

Comic Ideas

Reimagining Philosophical Practice in the Digital Age

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Abstract. *The paper claims that our increasingly visual mediascape opens up the possibility of imagining new ways of doing philosophy that take place through the medium of image at least as much as through the medium of word. Section 1 introduces the general question of the change of habits associated with the transition from page/word to screen/image, challenging the traditional skepticism regarding the cognitive reliability of images. Section 2 discusses the limits of the idea that screens are unavoidably destined to have a lethal impact on philosophical thinking, emphasizing how this conviction risks excluding philosophy from the novel cognitive ecology cultivated by the internet. Section 3 examines the conditions of possibility of «comicepts» – philosophical concepts created and communicated by leveraging the specific features of comics as a medium. Section 4 concludes by making a plea for a more liberal and inclusive philosophical practice based on the decoupling of “concept” and “verbal concept”.*

Keywords. Comics, Visual Thinking, Screen, Media Philosophy, Word and Image.

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1. Introduction: From Page/Screen to Word/Image

It seems no exaggerated to say that human cognition, as well as the human *ethos* more in general, is currently changing in such a way that its privileged surface is less and less the page and more and more the screen. In a short but very dense book discussing when and how the idea of a text became a full cultural object and the textbook habits were settled, Illich (1993) announced – firmly but not nostalgically – that «the book has now ceased to be the root-metaphor of the age; the screen has taken its place», since with the diffusion of various visual codes «the alphabetic text has become but one of many modes of encoding something» (Illich 1993, 3). At that period, the screen was that of the first kinds of rudimentary PCs, but times have run very fast since then, leading to personal devices such as tablets, smartphones, smartwatches, visors, and the like, which – not being confined to a unique fixed use – are «hypotelic» rather than «hypertelic» (borrowing the terms from Simondon 2017, 53-59). In other words, the multifunctionality and representational plasticity of the screen make such devices «super-artifacts» (Fasoli 2018): through a screen you can write a text, book a flight, buy an illegal weapon, watch a video, program a software, etc. by interacting with information that is dropped off personally, refreshed continuously, and displayed under the multiple vests of texts, images, sounds, and call to action. Things goes very differently with the page, which cannot host diverse, mobile windows, does not communicate through notifications, and can contain (preferably and more easily) only texts or (less frequently and with more technical difficulties and limits) static images.

For these reasons, it is true that – on the one hand – understanding screens exclusively from the perspective of images is quite narrowing, insofar as our standard, inherited conception of the image is *visually* informed: it reduces the experience of screens – which is largely made of touching – to what they enable *to see* seems to betray an imagocentric stance (Carbone & Lingua 2023). Nevertheless, on the other hand, one fundamental anthropological implication of the shift from the page to the screen – especially for the aim of the present contribution – is that visual languages have started to become less and less the domain of specialists, mainly from fine arts, and more and more daily mediators of communication, expression, and thinking, i.e., a true *culture-building* factor. We view, capture, save, create, modify, share, etc. an increasing number of video-images of all kinds as a part of our everyday routines: they have become central in every activity that connects humans to each other and reference points for information and knowledge (Burnett 2005). This is forcing us to acknowledge not only how we are accustomed to think by using «a panoply of non-sentential representations throughout our ordinary lives» (Camp 2007, 145), but also how without images we would never have representative and reflective thinking, that is, the very notion of a difference-in-the-relation between mind and world, idea and thing, internal and external, false and true (Malafouris 2007; see also Jonas 1962).

So, although the emergence of a pictorial or iconic turn may be considered even a cyclical trope in human history (Grønstad & Vågnes 2006), an epoch-making revolution is at stake today: the traditional «world-as-a-text» model, for which everything in the world exists in order to end in a book, has started to be challenged by the «world-as-a-picture» model, for which instead everything in the world exists in order to end in a video-gallery (Mirzoeff 1998; see already Sontag 1973). In this respect, the exposition to screens is the epitome of a tendency dating back at least to the first half of the 20th century, when media such as photography, cinema and television began to compete with – or, as someone fears, replace – the typographical medium in framing minds, gradually eroding the monopoly of the written word (Antinucci 2011). This is absolutely crucial, since it implies a direct challenge to the general skepticism – if not true hostility – about images and their cognitive reliability that characterizes our cultural and philosophical tradition from its very beginning. Indeed, at least starting from Plato, «a long history of suspicion attends to the role of the visual in western thought», so that even today we can experience «the longstanding distrust of visual methods as primary modes of epistemological work» (Drucker 2020, 10-11). On the contrary, especially with the mechanical reproduction of the words inaugurated by «the printing revolution» (Eisenstein 2005), written word became the general, exclusive model for all processes of communication and understanding, as we can now realize critically (e.g., Harris 2009; Kress 2000). For example, Ellul (1981, especially 172-201) – however prone to use apocalyptic tones – denounced that the direct proportionality between the triumphal progress of images and the regression of the word forced the latter into to a true humiliation, leading to the devaluation of an entire culture founded on articulate, deep and reflective reasoning.

This is symptomatic of a tendency to establish a separation between the two domains and registers of word and image, which are not only taken as opposing symbolic systems, but also put into a severe hierarchy: word, «marked by linear and classificatory rationality», predominates on image, «characterized by associative and fusional immediacy» (Carbone & Lingua 2023, 74). Words are devoted to bringing knowledge and thinking and images at best to exciting and entertaining: consequently, reflective thought is in danger when mind is exposed to fluxes of images, since they impose themselves as immediate, unquestionable givenness that does not demand a critical attitude, but rather mesmerizes, attracts, and hypnotizes. Images engender passive submission rather than attentive interlocution, by putting chaos, entertainment and depravation (*eternal childhood*) in place of order, reasoning and rectitude (*adulthood*): this was – for example – the “bookish” welcome given to

mass visual media such as cinema (Huizinga 1936, 75-76), comics (Wertham 1954) or television (Postman 1985; Sartori 1998). With these premises, philosophizing through images is simply impossible, as even who was highly sensitive to the expressive affordances of images claimed firmly: since «images are always concrete, never abstract», cinema (but the same goes with any image-medium whatsoever) is «an artistic and not a philosophic language»; it may be «a parable, but never a directly conceptual expression» (Pasolini 2005, 171). Ultimately, «pictures are for entertainment – if I wanted to make a philosophical point, I'd publish an essay in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*» (Smith 2006, 39).

Against this background, my contribution explores another possibility, taking seriously the anthropological consequences of the spread of screens, which – like it or not – promises to change our very habits of thought. I will argue that our increasingly visual mediascape opens up the possibility to imagine other ways of doing philosophy, following those media theorists who have begun to draw our attention to the peculiar media oblivion that has led philosophers not to put into question the expressive and technical media supporting their own everyday practices (e.g., Hartmann 2000; Kittler 2009). In particular, I will outline the possible contours of a new image of thought for which even philosophizing can take place through the medium of image at least as much as through the medium of word, by particularly focusing on the medium of comics, whose very structure avoids the opposition between the expressive resources of words and images. With this aim, Section 2 discusses the limits of the idea that screens are unavoidably destined to have a negative and even lethal impact on a series of abilities and attitudes that are strictly associated to philosophical thinking. Then, Section 3 engages with the case of philosophical comics from both a “transcendental” and an “empirical” perspective, by at the same time focusing on the condition of possibility of philosophical comics (Section 3.1) and using as an example *How to Do Concepts with Images: A Graphic Essay* (Pezzano et al. 2024) (Section 3.2). It is an experimental, philosophical comic that I have co-developed with the International School of Comics of Turin, Italy, as a part of two research projects on how the ongoing change in knowledge production and distribution may also affect philosophical practice. Finally, Section 4 concludes by making a plea for a more liberal and inclusive philosophical practice based on the decoupling of “concept” and “verbal concept”.

2. More than Meets the Eye? Philosophy in a New Epistemic Environment

At first glance, the current mediascape is anything but a good soil for the cultivation of philosophy. Indeed, the digital, screen-based mind would be one educated to reactivity rather than cognition, to excitement rather than reflection; we would be arrived at an important juncture in our intellectual and cultural history: the transition from the linear, focused and rational mind to the shallow or “grasshopper” mind. While the medium of the print advantaged slower and time-consuming, deep processes that include deductive and inductive inference, critical analysis, reflection, perspective taking, abstraction, evaluation, and the like, i.e., the supposed true reasoning, screen media advantages fast processing of multiple bits of information, that is, continuous monitoring, dart-quick task switching, fragmentary skimming, compulsory skimming, impatient skipping, superficial browsing, and so on (e.g., Carr 2020; Jackson 2008; Weigel & Gardner 2009; Wolf 2007). The so-called “multitasking” would actually be an incessant *task switching*, since our cognition is limited in its ability to pay attention: our ancient brains would not be made for this high-tech world constantly full of interferences and solicitations; we would inherently be information-seeking creatures who forage for information resources in a manner similar to how our ancient ancestors foraged for food and defended themselves from the dangers of life in the wild (Gazzaley & Rosen 2016; for a review of the criticisms of such an a-dialectical stance, see

Gannon 2002). Too much noise and confusion outside the mind produces noise and confusion inside it: we would have inexorably entered the post-alphabetic phase of «the Great Fusion» (Simone 2000), based on immediacy, deconstruction, genericity, vagueness, and undifferentiation, resulting in non-hierarchical and non-syntactical meanings. Finally, the condition of «secondary orality» (Ong 1982, 133), which has now already become of secondary *multisensorial co-presence* (from Zoom calls to metaverse environments), is exposing humanity to the threat of re-tribalization.

As someone condemns with very alarmist and contemptuous tones (e.g., Han 2023; Spitzer 2012; Türcke 2012), such a perpetual exposition to visual stimuli and information delivered in real time is eroding every room for contemplative life, there where the theoretical attitude grows up: a tribal mind is intrinsically uncritical. This would mean that our fast, time-consuming interaction with screens tends to dissolve the very preconditions for those *slow thinking* activities such as challenging preconceptions, showing groundlessness, demonstrating fallaciousness, arguing by giving reasons, and the like: not by chance, the parallel with fast food is commonly used to describe the digital condition of «infobesity». With these premises, deep thought, higher-order cognition and our very attentional faculty are something that has to be *protected* from screens, rather than being *exposable* through them, and the best possible “firewall” against digital colonialism is the page (Casati 2013). After all, the page would emerge as an alternative to scrollable, extendable screen-alike surfaces even originally, when – between the 4th and the 5th century – the *volumen*, a scroll of papyrus or parchment to be manually unrolled from left to right or from up to down, was replaced by the *codex*, substituting a homogeneous and continuous space filled with a series of juxtaposed written columns with a discontinuous series of clearly delimited unities (Agamben 2017, 100-102). Thus, the old-school book would possess some distinctive cognitive advantages to be preserved: the linearity and unity of its contents simplifies the comprehension; the stable, confined space of its pages allows one to keep an eye on many thoughts at a time without being tempted by *doomscrolling*; its intrinsic *offline status* offers a relative isolation from the intrusion of external sources of information. Further, the dense word-lines of the page provide the opportunity to see very little, freeing us to see *in our mind* (Mendelsund 2014), a feature that becomes healing when humanity – even before the coming of YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, etc. – is «increasingly inundated by a flood of prefabricated images» that risks making us lose «the basic human faculty» of «bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut», precisely in the sense of «bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters on a white page» (Calvino 1988, 91-92).

Definitely, preserving this ability to see with the mind’s eyes seems even more urgent when philosophy sets in. Attentive reading, reasoning, analyzing, understanding, inferring, classifying, arguing, reflecting, problematizing, abstracting, and so on and so forth: all that is the daily bread of the philosophical work, which is precisely based on the processing of *texts*. Indeed, it is the word that offers those general, decontextualized and disembodied meanings which lie at the very heart of philosophical practice, at their best represented by highly disincarnate ideas such as “being”, “absence”, “truth”, “freedom”, “meaning”, “categorical”, and so on. It is the realm of the invisible, of the pure intelligible: something that has to be understood by being conceptualized through words, not to be seen through external images. From this perspective, the mediascape may even be increasingly visually based, but philosophy can only be supported by the medium of word-writing: to fight a situation that is «subverting the capacities for individuals and societies to create the conditions for philosophy», we would never forget that to create philosophers «it is to writing and print that we must continually turn» (McLaren 2012, 388, 410). Such a *media conservatism* may appear as a mere snobbish attitude, but at a closer look it may better reveal a true transcendental limit. Indeed, the media conditions of possibility of philosophy appear as actually indissociable from the word, since *only* writing can facilitate reasoning and

enable abstract and theoretical thinking, as it has been variously claimed in anthropology (Goody 1977; 1986), media studies (Havelock 1986; Olson 1994; 2017; Ong 1982), media philosophy (Stetter 1999), philosophy of mind (Menary 2007), philosophical anthropology (Sloterdijk 2012, 53-56), and genealogical inquiry (Sini 2016).

Hence, the peculiar «consistency» of philosophy would derive from the fact that «it is written»; in this way, ideas are recorded «in principle forever», becoming ruminable «over and over again» for present as well as future thinkers, which opens up the opportunity to move us «away from questions that are concrete and particular» towards «the generality and abstractness» of the arguments. Saying that writing is «a sufficient condition for formal philosophy» is too much, but it «certainly seems to be necessary» (Appiah 2003, 339-353). However, the very meaning of writing is changing even drastically today, going in the direction of a syncretic or extended practice that integrates words and images in various ways (Montani 2020) and breaking the exclusive link between thinking and words (Flusser 1997, 41-60). Thus, it is at least legitimate to ask if the historical fact that philosophy had the alphabet as its privileged evolutive partner *eo ipso* implies that its source coincides with its only possible end in a both teleological and chronological sense. What was originally illegitimate, is it meant to be such forever? Does the *de facto* determine the *de jure*? And what if the *de facto* changes? Does it become possible to write philosophy differently? The problem is huge: if we keep firm that philosophical thinking can have no other evolutive partner in the future, then the contingency of the empirical or historical-transcendental condition of philosophy (whose existence is already no small concession for many) determines an eternal, univocal situation, and philosophy has to be screened from screens, always returning to the shelter of a page filled with words.

The limit with such an outcome is that it risks seriously excluding philosophy from the novel cognitive ecology that internet is cultivating, a transformation of our very epistemic environment that would be extremely shortsighted to take as uniquely detrimental and alien to the human mind (Clowes 2019a; 2019b). After all, even those who are worried about the current change of our cognitive landscape envisage as a solution the development of a «biliterate brain» that is not split between the page and the screen but is rather steeped in the best of both (Wolf 2018, 125-138). So, the key question is if this can also apply to philosophy: is it possible to develop something like a biliterate philosophical brain, here in the sense of a mind that is able to think philosophically through images as well as through words? When the production and distribution of knowledge are increasingly a matter of visualization, we can and probably should ask if a renewal of philosophy is possible and even what kind of improvements we could expect (or, at least, hope to obtain) from it.

This is where comics can come in, being particularly prone to support forms of «biliterate» writing/reading able to combine the virtues of the old-school, deep reading and those of the new-school reading (Calabrese et al. 2021).

3. Comicepts: Philosophizing through Comics

3.1. Comics as a Medium: On the Conditions of a Graphic Philosophy

Indeed, comics blend image and word «to create a unified, albeit complex, whole» (Meskin 2009, 235) in which images are not treated as mere illustrations, but as a true co-worker in the process of sense-making. In comics, word and image intermingle, interanimate, resonate, and interweave, providing a «double orientation» (Sousanis 2015, 64) that gives them «equal ontological priority» (Wartenberg 2012). The verbal and the visual collaborate in generating meaning, or – more precisely – they co-explore all the range of interactions from convergence to divergence (McCloud 1994, 138-161). Thus, comics marries

the apparently opposite virtues of words (linear, discursive, discrete, etc.) and those of images (simultaneous, iconic, holistic, etc.) in such a way that it factually disproves the belief that images and visuality are as such immediate and universal, not requiring any learning process or cultural convention to operate meaningfully (Cohn 2013). Furthermore, this wedding is such that a true mash-up between them takes place: on the one hand, images are treated as words, namely, they are used as a way of saying things, exposing ideas, suggesting points, and so on; on the other, words are treated as images, insofar as the style of presentation of the text (font, dimension, colour, placement, etc. the so-called “lettering”) contributes to the work’s meaning (Hudson Hick 2012). Ultimately, this has as a consequence also the full exposition of a condition that is as trivial as overlooked in traditional texts: even letters are graphic signs occupying a space, so that word-writing is however an exercise in graphic design (Holbo 2012). However, in comics such a process leaves the background and becomes an explicit performance, giving birth to a «spatio-topical system» revolving around the design of the page intended as a «hyperframe» hosting panels, layers, threads, balloons, gutters, frames, etc. whose composition is not just guided by aesthetic taste, but is an essential factor in sense-making and meaning-communication (Groensteen 1999).

So, «what would it mean to do philosophy, to theorize in comics, not just about them?» (Mitchell 2014, 263). At first glance, comics appear as highly refractory to supporting philosophical reflection: not only are they contaminated by images, but these images are often associated with childishness, simplification, frivolity, superficiality, fantasy, and so on. From this perspective, if a comic is ever philosophical, it would be so only *in spite of* its images and never *thanks to* them. In other words, it would be philosophical merely occasionally and extrinsically – at best, it might bring abstract problems to life in a stimulating and accessible way (McLaughlin 2005; 2017), which would amount to no more than an entertaining and popularizing function. So, if comics are to be philosophical in an intentional and intrinsic way – by truly presenting, understanding, and answering philosophical questions (Cowling & Cray 2022, 11) – they must be capable of making arguments by wedding word and images into a unique mode of philosophical “writing + drawing”: this would constitute a true «graphic philosophy» (Wartenberg 2023, 238-289). Drawing on the notions of «means conditions» (Livingston 2006), «Best Tool Principle» (McClelland 2019), and «formal means» (Nilsson 2024) that have emerged in debates on “film as philosophy”, we can argue that at least two conditions must be satisfied to achieve such a «graphic philosophy».

First, the traditional philosophical text should not be taken as a model for the format of a philosophical comic: a paper and a graphic essay should perform different tasks and be differently suited to diverse context and aim – arguably not in the sense that the latter gets involved merely for educational purposes, as a kind of philosophy “for young people” or “for dummies”. *Second*, comics should be genuinely regarded as a medium – that is, a means capable of expressing and addressing anything, also within the philosophical domain. Not only should the graphic discourse of comics be able to engage with concepts as well as with stories, facts, and so on – just like the traditional text – but a philosophical comic should not focus solely on comics themselves (as was paradigmatically the case with McCloud 1994; see also the pioneering Sousanis 2015). After all, a philosophical paper is not typically a reflection on writing in general, much less on academic writing specifically.

In this respect, there are at least four elements that may pave the way for having true “comicepts”,¹ that is, concepts created and communicated by leveraging the specific features of comics as a medium. *First*, the intrinsic multimodality of comics – that someone

¹ I owe the expression to Nilsson (2024), who adopts the term «cinecepts» to refer to philosophical concepts created through audio-visual means. I have also adopted it in the study of possible «gamecepts», that is, philosophical concepts created through videogame means, in Pezzano (forthcoming).

even reads in terms of multisensoriality (Hague 2014) – appears as particularly well-suited for meta-discursive exploration, at least more than any monomodal form that can develop on just one level, thus being unable to go beyond a diminished meta-referentiality (Cook 2017). This can support the generation of “objectifying”, “reflective” or “distancing” effects that are a crucial part of any critical, argumentative, analytic, etc. thinking. *Second*, comics occupy a kind of intermediate position between the book and the hypertext, which gives them a kind of “tree-like + rhizomatic” dual nature. Comic discourse still takes place on the confined, ordered space of the page, i.e., within a fixed, static environment able to support reflection and inferential reasoning, where the philosophical discourse finds its own comfort zone. At the same time, a comic page is not exclusively hierarchized and horizontal, but also allows us to navigate and participate in the sense-making, as well as to experiment with the various layouts displayable on screens in a more flexible way (Calabrese & Zagaglia 2017; Sousanis 2015, 58-63; Eisner 1990, 147-161). *Third*, comics do not require advocating for an anti-propositional stance opposing word and image. This is crucial not to oppose the traditional, verbal practice of philosophy to a hypothetical, visual one, as if the latter would be supposed to get rid of those alphabetical resources which have nurtured the former. *Fourth*, the cartoonist character proper of comic images (which does not mean that all comic images are as such cartoons, obviously) implies a peculiar kind of abstraction: an «amplification through simplification», according to which details are not eliminated but selected, in such a way to both focus attention towards a certain idea and stimulate an active filling up, resulting in conceptualized images (McCloud 1994, 30-37).

Calvino once wrote that the «wrangle» between philosophy and literature is such that while the eyes of philosophers «see through the opaqueness of the world, eliminate the flesh of it, reduce the variety of existing things to a spider’s web of relationships between general ideas», that is, to an impersonal chessboard with abstract chessmen, the writers come and replace them «with kings and queens, knights and castles, all with a name, a particular shape, and a series of attributes royal, equine, or ecclesiastical», rolling out «great dusty battlefields or stormy seas» (Calvino 1997, 39-40). So, while literature is closer to concreteness and particularity, philosophy is more tempted to fly towards the higher sky of abstractness and generality. However, this is also part of philosophy’s virtues, since it is not at its best when it is «too fully clothed in human flesh, too sensitive to immediate, lived experience» (Calvino 1997, 41). On these bases, literature may offer a kind of corrective to the «phantom lightness of ideas», by reconciling it with the «heavy weight of the world» (Calvino 1997, 49). For Calvino, literature turns type into tokens, in order to bring concepts to life: it is not the king in general or even The King “as such”, but *this* king, in *this* situation, etc. Yet, such an operation of instantiation betrays an unescapable, ekphrastic nature in literature: literary images *are made of words*, as the same Italian writer acknowledges, by stressing that in this «clash» each side is «perfectly well aware that the raw material of its own constructions is the same as that of the opposition: words» (Calvino 1997, 40).

But things change with comics, which can also use the different raw material of images, and not just to provide a “storytelling” corrective, viz., a way of producing a kind of philosophical *Biblia pauperum* for educational purposes, or an “existential” rebalancing, viz., a way of (re)connecting the austere, philosophical discourse to the living, everyday experience. Rather, a true contribution to the very process of conceptual elaboration can be at stake, and one that is not – for example – limited to the terrain of ethics, which is more likely called in also when the possible encounters between literature and philosophy are considered (e.g., Diamond 1993; Gaita 2004, 55-60; Nussbaum 1990). Indeed, even without concluding that philosophical discourse is grounded in «absolute metaphors» that are not translatable back into conceptual language (Blumenberg 2010), it has to be remarked how philosophers have always had recourse to plenty of (*verbal*) pictures in their theoretical works in a very inventive and surprising way, in spite of their pronounced prejudice against

the concreteness and immediacy of images (see, e.g., Falzon 2002, 3-5; Mitchell 1986, 5-6, 158). Such images play a role that is not just illustrative, but rather expositive and even argumentative: they are used as a way to illuminate ideas, as pathways to the understanding of philosophical thinking, and even as tools for structuring thought itself – namely, they are a key element of the very design of concepts.

In this respect, comics could guarantee a “boost” to such a practice, precisely for their ability to make a truly visual image out of a merely verbal image, opening the possibility to develop a theoretical, metaphysical, ontological, and so on *graphic* discourse. If «philosophers have a great taste for images», to the point that «there is no trade that requires more of them», but at the same time they «hide them under dull-gray words» (Valéry 1976, 68), then we can dress such images up in a truly visual fashion through comics, exploring new ways of making points, presenting ideas, and defending arguments, all without abandoning the “safe zone” guaranteed by the page.

3.2. How to Do Concepts with Images: An Example of Graphic Philosophy

In this vein, *How to Do Concepts with Images* (Pezzano et al. 2024) – the result of nearly two years of collaborative work, particularly with the scripter and letterer Manfredi Toraldo and the artist Lorenzo Livrieri – presents a multi-layered structure comprising eleven comic sections: five narrative sections [NS], five conceptual sections [CS], and one final hybrid section [HS]. Narrative and conceptual sections proceed in parallel but remain independent. Thus, one can not only read the comics in the main order, but it is also possible to begin by reading all the narrative sections and then all the conceptual ones – or vice versa. Alternatively – and hypothetically – one might choose to read only the narrative sections or only the conceptual ones. In addition, the comic sections are followed by a verbal afterword and a detailed, commented bibliography, for a total of 169 pages. Therefore, the structure and contents of the work can be summarized as follows:

- NS1: *Imago* (12 pages).
 - CS1: *Mental Habits* (25 pages). Explores the plural nature of modes of thought from a perspective that spans philosophy of mind and historical-theoretical media studies.
- NS2: *Arthur* (7 pages).
 - CS2: *Comics as a Medium* (12 pages). Defends the full-fledged status of comics as a medium, with a primary focus on comics studies.
- NS3: *Simone* (7 pages).
 - CS3: *“Word VS Image” or “Word & Image”?* (17 pages). Challenges the canonical opposition between word and image in light of investigations in visual culture studies, visual thinking studies, developments in media theory, and research on the problem of epistemic injustice.
- NS4: *Anteros, Harmonia, and Jorge* (9 pages).
 - CS4: *Encounters and Clashes of Medial Civilizations* (31 pages). Offers a historical-conceptual framework for understanding the “media panic” that accompanies the transformative shifts in cultural transmission, from the alphabet to the web.
- NS5: *X* (5 pages).
 - CS5: *Towards a Post-Literate Rationality?* (13 pages). Addresses the “myth of the written word”, outlining the possible contours of a post-alphabetic rationality.

- HS: *Credits* (5 pages). Concludes with brief reflections on the nature and future of philosophy from a metaphilosophical standpoint.
- *Afterword* (7 pages). Retrospectively introduces the genesis and purpose of the comics.
- *Bibliography* (19 pages). Provides and explains the references for each of the expository sections of the work.

Such a multimedia, stratified context enabled us to accomplish things that would not be possible in a traditional text. I will highlight just three examples (see the figures in the appendix). First, the spatial structure of the book as a medium – both graphic and mental – is thematized by being displayed in a way that makes it visible as if from the outside, resulting in a more refined meta-discourse than the typical one in which the author would merely have spoken about the book (Figs. 1-3, from NS4). Second, the problematization of the adamant belief that images inevitably contaminate thought is both shown and through the staging an interaction between two young, irreverent streamers and an old, moaning professor, offering a semi-fictional and meta-medial presentation of the challenging encounter between “new digital minds” and “traditional bookish minds” (Figs. 4-8, from NS4). Third, the idea that the abstracting mind would have taken shape by interiorizing the written word is co-discussed both verbally and visually, forming “dual” logical sequences that rely on the symbiotic integration of words and images (Figs. 9-13, from CS4). All of this can happen without abandoning written words, renouncing linearity, exiting the academic practice of quoting, or giving up the ability to pause, move backward or forward, and allow readers to stop, analyze, reflect, re-read, meditate, and deepen their understanding. In short, there is no need to invoke – as is the case with some perspectives inspired by design – a «non-discursive approach to philosophy» (Hummels et al. 2022) or a «philosophy without texts» promoting a non-verbal investigation of “show, don’t tell” (Rietveld 2022; see also Mol 2022; Rietveld & Kiverstein 2022).

Patently, making also visible what was once just sayable cannot come without having effects on philosophical practice itself, which is dragged into a process of true alteration. Yet, precisely the demand of designing complex and coherent “visual + verbal” discourses made by comics can pave the way for learning and discovering something new about philosophy itself. For example, we could find how attributing a character to an author, as well as to potential readers, can contribute to the effective development of the discourse, marking a difference with the currently predominant format of philosophical research, viz., the paper, which prescribes a pure impersonality in the sense that it has to be designed by and for “angelic” consciousnesses whose personal traits should be thinned to nothingness (see Danto 1986, 135-161). In *How to Do Concepts with Images*, the leading essayist (Ena) is not anonymous or external to the discourse but instead suggests a specific gender, age, neuropsychological condition, tone, etc. and overall attitude. This characterization not only makes the epistemic standpoint of the work more explicit but also contributes to its articulation (Fig. 14).

Especially in the analytic tradition, the prevailing canon of academic research calls for an entirely disembodied philosophizing. However, the idea that «if a thinking situates itself, embodies itself, or historicizes itself, then it is not profound, and worse, not philosophy» reflects «a rigid and dogmatic sense of what philosophy “is” and what it is not» (Sanchez 2011, 40). Are we certain that this should be taken as an indisputable given rather than something to be reconsidered and amended? Once again, the time is ripe to ask whether such a firm belief is also induced by the media conditions that have shaped philosophical practice throughout its history. Is it truly desirable – and even before that, possible – for such a practice to remain unchanged in the face of a new, increasingly visual mediascape?

4. Conclusions: A Plea for Media Pluralism

In this paper, I discussed the idea that our familiarity with screen-based devices opens up the possibility of imagining new ways of doing philosophy that take place through the medium of image at least as much as through the medium of word. Section 1 introduced the general question of the change in habits associated with the transition from page/word to screen/image, challenging the traditional skepticism regarding the cognitive reliability of images. Section 2 highlighted that considering screens as uniquely destined to have a lethal impact on philosophical thinking risks excluding philosophy from the novel cognitive ecology cultivated by the internet. Section 3 examined the conditions of possibility of true «comicepts» – concepts created and communicated by leveraging the specific features of comics as a medium. In doing so, I used as an example *How to Do Concepts with Images*, a philosophical comic that I have co-designed with the International School of Comics of Turin, Italy (Pezzano et al. 2024). This reference was not intended to serve as a model or paradigm for philosophizing through comics – not least because its unavoidably experimental and pioneering nature makes the design choices structurally revisable, disputable, and improvable.

Ultimately, I defended the idea that philosophy may have recourse to comics not in order to enliven its discourse, that is, to make it more entertaining and the like, but as a way of testing and discovering new methods for philosophizing in an increasingly visual age. As I have stressed, one of the advantages of comics is that they lend themselves to trying to do concepts with images by preserving some of the traditional virtues of the wordy page at the same time. Indeed, the fact that we are witnessing the end of a monopoly does not mean that the monopolist – in this case, the written word – is next to disappear, being supplanted by another one: there is no advantage in reiterating the same reductive attitude which one was trying to question, as if the day of substituting an old-fashioned medium with an updated one is next to come. Being truly liberal does not mean to exchange one absolutism with another, but rather to reject the very absolutistic and monopolistic logic, admitting that it is precisely through confrontation and even competition, i.e., through relations, that different capabilities can be better shaped up and specific niches can be distinguished. In other words, imagining philosophizing through comics does not engage in usurping the function of the book or bidding farewell to the text, thereby making comics the ultimate philosophical medium. If on the one hand, we can say that “whereof one cannot (solely) write, thereof one can (also) draw”, on the other we should also remark that “whereof one cannot (solely) draw, thereof one can (also) write”, since it is a matter not of contraposition but of collaboration: definitely, comicepts, if they have a chance to truly exist, are not supposed to replace traditional verbal concepts.

Thus, the challenge is starting to explore the specific way in which we can do philosophy through comics, discovering new possibilities as well as downgrading some of the old ones. For the comic medium is just like the other media: on the one hand, it is suitable for doing much more things than we tend to assume, exploring the most frivolous genres as well as the deepest ones; on the other, it constrains our opportunities, in the double sense that it discloses some possibilities and conceals others, since unveiling and veiling, incomes and losses, go always hand in hand in a medium. However, it does not suffice to say that what has to be done is embarking on the exploration of such a territory in the first person, be it for no other reason than an entire social practice and shared culture is required as a background. The spread of new communicational forms of open dialogue between peers, in which research consists, cannot be merely delegated to personal goodwill: it primarily depends on the existence of a given sociocultural humus. Therefore, the lack of comic “graphic essays” with a specific philosophical purpose as an autonomous genre is not merely attributable to individual old-school philosophers reluctant to engage with their intentional

design routinely, nor can it simply be attributed to a conspiracy by the supposed spectre of the “priests of the word”. Rather, there are numerous practical motivations, ranging from economic and technical factors to educational and institutional ones. After all, on the one hand, a pen and some sheets of paper are inexpensive and do not pose the problem of mechanical obsolescence. On the other, we are trained to write with words from the earliest stages of schooling, the parameters for blind peer review of papers are well-established, and there are no proper infrastructures for producing and disseminating philosophy in alternative formats. In short, the entire academic system of incentives is currently heavily text-centric – if not even more narrowly paper-centric (Pezzano & Gualeni 2024).

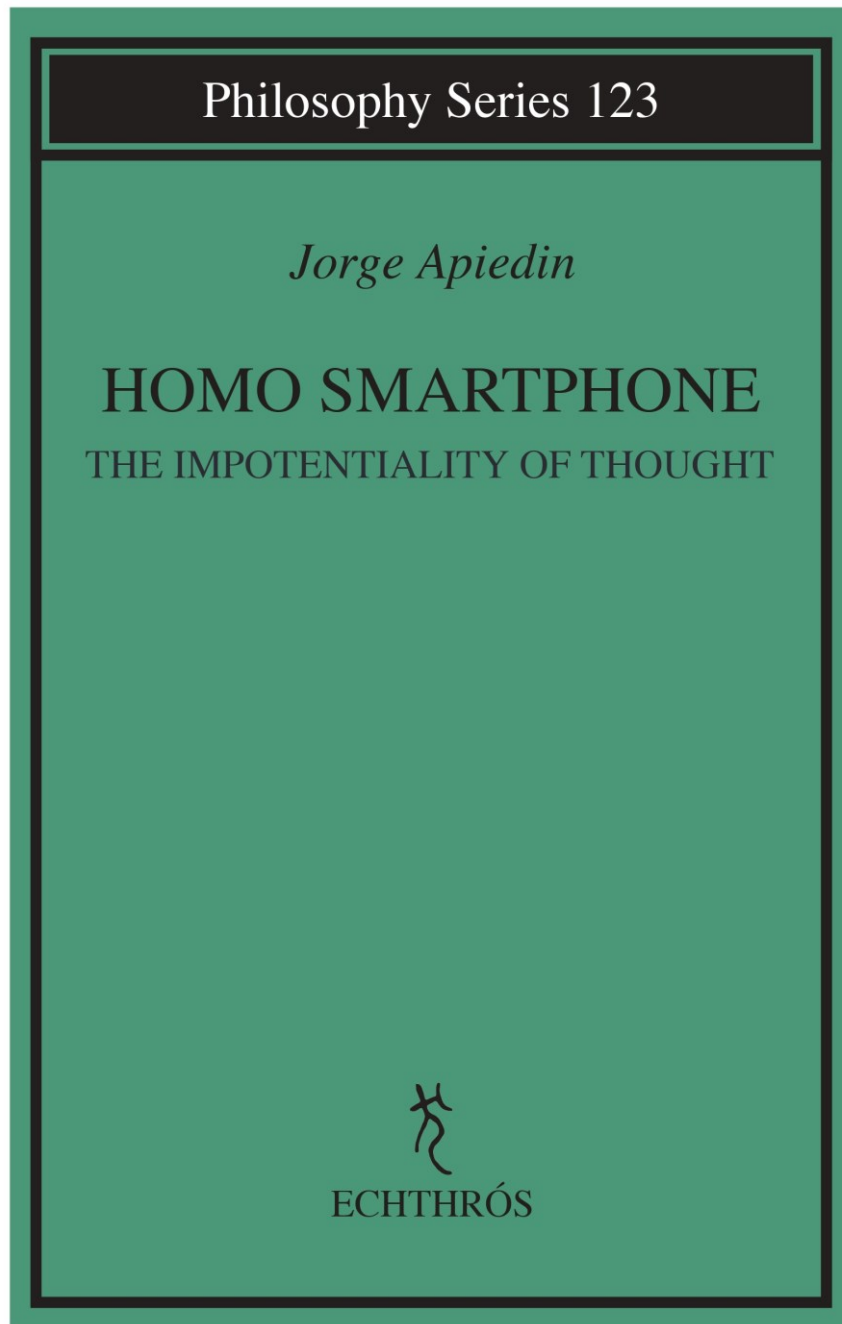
Nevertheless, all that should not become a reason for rejecting any kind of change *a priori*. If philosophical knowledge can be seen as the activity of designing those particular semantic artifacts named concepts (Floridi 2019, 27-52), then today we can at least consider the possibility that such a design may also be done by means other than written words – returning a little bit of the graphical soul to such designing. In this way, we can leverage the «digital’s cleaving power» of “cutting-and-pasting” features of the world and our corresponding assumptions about them (Floridi 2017) in order to finally decouple “concept” and “verbal concept”. Maybe philosophers have hitherto only *written* the world, and the point is now to (also) *visualize* it – Is this too comic an idea?

Acknowledgments

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Figures

A) *Figs. 1-3* [drafts from NS4]. A (meta)display of a (semi-fictional) traditional book, presented both as a material device and as a *forma mentis*.



was printing these pages, a news story reached me that is as tragic as it is revealing of the dark times we are heading – if not even running wild – towards. A boy died in a hit-and-run accident because he was living trapped in the mental cobweb of images that the screen had woven around his attentional faculty, while a poster girl, nowadays they call them “streamers” or “content creators”, committed suicide as she was living similarly trapped in a pseudo-reality created by fiction, where rest and stopping to think, reflect, and critique has become impossible. All of this only proves my argument in this book, providing yet another tragic example of how the gestures and behaviors of individuals have been reshaped from top to toe by the cellular telephone (which the Italians dub the *telefonino*). Such a total decay of customs led me to develop – I must confess – an implacable hatred for this apparatus, which has made the relationship between people all the more abstract. I found myself more than once wondering how to destroy or deactivate those *telefonini*, as well as how to eliminate or at least to punish and imprison those who do not stop using them. I’m afraid that Adorno was on the mark when he wrote, in the § 92 of his *Reflections from Damaged Life*, that

The objective tendency of the Enlightenment, to wipe out the power of images over man, is not matched by any subjective progress on the part of enlightened thinking towards freedom from images. While the assault on images irresistibly demolishes, after metaphysical Ideas, those concepts once understood as rational and genuinely attained by thought, the thinking unleashed by the Enlightenment and immunized against thinking is now becoming a second figurativeness, though without images or spontaneity.

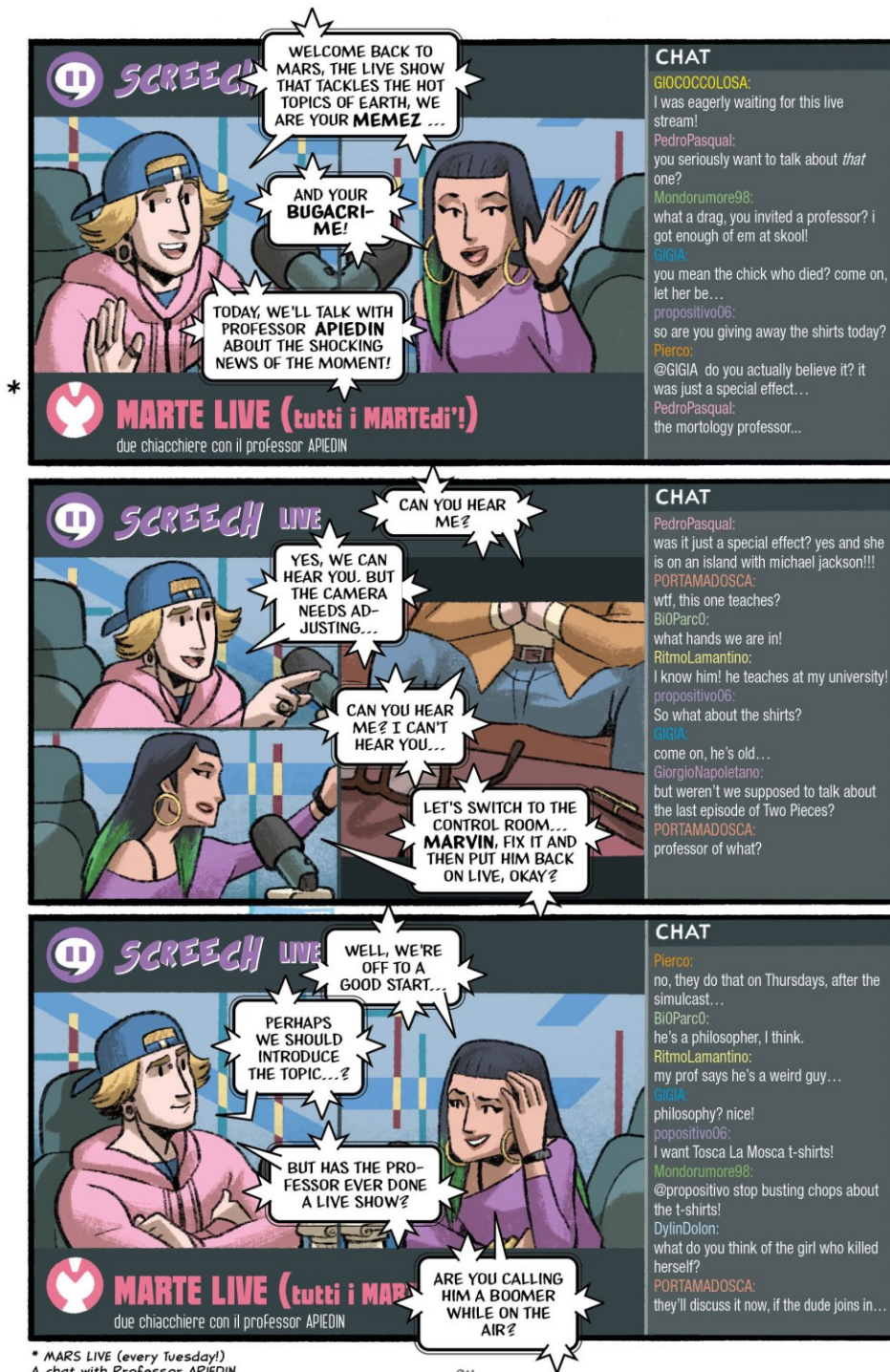
4

Amid the network of now wholly abstract relations of people to each other and to things, the power of abstraction is vanishing. The estrangement of schemata [...] ceaselessly enforces an archaic retranslation into sensuous signs. [...] Representation triumphs over what is represented. Their outsize, simplistic and therefore false comprehensibility corroborates the incomprehensibility of the intellectual processes themselves, from which their falseness – their blind, unthinking subsumption – is inseparable. [...] What was once called intellect is superseded by illustrations. It is not only that people are no longer able to imagine what is not shown and drilled into them in abbreviated form. [...] What is acted out by such pictures and then re-enacted by the well-versed onlooker, in the instantaneous sizing-up of the situation, the unresisting submission to the empty predominance of things, is the jettisoning of all meaning like ballast.

Possibly the ultimate sign of this desperate situation is the existence of wannabe pseudo-thinkers who, instead of shielding the concept from screens, end up poisoning it with images to the point where they titrate their pseudo-texts with strange, incomprehensible terms such as *DIgit4l-m3nte*. Since when did we start supinely accepting that future generations would no longer think? *Mala tempora currunt*, for thinking and for humanity as a whole: only a book can save us now.

Paris, 15 March 2024

B) Fig. 4-8 [drafts from NS4]. A sequence presenting a (semi-fictional) dialogue between “new digital minds” and “traditional bookish minds” during a live stream.



SCREECH LIVE

I'M AFRAID WE'VE LOST HIM.

JOKING ASIDE, WE GOT SOME SENSITIVE ISSUES TONIGHT.

ARE WE GOING TO BE DEMONETIZED?

MARTE LIVE (tutti i MARTI)
due chiacchiere con il professor APIEDIN

MUST I APPEAR ON VIDEO?

HOW DOES THAT WORK??!

CHAT

Contosudi3: hahaha, Memez messed up!

Gormita99: how can you mess up with BugaCrime???

MODERATORE: don't start with BugaCrime or I'll kick you out. @propositivo the t-shirts will be given away later.

GIGIA: why is there always a toxic male?

PORTAMADOSCA: he's alive!!!! What is he, a Luddite!

DylinDolon: I find it unfortunate...

Gormita99: but it's not our fault, BugaCrime is so d4mn h0t!

MODERATORE BANNED Gormita99

SCREECH LIVE

THERE, HE HAS REAPPEARED!

PROFESSOR, CAN YOU HEAR US NOW?

YOU'RE NOT A FAN OF TECHNOLOGY, ARE YOU?

YES, YES.

CHAT

Contosudi3: what are Luddites?

Skeletor75: uh, who is today's guest?

GiorgioNapoletano: I like them better when they talk about anime...

RitmoLamantino: Luddism was a movement that sought to destroy the machines...

GIGIA: a philosophy professor

DylinDolon: they want to have a torchlight procession

PORTAMADOSCA: a guy who doesn't even know how to use a cam

BEFORE YOU LEAVE, DO YOU HAVE SLIDES TO SHARE OR SOMETHING TO SHOW?

I HAVE MY NOTES TO READ, NOTHING ELSE IS NEEDED...

ISN'T IT A LITTLE INEFFECTIVE?

CHAT

GiorgioNapoletano: a torchlight procession? The two Martians?

RitmoLamantino: however this guy here is a bore...

giococcolosa: even my philosophy prof had trouble with the computer

GIGIA: but really? what a bore... I thought philosophers made people argue...

DylinDolon: nah, the torchlight procession for the chick's death.

DylinDolon: she also had a sick grandmother

CIOCCOPSTICCIO: I know there's a fundraiser for the grandma

85

82

I castelli di Yale online. ANNALI DI FILOSOFIA
Vol. XII, n. 2, 2024 – ISSN 2282-5460

<p>SCREECH LIVE</p> <p>NOTHING BEATS READING AND COMMENTING ON TEXTS...</p> <p>TO DWELL PROPERLY ON CONCEPTS...</p> <p>THAT IS, TO DISENTANGLE THE MEDIATING CHARACTER OF WHAT APPEARS IMMEDIATE!</p>	<p>CHAT</p> <p>PedroPasqual: see, @Pierco?</p> <p>Pierco: oh you people will believe anything!</p> <p>Picard->Kirk: I took philosophy with a guy who made us read comic books...in high school</p> <p>PORTAMADOSCA: bah, ask him a few hard questions...</p> <p>BiOParc0: Martians, ask him how he would print his books without technology (luddites=dumb)</p> <p>GommaColCappello: Long live Two Pieces!</p> <p>GIGIA: he's right, though, reading is important</p> <p>CICCIOPASTICCIA: you can check out the fundraiser at</p>
<p>SCREECH LIVE</p> <p>BUT ALSO IMAGES SERVE THE PURPOSE OF UNDERSTANDING...</p> <p>THE SLOOOOOW EFFORT OF THE CONCEPT REQUIRES READING CAREFULLY!</p> <p>STAY AWAY FROM THE DISTRACTION OF IMAGES!</p>	<p>CHAT</p> <p>www.frimagosgran.help</p> <p>CICCIOPASTICCIA: sorry I meant: forimagosgran</p> <p>CICCIOPASTICCIA: still dot help</p> <p>RitmoLamantino: but read other stuff too, nut just books!</p> <p>Picard->Kirk: my prof used to say that comic books are also important...</p> <p>Picard->Kirk: he made us read MAUS and WATCHMEN and some other one...</p> <p>CICCIOPASTICCIA: anyway, it's a crowdfunding..</p> <p>GommaColCappello: I saw the movie!</p> <p>GommaColCappello: the blue guy rocks! like Truffy!</p>
<p>SCREECH LIVE</p> <p>AS LONG AS THEY ARE WORKS OF ART, IT IS STILL OKAY.</p> <p>HOWEVER, IT IS ONLY ON THE PAGE THAT WE CAN TRULY EXPRESS OURSELVES AND THINK!</p>	<p>CHAT</p> <p>PedroPasqual: they should make a movie about the professor's book! so that his brain explodes!</p> <p>PORTAMADOSCA: das he really not use slides?</p> <p>OrcoHorcrux: have they given away the t-shirts yet?</p> <p>GIGIA: I studied economics, I used to memorize everything for the exams</p> <p>propositivo06: not yet no t-shirts for now</p> <p>RitmoLamantino: prof Burbero says that studying by memory is useless, he's the one who says this guy's an idiot</p> <p>OrcoHorcrux: thanks</p> <p>PORTAMADOSCA:</p>

SCREECH WELL, SORRY, BUT RIGHT NOW WE ARE APPEARING ON THOUSANDS OF SCREENS...

BAH, I JUST WANT TO TALK ABOUT MY NEW BOOK...

CHAT
LONG LIVE BURBERO!!!
GIGIA: heh, but sometimes there is no alternative
PORTAMADOSCA: I KNEW IT!!! he's a sellout!!!
GIGIA: when you have to study three books for a month either you memorize them or they will flunk you
ForcaCaudina: what do you mean by sellout?
GIGIA: or make nice with the teacher... it happened in my class...
PORTAMADOSCA: that he only came to get publicity
Pierco: @ForcaCaudina that he is a wh*re

SCREECH YEAH, HOMO SMARTPHONE -- THE IMPOTENCE OF THOUGHT...

SOUNDS CHALLENGING.

IT MUST BE, I DO PHILOSOPHY, NOT COMICS OR VIDEOS!

IS IT TRUE THAT YOU ALSO TALK ABOUT IMA-GO'S SUICIDE?

CHAT
MODERATORE: no insults!
RitmoLamantino: they're all the same
Giorgio13: have they given away the t-shirts yet?
CarlaRapallo: what shirts are they giving out today?
GIGIA: but I've never swooned with a lecturer.
Propositivo06: no. No shirts
RitmoLamantino: swooned? how old are you @GIGIA
Giorgio13: They don't give away T-shirts?
falcomelico: they ran out of them
GIGIA: those are not questions to ask

SCREECH LIVE

LOOK, YOU SPEND TOO MUCH TIME ON SCREENS TODAY!

CHAT
CarlaRapallo: but I wanted to buy a gift for my girl
Propositivo06: nonono they still haven't given them away
Giorgio13: @GIGIA I should not ask about the t-shirts?
GIGIA: you don't ask a lady her age
Contosudi3: BOOMER!
RitmoLamantino: the webcam has rebelled!
Pierco: hahaha lol!
Mondorumore98: hahhaha
POVdelPugno: they given away the T-shirts yt?
GIGIA:

SCREECH LIVE

LOST IN IMAGES, WITH A NONEXISTENT ATTENTION SPAN, UNABLE TO ARTICULATE AN ARGUMENT...

PROFESSOR...

HOW DO YOU SUPPOSE YOU CAN THINK SERIOUSLY LIKE THIS! YOU NEED TO GO BACK TO READING AND TRAIN YOUR MIND'S EYES!

CHAT

Contosudi3 you're a jackass!
Contosudi3:
?
CarlaRapallo:
not yet.
PolaccoColGomito:
@Contosudi3 did you call her a boomer?
BurattinoSenzaFichi:
am I in time for the shirts?
BurattinoSenzaFichi:
*shirts
Contosudi3:
the PROFESSOR is a BOOMER! not @GIGIA
MODERATORE:
It-shirts will be given away later on
GIGIA:
oh sorry
falcomelico:
As I recall, last time they ran out of

SCREECH LIVE

PROFESSOR, YOUR IMAGE IS GONE, BUT MARVIN SAYS THE SIGNAL IS FINE...

WHA--HUH??

AH, I WAS TRYING TO TURN UP THE VOLUME...CAN YOU HEAR ME?

CHAT

them...
RitmoLamantino:
swooned? how old are you @GIGIA
MoltoRinoMalhoingoiata:
have they given out the T-shirts yet?
GIGIA:
@RitmoLamantino again!?!?
MODERATORE HAS PINNED A COMMENT AT THE TOP:
T-shirts will be given away in a few minutes, please be patient
RitmoLamantino:
@GIGIA jeez, loosen up a bit!
MARVIN:
have we given away the t-shirts yet?
GIGIA:
you're not funny
MODERATORE:
@MARVIN you're a dumbass!
DylinDolon:

SCREECH LIVE

WE CAN HEAR YOU, BUT WE CAN'T SEE YOU, PROFESSOR...

SO, ACCORDING TO YOU, IMAGO'S VIDEOS DID NOT REPRESENT HER WAY OF THINKING OR A WAY TO MAKE PEOPLE THINK?

NONSENSE! I HAVE NEVER SEEN ONE AND I NEVER WILL, BUT SHE CERTAINLY KILLED HERSELF BECAUSE SHE WAS TOTALLY IMMERSSED IN A VIRTUAL WORLD OF ALIENATING IMAGES!

CHAT

so no one wants to talk about Imago?
PORTAMADOSCA:
this guy's a moron!
GIGIA: ...
DylinDolon has left the live chatroom
GIGIA has left the live chatroom
Pierco:
BRAVO! All hypocrites!

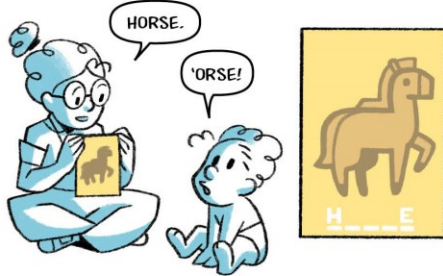
C) Figs. 9-13 [drafts from CS4]. A sequence exploring how the rational mind is shaped by the same alphabetic medium originally criticized by Plato/Socrates.



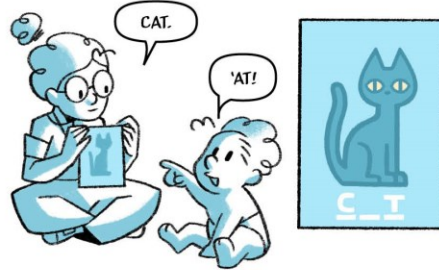
PHONEME
/'fɒʊni:m/

"ALTERNATIVELY, THE CONTOURS OF THE PHONEME EMERGE AS AN INTANGIBLE UNIT OF LINGUISTIC SOUND."

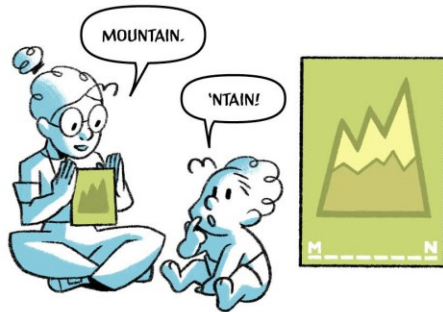
"TODAY, WE BELIEVE THAT WORDS REPRESENT THE VOICE, WHAT WE SAY, AND EXPRESS CONCEPTS, WHAT WE THINK..."



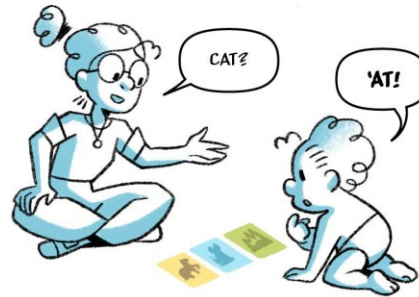
"...BUT THIS DEPENDS ON THE EXISTENCE OF REIFIED WORDS, WHICH PRESENT THEMSELVES TO US AS STANDALONE ELEMENTS FREE FROM REPRESENTATIONAL CONSTRAINTS."



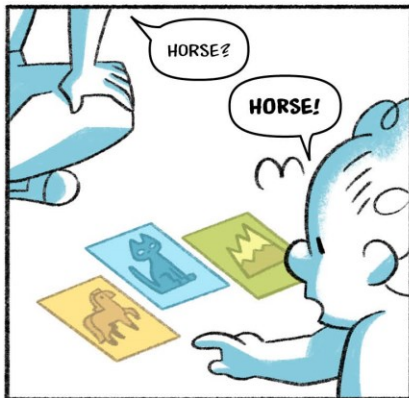
"THUS, ABLE TO EXTERIORIZE WHAT LIES IN OUR MIND AND TRANSITS THROUGH OUR VOICE, SHAPING IT INTO THE FORM OF A SENSIBLE OBJECT."



"THROUGH SUCH TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION, THE LINK BETWEEN THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE IS CONSOLIDATED TO THE POINT WHERE IT SEEMS OBVIOUS THAT THE PUREST IDEAS ARE VESTED IN VERBAL CLOTHING..."



"AND RATIONALITY CULMINATES IN THINKING THROUGH LANGUAGE, INDEED IN THINKING LANGUAGE ITSELF!"

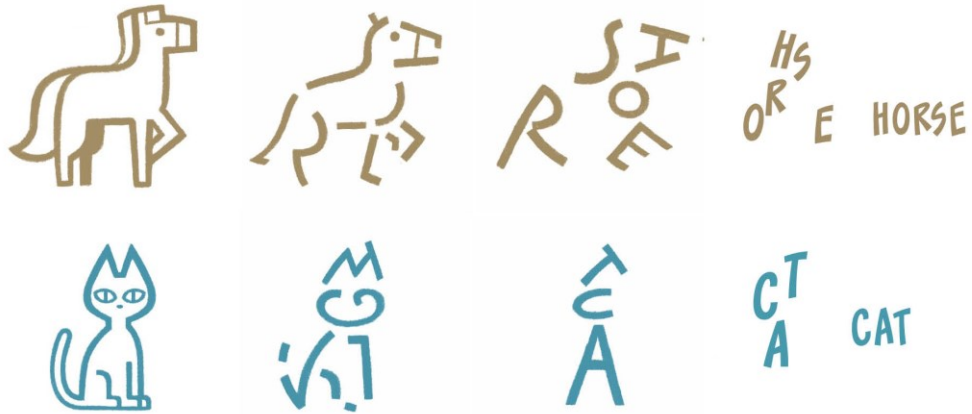


"THAT IS, IN THE EXERCISE OF REFLECTIVE AND RECURSIVE GYMNASTICS OF A META-LINGUISTIC NATURE."



"SO THAT THOUGHT THAT THINKS ITSELF WOULD CONSIST OF LANGUAGE THAT SPEAKS ABOUT ITSELF -- INDEED THAT (SELF-)DESCRIBES."

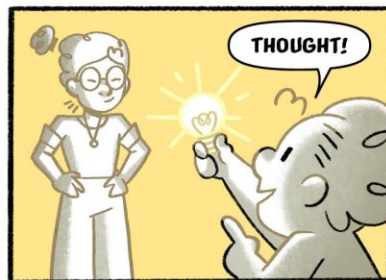
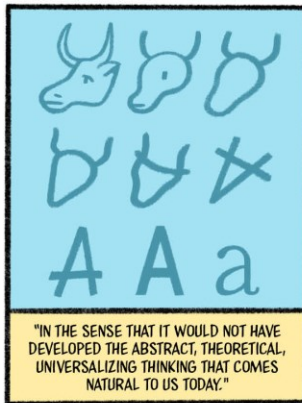
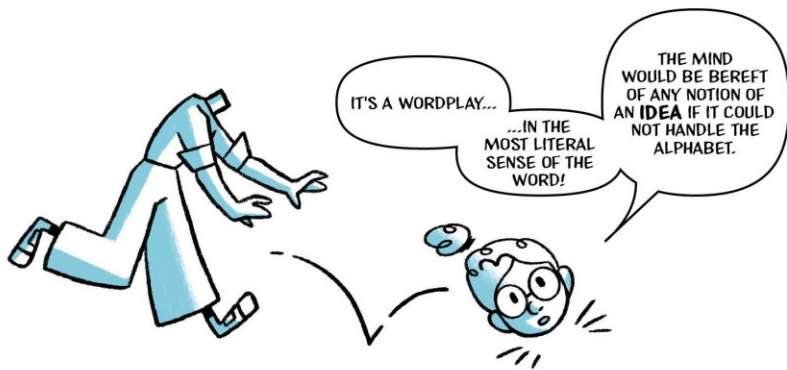




BY COLONIZING THOUGHT WITH ITS OWN VERBAL ENTITIES, THE ALPHABET HAS MADE LANGUAGE BOTH MEDIUM AND CONTENT OF THOUGHT.

IT COULD BE SAID THAT THE MIND WOULD NEVER HAVE ITSELF IN MIND, THAT IS, AN OBJECT SUCH AS "THE MIND," WITHOUT THE ALPHABET.







D) Fig. 14. A comparison between the final concept design of the character of the leading essayist and an earlier sketch of the same character created by a different artist during the casting phase.



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