

Santiago García (trans. Bruce Campbell), On the Graphic Novel

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European Comic Art

DOI:
[10.3167/eca.2017.100207](https://doi.org/10.3167/eca.2017.100207)

Published: 01/09/2017

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):
Miranda-Barreiro, D. (2017). Santiago García (trans. Bruce Campbell), On the Graphic Novel. *European Comic Art*, 10(2), 103-106. <https://doi.org/10.3167/eca.2017.100207>

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Santiago García (trans. By Bruce Campbell), *On the Graphic Novel* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015). 375 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4968-1318-3 (\$30.00).

It seems that the ‘graphic novel’ is here to stay, either as an ‘agreed-upon’ or ‘disagreed-upon’ term, as the Spanish comic book translator, writer and critic Santiago García argues in his study *La novela gráfica* (Astiberri 2010), translated into English as *On the Graphic Novel* (University Press of Mississippi 2015). The term ‘novel’, and therefore the literary prestige associated with this word, has served to raise the profile of the comics medium, which is nowadays the object of museum exhibitions and the recipient of literary prizes. However, some may say that the label ‘graphic novel’ is mostly a marketing strategy. After all, are not all graphic novels just comics? What makes them different to other formats or stories told through the combination of text and image? What are the typical features of the graphic novel (and what would be a ‘true’ graphic novel)? When did it start and what are its precedents in the history of comics, who were its precursors? García’s book revolves around these questions, posed in the form of a ‘historical essay’ (4) in order to understand ‘why the graphic novel has emerged, but also why it did not emerge earlier’, for which the author sets out to ‘re-write the history of comics from the point of view of the graphic novel’ (4).

This book is a fascinating journey across the history of the medium, by the hand of a knowledgeable author who provides a wealth of details and an insightful and original view on the evolution of comics. From pioneers such as Töpffer to the contemporary ‘graphic vanguard’ (for example Martin Vaughn-James, Richard McGuire and Jerry Moriarty) (168), García searches for the origins of ‘adult contemporary comics’ (i.e. the graphic novel) in the first incarnations of the medium in the press, early attempts to associate it with literature (‘picture novels’ and ‘pictorial narratives’, the first biographies in comics), the appearance of adult genres such as ‘love’, ‘crime’ and ‘horror’, and the eventual consolidation of comic

books for adults thanks to the Comix Underground and their further development in ‘alternative comics’, ‘the threshold for the graphic novel’ (122).

On the Graphic Novel is somewhat a coming-of-age story of comics: from a mass-produced product mostly directed to a youth audience (and therefore seen as devoid of intellectual and artistic value, even as a damaging or dangerous form of subculture) to a ‘serious’ and artistic medium. In contrast with the restrictions imposed on authors by an industry that used to be in control of ownership and created comics based on formulas and pre-established aesthetic patterns, García argues that ‘the contemporary graphic novel represents [...] awareness of authorial freedom’ (185). It would not be, therefore, a format or a genre or defined by its content, but ‘a movement [...] that founds a tradition related to the others, but distinct’ (185). As a movement, it is also characterised as an international one, not based on ‘geographical or political limits’, as shown by the anthology *Comix 2000* published by L’Association (172), but rather on aesthetic and artistic affinities (a transnational medium, perhaps?). In this regard, one of the strengths of the book is to put different traditions into dialogue (American, French and Japanese) and also to bring Spanish comics into such a conversation. Whereas this would be not just a natural but probably a necessary choice in its original version (aimed at a Spanish speaking readership), in its translated form this helps to raise awareness of a comics industry that is usually left aside in international publications. Moreover, as the author himself acknowledges, García’s work is not produced in a vacuum, but is both indebted to the work of previous Spanish comics scholars (especially his mentor Juan Antonio Ramírez) and part of the ongoing research carried out by key names in the study of Spanish comics such as Manuel Barrero, Pablo Dopico, Román Gubern and Ana Merino, to name a few.

What is, then, the graphic novel? Although García wisely does not provide a straightforward definition (as he explains in the second chapter, comics elude rigid

definitions), throughout his study the reader is able to compose a tentative idea of the main traits shared by the works produced within this movement: an artistic and 'literary' form of adult comics that avoids formulaic genres dominated by characters or 'heroes' (superheroes, adventure, science-fiction, etc.) in favour of more personal narratives (especially autobiography) and serious subjects (history, journalism), and which tends towards the publication of complete stories (as opposed to serialised ones) in book format, commonly (but not necessarily) in black and white. Although all these features are of course open to discussion, García does a great job in unfolding the development and the rise of the graphic novel across time and provides a great amount of detail regarding the contribution to its emergence of crucial artists and writers. His study does not aim, however, to be prescriptive, as he concludes that the debate on the limits of the graphic novel in many current works would be a 'sterile' one (187) and as a 'young and tender phenomenon that it still has not solidified' (188) it is 'an art form [...] far from exhausting its potential' (189).

The book is a necessary and scholarly contribution to the study of comics, given the importance that the graphic novel has gained in recent years. It will be of interest to experts on the medium, but also to readers who are less familiar with its history. It will no doubt incite a necessary debate over the nature of contemporary comics. In this regard, I would like to finish with a reflection on the use of terminology. As stated earlier, the use of the term 'novel' obviously seeks to give literary prestige to the medium. However, the strong focus of the graphic novel on non-fictional genres (memoir, biography, journalism) also raises the issue of whether this is in fact a suitable term to describe these works. Would it not be more accurate to go beyond the simplification of these comics as 'novels' and to use a greater variety of genres to define them (autobiography, auto fiction, etc.; not to mention that a novel does not have to be necessarily 'serious')? García also uses the terms 'graphic memoir' (174)

and 'journalistic comics' (166), but as examples of graphic novels. Furthermore, the author claims that:

the comic form is not a hybrid of word and image, a bastard child of literature and visual art incapable of inheriting any of the virtues of its parents. The comic form belongs to a different lineage, and is produced on a different plane than either of those arts. It has its own rules and its own virtues and limitations, which we have only begun to understand. (182)

A different route might be, therefore, for comic studies to become less dependent on literary terminology and fully embrace the specificity of the medium to define contemporary comics, although it is also true that the term graphic novel is often imposed by publishers rather than by authors and scholars. This is an unresolved tension, and the reason why works such as García's *On the Graphic Novel* are absolutely vital to keep the dialogue open and understand the nature of comics today.

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