

Volume 41
issue 2 / 2022

Contracampo e-ISSN 2238-2577
Niterói (RJ), 41 (2)
may/2022-aug/2022

Contracampo – Brazilian Journal of Communication is a quarterly publication of the Graduate Programme in Communication Studies (PPGCOM) at Fluminense Federal University (UFF). It aims to contribute to critical reflection within the field of Media Studies, being a space for dissemination of research and scientific thought.

Phenomenology of representation in comics, or, how to represent Park Bench

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TO REFERENCE THIS ARTICLE, PLEASE USE THE FOLLOWING CITATION:

Bittencourt, Danilo; Silva, André Luiz Souza da. (2022). Phenomenology of representation in comics, or, how to represent Park Bench. *Contracampo* – Brazilian Journal of Communication, v. 41, n. 2.

Submitted on: 01/25/2022. Reviewer A: 03/27/2022; Reviewer B: 06/13/2022; Reviewer A: 07/08/2022; Reviewer B: 07/18/2022. Accepted: 07/20/2022.

DOI – <http://dx.doi.org/10.22409/contracampo.v41i2.52968>

Abstract

This article aims at reflecting on representation in comics drawing from a phenomenological perspective. It also proposes theoretical subsidies to those researchers interested in comics, their production and reception as objects of study, willing to examine them as an aesthetic-communicational phenomenon capable of instigating in their readers the desire of representing, in tandem with the work of art, aspects of empirical reality. To such end, we enumerate some guiding principles for the analysis based upon phenomenological aesthetic theories, especially those of Mikel Dufrenne's (1973; 2015) and Wolfgang Iser's (1978; 1989; 2000), and we take as empirical corpus, as demonstrative of our theoretical incursion, the comic book *Park Bench*, authored by the French artist Christophe Chabou  .

Keywords

Communication; Comics; Phenomenology; Representation; Aesthetics.

Introduction: representation as aesthetic sensitivity

Incursions that take the idea of representation — that is, the identification of elements and actions, either expressed or staged, as pieces corresponding in a greater or lesser extent to objects found in reality — as a theme of analysis are recurrent in comics-related academic literature. They are inquiries, however, mainly centered on the representation in a restricted manner of this or that historical event, this or that culture, this or that social or ethnic stratum (Ayaka & Hague, 2015). Works devoted not to the representation of something but to *representation itself*, on the other hand, are scarce — those taking representation as a specific object of study, despite its inherently transitive character and, therefore, always eager for one or more objects to represent. The present article seeks to contribute to this barely explored domain, and the frameworks we propose, as well as the analysis we conduct, seek to bring into relief the act of representing in place of what is represented.

Our object, therefore, consists in: *proposing a concise framework for the analysis of representation in comics*, by putting it to the test through a copy of French comic book artist Christophe Chabouté's work of art *Park Bench* (2018); and, by means of a brief phenomenological analysis of such empirical corpus, *elucidating the act of representing through a comic*. Bearing in mind that under this methodological perspective, such an act reveals itself not only throughout the immanence of the work, let alone in its social character, but within the intersection between the comic and its reader, within the relationship which such intersection establishes between the fictional and the living worlds. Our hypothesis is that, *due to its predominantly aesthetic nature, representation in comic books tends to correspond more to the creative faculties of the artist and the reader than to a supposed "portrait" of the represented reality, or mimesis; however, this does not negate the enlightening potential or epistemological value of artistic representation*.

If discussions concerning representation as a phenomenon are scarce in this domain, the same cannot be claimed when the field of Communication and Aesthetics are brought into consideration in a broader sense, hence we can draw valuable contributions. In this sense, we have opted for approaches originating from the phenomenological school, and we have done so for at least two reasons: first, because they are above everything spectator-/reader-centered, more adherent as such to the field of studies on reception, with which we are acquainted; secondly, because they prioritize sensitive and subjective aspects of such reception, albeit without disregarding those of cognitive-intellectual profile. Be that as it may, both the receptional-phenomenological and the subjective-sensitive perspectives are also barely recurrent in comics studies, and for this very reason, they call out for inquiry (Pizzino, 2020, p. 14).

With the term "representation," we seek to refer to what is commonly referred to as *mimesis* in aesthetics. However, we do not mean *mimesis* as a perfect imitation (or intended perfect imitation) that merely reflects or copies the reality of things in the world. Instead, we refer to *mimesis* as a reference, a representation of something that exists outside the artwork but only exists as such — as an aesthetic object — by being within, by being an inseparable part of a specific artwork that gives it materiality and provides a medium for the aesthetic experience, creating a world within the particular narrative (Kukkonen, 2013, p. 43-44, our translation) — an artwork in the form of comic books.

Without such prior conceptual delineation, the theme of representation becomes outreaching broad; it has unfoldments in Sociology, Politics, Communication, and Philosophy — going beyond the field of Aesthetics and attaining such domains as those of Philosophy of Mind, as well as Epistemology (Ishiguro, 1994). The importance of the theme derives righteously from such a broad array of unfoldments, out of descriptive aspects of social and psychological life, going through those properly utilitarian, enabled to interfere effectively in the social field all the way up to that which is dearest to us: representation as aesthetic sensitivity.

Among phenomenological theories that touch upon the theme of representation from an

aesthetic perspective, we have selected Wolfgang Iser's (1978; 1989; 2000) and Mikel Duffrene's (1973; 2015), as well as brought into consideration a review of phenomenological literature devoted to the theme of representation authored by John Brough (2010). Phenomenological theories of representation, although conceived in view of the artistic phenomenon as a whole, often reflect distinctive aspects of specific arts, notably those of literature and visual arts. Therefore, it is necessary that a work dwelling upon representation in comics should define under which particular conditions representations occur in a such specific medium, resorting thus to an appropriate theoretical framework, that is to say, that pertaining specifically to comics, even if approaches of semiotic, narratological, or cognitive, rather than of a properly phenomenological character, are prevalent in it (Fresnault-Deruelle, 1973; Kukkonen, 2013; Groensteen, 2015; Barbieri, 2017, 2018).

Phenomenology of representation: performative act, imagination, and aesthetic experience

If fiction in comics were merely a reflection of our empirical reality, we would not be capable of detaching the former from the latter — but we are. On the other hand, if nothing in fiction somehow depicted the living world, we would not be able to interlink with each other: it would not be possible to recognize actions, situations, landscapes, and characters by means of associating them with real counterparts; in addition, it would not be possible to identify ourselves with ambiances, atmospheres, perceiving in them something familiar or intimate. Herein lies the problem of representation in comics and generally in arts: the relationship between the staged and the living world (*Lebenswelt*¹), the differences and similarities arising from such encounter/clash rendered possible by means of aesthetic experience.

John Brough (2010), a scholar devoted to the study, translation, and organization of Edmund Husserl's writings, while reviewing the major aesthetic theories of representation of phenomenological provenance, observes that the school's founder had already comprehended that the universe staged by works of art is characterized as a "world apart", detached from that which we intuitively regard as "the real". Such conception pertains to the perception the individual has when facing a work of art, considering that the understanding that a certain object is an artistic object depends, to a large extent, on the observer's ability to separate it from empirical reality, from the lifeworld. The philosophical school founded by Husserl, in effect, tends to counter theories of mimetic character, or at least those which see in art a copy, an attempt of copying or mimicry of the real, such as became established by the Platonic lineage, and in exemplary fashion by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (2004) with regards to tragedy, even when the Stagirite proposes to praise it by means of the concept of catharsis. Although cathartic, tragedy is mimetic to Aristotle. The phenomenological school, in turn, seeks to drift away from such tradition, by regarding fiction not as mimicry but as a world radically apart, albeit enabled for establishing references, for representing.

Generally, the issue for aestheticians in the phenomenological tradition is not whether artworks depict or represent objects from the perceptual world. They will grant that they often do. Their position is rather that representation properly understood is not mimesis in the sense of copying. If it is taken instead to mean the representation of a world within the work of art, which may or may not have a relation to the larger world beyond the work, then virtually all phenomenological aestheticians have representational theories of art. (Brough, 2010, p. 281)

1 For Husserl, the "living world", or *Lebenswelt*, concerns the pre-scientific world, that is, not mediated by scientific epistemology. The experience of the living world is hence an intuitive, spontaneous experience, and reflects the human subject's natural attitude before the world. For a further development of this Husserlian concept and its relation with scientific knowledge, see Juliana Missaggia (2018). Here we refer to *Lebenswelt* in frequent contrast with the world of fiction, that is, when the natural attitude is transfigured into aesthetic attitude.

In phenomenological terminology, the recognition of a work of art as a work of art depends on the subject's/observer's aptness to suspend his natural attitude, that is to say, to disrupt his unreflective, intuitive, spontaneous, typically ordinary stance in face of a certain object — which in turn comes forward as inviting, willing, capable of instigating the audience into an experience of aesthetic character: an *aesthetic object*. The disruption of the natural attitude and the awakening of the *aesthetic attitude*, therefore, delimit the boundary between the living world and the world of the work of art, so that

Husserl's conception of art as representational emerges in his notion that a work holds a world within itself, with its own space and time, which may or may not refer to a particular external subject. The subject of the work is represented within the world of the work, a closed domain of sheer appearance that is not taken as actual, but as something that exists only for sight or hearing. (Brough, 2010, p. 282)

This other world of pure appearance and distortion specially conceived by the artist to be appreciated by reception, even if it consigns countless external elements, is explicitly detached from the real, alien as it may seem to natural attitude, and not to be (and unlikely to be) confused with the living world — at the risk of losing the very perception of that as a work of art throughout the process. We should not, however, underestimate representations and their character of pure appearance.

In an apparent paradox, artistic representations, precisely because they are distortions, *can be highly enlightening about reality*. In inviting the audience to establish associations with the living world, the work mobilizes elements resembling this world, which are to be advanced in a necessarily deformed manner — and it is precisely this deformation that can render some aspects more visible that, out of a natural attitude, would be scarcely identifiable or rather invisible: “the glow of the world created within the work may indeed illuminate the world beyond its boundaries, but that is not to copy” (Brough, 2010, p. 283). From the contrast between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the representation invites the spectator, engenders effects, and furnishes elements for the comprehension of the culture. In this sense, Wolfgang Iser's inquisitive trajectory sets as its starting point an aesthetic response theory for literary anthropology, in which representation exerts a decisive role in the aesthetic phenomenon:

Representation as aesthetic semblance indicates the presence of the inaccessible. Literature reflects life under conditions that are either not available in the empirical world or are denied by it. Consequently, literature turns life into a storehouse from which it draws its material in order to stage what in life appeared to have been sealed off from access. The need for such a staging arises out of man's decentered position: we are, but do not have ourselves. (Iser, 1989, p. 244)

Iser detects in the phenomenon of literary representation the human need for experimentation and possession of what, despite its existence in the real, is not conveniently made available by it and can only be attained through aesthetic experience. What Iser observed in the literary domain seems to us to occur not only within itself but in other art forms, such as comics. It is what Iser calls negativity. The living world is ultimately unknowable in its totality; but art allow us to transcend its boundaries and to know the world (and oneself) through its denial — the world of the work, the fiction itself: “If a literary text does something to its readers, it simultaneously tells us something about them. Thus literature turns into a divining rod, locating our dispositions, desires, and inclinations and eventually our overall makeup” (Iser, 2000, p. 311). Herein lies its anthropological-communicational sense.

As distinct from the living world, the art world offers what the real cannot offer, unless as reference: existence itself as an object of contemplation, discoveries, and above all, as an object of aesthetic appreciation. In this sense, the idea of representation drifts away from its traditional mimetic character, that is, it becomes even more dependent on the reader's participation as an active pole, responsible in tandem with the work itself not only for the actualization of the aesthetic experience as a whole but also for the relations the staged might suggest towards the non-staged, the fiction towards the living world:

The semblance is aesthetic insofar as something is represented that has no given reality of its own and is therefore only the condition for the production of an imaginary object. Representation can only unfold itself in the recipient's mind, and it is through his active imaginings alone that the intangible can become an image. It follows, then, that representation, by bridging difference and thus making the intangible conceivable, is an act of performing and not — as Western tradition has repeated time and again — an act of mimesis, since mimesis presupposes a given reality that is to be portrayed in one way or another. (Iser, 1989, p. 243)

The artistic universe is a universe of appearances, of similar things, though not identical to what they are referent to their — explicit, deducible, or speculative — sources of inspiration. By treading the reverse path, starting from literary anthropology and heading for Iser's aesthetic response theory, it is worth recalling at least two important categories in his system: that of familiar territory, abridging in itself all the experienced (as natural attitude) as well as the enjoyed referential (as aesthetic experience) (Iser, 1978, p. 69); and that of defamiliarization, concerning the capacity of the work of art of not only referring to the familiar territory but also (and above all) of frustrating it, and with great aesthetic effect, directly proportional to the distance between what is anticipated and what is experienced via reception (Iser, 1978, p. 87). Defamiliarization of the familiar territory is consequently an important factor in the process of representation in arts, not only in terms of aesthetic effect but also as negativity and unveiling of aspects of the real — hence its communicational and anthropological character.

Representation, however, would not be possible without the spectator's imaginative effort. In his theoretical system, Mikel Dufrenne (1973) breaks down the aesthetic experience into at least three levels: (1) the level of presence, in which the work of art is perceived² as such by the spectator's corporeal sensitivity; (2) the level of representation and imagination, when perception shapes through imagination the contents present therein, transforming them into distinguishable (represented) events out of prior knowledge; and (3) the level of reflection and feeling, in which perception flows towards an objective comprehension to which it had been exposed, as well as towards a sensitive comprehension, within a dialectic relationship between reason and emotion that Dufrenne understands as the apex of the audience's experience: "the very height of aesthetic perception is found in the feeling which reveals the expressiveness of the work" (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 49).

Here we stress the imaginative character of the representational game as described by Dufrenne, imaginative not only for the artist but also for the very reception, needful of the use of its imaginative capacities throughout the fruition process of the works — even though such input comes about from what the work proposes: hence its sovereignty as propositive element; and that of the artist's as a in need of fulfilling the a creative subject. Despite the recipient's eminently active condition, in need of fulfilling the aesthetic experience with his own imagination, the most creative element of the artistic game for Dufrenne is the artist himself (Bandi, 2018). In any case, both imaginations — the spectator's and the artist's — shape representation and their communicational performance.

Imagination nourishes representation with modes of implicit knowledge [les savoirs] previously constituted in lived experience. More precisely, imagination plays a dual role. It mobilizes such knowledge, and it converts what is acquired by experience [l'acquis] into something visible. In the former case, we must consider knowledge as an aspect of imagination. For knowledge is a virtual state of the image, whose intentional correlate is the possible. (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 348)

Mediated by the subjectivity of both, reality (or the living world) arises in the aesthetic experience as pure appearance, and it is, therefore, "less a world than an atmosphere of a world — and which represented objects illustrate but do not determine" (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 528). The world advanced by the

² "Perception" here possesses the same meaning as that proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

work of art and staged with the spectator's aid is inward upon the work itself, it is a singular and subjective world; and for this very reason autonomous, because:

Thus, if the represented world is an image of the real world, it is an image that is inevitably and voluntarily mutilated. That which the work gives us of the real world is only what is necessary to situate the characters or to illuminate the action. Its purpose is not so much to represent a world as to single out some determinate and meaningful object from within it, making this object its property and taking us back to it untiringly. (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 175)

In spite of representing reality as distorted or mutilated, so is the "real" illuminated by the aesthetic for Dufrenne, once that art bestows meaning through its representations to what lacks it (at least not in a predetermined way): hence its necessity to represent the "real", to render it comprehensible, communicable.

The real world needs aesthetic worlds. The aesthetic object takes up the real in order to give meaning to the real. The aesthetic object finds and unifies the real in the light of the existential *a priori*. By giving form to the real, the aesthetic worlds deserve to be real. On the other hand, the real does not repudiate the plurality of aesthetic worlds, for it is through their very plurality that it is the real, that is, the overflowing. (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 532)

Works of art and the experience they might suggest accomplish such — rational, emotional, communicational (and even ontological) — success precisely for furnishing the spectator a myriad of singular worlds, as prolific as the overflowing of the very reality, the very living world or *Lebenswelt*, which in turn can only be taken from as singular a conscience as itself:

(...) there are plural worlds only because a world (even an objective world) exists only as assumed and defined by a consciousness which is, first of all, a singular consciousness. The real is not initially given as an in-itself which is subsequently divided into particular worlds or monadic perspectives. On the contrary, the unity of the real, understood as an objective world, can be felt and affirmed only on the basis of the experience of singular worlds. (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 538)

Representation in comics: visual imperative and phenomenology of image

Either as a system (Groensteen, 2015) or as juxtaposed images (McCloud, 2005), comics are distinguished, to a good extent, for being *strongly visual arts* (Groensteen, 2015, p. 17; Bramlett, 2020) — albeit not in its totality (Hague, 2014, p. 9). Among its most prominent constitutive elements are vignettes (illustrations), frames (lines that delimit them), and gutters (empty spaces that separate them), etc; all articulated, artfully juxtaposed, and/or superposed in order to suggest the narrative upon the page (its material support). Unlike, for instance, what occurs in the literary work of art, in which the reading stream depends on the linear linguistic enchainment, the comic work of art is charged with subverting such rectitude, by allowing itself to alternate between *linear* and *tabular regimes*³ (Fresnault-Deruelle, 1976). A phenomenological analysis of representation in comics must therefore take into account that representation comes about under these conditions, and, in this sense, be enabled to mobilize, if necessary,

³ Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle (1976) observes that comics may operate in two reading regimes: linear and tabular. In the former, akin to the classic literary regime, the reader follows the story frame after frame, neatly queued up, from the left to the right (or from the right to left when it comes to manga). In the latter, whether for size, color, placement or isolation, one or more vignettes stand out in such a way in the overall context of the page (tableau) to the extent of eventually subverting the linear reading and its traditional sequentiality.

auxiliary tools such as semiotic-, structuralist-, or gestalt-leaning theories (Dufrenne, 2015, p. 184-185).

In regards to representation, comics studies remain incipient, at least when we take into account the kind of approach dear to us here, whatever it may be, that which before dwelling upon the to-be-represented object is concerned with the way of working it out. When we adopt the phenomenological method, comics studies reveal to be even more alien. On the other hand, to a greater or lesser extent, with greater or lesser zeal, some inquiries devoted to comics have touched upon the theme of representation, thereby rendering it opportune here some punctuations.

Since we are concerned here with representation, priority is given, in the domain of comics studies, to theories pertaining the relationship between representations of “realistic”, “iconic” or “abstract” content. That is to say, those displaying greater similarity to what we consider “real”, and those more debugged representations. It is also dear to us incursions aiming at tensioning the boundaries between the fanciful and the mimetic. Outwardly, we know that comics, as well as drama and cinema, are art forms that advance more than narrate fictional occurrences (Barbieri, 2017, p. 18). Moreover, it is widely known in the domain of comics studies the diagram advanced by Scott McCloud (2005, p. 52-53), which exposes examples organized into a great triangle, the *continuum* that lists and differentiates representations regarded as more or less realistic from those more iconic and abstract. Drawing from McCloud’s triangle, Daniele Barbieri (2017) comments that:

Where visual abstraction is low, we assume that the story being told unfolds in such a way which is substantially that real, even though it may be represented more or less realistically. As the visual abstraction ascends, the world being told about also becomes progressively more abstract and less relatable to the real world, except in increasingly metaphorical ways. (Barbieri, 2017, p. 67-68, our own translation)

From a cognitivist perspective and by building up from Halliwell (2002), Karim Kukkonen (2013) — highlighting visual aspects as well — proposes another concept of representation in comics, this time detaching “*world-creating*” *mimesis* from a “*world-reflecting*” *mimesis*:

(...) we could say that superhero storyworld proposes a “world-creating” *mimesis*, that is, one that creates its own, self-contained world of fiction. In this storyworld, the comic presents heroes and villains as clearly distinguishable, everything is in bright colors, and a man can survive machine-gun fire unscathed. The storyworld does not aim to mirror reality but follows its own rules and probabilities. The realist storyworld poses as having “world-reflecting” *mimesis*, one that illuminates and reflects the real. In the realist storyworld, the comic reduces its color scale, avoids visual stereotyping through the physique and facial features, and reduces dramatic angles and onomatopoeia. (Kukkonen, 2013, p. 88-89)

We understand that the opposite may occur as well: a realistically representing drawing in a work, on the other hand, may be profoundly metaphorical and fanciful in other aspects, including narratological ones. What is important here is pointing out that despite being more or less “realistic” or “mimetic”, staged worlds in comics remain detached from the living world, not only because of the reasons exposed above but also because of aspects inherent in this art, for instance, its reticent character:

Comics is a genre founded on reticence. Not only do the silent and immobile images lack the illusionist power of the filmic image, but their connections, far from producing a continuity that mimics reality, offer the reader a story that is full of holes, which appear as gaps in the meaning. (Groensteen, 2007, p. 10)⁴

Once exposed to the predominantly visual character of comics, punctual incursions into a *phenomenology of the image* become necessary. From a general overview, it is worth exposing the

4 Groensteen, T. (2007). *The system of comics*. 1. ed. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. Translation: Bart Beaty & Nick Nguyen.

significant intentions, that is, those indicative of the object as a whole, of symbolic character, and those namely *pictorial intentions*, indicative of the object from a glimpse, of imagetic nature. In the case of the former — that is, significant intentions —, the intentionality vector is triggered via the aesthetic experience brought about by the work itself towards the represented external object, taken in its totality as a symbol. Verbal language favors such intentionality given its abstract character (Bramlett, 2020). In the case of pictorial intentions, by its turn, the intentionality vector treads the reverse path: it poses before the reader the represented object as a pictorial image, over a screen, over a wall, or in the case of comics, on a page via drawing. From the totality of the thing as a symbol, we address its glimpse as an icon. "The meaningful intentions point to the thing, the pictorial intentions approach the thing. The direction of intention is different." (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 82).

It must be pointed out, however, that the predominance of pictorial intention *does not root out the significant intention* — even if linguistic symbols are non-existent in the composition (as in our corpus) —, in view of the fact that when we intuit the object represented by the image, beyond and from the imagetic glimpse, we also intuit the object in its totality. Furthermore, if words intend the at-once-represented object as a whole, images advance the object from a certain angle, from a certain light, from a certain pose or moment. That is why meaningful intentions are supposed to be more abstract, while pictorial ones are supposed to be more actual (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 83). Precisely because it is more actual, pictorial intentionality affords the reader a closer experience than that of visualizing the very object — closer, therefore, to what we understand as perception (ibidem). The reader knows that that is not the thing itself: he is deprived of the possibility of touching it, smelling it, or observing it from an angle other than that or those offered as representational images. The fictional character of the experience is held despite the similarities.

If the sensorial properties of the represented object are not accessible to the spectator, the sensorial properties of the work of art, on the other hand, are advanced to him as an inextricable element of the aesthetic experience. There is a material substrate from which representation occurs:

Some of the pleasure of looking at paintings comes from shifting between focus on the theme and focus on the substrate: we might step up very close to the painting, or we might narrow the scope of our vision, in order to concentrate on the material substrate, to appreciate the brushstrokes and colors in these particular spots; then we move back for a view of the wider whole, retaining all the while our recent grasp of the materiality of the thing. The interplay between the substrate and form enhances the presence of the work of art, and such an interplay is possible because of the various meaningful intentions we train on the thing we are looking at. (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 83-84)

In comics, we also have access to a substrate, even though mediated by the editorial process of scanning and later printing of the drawings. Strokes, traces, reticules; straight and curved lines, volumetry, and perspective, among other resources employed in the drawings, are recognizable in the act of reading — and they are a source of aesthetic pleasure (Barbieri, 2018, 13-63). A pleasure which, for instance, also functions as a detaching aspect between the living world and the world within the work, as Husserl had already observed in the early days of the phenomenological movement (Brough, 2010, p. 281).

Phenomenology of representation in comics: theoretical synthesis and framework for analyses

By proceeding to the historical opposition of the phenomenological school to mimesis in the domain of Aesthetics, Iser and Dufrenne propose theoretical systems whose convergence we regard as fruitful for the analysis of representation in comics. Not only do they furnish analysis categories of the aesthetic-communicational lens, but also propose outlets of anthropological and even ontological

foundations before the profound human need for representation. More precisely, we can observe that the spectator's imaginative activity in Dufrenne is articulated without hindrances to the performative character of the representation in Iser. On the other hand, the studies on comics exposed herein also furnish valuable theoretical subsidies for the analysis of the aesthetic experience suggested by the comic work of art, taking representation — mainly via drawing — as its pressing aspect.

Finally, we can draw from the theoretical synthesis of such works some *general principles for analysis*, indicative that (1) *representation in comics comes about in accordance with its own visual semiotic system*, endowed with typical constitutive elements and organizational regimes, varying from more realistic to more iconic and/or abstract representations, which, structured by means of its characteristic reticence, aid the detachment between the living and the fictional world; (2) *aesthetic experience in comics comes about in the act of reading, encompassing the reader's engagement in tandem with the work itself, into representing living world objects in the fictional world domain — hence the performative and imaginative character of representation*; (3) *because they are a visually-dominant art, comics are more likely to favor pictorial (advancing) intuitions than significative (indicative) ones* — it hence follows that comics — as well as theater and cinema — advance more than narrate their stories, and that (4) *it partakes in the experience of representing within comics the contact with the substrate of the drawings*, its constituent illustrative elements, sources of great aesthetic pleasure and tension with regards to the living world; moreover, (5) *the representation of aspects of reality through comics, even if mutilated and apparent, is capable of shining the living world from its negativity (or contrast) through the reader's familiar territory*, in a process of defamiliarization with great aesthetic effect; and (6) *the aesthetic experience engendered within comics involves both reflective and sentimental states, assigning meaning in its peculiarity to the overflow that marks the living world*. That being said, we will proceed to a brief analysis of our empirical corpus, whose intention is to put the aforementioned considerations to the test.

A brief analysis of Park Bench

In *Park Bench* (2018), Chabouté introduces the reader to a series of events evolving around an ordinary park bench. In this *bande dessinée* (as the French call their comics), an intense irony underlies between the simplicity of the piece of urban furniture, its banal character, and the events of the great sentimental value it “witnesses”, of which it even seems to partake, even if as a “non-agent”; an object that even if deprived of will, somehow “acts” insofar as it observes its surrounding world with us. Indeed, the irony is readily posed on the volume cover (Picture 1) when the significative intentionality of the title, expressed in the phrase “a piece of wood and steel”⁵ reduces the already banal nature of the object itself to something even more ordinary: its raw material, its dismantled material components, a prior setup for any design. At the same time, we visualize the bench in the lower left corner of the illustration: a pictorial aspect that confers its specific form and angles, associated with a washed-out red balloon tied by its backrest. We may then question: “tied up there by a child who passed by?” (ibidem., p. 181). The articulation between the abstraction of the linguistic code and the actuality of the park bench and the balloon, as drawing, substrate, establishes a representation that seems to be ironically referent to the significative potential of an object of urban furniture which, at least in a first moment, may seem ordinary, but that at the same time, it is posed as a chief element, once present on the title. In a further part of the volume, the fourth cover highlights: “A rest, a moment, a pause. A haven, a refuge, a home... A scene... A

5 In the English-language edition, part of this irony is lost due to the translation and editorial decision in favor of the title *Park Bench* rather than “A Piece of Wood and Metal”, in greater accordance with the original in French: *Un Peu de Bois et D'Acier*. As the analysis we conducted in this article concerns the Portuguese-language edition, we have opted for maintaining at least in this extract the substance of our argumentation pertaining the ironic character of the work, while we have kept “Park Bench” on the title of our work, so that the Anglophone reader may associate it directly with the comic such as it has been published in his own language.

crossroads... Just a park bench” (emphasis added).

(1) The work mobilizes with great effort the typical, visually emphasizing semiotic system of comics, in a representation not only of the bench but also of its surrounding universe, employing the use of various strategies of imagetic character. In regards to the setup of the pages, Chabouté oscillates constantly between the use and non-use of frames, furthering repeatedly a massive emptying of backgrounds with many blank spaces — what vests the layout a great lightness and great emphasis on the represented objects (Picture 2). Shifts from aspect to aspect are recurrent, that is to say, those during which occurs a splintering of the background into multiple vignettes envisaging the establishment of a certain tone, an atmosphere (McCloud, 2005), in which we are beset by a feeling of boredom (Schneider, 2016) even when such passages are used for suggesting great ellipses, like the passing of a season (Picture 3). The artist displays full mastery of his drawing skills, scarcely touching the caricatural, preferring rather to remain in a zone usually regarded as realistic, tending at times to the photographic zone. The staged world follows the same path, moving away from the fanciful. The formal setup of the objects — above all the bench, the trees, and the nearing landscape — is held at a figurative level, often bordering the technical level. The perspective engenders realism in space, inasmuch as the overall atmosphere detaches us from the living world, stimulating a more contemplative, observing stance.

Figure 1 – Book cover

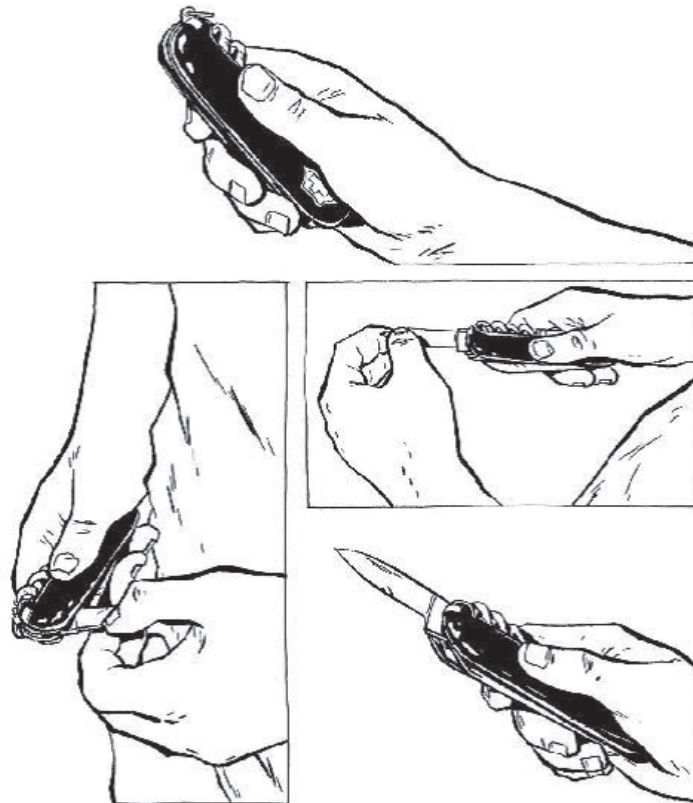


Source: Chabouté (2018)

(2) Representation in comics depends on the engagement of reception in the sense of imagining and performing in tandem with characters and objects advanced by fiction. Noteworthy have been the efforts in the work in the sense of proposing, in tandem with the reader, the staging of countless small actions, that is, daily, ordinary, banal incidents in the manner thought up by Roland Barthes (2013). A succession of fragments of different lives that can be nevertheless suggestive of great aesthetic effect, witnessed as such by the bench (and by us) in a crossroads of mutual interferences, demonstrating a great capacity of defamiliarizing what is posed beforehand; of establishing, therefore, a proportional distance between what is projected and what follows. Example: the relationship of rivalry between the homeless

who tries to make the bench his bed, his haven, and the cop who regularly ousts him from it (Picture 4), evolves abruptly (and unexpectedly by then) into a new friendship. The story familiarizes us with its characters and their plights, ironically in order, then, to defamiliarize them through the protagonist-bench's "passive interferences", which by inviting bystanders for a rest, also invites them into an encounter. They are short episodes represented in specific, thematized frames, which intertwine or metaphors other episodes that, despite their banality, demonstrate a great capacity to engage the reader continuously, in tandem with the work itself, into enacting them.

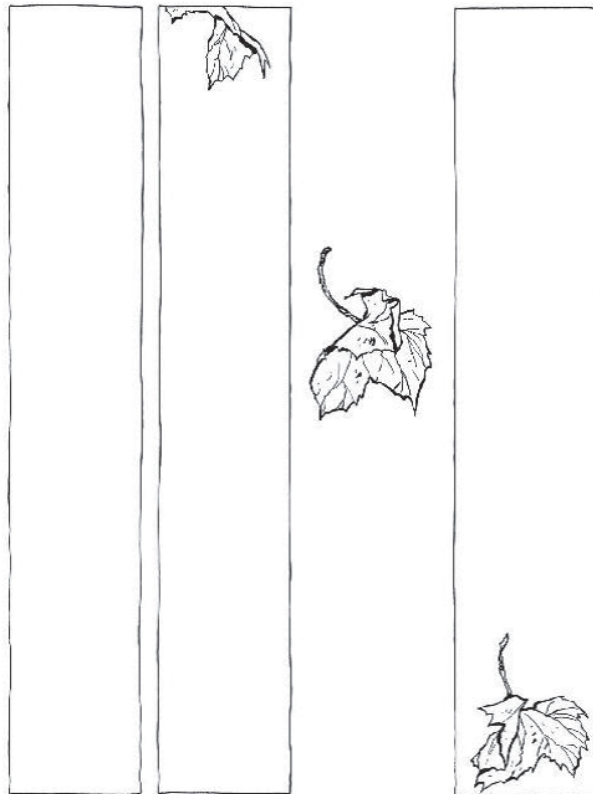
Picture 2 – The handling of a penknife represented in a "instructional" way with extensive use of blank spaces and tracings of technical or realistic character.



Source: Chabouté (2018, p. 7)

In this sense, the irony and contrast of values are held in a representational tone. The discovery of a pregnancy is immediately succeeded, on the action, by an ordinarily-bystanding executive dressed up in a black suit, supposedly heading for his office. A love disillusionment is interspersed by a dog who makes the bench his toilet, etc. The alternate sum of these more or less meaningful small events composes the narrative unity. It should be noted that these transient passages, physically and separately speaking, occupy little space within the material structure of the work, running to 340 pages. A few comic strips suffice to represent such events. The passages are also organized as interspersing dramatic arches, designed in a manner alike that thought up by Gustav Freytag (1900), and that serves, furthermore, as a cue for a new arch. Nuclearly seen, these arches have beginning, middle, and end, or at least a kind of outcome that works like a booty (or "hook") for what comes next — hence its invitingly suggestive character at a narratological level for readers, stimulating them into accompanying the unrolling of the story(ies): an aesthetic attitude which hardly resembles the natural one, related to the living world.

Picture 3 – One of the “dull” shifts from aspect to aspect.



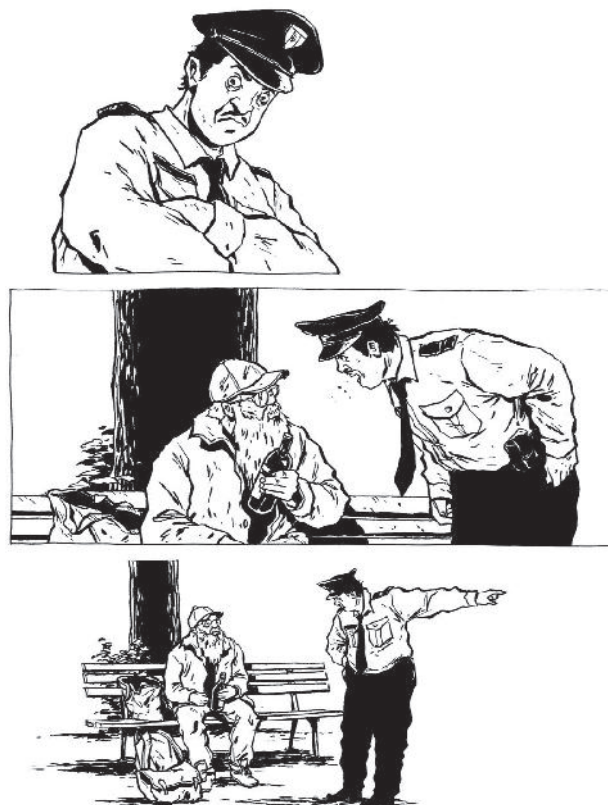
Fonte: Chabouté (2018, p. 140)

(3) The strongly visual nature of the comic strips, combined with the muteness of the work, except for a few placards and inscriptions made by the characters themselves (on the bench, for instance), encourages the reader into concentrating even further on the images, especially on the engenderings, articulations, possible arthrologies in between. They are very clear to the reader, pictorially and significantly; they are didactic in their representations, practically iconic in their connotations of objects — like the bench itself, the balloon, the flower bouquet, the delicate candy, the fishing rod, the penknife, and so forth. Chabouté’s nearly photographic style, associated with the extensive use of blank backdrops, enhances the artist’s effort to render the represented objects easily identifiable for the reader, not only by resemblance but also by contrast and figure-background so that the fruition of the work does not suffer unnecessary interruptions in the identification of these artifacts. For example, the park bench, the story’s protagonist, is at its most traditional and universal, with horizontal and parallel wooden slats, assembled over a steel basic structure (Picture 1). This piece of urban furniture contrasts in its universality with its peculiarly-designed substitute that appears during the last moments of the work and is less recognizable as a park bench than that traditional one, thus being rejected by bystanders (Chabouté, 2018, p. 308) — such feeling (of disregard) which comes forward to us, manifested by pictorial means through duly represented gestures and glances within the substrate of the work, which bring them closer to each other rather than indicating.

(4) The pleasure emanating from the representation proposed by the work partially derives from the treatment given by the artist to its substrate, constituted by his drawings and other artistic techniques. Variations in the thickness of the tracings are constant as much in the representation of characters and backdrops as in the very frames (Picture 4). Nights are represented in negative, that is, by the inversion of

the black and white scheme, rendering the sky dark and the object's light, establishing then the contrast with daytime scenes. The substrate is what ensures form to actions, both those of great significance — pregnancy, disease, rejection, death — and those of a more ordinary nature — urine, physical exercises, commuting to work, meals. Cycles and repetitions demarcated by moments of boredom are established and succeeded by moments of conflict resolution and narrative development, consonant with enlargement or abridgment of spaces over the pages, driving the pace not only in a narratological manner (in the sphere of actions) but also graphically (in the sphere of the substrate). As Barbieri observes (2017, p. 91), rhythm is repetition, “the effect of the recurrence of a scheme”. Repetition both during the succession of events and during their introduction, through Chabouté’s skills and the fascination he is able to foster in his readers.

Picture 4 – Emphatic gesturing



Source: Chabouté (2018, p. 32)

(5) The fascination exerted by the work largely owes to the strong contrast that is established between its proposed artistic representations and its represented real objects, capable of warding off and illuminating the living world in a single stroke. Not only artifacts as well as characters are advanced in an ostensibly didactic despite realistic manner — nearly theatrical (in a caricatural sense), as though silent movie actors, strongly exaggerated in their facial expressions and body postures, including compelling hand gestures manifesting emphatically different affections: happiness, rejection, anger, neglect, contempt, etc (Picture 4). So emphatic are the represented human beings and artifacts that the reader can hardly avoid somehow associating that square which we imagine to be French (to wit, the artist’s nationality) with any other square, not only from actual France but also from elsewhere, some closely resembling, others less so. That is to say, the objects therein represented, as well as people, are so general (bench, trees, bystanders, etc) that even a square in Brazil or Japan would not be so different. Negativity, that is,

the contrast between the world staged by the work and the living world, invites the reader to shine the latter through the former — from this, the representative-communicational character of the work of art in comics derives. When it is advanced in a mutilated, fragmented, reticent form, in pure appearance, life acquires in apparent paradox a greater and clearer sense.

(6) As ironic as the story the work introduces us is the opening, its pure appearance affords different horizons of meaning. That is to say, the unyielding constraints of artistic representations, their excesses, and pure appearance — such as those advanced in *Park Bench* —, offer us a meaningful sense of organization and purpose, once the narrative itself is organized. And this sense of order, even if in pure appearance, supports us in dealing with its opposite: the overflowing of the living world and unawareness before its complexity. Both ascertainties — that of overflowing and that of being unaware —, when faced with the comic work of art, impel us aesthetically and ontologically into contemplating, exploring, and discovering.

Final considerations

From a phenomenological analysis of comics, such as we have described and exemplified in this work, besides the scrutiny of different aesthetic experiences engendered in the encounter among different readers and different comic works of art, out of the discovery of nuances permeating the fictional representation — such as we have done in the analysis of *Park Bench*, our empirical corpus —, it is also possible from them to advance into other incursions beyond the fields of Aesthetic and Communication: unfoldments of anthropological character — concerning cultural representations in comics, for example —, as well as those of ontological character keen to the relationship between comics and the assignment of meaning to the very living world; themes we have touched upon in the course of the text.

In face of the constant engagement between reader and comics, we can infer, moreover, that the value of the work of art should not be measured by its alleged “realism”, direct and impersonal, but above all by its capacity to engendering a pleasurable aesthetic experience for reception; and that, furthermore, the very notion of “realism” should be taken with a certain carefulness, once that the work of art, even that regarded as realistic, naturalistic or photographic, is also but a distortion of the living world, a necessary distortion not only for the setting of the reader’s experience with comics as aesthetic experience, as well as for the illumination of the “real” by that same representation. Hence we ascertain that the reductive character of representations in comics also works as inviting quality, capable of instigating the reader into fulfilling the gaps left by the work — what he should undertake through his imaginative capacity, his ability to fulfill the “holes” offered to him.

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