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Picturebooks Challenging Sexual Politics. Pro-Porn Feminist Comics and the Case of Melinda Gebbie and Alan Moore’s *Lost Girls*¹

The Subversive Politics of Sequential Art

Comics Studies has gained an increasing significance in the past few decades as a groundbreaking academic field that realized the potential in taking popular (sub)cultural products seriously by adapting the methodological apparatus of post-structuralist semiotics to learn more about collective aesthetic responses, cognitive processes, psychic struggles and representational strategies symptomatically applied by the interpretive communities of our contemporary new media societies. Scholarly analyses published in international specialist journals – including titles such as *Mechademia*, *European Comic Art*, *Studies in Comics*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*, *Image and Narrative*, *Sequential Art Narrative in Education* – convincingly demonstrated that the seemingly safe ‘just’ pleasurable imagetexts of graphic novel masterpieces like *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1986), *Safe Area Goražde* by Joe Sacco (2000), *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2003) or *The House that Groaned* by Karrie Fransman (2012) provide adequate forums for the sublimation of serious cultural traumas² ranging from Nazi genocide and the Holocaust, ethnic nationalism in the Bosnian armed conflicts, gendered violence and women’s identity crises throughout the war with Iraq in Iran to advanced postindustrialist consumer societies’ petty daily frustrations, common neurosis, and mundane cultural malaise. My aim in the following is to explore a paradigmatic “multimodal” (Jacobs 180) thematization of the deeply troubling experience of desire and sexuality, conceived as a source of both private and public trauma and cure, in the work of iconic artist Melinda Gebbie while focusing on “gendered readership and cultural legitimacy, censorship issues and historical thinking” Jaqueline Berndt calls cornerstones of contemporary cross-cultural comics studies. (5)

Melinda Gebbie is an American pro-porn feminist comics artist, a UK resident from the 1980s, who became infamous with her explicitly entitled *Fresca Zizis* (Fresh Cocks in Italian). This comics published in 1977 was designed without any titillating intent as an autobiographically inspired “cautionary tale” (Gebbie in Sneddon 70) meant to document the adventurous experience of a woman artist in the male-dominated underground comix scene, “a warning and a comfort to all those women who venture out too deep” (Gebbie in Gravett 9). *Fresca Zizis* embraced a fabulous avant-garde imagery and depicted strange stories in a hybrid mixture of styles, with a penchant for the surreal, the mythological or the historically iconic (equally revamping revolutionary Joan of Arc and the Charenton Asylum housing Marquis de Sade), as well as fantastic dreamscapes familiar from fairy tales (Fox 3). Still the book charged with obscenity provoked a court trial, got banned in Britain, and all existing copies were ordered to be burned.³

This seems a radical gesture of censorship in an era posterity mostly associates with liberal-minded philosophies of the human rights movements and the free love of the hippies. Nevertheless – besides the UK under Thatcher’s reign – even the 1970s US pop culture’s institutional control abounds with similar episodes. In the very same year when *Fresca Zizis* was ostracized, major television networks like NBC regularly sanitized their soap opera shows changing here an anxious maternal warning to “take the pill” to “be careful” for avoiding implications that women might plan in advance to have sex, and cutting out there a young male character’s request for condom for fear that the hint at birth control hence at the dangers of corporeality might altogether ruin the screen romance’s idyllic notion of love.⁴

The Wimmen’s Comix Collective Melinda Gebbie cooperated in from 1970 to 1991 in San Francisco took up the discussion of precisely these taboo topics. As a solidarious

sisterly crew they challenged the male cartoonists’ old boys network privileges and canonical conventions with self-published underground comics intent on offering a politically self-aware feminist treatment of sexuality; involving topics such as abortion, birth control, homosexuality, sexual harassment, and childhood abuse. (Lambiek 6) These themes all allegedly sprung from the contributing women artists’ real life lived experiences. Their aim was to turn unspeakable, traumatic private affairs as well as women’s suppressed erotic fantasies into public chronicles in all women anthologies inspiring further titles tellingly called *Wet Satin, Tits & Clits, Dyke Shorts, Twisted Sisters, or Dynamite Damsels*.

Fresca Zizis’ scandal did not prevent Gebbie from devoting sixteen years to illustrate an even more controversial book, the erotic *Lost Girls* trilogy, a mixed-genre graphic novel saga she co-created with legendary graphic novel writer Alan Moore.⁵ The project started out in the early ‘90s when Gebbie collaborated with Moore on an eight-page story for an anthology titled *Tales of Shangri-La* that never came to being but allowed them to discuss in depth their sexual politics as well as the failures and potentials of the pornographic genre. (Sneddon 4-5) The creative partnership evolved into a romantic relationship and eventually resulted in the artists’ marriage and the publication of the trilogy in 2006 by the American publishing company tellingly entitled Top Shelf Books. This three volume comics eludes conventional categorizations on grounds of strategically transgressing medial, generic, gender, ideological boundaries; and a result remains banned or restricted by some bookshops and libraries even in today’s first world democratic societies that take pride in respecting the freedom of thought.

A lecherous web of fabulously illustrated, entangled stories undertake to explore childhood sexual traumas and compensatory erotic fantasies of the most memorable heroines of children’s literature: Alice from *Wonderland* (Carroll 1865, 1871), Wendy from *Peter Pan* (Barrie 1911), and Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz* (Baum 1900). These predominantly visual adaptations of youth novels combine the iconography of children’s picture books with stock narrative patterns of the pornographic genre to tackle the dilemma “Whose desires emerge in the narrative throughout adult fictionalizations of children’s sexuality?” and to provide therapeutical cure to the abused girls, allowing them to find their lost voices, visions and visibilities through their sexual autobiographical agency organizing the image-text. The aim of this essay is to explore all these transgressive facets of the book which make it such a challenging read.

A Ritualistic Threshold of Erotic Storytelling

The story embarks with the chance encounter of three women who meet in 1913 at the Swiss Hotel Himmelparten near the Austrian border: the world-wise Lady Alice Fairchild a British, aristocratic, lesbian libertine in her late fifties, the plain Mrs Gwendolyn Potter a middle-aged, middle-class, unhappily married English woman, and the rebellious Miss Dorothy Gale a nineteen-year-old farmgirl from the American Midwest, who turn out to be Alice from *Wonderland*, Wendy from *Peter Pan*, and Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*, respectively. Much in the classic tradition of Boccaccio’s fourteenth century *Decameron* in which a group of youngsters flee from the plague-ridden Florence to a deserted countryside villa to entertain each other with erotic tales of love ranging from the wittily comic to the mystical, moralistic and tragic, Hotel Himmelparten, literally meaning Celestial Garden, becomes a liminal space. It is at once a ritualistic threshold where one’s identity can be restructured beyond the confines of cultural restrictions and taboos; a refuge where one can be temporarily sheltered both from the haunting ghosts of past traumas and the threat of the unrestrainably upcoming first World War; a nearly phantasmagorical, magical locus where Eros is meant to rule over Thanatos by means of erotic storytelling. The carnal delights of

self-fictionalization serve to keep the ruthlessly rationalistic, ideologically biased, fatally annihilating History (the transnational catastrophe of war and inhumane violence) at bay.

Via an exciting eroticization of the narrative structure, multiple verbal/pictorial narrative threads embrace – besides the graphic novel’s generic given: the hybrid, multimedial intercourse of image and text. The accounts of a carnivalesque plethora of sexual acts performed in the diegetic present in the edenic, ecstatic space of Hotel Himmelgarten between the sexually over-heated guests and staff are coupled by orgasmic flashbacks from the “sexual autobiographies” of the “three queens of desire” ruling over this “decadent sensual paradise” (Hatfield 4). They simultaneously stimulate and soothe one another by sharing their retrospectively recalled, self-reflective, confessional tales about their erotic awakenings, sexual formation, and carnal adventures. Memories surge in a fleshly, embodied manner, provoking the calculable corporeal reactions of the pornographic genre, and allow for the communal reexperiencing of past delights.

A further titillation of the erotic imagination, and a certain mirroring of the girls’ past and the hotel’s present joys, is guaranteed by the so-called White Book placed in each of the hotelroom’s nightstand drawers. It is basically a high-artsy forerunner of Tijuana Bibles illegal, anonymous, underground, little pornographic comic booklets popular in the interwar US, which often depicted popular cartoon characters, like Popeye or Mickey Mouse, engaging in a variety of sexual adventures (Tribunella 638). But it is also a mocking allusion to Huysmans’s *A rebours* (1884) a novel of lascivious and philosophical, amoral, Parisian decadence, that was referred to by Oscar Wilde as the major corruptive influence on his fictional character Dorian Gray, coined the “Yellow Book” in an enigmatic wording that subsequently gave the title of a major late nineteenth-century journal of aestheticism edited by Aubrey Beardsley. The book pays an inter(image)textual homage to masterpieces of Western erotic art from Beardsley, Wilde, and De Sade through Pierre Louÿs, Colette, Apollinaire to Mucha and Schiele; and as a book-within-a-book it also holds a metafictional significance. It was designed by the erotomaniac hotel manager Mr Rougeur an ex-counterfeiter of original art who emerges as a self-ironic fictional alter-ego of *Lost Girls*’ illustrator Melinda Gebbie whose wonderful drawings clearly gain inspiration from the abovementioned erotic-pornographic canon, albeit combining expert pastiche with stunning original ideas and style. Still, the genuine nature of artistic creativity and of erotic desire are questioned hand in hand, hinting at the significance of cultural influence and former fantasies. Moreover, Mr Rougeur’s concept of Hotel Himmelgarten as an erotic retreat continually satisfying all sexual fantasies – a place where “everyone [can] act how people do in fictions. In *romances*” (23.5)⁶ – reveals the eroticization of fantasy and the artful fantastification of erotica, as guiding principles behind *Lost Girls*’ making.

Lost Girls’ straightforward celebration of sexual liberation takes place through a dizzying array of rather explicit representations of bold erotic gambits, daring sexual positions, nonconventional forms of pleasuring (way beyond the heterosexual, reproductive, penetrative sexual economy), as well as experimental, perverse carnal practices ranging from transvestism to gruppensex, incest, and bestiality.⁷ The effect of this erotic excess borders on the vertiginous, if not the risibly bizarre or hauntingly grotesque. The sexual saturation of the Alice-homage tells it all: Moore and Gebbie’s Carroll image “aggressively courts the paedophilia thesis” (Brooker xv, Kidd 2); they depict the author as a child molester, an aged, balding, spectacled, White Rabbitish, family friend called Bunny who seduces the girl Alice in front of a mirror. Her first underage orgasm is witnessed reflected in a looking glass, and her immature mind, by means of psychological distancing, projects all pleasures taken onto her mirror-image. She will identify with this double as she enters an inside-out, upside-down world of debaucheries, in guise of the lesbian “invert” (a late nineteenth-early

twentieth century word for homosexual and a pun on the symbolical significance of mirroring), who duly takes after Carroll to become a seductress and storyteller on her turn, a veritable Sadeian “mistress of ceremonies” (Hatfield 7). At one point in her autobiographical reminiscences Alice blames Carroll/Bunny that “pink, flustered man [for having] shoved [her] down a moral rabbit-hole” towards the “drug-addicted lesbian prostitute” she will have become (3.26.7). Alice’s adult debaucheries are emblemized by an eroticized Wonderland imagery pointing back to “her own youthful peccadillos” ranging from the garden of live flowers turned garden of earthly delights, an orgiastic mad tea-party, and a hookah-smoking caterpillar amidst the folds of her female partner’s labia.

Stripping Kiddie Lit

The strangest strategy of the graphic novel – that made some bookstores to actually ban the book from its shelves – is the troubling association of this unleashed sexual licentiousness with infantile innocence. As Gebbie confessed in an interview at the 2013 Edinburgh International Book Festival, it was a conscious decision on her part to draw nicely and colorfully to make the work look “irresistibly tender,” “like a beautiful memory,” just “like a children’s book but for grownups” (Sneddon 23, 37) The sexually explicit narratives about Alice, Wendy, and Dorothy are framed within the confines of children’s literature they intertextually revisit to burst its ‘safe’ generic boundaries with taboo-breaking themes taken from the ‘adult genre’ of pornography radically mismatched with the presumed purity of children’s literature. Already, the epigraph to Book 1, “We are but older children, dear, who fret to find their bedtime near.”, a line taken from *Through the Looking Glass* invests the notion of the bedtime-story with twisted, tongue-in-cheek meanings.

While problematizing the idea of defining target audience on the basis of age group belonging, and questioning the possibility to neatly distinguish children’s versus adult books from each other, *Lost Girls* debunks the “‘I know it when I see it’ approach too often taken with childlit as well as porn, [...] and forces us to look twice” (Kidd 10). Practically, all the critics partaking in the *Lost Girls* roundtable of *ImageSexT*, in a special 2007 issue of *ImageText*, an *Interdisciplinary Journal of Comics Studies* agreed that Moore and Gebbie’s “perverse brainchild” undertook to expose children’s classics as “always already adult” (Kidd 2) by activating the latent sexual contents of these innocent readings (Hatfield 7, Alaniz 276) which “have the greatest hold on Anglo-American imagination” because their fictional heroines’ “erotic aims remain, in some fashion, ungoverned by social and gender rules” approaching them to “poster-children of queer theory” (Quimby 13 in Kidd 8). “Stripping the fantastic out of children’s stories” (Sandifer 7) – turning the Scarecrow, the Lion, and the Tin Man into farmhands Dorothy sleeps with, the Red Queen into a nymphomaniac schoolteacher, and Peter Pan into a young male prostitute – does not automatically result in disenchantment but the (re)generation of further weird wonders disorganized by desire. Eventually, *Lost Girls* is not only “perversely faithful” (Kidd 2) to its sources, but “much less creepy” (Eklund 7) than its originals, too, because it “replaces putative innocence with a forthcoming knowingness” (Hatfield 4). *Lost Girls* combines in “luxurious, exclusive, difficult fine art” (Wolk in Tribunella 630) marginalized, hybrid genres, children’s literature, pornography, and graphic novel, which all deal with the rhetorics of maturation and the liberation of repressed (sexual) fantasies through artistic imagination. (Tribunella 629)

These interpretations are heavily indebted to feminist psychoanalyst Jacquelin Rose’s seminal book *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (1984) where she argues that children’s books – as well as cultural-, critical responses to the genre – are fuelled by adult desires they are meant to fulfill. They perpetuate adult fantasies about an idealized, immaculate, innocent childhood which underage readers are urged to identify with

and emulate. Alas, this essentialist, universalizing self-definition along the lines of a pure and primitive simplicity deeply disregards actual children’s individual differences (race, class, gender, etc), heterogeneous selves, and real-life desires or interests. According to Rose, this child-ideal also satisfies the adult dreams of linguistic transparency, of a representation apt to simply and truthfully reflect reality as it is, of an accessible archaic past, and of a stable and secure experience of selfhood and sexual identity. Rose’s wording about children’s fiction which “colonize,” “solicit,” “chase,” or “even *seduce*” (2) children into adult ideals is certainly evocative of the Freudian theoretization of human psychosexual development.

However, *The Case of Peter Pan* and *Lost Girls* seem to provocatively invite us to reconsider our scientific knowledge and stereotypical social preconceptions about relations of seduction, especially between adults and children. Both texts subtly remind us that what we are familiar with today as the cornerstone of psychoanalytical theory, the Freudian Oedipus complex, was originated in and came to replace a forgotten hypothesis referred to as the Freudian Seduction Theory⁸ that initially provided a significantly different understanding of intergenerational erotic bonding. Whereas the original Seduction Theory (1896) explained the patients’ hysterical and obsessional neurotic symptoms with early childhood sexual abuse and molestation, Freud’s succeeding modifications to the theory reinterpreted the repressed memories of actual harassment as *imaginary* fantasies of make-believe erotic encounters. Thus, he shifted the emphasis (and the blame) from the desiring adult as a sexual agent objectifying the child to the eroticized child burdened by unreliable libidinal fancies about the adult. His insistence on primordial infantile desires culminate in the Oedipal scenario (gaining an emblematic significance as of 1910) whereby the child’s yearning to sexually possess the parent of the opposite sex is coupled with aggressive impulses turned against the rival parent of the same sex – emotions and drives that must be repressed into unconscious realms throughout the socialization process as the boychild (Freud’s archetypal subject) learns to identify with the Father and find erotic substitutes for the Mother. This chronology of the evolution of Freudian theory shows how desires belonging to adults are projected on children in one of the great masternarratives of Western scientific thought willing to compensate for the shame felt over child-loving, for violating, albeit mentally, speculatively, the incest/paedophilia taboo. (see Bernheimer-Kahane 1990)

Lost Girls tackles a major related dilemma: Whose desires emerge in the narrative throughout adult fictionalizations of children’s sexuality? Moore and Gebbie’s graphic novel, published by the tellingly named *Top Shelf Books*, clearly fits in a genre targeting the sexual arousal of grown-up audiences and follows patterns familiar from typical pornography (as the heroine’s transformation from inhibited repression to liberal sexual openness, the characters’ sexual ever-readiness, and their utter neglect of post-coital worries related to sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy (see Hatfield 7)). But it also adopts a theme fully incompatible with the porn genre’s utopian, eternally orgasmic and omni-potent fictional universe by incorporating episodes of traumatizing childhood sexual abuse within each of the lost girls’ sexual autobiographies. In that sense “it parts company from pure porn in precisely that place: it’s all about consequences” of repressed and reemerging past memories (Gaiman 7, Pilinovsky 186). The nauseating rhetorics of rape (“Don’t tell anyone!” “I know what’s good for you.” “You can’t resist me.”) resurface on each instance of victimization – be it enacted by Mr Carroll, Captain Hook, or a disembodied tornado respectively – to posit sexuality under the suffocating control of oppressive power regimes and hence show that the lost girls’ fictionalization of carnality is not a sign of false-memory but a natural reaction attempting to deal with the frustrating, transverbal experience of unwanted initiation into adulthood. On a more abstract, metafictional plane this abusive victimization might also refer to the author seducing his heroine into the story where she will stay eternally trapped,

silenced, with his (her maker’s) voice speaking up in her place; in Alice’s case this means ensnaring the real-life girl muse within the fictionalized figure. Paradoxically, both sexuality and fantasy are regarded to be violent acts which are nevertheless instrumental in fighting against psychic and social repression, the most dangerous forms violence can take. This is a deeply Foucauldian doublebind: while *Lost Girls*’ pornographic representation subversively challenges the child-body’s disciplinary asexualization, its taboo-breaking verbosity satisfies the more cunning – non-repressive, but productive – ideological technology of the “incitement to discourse”(17), and hence purports the power network it aims to undermine by making transgression visible, audible, and controllable.

Ambiguously, both the (unspeakable) traumatic and (oververbalizing) therapeutic kernel of stories are rooted in childhood sexual experience. It is an impetus for the “fall from innocence,” responsible for inflicting wounds in psychosexual prehistories to produce “damaged adults” (Tribunella 631) (a drug-addict Alice, a nymphomaniac Dorothy, and an apathetic Wendy). Yet, simultaneously it also serves as a starting point for relieving, elevating, curative storytelling sessions (that can remedy Wendy’s bourgeois prudishness, Alice’s man-hating, and Dorothy’s shame over the incest with her father) apt to enhance the grown-up women’s sexual healing and empowerment through reconnecting them with their long-forgotten girlhood selves. As female/feminist versions of Peter Pan’s followers the Lost Boys – who were accidentally abandoned by their parents and whisked off to Neverland doomed to eternal(ly pure and primitive) youth – here the Lost Girls must find and rescue their own childhood selves through/in open-ended life-narratives of their own making which surpass clichés of asexual innocence and unrestrained jouissance alike, must come to terms with their reawakened past memories, and seek community with fellow female storytellers. Hence the first person plural pronoun in Wendy’s explanation to Dorothy why her confessing her desires and dreads will benefit her: “There’s different *possibilities* now ... We can’t disown the girls we were. We can’t... let them remain *lost* to us.” [emphasis Moore’s and Gebbie’s] (78). Paradoxically, innocence is recuperated via the unashamed, sincere discourse about absurdly filthy sexual acts and decadently refined erotic practices. If ‘lostness’ is identified with the Unsaid and the aggressive silencing of culpable carnality, ‘to be found’ implies daringly speaking up to reunite in “companionable lust” (Hatfield 4)⁹ spread in verbose, confessional, self-reflective tales of desire evocative of the Freudian psychoanalysis’ talking-cure (explicitly referred to in the text¹⁰) yet lacking the normativizing self-correction thereof. Lesbian Alice’s being healed of misandry does not entail her heteronormativization but rather just an expansion of scales of pleasures towards unabashed bisexual delights matching the straight Dorothy’s experimental introduction to Sapphic sex. The celebration of the multiplication of erotic possibilities challenges the Freudian understanding of desire as a compensatory, insatiable yearning fundamentally based on an irredeemable loss and a frustrating sense of persistent lack, absence. In *Lost Girls* desire overabundantly flows everywhere, you only have to find the adequate words to get hold of it. These words are matched by a tactile imagery, Gebbie compares to embroidery (Sneddon 22), that invites a female gaze meant to gratify womenreaders.

Intelligent Pornography in the Demythologizing Business

For Moore “intelligent pornography” equally aims at sexual gratification, moral education, and spiritual healing, appealing to audiences of all sexual orientations. (Moore 39) It is much in line with Angela Carter’s notion of “moral pornography” outlined in her *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) as an argument stated in a fictional form, a critique of the unequal relation between the sexes, and a “demythologizing business” for “pouring new wine in old bottles to make old bottles explode” (Carter “Notes” 69) destined to burst generic frames,

gender confines, and social hypocrisy alike. Sexuality is not a biological given but a cultural construct subject to ideological influences responsible for shaping as distinct sexual economies as the ones distinguished by Michel Foucault in the first volume of his seminal *The History of Sexuality* (1978): the Western *scientia sexualis* (governed by repressive, corrective, punitive, reproduction-fixated, medical and religious and criminal discourses about sexuality) versus the Eastern *ars erotica* (characterized by a mystical, philosophical, poetical attitude to sensual pleasures passed on to the initiates to liberate them). (51-75) Naturally Moore and Gebbie take side with *ars erotica*’s joy and verbosity instead of *scientia sexualis*’ silence and shame. In an essay tellingly entitled “Bog Venus versus Nazi Cock-ring” (2006) Moore argues for a beneficial influence artistic pornography could have on society by “venting sexual pressures harmlessly before they can explode in sex crime or abuse,” and encourages all to forge a more enriched and relaxed cultural atmosphere by acknowledging the crucial role that sexual imagination has always played in our lives. *Lost Girls* even attributes to sexual liberation a certain magical ritualistic potential, exaggerating its healing efficacy, occasionally forgetful of the fact that the traumas to be cured have been caused by sexual initiation in the first place.¹¹ Conforming to the original etymological sense of the word *pharmakon*, poison and cure are identical, in *Lost Girls*’ paradoxical understanding of sexuality.

Eklund opines, that the “ethic and aesthetic [of *Lost Girls*] can be described as a magical realism of the fuck” (6). And indeed the vivid sexual phantasmagorias that the girls’ *ménage-à-trois* entertain each other with in the shadow of boring marriages, ephemeral affairs, and disinterested political maneuvers leading to the world war, create a clandestine, alternate reality where they can find comfort and joy to reach another, fuller “dimension of existence” – just like in the theatre where they are pleasuring each other to the rhythm of Stravinsky’s and Nijinsky’s *Rite of Spring* without any other spectator noticing their trespassing. (Alice later wonders about the fantasmatic nature of this specific sex-act – that took place amidst an actual historical event of the audience breaking out in a riot during the play – asking in her diary: “Did that really happen?”(10.6)) Their cathartic world-making relies on a blurring of history and fantasy, a combination of libidinal and creative artistic energies. The emblematic fantasy-lands belonging to each heroine – Neverland, Wonderland, and the Land of Oz over the rainbow, respectively – come to indicate the unspeakable orgasmic subtext they can share through physical and narrative intercourse alike. The *Lost Girls*’ erotic storytelling sessions as shamanistic rituals imply metafictional significations: through conjoined erotic and imaginative agency altered states of consciousness may be reached to interact with a spirit world denoting both the original authors (Carroll, Barrie, Baum) whose fictional realities are evoked to be revised, and the current readers whose belief in the new versions brings the heroines to life and renders possible their sexual healing, along with the readers’ own. Eklund attributes shamanistic gifts to Moore and Gebbie who grant injured characters with sexual empowerment and spread the curative powers of their stories to reading audiences, too. (13)

Breaking Representational Confines: Orgasmic Ruptures of ImageText

As the preface to the special 2007 *ImageSexT* issue argues, *Lost Girls*’ superfluously overabundant artistic project revolves around a “lack that demands more:” it offers excessive verbal and visual narrativizations of sexuality, a theme or experience identified with fundamental unspeakability. As if being verbose about silence, or explicit about the ambiguous, it points towards a certain representational “beyondness” reaching over the endpoints and intersections of image-, text-, sex- practices. The imagetext is naturally embodied here in an eroticized way: the storytelling sessions (words) about sexual adventures are mostly interrupted by further carnal acts inspired by past passionate memories (mental

images) which in turn help shaping future sexual self-identities. The intermedial imbroglio is coupled with temporal and spatial confusion: past, present, and future delights mingle in the remembered, reenacted, forecasted ex-stasis (ecstasy’s etymological elsewhere) of the erotic subject. Sexuality and the representational attempts thereof demonstrate a certain insatiable continuity: in Sandifer’s witty wording, “The arresting power of the pornographic image demands more looking. The fumbling inadequacy of talking about sex demands more discourse. As for sex itself...” (2007, 9)

Yet there are sudden momentary outbursts of erotic and creative energies, discharges of accumulated tension, orgasmic peaks which disrupt the flow of the imagetext (both the sequential visual panels and the linear verbal narrative). These full-page size illustrations, rather visionary illuminations, of the unspeakable and un-image-inable sexual climax allow for the emergence of the fantastic into the realm of sexuality that has been conventionally coded as the adult world of reality deprived of innocence and imaginativeness. (Sandifer 8) These splash-pages of climactic ‘money-shots’ spell out the correspondences between the source texts (Carroll, Barrie, Baum) and Moore and Gebbie’s re-envisioning (Hatfield 7). We witness fantasticated versions of sexual initiations and the first orgasms: Dorothy masturbating upside-down in a twister in the surrealist company of cupboards, bedsheets, a horse, a wheelbarrow, an automobile and a cat swirling around her (7.6), Wendy flying (and jerking off) with Peter Pan rubbing fairy dust on her clitoris under in moonlit sky (8.7), and Alice dreamily plunging into the mirror to perform cunnilingus with her own reflection (9.6). Further full-page sex scenes are equally unrealistic. Captain Hook and Peter Pan are sword-fighting with their erect penises (19.7), Wendy suckles five feral and furry Lost Boys (15.7) and gets gang-banged by a troop of pirates (26.6), Hook grabs on Wendy’s panties as he is being swallowed by a monstrous vagina-(dentata)-crocodile (27.6). Dorothy is penetrated in a variety of inventive ways by practically all the characters of the Wizard of Oz: by a ragged Scarecrow (14.6), a cowardly Lion (18.6), and a robotic Tin Man suspending her upside-down in manacles (24.4). Alice has her share of pleasures in a Bacchanalian school dormitory turned into a garden of live flowers (16.6), in an opium-den where tiny copulating couples creep upon her (26.6), as well as at an orgiastic mad tea party organized by a former teacher Mrs Redman where “women [are] pinned down with croquet hoops, then stroked with hedgehogs and flamingo feathers, the hostess never takes off her Ascot hat even when in flagrante, and one mousey little girl comatose with hemp tea [gets] penetrated with a carrot by a girl masked as a rabbit” while Alice “dissolves in tea and luscious nonsense” as a cat licks her privates (17.4-5-6).

Even her insane, erotic nightmares have an enchanting quality: Alice imagines the Jabberwocky as a “dream-horror” rampaging closer and closer in the form of a giant penis chasing her (29.6). “I pictured veined neck, its swollen head and slitted eyes. It crashed through the turged, bulgey...*tulgey* undergrowth making a slurred bubbling... a burble...as it ejacuated. It was a monstrous, a quivering cock, and it wanted to *jab* me. (29.5) It is significant that Alice has the vision of the giant phallic Jabberwock when she is temporarily institutionalized in an insane asylum, after she runs out of words due to her erotic excess, and can barely communicate except for nonsense. The Jabberwock that stands in the original for a monstrous ‘name without a thing’ here becomes a sexualized embodiment of the Unspeakable that threatens and tempts Alice with taking her to the nonsensical discursive register, beyond all words and sensations. The single splash panel of the Jabberwock-cock perfectly attests in itself how *Lost Girls* conjoins the challenging of the limits of representation with the breaking of sexual taboos and the fight against unimaginative repression or rationalization. However, this gambit is just as dangerous as it is delightful: the full-page orgasmic flashbacks constitute “ruptures of fantasy” which intrude into mundane reality by offering “transitional

gateways” (Sandifer 9) into “an inverted world where nothing made sense in the way it once did” as Alice says (9.8). Hence the simultaneous coexistence in multiple presumably incompatible – but now radically confused – realms (reality and fantasy, fairy-tale and pornography, childhood innocence and knowing adulthood, original and revision, even the crossover of different fictional universes) will normally risk schizophrenia, incomprehensibility, and misinterpretation. These are the risks *Lost Girls* willingly embraces upon relocating children’s classics within an adults-only¹² world that is traditionally “marked by the abandonment of the exact sort of fantasy world it is being equated with here” (Sandifer 9).

Its genre is primarily distinguished by a graphic, visual explicitness yet *Lost Girls* also excels in a singular linguistic dexterity throughout its attempts to “repeatedly gasp, grunt, and moan the unspeakable” (Sandifer 11) in an uninhibitedly verbose imagetext. Moore’s erotic writing pleasures readers with metaphorically dense, movingly poetic, and shamelessly sensual passages which perform a nearly impossible discursive endeavour on verbalizing the orgasmic peak’s momentary loss of words (of rational denomination and conventional meaning) that does not leave any lovers in the dark, though, but brings a bright illumination by an intimate encounter with the Unnameable. The description of Alice’s first sexual experience is so illustrative of the above and so paradigmatic of the language of *Lost Girls* in general that it is worth to be quoted at length. On the same page (9.6) we see three large image panels below each other: the first shows a mirror reflection of young Alice being courted by the paternal friend Carroll Bunny; the second a closer look at the girl Alice falling/flying in the mirror, with arms outstretched for embrace, undone hair and bare breasts, moving towards her older-self (metonymically indicated by her wrinkled hands holding the mirror); and the third a close-up of Alice’s wide-eyed, parted-lipped, cathartic face and her nude torso and trembling hands reaching beyond the confines of the looking glass that melts and liquefies like water, ready to meet mature Alice who is immersing her hands within the fluid mirror-image, in the moment just prior to their touch bursting the boundaries of representation (as the image steps out of the frame, and the spectator enters within at an ecstatic limes). (The next page contains the full-page splash I have already analyzed above.) The images are accompanied by the following text:

It seemed like a dream. The wine that made sweet vinegar of my saliva now began to make the room revolve, negating gravity. I fell or floated down a hole inside myself, and at its far end all that I could see was mother’s mirror, there across the room. Inside me fingers fluttered, strange birds in a deep salt pool, their movements making ripples I could neither name nor own. (9.6.1)

The bird moved faster caught up in a race with rules beyond my comprehension, purposeful and frantic. I imagined that I heard their cries, then knew them from my own. I fell and from the hole’s far end she fell towards me, half bare, hair like wild rape, white lace petals opening about her skinny legs. His hand was hot between my thighs. I made pretence that it was her. (9.6.2)

The mirror-glass was melting into silver, boiling into mist, and I reached out and felt young muscle in her shoulder, in her neck, the child-silk at her nape. We slid together, wet with mirror, slick as mercury, smeared kisses down each other’s hips and rolled each other’s wine upon our tongues. Legs twined into a warm caduceus we clung, pressed shivering against reflected heat; lost, tumbling in brightness. (9.6.3)

The struggle with unspeakability is thematized most amusingly on metafictional planes when serious language-philosophical, socio-psychological, and ideology-critical theoretizations, verbose eulogies about sexuality’s and literary erotica’s subversive transversal powers are interrupted, fragmented, and rendered nonsensical or silenced by the actual carnal praxis. The loquacious idealization of porno-graphy’s utopian discursive elsewhere – reminiscent of Moore’s own *ars poetica* – is mocked in a highly self-ironic manner as the manifesto-like monologue turns into a dialogically embodied body-text by means of ‘meaningless’ moanings incited by the actual sex-acts’ shared delights pointing physically beyond the realms of representability.

Pornographies are the enchanted parklands where the most secret and vulnerable of our many selves can play. They...oh, your cunt. So warm...They are the palaces of luxury that all the polices and armies of the outer world can never spoil, can never bring to rubble. They are...oh. Mademoiselle Gale? Is that your finger inside Madame Potter next to me? No...no, don’t stop. They are our secret gardens where seductive paths of words and imagery lead us to the wet, blinding gateway of our pleasure...beyond which, things may only be expressed in language that is beyond literature...beyond all words... (3.22.8)

However, the most authentic narrative about unspeakable sexuality is offered in the above passage by the ellipsis’ recurring row of the three full stops suggestive of the silent sighs marking mutual orgasm. These triple-dot punctuation marks denote a suspension of speech, a trailing off into silence towards intimately meaningless moanings and mutterings, a transversality that is both insignificantly inaudible yet tells more than any words ever could. Moreover through a highly sophisticated typographical titillation, the triple-dots also provide a tongue-in-cheek iconic representation of the libidinally invested bodily orifices which play a crucial role in the pornographic genre that is cunningly summoned and surpassed here.¹³

Graphic Erotica Narrating Traumatic Unspeakability and Defending the Right to Dream

Besides its playful connotations, unspeakability also bears traumatic implications. The advent of the First World War haunting the storytelling *Lost Girls*’ diegetic present introduces a national historical contextualization of the retrospectively recalled, narratively healed personal childhood sexual traumas. Individual psychic turmoil is matched with the collective cultural trauma of historical cataclysm. For Moore and Gebbie, War signifies the triumph of Thanatos over Eros, a failure of fantasy with inhumane and dark results, destroying “all the art and architecture, the fields of flowers and young people’s dreams” – in short, as Alice says, ‘All the *imagination*’” (30.3) (Hatfield 13). At the end of graphic novel’s final, third volume the German troops arrive to burn down the hotel, annihilating its emblematic objects: the White Book (the collection of curative pornographic tales located in each room, that is also an intratextual mise-en-abyme double of *Lost Girls* itself) as well as Alice’s looking glass (a gateway to sexual pleasures released from repression and a portal opening intertextual paths towards recyclable classics).

On the final page’s six-panel image-sequence we see in passionate black-and-crimson colors a young soldier’s corpse left behind by the raid. His horizontal body-position, parted lips and legs, and the finger-muscle contractions of his hands eerily recall the Christian mystics’ notion of *petit mort*, or “small death” euphemistically denoting the fatally self-

shattering, mystical-mortal orgasmic experience accompanied by sacred visions, hallucinations, and sense-impressions meticulously recorded in their writings. Yet the body outstretched in a pit torn in the earth’s flesh by a mine-explosion shamelessly displays its insides, guts uncontrollably bursting out of a wound inflicted by war violence, so that this anatomized, disemboweled body deprived of the eroticism that has been previously a major marker of human flesh in this work sheds light on the limits of corporeal intimacy and representation. While the skin-surface is a locus of erotic excitement, whatever is beneath it, the bodily-inside provokes fear, disgust, and guilt.

However, even if the young soldier’s share is just pain instead of pleasure, *Lost Girls* still seem to end in an ambiguously open-ended, yet potentially optimistic note. After the initial close-up zoom at the corpse we seem to move out and away from the pit to get a more distanced view of the same scene from a low-angle shot that also reveals a single red poppy blooming by the barbed wire fence of the battlefield. The poppy stands for a national symbol of remembrance of soldiers who died during the First World War in the trenches of Flanders, but it also has a significant function in the personal mythology constituted by the *Lost Girls*’ sexual autobiographies, since it is the very flower that blossoms after Dorothy and Alice’s first making love and Wendy overhearing them. Hence public and private spheres and stories become radically indistinguishable from each other, pain and pleasure coexist side-by-side, like the threat of eternal sleep and the promise of resurrection after death, like the poppy-field in children’s fantasy (in the *Wizard of Oz*) and adult reality (Trenches of Flanders). The poppy, with its fragile petals and fuzzy center including opiate seeds of a pain-relieving quality, is a symbol of the vulva and feminine tenderness contrasted with masculine violence. (A similar binary logic is reinforced with the opposition of naturally pleasurable sexuality (poppy) vs. self-destructive civilization (trenches) – which are nevertheless organically connected, motivating and manipulating each other.)

Along the same lines, even nonsensical meaninglessness gains gendered implications. In the heroines’ reminiscences “Desire’s a strange land one discovers as a child [...] where nothing makes the slightest sense” (6.3) and most of the fantastic sexual debaucheries – punctuated by orgasmic instances of unspeakability discussed above – seem to be deprived of rational sense. Yet these feminine autofictional phrasings of ‘transverbal beyondness’ constitute clear counter-points to the aggressive linguistic invasion enacted at their stories’ end by the hostile German troops burning down the hotel. The invaders’ linguistic exchanges violate conventional communication, consisting of military instructions, swearwords, and animalistic grunts which are left untranslated and hence become highlighted as traumatically meaningless, malignant tumor-like, for English-speaking audiences.

However the end of this story certainly does not mean the end of storytelling per se, the final image of the poppy blooming by the corpse against all odds is a sign of regeneration, of new stories to come and old stories to be retold, bringing *Lost Girls*’ initial project to full realization by reminding readers that the Scheherazade-figures are meant in the first place to tell their teasing tales in order to ward off death and the fear of mortality. Hence the pleasure of the fantastic erotic imagetext brings collective cure by promising survival in cultural memory.

The conclusion of Moore and Gebbie’s graphic novel precedes the final incomprehensible war-images and soldiers’ rant: it is spelt out by Alice who claims that “beautiful and imaginative things can be destroyed. Beauty and imagination cannot. They blossom, even in wartime...” (3.30.3) Political violence, dictatorship, and censorship are contrasted with imaginativeness that increases empathy and tenderness towards fellow beings and prevents all from hurting others or oneself. (see Gebbie in Sneddon 51) This gigantic work of graphic erotica ultimately offers a “humane and seductive defense of the inviolable

right to dream” (Faber 10). Hence Alice willingly abandons “the mirror that held her trauma” and is ready to start with her Lost Girl companions a new life driven by the passion of storytelling, even after “the end of Europe’s innocence.” In a true Carrollian vein, Wonderland invigorated by imaginative agency appears as “a journey, and not a destination” (Pilinovsky 194).

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Endnotes

1. This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.
2. On the representation of trauma in graphic novels see Eszter Szép’s articles, eg. “Graphic Narratives of Women in War: Identity Construction in the Works of Zeina Abirached, Miriam Katin, and Marjane Satrapı.” *International Studies. Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*. 16.1 (2014): 21-33.

3. Last Gasp originally printed approximately 10,000 copies of *Fresca Zizis*, after the court trial all 400 unsold copies were ordered to be burned. This comic book has not been reprinted ever since although recently some plans were initiated to include it in an upcoming collection of Gebbie’s black and white work.
4. These examples come from a ‘cleansed’ 1977 episode of the *Laugh In* series frequently quoted among the most outrageous moments of US television censorship.
5. Illustrator Gebbie described the collaboration process with writer Moore as follows: first Moore asked what she wanted to draw, and practically built the comic around that. He dialogued the comic after she had drawn the pages, matching the speech perfectly to her figures, and never hesitated to provide thumbnail sketches for her to ease her work. (Sneddon 68)
6. Parenthetical references unless indicated otherwise are to *Lost Girls* (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2006), the first number indicates the chapter, the second the page, the third the image number.
7. Gebbie claimed that there had been only a taboo subjects *Lost Girls* decided to avoid: bondage, a contentious issue because of the curtailing of personal freedom and religious iconography, for fear of being anti-papist. (Sneddon 67)
8. On Freudian psychoanalysis/ Seduction Theory as a cultural discourse that provides a key to understanding *Lost Girls* see Eric Tribunella’s excellent article. “Literature for Us ‘Older Children:’ *Lost Girls*, Seductions Fantasies, and the Reeducation of Adults.” *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 45.3 (2012): 628-648.
9. “Throughout much of the novel they prod and eat and frig each other, in and out of dress, to near-distraction, while somehow managing also to regale each other with elaborate, absurdly filthy stories, confessional and reflective tales that constitute their sexual autobiographies.” (Hatfield 4)
10. Alice says: "Fiddlesticks! Why, there is a notable professor of the mind currently practicing not far from here, in Vienna. He would find your image of flight perfectly acceptable and indeed appropriate. I have no doubt you are as sane as I. Of course, I did spend a number of years in a sanatorium" (1, 8, 8).
11. Ida Yoshinaga calls attention to the drawbacks of this excessive, somewhat idealistic celebration of sex-magic, claiming that although Gebbie portrays traumatized characters, she keeps the horrifying, abusive acts mostly invisible, de-sensationalized or be-jewelled in guise of exquisite consensual pleasures. Hence the colonialist ideological implications of the relationships are ignored while black bodies are fragmented, fetishized, and minimized (411-5).
12. The back cover of the box that houses the three volumes warns: “For Adults Only.”
13. Previously Gebbie made an artistic pastiche of Pauline Réage’s 1954 porn classic *The Story of O* too, that plays on a similar typographical trick when identifying the letter O with the female orifice. The titular O also features in Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* comic book series as a blend of several fictional characters with the name Orlando renown in the sixties as sexually licentious O.
14. Images reprinted with the permission of Top Shelf Comics. Credits: *Lost Girls* © Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie (www.topshelfcomix.com).

Image 1:

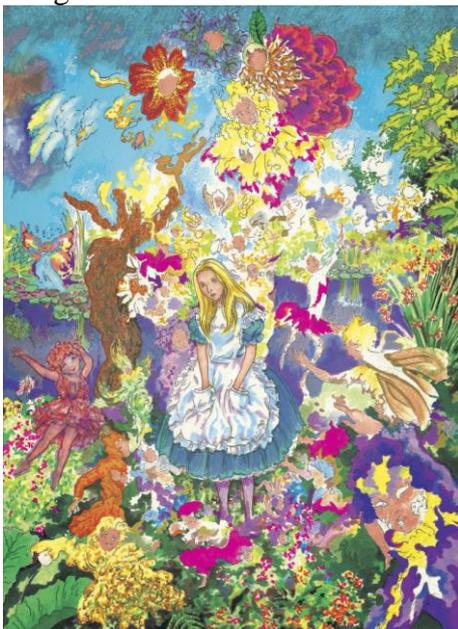


Image 2:

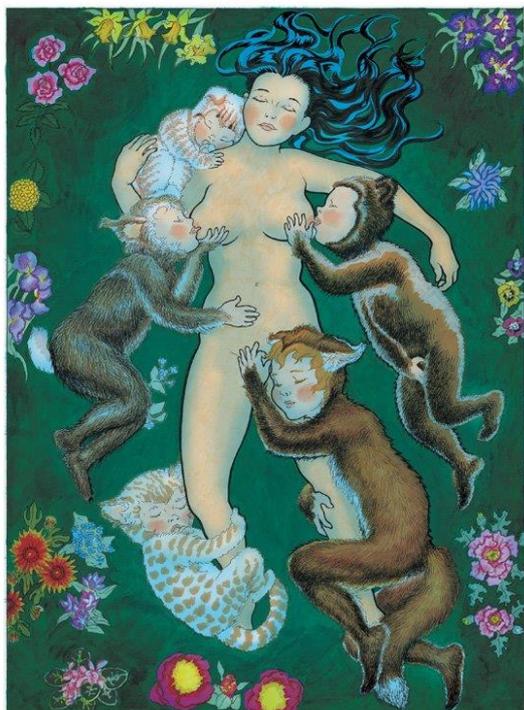


Image 3:

