



## Quim Monzó

Silvia T. Colmenero



- 1952 Born Barcelona
- 1966 Attends Massana Art School and starts working in a studio, L'Estudi Publicitari Industrial
- 1970 Works as a war correspondent and travels to Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania, Northern Ireland
- 1976 The Grison's Howl from the Sewers wins the Prudenci Bertrana Prize for the novel
- 1977 Self Service (with Biel Mesquida)
- 1978 Uf, he said
- 1981 Olivetti, Moulinex, Chaffoteaux and Maury (1980) wins the Critica Serra d'Or Prize.
- 1983 Co-scriptwriter of the film Angel's Bread.
- 1983 Petrol.
- 1984 The Day of the Lord.
- 1986 Maian's Island (1985) wins the Critica Serra d'Or Prize.
- 1987 Zzzzzzzz.
- 1989 The Extent of the Tragedy wins the El Temps Prize.
- 1990 The Turkish Suitcase.
- 1991 Hotel Intercontinental.
- 1993 The Reason for Everything (1993) wins the City of Barcelona Prize.
- 1994 The Reason for Everything (1993) wins the Critica Serra d'Or Prize.
- 1994 I Won't Plant any Trees.
- 1997 Guadalajara (1996) wins the Critica Serra d'Or Prize.
- 1998 Utterly Defenceless Before Hostile Alien Empires.
- 2000 Eighty-Six Stories (1999) wins the National Prize for Literature and the Lletra d'Or Prize.
- 2000 It's All Lies.
- 2001 The Best of Worlds.
- 2002 Awarded Catalan Writer's Prize.
- 2003 The Subject of the Subject.
- 2003 Three Christmases (illustrations by Ramon Enrich).

### From utopia to shock and amazement

J. Guillamon

I can still remember the impact made in 1980 by the publication of "Olivetti, Moulinex, Chaffoteaux and Maury". Quim Monzó's first books (including "Uf, he said") formed part of the rhetoric of the counterculture. They contained psychedelic references (blue fields, green and bright orange skies), false crime stories similar to those of Handke or Godard and surrealist solutions (women with transparent breasts and men who ate printed letters). "Olivetti..." moved in a different direction. In contrast to the way the counterculture defended and praised its own lifestyle, Monzó observed human behaviour and described it in great detail. His stories were basically urban. In the 70s the same locations (the Ramblas and Escudellers Street) formed the background to two radically different visions of the city: festive, liberated territory ("Rambles" by Sisa) and the setting for contemporary neurosis ("Bilbao" by Bigas Luna). Monzó's vision showed more contrasts. In his stories, we were shown a Barcelona which was full of familiar places (bars and restaurants open till dawn) and which promised wonderful things (freedom from routine, and swinging) but also, in equal measure, alienating routines and confusing mix ups.

There are two key stories in "Olivetti" which help us understand the change from the 70s to the 80s. The first, "Cacofonia", describes the journey taken by the main character, very early in the morning, as he goes from Tibidabo to the Ramblas and then meets a girl in the Baviera bar. She tells him that their generation's imaginary world has fallen apart. Each person is now interested in something different (one wants to be the person with the most money, another wants to seduce a different girl every day, another to eat a lot, work all the time and take more amphetamines than anyone else). They get in a car and drive up Balmes Street in the wrong direction, against the traffic, something which loses dramatic effect as there's hardly any traffic around at that time of day. The main character of "The Vegetable Kingdom" reconstructs the story of his life from the period of Les Enfants Terribles, when he spent his time in bars with prostitutes and US marines, until his eventual disenchantment (Monzó's ideas are like those of Pau Malvido in the famous series "We are the Damned" in the magazine "Star"), and ends with a funny vegetarian recipe applied to sexual relations. The ideals have gone, but nobody complains and the main character has become a libertine. Now he is only interested in proselytizing and winning over as many girls as possible with his idea.

Since "Olivetti", Monzó's work has continued along the same lines: "Maian's Island" shows the dissatisfaction, alienation and voyeurism of bourgeois life. "The Reason for Everything" illustrates the human farce of love and the rituals of sex. "Guadalajara" describes the repetition and weariness of the individual in a modern city (a city which has gradually lost its reference points and become a space with no names). Monzó develops short series of stories which reappear in several different books. At the start, he used cinematic images as a metaphor for the frailty of conscience, desire and memory ("Un cinema", "Nines russes/Russian Dolls"). Or he based scenes on typical situations from pornography: romantic seduction ("Historia d'amor/Love Story"), a meeting in a train ("La dama salmó/The Salmon Woman", "Ferrocarri"/"Railway") or the piano lesson ("Filantropia del mobiliari/The Philanthropy of the Furniture"). Some of the stories contain numerous references to the obsession with tidiness and its opposite, the gratuitous act ("El nord del sud"/"The North of the South", "To Choose"). The last books highlight the anguish of the professional writer ("El segrest"/"The Hijack", "La literatura"/"Literature") and include superb parodies of short stories and literary classics: "Sleeping Beauty" ("La bella dorment"), Cinderella ("La monarquia/The Monarchy") or Kafka's Metamorphosis ("Gregor").

One of the keys to Monzó's success is that his work can be interpreted in a variety of ways. He has often been considered as the writer responsible for reviving modern literary Catalan. Some traditional Catalan philologists compare him to Carner and even, I read the other day, to Martí de Riquer because of his intensity and discipline. European critics, however, link his work to that of Kafka, Borges and Rabelais. It is interesting to note how the strategies of cultural legitimisation have worked in his case. I believe that Monzó has created his own aura of success. For me, he is a curious enthusiast and a great individualist. The description of a character in one of his most recent stories fits him perfectly (he never manages to finish reading a book because, as he sees it, nothing is better than the sense of potential and freedom implicit in the first pages, when you don't know how the story is going to continue). Throughout his career Monzó has had many models, including Cabrera Infante, Frank Zappa, Grupo Pánico, Wolinski, Trabal, Handke and Donald Bartheleme. Recently he has also discovered affinities with writers such as Robert Coover or Slawomir Mrozek. Whilst not committing himself to any of these in particular, he has managed to integrate and ensure the continuity of their influence in a personal interpretation of the literary tradition which stretches from the vibrant literary utopia of the 70s to the shock and amazement caused by living in current times.