



Women, spaces and comics: those sharp shadows

In the last decade or so, a large number of comics by women from around the world have appeared on the Spanish graphic novel market. This means that after many years we are now in a position to make an analysis of the focus of women writers, the stories they choose and the way they draw.

Here we want to examine just a few of the many graphic novels that have been published, analysing the spaces in which some of the more personal and creative work takes place. We hope that this will give a clearer understanding of the way some of the most original women artists are thinking, but more importantly, the direction they are taking. We will study their *mises-en-scene* and situations and the real and symbolic spaces that appear, but in particular we want to see the angle from which they are looking and recording their ideas, and the light under which they do so.

Taken in chronological order¹, the comics analysed here encompass different writers, ages, origins and themes. However, they have two things in common: they have all been translated into Spanish and none of them is in full colour. The use of the traditional system of black and white comic strips offers a chance to examine in

greater depth this world of light and shadow we want to analyse.

The first comic we will analyse is *My New York Diary* (1993)² the work that brought its author, the Canadian **Julie Doucet** (1965), to the public's attention. The work is in the best underground tradition and tells the trials and tribulations of a young woman trying to realise her vocation, drawing for a living in New York city. Doucet's New York is a dirty, chaotic and unbalanced city that appears disturbing and threatening; one in which women are especially vulnerable to sexual and emotional abuse. The rooms, the enclosed spaces, are even more chaotic and stifling, and the author is depicted as being on the verge of an emotional and nervous breakdown as the result of stress, a difficult relationship and drug abuse. The result is a graphic novel containing multicoloured strips and very intense strokes and Doucet's use of black and white comes close to expressionist etchings. However overwhelming or disturbing it might at first appear, *Diary* does not make for difficult reading, because its intimate, honest, self-critical and ironic tone with its light touch of humour and the optimistic finale lighten up the atmosphere. Significantly, the last story, when the narrator

decides to leave the city after dumping her partner, is the most ordered and light-filled of any.

My New York Diary, which is an account of a maturing process, is a reminder that such processes are always more difficult for women, who are much more exposed and vulnerable; yet it also reflects women's ability to overcome such problems and emerge victorious.

Structured as short stories that were published during the 1990s, the striking but delicate comic book *Daddy's Girl* (1996)³ by American artist **Debbie Drechsler** (1953) focuses directly on the theme of incestuous sexual abuse. It is a shadowy subject which no society has yet chosen to illuminate and act upon as firmly as its extreme gravity merits. Because these events tend to occur within the impenetrable area of the private family home, it is these indoor spaces that we see most in her work. Once again the pictures have the texture of an etching. They are dark and stifling, and the combination of an apparently childlike stroke with the extreme detail very aptly transmits the feeling of menace, the fear, the anguish and the trauma the heroine experiences in her day-to-day life; it is clear proof that, contrary to popular opinion, the home is often the most dangerous and threatening of all places for women.

In her next work, *The Summer of Love* (2002)⁴ the heroine has grown up and has moved to a new town. New house, new friends, new places... High school, gym, playground, bars, parties... the author focuses on her difficulty in adapting to the change and her intense and contradictory mood swings. In doing so, she brings in a personal technique: she adds russet and green to the traditional black and white for the shading and background in the different scenes. As well as effectively reflecting the ever-changing, sometimes cruel, insecure and uncomfortable world of adolescence (magnificently represented by the metaphor of the forest surrounding the house), by using coloured shadows, she manages

very successfully to reflect how her emotional state modifies the way she experiences certain moments and spaces.

A Child's Life and Other Stories (1998)⁵ and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* (2002)⁶, both by American writer **Phoebe Gloeckner** (1960), share many of the features of the other works we have been examining. Once again, the aesthetic is that of the 1970s underground comics and the theme is autobiographical. While the first of the two books is structured in the form of short stories, the second is a diary. Again, childhood, adolescence, alcohol, drugs and sex are all part of the backdrop. Gloeckner skilfully denounces the emotional abandonment and sexual abuse suffered by many girls who grew up during the «sexual revolution» through the sordid realism of her illustrations. And once again, it is the account of a process of maturity that it is achieved even in the most traumatic and shadowy of circumstances.

Most of these features can also be found in the famous *Persepolis* (2000)⁷ by Iranian artist **Marjane Satrapi** (1969). Rewarded more for its subject matter than for its expressive but unelaborate illustrations –although these do gain in quality as the narrative progresses– it is worth highlighting her successful use of black and white, and the novel way she resorts to images and techniques from traditional Persian artistic culture. In a clear attempt to reflect and denounce the black shadow that Islamic fundamentalism has cast across Iran in general and Iranian women in particular, Satrapi uses black for the background to many of the frames, especially the interiors. She repeats the technique even in the third volume of the series, when the narrator moves to Europe; in this case however, it is employed to express the feeling of loss, alienation and hostility she experienced in Austria, in Vienna, which she depicts as being cold and dark.

The great success and influence of *Persepolis* has helped normalise the theme of the female autobiography in non-western countries. In



EN UNA OCASIÓN, MI PADRE CASI LLEGA A LAS MANOS CON UNA INVITADA QUE VIÑO A CENAR, DISCUTIENDO SOBRE SI UN RETAZO DE BORDADO ERA DE COLOR FUCSIA O MAGENTA.



her *Le Jeu Des Hirondelles* (2007)⁸, with its much more elaborate and complex illustrations, the Lebanese artist **Zeina Abirached** (1981) manages to reproduce the stifling atmosphere and the anguish of a population trapped where they are by air raids through blacking in the backgrounds in the interiors and by repeating images. Korean artist **Kim Eun-Sung** (1965) in *My Mother's Story* (2008)⁹ tells the story of a woman's simple life, which is at the same time a recreation of a united Korea that now only exists in the memory of its survivors. She does so by using dark interiors and simple images. Another recent publication is *Nylon Road* (2006)¹⁰ by the Iranian **Parsua Bashi** (1966). Although it repeats Satrapi's theme, it approaches it directly from memory. This may be the reason that Bashi has chosen a sepia tone as a background for her grey and white illustrations.

All the graphic novels we have discussed so far –recognised by their authors as being autobiographic– have been conceived, selected, organised and prepared from memory. In the next comic we want to look at, however, the author drew the strips for therapy and to give vent to her emotions, and initially had no intention of publishing them. «The drawings dodged my thoughts and went straight to the truth (...) the truth always shines a light on the dark places: that's what makes the shadows so sharp», in the words of **Rosalind B. Penfold**, the author of the comic *Dragonslippers. This is what an abusive relationship looks like* (2005)¹¹. What makes Penfold's drawings so striking is the light they shine on the vast, dense shadow of abuse, showing us, through pictures, the devastating effect it has on the psyche, life and everyday events of those who suffer it. Presented in the form of a confession, the graphic novel starts by asking the reader to hold a light while the author searches the basement for the box where she keeps the drawings that will eventually become her diary of the process. In this symbolic way, she begins a visual narrative that operates in the most intimate spaces: The car, the house, the bedrooms, the bed... but also the diary, the

body, and especially, the mind of an abused woman. Penfold's graphic novel is magnificent for several reasons, especially because it has the capacity to record immediacy throughout the process. Her drawings are simple and surprisingly expressive, capable of capturing in a few quick brush strokes all the complex and nuanced world of a relationship of this kind; fear, anxiety, pain, disorientation, uncertainty, obsession... the nightmare of the abused woman; and indifference, anger, contempt, violence, obsession... the maelstrom of the abuser. *Dragonslippers* also contains some very effective narrative features, particularly the decisive moments and means in the transformation of both characters. At the most traumatic and painful moments, the author inverts the colours, drawing what seems to be the negative of the original, a dark place.

After a long and painful journey back to health, the author, with the help of her therapist, was able to put this true and sincere account together and publish it. Although it has been translated into a host of languages we feel the book is still not as well known as it should be; it is a magnificent text for anyone wanting a personal, profound and educational look at this obscure and tragic social phenomenon.

In 2006, the American artist **Alison Bechdel**, known for her humorous comic strips on all things lesbian, (1960) published *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*¹². As the title suggests, this is another family story. Throughout this article we have stressed the importance and attention given by the authors to the private, intimate spaces of the home. In this work, however, the home, the obsessively tidied and decorated Victorian home, is not just the setting; by its very nature, it is another character in the story. Bought in a dilapidated state by the father, the house ends up becoming more of a museum than a place to live and work, for it doubles as a funeral home. This beautiful but chilly backdrop leaves its mark on family life. Bechdel situates her childhood and teenage years among the sophisticated furniture, the lamps, the salons and the gardens, she looks back at

the complex and tormented personality of her father and the ambiguous relationship between the two, both homosexual. Trying to understand his possible suicide, the author engages in a continuous exercise of telling, and reviewing and reflecting on the story told. *Fun Home* is a highly elaborate work and it dazzles the reader in many ways: for the graphic virtuosity of its author, a consummate draughtswoman; for her narrative techniques which in our opinion will bolster the development of the graphic novel and herald a magnificent future for this young literary genre. Full of metaliterature and hypertext, literature is omnipresent in the relationship between father and daughter but the contribution of the multiple details and nuances provided by the outstanding images produces a complex novel whose appeal is as unusual as the artist's use of blue water-colours for shading and backgrounds.

The career of French artist **Aude Picault** (1979) is reminiscent of Bechdel's: having produced much lighter and more humorous works¹³, in 2006 she released *Papa*¹⁴, a short graphic novel on the process of coming to terms with her father's suicide. This therapeutic tribute to her lost father, *Papa* is, however, much more direct and emotional. It seems surprising that the artist's open, simple and fresh, spontaneous and expressive stroke is capable of dealing so forcefully with the intense subject matter. «Where are you now?» asks the daughter. «I'm nowhere» replies her father, and in order to make him more than just a memory, the author brings him back to life in this poetic work. Using short lines that tangle and untangle, that turn in on themselves and open to the infinite, Picault is notable for her capacity to draw, express symbolic spaces as difficult as suicide, death, the suffering and sorrow of the daughter, and her reconciliation with her abandonment and the shared past.

In 2007, **Rachel Deville** (1972), a French artist living in Barcelona published *Lobas*¹⁵ which delves into the chiaroscuro world of the relationship between identical twin sisters. In a dislocated world of adults that they experience from behind closed doors and endless threatening corridors, the twins build a world with their own rules, spaces and even language, a world that will gradually deteriorate until the necessary separation gives them their own different identities.

The world of upstairs and downstairs, the ambivalence, the mirror... even the titles of the chapters (*Narcissus, Cain and Abel, The Labyrinth, Medusa*) are all clear indications that the author wants to situate the sisters' story more in the field of myth than reality. Using only traditional pencil and starting from a grey world, she works the chiaroscuro technique, increasing and reducing the intensity of the shadows as they occur. In order to achieve the chaotic and disturbing setting the history requires, Deville depicts a host of enclosed spaces, ranging from the uterus to the labyrinth. Dolls' houses, boxes, cages, shells... they are all spaces that symbolise enclosure and stifling, until we come to the estrangement of the two sisters, which, as in *My New York Diary*, ends the book on an optimistic note, with a picture that is more open, ordered and filled with light.

The most recent comic we have read is by a young American artist **Lilli Carré** (1983), whose black-and-white work *The Lagoon* (2008)¹⁶ takes an entirely personal look at the myth of the Siren with her sweet but deadly song. While sound is the driving force in the story, the dark cover is an indication of the way the artist uses black to set the scene. Here, black refers back to real spaces and time –the night– and in turn to the mysteries and dangers that the night and the lagoon hold. The creature, of course, is black.

With its own very strong personality (all the author's characters have a black shaded

triangle on their noses that makes her work easily identifiable) the book is disturbing in effect, with a successful fade-to-black at the end included.

There are many other artists we could include¹⁷ but we shall end the list here. We believe that the influx of women into the world of the graphic novel not only provides female images that are removed from the sexist stereotypes that are so common in the genre but also offers new themes and visual techniques to reflect them with. The strongly autobiographical trend to be found in these works, far from taking us to non-transferrable worlds, demonstrates that women's experiences are very similar the world over, and also serves to cast some light on the shadows in which many of these hidden and silenced experiences have suffered until now: traumatic childhoods, raw adolescence, sexual abuse, domestic abuse, incest, social and sexual vulnerability, difficult relationships with parents... these are subjects that are constantly reflected and treated with a depth that confers on them a critical and social denunciation that it is important to highlight.

Another no less noteworthy feature is the lucidity and honesty with which these women have looked at the darker sides of all these experiences, visiting the most painful and traumatic spaces, yet providing the necessary touch of self-criticism, humour, delicacy and poetry to make them both readable and enriching.

- 1 The titles and the dates given in brackets after them are those of the publications in their original language. The footnotes refer to the Spanish edition.
- 2 **Julia Doucet:** *Diario de Nueva York*. Inreves, 2001.
- 3 **Debbie Drechsler:** *La muñequita de papá*. La Cúpula, 2004.
- 4 **Debbie Drechsler:** *Verano de amor*. La Cúpula, 2007.
- 5 **Phoebe Gloeckner:** *Vida de una niña*. La Cúpula, 2006.
- 6 **Phoebe Gloeckner:** *Diario de una adolescente*. La Cúpula, 2007.
- 7 **Marjane Satrapi:** *Persépolis*. Norma, 2002-2004.
- 8 **Zeina Abirached:** *El juego de las golondrinas*. Sins Entido, 2008.
- 9 **Kim Eun-Sung:** *La historia de mi madre*. Sins Entido, 2008.
- 10 **Parsua Bashi:** *Nylon Road*. Norma, 2009.
- 11 **Rosalind B. Penfold:** *Quiéreme bien. Una historia de maltrato*. Lumen, 2006.
- 12 **Alison Bechdel:** *Fun Home. Una familia tragicómica*. Mondadori, 2008.
- 13 **Aude Picault:** *Rollos míos*. Sins Entido, 2008 y *Más rollos míos*. Sins Entido, 2008.
- 14 **Aude Picault:** *Papá*. Sins Entido, 2009.
- 15 **Rachel Deville:** *Lobas*. Sins Entido, 2007.
- 16 **Lilli Carré:** *La laguna*. La Cúpula, 2009.
- 17 For the personal approach to space in their work we can recommend a number of other authors who have been translated into Spanish, such as Mary Fleener, Linda Medley, Jessica Abel, Gabrielle Bell, Gabriella Giandelli, Vanna Vinci...



↑ *Summer of Love*. Debbie Drechsler [La Cúpula, 2007].