Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Week- 08
Lecture- 05

Contemporary Genres of Resilience - The Graphic Novel II

Hello everyone, how are you? Welcome to this second session on contemporary genres of resilience− the graphic novel. If in the previous video we commented how resilience is an important theme in *Maus*. Now we will focus on a wide range of international graphic narratives, mostly autobiographies that present aesthetic strategies to document trauma. In themselves, they are examples of resilience, being the resulting product of processing, codifying and transferring such trauma to the page. And this is for me a key point in these two sessions. This is the creative result of processing trauma, all these narratives, that has an immense power in itself.

Trauma can be approached from a wide variety of aesthetics, whether cartoonish, expressionistic, schematics, realistic, oneiric, naturalistic, childish, metaphorical or grotesque, just to name a few possibilities. A quick look to different examples, even without analyzing them in detail, offers a panorama of the expressive possibilities of graphic narratives to address trauma, and that's why I want to show you as many examples as possible.

Let's have a look at the first one. Thirteen years after the sudden death of her two-year-old son, British author Nichola Streeten wrote *Billy, Me & You*, an account of how she and her husband coped with the loss of their son. The result is a graphic narrative full of pain, but also humour, where childish black and white drawings with many blank spaces are combined with real-life photos of the last things Billy touched, such as his toys or his shoes. The drawings offer emotion, since they convey a sense of urgency for sharing the trauma, of getting rid of it, but it is an emotion deprived of sentimentalism. Blank spaces are on full panels, sorry, on full page panels, that is panels that occupy the entire page, also called splash panels. Pace, or the rhythm, helps us to process the story without being overwhelmed by emotion.

Women authors have been using comics for many decades to evoke trauma and abuse, but also to denounce and fight sexism. As this page by Moroccan author Zainab Fasiki illustrates, in it, she recreates the same woman, subject to the surveillance of masculine gaze. She writes underneath the eye *rajul*, which means “man” in Arabic. So, regardless

of the modesty of her attire, she is going to be attacked. This is a visual metaphor that summarizes how sexism controls women's bodies.

Many LGBTQI+ narratives give visibility to vulnerability. In *P, La mia adolescenza trans*, P, the Italian author, the author's alter ego, rather, explores discrimination, abuse and self-hate, deploring how she is objectified because she refuses to accept the gender, binarism, man-woman as a non-binary trans person. Graphically, the author opts for oversimplified lines and a histrionic yellow to highlight the dissonance between how she is perceived by society and how she perceives herself.

Yellow is also used by Iranian author, Shagahayegh Moazzami, in *Hantee*, where she tells her own story, her difficulties to overcome her traumatic life in Iran, before migrating to Canada. Opting for a symbolic approach, she personifies all her fears and the effects of a repressive, violent and sexist education in an imaginary woman, a member of the morality police that undermines her thoughts to overcome her trauma and live a better life in Canada. Moazzami combines expressionistic pencil drawings with yellow backgrounds whenever this awful woman appears to emphasize her inability to escape her own repressive upbringing and fears. And this doesn't stop when the migration is fulfilled, when she is in Canada, but these fears follow her to her destination.

Also Iranian, but based in Italy, Majid Bita narrates his own childhood in Nado in Iran. When he reproduced bombings, executions, etc., he draws on lyrics of real creatures instead of bullets, planes or missiles. With this strategy, Bita tries to recreate the mind of a child who doesn't understand what is going on around him, but tries to protect himself projecting a fantasy.

In these two manga examples, the first one is by Kabi Nagata, the aesthetic varies. In this case, this is a chibi style, cute simplified drawings, but with a certain dose of histrionics. And in the second example, by Inio Asano, in his work *Goodnight Punpun*, we have a dramatic combination of anthropomorphic characters, birds, realistic backgrounds based in photographs, a feature which is constant in manga and manhua, if you are readers, you know already about this, and also grotesque characters. Visual metaphors abounding traumatic recollections of rape and abuse, as this one by British author Una, representing the roots of the protagonist's trauma and the wave of sexual abuse in a literal way. You see that there are literal weights and roots here.

The most realistic approaches to traumatic events are found in documentary comics, not autobiographies as the above mentioned examples, although the artist may appear. This page with a photograph and a map by Peruvian author Jesus Cossio shows that the need to document goes hand in hand with a more realistic style. The same happens in the second example, *Vivos se los Ilevaron* by Andalucia Soloff, Marco Parra, and Anahi Galaviz, which tells the story of 43 Mexican students, who were kidnapped and killed by

narcos. The creators take a naturalistic stance to stress the individuality of the victims and to pay a tribute to them and their families.

This is not always the case, as in *Grass* by Korean author Keum Suk Gendry-Kim, who retells the story of a survival of sexual slavery, Ok-Sun Lee, who was kidnapped by the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War. Here the author's style is usually schematic but expressive, with simple ink strokes, but it becomes expressionistic in the crudest moments. She also uses ellipses to preserve the dignity of Ok-Sun, when she tells about the first time she was raped, but it's very powerful because you know what is going on, and she's preserving the dignity but not showing too many details, but the impact is very emotional, nevertheless. The fact that most of documentary and autobiographic comics are not realistic does not entail a lesser ethical engagement reader-author. In fact, it's quite a contrary, or reader-protagonist, it’s quite a contrary. According to Scott McCloud's theory on cartooning, and I quote, “this is a form of amplification through simplification”.

When we abstract an image through cartooning, we are not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By striping down an image to its essential meaning, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realist art can't. The amplification of meaning through cartooning opens the way for an identification reader-protagonist. Since the schematic image is more universal, when you see a cartoon, you see yourself, and you just have to think about emoticons, for instance. This also explains the success, recognition, and appeal of *Maus* with its gallery of anthropomorphic characters that we have alluded to before.

After this overview of graphic narratives, mostly autobiographies but not exclusively, as examples of resilience against trauma, I'll continue with an in-depth analysis of a work that addresses resilience from the perspective of a survivor of rape and sexual abuse, and the possibilities for solidarity among women readers, with which this book opens. I'm referring to *Commute*, an illustrated memoir of female shame published in 2019 by a US author, Erin Williams, in a graphic memoir in which she recreates an ordinary day in her life in a chapters devoted to ordinary activities, her morning routines, walking the dog in her neighborhood, waiting for the train in the platform, commuting from Westchester County to Manhattan, walking to her office, taking a break, returning by train to Westchester, and getting home with her baby girl. The day recreated in Williams's life evokes any walkway in the office life, but also echoes the daily journey to walk and back that millions of women repeat every weekday. Recreating a regular work day with its recurrent routines is stating that the everyday is bound with repetition. We always repeat the same routines every single day.

Williams's routines evoke the same repeated routines experienced by herself, but also by many women around the world. In exploring the poetics of the everyday, Williams partakes of a well-known modernist trope, the one-day narrative, and you know about this, because probably you have read James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Mrs. *Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf or even Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*, and all these novels take place on a single day. This is a one-day narrative. By addressing a routinary weekday, Williams's personal experience becomes ingrained with human experience.

Train rides occupy also a central position in Williams's recollection of the everyday. Commuting turns to be an extended metaphor for the everyday and other daily activities such as skin routines, dog walks, tea making, walking, or breastfeeding are placed in the margins of train rides. Revealingly, Williams's daily commute interspersed with traumatic memories of sexual harassment, abuse, rape, and alcoholism, and reflections about the objectification of women in a patriarchal society and the resulting female shame they endure. Williams's criticism delves on how patriarchal consumerist society turns women either into sexualized commodities which are always available for men or invisiblized when they are no longer their object of desire. In this contingency between the self and the collective, trauma, usually relegated to the invisibility of the private, emerges slowly but a steady pace between the crevices of everyday life.

This is triggered by situations of female objectification and what writer Laura Bates defines as “everyday sexism”. Bates started her eponymous project in 2012, documenting in Twitter and in a website, which is still active, stories of sexism faced on a daily basis by ordinary women in ordinary places. The result was thousands of stories from all over the world. Erin Williams's project in *Commute* coincides with Bates's approach in her project and homonyous book *Everyday Sexism*. I'm quoting Bates “to prove how the steady drip-drip-drip of sexism and sexualization and objectification is connected to the assumption of ownership and control over women's bodies and how the background noise of harassment and disrespect connects to the assertion of power that is violence and rape”.

Thus, catcalling or groping share the same cultural framework of sexual abuse and gender-based violence. In the graphic memoir, this is illustrated through examples of everyday sexism while commuting that remind the author about past episodes of sexual violence. For instance, the steady gaze of a man in an almost empty train at night triggers the memories of the first time she was raped by John, the cousin of a boy she liked, when she was 15. The result of this diary of everydayness is surprisingly fresh and poetic. The absence of panels and gutters and the page layout, consistent entirely of splash pages, that is, there are no panels, the page is the panel in itself, forces the reader to focus at a slow pace on ideas and facts that otherwise might be too overwhelming.

Her powerful prose resonates in the various pages in the absence of backgrounds. She differentiates the events of the day she is recording from the memories with a simple device and you have probably seen it. The frames of the splash pages containing memories resemble thought balloons. Look at the frames of these pages. Those which record the current timeline bleed to the edge of the page. So, there is not this bubbly frame. Instead of recurring to visual metaphors to describe her trauma, as for instance Una is becoming, as we have seen in a previous example, or to recreate with detail rape and other episodes of abuse, as other authors might have done, such as Phoebe Gloekner with *A Child's Life*, she evokes spaces and objects that serve as metonyms for such trauma. For instance, the room where she was abused or the back garden where she was dropped after the assault. That is, she focuses on spaces which are commonplace or that are connected to the everyday. Then she juxtaposes the memories of those places with similar ones during her daily commuting.

The simplicity and schematism of the drawings adds to the matter of fact attached an ironic tone with a poetic penchant. One-dayness and everydayness are shown through laconic black and white drawings with concessions to color for illustrating less repetitive aspects of her experience. For instance, her baby, the sight of some flowers in the street, herself after giving birth. Color also serves sporadically to highlight certain traumatic memories such as the schematic green pool of vomit after being raped or the blue walls, this is cornflower blue as the author states, in the room where she and Willy Lee saw her first dick. As I have mentioned earlier, repetition is connected to everyday life but also to everyday sexism, as experienced by all women regardless of their background and nationality.

Such repetitions are mirrored by Williams's self-representation. She replicates the same facial features and body postures and also the faces of ex-boyfriends, people she encounters on the train and other secondary characters. As Kai Mikkonen states, repetition plays a relevant expressive function in comics and *Commute* displays many different forms of repetition, even dialogues are repeated. If we focus on Williams as a character, we can see that she is a continuing character whose facial features and postures are constantly repeated. This multiple repetition has multiple effects.

To emphasize objectification of women in society, to create an emotional engagement of the reader or protagonist-reader, the constant focus is on her, it's on Williams, so she drills her expression on the reader, to show her helplessness in abusive situations by repeating the same dialogues, to reinforce a sense of matter-of-factness as metaphorical recreation of the traumatic impact of abuse and sexism. So, her recreation is fixed, rigid, almost lifeless, showing that trauma is an impasse which suspends life, which is put on

hold. Regarding trauma, Williams discusses at length her mechanism to cope with it, although it's not, we cannot say that she overcomes it completely, at least at the moment in which she's narrating the events, because the events keep repeating, which she's narrating, and she is still under the effects of trauma. As she recalls, “I think about it”, referring to her rape, “every day, here's what I learned, that my body belongs to whoever has the strength to overcome its resistance, what it feels like to be choked, that men will take things from you when you are too young to recognize that they are yours to give. This is how I learned that you can dissociate in order to survive”, capital letters in the original.

Dissociation is her mechanism of choice to survive trauma, and that is the origin of her addiction, too. If she cannot feel her body because she is drunk, then men cannot harm it when she dates or has sex with someone. Trauma scholars show that the re-experience of the trauma itself re-evokes a dissociative reaction. So, the different abusive experiences she repeatedly encounters make her re-experience trauma again and reinforce this dissociation. Such dissociation can be also appreciated at a graphic textual level.

It translates into a detached ironic tone that contrasts with the harrowing events she narrates. At a graphic level, her drawings do not emphasize morbid details nor recreate painful episodes, but those ellipses are compensated with straightforward texts. Regarding the different uses of iconicity, Williams uses a constant graphic style. Her characters are slightly cartoonish, but still seem to portray real people. These faces are identified via names and documented by the author in her daily life and recollected as memories.

There is an exception that stands out, that is the face of John, who raped her when she was 15. His face is absolutely schematic, an exaggerated smiling icon accompanied by the words, “And Raped Me”. There is an evident dissonance between the overt smiling face, you can see that it is very exaggerated, and this word that provokes a visceral, chilling, sinister reaction on the reader. On the one hand, the erasure of the rapist's features might be a product of the trauma endured at the time. Repression of memories is frequent among PTSD patients, for instance.

On the other, this depiction becomes problematic. Such icons, according to McCloud, demand our participation to make them work. In a patriarchal society where all women are potential victims of rape, for instance, just in the US where the comics is set, where the graphic memoir is set, rape averages out to one every one-two minutes. So, in this kind of patriarchal societies, all men can be perceived as potential rapists, and that's the problematic thing about this smiling icon. This identification might seem sinister and reductionist, but rather than representing all men, the author captures and conjures all

rapists into that icon. This is evident in the last page of the chapter with the words,"and we women, we remember you". So, she challenges all rapists and calls for solidarity among all women to fight sexism and to fight rape.

Now moving to my conclusions, Erin Williams's *Commute*, as well as the rest of the works presented in these two sessions, are illustrations of the power of graphic narratives to engage with representations of trauma. Williams's personal experience recalls for an identification with all women, as the subtitle suggests, with the allusion to female shame, it's a collective female shame. Perhaps not all women suffer sexual trauma or have been victims of gender-based violence, but all women do suffer sexism on a daily basis, and yet they are expected to deal with it.

What Williams implies is that everyday sexism is what all women have in common, and that sexism is codified in the everyday, whether in advertising and media, with its objectification of women, or in public spaces and streets, in the internet, in the behavior of many men, but also many women, since they are domesticated by patriarchy. Graphic projects such as *Commute* complement larger projects such as *Everyday Sexism* or "Me Too", where an intrinsic sense of solidarity in sharing stories of resilience. There is this intrinsic sense of solidarity in sharing these stories. The more often these patterns of abuse are denounced, the more they are visibilized, questioned, and rejected. In all graphic narratives addressed in these two sessions, most of them involving autobiographical or witness accounts, protagonists gain agency by giving visibility to their own trauma and vulnerability, a choice that implies resilience.

Some of the authors, such as Spiegelman and Williams, allude to the fact that controlling little things, everyday things, and accepting the immense majority that they cannot control, gives them limited power, gives them limited agency. In Williams' case, there is resistance in common vulnerability. By sharing her own vulnerability and everyday sexism as a recurrent feature, Williams invokes solidarity among women against an abuse they all suffer. In addition, *Maus* invites readers to engage with a memorialization, or commemoration, if you want to use the term used by El Refaie, of the Holocaust, raising an ethical awareness. Holocaust memorialization invokes a commitment to the future, a promise made to ensure that atrocity will never be tolerated, that those past events will never be repeated.

For philosopher Hannah Arendt, only acquiring a social contract, societies can guarantee that previous crimes could not be repeated by using the force of mutual promise. So, somehow Spiegelman partakes of this social contrast by giving visibility to those events that, when he started to write about them in the 1980s, were not as frequent in popular culture and in documentaries in general. The Holocaust was not discussed in popular culture in the early 80s.

As I have emphasized through these sessions, autobiographic comics are artifacts of resilience in themselves, since cartoonists transform their trauma into a material commemoration that can be shared, read, and interpreted, even raising ethical awareness and identification. At the graphic level, these works show a wide variety of registers and I hope you have seen, you have perceived that, whether humorous, serious, dramatic, or undramatic, or a bit of everything.

Also, they show a wide variety of aesthetics, grotesque, cute, expressionistic, abstract, realistic, metaphorical, cartoonish, schematic, repetitive, etc. With this variety of registers and aesthetic, graphic narratives illustrate that there are as many styles of graphic trauma as traumatic experiences are. In their effective, solidarity, and ethic approach to traumatic events and lives experiencing with disasters, war, illness, or migration, graphic narratives give visibility to stories that may pass otherwise unnoticed, that are not part of History with capital “H”, that do not reach history books, but are important anyway. In doing so, they are able to promote a stronger engagement with readers without reproducing or reenacting trauma. They all offer examples, whether individual or collective, of agency, resilience, and organization.

I hope you have enjoyed these two sessions. Thank you so much for your attention and I'll be willing to answer any questions you may have. Thank you, thank you so much again.