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The problem of the origins of Italian comics, and the difficult transition from amateur essay writing to the scientific debate on the medium's history in Italy.

This is meant to be a review of the booklet *Notes on the Early Decades of Italian Comic Art*.² In fact, however, I have tried to extend the discourse from this useful short book to a more general problem, anticipated by the title of this article. Gadducci's *Notes* allow us to see how the issue of the actual origins of comics has been treated with little scientific consistency and with few historical studies of first-hand sources. This is particularly evident in Italy—one of the Western countries with the most extensive and broad comics productions, particularly until the 1970's.

Thus far, *Notes* has gone relatively unnoticed within the Italian circle of studies, criticism and information on comics.³ And this is a shame. This book exposes some truths on the origin of Italian comics which so far have been scarcely known, or have remained unknown due to the negligence of many among the scholars who are supposed to research them – read: not the historians of popular literature and the press, but those who specifically study comics and claim to be particularly interested in the history of this medium. I will touch upon this point later. Based on careful bibliographical and iconographical research, *Notes on the Early Decades of Italian Comic Art* is a booklet that, in only 28 pages, offers useful comments on the early years of comics, as well as their predecessors, in Italy. The booklet focuses on the period from the second half of the 19th century to the 1930's, but also deals with the appearance of the direct 'ancestors' of Italian comics in the 17th century.

The points raised by this work are so many that they deserve separate considerations.

1. The question of the audience

Apart from the value of its contents, one of the first merits of Gadducci's essay is that it is directed at a wide audience. There are several exhaustive and informative footnotes in the booklet, the first one of which explains that *Notes* is the revised and updated edition of a previous version of the same study originally published in the well-known *International Journal of Comic Art*. Gadducci's decision to publish his essay in colour as a small booklet rather than in a full size book is praiseworthy: by isolating the contents in a self-contained publication he highlights their importance; and the decision to keep it in English is useful to make a very Italian story known outside Italy.

2. Editorial choices

The second issue that stands out in *Notes* is that of the editorial choices made by

the author. The publication is well presented in terms of graphics and layout. However, a degree of incongruence and incompleteness in the methodology is apparent, suggesting that this booklet could be considered as a sort of beta version of an essay that will hopefully see the light in the near future in a longer and revised edition. It would be best to include it in an anthology on this history of comics. In other words, this product can already be considered a lesson for all comics' scholars—myself included—who, for years, have been writing their essays working from uncertain data and dates; but the lack of a more detailed methodology can be felt. For methodology, I mean a theoretical and possibly operational definition of the object of analysis: starting on the first line of the essay, the word 'comics' is used without any explanation of its meaning. In a work aiming to show the real origins of comics in Italy, not to make a clear definition of what 'comics' (in Italian, *fumetti*) means is in my opinion a mistake: how can we distinguish comics from what cannot be considered as such? What are the *conditio sine qua non* (language, layout, art, etc.) that make a comic? This is the central point in the international debate on comics as a form of expression, because 'ancestors', 'predecessors', and 'proto-comics' can be found in many historical periods. Even taking into account only the modern era, one can find plenty of illustrated stories and comic panels ordered in a certain sequence. Therefore, the lack of a definition on what is a comic and what is not, is a problem that Gadducci does not solve or even attempt to solve, choosing simply to ignore it.

3. Methodological problems

Fabio Gadducci is a professor at the Information Technology department of the faculty of Mathematics, Physics and Natural Sciences of the University of Pisa: he has had several well-received works published abroad. He has been focusing on comics since the end of the 1980's, both for personal pleasure and as a kind of secondary field of specialization. He went from publishing in fanzines to the organization of comics-related events, and on to publishing articles and books, and creating an academic journal for the study of the history of comics: *SIGNS* (written entirely in English, through the same publisher as his *Notes*).

Gadducci is certainly not a newcomer to comics, quite the opposite in fact. However, despite his culture, talent, acumen and experience, Gadducci is neither a historian, nor a sociologist or a semiologist, nor an expert on cultural studies and cultural processes. This does not mean that only those with a degree in the human sciences, sociology, semiotics or literature deserve a place in the world of comics studies; several important studies over the last decades have been the work of journalists, fans and collectors: in other words, a mix of professionals and consumers from various origins. However, over the last few years, the amateurish nature of Italian comics scholarship, created and supported by such passionate figures, has become clearer when compared to the works made by a new generation of more academically-minded scholars, who, while using much of what had been written by the amateur essayists, have produced an entirely new type of knowledge on comics, different from what had been handed-down so far in an often distorted and fragmentary manner. Fabio Gadducci is halfway between these two groups: he is an academic from outside the world of arts and social sciences, and therefore, comics-wise, an 'amateur'; but he is positioned very much inside the debate on comics thanks to his past experiences and to his profound first- and second-hand knowledge of the relevant literature. In more than one way, his

intermediate position strengthens his essays: free from the theoretical strictures and the mental automatism typical of some specialized academics, he shows a fresh outlook and he knows how to get to the point. But at the same time, not being fully familiar with the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study of comics as it has been practised until now, he has overlooked some methodological problems which could have been avoided through a collaboration with someone versed in sociological and/or historical-literary studies.

This is not an insurmountable problem, however, because the contribution given by Gadducci's *Notes* will allow other scholars to fill the gaps in his work and to produce more complete definitions and explanations of the problem of the formal and cultural origin of comics in Italy. In this sense, the usefulness of his research is undeniable.

Gadducci's work, accurate and innovative as it is, also has another merit: it has shown once again the cultural backwardness and the professional laziness of those academics who, in theory, should be the ones to investigate the topics discussed by Gadducci himself. Gadducci, driven by passion and aware of the lack of this type of work, has felt the need to conduct a research on the origin of comics in Italy. This is something that neither literary historians, nor popular arts historians, nor historians of publishing, nor, above all, comics' scholars—except for a few rare and exceptionally talented people like Alfredo Castelli⁴—have previously done in any consistent fashion. This topic is of the utmost importance because comics represent that crucial, late-modernity phenomenon where the text culture and the image culture merge, resulting in new forms of mass cultural products whose importance in the development of the tastes of the masses the guardians of official culture seem unable to acknowledge: magazines, stickers, comics, photo stories, satire.⁵

This is not to imply that there has not been any research in this field from an historical or a literary perspective. Gadducci is aware of the variety of this research and uses it in his own work, providing several highly useful references. There are many studies on the popular press and on the illustrated magazines of the 19th century. But these studies do not specifically cover the topic of the origin of comics as such. Gadducci attempts to, and mostly succeeds in, acting as the *trait d'union* between two fields which, while discussing analogous topics, look like divorced partners, unwilling to even communicate by mail.

What *Notes* could promote is an awakening of the field's specialists from their slumber, pushing them to do research in more original directions. There is still much left to discover.

4. The contents

I would like to end this piece by discussing, very briefly, the contents of the book, as it should by now be clear that this work is worthy of purchase and examination. *Notes* begins its analysis in the 1840's and, through five swift paragraphs—enriched by several footnotes and references—comes close to the early years of the *Corriere dei Piccoli* ('Journal of the Children', 1908-1995), the weekly magazine conventionally used to pinpoint the origin of comics in Italy.

Notes' most interesting pages are 1-16. From page 17, the discussion moves to the


(‘The Sunday’s Little Journal’, 1st series 1806-1911) and to the *Corriere dei Piccoli*, so the relevant material regarding the origin of comics in Italy has already been discussed. The loose sheets and the humorous illustrations published at the end of the 18th century, which were either lone illustrations (caricatures) or leaflets like the Images d’Epinal (seen in France) or like the Bilderbogen of the German speaking countries (where the various pictures would create some sort of sequence) were comics’ direct ancestors; both formally—picture and text live together, despite being kept separate, and there is an early idea of a sequence of temporal and spatial events—and in terms of publishing—because of their humorous nature and because they were welcome in circles officially considered to be of scarce literary importance.


Other than for their attempts to maintain sequential order, the lone sheets were not yet a proto-comic. They were closer to narrative products with a moral, more similar to fables and illustrated allegories than what is currently considered a funny or adventurous story. According to Gadducci’s research, the earliest examples of tales or illustrated comments, where easy-to-read images inserted in what could be considered somewhat sequential panels, dating back to 1847, in *Il Mondo Illustrato* (‘The Illustrated World’), and to 1848 in *Lo Spirito Folletto* (‘The Pixie Spirit’). From that point on, sequential images abound in satirical and political magazines: *Pasquino* (since 1856), *L’Arlecchino* (since 1859), *Il Lampione* (‘The Streetlamp’, since 1860), and others. In particular, in issue # 229 of *Pasquino*, 10th of June 1860, a sequentially illustrated story by Casimiro Teja, which reminds Gadducci of *Der gewandte, kunstreiche Barbier und sein kluger Hund* by Wilhelm Bush (‘The Very Talented Barber and His Clever Dog’, 1865), shows what is beyond a doubt the structure of a comics story. The story is titled *La rivoluzione in Sicilia—Soliloqui del mio parrucchiere* (‘The Revolution in Sicily—Soliloquies of my Hairdresser’). It is fourteen pages long, has a short text, and relates the work of a competent barber on a customer’s beard and hair.


Gadducci comments upon several other examples, all of which are listed at the end of the book. Amongst these are the weekly magazine *Il Nano Rosso* (‘The Red Dwarf’), 50 issues published starting in April 1892, presenting some real comics (sequences of images and text with dialogues and rhymed descriptions, an idea which clearly predates the *Corriere dei Piccoli*) and *Novellino* (published starting at Christmas, 1898), which in its very first issue already has a sequence of four pictures on the front cover and a short story titled *Il fonografo* (‘The Phonograph’, possibly by Enrico Novelli, a.k.a. Yambo) on the back cover. *Il fonografo* is structured in six images, the first four of which are square and take the top half of the page, the last two are horizontal ‘panoramics’: their composition is that of a comics story in the modern sense of the word. Furthermore, this is where speech bubbles make what is probably their first appearance in Italy: real *fumetti* (literally ‘little smoke balloons’) showing the breathing and/or the sounds produced by the characters or by the phonograph.


As I have mentioned before, the limit—but also, perhaps, the usefulness—of Gadducci’s work resides in the lack of a clear definition of what distinguishes a comic from something that is not. And it is for this reason that his essay is a fundamental tool that other scholars can use to (re)construct the origin of comics in Italy.


Notes

- 1  1 Marco Pellitteri (Palermo, 1974), Ph.D. in Sociology and social research gained at the University of Trento. Sociologist of culture and mass media, his main research fields are comics, animation, video games, relationships between youths and media, the success of Japanese pop culture in Europe. He is author of five books and several articles published in Italian and foreign journals and conference proceedings. His most recent volume is *Il Drago e la Saetta. Modelli, strategie e identità dell'immaginario giapponese*, Latina, TunuÈ, 2008, a 664 page-long sociological study on the spreading of Japanese popular culture in Europe through manga, anime and video games, translated in English as *The Dragon and the Dazzle: Models, Strategies, and Ideintieis of Japanese ImaginationóA European Perspective* (TunuÈ 2010). He is scientific director of two essay book series for TunuÈ Publishings and of the annual International Cartoonistsí Exhibition in Rapallo (Genoa).

- 2  2 Fabio Gadducci, *Notes on the Early Decades of Italian Comic Art*. San Giuliano Terme (Pi): Felici, 2006. Colour leaflet, 28 pp., 17x23 cm, " 6,00.

- 3  3 When talking about comics, the distinction between information and critical study is relatively easy to recognize. The one between study and criticism is harder. This is not the place where to discuss this in-depth, suffice is to let the reader know that such difference has become more marked over the last few years, following a progressive merging of criticism with information (resulting in the loss of some of the rigour that used to be common in previous years)and the rapid developmentótheoretical, methodological and practicalóof the disciplinary studies on this field.

- 4  4 Cf. Alfredo Castelli, *Eccoci ancora qui! 1895-1919: i primi 25 anni del fumetto americano per quotidiani*, 11 volumes. Lucca-Milano: Museo Italiano del FumettoóIF Edizioni, 2006.

- 5  5 Cf. Sergio Brancato (edited by), *Il secolo del fumetto. Lo spettacolo a strisce nella societ italiana 1908-2008*. Latina: TunuÈ, 2008. With special attention to the interventions by Brancato himself, Gino Frezza, Pellitteri, and Gadducci with Matteo Stefanelli.