

A FILM OF ONE'S OWN

The Contemporary Female Animated Self-Portrayal

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The female animated self-portrait is a relatively recent phenomenon, related to the increasing number of independent studios, schools and institutions that have guaranteed creative freedom to female animators. Through their animated self-portraits, animatrices have explored their own identity, developing new discourses and representation models for a subgenre that existed from the early days of cinema animation.

Now the recent blooming of animated documentary has stimulated the production of animated self-portraits and self-biographical films by new female animators, and by artists coming from other disciplines, such as the comic book designer Marjane Satrapi. Her film *Persepolis* (2007) has been a pioneering experience for the French Bande Dessinée and will be a focus of the paper.

A key aspect of this paper is to elucidate the significant differences between the previous generations of female animators – summarized by Jayne Pilling in *Women & Animation* (1992) – and this new generation, whose self-portraits do not necessarily reflect their artistic work and their relation to themselves as women but appeal more to universal issues and conflicts.

SIGNS OF IDENTITY OF ANIMATED FEMALE SELF-PORTRAITS

As Virginia Woolf pointed out in *A Room of One's Own*, female artistic creation requires two essential conditions: economic independence and a place to write (1929, p. 25). Moreover, animated filmmaking is a product of teamwork; although women were recruited in animation industry since it required division of labor, women directors were a noteworthy exception for decades. Nevertheless, as soon as they had the opportunity, animatrices displayed in their films the results of the Feminist cultural revolution, pulling themselves from their introversion in a production's secondary role to eventually become protagonists of their own work.

The late appearance of these self-portraits endowed them with distinguishable signs of identity, establishing a divergence from the professional model created by men, first depicted by Winsor McCay and followed by the Fleischer Brothers in their series *Out of the Inkwell* (1921-27), who fashioned a cliché for cartoon comedy. Different to this idea of the animator as demiurge of a fictional universe, women have proposed a model closer to documentary, thanks to the following contributions: 1) the emergence of a *variety of spatial contexts*; 2) *diversity of characters' typologies*; 3) *multiplicity of voices*; and 4) the introduction of *autobiographical elements*.



La animación, una habitación propia para la mujer creadora (This Could Be Me, Michaela Pavlátová, 1995).

As an illustration, the film *This Could Be Me* (1995), by Michaela Pavlátová, describes the artist in relation to her spatial context and her personal relationships. Unlike the male self-portrait, where the male limits his self-depiction to himself as professional animator, in this film there is no separation between the animator and the person.

Pavlátová's self-portrait is structured as a series of metonymies that express the variables of her existence: thus appears her city, Prague; her house and studio; and the pub, where she observes the behavior of people; the photos of her relatives. Pavlátová does not offer an ultimate version of herself, because

the self is one of the most *animated* of entities: one day we wake up in a good mood and we feel attractive, but the following day we can be depressed, and our self-esteem decreases. This mutability affects the things surrounding the animatrice, because even the city of Prague, in Pavlatova's own words, "is big and small at the same time". So, her self-depiction approaches to those fluctuating, fragmentary, ephemeral and spontaneous things, as a willful but incomplete hypothesis.¹

Another consequence of women writing their own films has been the creation of a great variety of characters, essentially different from those projected by the male imagination. This has freed women from negative gender stereotypes, disrupting the association between femininity and fragility. Many female characters created by animatrices appear as thoughtful, inquisitive, fighting women, as a projection of their own creative personality, becoming more evident in their self-portraits. Very often, these characters have been shaped using the body of the animator as a reference, through means such as pixillation, rotoscoping or photographic cut-outs. Thus, animatrices have vindicated the natural body of women, of all ages and all sets of features, subverting existing stereotypes of beauty. For instance, In *Touched by an Angel* (2000), the elderly Beatrijs Hulskes depicts herself as a mediating goddess of Nature, a woman who also contains the seed of the Divine, as Susana García ramon notices (2004, p. 110).

As creators, animatrices have a voice that is not unique but multiple. The mutual interview as *modus operandi* reinforces this documentary perspective. In *Interview* (1979) Caroline Leaf and Veronika Soul deliver their reflection on animation as a medium, and as a mode of living, appearing as independent women who work autonomously – but not in creative isolation. They establish a dialogue with other artists, other women, legitimating unconventional animation processes. Both have opposite views on animation, yet *they can create together*, as the beautiful final scene of the film demonstrates.

Eventually, shifting attention from meditation about the medium to testimony about their lives and that of their families, animatrices have introduced rich and complex autobiographical nuances into their self-portraiture. Faith Hubley's film testament, *My Universe Inside Out* (1996), recounts the joys and traumas of her long existence, serving as a universal inspiration for other animators.

¹ According to Jacques Derrida in *Mémoires d'aveugle* (Memoirs of the Blind, 1990), the self-portrait is always a hypothesis, because artists cannot look directly at themselves while they paint. Therefore, the picture is necessarily proposing a conjecture to the viewer (1990: 24).

But, if there has been a *female* autobiographical animated film that has become a social phenomenon, it is *Persepolis* (2007), the adaptation of Marjane Satrapi's comic, co-directed by herself and Vincent Paronnaud, which is the focus of the next section.

MARJANE SATRAPI AND PERSEPOLIS

The long feature *Persepolis* is intimately concerned with the living experience of the Iranian artist: when it was scheduled to have its world premiere at Cannes, the Islamic Republic found this choice offensive, arguing that the movie “presented an unrealistic face of the achievements and results of the glorious Islamic Revolution in some of its part” (Davoudi, 2007, p. 42), and censored the film being shown in Teheran.

However, Marjane Satrapi had to move to France in 1994. She became a member of L'Association, a collective of artists that promotes new comic talents. The most notable are autobiographical works, such as Dupuy and Berberian's *A Cartoonists' Diary*, Lewis Trondheim's *My Circumstances*, Guy Delisle's *Pyongyang* and David B. *Epileptic*. However, Satrapi wrote and designed her comic *Persepolis* (2000-2003), having as a primary influence Art Spiegelman's portrait of the Holocaust *Maus* (1980-1991).



Marjane Satrapi comparten la dirección de la autobiografía de la primera, Persépolis (2007).

Although she shared the responsibility of film direction with Paronnaud, Satrapi's graphical personality and her experiential view dominate the entire feature. Despite Satrapi's personal involvement with the story, the passing of time has helped her to reach a

historical perspective, a reflection opposed to anger –the seed of extremism and fanaticism. Satrapi seeks to build bridges between the Occident and the Middle East, to warn us against the war game of identities – the obsession with identifying the enemy, by giving a name to danger, calling it terrorism – that still threatens peace (Satrapi, 2008, p. 47).

Persepolis is a story about identity, roots, their loss and the eventual impossibility of their recovery. The first part of the film focuses on the

days of revolution, when Marjane's moral principles are forged. She acquires awareness of the past and the present by contrasting multiple voices, starting by her family members and acquaintances, with the official *truth* –spread by the Government. The influence of her uncle Anouche, who is imprisoned and executed, is particularly important for Marjane, who becomes the recipient of an inheritance of knowledge and acquires the duty to transmit it in turn.

The second part of the film is focused on the Iran-Iraq War and its effects on Marjane, who has to leave for a safer place in Europe, where she confronts loneliness and misunderstanding. Despite her absence from her homeland during the conflict, her exile is akin to the situation described by Marguerite Duras in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959): the tragedy of a young woman, shaved and locked in a cellar of Nevers, is the tragedy of a bomb-ravaged city. The woman is a synecdoche of her entire country; she exemplifies its tragedy, because expatriates are a consequence of war –too often forgotten.

The third part illustrates her own feeling of estrangement when she returns to post-war Iran, where the whole society seems to be disorientated. The country had oscillated between two extremes: the loss of identity during the Sha's dictatorship, its absorbing of American culture and consumerism; and the extreme retreat into itself, its embracing of nationalism and religious fanaticism, a kind of disease from an over-saturated self, which denies expression in most of its forms. At the end of the film, when Marjane comes to realize she will be unable to succeed in Iran as a woman, she begins the road again, carrying her Persian legacy to start in France anew.

The tragic aspects of her autobiography evoke Jacques Derrida's notion of the self-portrait as a portrait of ruins, with the artist confessing a fault and asking for forgiveness (1990, p. 117). The experience of death, the loss of her beloved beings, articulates her biography alongside the political and social devastation of her country. However, this story is crossed by an invisible sublimation of pain in the eventual success of Satrapi's professional career. Even though the story of her life is centred on her miseries, Satrapi is a winner.

PUTTING TOGETHER THE MALE AND THE FEMALE

Fortunately, the female self-portrait has surpassed its confinement in the field of independent animation short films – and its reduced distribution –, opening the way for subsequent adaptations and original creations that surpass the customary models for commercial animation,

as for instance Ari Folman's successful film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). *Persepolis* also exemplifies a flourishing coordination between a female and a male director, achieving a view on history, human values and intimate concerns that has touched people from very different countries. Nevertheless, before this harmonization took place, it was necessary that women generated critical reflection about their roles in society, and specifically discussion about their functions in the animation industry –having come a long way since women found opportunities equal to those of their male colleagues.

During the Seventies, films such as *Interview* – or Candy Kugel's collective project *My Film, My Film, My Film* (1983) – appeared as a means to reinforce the status of women in animation, underlining their plurality and their divergences. As opposed to Evelyn Lambart, Claire Parker, or Joy Batchelor, whose careers were associated with or even subordinated to a male partner's, Soul and Leaf incarnated for the first time an emerging model of animatrice who worked on her own.

In more recent years, the legitimation of a professional status has become less important than the reflection of the animatrice's personal legacy. This reflection about cultural and familial heritage has opened the field for autobiographical issues, though the accent of the story is displaced to new interests and disrupting views. For instance, in *Ici par ici* (2006), Diane Obomsawin uses self-caricature to portray the consequences that the divorce of parents has on their children, depicting her childhood and adolescence divided between two countries and two families.



La autocaricatura tiñe de humor la perspectiva femenina sobre el drama familiar propio en Ici par ici (Diane Obomsawin, 2006).

The current mushrooming of animated documentary and autobiographical films makes it necessary to question the validity of certain assessments arguing for a specificity to women's animation, such

as the opinion that women tend to be more able than men to explore and share personal experience – as Jayne Pilling echoes in her 1992 anthology *Women & Animation* (p. 6). A meta-film such as Chris Landreth's *Ryan* (2004) evokes the premise of dialogue between two filmmakers just as in *Interview*, with the male animators showing a noticeable willingness to share their live episodes. Moreover, John Canemaker's *The Moon and the Son: An Imagined Conversation* (2005) – the notable precedent for which is Faith Hubley's *My Universe Inside Out* –, can be regarded as the result of accepting the existence of a female sensitiveness within male artists, as Virginia Woolf prophetically asserted:

[It] is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman–manly or man–womanly. (...) Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated (1928: 143).

Marjane Satrapi has been successful precisely due to her genderless rebellious attitude. Despite the women's situation in Iran, Satrapi has deliberately avoided talking consciously of herself as a woman. The perspective of *Persepolis* is not polluted by a sexual view, because she is critical of intransigent and hypocritical female characters.

Ironically, the most noteworthy difference between previous models of animated female self-portraits and more recent ones has been their achievement as the product of partnership and mutual influence between men and women. The film *Persepolis* comes as the result of collaboration between Satrapi and Paronnaud, up to the point that the male artist could interiorize the experiences of his female colleague. As an illustration, Satrapi wanted Paronnaud to design the scene of the film in which Marjane attempts to commit suicide, because she was too involved with this episode of her own life. Paronnaud developed an all poetic *mise-en-scène* that summed up Marjane's self-consumption and reactivation, without having undergone them as she did, although he could creatively imagine these sensations from equivalent experiences. This way, the interchange between men and women that will advance most of the artistic forms of today takes place when people from both genders can identify with each other despite their differences.

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