Between Censorship and Innovation: The Translation of American Comics during Italian Fascism

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Abstract

This article outlines the main issues surrounding the process of import, translation and cultural adaptation of American comics in Italy from 1908 to 1942. During this time, the first comics were translated from Europe and the United States, leading to a revolution in Italian children's literature. These were also the years in which comics began to be perceived as a political, as well as pedagogical problem, which prompted the Fascist regime to issue censorship measures aimed at limiting their circulation. The aesthetic and ideological dimension of comics will be investigated alongside the different strategies of translation and adaptation used by Italian editors and cartoonists. The reasons behind the disapproval of comics by Italian pedagogues, and the ambivalent attitude of the Fascist regime, will also be explored. In conclusion, my analysis aims to offer insights into the cultural function of children's literature during Fascism and the specific role of comics as a site for innovation.

Comics and Translation

The history of Italian comics is a history of translation. Foreign comics, mostly from the United Kingdom, France and the United States, entered the Italian market at the beginning of the twentieth century, adding movement and colour to the pages of the first children's magazines. Being labelled as a product for children, comics had to comply with specific translation norms and pedagogical (as well as aesthetic) requirements. Such requirements acquired political connotations during the years of Fascism (1922–43), when books for children became powerful tools for propaganda in the service of Mussolini's regime.

The symbolic and political significance of childhood during Fascism is well known, and historians have explored the ways in which Fascist censorship protected children and adults alike from unsuitable materials. What is less widely known, and has only received scholarly attention over the last decade, is that foreign (especially American) comics enjoyed an extraordinary success in 1930s Italy. The proliferation of comic magazines containing almost entirely foreign stories was at odds with the cultural policies of the Fascist regime which, from 1938,

launched a project of *bonifica*, or reclamation, of Italian culture. It is only in 1941, however, that Fascist censorship, combined with the impending war, led to the disappearance of foreign comics. Between 1908 and 1942, the translation and cultural adaptation of comics provided a site for negotiation, and often struggle, between competing notions of childhood and children's literature. I am interested in showing how, in spite (and sometimes because) of the censorial measures enforced by the regime, comics became a space of relative freedom, which blurred the boundaries between notions of 'original' and 'translation'.

After a long period of neglect, during which literature for children and especially comics were deemed unworthy of scholarly attention, some ground-breaking studies have recently examined the relationship between Fascism and comics. After the early contribution of Claudio Carabba's *Fascismo a Fumetti* (1973), in the last decade several scholars such as Juri Meda with his *Stelle e Strips* (2007), as well as Fabio Gadducci, Leonardo Gori and Sergio Lama with *Eccetto Topolino* (2011), carried out important archival work that has provided valuable insights into the history of comics during the Fascist regime. By retrieving official documents and digging out private correspondence, censorship files and newspapers articles, these scholars have shown how, towards the end of the 1930s, intellectuals, pedagogues and politicians alike were engaged in a lively and often heated debate centred on the cultural value and legitimacy of comics.

Building on these important contributions, my previous work (Sinibaldi, "*Black and White Strips*", "Dangerous Children", "Dangerous Strips") has focused on the complex and often contradictory ways in which foreign comics interacted with Fascist notions of identity. This article aims to look more specifically at a number of examples illustrating the translation, adaptation and rewriting of American comics during the Fascist regime. I will explore the reasons behind comics being perceived as a moral, as well as political, threat by many intellectuals and educators, as well as the creative strategies employed by Italian cartoonists to overcome the obstacles of censorship. By showing how foreign comics brought innovation to the literary field of children's literature, I will draw a broader conclusion on the role of children's literature under a repressive political system.

Rather than focusing on a specific comic strip, I am interested in the translation of comics as a cultural phenomenon which profoundly affected the landscape of children's magazines in 1930s Italy. For this reason, I will not offer specific examples of what Roman Jakobson famously described as "translation proper", i.e. linguistic transfer between source and target text. Owing to the distinctive features of comics, in particular the close interaction between verbal and visual elements, I employ the term *translation* in its broadest sense, encompassing the transformation and manipulation of images, balloons, captions and editorial policies. By doing so, my analysis also aims to assess the broader effects of translation on Italian comics, and the consequent blurring of the lines between 'original' and 'translation'.

Between Domestication and Innovation

In order to understand how a genre such as that of children's comics, which had historically been regarded as disposable literature (Lopes), became an ideological and aesthetic battleground in Italy, we need to go back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The first decade of the century has often been described as a "Golden Age" in Italian children's literature (Vagliani), which saw the publication of popular magazines such as *Il Giornalino della Domenica* (1906) and *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* (1908). Thanks to the influence of European, and especially British illustrators (Arthur Rackham and Beatrix Potters among others), the visual dimension of books for children began to acquire more importance, and pictures became an essential feature of children's magazines, rather than a marginal addition.

It is during these years that *storielle illustrate* or 'illustrated stories', as they were commonly called at the time, appeared more consistently on the pages of children's magazines. Although the term *fumetti* (i.e. comics) was only used sporadically until the 1950s, I will refer to them as comics, because they fall within the modern definition of the genre. It should be acknowledged, however, that the definition of comics is still an object of debate among theorists, philosophers and historians. In my use of this terminology, I refer to the definition articulated by Scott McCloud of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). I also take into account the criticism of such definition, considered to be too broad, and I agree with R. C. Harvey's claim that "the essential characteristic of 'comics'—the thing that distinguishes it from other kinds of pictorial narrative—is the incorporation of verbal content" (19). This is especially relevant to our discussion; as the article will show, the verbal-visual blend (Harvey 102) was seen as fundamental in determining the way in which images were decoded, and became a main point of contention in the translation of comics during Fascism.

The first Italian and foreign comic strips were published in *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, the leading national children's magazine sold in combination with the Sunday supplement *La Domenica del Corriere* from 1908. Some of the first American comic characters to appear in the magazine included "Bibì e Bibò" ("The Katzenjammer Kids", 1897), "Fortunello" ("Happy Hooligan", 1899), "Arcibaldo e Petronilla" ("Bringing Up Father", 1913), "Mimmo Mammolo e Medoro" ("Buster Brown", 1902) and "Mio Mao" ("Felix the Cat", 1923; fig. 1). The strategies of adaptation were rather consistent across the magazine, which is not surprising given the identity of *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* as a respectable, middle-class publication. The fact that comics were clearly marked as a product for children is evident from the selection of comic strips to be translated, all featuring small children or animals with whom young readers were expected to identify. As we can see from figure 2, the most obvious manipulation of the original "Felix the Cat" was the removal of balloons in the Italian comic strip, which were replaced by rhymed captions. By restoring a clear separation between text and images, the anonymous

Italian cartoonists adapted the foreign comic strips to the conventions of Italian children's literature. The addition of rhymed captions also significantly altered the narratorial stance, since characters were no longer speaking for themselves, but instead their actions were described by an omniscient narrator. Instead of having direct access to the characters' thoughts and utterances, readers were addressed by an adult narrator, which provided them with the correct interpretation. As a result, the narrative structure of comics was modified in such a way that an adult mediator could be restored, according to a common practice in children's literature where the 'narrator's voice' (Wall) plays a fundamental role.

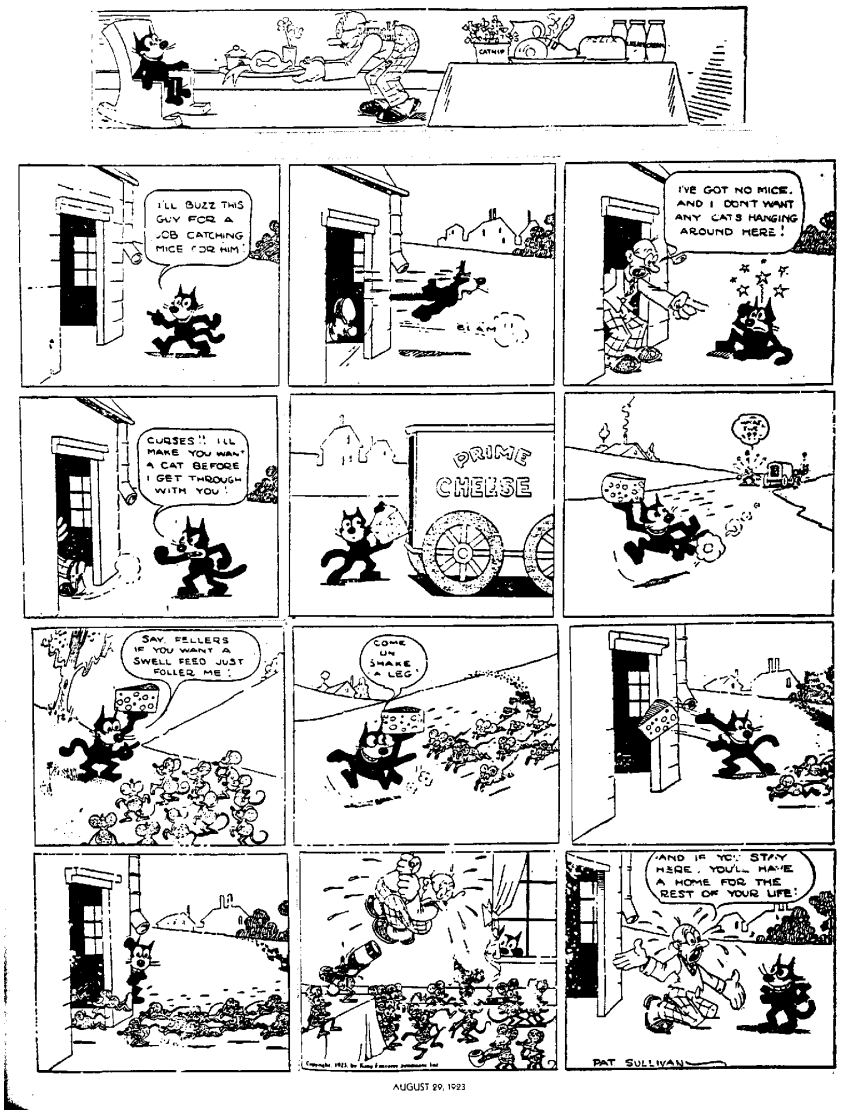

Figure 1: The first "Felix the Cat" by Otto J. Messmer in *England's Daily Sketch*, 1 August 1923

Figure 2: The first appearance of "Mio Mao" in *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, 15 January 1926

According to Emer O'Sullivan, the "discursive presence of the translator" is often more evident in children's texts, due to the asymmetrical communication structure and the fact that the (adult) translator is influenced by culture-specific notions of childhood (91). In the case of Italian comics, the function of the rhymed captions was that of providing a moral message (an essential component in children's literature of the time) and to simplify the plot, making it suitable for younger readers. By replacing balloons with rhymed captions, the characters are essentially silenced by the adult narrator and, from the point of translation, the original text, which relied on the interaction between images and balloons, is erased and rewritten in a new form. As a consequence of this rewriting strategy, not only the reader but also the character of Felix the Cat is considerably infantilised, since his thought process is made invisible and the narrator portrays him as a naughty child in need of a spank.

Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that the visual dimension was untouched, therefore Italian readers were exposed to the original images, only without balloons. This meant that, despite the disappearance of what is arguably the most distinctive (and innovative) feature of comics, the adaptation carried out by Italian cartoonists did not completely undermine the experimental dimension of comics. In fact, the degree of creativity and innovation to be found in this type of publications was considerably higher compared to other, more 'official' genres of early twentieth-century children's literature, which, being part of school education, continued to develop along traditional and didactic lines. This is particularly evident if we look at two of the earliest comic strips created by the leading cartoonist of the time, "Bilbolbul" by Attilio Mussino (1908; fig. 3), and "Pino e Pina" by Antonio Rubino (1910; fig. 4).

These were self-contained stories with a very simple plot, often based on the repetition typical of nursery rhymes. The protagonists were either children or anthropomorphic animals, who entertained readers with their naughty and irresponsible behaviour but were invariably disciplined by adults, and learned their lesson (until the next episode). Although the didactic dimension was dominant, the theme of disobedience (shown in the curious and defiant twins Pino and Pina), and the association between childhood and freedom of imagination (Bilbolbul used to change

Figure 3: "Bilbolbul" by Attilio Mussino, *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, 27 December 1908

colour depending on his emotions), were innovative features in Italian children's literature and paved the way to the translation of foreign comics.

During the 1920s, a large number of foreign comics not clearly marked as translations coexisted alongside Italian comic strips, making the two often indistinguishable. In this fluid landscape, the narrative structure of foreign comics was rewritten and 'Italianised', but the characters and the stories deeply influenced Italian cartoonists. This is especially evident if we look at the satirical dimension of

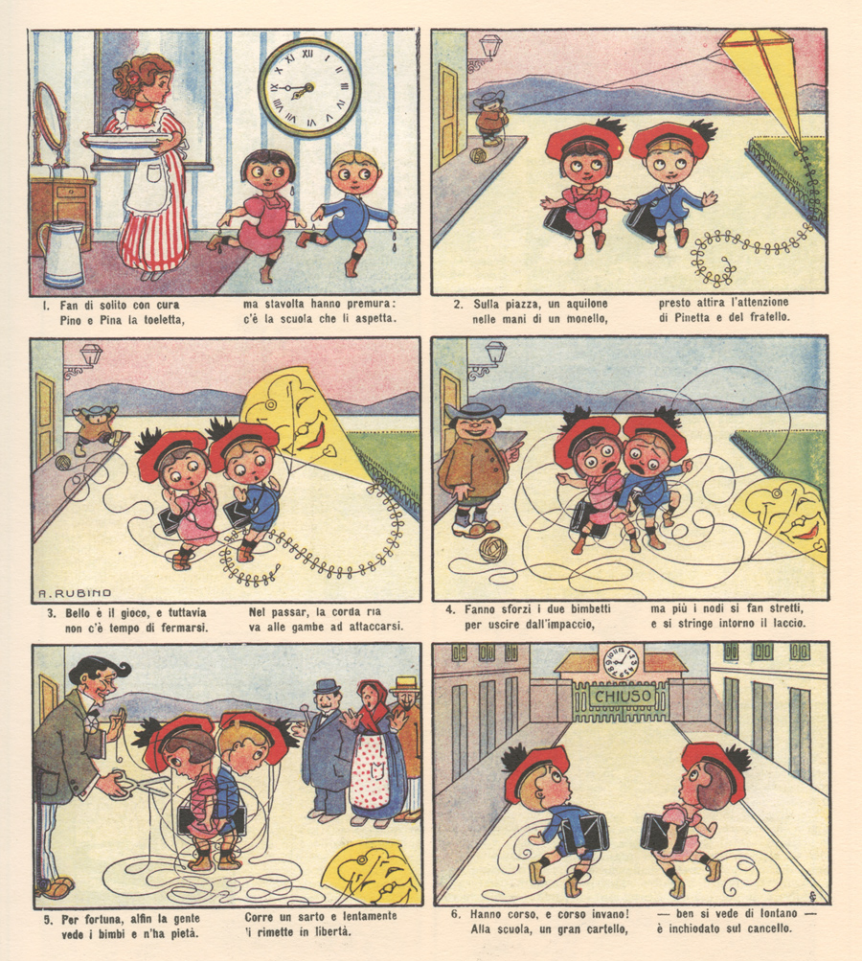

Figure 4: "Pino e Pina" by Antonio Rubino, *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, 14 August 1910

some comic stories published in the 1920s, where Italian adult characters were introduced for the first time and served as a humorous reflection on national identity. The most popular comic strips of this kind were "Il Signor Bonaventura" (1917) by Sergio Tofano, "Sor Pampurio" (1925; fig. 5) by Carlo Bisi and "Marmittone" (1928) by Bruno Angoletta. While the character Marmittone was a parody of a cowardly soldier who ended up in prison at the end of each episode, Bonaventura and Pampurio were average middle-class men, who found great pleasure in consumerism and the entertainment industry. Both characters clashed significantly with the anti-bourgeois campaign carried out by the Fascist regime, and the fundamentally militaristic values of Fascism, yet they enjoyed widespread and lasting popularity with Italian readers.

These examples show how, as Italian comics developed through a continuous dialogue with foreign models, their function became closer to that of the first comic

Figure 5: Detail of "Sor Pampurio" by Carlo Bisi, *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, 28 April 1929

strips that appeared in American Sunday papers. Talking about their satirical representations of American society, Heinz Politzer has famously claimed that comic strips offer a "mirrored image of their readers" (43). At a time when pervasive representations of the kind of society Italy should aspire to be were circulated widely and exalted by Fascist propaganda, comics represented a space of relative freedom where alternative narratives of national identity could be articulated.

In this regard, it is important to mention that, although they were published in children's magazines, satirical comics produced in the 1920s addressed a dual audience of children and adults (Beckett), which enabled them to become a product of mass consumption. The impact of comics on the genre of children's literature (and beyond) was also a consequence of the strategies of domestication, adaptation and rewriting carried out by Italian editors. As shown by *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, erasing the boundaries between original and translation, national and foreign, also meant that Italian comic strips could play an innovative and often subversive role. The revolutionary potential of comics, occupying a liminal space between translation and original, becomes apparent if we look at the reaction of conservative pedagogues. As the twentieth century progressed, and comics began to occupy more space in children's magazines, a pedagogical and aesthetic conflict arose between conservative and progressive factions. On the one side, there were those who welcomed innovation in children's literature and saw translation as a tool for modernisation; on the other, those who held on to traditional values, with the declared aim of protecting Italian identity from external (as well as internal) sources of corruption.

Among those belonging to the latter group, many appealed to the tradition of Italian children's literature embodied by the character of Pinocchio. In a paradoxical turn of events, Carlo Collodi's puppet who had been perceived as a revolutionary character in his own time, for questioning adult authority and criticising the educational system, became the symbol of traditional, didactic children's literature

(Sinibaldi, "Pinocchio"). In a letter explaining the reasons behind his resignation as chief editor of *Topolino*, published on 30 December 1933, Collodi's nephew Paolo Lorenzini denounced that:

> L'Editore, nell'intendimento di conformarsi ai gusti dei ragazzi d'oggi e di render loro sempre più gradito il 'Topolino', lo è andato ricolmando, ognor più di vignette e storielle figurate. Lo spazio rimasto a sfogo di velleità più o meno letterarie di piccini e di grandi era pochissimo e viene ancor più ridotto.
>
> [With the intention to appeal to readers' taste, and make them love *Topolino* even more, the editor has filled the magazine with comics and illustrated stories. The already small space that was devoted to literary pieces has been further reduced.][1]

A few years later, in his intervention at the Bologna conference for children's literature (1938), a leading member of the Fascist Union of Authors and Writers, Francesco Sapori, denounced the overwhelming presence of foreign comics (which he refers to merely as "illustrations") on Italian magazines. He said, "La tutela della razza sta nelle genuine espressioni artistiche e letterarie. Ad esempio, io sono ancora per Pinocchio, non ancora per Mickey-Maus" (31) ["The preservation of racial integrity lies in the authenticity of artistic and literary expressions. I still support Pinocchio, not yet Mickey Maus [sic]"].

The criticism voiced by Lorenzini and Sapori was informed by a conservative view on children's literature as a tool for moral education, according to which children should have access to few selected readings. Interestingly, this notion shares similarities with the attitude of the Fascist regime towards translated literature, criticised for corrupting the taste of Italian readers (Rundle). The immense success of translations with children and adults alike was interpreted as a worrying sign of moral corruption in a context where literature was supposed to be edifying rather than entertaining. Such attitude towards children's literature and translation is not surprising if we consider that Fascism was an authoritarian political system with totalitarian ambitions, in which readers' (as well as citizens') demands ought to be manipulated and controlled, rather than fulfilled. This attitude was exacerbated when a particularly vulnerable and valuable sector of society such as children were concerned. Being the primary target of Fascist propaganda, children were seen as empty vessels who needed to be filled up with moral and political knowledge. At the same time, adults were infantilised by the Fascist State who treated its citizens as irresponsible children to be indoctrinated and deprived of civil rights (Gibelli 4). This is shown by a complex system of censorship which, especially after 1935, aimed to protect the moral health of Italian citizens of all ages (Bonsaver 122).

It is important to consider that, alongside its more conservative traits, Fascism was also a forward-looking ideology which pursued a new model of modernity for Italian society (Ben-Ghiat). In this regard, it is not surprising that the argument put forward by those promoting innovation in children's literature was based on

[1] All translations from the Italian are mine.

presenting comics as a modern and ground-breaking product. Antonio Rubino, one of the first and most famous Italian cartoonists, highlighted the innovative dimension of comics in his passionate defence of comic strips. In a short piece entitled "Che cosa sono i 'fumetti"' ("What are comics") he wrote:

> Questo sistema, pratico e moderno, evita le confusioni e le perdite di tempo [. . .]. Niente descrizioni inutili, niente inutili commenti. La storia, grazie a questo sistema, invece d'essere un RACCONTO, diventa un'AZIONE SCENICA.
>
> [This system, practical and modern, avoids any confusion and waste of time [. . .]. No more pointless descriptions; no more comments. Thanks to this system, the plot, from being only a STORY, becomes SCENIC ACTION.]

In an article published the following month, the cartoonist refers to the phenomenon of comics as "Veramente caratteristica dell'epoca moderna" ["truly characteristic of our modern times"]. Lengthy narratives have finally been replaced by "concetto di immediatezza, di velocità, di sintesi" ["immediacy, velocity and synthesis"], thanks to a new, ground-breaking language (Rubino, "Tavole a quadretti"). As we can see, Rubino is very careful not to base his argument on readers' enthusiasm for comics. Rather, he highlights the affinity between the intrinsic qualities of comics and that of Fascism as a modern, powerful and forward-looking movement. Fascist pedagogue Luigi Volpicelli gave evidence of a common view of children as naïve and vulnerable readers when he said that, "l'adulto va ritrovando nel libro che legge quello che vi cercava ed il fanciullo, invece, vi cerca quello che trova" (59) ["while adults find what they are looking for in books, children just look for what they find"]. Moreover, at the Fascist conference on children's literature that would take place in November 1938, intellectuals and pedagogues emphasised the necessity for books for children to deal with topical political and social themes, and to be informed by Fascist values. The main argument against translation was based on the conviction that Italian children would not benefit from foreign influences, and that the latter would have a corrupting effect. By showing how the communicative structure of comics would in fact reflect and contribute to Fascist education Rubino was therefore arguing for the pedagogical value of both foreign and Italian comics.

The fact that both those speaking in defence of comics and those condemning them claimed to do so in the interest of Fascist education is revealing of the inner tension between conservative and progressive qualities within Fascist ideology. Mussolini's admiration for certain aspects of American culture (Gentile), including Walt Disney's cartoons, is renowned, and so is his attempt to modernise the country "under authoritarian premises" (Ben-Ghiat 3). However, as an anti-democratic and socially conservative movement, Fascism strongly rejected certain aspects of modernity, and its progressive qualities were counterbalanced by traditionalist tendencies. In this context, childhood provided a perfect symbolic category of continuity through renewal, and children's literature functioned both as a repository

of traditional values and as a means for educating new Italians, thus enabling the anthropological revolution of Fascism.

However, partly thanks to its marginality, children's literature (and comics in particular) also served as a means of innovation and even challenging of traditional norms of the genre. While, as argued above, eliminating balloons and replacing them with written captions restores a more traditional narrative voice, the effects on the reader are not always predictable. Talking about his experience as an avid reader of comics during Fascism, Italian writer Italo Calvino explains how, by pushing the omniscient narrator out of the picture, captions actually increased readers' imaginative power:

> Il versificatore non aveva la minima idea di quel che poteva essere scritto nei balloons dell'originale, perché non capiva l'inglese o perché lavorava su cartoons già ridisegnati e resi muti. Comunque io preferivo ignorare le righe scritte e continuare nella mia occupazione favorita di fantasticare dentro le figure e nella loro successione. (121)
>
> [Translators didn't have the slightest idea of what was written inside the original balloons, either because they didn't know English or because they worked on comics that had already been deprived of the text. In any case, I used to ignore the written text and just use my fantasy to interpret the succession of images.]

At first sight, the case of comics translated into Italian at the beginning of the twentieth century seems to support a traditional view of both children's literature and translation as ideologically conservative. According to this view, and owing to their marginal position, translations are representative of more conservative norms (Even-Zohar 45–6). Although conservative and didactic elements are certainly present in the Italian comics under review, this is only part of the story. As we read in Calvino's testimony, the removal of balloons could have the opposite effect of stimulating readers' creativity and fostering their freedom of interpretation. Moreover, if comics could enter the Italian literary system almost unnoticed, it is precisely because they were perceived as throw-away literature, with little or no literary value. Thanks to the flexibility of the medium and the creativity of Italian cartoonists, comics survived and thrived despite the criticism of intellectuals and pedagogues. We should also remember that, in spite of the totalitarian ambitions of the regime, Italy still had an open market economy (Forgacs and Gundle), therefore the financial gain associated with comics was an important factor in determining their survival well into the 1930s. We have seen how original and translated comic strips published in the first three decades of the twentieth century challenged some of the conservative and repressive norms of children's literature. The following discussion will show how this period prepared the ground for a ground-breaking cultural phenomenon, that is the translation of serialised American comics.

Comics Craze and Fascist Censorship

The mid to late 1930s have been described by some historians as "the years of consent" (De Felice) during which the regime's totalitarian traits became more visible. Although the actual consent enjoyed by Fascism has been questioned by scholars (Corner) who warn us of the risk of confusing reality with Fascist propaganda, it is undeniable that efforts to achieve widespread and popular support through censorship and propaganda intensified in those years. This led to a paradoxical situation where translations were extremely successful with readers and economically rewarding for publishers, while at the same time, being condemned for clashing with Fascism's nationalist claims and rhetoric of self-sufficiency.

This was also the time when the fascination with American culture and society reached its peak, as we can see from the overwhelming success of Hollywood movies (Ricci) and jazz music. The 'swing craze' which hit Italy in the 1930s, providing young Italians with a rebellious, nonconformist musical experience, was followed by the 'comics craze' (Gadducci, Gori, and Lama 14), bringing major changes to the cultural landscape of Italy. On 17 December 1932, the first issue of *Jumbo* was published by Lotaro Vecchi, featuring for the first time almost exclusively American comics, with the text contained in balloons (although still accompanied by rhymed captions). This proved to be a watershed in the history of Italian children's magazines, leading to a proliferation of new magazines publishing mostly American comics, such as *L'Avventuroso* (1934), *L'Audace* (1934), *Giungla!* (1938). Characters such as Flash Gordon, The Phantom and Mandrake the Magician became immensely popular with Italian readers of all ages, while raising concerns among Fascist pedagogues and intellectuals.

If we look at the titles of these magazines, we can see how a new emphasis was placed on risk, adventure and escapism. While the children's periodicals published at the beginning of the century addressed young readers as their primary audience, and made this very clear from their titles, the new magazines targeted a more diverse readership. The broadening of the intended audience was a revolutionary feature of 1930s comics, and one which brought them even closer to the original American comics. As already mentioned, the first comic strips which appeared in American Sunday supplements at the end of the nineteenth century were not intended for children, since they addressed political and social issues in a satirical manner. However, already in 1924, a survey showed that approximately 84% of American urban children and teenagers were regular readers of Sunday papers (Batchelor 275). In the 1930s, despite the growing number of magazines tailored for teenagers, Sunday comics continued to be consumed by a mixed audience of young adults and adults.

In the Italian context, the fact that comics were no longer seen as exclusively children's products granted more freedom to translators and Italian cartoonists, who could now express their creativity beyond the didactic dimension of children's literature. On their part, comic magazines were often keen to emphasise that they did not address children as their primary audience, as a way of obtaining permis-

sion to deviate from the cultural norms of writing and translating for children (Oittinen). This is made clear in several editorial messages published in *L'Avventuroso*, such as the following one from 24 January 1937: "*L'Avventuroso* non è un giornale per bambini ma per tutti e in special modo per giovinetti e signorine. [. . .] Non ci stancheremo mai di ripeterlo, finché ci saranno sordi in giro" (2) ["*L'Avventuroso* is not a magazine for children, but for everybody, and particularly teenage boys and girls. [. . .] We will keep repeating it as long as there are deaf people around"]. The message responded to the accusations of Fascist pedagogues, who had repeatedly denounced the harmful effects of American comics on Italian children. In an article comparing children's magazines to poisonous infiltrations, Giuseppe Fanciulli would make direct reference to *L'Avventuroso*, saying: "Giornale per tutti, sì, ma acquistato specialmente da ragazzi" (452) ["It might well be 'for everybody', but it is consumed primarily by children"]. If we consider that comics were seen as a worrying sign of fascination with American culture, the fact that they now reached a wider audience, beyond the control of children's educators, raised even more concerns with the regime. Moreover, the new visibility of comics also resulted in children's literature becoming less of a confined and enclosed space. Until then, children's and adults' magazines had been marked by a clear separation, as exemplified by the *Corriere dei Piccoli* being the children's counterpart to the *Corriere della Sera*.

Throughout the 1930s, comic magazines became inexpensive, disposable products, having a wide circulation among children and adults of all social classes. At a time when Fascism was striving for cultural and economic self-sufficiency, Italian children were over-exposed to foreign images and narratives, and this soon became a political issue of major importance. We should not forget that, since 1935, in correspondence with the colonial aggression against Ethiopia, Mussolini had launched a campaign for autarchy. This was paralleled by the attempt to reclaim and purify (*bonificare*) Italian language and culture from harmful influences coming from within and without. In September 1938, the racial laws were issued, leading to the persecution of Italian Jews and the oppression of African colonisers. In this context, the overwhelming presence of translation was interpreted as a sign of linguistic and moral decadence of the Italian nation, and a threat to the racial purity of Italians. In the first report of the Commission for the Purity of the Italian Language (*Commissione per l'Italianità della Lingua*) (1940), Giulio Bertoni claimed that: "Italian language means Italian thought. Our language is our nation" (qtd. in Klein 127).

This leads us to ask, what was the language of comics, and which nation did they address? Was it the homogenous and idealised nation addressed by Mussolini from his balcony overlooking Piazza Venezia, or was it the real nation, fascinated by foreign (especially American) culture and keen to escape the pervasive propaganda of the regime?

When comics began to be reproduced in the original format from the 1930s, the new communicative structure based on new text-image interaction broke free from traditional narrative and aesthetic constraints. In particular, the language of comics

created the illusion of speaking to children on the same level, and to be accessible to them without adult mediation. In this regard, Fanciulli's criticism is revealing of how the language of comics was perceived as foreign and potentially dangerous to children because of its liberating potential:

> Non è vero, infatti, che i 'consumatori' (non si può dire lettori) intendano con esattezza il poco intellegibile contenuto di quei racconti; ognuno se ne fa un' 'idea' con un'oscillante serie di immagini, molto somiglianti a quelle del sogno e non troppo lontane da quelle di un delirio. (454)
>
> [We cannot say that 'consumers' (for they cannot be called readers) extract any fixed meaning from those unintelligible stories; everyone gets their own 'idea' out of the oscillating series of images, resembling a dream which is not far from a delirium.]

Consumers is not a neutral term: it is often found with reference to consumers' society or consumerism, both of which were strongly criticised by the Fascist regime as emblematic of the moral decadence of American civilisation. As previously mentioned, the term *consumers* also implies a freedom of choice which was seen as problematic and even dangerous when children were concerned. Children's literature has been traditionally employed as a tool for promoting literacy skills, especially in a country such as Italy, where illiteracy rates remained high and Fascism carried out a campaign against dialects (Klein 22). Children and teenagers enjoyed comics precisely because, contrary to most children's texts, they were not informed by didactic aims, nor were they meant to improve their reading and spelling. Giuseppe Trevisani expresses this very clearly when describing his experience as a reader of comics during Fascism: "Questo giornalaccio tutto figure finalmente non insegnava niente. Non piaceva ai genitori, non piaceva ai professori. Era soltanto divertente, nella sua sciaguratagine, nel suo italiano a volte persino sconnesso" (13) ["This rubbish comic magazine, full of pictures, did not teach anything. Parents didn't like it, teachers didn't like it. It was only fun for its vulgarity, for its broken Italian"]. Interestingly, the language of comics is repeatedly described as a 'broken' and contaminated language; the words contained in the balloons are translations of a foreign text threatening the integrity of the national language/body, of which childhood was a powerful symbol.

Despite having been condemned on pedagogical and political grounds, the censorship of American comics followed an irregular and discontinuous pattern, which is not dissimilar to that of adult literature (Billiani). In the aftermath of the Bologna conference on children's literature in 1938, several measures were issued by the Ministry of Popular Education, all with the objective of reducing the presence of American comics on Italian children's magazines. Following the conference, Dino Alfieri, the head of the Ministry of Popular Culture which provided a centralised system of censorship and propaganda, issued a notice to all publishers, imposing the elimination of foreign materials, except for Disney, whose artistic and cultural value was acknowledged by Mussolini himself. The notice was reproduced

in some of the most popular children's magazines such as *Giuglia!* (11 December 1938) and *L'Avventuroso* (18 December 1938).

The fact that magazines felt the need to explain the reasons behind the disappearance of some of their favourite comic heroes is revealing of how these publications had built a new relationship with their readers based on accountability. For the first time, children and teenagers were addressed as consumers, with their rights and interests. Moreover, the periodical nature of magazines fostered an immediate dialogue with readers, which developed mainly through the correspondence section. *L' Avventuroso* offers a telling example of this. On page 3 of the 18 December 1938 issue, the editors reproduced the censorship measures received by the Ministry of Popular Culture, preceded by this message:

> In risposta alle molte lettere non sempre cortesi che riceviamo da qualche tempo, in seguito a modificazioni, variazioni, soppressioni, verificate nei nostri periodici, riportiamo qui sotto le norme emanate dal Ministero della Cultura Popolare, norme a cui devono uniformarsi tutti i giornali dedicati alla gioventù italiana [. . .] e alle quali ci atterremo con scrupolo e disciplina fascista, nella piena certezza di poter riuscire in miglior modo a soddisfare in nostril lettori che ci serberanno la loro cara amicizia.
>
> [In response to the (not always kind) letters we have been receiving for some time, following the changes, alterations and eliminations which have occurred in our magazine, we reproduce the norms circulated by the Ministry of Popular Culture, norms with which all children's magazines have to comply. [. . .] We intend to follow them with Fascist obedience and discipline, and we remain assured that we will still be able to satisfy all those readers who continue to be our friends.]

Throughout the 1930s, the Fascist regime's attitude towards comics (as well as all translated literature) continued to oscillate between condemnation and fascination, as shown by the attempts to exploit the new medium as a propaganda tool and by the growing 'hybridisation' of Italian comics. In some cases, foreign comics were completely transformed and disguised as Italian, such as Walter Booth's "Rob the Rover" (1920), who was turned by Enwer Bongrani into the young Fascist pilot "Lucio L'avanguardista" (*Jumbo*, 1932). In other cases, Italian cartoonists created hybrid characters who combined stylistic features of American comics with Fascist content. In the 1930s, even a traditionally apolitical magazine such as *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* began to feature some fascist comic characters, such as "Lio e Dado", two friends who belonged to the Fascist youth organisation Opera Nazionale Balilla (fig. 6). Despite being a product of Fascist propaganda, the two boys were also remindful of the more widely renowned Tim and Spud from "Tim Tyler's Luck" created by Lyman Young in 1928, and translated into Italian as "Cino and Franco" (1933). Initially published as individual strips in *Topolino* in 1933, "Cino e Franco" quickly became very popular with Italian readers, to the point that publisher Nerbini issued 27 editions of "Il Giornale di Cino e Franco" (1934–38) exclusively devoted to the couple's adventures (fig. 7). In creating "Lio e Dado",

Rubino exploited the successful format of "Cino e Franco", and selectively appropriated some aspects of the American comic strip. Despite being presented as an authentically Italian and Fascist product, it is easy to see that the story of these two inseparable boys follows a narrative and stylistic pattern that had been established in translation. Everything from the appearance of the two friends, one blond, one dark-haired, to their boisterous personalities reminds us of a younger, ideologically loaded version of "Cino e Franco", living a life of adventure and discovery.

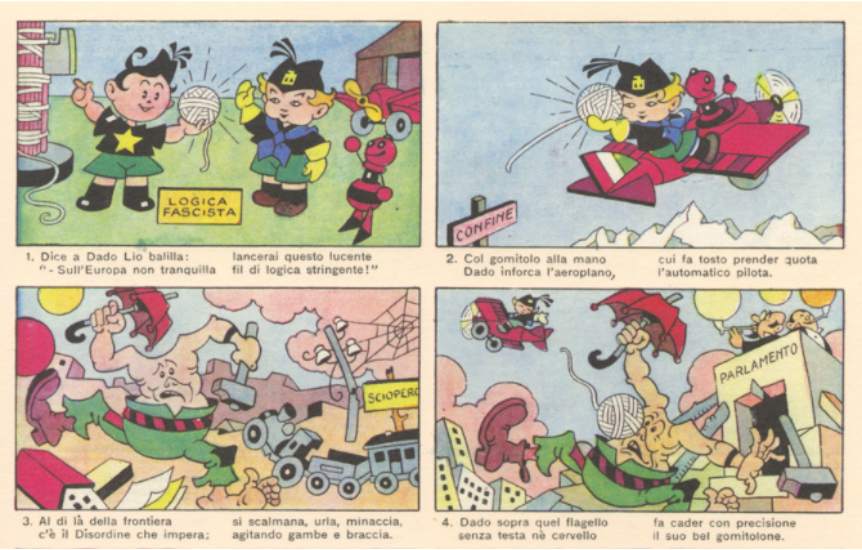

Figure 6: Detail from "Lio e Dado" by Antonio Rubino, in *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, 17 February 1934

Especially after 1938, the most common strategy to circumvent censorship and enable the publication of foreign comics became that of camouflage. American comics were increasingly disguised as Italian, through changing the characters' names and sometimes even their appearance. Between 1938 and 1941, Audax became known as Maresciallo ('marshal') Rossi, Jungle Jim was turned into Geo and Mandrake's name was Italianised into Mandrache, while Tarzan became Sigfrido. "L'Uomo Mascherato", Italian translation of "The Phantom", became "Il Giustiziere Mascherato" (Masked Crime-Fighter), and changed the colour of his skin-tight costume from red to green. Finally, the blond Brick Bradford (translated into Bruno Arceri) acquired dark hair and a darker complexion.

These strategies of domestication were clearly aimed at erasing the more superficially foreign traits of American comics, while continuing to publish the comic strips which were commercially successful in spite of the Fascist ban. It goes without saying that readers were bound to recognise their favourite comic heroes despite the camouflage. As a result, the domestication of foreign comics can be seen as an act of resistance rather than compliance, and one that sealed a tacit agreement between readers and cartoonists.

Figure 7: Detail from "Il Giornale di Cino e Franco", supplement to *L'Avventuroso*, 28 July 1935

The tightening of censorship also led to the creation of comic strips that 'looked like' translations, whilst being undeniably Italian and therefore acceptable in the eyes of the censors. Examples of comic characters that physically resembled American heroes, but spread truly Italian and Fascist ideals, include Dick Fulmine (fig. 8) and Joe Petrosino, two Italian-American policemen who operated in the United States. At a time when Fascist censorship was also targeting crime fiction—in 1938 the Ministry of Popular Culture had decreed that "L'assassino non deve assolutamente essere italiano e non può sfuggire in alcun modo alla giustizia" (qtd. in Crovi 52) ["the criminal should not be Italian and must not escape justice"]—, detective comics became a popular subgenre; not only did they fulfil readers' demands for American comics, they also presented Italians as heroes.

A definitive ban on comics was issued in 1941. At a time when Italy had just entered the Second World War, which would soon compromise the economy of the country, the Ministry of Popular Culture imposed the preventive censorship of over six million comics, including Disney's (Boero and De Luca 174). In July 1942, a racial census was imposed on all cartoonists and children's illustrators, with the aim of excluding all individuals of Jewish heritage. A few years before, Fanciulli had denounced how even a respectable magazine such as the *Corriere dei Piccoli* had been taken over by comic strips "ispirate da un gusto barbarico, grazie a Dio diversissimo dal nostro, con 'eroi' bianchi e negri, che divennero popolari proprio per la loro melensa balordaggine" (453) ["inspired by a barbarian taste, thank God so different from ours, with black and white 'heroes' who own their popularity to their foolishness and perversion"]. Such criticism is all the more interesting if

Figure 8: "Dick Fulmine" by Vincenzo Baggioli and Carlo Cossio, first appeared in *Albi dell'Audacia*, 29 March 1938

we consider that the *Corriere dei Piccoli* only published either Italian or heavily adapted foreign comics, and that none of the very few non-white characters featuring in the comic strips were portrayed as heroes. This makes Fanciulli's concerns even more revealing of how the large presence of American comics on the Italian market provoked a generalised fear of moral and racial corruption. This fear was associated with translation, an activity that was in itself perceived as a threat to the purity of Italian identity, disregarding the actual content of the texts.

A final example of how Fascist censorship contributed to the 'miscegenated' identity of comics can be found in "Tuffolino", an original comic strip created in 1942 by renowned children's author Federico Pedrocchi and cartoonist Pier Lorenzo De Vita (fig. 9). If we consider that the character of Tuffolino appeared at the same time as Topolino ('Mickey Mouse') was withdrawn from the market, it is clear that this little boy, despite bearing no resemblance with the famous Disney mouse, was a desperate attempt to replace the censored character.

Figure 9: Detail from "Tuffolino" by Federico Pedrocchi and Pier Lorenzo De Vita, in *Topolino*, 11 August 1942

Translating Comics: Repression or Creativity?

In historical studies of Italian Fascism, children's literature is usually mentioned with regard to the regime's strategies of indoctrination, as part of a wider policy of social control that included para-military youth organisations as well as school reforms (Paluello). However, as this article hopes to have shown, beyond the repressive interventions of the regime children's literature also represented a potential space for resistance and innovation. This is especially evident in the case of children's periodicals, which owing to their disposable nature and wide circulation, provided an ideological battleground, as well as a site for creativity and experimentation.

From the very beginning, comics were a hybrid product, which blurred the boundaries between the 'local' and the 'foreign'. The fact that they primarily addressed children, combined with the often collaborative (if not unknown) authorship and low literary status, meant that comics could be more heavily manipulated in translation. This led to the removal of balloons, according to a domesticating and overall conservative strategy of translation. However, despite entering the Italian field of children's literature in disguise, foreign comics had a profound effect on Italian comics, through a continuous process of cross-fertilisation and cultural influence.

We have seen how from the second half of the 1930s, the overwhelming presence of foreign and especially American comics became a threat to Fascist notions of identity based on racial purity and ideological homogeneity. Italian cartoonists responded with creative and resourceful solutions to ensure the survival of children's magazines, by then completely reliant on American comic heroes. Readers could continue to access comics almost until the outbreak of World War II. Strategies of disguising, camouflage, and pseudo-translation were employed with the aim of preserving the foreign 'flavour' of the stories, in opposition with the earlier attempt to adapt comic strips to the conventions of Italian children's literature. Far from disappearing, comics continued to strive and, whilst being affected by Fascist propaganda, they continued to provide a site where alternative narratives could be articulated and coexist with the official narratives of the regime.

In conclusion, the analysis of some examples of foreign and Italian comics published between 1908 and 1942 has shown how the same strategies of translation can serve different purposes and achieve different results according to the political and ideological context. The hybrid nature of comics and their 'translated' status made them more susceptible to being monitored and censored, but their inherent fluidity also meant that they were able to adapt to changing circumstances. In spite of its official function as an instrument of Fascist indoctrination, children's literature and particularly comics continued to provide a potentially subversive space. The formal innovation and experimentation of children's magazines was halted by the outbreak of World War II; however, the blossoming of children's literature in post-war Italy will build on this legacy.

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