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## Towards Freedom of Adaptation

### The Case of *El hombre descuadernado*, an Adaptation of “The Horla”

Benoît Mitaine

*This chapter offers a case study of El hombre descuadernado (2009), a comic book adaptation of Guy de Maupassant's «The Horla» (1886) by Spanish writer Felipe Hernández Cava and Argentinian artist Sanyú. If one considers a good adaptation to be a free adaptation, i.e. one which betrays its source rather than reproduce it, then literary classics provide many opportunities for adaptations inasmuch as they are open to multiple readings and to the specific concerns of various eras (in this case, a parallel is made between the figure of the Horla and Alzheimer's disease). Thus, after exploring Cava's reasons for adapting the novella with its motifs of disease, madness, fear and the double, this chapter analyzes some of the visual and narrative strategies which, it would seem, aim at embodying madness and involving the reader in it by subverting graphic storytelling codes.*

“Like Eisenstein in his day, I am still convinced that the best way to approach reality is by transcending realism.”<sup>1</sup>

(Felipe Hernández Cava)

Guy de Maupassant is amongst the most adapted French authors, and his work has been turned into plays, films, television series and comics.<sup>2</sup> Though it is difficult to explain the

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<sup>1</sup> The original text reads: “Como Eisenstein en su día, sigo defendiendo que la mejor forma de acercarse a la realidad es trascender el realismo.”

<sup>2</sup> The author of the *Maupassantiana* website lists 35 theatrical adaptations made between 1968 and 2013, with a very strong presence of *The Horla* (12 adaptations). Between 1908 and 2013, there were no fewer than 101 film adaptations. The titles most frequently adapted for the theatre are “Dumpling” (10 adaptations), *Bel Ami* (9) and “The Necklace” (9). As for television, the author identifies 81 adaptations made between 1949 and 2011. Finally, as for comics, at least 7 adaptations were published between 1952 and 1973 (apparently never reissued in album format), and 25 comics albums were released between 1983 and 2013. Not all of these 25 comics are exclusively dedicated to Maupassant. They are often thematic collections only featuring one of Maupassant's short stories. In addition, *El hombre descuadernado* is not among the 249 references of all adaptations up until 2013 listed on *Maupassantiana*. It is therefore very likely that the list of adaptations (except perhaps for film) is even more impressive. [Http://www.maupassantiana.fr/Adaptations](http://www.maupassantiana.fr/Adaptations). Accessed 24 May 2013.

power of attraction of his work in the 20<sup>th</sup> and the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,<sup>3</sup> there are at least a few hypotheses that could account for the author's 'adaptability'—or *adaptogénie* as Gaudreault calls it (271).

One of the main factors is undoubtedly Maupassant's renown as one of France's foremost canonical authors. Author of several classic masterpieces (*Bel Ami*, "Dumpling," "The Horla," and so on), he lives on in memory through his works, to paraphrase the title Judith Schlanger's book, *La Mémoire des œuvres*. Fame is itself already a source of capitalization<sup>4</sup> ('only the rich get credit'), with the number of adaptations of an oeuvre often proportional to an author's reputation.

Adaptation (especially film versions with their media and promotion spectacle) serves the interests of the adapted work by updating it to current tastes, while through its stature the adapted work serves the interests of the adaptation by endowing it with legitimacy. To the fame of Maupassant, we can add a second factor, namely the brevity of most of his stories, be they erotic, realistic or fantastic.

This brevity seems to have found favor with comics artists (unlike filmmakers perhaps) to the extent that throughout the sixties and seventies, before the album format became the dominant publications form, the authors published their works in magazines,<sup>5</sup> which forced them to shorten the work and make it suitable for serial publication. The third and final factor contributing to Maupassant's *adaptogénie* is its genre: the author excelled in tales of the fantastic. In his introduction to the special issue of *Otranto* devoted to the relationship between comics and the fantastic, guest editor Jean-Paul Gabilliet suggests that "historically, the fantastic has been a *structuring* force in comics" to the extent that, through their semiotic

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<sup>3</sup> One could think of the (poorly received) film adaptation of *Bel Ami* (2012) by English directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, or the comics adaptation of *The Horla* (with its abhorrent graphics) by Frederick Bertocchini and Eric Puech (Ajaccio: Éditions du Quinquet, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> The issue of an author's celebrity doubles in the current case, which concerns the adaptation of a short story. As to the status of the arts, the novella (like the novel) is traditionally seen as superior to comics. The hypothesis of symbolic capital differing between art forms (and not between authors) is raised by Groensteen 1998 (11), defended by Monique Carcaud-Macaire and Jeanne-Marie Clerc (17-18) and Hutcheon (34, 91-92).

<sup>5</sup> Examples include *Maupassant: Contes et nouvelles de guerre* by Dino Battaglia (Saint Egrève, Mosquito, 2002), whose short stories were first published between 1976 and 1977 in the Italian magazine *Linus*. Counterexamples to the argument favouring the short form over the long story in comics adaptation are *Bel-ami* by René Detire which was published in the daily *France soir* throughout 1952, or the work studied in the present volume by Thomas Faye, *El cid* by Antonio Hernández Palacios, published in serial format in the Spanish magazine *Trinca* from 1971 onwards.

hybridity, comics “seem [...] to generate intense phantasmal powers.” Furthermore, unlike literature, comics can “*represent* without necessarily *signifying*” (7). In sum, it is this capacity inherent in abstraction, which Gabilliet calls the “disequilibrium of expression,” which is supposedly at the basis of the natural affinity between comics and “strictly ‘non-referential’ stories,” which is precisely the defining feature of the fantastic (Gabilliet 7).

In the case of *El hombre descuadernado* (2009) by scriptwriter Felipe Hernández Cava (Madrid, 1953) and Argentine artist Héctor Sanguiliano aka Sanyú (Neuquén, 1951), neither hypothesis holds. Indeed, the authors took great care to remove all intertextual references to the title (in Spanish, Maupassant’s short story is known by the same title in French, “El Horla”), insisting on the autonomy of the comic vis-à-vis the source. They chose not to exploit the fame of the adapted work and the commercial potential that such adaptations (sometimes) generate.<sup>6</sup> As to brevity and genre, the authors deliberately changed the source text to reflect the opposite: they lengthened the original by adding biographical facts about Maupassant, undermining a reading in terms of the fantastic. The third hypothesis is partially valid (as with works of fantasy in general), but has no explanatory force as far as this adaptation goes.

In short, instead of looking at the ‘bottom line’ (not to mention the convenience of a readymade script) and explain things in the style of *Maupassantmania*, it might be more productive to first ask ourselves what makes a work a ‘classic.’ Classic texts broach issues that offer universality and timelessness, qualities that make them flexible and adaptable to “contemporary issues,” which is the basis for “the plurality of readings throughout time” necessary for their survival (Schlanger 107).

I will address the latter in the first part of this article, which is devoted to the reasoning that pushed (a strong word perhaps, but the adaptation was practically made under constraint) Felipe H. Cava to adapt “the Horla,” that monster that each generation reshapes (adapts) according to the new social fears of the day. Secondly, this essay will alternately focus on the script and the drawing. This will allow us to discuss some of the major changes introduced in Cava’s script compared to Maupassant’s hypotext (including the expansion of the genre by

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<sup>6</sup> Despite the harsh judgements by some critics (see note 1 of this article) on Proust’s adaptation by Stéphane Heuet, the work was a great commercial success accompanied by many translations (into fourteen different languages: <http://www.stephane-heuet.fr/>).

adding biographical facts about Maupassant's life). It will also facilitate the analysis of three major graphic approaches to narrative—which Philippe Marion refers to as “graphiation” (294)—Sanyú uses to convey madness: (1) the shifts between baroque and expressionist styles; (2) the visual *mise en scène* of the themes of the double and fragmentation; (3) effects of deformation (surprising variations in size) and multiple *trompe l'œil*s that predominantly exploit sequentiality (the illusion of sequential progression and its inverse, the illusion of sequential stasis). Finally, as the culmination of this game with narrative codes, Cava and Sanyú disconnect the storylines within one single panel. This generates narrative disjunctions that disturb the reader's senses as well as the meaning and direction of reading.

### *Adaptation as Pharmakon*

In his preface to *El hombre descuadernado*,<sup>7</sup> Felipe Hernández Cava relates how the adaptation was the driving force behind a difficult mourning process. In a restrained account, Cava tells us how Alzheimer gradually changed and ultimately took his mother. Ana Juan and Keko, artists and among Cava's closest friends, were afraid of the impact his mother's declining health would have on the writer. They eventually found, by way of a remedy, an unusual way to keep him occupied. They entrusted him with the creation of a new collection for Edicions de Ponent, one of the three major independent comics publishers in Spain. Together with his loyal friends, Cava set out to work and in 2007 he founded *El cuarto oscuro*, the collection that would include *El hombre descuadernado*. This anecdote would be insignificant were it not for the fact that the collection specializes in adaptations of classic horror stories.<sup>8</sup> Besides Cava and Sanyú's loose adaptation of “The Horla,” it also comprises an adaptation of a passage of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* by Ana Juan, an adaptation of E. T. A. Hoffmann's “Sand-Man” by Felipe del Barrio and May Prol, and Keko's adaptation of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. The name of the collection, “El cuarto oscuro,”<sup>9</sup> derives

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<sup>7</sup> As Cava notes in the preface, the title derives from Colombian poet Raúl Gómez Jattin (1945-97). The adjective *descuadernado*, though rare in Spain, is used quite commonly in Colombia as a synonym for *décousu*, ‘incoherent.’ In this case, ‘disjointed’ [cutaway] would be a satisfactory translation.

<sup>8</sup> The advantage of adapting classics, as Keko (one of the authors of the *El cuarto oscuro* collection) confirms in a letter dated 27 December 2011, is that the copyright of these texts has expired. Now in the public domain, they are cheaper to adapt.

<sup>9</sup> For additional context about the origin of this collection, I provide the following excerpt from my correspondence with Keko: “The idea came about during one of these convivial lunches Ana [Juan], Felipe [del Barrio] and myself often organized at the time [...] when Felipe was going through a very rough patch. We discussed the idea of a collection of frightful tales Ana and I love so much and which

from the eponymous punishment that owes part of its efficacy to the dual effect of confinement and fear of the dark. A kind of ‘jail cell’ at home, “el cuarto oscuro” is a windowless room (closet, storage room) where we lock up disobedient children. Although the term (and punishment) is no longer widely known, it owed its effectiveness to the word combination "room" + "dark," so evocative and ominous. In addition to this first meaning, there is a more profound one tied to Cava’s experience at the time. You do not need to be a psychoanalyst to make the connection between the title and the name given to those ‘mental closets’ where our traumas are repressed: *el cuarto oscuro* is a mental crypt (a junk room) where we get rid of what we are unable to integrate psychologically (Hachet, *Cryptes et fantômes*).

In this case, the choice of the “Horla” is not an accident, as Cava is the first to point out. From the second paragraph of his preface, the author compares Alzheimer’s to something alien that has grown roots in his mother’s brain, feeding off her thoughts until she collapses (“It was as if something unfamiliar had taken possession of [her brain] and fed off her consciousness, leaving her memory blank”).<sup>10</sup> This comparison is reminiscent of the Horla, this new, alien being that snatches humans and makes them go insane. On the third page of the preface, Cava candidly acknowledges that he used the adaptation of “Horla,” the most terrifying story he’s ever read, as “a good pretext to [...] talk about what was happening to me.”<sup>11</sup>

Where Cava’s confessions become truly remarkable is when, in the next sentence, he adds that his adaptation not only explores the association between Horla and Alzheimer, but also his identification with Maupassant: “I was the protagonist of this story and at the same

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only Felipe could edit, and from him came the idea of working on classics in the genre whose copyright had recently expired. I think he suggested the name, which was the source of many jokes since ‘El cuarto oscuro’ also refers to where sexual encounters take place in gay bars.” Original text: “La idea surgió en una de las fraternales comidas que habitualmente celebramos Ana, Felipe y yo, en un momento [...] muy difícil en la vida de Felipe. Hablamos de una colección de género terrorífico, algo a lo que Ana y yo somos muy aficionados, y que sólo podía dirigir Felipe, al que se le ocurrió la idea de trabajar sobre clásicos del género que habían perdido los derechos de autor en fechas recientes. El nombre creo que también lo sugirió él y fue motivo de muchas bromas porque “El cuarto oscuro” es también un lugar donde tienen lugar los encuentros sexuales en ciertos bares de ambiente gay.”

<sup>10</sup> Original text: “Era como si algo extraño se hubiera adueñado de él y se alimentase de todos sus conocimientos hasta irlo dejando inmaculado de recuerdos.”

<sup>11</sup> Original text: “un buen pretexto [...] para hablar de lo que me estaba sucediendo.”

time the writer who imagined him when he already felt the threat of reason slipping away.”<sup>12</sup> Further on he adds: “I had to give free rein to the fears that plagued me and let them spill out into the medium I have always had the most faith in: comics.”<sup>13</sup> Judging from these statements, *El hombre descuadernado*, would be the transcription of an inner experience, an emotional shock, which almost pulled the author over the precipice of madness. In this case at least, adaptation would be a cultural practice with cathartic and therapeutic value.

### *How to go about adapting?*

During the creation of an adaptation, two major questions naturally arise: “Which work to adapt?” “How to adapt the work?”

Most answers to the first question—a matter of heart and soul—can be found in the preface of *El hombre descuadernado*. The second question is more concerned with textual mechanics: selection, condensation, transformation, and so on. However, all too often we forget that comics adaptations involve two moments: it begins with the adaptation of a text into a new text by a scriptwriter followed by a second adaptation by the artist who gives visual form to that script. The relation between the graphic adaptation of the textual adaptation is asymmetrical in the sense that the writer and artist are separate individuals, especially when the artist is granted more freedom. If, as semiotician Oscar Steimberg (Berone and Reggiani) argues, the writer often has the upper hand, *El hombre descuadernado*, by contrast, testifies to the absence of a hierarchy between an Author with capital A and an artist who would just be the latter’s puppet. This is the work of two authors, two artists who each in their turn have adapted “The Horla” with their tools, knowledge and sensibility.

### *1. Cava adapts Maupassant*

Often considered “the most important writer in Spanish comics” (according to Peeters and Baetens on the website of their publishing house Impressions Nouvelles), Cava is a self-confessed ‘elitist’ writer who is driven by reflection and not by dreams of commercial

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<sup>12</sup> Original text: “Yo sería el protagonista de ese relato y, al mismo tiempo, el escritor que lo urdió cuando ya estaba amenazado por la pérdida de la cordura.”

<sup>13</sup> Original text: “Tenía que dar rienda suelta a los miedos que me corroían a través del cauce en el que más he creído a la fecha: el tebeo.”

success. Averse to conventional and moralizing work, Cava is one of those authors who revels in ambiguity and never provides his readers with straightforward stories. He does so deliberately, and it is often difficult to figure out what's behind it:

I wanted to make a declaration of principle on how to tackle a personal drama while not portraying the disease from a supposedly realistic angle, which is all the vogue today. Like Eisenstein in his day, I am still convinced that the best way to approach reality is by transcending realism.<sup>14</sup>

For this master of the unsaid, a text like “The Horla,” whose plot revolves around the double, dispossession and vampirization, wins hands down over any realistic script about Alzheimer’s. In addition, *El hombre descuadernado* does not so much tell the tale of a disease than the suffering of someone torn to pieces, no matter if it is Cava or Maupassant. This makes the comic into a sort of labyrinth where multiple narratives are intertwined: that of the “Horla” with the theme Alzheimer’s woven in, and that of Maupassant’s life mixed with Cava’s. In short, we are dealing with an adaptation animated by a form of generic migration: it gives the “Horla” more autobiographical weight (Maupassant as chronicler of his own life) than the original tale, which reads more like a form of autofiction. However, the autofictional component has not completely disappeared. Indeed, Cava has removed the mask of the narrator of the “Horla” to make it appear behind the figure of the author (Maupassant) to hide himself all the better behind the mask of the narrator of *El hombre descuadernado*. In this way, Cava appropriates the enunciative tactic of Maupassant by hiding / splitting himself behind a narrator with whom he shares his feelings.

Besides these genre transformations, Cava has also changed the form of the “Horla” by relieving his own text of the calendar constraint of the diary form. The forty-two dates extending from 8 May to 10 September in the original have given way to twenty-one chapters

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<sup>14</sup> Original text: “Yo quería hacer toda una declaración de principios sobre una manera de abordar un drama personal que huyese de la moda, tan en boga, de apelar a enfermedades desde presupuestos presumiblemente realistas. Como Eisenstein en su día, sigo defendiendo que la mejor forma de acercarse a la realidad es trascender el realismo.” This is an excerpt from personal correspondence with Felipe Hernández Cava, dated 12 January 2012. To situate the quote, we should point out that Paco Roca had already tackled Alzheimer’s disease in a realistic style in his comic *Arrugas* (Astiberri, 2007). The work was a huge success and won the 2008 Premio Nacional de Cómic. Hence Cava’s desire (and the demand not to be accused of opportunism) to go against the grain of everything that had been done on the subject.



of three pages which, if one compares the hypertext to hypotext, refer, through textual or graphical citation, to twenty-one of the forty-two dates of the “Horla.”<sup>15</sup> Although the temporal anchors are gone, the chronological progression remains faithful to the sequence of events in the “Horla.”

Moreover, the intertextual debt uniting these two texts is never obscured. For example, the second page of *El hombre descuadrado* refers to the first day of the “Horla” diary, May 8: “Just like the character of your story I, too, could see the black barges full of coal pass by on the Seine on their way to Rouen ... / ... and the coming and going of the three-master which seemed to glide by my garden, drawn by a small tugboat buzzing like a fly in the middle of the fumes.”<sup>16</sup> The words “story,” “three-master,” “tugs buzzing,” and so on are all unequivocal references to Maupassant’s story.

The phrase cited above is an excerpt from a conversation between Flaubert and Maupassant. Fussy readers might be surprised to hear Flaubert mention “Horla,” as it was only published in 1887, seven years after the death of the father of *Madame Bovary*. This is not an anachronism but rather a conversation hallucinated by Maupassant who is at death’s door, ravaged by syphilis. Conversations with the dead, amongst them Flaubert, Gérard de Nerval, Nietzsche and his brother Hervé de Maupassant, refer to the daily life of a man who has gone insane and inhabits both worlds owing to his condition. He has no problem admitting as much: “I talk a lot and often with the dead”<sup>17</sup> (Cava and Sanyu 50, C1).

Though difficult to understand on a first reading, the first chapter plunges the reader into Maupassant’s world of hallucinations. Certainly, the first page of the book contains a significant clue as to the author’s life, at least for those in the know: He is depicted prostrate, supported by two men, arms tied at the back in a straitjacket while crossing the main entrance

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<sup>15</sup> Chapter 1 = May 8; Chapter 2 = 12 May; Chapter 3 = 18 and 25 May; Chapter 4 = 25 May; Chapter 5 = 8 May, 2 June and 2 July; Chapter 6 = 2 and 3 July; Chapter 7 = June 2, 4, 5 and 14 July; Chapter 8: 2, 4 and 6 August and 4 July; Chapter 9 = 7 August; Chapter 10 = August 7 and 8; Chapter 11 = August 14; Chapter 12 = August 17; Chapter 13 = July 2; Chapter 14 = August 19; Chapter 15 = August 19; Chapter 16 = 19 and 21 August; Chapter 18 = 17 and 10 September; Chapter 19 = 16 July and 10 September; Chapter 20 = 10 September; Chapter 21 = Ø.

<sup>16</sup> Original text: “yo también, como el personaje de vuestro relato, veía desplazarse por el Sena las negras gabarras de carbón hacia Rouen... / ... y el ir y venir de los barcos de tres mástiles que parecían deslizarse por mi jardín, arrastrados por un pequeño remolcador que zumbaba como una mosca entre el humo.”

<sup>17</sup> Original text: “Hablo mucho y a menudo con los muertos.”

to Dr. Blanche's mental hospital.<sup>18</sup> As his biographers inform us, he was committed on January 8, 1892, following a suicide attempt on the night of the first and second of January (Satiat 567-75). He would not leave the institution until the day of his death, July 6, 1893. Without specifying this at any time in the comic, Cava starts his story on January 8, 1892, just days after Maupassant's suicide attempt. This explains the curious anticipatory caption formulated in the first person that introduces the first panel: "Today I announced that I am dead. Although this will only happen in a few months."<sup>19</sup>

The second panel is an immediate reference to another important character in the story, the invisible twin who will be designated eventually as the Horla "But, he, however, did not die. He's lying on the grass in front of his house."<sup>20</sup> "He," so the narrator tells us, "is not dead"; what is more, he has even won the war as this phrase, taken from the entry dated May 8, is not originally in the third person but in the first: "I spent all morning stretched out on the grass in front of my house" (Maupassant [ref to be inserted]).

The first four pages of the comic set the stage and multiply the references to the events of May 8. Following the rapid pace of the short story, the fever episode quickly follows (chapters 2, 3, and 4). This allows Cava to introduce the themes of disease (syphilis), madness and the double.

Fig. 1: Cava and Sanyú, *El hombre descuadernado* 13, C2.

With the reader now fully aware of Maupassant's torment, the story switches to horror with the irruption of the Horla starting on the third page of chapter 4 (following the chronology of the short story, this would refer to the events of May 25). Strangely, on numerous occasions the graphics are at odds with the text, thus producing a *narrative disjunction* [Fig. 1]. Cava soberly renders the text as "He sleeps two or three hours until the arrival of the next crisis. He wants to scream, but he cannot. He wants to move, but cannot.

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<sup>18</sup> All these graphic details are rigorously accurate. Maupassant's attempted suicide was a hot topic in the press of the time and his arrival at the mental hospital was also reported in the dailies (Satiat 574).

<sup>19</sup> Original text: "Hoy he anunciado que he muerto. Aunque esto no sucederá hasta dentro de unos meses." Most of Maupassant's comments in *El hombre descuadernado* can be considered authentic. In this case, Maupassant's correspondence attests to several statements of this kind. It is close to what he wrote to Lulia Cahen for example, on December 2, 1891: "Madam, I'll be dead in a few days ..." (Satiat 559).

<sup>20</sup> Original text: "Pero, el, en cambio, no está muerto. Tendido está sobre la hierba, delante su casa. "

He wakes up covered in sweat”<sup>21</sup> (Cava and Sanyú 13, C2). Whereas Cava withholds the name of the monster, Sanyú represents the most striking scene of the night of May 25 during which the Horla mounts the bed of the diarist, kneels on his chest and tries to strangle him. Though both Cava and Sanyú narrate the events of the same day (May 25), they do not focus on the same passage, each artist seeming to keep only what suits him best. This separation is quite destabilizing for the reader since it generates a double narrative process in which the drawings become independent from the text and vice versa. The traditional pattern in which the artist is the faithful double of the writer no longer holds. It is as if the writer had lost control of his double, who has become a Horla...

The presence of the Horla grows from chapter to chapter. Chapter 5, entitled “Maupassant and Maupassant,” is clear indication that the double has usurped his master. His grip on the writer is now complete and it is the Horla who ends up dictating the story (Cava and Sanyú 15, C6). The writer has become the ‘writing,’ a kind of human typewriter. As he points out to his host, “[t]he writer does not always choose his themes, sometimes the themes choose him”<sup>22</sup> (Cava and Sanyú 15, C4). More than any other in the comic, this replica applies as much to Maupassant as to Cava, who puts his guard down for these three panels. After reading the preface and given the many inner demons he is fighting, we are justified in thinking that it is indeed Horla who has picked Cava and not the other way around.

This double page spread where the Horla is shown leaning over the shoulder of Maupassant with pen in hand at his desk brilliantly illustrates both the physical and mental influence of the double on the original. Besides the Horla’s towering presence that domineers the writer, it is difficult not to link the Indian ink Maupassant uses to write his short story with the Horla’s physical appearance, which is portrayed in thick black stripes resembling ink strokes. It is as if the Horla surfaces from the page, still dripping with the ink the author used for writing this romantic being into existence. This is indeed the familiar scenario of the mad scientist or divinely inspired writer who is overwhelmed by the creature he has created.

Fig. 2: Cava and Sanyú, *El hombre descuadernado* 15, C2-3-4.

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<sup>21</sup> Original text: "Duerme dos o tres horas hasta if renueva the crisis. Quiere gritar, pero no puede. Quiere moverse, tampoco puede. If despierta Bañado in sudor ... ' .

<sup>22</sup> Original text: “el escritor no siempre elige sus temas, sino que son los temas los que le eligen a él.”

In addition to the Horla's posture and physical appearance, we must also take note of Sanyú's cunning and original framing, not only in this excerpt but throughout the comic. Emphasizing body parts through extreme close-ups effectively strengthens the evil and monstrous aspect of this otherworldly being: if this malevolent eye can only inspire fear [Fig. 2], this is even more so in the close-up of the hand that simultaneously refers to the hand of the strangler as to the monstrous fantasy of the severed limb that seems to have a will of its own. This streaked, clenched, and flayed hand<sup>23</sup> is no longer human; it is at best animal, at worst supernatural, extraterrestrial.

By titling this chapter "Maupassant and Maupassant," Cava goes beyond a simple adaptation and proposes a psychoanalytic reading of the "Horla." Like others before him, he suggests that this hallucinatory tale owes as much to the madness of the author as to his imagination as a writer. Throughout the remaining fifteen chapters, Cava continues to blend the story of the "Horla" with the life of Guy de Maupassant, taking the reader through each phase of the author's madness up until the final page which shows a lifelike representation of the tomb at the Montparnasse cemetery where the author was laid to rest.

Though much more can be said of Cava's script, it would take away from our analysis of the artwork, which, from beginning to end, is marked by the madness and suffering of the central character. The double graphic adaptation by the Argentine artist, as he simultaneously interprets the Horla and Cava's script, is enigmatic and often makes the reader think the drawings could only have been the work of a madman. If indeed it seems crazy, it is only in the sense that Sanyú has devoted an insane amount of time to the work—five years of his life in fact (while admittedly working on other projects).

## *2. Sanyú Adapts Cava and Maupassant*

Sanyú uses three major graphic-narrative devices to give form to insanity.

The first, which is immediately striking, is the unconventionality of his drawing style where the Baroque and expressionism overlap. Sanyú acknowledges the forces of water, air and fire so important in Maupassant's short story. He has left them free rein, giving in to "the

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<sup>23</sup> This is perhaps an allusion to another tale by Maupassant, "The Flayed Hand" (1875).

imagination of matter” as Gaston Bachelard would say. The sinuous lines, endless whorls and arabesques—the aesthetics of the fold [Fig. 3]—which endow the drawings with a baroque patina (evident in chapter 1), owes much to the decisive presence of the three elements of the universe.

These baroque caprices are not only numerous but also quite fragile; at any time, they can be swept away by the Horla’s irruption or Maupassant’s bouts of madness. Sanyú’s black brush lends itself readily to expressionism. This fusion or alternation between two demanding styles makes reading difficult to the point that the drawings become an obstacle to the progression of the story. The use of Indian ink and a (no. 3 marten) brush, both for the lettering and the drawing, adds to the plastic density of a work where the eye gets bogged down like a prisoner of volumes and whorls. A world away from the clear line, Sanyú is a practitioner of the dark line, making his drawing sometimes so opaque it oscillates between figuration and abstraction.

Fig. 3: Cava and Sanyú, *El hombre descuadernado* 17, C 4-5-6.

The second graphic technique Sanyú uses to embody madness also stems directly from Maupassant’s short story. It concerns the exploitation of the theme of the double, so central to the “Horla.” From page 2, the specular and distorting properties of water are used to visualize the inverted and undulating reflection of Maupassant and Flaubert strolling along the Seine. Deformed through reflection, their bodies appear imprisoned by their clothes, wrapped around their figure like a straitjacket, reinforcing the link with the previous page where we already saw Maupassant in his straitjacket. This reversal of top and bottom, coupled with the anamorphic and baroque world of folds, anchors the story from the beginning to a realm where the laws of perception are turned inside out.

Fig. 4: Cava and Sanyú, *El hombre descuadernado* Cava and Sanyú 11 C2-3.

From chapter 4 onwards, this classic doubling generated by reflective surfaces such as water (chapter 1) is followed by a form of duplication that is no longer physical but psychological. Maupassant’s face appears on page 11 [Fig. 4] in close-up, split over two panels: the left, marked by multiple scratches, suggests the presence of evil, while the other half appears normal. It is only after having symbolized the subjective schism by this iconic

fracture, and after having candidly named the disease in a dialogue<sup>24</sup> that Sanyú can finally introduce the Horla onto the stage. He bursts onto the page in the final panel of the third and final page of chapter 4: he appears squatting on Maupassant's body, one hand around the author's neck in an attempt to strangle him. His nakedness, hirsutism and prominent musculature make him Maupassant's primitive double, a kind of archaic figure escaped from the depths of the unconscious. A true *Doppelgänger*, an emanation of morbid evil and Maupassant's rival, the Horla will not stop harassing his master, driving him to suicide before taking his place.

The third and final major graphic device is by far the most sophisticated and requires more attention. As I have already indicated, *El hombre descuadernado* testifies to a rigorous composition in which each of the twenty-one chapters—each three pages long—heeds the same cadence: as a rule, the first two pages contain six panels while the third page only has two. From this one might conclude that the story is embedded in a multiframe<sup>25</sup> that is monotonous on both the narrative and rhythmic level, leaving no room for variation or the unexpected. This is not the case for at least two reasons.

First of all, and even after acknowledging that the chapters quite faithfully adhere to the chronological progression of the “Horla,” what matters is that in their self-contained format they more closely resemble a book of poems<sup>26</sup> than a graphic novel. The patterning of 2 x 6 panels + 2 that many artists have used to play things safe, always returning to the ‘waffle iron’ grid, has thus been reinterpreted by Sanyú as if it were serial music where atonality and syncope prohibit the settling of a regular beat. The trick to successfully thwart this obsessive pattern is to divide a single image or scene into two, three, six or sometimes twelve panels [Figures 3, 4, 5, 6]. It is thus not unusual to see a face or a body divided into several panels or, more precisely, fragmented, dismembered. Given the work's theme, the fragmented

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<sup>24</sup> *El hombre descuadernado*: “What torments me is not knowing whether my hallucinations, my split personality, or persecution mania ... / are the result of that stigma that love put in my blood or that dark something that already took possession of another Maupassant ... that thing that killed my brother Hervé” (Cava and Sanyu 12, C5-6). Original text: “lo que me tortura es no conocer si mis alucinaciones, mis desdoblamientos de personalidad, o mi manía persecutoria ... / son fruto de ese estigma que el amor puso en mi sangre o de ese algo oscuro que se apoderó ya de algún Maupassant ... eso que se llevó a mi hermano Hervé.”

<sup>25</sup> The multiframe designates the panels that make up a page.

<sup>26</sup> The titles of the chapters point in this direction: “Flaubert and Maupassant” (chapter 3); “Maupassant and doctor Landolt” (chapter 4); “Maupassant and Maupassant” (chapter 5); “Maupassant and his brother Hervé” (chapter 6); “Maupassant and his servant François Tossart” (chapter 7); “Maupassant and Baron, warden of doctor Blanche's insane asylum” (chapter 10).

representation of the body is highly effective for conveying the psychological alterations Maupassant suffers which are at the heart of “Horla.”<sup>27</sup>

This game with sequential codes has other unexpected effects. The two-page spreads on pages 41-42 and 59-60 are in this respect the most remarkable.

Fig. 5: Cava and Sanyú, *El hombre descuadrado* 41-42.

The first [Fig. 5], entitled “Maupassant and the Horla” (chapter 14, 41-42), illustrates the nightmare on July 5 as described in the diary entry of the short story: “Imagine a man asleep, who is being killed, and who wakes up with a knife in his lung, with a death rattle, covered in blood [...]” (Maupassant [ref to be added]). Surprisingly, while Sanyú’s drawing unambiguously refers to the nightmare of July 5, Cava’s text contains exact quotes from the diary entry of 19 August, which makes no reference to what the comic depicts. The only way the text and image are linked is through the chapter title: “Maupassant and the Horla.” Everything suggests that the artist has just followed his whim and merely implemented the six panels per page rule as he saw fit. However, nothing is further from the truth. Sanyú has followed Cava’s script to the letter.<sup>28</sup>

A rare sight in comics, the authors here exploit the natural semiotic split between the text and the drawing to generate a narrative disjunction. By dividing the diegetic sources, the reader is confronted with the sheer difficulty of interpretation. The superposition of narrative threads (graphic and textual) turns the page spread into a screen upon which Sanyú’s drawings are projected as if they were the obsessions formulated by the protagonist. In other words, the text becomes the narrator’s stream of consciousness while the drawings express his subconscious.

The mosaic—the fragmentation of large areas—is the second graphic technique that stands out. Once again, Sanyú and Cava shatter the codes of comics by abandoning the sacrosanct principle of sequentiality that demands the logical progression from one panel to the next, from one strip to another, from one page to the next. However, chapter 14 states the

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<sup>27</sup> As Pierre Borel reports in *True Maupassant*, from 1883 the author began to suffer from hallucinations (133). But it was not until 1891 that he descended into a world of suffering and hallucination (Satiat 532-602).

<sup>28</sup> Sanyú confirmed this in a letter dated February 11, 2012.

obvious: there is no traditional sequential chain at work here. Only by taking a distance from the panel, strip and page, and by forcing oneself to forget the text and only focus on the drawing, can the reader appreciate the change in scale. Ultimately, the panels are a *trompe l'oeil* intended to maintain the illusion of narrative action, that is to say, the illusion of sequentiality.<sup>29</sup>

Fig. 6: Cava and Sanyú, *El hombre descuadernado* 59-60.

The double page spread of chapter 20 (59-60) entitled “Maupassant y la mariposa de su sueño,” is the inverse of chapter 14 [Fig. 6]. Though it also plays on the monumentality of the mosaic, there are two distinctions one should keep in mind. The first is rather obvious: the double page is silent. The other is subtler: In this double page a sequential action unfolds despite the appearances that this is also a drawing fragmented into twelve panels, with the butterfly twirling from frame to frame. It is therefore no longer a question of semiotics and narrative disjunction (text and drawing are no longer opposed), but a simple opposition between animated/inanimate. By the same token, one can no longer speak of the illusion of sequentiality but, on the contrary, the illusion of non-sequentiality.

Indeed, the reader is first struck by the fixity, the lack of animation in this fragmented representation of Maupassant that stretches over nine panels, where the author appears belly-down, inert, more dead than alive, arms tied behind his back in his straitjacket, legs spread and then folded like a frog or a butterfly with open wings. At first, we get the impression that this is a frozen scene, as if we were looking at a painting or a photograph. However, when we finally realize that this is not a butterfly colony twirling around the author but the same insect reappearing in each panel, the illusion of a-sequentiality vanishes. This butterfly, showing off its death's head pattern, in no way resembles the “flower that flies” mentioned in the dairy entry of August 19 in the “Horla.” It only adds to the scene's morbidity, and rather than a flitting butterfly, it evokes the blowfly attracted by the stench of death. Furthermore, the seemingly lifeless and gagged body on the ground foreshadows the one in the next chapter, with Maupassant lying in his coffin, wrapped in a shroud.

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<sup>29</sup> Thierry Groensteen had already noticed this specific case in his *System of Comics* (67).



These three main graphic strategies with narrative intent do not just generate an effective aesthetics of madness. They also put *El hombre descuadernado* at the forefront of those recent works characterized “by a poetics of reticence, ambiguity, and indeterminacy” (Groensteen 2013: 30). As Thierry Groensteen continues, some authors are reluctant to stay on “the narrow path of ‘narrative and nothing but,’” opting instead for “gray areas, images that are cut adrift, message-jamming strategies of all kinds” (ibid.). Sanyú and Cava clearly belong to this category.

### *Conclusion*

Just recently, Jan Baetens observed that “in essence, the cultural prestige of literature prevents comics from being conscious of their own strengths” (208). Moreover, “the obsession with *fidelity* to the original text” remains the most controversial issue in comics adaptations to date (ibid.). This opinion is shared by Benoît Peeters who deems that “the main threat is academicism” (Ferniot 50), which only results in dull, illustrative works whose sole purpose is to make the ‘classics’ palatable to a generation of young readers in the hopes that one day they will read the original. This view on adaptation relegates comics to a mere ‘cultural stage’ in the child’s upbringing. All grown up, he or she will eventually read “real literature without images,” which positions comics as an “auxiliary” medium to literature (Baetens 206). From these perspectives, it becomes clear that as far as adaptation is concerned, servility does not pay off and freedom (or betrayal) is the only thing worth striving for.

By freeing itself of fidelity and by negating the fame of the text and its author (who acts as gravitational point preventing critical distance), *El hombre descuadernado* goes far beyond straightforward adaptation and proves that fortunately sometimes comics can take advantage of their intrinsic narrative qualities. Although undeniable, intertextual debt is ultimately of little importance. This is a work geared towards creativity and originality, which helps explain why the authors preferred not to keep Maupassant’s original title. They are the authors of an altogether different work.

In short, the work’s quality cannot be ascribed to its intertextual complexity or Maupassant’s tutelage. Rather, it derives from the authors’ perfect combination of languages that are normally “untranslatable,” to borrow Oscar Steimberg’s words: “comics are a great medium. Precisely because it is the symbiosis of two languages which, in reality, are

untranslatable; and the result is the artistic work. That's what makes comics so strong: they are impossible!"<sup>30</sup> (Berone and Reggiani). The tour de force that is *El hombre descuadernado* is perhaps just that: making the impossible possible.

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<sup>30</sup> Original text: “La historieta es un gran lenguaje. Porque, justamente, es la puesta en fase de dos lenguajes que, en realidad, son intraducibles; y el resultado es la obra artística. ¡Lo que tiene de bueno la historieta es que es imposible!”

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