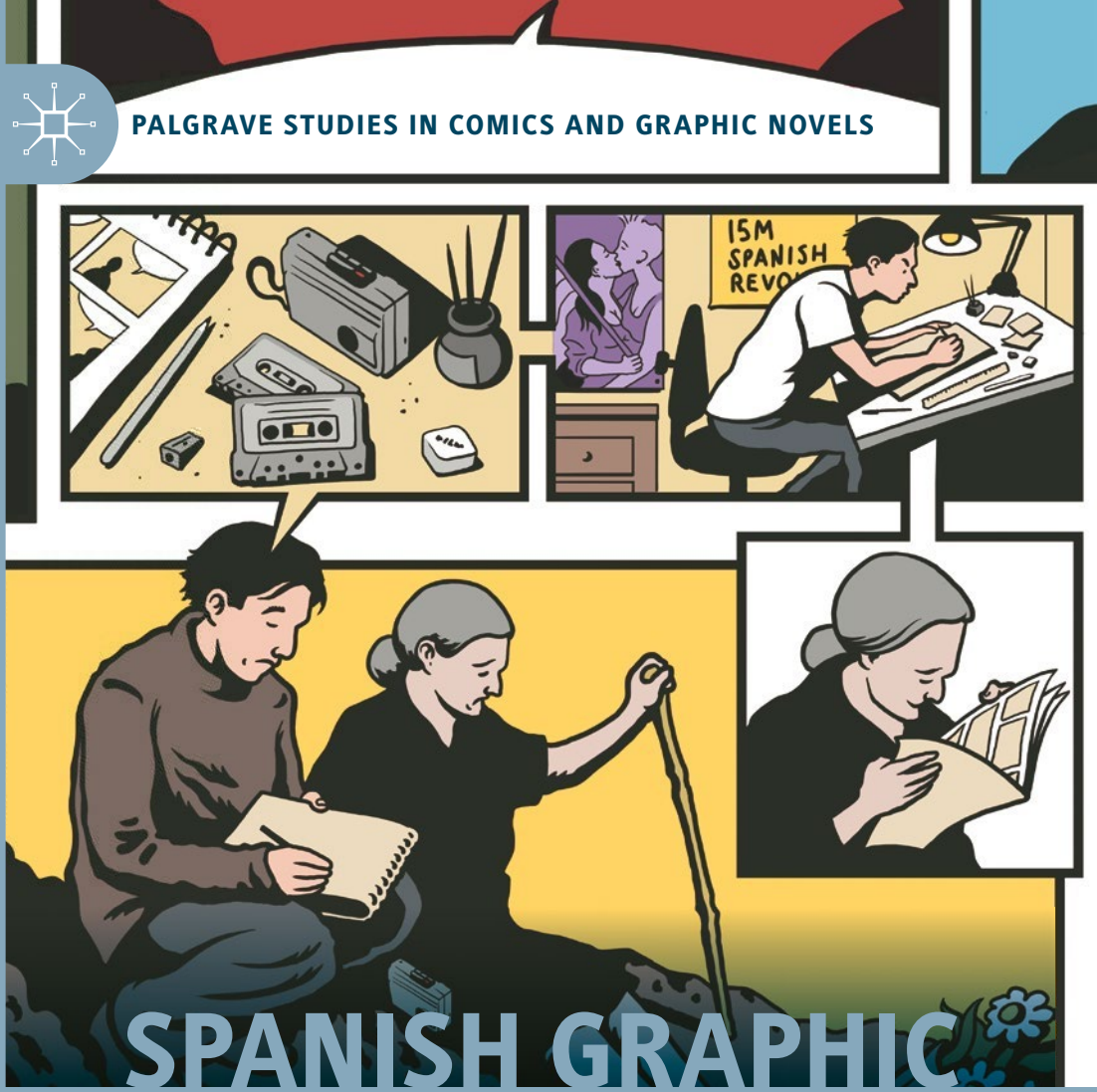

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SPANISH GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

Recent Developments in Sequential Art

Edited by
Collin McKinney · David F. Richter

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Editors

Spanish Graphic Narratives

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INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

Graphic Spain: From *Aleluyas* to the "Second Boom"

Collin McKinney and David F. Richter

This anthology of essays might not have been possible in the 1990s when we were discovering Spanish literature as undergraduate students in the American university system. *Don Quijote* was what you studied in the classroom, comics were something you read in your personal time. (And let's be honest, what wannabe literary scholar would have admitted to reading comics?) But the academic landscape has changed in the past few decades, as has the literary scene itself. Once considered a mere pastime of school boys and socially-awkward men, comics and graphic novels have now wedged themselves firmly into both the mainstream literary landscape as well as serious literary scholarship. In Spain, the so-called "second boom" of graphic literature (roughly since the turn of the century) has given rise to successful publication houses like Astiberri and Dibbuks, which boast extensive catalogues that include subjects ranging from Civil

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War memoirs to crime novels, books that can be found on the shelves of popular bookstores like FNAC or Casa del Libro in addition to specialized bookstores in every major Spanish city. Indeed, graphic literature has definitively shed its reputation as a niche literary form and has earned the right to be taken seriously.

As further evidence that graphic literature has moved beyond its status as a springboard to get semi-literate children interested in reading, graphic narratives are now the subject of college courses and conference panels, in addition to scholarly articles and books. Recent academic volumes that discuss the growing interest in Spanish comics and graphic novels include *La novela gráfica* (2010) by Santiago García, *El discurso del cómic* by Luis Gasca and Román Gubern (2011), *La historieta española, 1857–2010: Historia, sociología y estética de la narrativa gráfica en España* (2011), coordinated by Antonio Altarriba, *La cárcel de papel* (2017) by Álvaro Pons, *Historieta o Cómic: Biografía de la narración gráfica en España* (2017), edited by Alessandro Scarsella, Katiuscia Darici and Alice Favaro, *Diez ensayos para pensar el cómic* (2017) by Ana Merino, *Con el lápiz en la mano: Mujeres y cómics a ambos lados del Atlántico* (2019), edited by Elizabeth Montes Garcés, Marina Bettaglio, and María Elsy Cardona, *The Art of Pere Joan: Space, Landscape, and Comics Form* (2019) by Benjamin Fraser, and *Consequential Art: Comics Culture in Contemporary Spain* (2019), edited by Samuel Amago and Matthew J. Marr. The present volume of essays is yet another step down this new path of inquiry into graphic narrative in the Spanish context.

Spanish Graphic Narratives examines the most recent thematic developments in Spanish sequential art, with most chapters focusing on comics published since 2007. This volume brings together scholars based in the USA, Canada, and Spain and seeks to address the graphic works that are increasingly being studied in academic settings in an international context. Considering Spain's rich literary history, contentious Civil War (1936–1939), oppressive Francisco Franco regime (1939–1975), and progressive contemporary politics, both the recent graphic novel production in Spain and the thematic focal points of the essays here are greatly varied. Topics of particular interest include studies on the subject of historical and personal memory; representations of gender, race, and identity; and texts dealing with Spanish customs, traditions, and current issues in Spain. Even though all of the essays examine graphic narratives in the Spanish context, they all do so in different ways, using a variety of

analytical tools and distinct critical methodologies. Just as a poem or novel can be read, discussed, and written about using a multitude of critical approaches (from the formalist *close reading* and literary-historical perspectives to the more ideological positions of gender and cultural studies), this volume celebrates the diversity of critical traditions and methods of inquiry. As such, the essays in this volume each deal with sequential art, but from a variety of perspectives both thematic and critical. The pages that follow make no attempt to provide a comprehensive history of graphic literature in Spain.[1] Instead, a brief, modest synopsis of both the literature and scholarship will provide readers with some context for the essays that follow.

The Comics Tradition in Spain

Although comics studies in a Spanish context is a relatively new phenomenon, the comics tradition itself is not. Comics, in one form or another, have been around in Spain for more than a century. The new medium introduced in the 1830s and 40s by Swiss teacher Rodolphe Töpffer, considered the father of comics, spread throughout nineteenth-century Europe and would eventually reach Spain, although somewhat later than other European countries (Barrero, "Orígenes" 21). But even before comics proper came to the Peninsula there was already a tradition of graphic storytelling in the form of *aleluyas*, known as *aucas* in Cataluña. These proto-comics consisted of a single-page of images, usually having 48 panels, each of which included a rhyming couplet or triplet. A unifying theme or narrative tied the panels together, as in the story of General Prim from 1861 (see Fig. 1.1). Antonio Martín, one of the pioneers of Spanish comics studies, makes the following observation about *aleluyas* in the nineteenth century: "Es imposible comprender y valorar la importancia de las aleluyas y su impacto sobre los lectores … [incluso] a los lectores menos

[1] See Santiago García's *La novela gráfica* (2010), translated by Bruce Campbell in 2015 as *On the Graphic Novel*, for a general history of the graphic novel, which refers to the Spanish context on pages 263–64, 180–81, and elsewhere. For more specific information on the origin of comics in Spain see Antonio Martín's *Historia del cómic español: 1874–1939* (1978), Ana Merino's *El cómic hispano* (2003), the 2011 special volume of *Arbor*, "La historieta española, 1857–2010: Historia, sociología y estética de la narrativa gráfica en España," and more recently, Antonio Lázaro-Reboll's "Historicizing the Emergence of Comics Art Scholarship in Spain, 1965–1975" (2018). In *The Art of Pere Joan* (2019), Benjamin Fraser also gives a succinct overview of comics production and scholarship in Spain (35–58).

Fig. 1.1 "Vida del valiente general D. Juan Prim, marqués de los Castillejos" (1861), held by the Fundación Joaquín Díaz, Urueña (Valladolid)

cultos y generalmente iletrados" ("Las Aleluyas" n.p.) [it is impossible to fully comprehend and appreciate the importance of the *aleluyas* and their impact on readers … including those that were less educated or illiterate]. Although *aleluyas* can and should be viewed as sequential art, arguably the most important defining quality of comics as described by Will Eisner (*Comics*) and Scott McCloud (7, 199), they lacked some of the characteristics of later comics, such as certain structural elements (e.g. speech bubbles) and serialized narratives. Antonio Martín has further argued that they do not possess the same degree of narrative continuity between panels that one finds in traditional comics ("Las Aleluyas" n.p.).

While these proto-comics were written primarily for juvenile readers, or illiterate consumers of all ages, it was not long before short humorous and satirical comic strips showed up in adult venues, such as those found in papers like *La Flaca*, *El Mundo Cómico*, or *Madrid Cómico*. As Martín outlines in his essay "Notes on the Birth of Comics in Spain, 1873–1900," political shifts and social pressures at the end of the nineteenth century led to significant changes in the press, which in turn allowed comics to flourish: "In this new press, for the society of the Restoration, Spanish comics grew, attaining their true raison d'être" (134). Many of these early strips took aim at contemporary Spanish society, playing with well-known figures or popular types, in the *costumbrista* tradition. Some of these early comics creators include José Luis Pellicer, Francisco Cubas, Eduardo Sáenz Hermúa (known artistically as Mecáchis), and Ramón Cilla.

The first years of the twentieth century would follow a similar pattern—illustrated magazines for children, and humorous strips for adults. But by the end of the second decade, changes to the mechanics of printing (specifically, the ability to mass produce color newspaper-quality magazines), as well as continued urbanization and the capitalist development that came with it, and shifting attitudes (such as a move away from didactic morality in favor of pure entertainment), initiated a commercial shift that led to the decline of adult comic strips and the ascension of magazines for young middle-class readers (Martín, *Apuntes* 7). Beginning in 1915, *Dominguín*, the first weekly comic in the modern sense of the word, was published in Barcelona under the direction of José Espoy. As Martín explains, the magazine was ground-breaking and would set the tone for future Spanish comics: "*Dominguín* representa el arquetipo de los tebeos, anticipo de lo que estos habrían de ser con los años: predominio total de la imagen, textos escasos y sintéticos, todo color, dibujo ágil y dinámico" (*Apuntes* 8)

[*Dominguín* constituted the archetype of comics, a precursor of what comics would become in subsequent years: a complete superiority of the image, scarce and concise usage of text, full color, dynamic and flexible drawings]. Other comics would soon follow, including *Charlotín*, *Pinocho*, *Pulgarcito*, and of course the iconic *TBO*, from which the term *tebeo* is derived.[2] Despite the proliferation of comic books, Martín laments this new period, which he describes as a "progressive infantilisation" of the comics form:

> In Spain, at the turn of the century and mainly from 1917, a poor understanding of the expressive possibilities of the comic by the publishing industry, along with an evaluation full of prejudices that indicates a certain contempt of the medium, plus a hypocritical educational and moral stance, deprived Spanish comics of the adult character with which they had originated, consigning the medium mainly to children. ("Notes" 155)

Over the next half century this infantilization of comics would continue, leading to the virtual disappearance of adult comics in favor of bellicose narratives for boys, such as the swashbuckling tales found in the series *El Cachorro*, or the action-packed adventures of the eponymous hero of *El Capitán Trueno*.[3]

It is not until the 1970s that we find the beginnings of a notable corpus of comics for adults, which would appear in the form of underground comix. Consisting initially of translated works, primarily from France and the United States, and later of original works from Spanish creators like Max, Javier Mariscal, Miguel Gallardo, the Farriol brothers, and others, the irreverent style of underground comix found in magazines like *El Rrollo Enmascarado*, *El Víbora*, *Star*, or *Cimoc* breathed new life into the comics tradition, if only for a moment.[4] These comics reflected what Pablo

[2] *Tebeo* is one of several Spanish terms that are roughly synonymous with comic. Others include *historieta*, *cómic*, *viñeta*, and *novela gráfica*. For a discussion of the subtle differences between these terms see Antonio Gil González's article "Comics and the Graphic Novel in Spain and Iberian Galicia," Nuria Ponce Márquez's study "El mundo del cómic: Planteamiento terminológico, literario y traductológico," and Manuel Barrero's *Diccionario terminológico de la historieta* (2015).

[3] See Pedro Porcel's article "La historieta española de 1951 a 1970" for more information on these popular adventure series.

[4] See Pablo Dopico's *El cómic underground español, 1970–1980* for a comprehensive look at Spain's underground comix tradition, as well as Francesca Lladó Pol's *Los cómics de la Transición (El boom del cómic adulto 1875–1984)*.

Dopico described as a spirit of "hippismo tardío" ("Esputos" 174) [a delayed hippy movement], and they did not hesitate to depict sex, drug use, political protest, and other taboo subjects (see Fig. 1.2). Featuring the work of Antonio Pamies, Javier Mariscal, and others, the pages of *De Qvommic. El Rrollo Aristocrata* demonstrated a clear underground aesthetic, with references to "frics" [freaks], countercultural movements, allusions to sex, and the frequent appearance of the irreverent character Nedbul (too controversial by today's standards). Although the underground comix scene remained marginalized, both socially and commercially, it provided a creative platform for future graphic novelists, such as those studied in this book.

Despite the proliferation of comics throughout the twentieth century, such was the moral climate and economic precariousness of graphic literature within Spanish culture that there were moments when it seemed the comics industry had run its course and might fade into the past. In his article on stigma, comics, and popular culture, Paul Lopes describes the stigmatization of comic books since the 1930s and how that low reputation negatively affected the evolution of the comics genre (389). In particular, post-World War II comics saw an increase in more mature or "adult" themes, including romance, crime, and horror (Lopes 400), much to the displeasure of crusading moralists. Renowned cartoonist and critic Will Eisner reminds us that between the 1940s and 1960s "the reading of comic books was regarded as a sign of low intelligence" (149), or what others have called low status or part of a dangerous "subcultural." Some, however, saw potential benefits of reading comics, calling them "an entryway to 'true reading'" (García, *Graphic* 14). The popular phrase in the industry was, "where today there is a comic book, tomorrow there will be a book" (qtd. in García, *Graphic* 14). Today, the mixed reputation of comics has largely been resolved both in Spain and abroad, and graphic narrative "has moved beyond the negative impression stamped on the field by the Senate hearings of the 1950s" (Weiner 61), which sought to address what some in the USA saw as a public health problem inherent to the genre.

Beginning in the 1960s, commercial problems compounded the cultural challenges faced by Spain's comics industry. With the rise of television use came the decline of street kiosks and the simultaneous dwindling of publishing houses. The consumption of comics gradually became a niche endeavor; so much so that by the end of the century Spanish comics seemed to be all but gone. Benoît Mitaine calls the 1990s a "década de crisis para el cómic español" (150) [a decade of crisis for Spanish comics].

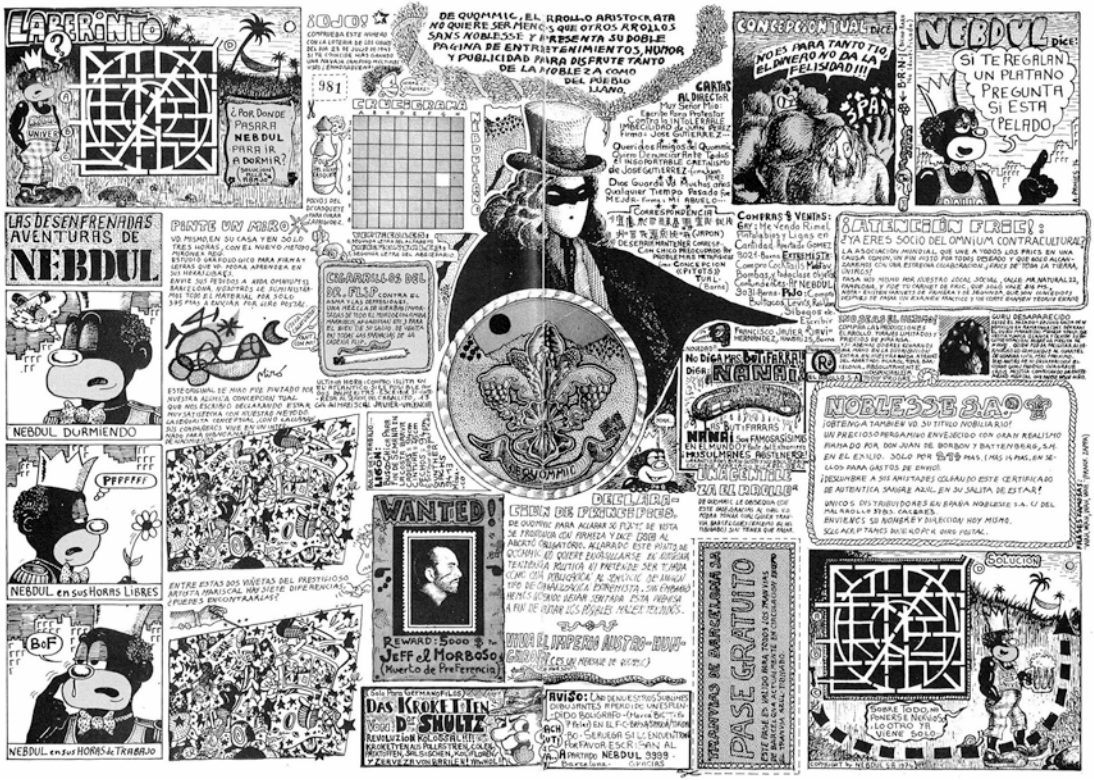

Fig. 1.2 Two-page spread from *De Qyommic. El Rrollo Aristocrata* (1974)

Or as Santiago García bluntly put it: "Dicho de otra forma: el cómic murió. En algún momento entre 1985 y 2000, lo que entendíamos como tebeos dejó de existir" (*Panorama* 5) [Put another way: comics died. In some moment between 1985 and 2000, what we understand as comics ceased to exist]. While García's diagnosis may be true of the traditional comics format, the medium itself found a way to recover. The salvation of Spanish comics would eventually arrive with the advent of the "graphic novel" (García, *Spanish* x–xi; Constenla). The term "graphic novel" originates from a short essay penned by Richard Kyle in 1964 titled "The Future of 'Comics'" wherein he discusses "serious" and "adult" comic book strips and notes an increased level of depth in these "graphic stor[ies]" or "graphic novel[s]" (3, 4). In *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel* (2003), Stephen Weiner elaborates on these comics that "take themselves seriously" by suggesting that when comics from the 1970s to 1990s started to be used "as a vehicle for personal and political statements" (in Eisner's *A Contract with God*, or Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, for example), the "new course for comics" ensured the need for a new name as well (17–20).[5] Yet some scholars and practitioners dislike the term "graphic novel," arguing that it is simply a way to side-step the historical stigma surrounding comics, or a marketing gimmick meant to repackage and sell comics to adult readers. Kristin Kiely, for instance, argues that the term is exclusionary, narrowing the definition of the genre as well as the canon itself (278). Daniel Clowes, author of *Eightball* and *Ghost World*, dislikes the term, which he calls "imprecise" and "pretentious" (10). And Manuel Barrero, who runs the website tebeosfera.com in Spain, argues that the nomenclature is harmful to the medium in that it creates needless confusion: "el concepto encierra una perversión etimológica, una defectuosa comprensión de su evolución histórica, una equívoca interpretación de sus cualidades narratológicas" ("La novela" 1) [the concept entails an etymological perversion, a misled understanding of historical evolution, an erroneous interpretation of narratological qualities]. Even Spiegelman, a pioneer of the format, once quipped that a graphic novel is simply a "comic book that needs a bookmark" (qtd. in McGrath 26). But these critiques ignore the fact that this rechristening was merely a superficial effect of a more profound shift that occurred within the industry. On

[5] In his foundational 1985 study, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Will Eisner elaborates on the term "graphic novel" and notes that in the 1980s it was the "fastest-growing literary medium in America" (148).

the one hand is the materiality of graphic novels. Commenting on the situation in the United States, Will Eisner notes that the change in nomenclature runs parallel with changes in production. Evolving technology transformed the industry by making publication easier and of a higher quality; as a result "the form's potential has become more apparent" as the medium has left behind low-grade newsprint, which often lacked proper coloring and clarity of line, in favor of high-quality materials and finishing, which, in turn, has attracted "a more sophisticated audience" (1).

Along with this improved quality came creative changes as well. In their study of the graphic novel form, Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey note several differences between the recent graphic novel movement and its serial comics forebears: a predominance of single authors; a proliferation of one-shot works as opposed to serialized stories; stronger narrative voices; and greater experimentation with length, format, and layout (8–23). Scottish author and cartoonist Eddie Campbell suggests that the rise of the graphic novel represents much more than a simple rebranding or tweak to the format when he states that "it's undeniable that there is a new concept of what a comic is and what a comic can be" (qtd. in García, *Graphic* 9). In his "Graphic Novel Manifesto," Campbell promotes the term "graphic novel" as a necessary step to denote a paradigm shift within the field of comics: "It is a disagreeable term," he explains, but one that is necessary because it "signifies a movement rather than a form" (n.p.). Part of this movement, he continues, is to cast off the low-brow connotations associated with the comic book, "which has become an embarrassment," and which too many readers identify with "a sub-genre of science fiction or heroic fantasy" (n.p.). The shift from comics to graphic novels, he concludes, is not merely about becoming more marketable, it is a chance to find a new identity, an opportunity to take the medium beyond "the cliches of 'genre fiction'" (n.p.). Similarly, in *On the Graphic Novel*, Santiago García qualifies graphic novels in terms of being "*more adult*," (20), having "a new spirit" (22), engendering a "*tendency toward density*" (154), and focusing increasingly on autobiography (162).

The "Segundo Boom" and Recent Scholarship

Scholars working within the Spanish context have made similar observations, noting that the revision in nomenclature mirrors a shift in themes and tone. Samuel Amago and Matthew J. Marr, for example, suggest in their 2019 volume *Consequential Art: Comics Culture in Contemporary*

Spain that the historical development of the comics form has given rise to a variety of neologisms and "multitudinous lexical variations" that seek to define the genre (5). In short, the change of terminology reflects a change in material quality as well as a change in focus—a move away from humor, satire, and adventure, in favor of topics that seek to challenge the status quo or cast light on what was once taboo. Anne Magnussen describes this shift toward reactionary, adult comics in her introduction of *European Comic Art*, where she suggests that topics like the Spanish Civil War and Franco dictatorship are "central to the understanding of Spanish comics history, as it saw the emergence of comics produced for adult audiences that were more closely connected to the social, cultural, and political protests of the time" (3). There is no denying that this new format is dominating the graphic narrative industry. According to *Tebeosfera*'s annual analysis of the comics industry by year, the vast majority—nearly 77%—of comics published in Spain in 2018 were in book format ("Informe" 13).[6]

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the paradigm shift described above can be found in the changing attitudes among scholars and critics. As we suggested in the opening lines of this chapter, serious literary scholarship on Spanish graphic narratives is a relatively new phenomenon. Despite a long record of comics production in Spain, it is only in the past few decades that comics have moved out of the cultural and literary "gutter," to borrow an expression from Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest (1), and achieved a semblance of respectability and success. Figures like Antonio Martín and Luis Gasca paved the way with important documentary works, joined by the likes of Álvaro Pons, Román Gubern, Manuel Barrero, Enrique Bordes, and Juan Antonio Ramírez. With a few exceptions, the valuable contributions of these early trailblazers were squarely in the field of literary history rather than literary analysis.

[6] While this naming debate continues, regardless of the terminology that one chooses, the works that we call sequential art, comics, underground comix, graphic novels, and graphic narratives share a defining characteristic; they lie at the intersection of verbal and visual storytelling, and the affordance of this word-image combination is greater than what either one could do on their own. Although we have followed Hilary Chute's lead in using the more inclusive term "graphic narrative" in the title of this book, in this anthology we have allowed authors to use whichever term they like or even to use them interchangeably. For further reading on this ontological debate—which Thierry Groensteen calls "the impossible definition" (12)—see Baetens and Frey (1–23), the aforementioned García (*Graphic* 20–24), and Hilary Chute (3).