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## *Other ways to publish comics in Italy*

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As in many other countries, the Italian comic industry is in a period of transition. Struggling with an unstable market and an erratic economy, alternative publishing companies are finding it necessary to change their production system. In this time of difficulty, ‘hybrid’ publishers are starting to emerge, with structures, modalities, even ideologies borrowed from the DIY movement. They not only attend the same network of events and festivals of self-publishing; these entities pursue similar ethics of art and collective editorial management, with a greater involvement of the artists and striving for more equal treatment, fair salaries, and equal contracts. Their aspiration: to find an ‘organized’ way of self-publishing, respecting the professionalism of comics authors, and their creative work.

Certainly, similarities between small press, alternative publishers, and self-publishing has always existed. For example, the direct market – as Charles Hatfield remembers – has encouraged the rise of small, alternative presses and even scores of self-publishing comics creators<sup>1</sup>. Self-publishing is a practice that involves dealing with the entire comics production process: creation, development, physical realization, promotion, and distribution of a product via direct sales in festivals, events, online shops, or specialist bookstores. Furthermore, we must notice that DIY comics has increased even more in recent years, thanks to technical and cultural factors, as Sara Pavan explains: easier access to digital layout, economic online digital printing, comics schools, and *Accademie di Belle Arti* disseminated in numerous cities<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Gabrielli, Ettore. “Intervista a Sara Pavan: Il potere sovversivo della carta”, in *Lo Spazio Bianco*, 2014, available at: <http://www.lospaziobianco.it/intervista-sara-pavan-potere-sovversivo-carta> (Accessed: 22 June 2020).

In this paper, we shall analyze some noteworthy Italian specialty comics publishers that are combining artistic independence with a ‘new approach’ in production: we shall focus on Associazione Mammaiuto, Canicola Edizioni, and in particular Progetto Stigma.

All of them can be considered ‘alternative publishers’. According to *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, a precise definition of ‘alternative comics’ is like impossible<sup>3</sup>, although the elements they and Charles Hatfield relieve fit with our production. Alternative comic scene is sometimes known as independent comics, due to the independent nature of publishing within the alternative comics economy. However, «for some, the terms “independent” and “alternative”, though seemingly near-synonymous, came to represent opposing aesthetic tendencies»<sup>4</sup>. On the contrary, in Italian *alternativo* and *indipendente* are practically equal, with the last one more commonly used.

Moreover, Mammaiuto, Canicola and Stigma publish products that include “One-shot Graphic Novel non-mainstream” and “Small Press non-mainstream comics”, according to Pascal Lefèvre’s basic formats<sup>5</sup>. Even in Italy the diffusion of graphic novels has improved the perception of comics as a form of art/literature, enticing new artists to this format. The Italian historical hegemony of magazines and newsstands gave way to bookstores as the natural place to sell comics. It is not so surprising, that ‘hybrid’ publishing entities adopt the book-length narrative as publishing formats: namely, comics thought and realized directly for comic bookstores (or comics festivals), in most of the cases without a serialization in anthological magazines or comic books – the one economically proven means of getting book-length comics into print, as Charles Hatfield explains<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Bramlett, Frank; Cook, Roy; Meskin, Aaron. *The Routledge Companion to Comics*. London: Routledge, 2016, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Lefèvre, Pascal. “The Importance of Being Published: A Comparative Study of Different Comics Formats”, in Magnussen, Anne; Christiansen, Hans-Christian. *Comics and culture: Analytical and theoretical approaches to comics*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000, p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005, p. 162. Due to absence of official reports, it is not easy to obtain a reliable portrait of Italian comic market, especially for independent realities. According to a report realized by Comicon Festival, in 2018 were published 5963 comics (“I numeri dell’editoria di fumetto in Italia”, in *Comicon Plus*, n. 0, 2019).



### **Associazione Culturale Mammaiuto**

An exception in this respect is [Associazione Mammaiuto](http://www.mammaiuto.it): a group of authors defining themselves just as self-publishing collective, formed in 2011 as a cultural association with their headquarters in La Spezia. In Italy it is not strange for an alternative publisher, a theatre company, or other artistic realities to be an *associazione culturale*, a legal status for entities pursuing cultural missions. Similar to nonprofit organization in UK, this status allows tax benefits, and permits to apply for institutional grants.

Mammaiuto's works reach the readers without intermediates, thanks to a first publication on the website [www.mammaiuto.it](http://www.mammaiuto.it), where short and long-term comics are serialized. After the online release, Mammaiuto association prints between 200-500 copies, selling the comics through its website (30% of total sales) and in events and festivals (especially at Lucca Comics, with 60% of total sales). Short stories are sometimes published in anthologies. The purpose of these sales is to give maximum remuneration to the authors, in addition to sustain the basic costs of the association. However, their stories remain available online, with the comic book representing support for the collective and, at the same time, a collector's item.

Artistically, the group is heterogeneous: drawings, narration styles, genres, and themes are various, with influences from *ligne claire* to Bryan Lee O'Malley. Throughout the years, the widespread presence of festivals has increased their audience, with readers from North-Central Italy and age range from 20 to 40. Winner of several DIY comics awards, their professionalism put Mammaiuto practically at the same level of a small press.



Samuel Daveti, Laura Camelli, *I Tre Cani*, Associazione Culturale Mammaiuto, 2018.

Some of their works were also republished by Italian ‘classic’ publishing house. In 2015, an agreement with Shockdom was stipulated with mixed result. Mammaiuto’s mission is to produce original narrations, aiming to export their comics abroad: it happened successfully in France with *I tre cani* (Samuel Daveti – Laura Camelli), published as *Les trois chiens* by Éditions Sarbacane. *Esatto*, originally a black & white comics by Lorenzo Palloni, was published by Sarbacane in color (as *La louve*) and after being republished in Italy by SaldaPress in the same colored edition, the author increased the earning potential of his work. In 2020 Sara Menetti’s *Pregnancy Comic Journal* was published by Feltrinelli Comics, only some months after the DIY edition. In these last cases, the publishers reached an agreement directly with the artists, without going through the association.



Lorenzo Palloni, *Esatto*, Associazione Culturale Mammaiuto, 2016.

As we noticed before, Mammaiuto sells comics directly online and in festivals. What differentiates publishers and DIY collectives is distribution, that represents the biggest expense in publishing industry. Obviously, distribution adds a widespread presence in bookstores and comic bookshops, with a decisive increase to reach readers. Among distribution, promoters and percentage of the retail price for the bookstore, around 60% of production costs run out. For example, according to the alternative publisher Eris Edizioni data, the expenses incurred in publishing each of its comics are: distribution 63%; printing 17%; authoring 11%; administration and management of the publisher 5%; shipping and marketing 2%; translation 2% (in case of foreign work). This situation has historical reasons, influenced at the beginning of the Eighties by the American direct market system: the intent was to balance the selling decrease with the exclusion of right to return. In Italy, in bookstores unsold books are returnable to the publisher, while in comics bookstores they are not.

Nowadays, most of the publishers have a national distribution: the bigger are Manicomix, Pan Distribuzione and Star Shop. Realities with independent or big distribution can be considered full-fledged publishers.

This also applies to alternative, small presses: publishers with small business, specific topics and genres and an attention for alternative, new authors. As in the case of DIY realities, their relationship with indie festivals and bookstore is a key strategy. According to Istat - Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, in Italy small presses publish around 4 books every year (10 maximum), with approximately 1000 copies per book<sup>7</sup>.

#### IL PREZZO DI COPERTINA NON È SCONTATO!

Caro lettore, ci sembra importante farti sapere come nasce il prezzo di copertina di un libro. Bisogna tenere conto di diverse voci che sommate insieme, copia dopo copia, vanno a coprire tutte le spese di produzione del libro e il lavoro di tutti coloro che hanno contribuito a fartelo arrivare in mano. Ecco allora il prezzo di copertina suddiviso nelle percentuali delle spese di produzione di *Il celestiale bibendum*:



- 63%** Distribuzione (Distributori - Promotori - Librerie)
- 17%** Costi di stampa
- 11%** Diritto d'autore
- 5%** Amministrazione e gestione della casa editrice
- 2%** Spedizioni e promozione
- 2%** Traduzione

Eris Edizioni publishes every book with this information.

In this sense, [Canicola Edizioni](#) is exemplary: they work on a very specialized audience, publishing monographic works, one-shot graphic novel, and anthologies. Its editorial staff, currently guided by Edo Chiericato, Liliana Cupido, and historical collaborators, follow every production process, with strong editorializing.

Established in Bologna in 2004, Canicola became a cultural association in 2005. The project started as a self-publishing magazine by Andrea Bruno and Edo Chiericato: it was distributed in international festivals, winning the Angoulême's BD Alternative prize in 2008. Subsequently, Canicola became – according to Edo Chiericato – a “militant project publisher”.

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<sup>7</sup> Istat Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, *La produzione e la lettura di libri in Italia. Anno 2016, 2017*, available at: <https://www4.istat.it/it/archivio/207939> (Accessed: 22 June 2020).



Canicola's mission is to promote comics culture through a "bibliodiversity" editorial line; Edo Chieragato and Liliana Cupido realize a specific project for every book, through special exhibitions, presentations, and workshops, working with public and private institutions. They print 1000-1200 copies per book.



Sarah Mazzetti, *I gioielli di Elsa*, Canicola Edizioni, 2017.

## Progetto Stigma

Other realities are focusing more on fair salaries and creative freedom, with juxtaposition between editor and author.

The main example is Progetto Stigma: established in 2017, it started to publish in 2018. Stigma defines itself as an editorial project: devoid of legal status, it is managed directly by its published artists, exactly as a DIY collective. Its 'political' conception is clarified by its motto (*I matti finalmente gestiscono il manicomio*), and its name, which refers to a symbolical liberation from the 'editorial slavery'.

The idea occurred to AkaB, one of the most prominent alternative comics artists in Italy who passed away prematurely in 2019. Pseudonym of Gabriele Di Benedetto (Milan, 1976-2019), illustrator, comics artist and film director, AkaB was active in self-publishing since the Nineties with his group Shok Studio, with whom he successfully sold comics to American publishers like Dark Horse. In 2011 the group Collettivo Dummy, formed by Alberto Ponticelli, Ausonia, Officina infernale, Squaz, Tiziano Angri, realized the comics *Le 5 fasi* (Edizioni BD). It is in this period that the idea of Progetto Stigma started to emerge. In 2017 Stigma reunited Collettivo Dummy group, as well as young artists from underground and DIY culture, in its editorial staff, called *Conclave*. Mostly of these artists are based in Milan.





Stigma's editorial line is clear: it publishes artists with an underground style, sometimes debuts them. Most of their comics (3-4 per year) are long-form stories, except some anthologies. Visually, the central role of the author is underlined by the absence of Stigma logo on the cover. Every book is revised by the collective, and a curatorial team is selected for every project, that follows the comics with a work of critic and editing.

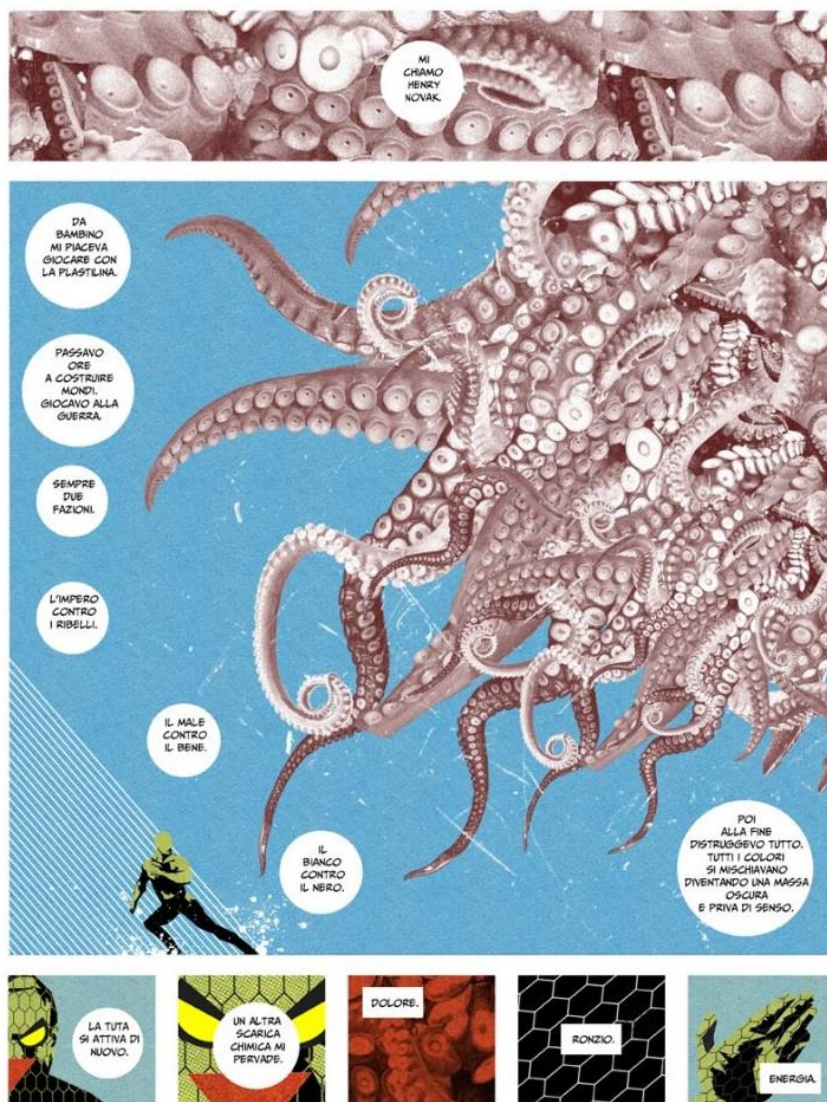
To obtain the higher remuneration for the author, every book published by Stigma is launched via pre-order: to incentivize it, readers will receive also a 'special', an original work in comic book format printed in an unique edition. This system tries to unite the reward-based crowdfunding to the project mission: this results in a more fair salary for the author. In this way, the 30% of sales during the pre-order goes to the author, and 12% to the curator.

Furthermore, pre-order is followed by a distribution in bookstores, thanks to an agreement with alternative publisher Eris Edizioni. In the books sold directly in bookstores, author's share drops to 12%, due to distribution costs.

Eris Edizioni, established in 2009 in Turin, is crucial for Stigma: publishing comics, novels, and essays, has decided to support Progetto Stigma with distribution and handling organizational tasks such as administration, printing, and promotion in bigger festivals (while in DIY events Stigma participates independently).



Dario Panzeri, *Perso nel bosco*, Progetto Stigma, 2019.



AkaB, Officina Infernale, *Iron Kobra*, Progetto Stigma, 2019.

Stigma's books are published in creative commons and the artists can republish their works with others, if they want. For now, Stigma's public is limited: pre-order is around 160-380 copies, 1500 in total with the volumes sold in bookstores. Book size and package depend on the editorial project: for example, *Perso nel bosco* (by Dario Panzeri) and *Le mani di Zeta*, AkaB's posthumous work, remind art books.

Stigma operates as a 'collective' also creating synergies similar to DIY comics: collaborating for the visual part in a CD's music bands, the comics page in a cultural magazine or the illustration cards for a board game project. The artists that participate are paid individually.

AkaB was the founder and led the project: he also managed website, social networks, pre-order. Following his death, all the collective is carrying out Stigma's editorial plan.



AkaB, Officina Infernale, *Iron Kobra*, Progetto Stigma, 2019.

In summary, we can find interesting insights in the cases we have offered. Despite different production methods and published comics, the massive issue remains to avoid the distribution costs: that can be achieved selling directly online and in festivals (Mammaiuto) or through a pre-order (Stigma) or cooperating with other publishers (Mammaiuto, Stigma). In particular, these publishing entities are creating engagement and loyalty with their audience, with serialization (Mammaiuto), 'rewards' (Stigma) or editorial project extended to

exhibitions and workshops (Canicola); in some cases, trying to obtain international recognition exporting abroad their books (Mammaiuto). Although doubts remain on their greatest challenge – their sustainability in the long term – in the end they are building their own ‘communities’, trying to promote comics culture and greater involvement of the artists in their projects.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> We would like to thank: Alberto Brambilla, Pablo Cammello, Edo Chiericato, Samuel Daveti, Isa De Pica, Ettore Gabrielli, Alessandro Martoz Martorelli, Lorenzo Palloni, Giulia Panzeri, Maria-Angela Silleni, Jacopo Starace. In memory of AkaB.