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Revista de Antropología, Ciencias de la Comunicación y de la Información, Filosofía,  
Lingüística y Semiótica, Problemas del Desarrollo, la Ciencia y la Tecnología

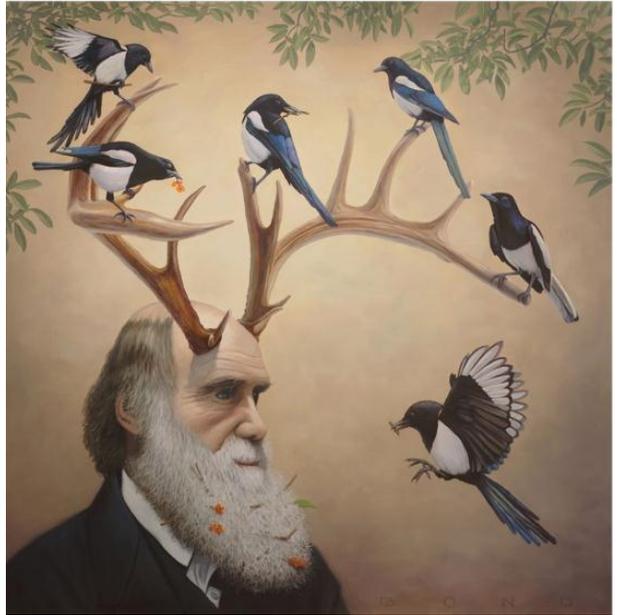
Año 35, 2019, Especial N°

# 22

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

ISSN 1012-1537/ ISSNe: 2477-9385

Depósito Legal pp 198402ZU45



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Facultad Experimental de Ciencias  
Departamento de Ciencias Humanas  
Maracaibo - Venezuela



## **The comics about Asterix as a way of representing modernity**

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### **Abstract**

The article considers the semantic allusions of French comics about Asterix via the interpretative and inductive-deductive method and linguistic-semiotic analysis of the comic's text. As a result, Comics about Asterix came out against the background of powerful sociocultural changes in French society, which affected their content. The authors of the article concluded that the following modern markers can be identified in Asterix comics: France political reality (election campaigns, major political figures, attitude to collaborationism, attitude to modern republican culture and state structure); feminism and attitude to it from the French society; stereotypes of national behavior and self-identification of the French.

**Keywords:** Comics, Asterix, Obelix, Ancient, Rome.

## Los cómics sobre Astérix como una forma de representar la modernidad

### Resumen

El artículo considera las alusiones semánticas de los cómics franceses sobre Asterix a través del método interpretativo e inductivo-deductivo y el análisis lingüístico-semiótico del texto del cómic. Como resultado, los cómics sobre Asterix aparecieron en el contexto de poderosos cambios socioculturales en la sociedad francesa, que afectaron su contenido. Los autores del artículo concluyeron que los siguientes marcadores modernos se pueden identificar en los cómics de Astérix: la realidad política de Francia (campañas electorales, figuras políticas importantes, actitud hacia el colaboracionismo, actitud hacia la cultura republicana moderna y estructura estatal); feminismo y actitud hacia él desde la sociedad francesa; estereotipos de comportamiento nacional y autoidentificación de los franceses.

**Palabras clave:** Cómics, Astérix, Obélix, Antigua, Roma.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The history of French comics (bande dessinée - drawn stories) about Asterix and Obelix from the very beginning of their appearance to the general public evoked various comments and spawned a large amount of popular and scientific literature. There are a lot of definitions of comics as a genre of mass art, as well as examples of semantic analysis of the content of albums about superheroes of different countries in the scientific literature. The content of the comic depends on the idea of its creators. Their differences from reality can be in very varying degrees. The comics

about Asterix adventures became quickly a noticeable phenomenon in the French mass culture of the second half of the 20th century. The first French satellite (A1, launched on November 26, 1960) and a children's park near Paris was named Asterix, in the popular newspaper Figaro the Year of Asterix column was appeared. A whole industry developed around the main characters of the series, producing films, stickers, T-shirts, bags, children's toys, etc. (SONIN, 1999: LIMA, MENDES & PAIVA, 2018: OSIPOV, KUDRYAVTSEV, KOPTEV, IERMAKOV & BLIZNEVSKAYA, 2018).

The appearance of the first Asterix comic is connected with the order of the Pilot newspaper to the writer René Goscinny and the artist Albert Uderzo in autumn of 1959 to create a series of adventures of the French superhero. As a hero, the mythical figure of Gaul Asterix was chosen and the time of the conquest of Gallia by Rome - 50 BC. The sources for the plot were Notes by Julius Caesar (ROUVIÈRE, 1996), The Daily Life of Rome by Jerome Carcopino (ROUVIÈRE, 1998), The History of Rome by Andre Piganiol, and also the dictionary Le Petit Larousse LAPLACE (2010) as a source of aphorisms, special vocabulary, etc (APRÈS, 2000: SARAC, 2018: SOHRABI, 2017).

It should be noted that the comic appeared in difficult political and cultural conditions for the country, which undoubtedly

left an imprint on its content. During this period, the process of decolonization was gaining momentum, France's withdrawal from NATO occurred, and General de Gaulle anti-American demarches were sounded, the formation of a consumer society was coming to an end, a social crisis was brewing that would come to the surface in May 1968, feminism and the idea of self-government were gaining popularity which were discussed in leftist circles, European society drew attention to the environmental problems and development policies of large suburbs, the usual conservative order, the spirit of rebellion, the triumph of the struggle against inequalities forces. French superheroes gained popularity quickly, in the described plots were begun to look for historical parallels and satire to the present, and in 1966 L'Express magazine wrote about the Asterix Phenomenon.

## **2. METHODS**

The methodology of this article is based on the principles of historicism, that is, the consideration of all events is in their historical conditionality. The general principles of historiographic analysis were used: the definition of the research problem, the analysis of the theoretical and methodological authors positions. Special methods for analyzing such a genre of literature were also

used: an interpretative method, an inductive-deductive method, a linguistic-semiotic analysis of the comic's text.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

History and modernity are two important markers for the deconstruction of the Asterix comics. Naturally, the authors denied any hint of politics and recent history. René Goscinny said in an interview:

It would be ridiculous just to take the Gauls and the Romans, two antagonistic groups. The Gauls are less numerous and less powerful, so we will give them a druid who produces a magic drink ... And the work was done without any preconceived idea. René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo refer to historical events that often correspond to reality, but are not afraid of anachronisms, take liberties with the interpreting these very events. Moreover, in the historical descriptions with careful study you can see a reflection of modernity. Thus, the myth of Asterix serves as a way of representing the modernity (CARCOPINO, 1939: 12).

The ecologically clean Gaul world is opposed to the civilization ravages, personified by the attacking Rome. Gauls personify the harmony of nature and culture, the natural environment. In the scenes of their lives, all the main stereotypes of Gallic (*gallicité*) are presented: friendliness, numerous feasts, fights, disorder. The village is a small courtyard, riddled with anti-

elite and republican logic. Nicolas Rouvière notes that, through such a democratic ethic, the values of the radicalism of the Third Republic are reflected in the comic. The Gaul village represents a certain microcosm, a small republic in miniature with faith in the mind (even the druid more resembles the figure of a secular scientist), a school, an obstacle to power drifts and environmental awareness (reflected through the image of the forest surrounding the Gaul village, which the Romans cut down) (ASTERIX, 2000).

This sterile Gaul world is, on the one hand, closed in itself, and on the other open to the world, since the Gauls travel constantly (which is characteristic, almost exclusively within the borders of the Western world). Through travel, the authors of the Asterix comic strip ironic not only at national stereotypes, but also touch on a number of important social and political issues. As an example, the album *Astérixchezles Helvètes*, which presents the famous clichés about Switzerland: gold coins, edelweiss (national flower), cheese. In addition, in the comic, we find obvious references to the immigration problem: 1) the owner of the inn Petisuix and the Zurich banker accept and hide the Gauls pursued by the Romans; 2) the phrase full Iberian cart, an allusion to the wave of Spanish immigration to France in the first half of the 20th century (DUHAMEL, 1985).

Researchers explain this topic by René Goscinny birth (a Jew of Ukrainian-Polish origin) and Albert Uderzo (an Italian émigréson). In 2016 there was a hidden reaction to the election words of Nicolas Sarkozy (our ancestors were Gauls) demanding the assimilation of immigrants in the name of common historical origins. On the example of the *Astérixchezles Belges* comic (DURAND, 2010), the authors raise the question of the artificial origin of cultural and linguistic borders, the idea of common European heritage is formulated, ethnocentrism is criticized, and the Gauls themselves, in fact, speak the same language. Geneva (Genova) serves as the venue for the International Conference of the Gaul Tribes. The Gauls themselves personify some *terred'accueil*. They set Pépé, the son of a Spanish opposition to Soplalognonat liberty. In *Le Domainedesdieux* they come to the rescue to slaves who are building plots in the nearby forest (CAESAR, 1839).

Another major marker of modernity in the Asterix comic is the image of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire is the image of the modern state (France of the 1960s–1970s) with its large administration, prefects, meetings, communication networks and cultural institutions. This state machine is opposed by the seemingly democratic Gaul world. Actually, the idea of democracy is shown in comic books through several electoral battles. In 1974, when the presidential campaign was underway, and Valéry

Giscardd' Estaing won, the album Lecadeaude César was released, describing the elections in the Gaul village. Scenes of electoral battles are also found in the comics *La Rose et la glaive* and *Le combats des chefs*.

Gollism liberal reversal, undertaken in 1976 by Jacques Chirac, in his political struggle with President Valéry Giscardd' Estaing and the Left, also received the authors solid dose of criticism in the comic book on *Obelix et compagnie* (Obelix and Company) as an attempt to update old etatism and develop political marketing methods. Jacques Chirac himself appears as Caius Saugenus, a Roman technocrat, an adherent of a market economy. He pushes Obelix to produce menhirs in order to supply the Roman market, accumulating sestertia, and thus become the most important man of the village. The riches of a small part of the villagers, labor and the growing competition between its inhabitants destroy the harmony of the Gaul community.

Comics about Asterix has long been the subject of the political culture of modern French. The French journalist Alain Duhamel even published a book titled *The Asterix Complex*, analyzing the origins of the cultural exclusivity of the French, their attitude to dangerous and destructive mondialization. For example, the comic *Obélix et compagnie* (Obelix and company) is symbolic in terms of reflecting the spirit of anti-capitalism. Gauls are not

interested in money! Alain Duhamel noted the existence of a dualism which has always dominated the national life of the Gauls. Their political sphere was bipolar, which in modern life was reflected in the struggle of the right and left camps and voting against the hostile political bloc. At the same time, in the depths of his soul, the Gaul was always an adherent of the majority and the minority. He was also a legitimist, and a rebel, disciplined and dissatisfied. The figure of Asterix seems to be a symbolic figure of the average Frenchman, who does not consider himself either right or left, embodying a typical national character and personifying resistance to the invaders (already a political myth by that time).

The comic about Asterix did not escape accusations of sympathy for Gaullism and personally de Gaulle. At the time of their appearance, Charles de Gaulle just came to power, establishing the V Republic. Therefore, in the 1960s, part of the press described Asterix as a Gollist comic, likening a small Gaul village which resisted Rome to the French patriotic metaphor of General de Gaulle, who resisted US hegemony. Although the authors themselves denied such hints, and René Goscinny in 1968 specifically noted: General de Gaulle did not need Asterix.

In the comics, according to a number of researchers, there is the theme of collaborationism. The resistance of the Gallic village can be equated to the resistance of German-occupied France. There

are tribes who have obeyed the occupation - this is the Helvetii. Researchers engaged in the history of this period point to the important place given by the regime of Marshal Pétain of Gallic iconography in their propaganda posters or to the troops of fascist France in Gergovia. Another plot is the sending of the sick leader Abraracourcix to Aquae Calidae (= Vichy) in the album *Le bouclier arverne*, in which they saw a parallel with the history of Vichy. The album itself appeared at a time when, in French society and politics, the question and reflections on the possible reconciliation between resistance and collaborationism again arose. Finally, in the album *Astérix et les Goths* (released in 1964), experts saw a hint at the Franco-German reconciliation, the policy pursued by de Gaulle and resulted in the conclusion of the Elysian Treaty with Germany in 1963.

Comics about Asterix came out against the background of powerful sociocultural changes in French society, which affected their content. Let us give an example, the representation of feminism. This is the image of Maestra, which is leading the movement for the liberation of the Gaul, which opposes the tyranny of men, wants to take power and lead the village instead of Abraracourcix: Sisters! Break the chains! ... Down with the slavery of everyday life! Ask yourself if you need this ... male tyranny. But a common motive: feminism is a threat to the patriarchal society: Now a woman can do a lot. She is now equal to a man, with all her

desires and ambitions that she could not realize before, says the druid Panoramix who Asterix asks the question: So they can now be druids? However, Panoramix soothes, denoting certain limits to the power of women: Easy. Easy, Asterix! Do not exaggerate.

#### **4. SUMMARY**

Thus, in the Asterix comics, the following modern markers can be distinguished, which are most clearly manifested in several analyzed albums:

- The political reality of France (electoral battles, political figures, attitude to collaborationism, republican political culture);
- Feminism;
- Stereotypes of national behavior and self-identification of the French.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

In conclusion, the success of the Asterix comic has made it an attractive target for political propaganda. The attempt to usurp

the image of Asterix by Vichy was already mentioned. Do not stand aside and the modern right. In 1998, the Gollist party, The Rally for the Republic, requested permission from the authors of the comics to use the image of Asterix and Obelix in the election posters of the party. During the 2009 European campaign, the National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen also turned to the image of Asterix. Thus, comics continue to be both a means of entertaining the mass public and a means of politicizing history.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

Año 35, Especial No. 22 (2019)

Esta revista fue editada en formato digital por el personal de la Oficina de Publicaciones Científicas de la Facultad Experimental de Ciencias, Universidad del Zulia.

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