

Empathy-eliciting strategies in Javier de Isusi's *Asylum*: Exile, migration and human rights

Estrategias de construcción de empatía en *Asylum* de Javier de Isusi:
exilio, migración y derechos humanos

Estratègies de construcció d'empatia en *Asylum* de Javier de Isusi:
exili, migració i drets humans

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Abstract

This article examines the graphic novel *Asylum* (2017 [2015]), by Javier de Isusi (Bilbao, 1972), through the lens of migration studies, comics studies, and empathy theory. Focusing on themes of exile and human rights, *Asylum* portrays the transnational and transgenerational struggles of refugees from the Spanish Civil War to the present. Drawing on theories of empathy from Suzanne Keen (2006, 2008), Max Louwerse and Don Kuiken (2004), as well as Sara Ahmed's work on emotions (2014), the analysis examines how de Isusi employs specific comics strategies—such as colour, framing, point of view, and the depiction of violence and trauma—to evoke empathy for victims of forced displacement. By examining the graphic novel's diverse portrayals of refugee experiences, this article focuses on how visual and narrative strategies capture the emotional and political complexities of migration, in both historical and contemporary contexts. In doing so, the analysis highlights the educational potential of comics like *Asylum* for addressing complex social and historical issues in the classroom. In order to analyse the comics devices employed by de Isusi, which depict the multilayered and heterogeneous nature of refugee experiences, this article will firstly introduce the comics artist and underscore the humanitarian issues that have remained a central concern throughout his work. The article will then provide a brief outline of *Asylum* before contextualising the comic within a body of graphic narratives (within and beyond Spain) that deal with exile, migration and human rights. Subsequently, previous research on *Asylum* will be addressed. An outline of the theoretical framework of the present analysis will be provided, which draws on empathy theory and emotions in the context of comics studies. The subsequent section will examine the empathy-inducing comics strategies employed by de Isusi, which portray various refugee experiences. The final section will evaluate *Asylum* as a pedagogical resource in the classroom setting.

Keywords: graphic novels, Spanish Civil War, refugees, comics, non-governmental organisations

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la novela gráfica *Asylum* (2017 [2015]), de Javier de Isusi (Bilbao, 1972), desde la perspectiva de los estudios sobre migración, el cómic y la teoría de la empatía. Centrada en los temas del exilio y los derechos humanos, *Asylum* retrata las luchas transnacionales y transgeneracionales de los refugiados, abarcando desde la guerra civil española hasta la actualidad. A partir de las teorías de la empatía propuestas por Suzanne Keen (2006, 2008), Max Louwerse y Don Kuiken (2004), así como de los planteamientos de Sara Ahmed sobre las emociones (2014), se examina cómo de Isusi genera empatía hacia las víctimas de desplazamiento forzado mediante estrategias propias del cómic, como el uso del color, el encuadre, el punto de vista y la representación de la violencia y el trauma. Las diversas representaciones de las experiencias de los refugiados permiten también explorar cómo se captan las complejidades emocionales y políticas de la migración, tanto en contextos históricos como contemporáneos, a través de recursos visuales y narrativos. Lo anterior resalta el potencial educativo de cómics como *Asylum* para abordar en el aula cuestiones sociales e históricas complejas. Para analizar las estrategias empleadas por de Isusi en la representación de la experiencia heterogénea y multifacética de los refugiados, primero se presenta al autor-ilustrador, resaltando la dimensión humanitaria de su obra. A continuación, se ofrece un resumen de *Asylum*, seguido de su contextualización dentro de un corpus de novelas gráficas españolas e internacionales que abordan el exilio, la migración y los derechos humanos. Asimismo, se incluyen investigaciones relevantes en torno a *Asylum*. Posteriormente, se expone el marco teórico que sustenta el análisis, basado en las teorías de la empatía y las emociones, aplicadas a los estudios sobre cómics. Después, se examinan las estrategias narrativas y visuales que utiliza de Isusi para generar empatía mediante la representación de diversas experiencias. Finalmente, se evalúan las aplicaciones de *Asylum* como recurso pedagógico en el aula.

Palabras clave: Novela gráfica, guerra civil española, refugiados, cómics, Organización no gubernamental

Resum

Aquest article analitza la novel·la gràfica *Asylum* (2017 [2015]), de Javier de Isusi (Bilbao, 1972), des de la perspectiva dels estudis sobre migració, el còmic i la teoria de l'empatia. Centrada en els temes de l'exili i els drets humans, *Asylum* retrata les lluites transnacionals i transgeneracionals dels refugiats, abastant des de la guerra civil espanyola fins a l'actualitat. A partir de les teories de l'empatia proposades per Suzanne Keen (2006, 2008), Max Louwerse i Don Kuiken (2004), així com dels plantejaments de Sara Ahmed sobre les emocions (2014), s'examina com de Isusi genera empatia cap a les víctimes de desplaçament forçat mitjançant estratègies pròpies del còmic, com l'ús del color, l'enquadrament, el punt de vista i la representació de la violència i el trauma. Les diverses representacions de les experiències dels refugiats permeten també explorar com es capten les complexitats emocionals i polítiques de la migració, tant en contextos històrics com contemporanis, a través de recursos visuals i narratius. L'anterior ressalta el potencial educatiu de còmics com *Asylum* per a abordar a l'aula qüestions socials i històriques complexes. Per a analitzar les estratègies emprades per de Isusi en la representació de l'experiència heterogènia i multifacètica dels refugiats, primer es presenta a l'autor-il·lustrador, ressaltant la dimensió humanitària de la seva obra. A continuació, s'ofereix un resum de *Asylum*, seguit de la seva contextualització dins d'un corpus de novel·les gràfiques espanyoles i internacionals que aborden l'exili, la migració i els drets humans. Així mateix, s'inclouen recerques rellevants entorn de *Asylum*. Posteriorment, s'exposa el marc teòric que sustenta l'anàlisi, basat en les teories de l'empatia i les emocions, aplicades als estudis sobre còmics. Després, s'examinen les estratègies narratives i visuals que utilitza de Isusi per a generar empatia mitjançant la representació de diverses experiències. Finalment, s'avaluen les aplicacions de *Asylum* com a recurs pedagògic a l'aula.

Paraules clau: novel·les gràfiques, Guerra Civil espanyola, refugiats, còmics, organitzacions no governamentals

1. Introduction

This article explores *Asylum* (2017 [2015]), a graphic novel by Javier de Isusi (Bilbao, 1972), through the interdisciplinary frameworks of migration studies, comics studies, and empathy theory. *Asylum* traces the transnational and transgenerational struggles of refugees, depicting stories of displacement, exile and human rights in two timeframes: it compares forced exile following the Spanish Civil War in the Basque country with contemporary tales of refugees from Africa and Latin America. Methodologically, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines close textual and paratextual analysis with insights from empathy theory, as developed by Suzanne Keen (2006, 2008), Max Louwerse and Don Kuiken (2004), alongside the study of emotions as theorised by Sara Ahmed (2014). This framework is complemented by comics theory, focusing on visual analysis to examine how de Isusi employs the unique affordances of the comics medium—such as colour, framing, point of view, and the visual depiction of violence and trauma—to foster empathetic engagement with displaced populations. Through its layered visual, paratextual, and narrative techniques, *Asylum* highlights the emotional and political complexities of forced migration across time and space. The article also considers the pedagogical value of comics in the classroom, arguing that *Asylum*, through visual storytelling, humanises migration and illuminates the ongoing impact of displacement on individuals and communities.

2. Javier de Isusi

Javier de Isusi is a Spanish comic book author and illustrator whose work reflects his profound engagement with themes of social justice and human rights. After studying architecture in San Sebastián and Lisbon, de Isusi embarked on a transformative year-long journey across Latin America. This experience ignited his passion for storytelling through comics, leading to the creation of *Los viajes de Juan Sin Tierra* [The Travels of Juan Sin Tierra], a four-part comic book series, published between 2004 and 2010, inspired by the author-illustrator's travels and reflecting his deep interest in social issues.

De Isusi's dedication to depicting global humanitarian concerns continues in his later graphic novels, where he

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probes the emotional and psychological effects of political violence. This commitment is evident in works such as: *He visto ballenas* (2015) [I Have Seen Whales], which explores themes of reconciliation and forgiveness by examining the complex legacy of the Basque conflict through the lives of three fictional characters: a former militant of the Basque separatist

group ETA, a former member of the Anti-Terrorist Liberation Groups (GAL), and a man whose father was killed by ETA¹. *Asylum* (2017) addresses the refugee crisis from multiple perspectives. *Transparentes*. *Historias del exilio*

¹ GAL stands for Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación [Antiterrorist Liberation Groups]. ETA, an acronym for Euskadi ta Askatasuna [Basque Homeland and Liberty], was an armed nationalist separatist group in the Basque Country between 1959 and 2018.

colombiano (2020) [Trans-Parents: Stories of Colombians in Exile], de Isusi's graphic novel based on testimonies collected by the Colombian Truth Commission, sheds light on the stories of Colombian exiles affected by over 50 years of armed conflict. The author-illustrator's most recent graphic novel, *Todas las mañanas* (2024) [Every Morning], co-published by Astiberri and the associations FICE Spain², Agintzari and Resilis, portrays two families in a specialised foster care programme for children with severe emotional trauma. De Isusi's commitment to civic participation and his reflection on social issues through the comics format have garnered critical acclaim, culminating in his receipt of the prestigious 2020 National Comic Award for *La divina comedia de Oscar Wilde* (2019) [Oscar Wilde's Divine Comedy], the Premio Euskadi Ilustración [Euskadi Illustration Prize] in 2021 for *Transparentes*, and the "I Premio Zona Negativa" in 2025 for *Todas las mañanas*.

3. Asylum

De Isusi's graphic novel, *Asylum*, uses the Spanish Civil War and the 1939 Basque exile to foster connections with contemporary refugees from Africa and Latin America. The frame story focuses on Marina, a 94-year-old Basque grandmother, who recounts her memories of exile and displacement to her lesbian granddaughter, Maialen, who, along with her mother, visits her grandmother in a nursing home (appropriately termed "un asilo" [an asylum]) to convince the old woman to sell her apartment. Marina adamantly refuses, the reason for which is revealed at the end of the graphic novel: she is renting the apartment to four immigrants. Marina urges her granddaughter to meet the asylum seekers, and the rest of the graphic novel recounts the grandmother's story of exile and displacement interspersed with similar—yet chronotopically distinct—testimonies from the four refugees.

Marina tells these stories to Maialen, and, by extension, to the reader-viewer. She recounts to her granddaughter the story of her life from the time of her fifteenth birthday, 18 July 1936, after her hometown of Otxandio is bombed. Marina and her family spend years seeking refuge in France and Cataluña, in appalling conditions, until they are finally given political asylum in Venezuela. The frame tale is punctuated by other contemporary narratives of exile and violence, which are told to Maialen when she visits the inhabitants of her grandmother's apartment near the end of the graphic novel. Aina, a young girl from Benin, Nigeria, falls prey to a human trafficking mafia; Christopher Wekesa, a young gay man from Uganda, is forced to flee to Kenya and then to Europe to avoid being imprisoned and/or murdered; Sanza Adzuba, a Congolese woman fleeing massacres in her country, spends ten arduous years trying to reach the border at Melilla; and Imelda Garrido Fernández, a Mexican woman, has left Ciudad Juárez in fear for her life after receiving threats for denouncing disappearances and murders of women. This non-linear, achronological, fragmented narrative structure not only has the potential to

² FICE is the acronym for Federación Internacional de Comunidades Educativas. See: <https://ficespain.org/>. Agintzari is a social initiative cooperative based in the Basque Country, dedicated to providing innovative and community-based social services. See: https://www.agintzari.com/cas/agintzari_identidad.aspx. Resilis (or the Resilis Foundation) is a nonprofit organisation based in Catalonia, Spain, founded in 2006 (with roots in earlier initiatives). It focuses on supporting children and youth who are at risk, facing social exclusion, or experiencing serious challenges. See: <https://www.resilis.org/>.

influence the reader-viewer's cognitive-emotional response but also reflects the complex and disjointed experiences of refugees.

4. Migration studies and comics

Since the twentieth century, migration has intensified, driven by forced displacements due to war, persecution, and economic instability. The migration "crisis" in Europe, particularly since 2015, has dominated political and journalistic media discourse, often with simplistic, racist, dehumanizing and othering narratives (Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017; Arcimaviciene and Baglama, 2018). However, various other forms of creative media, including graphic novels and comics, have countered such depictions. Research on migration-themed comics examines how these works challenge stereotypes, provide alternative narratives to those portrayed in other media, and foster new forms of political thought and emotional connection (Vuorinne and Kauranen, 2023, p. 19). A significant turning point in the relationship between graphic novels and life narratives was marked by Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986-1991), which recounts Spiegelman's father's experiences as a Holocaust survivor and his subsequent exile. This groundbreaking work not only redefined the genre's potential for depicting memory, history, trauma, and displacement, but also paved the way for a surge in graphic novels exploring migration and diaspora. Scholars like Naghibi et al. (2020, p. 295) argue that *Maus* catalysed a broader trend, inspiring comics that centre the lives of migrants, refugees, exiles, and individuals navigating personal and multigenerational diasporas. This trajectory is exemplified by two other seminal works: Marjane Satrapi's two-part series, *Persepolis* (2000, 2004), which chronicles the author's childhood during the Iranian Revolution and her displacement to Europe; and Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006), a wordless graphic novel notable for its universal portrayal of an immigrant's disorientation and hope while adapting to an unfamiliar society.

Building on this legacy, the cultural and scholarly interest in migration-themed graphic narratives has continued to grow. Álvarez Gómez (2021, p. 243) underscores this momentum, noting that between 2014 and 2019 alone, at least thirteen comics addressing migration were published or translated in Spain, offering stories that interrogate concepts such as flight, borders, and confinement. Some of these comics include: *Sansamba* by Lola Vanguardia and Susanna Martín (Norma editorial, 2014); *Viñetas de vida* by various authors (Astiberri, 2015) [Life Comics]; *La Grieta* by Carlos Spottorno and Guillermo Abril (Astiberri Ediciones, 2016) [The Rift]; *Refugiada* by Tessa Julià Dinarès and Anna Gordillo (La Galera, Sau, 2017) [Refugee]; *Un regalo para Kushbu. Historias que cruzan fronteras* by various authors (Astiberri, 2017) [A Present for Kushbu. Stories that Cross Borders]; *Refugiados / Viñetas solidarias* by various authors (ECC Ediciones, 2018) [Refugees: Cartoons of Solidarity]; and *Como si nunca hubieran sido* by Javier Gallego and Juan Gallego (Reservoir Gráfica, 2018) [As If They Had Never Existed]³. *El cielo en la cabeza* by Antonio Altarriba, Sergio García and Lola Moral (2023) [The Sky Overhead] depicts a young refugee's journey from the Congo through Libya to Spain.

³ For more graphic novels and comics related to Spain and migration (especially Africa-Spain migration), see Raúl Álvarez Gómez (2021). Some of the other titles mentioned by Álvarez Gómez were published in Spain by authors from countries outside Spain.

Together, these works illustrate how the medium's hybrid form—blending visual and narrative storytelling—enables nuanced explorations of identity, belonging, and the enduring human impact of forced displacement, reflecting a growing recognition of the power of comics to convey complex emotional and historical experiences in an accessible format. Moreover, comics not only recover marginalised and minority voices from the peripheries of representation (Nabizadeh, 2019, p. 1; cited in Vuorinne and Kauranen 2023, p. 13) but also serve as a medium for fostering dialogue between the lived experiences of readers and the worlds depicted in these works (Boatright, 2010, p. 468). Through both first-hand accounts and vicarious narratives based on testimonies and conversations, these graphic novels offer profound insights into the experiences of those who have faced displacement and migration. As such, they provide an important avenue for understanding and empathy, highlighting the capacity of comics as a medium that “mobilizes the visual work of witness” (Chute, 2016, p. 32). Works by comics creators like Javier de Isusi exemplify this form of witnessing, giving voice to those silenced by violence and persecution, and establishing their creators as powerful figures in contemporary graphic literature. By engaging with themes of migration, memory and identity, graphic novels not only document personal and collective histories but also invite readers to participate in an ongoing dialogue about these topics.

5. State of the art

5.1. Previous studies on *Asylum*

To date, *Asylum* has been the focus of four scholarly articles. Pedro Piedras Monroy (n.d.) gives a brief synopsis of the comic's interplay between past and present tales of migration from the perspective of Walter Benjamin's theories about history and messianic time. Isabelle Touton (2022) also focuses on the comic's temporal shifts between past and present. She examines *Asylum* as a didactic resource that compares past and present, and she aligns the comic's past-present comparative device with a strategy used by other comics artists, as well as by certain non-governmental organisations (NGOs), journalists and “artistas militantes” [militant artists] (Touton, 2022, p. 111). Nagore Sedano's (2023) analysis is less favourable. She argues that *Asylum* reinforces stereotypes about progressive, Western, Basque society versus the “backwardness” of countries that have not advanced in terms of gender equity and LGBTQI+ awareness. Sedano frames this argument in terms of the trope of “liberatory Basque blood” (2023, p. 57) and draws on Jasbir Puar's concept of “homonationalism”: “the instrumentalization of the gay-friendliness of a nation as a parameter of its modernity” (Sedano, 2023, p. 57). Sedano maintains that *Asylum* repackages the 1939 Basque exile “as part of a celebratory women's and gay rights tale of the nation” (p. 57). However, this scholar argues that this reframing simultaneously obscures the neo-colonial dynamics between the Basque Country and Latin America and marginalises heterodox voices within the 1939 Basque nationalist exile. While acknowledging the concerns raised by Sedano regarding the graphic novel's reliance on stereotypes that depict (primarily) African countries as “backward” in terms of gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, the present article ultimately argues that such portrayals are countered through the humanisation and individualisation of the refugee characters.

In this regard, the present analysis expands on Jasmine Wrobel's point that, rather than reinforcing reductive narratives, *Asylum* fosters empathy for and solidarity with refugees (Wrobel, 2023). Wrobel examines the graphic

novel through the lens of Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory (Rothberg, 2019), from an intersectional perspective. Rothberg challenges the notion that differing narratives of historical trauma compete and instead champions the idea that such memories can interact productively while maintaining their specificity (Rothberg, 2019). Indeed, *Asylum* underscores the importance of multidirectional memory by depicting how historical events are remembered and represented beyond national boundaries and across different cultural groups.⁴ Wrobel points out that de Isusi evokes empathy and solidarity among readers by leveraging a story about Spanish Civil War exile to encourage contemporary (especially Spanish) readers to empathise with present-day refugees. The present article draws on and expands on these studies, particularly Wrobel's analysis, by focusing on *Asylum*'s empathy-inducing comics strategies in more detail.

5.2. Empathy studies

As Naghibi et al. point out, comics on migration create an immersive experience that allows readers to emotionally and ethically engage with the stories of migrants and refugees (Naghibi et al., 2020, p. 296). This aligns with Nussbaum's (2012) definition of empathy as "the ability to see the world from another's viewpoint" (p. 36). Building on this, Suzanne Keen defines empathy as the spontaneous or vicarious shared feeling that can be elicited by witnessing another person's emotional state, listening to them, or even reading about them (Keen, 2006, p. 208). Keen also advocates for more scientific investigation into how narrative empathy affects readers, emphasising its crucial role in understanding literature's impact on society. Her research focuses on how empathy is elicited and measured within narratives, revealing significant gaps in current scholarship. In her later works, she identifies narrative techniques that enhance empathy, such as character identification, narrative situation, and literary devices like discourse and pacing (2006, p. 216). These techniques help readers form personal bonds with characters, experiencing their emotions (struggles or joy) as if they were their own. Additionally, Keen proposes three varieties of authorial strategic empathising: "bounded strategic empathy", which creates strong emotional bonds within a specific group while possibly excluding others (Keen, 2008, p. 481); "ambassadorial strategic empathy", which uses stories strategically to influence how a particular audience feels and thinks about certain issues or groups, appealing for justice, recognition, and assistance (Keen, 2008, p. 483); and "broadcast strategic empathy", which employs shared human experiences to foster a sense of understanding and connection with a wide audience (Keen, 2008, p. 488).

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In works like *Asylum*, there is an emphasis on the importance of empathy and dialogue in the healing process. Aligning with Keen's notion of "ambassadorial strategic empathy" (Keen, 2008, p. 483), these narratives aim to mobilise empathy among readers to encourage political actions, such as fostering a more hospitable reception of refugees by host populations, particularly in Western European countries (Davies, 2020, p. 178). According to

⁴ Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory chimes with other theories in cultural memory studies, such as transnational memory (de Cesari and Rigney, 2014), transcultural memory (Erll, 2014), and mnemonic relationality (Erll, 2017).

Naghibi et al. (2020, p. 296), the concept of “being *en route* to change” in graphic life narratives, refers both to the literal journeys of displaced people and to a metaphor for the evolving perspectives of creators and readers. As these narratives depict the complex experiences of migrants and refugees, they challenge readers to rethink standard or received images of history. As Chute (2016, p. 31) notes, driven by the urgency of re-seeing war through acts of witnessing, comics propose “an ethics of looking and reading” that seeks to defamiliarise conventional images while still aiming to communicate and circulate powerful truths (Chute, 2016, p. 31).

In their introduction to the issue, “The effects of personal involvement in narrative discourse” (2004), the editors, Max Louwerse and Don Kuiken, discuss the deep emotional and cognitive engagement that individuals experience when interacting with narratives, whether in texts, films, or performances. This involvement often leads to lingering emotional effects, changes in beliefs, and shifts in self-perception, suggesting that such texts do more than merely entertain; they also have the potential to influence and reshape the reader-viewer’s internal world (2004, p. 170). As numerous comics theorists have pointed out (Chute, 2016; Simpson, 2018), this emotional and cognitive involvement also applies to the comics medium, with its multi-modal blend of visual art and textual narrative. As Will Simpson claims, “the particular communicative multimodality within comics, as well as the necessity, nature, and extent of reader engagement, offer readers uniquely constituted opportunities for emotional engagement and responses” (Simpson, 2018, para 1).

Numerous comics scholars have recognised the potential of graphic novels for advancing humanitarian aims through comics strategies that generate empathy and identification in the reader (Salmi, 2019; Freedman, 2022). As Ariel Freedman points out, the claim that graphic narrative has the potential to elicit empathy is often based on Scott McCloud’s notion that the iconic simplicity of the drawn image increases engagement and identification in the reader-viewer (Freedman, 2022, p. 128). According to McCloud, “[w]hen you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face, you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon, you see yourself” (McCloud, 1993, p. 8, cited in Freedman, 2022, p. 128).⁵

Conversely, Sidonie Smith (2011) challenges the notion that “crisis comics”—comics supported by NGOs and human rights organisations, with testimonial tales by marginalised or minoritised people who are depicted vicariously (and in some cases, exploited) by charities and author-illustrators—automatically provoke empathy in reader-viewers. On the contrary, she argues that such graphic novels can unintentionally reinforce narrow, stereotyped views of “the other” (2011, pp. 84-85). Furthermore, Smith cautions that the empathy generated by such texts may serve to entertain or pacify rather than promote real reform (2011, p. 85). Moreover, she notes that testimonies in these comics are often mediated and therefore blur the lines between authentic witness testimony and constructed narrative (2011, pp. 82-83). Smith calls for a more politically aware practice that

⁵ Even Charles Hatfield, who warns against assuming “complete identification” between observer and observed, concedes, “a limited claim might be made for reader empathy” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 117). Hatfield maintains that “[t]he logical principles or signifying practices of comics, no less than film, militate against a thoroughgoing identification of observer and observed. While a limited claim might be made for reader empathy, positing complete identification stretches the case beyond credulity” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 117).

acknowledges these dynamics and focuses on systemic change rather than empathy-induced moral comfort. She identifies this approach in the genre of graphic memoirs, or what Gillian Whitlock terms “autographics” (Whitlock, 2006; Smith, 2011).⁶ While acknowledging Smith’s views that some “crisis comics” can unintentionally reinforce “othering” stereotypes and induce empathy-driven moral comfort, the present analysis argues that not all fictional graphic narratives that fall outside the genre of “autographics” do so. On the contrary, graphic novels such as *Asylum*, which blend testimonial stories of refugees into a fictional (graphic) narrative, can generate empathy in reader-viewers, and advocate for awareness, solidarity and action, while humanising and individualising the refugee characters.

In “The Contingency of Pain”, the first chapter of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed, 2014), Sarah Ahmed argues that empathy is a complex process because emotions are shaped by social, cultural, and linguistic factors. Practising empathy may not always give the expected results, especially in situations with power imbalances (like those involving differences in race, gender, or social class). Sometimes, what appears to be empathy can actually create (more) distance rather than connection. For example, someone in a powerful or privileged position might feel good about their ability to empathise, but that does not always result in meaningful change for the person with whom they are trying to empathise. Ahmed also points out that language shapes how people express and understand emotions, which, in turn, affects their view of empathy (2014, pp. 22-23). However, language has its limits, and often it cannot fully represent the depths of pain (2014, pp. 22-23). As Ahmed signals, the way pain is perceived and addressed in social and political contexts is related to the tension between the representation of pain and the reality of its experience (2014, p. 25). Moreover, echoing Smith, Ahmed suggests that empathy should involve moving beyond just “feeling with someone” (2014, p. 41) to actively working against unfair social systems. The subsequent analysis aims to show how de Isusi’s graphic novel moves beyond Smith’s notion of empathy-induced moral comfort and Ahmed’s caution about simply “feeling with someone” to align with Keen’s notion of “ambassadorial strategic empathy”. The textual analysis will examine the ways in which the empathy-provoking strategies in *Asylum* humanise the refugee characters, promote awareness about heterogeneous refugee experiences and serve as a call to action.

Before exploring the various empathy-eliciting strategies in the graphic novel, it is important to acknowledge the difference between the “real” and “implied” reader-viewer in comics. The “implied reader”, a term coined by literary critic Wayne Booth (1983 [1961]), refers to an ideal or a hypothetical reader that the author has in mind when writing, and which is suggested by the style, content, structure and assumptions within the written text. When adapted to the comics genre, the “implied reader-viewer” may be understood as the text’s ideal reader-viewer, constructed to respond emotionally in specific ways—guided by visual framing, character expression, pacing, and layout design—creating a pathway for empathy that aligns with the creator’s intent. However, the

⁶ Smith mentions *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) as examples of “autographics”. For her part, Ariela Freedman (2022) draws on Sianne Ngai’s concept of “ugly feelings”—emotions like discomfort or irritation that block empathy—to examine *Le Photographe* (Emmanuel Guibert, Didier Lefèvre and Frédéric Lemerrier 2006, Dupuis) [The Photographer], which, Freedman claims, can disrupt conventional humanitarian sentimentality by cultivating ironic distance and meta-reflection.

real reader-viewer brings their own emotional frameworks, cultural references, and levels of visual literacy, which can either align with or diverge from this intended response. Indeed, the multimodal nature of the comics genre allows for rich, nuanced emotional cues that can invite empathy, but only if the reader-viewer engages with them as the text assumes.

6. Paratextual elements

When considering the emotional and cognitive impact of *Asylum* on reader-viewers, it is important to reflect on the text's paratextual framing. As Gérard Genette points out, paratextual framing mediates between the text and its reception, shaping reader's expectations and interpretations (Genette, 1997). According to Appel and Richter, it also influences the persuasive effects of fictional narratives, given that "fact-related information contained in fictional narratives may induce substantial changes in readers' real-world beliefs" (2007, p. 113). The real-world paratexts—such as the ones included in the last pages of *Asylum*—can significantly influence narrative persuasion by blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. Moreover, this persuasive effect is closely linked to "narrative transportation", defined by Green as a "combination of attention, imagery, and feelings, in which an individual becomes immersed in a narrative world" (Green, 2021, p. 87).

Asylum was commissioned by three NGOs—the Peace Research Centre, Comisión de Ayuda al Refugiado en Euskadi – CEAR-Euskadi (the Basque Commission for Refugees), and Gernika Gogoratuz (Remembering Gernika)—and the proceeds from the graphic novel go to Gernika Gogoratuz.. Knowing that the comic's benefits help refugees can increase empathy, while affiliation to an NGO lends credibility, reinforcing the narrative's call to action, which is emphasised through the exploration of human rights and exile of the text's final pages (De Isusi, 2017, pp. 98-103).

Moreover, the copyright page of *Asylum* states that the stories of the main characters in the graphic novel are based on real testimonies, while the names of the refugees have been changed to protect their privacy. De Isusi relies on historical documents and refugee testimonies, many of which he obtained from CEAR, and transforms them into a fictionalised narrative. For instance, when portraying the story of Christopher Wekesa, though fictional, *Asylum* draws on real-life cases of persecution and activism in the LGBTQI+ community. De Isusi also refers to real-life events and people, such as the Ugandan LGBTQI+ activist David Kato, who gained international attention after successfully suing a Ugandan tabloid that had published his name and photograph, along with those of other LGBTQI+ individuals, calling for their execution. Tragically, Kato was murdered in 2011 in what was considered a hate crime. Another case is that of the Cameroonian activist Jean-Claude Roger Mbede, who was arrested in 2011 after sending a text message expressing his love for another man. Sentenced to three years in prison, he was considered a prisoner of conscience by several human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. He died in 2014 because of malnutrition, sexual assault and a hernia suffered during his confinement. By directly incorporating real-life situations into the comic, *Asylum* allows readers to generalise the lessons it conveys and apply them beyond the story.

The six-page epilogue includes a passage from Rigoberto Jara, who fled the Chilean dictatorship in 1974 and sought refuge in the Basque country, where he has lived since, working to support refugee communities. The

epilogue also denounces the human rights and migration situation in Europe and in Spain, encouraging readers to become more politically aware and engaged by including links to the CEAR website, and a QR code which urges readers to donate and/ or become a member of the association. These supplementary materials not only legitimise the refugees' personal testimonies and the harrowing situations they face, but they also reinforce de Isusi's political and ideological perspective and pedagogical aims, as well as his commitment to historical memory. Furthermore, considering Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock's statement that "the power of narratives to change beliefs has never been doubted and has always been feared" (2000, p. 701), and given that the stories can be perceived as realistic and credible, these paratextual materials encourage reader-viewers to interpret the graphic novel not just as an entertaining story, but also as a meditation on real-world issues about migration and human rights. They advocate for readers to respond and to become more politically involved in supporting refugees.⁷

7. Comics strategies

In addition to the paratextual framing, de Isusi employs various other comics strategies to elicit the reader-viewer's empathy and to give dignity and voice to the refugees. His use of colour, framing, choice of narrative perspective, and panel layout, all play a crucial role in influencing empathy in the reader-viewer. These comics strategies have the potential to shape narrative point of view, guide emotional engagement, and allow for a deeper connection between the reader-viewer and the characters.

7.1. Framing: Headshots

De Isusi offers a nuanced depiction of asylum seekers and challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about them through personalised stories presented from an intersectional perspective. The graphic novel focuses on the testimonies and subjective perspectives of the refugees. The characters are individualised and humanised and each story is recounted from a first-person, homodiegetic narrative voice. This narrative choice not only amplifies the characters' subjectivity but also fosters empathy.

Accompanying their first-person testimonies, the main characters are often visually depicted in front-profile headshots, looking directly at the reader (see Figure 1; p. 20). These images, hand-drawn in watercolour soft hues, are reminiscent of passport photos, a poignant reminder that such official documents enable citizens to travel to and from certain countries (or prevent them from doing so). These headshots are also reminiscent of the "mosaic of faces" or "victims' murals", which consist of individual portraits arranged together to form a larger, unified image or display. This format often commemorates those who have disappeared or been victims of violence under oppressive regimes or dictatorships, as seen in countries like Argentina, Chile and Mexico, and thus offers a covert allusion to the human rights abuses carried out in these countries (Jean Jean, 2023). De Isusi

⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the graphic novel's paratextual framing and its association with encouraging solidarity and empathy in the reader, see Wrobel 2023, pp. 244-249.

uses the same narrative and visual strategy to introduce each of the four refugees (Aina: p. 20; Christopher Wekesa: p. 30; Sanza Adzuba: p. 44; Aina and Sanza: p. 64; Imelda: p. 75). This technique is repeated at various stages in Marina's story (p. 15; p. 25; p. 38; p. 53; p. 71; p. 88) and, thus creating a visual and emotive connection between the disparate tales. The composition of the panels follows the same order: three headshot drawings of the character as they introduce themselves, followed by one longer, rectangular close-up of their face below (see Figure 1; p. 20). The lack of a frame around these panels not only makes the characters stand out against the white background but also reinforces the refugees' sense of displacement.



Figure 1. De Isusi, 2017, p. 20

7.2. Subjective shot

De Isusi uses other framing techniques to elicit an emotional and cognitive response from the reader-viewer, such as a device referred to in film studies by Joseph V. Mascelli as the “subjective shot” (see Mascelli 2005 [1965]: “Camera Angles”). Through this framing strategy, the reader-viewer sees from the subjective perspective of the character in the story. The subjective shot frames the events so that the viewer ‘sees’ the events through the eyes of the character, creating an intimate, immersive perspective. In *Asylum*, this framing strategy is most apparent in Sanza’s testimonial account, as she watches from the shoreline as refugees try to climb the fence at

Melilla (see Figure 2; p. 48). The composition of the eight rectangular panels, which appear to be layered haphazardly on the splash page, captures the chaos of the scene. Panels 1, 5 and 8 are framed in such a way that

The subjective shot frames the events so that the viewer 'sees' the events through the eyes of the character, creating an intimate, immersive perspective.

the reader-viewer sees through the eyes of Sanza, witnessing what she sees, whereas in panels 2, 6 and 7, the reader-viewer sees through the eyes of the refugees who are trying to escape, in high-angle shots from the top of the fence. On the gutter of the splash page, the reader-viewer witnesses Sanza watching the chaos unfold. These subjective shots reflect Chute's definition of different kinds of witnessing in comics: "being a witness to oneself, a witness

to the testimony of others, a witness to the process of witnessing" (Chute, 2016, p. 29). Through this strategy of the subjective shot, de Isusi encourages readers to empathise and identify with the plight of the refugees, not only to see what they see but also to feel their sense of anguish and fear in their escape attempt.



Figure 2. De Isusi, 2017, p. 48

7.3. Panels' layout

In addition to subjective shots, de Isusi encourages the reader-viewers to empathise with those seeking asylum through other comics strategies used to represent violence and trauma. Violence is depicted through specific framing techniques, fragmentation, modifications to the grid layout, and changes in colour palette. De Isusi modifies the text's regular panel layout (rectangular panels which should be read in a conventional pattern: from left to right and top to bottom) to reflect dramatic changes in thematic content.⁸ For instance, when Marina recounts the story of the bombing of Otxandio, de Isusi disrupts the regular grid layout to show fragmented, disordered panels, as if the panels, as well as the town, have been hit by the bombs, thus capturing the explosive effect, panic and destruction of war (see Figure 3; pp. 18-19). The onomatopoeia in bold capitals ("BOOM", "KRAAK", "DANBA") serves to reinforce this. When Sanza tries to swim to Spain from Melilla, with only a tyre to keep her afloat, the shape of the panels—parallelograms and trapeziums in landscape that cover the width of the page—capture the waves of the sea and Sanza's sense of disorientation (p. 50). This panel layout of quadrilateral panels that cover the width of the page is repeated when the young Marina helps a woman give birth on the beach at Argelès-sur-Mer concentration camp (p. 56). Whereas the quadrilateral panels reflect once more the waves of the sea, the over-the-shoulder shot, and the close-up of Marina's anxious facial expression, depict the latter's sense of disorientation and fear, as well as her resilience and solidarity in the face of adversity.



Figure 3. De Isusi, 2017, pp. 18-19

⁸ These disruptions to the regular grid layout are evident on pages 18-19, 40-41, 48, 50, 78.

7.4. Colour

The illustrations in *Asylum* are created using watercolour techniques. In an interview, de Isusi detailed his approach to colour selection, explaining that each story employs two colour gradients: a cool grey tone, and a warm gradient ranging from yellow to red, including orange, ochre, and sienna (de Isusi in Irurzun, 2017). In his watercolour drawings, along with the grey, de Isusi uses specific colour palettes to represent the stories and emotions of the characters, and certain colours are identified with specific characters. For example, present-day Marina is presented in light blue and yellow tones, whereas her past representation is depicted in sepia, brown and beige tones. This change in colour tone in Marina's story reflects the move from present to past (pp. 14-16). Aina is presented in red and blue tones, and red is the dominant colour in the most violent parts of her story. Sanza Adzuba is portrayed in yellow and green tones. Christopher Wekesa is depicted with yellow and blue colours that sometimes blend together to create green, whereas Imelda Garrido is represented in orange and blue tones.

7.5. Change in colour palette

Another visual device employed by de Isusi to represent violence and trauma is a sudden change in colour palette. This is most evident in the depiction of Aina's traumatic memories (pp. 67-68), which change from green, grey and yellow hues to blood red when she recounts the traumatic story of losing her child. She explains to Sanza that her child fell out of the truck on which she was being transported and the smugglers refused to stop. The varied panel sizes and the use of onomatopoeia in block capitals ("¡MI NIÑA! ¡MI NIÑA! ...¡PARAD! ¡PARAD EL CAMIÓN! ...¡AAAAAH! ...¡EL CAMIÓN NO SE PARA!" [p. 68]) [MY GIRL! MY GIRL! ... STOP! STOP THE TRUCK! ... AAAAGH! ... THE TRUCK WON'T STOP!], along with the almost monochrome blood-red colour palette, capture the violence of the scene and Aina's devastation and panic as she loses her child. The lack of any text on these pages (aside from the aforementioned onomatopoeia) underlines the notion of the unsayable aspects of traumatic memory. The reliance on visual imagery here highlights the capacity of the latter to express what words alone cannot.

All the colours merge in the encounter between Maialen, Imelda, Sanza, Christophe, and Aina, at the end of the graphic novel (Figure 4; p. 89), thus creating a polychromatic representation of life's complexity. For the author-illustrator, the core message of the book is that only by bringing all the stories together can one truly appreciate the full spectrum of life's experiences, much like the richness of diverse colours blending into a cohesive whole (de Isusi in Irurzun, 2017). This visual merging of colours serves as a metaphor for empathy and diversity, suggesting that the world becomes richer and more vibrant when viewed through a lens that embraces difference. The final image of the globe (pp. 93-96) reinforces the narrative's core theme of empathy, by visually embodying the idea of an interconnected world of global citizens who are (or should be) united in a sense of shared humanity (de Isusi in Irurzun, 2017).



Figure 4. De Isusi, 2017, p. 89

7.6. Narrative perspective: Witnessing the witness

Maialen's initial intention to evict the migrants staying at Marina's apartment shifts after she speaks with them, as Marina had requested. Their stories of pain and suffering allow Maialen to experience an empathetic feeling of co-suffering, as termed by Elizabeth Spelman (cited in Ahmed, 2014, p. 21), and they also evoke compassion in the reader, defined by Spelman, as "suffering with others" (cited in Ahmed, 2014, p. 41). Although Maialen genuinely feels empathy, Ahmed's work emphasises that such emotions can remain as a "wish feeling" and do not necessarily lead to meaningful support or structural change (2014, p. 30). Despite her initial intention to evict the migrants, Maialen eventually supports Marina's decision to transfer the apartment's ownership to the migrants' foundation. The shift from wanting to evict the migrants to endorsing Marina's decision reflects Maialen's transition from initial resistance to taking concrete actions that address power imbalances and offer tangible support. Additionally, as a homosexual who understands personal discrimination, Maialen comes to realise that each one of them, regardless of their circumstances, is subject to persecution and suffering. This understanding deepens her empathy and reinforces her commitment to addressing injustice.

Furthermore, the reader shares with Maialen her vicarious experience when listening to the stories of Sanza, Aina, Chris and Imelda, as the reader also witnesses the reconstruction of their migratory odysseys. In other words, the reader follows a parallel trajectory to Maialen's as she engages with the witness-stories of the aggressions, persecutions, fears and resilience of both Marina and the four migrants. Furthermore, the reader shares with Maialen her vicarious experience when listening to the stories of Sanza, Aina, Chris and Imelda, while also witnessing the reconstruction of their migratory odysseys. In other words, the reader follows a parallel trajectory to Maialen's as she engages with the witness-stories of the aggressions, persecutions, fears and resilience of Marina and the four migrants.

The readers' immersive experience can be explained through what Green and Brock refer to as the "transportation-imagery model" (Green and Brock, 2002; cited in Green, 2021, p. 91), whereby "narrative transportation [is] defined as a combination of attention, imagery, and feelings, in which an individual becomes immersed in a narrative world" (Green and Brock, 2000; Green and Brock, 2002; cited in Green, 2021, p. 87). This transportation is characterised by intense emotional and cognitive involvement, linked in turn to the fact that narratives can affect beliefs or attitudes (Green and Brock, 2000, p. 701). The multimodal nature of comics can further intensify this transportation effect, fostering a deep empathetic engagement with the migration experience. De Isusi further amplifies this transportation effect by grounding *Asylum* in historical documents and refugee testimonies—many sourced from organisations like CEAR and FICE Spain, Agintzari and Resilis—that lend the narrative authenticity and by transforming these authenticating documents into a fictionalised story.

8. *Asylum* as a pedagogical resource

As exemplified in the Reading Guide on *Asylum* by Deirdre Kelly and Diana Castilleja, de Isusi's graphic novel is a valuable pedagogical resource for promoting historical memory and fostering empathy toward displaced populations (Kelly and Castilleja, 2025). The graphic novel's linguistic accessibility—characterised by clear sentence structures and a relatively straightforward lexicon—makes it particularly suitable for use in the ELE (Spanish as a Foreign Language) classroom from level B2 on the CEFR framework (Kelly and Castilleja, 2025, p. 2). The guide, freely accessible online, provides practical pedagogical applications through specific classroom modules such as panel-by-panel comparative analysis, reflective writing tasks aimed at cultivating historical empathy and post-reading comprehension activities that encourage students to analyse central themes, narrative structure, character development, and the interplay between individual memories and collective historical memory.

Indeed, *Asylum* can deepen students' grasp of memory, identity, and historical trauma, making it a powerful interdisciplinary teaching tool when supported with structured classroom activities

As Iker Saitua points out in his article which analyses de Isusi's graphic novel as a didactic tool for teaching about the Spanish Civil War in the Basque country, *Asylum* has the potential to develop historical empathy through personal narratives; to understand the historical context of war and exile; and to practice critical analysis by interpreting visual storytelling and corroborating sources (Saitua, 2019). Visually, the graphic novel uses symbolic colour schemes, cinematic framing, and impactful imagery, which have the power to engage students both

emotionally and intellectually. Indeed, *Asylum* can deepen students' grasp of memory, identity, and historical trauma, making it a powerful interdisciplinary teaching tool when supported with structured classroom activities (see Kelly and Castilleja, 2025).

Furthermore, the integration of graphic novels such as *Asylum* into the curriculum is especially pertinent in light of Spain's Democratic Memory Law of 2022 (Ley 20/2022, 2022), which mandates the inclusion of recent historical events, including the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, in educational programmes (Ley 20/2022, 2022, Art. 44). Given the limited treatment of these topics in both primary and secondary education in Spain, *Asylum* offers an effective means of addressing this curricular gap through an engaging, multimodal format. From a thematic perspective, the frame tale about Marina's exile from the Basque Country to Venezuela following the Spanish Civil War is suitable for children over the age of 12. However, the interpolated stories of the four refugees, which deal with themes of forced marriage, the sex slave trade, femicide, homophobia and serious human rights abuses, are more suitable for teenagers over the age of 16 and would need to be contextualised and explained with care and sensitivity in the classroom setting.

9. Conclusion

Various strategies of the comics medium employed in *Asylum* not only have the potential to generate empathy in the reader-viewer for displaced populations but also challenge stereotypes of refugees by individualising and humanising them. These empathy-inducing strategies promote awareness about exile and human rights, encouraging readers to move beyond empathy towards solidarity, action, and ultimately, social change. By analysing specific strategies of the comics medium – such as colour, framing, point of view and the visual depiction of violence and trauma – this article challenges Smith's claim that "crisis comics" falling outside the "autographics" genre serve only to invoke empathy-induced moral comfort. Conversely, it shows how graphic novels such as *Asylum* can function as clarion calls for structural and social reform.

Various comics strategies employed in *Asylum* not only have the potential to generate empathy in the reader-viewer for displaced populations but also challenge stereotypes of refugees by individualising and humanising them.

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