's Hollywood factory), are a complex, fascinating and revealing universe in twentieth-century visual culture, with a philosophy that is for some decidedly "anti-metaphysical" (Giorello & Cozzaglio, 2013).

The anthropomorphism of these drawn figures[3], together with the characteristic diversity of each character (Mickey's bravery and wit, Donald's indolence and unwillingness to do things, Scrooge's greed and active arrogance, etc.; Buzzati, 1968; Faeti, 1986), recomposes a broad visual discourse on family dynamics in the modern, technological age. The characters are completely different from each other, yet they are seen and told from the point of view of their paradigmatic exemplarity: there is no world, and above all there is no adventure, no fantastic or comic story (in the great Disney comics by authors such as Carl Barks and Floyd Gottfredson, or in the Disney counterparts published in Italy for more than half a century by the great Italian authors such as Angelo Bioletto, Romano Scarpa, Carlo Chendi, Luciano Bottaro, Gian Battista Carpi, Giorgio Pezzin, Giorgio Cavazzano, Massimo De Vita and many others; Frezza, 1987, pp. 45-52; Boschi et al., 1990; Gadducci et al., 2011) but cutting out the specific measure of each character and highlighting the symbolic, narrative, psychological and zoo-anthropological character that composes it.

According to this structure of Disney's imaginary, the family does not lie on genetic links, but on the coordination (often paradoxical and comical, and often unsuspected, but ingenious and underlying) of the characters' differences in character. This a diversity stands out for the psychoneurotic symptoms that are distributed within (and between) each of the characters, and in this way the world, thus inhabited, is revealed as a stage constituted by behavioural irreducibilities. For the latter, the idea or goal of social normality is stateless, a clear fiction. There is no social equality obtained from observing accepted typologies in the environment in which one lives, but a set of mutually differentiated psycho-behavioural cells, which may initially struggle with each other, but which end up reaching agreements or compromises that are in any case provisional, ready to be challenged from one adventure to the next.

Disney's world of comics - much more so than that of cartoons - makes a theoretical and creative combination of character diversity (often radical, yet clear and indisputable), thus giving rise to a narrative environment in which conflicts between desires, tensions between behaviours and differences over the goals pursued by each individual are the salt of everyday life, never taken for certain or equal to itself, and whose fundamental balance and ethical purpose is always being renewed.

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

Flattop, Shaky, Pruneface or The Mole are some of the villains that attract the attention of readers of the thrilling strips of the greatest crime comic, Dick Tracy, devised and produced by a master of comics, Chester Gould, from 1931 to 1977. (The origin of this extraordinary comic is told by a writer of detective novels such as Ellery Queen in Queen, 1970, although in reality it is a couple of writers: Frederick Dannay and Manfred B. Lee). Against the endless range of criminals and gangsters who stand in opposition to Chicago's adamant policeman, these characters have the mark of an eccentric, monstrous and horrible difference written on their bodies. Their faces reveal a correspondence between moral character and criminal identity in which some scholars of Gould's work have seen links to the psychiatric theories of Cesare Lombroso.

However, for us and their audience, these anti-heroes have had another meaning above all. From the perspective of sociology of cultural consumption, they are of interest as figures open to a non-superficial investigation of the relationship between media and the singular capacity of individuals. It is no coincidence that these Gould characters achieve great success and become objects of love, sharing and worship. For example, when Flattop dies at the end of a 1943-1944 story, American comic readers are so moved that they organise wakes, memorial services and funerals, as if they had lost a real friend.

Chester Gould's comic is famous for the sympathy shown towards the villains, for giving readers free rein to feel unbridled emotional energy, expressed in testimony, actions and public statements. Readers' sympathy grows in a special way when the bad guys, marked by dissonant physical features or unpleasant bodies, connect with a particular sensibility, with the ability to express a singular way of being in the world. Chester Gould uses the typical expressive feature of comics: a figurative simplification that marks in figure and behaviour the opposition between evil and good, the latter personified by the guardian of law and order. But Gould knows all the narrative and dramatic mechanisms that make mass consumption work too well; he is too clever not to give some villains a chance to win the hearts and imaginations of readers.

Flattop and The Mole, for example, show diversity in their relationship with the law or with the harshness of city life, or even simply with the fact of existing and facing the difficulty of the relationship that each individual has and feels towards others. Even with the negative connotation of the crime and a secondary punishment on the narrative level, they generate very strong identifications out of empathy for their individual human condition. Readers recognise in Gould's characters the anti-social nature of the most authentic human relationships, of deep bonds. By overturning stereotypes of physical deformity, these Dick Tracy villains unveil what unites those who are different, what they have in common with those who think they are different from them. Despite the physical difference, several skills - rather than vices - can be identified in their actions, honoured in the challenge of living; they do not mean abandoning the relationship with others, but the ability to overcome one's own limits, to experience the impossible.

Flattop is sympathetic in the direct way he converses with Dick Tracy, without cruelty; even though he has kidnapped the aquiline-nosed cop, he reassures him, embodying an intelligent, lively and witty way of dealing with the cop's "stubbornness". Flattop is an inimitable dandy in his way of thinking, of reacting to occasions, asserting an unfettered individuality that does not shrink from the puritanical and normalising gaze of "civil society". This amuses readers, but it also impacts the desire to "free oneself" from all

conditioning deep inside. Gould thus frames Flattop almost as the victim of a chain of circumstances and encounters in which others try to take advantage of him, leading to a tragic outcome. Although he must be punished for his crimes, death slowly comes full circle on Flattop, and this makes readers feel an uncomfortable sense of defeat, a melancholy sympathy for the fateful destiny that ends his adventure. For this reason, the end of the story seems to amount to the death of a close person; with the death of Flathead, the audience loses the opportunity to recognise themselves in the characteristics - courage, wit, cunning - that he has demonstrated.

The character of The Mole is just as interesting. He lives locked in the underground, able to move under the streets; like a mole, he stirs up earth with his hands to survive a collapse; marked on his face - similar to the face of an animal that digs tunnels - he expresses a clear affective compression, due to a forced, unwanted solitude. Even the adamant policeman, Dick Tracy, is impressed by this outcast, capable like few others of overcoming the oppressive isolation that has made him unintentionally violent: at Christmas he brings him presents and sweets to his cell.

In Chester Gould's comic, beneath the web of rigid puritanical judgement on the maintenance of law and order in the American cities of the violent 1930s and 1940s, through the conventional or schematically expressionistic masks with which the figure of the villain is portrayed, penetrate marks with which a non-casual attention to the condition of those who are different, but capable, emerges. With Gould's anti-heroes, the ability of the different criminal is socially punished, but humanly redeemed. Some remarkable layers of communication in inter-individual experience, situated beyond any words or conventions, are fixed through them. The collective imaginary of the mainstream consumer culture industry such as the comic book - especially in the classic era from the 1920s to the 1950s - proves to be an anything but pacifying, rather ambivalent field, in which the experience of the individual, his or her uniqueness and diversity, is worth at least a little more than written rules and physical barriers.

DIVERSITY OF HEROES

Within the wage range of adventure heroes of the comic strips of the late 1920s and the 1930s and 1940s, diversity permeates through various elements that mark the very individual physiognomy of the heroes themselves.

It may be the difference due to the dual nature of wild man and English lord at the same time that marks the figure of Tarzan (in the great strips of Harold Foster, Burne Hogart and all the later illustrators of the Ape Man who succeeded these two masters, among whom I personally prefer Joe Kubert, who reinvented him graphically from the sixties to the eighties). The dual nature of this character explains on the one hand the activation of his primordial rage (anger and muscular effort, leading to the famous wild cry that spreads through the trees of the jungle), and on the other hand his civil (though always temporary) belonging to an aristocratic culture - that of the English nobility of the early 20th century - which demands control, good manners and clear rationality in behaviour. The result of this dual nature leads to a degree of unresolved harmony between the two constituent elements of the character, which not coincidentally remain constantly on the verge of colliding with each other, putting Tarzan's very identity at risk.

However, the diversity of the 1930s adventure comic hero is made explicit through other equally important figures. In *The Masked Man* (by screenwriter Lee Falk and

illustrator Ray Moore) it manifests itself in the red-striped suit that covers the face and body of this vigilante hero of the jungle (territory that productively mixes African and Indian jungle), without the reader ever seeing his face uncovered (only his fiancée, Diana Palmer, will have the privilege of seeing his physiognomy live when, four decades later, in the 1970s, she finally marries him).

In *The Masked Man* comics, the absence of the exposed face in close-up views remains constant (it is, therefore, a face that has disappeared for decades in the illustrations first of Ray Moore and then of Wilson McCoy and Sy Barry, who always draw him in the scarlet striped suit or, when he is almost naked, always with his back turned, or also in the role of Mr. Walker, an anonymous citizen wearing dark glasses and a hat that, again, cover his intimate image). This significant deprivation of the hero's face is the consequence of a very significant simplification, carried out by Lee Falk, of the character's life (who would like to have a normal life, get married, have children, enjoy the advantages of a jungle free of prohibitions, but also provided with hedonistic and paradisiacal advantages) in the symbol of the nemesis of pirates, criminals and evildoers (the sign of the skull that propagates his image of the avenger), and of the immortal avenger (in reality, The Masked Man is mortal like all humans), but the oath and the commitment to assume the role and restore his symbolic authority are passed down from father to son, for many generations, in pursuit of the myth of a resilient immortality of the symbol of the skull and its eternal justice). The difference of the hero lies, in other words, in his sacrifice, which is neither exposed nor made clear to the eyes of others, but confined in an unalterable secret.

Two years before *The Masked Man* (which started his stories in 1936), Lee Falk created his other great character, Mandrake, in 1934. Initially a magician capable of truly changing the reality around him, and transformed over the years into a mesmerising illusionist, Mandrake's diversity lies in his clear dandy-like behaviour. Always dressed in a cloak and top hat, his face marked by a perfect moustache, Mandrake's pose is constantly that of an individual who seems indifferent to the mysterious phenomena he is confronted with. Not because he feels distant from things, but because he knows how to interpret, recognise and modify the hidden structure of phenomena: reality manifests itself in its sometimes apparent coordinates, and therefore Mandrake's magic-illusion consists in revealing the visual fabric hidden (often secretly) in the not basic but distorted garb in which reality, on the surface, presents itself to the reader's eyes. Mandrake's diversity lies in the superior competence with which his dandy eye reformulates and rearranges the image of reality (which, obviously, in the comics of Lee Falk and Phil Davis, corresponds to the reality of the drawn image itself). It is an essential experience for the reader of the 1930s and 1940s and the decades that followed, as he or she is confronted with the enigmas of the visual field on which the communicative character of comics is based. However, Mandrake always manages to unveil appearances: there are no camouflages or visual deceptions, because this hero, apparently indifferent and superior, captures them, examines them and penetrates their constitutive filigree, unmasking their possible deceptions.

The last hero I wish to analyse here (but not precisely the last, but rather the greatest hero of the forties: blond and athletic, the eternal boyfriend) has the advantage of a white body and a western soul that make him the champion of the protagonists of adventure comics, especially for his striking eroticism, capable of igniting tensions and passions in all the female figures he comes across. It is, of course, Flash Gordon, drawn from 1934 to the

end of 1944 by Alex Raymond, undisputed master of glamorous drawing, reminiscent in its forms of sixteenth-century painting and the erotic divism of Hollywood cinema (Flash Gordon has recently revived critical attention; Tirino, 2019).

The Flash Gordon strips represent the climax of superb drawing in terms of the postures of the bodies and the audacity of the scenery. Raymond shows his character in poses where the dynamism of gestures is locked in perennial tensions and where beauty is shamelessly exposed. Gordon is the hero of the charismatic evidence of the strong, athletic body (the male one), just as his heroines (starting with Dale Arden, his brunette girlfriend) are the hero of the feminine charm discovered in the forms wrapped in tiny, unstuffy garments. The phantasmagoria of the worlds he traverses on the planet Mongo (along with Dale and Dr. Zarkov) allows the author of this extraordinary comic to contrast the typical firmness of the gesture of Gordon and his friends, as well as his enemies, with the wonderful diversity of environments that make up the geo-environmental variety of the existing realms on Mongo, a planet that corresponds to the fantastic world of the paratechnological and paranaturalist imagination without limits of conception and graphics of Raymond's masterful drawing.

Gordon is not the only blond, athletic, adventure comic book hero caught up in amazing and wonderful stories. There are others who project in the comic strips a brand strongly inclined towards unknown destinations and infinite exploration just like him: for example, Brick Bradford, by William Ritt and Clarence Gray -created in 1933, a year before the Flash Gordon strips- is particularly interesting for the themes that mix myths and scientific perspectives that emerged in the thirties, such as the first robots and the theory of relativity.

Both the characters of Ritt and Gray and Raymond confirm the typology of the "wasp" hero: white, American, dynamic and representative of that courageous entrepreneurial spirit that wins all challenges and survives all trials. Rather than being different in their physical-spiritual configuration, they appear as the confirmation of a type, which in its own way is, however, a stereotype, a figure that aspires to reach the top. For some interpreters of these American comics, they are the proof of a cosmopolitan and domineering imaginary whole, the confirmation of a phantasmagorical project that underlies the will to power of Western capitalism. However, the overall judgement of these comics cannot be reduced to something so schematic and reductive[4].

In composing the repertoires of myth, fantastic imaginary and scientific-technological imaginary, these adventure comic works of the 1930s do not surrender to a univocal will or to a unilateral project of conquest of the imaginary (like myths - foundational narratives of civilisations - they exhibit both sacrifice and pain, victory over death and conquest of the future at the cost of a tragic awareness of the finitude of life; on philosophies of myth in the twentieth century, Leghissa and Manera, 2015; on myth and comic, Polli and Binelli, 2019). These comics decompose and together rather recompose the imaginary, using the structuring of a complicity between the speed and beauty of the stories and the extraordinary appropriateness of the figure that stimulates readers to complete their concrete vision.

Raymond's comic (and his character, who is a hero subjected to all the audacious tests of preserving his identity) stands out above all for the extraordinary and unique graphic-pictorial composition of the illustrations, for the eroticism that emanates from the bodies and for the scenographic design of the environments that host his adventures. In short, the diversity of Gordon's character lies in the capacity with which he identifies

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himself with the ways in which the surface of the drawing is transformed into a multidimensional universe, in which not only the compositional lines of the illustration reconnect the comic with a cultural pictorial-artistic repertoire, but the colour, the dynamism between the vignettes and their arrangement, the extensive amplitude of the drawn spaces turn the reader's gaze to radical thresholds of the imagination thrown between the present and the future.

DIVERSITY OF SUPERHEROES AND DIVERSITY OF MUTANTS

In the historical period from the era of adventure comics to that of superheroes (from 1938 onwards), diversity becomes a specific connotation of the comic book character, capable of surpassing all limits of what is possible. There is no superhero (from Superman to Batman, Captain America, Human Torch, Hawkman, Aquaman, Flash or Green Lantern) who does not incorporate the diversity that distinguishes his body, which is almost always shown in the costume in which the superhero's secret identity is hidden, but which, above all, is the signature of his power: flying, moving at supersonic speed, having a bullet-resistant steel body, supervision and superhearing, but also hiding in the night and having superior technology. Again, dominating the seas, being an invincible super-soldier with enormous strength and endurance, etc. The diversity of the superhero focuses particularly on the potential of his or her body, whose energies derive from a technological force, from a power of the universe or of nature, and which transforms the "average" or standard human body into something that escapes the limits of the biological or cultural. The road for the superhero to reach that stage is not easy. He has to go through a period of training (for Superman it is the childhood and adolescence spent in Smallville, a small rural town, before going to live as an adult in Metropolis; for everyone else, it is a matter of time - often preparatory to his presentation on the public and social scene - during which he has to train himself in a kind of self-training, often sporting and sometimes a mixture of scientific-technical knowledge and tests of the various skills of the new body that make superheroes perform when they have to intervene).

On settlement of consumer society after the Second World War, i.e. the turn of the screw between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the superhero imaginary expresses - in the general reformulation carried out by Marvel Comics under the leadership of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby - how much and how intensely the personal diversity of the superhero counts in the crafting of stories that strike the imagination of the large international readership. Bodies made of stone (The Thing), of soft, stretchy fabric (the Plastic Man who is also a scientist and inventor), an invisible Woman who generates an impenetrable force field, a young and rebellious Human Torch, a high school student with enhanced spider powers (Spider-Man), a blind man with sonar built into his body and an athlete like no other (Daredevil), a normal-bodied scientist who transforms into a green-bodied colossus magnified in both strength and the inscrutability of radically different thinking (Hulk), a doctor with injured feet - almost disabled - who transforms into a blond-haired Norse god (Thor), a technocrat with a wounded heart on the verge of collapse from a heart attack who nonetheless equips himself with heavy robotic armour with nuclear energy and luminous power (later, over the decades, reconverted into an integrated suit of armour (Thor), a technocrat with a wounded heart on the verge of collapse from a heart attack who nonetheless equips himself with heavy robotic armour with nuclear energy and luminous power (later, over the decades. The suit is a skin-integrated suit, genetically

embedded in the brain and musculature, intelligent and mutable armour that brings back the conflict between pursuing the collective good or the strategic and necessary interests of political and military power that strongly conditions, and sometimes dents, Iron Man's personality).

It is a range of differences (listed here in a non-exhaustive manner) which, while manifesting themselves in the eyes of the readers of the sixties, in a decade of strong changes in the media imaginary (literature, comics, cinema and television), undoubtedly reaffirms a singularity that shows the character of the period. Diversity becomes a quality of the affirmative configuration of the superhero but, at the same time, it reveals a problem of identity, personal history and lived memory.

Later, from the late 1960s onwards, another qualitative leap took place: from the singular, individual diversity of the superhero to that of a whole group. Mutants (in the visual and narrative formulation of the X-Men, from the original by Lee and Kirby to the conscious and erudite by Chris Claremont and later authors) show the diversity not only of the individual (from Wolverine to Phoenix to Storm, Beast, Cyclops, Angel, Iceman and all the others), but of the community and of the mutant species itself versus the human species, with whom they have political relations that are not always resolved, resulting both in positive relations and racism or intolerance that remove the idea of the United States as a country with a uniform culture, showing how negative and destructive reactions erupt at the mere appearance, on the social scene, of the mutants themselves.

From differentiating between species and communities and the emergence of a political and collective diversity of mutants to the need for a homeland of their own, separate from other territories, there is little distance: the group of mutants (which overcomes the first phase of the singular recognition of the different mutant individuals, gathering its members initially in the school of Dr. Xavier, a wheelchair-bound mutant with a very powerful brain capable of reading thoughts and penetrating the minds of others) encounters several in the course of their misadventures. Xavier, a mutant with inert legs who moves around in a wheelchair, but with a very powerful brain capable of reading the thoughts and penetrating the minds of others, finds several in the course of their misadventures, but soon loses them (from a slowly sinking island, and thus a temporary and limited homeland, to other places where mutants take refuge to defend their community, in a prolonged exodus awaiting a promised land that never comes). Diversity becomes a social condition that opposes one group to another (mutants vs. humans) and between them the political game develops that can lead either to outright war or to the diplomatic terrain (difficult, laborious and unbalanced with hidden or arduous dangers) of compromise and coexistence, constantly at risk of dissolution.

DIVERSITY IN ITALIAN "BLACK" COMICS

From December 1962, and for much of the 1960s, the phenomenon of so-called "black" comics spread in Italy. Small monthly books (inaugurated by the success of *Diabolik* and later his competitors, from *Kriminal* to *Satanik*, including several other characters that last a few years on the newsstands and, over the next decade, disappear from the monthly comics market) that, although they were introduced into a pre-existing cultural repertoire (that of masked and criminal characters, such as Fantômas, Lupin or Rocambole), exceeded the expectations of the readers of the time. In fact, Diabolik (and his partner, Eva Kant), as well as Kriminal and Satanik are criminals conscious of being

criminals and placed without a shadow of a doubt on the other side of the law. Cunning, dangerous and capable of camouflage, but also endowed with a particular, unpredictable and non-univocal ethic. They show the capacity to oppose their own judgement of what is real, not stereotyped, to the institutional norms or common beliefs of techno-modern society where inter-class oppression unbalanced by courts and law enforcement is in force. In their own way, they are rebels capable of transgressing the limits of the Law, without scruples, but bringing to light something profound that readers appreciate for the bravery, the daring, the game between good and bad constantly placed between various polarities, not always predictable and never naive.

The diversity of Italian black comics is distinctly cultural and ethical. They result in strong reactions from the political and religious representatives of the time, who stupidly confuse the planes of real communications with those of the forms of the public imagination, leaving them dumbfounded and surprised. They completely fail to understand - in their basic pedagogical and univocal logic - that the ways of life of the consumer society are modifying social behaviour (between generations, sexual differences, family roles, etc.) in the course of a decade in which modernity crumbles all forms of collective coexistence that previously ensured relative stability. For this reason, these black comics are the subject of frequent complaints, which they face up to without hesitation and thanks to which they win the attention of a public that appreciates them and follows them with affection, especially Diabolik, born from the pen of the sisters Angela and Luciana Giussani, but also Kriminal and Satanik, the fruit of the creative collaboration of Magnus (Roberto Raviola) and Bunker (Luciano Secchi). On the other hand, such characters do not remain fixed in unchanging formulas; they are capable of adapting to the times and of revealing, at the right moment of maturity, the background and motivations of gestures and points of view that increasingly prove their ability to surprise and convince about the ethical dimension of their actions.

Among these three great characters of black comics, Satanik is particularly significant precisely because of the question of his diversity. As a female character, her gender diversity emerges as a very present fact, both in her physical characterisation (Marny Bannister, a young woman with a horribly disfigured face who, thanks to a potion, becomes a very sensual vampire) and in her moral sphere, being an avenger gifted with a memory without hesitation or doubt. Satanik's publications combine references to the imaginary of horror and fantasy literature and films with a crude depiction of sexual relations between genders, where the beauty of the female body is always a multi-faced mirror, hiding pain, loneliness, hurt feelings and violent desires for survival of the stronger over the weaker. Satanik remains to date the prototype of an irreducible diversity - characterised by gender difference and reaffirmed in a still profoundly macho era - which, being obscure and marked by a cursed intimate suffering that cannot be conquered, denotes a possible place within which socially diversity itself finally obtains the legitimisation to claim its own reasons.

DIVERSITY OF AUTHORS

In the second half of the 1960s, so-called auteur comics began to appear in France and Italy. In 1965, in *Linus* publications in Italy, the illustrator Guido Crepax inaugurated the Valentina stories, while thanks to the Ivaldi publishing house in Genoa, the first great Corto Maltese adventure by Hugo Pratt began in 1967: *The Ballad of the Salty Sea.* For his part,

another extraordinary illustrator, Dino Battaglia, after having created in 1965 *I cinque della Selena*, a beautiful science fiction comic based on a script by Mino Milani, where his excellent graphic and experimental ability, inspired by 20th century painting, emerged, also began to publish horror comics in the magazine *Linus*, taken from authors such as Poe, Stevenson, Hoffmann, Lovecraft, Maupassant and others, later collected in the beautiful anthology *Totentanz* (1972). At the same time, Guido Buzzelli, who was returning to comics after a period devoted to painting, created a prototype graphic novel in 1966 as *La rivolta dei racchi*, followed shortly afterwards by other interesting and complex comics such as *I Labirinti* (1968) and *Zil Zelub* (1971).

In France and Belgium, great authors such as Giraud, Goscinny, Uderzo and even classics such as Hergé, who are part of the national publishing scene and who have always been at the forefront in terms of the dynamics between genre stereotypes and narrative innovations (Pintor-Iranzo, 2017, pp. 298-309), they established themselves in the same period as the main authors of the modernisation of comics, with a great response of convinced support from the vast reading public.

These auteur comics transfer to the written-visual medium the tendency (editorial, generically political) to highlight the singularity of the authors, a tendency which, since the beginning of the 1960s, has already permeated cinema (the expressive modernity of auteur cinema and the "new cinema" which, starting with the French nouvelle vague group, spread to various national cinematographies, from Italy itself to other European, Asian and Latin American countries). The diversity of this publishing process has something important, but also overvalued, based on the historicised and unrestrained need to socially reclaim the distinctive quality of works of authorship from which there is no intention of turning back. It is a complex process, both editorially and culturally, related to an audience that demands more, and which involves comics in this general change that, in the meantime, directs both the panorama of cinema and that of generational cultural consumption of the moment (from literature to music, passing through the visual arts, cinema and comics themselves).

From the 1960s to the 1970s, the experimentation of authors spread like wildfire; in the mid-1970s, it became more radical in France with the Humanoïdes Associés group, which published the magazine *Métal Hurlant* (highlighting authors such as Moebius/Giraud, Dionnet, Druillet, Bilal, etc.). These authors step on the accelerator at the crossroads between the imaginary of science fiction, utopia/dystopia, the fissure of visual and rhythmic perceptions, and the design of strips. They are a few years ahead of the experimentation on the filmic image that appears thanks to the irruption of digital technologies at the end of the decade and, in particular, they show that there are no iron traditions in the expressiveness of comics, but that the experimental field has 360 degrees, that the white of the drawable page is a background without limits, and that the interferences and transfers between image media (sound or synaesthetic) are absolutely fertile and launched towards the future.

Comic authors - in Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, etc. - emphasise the particular diversity of the mark that distinguishes their work, the inexhaustible experimentation that intervenes on the communicative forms of the medium and that, from that moment on, raises the degree of significant contrast between the narrative-visual renewal and the serialisation of the illustrated stories. This is a knot that holds a series of elements together: firstly, the diversity-quality of the mark that each author imprints on his illustrations and design, a diversity that, on the one hand, refers to the meaning of the

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image discussed above and, on the other hand, highlights the great individuality of the proposals; on the other hand, the narrative quality that moves towards unexpected and unannounced horizons, both in the things represented and in the semiotic-expressive mode and in the perspective used to tell the story; pushing the publishing system to try unknown paths with the risk of losses, but also with the ambition of conquering unpublished spaces of publication and with general consensus (therefore, with the promise of great profits); the declared contrast with the ideological-political critique of the institutional organs of social control, i.e. to travel without any repression into almost forbidden territories and contents, such as eroticism (in an extreme form, pornography), political-historical analysis, emblematic and critical areas of horror, of unabashed social diagnosis, of the imagination freed at last from restrictions or ties.

In this line, the publishing panorama of comics (especially, but not only, in Europe) extends in a quite plural number of singularities, all different and all significant, which testify that, from that moment on, there are no brakes to the expressiveness of the medium, but a vast opening of an imaginary without dominators, or rules fixed for all, but with entirely legitimate paths (though not all equally biting or capable of marking the general and generational culture) without restrictions, obligatory channels or coercive preferences being imposed.

UNDERGROUND DIVERSITY

The American production of the so-called underground comics, mainly located in California or New York, took hold in the 1960s (Martínez-Pinna, 2019, discusses its evolution over several decades), driven by the interest that a series of independent and off-market films aroused in that same period, films that from the 1950s onwards travelled the terrain and expressive paths not taken by mainstream Hollywood productions and which were aimed at an audience liberated both in individual and collective behaviour and in consumption dynamics. This audience if made up of various diversities (political or sexual orientations, life and socialisation patterns, etc.), which grows mainly in or near metropolitan areas, and which does not adapt to the usual ways of life.

The underground has different channels, passes from one medium to another and registers the socio-cultural advance of an existential quest that seeks to break with the mere productivity of the industrial age. It is interested in art, but not art institutionalised in the market or knowledge formalised and recognised by academies or established traditions, but art that practises alternative forms, following a process of identity lived during the search itself.

So-called underground comics (published in magazines and pages at very low cost, almost always in black and white) draw on a variety of cultural references: certain beat literature of the post-World War II period, jazz and be bop, the chiaroscuro brand - sometimes apparently improvised - of American horror comics, certain forms of symbolic violence of the latter, sometimes taking stylistic features from pornographic comics (banned and distributed only for adults) to exercise a right of criticism and representation otherwise denied. It explores the limits of parody, of political diatribe, of the grotesque, of the contradictory, of the deranged and almost psychoanalytical story, or of the transgressive behaviour (between sexism and politics) of the hippie generation and of youth communities steeped in utopianism and radicalism. He soon had his models, his

authors of reference: Gilbert Sheldon's *Freak Brothers* and Robert Crumb's work above all.

An author who influenced the freak and beatnik generation of the sixties, Crumb is the famous author of *The Fritz Cat*, but also of the comics of a truly unique character, *Mr. Natural*, created from 1966 onwards. The comics of Mr. Natural (a self-righteous or ascetic man with a big white beard, whose stories have the highest rate of narrative and comic paradox, where every point of view about life, the real and the social, is totally subverted by the character's positive and negative adventures) are a kind of cognitive and arbitrary immersion in the meaninglessness that surrounds the lives of individuals and American (particularly Californian) civilisation, in a period of great collective upheaval, where logic and behavioural habits are subject to radical upheavals, and where the practical can become celestial and abstract or vice versa.

Through the character of Mr. Crumb asserts a radically different way of thinking about illustrated images, which in their combinations (narrative and comic) can bring out disenchantment and, on the other hand, the fascination of a gaze that knows how to reach out to truths that are as close as they are difficult to grasp (for example, what are the links between earthly lives and cosmological contributions? Are they identifiable in any way?) In short, the stories of Mr. Natural constructs a sum of diversity of thought, or radically divergent thought, which has become detached both from ordinary logic and from the direct link to the objectivity or physicality of things and people. They pursue a kind of crossover between the surface and the depth of the world, without primacy or subordination between one or the other dimension and, ultimately, without conditioning approaches.

More than a decade after the publication of Crumb's great comics, another author trained in underground comics, Art Spiegelman, created a work that has become famous and has been intensely studied and debated, *Maus* (1986-1991), which takes up the critical theme of the Shoah (Crisóstomo-Gálvez, 2018). The experience of life in a concentration camp of a Jew is told by a father to his son alternating with the present time, so that the Shoah is not past history, but an entrenched and propagated event in contemporary lives. Maus has above all the particularity of highlighting the typological singularities of the characters by using the anthropomorphic marking of the face of animal species (as in Disney comics). Spiegelman underlines the value of the anthropomorphic characteristic in extracting the character of the characters: Jews-mice, Nazis-cats, Poles-pigs, etc. In his illustrations, the diversity of the animal faces expresses, implicitly and explicitly, the relationship of domination, subordination and aggression, or the survival strategies, as well as the ethical diversity, established between the ethnic groups-species involved in the events of the Second World War, experienced in an intense and painful way.

There is no doubt that, had he not practised and trained as an author in the world of underground comics, Spiegelman would not have been able to follow the path that led him to conceive and propose visually and narratively a graphic novel like Maus, in which, at a certain point, it is no longer the declared symbolic character of the figures with which the author reconstructs a dramatic and lacerating human condition that counts, but the emotional intensity within which the events unfold in such a way as to make the reader's eyes, mind and heart fall into them. This is the underground mark of the comic: transforming itself and conquering its own undoubted artistic autonomy in a story that is distinguished by a fascinating and self-conscious journey of knowledge and pathos.

DIVERSITY OF SYMPTOMS: FROM RANXEROX TO ZANARDI AND DYLAN DOG

The cultural heritage of black comics, mixed with that of the underground and the expressive and political research of the authors, is transformed, at the crossroads of the years between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, into a period of strong editorial innovations that, in Italy (but also, in different forms, country by country, in Europe and elsewhere), change the future of authors and, at the same time, that of serial comics. It is a complex story of change in the world of comics itself within social communication (Frezza, 2017). On the one hand, the last two decades of the 20th century witnessed an increase in the influence (and sometimes the power) of television in a culture that has become post-modern, and on the other hand, comics are gradually losing their universal-popular-serial character to establish themselves as a medium aimed at an increasingly selective public.

At the time of these adjustments, the culture of communications is, at the turn of the millennium, definitively and globally shifting from so-called "analogue" to "digital" cultures and technologies. The postmodern fades in that cloud - still diffuse and growing, but undeniable - of so-called "digital" cultural processes and forms. Networks change the ways in which the public participates and the very ways in which large communication networks are structured. Comics do not remain oblivious to these great transformations, but penetrate them in the new occasions with which they propose stories, myths, characters, histories, editorial formats in keeping with the times (this is the space conquered by the so-called "graphic novel" which, however, although it increases the level of narrative quality and expressive research, does not manage to make up for the loss of the great flows of popular communication maintained, during almost the entire 20th century, by the daily comic strips and serial comics). On the one hand, the graphic novel becomes a space in which the diversity of themes and stories stands out with considerable prominence, and on the other it assimilates the comic to the dimension of the book, of the long story (outside all seriality, interwoven and complex with original and non-original prescribed ambitions), aiming at an experimental narrative quality, but sometimes at the expense of the mordacity and originality of the graphic brand, and sometimes the other way round.

It is difficult to summarise a period that took place four decades ago, in which the position of comics within the changes of the digital era goes through several phases and tests possible ways of channelling the changes without losing importance between the different media. In any case, some characters and certain regular comic series (periodical, monthly) manage to become general representatives both of the new generations and of the spirit of the times, which points to a different consciousness from the existing one.

In this partial review of how diversity spread at different levels in the production of comics, I would like to take a particular view of the 1980s. It is a period of tensions and changes open to different conclusions at all levels (economic, political, social, media, cultural, local-global) which, nevertheless, expresses contradictions, collective moods and signs of change that continue to this day. Sometimes they remain unresolved, sometimes they show a long continuity established between today's digital age and the first emergence of postmodernity which, in the 1980s, moves, still unsure, towards the structures that today characterise digital civilisation.

In Italy, the 1980s is a period symptomatic of successive socio-cultural transformations and the comics allow us to recognise certain figures and characters who accumulate the meaning of these changes. I am referring to three particularly significant ones. The first

important figure is *Ranxerox*, the almost android, half-cyborg, slum-dweller living in a chaotic, futuristic post-metropolis, first born (in 1978) in the pages of the underground magazine *Cannibale* (with the initial illustrations by the same scriptwriter, Stefano Tamburini) and then entrusted to the inimitable graphic talent of Tanino Liberatore in the pages of *Frigidaire* magazine (from 1980 onwards). Ranxerox has a personality that cannot be defined, Tamburini himself defined him as a "synthetic type" and the moods of this character act in an inscrutable way, from helpless tenderness (towards his teenage girlfriend, Lubna) to violent and aggressive reactions (towards those who prevent him in any way from being anarchically free, expressing a basic rebellion without precedent or conditioning).

The environmental imaginary in which Ranxerox lives is the same as in a film like *Blade Runner*, and Tamburini and Liberatore anticipate the scenographic modelling of the post-metropolis of the cinema of the following decades through their magnificent illustrations. The absolutely unprecedented nature of the character must be underlined: what is a slumlord type (synthetic-android, human-like technological body without brakes and self-awareness) but the result of a radical maladjustment to the norms of a capitalist society where chaos reigns rather than the viable horizon of a hopeful life? His gestures and reactions move in a setting where the global catastrophe is already engraved in the features of the body (muscular and fascinating in its own way, Ranxerox is thrown into self-destruction or deactivation of the body, that is, to find himself undone and broken in his own system of functioning), a setting where there is nothing but the pure desire to consume (and inject drugs), and where sociability is a clear phantom, a drift of meaning already settled.

Ranxerox's diversity is thus openly anti-social and perhaps even anti-human, set at the point of combining biological organisms and technological devices that, while trying to integrate, turn out to be dysfunctional, at the very least eccentric if not maladapted, without rules or codes of conduct; in short, prey to the chaos and nothingness in which they move, lost and self-destructive. Due to these constituent elements, Ranxerox remains a beautiful image that anticipates the post-apocalyptic sense that, from the 1980s until today, nourishes the futuristic imaginary that runs through post-modernity (the last two decades of the 20th century) and expands and reaches extremes, in various forms, in today's digital culture.

The second figure worth mentioning is the character of Zanardi, created by Andrea Pazienza in the pages of Frigidaire from 1981 and continued in various magazines (*Alter alter, Corto Maltese, Comic Art*) until 1988, when Pazienza died at the age of thirty. Zanardi's diversity is present both in the cold look and in the wickedness that derives - in the words of the author himself, Pazienza - from "emptiness, the most absolute emptiness". Zanardi moves with the cold cynicism of those who not only take advantage of anyone or anything for their own benefit, but who have no limits or conditions of conscience. He may be - almost - the absolute evil, whose face shows no wrinkles or minimal signs of reconsideration, driven by the strategic tendency to push the others (his two companions, Petrilli and Colasanti, with whom he shares the adventures) towards the excess of darkness, brutal sexuality or violence that is more moral than physical. Zanardi's diversity is symptomatic of the absence of any socio-cultural adherence to a life project; for this extreme and unrepeatable character, life is nothing more than a vicious circle of predation in search of a pleasure that is consumed and of which nothing remains in the end. All the dispersion, measured both in behaviour and in the tendency to wear out, to

erode, to exploit without any respect, to waste time and the momentum of life. However, there is no moral judgement in Pazienza's illustrations (nor is there any intention here to judge the character of misunderstood moral positions!), but rather they show the scrutinising gaze, the lucid and irrepressible realisation of the borderline already crossed from radical disenchantment to the empty end of the gesture.

This figure created by Pazienza's genius is an implicit indictment of the lack of vital impulse that pervades the era of Western capitalism at the dawn of post-modernity. Even today, forty years later, this accusation still makes sense (although it is fuelled by nonsense and the declared absence of positive intentions) in the age of globalisation and the universal connection of digital networks. Zanardi's extremely negative symptomatology is the dark mirror in which the image of the Westernised world continues to be reflected, beyond any semblance of (useless) order and (battered, ultimately non-existent) planning.

The third character symptomatic of a diversity already rooted in the Italian comic market and reflected in the best serial production (that of the publishing house directed by Sergio Bonelli) is *Dylan Dog*. It appeared in a monthly publication in 1986, created by Tiziano Sclavi and continued after him by various authors who kept the general structure of the series both in the characterisation of the main characters and in the way the stories were structured. It is a horror comic that re-launches, re-packages, relocates and re-adapts the horror imaginary of cinema based on figures such as zombies, vampires, werewolves and other traditional monsters, to which it adds others of its own creation (such as the killer rabbit); this type of horror comes from the cinema of authors such as John Carpenter, George Romero, Joe Dante, Tobe Hooper, etc.., a cinema that constitutes the starting point of Dylan Dog's imaginary (nicknamed "the nightmare investigator"), promoting over thirty-five years (one after the other) a fermenting place of stories that return a rather dramatic vision of contemporaneity.

This series (which in the early 1990s witnessed a consistent and perhaps unexpected generational/era success, reaching one million copies per month in three parallel series that were later reduced in the following decades)

> "non si limita ad una rappresentazione anti-mitologica sulla realtà contemporanea. Si dilunga, anzi, su qualsiasi zona possa comporre l'intreccio processuale della realtà e della finzione: il cinema, la letteratura "colta" e quella di serie, il mito e la fiaba, la science fiction, la pittura e i geroglifici, la storia convenzionale dei generi, le tecnologie della comunicazione, la tv, i satelliti, i freaks, il razzismo antico e quello recente dei naziskin, i mondi paralleli e le voragini paradossali del viaggio nello spazio-tempo" (Frezza, 1999, p. 200)

The creator and scriptwriter Tiziano Sclavi and his successors use and reuse conventions and stereotypes, adapting them to singular plots; they contaminate reality and narration; on several occasions they impost a metadiscursive and metanarrative level of comic stories that, not by chance, intrigues and fascinates an excellent reader like Umberto Eco (later taken up and drawn as a character in an episode of the series). Among the published works, there is one in particular - often cited as the masterpiece by the author of the series, Tiziano Sclavi, who produces it together with Mauro Marcheselli and Andrea Venturi - whose protagonist explicitly gives the episode its title: Johnny Freak (published in June 1993, no. 81 of the original series). Johnny is a young man with no legs, but despite his physical peculiarity he possesses extraordinary creative abilities. He is

"Un diseredato dai propri genitori che, nonostante tutto, preserva l'innocenza del Figlio. Johnny è adottato da Dylan ed è, per poco tempo, sottratto a un sacrificio imposto da biechi e inumani trapiantatori di organi. Dunque non a caso Johnny - salvato da Dylan e da una tenera infermiera - si ficca di notte tra i due innamorati, come qualsiasi bambino nel letto dei genitori. Johnny è lo specchio che raffigura la condizione dei lettori: diseredati e maledetti ai quali l'autore di Dylan Dog consegna un futuro senza certezze e speranze" (Frezza, 1999, p. 203).

In other words, the condition of being different, and the very emotional diversity of the character of Johnny Freak (a disabled young man, abandoned by those who gave him life, but with an almost innocent tenderness and unparalleled abilities to live and restore a sense of how he feels and perceives), allows us to intuit much of the state in which the comic's readers themselves live. In other words, diversity is a condition that goes beyond the illustrated page and points to a specific maturation of the reader's gaze after which there is no turning back. On the one hand, the comic reaches a plane of coincidence between *pathos* and politics; on the other, it builds a bridge to the future, so that, despite the context in which Dylan Dog's stories move, the outcome is not prescribed or pre-established, giving diversity a decisive point in its favour.

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Notes

[1] The great Italian-born American director Frank Capra, in his autobiography (Capra, 1971), says he is an admirer of Herriman's work, which he considers "a delightful combination of wisdom and wit". Capra once asked the great artist what gender Krazy Kat was. Herriman answered: *"Non lo so. Un giorno provai a pensarci; immaginai che Kat fosse una gatta, disegnai persino alcuni fumetti in cui era incinta. Ma non era più Kat; era troppo preoccupata per i suoi problemi, come in una soap-opera…Mi resi conto allora che Kat è come un elfo. E gli elfi non hanno sesso. Kat non può essere un gatto o una gatta. Kat è uno spirito, un folletto, libero di imbattersi in qualunque cosa"* (Capra, 1989, pp. 54-55). However, regardless of Herriman's response to Capra, there is no doubt that the dynamics of the relationship between Krazy and Ignatz include both the feminine and the masculine, completely independent of the gender one wishes to attribute to either character.

[2] Quoting some elements of Michael Tisserand's biography of Herriman (Tisserand, 2019), Chris Ware believes the poetic quality of the great illustrator's work is directly linked to the biography of the author, an American of African-American origin, but with white skin, who, therefore, would have lived a double and uncertain human condition of painful existential dislocation from which his artistic vision would have derived

(Ware, 2017). I take the liberty of considering this extremely limiting assessment of the poetic quality of Herriman's comics, whose narrative and imaginative intelligence goes beyond any biographical connotation.

3 According to Eisenstein (2004), the anthropomorphism of Disney characters recalls the deep logic of totemism, while a philosopher, sociologist and mediaologist like Walter Benjamin sees it as a key with which imagination can act as a liberating viaticum to capitalist exploitation; Benjamin, 1936, further elaborated by Ciotta, 2005).

4 There is no doubt that the gaze of the "white" culture as a whole prevails in the history of comics over that of other ethnically differentiated cultures. This does not automatically imply that this predominance means the assimilation of the meaning of comics to representations and stories that adhere to the will to power of "white" culture. The opposite is rather often the case, if only because contradictions, alternative points of view, impulses and orientations emerge in this cultural ensemble which, if anything, challenge this will to power. On the other hand (as in film), in comics the meanings of images are articulated strictly in forms of language that have recursive, interrogative, specular and, not infrequently, strongly critical capacities. Therefore, we need methodologies of analysis and interpretative categories that are not superficial, but capable of adequately "reading" such complexity, beyond univocal or, at worst, ideologically aligned research schemes.