



## *Migrating arts. Of comics, Italian culture & Blog&Nuvole*

(Lucia Saetta e Cristina Vannini Parenti (a cura di),  
*Blog & Nuvole. Un incontro tra la scrittura della rete e l'arte del fumetto*,  
Bologna, Comma 22, 2009.  
< <http://blognuvole.splinder.com> >

by Nicoletta Vallorani

Migration is a word that can be variously inflected. And moving through land is not different than crossing symbolic borders: only a bit more complicated, because it implies following landmarks that are not always so visible and/or readable, mysterious footsteps that may indicate the visit of an unwanted guest. As in the story of Barbara Garlaschelli and Jacopo Vecchio ("Orma"), you never know what may happen when a stranger crosses your threshold but at the same time the only way to find it out is to wait for his next visit.

This is only one of the very short illustrated stories collected in the book/catalogue edited by Lucia Saetta and Cristina Vannini Parenti, and published by Comma 22. On the whole, the texts are 35, and all amazingly brilliant. The volume in itself results from a very unusual and praiseworthy artistic project that deserves attention, and was started and carried out by Blog&Nuvole (Blog&Balloons). As it is easily understood, the project deals with graphic novels as art.

This is virgin territory, particularly in Italy. During the prize-giving ceremony, Franco Cologni – while describing his first meeting with Lucia Saetta and Cristina Vannini Parenti – quite sincerely said that he couldn't really see how the Foundation he chairs was related to a project concerning comics. He also confessed that it took him time to understand, and like very much, the project. And he did it, also in the light of bits and fragments of his personal experience, reconstructing his occasional readings of the adventures of a quite famous and very much loved character of Italian comics, namely *Il signor Bonaventura*, a funny guy going around with a very big check under his arm.

This very personal memory can function as a bridge and a mediation to understand how such an unusual and praiseworthy project succeeded in getting to a very happy end in a cultural context where comics and graphic novels are considered, at their best, as kid's stuff. Cologni's mentioned is fully coherent with Fausto Colombo's



main reference in his introduction to the prize-giving ceremony: if Cologni reminded Sergio Tofano and his comic strips for *Corriere dei Piccoli*, Colombo fondly refers to *Il grande Blek*, a very lucky series created by Sinchetto, Guzzon and Sartoris, and loosely dealing with the adventures of a sturdy, blonde trapper. The series was widely circulated in Italy among teenagers in the late 50s. It was read mostly in secret, precisely because it was not literature. Apparently this by no means discouraged the wide audience who clearly perceived the transgression implied in their behaviour, while at the same time cultivating a faint feeling of guilt for probably damaging their literary high-brow education. This feeling resulted from the comics being a hybrid combining words and images, therefore automatically meant for weak readers.

The difficult relationship of comics to other form of literacy has interfered with the growth and articulation of an official tradition, not only Italy – where the 9<sup>th</sup> art has been widely ignored so far – but also abroad. Being a hybrid genre, comic art results at odds with the “ideology of purity” that has dominated the Western approach to aesthetics and its labels both in criticism and in the market. Only recently comics have been granted greater attention, and they have gained an increased status as an expressive medium, though they still posit problems of ranking in academic research and criticism.

This results in part from their basic features. Strictly speaking, they cannot even be considered a genre, in that they absorb and traverse many different genres. Comic art is, under many respects and in the Italian culture in particular, an unedited hybrid. It is neither familiar nor known. Though having quite a long hidden tradition abroad, it build itself as virgin territory, a still unmapped land where one can only move tentatively and in any case suspiciously. Because, it is said, this is not art. At its best, it is popular culture. And this definition, whatever may be said about the fortune of Manzoni as a popular writer, has never been a good starting point for any artistic project in Italy.

Against all odds, Lucia Saetta & Cristina Vannini Parenti, started the project of *Blog&Nuvole* in August 2008 and they completed it 9 months later. It was a birth, under many respects, and it required the time needed for any birth. The first step was the creation of a blog by Salvatore Mulliri – Aquatarkus, on *Splinder*. The choice was meaningful in itself. It automatically selected a specific audience for the project, profiting of the natural internationalization favoured by the web. Saetta & Vannini Parenti were probably aware of the slightly different status comics do have abroad. Though being still in search of legitimization, comics have there a wider, more skilled public, and a greater amount of academic critical assessment is being produced. Very slowly, the notion that comics are unworthy of serious investigation has given way to a deeper curiosity about comics as artefacts, commodities, codes devices, mirrors, polemics, puzzles and pedagogical tools. And there has been a sufficient accumulation of well-crafted work to develop a growing audience, a more refined taste and much critical attention.

Therefore, for Saetta and Vannini Parenti, the point was how to arise interest in the Italian cultural establishment and how to articulate a tradition that could support an experience of this kind. I think these were the main issues leading Saetta and Vannini Parenti to select the partner of their project. Fausto Colombo, who has been involved



even in its starting steps, is a Professor of Theories & Techniques of the Media at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano, and he chairs the OssCom (Research Centre on media and Communication). Not only he knows what we mean when we speak of comics, but he is also fully aware of the Italian state of the art on the background of the international context.

The other partners of the project are even more meaningful. The first of them, the Fondazione Cologni dei Mestieri d'Arte, is an unusual institution, born from the skills, intuition, imagination and stubbornness of Franco Cologni in 1995. The aims of the Foundation are clearly declared in a meaningful passage of the elegant and well-crafted presentation leaflet: "Intuition of the mind and intelligence of the hand do not live simply on memories, or on lessons learnt by heart. They need a specific propellant, a force that has no equals. Passion". Apparently Franco Cologni, who is the founder and president of the Foundation, is used to more "traditional" arts. Nevertheless he can understand passion, evidently, and at least in this specific contingency he was open-minded enough to take the challenge posed by something totally new in the Italian context. More used to the so-to-speak unconventional forms of art seems to be Davide Rampello, President of La Triennale di Milano. He provided a support that gave to the project an unusual visibility and granted a delightful, perfectly planned hospitality to the final steps of the project. Beppe Calzolari (Head of the Scuola del fumetto) and Cesare Fumagalli (General Secretary of Confartigianato Imprese) showed equal enthusiasm and admiration for the project, and were ready to admit that they were totally amazed by the results produced in terms of both quality and number. All the partners cooperated in introducing the book/catalogue, that was presented on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009 in the Salone d'Onore (Triennale di Milano), on prize-giving day.

The project in fact implied a contest that was intended to bring to light the energy and ferment of contemporary comics. Lucia Saetta, in her introduction to the volume, defines it as "a multi-vocal project": a wide participation was essential, and not easy to obtain in a field where most of what is produced is marginal and invisible. So the web provided the best possible channel for launching a contest that combined authors of literary texts and graphic novel artists. "We started from the idea – states Cristina Vannini Parenti – that we could create a bridge between two brightly illuminated spots in the web: a certain kind of writing and the art of visualizing it with an eye to innovation and a genuine feeling for art". Five thematic areas were selected, and they were: The gallery of time, In the mirror, Soul objects, Scalene stories, Oneirics.

And the contest was launched to the web. Authors were invited to send very short stories. Cartoonists then would volunteer to make them into very short graphic novels. Among the 200 texts received, 35 were illustrated and collected in the catalogue. And 5 were considered the best "fusion" of visions and images and they won: "I ragni non sono previsti tra gli animali da amare" (Synesius & Elena Miele), "La casa di Rebecca" (Luigi di Cicco & Filippo Paris), "Ventesimo frammento. Molto Romantico" (Gaetano Vergara & Eugenia Monti), "Centro Studi Strane Poltiglie" (Artur Scantini & Lucho Villani), "Sed tantum dic verbo" (Cubber & Hannes Pasqualini). They were designated by a highly qualified committee (Carlo Ambrosini, Franco Cologni, Fausto Colombo, Gianluca



Costantini, Flaviano Fillo, Francesco Forlani, Marcello Jori, Anna Mallamo and Zena Roncada), whose members combined different skills, competences, age-levels and artistic specializations. When commenting on their experience, they exhibited a shared amazement at the quality of the results and a doubtless enthusiasm for both the idea and the way in which it was put into practice. The borderless arena of the web, combined with the originality of the project, amounted to the creation of a huge reservoir of ideas, fed by the imagination of artists that cooperated not on the ground of their mutual familiarity, but on a shared project that they happened to share taking part into a contest.

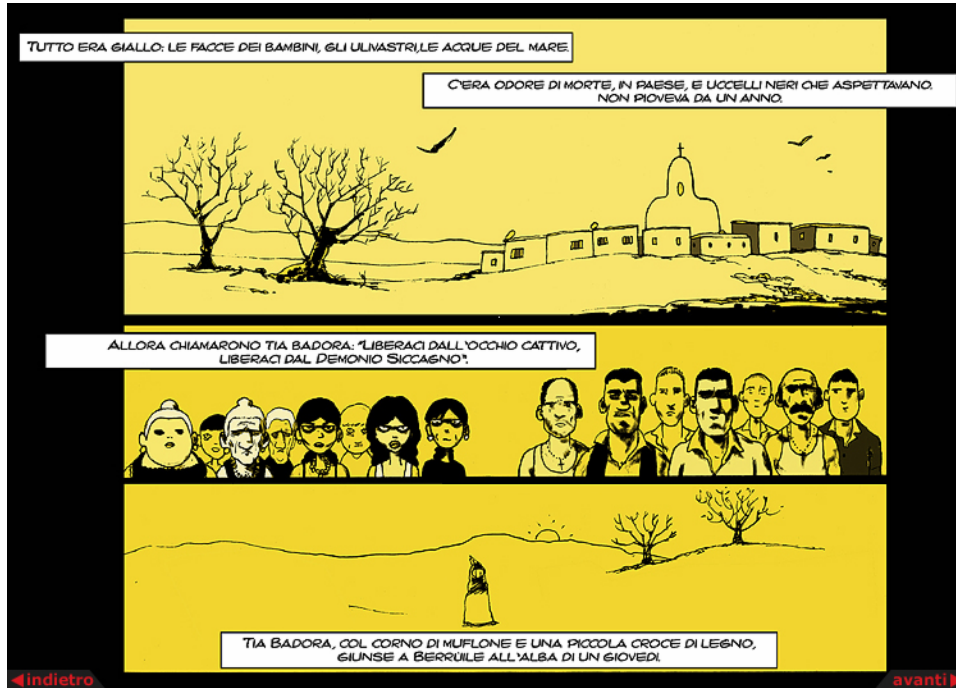
In his introduction to the volume, Davide Rampello writes that “Blog&Nuvole is about a love story. An impossible love story between the words that bloggers commit to the web and the signs that cartoonists draw on paper, poised between graphic and illustration, painting and cinema”. And I would add something more, a farther kind of hybridity and migration fully evident in “Tia Badora”, a story by Thomas Bires (drawings), Birambai (text and voice off) , Gavino Murgia (music) and Ondalab – Davide Onnis (video; <<http://blognuvole.splinder.com/tag/~+fuori+concorso+~>>). “Tia Badora” is worth much more than a glance, also because it refers of a further kind of migration: from literature, to literature and drawing, to literature, drawing, music and moving image. The work is a jewel and it effectively testifies of an eclectic art.

And it is a threshold: it is only to be hoped that this threshold is soon crossed by more artists and cultural institutions, both in the Italian context and abroad.

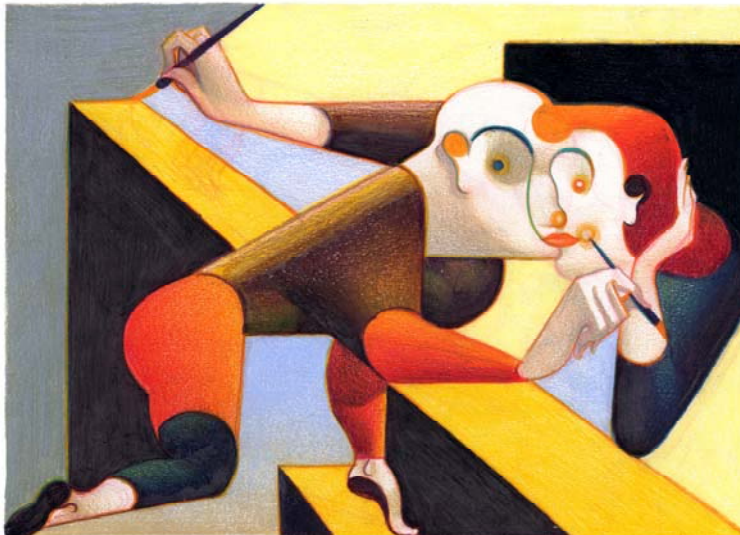
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Nicoletta Vallorani  
Università degli Studi di Milano

[nicoletta.vallorani@unimi.it](mailto:nicoletta.vallorani@unimi.it)



Bires



Illusion Mattotti