

Show and Tell

Monica Sassatelli*

University of Bologna, Life Quality Studies Department (Italy)

Submitted: April 9, 2021 – Accepted: May 4, 2021 – Published: May 26, 2021

Abstract

This short piece is a commentary on the collection of experimental interventions at the crossroads of sociology and comics, or comics-based research, published in the current issue of *Sociologica*. Starting from some of the most relevant aspects that both unite and distinguish the different approaches, it proposes a reflection on how comics, and more broadly drawings, can help expand the sociological imagination. It does so — through text, drawings and captions — focusing on the transition between concepts and images, or verbal and visual icons. The comments draw particular attention to these interventions' diverse but converging plea for visual literacy — tentatively renamed here imaginacy.

Keywords: Representation; Comics; Social Research; Drawing; Imaginacy.

* ✉ monica.sassatelli@unibo.it

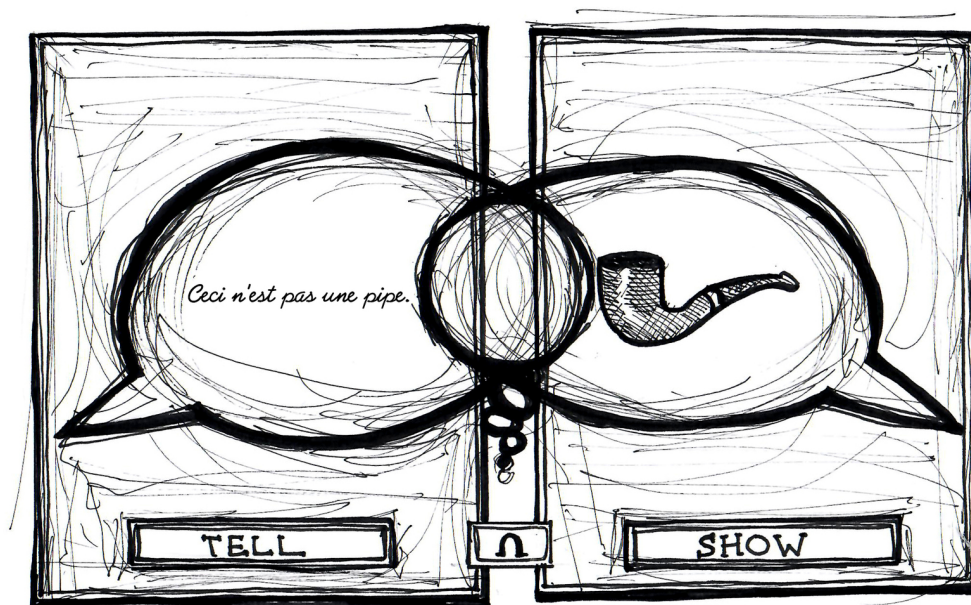


Figure 1: Show and Tell

“Two principles, I believe, ruled Western painting from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. The first asserts the separation between plastic representation (which implies resemblance) and linguistic reference (which excludes it). By resemblance we demonstrate and speak across difference: The two systems can neither merge nor intersect. In one way or another, subordination is required” (Foucault, 1973, p. 32). Then Magritte comes along, and his pipe; Foucault is intrigued, Magritte writes him letters: I wish *this* would become a comic... Deconstructed as a comic the intersection (\cap) between Show and Tell, building blocks of our primary education and training to enter the world of representation, is not quite empty. There’s the gutter. The space between panels, ‘gutter’ in comics, is the space where everything happens: transitions of time, action, scene. The space where *this* becomes a pipe, or a not-a-pipe. The space of becoming, that tells *and* shows, but where one cannot stay — lying in the gutter.”¹

This challenging collection of experimental interventions at the crossroads of sociology and comics confronts bravely and directly the problem of transition between concepts and images, or verbal and visual icons, the first working through abstraction, the second through resemblance. A mighty problem for which it was appropriate to start with a quote by the author of *Les Mots et les Choses*, whom I will have to evoke again later on. First, though, transition is a good place to start. Transition between panels is what defines comics — “sequential art” according to Will Eisner’s insider’s definition (Eisner, 1983). Matters of transition — or better translation — animate all of the contributions in this section. Indeed, if we were to identify the intersection of keywords of these otherwise diverse experiments, that set would not be empty and it would contain the word translation. Some contributions are reflections on

1. I would like to thank Lorenzo Di Giacomo (lorenzoars.com) for the digital editing of my three drawings. Here, and at various points in my comments, I have in mind the essential *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (McCloud, 1993) — here specifically two chapters, “Show and Tell” and “Blood in the Gutter”.

single initiatives, some are about whole programmes with an established history; monographs and anthologies; self-standing or part of wider projects. Some are concerned with comics as an innovative means for teaching, dissemination and communication, others explore forms of interaction between artists and sociologists, images and words, that start earlier in the process of research and conceptualization, up to the point where the sociologist and comic-artist are one and the same. It is indeed like charting a new territory and every contribution makes a specific advance in a slightly different direction, all challenging, energizing and much welcome. What they do share therefore may not be the direction or even the path, but the means of *transportation*. Transition, translation, or even, as Clifford Marcus (2017) writes in his preface to *Lissa*, the graphic novel launching the series *EthnoGraphic, transduction*. Marcus talks of the transduction of ethnography, where the transition is not just one of language but also of form, and not just as an addendum or illustration: “instructing anthropologists and academics more broadly in remaking their work into new forms” (*ibidem*, p. 11) in an opening intended to favour “public anthropology” (*ibidem*, p. 14).

This means all sorts of issues emerge beyond those involved in the translation between two equivalent languages. In the extra difficulty of the impossible symmetry between different forms of representation, the possibility of confronting sociological and anthropological themes that struggle within just one form also emerges. In that sense even comics are shown as just one possible form of the many that could be explored and combined, and sociology just one of the possible disciplines that stand to gain from such explorations. Indeed, several disciplines, it is remarked, are increasingly experimenting in this direction: this is an effervescence well captured in these contributions, some of which stretch back several years, claiming a lineage with earlier experiences that go back as far as the 1970s, especially in France and in history.

The combination of showing and telling makes it harder to hide the clash between them evoked by Foucault’s opening quote. Symmetry is impossible and typically the two realms have either kept separate or combined in ways that are clearly the territory of one, with the other as inferior appendix (illustrations in books, captions for paintings).² The contributions proposed here make a valiant effort at finding a productive equilibrium: by using a medium that balances words and images they explore ways in which sociological ideas and findings can balance verbalization and visualization. A critical issue might be, though, that sociology is born verbal, so to speak, it never or rarely needs to be verbalized because words (and sometimes numbers) are its native language. Rather than equal translation between two native languages then, what we observe here is a transfer to images, a process of adaptation. This operation is indeed also characterized as adaptation or, in the piece about *Sociorama*, the longest standing experiment of the group, comic-ization. That is, the adaptation of sociological qualitative research into fiction in graphic form. As the useful review of this aptly titled collection, the contribution by some of its creators here presented shines a light precisely on the adaptation process. What emerges out of the detailed description of the complex collaboration between sociologists and graphic artists is not so much a template to replicate but a manifold variability, even within a project like *Sociorama* with a strong editorial line and clear, common objectives. It is perhaps the recurring problems, often bravely reflected upon with sociological acumen, that strike most. For

2. Comics are true hybrids and suffer the stigma of all hybrids, especially in artistic fields where, despite everything, the romantic idea of the genius consumed by a single passion still holds. Marjane Satrapi — author of wonderful comics that should find space in libraries of sociology — told a *New York Times* interviewer that comic artists are not generally well recognized because “People either like to write or they like to draw. And we like to do both. We’re like the bisexuals of the culture” <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/21/magazine/21wwwln-Q4-t.html>

instance, the remark that due to graphic adaptation, gaps in the research emerged “to the extent that parts of the characters’ lives had to be invented in ways that seemed likely to the sociologists” (Berthaut, Bidet & Thura, 2021). That seems a finding in itself: if we integrate comics earlier in the research project, that data can actually be collected. It also provides a demonstration, if we still needed one, that data needs first of all to be conceptualized — made thinkable and visible, even as missing — to then be collected.³

As these contributions show, first of all sociology needs to discover comics. Clearly, discovery has associated risks of appropriation (see Figure 2); however, the unique sociological value of certain comics or graphic novels, prior or in parallel to sociology’s discovery, has inspired the productive explorations presented in this section.⁴ After all, sociology does not have the monopoly of “telling about society” (Becker, 2007). This is not just with respect to comics — Becker for instance writes about Jane Austen’s novels as social analysis — but to many other forms of expressive culture. The more this realization is integrated into current experiments, the less a new world needs to be discovered from scratch every time. We can instead concentrate on how our own world has expanded as a result, not so much by adding uncharted land, but a new *field of practice* with specific affordances (Kuttner et al., 2020).

-
3. As many of the contributors remark, there is of course a well-established tradition of including drawings, if not exactly comics, into anthropological research especially (for a particularly focused and self-reflexive example see Taussig, 2011). Recently visual methods are also increasingly experimental, often involving forms of elicitation, including comic-elicitation on the part of the respondents (Flowers, 2017) and even “painting with data” (Balmer, 2021). For an interesting counterpoint to the themes discussed here — not how images can visualize words, but how words bring forth images, see Mendelsund, 2014).
 4. Key classics — Bechdel, McCloud, Satrapi, Sacco, Spiegelman — are all cited by the contributors. Clearly, others could have been mentioned. This is not the place to attempt a representative sample of a field that is wildly diverse and where national traditions are distinctive also in their role in public life (for Italy, for instance see Castaldi, 2017; Mandolini, 2020). To add at least a recent example, however, I would cite, for its perceptive combination of everyday life and institutionalized constraints, of private troubles and public issues, as well as an example of counter-appropriation of sociology by a comic-artist (a few feminist thinkers feature as *deus-ex-machina* characters) *La charge émotionnelle et autres trucs invisibles* (Emma, 2018).



Figure 2: Sociology Discovers Comics

Like a novel Columbus, the sociologist is finally landing somewhere unexpected, on Comics, discovering (un-covering) them to the world of research, theory and teaching, sociology's three *vessels* ready to be filled with the goods of this marvelous new land, where there is — surprise! — already sentient life.⁵

Depending on when and where the discovery of comics enters sociology a sort of typology might be established, to interpret both old and current experiments, and perhaps further directions. Cancellieri and Peterle (2021) talk of *comics-based research* (CBR), quoting the recent review of the emerging field by Kuttner and colleagues (2020). The anthology they curated, *Quartieri*, provides a prime example of the diverse field within a single volume, what *Ethno-Graphic* aims at across a series. In both cases, comics are used to do research work, are part of the data generation process. But it is also possible — and we have here represented — to think of what I might call *research-based comics*, where the co-creation remains somewhat looser, and

5. Representative of “life on Comics”, two comic artists are portrayed through a rendition of their own drawings: Marjane Satrapi (2007), and Scott McCloud (1993). The overall picture cites (through a combination of tracing, adaptation and original inserts) one of the early representations of Columbus arriving in the “New World”, contained in Giuliano Dati’s illustrated publication of Columbus letter in 1493, in which Columbus said “Hispaniola is a marvel” (for a reproduction see <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a52282/>).

the two worlds stay more separate. That is not to say this is a lesser enterprise, but one with a different equilibrium, leading also to a different emphasis on either dissemination or research. In that sense, looking at the cases presented in this section, *Sociorama* on a whole would seem to me to lie in the category of research-based comics, confirmed by its overall stronger emphasis on adaptation and dissemination. The same applies to the other anthology presented in the section, *Portraits of Violence* (Evans, 2021), and the web-comic *Beauty* (Kuipers & Ghedini, 2021).

Now, if we imagine these more as points on a continuum or spectrum rather than as discrete types, on the basis of gradually increasing entanglement and equivalence between visual and verbal, pictorial and discursive, comics and research (however impossible our history tells us that is — see Foucault’s quote and Figure 1 again) then we can imagine two further positions, one at each side of the ones already considered. At one extreme, where separation is clearer and division of labour too, we may put research (sociological or otherwise) on comics. This field of comics research clearly already exists. Sociology/research that has comics as its subject matter can be traced a long way back, to the official birth of the comic strip even. Kuttner et al. (2020) point to a 1944 article in the *Journal of Educational Sociology* (Sones, 1944), and in general to the early interest in the educational, or rather otherwise, potential of comics. We would proceed on the continuum to research-based comics, then comics-based research. Beyond the latter there might be a further step towards greater “fusion”. We might call this “research comics” perhaps, for want of a better term. The idea of research comics may still just be an idea, but it emerges logically (or perhaps visually, having imagined the line of the continuum and the possible positions on it) from the experimentations shown here, already applied in some of their aspects, where comics are actually allowed to do research, in its various guises, from conceptualization to analysis. In this selection it is perhaps the incubating example of the screen play and commentary for *Theories of Creativity* that hints at this possibility, possibly more due to its topic than the approach, which is also intent on “translating theory into images” (Schiemer, Duffner & Ayers, 2021a; 2021b). In other words, comics are not only something to analyze, to display analysis, or to analyze with, but also a way to challenge and redraw the contours of what is up for analysis, to expand as well as to promote the sociological imagination (Kuipers & Ghedini, 2021). This is what my final comments and image are about.

Towards Imaginacy?

Evoking the sociological imagination means evoking the role of public sociology (or anthropology, as in Marcus cited above). One problem perhaps in our supposedly image-dominated society is when such predominance is combined, as it often is, with the permanence of the near exclusive monopoly of discourse and literacy (and numeracy) at the basis of our intellectual toolkits. We (especially “we” as a broad, general public, but not only) are thrown into a world of images, without instruments of analysis, like illiterates. A couple more quotations from these pieces stuck regarding this issue:

Portraits of Violence: “To be visually literate, they [our students] must learn to ‘read’ and ‘write’ visually rich communications” (Evans, 2021, p. 252).

EthnoGraphic: “we really started to work together to translate across our different disciplines. For example they [comic artists] really had to teach us [anthropologists] what visual language means and how you can convey ideas via symbolism” (Barberis et al., 2021, p. 295).

How will students and the general public more generally acquire such skills? And once the ethnographers are trained, will their readers get it too? Seeing and knowing are linked, but

the link can be the opposite of what we expect: one needs to see in order to gain knowledge; but one needs to know in order to see,⁶ as the duck-rabbit illusion shows (Fig. 3). Is this a compelling argument for training — for all, not just innovative scholars — in visual codes and literacy? Or for what we might call imaginacy, precisely to complement literacy and numeracy with a term that recognizes the specificity of the visual and does not imply translation from verbal logic, a logic that often works against the grain of the visual?⁷ I think it is. Perhaps even more ambitiously than they set out to, these interventions, through sociological comics, show a path towards imaginacy.

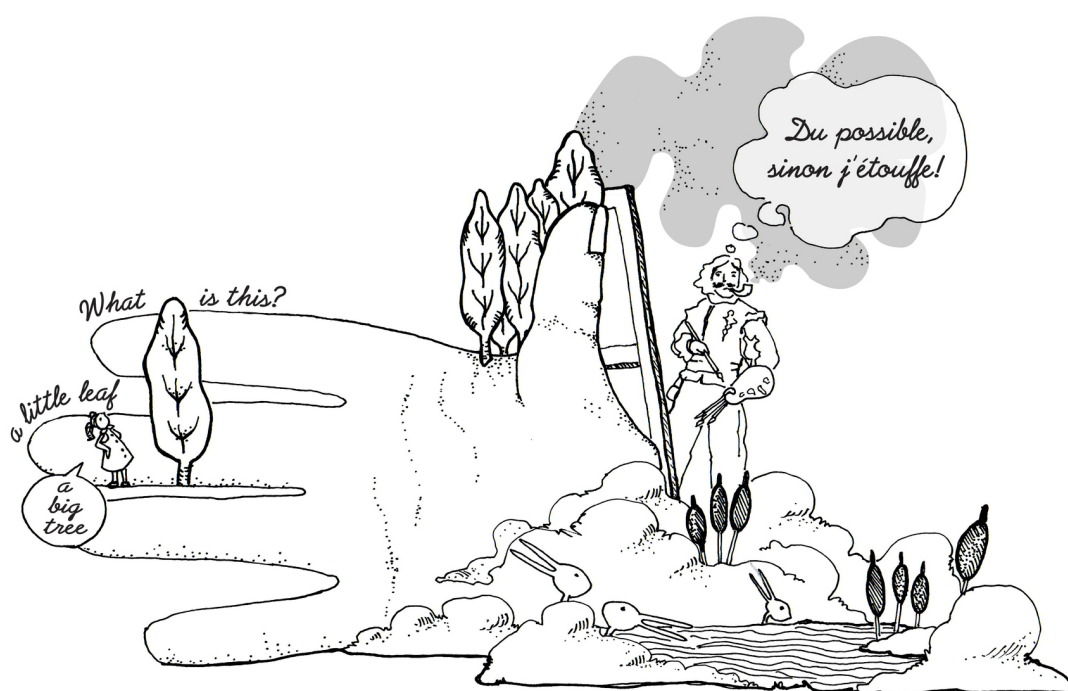


Figure 3: What is this?

Velásquez stands a little back from his canvas, he felt like suffocating and stepped away from the impossible task. He's wishing for some *possible*. He left the *Meninas* inside and

6. Bourdieu forcefully showed this direction of correlation with respect to art perception: "In a sense one can say that the capacity to see (*voir*) is a function of the knowledge (*savoir*), or concepts, that is the words, that are available to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programmes for perception" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 2). We can perhaps extend this to all perception, whilst also allowing for the opposite direction and other "programmes".
7. Although there might be better alternatives than "imaginacy", this is why I'm not satisfied with "visual literacy" as an expression, whilst agreeing that there is a serious gap to fill in that sense. The omnipresence of a focus on translation is to me a confirmation of both the gap and the partiality (partial to literacy) of the solutions we have found so far. For instance, we do not need inverted commas or neologisms to convey a visual equivalent to "write", we have that word already: it is to *draw* (on "visual literacy" see Evans, 2021). On the dangers that visual overstimulation in our "civilization of the image" brings precisely to the faculty of human imagination in all its dimensions and to *Visibility*, see Italo Calvino's essay that goes by that title (Calvino, 1988). That inflation of images of a specific kind — say of animals, a common subject of cartoons and animation — might actually be the symptom of receding social relevance, is a theme insightfully explored by John Berger in *Why look at animals?* (Berger, 1980).

is painting *en plein air*. This anachronism is the *possible* evoked by Deleuze as the realm of art.⁸ The possible which juxtaposition offers, clearing the painter's lungs and imagination. A leaf on a hand is a tree by a little girl. A rabbit by a bush; a duck by a pond. If one knows that illusion one might be able to spot a duck-rabbit-fish jumping out of the water as well, (and then who knows what else?), and be free. The question might well be a simple "what is this?": but we are warned by the pipe and by the back of the canvas that images are treacherous, representation "a subtle system of feints" (Foucault, 1966, p. 3). From one perspective, it all suggests "this" may well be a trap. But also: there is plenty of *possible* as you step back; breathe.

References

- Balmer, A. (2021). Painting with Data. *Alternative Aesthetics of Qualitative Research. The Sociological Review*, 1–19 [online first]. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026121991787>
- Barberis, E., Grüning, B., Hamdy, S., Nye, C. & Dragone, F. (2021). EthnoGRAPHIC: An Interview. *Sociologica*, 15(1), 291–298. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/12778>
- Becker, H.S. (2007). *Telling about Society*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Berger, J. (1980). *On Looking*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Berthaut, J., Bidet, J., & Thura, M. (2021). Making Sociologically-Grounded Fictions. A Review of the *Sociorama* Collection Experience. *Sociologica*, 15(1), 265–290. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/12781>
- Bogue, R. (2007). The Art of the Possible. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 241(3), 273–286. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rip.241.0273>
- Bourdieu, P. (1979). *La distinction*. Paris: Ed. de Minuit. [En. Trans. (1984) *Distinction*. London: Routledge].
- Calvino, I. (1988). Visibility. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cancellieri, A. & Peterle, G. (2021). *Sociologica*, 15(1). Urban Research in Comics Form: Exploring Spaces, Agency and Narrative Maps in Italian Marginalized Neighbourhoods. *Sociologica*, 15(1), 211–239. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/12776>
- Castaldi, S. (2017). A Brief History of Comics in Italy and Spain. In F. Bramlett, R. Cook, & A. Meskin (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Comics* (pp. 79–87). New York: Routledge.
- Eisner, W. (1983). *Comics and Sequential Art*. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press.
- Emma (2018). *La charge émotionnelle et autres trucs invisibles*. Paris: Massot.
- Evans, B. (2021). Portraits of Violence. Critical Reflections on the Graphic Novel. *Sociologica*, 15(1), 241–263. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/12283>

8. "Du possible, sinon j'étouffe" is the exclamation with which Deleuze on several occasions graphically portrays Kierkegaard's cry for alternative modes of existence and "arborescent possibility" associated with art (Bogue, 2007).

- Flowers, E. (2017). Experimenting with Comics Making as Inquiry. *Visual Arts Research*, 43(2), 21–57. <https://doi.org/10.5406/visuartsrese.43.2.0021>
- Foucault, M. (1966) *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Gallimard. [En. Trans. (2002) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge].
- Foucault, M. (1973). *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Paris: Fata Morgana. [En. Trans. (1983) *This is not a Pipe*. Berkeley: University of California Press].
- Kuipers, G., & Ghedini, F. (2021). Beauty: Triggering the Sociological Imagination with a Webcomic. *Sociologica*, 15(1), 143–162. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/12774>
- Kuttner, P.J., Weaver-Hightower, M.B., Sousanis, N. (2020). Comics-Based Research; The Affordances of Comics for Research Across Disciplines. *Qualitative Research*, 21(2), 195–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120918845>
- Mandolini, N. (2020). Let's Go Graphic. Mapping Italian Graphic Novels on Gender-Based Violence. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2020.1809484>
- Marcus, C. (2017). *Lissa and The Transduction of Ethnography*. In *Lissa*, written by S. Hamdy & C. Nye; illustrated by S. Bao & C. Brewer; lettering by M. Parenteau. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art*. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press.
- Mendelsund, P. (2014). *What We See when We Read*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Satrapi, M. (2007). *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Schiemer, B., Duffner, R., & Ayers, S.R. (2021a). Theories of Creativity: The Significance of the Insignificant. Research Note: Methodological Reflections behind the Scenes. *Sociologica*, 15(1), 193–210. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/11587>
- Schiemer, B., Duffner, R., & Ayers, S.R. (2021b). Theories of Creativity: The Significance of the Insignificant. A Graphic Novel. *Sociologica*, 15(1), 163–191. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/12775>
- Sones, W.W.D. (1944). The Comics and Instructional Method. *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 18(4), 232–240. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2262696>
- Taussig, M. (2011). *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Monica Sassatelli – University of Bologna, Life Quality Studies Department (Italy)

✉ monica.sassatelli@unibo.it; <https://www.unibo.it/sitoweb/monica.sassatelli>

Monica Sassatelli is a cultural sociologist, currently Associate Professor at the University of Bologna; she also holds an affiliation as Senior Lecturer at Goldsmiths – University of London. Her research and teaching concentrate on cultural events and institutions, cultural policies and creative industries, recently with particular focus on visual arts. She's currently writing about drawing in social research.