Comic Books and Graphic Novels in their Generic Context. Towards a Definition and Classification of Narrative Iconical Texts

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In current criticism on comic books and graphic novels there is a recurrent use of the terms 'comic' or 'comic book' to refer both to the language employed by these texts and to the different subgenres that use this language. Comic strips, comic books and graphic novels share the common characteristic of employing the same iconical language. Nevertheless, they are different texts that should each be placed in their own context in order to understand their generic specificities. Their contextualisation will help avoid the confusion produced by the indiscriminate use of the term 'comic'. This article aims to offer a proposal for the assessment and classification of the different types of texts that exist under the umbrella terms of 'comics' and 'comic books', with a view to placing them within what can be called the 'iconical discourse community'.

Keywords: iconical language; iconical discourse community; comic book; graphic novel; comic strip; illustrated novel

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Comic books y novelas gráficas en su contexto genérico. Hacia una definición y clasificación de los textos icónico narrativos

En la crítica actual de cómics y novelas gráficas hay un uso constante de los términos 'comic' y 'comic book' para referirse indistintamente tanto al lenguaje empleado por estos textos como a los diferentes subgéneros que emplean este lenguaje. Las tiras cómicas, los cómics y las novelas gráficas comparten la característica común de emplear el mismo lenguaje icónico. Sin embargo, son tipos de texto diferentes que deben ser ubicados en su propio contexto para poder comprender sus especificidades genéricas. Esta contextualización ayudará a los críticos a evitar la confusión producida por el uso indiscriminado del término 'cómic'. El objetivo de este artículo es ofrecer una propuesta terminológica para la consideración y clasificación de los diferentes tipos de textos que existen actualmente bajo los términos 'comic' y 'comic book', con el propósito de ubicarlos dentro de lo que se puede llamar la 'comunidad de discurso icónico'.

Palabras clave: lenguaje icónico; comunidad de discurso icónico; cómic; novela gráfica; tira cómica; novela ilustrada

In 1972, Gérard Genette introduced his book, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, with the following words: "We currently use the word *narrative* without paying attention to . . . its ambiguity, and some of the difficulties of narratology are perhaps due to this confusion" (1980: 25, emphasis in original).[1] When approaching the world of comic books and graphic novels, critics seem to be labouring within exactly the same confusion. In the state of current Comics Studies, there seems to be a constant use of the terms 'comic' and 'comic book' to refer both to the language employed by comic books and to the different subgenres that use this language. Labelling everything as 'comics', as done, for example, by Scott McCloud (1994), David Carrier (2000), Miguel Ángel Muro Munilla (2004), or Thierry Groensteen (2007), may inevitably lead to terminological confusion similar to that pointed out by Genette. In fact, the analysis of iconical texts seems to be hampered from the outset as the terminology that elucidates their classification does not offer a plain distinction between their language and the different types of texts.

Further in the critical literature, we can find many examples of authors, such as Ana Merino (2003), Jesús Jiménez Varea (2006), or Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (2009), who indistinctly label comic strips, comic books or graphic novels as 'comics', thus terminologically including them all within the same subgenre of comic books, regardless of their intrinsic differences. In their analyses, three different meanings are given to the same term: 'comics' may refer to the language, the medium and the subgenre of the comic book. Heer and Worcester acknowledge the ambiguity of the term, although they perpetuate it in *A Comics Studies Reader*. As they affirm in the opening pages of the book, "The term 'comics' is itself filled with ambiguity . . . For our purposes, the term most often refers to comic strips, comic books, manga, and graphic novels, but also encompasses gag cartoons, editorial cartoons, and *New Yorker*-style cartoons" (2009: xiii). The reader of critical theory may become lost in the difficulty of trying to ascertain the meaning of the same word in various different sentences.

When a literary critic approaches the analysis of a novel, the text scrutinised is not labelled as a piece of 'poetry', since a novel and a poem are obviously different types of texts, although they both might employ the written word on paper. When analysing a comic book, it would be helpful, if not necessary, to distinguish between the language employed (iconical language), the discourse community that has created the text (the iconical discourse community, following John Swales' terminology, 1991), and the type of text as text (in this case, a comic book, in contrast to other narrative iconical subgenres, such as comic strips or graphic novels). This distinction between iconical language, iconical discourse community, and narrative or non-narrative iconical texts will help situate comic books and graphic novels in their own generic context. The aim of this article is, therefore, to introduce the concept of iconical discourse community for

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the analysis of comic books, graphic novels and other related narrative and non-narrative iconical subgenres. With this purpose, I will firstly highlight certain problems affecting the terminology employed to describe the language of comics. I will consider the various proposals for the analysis of the language of comic books that have appeared to date. Then, I will provide a definition of the iconical discourse community, together with a classification of non-narrative and narrative iconical subgenres, where comic books and graphic novels belong. This article is aimed at gaining insight into the world of these texts in order to avoid the problematic confusion produced by the indiscriminate use of the term 'comics'.

1. Considering linguistic terminology

With regard to the question of linguistic terminology, the major drawback comes primarily from a general lack of agreement among critics. In the critical literature we can find at least five different ways of labelling the comic-book subgenre, depending on the various authors involved in the field. Consequently, even though they are writing about the same subject and the same level of analysis of works and genres, critical intercommunication is hampered by the fact that they do not share the same critical language.

a) Scott McCloud and comics as language

One way of labelling comic books is by using the term 'comics' in an all-inclusive sense. Scott McCloud (1994), David Carrier (2000), Mario Saraceni (2003), Douglas Wolk (2007), Thierry Groensteen (2007), or Mike Chiin and Chris McLoughlin (2007), among many others, employ this term to refer not so much to the comic-book subgenre, as to the language used by iconical texts, regardless of whether they are graphic novels, comic strips, single-panel cartoons, or comic books. The basic premise behind this inclusiveness is that all such books have a common language which is not shared by any other type of text. Otherwise we would label newspaper advertisements or book covers as comic books, as all of them employ words and images to create a certain type of text. This seems to be the reason why Scott McCloud considers the Bayeux tapestry and Egyptian paintings as ancient comic books (1994: 12-15). McCloud focuses on the use of iconical language to create a narrative text but, as he employs the terms 'comic book' and 'comics' to refer to this language, he also suggests that medieval tapestries and Egyptian paintings are types of comic books. Obviously, these tapestries and paintings are not types of comics. McCloud's use of the term 'comics' to refer to the common language shared by these texts creates an ambiguity of meaning that misleads to the belief that the Bayeaux tapestry should be considered a comic book.

This ambiguity becomes apparent when we consider those examples of primitive comic books offered by McCloud. We cannot distinguish the concepts of language and genre when we label both as 'comics'. I would agree with McCloud on the fact that Egyptian paintings employ the same language as comic books, and present a narrative structure based on a juxtaposition of different iconical representations. However, sharing the same

language does not necessarily mean being the same type of text (otherwise a narrative poem and a novel written in poetic prose would be considered the same type of text). For this reason, I propose the use of the term 'iconical language' to refer to the language which employs icons in order to deliver a message, and the terms 'comics' and 'comic books' to refer to a specific narrative iconical subgenre.

Thierry Groensteen, in his book *The System of Comics*, also considers 'comics' a language and aims at analysing this language "not as a historical, sociological, or economic phenomena, which it is also, but as an original ensemble of productive mechanisms of meaning" (2007: 2). Later on, in his "systematic description of the physical essence of comics" (2007: 24), he affirms nevertheless that "comics is a genre" (2007: 10). Although Groensteen's work offers many useful tools for the analysis of such texts, this author too cannot avoid the overriding ambiguity of such a taxonomy. For Groensteen, comics are a language, a genre and also a 'system' (2007: 159), a notion stemming from the semiotic perspective he employs in his analysis.

Douglas Wolk, similarly, affirms that "comics are not a genre; they're a medium" (2007: 11), pointing to the origin of the terminological ambiguity in this precise distinction. With this statement, Wolk's aim is to endorse Scott McCloud's contention that we must learn "to separate the form of comics from its often inconsistent contents" (1994: 199). Comics scholars, then, seek to establish clear differences between the language that the medium employs and the types of texts that are created by means of that language. This is what Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith also convey when they affirm, "The search for a definition [of a comic book] must begin with disentangling the comic book medium from the semantic confusion of the term 'comics'. First of all, there is no distinct medium known as comics. 'Comics' is a useful general term for designating the phenomenon of juxtaposing images in a sequence" (2009: 3, emphasis in the original). As can be gathered, Duncan and Smith consider comic books a medium, not a genre, whereas the term 'comics' refers to the juxtaposition of images in a sequence and, therefore, it may also refer to cinema and many other types of texts. In *The Power of Comics* (2009), Duncan and Smith employ 'comic book' as an umbrella term to include every iconical text.

Neither Wolk's nor Duncan and Smith's use of the terms 'comics' and 'comic book' separate form from content, since they employ the same term to refer both to the iconical (text-and-image) language and to the comic-book and graphic-novel subgenres, thus leading to ambiguous statements such as, "Even though all graphic novels are comic books, not all comic books are graphic novels" (Chiin and McLoughlin 2007: 15). The reader is left to wonder whether the authors are talking about genres, subgenres, language, or everything at once. The first part of this statement clearly refers to the language employed by both subgenres, and might be rephrased as 'even though comic books and graphic novels use the same iconical language'. The second part of the statement refers to the generic distinction between different types of texts. Thus, saying that "not all comic books are graphic novels" is establishing a generic difference between types of text that employ

the same language. Hence, using the same term for the medium, the language and the texts creates a confusion which prevents critics from reaching certain insights and forces us to look beyond it to the elaboration of adequate critical tools.

b) Will Eisner, comic books and the sequential nature of art

Another terminological proposal comes from one of the most important figures in the history of these genres. Will Eisner, in *Comics and Sequential Art*, published in 1985, proposes the term 'sequential art' to refer to narrative iconical texts. In the chapter 'Writing and Sequential Art' (2001: 122), Eisner coins this phrase to express the system of creating a narrative with words and images by opposition to the written text of, say, a novel. The author employs the term *sequential* as used in other visual media, such as cinema, thus establishing the sequence as the central structuring element of the visual narratives.

'Sequential art' has been a successful label for these texts, apparently for two related reasons. On the one hand, it connects the world of comic books with the sequential narratives of the cinema, thus profiting from the huge popularity that the latter has achieved in recent years. On the other hand, the label relates the term 'art' to a field that has been usually considered a peripheral manifestation of a certain 'subculture' for children (Sabin 2001: 157). Thus, terminologically, 'sequential art' highlights the urge, in the cultural arena, for comic books to be considered on equal terms with those artistic expressions usually labelled as 'high art'.

Nonetheless, this phrase labels as art the sum total of these texts, but does not make specific reference to the iconic nature of the texts themselves. Therefore, the term 'art', as employed here, could also be used to refer to any other type of art presented in the form of a sequence: it could be applied to written texts, including the novel, whose written words are read sequentially.

c) Graphic language

Trying to use a term closer to the iconic nature of comic books and graphic novels, other critics prefer labels which emphasise the visual aspect of their language. Rocco Versaci, for instance, claims that he reads 'graphic language', understanding 'graphic' as in 'illustrated' (2007: 1). In this way, he employs the term 'graphic' to refer to the iconical nature of the language employed by comic books and graphic novels. The image is thus different from the written word in the category of 'graphicality', if we oppose the language of a comic book to the language of a novel. However, although the image as drawn on the page of a comic book certainly has a graphic nature, so too does the written word on the page of a novel (one only has to open *Tristram Shandy*, or one of Samuel Beckett's late novels to realise this). Indeed, the 'graphicality' of words and images is a common, not a distinguishing element: both have a graphic substance, and this common feature integrates, in the case of iconical texts, both visual and written elements within the same category of iconical language. The term 'graphic language' is not without ambiguity.

d) Literatures of the image and verbal-iconical genres

Various Spanish critics have coined other terminological formulas for discussing the relationship between words and images in these genres. Román Gubern, for instance, talks about 'literatures of the image' (*literaturas de la imagen*, 1973: 17), and labels the comic book a 'narrative in images' (*narrativa en imágenes*, 47). Still, although this phrase is applicable to comic books and graphic novels, it can also be applied to cinema, in so far as both are narratives composed of images. As stated previously, the Bayeux tapestry is also a narrative in images, but it is difficult to think of it as an example of a comic book. Sharing the same language and being a narrative does not make any type of text into a comic book.

Nevertheless, Gubern, as well as other critics, employs the phrase 'verbal-iconical' genres (*géneros verbo-icónicos* and *códigos verbo-icónicos*) to refer to the generic family to which comic books and graphic novels belong. With this phrase, critics like Alfonso Lindo (1975), Antonio Altarriba (1984), Miguel Ángel Muro Munilla (2004), and even myself in an earlier study (Romero-Jódar 2006), highlight the existence, in these text types, of two different languages, to wit, the 'written language' (*lenguaje verbal*, Gubern 1973: 55) and the 'iconical language' (*lenguaje icónico*, Gubern 1973: 55). The label suggests that the written words in caption boxes and word balloons interact and intertwine with the iconic images in the panels, and vice versa.

However, according to this perception of verbal-iconical genres, written words and images remain separate in two different language types. Strictly speaking, what the term implies is that there is both a verbal and an iconic aspect, which may occasionally interact with each other, while still belonging to different areas. As Douglas Wolk states, drawn images and written words are "vastly different things, they work in different ways, and comics require them to be jammed together constantly" (2007: 126). The use of this terminology implicitly foregrounds a tension between two different semiotic systems contained in a hybrid genre, that is, a genre that does not have a language of its own, but has to borrow strategies from other media in order to convey its meaning.

Additionally, critics making reference to the dichotomy between verbal and iconical languages seem to forget an important aspect of the written text. Will Eisner has highlighted the fact that "text reads as an image" (2001: 10), and further noted that "lettering, treated graphically and in service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery" (10). This is one of the key elements of these texts: words, as graphic representations, or as pure signifiers (in Saussure's conception of the term), have an iconic component that makes the reader perceive them as images. Hence, the verbal aspect as stated by critics in the previous section stops being verbal in the sense attributed to written words, and becomes instead part of the iconical language.

e) Narrative iconical subgenres

It is my contention that, in order to place comic strips, comic books and graphic novels in their generic context, we should employ the phrase 'narrative iconical subgenres'. These three types of texts are narratives which make use of iconical language in order to deliver

a story. Nevertheless, many other types of texts, which are not necessarily narrative, also employ this kind of iconical language, comprising both written and iconic elements. To give a clarifying example, the visual, iconic side of the written text is also employed by the discourse of advertising, where lettering and written text function as images to support the message they try to convey. This is what Vázquez and Aldea refer to as the 'semantisation of lettering' (*semantización de las grafías* 1991: 138). Words, understood as graphic images with a visual quality, can be filled with paralinguistic meanings which go beyond the linguistic sign. Thus, a word such as 'revenge', depicted in capitals, with a certain broken font, in red and a big font size, does not only convey the literal meaning of 'revenge', but also includes the speaker's attitude: anger, passion, and shouting; that is, certain paralinguistic elements which remain outside a linguistic sign (Cook 1996: 64).

2. The iconical discourse community

A connection is thus established between the worlds of graphic novels and advertising, in that they share a common iconical language. Nevertheless, they remain different types of texts that should be placed in their respective position inside their discourse community. This takes us to the second part of this article: the assessment of the iconical discourse community, and the classification of the non-narrative and narrative iconical subgenres. To do so, it will be helpful to approach this subject from its very beginning, from the concepts of iconical language and genre, in order to define the concept of iconical discourse community, in the hope that this will help differentiate between non-narrative and narrative iconical subgenres.

As previously stated, iconical language is that which employs icons in order to deliver a message. According to Peirce, "an icon is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own" (Buchler 1955: 102); that is, "it represents its object mainly by its similarity" (105). There is a physical resemblance between the icon and the object it represents (Vázquez 1991: 64; Cook 1996: 74). Nevertheless, in the process of representation of the real object by means of an icon, there is always an operation of modelling of the sensory reality (Villafañe 1996: 25). Thus, obvious as this may seem, it is not reality itself that is being represented by the icon, but rather a modelling of that reality through the perception of the artist-speaker.

When considering the nature of language, Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out that "contrary to all appearances, language never exists apart from the social fact, for it is a semiological phenomenon. Its social nature is one of its inner characteristics. Its complete definition confronts us with two inseparable entities" (1964: 77). These are, on the one hand, language itself and, on the other, its community of speakers. When considering iconical language, we also have to keep in mind its community of speakers, or, in other words, the community of those who use iconical language to communicate.

Leonard Bloomfield, in his book *Language* (1933), defines this community of speakers in the following terms: "A group of people who use the same system of speech-signals is a

speech-community" (1979: 29). As he further explains, "a speech-community is a group of people who interact by means of speech" (1979: 42). The concept of speech-community, as Dell Hymes points out, is highly significant, as it "postulates the unit of description as a social, rather than linguistic, entity" (1974: 47). Thus, language contains an important social component that allows human beings to interact with one another. Nevertheless, the term 'speech-community' is apparently too narrow, as the word 'speech' seems to refer only to spoken language (the production of sound by means of spoken words) and the concept, therefore, cannot be applied to the languages of written words or iconical representations. Drawing on this notion, John Swales proposed the term 'discourse community' to comprise social groups which employ other types of languages, different from speech, whether spoken, written, iconical, etc. A discourse community therefore comprises the community of people who employ the same language in order to establish a communicative event. But, following Bloomfield, Swales drew a distinction between 'speech-community' and 'discourse community'. In his own words, "a speech-community typically inherits its membership by birth, accident or adoption; a discourse community recruits its members by persuasion, training or relevant qualification. . . . An archetypal discourse community tends to be a *Specific Interest Group*" (1991: 24, emphasis in the original). According to Swales' reading of Bloomfield's theories then, it takes no real effort to enter a speech-community, except for that of understanding the community where one grows up or finds oneself. By contrast, entrance to a discourse community implies an effort of training or relevant qualification on the part of the member and some process of selection or choice or obligation. Adherence to a discourse community would demand training, instead of natural development: in other words, a discourse community recruits its members. They must be persuaded to enter the community, and are conscious of the effort involved. Such would be the case of learning how to read and write the language of one's speech-community, of learning a second language, or learning how to read and draw images or create icons.

Applying these concepts to the world of comic books and graphic novels, it could be stated that these texts belong to a specific discourse community which employs iconical language with the purpose of delivering messages. The iconical discourse community, then, produces and decodes all types of texts which use images to establish a communicative event.

3. Iconical Genres

Having introduced the idea of the iconical discourse community, we can now move on to the analysis of genres and generic specifications. John Swales points out that "genres are the properties of discourse communities; that is to say, genres belong to discourse communities" (1991: 9). Any communicative event based on iconical language is included and classified into the genres belonging to the iconical discourse community. A bas-relief in the Greek Acropolis, for instance, is the product of this community (in its specific historical context). And so is an altarpiece in a church, depicting stories from the Bible

or the life of Christ. These icons carved in stone or painted on the walls are not only aesthetic works, they are narratives communicating stories to those who have the "relevant qualification" (1991: 24) to decode and interpret them.[2]

The physical medium of the two examples above are wood and stone. In order to narrow the scope to the genres directly related to comic books and graphic novels, I will centre on those iconical texts whose medium is paper, which includes disparate genres, such as comic books, comic strips, graphic novels, illustrated novels, single-panel cartoons, film posters, book and CD covers, and advertisements, among many others. All of them share the common characteristic of being texts that convey messages by means of a type of language combining written words and images, and brings to the fore the iconic potential of both.

Although there are critics like Román Gubern (1973: 55) who oppose iconic and written language as completely different elements in these genres, many others integrate the two into the single category of iconic meaning. In this sense, Guy Cook points out that "in communication, language always has physical substance of some kind. . . . In writing, the same is true of page and letter sizes, fonts and handwriting styles. [They] also carry meaning. . . . They are examples of paralanguage" (1996: 71). Although this critic was analysing the discourse of advertising, this statement can also be applied to comic strips, comic books and graphic novels. As Mario Saraceni notes, "besides being a verbal entity, a word on paper is also a visual entity" (2003: 14), in keeping with the ideas of Eisner previously endorsed in this paper. Hence, the written word in these genres is seen as consisting of a linguistic sign and paralinguistic elements, both working at the same time but "counted as one message" (Barthes 1998: 71).

4. Non-narrative and narrative iconical subgenres

A characteristic feature of the iconical discourse community is its ability to create narrative texts by means of the juxtaposition of icons. Thus, it can produce either descriptive or narrative texts, depending on the structure of images included. The concept of 'narrative' as employed here refers to the creation of a narrative text by means of juxtaposed images that create a progression of action in an unfolding of time.

In the examples of iconical texts given earlier, there is a plain difference between some of them. Although graphic novels and advertisements share a common language and are thus addressed to and produced by the iconical discourse community, they are obviously different in one important aspect. An advertisement in a newspaper, for instance, delivers a message to the reader by means of linguistic elements and a single image, which is not

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[2] Note that, in their vast majority, paintings in medieval churches were aimed at people who could not read and write. That is, the viewers were not part of the discourse community of written language, but were already acquainted with the basics for decoding the iconology of medieval religious paintings. Therefore, these viewers were part of the iconical discourse community, even though they were not trained in the creation of images, but only in their decoding and interpretation.

articulated as part of a sequence. The message comes as a shot from the iconic elements, and can be translated into words as a single, simple sentence. By contrast, a graphic novel, while also delivering a message, in this case in the form of a narrative text, does it not with a single image, but by means of a sequence of juxtaposed panels. Therefore, the narrative of a graphic novel cannot be translated into words as a single sentence, but only by means of more complex linguistic structures.

The iconical genres on paper include both those subgenres which do not present a narrative and those which do. In other words, a distinction between non-narrative iconical subgenres and narrative iconical subgenres can be made. The narrative iconical subgenres present a sequential structure which relates panels, following a relationship of juxtaposition (McCloud 1994: 9). On the other hand, in the non-narrative iconical subgenres there is no sequential structure, as there is no relationship between different images or panels: the reader is offered one single icon, which may be composed of images and words, with their visual quality, but which does not relate sequentially to any other image.

To give a simple example similar to that offered by Scott McCloud (2006: 13): we have the drawing of a man with a hat, without any background or additional information (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Single iconic image. Andrés Romero-Jódar 2009, graphite on paper.

In this case, we are offered a single iconic image which may be translated into words by a noun phrase: *A man with a hat*. We may add possible adjectives to this phrase, such as: *An old man with a hat*; or a relative clause: *An old man with a hat, who is dressed in elegant clothing*. Nevertheless, as soon as we limit the space of the drawing to a panel (or vignette, or frame), and we add the drawing of the ground on which he is standing, the dark-red bricks of the building at his back, and a bus stop on his right, the reader is offered a non-narrative iconical text (Figure 2).
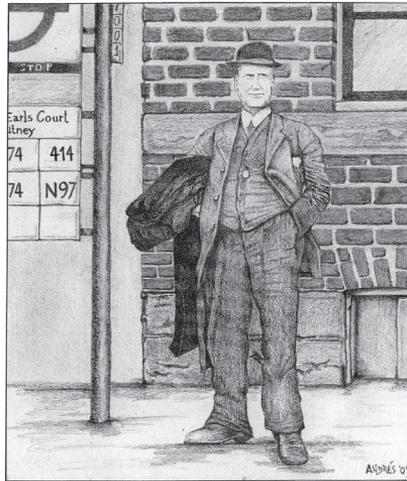
Figure 2. Non-narrative iconical text. Andrés Romero-Jódar 2009, graphite on paper.

The reader can translate this picture into words as a single sentence which contains the previous noun phrase: *An old man with a hat, who is dressed in elegant clothing, is waiting for the bus.*

As soon as we add other panels, so that they may relate to each other in a juxtaposed sequence, the reader is offered a narrative iconical text (Figure 3).
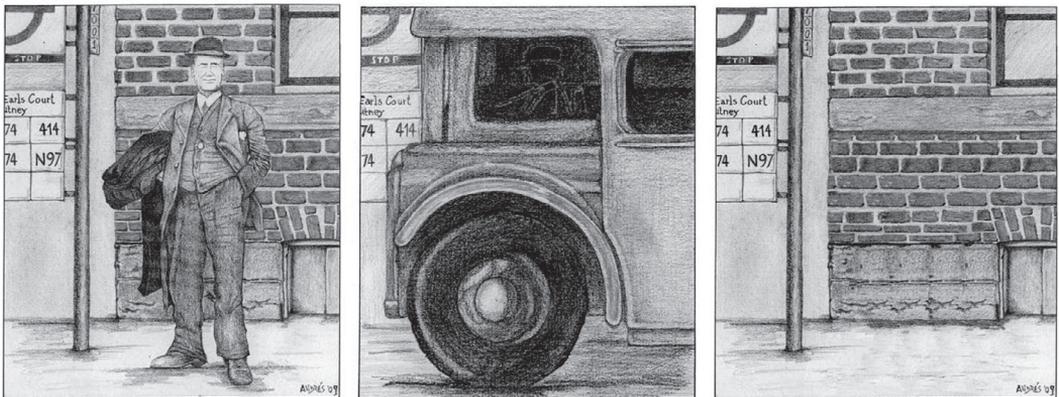

Figure 3. Narrative iconical text. Andrés Romero-Jódar 2009, graphite on paper.

Thus, we add a second panel, with the same size of the first, depicting the drawing of a bus standing in front of the stop. And then, we add a third panel showing the dark-red building bricks and the bus stop, but the "old man with a hat" is nowhere to be found. The reader will consider these three images as a sequence of events, related by a juxtaposition of panels, and will translate them into words as a narrative structure of juxtaposed

sentences: *An old man with a hat, who is dressed in elegant clothing, is waiting for the bus* (Panel 1). *The bus reaches the stop* (Panel 2). *The man jumps into the bus and leaves* (Panel 3). In this narrative structure, the time sequence is important for the understanding of the message. The juxtaposition of the single sentences may be understood by the reader as relationships of additive coordination (*and... and... and*), or subordination (*when, as, later*, etc.), in the present tense (*A man is waiting for the bus*), or in the past (*A man was waiting for the bus*). The different possibilities may be given by the panels themselves, by means of caption boxes holding that information. Nevertheless, the key idea to grasp from this third case is the existence of a narrative structure through the juxtaposition of different panels.

5. Non-narrative iconical subgenres

Some characteristics of non-narrative and narrative iconical subgenres can be highlighted. In non-narrative iconical subgenres, there is no sequential structuring between images, and thus they can be translated into verbal language as single sentences. Instead of narrating, they describe the situation portrayed in the image. And, when translated into words, they rely on a present tense that describes the single temporality of the situation.

This group of texts on paper includes advertisements (from newspapers, magazines, leaflets, and so on); front and back covers of books, CDs, DVDs, magazines, etc.; film posters and other types of bills; and also single-panel cartoons and illustrated novels. The last two require further explanation. Although usually related to narrative iconical subgenres, such as the comic book or the comic strip, the single-panel cartoon and the illustrated novel do not present a sequential structure of panels to deliver a message and to create a narrative. They are essentially descriptive in their iconic nature. The single-panel cartoon, usually found as entertainment in newspapers, does not offer a sequential narrative, but tends to present single caricatures of well-known public characters or situations. There is neither time sequencing nor narration of different events by means of sequentially-arranged panels. Its function is mostly descriptive, with a parodic or censoring tone for the amusement of the reader. To give a visual example, we can consider the following single-panel cartoon (Figure 4).

As can be seen in this iconical text, the reader is offered a visual description of a situation by means of a single picture. There is no sequence of images and, therefore, no visual narration of events.

Similarly, the illustrated novel belongs to a non-narrative iconical subgenre. In an earlier work, I offered a formal definition of this type of text, highlighting the complex relationship that is established between the written text of the novel and the illustrations that complement and translate it into images. As I stated in that essay, the verbal aspect of an illustrated novel can be seen as "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
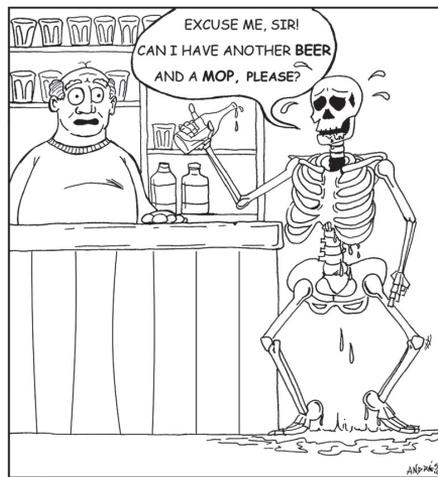
Figure 4. Single-panel cartoon. Andrés Romero-Jódar 2009, ink on paper.

(iconical aspect). And it is a *frame*, for the images are embedded inside that closed text" (emphasis in the original, Romero-Jódar 2006: 97). When considering the iconical language employed in illustrated novels, the drawings are not sequentially arranged, and do not have a relationship of juxtaposition to each other. Obviously, they are directly related to the written text of the novel, but they do not create a narrative as an iconical text would do. Consequently, there are different ways of approaching and labelling an illustrated novel generically: if we focus on the relationship between written text and images, we might affirm that the illustrated novel is a verbal-iconical production. If, however, we centre on the relationship established between images, whether they follow a sequential structure or not, the illustrated novel could be seen as a non-narrative iconical subgenre.

To clarify this aspect, we can experiment with an example of a classic illustrated novel. Below, I have arranged John Tenniel's first four illustrations for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865, Figure 5) as a sequence.

As can be seen, there is no narrative relationship between the images. The sequential arrangement of these illustrations does not offer a coherent progression of events in an unfolding of time. These images achieve their complete meaning in the illustrated novel depending upon the closed written text, not by means of their juxtaposition. Therefore, we can affirm that the illustrated novel, from the perspective of the iconical discourse community, is a non-narrative iconical subgenre.

6. Narrative iconical subgenres

In the category of narrative iconical subgenres, we encounter the central problems for the analysis of comic strips, comic books and graphic novels. These texts present a complex
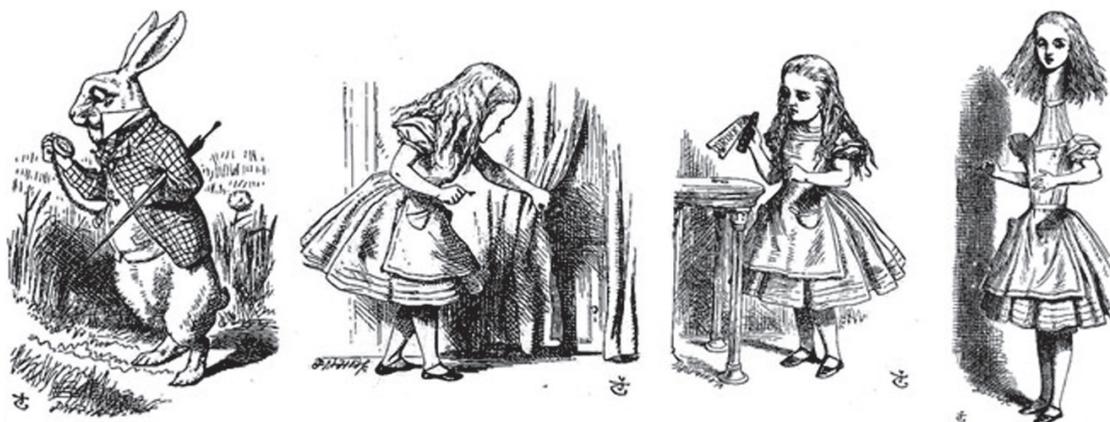
Figure 5. First four illustrations for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.
Sir John Tenniel, wood engravings (1866: 1, 8, 10, 15).

structure based on a juxtaposition of panels. This relationship can be understood either as coordination or subordination of clauses, depending on the deictic elements of time and space that may or may not appear in the picture. These subgenres are narrative, as they offer a sequence of events unfolding in a progression of time.

Working on the definition of comic strips, I contended in a previous essay that, formally, the comic strip is "made up by . . . several coordinated pictures . . ., usually humorous in tone, and based on a slapstick effect or sudden denouement, producing a final laughter/joke" (2006: 99). As explained before, the term 'coordinated', employed in this quotation, should be understood as 'juxtaposed', because the relationship established between pictures may be either coordinative or subordinative. Excellent examples of these texts can be found in the comic-strip series *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson (1985-1995), *Peanuts* by Charles Schultz (1950-2000), or *Garfield* by Jim Davis (1978-2013).

The main difficulties of definitions come from the problematic issue of how to define the comic-book subgenre. We can define comic books in comparison to comic strips, as both are serialised productions of periodical appearance which employ iconical language to create a narrative. There are primarily two distinguishing features. One is formal: the comic strip is shorter than the comic book. The first usually being no more than one page, whereas the comic book commonly is much longer (for instance, the American comic book set the standard of twenty four pages). And the other difference is generic: whereas the comic strip can be said to be always humorous in tone, the comic book is not necessarily a comical book. In other words, comic books such as Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-2000), or Neil Gaiman and Andy Kubert's *1602* (2004), are adventure narratives which do not aim at being comical.

The third and final narrative iconical subgenre to be presented in this article is the graphic novel. It is commonly agreed that the first graphic novel appeared in 1978 with *A*

Contract with God by Will Eisner.[3] As Paul Gravett explains, American publisher Richard Kyle coined the term 'graphic novel' around 1964 (2005: 8), and Eisner employed it to establish a distinction between this work and the previous comic-book production. Nevertheless, the term 'graphic novel', or at least its Spanish counterpart *novela gráfica*, was already present in the world of iconical narratives since the early 1960s. *La Tumba de Hierro*, by Eugenio Sotillos and José María Sánchez Boix, published by Ediciones Toray, saw the light in 1961 as the first issue of the *Hazañas Bélicas* graphic-novel series —a series that would last for ten years, releasing two hundred and fifty two issues. Six years later, in 1967, the term was already firmly established in the Spanish readership when Ediciones Toray published a series of fifteen graphic novels for adults (*novelas gráficas para adultos*) starting with Jorge Nabau's *Miedo en la noche* and finishing with Joaquín M. Piles and Antonio Borrell's *Los monstruos del mar*.

When attempting to define the graphic novel, critics do not even agree on its existence. For instance, Douglas Wolk affirms that there is no difference between comic books and graphic novels, and he claims that the opposition between them is the same as "the difference between movies, films and cinema" (2007: 61). In a similar way, Mario Saraceni claims that the term graphic novel "has been adopted mainly for commercial reasons. In fact, the distinction between comic book and graphic novels is nothing more than a matter of labels, and has barely anything to do with content or with any other feature" (2004: 4).

On the other hand, there are authors who support the term for the new subgenre but do not offer enough distinguishing features to differentiate graphic novels from comic books or comic strips. Thus, Aviva Rothschild passionately affirms that "graphic novels use words and pictures in ways that transcend ordinary art and text, and their creators are more than writers and artists" (1995: xiv). However, the only distinguishing aspect that she uses to define graphic novels is that they are book-length comics. Stephen Weiner points out that graphic novels "have a beginning, middle, and end between two covers and attempt to have the same effect as serious prose novels —in other words, the characters grow, change, and reach a point of resolution" (2005: vii). In both cases, the authors might be describing comic books, as they also have a beginning, middle and end between two covers, and their length may vary from just a few to any larger number of pages.

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[3] Manuel Barrero offers an in-depth discussion on the origin and use of the term 'graphic novel', and the establishment of Eisner's work as the first of this subgenre. As he explains, "La obra de Eisner ha sido elegida como la piedra basal por razones que van más allá de la intencionalidad del autor. Este acuerdo, adoptado oficialmente en la convención de cómics de San Diego de 2003, valoraba fundamentalmente que: A, la obra era americana y no iba dirigida a los niños, B, la obra gozó de éxito entre público y crítica, al contrario que sus antecedentes, C, venía firmada por un símbolo del cómic norteamericano, y D, y no menos importante, servía a los intereses de quienes así lo consensuaron (DC/Warner, por ejemplo, acababa de reeditar la obra y tenía esperanzas en ciertas adaptaciones cinematográficas de historietas). La elección de Eisner como fundador de la novela gráfica era, claramente, la opción más útil desde la óptica editorial" (2008). I agree with Barrero in that there are graphic novels prior to *A Contract with God*. Despite the commercial purpose of the generic label, the phrase 'graphic novel' has been helpful in drawing attention to other ways of creating narratives with iconical language different from mainstream superhero comic books.

At this stage, we should bear in mind Tzvetan Todorov's warning that "a new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination" (2000: 197). The graphic novel is clearly a transformation of the comic book. However, although they share the same iconical language, comic books and graphic novels may be said to be essentially different in their use of narrative time. This fact allows graphic novels to explore and create more complex narrative structures.

The concept of narrative time and space is explained by Mikhail Bakhtin with the notion of the chronotope, which he defined as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (1988: 84). Bakhtin also affirmed that "it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time" (85). The Russian formalist established three different categories of ancient novels, according to the perception of time in the chronotope, to wit, the Greek romance, the adventure novel of everyday life, and the ancient biography and autobiography.

Starting from the first two categories, I established a generic distinction between the comic book and the graphic novel (Romero-Jódar 2006: 103-04). Basically, the comic book relies on the chronotope of the Greek romance, in which, according to Bakhtin, the character "keeps on being the same person [after his or her adventures] and emerges … with his identity absolutely unchanged" (1988: 105). That is, characters in comic books are not affected by the passing of time, and their identities remain static. To give a clarifying example, Jerry Siegel and Joel Shuster's Superman has never changed his essential identity, even after seventy years of adventures and life-threatening experiences. And the same can be said of Albert Uderzo and René Goscinny's Asterix, Hergé's Tintin, or Superlópez, by Juan López Fernández "Jan", as well as of many other comic-book characters around the world.

By contrast, the graphic novel relies on the chronotope of the adventure novel of everyday life. According to Bakhtin, this kind of novel "depicts only the exceptional, utterly unusual moments of a man's life, moments that … shape the definitive image of the man, his essence, as well as the nature of his entire subsequent life" (1988: 116). Characters in graphic novels suffer the passing of time as it transforms their identity and behaviour, turning them into different beings from those that started the narrative. Thus, character-change and narrative-time progression are the two basic concepts that may be said to define graphic novels in contrast to comic books. This allows works like Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's *Signal to Noise* (1989), Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986), or Paul Hornschemeier's *Mother, Come Home* (2002-2003) to be considered graphic novels.

7. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, comic books and graphic novels belong in a vast group of texts which employ iconical language to deliver a message and produce a communicative event. In these texts, the iconicity of written language is foregrounded by underlying its graphic nature, so that words become icons that can be modelled in order to add paralinguistic elements to the text.

Comic books and graphic novels are narrative iconical subgenres, part of the iconical genres on paper, and are created in and by the discourse community that employs iconical language. I use this new terminology in order to avoid ambiguities of meaning, and to clearly state the focus of my analysis. With previous terms, such as 'graphic language', 'comics' as language, 'sequential art', or 'verbal-iconical genres', the object of analysis is, for one reason or another, not completely clear from the onset. I therefore propose the use of the phrase 'iconical language' to refer to the language of comics, and 'iconical discourse community' to refer to the community that produces and decodes these texts.

Further, within the iconical genres on paper, we may distinguish between those which do not present a sequential relationship between different panels (the non-narrative iconical subgenres), and those which rely on the syntactic juxtaposition of panels to create a narrative (the narrative iconical subgenres). Within the category of narrative iconical texts, we find the comic strip, the comic book and the graphic novel. The first two can be differentiated by means of their length and their tone, whereas the comic book and the graphic novel tend to differ in their use of narrative time and space.

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