

Transmediality against Transphobia: The Politics of Transsexual Self-Portraiture in Fumettibrutti's Work between Comics and Photography

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Abstract

THE comic artist Fumettibrutti (nom de plume of Josephine Yole Signorelli) is currently one of the most successful figures of the prolific Italian graphic novel. After emerging from the underground comics scene thanks to an explicitly erotic style that attracted young readers and went viral on social media, Fumettibrutti came out as a transsexual woman with the publication of her graphic memoir *P. La mia adolescenza trans* [P. My Trans Adolescence] (2019). Since then, the artist has complemented her comics-based autobiography with numerous selfies disseminated on Facebook and Instagram, thus producing a transmedia narrative. The objective of this article is to explore Fumettibrutti's ability to represent (trans)gender abuse and discrimination using the media of comics and photography and their interaction. This is done by means of a cross-disciplinary analysis that considers the mediality of comics and the convergence of technologies animating the practice of photographic self-portraiture. My contribution looks at the range of cultural products (graphic novels; comics and vignettes published online; online photographic self-portraits) that shape the artist's transmedia storyworld on transphobic violence, considering both their artistic dimension and their communicative function. In particular, I am interested in understanding if the interplay between a medium that works on the basis of iconic abstraction (comics) and a medium that establishes an indexical relationship with objects (photography) opens up new possibilities for the representation of discrimination against transsexual women.

FUMETTIBRUTTI ("Ugly comics", in its literal English translation) is currently one of the most prolific and successful comics projects based in the Italian artistic and publishing scene. The project was initiated in 2016 by Josephine Yole Signorelli (born in 1990), a Sicilian comic artist based in Bologna, with the launch of an Instagram profile where, since then, she has frequently published autobiographic vignettes and sexually provocative photographic self-portraits. Fumettibrutti's highly

erotic and at the same time unequivocally feminist style attracted young readers and went viral on social media, thus allowing the artist to leave the underground Bolognese comics scene to which she belonged and enter the mainstream sphere of national art and communication. Her career path is emblematic in the context of the growing and increasingly popular Italian *fumetto*, where a new visibility of gender-diverse authors and stories¹ is coupled with the strengthening of the relationship between the underground and the mainstream stages.²

The consecration of Fumettibrutti as a mainstream comic artist arrived in 2018, with the publication of her first graphic novel by Feltrinelli Comics, one of the major Italian publishers of graphic narratives. *Romanzo esplicito* [Graphic Novel]—this is the title of the graphic novel—was presented as an autobiographical work dealing with young women's existential struggles with migration (from the South to the North of Italy), financial difficulties, drug abuse, sex work, and vaguely abusive sentimental relationships. In the wake of *Romanzo esplicito's* success, Fumettibrutti's short stories were then included in two anthologies with feminist comics drawn by women: *Materia degenera*, edited by Marco Galli in 2018, and *Post pink*, edited by Elisabetta Sedda in 2019.

In September 2019, a new graphic novel by Fumettibrutti came out, again with Feltrinelli Comics: *P. La mia adolescenza trans* [P. My Trans Adolescence]. With this publication, which was extensively advertised as an autobiographical text on social media (Instagram, Facebook and Tumblr) with anticipating vignettes and selfies (e.g., fig. 1), Fumettibrutti came out as a transsexual woman. This provoked a wave of reactions among her followers, especially among some of the men who had expressed their sexual interest with comments to Fumettibrutti's selfies and, after the coming out, felt the urge to justify their previous public admiration for a transsexual woman.³

Notwithstanding these demonstrations of hostility, *P. La mia adolescenza trans* was a great success that guaranteed Fumettibrutti further waves of notoriety and

¹ Among Italian contemporary comic artists, a crucial role is played by women and non-binary subjects who are bringing to the fore gender-related issues through the graphic novel format. Significant accomplishments in the field of national and international prize competitions confirm this: Barbara Baldi was awarded the Grand Prix Artémisia 2020 for her graphic novel *Ada* (2018); Fumettibrutti's *Romanzo esplicito* (2019) and Zuzu's *Cheese* (2019) won *ex aequo* the 2019 Lucca Comics prize for newcomers. Other names of Italian comic artists who experiment with the representation of gender from a non-hegemonic perspective (that of the white, cis-gender and heterosexual male) are Nicoz Balboa, Cristina Portolano, Alice Social, Rita Petruccioli, Alice Milani and Flavia Biondi, to mention only a few.

² The accentuating interpenetration between the mainstream and the underground spheres is clearly demonstrated by the career path of one of the most renowned names of the Italian *fumetto*: Zerocalcare. In his case, widespread popularity and publishing contracts with a national publisher (Bao Publishing) arrived after years of artistic production in the world of underground comics and numerous collaborations in the cultural scene linked to the activities of Roman left-wing political groups with which he continues to cultivate a privileged relationship.

³ In Italy, transphobia is a worrying phenomenon, which is demonstrated by the fact that, between 2008 and 2020, transphobia resulted in the highest number of murders against transgender and transsexual people among all European countries (Trans Murder Monitoring).



Fig. 1. Fumettibrutti. Self-portrait with *P. La mia adolescenza trans*. Instagram @fumettibrutti.

granted her a prominent position in the Italian arena of popular culture. After the publication of her second graphic novel, the author edited the volume of short graphic stories *Sporchi e subito* [Dirty and Now] (2020); she appeared on the cover of *Sette*, one of the most read Italian magazines (a weekly supplement of *Il Corriere della Sera*), which carried an interview with her by the writer Teresa Ciabatti (2020); for the magazine *L'Espresso* she drew a widely debated cover with a pregnant transsexual man (Fumettibrutti "La diversità"). Moreover, she published the final volume of the trilogy of graphic memoirs started with *Romanzo esplicito*. The book, titled *Anestesia* (2020), recounts the surgical and medical misadventures that the author had to endure to complete her MtF (Male-to-Female) transition. *P. La mia adolescenza trans'* popularity is also demonstrated by the request that Fumettibrutti received to draw a weekly strip with P, the book's protagonist and her pre-transition autobiographical self, for the magazine *Robinson*. The series, titled "I vestiti nuovi di P" [P's new clothes] consists of ten strips where P shows her feminine gender identity by wearing eccentric and sophisticated clothes.

The objective of this article is to explore Fumettibrutti's ability to represent (trans)gender abuse and discrimination using the media of comics and photography and their interaction. This exploration will be done by means of a cross-disciplinary analysis that considers the iconic potential of graphic narratives (McCloud 24–35) and the convergence of technologies animating the practice of photographic self-portraiture (Frosh). The analysis will focus on the graphic novel *P. La mia adolescenza trans*, as well as on the selfies and the vignettes published by Fumettibrutti on her Instagram pages (the official account @fumettibrutti and the personal account @inbrutta). Drawing on theories of transsexual self-representation (Butler; Prosser; McQueen; Long Chu) and postfeminism (Gamble; Genz; Gill), my analysis will pay particular attention to the transmedia and

multiplatform mobility that the connection between the two distinct productions activates, to evaluate the potential symbolic and political effects of this mobility. In the conclusion, I argue that the transmedia interplay between a medium that works on the basis of iconic abstraction (comics) and a medium that establishes an indexical relationship with objects (photography) opens up new possibilities for the representation of prejudice and violence against transsexual women.

Despite not following a strict chronological order, the article retraces Fumettibrutti's process of publicly coming out as a transsexual woman and offers a reading of the representative practice that accompanied it. The analysis starts by outlining the postfeminist aesthetics—that is, the coexistence of explicitly feminist symbols with elements representative of a heteropatriarchal system—that dominates the artist's activity as an Instagrammer before the coming out. It then focuses on the role played by comics' iconicity in the troubled autobiographic portrayal of the pre-transition self (*P. La mia adolescenza trans*), to finally go back to Fumettibrutti's Instagram-based practice of supplementing her work as a graphic novelist with post-transition selfies. The article's circular structure allows to better unfold the dynamics of transmedia interaction that characterize the Italian creative's artistic operation and permits to recognize the postfeminist ethos as a common thread that productively transforms comics' mobility across media into a political tool against transphobia.

Fumettibrutti: Comics, Selfies, and the Postfeminist Aesthetics

FUMETTIBRUTTI'S Instagram profiles (the aforementioned @fumettibrutti and @inbrutta) clearly showcase the artist's explicitly erotic style, which is characterized by the ubiquitous presence of nudes and sex scenes where the female body is portrayed both as a site of feminist agency and desire and as object of a subtle violence exercised by the invisible but pervasive male gaze. This can be observed in the combination of comic vignettes or strips⁴ and photographic selfies that composed Fumettibrutti's social media accounts.⁵ A screenshot taken from the Instagram page (fig. 2) confirms these assumptions. It includes five vignettes/strips, all of which portray heteronormative sexual scenes or female-bodied nudes. A

⁴ Instagram, a social medium primarily dedicated to the sharing of single images or short videos, allows users to upload connected images that followers can open one after the other. This feature is often productively exploited by comic artists who are active on the social network because it allows to reproduce with digital tools the sequentiality of the comic strip.

⁵ The juxtaposition of vignettes, strips, and selfies characterized the comic artist's accounts since the beginning of 2020, when the analysis for this article started and the screenshots that will be showcased later in the text were taken. However, between 2020 and 2021, Fumettibrutti restyled her Instagram profiles and created a sharp distinction between the public account @fumettibrutti and the personal one @inbrutta. At present, the first, official account contains a selection of vignettes, strips, and book covers that the artist published since 2018. The selfies, the pictures, and some of the preparatory sketches for the vignettes were moved to the second, personal account. Notwithstanding this clear separation, which somehow rejects the productive media commixture with which Fumettibrutti's career started, a link still exists between the two accounts as they are connected by reciprocal tags that redirect the follower to the twin page.

picture where Fumettibrutti is captured in a chaste and pensive pose accompanies the comic vignettes and provides a photographic reference to the supposedly autobiographical representation offered in the comic panels. The assonance between picture and comics is suggested by the resemblance (mostly conveyed by the hair style) of the female figures present in the screenshot. The insertion of the photograph also demonstrates the author's personal commitment to the postfeminist aesthetics that defines the set of vignettes. The first and the fourth vignettes reproduced in the screenshot, for example, focus unambiguously on the female character's pleasure, as they both depict the woman in a dominant sexual position. By contrast, the third vignette represents a man's voyeuristic exposure of the woman's physicality, which is conveyed not only by the location (a balcony) and the speech balloon that states "Devono ammirarti tutti..." [They all have to admire you],⁶ but also by the woman being silenced, as suggested by the man's hand over her mouth. The fifth vignette provokingly mixes the feminist and anti-feminist components, presenting a woman who enjoys submitting herself to oral sex, which in patriarchal culture is often symbolically associated with male gratification and female lack of voice.

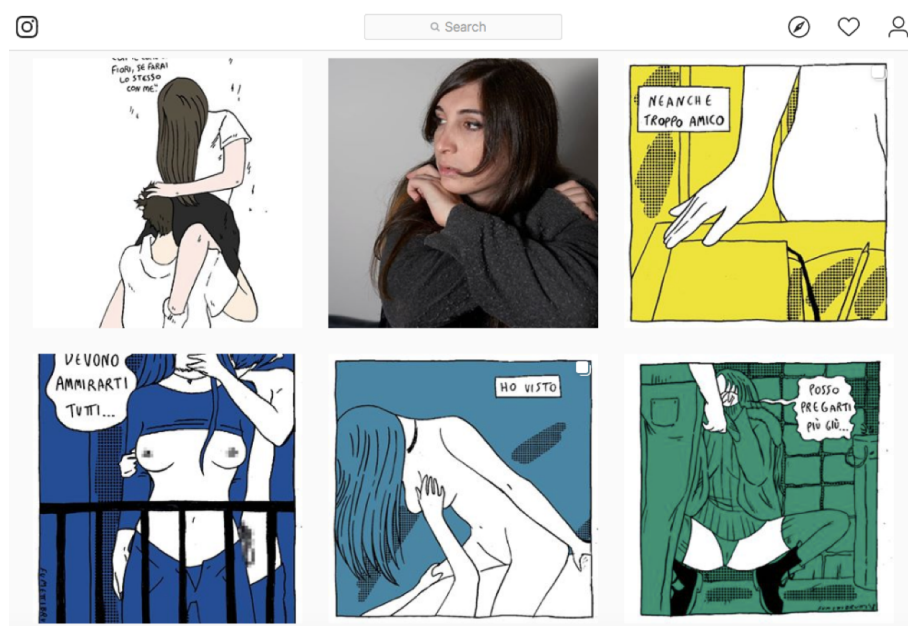


Fig. 2. Example of combination of comic vignettes and selfies. Screenshot from Instagram @fumettibrutti.

The promotion of a postfeminist aesthetics is a general feature of Fumettibrutti's work, as testified by another screenshot from her Instagram profile (fig. 3). Here, cartoonish images of female sexual objectification (first vignette) or empowerment (second and fourth vignettes) are juxtaposed with a photographic

⁶ All translations from the Italian are mine, unless otherwise stated.

portrait in which the author is captured while posing for her own mobile phone's camera. The picture, which is part of a set of photographic portraits aptly titled "Fumettibrutti si fa i selfie" [Fumettibrutti takes selfies], epitomizes postfeminism, because it clearly complies with patriarchal visual culture and normative beauty standards while focusing on the agentive, and specifically feminist, practice of female self-representation.

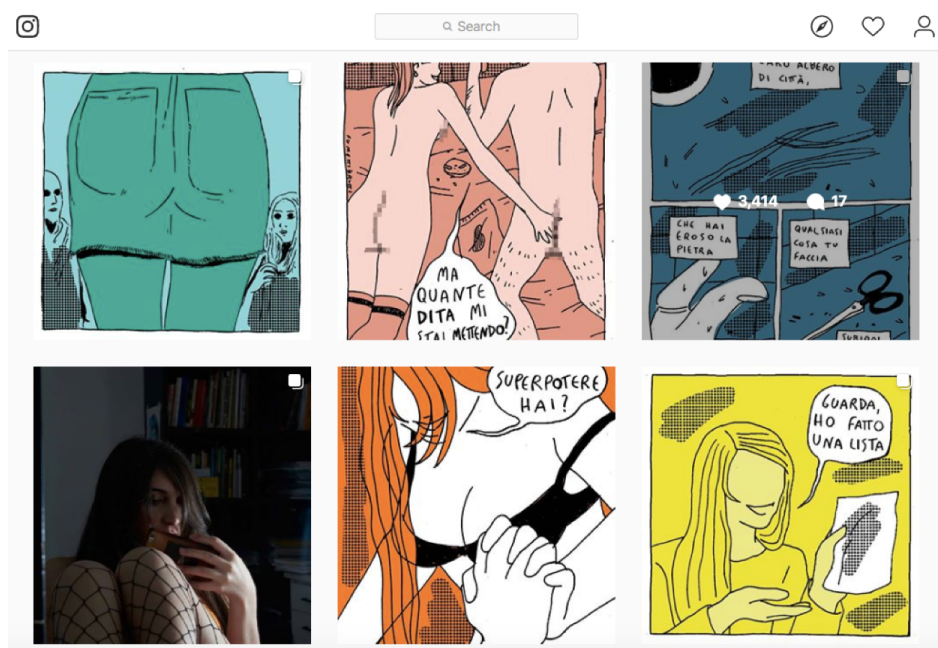


Fig. 3. Example of Fumettibrutti's postfeminist aesthetics. Screenshot from Instagram @fumettibrutti.

Despite having been criticized by some feminists as “a betrayal of a history of feminist struggle, and rejection of all it had gained” (Gamble 37), postfeminism is a complex and controversial phenomenon that Sarah Gamble poignantly defined in terms of a “pluralistic epistemology” (41). In light of this, postfeminism—and the aesthetics that originates from it—describes an epistemological stance where contradiction is treated as a privileged category for knowledge and political action. Contradictions and paradoxes are crucial to postfeminism as they are intertwined with the eminently postfeminist process of feminism entering mainstream communication and with the related need of postfeminist subjects to “[buy] into standardized femininities while also seeking to resignify their meanings” (Genz 338). Moreover, postfeminist women and advocates explicitly reject dualisms and polarizations, thus recognizing the set of elements that constitute their own subjectivity (background, education, desires, aspirations, relational approaches) as organic to the patriarchal imaginary that they aim to challenge. As Elizabeth Grosz once wrote, feminists face alternatives that

are all in some sense “impure” and “implicated” in patriarchy. There can be no feminist position that is not in some way or other involved in patriarchal power relations; it is hard to see how this is either possible or desirable, for a freedom from patriarchal “contamination” entails feminism’s incommensurability with patriarchy, and thus the inability to criticise it. (342)

This conscious and chosen refusal to draw sharp lines between categories that second wave feminists conceptualized as opposite and separate—for example, the feminist agentive woman subject *versus* the passive and objectified woman under patriarchy; the gazing and autonomous female body *versus* the female body trapped by the pleasures of the male gaze—has been interpreted by some feminist scholars as a fruitful political strategy. In other words, it acts as a “sexual micro-politics” often played in the sphere of popular culture that realistically “seeks to effect change and redistribute the dimensions of female agency” by acting from inside the inescapable patriarchal order (Genz 345).

The aesthetics that is linked to postfeminist tendencies dominated the cultural scene of the 1990s, when audiences witnessed the proliferation of mainstream products ranging from film to music in which “celebrations of ‘girl power’ and female success sat side-by-side with the intense, hostile scrutiny of women in the public eye” (Gill 607). The influence of postfeminism in the sphere of cultural production did not end with the 1990s. On the contrary, it developed into a pervasive “postfeminist sensibility” that resulted in the spreading of an imaginary dominated by a strong focus on practices of representation of the female body as a site in which self-surveillance and self-monitoring guarantee the reproduction both of feminist and patriarchal values (Gill 615–19).

As my analysis of *P. La mia adolescenza trans* in connection with the selfies posted on its author’s Instagram profile will show, postfeminist aesthetics proves particularly efficacious when it comes to the self-representation, as well as denunciation, of the feminine transsexual subject⁷ and her experience of abuse.

***P. La mia adolescenza trans*: Representing the Transsexual Self through Comics’ Iconicity**

FUMETTIBRUTTI’S second graphic novel, *P. La mia adolescenza trans*, can be summarized as the autobiographical story of a teenager whose gender dysphoria provokes a series of physical and psychological changes, social traumas, troubled sexual experiences, and a final decision to undergo MtF sex transition. The process of transition is symbolized through an explicit intertextual reference to the most famous and important text of Italian literature, Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*. The name of the protagonist, P, is taken from the seven Ps that Dante—the *Divine Comedy*’s protagonist who undertakes an ultramundane journey through the Christian dimensions of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise—has carved on his forehead

⁷ The use of the label *transsexual subject* corresponds to Fumettibrutti’s own decision to describe herself as such.

while he is visiting the quintessentially transitory realm of Purgatory. The seven Ps, which stand for the seven deadly sins (*peccata*), are gradually erased from Dante's forehead as he progresses through the seven terraces of Purgatory towards Paradise. The reference to Dante's notorious work is made unambiguous by means of two consecutive panels in the last part of the graphic novel (154–55). Here, an angel like the one that allows Dante to pass from Purgatory to Paradise guarantees the protagonist the possibility to navigate from one bank of the river to the other, a passage that epitomizes transition.

The fact that the intertextual reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy* is linked to the name of the protagonist, P, reveals the author's decision to problematize the autobiographical pact (Lejeune 22–23) by selecting a name for the main character that does not coincide with her own. Fumettibrutti's naming choices are far from being a mere casual alternative to the rules of traditional autobiography. On the contrary, they amplify the inherently autobiographical tendency to break “apart the subject into the self reflected upon and the self that reflects” (Prosser 112), which also corresponds to the tendency to create a double self (one pre- and the other post-transition), identified by Jay Prosser as a common component in transsexuals' autobiographical narratives (112–13). It is only towards the end of the graphic novel, when a major identity change results in the homologation of the protagonist's name with that of the author, that P becomes Yole (the name that Fumettibrutti chose for herself during the transition).

This “split between the ‘I’ of the *bios* and the ‘I’ of the *graph*” (Prosser 112) is well conveyed by the medium of comics. Research on the genre of graphic memoir has shown how the self is often portrayed as “plural” in comics, where life changes and the connected modification in the characters' physical and behavioural features generally result in different images of the self (El Refaie 52–60). Furthermore, it has been stated that the comics form allows authors to represent themselves as other (Hatfield 114–17; Chute 80–82). For Charles Hatfield, for example, autobiographical comics' tendency to the practice of self-caricature determines an “alienation or estrangement, through which the cartoonist-autobiographer regards himself as other, as a distinct character to be seen as well as heard” (114). In the case of Fumettibrutti's *P. La mia adolescenza trans*, graphic memoir's ability to “present events from an (imagined) position of objectivity” (Hatfield 115) and the connected lack of a first-person narration allow the author to avoid the explicitly subjective narration that characterizes prose autobiography. The narrative practice of distancing the authorial self from the narrated self is amplified by the absence, in Fumettibrutti's graphic novel, of a metatextual reflection on the unreliability of memory. This metatextual reflection is a common feature in autobiographical comics, where a set of “authentication strategies” (El Refaie 143–78) are frequently used to problematize the apparent objectivity of the narration and to exhibit the obstacles of fallacious memory that might affect the process of autobiographical narration. The linear narrative proposed by Fumettibrutti presents itself as something that has not been filtered by subjectivity, thus allowing the creation of a hiatus between past and present, between the narrated object and the (invisible)

narrating subject. This is further enhanced by the lack of captions or extradiegetic narrative elements in which the narrator retrospectively presents the events by means of a first-person narrative. In *P. La mia adolescenza trans*, rectangular text boxes and narrative blocks appear, but they are only employed as a substitute for thought balloons, which is to say a space where the protagonist articulates her present thoughts.

In this sense, P is not formally recognized as part of the authorial self. On the contrary, P functions as an icon. Following the reflections proposed by Scott McCloud, iconic abstraction—namely, the process of erasing unnecessary details with the aim of constructing an image that loses in specificity but gains in universality—is a general feature of cartooning, an art form where the resemblance of the image to the referent is usually mediated by a simplified drawing (27–35). This simplification is radical in Fumettibrutti, whose style is characterized by a clear intention to depart from realistic representation and adopt a hyper-stylized technique (fig. 4). Fumettibrutti's propensity to reduce or make the trait essential and spontaneous to the point of not even respecting the preference for neatness that traditionally distinguishes cartooning also reproduces one of the most notable trends of the Italian contemporary graphic novel: that to compose books with ostentatiously badly drawn images. This trend was initiated by the famous comic artist Gipi with his *LMVDM: La mia vita disegnata male* [My Life Badly Drawn] (2008) and continued by authors like Zuzu, Maicol & Mirco, and Nicoz Balboa, to mention only a few.

The process of iconization of the protagonist is confirmed not only by the style adopted by the artist but also by the expansion of P's representations beyond the limited space of the graphic novel. This is the case of the previously mentioned "I vestiti nuovi di P" [P's new clothes], where Fumettibrutti's character becomes a symbol for a positive transsexual experience of identification and recognition in the chosen female gender, which is well portrayed by the element of the clothes. Moreover, the presentation of P as an icon is conveyed by the publication of a vignette in the author's Instagram page that shows a black transsexual woman taking a selfie with a phone where P features in the cover as a true icon of intersectional feminism (fig. 5). The prominence of both male and female sexual connotations in the body portrayed in the vignette testifies to the androgynous politics that P represents. I will talk more about this in the next few paragraphs, but for now, it is enough to stress how, in feminist terms, a focus on the figure of the androgynous showcases an interest in the critique of gender binarism, that is, the oppositional distinction between the principles of masculinity and femininity. In light of this, we can say that Fumettibrutti aims at challenging gender normativity.⁸

⁸ The critique of gender normativity is generally considered the "field-defining rule" of Queer Studies (Wiegman and Wilson 2), one of the most influential and theoretically productive ramifications of Feminist Studies. Despite this long-standing affiliation, a debate has started about Queer Theory's ability to emancipate from its historical "primary commitment to antinormativity" (Wiegman and Wilson 1). The sub-field of Trans Studies is actively contributing to this work of disenfranchisement by studying trans subjects' eccentric position in relation to the realm of antinormativity and their



Fig. 4. Example of Fumettibrutti's hyper-stylized drawing technique (*P. La mia adolescenza trans* 159).

At the same time, the ambiguity of her autobiographical practice, where a split between the authorial self and the self pre-transition occurs, can be interpreted, following Prosser's analysis, as the desire of the transsexual subject to conform to gender normativity, to be recognized as a full member of the selected gender (120) and, consequently, to reject androgynous identity. This last propensity speaks about that "attachment to a norm—by desire, by habit, by survival" that Andrea Long Chu has recently addressed as one of the most crucial aspects of transness

capacity to overcome critical oppositionality by going both with and against the gender rule (Long Chu and Harsin Drager 107). It is precisely this problematization that this article aims to embrace.

and as one of the objects that Trans Studies need to select to make an original contribution and differentiate themselves from the field of Queer Studies (Long Chu and Harsin Drager 107–08). In the case of Fumettibrutti, the desire to conform and the neglect of the norm coexist, thus pointing at an inherent contradiction that confirms the artist’s commitment to a postfeminist aesthetics where anti-normative politics and normative desire shaped on the rules of patriarchal gender division are simultaneously displayed.



Fig. 5. Fumettibrutti. “God is a Black Trans Woman.” Instagram @fumettibrutti.

The representation of transphobic and misogynous violence—or “trans-misogyny”, as Julia Serano (“Trans Woman Manifesto”) defines the intersection of discriminations against trans and feminine subjects—is a crucial theme in *P. La mia adolescenza trans* and also follows the postfeminist pattern. In the graphic novel, gender abuse rarely takes the form of physical violence. On the contrary, it is often portrayed in its indirect forms, as verbal aggression or as the result of being exposed to the other’s (often male) gaze. In a sequence of panels at the

beginning of the book (8–11), P is approached by a man who verbally abuses her as soon as he discovers her transgender identity. This episode exemplifies the type of offences that transgender women, and female-looking subjects in general, experience in the streets. The same offences are recognized by the protagonist as a product of sexist objectification: “mi trattano come un oggetto” [they treat me as an object], she says (Fumettibrutti, *P*, 11). However, the abuse is not interpreted in merely negative terms by P, who in that very practice of objectification finds a form of recognition, as she admits smilingly: “Ma solo così credo di valere qualcosa” [But only in this way I think to be worth something] (11). Here the implicit critique of patriarchal violence is coupled with a longing for acknowledgment that results in the explicit appreciation of abuse. In other words, the desire to be recognized as a woman implies the legitimization, by the relational self, of objectification, which, historically, is the trouble of femininity and the cause of the exposure of feminine individuals to violence.



Fig. 6. Fumettibrutti, *P*. *La mia adolescenza trans* 8.

Fumettibrutti’s drawing choices reproduce this eminently postfeminist attitude even at a formal level. In the fourth panel of figure 6, for example, the author’s framing contributes to P’s objectification, since the protagonist’s body is portrayed

as seen through the gaze of the man that will eventually harass her: it is represented from behind, with a focus on butt and legs. However, this image of objectification is counterbalanced by the textual element, where P explains that it is her own choice to “exhibit” and “offer” her body (8), thus highlighting the agency that guides her action. In light of this, the act of hypersexualizing the protagonist’s body can be labelled as an act of “visual self-objectification”, to use Hillary Chute’s definition of the practice of women’s agentic and creative “re-facement” of their own stories of abuse (81).

This creative choice does not make the verbal abuse experienced by P ineffectual. On the contrary, its visual representation communicates the tragic impact that the events have on the protagonist’s psychic life. In another sequence of panels (98–102) the practice of self-harming is associated with the mental reproduction of the transphobic and sexist insults received (“trans”, “faggot”, “slut”), as well as with the internalized feeling of inadequacy. P’s sense of being unacceptable the way she is reaches a point where she labels herself as “disgusting” and a “failure”. The black panels that follow the self-harm and the mental reproduction of the transphobic insults, together with non-narrative/abstract panels, are a common feature in graphic representations of sexual violence (Remonato 379–81; Prince 255; Mandolini). In *P. la mia adolescenza trans* they indicate the impossibility to continue verbalizing and visualizing the trauma, thus testifying to the devastating effects of verbal abuse.



Fig. 7. Fumettibrutti, *P. La mia adolescenza trans* 138–40.

Another sequence (fig. 7), which represents P’s perception of abuse after agreeing to be watched by strangers while having sex with a man, offers further insights into the paradoxes of gender violence. The agency with which P accepts to play the role of the looked-at in the context of the voyeuristic practice does not save her from the traumatic reoccurrence of the objectifying gaze. Here, what Marianne Hirsch identified as one of the characteristics of comics, namely their “visual-verbal biocularity” (1213), allows Fumettibrutti to offer a representation of the irrepresentability or inexpressibility of the situation the traumatic event forced P into. This apparently paradoxical operation is made possible by the cooperation of words and images and by their ability, to go back to Hirsch, “to

enact the impossibility of seeing and the impossibility of not looking” (1213). The first two wordless panels address the issue of the gaze by providing an explicit representation of the sexual act and a symbolic depiction of the intrusive presence of the voyeurs. The impossibility of not looking is here a crucial component that not only allows a visual description of the practice of objectification and the suffering it provokes, but also forces the readers to confront their complicity with the voyeuristic act (we are also looking at P having sex). Moreover, we can interpret the absence of text in the two panels as a technique used to express the impossibility of saying, to add to Hirsch’s observation. The impossibility of saying relates here both to the inability to define the intrinsically ambiguous violence and to the silencing of the abused subject who, not by coincidence, is always portrayed with her mouth covered. In the third panel, on the other hand, the sex image becomes semi-abstract, so to lose the details that characterize the situation as voyeuristic, and it is dotted with transphobic and misogynous insults (“disgusting”, “failed woman”, “abortion”, “bitch”, “faggot”, “tramp”). Here, the dominant role of the textual component (which is not verbally articulated but mentally reproduced by the protagonist) signifies the invisibility of the violence suffered by P and “enact[s] the impossibility of seeing”, as proposed by Hirsch (1213).

Even in her account of gender transition, Fumettibrutti adopts representational strategies that, precisely by means of the coaction of words and images, present the protagonist’s decisions as the result of an ambiguous interplay between agency and violent social conditioning. Once again, the author plays with the categories of normativity and anti-normativity to propose a narrative of her transition that, on the one hand, recognizes the wrongs of gender conformity and, on the other, describes what Prosser labelled as “gender realness” (11–12). This expression is used to identify the pervasiveness of gendered divisions in our society and the legitimate desire of the transsexual subject to adapt to the sexual dichotomy male *versus* female, which she/he often perceives as foundational for her/his subjectivity, in order to live a better life.

The critique of gender conformity is expressed by Fumettibrutti’s decision to locate the transition before the moment of medical intervention on the body.⁹ The phase of sex reassignment surgery is completely excluded from the narrative, and the prescription of female hormones by the doctor who officializes the protagonist’s transgender identity is not recognized as crucial. The focal point of P’s transition into Yole, which results in the change of the gender pronoun and in a visible modification of her appearance, coincides with her family’s acceptance of her transgenderism (153–56). This representation of transition as a mental process challenges the trope of the “wrong body”, a common pattern in transsexual life-narratives circulating in contemporary popular culture (Prosser 67–68; Lovelock

⁹ The phase of the sex reassignment surgery is represented in the third graphic novel of the trilogy, *Anestesia*, where Yole has already completed her gender transition and is about to complete her sex reassignment with a surgical intervention which, according to Italian law, allows her to change the name on her identity card. From *Anestesia* it is clear that Fumettibrutti sees transitioning as a process that does not start or conclude with the anatomical modification allowed by the surgical procedure.

676). Despite describing the actual sentiment of displacement experienced by some transsexual individuals, this pattern risks to confirm gender dichotomies. As Judith Butler argued in her discussion of the notorious documentary on the Harlem queer ballroom scene *Paris Is Burning* (1991), by Jennie Livingston, “the denaturalization of gender can be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms” (85).

This implicit denunciation of gender normativity does not prevent the author from illustrating Yole’s final decision to take hormones, a choice that testifies to the inherent contradiction experienced by the protagonist, whose theoretical rejection of the idea of a gender-conforming body conflicts with her desire to have one. Again, it is the medium of comics that facilitates the expression of such a stratified message. In a sequence of panels, the graphically portrayed act of taking the pills is counterbalanced by the text, which reproduces the list of side effects potentially caused by hormones (179–83). While the text represents the rational part that recognizes hormone therapy as an implicit form of violence imposed on the transsexual body by the imperative of gender standardization, the images exhibit the protagonist’s agency and choice to accept the risks of the medical intervention.

Digital Photographic Self-Portraiture, Indexicality, and the Transsexual Body

THE denunciation of transphobic abuse and the representation of the paradoxical position occupied by the transsexual subject in the gender spectrum doesn’t apply only to *P. La mia adolescenza trans*. Fumettibrutti’s daily activity as an Instagrammer has allowed her to complement her narrative with the use of different media and platforms. It is mainly through photographic self-portraiture on social media that the author has continued her artistic reflection on transsexuality, representation, feminism, and violence. Whereas the graphic novel offers an account of past events reconstructed through the representative process of iconization, the photographic self-portraits posted online document the present and provide the spectator with a representation based on an indexical relationship with reality.

The general perception of digital photographic images as retaining a direct connection with the reality they claim to represent is still accurate, despite the “ontological concerns” (Osborne 63) that have arisen from the technological changes happened in the last decades. Peter Osborne affirms that the process of “digitalization of the act of photographic capture [...] retains both the causal and deictic aspects of photographic indexicality” (63). Moreover, the “disjunction” or separation that characterizes the production of digital photographs (photographic capture and data processing) is not unknown to traditional chemical photography (as exemplified by the presence of the crucial elements of the negative and the print), which testifies to the inherent manipulability of all photographic images (Osborne 64). This manipulability, however, has never really affected the social perception of

photography (even in its digital format) as indexical, which is to say, as a medium that maintains a close connection with reality. As Mary Ann Doane contended, the idea of the photographic image as a trace of reality (from which theories of its indexicality originated) persists and is still strong, to the extent that it is possible to talk of an “indexical imaginary even in the realm of digital photography” (5).

Given the indexical components of photography, crucial matters arise in relation to the intersection of the practice of photographic portraiture and the representation of transsexual subjects. In his analysis of photographs included in autobiographical texts written by transsexuals, Prosser argues that the invisibility of the photographic medium, which creates the illusion of a total adherence to the referent, is often used to “make real the [transsexual] subject’s true gender on the body” (211). To put it in another way, according to Prosser, photographic portraits function as a tool to visualize transsexuals’ actual gender identity, which is otherwise unobservable but in photographs “appears co-natural with the body, and may even begin as more referential of the self than the body” (211). Fumettibrutti’s operation challenges this type of narrative with photographs that, instead of availing the idea of a “true gender”, represent the gendered body as the product of desire, relationality, and gaze. Even when photographed by someone else, as is the case with a set of pictures taken from the previously mentioned album “Fumettibrutti si fa i selfie” (fig. 8), the artist is captured while engaging with tools that allow her to control and reflect her own image (a mirror and a mobile phone with a camera). Turning her gaze towards the mirror and the mobile phone, the woman shows herself as a desiring subject who frames her body according to her will. Moreover, the presence of the mobile phone camera makes visible the photographic medium, thus highlighting the process of construction of the gendered body’s image and displaying the implicit external gaze to which the same body image will be subjected once published online.

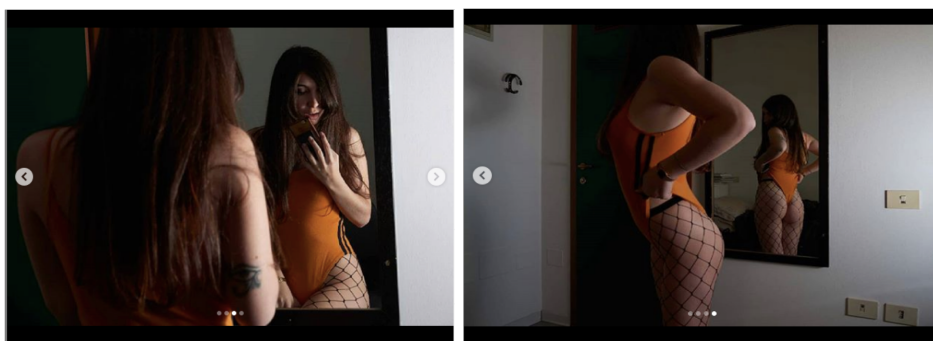


Fig. 8. Fumettibrutti. “Fumettibrutti si fa i selfie.” Instagram @fumettibrutti.

This strategy testifies to the reproduction in the realm of photography of the operation of self-objectification previously described in *P. La mia adolescenza trans*. And it is precisely through this operation, which allows to display female agency and female objectification at once, that the postfeminist aesthetics is also con-

firmed. In the passage from the iconic dimension of comics to the indexical realm of photography, the eminently relational construction of the image acquires a stronger perceptual connection with the reality of the process of subjectivity negotiation that the transsexual person generally undergoes. Through photographic self-portraiture, which makes clear the link between representation, identity, agency, and subordination to the other's (invasive and always patriarchally connoted) act of looking, Fumettibrutti implicitly promotes an idea of the transsexual self as performative and intersubjective. As Paddy McQueen noted with regard to the development of transsexual gendered identity, "one's sense of self is a process of continual becoming that is constructed through interaction with others as well as socio-institutional practices and discourses" (560).

The photographic genre of the selfie, which has recently attracted theoretical attention due to its pervasiveness in digital culture (see, e.g., S. Murray; Van House; Warfield; Frosh; Gómez Cruz and Thornham; D. Murray), is crucial to Fumettibrutti's operation. According to Paul Frosh, the indexical component in selfies is not the "trace of a reality imprinted on the photograph" (1609), as was considered to be the case for traditional photography. The index in selfies, by contrast, is the trace of an action enacted by the photographer that implicitly fosters sociability and connection. This focus on performativity presents the selfie's self as "a constructed effect of representation and as an object and agent of representation" (Frosh 1621). This is clearly shown by Fumettibrutti's Instagram selfies practice, as demonstrated by the aforementioned set of pictures entitled "Fumettibrutti si fa i selfie". Moreover, indexicality is conceptually embedded in digital photographic self-portraits if we consider their inherent relational component, which is promoted by the common interpretation of the selfie as a "live" genre that abolishes distances and guarantees the reception of the image as a portrayal that bears a close connection with reality (Frosh 1609–10). Fumettibrutti problematizes this prominent indexical component, which complements the iconic operation undertaken in the comics narrative, taking her critique of transphobic abuse further.

The publication of explicitly erotic selfies representing a normative female body that the viewer interprets as a performed but lifelike manifestation of the author's self troubles (and, in turn, is troubled by) the narrative proposed in the comics medium, where the transsexual body is illustrated in its androgynous, anti-normative form. In other words, the implicit interplay of the two media frustrates the viewers (who presumably know both the graphic novel and the selfies) and forces them to confront their prejudices on gendered identity, thus exercising an eminently political function. Considering this coaction of comics and photography, the transgender/transsexual woman can only be conceived as a multifaceted subject that epitomizes the paradoxes and the complexifying political virtues of postfeminism: she manifests a desire to conform and, at the same time, is the conscious bearer of a precious difference.

This transmedial confrontation is potentially productive as it exposes the misleading association between gender-conforming bodies and heteronormative life

experiences; but it can also trigger transphobic reactions, as repeatedly happened to Fumettibrutti. An example is the comment posted underneath an Instagram selfie of the artist's neckline, which Fumettibrutti subsequently screenshotted and re-posted online as a form of denunciation (fig. 9). The comment "Ma sei uomo o donna?" [But are you a man or a woman?] demonstrates the follower's need to reaffirm the traditional gender dichotomy because of the unsettling interaction of the graphic novel (and the related coming out of Fumettibrutti as a transsexual) with the sexually provocative heteronormative online selfies. Fumettibrutti's reply to the comment, "Tesoro tutto quello che desideri" [Whatever you like, honey], creatively re-criticizes the idea of a rigid gender divide, promoting instead a relational and performative conception of gendered identity. In addition, her reply teases the follower by potentially bringing up his most secret desires or phantasies. This brief conversation serves as proof of the ability of transmedia operations like the one I have described here, to expand the boundaries, as well as increase the intensity, of narratives about transphobia and gender-based abuse by employing different platforms and media. In fact, in the transmedia dimension, where comics and selfies interact to become "networked objects" (King 137), the practice of representing patriarchal structures of domination continues, together with the practice of criticizing them.



Fig. 9. Comment and reply on Instagram @fumettibrutti.

To conclude, in Fumettibrutti's transmedia storyworld photography complements comics, patching up the hiatus between narrated and narrating self that characterizes the graphic novel. In other words, the photographic self-portrait reassigns realism to the comics narrative and re-establishes a relationship with the referent. However, the re-stitching proves problematic because the antinormative androgynous image of P doesn't overlap with the gender-normative image of the selfies. This imperfect reconciliation generates a prolific space where the ambiguities of the transsexual subject emerge, together with her inherent post-feminism, and where the critique of simplification becomes a political tool against transphobia.

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