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Illustrating History: April 25th in Portuguese Comics

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Abstract: This essay offers a comprehensive analysis of Portuguese comics, with a specific focus on those that depict the April 25th Revolution of 1974. It traces the historical evolution of these comics, examining how they have engaged with significant political and social changes in Portugal. The study critically evaluates the term “BD de Abril” (April Comics), proposing a more nuanced categorization that reflects the thematic and chronological diversity within this body of work. By analyzing key works, including *Utopia* by Raquel Varela and Robson Vilalba, the essay explores how Portuguese comics have functioned as both artistic and historiographical tools, especially during periods of political upheaval. The research identifies four distinct phases in the development of “April Comics”: Denunciation (pre-revolution), Exaltation (immediate post-revolution), Revivalism (1990s–2000s), and Revisitation (2010s onwards). Each phase is contextualized within the broader socio-political landscape, revealing the evolving role of comics in reflecting and shaping historical consciousness. The essay concludes by arguing that while “April Comics” is a valuable category, it requires refinement to fully capture the complexity and richness of these works.

Keywords: Portuguese comics; April 25th Revolution; BD de Abril; historical comics; socio-political change; comic studies

French historian Ivan Jablonka opens his essay *Histoire et bande dessinée* with a provocative question: “What if historians and illustrators teamed up? The essay is significant for its advocacy of interdisciplinary collaboration and for encouraging researchers to present their findings through images, a practice he defines as “graphic social sciences.”¹ Perhaps Portuguese historian Raquel Varela was familiar with these ideas or well aware of the considerable academic interest in comics and history evident in France

1 Ivan Jablonka, “Histoire et bande dessinée,” in *La Vie des idées*, November 27, 2014, Available at: <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Histoire-et-bande-dessinee.html>.

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since the 1980s. Whatever was the case, her recent work, *Utopia*, a graphic novel in collaboration with illustrator Robson Vilalba, directly embodies what Jablonka advocates: the exploration of comics as a tool for historical inquiry through a partnership between historians and comic artists. This work stands as a landmark in the universe of Portuguese graphic novels, skillfully delving into both historical events and Portuguese society with the depth and precision found in traditional academic research. The book narrates the story of the April Revolution through the eyes of José, the protagonist and first-person narrator, following his life journey up until November 1975. Its timely release in April 2024 coincided with the nation’s commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the April 25th Revolution, a date traditionally celebrated with the publication of comics that explore the Revolution’s legacy.² As a result, the term ‘BD de Abril’ (or ‘April comics’) was coined to designate this specific corpus.

This article aims to critically assess the value of this term as a category of analysis. By offering an overview of key comics produced during this period and conclude with a visual analysis of the graphic novel *Utopia*, I will examine how comics intersect with historiography and challenge traditional boundaries between fiction and historical narrative. The theoretical basis of this analysis will be informed by the work of historians and philosophers like Adrien Genoudet, whose insights into visual history and the narrative power of comics shape the discussion.

1 Origins

Portugal stands among the pioneering nations in the world of comics, being one of the first seven countries to publish them.³ The roots of Portuguese comics can be traced back to

2 The Carnation Revolution, as it is commonly known, was a peaceful military coup that occurred on April 25, 1974, bringing an end to nearly five decades of authoritarian rule under the Estado Novo regime. Named for the carnations placed in the muzzles of soldiers’ rifles, this revolution sparked political, social, and economic transformations, ultimately leading to the establishment of a democratic government in Portugal.

3 Cf. João Paulo Paiva Boléo et al., *Das Conferências do Casino à Filosofia de Ponta* (Lisboa: Bedeteca/Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, 2000), 7.

the early 19th century when they were connected to the development of the press, with short sequences of satirical and political drawings regularly appearing in newspapers. These early forms of comic strips were characterized by incisive social and political commentary, reflecting the troubled times during which they were created.⁴ Although intrinsically linked to newspapers, these graphic narratives represent the evolution of a long-standing tradition, as the art of telling stories through images has been prevalent across various media for centuries. Interestingly, the tradition of sequential visual narratives in Portugal dates back even further,⁵ unexpectedly related to other forms of sequential narrative, among which the tile iconography, known as *azulejaria portuguesa*. A key figure in elevating this practice was the famous ceramist Raphael Bordallo Pinheiro, a renowned artist, illustrator, and caricaturist whose work had a profound impact on the development of graphic storytelling in Portugal.

Both the penchant for visual narration and the development of the press set the stage for the emergence of the first comic strip in Portugal.⁶ Building on this early foundation, Bordallo Pinheiro played a crucial role in establishing this genre. His work *Apontamentos de Raphael Bordallo Pinheiro sobre a Picaresca Viagem do Imperador de Rasilb pela Europa*, exemplifies his pioneering efforts. This satirical account of Emperor Dom Pedro II of Brazil's visit to Europe in 1871 is considered the first Portuguese graphic novel, exploring a political-historical episode. Bordallo Pinheiro thus inaugurated a tradition in Portugal that predates modern documentary history and graphic reporting by over

4 Portugal experienced significant turmoil from the late 1800s to the 1920s, marked by political instability, economic challenges, and social unrest. The end of the 19th century saw the fall of the Portuguese monarchy and the rise of republican sentiments, culminating in the revolution of 1910 and the establishment of the Portuguese First Republic. This period was characterized by frequent changes in government and financial crises that weakened the state.

5 João Pedro Ferro, *História da Banda Desenhada Infantil Portuguesa* (Lisboa: Ed. Presença, 1987), 32–52. This artwork spans from the 17th to the 19th century, significantly promoting the exploration and development of visual storytelling with the depiction of lives of Saints, but also representations of algebraic theorems, scientific experiments, and philosophical concepts, inexorably intertwining visual culture with scholarly culture in churches, colleges, and palaces. See António Celso Hunyady Mangucci, “História da azulejaria portuguesa, iconografia e retórica” (PhD diss., Universidade de Évora, Portugal, 2020).

6 Published in August 1850 in *Revista Popular* and titled *The Sentimental and Dramatic Adventures of Mr. Simplício Baptista*, it was an abbreviated copy of *Aventures Sentimentales et Dramatiques* by Mr. Verdreau, signed by Flora, a likely pseudonym of António Nogueira da Silva (see João Paulo Cotrim, “A vontade de estar n’ A Berlinda,” in *Bordalo n’A Berlinda* [2005], <https://purl.pt/273/1/jp-cotrim-01.html>).

a century.⁷ The growth of the Portuguese press in the 19th and early 20th centuries provided fertile ground for the flourishing of comics. Publications such as *A Paródia* and *O António Maria* which he himself founded and directed, served as platforms where these early comic strips gained popularity.

Initially, comics were exclusively intended for adults. With the onset of World War I and the rise of the Portuguese Republic, the periodical press was filled with satirical illustrations and ironic commentaries. It was during this time that the first children's newspapers featuring comics emerged which marked a shift from comics as mere humorous press to an autonomous cultural and artistic expression. The first children's magazine, *ABC-zinho* (1921), featured comic strips from its inception, with contributions from artists like Cottinelli Telmo and Stuart Carvalhais. In 1936, *O Mosquito* was launched, featuring both international and Portuguese artists, including Eduardo Teixeira Coelho, who illustrated historical novels that reflected the nationalist ideology of António de Oliveira Salazar, a conservative Portuguese economist and authoritarian dictator. In the 1940s, he enhanced the magazine's appeal by illustrating novels with a historical theme, particularly focusing on the ‘Age of Discoveries’ and maritime expansion – the ‘golden era’ of Portuguese history – promoting Salazar's nationalist ideology.⁸ Authors and illustrators explored exotic settings, blending imaginative visuals with adherence to the Estado Novo regime's pre-censorship requirements.⁹ Since then, Portuguese comics have

7 Portuguese critics unanimously recognize Bordallo Pinheiro as the forerunner of the comic strip. António Dias de Deus, renowned for his scholarly work on the history, aesthetics, and cultural impact of Portuguese comics, and Leonardo de Sá, a comics historian, co-authored *A Volta d’A Picaresca Viagem de Raphael Bordallo Pinheiro* in *Apontamentos de Raphael Bordallo Pinheiro sobre a Picaresca Viagem do Imperador de Rasilb pela Europa*, a facsimile edition edited by Bedeteca de Lisboa in 1999. Together with João Pedro Ferro, known for his work on the history of Portuguese children's comics in *História da Banda Desenhada Infantil Portuguesa*, as well as Rui Zink and João Paulo Cotrim, have significantly contributed to the study and appreciation of Portuguese comics.

8 Cf. Boléo et al., *Das Conferências do Casino*.

9 Ricardo Leite Pinto's research on the censorship of children's periodicals during the Salazarist dictatorship focuses on the Estado Novo's efforts to control the content of comics and juvenile literature. His study, titled “Salazar contra ‘Superman’: Banda Desenhada e Censura durante o Estado Novo: o caso das publicações periódicas infanto juvenis e o papel da Comissão Especial para Literatura Infantil e Juvenil e da Comissão da Literatura e Espectáculos para Menores (1950–1956),” examines how these censorship practices aimed to instill nationalist values and suppress material considered subversive. The paper also discusses the regime's particular aversion to American comics, which were seen as promoting undesirable traits such as violence and individualism, leading to their restriction or alteration. This research is published in *História: Revista Da Faculdade De Letras da Universidade do Porto* and can be accessed at <https://ojs.letras.up.pt/index.php/historia/article/view/1731>.

consistently drawn upon the country's history as a narrative matrix, establishing a tradition of historical comics that has flourished across generations. This genre has evolved along two main paths: one that integrates historical events into fictional universes, using history as a backdrop much like in historical novels, and another that places the historical event at the very center of the narrative, sometimes to the point of constraining the creativity of authors. António Dias de Deus, a comics historian and a pioneer in the study of this art in Portugal, critiques this tendency by stating, "the almost total inability to construct realistic Portuguese comic strips, diverting the cartoonists' energy towards a distressing and repetitive insistence on historical motifs and literary classics."¹⁰

The 1950s saw an economic crisis, leading to the emigration of prominent artists. Nevertheless, a new magazine emerged, *O Cavaleiro Andante*, featuring works by a generation of influential Portuguese comic artists. Their varied styles and thematic richness played a pivotal role in shaping the medium, leaving a lasting impact on the field.¹¹ In the 1960s, the economic crisis of the previous decade worsened significantly, particularly due to the Salazarist dictatorship's refusal to initiate decolonization. This policy created a climate of instability in the African countries occupied by Portugal, ultimately leading to the colonial war in Africa. Consequently, the economic crisis aggravated with a noticeable impact on the comic industry. While comics continued to exist, few were authored by Portuguese writers and illustrators. In 1968, the magazine *Tintin* emerged, representing the 'conquest' of Portugal by Franco-Belgian comics; it introduced a standard of quality both in the stories and in their presentation, and introduced Portuguese readers to contemporary European authors. In this decade, there was a paradigm shift in Portuguese comics, with the francophone term 'banda desenhada' (BD) replacing 'histórias aos quadrinhos,' reflecting the medium's growing complexity, thematic depth, and artistic innovation. The term 'banda desenhada' (literally 'drawn strip') aligned closely with the European comic traditions, especially the Franco-Belgian school, acclaimed for their distinguished graphic narratives. This shift helped elevate the perception of comics in Portugal to a respected art form capable of sophisticated narratives, introducing aesthetic experimentation and narrative depth that moved beyond the simplistic and often formulaic storytelling of earlier comics.¹²

¹⁰ António Dias de Deus, *Os Cómics em Portugal* (Lisbon: Cotovia, 1997), 71.

¹¹ Cf. João Pedro Ferro, *História da Banda Desenhada*, 131–43.

¹² Cf. Boléo et al., *Das Conferências do Casino*, 14.

In the early 1970s, during the so-called 'Marcelist Spring,'¹³ comic book authors began to experiment with slightly bolder ideas, but nothing significantly innovative was achieved. It wasn't until the Carnation Revolution of April 25, 1974, which marked a profound transformation in Portuguese society, that there was a significant change in the Portuguese comics scene. The peaceful military coup ended decades of dictatorship, ushering in an era of democracy, freedom of expression, and cultural reawakening. The newfound political freedom allowed comic artists to explore previously censored themes. This period saw a surge in creativity and innovation, as artists and writers embraced the opportunity to address contemporary issues and historical events with unprecedented openness. Publications such as *Visão* and the works of artists like Victor Mesquita began to reflect the dynamic and evolving political landscape, incorporating themes of resistance, revolution, and social justice. The post-revolution era encouraged the diversification of artistic styles and the emergence of graphic novels that combined literary depth with visual storytelling. This period of artistic freedom and exploration fundamentally reshaped the genre, embedding it deeply within the broader context of Portugal's socio-political transformation.¹⁴

2 BD de Abril

For those born after the April 25th Revolution and far removed from the visual culture of that period, exploring this universe is a journey of discovery that extends well beyond the commonly recognized iconography of the red carnation,¹⁵

¹³ From 1968 to 1970, Marcelo Caetano aimed to modernize Portugal and introduce political openness following Salazar's incapacitation. His administration marked a shift toward liberalization, implementing reforms across political, economic, and educational spheres, though he fell short of democratizing the regime fully. Caetano eased certain repressive measures, renamed PIDE to the Directorate-General for Security (DGS), and attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to resolve colonial issues while continuing the colonial wars. Despite promises of free elections and the extension of voting rights to literate women, his reforms did not lead to significant regime change. Cf. *Visão História* n.º 2: *A Queda de Salazar e a Primavera Marcelista* (Lisboa: Edimpresa, July 2008). For a comprehensive understanding of 'Marcelismo,' see Márcio Sérgio Costa Barbosa, *Novo Estado Marcelista (1929–1974)* (PhD diss., Universidade de Coimbra, July 2015).

¹⁴ Cf. Rui Zink, *Literatura Gráfica? Banda Desenhada Portuguesa Contemporânea* (Lisboa: Celta, 1999), 167–89.

¹⁵ The red carnation holds significant iconographic value in Portuguese culture, linked to the Carnation Revolution on April 25, 1974. During this peaceful coup, civilians and soldiers placed red carnations in rifle muzzles and on uniforms, symbolizing non-violence and hope for democracy. This transformed the flower into a symbol of peace, freedom, and resistance. Annually commemorated on Freedom Day, April 25, red carnations feature prominently in celebrations, reminding citizens of Portugal's democratic transition.

offering surprises at every turn. The surprise is even greater for those distant from the main center of cultural production, Lisbon, where comics are predominantly concentrated, and which has always been the epicenter of political activity. However, this initial distance allows for a detachment that enables the recognition that a series of categorizations is necessary when discussing the 25th of April in comics. To understand this phenomenon from a temporal distance, it is essential to examine a publication that emerged in 1999, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the revolution: the volume was edited by João Paulo Paiva Boléo, João Miguel Lameiras, and João Ramalho Santos and titled *Uma Revolução Desenhada: O 25 de Abril e a BD*. This joint edition by Edições Afrontamento, Bedeteca de Lisboa, the Centre for Documentation of the 25th of April at the University of Coimbra, and the Centre for Social Studies serves as a multifaceted portrayal of the revolution through Portuguese comics. It straddles the line between an exhibition catalog, a specialized magazine, and a comic book album.

For numerous reasons, this work stands as a significant reference. First, it possesses great documentary value, featuring illustrations of rare comics that circulated locally, in self-published editions, or very limited print runs, frequently preserved in private collections. It includes works that encapsulate the spirit of the revolution, enthusiasm, ideals, and transformative energy, offering reinterpretations through the perspectives of those who experienced it first-hand. Second, it is the result of a collaborative effort among institutions – from University of Coimbra to Comics Library (Bedeteca) – that, although not typically associated with one another, have united to honor the historical legacy of comics. This collaboration marks a rare instance of Portuguese academia embracing comics and recognizing their value as a research source in the social and human sciences. Third, it extends the curation of an exhibition beyond spatial and temporal limitations, making it accessible in the present day.¹⁶

A close analysis of the works compiled in this volume shows that ‘April 25th’ goes beyond being just a date; it represents a praxis, capturing the political circumstances that ignited a societal awakening in Portugal. This era instilled a collective responsibility to preserve values and social practices within memory and the arts. Additionally, it has taken on what I see as a denomination: ‘BD de Abril,’

¹⁶ Lastly, it serves as a testimony to the male prevalence in the industry. It is disconcerting to note the absence of women in several dimensions of the project, from the organization of the event and contributions to the magazine, to their roles as artists or illustrators in the works on April 25th featured in the final section which highlights the underrepresentation of women in this field until the late 20th century.

referring to the comic strips that emerged from the new artistic expressions and content inspired by the Revolution. Consequently, it comprehends a multitude of disparate themes and trends, both political and aesthetic, capturing the diverse and transformative nature of this period.

While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly who first coined the term, the expression “BD de Abril” appears in João Paulo Paiva Boléo’s article *A BD e o 25 de Abril: Um Outro Olhar*, published in 1999,¹⁷ in the same year Boléo edited the collective work mentioned above where an equivalent term is used: “BD do 25 de Abril,”¹⁸ and is now in widespread use.¹⁹

Why, then, comics? In the 1970s, comics experienced a substantial global surge in popularity, a trend that also made its mark in Portugal. Their influence grew to the point that they were incorporated into the Portuguese educational curriculum. Some point to the high illiteracy rates at the time and the ability of images to make messages more accessible and understandable. After the Revolution, there was an explosion in the use of comics as tools for communication, education, and political struggle. Interestingly, even Salazar, who did not approve the importation of American comics and superhero culture, allowed their domestic production. He even used them as a form of youth entertainment aimed at indoctrination, with censorship ensuring that the messages aligned with the nationalist Christian ideology of the regime’s construction of the ‘Homem do Estado Novo.’²⁰

¹⁷ Cf. João Paulo Paiva Boléo, “A BD e o 25 de Abril: Um Outro Olhar,” in *Camões – Revista de Letras e Culturas Lusófonas*, no. 5 (April-June 1999) 103–12. In this article, Boléo critically examines the role of comics in reflecting and interpreting the Carnation Revolution, particularly in the context of its 25th anniversary.

¹⁸ Cf. João Paulo Paiva Boléo et al., *Uma Revolução Desenhada: O 25 de Abril e a BD* (Lisboa: Edições Afrontamento, 1999), 31.

¹⁹ The Revolution profoundly influenced the lexicon and pragmatics of the Portuguese language, creating expressions rooted in a linguistic semiotics strongly linked to political and military context, such as ‘Capitães de Abril.’ By way of analogy expressions like ‘liberdade de Abril’ and ‘memórias de Abril’ became commonly used, with ‘BD de Abril’ being one of these linguistic variations. To explore this topic further, see the *Glossário 25 de Abril*, an educational resource aimed at clarifying fundamental concepts related to the Carnation Revolution. It includes 50 key terms that help explain the historical, political, and social changes brought about by the Revolution, offering insights into the events that shaped modern Portugal.

²⁰ The term ‘Homem do Estado Novo’ (Man of the New State), refers to an individual who embodied the ideals of the Estado Novo regime in Portugal under Salazar. This model citizen was characterized by loyalty to the regime, adherence to conservative values, strong nationalism, and support for Salazar’s economic policies. These individuals represented the ideals that the authoritarian regime sought to instill in Portuguese society from 1932 to 1968. See Andreia S. P. da Silva, *Propaganda Política do Estado Novo: Análise de Conteúdo dos Discursos Presidenciais de Tomada de Posse (1926–1974)* (Lisboa: Universidade de Lisboa, 2013), 117.

Subsequently, under the designation ‘BD de Abril,’ we find a collection of comic strips spanning various dates, including some as early as 1965. These works come in diverse formats, from newspaper strips and panels in periodical press to pamphlets, illustrated books, albums, and graphic novels. They were produced both in Portugal and abroad, in countries such as France, Angola, and Mozambique. The themes explored address events directly related to the military uprising on April 25th, as well as the broader context preceding and following the Revolution, including the history of Portugal, political propaganda, the fascism of the Estado Novo, censorship, the biography of Salazar, the actions of PIDE,²¹ pedagogy, the representation of women, and the evolution of comic book language in a democratic context. The broad scope of these themes naturally led to further questions: What about April 25th itself? How is the dawn that set the stage for that historic day portrayed? As I explore these questions further, several other observations come to light. The first of these is the identification of four distinct stages within two significant historical periods:

1. Pre-revolution: This period is characterized by what I will designate as ‘denunciation,’ marked by a very restricted clandestine production of comic strips. There are isolated cases, such as those in Coimbra during the student struggle in 1969, and other creations that emerged in countries like France by political exiles, as pointed out by Boléo and others.²² These works discuss matters such as exam boycotts, censorship, ideological and political repression experienced during Salazar’s dictatorship, and the persecution by PIDE. For instance, the work by Pepetela and Henrique Abranches, *Against Slavery, for Freedom*, addresses the episode of the liberation of political prisoners in Angola, representing one of the moments that preceded the beginning of the colonial war.²³ Clearly, due to the effectiveness of Salazar’s censorship mechanisms and the surveillance by PIDE, there was no consistent production of comic books denouncing the regime. Instead, what we find are isolated creations that only gained recognition after the Revolution.

2. Post-revolution: Within this period, I identify the remaining three stages. The first stage, which I will term ‘exaltation,’ occurred mainly during the 1970s and 1980s. Following the Revolution, themes related to April 25th itself, featuring widely recognized iconography such as the G3 rifle, red carnations, armored vehicles, and soldiers on the streets, became more prevalent in the press, including comic strips and individual vignettes. Comics were frequently used for educational purposes, though often with ideologically oriented pedagogy, and propaganda, with booklets dedicated to the workers’ struggle, social mobilization, workers’ rights, corporatism, and the Portuguese reality in the aftermath of the Revolution. Additionally, there were works with Marxist orientations, involving the mobilization of workers to vote, calls for strikes, and demands for workers’ rights, prominently published by *Edições Avante*.²⁴ Conversely, there were also works of anti-communist resistance by the ELP (Army for the Liberation of Portugal) and the MDLP (Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Portugal), connected to the political power of the Estado Novo and major economic interests, aimed to reverse the democratic changes introduced.²⁵ In comic books, as opposed to comic strips, this period is primarily characterized by the depiction of the April 25th episode, which often appears as a brief mention in various adaptations of the History of Portugal. It is unsurprising that during the transition to democracy, there is a rewriting of history, aimed at distancing itself from Salazarist rhetoric, particularly in comic book format intended for a younger audience.

The second stage, spanning the 1990s and 2000s, is the period I designate as ‘revivalism.’ This stage consists of works that emerged during the celebrations of the anniversary of April 25th, recognized as one of the fundamental dates in 20th-century Portuguese history. This period features comic books with a strong didactic-informative aspect aimed at transmitting the legacy of April 25th and instilling the values of democracy and the ‘April 25th ethics’ in a generation now distanced from the event. Consequently, titles with keywords

21 The PIDE (Policia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado), the ‘International and State Defense Police,’ was the secret police force of the Estado Novo regime in Portugal, operating from 1945 until 1969 (when it was renamed DGS – Direção-Geral de Segurança). PIDE was infamous for its role in repressing political dissent, using surveillance, censorship, imprisonment, and torture to maintain the regime’s authoritarian control. It was instrumental in suppressing opposition to Salazar’s government, both within Portugal and in the country’s overseas colonies.

22 Cf. Boléo et al., *Das Conferências do Casino*, 48–53.

23 MPLA. (n.d.). *Contra a escravidão, pela liberdade* (Lisboa: Nova Aurora Ed.)

24 *Edições Avante!* is the publishing arm of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), known for its role in disseminating Marxist-Leninist literature and other materials aligned with the party’s ideology. The origins of *Edições Avante!* date back to the early 20th century, during a period of political repression in Portugal under the Estado Novo dictatorship. The publishing house was founded as an underground operation, named after the party’s official newspaper, *Avante!* (Forward!), which was first published in 1931.

25 Cf. Boléo et al., *Das Conferências do Casino*, 50–55, 195–98; and Rui Zink, *Literatura Gráfica? Banda Desenhada Portuguesa Contemporânea* (Lisboa: Celta, 1999), 110–112.

such as “reborn hope” and “inner revolution” emerged, conveying a sense of personal transformation and often an embrace of capitalist ideals.²⁶ At the same time, we observe a revival of the colonial war narrative, with a strong right-wing utopian perspective. Alpoim Galvão, a Portuguese commander decorated by the Estado Novo, decided later in life to write scripts for comic books, in which he portrays himself as the protagonist, recounting historical events he experienced as a military officer. These works also feature General Spínola, a Portuguese military figure and politician who served as the fourteenth President of the Portuguese Republic and the first after the April 25 Revolution, appearing as a historical character in his comic books.²⁷ They criticize the decolonization process and focus on the manipulation of African liberation movements by the United States and the USSR. Also, in 1994, for the first time, the history of a political party in comic book format appears. *PSD-Social Democratic Party-20 years*, authored by Santos Costa, is a rare book, where the legendary figure of Francisco Sá Carneiro, Portuguese politician, founder and leader of the Popular Democratic Party/Social Democratic Party, realistically drawn, in clear line style, occupies a central place.²⁸

The third stage, beginning in 2010, is what I refer to as the ‘revisitation’ phase. The generation of authors emerging during this period introduces a significant change in the way April 25th is portrayed in comic books, offering fresh perspectives, and seeking to revisit historical events with contemporary sensitivity, both aesthetically and narratively. Their works reflect not only a critical analysis of the past but also an attempt to understand its repercussions in the present. There is greater experimentation with longer projects, such as graphic novels that reinterpret not only the history of April 25th but also social life during the Estado Novo from the

perspective of the “anonymous citizen,” often overlooked in historical narratives. These projects explore the interference of PIDE in daily life, as well as Salazar’s biography. An example is Miguel Rocha’s work, which is featured in *As Pombinhas do Sr. Leitão and Salazar*. Miguel Rocha’s work is notable for intertwining historical and political narratives with a personal perspective on the past. In *As Pombinhas do Sr. Leitão*, Rocha delves into the tensions within Portuguese society during the Estado Novo regime, using a darkly satirical tone to critique its authoritarianism. The style is marked by stark, expressive illustrations that convey unease and irony. In *Salazar*, co-authored by João Paulo Cotrim, who wrote the script, the tone is reflective yet critical, with a blend of realism and abstraction that deepens the narrative’s themes.

This period is also characterized by a renewal of historical comics, with a notable sensitivity to the theme of the colonial war, which has always elicited internal discomfort in the country. Rather than merely recounting historical events, the works of this period aim to delve into individual experiences, offering testimonies of those who lived through the war. There is a deliberate effort to legitimize the perspectives of the “other,” the colonized and marginalized, by bringing their voices to the forefront and challenging dominant narratives, as evidenced in works like *As cinzas da revolta* by João Amaral and Miguel Peres. Additionally, there is an exploration of the enemy’s identification as a construct of fascism, depicted in *Filhos do Rato* by Luís Zhang and Fábio Veras, and *Vampiros* by Filipe Melo and Juan Caviá. This latter work exhibits a particularly striking sense of creativity.²⁹

The recognition of trauma is now acknowledged, particularly among those who recount historical events through personal testimonies from those directly affected. As Portuguese society becomes more open to discussion and reflection on the past, there is a growing interest in narratives that observe the impact of trauma, contributing to the recognition of trauma as a crucial step in the healing and reconciliation with the past. One such example is Francisco Sousa Lobo’s *Gente Remota*, a graphic novel based on four extensive interviews conducted in 2014 with ex-combatants of the colonial war. Lobo emphasizes the authenticity of the war experiences and the crimes committed by PIDE, asserting that nothing in the narrative has been fabricated. This approach aligns with the broader academic study of trauma in comics, a field extensively explored by scholars such as Hillary Chute, who argues that the “fragmented visual-narrative construction” of

26 One of the comic books that received critical acclaim at the time is *A Revolução Interior* (The Inner Revolution: Looking for the 25th of April), by João Miguel Lameiras, José Carlos Fernandes, and João Ramalho Santos, published by Edições Afrontamento in April 2000. This graphic novel creatively presents the events of April 25th, specifically designed to resonate with generations who grew up in a democratic Portugal, offering them a fresh perspective on the revolution that shaped their nation’s history.

27 The album *Operação Mar Verde*, written by Guilherme de Alpoim Galvão and illustrated by A. Vassalo, published in Porto by Caminhos Romanos in 2012, is a notable work.

28 A founder of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), Sá Carneiro was a key political leader during the post-Carnation Revolution era. His commitment to democratic principles and his charismatic leadership made him a symbol of political renewal in Portugal. His tragic death in a plane crash in 1980, under mysterious circumstances, further cemented his status as a legendary and heroic figure in Portuguese political history.

29 João Amaral and Miguel Peres, *As cinzas da revolta* (Lisbon: Polvo, 2018); Luís Zhang and Fábio Veras, *Filhos do Rato* (Porto: Escorpião Azul, 2017); Filipe Melo and Juan Caviá, *Vampiros* (Lisbon: Tinta-da-China, 2020).

comics can “mimic” the shape of traumatic memory, underscoring the medium’s unique ability to convey the complexities of trauma.³⁰ Similarly, Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind, in *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage*, contribute to this discourse, laying the foundation for understanding how the comic form can effectively represent trauma and situating these narratives within cultural and theoretical frameworks.³¹

Among these comic books, which blur the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, some are explicitly dedicated to narrating history. These works incorporate historiographical sources and the testimonies of individuals who experienced historical events firsthand. The authors strive to depict historical realities accurately, placing a strong emphasis on their research methodologies and the origins of their sources, which are essential for evaluating the reliability and authenticity of their narratives. Particularly noteworthy is *Operação Óscar* (2000) by José Ruy.

Returning to my earlier question, “But what about April 25th – the day itself?” we find that there are, in fact, few works available in book format that explicitly narrate the military operations leading up to the coup. Notable among them are *Operação Óscar*, *O País dos Cágados* (2012) by António Almeida and Artur Correia, and the recently released *Utopia* (2024) by Raquel Varela and Robson Vilalba.

3 Comics and History

Utopia narrates the story of the April Revolution through the eyes of José, a young man from the outskirts of Lisbon in the mid-1960s, witnessing the final years of the Estado Novo. He sees his friends’ parents sent off to fight in Africa, helps victims of the devastating 1967 floods, and secretly engages with political and intellectual ideas, books, music, and films from abroad. As he matures, he observes the rise of the anti-fascist struggle, the role of protest music, and the regime’s fall in 1974. After the 25th of April, he joins the militant left, embracing the radicalism and revolutionary fervor of the PREC period.³²

³⁰ Cf. Hillary Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 122.

³¹ Cf. Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind, eds., *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

³² The PREC period (Processo Revolucionário em Curso, in English, Revolutionary Process in Progress) refers to the turbulent phase in Portugal from 1974 to 1976, following the Carnation Revolution, during which the country underwent significant political and social changes, including the transition to democracy, widespread nationalizations, and land reforms.

Beginning with a one-page introduction, the book sets forth the authors’ intentions, highlighting the complex relationship between fiction and reality, particularly in times of revolution, when reality can often outdo fiction in its ability to surprise and move us. While this work is meant to be a piece of fiction, it is intricately tied to the historical and social fabric of the Carnation Revolution, reflecting the lives of real people and the transformative moments they lived through with a high degree of verisimilitude. The essence of the characters and events is drawn from these authentic experiences, particularly from those who, in the act of reshaping the world, also transformed themselves.

Through the lens of fiction, the broader implications of the revolution are illuminated – particularly how ordinary people actively implemented Marxist political rhetoric, providing insights into the social dynamics and the spread of revolutionary fervor that traditional historical narratives, often limited by their factual constraints, might overlook. *Utopia* exemplifies this by blurring the boundaries between fiction and historiography through a network of iconic and textual processes, a blending that is evident not only in its thematic content but also in its formal structure. The division of the page into distinct panels, their arrangement, and the intentional pacing create a distinctive visual rhetoric that enhances the narrative’s impact.³³ The story unfolds across both space and time (Figure 1), merging spatial representation with temporal flow, showcasing how comics, as a semiotic system, function as a unique form of writing – *la bande dessinée comme écriture*³⁴ – mirroring the characteristics of

³³ Thierry Groensteen describes it in detail in his pioneering work *The System of Comics*. His analysis highlights how comics function as a distinct language, using a combination of visual and textual elements to generate meaning and convey complex narratives. His work has been instrumental in establishing a theoretical framework for understanding the semiotic system of comics. His concept of *iconic solidarity* emphasizes how individual images, or panels, within a comic are interconnected, with each panel’s meaning influenced by its relationship with others, creating a network of meaning that enriches the overall narrative. Groensteen also introduced the *spatio-topical system*, which explores how comics utilize spatial arrangements to convey meaning, where the placement, size, and shape of panels on a page as well as their interaction within the visual space are crucial to storytelling. Additionally, his concept of *arthrology* examines the connections between elements within a comic, distinguishing between the relationships on a single page or sequence and those that span across the entire work. This idea underscores the importance of both micro and macro connections in creating meaning within comics. See Thierry Groensteen, *Système de la Bande Dessinée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999).

³⁴ The concept of “La bande dessinée comme écriture” is closely associated with the work of French comics theorist Benoît Peeters. He has extensively explored the idea of comics as a form of writing or narrative language, particularly in his influential book *Case, Planche, Récit: Lire la Bande Dessinée*. Add info on publisher, etc.

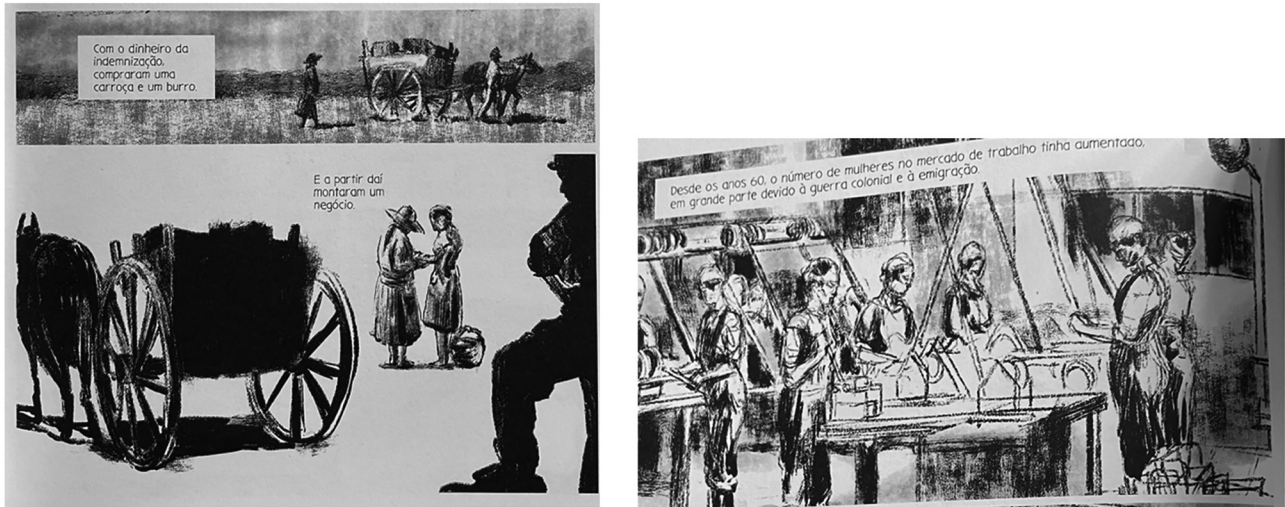


Figure 1: Panels from *Utopia*, 2024, pages 23 and 86. Credit: Raquel Varela and Robson Vilalba, Published by Bertrand Editora: Lisbon.



Figure 2: Panels from *Utopia*, 2024, pages 70 and 110. Credit: Raquel Varela and Robson Vilalba, Published by Bertrand Editora: Lisbon.

other linguistic systems. This graphic novel maintains a regular rhythm in its panel structure, with a consistent number of vignettes per page, except during moments of heightened emotional intensity (Figure 2), which correspond to key personal milestones for the protagonist or significant periods of political and social upheaval in history.

The use of soft, sketch-like lines and subtle shading, creates a sense of intimacy and reflection. The gentle interplay of light and shadow, combined with strokes in a draft-like, unfinished style, evokes a feeling of distance, subtly reinforcing the notion that these events belong to a different time. The predominant focus on hands and small gestures adds a layer of personal connection, bridging the past and present in a way that feels both familiar and nostalgic, with clear ideological undertones.

This sequence of panels (Figure 3), showcasing Salazar, Mussolini, Hitler, Salgueiro Maia,³⁵ and vivid portrayals of the Revolution, alongside Amílcar Cabral and what can be perceived as authentic images of the anti-colonial movements, effectively illustrate the intersection of fiction and historiographical narrative. The combination of realistic depictions of historical figures and events with stylized artistic choices, such as rough lines and shadowy forms, creates an atmosphere that suggests a more subjective view of history. This approach allows the work to engage with

³⁵ Salgueiro Maia was a key figure in the Portuguese Carnation Revolution. He led the military forces that peacefully overthrew the Estado Novo dictatorship, paving the way for democracy in Portugal.



Figure 3: Panels from *Utopia*, 2024, pages 13, 107, and 58. Credit: Raquel Varela and Robson Vilalba, Published by Bertrand Editora: Lisbon.

history as both a documented reality and a narrative shaped by memory, perception, and creative expression, inviting readers to question the nature of historical truth and the role of narrative in shaping our understanding of the past. This questioning becomes particularly crucial when examining the connection between history and comics, as it prompts reflection on what Mioara Caragea describes as history's "polysemantic fluidity," emphasizing the multiple interpretations and meanings that history can take, depending on the narrative lens through which it is viewed.³⁶ This fluidity reveals the dual referentiality of the concept of history, referring both to the reality of a given era and the scientific discourse about the past. According to Caragea, this is not accidental; it denotes history as encompassing both what happened and the narration of what happened.³⁷ This duality draws attention to the common structure of the two discursive genres, suggesting on the one hand that history is inherently narrative, and on the other, the possible tension when two discourses engage with the same subject matter.

³⁶ This notion is explored in an essay reflecting on the concept of history by Mioara Caragea, "HISTÓRIA," in *E-Dicionário de Termos Literários*, ed. Carlos Ceia, https://edtl.fcsh.unl.pt/encyclopedia/historia#_ftn1.

³⁷ In Portuguese, the word also carries a third meaning: that of a tale, imaginary narrative, or fiction, which creates a distinct homonymy between history-as-science and history-as-fiction.

The establishment of each scientific field created a significant divide between the two disciplines, often framing them as opposites: history as the pursuit of objective truth and literature as the realm of invention. However, this rigid separation was increasingly challenged by historians Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, co-founders of the Annales School, who advocated for interdisciplinary methods and the inclusion of diverse sources, such as oral histories, material culture, and everyday life artifacts – the field opened up to new ways of understanding the past. Lucien Febvre famously described the historical fact as "invented and fabricated." This phrase, used during his inaugural session at the Collège de France on December 13, 1933, emphasizes the idea that history is not a passive recounting of past events, but an active construction by historians.³⁸ Scholars including Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida played a pivotal role in advocating for the change, emphasizing that both history and literature engage in narrative construction. Their work, emerging from the

³⁸ The 'creation' of historical facts involves piecing together evidence, often fragmentary and incomplete, to construct a narrative that makes sense of the past. This process is inherently subjective, influenced by the historian's own context, biases, and the intellectual currents of their time. As such, what we understand as historical 'truth' is not an objective reality that exists independently of the historian, but rather a constructed narrative that reflects both the past and the lens through which it is viewed. See: Lucien Febvre, *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1953).

broader context of French post-structuralism and deconstruction, has emphasized the fluidity and interdependence of these genres, arguing that both history and literature engage in narrative construction. The historical fact is therefore not simply given, nor is it discovered in its original, untouched state as it existed in the past. Rather, it is the product of a complex process of elaboration and interpretation.³⁹ This led to a wider intellectual movement that challenged the rigid boundaries separating history from other visual narrative forms. Historians like Pascal Roy, Yvan Jablonka, Denis Maréchal, and Adrien Genoudet now increasingly regard comics as a significant source of historical insight.

One of the works that makes a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of history and visual storytelling, particularly in the context of comics, is Adrien Genoudet's *Dessiner l'Histoire. Pour une histoire visuelle*.⁴⁰ In this work, Genoudet builds on the approach suggested by Jablonka by proposing 'visual history – an approach to historical representation that transcends traditional text-based narratives. Genoudet argues that the historian's role goes beyond merely reflecting on history and its representation; it involves the very act of writing history. He argues that "the writing of history is largely dominated by the past as a visual performance."⁴¹ The images that emerge from this process reflect a drive to closely recreate a past that artists strive to bring to life through their drawings. By critiquing established cultural understandings of history, and delving into the notion of the past, Genoudet positions his reflection within a revitalized cultural history, focusing on how graphic media, particularly comics, contribute to the construction of a visual and collective memory of history, with 'the past' being central to Genoudet's argument due to its visual essence: "To speak of 'the past' in the context of

history inherently involves an interest in its visual dimension. The past, like memory, is an image."⁴²

Utopia portrays history by assembling past images into what Genoudet refers to as a visual performance. While it aims to be a work of fiction, Raquel Varela's historiographical background unmistakably emerges, revealed through a narrative style uncommon in comics: limited dialogue and the extensive use of caption boxes. The tone leans heavily toward the referential and educational, delivering clear factual information – locations, dates, numerical data, and instructive details. Despite the somewhat softened drawing style, the images succeed in making historical figures identifiable. Kate Hamburger's assertion that "images do not operate in the fictional mode" supports the argument that the visual elements in *Utopia* create a plausible historical narrative rather than a purely fictional one.⁴³ The imaginative landscape and narrative design evoke the concept of "possible worlds," as articulated by Lubomír Doležel.⁴⁴ Consequently, it can be suggested that this work employs fiction as a means to write a legitimate version of Portuguese history, highlighting anonymous citizens who are frequently sidelined or overlooked in official narratives. This is a personal vision from a historian with deep knowledge of Portuguese history, resulting in an account that is both conceivable and credible.

After years of being anchored in fictional storytelling, comics are now shifting toward narratives that engage more directly with reality.⁴⁵ This evolution is particularly relevant to the intersection of history and comics, as it opens up new possibilities for representing historical narratives through a medium that increasingly offers fresh perspectives on how we understand and visually perceive the past – literally *see* the past – as demonstrated in the work of Raquel Varela and Robson Vilalba. This album, while maintaining a certain revivalist tendency, sets itself apart and appears to mark the beginning of a new phase, which may only become more apparent in the coming years.

³⁹ Foucault, Barthes, and Derrida have played pivotal roles in challenging the traditional boundaries that once clearly separated history from literature. Foucault, for instance, interrogated the supposed objectivity of historical discourse, revealing how it, too, is influenced by power relations and subjectivities. Barthes, in his essay *The Discourse of History*, questioned the very notion of historical 'truth,' suggesting that history, like literature, is a form of narrative shaped by the historian's choices and interpretations. Derrida's deconstruction further blurred the lines, arguing that the distinctions between factual and fictional narratives are not as clear-cut as traditionally assumed.

⁴⁰ Genoudet's book is the first title published in the new Graphein collection by Le Manuscrit Editions, which aims to integrate the ninth art and all graphic arts as elements of contemporary historical analysis, as detailed on their website. <https://lemanuscrit.fr/collections/graphein/>.

⁴¹ Adrien Genoudet, *Dessiner l'Histoire. Pour une histoire visuelle* (Paris: Le Manuscrit, 2015), 73.

⁴² *Idem*, 56.

⁴³ See Käte Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, trans. Marilyn J. Rose, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 57–58.

⁴⁴ Doležel borrowed the idea from modal logic and philosophy, where it originally referred to different ways the world could have been under various conditions. In literary studies, this concept is adapted to explore the nature of fictional worlds created in literature and their relationship to the real world. See Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

⁴⁵ Philosopher Laurent Gerbier identifies this shift – the 'comics of reality' – as the fourth significant wave of renewal and formal redefinition in the medium since the 1960s. The 'documentary turn,' as he names it, establishes a new code and framework, emphasizing a commitment to a non-fictional engagement with reality. See Laurent Gerbier, "La bande dessinée du réel et la poésie de la non-fiction," *Neuvième Art*, April 2020, <https://www.citebd.org/neuvieme-art/la-bande-dessinee-du-reel-et-la-poesie-de-la-non-fiction>.