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## **Drawing the Virus. The Representation of COVID-19 in Italian Comics**

### Abstract

Through the perspective of Cultural Semiotics, this article aims to show how Italian comic book creators have represented the tragic event of the coronavirus pandemic during the first lockdown (between March and May 2020) imposed by Giuseppe Conte's government. By analyzing the works produced during this timeframe, we attempt to identify the main ways the pandemic was depicted. We will focus on the representation of time and space, the double status of the virus (as an agent and condition), and creators' different textual strategies.

### Keywords

Comics, Italy, COVID-19, Semiotics, Media, New Media, Culture

### Introduction

The following article presents a semiotic and cultural analysis of different comics, webcomics, and animated videos published in Italy during the three-month quarantine (from March to May 2020) declared by the Italian government to fight the rise and spread of COVID-19. As a result of this, our primary goal is to shed light on the perception of the pandemic in Italian culture and show how cultures signify and define traumatic events through semiotic and aesthetic devices, including visual media. This objective has

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indeed required a multidisciplinary approach, as the cultural dominion of comic books and animations is inherently linked with new media. Moreover, the pandemic crisis has questioned the relationship between individuals and technology, media, and social interactions, making the cultural representation of this crisis not only a textual but a cultural and cross-medial issue.

As we will see in much more detail later, our analysis focused on three main areas of representation, which are to be considered reference categories to map how COVID-19 has been imagined thematically. The mentioned areas are the depiction of time, space, and the virus itself. Furthermore, this article will be dedicated to mediality, as it represents a transversal category with which all the others are articulated and interlinked.

Therefore, the following essay will be divided as follows: after a brief introduction, where we explain our case study and method, we present the analysis results, which consist of the identification and definition of the areas mentioned above. Finally, we draw some conclusions about the role of the mediascape in the construction of *cultural unities* (Eco 1976, 57) and how and why comics represented COVID-19 during the Italian pandemic crisis.

### *Why Comics?*

We will deal with comics as a medium, with the most common publishing, especially with works posted on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, including pictures and text. Although not actual comics, the latter are nevertheless the work of leading authors in the Italian comic books scene, such as the animated videos proposed by the artist Zerocalcare on the La7 TV channel on Diego Bianchi's show "Propaganda Live." Even though our work considers only a small portion of Italian culture, it can be placed in a broader context and a more strictly semiotic perspective: texts that use visual language prevalently.

Visual language has embodied one of the preferred codes to make sense of the pandemic. In the Italian context, for example, numerous emblematic images spread through media and new media: the picture of the virus taken using an electron microscope, often used by numerous cartoonists; posters on balconies, usually depicting a rainbow reading the slogan 'Everything will be fine'; photographs of doctors, nurses and health personnel exhausted by work shifts; the tragic succession of trucks full of Covid victims in Bergamo; but also images of institutional events, such as Pope Francis' Easter Mass in the empty St. Peter's Square.

The criterion with which we have built our corpus is that of socio-cultural relevance. It seems that Italian comics have been experiencing a moment of considerable expansion during the last few years. In this regard, Dallavalle (2020) conducted a meticulous data analysis about the state of health of this market, combining different sources such as the reports of AIE (Italian Publishers Association) and ISTAT (the national institute of statistics). The work showed that “[Italian] comics have been living a golden age for the last twenty years, at least as far as the media attention is concerned [our translation]” (Dallavalle 2020, 12) (Tab. 1).

Table 1: Yearly publications and comic book publications in the Italian market

Year	New Publication/Year	Comic Books	% of Comics in Total
2000	54 245	347	0.6%
2010	84 696	1 624	1.9%
Δ% (2000/2010)	+56.1%	+368%	+216.6%
2018	134 948	4 705	3.5%
Δ% (2010/2018)	+59.3%	+189.7%	+84.2%

Source: Informazioni Editoriali, July 31, 2019 (ie-online.it).

Therefore, the analyzed creators are significant figures in Italian media, so much so that their drawings and words play a significant role in the epistemic processes of production, reproduction, and interpretation of the reality in which the Italian audience lives. Among the most relevant authors, we may name: Zerocalcare, who is currently a best-selling author and has achieved fame through self-production; Leo Ortolani, creator of Rat-Man, one of the most influential comic characters in the Italian Comics scene; Marco Tonus, a graphic designer and cartoonist who has collaborated with numerous magazines and newspapers such as “l’Unità,” “l’Internazionale,” “il Vernacoliere” and “il Male”; and many other cartoonists such as Gipi, Davide Toffolo, Maicol&Mirco, Sio, and Grazia La Padula, who contributed to the collective project *Come Vite distanti*.

For context, the works quoted will be listed and briefly described in Table 2.

Table 2: Content of the quoted texts

	Author(s)	Publishing	Content
<i>Come Vite Distanti</i>	Various authors referring to ARF!, a Roman comic festival	A different artist drew 78 boards, constituting a single comic book— published daily on Facebook and the ARF! official site	The story's protagonist is a young man who can magically travel through different homes thanks to a magic red door
Various comic strips	Leo Ortolani	Facebook posts	The strips describe in a comical and often exaggerated way the life of the author during the quarantine
<i>Rebibbia Quarantine</i>	Zerocalcare (Michele Rech)	Short animated videos presented on TV and posted online	The focus of the videos is the author's neighborhood, Rebibbia, and the life of its people during quarantine
<i>Pangolino</i>	Marco Tonus et al.	Limited-edition book (1000 copies printed)	A parody of the famous 'Mickey Mouse' comic strip, in which the typical elements of the Disney magazine are revisited in a satirical way

Source: ours.

### *Select Theoretical and Methodological Note*

The present study can be situated in the field of cultural semiotics. Therefore, our ultimate analysis is concerned with Italian culture itself, specifically, both diachronic and synchronic segments of Italian culture that we call the Italian "semiosphere" (cf. Lotman 1985). We believe, along with Lotman, that culture is a complex system of signs that needs to be taken into account holistically. We feel close to the perspective that views the semiotics of culture centered on texts and codes of signification (Lorusso 2009, 1.1): an observer needs to work from texts to understand cultural trends, perceiving texts as *cultural functions* that envision their functioning within a given

system. In addition to the Lotmanian theory of culture, we will refer to the so-called “generative semiotics,” which can be traced back to Greimas’s works (*cf.* Greimas 1982; 2002) and provides a well-stocked toolbox for the qualitative analysis of texts.

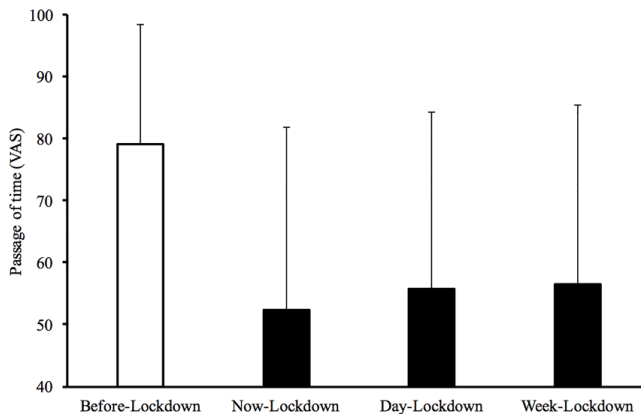
## Research Results

### *The Representation of Time: a Model of Seriality between Iterative Development and Suspension*

Whereas photos and audiovisual material convey a strong effect of instantaneity, the comic strip brings a different temporality representation. As stated by Daniele Barbieri in *Semiotica del fumetto*, the comic medium puts a certain amount of time on stage: strips “contain in their representation a certain amount of time [our translation]” (Barbieri 2017, 96), which would be the time needed to read the balloons, the diegetic spaces, and the topological distribution of the page.

Comics, therefore, allow to portrait a rather specific representation of time, and it can be interesting to understand how different authors have staged the perception of time during the sanitary emergency and, in particular, the lockdown period. In fact, according to a study carried out by a research team of the University of Clermont Auvergne (Volet, Gil, et al., 2020), the passage of time during this period was perceived by individuals in isolation in a different, generally slower way (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: The mean passage of time for the period before the lockdown and during the lockdown, i.e., the now, the day, and the week



Source: Volet, Gil et al., 2020.

In addition to diegetic reading time, however, we need to analyze the pacing of media development to find the relationship between the time perceived by individuals during the lockdown and comics' time as a medium. Therefore, we will analyze comic production and publication forms, as they reflect Italian people's practices.

The comics' seriality is pertinent to the perception of time in Italian society during the lockdown. Seriality is a common element of an endless number of media creations and consists of the recurrence of different elements (protagonist, places, *et cetera*) in each episode of the text in question. If we consider these works in their entirety, we can observe the presence of two different ways through which temporality is articulated: iterative (daily) and durative (referring to lockdown times). In "Come Vite Distanti," for example, we have on one hand almost all the panels following one another with the same iterative structure: Leo, the protagonist, enters and exits different houses through a magical threshold; nevertheless, on the other hand, a single, coherent, and therefore durative, narrative path is delineated throughout the whole story.

This kind of recursive or "spiral" (Barbieri 2017, 100) seriality, although very common in the comic world, could be considered as a codification of individuals' perceived temporality during the health emergency: the cartoons followed each other in the same temporal rhythm as the rhythm of the Italian readers, who were locked in, living the daily quarantine routine. At the same time, they experienced deep transformations and upheavals from a single cultural trauma that needed meaning and semiotic stability. We can notice how in Leo Ortolani's strips and in "Come Vite Distanti," each of the episodes, meaning each strip and each board respectively, was published daily on Facebook, approximately from the end of March to June.<sup>1</sup> Every day the fans of the collective project and Ortolani's followers were confronted with a very short appointment (the reading speed is minimal for both the strips and the single panel), usually published in the context of their Facebook feed (Fig. 2).

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<sup>1</sup> From the 25<sup>th</sup> of March to the 8<sup>th</sup> of June (COmeViteDistanti) and from the 6<sup>th</sup> of March to the 4<sup>th</sup> of May (Leo Ortolani).

Figure 2: A Leo Ortolani comic strip presented on a Facebook feed



Source: Facebook (Leo Ortolani's official page)

Another text we have taken into consideration is *Pangolino*. *Pangolino* is a parody of *Topolino*, an Italian serial comic strip *par excellence*. Here seriality is seen as parodic: with the reprise of various elements from the *Topolino* comic, such as advertisements, competitions, agony aunt letters, *et cetera*; the pandemic experience is seen as new normality. Using seriality (this time not actual but simulated) gives meaning to temporal length.

### *The Representation of Space: Places and Spaces of the Pandemic*

In addition to changes in the perception of time, one of the main aspects of the pandemic was indeed the resemantization of spaces, as seen in Lorusso et al., 2020 (for example, in Lorusso's contribution "Il senso di casa" ["The meaning of home"] in which she reflects on the values that Italian homes acquired during the lockdown). In the analyzed text, we have identified a series of "places" and "spaces" symbolic of the pandemic.

However, with "spaces" and "places," we are not referring to any anthropological or sociological category but to a pair of analytical terms that help to clarify the meaning attributed to some areas that played an essential role during the pandemic.

By places, we mean the physical areas of the pandemic, the representations of those places that characterized the health emergency. In this category, we can see *the home, the supermarket, the balconies, and telecommunications* (which, despite representing virtual places, have been concretely ‘inhabited’ by Italians during this period). Place limits, thresholds, and social distances are represented there: some examples are queues, grandparents on video calls, or spaces of practice. While these environments in the pre-pandemic situation ordered very different frames, today they form a single pandemic script, for their content has been resemantized.

On the other side, by the term ‘spaces,’ we mean those areas representing mostly passions, states of mind, and internal, proprioceptive conditions, which testify to the psychophysical repercussions of the lockdown on individuals. For example, this type of representation is evident in Grazia La Padula’s board from COmeVItteDistanti (Fig. 3). Although the pandemic’s physical spaces are also represented in the panel, it is the inner space of the protagonist to be staged. La Padula uses specific graphic and stylistic choices to portray social alienation and temporal suspension, both states of mind felt by individuals during the lockdown.

Figure 3: An example of the “space of the pandemic” representing a proprioceptive and psychological state of being



Source: <https://www.arfestival.it/covid/>



### The Visual Figurativization of the Virus

Focusing merely on the images of our corpus while leaving the verbal part of the comics out, the virus seemed to be visually represented in two different ways:

The virus is first represented as a figure from the natural world, which anthropomorphizes itself and becomes an authentic subject, with its proper narrative path: from a semiotic point of view, the virus is, therefore, an actor, thus playing both a structural and a stereotypical role in the storytelling.

The peculiarity of this representational model is the presence of an agency, a will. Its anthropomorphization makes it possible to identify the virus as an active agent in the world. It is frequent to see the humanized version of the virus in the corpus, which is the digital reconstruction of the vibrio on the electric microscope (Fig. 4).

Although not drawn as a figure from the natural world in the second method of depiction, the virus is represented through other characters, situations, and objects found in comic strips. The pandemic and the virus constitute the central theme based on which the stories are told, rather than actual actors. Therefore, the virus is just a condition, losing its role as a subject and its agency and ability to act voluntarily on things (Fig. 5).

Figure 4-5: Virus as an actor (left) and virus as a condition (right)



Source: Facebook (Leo Ortolani's official page);

Youtube.com (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCq9c2ed5c07j9DOXtDvwbhA>).

This double typology may be a clue to how the COVID-19 emergency has been perceived in the Italian semiosphere: on the one hand, the iatrogenic construction of the virus as an anti-subject to be fought, and on the other

hand, the virus as a condition to be overcome: in this second case the virus is not an adversary, but a state of being to be avoided (fought) through individual practices and political choices.

### *Social Media and Enunciative Strategies*

Countless images online have contributed to constructing, although in different forms (memes, photographs, drawings, and others), the meaning of this period. During our analysis, we realized that it was impossible to work on a large part of the corpus without considering its more strictly media-related aspects.

In this regard, we have identified a close connection between the corpus and semiotic enunciation theories, which focus on the relationship between texts and their production.

It can be noted that many strips and comics were posted directly on the authors' Facebook and Instagram pages. Significantly, this kind of text is directly available on a platform that, in wide use, is linked to the private sphere of the users and contributes to the construction of the in-the-moment enunciation-subject, in a similar way to verbal language, as we can read in Violi:

We write what we are doing at a certain time, where we are, the friends we are seeing in the particular moment when our "Facebook friends" will be reading us, as if we were telling them a story. Such posts by no means represent our permanent identity, but only a moment in our life, a snapshot soon to be replaced by other moments and images, as in a live, orally told story (Violi 2017, 11).

Readers thus have the feeling of being "face to face" with the artists' thanks to the implementation of an enunciative strategy: one where the author produces a subjectivization effect through the production of a text which is, on the contrary, traditionally linked to what Metz calls "impersonal enunciation" (Metz 1995). This link is even more evident when the characters are encyclopedically recognized as the authors themselves. For example, in the Italian audience, it is commonly known how Zerocalcare, the protagonist of Michele Rech's comics, represents the author's avatar, who depicts his everyday life within his neighborhood with his animations. Leo Ortolani's strips describe this game of enunciation very well if we consider that, in almost all the strips, the subject is Leo himself.

The cartoonists are therefore invested in the first person, not necessarily because they represent themselves in the drawings, but because they represent their proper world and their idiosyncratic way of experiencing the pan-

demic and the lockdown: social media blurs the boundaries between private and public life and between individual points of view and historical events. In other words, a strong effect of presence and subjectivity is produced on social media, which makes the enunciations attributable directly to the author itself.

All these enunciative strategies would be impossible without the contemporary media landscape, which has heavily contributed to forming the encyclopedic meaning of COVID. Comics, in other words, are not exempt from what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call “hypermediacy” (Bolter; Grusin, 1999). This term identifies a double feature of new media. On the one hand it creates an illusion of immediacy, while on the other, new media mediates and re-mediates itself:

Where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as “windowed” itself-with windows that open on to other representations or other media (Bolter, Grusin 1999, 34).

## **Conclusions**

The analysis above has allowed us to note comics’ importance as a medium and their use on a social level. Comics have been introduced into Italian culture to interpret the pandemic condition. Additionally, comics have given the Italian audience the semiotic tools to create new meaning following the irruption of the senseless and the unexpected. Comics have helped people create and figure out their role in recent past events along with other media. This benefit is unduly true, especially if we consider that, according to semiotics, meaning is constructed through narrativity.

Meanwhile, fixating on a visual level, the pandemic’s images have contributed to constructing an actual standard frame in our semiosphere. Those images have added some meaning to our world experience. This setting could be viewed via the pandemic’s thematization, which was especially highlighted in the portion of the article where we have seen the virus portrayed as a condition.

Finally, in the culture section, we noted how the sense of the virus had been constructed from an individual and intimate perspective, thanks to both the comic strip’s characteristics, which allow for a visual representation of states of being and emotions, and the use of social media, which convey a strong sense of singularity and subjectivity. The pandemic event has therefore not been characterized by a grand narrative but by several single perspectives.

We can conclude by showing that our study, although partial, can certainly be expanded in two directions. First, it motivates us to investigate more thoroughly the crossmediality and contaminations that comics continue to undergo with new and old media; on the other hand, it persuades us to consider comics as one of the many places in the semiosphere that we can reach out to understand how cultures stratify and shape their collective memory.<sup>2</sup>

In this regard, our work constitutes a part of broader research that aims to investigate from a semiotic perspective the codes and languages of comics and the relationship between this type of medium and the traumatic events in Italian culture. The semiotics of culture, which constitutes our referent discipline, does not simply consider texts as objects to be analyzed, but it also conceives them as cultural functions that help us understand ideologies and how a given society represents itself.

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<sup>2</sup> An interesting research project about cultural memory in situations of conflict, post-conflict, violence and collective trauma is the TraMe centre in Bologna (Research centres — Philosophy and Communication Studies ([unibo.it](http://unibo.it))). One of the centre's research areas is the relationship between mass media and memory, with research that analyzes the press, TV, the web and their impact on culture.

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