

Diasaféo. Illustration as Envisioning or Interpretation of the Holy Book in the Works of Marc Chagall and Robert Crumb

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Abstract

"I saw the Bible, I dreamed it. Since childhood, the Bible captivated me. For me it has always been and still is now the greatest source of poetry of all time" used to say Marc Chagall to Franz Meyer. Chagall was commissioned in 1930 to draw a series of illustrations of the Bible, on which occasion he explores similar cultural products and makes some of the most famous drawings of the sacred book. Starting from Chagall's statement with its obvious applicability on the Christian world and considering the Bible is one of the most read books, I will try to answer some specific questions: what is the link between illustration and the sacred text? What role has the illustration in the representation of the sacred text? Which would be some relevant works or art to the history of biblical illustrations? How do these stories re-appear in illustrations in contemporary times?

The verb *diasaféo* (to clarify, to present with explanations, to clarify) appears in the Greek version of the Bible and is present only once in the Old Testament, when Moses clarifies at his turn the laws on Mount Sinai. He repeats it, but he also clarifies, explains them. Not only semblance, but also interpretation. Likewise, illustrations made for the biblical text can be only appearances or they can they can explain the text.

Through two case studies which are highlights in the history of art and that of illustration (painter Marc Chagall and comics artist Robert Crumb) I will try to determine which is the relation between text and illustration. The point of view upon the artworks will be the one stating that the Bible is primarily a mythology, but it is that particular mythology presented by the book that was prevalent in the world of illustration over time in various media. There is on the one hand the text and on the other's its representation.

Keywords: Bible, illustration, painting, mythology, comics.

Introduction: Illustration as an art form and the context of illustrating the Bible

The verb *diasaféo*¹ (to elucidate, bring explanations, clarify) appears in the Greek version of the Bible and it is only present once in the Old Testament, when Moses "clarifies" in his turn the commandments on Mount Sinai. He repeats but also clarifies, elucidates them. In the same fashion, illustrations to the Bible can only be "envisions" or, more than that, they can be designed and regarded as interpretations, as they may clarify the text, they may bring additional explanations. The stylistic register in which the illustration is designed bears, most of

the time, the graphic markers of the time when it was accomplished.

The perspective on the illustrations of the holy text is the one in which the Bible is mainly a mythology, only that it is a mythology spread in the most illustrated books, on the most diversified supports in the world, along history. Thus, there is for one thing the text and its graphic representation for the other. With the help of two major case studies in the history of art and, implicitly, of the illustration practice, I will try and determine the relation between the text and the illustration and the functions of the latter.

Starting therefore with the idea that the Bible is the most read of the books, and that the holy texts are the most represented in the world along history, from stained glass and easel

¹ Valeriu Anania Bartolomeu, *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură [The Bible or The Holy Scripture]*. Cluj-Napoca: Renaşterea, 2009, p.200.

painting, to cinema and comic strips, I will try to answer questions like: what is the relation between illustration and the holy book? What is the function of illustration in the process of representation of the holy book? Which are the major examples for a history of the biblical illustration? How is contemporary world present in the illustration of these stories? Which are the main actors involved in the process of text representation? What does it actually mean for an artist to illustrate the Bible?

A relevant point of view for this topic comes from the works of Michael Baxandall, a British art historian who analysed the works of art through the intellectual, social and physical conditions in which these were produced. His concept of *the period eye* appears in his work *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* where he describes the cultural conditions in which the Renaissance art was created, seen and understood. *The period eye* is a method of analysis often used in the works of art historians. Baxandall explains how we process differently information in our brains, using a mix of “tools” that we get from birth (the eye and the actual sight process), as well as tools we acquired by experience and that are culturally determined². Cultural factors influence the visual features that are attractive in each separate period of time. *The period eye* analyses how the artist and the work of art function in the original social, commercial and religious context.

Renaissance is probably the most definite time of a boost in demand for the illustration of the biblical scenes, which is not to say that they were not present before, only that their visibility was less poignant. Possibly due to the progress in the painting techniques, the sensation that this period brings is one of abundance. It is also the time when, for the first time, artists are valued as individuals, as personalities, which supports the process of a wide recognition of their works.

Baxandall points out how the painter depends on the viewer and on the science of making his work understood. When the latter is not familiar with the biblical scenes before viewing a new painting illustrating them, everything is in vain; he won't understand it, which does not mean that the painter made any

mistake. The painter, as Baxandall explains, is a “professional visualizer” of the Bible stories. This, strictly in reference to the *Quattrocento*, works of art were not accepted as we see them now, but rather as the “marriage” between the painter and the personal history of visualizations of each viewer. Can we still speak, in this case of a precise function of illustration or only of in duet with the one interpreting it?

Giotto, for example, as we read in Gombrich³, followed in his practice the advice of the preaching monks who told believers that when they read the Bible they should imagine the scenes just as they might have taken place in reality. Giotto thus contextualised with the most honest curiosity, constantly wondering how everything might have looked during those times, while also employing the critical eye of a possible viewer of the scene. For Giotto, painting is more than a mere supplanting of the writing and goes beyond painting's role as educator of the masses at the time. Giotto is a pioneer, brings authenticity to the biblical scenes, for the first time in the history of art and he is also the first artist whose history becomes relevant in itself. He will be followed by all artistic destinies regarded so, when the artist walks to the foreground with his work following.

Robert Crumb and Marc Chagall as milestones in Bible illustrations

For the exemplification of the theme, I chose two series of illustrations of the Bible accomplished by two artists, as different from one another, as surprising in their decision to approach this theme. They are Marc Chagall, with his series *Dessins pour la Bible*, colour lithographs accomplished between 1930 and 1955, and Robert Crumb, with his work *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* from 2009, best selling graphic novel on which he worked for 5 years.

Robert Crumb is an American illustrator and musician, born in 1943, a controversial underground artist (he created on *LSA* during the years when it was still legal), known to the wide public especially for his character *Fritz, the Cat*. He participated, by selection, in the 55th edition of the Venice Biennial (2013) with the work *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*, a graphic novel representing the story of the biblical Genesis. At that time, Crumb was rather an artist

² Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.35-40.

³ Ernst Gombrich, *Istoria artei [The Story of Art]*. Bucharest: Pro Editură și Tipografie, 2007, p. 202.

invalidated on the international art scene, and his presence in the central exhibition of the Biennial curated by Massimiliano Gioni and called *The Encyclopedic Palace* was unexpected for contemporary art practices. By extrapolation, it was a sort of validation of illustration as an independent artistic practice, a victory after a long endeavour in which illustration fought for representation and to overcome the status of *commercial art*.

Robert Crumb is a god example of what Kearny⁴ called the attempt of a contemporary artistic consciousness to assimilate the biblical texts. How does this assimilation, this appropriation happen? Kearney explains: through imagination, as it has always happened. It is not an attempt to precisely understand the old texts, neither one to decode them or place them in a present context. It is rather a process of “mutual convergence”. The old is reinterpreted, the time distance vanished in the process of interpretation, which becomes in this case twofold: while the alien becomes familiar, the familiar becomes alien. By assimilating different meanings, adopting different meanings in our own perspective, we separate ourselves at the same time from this perspective, in order to open that meaning someplace else. Bringing in the present old texts through a process of reinterpretation turns into a dialogue, in the most literal sense possible of the Greek term *dia-legein*: to read by crossing, to read between, among the two. What sort of imagination by re-appropriation do we see in Robert Crumb? In consideration of his works prior to the illustration of the Bible, marked by highly original fiction, the drawings surprise by their precise following of the plot. It keeps to the word of the Bible, and the drawing flow like a story. It is a graphic novel, par excellence, it is the myth disguised in the form of a different genre. “Mutual convergence” is thus translated in adopting a familiar tone with the biblical text closely followed, while the author gives up his own originality, separating from the famous characters that defined him so far. The alien becomes familiar when dressed in present stylistic garments. Crumb's drawing style for the biblical illustration is consistent with his entire work. Plain and crossed hatching, in black and white, reminding us of Dürer's work in the 1500's, is the drawing technique for the entire book and

⁴ Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination. Toward a postmodern culture*. London: Routledge, 1988, p.38.

seem to carry the artist towards a surprising classicism for someone with a practice like his. Interested, as illustrator, in creating typologies, Crumb revisits the first human archetypes that are born in the holy texts. His interest for the subject is the interest of any artist reaching a certain maturity of creation. Robert Hughes, critic of art, finds in Crumb's drawings for the Bible influences of artists like Bosch, Pieter Bruegel, Rubens, Hogarth and Goya⁵. The artist himself confesses his intentions of a direct approach of the chosen theme: “I fooled around in the sketchbooks with those ideas and I just, I didn't like how it was working out so I just decided to do a straight illustration job of it. It seemed to me that the original text was so strange in its own way that there was no need to do any sendup or satire of it. My trial efforts to do that seemed lame, it wasn't working out”⁶. What separates Crumb's drawings from the works of the mentioned artists is, first of all, the media support, the comic strip format chose for the representation. This frames the biblical story and makes us aware of all the conventions of the genre. We are not surprised to see people naked in all the details, and the perspective of the author is a pragmatic one, allowing us to understand that the artistic act was nevertheless limited: „I didn't want to show sex organs, cause then the thing becomes X-rated and it limits the sales. I've done my share of explicit sexual drawings, as anybody who knows my work can certainly attest. I just decided it wasn't really necessary”⁷.

Miles away, the far more famous oeuvre of Marc Chagall lies a different testimony on the sacred narration. „I did not see the Bible, I dreamed it. Ever since early childhood, I have been captivated by the Bible. It has always seemed to me and still seems today the greatest source of poetry of all time”⁸ Marc Chagall told Franz Mayer, his son in law, a museum director. Chagall was assigned in 1930 by Ambroise Vollard, famous editor, art collector and art dealer, to create a series of illustrations of the Bible, on which occasion he intensely explores

⁵ Robert Hughes, “Robert Crumb. Roll right up, folks!”, <http://theguardian.com/books/2005/mar/07/robertcrumb.comics1> (visited on December 15th, 2014).

⁶ Alex Wood, “Hey, I'm Still Here...”, <http://crumbproducts.com/pages/about/hey.html> (visited on December 15th, 2014).

⁷ Eric Spitznagel, “Robert Crumb Thinks God Might Actually Be Crazy”, <http://www.ericspitznagel.com/awkward-question-time/robert-crumb> (visited on December 15th 2014).

⁸ Jackie Wullschlager, *Chagall: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 2008.

similar cultural works, so that later he can create the most famous drawings of the Holy Book. Chagall is more renowned for his drawings than his paintings and it can be seen better that in any of his other works in the drawings representing the biblical stories. They are dramatic works accomplished by powerful contrasts, through a fluid and intense drawing. Chagall creates framed scenes, each bearing a touch of *mise en scene*.

For Chagall, the illustration of the Bible is more related to expressing the emotions of the artists, than with presenting a narrative. He creates portraits taken out of the context, separated from each other. Just as in the case of Robert Crumb, Chagall imports in his family on paper the biblical characters that he recreates in his own style. Or maybe there are the initial Chagallian characters that are now populating the Bible. Chagall does not tell a story, as Crumb does, but instead presents an isolated narrative, where characters often seem to be floating, melting into the surrounding objects, in a childish and innocent manner, that often gives them an unfinished aspect. The Bible seems to represent to him rather a starting point for a journey in itself. With Crumb, one can note the line between the illustration and the story; he tells a story with the help of the drawing, creating a full visual narrative. Episodes are narrated step by step and no detail in the story is left out. Each word of the biblical text is represented in drawing, as well as textually reproduced. Crumb's book includes a complete version of the Genesis and this might be Crumb's solution for the text and the image to fully coexist. With Chagall, however, the text is completely stroke out, as we have been used to see for centuries when looking at illustrations of the biblical scenes, but his drawings do not remind of the classic paintings, nor of the icons. His drawings reveal the biblical scenes as if they were a series of dreams lacking any realism in a drawing. They don't look like anything familiar to

us but, then again, why should they? It is an ingression to the painter's own imaginary, and his introspection actually reveals a certain aesthetic choice that he puts forward. The thick lines used on the characters and sometimes on the background, the vivid, primary colours, in small number in each composition, the lack of perspective all place Chagall's works in a space of illusion, of the unreal.

Conclusions

Returning to the initial point of the work, while Robert Crumb gives an illustration that envisions and faithfully represents the biblical text, also fully including it in the book, Chagall brings a more abstract interpretation, fully original in both style and composition. A close look into the works of the two reveals several functions that might be assigned to the illustration in relation to the biblical text. Illustration has a *mimetic* function, that of translating the text into images, of accounting it in a visual narrative, so that the story may be understood from the images only. The *ethical* function of the images is present in the choice of preserving or not the piety of the initial text. The *anthropologic* function is that of placing the viewer into a certain period of time, with its specifics. And, eventually, the *religious* function of the illustration, similar to the one in the *Quattrocento*, for example⁹, when there was a functional nature of the Holy Book illustration, so that it served as guide to those who could not read.

Regardless of the relation between the illustration and the biblical text or of the way in which the artist related to it, the power of the Holy Book of generating new works of art remains undiminished.

⁹ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.41.

Appendix 1 – Creation



Fig. 1: Robert Crumb, *The Book of Genesis*.
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Appendix 3 – Cain and Abel

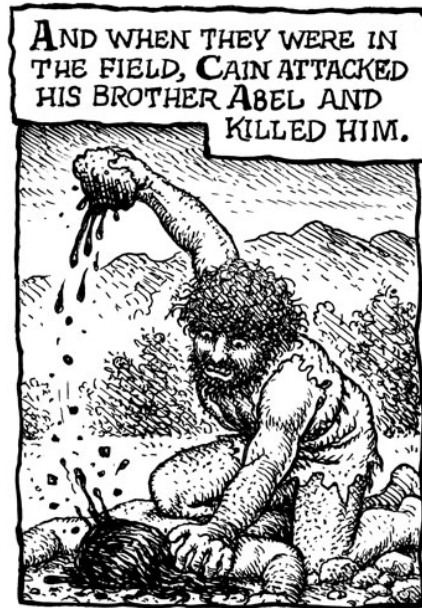


Fig. 4: Robert Crumb, *The Book of Genesis*.
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Appendix 2 – Adam and Eve



Fig. 2: Robert Crumb, *The Book of Genesis*.
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Appendix 4 – Lot and his daughters



Fig. 3: Robert Crumb, *The Book of Genesis*.
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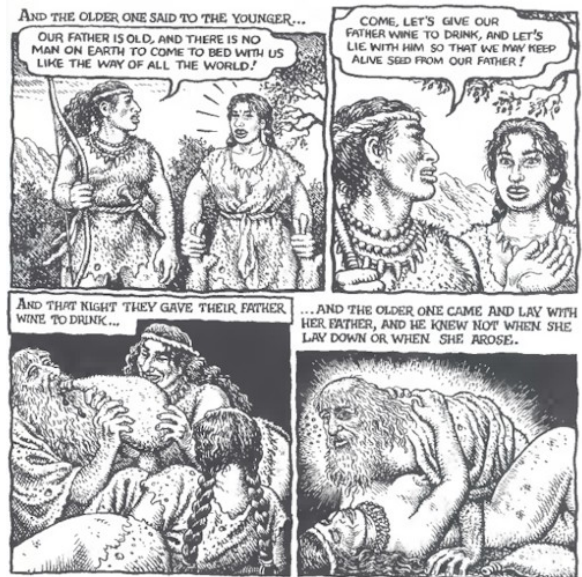


Fig. 5: Robert Crumb, *The Book of Genesis*.
© Alexander Wood

Figure 1: Robert Crumb, *The Book of Genesis*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2009. http://26.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_l68jgdmlm11qz6f4bo1_500.png (visited on Dec. 15th 2014)

Figure 2: Robert Crumb, *The Book of Genesis*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2009. <http://www.metroactive.com/features/book-of-genesis.html> (visited on Dec. 15th 2014)

Figure 3: Robert Crumb, *The Book of Genesis*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2009. http://25.media.tumblr.com/ab7DluYNrqnaiw7krjDTy3cpo1_500.jpg (visited on Dec. 15th 2014)

Figure 4: Robert Crumb, *The Book of Genesis*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2009. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2009/oct/23/robert-crumb-art> (visited on Dec. 15th 2014)

Figure 5: Robert Crumb, *The Book of Genesis*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2009. <http://commonsenseatheism.com/?p=8606> (visited on Dec. 15th 2014)

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