Disability Studies and Spanish Culture

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CHAPTER 2

Envisioning Autism

Miguel Gallardo’s Comic María y yo (2007)

Given that cultural products foregrounding disabled protagonists continue to be a relative rarity in Spain—just as elsewhere—it is particularly (and appropriately) intriguing that one of Spain’s most notable graphic artists, Miguel Ángel Gallardo, has written (and drawn) a wonderful comic centered on the theme of autism. Gallardo’s name might ring a bell as he is a well-known figure associated with the Movida Madrileña of the 1980s, an explosion of cultural activity in the wake of the death of the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco that gave rise to a range of liberated artistic expressions in music, film, performance art, and more. While director Pedro Almodóvar is perhaps the best-known figure to have come out of the Movida—continuing to make films even in the twenty-first century (Volver 2007; Abrazos rotos 2009), but famous for his films of the early and late 1980s, including Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios of 1988 (see also Triana-Toribio 2000 and Graham and Labanyi 1995)—other graphic artists associated with the period have not garnered as much fame in international circles. As noted in a three-page entry in the two-volume Atlas español de la cultura popular: de la Historieta y su uso, 1873–2000, edited by Jesús Cuadrado, Gallardo is a designer, publicist, illustrator, and animator who was born in Lleida, Catalunya in 1955. He began as a practitioner of historietas (comics) in 1977 and directed the first era of a popular graphic series titled Makoki. Regarding the latter, Cuadrado notes that ‘su coautoría del popular personaje Makoki […] oscureció su compleja personalidad de autor gráfico multidisciplinar’ [his co-authorship of the popular character Makoki (...) overshadowed his complex identity
as a multi-faceted graphic artist]. The encyclopedia entry goes on at length listing Gallardo’s extensive production of series, publications, monographs, catalogues, illustrations, animation, television work, and more (510–12). One of Gallardo’s other notable roles was as collaborator and co-creator of the pioneering graphic magazine *El Víbora* (see Alary 56, 60; Beaty 116, 119; Dopico 318–34; García 165; Vilarós 211–13), and the recent republication of his works of that time period (e.g. 1981’s *Makoki: Fuga en la Modelo*, by the Barcelonan publisher La Cúpula in 2009) only reaffirms the value of his contributions to the comic world in Spain. In addition, he is a prize-winning comics artist (doubly praised by the Salón del Cómic de Barcelona, and the winner of a Serra D’Or prize for his guide to disability for children, ¿Qué le pasa a este niño?) who has worked regularly as an illustrator for *La Vanguardia* and other Spanish and international publications (including the *Herald Tribune* and the *New Yorker*). Problematically, however, until now there has been no sustained, nor even thorough, critical examination of Gallardo’s visual texts by Hispanist critics.

With this in mind, this chapter does not seek to provide an exhaustive analysis of Gallardo’s cultural production as a whole, but instead to focus on his more recent autobiographical comic work *María y yo* (2007) and, below, on the adaptation of that work to a complex documentary feature by director Félix Fernández de Castro (2010). The present analysis of Gallardo’s work is significant because he has not yet sufficiently attracted the attention of academic scholars in general—a landmark ‘cultural studies’ approach to the Spanish transition (1973–93) by Teresa Vilarós mentions him on only two pages. Even though his name is frequently invoked as a way of pointing to the cultural production of the Spanish transition, if not the Movida culture of Madrid specifically, these invocations serve as mere indexes, with scholars seemingly reticent to devote more time to understanding his style and contribution in-depth. That being so, his recent incorporation of the theme of disability is doubly marginalized—first, because the comic is still, generally speaking, a neglected medium in academic circles (this is particularly true with regards to Hispanic Studies), and second, because there are no more than a handful of researchers within Hispanic Studies who incorporate Disability Studies approaches into their work, and even fewer, perhaps, who do so in the realm of Spanish (Peninsular) cultural production as opposed to that of Latin America.

Even outside of Spanish cultural studies, the study of comics is just beginning. As recently as 2007 it was possible for critic Craig Hight to write that: ‘Although comics are a medium as rich and complex as
any other, the study of comic forms is a comparatively neglected field within media studies, with attempts to identify the defining characteristics of comic narratives and aesthetics still in their infancy’ (181). In 2009, Thierry Groensteen similarly noted the ‘considerable lack of legitimacy’ enjoyed by comics, writing that ‘Comic art suffers from an extraordinarily narrow image, given the richness and diversity of its manifestations’ (Groensteen, ‘Why’ 3). On the other hand, many have started to view comics as a ‘legitimate’ subcategory of literature (e.g. Versaci’s This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature from 2007).

Although fans and scholars of comics know better, those unfamiliar with the breadth and depth of comics artistry may tend to think that many if not all comics are reducible to a ‘finite set of visual attributes, which are either inherent to the medium or historically stable’ (Cohen 13). Instead, comics enjoy a wealth of visual, formal qualities just as they possess a dynamic history. While published scholarship on the development of comics generally tends to point to a modern pre-history rooted in the 1800s (e.g. García 28), the publication of Spanish comics directed toward adults only took off in the 1960s–1970s (Alary 35; cf. García 163), and a significant appreciation of the artistic nature of comics emerged even more recently. According to Viviane Alary’s essay ‘La historieta en España: entre el futuro y el pasado’:

Nuestro fin de siglo legitima la historieta de diversas maneras. Se la ve como un lenguaje en parte dependiente de su condición de producto de consumo ligado al desarrollo de una cultura de masas; pero, a la par, se reivindica su condición de arte, el noveno, capaz de desarrollar un lenguaje artístico peculiar. (Alary 35)

[Our turn of the century legitimized comics in many ways. It was seen as a language in part dependent on its condition as a marketable product, linked to the development of a mass culture; but at the same time, it was revindicated as an artistic creation of the ninth art, capable of developing an individual artistic language.]

Spanish comics are an important if undervalued and under-researched European comics industry—they are barely mentioned, for example in Bart Beaty’s book Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s. Spanish graphic artists have struggled to achieve the same critical acclaim afforded to English-language, Japanese, and even French comics, among others. If one peruses, for example, the chapters of recent edited volumes on the art of comics—such as those
collected by Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons in *The Language of Comics* (2001); by Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister in *Film and Comic Books* (2007); or by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester in *A Comics Studies Reader* (2009)—one will find virtually no mention of Spain nor of Spanish artists. Even Spanish comics artist/scholar Santiago García’s recent and encyclopedic work *La novela gráfica* (2010) is more of a general introduction to the history of all comics than a work focusing on the Spanish context (it is notably full of examples taken from English-language comics, among those from other non-Spanish traditions).

Spanish scholar Pablo Dopico’s illuminating study of Spanish comics (*El cómic underground español*, 2005) is a giant step forward in this sense, but although its topic matter is strictly Peninsular, it nonetheless ostensibly confines itself to the period of time between 1970 and 1980. Despite the impressive, wide-angle lens through which it treats this formative period in Spanish comics, it does, however, touch upon Miguel Gallardo’s artistic activity during the mid-1970s immediately after the death of Franco, including his work with Juan Mediavilla and their collaborative urban representation of ‘la gran ciudad y los extraños personajes marginales que allí habitaban’ [the big city and the strange marginal characters that were living there] (209). As Dopico reports, *Makoki* was created in 1977 by Gallardo, Mediavilla, and Barrallo and soon became one of the most ‘emblematic characters of the Spanish counterculture’ (296; see also 298–300). A brief section on Gallardo, specifically, here functions as a general introduction to his earlier work (355–69). Nonetheless, little of this information is of interest to the present chapter, which focuses on a much more recent—and, thematically and stylistically speaking, very distinct—period in his artistic production, one which should prove to be quite intriguing for Disability Studies scholars.

Just as the topic of disability remains an undervalued area of scholarship at large, that subfield devoted to the representation of disability in comics is virtually unexplored. The existing edited collections on comics available in English—some of which are mentioned above, and many of which are published by the University Press of Mississippi—feature not a single chapter focused on disability. The notable exception is the lone essay by Margaret Fink Berman in *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* (2010). Still, even this essay focuses on Ware’s depiction of a woman with physical disability, leaving issues relevant to developmental disabilities, such as autism, unaddressed. This lack may be attributed to the fact that the notion of Disability Studies has only recently begun to command attention from
academics working in more culturally oriented fields of scholarship. But there may also be another complementary reason.

The paucity of comics scholarship focused on disability may be the problematic legacy of mid-twentieth-century comics as explicitly formulated (in the influential American context) by the Comics Code of 1954. As Scott McCloud notes, in that year,

comics publishers agreed to a strict code of ethics that would dominate the industry for decades to come and created an authority with the power to enforce it. The Comics Code imposed the severest restrictions of any narrative medium of its day. Gone were any depictions of gore, sex or sadistic behavior, but gone too were any challenges to established authority, the unique details of any crime, any hints of ‘illicit relations’ or the condoning of divorce, any references to physical afflictions or physical deformities, and any allusions to ‘sexual perversions’ of any kind. (Reinventing 87)

This ‘cleansing’ of all manner of social, cultural, political, sexual, and corporeal difference from the comics of that period greatly affected the subsequent development of those themes not merely in the United States but arguably also necessarily in other countries where comics artists looked upon the American industry as a thriving model. Even in a contemporary context where comics art has been seen through the various lenses of critical theory—the volume edited by McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon boasts sections devoted to gay/lesbian/queer comics, gender politics, nationalist myth and nostalgia, and the urban poor, for example—disability doesn’t seem to make the list. While I am not sure whether there is a lack of comic books/graphic novels with disabled protagonists or a lack of scholars interested in the theme of disability and comics, both explanations are likely true to a certain degree. Whatever the reason, more and more cultural critics are recognizing that ‘the portrayals of life found in comic art are not neutral or random images. In practice, not just in theory, often comics’ portrayals of social issues and representations of particular groups have significant ideological implications’ (McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon 5). In this context it is more important than ever that critical Disability Studies be systematically mobilized to shed light on the portrayal/lack of portrayal of representations of disability in the wider comics world.

Part of the strength of Gallardo’s comic María y yo—which focuses on his relationship with his daughter, who has autism—stems from its autobiographical approach; and in this sense, it implicitly pays homage to a distinctly American mode of autobiographical comics art.
Such an autobiographical mode is widely associated with the emergence of work by Harvey Pekar. Pekar, dramatized in the film *American Splendor* where he is played by actor Paul Giamatti, initiated a period of comics production steeped in ‘a radical appreciation for the mundane’ (Hatfield 111; see also Hight), thus departing from the approach that over-valued superheroes. This shift from the superheroic theme and the mythic (read national) frame to the quotidian and the personal allowed for alternative stories to be told, stories that have historically had less mainstream marketability. As Charles Hatfield discusses, comics as reimagined by Pekar spoke to a different audience, embracing a more delicate psychology and permitting self-reflection, both by the artist and the reader alike: ‘For Pekar autobiography is a means of autodidacticism, as his comics represent a struggle for an understanding both emotional and intellectual’ (110); he concludes that ‘The cartoon self-image, then, seems to offer a unique way for the artist to recognize and externalize his or her subjectivity. In this light, comics autobiography may not be alienating so much as radically enabling’ (115).

Gallardo’s self-representation and his depiction of the life he shares with his daughter in *María y yo* is, in this sense, radically enabling: he externalizes both his own frustrations with the social situations that surround disability and his love for his daughter, and in the process he also gives voice (or better, shape) to María’s own struggles, joys, and ways of thinking in ways that only a parent might be able to do. This autobiographical approach capitalizes on a characteristic intimacy associated with comics that has been noted by a number of scholars. David A. Beronä, for example, notes that ‘Comics have always forged a personal—almost singular—relationship between the artist and reader’ (39; see also McCloud, *Reinventing Comics* xii). All in all, following Hatfield’s assertion that ‘autobiographical comics that strive after authenticity have the potential for radical cultural argument’ (128), Gallardo’s comic is thus a powerful document of the life-experience of disability at the same time that it is a unique cultural expression in an underappreciated medium.

*María y yo* is just as informative regarding the quotidian aspects of living with disability as it is an intimate expression of a father’s relationship with his daughter. The back cover of the 2007 comic states Gallardo’s goal quite clearly: ‘En este libro, Miguel Gallardo, acostumbrado a comunicarse visualmente con su hija María, quiere compartirlo con sus lectores como si nosotros fuéramos ella y a través de sus dibujos entendamos su mensaje simple y breve de una manera inequívoca’ [Through this book, Miguel Gallardo, accustomed
to communicating visually with his daughter María, wants to share this with his readers putting us in her shoes and, through his drawings, allowing us to understand his simple and concise message in no uncertain terms]. While Gallardo may happen to be an established graphic designer with over twenty years of experience, it is more than appropriate that his autobiographical rendering of his relationship with his (then) 12-year-old daughter—and, moreover, of her relationship with her own social environment—should take shape in such a visual medium. The comic thus succeeds on two levels at once. First, it succeeds as a document and a recasting of the life-experience of a girl with autism (and of that of her father). To that effect, as is noted once again on the comic’s back cover (copied from the book’s epilogue by Amaia Hervás):

Un gran atractivo de este libro es que corrige muchos tópicos sobre los niños con autismo, un síndrome que se diagnostica cada vez con más frecuencia. María no es distante ni fría, sino emocional, afectuosa, más allá de las peculiaridades del trastorno que padece. Nosotros también podemos hacer más feliz a María y a todos los niños como ella, sencillamente aceptándola tal cual es: única, como todos los demás.

[A great strength of this book is that it corrects many common misundertandings of children with autism, a syndrome that is diagnosed with increasing frequency. María is neither distant nor cold, but rather emotional and affectionate, undetermined by the specifics of the disorder from which she suffers. We, too, can make María, and all the children like her, more happy simply by accepting her as she is: unique, just like everyone else.]

The latter slogan, ‘I’m unique just like everyone else,’ figures in English prominently on María’s shirt as seen on the drawn cover of the comic, on its dedication page and even on a page near the middle of the book in a section labeled ‘Única’ [Unique] (18). In every appearance of this slogan, the book foregrounds that its contribution is to visually elaborate on the realities of living with someone with autism (through the form of the comic) while succumbing neither to the problematic trope of exceptionality nor to a mainstream idea of a homogeneous normalcy.

Secondly, in addition to being a comment on and contextualization of the reality of living with a disability such as autism in a society unprepared and at times even unsympathetic to what that means, the comic María y yo is also a rich visual text in its own right, mobilizing
the full range of formal qualities of sequential and comic art to achieve its artistic and educational goal. While this chapter seeks to address both of these concerns—*María y yo* as document of disability and *María y yo* as cultural text—even relating them where appropriate, it proceeds from a discussion of the first to that of the second, preceded by a section concisely presenting the link between autism and visuality. It is to this preliminary (and necessary) discussion that we now turn by briefly exploring the written works of Temple Grandin.

The Visual Paradigm of Autism
Seen Through the Writings of Temple Grandin

Temple Grandin (PhD, University of Illinois) stands out as one of the most well-known persons with a form of autism (Asperger's syndrome)—one writer even goes so far as to say that she is 'possibly the world’s best-known autistic' (Halpern 38). Her own published autobiographical reflections on her skills, strengths, and vulnerabilities provide a valuable point of entry into how *María y yo* might be approached by both casual readers and scholars alike. Although she is also noteworthy for having written more recent books (e.g. *Animals Make Us Human*, co-authored with Catherine Johnson) and having been the subject of a biopic in which she is played by actor Claire Danes (*Temple Grandin*, HBO films, 2010), the works *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (co-authored with Margaret M. Scariano, first published in 1986) and *Thinking in Pictures* (first published in 1996) provide the most relevant understanding of her life-experience as a person with autism.

*Emergence* documents everything from Grandin’s childhood memories and early school years to her graduate school experiences and beyond. As it is quite simply a path-breaking book, written by an autistic person about the topic of autism, she makes an effort to provide initial explanations for those who may be unfamiliar with the condition (for a concise scientific perspective, the reader might consult Frith and Hill, ‘Understanding Autism: Insights from Mind and Brain’). These descriptions are, of course, also important to understanding the contribution of *María y yo* in this chapter. Grandin explains:

> Autism is a developmental disorder. A defect in the systems which process incoming sensory information causes the child to over-react to some stimuli and underreact to others. The autistic child often withdraws from her environment and the people in it to block out an onslaught of incoming stimulation. Autism is a childhood anomaly
that separates the child from interpersonal relationships. She does not reach out and explore the world around her, but instead stays in her own inner world. (13)

Using the first person and drawing on her own experiences, Grandin describes behaviors and characteristics that are in many ways typical of people with autism. She writes of her characteristic sensitivity to noises (23), noting that she was often threatened by noises ‘violating my ears and very soul’ (23) and was also unable to grasp the concept of rhythm easily (30–31). She tended to avoid tactile stimulation (32), even though this is just as important for autistic children as for others (33). To meet this frustrated need, she eventually designed a ‘squeeze machine’—modeled on a device she saw on a cattle ranch—that provided her with the warmth and comfort that she was uncomfortable receiving from other people (86–99; see also Thinking 62–81).

After all, as she explains, autistic children ‘prefer (proximal) sensory stimulation such as touching, tasting and smelling as opposed to distant (distal) sensory stimulation of hearing or seeing’ (33)—but it is likewise important for the autistic child to be able to control the terms of that proximal stimulation, as Emergence and Thinking both emphasize. If Grandin’s early autobiographical narrative is any indication, people are typically seen as unpredictable and overstimulating by people with autism—as a child, the “people world” was often too stimulating to my senses. Ordinary days with a change in schedule or unexpected events threw me into a frenzy’ (25).

On a social level, she was very often isolated, ‘Communicating with someone—anyone—continued to be a problem’ (85). On a personal level, she was prone to ‘Obsessive questioning and perseveration’ (35), just as to ‘uncontrollable laughter’ (36) or an ‘obsession with a particular topic’ (36). Some of her behaviors were perhaps less typical of autism (and more idiosyncratically psycho-social), being ‘so impulsive and bizarre’ they surprised even Temple herself (28).

Yet while these descriptions of behavior associated with autism are instructive and perhaps even, to a large degree, accurate, we should nevertheless be wary of reading too much into them or prioritizing them in our treatment of people with autism. In his foreword to Grandin’s subsequent Thinking in Pictures (pp. 11–18), Oliver Sacks points to an incomplete and superficial image of autism that is nonetheless deeply rooted in the popular consciousness. ‘The word “autism” still conveys a fixed and dreadful meaning to most people—they visualize a child mute, rocking, screaming, inaccessible, cut off from human contact’ (11). In Emergence, Grandin works to correct this
misperception, stating early on, for example, that ‘autistic children have more socially related behaviors than many people realize [...]’ To say that an autistic child has absolutely no response to people is a misconception’ (15). *Thinking in Pictures* returns to and extends the autobiographical approach that Grandin began in *Emergence*, but it also delivers the picture of a better-adapted and more successful Grandin, in the process meditating more explicitly on the significance of the visual field for both herself and, perhaps, others with autism.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about *Thinking in Pictures*—signaled in the title itself—is its primary focus on the topic of visuality. This was, of course, a dimension of the earlier *Emergence*, to which Grandin turned briefly in chapter 11, which begins, ‘My mind is completely visual, and spatial work such as drawing is easy’ (135). She writes there of ‘seeing’ and ‘reading’ book pages in her mind, of the fact that pictures can be used effectively to communicate with autistic children, and of the opposition between visual and sequential thinking (135–36), but the effort is not sustained. In *Thinking*, however, we have a much more thorough, sustained, and conscious evaluation of the role of visuality in Grandin’s autism, now clearly seen as a source of strength and confidence. The book begins with a strong affirmation in the first chapter, titled ‘Thinking In Pictures: Autism and Visual Thought’:

I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures [...] One of the most profound mysteries of autism has been the remarkable ability of most autistic people to excel at visual spatial skills while performing so poorly at verbal skills. When I was a child and a teenager, I thought everybody thought in pictures [...] my visualization skills far exceeded those of most other people. (19–20)

Grandin undertakes a concerted and detailed explanation of her own visual way of thinking. ‘Unlike those of most people, my thoughts move from video-like, specific images to generalization and concepts. For example, my concept of dogs is inextricably linked to every dog I’ve ever known. It’s as if I have a card catalogue of dogs I have seen, complete with pictures, which continually grows as I add more examples to my video library’ (27–28).

She suggests that autistic children may tend to learn nouns more easily than other words ‘because they directly relate to pictures’ (29), and that the process of working from
specifics to generalized concepts occurs ‘in an associational and non-sequential way’ (32). Conversely, reading may sometimes prove difficult as she is sometimes unable to ‘convert text to pictures’ (31). Interesting in this respect is that making sense of concepts ‘such as learning the give-and-take of a relationship’ only made sense to Grandin after having been visualized through the relevant ‘visual symbols of doors and windows’ (34). Likewise, she reveals that a visual image helped her to understand the notion and necessity of ‘getting along with people’ (36). Her visual skills have also been extremely valuable in her famed redesigning of numerous cattle-handling and slaughter facilities, as she is able to visualize the ideal functioning of machinery in her mind (40–41). In fact, the reader unfamiliar with Grandin’s story may be surprised to learn that ‘One third of the cattle and hogs in the United States are handled in the facilities I have designed’ (142).

Yet visuality is important to her not merely as a tool in her mental engineering work, but as a form of acquired empathy. Chapter 8 of Thinking, ‘A Cow’s Eye View: Connecting with Animals,’ goes further in highlighting the importance of visuality for many people with autism, as Grandin describes the many insights she has experienced from putting herself in a cow’s place.

When I put myself in a cow’s place, I really have to be that cow and not a person in a cow costume. I use my visual thinking skills to simulate what an animal would see and hear in a given situation. I place myself inside its body and imagine what it experiences. It is the ultimate virtual reality system, but I also draw on the empathetic feelings of gentleness and kindness I have developed so that my simulation is more than a robotic computer model. [...] Cattle have a very wide, panoramic visual field, because they are a prey species, ever wary and watchful for signs of danger. Similarly, some people with autism are like fearful animals in a world full of dangerous predators. They live in a constant state of fear, worrying about a change in routine or becoming upset if objects in their environment are moved. (143–44)

Grandin splendidly milks the idea of a connection between the visual perception of both cows and autistic children over a number of pages, highlighting the disturbance caused by novel objects in their visual fields (e.g. 146). But just as important as the way in which this chapter points to the power of visuality for some people with autism is the way it undermines a poorly situated belief that they are absolutely incapable of empathy. Although Grandin is unlike many other people whose diagnoses locate them on a different area of the autism spectrum and
who may neither have had the same access to education nor received as much family support, her motivation and success illustrate that there may be other non-traditional routes to empathetic thought for people with autism. If Grandin’s autobiographical narratives are any indication, visuality may be taken as one of the dominant tropes associated with autism—as the basis for an ‘autistic mode of thought’ (see also Hacking and McGeer) and even as a pathway leading toward empathy. My hope is that as the reader ventures further into the subsequent analysis of the text *María y yo*, Grandin’s explanatory discussions of autism will provide a touchstone for the behaviors and social environment of María and also for the unique visual style advanced by Miguel Gallardo.

**Autobiography, Disability and Comics Form in *María y yo***

The best way to approach *María y yo* is as a visual autobiography drawn by one person but experienced by two—a father and daughter pair. In this respect, it should not be taken lightly that Miguel Gallardo is listed as the second author of the comic, with his name listed behind that of his daughter, María. María, although she has not contributed any drawings to the book, is a part of every page and in a sense has inspired (at the very least) if not actively shaped the narrative, events, and the very content of the volume. *María y yo* is, importantly, a rendering solely of the time spent together by father and daughter—notably there is no set-up centered primarily on Miguel, nor is there any attempt to detail María’s life apart from her father (one intimates, correctly or not, that she more regularly lives with her mother). The basic premise is made explicit as text by Gallardo on page 3.

María vive con su madre en Canarias, a 3 horas en avión de Barcelona, donde vivo yo. A veces nos vamos de vacaciones los dos juntos a pasar una semana en algún resort del sur de Gran Canaria frecuentado por alemanes y otros guiris. Esta es la historia de uno de esos viajes, volviendo de Barcelona y aprovechando los últimos días del verano en uno de esos hoteles. En esos viajes María y yo hablamos, reímos, hacemos listas de gente y comemos hasta hartarnos.

María tiene 12 años, una sonrisa contagiosa, un sentido del humor especial y tiene autismo. (3)
Barcelona, where I live. Sometimes the two of us take a vacation, spending one week in a resort in the south of Gran Canaria frequented by Germans and other foreigners. This is the story of one of those trips, returning from Barcelona and taking advantage of the last days of summer in one of those hotels. On those trips María and I talk, laugh, make lists of people and eat until we are stuffed.

María is 12 years old and has a contagious smile, an endearing sense of humor, and autism.

Gallardo’s creative talents are, throughout, consciously mobilized first and foremost to deliver a sympathetic and humanizing portrayal of his relationship with his daughter, and perhaps only secondarily (or, after all, perhaps not) an informed presentation of disability, specifically autism, to those who may be unfamiliar with it. Whether or not he intended the comic to have a pedagogical component, one that in the end deserves to be approached from a Disability Studies framework, it definitively succeeds in this respect. María y yo notably goes beyond commonly held stereotypes of people with autism to deliver a thorough portrait of the textures of the daily life that Miguel and María share together—it is entertaining and even educational while showcasing a high degree of artistic creativity.

A detailed look at the initial section, ‘De Barcelona a Canarias’ [From Barcelona to Canarias] (4–5), serves as a concise introduction to Gallardo’s presentation of disability, his depiction of María’s perseverative behaviors, and to his characteristic sense of humor. It is one of the most traditional sections of the comic from the perspective of formal features, first and foremost because it foregrounds a linear plot through what are—more or less—four rows of sequential art on each page. It is significant that the first pages after the grounding image of María (2) and the concise textual explanation of the book’s contents (3) comprise an attempt to ground the work in a traditional format that would be easily appreciated by both advanced and casual readers of comics alike. This is particularly so given that, as will be discussed below, the book evolves by progressively abandoning this approach in favor of one that presents numerous connections with what might be seen as an ‘autistic visual sensibility.’

In terms of plot, ‘De Barcelona a Canarias’ begins with María and Miguel’s arrival at the airport in the first panel of page 4 and ends with their boarding of a plane at the end of page 5. The section seems conscious of its role as narrative, and Gallardo begins the first panel by introducing the reader to a problem of sorts that will be eventually resolved at the end of page 5. Through a point-of-view mid-shot
we see the outline of an airline employee standing behind a desk informing María and Miguel that, since they have arrived late, they may have to travel separately. Just as in more traditional non-comic narrative Gallardo here begins also in medias res, thrusting the reader into a situation that would certainly be a nightmare for any parent and child traveling together. There is a human quality to the pages (which perhaps contrasts with his co-authored work such as Makoki: Fuga en la Modelo) in that Gallardo, at least in this instance, has chosen to hand-draw the panel-frames of the sequence without a straight-edge and seemingly rather quickly at that. The resulting lines are unequally shaded, irregular, and at times purposely imprecise, rendering visible the traces of the human hand that has drawn them.

As the pair hustle through the airport to the gate in the subsequent three framed drawings (page 4 consists of 11 sequential drawings—only seven of which are framed as separate panels—and an explanatory footnote), Gallardo cycles through a number of the word-image combinations that may obtain in comics as described by Scott McCloud in his foundational text Understanding Comics (1994). Panel 2 presents the ‘additive’ combination, as Miguel spies a clock in the hallway and exclaims ‘¡Mierda! Faltan 20 min. para embarcar!’ [Shit! Only 20 min. until boarding!], panel 3 the ‘word-specific’ combination as the picture merely illustrates Miguel’s own perseverative thought pattern (‘¡Correr! ¡Correr!’ [Run! Run!]), and panel 4 the ‘duo-specific’ combination as María in close-up screams louder than before (terms from McCloud, Understanding 153–55). This chaotic and rapid cycling through various word-image combinations assists in imbuing the sequence with a sense of visual complexity and narrative chaos. María y yo’s characteristic two-tone appearance (only black and red inks are used) aids in creating an effect of two-channel overstimulation. Here, through the black ink, we directly see that it is Miguel who is overstimulated by the pressure to arrive on time at the gate and to deal also with María’s constant perseverative yelling. And yet María herself is also likely characteristically overstimulated by the hustle and bustle of the airport, not to mention her father’s own hurried sense of time running out. While it is not the case that the color red is always used throughout the book as an extension of María’s experience (it is used quite extensively to provide depth of narration in a variety of ways), here it is used to great effect as a way of pairing María’s red hat with her wailing repetition of ‘Ceiba es fea’ [Ceiba is ugly]—as we are informed by page 4’s sole footnote, Ceiba is the name of one of María’s favorite cousins in Canarias. There is a practical element to this pairing—just as there is elsewhere in the comic—in that using the same color for
hat and wail allows the reader to see that it is María herself who is the origin of the scream, but the color also adds intensity to the crescendo effect through which her words progressively occupy more and more of the panel. In panel 3 the word ‘Ceiba’ appears in red very close to María, panel 4 is equally split between María’s head in the lower half and gigantic red letters in the upper half, and what would be panels 5 and 6 consist of one stretched and unframed image as Miguel drags María through the airport while her red-ink scream virtually eclipses the torso and face of a passer-by. As McCloud notes, comics artists will erase the frames of an image as a way of manipulating the reader’s received sense of time (Understanding 95–103), and here María’s scream has a greater emotional impact and temporal weight that is insufficiently mediated by Miguel’s small-lettered/black-inked meek protest (‘¡¡María… por favoooooor!!’ [María… Pleeeaaase!!]). Her scream (still in red) in fact echoes through three more panels on pages 4–5. After a passer-by judges Miguel for having a badly behaved child (panel 7) and the appearance of another non-framed image of a (red) clock with the title ‘El tiempo pasa’ [Time Passes] (panel 9)—thus emphasizing the temporal duration experienced by the two in the airport—Miguel and María sit down on a bench where she continues to scream, to the disapproval of many others in the airport. The entirety of page 7 is a large panel of a small plane in mid-air with the red-ink words ‘Ceiba es feeeeeeaaaaaa’ emanating from the plane and dominating the otherwise rather stark image.

On page 5, after Miguel tells María to stop screaming (and is unsuccessful), Gallardo includes a sprawling scene of a line of people who are all waiting to pass through gate 28 (a line which, unframed, threatens to take up half of the page). Faced with the long line (and with the [im]possibility of being separated on two different flights), Miguel moves to the front of the line saying ‘Perdone amable señorita, voy a pasar por delante de toda esta cola, porque María bla bla bli bla…’ [Pardon me young lady, I’m going to jump ahead of this line because María blah, blah, blah, blah…]. A red line connects María’s face to the young lady’s eye, and the latter responds ‘Oh… sí claro, caballero’ [Oh, of course, good sir]. Boarding the aircraft, Miguel speaks to the flight attendant about being late and about the problem of overbooking, explaining that he and María cannot be separated, and the last image on the page shows us a red-inked abstract figure abruptly being hurled out of the parked plane with the humorous caption ‘Rápidamente encuentran una solución’ [A solution is quickly found]. The fact that the word ‘solución’ [solution] appears in red heightens the humorous effect. On these two pages we have a triple
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introduction; to the plot of María y yo, to Gallardo's characteristic style, and, not insignificantly, to his treatment of disability. Already we have an understanding that the comics artist wants to portray the day-to-day realities of interacting with his daughter. This will clearly include activities that are enjoyable or, as here, frustrating. True to the title relationship, it will highlight both María's reactions to her social environment as well as Miguel's perceptions of the often skewed reactions of strangers who lack a way of making sense of María's autism. Part of relating the day-to-day realities of their experiences together means revealing the coping strategies Miguel has developed to deal with this ignorant public—even if that means taking advantage of public perceptions as occurs in the above-related episode of cutting to the front of the line. The style of María y yo, and as we will see later, its formal qualities and development of what might be considered an 'autistic visual aesthetic,' accentuate this attempt to visually represent an autobiographical experience of autism. The hand-drawn panel borders, the seemingly unrestrained personal honesty of the narrative, and the mundane nature of the subject-matter all contribute to the sympathetic presentation of disability in the comic. Part of the strength of María y yo—at the level of content—comes from its nuanced but (apparently) unvarnished presentation of the characteristics traditionally associated with autism. As with the larger population (to a great degree), some of these behaviors are, perhaps, frustrating, while others are endearing and others, well, just are. Keeping in mind Temple Grandin's descriptions in Emergence and Thinking, we see María engage in perseverative behaviors and acting out (screaming, for example) in public. We see her (on the inside front cover no less) characteristically completely absorbed in the repetitive act of letting beach sand fall through her fingers (also 18–19, 36; a behavior depicted also in Fernández de Castro's film, to great effect). The drawing of her chewing her resort buffet food (a favorite shared activity of the father–daughter pair) is labeled with the red-inked word 'superconcentración' [superconcentration] (13). These behaviors are not always problematic. María perseveratively asks questions, but Miguel's pictures of people provide an outlet for that behavior, as on page 10 where the two share the same space by the pool amid a warm, red-inked background of plants—María engaging with her pictures and Miguel sipping a drink. '[Miguel:] Amigos, esto es vida, tomando el sol, con mi pulserita rodeado de alemanes que hacen lo mismo que yo... ¡Me siento integrado!' [This is the life, my friends, out in the sun, with my red bracelet surrounded by Germans doing the same thing as me... I feel at ease!]; '[María:] ¿Quién es,
papi?’ [Who is this, daddy?]. At times, the narrative reflects that María’s behaviors may not be as frustrating as the social response to them by strangers. On one compelling full-page panel, for example, we see shaded-in outlines of María and Miguel walking on a blank page beneath 13 disembodied eyes as the text emphasizes what it feels like from Miguel’s perspective to be the center of public attention if not scrutiny and judgment (‘Y otra vez las miradas, siempre las miradas’ [And once again the stares, always the stares]; 26, italics indicate red ink). Gallardo emphasizes the importance of routines while at the resort (24) and María’s understandable reactions to deviations from those routines (25). But he also presents her ‘Estereotipias, movimientos sincopados que obedecen a algún ritmo interno y que son difíciles de parar si no le ofreces un plan concreto’ [Stereotyped movements, syncopated movements that follow an internal rhythm and that are difficult to stop if you don’t offer her a concrete plan] (30). These include ‘slapping one hand over the other,’ ‘knocking her right hand against her chin with index finger extended,’ clapping, ‘making strange circles in the air with her finger,’ and so on (all illustrated on page 30).

But Gallardo also works to resituate autism not merely as a neuro-physiological issue but as a social relation as well—linking content with formal expression. In one instance, Gallardo uses a full-page labeled ‘Caras’ [Faces] and divided vertically in half to oppose María’s glowing happy face (‘Cuando María se ríe, todo alrededor se ilumina, como si se contagiara’ [When María laughs, everything around her is illuminated, as if it were contagious]) to the ‘Caras que no me gusta ver en las personas que miran a María’ [Faces I don’t like to see in the people who look at María]. The strict formal division of this page into two halves points to the distance between his own fatherly connection (and his informed grasp of autism) and the lack of knowledge and lack of connection that comes to define the greater public. The top half of the following page elaborates on this through a traditionally framed if large panel wherein a rosy-cheeked (red-inked) María is barely visible within a crowd of seated restaurant guests as her (red-inked) scream ‘Elia es guapaaa’ [Elia is preetty] rises up and breaks a section of the upper panel border (17). The bottom half reveals that although Miguel sometimes tries to stop María’s perseverative screams, he would like, also, to stop the poor reactions of public onlookers (‘A veces me gustaría decirles a ellos también: ¡No, señora!’ [Sometimes I would also like to tell them: No, madam!], 17). More importantly, he resorts to the metaphor of a dividing wall separating María from the world ‘Un muro rodea a María’ [A wall surrounds María]—but with a twist.
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This wall is relational, dependent on social circumstances and most of all on the attitudes of others, and not necessarily on María:

Un muro invisible rodea a María cuando la gente la ve por primera vez o se cruza con ella. Un muro de miedo a lo desconocido y de extrañeza. Nadie sabe qué hacer ni cómo comportarse al principio, sin embargo, la gente que llega a conocerla, aunque sea fugazmente, queda encantada al ver que el muro que han levantado no es tan alto. Bien es cierto que María tiene los sentidos muy sensibles para el rechazo, sólo se acerca al que está dispuesto a prestarle un poco de atención y escucharla. He conocido a personas enamoradas de María tan sólo por hablar con ella un rato y ver como no es difícil comunicarse. (31)

[An invisible wall surrounds María when people see or run into her for the first time. A wall of fear of the unknown and of the surprise. No one knows what to do or how to behave at first, but then, the people who come to know her, even if fleetingly, are amazed to see that the wall they have built up isn’t that tall. It is true that María is very sensitive to rejection, she only approaches those who are inclined to give her a bit of attention and listen to her. I have known people who fall in love with María only by speaking with her a little while and seeing that it isn’t so difficult to communicate with her.]

The illustrations that accompany this necessarily pedagogical paragraph are just as striking, with a range of four faces drawn in black ink surrounding a central depiction of María’s shining face, inked in red and surrounded by a black-dashed circle indicating the wall. While the relation of words to images on this page might best be described in McCloud’s terminology as ‘word-specific,’ the image nevertheless more directly addresses the range of reactions that people may have when meeting María for the first time: a middle-aged woman and a middle-aged man with glasses look skeptically at María from the left while a boy stares in childish wonder and a younger woman looks as if she might venture to communicate with María from the right side of the drawing. Here it is worth turning to the discussion of the abstract-iconic spectrum as it is mobilized in comics. As scholar Thierry Groensteen has noted, ‘Indeed it is the distinctive feature of visual monstration to present the “particular” rather than the “general”’ (Groensteen, The System of Comics 123); and yet, as McCloud reminds us, it is best to speak of degrees of abstractness in cartoon icons (Understanding 28–31). The range of abstractness-iconicity used by Gallardo is reduced in comparison to other comics that present a more exaggerated difference
between one and the other end of the spectrum, and the level of iconicity he uses to draw the characters of María and Miguel is more or less comparable to that he employs in drawing certain German tourists or even the full cast of characters in the comics appendix. Here, however, Gallardo uses a slightly more abstract but nonetheless iconic style, which effectively conveys his sense of hesitant frustration when routinely faced with a series of social types who may react to seeing María for the first time in somewhat predictable ways.

One of the most striking aspects of the formal expression of the volume involves its page layout (see also Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 142–43). Whereas overall, Gallardo shows a marked aversion to the traditional strict panel divisions that have come to be synonymous with sequential art in the popular imagination, he sporadically incorporates this more traditional formal structure when making specific points. More often than not, he prefers a style in which images co-exist and almost float together on a white background. Simply put, what comics fans/scholars call the ‘gutter’ between panels (see McCloud, *Understanding* 66; Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 114) is almost nonexistent in *María y yo*. Significantly, however, Gallardo returns to a traditional, sequential use of framed panels on pages 33–34 in the process of giving the reader a sense of what it is like to have, as the subsection title indicates, ‘Una conversación con María’ [A Conversation with María]. Each panel features Miguel’s face in close-up on the left and María’s face in close-up on the right, with no deviation from this pattern throughout the 24 panels comprising the sequence. While María greatly enjoys her time interacting with her father, as Gallardo notes on the previous page in a lengthy paragraph attempting to manage the reader’s expectations if not educate him or her outright, ‘Con María no tenemos conversaciones al uso, siguen siempre unas pautas rígidas que ella establece, una parte de su discurso son los nombres […] Ella va soltando nombres que están ligados a sus recuerdos […] Una memoria extraordinaria para la gente’ [María and I have conversations that are unconventional, they routinely follow a strict structure that she establishes, names are a big part of her speech (…) She throws out names that are linked with her memories (…) She has an extraordinary ability to remember people] (32). Although the visual nature of the dialogue of their unconventional conversation is not necessarily linear, it goes something like this:

María: —Marcos
Miguel: —¿Quién? [Who?]
María: —Marcos
Miguel: —¿Marcos?
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María: —¿Quién? [Who?]
Miguel: —Marcos… ¿Quién es? [Who is he?]
María: —Un amigo [A friend]

María: —¡Alfredo!
Miguel: —Pero cómo es posible que te acuerdes de… [But how is it possible that you remember…]
María: —¡Te acuerdas de Alfredo! [You remember Alfredo!]
Miguel: —Te acuerdas de Alfredo, ya veo… [You remember Alfredo, I see…]

María: —El Richar [Richard]
Miguel: —Yo no… Yo no sé quién es el Richar, María… [I don’t… I don’t know who Richard is, María…]
María: —¿Quién? [Who?]
Miguel: —El Richar [Richard]
María: —Te acuerdas del Richar [You remember Richard]
Miguel: —Richar, claro [Richard, of course]

María: —¡Yopleidi!
Miguel: —Mmm Yopleidi… Síi [Hmm Yopleidi… Yes]
María: —¡Te acuerdas de Yopleidi! [You remember Yopleidi!]
María: —Jose, Luis, Pilar, Leo, Susi, Simón, Pilarín, Yeremai, Ami, Keni, Machuca, Diana, Isra, Hanoch, Janet, Marta, Guasi, Fabi, Román, Paco, Ima, Ceiba…
Miguel: —Puf [Phew] (33)

The strict and traditional panel divisions punctuating this dialogue reflect the ‘pautas rígidas’ [strict structure] established by María to great effect, visually highlighting the sense of order and routine that characterize the conversations between father and daughter. The next page similarly features another ‘unconventional’ conversation between the two: Miguel begins by asking María what she has eaten today, to which María continually responds that Lili hit her (panels 1–6, page 34), and once Miguel modifies his approach to ask about Lili, María once again changes the subject (twice) before finally telling him (in panel 11) that she has eaten spaghetti and chicken. The final panel shows both María and Miguel facing the reader head-on (still in characteristic close-up continued from page 33) with smiles on their faces as Miguel says ‘¿No somos la mejor pareja de comediantes que hayais visto?’ [Aren’t we they best comedic duo you have ever seen?].

Returning to the lengthy paragraph introducing the topic of conversations with María on page 32, it is important that Gallardo draws
the punctuating image of a key beneath the paragraph—it is as if he, here, intends to ‘unlock’ for the reader the secret of understanding how María’s thinking works and of learning how to appreciate one’s time with her. He writes:

Su especialidad son las listas de familias, primos, tíos, amigos y ... de pronto, surgido del fondo de uno de sus cajones, el nombre de alguien que hasta tú habías olvidado (algo nada extraño en mi caso) y la cara de alegría de María al ver que tú te asombras de su memoria, eso amigos, es oro. (32, the italics indicate red ink)

[Her specialty is making lists of family members, cousins, aunts and uncles, friends and ... suddenly, retrieved from the bottom of one of her drawers, the name of someone that even you had forgotten (nothing strange in my case) and the happy face she makes upon seeing that you are amazed at her memory, that, my friends, is gold.]

The notion that María has ‘cajones’ [drawers] in which she stores her numerous memories of people is an important one whose significance has been underscored earlier in the book (appearing, also, on the back cover), and one that will appear poignantly also in the documentary by Fernández de Castro. On page 23 there appears a sketch of 13 drawers with the labels ‘Comida’ [Food], ‘Paseos’ [Walks], ‘Piscina’ [Pool], ‘Canarias’ [Canary Islands], ‘Fotos’ [Photos], ‘Barcelona,’ ‘Amigos’ [Friends], ‘Arena’ [Sand], ‘Nombres’ [Names], ‘Preguntas’ [Questions], ‘Cumpleaños’ [Birthdays], ‘Bañete’ [Bathtub], and ‘Otras cosas’ [Other Things]—presumably an illustration of what is most important to María, weighted by increasing the space occupied by certain drawers, with ‘Comida’ being the largest and ‘Arena’ coming in a close second. Gallardo contextualizes this picture by refusing to allow autism to be the reader’s only guide: ‘Compartimos además manías y costumbres, las mías me las inventé yo, las suyas son mezcla de su discapacidad y de ser terca como su abuela. Somos los dos reacios a los cambios y queremos que las cosas estén en su sitio’ [Moreover, we share manias and habits, I have invented my own, hers are a mixture of her disability and of being stubborn like her grandmother. We are both resistant to change and prefer it that things be in their place] (23). Gallardo does well here in preventing María from being equated with her disability alone—it can be difficult for some unacquainted with people with disabilities to understand that a disability does not determine a person’s behavior nor completely account for their personality or identity. Nonetheless, the metaphor of the drawers works as a way of pointing to
those patterns of thinking and relating that are, perhaps, characteristic of autism while imbuing such qualities with an accessible, quotidian, familiar and even warm, cozy, and personalized feeling. While the recourse to strict, sequential panel divisions in the section focusing on conversations between Miguel and María (above, 33–34) may have been important to illustrate their repetitive nature, Gallardo’s drawer metaphor is appealing for its relatability and potential pedagogical applications, becoming a good way of introducing autism to those unfamiliar with it without overly emphasizing the notion of difference.

Here it is worth returning to Grandin’s text *Thinking in Pictures* to understand that ‘[d]iscussions with other autistic people reveal similar visual styles of thinking about tasks that most people do sequentially’ (32). Paralleling, if not consciously building upon María’s non-sequential, ‘drawer-like’ thinking, Gallardo’s text also routinely exploits the visual nature of the comics format, arranging objects together on a page that are necessary for accomplishing a certain goal or engaging in a certain activity. The first page of the section entitled ‘Peces’ [Fish], wherein Gallardo focuses on pool-time play at the resort in Canarias, features an illustrated look at packing the backpack for María and Miguel’s time at the pool. Items showcased include the backpack itself, two towels, hats to protect from the sun, sunblock, a notepad (for Miguel), a notepad of names (for María), wet wipes, and—displaying once again Gallardo’s humorous tone—‘gafas para el agua (la piscina tiene cloro para matar varios elefantes)’ [underwater goggles (the pool has enough chlorine in it to kill a few elephants)] (28). The appendix-like section at the end of the comic bearing titles such as ‘Reparto’ [Cast] (42), ‘Casting en Canarias’ [Casting in the Canary Islands] (44), ‘Casting in the Canary Islands – 2’ [Casting in the Canary Islands – 2] (45), ‘Casting en Barcelona’ [Casting in Barcelona] (46), ‘¿Quién vino a la fiesta de final de verano?’ [Who came to the end of summer party?] (47), ‘¿Quién estaba en la cena de fin de año?’ [Who was at the end of year dinner?] (48), and ‘¿Quiénes no pudieron venir a la cena pero vinieron después?’ [Who didn’t make it to dinner but showed up later?] (48) permit the reader a glimpse into María’s love for the people close to her as well as what Gallardo describes as her staggering ability to remember people. The iconic drawings of people in María’s life included here (which reach a grand total of 45) sprawl over the pages in tidy rows of varying numbers and without any sort of panel structure, each boasting their own name in black ink.

The significance of Gallardo’s comics style as presented here is not solely visually ‘autistic’ of course. It is perhaps best to complement this interpretation by emphasizing at the same time the particular
characteristics of what Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons call *The Language of Comics*. In the introduction to their edited volume, they cite the undeniable ‘[v]isual turn of our culture’ (ix), alleging that ‘Comics is one of the most popular and pervasive media forms of our increasingly visual age’ (ix). Nonetheless, *María y yo* also includes a more explicitly pedagogical component emphasizing the importance of visuality for people with autism. A series of visual lists follows the various casting pictures at the end of the comic: the first, illustrating ‘Los deberes de María’ [María’s chores] (49) is properly introduced as presenting ‘pictogramas que utiliza María’ [pictograms that María uses] (49). Of interest here, as Andy Bondy and Lori Frost mention in *A Picture’s Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism*, is the fact that ‘aided symbols’ such as ‘Real Objects, Photographs, Line Drawing Symbols, Alphabet Symbols’ (53–55) are of great use in communicating with people with autism. A system that the authors have developed known as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) (67–94)—only one of many such systems that have been developed worldwide to aid in visual communication—can help with both ‘Understanding Changes in Routine and Expected Outcomes’ (131) as well as ‘Understanding Transitions’ (135; see also Boutot and Smith Myles, 125–27, for the importance of visual supports and visual schedules for populations with autism). Although he does not refer specifically to the system developed by Bondy and Frost, Gallardo takes a very similar pedagogically motivated approach in the final pages of his comic, noting the following:

Los niños con autismo son buenos procesadores visuales. Asimismo estos niños tienen problemas a la hora de anticipar lo que va a suceder, lo que les causa situaciones de angustia y frustración. Los pictogramas permiten la estructuración y planificación de sus actividades. Dispuestos por toda la casa ayudan a María a anticipar los acontecimientos que van a ocurrir durante el día. (49, italics indicate red ink)

[Children with autism process visual information well. These same children have problems anticipating what’s going to happen next, which causes them to experience anxiety and frustration. *Pictograms* facilitate the structuring and planning of their activities. Postings throughout the house help María to anticipate the events that will occur over the course of a given day.]

The example on the same page as this description includes six traditionally framed panels with hard (seemingly non-hand-drawn)
borders: a car (indicating a trip out of the house), María’s face next to a comb and scissors (indicating a haircut), a pizza pie, a young girl putting toys in a box, a young girl in a bathtub, and a young girl with her head on a pillow. The difference in style here—both in terms of the image borders and also the images themselves, which are drawn with a thicker black pen and a more expressly polished if formal approach—helps the reader to conclude that these images are more professionally pedagogical or communicational documents. Moreover, of the four human images, the first is clearly María’s face while the others are noticeably not María but a more abstract young girl—a fact that visually allows the reader to intuit that although María uses these pictograms, they are not necessarily an individualized system but more broadly representative of varying types of visual communication. The nine framed images associated with ‘¿Qué haces cuando vas al lavabo?’ [What do you do when you go to the bathroom?] elaborate on the process from raising the toilet cover (panel 1) to turning off the faucet after washing one’s hands (panel 9, close-up) (50); and the next series depicts nine sequential activities associated with ‘Miércoles – Agenda del día’ [Wednesday – Daily Agenda] such as ‘Vestirse’ [Get dressed], ‘Ir al colegio’ [Go to school] and ‘Ducharse’ [Take a shower] (51). Whereas these pictograms introduce the reader to images that are destined for use by people with autism, here María, the last drawn-image series of the book mobilizes a visual pedagogical approach specifically designed to introduce readers to the general characteristics of autism, featuring specific traits illustrated by abstract solid-shade human figures such ‘Accesos de risa en momentos inadecuados’ [Outbursts of laughter at inappropriate times], ‘Dificultades para interactuar con otros’ [Difficulty interacting with others], and ‘Dedicación obsesiva a juegos desacostumbrados o reiterativos’ [Obsessive dedication to unconventional or reiterative activities] (53; cf. Grandin, above).

But as mentioned earlier, María y yo is far more than just a visual presentation of the traits often associated with autism. As an autobiographical comic, it is also an attempt to affectionately render Gallardo’s relationship with María—and her endearing qualities—in visual form. Thus, accompanying the presentation of what are perhaps characteristically autistic behaviors in the comic are drawings of more idiosyncratic, personalized behaviors that constitute María’s endearing traits. For example, after arriving from Barcelona at the Gran Canaria airport, she is ‘contenta de llegar por fin y lo demuestra a su manera’ [happy to have finally arrived and she shows it in her own way] (8). The red ink connecting objects and words—at other times linked to
sound as seen the above discussion of pages 4–5—is here used to show motion. María and Miguel stand foregrounded from a lightly drawn crowd of bystanders with luggage; her t-shirt shirt is red and with her right hand she pinches Miguel’s arm with affection as the explanatory nondiegetic words, also in red ink, specify: this is a ‘pellizco de cariño’ [affectionate pinch] (8). Two red asterisks connect with lines to Miguel’s arm at the site of the pinch, and María is calm and smiling as her father looks around, perhaps somewhat perturbed by the crowd or thinking through the next stage of the journey. Similarly, later in the comic Gallardo reiterates that if María likes you she will give you a forceful pinch (31).

One of the most tender moments in the comic is the depiction of Miguel and María’s time in the pool. Here, Gallardo is at his most playful as he visually renders both himself and his daughter as fish: ‘Los dos somos peces. En el caso de María tiene que ser un poco templadita, es un pez algo delicado […] ¡En el agua somos felices!’ [The two of us are fish. In María’s case, the water must be lukewarm, she is a somewhat delicate fish (…) We are happy in the water!] (29, italics indicate red ink). We see profiles of two fish facing each other, with iconic features of the cartoon-María superimposed on the face of the fish on the left, and Miguel’s characteristic glasses on the one on the right. In the image below, Gallardo superimposes Miguel’s iconic characteristics on the face of a submerged turtle: ‘A veces yo sumerjo y la llevo a mis espaldas como si fuera una tortuga de la polinesia’ [Sometimes I submerge myself and carry her on my back as if I were a Polynesian turtle] (29; this image appears also the documentary film by Fernández de Castro). In addition to the concerted attempt to realistically (and autobiographically) portray the quotidian realities of autism, Gallardo is at pains to present the reader with a wider understanding of María, her likes and dislikes, her personality, her favorite activities and perhaps most importantly her beaming face (2, 8, 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24, 25, 31, 37, 43, 49, embedded). María’s face is, notably, sometimes the only picture on an entire page (2, 43), many times tinged in red ink as a way of endowing the image with greater emotional weight. The comic narrative ends, appropriately enough, with the image of a single drawer labeled with the word ‘Gracias’ [Thank you] (55), thus calling up for the reader the previously established feelings of warmth associated with that image and also referring obliquely to the visual patterns of organization that have been associated with María. Gallardo is, perhaps, thanking the reader for two interconnected things at once—for taking part in his intimate portrayal of/tribute to his daughter and also for perhaps learning a thing or two about people with autism in the process.
In general, the 2010 film directed by Fernández de Castro and inspired by Gallardo's comic book is faithful to the original artist's dual goal of being both entertaining and educational. It is undeniable that, as discussed below, the film does well in incorporating as well as dramatizing specific sequences from the 2007 comic. For example, the DVD menu for the film consists of a series of drawers (labeled 'Play,' 'Capítulos' [Chapters] and so on), and the first screen image (of the title and production information) is also a drawer seemingly drawn by Gallardo. I want to begin with a concise presentation of the way the film successfully translates many elements of the comic to the screen—noting in passing specific episodes that figure in both cultural products, and delving further into the way the film expands upon one episode in particular (Maria's sand-sifting on the beach). Here, however, we might also understand the documentary's visual contribution from a slightly different perspective, taking into account the more specifically cinematic aspects of the work and, finally, noting where Fernández de Castro's goals seem to diverge from those of Gallardo's original text. These differences notwithstanding, ultimately the film María y yo (2010) is overall true to the comic that inspired it—an equally compelling presentation of a compelling personal story, one that notably foregrounds the day-to-day realities of life with a person with autism.

The limited press coverage of the film's 2010 release was generally positive. Although it did not win the 2011 Goya category for which it was nominated (that of Best Documentary Film; see the website: premiosgoya.academiadecine.com/finalistas), María y yo has routinely met with glowing reviews: for example, the film is characterized by a 'sinceridad apabullante que contagia al lector' [contagious sincerity that overwhelms the viewer] (Pons) and transmits 'optimismo, amor y el mensaje de que la esperanza puede ser una realidad en sí misma' [optimism, love and the message that hope can be a reality in itself] (Bonet Mojica). As if having expected the worst, one critic seems notably relieved that 'sales razonablemente contento […], con la sensación de que los genéticamente perdidos y aislados pueden encontrar refugio, comprensión y comunicación [si] están protegidos por el amor, el conocimiento y la paciencia' [you leave reasonably content (…), with the sensation that those who are genetically lost and isolated are able to find refuge, comprehension and communication (if) they
are protected through love, knowledge and patience] (Boyero). Other reviews similarly attribute a generally ‘positive’ (and perhaps an uncritically anodyne) tenor to the film. A review in La Vanguardia (a periodical to which Gallardo has regularly contributed) characterizes María y yo as ‘un acercamiento pausado y realista a la problemática del autismo, capaz de analizarlo desde la visión que no renuncia al optimismo’ [a cautious and realist approach to the question of autism, capable of portraying it from a perspective that doesn’t do away with optimism] (Pons). References to other disabled screen protagonists (e.g. Rain Man in Boyero) and to Gallardo’s previous work with Makoki (Pons) are overall de rigueur in this arena, as might be expected.

But reviewer Gregorio Belinchón—who perhaps follows suit by noting that the film is comprised of ‘[t]ernura y humor mezclados a partes iguales’ [tenderness and humor mixed in equal parts] (‘Otra cara’)—nevertheless goes a bit further than other critics in that his praise is more informed as regards comic adaptations and also stronger. In one of his reviews published in El País, he highlights the film’s uniqueness: ‘No existe otra película parecida en el cine español, y pocas más en el cine mundial’ [There exists no comparable film within Spanish cinema, and even in the world of global cinema no more than a handful of others] (‘María’). Moreover, for Belinchón, María y yo stands with the aforementioned American Splendor (the Pekar biopic) as one of a small group of films based on autobiographical comics (see Hatfield, chapters 4, 5).

Of great interest here is the common claim—one largely supported by Pascal Lefèvre’s essay ‘Incompatible Visual Ontologies? The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images’ (2007)—that both ‘Cinema critics and comics fans seem to agree that it is hard to make a good movie of a comic’ (1). As Lefèvre makes clear, complaints have taken many forms, such as arguing that that comics style does not translate well to the screen, that although both media are visual, the nature of narrative storytelling is widely different in each case, and that the nature of both spectatorship and production differs from comics to film (2–3). Some even invoke the more commonsensical notion of ‘primacy’—the idea that ‘usually people prefer the first version of a story they encounter’ (3). Commenting specifically on the process of adaptation, the critic points to four problems that routinely loom large. All of these stem from the ‘characteristics of the comics medium itself’: 1) the deletion/addition process, 2) the nature of page layout vs. film screen, 3) the translating of drawings to photography, and 4) the sound of film vs. the silence of comics (Lefèvre 3–4). While the present focus is more generally on the documentary film’s presentation of the theme
of disability and its link with María y yo’s formal aspects—leaving these problems of adaptation largely unaddressed—I do discuss some very interesting choices made by Fernández de Castro in an attempt to preserve qualities of the original drawn text. Although, as Lefèvre makes clear, other cinema critics and comics fans may or may not find these decisions to be successful, that is not my concern here.

Similarly, although the discussion that follows treats the documentary largely as a continuation or re-narration (but not specifically as an adaptation) of Gallardo’s comic book text—with little space to properly read the film within existing traditions of documentary filmmaking while discussing its treatment of disability at length—it is important to note in passing that the film squares with relatively recent trends, generally speaking. Noted documentary theorist Bill Nichols, for example, points to an increasingly blurred boundary between fiction and documentary (in chapter 5 of Blurred Boundaries), pointing to a ‘shift of emphasis toward the poetic, expressive and rhetorical’ in documentary film (99; Keith Beattie’s more recent volume similarly emphasizes the ‘expressive, evocative, entertaining and pleasurable capacities of documentary film,’ 151). This issue, of course, while not addressed directly in this chapter, will certainly become clearly relevant to subsequent discussion of the film’s more lyrical presentation and incorporation of animated sequences.

First and foremost, it is significant that Gallardo has collaborated with the documentary filmmaker in every sense, not merely as inspiration nor even as co-protagonist—nor yet for having allowed words and images from the original comic to appear in the film—but moreover for allowing the director access to his vast collection of personal drawings of María (featured from the third minute of the film). Félix Fernández de Castro is successful at incorporating these images—many of which do not appear in the comic book—into his film, and even at producing many wonderful animated sequences likewise clearly referring to Gallardo’s work. Many times in the film Gallardo’s voice-over reads directly from the comic book text over the filmic images, and while the narrative action is very (but not completely) faithful to the spirit if not the letter of the comic, Fernández de Castro sometimes recreates actual drawings from the comic, modifying them to succeed as film-images in their own right. This is the case, to give just one example, with the comic book’s presentation of close-up iconic drawings of María and Gallardo on page 23, where the text mentions physical similarities between the two: strong and thick hair, and the same nose shape. In the film (beginning at 28:33), video-images of each of their faces are superimposed on an animated background—with the advantage that
exaggerated, animated hair can be drawn on each and that their faces can then be rotated to profile to allow an accurate comparison of nose shape (a common trait signaled by animated arrows, among other drawn images). As if illustrating the entire original comic book page, the film’s animation then ‘travels’ down to show a recreated image of the drawers representing both Miguel and María’s shared characteristic of being ‘reacios a los cambios’ [resistant to change] and wanting ‘que las cosas estén en su sitio’ [things to be in their place] (23). In a sense this entire page is faithfully presented on the cinematic screen, where it has been wonderfully imbued with a dynamic energy lacking from its static presentation on the original page.

In terms of content, both comic book and film prioritize María’s love for the resort buffet (e.g. page 13 and minute 21:45), capture the onslaught of stares by strangers (e.g. pp. 26, 31; 48:59–49:20), evoke María’s propensity to remember and talk about specific people (e.g. p. 33; 56:20), and depict her super-concentration while eating (e.g. p. 13; 48:39)—these being merely a sampling of such instances. Even the diegetic scenery is similar—as Belinchón notes, ‘Tampoco dudó [Fernández de Castro] en rodar en los mismos sitios donde disfrutan Miguel y su Marieta’ [Neither did (Fernández de Castro) hesitate to film in the same locations where Miguel and his Marieta vacation] (‘María’). The sequence of the comic book discussed in the previous section entitled ‘De Barcelona a Canarias’ (4–5) is captured cinematically in the airport on a real SpanAir flight—although there is considerably less time-pressure here than in the comic book (one surmises that traveling with a film crew perhaps requires a bit more planning). The film goes a bit further than the comic by expanding upon the text with which Gallardo pokes fun at the resort—for example, the film refers to ‘Una reserva natural de Guiris’ [A nature reserve for foreigners] and at various times shows both Miguel and María wearing humorous t-shirts with English text (e.g. at approx. 1:08:08—Miguel’s shirt: ‘Warning: Tourist Area’; María’s shirt: ‘I’m not a tourist / give me a break’). Similarly, the comic’s oft-repeated image of the series of drawers takes on new resonance in the film as the hotel at which the two are staying has balconies that look like actual drawers, complete with handles (it seems possible that this image has been digitally enhanced—and to wondrous effect—as a Google-image search reveals that neither of the hotels mentioned in the credits [the Hotel IFA Continental and the Hotel Parque] seems to have this appearance). The image of this hotel-consisting-of-drawers (e.g. 54:28–35; 54:45)—whether digitally manipulated or merely a well-chosen (non-)diegetic image—reveals a highly conscious grasp
of the importance of this drawer metaphor for understanding María’s (and also Miguel’s) need for a sort of structure, order, and organization. The film manages to suggest visually that the pair actually inhabit a drawer of the hotel themselves, a metaphor not merely for structure but also for the coziness and intimacy the pair share throughout the film and the comic book alike.

Whereas there are numerous episodes that figure in both texts—with relatively minor changes needed to bring them to life cinematically—I would like to focus on two in particular that seem to gain significantly greater resonance in the filmic version. One of the most notable ways in which the film expands on specific images inspired by the comic book is through its presentation of María’s habit of sifting sand through her fingers on the beach. This image appears on the inside front cover of the comic book—a highly visible, memorable, and significant location. María sits at the bottom left corner of a two-page spread with a low horizon and mostly empty space, watching sand drop into a red bucket (a similar drawing occupies the two pages of the inside back cover, with María in the lower right-hand corner). Keeping in mind comics theorist Scott McCloud’s discussion of the comic as necessarily having to resort to rendering time in terms of space (Understanding 95–103), the vast expanse of empty space employed by Gallardo in these images succeeds in imbuing them with an extended, even timeless quality. Even in the comic book this works at two levels at once: first, as an expression of both María’s super-concentration when involved in this reiterative activity (qualitative, experienced time, Bergsonian time if you like) and also the length of time likely consumed by this activity (quantitative, measured time, Bergson’s notion of spatialized time); and second, as an evocation of less character-driven and more universal themes associated with time, perhaps a meditation on the fleeting nature of time, the smallness of human experience and so on. Taking the comic book as a whole, it is clear that the first is privileged although both of these interpretive levels co-exist. The same cannot be said of the film, however.

The first reason for this perhaps nuanced shift in meaning when passing from the drawn to the filmic image is, quite simply, a matter of form. Film is, of course, a necessarily temporal medium, which contrasts with the purely spatial (flattened and two-dimensional) form of the comic. In the documentary version of María y yo the viewer is actually able to witness the sand falling through María’s fingers in real time—there is no need to resort to spatial strategies for rendering time visible as on the inside front and back covers of the comic book. But this is not the only reason. In addition, Fernández de Castro
builds up to the emotional weight of this sequence from very early on in the film, thus exploiting the temporal aspect of film in order to create a certain familiarity with the sand as a filmic sign and a visual metaphor. A brief animated section from 11:30 to 11:46 shows a photo-image of María as she sits in shallow water on the animated image of the beach—the sand is not yet visible. Gallardo’s voice-over references the parents’ gradual understanding that María was different than other children (his ex-wife and the mother of María, May Suarez, figures much more prominently in the film than in the comic), and the sequence develops by showing the animated tide recede, leaving María seemingly stranded on the sand with (disembodied) adult footprints approaching María's image step by step. In this way, the sequence visually portrays the parents’ feeling of a growing distance between María and the world around her. The director Fernández de Castro even comes off, here, as a savvy comics-insider—in a sense this sequence displays the ‘interdependent’ combination of words and images that is so germane to successful sequential art (McCloud, *Understanding 155*). The message is clear either way—whether one listens to the voice-over or looks at the pictures alone.

As noted in numerous guides to understanding autism—such as *Autism in the Early Years: A Practical Guide* (2010) by Cumine et al.—autistic children may spend ‘long periods intensely scrutinizing just one object or a single part of an object’ (60). The authors go on to write that:

Children on the autism spectrum spend less time playing functionally than others matched for expressive language and general mental age. Such play is less varied and integrated and is characterised by repetitive manipulations such as continuously loading and unloading a truck or repeatedly crashing an aeroplane. (61)

Fernández de Castro—of course following Gallardo’s lead—makes the decision to emphasize María's sand sifting over other behaviors, and he even turns it into a cinematic metaphor. Situated at a privileged point approximately halfway through the 80-minute documentary (37:07–38:38), the director effects a punctuating fade from black to lead into the content originally delivered on pages 18–19 of the comic book.

In general terms, this filmed sequence maintains the content of those pages—that is, in both comic and film, María watches the sand fall through her fingers into a red bucket, Gallardo’s text/voice-over references the song ‘Everything is Falling into Place’ (by Kevin
Johansen), and he wonders what might be happening in his daughter’s head while she engages in one of her favorite activities:

En mis fantasías (soy una persona muy imaginativa) tiendo a pensar que María puede ver la composición de los átomos de la arena, o quizás, ve mundos enteros o estrellas o… sólo arena cayendo. Pero cuando la arena pasa entre sus dedos, María es feliz. Horas y horas viendo caer granitos de arena… como un reloj. Everything is falling into place. (Italics indicate red ink, text from the comic book, which varies only slightly in the filmed version).

[In my imagination (I am a very creative person) I tend to think that María is able to see the composition of the sand’s atoms, or maybe, whole worlds or stars or… just sand falling. But when the sand passes through her fingers, María is happy. Hours and hours watching grains of sand fall… like a clock. Everything is falling into place.]

The filmed sequence, while faithful to the original comic book, expands greatly upon the image of molecules drawn there (19) by cycling through superimposed black-and-white (seemingly Gallardo-styled) images of not only molecules but (through successive fades) also images of a solar system and finally a number of drawn constellations. But whereas Gallardo’s text pulls the comic book reader out of Miguel’s meditation on time and the infinite through a final image that re-establishes the priority of María’s world (her day-to-day reality) over her father’s momentary imagination (portraying her smiling face, and, through text, giving voice to her stereotyped enunciations), Fernández de Castro includes no such filmic equivalent.

That directorial decision seems to be made in preparation for a much more concertedly metaphorical (and cinematic) use of María’s sand-play later on. Significantly marking the (approximate) three-quarter point of the 80-minute film (57:07–58:27), the director returns to another important sequence on the beach as a way of further pursuing the sand-play as a metaphor—in the process notably changing the tenor of the original comic-book narrative. Whereas the 2007 original gives perhaps equal weight to each aspect of the shared experience of María and Miguel—even if Gallardo is necessarily the one narrating the story—Fernández de Castro privileges Miguel’s experience over that of his daughter, perhaps in order to have his film speak to a wider audience. This is most clear in the last quarter of the documentary as the film’s intercalated interviews focus more than before on the parents’ perspective (both Miguel and May
express their concerns for María’s future, rather than talking about María herself), and this second sand scene in fact functions as the impetus for that shift. María is first seen against the beach landscape in an expansive general shot. She is much smaller in the expansive and mostly empty frame than ever before in the film—the frame approximately approaches the visual composition of the images on the inside front and back covers of the comic. Fernández de Castro incorporates many more eyeline matches than before—when the emphasis was on portraying María immersed in her sand activity—here connecting Miguel’s gaze with María and with the sea, and even intimating that María herself is gazing out to the sea as does her father. These decisions imbue the sequence with a more generally pensive, thoughtful tone. The song employed here—starting at 57:54, ‘La marea’ (2007; by J.P. Martin, J.M. Latorre, A. Benito, D. García, J. González, and G. Galcan and interpreted by ‘Vetusta Morla’)—intones the lyrics ‘la marea me dejó arenas de plata que pone en el reloj el tiempo que no pasa...’ [the tide left me silver grains of sand that time, standing still, deposits in the clock...]. There is a clear connection made here with the earlier animated sequence that portrays María left by the tide on an isolated beach, distanced from her parents—and in both, it is the parent’s feeling of distance that is enunciated. The sequence ends as María and Miguel walk away hand in hand, but with the red bucket alone on the beach, a clear cinematic symbol for notions of loneliness, loss, and even the more metaphysical treatment of death toward which the director moves in the final stretch of the film.

Despite these subtle shifts from the comic book’s more autobiographical format—and disability-specific theme—to a film that is more concerned with human universals, Fernández de Castro does also elaborate on the original’s somewhat pedagogical treatment of autism. The fact that in an interview included with the DVD he categorically denies that the film is about autism should not be taken seriously:

Yo he dicho muchas veces que María y yo no es una película sobre autismo, no creo que el cómic lo sea tampoco. Para mi el autismo es como una circunstancia, es como el telón de fondo en el que se desarrolla la historia de los dos personajes. El autismo es una enfermedad o una condición de la que incluso la gente que sabe mucho, sabe relativamente poco, los estudios son relativamente recientes y la verdad es que todavía hay grandes incógnitas sobre el autismo y para mí hubiese sido una presunción pretender que ello podía aportar algo al tema del autismo en sí desde una perspectiva científica o médica o lo que fuera.
A mí me interesó más la historia sujeto de estos dos personajes lidiando con la discapacidad...

[I have said many times that the film María y yo is not about autism, and I don’t think the comic was either. For me autism is like a circumstance, like the backdrop against which the story of the two characters develops. Autism is an illness or a condition about which even the people who know a lot know relatively little, the studies are relatively recent and the truth is that there are many things we still don’t know about autism and for me it would have been presumptuous to think that it [the film] would be able to contribute something to the topic of autism itself from a scientific or medical perspective or anything like that. What interested me more was the subjective story of these two characters struggling with the disability...]

Having downplayed the ‘contribution of the film to autism itself,’ the director goes on in his interview to explain that his preference was to depict a love story (see also Pons; cf. Yo, también in chapter 1), the story of two characters overcoming obstacles, and even to deliver a film touching on the nature of communication in general. Even a cursory look at the documentary María y yo, however, reveals that this is, in essence, a distracting commentary (perhaps conscious on the director’s part), as the film also greatly expands on the comic’s treatment of autism in several respects: through substantial presentation of the parents’ progressive realization that their daughter is autistic, through explicit (animated) instruction outlining the traits associated with autism, through sequences focusing on María’s psycho-physical therapy sessions, and through the presentation of the use of pictograms in María’s residence (with her mother and grandfather) in Canarias.

The indication that this is a film about parents dealing with autism and not merely a film about María and the world she shares with her father—breaking with the shared autobiographical day-to-day perspective that dominates the comic book—comes early on when Miguel reflects on the day of her birth in a voice-over while on the airplane (8:30). While the comic book mentions autism on page 3 in its introductory text, with the development of María’s autism taking place largely simultaneously along with the development of its autobiographical narrative, the film very quickly takes time out from the adaptation of the ‘De Barcelona a Canarias’ travel segment to discuss María’s birth, to present shots of Gallardo’s notebook drawings of the newborn with her parents, and to show the artist-father’s...
characteristically upper-case journal text in close-up. An accompanying voice-over by Gallardo notes that ‘May fue la primera que se dio cuenta de que algo no andaba bien’ [May was the first to realize that something was wrong]. No such statement as this appears in the comic book, which avoids the tragic tone (one would presume deliberately), opting for a more matter-of-fact presentation that is—unlike the film—neither tragic nor ‘optimistic’ (see the press reviews by Bonet Mojica, Boyero, above; also the interview by Fernández de Castro himself). Subsequent interview segments of the film continue to hammer home the narrative of ‘coping with tragedy’ begun here: May discusses how she told Miguel that ‘María no me quería’ [María didn’t love me] in the same way as other children she had cared for (9:00–9:30), Miguel discusses his own later realization that something was wrong after talking with doctors (9:30–10:12), and May states that she had a feeling of being to blame (10:12–10:19). Much later, the film captures Miguel’s candid description of how he realized that María was going to need to attend an alternative school (50:25), noting that this realization brought a knot to his throat (‘nudo en la garganta’).

Although it does so through a wonderfully playful animated style—and perhaps necessarily given the film’s ambition of reaching a wider audience than the comic book—the film is more focused on providing viewers with a general(ized) introduction to autism than immersing them in María’s world. In one instance, resorting to a narratologically ‘objective’ frame, a ‘yes’/‘no’ checkbox list appears on the screen. The ‘no’ options toward the right margin of what looks like an animated piece of notebook paper are soon successively checked in red ink, drawing attention to those characteristic traits not typically displayed by children with autism: María showed a lack of ‘abrazar [hugging], afectiva [affectionate (demonstrations)], jugar [playing], sonreír [smiling], utilizar brazos [using (one’s) arms], cantar [voicing], (no responder al) cariciar [(being unresponsive to) caressing],’ and Gallardo’s voice-over punctuates this list with a seemingly definitive statement that María ‘se quedaba como ausente’ [seemed to be very distant] (10:20–10:30). Both Miguel and May here make reference to medical tests that were performed on María during childhood (10:30–11:31), thus imbuing the film with a medicalizing perspective on disability that is completely absent from the much more careful presentation of autism preferred throughout Gallardo’s comic book. Similarly, in the film we learn of the moment when María was officially diagnosed (when she was eight years old, 13:30), a detail not appearing in the comic book and, I would argue, unnecessary for its full appreciation.
It must be said that, at times, the extra effort associated with the film's direct (if denied) attempt to portray the realities of living with autism can yield results that are quite cinematically engaging and educational for viewers unfamiliar with autism. From 52:15 to 53:54, for example, we witness María's work with a behavioral-physical therapist, as she is coached to balance herself on a tottering top-like platform for a count of ten—helping her with her balance and perhaps also with her upper limit of patience for activities for which she finds no immediate use. This and other instances of the direct presentation of disability are quite distanced from the paradigm of the medical model, having more to do with practical issues of developing physical and social autonomy just as communication. A sequence lasting more than a full minute (from 42:06 to 43:08, prompted by her mother's contextualization in an interview) documents how far María has come in terms of getting dressed by herself. She puts on her own pants and socks while helped and encouraged only minimally by a non-parent caretaker. Likewise a series of shots (beginning at 31:20) show her being coached to shave her own legs, and although the images shift after no less than a full minute, the sounds of both the shaver and María's conversation with her caretaker are gradually faded out over a period from 32:26 to 32:39. From 32:40 to 35:28 we watch as María is coached through setting the table (putting down her own placemat, getting her own napkin and silverware in preparation for a two-course dinner consisting of soup and meat); she later puts her dirty glass in the sink and her leftover bread in the bread box, demonstrating what, in light of her mother's previous remarks, is a remarkable degree of self-sufficiency that is directly attributable to María's concerted efforts to improve.

Importantly, these tasks occur immediately after a longer sequence (29:38–32:40) foregrounding the use of visual cues and pictograms that had been referenced in the appendix of the original comic (49–51). The first image that we see of a pictogram is on a bookshelf (29:38) in María's room during a sequence in which a caretaker uses a visual schedule (see Bondy and Frost) to walk María through the events of the day. Interestingly enough, that day is Wednesday, the same day of the week to which the original visual schedule in the comic was devoted (51), although the tasks here are different: ‘depilar las piernas’ [shave your legs], ‘lavar las manos’ [wash your hands], ‘poner la mesa’ [set the table], ‘cenar’ [eat dinner], ‘la despedida’ [goodnight-time], and so on. But from 32:26 to 32:39 (underneath the sound of the electric shaver) we see a series of pictograms as posted in various locations throughout the house (see the comic book text, p. 49). The
rhythmic relations of montage here are of a pointedly regular duration (approximately 2.5 seconds each), which is perhaps best understood as a semi-subjective cinematic technique wonderfully if indirectly referencing María’s characteristically routine and well-ordered world.

Perhaps the most cinematically successful sequence of the film is also focused on a sort of general(ized) introduction to the topic of autism. This sequence seeks to render the characteristic overstimulation experienced by people with autism in visual terms accessible to a non-autistic audience. Gallardo’s voice-over provides a context for the viewer: ‘Muchas veces las personas que sufren del autismo reciben la información del exterior a través de canales no convencionales’ [Frequently sufferers from autism receive information from outside through unconventional channels] (14:44–14:49):

Algunas teorías, por ejemplo, sostienen que las personas con T.E.A. [Trastornos del Espectro Autista] no son capaces de discriminar entre los distintos estímulos que reciben, o de ordenarlos en su cabeza en función de su importancia. Todos estos estímulos les llegan mezclados entre sí, creando una sensación de ruido, de confusión, como si estuviesen permanentemente delante de 20 televisores emitiendo a la vez 20 canales distintos. (14:49–15:06)

Some theories, for example, maintain that people with T.E.A. (Autism Spectrum Disorders) are not capable of differentiating between the distinct stimuli they receive, or of organizing them in their head according to their importance. All of these stimuli reach them all mixed together, creating a sensation of noise, of confusion, as if they were permanently seated before 20 televisions each tuned into a different channel.

This sequence (which is also noted by Carlos Boyero’s review as being particularly effective) incorporates a number of visual images that connote some sort of visual or sonic disturbance: Miguel yelling out a nickname (‘Mariota’) from another room, an open window allowing sounds from children playing in the street below to enter the apartment, a teapot on the stove (in anticipation of its eventually whistling), an animated bull on a television seemingly charging directly at the viewer, and so on. As the sequence evolves, these images are put into alternation with each other through increasingly shorter takes and ever-faster rotation among the fixed set of images. The shots also evolve from being largely static at the beginning to becoming traveling shots and even zooms—forcing the visual images of the objects
represented to take up more and more of the screen. The bull snorts, the coffeepot whistles louder and louder, sirens begin to wail outside on the streets, Miguel repeatedly calls out to María from the other room... After a culminating point at which visual representations of animated explosions (notably without accompanying sound) yield to a return to the familiar image of María sifting bits of paper through her fingers, Gallardo’s voice-over then explains for the viewer: ‘Como resultado, muchos se vuelven hacia su interior, evitando el contacto con la gente’ [As a result, many turn inward, avoiding contact with people].

The fact that the latter sequence is so effective and captivating, however, perhaps ultimately says something about what Fernández de Castro might have wanted to say with this film. That is, he would rather foreground this issue of communication between director and audience than, as is the case in the comic, plunge the reader into the world María shares with her father. Whereas the comic book does well in leaving many clinical and contextualizing explanations of autism to be deduced logically by the reader, if not ignored by him or her altogether, the film eschews the autobiographical nature of the original comic in favor of an overt tendency to ‘teach’ rather than represent disability on its own terms. In the end, while there is reason to see Fernández de Castro’s unique product as a successful film in its own way—and certainly as a worthy tribute to Gallardo’s original comic, if not also a faithful adaptation of it—its treatment of disability is not nearly as nuanced.

Notes

1 I write that this work on the theme of autism has ‘appropriately’ been produced by a graphic artist—this is because, as will be discussed shortly, the notion of visuality is particularly important for some people with autism.

2 See the *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, 14 (2009) for a special section of articles reflecting on the legacy of the Movida, edited by William Nichols and H. Rosi Song.

3 For a contextualization of the latter, see my recent review of *Carnal Inscriptions* (2009) by Susan Antebi in *Hispania*—a pathbreaking work focusing on disability and the body in canonical and less traditional Latin American cultural products.

4 The use of the term ‘recovered’ and ‘recovering autistic’ (5–6, foreword by Bernard Rimland) is a bit strange, but then, as Grandin herself writes in her own introduction, she is ‘living proof’ that ‘the characteristics of autism can be modified and controlled’ (13). I would rather not engage the theme of ‘curing’ autism—one that has been so pervasive in the American media
in recent years—but it is certainly unquestionable that early intervention can lead to much better socialization, behavior modification, and ultimately successful lives for people with autism. I believe that this is what Grandin has in mind.

5 ‘However, not all people with autism are highly visual thinkers, nor do they all process information this way. People throughout the world are on a continuum of visualization skills ranging from next to none, to seeing vague generalized pictures, to seeing semi-specific pictures, to seeing, as in my case, in very specific pictures’ (28).

6 ‘An image finally presented itself to me while I was washing the bay window in the cafeteria (students were required to do jobs in the dining room). I had no idea my job would take on symbolic significance when I started. The bay window consisted of three glass sliding doors enclosed by storm windows. To wash the inside of the bay window, I had to crawl through the sliding door. The door jammed while I was washing the inside panes, and I was imprisoned between the two windows. In order to get out without shattering the door, I had to ease it back very carefully. It struck me that relationships operate the same way. They also shatter easily and have to be approached carefully. I then made a further association about how the careful opening of doors was related to establishing relationships in the first place. While I was trapped between the windows, it was almost impossible to communicate through the glass. Being autistic is like being trapped like this. The windows symbolized my feelings of disconnection from other people and helped me cope with the isolation. Throughout my life, door and window symbols have enabled me to make progress and connections that are unheard of for some people with autism’ (36–37).

7 Although the artist’s textual comic style consists purely of upper-case letters, I have adapted it here and throughout in both upper- and lower-case. I should also point out that I use the name Gallardo when referring to the comics text as a cultural product and Miguel when referring to his autobiographical rendering of himself as a character within the sequential art of María y yo.

8 The pages throughout María y yo are unnumbered. In this chapter, I refer to my own numbering system, which starts with page 1 immediately after the book’s publication information. Thus page 1 has a picture that matches the cover, in which we see the backs of both Miguel and María, the latter wearing her red shirt bearing the English words ‘I’m unique just like everyone else.’ Page 2 boasts only a centered picture of María, drawn in red and contained within a black-penned outline of a Polaroid picture. Page 3 begins with a small picture of an airplane and features the aforementioned text, which begins ‘María vive con su madre.’ All other pages follow from here.

9 Gallardo’s previous publication of an illustrated guide introducing younger children to the topic of disability indicates that this motivation is not alien to his work.

10 On the origin of the drawings as a medium of a shared communication between father and daughter, Gallardo notes that ‘Durante años he estado dibujando para María en libretas, papeles sueltos y papeles de envolver a todos los grupos de gente que le importan y le gustan: Familiares, niños del cole, amigos...’ [For years I have been drawing for María all the groups of people that matter to her and that make her happy on notepads, loose-leaf
and scrap paper: Family members, children from school, friends…] (42, full page panel), and also, ‘Me gusta dibujar para ella y de que sea una forma de comunicarnos entre los dos’ [I like drawing for her and that we have this form of communicating just between the two of us] (52).

11 The red ink works most frequently as a strategy of inflecting the necessarily two-dimensional form of comics with a dynamic/temporal quality. Sound and movement, of course, are necessarily temporal aspects of experience. But Gallardo also uses the color to add a further descriptive dimension to the static pictures—of the swimsuits worn by German tourists at the pool (11), for example, or as with the resort bracelet (10) that allows him to drink daiquiris by the pool in the afternoons. For an in-depth and illustrated discussion of how motion is represented in comics, see Gasca and Gubern (194–273). On the representation of temporality in general, see McCloud (Understanding 95–103). Douglas Wolk notes perspicaciously that, ‘Comics suggest motion, but they’re incapable of actually showing motion. They indicate sound, and even spell it out, but they’re silent. They imply the passage of time, but their temporal experience is controlled by the reader more than by the artist. They convey continuous stories, but they’re made up of a series of discrete moments. They’re concerned with conveying an artist’s perceptions, but one of their most crucial components is blank space’ (125).

12 Selected pages of the comic as published by Astiberri appear in the extras section of the DVD menu, including some of those discussed above—particularly in the ‘De Barcelona a Canarias’ sequence (pp. 4–5).

13 Interestingly, of course, such critics do little more than follow the director’s own lead. In an interview included as a component of the DVD’s ‘extras’ submenu, he remarked the following: ‘el tono en el que estaba contada la historia: que podría ser dramática con descendiente triste, pesada, en cambio estaba tratada de una forma muy vital, muy positiva, muy optimista’ [the tone in which the story is told: it might have been dramatic with a sad or heavy downward turn, instead it’s been treated in a much more vital, more positive, more optimistic way].

14 Various influences on Gallardo’s eclectic style are mentioned, including ‘Segar, Wilson McCoy, Jack Kirby, Sempé, Robert Crumb, Quino, Peter Arno […] U.P.A. […] [the authors of] Tío Vivo y Pulgarcito […] [illustrators like] Jim Flora, Miroslav Sasek […] [and the elegant school of] The New Yorker’ (Pons). Boyero does well in noting the drastic stylistic difference between María y yo and Gallardo’s other work given that Gallardo himself voices this very distinction in the film of María y yo: ‘Yo siempre he sido un dibujante muy meticuloso, muy… soy muy amante de las referencias de, de hacer pastiches de estilo, de trabajar mucho la técnica, ¿no? Y pronto, al empezar a dibujar con María, empecé a dibujar del natural o de la imaginación […] y entonces me acostumbré a hacer un tipo de dibujo rápido […] mis dibujos se fueron convirtiendo en algo muy icónico, muy simbolista’ [I have always been a very meticulous graphic artist, very… I love making references (to other artists’ work), making pastiches of style, focusing on technique, you see? And suddenly, when I began to draw with María, I started to draw more naturally or off the top of my head (…) and so I became accustomed to creating a type of rapid sketch (…) my drawing became something very iconic, very symbolist] (24:26–25:12).
There is a particularly interesting resonance between Nichols’ earlier discussion of ethics in his book *Representing Reality* where he writes on the ethics of representation and the notion of proximity to documentary subjects (esp. pp. 91–92) and the comments reportedly made by the film crew for *María y yo* who cautioned first-time filmmaker Fernández de Castro that it was easier to approach and film María than it would be other protagonists—seemingly because her autism prevented her from changing her behaviors in response to being filmed or feeling like the crew was intruding (from speech reported by the director in the interview included as an extra on the DVD release).

The viewer will instantly notice a correlation between the style of the animated sequences and that employed by Gallardo in the comic book. Nonetheless, whereas Gallardo is explicitly mentioned as the inspiration for the film and credited as the sole entry under ‘Creación personajes y story’ [Creation of characters and story], he is, in fact, one of five names listed under the heading of ‘Diseño producción grafismo’ [Graphic Production Design]—indicating that the work of animating these sequences has not been his alone. The other credited names in this category are Karin du Croo, Mariona Omedes, Félix Fernández de Castro, and Carles Mora.

The text from that page detailing the physical comparisons has, here, been expanded to include also the mention of a ‘coscola lisa,’ which has been similarly bolstered by animation.

Boyero poignantly notes in his review that ‘Es inquietante y lírica la comparación que hace de su hija con una isla a la que solo puedes acercarte unos instantes cuando baja a marea’ [The comparison made—of his daughter with an island that you can only reach for a moment at a time during low tide—is disquieting and lyrical].

In fact, another interesting sequence of the film stunningly illustrates what comic theorist McCloud calls the ‘montage’ combination of words-and-images (*Understanding* 154), as various animated terms associated with autism rain down on the screen, pushing the image of both Miguel and May downward and ending with the word ‘discapacidad’ (13:05–13:12).