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**Introduction**

**Comics in 21st-Century Spain**

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In 2016, cartoonist José Pablo García adapted the essay *La guerra civil española*, by renowned historian Paul Preston, to the comic book format, using the same title. Within a few months, the collaboration between cartoonist and historian reached number three on El Periódico’s list of best-selling non-fiction books. The book’s commercial success illustrates both the Spanish public’s renewed interest in history in recent years, and the increasing relevance of the graphic novel as a genre in 21st-century representations of the past. Spanish comics make up part of the general boom of the graphic novel over the last two decades, during which the number of graphic novelists has grown, the themes of their work have diversified, and the editions have increased in both quantity and quality. Many Spanish graphic novels have been translated and become staples at national and international exhibitions and fairs, as well as in bookstores around the world. They have garnered considerable critical attention also, resulting in the normalization of their study within the academic disciplines. *The Graphic Past: Comic and History in 21st-Century Spain* seeks to contribute to this growing critical landscape; the present collection of essays engages with the representation of Spain’s past in comics by Spanish authors and published in their country and abroad.The historical past has become one of the most important topics of contemporary comic production and its success in Spain is not surprising, given the relevance that issues such as the memory of the Civil War and Francoism have gained in new millennium. Hence the need for an in-depth exploration of this topic. This volume also seeks to contribute to the further consolidation of the comic as an object of academic study within U.S. Hispanism and beyond.

Contemporary Spanish graphic narrative has come far in the last few years and there is a definite sense that in Spain “we are living in a creatively Golden Age for comics” (García, *Spanish Fever* xiii). Globally speaking, the graphic novel has gained respectability, and critics and informed readers alike refer to graphic narratives as pivotal cultural referents. The label comic, and even its equivalent in Spain with the long-standing tradition of *tebeos*, has lost its childish connotation and the medium now routinely addresses grave, profound, and distinctly not-playful events, in the spheres of both the imagined and the real. Traditionally, comics had to struggle with marginalization that resulted from multiple factors: the mixing of narrative and graphic traits, the historical association with an uneducated reader, the relationship with industrialized mass culture, the adherence to forms and genres of popular culture (sci-fi, adventure, comedy), and the close dependency on the popular press and magazines. All of these contributed in important ways to the tension between *high culture* and comics that defined the reception of the latter for decades. However, more recently graphic narratives have merited considerable critical attention and have enjoyed increasing visibility in curricula, conference programs and publication trends, in Spain and in other countries. Research groups, university courses, and national and international conferences have accomplished much in paving the way toward academic recognition of this narrative mode. It is the focus of both dissertations and published books, and respected cultural venues like the press have devoted noteworthy space to promoting comics readership. Online sites such as Tebeosfera.com and Guiadelcomic.es provide detailed information on the universe of comics to the public and critics alike.

Comics have long enjoyed a vigorous readership in Spain, together with a rather sustained editorial production. The Francoist dictatorship prevented the comic from reaching its full potential while, at the same time, it provided the conditions for a graphic production of high caliber, through stories that disguised their mocking satire as childish reading and superficial entertainment. However, Spain’s vibrant comic book scene from the 40s to the early 70s, with its representation of subaltern characters giving space and voice to a subtly subversive discourse, fell into a period of protracted decline in the late 20th century. As the 1980s came to an end, the saturation of the market and the general crisis of the industry claimed victims even among prestigious magazines like *Cairo*. The crisis of the European, especially Franco-Belgian, market made matters worse. By the mid-1990s, only a handful of magazines were being published, such as *El jueves*, *TBO*, and *Top Comics*. The decade was a desert for graphic authors, but the 1990s saw some growth in the number of titles published by small independent publishers. In the 2000s, the market showed encouraging signs thanks to the emergence of the graphic novel format. Independent long-form comics (mostly produced by underground, alternative, and indie artists) began to be published and distributed more widely across Spain and two bestselling graphic novels, *Arrugas* (2007) by Paco Roca and *María y yo* (2007)by Miguel Gallardo, were made into movies. Other important titles in recent years include Max’s *Bardín el Superrealista* (2006), Fermín Solís’ *Buñuel en el laberinto de las tortugas* (2008), Altarriba and Kim’s *El arte de volar* (2010) and *El ala rota* (2016), Santiago García and Javier Olivares’s *Las Meninas* (2015), and Ana Penyas’s *Estamos todas bien* (2018). As it stands, due to both the fortuitous popularity of graphic novels and the resilience of fanzines and small independent publishers, the comic has weathered the crisis of the medium, managing to remain vital while maintaining solid ties with its own tradition. The launch of publishers that specialize in graphic production and the creation of awards like the National Comic Prize, inaugurated in 2007 by the Ministry of Culture, also contribute to the success of the Spanish comics industry today. Among the most noteworthy of the publishers mentioned above is Astiberri (Bilbao), which has supported the creation of authors since 2001.

The Spanish market for comics remains stable and relies mainly on the translation of American, Japanese, and Franco-Belgian titles. According to the annual report of the Tebeosfera Cultural Association, one in four comic books that circulates in the Spanish market is by a national author. Women sign just over 3 percent, but if we count all the artists of all nationalities, women are credited in 30 percent of the comics distributed. More than half of the published comics are action or superheroes. The ideal format is that of a book, chosen for most new, original graphic works (not translations or new editions of previously published work) and 80 percent of that production is located in Catalonia —ECC, Norma and Planeta. Other entities, generally very small, publish the remaining 20 percent of original Spanish comics. The labels that bet the most on Spanish authors are medium-sized companies such as Astiberri, Norma, Dibbuks, Dolmen, Diabolo and Evolution. In the last few years there has been a small increase in publications aimed at children, greater consumption of comics by female readers, and a certain inclination in some publishers to produce comics for educational purposes.

As is often the case for academic disciplines aligned with other artistic forms, the trajectory of Comics Studies begins with recording the history of the comic medium. Contemporary professional scholars owe a debt of gratitude to the preservation efforts that frequently accompanied this early, frequently amateur, scholarship. In the American and European contexts, Comics Studies, as a scholarship-driven academic field, has its origins in the sixties. Since then, comics have been the object of study of several schools of thought. Structuralism studied graphic works from two perspectives, one focused on the narrative of comics as mythological systems, and the other focused on comics as graphic-linguistic systems. Semiology, Psychoanalysis, and Marxism are also well-established lines of inquiry, as well as the study and classification of the comic’s expressive resources through cinematographic language. More recently, Cultural Studies, together with post-structuralist and postmodern perspectives, have emphasized the possibilities of the comic medium as a space for cultural reflection.

Comics Studies developed as an interdisciplinary academic field in the early 1990s, with the global Anglophone and Francophone graphic production, along with Japanese Manga, attracting the lion’s share of critical attention. One of the most important contributions to this discipline came from a professional cartoonist, Scott McCloud, who in 1993 published *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, a book that took a particularly formalist approach to the genre. It is difficult to overestimate the influence of McCloud’s ideas. Another landmark book was Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), which maps out the fundamentals of graphic storytelling. Critical publications have multiplied over the years, including important collections of essays that focus on specific topics or trends. Among these publications, *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, edited by FrankBramlett, Roy T. Cook and Aaron Meskin,stands out as a single collection that can serve as a state-of-the-art introduction and overview of the field. The Modern Language Association (MLA) volume *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (2009), edited by Stephen E.Tabachnick, is also most useful to scholars and students alike. Unfortunately, Spain merits only a few pages in each volume.

Despite the abundance of critical works, the marginalization that has traditionally relegated the comics to a lower cultural status continues, even within the seemingly liberal bounds of current cultural criticism; U.S. Hispanism, and consequently Spanish comics, have not proven the exception to this rule. Nevertheless, while many prestigious literature and culture journal series have yet to publish issues on the study of comics, the proliferation of academic publications (books and articles) and research groups (i.e. PACE) demonstrates that graphic narratives have emerged as legitimate objects of analysis, mirroring the popularity of the genre among consumers. Critical analyses have evolved from the exploration of the essence of the genre within the Visual Arts to looking at the richness of a graphic production that transcends both the popular and the countercultural and aims to offer stories of greater depth. *El lenguaje de los cómics* (1972) by film historian Román Gubern and *El discurso del cómic* (1988), by Román Gubern and Luis Gasca, are among the first comprehensive studies on the medium. Other scholars, including Antonio Lara and author Terenci Moix, also have contributed to the birth of the field with historical and semiotic approaches.

Recent publications by Spanish comics scholars such as Sergio García Sánchez, Rubén Varillas, and Andrés Romero-Jódar, to mention just a few, approach the comics from a wide range of perspectives. These include the exploration of formal conventions, the cultural and historical contexts that originate comics and their reception, and the economic, ideological and socio-political ideas that provide the basis for the–some Spanish but mostly foreign–comics themselves. In *La novela gráfica* (2010)*,* scriptwriter and critic Santiago García traces back the evolution of the graphic novel from an art history perspective. In *The Trauma Graphic Novel* (2017), Romero-Jódar approaches comics that portray traumatic experiences as an emerging subgenre but does this through the analysis of important graphic novels in English. Looking at comics from a global perspective, including Spain, is the goal of *On the Edge of the Panel. Essays on Comics Criticism* (2015*)* edited by Esther Claudio and Julio Cañero. The current body of criticism tracks the evolution of the genre, while it testifies to the acceptance of its cultural-heritage dimension. These works also prove how the comic responds to a variety of modalities that consolidate the graphic novel as a prominent form of figurative narration. Another line of scholarly research focuses on the characteristics that make comics particularly apt for use in the classroom, including as a vehicle for the acquisition of Spanish as a foreign language.

More critical studies in recent years offer a broad, panoramic approach, as can be seen in the volumes published by academic presses in Spain: *Las batallas del cómic: Perspectivas sobre la narrativa gráfica contemporánea* (2016), by Javier Lluch-Prats, José Martínez Rubio, Luz C. Souto and Xelo Candel Vila (eds.), and *Nuevas visiones sobre el cómic: Un enfoque interdisciplinar* (2018), by Julio A. Gracia Lana and Ana Asión Suñer (eds.). These volumes, and other similar publications, examine a diversity of historical contexts and themes, from superhero cartoons to graphic novels, produced in Spain and elsewhere (including Manga). Sometimes comics are analyzed with the hermeneutical tools of literature, without paying too much attention to the formal features that define the genre, but more often the contributors come from the fields of History and Art History. Other publications explore the role of comics in the classroom, like *Memoria y viñetas: La memoria histórica en el aula a través del cómic* (2019),edited by David Fernández de Arriba, which is conceived as a guide for teachers who wish to introduce comics as a pedagogical tool to engage with recent Spanish history. There are titles that delve into much narrower topics to offer detailed and even erudite contributions to the field, such as Michel Matly’s *El cómic sobre la guerra civil* (2018). Other works are written by graphic artists themselves, some of whom are also scholars in this or related fields. This is the case of *La España del tebeo: La historieta española de 1940 a 2000* (2001), by cartoonist Antonio Altarriba, who offers a meticulous description of the comics’ features during Francoism (particularly in adventure and sentimental comic strips) and democratic Spain. Altarriba draws a connection between cartoons and their historical context. Another very useful tool for scholars of Spanish comics is the recent compilation by Jacobo Hernándo Morejón, *Catálogo de la historia de España a través del cómic (1940-2018). De la prehistoria a la crisis del 98* (2021).

The studies produced by U.S.-based critics tend to be analytical, while many consider the specificities of Spain’s political and cultural context. *Consequential Art: Comics Culture in Contemporary Spain* (2019), co-edited by Samuel Amago and Matthew J. Marr, is a good example, as are Ana Merino’s *El cómic hispánico*(2003) and *Diez ensayos para pensar el cómic* (2017), which opt for a transatlantic approach. In *El cómic* *hispánico*, the author analyses the Spanish, Cuban, Argentine and Mexican comics of the 40-60sascultural artifacts capable of negotiating the massive and popular cultural impulse of 20th-century modernity. In *Diez ensayos para pensar el cómic*, Merino gathers a collection of essays that point to key authors and works from different national and temporal contexts. Other volumes are also worth mentioning. In *Imágenes del desencanto: Nueva historieta española 1980-1986* (2013), Pedro Pérez del Solar examines how the Spanish comic from the 1980s offers alternative views to those promoted by Francoist regime–and also to some discourses emerging from the new democratic State–which depoliticized a good part of Spain’s cultural production. For the author, comics are a commentary on this scenario and a reflection of such key phenomena as *el desengaño* or *la movida*. In *Cómics de la Transición (el boom del cómic adulto 1975–1984)* (2001), Francesca Lladó considers the consolidation of adult comics that took place from Franco’s death until the first Socialist government as a golden age for comics, which stands out for its creativity, originality, risk-taking, and the widespread acceptance by the public. More recent publications are Ann Mangusen's edited volume of essays *Spanish Comics. Historical and Cultural Perpectives* (2021), and *Spanish Graphic Narratives. Recent Developments in Sequential Art* (2021), edited by Collin McKinney and David F. Ritcher. Both works share the goal of presenting an overview of the development of comics in Spain, themes and trends, but the former covers a chronological arc of more than a century, while the latter focuses on titles that have emerged since 2007.

The scenario explained above reveals a paradox: most scholarship produced in Spain tends to focus on comics created and published globally, in a seeming attempt to flee from provincialism and partake in the fascination produced by seminal titles and trends of Anglo-Saxon graphic novels; meanwhile, it is U.S. Hispanism, alongside other international centers for the study of Spain's languages and cultures, that seems to be claiming a more relevant place for the Spanish comic within academia. Additionally, while in Spain comics are studied mainly by historians and Art historians, in the United States, like in other European countries, Spanish comics capture the attention of scholars in departments of Hispanic Studies, where literature is the main field of expertise. As a result, this corpus is being normalized as an object of analysis and progressively introduced in the classroom, sharing the space otherwise reserved to canonical literary texts. This practice not only questions the divide between high and low culture via a material that is most valid for the understanding of the Hispanic experience in the realms of History and the Arts, but also helps qualify the notion that U.S.-placed academics privilege textual analysis by close reading and theoretical insights whereas Spain-placed academics’ main mission is the enrichment and conservation of the literary heritage.

By and large, this body of scholarship, including the most groundbreaking works, would benefit from complementary analyses and deeply focused projects such as the one presented here with *The Graphic Past: Comic and History in 21st-Century Spain.* Current focus on issues such as the recovery of the historical memory of the Civil War or the recent surge of Catalan nationalism has brought the past into the present consciousness in Spain in the recent years, a relevance that translates into comics production. History has always been a source of inspiration for graphic books; a look back at the stories that tell the painful history of Spain in vignettes reveals, among others, Forges’s masterpiece, *Historia de Aquí* (1980–81). The very nature of this volume’s object of study, the graphic past, lends itself to a wide range of approaches and interests and thus will appeal to a similarly wide array of scholars. Nonetheless, the subject matter also provides a certain coherence and focus at its core that can facilitate a deeper understanding and analysis of texts, while securing an argumentative and methodological consistency. Thus, the volume seeks to demonstrate that comic production, more specifically the works that deal with representations of the past, deserves close attention; something that Spain’s longstanding comics culture and vibrant recent works in Comics Studies already prove.

*The Graphic Past: Comic and History in 21-Century Spain* also serves to further consolidate comics as an academic subject within U.S. Hispanism, in much the same way that the study of Spanish cinema came to be legitimized the 1990s. This volume creates a space to reflect on the question of what it means to study the comic. The collection of essays brings together scholars from several countries in Europe and the Americas, most of them recognized for their previous work on comics. Some of us bring to the study of the genre our expertise, specifically on the representation of the past, either in the field of historical memory or heritage and national identity within the frameworks of history, literature, cultural studies, and cinema. Responding to the suggestion from Anne Mangussen in her introduction to the volume *Spanish Comic*s, this set of nine essays integrates diverse methodologies and intentionally undermines the traditional division between cultural analysis and formal analysis (12). By bringing together a range of intellectual traditions and disciplines through the work of historians and literary scholars from Spain, France, Peru, and the United States, the volume facilitates an enriching conversation and leaves room for unforeseen connections and links. The commitment to incorporate these different intellectual traditions has yielded a thought-provoking combination of in-depth analyses of specific works and articles that provide overviews of trends or the representation of specific historical periods. Furthermore, opening this space for interdisciplinary discussion clearly demonstrates the importance of comics within the Humanities and the Social Sciences, expanding the traditional scope of U.S. Hispanism in the present moment of introspection regarding the ways in which the Humanities are being required to justify their use and value for our contemporary world.

Our goal has been to gather papers that allow us to examine temporality without dissociating the treatment of the recent past from the imagination of other periods. As Isabelle Touton points out, comics that take on the latter group are no less relevant for understanding the present in Spain, even when it does not rely on living witnesses or a photographic archive, but rather on a reconstruction of the past that is the result of both extensive research and the psychological strangeness that such reconstruction produces (86). The collection of works in this volume shows, indeed, that the revival of times prior to the Civil War does not indicate a lack of reflection on Spain's developments in recent years, as can be seen in Pedro Pérez del Solar’s essay. It is undeniable that the proliferation of key platforms for the development of graphic novels in Spain–awards, publishing houses, festivals–coincides with the public scope acquired by historical memory as a discourse. While Mangussen recognizes this fact, she also insists on the transnational character of comics produced in Spain: “they stand out because of the particular interrelation between the country’s national history and that of the other parts of the world” (3). In the same vein, Ivan Pintor Iranzo connects the depictions of suffering that pervade Spanish graphic novels of historical memory to the distress brought about by more recent economic crises, while he also identifies a formula for the political rewriting of a *pathos* that remits from recurrent images of oppression and displacement in the global context (274).

In opposition to memory narratives, valued for seeking to recover collective experience from oblivion, the imagining of more distant periods in History goes back decades in vignettes and often has been considered a conventional and even instrumental tool for hegemonic discourses of national identity. Representing the nation, including nationalism, is a key trait of comics, as Arturo Meijide Lapido’s essay explores apropos of Galicia. As can be seen in various other essays in this volume, images of the nation’s past have evolved from appearing in comics under the ideological lens of Franco's regime to being an essential element of books that reflect on archaeological findings and other forms of research. In many cases, showcasing this rich cultural heritage through graphic art allows for commentary where it might not otherwise fit.

The legacy of Medieval times and the Golden Age finds in comics a mirror of the contribution of these periods to the Arts, as well as to the development of the early stages of modernity. Nevertheless, graphic novels also engage in challenging nostalgia and complacency with the nation's hegemonic past as a global political power. The acknowledgment of the twofold character of the Early Modern period as rich national heritage produces an interesting corpus of both graphic novels and critical analysis. It couples with the fascination for a Silver Age in the first third of the 20th century, which is associated with both cutting-edge artistic activity and the country's economic and political decline. This period includes the outbreak of the Civil War, when artists and intellectuals, like other citizens, endured persecution, exile, prison or execution. It is the same context of suffering and misadventure that is presented in comics on historical memory. This corpus provides more stories of people, unknown to most readers but evoked to represent the struggles of previous generations, some on the frontlines, some as civilians. Memory as an intergenerational engagement includes other experiences that marked collective identities, like migration.

The first essay in the volume, “The Classics in Vignettes: *La vida es sueño* as a Case Study in Adapting Literary Classical Works to the Comic Format,” highlights the possibilities of comics for literary adaptation and pedagogical outreach, especifically in reproducing and conveying the aesthetic complexity of Baroque theatre. The evolution of the iconic representation of the early modern period from Francoist popular comics to the more sophisticated graphic novel leads to the explanation by Moisés Castillo and Carmen Moreno-Nuño of how the authors of the comic adaptation maintain the essence of Calderón de la Barca's work and the expressiveness of Golden Age theater through specific drawing and coloring techniques and the use of meta-theatrical devices. Vílbor and Sanz, in their adaptation, deftly fuse the textual and the graphic with key elements of the theatrical experience, both the dramatic text and its enactment, and effectively transform the reader of the graphic novel into a spectator of the play. Through the skillful employment of these strategies, comics can be seen as reproducing in the 21st century what Spanish drama in the 17th century represented: a quality cultural product accessible to the public at large.

The Comedia with its spectacle is not the only visual art to be made more approachable for a wider audience through the popular medium of the comic. “Avant-Garde Artists and the Aura of Homosocial Creativity: Fermín Solís' *Buñuel en el laberinto de las tortugas*” brings the analysis of graphic novels that explore the visual arts to the realm of film. Solís's album offers a portrayal of artistic and intellectual development in the 1920s and 1930s through the life and adventures of several of Spain’s most important cultural figures of the era, providing an example of a comic book that evokes national milestones of universal projection through sponsorship by local institutions. The analysis focuses on how this type of historical fiction contains a meditation on individual genius for bringing about experimentation, but also presents male sociability as a positive element for artistic coming-of-age. The narrative of male camaraderie in the story told by Solís offers also the possibility to glimpse a commentary on the selective use of iconic figures to represent the repression suffered by the progressive community of artists in the hands of conservative forces.

The relationship between comics and History is explored in the contribution of Jacobo Hernando Morejón. In “From Iberia to Hispania: The Conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in the Spanish Graphic Narrative (1940–2020),” the historian traces the evolution of the graphic representation of the Roman and Carthaginian conquests, both in terms of their ideological content and the relationship that these comics have with academic disciplines. Comics, Hernando shows, evolve from presenting Hispanic identity as defined by resistance, patriotism and military spirit, to one in the 21st century that ascribes weaknesses and non-heroic feelings to the inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula. The transformation is seen as reflecting a change in sensibilities, along with respect for how archaeology provides knowledge about civilizations. Historical accuracy in the vignettes goes hand in hand with greater realism in behavioral specifications.

In “Fragments of a Civil War: From ‘Otros tiempos’ to *Estampas 1936*,” Pedro Pérez del Solar analyzes the search for verisimilitude in the reconstruction of space in vignettes published first in a popular Madrid periodical and later collected in book format. He notes the gritty and non-partisan approach to representing the conflict at its outset that Felipe Hernández Cava and Miguel Navia employ as they combine the latter's illustrations with testimonies and quotes from moderate Republicans of the time. Pérez del Solar also addresses significance of the transposition of publication format, moving from a recurring spot in a monthly magazine that sought to insert the memory of the Civil War in the identity of Madrid during the progressive leadership of Mayor Manuela Carmena between 2015 and 2019 to the release of a bound collection of the comics in 2020.

The comics about the War and its aftermath are embedded in the ideological framework that shapes the current debate on the subject in all media. In “Traumatic Past and Author's Choice. Narrative Strategies on Memory in Spanish Graphic Novels” Pedro Piedras Monroy establishes the variety of tactics in comics that address the 1930s and its legacy of violence in the current context of confrontational political discourse and public opinion. Using Scott McCloud's concept of closure —the process of constructing a continuous unified reality out of the disconnected panels— Piedras distinguishes those authors and stories that consciously select content and format that may lend itself to not only transmit but also problematize the past as trauma. He also invites us to observe in this already rich body of work a potential vehicle for the construction of a much-needed democratic memory in Spain.

Following the overview provided by Piedras, Sarah Harris offers an in-depth analysis of *Los surcos del azar,* one of the key titles within this corpus. With “‘Quería que el lector se pusiera en su lugar’ (I wanted the reader to put themselves in his place): Techniques for the Recovery of History in *Twist of Fate* by Paco Roca,” Harris places Roca's work within the broader context of the overdue recovery of the war experience. She looks at the formal, discursive and visual resources used to foster a sense of empathy regarding the experience of events that may have received insufficient visibility and recognition: the participation of defeated Republicans in the anti-fascist struggle of WWII. Harris evaluates the productive effect of emotions as a means of acknowledging sacrifice and service carried out beyond the limits of their own country's experience with war, and therefore removed from the political positionings that shape its interpretation.

Arturo Meijide Lapido also delves into the intra-historical space of memory to rescue the past as a space for exploring identity and its representation. With “Metafictional Archive: Memory, *mise-en-abyme*, and the Atlantic in Miguelanxo Prado's *Ardalén* (2012),” Meijide analyzes intertextuality as a mechanism to capture the construction of an Atlantic Galician identity, determined both by the awareness of a culture rooted in Celtic heritage and by the experience of mass emigration to America. This long-standing intellectual articulation takes shape in *Ardalén* through the inter-generational relationship as a fictitious situation. The protagonist’s inquiry into the personal experience of a family' s ancestor turns into the discovery of a sense of community defined by displacement. In the work’s use of paratexts to juxtapose historiography and the ownership of memory, Meijide sees the properties of the graphic novel as vehicle for rewriting national history.

Ofelia Ferrán also looks at graphic art as a medium with yet another role for commenting on the past: the illustration of a text. In “In the Interest of Full Dis-Closure: Miguel Brieva's Illustrations of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's *Diccionario del franquismo* and the Unending Process of (Un)Learning Francoism,” Ferrán considers the reprint in 2019 of Montalbán's 1977 book as an attempt to update this critical project. As she notes, Brieva’s drawings not only illustrate of some of the dictionary’s entries, but also incorporate new images that underscore connections between Francoism and contemporary Spain. Like Piedras, Ferrán makes use of McCloud when observing the strategy of “dis-closure”, or the questioning of inherited patterns of ideological closure, with which Brieva establishes complicity with the reader in order to criticize the devastating effects of neoliberalism. In *Diccionario del franquismo*, the didactic function deconstructs an ideological stance that endures into the present even though the government that upheld it has disappeared.

Comics of one kind or another share a commonality in their approach to the role of retelling the past from a postmodern standpoint, as Michel Matly demonstrates in the last essay of the volume. Both authors and scholars show awareness of how the genre not only, or not necessarily, contributes to a knowledge of the past by providing more data and images, but also by challenging readers to resist a stabilizing sense of history as a totalizing narrative (Cutter and Schlunds-Vials 16). Matly, a renowned expert on the Spanish Civil War in comics, closes our collection precisely by questioning the historical comic itself as a category dissociated from the real representation of history. The author defines this category as a set of units that are subject to their context of production and consumption. The three-dimensional characteristic of the comic as art, as a narrative, and as an object of history, is none other than that of time, this being understood not only by the succession of actual events that are re-imagined in cartoons but also by the moment in which they are created, which is in turn independent of the time in which they will be consumed. Temporality is thus understood as a source of knowledge about a society that undergoes a given historical experience but not least as a tool that informs about or reveals elements of the society that processes such experience in time. It is the encounter of temporalities that offers the meaning and the pleasure of reading, explains Matly, who uses those pertinent theoretical concepts to lead the reader to an understanding of the instability of history, its constant epistemological evolution.

Whether the idea is to inquire into the fortunes of previous generations, events and historical figures, the literary canon or the imagination of antiquity, a common element emerges from the set of analyses presented here: the didactic dimension. Castillo and Moreno-Nuño’s essay pays particular attention to this matter but in every article, the comics studied invite contemplation of an experience that took place in the space of the nation. They point out how this space blurs its limits to become part of an international scenario of war or artistic endeavor, of immigration or exile. The comics take us into the past, to times gone by and to discourses and modes of representing them with a declared intention of filling a gap perceived in the collective mind and in the education system. While the Humanities continue to lose ground, these comics bring to the foreground and question the superficial treatment of Spain's recent political history. The didactic dimension of graphic novels may be especially appreciated by students who try to grapple with a national history that seems far removed from their lives, or that is not their own.

Comics reproduce a range of experiences that could interest a reader who might feel part of a community, connected to that past and space in some way, or is simply eager for a deeper understanding. The visual narrative format brings together fiction, facts, and symbolic capital, in order to embed the acquisition of knowledge within the pleasure of reading, and often involving an element of nostalgia. In so far as they are immersed in patterns of production and consumption intended for the masses, comics are an integral part of popular culture that benefits from the hermeneutical frame of Cultural Studies. In their attempt to convey historical accuracy to readers, cartoonists and scriptwriters often find themselves in the role of researcher. They build stories and create drawings that are compatible with a previous knowledge base as well as with an archive of visual materials, and they make choices like those analyzed by Pedro Piedras in his essay. This is also the case with comics based on testimony, guided by the goal to give visibility to political episodes and experiences, and to claim a place for them within the public consciousness and identity.

Taking all of this into account, and given that there are other media that tell stories of other times, that comment and to call into question hegemonic discourses and challenge oblivion, it is worth asking how do comics contribute to the work that novels, theater, film, and broadcast and print media have been doing in this area? How do graphic novels find their place among these other genres that deal with recollection and consumption of the past? To start, we can think in terms of habits and expectations among reader audiences, which for comics is no longer limited to children but rather has expanded to encompass readers of all ages. In fact, many who might not be attracted by the format and aesthetics of historical fiction in traditional novels or period pieces in film and television series might find in comics a more appealing, experimental and dynamic format for such content. Further, comics are a crossroads, incorporating features from several genres that combine text and image, a hybridity that is reflected in their study.

Authors and scholars frequently identify the genre’s distinct narrative features in the mechanisms of the storytelling based on the cartoon, but sometimes also apply an analytical methodology more typical for photographic media, especially cinema. This approach especially impacts the consideration of graphic novels as legitimate artifacts for documenting the historical experience, as Nina Mickwitz explains, since the idea persists that the documentary is defined by audiovisual technology: “recording media” (9). In fact, Mickwitz posits a role for the comic as a discursive mechanism to question how the experience of the real and the constructed are closely linked through the medium used (160). In general terms, the graphic novel that claims to be inspired by the veracity of the factual, which includes biography, testimony and historical fiction, takes advantage of resources found in underground comics as much or even more than in literature and cinema (Gómez Salamanca and Rom Rodríguez 105). In the acknowledgment of its liminal origins, one can also discern the genre’s contribution when it comes to providing stories from the past with thoughtfulness and emotion, as Sarah Harris’ essay illustrates. Graphic novels thus make a place for themselves alongside other literary and visual media, especially cinema, resisting any relegation to a lesser place in the hierarchy of cultural and artistic production. Cinema and literature already go hand in hand as fields of scholarship in many university Spanish departments in countries other than Spain. The graphic novel is beginning to find its place there also.

In the re-imagination of the past, the cartoonist has further a control over the shape of the material produced than the cameraman in his or her capacity for creating subjectivity. Drawing can oscillate between realism and caricature and go beyond the limits imposed by rationality and the physical world in order to materialize the imaginary, the unconscious, or the dreamlike. The connotative character of drawing can disarticulate, through irony, the aura of authenticity displayed by photography and its mimetic quality (Cutter et al. 5). Hillary Chute identifies comics’ unique capacity for political purpose in the way they can integrate “aesthetics and ethics” within the genre's potential for subjectivity in terms of style (4). Ofelia Ferrán’s essay is an excellent example of this; the emphasis on the political is in fact one of the pillars of Cultural Studies. Furthermore, Chute sees in the fragmentary nature of the comic–in its arrangement in vignettes and on the page–an optimal element for a language of memory and of past recollection, since such a structure invites the reader to question notions of chronology and causality by having to fill in the gaps (6). These characteristics allow us to apprehend both the narrative and the factual aspects of the story. The reader is not given a closed or fluid temporality, as in cinema or theater, but rather the ability to move synchronically with their eye to any or all the vignettes at the same time, in a sort of “poética aérea” (aerial poetics) (Pintor 265). Drawing also makes it possible to recover for the present the imagination of bodies and spaces that, when subjected to a certain stroke and chromatic range, transcend their referential quality and embody other values or discourses with ideological or affective significance (Chute 28). The complexity of the relationship between history and representation is, as we mentioned before, the main topic of Jacobo Hernando Morejón’s essay. The urge to grasp the past is linked to factors unique to each country as much as to the universal trend that Andreas Huyssen connects to disenchantment with unfulfilled utopias and technologies as bearers of a more sustainable future (6). The past is in many ways intrinsically connected to the future, and the comic genre presents itself as a most useful vehicle for the understanding of our multitemporal world in Spain, the U.S., and abroad.

The study of graphic cultural artifacts may be legitimately claimed by various disciplines but, undoubtedly, literary studies have much to say with respect to graphic novels and graphic narratives at large. Regardless of the different intellectual traditions that inform their work, scholars have an obligation to both preserve and analyze the corpus of Spanish comics. To that double end, the graphic narratives that portray the past offer, as the comics studied in this volume clearly prove, an invaluable opportunity to engage in issues that are key to our contemporary world: the construction of national identities, the fabrication and contestation of an official history, the imagination of remote historical periods, the relationship between the past and the present, the persistence of the trauma of the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship, the transnational nature of memory, the recovery of the collective experience from oblivion, the pedagogical role of culture, the ever-changing notion of readership, the dialectics between forms of expression and meaning, the centrality of the visual for today’s subjectivities, the importance of images to document history, the importance of graphic materials for political and ethical discourse, the relationship between the representation of the past and emotions, the postmodern understanding of the writings of history and, probably most importantly, the unique capacity of comics to challenge readers to resist a stabilizing sense of history as a totalizing narrative. In our current historical juncture in which the quality of democratic life has been diminished in important ways and the surge of autocratic and neofascist movements is ubiquitous in the international scenario, the ability of comics to destabilize totalizing accounts of the past cannot and should not be underestimated.

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