

Femininity in Superhero Comics: a study of social representations

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The visual image has been largely taking up the means of communication of postmodernity as an important communicational resource. By the same token, the theory of social representations (TSR) has assumed a privileged place in the study of mass communication, to grasp the relationship manners socially shared by subjects about determined objects. The goal of this research is to present a methodological composition with a visual image analysis that can be useful in the field of research about TSR. To this end, we regained the analysis of visual content through an associative model of Variables and Values, linking it to the premises of Barthesian semiotics, attesting that they are complementary methods. This methodological composition was applied to investigate the femininity representation in superhero comics, through the image of Wonder Woman. The results show the reaffirmation of traditional values naturalized in the representation of femininity, exhibiting only a few (and momentary) changes over the years.

Keywords: Image Analysis; Social Representation; Content Analysis; Semiotics; Femininity.

INTRODUCTION

The description of contemporary Western societies as "image societies" has become increasingly popular. Aumont (2005) uses the term "civilization of image" to refer to their predominance in the West, a finding even more significant in terms as "oculocentrism" (Barros, 1999) and "ocularcentrism" (Banks, 2009). Although the belief that images are the language of modernity, they operate as communication elements since the beginning of human history (Vergueiro, 1998).

Moreover, Vergueiro (1998), Mirzoeff (1999), Gombrich (2012), and Medina Filho (2013) have highlighted the uneven approach of visual elements in the humanities, especially when compared to the power of those imagistic artifacts in the field of group communications (and relationships). In general, the controversy regarding the use of images as a source of scientific information is based on two conflicting principles. The first presupposes a naïve reading of the images as "explicit", evoking all possible immediate meanings. As a communicative element, the image would be *obvious*. The second refers to the exact opposite of the notion of obviousness: if the image isn't obvious, it allows interpretation (Moliner, 2016), revealing its polysemic nature (Penn, 2002; Joly, 2012).

Even though they are underused, the images have a background in the human sciences, which begins in the field of art history (Gervereau, 2007). On the other hand, ethnography and anthropology (Mathias, 2016) have also used visual content, such as figures and films, to break down communicative barriers and narrate non-verbal aspects (Harper, 1998). In social psychology its use is increasing, as demonstrated by the works of Hakoköngäs and Sakki (2016), Moliner (2016), Martikainen (2019), Martikainen and Hakoköngäs (2022) with different approaches.

In parallel, semiology and semiotics, rooted in the classical era and language philosophy (Joly, 2012), emerged from the intersection of linguistics and structuralism. Both study the relationships between signs and propose to expand linguistics, focusing exclusively on the linguistic sign. With French tradition and founded by Ferdinand Saussure, semiology establishes the sign as a dual entity that attaches a concept (the meaning) and an acoustic image (the signifier).

Upon reading Saussure's production, Roland Barthes restructures semiology in the field of humanities in France, and with Lévi-Strauss's writing allowing the acquisition of methodological awareness regarding its status (Gervereau, 2007). Barthes expands Saussure's bipartite model, emphasizing that signs can have multiple meanings. In figurative systems (e.g., representational art) they can allude to culturally and conventionally indirect content.

According to Barthes' model, signs can have a first-order meaning, or *denotative* ("fox": canid), and a second-order meaning, or *connotative* ("fox": smart fellow, astute) (Penn, 2002). If the connection between the signifier and the first-order concept, the denotative, can many times be arbitrary and conventional (mainly in non-figurative languages, as the verbal), its relationship with the second-order meaning is higher, since the cultural environment actively participates in its construction. This is where Barthes introduces the character of the *myth*-generating power of the image: connotative content can, by the own power of the image, sound as the first order, naturalizing itself. For this scholar, the code of the connoted system is composed, among other elements, of one "rhetoric of the era, [...] drawing from a reserve of stereotypes" (Barthes, 1990, p. 13) which are graphically displayed on images, bringing a cultural aspect not only to its production but also to its reading. With this in mind, Barthes calls attention to the fact that the image also *naturalizes*: hides in itself contents and *connotative* meanings and disseminates them as if they were natural, completely hiding its ideological and constructed nature. Thus, every image has a set of meanings (Klempe, 2013), constituting a communicational artifact.

Penn emphasizes that the second-order, or *connotative*, pinpoints exactly the matter that "those that make psychological use of the system have their point of entry" (Penn, 2002, p. 324). This is, in fact, the "point of entry" through which the social sciences, especially social psychology, can access the images.

Images, Social Representations, and Mass Communication

In "Psychoanalysis: Its Image and Its Public", Moscovici (2008) presents the state of resemblance between visual images and the mental image concept, and the latter with social representations. Images compose human thinking, they serve as support for the unknown, and summarize the object – both in verbal and pictorial terms (Arruda, 2020). Reassessing the conceptual discussion about the topic, Arruda (2020) highlights that, regardless of the approach, the figurative dimension, whether iconic or verbal, is at the core of the dynamics of representation construction.

Connotative meanings of a sign are collectively constructed and conventionally agreed upon, lacking a natural relation to the object. However, these meanings gain so much concreteness that their collective genesis, arbitrary to some extent (Klempe, 2013), is obscured. De Rosa & Farr (2002) name this ability for image hypostatization: to transform the concept

into substance, conventional in perception, abstract into concrete. Similarly, representations are shaped through intra- and intergroup communication, anchoring in originally disconnected meanings (Jovchelovitch, 2011), and once objectified, they acquire a naturalized quality.

Therefore, if the image-myth, according to Barthes, and the naturalized social representations, as described in the theory of social representations (TSR), cannot be treated as synonyms, it seems valid to treat the former as an expression of the latter – research such as that of Hakoköngäs and Sakki (2016), for example, has affirmed the myth as a naturalized meaning. This is because, when realized in the visual image, it represents an "unforgivable confusion between history and nature" (Penn, 2002, p. 324). Bazin (1989) allows a similar view when describing the process, partially with feedback, conducted by the image and its meaning: the image, signifier, is the embodiment of a representation. Not only does the image solidify the representation, but it also sustains it and, in sequence, serves as a ballast for new anchors and objectifications, maintaining the adaptable character of the representation (Hakoköngäs & Sakki, 2016).

This theoretical conclusion has been demonstrated in several studies over the years. The intimate relationship between the visual image and social representations (Reavey and Johnson, 2008), with images being forms of materialization of representation, is demonstrated, for example, in the works of Alba (2004) and Arruda & Ulup (2007). In these studies, the elaboration of mind maps by the participants to represent either the environment where they live (their city and country), or the broader level where this environment is inserted (the continent and the planet), demonstrate that the graphic representation of the mind map is the social representation itself, a *rectifying image* (Arruda & Ulup, 2007).

On the other hand, images can also shed light on elements of representation that are difficult to express verbally, as demonstrated by the work of Sen & Wagner (2005); Martikainen (2019); Martikainen & Hakoköngäs (2022). Gomes et al. (2022) also defend the relevance of images as ways of accessing layers of knowledge that are difficult to express in words.

In another aspect, still in the field of social representations, the legitimacy of the use of mass media as a form of access to content that organizes popular knowledge and behavior, according to Souza and Menandro (2007), arises together with the theory itself, a use sustained by Loizos (2007) for the apprehension of collective thought in a broad sense. Sá (1998) found, in studies that exhibited objectified social representations, that the use of media outlets is preferable to the direct query with the informant.

Despite this, a limitation to the extensive use of images in the humanities and social sciences is the lack of widely disseminated methodologies for doing so. In a recent

investigation, Moliner (2016) collected some social psychology studies that used images, presenting methodological suggestions for analysis. Hakoköngäs and Sakki (2016) and Martikainen (2019), using the covers of history books and drawings made by the research subjects, respectively, also make theoretical-methodological proposals. While the former performs an integrative and not thoroughly descriptive reading of the images, considering the component elements in order to make explicit naturalized meanings, the latter combines drawings and verbal descriptions, analyzed together and separately, to identify both the representations about teachers and pedagogical practices, as well as the coherence between the two forms of manifestation among themselves and with the institutional objectives expressed for education.

In turn, we propose the conjunction of two methods – visual content analysis (VCA) and semiotic analysis – which, although different, bring interesting common bases for research in social representations.

METHODS

Content Analysis (CA) is a set of techniques for the study of communications (Bardin, 2011). For Ball and Smith (1992), CA is the most systematic and empirical method available for document analysis, and its use in the study of social representations is included in Moscovici's (2012) initial work.

The main objective of CA is communication. According to Bardin (2011), communication is "any conveyor of meanings from a sender to a receiver controlled by the former or not" (p. 39). Thus, CA can work with non-verbal communication, as graphic and audio elements (Bardin, 2011). Nevertheless, even though CA can be applied to visual data, this usage is not very frequent. Bock, Isermann and Knieper (2011) attested that the highest part of production concerning visual content analysis (VCA) is after the year 2000. An example can be found in Moliner (2016): its methodological approach carries CA elements. Oliveira (2022) conducted similar research, using form counting and co-occurrence to quantitatively analyze his corpus and identify variations in motives for qualitative analysis of touristic publications.

Such adaptations are possible because CA must limit itself to the explicit content of communication (Ball & Smith, 1992). However, even though strictly based on the obvious, CA

aims to achieve what Bardin (2011) calls “context of existence”, or message production conditions. For this reason, CA needs a theoretical framework to clarify the meanings and effects indicated by the analysis (Bell, 2001).

Bock, Isermann and Knieper (2011) stand for the use of CA to synthesize large sizes of visual data, a clear advantage in comparison to more qualitative methods, that demand an exclusive dedication to each one of the documents. This proposition can be exemplified by Bell's (2001) study about the published covers of the Australian magazine *Cleo* in its first twenty-five years of publication. The author proposes specific formatting of the content analysis for the treatment of visual data, using a list composed of variables and values. The first one refers to specific and simultaneous aspects of the image analyzed. Whereas the values comprehend possible demonstrations of each one of the variables. The variables are simultaneously interrelated – they can all be observed in one image, whereas the values are exhibited in an excluding manner: the occurrence of a determined value prevents the appearance of other possibilities in the core of that specific variable. It can be noticed that the author's quantitative adaptation of the method allows the delimitation of typical or modal images, as suggested by Bardin (2011) – when counting the frequency of appearance of each value, it is possible to establish the element association rules, by equivalence or by exclusion, and point out the most typical representative cover of the twenty-five years of publication of the magazine (Bell, 2001).

Bell's (2001) proposal echoes Saussure's (1984) model on the biaxial organization of messages, in this case, visual messages. This model can be named as the "Permutation Principle" (Joly, 2012), and is structured as follows: messages are composed of a horizontal, syntagmatic axis, represented by the whole of the manifested message, the sum of the elements present in a given emission. Thus, the syntagmatic axis refers to the co-occurrence of different elements in the same set (the syntagm). The second axis is vertical, called associative or paradigmatic, and addresses the possible alternatives for each of those elements. The permutation principle is also applicable to image analysis (Penn, 2002; Joly, 2012), in Bell's (2001) proposal, the different elements of a phrase are the variables, and the possibilities of presentation of each of these variables are grouped in the form of values.

In a sense, the method proposed by Bell (2001) is an upgrading of other studies regarding visual content analysis. Ball and Smith (1992) present two investigations, one from the 1940s and the other from the 1970s, using variations in visual presentation elements over time to define "typical models" of female dresses and men's beards. Bell's (2001) model introduces important upgrades to previous research, as the possibility to combine, in the same

format, the objective description of visual elements, through the unfolding of each variable in a specific number of values, as well as the accurate synthesis, a categorization by constituent elements of each image analyzed, simplifying the counting of results. Hence, a systematic approach model of the object is obtained. As referenced, Moliner's (2016) model works similarly in the investigation with an image corpus, even though the relationships between shapes and motives include the context of the appearance of the former, a view not existent in Bell's (2001) model.

The result of this VCA, a type image or *pattern*, does not lend itself to further scrutiny of CA. As previously stated, Bell (2001) affirms that the VCA is more adequate to the image set approach, as singular images are more well-covered by in-depth analysis methods, such as the semiotic. First and foremost, the insertion of a second graphic art reading method allows us to solve one of the main criticisms usually directed to CA, which is its fragmenting effect on the object. Although the method vaporizes the visual text as part of the analysis process, it is done as a protection to make sure that the research stick to the object data (Ball & Smith, 1992). Nevertheless, we should keep in mind the remark made by the authors themselves, that CA tends to fragment what is entirely grasped by the usual message receivers. In this sense, to submit the type images, which are a synthesis of the CA process, to an integrative method as the semiotics tends to reduce the losses caused by fragmentation.

Penn (2002) proposes that the semiotic analysis be conducted in three different and successive stages: material selection, denotative inventory, and connotative inventory. The first stage involves collecting materials considering factors such as research goals, source availability, and the nature of documents (analyzable or not).

In the denotative inventory stage, the evident elements of the image are thoroughly outlined. Gervereau (2007) argues that this stage may seem trivial due to its limited ability to describe what is seen, but the lack of everyday experience can lead to "visual blindness" caused by careless image consumption. Penn (2002) emphasizes the importance of conducting a comprehensive and meticulous inventory to avoid selective and self-affirming analysis, as a systematic approach helps in this regard.

The third and final stage of the analytical process, the connotative inventory, has the goal to expose the highest levels of meaning (Penn, 2002). From the elements classified in the previous stage, it is possible to describe their connotations, evoked meanings, and relationships with other featured elements. As emphasized by Penn (2002), this stage demands a bigger load of cultural knowledge from the researcher, to divide the second-order meanings susceptible to being evoked by those elements. Moreover, this stage tends to integrate the existing visual

elements, highlighting their relationships at the meaning level. Finally, at the end of this stage, the researcher must systematize his notes in a report that can assume different forms, such as signification maps or tabular frameworks (Penn, 2002).

The Feminine Figure and Body in Superhero Comics: An Application of the Combined Methods

To demonstrate the application of the VCA method combined with semiotic analysis in a research on social representations, we used visually mass-produced popular cultural products: comic books. Continuously published since 1941 (Greenberger, 2017), Wonder Woman is the most iconic and popular female character in superhero comics (Lepore, 2017). In the U.S., a poll conducted just five months after the character's debut, she was voted the favorite superhero by 80% of readers, as stated by Del Manto (1988). Despite this, Oliveira (2007) highlights the role of female figures as "otherness" in superhero comics, due to the male predominance among media producers and consumers.

For the VCA, we chose four Wonder Woman comic book stories from different decades (1980-2012) in Brazil, with random selection based solely on the publication decade (Guimarães, 2014), in order to apprehend different moments of publication. Next, the magazines were scanned and the panels (coding units) were counted, with the page serving as the "context unit." From the total of panels collected, only those with Wonder Woman were selected for analysis.

Once this was done, we begin the analysis through variables and values, defining eight variables (Table 1) during the preliminary processing of the collected material. Each one of them received a limited number of values (between three to six), to describe its main possibilities of occurrence.

Data from the corpus reading were cross-referenced with drawing guides for the comic book industry, such as the works of Lee and Buscema (1978), McCloud (1995; 2008), Janson (2005), and Carvalho (2006), to define the value of each content variable. The use of guides produced by authors and researchers of comic books allowed a higher alignment between the analysis resource and the analyzed source, leading CA to a stage already predominantly semiotic and contextualized. This contextualization also reduces the impact of the *interpretive excess* indicated by Joly (2012).

List of Variables and Values for the Content Analysis

The variables used, as listed in Table 1, were the following:

Display Variable. Through the sectioning in small parts, this variable comprehends how much of the character's body parts are being displayed. For the segmentation of the body into intervals, we used the study by Lee and Buscema (1978, p. 45) as a reference.

Direction Variable. This variable comprehends the body display about the viewer's gaze/framing focus. Its values describe the vertical axis rotation of the body object, codifying the occasions in which this rotation happens in another axis through the value B5 - "Others/Torsion". The "Half Profile" value signals all the times that, still frontally portrayed, the figure is at a 45-degree angle, between the "Front" direction and the "Profile" direction. Intermediary rotations in which the character appears predominantly from the back were considered as such ("Back").

Table 1.

List of Variables and Values for the Analysis of Wonder Woman Comics.

Content Variables	Values	
A) Display	A1	Head – Bust
	A2	Head – Hips
	A3	Head – Knee
	A4	Entire body
	A5	Other parts (<u>with</u> the head)
	A6	Other parts (without the head)
B) Direction	B1	Front
	B2	Back
	B3	Profile
	B4	Half profile
	B5	Others/Torsion
C) Posture	C1	Straight
	C2	Crouched
	C3	Lay down
	C4	Sitting
	C5	Others
D) Disposition	D1	Figure
	D2	Same Level
	D3	Background
	D4	Others/Not applicable
E) Take	E1	Closed (close-up)
	E2	Intermediary
	E3	Opened (panoramic)
F) Camera Angle	F1	Superior
	F2	Horizontal
	F3	Inferior
G) Clothing	G1	Uniform Destroyed/Naked
	G2	Uniform Damaged/Half Naked
	G3	Uniform Intact/Dressed

	G4	Uniform Added
	G5	Uniform Covered
	G6	Unidentified
H) Age Group	H1	Child
	H2	Young
	H3	Adult
	H4	Middle Age
	H5	Elder
	H6	Unidentified

Posture Variable. This variable describes the figure illustrated by some action. Thus, the variable considers the static moment of the movement, (“Straight”, “Crouched”, “Lay Down”, “Sitting”) plus the value C5 – “Others” for moments that these descriptions were inaccurate.

Disposition Variable. This variable denotes interaction situations between the main character and other characters, exclusively of the male sex. This variable allows the description of the interaction in levels, focusing on the Wonder Woman character as the point of interest. Hence, it can be interpreted as “Figure”, “Background”, or at the “Same Level” as the male figure. However, the value D4 – “Not applicable” assemble the moments where the main character does not have any interaction with male figures.

Take Variable. This describes what is traditionally called as “cutting” of a scene (McCloud, 2008). It is the cut that guides the reader about what deserves their attention, drives the gaze, and offers visual information, according to the author's interest. Moreover, combined with the Camera Angle Variable they make what is called by McCloud (2008) a “framework”. The variable allows only three options: “Closed or Close-up”, for narrow takes, usually focusing on body parts in cutting; “Intermediary”, for the moments where characters are highlighted in detail, but with the setting also visible and last, the value “Opened or Panoramic” value, when the focus is on the setting, introducing characters with a less defined presence.

Camera Angle Variable. Complementary to the Take Variable, its range of values describes camera angles (or viewer’s gaze) alternating on a horizontal axis. For Lee and Buscema (1978) and McCloud (2008), this variation causes dramatic effects on the reader’s perception, useful for the story. The “Horizontal” value describes the medium level of the camera approach, capturing the scene frontally. The other values (“Superior” and “Inferior”) indicate the camera’s positioning above and below the medium level, respectively.

Clothing Variable. This variable describes the presence or integrity of Wonder Woman’s uniform in the analyzed corpus. We used the traditional heroine uniform as a reference, composed of a tiara, the corset, shorts, bracelets, and boots, according to the style

guide of DC Comics publisher (Nolen-Weathington, 2007). This state corresponds to the “Uniform Intact/Dressed” value, considering the baseline for comparison. The uniform’s condition progressively varies, being portrayed as reduced (“Uniform Damaged/Half Naked” and “Uniform Destroyed/Naked”) or upgraded (“Uniform Added” and “Uniform Covered”). The “Unidentified” value describes the coding units where body parts are portrayed traditionally without clothing elements, preventing the accurate assessment of the garment.

Age Group Variable. In its fictitious story, Wonder Woman is a Greek Amazon sculpted in clay centuries ago. However, she is regularly portrayed as a grown woman that has not reached middle age. Assuming the value (“Adult”), her less mature appearances were labeled as “Young” or “Child”; the “Middle Age” and “Elder” values were used when she was depicted older than usual.

Semiotic Analysis Applied to Wonder Woman Comics

After coding the corpus, we used the proportional incidence of each value to obtain a "type image" for each story. This type image consists of one or more panels that represent the most common values or a high number of values combined. Thus, we obtained six type images, with two panels each from the 2012 and 2002 editions.

Then, each image underwent both descriptive inventories. In the connotative inventory, we placed the images within their production context and the surrounding visual culture, including other art forms such as visual arts and dance. This confirmed their connection with other circulating images (Leitão & Santos, 2012). The "type-images" were then analyzed in relation to other visual manifestations and their associated meanings. Finally, in the second connotative treatment, the modal images were analyzed from the perspective of TSR and studies on representations of femininity in the mass media. This integrated all the previous steps and facilitated the discussion of the results.

RESULTS

Visual Content Analysis

From the four stories of the corpus (published in Brazil in 2012, 2002, 1997, and 1986), we achieved a total of 83 units of context (pages) were analyzed, containing a total of 484 coding units (panels). Among these, 233 (48%) were submitted to analysis, for portraying the main

character. This minority character in the character's presentation, even in her own comic book, repeats the data found by Cocca (2014), in addition to having strong similarities with the findings of Jones (2018).

The 233 coding units were then encoded in the form of variables and values, breaking down their syntagmatic manifestation through the possibilities expressed by the elements present (values). This allowed the identification of one or more image-types, i.e., containing all the predominant values in a single image. This image-type, which synthesizes the corpus of analysis, is again subjected to an analytical process, this time semiotic.

Semiotic Analysis of the Type Image

Due to space, we will present below only the type-image extracted from the story "Thrones" (Figure 1), published in Brazil in November 2012 (originally published in Wonder Woman 6, vol. 4, April 2012) (Azzarello, Akins, Green & Wilson, 2012). The choice of this type-image is based on what is particular about it. As we will demonstrate in the analyses, it is the one that has the greatest visual (qualitative) distinctions, without, however, effectively breaking with the already naturalized representation.

Denotative Description

Panel placement on the page. Vertically, the panel takes 2/3 of the page and all its width. Two other panels, smaller and horizontally aligned, fill out the page.

The scene. The panel portrays Wonder Woman with a young woman in her lap, Zola. Both are leaning on the tail of a sea animal, which is the impersonation of Poseidon. With an intermediary level, the viewer is discreetly situated below the horizontal level.

Textual elements. Wonder Woman and Zola talk through two speech balloons portrayed in the scene.

The Wonder Woman. She is a young woman, depicted in full body, athletic, with strong legs, carrying a victim that blocks the view of her upper body and abdomen. Vertically, the heroine fills the entire panel, and, having Zola in her lap, they make a lowercase “t”. Wonder Woman is straight, directly facing the reader. She has a great amount of hair and it is oriented to the upper margin of the panel, indicating the downward movement of her body. Her facial expression is calm. All her body parts, including the neck, are strong and marked by graphic features indicating muscular tension. The neck is almost as thick as her face, and it is decorated with a necklace of three horizontal bands with the letter “W” in front. Wonder Woman holds



Figure 1.

Type Image Extracted from “Thrones” (Azzarello, Akins, & Green, 2012).

Zola with her right forearm behind her legs until her hip, while the heroine’s left arm holds her from the back, her left hand under Zola’s armpit. The main character’s left leg is stretched in

the reader's direction, as a support point, while her right leg is bent backward, with only the tip of her toe touching the ground. Only her right foot can be fully seen, as the framing does not allow the full view of the other foot. Her thighs are long. Even though all image outlines are made in black, Wonder Woman is detailed in only a few lines: there are subtle delineations of her cheekbones, the muscles of her thighs, and knees. The hand and forearms, however, are marked by graphic elements and small black spots, suggesting dirt on her exposed skin and on the bracelets that cover the forearms. Regarding spots and black marks, the forearms and hands are covered with red spots as well, suggesting blood. Even with Zola's body interference, it is possible to see that Wonder Woman uses her whole uniform: tiara, necklace, corset, bracelets, belt, shorts, boots, and her magic knot, tied at waist level. Wonder Woman's skin has a pinkish-ochre tone, with brown shadows.

Other elements of the scene. Wonder Woman carries a young woman with short hair and a scary expression, namely Zola. The girl's body is curved in a "V" shape in the heroine's arms. Zola has a backpack in her right hand, positioned behind Wonder Woman's head, that is directed up as well as her jacket string and hair, indicating the downward movement of the figures. The young woman is dressed in a hooded sweatshirt, shorts, and sneakers. Her eyes are wide open. Zola's skin tone is lighter than Wonder Woman's, in a subtly rose, almost white tone. Her orange-yellow short hair is up.

Wonder Woman and Zola are on a large green tail of a sea animal, similar to a blue whale. Horizontally, the tail takes all the panel base length, and it zooms out in the shape of a cone, while it moves away towards the background of the scene, ending up at the same height as Wonder Woman's hip. The end of the tail is divided into two side fins, that extend until the vertical limits of the panel, shaping a huge letter "T". Throughout the entire tail extension, long lines and black hatching indicate muscle bundles, with shadows producing volume. Some light-tone features give the sparkling feeling of something wet. In the closest portion of the viewer and over the fins, graphic elements painted in ochre and brown represent barnacles fixed on the tail. The latter is submerged under water, depicted in gray shades, with thick lines in black indicating the ripple of the liquid. The fins are raising from the surface, causing drops of water to fall from them. In the background, a bridge forms an arc, parallel to the upper limit of the panel. It is seen from below, predominantly black. Grey-blue tones symbolize the sky.

Connotative Description

Located in the center of the image, dividing it into two parts, Wonder Woman's figure is solid, as a column between the two horizontal limits of the panel. Her figure is so strong that it challenges those limits, a typical resource of super adventure comics, as pointed out by Jimenez (2006), although it doesn't visibly break it. The heroine's figure is majestic, mainly when we compare her facial expression with the young Zola. The contrast between them increases the difference between the characters, an opposition between strength, activity, safety and vulnerability, passivity, and fear. This divergence can be observed even in the image's specific details: Wonder Woman has tanned and hypertrophied legs, whereas Zola has slender and pale legs, of a yellow tone. The main character's arms and hands, marked by dirt and blood, reinforce her active nature, once again contrasting with Zola, in which her clothing lightness is only broken by the shadows of her jacket. Although saved, the young woman is the only element of the scene that does not touch the limits of the panel: on the contrary, her open hand seems to be looking for something to hold on to. Similarly, the positioning of the viewer in the scene below the medium line of the panel increases the contradiction between the characters. The angle heightens Wonder Woman and diminishes Zola, especially because of the effect of the framing in her scared, comical face.

The hero carrying the victim in his arms, that is, saving him, is a recurrent image especially on the covers of American superhero comics. It refers to the Pietà, a medieval Christian iconography. This presence on covers of publications is constant, receiving the name "*Pietà Covers*" (Engblom, 2007).

However, a detail about Wonder Woman's complexion immediately attracts attention: even though inside the horizontal limits of the panel, she is a woman of considerable size. The North American comic book industry uses the "head" as a unit of measurement of the human body. Traditionally, the feminine figure is between 7.5 (Lee & Buscema, 1978) and 8 head height (Maguire, 2006). This distinction demonstrates different drawing styles or schools, as pinpointed by Moore (2006). The structure with the highest number of heads refers to the contemporary and highly styled school, with somewhat unreal anatomy, but this generates more dynamism when applied to superhero comics. In this image, Wonder Woman's body has nothing less than 8.75 head height, surpassing even the "heroic anatomy" pattern, as demonstrated in Maguire (2006) and Damasceno, Vale & Jadson (n.d.). Only Moore (2006) suggests figures so big when putting the heroic anatomy with over eight head height. This larger proportion of protagonists has a direct effect on the reader: pictured at such proportion, the superhero is even more superhuman, anatomically different than those who need her help and protection. However, this exaggeration can result in adverse effects, such as the

masculinization of the feminine figure. Both in Buscema's classic anatomy (Lee & Buscema, 1978) and in Maguire's (2006) modern lines, the male superhero figures are the ones that exceed the limit of eight head height.

DISCUSSION

With more than eighty years of continuous publication, Wonder Woman is a myth in the sense given by Barthes. Supposedly idealized to break up the hegemonic model of femininity (Greenberger, 2017), it precisely arises at the historical time in which those peripheral types give their first solid steps out of the usual roles of damsels in distress or *femme fatales* (Cocca, 2014). However, its plot, and more than that, its imagistic representation, carry contradictory meanings to this proposal (Lepore, 2017). A clear instance of this contradiction pertains to physical beauty.

Beauty, an indispensable aspect of female representation (Higonnet, 1995), has an active role in Wonder Woman's image – through this aspect, she connects the most to traditional female representations (Rosa, et al., 2021). Her hair flies in the wind; her exposed legs draw curved and sinuous lines. Her breasts are important femininity factors: they are highlighted regardless of the clothing she is depicted in or the movement in which naturally it would not be possible to have a full view (Cocca, 2014).

Another aspect between Wonder Woman's graphic display and the social representation of femininity is subtle physical strength, femininity being its limit. The muscles are portrayed mildly, predominating the use of variations in the light instead of lines to define them. Her physical strength must be displayed, although indirectly, far away from thick and precise lines that outline male musculature. Not coincidentally, the panel described in this research defies the norm by emphasizing the heroine's physical strength, which typically aligns with masculine traits in the comic context (Rosa, et al., 2021) – it was the only story that demonstrated it, among those analyzed.

Despite being the warrior princess of a nation of warrior women, if her body was drawn coherently with the accomplishment of physical performances, she would end up being a product outside of the “desirable point for consumption” (Samarão, 2007). Her curves and curls need to be preserved as a way of sex portrayal, thus, as femininity itself (Oliveira, 2007). Again, it is not a coincidence that the analyzed panel masculinizes the character the most, featuring her prominent physical strength. The head proportion and shoulder-hip ratio (Maguire, 2006) aligns with male models.

Overall, we have the restatement of the most traditional feminine representations: distant from denying it, what Wonder Woman does is reinforce it by contrast. Strong (masculine), although beautiful (feminine); self-assured (masculine), but delicate (feminine)... This continuance serves a dual function: if on the one hand, Wonder Woman acts emphasizing the established feminine model while being a part of the conveyed social representation, on the other hand, this happens to allow the communicational flow (and the consumption) between writers and readers. Wonder Woman, an object of communication, cannot exist beyond the social world that produces and consumes her. To support her designation as a "woman," the character must embody a clear representation of the femininity shared by her authors and readers. However, the diegesis and its role as the protagonist of the super-adventure require that the passivity feature of the social representation of femininity, for instance, be put aside or hidden. This matter comprises the major issue of her characterization: independence, strength, initiative, and activity are contents linked exclusively to the desired representation of the male figure (Bourdieu, 2016) – in the feminine, they correspond to an undesirable model. To counterbalance the masculine elements, feminine signifiers are emphasized to the point of parody, with exaggerated features such as sexy hair even underwater and an exaggerated curvature of the upper body that accentuates the breasts and creates an hourglass effect on the hips (Cocca, 2014). Not coincidentally, in the scene where she explicitly embodies a typically male role, namely the savior hero, the imagistic of the scene evokes feminine contents of religiousness, as Virgin Mary, to reduce the dissociation generated.

In summary, despite its four decades of publication, Wonder Woman still has not been able to break with the hegemonic representations of femininity and masculinity to create an authentic form of being a woman at the forefront of the action.

CONCLUSIONS

The connection between social representations and visual images cannot be ignored. In our image-driven contemporary society, images hold significant influence over meanings, emotions, and memories. However, research in these areas is lacking, particularly in terms of accessible methodologies for studying visual sources. This investigation aimed at grouping initiatives, generating a review, and applying the methods found, combining different approaches to only one source.

Therefore, this study suggests exploring visual images as a research source for social representations. It also highlights the use of visual evidence to convey representations found in

other cultural products, supported by the scientific field. We hope these interdisciplinary investigations in social psychology, communication, and anthropology serve as an invitation to further studies with both their strengths and limitations.

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