

## Re-appropriating Abjection: Feminism, Comics and the Macabre Coming-of-Age

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### ABSTRACT

Julia Kristeva's theories on the abject have proven fruitful for feminist criticism, which has produced a huge body of research on the representation of motherhood and femininity as macabre. More recently, the concept of abjection has been blamed for supposedly legitimising, instead of questioning, hetero-patriarchal erasure of women's subjectivity. Despite this theoretical controversy, a growing number of comics and graphic novels, where the abject is used as a technique to illustrate the formation of women and girls' gendered identity, have been published in the last decade. This article contends that the study of graphic narratives that are concerned with a macabre coming-of-age is a crucial site for the re-appropriation of abjection. This position sees abjection as a productive critical category that reflects an ongoing effort by feminist authors to portray the troubled construction of a female Self. To corroborate this idea, the article engages with previous scholarly close readings of comics/graphic novels on girlhood and the macabre. Further recognition of the fecundity of the abject category in the realm of graphic narratives is guaranteed by the in-depth analysis of the comic zine *Fundo do nada* (2017), by the Portuguese artist Ana Caspão. This comic zine, which has been so far ignored by critics, serves as case study given its ability to describe, by means of the medium-specific features of comics, a young woman's coming-of-age, in which the abject functions as a tool to express the disquieting process of negotiating subjectivity from a feminine positioning.

**Keywords:** abjection, comics, coming-of-age, feminist criticism, Ana Caspão

### INTRODUCTION

The notion of abjection, which was introduced by Julia Kristeva in 1980 in her book *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* and re-launched by Barbara Creed in 1993 as a critical theory that quickly gained scholarly success, has been widely adopted in the field of feminist cultural studies, to the extent that it has been identified as the core of a discursive regime (Chanter, 2008: 3; Jay, 1994; Menninghaus, 2003: 365-402). However, the widespread adoption of the abject by feminist scholars who drew on Kristeva's theories on abjection to analyse cultural products has been recently blamed for supposedly legitimising, instead of questioning, hetero-patriarchal divisions and the erasure of women's subjectivity (Menninghaus, 2003: 365-402; Tyler, 2009). In this article, my objective is to suggest that the medium-genre intersection of graphic narratives and the female coming-of-age, that is to say, comics and graphic novels (medium) focussing on girls' experiences of growth and approximation to womanhood (genre), can open up a productive space for the critical re-appropriation of the aesthetic category of abjection. The debate on abjection and its uses in the field of feminist cultural studies has mainly rotated around the theme of womanhood and motherhood in cinema and the visual arts.<sup>1</sup> In light of this, re-directing critical attention to the field of graphic narratives' representations of girlhood, adolescence and early womanhood can allow feminists to re-evaluate abjection as an extremely fruitful concept that both describes and contests the symbolic processes of dehumanisation and exclusion on the basis of which girls and women are discriminated against within hetero-patriarchal societies. On the one hand, the coming-of-age genre with female protagonists focuses on an existential process that highlights the phase of the subject's entrance into the public realm and the mechanisms through which femininity is negotiated (Lazzaro-Weis, 1990: 17-18; Pratt, 1981: 14; Felski, 1989: 126-127), which permits artists

<sup>1</sup> On motherhood and abjection in film and the visual arts, see, among others, Alexopolous and Power (2022); Arya (2022); Chanter (2008); Creed (2007); and Ross (1997).

to represent and analyse the gendered dynamics of subject-formation. On the other, graphic narratives have been identified as a medium that supports a multifaceted depiction of the paradoxical position that women and girls occupy in contemporary society, where they are often intimately divided between processes of objectification or abjection promoted by the dominant sexist culture and practices of subjectification enabled by the increased understanding of feminist socio-symbolic operations. It is the graphic narrative's verbal and visual cross-discursivity – its reliance on the collaboration of words and images – that facilitates, together with other features of comics, a multifaceted depiction of the female Self (Chute, 2010: 5–6).

The productivity of this medium-genre intersection is confirmed by the fact that, in recent years, a growing number of comics and graphic novels that portray monstrous/abject girls who go through a path of self-discovery to affirm their subjectivity have been published. These include the graphic novels *Through the Woods* (Carroll, 2014), *My Favourite Thing is Monsters* (Ferris 2017), the serial comics *Monstress* (Liu and Takeda, 2015 (ongoing)), *Pretty Deadly* (DeConnick and Ríos, 2014–2020) and the webcomic *Nimona* (Stevenson, 2012–2014), subsequently adapted into a graphic novel. These cultural products also received critical attention and were explicitly linked to the thematic area of abjection.<sup>2</sup> This article will draw on existing scholarship on graphic narratives, girls and abjection to hypothesise how feminist abject aesthetics can be productive, in the study of comics and graphic novels. This productivity will be further explored by a case study centred on the comic-zine *Fundo do nada* (2017), by the Portuguese comic artist Ana Caspão, which seems to stem from the same interest in monstrosity and girlhood in comics. The case study will be analysed by combining a set of methodological and theoretical tools offered by comics semiotics (Cohn, 2014; Groensteen, 2007; 2016; Ojha *et al.*, 2021) and feminist theory (Butler, 2002; 2011; De Lauretis, 2007).

The methodological tool of comics semiotics – the discipline that studies graphic narratives from a formal perspective – allows us to illustrate the potential of graphic narratives for portraying abject, yet empowered, female bodies. Theoretical references to feminist thinkers who draw on poststructuralist thought and promote a non-ontological view of gender and gendered identities, can facilitate an understanding of Kristeva's theories as non-essentialist and non-prescriptive, which contemporary graphic artists working on female monstrosity seem to embrace. The case study will serve as a means to substantiate the fecundity and potencies of the critical category of abjection to study the contemporary feminist coming-of-age produced in the broad and highly differentiated field of graphic narratives. The selection of a Portuguese comic-zine produced and distributed at a non-mainstream level, which differs substantially from the Northern-American semi-mainstream texts in popular culture that scholars have previously linked to the category of abjection, is crucial, in this regard, because it testifies to the vitality of the abject paradigm even in the European area of feminist underground circulation of comics, as this is traditionally the space of a 'counterpublic' (Galvan and Misemer, 2019), whose stances are closer to those of grassroots feminist movements and groups. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to demonstrate how the graphic zine *Fundo do nada* reflects a general tendency in feminist graphic narratives' production to establish a renewed dialogue concerning the representation of abjection.

## CELEBRATED, CONVERTED, CONTESTED: THE VICISSITUDES OF THE ABJECT PARADIGM

Julia Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* was published in 1980 and two years later was translated into English as *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. It is a long, complex essay, where the philosopher engages with psychoanalytic discourse and, in particular, with Lacanian theories on the process through which the individual becomes a subject and accesses the symbolic order, that is, the realm of language where the child gains a stable sense of identity by overcoming the Imaginary phase of indistinct perception of her/himself caused by an uncomplicated connection with the mother or primary carer (Minsky, 1996: 141–142). As an addition to Lacanian theory, Kristeva introduces the notion of the semiotic, which coincides with that mirror-stage of symbiosis with the mother, which needs to be surpassed in order for the individual to become a subject. According to Kristeva, the semiotic phase can be left behind only through a process of abjection or, to put it another way, through the expulsion of the maternal. In light of this, the philosopher associates the concept of the abject to the mother who, she affirms (following Lacanian theories), needs to be *abjected* in order for the child to gain independence and access the 'paternal' realm of the symbolic, which provides her/him with access to 'the autonomy of language' (1982: 13).

More generally, the abject is as an entity that is expelled by the Self so that the not-yet-Self can become a Self. It is what once belonged to the 'I' and was later discharged because it was considered excessive or threatening. Examples include vomit, which Kristeva employs as the main metaphor to introduce the concept of abjection (1982: 3), but also other bodily excrements, such as eggs, corpses, and so on. Since it is precisely through the

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<sup>2</sup> See Ahmed and Kwa (2021); Kwa (2020); Cooper (2020); Corcoran (2020); Precup (2017); and Rossberg (2022).

process of abjection or separation that the individual becomes a subject, the abject can be conceptualised as opposed to the subject. However, abject does not equal object. If the object is without agency and it is virtually imagined or created by the subject to satisfy its 'desire for meaning', the abject is an agentic force that actively works to bring the subject to where it does not want to go: 'toward the place where meaning collapses' (Kristeva, 1982: 1-2).

When focussing the reading of Kristeva's theories on abjection to this linear scheme, the philosopher could be blamed for legitimising hetero-patriarchal ideas on subjectivity construction, according to which the subject needs to reject the feminine (the abject mother, the semiotic) and join the father through their identification with the symbolic order. However, *Powers of Horror* clearly conceptualises the abject as an ambiguous, latent entity that is hierarchically inferior to the subject but 'from its place of banishment does not cease challenging its master' (Kristeva, 1982: 1-2). To put it another way, the abject, once abjected is displaced, and does not disappear. On the contrary, its presence imposes on the subject a constant tension between the supposed integrity and order that it has reached as an individual and the lack of meaning and borders that the abject represents. So, we can say that abject theory is a product of hetero-patriarchal logic (the same logic that interprets separation as the basis of subjectivity construction); but, at the same time, it challenges the very logic of separation because the abject's presence always reminds the subject of its previous connection with what it later expelled. Here lies Kristeva's major difference with Lacan, and later feminist scholars drew on this potentially disruptive force of the abject to develop an affirmative understanding of abjection.

Following the translation of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* into English in 1982, the abject paradigm has been included in a vast array of feminist scholarly works aimed at interpreting artistic productions that portray motherhood and, more generally, womanhood as monstrous or separate from the category of humanity. Barbara Creed, who published *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* in 1993, is among the earliest and most famous advocates for the validity of abjection as a critical category. She employed it to analyse mainstream horror movies such as Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979); William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973); Brian de Palma's *Carrie* (1976) and David Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979). She noticed how the recurring portrayal of mothering and female reproductive functions as abject in these films sustains 'the ideological project of the horror film – a project designed to perpetuate the belief that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man's sexual other' (2007: 83). Creed explicitly affirmed that she interpreted Kristeva's theories as descriptive rather than prescriptive. She understood Kristeva, not as telling us how things should be, but how things are in our hetero-patriarchal cultural context; she used the abject paradigm as a descriptive tool. Abjection was, for Creed, a critical instrument through which it was possible to unveil the cultural construction of women as monstrous others that was, at the time (but, one may ask: have things really changed in the last thirty years?), reproduced and naturalised through filmic productions where the feminine was portrayed as a threat to humanity and subjectivity.

If Creed saw abjection as an emblematic but mainly negative category for women, other feminist critics, such as Mary Russo and Tina Chanter, looked at the subversive potential of abjection. Without denying the risks of essentialism that representations of femininity as abject inevitably pose, Russo and Chanter thought that there is 'room for chance that emerges from the very constrained spaces of normalization' (Russo, 1994: 11). They both argued that, when appropriated by women artists who reflect on their own condition of exclusion, portrayals of the feminine as abject can potentially question the normative idea of subjectivity and the canonical bodily aesthetic regime by introducing a productive shift. In *The Female Grotesque* (1994), Russo described abject and grotesque bodies as open, protruding, irregular, and multiple. As such, she continued, they are generally associated with social transformation because they challenge the prototype of the masculine self-contained, symmetrical and static body (1994: 8). Similarly, Chanter, in *The Picture of Abjection* (2008), saw abjection as a regime of representation that problematises the subject's stability and the boundaries of identity (2008: 3), which aligns with the feminist project that has been underway since the first feminist critiques of the Cartesian subject-object division. In other words, both Russo and Chanter believed that one can act creatively from within the restrictions of the dichotomy between the subject and abject to open up to the possibility of a new subjectivity that inherently contests the principle of opposition and separation.<sup>3</sup> More recently, scholars such as Rafael A. Chico Quintana (2014) and val flores (2013) have aligned with the theoretical path traced by Russo and Chanter and widened its spectrum by adapting to the experience of queer subjects and non-hegemonic bodies who do not necessarily present feminine characteristics or do not necessarily identify as women.

But the tendency to look at abjection in affirmative terms has also been criticised by scholars in the fields of Critical Theory, Cultural Studies and Sociology. Among these, Winfried Menninghaus dedicated an entire chapter of his book *Disgust* (2003) to abject criticism and discussed the academic and artistic currents that germinated on

<sup>3</sup> Theoretical and critical productions on affirmative abjection have been developed by other feminist critics. See, for example, Covino (2020), Taylor (1993), and Frueh (2001).

the theme of abjection between 1982 and 1997. Menninghaus harshly criticised those who, while advocating in favour of abjection criticism, appropriated Kristeva's theory for political purposes, extended it to the analysis of the most disparate practices of exclusion, and turned abjection 'into a simple fable of repression and liberation' (2003: 392). Notwithstanding the compelling invitation to engage with Kristeva's theories in a more accurate manner and to avoid simplistic adaptations aimed at legitimising identity politics discourses or the sterile self-legitimisation of some marginalised groups, Menninghaus interpreted and accepted Kristeva's abjection as 'an unchangeable given of subject formation' (2003: 392). In other words, Menninghaus read Kristeva's ambiguous text in prescriptive rather than descriptive terms. By doing so without criticising this supposedly prescriptive approach, he denied the dimension of social construction in subject-formation processes and, with this, the possibility of changing the way we understand subjectivity, which, as we have seen, Kristevan theories on abjection already subsume.

Similarly, Imogen Tyler (2009) warned against the uncritical use of the theoretical frame of abjection to produce and analyse representations of the maternal. In her view, the misinterpretation of Kristeva as a feminist, together with the optimistic and naïve tendency to interpret cultural representations of abjection as a conceptual threat to misogyny, is detrimental to the actual lives of women. Drawing on her background as a sociologist, she cited the example of pregnant women who suffer domestic violence and whose testimonies she collected by means of interviews and through an Internet chat room. This group, according to Tyler, would be indirectly affected by the critical legitimisation of the representation of mothers as abject beings. Like Menninghaus, Tyler interprets Kristeva's theory and its possible uses in merely prescriptive terms and she sticks to the idea that abject theory only superficially re-assigned prominence to a maternal which Lacanian psychoanalysis marginalised when it presented the feminine/maternal as opposed to the subject - which is to say as irremediably othered, excluded, and objectified (2009: 80–81). In this sense, portrayals of the monstrous maternal are, for Tyler, ultimately dangerous for feminist discourse as they confirm the hetero-patriarchal idea of the feminine/maternal as a non-subject. Following this line of thought, the author talked about a supposed 'theoretical violence of abject criticism' (Tyler, 2009: 87). The problem with Tyler's reflection on abjection is that it is sustained by a simplified reading of Kristeva, from which the sociologist problematically erases the description of the abject as an agentive force that threatens the subject and its integrity. To put it differently, Tyler conceptually collapses the concept of the abject with that of the object to the point that there seems to be no distinction between the process of abjection, which for Kristeva implies banishment but not an erasure of power, and that of objectification, in which the negation of the other's agency is a primary component.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Kristeva's abject is deprived of the possibility to challenge the subject's cohesion and stability, which is to say the very principles that dictate its own (the abject's) exclusion.

Both Tyler and Menninghaus developed a critique of abjection that is problematic from my feminist perspective, taking feminism to be a political and theoretical movement devoted to subversion, not the confirmation and/or mere inversion, of hetero-patriarchal discursive features. Following their reading of Kristeva, they both appear to validate the oppositional logic to which they refer in the philosopher's essay, thus conceiving the subject/abject dichotomy as inalterable and, in the case of Tyler, as detrimental to the category of the maternal/feminine. The failure to acknowledge the abject's potential in threatening the subject, which Kristeva (though ambiguously) outlines, corresponds to these authors' insufficient questioning of the principles of separation and opposition, according to which the subject is constructed in hetero-patriarchal societies. To borrow from Judith Butler, who blamed Kristeva for being excessively enigmatic and not radical enough (2002: 101–118), but recognised the subversive possibilities of the abject paradigm, we should not view the abject as an entity that is merely antithetical to the subject. On the contrary, 'we need to consider the abject as something that allows to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic, legitimacy and intelligibility' (2011: xiii).

In light of this, subject-formation can be creatively rearticulated, even starting from the controversial Kristevan paradigm. This can be done by employing the category of the abject as a tool for describing and denouncing the exclusion of women from the rigid and impermeable idea of male subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> The category of abjection can also

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<sup>4</sup> It is not a coincidence that philosophical conceptualisations of gender violence, which is the area Tyler is working in, mostly describe acts of violence against women, such as rape or femicide, as acts aimed at annihilating, controlling and depriving of agency (objectifying) the victim. See Cahill (2001) and Radford (1992).

<sup>5</sup> When mentioning the idea of 'male subjectivity' here (as throughout the article), I refer to the general conception of the Self as rigidly impermeable and autonomous that western hetero-patriarchal culture traditionally assigns to male subjects and male characters or figurations. Far from implying that male subjects naturally align with a solid type of subjectivity, while female subjects automatically disrupt this scheme by preferring a relational typology, I embrace R. W. Connell's insights, according to which a myriad of different and constantly evolving masculinities orbits around a general model of masculinity imposed at a cultural and societal level for a certain period of time (2005: 76–80). Further studies should investigate how the transgression to the hetero-patriarchal subjectivity model in graphic novels is slowly contributing to altering the shape of hegemonic masculinity, if it is true that, as Connell writes, hegemonic masculinity occupies 'a position always contestable' (2005: 76).

be recuperated by stressing the paradoxes that Kristeva herself assigns to the abject as an entity that is expelled by the subject but constantly hunts the Self, thus questioning impermeability and separation.

## MONSTROUS GIRLS IN SEARCH OF THEIR SELF: A NEW TREND IN COMICS PRODUCTION AND CRITICISM

Tyler and Menninghaus' critique does not only rotate around Kristeva's notion of abjection. On the contrary, it extends to embrace the whole set of uses that critics, and even creators, have made of it. In the case of abjection, a theoretical effort of conceptualisation by Kristeva was followed by a critical appropriation by some Cultural Studies scholars, which has, in turn, further stimulated artistic productions. This osmosis between theory, criticism and art resulted in the institutionalisation of so-called 'abject art', a trend emerged during the 1990s in the field of visual/performative arts and curatorial practices, in which the abject critical paradigm was consciously used, explicitly referenced, adapted and re-worked, most of the times to convey feminist messages and visions, arguably an eccentric view of gender and sexuality.<sup>6</sup>

The predominantly visual sphere of graphic narratives (Groensteen, 2007: 9), where feminist trends have been noticeable in the underground scene since the 1970s (Galvan, 2015; Kirtley, 2018; Munt and Richards, 2020), and have now been consolidated and popularised by the recent format of the graphic novel (Chute, 2010), have been certainly influenced by abject art and by the critical trends emerged around the conceptual category of abjection. This is demonstrated by the dramatic increase in feminist production of graphic narratives dealing with the trope of female monstrosity (Langsdale and Coody, 2020).

Coming-of-age graphic narratives that portray monstrous girls and young women seem to be particularly well suited to the creative reworking of subjectivity through the paradigm of abjection. This is because they are a privileged site for investigating girls' transition to adult femininity and the related challenges that girls face when they confront the symbolic othering with which the hetero-patriarchal order excludes women and those who manifest female reproductive functions. In this sense, coming-of-age tales where girls' monstrosity is clearly engendered are a political tool to describe and denounce sexist abjection whilst continuing to represent girls' struggles to affirm their subjectivity, since subject-formation is the core of the coming-of-age genre.

Here it is fruitful to recall the work of literary scholars who have already observed a tendency in the feminist *Bildungsroman* to propose an open, unstable, relational and plural understanding of subjectivity, which redefines the concept of a definite, rigid Self offered by traditional male-centred versions of the coming-of-age genre. In her analysis of Anglophone coming-of-age novels published in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by feminist authors such as Angela Carter, Jean Rhys, Joan Riley and Andrea Levy, Maroulla Joannou identified a propensity to challenge the conventional linear and progressive narrative process of self-discovery. This results from the impossibility, for female characters, to experience the same type of adventures that the male character of the *Bildungsroman* experiences without running the risk of being socially marginalised or abused (Joannou, 2019: 203). In other words, the feminist *Bildungsroman* with female protagonists traces different routes, which can be described as 'explorative rather than goal oriented, epistemological rather than teleological, relational rather than linear' (Joannou, 2019: 203). This couples with the findings of critics such as Joanna Frye, who observed in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) a representation of the female Self as multiple (*Living Stories*). Similarly, Carol Lazzaro-Weis labelled the inclination to avoid portraying the protagonists' identities as stable or definite as one of the landmarks of the Italian female *Bildungsroman* of the 1980s (1990: 33–34). Things do not change in the postfeminist coming-of-age, where young women and girls are depicted as individuals who gained apparent emancipation and power, but continue to be haunted by the likelihood of their objectification and domestication, thus presenting a troubled and always negotiable and vulnerable sense of Self (Šrníková, 2017: 61–93).

The creative redefinition of subjectivity is also made possible by the specific features of graphic narratives: a medium where, as can be seen, the presence of more or less definite boundaries (the page's layout, the panel, the frame, the grid, and the speech balloon) and progressive sequences (the linear arrangement of different panels that determines narrative) is often counterbalanced by the innovation allowed by the technique of cartooning, as well as by the employment of formal strategies aimed at challenging these boundaries (bleeding, borderless panels, inset panels, etc.) and linear development (braiding, fragmentation, gutter erasure, etc.).<sup>7</sup>

This has been highlighted by scholars in the field of Comics Studies who have employed the abject paradigm to analyse graphic coming-of-age narratives with monstrous girls as protagonists. Ayanni Cooper, for example, read two recent Image Comics centred on young abject women in search of themselves – the steampunk series

<sup>6</sup> On 'abject art' see Arya and Chare (2016) and Foster (1996).

<sup>7</sup> For definitions of terms in comics semiology, which will be explained later as necessary, see La Cour, Grennan and Spanjers (2021: 26, 40, 116–117, 117–118, 140–141, 142–143, 227–229, 289, 303–304).

*Monstress* (Liu and Takeda, 2020-ongoing) and the epic fantasy *Pretty Deadly* (DeConnick and Ríos, 2014-2020) – through the lens of Kristeva’s theories. Cooper explores Maika, the woman-monster protagonist of *Monstress*, and Ginny, the half-human daughter of the personification of Death and main character in *Pretty Deadly*, as hybrids who are made both abject and strong by their eccentric lineage: they are said to be ‘empowered by their liminal positionality’ and their very heroism is deeply bound up with their own monstrosity (Cooper, 2020: 52). As agentive abject subjects, they embody boundary-breaking and, precisely because of their hybridity, they challenge the principle of separation that dominates hetero-patriarchal concepts of subjectivity. To borrow from Butler’s definition of abjection, they epitomise that ‘abjected outside, which is, after all, inside the subject as its own founding repudiation’ (2011: xiii). Cartooning, according to Cooper, is crucial to the articulation, display and reproduction of this process of overcoming borders. In particular, the representation of the female abject as violent and obscene, but at the same time aesthetically beautiful, that is facilitated by the technique of cartooning permits ‘delaying, if not denying, a complete rejection’ (Cooper, 2020: 51) by the readers, thus allowing reader identification, and, consequently, their recognition of the abject as being part of their subjectivity.

Similarly, Miranda Corcoran published an analysis of Carroll’s collection of short graphic stories *Through the Woods* in which she discusses comics as a fruitful medium to portray the threat of abjection posed to girls by their own future as women. Carroll frequently uses the technique of bleeding, which erodes the panel’s frame so that the image directly touches the borders of the page, to represent the threat of abjection and the abrasion of the boundaries that the abject’s presence implies (Corcoran, 2020: 2–3).

Abjection is also crucial in the analysis of scholars who conducted a close reading of *My Favourite Thing Is Monsters*, Ferris’ graphic novel about the city adventures of Kate, a lesbian girl living in lower-class Detroit who sees herself as a werewolf fighting the imaginary monsters that populate her world. A graphic coming-of-age (Kwa, 2020: 469), Ferris’ work was read as a book guided by the principle of interconnectedness, where monstrosity emerges as a feature that illustrates excess and is conveyed by the comics technique of the grotesque caricature (Ahmed and Kwa, 2021: 38).

Finally, Michaela Precup described the title character of Stevenson’s *Nimona* as a monstrous girl who redefines the categories of hero, villain, child and monster by challenging rigid oppositions. Nimona is, in fact, a strong queer child who uses her abilities as shapeshifter to support the villain Ballister Blackheart. However, Stevenson’s representation of the protagonist as the epitome of cuteness complicates her identity and leaves the readers with no choice but that to accept the untenability of a rigid distinction between the roles of monster (abject) and human (subject) (Precup, 2017: 554–557).

The connection of the feminist graphic narrative’s coming-of-age story with the tropes of monstrosity and abjection should not come as a surprise if we consider underground women cartoonists’ engagement with the practice of using grotesque self-caricatures as a parody of the stereotypical female beauty proposed in mainstream comics. The works of crucial figures from the North American feminist underground comics movement, such as Aline Kominski-Crumb and Julie Doucet, have been analysed following this critical thread (Diamond and Poharec, 2017: 408; Køhlert, 2012). In this article I have selected a case study from the underground of feminist comics production that, in the following pages, will further substantiate the idea of the abject paradigm as a productive analytical tool with which to read the growing number of coming-of-age graphic narratives with monstrous girls as protagonists.<sup>8</sup>

## **FUNDO DO NADA: THE POTENTIAL OF THE FEMINIST MACABRE COMING-OF-AGE IN COMICS**

My close reading focuses on a 2017 Portuguese comic-zine, of which only 50 copies were published by the independent feminist publisher Sapata Press: Ana Caspão’s *Fundo do nada*. Despite its limited circulation, *Fundo do nada* is part of the most influential and successful feminist cultural project in contemporary Portuguese *banda desenhada*. Sapata Press, which was established in 2017 by the Brazilian but Lisbon-based comic artist Cicho Silveira, provided feminist artists working with comics in Portugal and in the broader Lusophone area with a safe space to discuss feminist and LGBTQ+ issues and with the possibility of reaching a wider public. Sapata Press’ operation reached mainstream recognition (Monteiro, 2017) and resulted in the publication of 25 short books (or ‘zines’) on topics ranging from queer sexuality and identity to women’s experiences of isolation and migration. Among these,

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<sup>8</sup> The common underground context of Kominski-Crumb’s, Doucet’s and Caspão’s work is highlighted here, but not to suggest that the North American artists influenced Caspão. The objective of this article is not to suggest the presence of a genealogy on the themes of monstrosity and abjection in feminist underground comics. On the contrary, its aim is to hypothesise the presence of a general interest in abject aesthetics in the contemporary coming-of-age graphic narratives. Caspão’s work demonstrates that this interest goes beyond specific cultural contexts, distinctive sectors of the comic industry and explicit commonalities, which testifies to the transversal dimension of the phenomenon.

many centre on experiences of female or LGBTQ+ children and adolescents, such as Ellie Ireneu's </3 ou coração partido [ </3 or Broken Heart] (2017), Joana Estrela's *Os vestidos do Tiago* [Tiago's Dresses] (2018) and Raquel Vitorelo's *Tom Boy* (2019).<sup>9</sup> Sapata Press, which closed down in 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Silveira, 2022), played a major role in supporting the growing number of women's voices that, in 2015, João Machado had noticed as a new phenomenon in Portuguese comics (2015: 58–59). Centred on the abject and monstrous iconography of the witch, Sapata Press also published the multimedia comics-zine *As bruxas de Blergh* (2017). On monstrosity and girlhood, they also circulated the two-page zine *Satan* (Silveira 2017). Beyond Sapata Press, recent Portuguese comics production includes *No caderno da Tangerina* [Inside Tangerina's Notebook] (2017) and *Tangerina* (2019), by Rita Alfaiate. Both works, published by Escorpião Azul, are part of a unitary project with thematic affinities and a plot continuity focussed on the relationship between a young monstrous girl and one of her schoolmates.

The 19-page zine *Fundo do nada* is a brief and highly symbolic narrative that revolves around the coming-of-age of a girl and her self-discovery when dealing with the world. In other words, *Fundo do nada* is a feminist *Bildungsroman* journey where a young feminine individual struggles to gain a sense of Self. This, however, is done through a constant confrontation with emblems of the abject and the macabre, which are clearly exhibited even at the level of the work's simple but dense plot. After an idyllic and solitary early childhood, a girl meets a man and a woman to whom she gets attached. When the man and woman, together with the idyllic world, suddenly melt and disappear, the girl precipitates in a subterranean and creepy world where she is re-born as a young woman. Here, she is condemned to carry an egg-like ball that she eventually manages to bring to a bird's nest where she offers it to the mother bird. The mother bird, however, catches both the protagonist and the sphere that she carries between her legs. During the catch, the young woman ejects the egg-ball, which is ultimately eaten by the baby bird who inhabits the nest. Later, the protagonist is herself ejected by the bird, who lets her fall, leaving her injured but alive on the ground.

*Fundo do nada* describes abjection, the abjection of the feminine, and the process of subject-formation outlined by Kristeva in an exemplary way. Even at a visual level, Caspão fills her comic-zine with macabre images, the first of which is the representation of the melting woman who slowly disappears. The woman, who can be interpreted easily as the girl's primary carer and mother, given the affectionate gestures that characterise the relationship between the two, is represented while losing her human features (Caspão, 2017: 5). The melting process is well conveyed through the classical comics division of the images into sequential panels; these are interrupted only by the caption '*Claro que, passo a passo, o mundo começou a escapar das minhas mãos*' [Obviously, one step at a time, the world started getting out of hand] (Caspão, 2017: 5), which further reinforces the idea of loss of unity with the maternal that characterises the semiotic/pre-symbolic phase.

The process of painfully abjecting the mother, which corresponds to the act of separating from her, is what clearly determines the girl's progression into adolescence and then early womanhood in *Fundo do nada*. In other words, it allows her re-birth as a fully grown subject. This is represented in a six-page sequence of panels (Caspão, 2017: 6-11) where the girl passes through the anatomical changes of puberty while descending into a series of underworlds which are connected through the element of water, a symbol of amniotic connection, but also of change and difference (Neimanis, 2017: 68). The multifaceted symbolism of water, which accompanies the process of evolution and separation though recalling gestational connection, is not the only strategy that complicates the idea of subject-formation as result of mere partition. When the protagonist resurveys from an oyster like a strong and macabre Botticelli Venus, she finds a sphere between her feet (Caspão, 2017: 10–11), which she has no choice but to carry during her explorations of the creepy underworld she finds herself in (Caspão, 2017: 12). The sphere, which the protagonist calls '*mágoa*' (the Portuguese word for 'pain') is clearly an egg, another symbol of abjection, a product of bodily expulsion (Kristeva, 1982: 3). The link between the sphere and the Kristevan idea of abject femininity, of which the protagonist is both product (as a daughter) and bearer (as a young woman), is suggested by the fact that the egg is often carried by the protagonist between her legs (Caspão, 2017: 11, 14, 16, 17). Moreover, when she places the sphere in front of her face, the egg turns into an orbuculum that changes the young woman's features so to resemble those of the abjected and melting mother, which in turn recall the attributes of another symbol of abject femininity: the witch (Figure 1).

In light of this, Caspão clearly positions her narrative within the restrictive frame that describes the claustrophobic cultural entanglement of abjection and femininity. However, she manages to introduce elements that insist on the ambiguous dimension of the abject and ultimately question the idea that subject-formation equals separation. This is further confirmed if we look at the panels where the protagonist resuscitates as a grown-up young woman: this re-birth is represented as the act of escaping/leaving the oyster, whose vagina-like shape

<sup>9</sup> Ireneu and Vitorelo are Brazilian artists whom Sapata Press introduced to Portuguese readers. Vitorelo, who occasionally reproduces an abject/monstrous aesthetics in her work by using the iconography of the dragon, dedicated a long post to Stevenson's *Nimona* on her website. In the post (Vitorelo, 2021), she discusses female subjectivity, girlhood and the challenges of being a female cartoonist at length.



Figure 1. Source: Ana Caspão, *Fundo do nada* (2017), p. 13.

(Caspão, 2017: 9) recalls the cavity on the ground from which, at the beginning of the zine, the girl entered the world (Caspão 2017: 2). This suggests that the individual is what leaves the maternal behind, it is what abjects it. However, as our protagonist is a young woman, she necessarily carries signs of what she abjected as part of her own body (the egg-like sphere and the motherly, witchy features). This opens a fruitful representative space that allows the author to draw the woman as an agentive subject but, at the same time, as a clear repository of abject herself.

Even the ending seems to suggest an association between the protagonist's subjectivity and the abject element: as soon as she lets the egg go and it disappears (eaten by the baby bird), the woman herself is ejected by the mother bird, landing without agency on the ground, trapped by serpent-like roots (Caspão, 2017: 19). To put it differently, Caspão stresses the fact that the abject (represented by the sphere) is constitutive of the protagonist's subject; without it, the subject cannot exist and it loses its agency. That paradoxical characteristic of the abject that Kristeva outlined when she stated that the abject always challenges the subject, even from its place of banishment, is expanded here and is brought to a degree of intensity that allows the narrative to contest, from within the paradigm, the very principle of subject-formation through separation. This operation is supported and amplified by the specific features of the medium of graphic narratives that, in *Fundo do nada*, are employed to represent the abject's capacity to surpass borders and positions to the extent of contaminating the subject's integrity. In particular, the page layout is used to provide the reader with a depiction of the subject as a mobile, unstable and permeable entity. The zine generally presents a traditional page layout, with distinctively separate panels and linear borders. But disruptions to the comics grid are also present and often coincide with crucial moments in the process of subjectivity-building in which the abject plays a role. One example is the page depicting the painful process of separation from parental figures and the progression into adolescence. The passage into womanhood is directly connected to the re-birth of the protagonist and to her development into an autonomous subject, as demonstrated by the fact that this page is the one that precedes that of the resurrection from the oyster. But the subject-formation is here clearly haunted by the abject, which is embedded in the girl's changing body and highlighted by close-ups on some of the most sexualised parts of her anatomy (her hips, breasts, and feminine face). Moreover, in the dark space between the close-ups, Caspão inserts abject elements (Figure 2) that resemble the vagina and the umbilical cord from which the girl escaped during her first birth (Figure 3). The presence of these liminal elements, together with the absence of borders that characterises the page, transfigures the traditional page structure and confirms



Figure 2. Source: Ana Caspão, *Fundo do nada*, p. 9.



Figure 3. Source: Ana Caspão, *Fundo do nada*, p. 1.

the genre's ability to support the thematic and narrative idea of subject porosity imposed by the abject with formal strategies.

Another example of productive disruption of the canonical comics grid is a double page – two adjacent pages that the reader can cover with a single glance (Groensteen, 2007: 35) – where the protagonist is trying to establish communication with the baby bird she finds on the nest (Caspão, 2017: 14–15). The creature, which is clearly another embodiment of the abject according to his horrid features, reacts to the young woman's presence with a frightful scream that resonates throughout the entire second page (Figure 4). The scream and the distorted speech balloons that are used to represent it transgress the panel's borders, like a breach that ends up contaminating everything and leaves the reader, once again, with the idea of the subject's extreme permeability to the abject's call. The unsettling continuity between subject and abject is further suggested by other characteristics of the layout, such as the inset panels – a technique used in comics to draw focus on a specific element in a scene (Cohn, 2014) – with which, in the first part of the double page, the eyes of the protagonist and those of the abject bird are clearly associated, being at the centre of a threefold close-up (Caspão, 2017: 14).

Similarly, in the second page, the bird and his eye are visually associated with the sphere, which not only has the same round shape and is displayed adjacently, but also shows the same *emanata*/pictorial ruins. In comics semiotics, *emanata* or pictorial ruins are non-mimetic signs that provide the reader with important information about movement or the emotional state of characters (Ojha *et al.*, 2021: 3). Here, they appear in the form of small droplets positioned around the baby bird's head and around the sphere to represent a state of internal turmoil (Caspão, 2017: 15). This iconographic association testifies to the impossibility of drawing a clear line between the protagonist's self, to which the sphere belongs, and the abject (the bird). The implicit connection is also demonstrated by the reverberation of the creature's scream, which is made visible by the presence of *emanata* that surround both the nest and the protagonist's head (Caspão, 2017: 15).

In light of the analysis, it is possible to affirm that graphic narratives and the comics' medium potentially offer a privileged platform for the representation of the abject, in Kristevan terms. The description of the process of separation that leads to identity development and the concomitant portrayal of the constant and productive threat to the same development posed by the abject is facilitated by at least two medium-specific features of comics. The first is comics' tabular division into panels that are often deprived of their borders, or whose delimited space is



Figure 4. Source: Ana Caspão, *Fundo do nada*, pp. 14-15.

often transgressed by the presence of disruptive elements (bleeding).<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, comics permit the reader to establish quick connections between components of the page (or double page) that are positioned in different panels. This characteristic, which is called *braiding* and consists in a sort of ‘dialogue’ that panels have with each other across the perceptive unit of the page (Groensteen, 2016: 88), further allows the author – Ana Caspão, in our case – to exceed the panels’ partition by virtue of iconographic or semantic assonances.

## CONCLUSION

The conventions of graphic narrative are innovatively exploited in *Fundo do nada* by Ana Caspão, a compelling and provocative graphic zine, where abjection is described and denounced as a burden, which the growing girl needs to confront, but through which she can re-define herself as an eccentric being. This paradox, which allows the representation of the protagonist neither as a rigid subject nor as a rigid abject, is at the core of a strong trend in contemporary comics and graphic novel production by female artists who engage with the coming-of-age genre and interpret it as a space for the construction of a feminist subjectivity, which, following Teresa de Lauretis’ valuable insight, in hetero-patriarchal societies, cannot but have contradiction as ‘its condition of existence’ (2007: 174).

As we have seen, critics in comics studies have already analysed various texts in the category of the graphic coming-of-age by using the abject paradigm. This is the case in the graphic novels *Through the Woods*, by Emily Carroll, and *My Favourite Thing is Monsters*, by Emil Ferris. Moreover, an abject aesthetics has been identified in examples from the world of serial comics (*Pretty Deadly*, by Kelly Sue De Konnick and Emma Ríos, and *Monstress*, by Marjorie Liu and Serena Takeda), as well as in the digital comic *Nimona*, by Noelle Stevenson. By discussing abjection and its representation at a thematic as well as at a formal level, the article has provided the reader with a review of scholarly contributions to abjection in the contemporary graphic coming-of-age and adds the close textual reading of a comic-zine created and distributed in the underground scene of Portuguese comics. The analysis of *Fundo do nada* by Ana Caspão and its association with texts that portray girls’ and young women’s

<sup>10</sup> Despite being a common feature in comics, the grid and panel division are not always present in graphic narratives. Authors such as Will Eisner and Guido Crepax have experimented with the alteration or erasure of the grid since the 1970s. However, the grid and panel division still remains a reference for many comics artists, including Caspão, whose work is characterised precisely by a productive tension between the reproduction and the transgression of the grid’s scheme.

monstrosity points to the presence, in contemporary comics production, of a transversal trend that, by transcending specific cultural contexts and sectors of the comics industry, is re-assigning feminist relevance to the category of abjection.

Other investigations and close readings of graphic coming-of-age narratives that feature abjection are needed to further substantiate this argument and confirm the presence of this trend at a transnational level. Apart from Caspão, all the other close readings on the topic focus on Northern American texts that, despite benefitting from a wide international circulation, stem from a culturally specific comics tradition. The tendency to prioritize studies on this visual tradition, probably deriving from the current Anglo-centricity of comics scholarship in regard to the selection of a cultural studies and formal approach, should be counteracted by analyses of non-Anglo-American works where a girl's path towards womanhood is depicted as coinciding with a threatening and at the same time, potent, manifestation of the abject.

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