

◆ Chapter 6

“Quería que el lector se pusiera en su lugar”: Techniques for the Recovery of History in *Twists of Fate* by Paco Roca

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As this collected volume makes abundantly clear, several Spanish comics that recover previously underrepresented elements of history are garnering well-deserved critical acclaim in the young 21st century. One comic that explores both the process and the importance of the recovery of historical memory, and is among those to inspire much popular and scholarly attention, is Paco Roca’s 2013 graphic novel *Los surcos del azar* (published in English in 2017 as *Twists of Fate*). This comic recovers the story of *La nueve*, conscripted Republican combatants who, after their defeat in the Spanish Civil War, fought against other fascist regimes including the Nazis in the Second World War. While never sacrificing high quality storytelling, the comic communicates a history that seems ineffable in other mediums: memories of intense polarization, totalitarianism, a life of disappointment, ideological abandonment, and inhumane violence.

Scholars have published incisive articles on *Los surcos del azar* that analyze such elements as its representation of exile, war, and memory. The present essay builds on existing scholarship by adding an analysis of the comic’s unique contribution not only to the praxis of recovering historical memory, but also to its theory. To do so, the essay first puts *Los surcos* into context, focusing on its participation in the historical and political process called the Recovery of Historical Memory. Secondly, the essay uses reflections on memory by Anne Whitehead and others, and comics theory by Hillary Chute and others, to explore the visual and formal strategies that add relevance to the practical and theoretical considerations that *Los surcos del azar* brings to light. What emerges is an analysis of Roca’s use of frame, story, color, and perspective, as he juxtaposes temporalities and encourages readers’ strong identification with the experience of discovering underrepresented historical information. These techniques convey the importance of the historical events at the book’s center while also bringing light to

the complications of giving and receiving testimony in a broader sense. Implied in this analysis is support for the argument that resources specific to the comics medium encourage readers’ empathic response. Thus, the comic offers an example of the compelling contributions masterful cartoonists are making to the process of relating the history of shared community violence.

The End of a Long Silence

Following his side’s victory in the Civil War (1936–1939) and four decades of repressive totalitarian rule (1939–1975), dictator Francisco Franco’s death by old age led to an almost entirely peaceful transition to democracy in Spain, a transition that international onlookers have touted as exemplary. However, the price to pay for this peace was that many of the regime’s structures and leaders remained in place (at least temporarily), and the forebears of victims of the Civil War and immediate postwar gained few political fora in which to denounce the injustices the Francoist regime had perpetrated. The so-called *pacto del silencio* (“pact of silence,” also called a *pacto del olvido*, or “pact of oblivion”) managed to continue the defeated side’s political silence, first imposed by the repression of the dictatorship, for several more decades after its demise. Many lived histories were lost with the passage of so much time. As one example among many, “the history of *La nueve* was largely silenced during Franco’s dictatorship for obvious reasons and is still little known in Spain today” and therefore “*Los surcos del azar* has contributed to its retrieval from the oblivion imposed by Francoism” (Pérez García 73).

When stories of the political violence of the Civil War and postwar did emerge, this process often occurred through private and local efforts, and in creative and literary spaces, rather than official, public, and political ones (González 179). This relegation to the private and the cultural sphere is problematic because, as Jo Labanyi has written, the preamble to Spain’s Law of Historical Memory “insists that memory is a private matter” but “fails to acknowledge that ‘historical memory’ is a form of collective and not personal memory, quite apart from the fact that citizens have the right to express their personal memories in the public sphere” (2008, 120).

So, in a phenomenon that Labanyi famously called a “memory boom” (2007, 95) around the turn of the millennium, and in stark contrast to what had come before, both the international community and Spain became practically obsessed with its historical memory. A huge number of novels, films, academic studies and conferences, political debates, and newspaper articles about the Civil War and post-war emerged at this time, leading Vicente J. Benet to comment that cultural debates about the memory of the Civil War and Francoism

were among the most frequent topics (349). Just two of the most internationally popular novels in the literary frenzy that would help provoke political attention a few years later include Javier Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina* (*Soldiers of Salamis*) and Carlos Ruiz Zafón's *La sombra del viento* (*The Shadow of the Wind*). Films such as Guillermo del Toro's *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*) and *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*) also garnered much international attention. Shortly thereafter and in the realm of political action, controversial efforts to uncover Spain's past included the literal unearthing of hundreds of mass graves; Spain's Socialist government declared 2006 the "Year of Historical Memory;" the Congress of Deputies passed a Law for the Recovery of Historical Memory in 2007.¹ In the young 21st century, a noteworthy group of Spanish graphic novels also participated, and continue to participate, in this practice of representing and recovering historical memory.

Taking an international perspective, it is worth noting that Anne Whitehead's critical guide *Memory* observes a similar obsession with memory across the globe, engendering what Andreas Huyssen has called a "culture of memory" (15). Whitehead argues that this obsession arose from recent technology and its concomitant quick, nearly constant access to information, alongside massive increases in immigration worldwide and the tendency that an international flow of people has toward nostalgia (1–2). "Memory," she also notes, "is historically conditioned; it is not simply handed down in a timeless form from generation to generation, but bears the impress or stamp of its own time and culture," and so the particular case of Spain c. 2000 both participates in a global phenomenon and bears characteristics that distinguish it (4). Elizabeth Jelin adds that "archives are growing in numbers, commemorative dates proliferate, and there is a never-ending demand for memorial plaques and monuments" (1).

Spain is also one example of another international phenomenon whereby many powerful comics effectively relate stories of violent and traumatic experiences, both individual and collective. Hillary Chute's incisive *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* notes that "[t]he form of comics is traveling so fast across the globe, including springing up in countries where long traditions have not been active, because of its connection to expressing conflict and trauma" (262). Here, comics represent the "'simultaneity of traumatic temporality', [wherein] the witness inhabits both present and past at the same time" (206). Samuel Amago writes of the "role that comics have had in making Spanish history known to a popular readership in Spain" (33). Amago further notes that "because comics are at once both sequential and simultaneous, they allow the artist to play with this temporal simultaneity" (38). What's also important to note about comics is that in telling stories through images they offer a particular type of complexity not unlike filmmaking: "the image is never a simple reality. Cinematic images are primarily operations, relations between

the sayable and the visible, ways of playing with the before and the after, cause and effect” (Rancière 6).

Roca in Spanish Comics

Spain is one of the aforementioned countries that has developed an increasingly vibrant and exciting comics scene in the early 21st century. Since 2007, the Spanish Ministry of Culture awards the National Comics Prize to the best comic of the year, and many public libraries and universities, which organize conferences and seminars, have gotten on board. As one of the cartoonists continually raising the bar, in 2008 Paco Roca won one of the earliest national prizes. The game-changing success of Roca’s 2007 *Arrugas (Wrinkles)* brought with it the freedom to write and draw what he chooses, and Roca’s success and renown has continued as he has elected to center his work on a range of topics and time periods.² That said, from across this range, Roca does tend toward a particular type of storyline, as confirmed in his own observation: “I think I always tell the same story—people who stoically fight against something—but the situation is what it is, and things end the way they must. No one wins, but everybody’s tried and they end with dignity” (Claudio 121). In line with this same type of story, *Los surcos del azar* offers “un homenaje a unos héroes olvidados que pese a las continuas derrotas no dejaron de luchar” (David Fernández de Arriba 18) (an homage to some forgotten heroes, who despite their repeated defeats didn’t stop fighting).³

Roca is a powerhouse and a trend-setter. Borja Usieto writes in *Cuadernos de Cómic* “si tuviéramos que escoger un paladín de la novela gráfica española este sería con gran probabilidad Paco Roca, el autor al que se le debe (no en solitario aunque sí en mayor medida que a otros) el consolidamiento del cómic bajo la forma de novela gráfica en el tejido cultural de nuestro país” (If we had to choose a paladin of the Spanish graphic novel, it would most likely be Paco Roca, the author to whom we owe (not solitarily, but in greater measure than others) the consolidation of the comic in form of the graphic novel in the cultural fabric of our country). Usieto attributes much of this power not only to Roca’s considerable storytelling and artistic skills, but also to his decision to write for a broad audience. These two aspects combine such that, as Esther Claudio states, his “balanced and sober style, the most successful aspect of his work is the harmonious, beautiful drawing, which makes it accessible and appealing to a wide audience” (118). Given his artistic freedom, Roca keeps choosing his subjects intentionally to raise awareness of underrepresented stories and historical events.⁴

In addition to his clean, careful style and attention to broad audience appeal, another characteristic of Roca’s oeuvre is his attentiveness to the theme

of memory, causing Pepo Pérez to note that “la memoria es, también, el gran tema personal de Paco Roca” (144) (memory is also Paco Roca’s greatest personal subject). Diego Batista confirms that

From *El faro* (2004) to *La encrucijada* (2017), through *Memorias de un hombre en pijama* (2010) and *El invierno del dibujante* (2010), Roca immerses himself in his own and others’ memories to tell stories that must be told. Memory often appears as something universal and ordinary while, at other times, it is presented as an individual and intimate concept. But in each of his works there is a strong desire to establish a connection between the past and the reader’s own reality. (70)

The reasons above, including Roca’s importance as a cartoonist, the context of a thriving comics scene in Spain, and the power of memory in Roca’s work, create the conditions whereby *Los surcos del azar* offers an impactful and important contribution to historical memory.

The Impact of *Los surcos del azar*

Los surcos del azar, the title of which takes a line from Antonio Machado’s *Campos de Castilla*, is Roca’s third about the Spanish fight against fascism.⁵ Roca’s intention with *Los surcos del azar* is to recover and celebrate a part of history that had been forgotten by many, a problem that, according to the character of Miguel in the comic, started the very day after the liberation of Paris, when Charles De Gaulle glossed over their contributions in his victory speech (242). The comic is meticulously researched, visually stunning, and told in a simple and straightforward manner across two distinct timeframes. In fact, Roca has said that his historian consultant on the book encouraged him to dial back his dramatic flair on a number of occasions, resulting in a sober tale (Corazón Rural, np). The book that emerged from this negotiation became a hit with critics and readers alike, winning the prize for best Spanish comic at the Salón Internacional del Cómic de Barcelona and selling twice the number of copies that mark a Spanish comic as a commercial success (Catalá Carrasco 160).

In addition to the powerful central story of the role Republican Spaniards played in fighting fascism, not just during, but also after the Civil War, the book also utilizes a frame structure whereby a Spanish author, Paco, meets, interviews, and draws the story of, Miguel Ruiz, an elderly Republican living in France. Even Miguel’s closest friends in France are oblivious to his military

background. They have no idea that, as a younger man, Miguel lived through the Spanish Civil War, expatriation, eventual arrival in antebellum France, forced labor in camps in Algeria and Tunisia, reenlistment in the anti-fascist forces, this time the French, storming the beaches of Normandy, and participation in *La nueve*, the first company to liberate Paris. In the extradiegetic world as well, most people did not know that this company was made up primarily of Spaniards either. In other words, the heroism of man and company are ignored on a small and large scale in both the fictional and the real worlds.

Though not specific to the case of Spain, many scholars have already written on the connection between comics and memory of shared community violence. Hillary Chute draws this argument into its ethical implications, noting that comics (a word she uses in the singular):

provokes the participation of readers in those interpretive spaces that are paradoxically full and empty. To the extent that comics’s formal proportions put into play what we might think of as the unresolvable interplay of elements of absence and presence, we could understand the gutter space of comics to suggest a psychic order outside of the realm of symbolization—and therefore, perhaps, a kind of Lacanian Real. Comics openly eschews any aesthetic of transparency; it is a conspicuously artificial form. (17)

As a consequence, readers participate in the recreation or representation of the story, removing the possibility that we might otherwise maintain distance from the events narrated. Tom Gunning agrees, adding that “the power of comics lies in their ability to derive movement from stillness—not to make the reader observe motion, but rather participate imaginatively in its genesis” (40). All comics compel readers to participate in filling in gaps, which implicate readers as participants as we experience the violence in these graphic narratives. *Los surcos del azar* further employs its frame story, color, and strong point of view to draw readers into its historical narrative.

Technique: Framing Past and Present

The comic’s frame narrative, consisting of present-day conversations between the two main characters, adds much depth to the flashback story of Miguel and his wartime experiences. This testimonial and generational component reminds me of some of what makes Art Spiegelman’s groundbreaking *Maus* (1980) so powerful, and many have speculated on the influence of *Maus* on this work,

often referring to *Los surcos* as “el *Maus* español” (Astiberri, np).⁶ Unlike the nonfiction and autobiographical *Maus*, *Los surcos* reads like a biographical comic, but yet is fictional. The book, then, offers a fictional account of what plausibly could have happened to one of the real-world men who fought against fascism. Employing an interview structure for a fictional account permits reflection on the importance and complications on giving testimony. As Robert Coale writes in the epilogue, “La historia de estos exiliados es, por una parte, una odisea colectiva, pero por otra, cada una de las vivencias personales podría dar lugar a una novela o una película de aventuras sin tener que exagerar” (323) (The history of those exiles is, on the one hand, a collective odyssey, but on the other, each of the lived personal stories could be the basis of a novel or an adventure film without exaggeration). The dynamic of giving and receiving testimony offers more than a simple linear narrative as “the narrative that is being produced and listened to is the location where and the process through which something new is being constructed” as “the listener becomes a participant, although a differentiated one, with his or her own reactions” (Jelin 64).

Because of the frame narrative, we learn of Miguel’s reluctance to relate his experiences, and see how Paco’s research situates Miguel’s individual story within a larger international narrative. Esther Claudio notes in her interview with Roca that “it’s a portrayal of what historical memory has been in Spain, of finding the testimonies, of the survivors’ reluctance to open old wounds, of taking this story up to the present, of showing how Spanish refugees were treated in France” (129). Roca replies that “if I’d stuck to the story of *La nueve*, without the section concerning the present, that soldier wouldn’t have been able to give me a complex perspective” (130). Borja Usieto adds that this dual structure makes one “cuestiona[r] el valor de la realidad y de la ficción y del papel de una sobre la otra” (228) (question the value of reality and fiction and the role of one over the other).

In addition to adding complexity and reflection, the frame story of *Los surcos* provides some stylistically provocative reversals from what we might expect. First, the book starts with strongly enunciated images of the past (fig. 1), and not with the story of the interview. This and all of the other wartime events that Miguel has experienced, and that he relates through these interviews, are drawn in bold colors and with black borders around each panel. They feel secure and real, showing how the past has solidified into a historical reality. While this use of color and solid borders brings vibrancy to the past events, it also inverts the expectation for a typical “flashback,” often represented in illustration, television, or film with soft colors and borders, the fuzziness of memory and distance. As Amago notes, “the chromatic tones that we tend to associate with historical memory [are] so often rendered in black and white” (52). Another character in the comic even observes that the solidity of the past is an impediment to

Miguel’s wish to forget it (185). Visually, *Los surcos del azar* gives life to the events of Miguel’s story, making the past look more “alive” than the present, perhaps in a visual metaphor for Miguel’s own experience, evidenced when he says he remembers details from the war years much more clearly than he remembers events from that same day (117). Likewise, each chapter’s title bears two names: one, in lightweight font naming the present day of the interview, and the other in bold font naming the past event narrated in that day’s interview.



Fig. 1. Strongly enunciated images of the past on the opening page.
Paco Roca. *Los surcos del azar*. Bilbao: Astiberri, 2013. 10.

Correspondingly, it is the present-day conversations between Paco and Miguel that are drawn in neutral gray tones (fig. 2), and contained in panels with soft, almost blurry edges. In the present, there are no hard borders (which would have implied certainty) to the panels. The frame story, in this sense, is not the story of the interview, but rather the past that encircles an uncertain present. The present is still in the process of becoming real, or as Usieto describes, “El pasado es algo fijo, inamovible, construido a base de hechos, de ahí el grafismo estable que tiene en el cómic, su color sólido y su dibujo elaborado; el presente en cambio es algo no permanente, en constante movimiento, en construcción,

de ahí su dibujo sin terminar y su falta de color” (229) (The past is something fixed, immobile, built on facts, which gives it a stable graphical element in the comic, its solid color, its elaborated illustration; the present on the other hand is impermanent, in constant movement, under construction, which gives it an unfinished drawing style and lack of color). Says Roca about this decision, “I didn’t want to frame the present: I wanted to make it look fresh, more like a draft, ethereal. It’s also what you say, memories are kind of boxed and the present has a certain continuity; it’s unfinished, like a constant draft” (Claudio 126). Additionally, the visual aspect of *Los surcos*’s medium permits many objects to serve as so-called memory triggers during the interview, reminding Miguel of a particular experience and adding story to the record. Something as ordinary as the key to open a can of sardines becomes the symbol of shared memory and a memento of Miguel’s love for his girlfriend Estrella (as seen, for instance, on 56 and 281). It is the drawn visual presence of these objects that spark both the narrative within the interview, and the reader’s recognition of their importance.



Fig. 2. Neutral gray tones for the present day.

Paco Roca. *Los surcos del azar*. Bilbao: Astiberri, 2013. 20.

On the page, the past interrupts and makes itself impossible to ignore in scenes of the present, a characteristic that provokes consideration of the nature of these violent memories. Not only do cartoonists employ a medium that inherently imitates and “mirror[s] at a formal level the effects of trauma” (Whitehead 84) and “fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments” (McCloud 67).⁷ As Batista explains, memories “depend firmly on the individual’s emotions and experiences associated with specific memories. Thus, memory becomes something fluid where what is most important are not the reported facts but the social and emotional impact generated by the restitution of the forgotten memory” (71). Furthermore, memories of violence, which cannot be fully processed, invade the present in a visual representation of the famous phenomenon of the repetition compulsion, evident in the arts as in symptomatology of those experiencing PTSD (Whitehead 84). Here, this intrusion takes the visual form of the panels of the violent past puncturing the soft and sketchy present in *Los surcos*.⁸

This book provides many examples of the phenomenon of an intrusive, interrupting past beginning on the first day that Miguel allows Paco to interview him. Paco sits with a notebook in a café, jotting down ideas or sketching—and, as always, this present-day scene is drawn as a sketch too—when the clearly enunciated (clearly *present*) representation of the violent past interrupts and punctures the page, in this case an especially disturbing panel in which a well-dressed and cigar-smoking business man sitting cross-legged on the docks of Alicante learns there is no room for him on the boat that would offer an escape, and slits his own throat, the blood spraying through the air, cigar still lit (fig. 3). Something similar occurs days later when Paco asks Miguel about a Spanish prisoner who protested the torture of the work camp in Orán, only to be beaten to death behind the heavy barrel he had been commanded to transport. The wordless interruption of these panels into the present-day interview prevents Miguel—or perhaps save Miguel—from putting the horrors into words.



Fig. 3. An image of the past punctures the page.

Paco Roca. *Los surcos del azar*. Bilbao: Astiberri, 2013. 42.

Intrusions of the violent past into the space of a page depicting the present also illustrate Miguel's spoken reflection on the differences between what one might consider "normal" in the context of combat as compared to what others could understand as "normal" in the civilian world (103). Here and on other occasions, the sounds of the violent past (in the classic comics technique of onomatopoeia) invade the space of the present too (114). Finally, in the subsequent panel on the recto side of this spread, everything representing the past turns completely black and indecipherable as Miguel states "Todo es confuso. No sé si es la realidad o un sueño" (115) (Everything is confusing. I don't know if it's reality of a dream). A stylistically similar series of panels later relates the story of Miguel's car accident, wherein Estrella and his plans for future resistance fighting are killed in the same moment by a landmine (307–8). Here, a series of images show the overturned car, but eventually crop out the ineffable and un-representable moment when Miguel pulls Estrella's lifeless body from the car (308). Side by side, we see the difficulty of this portion of the interview; Miguel falls silent, unable to respond to Paco's question about whether this is the same woman he still visits at the cemetery.

Technique: Colors and Objects

Similarly to many of his other books, Roca uses a specific color palette for each location of Miguel's story (75, 286, and 172 offer some especially striking examples). This is important because Miguel follows the fight against fascism to many places, and readers need to have a sense of each, but it is also important because the full-color rendering of these pages creates particular moods and profoundly impacts our reading experience. Jorge Catalá Carrasco comments on the colder tones that reflect sadness and pessimism, for instance on the docks of Alicante as would-be exiles await the boat that might offer them an escape, while the brightest and warmest color palettes come with the triumphal liberation of Paris and with lively moments of resistance including the secret acquisition of a Republican tricolor flag (163, 134). Catalá Carrasco adds "pero además de mantener una paleta cromática uniforme que acompaña los episodios de la novela gráfica, el autor distingue los momentos de especial intensidad contraponiendo la intensidad del rojo (con una evidente asociación con la sangre) para expresar la intensidad y el dramatismo del momento" (163) (But besides maintaining a chromatically uniform palette that accompanies each of the graphic novel's episodes, the author distinguishes especially intense moments by the contrast of the intensity of red (with an evident association with blood) to express the intensity and drama of the moment). In addition to the aforementioned blood spray of the man who dies by suicide on the docks, a number of other panels

colors draw our attention to particular important objects such as a hair bow or a flag. Offering further evidence of the provocative selection of colors in this book, when a moment fades from memory, as happens when the poet Antonio Machado dies, we see the color of the panels fade all the way to white, more similar in style to the indeterminant present-day panels than those that represent the past in the rest of the book.

An excellent example of the clever use of color, and one that gives clear indication of how Roca chooses color palettes to reinforce the commentary on recovery of memory is the cover of the book (fig. 4). This cover reproduces one of the photographs Miguel shows Paco during their interviews, a posed photo of his battle company. Here, though, there is a splash of color and clarity, perhaps in the shape of spilled coffee, but only on the image of Miguel’s face in the crowd. The other soldiers, whose stories have not been told, remain colorless and faded into the grey background of the book’s cover. The use of this technique reminds us that while *Los surcos del azar* is the story of one man (one character), he is also part of a much larger group. He is the protagonist of this story, here the only member of his company to emerge with the vibrant colors of intelligibility, but his example offers only one glimpse into this bigger picture.

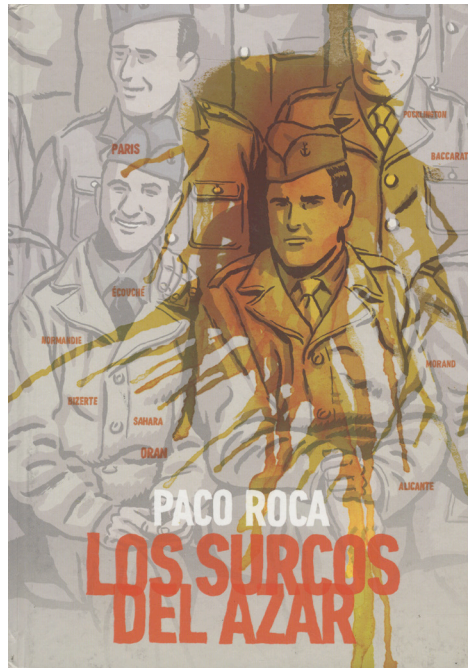


Fig. 4. A splash of clarity on the front cover.

Paco Roca. *Los surcos del azar*. Bilbao: Astiberri, 2013. Cover.

Other nods to this dynamic of a personal story suggestive of a shared experience include references to sites of collective memory such as the cemetery, where Miguel visits Estrella's grave and leaves fresh flowers that demonstrate his ongoing mourning for her (45, 246). Paco suggests that Miguel's companions "se merecen un monumento," (59) (deserve a monument) but of course they do not yet have one, hence the need for this book. Paco keeps a private box of mementos with photos and other objects of memory, and he draws these items out to show Paco, allowing them to be added to the record of being reproduced in drawing in this comic (119, 160). In the end of the interviews, we learn that because Albert was inspired hearing Miguel's stories, he has arranged with the town's mayor to provide an homage for Miguel (318).

Technique: Perspective and Point of View

In addition to the aforementioned phenomenon whereby readers of comics are implicated in recreating the story through connecting the fragmented panels, comics also offer another technique that draws readers into the experience of certain characters. Samuel Amago's "Drawing (on) Spanish History" presents several examples of "comics artists working with historical material [who] have employed the intimacy and cognitive engagement of the form to further worry, reveal and uncover untold histories of wartime and postwar Spain" (32). Several of Paco Roca's books develop empathy for one character by including frequent panels drawn from that character's point of view. This is a technique reminiscent to one that Roca had used in *Wrinkles*, where, for instance, the main character, an Alzheimer patient, looks down at his own hands, and the reader also looks down from the same point of view. This strong point of view causes readers to see through Emilio's eyes, feel his confusion when he is unable to recall the word for "ball."

In the scenes of modern-day France, *Los surcos* creates in the reader a strong identification with the Paco character through representing many panels from his visual perspective. To consider more deeply just one of these examples, we can look at a particular page, a page much like many others, wherein Paco asks Miguel questions and Miguel complains about the poor treatment he and his compatriots received, while his neighbor Albert looks on (fig. 5). The men are preparing coffee, and while the detail panels on the left side of the page could have been drawn from anyone's perspective, they are from Paco's. He is the only one of the three men standing by the stove as they chat, and given the angle from which the three panels show the detail of the coffeepot reaching a boil, it is clear we are to see from Paco's point of view and not those of the of the characters. In continually avoiding general perspectives, choosing instead

subjective angles from Paco’s point of view, readers are led to see these scenes through his eyes. There are too many other similar examples to consider all of them, but as a whole they encourage readers to identify strongly with Paco (for instance, 20, 22, 23, 92, 160, 169, 181, 271, 281, 284). We see through his eyes elements of his (our) stitching together the story: the notebook, the coffee drunk during interviews, the meals shared, the box of mementos from Miguel’s past.



Fig. 5. Example of Paco’s first-person point of view.
Paco Roca. *Los surcos del azar*. Bilbao: Astiberri, 2013. 46.

Notes Roca about his layouts, “I prefer to use a fixed shot and let the action develop through details, where the character is more than a talking head through the body language and where there are things happening simultaneously” (Claudio 122). With this technique, Paco “becomes the narrator who establishes the path as well as the guide who leads his readers along a figurative journey into the past, thus becoming the bridge that will restore the forgotten history to the reader’s truncated present” (Batista 71). Paco also asks the questions we readers would like to ask, such as “¿Y qué pasó después?” (García Navarro 128) (And what happened next?). This is typical of testimonial practice, wherein these “involve someone who asks the questions and edits and ‘normalizes’ the narrative. This alterity is then transferred to the relationship with the reader” (Jelin 73). The reader can further identify with Paco in that, like him, most of us also do not initially know much about the story of *La nueve*. Since the story begins by delving into a narrative of the past, with little or no preamble, and because so few Spaniards knew about the history of *La nueve*, we readers take on the position of Paco, discovering bits of information, little by little, from getting to know a reluctant interviewee. Along with Paco, we catch glimpses of clarity, gain some knowledge of the tribulations in the fight against fascism.

Meanwhile in the scenes from the past, Roca creates a strongly enunciated point of view from the perspective of Miguel. Roca explains the use of limited perspective relating to Miguel like this: “Incluso en las escenas de batalla ofrezco la visión limitada de los soldados. Nada de vistas generales, los soldados solo saben lo que pueden ver, no tienen una visión global del campo de batalla. Quería que el lector se pusiera en su lugar” (Jiménez, np.) (Even in the battle scenes I offer the limited view of the soldiers. No general views; the soldiers only know what they can see; they don’t have a global view of the battlefield. I wanted readers to put themselves in their place). These intimate panels that focus on details from the point of view of Miguel contrast with traditional wartime narratives that offer sweeping landscapes and scenes of battles on a grand scale, and an omniscient narrator, whereas here Roca confirms the importance of point of view in influencing the reader’s experience. Distinguishing this narrative from traditional tales of war allows Roca to question and deconstruct the sense of wartime experience as privileged and all-knowing, even as heroic in a conventional sense. In *Surcos*’s scenes of the past as in its scenes of the present, we gain knowledge about the progression of the various wars only as this character learns more.

By using this intimate view on wartime experiences, Usieto notes, Roca “desmitifica el conflicto bélico, huye de planos espectaculares y de épicas narraciones para mostrar la batalla desde el suelo, con el punto de vista de un soldado más que no conoce el progreso global de la guerra sino solo al enemigo que tiene delante” (229) (demystifies the military conflict, avoiding spectacular

and epic narratives to show the battle from the ground, from the point of view of a soldier unfamiliar with the global progress of the war beyond the enemy in front of him). This element of demystification was intentional, and it arose from Roca’s desire to honor the lived and historical events. Pérez García explains Roca first intended to produce something along the lines of Quentin Tarantino’s dramatic revenge film *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), but “the task of documentation and his meeting with Republican veterans led him to change his approach,” to “strip away the myth that surrounds *La nueve* and to use a documentary tone that would allow him to depict the historical context with realism” (71). In both present and past this realism comes from the strongly enunciated perspective of the character with whom we readers are meant to identify, adding to the power of the historical narrative.

Praxis of Testimony

Los surcos’s play on verisimilitude contributes to the reader’s experience as well. As already mentioned, this book is a fictional account of what plausibly could have happened to one of the men who really existed and fought against fascism, but it reads as nonfictional biography. This successful air of veracity is not really surprising, as the story is well documented (for instance through collaboration with the historian Robert S. Coale) and full of maps and historical explanations. Given its verisimilitude it is also unsurprising to learn that Roca first learned of the tale at the heart of *Los surcos* through his unexpected encounter with Evelyn Mesquida and her nonfiction book about *La nueve*. Mesquida’s account and Roca’s subsequent conversations with two exiled Spanish men inspired him to tell the historical tale and frame it with his own experience of uncovering details about *La nueve* (Fernández de Arriba 17). In other words, the book is fictional but its origin lies in an encounter with historical nonfiction.

Some examples of the realia that add to the book’s air of realism are the diagrams (92), maps (268–70), and reproductions of photographs and newspapers (92, 274). All of these documentary objects make the reader feel as if they—themselves—are conducting research using evidence and consulting historical primary materials. This experience is further deepened when we learn through Paco’s example how hard historians and interviewers have had to fight to recover this story. Miguel is initially resistant to being interviewed, intentionally missing their appointment, and then saying, “Todo eso son cosas de viejos. ¿A quién interesan ya?” (All that’s just old people’s stuff—who’s interested in that anymore?) to which Paco responds, “Yo creo que deberían interesarles a todos, para que no volvamos a sufrir algo así por culpa de las ideas fascistas, ¿no?” (41) (I think it should interest everyone, so that we never again suffer

something like that because of fascist ideas, right?). On the other hand, once the process gets started, Miguel begins to admit aloud how important it is that he share this experience. But then, days later, Miguel accuses Paco of trying to “revolver la mierda para escribir el libro o lo que sea que vayas a hacer” (221) (stirring up shit to write a book, or whatever you’re going to do) in the context of Paco not fully accepting the idea that killing fascists is not murder. These conversations mirror, in many ways, the debates around the recovery of historical memory in Spain and elsewhere, thereby lending depth to the comic’s exploration of the difficulty and importance of testimony, and the dangers of ignoring these stories any longer (both in the context of the global rise of fascism and because so many survivors of these wars do not have much longer to live). This expansion in focus suggests its universal relevance beyond the specific historical events it narrates.

By way of this interview process, *Los surcos* further criticizes the international failure to come to the rescue of Spanish resisters, “los exiliados republicanos que estaban dando su vida por Francia y por derrotar al nazismo y el fascismo, se le añadía la sensación de ser relegados al olvido” (Fernández de Arriba 29) (the exiled Republicans that were giving their lives for France and to defeat Nazism and fascism, added to that, they have the feeling of being relegated to oblivion). For instance, in the conversation between Miguel and Paco, Miguel complains that the BBC attributed the capture of Écouché to the British, and that Charles De Gaulle doesn’t even mention his foreign soldiers in his victory speech (242). In an earlier conversation, Miguel had complained that “Nadie nos reconoció nunca el sacrificio” (46) (Nobody ever recognized our sacrifice) of the “muchos españoles [que] luchamos contra Hitler” (many Spaniards [who] fought against Hitler) to which the younger man replies, “Nunca es tarde” (It’s never too late).

Miguel’s response to this is one of the key pieces of dialogue in the book. He says, “tengo noventa y cuatro años y la mayoría de mis compañeros ya habrán muerto, seguro, sin ningún reconocimiento. Si eso no es ‘ser tarde’... ¡A la mierda todos!” (46) (I’m ninety-four years old and most of my companions are probably dead, of course, without any recognition. If that’s not ‘too late’... Everyone can go to hell). Here he seems resigned to die in obscurity. Nonetheless, in the final word balloon of the book, Miguel thanks Paco for making him “recuperar una parte de [su] vida que no [se] atrevía a recordar” (320) (recovering a part of [his] life [he] hadn’t dared to remember). Fernández writes of the “ficción dentro de la ficción, la memoria recreada, como mecanismo para recuperar” (18) (fiction within the fiction, the memory as recreation, as a mechanism for recovery). This emphasis on recovery hints at what so many authors, interviewers, documentarians, etc. have noted: the moment is now or never if we are to recover this history. Over and over again

in graphic novels of the civil war, we see the idea of telling one story in order to “give voice” to a whole dying generation, a generation that lived through almost ineffable violence and repression.

For *Los surcos*, the recurring theme of being ignored and abandoned for so long, after all the sacrifices *La nueve* had made in the fight against fascism, highlights the importance of this moment and of this medium. Spanish comics are having a moment, and the medium offers several particular techniques that make for a powerful and moving experience for the reader. As Roca observes:

The real value of *La nueve* is symbolic: it’s about these people who kept fighting for many years for what they believed in Africa and in Europe. The tragedy is that they did it all with one goal in mind—to free Spain from fascism—and that was the only thing they could not achieve, no matter how hard they tried. (Claudio 129)

The value of this story may be symbolic, and the character at its center may be fictional, but the power of the medium and the artistry of the cartoonist give ample proof of how well-suited comics are in recovering History.

Notes

1. Spain’s Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) declared 2006 the Year of Historical Memory and submitted a “law of historical memory” to the Congress for ratification. These laws condemn Franco’s regime, recognize the rights of those who suffered during the Civil War, abolish laws passed during the regime to dictate sentences, provide better financial benefits to the families of the victims of the dictatorship, allow occupation of land to identify mass graves, force local authorities to remove symbols of the Franco regime, ban political rallies at the Valley of the Fallen, and provide free access to public documents and files (Beaumont, 2008).
2. *Arrugas* was finally published in translation in 2015 by Knockabout.
3. Translations from the Spanish in this essay are mine.
4. Other than *Los surcos del azar*, other examples of the social consciousness of Roca’s recent work include commentaries on the economic crisis in Spain, called “Chronicle of a Crisis Foretold,” and an Oxfam initiative telling short stories through an app.
5. A bit of Machado’s demise in the Civil War is portrayed in *Los surcos del azar* as well. He happened to be away from home when the war broke out, became separated by the fault lines of the war, and he never saw much of his family again. He died just

- after having to make a punishing voyage to cross into Collioure France, and where characters in *Los surcos* meet him. Machado is buried where he died.
- 6 Javier Gallego states this on his television program *Carne cruda 2.0*, and Astiberri uses the blurb on all its marketing materials for the book.
 - 7 Also, these indelible images, here offered in bold colors and definitive borders emerge into the present day like Roland Barthes's punctum, an image piercing the moment as a consequence of past events that cannot properly be processed.
 - 8 See *Caruth's Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* for an introduction to this idea in trauma narratives.

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