Younger Readers and the Comic Book as a Site of Ambivalent Sound Symbolic Collaboration

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Abstract

Drawing upon a broad range of disciplines, such as literary theory, visual semiotics, pragmatics, sound symbolism and media studies, this article will introduce, explore and define the relationship between words and pictures in imagetexts. It will then apply these findings to the discourse concerning the use of expressive sound symbolic forms in comics, in order to elucidate the ambivalent relationship that these intrusive sensorial elements have with images as presented in comics and with their younger audiences. In particular, this article will show how the presence of 'lettering' (e.g. textual features) fosters the dynamicity of the genre but, at the same time, poses issues when it comes to defining its close amalgamation with the visual image. The dual main aim is, first, to show how the presence of onomatopoeia shapes the way we perceive the conventions of imagetexts, comics above all, and, secondly, to underline the importance of the younger reader as a 'self-regulating' protagonist in the process.

Keywords

onomatopoeia; younger readers; sound symbolism: comic book; multimodality.

Résumé

Cet article explore et analyse les relations entre les mots et les images dans les « imagetextes » à partir d'un large éventail de disciplines, comme la théorie littéraire, la sémiotique visuelle, la pragmatique, la symbolique des sons et les études médiatiques. Il entend appliquer ces observations à la représentation symbolique de l'expression des sons dans la bande dessinée, de façon à mieux comprendre la relation ambivalente que ces éléments sensoriels intrusifs entretiennent avec les images dans les ouvrages pour jeune public. L'article montre en particulier comment la présence du « lettrage » (les éléments textuels) renforce le dynamisme du genre, mais aussi les problèmes qu'il soulève lorsqu'il s'agit de l'amalgamer avec le visuel. L'objectif est double : montrer comment la présence des onomatopées informe la façon dont sont perçues conventionnellement les « imagetextes », en bande dessinée plus qu'ailleurs, et souligner l'importance du jeune lecteur qui est un protagoniste « auto-régulateur » dans ce processus.

Brief Introduction to the Text vs. Image Relationship

The relationship between verbal and textual elements can be described as an 'extraordinarily ancient problem' (Varnum & Gibbons 2001, 6) in the study of the arts and humanities. Indeed, even early writers—such as Plato, Horace and Aristotle—dedicated a copious amount of words to the examination of the possible differences, similarities and correlations between visuality and textuality. Even when attempts were made to combine text and images, as for example in German multimedial work from the 1400s, 'words and pictures stayed separate, refusing to mix, like oil and water' (McCloud 1993, 144). During the 18th century, an influential theoretical position on the text-image relationship was stated by the German writer and philosopher Gotthold Lessing (Varnum & Gibbons 2001, 9): while words need to be written in sequence, stated Lessing, images are perceived as a whole, 'apprehended all at once'. For Lessing, this dissimilarity is enough to enable him to argue that painting and poetry belong to two totally different worlds, and that any concurrence of the two might lead to either a painting which is a 'speaking picture' or a text which automatically turns into 'a freakish kind of writing' (Varnum & Gibbons 2001, 9). Images were strictly within the realm of visual arts—painting above all—while words were the core element of poems and narrative texts. The immediate, vivid and suggestive power of images was perceived as a serious threat, able 'to usurp the sacred domain of poetry' (Mitchell 1986, 108), while the symbolic aura of words could only be preserved by keeping images at a safe distance. The theoretical prohibition on combining the two modes in one text was strengthened by the general conviction that images were ontologically inferior to texts. Images, as 'natural signs' (Mitchell 1986, 79), were thought to be able to convey only 'a limited and relatively inferior sort of information, suitable for beings in a state of nature, such as children, illiterates, savages and animals' (Mitchell 1986, 79). The idea was that text was able to express a broader array of abstract and complicated ideas of a sort that images could only try to evoke. This disparity was seen as presenting insurmountable problems in attempting a successful conjunction of the two modes.

A New Multimodal Era at the Turn of the 20th Century

The early decades of the 20th century witnessed the birth of a constellation of new artistic and literary movements that overturned common perceptions of textuality and visuality, both in conjunction and as separate entities (Mitchell 1986, 47; Contini 1970, 222). New ideologies 'tried to breach the frontier between appearance and meaning' (McCloud 1993, 148), and did this through a continuous colliding of images and texts in various forms, staging what has been defined as the beginning of a tumultuous—and on-going—'war of signs' (Mitchell 1986, 47). See, for instance, the plethora of avant-garde movements blossoming during those years. The upshot of these tendencies was an intense proliferation of new multimodal media and genres, which started during the first decades of the 20th century, persisted during the post-wars era and still continues nowadays, fostering a prolific production of hybrid genres and persistent renovation of existing ones (Mitchell 1986, 55). Newspapers, advertisements, comics, graphic novels, children's books, picture books, films and television broadcastings—to name but a few—all host a mixture of visual and verbal elements and have radically revolutionised the way audiences receive and process information. One of the consequences of the introduction of these new genres was the sudden shift in the word-image balance: if after the invention of the printing press the word had somehow gained a greater importance, now the image was gaining public attention (Varnum & Gibbons 2001, 9). Images appeared to be 'more direct, attractive and seductive than written texts' (Varnum & Gibbons 2001, 9). Nevertheless, the shift was not exempted from the complexities involved in such a big revolution. As controversially asserted in 1957 by the American philosopher Suzanne Langer 'there are no happy marriages in art—only successful

rapes' (Langer 1957, 86)—a pugnacious statement that illustrates perfectly the 'sense of violence and violation associated with the conjunction of artistic media' at the time (Mitchell 1986, 55).

Defining the Relationship Between the Verbal and the Visual in Imagetexts

The concept of 'imagetext' was coined by Mitchell (1986) to refer to the 'interaction of verbal and visual codes in composite synthetic works, such as comics, storybooks, picture books, graphic novels, audio-visual texts etc.' (Mitchell 1986, 89). As such, imagetexts can be considered as a sub-category of multimodal texts, which are defined as works that 'present information across a variety of modes including visual images, design elements, written language, and other semiotic resources' (Jewitt and Kress 2003). In such texts the relationship between the written text and the images is considered central in the pursue of expressing meaning for the target audience. In the case of comics, there are various typographic and image-like elements used and these will be analysed later in this article. What all imagetexts have in common is their intrinsic multimodality, which entails sensorial effects coming from unexpected elements: the way in which the pictures are positioned and their shape, and the font and colour of the text convey semantic information as well (Oittinen 2008, 6), creating a multimodal environment filled with sensorial cues.

When discussing about multimodality, it is vital to cite the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), who have summarised very satisfactorily what 'multimodality' entails and how it should be perceived:

> A spoken text is never just verbal, but also visual, combining with modes such as facial expression, gesture, posture and other forms of self-presentation. A written text, similarly, involves more than language: it is written *on* something [...] on some material and is written *with* something [...]; with letters formed as types of font, influenced by aesthetic, psychological, pragmatic and other considerations (*Ibid*., 41).

It is fairly easy to define the verbal and the visual separately, but when it comes to describe them in collaboration, ideas and definitions get complex and challenging (Mitchell 1986, 116), as their co-relation seems to stubbornly refuse any attempts 'to make it a matter of neutral classification, a mere problem in taxonomy' (Mitchell 1986, 47). Efforts to distinctively outline the two seem to produce straightforward results, as one becomes instinctively—and rightly—aware that the mode of written language and that of visual image are ruled by 'two distinct logics' (Serafini 2010, 88): written words are defined by the logic of 'temporal sequence' (*Ibid*., 87) while visual images are ruled by the logic of 'spatiality, organized arrangements, and simultaneity' (Kress 2003). In text-based works 'meaning is derived from position in the temporal sequence' (Serafini 2010, 87) and is decoded through linguistic signs shared by a specific language community, whereas in visual images 'meaning is derived […] from spatial relations' (Serafini 2010, 87).

Sipe (2012, 5) suggests that the easiest and most natural way to talk about word-picture relationship is to use metaphors. Indeed, looking at the literature on the topic, metaphors drawn from other artistic disciplines are extremely common: theatrical performances, music sheets, cinematographic material and dance performances are the most cited ones. For example, words and images have been described as being involved in an ever-ending 'musical duet' and 'a rhythmic syncopation' (Sipe 2012, 5-6) in which they incessantly take turns in order to entertain the audience; as the 'silent dance of the seen and unseen' (McCloud 1993, 92); and as a theatrical stage, involving a 'multitude of voices' (Oittinen 2008, 16). It appears that the intrinsically multimodal nature of this peculiar opposition needs theoretical inter-disciplinarity in order to be fully explained and justified.

When it comes to defining those texts in which visuality and textuality work hand in hand, dissimilar genres and formats differ substantially in the way they exploit the combinative potentials of words and images. This is due to the fact that—depending on media, format or genre—the author's use of the different diegetic elements and, consequently, the audience's expectations, in terms of how these elements are displayed, vary enormously. Thus, in certain contexts, readers-viewers expect images to simply replicate, illustrate and complement in visual form what the text is expressing (Wartenberg 2012, 90). For example, in some picture books there is a clear 'asymmetry' (*Ibid*.) between pictures and text. In this format, pictures act as accompaniment to the text, often simply representing visually what the text is describing and only occasionally adding secondary meanings—and even when they do, they still depend on the textual in order to 'make sense' or exist. Divergent is the text-image connection within other media. In comics, for instance, the image-text correlation is a necessary condition for the format to even exist, as images and texts are given 'equal ontological priority in determining the story-world the comic creates and in providing readers-viewers with the enjoyment they get from the comic' (Wartenberg 2012, 101)—hence sharing an effective 'symbiotic relationship' (Khordoc 2001, 172).

The debate concerning the reception, perception and decoding of visuality and textuality in imagetexts is still lively and on-going. While it is true on one level that both images and texts in imagetexts are perceived in the same way—that is visually, through sight—it is also accurate to assert that the two are decoded in different moments, even when so closely juxtaposed. This thesis is supported by scientific studies that provide evidence 'that different parts of the brain are responsible for language and visuo-spatial input respectively' (Hudson-Hick 2012, 136). In the case of comics, in particular, the medium hosts an almost complete blending of images and texts—a feature that might ultimately convince its readers to assume that all of its elements should be viewed as components of the visual image; to the clear detriment of the textual parts, which effectively represent a pivotal aspect of the medium, as they provide its characters with voice, movements and, eventually, verisimilitude. On this view, it would be acceptable to state that in comics all text is, in principle, an image or 'a visual image of a word' (Wartenberg 2012, 88), and operates as such. Nevertheless, affirming that the text itself ceases to exist is, at any rate, erroneous. Despite not being 'ontologically isolated from the comics' pictorial elements, as it happens in illustrated books, newspapers or captioned single-panel cartoons' (Hudson-Hick 2012, 137), the comic's text still exists and, at the very least, one 'cannot seemingly read text at the same time one looks at an accompanying picture' (*Ibid*. 136). Ultimately, 'language is built from a limited set of discrete minimal units, while visual signification is continuous and infinitely gradated' (Miodrag 2013, 8) hence the differences are undeniable.

Key to the understanding of the image-text relationship in imagetexts is to regard it as a fluid spectrum of different degrees of amalgamation that vary according to genre, format and medium rather than a straight-up 'confrontation' between the textual and the visual (Groensteen 2007, 8). Nevertheless, there is indeed an unstable rapport and a power shift between the two codes, which try to steal the spotlight from each other in order to gain the reader's attention and only momentarily seem to cohabit peacefully. As such, even visual and verbal modes that are in close proximity or which, supposedly, are working 'in collaboration' might each convey separate nuances to the reader/receiver (Kess & Van Leeuwen 2006, 20). This is precisely what isolates the imagetext as being part of an individual multimodal genre, characterised by an unreachable—yet tantalising—blend of visuality and textuality (Duncan & Smith 2009, 145), each processed by the readers/viewers in two different mental moments and continuously vying for attention.

Reading the Imagetext: The Self-Regulating Reader

As multimodal texts proliferated, scholars of linguistics were forced to re-think their approaches in order to accommodate the new phenomena. New ideas and theories emerged to fill the void—semiotics being at the forefront. As scholars specialised in the study of meaning-making, semioticians have produced various pivotal theories on the dynamics involved in the text-image relationship (Sipe 2012, 5).

While scholars experienced a need to create new theories in order to mirror these new, emerging inter-systemic, more complex texts, readers also had to adapt to the abundance of signs at their disposal. Ultimately, 'images and texts mean things because readers bring experiences and understandings of images, language and the world' to them when reading (*Ibid*.). In such a multimodal and sensorial environment, the role of the audience becomes central. In addition to providing multiple levels of meaning and having the power to 'invite readings on different levels by all ages' (Beckett 2012, 2), the co-presence of verbal and visual elements fastened within the intrinsic hybridity of imagetexts fosters a continuous evolution in terms of how the genre updates itself and how it speaks to its readers. Because of the different levels of meaning that continuously fight for attention, the reader is the centre of this 'semiotic conflict', acting as the individual who decides what to do with the different inputs.

It is no coincidence that many books targeted at children are of a multimodal nature. As well as taking sensuous pleasure and 'spontaneous delight in the colours and textures of pictures' (Nodelman 2008, 12), children seem to enjoy the experimental freedom offered by imagetexts. Reading the imagery requires experience and allows 'acquisition at the viewer's pace' (Eisner 2008, 69). During the continuous movement between written language and images in the development of comprehension, the reader is often required to fill the gaps between the two as desired (Kabuto 2013, 14). An illuminating example of this is the unconscious, internal provision of sound and action in support of the images (Eisner 2008, 69), what Petersen (2007, 579) defines as 'sub-vocalisation'. Comics, in particular, easily prompt their readers' 'natural habit of imagining the sound through inaudible speech movements of the lips and throat' (Petersen 2007, 579). This practice establishes self-regulating 'spectators' who are basically performing the comic for themselves, 'just as a ventriloquist might bring a voice to a puppet' (Petersen 2007, 579), creating a dynamic presence that fosters creativity and participation.

In summary, imagetexts provide the experienced and less-experienced reader with various opportunities to pro-actively participate in the creation of, not only meaning—through the offering of different sensorial elements and inputs—but also actions and sounds. This is the peculiar characteristic that separates, in terms of reading experience, text-only books from imagetexts: the great power given to their readers. The next section will introduce the discourse surrounding the use of lettering in comics, which, in turn, will lead to the introduction of the way sound symbolic forms are presented to the reader.

Lettering in Comics: Function and Use

The term 'lettering' refers to both the creation of new typefaces with a particular shape and design and, by extension, to their positioning within the visual images of a narrated story (Ficarra 2012, 41). The term 'letterer' denotes a professional responsible for both the drawing and the placing of 'balloons, captions, sound effects, display lettering, titles, signs and logos' (Chiarello & Klein 2004, 83), and is often allowed to design new typefaces, so as to fit his or her personal style (Lupton 2004, 74). The process has had a high impact on the articulateness of those imagetexts that require textuality in support of the images, as 'it brings

the text to a direct involvement towards the expressivity of the text itself' (Eisner 2008, 2). As such, the practice of lettering is widely used in comics (McCloud 1993, 9). To this end, Thomas (2000) explains that 'lettering is to comic books what back-up singers are to music: often over-looked, but if done wrong, it's noticed in a bad way'. The process has not changed since the 1930s, as most letterers still work by hand, although since the early 1990s there has been a growing demand for digital lettering, and nowadays letterers and artists tend to work by mixing handwriting and computer-based lettering (Thomas 2000).

As imagetexts become more and more hybridised, they often acquire and experiment with stratagems used in other cognate formats, including lettering (Sipe 2011, 249). This being the case, lettering is slowly becoming a commonly used and generally relevant practice, not only for comics, but also for imagetexts in general. See, for example, the increasing use of comic-like lettering in picture books for young readers set out as diaries written by fictitious young protagonists—a sub-genre that has witnessed a gradual and growing interest in the last decade. Successful series such as 'Diary of a Wimpy Kid' (Kinney 2007), 'Big Nate' (Peirce, 2010), 'Dork Diaries' (Russell, 2011), 'Timmy Failure' (Pastis 2013) and 'Middle School' (Patterson, 2014) borrowed the use of lettering from comics—a genre that has made use of the device ever since its early days at the start of the 20th century—with the aim of enhancing the eloquence of the images accompanying the text (and vice versa).

In all these genres, lettering is mainly used to 'convey imagined imaginary sounds' (Hague 2014, 64), such as dialogues, on-going and iconic sounds (onomatopoeias, interjections) and narration (through captions, pictorial elements, etc.). The different varieties of lettering designs and styles 'speak of an on-going struggle to capture the very essence of sound' (McCloud 1993, 134), with the final aim of allowing the audience to 'become immersed in the narrative experience to a greater degree' (Petersen 2007, 578). So as to better understand the motivations behind the use of lettering in imagetexts and the nature of the adjunction of textual features to pictorial elements, in the next section I will offer a thorough analysis of how the comic format has managed to successfully implement and exploit the sonic potential of letters immersed in visual images.

Perceiving the Audial Through the Visual in Comics

After sight, 'hearing is the sense that has most concerned scholars writing on comics' (Hague 2014, 63). It is undoubtedly thanks to the words—and, consequently, the perceived sounds suggested by the letters in sequence—if comics secure 'temporal substance' (Chmielewska 2011; translation mine). Comics are indeed a silent medium, and when we read them there are no audial inputs of any kind. Nevertheless, in their own way, comics can be very raucous. There is an 'implied cacophony that is represented upon the comic's pages through visual forms such as onomatopoeic words, word balloons, and similar devices' (Hague 2014, 63), that gives us the impression that we can actually hear with our eyeballs. This kind of stratagem has become a cliché, to the point that 'journalists find it irresistible to include 'pow!, blam!' and the like in headlines when writing about comics' (Hague 2014, 64). The format seems to provide sounds that are only imagined and not actually perceived with the human organ that is supposedly in charge of that sense. Don Ihde calls it 'auditory imagination' (*Ibid*., 65). In other words, the process is triggering a synesthetic experience for the reader. Before delving into the nature of this synesthetic reception, it is fundamental to understand how in practice comics make use of text in order to represent actions, sounds and meaning. In this respect, Wartenberg (2012, 97-99) suggests that there are four ways in which text functions in a comic book:

(1) <u>Text-balloon</u>: 'this is the symbol that occurs within the pictorial space created by the frame of a comic that indicates the presence of a more or less enclosed space, generally within the frame of a comic' (Wartenberg 2012, 97). That space contains linguistic elements that are understood as the words that a character is saying, whispering or thinking.

(2) <u>Narration or commentary</u>: text present in captions preceding the image that explain and comment the scene depicted.

(3) <u>Pictorial use</u>: Any text within the image that is not an onomatopoeia or a text-balloon. See road signs, shops' names, posters, etc.

(4) <u>Sound Symbolic/Iconic forms</u> (both sonic and non-sonic events): 'Neither pure linguistic nor pictorial', they represent the 'translation of sensorial features of the depicted world of comics into visual form' (Wartenberg 2012, 99). Often used to represent 'temporally extended processes' (Wartenberg 2012, 100), they bring dynamicity to the page of the comic book.

While text-balloons and narration text are physically separated from the image—to some extent still owning a textual status—in the case of intrusive pictorial elements and sound symbolic forms the text is not confined within an only-text border and is invading the actual image. This is what Groensteen calls 'simultaneous mobilization of […] codes' (2007, 6), which, in turn, suggests that the comic book should be seen as a system. This system is made up of a combination of different codes, both visual and discursive (Groensteen, 2007, 6) and this is exactly where the comic book gives its best in terms of multimodality. The use of sonic elements represents an 'alternative and unique representational system' (Wartenberg 2012, 100), a clever stratagem to make up for the lack of duration—in an effort to replicate what films already naturally do, 'as temporally extended objects' (Wartenberg 2012, 100). Unable to function as films, comics make up for the lack of audial features by offering a synesthetic experience to the reader. Doing this they 'try to be similar to film but distance themselves from static pictorial art such as paintings, since they deliberately avoid such symbolic means of representation' (Wartenberg 2012, 100), creating a distinct sensorial art.

The next section will attempt to bring together all of the theory proposed thus far and show how sound symbolic forms fit within the text-image rapport proposed at the beginning of the paper and how their presence fosters a collaborative text-image rapport as experienced by the self-regulating readers.

The Visualisation of Senses as a Site for a Collaborative Text-Image Rapport

Visual sounds perfectly represent one of the rare cases in which textuality and visuality have learnt—at least momentarily—to cohabit peacefully, rather than standing in opposition to each other. Able to convey sound to 'undoubtedly a greater degree than any other linguistic message in comics' (Khordoc 2001, 169), sound symbolic forms carry a meaning 'that is not found only in the actual inscription but, most importantly, in their graphic representation, as they are painted directly onto the image, and in fact, are a part of it' (Khordoc 2001, 169). The different letters forming iconic words and their intense graphical nature contribute to the association of the word with a particular meaning, working as both text and image: the denoted meaning brought by the text is still present but, unlike text-balloons or captions (apart from rare exceptions), it enhances its expressivity through graphical features that resemble an image to all intents and purposes. The size, colour, type of font and the general graphical intensity of the onomatopoeia will thus suggest different paralinguistic properties: for instance, a bigger font will evoke a louder noise, while a 'boom!'

written in red will amplify its impact through chromatic eloquence. These are all visual symbolisms, which the reader learns to decode, and which are processed thanks to 'iconic conventions' (Morgana 2003, 169; translation mine) established between the writer, the genre and its audience. Ultimately, a successful graphic onomatopoeia is able to suggest, with higher intensity and unlike its sole design, real sensations and does this through two main factors: the evoked sound (through textuality) and the logo (through visuality) (Ficarra 2012, 44). In summary, in the case of comics, lettering is not the simple transposition of a spoken dialogue but, rather, a representation of a 'drawn dialogue', in which the visual reading is the medium of its enunciation, unquestionably mimicking image-like qualities (*Ibid*.). Once again, the readers are given most of the power during the process—by self-regulating their reading process and 'absorbing' the lettering on show in order to eventually create a personal onomatopoeic performance.

The power of this text-image collaboration is also shown by the fact that onomatopoeias often manage to express senses that go beyond the sonic, assaulting the realm of movement and olfaction (Pellitteri 1998, 129) or the so-called 'non-sensory lettering' (Duncan & Smith 2009, 157), used to express feelings and thoughts. While in some cases lettering seem to be able to—at least iconically—represent sonic inputs, comics can also stage and suggest senses, such as smell or movement, that challenge and push the symbolic power of words and their graphic representation. In this case, senses cannot even be subvocalised as happens with sounds, but are only evoked, forcing the reader to go beyond the sonic and to 'see' visual smells, almost creating a 'virtual reality' (Pellitteri 1998, 137; translation mine). Unable to rely on the sonic iconicity of phonemes when devising non-sonic representations, comic artists rely heavily on the graphical features of graphemes, establishing a mutually beneficial text-image bond. For example, the grapheme ‹z› commonly recurs in onomatopoeias conveying movement (e.g. ‹zip›, ‹zap›, ‹zow›, ‹zing›). The only plausible reason for this is the actual appearance of that particular letter, formed through the straight stroke of three lines, one after the other, in a sudden movement of the pencil—thus being the perfect graphical candidate to symbolise rapidity in motion.

To sum up, the cooperation shown by text and images when trying to convey sensorial features is remarkable, as the devices used concurrently exploit attributes coming from both textuality and visuality. Still, it is not always about peaceful co-operation: the text-image relationship still remains fluid and mutable. There are times when, even in the case of onomatopoeias, the text-image pacific cohabitation momentarily malfunctions and the self-regulating reader struggles to make sense of all the inputs received in a meaningful way. The next section will try to expound on those instances in which onomatopoeias engage in an ambivalent and antagonistic relationship with the image.

Visualisations of Senses as Antagonistic and Censoring Devices

Despite the fact that onomatopoeias 'may make it slightly more difficult to process visual information and to work out what is going on' (Hague 2014, 65), they are not believed to defocus the mind as quickly and disruptively as perceived noises can. So, from a perceptive point of view, onomatopoeias are not considered to disturb the reading flow, particularly when taking into account that they are part of the reading flow while noises are not. Nevertheless, there are other ways in which onomatopoeias can situate themselves in an antagonist relationship with the visual image, creating pivotal visual moments where the younger reader, in particular, is faced with unexpected reading decisions.

Sound symbolic forms seem to suit comic books perfectly—they satisfy the comic book's need for ludic devices aimed at amusing the audience, and do this with simplistic phonosymbolic means—and take

advantage of young readers' tendency to play with language. Younger readers might not understand complicated syntax, but they can grasp the immediacy of these iconic words thanks to their reliance on basic and instinctive phonosymbolic patterns. 'As newcomers to the sounds and rhythms of their native tongues, children have an intense awareness of and sensual relationship with language' (Lathey 2010, 204) and can instinctively 'play' with it and appreciate any device that does so.

Sonic events, in particular, perform a similar but emphasised role in comics. Curiously enough, onomatopoeias began to be associated with comics thanks to a television show rather than a comic book (Duncan & Smith 2009, 156). The Batman cartoon series was broadcast in the United States and subsequently became an international success in the 1960s. Onomatopoeia in Batman is a prime example of the way imagetexts control the perceptions of children. The device is employed at strategic moments that, if viewed without such effects, might be deemed unsuitable for children. For example, when Batman punches an enemy, a big stylised 'pow!' or a 'zowie!' appears on-screen (Duncan & Smith 2009, 156). The text distracts from, and sometimes literally obscures, the violence of the narrative, replacing it with humoristic, simplistic and nonsensical interjections that have little relevance to the sound of a punch, let alone to how it might feel to receive it. That the device is mainly used in conjunction with noises suggests that it is used as a means to censor the violence of the actions it appears to represent. By means of visual graphics, onomatopoeia makes the viewer concentrate on the visuality and sensuality of the picture rather than the action itself, and therefore lowers the seriousness of the violent act and, as a matter of fact, it places itself in an antagonist relationship with the image. The playful text inserted onto the scene dampens the violent tone of the image so that the authors can insert violent scenes and justify them to young audiences by onomatopoeic cartoons.

The same censoring concept can be applied to comics. By means of 'verbal art', the reader is forced to concentrate on the stylistic and sonic aspect of the scene, rather than the scene itself, which almost loses credibility in favour of a more humorous and carefree reading. Onomatopoeias do provide the image with a more realistic, sonic, amusing and reassuring environment, thus giving importance to the scene taking place, but they also take power away from it by forcing verbal text into the picture and changing the way the image would have been perceived if the text were not there.

Conclusions

This article has shown that sensorial cues play a central role in the development of media that make use of both visual and verbal elements. When it comes to imagetexts, their relationship is even more crucial, as it is central to the understanding of the events taking place. Words provide the image with properties that it would not otherwise have, adding a new parallel dimension to the text and offering multiple readings and great diegetic power to the audience. In comics, in particular, the almost total amalgamation of the two plays a pivotal role in the creation of meaning: speech balloons make up for the lack of sound, motion lines extend images temporally, and narrative captions are used to introduce narrators external to the story. Most importantly, 'the ability to create the illusion of sound through visual devices is unique to comics. Theatre and cinema do not need to create the illusion, as actual sound is integral to these art forms' (Khordoc 2001, 173). In literature, 'the illusion of sound is rather limited as it is represented mainly through narration' (*Ibid*.). In the case of comics, however, 'they are fundamental to understand the complex reading process required of comics readers' (*Ibid*.).

The sound symbolic form is part of those established conventions that make the comic a particular,

multimodal and special genre of its own. It gives to the pictures sonic values that they would otherwise lack and it places itself between the verbal and the visual—it is a word, despite being often of interjectional origin, but it is also part of an image. It is stylised according to the type of sound it represents and is fully integrated with the pictorial element, using the graphic aspect of a word to compensate for the absence of sound. By varying the thickness, shape or colour of the letters, the word is at the same time a conveyer of beyond-sonic qualities and also graphically bonded to the image, becoming both a verbal and pictorial element. As such, onomatopoeias make comics a unique genre since they enhance the verbal/visual ambivalence that differentiates the format from any other media. Finally, I have discussed how the onomatopoeia is used in comics because its immediacy easily holds the attention of younger readers, encouraging their playful engagement with language through its experimental and adaptive nature and fostering a self-regulating experience that revolves around the interpretation of all the visual and textual cues provided.

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