

# Digitalian comics: Italian digital comics from national tradition to platform society

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## Abstract

The peculiar mechanisms of the Italian cultural industry have led comics to develop forms and formats through very different paths from those taken, for example, by their US counterparts. Nonetheless, the medial, social, and cultural logics linked to the development of digital media and the establishment of the platform society have pushed Italian comics to change in light of an increasingly globalized media ecosystem and of production and diffusion strategies common to digital culture worldwide.

This chapter performs a medium-archaeological operation, on the one hand by tracing the premises that shaped Italian digital comics through the historical evolution of Italian comics and particularly of the strip format, divergent from other national models and traditions; and on the other hand, by reconstructing the different phases of Italian digital comics through a recovery of often lost and irretrievable works. It engages with the protocols and logics deriving from the platformization of economy and society and relies on a mediological and narratological framework, to understand how platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr have pushed Italian comics into a formal restructuring and into adopting new models of consumption and interaction with the public (in accordance or reaction with social and algorithmic logics).

## Paper<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, we analyze the media context in which Italian digital comics were born and have evolved. Moving from the specificity of the Italian cultural industry, which has developed distinct paths compared to U.S. comics production, and accounting for the homogenizing force provided by globalization, we identify the main characteristics and directions that Italian digital comics are currently following.

Throughout history, comics have always remediated earlier and contemporary media models and formats to create new forms of entertainment, as pointed out by Bolter and Grusin (1999) and Grusin (2015). In the earliest comics, the creation of the spectator experience, understood as an active and productive dimension of the audience (Jenkins 1992; Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; Boccia Artieri 2012), was based on the use of representational and entertainment technologies such as illustrations, zootropes, magic lanterns, feuilleton,

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<sup>1</sup> The article is the result of shared ideation, writing and revision work by the two authors. In each case, Lorenzo Di Paola wrote the introduction, first section and conclusion; Giorgio Busi Rizzi wrote the second section.

vaudeville, and cinema (Frezza, 1978; Gardner, 2012). These media forms contributed to the development of comics, shaping its semiotic and narrative structures. In early U.S. comics, still in the process of standardization, it was common to adopt bold visual solutions and unconventional layouts that required a high degree of cognitive effort on the part of readers to correctly decode the narrative message. A year before the appearance of *Corriere dei Piccoli* in 1907, the daily strip format was born thanks to Bud Fisher's *Mutt & Jeff*, which transformed the comic strip from a colorful, festive Sunday event into a daily companion for the general newspaper audience.

Approaching more standardized industrial practices (Gubern 1972), comics absorbed forms and protocols from the medium in which they were published, namely the daily press, which connected them with the broad American audience. It can be argued that newspapers played a crucial role in the development of the comic book audience, as audiences became strongly identified with the stories produced by early authors. This process finally came to fruition in 1915, with the advent of syndicates:

newspapers brought with them the newly reimagined community created by syndication. Benedict Anderson's "meanwhile time" of the realist novel was supplemented at the turn of the century by the new synchronicities of the syndicated newspaper, as "every Sunday Americans across the country could open their newspapers and read the same strips." The modern comic strip, born of the study of the grim realities of modern urban life, allowed Americans, in the words of one of early comics' few defenders, Gilbert Seldes, finally "to think nationally." (Gardner 2012: 12,13).

Until the advent of comic books (1938), U.S. comics would continue to be linked to newspapers on which from the 1920s onward began to develop the tendency to link daily or weekly episodes together leading to the creation of increasingly long and articulated sagas and a broadening of the narrative genres used (Gardner 2012). From *Tarzan* (1929) onward, we witness an explosion of characters and heroes capable of revolutionizing the Western mythological-narrative system (*Tim Tyler's Luck* in 1928, *Buck Rogers* in 1929, *Dick Tracy* in 1931, *Flash Gordon* in 1934, etc.) by resorting to an increasingly refined range of genres and narrative techniques (Frezza 1995).

### *Faraway, so close: the peculiar historical evolution of Italian comics*

In Italy, the comic strip presents a very different genesis and structure. *Corriere dei Piccoli*, (the first magazine in which Italian comics began to take shape) right from its title, makes explicit its intention to conquer the wide audience consisting of children and young people, an area previously occupied by periodicals linked to the humanistic tradition of the illustrated story.

The magazine and its comics represent a hybrid cultural object, characterized by conflicting impulses of preservation and modernization. This ambiguity is partly derived from the Italian cultural situation of the time-characterized by the elitist and pedagogical logics of the intellectual class-and partly from the dialectic between the progressive ideas of Paolo Lombroso (more interested in the educational and pedagogical models of French magazines and the active involvement of the child audience) and the corporatist ideas of Luigi Albertini (more directed toward exploiting the explosive charge of U.S. comics). Albertini, who took over as editor-in-chief of the *Corriere della Sera* in 1900, contributed decisively to transforming the newspaper from a more or less artisanal enterprise into an industrial apparatus capable of adapting and responding to new market needs. Inspired by English and U.S. journalistic models, he arrives at greatly expanding the newspaper's audience by launching several supplements (*La Domenica del Corriere*, *La Lettura*, *Il Romanzo Mensile*, and *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*) capable of capturing different segments of the public. There is a great economic effort, and ideas, to broaden the audience segment, both by popularizing forms and contents of elitist circulation and by giving greater editorial dignity to popular production. Paola Lombroso Carrara, Cesare Lombroso's daughter and an important Italian journalist, is the mastermind behind the birth of the *Corriere dei Piccoli*, and although due to the machismo of the time she never became editor-in-chief of the magazine, she brings to these pages the reforming drive that characterized her career, especially in the function of childhood:

*Corriere dei Piccoli* would converse with its readers through the person of Zia Mariù. Behind the pseudonym was Paola Lombroso Carrara, a socialist and philanthropist with a keen interest for children's psychology and pedagogy. The whole CdP project had been her idea, she had proposed the project to Luigi Albertini, director of *Corriere della Sera*, in 1906. While he was intent on broadening his readership with all kinds of supplements, Paola Lombroso Carrara wanted to reach child readers and knew that this liberal Milanese newspaper would guarantee an unprecedented spread, and the publication of a high number of issues that could be sold cheaply. Albertini asked Lombroso to make sample issues (Nidasio in *Ginex* 125; Dolza 8) and Lombroso took this task to heart by examining both the American comics and French and British children's publications from 1906 until 1908. Lombroso did this preparatory work, hoping to become the director of the future children's magazine. She eventually was refused that job and had to accept and content herself with the minor role of conversing with the child readers on a page divided in two sections "La piccola posta" (small post) and "Corrispondenza" (correspondence). (Van de Wiele 2022, 229)

From the dialectic between the two came a moderate magazine, suitable for the children of the bourgeoisie and the popular classes, who ideally aspired to social ascension. The ability of the *Corriere dei Piccoli* group to attract the best Italian talent and introduce many American

characters contributed to the success of the magazine, which set the standard for comic publications in Italy for a long period of time.

While, then, in the U.S. daily strips and Sunday pages (the latter with formats that have varied over time to the point of becoming a rarity in the newspaper cosmos) continue to this day to be destined for newspapers, in Italy the spread of comics as children's entertainment destined (and maybe confined) the medium to children's magazines, which by necessity have adapted content and formats to their own logic. Consider, for example, the adaptations, both formal and narrative, that Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* (published in the U.S. beginning in 1934 by the King Features Syndicate founded by William Randolph Hearst) had to undergo on the pages of *L'Avventuroso* (Di Paola 2019) - fanciful translations, censored bodies, different coloring of the plates - and the frictions between the U.S. syndicates and their Italian representatives.

Between the 1950s and 1960s, a format similar to the strip with which *Tex*, *Zagor*, *Capitan Miki*, and *Il grande Blek* (enormously successful Bonelli and EsseGesse comics that contributed to the birth of the Italian-style western later made famous by Sergio Leone's films) were originally published in Italy became widespread. These, however, were strip comics that became popular due to their cheapness and practicality in the postwar period, soon giving way to the album format known as 'bonellide' (16 × 21 centimeters, paperback, with a foliation of about 96 pages) that would become somewhat the standard for Italian newsstand comics. However, these works are not directly relevant to the present analysis because, although they use the strip format, they follow a narrative structure in which the story is told page by page, and are designed as albums. Therefore, Bonelli's strips do not have the same narrative autonomy as the strips of the American model, but rework the narrative model of the comic books (while retaining the strip format).

In Italy, the road to comics maturity finally found an outlet in *Linus* (1965), which clearly focused on the strip format (the dialogue that opens the first issue between Gandini, Eco and Del Buono on Schulz's *Peanuts*, defined as "the Salinger of comics", is very famous) republishing great U.S. classics and offering a new space to Italian cartoonists who could finally dare the road of mature comics.

The ideological framework in which *Linus* intends to place itself is clear: 'high' culture was trying to embrace into its own interpretive and theoretical schemes, into its own taste and culture, the subversive charge of comics. Doing so required a targeted choice of comics and their strategic positioning in the reading system:

**Eco:** Having dealt among the first, in Italy, with the American narrative tradition, how do you place Charlie Brown in American literature?

**Vittorini:** One would first have to establish what kind of literature Schulz belongs to, but in

any case, without complicating it, I would compare him to Salinger - but with a much broader and in my opinion much deeper interest (Eco, Vittorini, del Buono 1965, p. 1)

This is a huge step, an epochal opening towards comics, to which narrative and poetic possibilities hitherto denied were recognized. Seriality was no longer seen as a mere commodification of art; rather, the iterative structure of the strips is considered by the three intellectuals to be a fundamental tool to increase the richness of a story:

**Eco:** And here then comes out a rather strange conclusion: while habitually comics are narrative productions to be consumed rapidly while one drinks coffee, day by day, and then thrown away, when instead they are successful, they are important work and are something that must be reread. Charlie Brown stories were born to be consumed every morning: precisely because they are important, they should instead be preserved and reread from the beginning. Only then do they acquire meaning. (Eco, Vittorini, del Buono 1965, p. 2).

Thanks to this favorable environment, several humorous authors began to emerge in this period who adopted the strip in different ways for their production. Among them, the first was Enzo Lunari, with the creation of the character of *Girighiz*, a small troglodyte, who was initially drawn in a rather rudimentary manner, but later acquired a greater degree of richness and detail. Other comic strips were also published in the same magazine over the years, including Altan's *Trino*, a bungling "god" charged by a "superior" to create the world, and Sergio Staino's *Bobo*. The strips also began to find space in the pages of epigones of *Linus* (*Eureka*, *Il mago*, *Sgt. Kirk*, etc.), but never found a place in national newspapers (which always favored the single humorous cartoon). The only exception is *Paese Sera*, which already in the early 1950s published the first Italian comic strip, *Gatto Filippo* by Pino Zac. This newspaper represents a significant point in the history of daily publishing, as it not only devoted space to the famous imported comic strips of the time, but also tried to promote its own stable of authors by holding a contest in 1968 for the creation of an Italian comic strip. The first edition of the contest was won by Bonvi with his creation *Sturmtruppen*, a satirical comic strip, set during World War II, featuring - in surreal and comic situations peppered with Italian mocking German - Germanic troops. It is perhaps to this day the most successful Italian strip nationally and internationally. Countless authors participated in the contest over the years, and among the winners we find names such as Forattini, Skiaffino, Panebarco and Torti. Only a year earlier, then, Massimo Mattioli had made his debut in *Vitt* (a children's comics magazine heir to one of the most important Italian comics publications, *Il Vittorioso*, which was born in 1937 and had hosted the debut of artists such as Benito Jacovitti) precisely with a strip: *Il vermetto Sigh*. We are perhaps in the golden age of the Italian strip, which reached its zenith with the enormous success of *Lupo Alberto* by Silver (Guido Silvestri), which debuted in 1974 in the *Corriere dei Ragazzi* and

then made its way to a monthly in which the strip gave way to a horizontally-formatted board. It is another comic strip that between social satire, comedy and irony enjoys a great success among the public, thanks to the iconicity of the characters of the anthropomorphized animal protagonists. Within a few years, however, changing social and media conditions led to an irreversible crisis of magazines and comics on newsstands. The advent of new generations who grew up in the shadow of television and the advent of video games caused a huge change in media consumption and practices, by reducing the space for cartoonists and pushing comics into different formats that will later pave the way for the graphic novel. Few magazines would continue to publish strips and many cartoonists would find refuge in the pages of diaries designed for schoolchildren audiences, such as *Smemoranda* (since 1978) and *Comix* (since 1994).

As is evident from what has been said so far, Italian comics, although inspired by the U.S. model, followed very different tracks and practices. The peculiar economic and production conditions developing outside of newspapers and the syndicate system lead to different narrative solutions, consumption practices and audiences configurations. This resulted in the birth of an 'Italian school' of the strip (clearly identifiable chronologically and stylistically) that, although starting from the U.S. model, developed a strong identity, which on the one hand took on the polemical and intellectual charge of satire - whose origins lie in nineteenth-century magazines such as *Podrecca* and Galantara's *L'Asino* - and on the other mixed it with the milieu and style of those magazines (*Linus*, *Alter Alter*, *Sgt Kirk*, *Orient Express*, *Cannibale*, *Frigidaire*, etc.) that since the 1960s gave birth to Italian auteur comics.

The crisis in the publishing market and the turn to digital of the entire media system led to the emergence of new systems of production and consumption, new cultural paradigms, and social models that caused a break with the brief tradition inaugurated by the 'Italian school' of the strip. At the same time, however, the strip format found renewed success because of the narrative features that had made it successful, to the point of providing the model and functioning for the network's princely language, that of memes.

### Global, experimental, networked: Italian comics after the digital turn

The dynamics of globalization and the concomitant rise of the graphic novel (resulting in comics gaining greater cultural legitimacy, and being imported, translated, and published even in contexts and formats from which they had been excluded) resulted in comics from all over the world realigning to, if not a uniforming onto, the forms and reading contexts of the main markets - namely, the U.S. one, and the Japanese and Korean traditions that, benefiting from the very beginning from an extremely branched and high-performing Internet infrastructure, developed

a greater quantity and variety of digital comics sooner than other contexts, eventually settling primarily on the webtoon format, vertically scrolling comics that paradigmatically isolate one panel at a time.

To better understand the way comics adapt and reinvent themselves in light of the dynamics of the digital, however, it is first necessary to identify the different phases through which cultural practices have been progressively digitalized. Elsewhere (Busi Rizzi 2023), we proposed four key phases of the historical unfolding of digital culture, showcasing different leading paradigms: personal computing; network computing; digital renaissance; platform economy. In turn, these phases would orient forms and practices of production toward dominant modes that are different from time to time.

The first phase (circa 1985-2000) is linked to the invention and diffusion of personal computing. PCs grow in distribution and popularity, and top/down and bottom/up interests and dynamics converge: on the one hand, tech companies want to prove the usefulness of their products and are looking for testimonials to show it; on the other hand, professionals and artists are looking with curiosity at the expressive possibilities offered by the new technology, and aim to experiment with new ways of creation. This results in two different trends, which in turn ultimately converge: on the one hand, the first comics created directly on the computer appear - the names most often mentioned in the Anglo-American scene are those of Mike Saenz and Peter Gillis, with *Shatter* (1985-86), and Pepe Moreno, with *Batman: Digital Justice* (1990; on the subject, see Di Paola and Tirino 2023). On the other, several video game companies (Ubisoft, Infocomics, Ocean Software, Infogrames) adapt successful comics as video games, remediating to some extent the comic book form (panels, balloons, etc.). The evolution of Italian comics follows the same directions and results in the same bipartition: in the first case, the most important name is Giovanotti Mondani Meccanici; in the second, Simulmondo.

Giovanotti Mondani Meccanici (GMM) were a multimedia artistic group founded in 1984 by Antonio Glessi and Andrea Zingoni. Over two decades, their work spanned a wide range of media: computer comics, computer installations, music, video art, and so on. Heavily influenced by postmodernism and cyberpunk and immersed in an incredibly vibrant countercultural environment focused on creative contamination between the arts, they debuted in May 1984 on the independent comics magazine *Frigidaire* with a story entitled "Giovanotti Mondani Meccanici – Melodramma Moderno Notturmo", whose lo-fi aesthetics owed equally to the stylistic references of GMM and the difficulty of leveraging the affordances of the Apple II, on which the comic was realized. The technology of the time involved limitations in computation, hence some of the stylistic features of GMM's work: two-dimensional graphics, scaled-down lines in low resolution, and a limited color palette (Spampinato 2021). Moreover,

it involved limitations in controlling the drawing process: the comics were drawn on a grid of just 280 x 192 pixels and in a range of six colors (blue, green, magenta, orange, white and black) - those allowed by the Apple Graphics Tablet (created in 1979, and one of the most used to draw on the first computers - the other being the KoalaPad, released in 1983). Finally, there were limitations in publishing: once the design was finished, photographs of each individual panel on the monitor were made, then plotted on a bristol sheet (Spampinato 2021); however, "a mismatch between the screen pixel screen and the offset print resulted in a kind of moiré effect, a gray patina that extinguished the brightness of the colors" (Lagonigro 2021, our translation). GMM's first comic (later transposed into a short video) tells the story of Ella, a transgender extracyborg, who suffers at the hands of the three Giovanotti, government humanoid robots devoid of any form of consciousness. The 1980s would see, on the one hand, the expansion of GMM's sphere of action - with LPs, video art installations, fashion exhibitions - and, on the other, the publication, again on *Frigidaire*, of less than ten computer-generated comics following the same premises.

Simulmondo was an Italian software house, founded in Bologna by Francesco Carlà in 1988, and active until 1999. After initially developing a series of sports-themed titles, Simulmondo started an unprecedented industrial practice centered on the serial production of affordable video games based on comics, sold in Italian newsstands on a monthly basis. Between 1992 and 1994, the company produced several titles mainly based on Italian comics such as *Dylan Dog*, *Tex*, *Diabolik*, to which they added some stories created from scratch (*Simulman* and *Time Runners*). On the formal side, the idea was to produce interactive comics that could ride the success of their paper counterparts (Carbone 2020). The games had a simple interface and a structure that alternated platform sections with comics-like dialogues, the outcome of which influenced the course of the story. On the economic side, the idea was to adopt the distribution channels and practices of comics: the video games were published monthly, sold in newsstands, and had a very contained price. Newsstands had the right to return the unsold titles, as they did with periodicals. However, the lack of variety of the titles and the newsstand crisis led the company to suspend releases by the end of the 1990s.

These two directions nonetheless converged with the creation of the first Italian e-comics: *Alias* and *Striker - Occulta Lapis*. The production histories of both works are extremely peculiar: *Striker* was created by three newcomers, both for the world of comics and that of programming, and then distributed, in 1993, by Dynabyte. It is an interactive comic (featuring interactive elements and branching paths) with cyberpunk and post-apocalyptic themes, in which the player plays the punk Striker, imprisoned on an alien planet. *Alias* was created in 2001 by the Comics & Illustration department of Fabrica (the Benetton Group's research center), at the



time led by Andrea Artusi; it was distributed as a mini-cd attached to the digital recharge cards of telephone operator Blu, and featured a soundtrack and animations. Daniel, the protagonist, is a young video game programmer haunted by a recurring nightmare. After receiving a mysterious message on his cell phone, Daniel discovers, at the hands of a biotechnology scientist, his true identity-namely, Alias.

The second phase of digital culture (circa 1995-2010) partly overlaps with the first, and develops around the paradigm of network computing. The Internet arises and expands, geographically and in terms of the amount of time it takes up on an average day to the average user. Most webcomics coalesce around the strip format, leveraging digital practices (rather than experimenting with digital affordances) to provide their readers with a serialized product. Their static, print-like nature can be explained both as a consequence of the limits in computation (a heavier webpage would take more time to load) and as a way to anchor the form on something that the audience was already familiar with, remediated in a new environment.

It is the phase in which several key authors of the Italian independent scene of recent years make their debut: Dr. Pira (with *Fumetti della gleba*, created in 1997, whose comics were also printed as self-published and were later collected in *L'Almanacco dei Fumetti della Gleba*, 2016); Vanzella and Genovese (*Self Comics*, a website and an independent magazine, since 2003); Daw (*A come Ignoranza*, which began in 2004 on the Asfalto forum to be published in paperback as early as 2007); Davide La Rosa (with a blog called *Mulholland Dave*, since 2005), and so on. Others (including Tuono Pettinato and Ratigher) collaborated to the *Super Amici* collective and to *Fumetti disegnati male*, a site and a series of self-published comics magazines (since 2004).

Several collective entities play a leading role in aggregating talent: *Mammaiuto*, born in 2011 as a cultural association with daily blogposts and cartoons, then became a platform for selfpublishing; *Lo sciacallo elettrico* (founded by Marco Feo in 1995), "the first Italian online comics magazine," which hosted several authors on its site and as a publisher. Significant in this sense is *Gommo*, a cd-rom structured as a black box housing different objects: a comic by Alberto Lavoradori, but also some animations and original music related to it. Other communities were *Inguine* (founded in 2001 by Gianluca Costantini with Marco Lobietti, Alessandro Micheli and Vanni Brusadin), since 2003 coupled by a print magazine under for Coniglio Editore (*InguineMAH!gazine*); and *Nuvole Elettriche* (2005), republished as a print anthology by Schockdom (2008). *Schockdom* is one of the most active realities of this period: the project was born in 1997 at the hands of Lucio Staiano, Andrea Ruffini and Marco Licchelli, with the idea of publishing multilingual digital comics on CD-ROM. Quickly taken over by

Staiano alone, it was rethought into a site hosting multilingual comics created in Flash. In a few years, Schockdom attempted transmedia expansions (creating various products for the TV and web TV market) and internal ones, originating a magazine and a comics school. Although the idea would prove too ambitious, Schockdom kept hosting and launching new authors: since 2003, Eriadan (Paolo Aldighieri)<sup>2</sup>, whose production will be edited in volumes by Schockdom itself. It is on the pages of Shockdom that Sio (Simone Albrigi) made his debut in 2006 with *Scottecs*, a periodical strip of humor full of non-sequiturs, indebted as much to classic comics authors (Albrigi mentions Watterson, Ortolani, and Faraci) and independent ones (the aforementioned Pira, Daw, and La Rosa) as to US spoofs and parodies (on television and in the movies). Notably, several other pages were explicitly devoted to revamping the strip format: [lastriscia.net](http://lastriscia.net), [blogcomicstrip.blogspot.com](http://blogcomicstrip.blogspot.com), [singloids.com](http://singloids.com), and so on. Most of these web pages have vanished or become inaccessible due to the obsolescence of the Internet, since networked computing is everything but a “memory machine” (De Kosnik 2016). On the contrary, digital media are “degenerative, forgetful, erasable” (Chun 160). Hardware breaks down, programming languages become old, plugins are no longer updated, and web domain rents go unpaid, among other things. It is especially the case of the experimentation with the form and the affordances of the digital environment that resulted in works incorporating hypertextual or interactive elements, audio, animation, and so on.

Such destiny was indeed shared by *Armadel*, the “world’s first hypercomic”, created in 2001 by MediaComics and hosted on the website of the leading national newspaper *Corriere della sera*. The comic was published monthly, with four episodes making up a complete story of 120 pages. The story combined mystery and science fiction, revolving around three characters (Dan, Taj, and Sylvia), who discover a machine that can digitize the human molecular structure and allow a person to materially enter the Internet. Allegedly conceived to utilize the full interactive potential of the internet (a frequent rhetoric in digital products), the comic was designed for full-screen horizontal viewing and embedded with hyperlinks and interactive elements. An interactive grid allowed to highlight or expand certain elements, allowing users to read the protagonists' diaries, open pop-up windows, start flash mini-games, and so on. However, the slow internet bandwidth at the time hindered the full enjoyment of the comic's interactive features. In this respect, *Armadel* is emblematic of a transitional phase of digital comics, that can be likened to media of attraction - a term that Rebecca Rouse, when discussing mixed reality, borrows from that of “cinema of attraction”. Their characteristic would be that of being “unassimilated, interdisciplinary, seamed, and participatory” (Rouse 2016:

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<sup>2</sup> In turn, in 2006 Eriadan launched, with Antonio Sofi, the *Bit Comics* project, a weekly comics column hosted on [apogeeonline.com](http://apogeeonline.com), hosting many different authors over three years before shutting down in 2009.

105). Digital comics in this early phase experiment with the form, often with good results in terms of audience, but ultimately struggle to consolidate and settle, for technical, economic or sociocultural reasons.

### Online, platformed, established: the mature phase of Italian digital comics

The third phase (circa 2005-15), that we will call 'digital renaissance', is symbolically introduced by three watershed events. The first is related to the spread of self-publishing platforms and blogs, which encourage publishing disintermediation and allow aspiring artists to speak to a much larger pool than the (admittedly local) audience of print self-publishers. The second is due to the ubiquity of game culture, which by virtue of ever-increasing computational and connectivity capabilities expands into all other practices of the digital, continually relaunching its ambition in visual and narrative terms and intensifying its dialogue of forms and imaginaries. The third stems from the growing interest towards digital comics due to an increased legitimation of the medium, demonstrated (and perhaps propelled) by Scott McCloud's influential *Reinventing Comics*. It is a phase of formal experimentation, perhaps less intense in Italy than in the main Western comics markets (the Anglo-American and Franco-Belgian ones: cf. Busi Rizzi 2023), also due to a less consolidated publishing space and less distributed and efficient digital infrastructures, and which therefore, for economic and structural reasons, lends itself less to experimentation.

However, there is no shortage of technically ambitious ideas. Most notably, one can mention *To Be Continued* (2014-17) by Lorenzo Ghetti and Carlo Trimarchi, respectively author and webmaster. This serial webcomic, hosted on a dedicated website, told the story of a group of teenage superheroes attending a superhero school. The comic leveraged digital affordances in multiple ways: most of all, it made extensive use of the infinite canvas format in a vectorialized version, where the reading path was pre-determined through the scroll system (Busi Rizzi – Di Paola 2023a), but the progression pace was left to the readers through the mouse wheel, arrow keys, and space bar; other times, it relied on panel succession by substitution (again, at a click/tap by the user), with panels merging, replacing or overlapping with previous ones through animated transitions; it used a mild interactivity to supplement, via hyperlinks, the information provided by the diegetic universe; and it mimicked webpages from social media, Wikis, and newspapers, allowing users to scroll and click as if they were browsing the actual pages and not their simulacrum. The comic hence both remediated the imaginary of and activated embodied reactions akin to video games, cinematic narratives, and, most of all, the Web itself, in a media convergence and dialogue that has increasingly characterized contemporary culture. Moreover, it thematized the condition of Generation Y by symbolically staging their transitional condition, alluding to the cracks in the economic, social and value

system and the repercussions of digital culture on everyday practices (Busi Rizzi – Di Paola 2023b).

Another interesting – although very short-lived - object was *Void*, a motion webcomic created by Fabio Corrirossi (text), Damjan Stanich Fabio Ramacci, Emilio Pilliu and Gea Ferraris (drawings), Emilio Pilliu (colors) Stefano Bagnoli and Cristiano Giacomi (motion-design), and Simone Ferretti (ost). *Void* was set in a 2999 Rome, populated by androids and overrun by technology. Heavily influenced by science fiction (Philip K. Dick) and cyberpunk, the project aimed at creating a much larger storyworld than it ultimately managed to. As many motion comics, its control of the reading pace gave rise to ambivalent reactions by the comics community, and did not manage to intercept their tastes and sufficiently consolidate its popularity.

Even more ephemeral was the *Deepcomix* app. It was a multilingual application for iPad and iPhone, using the gyroscope to let the reader navigate the comics storyworld in a 3d environment. It allowed for moving the observation point, zooming, and transitioning from one image to another through a dynamic effect. A teaser comic was created, titled "3 di notte"; it was a horror story written by Stefano Ascari, drawn by Emanuele Tenderini, with special effects by Michele Sciolette, and can still be found online. Nonetheless, the app quickly disappeared; it is reasonable to believe that this was due to the significant disproportion between the difficult market positioning of the app (which offered an extremely appealing object, but lacked established consumption and reading practices) and the huge commitment in terms of time and money that the creation of each story seems to require. Thus, the idea returns that many objects thought up during this period are, again in Rouse's words, "unassimilated, interdisciplinary, stitched together, and participatory" (2016: 105), and to this constitutive instability they often end up paying the price. Ghetti himself, after consolidating his audience, will abandon formal experimentation and rather move on to more prototypical objects (the print series *Millennials*, a follow-up to the webcomic made with Claudia Razzoli and Caterina Cappelli, and two graphic novels for Coconino, *Dove non sei tu*, 2018), and *Non dimenticarti di me*, 2019) or to experimenting on practices rather than technologies (*APRI*, a series of epistolary short stories, and *Isa*, the story of Isabella D'Este published in installments on Instagram, in collaboration with Rita Petruccioli).

Although less experimental in relation to digital affordances, in the same period Makkox made his online debut with the blog *Canemucca* (2007), which later became part of another collective website aggregating comics artists, called *Coreingrapho* (that Makkox founded in 2009 with Antonio Sofi and Flaviano Armentaro). Makkox is, to this day, still one of the most important names in Italian comics, for the innovative language on a verbal and formal level. The

appearance that distinguished his works, still unusual for the time (or at least not settled as the primary reading mode for webcomics), is that of vertical comics scrolls or (later on) comics shown as animations, with transitions substituting the previous panels with new ones, resulting in a fixed reading pace. Finally, mention must be made of *Graphic news*, an original graphic journalism site founded in 2014 by Michele Barbolini, David Biagioni, Federico Mazzoleni, and Pietro Scarnera. Each *Graphic News* report was published in two languages and incorporated infographics, occasional animations, and atypical transitions (through scrolling or clicking). In this case as in others cited hereby, what stands out is the difficulty of converting some initial funding (here, a regional grant) into a self-sustainable publishing practice, which leading to discontinuing publications in 2018. One wonders if some of these projects were just too far ahead of their time - if as a result of the imminent discontinuity, they would not have had a better chance to continue.

The most recent phase (2010-present) concerns indeed the rise of, or switch to, platform economy. Although the phenomenon is broad and complex, three key configurations most evidently link platforms and comics. The first is that of platforms that host (and generally sell) comics, usually created according to a specific format. Globally, the best-known cases are the U.S.-based *ComiXology* (2013-) and the French *Izneo* (2010-)<sup>3</sup>, which mainly host skeuomorphic comics, that is, comics that replicate the paper format<sup>4</sup>. The second case is that of crowdfunding and support platforms, such as *Kickstarter* (2009-), *Indiegogo* (2007-), *Patreon* (2013-) or *Kofi* (2012-), used by beginning or independent authors as channels to be subsidized, without intermediaries, by their readers. The third case is that of social media, not only as an intermediate stage of publication in preparation for a transition to print, but also as key players in the formal and social evolution of comics.

The first category allows us to focus on several Italian experiences. The first that can be cited is *Verticalismi*, created as a website by Mirko Olivieri and then doubled, in 2015, by its sibling app *Verticomics*. Both were based on the vertical scroll as the ordering principle of comics reading, offering both free and paid comics. Over the years, *Verticalismi* hosted many prominent Italian cartoonists, such as Sio, Mirka Andolfo, Giulio Rincione, Taddei and Angelini, and so on - and yet it shut down around 2018. The second example is that of *Tacotoon*, a digital entertainment platform created by Edizioni BD. *Tacotoon* operates as an in-app store for webcomics, specifically designed for a vertical scroll reading. It boasts a vast catalog of both original and non-original comics series, sold one episode at a time, using an internal

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, several other e-book stores did - or still do - the same: e.g., *iTunes*, *GoogleBooks*, and so on.

<sup>4</sup> See Busi Rizzi 2023 for a reasoned taxonomy.

currency known as "tacos." The third case is that of *Jundo*, a webcomics and webtoons app marketed as 'the first platform in Italy to read webtoons, comics, and graphic novels', created by Lorenzo Carucci and launched in 2021. Accessible through a cheap (1,99€) monthly subscription, *Jundo* has been programmatically created to facilitate the production and distribution of emerging comics, both original and previously unpublished in Italy. Readers can read for free the first chapter of each work (at present, a medium-sized catalog, counting around 70 comics series). On the production side, artists are supported by a personal editor and a creative team; on the consumption side, the comics are optimized to be read on a digital screen, and an algorithm (akin to that of Netflix) suggests similar stories that readers may like. A similar experience was that of *Wildier*, a website of free online scroll comics which was active from 2017 to 2019; and, although focused on the skeuomorphic format, that of *Yep Comics!*, created in 2016 by Shockdom and giving access to their whole catalog, and that of *Astromica*, created in 2019 by Simone Balzano. *Astromica* is both an app and a website, with a catalog of more than seventy monthly and bimonthly series that allows a new chapter to be published every day. Readers can search and vote for their favorite comics.

Even from this quick overview it can be seen that the Italian problem is not a lack of creativity, but rather an atavistic tendency to multiply standards that are not compatible with each other. This does not mean, of course, that in this phase there is no way to aggregate authors on different channels: it is certainly worth mentioning *Stormi*, an online magazine of graphic journalism programmatically anti-fascist, anti-sexist, anti-racist and ecologist, born at the hands of the BeccoGiallo publishing house and edited by Giacomo Taddeo Traini, Alice Franceschini and Mattia Ferri; as well as the collective experience launched in 2014 by Dr. Manhattan (Alessandro Aprea), aimed at creating a free webcomic through a community of cartoonists and scriptwriters working on a voluntary basis, rebooting an idea born in the late 1990s (the webcomic is called *Icon 1 and the Alpha team*, and is currently at its fifth issue).

**Conclusion. *The eternal return of the same:* The merging of the Italian strip tradition and digital practices**

The creation and success of the various online platforms has had a significant impact on the formal, medial, and social practices affecting comics. At the same time, as the experimental vein related to the possibilities offered by digital tools, the main trend has been that of publishing comics on the most popular social networks (Facebook and Instagram), adapting them to the affordances of these platforms. Both socials have strict specifications for the size and format of images uploaded to the platform, that obviously affect the composition and presentation of images. Moreover, images are regrouped in carousels or galleries, allowing

users to scroll between different images within a single post. This allows multiple related images to tell a unified (yet fragmented and fragmentable) story through a single post, providing greater narrative versatility than a single static image. In such galleries, the scrolling of images occurs horizontally, and comic artists often take advantage of this feature to scroll through individual panels to a last image that regroups the previous ones together. These features have greatly facilitated the success of short comics and comic strips that fit well with the formal structures and social practices of social networks. The limited space, the ability to scroll through images, and the users' habit of fast and distracted 'consumption' of content have led many cartoonists to adapt their content to the logics imposed by social: the Internet requires the same immediacy, ephemerality, and daily engagement as newspapers. After years of absence, due to changed and unfavorable social and media conditions, the Italian strip seems thus to be reappearing precisely thanks to the dynamics set in motion by social networks. The great temporal distance from the Italian school we mentioned in the first section, and the changed conditions of production and consumption (notably, the disappearance of the publishers that guaranteed continuity) nonetheless implies a clear discontinuity with the Italian magazine experience.

These new works rather set out to recapture and reconfigure the classic genres of the strip, the serial cartoon, and the self-contained panel. They are inspired by the brevity of the comics of origin, but are adapted to the new frontiers and intersections of the digital context. They find space on the authors' personal websites, resonate through social media pages, and are intercepted and supported by publishers.

A very interesting case is that of Walter Leoni, who has been publishing his humorous strips *Totally Unnecessary Comics* on the *Linus* magazine since 2021 (he has since published his first graphic novel, *SOS tata*, in 2020). Before landing on the pages of the historic magazine, Leoni worked for years in the "undergrowth of illustrators": "I made storyboards, manuals, illustrations... A whole series of works in which you have no visibility as an author, which you often do not even sign for, and in which you do not draw or tell what you want, but what they ask you." (Mazzotta 2021). It is interesting in this sense to observe the evolution of *Totally Unnecessary Comics* on the author's Facebook page, and in particular the gradual shift from political and social satire to strips that rework the great tradition of international strips in a unique style. The 'dialogue' with the work of Schulz, Quino and (especially) Watterson leads Leoni to land on comics with a strong poetic and comedic charge, through an alternance between reiterating themes and improvising typical of the great masters. The theme of fatherhood allows him to explore with humor and delicacy the world of childhood, again through a series of tributes to the masters from whom he draws inspiration. The combination of satire and comedy leads Leoni to be perhaps the only Italian case in which it is possible to glimpse some continuity with the model of Italian strips developed in magazines between the 1960s

and the 1980s. If contemporary strips may adopt a more fragmented and experimental approach, using the form of self-contained panels or short independent gags (the aforementioned Sio, Daw, etc), Leoni recovers the continuity and linearity of those stories that were developed week by week in print magazines.

Of course, one must mention Zerocalcare (Michele Rech), one of the superstars of contemporary Italian comics, and possibly the intersection of the Italian strip tradition, autobiography proper to the graphic novel, and digital culture. Rech started publishing his stories on Facebook in 2009 and quickly rose to fame, releasing his first bestseller, *La profezia dell'armadillo*, for Bao Edizioni in 2011 (he has since published ten other books, all bestsellers). He achieved such a quick success not through experimental technical solutions or by deviating from traditional formats, but by repurposing the comic page format for the web. Zerocalcare's work encapsulates the fears, disappointments, and desires of a generation grappling with uncertainty (Busi Rizzi and Di Paola 2023b). His stories, marked by a strong autobiographical element, have been able to immediately and deeply resonate with Italian Millennials, leveraging their humorous nature and pop culture references to engage with complex personal and political issues.

Other contemporary comics share this tendency in mixing elements, yet more clearly show their origin from the Italian strip tradition, both with personal (e.g., Diaridibrodo and Labadessa) and political (Natangelo) themes, or their perchance for trends deriving from contemporary comics, i.e., autobiographical or pseudo-autobiographical narratives (amongst those more established on social media, one can mention Gio Quasirosso and Cristina Portolano, both of whom have successfully published their own graphic novels). Quite often, in the latter case, their stories have a significant social engagement component and aim to give voice to historically silenced minorities.

In this sense, the key name on the Italian scene is Fumettibrutti (Josephine Signorelli), who started her career in 2016 through an Instagram profile where she posted autobiographical strips and provocative self-portraits. Her breakthrough came in 2018 with the publication of her first graphic memoir, *Romanzo esplicito* (2018), by Feltrinelli Comics, a major Italian publisher. This autobiographical/autofictional work explored themes such as financial struggles, drug abuse, sex work, and complex romantic relationships. The author was later included in two feminist comic anthologies, and followed her debut with two autobiographical works (*P. La mia adolescenza trans*, 2019, and *Anestesia*, 2020), in which she came out as a transsexual woman, a revelation that sparked a wide range of reactions. Fumettibrutti's role in the Italian editorial field consolidated after her coming out, and helped casting light on the production related to LGBTQ+ themes, often marginalized in the Italian context, thus confirming the Web's



ability to act as an aggregator and bridge allowing authors and audiences to find space in a traditionally conservative publishing landscape.

In conclusion, the forty-year history of Italian digital comics shows a heterogeneous landscape, arising from a specific context with peculiar characteristics at the level of themes and production practices. Since the emergence of digital culture, this landscape has articulated in phases that have followed a transnational evolution, but at the same time have allowed resurfacing creative dynamics and imaginaries peculiar to the national context. It is thus a vast and contradictory universe that still waits to be navigated, and hopefully this chapter has managed to carry out a preliminary exploration.

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