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ARTICLE



Tactile comics, disability studies and the mind's eye: on “A Boat Tour” (2017) in Venice with Max

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ABSTRACT

Positioned at the intersection of disability studies and urban comics studies, this article explores the artistic form, content and social engagement of the tactile comic ‘A Boat Tour’. Though the comic’s credited author is Max (a.k.a. Francesc Capdevila Gisbert; Barcelona, 1956-), it was nonetheless developed through a collaborative process as part of the Catalan contribution to La Biennale di Venezia. Using both braille and a form of haut-relief braille-like texture, the comics sensory representation of a boat tour experience is significant on two levels: first for its contributions to a transnational disability culture and its general avoidance of the problems common in disability representation; and second for its innovations within the tactile comics form. These innovations are explored in the context of scholarship on the Iberian comic, the wordless and tactile comic, and accounts of visual impairment understood as a social construction. In particular, the work of Georgina Kleege, including her recent book *More than Meets the Eye*, demonstrates that the distance routinely established between visual art and the experience of visual impairment is itself an ableist construction.

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Introduction

Included as part of the Catalan contribution to the 57th Biennale of Venice (2017) was an innovative tactile comic composed by the creator Max (a.k.a. Francesc Capdevila Gisbert; Barcelona 1956). Titled ‘A Boat Tour,’ the comic represents one of Venice’s iconic canal trips, employing illustrations in ‘haut relief’ to deliver a duo-modal sensory experience – in braille and braille-like texture, as well as monotonal visual form.

On the website for the Institut Ramon Llull, founded in Barcelona in 2002, one can download a 41 page file containing an image-only form of the comic, as well as brief pieces written in a mix of either English or Italian (www.llull.cat/monografics/blindwiki/). Accompanying Max’s comic in that download are ‘Catalonia in Venice’ by Manuel Forcano, ‘La Venezia che non si vede: Unveiling the Unseen’ by Mery Cuesta and Roc Parés, an artist bio for Antoni Abad, and ‘The Fascinating Adventure of the Tactile Comic’ by Mery Cuesta. As this file reveals, ‘A Boat Tour’ was in some senses ancillary to other collaborative endeavours that perhaps attracted even more attention. The central artist of

the ‘Catalonia in Venice’ contribution was not in fact Max, but rather Antoni Abad (Lleida 1956), who is described by Mery Cuesta and Roc Parés as ‘an international artist renowned in the digital art world for his socially engaged work with groups of people with special needs’ (7). This commitment to social engagement resulted in an installation of sorts: ‘Antoni Abad implemented BlindWiki in Venice: an open participation network that uses mobile phones as a locative medium for social communication’ (7). One notes that BlindWiki is itself a Spanish-Italian co-production or sorts led by the Spanish Academy in Rome (11). The comic is thus no exception to the spirit of transnational collaboration undergirding the Catalan contribution to the Biennale. Along with support from Venetian and Italian institutions, those supporters and collaborators of the project from outside of Italy included the Institut Ramon Llull, Generalitat de Catalunya, Ajuntament de Barcelona, Govern Illes Balears, and the Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Thus, the Institut Ramon Llull insists on the collaborative nature of Max’s ‘A Boat Tour,’ stating: ‘The drawings and graphic conceptualization was developed by the well-known cartoonist, Max, in collaboration with the blind participants of BlindWiki under the direction of the “Catalonia in Venice” co-curator, Mery Cuesta’ (9).

Since no background provided in the forty-one-page file explains the genesis of Max’s involvement in the project, it is easy to conclude that he was identified as a possible collaborator who could bring international attention to the project. While his reputation in Spain and across Europe is well known, and while he is one of the Iberian comics artists with the greatest projection in North America, his Anglophone reputation may have lagged behind that of his peers from Franco-Belgian or Japanese traditions. Given the timing of his engagement with the ninth art – more or less coming to age in postdictatorial Spain after the death of Francisco Franco on 20 November 1975 – Max was, like many others of his generation, influenced by comics artists from the American underground tradition (e.g. García 2010; Merino 2014). His 1970 s Barcelona was then putative centre of the postdictatorial comic (Dopico 2005, 337), having been, along with Madrid and Valencia, a hub of comics activity going back to the days prior to the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) (Alary 2002, 38). Early on, Max established a recurring character named Gustavo who, in part, allowed the creator to harness the libertarian political energies that had survived the Civil War and the dictatorship. Along with his friend and comics creator, Pere Joan (Palma de Mallorca, 1956–) he edited the notable magazine *Nosotros Somos los Muertos* beginning in 1993. Often written as *NSLM*, the magazine was the first venue in Spain to publish the work of international artists such as Chris Ware.¹ Max soon became an increasingly recognised figure in both the European and American comics markets (e.g. Beaty 2007, 115–19, 125–28, 135). He won the 1999 Ignatz Award for Best Foreign Material – his comic *El prolongado sueño del Señor T.* was translated into English and published by Drawn & Quarterly as *The Extended Dream of Mr. D.* (2000) – and also the first-ever National Spanish Comics Prize in 2007, not to mention multiple prizes from the Festival Internacional del Comic de Barcelona (in 1989, 1996, 1998, and 2000).

While those readers of Spanish, Catalan or English who are interested in learning more about Max’s career, style and themes have no shortage of options, it is most important to understand that with ‘A Boat Tour’ he is to a large degree working outside of the unique artistic reputation he has forged over the course of four decades. It is his ability to adapt, integrate into a team, and put his own authorial comics voice to the side that matters here. In brief, Max’s willingness to innovate would be nothing without those

others who have influenced the scope and nature of the project. Yet, along with Mery Cuesta and the BlindWiki participants, innovate he has. The result is pitched at a wide and diverse international audience. The Catalan contribution sought to underscore a premise readers may associate with the rise of universal design, rather than the more narrow discourse of targeted inclusion. In the words of Manuel Forcano, Director of the Institut Ramon Llull: 'the objective is not to simply make the artistic project accessible to people who cannot see, but to bring to light the great asset that exists in the process of collective creation where diverse citizens with different capabilities share their sensory experiences in the context of artistic creation' (5). The present article introduces and explores 'A Boat Tour' from both a comics studies and a disability studies perspective, but sets aside – for the time being – those larger social issues suggested through Antoni Abad's BlindWiki project itself. It is nonetheless crucial to realise that the project's stated objective can be applied also to the bi-modal construction of the comic as well. Constructed in both the tactile and visual modalities, 'A Boat Tour' is a comic at once accessible by touch and vision.

With nods to disability studies and urban studies, the first section that follows establishes a framework for approaching 'A Boat Tour' as a simultaneously tactile and visual comic. Its ambiguous positioning regarding the notion of 'disability art' or 'disability in art' means that the comic cannot be considered representational from a disability studies perspective. The disabled body is not on display here, not marshalled for ableist sensation (Mitchell and Snyder 2000; Siebers 2010). Drawing on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Staring* (2009), neither is there any problematic or productive use to which the gaze can be put when a sighted person reads the comic. Yet the social construction of disability clearly figures into the construction and reception of the work, and brings up questions regarding the multi-modal access to visual art that drives Georgina Kleege's book *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (2018). The comic's representation of urban space – here the somewhat uniquely urban, over-photographed canals of Venice – is also of note. While this project aligns in the most general terms with the penchant for comics representation of urban spaces, architecture, and infrastructure that is increasingly being acknowledged by scholars, it rejects rather than confirms the 'triumphant and triumphalist' discourse of urban modernity.² A brief contrast with Jirô Taniguchi's 2014 comic *Venice* (translated into English in 2017) suggests that tactility in comics, as it is with prose literature either in braille or print, subverts the visual spectacle of urban modernity while still allowing readers to visualise space in their mind's eye.

The subsequent section delves into a close-reading of the formal composition and tactile/visual elements of 'A Boat Tour.' While there may be a temptation to see the comic as being in a class of its own, in fact, it has much in common with the tactile elements of comics for sighted readers, as elaborated by Ian Hague (2004). It is simultaneously possible to place the comic within the tradition of the wordless comic (Beronă 2008), and to identify a new function for such properties as the comics gutter and the insert (Groensteen [1999] 2007, [2011] 2013; Postema 2013). It connects with other artistic endeavours, such as Ilan Manouach's *Shapereader* project (shapereader.org), which seek to provide non-visual access to aesthetic experiences. In the end, 'A Boat Tour' may raise more questions than it answers regarding how the novel comics language in which it is composed works, but it nevertheless pushes the ninth art beyond the limits of its storied visual past and patterns of sighted readership.

Venice in the mind's eye

There is something marvellously subversive about the Catalan contribution to La Biennale di Venezia. We are informed that '[it] occupies a boldly paradoxical space: one dedicated to the senses, and more concretely to that which cannot be seen, as a counterpoint to a visual arts Biennale' (7). In this paradox of a non-visual, visual art there is a provocation that one encounters also in the work of Georgina Kleege. As the child of a painter and a sculptor, Kleege grew up steeped in the language, concerns and cultural milieu of the visual avant-garde. From *Sight Unseen* (1999) to *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (2018), she is intent on drawing attention to and marking the culture of sightedness. Her take resonates with the writings of Rod Michalko, who has stated: 'Blindness "showed" me that sightedness *could* be conceived as a culture with particular ways of "looking and seeing," understanding and knowing, and with particular ways of demonstrating this to sighted others.'³ This culture of sightedness can be understood, then, as a performative culture. Its normative trappings rest upon the construction of 'blindness' as the opposition of sight and invite attempts at passing (Michalko 2002, 45). From this essential opposition there follow a host of discursive and figurative strategies through which sighted culture has historically marked and marginalised the trope of the 'blind' person, imbuing them with the quality of lack, and paradoxically exceptionalizing their moral qualities and 'inner vision' (Barasch 2001; Bolt 2016; Garvia 2017; Sutherland-Meier 2015).

Grounded in this tradition of disability studies critique, Kleege accomplishes in the realm of visual art what David Bolt does in his study of prose titled *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-Reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing* (2016). In *Sight Unseen* she largely followed a path similar to that of Martin Norden's *Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (1994), insisting that the 'representation of the blind' routinely turns out to be about sight; for example, that 'in fact, movies with blind characters are not about blindness at all. They are about sight' (1999, 58). As '[t]he viewer contemplates the blind man on screen with both fascination and revulsion' (Kleege 1999, 48), the audience participates in the construction of an ableist norm. This analysis of cinema recapitulates the critique of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century tradition of freak shows, as analysed by Leslie Fiedler (1978) and later Garland-Thomson (1996). From this curious and constructed vantage point of ocularnormative ableism, as Tobin Siebers explores in *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), the history of modern visual art is closely connected with tropes of bodily disfigurement and distortion. The corporeal other is opposed to ableist society's construction of what Garland-Thomson (1997) termed the 'normate.' This tradition of art threatens to turn disability into a metaphorical vehicle for the delivery of sensation. Otherness becomes a spectacle marshalled in order to produce a certain type of emotional response.

In *More than Meets the Eye*, however, Kleege carves out a space for disability in artistic discourse as a subject rather than an object. She draws upon the artistic milieu in which she has been immersed since her youth in order to dismantle the understanding that the visual arts are either inaccessible to those persons experiencing visual impairment or else completely saturated by ableist tropes. For her, the production of, engagement with, and enjoyment of visual art is not purely a realm pertaining to sighted culture. Kleege is essence reclaims visual art as something that is 'more than meets the eye.' Here it is worthwhile to remark that sighted people tend to not recognise the distinctions between what Frances Koestler calls 'total blindness, legal blindness, and functional blindness'

(1976, 45; also Michalko 2002, 60). That is, as few as 10% of those people who are labelled as 'blind' in society are completely without sight, such that the vast majority have some degree of residual vision. For Kleege, there is no contradiction involved in accessing visual art via a combination of visual and tactile methods, or else by purely tactile means. She does not outline an exclusively tactile approach to visual art, but rather constructs a more capacious understanding of how humans access it and how the seeming objectivity of ocularnormative approaches hides their semiotic limitations. She reminds readers that 'The vast majority of blind and visually impaired people in the industrialized world are adults who were formerly sighted' (2018, 2, also 4, 10). Amidst her thoughts on 'Touch Tourism' in chapter 4, Kleege discusses a 2015 exhibit at the Prado Museum in Madrid consisting of six tactile reproductions of famous paintings, with outlines of figures, as well as differing textures (2018, 67). The designers of that exhibit worked closely with members of ONCE (*Organización Nacional de Ciegos de España*/National Organisation of Blind Persons in Spain) to ensure an experience accessible also to sighted visitors (on ONCE see Garvía 2017). 'A Boat Tour' can be meaningfully understood as a similar contribution, though in the ninth art rather than in painting.

In order to understand what the comic under study accomplishes, it helps to adopt Kleege's insistence on disability as the subject, rather than the object, of visual art. Thus instead of analysing the way in which comics representation comes to 'reflect and/or resist broader cultural conceptions about disability' (Smith and Alaniz 2019, 1), as scholars have done by privileging the figure of the superhero in comics, this is to consider disability as a force that brings meaning and significance to art by a means other than representation. Beyond the possibility of its visual or metaphorical appearance in comics, then, disability can be a presence in art in a way that is irreducible to content. To appreciate fully this distinction, one must be willing to acknowledge not merely what a work does, but moreover what it does not do. Before moving to a close analysis of Max's comics collaboration – and thus to a discussion of what it does – it is just as important to consider what 'A Boat Tour' does not do. A meaningful counterexample for these purposes can be found in Jirô Taniguchi's *Venice* ([2014] 2017), an urban comics work also depicting a sensory experience unfolding along the same city's storied canals.

The storyline of *Venice* narrates the arrival of a nameless Japanese man to the city. Although his mother never talked about it, the artist's protagonist has recently discovered from a trove of images that his mother's parents, his grandparents, once lived there. The text pushing the story forward is spare and relatively unobtrusive. The vast majority of the pages have no text whatsoever and experiment with differing page layouts that mix together watercolour paintings, postcard images, and photo-collage. Most pages can be taken as direct perspectives of what the protagonist sees, though his figure sometimes appears. Gazing over the canals and contemplating the city's architectural splendour the viewer is meant to adopt the visual perspective and the inner mood of the protagonist, who is silent, wistful, nostalgic, concentrating in deep thought or else lost in vague impressions. There is almost no dialogue, and what exists of it – e.g. a discussion with a bartender who knows where the visitor's grandfather lived and painted – is filtered through the narrative text, thus as information learned, rather than reproducing it directly through word balloons or a communicational exchange. Taniguchi's work appeals primarily to the sense of vision in a way that could be described as picturesque at best and touristic at worst. His full-colour illustrations are wonderful and pleasing to

the eye. They convey a sensitivity and emotional resonance that do not always occur with iconic spatial representation in comics. Despite its compelling art and page design, *Venice* is nonetheless a prime example of the ability of comics and graphic novels to showcase the city as a visual spectacle, an aestheticised form, a place of wonder to be eagerly embraced by cultures of sightedness.⁴ While Taniguchi's subdued storyline nevertheless adds narrative value to the images, there is a sense in which they stand on their own as purely visual tributes to the city's stunning beauty. Max's comic is not aesthetic in this visual way. Instead, it seeks to induce inner moods through tactility.

'A Boat Tour': tactile, wordless innovation

Even though Ian Hague once expressed scepticism regarding the possibilities of comics with braille-like raised surfaces (2004, 57, also 62n71, 174–75), his *Comics and the Senses* (2004) nonetheless offered a welcome challenge to the idea that 'all sensory content in comics, it would seem, is filtered through the lens of the eye' (2004, 23). 'A Boat Tour' almost seems crafted as a pointed response to that scepticism. It is a challenge to ocularcentrist readings of the ninth art. Though perhaps imperfect in certain limited respects, it is a game-changer for tactile assessments of comics that have emphasised – as Hague has done well in his book's fourth chapter (2004, 92–119) – design approaches, the comics multiframe, textures, and qualities like hardness, flexibility, weight, and gloss.

Max's collaborative design of the comic destabilises the notion that comics are a sighted medium. At the same time, however, it paradoxically borrows from the sighted tradition of the wordless comic. In this particular example of tactile comics, the richness of visual symbolism that Beronä (2008, 7) attributed to the wordless form is replaced with a richness of bodily sensation. A use-economy of felt conscious states substitutes for the exchange-economy of visual appropriation. That said, words are an important fuel for the launch of the experiment. The comic (2017, 22–37) begins with two, simultaneously tactile-visual, glossary pages that associate terms with textures in both braille and print (22–23). This 'Tactile Comic Code/Glossario Fumetto Tattile' lists out the shape ('Boat/Barca'), line ('Itinerary/Itinerario'), and textures ('Wall/Muro,' 'Water/Acqua,' 'Light/Luce,' 'Shadow/Ombra,' 'Sounds/Rumori,' 'Motors/Motori,' 'Echo/Eco,' 'Splash/Spruzzo,' 'Wood/Legno,' 'Bells/Campane,' 'Voices/Voci,' 'Seagulls/Gabbiani,' and 'Smells/Odori'). Rather than calling this a glossary, it might be more appropriate, given the spatial nature of the comics form in general and the cartographic theme of this specific project, to borrow from the vocabulary of map-making and refer to this as a legend. Each subsequent page of the project constructs a component of the boat tour using both visual line and raised tactile surface. There is neither more nor less information in the visual image than in the raised line such that each modality conforms precisely to the other.

After the title page ('A Boat Tour/Tour in Barca,' 24), which consists of a single panel containing the overhead, bird's eye view of the boat entering the narrow canal between two walls, each page contains two distinct panels. These are marked by a thick line/raised line surface. The first panel is a narrow rectangle placed at the top of the page that consistently displays the position of the boat relative to walls and overhead bridges at it weaves through the canal. The boat outline is standardised in shape but as it moves through the canal. Its prow variously points in different directions. A broken 'Itinerary' line shows the boat turning left or right. The walls of the canal are separated by a varying

width that reflects changes in represented distance. The last of these, on the ‘Arrivederci!/Bye!’ (37) page, contains an irregular wall area that evokes a dock.

The second distinct panel on each page is lower and much larger, perhaps more than three times the area of the upper panel. These secondary panels are almost square in shape and variously portray one of three perspectives on the travel experience. These all emphasise an aspect of sensory experience. One variant is an overhead bird’s eye view, similar to that contained in the upper-panels of each page. Thus for example, the larger area of the second panel allows the reader to experience the passing of the boat into a portion of shadow (‘Into Shadows/In Ombra,’ 26), or conveys the auditory silence using delineated textural zones within the frame (‘Silence/Silenzio,’ 29). Another variant is the straight-on horizontal view of the boat passenger. Thus during the experience of the tour, when church bells can be heard echoing through the narrow canals (‘Bells/Campane,’ 31), visual-tactile readers of the comic see-feel the water, with tall buildings rising up on either side (Figure 1). A third variant uses the lower panel to convey a pure sensation, felt but not given a spatial contextualisation other than the passengers current position. One example of this (‘Humidity/Umidità,’ 32) represents humidity through densely arranged visual dots/raised points covering the panel, save for a central circle that is smooth. Another example (‘Rocking/Beccheggio,’ 33) uses irregularly spaced, raised wavy lines to evoke the sensation of rocking to-and-fro on the canal water.

As evident in this brief description, ‘A Boat Tour’ is intent on conveying the sensory experience of the canal ride in terms that go far beyond the visual to include auditory and felt sensations. Beyond the last panel where two stick figures are depicted, one waving from the dock and the second waving from the boat (‘Arrivederci!/Bye!’ 37), there are no people depicted in the comic. This is not the tale of a specific protagonist, but rather a more open narrative into which individual readers can project their own imaginations. When contrasted with Taniguchi’s *Venice*, it is clear that this comic is not vehicle for urban spectacle, but rather a vehicle for experiencing the presence of heat, air, humidity, the sound of voices, echoes, water, all through the boat’s movement. If Taniguchi’s narrative relies on the visual image of the city that has been harnessed as exchange value, Max emphasises its use value by way of the full sensuous re-appropriation of what Marx had referred to as ‘all human senses and qualities’ (Fraser 2019b: ch. 2; drawing on Marx 1964, 139; Merrifield 2002, 78). In doing so, it relies on quite innovative uses of the comics gutter, the insert, and the balloon that merit exploration in turn.

As noted above, in place of any sort of traditional panel-and-gutter structure, the open hyperframe of each page of ‘A Boat Tour’ includes two separate yet related panels. Their relation is not consistent with the grammatical function of the gutter in much comics art. There is no gutter here to provoke temporal consequence or disjunction. The relationship of the first to the second panel on a given page is not one of sequence but rather one of simultaneity. The sequence of images instead unfolds between – rather than within – individual pages of the comic. Yet the gutter reappears in the guise of the water canal in each page’s upper panel. The white/unraised space of the canal is here a space between architectural elements, between the walls of buildings. These elements are architectural both in terms of their denotation of physical urban architecture and also in terms of the architectural quality of comics form that has been noted by critics (Groensteen [1999] 2007; also Labio 2015). As tactile readers trace the canal’s dimensions with their fingers, they gain a sense of the boat’s movement. The gutter has thus been reincorporated into the comic’s diegesis in the form of the canal itself. This reincorporation collapses the

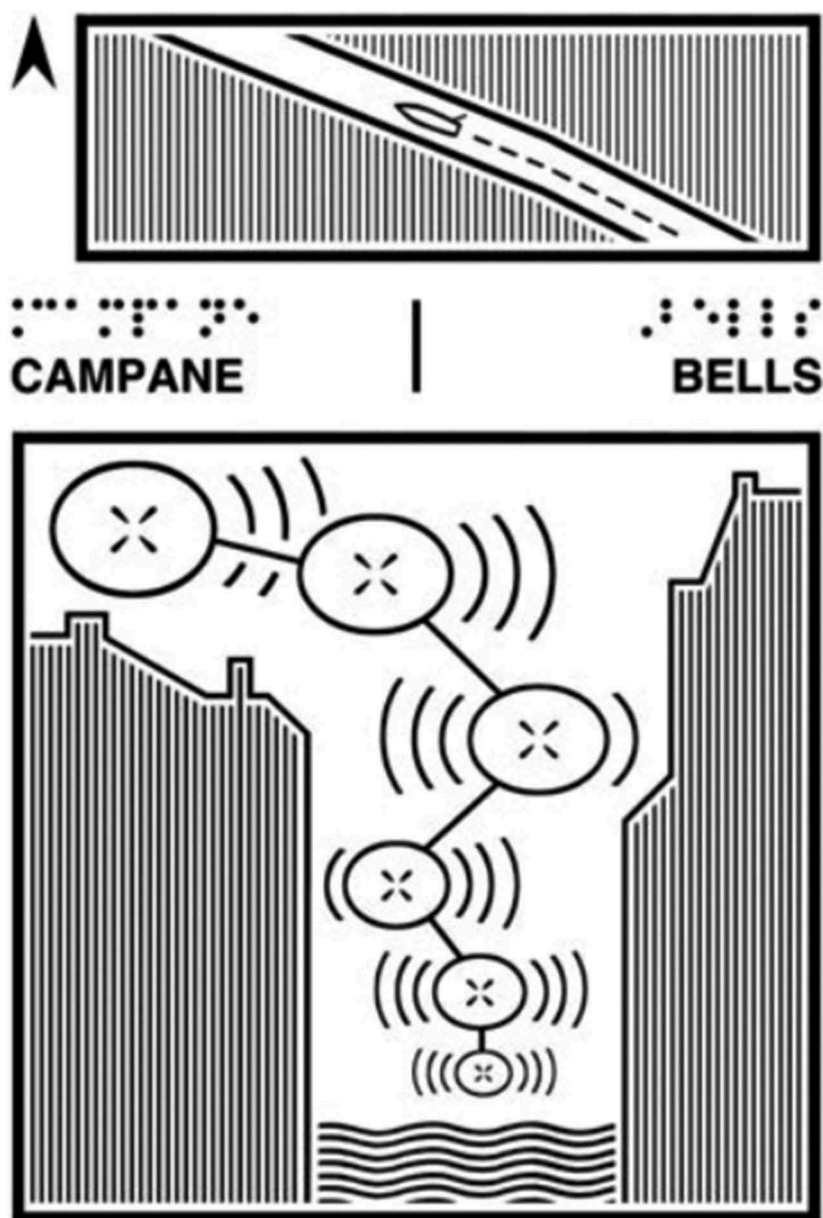


Figure 1. Echoes/Eco' (25)

extradiegetic space of narration and the diegetic space of the events narrated in a way that does not tend to happen in visual comics.

The second panel on each page can be taken as a comics insert. Barbara Postema and Thierry Groensteen have written of the various relationships that may exist between what the critics call a host or base panel and an insert panel (Groensteen [1999] 2007, 86; Postema 2013, 43). In the case of 'A Boat Tour,' one can generalise that the second panel or insert is related to the first panel in a very certain sense. Neither is primary to the other.

Technically speaking, there is no temporal simultaneity, as these are not two events. While one is an event, an action, a movement, a verb; the other is a sensation, an adjective, a qualia. Both are part of a single temporal moment or duration. Their separation on the page merely reproduces the mind's ability in practice to distinguish aspects of a single experience that are in reality coetaneous and in principle inseparable.

The balloon has been taken by many to be a defining element of comics form, though this take is certainly not unanimous (Carrier 2000, 65; Cohn 2013, 35–37; Gubern 1972, 141; Kunzle 1973, 2–3). In 'A Boat Tour,' we have neither word nor thought balloons, but rather an invocation of the balloon form that expresses a sound. The variety of sonic qualia experienced by the boat passenger – or if one prefers, the tactile-visual reader of the comic in their mind's eye – is reflected in the use of a variety of visual/raised forms. Using the comic's aforementioned codified legend, one can identify, in the single panel for 'Symphony/Sinfonia' (36) (Figure 2), the presence of seagull sounds, human voices, splashes, bells and more, still. Though highly unique in the way it is expressed in this particular comic, this encoding owes to a long semiotic history of the way meaning has been represented in comics balloons in both conventional and abstract forms (Gubern 1972, 145, 148, 151).

In each of these instances of an innovative usage of standard elements of comics form, 'A Boat Tour' represents the quantitative or physical journey between two points as a qualitative change in the passenger. The flow of the boat along the canal evokes the flow of consciousness. It does this by way of a series of states of mind that seem to be distinct from one another and yet that are only distinguishable through an act of mind. There is indeed an adventure in this comic, but it is not the exotic adventure popularised by Hergé's Tintin, but rather the more quotidian adventure of urban navigation. The canal tour becomes a metaphor or allegory for a form of movement that relies on sound, feeling and sensation more than it does sight. Autobiographically infused writings by Rod Michalko and Steven Kuusisto are sources that emphasise well how this form of locomotion connects with the experience of the persons with visual impairment in urban environments. It is the way in which this tale of a boat tour is told that destabilises the expectations of the ocular centric reader. Innovations in the comics gutter, insert, and balloon are further destabilizations of the orderly sequence of ocularcentric comics narrative as they place value on sensory experience over visual landmarking and the habitually sighted forms of urban orienteering.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is clear that 'Max has created an evocative, and at times abstract narrative, born from a new language that allows the reader a glimpse into the wide and unexplored horizon of comic sensorial possibilities' (12). Yet there remain a number of concerns to be considered by future scholarship exploring the possibilities inherent in the tactile comic. For example, the sudden and seemingly unnecessary appearance of stick figures in the last page of 'A Boat Tour' seems to convey a reluctance to dispense with the figurative representation of persons experiencing disability in society – when a chief benefit of the tactile representation of sensory experience would be to avoid altogether the problematic legacy of such corporeal representation in visual art. In addition, the precision evident in the codified legend that begins 'A Boat Tour' does not announce or encode the way that secondary panels evoke a mixture of views in horizontal and vertical or bird's eye views as the comic progresses. While conventions might be developed for signalling the encoding of such diverse

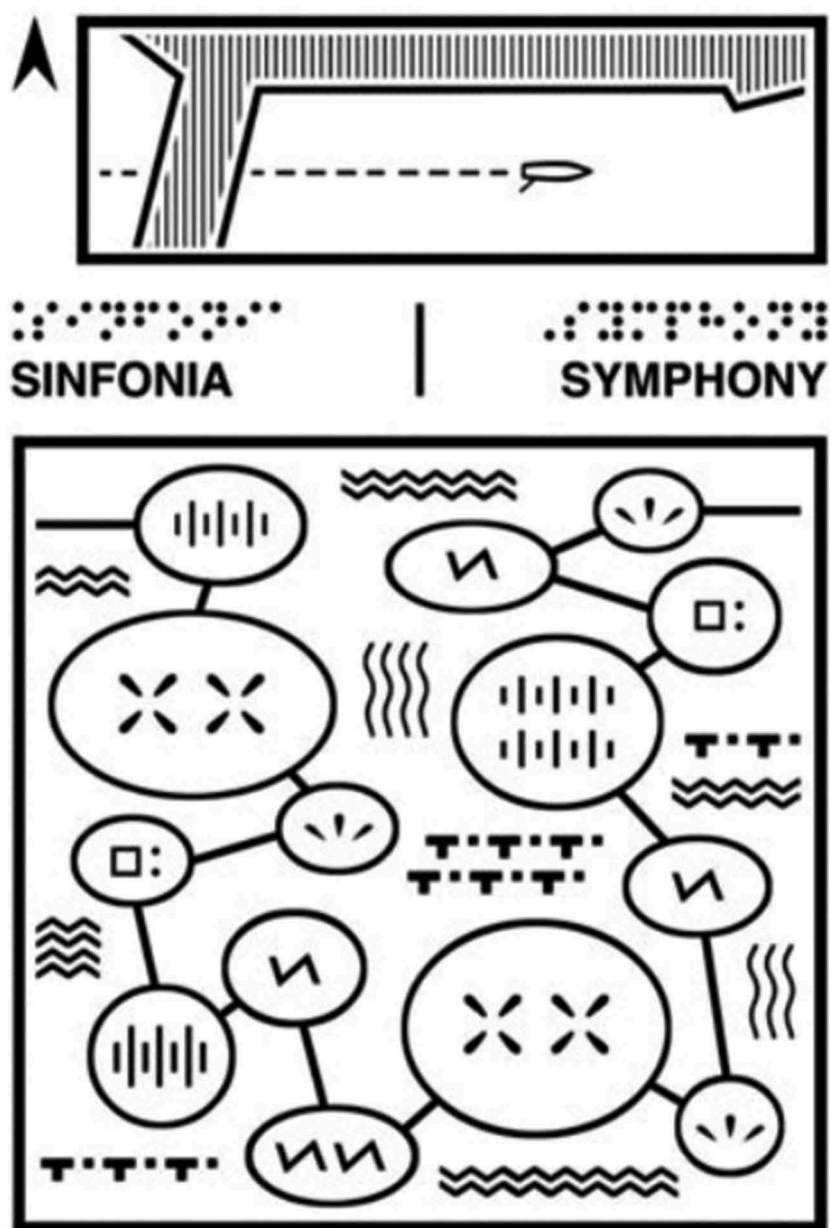


Figure 2. 'Symphony/Sinfonia' (36)

perspectives, other issues remain. For instance, the unnuanced reduction of infrastructural relief and building textures to the single category of 'wall' seems to be problematic in both horizontal and vertical views. The sorts of visually hidden space analysed so well by comics theorist Pascal Lefèvre (2009) persist here, and deserve theorisation as tactile artistic constructions in their own right.

A strength of the project is its reliance on collaborative forms of artistic creation, which are still undertheorized in relation to disability. Collaborative approaches to artistic production have evident value for persons experiencing cognitive disability in society (Fraser 2018). Projects such as ‘A Boat Tour’ and *Shapereader* also demonstrate forcefully that their importance for persons experiencing visual impairment is worthy of further attention. The point is to theorise not merely the collaborative creation of works of art themselves, but also to enrich our understanding of how those same works can be experienced in a collaborative fashion. Georgina Kleege has already raised this point through analysis of Mexican photographer Gerardo Nigenda’s use of braille in his photographic images, which in her words invite ‘a collaborative effort between a sighted viewer and a blind interlocutor’ (2018, 52). Similarly, she has posed trenchant questions about the presence of tactile language in social contexts that might be applied to comics – e.g. whether the use of braille in public is ‘intended to send some sort of message to sighted people rather than to aid the blind’ (Kleege 2018, 46). Max’s ‘A Boat Tour’ is such a compelling contribution to the ninth art precisely because it is concerned at once with the overlapping artistic and social dimensions of tactility.

Notes

1. On Max, e.g., Dopico 2005, 373–84; Pérez Del Solar 2013, 79–88; Merino 2002, 142–45; Altarriba 2002; on Max, Pere Joan and NSLM, e.g.; Lladó Pol 2001, 2009, 34–37; Fraser 2019a, 47–49, 55–57; also on Spanish comics: Amago and Marr 2019; Merino 2003; Pérez-Sánchez 2007.
2. Ahrens and Meteling 2010; Chute 2017, ch. 5; Davies 2019; Dittmer 2014; Fraser 2019b; Lefebvre 1995, 3.
3. Michalko 2002, 9, original emphasis; referring also to 1998, 102–27; consider too Kuusisto 1998.
4. In doing so, the ninth art recapitulates a principle undergirding the modern science of urban design, which crafted the city as an exchange value more in the interests of builders, technicians, capitalists and ultimately tourists than as a use-value for the city’s inhabitants (Lefebvre 1996; Fraser 2019b). Of course, Venice is a visually stunning city, and its architecture and unique pre-modern organisation places it at a remove from the 19th-century urban planning denounced by Lefebvre. Yet it participates nonetheless in the circuits of touristic capital that have sustained urban capitalism throughout the twentieth-century and into the twenty-first.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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