

FORGIVEN, NOT FORGOTTEN: HISTORICAL MEMORY AND COMIC BOOK REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR AND FRANCO'S DICTATORIAL REGIME

"...La mera supervivencia exigía la adhesión incondicional al Régimen... No solo había que renunciar a los viejos ideales sino mostrar mayor fervor que los adeptos...Detrás de esos cambios había una tragedia personal tan profunda como inconfesable... No se trataba de traición sino de suicidio ideológico... Para afrontar el presente, debían acabar con el pasado... Morir para seguir vivos."¹

Civil wars leave complex and multi-layered scars that reach all sectors of a polarized country. There is no nemesis, no common enemy to fight and unite a country against. Civil wars split families, destroy friendships and plant seeds of resentment, distrust and revenge. In the case of Spain, the dictatorial regime that followed the Civil War (1936-1939), until the death of Franco in 1975 and the approval of the Constitution in 1978, and the repression that was widely executed throughout that period, prolonged those feelings and preserved the social rupture. Francisco Franco's regime used a combination of violence, fear, education and propaganda to erase the presence of the Republican faction of the war. Where a *damnatio memoriae* was not possible, memories of the conflict and its left wing, losing protagonists were manipulated to fit within an official, immutable, unquestionable narrative of events² that presented Spain as a country engulfed in chaos and amorality before the war, with Franco as a chosen saviour who had a sacred mission to fulfil, that eventually led to the restoration of peace, order and economic progress.

After Franco's peaceful passing, a process to transition (known as *La Transición*) to a democratic regime unravelled. Spain moved forwards peacefully and made a conscious effort to silence its past. However, this stopped a potential retaliation or restoration of damages and crossed out the possibility of denouncing past crimes and injustices.

Nonetheless, as democracy in Spain gained solidity the silent generation began to speak more openly about the past after years of only being able to share experiences of violence, repression, exile and loss in contained, controlled private spaces³. There was also the factor of age, as the stories of those who had fought in the war and faced the subsequent repression after Franco's victory were starting to fade, and valuable information was being lost. In 2007 under a socialist government, the Historical

¹ My own translation: "Mere survival required unconditional adherence to the [Franco's] Regime ... Nor only you had to renounce the old ideals but show greater devotion than the followers ... Behind those changes there was a personal tragedy as profound as it was unspeakable ... it was not treason but ideological suicide... to face the present, they had to end with the past ... to die to stay alive". Antonio Altarriba and Kim, *El arte de volar* (Alicante: Edicions De Ponent, 2009), 141.

² The official discourse from the Francoist regime was relentlessly transmitted through different channels (including education) and presented Republican fundamental values and principles under such a derogatory light that it was also a factor in generating a blanket of disappointment, shame and silence on the losing side.

³This lack of safe spaces to discuss, process and share experiences has been widely mentioned in works such as Sarah Harris, "I had not dared to remember': Trauma and Historical Memory in Recent Spanish Comics," *ImageText* 9, no. 1 (2017); Juan Carlos Pérez García, "La representación en el cómic de la memoria traumática sobre la Guerra Civil española," International Congress "*Guerre civile espagnole et bande dessinée*", (16-18/11/2016, Musée de la Bande Dessinée de Angoulême), <http://hdl.handle.net/10630/12604>; Evelyn Hafter, "Representaciones del pasado en una novela gráfica sobre la guerra civil española: Memorias en conflicto en Un largo silencio de F. Gallardo Sarmiento y M. A. Gallardo," *Viñetas Serias: Primer Congreso Internacional de Historietas*, (Buenos Aires, 2010).

Memory Law⁴ passed by the Congress. It formally condemns Franco's regime and gives rights to the victims (and their descendants) of the Civil War and the dictatorship that followed⁵. Even though the execution of this law throughout the country was uneven, it stimulated the creation or expansion of civil organisations for the recovery of historical memory.

With a growing comics scene that nurtured creator driven works and a political moment that favoured revisiting and retelling the scarring recent past, autobiographical and non-fictional titles which focused on remembering the Civil War and Franco's regime, as well as adaptations from other media, flourished in graphic novel form. The graphic novel format also allowed these new titles to expand their distribution channels, becoming widely available in bookshops and reaching a wider audience which had developed an interest to discover the past of its own country.

Sarah Harris⁶ proposes that distinctive characteristics of the comics medium make them particularly suitable to convey collective trauma. Beyond the connection between trauma and comics, with this paper I would like to open a discussion about what to me is an act of catharsis using graphic novels as a vehicle to gather and preserve memories from the Civil War and the dictatorship that followed. As well as repositories for a hidden side of social history, in some of the more autobiographical cases, these comics also try to regain a certain balance through bringing the losing side of the war to the foreground and attempt a reconciliation with the past. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory⁷ has been used to explain this intergenerational transmission, however I cannot help but agree with Sebastiaan Faber⁸ when he points out that the context of the Holocaust is very different to the Spanish Civil War, as the latter presents a political and ideological background that conditions the historical memory. Hence, I believe Hirsch's theory is completely valid, but we should consider certain variations when studying the Spanish case.

This catharsis can completely belong to the author, even if it borrows elements from friends or family, as they add context and wrap around the central memories but are not the foundation of the narrative

⁴Ley 52/2007, de 26 de Diciembre, por la que se reconocen y amplían derechos y se establecen medidas en favor de quienes padecieron persecución o violencia durante la guerra civil y la dictadura. <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/l/2007/12/26/52/con>.

⁵In the same year the Ministry of Culture created the *Premio Nacional de Cómic* (Spanish National Comics Prize), which legitimated comics as a medium beyond the traditional view of a limited, child focused vehicle for mass entertainment. *El arte de volar*, which we will refer to on this paper, won this award in 2010. The Ministry of Culture has the full list of winners on its website: <http://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/cultura/libro/premios/listado-de-premios/premios-nacionales/comic/presentacion.html>. Also, the University of Valencia now has a Professorship in Comics and comic focused academic studies and events are starting to multiply.

⁶Harris, "I had not," 8.

⁷"Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation." Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today*, 29, no. 1 (March 2008):103–128, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>.

⁸Sebastián Faber, "Actos Afiliativos y Postmemoria: Asuntos Pendientes," *Pasavento. Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 2, no.1 (winter 2014): 137-155. Also see Carla Suárez Vega, "Memoria histórica en viñetas: representaciones de la Guerra Civil Española a través de la narrativa gráfica y los testimonios familiares," *Caracol* 15 (June 2018): 286-307, <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2317-9651.v0i15p286-307>.

(as in Giménez's *Paracuellos*⁹). The deliverance can also come from a previous generation (for example in Gallardo's *Un largo silencio* and Altarriba's *El arte de volar*), who experienced the war and its cruelty and then attempted to rebuild their lives as a discreet, stultified shadow¹⁰.

Whether this generation refused to speak about the past or quietly discussed and relived it in the precarious safety of a private environment, their core values, ethical and religious beliefs and of course experiences shaped who they were. These fundamental principles were conveyed to the next generation, who would embrace the challenge of translating this multi-layered combination of facts and emotions into comics¹¹. Finally, we also have works which do not have a direct connection with the protagonists of the stories and have found them through second-hand sources or research (Roca's *Los surcos del azar* is a good example)¹².

It is interesting to note that regardless of the origin of the source, these stories are told through the eyes of either real or fabricated characters that spark an immediate sympathy and create an empathic connection with the reader¹³. These comics do not hide their subjectivity, as it is indeed one their engaging features¹⁴. Although this personal point of view does not necessarily lead to a distortion of

⁹ The works mentioned here are being used as representative examples, but they are not the only titles that focus on the Civil War and the dictatorial regime that followed. As I mentioned before there has been an increase on the number of comics that cover this period.

¹⁰ Antonio Altarriba, in an interview I conducted on the 12th of June, said: *"El hecho de que mi padre al final acabara tomando esa decisión de quitarse la vida, de que estuviera tan amargado, tan desilusionado, era porque el balance que el hacía de su propia existencia era un balance continuado de derrotas, y la principal derrota fue su derrota ideológica, la que le obligo a exiliarse y la que le obligo luego a regresar y a vivir durante una buena parte de su vida bajo la escenografía absolutamente invasiva del vencedor. Y con esa conciencia de que el formaba parte de ese relato de los malos que finalmente habían sido vencidos y extirpados"*. My own translation: "The fact that my father ended up making the decision of killing himself, [the fact] that he was so bitter, so disappointed, was because the balance he made of his own existence was a continuous re-count of defeats, and the main defeat was his ideological defeat, the one that forced him into exile and the one that then forced him to return and live for a good part of his life under the absolutely invasive scenery of the victor. And with the awareness that he was part of that story of the bad guys who had finally been defeated and extirpated".

¹¹ Altarriba himself makes an interesting point about this on the previously mentioned interview: *"La transmisión del trauma yo creo que es bastante evidente, ¿no? Porque de alguna manera, aunque no seas tú el que hayas vivido los acontecimientos, en las fuentes que has consultado, en las personas con las que has hablado, en la vida que tú has tenido de alguna manera ese dolor, ese sufrimiento, esa experiencia te ha salpicado"*. My own translation: "The transmission of trauma I think is quite evident, right? Because in some way, even if you are not the one who has lived the events, the sources that you have consulted, the people with whom you have spoken, the life that you have had in some way, that pain, that suffering, that experience has splattered you".

¹² I am not including other works mostly due to space and concision or considering comics that adapt other media with a more factual approach, such as Jose Pablo García's adaptation of Paul Preston's work.

¹³ "Elements of the reading experience, in that comics rely on simultaneous presence and absence, allow past and present to coexist on the page, and compel readers to participate in filling in gaps, add to their powerful impact and implicate readers as participants as we experience the violence in these graphic narratives [...] These characteristics implicate the witness (reader) in piecing fragments together, in identifying, and therefore sharing experiences with sympathetic characters. The very humanness of embodying the experiences of self, parent, or fictional character, through drawing their violent pasts makes these stories authentic and visible." Harris, "I had not," 9 and 29.

¹⁴ Something that also came up in the interview with Altarriba: *"La objetividad o la supuesta objetividad parece que te hace recurrir más al argumento, a la contraposición crítica, pero la subjetividad ya es una invitación a tu propia subjetividad, a decirle 'mira esto fue lo que me ocurrió, si te cae bien acompáñame'. Y eso es lo que el lector hace, hay una especie de acompañamiento empático de la trayectoria del personaje"*. My own translation: "The objectivity or the supposed objectivity seems to make you resort more to the argument, to the critical opposition, but the subjectivity it is already an invitation to your own subjectivity, to tell [your subjectivity] 'look this is what happened to me, if you like me, join me'. And that is what the reader does, there is a kind of empathic accompaniment to the character's trajectory".

the truthfulness behind the narration it should not be completely dismissed either. The visual language of comic books aids to this connection, as the graphic support helps convey the narrative in a more immediate manner. The clever use of visual metaphors, perspectives and the gutter (the blank space between panels) to suggest and imply, alongside other visual techniques, turn the reader into an active agent in understanding and adding meaning to the stories¹⁵. Nevertheless, I believe we should also go beyond the morphological or semantic analysis of comics and examine the creative choices from an aesthetical point of view to help us understand each piece of work as a whole, even more so when there is a collaborative effort between a writer and an artist¹⁶.

Carlos Giménez did not live through the Civil War, so his most personal works are inspired by his years at the “*Auxilio Social*” home in Paracuellos del Jarama¹⁷. His first pages of *Paracuellos* were not met by a huge interest¹⁸, probably due to timing, but subsequent collected editions have been welcomed with critical acclaim and have reached a wide breadth of readers. *Paracuellos* leans towards an expressive, almost cartoon style that contrasts with the brutality of some of the stories, which are contextualised either through text or graphic symbolism, with the inclusion of religious and fascist icons as an ominous constant (Figure 1). Through his experiences in the “*Hogar*”, Gimenez reflects the unquestionable authority of the new regime and its violence, the imposition of Catholicism and the post war social rift. This is a unifying feature of the works we mention here: ordinary people stories transcend the frame of microhistory and become representations of the collective memory of a nation.

Gallardo and Altarriba tell their respective father's stories using as a base their testimonies, poured on paper form and orally narrated over time. Gallardo's *Un largo silencio* (*A Long Silence*, 1997, republished in 2012) follows the format of a first-person memoir with a text heavy composition and interspersed illustrations and comic pages. The account of events starts with late childhood recollections and spans over the antebellum atmosphere, the Civil War, a concentration camp in France and a prisoner's camp back in Spain, ending when Gallardo's father finds a job again and meets his wife. The narration focuses on events and quantifiable details such as the price of items or school grades rather than feelings or a personal view of the events. The moments gifted with intrinsic emotion focus on the drawn excerpts, which are expressive and occasionally raw like a two page strip with the

¹⁵ Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn. Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 11-38.

¹⁶ Here I am referring to linework, chromatic palette, drawing techniques, character design and other stylistic and aesthetic choices.

¹⁷ “*Auxilio Social*” was a welfare institution during Franco's regime to assist impoverished women and children, mostly from the Republican side of the war.

¹⁸ Pérez García mentions that when *Paracuellos* was first published in 1976, its first Spanish editor was not convinced as the subject was too sad and sinister for the readers. It was, he considers, too early for the memory about trauma and an appropriate social context was still missing. Juan Carlos Pérez García, “La representación,” 5. In one of the most recent volumes of *Paracuellos*, Giménez confirms this: “*Cuando realicé los primeros episodios de Paracuellos – entonces todavía no se llamaban así- ningún editor español de la época quiso publicarlos en sus revistas. Les horrorizaba en solo hecho de ver aquellas páginas llenas de niños famélicos y tristes con aquellos ojos desproporcionados y aquellas orejas más desproporcionadas aún. [...] Ante la incertidumbre de no saber cuantas páginas podría llegar a realizar y publicar – no siquiera sabía si conseguiría verlas publicadas-, opté por comenzar a contar antes que nada lo que más interés tenía en dejar constancia: los malos tratos, el hambre, la sed, el fanatismo religioso...*”. My own translation: “When I created the first episodes of *Paracuellos* - then they were not called that yet - no Spanish publisher at the time wanted to publish them in their magazines. It horrified them just by seeing those pages full of starving and sad children with those disproportionate eyes and even more disproportionate ears. [...] Faced with the uncertainty of not knowing how many pages I could create and publish - I did not even know if I would get to see them published-, I chose to start telling first of all what I was most interested in recording: the abuse, the hunger, the thirst, the religious fanaticism...”. Carlos Giménez, *Paracuellos 7* (Barcelona: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2016), 9-10.

title *Aire* ("Air") in which Gallardo's father and a friend, both in uniform, flirt in Alcala de Henares¹⁹ with two young seamstresses that are killed by an air raid shortly after. The book itself mimics a scrapbook or notebook, with the body of the text in a typewriter-like font and includes paratextual materials such as personal documents or photographs that construct authenticity and grow the reader's connection with the narrator.

Altarriba's *El arte de volar*²⁰ (*The Art of Flying*, 2009), illustrated by Joaquim Aubert Puigarnau (known as Kim) is more extensive and presented in an ambitious graphic novel format. The story follows Altarriba's father (also called Antonio) from his childhood to his death at 90 years old by committing suicide at a nursing home. *El arte de volar* builds its narration using Antonio's memoirs as a starting point and serves as a cathartic resolution to his father's life but also as a tool to help Altarriba with his grieving process. From a poverty-stricken childhood to a financial downfall later in life the book follows Antonio's life through the Civil War, a period of exile in France and his return to Spain. Here, Altarriba avoids victimising his father and presents him as a figure with shades of grey. The direct, first person style of narration is far from subtle and includes strong visual metaphors and dreamlike scenes to emphasize emotions. This was Kim's first work in long form and such challenge is reflected in the art, which feels the weight of a long and elaborated script but still manages to keep a steady narrative flow and have moments of visual brilliance²¹.

Paco Roca was no stranger to comics that are linked to historical memory, and with *Los surcos del azar* ("The Furrows of Chance", 2013, a special edition with additional material published in 2019) he takes a leap forwards and creates a solid, researched and beautifully illustrated graphic novel about a Miguel Ruiz, who we follow as he flees Spain and ends up in forced labour camps in Northern Africa and eventually as a member of *La Nueve*, a military company mainly formed by Republicans that joined the resistance against the German army in France and were amongst the vanguard that liberated Paris. Unlike the previous works mentioned here, Roca collates memories and research from different sources, creating a believable protagonist (based on a Republican soldier called Miguel Campos) who is introduced to us in both past and present moments. In fact, the comic starts with a character called Paco (an alter ego of Roca) who travels to France looking for Miguel, now an elderly man reluctant to relive the past. These sections (which are the most fictional ones) are drawn in a looser, expressive style with fine lines and monochrome colouring that remind us of a sketchbook or travel book²², contributing to the idea of a journey of discovery. The main storyline, however, is the one set in the past and is presented in colour (all colours are subdued and present cold undertone except for exceptional moments such as the celebratory parade after the liberation of Paris, which has warm hues) and with a tighter, more elaborated style (see Figure 3). Roca's clean, precise linework, and the subtle expressions of the characters are visually compelling and carry deep meaning and emotion through both storylines. Even though *Los surcos del azar* is a historical fiction it still presents high value as a well-founded piece of work to recover and divulge historical memory.

¹⁹City on the east of Madrid, its historical centre is one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites and it is also the birthplace of Miguel de Cervantes.

²⁰Translated as *The Art of Flying*, it is available in English through Jonathan Cape. Altarriba and Kim teamed up again to tell the story of Altarriba's mother in *El Ala Rota* (*The Broken Wing*), a more contained story published in 2016 that shows the growth of Altarriba and Kim as a creative duo.

²¹In 2018 Kim released a creator own graphic novel about his time working in Germany (*Nieve en los Bolsillos*, published by Norma Editorial). The comic is a collective tale of stories of displaced spaniards who were away from their homeland for diverse (and sometimes tragic) reasons.

²²We can see sketches and other drawings in a similar style in *Dibujante Ambulante* (Astiberri, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

After decades of repression followed by a young democracy, Spain is slowly fulfilling the demand of filling the gaps of knowledge regarding the Spanish Civil War and Franco's dictatorship that followed.

As part of the media that captures hidden stories and gives wings to an emotional release after decades of silence, graphic novels have started to proliferate. These cathartic comics are a valuable repository of historical memory, although they mostly focus on one individual or a small group of people during a defined period. Nonetheless, beyond these narrations there is an effort of representation, to go beyond the frame of microhistory and try reconstruct and understand the collective memory and values of a nation.

These comics cannot simply be considered vessels for a story that needs to be told. They should be acknowledged from both the narrative and artistic perspective, as the creative decisions in how these experiences are drawn shape and add meaning to the story.

The intrinsic characteristics of comics as a medium generate a strong emotional connection with the reader and invite them to participate of the author's catharsis. This sparks an engagement that, united with the powerful combination of image and text, turn these comics into a potential didactic tool at all levels²³. However, the partiality of the recollections as well as the strong emotional load that appears associated with them should be contextualised in order to avoid falling into a trap of easy victimisation of the subjects as well as oversimplification of events.

²³ The incredible potential of these graphic novels to teach and debate the Civil War and the repressive regime that followed is a subject that deserves extensive research to perform a detailed analysis and suggest methods and practices. Spanish textbooks can be too brief and only offer a superficial approach to such turbulent times, and there have been cases of minimising the impact of the conflict and Franco's dictatorial regime. These graphic novels, thanks to their intrinsic qualities mentioned throughout the paper have a great potential to convey information in an engaging way.

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