

Tous les garçons et les filles de mon âge? Comics as a nexus to Italian youth media cultures and generational imaginaries

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Abstract

It is difficult to clearly frame the relationships between a medium such as comics and (old and new) generations. Still, the role of comics in defining a generational condition cannot be underestimated. Not only because comics have helped give voice to and display generational similarities and belongings, but also because the imaginary of different generations has manifested itself in the various media practices of consumption and production that have characterized the history of comics. Comics is thus a fertile ground for analysis to investigate the dynamics that contribute to creating that "conception of the world" capable of orienting young people's experiences and emotional lives. Thanks to its hybrid nature, its flexibility, and its extraordinary ability to feed on and intertwine with other media, comics thus give us an overview of the fundamental role that media play in shaping the identity of new generations. Through a genealogical reconstruction of the relationships between Italian comics and generational imaginary, this article will investigate how repertoires of memory, symbolic contents, and narratives combine to create, over time, cohorts united by a common sense, an encyclopaedia and a value system that allow mutual recognition among members of the same generation.

Examining the intricate web that ties comics to life patterns allows to shed light on how media influence the formation of generational identities and intergenerational relationships. Indeed, such interactions foreground the processes of construction of one's own life and knowledge, involving emotional and educational components and identity beliefs, based on social roles, available technologies, and individual and collective practices of consumption.¹ As Karl Mannheim stated:

The problem of generations is important enough to merit serious consideration. It is one of the indispensable guides to an understanding of the structure of social and intellectual movements. Its practical importance becomes clear as soon as one tries to obtain a more exact understanding of the accelerated pace of social change characteristic of our time. It would be regrettable if extra-scientific methods were permanently to conceal elements of the problem capable of immediate investigation (1952: 286-287).

The concept of generation does not simply imply the chronological contemporaneity of individuals born in the same time interval. Instead, it is based in the common participation in what Mannheim (1952) calls 'social location', "a specific range of potential experience" and "a tendency pointing toward certain definite modes of behaviour, feeling, and thought" (291). It is the kind of identification that Göran Bolin calls "we-sense" (2019). Moreover, youth plays a decisive role in initiating processes of cultural change, acting as a "revitalizing agent" whenever faced with "rapidly changing or completely new circumstances" (Mannheim 1997: 34). In this sense, analysing the relations between generations and comics shows us how media metamorphoses have contributed to changing imaginaries and the social, economic, and cultural practices of generations of cartoonists and audiences. In fact, they tie in with

the generation's nurturing environment, understood as the set of environmental factors, in private and public, that individuals of the same generation experience and share [...] likely to be decisive in fostering a certain specific sentiment in different age cohorts. [...] Institutional and political changes are another such factor. Beyond the epochal watershed role of the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is obvious that a generation that grew up during the Cold War will look at

the world from a very different perspective than one that has never seen it and learns about it (when it learns it) from schoolbooks or through the stories of older people (Colombo 2012: 24, our translation).

The environment provided by mass culture has had indeed, over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first century, the ability to rapidly introduce new lifestyles and habits to younger generations. Consequently, each generation marks the period of its own education and growth with rituals and memories linked to the practices and values imbued with that culture.² These life patterns stem more evidently from situated practices whose centrality evolved over time: going to the movies during the mass cinema era, visiting newsstands and sharing comics in the Eighties, etc. Even if it is reductive to look at generations from an exclusively mediacentric perspective, individual and collective experiences and practices linked to media consumption play a prominent role in the narratives that define generational identity. By examining these divides and connections, one can gain insight into how comics have come to represent and interpret the identities of different generations, and the ways in which old and new generations interact with and through it.

1. *A long time ago, in a peninsula far, far away: adventure and exoticism in cinema and comics*

Let's then start by considering those who were born in the 1920s, able to access comics due to the influence of the previous generation who grew up with *Corriere dei Piccoli*, a magazine that broke with the traditional monumentalizing logic of late nineteenth-century Italian culture, instead providing readers with insights to the international entertainment scene. Indeed, for the first time in Italian history, American characters were introduced, albeit in a completely different format from the original. This generation, caged by regime bans, pedagogical logics, and autarkic culture, found a way to escape through the colourful and exciting U.S. adventure comics published in Italy in 1934 with the launch of *L'Avventuroso* magazine. *Flash Gordon*, *Radio Patrol*, *Secret Agent X-9*, *Jungle Jim*, *Cino e Franco*, *Mandrake* and *L'uomo mascherato* became representative figures for a generation



Image created by the authors on Midjourney 5.1

marked by a strong desire for freedom and an afflatus toward a truly international dimension. *L'Avventuroso*, a comic magazine, thus turned into a symbol of that generation. Particularly noteworthy is the figure of designer and journalist Giuseppe Trevisani, who collaborated with Elio Vittorini's *Politecnico*, the first magazine in Italy to discuss mass culture and comics without prejudice. In his words, *L'Avventuroso* was

a simple, almost crude paper; there was nothing but the pure and simple, very plain translation of the words in the comics. The boys who had just finished elementary school and were beginning high school that year, with their first Latin class, eagerly threw themselves on that paper, which was different from what they had been allowed and advised to read up to that point. All their little newspapers, all their books, had been up to that point uplifting and instructive. This all-figure rag finally taught nothing. Parents didn't like it, teachers didn't like it. It was only amusing, in its wretchedness, in its sometimes clumsy Italian. High school boys accepted it unreservedly, fanatically, precisely because it was not approved by grown-ups. That sheet of coloured paper divided them not only from their parents and educators, but also from boys who were a few years older than them: they were already older, did not understand comics, and never understood them again. Gordon's friends in Italy are all from 1923 and 1924; there are perhaps a handful from 1922. The older ones, for a few years' difference, did not experience that key episode of contestation: unlike their barely younger comrades, they had neither the ability nor the luck to make that paper a flag and a challenge, regardless of the merit of the stories. They missed the bus. It was the first time a generational group became vaguely aware of itself (Trevisani 1974: 13-16, our translation).

This was such a strong formative experience that in-

fluenced the interests and paths of intellectuals who would devote themselves to comics in the coming years. It is a generational lace (masterfully romanticized in Umberto Eco's *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*)³ that also had important theoretical repercussions, since in the analyses and approaches that this generation devoted to comics, we find a clear prominence of U.S. ones (particularly those produced between the 1920s and 1940s), which became the core around which theories on comics language and history were developed.⁴ Comics thus became an important part of a renewed cultural debate on mass communications and the forms of the culture industry.⁵ Today, comics are no longer an object to be ashamed of and to be hidden from the censorious gaze of institutions and families, and if graphic novels find a place in bookstores and are sometimes shortlisted for prestigious literary prizes, it is something we owe first and foremost to that generation that grew up amidst, on the one hand, the gatherings of the little *balilla* (boys aged 8 to 14), and on the other, the fantastic escapes to planet Mongo within the pages of *L'Avventuroso*.

Furthermore, cinema – with its recently-gained centrality in the media system – proposed the same kind of imaginary and values, laying the foundations for a strong discontinuity with the past that would soon find itself consonant, after the fall of Fascism, with the rise of a republican and modern Italy and with the consequent process of modernization that invested the country:

The 1930s and early 1940s show a strong predilection of the Italian spectator and reader for the models of audio-visual culture coming from the United States [...]. With the images of American films and with the drawings of American and

Italian adventure comics, a cultural biography is configured, marked by the desire for freedom from autarkic knowledge. The Italian reader-spectator aspires to an experience of international imaginary, is attracted and fascinated by the hermeneutic power of the audio-visual spectacle of cinema and comics and the universalism it implies. That reader-spectator thus experiences, contrastingly, the ambivalence of his condition: projected outside national fences and yet confined within the limits and frames imposed by regime politics. It is a compression that, not coincidentally, as soon as the Second War is over, results in a hypervitalism of national culture in those sectors of mass culture (cinema, comics, photo-novels, publishing at large) that had suffered from arbitrary and unintended restrictions in the previous decade (Frezza 2008: 79-80, our translation).

This media landscape will evolve profoundly - considering the younger age group, with the rise of Disney animated films and periodicals (and their epigones), or in all the experiences, from the 1960s onward, in which music would be the engine of protests, contestations, and counterculture, creating a humus with which comics will establish a very close link, especially through underground magazines. However, from a technology-related perspective, the forces in the field will remain roughly unchanged until the arrival of a new actor: private TV.

2. Modern times: TV broadcasts and the creation of a transmedial, transnational youth imaginary

Indeed, not only do media link individuals from the same generation to their historical era, but they also create a dialectic with both the past and future, connecting or disconnecting previous and upcoming generations:

media uses typical of a generation (for Italian baby boomers, for example, the invention of a radio broadcasting independent of the state monopoly in the 1970s) are made possible on the one hand by the will to challenge and overcome the media system of the previous generation, and on the other hand by a consumption habit that the very generation of parents had helped to present and form (Colombo 2012: 17, our translation).

This paradoxical role as engine of change - yet in

the service of the previous generation - and propeller of an imaginary which had never before been so inventive yet regimented within the most restrictive constraints and needs of the market, is probably best embodied by *Carosello* (1957-1977). Combining spectacle and advertising, animation and acting, the ten-minute *Carosello* evening issues offered a daily appointment unmissable for Italian families, with a clear target in children and adolescents and a relationship with the imaginary of comics that would pave the way for several later programs, some of which were created by the same authors. Perhaps above them all *Supergulp!* (1977-1982) stands out, a 15-minute container of "comics on TV" created by Guido De Maria and Giancarlo Governi, which animated and broadcasted Italian and (later) international comics classics such as *Nick Carter*, *Alan Ford*, *Mandrake*, *Corto Maltese*, *Lupo Alberto*, *Cocco Bill*, *Sturmtruppen*, *Cino e Franco* again, but also Marvel comics and Franco-Belgian products such as *Asterix* and *Tintin*.

After the centre of the media system shifted decisively from film to television - and following the liberalization of private radios and TV channels since the end of the 1970s - things were bound to change forever. When in 1982 *Bim Bum Bam* debuted on Italia 1,⁶ colour broadcasting, the availability of a decidedly greater number of TV programs, and the transgressive offer of commercial television, were set to have a clear impact on memory and thus on that retrospective look that allows a generation to create traits that distinguish it from others. Indeed, if we look beyond the technological nature of media, we can find

narratives, characters, imaginaries and possible worlds, psychological and emotional constructs, cognitive tools, forms of shared enjoyment experience, symbolic content and values that sediment as repertoires in the memory of each member of the same generation, and that can be used as tools to re-enact the past and activate mutual recognition (Aroldi, Colombo 2013: 286, our translation).

Young people from this generation were the first to be marked by an imaginary that, thanks to the television system, integrated the West and the East for the first time, welcoming and encouraging the enormous success of Japanese anime. Indeed, from the mid-1970s onwards anime invaded the screens and imag-

ination of young Italians of the time, providing space for a new cultural identity with strong repercussions on lifestyles and social attitudes. The contrast with the cultural and educational models of the previous generations (alarmed by the purported danger of the Japanese cultural invasion)⁷ cemented the identity of the young people who grew up in this period, as did developing and training their cognitive tools in a world that was moving towards the digital, trans-medial practices that characterize today's society. Those cartoons, thanks to relatively low rights and translation costs, equally populated the otherwise fragmented schedule of local TV stations. In just a few years, one could count more than 150 Japanese animated series aired daily (see Benecchi 2005: 58). It was a small but significant revolution, capable of shaping the affective and media practices of this generation – so much so that it has been defined as “the Goldrake generation” (Pellitteri 1999; Teti 2018).

The discovery of the Western market in turn pushed Japanese production companies to internationalize their stories by creating hybrid narrative genres in which the syncretism between Western and Eastern mythologies and practices led to the creation of generational cults such as *Great Mazinger*, *Steel Jeeg*, *Tiger Mask*, *The Knights of the Zodiac* (mainly hosted by local TV stations because of their violent content) and *Lupin the Third*, *Dragon Ball*, *Captain Tsubasa*, *Ranma ½* (and many others), products capable of satisfying the identity needs of young viewers who looked for answers to adolescence crises and conflicts in an era influenced by the ruthless, hyper-individualized logic of yuppies. Furthermore, the anime imaginary seemed to respond more broadly to the interests and identity needs of an audience that was increasingly not only white and male. Anime made a decisive contribution to the education of the first generation to grow up within a tentacular media ecosystem in which television, video games, comics, role-playing games, action figures and fan culture offered social and pedagogical models of enormous formative and affective value and unprecedented pervasiveness.

Moreover, while children's television programs would have less and less space in the broadcast since the late 1990s, the imaginary brought to Italy by anime would remain in its transmedial form through manga. Indeed, not only would the comics versions

of familiar stories offer audiences the opportunity to explore and compare expanded, often uncensored versions of storyworlds they were already acquainted with. The sedimentation of its narrative and visual style, the conquest of at least a subcultural legitimacy, the calculated, friendly exoticism of its source material, and the good sales returns against a vast and hitherto unknown corpus would allow manga to acquire, in our country, a slice of the market that is still growing to the present day.⁸

Meanwhile, once the cartoon market had become primarily global and serial, the US was not slow to establish itself as a second driving force, asserting its importance in particular for the (relatively) irreverent and politically incorrect comedy of its products, which derived from and remediated the imaginary of US underground comics and were capable of shaping the prototypical forms and tropes of comedy for the Italian youth of the late 1990s and early 2000s (one can easily think of *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, or the later *Family Guy*, but the list is extremely long and counts titles such as *Beavis & Butt-Head*, *Celebrity Deathmatch*, and so on). In a way, US cartoons can be seen as a direct neutralization and dilution of the more transgressive and less palatable *comix* material, and perhaps that is the reason why, even in Italy, they managed to graft themselves onto the underground comics of the 1980s and largely supplant them in the generational imaginary.

3. Q: Are we not men? A: We are digital: the Web as a transnational, transhistorical mediator of identity and community

The media diet of generations Y and Z is richer, more articulated and more fragmented than that of their predecessors, and the identity foundations of these generations rest firmly on the logics and processes brought into play by digitization and media convergence. According to Amendola and Tirino, Generation Y has been characterized by four sociocultural features, i.e., a global dimension; an active role in consumer choices; a propensity to use mobile digital media; and a tendency to invest in identity building processes through social media (2018: 138). If generations are socio-anthropological constructs marked by common experiences, memorable facts, rituals

and myths, the key markers for Generation Y are to be found in the Internet and the triumph of digital culture (ibid.), which provided access to an increasingly global experience:

the Web is by its very nature far more cosmopolitan than television, which still functioned on the basis of drastic selections of information and in a local key, and above all tended to adapt contents and formats, even linguistically, according to national logics. In contrast, the net deconstructs traditional forms of mediation in favour of new intermediaries, and entrusts new types of mediation to large platforms that work not only to select content, but also to construct patterns of behaviour (Aroldi, Colombo 2013: 289, our translation).

On the production side, this means that these technologies provided users with an unprecedented opportunity to create self-made content – a content no longer limited to the private dimension, but shareable, spreadable, potentially available to everybody in the entire public sphere. The development of social networks and blog platforms was thus the ground on which self-representation was built and allowed young Gen Ys to recognize themselves as a “we”. On the consumption side, this implied that young people could draw as never before on an almost infinite, transnational, transhistorical archive of media content and products, building fully personalized cultural and emotional paths of consumption. Blogs and social networks thus not only gave youth self-narratives a visibility unthinkable in the past, but also allowed the creation of new communal forms and practices, capable of relating individual paths to collective ones (Boccia Artieri 2012: 134).

Nevertheless, comics did not abdicate their role in helping decipher the shape of a generation’s worldview, the constituent that in Mannheim’s terms (1952: 265) can orient the emotional-identity experiences of (young) people. Instead, comics – thanks to their hybrid nature, and their extraordinary ability to feed on and intertwine with other media – both formally remediated and symbolically processed the role that digital (and analogue) media had in shaping the experiences and identities of the new generation.

Moreover, through this cohort of webcomics, young authors were able to exploit the Web and its possibilities, experiment with new forms of story-

telling, find a space of representation that could increase their visibility and recognizability, and bind themselves to an active audience that disseminated their content and helped them attain an attractive commercial profile for the publishing market. In fact, the Web was mostly used as a springboard for careers, and as a channel to create a potential paying audience.⁹ Both Zerocalcare and Lorenzo Ghetti (the two case studies that we will discuss shortly) have indeed landed in the world of publishing and print media by exploiting the popularity derived from publishing on their blogs and websites. We will focus on them because, in apparently opposite ways (one more evidently moving from shared discourses and obsessions deriving in part from digital culture, one from experimenting with state-of-art technological affordances as a means to rethink comics storytelling), they are paradigmatic examples of comics’ ability to circulate symbolic contents, forms of the imaginary and values capable of making manifest the *we-sense* of Generation Y, rewriting social and medial experiences of various kinds (traumatic, formative, playful, etc.) through practices and rituals that they share with their audience.

Zerocalcare (Michele Rech) has been the first author to bring Italian webcomics to the forefront.¹⁰ He did so without adopting experimental technical solutions, without straying too far from the formats we are used to seeing on paper, but rather adapting the format of the board to the web page. He started in 2009 and very quickly achieved enormous success, publishing, later shortly (with the help of the fellow cartoonist Makkox, and thanks to the quick process assured by the unchanged format), the first book collecting the stories featured on his blog (*La profezia dell’Armadillo*, 2011). The book has since then been reprinted several times by Bao Publishing, of which Zerocalcare has become the leading author.

Zerocalcare’s stories are marked by a strong autobiographical slant, in line with a common trend that has connoted the Italian comics scene since the late 2000s (Barbieri 2009: 179-183). His subjects are tackled with a strong, provocative, humorous vein, capable of eliciting the instant adherence of a very large audience. With an incredible comedic force, Zerocalcare shapes and materializes the fears, disappointments, and desires of a generation marked by precariousness. Like other cartoonists who have suc-

ceeded in becoming spokespersons of generational tensions, he manages to conjugate two diverging tendencies: “on the one hand the timeless possibility of using the deposits of the collective imaginary, and on the other hand the manifestation of specific forms of expression that constitute the most concrete and determined attachment to the essence of the historical time in which that certain, single generation emerges” (Frezza 2008: 77, our translation). Exemplary in this regard is the story published on his blog in July 2012 under the title of *Iggiovanidoggi* [Today’s youngsters] (Zerocalcare 2012a), showing us how media fruition, far from being a passive activity, contributes to the formation of a value-identity system and connects individual experience and belonging to a community that shares practices, lifestyles, and social attitudes. In this short comic, Zerocalcare weaves a (comedic) lesson on the value of sacrifice by reconstructing his own worldview through a series of *exempla* of extreme suffering and self-sacrifice drawn from the world of animation. *Tiger Man*, *The Knights of the Zodiac*, *Ken the Warrior*, and *Mila and Shiro* thus become the cornerstones of a training and educational system through which Generation Y would learn the value of tenacity and hard work. Lived and imagined forms become intertwined, showing how a series of media products settle in the memory of a generation until they feed reflective practices capable of initiating a whole series of self-discourses.¹¹ The media landscape metabolised by the author seems to be experienced as a kind of inner compass, pointing out the most suitable life paths: “The media environment thus functions as a reference background for the ‘putting into context’ and ‘putting into perspective’ of individual experiences, and succeeds in giving substance to the forms of a shared imaginary” (Boccia Artieri 2012: 136, our translation).

Obviously, the cultural products that are part of the direct cultural heritage of the author’s generation are more present in his stories, but there is no shortage of references to those television programs, comic books, music, and historical events that have marked previous and subsequent generations. As previously said, the Web has in fact begun to disrupt the old identifying logics that made the relationships between a particular media heritage and a generation exclusive:

the Internet, as a global repository of media content, has *de facto* disrupted the mechanisms of distribution that made texts and cultural products an exclusive part of a generation’s memorial heritage, making them accessible to anyone; instead, television programs, historical events, music, and films that marked one generation can easily be shared with members of subsequent generations, either intentionally – by nurturing forms of family dialogue, for example – or as a result of sometimes unpredictable dynamics of rediscovery and revival (Aroldi, Colombo 2013: 290, our translation).

Media and their products have taken on, since the 2000s, increasing importance in shaping private and generational identities. The new generations, fully immersed in a landscape dominated by convergence and interactivity, integrate – in a salient, systematic way – their everyday life and their media diet in a unified emotional and value space. The Internet becomes the privileged place where new generations can tell their stories and rediscover common practices and rituals with a potential, unprecedented global dimension, but also a trading ground with previous generations, in which the walls separating cohorts seem to collapse under the weight of a media environment that guarantees a continuous *present* to the cultural products of every age and era.

In this regard, Lorenzo Ghetti could be seen as the other end of a continuum that stems from Zerocalcare, as he is apparently less engaged, less grounded in shared cultural references, less interested in aggregating a generational audience, and less willing to replicate the paper comics format. Instead, he has been the first cartoonist in Italy to design and create a serialized experimental webcomic, *To Be Continued* (from now on, *ToBeCo*),¹³ which tried to exploit the technical and narrative potential offered by the Web and its affordances. It is a work designed (with the collaboration of web developer Carlo Trimarchi) exclusively and expressly for an online reading, allowing users to explore its narrative through completely new directions and tracks, challenging the rules and structures of paper comics through a combination of strategies allowed by digital storytelling (De Mojana 2014). The story of *ToBeCo* is that of a group of superpowered young people who clash with the logics imposed by the superhero school they are attending.¹⁴ In the world imagined by Ghetti, the succession of generations of superheroes has led not only to an

overpopulation of these beings, but also to new problems related to the genetics of superpowers: each generation is, in fact, somewhat weaker than the previous one. Moreover, the long years of crime fighting have led to the disappearance of true supervillains, and a consequent spectacularisation and deresponsibilisation of the superheroes' tasks.

Perhaps, however, this first level of reading is not enough to fully understand the narrative brought forth by Ghetti. We know that, in comics, myths, symbols, and traumas derived from technological and anthropological-cultural mutations find a space of representation; in fact, comics are a veritable myth machine, capable of assimilating and translating external reality and its contradictions into its own *dispositif* (Frezza 1995). Hence, *ToBeCo* clearly tells the story of Generation Y, to which Ghetti belongs, and the transitional condition it is going through; of the manifest cracks in the economic, social and value system; of the infinite possibilities of a universe yet to be invented; and of its relationship with previous generations. The generational confrontation between superheroes staged in *ToBeCo* is hence not simply the tale of a mutation in values and social customs; we can, instead, see through this level and notice how this confrontation works as a metaphor for the more radical medial and anthropological transformations that humanity is undergoing. Our young heroes are indeed perfect expressions of the posthuman contemporary era, of today's digital season in which "all forms of technological communication are regenerating on a higher level of convergence, implying unprecedented cognitive maps of the traumatic and global stages of change [...] the realization of an irreversible mutation is dense with unknowns and urgently requires complex identity refoundations" (Frezza 2013: 114, our translation). The bland superpowers of Ghetti's heroes, which are almost within everyone's reach, and are experienced with extreme normality, are a reflection of those technological powers (which yesterday seemed enormous and destined to transport us to a utopian techno-democracy) that are available to everyone, and have contributed to creating a world in the grip of precariousness, a life made of constant performance, and an information increasingly threatened by fake news, the polarization of public opinion, and cyber-balkanization.

In fact, the new generations of superheroes, in

this comic, are not so much distinguished from their predecessors by their powers, or by a marked propensity for the use of technology, but by the uncertainty that weighs on their social and individual paths – a mirror of the widespread precariousness that characterizes Generation Y – and that leads the young heroes of the saga to seek new forms of solidarity in the group.¹⁵ In Ghetti's parable we can then grasp one of the most characteristic traits of his generation, namely "a politicization of the everyday, the effort to give a social and political dimension to the problems of the individual" (Gozzo 2009: 30, our translation). The confrontation with the dimension of global insecurity, the crisis of public welfare systems and the precarisation of the labour market has led the members of this generation to seek new forms of social participation: "behind the classification of subjects as apathetic, deresponsabilised and disengaged lies, therefore, a more complex reality, in which attitudes of distrust toward institutions and traditional channels of participation coexist with the elaboration of new meanings and the search for new forms of politics" (ivi: 32, our translation). In this sense, we can consider Ghetti's webcomic as a bridge to the later Generation Z.

4. *That's me in the corner: low narrativity, post-irony, diversity, and exhaustion*

Taking a freeze-frame of contemporary times is always complicated by the short historical distance, which makes it difficult to clearly isolate and assess the most significant changes. Moreover, the exponential acceleration of the possibilities and availability offered by the digital results in several rhizomatic effects: the creation of niches (the so-called filter bubbles), encouraged by algorithms that personalize online experiences on the basis of prior choices, thus replicating one's limits and bias; an excessively vast offer, which paradoxically transforms the infinite choice into a potentially infinite checkmate, in which it becomes difficult to opt for one object over another (an extremely common conundrum for anyone who makes use of streaming platforms); hyperstimulation and information overload, which cause a loss of depth caused by the immediate availability of anything of interest, devoid of the cognitive and physi-

cal labour that was previously necessary to sediment and deepen one's affection towards it.

Nevertheless, we argue that as a consequence of the mechanisms and by-products of contemporary digital culture, three main trends can be identified in contemporary comics. The first has to do with the diffusion of looser narrative structures, which tend toward abstraction from the narrative and/or visual point of view. The second concerns the passage from irony to post-irony, which empties the meaning-making mechanisms on which traditional humour relied while at the same time undermining the intertextual grounding that substantiated postmodernist humour. The third is related to the consolidation of autobiographical narratives, particularly as a mean to give voice to minority groups and diversity issues.

A preference for loose narrative and the database logic seems to distinguish contemporary comics, especially online. This tendency has heterogeneous causes and forms: first, it has to do with the contemporary rise of storyworlds at the expense of plots, due to an increased interest towards the depth and immersivity of a story and to the flexibility of storyworlds to serve as narrative databases, which translates into a greater proclivity to intermedial adaptations. Second, it easily conforms to the requirements of digital serial narratives (particularly those on social media), in which the entry point must be, as much as possible, narratively independent and most appealing, to lure readers into them. Indeed, most of the paradigmatic audience of serial webcomics is not composed by loyal fans, but by casual readers who have come into contact with a single page, strip, or cartoon as part of an algorithmic suggestion or a memetic trajectory.¹⁵ Third, low narrativity can be explained by the final crisis of postmodernist maximalism. Many contemporary Italian graphic novels¹⁶ seem to corroborate this suspicion, by fragmenting or tearing their plots not with the aim of reconstituting them, but by virtue, it seems, of a radical distrust of grand narratives (see Stefanelli 2017). Not infrequently, this narrative fraying is echoed by a thematic reflection on the post-Anthropocene, with loose, desolate landscapes that leave but peripheral space for human beings.

In this sense, it will be interesting to see the turn that AI-made comics will take when they are no longer sparse experiments, but a regularly adopted

production mode. Indeed, right now generative AIs are a technology in the making, which still struggles with narrative cohesion and consistency. As a result, the few longer works so far leverage and embrace the uncanny nature of their visual outputs and the abstraction of the resulting narrative plots.¹⁷ At the same time, in less than two years the gap between the first generation of AIs and the current one has been gigantic. While it is therefore plausible to assume that artificial intelligence will be integrated into the comics production process, wondering about what this change will entail currently involves more doubts than certainties, not only (or not so much) concerning copyright compliance and data protection, or the understandable fears of workers in the industry that the AI revolution will leave their work time untouched, but will reduce the availability of jobs, intensify their working pace and/or decrease their pay. From the perspective of consumers, the biggest question is how the audience will react to a potentially infinite and infinitely generatable volume of works customized to their tastes to the finest detail, i.e., to a system potentially (although for the moment it is a hyperbolic, futuristic hypothesis) capable of creating, on demand and on the spot, a neo-noir graphic novel set in the reader's hometown, as if drawn by Gipi.

Coherently with the emergence of low-narrative works, recent years saw an exacerbation of the mechanisms of postmodern irony, which already largely featured second-level meaning-making strategies such as quotations and double coding (Eco 1983). This paroxysmic evolution has resulted in the so-called 'post-irony,' in which non-sequitur is the matrix of a cognitive structure based on a radical ambiguity between (not) meaning to be ironic and (not) being understood as ironic (Hoffman 2016: 41). The postmodern intertextual irony that still characterizes Zerocalcare, where satisfaction stems for the readers' enactment of a treasure hunt towards more or less hidden references and their appreciation of the many communicative layers of the text, is thus replaced by an irony based on the exasperation of other aspects of postmodernism: the detachment from one's own statements, a ubiquitous resort to meta-fictional strategies such as *metalepsis* (i.e., breaching narrative levels) and self-reflective structures, and a penchant for absurdism. Although the most limpid example of this change is for now observable

in memes rather than comics, it is reasonable to suspect that comics will align with it. In fact, contemporary comics, at least in their digital incarnation, markedly tend towards memes, aiming at the same practices of reposting, sharing, and remixing, and therefore increasingly remediate their structures and forms. Although it is less evident, a post-ironic turn is already occurring in comics, and it is diffused enough to make us wonder if comics are reaching their exhaustion phase:¹⁸ suffice to think of the huge success enjoyed by Sio (Simone Albrigi), whose combination of a raw, essential visual style and absurdist humour is far from unique.¹⁹

In a manner partly consonant with, and partly opposed to, this narrative disunity, the last decade has also seen the definitive affirmation, in Italian comics (and elsewhere), of autobiographical narratives, several of which related to diversity issues. The experiences of authors belonging to marginalized and oppressed communities (racialized people, LGBTQ+ subjectivities, etc.) have increasingly found space in particular on the Web, where identity themes manage to make up for the fragmentation described above and offer a reason for communal cohesion, one of the few elements capable of replacing the void left by the increasing crumbling of the last traditional social institutions (permanent friendship networks, stable monogamous relationships, and so on). Mostly, though, the digital – an instable market *per se* – is still for such authors an intermediate space in view of a print publication that allows them to capitalize on the symbolic capital constituted by loyal their online audiences (Busi Rizzi-Mandolini 2023). This path is well-exemplified by the parable of Fumetti-brutti (Josephine Signorelli), currently the leading author of Feltrinelli comics with the three graphic memoirs *Romanzo esplicito* (2018), *P. La mia adolescenza trans* (2019) e *Anestesia* (2020). Compared to the landscape that preceded it, the Web has indeed offered a most significant institutionalization to minority groups, to whom comics themselves have long spoken only tangentially.

The white, straight, male nature of the prototypical author in some artistic traditions is no mystery.²⁰ We can advance hypotheses that account for the less central identities in past generations by resorting to critical analyses conducted in other national contexts, mentioning, for example, how female readers

of comics are notoriously required to grow up earlier and faster than their male peers, abandoning adolescent readings for good (Gibson 2015), or recalling the ingrained ability of minority subjects to produce queer, subversive, against-the-grains readings of material meant to be understood as hetero-, white-, cis-normative (see for example De Angelis 2014; Richardson 2020). While recognizing that this is the way history and its power dynamics have unfolded and that, as a result, in the Italian case the generational paradigm seems to subsume the intersectional identity components of audiences, we underline how this is still a largely understudied matter, one that calls for specific investigations reconstructing in detail a counter-genealogy that may accompany and challenge the one we are proposing.

In closing, a warning about historical distance returns: if viewed too closely, each new historical phase probably gives to the observer the impression of an irremediable historical caesura with the previous one. Generation Z certainly stands out as the first digital native one, and is currently experiencing a phase of extreme acceleration where not only individual trajectories, but collective destinies themselves are becoming precarious and uncertain: urgent anxieties related to climate change and non-renewable resources, widespread conditions of political instability with global and immediate socio-economic repercussions, the spread of a full and unprecedented awareness of one's intersectional positionality (yet not accompanied by significant changes in the very conditions of oppression), and the first pandemic of the modern era are linked in double strand to a process of digital advancement whose complexity and pace often feel overwhelming and out of control, at least for the limited agency of the individual. This existential disconnection seems a premise so different from those of previous generations that one of its most obvious manifestations is to claim its constitutive difference (the slogan, popular a couple of years ago, "ok boomer," the similar, recent outrage at the so-called "nepo babies", etc.). The sense of historical depth, already challenged by the digital capacity to instantaneously retrieve almost anything, has come to lose meaning and interest. Comics themselves, as indeed any other media object, have become so numerous, heterogeneous, specialized, divided into non-communicating niches, that accounting for

them as a whole seems impossible. And so it will probably be until we move on to the next generation, pull the strings and can better historicize this period of dizzying transitions.

5. Conclusions

Considering comics allows us to reflect on how the practices related to media products contribute to creating not only a shared imaginary (in turn capable of shaping the context in which the users' diosyncratic experiences unfold), but also forms of political and social participation that connect the individual with the multitude, the present with the past and the future. In investigating these complex knots, made up of generational divides and common exchanges and legacies, individualized trajectories and a drive toward community, comics prove fruitful in interrogating the dynamics that bind young people to media cultures.

It remains to be understood, however, what the role of this medium will be in moulding the experiences of the younger generations, and how it will contribute to transforming the future medial scene at large. While we have tried to sketch some research directions, we are aware that they need a transversal approach that does not trivialize the complexity and entanglement of the present social and medial configurations. We hope that this article provides a first contribution to that investigation.

Notes

* The article has been conceived, discussed, and edited together. However, Lorenzo Di Paola has originally written the introduction and sections 1 and 3; Giorgio Busi Rizzi has written the conclusions and sections 2 and 4.

¹ The relationship between generations and comics in Italy has been addressed in Frezza 2008.

² The period of adolescence and early adulthood is also, probably because of its strong emotional and cognitive tagging, the one we remember most clearly and, given the pervasiveness of contemporary mass culture, one clearly structured along generational divides: see Corning and Schuman (2015).

³ The title of the novel, published by Bompiani in 2004, echoes that of a famous adventure in the *Cino e Franco* (*Tim Tyler's Luck*) series by Lyman Young, published in Italy by Nerbini from 1933 on. In 1935 the publisher devoted a whole weekly magazine to the series, *Il Giornale di Cino e Franco*.

⁴ See Della Corte (1961); Becciu (1971); Eco (2003); Giammanco (1965); Strazzulla (1970).

⁵ The development of these cultural and affective paths concurred in creating suitable soil for the germination of a comic *milieu* that from the 1960s onward, thanks to artists such as Hugo Pratt, Guido Crepax, Dino Battaglia, Guido Buzzelli and many others – and thanks to new publishing spaces – began to strongly claim its own expressive and artistic autonomy.

⁶ In fact, the hugely popular TV broadcast had debuted in 1981 on Antenna Nord, which was visible in most of northern Italy. The following year, however, Antenna Nord was absorbed by the newly formed syndication Italia 1, owned (through Fininvest) by Silvio Berlusconi.

⁷ Interestingly, the alarm persists today, despite a significant re-evaluation of the cultural role played by manga and anime, as demonstrated by the (late) anxieties expressed by Walter Veltroni (2021) in an article evocatively titled “Perché i manga hanno conquistato i nostri ragazzi”.

⁸ In 2022, manga accounted for almost one-third of the comics market in Italy: see AIE (2022).

⁹ Blogs and social pages were thus transformed into portfolios that immediately gave publishers an idea of their commercial strength based on the number of their followers and fans.

¹⁰ His comics were so ‘generational’ that two articles, one from *La Repubblica* (Valtorta 2018) and the other from *L'Espresso* (Glioti 2018), (quite exaggeratedly) defined Generation Y as *generazione Zerocalcare*.

¹¹ Zerocalcare draws from a huge list of the most disparate films, cartoons, television series, comic book characters, philosophers, writers and politicians to build stories capable of ranging from private life anecdotes to socio-political issues.

¹² The comic can be read at <http://tobecontinuedcomic.com/home-page> (last accessed 14/03/2023).

¹³ The series, which unfolds over three seasons (plus a prologue), is in the vein of the wave that, starting as early as the 1970s, reshaped the figure of the superhero in a new (more critical and less optimistic)

guise; the tone of *ToBeCo*'s narrative is nonetheless light, ironic and never overly sombre.

¹⁴ Ghetti himself, faced with the crisis of the publishing system, has relied on the solidarity of his own community (that of fellow cartoonists and fans who contributed to *ToBeCo*) to land, after some self-published albums together with Claudia “Nùke” Razzoli, to one of the most important Italian publishers, Coconino Press, with which he issued the graphic novels *Dove non sei tu* (2018) and *In alto abbastanza* (2021).

¹⁵ From this point of view, webcomics in particular seem, since the mid-2010s, to have abandoned the idea of building cohesive and homogeneous communities of readers who patrol their work, and to rather aim at the immediate effectiveness and comprehensibility of their isolated segments.

¹⁶ Most notable, recent examples are Alice Socal's *Cry me a river* (2017); Paolo Cattaneo's *Non mi posso lamentare* (2019); Luigi Filippelli and Samuele Canestrari's *Un corpo smembrato* (2021); Marino Neri's *La tempesta* (2022); Percy Bertolini's *Da sola* (2021); Nicolò Pellizzon's *Culto* (2022); and so on.

¹⁷ Examples are Ilan Manouach's *Le VTT comme je l'aime* or *Fastwalkers*, or Dave McKean's *Prompt: Conversations with AI*, all three issued in 2022. One must keep in mind that stylistic trends will likely evolve accordingly to changes in technological affordances of generative AIs – in this sense, the attempt by Stable Diffusion to already provide the possibility of adjusting some parameters via a Photoshop-like front-end is telling. Moreover, another possible direction could be that of AIs integrating and complementing artists working by adopting and replicating their style.

¹⁸ The reference is to the formula by which John Barth influentially (and controversially) discussed literary realism in his famous 1967 essay.

¹⁹ Consider Daw, Davide La Rosa, Dr. Pira, Maicol & Mirco, and so on.

²⁰ The fundamental whiteness of comics is certainly evident in Italy, being a country with a significant history of emigration and where immigration from non-European countries, instead, only began to register substantial numbers in the 1980s. Amongst the recent notable exceptions, one may mention Takoua Ben Mohamed.

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