

Book Review – Paolo Cardullo

Hague, Ian. *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels*. Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies 57. New York: Routledge, 2013.

The human *sensorium* is commonly understood to be limited to six senses. But what happens when, while *watching* a movie, for instance, we expect something to unfold? How do we make sense of our sensations of fear, loss, prediction, passing time, nostalgia and so forth - 35 “senses” according to a radical estimate (Howes, 2009)? To what extent do our surrounding environment and the power relationships we all embedded in affect our consumption of cultural objects? Cultural products are generally meant to be read, viewed, or listen to. Modernity has had a purifying effect on cultural objects, conceiving them in frameworks that are bound to specific disciplines and expertise or confining their consumption to often distant and mono-sensorial modes of fruition. However, arguments for a multisensorial approach to knowledge have now a sustained tradition within cultural studies and humanities. Ian Hague's book, *Comics and the Senses*, fosters this emergent tradition, with theoretical insights that go beyond the subject of his research. The latter – comics and graphic novels – proves to serve well the scope of investigating the mix of sensorial complexity in which audiences are thought to be immersed.

Hague's book radically criticises the 'object' of comics scholarship, a long-standing functionalist and mechanist understanding of this medium. This has traditionally investigated comics as a form of visual representation (Chapter 1): what is more visual, in fact, than a narrative built upon an ordered sequence of pictures (and sometimes words, these usually in the forms of characteristic bubbles)? *Comics and the Senses* suggests a new framework, built on comics as 'performance'. It gives a primary role to readers, artists, techniques of representation, narratives, even the paper on which comics are printed, as well as the context in which these are to be consumed. Comics are social events, in which 'the determination of what is or is not a comic lies with the producers and consumers of the medium rather than in any particular observable element' (page 16). There are historically determined aesthetics and conventions that make a work of art a comic.

Hague shows, chapter by chapter, how each sense is built upon others, refusing a

simplistic 'synaesthesia', the stimulation of one sense by way of another. At the same time, he engages with the performative dimension of comics, embedded in readers' productive role and their bodily presence in place. The book structure follows these objectives in four chapters (2-5) which test boundaries of accepted knowledge on human *sensorium*. After a critical review of the current scholarship on comics in Chapter 1, the book engages with Sight, the main mode of perception in Western epistemologies: Chapter 2 takes fully into account the physicality of perception and, therefore, the synergetic working of different but connected apparatuses of affects, sight being only one entangled with others. Multisensoriality is indeed the theme that goes through the book. Chapter 3 contests the simplistic translation of Sound into text (e. g. 'Bang!', or 'Swoosh!'), arguing rather for a holistic mode of perception which involves the surrounding environment as well as the reader as a critical producer of sounds in comics (would, for instance, a dog bark in an English 'Woof-Woof', or rather in an Italian 'Bau-Bau'?). In Chapter 4, Hague examines Touch, exploring the manner in which it allows the physical and material connection to the world, 'concretising our notions of the place we inhabit' (p. 97). We can translate other sensations and senses through our skin, which covers the whole human body. Touch 'emphasises the "objectness" of the comics' (p. 87), their materiality as physically embodied medium, via textures of printed pages or of technological interfaces (in digital productions). The chemical senses, Smell and Taste, are accounted for in Chapter 5. Although acknowledging that comics often work as an indirect and symbolic reminder to these sense, various 'sniffing systems' in comics invite more than ever reader's body in performing the story. The book strikes one of its best moment in addressing the profound entanglements that smell and taste have with time. In eliciting memories and emotions, 'by pulling us backwards into our memories and personal experiences' (p. 124), taste and smell re-evoke one's past more vividly than ever. Finally, Chapter 6 tests this rich theoretical framework with reference to comic artists that engage in various ways with reader's sense, in particular to Alan Moore (*V for Vendetta*, *Watchmen*, *Promethea*). The chapter investigates the multiple modalities of communication in Moore's work, as a successful example of 'mixing of forms' (p. 151).

For Hague, the materiality of comics and graphic novels is experienced by the body of the reader and it affects this in various ways. Comics are an interface where the body responds to stimuli and these cannot only be visual. Readers of *Visual Studies* are certainly familiar to critiques of ocularcentrism. Yet, many visual sociologists have stressed the importance of the visual in presenting academic arguments. A mild critique

to *Comics and the Senses* is that it presents only two visual reminders of the complex language present in comics (illustrations at pp. 55 and 159). This is certainly also due to academic conventions in presenting scholars' works as articles or books in standardised format (printed text). As Hague suggests, some authors and producers of comics are now working within a multisensorial framework (see Chapter 6 in particular). It would have been useful to support the book's theoretical issues with tangible references to comic art. Visual elements, in fact, work together with words in making and sustaining an argument.

Comics and the Sense reminds us that comics are polysemic, they reproduce a variety of different possible meanings. But also that their multisensory elements are 'at once fundamental and active in the production of meanings in the medium' (p. 118). Comics are in fact socially embedded performances, 'lived' in specific contexts made, for instance, of light conditions and interactions with others. Interestingly, Hague envisions the future of research in comics in 'participant observation, [comic-elicitation?] interview and experiment based research'. (p. 29)