

## Out of the Gutter: The Politics of Dissent in Visual Print Media in Spain from 1975 to the Present

Efforts to memorialise Spain's Transition and the ratification of the 1978 Constitution took centre stage in the fall of 2018, as a number of public and private institutions launched exhibitions looking back at four decades of democratic rule. Whereas state-governed spaces in both the Congress and Senate enacted commemorative gestures, signalling the history of democracy as seen through visual art from the late 1970s to the present,<sup>1</sup> cultural bodies such as Madrid's Museo Reina Sofia and Barcelona's Arxiu Municipal offered room for critique. Examining 'contraimágenes de la Transición' and 'la memòria d'uns anys decisius de mobilitzacions veïnals i laborals' respectively,<sup>2</sup> these institutions elucidated the complexities of commemoration by refusing to paper over the political and identitarian contradictions that underpinned the shift to a post-Francoist regime. "Out of the Gutter" posits a similar platform from which to reconsider the Transition in juxtaposition with the financial crisis of 2008, generating a dialogue between both historical intervals to open up a space to discuss the power of visual print media (VPM) and contest cultural frontiers during times of political and economic uncertainty. This dossier interrogates evolving discourses on the Transition, elucidating Spain's problematic democratic heritage and how visual artists have contested its legitimacy from 1975 to the present. Accordingly, the project seeks to draw further attention to visual materials from post-Francoist Spain, foregrounding their status as vehicles of dissensual expression and disruptive creativity against a backdrop of political tumult.

The question of memory subtends a number of debates engaged here, particularly given artists and activists' recent attempts to revisit and rewrite Spain's democratic past in the context of the financial crash of 2007-2008. Indeed, a number of the critical interventions in what follows query the ways in which the past is made present, or the ways in which memory functions as a form of social labour in contemporary Spain. While there is not sufficient space for examining this issue in the depth that it merits in the Introduction, a number of publications have recently examined the state of memory studies in contemporary Spain.<sup>3</sup> Understood here as a chain of 'spiralling interactions' between seemingly discrete historical intervals,<sup>4</sup> memory—and the labour it entails—helps elucidate the connections between history, artistic representation and political expression. Our efforts, therefore, to analyse the 'dynamic transfers' between the Transition and the financial crisis in each half of the dossier,<sup>5</sup> therefore, are illustrative of what

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<sup>1</sup> The Congress of Deputies hosted 'Constituciones (1812-1978)' and 'El poder del Arte', which was split into two separate exhibits, the second half of which was displayed at the Senate until March 2019.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/exposiciones/poeticas-democracia> (Accessed 10 March 2019); [https://www.barcelona.cat/infobarcelona/ca/quaranta-anys-dajuntaments-democraticos\\_779432.html](https://www.barcelona.cat/infobarcelona/ca/quaranta-anys-dajuntaments-democraticos_779432.html) (Accessed 3 March 2019)

<sup>3</sup> See Alison Ribeiro de Menezes' *Embodying Memory in Contemporary Spain* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), Antonio Míguez Macho's *The Genocidal Genealogy of Francoism: Violence, Memory and Impunity* (Eastbourne: Sussex, 2016), H. Rosi Song's *Lost in Transition: Constructing Memory in Contemporary Spain* (Liverpool: LUP, 2016), Secundino Serrano's *Las heridas de la memoria. República, guerra, exilio, maquis, Transición* (León: Eolas Ediciones, 2016). Ribeiro de Menezes and Stewart King's special issue of the *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* entitled 'The Future of Memory in Spain' (94.8, 2017), Joan Ramon Resina's *The Ghost in the Constitution: Historical Memory and Denial in Spanish Society* (Liverpool: LUP, 2017) and Juan Miguel Baquero's *El país de la desmemoria: del genocidio franquista al silencio interminable* (Barcelona: Roca Editorial, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: SUP, 2009), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 11.

Michael Rothberg has described as ‘multidirectional memory’,<sup>6</sup> or as a confrontation between conflicting histories in the public sphere.

Centring on two of the most politically charged moments in Spain’s recent history, “Out of the Gutter” not only examines the ways in which narratives of consensus surrounding the Transition have continued to unravel in the context of the financial crash, it strives to show how—for Spaniards living through the crisis years—the Transition has become ‘a synecdoche’ for a society torn between the present and the past.<sup>7</sup> Our aim is to show how the crisis expanded upon an already ‘malleable discursive space’ while taking advantage of new forms of collective articulation emphasised by the 15M Movement.<sup>8</sup> While some of the essays in the collection point to moments that go beyond the last 40 years—making reference to the Spanish Civil War, World War II and early Francoism—this project focuses on the fraught relationship between the Transition and the crisis, thinking through memory as a tool for the ‘ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing’ taking place throughout the entirety of the democratic period.<sup>9</sup>

As part of this reframing – as this special issue of the *Bulletin of Spanish Visual Studies* seeks to underscore – there is a pressing need for critical approaches that harness the nature and function of the cultural works produced and consumed in Spain, as well as their direct imbrication with the political developments of their time. To that end, the issue’s focal lens is one which we have come to label ‘Visual Print Media’ – a capacious term comprising comics, *tebeos*, cartoons, zines and graphic novels – which represents a holistic approach to form, social impact, and the creative and collective practices involved in production. Previously dismissed as ephemeral, puerile and/or low-brow, in recent times, these products of popular culture have themselves undergone significant critical revision. The past decades have seen several of VPM’s subgenres gain traction in their acceptance – even elevation – as legitimate sources for political and cultural intervention in their own right. Indeed, with reference to comics, Hillary Chute has highlighted the ‘immediacy and diagrammatic ability to display otherwise hard-to-express realities and sensations’.<sup>10</sup> This project, then, attends to the inherent aesthetic tug-of-war between image and text across VPM that allows it to act as an ideal frame for a figurative rendering of social, cultural and political tensions.

In his pioneering work, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud explores the power of the liminal space between panels – known in the trade as the ‘gutter’. It is in this limbo, he goes on to say, that the human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a congruent whole.<sup>11</sup> The subsequent act of ‘closure’ allows us to unite moments fractured in both time and space in order to move through an imagined continuum of a stable reality.<sup>12</sup> VPM scholars are frequently drawn to the gutter, intent on grappling with the way in which its entire presence stems from an inherent absence. Hillary Chute points to the gutter’s ‘present blankness’ as a constant source of tension between respective frames.<sup>13</sup> This tension can be

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<sup>6</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Kostis Kornetis, ‘Is There a Future in This Past? Analyzing 15M’s Intricate Relation to the *Transición*.’ *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 15.1-2 (2014): 83-98, p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Hillary Chute, *Why Comics?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), p. 241.

<sup>11</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Closure’ is one of the *Gestalt* Visual Organisation Principles as described by Leslie Stroebel, Todd Hollis and Richard Zakia in *Visual Concepts for Photographers* (New York: Focal Press, 1980), p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> Hillary Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2016), p. 35.

seen to undergird a dialogic exchange *between* frames that is open to presentational destabilisation in a way that standard text is not. Nick Sousanis develops this notion in *Unflattening* – itself presented as a visual narrative – which pushes against the ‘flatness’ of linear storytelling.<sup>14</sup> It is, therefore, not only the material in question that can be interpreted as a vehicle of cultural resistance, its very form requires readers to participate in the construction of space and time while considering a range of contrasting viewpoints. This contrast between perspectives, as Sousanis argues, yields a ‘kaleidoscopic’ perception of reality that invites readers to experience time more fluidly, as past, present and future commingle within a highly elastic textual space.<sup>15</sup> Comics, graphic novels and other forms of visual print media, therefore, allow us the opportunity to mix and match narrative threads and images. We can look back, skip ahead or review pages we have already read. In so doing, these texts grant readers access to a variety of temporal experiences via a unique set of frames within – and without of – which to spatialise time.

It is the imagined construction in time, both metaphorically and aesthetically, of the gutter space that this special issue proposes to explore, in order to interrogate the presence of a continuous cultural narrative between period(s) in question. Although separated by 26 years of significant socio-political change, collectively, these frames transcend that which exists between them, and thereby connects them, acting as a dialogue with an imagined and re-imagined future that contests at each juncture a pervasive and doggedly determined ideation of democracy. Thus, the articles that follow explore the work of visual artists, as well as the iconic publications where their work could be found, in pushing the boundaries through political dissidence during and after the Transition. In addition to bringing this key medium into the reframing of the relationship between the Spain’s present and its recent past, the essays share a commitment to a valuation of VPM as more than simply entertaining artefacts, but also as legitimate historical sources that can be considered true cultural indicators of the attitudes held by given groups in society.

The Transition’s own boundaries have been set and re-set by taxonomical disputes at a broader level that relate to conceptions of democracy itself, as well as the necessary criteria for the shift from a state of democratic transition to one of consolidation.<sup>16</sup> To that end, the first three papers engage the notion of the democratic order as one of an imagined futurity that lay beyond, on an ever-shifting horizon. First, **AUTHOR 1** calls into question notions of consensus in the forging of the democratic space through an extensive archival exploration of censorial judgements filed against the magazine *El Pápus* (1973-1987). This publication stands as an emblem of the *destape* period with its anarchic and sexualised content as well as the more-sobering bombing of its offices in 1977, killing the doorman and leaving some 20 others injured. Using the question of gender as a lens through which to scrutinise discrepancies in applications of the 1966 Press Law, this article illustrates the utility of VPM as a socio-political barometer with which to challenge the notion of consensus, in particular in revealing the

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<sup>14</sup> Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Sousanis, *Unflattening*, p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> See Laura Desfor Edles’ *Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain: The Transition to Democracy After Franco* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), Joan Ramon Resina’s *Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics of Memory in the Spanish Transition to Democracy* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), Alberto Medina’s *Exorcismos de la memoria: políticas y poéticas de la melancolía en la España de la Transición* (Madrid: Libertarias, 2001), Germán Labrador Méndez’s *Letras arrebatadas. Poesía y química en la Transición española* (Madrid: Devenir, 2009), Pamela Radcliff’s *Making Democratic Citizens in Spain: Civil Society and the Popular Origins of the Transition, 1960-1978* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), Sophie Baby’s *El mito de la transición pacífica. Violencia y política en España, 1975-1982* (Madrid: Akal, 2018) and Teresa Vilarós’ *El mono del desencanto. Una crítica cultural de la Transición española, 1973-1993*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2018).

heterogeneous experiences of minoritised groups. In the second essay, **AUTHOR 2** studies the formal aspects of the aesthetic of consensus, using the publication *TROCHA* (1977-1978) to examine the way in which these constructions were subsequently commandeered by those seeking to legitimise the transition's democratic imaginary. The analysis of what **AUTHOR 2** identifies as a 'visual culture of the left' is complemented by a contextualising exploration of the modes of production and the 26-member collective involved in bringing the publication to fruition across its print-run. The case of *TROCHA* acts as an important lens through which to read the evolving world of adult comics of the Transition. The contesting of allocated space is also explored by **AUTHOR 3**'s paper, which elucidates the way in which the works of key cartoonists during the 1970s and early 1980s blurred the boundaries of comics as an exclusive domain for children. These pioneers of the tradition, successfully carved out an adult space, offering a platform through humour to some of the powerful themes that would come to dominate discussion surrounding the Transition; memory, sexual identity and freedom of expression. The overarching thread of these first three essays, then, is one that engages the co-operative practices involved in the production of publications of the period as well as those that tried to frame the nature of ideas that would be permitted for general consumption. Traces of the sense of collectivism, of bringing together a range of dissenting voices around a common goal can be detected in the subsequent period as the cracks and fissures belying this moment of so-called consensus begin to make themselves known.

The financial collapse of 2008 galvanised citizens from all over Spain who registered their discontent with democratic representation while finding new ways to engage the political in the contemporary world. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, publications such as Juan Carlos Monedero's *La Transición contada a nuestros padres* (2011) and Guillem Martínez's edited volume *CT o la cultura de la Transición* (2012) reflect the fact that history, as well the ability to reframe and rewrite it, constituted a key task for activists working under the capacious, if nebulous, agenda of the 15M Movement. For these citizens a move beyond the 1970s and the 'conceptual prison' it represented not only stood as an opportunity to contest the Transition, it provided a template for increased democratisation both personally and institutionally.<sup>17</sup> However the crisis and the ensuing 15M Movement are remembered in the future, what remains clear is that the articulation of indignation—whether directed at public institutions, at private corporations, at political representatives, at the banks and mortgage lenders, or at the monarchy—constituted a kind of 'snap,' a process defined by a break or a fracture with 'an accumulated history' whereby tens of thousands of Spaniards repudiated the nation's immediate past as well as 'its perpetual re-enactment'.<sup>18</sup>

Even if this 'snap' as Sara Ahmed puts it, 'seems sharp or sudden, it might be because we do not experience the slower time of bearing or of holding up; the time in which we bear the pressure, the time it has taken for things to break'.<sup>19</sup> More than three decades after the *pacto del olvido* was institutionalised by the 1977 Amnesty Law, the financial crisis would build upon 2007's Historical Memory Law, emboldening citizens to demand justice in the present while looking back to what many considered a Transition brokered by the elite. In her/his essay, **AUTHOR 4** argues that crisis-era challenges to Spain's political and cultural identity have opened up a new ways of understanding and grappling with the nation's history dating back to the Civil War. Pointing to the cracks in the foundation of Spain's democratic heritage, s/he contends that these artists' work should be analysed considering this *longer* history of conflict and dictatorship – through a study of the gestural – and in terms of VPM's capacity to offer

<sup>17</sup> Kornetis, 'Is There a Future in This Past?', p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2017), p. 202.

<sup>19</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 189.

new understandings of the historical witness and her/his experience amidst a sea of dead, injured and unidentified bodies that continue haunting in contemporary Spain. **AUTHOR 5** looks at developments in the housing sector from the Francoist regime to the present, tapping into recent activist histories to show how a ‘triadic development modern (tourism-construction-financial development)’ has been in place from the 1950s to the present. Engaging texts as varied as Juan Antonio Bardem’s 1956 film *Calle Mayor* and Paco Roca’s 2015 graphic novel *La casa*, s/he demonstrates that the question of shelter – particularly in the context of the crisis with mortgage foreclosures, housing evictions and (un)occupied living spaces dominating public discourse – has always been a political issue. **AUTHOR 6** traces the history of fanzine literature produced by queer activists in Spain from the 1970s to the present. Moving beyond the representation of ‘oppositional practices and politics’ in these works, s/he argues for fanzines as a space of collective expression and as conduit for political mobilisation. Operating as both a means and a mode of resistance, therefore, fanzines not only enable collaborative forms of expression, they empower their creators to transform themselves as well as the world around them, particularly in periods of cultural tumult. Focusing on ‘euphoric narratives,’ described here as ‘a concept that accounts for societal changes involving processes of crisis and renewal’, **AUTHOR 7** finds common ground between form and context. S/he claims that comics (re-) emerged in the midst of the 15M Movement as a means to envisage alternative cultural and political realities. Underpinned by Ranciorean analysis, her/his essay claims that visual print media provided a platform from which artists could construct dissent through collaboration, effectively short-circuiting neoliberal ideology by emphasising the power of social collectives in a post-15M era. What all of these pieces share, then, is a concern for how artists working in visual print media have deconstructed *in the present* narratives surrounding the political and cultural (in)stability of the nation’s past. In finding new ways to confront the so-called *Cultura de Transición*, as well as the national history that preceded it, the majority of these artists underscore that mere critique is not enough, attesting that lasting change requires new methods for collaboration and political participation.

Bringing the dossier full circle, **AUTHOR 8** uses the epilogue to trace a history of dissent in contemporary Spain, reminding us that civil disobedience and other dissensual practices have been in operation from late Francoism to the present. The 2007-2008 financial crisis, s/he claims, does not mark the founding moment of political rebellion but rather its continuation, a seemingly perpetual inquiry into the viability of democratic politics in contemporary Spain. A number of critics have debated if the global crash merely intensified existing tensions, as **AUTHOR 8** herself/himself argues in the Epilogue, or if it marked a foundational moment in the displacement of traditional political identities.<sup>20</sup> Whether it figures as ‘un momento “inaugural”’ or as ‘parte de un ciclo’ in the longer history of political dissent in contemporary Spain,<sup>21</sup> the crisis—along with the eruption of the 15M Movement in 2011—further dismantled narratives of a model Transition to democracy. And while a number of Spaniards have contested the legitimacy of these *relatos* since the late 1970s, the crisis brought these objects of critique together, expanding across society like ‘una especie de “segunda piel”’ through which ‘corrientes de afecto y energía’ have continued surging even after the purported end of the crisis.<sup>22</sup> Attentive to the genealogy of dissent examined in the Epilogue, this dossier as a

<sup>20</sup> Luis Moreno-Caballud, ‘Cuando cualquiera escribe. Procesos democratizadores de la cultura escrita en la crisis de la Cultura de la Transición española.’ *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 15.1-2 (2014): 13-36, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Federico López-Terra, ‘Imaginación colectiva en la España post-15M.’ in *España después del 15M*. Jorge Cagiao y Conde and Isabelle Touton, eds. (Madrid: Catarata, 2019). 167-192, p. 168.

<sup>22</sup> Amador Fernández-Savater, ‘Una disputa antropológica: crisis y movimientos en España, 2008-2017.’ in *España después del 15M*. Jorge Cagiao y Conde and Isabelle Touton, eds. (Madrid: Catarata, 2019). 21-38, p. 27.

whole is similarly interested in the “unflattening” of static historical narratives regarding Spanish democracy and the frames in which they have been cast. Visual Print Media as a form, we propose, is uniquely positioned to undermine linear understandings of democratic history in a post-Francoist context. What emerges, we hope, is a “kaleidoscopic” – and dialogic – vision of the nation’s recent past as seen through the present and vice versa, underscoring VPM’s singular capacity to engage the liminal spaces of Spain’s democratic history.

