

Doing Social Sciences Via Comics and Graphic Novels. An Introduction

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Submitted: March 16, 2021 – Revised version: April 25, 2021

Accepted: May 8, 2021 – Published: May 26, 2021

Abstract

Visual communication is far from new and is almost as old as the social sciences. In the last decades, the interest in the visual dimension of society as well as towards the visual as expression of local and global cultures increased to the extent that specific disciplinary approaches took root — e.g. visual anthropology and visual sociology. Nevertheless, it seems to us that whereas they are mostly engaged in collecting visual data and analyzing visual cultural products, little attention is paid to one of the original uses of visual material in ethnographic and social research, that is communicating social sciences. Departing from some general questions, such as how visualizing sociological concepts, what role non-textual stimuli play in sociology, how they differentiate according to the kind of public, and how we can critically and reflexively assess the social and disciplinary implications of visualizations of empirical research, we collect in the special issues contributions from social scientists and comics artists who materially engaged in the production of social sciences via comics and graphic narratives. The article is divided into three parts. Firstly, we briefly address the rollercoaster history of encounters between sociology and the sequential art. Secondly, we reconstruct the dynamics and processes which lead to the institutionalization of a transnational field of comics studies. Finally, we introduce the contributions collected in the special issue, based on the personal experiences of social scientists, sometimes in collaboration with illustrators.

Keywords: Graphic Narrative; Comics; Visualization; Social Research; Communicating Social Sciences.

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1 Introduction

This is the first issue of a new section of *Sociologica*, “Re-formats: Envisioning Sociology”, devoted to doing and communicating social sciences in non-conventional ways — i.e. in ways different from written texts.

The idea of returning research results in forms other than text seems particularly important in recent decades because of a renewed interest in iconic and transmedial communication as a field of study and as a daily practice. This interest was boosted by the international success of social media (based on visual communication) and of graphic novels (Baetens & Frey, 2014).

Visual communication is far from new and is almost as old as the social sciences. Anthropology, in its early connection with biology and colonial dehumanization, probably showed an earlier interest in visually representing its research subjects (here the problem is more about problematizing representations; see MacDougall, 1997), but visual apparatuses appear in sociology before the twentieth century.

For example, DuBois’s effort to creatively visualize data about racism and discrimination received recent hype in the sociological community after a 2018 publication (Battle-Baptist & Rusert, 2018) and some popular articles (e.g. Mansky, 2018; Hsu, 2019). At the same time, the Chicago School is likely responsible for exploring visual representations in different ways. First, for mapping data, a specific line of visual representations can be traced back to Booth’s poverty maps and to epidemiological mapping (including John Smith’s famous 1854 work on the communication of cholera) (Kimball, 2006; Friendly, 2008). Second, the Chicago School used visual content in their works, such as pictures of people and neighborhoods, in early editions of *The Hobo* by Anderson (1923) and *The Gold Coast and the Slum* by Zorbaugh (1929). The Chicago School also offered one of the earliest visual representations of concepts, the concentric zone model of the city developed by Burgess, in Park, Burgess and McKenzie (1925). Such milestones of representation do not come out of the blue — and are often based on different influences (Owens, 2012).

At the same time, the characteristics, effects and consequences of data visualization faced scientific and public debate, as addressed by the early and renowned *How to Lie with Statistics* by the cultural educator Darrell Huff (1954). Not by chance, it included drawings by one of the most famous American scientific illustrators of the time, Irving Geis.

Thus, this non-textual endeavor as old as science deserves special attention in contemporary sociology: how do we visualize concepts? How do we communicate with various audiences using different dissemination strategies? What role do non-textual stimuli play in social sciences? How can we critically and reflexively assess the social and disciplinary implications of visualizations? We will debate these kinds of questions in this section.

In particular, we are less interested here in more consolidated disciplines and approaches, like visual anthropology and visual sociology (i.e., in the collection of visual data, or in the analysis of visual cultural products). Instead, we focus on communicating via images and non-textual media. Nevertheless, from a reflexive perspective, we also consider visual analyses of sociological visual products. In this respect — as comics are key to this first collection — we want to briefly address the rollercoaster history of encounters between sociology and the sequential art (§ 2) and of the institutionalization of comics studies (§ 3), before introducing contributions we collected for this issue (§ 4).

2 Sociologists Meet Comics: A Long and Discontinuous History

Sociologists' interest in comics is older than one may suspect.¹ In 1944, the *American Journal of Education* published a special issue devoted to comics. It was edited by an American sociologist and student of Robert E. Park, Harvey Warren Zorbaugh, whom we just mentioned above.² All the contributions in the special issue stressed comics' potential in the education field, especially for children with learning difficulties. Thus, because comic books had reached a large number of readers in a few years, especially among children and teenagers, the authors positively defined comics as a *social force*, as their language and characters might be exploited for purposes beyond entertainment (cf. Gruenberg, 1944). In his introduction to the special issue, Zorbaugh also highlighted how comics had already been successfully introduced on campuses and in classrooms and had "played an active role in the war" (Zorbaugh, 1944, p. 202) mainly for propaganda purposes. Mostly, he recognized comics' ability to stimulate what Wright Mills (1959) identified fifteen years later as one main feature of sociological imagination: comics' ability as an "outgrowth of the social unconscious" to illuminate the link between individuals' problems and the social world (Zorbaugh, 1944, p. 203).

Five years later a new special issue on comics appeared in the *American Journal of Education*, again edited by Zorbaugh. Compared to the first special issue, the tone and style of the contributions appear different. In the beginning of his piece, Zorbaugh underlines how "the past two years have witnessed a violent controversy over the suitability of comics as reading for children" (1949, p. 225). Thus, all the articles stem from this evidence of a growing campaign against comics supported by numerous civic associations, politicians and intellectuals that strongly influenced the social climate and the perception of comics. The authors' defense of comics' potential communicative and educative force interlaced three arguments. First, they distinguished comics strips published in newspapers, comic books with superheroes, comics explicitly for children (mimetic comics representing children's histories or family settings) and

1. For a chronology, see also Giner-Monfort (2019).
2. A short article titled "A Sociology of Comic Strips" appeared in a non-academic journal already in 1936. The author Aaron Berkman, a social realist painter, looked at the Sunday strips as "catering to neurosis" and "offering escape to a morbid imagery and brutal sadism" (pp. 51–54). Thus, the text provides some meaningful insights. Firstly, it makes evident how a general negative perception of comics was present even before the boom of comic books and the anti-comics crusade in the late 1940s. As Beaty observes (2011), negative emotions and opinions towards the new "mass medium" had already characterized for example cinema. The point, as Beaty stresses, is that comics were even older than cinema, even if they became a mass cultural product only in the 1930s. A second aspect to note is that this opinion was expressed by an artist, who at the time was also in the directorship of the Federal Art Project commissioned by Roosevelt as part of the New Deal. As various scholars later noted (cf. Grieve, 2009), the project produced a *middlebrow culture*. The FAP, "embraced both liberal and conservative impulses," as an outcome of negotiations between democratic and traditional national values (*ibidem*, p. 85). Thus, being representative of a middlebrow culture at the edge between high and popular culture also produced evaluation criteria that reflected on the one hand the tastes of the middle-class, and on the other hand the need of strong symbolic and social boundaries respectively towards cultural objects and artists involved in producing popular art. Finally, the use of a "presumed" sociological perspective by a non-sociologist caused questions to arise concerning the status of sociology at that time, and consequently the public functions attributed to it. Certainly, this general perception was due to the dominance of a functionalist understanding of the discipline in the American sociology and the fact many scholars (see the Chicago School) were involved in solving social urban problems that, according to Berkman, comics with its language factually contributed to legitimize. Thus, as we will argue in this section, the fact that the positions of sociologists towards comics (also of those grew up in the Chicago School) differed from the opinion of moral entrepreneurs acting in the public space sheds light on the potentiality of sociology for both working with comics and legitimating them scientifically, even if these opportunities have been little exploited until a few years ago.

comics with violent or sexual scenes that may offend “sexual mores” (*ibidem*, p. 228). Nevertheless, this rough classification from Zorbaugh and the other authors also stressed that comics’ cultural form and content over time does not preclude the fact that comics’ language may address other content and other goals (cf. Schultz, 1949). The more striking passage, however, concerns the appeal to social research to construct empirically based counterarguments against the more powerful discourses from *moral entrepreneurs* — particularly from psychiatrist Frederic Wertham — about comics’ perverse effects on children, especially in enhancing juvenile delinquency. In particular, Zorbaugh presented a survey comparing the opinions of about 3,000 American adults on whether comics might be appropriate reading for children. Beyond the survey’s detailed results, Zorbaugh claimed that it provided a differentiated framework of adults’ opinions on comics, but it could not help to deduce the concrete influence of comics on children. Another article (Frank, 1949) compared the opinions and experiences of parents and teachers regarding the features, uses and effects of comics and came to similar conclusions. Thus, adults’ various stances on comics’ usefulness for learning to read, on the value of their artistic form and, above all, on their possible influence via cultural content merely highlighted the error of blaming comics without conducting empirical investigations on their reception by children. In the same year, Wolf and Fisk (1949) interviewed a hundred youths about their consumptions of comics and remarkably found no evidence of perverting effects.

In the 1950s in the USA, the “anti-comic crusade” that eventually “led to a self-imposed industry codes for comic books in 1954” (cf. Lopes, 2006, p. 400) became stronger. The attack against comics and television’s increasing influence as competitive mass media (cf. Beaty, 2011) negatively affected the sale of comic books. Three interrelated points are here to note, which found some correspondences also in other western countries, such as Germany, Great Britain and Italy (cf. Jovanovich & Koch, 1999; Chapman, 2011; Brancato, 2008). First, beyond the fact that the supporters and censors of comics presented different stances on comics’ reception, both parties framed comics within the field of education. Whereas supporters attributed primarily educational functions to comics, the censors focused on comics’ negative effects on children’s socialization. Secondly, the introduction of censorship codes strengthened the idea that comics were for children and teenagers (cf. Sabin, 1993), preventing the comics market, at least in the USA, from developing in new ways (cf. Beaty, 2011). If alternative forms of comics truly developed in the 1960s and 1970s in the underground milieu (cf. Hatfield, 2005), they had little influence on the overall comics market (cf. Roeder, 2008). Thirdly, the infantilization of comics reinforced their position as popular art and their low status in the market of symbolic goods. Thus, this association helped maintain a stigma towards comics as instigators of juvenile delinquency (cf. Lopes, 2006). These three points raise questions about how education and culture were understood at that time, especially in relation to a specific target. These points also make one think about the interdependence between educational goals and a specific framing of culture. More precisely, the negative perceptions of comics rested on two ideas of culture: an elitist conception that separated high from low cultural products (Roeder, 2008; cf. Di Maggio, 1987) and another, functionalist, conception that assumed culture should primarily fulfill educational and moral tasks, especially for minors.

Departing from these considerations, two further contextual aspects make one reflect upon the delayed interest of scholars and of social scientists specifically toward comics. Focusing on the US case, we can assume the negative moral and artistic value attributed to comics and the belief that they mainly targeted children deterred scholars from focusing on comics and, consequently, from looking at them as a research field and a communicative tool (cf. Beaty, 2011). On the other hand, this disinterest of scholars and social scientists also reveals the main orienta-

tions of the sociology of culture, the sociology of communication and the media and cultural studies in the 1960s and 1970s. The question concerns less which theories suited comics, and more which sociological perspective on culture and cultural production was hegemonic. In the USA and in other western countries, the dominant public opinion toward mass products, including comics, was shared by many intellectuals and schools of thought. Notably, the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies held a similar and widespread understanding of comics. The first generation of cultural studies scholars had developed an extensive concept of culture, so, to include all human activities and behaviors, however they maintained a conservative criticism towards comics (cf. Magnussen & Christiansen, 2000; Chapman, 2011). This is especially evident in Hoggart's work *The Uses of Literacy* (1957, p. 201), where the author complained about the Americanization of the British culture, particularly through comics:

at the lowest level is illustrated in the sales here of the American or American-type serial books of comics, where for page after page big-thighed and big-bosomed girls from Mars step out of their space-machines [...] The process continues, for a substantial number of adults especially; a passive taking on of bad mass art geared to a very low mental age.

Despite Hoggart's seeming focus on adulthood, this statement echoes Wertham's perspective that comics stimulated passive consumption. More broadly, it reflects the critical perspective on comics of Marxist intellectuals, among the US intellectuals of the New Left (cf. Murray, 2000) with conceptual and ideological roots in the Frankfurt School.

In light of this cultural climate, the few sociologists and social scientists in this phase, who viewed comics favorably or neutrally, represent paradigmatic examples of how a scientific and sociological interest on comics might develop after overcoming both an "apocalyptic approach" (cf. Eco, 1964) based on moral-esthetic classifications of cultural goods and an "integrated approach" that lacks objective distance from its own research (*ibidem*, 1972).

The first example comes from Howard Becker (1982), who, in a short passage from his introduction to *Art Worlds*, refers to comic strips: "Because my focus has been on forms of social organization, I have frequently compared art forms and works which have different reputation as art. I have spoken of Titian and comic strips in the same breath." As Beaty emphasizes (2012, p. 37), Becker's understanding of art as the result of collective activities that produce and circulate art objects allows the definition of comics as a world art, among other definitions independent from the mass cultural critique that tends to classify comics as non-art. Once we accept and clarify that art objects may possess different reputations, the obvious question is not merely how sociologists (and more generally scholars of SSH-disciplines) deal with comics. Instead, from a historical and epistemological perspective, the question is how much scholars absorb the common criteria of the doxa when evaluating symbolic forms and goods. In other words, the crucial point is how defining comics as art, as non-art, as a mass cultural product or as an avant-garde cultural product influences the scientific interest in comics and how scholars engage with them. Eco, for instance, criticized both the apocalyptic and integrated approaches towards comics. However, in the Italian magazine *Linus*³, he selected comics according to the traditional division of low and high culture. Thus, *Linus* should host foreign, intellectually stimulating comic strips such as the *Peanuts* and the works of emergent comic artists such as Magnus, Crepax and Manara, who bore avant-garde artistic values (see Boltanski, 1975).

3. *Linus* was co-founded by Eco in 1965.

This last topic brings us to our second example. In 1975, following Bourdieu's field theory, Boltanski published an article in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* depicting the comics field's social and symbolic transformation in the 1960s with the emergence of "comic artists." This transformation took root broadly in Europe, but it only became meaningful in the 1990s for the USA (cf. Willams & Lyons, 2010). Similarly remarkable is the attempt to sketch the process of legitimizing comics by considering the influence of intellectuals and academics on the process itself. Boltanski proposed only a scheme, but his idea may constitute a valid starting point for further considerations about how scholars' changing stances towards comics influenced its institutionalization in various fields of cultural production, consequently leading to a research field in comics studies (cf. Gabilliet, 2013).

The last, and perhaps more meaningful paradigmatic example, concerns the 1975 *La lecture de Marx* text Bourdieu published in *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences sociales*, a publication that later included in the French version of *Language et pouvoir symbolique* (1991).⁴ The article juxtaposes texts and comics pictures, a strategy Bourdieu adopted to compare "three forms of discourses": the comments of Marx (extrapolated from his work with Engels, *German Ideology*), the excerpts of Balizar's article *Quelques remarques critiques à propos de "Lire le capital"*⁵ (reproduced in the article as a facsimile) and Bourdieu's analysis of Balizar's text and of Marx's thoughts (cf. footnote 2, in *Language et pouvoir symbolique*).

From an outside perspective, we can identify three pivotal questions for our special issue. The first concerns a critical comparison of three theoretical and epistemological perspectives via a graphic and pictorial language and comics' spatialization layout techniques (to avoid an aprioristic hierarchic order among the perspectives). Additionally, this graphical strategy could emphasize the dialectical (fictional) interactions among the three scholars, making their different positions more visually vivid than a traditional argumentative text could. Thus, the visualization and spatialization of their thoughts in the page layout can better contrast Balizar's argumentation on historical materialism with Bourdieu's meta-criticism on Balizar's ways of reading Marx and, more broadly, with a widespread "prophetic" interpretation of Marx's work in the intellectual field of the time. The second important question concerns Bourdieu's cooperation with the comic author Jean-Claude Mézières, who was well-known for his science-fiction series *Valérian et Laureline*, which was published in the juvenile journal *Pilote* (directed by René Goscinny). The cooperation between Bourdieu and Mézières also concerned Mézières's broad involvement in the graphic work carried out within *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, which Bourdieu had founded the same year he and Boltanski published these two articles. Finally, the third and last question concerns the legitimization of this experimental sociological text with graphical content at that time, which entails considering the position of the journal and its founders in the sociological field.

In a recent article on the use of images in *Actes*, Chadoin (2017) provides deeper and broader insight into the meaning of comics and other visual materials for *Actes*. The visual materials in the journal aimed to subvert "the customs and traditions of the academic field and make visible what generally is hidden behind the censorship, the tricks, and perversions which characterized it" (*ibidem*, p. 14). In other words, *Actes* proposed a new way of using visual materials in scientific works, giving them a desacralizing function regarding established paradigms. Nevertheless, beyond this *pars destruens*, Chadoin also claimed that embedding visual materials in the journal aimed to discover new effective ways to deploy concepts, stressing the idea of social research

4. In the French text it is included as a chapter in the fourth section, which is not present in the English version.

5. The article was published in 1973 in the journal *La Pensée*, 170, 27–47.

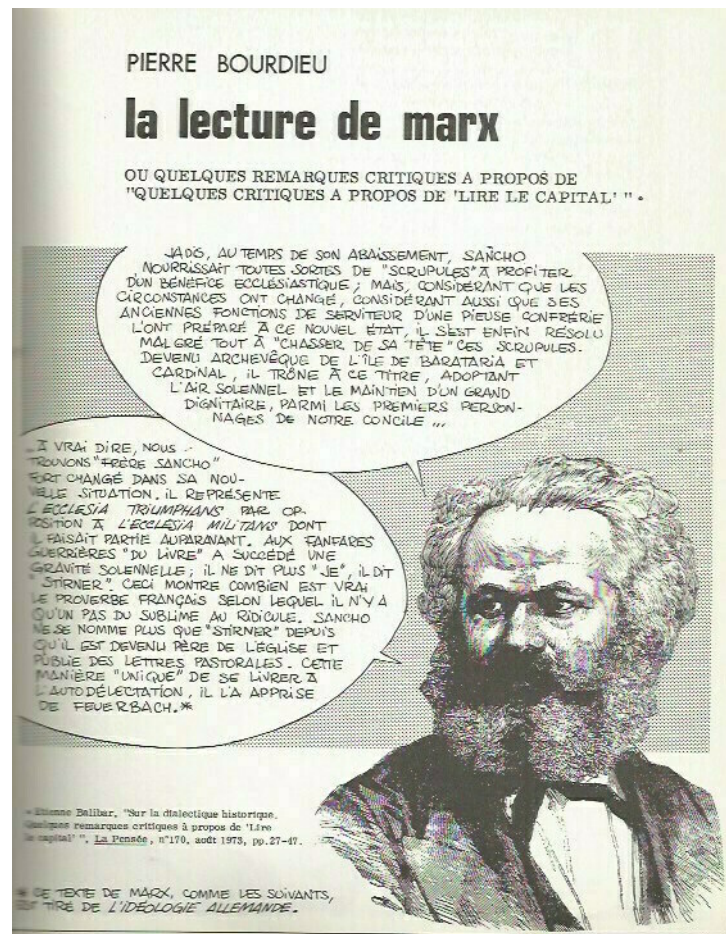


Fig. 1: Bourdieu, P. & Mézières, J.P. (1975), *La Lecture de Marx, Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1(5-6), p. 37
 Source: Chadoin, O. (2017). Le visuel et le conceptuel. Sur l'usage des images dans la revue *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales. Revue française des méthodes visuelles*, 1.

as *work in progress*. Thus, as Boltanski (2008, p. 20) claimed years later, the journal conceived comics as graphic tools for communicating scientific ideas because, as Boltanski suggested to Bourdieu, it should be a sort of “fanzine of sociology.”

Summing up, the origin of *Actes* elucidates two points. The first concerns the *social conditions* that allowed two French sociologists to focus on comics in the 1970s. On the one hand, comics were developing differently in France than in the USA. Comic artists in France were closer to the intellectual field than were comic authors overseas; therefore, their cultural legitimacy was higher in Europe. On the other hand, Bourdieu and his scholars were developing a specific perspective on how to produce and disseminate knowledge, which disrupted the traditional classification of symbolic goods and scholars’ discourses and stances. The second point considers that their specific interest in comics embodied a specific anti-conventional academic and intellectual habitus, a fact that probably contributed to the scarce spread of similar legitimate experiments in the sociological field.

These latter observations raise questions about the different approaches scholars of SSH-disciplines and intellectuals developed toward comics in this first phase after WW2 and, consequently, about whether these approaches remain meaningful for reflecting on the status and development of the social sciences and humanities. This reflection assumes two interrelated levels. Of course, conducting and communicating social research via comics entails engaging with a specific field of knowledge with rules and languages distinct from those within one’s own disciplinary field. Nevertheless, developing this awareness at the edge between two fields of knowledge might help highlight the constructive character of each disciplinary knowledge.

In the 2000s, the development of a scientific field of knowledge on comics seems to have partially overcome the original challenge of recognizing comics as a legitimate cultural and research object. Apparently, their ongoing academic legitimization appears due to the graphic novel phenomenon, at least in literary studies. Nevertheless, this dynamic should not be understood deterministically; rather, it extends the range of questions to firstly regard the institutionalization path of a research field in comic studies. As various scholars have observed (Beaty, 2011; Hatfield, 2010), outlining a clear path is difficult at the moment. This field’s actual development culminated from public initiatives, public interventions and publications stemming from various disciplinary fields. In this regard, the field of comic studies currently has no organic structure, so understanding whether it is multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary remains difficult. In this regard, we can finally consider how sociology and social sciences intercept this field and how the latter may help develop new sociological ways of scientifically dealing with comics.

3 The Institutionalization of Comic Studies in the SSH-Disciplines. A Place for Sociology?

To better explore these questions, pinpointing crucial steps in the institutionalization of comic studies may be helpful. The accumulation of knowledge on comics shows the degree of their legitimization, but the ways scientific knowledge on comics has been organized and legitimized better highlights the possibilities for individual scientific uses of comics and paths for developing social sciences through comics. Thus, as some of the contributions to the special issues highlight, the establishment of comic book series (*Sociorama*, *Ethnographic* and *ERCcomics* — see below) on social research represents a crucial step.

To analyze the institutionalization process for comics studies, we consider a set of indicators

that inform us of its whole development curve over time and its specialization trends. These indicators concern the establishment of scientific journals, academic/scientific book series, academic research committees and associations, degree courses and the production of research and theoretical works, handbooks and textbooks on comics by scholars from various disciplines.

Thus, combining these indicators provides indications about the inception of comics as legitimate scientific objects. The first journal specializing in comics, *Inks*, was founded in 1994 by Ohio State university press. It received a more solid formalization only in 2016. It preceded *The International Journal of Comic Art*, founded in 1999, and the interdisciplinary journal of comics studies, *ImageText*, founded five years later. More recently, *The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, the *Journal of Sequential Art in Narrative Education* (hosted by the University of Nebraska Lincoln) and the journal *Studies in Comics* were all founded in 2010, and the journal *The Comic Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* was founded in 2013.

Book series began to appear later, including two book series from the University Press of Mississippi: *Conversations with Comic Artists* (2000) and the *Great Comics Artists* series (2006). In 2015, the University Press of Mississippi founded the book series *Critical Approaches to Comics Artists*, mainly focused on research topics. On the other hand, this publisher's interest in comics was evident in the 1990s after publishing several works on comics, included in the book series *Studies in Popular Culture*⁶. The other book series all started in the last decade. In 2014, the Leuven University Press established the book series *Studies in European Comics and Graphic Novels*, and in 2015 Routledge published the book series *Routledge Advances in Comics Studies*, explicitly included in the broader field of communication and media studies. In 2016, two new books series were established: the *Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels* (at the intersection of literature, media and cultural studies) and the book series *Comics Culture* from Rutgers University Press. In 2018, the publisher Bloomsbury inaugurated the book series *Bloomsbury Comics Studies*, and a year later the Ohio State University Press began the book series *Studies in Comic and Cartoons*.

Regarding publishers, comic studies appear well arranged, but little progress has been made in formal research groups/centers and degree courses. Regarding the research groups, we can first mention the Oxford Comics Network from the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (since 2013) and the *Comic Studies and Graphic Narratives* research committee founded in 2015 (formally in 2018) within the International Comparative Literature Association. The list also includes the Comics Studies Society, founded in 2016 and publisher of the journal *Inks*, and the Comics Research Hub, founded in 2018 at the University of Arts London. We can also include the *Graphic Medicine International Collective* established in 2007 and the Graphic Justice Research Alliance established in 2017. Thus, an overview of these research networks organized around an established discipline (medicine, law, comparative literature) or around the field of comics studies highlights a fragmented field. On the other hand, social sciences appear underrepresented, except for the blogs "Émile on Bande" and the "Graphic Social Science Network" (initially sponsored by the *Sociological Review*), which have sporadic output.⁷

Even considering degree courses in comics and graphic narratives (e.g., a BA in Comics and Graphic Novels from Teesside University; a BA in Cartoon and Comic Arts at Stafford-

6. In 1958 UPM had published psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's *The Circle of Guilt* (1958). As in his previous texts, especially his bestseller *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), Wertham theorized a strong interdependence between juvenile delinquency and (a passive) exposure to mass media, especially comics (cf. Beaty, 2005; Eckhoff-Heindl & Sina, 2020).

7. See, respectively: <http://socio-bd.blogspot.com/p/blog-page.html> and <https://markcarrigan.net/2017/06/21/what-is-graphic-social-science/> (last visit on 7 March 2021).

shire University; a Master's in Comics and Graphic Novels at Dundee University, a Centre for Cartoon Studies in Vermont, USA and a School of Comics Studies at the University of Oregon), comics still appear little in many curricula, a fact that reflects the increasing gap between research and teaching activities in academia.

Finally, the scientific/academic productions on comics and graphic narratives better highlight the different institutionalization phases of comics studies both quantitatively and qualitatively. Thus, we conducted research via Worldcat.org and the British library using the following keywords: comics studies, comic art, comics strips, comics book, graphic novels, comic artists and comics. We searched for both in the "title" and "subject" fields.⁸ The database was then re-examined in light of the titles included in the main scientific/academic book series devoted to comics studies. Starting from the second postwar period, the sample contains 474 titles.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, most works were produced by local and national governments and associations. With few exceptions, they mainly regard comics' effects on minors (e.g., Elmhurst Board of Education, 1954; Board of Education, 1960). This framing has changed only since the late 1980s, parallel to an increasing internal differentiation of comics in the international market and the graphic novel's growing consecration as a literary genre.

Nevertheless, recognition of graphic novels in the literary field does not immediately correspond to an academic interest. As Figure 2 shows, scientific interest in comics has been more evident since the 2010s (twenty years after *Maus* received the Pulitzer Prize), aligning with the establishment of book series and the growth of academic research networks.

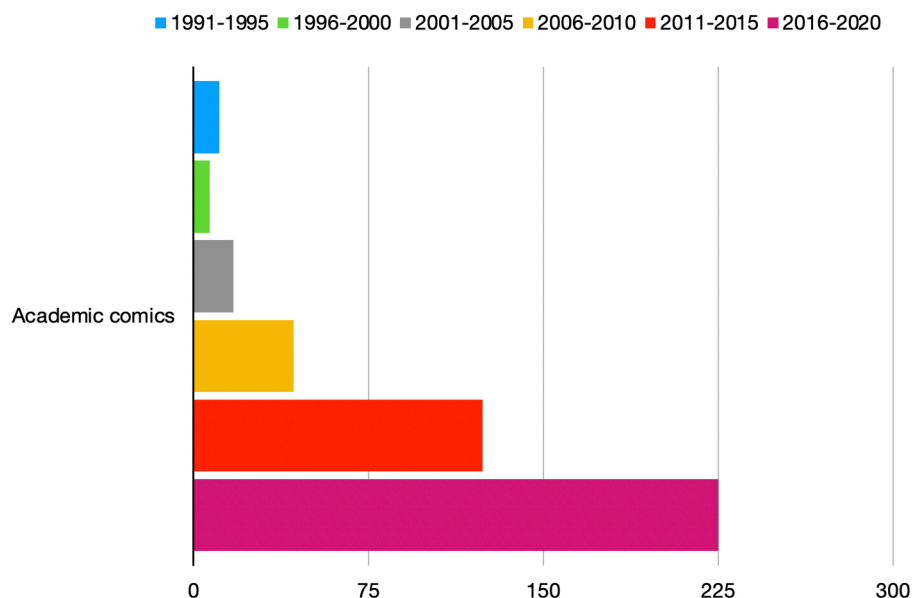


Fig. 2: Trend of Academic Production on Comics (1945-2021)
Source: Worldcat.org and the British Library. Author's elaboration.

Graphic novels seem then to play a limited role in developing comics as a research field. The concept of "graphic novels" appeared only after 2001, and comparing various timespans shows

8. We limited our research to publications in English. We do not consider our database exhaustive, but it is still indicative of the main trends in the field of comics studies.

its weight remains constant over time (from 2001 to 2005, it is used alone only in 8% of publications on comics; from 2016 to early 2021, the percentage remains similar, reaching 10.3% of all publications). This aspect may indicate that comics as scientific objects elicits interest independently from its classification.

Since 2016, the titling changes slightly due to the increasing use of the labels, “comics studies” and “comic art,” even if they remain infrequent (respectively, 3.6% and 2.4% of publications from 2016–2021). Comics still have a broad definition (more than 40% of all the titles), whereas the weight of comic books slightly declined after 2001. Since this date, the number of publications that do not directly refer to comic books, comics, comics strips or graphic novels conversely increased. This sample of titles either alludes to specific genres and national traditions (e.g., manga and superheroes) or directly refers to comic works, artists, characters or publishers. Overall, these data provide a twofold reading. First, the development of an (inter)disciplinary interest in comics is not directly due to the boom of graphic novels and their legitimacy in the literary field, even if graphic novels’ contribution is significant. Second, the increasing interest in the specific features of comic worlds is also meaningful for comics’ ongoing legitimization (Fig. 3).

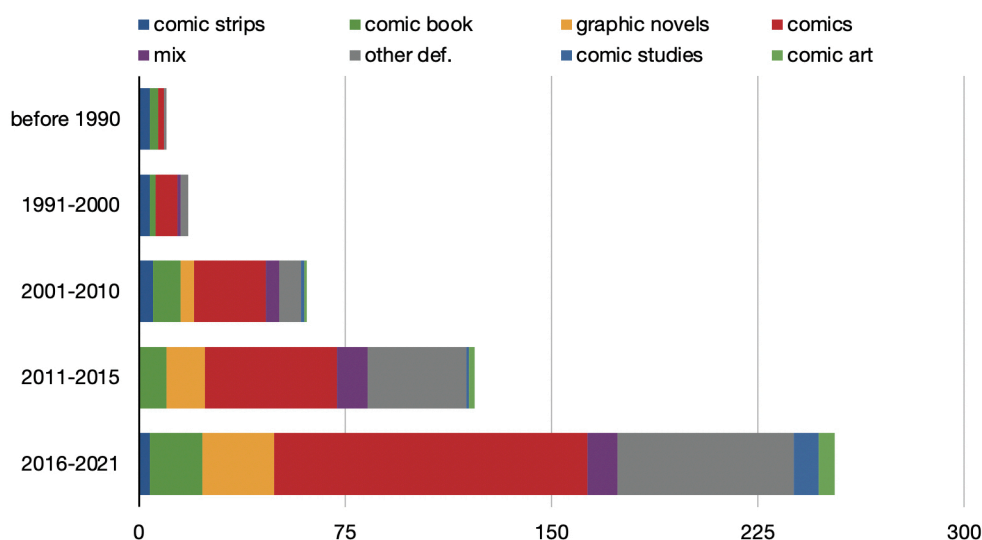


Fig. 3: Scientific Interest in Comics According to Their Format (1990–2021)
 Source: Worldcat.org and the British Library. Author’s elaboration.

A further meaningful indicator for testing the development of comic studies is the distribution among the following: 1. handbooks on comics, which also include introductions to its history in various countries; 2. diegetic and extradiegetic research that refers either to specific features of comics or comics genres or to social phenomena;⁹ 3. theoretical works aiming to pinpoint and define comics’ features and/or properties; and 4. educational works that stress the educational goals and eventual uses of comics in schools and in higher education. Regarding percentage, the number of handbooks and educational works significantly decreased in the last five years, even if it is to specify that the number of educational works were limited over

9. For this purpose, we also read the synopses of the works.

time. Conversely, the weight of theoretical works oscillated over time between 35% and 23%, while the percentage of research works increased considerably after 2016 (Fig. 4).

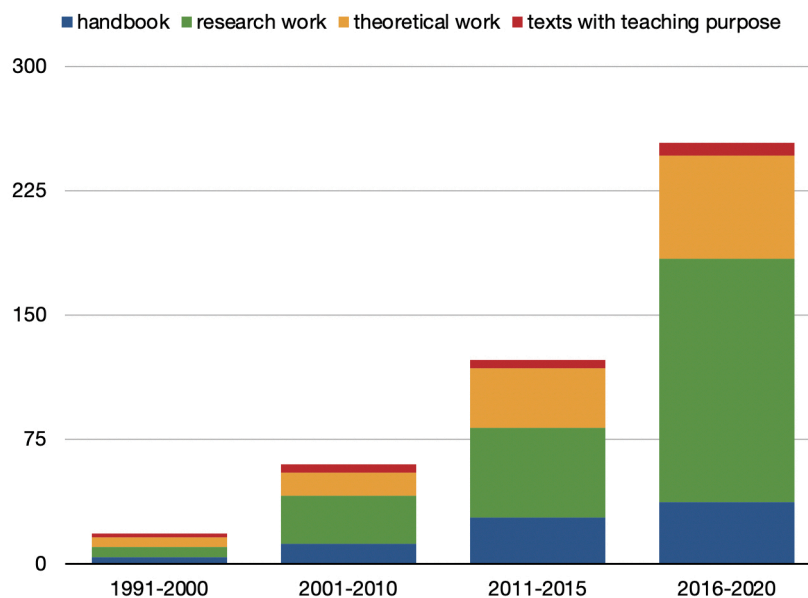


Fig. 4: The Distribution of Academic Works on Comics by Type of Publication (1990–2021)
Source: Worldcat.org and the British Library. Author's elaboration.

The latter data concerning the increasing amount of research works on comics indicate the aforementioned gap between research and teaching activities (even in the new field of comic studies) and the increasing interest toward issues relevant for the social sciences. Broadly, the analysis of topics highlights four main trends. First, categories such as “popular culture,” “popular fiction,” “popular art” and “mass culture” are seldom used (especially in the last five years). More usually, comics are associated with the broad and neutral category of culture. Secondly, in the last decade, comics were often understood either as media or as transmedia and hypermedia, and they were often compared with films and movies. If this trend stems from the growing phenomenon of movies inspired by comics (superhero films and films drawn from graphic novels), it also indicates how comics studies partially overlapped with media studies. A third aspect concerns the little relevance given to comics' visual dimension and the greater attention devoted to its literary features, such as the language, narrative and storytelling (even when enriched by a visual analysis). Finally, the number of extra-diegetic topics through which comics are analyzed has increased in the last five years to include gender, race/multiculturalism, colonialism/postcolonialism, identity, power/politics, memory and trauma.

Summing up, recent developments in academic works devoted to comics highlight three main fields where comics is a legitimate research tool: media studies, literary studies and in other studies (gender studies, postcolonial studies, etc.). It seems, therefore, that comics' interdisciplinarity is more due to their position in existing interdisciplinary fields than due to the engagement and interactions of scholars from various disciplines. On the other hand, several issues investigated in comics have sociological interest. Sociological theories are also increasingly used to analyze comics' issues and to explain the development of comics, especially its processes

of production, circulation and reception in various social contexts. Thus, if sociological issues, sociological theories and sociological methods are not excluded, sociologists show little engagement, with few exceptions (e.g., Snyders, 1997; Hall & Lucal, 1999; Brienza, 2010; Phillips & Strobl, 2013).¹⁰ Nevertheless, in the previous section we have seen that in the history of sociology various scholars have seen comics as a cultural product, and as a medium in a manner innovative for their time and the discipline itself.

4 Presentation of the Special Issue

In our special issue, we will continue reflecting upon new ways of doing and communicating social research through comics. In particular, we are interested in comic productions in various fields in the social sciences and humanities — obviously within our journal's scope and with an eye for its impact on sociology and on sociological production in the future.

A caveat that narrows our focus: relevant experience and literature exists on using comics to teach sociology (e.g., Snyder, 1997; Hall & Lucal, 1999; for a review see also Giner-Monfort, 2019). Still, the experience of using comic strips to communicate social sciences seems scarcely explored and subject to critical reflections — with the possible partial exception of visual anthropology. For example, medical anthropologists have actively participated in graphic medicine. We will give hints on promising developments with an interview with Sherine Hamdy and colleagues about their project *Lissa* and the books series *ethnoGRAPHIC* (published by the University of Toronto Press), most likely the first of its kind.

Thus, this special issue collects the personal experiences of social scientists — sometimes in collaboration with illustrators — who share how their conceptual concerns and fieldwork experience were shaped by graphic novels. In more detail, in their contributions they stress what dilemmas they experienced in putting their research into images¹¹, specifically regarding their conceptual understanding of the role of images and the interaction between social scientists and the professional expertise of cartoonists. The issue will also discuss what market, destination and uses were considered for comic products and which publishing outlets and strategies were considered.

The selection of contributions aims to mirror various approaches: dedicated book series (*Sociorama*, as discussed by Berthaut, Bidet and Thura in this issue [2021]; *ethnoGRAPHIC*; and — in some respects — *ERCcOMICS*, as discussed by Kuipers and Ghedini in this issue [2021]) vs. publications in non-specific outlets (e.g. *Quartieri*, from a comics publisher specializing in biographical strips and graphic journalism); publications whose visual dimensions were considered in early research programmes (as for *Lissa*, Schiemer and Duffner in this issue [2021a]) vs. publications that offered popularized comics of research already published in written form (Evans, 2021; Berthaut, Bidet & Thura in this issue [2021]) or a new reflection based on previous research (Cancellieri and Peterle in this issue [2021]); publications with various audiences and purposes, such as students for educational purposes (e.g. *Lissa*), the general public for popularization goals (*Sociorama*, *ERCComics*) or (at least partly) the academic community (*ethnoGRAPHIC*). Thus, we included an article/comic that follows the whole process of theorizing, analyzing and “cartoonizing.” The contribution by Schiemer and Duffner (2021a;

10. We can here mention also the sociologist Eve Ewing, who is at the same time writer of the Marvel series *Ironheart*.

11. Without reading the final comments, we probably would have used the term “translating”, which entails conceptual limitations on how comics are intended.

2021b) in this issue is not based on a previous experience but instead recounts the production of a brand-new comic. It is a lab experiment of the creative process in itself.

Due to space and availability limitations and due to difficulties in mapping the actual experiences of using comics in sociology, we could not fully account for such a rich field. Certainly, other interesting cases exist that we could not include: the book series *Philosophie für Einsteiger* [Philosophy for Beginners] issued by German scientific publisher Wilhelm Fink with volumes on Luhmann (Muller & Lorenz, 2016), Bourdieu (Lorenz *et al.*, 2014), Marx, Butler, Foucault, Arendt and more; graphic-dense introductory books to sociology, like *The Sociology Book* (Tomley *et al.*, 2015) or *Introducing Sociology: A Graphic Guide* (Nagle, 2016); the rich repository of visual resources for sociologists and sociology-curious people on the website *Sociological Images* (started in 2007 and very active on social media); social sciences-informed media outlets like *PositiveNegative* that “produce comics, animations and podcasts about contemporary social and humanitarian issues, including conflict, racism, migration and asylum” by combining “ethnographic research with illustration.”

We maintain that this selection of contributions of topics helps the debate on how to do social science via comics and how to use comics in a sound, conscious way. We hope this first collection of cases — in which Beaty (2021), Hague (2021) and Sassatelli (2021) found strong and weak points and emerging trends — will contribute to a debate and further research on how non-textual ways of doing and communicating social sciences play a role in our discipline’s development.

In particular, Kuipers and Ghedini, who started a webcomic that presents outcomes from a research project on the social shaping of beauty standards in the transnational modelling industry, reflect on visual communication as a way of triggering sociological imagination. Berthaut *et al.* recap the trailblazing French experience of *Sociorama* and the challenges to taken-for-granted assumptions in academic sociological writing. Evans discusses the theoretical and practical implications and risks of debating violence via comics, starting from his experience with the publication *Portraits of Violence* (Evans & Wilson, 2016). Based on their experience as coeditors and coauthors of *Quartieri*, Cancellieri and Peterle (see also 2019) go beyond using comics for dissemination purposes to discuss comics as a potential tool for analysis. Schiemer and Duffner, with graphic artwork by Ayers, reflect on creativity, in which graphic representations provide feedback to their conceptual framework.

Finally, anthropologist Sherine Hamdy and her colleagues (coauthor Coleman Nye and filmmaker Francesco Dragone [Barberis *et al.*, 2021]) join the conversation via an interview with reflections on their multimedia project *Lissa*, which kicked off the previously mentioned book series *ethnoGRAPHIC*.

The section concludes with three comments from Bart Beaty, Ian Hague (both as experts of comics studies) and Monica Sassatelli, who reflect on sociology’s discovery of comics and remark upon emerging trends and critical concerns.

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