

Broken dreams/Broken wings: an interpretation of violence against women through Mexican graphic narratives

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In recent years, Mexican comics have been developing visual and narrative expressions that explore new ways of storytelling different from the caricature and satirical comics made on decades before. Humorous comics are part of a tradition of visual representation of Mexican history that extends to the beginning of the twentieth century. Given the high illiteracy rate, visual media was particularly important since it was a medium that could be disseminated in society and contribute to the creation of a visual imaginary and a graphic code. Humorous comics and more specifically caricature, was one the most popular ways to criticize the government, demystify historical events or evidence social and political problems. Therefore, caricature became an expression that offered an interpretation of the reality through humour and irony.

Even though, humours comics were not the only visual tools to express discontent and through time, artists developed graphic devices as protest forms, we can affirm that caricature was one of the most popular. Although, in recent years, Mexican comic book artists have been developing different visual and narrative strategies to either criticize the political and social conditions of the country or present alternative ways to interpret and understand the past. Such as Augusto Mora in his graphic novel *Grito de Victoria* (published in 2016 by La cifra) or Luis Fernando in his autobiographical graphic novel *La pirámide cuarteada. Evocaciones del 68* (published in 2017 by Resistencia in coedition with the Ministry of Culture) which both offer an alternative interpretation of the two civil mobilizations and its implications at the present time. This suggest that on the last ten years, problems have been perceived differently, not simply by the authors but also by the audiences who are open to alternative interpretations of historical

events and furthermore, unconventional ways to speak about the contemporary reality through the language of comics.

H.G. Santarriaga, a Mexican comic book artist well-known for his visual style and ability to address a variety of genders, is one the authors that has been expanding the visual and narrative devices to speak about the contemporary Mexico. Santarriaga is a prolific author which stories are mainly in the gender of science fiction, cyber-punk (as the graphic novel *Cuervo eléctrico*, 2017) and terror (such as the graphic novel *Bajo la piel de la bruja*, 2019) represented in a visual style characterized by thick lines and a great use of contrast, specially between black and white, as it is showed in the graphic novel *Luz eterna* (2016). Although, since 2018 he has been working on a trilogy of graphic novels that explore, from the point of view of female characters, the violence, restriction and suffering that a woman can experience in the contemporary Mexico.

On the last two years, Santarriaga published a collection of graphic novels entitled *Sueños rotos (Broken dreams)* which, from the point of view of a female protagonist, based on true stories and verified facts, speak about prostitution and human trafficking. After a process of research and the study of different cases, the artist created a fictional narration that addresses, with more fidelity, the problem of violence against women than the mass media does in Mexico. Santarriaga, as a creator, gives voice to all those women who are victims of abuse, aggression and subjugation in order to make the reader conscious of a situation that has been happening for a long time ago in Mexico and has been normalised.

Santarriaga is well known in the Mexican graphic narrative's scene by his characteristic visual style and his stories frequently situated in an urban scenario or a dystopian world. Even though, the characters are situated in imaginary places it is possible to note that the author has a special interest on the social implications of the mechanisms of power, restriction and violence

than characterize the present times. Through his comics, the author creates stories that can be understood as cultural expressions that are framing part of the reality of our time and pointing out the violence, poverty and corruption that characterizes the social and political Mexican environment nowadays. By doing that he creates metaphorical stories that offer an alternative way to understand the reality of our time different from the satirical caricatures or the official networks of information.

In that sense, the reader's social consciousness is activated by Santarriaga's allegorical stories or reactivated if they are influenced by their social imaginary –such as the media's narrative forms in which the news are broadcasted–. The reader's consciousness can also be activated by photographs, videos and other visual devices created by the mass media which influenced the process of producing beliefs and ways to understand the world. In that sense, we can affirm that the readers link personal experiences and reception process to a public media discourse and create a frame through which they understand the world.

Thus, frames organize thinking and impact on the mechanisms of reception and understanding of facts. One example of this it is the way in which Mexican mass media informs to the society the different cases of female victims of homicide. One specific case offers us an example of how the story of a victim it is transformed into a media spectacle and a later cause of public indignation. On February of 2020, Ingrid Escamilla, a young Mexican woman, was killed by her partner. The crime was characterized by a terrible use of violence since he skinned her, mutilated her, and throw parts of her body to the toilet in front of her teenage son who had a mental condition.

The case was cover by the media by presenting photographs of the body mutilated and an impressive image of the criminal showing his face and chest covered by the blood of his victim; the images were published on national newspapers and other visual media emphasizing the brutal

characteristics of the crime over the dignity of the victim. By presenting the photographs of the mutilated body a phenomenon of double victimization happened over her, reinforcing the tendency to normalise the use of violence against women and showing the murder as a spectacle available to the public domain.

The language used on the articles published in national circulation newspapers emphasized the cruelty of the crime by using sensationalist headlines like: “Descarnada” (as a play on words referring to the removing of the flesh, published on the newspaper *La prensa* on February 11 of 2020), “La culpa la tuvo Cupido” (“It was Cupid’s fault”, framing the murder as a passionate crime in the newspaper *Pásala*, published on the same day). Furthermore, the front page of *La prensa* showed a picture of the body of the victim, another one of the perpetrator showing his face and chest covered in blood and a text saying: “Asesinan a mujer, dentro de un edificio en la GAM, y pretendían dejar solo el esqueletito; hay un detenido” (A woman murdered, inside of a building at the Gustavo Amadero (a Mexico City’s municipality) and it was pretended to leave only the little skeleton; a man was arrested).

The language used on these articles function as mediator between the crime and the perception of it. In this receptive perspective, we notice how these texts exists dependently of “[...] grands récits [master narratives]—the social discourses of an era that give violence meaning and constitute powerful argumentative apparatuses thanks to their narrative dimension. Founded in ‘a vast plot with its characters, development, and outcome,’ these discourses leave a lasting mark on our minds. In order to think women’s violence, it thus makes sense to undertake an inventory of its typical narrative forms. The stakes are both political and epistemological” (Cardi, 4).

This case also shows us how the rhetoric and visual coding contribute to understand specific situations, experiences, and sequences of actions. Furthermore, the role of media on the creation of a discursive representation of violence against women.

“Theorists vary in their interpretations of the impact of media representations on social realities. However, a common shift in understandings of this impact includes both the recognition of the shaping power of media representations as well as the contexts in which texts are co-constructed and reconstituted by audiences and the social environment in which they are embedded (van Zoonen, 199)” (Buiten, 117).

Since the publication of the articles mentioned, a number of complaints were made by readers and members of the civil society which condemned the publication of the body of the victim, the absence of respect to the case and the spectacularizing way in which the event was presented. Due to the social mobilization that started on the social media, government employees made public statements condemning the increasing number of women murdered in the country although, the morbidity in which this particular case was covered by media and a legal action against the exposure of the body of the victim on the press did not received special attention from them.

This case shows us an example about how frequently the media has been contributing to a process of normalization of the use of violence against women and in that sense, subtly reinforcing aggression specially between polarized sectors of society. After the controversy that the publication of the photographs caused and the critics of the overall coverage of the case presented as a display of entrainment, public manifestations on the streets happened and simultaneously a number of comments on social media were published online justifying the crime and condemning the protests by using expressions with a considerable misogynist content.

“It should be noted that a variety of discourses circulate through the print media, and a range of discourses (often contradictory) can be drawn upon to formulate a single news story” (Buiten, 117) although, a certain use of language and images contributed in one hand to spectacularised violence and on the other hand, raised a discussion about how media is covering the facts and the creation of a discourse of crimes against women in which the role of the perpetrators in either minimized or normalised as part of one of many expressions of the social conditions of Mexico. By this rhetoric, it is suggested that violence against women is part of the Mexican society and therefore it must be accepted, since “[...] it continues to be reported in ways that tacitly accept it as part of our society. Its unspoken encouragement that women accept and live with the threat of violence” (Buiten, 117).

The case of Ingrid Escamilla reveals the importance of alternative narratives that transform the process of reception and understanding situations like this one. Authors like HG Santarriaga, in the graphic narratives flied, uses a series of visual and narrative mechanisms to speak about topics like violence against women, human trafficking, prostitution and the annulation the human condition which differ from the treatment and approach of mass media and social media to these topics. Though the use of colour, contrast and the use of testimony, the artist managed to create a voice that coincides with the point of view and way to understand the world of a victim.

The first volume that conforms the series of *Sueños rotos* is *Sueños rotos: Sofía* (2018), named by the protagonist, which tells the story of a young girl who is victim of human trafficking. Published by the independent publishing house Nostromo¹, this graphic novel

¹ HG Santarriaga is one of the founders and editors of the independent house Nostromo and very recently, the graphic novel *Sueños rotos: Sofía* has been translated to English and published on Kindle.

explores a problem, based on true stories and veridical facts, and speaks about human trafficking and sexual forced labour.

After a research and the study of different true stories, the artist creates a fictional narration that offers a testimony that metaphorically represents, with fidelity but avoiding spectacularism, a case of abuse and subjugation against young women. As a creator, Santarriaga has the ability to articulate a voice that recreates a specific case that represents one of the many young women who has been victims of human trafficking in Mexico.

Sofía, the main character of this graphic novel, represents a 14-year-old girl who lives in a small town, who fantasize with a life full of excitement and away from the boring tranquillity of her hometown. It seems that her dreams will become true when she meets a hunter disguise as an adorable and attractive gentleman. But in a noticeably short period, the illusion of happiness transforms into a scenario where she loses herself and is subdued by those who oppress her by cruelty. Sofía represents one of many girls and women who fall into the intricate trap of trickery and became prisoners of terror, living on the precarious line where their life does not longer belong to them.

Considering the argument of the story and the physiological construction of the protagonist, we can argue that the author is giving individuality and identity to one of the many numbers that are presented in the charts of the official sources of information about human trafficking and at the same time, avoiding sensationalistic language of the tabloid sources. Even though we can argue that media has a different intention from a graphic novel in terms of production and reception, it is important to emphasize that the contribution of the author relies on the creation of an alternative frame to situate a problem like this and by doing that, he is also offering an different point of view in which the attention is focused on the victim. Since the author did a proper research, analysis and summarization, he created an individual voice that

possess the common elements of the testimonies of the victims of human trafficking: manipulation, deceiving, self-deception, restriction, violence and forced labour.

Also, in this graphic novel, the artist takes the risk to develop his artistic style and takes distance from his previous works to explore different ways to tell a story. By using different colours, specifically green and red, the artist invades the panels by one of these colours depending on what is happening in the story, therefore the colour becomes into a mechanism to express meaning. In that sense, the colours become like a narrator that suggest to the reader what the feeling of the panel is. The colours also bring tension and singularity to every page, making this work a visual expression of a cruel reality.

The colour red represents the decline, the downward spiral of violence and the brutal imposition of authority against the protagonist and the green, express innocence and happiness, those small pieces of joy lost in a sea of pain that Sofia experienced. Through this story, Santarriaga makes us conscious of a situation that has been happening from a long time ago in Mexico, but it has not been solved since the social and spatial vulnerability of the victims has remained unspoken.

On the other hand, we have *Sueños rotos: Julia* (2019), the second graphic novel that gives continuity to this collection. If the first one speaks about human trafficking, the second one talks about prostitution and the deprivation of freedom. At the beginning of the graphic novel, we get know Julia, a young woman who dreams about flying to the moon through her dancing. Julia, as many young women, has illusions and aspirations that are represented on her wings. These wings are not just part of her body they are an essential part of who she is. The wings are a symbol of her individuality, of what makes her special and unique. It might seem that Julia is just one of many although, she represents an important number of women whose life ends up destroyed under an illusion that gradually takes the form of terrible and unbearable reality.

Santarriaga manage to present Julia's story with originality by using the panels as a visual representation of the repetition and the deteriorating rhythm of addiction, violence, and restriction. A contender ballerina becomes a pole dancer into a table dance and in time, not by decision, into a prostitute. The bird with those beautiful wings that were designed to fly and get to the sky becomes into a prisoner of a cage "La jaula", a restricted space without any windows, where "Los monstruos" (clients described as monsters) can watch, touch and use the creatures that live in the cage who can never go out, who are not allowed to see the sky and live confined into a space where drugs and constant beating are used as mechanisms of control. The creatures that live inside this cage live their own war against each other. Although, this is a not a battle in where the strongest survives, this a story where it does not matter what is done, at the end, the fight is going to be useless.

The absolute control that the characters situated in position of power had over the protagonist and the other female characters represent the symptomatic differentiation of gender identities and the gradual process of the annulation of human condition. It is possible that we can find a sense of inevitability in this graphic novel, some could say even an absence of hope but the great achievement of this story it is that it shows the reality of many women in Mexico. This a story without concessions, it is not gentle and its does not offer a kind end to please the reader, on the contrary, it shows a phenomenon with its complexities and fatal consequences. In a sense, Julia could be another case that increases the numbers, but her story shows us how the individuality can be suppressed under the restriction, the physical and psychological control, and the deprivation of free will. Julia loses not only her freedom, she losses her name, her wings and finally her individuality. By representing the mechanisms of power and the life conditions of a victim of prostitution, the graphic novel condemns the assertion of power by those clients who

brutalise sex workers and those in charge of them, evidencing a situation that is not isolated from social and psychological causes.

The graphic novels of the serie *Sueños rotos* highlight the experience and testimony of the victim and simultaneously exposes the role of the perpetrators evidencing a critical vision of the causes and consequences of such violence against women. The voice of those affected by violence is represented in a context in which also another women are part of the system of oppression and violence like Mamá Cecilia in the graphic novel *Sueños rotos: Sofía* or Mamá Celia in *Sueños rotos: Julia*, both elder women, who function as vigilant figures that monitor the group of women locked up in the cage and provide them to the essential conditions to keep the prisoners alive.

Graphic narratives like these enable us to notice how alternative comics create narratives that challenge and criticize the journalistic frames and offer a different way to understand the reality. Both graphic novels, *Sueños rotos: Julia* and *Sueños rotos: Sofía*, involved an intersubjectively understanding of the present represented by symbols and a visual language that discuss how violence against women is also defined and sharpened through cultural expressions.

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