

Post-apocalyptic and Integrated? A Mediological Analysis of Gipi's *La terra dei figli* (2016)

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Abstract

This paper examines the works of Gipi (Gianni Pacinotti), a seminal figure in Italian graphic novels, through the analysis of his science fiction graphic novel *La terra dei figli*. The study explores how Gipi foregrounds societal fears of environmental catastrophe and the disintegration of human-centered values in a post-apocalyptic world. While fitting into the groove of the postapocalyptic and dystopian genre, the graphic novel stages a metaphor for a future society that has abandoned literacy in favor of post-digital practices, thus performing a critique of the practices and values of digital culture and online communities.

The study underscores Gipi's view of the divisive effects of the Internet on society, particularly through phenomena such as filter bubbles and echo chambers. It emphasizes his concern about social media's potential to deteriorate communication and exacerbate social division. Gipi's work signals a longing for a lost literary culture, exemplified and symbolized by physical books. Despite this, the study questions whether his fear and resistance to societal change are typical responses to inevitable transformations. By investigating Gipi's portrayal of literate versus digital cultures, this study provides insight into the complexities of contemporary media and their societal impact.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Digital Critique, Digital Culture, Literacy, Post-apocalypse, Dystopia

Introduction

Known by the stage name Gipi, Gianni Pacinotti is without a doubt one of the mainstays of the Italian comics and culture industry.

His extensive career has spanned various phases of comics publishing history. He made his debut in the 1990s at the height of the comic magazines crisis, and achieved artistic consecration thanks to the cultural and editorial affirmation of the graphic novel format, of which he has proved to be one of

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the most technically gifted and versatile interpreters. Just to mention book-long, self-standing stories, Gipi authored the critically and publicly acclaimed *Appunti per una storia di guerra* (2004), *Questa è la stanza* (2005), *S.* (2006), *LMVDM. La mia vita disegnata male* (2008), *Unastoria* (2013), *La terra dei figli* (2016), *Momenti straordinari con applausi finti* (2019), and *Stacy* (2023)². This extensive production has made Gipi one of the protagonists of a novel interest of the Italian cultural establishment towards comics – or rather, “graphic novels”. In fact, following the mechanisms of artistic and cultural legitimization (Lesage, 2023), the graphic novel format and its appeal to the high-brow sensibility appeared to seamlessly transform comics into an adult product, finally worthy of the attention of intellectuals. As a result, in 2014 *Unastoria* was nominated for the Premio Strega, almost entering the list of finalists for the prestigious literary prize.

Gipi has gained additional fame through his recurrent participation in the Italian satirical talk show *Propaganda Live* and due to his controversial online persona. In particular, a controversy arose in 2021 following a comic strip he drew, concerning an episode of the Italian #metoo debate (we will discuss it in detail in section 4). *La terra dei figli* was published shortly before these events, in 2016 (later to be adapted into a film of the same name, directed by Claudio Cupellini, in 2021), and yet it already bears the sign of Gipi’s conflicted relation with Internet communities and digital practices. However, before we examine the dense intersection of these threads, we must introduce the book in relation to the post-apocalyptic genre.

Such stuff as nightmares are made of: science fiction and the (post-)apocalypse

Aligning with the tradition of science fiction, *La terra dei figli* ventures into possible futures while providing a commentary on (what the author perceives to be) the present condition and trends. Through these stories, society explores its deepest fears and confronts the potential threats that the future may hold. The narrative thus serves as a mirror, reflecting both potential future trajectories and a critical examination of our present reality. As Philip K. Dick (1999) explains it:

We have a fictitious world; that is the first step: it is a society that does not in fact

² To this, one may add the story collections *Esterno notte* (2003), *Diario di fiume e altre storie* (2009), *Verticali* (2009), *Baci dalla provincia* (2011), *Boschi mai visti* (2018), *Effetti collaterali* (2018), *Il pugile* (2018), *Il cacciatore di cuori* (2019), *Il mondo moderno* (2019), the first issue (of three envisioned) *Barbarone sul pianeta delle scimmie erotomani* (2022), and the script of the fantasy comic book *Aldobrando* (with Luigi Critone, 2020). Gipi also directed three films: *L'ultimo terrestre* (2011) and the mockumentaries *Smettere di fumare fumando* (2012) and *Il ragazzo più felice del mondo* (2018).

exist, but is predicated on our known society [...]. It is our own world dislocated by some kind of mental effort on the part of the author, our world transformed into that which it is not or not yet. This world must differ from the given in at least one way, and this one way must be sufficient to give rise to events that could not occur in our society - or in any known society present or past [...] a new society is generated in the author's mind, transferred to paper, and from paper it occurs as a convulsive shock in the reader's mind, the shock of *dysrecognition*. He knows that it is not his actual world that he is reading about. (pp. XVIII-XIX)

While our discussion does not focus on the evolution of the genre, it is crucial to acknowledge how the 20th and 21st centuries have significantly altered the perceived role of science and technology. In the 19th century, these fields were mostly viewed with a sense of optimism and as harbingers of progress and prosperity, encapsulated in the formula “magnificent fortunes and progress” (“le magnifiche sorti e progressive”, Leopardi, 1845). However, global tragedies and crises over the past two centuries have eroded this optimistic view. The once central role of humanity in the grand scheme of things has been radically challenged by exploring our positioning as a more and more peripheral part of a complex and interconnected global system. Moreover, our relationship with technology and the media landscape has become increasingly intricate, and the faith in a bright, technology-driven future has been undermined by a series of historical events and a growing awareness of the multifaceted impacts of technological advancement. The modern subject now finds itself navigating a reality where the promise of science and technology is intertwined with potential perils and uncertainties, reshaping our collective imagination and expectations of the future. Technology

in recent years has changed its scope, creating not just new tools but new habitats, expanding into the territories of the living and the biological, exponentially increasing the transformative power of the human through genetic engineering, nanotechnology and neuroscience. [...] Technology, in other words, is no longer located upstream or downstream of the imaginary, but enters in *medias res*. That is, it intervenes within the neurological, social and technical mechanisms of production of the imaginary itself by invading (or creating out of whole cloth) the human circuits and devices of its production. (Musso, 2019, p. 132, our translation)

All these tensions converged in and intertwined with a feeling of loss of future, a condition that Fisher (2012) defined “hauntological”³ and linked to con-

³ Hauntology explores how the unexpressed past, especially its forgotten or suppressed aspects, continues to influence the present. Mark Fisher uses this concept to analyze cultural and musical trends of the 21st century, where music and art often reflect a nostalgia not just for the past, but for futures that never materialized. Hauntology characterizes a cultural era that is stuck, unable to imagine a promising future, trapped in a cycle of repetition and revisitation of what already exists.

temporary capitalism, and that Frezza (2015) has called “endoapocalyptic”⁴. It is “a time of the end without end”, an endemic apocalypse in which being on the brink of survival is not an isolated event, but an endemic phenomenon, a constant in the fabric of the narrative imaginary. This led to the rekindling of old anxieties; fears related to scientific and technological progress, perhaps dormant or unacknowledged, have resurfaced and are now being re-actualized through the lens of the catastrophic imaginary.

Contemporary science fiction has elaborated on this reflection by merging with other narrative genres, especially horror. No longer confined to stories of space exploration or adventures in distant worlds, the genre has become an unsettling mirror of the collective anxieties related to science and technology, a means to explore the complex dynamics between humanity and the evolutions of its (natural and technological) environment.

The end of the world as we know it: *La terra dei figli* as post-apocalyptic cautionary tale

The narrative in *La Terra dei Figli* unfolds against a backdrop where the future seems indeed absent, and an endoapocalyptic setting prevails. The characters’ interaction with technology is significantly reduced, yet, paradoxically, this very absence is a central driver of the story. Gipi’s book depicts a world after a planetary tragedy whose origins remain mysterious, although they seem to be a fallout of contemporary environmental crises.

The opening of the book reads: “Whole chapters could have been written in history books on the causes and reasons that led to the end. But after the end, no more books were written” (Gipi, 2016, n.p., our translation). This incipit sets the tone for the narrative, emphasizing the loss not only of the world as it was known, but also of means to share and pass knowledge, to understand and learn from the past, to archive and historicize. We are thus facing the *end of history* in its proper sense (in an even larger sense than Fukuyama’s – 2006), since any possibility of narrating the human experience and transmitting collective memory is nullified. Even more radically, the epigraph states that after the end *no more books* were written. This perspective challenges us to reconsider the human experience in the absence of its current social, cultural, and cognitive scaffolds, and raises a question that has much to do with the posthuman: if we consider humanism to be linked primarily to tradition and the traditions

⁴ The concept of endoapocalypse presupposes the ubiquitous presence, in our imaginary, of a form of apocalypse that does not follow traditional models of eschatology or messianism, where a final judgment or redemption is generally expected. Endoapocalypse is instead a continuous, infinite process, a sort of “endless end time”, where the apocalyptic epilogue is constantly reimaged. Apocalypse thus becomes an *endemic* phenomenon, a permanent and persistent condition that does not lead to a new beginning but to a continuous decay or destruction without conclusion.

of literary knowledge and creation, what becomes of humanity and its anthropocentric worldview when these foundations crumble?

The story focuses on two brothers who live in a swamp with their father, who merely educated them to survive. The father's approach symbolizes another stark departure from the ideals of modern humanism, which traditionally emphasize literate-style education and the values and social systems it implies. The boys' father even forbids his children to use words like "love" and "care", considering them dangerous relics of a bygone era where such feelings were relevant. Humanist values are hence useless, if not harmful; in such a post-apocalyptic landscape (and conversely, metaphorically, in our current mediascape) "the era of modern humanism as the model for schooling and formative education is over with, because the illusion can no longer be maintained that large political and economic structures could be organized on the amiable model of the literary society" (Sloterdijk, 2017, p. 196).

However, alphabetic culture plays a key role within the story. After the death of their father, the boys discover his diary, which they unsuccessfully try to read. Gipi ingeniously portrays this moment, allowing readers to seemingly perceive the writing through the eyes of the two illiterate boys. Compositionally, the scene foregrounds its focalization: if we imagine that we are witnessing an internal focalization aligned with the children's perception, we can hypothesize that they are facing words that are meaningful, but unintelligible to them. Nonetheless, on a more suspicious reading – if we assume that the focalization is external, or that the children's illiteracy is not the diriment element – one can legitimately advance the hypothesis that the diary is full of meaningless scribbles, simulacra of the words that once existed, traced by the late father in a memorial, mimicking a gesture that is now emptied of its meaning. The diary would thus become through the story a paradoxical, postapocalyptic version of the ideal of writable text postulated by Roland Barthes (1970)⁵, taking on the meaning attributed to it each time various characters read it and report back to the boys. Both interpretations, anyway, emphasize the disconnection from the past and underscore the significance of alphabetic signs as carriers of a conventional, accumulated, yet powerful meaning, now begone and alien to the protagonists.

Moreover, the passage does not only highlight the cultural and cognitive chasm between the old world and the new, but more radically places the anthropic perspective, the *human gaze*, as only one of the possible readings of the world. This shift in perspective has profound implications. It challenges the long-held notion that humans, as speaking and writing beings, are the central interpreters and definers of the world through their system of signs and mean-

⁵ Barthes imagined "writable texts" to be open-ended and polysemic, containing multiple layers and possibilities of meanings. They can be interpreted in various, often contradictory ways, radically depending on the reader's interaction with the text, which becomes, in a way, a proper rewriting of that text.

ings. What happens instead, it asks, when humans cease to be the measure of all things, when they lose the ability to imbue the world with meaning through the complex web of signs with which they have covered the world?

The men in the high illiterate castle

According to most science fiction – and to Gipi’s, for sure – such a transition would imply a deanthropologization of the world. In such a scenario, the central, dominant position of humans is questioned; the boundaries that divide accepted dichotomies such as culture and nature, humans and animals, become blurred and porous, allowing us to perceive a different world (a world that has in fact existed all along, but was obscured by the anthropocentric perspective), in which the primacy of man is nothing more than the result of a perspectival illusion. Moreover, the world in *La terra dei figli* is likely the result of pollution and environmental harm, suggesting that its downfall depends on humanity’s failure to see itself as deeply interconnected with other living beings.

Nonetheless, and despite environmental critique being a salient theme in *La terra dei figli*, we believe that the real focus around which Gipi’s narrative obsessively revolves is the relationship humans weave with media and technology. Instead of exploring human/machine hybrids, the story fictionalizes the consequences of a shift in human cognitive processes due to the current technological and media landscape.

Interestingly, in Gipi’s view, the catastrophic consequences of this shift involve a regression not so much to the animal, but to the illiterate. This is most evident in the depiction of another group of humans in the story, known as “i fedeli” (the faithful, or the believers). They embody the remnants of today’s digital society and the dynamics of social networks; their mode of communication is a sparse and fragmented idiolect, a pastiche of internet keywords and social media trends, stripped of their original meaning and transformed into a haunting gibberish. Gipi’s comic foregrounds language as the primary indicator of the human/non-human border. As Farci (2012) argues:

If we consider the hypothesis that humanism is linked primarily to the tradition of literary knowledge, it is likely then that some of the major issues related to the posthuman coincide with the nature of the social bond that emerges in the relationship between the dimension of consumption and the use of current technological devices. [...] Such a transition marks the emergence of a new subjectivity, which Abruzzese defines as ‘illiterate’ [...], since it is completely uprooted from any textual and aesthetic tradition, as well as foreign to the social pact between writing and literature. This new anti-modern, anti-historical and anti-social subjectivity [...] disposes for the first time of communication platforms that it has never been able to leverage before, except through the mediation of the ordering languages of institutions. (p. 15, our translation)

La terra dei figli accordingly posits that social networks, at some unspecified time before the story's events, have altered the social and cognitive structures of humankind. After the fall, this transformation has given rise to the new society of the *fedeli*, who communicate in an ungrammatical language completely foreign to literary culture. This language is dense with words and syntagms characteristic of contemporary times, reflecting ongoing alterations in linguistic norms, such as the pervasive use of 'k's replacing the 'c-h' nexus⁶, and the recontextualization of popular internet elements like kittens into tools for divination. English words integrated into Italian, such as "giga", "granny", and "hot", are redefined as primitive signs of approval and celebration.

The portrayal of the *fedeli*'s language in the book performs a critique of internet culture, equating it with a degeneration of communication and cognition. This degradation is further symbolized by associating internet culture *tout court* with pornography, which is implicitly blamed for stupefying and corrupting the online community. The tribe of the *fedeli* mirrors and exemplify the worst behaviors seen on the web: hate speech, cyber balkanization, emotional illiteracy, gullibility, and a lack of critical thinking in the face of misinformation. Like the most toxic social media groups, they ostracize, attack, even destroy those who are different or not aligned with their views. In the comic, this manifests literally in their hunting and killing of outsiders, to the point of brutality and mutilations.

Thus, a social group such as the *fedeli* is not only the continuation of our contemporary lawless society (of a society without fathers, Recalcati would say⁷, hence literally a *terra dei figli*); even more so, they are the embodiment of the paroxysmal consequence of this tribalization of the web: within online communities, one finds oneself interfacing with social micro-groups, whose components and members share the same interest, experience, passions and emotions (Maffesoli, 2004); and everything else is foreign. Hence, Gipi takes to extremes phenomena that can be detected on the Web, such as filter bubbles and echo chambers: they are forms of selectivity of a different nature, the former determined by the filtering logics imposed by the algorithms regulating digital platforms, the latter by the constant exposition to the thoughts and ideas of people with similar beliefs, implied by the structural properties of the networks (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2019, pp. 363, 119).

In the comic, such division and tribalization are taken to an extreme. Gipi himself made no secret of how the strongly negative characterization of the

⁶ One cannot help but notice that the stigmatization of the ch nexus in place of k, which was very common when the early diffusion of cell phones had given new popularity to abbreviations aimed at communicative economy, makes sense only in writing, and not, *strictu sensu*, in the dialogues of the comics characters, where the two morphemes serve the same function in Italian.

⁷ A significant part of Recalcati's production around the years 2010s revolved around the idea that hypermodernity put a definitive end to the father figure as the symbolic embodiment of a law that is not tyrannical but nevertheless curbs the immoderation of desire.

fedeli points to them being heirs to the practices, imaginaries and cultures of web users:

... for me, this is about our times. This was a way of pouring out all my anxieties about the modern world or, rather, societies in general. [...] the *fedeli* talk in a stupid way, they are all idiots. I hope that their being dumb doesn't make them less scary. Because to me idiocy is much scarier than controlled wickedness. (Gipi as cited in Stefanelli, 2016, our translation).

No country for old men: the digital, Gipi's anxieties, and the polarization of activism

This is telling of a larger, complex dynamic in the digital age, where the proliferation of diverse voices and the rapid evolution of social norms and languages act as a microcosm of larger societal shifts and conflicts. What Gipi's diagnosis is leaving out is an understanding of social transformations and the struggles of minorities who, during the triumph of literate culture, had little to no space, and who today, especially thanks to the web, finally found a place to voice their positions; admittedly, sometimes in aggressive ways, in line with the communicative dynamics typical of online social networks.

The book then reflects the conflicting relationship that Gipi has woven over the years with online communities of activists and comic fans, which led him to theatrically (and repeatedly) announce his retirement from social networks, bemoaning their evil effect:

likes, retweets, they have an immediate effect, they strengthen you in your beliefs, they warm your heart, they make you feel part of a community, a tribe. I had a hundred thousand followers and I knew pretty well how they would react every time I wrote something. I knew that if I had unleashed them against someone, reporting any nonsense, they would have probably followed me. [...] I knew that, but I did it anyway. Because there is nothing to do about it: no matter how much one hates power, as I do; if you have it, you exercise it. [...] Social media are built in such a way that if you don't have a strong character, they can make you a worse person. [...] They're a perfectly functioning business, basically founded on a disease. (Gipi as cited in Mirenzi, 2021, our translation)

As anticipated, Gipi has indeed been more than once reproached for his online behavior, the most famous case being that of a strip he published in 2021 on his Instagram profile in the wake of the #metoo movement, after the rape allegations against *Ciro Grillo* and *Beppe Grillo's* attempts to defend his son. Gipi's strip showed its protagonist, the "Modern Commissioner", grappling with the "paradox" of two women accusing each other of violence, both purportedly bound to be believed (and innocent) by the mere fact that they are

women. This intended satire of the alleged condescension of the justice system towards women who report violence, and of the media's habit of condemning perpetrators well before any trial, provoked an intense wave of criticism, with several cartoonists taking sides in favor or against Gipi. As a result, the author distanced himself even further from social media. In his words, Gipi describes it as the feeling of no longer recognizing himself in the language and struggles carried out by the community he recognizes as his own:

Several times the fascists threatened to beat me up. These were things I expected them to do, which I never cared too much about. The real sorrows I got from the other side, from those on the left. [...] I kept repeating to myself, "How can't you see that I'm on your side?" And every time I engaged in a discussion with them, the more I tried to explain myself, the more they would zero in on me with the usual accusations: the "white male," the "privileged straight cisgender", etc. Many different people were using the same words. (Gipi as cited in Mirenzi, 2021, our translation)

This fear seems so central in Gipi's worries about our times that it was the thread that kept together several pages he posted, since September 2022, on his Instagram account, and that eventually became his latest graphic novel *Stacy* (2023). Like any true dystopia, *La terra dei figli* is thus not so much a cautionary tale about the future but rather a poignant commentary on the past. There lies what the author believes had already been irreversibly lost; namely, the social and cultural patterns that were once safeguarded by literary culture, and that by definition defended civilization itself.

The pivotal role given to alphabetic culture is clearly discernible in the story, and further stressed by the only written artifacts featured in it: the father's notebook and the book of the god *fiko*. The two are the only apparent instruments of redemption in the story, able by the sheer force of their evocative literary power to enliven lost values and *literally* write the possibility of an optimistic ending to the story we read (Gipi as cited in Stefanelli, 2016). Interestingly, though, they do so by means of the interpretation of a presumably barely literate mediator that reads them to an illiterate audience. The scenes in which a text is read to others leave ample room for interpretation: do the readers really know how to read, are they interpreting the text in front of them as needed, or are they illiterates who completely reinvent the signs in front of them? Whatever the answer, the power of literature stands out as redeeming the new world from its own brutality.

Conclusions

Gipi's work and personal experiences reflect a profound concern with the cultural and social impacts of the digital age, particularly the rise of social me-

dia. He fetishizes the established norms and values of literate culture as the only possible cure to what he perceives as a social apocalypse brought about by the unregulated, chaotic nature of the digital. In doing so, he leaves traces of a clash – a generational one, and one between literate and illiterate cultures, between the gatekeeping of legitimated culture and the anarchic chaos of digital ones – that is leaving marks on the contemporary social body, establishing a generational divide that mostly stems from a technological one, and which is making the current media ecosystem increasingly complex to read.

Despite the title of the book seems to suggest a reading similar to the Recalcati's diagnosis of the contemporary disappearance and lack of fathers as lawful figures (2017), Gipi's sons are not (only) children without guidance. The author's grief for the loss of (a) language and the rise of new cultural forms (interpreted as the frightening triumph of idiots) rather bears a striking resemblance to an archetype of post-industrial times, namely the

increasingly recurrent lamentations about the cultural degradation of youngsters, about their indifference to the past, about their ignorance, about their dislike of books, about their disregard of anything but their own present. [...] Intellectuals, writers, cultural workers bound to their provinces of personal prestige – react in ways as empty and repetitive as they are alarmed. Priests of vanishing values and rituals, they despair of their own demise far more than that of the young. Convinced that in the forgetfulness, vulgarity and aphasia of the new generations there is no content to be found, but dullness and deafness, rejection and aggressiveness, consumerism and inertia, these avid mentors of youth decay go no further than dismayed observation of disaster. (Abruzzese, 2003, pp. 240-241, our translation)

Gipi's stance resonates with these premises in the face of the complexities of our current media ecosystem. It reflects the challenges in reconciling the established cultural paradigms of the past with the rapidly changing realities of the digital age. This conflict extends beyond communication styles and media choices; it affects how civilizations generate knowledge, establish communities, and negotiate power and identity in an increasingly connected and technologically driven world.

La terra dei figli addresses how these generational and technological divides are profoundly changing societal dynamics, from personal interactions to the collective cultural and political discourse. As differences grow, they challenge us instead to find ways to foster more inclusive culture and communication that reflect and respect the values of both the literate and digital world.

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