

Italian Comics in the New Millennium

VOLUME I

Continuity and Innovation

Edited by

Alessio Aletta

University of Toronto

Series in Art



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Preface

From the Newsstand to the Bookstore: A Note on Contemporary Comics by a Seasoned Reader

Luca Somigli

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There was a time when I could have drawn a detailed map of the newsdealers in Florence, my native city, with exhaustive notes on such weighty matters as which were likely to carry foreign comic books, which held on to back issues, or which were the first to receive the newer publications. I still carry that map in my head, but its inevitable disconnection from present reality (the past being, in L. P. Heartly famous words, “a foreign country”) seems to have increased over the past few years, as on each new trip I am confronted by new establishments or, worse, empty storefronts where once-flourishing newsstands used to be, or by permanently shuttered kiosks, their corrugated iron sidings covered in graffiti. In the main train station of Santa Maria Novella, a masterpiece of modernist architecture whose fixtures must surely be protected for their aesthetic value, a large, old-fashioned sign “Giornali” dating back to its construction in the 1930s still marks the spot where once stood the newsdealer that displayed new comics one day earlier than any other place in the city (an important matter for a 16-year-old comic-book nerd). Now, though, the sign looms anachronistically over the gap in the wall that leads to the stairs to the shopping concourse on the lower floor, which includes, among other things, the graphic novels section of the Feltrinelli bookstore; as metaphors go, this is perhaps a bit too on the nose...

If I mention the slow extinction of what was once a veritable institution of Italian cultural life, the newsdealer, it is not to indulge in a stroll down memory lane, but rather because it seems to me as good a way as any to think about the repositioning of comics within the landscape of Italian culture over the last three decades. Clearly, the crisis of newsdealers has less to do with comics than with the radical transformation in how news of all kinds, from politics and economics to celebrity gossip and TV programming, is distributed and consumed in the age of the internet and social media. Nevertheless, the

disappearance of what were traditionally the main distribution points of comics has inevitably impacted their production, as the current catalogue of the venerable publishing house Bonelli shows: While its traditional fleet of monthly black and white comic books is now reduced to a rump, with a strong reliance on reprints and on series dedicated to its flagbearer, the evergreen *Tex*, its offerings of more expensive hardbound volumes in color, in different formats and sizes and either stand-alone or part of limited series, has greatly expanded. With a significant delay that is evidence of the endurance of its comics industry, Italy is now undergoing a transformative shift that occurred over two decades ago in other Western countries with great comics traditions such as France or the United States – a shift away from occasional or irregular consumption of comics as one among many offerings in the domain of entertainment to a dedicated readership that seeks out comics in specialized shops and in bookstores. The impact on the cultural status of the medium is not to be underestimated. Newsdealers never sold “graphic novels”; rather, they sold comic books – “fumetti” or even “giornalini,” to use an increasingly outdated term – objects that had often little concern for their cultural respectability (magazines such as *Linus*, *Corto Maltese* or *Orient Express* were a different matter, but they rather belonged to the potentially middle-brow category of the “riviste” as a result of their anthological nature and of the presence of articles). The tension between, on the one hand, the ambition and potential of comics (could one argue, for instance, that *Tex* anticipated the revisionist western by a full decade?), and on the other, the limitations imposed by the need to satisfy the demands of seriality and genre structured the medium for much of the twentieth century and likely curtailed its development. For every creative stroke of genius – say, Guido Martina and Angelo Bioletto’s spectacular Disneyan take on Dante’s *Inferno* in *L’Inferno di Topolino* or Jacovitti’s surreal western-ish landscapes or Tiziano Sclavi’s mind-bending early issues of *Dylan Dog* – there are uncountable stereotyped stories of, depending on what was in vogue in a particular decade, talking animals, cowboys and Indians, mildly erotic femmes fatales, or gory splatter scenarios. On the contrary, as they have increasingly loosened their ties with the sphere of the popular, comics in the twenty-first century have become accepted as a means of serious aesthetic expression – the last of the great new media of modernity to do so, well after cinema and television. Indeed, the current flourishing of graphic works ranging the gamut from journalism to memoir, from history to biography, is the best evidence that there are no limits to the topics and domains that comics, like any other medium, can engage with – all you need is a script and a pencil, virtual or otherwise.

The essays collected by Alessio Aletta in these two truly ground-breaking volumes chart in great detail the transformations of the comic book/graphic novel landscape in Italy and provide the first comprehensive map of where the

medium is and where it has been going since the turn of the new millennium. The “tension between tradition and renovation,” to use Aletta’s words, is the *fil rouge* that runs through the two volumes, but their internal organization quickly suggests the terms in which that tension is playing out. Volume one is more directly concerned with how traditional serial comics are accommodating to changed conditions of production, distribution, and consumption while, at the same time, remaining connected to their roots and, not secondarily, to readers’ expectations. Both at the macrolevel of the comics industry and the microlevel of individual series, this accommodation is a very difficult balancing act, as emerges clearly in the two essays dedicated to the “strategies” developed by the two traditional juggernauts of the Italian publishing industry, the aforementioned Bonelli and Disney Italia (which continues the strong tradition of Disney comics established by Mondadori, the previous publisher of *Topolino* and its spin-offs) to retain and possibly expand their position in an increasingly shrinking market. Precisely because of their long and storied histories, both publishers are caught between the expectations of a faithful but increasingly older readership (that often turns to their comics for their nostalgia value) and the need to develop new strategies to attract and retain younger readers who, in the age of fully developed digital media, have many other forms of relatively unexpensive visual entertainment at their disposal. Writing of Bonelli, for instance, Francisco Sáez de Adana points to the similarities between its recent strategies and those developed by American comics publishers when, in the later decades of the twentieth century, they too were confronted with the shift in distribution and consumption away from generalized venues such as drugstores to specialized comics shops – a signal of the previously mentioned belated alignment of Italy to international trends. In recent years, Bonelli has increasingly made recourse to the “continuity model” made popular by Marvel comics (a trailblazer in this as in many other ways) and has more carefully constructed its stories in the monthly series in terms of narrative arcs that can be easily repackaged in collected volumes marketed in bookstores – thus bridging the gap between the two forms of distribution we identified above. To be sure, this is not an entirely new phenomenon – the volume publication of *Tex*’s story “Sangre Navajo” in the Oscar Mondadori series, to my knowledge the first Italian popular comic to be collected and published as a serious work of fiction, dates back to 1973 – but the fact that it now underlies the editorial line of entire series such as the recent *Tex* spin-off, *Tex Willer*, is a clear signal of the need to think in innovative ways about how traditional comics reach their audiences.

That said, this volume also provides strong evidence that popular comics have often been sites of experimentation and innovation on their own terms, as in the case of Leo Ortolani’s *Rat-Man* and of Luca Enoch’s *Gea*. While both plainly and, especially in the case of *Rat-Man*, enthusiastically exhibit their debt to their numerous sources in popular culture, they have also opened up

the medium to new thematic and narrative scenarios. *Rat-Man* played on the tension between, on the one hand, parody and pastiche, and on the other, a solid sense of narrative construction to create a unique comics universe that is perhaps the closest thing to a postmodern comic book in the Italian canon. Likewise, *Gea* never shied away from its close relationship with mainstream, and more specifically Bonelli, comics, and yet within the parameters of genre, it also articulated a complex meditation on diversity – of gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, social class, spiritual belief, etc. – not only unheard of in popular comics, but also often at loggerheads with mainstream Italian society. That the 1990s were a decade of great ferment is confirmed, at the other end of the spectrum by the recourse to tropes and situation from genre fiction by authors such as Lorenzo Mattotti or Gipi who have otherwise eschewed the conventions (as well as the forms of production and distribution) of serial comics, and who have continued a tradition of visual experientialism that provides a living link with the seminal underground moment of the 1970s and 1980s best represented by the figure of Andrea Pazienza (the “Pazienza-function,” to use Carlotta Vacchelli’s astute definition of this living legacy).

The adjective “new,” repeated three times in its subtitle, is the keyword of the second volume, which charts not only the diverse subjects that contemporary comics have engaged with, but also the new means of production and distribution, some, such as self-publishing, with roots that connect present and past of the medium, and others, such as digital platforms, that open up entirely new ways of structuring and reading comics. What is striking about the essays collected in this volume is both the boundlessness of the reach of the medium and the number of practitioners who use it. In other words, the remarkable fact is not (only) that the comics medium can address complex subjects such as, say, abortion or immigration, but rather the sheer volume of memoirs, fictional stories, and sociological or historical visual essays that address these various subjects. Not least among its many merits, this volume provides a reliable survey and guide of the graphic literature on several important subjects now available in Italy. While some publishers such as BeccoGiallo or Coconino Press have emerged over the last two decades as leaders in the production of graphic novels for distribution in bookstores, the market is very much a multipolar one (certainly more than is the case of serial comics), with presses of all size as well as multiple platforms contributing to the increasing presence and visibility of graphic narratives. The essays collected in the second volume of *Italian Comics in the New Millennium* are an excellent compass to orient ourselves in this new landscape.

Indeed, compasses and other navigation instruments are needed now more than ever because, despite the established legitimacy of the graphic medium,

the critical discourse still lags rather behind. *Italian Comics in the New Millennium* provides ample evidence of the excellent research in the field currently being carried out by young(er) scholars, which bodes well for the future of comics studies. Hopefully, after this work on comics in the present, other periods of Italian comics and graphic novels will be the subject of equally knowledgeable, insightful and stimulating investigations. To quote Aletta's apt conclusion – as well as the final panel of comics stories from time immemorial – “to be continued.”

Introduction

Italian Comics, Zero Slash One

Alessio Aletta

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All centuries have been, and will be, more or less transitional; because human society is never stationary, and will never at any time attain to a fixed condition. [...] But perhaps you mean to say that the present age is especially transitional, inasmuch as it is a rapid passage from one state [...] to another, absolutely different. In which case I would ask your permission to laugh at this rapidity.

Giacomo Leopardi, “Dialogue between Tristano and a Friend”
(1827)

The Shadow Line, that’s how some call it. It’s the hardest border to cross – for everyone, even for a superhero. Especially when they have to start from scratch.

Paperinik in *PKNA* “Zero Barra Uno” (1998)

The aim of this book is to try and answer an exceedingly simple question: How are Italian comics (“fumetti”¹) doing lately? As is often the case with simple

¹ Some clarification about the terminology is perhaps in order. The Italian word *fumetto* (literally, ‘little smoke’) refers first and foremost to the speech balloon in comics. In this acceptation, the term is thought to have been coined by Antonio Rubino, one of the pioneers of Italian comics, and entered common usage by the late 1930s (Arcangeli 2011, 208-209); by extension, it soon came to denote the comics medium as a whole. Throughout this volume, ‘comics’ will serve as a general umbrella term, while ‘fumetti’ will specifically refer to Italian comics.

In recent decades, the American term ‘graphic novel’ – sometimes translated as *romanzo grafico* – has also gained traction in Italy. This label typically refers to standalone comic books, often marketed in bookstores and associated with more literary or artistic ambitions. Personally, I find the term to be not particularly helpful, as defining what constitutes a graphic novel is notoriously difficult. However, some contributors to this

questions, answering it adequately means dealing with a great deal of complexity, nuances, and even contradictions; so much so, in fact, that two full volumes will merely serve as an introduction to an issue that could easily fill a whole library. For now, I shall start with one example, which seems to me particularly poignant.

Paperinik (known in English as “Duck Avenger”) is arguably the most famous original character created by the Italian branch of Disney comics. He was born in 1969 from the imagination of Guido Martina and the pencil of Giovan Battista Carpi as the secret identity of Paperino (Donald Duck). Initially envisioned as a parody of the anti-heroes featured in the slew of contemporary Italian gritty comics known as *fumetti neri* (‘black comics’), such as *Diabolik* (see Castaldi 2010), Paperinik soon evolved into a run-down, unlucky superhero. This characterization proved extremely successful and, for nearly 30 years, Paperinik was established as a merely comical character, facing antagonists like Uncle Scrooge and later the Beagle Boys and Rockerduck. The series *PKNA* (*Paperinik New Adventures*), running from 1996 to 2001, is an attempt to modernize the character, making him more similar to classic American superheroes. The threats faced by Paperinik – now dubbed PK – escalate considerably: aliens, artificial intelligences, time-travelers. Likewise, the stories shift towards a more mature tone, targeting a teenage audience instead of children. Even the format of the comic book changes, adopting a larger stapled format akin to American superhero magazines (*spillato*), rather than the familiar Italian *libretto* (small paperback booklets). Despite these changes, Paperino’s defining traits as a character (such as his ill luck and his sense of humor) remain clearly recognizable.

This transition is directly addressed in a special numbered issue published in 1998, appropriately titled “Zero barra uno” (‘Zero slash one’), deviating from the standard numeration. The story takes place over one night, immediately after Paperinik becomes “PK,” and showcases the protagonist’s struggle with his new superhero life, which understandably frightens him. Ultimately, he chooses to embrace his destiny, concluding: “Nasce un nuovo giorno. E finisce un’epoca”² (PKNA 1998, 62). It might be a coincidence, but this transitional issue seems to me to perfectly embody the broader trajectory of Italian comics

volume have chosen to use it to distinguish certain works from mainstream serialized comics, and I have not altered their usage.

Finally, partially overlapping with ‘graphic novel’ is the term ‘fumetto d’autore’ (authorial comic), a broad and somewhat fluid category encompassing works that bear a strong personal imprint (it may be used to describe objects as diverse as Hugo Pratt’s exotic adventures, Andrea Pazienza’s experimental narratives, and Zerocalcare’s humor). A key distinction, however, is that ‘fumetto d’autore’ can also apply to serialized comics.

² “A new day rises. An era comes to an end.”

at the turn of the millennium. This volume, then, focuses on the metaphorical “shadow line” threaded not only by Paperinik, but by Italian comics in general.

Indeed, in the realm of Italian comics, the new millennium represents not only a time of change but also a natural continuation of processes long underway. For one, the same institutions that have dominated the Italian comic book market for half a century are still standing tall, while finding new ways to adapt to the ever-shifting market: most notably, the aforementioned Disney and Sergio Bonelli Editore. As regards Disney Italia, the case of Paperinik/PK is maybe the most drastic example, but the entire company, since its inception, has persistently strived to remain relevant (in this volume, this issue is thoroughly discussed by Andrea Tosti, and exemplified through the case of Dantean comics by Marialaura Pancini). Given the inherently mutable nature of its target audience, Disney has continually adapted its flagship magazine *Topolino* and its various other publications. Indeed, the entire Italian Disney comics school has consistently been at the forefront globally, having long surpassed in this regard its parent company in the States: As noted by former *Topolino* director Valentina De Poli (2022), nowadays, Disney considers Mickey and Donald more as mascots than characters with narrative potential. Conversely, Italian comics have continuously reimaged the adventures of mice and ducks, with undisputed masters such as the great Giorgio Cavazzano bridging the two centuries; at the same time, the Italian Disney production has expanded beyond the scope of American-born characters, publishing original series such as Gnone, Barbucci, and Canepa's *W.I.T.C.H.* (2001-2012) and Francesco Artibani's *Monster Allergy* (2003-2006). Such series, while maintaining some features associated with the Disney brands, are a far cry from their counterpart, if only because they feature human protagonists; still, they have become massive cultural sensations in Italy and abroad.

Perhaps even more so than Disney Italia, the publishing house Sergio Bonelli Editore remains the true protagonist of the serialized Italian comics market. Its iconic flagship title, *Tex*, continues to enjoy immense popularity despite being in print since the 1940s. *Tex*'s editorial line is perhaps the most conservative within the Bonelli lineup, its status quo having remained fundamentally unchanged for decades – nonetheless, as evidenced in this volume's first chapter by Sáez de Adana, there are signs of innovation, for instance in the use of continuity and in the adoption of new editorial formats. Still, even in this regard, as early as the 1980s, there were indications of a desire to push these boundaries: for instance, in terms of formats, the inauguration of the large-format series *Speciale Tex*, familiarly known as “Texoni” (“big Tex”) dates to 1988 (the character's fortieth anniversary). The 80s also saw the debut of Tiziano Sclavi's *Dylan Dog*, which quickly came to rival Tex in popularity: a radically innovative mystery-horror series, with frequent forays into current affairs and

featuring an introspective, tormented hero (Comberiati 2022). *Dylan Dog* opened the trail to a plethora of new Bonelli series with a much modern sensibility, notably Medda, Serra and Vigna's sci-fi series *Nathan Never*, and then Luca Enoch's "punk" *Gea* (the latter here analyzed by Manuela Di Franco), published precisely around the turn of the millennium. The year 2000 also marks the debut of one of the most ambitious prosecutions of this trend: Boselli and Colombo's *Dampyr*, a horror-action series with a rather strong continuity; *Dampyr* also has the distinction of having been chosen as the first attempt to kickstart a "Bonelli Cinematic Universe," through a movie adaptation released in 2022.

While Disney Italia and Bonelli Editore remain dominant forces in the serialized comics market, they are far from the only players shaping the contemporary landscape of Italian comics. Similar patterns of adaptation and transformation can be observed in other major and minor publishing houses. Astorina, for instance, continues to reinvent *Diabolik* for modern audiences; Eura (later Aurea) has played a crucial role in introducing international trends to Italian readership with series such as Bartoli and Recchioni's *John Doe*; and McK currently publishes, among others, Silver's *Lupo Alberto* – a character that has achieved an iconic status in the Italian landscape, bolstered by extensive merchandising and his role as a testimonial for public awareness campaigns on pressing social issues, from AIDS to pollution to COVID-19. These companies, along with publishers of non-serial comics, illustrate the broader structural shifts in the Italian comic industry, reflecting changes in readership habits, production methods, and narrative experimentation.

To fully grasp the transformations of Italian comics over the past two decades, however, one must look beyond this immediate timeframe and acknowledge the developments of previous decades. The 1960s marked a growing perceived distinction between traditional, mass-market comics and more artistically ambitious works, shaped in part by increasing cultural exchanges with France, where *bandes dessinées* had already gained literary recognition. Figures such as Hugo Pratt and Guido Crepax were instrumental in this shift, producing works that challenged conventional genre boundaries, integrating high literature and philosophical depth into adventure storytelling. A crucial development during this period was the founding of *Linus* in April 1965 by Giovanni Gandini. This magazine played a pivotal role in elevating comics to a respected form of 'graphic literature' for adults, introducing Italian readers to internationally acclaimed works such as Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts*, Al Capp's *Li'l Abner*, and Crepax's *Neutron*, which debuted the iconic character Valentina. Beyond comics, the magazine fostered cultural discourse by including sections on society, politics, media, and literature. Under editors like Oreste Del Buono,

Linus became a central platform for avant-garde and satirical comics, significantly shaping the acceptance of sophisticated narratives in Italy.

By the 1970s, underground and countercultural movements further propelled this evolution, giving rise to politically charged, satirical, and experimental comics aimed at adult audiences. Magazines such as *Il Cannibale*, *Il Male*, and *Frigidaire* became crucial platforms for this avant-garde wave, with Andrea Pazienza emerging as a key figure whose work epitomized the era's raw energy and artistic freedom (and whose influence is still palpable today, as Carlotta Vacchelli highlights in her chapter).

The 1980s witnessed an increased blending of Italian and international influences. Publications such as *Lanciostory* and *Skorpio* facilitated exchanges with South American comics, exposing Italian audiences to new storytelling techniques and thematic explorations. Meanwhile, artists like Guido Buzzelli and Milo Manara continued to push artistic boundaries in Italy and abroad, solidifying Italian comics as a major cultural export. This decade also saw the rise of serialized comics that transcended traditional genre constraints, such as the aforementioned *Dylan Dog*, by Tiziano Sclavi.

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the once-clear division between mainstream and auteur comics had largely dissolved. Series such as Leo Ortolani's *Rat-Man* exemplified this trend, evolving from a humorous superhero parody into a profound meditation on identity, failure, and resilience, while hybridizing continuity and episodic structure (as pointed out in this volume by Antonio Mirizzi). The 2000s and 2010s saw a new generation of creators who further blurred the lines between mainstream comics and *fumetto d'autore*. Figures like Mattotti, Gipi, and Zerocalcare (whose works are examined here by Tirino, Rossi, and myself, respectively) embraced innovative storytelling approaches, drawing from autobiographical, sociopolitical, and experimental traditions while engaging a broader audience through both traditional and digital platforms. The increasing presence of graphic novels in Italian bookstores reflects this shift, as comics gain cultural legitimacy and commercial viability beyond the confines of specialized *fumetterie*.

Parallel to the evolution of the comics industry itself, the academic study of comics in Italy has undergone a profound and multifaceted transformation. Once dismissed as a trivial form of entertainment, comics gradually asserted their place as a legitimate object of scholarly inquiry. Early critical engagements with the medium were marked by hesitancy and an implicit struggle for legitimacy, yet over time, more rigorous and systematic approaches emerged, culminating in a rich and interdisciplinary field of study.

One of the earliest intellectual interventions in the critical discourse on comics in Italy can be traced to *Il Politecnico*, the influential left-wing literary

magazine founded in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War by Elio Vittorini, one of the preeminent intellectuals of his time. In its pages, Giuseppe Trevisani published “Il mondo a quadretti” (1945), widely considered the first Italian article dedicated to the medium (Di Paola 2019). This pioneering piece, while groundbreaking in its mere existence, ultimately adopted an ambivalent stance on the expressive and artistic validity of “comics,” significantly named by the English term. A more substantial, albeit still tentative, engagement followed with Carlo della Corte’s *I Fumetti* (1961), which endeavored to frame comics within literary and artistic paradigms. However, the study remained primarily centered on American productions, dedicating only a handful of pages to Italian *fumetti*.

A decisive inflection point in the scholarly treatment of comics came with Umberto Eco’s seminal *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964), which situated comics within the broader discourse of mass culture and semiotics. However, even in this foundational work, comics remained a relatively marginal focus; of the essays in the volume, only three explicitly examined the medium (Di Paola 2019), and all were devoted to American exemplars such as *Krazy Kat* and *Superman*. Yet, Eco’s influence was by no means confined to this single text. Alongside Vittorini, Oreste Del Buono, and other prominent figures of the Italian intellectual scene, Eco was one of the main interlocutors of *Linus*, a magazine that, as previously mentioned, would prove instrumental in establishing a space for critical discourse on comics, both Italian and international. Around the same years, Roberto Giammanco introduced a sociological lens to the study of comics with *Gulp. Il sortilegio a fumetti* (1965), once again approaching the medium primarily through the framework of American culture.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a significant expansion of academic engagement with comics, marking a shift from preliminary legitimization to more rigorous and historically grounded analyses. Leonardo Becciu’s *Il fumetto in Italia* (1971) represented a watershed moment as the first systematic historical study dedicated to Italian comics. His work meticulously traced the national evolution of the medium, contextualizing it within broader artistic and cultural traditions, and in doing so, provided a foundation for subsequent scholarship. Meanwhile, Antonio Faeti profoundly enriched the field by integrating comics into pedagogical and media studies discourses. His research explored the didactic potential of comics and their intersections with children’s literature and visual culture (1972; 1986; 1990). Around the same period, Alberto Abruzzese’s contributions further embedded comics within interdisciplinary academic conversations, examining their relationship to broader media landscapes and mass communication theory (1979; Barbiani and Abruzzese 1980).

By the 1990s, comics criticism in Italy had matured into a well-defined and intellectually sophisticated field, enriched by increasingly refined theoretical

frameworks. Gino Frezza emerged as a key figure in advancing the theoretical understanding of comics, particularly with regard to serial storytelling. His *La scrittura malinconica. Sceneggiatura e serialità nel fumetto italiano* (1987) offered a penetrating examination of the structural and narrative mechanisms underpinning Italian comics, while his later *Fumetti, anime del visibile* (1999) delved into their semiotic and communicative dimensions, situating them within the broader constellation of visual culture. *I linguaggi del fumetto* by Daniele Barbieri (1991), one of Eco's pupils, is still widely regarded as a cornerstone of the discipline, providing an exhaustive analysis of the language and structural properties of comics, establishing a theoretical foundation that has continued to inform subsequent scholarship. Simultaneously, Sergio Brancato (who instead studied under Abruzzese) interrogated the inherently hybrid nature of comics in *Fumetti. Guida al fumetto nel sistema dei media* (1994), positioning them as a quintessentially transmedia phenomenon that disrupts conventional distinctions between artistic expression and commercial storytelling.

By the turn of the millennium, retrospectives on the history of Italian comics had become an established component of the academic discourse, reflecting the medium's now century-long legacy. These ranged from studies focusing on its national specificity (Brancato 2008) to broader investigations of its position within a global framework (Bindi and Raffaelli 2021). At the same time, the broader discipline of comics studies had attained an unprecedented degree of vibrancy, producing a wealth of scholarship that engaged with the medium from increasingly diverse perspectives. Rather than naming individual scholars, I will list a few of the most notable recent collective contributions: the special issues *E-comics*, edited by Sergio Brancato and Ivan Pintor Iranzo for *H-Ermes* (2020); *Crossing Drawn Borders: fumetto e migrazione*, edited by Busi Rizzi, Dupré, Lanslots, and Mangiavillano for *Scritture migranti* (2022); *Transnational Italian Comics*, edited by Daniele Comberiati and Barbara Spadaro for the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2023); *For Real. Il fumetto italiano tra realtà e realismo*, edited by the SnIF study group and published by Franco Cesati Editore (2024). These works, emblematic of the field's contemporary dynamism, reflect the ever-expanding range of methodologies and theoretical approaches that now characterize comics scholarship. While early scholars focused on legitimizing comics as a serious artistic medium, later studies incorporated interdisciplinary methodologies, drawing from semiotics, sociology, pedagogy, and media studies. Each generation of scholars has expanded upon the insights of their predecessors, ensuring that comics remain an evolving and vital subject of academic inquiry within Italian cultural studies.

Continuity and innovation, then: The tension between tradition and innovation is a compelling theme examined in the chapters dedicated to well-established

Italian comic publishers as well as individual prominent figures and their lasting impact on the Italian (and global) comic scene. The contributions collected here delve into the challenges faced by publishers in maintaining the essence of beloved series while also adapting to contemporary sensibilities, as well as the experimentations of comics artists working the threshold between the old century and the new one. This volume, then, aims to offer some general coordinates (although a comprehensive exploration is clearly impossible) of the transformations and continuities within the Italian comic industry, bringing together diverse perspectives and approaches to shed light on the dynamic evolution of Italian comics.

The first section, “Of Mice and Men: Navigating Change in Italian Serial Comics,” explores the evolution and challenges faced by iconic Italian serial comics, such as the mice (and ducks) of Disney Italia comics and the adventure heroes of Bonelli productions, closing on the atypical case of a series “d’autore”: Leo Ortolani’s *Rat-Man*. The articles examine the shifts in audience, narrative strategies, and thematic approaches, highlighting how these comics have adapted to changing cultural and industrial contexts.

In the first chapter, Andrea Tosti analyzes the evolution of Italian Disney comics in the new millennium and the challenges they have faced. The production of Disney comics in Italy, mostly independent from the US central already around the half of the twentieth century, made Topolino (Mickey Mouse), Paperino (Donald Duck), and their friends so prominent in the national imagination, presenting a fantastical portrayal of Italy, especially through parodies of literary classics. However, in recent years, the centrality of Italian Disney comics has diminished, and they have become less reflective of the country’s current state. Factors such as a sales crisis, competition, increased control from the parent company, and a generational shift have forced publishers to reconsider their strategies. Italian Disney Comics has catered more to adult audiences, focusing on nostalgia and being less capable of addressing current events satirically; the future of *Topolino* in Italy seems now more unpredictable than ever.

Focusing on one peculiar case, Marialaura Pancini discusses Disney Italia’s treatments of Dante Alighieri and the *Divine Comedy*, comparing the famous *Inferno di Topolino* (1949-50), the *Inferno di Paperino* (1987), and proposing a detailed analysis on the most recent Dantean comic book by Disney: *Paper Dante* (2021). By examining these comics published at different times, the author appreciates the evolution of comic storytelling over time and the adaptation of the quintessential Italian literary classic into the comic medium.

Moving to another behemoth of the comics industry, Francisco Sáez de Adana discusses new serial strategies in Sergio Bonelli Editore, departing from the “Arthurian” model and the distinction between series (consisting of self-contained, independent episodes) and serials (episodes are interlinked and

must have an order): Bonelli comics are typically structured as series (an example being *Tex*). However, in recent years, new serial strategies like crossovers and retro-continuity have been introduced to maintain continuity in this complex industrial structure.

Still within the context of Bonelli, Manuela Di Franco proposes a “punk” reading of one of the publisher’s most experimental series, *Gea* by Luca Enoch, published right at the turn of the millennium (from 1999 to 2007). *Gea* blends comix and ancient mythology, breaking away from the traditional ‘Bonellian’ model: it presented a socially and politically engaged fantasy story, challenging societal norms and embracing diversity, and it incorporated intertextuality and intermedial references, drawing from literary and philosophical texts to reinterpret myths and legends, to name a few innovative elements that *Gea* introduced to the Italian comics scene.

In turn, Antonio Mirizzi analyzes a classic series parodying both Disney and superhero comics: *Rat-Man* (1989-2017) by Leo Ortolani, which he argues is still a unicum in the Italian comics industry. The paper analyzes the unique narrative of *Rat-Man*: The serial format reflects its hybridization, incorporating parodies, sit-coms, and continuous narratives, while the overarching structure showcases Ortolani’s ambition to create an expansive puzzle novel.

Switching from the experience of serial comics to close readings of individual artists, the section “Old and New Masters” examines the lasting influence of Italian comics creators from the last century like Andrea Pazienza and the work of modern authors like Gipi and Zerocalcare, exploring the evolution of narrative styles, thematic depth, and intermedial experimentation across different generations.

Carlotta Vacchelli examines how Italian comics artists across different mediums have been influenced by Andrea Pazienza, a seminal comic artist from the 80s. Drawing from Michel Foucault’s concept of the “author-function,” Vacchelli explores how Pazienza’s legacy is seen in various aspects of contemporary Italian comics, including gender/minority issues, socio-political parody, self-narration, surrealistic perspectives, reflections on aesthetics, antifascism, and biography. Vacchelli’s analysis argues that Pazienza’s comics revolutionized the medium, expanding its potential, and the “pazienziiano” trend continues to shape Italian comics in the twenty-first century.

Mario Tirino examines the narrative ecosystem of the graphic novel *Stigmatate* (1999) by Lorenzo Mattotti, including its adaptations into the Spanish film *Estigmas* and the TV series *Christian*. The analysis focuses on supernatural elements, television adaptation strategies, transnational dimensions, and Lorenzo Mattotti’s intermedial storytelling. This case study is inserted in the context of the experimentations in inter- and trans-mediality in Italian comics

and the rise of narratives featuring characters with supernatural powers in the last two decades. Ultimately, *Stigmatate* showcases the potential of contemporary Italian comics in remediating past cultures within a dynamic intermedial and transmedia landscape.

Umberto Rossi focuses on *La terra dei figli* (2017) by Gipi, one of the main representatives of contemporary “authorial” Italian comics. This post-apocalyptic story explores themes of societal collapse and decline, with some transparent references to contemporary politics and culture: the narrative touches on issues such as illiteracy, violence against women, and the impact of social media, reflecting a biopolitical perspective and emphasizing the fragility of the body politic in Italy. Gipi’s expressive drawings add a grotesque and moralizing dimension to the story, underlining disquieting aspects of current societal trends.

The final chapter concludes this overview by examining the work of Zerocalcare, widely regarded as one of the most representative Italian comic artists of the new millennium. Zerocalcare’s unique style synthesizes influences from past comics masters, both Italian and international, resulting in an entirely original form that has already become an inspiration for the next generation of artists. The chapter provides an overview of Zerocalcare’s various works and focuses on his first printed collection of webcomics originally published on his blog (zerocalcare.it), titled *Ogni maledetto lunedì su due* (2014): This work in particular showcases Zerocalcare’s distinct stylistic traits, narrative strategies, and thematic explorations.

This volume originated from a single panel held at the NeMLA Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, in March 2022. Yet, thanks to the enthusiastic support and interest of colleagues all over the world, what began as a small discussion has grown into a rather large-scale collaborative effort that has finally materialized in the form of this two-volume curated collection. Central to its realization was the role of two of the most active study groups dedicated to Italian Comics: TICS (Toronto Italian Comics Studies), based in North America, and SnIF (Studying ‘n’ Investigating Fumetti), which in just a few years has been doing such great work in the field of Italian comics. Many colleagues and friends from both these groups have contributed to this book (through direct participation or by supporting it in other ways), and I thank them all wholeheartedly. I am also indebted to the folks at Vernon Press, who believed in this project from its inception, to Professor Luca Somigli of the University of Toronto, who kindly agreed to preface this work, and to Nunzia, who was a huge help in some of the most tedious aspects of the editing process. These two volumes on *Italian Comics in the New Millennium* represent the culmination of three years of work and the result of an international cooperation. It is my fervent hope that they will help bring the study of contemporary Italian comics to the attention of international scholarship.

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About the Contributors

Andrea Tosti. As a long-standing comics enthusiast and independent researcher, he has worked on and with this medium for years. In particular, he has studied the history and evolution of comics and the relationship between the medium and other artistic, narrative, and communicative forms, with a strong focus on the visual component. He has also dealt with comics from the point of view of the audience's perception of the medium and, particularly, the cultural history of Disney comics in Italy. His current research concerns the attempt to insert comics into the broader field of data visualization and the study of comics as a medium capable of implementing scientific communication and dissemination, as well as the use of it as a pedagogical, educational, and data display and analysis medium.

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Antonio Mirizzi is a PhD student at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. He is currently working on a tentative framework describing the cognitive experience of comics readers, but his research topics also include narrative complexity (especially in comics), comics seriality and the reshaping of the novel form in comics. Along with academic commitments, he works as a comic writer and artist, while teaching history and theory of comics in private courses addressed to both adults and children. He has recently published an essay dedicated to the work of serial author Leo Ortolani, *Rat-Man. La Scimmia, il Topo e il Supereroe* (2023), originally his Master's thesis.

Carlotta Vacchelli is a curator at Lucca Comics & Games, and a professor at the American University of Rome. After completing her Ph.D. dissertation on the influence of Andrea Pazienza on contemporary Italian culture (Indiana University, 2020), she was a Research Fellow at CIMA (NYC, 2021), a Ragusa Foundation Fellow (NYC, 2021), studying the artistic relationship between Mario Schifano and *Frigidaire*, and the artists' multimedia reception, and a Post-doctoral Fellow at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – MPI, with a project on Countercultural comics. Her articles appeared in edited volumes and peer-reviewed journals (selected: *Italian Modern Art, Elephant & Castle, Studi Italiani, Italica, Italian Quarterly, Studi buzzatiani, International Journal of Comic Art, Cultura & Comunicazione, Simultanea*). She curated exhibitions on Italian comics authors (“AkaB. Qui non esiste morale”, 2020; “La funzione-Pazienza”, 2020; “Pablo Echaurren. Controfumetto”, 2022). She is a scientific member of CLAP! Museum (Pescara), Centro Fumetto “Andrea Pazienza” (Cremona), and comics research group SnIF.

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¹ This index collects the names of individuals, works (comics, books, and works of art in general, but not single stories), magazines and newspapers, publishers, collectives, festivals, and characters. Only when it seemed necessary, a parenthetical remark is added to avoid ambiguity. For Italian works, the title is given in Italian.

For fictional characters, the family name follows the first name (e.g., “Tex Willer,” not “Willer, Tex”). Superheroes are listed under their superhero name (e.g., “Batman,” not “Bruce Wayne”). Artists who use a pseudonym are listed under their pseudonym (e.g., “Zerocalcare,” not “Rech, Michele”).

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