GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

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Título: A Reading of Blacksad as Graphic Novel in Terms of the *Noir* Tradition / Lectura de Blacksad como novela gráfica en función de la tradición *noir*

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Contents

1.   Preliminary Remarks and Objectives

The subject-matter upon which this End-of-Degree Project is based revolves around the fictional figure that appears as main character in the *Anthology* of *Blacksad* graphic novels published in 2000 by the firm Dargaud, the artists of which are Juan Díaz Canales (Writer) and Juanjo Guarnido (Illustrator). Henceforth in this Project, this same *Anthology* will be identified as *Blacksad*.[1]

What may be called a study, or reading, of *Blacksad* here will place emphasis on *noir* aesthetics, and especially on the tradition of *film noir*, as the stylistic factor that most contributes to any explanation that is aimed at elucidating the essential nature of *Blacksad*. Thus, neither should it be surprising that the tradition of early and mid-twentieth century American detective fiction (that of the 'private dick' novels created by Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh) also figures in this analytic process.

Therefore, the emphasis upon ways of defining paradigmatically the *noir* and private detective traditions in twentieth-century art will be broached in this Project prior to a more detailed exploration of the figure of Blacksad as represented in the *Anthology* that concerns this Project.

Thus, the ultimate objective of this Project is to explore the fictional character / figure of Blacksad in social and psychological terms in order to foreground this same figure as an artistic creation worthy of consideration within the diachronic context of literary and graphic art.

As were to be expected in this kind of academic piece, the conclusions reached about ways of pinpointing the narrative and aesthetic essentialism of *Blacksad* will also be set down, together with the details of the bibliographical sources researched as the first phase of the undertaking of this study.

2.   The Phenomenon of the Comicbook / Graphic Novel

2.1.   *Theory*

In order to understand and analyse the intricacies of *Blacksad* and the place it has in the context of the modern graphic novel, it is necessary to know what a graphic novel is first,

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[1] Chronologically, the graphic novels referred to here develop in the following sequence: *Blacksad: Somewhere within the Shadows* (2000), *Blacksad: Arctic-Nation* (2003), *Blacksad: Red Soul* (2005), *Blacksad: A SIlent Hell* (2010), *Blacksad: Amarillo* (2014), *Blacksad: They All Fall Down - Part One* (2021a), *Blacksad: They All Fall Down - Part Two* (2021b).

and what makes them different from other media that use iconical language, such as comicbooks, manga, comic strips, etc…

Before proceeding with making any type of classification here, the ambiguity of the term "comic" itself needs to be elucidated. In this respect, Romero-Jódar (2020) states the following: "In the state of current Comics Studies, there seems to be a constant use of the terms 'comic' and 'comicbook' to refer both to the language employed by comicbooks and to the different subgenres that use this language" (p.118). This ambiguity can make it difficult to discern which of the meanings "comic" is referring to, so other terms will be used in order to avoid confusion in this End-of-Degree project. The term "iconical language" will be used to refer to the narrative style that uses images and words in order to communicate its narrative content, and the term "comicbook" will be used to refer to the narrative genre, different from other genres that use iconical language such as comic strips or graphic novels (Romero-Jódar, 2020, p. 118). In order to classify iconical subgenres, the main division would be between narrative and non-narrative iconical subgenres. In Romero-Jódar's words:

> In non-narrative iconical subgenres, there is no sequential structuring between images, and thus they can be translated into verbal language as single sentences. Instead of narrating, they describe the situation portrayed in the image. And, when translated into words, they rely on a present tense that describes the single temporality of the situation
>
> Moreover, in terms of the category of narrative iconical subgenres, the central issue involving the analysis of comic strips, comicbooks and graphic novels is encountered. These texts present a complex structure based on a juxtaposition of panels. This relationship can be understood either as coordination or subordination of clauses, depending on the deictic elements of time and space that may or may not appear in each picture frame. These subgenres are narrative, in fundamental terms, given that they offer a sequence of events unfolding in a progression of time (Romero-Jódar, 2020, pp. 129-130).

Thus, the decisive property that divides narrative and non-narrative iconical subgenres is sequential structure. When the different panels of the iconical subgenre are related, telling a story through a series of events, as occurs in comic strips, comicbooks and graphic novels, that subgenre may be considered narrative. On the other hand, an iconical subgenre could be considered non-narrative if it is composed only of a single panel (like the single-panel cartoon or advertisements) or if the panels it is composed of do not hold a sequential relation, for example, the illustrated novel, where the illustrations of the different scenes lack coherence by themselves, depending on the text (Romero-Jódar, 2020, pp. 129-130).

Focusing on the different narrative iconical subgenres, the comic strip can be easily differentiated from comicbooks, as comic strips normally have a length of a single page, while comicbook and other narrative subgenres are composed of dozens of pages. However, the difference between comicbook and graphic novel is a much more challenging topic, especially since some critics do not agree on there being a difference between them at all, for instance, Douglas Wolk explains his view on the topic in the following lines:

> Those conflicts have been going on for a couple of decades in relation to the very basic question of what to call the things with panels and word balloons and so on that I'm discussing in this book. The cheap way of referring to them is "comics" or "comicbooks;" the fancy way is "graphic novels" … Consider, by analogy, the difference between "movies," "films," and "cinema" (Wolk, 2007, pp. 60-61).

This implies that the creation of the term "graphic novel" as opposed to "comicbook" does not come from a difference in formal features, but is, rather, due to cultural reasons unrelated to the features of the comic *per se*. The term "graphic novel" reportedly started to be used during the 1980s, the decade during which the medium started to be considered an art form, mainly because of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God*, which popularised the term and made the critics consider the medium of comics as having reached "maturity" (Tabachnick, 2017, p. 35).

However, the fact that the term "graphic novel" did not originate in a difference between formal features does not mean that the term can not be used for that purpose. Certain critics and experts have pointed to possible characteristics in which "comicbooks" and "graphic novels" differ, but no consensus has been reached, it would seem. As such, this Project will follow the definition provided by Romero-Jódar, who postulates a clear division between the terms thanks to the concept of "chronotope," as coined by Bakhtin (2010, as cited in Romero-Jódar, 2020). Regarding the chronotope, the well-known definition by the narrative theorist may be taken into account: "We will give the name chronotope (literally, 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin, M. M., 2010, p. 117). In his work, the Russian formalist establishes that what differentiates "Greek romance" from the "adventure novel of everyday life" (genres of ancient novels) is the use of chronotopes, that is, the events that are chosen for the story to be told.

Bakhtin concludes that the main effect of the use of different chronotopes results in different amounts of character development. Thus, if chronotopes are applied to modern iconical subgenres, we find that the "comicbook," as in the case of the "Greek novel,"

features a protagonist who does not suffer change throughout the events of the story. In this case, superhero comics come to mind, especially the likes of *Superman*, given that this stoic character's essence can be said to never have undergone alteration. As presented by Umberto Eco (1964) the reason why this character never married Lois Lane is because the implication of the passing of time would destroy the unchangeable chronotope of the comicbook. Superman, as the paradigm of comicbook characters and series, relies on that narrative time to prolong his existence *ad infinitum* (p. 237). On the other hand, the protagonist of the "graphic novel" is subject to the same kind of chronotope used in the "adventure novel of everyday life," where only the moments that define a character are narrated by the story, i.e. events of utmost importance in the character's life that ensure that, by the end of the story, the protagonist is no longer the same person that they were at the beginning of the work. For this chronotope, groundbreaking graphic novels such as *Watchmen* come to mind, given that the ideological issues at hand make it almost impossible for their protagonists to remain unaltered through the events of the narration: "'Who Watches the Watchmen?' is one of the central questions of the comic. What are the checks and balances for superheroes? And what happens when society rejects its champions? Watchmen answers: Then superheroes have to accept that they do not act on behalf of others but rather to live out their own fantasies and neuroses and to please their own vanities" (Berninger et al., 2010, p. 154). This graphic novel questions every trope and cliche of the superhero genre, putting the characters in conundrums that are not only thought-provoking for the reader, but also serve as a tool for character development.

2.2.   *Aesthetics*

Given that different subgenres of "iconical language" have been classified, and their basic characteristics defined, the phenomenon of the graphic novel may now be further studied by commenting on two intrinsic features of any work, their aesthetics and the techniques used to create said work.

The objective of this first section, with regard to the phenomenon of aesthetics, is to ponder its essentialism and then consider how it comes to be projected within the context of the graphic novel. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the definition of the term *aesthetics* is the following: "The philosophy of the beautiful or of art; a system of principles for the appreciation of the beautiful, etc.; the distinctive underlying principles of a work of art or a genre, the works of an artist, the arts of a culture, etc" (*OED*, n.d). Keeping this definition in mind, this term can be used to refer to the general tone of a work, its

insertion within a recognisable artistic movement, as well as the conceptual contents that emanate from it or which become discernible as it unfolds.

Relevant to this task of definition is the way in which critics (in contrast to the majority of the population, let us say), would seem to need to distinguish between the categories of the comicbook, on the one hand, and the graphic novel, on the other. In this same sense, would seem that the factors of greater maturity and seriousness in the case of latter come into play: "The most recent change has led to the coining of the term graphic novel to designate a new trend that links comicbook aesthetics with literary writing, thus providing a rise in the status of this iconical production" (Romero-Jodar, 2006, p. 94).

Yet, despite the abundance of historical narratives, the graphic novel does not find it easy to cut ties with its origins within the superhero tradition. At the same time, what has also emerged as a trend in recent decades is the way in which such superhero narratives have tended to absorb the more cynical, even pessimistic, sometimes *noir*, aesthetics of the graphic novel: "If they do feature superheroes, it is a new kind of superhero – like Frank Miller's portrayal of Batman as the Dark Knight – psychologically complex, often neurotic, and self-questioning" (Tabachnik, 2017, p. 26). Thus, even the moral-ethical status of these superheroes comes into question, given that many of these graphic novel protagonists act in unheroic ways, prompting the reader to consider and develop their own opinion on the events unfolding instead of being force-fed "baby-bird moralising" opinions from a Manichean (morally simplistic black-and-white) story (Berninger, 2010, p. 157).

Thus, the aesthetics of the graphic novel can be hard to define, largely because the subgenre hosts within itself a plurality of tones and styles, ranging from realistic black-and-white historical narratives to the reinvented figure of the cynical, even unheroic protagonist. While this plurality provides a rich repertoire for the reader to explore, it raises issues with regard to the pinpointing of the aesthetics of the subgenre. However, it could be argued that the presence of sober, psychological tone is a constant within the subgenre, generally speaking (Berninger, 2010, p. 142).

2.3.   Techniques

This last section of this graphic novel cluster, will wrap up the analysis of the different formal features that characterise this same class of fiction. In order to do that, this section will revolve around the technical aspects or techniques that are used in the creation of graphic novels, as well as in any other subgenres who use "iconical language."

According to the *OED* the term *technique* refers to: "The formal or practical aspect of any art, occupation, or field; manner of execution or performance with regard to this. Also more generally: way of doing something" (*OED*, n.d). Given that this term can refer to procedures used in any field of expertise, in order to contextualise the term within the specific field of comicbook art this End-of-Degree Project will refer to *technique* as understandable regarding the range of procedures used to represent graphically on pages the scenes of the story unfolding (for example, painting, drawing and framing techniques) as opposed to other procedures that are not directly involved in on-page representation (for example, storytelling or character design techniques). The following quoted lines do not only highlight part of the repertoire of techniques in this artistic field, but also state the subtle but important nature of the arrangement of the elements on a prototypical comicbook / graphic novel of a page:

> The spatial arrangement of elements on a page is significant, as is the flow between panels, inside panels, from speech balloon to speech balloon. The structure and shape of the speech balloons hold meaning. Gutters can vary in width, which can in turn be the same all over the page or vary between different panels. Text is usually presented in all caps, using font size, exclamation marks and bold types to indicate loudness, and typeface to indicate tone of voice and even accent. (Berninger et al., 2010, p. 241).

It is the prototypical value of this quotation that endows it with value, therefore.

What differentiates the procedures that will be considered as techniques in this End-of-Degree Project from those that will not is the untranslatability of these techniques to another type of media. That is to say that a story created for a comicbook could easily be told in a film instead. However, for example, the arrangement technique involving the reduction of the width of gutters between panels to create the effect that the action told in those panels is happening rapidly, could not. Logically, note needs to be taken here of how the effect (the sensation of greater velocity) described above could be imitated using procedures inherent to the artistic medium of cinema, for example, the shorter duration of multiple shots strung together in quick succession within a sequence. However, the evocation of that same sensation would not change the fact that the technique *per se* would remain untranslatable to other types of media (Berninger et al., 2010, p. 13).

Thus, considering the wide-range nature of the catalogue of techniques and procedures that are used in the creation of comicbooks and graphic novels, a complete classification of these terms would be required in order to facilitate the comprehension of this repertoire. Despite this need for classification, and in the same fashion as indicated in Section 2.1, experts in comic art do not seem to have reached a consensus regarding how to classify

this array of techniques. Therefore, this End-of-Degree Project will use as a point of reference the categorisation created by one of the most prominent modern comic experts, Scott McCloud:

> These are the five areas where your choices can make the difference between clear, convincing storytelling and a confusing mess: Choice of moment: Deciding which moments to include in a comics story and which to leave out; choice of frame: Choosing the right distance and angle to view those moments; choice of image: Rendering the characters, objects and environments in those frames clearly; choice of word: picking words that add valuable information and work well with the images around them; and choice of flow: Guiding readers through and between panels on a page or screen. (McCloud, 2006, p. 10)

This clear distribution allows the user to classify any stylistic device or procedure used in the analysed comic as one of five types of choice.

Also inevitably relevant in the latter sense is how each of these five categories will be found to host a wide array of recognisable techniques. The same could be said about different nuances in those same choices, for example, the fact that Watchmen follows the perennial pattern of presenting nine panels per page could be described as a "choice of flow" (McCloud, 2006, p. 10). Yet, viewed thus, this classification does take into account, in terms of the phenomenon of representation, the nuance that this nine-panel structure is intentionally used to recreate the feeling of classical superhero comics (Berninger et al., 2010, p. 154).

3.   Contextualization

3.1.   Context

In the previous section, the fundamental concepts of the comicbook, on the one hand, and iconical language, on the other, have been laid out. Once the frame in which iconical subgenres operate has been explained, it is the moment to clarify where in that frame does *Blacksad* stand. All the volumes of *Blacksad* fit in the "graphic novel" definition that was given above: The panels follow a succession of events through time which create a narrative, while the events of the album take place during dozens of pages each, and finally, the protagonist undergoes change during the story. John Blacksad's psychological state reaches a point of resolution at the end of each and every volume, whether he is heart-broken, inspired with new-found conviction or, for example, haunted by guilt due to having killed a man,

Blacksad could not be described as a static character at any point of the series of adventures in which he is involved.

3.2.   *Juan Díaz Canales (Writer)*

Juan Díaz Canales, the writer who pulled together the narrative of the *Blacksad* graphic novels, was born in 1972 in Madrid. Before becoming widely known as a writer, he was educated in a school for animation, and in 1996 he became one of the founding members of Tridente Animation (Canales & Guarnido, 2001).

During the decade of the 90s, Canales was slowly but surely planning to create a series of graphic novels with Juanjo Guarnido, who he met in Madrid while they were working together as animators in an animation study called Lápiz Azul (Matute, 2022). That plan would later come to fruition in November, 2000 in the form of *Blacksad: Somewhere within the Shadows*, which would eventually become the most awarded and recognised graphic novel of both of their authors.

Canales has been granted many awards for his work in the *Blacksad* graphic novels, such as the Angoulême Best Series Award or the Eisner Best Edition of International Material Award, both for the *Blacksad* series (Norma Editorial, n.d.). Despite the popularity of the work, it is not the author's only source of recognisement, as he has worked in many other graphic novels, the most prominent probably being *Corto Maltese*, the extremely popular graphic novels created by Hugo Pratt, whose legacy has now been entrusted to Canales when he was chosen as writer for the reboot of the series in 2015 (Matute, 2022).

3.3.   *Juanjo Guarnido (Illustrator)*

Juanjo Guarnido, who illustrated the pages of *Blacksad,* was born in 1967 in Granada. Prior to becoming the illustrator of *Blacksad*, he had already led a successful career as a comic illustrator and lead animator. In his first years as an illustrator he worked on several fanzines while he studied painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts in the University of Granada (Canales & Guarnido, 2001), and shortly after graduating, he was hired by Marvel Comics. He also worked as lead animator for Disney in widely recognised movies such as *Hercules*, *Tarzan*, and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (Norma Editorial, n.d.).

Later in his career, he would once again contact Juan Díaz Canales, the writer and animator that he had previously met in Madrid, and with whom he had already planned to

work with in a series of comics. Due to the scarce comic market in Spain during the 90s, Díaz and Guarnido looked for a French publisher instead (Matute, 2022), and, in November 2000, *Blacksad: Somewhere within the Shadows* was published by Dargaud.

Although *Blacksad* has become his most successful work, having won Angoulême and Eisner awards, he has also won awards such as the Landerneau Prize as illustrator of *Les Indes Fourbes* (Pasamonik, 2019), another successful comic series. He has also worked as lead animator in award winning Disney movies, and has also directed the independent animation *Freak of the Week* which has several million views on YouTube (Guarnido & Freak Kitchen, 2014).

3.4.   *Dargaud (Publisher)*

Dargaud, the Franco-Belgian publisher of graphic novels that eventually published *Blacksad*, was originally founded by Georges Dargaud in 1936. The Parisian publisher is most widely known for having published *Lucky Luke* and *Asterix*, both series being extremely popular comicbooks.

Considered one of the pillars of the Franco-Belgian comic (Also known as *Bande Desinée*, or BD), the publisher started to gain notoriety in the 40s, when it started publishing the French version of the popular Belgian comic, *Tintin*. That popularity kept rising, especially after obtaining the rights to the publishing of both *Asterix* and *Lucky Luke* during the 60s (Dargaud, 2023).

Its founder, Georges Dargaud, retired in 1989, selling the company to Média-Participations. Since then, the publisher has greatly expanded, creating subsidiary publishers, like Lucky Comics, which was entirely dedicated to the *Lucky Luke* franchise, Kana, which publishes the French version of the most popular manga series, and even acquired animation studios like MoonScoop, creators of popular animation television series such as *Titeuf* or *Code Lyoko*. Nowadays, Dargaud is still one of the most influential BD publishers of the world, being part of Europe Comics (European Commission, 2015), and *Blacksad*, having received several Angoulême and Eisner awards, has become one of the publisher's most known recent graphic novels (Norma Editorial, n.d.).

4.   *Film Noir*

4.1.   The Concept of Film Noir

During this Project, what has been repeated a number of times is how *Blacksad* oscillates between the realms of the "graphic novel" and *film noir*. This raises the question of what is the nature of *film noir*? *Film noir* is a French term referring to black-and-white, crime movies belonging to the decades of the 1940s and 1950s. Despite being a film subgenre originated in American Hollywood movies, the term used to describe is French because the coinage of the term is due to contemporary French cinema critics, who used and popularised the term to the point that the French term is directly used instead of a translation of the term.

Regarding the historic context of *film noir*, it is worth noting that despite the subversive nature of the subgenre, *film noir* was not a completely *underground* movement, in fact the film studio which produced the most number of *noir* films was the Radio Keith Orpheum (RKO), one of the *Big Five* studios of Hollywood during the the 1940s and 1950s, and despite the fact it went defunct in 1959, it was then almost comparable to the other members of the *Big Five*: Paramount Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 20th Century Fox and Warner Bros (Gómez, 2018, p. 747). Cinema historians clearly state that, in the same manner as some of the most renowned actors of the genre, like Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, *film noir* was "entirely within the studio system," even if they normally were lower-budget or even Series B films: Despite this greater realism and conceptual maturity, it was a film genre made entirely within the studio system, not an alternative to the classicism proposed by some daring and contentious 'sharpshooters', as some scholars have argued (Gómez, 2018, p. 751).

This definition may be useful initially, but a deeper analysis is necessary in order to understand which are the characteristics of *film noir* and which are features that *Blacksad* borrows from this style of cinema. The first point that may be highlighted with regards to a definition of *film noir* may be expressed thus: "It is the presence of crime which gives *film noir* its most constant characteristic. The dynamism of violent death" (Borde & Chaumeton, 1955, p.19). That is to say, *film noir* can be considered to be a subgenre of crime fiction, movies in which any type of illicit activities, most notably murder, drive the plot and create the perfect setting for its preferred type of protagonist to thrive, the "hardboiled detective" (see Section 5.4).

But then, what makes *film noir* movies different from any other type of crime film?

In brief words, the *film noir* style does not follow the conventions that were common at the time, i.e. during the 1940s and 1950s. Borde and Chaumeton state the following in this regard

> All the components of *film noir* yield the same result: disorienting the spectator, who can no longer find … familiar reference points. The moviegoer is accustomed to certain conventions: a logical development of the action, a clear distinction between good and evil, well-defined characters, sharp motives, scenes more showy then authentically violent, a beautiful heroine and an honest hero. At least these were the conventions of American adventure films before the War (Borde & Chaumeton, 1955, p.24).

As can be observed, *film noir* is a product of its era, when the World War seems to have inspired directors to try to evoke the crudity of real violence, as well as highlighting the lack of moral values being experienced by individuals involved in violent conflicts. *Film noir* stood out because it created a certain degree of discomfort in the moviegoers of the epoch concerned, who had hitherto consumed movies in their search for solace in the conventional, clear-cut moral schemes in the movies of the period such as only to find in film noir productions that could only be described as mirroring the dire and confusing reality of the mid-twentieth century.

4.2.   *Blacksad and Film Noir*

Once the basics of *film noir* have been laid out, it is now the moment to delve into the ties that *Blacksad* has with this same film subgenre, thus, in this section an analysis will be carried out of the patterns and style that *Blacksad* projects to its readers, while attempting to offer an explanation as to why *film noir* is sensed as being an influential presence in the Dargaud product.

Among all the elements which go into the making of *Blacksad*, in terms of its *noir* inheritance, it is the setting that is one of the elements which the film noir genre seems to have shaped the most. For clarification purposes, the term *setting* will be used in this End-of-Degree Project to refer to the universe in which a certain which a work of fiction is happening, as described by the *OED*: "The environment or surroundings in which a person or thing is 'set'; the literary framework of a narrative or other composition; the mounting of a play" (*OED*, n.d.). Thus, this *noir* influence, which is found to be subtle at times, it will be argued here, may be said to have determined everything about the world which the anthropomorphic animals of *Blacksad* inhabit. This influence is not just a theory postulated by critics, given that the writer himself, Juan Díaz Canales, has mentioned in several

interviews that he was, and has been, strongly influenced by *film noir* and has revealed that he chose the decades of the 1940s and 1950s within which to develop this storylines because they are historically very rich and give rise to countless conflicts that took place at the time and that are still relevant today (Matarranz, 2021). Thus, while keeping this seemingly undeniable influence of *film noir* on *Blacksad*, leads to the conclusion that the most important element of the universe of the *Blacksad* series has been inherited from *noir* settings, whose most relevant element could be argued to be liminality.

Keeping in mind the already-mentioned factor of liminality, analytically speaking, both *film noir* and *Blacksad* may be explored in terms of *film noir* settings, for example, the following may be discussed: "*Film noir* occupies a liminal space somewhere between Europe and America, high modernism and 'blood melodrama,' and between low-budget crime movies and art cinema" (Naremore, 1988, p. 220). This quality of inhabiting the middle grounds in between concepts, in terms of different types of media, or different art movements, it would seem to become one of the most clearly definable characteristics of Blacksad as a visually-based graphic product, an aesthetic-structural characteristic it will be argued further here, itself inherited from *film noir*. It is worth noting that, although *Blacksad* could initially not be considered to unfold somewhere "between Europe and America" given that the events of the series occur in New York, Juan Díaz Canales has stated during an interview that, in the first album, they intentionally did not mention the city in which the events occur in order to maintain universality, and that they later chose New York because it is a city so overrepresented that the story does not lose universality at all (Naremore, 1988; Matarranz, 2021).

Despite the huge influence that *film noir* has on the feature of the setting, the universe in which the stories of *Blacksad* occur, this is not the only element of the work to which this film subgenre has given shape (Austin, 2019, p. 2). It may be affirmed that the most noteworthy of these elements is characterisation, as manifested through characters *per se*, out of which, the protagonist seems particularly deserving of attention. Thus, the iconic black cat detective, John Blacksad, which has become a cult figure, and who has also been a subject of study, may be highlighted, for example, in terms of the tropes of the "hardboiled detective" and the Victorian detective:

> The DNA of the hardboiled detective is that of a white male (black in the case of Blacksad), cynical and ironic in equal parts, who moves on the fringes of society relying more on cunning and physical strength than on the deductive skills of the Victorian detective. In addition, he always carries with him the burden of a certain

fatalism that makes him know that even if he finds the culprit in the last scene, he will

continue to be a loser, because he knows that by putting that man in jail he has

improved nothing, or almost nothing (Santamaría, 2020, pp. 164-165).

Regarding this same matter, it has also been stated the "hardboiled detective" can be

considered to be a solitary character doomed to defeat, nothing less than the transposition of

the cowboy myth to the hostile urban environment. (Santamaría, 2020, pp. 165). These

elements which are a definition of the archetype of the "hardboiled detective" are also an

exact description of John Blacksad, who moves on the fringes of society, a liminal being

trapped between his ideals and pragmatism, between a desire for peace and a relentless

determination to take down crime and even between blackness and whiteness, given that

Blacksad's facial fur is black and white, and thus, when a racial war, based on fur colour,

looms over the streets of New York in *Arctic-Nation*, the second album of the *Blacksad* series,

John Blacksad is despised by both factions alike (Canales & Guarnido, 2008; Santamaría,

2020).

Thus, the liminal features of the "hardboiled detective" that are discussed in the

aforementioned quote are inherited by John Blacksad, a character that "suffers appalling

abuse" both physical and psychological, as is common in film *noir*, but whose indomitable

spirit lets him appreciate that which is positive in a world of *noir*, giving way to some

personal, character-oriented scenes that can become very emotional and even cathartic as far

as the reader is concerned (Borde & Chaumeton, 1955, p.22).

Given that the amount of text necessary to analyse the trope of the "hardboiled

detective" *per se* would be deserving of a section of its own in this Project, its further

examination has been broken down into two parts, one dedicated to its aesthetics (see Section

5.3, together with another in which the narrative elements associated with the "hardboiled

detective" mode of fiction are assessed (see Section 5.4).

4.3.   *The Aesthetics of Film Noir*

In order to carry through a sufficiently deep analysis of the concept of *film noir* and

how it is related to *Blacksad*, there are two main points that need to be commented on with

special emphasis: Aesthetics, on the one hand, and narrative elements, on the other. The

former has been described in the following terms (see Section 2.1): "The philosophy of the

beautiful or of art; a system of principles for the appreciation of the beautiful, etc.; the

distinctive underlying principles of a work of art or a genre, the works of an artist, the arts of

a culture, etc" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d). As such, the artistic styles operating within a work, the tone a story may carry, and even the interpretation of what is being conveyed through narrative may be understood as being part of the aesthetics of that same work.

Thus, the aesthetics of *film noir* and *Blacksad* would seem to be intrinsically tied, so much so that their potential interaction can hardly go unnoticed even when only observing the cover of the first album of the series:

> It becomes clear from the first cover of *Blacksad*: Somewhere within the Shadows that the comics use *noir* stylistic devices and archetypes. The album cover features Blacksad in a suit and trench coat aiming a gun at an unseen foe while his *femme fatale*, Natalia, grips his chest and looks coolly over her shoulder. The positioning of the figures on the cover, as well as the low-key lighting that accentuates the contour of the woman's face, emulates posters advertising 1940s and 1950s American films and the overall *noir* style. (Austin, 2019, p. 1)

Thus, simply by observing the cover of the first album, it is impossible not to notice the *noir* aesthetics in which Canales and Guarnido's graphic novel is steeped in. In fact, the cover does not only showcase the aesthetics themselves, but is also an example of *Blacksad*'s intertextuality, given that it is a visual reference to Howard Hawks' *noir* film *The Big Sleep* (1946) starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. "Both the cover and The Big Sleep poster show a middle-aged male protagonist pointing a gun at an unseen foe in defence of his love interest" (Austin, 2019, p. 4).

Regarding the role of the protagonist, the "hardboiled" aesthetic has become in most cases an intrinsic feature of *film noir* main characters. The "hardboiled detective" has become a widespread term used to describe these proto-vigilante protagonists, whose aesthetic fits the following description, according to Borde and Chaumeton: "He is often more mature, almost old, not too handsome, Humphrey Bogart typifies him. He is also an inglorious victim, who may suffer, before the happy ending, appalling abuse. He is often enough masochistic, even self-immolating, one who makes his own trouble" (Borde & Chaumeton, 1955, p.22). These features, which also fit John Blacksad perfectly, go hand in hand with the gritty, cynical atmosphere that *film noir* tends to generate. Refusing to emulate the classic hero of clearly white-related morals and unscathed, young appearance; the "hardboiled detective" is a mirror of the realistic /naturalistic atmosphere of *film noir*: A guy who is not young nor handsome, and almost certainly the victim of rough treatment at some point during the story, usually fitted in dark plain clothes and enveloped in the smoke of a cigarette. All these characteristics,

taken together, give rise to the figure of a regular Second World War veteran of the time, rather than to an extraordinary hero-type protagonist of most stories.

In terms of aesthetics, what is applicable to the protagonist-as-hard-boiled-detective is not necessarily more important than that which surrounds other types of character, as in the case of the figure of the *femme fatale*. As critics have defined her this type of character is always a woman and most often the love interest of the protagonist, while the aesthetics and morals surrounding this female figure may also be defined in the confusing, oxymoronic way, as in the case of the protagonist-detective:

> Finally, there is ambiguity surrounding the woman: the *femme fatale* who is fatal for herself. Frustrated and deviant, half predator, half prey, detached yet ensnared, she falls victim to her own traps. … . This new type of woman, manipulative and evasive, as hard bitten as her environment, ready to shake down or to trade shots with anyone—and probably frigid—has put her mark on *noir* eroticism, which may be at times violence eroticized. We are a long way from the chaste heroines of the traditional Western or historical drama (Borde & Chaumeton, 1955, p.22).

Conceiving of such characters in liminal terms becomes inevitable, therefore.

Although, as characters within a graphic novel, in this case, such female figures still contrast harshly with those of the innocent and chaste classic heroine, the aesthetics surrounding the *femme fatale* constitute a highly stylised phenomenon, seemingly the most stylised within the genre as such. In contrast with the run-of-the-mill appearance of the "hardboiled detective," the presence of a *femme fatale* is indeed eye-catching. This stylisation is most certainly due to the fact that the *femme fatale* does not fit in the *film noir* atmosphere through realism, but through the mature tone of the genre, as this adult feel to their aesthetics comes from contrast with the usual female lead and most notably, through eroticism. The murky plot, confusing action and general reversal of all roles and conventions create a context in which subtle hints of eroticism in the sexual tension between the "hardboiled detective" and the *femme fatale* become very effective in adding to the mature feel, even to the point where this trope does not stand out despite its stylised, maybe even unrealistic nature.

4.4.   *The Narrative Elements of Film Noir*

Finally, this section will discuss the narrative elements of *film noir*. The term "narrative elements" may be applied to the patterns and tropes that are used and repeated throughout a "narrative," that is, "a sequence of events unfolding in a progression of time"

(Romero-Jódar, 2020, p. 130). As is well-known, the way in which different subgenres use these elements differs depending on the requirements of the story, the conventions of the subgenre or even the technical or financial limitations of the work, in the case of the comicbook / graphic novel, etc.

Although narrative elements are generally considered to be something intrinsic to the story as a whole, they are not necessarily so, because a certain motif or trope may only occur within a specific scene, or in terms of specific character. As such, the themes related to the figure of the protagonist become especially relevant in comparison to those linked secondary characters, which for inevitable reasons, generate less narrative elements. Given what has just been stated, the characteristic protagonist of *film noir*, the "hardboiled detective," may be viewed as a reinvention of the Victorian detective, the detective trope developing thereby into a state of affairs that fits the reality of the mid-twentieth century, while preserving, liminally, the capacity for reason and wit that are distinctive of characters such as Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Edgar Allan Poe's Auguste Dupin (Doyle, 1887; Poe, 1841). This new type of protagonist is no longer trying to amuse aristocrats with logical puzzles, but rather to denounce and reflect on the harsh reality of the 1940s and 1950s. As such, therefore, and since the methods the character uses are also different, the "hardboiled detective" does not only depend on his wits and reasoning, but also, keeping in mind the *noir* tradition, the protagonist can and will use force in order to achieve what they think is morally correct (Martín, 2005).

The narrative elements of *film noir*, together with those of "hardboiled detective" fiction, benefit from being analysed through the prism of liminality, given the fact that one of the main characteristics of *film noir* is based on the generation of a state of confusion within the spectator / reader. It is this sense that the subgenre tends to explore topics that were normally avoided in most mainstream movies of the mid-twentieth century. It is in this liminal sense that these artistic productions operate within a middle ground, or grey area, somewhere between concepts, thereby, giving rise to a worrisome sensation that affects viewers / readers in a morally disturbing social reality that is no longer simply black and white i.e. not being able to discern whether the characters are following or breaking the law, while neither knowing, whether a protagonist can be considered a hero or not. As an example of this same ambiguities within the subgenre, the *film noir* connoisseurs Borde and Chaumeton describe the archetypal protagonist of the genre in the following way: "The private detective is mid-way between lawful society and the underworld, walking on the brink, sometimes unscrupulous but putting only himself at risk, fulfilling the requirements of

his own code and of the genre" (Borde & Chaumeton, 1955, p.21). This uncertainty regarding the phenomena of law and crime stands out within the excerpt, given that it is also intrinsic to the workings of the "hardboiled detective," who operates in the space between society, on the one hand, and the criminal underworld, on the other. Such an investigative professional achieves results that a protocol-tied investigator would be unable to. Still, the detective is said to "fulfil the requirements to his own code," reinforcing the idea that this type of protagonist is one guided for the most part by a strong moral code of his own making (Borde & Chaumeton, 1955, p.21). All this creates the impression that the private detective is trapped between the ideals of a nineteenth century detective, on the one hand, and on the other hand, a world that has lost moral direction due to the consequences of the World Wars.

5. Analysis of *Blacksad*

5.1. *Summary*

Somewhere within the Shadows. Blacksad looks into the death of Natalia Willford, a well-known actress with whom he had an intimate relationship before becoming her bodyguard. The first person Blacksad looks for is screenwriter Léon Kronski, Natalia's last known boyfriend, who has recently vanished. Under a false name, he discovers Kronski already dead and buried. Blacksad is then taken into custody by the police after being brutally battered by two hired goons. Police commissioner Smirnov informs Blacksad that he is unable to do any more research because of pressure from his higher-ups, but he makes Blacksad an offer that may benefit both parties.

A rat thug and an iguana hitman try to assassinate Blacksad and each other when he arrives home. After Blacksad kills the rat, he interrogates the dying iguana and discovers the real culprit: Ivo Statoc, a frog who is the richest and most influential businessman in the city.

Arctic-Nation. Kyle, a young black girl, goes missing in the opening scene of Arctic Nation, which takes place in a neighbourhood where racial conflict is rampant. When Blacksad is hired to look into the matter, he and his sidekick Weekly discover that the local police chief, Hans Karup, a polar bear who belongs to the white-power group Arctic-Nation, has attempted to pin the crime on a black gang in the area.

Karup, who is believed to have pedophilic tendencies, is killed by his own gang after a bloody dress is discovered in his car. Huk, the main instigator of this execution, had his own

motivations for removing Karup from the situation because he is Jezabel's (Karup's wife) lover.

Red Soul. Red Soul concentrates on post-World War II politics in the US and around the world. Blacksad attends a lecture by Otto Liebber, one of his former masters, when his latest assignment—serving as a bodyguard for a wealthy turtle—is less than fascinating. Liebber, an atomic scientist who created the hydrogen bomb, is also a member of the Twelve Apostles, a left-wing society that includes the wealthy patron Samuel Gotfield and his fiancé, Alma Mayer.

After a party where Alma and Blacksad start to feel drawn to one another, a member of the Apostles who resembles Liebber is killed. Liebber narrowly escapes a vehicle bombing shortly after and runs away. Blacksad learns that Liebber was a former employee of the Third Reich, and that he was being pursued by Herzl, a member of the Apostles and survivor of the Nazi concentration camps. Moreover, Liebber reveals to Blacksad that he has been trying to atone and restore balance to the political spectrum by secretly leaking the hydrogen bomb formulas to the Soviet Union.

A Silent Hell. Here, Blacksad is in New Orleans. Sebastian "Little Hands" Fletcher, a brilliant jazz and blues pianist, has vanished and abandoned his pregnant wife, and record producer Faust LaChapelle urges him to find him. Thomas LaChapelle asks Blacksad to decline the task since his father's sickness has already cost him too much money. Fletcher's wife reveals to Blacksad that Fletcher was agitated about composing the song "Pizzen Blues" before he vanished.

As Blacksad learns from one of his former bandmates, this song tells the tale of the numerous deaths and disfigurements that took place in Fletcher's hometown as a result of Dr. Dupré's Life Everlasting, a deadly drug marketed as a treatment for asthma. Fletcher has been preparing to sing it during an impromptu performance.

Blacksad also discovers that Dr. Dupré is actually Faust LaChapelle, who has been attempting to conceal the truth the entire time and is currently suffering from a fatal bronchial ailment.

Amarillo. Chad, a writer lion, travels the road as a vagrant with his friend Abraham Greenberg, a poet bison and one of the Apostles that appeared in Red Soul. Abe views his vocation more romantically than Chad, who sees writing as a career and a means to money, and Abe accuses Chad of not having a true passion like he does. Abe takes his collection of

poems he was about to publish and burns them, and encourages Chad to do the same with his next novel's manuscript, to give it a "proper ending."

Blacksad lands a side-job when a rich Texan hires him to drive his expensive car to Tulsa, Oklahoma where he is flying. At a pit-stop, Chad and Abe steal the car and Blacksad, with the help of a street gang, rides on a motorbike in their pursuit, hoping to catch them on their way to Amarillo. Later, Chad and Abe party with Abe's friend, Billy, a mobster flamingo, and when Abe reveals that he sent Chad's novel to someplace in Tibet, Chad shoots him dead and flees in Blacksad's car, crashing it into the post box to retrieve his novel.

Blacksad parts ways with the bike gang in Amarillo and runs into Neal Beato, a suspicious lawyer hyena, while he convinces a potential client into suing his boss, a circus owner, for replacing him unlawfully. Chad is trying to go into hiding working on said circus, but when he discovers Polyphemus, a clown bear, trying to rape her friend Luanne, a "psychic" cat, they get into a fight and Luanne ends up stabbing Polyphemus on the neck. Moreover, Chad and Luanne try to run away on a train, but Elmore, the circus leader, follows them and fights Chad before falling to his death.

5.2.   The Place of Blacksad in the Field of the Graphic Novel

Once the summary of the events of the novel and the basic concepts regarding "iconical language" have been laid out, it is possible now to begin analysing this graphic novel *per se*. This section, therefore, will focus on analysing the role that *Blacksad* plays in the current artistic panorama graphic novel.

Blacksad may be considered one of the most relevant and award-winning graphic novels of the last two decades, being one of the very few works to have won as many as four Eisner awards (Comic-Con International: San Diego, 2020). The stellar reception that *Blacksad* has received from critics is in no small part due to it being a thoughtful, character-oriented graphic novel with thoughtful writing and charismatic artstyle, thanks to the professionalism of Juanjo Guarnido and Juan Díaz Canales (Norma Editorial, n.d.). But what place within the contemporary scenario of the graphic novel does *Blacksad* occupy? It could be argued that what makes *Blacksad* characteristic is that the series resides at a generic crossroads, or in a semiotic middle ground where pictorial art, cinema, and prose fiction interact. It is in this sense that *Blacksad* is liminal.

Relevant here is the clarification provided for this latter term by the *OED*: "Characterised by being on a boundary or threshold, esp. by being transitional or intermediate

between two states, situations, etc" (*OED*, n.d). In this same sense the main objectives of this Project is to explore how *Blacksad* may be said to project itself liminally to great effect, and explain how the series manages to shine while it navigates the boundaries which other media usually avoid. Everything in *Blacksad* could be argued to exist in the space between two different things: *Blacksad* exists in the middle ground between the graphic novel and cinema; the setting within which it develops exists between the human, real world, and a fantasy world where people have animal traits within the tradition of the fable (see Section 5.4); the tone is constantly shifting from the dark, murky, even expressionistic, scenes of *film noir*, on the one hand, to scenes and incidents characterised as light, sometimes even carefree tone of a comicbook. Even John Blacksad, being a black and white cat detective, exists in the liminal space between ethnic groups and, as already mentioned, in the grey area between the victorian detective and the "hardboiled detective," as developed in Section 4.2 and Section 4.4 respectively. In short, and due, moreover, to its liminal, inter-generic identity, this Project would argue, it is not surprising that *Blacksad* is found playing a key role in the contemporary graphic novel market, as confirmed by its excellent reception by critics, its string awards and its ever-growing popularity.

Speaking of which, in order to determine the place that *Blacksad* occupies in the modern graphic novel landscape, not only the expert opinion of critics and their analysis of the work should be considered, as the popularity that a work has with a more general public can often be even more relevant when determining the success of said work. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that despite not being comparable in popularity to the extremely famous superhero comics of *Marvel* and *DC Comics*, *Blacksad* is one of the most celebrated comics of the last two decades, not only acclaimed by critics, but also in terms of popularity as the series has been adapted to different media, namely, a video game called *Blacksad: Under the Skin* (Microids, 2022), a tabletop roleplaying game (Sueiro, 2015) and the series' illustrator, Juanjo Guarnido, revealed in an interview that there have even been advancements towards a film adaptation, whose film rights belong for the moment to *StudioCanal* (Cabrero, 2019). Moreover, the cultural impact of *Blacksad* is not limited to its adaptation to different media, especially in Paris where the series is particularly popular, as could be observed during the awaited return of the series when *Blacksad: They all Fall Down - Part One* was released after six years of hiatus. During said release, the buses in Paris carried advertisements of the black cat detective, while teasers of the comic were also played during the trailers prior to the airings of the latest James Bond movie *No Time to Die* (Matarranz, 2021).

5.3. *Narrative and Technical Aspects*

This current section of the analysis of the *Blacksad* series will be concerned with both its narrative and technical aspects. In order to ensure the orderly presentation of data in an ordered manner, this section will try to analyse concepts one at a time, despite their interrelatedness. This section will take into account the definition of the term "narrative" as presented in Section 2.1, and the definition of the concept of *technique* as defined in Section 2.3, referring mainly in this case to pictorial techniques (painting + drawing) and to framing techniques.

As far as the use of pictorial techniques is concerned, there should be no doubt about which of the procedures used to illustrate *Blacksad* is worthy of being highlighted, given the fact that it implies the application of a skill that is almost exclusive to *Blacksad* within the world of the graphic novel, i.e. it implies the illustrator's (Juanjo Guarnido) use of ink and colour via the unique use of watercolours as his main drawing method (Canales & Guarnido, 2008). The proper application of this method means the need to employ a unique preparatory technique before actually painting the page. As he himself explains in *Blacksad: La Historia de las Acuarelas*, this preparatory technique consists of sketches as small as movie tickets or as large as postcards, drawn in thirty seconds, coloured in much more time, which help him to find the more or less exact colour palette and lighting for each sequence (Canales & Guarnido, 2008). This proto-process is needed in order to know the exact colour palette required before painting begins, given that there is little margin to correct errors using watercolours. In the end, despite being a little-used technique, its tasteful results have set *Blacksad* apart from most contemporary graphic novels.

Perhaps the most prominent feature of the watercolour technique is the use of colour. For the most part the *Blacksad* series, as can be observed, tends to use a range of soft, dark colours in order to recreate the gloomy and even pessimistic sensations generated by *film noir*. To further evoke this expression of feeling by contrast, and in order not to break the realistic tone of the work, the only moments in *Blacksad: Somewhere between the Shadows* where the usage of colour varies drastically are during flashbacks. The first flashback belongs to John Blacksad, who is remembering moments he shared with Natalia Willford, his ex-lover who has just been murdered (Canales & Guarnido, 2000, p. 4). This above-mentioned flashback represents the nostalgia that Blacksad feels for Natalia and the good moments they shared together, to the point where Blacksad's memories become distorted, the haziness involved tending to idealise their time as lovers. All this causes the panels that belong to this

flashback to be much more vibrant, full of nature (roses, trees and all types of flowers). Even present are panels dominated by white, which are almost non-existent on the rest of the work. The second flashback revolves around the iguana hitman that tries to kill Blacksad on two different occasions. This hitman is laying wounded by a shot in Blacksad's apartment and, feeling betrayed by his boss Ivo Statoc, decides to tell John Blacksad how Ivo killed Natalia Willford (Canales & Guarnido, 2000, p. 34). Therefore, the scenes that contribute here to the narrative flow are dominated by a cacophony of red, evoking in the reader the feelings of aversion and disgust towards this cold-blooded murder.

As far as framing techniques are concerned, the experience of both the writer and the illustrator of *Blacksad* as animators (see Section 3.2 and Section 3.3) has undoubtedly altered the way in which scenes are framed in this graphic novel. This influence on the framing of the different scenes of the page is crucial in order that an awareness of the liminal interaction of cinema and comicbook art be generated, something expressed by Juanjo Guarnido himself during an interview, where he stated that he wanted, with the means available to the comicbook, to transmit to the reader what it feels like to watch a movie (Canales & Guarnido, 2001). As such, it makes more sense to analyse the framing of the panels of *Blacksad* in terms of shots (close-up shots, zenith shots, etc…) as they are used in the cinema that the framing that this graphic novel is trying to evoke.

Perhaps one of the most noticeable uses of shots in Guarnido's panels is that of the wide-angle shot, which the illustrator himself has said has the tendency to evoke the visual style of the CinemaScope lens used in films of the 1950s and 1960s (Canales & Guarnido, 2001, p. 6). These shots are normally used in the last panel of every two pages, to evoke the cinematic feeling of a change of shot to mark the beginning of a new scene in a film.

In the same cinematic sense, a prominent feature of the liminal interaction of shots and panels, despite its general scarcity, is the use of zenith shots, a type of panel that shines thanks to its infrequency in terms of framing. In the case of *Blacksad: Somewhere between the Shadows* the most notable zenith shot is a full-page panel that occurs after Blacksad has been attacked by both a hitman and a goon in his apartment (Canales & Guarnido, 2000, p. 37). In this panel, Blacksad lies in his sofa, bruised and smoking in full *noir* fashion, accompanied by the corpse of the hitman and the resultant chaos of the room is to be found. This shot also involves the dramatic moment where Blacksad has learned the name of Ivo Statoc, the killer of his ex-lover, Natalia Willford. As such, the physical abuse that Blacksad has suffered can be considered to be a metaphor of his feeling emotionally drained. In that sense, the chaotic disarray of broken pieces and items in the room constitute a representation

of the current state of his life. This full-page zenith shot creates a stunningly unique point of view that incites the reader to further analyse what could be defined as a character-defining shot.

The two aforementioned techniques are the most prominent uses of shot-types in *Blacksad*, given that the rest of the graphic novel features an effective balance of full shots, medium shots, cowboy shots and close-up shots. These shots are used in what may be considered to be their standard uses, for example, a close-up shot of Blacksad smoking a cigarette highlights the importance of what the character is thinking, while cowboy and medium shots are here the default for fights, in which more than one character needs to fit, but not far enough that their attacks lose detail (Canales & Guarnido, 2000, p. 37).

5.4.   *Character*

The analysis of this graphic novel series would not be complete without dedicating a section to its star and leading role: John Blacksad. This section will endeavour to study and foreground the different narrative, technical and aesthetical elements that have influenced the creation of the protagonist of the *Blacksad* series.

As posited in Section 2.2, *Blacksad* benefits from being analysed under the frame of liminality, and so it is with regard to the character of John Blacksad as such. Firstly, what is clearly observable is the character's borderline existence as both animal (a cat, in this case) and human being, a phenomenon, moreover, which contributes to the representation of all the characters in the series anthropomorphically speaking Juan Díaz Canales's words acquire relevance in this regard: "By mixing the noir genre with the animalier one obtains a very rich game of contrasts. On the one hand, a very actual genre, the detective story, which has not even a century of history. On the other hand, the fable, as old as men and probably older than the invention of writing" (Canales & Guarnido, 2001, p. 5). Although this connection between the fable and the graphic novel may appear to be merely coincidental, the influence between the fable and the graphic novel is clearly relevant. Spiegelman's Pulitzer-winning, Holocaust-based work, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, constitutes an outstanding example of anthropomorphic literature (Spiegelman, 1997).

Thus, in terms of the portrayal of Blacksad as a character in this *Anthology*, this figure's anthropomorphic representation as a cat clearly places him within the tradition of the "animal fable." However, in his case, any kind of moralistic scheme or lesson, as linked with the tradition of Aesop's didacticism, for example, is replaced by what Gillian Rudd, referring

to fables in the modern era, calls the undermining of the "anthropomorphic habit" (Rudd, 2006). This critic's comments underline that the factor of "translation" in fables contributes to the presence of a character as a complex (anthropomorphic) figure and, thus also a liminal figure:

> Translation occurs not only between languages, but also between states and species. Animal fables are sites of this kind of translation as they amalgamate human and animal worlds, shifting their characters between animal and human identities in ways designed to make the reader reflect upon human quirks and morals. (Rudd, 2006, p. 39)

In this same sense, Blacksad is portrayed in this equally complex way, thus making him more fascinating to readers. Thus, without going into detail, what is being argued here is that it is Blacksad's uniqueness that stands out as a key trait of his portrayal as a human being, on the one hand, and as a professional within the hardboiled private detective artistic tradition.

The characters of fables are chosen for their emotional distance from, rather than their closeness to, their audience. The key factor is displacement. Because the fables' chief reason for being is to make a sharp and potentially unpalatable observation about human nature, characters must keep their impersonal distance from auditor/reader (child or adult) in order for the point to penetrate without emotional resistance. It is the aura of mystery that surrounds this thorough cat detective that holds readers' attention, therefore.

This professionalism par excellence is a trait that the critic K.F. Hilliard, relevantly so as far as this Project is concerned, happens to link with the allegorical value of the figure of a cat in Gunter Grass's Katz und Maus (1961). The character of the cat-related author, Pilenz, "is driven to write; and by virtue of that compulsion he is indentured to a minute empirical realism" (Hilliard, 2001, p. 420). Such similar professional dedication to the art of detection and investigation, this Project would argue, is what has contributed to Blacksad's cult following within the realm of the comicbook / graphic novel.

In the same way, Arnold Clayton Henderson's emphasis upon the possibility of discovering "authentic mediaeval meanings" in beast fables helps point to the figure of Blacksad as both an "authentic" living being, as well as a truly and instinctively professional detective.

Despite this recognisable relationship between the fable and the graphic novel, the question arises as to why John Blacksad is specifically a black cat? The answer to this question, in anecdotal terms at least, lies in a note that Juan Díaz Canales sent to Juanjo Guarnido in 1996, in which, after introducing Juanjo to the fact that he always crosses a black cat on his way back from university, he wrote the following lines:

> Coming home late at night a black cat always crosses my path. In the morning I arrive at the faculty and an agile, dark, yellow-eyed feline comes out to greet me from their home in the garbage cans. Oh, my friend! That black cat does not rest. Wherever you go its elongated shadow will chase you, and when you least expect it, it will hunt you down like a harmless mouse. (Canales & Guarnido, 2001, p. 3)

In the end what could be highlighted is that the artistic consequences of such circumstances emerges in the links that can be established between the mere superstition based on how crossing with a black cat brings bad luck, on the one hand, and both the racial issues (see *Arctic-Nation* and Section 4.4), and *noir*-related, pessimistic mood factors (see Section 4.3) that also sustain the series, on the other.

Once explained the circumstantial origins of the figure of John Blacksad, the characterisation of this figure may also be highlighted in terms of a wide-range of minute details which may be said to be impact-laden, while contributing the overall impression that a reader / spectator experiences when coming into contact with this memorable character recreation.

With the need of brevity in mind, such an analysis can be carried out here according to the "five principles of life" that were defined by Aristotle as a tool by which to create dynamic characters that feel believable to any reader (Tierno, 2012, p. 125). Perhaps the most eye-catching of these "principles" is that of the "nutritive life," that is, the transmission of information about what the specific character eats and drinks. Consistency in that sense, together with attention to reader reception, leads to the critical foregrounding of a trait that signifies that it is a character who is really alive that is being dealt with. Once an effort is put into noticing the moments in which John Blacksad is found to be interacting with food, what becomes clear, in a paradigmatic sense, is that the black cat detective never eats or drinks for the sake of satisfying his nutritional needs throughout the seven volumes. Every single time Blacksad is seen eating, he is doing it in company, either of a suspect or a client: Sharing a dish of creole cuisine with who he suspects to be the murderer in *A Silent Hell* and accepting a sandwich from the mole construction worker who he is investigating at that moment in *They All Fall Down - Part One* (Canales & Guarnido, 2010, p. 19; Canales & Guarnido, 2021a, p. 21).

The one time Blacksad remembers that he has been eating very little food lately, he buys a pretzel from a street vendor, but ultimately does not eat as he gives to a homeless racoon kid (Canales & Guarnido, 2021b, p. 12). Such moments exemplify the selflessness of Blacksad, an idealist who is always too busy fighting crime to waste precious time eating,

given that it is only the interrogation of a suspect that may be accompanied by a sit-down meal on very few occasions.

Still within the framework of the "principle of nutritive life," the relationship that Blacksad holds with drinking is a bit different from the one he has with eating (Tierno, 2012, p. 125). In contrast with eating in the context of a meal, which he is only seen doing three times in the entire series, Blacksad is seen drinking more frequently, and although these occasions also occur when investigating a suspect, he can also be seen drinking with friendly figures, especially when it comes to bourbon or whisky. In this case, the factor of health and well-being takes second place, given that those same drinks are classic ingredients in the lives of private investigators.

The aforementioned class of drinking moments in the case of friendly figures are three: drinking a bourbon with a client in his apartment in *Blacksad: They All Fall Down - Part One* (Canales & Guarnido, 2021a, p. 12), sharing a drink with his friend Weekly in a cafeteria during the events of *Blacksad: Arctic-Nation* (Canales & Guarnido, 2003, p. 6) and, lastly, sharing a cup of post-coital coffee with his lover Alma Mayer in *Blacksad: Red Soul* (Canales & Guarnido, 2005, p. 40). This latter moment may be seen as a special case, given that this is the only moment in which Blacksad drinks something that is not alcohol, and the only time he is seen eating or drinking something in an intimate situation. Before continuing with the analysis of this character-defining scene, it is necessary to underline what has already been posited above. i.e. that Blacksad's ethical-professional code leads him to give priority to his crime-solving tasks, a personal trait which, therefore, can be contextualised within another of the Aristotelian principles highlighted by the critic Tierno, namely, the "principle of capacity for rational thought."

Moreover, his ethical-professional mindset not only has an effect upon the "principle of [his] nutritive life," but also upon the Aristotelian principle of his "desiring life," that is, it becomes clear that Blacksad also neglects his bodily functions in a sexual sense in order to try to accomplish his ideals as a crime fighter (Tierno, 2012, p. 126). It is within this context that the coffee-drinking scene with his lover can be better understood, especially if caffeine-as-stimulant is taken into account as a relevant factor in terms of the channelling of both intimate and professional energies. Love and sleuthing are given equal priority, in other words. Moreover, this latter scene may be said to be character-defining, given that it reveals the vulnerable side of Blacksad to which the reader has no other access at any other moment. Likewise, this state of affairs strongly reinforces the essence of his character at the end of *Blacksad:Red Soul*, due to how the black cat detective fails to meet the appointment with

Alma in Niagara Falls because of his crime-fighting obligation, thereby giving rise to a heartbreaking scene that establishes his relentless determination to do what is ethically (and professionally) correct, even at the expense of the role of love of his life (Canales & Guarnido, 2005, p. 56).

Taking up the matter of the already-mentioned interaction of the character of Blacksad with the tradition of the fable, the depth and extent of that interaction becomes more evident if this same ethical-professional dimension of his identity is taken into account as the way by which his figure is constantly surrounded by an enigmatic aura, a situation which, in the end, in meta-artistic terms, contributes to Blacksad's projection as a cult figure in the world of the comicbook / graphic novel.

6. Conclusions

In the end, the analytical-critical reading of the *Anthology* of *Blacksad* graphic novels provided in this Project leads to a clear conclusion, as expressed in its latter section: there is no doubt about the cult status that has been achieved by this fictional-pictorial figure within the contemporary cultural scene and, more specifically, within the world of the those who are habitual consumers of comicbooks and graphic novels. What may also be concluded is that, as a result of the multi-faceted liminal space occupied by the figure of Blacksad, it is the enigmatic, mysterious nature of that same figure that becomes memorable.

This multidirectionality has been explored in this Project in terms of how, on the one hand, *noir* aesthetics and the tradition of hardboiled detective fiction are intertextually active in the construction of this unique figure. A possible comparison with Will Eisner's *Spirit* (Eisner, 2005), while not forgetting his African-American sidekick, Ebony White, would be in order, in that sense. On the other hand, an explanation of how the traditions of the fable and of anthropomorphically-based art (as in the case of Spiegelman's *Maus* and Gerry Alanguilan's figure of the chicken, Elmer) also traverse this liminal space has also been offered. Thus, in the end, it is Blacksad's enigmatically unique identity within contemporary culture that this Project has attempted to highlight.

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