

JUICILY JUXTAPOSED: PLEASURE TROPES IN THE HISTORY OF EROTIC COMICS

Abstract. *The article argues for the ninth art as the most suitable medium for an artistically and critically engaged depiction of human sexuality, and demonstrates its point with a historical tour of the genre from Tijuana bibles through American superhero and horror comics to the US underground, European mastery and, finally, Moore and Gebby's 21st century meta-porn masterpiece, *Lost girls*. The article enriches this historical tour with meditations on the relation between erotica and pornography, the funny and serious, and fantasy and reality in the sex life of humans.*

Key words: *erotica, pornography, comics, *Lost girls*, Tijuana Bibles, Alan Moore, Robert Crumb*

Foreplay

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This article is loosely based upon a lecture on the history of erotic comics I held several times during the past years within the framework of Ljubljana's monthly comic-themed event-series dubbed *Stripolis*, the idea for which came up when I took my girlfriend to a Valentine's day screening of gems from the history of movie porn in a local art cinema. After having cringed through two hours of awkwardly prolonged muff-shots and painfully self-aware pleasure faking, walking home with our libidos effectively grounded, I noted to her how much better comics were at staging arousing fantasies while remaining artful and intelligent. Because the erotic genre is so much more commonly known in the 7th than in the 9th art, she encouraged me to compile a comprehensive presentation of sexy funnies' history for a general audience still not in the know. What follows is a brief history of erotic comics that will, I hope, successfully demonstrate why comics may be seen as the ideal medium for simultaneously tickling our eyes, brains and genitalia in one big orgy of thought-provoking and sexy art.

Before we delve into the historical overview, however, allow me a few initial theoretical comments to set the stage. If I was ever asked what I feel the difference was between erotica and pornography (or, more to the point, between artistic and artless works with sex as their central theme), I

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would have to state that it lies neither in the list of organs on display nor on whether the audience's arousal is the work's central goal or not, but rather, in whether the work presents its material in all its due complexity and makes us, even while coming, wonder at what works and why in human sexuality. Since, as mentioned above, comics have in my experience been much better at doing this than movies, I want to start with a reflection on the reasons for this. I believe the key to comics' success in the area is the relationship between fantasy and reality in human sexuality – a central theme in quality eroticism, as we shall see later on – that almost always manages to get left by the side on the silver screen. Because live-action pornographic film works with real events enacted by real people that have yet to be structured into imaginary art, it is much more prone to give reality the upper hand with the excuse that it is it that arouses while art merely provides it with a socially acceptable packaging. However, I believe nothing could be further from the truth as evidenced even by the coarsest porn's penchant for staging its situations. I would venture even as far as to say the opposite is true: it is the very artificial structure of erotic art that guarantees arousal with banal reality the one constantly threatening to dissolve it. Comics let precisely this fantastical aspect of the erotic run free, since they allow the staging of the most bizarre and exotic sexual scenarios without the laws of physics or discomfort of concrete actors getting in the way. And, what is perhaps even more important, within comics it is possible to develop these scenarios to their furthest extremes all the way to the point where they flip into their own opposites, thus presenting sex in all its ambivalent complexity and resulting in, well, art, that does not suffer from getting its consumers off.

The other key element to comics' penchant for good erotica, closely connected to the first, is that the 9th art works with images that are not only qualitatively less real than the ones used by film but also quantitatively fewer. This means that, in depicting sex, comics can do away with the prolonged pounding that can become so tedious in cinematic presentation of shagging, and are free to only present us with a few or even a single picture for each chapter of a sexual encounter, letting the audience stare at the scene for as long as they like and imagine its duration at their own pace. In short, comics can at once be more imaginative than movies and programmatically leave more to the imagination. While the second trait has long been seen as a traditional differentiator of eroticism vs. porn, it takes on an entirely new meaning in comics: the 9th art does not have to hide any part of the body in order to jump-start the reader's imagination; it can show it all and still leave room for the recipient to animate and dub the mute and petrified image within, and according to the specific needs of, his own mind.

Now, with this preliminary reflections out of the way, let us examine the fascinating history of erotic comics, concrete examples from the vaults

of which will provide us with valuable material for further musings on issues enumerated above, alongside with new ones, such as the relationship between the sexes, forbidden and accepted sexual practices and passive and active attitudes taken up within them. In choosing which works and authors to include I largely followed already established histories both of subgenre (Pilcher, 2008, 2009) and the medium in general (Sabin, 2001; Mazur&Danner, 2014).

Beginnings: from 8-pagers to superbooks

Tiny, pocket-sized drawings of copulating couples, groups, and solo flyers have been the mainstay of porn for centuries but it was not until the development of modern newspaper comics as a mass culture that they began to form narratives classifiable as proper comic art. While official newspapers of the 1920s carried multiple pages of humorous and adventure comics with sexuality merely occasionally hinted at, the mob-run black market provided the missing pieces of the story by publishing anonymously drawn and illegally distributed little booklets called “8-pagers” at the time but later more famously dubbed “Tijuana bibles” which filled its nominal octet of papers with peeks into the bedrooms of the heroes known to readers from the print. Thanks to them, audiences could giggle and drool over Wimpy straddling Olive while Popeye’s away only to get buggered by the sailors enormous member upon his return; Dick Tracy finally succumbing to his lust with the series’ lady leads (Adelman, 2004); Mickey and Minnie Mice getting caught (and joined) in the act by Donald Duck; or Blondie taking advantage of her infant’s slumber to try and make another one with Dagwood (<http://www.tijuana-bibles.com/>).

Some Tijuana Bibles were drawn and written embarrassingly crudely but some suitably appreciated pseudonymous authors had a proper knack for both cartooning and dialogue. The language in mainstream comics in 1910–30 was a wonder to behold – one may recall the linguistic summersaults *Popeye’s* Segar (“Well, it’s a dern good thing ya didn’t see a hippitypotamus! Pooley! I yam disgustipated!” (Segar, 2009)) or *Krazy Kat’s* Herriman (“Dawn!! And “Bum Bill Bee”, that momentous nonentity who neither gives not takes yet is generous, a traveller en route to either or neither, a pilgrim on the road to nowhere – pauses at the base of the enchanted mesa.” (Herriman, 2003)) – and the 8-pagers, despite all their seemingly primal sauciness, took up the tradition with gusto, producing such imaginative sexual innuendo as “You shuck my oyster, I’ll husk your cob!” or “Hoist your ass in a 90 degree angle, I’ll install my lightning rod and you’ll be safe” (<http://www.tijuana-bibles.com/>), demonstrating once again the vital role a witty use of the symbolic plays in sexuality.

Equally worthy of notice is the unabashed range of sexual practices portrayed in the Bibles: classic couple sex is spiced up not only by additional members, backdoor entries, double-headers and, bizarrely commonly, adult breastfeeding, but also male gay action that hops into the hetero mix with surprising off-handedness (Adelman, 2004). Perhaps most commendably, despite being aimed primarily at a male clientele, the Bibles exhibit little trace of the misogyny found in later day porn, preferring to let their characters have exuberant fun without the need to vent pent up aggression towards the weaker sex or hypocritically moralize over its portrayed availability. More specifically, Tijuana Bibles, in spite of the grotesquely cartoonish style of their drawings and the outrageousness of their scripts, portray relationships between sexual partners realistically, as one of humorous mutual teasing, with girls free to complain about their partners' fetishist hang-ups or disappointing levels of sexual prowess and men replying with their own barbs and witticisms (Adelman, 2004 and <http://www.tijuana-bibles.com/>). They show sex, in short, as it is and should be: full of humour and playfulness, elegantly avoiding both political correctness on one and resentful aggression on the other hand.

As comics attained independence from newspapers and built their own nests in specialized publications, more explicit sexual undertones found their way into mainstream production as well: the *Wonder Woman* title, in particular, catered to its male readership by expanding the 40s' Pinup imagery into structured scenarios featuring fights between scantily clad overwomen that frequently resulted in bondage gleefully portrayed on the covers (Pilcher, 2008). Fantasies of sexual domination over women, however, soon shifted towards more uncomfortable areas in horror titles with girls being regularly decapitated and ravished by monstrous stand-ins for the helplessly observing male protagonists (Ibid.), eventually leading to harsh critique from moral authorities (epitomised by Wertham's notorious 1954 tome "Seduction of the Innocent") and subsequent self-censorship of the industry via the Comic Code Authority (Ibid.; Sabin, 2001).

Enter: the Sexual Revolution

Sadly, the ban on sex and violence in American comics during the late 1950s and early 60s managed to flush out, along with the dirty bathwater of misogyny, layered discussions of such issues as well. As Alan Moore commented in a recent reply to PC complaints about the frequency of rape portrayals in his work: if something is to be addressed as a problem, it needs to be talked about rather than deemed nonexistent (<https://slovobooks.wordpress.com/2014/01/09/last-alan-moore-interview/>). Fortunately, by the time of the US ban, European comics had already sufficiently developed to be able

to pick up the dropped torch. The French-penned *Barbarella* (Forest, 2015) practically established the genre of “naked-lady-loose-in-a-fantasy-world” (examples of which we will encounter several more times in this essay) and while the scantily clad space-Amazon did cater to male voyeurs by building on the pinup tradition, she also presented its readership with a figure of a liberated woman in command of her own sexuality, using it in any way she pleased and winning the battles she fought with little help from men (Pilcher, 2008).

Meanwhile across the pond, it did not take long for the fledgling underground scene proliferating in the sexless vacuum to produce their own take on the motif: while it is true that Wallace Wood’s *Sally Forth* owed more to Pinup than *Barbarella*, naively letting her perpetually stripped body be taken advantage of by anonymous soldiers, she did remain the star of the show and always had the last word in her stories (Wood, 2001) – a description that could just as easily be fitted to Kurtzman’s constantly bare-bummed Annie Fanny published about a decade later in *Playboy* (Kurtzman, 2000). Both Sally and Annie were ambivalent erotic heroines: on one hand, they catered to the male fantasy of a voluptuous and sexually available nymph erupting naked in the midst of their civilized, clothed worlds but on the other, they also carried *barbarellian* undertones of female sexual confidence that could put the fear-of-goddess in the hearts of traditional patriarchs. All these lovely nudists cast into the centre of everyday worlds acted as sex objects in the double sense of the word defended by Lacanian philosophy: at once available, passive *and* able to possess its subjects, laying bare the libidinal substructure of their cultural endeavours (Zupančič, 2008).

This love-hate relationship between male lust and female independence was explored in more complexity by the above-mentioned Wood’s later work that spoofed classic children’s tales such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz* by sending their heroines stripped on self-discovering journeys across fantasy worlds where they initially got screwed by the lecherous male populace but eventually took charge of their own enjoyment and matured into confident and powerful lady warriors (Wood, 1993). A famous one-shot cartoon by Wood captures the spirit of his comics most succinctly: a giant Martian woman with her skirt hoisted up holds in her palm a tiny, panicked astronaut who had just landed his rocket on her maiden planet, and is preparing to plunge him between her thighs (Wood, 2013) – a concentrated image of Woman as a vast conquerable world developed all the way to its opposite extreme.

A slightly different twist on the inter-gender power-play was famously carried out by US underground scene’s most celebrated son, Robert Crumb, who has over the last half a century produced an extensive series of comics featuring a single fantasy scenario: a scrawny male stand-in for the author faces an attack by large-breasted, giant women with powerful legs and

buttocks, eventually manages against all odds to subdue and take sexual advantage of them, but is more often than not in the end crushed by the Amazons for his presumption (Crumb, 2015). Crumb's work is a perfect example of radical comic erotica that manages to unfold its author's masturbatory fetishes so thoroughly that they get turned inside out, keeping the readers simultaneously aroused and painfully aware of that very arousal's self-defying nature. Crumb has been, over the ensuing decades, repeatedly accused of promoting misogyny (Ibid) yet more open-minded readers have equally frequently pointed out that his staged fights between midgets and giantesses remain unfixed and the author's sympathies ambivalent.

Other parts of Crumb's erotic opus are also provocative: one should mention at least his early stories featuring Fritz the Cat, an opportunistic feline using the hippy craze to get his share of drugs and sex, but succeeding in the last half only with naive bunnies while getting continuously dumped by more decisive foxes he is most smitten with (Crumb, 2012); as well as the infamous one-shot *Joe Blow* where a respectable looking, white-collar couple gives their kids a practical crash course in sex-ed (Crumb, 2013): another tale that manages to be simultaneously arousing, repulsive and thought-provoking as it bulldozers through taboos to touch on issues of incest, paedophilia and the limits of sexual freedom. Crumb has, incidentally, made similarly impudent forays into the relationship between blacks and whites in the US, and is currently living in France with his third amazonite wife and daughter; both of them accomplished female cartoonists.

The 60s would not be what they were if they did not open doors for expression in the homosexual end of the erotic spectrum as well. Numerous authors dedicated to breaking the taboos on gay sex surfaced during the decade but one figure that cannot be skipped in this brief overview is Tom of Finland whose over-the-top images of beaming, leather-clad musclemen tying up and sodomizing each other in a variety of settings, from Nazi interrogation rooms to cannibalistic jungle villages, pushed male homosexuality right in the square populace's faces, presenting it as a joyous, celebratory, self-confident, yet, as all sexuality, disturbingly paradoxical and twisted practice (Tom of Finland, 2014). Tom could be described as the Crumb of gayness – he too was later told off by PC guardians for the happy-mask expressions donned by his heroes while raping their mock-suffering clones (Pilcher, 2009) – and we should all tip a hat to him for his unabashed frankness in depicting his fantasies.

European Echoes and Asian Extravaganza

Meanwhile on the old continent classic genre artists also started experimenting with mature themes, eventually culminating in the establishment

of the magazine *Metal Hurlant*. The mag was headed by Jean Giraud, previously known for his classic western serials who now took on the pen name Moebius and began producing meticulously rendered and associatively scripted reveries set in surreal landscapes and following an unconscious logic replete with suggestive archetypes fusing the heroic with the sexual and obscene. *Arzach*, for instance, starred a phallic-hatted rider of skeletal pterodactyls fighting Urvater-figure keepers of females who, however, upon their rescue turn out to be bug-eyed and frog-tongued – a motif of seductive fantasy flipping into repulsive grotesqueness when approached that we will encounter a few more times in this essay (Moebius, 2008).

Metal Hurlant (along with its American cousin *Heavy Metal*) were also the first to publish some key works of the Italian erotic comic renaissance, such as Tamburini and Liberatore's *Ranx Xerox*, a thriller starring a violent cyborg and his underage Lolita lover (2002); and Serpieri's *Druuna*, a multi-part, beautifully drawn sci-fi saga starring another scantily clad Amazon and set in a post-apocalyptic landscape interpretable as a metaphor for the unconscious playground of human desire (Eleuteri Serpieri, 1986). While drawing on the old trope of naked-lady-set-loose-on-the-world already mentioned above in connection with Wood's and Kurtzman's work and assuming a more specific niche in the genre's fantastical subspecies (where, as in the case of Wood's fairy tale satires and *Barbarella*, the unearthly setting enabled trailing the ambivalent logic of the libido along all its convoluted pathways with no need to pay heed to banal reality), Serpieri's unique contribution to the trope came in using its potential for sobering reflections on the crossroads of sexuality and violence, death and love and pleasure and submission.

Druuna is set in a dystopian future, on an Earth terrorised by an infectious disease turning men into tentacle monsters. Since her boyfriend suffers from the affliction, Druuna is forced to both hide him and procure medications for his state by seducing sleazy and/or violent figures of power – a strategy which repels and arouses her at the same time –, slowly making her way to the top of the decaying system that turns out to be ruled by either heads of ancient patriarchs in jars or morally ambivalent hermaphrodites. Throughout the run of the series Druuna constantly staggers between her disgust at the disease, the decay and the morbid sleaziness of her surroundings, and enjoyment at being subdued to it, while also finding time for brief escapes into dreamed up romantic encounters with her beloved in idealized settings (Eleuteri Serpieri, 1986; Pilcher, 2009). Through her ambivalent adventures, Druuna traced the entire paradoxical, open-ended map of both female enjoyment and its exhibitionistic display, never fully defining the line between the two and never settling on a definite puppet-master behind the whole show. Thus, the reader is constantly left unsure whether the storyline is guided by a putrefying patriarch, Druuna's romanticized

soul-mate, her own naughty unconscious or an ambiguous, poly-sexual archetype. In short: Serpieri's opus offers a marvellous, multi-faceted and arousing read that constantly has the consumer enjoying things he or she is bound to regret only a moment later.

On a lighter note, pages of the same publication also provided a home for the short stories of another Italian master, Giardino's *Little Ego*. This gem was conceived as a parody of the 1910s comic classic, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, complete with the art-nouveau visual style, that, however, exchanged the original's prepubescent male protagonist for a fully-grown female. Ego's (the titular adjective appended to it alluding to that psychic entity's diminutiveness compared to the bottomless ocean of the bubbling id below it) dreams, however, prove to be much moister than Nemo's and include getting pleased by a bouquet of flowers from an unknown admirer; an exponentially expanding orgy with her own mirror reflections; growing breasts getting out of hand; and a bathtub infestation of increasingly repulsive fauna culminating in a playful crocodile hump – each episode concluding with her ruffled awakening in wonder as to how one explains such madness to a psychiatrist (Giardino, 2006). In short, as his excellent predecessors enumerated above, Giardino makes use of his fantastic settings to thoroughly explore the multifarious facets of female desire and its inseparable phantasmatic reflection: from a mixture of disgust and pleasure at the bestial phallicism divorced from any concrete male personality to the borderline-scary solipsistic spiralling into the abyss of auto-reflective, auto-perpetuating enjoyment – with a silent, perverse male authority of the “shrink” lurking behind every final panel, ever ready to judge and possibly punish, providing Ego with a moral observer enabling her to spice up her reveries with a dose of both exhibitionistic and submissive pleasure.

Finally, to round things up with Apenine authors, it is impossible to bypass Milo Manara whose beautifully drawn tales have been tickling fancies of both sexes across the globe since the late seventies. Let it suffice for us to linger only at his most celebrated classic, known in English as *Click* and in Italian as *Il Gioco*, whose plot is centred on a mysterious device supposedly able to wildly arouse a prudish businessman's wife and controlled by none other than her own psychiatrist (sic!). In this series, the shrink serves as the hidden *spiritus movens* of the ice queen's sudden lapses into uncontrollable horniness at the most inappropriate of times and places, going so far as to fellate a fellow movie-goer in her husband's presence and even stick a candle up her bottom at a gala dinner party (Manara, 2012). What sets *Click* apart from typically misogynist porn revelling in righteous punishment of slutty behaviour with a well aimed facial is that this protagonist's torturer is less bent on humiliating his subject than on renewing her connection to a suppressed desire. Ultimately, it is the ice queen's husband and his guests

that come off as prudish in their repulsion over her actions while the protagonist ends the tale with an acceptance of her own unbridled desire and a healthy disregard for her environment's moralism. Perhaps most importantly, the fabled device turns out to have been a ruse all along, merely an empty box with a switch that, however, continues to turn the protagonist on even after this revelation (Ibid), thus leaving her, so to speak, free to subdue to her own externalized enjoyment electrified by its own opposition – a wonderfully complex and intelligent point for a comic that is actually very much able to get one off at first reading.

This brief scan across extra-American eroticism in comics could not be complete without including at least a passing account of the madness that erupted with the entry of that remaining world-class comic nation into the sex race: Japan. Manga's erotic subspecies, officially termed Hentai, comes in various sorts and forms, from romantic tales with lots of gentle and loving sex all the way to unhindered pandering to specific fetish fantasies. But its best examples are commendable precisely because they share most Manga's commendable dedication to the internal logic of fiction in blissfully oblivion to the limitations of the real world. The entire Bara genre, with its over the top hairy strongmen, for example, could give Tom of Finland a serious run for his money, as could Bakunyu to more awkward Western attempts at catering to lovers of wide chests (Pilcher, 2009), but the limits are set still far beyond in the Hentai universe. The extents of its perversion are witnessed by entire swathes of sexy Manga featuring well-endowed women (called Futanari, with You's wonderfully bizarre *Hot tails* providing the most famous example (1996) and still others featuring the bizarre "tentacle porn" trope (Pilcher, 2009) reviving the already mentioned motif of sex with slimy multi-appendage monsters – one that harks back to that universally subconscious trope of being handled by a multitude of unidentifiable body parts within a fluid, slippery medium, straddling the thin line between pleasure and disgust, and apparently possessing a graphic precedent in the very same country by none other than a famous 19th century woodcut entitled *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*. Hentai is also far less reserved than Western comics in depicting sex between family members (several classic series' of it are dedicated to the motif, Pilcher, 2009) and even sex involving minors (Ibid.) – which opens up another problematic question on the theme of the relationship between fantasy and reality: namely, is it ok to enjoy sexual content featuring non-consenting partners in medium where all characters are author-generated fictions. Interestingly, both tentacle porn and the infamous pedophiloid Lolicon apparently surfaced as reactions to prohibition against depicting contact between adult sex organs in Japanese comics (Ibid.), which, in my mind, only serves to ironically demonstrate the tight dialectical tryst between prohibition and perversion.

Now, let us take a pre-concluding breather with a scan across the global production in erotic comics of the last two decades before we sum up this history with a few theoretical conclusions.

The Millennial 69: Sequential Sex at the Turn of 2000

The late eighties and nineties saw a general move toward slightly trashier and more commercialized depictions of sex when compared to the liberating upsurge of previous decades, and this also cast a shadow on the era's comic titles. Two notable exceptions, however, included the epic series *Omaha the Cat Dancer* written by Kate Worley and drawn by Reed Waller (1996) that spans more than a thousand pages and boasts over a decade of publication history. The series stars an anthropomorphic feline working as an exotic dancer at a night club and is to be credited for its matter-of-fact depictions of sex casually appearing among other events and other aspect of couples' relationships (Ibid.; Pilcher, 2009). Omaha is basically a soap opera featuring the cat's stripping career (presented not as a degrading profession but as a way of taking one's sexual charge into one's own hands (Ibid.) and her relationship with her boyfriend that does, granted, include a larger proportion of sexual experimentation than your average relationship, but is in accord with the protagonists' characters, contains nothing unrealistic and includes all the emotional baggage that goes along with carnal knowledge. In short, Omaha is a great example of presenting sex as it can be at its best in reality, magic, demystified and simply lovingly fun.

The other nineties' candidate for a solid steamy comic was penned by another Italian, Giovanna Cassotto, marking a turn back to depicting fantasy rather than everyday sex. Cassotto shares her attitude with Omaha on rather than off stage, depicting herself in a multitude of compromising situations, from posing for a painter friend through daydreaming about shagging a clerk in a kitchen store to elaborate fantasies about being forcibly taken by a possible lycanthrope while exiting a bubble-bath, all of it painted in a style reminiscent of 50's pinups (Cassotto, 1999; Pilcher, 2009). Cassotto's tales can afford to be a bit less PC and a bit less structured than those done by her male compatriots precisely because they are executed by a woman: since they are her own, even possibly problematic fantasies are able to be accepted even with a lesser dose of arty embellishment. On the other hand, this is what sometimes costs them a bit of complexity: Cassotto neither goes as far into grotesque extremes to turn her fantasies on their heads, as Crumb or Tom do, nor does she relativize them by framing them within the quotidian. Cassotto's work is thus mostly a wide-open exhibitionistic window into the unabashed fantasies of one woman that are, however, surely shared by many others: therapeutic, revealing, arousing and beautifully drawn if a bit less clever than some others in the same genre.

On the other side of the millennial mark, the rise of the internet did a lot of damage to quality eroticism by flooding us with an endless sea of cheesy, cheap, often degrading yet ultimately highly effective porn (one can't waste too much time on masturbation in this day and age, can one?), but also provided a platform for experimentation in the comic medium, eventually giving birth to a couple of gems under the erotic heading as well.

The moniker of prime example definitely goes to *Oglaf* whose web-address has gathered an admirable number of followers in recent years by, as its author states on her website, "starting as porn but quickly degrading into sex humour". Drawn by Australian cartoonist Trudy Cooper, *Oglaf* follows a number of vaguely connected storylines within a sword-and-sorcery universe, using its unrealistic setting to make clever points about sexual roles and relationships between bed partners, while also doing its part in the excitement department with the concluding jokes of every episode preceded by graphic depictions of fun and lusty (yet often deadly) sex (Cooper, 2011). *Oglaf* should also be commended for off-hand, including same-sex encounters and female domination without a hint of PC token-strategy but merely as one more part of the vast and variable sea of sexual options. Memorable *Oglaf* leitmotifs thus include: a sexy witch's assistant tortured by his mistress through being exposed to juicy femininity yet forbidden even self-served sexual release and thus forced to ejaculate his bewitched, tale-tattling sperm into sealed jars to avoid detection; a dormant ice-queen desperate to come for spring to follow, resulting in male tongues stuck on an icy clitoris and frozen penises broken off in mid-shag only for final success to be afforded to a tough lesbian warrior; and a group of ultra-masculine barbarians so allergic to femininity that they conclude their manly clashes by mounting one another (Ibid.). *Oglaf*, in short, is a deliciously smart analysis of the dialectics of the homo and hetero-; domination and submission-; and restriction and pleasure-dichotomies that warrants repetitive readings either with or without a hand down one's pants.

As the other web-based diamond from the last decade I'd like to honourably mention the title *Loveblog* drawn by the French cartoonists Gally and Obion (2010) who supposedly used their joint diary in order to tease each-other during their long-distance relationship but produced as a side-product some of the most poignant meditations on steamy sex in steady relationships to date. Notable stories include the couple's debate over letting additional people in on their nightly séances; awkward stories of failed arousals such as awkward stripteases, luring the other from a party with promises of sex only to pass out on the bed at home; abandoning work to shag to the sound of Serge Gainsborough just to be cold-showered by the radio news; or failing to perform in the face of misty-eyed bukkake demands from the lady in the pair (Ibidem). *Loveblog* is a rightfully touching

and tingly read that manages to encompass all the joy of quality couple sex along with all of its inescapable failings and unexpected, embarrassing delights. It is a shame the authors has recently split up and we cannot look forward to further episodes.

To close the last chapter of this historical overview, I think we could hardly wish for a better candidate than a figure universally acknowledged as the best writer of the medium, Alan Moore. Moore is most famous for his revolutions of the superhero genre carried out in ground-breaking titles such as *Watchmen* and *Swamp Thing* yet he has never ventured into erotica – in spite of his publicly expressed interest in the matter (Moore has, in the past, led an unapologetically public long term *menage-a-trois* with his ex wife and her lover, funded an organisation of British cartoonists against homophobia and wrote a poignant introduction to Pilchers currently definitive monograph on Erotic comics by Ilex Press (2009)) – that is, never until the recently published, decade-long-in-the-making tome *Lost Girls*, drawn by Melinda Gebby, who, incidentally, became his second spouse during the books production. *Lost Girls'* plot revolves, as most of Moore's work from the period does, around the possibility of a shared real-world based encounter between fictional characters from different literary works, thus beginning with a retired Alice from Carroll's classic, a middle-aged Wendy familiar to readers of Peter Pan and a mid-twenties Dorothy of Oz fame encountering each other by chance in an Austrian mountain retreat only months before the start of World War I (Moore&Gebby, 2009). Through the book, the three women exchange anecdotes of sexual maturation in which the reader can easily recognise references to the literature apparently based on them (Alice's mind, e.g., escapes a lapine-looking uncle's sexual harassment by embracing her own mirror image; Wendy's bedroom in a middle class, respectable house is invaded nightly by a homeless kid; and Dorothy passes a tornado descending on her farmhouse by masturbating on the floor and emerging from it after the storm has passed into a new, adult world (Ibid.).

As the story advances, the women become ever more sexually entangled, provoking each other to test the limits of their hidden desires, until, by the end of the book, the entire hotel, abandoned by all other guests in fear of impending Armageddon, collapses into one big orgy with the feminine, sexually dubious manager reciting to survivors in mid-coito provocative tales featuring sex between children and their parents while offering layered reflections on the relationship between fantasy in reality. Perhaps the most ingenious part of the book, however, is the final in the series of stories by Wendy where she, while running from a paedophile friend of her parents, comes to terms with her haunting fantasies of being raped by the latter under the shocked gaze of her family, through realising that it was her fantasy and it was only up to her to concede to realising it or not ("I could think

about what I *liked*. That didn't mean I *really* wanted it to happen to me. That didn't mean anyone could force it on me" (Ibid.)) and, empowered by this reflection, repels the attacker by exposing him both to her hairy crotch and an equally mature monologue on how his lust for kids only stems from his inability to face up to grown-up sex and aging.

Lost girls, in short, are a staggeringly intelligent piece of comic erotica that opens up a wide variety of important questions on sex (the relationship between fantasy in reality again, the problem of fantasies of submission, the acceptability of domination over a sexual partner, the role of the female in sexual relationships, etc), manages to actually answer them and stay non-preachy and sexy throughout. It is a masterpiece, one of Moore's best works and made only better by having served as a platform for initiating a real-life love between the authors.

Conclusion: Post Coitum

After having presented the last example in the historical overview, my original lecture normally concluded with an invitation to the audience for to chat over a drink or a smoke, which, I believe, is the most proper topper to a sexually-themed encounter: relaxingly social and blissfully non-theoretic. Because this is an article, however, I must make a break with this usual decorum and present you with an analytical summary of the wild ride you have been subjected to above. Not the best way to part after a pleasant evening such as that but that is the nature of science, ever ignorant of manners on its relentless groping for the final truth.

Thus, to sum up, I believe our historical overview has satisfactorily demonstrated the ability of comics to fulfil the highest standards of erotic art by producing weighty reflections on important sexual themes while still retaining their ticklish potential. Below, for further clarity we will go through these themes and our examples' thoughts on them one by one:

1. The relationship between pornography and erotica. All of the comics presented above succeed in arousing readers while exposing the dialectics underpinning this arousal. Through this strategy they simultaneously avoid the trap of becoming a mere sterile reflection on sex with no sexiness in it and the one of ending up as only an efficient pornographic polygon for quick pleasure. This holds true of all our examples, from Tijuana Bibles straight or even misogynist scripts devolving into female domination or homoerotic endings; through Crumb's uphill push of his fantasies to their breaking point where objects entrap the ego; all the way to Serpieri's dialectics of violence and pleasure and Moore's musings on parallels between orgiastic and pre-bellie chaos.

2. The relationship between fantasy and reality. Pornography either presents its scenarios as isolated dream-worlds lacking any connection to reality, or injects an overdose of reality (including the base feelings of vindictive resentment and moral judgement towards women) into its depictions of mating. Quality erotica on the other hand bets by rule on a smarter blend of the two, allowing reality to pose a limit and medium of realization to the fantasy and infusing reality with a healthy dose of fantasy necessary for its entry into the world of enjoyment. This, again, is a strategy exhibited by all our examples, from the dichotomies of the real breaking into Crumb's, Tom's or Ego's dream-worlds to provide them with paradoxical twists and surround them with an uneasy aura; through fantastic scenarios propelling the everyday sex life of Omaha or Gally's and Obion's alter-egos to unexpected heights; all the way to scenes of copulation elevated into aestheticized tableaux as exemplified by the work of Manara or Giardino. The best erotic comics show us how fantasy never needs to be fully realized to work (and can even amount to violence if realized), but how we need it to function as an isolated dream-core that constantly animates real sex from without.

3. The relationship between submission and domination and subjectification/objectification. Bad porn tends to kiss up to its spectators' egos by presenting them with supposedly controllable sex objects catering to their every whim – made all the less pleasant by the real actors and actresses often barely containing their disgust with minds kept on money earned: it is here where the point of this paragraph crosses over into the one of the former. Proper erotica, on the other hand, lays out a much more layered picture of human sex by demonstrating that objectification is not equitable with submission and vice versa, above all because accepting the role of an object often gives the latter magnetic power over the subject. This is a strategy happily revealed by all our examples with the most obvious being Crumb's simultaneous cruelty towards and enslavement by his idealized females (with their mix of anger and pleasure at being objectified providing a mirroring paradox); the constant interchange of mutual objectification and domination among the actors in Tijuana Bibles, *Omaha* or *Loveblog*; Serpieri's, Manara's and Wood's female characters' pleasure at being objectified exhibiting a punishable limit in less-than-gentle men taking advantage of it; or Moore's and Cooper's independent ladies' reflections on the up and down sides to being an object or a subject in a sexual relation.

Human sexuality is a complex and paradoxical polygon that can serve either to frustrate its participants or, if they are willing to embrace its dialectics, provide a playground for a daring juggling act with opposing elements constantly teetering at the edge of unease. I believe our essay has satisfactorily demonstrated how the best erotic comics have been at the forefront of painting a just picture of this realm for almost a century: slyly surfing the

breaking point between life and dream, power and surrender, male and female and gay and straight. My sincere hope is that they will carry on this quest with at least such gusto the future and that the following decades will award us with many more erotic comics able to both provoke arousal and prod at the latter's origins at the same time. Finally, I also hope readers of this essay have received a convincing enough image of sexy comics' potential to encourage them to become their regular consumers (or, who knows, even producers), extending their own sex sexual lives into those of piquant pictures strung into steamy stories.

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