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The Graphic Novel – a Representation Medium of the Contemporary Society

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Abstract

The Graphic Novel obtained its cultural legitimization after a period of more than two Centuries when the Comic Strip had been unfairly considered as entertainment culture, vulgar and childish type of reading, or an environment for the propagation of illiteracy, violence and vices, with demoralizing and anti-educative effects. All these are implied within the meaning of the very term that made the Comic Strip famous: comics. Starting with the second half of the Twentieth Century many artists have written graphic novels where they have argued with complex socio-political problems, such as war and peace, democracy and totalitarianism, the concern for the environment, racism and intolerance, unemployment, the role of the individual in the society, depicting protests and social movements. In this article we render how the Graphic Novel, as a medium for the representation of the contemporary society, has contributed to the classification of the Comic Strip as the 9th Art. We shall analyse genres and topics addressed by artists, aiming at increasing the quality of discourse and narrative image in parallel with the cultural awareness of the public. We will also follow the process for the cultural legitimization of the Comic Strip from a criticised and censored reading to a respected one, with intellectual value, resulting in the inclusion of Comics in art galleries, museums and festivals mainly intended for adult audience.

Keywords: *Comic strip, Graphic Novel, cultural legitimization, social-politics, the 9th art, narrative images.*

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Introduction

The Comic strip is a “*sequential art*” (Eisner, 1982) and its fundamental element consists in the “juxtaposition of pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1994). It is a “system” rendered through a “collection of codes” (Groensteen, 1999), whose elements are forming an “iconic solidarity”. Thus this is not a “genre”, but a “medium” (Wolk, 2008). The comic strip was unfairly considered as entertainment culture, and the association between text and image had been perceived as a simplistic, limited, mediocre juxtaposition. For a greater diversity of creators and characters a “diversity of genre” is needed as a solution for “gender balance” and “minority representation” (McCloud, 2000). To this end the Graphic novel has been enlisted by creating multiple links with the society, therefore, assuming a social role through the introduction of a different kind of reading, a cinematic one, which, due to its dynamics, competes with the classic novel increasing the quality of both discourse and narrative image and raises the public cultural awareness. The term Graphic novel was considered a “misnomer” (Gravett, 2005), but after several attempts as “Picture stories” (Topffer, 1845), “Pictorial narratives” (Masereel and Ward, 1930), “Illustories” (Biro, 1950), “Picto-Fiction” (Gaine, 1950), “Sequential Art” (Eisner, 1978), “Paralittérature” (Mouchart, 2004)” (Gravett, 2005) the term has been validated by cultural legitimisation as a stand-alone medium, “at the same time means of mass communication and artistic discipline in its own right” (Groensteen, 1999), thus rendering the Comic Strip as the 9th Art. With the postulation of a social role within the topics connected to the contemporary society and within the genre that has been developed, it has proven its strength and capacity for transmitting messages, becoming an extraordinary weapon in the hands of artists engaged in movements for social change.

The Graphic Novel and the cultural legitimization

In the early years of Comics, their creators were not considered artists and had no copyright on their works. Even later, as they had been so strongly linked to printing, the basic medium for their manifestation, they had faced difficulties in publishing their works because of profit-oriented editorial policies. With a few exceptions, only the most popular creations had the chance to be published in volumes. However more and more graphic designers have embraced this serious, mature and liberal form of

expression and their creations have been published by alternative independent publishers and afterwards, as they were enjoying success, have been re-edited by prestigious publishers. The Graphic novel has played a key role in the process of acquiring the status of a recognized cultural object for the comic strip, adding an intellectual value to this medium. Graphic novels, more experienced and atypical, have built a new universe through complex stories of real artistic value, forcing the audience to a more careful, demanding, longer lasting reading and to contemplation rather than simple browsing, thus becoming “an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal... enjoying a renaissance and a newfound respectability” (McGrath, 2004), a debate medium efficient for shaping public opinions. The Graphic novel manages to impose itself with its authors, genres, critics, with its classics and avant-gardes, entering libraries, festivals, galleries and museums, thus acquiring the status of the *9th Art* (Pasamonik, 2015), a term firstly used by Claude Beylie and publicised in his work *Pour un neuvième art, la bande dessinée* (Lacassin, 1971). The contemporary graphic novel, in perpetual competition in a market flooded by commercial comics, retains a notable position holding 7.38% of the sales in the European Francophone Area, according to the ACBD 2015 statement, in the context in which the comic strips represents almost 10% of the total turnover of French publications. However, the publications market of the 9th art has been directly influenced by the economic and political instability due to the assassination of the animators at Charlie Hebdo newspaper, which lead to the heading of the editorial policies towards financial success at the expense of creation and innovation. In addition to printed versions, the authors have turned their attention towards different forms of virtual communication through “*Digital Production*”, “*Digital Delivery*” and “*Digital Comics*” (McCloud, 2000) due to the lack of editorial policy constraints and to the editorial freedom of expression.

The Social engagement in the Graphic novel cultural practice

When defining cultural resistance, Duncombe says “that it is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or to change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure”. (Duncombe, 2002) Culture may be used even as a tool for subordinating the society but it may also be a form of resistance, a medium that allows the development of solutions for a new social configuration. Artists are deeply influenced by the contemporary cultural, social and political context, and they often become militants in deeply supporting social causes. Furthermore, in situations of

crisis, artists react promptly in different forms. We have noticed this particular reaction in a series of cases (which have the subject of a different paper): the attacks in Brussels 22.03.2016, Attentats de Bruxelles: l'émotion en dessins (Pasamonik, 2016); the attack in the editorial offices of Charlie Hebdo publication, Paris, 7-9.01.2015, Buttes-Chaumont- The story of Chérif Kouachi (Costantini 2015); the immigrants crisis from the Middle East 2015, A Perilous Journey (Dix, 2015); Hate Preache Donald Trump election campaign 2015-2016, Donald Trump's reactionary recipe (McFadden, 2015); the ongoing Syrian war crisis 2011, Syrias' climate conflict (Quinn & Roche, 2011); the economic crisis in Greece 2009-2015, Greece (Goodwin & Burr 2011); TTIP and TPP 2016 The Transpacific, Partnership and "Free Trade" (Goodwin & Burr, 2009-2014); the Economic crisis 2009, Shadow Banking Vol. 1 & 2 (Bagarry, Corbeyran & Chabbert, 2014/2015); Fukushima Nuclear disaster 2011, Fukushima, Narohana (Moto, 2012);etc.

In 2016 our contemporary society is facing a sharp state of instability due to: the increasing nationalist discourse on the crisis of migrants 2015; terrorist acts in response to the reconfiguration of power in the Middle East, mass bombing (Boston Marathon, 2013), (Paris, 2015) and (Brussels, 2016); civil wars and multi-armed conflicts started from geopolitical interests; frozen conflicts (Crimea, 2014) (Ukraine, 2014); nuclear disaster (Fukushima, 2011); environmental pollution by toxic accidental release from mining, Baia Mare, Romania (Esmerelda Exploration Limited, 2000), Mount Polley, Canada (Imperial Metals, 2014) and San Juan province, Argentina (Barrick Gold, 2015); corporate-community conflicts in the mining sector Rosia Montana, Romania, Cajamarca, Peru and Halkidiki, Greece; with the pressures in accepting GMOs (Monsanto) and the refusal of marking packages; with the lobby for the use of hydraulic fracturing technology Pungesti, Romania (Chevron, 2013) and Zurawlow, Poland (Chevron, 2012) discouragement of local small farmers by monopolising the market by supermarkets etc. In this context, endowed with talent and creativity, artists have the ability to change themselves into a catalyst for sharing their viewers / readers a better understanding and awareness towards the problematic situations of the contemporary society. This force should not be underestimated because the images and words used in an ingenious way have the power to communicate and raise unexpected reactions with devastating effects. It is more than a visual show, it is a living, pervasive dialogue, to which the viewer cannot remain impassive. The political power

is troubled by the messages submitted by artists, thus often persecutes them, such as the cases of Aydoğan Özer, Mehmet Bahadır Baruter and Düzenli (Turkey, 2014) sentenced to prison. The popularity of graphic novels increases in the present context, as they are making direct and increasingly diverse references to the current events and problems which we all face, while providing a vast territory of expression for all artists, who, through the universe of imaginative and visual narratives are attacking social issues. “Narrative is both a vital form of movement discourse and a crucial analytical concept” (Davis, 2002). The intention of the artists remains one of informing, sensitising and raising civic spirit in their readers. The sense of empowerment that comes with the information acquired about political issues when reading political Graphic novels is one way to break through the exclusionary barrier raised through political and visual worlds.

Discussions and research methods

The graphic novels analysed throughout this paper relevantly reflect the difficult situation of social, political and economic instability of the contemporary society and become a means of action and propaganda involved in social change. This article points out the unusual ways of reading and mapping of the society, of the recent destabilizing events: armed conflicts, terrorist attacks, extremist policies, etc. By the examination within the comics of different situations (like case studies), in images, reports, documentaries, social chronicles and personal reflections, we draw attention on significant moments that the public is more or less aware of, from mass-media, photos, documentaries and TV or cinematic fictions. The graphic novel becomes an efficient tool used by the artists to react, to criticize the contemporary society, and even more, it becomes a form of artistic action related to the immediate reality. In the same time, through complex language, the Graphic novel reveals various and complex issues. The legitimization of the graphic novel as a form of art will conserve throughout time the artists’ reflections on the society and will be an important asset for the understanding of the recent history within future research in social sciences

As a case study, we focus on the *Non-fictional* type of Graphic novels because it consists in creations that deal with social issues. As *Non-fiction* subgenres we consider most relevant to our research the *Autobiographical Novel* / *Graphic Memory* and the *Report* / *Social Chronicle*. We intend to analyse a number of contemporary Graphic novels on social criticism, focusing our

attention on the social issues addressed by the authors in different forms such as: *confessions, self-help guide sites, journals, interviews, research reports, social and journalistic investigations, graphic, technical and educational manuals, social campaigns and daily radiographies*.

The Autobiographical Novel “can only be understood properly by drawing on formalist and socio-cultural perspectives” and the author’s endeavour is a “profoundly social and political” business (Refaie, 2012). We turned our attention to those works whose subjects are inspired by the actual turbulence of the contemporary society, without the intent to cover all problematical topics and social issues, strongly believing that the ones missing will be part of other studies. *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant? A Memoir* (Chast, 2014) is a self-help guide, a tragicomedy, where the absurdity and the black humour expose the conflicts between generations, the boredom, the chronic anxiety, the fear that dominate the existential aspects of taking care of the elderly during the last years of their lives. The society facing illness and its consequences is presented in a confession at the limits of recollection and dreaming in *L’ascension du Haut-Mal* (David B., 2011) where amid his brother's epilepsy the author presents the torments the family passes during the exhausting fight against the disease, the trauma and the emotional distress he faces, and the taking refuge in his drawings. We find the everyday life in explicit sexual scenes described in the *Journal* series (Neaud, 1996-2000) following the struggle for disclosure of the self-created mask while accepting and revealing one’s hidden homosexual identity facing the intolerant community. Another type of intolerance is shown in *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2007) through the child's perception of the transformation from the Iranian society with civil rights into another one with religious dictatorship with immediate effects on the woman's condition. The Western democratic society where she is migrating faces her with other types of intolerance, making her feel the loneliness and difficulty of integration.

The Report/Social chronicle links printed media to the narrative image as it is usually created by *BD-reporters* who innovate by combining comic strips with *journalistic investigation*. Artists observe, listen, investigate various social topics they visually archive, reports that turn into confessions seeking to render as documented as possible, different cultural, social or political problems specific for the investigated topic. The events are not reported immediately as in classic journalism therefore, a note of subjectivity is characteristic to the genre. In *Palestine* (Sacco, 2001) the author as a true

investigative journalist, fallible “*antibero*” specific to the “*underground*”, enters the refugee camps, conducts hundreds of *interviews* in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and presents the horrors and humiliations to which they are subjected and their impossibility to reply. The drawings that replace the testimonies combat the public image served by Western press. This novel is considered a successor of the traditional and specific techniques for “*New Journalism*” a movement for an alternative media to the official one. Inspired by the same Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Graphic novel *L’attentat* (Dauvillier & Chapron, 2012) is investigating the reason that causes a woman to become a suicide bomber in the service of Islamic fundamentalists and the reasons for the latter to go extremes to such atrocities. The concepts of respect, justice, territory and legitimacy, and also socio-political and religious beliefs are rendered through the family’s point of view of in the absurd situation of having a member involved in a bombing. The authors of *Graphic reportage* do not only carry out the exposure of religious conflicts. *Énergies extrêmes* (Blanci & Lapoix, 2014) is a journalistic investigation about the shale gas industry, the unprecedentedly lobby conducted in the US and France and the impacts on local communities and the environment. It also constitutes a *graphics, technical and educational manual* for understanding the controversial hydraulic fracturing technology, as *La guerre des OGM* (Le Galli, Basset & Mike, 2009) which provide accurate information on the impact of GMOs on organic farming combating the idea that they are sustainable solutions. To support this idea there comes the exciting series of interviews and testimonies *Paysannes-Carnet de Rencontres avec des femmes engagées* (Les Carnettistes tribulants, 2013) about the evolution of rural life and agriculture threatened by economic instability caused by excessive urbanisation and globalisation. The corruption favouring multinational authorities is denounced in *Détachez vos ceintures! Un aller simple pour Notre-Dame-des-Luttes* (Collectif, 2013) which brings together 60 authors who, by donating their earnings to employees (ACIPA, 2000) support the fight of rural residents threatened with eviction of their properties to make way for unnecessary megalomaniac projects. *Ça n’arrive qu’à moi* (Tronchet, 2010) brings us closer to urban areas where small gestures: selective waste collection, recycling, responsible use of water, detergents not contaminating groundwater, cycling, organic food etc. turn into environmental attitudes. Considered the bible of ecology, *Saison brune* (Squarzoni, 2012) is a faithful and intelligible reflection on the climate change subject. Following a serious documentation and interviews with specialists, the author drafted a report

with precise information also critical of liberal individualism which dominates companies stating that only solidarity and active involvement can bring about changes to this global problem. Committed to supporting the causes of the society to which he belongs, the author, (ATTAC 1998), denounces in *Dol* (Squarzoni, 2012), the destruction of the system of social contributions: pensions, social security, unemployment benefit and health, public services and state enterprises in the economic and French politics since 2002, when under the guise of media exposure coupled with moderate policies the Government formulated an outrageous liberal agenda. Direct repercussions on finance and public services are exposed in *Les sous-sols du paradis* (Boussard, 2008) which is a deep analysis of all that reducing taxes means by using tax havens, a colossal practice of money laundering, a type of financial delinquency intrinsically linked to corruption, arms trade, terrorism, prostitution, human trafficking and drugs. The author argues with real data generated by tax havens disaster, especially since they are used by some multinationals. We meet in *Putain d'usine* (François-Xavier & Levaray, 2007) with the harsh corporate world governed by the rules of shareholders' rush for profit, increased productivity and reduced production costs, The everyday life *radiography* of a chemical industry which is in perpetual restructuring documents the appalling situation and the despair of an employee who had spent 28 years in the same job. The employee is facing his managers' contempt and arrogance, is trapped in the workplace and is torn between two extremes, action or resentment, rebellion or resignation. Extreme attitudes of multinationals and anti-globalisation movements are ridiculed in *Il faut tuer José Bové* (Berjeaut, 2005) where the author, by using the image of José Bové³ satirises the capitalist society and the contradictions appearing in the media.

The Graphic novel narrative has the ability to engage the readers into the story by allowing them to experience themselves within the comics form. "By simplifying the fictional character in the narrative, comics try, in a visual context, to focus on the information over those who present it" (Figueiredo, 2011). We do not intend to catalogue all graphic novels selected as having the militant themes mentioned above since in many cases the authors' messages become transparent within the visual structures. The narrative themes of political

³ José Bové, born Joseph Bové June 11, 1953 in Talence (Gironde), is a leading figure of the anti-globalization movement and politician. Agricultural syndicalist of the Confederation Paysanne and Via Campesina, he is known for his stance against GMOs and illegal grubbing operations of GM crops, considered a civil disobedient by his supporters.

upheavals and social injustices are deliberate, their visual narratives are intended to evoke a certain attitude and encourage social awareness amongst its readers, which, in turn, is a form of narrative persuasion.

The above mentioned selected and discussed graphic novels render the tensions that animate the comic strips medium and their relation to their paradigms and socio-cultural contexts. The evolution from a form of entertainment towards an artistic product, ethically involved, socially and ideologically active, interrogating the present times renders the comic strip as an efficient medium for the telling of the present and future history.

Conclusion

The Graphic novel is the medium which enables artists to take a sensitive look to the world, by revealing unexpected details which come to our aid in clarifying our own perceptions of the contemporary society. *By becoming a contributor and/or creator of the world of information*, within the Graphic novel, *“then, the audience begins to become active members in the community of knowledge”* (Figueiredo, 2011). This analysis followed the trail of comic strip from being perceived as a subculture intended for entertainment, up to its legitimisation as an art form. We have highlighted the role of the Graphic novel in this process which, through visual experiments, through visual discourses focusing on a the great diversity of topics, of which a large part are directly connected to social life, but also by new genres created, has contributed to the establishment of an appreciated cultural object. We have defined the socially and politically engaged art, by highlighting the importance of involving artists in the social change by using this medium with outstanding potential, in fact, without limitations in expressing opinions. It is certain that more and more creators are aware of the power of this art which is embraced by a large audience, to which it addressed through graphic surprising and effective formulations. We focused our attention on a series of Graphic novels, appreciated by critics, whose topics are inspired by the present conflicts of the contemporary society, without intent to cover all topics and social issues. By the selected and discussed examples, we believe that we managed to prove the many facets of this medium unexploited so far, convinced that it will remain a vast territory of expression which will also provide countless research topics.

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