



Marco Bolognesi e Carlo Lucarelli, *Protocollo*

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The graphic novel is experiencing a sort of new wave in Italy, an unprecedented popularity that seems to suggest the increased awareness of comics as an effective and often discarded expressive medium. Though the sense of a shared purpose among artists dwelling in the field is still lacking, well-crafted work tends to be more often the case. The label is still slippery, and some confusion between the notion of “comics/comic book” and “graphic novel” often appears in the scholarly work concerning this field of inquiry. However, at the same time, the expression “graphic novel” has become increasingly popular and used even in Italy, partly to indicate the book format and the narrative completeness of this work, and partly to disassociate this kind of work from the juvenile and often second-rate connotations of the more popular definitions (comics or comic book). This switch towards a more mature and aware consideration of graphic art is confirmed by the recent work of some Italian novelists (N.Ammanniti, M.Carlotto, G.Carofiglio, S.Sarasso) who collaborate with famous artists already sporting a well-defined personal style (Igor in the case of Carlotto¹ and Davide Fabbri in the case of Ammanniti², whose stories were adapted by D.Brolli), who experience a close cooperation with another artistic talent in the same family (Carofiglio working with his brother³) producing a visual version of a written tale, or who circulate the story on the web (Simone Sarasso) before publishing it in the form of a graphic novel (together with D. Rudoni⁴).

On the background of this diversity of approaches, Einaudi publishes *Protocollo*, resulting from the joined work of Marco Bolognesi and Carlo Lucarelli and introducing, I think, a very unusual and pioneering concept of the many possible intersections between literary and visual medium.

Both artists have eclectic experiences. Bolognesi, the younger and the creator of the (astonishing and beautiful) images of the book, is basically a visual artist, though his

¹ M. Carlotto e Igor, *Dimmi che non vuoi morire*, Milano: Mondadori, 2007.

² N. Ammanniti, D.Brolli, D.Fabbri, *Fa un po' male*, Torino: Einaudi, 2004.

³ G. e F. Carofiglio, *Cacciatori nelle tenebre*, Milano: Rizzoli, 2007.

⁴ S. Sarasso e D. Rudoni, *United We Stand*, Venezia: Marsilio, 2009.



talent is very difficult to confine. He has been working in painting, photography, multimedia, video and cinema. His short films *Giustizia e verità* (1994) and *Il partito del silenzio* (1996), both included in the Biennale, reveal a deep and sensible political commitment with recent Italian history, while *Black Hole* – another short film recently awarded the prize of the Indie Short Film Competition in Florida – dwells in the mythology and archetypes of recent science fiction. Bolognesi lives in London, though born in Bologna, while Lucarelli goes on living in Italy, though residing in San Marino (so abroad, in a way). Famous as a novelist, Lucarelli has recently become very popular for his work as a journalist, firmly grounded in a strong sense of both the Italian recent and past history and an ethics rooted in the deep knowledge of the human nature. Lucarelli has often courted graphic novel as an expressive medium, though *Protocollo* is a totally new experience in his curriculum.

And as a matter of fact, *Protocollo* stands as an odd-man-out against the background of both the Italian and the international experience in this field: it somehow reminds – in recent times – the experience of *Slow Chocolate Autopsy*, shared by Iain Sinclair and Dave McKean, though the structure of the two works is totally different. Though labelled as a graphic novel by the publishers (“un *graphic novel* innovativo che fonde i materiali più diversi per il piacere totale dell’occhio”, as they write on the back flap), *Protocollo* is much more: a surprising visual experience inflected in a disturbing set of events, a dark, chaotic and Orwellian dystopia haunted by women (none of them a positive profile) and unfolding in a border land between dream and reality that gradually becomes – as the Bard once said - the land we all belong to.

On the surface and technically, *Protocollo* is no doubt a graphic novel: it combines words and images, it includes a sort of paneling that builds the sequential progress of the story, and words are mostly written in balloons, or sort of. However, panels are not always detectable, their borders are unclear and permeable, words are everywhere and their sequence is often to be built (or re-built) by the reader, and the book includes plenty of notes, written documents, and other various samples of written texts, radically revising traditional codes and technical devices we would expect in this kind of text. Therefore *Protocollo* may be defined a graphic novel, but it is a disturbing and unusual one: it has the same skin of a graphic novel, but a different complexion, toned to blue as the skin of most of Bolognesi’s women, here and in other works by him.

The story that Lucarelli and Bolognesi tell is firmly steeped in the field of dystopia: the nightmare of an impending dictatorial regime, run by a multinational economic power (Sendai Corporation), building androids, female cyborgs (blue women) who are invincible warriors and totally reliable soldiers. Technically, the book is articulated in 11 files, telling the curious story of Aki Kaufman, a crossbred, born in Paris to a German father and a Japanese mother, of German nationality and living in London. Aki was previously short-sighted but he has undergone a surgical treatment that apparently has gone wrong and required a new operation (by Sendai Vision, of course). This latter has been the beginning of the end: Aki’s vision starts being disturbed and unreliable, and as a result dream and reality get mixed up. And he finds out curious things both about women and about himself and his fate.



The whole of the story is poised between London and the rest of the world. The setting includes several locations in the US, the Eastern world (never so obscure and mysterious), and a dreamland (or a nightmarish world) combining bits and pieces of the weird imagination of dystopia in a curious, unsettling puzzle. Among the characters, women dominate, both symbolically and in terms of narrative dynamics. At best, they are a mystery. At worst they are unbeatable warriors and task-masters. They are not exactly given a negative profile: that would be much too obvious. They are no longer elective victims, traditional wives and girlfriends, murderers by proxy and warriors – very seldom – by chance. They are the future. They are winners even when bound, imprisoned and tortured. Finally, they are better than human beings precisely because they are not human. And they dominate the plot, that is deliberately fragmented to comply with Kaufman's discontinuous perception of the world.

The key-issue is therefore vision. I would say this is by far the most interesting aspect of *Protocollo*: the meta-discourse on art as a bridge between imagination and reality, the vital tool to combine them and to revise the modalities of vision, to make them more suitable to a quickly changing world.

"I colori cambiano a seconda delle emozioni" says Aki; and then he adds: "E' come se vivessi in un quadro". So, the discourse on visibility collates the whole story. And Aki's perceptions become our (i.e. the readers') guide in a more and more nightmarish utopia, which is our future world. And a most successful vision.

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