

REVIEW OF BOOKS

Review of Gino Frezza “*The comic strip papers. Strategies and portraits of a generational medium*”

Reviewed by

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Last May saw the publication of Gino Frezza’s last essay, *The comic strip papers. Strategies and portraits of a generational medium* (Liguori editore, 360 pages, €22.50), the final stage of the author’s thirty-year-long research into the forms and the destiny of a medium that, more than a century after its creation (conventionally set in 1896, with the appearance of the Sunday *Yellow Kid* comic strip stories), stills plays a key role in the system of the media and is overcome by the new processes of digitalization of communication scenarios.

The text combines unpublished contributions with the rewriting and organization of previous texts in a wide-ranging corpus. Frezza presents a specialist text in depth of analysis and theoretical foundation but at the same time accessible to all on account of the clarity of the writing. The volume is divided into three sections preceded by an *Introduction* which is, in essence, a theoretical manifesto: Frezza immediately makes it clear that it is not possible to observe and understand the evolution of the comic strip other than as part of a complex media system, giving due regard to the processes and reciprocal relations between different media. The comic strip is even identified as an “intermedial medium” and therefore the recourse to metaphors such as *transit* and *crossing over* does not appear to be a coincidence. In this epistemological framework, reflections on the relationship between the cinema and the comic strip are included. A relationship based, both in terms of language and as a consumer product now again at the forefront, on the development of the potential of digital cinema.

In the first part of the volume, *The limits of the text. Language, identity, generations*, the formal and linguistic aspects and the fictional strategies of the medium are investigated, the relationship between writing and the intrinsically *audiovisual* nature of the medium. The author dwells on the various stages of the history of the comic strip, reconstructs

how, initially misconceived as a product for mass consumption, from the sixties onwards it has become the object of a critical debate that has seen contributions from a number of different disciplines, from semiotics to sociology (and Frezza offers a precise but not pedantic reconstruction of this debate, a valid tool for anyone wishing to conduct further research). In his analysis, the author takes into account both the most beaten paths of research, such as the place occupied by the medium in the culture industry system or the artistic value of certain works (especially among the most recent *graphic novels*), and apparently secondary aspects, such as the use of the medium in teaching-disseminational projects, or the importance of certain works as historiographic sources or even as historical narratives.

The second part of the volume through the study of the experience of the Bonelli publishing house in Italy, clarifies fundamental aspects of the comic strip as a product of the culture industry and a generational medium. By analysing the publishing experience of Bonelli, whose protagonists are called *Tex*, *Dylan Dog*, *Dampyr*, Frezza uses to the notion of *total quality*, to synthesize the efficiency of the processes and the quality of the products.

In the third and final part, we find a gallery of notes and portraits, from *Dick Tracy* to *Peanuts*, from Jacovitti to Chuck Jones.

Frezza's analysis is far-reaching in time and space, from the experience of the illustrations of the 17th and 18th century to the most recent and elaborate *manga* series; adding to the in-depth knowledge of the Italian reality an equally rich and complete view of the principal features of international production.

Frezza's is a multi-faceted research, which, while drawing from the sum of years of study and passion (a passion which transcends the lines of the text and captures the reader), also makes use of the tools of semiotics to reveal the working mechanisms of the sequences and those of psychology and anthropology to reveal the secrets of the ambiguous identities of the superheroes and those of sociology to establish the framework for the economic and cultural process of the comic strip industry, in a continuous and profitable comparison with the extensive reference literature.