

WHEN SILENCE SPEAKS: VISUAL RHETORIC IN ZECA AFONSO – BALADA DO DESTERRO

CUANDO EL SILENCIO HABLA: RETÓRICA VISUAL EN ZECA AFONSO – BALADA DEL DESTIERRO

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the rhetoric of silence in comics as both a discursive strategy and a mode of visual writing, focusing on the graphic novel Zeca Afonso – Balada do Desterro (2023), by Teresa Moure and Maria João Worm. Drawing on theoretical approaches to silence (Block de Behar, Glenn, Picard, among others) and on the framework of visual rhetoric developed by Groupe μ , the study proposes the concept of silenciography as a set of semiotic-rhetorical strategies that inscribe silence into graphic narrative, moving beyond its reduction to the mere absence of words or sound. The article distinguishes between graphic silence and silenciography, and further between isotopic and structural silenciography, in order to account for the multiple ways in which silence organises both page layout and narrative rhythm.

Keywords: Silence, Silenciography, Visual Rhetoric, Graphic Narrative, Semiotics.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la retórica del silencio en el cómic como estrategia discursiva y como forma de escritura visual, a partir de la novela gráfica Zeca Afonso – Balada do Desterro (2023), de Teresa Moure y Maria João Worm. Apoyándose en los estudios sobre el silencio (Block de Behar, Glenn, Picard, entre otros) y en el marco de la retórica visual desarrollado por el Groupe μ , el trabajo propone el concepto de silenciografía como un conjunto de estrategias semiótico-retóricas que inscriben el silencio en la narración gráfica, más allá de su reducción a una simple ausencia de palabras o de sonido. Se establece una distinción entre silencio gráfico y silenciografía, así como entre silenciografía isotópica y estructural, con el fin de dar cuenta de los diversos modos en que el silencio organiza tanto la disposición de la página como el ritmo narrativo.

Palabras clave: Silencio, Silenciografía, Retórica Visual, Narración Gráfica, Semiótica.

O som envolve-me na cena, mas em silêncio também
consigo expressar-me.

Zeca Afonso – Balada do Desterro (2023)

In this essay, we propose to study the rhetoric of silence in comics as both a discursive strategy and a mode of visual writing. Our aim is to understand how page composition, the use of space, rhythm, and other visual and textual elements contribute to transforming silence into a vehicle of meaning. To this end, we focus on the analysis of *Zeca Afonso – Balada do Desterro*, authored by Teresa Moure (text) and Maria João Worm (illustration), seeking to examine how silence is inscribed in the visual discourse as a narrative operator. This graphic novel was selected for its distinctive contribution to the Portuguese-language comics landscape: not only does it emerge from the still-limited body of work created by women in this field,¹ but it proves particularly relevant for a critical engagement with silence as a rhetorical and aesthetic device.

Zeca Afonso – Balada do Desterro is a biographical account of the singer and poet José Afonso, a central figure in the anti-fascist resistance in Portugal. The work recounts lesser-known episodes of his life, including his childhood in Africa, the women who shaped his personal journey, his bond with music, and the illness he faced. Combining a lyrical-narrative tone with expressionist illustration, Teresa Moure and Maria João Worm construct an intimate portrait that evokes a Zeca haunted by echoes of abandonment, defiance, and colonial memory. Despite the narrative density it conveys, the work is visually anchored in silence: the story unfolds as much through graphic voids as through the subtle textures of line and shading; characters often appear faded or merely sketched, with absent or distorted faces; the settings are sparse, frequently repeated with slight variations, and there is a marked presence of white spaces and areas of non-image. This visual economy creates an atmosphere of suspension and hesitation, where what is not shown or not said acquires a distinct expressive power. The absence of speech balloons, the rhythmic fragmentation of pages, fixed framing, and suspended gestures all point toward a deliberately slow reading experience, where time is allowed to stretch and deepen.

Our analysis will be guided by the conception of silence as a creative matrix from which all forms of expression emerge — a notion that runs through multiple philosophical, aesthetic and literary traditions, as we shall see, and which, in the Portuguese context, was formulated by Eduardo Lourenço, who understands silence as “the nucleus [...] from which all forms emerge”² — an originating force that structures and makes creation itself possible.

1 Comics in Portugal have increasingly become a more diverse and dynamic field, marked by the emergence of powerful female voices that enrich the creative landscape and expand modes of representation. Artists such as Daniela Viçoso, Susa Monteiro, Joana Estrela and Ana Pessoa have made significant contributions to this renewal, offering innovative visual languages and narrative approaches. While there is still room to strengthen the presence of works entirely conceived by women, there is a promising trend towards greater recognition, visibility and participation—reflected in the growing representation of women in Amadora BD awards and exhibitions, as well as in the catalogues of specialised publishers, which are beginning to embrace a broader range of voices.

2 Lourenço, E. “*Esfinge ou a poesia*” in *Árvore, Folhas de Poesia*, nº 1, Lisboa, 1951, p. 6.

1. PERSPECTIVES ON SILENCE

Reflecting on the rhetoric of silence inevitably requires us to confront an apparent paradox, widely acknowledged by those who engage with this theme: rhetoric, as the art of eloquence and effective speech, seems inherently opposed to silence, which is often understood as the absence of words or enunciation. However, this apparent contradiction becomes especially productive when silence is understood as a structuring element of communication—endowed with illocutionary force and capable of producing perlocutionary effects.³

Following the pioneering contributions of Max Picard (1948), who highlighted silence as a structuring force of human experience in contrast to the noise of modernity, various authors have explored the theme of silence across multiple disciplines. In philosophy and communication, Susan Sontag (1969) interpreted silence as an aesthetic strategy and form of artistic resistance; in literary studies, George Steiner (2014) reflected on silence as a consequence of historical trauma. Semiotics and communication theory have also addressed the subject, with Roland Barthes (1977) treating silence as a sign, and Umberto Eco (1979) examining the unspoken as a communicative act.

Lisa Block de Behar, a Uruguayan scholar, is a prominent figure in the study of the rhetoric of silence in literature. In her seminal work, translated into English as *A Rhetoric of Silence and Other Selected Writings* (1995), she analyses the tension between discourse and absence, arguing that silence does not constitute an absolute void, but rather an implicit presence that communicates precisely through its apparent lack of enunciation, thereby reshaping communicative dynamics. In the introduction to this work, Block de Behar explores the antithetical nature of rhetorical expressions of silence, emphasising that it must be understood and examined in its intrinsic complexity, shaped by the tension between two seemingly opposing concepts.⁴ Its structure rests on a fundamental contradiction: on the one hand, it belongs to the realm of dialectical speculation and thought; on the other, it pertains to the sphere of eloquence and verbal expression. This tension is not merely theoretical, but constitutive of the very notion of silence as a discursive operator, demonstrating its paradoxical role in communication and meaning-making. This tension proves essential for understanding silence as a discursive and aesthetic strategy, allowing it to transcend mere absence of sound and assert itself as an active semantic force. For Block de Behar, silence cannot be analysed in isolation, as it is always defined in relation to discourse, in a continuous interplay of presence and absence. The author also underscores the persuasive power of silence, revealing its effectiveness as a tool of literary communication. For her, silence in literature is not limited to the omission of words, but represents a significant element that can deeply shape the reader's interpretation. This concept approaches the idea of the "efficient persuasion of silence," whose impact, according to Block de Behar, can be compared to Ernest Hemingway's principle of omission (known as the "iceberg theory"), whereby what is not said may carry as much weight as what is explicitly stated.⁵

3 Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4 CF. Block de Behar, L. (1995). *A rhetoric of silence and other selected writings*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter. pp. 1-2.

5 CF. *Ibidem*, pp. 62-63.

Another significant contribution is *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* by Cheryl Glenn, published in 2004. In the preface to this work, Glenn proposes an innovative framework for understanding the role of silence within rhetorical studies, arguing that silence should be recognised not merely as the absence of sound or communication, but as an active rhetorical device endowed with meaning and intentionality. Glenn breaks away from the classical rhetorical tradition, which has long privileged speech and explicit discourse as the only legitimate forms of persuasion, in order to highlight the communicative efficacy of silence in strategic, social, and cultural contexts.⁶ Glenn argues that silence should be understood as a specific rhetorical art, challenging its historical marginalisation within rhetorical and composition studies. While classical rhetoric manuals refer to figures associated with silence — such as *aposiopesis*, *reticence*, and *praecisio* — contemporary scholarship still tends to interpret silence merely as the absence of voice or text. Glenn contends that such a reading diminishes the communicative potential of silence and obscures its role as a tool of power, resistance, or domination. In treating silence as a discursive phenomenon, Glenn draws on earlier philosophical and sociological investigations, such as *World of Silence* by the Swiss philosopher Max Picard and *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance* by Bernard Dauenhauer, expanding the discussion beyond existential perspectives to include sociopolitical, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions. A central concern of Glenn's work is the relationship between silence and structures of power and gender; she proposes that silence operates as a multifunctional tool in human communication. Glenn explores the semantic complexity of silence, emphasising its significant presence even in contexts of apparent absence, and revisits Picard's reflections to stress that silence should not be understood merely as a void or an interruption of verbal discourse, but rather as a structuring element of human communication. Picard asserts that "silence contains everything in itself"⁷ — an idea that challenges the traditional view of silence as absence. Instead, silence is presented as a space rich in communicative potential, existing independently of spoken language. This conception finds resonance in Eduardo Lourenço's reflections, with both thinkers recognising silence as an originating force that underpins and structures communication, revealing that apparent absence may be the essential condition for the emergence of meaning. Glenn extends this notion by arguing that silence, like zero in mathematics, is a functional absence — a void that, paradoxically, performs a rhetorical and structural function within discourse.⁸

Christian Mair explores this complexity in his article *The Semantics of Silence* (1995), in which he examines the multifaceted role of silence as a linguistic, social, and cultural element, as well as a social, emotional, and ideological marker that significantly influences the interpretation and dynamics of communicative interaction. In his study, Mair identifies four fundamental meanings associated with the concept of silence: the absence of noise as a basic acoustic condition; the absence of speech, which may result from a conscious choice or a communicative failure; ceremonial pauses, such as moments of silence observed in memorials or collective mourning; and the

6 Glenn, C. (2004). *Unspoken: A rhetoric of silence*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press. pp. xi-xiii.

7 Picard, M. (1948). *World of Silence*. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing. P. 17.

8 Glenn, C. (2004). *Idem*, 150-152.

deliberate omission of information, a practice often found in strategic contexts such as political discourse or situations involving discursive manipulation.⁹

Over time, research on silence has expanded, keeping pace with transformations in communication and semiotic studies, leading to new approaches that reassess its role in contemporary contexts. Once primarily understood as a semantic and pragmatic phenomenon, silence acquires a new dimension in the perspective of Adler and Kohn (2021), who propose its reconfiguration within multimodal studies, claiming it as an autonomous mode with its own communicative value. This approach radicalises the understanding of silence as a fully semiotic entity, broadening its interpretative scope in multimodal products and revealing its potential as an autonomous narrative force and generator of meaning.¹⁰ This proposal is particularly relevant when applied to the visual language of comics, a medium in which silence manifests itself in tangible and structurally significant ways.

The tension between absence and presence, central to the reflections outlined above, is particularly productively explored in the medium of comics, where the unsaid and the unseen function as integral elements of narrative construction. This is particularly evident through the use of ellipsis, a narrative device that not only condenses time and space between panels but also amplifies the expressivity of what is left unsaid, inviting the reader into an active interpretative role. The study of ellipsis in comics has been widely addressed by theorists who recognise its central role in the interaction between author and reader.¹¹ However, silence in comics extends beyond this mechanism, manifesting in various ways and acquiring an iconic density that transforms it into a visually codified presence. Elements such as the expressive use of onomatopoeia, the gradual fading of letters or images, the insertion of blacked-out spaces, the variation in character scale within panels, as well as the manipulation of panel layout and narrative rhythm, all contribute to a visual-verbal transformation of absence into presence, allowing silence to become paradoxically “noisy” — challenging the tautological idea that “nada é mais silencioso do que o silêncio”.¹²

In this way, silence acquires an autonomous semiotic value, granting it a distinct status as a singular form of writing — a modality we propose to term *silenciography*. This term was used in

9 Christian Mair, “The semantics of silence”, in Gudrun M. Grabher & Ulrike Jessner (Eds.), *Semantics of silences in linguistics and literature* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1995), pp. 1-10.

10 Adler, S., & Kohn, A. (2021). *Silence: a modality of its own*. *Social Semiotics*, 33(5), 946–970. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2021.1971492>.

11 See: Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics* (1993), introduces the concept of *closure*, explaining how readers mentally reconstruct events not depicted between panels. Thierry Groensteen, in *The System of Comics* (1999), expands this analysis by exploring *arthrology*, a concept that highlights the relationships between graphic elements and how meaning emerges from both the visible and the absent. Will Eisner, in *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), examines the role of time and space in comics, showing how ellipsis defines rhythm and narrative tension. Benoît Peeters, in *Lire la bande dessinée* (1991), reinforces the idea of the reader as co-author of the narrative, as they must activate interpretive processes to fill the gaps left by ellipsis. Neil Cohn, in *The Visual Language of Comics* (2013), adopts a cognitive perspective, analysing how the brain processes transitions between panels and reconstructs unshown events. Finally, Jan Baetens, in *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* (2014), emphasises ellipsis as a mechanism of omission that generates ambiguity, encouraging the reader’s active participation in meaning-making. These contributions demonstrate that ellipsis is not merely an empty space, but a dynamic narrative device that expands the expressive potential of comics.

12 Cf. Luísa Malato, *A retórica do silêncio na literatura setecentista*, Porto: Revista da Faculdade de Letras: Línguas e Literaturas, vol. 20, n.º 1, 2003, p. 146, “Nothing is more silent than silence” (author’s translation from the original Portuguese).

the article “Silenciografias: Cecilia Bajour e as histórias que o silêncio conta”¹³ by Renata Penzani, published on the blog of the Brazilian publishing house Companhia das Letras, where the author explores silence as a narrative device. Building on this use, we propose an expanded definition of the concept, conceiving it as a set of semiotic-rhetorical strategies used to suggest and represent silence in graphic media, from comics to other forms of sequential narrative.

2. SILENCE AS A RHETORICAL STRATEGY

To understand the role of silence as a visual element in comics and to deepen the notion of *silenciografia*, it is essential to situate this analysis within the broader context of rhetoric and its multiple applications. Historically conceived as the art of verbal persuasion, rhetoric has gradually expanded into a broader field of study, encompassing diverse forms of expression, including visual languages. This evolution reflects a widening of the concept of discourse, recognising that the construction of meaning does not rely exclusively on words, but also on non-verbal elements that shape and mediate communication.

The rhetorical framework developed by Groupe μ marked a pivotal shift by acknowledging the specificity of visual communication beyond traditional linguistic models. This trajectory began in 1976, when the group applied the principles of general rhetoric to visual signification systems, exploring symbolic complexity through the analysis of Julien Key’s *Chafetière* — a hybrid image combining the features of a cat and a coffee pot — which raised the question of whether such compositions could be interpreted as visual metaphors equivalent to verbal ones.¹⁴ Groupe μ concluded that simply transposing verbal rhetorical categories into the visual realm was insufficient, necessitating a reformulation of the rhetorical system to account for the specificities of visuality. The collective therefore developed a methodology based on the cross-classification of visual properties — considering elements that are present or absent, joint or disjoint, as well as the plastic and iconic layers and their possible combinations — creating an analytical framework capable of revealing the underlying rules governing the internal organisation of images. This proposal contrasted with earlier perspectives, such as that of Roland Barthes, who viewed the image as subordinate to text, and it stood out for asserting the semiotic autonomy of visual discourse.¹⁵

13 Penzani, R. (n.d.). *Silenciografias: Cecilia Bajour e as histórias que o silêncio conta*. Companhia das Letras. Em: <https://www.companhiadasletras.com.br/BlogPost/6529/silenciografias-cecilia-bajour-e-as-historias-que-o-silencio-conta>

14 Cf. Dondero, M. G., & Sonesson, G. (2010). *Le Groupe μ . Quarante ans de rhétorique – Trente-trois ans de sémiotique visuelle*. *Actes Sémiotiques*. Retrieved from <https://www.unilim.fr/actes-semiotiques/3106>

15 Cf. Barthes, R. (1964). *Rhétorique de l’image*. *Communications*, 4, 40–51 - In this seminal essay, Roland Barthes explores the image’s capacity to generate multiple meanings through systems of signs that operate on both denotative and connotative levels. He argues that the image is not a passive reflection of reality but rather an active system of communication, endowed with rhetorical intentionality and capable of producing an effect on the viewer. Barthes presents the visual image as a signifying system structured by rhetorical mechanisms analogous to those of verbal language. Just as oral or written discourse draws on rhetorical figures—such as metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, or ellipsis—the image also employs complex visual strategies to communicate, persuade, and structure multiple layers of meaning. For Barthes, the image does not merely reflect reality but operates as a culturally encoded construction, readable and interpretable through specific conventions and symbolic systems. His analysis highlights how images communicate not only through direct denotation but, more significantly, through subtle connotations that guide viewer interpretation. Rhetorical strategies such as visual metaphor (establishing symbolic analogies), metonymy (suggesting contiguity), ellipsis (implying meaningful omission), and hyperbole (intensifying visual elements)

At the core of the rhetoric of the image lies the concept of rhetorical deviation, understood as a rupture from pre-established norms that generates expressive effects. This notion draws from classical rhetorical tradition, where figuration is valued as a break from expected linearity. One of the central ideas is the concept of *degree zero*, which represents the neutral point of departure in a discourse — a symbolic “pure” form of enunciation, stripped of overt rhetorical devices. However, this *degree zero* is a theoretical construct rather than an objective reality; it functions as a benchmark against which subsequent rhetorical deviations in the discourse can be measured. Any stylistic intervention — such as the use of metaphors or hyperboles — marks a departure from this neutral baseline.¹⁶ *Redundancy* is also a key concept, conceived here not as an unnecessary excess, but as a strategy for reinforcing and amplifying meaning. It emerges when discourse layers multiple levels of information onto a single textual or visual unit, ensuring that the intended message is conveyed even in contexts of noise or interpretive complexity. In visual language, redundancy operates through the repetition of forms, colours, or patterns that create visual cohesion and facilitate readability, within which autocorrection functions as an auxiliary interpretative mechanism by which the viewer seeks to realign the enunciation with its perceived *zero degree*.¹⁷ This process is especially evident in complex rhetorical figures such as metaphors or analogies, where the reader interprets deviations by identifying the underlying meaning that allows them to navigate between literal and figurative sense. Another key concept is *isotopy*, or *invariant*, which refers to the constant element that persists even after rhetorical operations have been applied. Isotopy functions as a semantic anchor, enabling the reader to recognise the transformation enacted upon the discourse.

Groupe μ classifies rhetorical operations into two major groups: substantial and relational. Substantial operations act directly on the content of discourse and include suppression, which eliminates elements from the utterance (as in ellipses), and addition, which introduces new elements to amplify or enrich the meaning (as in hyperbole). On the other hand, relational operations intervene in the structure of discourse, altering the relationships between elements without modifying their essential content. Among these are permutation, which changes the order of elements (as in chiasmus), and substitution, which replaces one element with another, as occurs in metaphors. In addition to these fundamental operations, Groupe μ proposes a system for classifying rhetorical figures based on two axes: the signifier/signified axis and the word/sentence level axis. The intersection of these axes generates four main categories of rhetorical figures: metaplasms, which act on the signifier at the word level (phonetic or morphological alterations); metataxes, which intervene on the signifier at the sentence level (such as syntactic inversions); metasememes, which operate on the signified at the word level (such as metaphors and metonymies); and metalogisms,

function at the connotative level of the image, activating indirect and often unconscious readings. Barthes further emphasises the naturalising effect of visual rhetoric: although connotative meanings are culturally constructed, they appear as natural and objective, concealing their underlying ideological processes. This mechanism lends the image an appearance of transparency and neutrality while conveying complex messages deeply rooted in social and cultural codes. In this way, Barthes’s reflection on the rhetoric of the image reveals not only its communicative dimension but also its structuring power in the production of meaning, challenging the viewer to go beyond immediate interpretation and to decode the symbolic layers embedded in every visual construction.

16 Cf. Groupe μ , *Rhétorique générale*, Paris, Seuil, 1982, pp. 32-41.

17 Cf. *Idem*, p. 41.

which affect meaning at the logical or argumentative level (such as paradoxes and fallacious syllogisms).¹⁸

This expansion of the rhetorical universe is fully realised in *Traité du signe visuel* (1992), where Groupe μ establishes a robust theoretical framework for analysing images as rhetorical devices. Through the exploration of elements such as colour, form, composition, and spatial organisation, the group demonstrates how images can be “read” and interpreted using semiological tools that serve persuasive mechanisms. By emphasising the structural dimension of the image and its rhetorical potential, Groupe μ offers an analytical model that transcends disciplinary boundaries, encompassing fields such as advertising, cinema, visual arts, and graphic design.

Drawing on a systematic approach to visual semiotics, the group explores the composition and dynamics of the elements that structure meaning in images, proposing the distinction between the *plastic sign* and the *iconic sign* as fundamental analytical tools. The plastic sign refers to the formal and sensory elements of the image — colour, texture, lines, shapes, and spatial arrangement — which, although not directly resembling the referent, influence visual perception and aesthetic reading. These elements shape the atmosphere of the image, guide the viewer’s gaze, and create visual patterns that act as conduits of interpretation.¹⁹ The iconic sign, on the other hand, maintains an analogical relationship with the represented referent, serving as the direct vehicle of figurative representation. It is through this sign that the image communicates recognisable narratives, conveying messages that can be decoded culturally and contextually. The interaction between these two levels — plastic and iconic — creates a space for symbolic construction in which the image transcends mere reproduction of reality and becomes a visual discourse structured by its own rules.²⁰ Visual rhetoric, according to Groupe μ , does not merely suggest immediate meanings; it mobilises complex strategies whose fundamental elements include: the strategic use of colour, form, and texture; the manipulation of relationships between signifier, type, and referent — through the interplay between what is represented (referent), its stylisation (type), and the way it is figured (signifier), images can generate ambiguity, visual metaphors, or interpretive irony, thus expanding the polysemy of visual discourse; and the use of *estrangement* as a rhetorical tool — through visual dissonance, the disruption of aesthetic norms, or the use of subversive imagery, such strategies create critical distance and act as instruments of semantic subversion and social critique, operating in the subtler processes of symbolic, cultural, and aesthetic construction.²¹

The visual rhetoric framework proposed by Groupe μ did not remain static; it has been enriched by critical contributions and theoretical expansions. Göran Sonesson emphasised the intrinsically rhetorical nature of images, as they simultaneously present similarity and difference in relation to the real world, and proposed four analytical dimensions: indexicality, iconicity, the fictional character of the image, and its role as a social object. Fred Andersson, in turn, extended the concept of plastic form beyond artistic images, applying it also to everyday objects, while Anne Beyaert-Geslin deepened the exploration of the figure–ground relationship, highlighting the active role of the viewer in the perception of images. Georges Roque, on the other hand, ques-

18 Cf. *Idem*, p. 45.

19 Cf. Groupe μ , *Traité du signe visuel: Pour une rhétorique de l’image* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), pp. 186-250.

20 *Idem*, pp. 124-183.

21 *Idem*, pp. 351-342.

tioned the distinction between the iconic sign and the plastic sign, highlighting the importance of cultural and perceptual context in visual interpretation.²²

Comics constitute a privileged field for the application of the principles of visual rhetoric, as outlined by this collective.²³ Visual rhetoric, in its theoretical formulation, is based on the premise that every visual utterance is structured on two fundamental levels: the iconic level and the plastic level, as previously discussed. The iconic level comprises the figurative and recognizable elements that represent objects or entities from the real world—such as characters, settings, and conventional comic signs—whereas the plastic level refers to the formal attributes of the image, such as color, texture, volume, and spatial organization. The interaction between these two levels generates planes of meaning that go beyond mere visual representation, activating rhetorical mechanisms that challenge the viewer's perception and promote plural, interpretatively dynamic readings. For rhetorical analysis of comics to be effective, it is essential to distinguish between the perceived level—what the viewer directly observes in the visual composition—and the conceived level, that is, the inferred or projected meaning arising from that observation. The tension between these two levels lies at the heart of rhetorical effectiveness, as it is in this dialectic that interpretative shifts, plays on meaning, and aesthetic or persuasive effects emerge. The way in which comics manipulate this tension determines their narrative and expressive impact, making them a particularly fertile medium for visual and discursive experimentation.

The Groupe μ , as we have seen, proposes a distinction between two fundamental types of semiotic systems, defined by the degree of codification in the relationship between expression and content. Strongly codified systems are characterised by relatively stable rules that govern the relationship between form and meaning, allowing for predictable interpretations shared among receivers. Written verbal language is the paradigmatic example of this type, given the normative structure of its syntactic and semantic rules. In the context of comics, speech balloons, onomatopoeias, and certain visual conventions—such as motion lines indicating movement or graphic symbols expressing emotions—belong to this system, as they follow stable codes widely recognised by readers. Weakly codified systems, by contrast, present a less predictable relationship between form and content and depend more on the receiver's interpretive context. The plastic level in comics—through the use of colour, texture, abstract panel composition, or the absence of specific graphic elements—falls within this domain, allowing for greater interpretive flexibility and opening up space for more subtle and subjective rhetorical effects. However, comics frequently operate along a continuum between these two systems, combining normative and expressive elements to create a compelling narrative experience. While strongly codified systems ensure the intelligibility and accessibility of the narrative, weakly codified systems introduce ambiguity, nuance, and interpretive layers open to the reader's subjectivity.

Essential to the rhetorical analysis of comics is the notion of *degree zero*. The general degree zero refers to the set of established cultural conventions and expected codes that guide the reading

22 Cf. Maria Giulia Dondero et Göran Sonesson. *Le Groupe μ . Quarante ans de rhétorique – Trente-trois ans de sémiotique visuelle*. *Nouveaux Actes Sémiotiques* [online]. Actes de colloques, 2008, Le Groupe μ . Quarante ans de rhétorique – Trente-trois ans de sémiotique visuelle.

23 Thierry Groensteen, one of the most influential theorists of comics, incorporated some of the principles of visual rhetoric into his analyses. In *The System of Comics*, he examines the specific structure and language of this medium, whose organisation and functioning align with the foundations of visual rhetoric proposed by the Groupe μ .

and understanding of comics. Among the most evident examples are the sequential reading of panels, the use of speech balloons to indicate dialogue, and the graphic conventions representing movement or sound. On the other hand, the *local degree zero* emerges from the enunciation itself and from the expectations created internally throughout the narrative. When this local degree zero is disrupted — that is, when a previously established pattern is broken — a rhetorical effect is produced that challenges conventional reading and demands a reinterpretation of the enunciation. For example, in an action narrative, if a sequence of panels unfolds with a rapid rhythm, marked by sound effects and intense dialogue, and is suddenly interrupted by a silent panel devoid of any text or sound at a climactic moment, this break in the narrative pattern generates a powerful impact, heightening dramatic tension and reinforcing the expressive weight of silence. Furthermore, the visual rhetoric of comics operates through the interaction between *isotopy* and *allotopy* as fundamental strategies. *Isotopy* refers to the repetition and maintenance of a coherent semantic field, ensuring the continuity of the visual discourse and stabilising the reader's interpretation. *Allotopy*, in contrast, arises from the disruption of this coherence, introducing unexpected or contradictory elements that create interpretive tension and striking rhetorical effects.²⁴

The visual rhetoric of comics is grounded in different modes of relation between the perceived level (*degré perçu*) and the conceived level (*degré conçu*), as proposed by the Groupe μ . These modes structure the way visual elements are read and reinterpreted by the reader, activating rhetorical processes that enhance the expressiveness of graphic narrative.

The first mode, *in absentia conjoint* (IAC), is characterised by the complete substitution of an expected element with another, thereby producing metaphorical effects. A common example in comics occurs in sequences involving delirium or hunger, where a character perceives ordinary objects transformed into food — for instance, a friend who, in the character's altered perception, takes the form of a roast chicken. This strategy reinforces the reader's immersion in the character's subjective experience and emphasises the intensity of their altered state. The *in praesentia conjoint* (IPC) mode, by contrast, involves the coexistence of two elements within a single visual entity, generating hybrid figures that combine distinct features. A classic example appears in science fiction or fantasy narratives, where characters possess hybrid anatomies — such as robots with human expressions and features — thus merging different ontological categories within a single being. Finally, the *in praesentia disjoint* (IPD) mode operates through the juxtaposition of separate elements that nonetheless maintain a semantic relationship, establishing visual analogies. This form of rhetoric allows for layered meaning through the strategic placement of related yet distinct visual components.²⁵ One of the most effective applications of this mechanism in comics occurs through the superimposition of panels that contrast an image of a clock striking midnight with the anguished expression of a character in imminent danger — thus creating a symbolic association between time and narrative tension.

Finally, in the *in absentia disjoint* (IAD) mode, the meaning of an utterance is not directly manifested but projected by the reader based on cultural and social references. In socially critical comics, for example, depictions of decaying urban landscapes can be interpreted as metaphors for

24 Cf. Groupe μ , *Traité du signe visuel: Pour une rhétorique de l'image* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), pp. 186-263.

25 Cf. Groupe μ , *idem*, pp. 271-272.

oppression or alienation, without the need for explicit verbal commentary. In this case, the visual discourse suggests a meaning that is realised through the reader's subjective interpretation.

Beyond these structural relations, comics also mobilise specific rhetorical strategies. One such strategy is the manipulation of narrative time, expressed through the arrangement and sizing of panels. Larger panels are often used to suggest moments of contemplation, introspection, or dramatic tension, whereas sequences of small panels accelerate the action and lend dynamism to the reading experience. Another essential strategy in comics is the use of onomatopoeia and graphic codes, which play a crucial role in building *sonic isotopies* and enhancing the expressiveness of scenes. Onomatopoeias such as “BAM!” or “BOOM!” directly translate impacts and noises, integrating seamlessly into the graphic space. In addition, conventional visual elements — such as motion lines to suggest rapid movement, stars around the head to signify dizziness, or sweat drops to indicate anxiety — consolidate a shared visual lexicon between authors and readers. Finally, the exploration of *plastic space* in comics evokes emotional states and narrative atmospheres through the expressive use of colour, patterns, and textures. In *noir* narratives, the predominance of black and white enhances moral and psychological contrasts, while vibrant colour palettes in action sequences amplify the energy and visual impact of the scene. The combination of these strategies confirms the richness of visual rhetoric in comics, highlighting the way graphic elements not only accompany the text but play a determining role in constructing meaning and immersing the reader.

It is now important to consider how certain discursive phenomena transcend the realm of the verbal and the explicitly articulated. Among these, silence plays a central role as an active discursive operator. Whether understood as emptiness, pause, or fullness, silence constitutes an essential element in various forms of human expression and in the experience of existence. This dimension of silence — as a space of communicative potential and a structuring element of discourse — invites us to explore its manifestations in visual languages, particularly in comics. If, in verbal and literary language, silence serves a specific rhetorical function, how does it materialise in a medium where image, space, and narrative coexist? This leads us to yet another question: when we speak of silence in comics, what exactly are we talking about?

3. A SILENT VISUALITY: THE RHETORIC OF SILENCE IN COMICS

The concept of silence in comics has traditionally been associated with the absence of text or dialogue, often identified with the term “silent comics” or “wordless comics.” These works, devoid of speech balloons, captions, or any textual support, construct their narratives exclusively through visual resources. In this configuration, the image occupies a central place in the narrative process, challenging the reader to carefully interpret iconographic codes and requiring a reading that goes beyond the explicit. Dialogue, a structural and recurring element in comics, plays a major role in the development of the narrative and the characterisation of figures. Its absence is therefore noticeable and contributes to the paradoxical “visible absence” that is inscribed in the graphic space. Graphic silence, then, should not be understood as a narrative void, but as a space of potential.

The study of silence in comics has gradually established itself as an autonomous field within academic criticism. Initially, analyses focused predominantly on the role of text and dialogue as narrative drivers, relegating silence to a secondary status. Foundational works such as *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud (1993) introduced a new perspective by emphasising the role of the

“spaces between panels” (gutters) as zones of meaningful pause, where silence operates not as absence but as narrative potential, encouraging the reader to fill the gaps and construct meaning.²⁶

Subsequently, essays such as *The Voices of Silence: Willette, Steinlen, and the Introduction of the Silent Strip in the Chat Noir, with a German Coda* by David Kunzle (2001) explored the history of silence in comics, highlighting how the silent strips of *Chat Noir* enhanced visual expressiveness and expanded narrative possibilities without relying on text. Here, silence emerges as an interpretive space, amplifying the semiotic weight of visual elements.²⁷

John Lamothe’s analysis in *Speaking Silently: Comics’ Silent Narratives as Immersive Experiences* adds to the debate by treating silence as a strategy for narrative immersion. Lamothe argues that silence in comics is not merely the absence of text or sound, but an expressive tool that accentuates emotional states such as grief, isolation, or introspection. He introduces the concept of “visual silence,” in which the absence of dialogue or narration compels the reader to interpret visual cues more actively, thereby increasing their engagement in constructing meaning. This reading directly engages with Scott McCloud’s theory of *closure*, which suggests that readers, by mentally filling in the gaps between panels, become co-authors of the narrative. Lamothe contends that graphic silence intensifies this process, making the experience more introspective and emotionally rich. Another key concept introduced by Lamothe is that of “communal silence,” in which silent sequences create moments of shared emotional connection among readers, evoking the collective effect experienced during a live performance when the audience’s silence reflects dramatic tension. This idea is explored through parallels with John Cage’s 4’33”, where the absence of programmed sound in the performance draws the audience’s attention to ambient noise, incorporating it into the experience. Similarly, silence in *silent comics* heightens the reader’s awareness of the graphic space and of their own active role in the narrative.²⁸

In *The Sound of Silence: Blank Spaces, Fading Narratives and Fragile Frames in Comics* (2019), Debarghya Sanyal expands the scope of the discussion by arguing that graphic silence is not merely a passive interval, but a structurally and rhetorically effective element. Sanyal highlights how the intentional use of blank spaces, blurred borders, and asymmetrical compositions creates “fragile narratives,” challenging the linearity of traditional discourse and suggesting multiple interpretations. This narrative fragility becomes particularly significant in stories that deal with themes such as trauma, loss, or social exclusion, where the unsaid acquires a greater expressiveness than what could be explicitly narrated. This strategy is observable in works that use silence to provoke reader introspection, fostering a more contemplative and emotionally rich narrative. Sanyal argues that silence, as a rhetorical device, intensifies the aesthetic experience by encouraging the reader to reflect on the psychological states of the characters and the emotional dynamics within the narrative.²⁹

26 Cf. McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (pp. 66–69). HarperPerennial.

27 Cf. Kunzle, D. (2001). *The Voices of Silence: Willette, Steinlen, and the Introduction of the Silent Strip in the Chat Noir, with a German Coda*. In R. Varnum & C. T. Gibbons (Eds.), *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (pp. 3–18). University Press of Mississippi.

28 Lamothe, J. *Speaking Silently: Comics’ Silent Narratives as Immersive Experiences*, *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 41, n.º 2, 2019, pp. 69–94, Popular Culture Association in the South, disponível em: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26644420>.

29 Sanyal, D. *The Sound of Silence: Blank Spaces, Fading Narratives and Fragile Frames in Comics*, *Studies in Comics*, 10(2), 215–233, 2019. DOI: 10.1386/stic_00003_1.

Complementing these approaches, Ryan Twomey, in *Graphic Sound and Silence: Chris Ware's Aural Depiction of Alienation and Isolation* (2016), analyses how the American illustrator uses silence as a central narrative element to express feelings of alienation and isolation. Ware employs complex visual techniques that not only depict sound but also emphasise its absence in meaningful ways. Twomey introduces key concepts for understanding the rhetoric of silence in Ware's work. One is the sequential absence of sound, which involves removing previously established diegetic sounds in subsequent panels, creating a sense of emptiness and isolation. The absence of familiar noises—such as dialogue or ambient sound—produces a “mute space” that highlights the character's emotional state. Another is the reverse sequential absence of sound, where sound reappears after a period of silence, acting as a marker of the void that preceded it. The contrast between silence and the reintroduced sound creates a powerful emotional impact, reinforcing the narrative weight of the silent moment. In addition to these techniques, Ware explores the notion of the “noisy mind,” in which external silence contrasts with the internal turmoil of the character. This device emphasises cognitive alienation and a disconnection between the character and their environment. In several sequences, the illustrator uses static panels and empty spaces to depict the emotional paralysis of his characters. In moments of grief or despair, silence becomes a powerful expressive tool, creating a dramatic pause that compels the reader toward introspection.³⁰

The use of silence transcends mere aesthetic device and surpasses its status as the simple absence of sound to become a rhetorical resource with significant expressive potential. In the context of comics, silence, as we have seen, acquires a unique narrative plasticity: it not only assigns expressive value to empty space but also challenges the role of the reader, who ceases to be a passive recipient and becomes a co-author of the narrative, responsible for filling in the gaps left by textual absence.

To reduce silence in comics to the mere lack of words is to oversimplify a phenomenon that reveals a considerably broader semiotic and aesthetic complexity. Silence, as demonstrated, acquires its own materiality, functioning as an iconic-verbal sign that interacts dynamically with other visual codes. This integration grants it a tangible and multifaceted dimension, allowing its transposition into the visual realm through two distinct manifestations which, in our view, deserve to be distinguished and will be discussed below: graphic silence and silenciography.

We propose that, although these concepts may appear semantically overlapping, they differ in both purpose and level of complexity. While *graphic silence* functions as a direct visual marker of the absence of sound or speech — encompassing formal elements that organise the narrative space, such as empty panels, stripped-down settings, or blank spaces between frames — *silenciography* deepens this dimension. It does not merely signify the visual absence of sound or dialogue; rather, it emerges as a semantic and structural operator that actively contributes to the construction of the narrative discourse. It assigns silence a cohesive and transformative role in the development of the story, elevating it to a visual and conceptual isotopy. From a semiotic standpoint, and in line with the principles outlined by the Groupe μ in their study of visual rhetoric, *silenciography* integrates silence into the field of structural rhetorical operations — such as suppression, addition, permutation, and substitution — thus transforming it into a dynamic mechanism of

30 Twomey, R. *Graphic sound and silence: Chris Ware's aural depiction of alienation and isolation*. *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics*, vol. 15, n.º 1, 2024, pp. 90-107. ISSN: 2150-4857, 2150-4865. DOI: [10.1080/21504857.2023.2238806](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2023.2238806).

narrative articulation. This is not a passive or ornamental silence, but an active device that guides reading, organises sequential flow, and broadens the interpretative potential of the work. Whereas *graphic silence* operates at a local and momentary level, *silenciography* functions on a global scale, shaping the macrostructure of the work and defining its reading dynamics. This distinction becomes particularly evident in entirely textless narratives, where silence is not an isolated resource, but the very structuring principle of the narrative itself.

Isotopic and Structural Silenciography: Two Dimensions of Silence

Drawing on our analysis, we propose a dual typology of silenciography: the isotopic, which reinforces narrative consistency through silent motifs, and the structural, where silence itself constitutes the narrative logic. In the first modality, silence functions as a recurring semantic feature, creating internal cohesion within the narrative discourse. The repetition of empty spaces, textless panels, or uninhabited settings acts as a guiding thread that shapes the reading experience and marks the emotional progression of the story. Here, silence takes on a symbolic weight, often associated with states of solitude, mourning, alienation, or introspection. The isotopy of silence is expressed not only through the absence of dialogue but also through chromatic choices, graphic minimalism, and spatial fragmentation. The second modality refers to narratives entirely devoid of text — the so-called *silent comics* or *wordless comics* — where silence is not an occasional device but the very foundation of the narrative. In this case, silence is not merely an aesthetic or symbolic element, but the core structuring principle of the storytelling. The total absence of words compels the reader to interpret the narrative solely through visual elements — framing, facial expressions, movement, and spatial composition — encouraging a more active and participatory reading. A well-known example is *The Arrival* (2007) by Shaun Tan, a narrative built entirely through images, without any textual support, creating a structural silenciography that underscores the protagonist's experience of disorientation and estrangement in an unfamiliar land. Here, silence functions as a metaphor for incommunicability.

Silenciography, by going beyond graphic silence, explores the expressive potential of the unspoken and the absent, emerging as a privileged device for addressing liminal themes and/or experiences that often escape the bounds of traditional discursive logic. In this sense, silenciography can be understood as a rhetoric of the unsayable — a strategy that operates through the tension between what is shown and what is hidden, the explicit and the implicit. Silence, in this view, ceases to interrupt discourse and becomes discourse itself. Silenciography also reveals a metanarrative vocation, insofar as it draws attention to the very mechanisms of meaning-making. By eliminating text or reducing verbal communication to a minimum, the silenced narrative foregrounds the role of the reader as co-author, compelling a deeper engagement in the interpretive process. Our understanding of silenciography as an autonomous branch of the rhetoric of silence in comics allows us to understand silence not merely as the absence of sound or text, but as a complex and multifunctional narrative operator. This conception broadens the field of comics analysis, shifting the focus from the mere representation of graphic silence to the exploration of its structural and semantic potential.

4. CONCLUSIONS: GIVING FORM TO SILENCE

Zeca Afonso – Balada do Desterro by Teresa Moure and Maria João Worm, published in 2023 in a joint edition by the Galician publisher aCentral Folque and the Tradisom label, is much more than a biography — it is a deeply sensorial aesthetic experience that unfolds from the very first contact with the book. The choice of a Luso-Galician graphic novel to tell the story of this singer reinforces the connection between Portugal and Galicia, a region with a historical, cultural and linguistic identity closely aligned with that of Portugal, and one which also saw a strong resistance movement against Franco's regime in Spain. By revisiting the life of Zeca Afonso, the book contributes to preserving his memory and the impact of his songs in the context of the struggle for freedom and social justice. 'Grândola, Vila Morena' was sung for the first time in 1972 at the University of Santiago de Compostela — over 50 years ago — marking the beginning of its journey towards becoming a symbol of the Carnation Revolution. The title carries powerful and evocative symbolism, reflecting the composer's life path and poetically and politically synthesising his experience as a singer of resistance, whose voice echoed both within and beyond Portugal, evoking not only physical exile but also the sense of displacement and marginalisation he faced throughout his life.

This Luso-Galician collaboration is not limited to paying tribute to one of the most charismatic voices in Portuguese culture—it also extends to the material care of the work itself. The visual impact is immediate: the cover, with its sober yet expressive design, uses deep earthy tones and organic lines that evoke the telluric force of Zeca Afonso's work. Maria João Worm's graphic style is harmonised with a carefully selected colour palette to create an atmosphere of intimacy and memory. The texture of the cover, with its slightly rough touch, seems to symbolically suggest a connection to the land, to tradition, and to the activism that Zeca embodied. Even the type of paper used in this edition contributes to the tactile experience of reading. The weight and matte finish create a surface that absorbs the colours in an integrated way, reinforcing the emotional proximity to the narrative content. Each panel seems to acquire its own almost tangible materiality, allowing the reader to discover a “Zeca mais íntimo; feito de carne humana; [...] que palpita e duvida, que vibra ao contacto com outras peles”³¹ as described on the back cover.³²

This is a book that leaves a lasting impression, not only because of the intrinsic beauty of its illustrations and the interplay of colours, but also because of the sense of silence that permeates the entire work — a silence that lingers even when the characters speak, even when Zeca is depicted on stage, in the midst of a concert. A silence that fully reveals itself at the close of the work, when it is finally named in the last word that concludes this graphic novel: “*Para mim já só fica o silêncio*”.³³ A silence that permeates the entire narrative and unfolds through the introspective journey of a reserved man, whose modesty and shyness — perhaps the most defining traits of his personality — lead him towards an inner retreat: a space of creative silence, the very matrix from which all his ballads emerge and where his words resonate: “o som envolve-me na cena, mas em silêncio também consigo expressar-me”.³⁴ This duality resonates with David Le Breton's reflection:

31 “a more intimate Zeca; made of human flesh; [...] who throbs and doubts, who vibrates upon contact with other skins” (author's translation from the original Portuguese)

32 Moure, T. & Worm, M. J., *Zeca Afonso – Balada do Desterro* (Galiza: aCentral Folque / Tradisom, 2023).

33 *Idem*, p. 187, “For me, only silence remains” (author's translation from the original Portuguese).

34 *Ibidem*, p. 185, “sound draws me into the scene, but in silence I can also express myself.” (author's translation)

“Si la présence de l’homme est d’abord celle de sa parole, elle est aussi inéluctablement celle de son silence”³⁵ which heightens the symbolic weight of his voice — the reader recognises the centrality of music, yet is denied the ability to hear it. Silence here is not the absence of voice, but a voice that manifests itself in what is left unsaid, and above all, in what is felt in the interval between light and shadow. This suspension of sound is masterfully rendered through musical staves devoid of notes, marked only by red carnations — icons of the Revolution — that fill the pages at the beginning and end of the book.

Balada do Desterro reveals a strong influence of silhouette and cut-out techniques, evoking a visual tradition that combines elements of shadow theatre and the language of expressionist cinema, marked by stark contrasts. The use of black and white in the early pages — depicting his life in Portugal — followed by the gradual introduction of more vibrant colours in his life in Africa, such as blue, yellow, and ochre red, recalls the aesthetics of engraving and stencil art. This evokes the near-artisanal feel of clandestine revolutionary pamphlets, suggesting themes of resistance and memory, and lending symbolic density that underscores the duality between memory and present, dream and reality, exile and belonging. The graphic silence and visual pauses — often represented through solid black fills — find an echo in the blank spaces of the page itself, creating a harmony between form and content that amplifies the poetic power of the singer’s words. Zeca Afonso lived through long periods of censorship, persecution, and marginalisation under the Estado Novo regime, frequently being monitored by PIDE (the International and State Defence Police). His music was censored and banned, and his voice stands as a cry of resistance against the silence imposed by authoritarianism.³⁶ In this particular work, silence takes on a paradigmatic role: on the one hand, it is a forced absence, reflected in the repression of any form of dissent and represented in the moments when the singer was silenced by the regime—whether through political persecution, censorship, or the obstacles he faced in recording and disseminating his music; on the other hand, it is an intense presence—even when compelled to fall silent, his legacy echoes in the collective memory beyond time, and silence becomes a space of protest and resistance. The silence imposed by the regime is thus transformed into a symbol of struggle and remembrance, reaffirming the political power of the collective voice.

Although in the context of this graphic novel silence takes on an active dimension, its ambivalent force nonetheless recalls what José Gil identifies in *Portugal, hoje: O medo de existir* (2004) as a structural mark of Portuguese society, intrinsically linked to fear. For the Portuguese philosopher, fear is more than an emotion: it is a kind of invisible grammar that structures Portuguese social life. Inherited from the Salazarist regime, this *affect* persists in institutions, behaviours, and bodies, taking on renewed forms that continue to obstruct symbolic inscription, the expression of desire, critical practice, and transformative action. According to Gil, overcoming this affective regime requires a profound rupture with the dominant ways of feeling and being, and the creation of new relational possibilities grounded in listening, memory, and the sharing of existence.³⁷ Fear

from the original Portuguese).

35 Le Breton, D. (1997) *Du silence*, Paris: Métailié, p. 12, “If a man’s presence is first and foremost that of his speech, it is also inevitably that of his silence.” (author’s translation from the original Portuguese).

36 Afonso, J. (s.d.). *Biografia*. José Afonso Official Website. Retrieved 18 February 2025 https://joseafonso.net/?page_id=28.

37 Gil, J. *Portugal hoje: O medo de existir*. Lisboa: Relógio D’Água, 2004, pp. 21-25.

manifests itself, among other forms, through silence: “a chapa de silêncio não desabou brusca-mente sobre a vida social, foi-se só insinuando e impregnando impercetivelmente”.³⁸ Far from being a mere absence of sound, silence is understood here as a suppression—whether voluntary or unconscious—of expression and memory, a survival strategy that, over time, becomes ingrained as a cultural habit. In this sense, silence functions as an extension of fear, blocking the possibility of inscribing events and thus preventing any form of transformation. As Gil notes, it is when the subject is “reduzido ao silêncio pela imensa culpabilidade”³⁹ that the process of inscription fails, leaving the experience unprocessed and the memory unconstructed. The philosopher thus establishes a fundamental connection between silence and non-inscription—two structuring concepts of his analysis. When an event is not named, interpreted, or discussed, it remains on the margins. This process of erasure becomes especially evident in the way Portugal has handled the traumas of its recent past. Gil points out, for example, that the colonial war remains little discussed, in part because the repression of the Estado Novo was quickly muffled by a collective desire to forget. Rather than a process of mourning, what settled in, according to the author, was a silence that took its place.⁴⁰

José Gil’s analysis proves particularly fruitful for thinking through this graphic novel, which gives shape to experiences of exclusion and silencing that the philosopher associates with the difficulty of the subject’s inscription in the Portuguese public space. However, the silence that permeates the work is not here synonymous with erasure or absence—it is, rather, an alternative form of expression, a counter-discourse that makes visible what usually remains hidden: pain, trauma, and the subtle violences of everyday life. The connection between silence and fear—as forces that limit expression and shape the Portuguese collective experience—takes on particular resonance when transposed into the visual medium of comics, especially in a work created by two women in a field still marked by predominantly male codes. Moure and Worm subvert not only the graphic and narrative conventions of the genre, but also the established forms of authority and discursive visibility. Just as Gil denounces the absence of symbolic inscription in the Portuguese imaginary, *Balada do Desterro* proposes an aesthetic in which visual restraint becomes a form of resistance and a mode of *reinscription*. The authors’ narrative approach contrasts with more common modes of representation in comics, which are often shaped by strongly codified semiotic and rhetorical systems, action-driven dynamics, fast pacing, and an emphasis on conflict. This difference in approach can be read as a conscious gesture of distancing from such conventions, favouring an aesthetic of testimony that privileges introspection. In this sense, the work not only participates in a deviation from prevailing aesthetics in contemporary comics but also offers an implicit critique of prevailing logics of visibility, voice, and presence. The images play with light and shadow in the composition of figures and settings, making the absence of facial detail and expression—mentioned at the beginning of this essay—a dominant element throughout the graphic narrative and establishing a melancholic and contemplative tone. The characters’ identities are often suggested more through context and body language than through specific features, in an expressive minimalism that amplifies the symbolic charge of the scenes, creating a static effect of isolation and

38 *Idem*, p. 135. “the sheet of silence did not suddenly collapse upon social life; it merely insinuated itself and imperceptibly permeated everything.” (author’s translation from the original Portuguese).

39 *Idem*, p. 28. “reduced to silence by immense guilt” (author’s translation from the original Portuguese).

40 *Idem*, p. 122.

solitude. The absence of speech balloons in most panels and the presence of captions, narrated in the third person, give way to a predominantly visual language. The characters communicate through gestures and postures, and even their interactions are mediated by shadowplay, which seems to absorb the individuality of the bodies. The solitary figure of the protagonist, frequently depicted in empty spaces or surrounded by distorted shadows, reinforces the sense of withdrawal and anonymity, captured in the opening words with which he is introduced: “Eis um homem. Apenas isso”.⁴¹ Empty spaces and the interstices between images function as narrative pauses that evoke states of waiting and solitude, while also reinforcing the rhythm of the narrative through a deliberately slow transience. This visual strategy amplifies the introspective atmosphere of the work, creating moments of temporal suspension that invite the reader’s contemplation and emotional immersion.

The African presence is striking both thematically and aesthetically. Geometric patterns and graphic compositions evoke African fabrics and ornaments, while the stylised human figures suggest hybrid identities imposed by colonialism. The use of blue and the enlarged eyes in some illustrations suggest a foreign gaze—a visual attempt to capture and understand a new cultural and musical geography. The inclusion of terms in African languages, such as *Baadaye* (later, in Swahili), reinforces the narrative’s intercultural dimension, evoking the influence of Mozambique and Angola in shaping Zeca Afonso’s identity and artistic journey. The presence of female characters, such as Teresa Torga, introduces an intersectional dimension that links political oppression with personal experiences of marginalisation. This complexity extends to the evocation of historical figures of popular resistance, such as Maria da Fonte, whose legacy of fighting social injustices in Portugal echoes as a timeless call to defiance and resistance against repressive structures. The work thus situates itself within a genealogy of resistance, where silence and invisibility are transformed into signs of struggle.

The dialogue between the characters highlights identity fractures and historical tensions, revealing underlying debates on colonialism, memory, and belonging. The opposition between Lourenço Marques and Maputo, for instance, is not merely a matter of toponymy, but a symbolic field where colonial and postcolonial narratives collide, reflecting the complexity of the imperial legacy and the construction of new national identities. The narrative does not merely depict the geographical spaces through which Zeca Afonso travelled but reveals the ideological and cultural transformations that shaped his worldview and his music.

The work also explores the subversive power of language through lexical play and strategies of concealment, such as the anagram “Azec Osnofa,” which recodes the name of Zeca Afonso. This linguistic manipulation not only highlights the dynamics of censorship but also suggests the necessity of creative reinvention as a form of resistance. The very act of encoding the name inscribes the struggle for freedom into the symbolic realm, where the word—even in disguise—retains its insurgent potential. Thus, censorship and political persecution are represented not only through what is explicitly shown, but through what is distorted, omitted, and reconfigured.

The reduction of graphic elements to their essence allows the story to be told in a more sensorial and subjective way, requiring the reader’s active participation in interpreting the images. The

41 Moure, T., & Worm, M. J. (2023). *Op. Cit.* p. 5. “Here is a man. Nothing more.” (author’s translation from the original Portuguese).

overall effect is one of intense visual experience, materialising as a form of spatial silence and a fundamental paradox. This final paradox, which emerges through the reading, lies in the relationship between the stillness of the image and the dynamism of music. Graphic art, by its nature, is static, whereas music is a temporal, fluid, and ephemeral phenomenon. Yet this stillness does not cancel out the evocative power of music; rather, it transforms it into a lingering trace within the narrative itself. The silence of the image is not an end but a provocation: if José Afonso's music cannot be heard on the page, it is the reader who must mentally reconstruct it, filling the gaps with their own memory and historical experience. In this way, the silence imposed by repression becomes a silence that invites active listening, rediscovery, and the perpetuation of his voice.

Balada do Desterro thus stands as a paradigmatic example of what we have previously defined as isotopic silenciography, in which silence operates as a recurring semantic thread, providing internal cohesion to the narrative discourse and guiding the reading through a sequence of meaningful absences. The repetition of empty spaces, the restrained colour palette, the spatial fragmentation, and the discursive economy converge to create a narrative in which silence is not a void but an active element in the construction of meaning. Teresa Moure and Maria João Worm's work explores absence in order to amplify states of introspection, displacement, and resistance, evoking a Zeca Afonso whose presence is defined as much by what is said as by what is left unsaid. Silence permeates the entire narrative like a guiding thread, conveying the singer's physical and emotional exile, the censorship that tried to silence him, but also the expressive power of his music, which endures beyond his voice. In its articulation with the graphic elements and sequential structure of this graphic novel, this silence becomes a central narrative operator, reinforcing the symbolic power of omission and pause. Ultimately, *Zeca Afonso - Balada do Desterro* reaffirms the capacity of comics to inscribe the unsayable and to transform silence into a space of resistance, memory, and evocation.

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