# The quest for a place in culture: The verbal-iconical production and the evolution of comic-books towards graphic novels

Andrés ROMERO JÓDAR

Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana
Universidad de Zaragoza
andres_romero_jodar@yahoo.es

## ABSTRACT

The comic-book genre has gone through several important changes along the twentieth century in the Anglo-Saxon world. This verbal-iconical genre seems to have been able to overcome the Manichean vision of the comic-book as something childish, and thus find a new space for the maturation of its own devices. As the latest outgrowth of the comic-book expansion, the graphic novel has become the corner stone whereby a link is established between the pure narrative form of the novel and the visual quality of the verbal-iconical genres. The daring and yet successful combination of these different trends has contributed to elevating the graphic novel to the status of proper art form. Hence, the aim of this essay is to offer a modest and serious proposal for the analysis of the four verbal-iconical genres directly related to the comic-book, to wit: the illustrated novel, the comic strip, the comic-book, and, finally, the graphic novel. The latter has given a new breath to the narrative forms of the verbal-iconical genres, especially to the comic-book, allowing for an experimentalism inside this trend, producing a new independent hybrid genre, and making possible a reorientation of narrative techniques concerning the time factor –chronotope– in the comic-book genre towards a more complex and coherent structure.

**Key Words:** comic-book, illustrated novel, comic strip, graphic novel, verbal-iconical genres.

## En busca de un lugar en la cultura: la producción verbo-icónica y la evolución de los cómics hacia las novelas gráficas

## RESUMEN

El género de los cómics ha pasado por cambios importantes a lo largo del siglo veinte en el mundo anglo-sajón. Parece que este género verbo-icónico ha sido capaz de superar la visión maniquea de los cómics como algo infantil, y, de esta manera, ha encontrado un espacio nuevo para la madurez de sus propias técnicas. Como el último avance de la expansión del cómic, la novela gráfica se ha convertido en el elemento clave para establecer una unión entre la forma puramente narrativa de la novela y la cualidad visual de los géneros verbo-icónicos. La arriesgada pero exitosa combinación de estas dos tendencias ha contribuido a elevar la novela gráfica al estatus de forma artística. Así, el objetivo de este ensayo es ofrecer una propuesta modesta pero seria para el análisis de los cuatro géneros verbo-icónicos directamente relacionados con el cómic, a saber: la novela ilustrada, la tira cómica, el cómic, y la novela gráfica. Esta última ha dado un aire nuevo a las formas narrativas de los géneros verbo-icónicos, especialmente al cómic, permitiendo el experimentalismo en esta tendencia, produciendo un

género híbrido independiente, y haciendo posible una reorientación de técnicas narrativas respecto al factor tiempo –cronótopo– en el género del cómic hacia una estructura más compleja y coherente.

**Palabras clave:** cómic, novela ilustrada, tira cómica, novela gráfica, géneros verbo-icónicos.

Sumario: 1. Defining the verbal-iconical genres and the graphic novel. An introduction. 2. The illustrated novel. 3. The comic strip. 4. The comic-book. 5. Defining the graphic novel. 6. Concluding remarks. 7. Notes. 8. References.

## 1. DEFINING THE VERBAL-ICONICAL GENRES AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL. AN INTRODUCTION.

It is always a difficult task to define a "new" genre, especially if it is not part of the cultural mainstream and viewed as "subculture" (Sabin 2001: 157) or as no more than a "peripheral manifestation" (Espino Martín 2002: 45). What cannot be denied is the fact that, as a genre, comic-books, born and developed under the scope of the 20th century, have witnessed important changes in the last decades –attracting critical studies from academic cultural centres–. The most recent change has led to the coining of the term *graphic novel* to designate a new trend that links comic-book aesthetics with literary writing –thus providing a rise in the status of this verbal-iconical[1] production–. Both in terms of visual quality and literary writing, there has been a gradual specialization of the comic-book as a medium in its response both to cultural and social changes, and to technical improvements. Apart from the thrust furnished by avant-gardes, the consideration of the comic-book as an art form came, above all, as a result of the "elimination" of the censorship codes of the 1940s and 50s in Europe and USA, at the end of the 1980s and 90s. In this way, the comic-book detached itself from its teenager-oriented readership to start focusing on a plural audience. Supported by technical improvements in the field of visual reproduction –to wit: colour, impression, photographic quality, etc– and by the "new" postmodern literary outlook, the comic-book mainstream of the end of the 1980s and 90s had overcome the superhero world[2] and its Manichean representations –dating from the 1950s– in favour of a more "serious" and plural kind of literature, thus creating a new trend/genre, usually known as the graphic novel.

The comic-book can be seen as a changing art form that tries to accommodate itself not only to market conditions, but also to social changes. In this respect, it is a dynamic genre that can be compared to Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about the novel:

> The study of the novel as a genre is distinguished by peculiar difficulties. This is due to the unique nature of the object itself: the novel is the sole genre that continues

---

[1] When I use the term "verbal-iconical" in some way I am following Lindo's ideas about the language of comics: "Dos clases de lenguajes coinciden en los cómics, el lenguaje literario y el lenguaje icónico, en una dependencia estructural" (1975:12).

[2] I only mention the superhero trend because it was the central production of comic-books up to the end of the 1980s.

> to develop, that is as yet uncompleted. The forces that define it as a genre are at work before our very eyes: the birth and development of the novel as a genre takes place in the full light of the historical day. The generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities (1988: 3).

In his "Epic and the Novel. Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel", Mikhail Bakhtin offers a classification and differentiation of the novel, contrasting it to the rest of "static" genres –those opposed to the dynamism of the novel–. For this critic, "the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop". I entirely agree with his idea that the novel as a genre is a changing entity, mainly due to its close relationship with social transformations. However, the novel is not "the *sole* genre that continues to develop". In my opinion, in contrast to the exhaustion of the novel as the central art form of the 20$^{th}$ century, the comic-book started to change its mainstream generic premises in terms of plot and literary orientation at the end of the 1980s and 90s. John Barth points out this fact in his article "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967):

> Literary forms certainly have histories and historical contingencies, and it may well be that the novel's time as a major art form is up, as the "times" of classical tragedy, grand opera, or the sonnet sequence came to be. No necessary cause for alarm in this at all, except perhaps to certain novelists, and one way to handle such a feeling might be to write a novel about it. (1967: 32)

Whereas the novel, according to Barth, has reached the point of exhaustion of "the aesthetic of high modernism" –as he explains in "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980: 71)–, the comic-book genre has started to develop into a new field directly related to literature, showing "a complex relation to the past, or pluralism, or to the transformation of western culture" (Charles Jencks quoted in Rose 1991: 125).

The graphic novel, as a very recent trend within comic-books, is difficult to define. However, there are important works that differentiate themselves from the comic-book conventions by establishing new patterns of verbal-iconical language. In order to define the graphic novel, it will be useful to compare this trend to other verbal-iconical productions. Hence, this essay aims to offer a general description of four of the most important genres of the verbal-iconical production –those which combine image and text– that have led to the outbreak of the graphic novel at the end of the 20$^{th}$ century. It is not my aim to discuss the status of comics as works of art, although this is one of the recurrent topics of the critics dealing with this genre[3]. I will also try to avoid a specific diachronic analysis of the history of comic-books,

---

[3] It is usual to find just diachronic analyses when dealing with the bibliography of the verbal-iconical genres, even when they attempt to offer a critical approach to the subject. Some examples are: Alfonso Lindo's *La aventura del cómic* (1975); Ramón-Terenci Moix's *Los "cómics": arte para el consumo y formas "pop"* (1968); Antonio Altarriba's *Neuroptica 3:estudios sobre el cómic* (1985); or Dr Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1955); and many others.

except for those cases where the evolution follows a logical transformation of the social mind –such as the evolution of the comic strip to the comic-book, or from the comic-book to the graphic novel–. In the pages to come, I shall briefly define, from a personal perspective, some related genres of the verbal-iconical production, and how, in my opinion, there has been a necessary evolution towards postmodernism in comic-books with the outbreak of the graphic novel. I will centre on four different verbal-iconical genres, namely: the illustrated novel, the comic strip, the comic-book, and finally the graphic novel[4]. All of them, since the application of the printing press in the media especially at the end of the 19th century, share a common characteristic: their close relationship to the concept of "mass culture"[5] (Lindo 1975:11; Nebiolo 1976: xvi). As Román Gubern points out in his analysis of the comics genre (in Zavala, 1981: 146), the verbal-iconical works, *previous* to the printing press, that accomplish a narrative function through figurative images, are characterized by being sedentary and unique (hence, they retained the "aura", in Benjamin's terms, 1988: 222). As such, they stand outside the market production and the concept of "mass culture" to which all these graphic textual productions are linked since the end of the 19th century[6].

## 2. THE ILLUSTRATED NOVEL

The illustrated novel is by far, the oldest of these four genres of verbal-iconical production. Although there are lots of texts that can be labelled illustrated novel –such as the Medieval codices with their miniatures–, I only consider forerunners of the comic-book ethos, those having entered the industrial production promoted by the creation of the printing press. Despite a large number of examples of pre-

---

[4] Thus, a secondary aim of this essay is to offer distinctive definitions of these four verbal-iconical genres in order to avoid the generalizations that are usually found in the critical theory of comic-books. To mention just a couple of recent examples, *El cómic hispánico* (2003) by Ana Merino is a quite confusing essay about the history of comic strips and comic-books in the Hispanic world. In this work, there is a constant oblivion of the different genres that make up the verbal-iconical production. The author includes every single work under the same umbrella term of "cómic," leading to a simplification of the genres that is far too reduced to be rigorous. Also I have to mention Stephen Weiner's *Faster than a Speeding Bullet. The Rise of the Graphic Novel* (2003), a market-oriented work which does not present a deep analysis of the subject matter. Weiner offers again another historical revision of comic-books.

[5] To define the term "mass culture", I follow the definition given by Dominic Strinati in his *An Introduction to the Theories of Popular Culture*: "mass culture is popular culture which is produced by mass production industrial techniques and is marketed for a profit to a mass public of consumers. It is commercial culture, mass produced for a mass market" (1996: 10).

[6] Román Gubert explains this: "Pueden juzgarse como precursores de los cómics únicamente aquellas formas de expresión icónica (es decir, que utilizan imágenes figurativas) que cumplan a la vez una función narrativa (desarrollo de una historia o explicación de un acontecimiento), si bien estas obras remotas, nacidas antes del invento de la imprenta, eran sedentarias y únicas, por lo que no podrían circular entre un público, debido a la singularidad del ejemplar […]. Razones por las cuales tales obras escapan del concepto de "cultura de masas", a la que aparece en cambio ligada la génesis histórica de los cómics a finales del siglo XIX" (in Zavala 1981: 146).

press illustrated works, most of them have remained outside the mechanical reproduction, being, as mentioned before, sedentary and unique. Only those works that have entered the industrial reproduction can be considered part of this verbal-iconical production related to comic-books.

Formally, the illustrated novel may be said to be made up by a *closed frame written text* inside which some images (pictures, drawings…) are embedded. The text is *closed* because the written (verbal) aspect of the work is not conscious and does not depend upon its accompanying images (iconical aspect). And it is a *frame*, for the images are embedded inside that closed text.

The assumption of this too simple definition implies the reduction of the illustration to a secondary level. The meaning of an illustrated novel would come primarily from the written text (the novel), whereas the iconical aspect would just add unnecessary information. However, this affirmation is both limited and limiting, for it does not consider the work as a complete unity in which text and image are interrelated.

The function of the illustration is far more complex than just being a subsidiary complement to the text (García Padrino 2004: 19). Núria Obiols, on this subject, highlights five functions of the illustrations in illustrated works (2004: 34-41). First, they show what words (text) do not express, just like little details or descriptions that are not included in the written part. Second, illustrations reinforce the contents of the text, for they express iconically a message that has already been uttered in the verbal part of the work. Third, illustrations decorate and embellish the work as a whole, making it more appealing to the visual taste. Fourth, they show small parts of the world that surrounds us. And finally, they also make the readers improve their knowledge about that precise world, while as a consequence, the reader turns out to embody the different role of the observer/witness of the reality of the text. Thus, whereas the text narrates a story, the illustrations may be said to offer a visual description of that world with the aim to complement, reinforce and embellish the text, and to offer a certain amount of information to the reader.

However, illustrations cannot be said positively to show small parts of the world that surrounds us, or even of the textual world, as stated in the fourth function according to Obiols, in an objective way. Illustrations can be considered as individual actualizations/representations of the textual world according to one single reader, in this case, the artist. That is, the artist recreates his interpretation/reading of the verbal text in the form of his/her illustrations of the textual world[7]. Then, in this individual representation the reader of the illustrated novel reads not only the text and the functions mentioned before, but also all the individual characteristics of the artist. In this sense, the artist includes preferences, style, cultural background, and aesthetic purpose in the illustrations, and by extension, in the illustrated novel as a unity. Only for this reason one may say that illustrations in illustrated novels function as a limitation of the possibilities of the imagination of the reader, because through them the artist imposes his/her own reading, and therefore signature, on the written text.

---

[7] This is what Obiols labels "materialización" (2004: 22).

A further division can be established inside this genre according to the original relationship between the image and the text. First, we have illustrations added to novels long after their creation and original publication. This is the case of the classical illustrated novels by Cervantes, Verne, and a thousand more. In these works, the separation between image and text in the sense of providing a global unit, is further increased. The written aspect is already conceived as a closed entity for the reader –maybe the best example would be the children-oriented adaptations of the Bible–. As the text is closed, the illustrations in these works offer an interesting contradiction. On the one hand, they reinforce their function as an individual interpretation of the text by the artist. As an example we can mention the last versions of *Don Quixote*, illustrated by well-known artists. Cervantes's work remains the same while the artist offers his/her vision of the textual world. But at the same time, the illustrated version of an old text also affirms that the text can be the subject of a new illustrated reading in the future. That is, the illustrated version of a classic can be said to be conscious of its own limitations as an individual reading of the text. Thus, the latest version of *Don Quixote* is just another reading of an individual and single artist, but the text remains unconscious of the iconical part while asks for a new illustrated reading in the future.

Second, there are works that are originally conceived as illustrated novels. In these cases, illustration and written text are more closely related. The subjective perception for the reader facing the work leads to a higher cohesion between the verbal and iconical aspects of the work. This illustrated novel, as the final product of two different artists[8], is conceived as a unity that cannot be dissected in the two basic parts of text and illustrations. And therefore, as opposed to the previous type of illustrated novel, this one does not expect a new version, a new actualization by a new artist. It is inside this type that the most experimental examples can be found, with works pushing the boundaries to fuzzy limits. To mention some examples of the same author, we can highlight Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* (with Charles Vess, 1997) and *The Dream Hunters* (1999, with Yoshitaka Amano), as traditional illustrated novels; while *The Day I Swapped my Dad for Two Goldfish* (1997) and *The Wolves in the Walls* (2003), both by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, may be said to be in a blurred frontier between the illustrated novel and the graphic novel.

## 3. THE COMIC STRIP

Amongst the four verbal-iconical genres mentioned before, the comic strip represents the basic origin, the nucleus from which the comic-book would emanate and later on, the graphic novel. The comic strip started to appear in magazines and newspapers in the middle of the 19th century, sustained by the technical improvements of the printing press. Roger Sabin, in *Comics, Comix & Graphic*

---

[8] Even if the writer and the artist are the same person, their techniques are different and can be said to function in different ways.

*Novels* (2001: 14-15), offers an interesting differentiation between three diverse trends inside these magazines in Britain: first, those that were "documentary in style, and concerned with the affairs of the day", such as *Illustrated London News* (1964), and *Illustrated Police News* (1864); secondly, the "penny dreadfuls", serialized prose stories with accompanying pictures, such as *Black Bess* (1863), *Black Rollo, the Pirate* (1864), or *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1878). A third trend of magazines, directly related to the origins of comics, was more humorous than the previous, "a mix of text and illustrations, but generally much more visual than the other two" (Sabin, 2001: 15), with titles like *Punch* (R. Bryant, 1841), *Judy* (Gilbert Dalziel, 1867), and *Funny Folks* (James Henderson, 1874). These magazines were primarily oriented to a high and middle-class adult readership, and it was not until decades later that some of them sought for a younger audience.

Formally, the comic strip is a verbal-iconical genre made up by one or several coordinated pictures (vignettes)[9], usually humorous in tone, and based on a slapstick effect or sudden dénouement, producing a final laughter/joke. The arrangement of several pictures to produce a narrative effect usually resembles the left-to-right organization of the written language[10]. In contrast to the illustrated novel, the iconical aspect (image) in the comic strip prevails over the verbal aspect (text) in terms of meaning producer. Although there is a closer relationship between image and text, it is usually the iconical aspect of this production that leads to the final sudden meaning of this normally short narration.

## 4. THE COMIC-BOOK

The third genre is the comic-book, or comics genre. Back to 1954, a senate interim report on "Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency" in the USA offered a "formal" definition of what a comic-book was at that time, according to the members of the subcommittee:

> When looking at the question: What are "comic books"? we may find that many, including all those which the subcommittee's investigation was concerned, were found to be neither humorous nor books. They are thin, 32-page pamphlets usually trimmed to 7 by 10½ inches. Most of them sell for 10 cents a copy. They are issued monthly, bimonthly, quarterly, semi-annually, or as one-time publications. They are wire-stitched in a glossy paper cover on which, in the crime and horror type, there has been printed in gaudy colours an often grim and lurid scene contrived to intrigue prospective purchasers into buying them. The inside pages contain from 3 to 5 stories

---

[9] According to Luis Gasca, "las viñetas constituyen una representación lexipictográfica del mínimo espacio o/y tiempo significativo, que constituye la unidad de montaje de un cómic. Por lo tanto, es a través de su vertebración concatenada, o montaje, como se construye y progresa la narración" (1994: 606).

[10] However, the left-to-right arrangement of the pictures is right-to-left organization in Japanese productions, to mention just one example, according to the reading of their written language.

told in pictures with balloon captions. The pictures are artists' line drawings printed in colour, intended to tell part of the story by showing the characters in action. In the case of crime and horror comic books, the story and the action are often quite horrendous[11].

Nowadays, the comic-book industry has witnessed a boom of production and artistic creation, to such a point that it now has nothing to do with this definition. The 21st-century mainstream comic-book is a luxurious magazine with digital and photographic quality, that sometimes includes computer-coloured drawings. This is such a wide field that I cannot generalize, but this fact certainly applies to the major part of the comics produced by the Marvel/DC Comics/Image axis –the three major companies of comic-books at this moment of their history–. And for this reason, when considering the comic-book production from its origins to the present day, I can affirm that the comic-book is the sole genre that has undergone important changes in our contemporary world, both in terms of visual and technical improvements as well as in literary trends. Hence, the comic-book can be seen as the most dynamic, chameleonic genre, able to adapt to the changing conceptions of reality[12].

Although many contending trends have emerged, all aiming at supplanting the first comic-book, it is usually agreed that *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* (Gilbert Daziel 1884) is "worthy of the name" (Sabin 2001: 15). Historically, the comic strip evolved towards popularity, until the appearance of volumes dedicated to their compilation, that is, detached from magazines and newspapers. A new market was created around these works, propitiating the appearance of a new productive industry under the common name of comic-book creation. The social changes and the historical development of the Anglo-American world in the 20th century (with important highlights like the two World Wars, the Vietnam and Korean wars, the Cold War, as well as the discoveries in the sciences, literature and socio-economy) also affected the comics in their subject matter. They departed from the humorous basis of the comic strip, gradually introducing other subjects directly related to the

---

[11] This report led to the creation of some censorship guidelines known as the Comics Code. Behaving like the owners of the Truth and the savers of decency, they were *seduced* by Dr Fredric Wertham's escapist analysis of comic-books, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). In his analysis, Dr Wertham empowers himself with the notions of rightfulness, embodying the role of saviour of morality and hero of contemporary American decency when he says: "I felt that not only did I have to be a kind of detective to trace some of the roots of the modern mass delinquency, but that I ought to be some kind of defence counsel for the children who were condemned and punished by the very adults who permitted them to be tempted and seduced [by comic-books]" (1955: 13).

[12] According to Alfonso Lindo, "el arte –y el cómic lo es– está […] sujeto a lo que conocemos como procesos de aceleración de la historia, cuyos tentáculos penetran por entre todas las actividades humanas, como una corriente ininterrumpida que hace girar la evolución –la forma y el ser– de las cosas. En cuanto al cómic […], ese proceso ha sido tan intenso, tan imperativo, que los artistas se han visto precisados a introducir en sus obras auténticos cambios revolucionarios, que han hecho de sus composiciones algo así como una avanzadilla del propio cambio estético operado, por regla general, en otros campos de la cultura" (1975: 7).

social situation. Thus, it is not surprising that the first superhero comic-book, *Superman*, appeared at a moment of unrest, a year before the outbreak of World War II in 1939. "Superman", created by Jerry Siegel and Joel Shuster, originally came out in June 1938 as the first issue of *Action Comics*. In other words, it emerged at a moment of social instability and worldwide uneasiness. This superhero, embodying the role of the new messiah[13], "came to Earth" as the counterpart for the social loss of hope in a future stability. In this sense, a superhero like Superman and the subsequent characters –such as "Batman", "Captain Marvel" and "Captain America", "The Fantastic Four", and so on– embody a reactionary belief in a unique (usually male) figure of control and power, able to reorganize society and do away with foreign threats[14].

I mention the superhero comic-book because this trend has been the mainstream of Anglo-American comics production up to the 1980s and 90s in its basic form of Manichean representations. However, we should not blame comic-book producers for this kind of "dull" entertainment in terms of literary projection. Comic-books suffered the imposition of the censorship guidelines of the Comics Code in 1955, promoted by the already mentioned essay by Dr Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, in 1954. Instead of analysing the failures of their own system[15], Americans[16] developed a kind of psychosis about juvenile delinquency which was projected over children entertainment and comic-books. It is not until the 1980s that the Comics Code is overcome –by means of works like Alan Moore's *The Saga of the Swamp Thing*, 1983-1987–. In this way, the comic-book of the 1980s and 90s suffers a progressive transformation from mere market-oriented industry to more author-conscious productions. As comic-books started to be considered, works of specific authors, inside specific companies, with figures like Alan Moore, Art

---

[13] There is a clear analogy between Superman and Jesus Christ. As Sabin points out, "Superman was similarly a man sent from the heavens by his father to use his special powers for the good of humanity" (2001: 61).

[14] The superhero can be seen as the image that the established power wants the citizen to have in mind. It is also the heroic figure of a patriarchal society, where a man is the symbol of the complete system and its values, and therefore, the superhero is usually conservative. There are thousands of superheroes or heroic figures, mainly in the pages of the American Marvel comics, such as the overtly patriotic "Captain America", the veteran of war "Nick Fury", up to the overtly reactionary "Frank Castle, The Punisher".

[15] Dr Wertham's conclusions about the nature of comic-books show this paranoid projection: "Slowly, and at first reluctantly, I have come to the conclusion that [the] chronic stimulation, temptation and seduction by comic books, both their content and their alluring advertisements of knives and guns, are contributing factors to many children's maladjustment. All comic books with their words and expletives in balloons are bad for reading, but not every comic is bad for children's minds and emotions. The trouble is that the "good" comic books are snowed under by those which glorify violence, crime and sadism" (1955: 10). Instead of analysing the educational system, or the excessive presence of guns in the American home, they project their paranoia over the comic-book production, leading to those censorship guides that propitiated the appearance of those "dull" entertainments for children. Directly related to this topic, Michael Moore's documentary, *Bowling for Columbine* (2003), clearly exemplifies how American paranoia works by means of projection over external agents.

[16] I focus especially on American production since British companies have traditionally been unable to compete against American mainstream.

Spiegelman, the-already-known-in-the-genre Will Eisner, Neil Gaiman, or Frank Miller, slowly gained a certain reputation.

It is easier to define the comic-book formally than thematically. In this sense, Román Gubern, in "El Cómic", offers two perspectives from which to define this genre: on the one hand, from a historical-industrial point of view, a standard configuration of comics relies on three basic elements: the vignette sequence, the permanence of at least one stable character, and the introduction of word balloons inside the pictures. On the other hand, from a semiotic perspective: "Los cómics se definen como una estructura narrativa (y, más raramente, solo expositiva o descriptiva), formada por una secuencia progresiva de pictogramas, en los que pueden integrarse elementos de escritura fonética" (in Zavala, 1981: 141).

According to this definition, there is no clear distinction between the comic-book and the previous comic strip. In my opinion, the difference between these two genres lies in two aspects: formally, in the length of the production –whereas the comic strip usually takes up no more than a page, the comic-book is longer, usually a 24-page story–, and thematically, in the tone of the story –whereas the comic strip is always humorous, the comic-book is not necessarily a comic book–. In this sense, the term comic-book when applied to the Anglo-American production, usually refers to a narrative form –based on superheroic characters–, that appears monthly in different collections.

Up to the 1980s, the comic-book usually contained one self-conclusive adventure of a certain character –thus, one month, Superman had to fight against the threat of Radioactive Man, and the following, he had to save Lois Lane from the hands of the Human Fly–. But the boom of the end of the 80s affected mostly the literary side of the comics production. As a consequence, the story lines started delaying closure by means of complex plots that sometimes took several months, even years to reach a denouement or resolution.

## 4.1. FIRST STEPS TOWARDS THE GRAPHIC NOVEL. BAKHTIN'S CHRONOTOPE

Within the history of comic-books, two important works stand out for having initiated the (r)evolution of the comic-books towards the graphic novel genre. These are Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986)[17]. Consciously trying to escape from the superheroic and mutant world, these works opened a door to adult audiences, provoking a reorientation of the industry's energies towards older readers (Sabin 2001: 162). Both works are revisions of the superhero theme, but with a contemporary perception resulting from a postmodern world. In this sense, the

---

[17] Along with Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1987), Roger Sabin labels this group of works as "the big 3", and points out that "all were American in origin, all had their roots in direct sales and all were published in book form in Britain within a year of each other" (1993: 87). Although Alan Moore is British, we have to accept the American origin of *Watchmen* for it was first published by an American company, DC Comics.

figure of patriarchal authority embodied by the superhero is put to the test. These works therefore exemplify the contemporary death of the metanarratives represented by those superheroic figures. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Frank Miller –already known in the media for his reconceptualization of an old Marvel superhero, *Daredevil*– presents a new side of Batman as an old, cynical and twisted man, "driven by inner demons, com[ing] out of retirement to wage his last fateful campaign against The Joker" (Sabin 2001: 162). On the other hand, *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore at the script and Dave Gibbons at the art, presents a group of old superheroes that has to fight against the evil menace of one of their former partners who tries to destroy the world. The main idea, reinforced all along the story, is summarized in a simple question, taken from Juvenal: "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes" (Who watches the watchmen?). It shows the contemporary lack of confidence in those saving superpowers that can be equated to the powers of metanarratives. Thus, both works portray the death of the golden superhero of the 1950s, claiming for a more "realistic" writing in the sense of characters affected by human passions, instead of archetypal figures.

Apart from their complexity of structure that creates a complete and uniform work in the comic-book format, these works also introduce another important change that will affect and define the graphic novel as opposed to the comic-book: the perception of time. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics", defines the chronotope "(literally, "time space") [as] the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (1988: 84) and continues arguing that "it can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time" (1988: 85). Bakhtin differentiates three categories of ancient novels according to the perception of time in the chronotope: the Greek romance, the adventure novel of everyday life, and the ancient biography and autobiography. The opposition established by Bakhtin between the first and the second type is important for the discussion in this essay, because it provides a theoretical base that helps differentiate the comic-book from the graphic novel. Briefly considered, the Greek romance, first type of ancient novel, is defined in terms of its chronotope by the presence of a character that

> [...] is nevertheless a *living human being* moving through space and not merely a physical body in the literal sense of the term. While it is true that his life may be completely passive – "Fate" runs the game – he nevertheless *endures* the game fate plays. And he not only endures – *he keeps on being the same person* and emerges from this game, from all these turns of fate and chance, with his *identity* absolutely unchanged (author's italics, 1988: 105).

The main character of the Greek romance, the Greek hero, exists outside the effects of time on his identity. That is, external forces (fate) make him enter a world of adventure and quests from which he will victoriously escape as flawless as before. In this sense, his identity as hero is not affected by the passing of time between one superhuman deed and another.

In contrast to this chronotope, Bakhtin defines the second type of ancient novel as "the adventure novel of everyday life" (1988: 111). It shows the metamorphosis of a character, the evolutionary process of an individual affected by the passing of time. This kind of novel "depicts only the exceptional, utterly unusual moments of a man's life, moments that are very short compared to the whole length of a human life. But these moments shape the definitive image of the man, his essence, as well as the nature of his entire subsequent life" (1988: 116). Thus, this hero is a figure in progress inside a world in progress, conditioned by the passing of time (chronotope). The most conspicuous element in this type is the possibility of *change*.

## 5. DEFINING THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

The graphic novel can be defined in contrast to the comic-book in terms of a radical opposition of chronotope perception that is similar to the differentiation between the Greek romance and the adventure novel of everyday life. Whereas the Greek romance is static in the sense of not being affected by the passing of time, the adventure novel is dynamic, its characters suffering the changes coming from its chronotope. So, I identify the Greek romance chronotope with the comic-book, and the changing time of the adventure novel with the graphic novel genre. In this sense, to use a clarifying pattern, "Superman" is the best example of the chronotope of comic-books. He is the original superheroic figure of the comic-book, but at the same time he has developed out of the science-fiction hero –like Dan Moore and Alex Raymond's "Flash Gordon", 1934–, the detective figure –like Chester Gould's "Dick Tracy", 1931–, the tight-dressed character –coming from Lee Frank and Roy Moore's "The Phantom", 1936–, and the noble heroic knight –such as Hal Foster's "Prince Valiant", 1937–.

As a character imprisoned inside the Greek romance chronotope, the passing of time does not affect his "essential" identity. Although some physical aspects have been modified according to the transformations of social fashions –mainly in the sense of the male body perception–, the Superman character has remained static and unchanged from the end of the 1930s to these first years of the 21st century, becoming not only an icon, but also an archetype of masculinity and social correctness. Umberto Eco offers an interesting analysis of the Superman myth in his *Apocalittici e integrati* (1968), and how the comic-book is based on that "destruction" of the narrative time. He exemplifies this fact with a simple question: why does Superman not marry Lois Lane (his life-long platonic love)? (1990: 237). According to Eco, this important event in the superhero's life would become the first step by Superman towards death, due to the implication of the passing of time that would destroy the unchangeable chronotope of the comic-book. Superman, as the paradigm of comic-book characters and series[18], relies on that narrative time to

---

[18] He is the paradigm not only of superheroic characters, especially if some of his powers and/or qualities are perceived in the characterisation of the heroes in series like *Asterix*, *Tintin*, *Captain America*, *X-Men*, *The Hulk*, *Spiderman*, *Batman* …

prolong his existence *ad infinitum*, fitting the expectations of both the market production and the reactionary politics embodied by his tight-dressed figure.

On the other hand, I consider the graphic novel a necessary evolution of the comic-book towards the more complex chronotope of the adventure novel defined by Bakhtin. The two works that "started" the transformation of the comic-book towards the graphic novel –that is, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*– rely on the narrative progression of time affecting their characters. As has been stated before, the Batman figure that Miller presents in this graphic novel is an old man moved by past obsessions, more human than superheroic. Alan Moore's work presents the classical super-group of heroes, this time affected by human (sometimes grotesque) passions as well as by the passing of time. All these "ex-heroes" are portrayed in a growing cynicism about a superhuman salvation of the world –Moore's characters question the necessity of those superheroes to rule the world–. Therefore, the characters of the graphic novels detach themselves from the old comic-book superheroes mostly by means of their interrelation with the time factor of the chronotope. As in the adventure novel of everyday life, they evolve and change through the force of the passing of time and memory. This can be said to be one of the first characteristics to oppose the graphic novel to the comic-book: the temporal evolution of characters, which provides a unity to the complete work, in contrast to the static nature of comic-book characters.

About the term "graphic novel", and although the first graphic novel is commonly attributed to Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* in 1978, the term has been mainly used to differentiate the new conception of comic-books in narrative and visual terms, at the end of the 1980s and 90s. But the term was also employed for commercial reasons; that is, the comic-book has been usually considered to be directed to a teenager and children audience, whereas the graphic novel is directly addressed to a mature and adult readership[19]. In essence, I agree with Roger Sabin's definition of this new genre: "[the graphic novels] could be defined as: novels in graphic form", as well as "lengthy comics in book form with a thematic unity" (2001: 165). Thus, the graphic novel stands as a hybrid genre in between the novel and the comic-book by making use of comics visual language, and novel literary narration. Needless to say that the graphic novel does not imply the end of comic-books[20], but rather a new branch of creative orientation inside the verbal-iconical productions. For this reason, I consider unacceptable the "definition" of graphic novel given by Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier, who affirm that graphic novels are *only* French and Belgian comics (2000: 132)[21] without taking into account the

---

[19] To the point of creating the "Vertigo" imprint in 1992, inside DC Comics company for the graphic novel production.

[20] In this sense, there are also postmodern comic-books, such as Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-2000).

[21] According to Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier, "comics are sometimes considered as an indigenous American art form. Yet they first took root in Europe, and have flourished there beyond the commercial and artistic limitations imposed upon them in the United States. Nowhere else in Europe have comics thrived and been so recognized as in France and Belgium, where they truly deserve the label of 'graphic novels'" (2000: 132). With respect to limitations on comic-books, France also imposed a strong censorship on this production in 1949, that is, six years before the Comics Code in the United States.

quality of the writing or the differences of the chronotope –that is, without giving any argument to support this statement, apart from their nationality–.


## 5.1.  AN EXAMPLE OF A GRAPHIC NOVEL: *THE SANDMAN*

The graphic novel trend/genre can be said to have reached its full definition with Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989-1996), a long work published inside the "Vertigo" imprint of DC Comics for graphic novels. Although it was originally published in the form of a series, *The Sandman* fits inside the already mentioned differential characteristics of the graphic novel as a hybrid genre: a chronotope that gives freedom to the characters to develop and change, and the structural cohesion based on a novelistic quality of writing in comic-book visual language. Thematically, *The Sandman* evolves around the idea of change and the compulsory evolution of living beings towards transformation according to the changes of the world. In this sense, the transformations suffered by Dream, the leading character of the series, can be compared to the metamorphosis process undergone by the comic-book toward the graphic novel. Thus, *The Sandman* consciously stands inside the chronotope of the adventure novel of everyday life in contrast to the comic-book chronotope of the Greek romance. Furthermore, the time of publication equates the time of the narration. That is, the series was released over seven years, and the story narrates how time over the same seven years affects and changes its characters.

Formally, this graphic novel series employs the visual language of the comic-book, but structurally, the leading character follows a progressive line towards death at the end of the work. This fact provides the cohesive element of the graphic novel, as long as every single issue affects the progression of the narration. Thus, it could be said that *The Sandman*'s most innovative element is the conscious use of time (chronotope) to provide the feeling of "change" and the inevitability of "death" that hovers along the complete work.

As a means of illustrating the use of time in the series, I propose to briefly examine some parts of the ninth volume of *The Sandman*, entitled *The Kindly Ones*, for it perfectly portrays that temporal consciousness in the narrative time of *The Sandman*. This story line collects all the unfinished stories of the previous volumes. All the secondary characters that were not given voice in their respective stories, find a place to develop inside *The Kindly Ones*. This volume not only integrates the previous story lines, but it is also the conclusion of *The Sandman*. Moreover, the volume as a whole is also self-conclusive, in the sense of having a proper inner structure whose development is visually underlined all along the progression of the plot. This idea is clearly suggested by the first picture of the first panel of almost every part of the thirteen sections that make up this volume. The following graphic shows the progression of these first panels that emphatically announce the ending of the series:
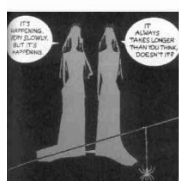
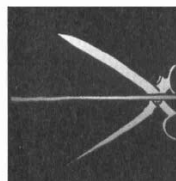Part 1.Page 1 — Part 2. Page 1 — Part 3. Page 1 — Part 4. Page 1

Part 5. Page 1 — Part 7. Page 1 — Part 8. Page 1 — Part 9. Page 1

Part 10. Page 1 — Part 12. Page 1 — Part 13. Page 24

(Writer: Neil Gaiman; artists: Marc Hempel (parts 1-5, 7 and 9-13) and Teddy Kristiansen (part 8), 1994-1995)

Graphically collected, all these panels –and the word-balloons included in them– show the progression of the story symbolized by an ominous cord-line about to be cut –life being symbolized as a cord in the hands of the Fates–. In this manner, the whole story is immersed in a conception of time in which the feeling of imminent death and the aura of destruction hover over all the different parts that make up this volume. This element not only gives unity to the volume as a whole, it also provides an important meaning associated to its main character's death. As the Three-in-one says on part 1, page 2 –talking about their roles as Greek Fates–, "every one we make's unique. Never seen before, never seen again". This also applies to Dream's story. Unlike what occurs in comic-books, the main character of this graphic novel is clearly affected by the passing of time. Therefore, formally we should highlight the special use of time in this graphic novel, for it helps the work detach from the traditional comic-book production. And at the same time we can also emphasize some thematic characteristics that consciously try to escape from comic-book premises and enter the realm of contemporary literature: elements such as the postmodern playfulness of the author, the lack of action in terms of highly-coloured fights and superheroic deeds, and the focalization on the individual as a changing entity/identity, to mention just a few.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The comic-book genre has gone through several important changes along the twentieth century –changes that ran parallel to developments in both visual and narrative techniques. Supported by the cultural transformations in the distinction between "high" and "low" art, this verbal-iconical genre has been able to overcome the Manichean vision of the comic-book as something childish and futile, oriented to a teenager readership –as suggested by Dr Wertham–, and thus find a new space for the maturation of its own devices. In this respect, as the latest outgrowth of the comic-book expansion at the end of the century, the graphic novel has become the corner stone whereby a link is established between the pure narrative form of the novel and the visual quality of the verbal-iconical genres. The daring and yet successful combination of two different trends has contributed to elevating the graphic novel to the status of proper art form, following a path already started by pop-art figures, such as Roy Lichtenstein. With the help of the experimentalism of avant-gardes and the later ideological development of postmodernism, the graphic novel has become the "new" genre of the millennium, adapting itself to changes in social tastes and trends.

Thus, despite its close relationship and connections with industry and commercialization, the graphic novel has given a new breath to the narrative forms of the verbal-iconical genres, especially to the comic-book, allowing for an experimentalism inside the trend and thus producing a new independent hybrid genre. In this sense, the graphic novel is the latest development within the process of maturation of the verbal-iconical genres, that had started with the illustrated novel, continued with the comic strip and ended up with the comic-book. Works like Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (both published in 1986) made possible a reorientation of narrative techniques concerning the time factor in the comic-book genre towards a more complex and coherent structure. Through these works, the "new" comic-book –the "early" graphic novel– was conceived as an independent work, outside the common serialized production. As such, its one volume-narration structure brought it closer to the singleness of unity of the novel. In this respect, the graphic novel has added a new chronotope that can be compared to Bakhtin's definition of the ancient adventure novel of everyday life. In these adventure novels, the events lead to the creation of "complete" characters who develop their identities along the story line, instead of remaining static representations of archetypal figures and roles, as for instance *Superman*, the classical character of comic-books who has not evolved in his sixty-five years of existence. Thus, unlike the old superhero of the golden age, the contemporary main character is transformed through circumstances into a more humane being that suffers and develops his/her own identity along the narration.

This is basically the reason why Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* is such a conspicuous example of the graphic novel. In terms of definition of the genre, *The Sandman* develops this type of chronotope. Appearing at the end of the 1980s, it works around contemporary ideas of the definition of the self in its projection of all its characters' identity construction. Thus, this work does not present a classical

superhero who remains immutable throughout the narration. On the contrary, Gaiman's graphic novel portrays characters affected by the passing of time and by the need to find their own place inside reality.

The graphic novel thus distanced itself from the "childish" nature of comic-books contributing to a certain "maturation" of the comics within the Postmodern world. The progressive erasure and questioning of superheroic figures in these productions echoes the Postmodern lack of confidence in metanarratives. The Anglo-American graphic novel production seems to have embraced –or maybe promoted– the contemporary feeling that is known as Postmodernism.

## 8. REFERENCES

Primary Sources

Eisner, Will (1996 (1978)). *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*. New York: DC Comics.
Gaiman, Neil and several artists (1994-1995). *The Sandman*. Vol. 9: *The Kindly Ones*. New York: DC Comics.
Gaiman, Neil and Charles Vess (1997-8). *Stardust*. New York: Vertigo DC Comics.
Gaiman, Neil and Dave McKean (1998 (1997)). *The Day I Swapped my Dad for Two Goldfish*. Clarkston: Borealis.
Gaiman, Neil and Yoshitaka Amano (1999). *The Sandman: The Dream Hunters*. New York: Vertigo DC Comics.
Gaiman, Neil and Dave McKean (2004 (2003)). *The Wolves in the Walls*. London: Bloomsbury.
Miller, Frank (1996 (1986)). *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. *Tenth Anniversary Edition*. New York: DC Comics.
Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons (1986-1987). *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics.
Moore, Alan and several artists (1987-2002 (1983-1987)). *The Saga of the Swamp Thing* (Five volumes). New York: Vertigo DC Comics.
Spiegelman, Art (2003 (1987)). *Maus*. Translated by Roberto Rodríguez. Barcelona: Planeta DeAgostini.


Secondary Sources

Altarriba, Antonio, ed. (1985). *Neuroptica 3: Estudios sobre el cómic*. Zaragoza: Diputación Provincial de Zaragoza.
Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich, (1988 (1981)). *The Dialogic Imagination*. *Four Essays*. Texas: University of Texas Press.
Barth, John (1967). The Literature of Exhaustion. *The Atlantic Monthly* August 1967: 29-34.
Barth, John (1980). The Literature of Replenishment. *The Atlantic Monthly* January 1980: 69-71.
Benjamin, Walter (1988 (1968)). *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.
Eco, Humberto (1990 (1968)). *Apocalípticos e Integrados*. Barcelona: Lumen.
Espino Martín, Javier (2002). La Reinterpretación del mito cásico en el comic-book U. S. A. Un análisis del mito en el *Sandman* de Neil Gaiman y el *Epicurus el sabio* de Messner Loebs. *El mito, los mitos* 2002: 45-54.

García Padrino, Jaime (2004). *Formas y colores: la ilustración infantil en España*. Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha.

Gasca, Luis and Román Gubern (1994). *El discurso del cómic*. Madrid: Cátedra.

Lindo, Alfonso (1975). *La aventura del cómic*. Madrid: Doncel.

Lofficier, Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier (2000). *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Pulp Fiction*. Jefferson, North Carolina and London: Mc Farland & Company Inc.

Merino, Ana (2003). *El cómic hispánico*. Madrid: Cátedra.

Moix, Ramón-Terenci (1968). *Los "cómics". Arte para el consumo y formas "pop"*. Barcelona: Llibres de Sinera.

Nebiolo, G., J. Chesneaux and Umberto Eco, eds. (1976 (1971)). *Los cómics de Mao*. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili.

Obiols Suari, Núria (2004). *Mirando cuentos. Lo visible e invisible en las ilustraciones de la literatura infantil*. Barcelona: Laertes.

Rose, Margaret A. (1991). *The Post-Modern and the Post-Industrial*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sabin, Roger (1993). *Adult Comics: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.

Sabin, Roger (2001 (1996)). *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels. A History of Comic Art*. London and New York: Phaidon.

Strinati, Dominic (1996 (1995)). *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Weiner, Stephen (2003). *Faster than a Speeding Bullet: the Rise of the Graphic Novel*. New York: NBM Publishing.

Wertham, Fredric (1955 (1954)). *Seduction of the Innocent*. London: Museum Press Ltd.

Zavala, V. S. et al. (1981). *Imagen y lenguajes*. Barcelona: Fontanella.