

Graphic novels can help construct the discourse of historical memory

July 13 2023, by Tania Alonso



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In Spain, 68.4% of the population over the age of 14 reads books. Most

of these people read for pleasure in their spare time, choosing the genres that interest them most according to their personal tastes and preferences.

One of the preferred genres among Spaniards, which is becoming ever more popular, is comics and graphic novels. According to GfK's report *El mercado del libro en España* (The Spanish Book Market), sales of comics and graphic novels grew by 10% between 2021 and 2022, accounting for 8% of all book sales.

One of the key features of comics and graphic novels is the use of visual impact to capture the reader's attention, give characters their own voice and share protagonists' experiences. This is why this format is often used to build the discourse of memory. Works such as *Persepolis* and *Maus* are examples of a historical memory recovery subgenre that also exists in Spain.

For her [doctoral thesis](#), Carmela Artime Omil, a researcher at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), examined the contribution of comics to the construction of historical memory and the way their format and characteristics enable them to form a bridge in Spain between those who lived through the war and post-war period and the generations that came later.

Food for thought

Graphic novels tell stories through a combination of visual and written language. All kinds of artistic and literary resources are used in this genre, including illustrations, documents, photographs, and stories with several protagonists or a first-person narrator. As a result, many works in this genre successfully connect readers with their characters, making them a very effective way to build a memory discourse aimed at condemning facts.

"The graphic part of comics is very useful when it comes to making readers confront certain images and events from the past," said Artime, who wrote and defended her thesis 'Memory construction in the contemporary graphic novels (2005-2015): the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath' under the doctoral program in the Information and Knowledge Society. "Some graphic novels use visual impact to capture the reader's attention, even appearing to want to elicit a reaction," she said.

A good example of this is *The Art of Flying*, which brings emaciated bodies to the foreground as a symbol of suffering in exile and a condemnation of the way people in this situation were abandoned by the French authorities. Another example is *Cuerda de presas*, which, to explain how women's bodies became a battleground and a punishment system, shows how women had their genitals tortured and were raped by their jailers.

Furthermore, the language of comics leads to a reflective reading method in which readers are encouraged to focus on the graphic elements in order to fully understand the story.

"The ability to go back and check something using a stimulus not involving words is an advantage of the language of comics," said Artime, whose research work was supervised by Teresa Iribarren, a researcher in the *IdentiCat* (Language, Culture and Identity in the Global Age) group of the UOC's Faculty of Arts and Humanities. "Readers can spend as long as they need on this reflection, as they can move quickly across the page or stop to look at an illustration and examine it more closely," she said.

Another advantage of using graphic novels in historical narrative is that they can combine the two separate aspects of fact and fiction. Many works contain real-life documents (such as letters or family

photographs), make reference to [historical events](#) or mention the author's research process. All this helps to bring the protagonists' personal experience to the present day.

Narrating the Spanish Civil War

One of the main conclusions of Artime's thesis is that today's Spanish graphic novels are highly political in nature and clearly intended to denounce real situations. "What you can see in these novels is the need to tell history again, to reflect, celebrate and expose the lives of those who lived through the war and the post-war period. You can see a clear political intention and a desire to condemn events and demand a response."

"Many of these novels pay homage to personal stories and allow them to be told by their protagonists. This way, comics tell their stories by placing characters' voices and bodies at the center, in a context in which recovering the bodies of the people who disappeared at the time of the events is a key part of the discussion on memory," said Artime.

Graphic novels thus seek to give their protagonists a tangible form, something known as "embodiment". According to Artime, the most obvious way of doing this is by assimilating participants' experiences. "This is what the narrator of *The Art of Flying* does by embracing his father's character and merging the two voices into one. Furthermore, the use and reproduction of personal items, such as letters, photographs, private notes and diaries, also help recover the memory of past experiences and bring them back to the present day," said the UOC researcher by way of illustration.

Artime's thesis also concludes that there is a change in the discourse of memory in contemporary novels. Personal pain clearly permeates the works written by the generation of the protagonists' children. But today's

works, which were written by their grandchildren's generation, are marked by the authors' own political discourse and expectations of history.

A format for disseminating, educating and raising awareness

Graphic novels and comics have become a significant dissemination and education tool in recent years. The apparent simplicity of their format encourages the public to read them and helps to explain complex stories and concepts.

"Comics are increasingly being used in classrooms in all fields of knowledge, but I think their use could go much further," said Artime. "It can help students to develop their creativity and reading comprehension, as well as their love of reading. Furthermore, the large number of comic titles and the wide range of topics covered by them make this genre a good tool for use in the classroom and for encouraging reflection in any field".

There is a long list of novels that reflect on memory and historical memory. Artime highlighted Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and the works of Guy Deslisle and Joe Sacco as some of the most important and internationally renowned. "In addition to these best-known works, I usually recommend *The Boxer* by Reinhard Kleist and *Fatherland* by Nina Bunjevac," said the UOC researcher.

As for Spanish graphic novels about the Spanish Civil War, she recommends *Cuerda de presas*, *The Art of Flying*, *Los surcos del azar* and the works of Pablo Uriel. "But the most exemplary figure in the field of historical memory [comics](#) is Carlos Giménez, the author of *Paracuellos* and *36-39 Malos tiempos*. Many of the images contained in

modern [graphic novels](#) about the Spanish Civil War seem to have been inspired by the drawings of Giménez, who used comic strips to denounce events and express his opinions," said Arttime.

The next step for the UOC researcher is to publish her thesis as an essay in order to reach academic audiences. By doing so, she hopes to help include the case of Spain in the international study of historical memory and the construction of identity.

Provided by Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)

Citation: Graphic novels can help construct the discourse of historical memory (2023, July 13) retrieved 3 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-07-graphic-novels-discourse-historical-memory.html>

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