

Reviews

Antonio BALLESTEROS, Claude DUÉE (eds).
Cuatro lecciones sobre el cómic.
 Cuenca: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2000.

The book edited by Ballesteros and Duée is a contribution to the study of comics both from a theoretical and from a practical point of view. It is divided in four chapters, the first one in French and the other three in Spanish.

Chapter one, by Pierre Janin, bears the title «La bande dessinée: est-elle un genre littéraire?» («Are comics a literary genre?»). Janin's starting point is his observation that for a long time the genre was regarded as a minor literary/artistic production by those who preferred other literary genres considered «nobler and older» (15). Surprisingly enough, Janin goes on to contend, «the victims of this situation were neither the comics themselves nor their readers, but those who tried to approach the phenomenon from an academic point of view» (15). The chapter is structured in clear-cut sections which make it easy to follow. First Janin tackles the question of definition, then he moves on to trace the origins of comics and cites Töpffer and Outcault as two standard names in the history of the genre. He then analyses the special relationship between image and text typical of comics and goes into detail about specific concepts such as «box», «comic strip» and «board», and their main features. Other elements such as «reading order» and «text» are also considered. Finally, Janin analyses the legal and eco-

nomical context in which comics are produced, paying special attention to the production in French. His conclusion is that the generic contours of comics are rather blurred and that it is difficult to anticipate the future of the genre, an issue which, according to him, concerns not only comics but all literary discourses.

Viviane Alary is the author of Chapter two, which bears the title: «La historieta en España: del presente al pasado». Alary places the birth of comics in Spain back in the eighteen seventies and mentions Spanish names such as Mecachis and Apeles Mestre but recalls that some scholars contend comic strips were born in the United States in 1896. Alary contends that the development of comics is to be observed along with the development of newspapers and mass culture. She takes a survey of the history of comics in Spain and analyses the influence and typology of key examples like the characters in *TBO*, *Chicos*, *Mis Chicas*, *Mortadelo y Filemón*, *El Coyote*, *El Capitán Trueno* and *Diego Valor*. She also contends that the power of censorship in France and Spain, and the fact that comics were considered worthless, led to a separation between comics for adults, for youngsters, for boys and for girls, which, in turn, led to the creation of a specific market modelled following official tastes.

According to Alary, comics occupy a strategic place between high-brow and low-brow art and between literature and painting, as the latest trends show and the new dialogue between exhibition rooms and artists demonstrates. Finally, she concludes that, like in other fields of art, Spanish comics are evolving along a dual line: one which focuses on sales and entertainment, and a more restricted one which focuses on quality. For Alary, the latter often produces personal, sophisticated works deeply involved with the social and artistic debate of our times and should be regarded as equivalent to a literature of resistance.

Chapter three, «La Construcción del superhéroe en el cómic americano. Visiones de una épica (post)moderna: los orígenes de Marvel», is by Antonio Ballesteros González. It is certainly the most personal and comprehensive in the book. Ballesteros confesses at the beginning that his text is a tribute to the heroes and authors that at one point in his teens helped shape his personality. Likewise, he insists that comics and cinema are a symbiosis of art and literature developed in the 20th century which seem to hide the remains of a dying genre: the epic narrative. Ballesteros contends that the 20th century undermined the traditional elements of epic narratives which, in order to survive, had to emigrate to other territories generally associated with cinema or the media. In this sense, Ballesteros insists that the attitude of some critics, obsessed with the idea of establishing a canon within the genre, has not been particularly helpful either.

Despite the fact that the golden age of the superhero were the nineteen sixties, Ballesteros contends that the roots of the phenomenon should be looked for back in the nineteen thirties among the thousands of pulp magazines sold at the time. Born in 1938, Superman stands out as the first real superhero,

whose life and deeds inspired many other stories and characters. The outbreak of WWII meant a change in the interests of publishers. The postwar period saw the growth of another (anti)hero: the detective. The Cold War period and the Witchhunt made comics authors turn their attention to science fiction and horror until Fredric Wartham's work *Seduction of the innocent* (1954) convinced American authorities that comics were exerting a negative influence on American youth, which in turn led to the creation of the Comic Code Authority. By the nineteen sixties Marvel Comics was already filled with stories starred by leading superheroes such as Captain America and the Avengers. Ballesteros then observes in detail some of the best known stars in this universe: Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, The Incredible Hulk, Thor, Dr. Strange, X-Men, Iron Man, Daredevil or the Silver Surfer, and concludes that superheroes have had a prominent role in twentieth century mythology.

The last chapter in the book, «Un paseo por el cómic francófono» is by Claude Duée. As the author explains at the beginning, it is an overall view of the history of comics in French which does not intend to delve into the sociological or semiologic depths of the genre. Duée maintains that comics in France and Belgium were not taken seriously and did not overcome the negative image they had until *Le Journal de Tintin* (1946) was published. However, censorship was maintained in France and Belgium well until the eighties, which in a way favoured the creation of stories with a more childish bias (i.e. *Asterix*). Duée closes her survey with a reference to the attitude towards the genre taken by the French authorities, certainly one of respect and protection.

Cuatro lecciones sobre el cómic has several advantages and one handicap. The book is illuminating, easy to read and

provides basic details about the comics tradition that those who are not familiar with the genre may find of interest. The book has many illustrations (black & white and colour) which help readers to recognise many of the characters dealt with throughout the text. Likewise, those who have been exposed to the genre as readers and/or scholars may discover a surprising wealth of detail. It cannot be said that this is a profound theoretical study of the genre (I suspect it was never meant to be) but it certainly shines out as a little jewel for those who, like me, have a tangential interest in the topic. Its only drawback is the

fact that one of the chapters is written in French. This is a serious handicap if the book is expected to reach readers from outside the area of Modern Languages. Considering that some of the authors are teaching in French universities (or are francophone), the translation of one chapter should not have been a problem. Other than this, the book is extremely attractive and deserves a place in libraries as a contribution to the study of a genre which characterised the 20th century.

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María José COPERÍAS (ed.)
Culture & Power V: Challenging discourses.
Valencia: Universitat de Valencia, 2000.

Cultural Studies is a wide-ranging discipline which brings together various areas of human knowledge within an extremely ample diameter of action. A priori disparate areas such as pragmatics, biology, anthropology, politics and literary theory, just to mention some, may converge in cultural studies in order to analyse human behaviour and its cultural manifestations. This confluence of the numerous subjects conforming cultural studies has its *raison d'être* in the attempt to understand what culture is, no matter how utopian the idea of achieving a universally agreed definition of this term may be.

Challenging discourses, fifth volume in the annual series *Culture & Power*, is a look into some of the most intriguing questions concerning the always misleading concept of culture. Among these are the difficulties to delimit this term socially, geographically, linguistically and even politically, the conflicts emerg-

ing due to cultural and ethnic differences – mainly based upon economics and class – gender, ideology and so on, and even the attempts at correcting popular misleading assumptions about the meaning of the term 'culture' itself. The volume is divided into three sections: *Challenges*, which puts some emphasis on education and class while paying attention to other subjects like ethnicity and different cultural modes, such as drug consumption; *Challenging Texts* where visual and auditory forms of communication, especially films and music, play a central role and *Challenging Identities*, which is centred upon the interrelation of different human groups while dealing with history and gender as well.

The need to redefine the meaning of 'culture' and some other taken-for-granted concepts such as progress, education and ethnicity is the basis of the first section of this collection. Exceptionally, the social standing of drugs as