

Comics and the Graphic Novel in Spain and Iberian Galicia

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Abstract: In his article, "Comics and the Graphic Novel in Spain and Iberian Galicia," Antonio J. Gil González develops a comparative and interart analysis of graphic novels by examining the evolution of the genre on the Spanish peninsula in general and in Galicia in particular. Gil González builds his analysis on Roman Ingarden's concept of literature as not only traditional fiction, but also theater and cinema. Gil González presents his argumentation by identifying the peculiarities of the comic as a medium, starting with its historical beginnings, and discussing its principal formats and generic and thematic variants. Further, he discusses the principal semiological and narratological variables in comicographic language using the arguments of Román Gubern. Gil González's discussion is based on the importation of the genre from Anglophone North America and from Europe (i.e., France, Germany, Belgium, etc.).

Antonio J. GIL GONZÁLEZ

Comics and the Graphic Novel in Spain and Iberian Galicia

Translated from the Galician by Manus O'Dwyer

If the theoretical proposition that the literary text and film can be analyzed on equal terms is true, I believe that it follows that this is also the case for the comic. Käte Hamburger, in *The Logic of Literature*, while she recognizes image as the essential matter of film, considers film to be a literary genre because of its fictional and narrative character. Roman Ingarden understood silent film as a borderline case of literature and theater. His proposition was that the silent film ought to be understood as a partially (and not purely) literary genre, but one which lacks essential levels of a literary work of art in both its phonic-linguistic formations and the signifying units linked to it. I propose that this approach is applicable to the genre of the comic strip. Partially literary, like cinema or theater, the comic shares certain elements of its process of institutionalization in the literary system, perhaps even more so than film and theater. Its origins are in nineteenth-century newspaper journalism, as well as in literature. Until the mid-twentieth century, comics were understood as a genre of popular culture, but since the 1970s they have come to be viewed more and more as an avant-garde genre (see, e.g., de la Iglesia; on sexuality in comics, see, e.g., Peters). The situation I am describing is of course simplified and should be taken in the context of the central locations of comics, namely the United States and some European countries such as France, Belgium, Italy, and Spain. Japan is also an important center, where the extraordinary vitality of *manga* marks an important stage in the status and articulation of the genre.

While comics can be related to hieroglyphics, miniatures, emblems, etc., both from the point of view of their formal structure (i.e., a sequence of pictograms accompanied by texts and semantically integrated to form a narrative unit), as well as with regard to their locus within the literary system (see, e.g., Schmidt), its emergence as a genre can be traced to the merging, in the nineteenth century, of religious and profane, ludic, and didactic forms with centuries of tradition. This merging of traditions leads to the political, satirical, and illustrated news topics which characterize the genre. The first graphic stories included in humorous or political publications for children (Gustave Doré, Roland Töpffer, Wilhelm Busch, etc.) can also be considered as precursors of what would become comic strips. What makes the comic strip a genre in its own right is its unique structural characteristics: its integration of character discourse and visual representation, bridging the distance between the verbal and plastic spheres through the bubble — the *globo* or *locugrama* (see Gasca and Gubern) — which communicates meaning to the reader. In English this is called balloon or bubble, in Italian *fumetto* (which metonymically would give the name to the entire genre) or in Spanish *bocadillo*. The genesis of the comic begins with the publication of *Yellow Kid*, created by Richard Felton Outcault in the pages of the Sunday supplement to the newspaper *New York World* in 1896 (it should be mentioned, however, that the character appears one year earlier in the vignettes of the *Hogan's Alley* series). The 16 February 1896 issue of the newspaper is groundbreaking in its use of the balloon (used by Outcault and by other earlier authors) along with other characteristics resulting from technological advances in the field of graphic arts, including color printing. The birth of the comic strip, significantly, coincides with the births of three other main components of mass media which altered Western culture, namely cinema in 1895, radio in 1896, and television in 1884 (see, e.g., Gubern 15).

The rapidity of the consolidation and expansion of the comic strip follows on the increasingly large print runs of newspapers and the competition and rivalries between publishers. These tensions conditioned the artistic production of comics in such a way that the figure of the comic author (whether script writer or artist) would not appear in the cultural landscape until much later. Early on, in fact, the name of the strip often varied with each issue, becoming quickly known by the name of its protagonists. Only after 1910 do they begin to receive stable titles. In the following decades these stories would be published either in the form of the daily strip, at first distributed throughout the paper, but, beginning in the 1930s, coming to be laid out on the same page, or in the form of sections in the ever expanding Sunday supplements. Furthermore, interesting sequential-relational manifestations in the same strips appear between the two formats, which, aside from original differences in the use of color (unlike the weekly, the daily strips were in black and white) often

attracted different readerships. In the 1930s comic books emerge from the reediting of these stories published in journals and supplements, leading to the appearance of two different formats: "funnies," which in Spain was known as *tebeos* — i.e., humorous magazines, geared towards a younger readership, together with various games and puzzles — and monographic series, appearing later, which would arise from the more well-known stories. These single themed books, which I call serial comic books, enjoyed ample diffusion in the US-American market, expanding later towards Europe through agencies — also called syndicates (*Superman*, of Action Comics, created in 1938 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, is the paradigmatic case).

In the 1970s the aforementioned pattern would repeat itself in Europe with the appearance of two new forms. Although these ostensibly followed the distinctive traits of the earlier versions (i.e., the magazine and monograph formats), there were qualitative differences. Technical developments and demand generated by a readership with prior generic expectations, along with institutional legitimization in the form of studies, congresses, salons, etc., explains the development of comic magazines in France, Belgium, Italy, and Spain. It is at this time that the description "comic," as well as variations thereupon such as "underground," "comix," etc., begin to be used as generic denominations in Spain; these differing from the *tebeo* (comic book) or *historieta* (comic strip). Another important development was the publishing of the most recognized series in one single text under the generic title of the "graphic novel" (on the graphic novel, see, e.g., Vandermeersche and Soetaert). This is the moment in which authors of comics achieved autonomy, despite their traditionally precarious position insofar as their relationship with agencies and editors, often the owners of the rights to the work in question. This would also be important in the normalization and establishment of this genre over time. Nevertheless, the crisis of the genre at the end of the 1980s dashed the hopes caused by this ephemeral prestige. Given this short history of the development of the comic, I propose a textual typology in which six categories are differentiated in terms of format, content, orientation, dependence, and autonomy. These categories are: 1) the vignette or comic strip; 2) the weekly newspaper supplement; 3) the funnies comic book; 4) the comic magazine; 5) independent publications and fanzine; and 6) the comic album. To these, since the mid-1990s, the electronic comic in its varied forms must also be added, for both its specificity in terms of its means of presentation, as well as for its semiological makeup.

In spite of their heterogeneous historical formation, virtually all of these categories coexist within current literary systems, although in varying degrees of vitality and with a different manifestation in the Galician and Spanish comicographic system. The clean bill of health enjoyed by the vignettes or the comic strip is unquestionable. This is especially the case for the first of these, with Galician humor often finding expression in Spanish media. The Weekly supplement also survives in the big newspapers, even if a tendency towards reduction can be observed, along with a loss of autonomy, even disappearance, of some of the most important supplements, such as *Pequeño País* or *Gente menuda*. Galicia is peculiar in this as the weekly supplement *Golfiño* of the newspaper *La Voz de Galicia* recently revived a funnies series which up until then had been published by Edicións Xerais. The crisis had an enormous impact, on the other hand, on the publication of *tebeos* and of comic books, with only the classics of certain genres achieving the necessary prestige demanding re-edition in album format (*Mortadelo y Filemón*, *Tintin*, *Asterix*, *El Capitán Trueno*, etc.). Along the same lines, the recent editions of original format classic collections, especially American ones, distributed with newspapers such as *El Mundo*, deserves mentioning. To this tendency, the newspaper *ABC* immediately countered with one of the European classics in album format (*Tintin*). Perhaps the presentation of *Aventura no Camiño de Santiago*, by Primitivo Marcos, is an attempt at bringing this tradition, generally nonexistent in Spain, to Galicia.

With regard to comic magazines, the recent development of the two systems did not run parallel: while the famous 1970s and 1980s adult comics disappear (e.g., *1984*, *Cimoc*, *Creepy*, *Totem*, *Madrid*, etc.), in Spain only the underground *El Vibora*, the humorous *El Jueves*, and the erotic and at times pornographic *Kiss Comix* survived; the latter following the style inaugurated by *A Cova das choias* in the early 1970s which would meet with success in *BD Banda* by Kiko da Silva. In the end, undoubtedly it is the album which is the most vigorous and consolidated textual form of comics — a format which seems to respond well to institutionalized modes of representation of the genre and by which all the

remaining pillars of the canonized forms can express themselves, as we have seen with funnies and comic books, in comic strips (*Mafalda* by Quino, *Peanuts* by Schultz, etc.) and of course in the comic magazine, with which authorial forms are shared *a priori*. This institutionalization of the album can also be appreciated in the Galician scene, which, in addition to counting renowned authors with extensive international trajectory such as Miguelanxo Prado, with titles such as: *O home que falaba vegliota* and *2 Viaxes*, both by Reimundo Patiño, *Gaspariño* by Xaquín Marín; *Esquizoide* by Antón Patiño; *Cita na Habana* by Fran Jaraba; *Patricia* by Jano; *Alter Ego* by Alberto Vázquez, as well as various series (*Misterio para Simón* by Fausto, Méndez, and Malvar; and the already mentioned *Aventura no Camiño de Santiago*), published both by institutional publishers (Deputación de Lugo), commercial publishers (Edicións Xerais), or independent ones (e.g., José Domingo Polaquia). Reimundo Patiño's *2 Viaxes*, created in collaboration with Xaquín Marín, is considered to be the first Galician album, strictly speaking, as *O home que falaba vegliota* originated in a mural format, making use of an interesting process of interaction and transmodalization between plastic and comic arts.

With regard to the categories of generic and sub-generic formats, the criteria of thematic orientation can be used, although it should be taken into account that theme is directly co-dependent, in some cases, with the already analyzed formal structures and publishing conditions within which comics operate. Such is the case of the vignette and the comic strip in newspapers; although the need to maintain a separation between these two types is weakened by their permeability to other formats, especially the album. Something similar happens in the relation between the humorous comic and the funnies, especially those destined for young audiences. As mentioned previously, the comic book begins to be connected to the genre of superhero, although it could be included in the wider category of adventure story, or even of science fiction, were it not for the hyper-codification and centrality it achieves. In terms of subgenres of the adventure genre, one could cite a long list, coming primarily from Anglophone America, connected to cinematographic and (sub)literary repertoires and possessing strong repercussions on the Spanish post-war comic. If these genres were originally quite homogenous and ideologically controlled by United States unions (since the products were destined for a young readership or for soldiers fighting in World War II or Vietnam), or by the censorship of the U.S. comics code in the post-war McCarthy period, it is not difficult to imagine what happened to its importance in subsequent adaptations under Franco in Spain. The political and ideological instrumentation of the comic strip had already been tested in Spain during the Civil War by *tebeos* such as the Falangist *Flechas* or the Carlist *Pelayos*, which could not escape the politics of the *partido único* and ultimately coalesced as *Flechas y Pelayos* (see Conde 19-20).

The main variations of this thematic repertory result in the modulation of the spatial-temporal placement of stable typologies: from the contemporary urban sphere, a rise in detective stories can be observed in the style of *Dick Tracy* (*Aventuras del FBI* or the legendary *Roberto Alcázar y Pedrín*). Historically speaking, the setting was almost exclusively medieval, such as the "cape and sword" adventure of Prince Valiant by Harold Foster (with titles like *Capitán Coraje*, *El Jabato*, etc., in addition to the already mentioned classics *El guerrero del antifaz* and *El Capitán Trueno*, which embodied the paradigms of the genre's evolution). Above all, after World War II, the genre of war adventure (e.g., *Hazañas bélicas*) is relevant and from the United States we see the comicographic equivalent of the Western (*El Coyote*, *Apache*, etc.). Alternatively, there is also the genre of pirate comics (from the U.S. *Terry and the Pirates* to the Spanish *El Cachorro* and *El Corsario de Hierro*). African nature and the model of Tarzan by Edgar Rice Burroughs was brought to comics by Harold Foster and set the stage for the genre of the jungle adventure (e.g., *El Capitán Misterio*, *Pantera Negra*). Lastly, we see the start of stories dealing with a technological future, space travel and UFO phenomena and science fiction (e.g., *Flash Gordon*, *Rock Vanguard*). All variants of these sub-genres share, in addition to numerous culture specific characteristics, a marked realist aesthetic in which protagonists are represented ideally as Apollonian and athletic. This process of transmission is manifested also in stories for young girls with female protagonists (e.g., *Wonder Woman*, *Barbarella*, *Cat Woman*), that gave rise to funnies geared towards girls, as well as sentimental comic books in Spain, an incipient version of the female adventure comic.

The European tradition, which includes *Lucky Luke* (by Morris aka Maurice De Bevere), *Asterix* (by Albert Urdezo and René Goscinny), and *Tintin* (by Hergé aka Georges Remi), with a very different

aesthetic, similar to the *tebeo*, hailing from the Franco-Belgian creations of Danny Dewilde and Jan Hoet, could easily fit into the categories of the Western or the detective forms. It remains without a doubt that the Spanish and Galician comic strip in most of its forms was influenced by European genres as demonstrated, for example, during the 2000-2001 exhibit *Maîtres de la bande dessinée européenne* in Paris and Angulema (commissioned by the director of the Comic Strip Museum in Anguleme, Thierry Groensteen, and organized jointly with the Bibliothèque National de France and the Centre National de la bande dessinée et de l'image françaises [see López Meirama]). The renaissance of the comic strip in the 1970s brought about the appearance of new reactive forms and thematic invention with countercultural characteristics in which violence, explicit sex, and social criticism are distinctive features. These new types of comics are connected with what I designate as "authorial" comics of a similar thematic range. These tend toward fantasy, science fiction, and even adventure or eroticism, but where emphasis is often placed on non-narrative, technical and/or stylistic features of production. I also postulate that this engendered the development of European comic magazines beginning in the 1970s. Lastly, much more of a sub-genre and peripheral is the pornographic comic, which, curiously, often accommodates the more standard comic genres: detective, fantasy, science fiction, underground, etc. This accommodation of various genres allows the pornographic comic to engage in complex intertextual, parodic, and hybridizing techniques, stretching from the infantile humor of the superhero series (e.g., *Fantomas*, *Superlópez*) to a certain porno *de auteur* (Manara, Crepax, etc.).

Beginning with a definition of the comic strip as a "narrative structure formed by the progressive sequence of pictograms which contains phonetic writing" (Gubern 107; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine), I employ Gubern's postulates for a semiological analysis, even if at times I might modify or even move away from his arguments. This modification is necessary in Gubern's initial theoretical distinction between significant units and units of montage; this distinction could be subsumed under the category of what Gubern himself terms significant macrounits, as well as taking into account the structure of the publication, color, stylistic forms, and the graphic arts of the artist (110). Although Gubern rejects the centrality of visual, it is really the vignette or pictogram that is the significant unit considered essential to the comic, which he defines as "the grouping of iconic signs which graphically represent the object or objects that they attempt to designate," particularly the "pictographic representation of minimum significant space and/or time, which composes the unity of the comic's montage" (Gubern 108-15). I believe that it is precisely the earlier correction regarding the level of montage and its inclusion with its significant units that helps to resolve the contradiction inherent in the author's argument, who, at another time, affirms that the unity of the montage is the scene (Gubern 111). The significant microunits which make up the vignette is the frame (all the elements related to composition: decoration, characters, wardrobe, etc.); the adjectivization (the angles and lighting); and the specific conventions of the comicographic language of the balloon: the unpronounced sounds, the visualized metaphors, onomatopoeias, and kinetic figures.

The frame is determined primarily by the shot, which, like in cinematographic language, tends to be classified in the following way: detailed shot or close-up (the face, a part of the body, an object of the scene), mid-range shot (the character from the waist up, three-quarters shot or "American shot" down to the knees), general shot (the entire body), and the panoramic shot (a general shot that shows the scene in its entirety). From cinema, we also have the concepts of adjectivization — the angle (high camera and low camera) — and illumination, related to the comicographic conventions not so much regarding luminous intensity in the use of color but, rather, in the strong contrasts between black and white in representing darkness. The form of the bubble also demonstrates characteristics (star-shaped forms emphasize the volume of the speech, whereas a cloud-shaped form or a dotted line signifies unspoken interior discourse) such as the sign which indicates the speaker (normally at a sharp angle also indicating, if it is substituted for a line of small bubbles, access into the character's psychic inner being). The typography used inside the bubble can also carry richly formulated messages. Visualized metaphors can be seen as the "psychic state of the characters, expressed with iconic signs of a metaphoric type" (Gubern 148), such as the heart for the love-stricken, the question mark for perplexity, and so on. Onomatopoeias are the linguistic representation of the diegetic sound's phonetic image and kinetic figures are signs that represent the movement inside the vignette: parallel,

convergent, pointy, etc. (for a systematic description of these and other functions of comic book semiotics, see Gasca and Gubern; Peeters.) To these, the terms caption and split caption must be added; only considered by Gubern in their relation to the *raccord* between vignettes when it seems apparent that this is neither their overwhelming nor specific function, as we shall see shortly.

From the point of view of macrounits, I indicated that those significant to the montage are precisely the most important ones. The analysis of comicographic montage brings up the problem of the segmentation of its units, which obey a double determination: the segmentation of the narrativity of the story into shots, scenes (a grouping of vignettes which maintain between each other a unit of time and/or space) and sequences (scenes connected by the same dramatic action); and, on the other hand, the arrangement of the vignettes and narrative units according to graphic and plastic criteria, to which a number of technical and industrial conditioning factors and mediations must be added. It is necessary, then, to compare the degree of semantization with the syntagmatic level of the vignette following Gubern at the level of their significant microunits. The homology thereby established between its size and the perception of the amplitude of space and time represented is of great interest, for it is a decisive aspect in the production of a narrative rhythm. At this level of things, the elliptical and fragmented character constructed from the vignette (in relation to the filmic), becomes perceptible in the extremes of its extension and enforced by conventions the reader must follow in order that the vignette be understood. The basic reigning convention in the sequentiality of a reading is the imaginary line that directs our perception from the left to the right and from the top to the bottom of the page (also occurring repeatedly inside the vignette). Furthermore, other conventions must be pointed out, such as the way the linear montage differs from parallel montage according to the way various spatial-temporal foci of narrative information are presented. Also important are the connective procedures between vignettes or *raccord* — whether by simple arbitrary juxtaposition, spatial contiguity, joined (in black, white, or connected), or supported by verbal narration: dialogues, captions, (which can be physically situated by saddling two vignettes) and voices and sounds in "off," originating in the adjacent vignette, spatial montage structures — the enlargement and concentration with the effect of cinematographic zoom, the analytical montage, which decomposes space into shots of significant detail, temporal structures — *ralenti*, flash-back, flash-forward — as well as the remaining narratological phenomena relative to order, duration, and frequency (these are not dealt with by Gubern). Lastly, what Gubern calls visual focalization of the story through the inclusion of dreams and subjective perceptions (161-75) is also worthy of attention.

All in all, the most important addition necessary to the analytic model I describe here addresses the fact that it only examines the verbal language of the comic in the mode in which it interacts with the graphic (interferences in the line of indicativity, sequentiality of reading within the vignette, etc.), without even mentioning the clear presence of basic narratological convention, linked ontologically to the use of verbal code. I refer to the narrator and especially to the analytical level of modalization this implies. A schematic system at this point must be signalled in the need to distinguish between at least four narrative functions present in the comicographic story (originating out of a series of interactions that demand investigation): 1) that of a meganarrator responsible for everything in all its dimensions (graphic, literary, narrative, etc.); 2) that of a visual narrator; 3) that of a literary narrator or traditional narrator, whose language is expressed normally within the captions, and who, with full illocutive virtuality, informs, comments, narrates, temporalizes, spatializes, ironizes the story or the visual component; and 4) that of the dialogical narrator in which each character is converted- the characters express their direct discourse but also, necessarily, become secondary narrators. Here, I object to the claim that literary or dialogical narration is not in itself an innate aspect of the comic strip, but one cannot forget that they form part of its institutionalized representation, and that their absence can in fact be perceived as an intentional semantic characteristic, like an equally significant silence, surely analogous to products in cinema.

In conclusion, everything seems to indicate that we find ourselves at a critical moment in which some observe signs that seem to document a rebirth of the genre of comics (on this see, e.g., Vidal). The success that the album boasts editorially, the extraordinary expansion of Japanese *manga*, the expansion of the comicographic to other audiovisual discourses — especially film and television (adaptations, animation, etc.), and videogame and other new media types thus represent relevant

areas to study. Many of these same factors can be interpreted in an inverse sense, that is, as the loss of specificity of comics as a graphic-literary discourse. On the internet we can find comic strips, magazines, and electronic fanzines all of which continue to maintain the basic structure of traditional page numbering which with more rapid internet speeds allows for the rapid circulation, downloading, and exchange of combined-image archives. I posit the question whether the radically static and elliptical character of the vignette still makes sense in a world in which it can be easily be converted to moving animation or changed in other ways made possible by technological development. The comic strip in its variations represents a fundamental experience in the process of learning to read, to play, and to live for millions of people, yet it has, until recently, been ignored by literary and comparatist scholars. Such disregard is difficult to explain, especially as the comic occupies a unique space between the written word and the moving image; it is a type of missing link between the world of the printing press and the global village of disposable images in which we now live.

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