Routledge Studies in Gender, Sexuality, and Comics

COMIC ART AND FEMINISM IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Edited by
Kristy Beers Fägersten, Anna Nordenstam,
Leena Romu, and Margareta Wallin Wictorin

Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region

This edited collection explores how the relationship between comic art and feminism has been shaped by global, transnational, and local trends, curating analyses of multinational comic art that encompass themes of gender, sexuality, power, vulnerability, assault, abuse, taboo, and trauma.

The chapters illuminate in turn the defining features of the aesthetics, materiality, and thematic content of their source material – often expressed with humorous undertones of self-reflection or social criticism – as well as recurring strategies of visualising and narrating female experiences. Broadening the research perspective of feminist comics to include national comics cultures peripheral to the cultural centres of Anglo-American, Franco-Belgian, and Japanese comics, the anthology explores how the dominant narrative or history of canonical works can be challenged or deconstructed by local histories of comics and feminism and their transnational connections, and how local histories complement or challenge the current understanding of the relationship between feminism and comic art.

This is an essential collection for scholars and students of comics studies, women and gender studies, media studies, and literature.

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Routledge Studies in Gender, Sexuality, and Comics
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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2021
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-367-48333-3 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-02496-7 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-03940-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Newgen Publishing UK

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Acknowledgements

This volume was made possible by a research grant awarded by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies for the project, "A Multidisciplinary Study of Feminist Comic Art," 2018–2021. Members of the research project include José Alaniz (University of Washington), Mike Classon Frangos (Linnaeus University), Elizabeth "Biz" Nijdam (University of British Columbia), Anna Nordenstam (University of Gothenburg), Leena Romu (Tampere University), Margareta Wallin Wictorin (Karlstad University), and project leader Kristy Beers Fägersten (Södertörn University), whose chapters in this volume are a result of the individual work and project collaboration supported by the generous research funding.

Within the scope of the project, the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies also provided funding for the symposium, "Comics and Feminism," held on 19–21 February 2020 at Södertörn University, Sweden. The symposium was co-funded by the Nordic Summer University and the Sweden–Finland Culture Fund, and co-organised by the Nordic-Baltic study circle, "Comics and Society: Research, Art, and Cultural Politics," co-ordinated by Laura Antola (University of Turku) and Anna Vuorinne (University of Turku). Much of the content of this anthology was first presented at the symposium, and the authors would like to express their gratitude to the symposium funders, organisers, and participants of this truly transnational event.

Finally, all chapter authors would like to acknowledge ever so graciously the comics artists featured in this anthology. Not only is their artistic work greatly admired, but their exceptional generosity and collaborative spirit are also immeasurably appreciated. All images in this anthology are copyrighted by the artists and/or their publishers, and are included by their very kind permission.

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1 Feminist comics
An expanding field

Kristy Beers Fägersten, Leena Romu, Anna Nordenstam, and Margareta Wallin Wictorin

Introduction

The pre-cursor to this anthology was the conference, "Comics and Feminism," co-organised by the Nordic Summer University study circle, "Comics and Society: Research, Art, and Cultural Politics," and the research project "A Multidisciplinary Study of Feminist Comic Art"[1] (2018–2021) held at Södertörn University, Sweden, in late February 2020. Shortly afterwards, we as the conference organisers would count ourselves lucky that the event was not affected by the travel restrictions that were soon to be imposed and the general upheaval of daily life. Indeed, as this volume of transnational perspectives on feminist comic art now goes to press, we are in the midst of global turbulence. The year 2020 has been dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which in addition to resulting in mass deaths and sicknesses, has strained healthcare resources, created political divides, exacerbated social inequalities, and crippled economies. By the time the coronavirus reached pandemic status, the global geopolitical scene was already characterised by grave tensions intensified by nationalism, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and far-right terrorism. And in countries such as Brazil, China, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, and the US, political leadership had already begun taking the form of autocracy, dictatorship, or demagoguery, stoked by the immigration crisis and bolstered by overreaching law enforcement and military involvement. In response, protests have proliferated and acts of resistance abound. Before the pandemic, the #metoo movement had already had a profound effect and has continued to expose widespread and systematic sexual harassment and assault; climate change activism had secured a political foothold; massive protests had shone a spotlight on and defied the rule-of-law hypocrisy in Brazil, Belarus, Hong Kong, Russia, and the US; and the resurgence and worldwide spread of the Black Lives Matter movement had forced an international reckoning with racism and racial inequality. Such progress, however, is put at risk by further threats, challenges, and injustices, more of which are certain to come.

It is thus a worrisome present with a future that may seem bleak, but it is nevertheless important to understand the times we are experiencing as the

context for artistic output. The publication of this anthology coincides with grand events on a global scale, such as the examples above. Like each of them, the anthology, too, should be put into context, such that it can answer the question: what has instigated the production of a transnationally expanding field of feminist comic art? The anthology *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives* aims to explore how the relationship between comic art and feminism has been shaped by global, transnational, and local trends. Given that comic art has always been an international form, it is no surprise that comics should also create, reflect, and respond to trends of globalisation. If the rise of graphic narrative genres in multiple national contexts may in itself be seen as an effect of cultural globalisation, comic art is, at the same time, deeply enmeshed in local histories and contexts.

An expanding historical context: Feminist comic art in Sweden and Finland

The emergence of feminist comic art can be traced to the Anglo-American context of the 1960s and 1970s. At this time, women's comic art and graphic narratives were closely associated with second-wave feminism, "which enabled a body of work that was explicitly political to sprout" (Chute 2010, p. 20). Self-published, underground "comix" were proliferating, which gave rise to comics with a decidedly feminist orientation (Robbins 1999), albeit as "more a reaction to [underground comix] than their outgrowth" (Sabin 1993, p. 224). Women's underground comix in the US and the UK thus paved the way for contemporary feminist comic art, and a growing number of contemporary comics are continuing to explore themes of feminism by creating new discursive spaces for problematising gender, gender roles, and social norms. Indeed, many women creators in particular have achieved mainstream recognition thanks to the expanding graphic novel market and the popularity of autobiographical comics.

While it is conventional to cite the Anglo-American history of feminist comics as central to the field, significant but often overlooked parallel developments or subsequent effects also took place in other countries. One noteworthy example is Sweden, where feminist comics were published in connection with the women's liberation movement from the early 1970s. In feminist publications, such as the women's journal *Kvinnobulletinen*, one could read comics in different styles, in which humour and satire were deployed as a weapon, and with themes connected to women's bodies, the labour market, and different sexualities. Feminist comics and cartoons have also long been published in Swedish fanzines, daily newspapers, and anthologies (Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin 2019). In *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives*, the point of departure is the comic art landscape of Sweden, where the history of feminist comics that explore the political through the personal has established

comics artists as influential social commentators and powerful political activists. Many Swedish female comics artists have garnered mainstream popularity and critical acclaim for their feminist perspectives and scathing but humorous social commentary. While positioned for comparison to their Anglo-American contemporaries, best-selling Swedish artists such as Liv Strömquist, Nina Hemmingsson, Moa Romanova, and others nevertheless deviate from the established aesthetic with similar yet singular styles of illustration and multimodal ways of interacting with materiality. These contemporary feminist comics artists can thus be considered pioneers with regards to their depictions of female experiences, and topics such as politics, class, gender, sexualities, and other issues of equality, thereby operationalising a feminist movement in Sweden.

Not only is Sweden a nation of enthusiastic consumers and creators of comic art, it is also progressive in many (but certainly not all) issues of equality, which has contributed to establishing substantial female representation in the otherwise male-dominated comics industry. Indeed, in his account of Swedish comics history, Fredrik Strömberg (2010) points out in the chapter, "The 21st century – Women take charge," that Swedish "female cartoonists" have recently been able to challenge male dominance due to "an active public debate about equality that has been going on in Swedish society for quite some time" (p. 96). Women creators are thus currently and unprecedentedly enjoying the unique status, from both a national and international perspective, of industry leaders. This development is also mirrored in publishing with the example of Galago, one of Sweden's oldest and largest comics publishers, which focuses on alternative and feminist comics and today boasts an all-female staff.[2]

The success, popularity, and momentum of Swedish feminist comic art warrant an exploration of local reverberations and transnational trends in feminist comic art both in and around Sweden, such as in Finland. When female cartoonists started to become more common and visible on the Finnish comics landscape during the 1980s and 1990s, there was a need to categorise their comics as "women's comics" in comparison to the decidedly established norm of male-dominated comics. The cultural conversation about the necessity of the label "women's comics" continued in Finland until the 2010s, as the main comics festivals discussed the label's positive and negative connotations.[3] As the discussion has continued, the Finnish comics field has also become more diverse and the need for categorising comics based on the artist's gender has become obsolete.

Furthermore, when discussing feminist comics and their distinctive features, it is of utmost importance to consider the differences between genres, artists, and generations of artists, since both the cultural and political contexts for making comics change over time. In Finland, women cartoonists had to defend their new place in the earlier male-dominated industry until the 2000s, when women were no longer a rare sight among the readers, students, or creators of comics. Additionally, the ways in which feminism(s)

is(are) understood have changed over time; in Finland, the debates about intersectionality, the rights of non-binary and transpeople, mental health, and body positivity have become more important and increasingly relevant topics, especially for many younger comics artists during the 2000s and 2010s. This trend is set to continue into the 2020s, even if the critical aspects and themes may very well change as a reaction to societal and political developments.

An expanding geographical perspective: Feminist comic art in the Baltic Sea region

As feminist comic art in Finland and Sweden show, the surrounding society – with its political situation, gender expectations, legislation, and cultural norms – affects what kind of feminist ideas artists may choose to tackle in their work. In this sense, both commonalities between and unique characteristics in feminist comics are significant. In many contexts, however, the concept of "women's comics" prevails, threatening to undermine the value of the social and political issues they address. The chapters of this anthology therefore promote and elaborate on the concepts of feminist comic art and feminist comics artists. The idea to compile an anthology on feminist comics in the Baltic Sea region thus first raises the question of whether it is possible to find a common denominator for feminist comic art. Are feminist comics connected by certain aesthetic qualities or themes? Is there a shared conception of feminism that is recognisable in the comics produced in the Baltic Sea region? The answer to both questions is "no." As much as there is an exchange of ideas and aesthetic influences between artists in different countries, there are local varieties specific to countries and individual artists. Furthermore, variations in contemporary conceptions of feminism seem to depend on varying historical conditions and experiences in the different countries. There is also a great variety of genres, media, and narrative styles represented in the feminist comic art of the Baltic Sea region. Thus, identifying or categorising feminist comic art can be considered an exercise in recognising variations on shared aesthetic, discursive, and ideological themes.

The situation of categorising based on such "different similarities" has a Nordic precedent. According to Rikke Platz Cortsen and Ralf Kauranen (2016, p. 12), Nordic comics are variable and diverse, thus making it impossible to find a certain thematic, stylistic, or generic commonality. The ways in which the comics draw inspiration from Nordic cultures and societies in creating their story worlds, characters, and atmosphere are numerous. "Nordicness" in Nordic comics is not an inherent quality but, rather, as Cortsen and Kauranen claim, a constructed quality that is built for transnational collaboration and promotional purposes (ibid.).

In the same way, feminist comics around the Baltic Sea region draw their aesthetic influences and feminist ideas from several sources. This anthology

aims to identify salient distinguishing features and transnational commonalities of feminist comic art. The transnational perspective highlights practices and characteristics of feminist comic art which have mobilised to extend across national boundaries. However, there might also be translocal particularities, where forms of global media are adapted to meet the needs of local contexts, which themselves are increasingly linked through practices of adaptation, translation, and mediation (Dirlik 1996; Brickell and Datta 2011: Denson, Meyer, and Stein 2013; Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). This anthology's chapters on Finnish, German, Polish, Russian, and Swedish comics endeavour to broaden the research perspective and develop the concept of feminist comics to include comics cultures peripheral to the Anglo-American, Franco-Belgian, and Japanese cultural centres of comic art.

An expanding collaborative landscape: Feminist comic art activity in the Baltic Sea region

The Baltic Sea region has functioned both as a site for transnational collaboration between artists and an inspiration for stories. Comics artists and others working in the field of comic art have collaborated, for example, by extending mutual invitations to local comics festivals, translating each other's work, or co-publishing anthologies and zines. The Baltic Sea region as a geographical and geopolitically defined area has also inspired comics artists to depict the sea as a facilitator for historical, cultural, linguistic, and social exchange between nations and people (Kauranen 2019).

The idea of the Baltic Sea region as a locus for transnational collaboration and exchange also holds true when it comes to artist networks. In 2016, Femicomix Finland, a network for feminist minded comics artists and activists, co-edited an issue of *Kuti* magazine dedicated to feminist comics (*Kuti* #40). The issue included comics from the Baltic Sea region (Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Russia, and Sweden) but also from other parts of Europe and around the world. Femicomix Finland itself was established in 2013, drawing its inspiration from the Swedish feminist network Dotterbolaget, which was founded in 2005 by a group of women who had studied at the Comic Art School of Malmö, Sweden. Central to Dotterbolaget's explicit ethos is creating and upholding a collaborative and supportive network among women and transpeople inside the comics industry (Hinchcliffe Voglio 2019), an ideology that Femicomix also subscribes to. Similar networks (and important partners for transnational collaboration) include the Chicago-based Ladies Night Anthology and the British collectives Comic Book Slumber Party and Laydeez do Comics, which share the aim of promoting female creators and diversity in the comics industry.

Transnational connections, that is, aesthetic, social, political, economic, and cultural interaction reaching across national boundaries, shape comics cultures and graphic narratives, as Shane Denson, Christina Meyer, and Daniel Stein (2013, p. 1) have proposed. Translating works from one

language to another is a common way to enable a transnational flow of ideas and narratives; however, not only can translations, festivals, artist meetings, or collaborative works (such as anthologies, zines, etc.) create transnational interaction between artists, but also the Internet, especially via social media platforms such as Instagram, enables transnational networking. These platforms have also made it easier for readers to find new comics and artists from other cultures and language areas.

Research on comics has expanded substantially during recent years, resulting in academic conferences and publications, national and international research networks, and dissemination and outreach activities. Among noteworthy examples of the latter is Nicola Streeten's series of five online seminars, "Feminism, comics & humour," organised by Laydeez do Comics and funded by The British Arts Council. The seminars, delivered live but subsequently made available on YouTube, are based on Streeten's latest book on feminist comics in Britain, *UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics: A Critical Survey* (2020), and trace the development of feminist comic art, especially the central role of humour, from the 1970s to the 2010s. A further example of scholarly outreach, and one that especially highlights transnational connections in feminist comic art, is the 2020 comics artist and industry panel, "Feminist graphic novelists: A webinar about Swedish and Turkish cartoonists" organised by the Consulate General and Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul as part of their *Dialogues/Dialoglar* series of interdisciplinary events. These activities confirm, as does this anthology, that the narrative content, formal developments, and cultural advancements of feminist comic art in both national and transnational contexts constitute subjects of immediate relevance for contemporary scholarship.

Comic art and feminism in the Baltic Sea region: Transnational perspectives

The chapters of this anthology present and analyse both the similarities and differences between feminist comics from a transnational perspective focused on the Baltic Sea region. As such, the anthology is "an exploration of global comic diversity and local specificity," as is the recently published special issue of *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* (Munt and Richards 2020, p. 1) which, in contrast to our approach, expands its focus to feminist comics across the world. We nevertheless have in common the view of comics and their reading as potential instruments of social change, as comics are texts that can "challenge and disrupt preconceived ideas and beliefs" (Munt and Richards 2020, p. 2).

The anthology chapters all share an approach that literary scholar Rita Felski (2003, p. 22) has called "double vision": as much as the chapters point out how feminist comics connect to social phenomena and tackle feminist issues, they also pay attention to their formal and aesthetic qualities. In many chapters, the feminist resistance is located in the multitude of ways

that comics utilise their medium-specific affordances of combining visual and verbal information and their spatiotemporal parameters. The chapters serve to illuminate defining features of aesthetics, materiality, and thematic content as well as recurring strategies of visualising and narrating female and queer experiences. The goal of the anthology is to curate a series of analyses of comic art that reveal and explicate transnational themes of gender, sexuality, power, vulnerability, assault, abuse, taboo, and trauma, often expressed with humorous undertones of self-reflection or social criticism. In addition, the analyses are performed by researchers from a range of disciplines, such as literary studies, linguistics, art history and visual studies, history, sociology, and gender studies, providing a rich array of aspects on feminist comic art.

Taking Sweden as its point of departure on a transnational journey, the anthology begins with "Part I: Swedish feminist comics artists." In Chapter 2, "Swedish feminist comics and cartoons at the turn of the millennium: Joanna Rubin Dranger and Åsa Grennvall (Schagerström)," Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Wictorin explore how works by two Swedish comics artists have shaped and been shaped by aesthetic, social, political, and cultural interactions that reach across national boundaries in an interconnected and globalising world (Denson, Meyer, and Stein 2013). In humoristic comics in black and white, Rubin Dranger claims space and attention for women in public life and criticises both the physical demands on women's bodies and the high expectations on individual achievement in an increasingly tough working life. Åsa Grennvall, today Schagerström, has drawn from punk, goth, and do-it-yourself aesthetics in her early fanzines and comics albums about relations, women's bodies and violence against women. Her albums have been translated into English, Finnish, French, and Korean. Both artists are part of the transnational wave of life narrative comics where especially women have been at the vanguard of creating a new aesthetics around self-representation (Chute 2010; El Refaie 2012; Ernst 2017; Køhlert 2019). Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin argue that there are connections and intertextualities between these early creators of Swedish life narrative comics and female comics creators in other parts of the world, such as the American comics artist Debbie Dreschler and the Finnish artist Tove Jansson (whose work is explored in Chapter 8).

In Chapter 3, "A woman's place (in the panel): Positioning and framing in comics by Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg" Kristy Beers Fägersten focuses on a selection of single-panel comics by two Swedish comics artists, seeking to explicate how gender norms are invoked and subverted in depicted talk-in-interaction. Informing the analyses are theories of positioning and framing, which aim to help us make sense of interactions as taking place in different sorts of occasions, how these differences are signalled, and how we behave according to social conventions and moral commitments. The feminist perspective on these conventions and commitments is expressed in the comics of Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg, in which frames and

positions are made particularly salient in the single-panel format. The single-panel comics invite analyses that capitalise on both the figurative and literal interpretations of positioning and framing by applying them to text as well as image. The chapter furthermore demonstrates how visual positioning and framing can align or conflict with textual positioning and framing to make gender roles salient, thereby warranting an analysis of how discourse, as resistance to positioning and framing, effects a renegotiation of "a woman's place" (Lakoff 1973) and associated expectations of being linguistically, socially, and morally compliant. The chapter concludes by highlighting that, transnationally, very few women produce single-panel comic art, and thus doing so can itself be considered a feminist act.

In the second part of the anthology, "Part II: Gender, sex, and sexuality in German-language comics," three chapters explore transnational aspects of feminist comic art in Germany. Chapter 4, "A brief history of girlsplaining? Reading Klengel, Patu, and Schrupp with Strömquist. Or: Reflecting visualities of gender and feminism in German-language comics" by Marina Rauchenbacher and Katharina Serles, analyses the success of the album *Kunskapens frukt* (2014), by Swedish comics artist Liv Strömquist. Translated into German as *Der Ursprung der Welt* (The origin of the world) in 2017, this work is first considered in relation to its influence on the "comeback of the vulva," and how its reception coincided with the #metoo-movement and other popular feminist publications within the German-language context. Rauchenbacher and Serles focus on two crucial works: Patu's and Antje Schrupp's *Kleine Geschichte des Feminismus im euro-amerikanischen Kontext* (2015) and Katja Klengel's *Girlsplaining* (2018). In so doing, they analyse prominent gender discourses and offer a sociopolitical contextualisation. "Visualities of gender," particularly with regards to how feminist comic art problematises what is shown vs. what is hidden, constitutes a central theme of the chapter, which is explored via art quotations. Transnational influences are thus explored not only via comparisons of the work of Strömquist, Patu, and Schrupp, and Klengel, but also in how these artists similarly invoke the work of non-comics artists, visually quoting the likes of Botticelli, Courbet, de Goya, or Rodin, among others. A further transnational feature explored in the chapter is the use of humour to express criticism, and Rauchenbacher and Serles provide compelling examples of how the featured comics artists directly engage with and even reproduce similar sexist and misogynistic tropes in order to expose, subvert, and criticise them via strategies of visual humour.

Additional evidence of transnational influences in German-language comics can be found in Chapter 5, "'What's in a name?': Anke Feuchtenberger's Roses and the mythic methodologies of her feminist comic art," by Elizabeth "Biz" Nijdam. In this chapter, Nijdam first calls attention to the 1922 poem, "Sacred Emily," in which Gertrude Stein writes "Rose is a rose is a rose." With the repetition of the symbol of the rose – as an object, a name, a metaphor, and a symbol – Stein asserts that, despite literature's

propensity for infusing this one type of flower with romantic meanings, it is in fact, just a rose. Like Stein's application of the same imagery, East German graphic artist Anke Feuchtenberger's pair of graphic narratives "*Rosen*" and "No Roses" also attack the metaphorical attachments of the rose to make a statement about the arbitrariness of its – and other gendered symbols' – signification. Nijdam invokes the theories of Roland Barthes (1957) and Mary Daly (1978) regarding the role of myth in hegemonic meaning-making, and examines the feminist political agenda behind Feuchtenberger's mobilisation of mythic symbols and myth- and countermyth-making strategies in her graphic narratives. By engaging the symbol of the rose in "*Rosen*," Feuchtenberger calls forth its associations with love and romance, only to deconstruct these conventions and disassemble its significations in the following graphic narrative, "No Roses." Invoking the semiotic structure of myth, Nijdam shows how Feuchtenberger deftly weaves together convention, overt symbolism, and the visual and verbal affordances of the comic art medium to force reflections on our notions of romantic love.

In Chapter 6, "For sex-positivity? Potential and limits of representing sex and sexuality in Ulli Lust's comics across genres," Anna Vuorinne focuses on the work of Ulli Lust, who can be considered one of the most famous and critically acclaimed female comics artists of the German-speaking world. Female sexuality as composed of both pleasure and degradation (Chute 2010) is thematised in Lust's work, where sexuality is a source of pain and trauma as well as pleasure and joy. Vuorinne investigates this theme in different genres of Lust's work, including pornography, autobiography, and reportage, and her analyses explicate how Lust's comics advocate the idea of feminist sex-positivity by celebrating female sexuality and normalising the diversity of sexuality and sexual behaviour. At the same time, the comics can be read as reflecting and reproducing normative as well as sexist and racist ideology. Vuorinne acknowledges Lust's comics as groundbreaking for their cross-genre exploration of female sexuality and their engagement with the theme of pleasure and pain, both of which ultimately serve to challenge normative ideas of female sexuality and to promote positive attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Importantly, Vuorinne's analyses highlight how challenging it may be to oppose essentialist and hierarchical ideas about sexuality and race that are deeply ingrained in the hegemonic culture of the West, thereby establishing the transnational relevance of Lust's comics.

In the third part of the anthology, "Part III: Non-binary and queer expression in comics," two chapters explore a similar theme with transnational manifestations. First, the thematic dynamism and diversity of German-language comics becomes ever more evident in Chapter 7, "Strategies of ambiguity – non-binary figurations in German-language comics," by Anna Beckmann. Drawing on theories of unreliability in literature and film studies and on transmedial narratology, the chapter both examines stagings of unreliability and ambiguity in the comics of Anke Feuchtenberger, Imke Schmidt, and Ka Schmitz, and explores narrative strategies of ambiguity as they are

used to challenge gender concepts in feminist comics. Beckmann argues that the question of what a feminist comic is has to be extended by the question of how feminist comics work and what the critical potential of feminist or queer graphic representation is. In effect, the representation of non-binary figures challenges expectations of femininity. The chapter thus explores which possibilities the comic specific aesthetic offers for queer presentations of gender, and how the specific mediality of comics is particularly suitable to represent narrative strategies of unreliability and ambiguity that question our ideas of strict gender roles.

Leaving Germany and entering Finland by way of Swedish-speaking Finnish author and artist Tove Jansson, the exploration of queer in comics continues in Chapter 8, "Feminist and queer aesthetics in Tove Jansson's Moomin comics," by Mike Classon Frangos. Jansson has been recognised not only as a major author of children's literature but also an important figure in the development of 20th-century queer literature. Scholars have noted the queer themes in Jansson's Moomin books, and her iconic role in comics history is widely acknowledged, especially the Moomin newspaper comic discussed in this chapter. Translated and published simultaneously in English, Swedish, and Finnish, among other languages, Jansson's Moomin comics trouble the space of the newspaper comic with queer and feminist themes. Classon Frangos analyses how Jansson's queer and feminist aesthetics were adapted into the comics medium, arguing that the Moomin comics explore the performativity of gender through theatrical scenes of desire.

"Part IV: Addressing violence in Finnish comics" includes two chapters, each analysing how mediated or immediate experiences of sexual harassment and violence are depicted in comic art. In Chapter 9, "Feminist education and empowerment: The individual and the collective in Emmi Nieminen and Johanna Vehkoo's comic on online violence," Ralf Kauranen and Olli Löytty offer an in-depth analysis of *Vihan ja inhon internet* [The Internet of Hate and Loathing] (2017), written by Johanna Vehkoo and illustrated by Emmi Nieminen. This work of comics journalism explores the phenomenon of online hate directed at women in Finland. The theme of the album is transnational in various ways: misogynist hate speech seems to manifest itself all around the world, and the Internet can be seen as a fundamentally transnational milieu that is depicted in the album in visually innovative ways. Drawing on theories of the personal and the political, Kauranen and Löytty analyse how feminist politics against misogynist and racist hate speech is expressed through the comics medium. The authors also focus on the different transnationally available narrative conventions and strategies at work in *Vihan ja inhon internet*, which contains both straightforward narration and content focused on providing information, such as advice on how to handle online harassment. The chapter outlines how *Vihan ja inhon internet*, as a journalistic comic featuring both testimony and tutorial, serves as a tool for feminist empowerment.

In Chapter 10, "The narrative complexity of showing and telling sexual harassment and violence in Kati Kovács's comics," Leena Romu undertakes an analysis of the works of Finnish comics artist Kati Kovács, who has depicted sexual violence in her comics since the beginning of her more than 30-year-long career. Both Kovács's fictional and autobiographical works include stories about young girls and women who suffer from sexual harassment and assaults. This chapter approaches representations of sexual violence in comics from a narratological perspective by focusing on the complex ways of combining word and image. In the core of the chapter is the question of how to represent sexual violence and harassment in a feminist way. Romu suggests that the question can be addressed by taking rhetorical narratology as a theoretical point of departure and considering how the interplay of word and image serves the larger rhetorical – and feminist – purposes of the narratives. Romu illustrates how, in Kovács's case, the feminist rhetoric of representing sexual violence and harassment is built on several narrative tensions (between narrating-I and experiencing-I, between the character narrator and protagonist) and ambiguous visual imagery. She concludes that feminist strategies to represent sexual violence in comics can be various depending on how the artists utilise the numerous possibilities of combining word and image, which proves how flexible and innovative the medium of comics can be in discussing feminist issues.

The final part of the anthology, "Part V: Memoir and remembering in Polish and Russian comics," includes two chapters which adopt an historical perspective. In Chapter 11, "'After all, we must be our own heroines': The power of feminism, *Fun Home*, and form in Wanda Hagedorn's graphic memoir *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*," Małgorzata Olsza presents the 2017 graphic memoir, *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* ["Totally Not Nostalgia: Memoir"]. Written by Wanda Hagedorn and illustrated by Jacek Frąś, *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* tells the story of Hagedorn's childhood and adolescence rooted in the grim realities of communist Poland of the 1960s and 1970s. Inspired by Americans Alison Bechdel and Kate Zambreno, Hagedorn examines her upbringing in a family that is meant to be "traditional" and "normal," i.e., subjected to the authoritarian rule of an abusive, misogynistic, and emotionally distant father. The memoir chronicles Hagedorn's development from the victim of psychological, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse to a young woman who finds in herself the courage to challenge gender and social norms. In this chapter, Olsza starts by emphasising the difference between Western and Central European conceptions of feminism, depending on different historical conditions (of particular relevance to the Baltic Sea region). She then moves from the political, through the formal, to the personal, focusing on the intertextual and intervisual relations with Bechdel's *Fun Home*, visual metaphors of trauma and emancipation employed in the memoir, and self-portrayal, self-acceptance, and visual representation of the female "beautiful/ugly" body. The chapter details how Hagedorn's memoir not only demonstrates the

power of female vision in comics, but also does so from a uniquely transnational perspective.

The anthology concludes with Chapter 12, "Staring back at history: Varvara Pomidor and Russian comics," by José Alaniz. The chapter's focus is on the work of Varvara Pomidor, whose comic art is characterised by a seemingly naïve but at the same time disconcertingly adult sensibility. Pomidor's stories at times touch on questions beyond the personal, to tragedy and historical trauma. In her story/cycle *Pravda* (2010), Pomidor combines memory fragments, politics, and collage to depict a late Soviet-era childhood. Painting on a background made up of clippings from the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* ("Truth"), Pomidor counterbalances the ordinary events of her young life with the grand narrative of history. Alaniz highlights in this chapter how Pomidor makes use of the visual and verbal affordances of the comic art medium to allow for alternative interpretations of history, at times aligned with Pomidor as a young girl, at times with Pomidor as an adult woman. While Pomidor herself may resist her art being subjected to the lens of gender, Alaniz argues that, given the Russian history of comics culture, the work of Pomidor must nevertheless be considered a significant feminist act.

This roster of chapters sets the cultural, social, and political scenes that contextualise the works under analysis. Each helps us to understand the featured comics (and comics artists) as a product of their time. The anthology, in its turn, is a product of its time, which documents the fact that feminist comics have not only evolved separately in various national contexts, but also crossed a transnational threshold. The anthology encourages us to acknowledge commonalities, intertextualities, and mutual influences while also appreciating each comic and comics artist in their own right and in their own unique context.

Considering the current state of the world, in which one crisis seemingly succeeds another, we can expect a variety of lived experiences, consequences, and commentary to be documented in many ways, including in the medium of comic art and graphic narrative. Feminist comic art, especially that which reflects the continuous flux between transnational and local influences, has the potential to proliferate, thus not only responding to but also creating political and cultural debate. We hope that this anthology paves the way for continued transnational investigations which reach into the far corners of the world to shine a spotlight on lesser-known comic art and comics artists.

Notes

1 Funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (*Östersjöstiftelsen*).

2 According to a statement by Rojin Petrow, editor-in-chief at Galago, in her address to the participants of "Feminist graphic novelists. A webinar about Swedish and Turkish cartoonists," 14 October 2020.

3 In 2011, Päivälehti museum (a museum dedicated for media) organised an event called Changing the Woman Image which included a panel discussion about women and comics. The participants hoped that, in the future, there would be no more panels dedicated to "women's comics." During the same year, Tampere Kuplii comics festival hosted cartoonist Solja Järvenpää's presentation titled "Women's comics – a curse word?" which was the topic also in a panel discussion at Helsinki Comics Festival in 2013.

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Part I
Swedish feminist comics artists

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2 Swedish feminist comics and cartoons at the turn of the millennium

Joanna Rubin Dranger and
Åsa Grennvall (Schagerström)[1]

Anna Nordenstam and
Margareta Wallin Wictorin

Introduction

Swedish feminist comics have had a significant breakthrough in terms of their popularity in the 21st century, primarily because of their inherent humour, sharp satire, bold aesthetics, and explicit politics. Artists such as Sara Granér, Nina Hemmingsson, Nanna Johansson, Lotta Sjöberg, and Liv Strömquist have attracted a great deal of attention due to their humorous feminist comics with vital ideas and new aesthetics. However, feminist comics and cartoons had been published in Swedish feminist journals, fanzines, daily newspapers, and anthologies, by artists such as Anne Lidén, Gunna Grähs, and Cecilia Torudd as early as the 1970s and 1980s. These comics employed humour and satire to challenge stereotypes and even to contest the idea that women have no sense of humour (Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin 2019).

Shortly before the turn of the millennium, two new feminist comics artists appeared on the Swedish scene, Joanna Rubin Dranger and Åsa Grennvall. They are often associated with the transnational wave of autobiographical comics, where especially women have been at the vanguard of creating a new aesthetics around self-representation (Chute 2010; El Refaie 2012; Køhlert 2019). Jane Tolmie has emphasised that this genre has potential as feminist art activism and creative emancipation, and gives both the artist and the reader a venue for affective and political activities (Tolmie 2013, p. xvii). In their analyses of Swedish life narratives in comics, Nina Ernst (2017) and Kristina Arnerud Mejhammar (2020) have discerned the ambition to make stories about important societal issues based on personal experiences. This chapter, however, is not focused on the autobiographical perspective of comics; on the contrary, we analyse how universal and important issues thematised in the feminist debate are verbally and visually expressed in the comics by Rubin Dranger and Grennvall, and how these comics can convey a strong aesthetic experience through recognition as well as defamiliarisation. In a 2002 interview for a comics magazine,

Grennvall answered the question of whether her narratives were subjective in this manner: "In my opinion it is up to the reader. The reader can decide if it is important for him/her, if it is objective or subjective. It has nothing to do with the comic artist" (Strömberg 2002). Rubin Dranger has expressed that graphic storytelling has a great advantage in being able to tell a story subjectively without having to be autobiographical. She does not have to choose between a narrating-I and an omniscient narrator's voice. She simply draws the figures in the settings with a dialogue in between, and she can tell whatever she wants (Rubin Dranger 2008, pp. 38–40).

Background: The feminist context

In this chapter, we focus on the comics of Joanna Rubin Dranger and Åsa Grennvall published between 1999 and 2002. The turn of the millennium marked an important time for feminism in Sweden, discussed in political debates as well as in the media and the academic world. Several young women wrote important books and texts about feminism, reaching out to a wide audience. For example, *Under det rosa täcket* [Under the Pink Cover] by Nina Björk (1996) introduced Judith Butler's queer theory and other theories in a popularised form and quickly became a feminist bible. In 1999, an anthology of newly written feminist texts was published as *Fittstim* [Cunt Clan], regarded as "the most timely book of all times" (Wilhelmson 2019, n.p.). Its two young editors, journalists Belinda Olsson and Linda Norrman Skugge, were angry with the fact that Sweden was always discussed as the most equal country in the world despite, for instance, the wage gap between men and women for equal work, the low proportion of female professors at universities (less than 10%), and the fact that there were no female editors-in-chief at any of the 25 largest newspapers in the country. The editors had assembled 18 young writers to reflect upon feminism, many of whom were active in the worlds of media, music, culture, or sports. The former generation of feminists, whose theoretical texts reflected their academic backgrounds, were not invited. The editors of *Fittstim* wanted to reach out to a wider audience and show that "there are women who have higher dreams than to become Miss Sweden. We want to show that we care. We are cool, handsome, tough, smart, and funny, and above all, we are feminists" (Olsson and Norrman Skugge 1999, pp. 6–7). All of the authors were asked to describe how they defined feminism, and at this time, the general idea was to talk about a variety of feminisms instead of one single kind of feminism. However, they all agreed that feminism for them meant that "men and women shall be treated in similar ways and have the same rights" (ibid).

The image on the book cover immediately aroused disgust, and even the book's title was controversial. The deeply derogatory word "*fittstim*" is said to have been used by the chair of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, Stig Malm, to describe the women's section of the Social Democratic party, led by its chair Margareta Winberg. The editors reclaimed the word, as well

as women's right to their own bodies, by printing on the book cover a photo of a torso in light blue bikini underwear with pubic hair sprouting out of the edges. This was a powerful and ironic way of pointing to the ideals set out for women in the advertisement and fashion world and in men's magazines of the time. *Fittstim* became a great success: it sold over 80,000 copies and was translated into Danish, Finnish, and Norwegian. The so-called "media feminists" went on a tour with the anthology, speaking in schools about the societal situation of young women, sexuality, obsession with bodily ideals, lesbian love, humour, music, and friendship – topics that were discussed in the articles in the anthology. There were no comics artists among the authors, but in a chapter about bodily ideals, there is one humorous and satirical cartoon about face-lifts, made by the comics artist Maja Lindén. By this time, Lindén had been noted for her comics *Vajlet* [Violet] and *Fru Draake* [Mrs Dragon] (1997–2005), published in the daily newspapers *Expressen*, *Dagens Nyheter* and the journal *Dagens Arbete*.

In the 1990s, the debate on feminism was also highlighted in feminist journals such as the culture magazine *Bang*, founded in 1991 by young female students at Stockholm University (Hultman 2014, p. 220). *Bang* was one of the most important feminist journals until 2021, when it was discontinued due to poor finances. It has had hundreds of thematic issues during the years, for instance on class, ethnicity, racism, food, children, sexuality, design, neo-liberalism, and art. The journal has been very important for introducing new gender theory and intersectional perspectives, and comics and cartoons were included in the journal from the first edition. In connection to an editorial text about the interpretation and impact of images, the editors published an ironic black-and-white cartoon made by the Swedish comics artist Joakim Pirinen, where a woman with traits of a teddy bear is chopping wood and in a thought bubble says: "Women can also chop wood!" (*Bang* 1991:1). This cartoon was published several times during the 1990s, and the wood-chopping woman was used on T-shirts in an advertisement campaign for *Bang* in 1993. In the 1990s, comics and cartoons were published in *Bang* by women such as Martina Edoh, Annalena Hellman, Susanne Skoog, and Lisbeth Svärling, in addition to well-known contemporary artists such as Lena Ackebo, Anna Höglund, and Joanna Rubin Dranger. *Bang* also introduced, quite early, North American feminist comics by Julie Doucet, Mary Fleener, Phoebe Gloeckner, and Aline Kominsky-Crumb, for a new feminist audience in Sweden (Skoog 1993, pp. 26–27). *Bang* saw an increase in feminist comics and cartoons from 2001 onwards, by artists such as Åsa Grennvall, Nina Hemmingsson, and Sara Olausson.

As in other countries, there was an ongoing feminist debate in fanzines, too. In Sweden, this medium flourished and reached a peak in the latter half of the 1990s, which was some years later than in the US, where the grrrl zine revolution had started in tandem with the Riot Grrrls-movement in the early 1990s. The fanzines had the opportunity to focus on personal experiences such as sexual violence, the right to abortion, and lesbian love.

Internationally as well as in Sweden, feminist fanzines represent a counterculture to commercial magazines, and are usually described as a critical alternative: non-professional, non-capitalistic, and non-institutionalised. Fanzines should be cheap, easy to print (mostly in black and white), and in principle, they could be designed in any way (Streeten 2020, p. 160).

The fanzines were distributed through non-traditional channels unlike mainstream publishing, often passed on from person to person, and they were sold at alternative places such as festivals and other events. The motto was DIY -Do-It-Yourself-, signalling a sassy attitude with roots in the 1970s punk movements, but challenging patriarchal structures as opposed to accepting the male dominance of punk. The feminist Swedish fanzines called for activism, independent creation, and solidarity between the fanzine artists (Gunnarsson Payne 2006, 2014). The Swedish fanzine *Amazon#8/2001* is representative of the tone: "Write. Copy. Walk around. (Or not.) Circulate your message […] Make a fanzine, damn it! Raise resistance against the commercial dictatorial press. Revolt. The word is yours" (translated quotes from Gunnarsson Payne 2006, p. 55). Comics and cartoons were also published in special fanzines for comics, appearing in Sweden as early as the 1970s and continuing today. However, until the turn of the millennium, there were only a few fanzines with comics by women (Bengtsson and Krantz 2002), the comics of Åsa Grennvall constituting an exception.

During the 1990s, academic feminism became stronger in Sweden. Gender research was institutionalised at universities as a new discipline and instated with its own doctoral studies program. Professorships with a gender perspective were established within older disciplines such as Comparative Literature, and a new administrative authority, The Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research, was founded. Since 1998, this authority has been responsible for strengthening the position of gender and intersectional issues in the academic world and in society at large by conducting research and disseminating information.

Altogether, the 1990s was a progressive decade for feminism in Sweden. At the same time, the Swedish comics scene was developing, culminating in the founding of a comics art school in Malmö in 1999. An increasing number of female comic artists were gaining prominence, and from the beginning of the 2000s, the mobilisation of female comics artists was strengthened through the founding of the comics artists' network *Dotterbolaget* in Malmö in 2005. The aim of *Dotterbolaget*, which is a separatist feminist network, was to support women and transpeople within the field of comic art, instead of seeing each other as competitors (Hinchcliffe Voglio 2019). The strategy was clear and gained momentum, and *Dotterbolaget* remains active, publishing fanzines, comics albums, and comics anthologies, and organising both exhibitions and workshops. The activity and progress in both feminism and comic art during the 1990s and 2000s in Sweden had a mutually fortifying effect, such that today, female comics artists dominate

the Swedish comics scene, and feminist comics artists in particular have made a significant impact.

Joanna Rubin Dranger

Born in 1970, Joanna Rubin Dranger has worked in the field of storytelling, representing her thoughts in many ways – through political cartoons, graphic novels, picture books for children, verbal text, and film. During and after her time at the art school *Konstfack* [University College of Arts, Crafts, and Design] in Stockholm from 1992 to 1995, she published cartoons and sequential graphic stories in daily newspapers, such as feminist editorial cartoons for *Aftonbladet* and illustrations in magazines such as *Bang*. In 2013, Rubin Dranger started publishing *Bildskolan* [The Picture School], a series of digital articles on visual communication, especially stereotypical images of minorities, published in the feminist web journal *Feministiskt perspektiv* [Feminist Perspective]. She is currently (in 2020) working on a graphic novel about the Holocaust.

The feminist superhero "Fittflickan"

In 1999, Rubin Dranger published the feminist comics *Fittflickan* [Cunt Girl], a comic series in four episodes, commissioned by *Aftonbladet* for their special section *Kvinna* [Woman]. This was the year when the feminist anthology *Fittstim* was published in Sweden, and Rubin Dranger's comics were part of the feminist discussions in the press at the time. *Fittflickan* is a humouristic feminist superhero story, referring to the conventions of the transnational phenomenon of supermen and superwomen. It is about a girl who gets superpowers from a botched attempt in a clinic to remove her "embarrassing hair," growing in the "wrong places" on her body. When she gets angry at some misogynistic behaviour, her cunt reacts with a boom. All of a sudden, she becomes very strong, is dressed like a superhero with a mask and a cap, and can fly, all according to superhero conventions (Coogan 2009, pp. 77–79).

In the first story in the series of four (Figure 2.1), the protagonist is walking around in the city as an ordinary woman. She gets annoyed with some men in the street, because of their comments on her body and her sex; she gets angry, attacks them with pernicious *Fittflicka* spray, and defeats them. In the other three *Fittflicka*-comics, the reason for her attacks are situations where women have trouble making their voices heard, when female authors are excluded from literary lexica and prizes and from literary discussions among men, and finally in the fourth one, when women are not included at all in the cultural elitist circles. The men in the comics end up lying beaten on the floor, or chopped up by *Fittflickan*, who makes a sculpture of their body parts. The construction of the stories can be seen as a seemingly naïve

Figure 2.1 © Joanna Rubin Dranger, "Fittflickan," *Aftonbladet*, 1999, n.p.

and humorous way of dealing with important feminist issues. This can be compared to what Nicola Streeten writes about why feminists have used humour to deal with serious issues: "we have laughed through our tears of pain and anger" (Streeten 2020, p. viii). The Finno-Swedish theatre and gender scholar Tiina Rosenberg claims that humour works well for agitation, since it is disarming and communicative, and makes the audience feel included instead of accused (Rosenberg 2012, p. 79). The comics series *Fittflickan* was commissioned by the widely read evening paper *Aftonbladet*, at a time when "the third wave" of feminism was sweeping over the country, and it was a form of agitation with humour.

The use of the word "*fitta*" [cunt], generally regarded as vulgar and most often used in a misogynistic context, appeared in other comics also at the end of the 20th century. One example is of Julie Doucet who used the corresponding word *plotte* (French for "cunt") in her comics *Dirty Plotte*, self-published in fanzines from 1988 to 1991, and then in a comic book series published in *Drawn and Quarterly* from 1991 to 1998. The use of this word can be seen as a protest against idealised versions of femininity, and as a critique against patriarchal attempts to control and restrict the female body (Køhlert 2019, pp. 26–27). The comic *Fittflickan* is drawn with smooth and playful white lines and spaces on a black background, creating sharp contrasts between black and white. The images in the panels, separated by white gutters, are reminiscent of political graphic art from the early 20th century, for instance by Frans Masareel. Regarding the protagonist, there is also a visual intertextuality to another cultural sphere, the work of the Finnish artist, author, and comics artist Tove Jansson's Moomin-world character, Little My. She is the angry girl who always manages to fix all problems in a fair way, and who is present in almost all Moomin books, beginning with *Muminpappans bravader* (1950) [*The Exploits of Moominpappa*, 1952]. *Fittflickan* has her hair arranged in a similar way as Little My, with a tuft on the top of the head, which in Sweden has become a symbol for bold girls with integrity who do not accept being treated badly.

Miss Remarkable & Her Career

The protagonist in Joanna Rubin Dranger's graphic novel *Fröken Märkvärdig & karriären* (2001), [*Miss Remarkable & Her Career*, 2003], also resembles Little My, but with two hair tufts. This book was Rubin Dranger's second graphic novel, after *Fröken Livrädd & kärleken*, (1999) [*Miss Scaredy-Cat & Love*].

Fröken Märkvärdig & karriären was translated and published in Norwegian in 2001, in English and Finnish in 2003, in Japanese in 2004, in Danish in 2007, and was made into a film, in Swedish with subtitles in English or French, in 2010 (Rubin Dranger 2008, pp. 133–134; Strömberg 2011, pp. 55–57). In 2011, when Rubin Dranger was asked how *Miss Remarkable & Her Career* was received in countries other than Sweden,

she mentioned all the translations, and also that the book was made into a film that received four different international awards. She also found it noteworthy that men aged 35–50, included in the juries for different film awards, were overwhelmingly positive about the film and said that they could identify with Miss Remarkable (Strömberg 2011, p. 57). *Miss Remarkable & Her Career* tells a story about a female protagonist, who as a little girl is told by her father that one has to be the best in one's field, among the top ten in the world, or one is just nobody. She is very proud of her achievement when she gets accepted at a prestigious art school. However, she soon finds the demanding, elitist, and individualistic attitudes of the teachers counterproductive. She gets performance anxiety, breaks down, and drops out of school. Instead, *Miss Remarkable* tries to work as a designer. She joins a shared office, where the others all work individually, isolated from each other, and with no cooperation at all. *Miss Remarkable* gets depressed and leaves that work, too.

One day, the protagonist (Miss Remarkable) and a female friend are sitting in a bar (Figure 2.2). Miss Remarkable, having lost her self-esteem after not being able to achieve what was expected of her, has a desperate look on her

Figure 2.2 © Joanna Rubin Dranger, *Miss Remarkable & Her Career*, Penguin Books, 2003, n.p.

face and a cloud of anxiety and depression hovering around her, an indexical sign that Rubin Dranger often uses in this book. Miss Remarkable has just told her friend: "But I just keep going, and I get nowhere." Her friend replies that it is because of her friend not marketing herself enough: "These are girl power times." She shows V-signs of victory with her fingers and does not seem to understand the miserable state in which her friend is engulfed. In turn, the protagonist replies that it is really tough for her because a monster, standing behind her back, keeps attacking her all the time. When Miss Remarkable points to the drawn monster, then even her friend can see it, and gets scared: "Oh that's an ugly one." This is a way of communicating that the friend finally understands the protagonist's situation. However, this is not explained by any narrator, but a conclusion that the reader him/herself can draw from image and text. There is no narrator present in the book; the story is monstrative rather than narrative (to use a concept from film studies). This means that events are performed by the characters themselves, in a situation in which the story seems to narrate itself (cf. Baetens 2001, p. 148).

The word "girl power" refers to the "empowered girl" cultures that evolved in the 1990s. The term was coined by the Riot Grrrl in the US, and widely spread by the British pop group Spice girls (Streeten 2020, p. 160). In Sweden, too, girls demanded access to spaces and positions without denying their femininity. In this scene however, Miss Remarkable does not have enough energy to successfully claim any power or position. The circumstances are not in her favour, and her weak attempt to raise her arms and her spirits results in her saying the word "Girl-power?" followed by a question mark.

The dark monster, which can be seen as an index of the protagonist's angst and depression, resembles another Moomin world character, Mårran. This monster appears in several of Jansson's picture books for children, for instance in *Vem ska trösta Knyttet?* (1960) [*Who will comfort Toffle?*, 1960]. Mårran is a scary creature: big, dark, and quietly spreading a cold feeling of angst. The visual style in *Miss Remarkable & Her Career* is quite similar to the one in *Fittflickan*, just a bit more nervous sometimes. Objects and characters of all kinds are given forms that indicate the protagonist's feelings visually instead of the author telling them verbally. Some examples are skyscrapers bending as if they are trying to chase Miss Remarkable out of the community, a patterned city square resembling the teeth of a monstrous mouth that tries to bite and swallow her, a telephone lead that tries to strangle her, etc. Black spaces are used for symbolising darkness and depression, and often the protagonist is more or less covered in black, while the story ends happily in white, indicating the bright daylight surrounding the protagonist after her having buried all her great expectations.

The mirror is a recurrent motif in *Miss Remarkable & Her Career*. It appeared already in *Fittflickan*, where the protagonist says a cheerful "Hi Beauty" to a happy face in a mirror that she passes on her way out. In

Miss Remarkable & Her Career, the mirrors reflect the protagonist in several different ways. The first mirror occurs right after the protagonist has decided to quit the art school. She is shown taking a shower in the bathroom, her thin body covered with plasters that are keeping her together, and her face dominated by staring eyes and a stiff, forced smile. In the mirror behind her, the black monster, the symbol of her angst and depression, shown with two sad eyes and no mouth, is staring at her. In all four corners of the page, there are speech balloons with negative expressions: "Dropout," "What's wrong with you anyway?," "Loser," and "Good for nothing," each conveying the self-contempt that creates her angst and depression. The next time a mirror appears is in the next chapter, with the ironic title "Now everything's all right." Here, the protagonist, big and strong and stretching her mouth into a big smile, is looking at herself in the mirror. The mirror shows a tiny little version of the protagonist, with a sad face hugging a teddy bear, and saying, in a black speech balloon: "What if one's not able?" What is shown in the mirrors can, by applying the psychologist Charles Horton Coley's concept of "the looking-glass self" be interpreted as the image that the author–artist wants to project as to how the protagonist interprets and internalises the way people around her see and judge her. The concept of "the looking-glass self" states that a person's self grows out of society's interpersonal interactions and the perceptions of others (Rousseau 2002). Here, the looking-glass image shows the protagonist's fear and feeling of being judged as a failure or as simply not good enough. In the next mirror scene appearing on the next page itself, the protagonist in front of the mirror takes on the role of her own judges, and shouts to the mirror image, to her looking-glass self: "I don't give a damn! I'm sick of you and your feelings! I've had enough of this childish stuff!" This shows the ambivalent attitude to herself, which can be compared to a scene in the comic *Cancer Vixen*, by Marisa Acocella Marchetto, where the protagonist smashes the mirror in front of her because she's angry with her former self (El Refaie 2012, p. 67). In *Miss Remarkable & Her Career*, there are several similar mirror scenes, the most interesting of which is the last one, which shows no reflection at all in the mirror. The protagonist has decided not to listen to the external demands but instead choose what she, herself, wants to be and do. She has buried all the great expectations, and on the last page she is standing by an open window, looking at the city with a big smile in the bright sunshine.

In an earlier section of *Miss Remarkable & Her Career*, there is an important and humorous panel that reveals the critique against the multitude of expectations directed at women, including having perfect physical bodies and being pretty, successful, and famous, (Figure 2.3). In this image, the protagonist has not yet understood that she must shrug off all the expectations laid upon her. Here, she is out in a city street, just about to turn around a corner. She is troubled, with a dark cloud of angst hovering around her, and a white text in the cloud shows that she thinks that her discontent with herself must be based on some childhood repression. However, the comics

Figure 2.3 © Joanna Rubin Dranger, *Miss Remarkable & Her Career*, Penguin Books, 2003, n.p.

author–artist shows that the problem rather lies in the commercial messages and other kinds of communications directed at women. On the wall above her, there is a large poster advising, "Stay light," and the placards in the magazine shop window that she will soon pass, scream "Slim in 10 days," "Strong & Pretty," "10 steps to better self-esteem," "Success," and "Reach your goals." This is a revealing summary of what this graphic novel is about: demands and expectations on young women regarding achievement and bodily ideals, and how one perceives oneself and is perceived by others. The story ends with the protagonist's revolt against these demands by burying the great expectations. The graphic novel thematises, in humorous as well as serious ways, how important it is to see the patriarchal structures and revolt against them instead of internalising them.

Åsa Grennvall (Åsa Schagerström)

Åsa Grennvall (now Åsa Schagerström) was born in Gränna in Sweden in 1973. She studied arts and textiles at Öland Folk High School and at *Konstfack* in Stockholm from 1997 to 2002, where she received her degree.

Grennvall began her early career by self-publishing fanzines and comics in magazines and newspapers at the turn of the millennium. Her album debut was *Det känns som hundra år* [It Feels Like a Hundred Years] (1999d), and the latest one is her 11th album *Urmodern* [The Great Mother] (2019). Grennvall has received prizes for the albums (The Swedish Comics Association's annual award *Urhunden*, in 2002 and 2017), as well as very good reviews, and some of the albums have been translated into several languages, such as English, French, and Korean. She is also represented in the Swedish anthology *From the Shadow of the Northern Lights* (2008) and the sequel *From the Shadow of the Northern Lights*, Vol. 2 (2010), representing various Swedish cartoonists.

Grennvall's early works are, in many aspects, part of a tradition of women's comics related to the underground comics movements in North America and Sweden. As Fredrik Byrn Køhlert (2019, p. 24) has remarked, "the cartoonists associated with the underground approached the anodyne cultural form of comics with intentions of subverting it through taboo-breaking and often personal content." Often the taboo-breaking topics were connected to the female body, sexualities, and childhood, and many comics by women in the US have been life narratives (Chute 2010). Today, Grennvall (Schagerström) is also one of several Swedish comics artists who have developed the autobiographical/autofictional genre by drawing graphic novels that thematise childhood, parenthood, vulnerability, alienation, body, and sexuality (Ernst 2017, pp. 79–85).

In the comics of Grennvall featured in this chapter, the humour is not as sustained as in the comics of Rubin Dranger, even if there are strains of black humour and irony; instead, there are sharp visualisations of aspects of the patriarchy in which women just like herself are living. There is violence in close relations, betrayal by the mother, loneliness, and alienation. These themes can be seen as a red thread from the first comic album in a more punk style, to the latest album *Urmodern*, consisting of 78 embroidered images, which is a form of art that Grennvall has worked with earlier (Skugge 2002). The motifs in *Urmodern* revolve around breakups, uprooting, and loneliness, but also a new beginning and a will to move ahead. Prior to the release of *Urmodern*, the artist exhibited embroideries at *Handarbetets vänner* [a gallery of the Friends of Handicraft] in Stockholm (3 December 2019–21 January 2020). In connection to publishing *Urmodern*, she switched her family name to Schagerström, an exchange that can be interpreted as a breaking point and a wish to move on with new forms.

Fanzines

At the turn of the century, and during her years at art school in Stockholm, Grennvall made several fanzines, namely *Sex 1* (1998), *Sex 2* (1999a), *Sex 3* (1999b), and *Mitt största skryt* [My Biggest Boast] (1999). All these were published as editions of 50 copies. The fanzine *En snäll kille* [A Nice Guy] (1999) was published in an anthology with comics, *Allt för konsten* [All

for the Art] (2000). Looking back at the time of producing these fanzines, Grennvall remarked during an interview:

> Well, I did these fanzines some years ago because I was "pissed off" and wanted to get it out with my best cure: so-called black humour. I was drawing them for my friends at art school, yeah. As a funny thing. I did not see them as art, or as comics. I did not even know that I made fanzines!.
>
> (Strömberg 2002, our translation)

In those times, comics were not treated as they are treated today in Sweden: "Comics were not seen as art when I was at art school," Grennvall states in a later interview (Ståhl 2014). Yet, her examination project at the art school in Stockholm consisted of a comics album, *Sjunde våningen* [The Seventh Floor] (2002).

The fanzines of Grennvall cannot be described in detail, because it is difficult to get hold of the material. For this chapter, we have images from the fanzines *Sex 2* (1999a) and *Sex 3* (1999b), which are reprinted in the book *Fanzine-Index 2002*, the images from the fanzines which are reprinted in the interview with Grennvall in *Bild & Bubbla*, a magazine for comics and comics research in Sweden (Strömberg 2002) and the entire fanzine *Sex 3*.[2] The fanzine *Sex 3* consists of 16 pages of comics, typewritten text, and collage. The fanzine is interesting because it comments on the feminist debate in Sweden at the time when the anthology *Fittstim* was being discussed. The introductory text, *Jag är ledsen* [I am sad], addresses critique against societal attitudes towards feminists and pinpoints the sorrow of the situation. The narrator explains:

> [...] misinterpretations about us "new feminists" (the box in which I seem to have been placed […] hmmm), that we are young, tough, cool chicks with a strong attitude, "elbowing ourselves forward" and "refusing to let anybody sit down on us." But inside I think we all are, at least me, mostly sad. I am sad, frustrated and feeling powerless."
>
> (Grennvall 1999, n.p.)

The sorrow Grennvall expresses is combined with anger, when she describes the situation in the world at that time with events such as the rapes of women in Kosovo, and the fact that, according to her, nobody seemed to care. In the fanzine, there is also a tangible ironic tone, such as in her response to the critique she received after her earlier fanzines, for which the protagonist faced severe criticism from some young men who felt insulted because they thought the word "rapist" was used to brand them all. The narrator explains in a humorous way in the fanzine: "My proposal is that you guys identify with the other sex, it is not difficult at all. Not dangerous either" (Grennvall 1999b).

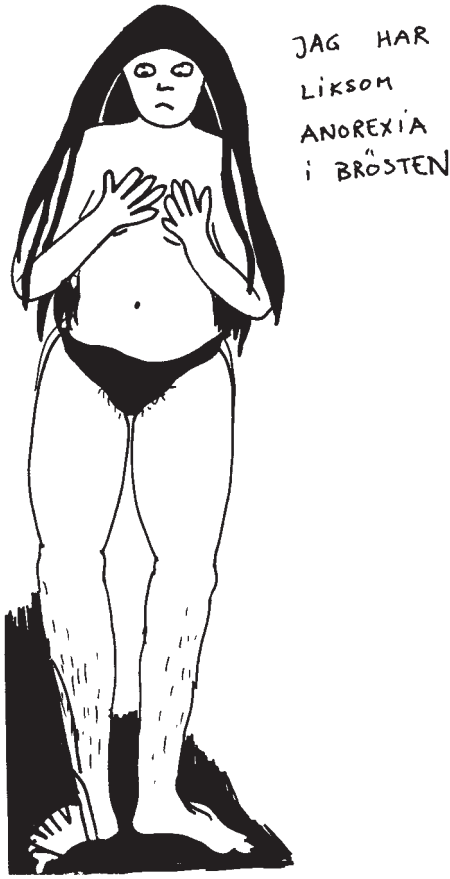

Figure 2.4 © Åsa Grennvall, *Sex 3*, self-published fanzine, 1999, n.p.

In another text in the fanzine *Sex 3*, she is ironic about feminist groups being regarded as "without humour"; in one image, there is a woman with long black hair, much hair on her legs, and visible pubic hair escaping from the edges of her bikini underwear (Figure 2.4). The image has striking similarities with the cover of *Fittstim*, and it can be seen as a supporting comment to the anthology as well as the ongoing debate about the obsession with images of breasts in various men's magazines. The text reads: "I've got, like, anorexia in my breasts." The themes of the body of women, vulnerability, and violence, as well as the melancholy, irony, and anger, and the black-and-white sharp drawing style, which is further developed later on, are there in the fanzine *Sex 3*. The woman in the image reminds one of the goth style, as also punk aesthetics with roots in the 1970s and 1980s, because of the richness of black, the straggling style, and the sharp contour lines. This style

was also used by the Swedish author Mare Kandre (1962–2005) in her 34-page punk comic "The Roxy" from 1979, which was printed for the first time after her demise in 2016. The comic portrays the young punk man, Adolph, and his everyday life in London, visiting the rock club Roxy in Covent Garden with his friends. Additional themes include threatening situations with skinheads, asserting independence from one's parents, heterosexual love, and violence. A similar punk style with the attendant alienation and violence is strongly present in the debut comic album of Grennvall, *Det känns som hundra år* (1999d), the sequel *Mie* (2000), and *Sjunde våningen* (2002).

Violence against women

Comics are "a super medium for telling about troublesome things," Åsa Grennvall stated in an interview in 2002 in the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (Ramqvist 2002, our translation). The comment was made after the publication of her third comics album *Sjunde våningen*. The album describes a young woman who gets beaten by her boyfriend but manages to leave him in time. From her debut in 1999 with the album *Det känns som hundra år*, the comics of Grennvall express pointed political critique of patriarchal structures with themes such as sexual harassment against women, violence in close relationships, sexuality, angst, and poor relationships with one's mother. In *Det känns som hundra år*, the daughter's revolt and the mother's betrayal are distinct. When the young woman, a Kafka reader dressed in black goth style, is searching for comfort because of difficulties in school, her mother answers coldly: "Yes, but you just need to shape up!" Instead of being the supportive adult, she puts all the blame on the daughter, whom she considers cruel, egoistic, and abrasive. The daughter is seen writing in her diary dated 7 October 1991, that she cannot manage any longer, and soon after she discovers that her mother has read the diary. This reminds one of Debbie Drechsler's comics album *Daddy's Girl* (1996), which was translated into Swedish in 1999 and whose comics Grennvall has said that she has read. The similarity emerges in a short comic, "Dear diary," where the mother of the protagonist has secretly read the private diary of her daughter. The black-and-white drawing style of Grennvall differs from that of Drechsler, who uses hatchings instead of the flat black surfaces and thin lines that Grennvall prefers, but the betrayal of the mother and the intensity of the anger in the comics are the same.

The theme of assaults which is strongly present in *Daddy's Girl* is also present in the comic album of Grennvall, albeit in a different way. The chapter "*Snutjäveln*" [Bloody Copper], is a 12-page black-and-white comic first published in *Galago* (1999c), a magazine for alternative comics. The assault in this case is committed by a policeman, a friend of the family, at a home party. Once again, the parents betray the daughter by denying the event, and the deceit is inexorable when the mother gets divorced and

moves in with the perpetrator. The strong feelings of anger are visualised, as is common in Grennvall's work, in an expressionistic way with a quickly drawn face in a naïve style, made by straggling thin, shaky, brush strokes. The girl is screaming (in a rather large speech balloon): "Fuck, you make me sick you disgusting fucking whore mother! How can you treat me like this, you disgusting whore! You make me sick!" The comic elaborates with strong emotions, and the pitch-black glossy cover effectively shows six versions of the protagonist, Åsa, in different ages, visually showing how she changes from being a happy girl in red, to the punk teenager in black, to a sad goth girl.

The images of the protagonist in the comics album change according to the time. In the next album, the protagonist is visually given more of the goth style (Fyhr 2003, p. 451). Also, the second album, *Mie*, elaborated the theme with different identities and sorrows shown on the black cover, the pitch-black pages between the chapters, and the black ink in the panels which together strengthen the tones of melancholia and sadness. The story, from around the turn of the millennium in 2000 and about a young woman pursuing education at an art school in Stockholm, could be connected to Grennvall's own life. But as Køhlert recently has pointed out, "the visual-verbal comics form [lacks] the ability to abstract subjectivity into a universal signifier" (Køhlert 2019, p. 11). In the literary autobiography, the narrated-I can easily mask herself in verbal abstraction, which is more difficult in comics with these kinds of realistic images. Grennvall solves this dilemma in the album by using the name "Mie," which can be read as "Me," designating a first-person speaker, and by drawings connecting the two women in the story. Mie, the angry punk girl who is kicking the wall with her foot, saying, "I hate all people who are not feminists! I get so piss…ed… oops!!" is extroverted and outspoken, while Åsa, the goth girl, turns her angst inwards. The two girls represent different parts of the protagonist herself, which is also shown on the cover, where the two girls are visualised together as Siamese twins (Figure 2.5). In the last speech bubble, Mie says: "You know that I do not exist in reality?" and Åsa replies: "Yes, but it does not matter. You exist for me." In an interview, Grennvall has argued that the comic should be read just as fiction: "I am not Mie, but I am neither the girl with the long hair in the comic" (Strömberg 2002).

In the comic album *Sjunde våningen*, a woman in black is standing looking sadly out of a window of a flat somewhere. The taboo-breaking motif of violence against women in this story is narrated in a more calm style, and the punk aesthetic is less prominent than in *Mie*. The album immediately became a success and was translated into Finnish in 2003, English in 2012,[3] French in 2013, Italian in 2014, and Korean in 2014. The comic, which is realistically drawn, tells the emotionally strong story of Åsa, the female protagonist, who is falling in love with a young man. However, he starts to control Åsa and assaults her both mentally and physically. The story includes

Figure 2.5 © Åsa Grennvall, *Mie*, Optimal Press, 2000, front cover

all the classical motifs of violence against women, such as shame, debt, and internalising the man's view, where the woman often "starts to see herself with his eyes" (Lundgren 2004, p. 29 in Enander 2008, p. 73). Subordination is also shown when Åsa tries to understand the man, and diminishes herself at the same time as the man expresses regret, yet continues his assaults. At the end of the story, the protagonist leaves the man, reconstructs her low

self-confidence, and gets the man condemned in court (a quite unusual outcome in the real world, but a happy ending in this story).

Research about violence against women shows that the victim can be scared, confused, and hopeful at the same time (Enander 2008, p. 76). In this album, there are scenes showing all of these reactions. One example is a page with 3+3+2 panels (Figure 2.6). On this page, the narration is intensified bit by bit. It is the day "after the violence against the woman" and the woman is showing the bruises on her arm, optimistic that the boyfriend, realising the wrong he committed the previous night, will apologise for his actions. Instead, her attempt triggers more violence in the man, who soon shouts, "Why are you reminding me of this?" The anger in his words transforms into violence again, and he catches the woman by the neck as if strangling her and screams, "Bloody stupid! Why are you doing this?" He thereby passes on his guilt for the violence inflicted on the woman. During these acts of violence, the man's eye is shown growing larger and larger, drawn from the side and showing the pupils also getting darker, which often symbolises evilness. The eyes of the woman are drawn in a round, white form, with pupils small as dots; she looks astonished and scared. During the worst sequence of the physical assault, the woman's eyes are pinched and drawn like small lines. Her face is zoomed in upon, and there are no sounds, no speech bubbles, no text. There is just pain at that moment, eliciting a striking and intense effect. Like most of the cases of violence against women, it is a question of both physical and mental assault. The man's desire for power is shown in the comic through an increased demand for control and by his practices of isolating the protagonist from her friends, saying terrible things, and trying to destroy her self-confidence. In this kind of situation, the woman needs strength and courage to leave such a destructive relationship, and the protagonist in the comics is able to do this. The Swedish scholar Viveka Enander discusses methods for empowering battered women in her dissertation, *Women Leaving Violent Men* (2008), one of which is reclaiming power through artwork and sharing the experiences in group form. That Grennvall's comics can have this function was recognised in a newspaper report published in 2005, featuring the headline, "Åsa gör serier som terapi" ("Åsa makes comics as therapy"). In the accompanying interview, Grennvall did not say those exact words, but she did admit that she used to start making a comic when she felt depressed, which made her feel much better. She also mentioned receiving many emails from readers who recognised experiences from her albums relating to their own lives, and she was happy to be able to comfort people with her comics, and that her comics created new ways of thinking among the readers (Boda 2005).

Hope is an important motif in the comics album *Sjunde våningen*, but it also shows how the fear caused by her traumatic experiences are internalised in the protagonist's body and mind for a long time. The last image in the album, covering a full page, shows the woman standing alone in a street. Centred in the image, she is walking forward, upwards, on a white road,

Figure 2.6 © Åsa Grennvall, *Sjunde våningen*, Optimal Press, 2002

which at the same time looks like a spotlight illumination of the scene. The rest of the environment is totally black. The woman is following the white road, symbolically walking up a hill, but she is also turning her head around to see if she is being followed, and among the other nine people around her in the street, all but one have the physical appearance of the man who used to beat her. His face is superimposed on bodies of different ages, from babies to grown-ups. The protagonist's eyes are emphasised by double lines, which gives her a rather desperate appearance. The caption on top of the image reads, "But some days I still see him everywhere." In her comics, Grennvall's practices of visualising and narrating violence against women introduced new and unique ways of tackling the problem from a feminist approach.

Conclusion

The turn of the millennium was an important time in Sweden for feminism gaining prominence in political debate, in the media, in academic circles, and in comics. Comics artists Joanna Rubin Dranger and Åsa Grennvall published their first printed albums in 1999; at the time, both of them had already published some comics and cartoons in daily newspapers, in magazines, and in the case of Grennvall, in fanzines. Both artists are part of the transnational wave of life narratives in North America, France, Germany, and the Nordic countries, and both artists' comics have been translated into several languages.

This chapter has argued that the comics made by Rubin Dranger and Grennvall constitute an important art form discussing crucial political and feminist issues of the time. They strongly criticise the physical demands on women's bodies, high expectations on individual achievement in an increasingly demanding working life (Rubin Dranger), and violence against women (Grennvall). The comics also thematise betrayals and alienations, and problems associated with being a young woman in a society ruled by men.

When the media feminists published the anthology *Fittstim* in 1999, they reclaimed the word "cunt," which Rubin Dranger did as well with her *Fittflickan*-comics the same year. The strategy of linguistically and visually reclaiming women's bodies was a counterstrike against the commercial and stereotypical ideal. The comics also claimed space and attention for women in public life as well as freedom from patriarchal violence. Some of these aspects had been communicated before in Swedish feminist comics and cartoons of the 1970s and 1980s, but were now dealt with using much stronger expressions. Rubin Dranger's comics and cartoons are more explicitly political, and her visual and verbal critique against the increasing commercial exploitation of women's bodies is more outspoken, albeit often ironic and humorous.

Grennvall's comics about violence against women and the strong revolt against the mother can be seen as feminist acts, where the personal becomes political. This brand of comics was not seen in Sweden before. The narration

brings the violence against women very close to the reader, and the expressionist drawings in pitch black and white effectively convey the fear and suffering of the protagonist. The punk aesthetics, which are strongly present in the first two comic albums, transform more into goth style in *Sjunde våningen*. Grennvall was one of the first comics artists in Sweden to use both punk and goth aesthetics in comics.

Everything is not totally black in these comics, however. There are passages of (black) humour in the work of both Grennvall and Rubin Dranger. It is more frequent in Rubin Dranger's comics, for instance in *Fittflickan*, the humorous superhero story about the cunt girl, chopping up men in the cultural elite who refuse to see and recognise the creativity of women. In *Miss Remarkable & Her Career*, there are passages of empathic humour where the female protagonist is fighting against the pressure from society to be a pleasant woman, without realising the obvious source of the demands that she has internalised. In the comics by Grennvall, there are aspects of humour such as in *Mie*, her second album, where the protagonist is making fun of herself as a feminist and as a goth. As Nicola Streeten has demonstrated, humour is an important strategy in British feminist comics and cartoons during this period, and probably more than in the comics from North America. Humour has been an important aspect in Swedish feminist comics, too.

Representing a younger generation, Rubin Dranger's and Grennvall's comics from the turn of the millennium contributed to an increase in young people's interest in comics as well as in feminism. During the decades to come, these trends would turn out to expand significantly in Sweden.

Notes

1 Throughout this chapter, we use the surname Grennvall, which was the artist's name at the time of publication of the comics featured in this chapter. As of the 2020 publication of her album *Urmodern*, the artist uses the surname Schagerström.
2 Many thanks to Fredrik Strömberg for sending us photos of the fanzine *Sex 3* (15 March 2020).
3 The English translation can be read free online, available at the link as given below: https://electrocomics.de/pdfs/electrocomics_seventhfloor.pdf

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3 A woman's place (in the panel)

Positioning and framing in comics by Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg

Kristy Beers Fägersten

Introduction

This chapter presents analyses of a selection of comics by Swedish artists Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg. Two comics by each artist comprise the focus, all of which have in common the single-panel format, shown below in Figures 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4.

Each of the comics features two characters in interaction. In Figures 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4, the figures appear in full-body form; Figure 3.1 features 3/4-body depictions. The characters are consistently positioned opposite each other, in face-to-face conversation. In Figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, the interlocutors are one man and one woman; Figure 3.4 features two women. Each comic includes two or three speech balloons corresponding to conversational turns. According to western comics reading convention, the conversation flows from top to bottom, left to right, with the character to the left in the panel initiating the conversation, while the character to the right responds. The comics thus further have in common the depiction of what are known as adjacency pairs, that is, instances of two-part, conversational turn-taking in which the utterance of one interlocutor conventionally requires another interlocutor to respond in a particular fashion (Schegloff 1968; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974; Goffman 1976). Examples of general adjacency pairs include greetings ("Hello!" – "Hi!"), questions and answers ("Do you have the time?" – "Yes, it's 12:30."), expressions of gratitude and acknowledgement ("Thank you so much!" – "No problem!"), among others. The comics addressed in this chapter include adjacency pairs in the form of speech acts (Austin 1962), whereby the speaker comments on the (female) addressee's appearance. Speech acts are so named to reflect the fact that in speaking, we both act and bring about action. Speech acts thus have both illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect, the former referring to what we do in speaking, and the latter referring to what our speaking brings about. For example, in saying, "You look nice/awful," a speaker compliments/insults an addressee (the illocutionary force of the utterance) and perhaps makes the addressee happy/embarrassed (the perlocutionary effect). Conventionally, such explicit evaluations of another require an

Figure 3.1 © Nina Hemmingsson, *Mina vackra ögon*, Kartago, 2004, p. 115

Figure 3.2 © Nina Hemmingsson, *Jag är din flickvän nu*, Kartago, 2006, p. 22

Figure 3.3 © Lotta Sjöberg, *Det kan alltid bli värre*, Galago, 2014, p. 43

Figure 3.4 © Lotta Sjöberg, *Det kan alltid bli värre*, Galago, 2014, p. 157

acknowledging response, whereby the perlocutionary effect of the utterance may be revealed. Responses can be in the form of expressions of gratitude (e.g., "You're so kind!"), deflection ("Oh, please! I look a mess."), or explanation ("I haven't been feeling well."), which may or may not reflect the true

perlocutionary effect. The aim of this chapter is to explore how each of the comics deploys different aspects of comic art as a visual medium to expose the relationship between illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect, and to highlight the nature of these verbal adjacency pairs as gender-biased, that is, as specifically orienting to the addressee's (female) gender and her associated linguistic obligations. To this end, theories of positioning and framing are applied, in an effort to explicate how image and text work in tandem to represent how a woman's literal place in the panel reflects her figurative place in social interaction. Positioning theory thereby recalls Robin Lakoff's (1973) seminal work on language and a woman's place, illustrating how the persistence with which language use conforms to gender norms suggests the continued relevance of the concept of "a woman's place." Such gender norms are made particularly salient in the second part of the featured adjacency pairs, wherein the perlocutionary effect of the speech act is revealed, as the addressee either capitulates to the norm despite contradictory impulses or subverts the norm via unconventional responses, creating a social incongruity that is conducive to humorous, satirical interpretation. The comics thus first engage the readers with depictions of social behaviour widely recognisable for its linguistic conventionality, before having them confront the gender inequity on which such convention is founded.

The chapter is organised according to the following structure: In the next section, the Swedish comics artists Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg are introduced, with a special focus on their single-panel comics. The single-panel format is then discussed in relation to its transnational characteristics and inclusion vs. exclusion in definitions of comics. This is followed by an outline of the theories of positioning and framing with regards to conversation, as well as their applicability to the analysis of comic art. The selected comics are then analysed, including an exploration of how humour, as a function of incongruity, is borne out of feminist resistance to (attempts at) positioning. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the featured comics are particularly suited to exploring how visual positioning and framing can align or conflict with textual positioning and framing to make gender roles salient. Such analyses can reveal how discourse as resistance effects a renegotiation of "a woman's place" and associated expectations of being linguistically, socially, and morally compliant.

Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg

The meteoric rise and dominance of feminist comic art in Sweden is generally said to have been initiated by the publication of Liv Strömquist's *Hundra procent fett* [One Hundred Percent Fat] in 2005. Before this, however, Strömquist's contemporary, Nina Hemmingsson (born in 1971), had studied at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art (Norway) and had been publishing comics in several Swedish national and regional newspapers. Together with comics artist Sara Olausson, Hemmingsson released a collection of comics,

Hjälp! [Help!], in 2004. Since this debut, Hemmingsson has played a central role in making political, satirical, and feminist comic art mainstream in Sweden, and she has forged a distinct, creative path that has helped usher in the pronounced feminist wave in Swedish comics[1]. Hemmingsson's publications include several co-authored titles and a book of poetry, but as a cartoonist, she is best known for her collections: *Jag är din flickvän nu* (2006) [I'm Your Girlfriend Now], *Så jävla normal* (2009) [So Fucking Normal], *Mina vackra ögon* (2011) [My Beautiful Eyes], *Det är svårt att vara Elvis i Uppsala* (2012) [It's Tough to be Elvis in Uppsala]; *Snyggast på festen* (2014) [Prettiest at the Party], *På A svarar jag hej då* (2017) [To "A" I Say Good-Bye], *Livet, ditt as* (2018) [Life, You Jerk], and V*ad glad du är som får titta på mig* (2020) [How Happy You Are to Get to Look at Me]. Hemmingsson produces short comics narratives, often in the form of single-panel comics. A recurring character in her comics is a stout, boxy female figure with ostensibly girlish features: black hair in a page-boy style, short dresses or coats, knee-high stockings, pearl necklaces. The character's most salient feature is her large, round, empty eyes, outlined in black and often dotted with eyelashes.

Lotta Sjöberg (born in 1974) is another of the many female comics artists whose work has contributed to the wave of feminist comic art that has dominated in Sweden since the mid-2000s. Sjöberg studied at the University of Arts, Crafts, and Design (Stockholm) before debuting with her first comic book, *Bebisbekännelser* [Baby Confessions], in 2005. This was followed by *Family living: Den ostädade sanningen* [Family Living: The Untidied Truth] in 2011, and her breakthrough collection, *Det kan alltid bli värre* [It Can Always Get Worse], in 2014. In addition to her own comic books, Sjöberg's artistic production includes illustration for educational and social activist resources. A familiar character in the single-panel comics of Lotta Sjöberg is a woman with close-cropped hair and facial features, such as under-eye bags, dark wrinkles, and flushed cheeks, that suggest worry and insecurity.

For this chapter, the choice to focus on both Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg is due to their shared and recurring practice of depicting a female character (vaguely recognisable as the artist herself, although the comics are not autobiographical) in single-panel comics. It is proposed that the single-panel format allows for the comics to provide a series of snapshots of the kind of interaction which these women, and by extension all women, regularly encounter. However, the inclusion of single-panel comics in comics scholarship is not entirely without controversy, nor are single-panel comics by women the transnational norm, as explored in the following sections.

The single-panel comic

Single-panel comics have been excluded, often deliberately, from definitions many theorists and practitioners have either proffered or embraced, such as Scott McCloud's (1993, p. 9) definition of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial

and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer," Will Eisner's (1985/2008, p. 2) definition of comics as "sequential art," and David Kunzle's (1973, p. 2) definition of comics as "a sequence of separate images." In contrast, both Aaron Meskin (2007) and Michelle Abate (2020) problematise sequentiality of image as essential to defining comics, citing precisely single-panel comics as counterevidence. Should one insist on sequentiality as a criterion, Meskin proposes that multiple instances of single-panel comics can, in effect, be regarded as forming a sequence (2007, p. 375). Abate argues that the notion of sequentiality must not be limited to an interpanel perspective; sequentiality is also intrapanel, existing even within panels (2020, p. 144). Sequentiality in single-panel comics is also alluded to by Jan Baetens and Charlotte Pylyser (2016, p. 303) since:

> even the reading of single-panel comics will never be instantaneous: one will have to decode the narrative layers of the drawing and take the time to read the accompanying caption, which cannot be discarded as a marginal aspect of the work.

In other words, the distinct processes of reading the image and reading the text (which also comprises an image) do not happen at once but rather in a sequence. McCloud (1993, pp. 95–97) acknowledges as much in his treatment of a single-panel example, depicting ten different characters, seven of whom take speaking turns. The speaking turns represent the passage of real time in the panel, while the left-to-right series of characters in action correspond to a sequence of images. That McCloud goes so far as to show how this single panel can be divided into multiple panels exposes the narrative potential and, by McCloud's own admission, confirms the single-panel comic as adhering to his own definition of comics – "All it needs is a few gutters thrown in to clarify the sequence" (McCloud 1993, p. 97). However, I have previously argued (Beers Fägersten 2019) for the existence of in-panel gutters, or "balloon gutters," which can be found in:

> [the] space between speech balloons that prompts a closure process by the reader. Balloon gutters may represent no more than the time required to switch speakers. However, they may also encourage a more involved closure process by the reader to determine what has happened between the turns.
>
> (p. 156)

The criterion of sequentiality can thus be fulfilled in single-panel comics which include the passage of time via conversational turns and the gutters between them, constituting what Abate (2020, p. 144) refers to as intrapanel sequentiality.

Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt (2005), however, further challenge the acknowledgement of single-panel cartoons as comics in claiming that, "In comics, the visual images are distinct, (paradigmatically side-by-side) and laid out in a way such that they could conceivably be seen all at once. Between each pictorial image is a perceptible space; we'll call this the gutter" (p. 423). The criterion of panel juxtaposition complete with the subsequent gutter(s) created echoes McCloud's treatment of sequentiality and would, again, seemingly exclude single-panel comics. With regards to the publication of single-panel comics in periodicals such as newspapers or magazines (such as those by Hemmingsson and Sjöberg), the frame of the comic sets it apart from the surrounding material. Much like the space between speech balloons that creates balloon gutters, the resulting juxtaposition of comic art and the co-published material also creates a space that, for all intents and purposes, functions as a gutter. Specifically, this space should be understood as a medium gutter which triggers a closure process in the reader, or "the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (McCloud 1993, p. 63), such that efforts are made to make sense both of the comic as a narrative medium distinct from the newspaper medium and of the content of the comic itself. Closure processes can be considered particularly crucial to the readings of single-panel comics, since this format requires the reader to access their own relevant background knowledge in order to process and interpret the content. In other words, the publication conventions together with the economy of the single-panel comic require its reader to recognise the comic as commentary on a familiar or recognisable state of events.

Single-panel comics do not exist without either co-text or context, and thus the juxtaposition of the single-panel comic and any co-published content should be acknowledged. This is implied in Elisabeth El Refaie's (2009, p. 176) perspective on the frame in the context of editorial cartoons which acts as an "implicit metacomment, signalling to the newspaper reader that it is to be viewed as part of the dramatic cartoon world, as opposed to the real world of serious news reports, commentaries and newspaper photographs." The single-panel comics of both Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg are often featured in or commissioned for Swedish national newspapers and popular magazines. To this extent, they are comparable to editorial cartoons, a format of comic art that has transnational recognisability (Samson and Huber 2007). Editorial cartoons, however, target and editorialise on current events, often using techniques of caricature to depict politicians or other political actors. In contrast, the single-panel comics of Hemmingsson and Sjöberg do not feature caricatures nor do they address political events that are located in a specific time frame. Instead, their single-panel comic art belongs to the genre of social commentary comics that Tim Benson (2018, n.p.) claims female cartoonists are drawn to, especially in the form of "gag, strip or social commentary cartoons." Indeed, in her analyses

of Nina Hemmingsson's comic art, Ylva Lindberg (2014, p. 85) acknowledges the single-panel format as essential to the artist's ability to comment on the greater, ongoing narrative regarding women and men both within the comic itself, and in the real world outside of the page it is printed on. In this way, the artist participates in the narrative, but remains untethered to it, instead alighting at intervals that serve both retrospective and forward-looking purposes (ibid). The single-panel format means the comics do not rely on a reader's familiarity with any particular story, but rather they invoke the greater, ongoing social narrative of gender roles and task their readers with accessing their own schemata prior to, during, and after engagement. The publication of Hemmingsson's and Sjöberg's single-panel comics in both national and regional periodicals means that they are not specifically directed towards a self-selected feminist readership, even if the social commentary delivered by the comics reveals a decidedly feminist perspective. The feminist theme, however, is all the more tangible in subsequent publication of the comics in album collections.

In this chapter, I argue that the single-panel format is particularly well-suited to commenting on the ongoing story of women and men (Lindberg 2014) by serving as snapshots of everyday life. The distinct framing of characters who are positioned face-to-face, in opposition to each other, highlights the interaction, making salient the conversational turns which comprise the narrative. Practices of visual positioning and framing thus direct a distinct focus on text in the form of conversational turns comprising adjacency pairs. These, in turn, manifest strategies of communicative positioning and framing, as presented in the next section.

Theories of positioning and framing

Theories of positioning and framing aim to help us make sense of interactions as taking place in different sorts of occasions, how these differences are signalled, and how we behave according to social conventions and moral commitments. A female perspective on these conventions and commitments is expressed in the comics of Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg, in which positions and frames are made particularly salient in the single-panel format. These comics can be interpreted as making overt use of visually conventional framing and positioning techniques, so as to effectively convey the ritualised framing and positioning that women encounter in their daily linguistic lives.

Positioning theory

The concepts of positions and positioning were introduced to the social sciences by Wendy Hollway (1984) in her analysis of relational work among heterosexual partners. Positioning theory was further developed in the fields of sociology, psychology, and social psychology in the work of

Luk van Langenhove and Rom Harré (1999), Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1999), and Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter (1993), respectively. Positioning theory concerns the various positions an individual can inhabit or align with, and which are operationalised in naturally occurring talk-in-interaction. In such conversational episodes, it is participant positioning that dictates interlocutor scripts and their subsequent interpretation. Conversation is thus a function of role-play or role imposition, but unlike the speaker/subject-focus of role performance as impression management in line with Erving Goffman (1959), positioning theory aims to account for how participants perceive both themselves and others in the conversational context. To this end, van Langenhove and Harre (1999) propose a "triad" to represent the structure of conversation as comprising positions, storylines, and speech acts. "Neither storylines nor positions are freely constructed; rather, they reflect already existing cultural narratives. Conversations have storylines, and the positions that people take within conversations are always linked to particular actions" (Kroløkke 2009, p. 765). Positions are fluid and subject to social actions deployed via speech acts, such that one interlocutor can verbally force another into a position they themselves would not have chosen to assume. Positioning theory thus highlights how cultural narratives supply conversational storylines which, in their turn, are linked to conversational positions as enacted via linguistic means (van Langenhove and Harre 1999, p. 17). Following Lindberg (2014), the specific cultural narrative invoked by the comics presented in this chapter is the ongoing story of women and men. Their analyses constitute the argument that this cultural narrative supplies familiar storylines, actions, and positions.

Framing theory

As a communication theory, framing "refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (Chong and Druckman 2007, p. 104). In other words, how any issue (e.g., social, political, religious) is framed (e.g., as serious, absurd, dangerous) will affect how it is received and accepted. According to the anthropological and sociological work of Gregory Bateson (1972/2006) and Goffman (1974), respectively, framing also refers to social and situational cues that define or frame an interaction. For example, formal language can indicate a serious frame; a wink can reframe the interaction as non-serious. In the Goffmanian sense of framing, a frame defines "what is going on in interaction, without which no utterance (or movement or gesture) could be interpreted" (Tannen and Wallat 1993, p. 59). Furthermore, frames are "structures of expectations" (Tannen 1993, p. 21) that are invoked by interlocutors to make sense of a communicative event, according to physical setting, type of speech event, tone of interaction, and participant presentation. Comic strips provide their own frames, both literally in terms of panels

and metacommunicatively in terms of an interactional frame. The literal, visual frame imposed upon the comic strip panel encompasses the depicted scene, confining the reader's attention to the contents and providing a pictorial snapshot which highlights the interactional and discursive framing cues. The communicative frame is manifest in the overall propositional content of the narrative (in other words, what the strip is about) and in the language used to instantiate the script.

The general concepts of positioning and framing are fundamental to comic art. For example, Eisner (1985/2008, p. 40) sees the panel as a "medium of control"; it is a frame "within which the narrative action unfolds." Panels as frames are "the controlling devices in sequential art."

> Functioning as a stage, the panel controls the viewpoint of the reader; the panel's outline becomes the perimeter of the reader's vision and establishes the perspective from which the site of the action is viewed. […] The reader's "position" is assumed or predetermined by the artist.
>
> (Eisner 2008, p. 90)

Applying communicative theories of positioning and framing to analyses of comics builds upon these concepts as they are known within comics scholarship, serving to highlight how textual and visual practices work in tandem in the medium of comic art. Positioning and framing are particularly relevant to analyses of the single-panel comics of Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg, who use the medium to question and comment on gender roles and social expectations, as explored in the next section.

Analysis

In this section, the theories of positioning and framing are applied to a selection of single-panel comics by Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg. The artists are first treated individually, before the section concludes with a discussion of the role of humour in their work as feminist comic art.

Nina Hemmingsson

In an interview in the newspaper *Göteborgs-Posten* in 2017,[2] Nina Hemmingsson made the following statement:

> In my drawing and writing, it is in the role of a woman that I notice things are expected of me that seem strange and that I don't feel comfortable with. To fulfil these expectations, to be part of the group, you have to sometimes play the part and posture. When you do that, you feel like there's an empty space between who you are and who you are expected to be – and that is what I fill with art.[3]

Hemmingsson's awareness of what is "expected" of her and, by extension, of others is reflected in her comic art, such as the single panels in Figures 3.1 and 3.2, translated below:

FIGURE 3.1
MAN: Oh you are so beautiful! You really shine like the sun!
WOMAN: Uh…Thanks.
CAPTION: Northern Europe's most compact darkness

FIGURE 3.2
MAN: May I say that you have very beautiful eyes?
WOMAN: No you may not but thank you for asking in advance, some uncultivated idiots would have just blurted it out, even in a totally inappropriate situation like this.
WOMAN: Now, where were we again?

The frame in these two comics is similar: a man and woman in conversation, with the man to the left and the woman to the right within the panel. The visual framing cues suggest casual and transactional interactions, respectively. In each example, the man is saliently oriented to the woman, gesturing or leaning towards her, further framing his turn as an overture, perhaps sexual in nature. Furthermore, in each example, the man initiates an adjacency pair by complimenting the woman's appearance, thus establishing the communicative frame via a speech act. In taking the first turn and issuing a compliment, the man positions both himself and the woman, asserting his own moral right to compliment the woman as well as the woman's position as morally bound to receive a compliment. This is what is known as first-order- or interactional positioning, referring to "the way persons locate themselves and others within an essentially moral space" (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, p. 20). In this adjacency pair, first-order positioning reflects the moral rights of men that align with the general storyline of the objectification of women.

In Figure 3.1, the woman responds to the first-order positioning with performative positioning (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, p. 21); in other words, she performs the position assigned to her, such that she, as expressed by Hemmingsson in the quote above, "plays the part." The compliment must be endured and appropriately responded to, even if it means suppressing her true "gut" feelings, as indicated by the caption. In Figure 3.2, however, the woman does not complete the adjacency pair according to linguistic convention or to the gendered storyline. Instead, she reflexively pushes back in her response, thus performing second order (or reflexive) positioning, in which first-order positioning is explicitly rejected and/or questioned (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, p. 20). Second-order positioning can thus be understood as an alternative to first-order positioning, each one representing the interlocutors' different perspectives. The woman in Figure 3.2 furthermore engages in

accountive positioning, which involves "talk about talk" (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, p. 21). In other words, the accountive positioning is accomplished via metacommunicative means, drawing attention both to the (attempt at) first-order positioning and the rejection thereof, that is, the second-order positioning in the form of accountive positioning.

Figures 3.1 and 3.2 highlight the kind of interactive positioning that women are subjected to, particularly by men. In Figure 3.1, first-order positioning is both asserted and accepted by virtue of the woman's performative positioning. In Figure 3.2, first-order positioning is asserted and rejected, whereby the woman invokes a second order via accountive positioning. The man's compliment in Figure 3.2 is revealed as more aggressive interactive positioning by virtue of the woman's convention–flouting response. This response is fantasy, examples of what women perhaps really think, but would not say, bound as they are by convention to succumb to the interactional positioning and to relinquish any agency. This comic both acknowledges and challenges such convention, establishing irony as a discursive strategy for opposing first-order positioning.

Lotta Sjöberg

Strategies of visual and textual framing and positioning can also be observed in the comics of Lotta Sjöberg, for example, in Figures 3.3 and 3.4, translated below.

FIGURE 3.3

MAN: Never heard of a bikini line, or what?

WOMAN: Ever heard of agony, anxiety, stomach ache, misery, darkness, dread, anguish, aversion, unease, fear?

FIGURE 3.4

WOMAN 1: What a smart blouse you have on today!

WOMAN 2: Really! But you weren't actually thinking that! You were actually quite shocked by how hideous this hag-blouse is and you wanted to be nice and so you lied right to my face…so damn obsessed with appearance!

The single-panel comic in Figure 3.3 is without an explicit visual frame to outline the panel. Instead, the tile floor provides an ersatz-frame, lending the interlocutors the appearance of game pieces on a chess board. The comic is furthermore interactionally framed as contentious by the man's *of*fensive (and of*fen*sive) conversational opener, "Never heard of a bikini line or what?" Figure 3.3 shows similarities with the conversational framing devices depicted in Nina Hemmingsson's comics, namely as those in which a man takes moral liberties to comment on a woman's appearance. In contrast to the men in Hemmingsson's comics, however, the man in Figure 3.3 critiques

instead of compliments the woman. As a conversational move terminated by a tag question ("or what?"), the turn invites – if not requires – a response, and thus the man both initiates an adjacency pair and engages in first-order positioning according to the established storyline of men and women.

In terms of visual positioning, the man, who is taller than the woman, is looking slightly down at her. His right arm is bent at the elbow, index finger pointing at the woman's mid-section, invading the space between them in an offensive (as opposed to defensive) move. Crucially, the man has his back turned to the reader. On the one hand, this position allows the reader to share the man's perspective, making them complicit in the man's confrontation of the woman. On the other hand, the positioning also allows the reader to align with the woman, such that, together, they are able to discern the full hypocrisy of the man who, himself, is conspicuously hairy.

The woman does not counter the man's insult with one of her own, but rather expounds upon it by listing other afflictions she suffers from that are even worse than visible pubic hair. The woman thus honours the conversational contract by completing the adjacency pair. However, by appropriating the man's conversational turn, "Never heard of…?," the woman engages in accountive positioning, meta-communicatively reframing the interaction to make explicit the perlocutionary effect, that is, the woman feeling, "agony, anxiety, stomach ache, misery, darkness, dread, anguish, aversion, unease, fear." Notably, the visualisation of this reaction as a dense, dark cloud over the woman's mid-section is similar to the visualisation in Figure 3.1, in which that woman's mid-section is also indicated as housing a "compact darkness." In these comics, the image and text collaborate to depict not just visual and interactional acts of positioning, but also their visceral effects (which can also be recognised in the comics of Johanna Rubin Dranger; see Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin in this volume).

The visual and interactional framing as well as the face-to-face positioning depicted in Figure 3.4 are, by now, familiar characteristics of the single-panel comics featured in this chapter. The significant difference in this comic, however, is the gender of the two interlocutors, who are both women. The woman on the left initiates the adjacency pair in the form of a compliment. In so doing, she interactionally positions the woman on the right, who must acknowledge the compliment, conventionally with an expression of agreement, gratitude, or downplay (Pomerantz 1978). While the second woman's response does complete the adjacency pair with something bordering on deflection, it is in no way a conventional reply. In this respect, the responses in Figures 3.2 and 3.4 are comparable. In Figure 3.4, the second woman also challenges her interlocutor's attempt at positioning. Notably, she reframes the interaction via reflexive positioning, whereby she is not at all the recipient of a compliment but rather the victim of a superficial, appearance-obsessed social convention. While this comic does not feature a man engaging in first-order positioning according to the storyline of men having the moral right to evaluate a woman's appearance, it does

suggest the insidiousness of the storyline across genders, such that a woman's appearance is subject to evaluation from both men and other women. The reaction of the second woman in Figure 3.4 reveals how this storyline can affect women, stoking their insecurities, leading them to question each other's motives, and taking out their frustrations and aggressions on each other.

Together, the featured comics show how acts of positioning correspond to expectations of women not only to look a certain way, but also to respond to and manage verbal evaluations of their appearance in a certain way as well. Such positioning can take a toll which, nevertheless, can be mitigated through humour, as explored below.

Humour as visual and interactional incongruity

Of particular importance in the selected single-panel comics is the use of humour to problematise gender roles and the moral space of positioning. Humour, in its turn, relies on our familiarity with social conventions, interactional scripts, and cultural storylines such that we are able to recognise when these are both invoked and reinterpreted, resulting in an incongruity. Indeed, many theories of humour position incongruity as a necessary condition for conveying humour. Caleb Warren and Peter McGraw (2014) argue that humour and its appreciation depend on an ability to manage simultaneously interpretations that may conflict with each other. Furthermore, humour of any text is a function of invoking two possible scripts which not only oppose one another, but also do so in a way that is incongruous with the receiver's expectations (Raskin 1985). The multimodality of comics distinguishes them as more complex than exclusively verbal or visual sources of humour (Hempelmann and Samson 2007), due to the potential variety of incongruous combinations. Indeed, incongruity is particularly essential to the humour of comics, the multimodality of which allows for three possible kinds of opposition: within the texts, within the images, or between the text(s), and image(s) (Beers Fägersten 2014, p. 156).

Incongruity alone, however, is insufficient for the actualisation of humour; any incongruity invoked must also be recognised and at least partially resolved in order for humour to be perceived or experienced (Attardo et al. 2002; Hempelmann and Attardo 2011; Attardo 2014). Efforts to understand humorous incongruities have led humour theorists to focus on what is required of the receiver to sort them out and resolve them, for example, the acceptance of given premises (Attardo and Raskin 1991). With regards to the comics featured in this chapter, such a given premise would be what Lindberg (2014, p. 85) has identified as both "implicit and fundamental," namely the ongoing narrative of women and men. It is only due to the reader's awareness of or even personal experience with this cultural narrative and, crucially, its role in conversational storylines that incongruity can be identified and ultimately resolved, resulting in humour.

In Figure 3.1, the depicted scene of a stylish and handsome blond man enthusiastically complimenting a woman in a pink, lace-trimmed dress is in alignment with the cultural narrative of women and men and the associated conversational storyline. So, too, is the first-order positioning, which begets the subsequent performative positioning. The humour of this comic is a function of the multilayered incongruity between text and image, namely the expression of gratitude ("Uh…Thanks") in opposition to the indication of an internalised, "compact darkness," and the invocation of darkness via the shadowy facial features of the woman and the explicit use of "darkness" in opposition to the bright visual aesthetic and the accompanying lexical field ("beautiful," "shine," "sun").

While the comic in Figure 3.2 also trades on the premise of the cultural narrative of women and men and the conversational storyline, the incongruity contributing to the comic's humour is mainly textual in nature. Here, the reflexive, accountive positioning enacted by the woman is facilitated by the indirect form of the initial compliment speech act. Direct speech acts exhibit correspondence between form and function indirect speech acts do not (Clark 1979), for example, "You are beautiful." vs "May I compliment your beauty?" The man in Figure 3.2 does not directly compliment the woman's eyes – he merely asks if he may do so. Consequently, the woman is free to interpret the utterance as a direct speech act in the form of a yes–no question instead of an indirect speech act in the form of a compliment. The woman thus exhibits a perlocutionary effect that is incongruous with the illocutionary force.

In Figure 3.3, it is the visual positioning of the man which facilitates the identification of incongruity, namely that of a double standard. Engaging in first-order positioning whereby he exercises his moral right to comment on a woman's appearance, the man's own appearance is not at issue. Nevertheless, the comic exposes the man to evaluation, such that his own hairy body is in opposition to the reference to hair-removal via the mention of "bikini line." Furthermore, the man's positioning in the panel imposes upon the reader his own first-order perspective, whereby the reader is literally behind him and figuratively "has his back." The perspective from this position is incongruous with that of the woman's, whose response highlights the inherent asymmetry of the male gaze and the emotional and psychological burden it entails.

Recognising positioning as well as appreciating and resolving the incongruities of the comics in Figures 3.1–3.3 require a familiarity with a given premise, namely the ongoing cultural narrative of women and men and the associated conversational storyline. This holds for Figure 3.4 as well, which, in contrast to the previous three comics, depicts interaction between two women as opposed to between a woman and a man. Figure 3.4 suggests that the first order, cultural narrative of men exerting their moral right to evaluate women can be further understood simply as the objectification of women, enacted by both genders alike. The aggressiveness of

the second woman's response, further encoded in the body language and facial expression, is incongruous with the first woman's demeanour and her seemingly sincere compliment. The result is a "cognitive dissonance" (Yus 2003, p. 1308), which can only be resolved by accessing the cultural narrative of women and men and recognising the norm of such gendered positioning. The second woman's response makes clear that the conversational storyline, conventionally enacted by a compliment speech act in the form of an adjacency pair, arouses in women self-doubt, self-loathing, and mistrust.

Ultimately, the series of comics analysed in this section illustrate how humour is a function of both recognising and unpacking gender roles according to the cultural narrative of women and men and the associated norms of interactional positioning. The comics serve as humorous resistance to such positioning, and as such should be understood as feminist acts of subversion and solidarity, as discussed below.

A woman's place: Discussion

In her seminal article, "Language and woman's place" (1973), Robin Lakoff contributed to the women's liberation movement by examining how discrepancies between the social positions of men and women had distinct linguistic manifestations. According to Lakoff, disparities in language usage, including language used both *by* women *about* women, reflect differences in the roles of women and men in society:

> "Woman's language" has as foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life, which are pre-empted by men. The marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways in which women are spoken of.
>
> (Lakoff 1973, p. 45)

While the field of language and gender has undergone significant development since the 1970s, the relationship between language and woman's place is still evident in the ongoing narrative of women and men, as evidenced by the comics presented in this chapter. Were there no remnants of this narrative, there would be no way to appreciate the irony incorporated into the comics. Indeed, each of the comics highlights the use of language to position and objectify women, and each illustrates, subverts, or otherwise trades on established expectations of women's linguistic behaviour. Familiarity with "woman's place" and the recurring practice of interactional positioning provide the premise which allows the comics to emerge as feminist acts of resistance.

Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg can be counted among feminist artists who use satire to question and problematise gendered social

conventions and gender norms in interaction between men and women (Jönsson 2014; Lindberg 2014). This chapter has thus aimed to explore how visual positioning and framing work in tandem with interactive positioning and framing in their single-panel comics to depict gender norms and co-construct feminist social commentary. Theories of positioning and framing aim to help us make sense of interactions as taking place in different sorts of occasions, how these differences are signalled, and how we behave differently according to social conventions and moral commitments. The female perspective on these conventions and commitments is expressed in the comics of Hemmingsson and Sjöberg, in which frames and positions are made particularly salient in the single-panel format. It is proposed that the application of theories of positioning and framing allows for a unified approach to comics analysis by simultaneously taking into account both text and image.

Villy Tsakona (2009, p. 1172) argues that the "condensed form" of single-panel comics ("cartoons"), can render them difficult to comprehend, thus requiring the reader to pay particular attention to the interaction of visual and verbal details that can create incongruities. This may be especially true of single-panel comic art and cartoons created by women. In their comparison of 300 comics (in the form of primarily single-panel but also multiple-panel "cartoons") published by female and male cartoonists since 1995 (150 comics each), Andrea Samson and Oswald Huber (2007) found, namely, that women's cartoons overall included more panels and text, and nearly two-thirds of the women's cartoons depicted incongruity-resolution humour. The majority of men's cartoons were characterised by a stricter adherence to the single-panel format, overall less textual support, and more nonsense humour. In this study, the authors also experienced difficulty in finding female cartoonists, who comprised only 9% of their initial cull of 1519 cartoonists from 61 countries. This low number is nevertheless significantly higher than estimates of female cartoonists in the US (Stoutsenberger 1994, in Samson and Huber 2007) and the UK (Benson 2018). Samsom and Oswald's study shows that, transnationally, very few women are making single-panel comic art, and thus doing so can itself be considered a feminist act. Nevertheless, women such as Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg, as well as their forebears and contemporaries, are inhabiting a place that was once the exclusive domain of men. Such is the strength of their advance that it is increasingly a woman's place.

Notes

1 According to a presentation by Nina Hemmingsson at the Nordic Summer University Winter Symposium, "Comics and Feminism," 22 February 2020, Södertörn University, Sweden.
2 www.gp.se/kultur/nina-hemmingsson-vill-inte-anpassa-sig-till-flocken-1.4678314
3 "I mitt tecknande och skrivande är det ju i kvinnorollen jag märker att det förväntas saker av mig som känns främmande och som jag inte känner mig

bekväm med. För att uppfylla det som förväntas, för att få vara med i flocken, måste man ibland spela roller och göra sig till. När man gör det känner man att det finns ett glapp mellan vem man är och vem man förväntas vara – och det är det jag fyller med konst."

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Part II

Gender, sex, and sexuality in German-language comics

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4 A brief history of girlsplaining?

Reading Klengel, Patu, and Schrupp with Strömquist. Or: Reflecting visualities of gender and feminism in German-language comics

Marina Rauchenbacher and Katharina Serles

Introduction

The following elaborations on feminism and comics are embedded in the research-project *Visualities of Gender in German-Language Comics*, conducted by Susanne Hochreiter, Marina Rauchenbacher, and Katharina Serles at the University of Vienna and funded by the Austrian Science Fund. This project strives to shed light on German-language comics and understand how gender is constructed within a comics-specific medial and German-language cultural context. The central idea is that the comics medium references and negotiates established visualities of gender. It identifies bodies as carriers of cultural inscriptions and exhausts the binary gender system as well as its corresponding body concepts, beauty ideals, and stereotypical gender roles. Therefore, the particular ways in which complex image-text-relations (re)produce and/or subvert dominant concepts of gendered bodies, identities, roles, and desires are identified and explored.[1]

This chapter analyses two comics relevant to the project, contextualises them within international developments, and elaborates on comparative aspects. The focus is thereby set on Liv Strömquist's works, which are particularly influential in the German-speaking realm. Following this comparative approach, the chapter firstly analyses prominent gender discourses and offers a sociopolitical contextualisation. Secondly, it focuses on some of the comics' art quotations fundamental to a cultural-historical critique of visualities of gender and feminism. Thirdly, this chapter examines the use of humour apt to establish a specific level of criticism.

Contemporary German-language comics on feminism and the influence of Liv Strömquist's works

When the German translation of Liv Strömquist's *Kunskapens frukt* (2014) was published in German as *Der Ursprung der Welt* [The Origin of the World] in 2017, it quickly gained a wide readership and public acknowledgement.

Various German newspapers published reviews on its "rehabilitation of the vulva" (Koopmann 2017, n.p.), or on its influence on the "comeback of the vulva" (Petersen 2018, n.p.). In German-speaking contexts, its reception coincided with the rise of the #metoo-movement and a broad discussion of popular feminist publications such as works by Laurie Penny, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as well as Margarete Stokowski's *Untenrum frei*[2] (2016) [Go Commando], to name the most important ones.

There is no doubt about Strömquist's transnational influence in general and the widespread reception of *Kunskapens frukt* within the German-speaking realm in particular: since its German translation, over 40,000 copies have been sold and there have been ten reissues. Three translations of comics by Strömquist have followed: in 2018, *Prins Charles Känsla* (2010) was published under the title *Der Ursprung der Liebe* [The Origin of Love]; in 2019, *I'm Every Woman* followed as a sample of *Einsteins fru* (2008) and *Einsteins nya fru* (2018); and most recently *Den rödaste rosen slår ut* (2019) appeared on the German-language market as *Ich fühl's nicht* (2020) [I Don't Feel It]. Following the success of Strömquist's work, its German publisher, avant-verlag, expanded its range of Swedish feminist comic authors by publishing Nanna Johansson's *Natürliche Schönheit* (2019) [Natural Beauty], a translation of *Naturlig Skönhet* (2017).

The success of *Kunskapens frukt* within German-language contexts makes it an apt if not inevitable reference for the analysis of German-language comics on feminist issues; especially since *Kunskapens frukt* appears to be the prime example for the reflection of "*all* gendered representations, including the author's own" in the comics medium (Classon Frangos 2020, p. 49).

This chapter aims at contextualising two crucial German-language comics on feminism: Patu and Antje Schrupp's *Kleine Geschichte des Feminismus im euro-amerikanischen Kontext* (2015) [*A Brief History of Feminism*, 2017][3] and Katja Klengel's *Girlsplaining* (2018).[4] Both adopt a didactical and/or documentary approach and have been commercially successful. Both works introduce, summarise, or at least allude to different feminist discourses and strive to establish narratological choices similar to *Kunskapens frukt*: *Kleine Geschichte* develops a documentary as well as playful, educational tone resembling cultural-historical elaborations of *Kunskapens frukt*, while *Girlsplaining* emulates the anecdotal and humorous approach of *Kunskapens frukt*. All works cite, reproduce, and – to some extent – criticise certain gender discourses. The following analyses focus in particular on these works' potential to elaborate on feminist topics in the medium of comics, thus elaborating on the hybridity of the medium as well as on the subversive and – following Ole Frahm – parodic potential of this medium (cf. 2010, p. 36).

Kleine Geschichte was first published in 2015, before *Kunskapens frukt* was translated into German. As of now, there are five print runs, and in 2017, an English translation by Sophie Lewis was published with MIT.

It is notable that the title of this translation differs significantly from the original. While the latter explicitly points to a cultural situatedness – *im euro-amerikanischen Kontext* [in the European-American context] – the English edition does not make this specification, and thus insinuates a colonialist perspective. In their foreword, Patu and Schrupp explicitly reveal the limitations of their work and discuss their focus on "European, Western feminism" (p. vi).

Kleine Geschichte introduces its elaborations with Adam and Eve (pp. v–vi) – a striking intertextual connection with *Kunskapens frukt* (cf., e.g., *Fruit of Knowledge*, pp. 12–13) and subsequently presents a cross-section of crucial feminist movements or relevant developments, from antiquity via, e.g., early modern feminism, to early socialist feminism and the topics "Women's Wage Labour," "Autonomous Women's Movements," "Domestic Violence" as well as "Intersectionality," "Gender Mainstreaming," "Queer Feminism," and "Third Wave Feminism." Unlike *Kunskapens frukt*, *Kleine Geschichte* does not focus on a "male"[5] or patriarchal/conservative perspective implementing the binary gender system, inequalities, misogyny, and sexism, but rather on the opposite, as it were, and reads as a historical summary of feminist movements and developments, thus being an insightful contribution to "herstory," as reviewers highlighted (e.g., Schulze 2015; Terre des Femmes 2015).

In contrast to *Kleine Geschichte*, *Girlsplaining* does not so much reference (feminist) theory/history, but deploys pop-cultural discourses and iconographies from *Barbie*, *Buffy*, *Sailormoon* and *Sex and the City*, to the *Harry Potter* books and movies. Klengel's humorous, pointed comparisons to these icons neither require nor offer lengthy elaborations.

First published as a six-part webcomic on the German version of *BROADLY* (a feminist channel of *vice.com*; cf. Klengel 2017–2018), it was then relettered, revised, and extended by another chapter in order to be printed in book form by Reprodukt. Over the course of approximately 150 splash pages, Klengel lines up contemporary (pop)feminist issues such as the aforementioned rediscovery of the vulva, "female" body hair, "female" role models, achieving orgasms, and societal pressure to reproduce (e.g., Spiers 2018; Stokowski 2019).

While Klengel's anecdotal approach does invite a comparison with Strömquist as both artists create avatars of themselves who occasionally break the fourth wall and address the readers (even though the latter does not refer to her comics as autobiographical), *Girlsplaining* is thoroughly negotiated as personal: frequent markers of authenticity (e.g., the notebook facsimile, crossed-out words or sentences, assembled photographs) and stories of personal involvement create directness and identifiability. Additionally, in the very first chapter, the protagonist introduces herself as "Katja Klengel" (p. 6) and pledges to "make comics, in which I am myself completely" (p. 19) – as impossible and problematic as that concept of authorship might be.

Questions of intersectionality are not addressed: what is being girlsplained centres around young, white, able-bodied, middle/upper class, Western European heterosexual cis-women, in digestible portions of 20 pages per chapter on average. The book's content and form have contributed to its marketability, consumability, and eventual success within a mainstream market (for criticism on the commodification of feminism see Zeisler 2016). It is not without irony that Reprodukt commissioned a redesign of its logo (now depicting a uterus with heads of Klengel's avatar as ovaries) and gave away wrapping paper of *Girlsplaining*'s vulva-endpaper, literally commercialising the vulva.

With the success of Strömquist in German-speaking countries, many reviewers and journalists compared *Kleine Geschichte* and *Girlsplaining* to *Kunskapens frukt* (Platthaus 2018; Kedves 2019; Pithan 2019), compiled similar comics, and even commented on "feminist comics" as "hitting a nerve" (Czerny 2019, n.p.). *Literacy.at*, an online presence of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research supplying teachers with reading recommendations, features Klengel, Patu/Schrupp as well as Strömquist in their media list on "Teaching Gender" (Peichl and Simmerl 2019, n.p.).

Notably so, the most recent of the works, *Girlsplaining*, does not reference *Kleine Geschichte* or *Kunskapens frukt* as source or influence (or any of Strömquist's other comics for that matter), which is ever so astonishing, as it does feature an extensive list of references and recommendations in the appendix (cf. pp. 154–155). Irrespective of any explicit or actual link between the three, the intertextual, topical, and formal connections are striking and will be explored throughout this chapter.

"HIDDEN in our culture" – Vulvas

The cultural history of the vulva is one of neglect, negation, and taboo and – when it comes to the word itself – one that has only recently been reclaimed. In the aforementioned book *Untenrum frei*, Stokowski takes up this discourse focusing in particular on questions of (in)visibility and (un)speakability. Recollecting a childhood experience, she elaborates on the German term *Spalte* ("cleft"/"slit") as a vulgar term for pudenda – according to the leading German-language dictionary *Duden* (cf. 2020, "Spalte"). Referring to Mithu M. Sanyal's cultural-historical study *Vulva. Die Enthüllung des unsichtbaren Geschlechts* (2009 [Vulva. The Revelation of the Invisible Sex]), Stokowski argues:

> Cleft – like the abyss. Who comes up with something like that? A cleft is a gap – something is missing, incomplete, a void, actually. Nothing one could like at all.
>
> (Stokowski 2019 [2016], p. 37)[6]

Much like the German term, "female" genitalia, sexuality, and agency have been discussed as an absence, as Stokowski informally summarises the vulva discourse or rather the absence of labelling, discussing and showing it.

Strömquist, who refers to Sanyal as well, reflects on the same issue of vulvas being "HIDDEN in our culture" (*Fruit of Knowledge*, p. 42) with the additional challenge of visualising the absence. She does so by mentioning the aluminium plaque for NASA's *Pioneer* featuring a "woman" and a "man" and explaining that, whereas "the original sketch for the plaque DID have a 'short line indicating the woman's vulva'" (p. 35), that line was erased for the image eventually sent into space. The two corresponding panels show the erasure in the style of a before-and-after picture and performatively double the effect when the line representing something missing, is missing itself. Throughout that chapter of *Kunskapens frukt*, first some medical, then numerous cultural visualisations of the vulva are reproduced in order to reclaim visuality in a culture that is unwilling to name and visually depict the vulva (cf. p. 40). Overall, Strömquist confronts the dominant cultural-historical absence of the vulva with numerous visualisations of it, which uncovers an erased/over-written tradition of showing (e.g., p. 43), establishes new image politics and assumes a "risk of representation". Introduced by Hillary Chute with regards to discourses of trauma in autobiographical comics, this risk "suggests that we need to rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility that have tended to characterise trauma theory as well as our current censorship-driven culture in general" (Chute 2010, p. 3).

Klengel, who covers the topic in the chapter "Viva la Vulva!" in *Girlsplaining*, takes a relatively modest risk (or none at all), as she chooses not to show any representations of the vulva except for metaphorical ones such as the flower on a poster behind the protagonist, a hole in the wall, a furry collar, or a dementor (pp. 93, 95, 97, 94). The latter is motivated by her central analogy: focusing on the lack of labelling, she refers to the vulva as the equivalent of the name "Voldemort," who – in the *Harry Potter* books by Joanne K. Rowling – must not be named. In doing so, she summarises the aforementioned debate – not least sparked by *Kunskapens frukt* – by culturally contextualising the loss of words when it comes to the "*DUWEISSTSCHONWAS*" ("you-know-what") of "women" (p. 92, Figure 4.1).

The Hermione/Emma Watson-look-alike in the centre carries a book by Simone de Beauvoir, alluding to her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), which is an instructive example of how Klengel visually instead of textually incorporates theoretical discourse; when she addresses Sigmund Freud's take on the vagina in the next panel (p. 93), her avatar is reading a book with his face on the back cover.

Klengel's avoidance (or even visual censorship) of vulvas is apparent throughout the book and symptomatic of its fairly harmless PG-rated, manga-style aesthetics: the cover illustration (reappearing twice within)

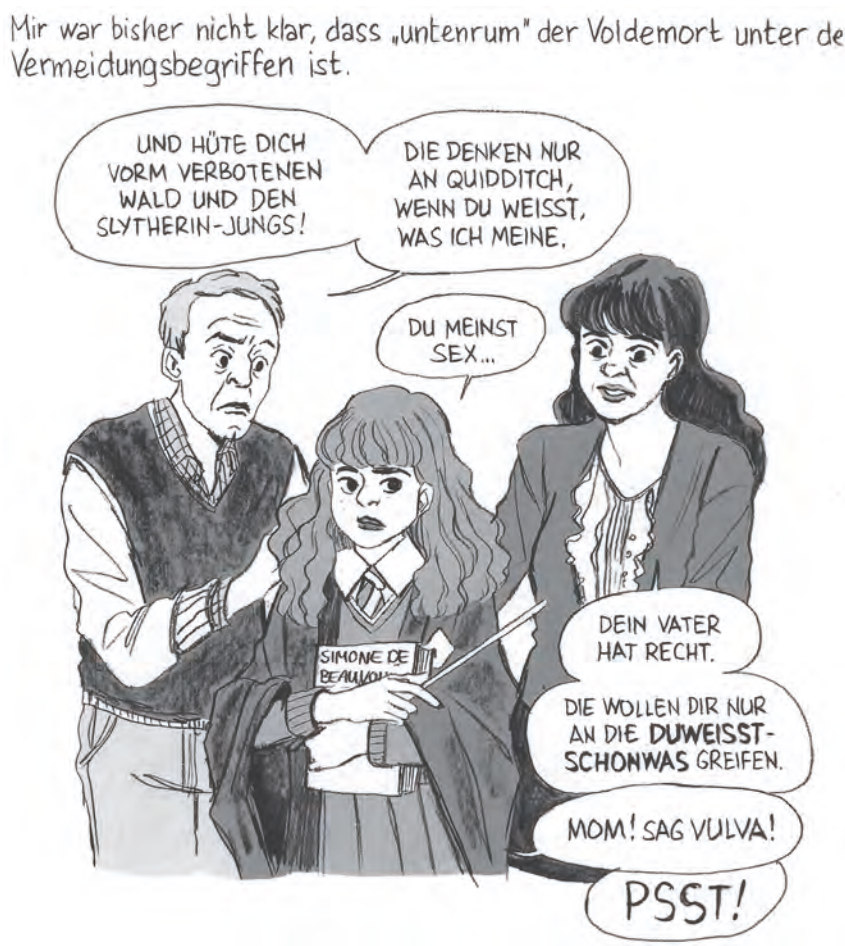

Figure 4.1 © Katja Klengel/Reprodukt, *Girlsplaining*, Reprodukt, 2018, p. 92

shows a girl flashing her vulva to a group of other girls. However, her back is turned to the reader, not revealing what is intradiegetically exposed. In fact, it is only the book's endpaper that features vulvas in more explicit anatomical detail, albeit ornamentally arranged as a decorative tapestry rather than a critical assemblage of individual vulvic reproductions in order to underline their cultural omission as in Strömquist's case.

Another, similar instance of visually censoring what is discursively tabooed can be examined in *Girlsplaining* as well: thematising the societal sanctioning of "female" body hair, the protagonist is repeatedly shown without it, even though other characters ascribe this feature to her, e.g., "You have pretty long leg hair, by the way" (p. 24).[7] Her pubic hair is not displayed either as

the exposure of her genitalia remains out of sight for the readers (cf. pp. 23, 35). Arguably, this seemingly uncritical and self-censoring practice can be read as a mere visual continuation of the discursive obliteration of "femaleness"; nonetheless, it might just shed light on the performative power of discourse as it *unshows* what is not supposed to be there: in this reading, both, the "female" artist as well as the "female" protagonist can only draw/see what is permissible to exist. Consequently and in contrast, the "male" primary sexual organ is pictured in exaggerated size and anatomical detail (cf. p. 115), which ties this practice back to Sanyal, who anecdotally based the aforementioned study on the fact that most of the "female" scientists she asked were able to draw a recognisable penis, but not a vulva (cf. Stokowski 2019 [2016], p. 37). The proposed concept of *unshowing* denotes a feminist practice in analogy to the concept of *unseeing* as a decolonial practice (e.g., Agostinho 2019) and as one of "the founding themes of visual representation" (Bal 2006 [1991], p. 31): what is *unshown* points at the (gendered) gap between conceiving, depicting, and seeing as well as at a visuality of invisibility. In image theoretical terms, this corresponds with W. J. T. Mitchell's elaborations on the paradoxical logic of an image which is always "'there' and 'not there'" at the same time or non-deictic deictical (Mitchell 1987, p. 17; cf. Simon 2009, pp. 37–38). Thus, Klengel's protagonist's *unshowing* of her vulva (and Klengel's omission of the depiction) could also be read as a feminist commentary rather than continuing self-censorship.

Kleine Geschichte notably does not refer to the vulva discourse, not even in the chapters on "Second-Wave-" and "Third-Wave Feminism," both of which tried to reclaim vulva and vagina by, e.g., hosting "speculum parties" to observe their genitals with the help of mirrors (e.g., Murphy 2004). "Female" genital organs are thematised *ex negativo* only.

In the first chapter, covering "Antiquity," Patu and Schrupp elaborate on the patriarchal dispositive of a biological superiority of "men" (cf. e.g., Honegger 1991).

The comment, "*Haha, du kannst nicht so erleuchtet sein wie wir. Hast ja auch keinen Penis.*" (p. 9, Figure 4.2)[8] is subverted on the visual level: the speaker's hand – as a symbol for the penis – is intersected by the gutter. In conjunction with a symbolic castration, the depicted "woman's" dismissive attitude (see posture and facial expression in the second panel) signifies a humorous, emancipatory approach. Read deconstructively, the gutter opens up for an in-between and an interrupted narration drawing on the reciprocity of panel, frame, and gutter. The "nothingness of the gutter," which is "erased" by the following panel "immediately" (Postema 2013, p. 49), visualises the not shown/(un)shown and demonstrates the lack of a visual repertoire – in this case concerning the depiction of the vulva.

Moreover, the sequence of these two panels performs the process of the objectification of "women" by "men"; the "woman" is categorised as kind of unworthy. Simultaneously, this categorisation is undermined with regard to Judith Butler's elaboration on the iterative construction of gender by

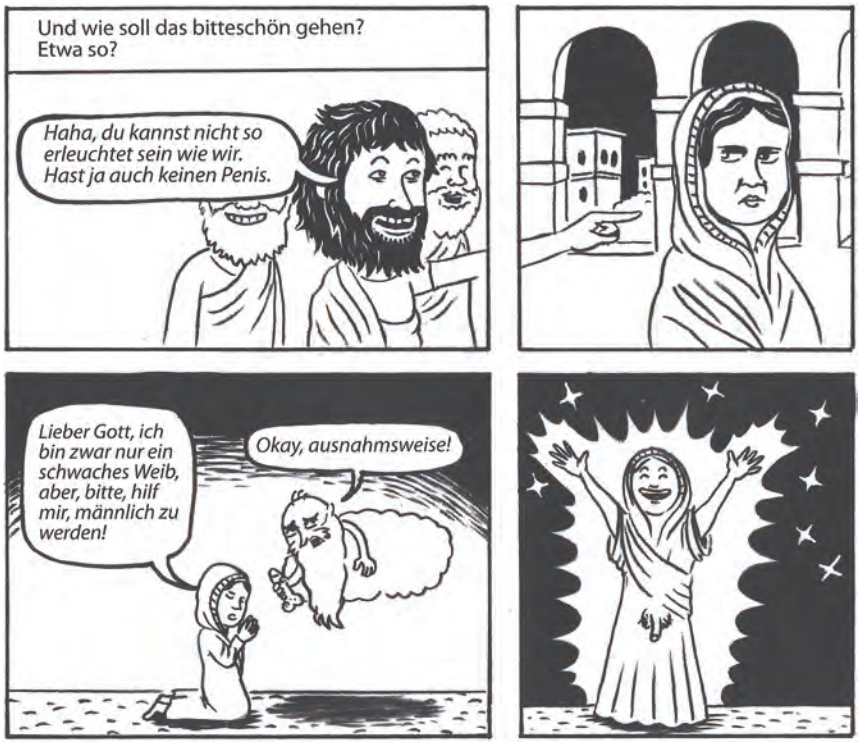

Figure 4.2 Patu and Antje Schrupp, © UNRAST-Verlag, *Kleine Geschichte des Feminismus im euro-amerikanischen Kontext*, UNRAST-Verlag, 4th extended edn. 2018, p. 9

speech acts (cf. 1990 and 1993). Concerning *Kleine Geschichte*, the "man's" presumptive claim is interrupted by the frames and the gutter – by the borders between the show-able and the not shown (due to a lack of visual repertoire). In doing so, these two panels subvert the powerful gesture of pointing – one might read the "man's" arm as a symbolic penis – as a gesture of categorisation and, following a phenomenological interpretation, as visual representation of recognition (as elaborated on in multiple studies on performativity and image criticism). It is the aforementioned deictic process of image perception which is performed within these two panels: as W. J. T. Mitchell explains, to "see" an image requires a "paradoxical trick of consciousness, an ability to see something 'there' and 'not there' at the same time" (1987, p. 17; cf. Husserl 1980). Following Mitchell, this paradoxical situation connects the "real" with the "mental image"; the interrupted gesture of pointing towards the named *other* signifies exactly this state of perception and undermines a claim for truth. However, this subversive

approach seems to be overridden in the following two panels, when the very same "woman" begs – a stereotypically "male" depicted god – for a penis; thereby ironically answering the question of how "women" could "become like men" (*Brief History*, p. 4).

Compared to *Kunskapens frukt* and *Girlsplaining*, in *Kleine Geschichte* the discussion of "female" sexual organs is literally hidden; the vulva is explicitly not shown and not named; instead, the politics of discussing the "female" body as incomplete are performed: the "female" character is depicted in total only after god has given "male" sexual organs to her, while shown in shoulder-close-up before. Thus, the statement, "You don't have a penis," (p. 4) correlates with the absence of the "female" figure's genitalia. In fact, when displayed, the "female" body is almost fully covered by a gown with "male" sexual organs compensating for an absence.

These four panels meta-reflexively visualise the struggle for a "female" visual repertoire by elaborating on the interdependence of the shown/not shown and, potentially, the process of getting to be a subject and being an object – a crucial feminist concern. Visually, this exemplary struggle becomes apparent through the lack of alternative images (e.g., Chicago and Schapiro 1973) or cultures of hiding. In the chapter "Queer Feminism" in *Kleine Geschichte*, this is stressed by the attempt to visualise queer-theoretical approaches: the multiplied silhouettes of four figures merge, thus symbolising the challenge of the binary gender system and emphasising the in-between. In order to show the questioned epistemological order, the figures have to be – paradoxically – recognisable as "male" and "female." Notably, the former are marked by schematic penises and the latter by breasts and the absence of penises. Tying this back to *Girlsplaining*, the "female" figures have pubic hair, but the vulva is hidden – thus precisely guaranteeing the indispensable recognisability.

"maybe the thinker COULD look like this" – Art quotations

In order to further define the cultural context of this chapter, specific characteristics (and readings) of the German edition of *Kunskapens frukt* need to be addressed, such as the evident art quotations of cover and title in contrast to different editorial choices and interpretations for the original and other translations.

To German and Austrian readers, the reference of VALIE EXPORT's famous *Aktionshose: Genitalpanik* (*Action Pants: Genital Panic*, 1968) bears a significant recognition value. In this iconic performance, the Austrian artist paraded through the rows of a cinema with her vulva exposed as her "action pants" featured a triangle-shaped cut-out.

Whether or not VALIE EXPORT was also equipped with a machine gun, which is shown in staged photographs a year later, is subject to debate and has been contested by the artist herself (cf. 2000, p. 32). The fact that the English edition of *Kunskapens frukt*, *Fruit of Knowledge*, published by

Fantagraphics in 2018, omits the gun, is likely to be motivated by a more restrictive publishing practice than by an art historical reflection on this debate.[9] Liv Strömquist posing as VALIE EXPORT is neither repeated nor referenced in the comic, it nonetheless sets the tone for her intricate, subversive, and empowering play with collages and references throughout the book (and her work in general), a technique on which Anna Nordenstam has commented extensively (2014, pp. 121–128).

With her performance, VALIE EXPORT aimed at returning or reclaiming the gaze that art history had made the "female" an object of "male" contemplation and imagination rather than considering "women" as seeing subjects. Notably so, Strömquist's reference on the cover falls behind the subversiveness and impact of the original: whereas VALIE EXPORT, her vulva, *and* her machine gun in hand look back and make the ("male") spectators their objects, Strömquist looks down, her vulva covered in black, the gun set aside unused.

Gustave Courbet's painting *The Origin of the World* (1866), in German *Der Ursprung der Welt*, is a renowned example for this presentation and regulation of the "female" sex: the "female nude is presumably made docile, an object of exchange between men (artist and patron or viewer)" (Jones 2012, p. 65). The fact that the French, Portuguese, as well as the German title potentially contain this art reference makes the German cover an even more dense and academic art historical commentary. Likewise, the status of Courbet's painting is challenged by being *not* shown, but instead being subverted by the juxtaposition with VALIE EXPORT's feminist statement. In doing so, the cover already opens up for the discourse-critical approach of the comic itself and for the subversive potential of comics' hybridity in general.

Just like *Kunskapens frukt*, *Girlsplaining* references "male" canonical artworks, even some of the same as Courbet's *Origin of the World* (cf. p. 65): in the last splash panel of the chapter "*Das Baby-Kettensägenmassaker*" ("the baby-chainsaw-massacre"), the protagonist's decision to postpone procreation is depicted against the backdrop of that painting.

There, she reveals to her boyfriend that contemplating ordering cake (while feeling pressured by society to do so – cf. p. 45, Figure 4.3) had been a metaphor for getting pregnant. With the intention of (re)claiming the artwork for the sake of her own (visual) argument, Klengel – much like Strömquist – (re)draws images with ample artistic freedom, assimilating them into her own aesthetics, and in this case specifically interfering with the original: with the belly and breasts enlarged in Klengel's version, she is alluding to the picture of a pregnant "woman" in order to add a level of humorous commentary. The stress of being unprepared to live up to "women's" "original" destiny is enforced by contrasting the protagonist's reality with this altered, more blatant version of Courbet's painting.

Another example of this practice of not just reclaiming but reenvisioning a "male" visual canon from a "female" perspective is the recurring header

Figure 4.3 © Katja Klengel/Reprodukt, *Girlsplaining*, Reprodukt, 2018, p. 65

to Klengel's webcomic, in which the Venus in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (c. 1484–1486) is exchanged for Klengel's avatar: instead of using her two hands to cover herself up – as is the case with Botticelli – the "Klengel-Venus" lifts her left hand carrying a pencil confidently if not triumphantly. While the level of sophistication and significance of this depiction could be contested, a meta-referential reading would suggest that it is her craft (symbolised by the drawing tool and the surrounding pages) which – *while* exposing her to the recipients' gazes completely – emancipates her from being a mere object of the gaze and having to "continually watch herself" (Berger 1972, p. 46), to potentially looking (drawing) back and becoming a gazing subject at the same time (cf. Mulvey 1975).

Lastly, *Girlsplaining* inserts a "female" figure into a "male" visual tradition: the protagonist's shock when she's confronted with horrific and violent birthing stories is expressed by a three-time repetition of the protagonist as the figure in Edvard Munch's *Scream* (1893–1910), exclaiming – over the course of three panels and pages –: "WHAT… // … THE … // … FUCK!" (pp. 60–62). Notably, Munch's *Scream* has become iconic, a commonplace reference for shock or outrage in graphic media – so much so, that it received its own emoji (the "face screaming in fear"). Incidentally, it might be the ambiguity in terms of gender of the original that rendered the figure so identifiable and thus popular. Strömquist herself, in *I'm Every Woman*, speculates whether it might depict Munch's ex-partner Tulla Larsen on seeing him again after their abusive relationship ended (p. 12; cf. *Einsteins nya fru*, p. 12).

Just like Strömquist and Klengel, Patu and Schrupp's visual concept draws on the recognisability of historical figures with numerous art/visual quotations of portraits supporting this. When it comes to art history, Patu and Schrupp quote a "male" canon too. The first example to be discussed here is the neoclassicist statue of Socrates by Leonidas Drosis, overall anticipating the topic of "the thinker" as most prominently achieved by Auguste Rodin (Figure 4.4).

The second is Francisco de Goya's etching *The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters* (1799). Both artworks serve as well-known examples of a patriarchal (visual) tradition of thinking and enlightenment and share an iconic status within a hegemonial cultural history. Strikingly, in both examples, Patu and Schrupp replace the "male" figure with a "female." In contrast to Strömquist and Klengel, who envision a similar replacement, Patu and Schrupp literally insert "women" into a patriarchal discourse without presenting new non-patriarchal, feminist, or subversive concepts. The adaptation of Goya's etching is endowed with a cat-like creature requesting the sleeping "woman" to wake up: "Reason knows no gender!" (p. 13). In the

Figure 4.4 Patu and Antje Schrupp, © UNRAST-Verlag, *Kleine Geschichte des Feminismus im euro-amerikanischen Kontext*, UNRAST-Verlag, 4th extended edn. 2018, p. 6

context of the overall topic of feminist movements fighting patriarchy, this seems to be somewhat misguided as not "women" would have to wake up, but "men."

It seems promising to compare Patu and Schrupp's approach in detail with Strömquist's to learn about the image-, gaze- and discourse-critical potential of art quotations in comics (as described in Serles 2018). In *Kunskapens frukt*, Strömquist refers to Rodin's statue *The Thinker*, and in contrast to *Kleine Geschichte*, this iconic statue is contextualised and transformed – visually and textually – with the topics PMS and menstruation; one hand on the belly and visually integrated into the surrounding textual area by arrows. The following page confronts a reproduction of *The Thinker* with an ice-skating character exhibiting their menstruation blood; again, arrows connect the textual comments with the visual layer. As Mike Classon Frangos points out, these two pages not only resignify menstruation "as a potentially elevated state associated with creativity, but a landmark work of the male canon of art is evoked in Strömquist's reparative work of feminist recuperation" (2020, p. 64). Strömquist comments on the status of *The Thinker* as a patriarchal quote of "male" hegemony by disrupting (visual) expectations: the caption on the first page reads: "And that sculpture, 'The Thinker' – you know, by Rodin" (p. 121), but Rodin's sculpture is not displayed on this page; in fact, the visual evocation of this statue is confronted by this *other* figure. The reader has to turn the page to actually see *The Thinker*, and it is important that it is marked as a quote as it is not redrawn but assembled as a photograph. The respective caption fundamentally questions the understanding of the binary gender system and the corresponding visual repertoire: "maybe The Thinker COULD look like this and STILL be seen as portraying PMS melancholy" (p. 122).

"HAHA JUST KIDDING!!" – Humour

Concerning narrative and rhetorical strategies, *Kleine Geschichte* and *Girlsplaining*, similarly to *Kunskapens frukt*, work with humour and strive to carve out their criticism by, e.g., caricaturing anti-feminist, misogynist arguments. As Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Wictorin argue with regards to Swedish feminist comics and cartoons from the 1970s and 1980s, humour is used as a strategy "to challenge the patriarchy" as well as "to contest the idea that women have no sense of humour" (2019, p. 78).

Research repeatedly elaborated on Strömquist's humorous approach and its emancipatory and subversive dimension (e.g., Lundberg 2008; Jönsson 2014; Lindberg 2014 and 2016; Classon Frangos 2020), often with regard to Mikhaïl Bakhtin's concept of "the grotesque." Ylva Lindberg, for example, emphasises the productively disrupting impact of "the carnivalesque and the grotesque, because they loosen up and even disintegrate rigid structures by transgressing the boundaries imposed by social conventions" (2016, p. 8).

The double entendre of ending most comics with the emphatic exclamation of "*SLUT!*" (e.g., *Einsteins fru*, p. 31), the Swedish word for "the end" – which (with a little bit of code-switching) also functions as the English insult for "a woman whose sexual behaviour is considered immoral" (*Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* 2002, p. 1349) – is one example of how subtly humour pervades Strömquist's work (and of how that is lost in, e.g., English and German translations, where it simply says "The End" or "*Ende*"). The ostentatious repetition of the word, sometimes even appearing to be placed on "female" characters (e.g., *Einsteins fru*, p. 110) or held up as a banner/flag (p. 124) calls to mind activist attempts and practices of Third Wave feminism to reclaim the term, fight victim blaming, slut shaming, and rape culture. To look for humour in even the most unlikely places is not a stretch at all: in an interview for *Bild & Bubbla* Strömquist explains that "there should be a joke in every panel [...] either in the image or the text" (Strömberg 2010, p. 27).[10]

Her subversive practice of masking the transgressions with allusions, irony, cynicism, jokes, or humorous exaggerations (on a verbal *and* visual level) culminates in the self-referential acknowledgement "HAHA JUST KIDDING!!," (*Fruit of Knowledge*, p. 33; cf. *Kunskapens frukt*, p. 33)[11] following six panels of fake quotes about labia enlargement as a popular surgery. "HAHA" – in the English translation only – marks a laughter that remains stuck in the throat and as such becomes paradigmatic for the function and usage of humour in Strömquist's works: it marks the inversion that what truly should be absurd, ridiculous, and laughable (in short: the oppression of "women" by "men") is the bitter truth, whereas alternative body images, for example, are nothing but a joke.

Nevertheless, this sort of informed laughter also bears the potential for emancipation when Bakhtin's concept of "the grotesque" is evoked in a recurring motif of rearranged orifices (cf. Jönsson 2014, p. 75). In *I'm Every Woman*, for example, a double splash page depicts ninja-like or niqab-wearing figures.[12] Bottom-down, they appear naked, stretching, dancing, and revealing laughing mouths instead of genitals, evoking images of the vagina dentata (cf. pp. 76–77; *Einsteins nya fru*, pp. 100–101). The corresponding speech balloons feature different types of onomatopoetic laughter in big, bold lettering. The visual discrepancy between the half-covered faces and the expressiveness of the body postures is striking. In this context, the disguised potentially symbolises censorship and repression, while the – literally – expressive genitalia signify emancipation. As such, it almost reads as a visual reply to Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976), who in her essay on "female writing" described "women" to be "riveted [...] between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss" (p. 885) and envisions a counterpatriarchal world in which "laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking" (p. 878).

Just like *Kunskapens frukt*, *Kleine Geschichte* adopts a humorous approach and strives to establish a certain level of criticism. However, in contrast to the former, the latter strives to create a "herstory" and does not primarily analyse the history of "male" repression. Due to this change in perspective, the very aim of the criticism in *Kleine Geschichte* is ambiguous: feminist movements and "women" are not only criticising subjects but rather the visual objects of criticism as well. While humour certainly allows for an unmasking of patriarchal (to some extent absurd) theories and – as demonstrated by Strömquist – introduces new, subversive discourse-critical approaches, in the case of *Kleine Geschichte*, it repeatedly tends to undermine the critical dimension of the history of feminism.

To give an example: among others, the achievements of the German campaigner for women's rights, Hedwig Dohm (1831–1919), are presented (Figure 4.5).[13]

In a reporting style, a caption describes feminist responses to anti-feminist developments of the 19th century while a caption in the second panel (which is not reproduced in this chapter) quotes Dohm (the comic does not provide footnotes). The two captions contrast with the drawings and the text passages in the speech balloons – above all in the first panel,

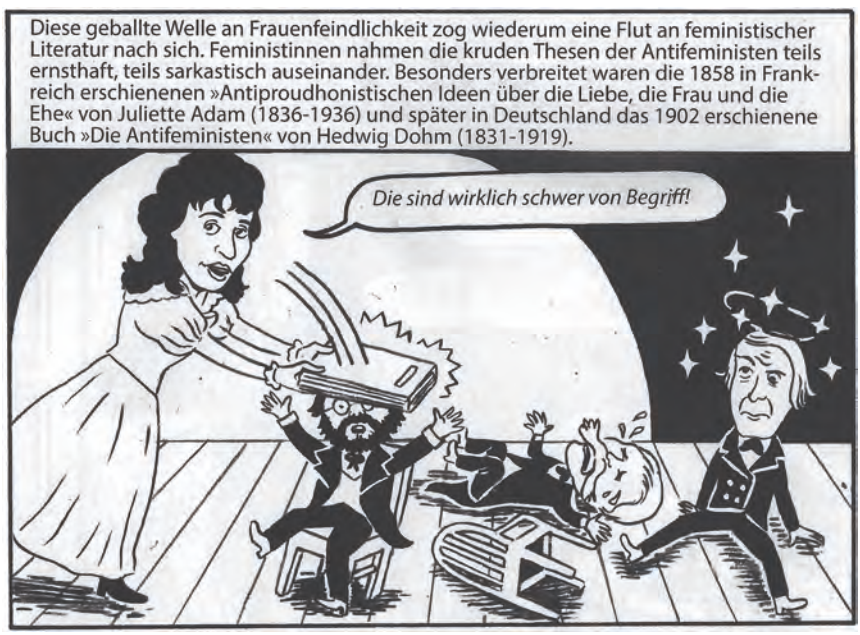

Figure 4.5 Patu and Antje Schrupp, © UNRAST-Verlag, *Kleine Geschichte des Feminismus im euro-amerikanischen Kontext*, UNRAST-Verlag, 4th extended edn. 2018, p. 33

where a slapstick-like style is established.[14] The avatar of Hedwig Dohm gazes at the recipients while hitting an opponent with a book. Two other "men" are already lying on the floor. The pictographic elements, such as the stars around the "man's" head on the right, are classical cartoon elements – as are the figures' oversized heads, which are even more dominant in the English version (cf. *Kleine Geschichte*, p. 33; *Brief History*, p. 28).

Image-politically, this example is representative for *Kleine Geschichte*, which comments on feminism and emancipation, but does not perform this approach on the intermedial level of the comics medium. As Kristy Beers Fägersten emphasises regarding the topic swearing and humour in Swedish comic strips, "humor results when a textual or visual cue encourages a likely interpretation of a narrative or a contextualized image, which is challenged by new information that opposes the likely interpretation, rendering it incongruent" (2017, p. 176).

In the case of the example in question, the factual captions are opposed by the drawings which seem to mock Dohm as well as her opponents. The drawings might be funny – and illustrative – but they seem not to interact with the captions on a discourse-critical level and fail to make readers "reconsider several dominant commonplaces about images," as Chute summarises the critical potential of comics' hybridity as a medium (2017, p. 22).

Connecting the following elaborations to our previous topics, one instructive example for this use of visual humour in *Kleine Geschichte* is the depiction of god being represented quite stereotypically (cf. Figure 4.2): aged, long-bearded and as such marked as "male" (cf., e.g., *Kleine Geschichte*, pp. 9–10; *Brief History,* pp. 4–5). The visual alternative to this image is supposed to take up misogynistic discourses humorously but, simultaneously, visually reproduces these stereotypes and provides no alternative. Just like the "male" god, the "female" alternative grows out of a cloud, but in this case also exposes her breasts; the head is notably oversized, the hair is put in curlers, she looks angry and clearly is meant to trigger the image of a "nagging 'woman.' " The corresponding speech bubble reads: "Woe betide you if you draw me as a bearded old man AGAIN!" (p. 8; cf. *Kleine Geschichte*, p. 13). This at least invites the aforementioned "reconsider[ation]": The "goddess's" comment on the chosen visual form ("male," bearded) questions exactly that problematic visual repertoire and, in turn, reflects on its own visual conception. The comparison with Strömquist's approach is once more productive as it exemplifies how the subversive potential of humour can be tapped without subscribing to misogynistic visual politics. In her works, Strömquist repeatedly elaborates on religion and gods/goddesses, especially in *I'm Every Woman* (cf. pp. 57–64; *Einsteins nya fru*, pp. 79–86). Strömquist adopts the stereotypical iconography of god with a flowing beard, his face is shown in close-up against the backdrop of a star-spangled sky; in the bottom foreground, a semi-circle is depicted, supposedly the half of a globe. The caption describes the erasure of

goddesses and the implementation of a "manly monotheism" (cf. *Einsteins nya fru*, p. 84; *I'm Every Woman*, p. 62); while god himself comments, "Help! Something got stuck in my beard!" (ibid.),[15] thus pointing to the interplay between text and image and blatantly addressing the sovereignty of monotheism. The world is stuck to the monotheistic god, but god does not know what is going on. Strömquist confronts this image with numerous depictions of goddesses, such as Athena, Innana, and Nut.

In *Girlsplaining*, humour functions as a selling point. As described before, the book is set-up to sell well by purporting "the fun kind of liberation" (Zeisler 2016, p. 9). It is vital to the whole project that everything is understood or at least entertaining, which Andi Zeisler pinpoints as "a mainstream [...] consumer embrace of feminism that positions it as a cool, fun, accessible identity that anyone can adopt" (p. xiii).[16]

"Fun" then largely derives from Klengel's flippant/snarky tone and her play with familiar (pop)cultural references. In fact, the title itself points towards Klengel's tongue-in-cheek approach: what follows is not only a "female" appropriation of the neologism mansplaining, it is also a play on an assumed oxymoron: a "girl" explaining anything in a patriarchal logic almost requires an immediate "HAHA JUST KIDDING!!" to follow. Consequently, the light-pink colour scheme of the entire comic ironically reflects the visuality of the space that is reserved for "girls."

The protagonist's address to the readers as well as her self-referential commentary are saturated with self-deprecation and irony: e.g., when she first refers to the American TV-series *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), she adds a footnote to the speech balloon reading, "*Please tell me, you still know this series. I'd feel old if you didn't" (p. 8).[17] Not even Klengel's own drawing skills are safe from sarcasm: instead, a caption next to a sectioned-off horse's head confesses: "Here, the artist consciously chose a model which would let her only draw half a horse" (p. 75).[18] In contrast to Strömquist once again, a different kind of inversion takes place as jokes are made at the expense of the victims. Similar to Patu and Schrupp, stereotypical if not misogynistic images are reproduced (cf. the reference to the exploitational historical cultural practice of "freak shows" with the protagonist pictured/exhibited as "Hairy Woman," pp. 27, 42). Here again, readers might choke on their laughter which is directed towards the discriminated.

How short-sighted this sort of depoliticised banter can be becomes apparent in the first chapter: comparing her humble everyday-life as a German comics-artist with the glamorous life of fictional columnist Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City*, Klengel's avatar arguably realises how superficial, oppressive, and transgressive many of the relations, ideals, and aspirations created by mainstream media are. Yet, she never systematically questions the role of capitalism and patriarchy, or even mentions feminism. Her takeaway from that comparison is telling: just like Carrie, she wants (and envisions) "an advertisement with [herself] and [her] column on a bus!" (p. 20, Figure 4.6).

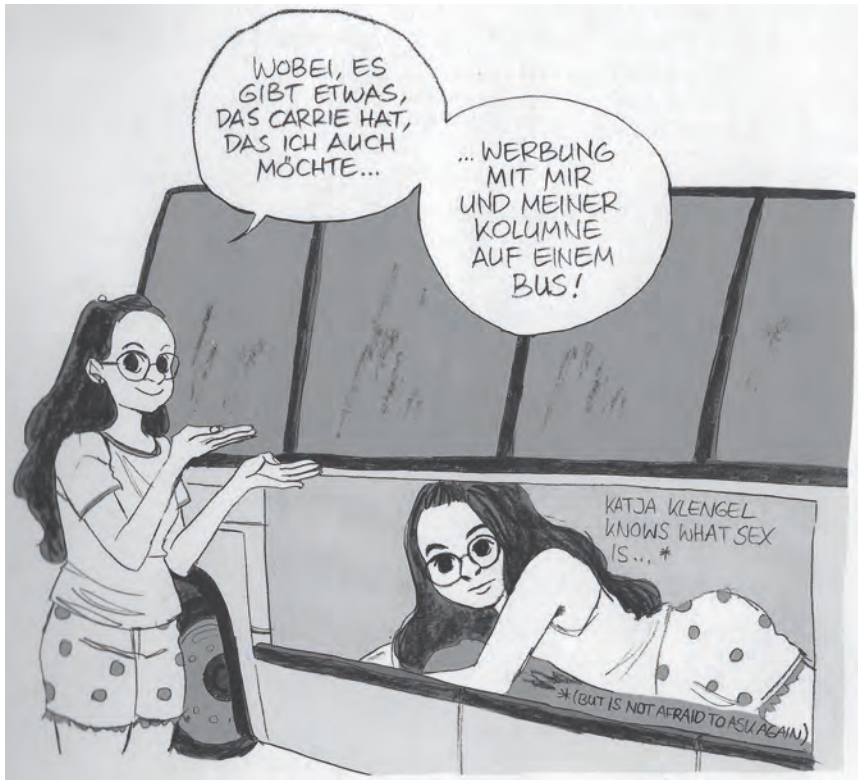

Figure 4.6 © Katja Klengel/Reprodukt, *Girlsplaining*, Reprodukt, 2018, p. 20

The corresponding ad as it appears in the series shows Carrie in an alluring pose on a bed or cushion, wearing a negligee; one caption reads "Carrie Bradshaw knows good sex." The slight adjustments in Klengel's visual reference (her character is wearing a shirt and shorts; the corresponding text reads "Katja Klengel knows what sex is…", p. 20) do reflect on "female" sexualisation, albeit ever so implicitly, and yet nowhere is the commodification of the "female" body described or criticised. It turns out that *Girlsplaining* lives up to its title, and that – in an unintended meta-referential twist – a "female" Lego-surfer-figurine eventually summarises the underlying and unrebutted prejudice of the book, "You girls are into FUN after all!" (p. 142).[19]

Conclusion

Reading Patu and Schrupp's *Kleine Geschichte* and Klengel's *Girlsplaining* through the lense or with the backdrop of Strömquist's works as formal as well as thematic influence led to the identification of a potent way of

reflecting and performing feminist discourses: all of the works discussed are interconnected by their reclaiming and reviewing of verbal and visual representation. They do so by inscribing themselves into so-called fine art and quoting or in some cases, even subverting patriarchal, hegemonial images like Courbet's *The Origin of the World,* Goya's *The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters*, and Rodin's *The Thinker.* They discuss the relationship of "femaleness," iconicity, and (pop)culture by (re)producing, establishing, and/or questioning a wide variety of symbols, figures, and topoi, such as *Buffy*, god, and the vulva. All three comics discussed extensively use humour to create new discourses and strive to reveal unruly feminist approaches.

That being said, they do so on different levels of intensity, complexity/theory, and criticism (which also is due to different conceptions and target audiences). This becomes especially apparent with regards to the vulva discourse: it is at the centre of an extensive cultural-theoretical elaboration in *Kunskapens frukt*, part of a pop-referential game of reference in *Girlsplaining*, and omitted in the historical-theoretical overviews of *Kleine Geschichte*.

By reflecting on the "risk of representation" (Chute 2010, p. 3) from different perspectives and with different thematic foci, we hope to have laid out the wide array of possibilities these comics resort to in order to reflect, criticise, and even overcome various (hegemonic) discourses, which we elaborate on in our project on *Visualities of Gender*.

Notes

1 For details on the project, see https://gendercomics.net.
2 Translations ours, unless indicated otherwise. We quote from official English translations wherever possible.
3 Due to copyright restrictions, the figures embedded in this article are from the German original; the English translation is given in the footnotes.
4 Marina Rauchenbacher authored the following analyses concerning *Kleine Geschichte*, Katharina Serles the analyses with regards to *Girlsplaining*.
5 In this context, double quotation marks are used to subvert the collective nouns "woman"/"women" and "man"/"men" as well as the attributions "male"/"female" representing and performing a heteronormative/binary system.
6 "*Spalte – wie Abgrund. Wer denkt sich so was aus? Eine Spalte ist eine Lücke – da fehlt etwas, es ist unvollständig und eigentlich ein Nichts. Spalte. Nichts, das man irgendwie mögen kann*." (Stokowski 2019 [2016], p. 37)
7 "*Du hast übrigens echt lange Beinhaare*."
8 "And how, if you please, was that supposed to work? Perhaps like this?" – "Ha ha! You can't be as enlightened as us. You don't have a penis." – "Dear God, I'm just a weak woman, but please help me become male!" – "Okay, just this once!" (p. 4).
9 The French, Spanish, and Portuguese translations, *L'Origine du Monde* (2016), published with RACKAM, *El Fruto Prohibido* (2018), published by Reservoir Books, and *A Origem do Mundo* (2018, Quadrinhos na Cia), do not take up the

VALIE EXPORT-montage (as it is less likely to be decoded in those contexts), but in the first two instances, a mirrored drawing of Eve and the snake from inside the book (cf. p. 87) and in the third one, the menstruating ice skater which appears on the back cover of the German version instead.

10 "*Det måste vara skämt i alla rutor [...] Antingen i bilden eller i texten*."

11 "*NEJ JAG SKOJA BARA!!*" / "*NEIN, WAR NUR EIN SCHERZ!!*" (*Der Ursprung der Welt*, p. 33).

12 Both interpretations are possible as no further explanation is given; the latter opens up questions of intersectionality, stereotypification, colonialism, and contemporary Islamophobia. Especially in German-language contexts, it might remind of Franziska Becker's problematic depictions of Muslim "women" as part of an ongoing anti-veil campaign in the German feminist magazine *Emma*, edited by Alice Schwarzer. For the influence of Becker on Swedish comics artists cf. Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin (2019, p. 83).

13 "This concentrated wave of antiwoman sentiment provoked, in turn, a wave of feminist literature. Feminists took apart the crude propositions of the antifeminists, both seriously and, on occasion, light heartedly, through the use of sarcasm. Particularly popular in France was an essay by Juliette Adam (1836–1936) published in 1858: 'Anti-Proudhonist Ideas about Love, Woman and Marriage'; and later, in Germany, a book titled *The Antifeminists* (1902) by Hedwig Dohm (1831–1919)." – "They're extremely slow on the uptake!" (p. 28).

14 As kindly pointed out to us by our colleague Susanne Hochreiter, this drawing alludes to caricatures of the 1900s; in a very misogynistic style, feminist topics were covered too. However, *Kleine Geschichte* gives no explicit reference; the problematic visual concept remains unquestioned.

15 "*manlig monoteism*" / "*Hjälp! Det har fastnat något i mitt skägg!*"

16 Even so, Klengel does not always trust her readers to pick up on her humour, which is why she at one point explicitly states, "I know, it is a comic, but do you hear the sarcasm?" ("*Ich weiß, es ist ein Comic, aber hört man den Sarkasmus?*," p. 95)

17 "*Bitte sagt mir, dass ihr die Serie noch kennt. Sonst fühle ich mich alt*."

18 "*Hier wählte die Zeichnerin bewusst eine Vorlage, bei der sie nur das halbe Pferd zeichnen musste*."

19 "*Ihr Mädels liebt doch FUN!*"

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5 "What's in a name?"

Anke Feuchtenberger's roses and the mythic methodologies of her feminist comic art

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Introduction

In her 1922 poem *Sacred Emily*, Gertrude Stein writes "Rose is a rose is a rose." Within this text and several of her subsequent poems, Stein returns to this formulation to playfully undermine the symbolism of the rose in literary and romantic traditions.[1] With the repetition of the rose – as an object, a name, a metaphor, and a symbol – Stein asserts that despite literature's propensity for infusing this one flower with romantic meaning, it is, in fact, just a rose. As Robert F. Fleissner suggests, "…the rose is really there, but it does not really say very much" (Fleissner 1977, p. 326). Like Stein's application of this imagery, Anke Feuchtenberger's pair of graphic narratives "*Rosen*" and "No Roses," published in *Mutterkuchen* (1995) [Placenta], also attack the metaphorical attachments of the rose to make a statement about the arbitrariness of its signification. Engaging the symbol of the rose in "*Rosen*," Feuchtenberger calls forth its associations with love and romance, only to deconstruct these conventions through the contradictions represented in the graphic narrative's verbal and visual narration, before tearing apart its signification all together in the following graphic narrative, "No Roses." Feuchtenberger thereby presents the reader with stories rife with clichés and metaphors, which upon deeper analysis come undone, illustrating an inherent ambivalence at the very core of the symbolism of heteronormative romantic love.

Mobilising the theories of Roland Barthes and Mary Daly regarding the role of myth in hegemonic meaning-making – namely, as an interpretive framework for understanding the mechanisms of ideology – this chapter examines the feminist political agenda behind the mythic symbols and myth- and countermyth-making strategies in Feuchtenberger's graphic narratives. Building upon the artist's own acknowledgement of the role of myth in her creative work (Toshiki 2009), I begin by illuminating how Feuchtenberger engages contemporary ideology through Barthes's framework of mythic discourse to deconstruct normative notions of romantic love via the conflicts she develops in the signification of her graphic narratives.

Feuchtenberger thereby produces countermyths through the deconstruction and consequent reassignment of meaning of symbolic objects and their mythological contexts. Applying a semiotic framework to interpreting her graphic narrative this chapter ultimately identifies new methods for reading Feuchtenberger's political interventions, which also align her graphic art with important intellectual developments in second-wave feminism. In particular, through an analysis of the ironic captioning and plot contradictions within Feuchtenberger's narratives, as well as between these stories and their intertexts, this reading of Feuchtenberger's graphic art reveals how the tensions she develops between the verbal and visual planes of her narration undermine the mythic symbolism of heteronormative love, romance, and womanhood, while also revealing the very processes of her mythic methodology.[2]

Anke Feuchtenberger and German comics after 1989

As one of the most prolific graphic artists working in comics after 1989, Feuchtenberger has been definitive in the development of a German comic avant-garde. Classically trained at the *Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weißensee* [Berlin-Weissensee Art Academy] from 1983 to 1988 during the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Feuchtenberger was instructed in traditional printmaking techniques less commonly taught in the art academies of West Germany. Her work was consequently informed by East German modernism and the legacies of German expressionism and surrealism adopted into the aesthetics of socialist realist art after the 1970s as well as by socialist theatre and Soviet poster design. Feuchtenberger therefore brought these experimental artistic methodologies to bear on graphic narrative during the 1990s, contributing significantly to the reinvention of German comics. Moreover, Feuchtenberger's feminist activism around German unification, as the most visible artist of the East German Woman's Movement, positioned her artistic production explicitly in dialog with the politics of 1989, while her work's integration of international trends in feminist art and theory set it in conversation with transnational feminist discourses. Then, in 1997, Feuchtenberger became an important teacher of graphic narrative, when she joined the *Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften* [College of Applied Sciences] in Hamburg, training many of contemporary Germany's most important cartoonists and comics artists, including Birgit Weyhe, Line Hoven, Arne Bellstorf, Barbara Yelin, Sascha Hommer, and Marijpol. This unique combination of classical training, avant-garde visual style, feminist politics, and teaching has positioned Feuchtenberger as a leader in German comic art since 1989, with her political and feminist graphic art leaving a lasting impact on comics both as it emerged throughout the 1990s as well as today.

Much of Feuchtenberger's early graphic narrative, including the series of comics collected in her 1995 publication *Mutterkuchen*, is unequivocally

Figure 5.1 © Anke Feuchtenberger, Campaign poster, 1990

tied to the East German feminist politics of the early 1990s. Following the peaceful revolution of 1989 that led to the collapse of East Germany and the fall of the Berlin Wall, posters, such as Figure 5.1, appeared all over the city, advocating for the future of Germany. Berlin was rife with political debate and idealist dreams, but not all individuals sought the same goals. Existing in opposition to popular sentiment calling for unification, East German feminists advocated for the reform rather than dissolution of the East German State. This poster, commissioned by the *Unabhängiger Frauenverband* [Independent Women's Association], came to symbolise the efforts of the East German Women's Movement. Reading "*Alle Frauen sind mutig! stark! schön! Unabhängiger Frauenverband. Auch für Frauen und Kinder eine sorgenfreie Zukunft in dem Europäischen Haus*" [All women are brave! strong! beautiful! Independent Women's Association. For women and children too, a carefree future in the European house], it advocated for the security of women and children in both the metaphorical and political European House.

Vibrant and playful, the poster depicts three mythological figures: a princess, a witch, and a mother. However, while the witch is depicted with her typical iconography of angular facial features and a broom, and the princess, who adorns a gown and a crown, kisses her frog-prince, the attributes of the central figure spring from a different kind of archetypal woman: the stereotypical East German mother. Placed centrally between the other two figures,

she stands defiantly staring up and out of the picture plane. Overburdened with grocery bags and two children, the pregnant mother carries a door tucked under her left arm. With the fairy-tale figures on either side of her appearing to embody courage, strength, *or* beauty, this figure mobilises a very different kind of iconography to represent all three. Feuchtenberger's poster thereby advocates for the fair treatment of all women and children no matter their story, projecting unity through difference and sending out a rallying cry to the women of East Germany.

Moreover, by elevating the East German mother to the status of mythological figure, Feuchtenberger also reveals her understanding of the role of myth in her critique of contemporary society. In positioning an East German mother alongside a fairy-tale princess and a wicked witch, Feuchtenberger illustrates how stories – in other words, myth – are essential in understanding womanhood, perhaps even implying that it is the fairy tales we continue to tell that both define and curtail women's roles in society. This early engagement with narrative conventions of womanhood thus suggests the role of myth in the meaning-making of all of Feuchtenberger's work.

Feuchtenberger's poster soon became synonymous with the East German Women's Movement, as she continued to visually support the work of these activists. Often commissioned by the Independent Women's Association, Feuchtenberger's graphic art appeared in public spaces across the city of Berlin as well as in the feminist journals and magazines that emerged alongside the movement. As such, Feuchtenberger's art reveals the utopian ideals of East German feminism before unification, which in turn lends insight into the artist's own political position. Even after the vote in favour of unification had passed, Feuchtenberger continued to produce political posters for the Independent Women's Association, at which point, however, the Association found itself on the political sidelines.[3]

By the first East German democratic election in March 1990, the illusion of political reform was shattered by a vote in favour of unification, when the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, the political party of the Federal Republic that had been advocating for unification, won by a large margin (Young 1999, p. 5). Instead of East German reform, or even an amendment of the West German constitution, the GDR was simply dissolved and its lands adopted as the five new states of the unchanged political system of the Federal Republic of Germany. This effectively rendered all efforts by the East German Women's Movement moot as soon as any discussion of the future of the GDR was effectively terminated by the country's disappearance as a political entity (Ferree and Young 1993, p. 199). Similarly, Feuchtenberger's feminist work also transitioned from the public arena into the private sphere – from posters into comics – where she continued to advocate for women's rights, critique gender norms, and deconstruct myths of womanhood, female sexuality, and heteronormative romantic love.

The myths and myth-making processes of ideology

When describing her 2005 short film *Somnambule's* [Somnambulist] exploration of its rabbit protagonist's desire to make contact with the moon, Feuchtenberger identifies the fantastic nature of this situation as a parable for relationships, specifically between a man and a woman, or a mother and her son. Here, she comments that she uses "a kind of mythology to explain very certain and biographical things" (Toshiki 2009, n.p.). In this particular context, however, Feuchtenberger's mobilisation of mythology is difficult to parse. While *Somnambule* features the type of imaginary story that is characteristic of traditional myth as well as the kind of anthropomorphic creatures featured in creation narratives and fables around the world, when Feuchtenberger's observation is applied more generally to her work, I interpret it as calling upon a different sort of understanding of her mythic methodologies. Framing this impulse within the context of Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis of myth, therefore, illuminates how Feuchtenberger's graphic art mobilises myth and myth-making to reveal the "unconscious ideologies" (Weber 2005) of western society.

In his 1957 collection of essays, *Mythologies*, Barthes offers critical theorists a new framework through which to understand the function of myth in the modern day (Barthes 1957, p. 10). Here, Barthes demonstrates how myth-making turns constructed meaning into common sense by creating "facts" out of interpretations (Linda Åhäll 2012, p. 109). Further clarified through the relationship of myth to discourse, Barthes argues that the way myths circulate through society makes particular representations and ways of understanding the world seem natural and universal, rendering that which resists established ways of experience and as "unnatural" and "abnormal" (During 1999, pp. 42–43). Through the processes of representation and other strategies of hegemonic codification, myth recasts the particular, culturally specific, and ideological as universal and predetermined (Weber 2005, p. 7; Åhäll 2012, p. 109). *Mythologies* thereby provide cultural critics with the theoretical foundation to concretely examine mechanisms of hegemonic power, developing the language necessary to perform ideological critique.

Counter to popular understandings, myth, for Barthes, is not a concept or an idea, but a mode of signification; it is – to mobilise the language of semiotics – the production of a sign in which the signified and signifier are connected through socially constructed meaning. The moment an object becomes a symbol, for example, bestowed with meaning not intrinsic to its nature, it becomes a myth. Identifying myth as a form of communication – essentially, a message – disseminated by way of an institutionalised and socially constructed system, Barthes's theory of myth reveals how forms of contemporary culture can – like ancient myth – impart the assumed values and expectations of a given section of society (Barthes 1957, p. 107).

"Myth," Barthes writes, is therefore "a type of speech" – a way of endowing words with additional signification; yet, he does not restrict mythology to oral communication (Barthes 1957, pp. 107–108). Myth is, in fact, any form of representation that emerges as part of a discourse (Barthes 1957, p. 107). Barthes therefore incorporates images into his analysis as much as text. Even while he observes that visual forms are complicated by their mediation through the perspective of the artist, pictures, drawings, and illustration still contain messages not inherent in the form or material of their representation (Barthes 1957, p. 108). Endowed with meaning in their signification or reference to ideas already circulating in a given society, images, such as the forms of representation proliferated through commercial advertising or popular media, as well as photography, film and television, sports, theatre, publicity, and, of course, comics, also impart mythic discourse. For, like their written counterpart, mythic images require a *lexis* to render them legible (Barthes 1957, p. 109). And this lexis, with its shared vocabulary, culturally determined norms in categorising, and associated institutionalised forms of knowing – namely, its manifest ideology – reveals a society's inherent biases and socially constructed assumptions and associations.[4]

Turning to the work of Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) further illuminates how Barthes's idea of myth can be explicitly mapped onto a feminist critique of ideology.[5] Here, Daly also mobilises myth to understand the construction of female identity and subjectivity; however, situating her interventions in terms of the relationship between mythology and the production and maintenance of female oppression, Daly writes: "Patriarchy perpetuates its deception through myth" (Daly 1978, p. 44). These myths, Daly observes, span from the banality of everyday clichés, such as the stories we tell our children and watch on television and in film, to more classical conceptions of myth (Daly 1978, p. 44). While myths are traditionally perceived to be stories that express intuitive insights that relate the activities of gods, this category of myth is typically read as symbolic and not a true reflection of sociopolitical forces and institutionalised forms of oppression. Similarly, society dismisses the stories that impact our daily lives and perception of the world – the everyday myths – as "clichés."

Yet, framing the important narratives that structure human relations and inform our understanding of individual experience and subjectivity as superficial banalities is, in fact, just another way of obfuscating the power of myth in contemporary culture (Daly 1978, p. 44). Clichés, couched in language that already disempowers their perceived influence and diminishes their affective qualities, are less likely to be critically engaged in scholarship, since their banality appears to be fundamental to their nature in the first place. These assumptions belittle the impact contemporary myth has on how we think, act, and understand the world around us. While myth, Daly writes, is typically only interpreted as able to "open up depths of reality otherwise closed to 'us' " – to offer us access to ideas symbolically – "it is not usually suggested," she continues, "that they [also] close off depths of

reality which would otherwise be open to us" (Daly 1978, p. 44). Through Daly, myth becomes the tool of an oppressive system to restrict the ways women and other marginalised communities are able to imagine their past, present, and future, cordoning off their personal growth and disabling their sense of agency.

Illuminating the power of myth over society, however, is difficult. Since partaking in "reality" by consuming popular media or by reinforcing normative notions of human experience through the participation in institutionalised patterns of behaviour is to, according to Daly, already "repeat mythical models, to *reactualise* them continuously" (Daly 1978, pp. 44–45). Thus, in order to reverse their power and the patriarchal distorting lens that they foster, "it is necessary to break their codes in order to use them as viewers; that is we must see their lie in order to see their truth" (Daly 1978, p. 47). Here, Daly is arguing for the development of methodologies that help us see "through" myth – for a feminist "myth-breaking and myth-making" that disrupts "the routine, the vanity, the adaptive behaviour of the death marchers caught on the wheel of their [patriarchal] 'paradigms' " (Daly 1978, p. 47).

Similarly, Barthes also acknowledges how critical engagement might illuminate that which myth makes "falsely obvious." However, Barthes claims that articulated language offers little resistance to the ideological truth claims made by mythic representation (Barthes 1957, p. 10). With the expressiveness of language itself relying on metaphor and symbolism – the foundation of mythic signification – language itself undermines the very possibility of resistance, which it seeks to bring to bear against itself (Barthes 1957, pp. 131–134). The best weapon against myth, Barthes argues, is thus to mythify in turn – to produce artificial myths that reconstitute myths in popular culture (Barthes 1957, p. 134).

Much of Feuchtenberger's early sequential art relies on this method of "myth-breaking and myth-making" to critique contemporary discourses on womanhood, female sexuality, and romantic love, constructing or reconstructing contemporary myth to see through the oppressive character of mythic storytelling and its role in perpetuating patriarchal ways of knowing and being woman. This is abundantly apparent in Feuchtenberger's short graphic narrative, "*Horror-Skop*" (Figure 5.2), which engages a traditionally mythic system of forecasting the future, the horoscope.[6] Printed in the catalogue to *PGH Glühende Zunkunft*'s exhibition in the Galerie am Chamissoplatz, "*Horror-Skop*" is the sole example of Feuchtenberger's comic art to appear in the exhibition catalogue and demonstrates how her art mobilises myths as early as 1991. Thematising female experience, everyday patriarchal existence, and the politics of German unification through the zodiac calendar, "*Horror-Skop*" reveals many of the characteristics of Feuchtenberger's later work, including the artists inclination towards the expressionist aesthetic and detailed patterning and interest in the female body and gender politics, and, above all else, her inclination to deconstruct and revise myth to feminist political ends.

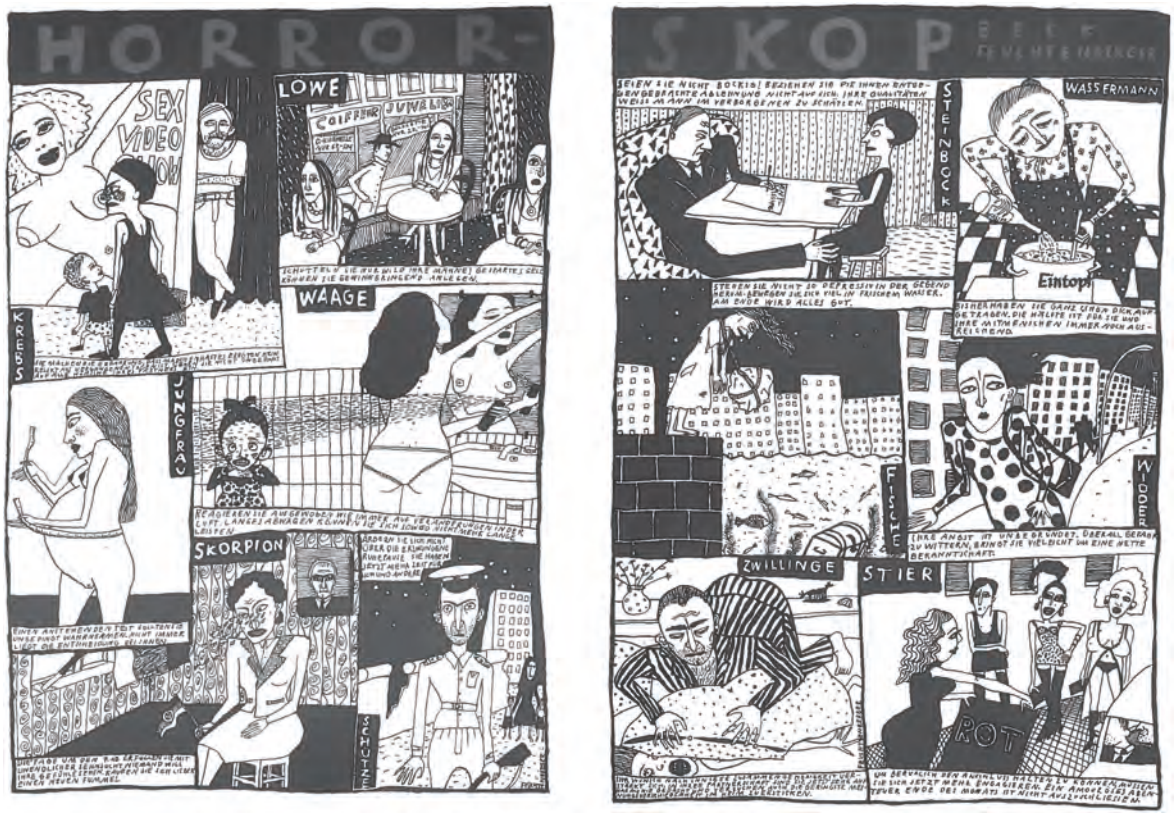

Figure 5.2 © Anke Feuchtenberger, "Horror-Skop," in *PGH Glühende Zukunft*, Galerie am Chamissoplatz, Berlin, 1991, pp. 14–15

"*Horror-Skop*" represents 12 women in 12 situations characteristic of female experience (Yilla-Häberlin 1995, p. 20). Each panel thematises one of the 12 astrological signs, depicting a woman in an oppressive social, political, or private circumstance, which is framed by advice written in the typical format of a horoscope. However, unlike a horoscope, the panels do not forecast the future of the individual presented; instead, as the title of the comic suggests, they typify female subjugation, persecution, and harassment by society, politics, men, or one another: a woman walks red-faced by a "sex video show," holding her child's hand as a man observes her casually; a soon-to-be mother measures her waistline in an act that recalls the contradiction between a woman's role as mother and society's demand for thinness; a female figure sits upright and austere across from her employer as he signs her pink slip, while groping her under the table; and a middle-aged woman sits in the centre of an ornately wallpapered room sobbing over German unification with a picture of Erich Honecker, the GDR's General Secretary from 1971 to 1989, hanging on the wall behind her and an East German flag in her hand. An important reference to the politics of unification, this last example demonstrates how Feuchtenberger unites German politics, and specifically the politics of unification, with her critique of female oppression.

Yet, while Feuchtenberger's representation of each of these circumstances clearly portrays a pessimistic view of female experience, the panel text is ambiguous, creating a tension between word and image which the artist often exploits and which is typical of her narrative style. This juxtaposition is particularly striking in the panel for the astrological sign *Fische* [Pisces]. Presented in front of the backdrop of typical East German *Plattenbausiedlungen* [industrially manufactured and prefabricated high-rise apartment buildings] and under a starry night sky, a woman in a tattered dress stands barefoot at the end of a brick wall. She leans forward with a boulder tied around her neck dragging her towards a body of water. The river or lake below is populated by fish, connecting the image with its astrological symbol. With a treasure chest nestled amongst the plant life on the ground below, the water appears to be inviting the figure into her deathbed.

The text above the image, however, presents a very different view, describing the water as a place for rejuvenation instead of suicide: "*Stehen Sie nicht so depressiv in der Gegend herum. Bewegen Sie sich viel in frischem Wasser. Am Ende wird alles gut*" ["Don't stand around so depressed. Move around a lot in fresh water. In the end, everything will be fine"]. Mobilising gallows humour, the horo/horror-scope's suggestion that exercise and a little fresh water would do the woman some good is at odds with the dark reality she is facing. It echoes the type of intertextuality, text and image combination, and mocking of political and popular slogans characteristic of Dada; yet, its subject matter is a criticism of the stigmatisation of mental illness. This panel visually conveys the hopelessness and social isolation of women suffering from depression, a subject that returns again in *Mutterkuchen* and Feuchtenberger's thematisation of suicide.

Ultimately, "*Horror-Skop*" inverts the conventions of the horoscope, a term that is etymologically derived from the Greek *hōroskopos*, where *hōra* means "time" and *skopos* "observer," to forecast a different kind of reality for female readers. Importantly, it is through Feuchtenberger's rewriting of the zodiac's classical mythology that this is accomplished. By engaging the mythos of astrological signs and deconstructing them through contradictions between her verbal and visual representations, Feuchtenberger's "*Horror-Skop*" offers an early example of how the artist mobilises myth alongside the tensions afforded by the comics medium to critique the gender politics of newly united Germany, aligning her feminist agenda with the kind of "myth-breaking and myth-making," for which Daly advocates.[7]

Turning to Feuchtenberger's *Mutterkuchen,* we see the artist's continued engagement with myth; however, this later work with myth more clearly maps onto Barthes's theoretical framework by moving away from classical mythology to attend to narrative conventions, contemporary discourses, and popular culture. In its opening graphic narrative, "*Die Strudel Petra*" for example, Feuchtenberger mobilises the advertising rhetoric of consumer capitalism, while also rewriting Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* (1845), a classic German narrative of patriarchal oppression and embodiment of 19th-century paternal morality.[8] She continues to employ this revisionist strategy in the subsequent comics of *Mutterkuchen*, rewriting patriarchal master narratives – i.e., myths – including Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) in "Living next door to Alice"[9] and Biblical mythology, recasting the Fall of Man as the Fall of Woman.

Finally, Feuchtenberger's graphic narratives "*Rosen*" and "No Roses" reveal both the artist's impulse to engage contemporary discourse as well as the nuances of her "myth-breaking and myth-making" processes in their pairing and reference to the symbolic value of the rose. In this context, "*Rosen*" deconstructs the semiotics of the most powerful symbol of romantic love – the rose – while thematising the oppressive characteristics of heteronormativity through its tension between text and image. Then, in "No Roses," Feuchtenberger illuminates the very processes of mythification by constructing a countermyth that substitutes the previous narrative's roses with a whole garden of wildflowers. "*Rosen*" and "No Roses" thereby map out Barthes's semiotic theory of myth graphically, rendering Feuchtenberger's mythic methodology legible in a two-part process that first deconstructs the mythic symbolism of romantic love, before constructing a countermyth that reconstitutes its social norms.

Feuchtenberger's myth and artificial myth "Rosen" and "No Roses"

Written in relation to each other, "*Rosen*" and "No Roses" work in tandem to propose an understanding of nature, as the space in which Feuchtenberger works through the categories of femininity and masculinity, independence

Figure 5.3 © Anke Feuchtenberger, "*Rosen*," in *Mutterkuchen*, Jochen Enterprises, 1995, n.p.

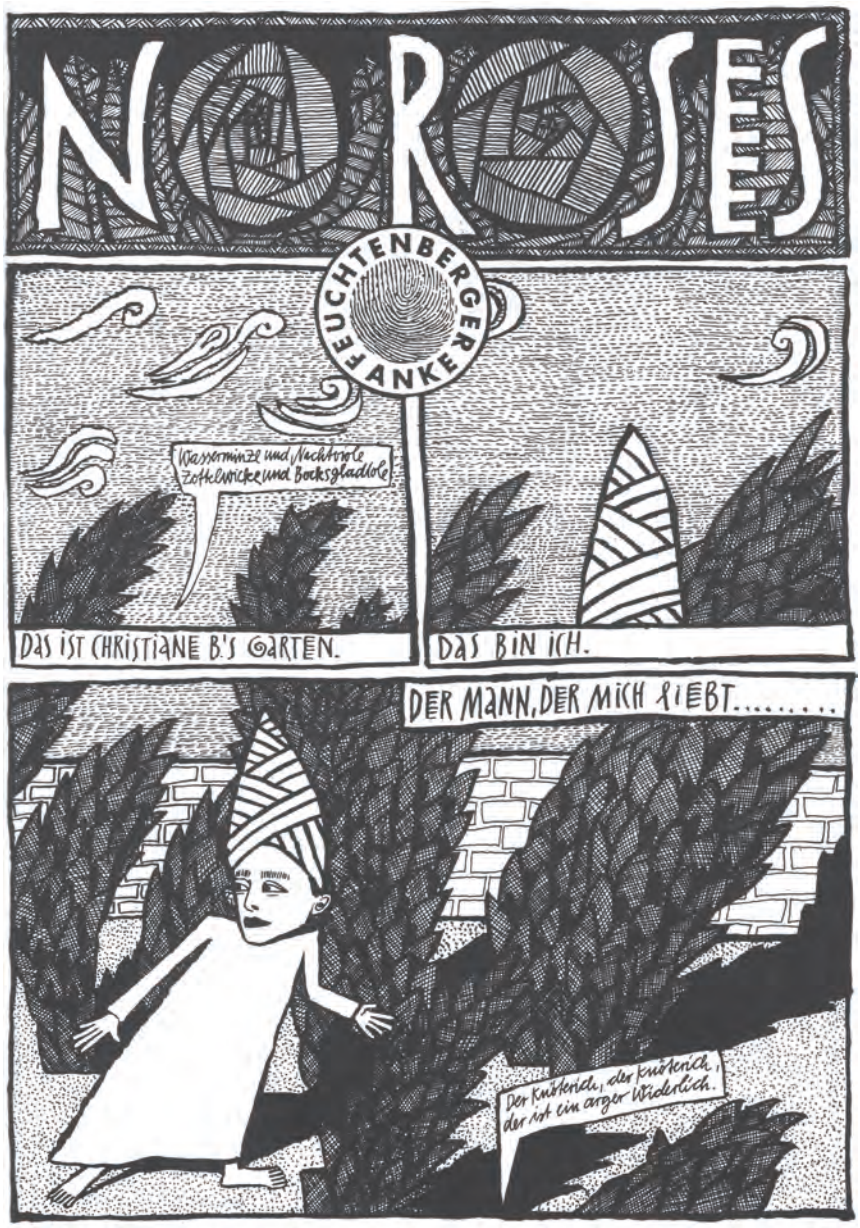

Figure 5.4 © Anke Feuchtenberger, "No Roses," in *Mutterkuchen*, Jochen Enterprises, 1995, n.p.

and dependence, and subject and object. The title reinforces this nature metaphor, while also indicating that roses play a particularly important role in the gender dynamics that unfold over the subsequent 10 panels of "*Rosen*" and 14 panels of "No Roses." While symbolic roses punctuate the space around the title of "*Rosen*" (Figure 5.3), roses are themselves integrated into the lettering of "No Roses" (Figure 5.4), immediately foregrounding a juxtaposition that not only exists in the language of the title panels – German and English, affirmative and negative – but also within the narratives themselves. By highlighting the contrasting elements of the two stories, I examine the relative positions of roses and nature in how the female protagonist defines her role as woman and sense of self.

Both "*Rosen*" and "No Roses" are told from the first-person perspective of the female protagonist; however, while "No Roses" tells her story, "*Rosen*" first focuses on her male partner, recounting all the ways in which he is devoted to the narrator, who only appears in the final panel, casting all previous narration in a different light.

On a visual level, "*Rosen*" opens with a menacing dog breaking through the wall of the domestic space also featured in later panels. This attack conjures up a movement through the types of spaces represented – from interior to exterior, from domestic to natural, from feminine to masculine – establishing the idea of transgression very early on in the graphic narrative. Emerging from behind the beast, holding the animal's leash, is the male protagonist of the story. Always represented with the viewpoint looking upward at him, giving him an equally menacing character as his canine companion, the two figures tramp through the woods on the hunt. By the third panel, the man has found and killed his prey. The unidentifiable spotted animal, perhaps a leopard, with which he returns, possesses oddly human facial features and the pattern of representation of its eyelashes is also immediately recognisable in the female protagonist's eyebrows in the following graphic narrative, creating an important connection between the figures.

Once home, the man beheads, skins, and disembowels the creature. He feeds the entrails to his dog, while he begins to prepare a soup out of the animal's flesh, presumably for dinner. After seasoning the meal with herbs, the man carries the steaming bowl to the table, where the last panel presents him absorbed in eating the spoils of his hunt alone, surrounded by cut roses in vases. His dog lies peacefully on the verge of slumber at his feet, while his female partner vomits in the toilet in the next room in a dress made out of his dinner's pelt, with plants puncturing the domestic space and spiders crawling around her feet (Figure 5.5).[10]

This dramatic ending to a comic mobilising narrative conventions of the hunt, in which the man kills his prey to provide sustenance for the family, recontextualises the whole story, while also informing the next. Having just witnessed the narrator's violent predicament in the final panel, her previous statements (e.g., "*Er liebt mich abgöttisch*" ["He loves me adoringly"]; "*Er wünscht sich 3 Kinder von mir*" ["He wishes three children

Figure 5.5 © Anke Feuchtenberger, "*Rosen*," Jochen Enterprises, 1995, n.p.

from me"]; "*Er bringt mir täglich Rosen*" ["He brings me roses daily"]) and the visual account of the hunt are cast in a different light. In particular, the final caption ("*Ich verzehre mich nach wildem Flieder*" ["I yearn for wild lilacs"]) as well as the preceding two ("*Er verzehrt meine Zeit…meinen Raum*" ["He consumes my time… my space"]) feature a play on words that draws attention to the role of consumption ("*verzehren*") in the graphic narrative's many contexts. With "*verzehren*" also meaning "to consume" in the sense of "eating something up," the three concluding panels of the graphic narrative develop a connection between the female protagonist and the animal her partner is literally consuming. Then, the image contained in the final panel of the graphic narrative, accompanying its textual engagement with concepts of consumption, features the protagonist throwing up the meal her partner concocted, essentially unconsuming the spoils of his hunt, which further stresses a relationship between the object of the man's hunt, the animal, and the subject of the man's desire, the female protagonist. Finally, with the distinction between "to consume" ("*verzehren*") and "to long for" ("*sich verzehren*") differentiated only through the reflexive pronoun "*sich*," the relationship between the narrator's partner's consumption of the protagonist's sense of self and her longing for freedom is underscored.

Ultimately, these various engagements of consumption in this final panel series undermines the perceived earnestness of the sentiments populating the previous pages, rendering the graphic narrative's words in ironic juxtaposition to its images retroactively. What began as a story seemingly about how much the protagonist is adored by her lover, how much he is devoted to her, and how he brings her roses daily, a seemingly romantic gesture, is recast by the hostility and suffocation implied by the final moments of the narrative. Furthermore, there suddenly appears to be multiple narrators, one verbal and one visual, expressing different perspectives in the same story – and even within the same panel – changing the reader's fundamental understanding of the narrative retrospectively.

This ability to present multiple narrating forces is a feature of the comics medium that makes it particularly adept at depicting ambivalence and complicated narrative structures, in which comic narration can emerge on many registers and incorporate a myriad of narrative trajectories into a single page. In fact, there are sometimes three separate narrative arcs that operate simultaneously in graphic narrative – the verbal, the visual, and their combination. Only in tandem do they construct the overarching narrative. Together, the visual and the verbal form the narration, which can be a third perspective that sets itself apart from the discrete verbal and visual layers of meaning-making through the synthesis of potential contradictions in these systems of representation, as is the case in "*Rosen*." Looking at this pair of graphic narratives via the different levels of narration reveals how the verbal narrator, in fact, intervenes in the visually presented story to contradict the graphic narration and posit a different understanding of the relationship represented in the comic. By disconnecting that which is visualised from

that which is written, the contradictions that exist on the different levels of visual/verbal narration deconstruct narrative conventions of romantic love to dismantle the signs – or more specifically, the myths – that constitute heteronormative affection.

In Feuchtenberger's sequel, "No Roses," however, the verbal and visual narrators work together as the female protagonist traverses an untamed garden alone, presumably the same garden referenced in the final moment of "*Rosen*." In the first panel, the garden is identified as Christiane B.'s, which perhaps situates this garden as Biblical through the feminised name of Christ (Figure 5.4), thereby positioning this countermyth in dialogue with classical Christian mythology. As the protagonist wanders, plants tear and unravel her garments until she stands naked at the shoreline. As she passes through the foliage, the plants speak their names, which is a second reference to the Garden of Eden, in which God created animals out of dust for Adam to name. In contrast, however, the plants of Christiane B.'s garden name themselves.

These contradictions of Christian mythology immediately establish a juxtaposition. In Christiane B.'s garden, instead of the patriarchal forces of creation, feminine power reigns: the plants speak their own names and our protagonist rids herself of a subjectivity defined by masculine presence by freeing herself of her clothing. As the protagonist wanders through the garden, her garment accumulates the leopard-like spots of the animal-carcass-turned-dress in the previous graphic narrative, before it is torn from her body. Here, the narrative progression of "No Roses" immediately and explicitly accomplishes the symbolic elimination of an important emblem of masculine oppression established in "*Rosen*," as the protagonist embraces her nudity.

Meanwhile the woman, who continues to play the role of verbal narrator, contradicts the narration of "*Rosen*" through captions articulating the flaws and failings of the man who loves her. While the first graphic narrative emphasises her lover's devotion and adoration, "No Roses" undermines his dedication. The verbal narrator informs the reader that the protagonist's lover is, in fact, an alcoholic, who is married to another woman with whom he already has five children. The tone and perspective have changed dramatically, a shift that is depicted visually as well, with panels now presented head on or from above rather than from below. In "No Roses," the graphic and verbal narration have united, providing two types of information, verbal and visual, with the same goals: to restore to the protagonist a sense of self that is naked, free, and unhindered by the conventions of heteronormative relationships and mythic symbols of romantic love established in "*Rosen*."

As the narrative approaches its conclusion, it feigns closure. With the rhetorical question, "That does not say much about me, does it?," the protagonist implies that her lover's shortcomings somehow reflect on her. This statement opens up the possibility for two simultaneous readings. On the one hand, it activates a patriarchal understanding that a man's achievements characterise a woman's value, while, on the other, it simultaneously

deconstructs this notion: the only one who can define a woman is she herself. Feuchtenberger therefore insinuates that, much like Stein's roses, the mythic symbols and popular discourses on romantic love she engages are empty and meaningless, thereby anticipating the insincerity of this penultimate panel's final word: "*Ende*" [End].

While the above-referenced closing to the caption creates the illusion that we have reached the end of the graphic narrative, the protagonist returns for a final interjection that undoes the feigned ending of the previous panel. With the assertion "No, not the end!," the protagonist proclaims – in a speech balloon as opposed to a caption: "When next time such a spiny restharrow has the leading role, I'm not playing along!"[11] Here, the narrator herself breaks the fourth wall to demand that she play the protagonist of her life (Figure 5.6). Furthermore, in mobilising the convention of the speech balloon, Feuchtenberger has returned to the protagonist her voice so that she may speak for herself, instead of letting the actions of her lover circumscribe her subjectivity. Finally, by calling her lover by one of the plants in Christine B.'s garden, the formerly subjugated protagonist ends the graphic narrative by reversing her oppression.

Conclusion: Feuchtenberger's comics semiotics

Returning to the subject of the titles of these graphic narratives underscores the semiotic nature of Feuchtenberger's mobilisation of contemporary myth, as roses play an equally important role in Barthesian semiotic theory as they do in Feuchtenberger's graphic narratives. He writes:

> Take a bunch of roses: I use it to signify my passion. Do we have here, then, only a signifier and a signified, the roses and my passion? Not even that: to put it accurately, there are here only "passionified" roses. But on the plane of analysis, we do have three terms; for these roses weighted with passion perfectly and correctly allow themselves to be decomposed into roses and passion: the former and the latter existed before uniting and forming this third object, which is the sign. It is as true to say that on the plane of experience I cannot dissociate the roses from the message they carry, as to say that on the plane of analysis I cannot confuse the roses as signifier and the roses as sign: the signifier is empty, the sign is full, it is a meaning.
>
> (Barthes 1957, pp. 111–112)

Here, Barthes illustrates how an empty signifier can be transformed into a sign through the attribution of meaning. By adopting a Barthesian understanding of the construction of the rose's myth value, Feuchtenberger's mobilisation of the same symbol demonstrates that once the signifier is warped through, for example, a countermyth that turns the concept of the signified against itself, the sign can be transformed to posit a different meaning – or, at the very least, reveal the emptiness of its former signification.

Figure 5.6 © Anke Feuchtenberger, "No Roses," Jochen Enterprises, 1995, n.p.

Through the contradictions developed between that which she visualises (the signifier) and that which she verbalises (the signified), the sign – the meaning of the rose – comes undone. Thus, in pairing these graphic narratives, Feuchtenberger deconstructs romantic love's most powerful symbol, rendering the cut roses of "*Rosen*" no longer the emblem of affection and adoration popular culture would have us believe; instead, they represent the captivity of Feuchtenberger's protagonist in the trappings of a toxic version of heteronormative romantic love. Like Barthes's dissection of the meaning of the rose, the semiology of Feuchtenberger's roses is deconstructed through the conflicting verbal and visual layers of the graphic narratives, illustrating how the sign's relationship between the signifier and the signified is socially constructed. Then, by illuminating the contradictions that emerge between an identity defined by external and socially constructed expectations and the protagonist's own female subjectivity, which contradicts a mythologised version of womanhood, Feuchtenberger sets her protagonist in a countermyth of her own devising – a decidedly feminist artificial myth – that ultimately allows her to define her own sense of self.

Conclusion

Dismissing codified ways of perception with "It's just a myth" – or story, or fairy tale, or legend – does a disservice to those parts of society that are being oppressed by mythic perceptions of experience and subjectivity. As a society, we understand our culture, history, and social interactions *through* stories; as such, narrative structures, such as myth, define our culture, even when these anecdotes appear trivial. In fact, it is the banality of these myths – their status as so commonplace that they are rendered insignificant – that makes them so dangerous. At the same time, however, the rewriting of myth is equally powerful in drawing attention to the ways in which myth structures our understanding of society and informs how we interact.

With specific regards to Feuchtenberger's graphic art in "*Rosen*," the artist mobilises the stories, conventions, and semiotic structure of myth to reveal the contradictions inherent in patriarchal myths on romantic love through the tensions the artist constructs verbally and visually. In "No Roses," Feuchtenberger departs from such mythic representations of female experience to invent a countermyth – an artificial myth à la Barthes or a gynocentric myth à la Daly. Instead of reinforcing and reactivating mythic forces of oppression, Feuchtenberger's antimyth is grounded in the self-discovery of women to recalibrate contemporary notions on feminine identity construction. The kind of comics semiotics exemplified by "*Rosen*" and "No Roses" is therefore grounded in a mythic reimaging of power relations, one in which a woman's subjectivity and sense of self is not defined by her romantic relationships with men, as most myth and media – from fairy tales to advertising campaigns – would have us believe, but on her own, in a garden of her own naming, deciding her own fate.

Notes

1 Goethe's "Heidenroslein," Robert Burns's "My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose," Sir Edmund Spenser's "Roses are red" from his epic *The Faerie Queene*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*'s "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (Act II, Scene II).

2 Heteronormativity is defined as denoting or relating to a world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation. While most often examined in the context of its inherent bias against homosexuality, embedded homophobia, and problematic notions of gender as binary as well as harmful conceptions of "normative" vs. the "non-normative" behaviour (see Rich 1980; Sharma 2009), heteronormativity also posits norms related to gender and sexuality that reinforce existing structures of oppression and ideologies, such as the patriarchy (Sharma 2009), and is therefore also damaging to heterosexuals and, particularly, to women (Jackson 2006).

3 Feuchtenberger's work is featured on the covers and within the pages of publications on the history of East German women's movement; see, for example, Anne Ulrich Hamele's monograph on the Independent Women's Association, *Der Unabhängige Frauenverband: ein frauenpolitisches Experiment im deutschen Vereinigungsprozess* (2000).

4 Moreover, when asked to explain her conception of myth, Feuchtenberger similarly described it as a form of representation that communicates ideas circulating within society (Nijdam, interview with the author, 2014).

5 While Mary Daly's mystical feminist writing has been cited as foundational in its influence of feminist thought in the 1970s and early 1980s, her theory has also been largely dismissed due to its association with the essentialist politics of second-wave and cultural feminism. As such, Daly's work problematically focuses on western notions of normative behaviour and gender politics as well as features an impulse towards the universalisation of female experience, the reduction of the female gender to female biology, and the absence of an intersectional perspective on female oppression that also acknowledges the spectrum of gender identity and the experience of female-identifying members of the BIPOC community. However, it is not the project of this article to reiterate the criticisms of second-wave feminism already well-defined by other scholarship. As such, this chapter positions itself alongside feminist scholarship, such as the work of Michelle Meagher, that seeks to reclaim second-wave feminism despite its problems in an effort to mobilise its theories to examine texts that are firmly situated within the politics of that generation. Moreover, this research joins the work of scholars, such as Clare Monagle, whose 2019 article "Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology: Mysticism, Difference, and Feminist History" revisits the role of Daly in second-wave feminism. For more information, see Michelle Meagher 's 2011 "Telling Stories about Feminist Art" in *Feminist Theory,* 12(3), pp. 297–316, Cathryn Bailey's 1997 "Making Waves and Drawing Lines: The Politics of Defining the Vicissitudes of Feminism" in *Hypatia*, 12(3), pp. 17–28, Jonathan Dean's 2009 "Who's Afraid of Third Wave Feminism?" in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 11(3), pp. 334–352, and Stacy Gillis's 2004 "Genealogies and Generations: The Politics and Praxis of Third Wave Feminism" in *Women's History Review*, 13(2), pp. 165–182.

6 Founded by Feuchtenberger and Henning Wagenbreth in 1988, *PGH Glühende Zunkunft* was an artist collective that collaborated on projects and exhibited

side by side from 1988 to 1993. After the Fall of the Wall, Feuchtenberger and Wagenbreth were joined by Detlef Beck and Holger Fickelscherer.

7 The feminist politics of East and West Germany differed dramatically (see Ferree 1993 and Kulawik 1991/1992); however, that was no more acutely palpable than immediately after German unification, when women arguably became the "losers" of German unification (Ferree 1994, p. 598). After 1990, East German women were suddenly faced with disproportionately high unemployment rates, the loss of many childcare and maternity benefits, and a new higher cost of living, particularly for basic goods. Moreover, the economic situation for older women and single mothers became especially precarious without institutionalised support from the East German state (Ferree 1994, p. 598).

8 Hoffmann was an educated psychiatrist and teacher, whose still popular children's story features heavy-handed patriarchal morality in short rhyming stories on the antics of misbehaving children and the sometimes-horrific consequences of their actions, such as cutting off a child's thumbs to stop thumbsucking. However, it remains unclear as to how emblematic *Struwwelpeter* was in terms of childrearing practices of the time vs. to what extent the stories were based on the author's own experience and concerns in parenting. Nevertheless, the immense popularity of the volume speaks to its cultural significance and the championing of a certain type of paternal moralism in the late 19th century. For more information, see Barbara Smith Chalou's 2007 *Struwwelpeter: Humor Or Horror?: 160 Years Later* (Lanham: Lexington Books).

9 "Living Next Door to Alice" explicitly draws on the work of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. However, dedicated to Alice Liddell in the title's accompanying caption, "Living Next Door to Alice" paints a very different picture of Carroll's fantasy world. Feuchtenberger's rendition of this classic children's story is even more surreal and haunting than the original text, simplifying the narrative to a series of bizarre encounters in abstracted spaces that bare few relationships to Carroll's imagined world. Furthermore, "Living Next Door to Alice" references not only Carroll's story about Alice but also the process of its making and the paedophilic controversy that surrounded Carroll's infatuation with the young girl as well as the photos he took of young Alice Liddell and other children, sometimes in the nude (Weldy and Crisp 2012; see also Woolf 2010).

10 Perhaps she could also be pregnant.

11 Spiny restharrow is a European woody herb (*O. repens*) with pink flowers, unifoliolate leaves, and long tough roots that remarkably resembles a vulva.

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6 For sex-positivity?

Potential and limits of representing sex and sexuality in Ulli Lust's comics across genres

Anna Vuorinne

Introduction

If one were to give a one-word summary of the work of Austrian-born, Germany-based comics artist Ulli Lust (b. 1967), the word might be sex. From her early pornographic fanzines to her famous graphic memoirs exploring her sexual history, Lust has continuously addressed the entanglements of sex, gender, and sexuality, with a specific focus on female gender and heterosexuality. She has regularly framed her comics with a feminist mission, emphasising the need for women's stories and perspectives (see e.g., Sobel 2014), and more specifically, described her work as sex-positive (Innerhofer 2016), associating it with a particular strand of feminism, committed to a critical, unprejudiced, and constructivist approach to human sexuality. But how exactly does sex-positive feminism manifest in her comics? In this chapter, I examine the representations of sex and sexuality in the comics by Lust and consider them against the founding ideas of sex-positive feminism.

The chapter gives an overview of the representations of sex and sexuality in Lust's work, starting from her early comics and ending with the most recent ones. As I explore her oeuvre by discussing a selection of comics, I analyse the narrative strategies of her comics vis-à-vis their political implications. On the one hand, I map out the use of genre conventions and comics storytelling by asking: How do her comics utilise different genres of comics – pornography, autobiography, and reportage – to represent sex and sexuality? What possibilities and challenges do these genres and their narrative conventions entail for dealing with sex and sexuality? On the other hand, I trace salient features as well as differences in the representations by examining the following questions: How do Lust's comics depict sex and sexuality? In what ways do they challenge and/or reproduce anti-feminist discourses on sex and sexuality? Based on my analysis, I argue that Lust's comics express, on the one hand constructivist, non-normative, and diversity-acknowledging ideas on sex and sexuality, and on the other hand, reaffirm essentialist and hierarchical thinking, which makes their relationship to

sex-positive feminism ambivalent. While the contribution of Lust's work to the politics of sexual equality remains controversial, her comics nevertheless attest to the creative potential of comic art with regard to the matters of sexuality, and offer valuable opportunities to reflect the feminist possibilities and challenges of the medium when representing sex.

Ulli Lust as a comics artist

A late bloomer as a comics artist, Ulli Lust started to draw comics only at the age of 30. With a background in fashion illustration, she began her artistic career as a visual artist and a children's book illustrator in the beginning of the 1990s. After moving from Vienna to Berlin to study illustration in the mid-90s, Lust found comic art thanks to her fellow students. Together, they formed a collective called Monogatari, which was among the first to publish reportage comics in Germany (Sobel 2014). The interest in journalism is clearly visible in Lust's early work, which perceptively documents mundane life in Berlin and other urban surroundings. While Lust counts as one of the pioneers of German-language comics reportage, she is first and foremost known for her two autobiographical comics albums recounting her life as a young woman, *Heute ist der letzte Tag vom Rest deines Lebens* (2009) [*Today Is the Last Day of the Rest of Your Life*, 2013] and *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein* (2017) [*How I Tried to Be a Good Person*, 2019], both of which have been translated to multiple languages and acknowledged with major comics awards. The first volume has been translated into more than ten languages, including English and French, as well as translations to Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish, and awarded the Max und Moritz-Preis, Prix Révélation, and Ignatz Award. The second volume has also been translated into several major languages and awarded the Max und Moritz-Preis. Thanks to the awards and translations, Lust is today one of the stars of the German comics scene, and the most acclaimed female comics artist of the German-speaking world internationally.

In addition to being a comics artist, Lust is an active member of the comics community. Since 2005, she has worked as the editor of the web comics publisher Electrocomics, one of the first international, multilingual (German-English) platforms to publish comic art online. Besides making and publishing comics, Lust works as a comics teacher, holding a permanent teacher's position (*Professorin*) at Hannover University of Applied Sciences and Arts. While her commitment to feminism is present in her artistic practice and her public profile, it shows also in her collaborations with other feminist artists. She is, for example, an active member of the Hamburg-based women artist collective SPRING with an eponymous comics magazine, and features – with a collaborative comic "Her big feminist ass" made together with her partner, comics artist Kai Pfeiffer – in the feminist comics anthology *The Big Feminist BUT: Comics about Women, Men, and the IFs, ANDs & BUTs of Feminism* (2013), where they represent European comic art among the contributors almost exclusively from North America.

Thinking sex with sex-positive feminists

Sex-positive feminism[1] took its shape in the US of the early 1980s and has had a profound impact on feminist and queer theory ever since.[2] It starts from the premise that sexuality is not an essential property but a socially, historically, and politically constructed category, which is separate from, yet overlapping with, gender (Rubin 1992, p. 149, 169–170; Vance 1992, pp. 7–10). Sex-positive feminism strives for sexual politics, where sexuality and sexual oppression are always addressed in connection to other social categories, such as age, class, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, and religion – that is, intersectionally, to use a term coined and popularised much later in feminist thought (Vance 1992, p. 17).

According to Gayle Rubin, sexual essentialism is but one of the six "fundamental axioms" regarding sexuality in modern Western culture, which a feminist approach to sexuality needs to challenge. The other five axioms are: (1) "sex-negativity," or the idea of sex being primarily a dangerous and destructive force, which becomes acceptable only by an exception such as reproduction, marriage, or love; (2) "the fallacy of misplaced scale," or the tendency to burden things related to sexuality with an excess of significance; (3) "the hierarchical valuation of sex acts," or a habit of placing sexual acts in a hierarchy, where the highest position is given to marital and reproductive heterosexuality; (4) "the domino effect of sexual peril," or a belief foregrounded on rigid morals of "good" and "bad" sexuality according to which crossing the line between these two will trigger chaos; and (5) "the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation," or a belief that sexuality is a universal matter conforming to a single standard (Rubin 1992, pp. 149–154). Reversing the aforementioned axioms, sex-positive feminism can thus be summarised as a constructivist, sex-positive (or -neutral), anti-hierarchical, diversity-acknowledging approach to sexuality, that treats sexuality as a significant but not overly important aspect of human life, and bases its sexual ethics on the idea of mutual consent rather than a universal moral system of "good" and "bad" sexuality.

While sex-positive feminism laid the ground for a critical understanding of sexuality at large, in the early days, it was concerned with the question of female sexuality in particular. Of specific importance was the idea proposed by Carol S. Vance that female sexuality, as it appears in patriarchy, is a complex and ambiguous matter unfolding through the dialectic of sexual pleasure and sexual danger (Vance 1992, p. 1). According to her, a feminist politics of sexuality can only emerge by the equal acknowledgement of these polarities:

> Social movements, feminism included, move toward a vision; they cannot operate solely on fear. It is not enough to move women away from danger and oppression; it is necessary to move toward something: towards pleasure, agency, self-definition. Feminism must increase women's pleasure and joy, not just increase our misery.
>
> (Vance 1992, p. 24)[3]

Sex-positive feminism has always been both an academic approach and an activist movement, often a combination of these two. Outside academia, sex-positive thought has, for example, paved the way for feminist and queer sex shops and pornography, decriminalisation of sex work, more comprehensive and inclusive sex education, and contributed to a more open-minded and pluralistic sexual discourse in general (Fahs 2014, pp. 268–269). As I next proceed to the discussion of Lust's comics, the framework of sex-positive theory will guide my analysis as I explore the relationship of her comic art to sex-positive feminism. The analysis, divided in three parts, is organised by genre starting from pornography, proceeding to autobiography, and ending in reportage.

Pornographic visions of pleasure and fantasy

Airpussy (2005) is the final volume of Lust's self-published pornographic comics series called "Springpoems" (1998–2005), and the only one republished later by a publishing house, the Belgian small publisher employé du moi in 2009.[4] Following the tradition of erotic comics, the series focuses on explicit representation of sexual acts and pleasure, aiming for sexual arousal for its readers (cf. Hall 2016, p. 154). The stories are set in contemporary urban surroundings, such as a club, subway, or supermarket, and portray sexual fantasies and sexual acts in the framework of ancient myths of fertility. With its 40 pages, *Airpussy*, a playfully erotic story of the spring adventures of the goddess of fertility, is the longest comic in the series. While the comic does not depict only heterosexual activities, it seems reasonable to define it as heterosexual porn, since the plot of the comic is centred on the goddess's quest to find a perfect male lover, and the story culminates with her having ecstatic sex with a hunky male security guard. Visuality plays the leading role in the aesthetics of the wordless comic, which includes text only in the form of paratexts (these contain the comic's cover, intro page, and a short postscript about the mythological subtext of the story).

Since the very beginning, the comic is explicitly focused on female pleasure. It opens with a lengthy scene, depicting the morning of the goddess and showing her masturbating in the bath. The sexual pleasure of the goddess is represented as an extreme corporeal experience: Her bodily sensations make her writhe in pleasure, raise her body above the ground, and give her the ability to fly – hence the title *Airpussy* (Figure 6.1). In the pornographic-mythological world of the story, the ability to fly has both a figurative and a literal meaning, being simultaneously a recurring metaphor for the sexual pleasure experienced by the protagonist and an actual ability she possesses. The goddess is a superwoman of pleasure, whose ability to experience pleasure and master her sexual gratification gives her the power of flying.[5] In the middle of the steamy masturbation session, the comic changes into a slapstick comedy mode and shows the goddess falling down into her bathtub with a big splash, as she momentarily loses her concentration

Figure 6.1 © Ulli Lust, *Airpussy*, Electrocomics, 2005, p. 6

on masturbation. Combining celebration of female pleasure with playful humour, the first scene makes evident the comic's empowering yet simultaneously funny approach to sex.

It is noteworthy that an erotic comic, for the most part describing sexual encounters between the protagonist and other characters, opens with a solo sex scene, a solitary foreplay to the following sexual adventures. While masturbation is certainly not an uncommon subject in pornography, in *Airpussy* it seems to have a specific significance. By showing the goddess pleasuring herself to an orgasm and presenting her as a master of her own pleasure, the comic challenges the social stigma related to female masturbation with a positive representation, which simultaneously normalises and celebrates it.[6]

While most of mainstream pornography, comics included, has been centred on the sexual pleasures and desires of heterosexual men, studies on pornographic comics by, for, and about women have shown that the genre can certainly be adapted to explore and express women's sexual pleasures as well (see e.g., Shamoon 2004; Brown 2013; Roberts 2015). The appeal of visual pornography is strongly related to voyeurism, the pleasure embedded in the act of looking. As the voyeuristic pleasures of mainstream porn have conventionally been related to the heterosexual male gaze, pornographic comics for women have been committed to finding ways to renegotiate the positions of looking (Shamoon 2004; Roberts 2015). Using voyeurism "as both theme and structure," as Jude Roberts (2015, pp. 215, 222–224) puts it, contemporary pornographic comics for women tackle the issue of gaze with stories that both portray and reflect the sexual implications of looking and being looked at.

The question of voyeurism is also addressed in *Airpussy*. Once the goddess has taken her bath and dressed up, she heads for a stroll in town. Partly walking, partly flying by the power of masturbation, she looks for a potential lover among the men she meets on her way. While she flies by an apartment building, her eye catches something pleasing: a shooting of a gay porn film is about to begin in one of the apartments. The goddess

takes a comfortable position by the window and enjoys the show while masturbating. Here the comic, again, normalises female masturbation but more than that, it valorises women's consumption of visual pornography by portraying voyeuristic pleasures. Showing the goddess enjoying porn, the scene appears as a wink to the readers, simultaneously making them aware of the visual structures of the pornographic comic they are reading and encouraging them to embrace the pleasures of voyeurism. With the reference to gay porn, the comic detaches voyeurism from the heterosexual male gaze of mainstream pornography, highlighting the alternative pleasures of looking and implicating a kind of sexual solidarity between women and homosexual men (although, in the heterosexual context of the comic, this strategy might be regarded also as a heterosexual fetishisation of gay sex).

While the visual form of comics allows the renegotiation of the spectatorial positions of pornography, it also presents other interesting possibilities with regard to pornographic representation. By playfully breaking the boundaries of physical reality, the previous examples from *Airpussy* confirm the notion made by several scholars that one of the most attractive elements in comics for pornographic representation is their potential of fantasy (see e.g., Brown 2013; Roberts 2015). The flexible spatiotemporal architecture of comic art is another element, which enables experimental and innovative representations of sex and sexuality.[7] The medium-specific way of treating time as space on the page presents interesting opportunities both for representing and for consuming erotic content: On the one hand, it allows the artist to experiment with the succession of time; on the other hand, it gives the readers an opportunity to enjoy the erotic visions at their own pace (Brown 2013, 2.1–2.4; Hall 2016, pp. 160–161).

Airpussy utilises the spatiotemporal potential of comics storytelling most vividly in a scene, which flirts with bestiality by depicting a sexual encounter between the goddess and a leopard. On her adventures, the goddess comes across a black woman walking with a leopard on the street. While a leopard on a leash appears to be, at first, the most surprising element of the scene, it quickly escalates to an even more fantastic scenario, where the leopard gives oral sex to the goddess (Figure 6.2). When the comic shows the leopard licking the goddess's vagina with its big tongue, it uses alternative panel arrangement as an expressive method. The page follows the comic's regular 3×3-panel-structure, but breaks the linear top-to-bottom panel succession with images "bleeding" from one panel to another. The bleeds introduce a circular panel arrangement, with its beginning and end in the upper left panel, transforming the spatial–temporal structure of the page into an infinite circle or spiral of excitement and pleasure.

The playfully experimental pornographic representations make evident that *Airpussy* is underpinned with a sex-positive agenda. The comic represents sex and sexuality in a gratifying and respectful, yet humorous, manner, and puts female desires and pleasures at the centre of the narrative. In addition, it seems to be communicating with a (heterosexual) female

Figure 6.2 © Ulli Lust, *Airpussy*, Electrocomics, 2005, p. 19

readership, encouraging among women readers an active exploration of their sexual pleasures. As much as the positive representation of female sexuality is based on the potential of fantasy in the comic, the prevalence of fantasy also imposes limitations for a critical and subversive treatment of sex and sexuality. Not unlike many other pornographic productions, *Airpussy* represents an erotic fantasy world, where sex appears detached from its social, political, and ethical frameworks (cf. Brown 2013, 4.1). The mythological subtext of the comic actualises a cultural context to the representation of sexuality, but instead of reflecting the cultural meanings of the myths of fertility, the comic appears merely as a reproduction of the myth (and its binary implications) in a modern setting. As Hall and others have argued, pornographic representations may use their fantastical, even utopian, possibilities to address sociopolitical issues (see Dyer 2002, pp. 138–150; Hall 2016, p. 162), yet this does not seem to be the case in *Airpussy*. The comic certainly makes a feminist contribution to the politics of sexual

representation by celebrating (heterosexual) female sexuality and refiguring the representational strategies of pornography, thus revealing the critical potential of fantasy and pleasure. However, without sufficient contextual information of the complexities of women's sexual realities, the potential of fantasy and experimental storytelling is in danger of remaining limited.

Autobiographical perspectives on sexual agency and liberation

In her most recent work, Lust has adopted the genre of autobiographical comics, and with the change of genre, the thematic focus on the entanglements of gender, sex, and sexuality has become even more evident. Contributing to the current boom of graphic memoirs, Lust follows the tradition of autobiographical comics, where topics from gender roles to masturbation and sexual trauma have been explored candidly since the 1970s (see e.g., Gardner 2008, pp. 6–19; Chute 2010, pp. 18–20). Her two-volume autobiographical series addresses topics from punk culture to parenthood and from friendship to artistic work, rendering her life in its diversity, yet the backbone of the series is her sexual history as a heterosexual woman.[8] The first volume of the series, *Heute ist der letzte Tag vom Rest deines Lebens*, tells about the teenaged author–protagonist's hitchhiking journey through 1980s' Italy by focusing on her experiences of gender-based and sexual violence. The second volume, *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein*, portrays her life in her 20s in 1990s' Vienna as she explores her sexual freedom in a non-monogamous relationship while navigating between the roles of an artist, a mother, a partner, and a lover. Depicting how Ulli's[9] sexual history as a woman is marked by the experiences of oppression, violence, and trauma on the one hand, and by the experiences of exploration, pleasure, and empowerment on the other, the two volumes seem to reflect the polarities of pleasure and danger described by Vance (1992).[10]

Heute ist der letzte Tag vom Rest deines Lebens shows Ulli in a constant defence of her sexual integrity as she fights against recurring sexual harassment and violence. An account of her experience of the Italian macho culture, the story paints a pessimistic picture of female sexuality, where an extremely patriarchal culture makes a female agency of any kind practically impossible, as heterosexual relationships are defined by an absolute male entitlement, and the female body is nothing but an object of male desire. The distinctly pessimistic perspective of the comic represents a significant exception to the otherwise optimistic descriptions of sexual exploration, pleasure, and self-fulfilment in the oeuvre of Lust. While most of her work, and especially the second autobiographical volume, defines sexual agency as a positive liberty – a freedom *to* engage in sexual activities – *Heute ist der letzte Tag vom Rest deines Lebens* serves as a reminder that sexual agency should be understood also as a negative liberty – a freedom *from* unwanted sexual engagement (cf. Fahs 2014, pp. 269–275).[11]

Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein explores Ulli's (sexual) self-development vis-à-vis her experiences of non-monogamy and sexual liberation. The comic opens by showing her in a conflicted situation: she has an emotionally rewarding and harmonious monogamous relationship with Georg, a fellow artist working in a theatre; yet, she is feeling uneasy because their sex life does not satisfy her. The comic renders Ulli's emotional conflict by playfully depicting her growing sexual appetite while simultaneously emphasising the feelings of rejection and shame evoked by it. In so doing, it seems to draw attention to how Ulli's compliance to sex-negative thinking, which idealises virtuous female sexuality and devalues the role of sex in romantic relationships, prevents her from listening to her sexual needs. Because the uneasiness towards her feelings of desire and the fear of upsetting her partner makes Ulli unable to communicate openly with Georg, the sexual problems of the relationship are eventually solved by his initiative. As it turns out, Georg has trouble staying sexually active in a long, serious relationship. Ulli is at first afraid of losing her loving companion, but the couple agrees that their relationship can continue if they allow each other the possibility to have other sexual partners. Unlike Georg, Ulli has not been in an open relationship before, yet she welcomes the new situation with great excitement: she enjoys her new-regained sexual freedom and soon finds herself a lover, Kimata aka Kim, a Nigerian man living in Vienna.

When Ulli and Kim start their sexual relationship, her erotic daydreams turn into erotic reality. Reminiscent of Lust's early work, *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein* renders the sexual acts between Ulli and Kim in an explicit and graphic manner. Like *Airpussy*, *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein* utilises the affordances of comics storytelling to create eye-catching whole-page erotic constellations, where space and time, imagination and reality come together to visualise the pleasures of the female protagonist, in this case, the author's past self (see Figure 6.3). While the representation of pleasurable sex in the comic is highly aesthetic, it might be regarded slightly more realistic than that of *Airpussy*. As Figure 6.3 illustrates, *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein* shows Ulli's and Kim's bodies covered in sweat and pubic hair, renders her stomach with stretch marks, and includes condom use in the depiction of intercourse. By including details conventionally considered unsexy in Western culture, the comic's pornographic imagery renegotiates normative ideas of sexiness and, in a small way, strives towards a more inclusive representation of the erotic. Moreover, the comic emphasises the physiological details of the sexual enjoyment experienced by the protagonist: It represents her excitement through the wetness of her vagina and verbally addresses the pleasures of clitoral stimulation.[12]

Despite the minor aesthetic differences, the most distinctive aspect between the pornographic representations of the two comics is the narrative environment in which they appear. While sex in *Airpussy* exists in an erotic fantasy world beyond any social and political ramifications, in *Wie ich*

Figure 6.3 © Ulli Lust, *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein*, Suhrkamp, p. 95

versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein, sex is inherently connected to the identity and relationships of the protagonist and embedded in the surrounding sociopolitical reality. In *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein*, the narrative context of memoir adds meaning in the pornographic scenarios. The explicit, lengthy sex scenes give an expression to Ulli's sexual self-discovery, as she finds and asserts her sexual agency by accepting, exploring, and acting on her sexual needs and desires. The pornographic representation highlights the importance of sexual pleasure and fulfilment to her as a person, implicating pleasurable sex as an essential part of a good life and sexuality as a fundamental layer of identity.

Besides speaking for active and independent female sexuality, and addressing the right to sexual fulfilment, *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein* makes a strong case for non-monogamy. As the move from monogamy to an open relationship and eventually to non-monogamy enables Ulli's sexual self-discovery, the comic seems to implicate that non-monogamy is a definitive part of her sexual identity.[13] Although the story draws attention to the challenges faced by the love triangle and depicts how Kim's jealousy slowly turns into extremely abusive and violent behaviour, which eventually ends the relationship, these problems are not presented as a counterargument against non-monogamy as a relationship model but as consequences of not complying with the principles of openness, respect, and trust presented as the foundation of any relationship. Ulli and Georg's relationship survives, because they talk things through as openly as possible and show respect to each other, while Ulli and Kim's relationship collapses due to impaired communication and the lack of trust.

As the comic explores the implications of non-monogamy in individual lives, it simultaneously draws attention to the cultural and institutional conditions of intimate relationships and sexuality. The sociocultural frameworks of intimate relationships are addressed, for example, through references to famous non-monogamous relationships: the reference to Fela Kuti and his 27 wives challenges the norm of monogamy by exposing it as a Western concept, whereas the reference to Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre presents non-monogamy as a visionary, even a feminist relationship model. The criticism against monogamy as a conservative and overly institutionalised relationship model is most evidently present in Ulli's attitude to marriage. While her family, living in the Austrian countryside, is obviously waiting for Ulli to marry and "settle down," she regards marriage as the epitome of a conservative, suffocating lifestyle with which she will not comply, and thus has no problem entering into a marriage of convenience with Kim to help him stay in Austria when his residence permit expires, even if they have no plans to be together happily ever after.

While the genre of autobiography allows one to critically examine one's personal experiences in their social, cultural, and political contexts (cf. Felski 1989, pp. 86–96; Chute 2010, pp. 20–24; Køhlert 2019, pp. 3–8), the focus on personal truth may also become a trap if it hinders the ability

to see alterity beyond one's own position. In *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein*, the most critical blind spot is the representation of male sexuality, especially with regard to race. There seems to be no doubt that the depiction of Ulli and Kim's love affair is motivated with good intentions to represent an "inter-racial" and "inter-cultural" relationship in an unprejudiced manner. The comic draws attention, for example, to the everyday racism Kim faces on the street and describes how people treat Ulli differently, when she goes out with him. When depicting Kim's impression of Claudia, a white woman who has a crush on him, the comic also touches upon the habit of white people to fetishise blackness. Kim feels repelled towards Claudia because he regards her as "*eine dieser weissen Frauen, die auf schwarze Männer stehen*" ["one of those white women who are into black men"], which makes him declare firmly: "*Ich möchte nicht auf meine Hautfarbe reduziert werden*" (Lust 2017, p. 131) ["I'd rather not be reduced to the color of my skin"] (Lust 2019, p. 131). Even if ethnic discrimination and fetishisation are explicitly addressed within the story, a closer look into the character of Kim shows that the comic's representation of black male sexuality is nevertheless underpinned with racist ideas deeply ingrained in hegemonic Western culture.

As bell hooks, Richard Dyer, and others have shown, the notions of blackness and sexuality are inseparable in, what hooks (1992, p. 72) calls, the "racialized pornographic imagination" of Western culture, where whiteness is associated with high spirituality, purity, and sexual normativity, and blackness with "primitive" corporeality, eroticism, excessive sexuality, and non-normativity (see e.g., hooks 1992, pp. 21–39; Dyer 1997, pp. 18–30). In *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein*, the binary conception of "white" and "black" sexuality is most evidently visible in the ways of representing the central male characters and their relationship to the white female protagonist. Depicted as a civilised and caring, yet sexually (almost) impotent "soulmate," Georg embodies the stereotypical notions of whiteness, whereas Kim, represented as a hot-headed, wild, and hypersexual lover, embodies the stereotypical notions of blackness.[14] "Dark desires are part of the story of whiteness, but as what the whiteness of whiteness has to struggle against," writes Richard Dyer (1997, p. 28), pointing out how the projection of sexuality on blackness has served as a strategy for whites to speak about their own desires through dissociation. Taking into account the dissociative logic described by Dyer, it appears symptomatic that Ulli experiences sexual liberation and asserts sexual agency in an intimate relationship with a black person, who is assumed to "have secret access to intense pleasure, particularly the pleasures of the body" (hooks 1992, p. 34) in the racist mindset.

As the aforementioned qualities of Georg and Kim are associated with the difference of their personalities and cultural affiliations, the racist discourse operates mostly on the level of culture and refrains from biological racism. In one scene, however, the comic makes an implicit comparison between the bodies of Georg and Kim, when a thought bubble revealing Ulli's unspoken

feelings during a conversation between her and Georg declares that Georg's penis is "*zu klein*" (Lust 2017, p. 263) ["too small"] (Lust 2019, p. 263) for her. Kim is not mentioned on that occasion, yet the notion seems to imply that Ulli's attraction to him is (at least partly) related to the large size of his penis, which objectifies his body and perpetuates yet another stereotype related to the assumed hypersexuality of black men.

The representation of "white" and "black" sexuality exposes an essentialist and even biologically based perspective to sex, which is evident also in the nature-inspired imagery and symbolism of the comic – a recurring element in Lust's work at large.[15] As the page where Ulli's hairy genitals turn into a tree full of singing birds (Figure 6.3) illustrates, the comic regularly uses animals, plants, and other artefacts related to nature as metaphors for sex, desire, and pleasure, promoting an understanding of sex in terms of nature, something natural and wild. The representation of heterosexuality in the comic seems to be based on a biological-essentialist conception as well; the visual depictions of heterosexual activities put male and female genitals often in the spotlight. In this way, the comic not only draws attention to the anatomical gender difference between a man and a woman but also seems to reduce heterosexuality to matters of anatomy. Similarly, the comic associates non-monogamy with the idea of "naturality." When Ulli, contemplating her intimate relationships, contends that for her loving two men is "*die natürlichste Sache auf der Welt*" (Lust 2017, p. 181) ["the most natural thing in the world"] (Lust 2019, p. 181), the comic seems to make a suggestion that non-monogamy is closer to "natural" human behaviour, and thus a better alternative to unnatural, institutionalised monogamy.

Lust's autobiographical work demonstrates that the genre of autobiography, which allows one to reflect one's sexual history in larger societal, historical, and political frameworks, carries the potential for a constructivist and nuanced approach to sex and sexuality. At the same time, a closer analysis of *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein* shows that autobiography may also be a challenging platform to address sexuality in a diversity-acknowledging, anti-essential, and non-hierarchical manner. On the one hand, the comic uses the positionality and the experiences of the author, a white heterosexual woman, as a tool for addressing the effects of normative conceptions of sexuality and conservative sexual politics in the lives of women, and deploys autobiographical storytelling flavoured with pornography to challenge stereotypical and harmful ideas on (female) sexuality. On the other hand, the comic's representation of "black" (male) sexuality vis-à-vis "white" sexuality reproduces stereotypical and racist notions of whiteness and blackness, showing that the focus on one's own sexual truth may turn into blindness to the positions of others and enhance essentialist thinking.[16] While the racist discourse remains the most critical issue in *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein* with regard the ideals of sex-positive feminism (intersectionality in particular), the comic, as I have shown, in other ways also promotes essentialist and biologically based ideas

of sexuality, which contradicts the efforts of understanding and challenging the sociocultural conditions of sexuality.

A further danger of an autobiographical approach is concealed in the representation of non-monogamy in the comic. Depicting Ulli's experiences and ideas of non-monogamy, the comic challenges the norm of monogamy, yet proposing that non-monogamy complies with the "law of nature," it not only adapts the biological sexuality discourse but transforms her personal preference into a universal dogma. This kind of argumentation, as Vance (1992, p. 21) observes, is an insidious side effect of the "personal is political" approach to sexuality, which makes "statements of personal preference that inevitably appear in honest discussion [...] into statements that may be probabilistically true [...] into statements that are truly prescriptive." While the aforementioned remains the only occasion which explicitly refers to the "naturality" of non-monogamy, it nevertheless is a reminder of how perilously thin the line between exploring political dimensions of personal experiences and preaching self-contained generalisations may be in autobiography.

Observations of sexual diversity in reportage

The matters of sex and sexuality are explored in Lust's oeuvre especially in the genres of pornography and autobiography, but they are also, albeit to a lesser degree, touched upon in her journalistic comics. "*Es war ein ganz zauberhafter Abend*" (2012) ["It was such a charming evening, darling!," 2012] is a short gonzo-style comics reportage about a night at the famous sex- and fetish-oriented nightclub KitKatClub in Berlin.[17] The comic describes its method of approach as "*Naturstudien" or "teilnehmende Feldforschung*" (Lust 2012a, p. 68) ["nature studies" / "participatory field research"] (Lust 2012b, p. 3), referring to the fact that the reportage draws on observations, interviews as well as personal sexual experiences collected at the club. Following the tradition of contemporary comics journalism, the reportage is told from the perspective of the author (Lust), who is also one of the characters (Ulli) of the comic, or in this case, the main character. The comic resembles in many ways Lust's autobiographical work, yet the journalistic framework introduces an important change of perspective. In the reportage, the author's autobiographical avatar, Ulli, is not only the experiencing main character but also an observing reporter, which moves the perspective beyond the sexual history of its author and towards the sexualities of other people.

Ulli's position in the comic is communicated to the reader already in the first panels, which show her interviewing and drawing a dark-haired woman at the club. The woman describes for Ulli her first night at the club, telling her that the occasion was also her first time of having sex with a man. Ulli is astonished to hear that someone would have the courage to have sex for the first time on the dance floor of a club. In the next panel, however, the woman

turns her heteronormative assumptions around by telling her that she was not as sexually inexperienced as Ulli assumes, since her previous sexual partners had just been women. The opening conversation paves the way for the rest of the reportage, which explores sexual diversity vis-à-vis assumptions and prejudices related to sexuality.

After the first scene, the reportage commences with visual impressions from the club. Ulli is depicted sitting in the corner and observing people around her, or rather, not only observing but checking them out. As she evaluates the attractiveness of the people around her, she categorises them under labels such as "trophy boy" or "*schwul*" ["gay"] as the thought bubbles in the panels indicate (Figure 6.4). Depicting how Ulli evaluates people based on their looks, the comic seems to draw attention to the habit of making identity assumptions based purely on visual appearance. Similarly to the first scene, Ulli's presumptions are exposed only to be subverted afterwards. She approaches the tattooed man in an S&M style leather outfit, portrayed in the fourth panel of the aforementioned sequence, and asks him if she could draw a picture of him. As the man, an assumed homosexual, replies, "*Ja klar. Muss nur vorher meine Herrin fragen"* (Lust 2012a, p. 70) ["Yes, sure. I just have to ask my mistress"] (Lust 2012b, p. 7), the comic points, again, towards her false assumptions of someone's sexual orientation.

Later in the comic, Ulli makes the acquaintance of the "trophy boy" and his partner. Like the aforementioned encounters, this one turns out unpredictable as well: First, Ulli learns that the "trophy boy's" partner is five months pregnant and is then invited to have a threesome with the couple. Looking hesitant at first, she accepts the invitation by kissing the woman and caressing her breasts. The sexual encounter continues with the "trophy boy" joining in by penetrating Ulli from behind until a shared climax. The scene ends with the three of them embracing each other tenderly and Ulli thanking the woman for being her first female sexual partner ever. Next, in

Figure 6.4 © Ulli Lust, "Es war ein ganz zauberhafter Abend," *Strapazin* #106, 2012, p. 69

the three final panels of the comic, Ulli is depicted walking home at dawn, feeling euphoric, and thinking: "*Mein Mann wird Augen machen, wenn ich ihm das erzähle"* (Lust 2012a, p. 79) ["My husband will be amazed, when I tell him!"] (Lust 2012b, p. 26). While the earlier encounters compelled Ulli to adjust her expectations of other people's sexuality, the encounter with the couple makes her reexplore her own sexual desires and pleasures as well. Showing how the older woman, whose sexual attraction was questioned at first sight, turns out to be Ulli's most memorable sexual partner of the night, the comic highlights the perils of first impressions and speaks for the open-minded exploration of one's sexual habits and pleasures. The last panel, which seemingly plays with the reader's presumed expectation of Ulli's relationship status, extends the project of assumption exposing beyond the storyworld and invites the readers to face their normative conceptions of others', and possibly their own, intimate relationships and sexuality.

As "*Es war ein ganz zauberhafter Abend*" draws attention to the variety of sexual orientations, it clearly stands out in the prevailing focus on heterosexuality in the comics by Lust. What appears to be the most significant and subversive difference of reportage compared to her other comics, however, is the way in which it defines sex. If one would like to give a very generalised and simplified description of sex in the comics by Lust, Ulli's statement of her sexual preferences in the reportage might provide a decent summary: "*Ich stehe [...] auf einfaches Vögeln"* (Lust 2012a, p. 70) ["I'm [...] into simple fucking"] (Lust 2012b, p. 8). While both *Airpussy* and *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein*, for example, do include depictions of masturbation, kissing, cunnilingus, and so on, the sexual action most often culminates in penile–vaginal intercourse (Ulli's sexual encounter with the couple is yet another variation of this kind of representation). Ulli's aforementioned statement seems to offer an autobiographical explanation to this tendency, but the recurring representations of PIV sex nevertheless reaffirm a very narrow and normative (even reproduction-oriented) conception of sexual behaviour, where (heterosexual) intercourse is the primary and the most respectable kind of sexual activity.

In the reportage, Ulli's discussions with the other characters expand the definition of sex and ask the reader to think about pleasure beyond the stimulation of the so-called sex organs. Gummi, the leather outfit man, tells Ulli whilst she is drawing him, that he does not have sex in the sense of "fucking" but enjoys spanking others. Gummi offers her a butt spank as a reward for the drawing, but regrets his offer rather quickly as he learns that spanking makes her squeak too much for his taste. A while later, a man with a top hat approaches Ulli on the dance floor and asks if she would allow him to massage her feet, as "[*er] steh[t] auf Füsse in Strumpfhosen*" (Lust 2012a, p. 74) ["[he] love[s] feet in tights"] (Lust 2012b, p. 15). Regarding the man's request as strange, maybe even uncomfortable, she declines at first, but as she only a moment later feels her high heels chafing her feet, she goes after the man and gives him a positive answer. Ulli and the man, who is named

Figure 6.5 © Ulli Lust, "Es war ein ganz zauberhafter Abend," *Strapazin* #106, 2012, p. 74

Alex, find a comfortable place to sit, and she draws his portrait while he gives a foot massage to her (Figure 6.5). Unlike the earlier spanking, the foot massage appears a genuinely pleasurable experience for both parties.

As Ulli and Alex discuss their sexual pleasures, he tells her that giving a foot massage feels "*wie küssen*" (Lust 2012a, p. 74) ["like kissing"] (Lust 2012b, p. 16) to him. As Figure 6.5 shows, his statement is accompanied with original sketches of him, divergent from the polished and cartoony primary style of the comic.[18] Through their placement in the middle of the retrospectively drawn images, the original sketches – a trace of the past encounter – invite the reader to observe Alex in the way that Ulli observed him in the moment of their encounter. As documents of the past, the sketches do not only carry a sense of authenticity, but also a sense of intimacy, connection, and even empathy. "Drawing someone carefully is a form of dwelling" (Sacco qt. in Chute 2016, p. 249), contends comics journalist Joe Sacco, and, indeed, the sketches seem to invite the reader to dwell and, working together with the kissing analogy, to understand Alex's sexual experience. In this sense, the depiction of Alex seems to carry the possibility of evoking what Hall (2016, p. 158) calls the "empathetic magic" of erotic art, which brings "one fully into the appreciation of, and empathy with, another's sexual desires."

With its play with prejudices and depiction of sexual diversity, "*Es war ein ganz zauberhafter Abend*" might come closest to the ideals of sex-positive feminism among the sex-themed comics by Lust. Working in tandem, the highly

subjective perspective and the journalistic framework of the comic draw the focus to subjective experiences while simultaneously problematising them, thus enabling a more diversity-sensitive perspective to sexuality than can be found in Lust's autobiographical work. While the comic refers to itself, probably humoristically, as "nature study / participatory field research," it comes closer to ethnography than biology, being a study of culture instead of a study of nature. It represents sexuality as a diversified sociocultural phenomenon, something that needs to be encountered with a curious and open mind. Comics journalism is often associated with crisis reporting à la Sacco and others, yet, by adopting the journalistic sensibility, what Hillary Chute calls "an ethics of attention" (Chute 2016, p. 202), Lust's night club reportage demonstrates that the genre may be mobilised to recognise the particularity of other people beyond the context of crises as well.[19]

Conclusion

The work by Lust demonstrates the rich possibilities of comics to tackle the matters of sex and draws attention to the variety of genres, styles, and approaches available for depicting sex and sexuality through graphic storytelling. As I have argued in this article, both the medium-specific qualities of comics and the conventions of different comics genres – such as pornography, autobiography, and reportage – offer viable possibilities to explore topics from sexual pleasure to the norms concerning intimate relationships and from personal sexual history to the erotic cultures of larger communities. Based on Lust's work, where pornography is combined with autobiographical storytelling and comics journalism applied in a study of sexuality, one might even propose that the most interesting representations and perspectives emerge when the boundaries and conventions of genres are deliberately challenged and reimagined. With their representations of sex and sexuality, Lust's comics draw attention to the polarities of sexual pleasure and danger in the lives of women, speak for female sexual empowerment, and seek to challenge normative ideas on sexuality and intimate relationships. In this sense, they are definitely characterised by sex-positive ambitions and underpinned with the agenda of depathologising the sexuality of heterosexual women in particular.

While Lust's comics illustrate the critical potential of comic art when dealing with sex and sexuality, they simultaneously draw attention to the challenges of representation with regard to feminist sexual politics. In the pornographic framework of *Airpussy*, the critical potential of playful and empowering representations of sex is questioned by the lack of context, whereas in *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein*, the sex-positive ideals of constructivism, anti-hierarchism, and diversity are contradicted by prescriptive statements as well as racist and essentialist discourses. The genre of journalism shows most potential with regard to sex-positive representation of sexuality among Lust's comics, yet I would not argue for

journalism being ethically and politically more sustainable than any other genre of comics. Every genre entails both possibilities and challenges of expressive-political nature, and therefore what counts when considering the sex-positive potential of a comic is how the comic takes into account the nature of a genre, and how this knowledge is translated into a sex-positive representational practice.

Notes

1 In this chapter, I use sex-positive feminism to describe a branch of feminist thought, which has also been called sex-radical feminism or sex-radicalism and anti-censorship feminism (Peluso 2009, p. 756). While I agree with critics that the first two terms might describe the approach more correctly, the chapter at hand is not a place for terminological analysis or debate. My choice of opting the terms sex-positive and sex-positive feminism is based on the practical intent to keep my terminology consistent with the terms used by Lust.

2 On the legacy of sex-positive feminism to feminist and queer theory, see e.g., Love (2011), Echols (2016), Walters (2016).

3 Although Vance's explicit focus lies on the conditions of female sexuality in patriarchy, her theory may be applied to other sexually oppressed groups as well, even if the pleasures and dangers of women are not identical to, say, gay men or gender non-conforming persons, cf. Echols (2016, pp. 15–16).

4 In this article, I refer to the electronic version of the comic, published on Electrocomics.

5 In the context of feminist literature, the goddess's ability of flying might be interpreted as an allusion to Erica Jong's novel *Fear of Flying* (1973), which famously addressed women's sexual agency and pleasure (I thank Ralf Kauranen for pointing out this reference to me).

6 On representations of female masturbation in pornographic comics, see also Roberts (2015, p. 217, pp. 222–224), Shamoon (2004, p. 95).

7 More on the medium-specific affordances of comics for pornographic representation, see Shamoon (2004), Brown (2013), Hall (2016).

8 The series was supposed to be a trilogy, depicting the author's experience of female sexuality at three different stages her life (see Sobel 2014), but Lust could not realise her idea for the third part, as one of the persons involved in the prospective story felt uncomfortable with the idea of having their personal life exposed in a comic, see Hummitzsch (2017).

9 I use the first name Ulli when referring to the protagonist of the two autobiographical comics and the comics reportage discussed in this chapter; the surname (Lust) is used when referring to the author.

10 In their short discussion of Lust's autobiographical work, Marina Rauchenbacher and Katharina Serles (2020) analyse violence as a connecting theme between the two volumes. I agree that both volumes address the issue of gender-based violence, yet I think it is crucial to make distinctions between the manifold – physical, sexual, psychological, and symbolic – manifestations of violence when discussing it (even if they often intersect with each other). This is especially important when considering Ulli's experiences of sex and sexuality in the two volumes. Whereas the first volume shows her experiencing recurring incidents

of sexual harassment and rape, there are no implications to such experiences in the second volume. Even when the second volume depicts Kim becoming slowly physically and psychologically extremely abusive towards Ulli, sex in their relationship is represented always as consensual.

11 On more detailed discussion on *Heute ist der letzte Tag vom Rest deines Lebens*, see Kupczynska (2013), Hochreiter (2014), Vuorinne (2018), Oksman (2020).

12 On the potential of comics to visualise female pleasure, see also Shamoon (2004).

13 Lust has addressed the question of non-monogamy also in her other comics, see e.g., Lust and Pfeiffer (2013).

14 Similar kinds of notions on the wild and animalistic nature of black sexuality are actualised also in *Airpussy* with its black female character who is accompanied with the sexually hungry leopard.

15 This is most evident in "Springpoems," but shows also in her other sex-themed comics, such as "Die Mutter aller Dinge" (2014) ["The mother of all things"]. In the comic/poster published in SPRING #11, a shirtless lumberjack fells trees in a lush landscape, where giant penises "grow" among the grass and bottoms of women thrust up from the ground.

16 The representation of "ethnic" male sexuality appears problematic also in *Heute ist der letzte Tag vom Rest deines Lebens*, where Italian men are almost exclusively portrayed as lewd predators and rapists.

17 The reportage was published originally in 2012 in the all-female issue "Damenstammtisch" ("Ladies' meeting") of the Swiss comics magazine *Strapazin*, edited by Lust and Kati Rickenbach, and later the same year in English on Electrocomics.

18 In addition to these images, the comic incorporates at least one other original sketch (an overview image of the club with the dark-haired woman standing by the bar). Lust's sketches made at sex clubs can be seen on her personal website (Lust 2011).

19 On comics journalism as a mode of recognition, see also Scherr (2014), Salmi (2016).

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Part III

Non-binary and queer expression in comics

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7 Strategies of ambiguity

Non-binary figurations in German-language comics

Anna Beckmann

Introduction

This chapter investigates how narrative strategies of ambiguity and ambiguous sign constellations are used in feminist and queer comics to challenge the binary concept of gender. Using four selected examples of comic art from Germany, in which non-binary characters play a central role, I show the specific aesthetic possibilities comics offer for queer and feminist gender representations. The focus lies on the question of what critical potential can be found in feminist or queer graphic representation to determine the extent to which the specific mediality of comics is particularly suited to represent narrative strategies of ambiguity that disturb and unsettle fixed and strict notions of gender.

Until now, there has been no scientific research on the history of German queer-feminist comics. Susanne Hochreiter, Marina Rauchenbacher, and Katharina Serles (2021) give a first overview of historical predecessors and current examples in the article, "Queer Visualities-Queer Spaces. German LGBTQ+ Comics," to be published in Alison Halsall's and Jonathan Warren's *LGBTQ Comics Studies Reader* at University Press of Mississippi in 2021. At present, the scholarly discussion focuses on individual artists, such as Anke Feuchtenberger or Ulli Lust (represented in this volume's chapters by Nijdam and Vuorinne), who have made comics since the 1990s and are known for their feminist content. There are also artists who are very popular but do not play such a major role in German comics scholarship, such as Ralf König, known for his involvement in the gay movement, or Franziska Becker, who has been drawing caricatures for the feminist magazine *Emma* since the 1970s (cf. Hochreiter, Rauchenbacher, and Serles 2021).

For about 20 years, a new queer-feminist comics scene has been developing in Germany, influenced by the likewise growing international scene of queer-feminist comics (Chute 2015, p. 196). More queer-feminist comics exist in the underground scene than in the mainstream book market, and additional networks and platforms are increasingly developing, such as the Comic Solidarity[1] and Feminist Comics Network[2] from Berlin, the blog Femgeeks[3], collectives of female artists like the Crush Club Collective[4] and

Spring magazine, or queer-feminist festivals like "Where do feminists draw the line" (held 6–8 December, 2019 in Mainz, Germany). In addition, a new prize was established in 2019 for the German independent comic scene, the Ginko Award, which stands for German Inclusive/Independent Comic and aims to support artists from marginalised groups in particular. The share of queer and feminist comics has also increased on the book market in the last ten years. This can be seen, among other things, in the comic artists whose works can be called feminist and who won the Max and Moritz Prize in 2020, one of the most important awards for graphic literature on the German-speaking scene: Lisa Frühbeis for the best German comic-strip, Anna Haifisch for the best German Comics Artist and Anke Feuchtenberger for her life's work.[5] Like the work of these artists, the four examples of comic art selected for analysis in this chapter belong to this queer-feminist movement and go beyond a feminism of two genders. The examples range from independent zines and web comics to comic books by established artists.

Narratology, semiotics, and queer-feminism in comic studies

Narratives are a part of our daily lives. By extension, they are present in every kind of fiction, play an important role in the navigation and negotiation of social constructs and societal norms, and also determine how causal correlations and coherent structures are conceptualised in everyday life. Strictly speaking, narratives are fictional and non-fictional stories, which consist of at least two events that are temporally and causally related. Narratology, the scholarly discipline dedicated to the study of narratives, has undergone a complex development in the last two decades. In this chapter, I draw upon post-classical narratology, which extends beyond only literary texts to include other media, contextual interpretations, social frameworks, and knowledge gleamed from cognitive science. In her article, "Futures for Feminist and Queer Narratology," Tory Young notes that:

> many of the new directions in modern theories of narrative, and in post-classical narratology in particular, are more attentive to context than their formalist predecessors, and some of these contextual interests emerge from feminist frameworks or issues in gender studies.
>
> (Young 2018, p. 913)

Post-classical narratology operates on the premise that narratives are related to context, society, and social norms and therefore also to reader expectations. Gender is one of these social and cultural constructs (Butler 1990, pp. 9–10), which shapes and is shaped by social and artistic narratives. Our expectations regarding the representation of gender in art depend on received ideas of how something or someone should be presented. Narratives and representations are directly involved in shaping norms of gender and

normative expectations of how individuals should be or behave. Therefore, there is a performative relationship between narratives, gender, sex, and sexuality. As Judith Butler first argued in 1990 in *Gender Trouble*, gender is performative: "In this sense, gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (Butler 1990, p. 33).

Butler describes sex and gender as constructs which are produced through speech acts and corporeal performances that repeat existing gendered norms of behaviour-perception and identity. The constant repetition creates a coherence. Butler emphasises that "gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler 1990, p. 33).

Gender and sex cannot be seen or discussed without social knowledge and a pre-existing social formation of one's own knowledge and performance of gender. Gender is a society-structuring and identity-creating category. This is visible in everyday narratives and acting, but also in art forms like comics. Gender constructs can, however, also be renegotiated for, as Butler herself states, the necessity of the act of repetition also encodes the possibility of failure (Butler 1990, p. 179), whereby failure entails acting, speaking, or depicting in ways that deviate from established understandings of gender. Failed repetitions show that there is no natural, original and unchangeable form of gender or sex, but that these categories are constructs that need to be repeated in order to have power. Through such "failed" repetitions, or, positively speaking, through forms of ambiguous representation, we see the emergence of the possibility of undermining the power relations in strict gender roles and forces. Such "failed" repetitions open up this possibility by drawing attention to the necessity of repetition for the consolidation of gender itself, while at the same time undermining the effectiveness of that repetition and thereby existing normative gender roles, creating new connections and meanings in the process.

One of Butler's central concerns in *Gender Trouble* was the question: "What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?" (Butler 1990, p. 42). Adapted to the field of representation, the question becomes: Which kinds of subversive representation, and which kinds of representation in comics in particular, might call into question the regulatory practice of gender representation itself?

Butler's work has been drawn upon by scholars in the field of narratology, such as the feminist narratologist Susan S. Lanser. In the 2018 article, "Queering Narrative Voices," Lanser returns to and rectifies her positions on gender and narrative voices in literary texts which she had previously established in the 1986 article, "Towards a Feminist Narratology," at that time a foundational text for feminist narratology. While Lanser claimed then that readers relate gender of unidentified narrative voices in texts to the gender of the author of texts, Lanser now emphasises instead "the value of asking how a queer narrative voice might be coded through formal

practices" (Lanser 2018, p. 930), suggesting that analyses should focus more on textual practices rather than on assigning a gender to an unidentified narrator (Lanser 2018, p. 933). Lanser (2018, pp. 923–924) asks how medial presentation works and what a queer form of representation looks like, drawing attention in the process to three different dominant usages of the verb "queer" in scholarship:

> (1) to make a claim for the non-heteronormative sex, gender, or sexuality of someone or something; (2) to disrupt or deconstruct binary categories of sex, gender, and/or sexuality; and (3) to disrupt or deconstruct any entity by rejecting its categories, binaries, or norms.

Lanser transfers this threefold division onto narratorial voices in texts, albeit with the claim that the third category is too open and without clear connection to issues of gender, sex, and sexuality, such that only the first two categories are operationalised for a queer narratology:

> (1) a voice belonging to a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject by virtue of sex, gender, or sexuality; (2) a voice that is textually ambiguous or subverts the conventions of sex, gender, or sexuality […]
>
> (Lanser 2018, p. 926)

I would not claim that there is a narratorial instance in comics like the one in textual prose, for reasons that would go beyond the scope of this chapter; here, a reminder of the importance of recognising the specific ways in which different media represent and mediate stories will have to suffice (cf. Rajewsky 2010). Nonetheless, there is good reason to use Lanser's typology of queer voices and transfer it to narrator-figures and characters in comics.

In this chapter, I concentrate on the question concerning the discourse of comics – according to the narratological meaning of term – asking how representations of non-binary figures and figurations function. With the term figurations, I include not only the reflection of the representation of non-binary characters on the level of the story (story-oriented), but also constellations of comics-specific signs, focalisation, and perspectives (discourse-oriented). The analyses therefore examine the representation of corporeality as well as the structure of signs, narration, and focalisation, paying particular attention to the power relations which are inscribed into the representation of gender and sex, and how the forms of graphic representation and narration in the selected examples reflect such power structures.

Comics are a heavily narrative art form. The examples featured in this chapter use different narratorial strategies to present their content, and I examine them with the tools provided by narratology. While it is important to use these tools with caution, given that they were originally designed with

literature in mind rather than for visual media, scholars working in the field of film studies and comic studies have shown that this form of disciplinary cross-pollination can function productively. Furthermore, I investigate constellations of signs in the chosen examples. The different signs at work in comics and their relationships to each other and to the narration can be very complex. There are indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs which can support or contradict each other. The combination of many different relations of signs and the complementarity of iconic, indexical, and symbolic parts (cf. Packard et al. 2019, p. 24) in comics emphasises their own "madeness" (cf. Backe, Eckel, Feyersinger, Sina, and Thon 2018, pp. 1–2) repeatedly breaks and interrupts the immersion of the reader, and can highlight the narrative itself instead of the content. This makes comics a medium predestined to depict strategies of ambiguity, and, as we will see, many artists use this comic-specific mediality to question ideas of gender, and often to deconstruct gender itself.

This chapter addresses phenomena where gender is presented as ambiguous and examines the representational strategies which lead to an ambiguity of gender and sex, because "[t]extual production of ambiguous markers […] upsets social categories by involving readers in a recognition of the principles of their construction" (Young 2018, p. 920). Sonja Lewin makes a similar line of argument with regards to using images for gender-sensible teaching, claiming that irritating, ambiguous images have the potential to bring distance between expectations of seeing and the image, which undercut normative and normalising assumptions. Such images could, according to Lewin (2015, p. 295), call attention to the schemes that underpin our process of reception. The selected examples help us to reflect upon how we construct gender in society, and they show how comics are able to make this process transparent.

Comic theory: Is there a political aesthetic of comics?

There are different ways to approach the analysis of comics. Among others, it is possible to focus on the connective possibilities in comics or to emphasise the fragmentation and gaps. The first possibility presupposes the existence of a reader-answer process, which Scott McCloud refers to as closure (cf. McCloud 1994), which prompts the reader to make sense of the picture and text, between the different panels and the complex constellation of characters in the comic. The second approach deals with the question of how the various systems of representation at play in a comic – such as image, text, and various other signs –resist being merged with each other. On this basis, some scholars have argued that comics produce a political, self-reflexive aesthetic that has great potential for pursuing queer-feminist and intersectional issues as well as political goals.[6]

Both of these comic theory approaches are applied in this chapter. While comics have numerous formal features that create breaks and gaps, this

potential is not always obvious, and many comics also employ narrative strategies that support a coherent story and clear understanding. My approach in this chapter, however, focuses on comics that exploit their mediality to question the vision of gender and sexuality.

Hillary Chute has examined the feminist aesthetic of comics, accentuating the form of comics, such that her analyses are interested "not *necessarily* in feminist 'content' in narrative […], but rather in *how comic texts model a feminist methodology in their form* […]" (Chute 2015, p. 200, emphasis in original). I support the idea that there has to be a focus on form in comics, because they bring a mediality which is particularly suitable to questioning forms of representation. However, I would question whether the form is feminist *per se*, because each art form offers different possibilities in terms of its specific mediality regardless of the topic. I therefore propose that there are specific media possibilities for how feminist topics can be negotiated in comics, but I refuse any essentialist notion that these topics are necessarily inscribed in those medialities. The specific mediality of comics arises from the panel structure, which has a certain inbuilt tendency to bring fragmentation into the storytelling, the drawn representation, and the different forms of seriality and repetition. Chute emphasises the roles of repetition and drawn pictures in comics for the process of visualisation: "This repetition is manifested with particular force in the hybrid, visual-verbal form of graphic narrative where the work of (self-)interpretation is literally visualized; the authors show us interpretations as a process of visualization" (Chute 2010, p. 4).

The aesthetics of comics are strongly based on the principle of repetition, or rather on a fragmented repetition that is created by the frames and gaps between image and text. I focus on narratives that use this aesthetic of repetition and fragmentation, the panel structure, and the gap between image and text to show ambiguous gender identities. The drawn aesthetics also play an important role in the representation of gender. Chute writes: "Hence while the visual form of graphic narrative enables an *excess* of representation […], it also offers a constant self-reflexive demystification of the project of representation" (Chute 2010, p. 9, emphasis in original). Comics have the potential to show the manufacturing process, the functioning of representation, and thus the creation of categories, which can be useful for negotiating queer and feminist topics. Although many narratives suggest a clear meaning, there are also comics that actively withdraw from coherence and clear attributions through the deployment of appropriate narrative strategies.

Strategies of combining, avoiding, fragmentation, and overlapping: Analysis

This first part of examples will focus on the first of Lanser's categories – narrator-figure or characters who can be identified as queer subject – and therefore on three comics: The first one is the underground zine *Trouble*

X, which has been published online and in print by an unnamed individual from 2007 until now. The short stories are presented as autobiographical and with a protagonist who describes themselves as non-binary. The protagonist is mostly appearing together with one or more snails, which are a species without specific sex; together, the protagonist and the snails reflect on the situations in which the protagonist themself is positioned and has to navigate.

Thereafter follows an exploration of *Ach, so ist das?! Biografische Comics aus der queeren Welt* (2017) ["Oh, I see?!" Biographical Comics of LGBTI], an online and printed anthology of biographical comics focusing on different LGBTQI* individuals which are written, drawn, and collected by the comic artist Martina Schradi (cf. Burmann und Schradi 2015). The protagonists tell stories about situations in their lives, where they were confronted with problems, hostilities, or incomprehension regarding their gender and/or sexuality. There were two books published in 2016 and 2018, but all comics are also available online and are tagged by headwords.

The third comic was made by visual artists Imke Schmidt and Ka Schmitz (2010). Titled, *Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst oder: Wer sieht hier wen? Ein Lightfaden für Bildermacher_innen* (2010) [I see something you don't see or who sees whom here? A guide for picture makers], it is a self-reflexive guide of practice to avoid gender stereotypes in visual art such as comics. The authors reflect on gender connoted symbols and signs and try to find a way of an inclusive and diverse visual representation of persons.

Combining

In the first part of the analysis, I focus on comics-specific strategies of ambiguity which use the drawn signs to question the socially established binary system of gender. This is done by combining and avoiding gender-connoted signs or by using fragmentation and overlapping signs and panels to question expectations of gender. Signs like gender-connoted clothes, hairstyles, body hair, or sexual characteristics that are normally assigned exclusively to one gender are put together on one person in such ways that the gender identity of the person is no longer easily identifiable by these signs.

On this page of the first issue of the *Trouble X* zine (Figure 7.1), we can see the protagonist (pronoun "they") in the second panel. They say, "we are born naked./ the rest is drag" (*Trouble X* 2007, p. 10).[7] In the third panel can be seen clothing such as a tie, a skirt, or a bra. Most of the depicted clothing has a gendered connotation: the skirt and the bra stand commonly for femininity, while a tie is read as male. Some of the clothes can be read as artefacts of transition or cross-dressing, therefore as tools for specific gender performances; chest binders or packers (penis prosthesis) fall into this category of objects. Accordingly, there are signs which have male and female, but also trans- or non-binary connotations. In the fourth and fifth panel, we can see how the protagonist puts on some of the clothes. Initially, it looks like the protagonist is donning the signs of a male appearance, but in the

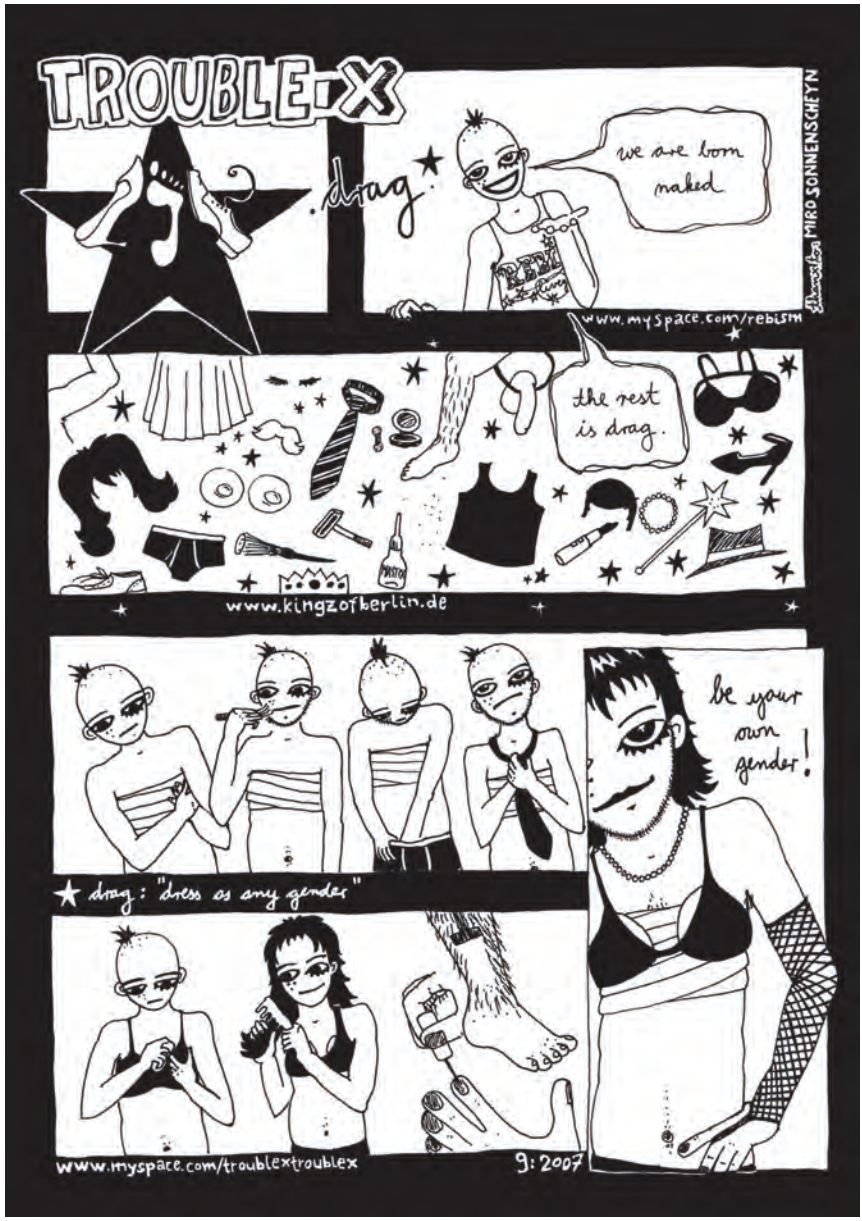

Figure 7.1 © Trouble X, *Trouble X, gender fuck me!*, self-published zine, 2007, p. 10

next panel, they also put on signs of a female gender performance. In the combination of these signs, a figure emerges that is neither male nor female. Thus, the connotation of clothes for the attribution of gender is made visible by depicting the process of getting dressed and also in the play with our expectations. The protagonist ends the comic with the statement: "be your own gender!" (*Trouble X* 2007, p. 10).

This effect can also be seen on this page of *Ach, so ist das?!* by Martina Schradi (Figure 7.2). In the first panel, we see Sasha, the protagonist of this

Figure 7.2 © Martina Schradi and Christine Burmann, *Ach so ist das?!*, Sasha, self-published web-comic, n.p.

biographical short story. The story of Sasha is tagged by the headwords third option, empowerment, and intersex. Sasha is explaining that they choose the name Sasha because it is gender-neutral. In addition, Sasha says in the second panel that the worst thing to them is the binary system of gender that people are thinking in boxes and not beyond that.

The next panel shows a scale featuring a range of different genders. At the one end of the scale, there is a man and at the other end, a woman; in between are different gender identities. To present this variation of genders, a combination of sexual characteristics and body hair is used, but also tools like a chest binder. The scalar variation of genders is set against a binary opposition in the preceding panel. Due to the different variations of the combinations of "male" and "female," aligned along a regularly differentiated axis of gender variation marked exactly by differing combinations of the signs for "male" and "female," the picture exhibits a classificatory tendency that seems redolent of practices of classification familiar from the natural sciences. This shows the difficulties and ambivalences when those excluded from the binary system and denied the legitimate position in the discourse are now assuming a subject position. The panel with the scale and the last panel showing a mixture of gender-connoted clothes have no frame, while in the second panel only the text is outside of the image frame. As such, the openness of both panels is emphasised, which can be read as a formal enactment of Sasha's stated dislike of boxes. The last panel also shows clothes as tools to perform gender. Here, the variation of gender is depicted through a mixture of sex characteristics and clothes.

The two examples play with the fact that gender is produced by repeating various acts, such as the wearing of gender-connoted clothes. They not only exhibit this process, but deconstruct it by deliberately combining the signs "incorrectly" to avoid an unambiguous attribution. In the combination of gender-connoted signs that stand for a binary system of gender, gender is made ambiguous. Often, we can also find the portrayal of different people as a common strategy of depicting diversity. On one page of the third Trouble X-zine, *queer is (not) dead*, we see a demonstration of feminists with exclusive positions, then one with a more extensive, queer practice. The first depiction shows different women, but some people are excluded, for example, a transwoman. The second panel shows the same people plus others, such as a person in a wheelchair, a person with a headscarf, and the previously excluded transperson. So, there is an integrative practice beyond a binary gender and "white" system as before.

Another example of this strategy can be found in *Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst oder: Wer sieht hier wen? Ein Lightfaden für Bildermacher_innen* (Figure 7.3). The authors' comics alter egos are seen from above, as they consider how it might be possible to represent as many different identities as possible. Many different characters are depicted, sometimes alone, sometimes in smaller groups. There are couples as well as people with children, some characters have disabilities, and many are without gender attributes.

Figure 7.3 © Imke Schmidt and Ka Schmitz, *Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst oder: Wer sieht hier wen? Ein Lightfaden für Bildermacher_innen,* zine, Genderkompetenzzentrum am ZTG, 2010, p. 9

Diversity here is pictured through the mixture of attributes and the combination of different persons in a group image. Some of them speak and address their own existence and appearance in the picture or ask each other whether they are satisfied with their representation. In doing so, the authors not only open the discourse on representation, but also consciously leave it open. In this way, they show that the question of how representation works and how it can be designed to be inclusive must always be renegotiated.

Avoiding

Another possible way of questioning the binary system of gender is to avoid any kind of gendered signs. This is also used in the *Trouble X* zine.

We see the protagonist here repeated in all panels (Figure 7.4). The representation prevents an unambiguous attribution of gender not through the mixture of differently gendered signs, but instead through their complete absence. We see a person with a shaved head, gender-neutral clothes, and no specific body hair or sex characteristics.

The story they tell is that they are on a path, the origin and end of which remain unspecified, but there is a suggestion that this path is one of gender transition, as indicated by the chromosomes on the T-shirt of

Figure 7.4 © Trouble X, *Trouble X, gender fuck me!*, self-published zine, 2007, p. 4

the protagonist. The protagonist is unsure about this transition, and their various emotional situations are depicted in the comic, as they are shown to be angry, sad, interested, or thoughtful. The different panels and a thought bubble, in which the words "… *aber irgendwie komme ich nicht so recht voran* ..." (*Trouble X* 2007, p. 4) [but somehow I'm not making much progress], can be read, overlapping into and across one another, further underlining that there is no straight path to be walked, no direct road from male to female or from female to male. The one snail is asking, "boy or girl?" and the other one, bumping against the protagonist's leg, answers, "both" (*Trouble X* 2007, p. 4). It is apparent here that the protagonist is exposed to the socially established binary system of gender, but evades the binarity by avoiding letting oneself be categorised.

Sasha from the comics *Ach, so ist das?!* (see Figure 7.2) titles themself as neutrois or also inter. This means that they are neither male nor female, but a neutral gender. Sasha is depicted without any specifically gendered signs like body hair or sex characteristics. The clothes in the last panel have a gendered component, and Sasha makes clear that they can choose whether they pass as a boy or a girl depending on which clothes they wear. There are research approaches that show that reducing the visual mediality of comics can promote stereotyping (Facciani et al. 2015, pp. 2–3), but as we can see here, the depictions also have great potential to avoid stereotypical attributions.

Fragmentation and overlapping

We see a further, third strategy in Figure 7.4: fragmentation and overlap. I have already mentioned that there is no direct path from woman to man or vice versa for the protagonist. They are uncertain and overwhelmed by thoughts about a possible transition. This confrontation is also reflected in the panel structure. The site consists of four panels, which partly overlap and do not represent a clear chronological sequence. Especially, the first and third panel have a striking shape: the first panel is held over the entire length of the page and divides the protagonist into two parts. While the head is at the top of the page, the legs are below. The body of the protagonist is divided, as are their thoughts about the transition.

In the third panel, the protagonist is portrayed in four different moods and situations, but a thought bubble is connected to all situations through space and time. In addition, the panel really consists of two panels, a small one showing the brooding protagonist and a larger one representing the other situations. The smaller panel is bordered by lines that flow into the larger one. The panel and the thought bubble overlap each other and are connected by the framing lines without actually creating clearly closed or separate panels. The structure of the panels reflects the conceptualisation of the transition by not presenting it as a forward, unambiguous decision, but as a thought that is connected to everything, moving forward, backward, in all directions. Through these formal qualities, the thought "but somehow

I'm not making much progress" (Trouble x 2007: 4) seems to coat and cover the whole life of the protagonist. There is no temporal narrative coherence in this panel, because the thought bubble is beyond four different situations, and there is no clue as to the order in which to read this interdependence of panels.

The fragmentation of the protagonist's depiction and the overlapping panels, as well as the temporal incoherence between text and image, shows the protagonist's inner struggle, such that the inner struggle of the protagonist on the level of the story is also apparent on the level of discourse. There is no straight path for the protagonist to tread, nor is there a straight way to depict this; instead, there is a strategy of ambiguity. Fragmentation and overlapping have a destabilising effect here. The binary system of gender is rejected by the protagonist, and a coherent narration of this state of affairs is itself rejected by the ambiguous aesthetic of this page.

Ambiguous focalisation: "Hure h" by Anke Feuchtenberger and Kathrin de Vries

The three-volume comic series *Hure h* by Anke Feuchtenberger and Kathrin de Vries was published between 1996 and 2006 and is strongly influenced by second-wave feminism. In each story, three per volume, the relationship between society and gender is negotiated. The figure Hure h is the focus of the plot. In every story, Hure h deals with societal ideas of gender, desire, and sexuality. The comics have complex strategies of ambiguity, especially in the field of focalisation.

Hure h in-between

The stories in the first volume deal with the fact that Hure h stands between the binary opposition of women* and men*. The term *Hure* means "whore," but works here in combination with the suffix h as a name. This "name" suggests that the figure is a female* professional sex-worker. However, Hure h does not engage in sex-work in any of the stories. Rather, Hure h repeatedly experiences situations in which the character is expected to have a certain, sexually connoted behaviour, but which the character cannot or does not want to fulfil. The comic features recurring situations in which there are men* and women*; these have no names themselves, but are simply denoted as "the woman" or "the man" or a group of "women and men," each time Hure h differs from them (cf. Feuchtenberger and de Vries 1996). In the stories of the second and third volume, too, groups with gender connotations are repeatedly depicted, while Hure h is always positioned outside the binary opposition female/male*. In the first volume in particular, Hure h is also marked visually as different: while men* and women* are both characterised by gender-specific attributes, the body and clothing of Hure h always deviate somewhat from those of the gender-specific characters. In

the second and third volume, the focus is more on the constantly changing body of Hure h. For example, Hure h sometimes has large breasts, sometimes a flat chest. It is striking how Hure h's looks change in each of the nine stories such that the character can almost be recognised by name only. The changing appearance of the figure underlines the specific mediality of the drawn comic body. Comic characters have to be repeated in each panel to establish coherence. If we look at the comics page, we see the characters reproduced (cf. Frahm 2010, p. 72). Hure h does not have one identity, but many, and these identities appear different and fragmented each time. The entire narrative itself is also fragmented: the stories neither build on one another in a coherent manner, nor do they tell the progressive development of a character, which often makes them difficult to understand. This prevents a clear reception and a clear interpretation. Antke Engel describes queer cultural politics as a process that has to avoid unambiguousness:

> Queer cultural politics foster the power of resignification. They drive discriminatory language and regimes of normalcy into processes of denormalization and equivocation. Instead of striving for "positive" images, which promise visibility, recognition, or "truthful" representation but inevitably produce new exclusions and homogenizing inclusions, queer cultural politics support ambiguities and polysemic articulations that provide space for difference beyond a logic of categorization.
>
> (Engel 2019, p. 346)

Engel's statement can also be applied to works of art themselves. The ambiguity strategies in Hure h are "polysemic articulations that offer space for differences that go beyond a categorization logic" (Engel 2019, p. 346). Just as Hure h cannot be reduced to an identity, the narrative cannot be reduced to a clear interpretation, both subvert categories and open up spaces and possibilities instead of closing them.

Unambiguous focalisation

At the beginning of the first story of the third volume, "*Die Hure h wirft den Handschuh*" ("Hure h throws the glove"), it says: "*Der grosse moderne Mann hat Macht./ Das sieht die hure h. Der grosse moderne Mann gefällt der Hure h*." – "*Ich bin die hure h. Vielleicht bleibe ich hier*."/ "*Der grosse moderne Mann erstaunt*." (Feuchtenberger and de Vries 2007, n.p.) [The great modern man has power./ Hure h can see that. The great modern man pleases Hure h. – I am Hure h. Maybe I'll stay here/ The great modern man is astonished.] While the sentences of Hure h are in speech bubbles, the other parts of the text are shown in block boxes that cannot be assigned to a figure, thereby suggesting a heterodiegetic narrator. This goes hand-in-hand with a hierarchical order, since the narrative comment seems to stand above the events.

On the page featured in Figure 7.5, we see the black and white image of a lighthouse with a human eye on the spire. At first glance, there seems to be grounds to equate the "big modern man" with the lighthouse, if we assume a coherence between block text and image. The phallic representation of the "great modern man" as a lighthouse parodically refers to an androcentric order. Hure h looks up while the eye of the lighthouse looks down. The question posed by gender studies in response to such a visual scenario – Who presents whom here? – must however be supplemented and expanded by a series of questions tailored to comics-specific communication strategies: Who sees whom and who is seen? How is gaze visualised? Who is represented from which perspective (cf. Nünning und Nünning 2004, p. 12)?

Hure h's gaze is not only directed upwards, but is also shown from below. The viewers of the image look at Hure h from a worm's-eye view, which reinforces the direction of Hure h's gaze upwards. The second panel is again a perspective from below, so that the astonished "great modern man" seems to look down at the readers. In this way, a hierarchy of gaze is negotiated, in which the readers, together with Hure h, have to look up to the "great modern man." The power of the male* lighthouse is represented by a hierarchy of text levels as well as by visual perspective constructions.

The following pages also focus on the viewing direction and the focalisation. Seeing, looking, and being seen are negotiated as powerful instruments: A blinding beam of light falls on Hure h. The "big modern man" looks up and down at the figure. The visual representation matches the text: First, you see an ear and then a foot. The focus is initially unremarkable, but then Hure h looks back: "*Die hure h blickt ihn an./ Die hure h blickt ihn besonders an.*" [Hure h looks at him./ Hure h looks at him especially.]

Instead of depicting what Hure h sees, we see Hure h's lifted dress and her genitals (Figure 7.6). The vulva of Hure h is shown, not what Hure h herself sees – which would be expected from the introduced point of view constructions. In the second area of the page, her genitals are enlarged. It is actually a special gaze because it does not show how Hure h looks up at the lighthouse, but how her vulva fills the entire area. Here, gender-specific gaze constructions are invoked, which were analysed in film scholar Laura Mulvey's seminal theorisation of the "male gaze":

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active / male and passive / female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.
>
> (Mulvey 1975, p. 11)

Laura Mulvey's theory is reflected and ironically staged in the scene described when the look of the "great modern man" is returned by Hure h

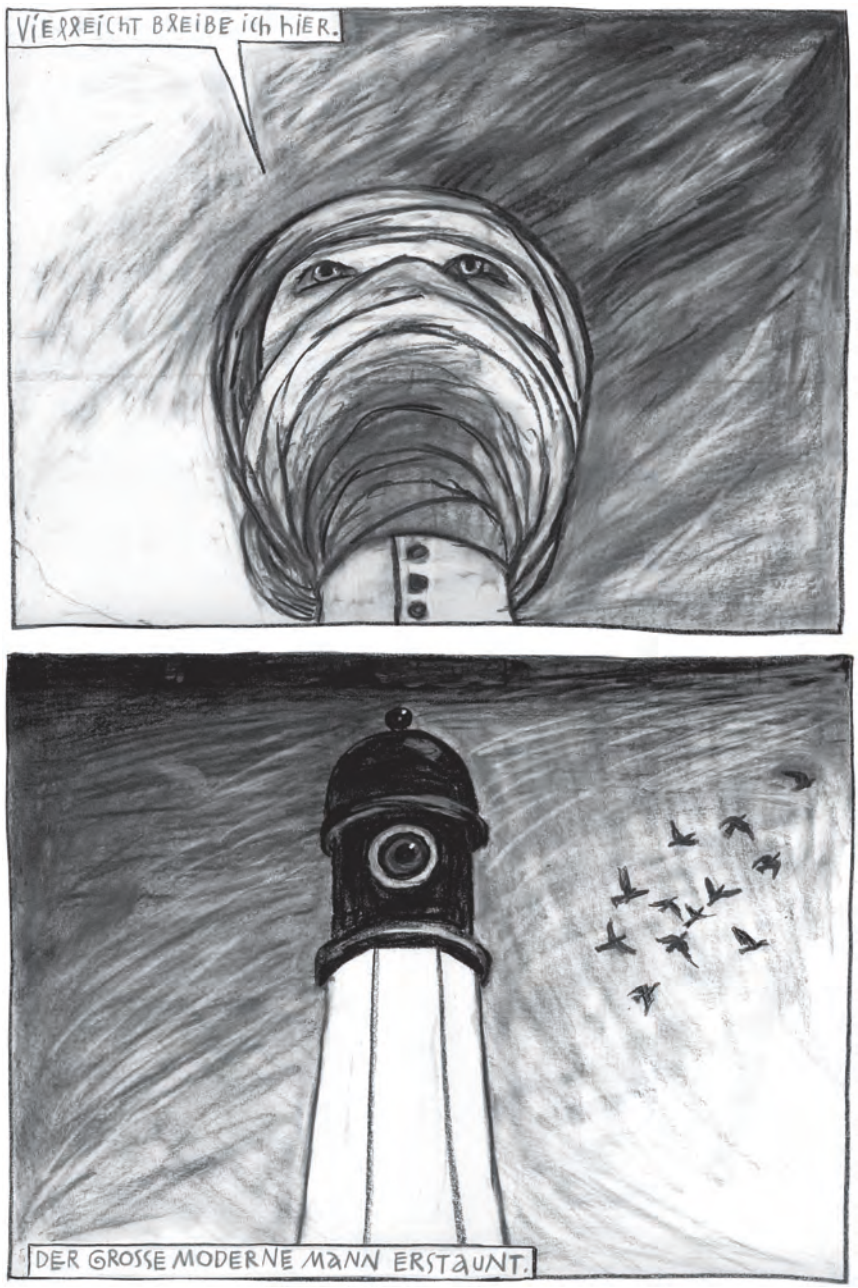

Figure 7.5 © Reprodukt, Anke Feuchtenberger and Katrin de Vries, *Die Hure h wirft den Handschuh*, Reprodukt, 2007, n.p.

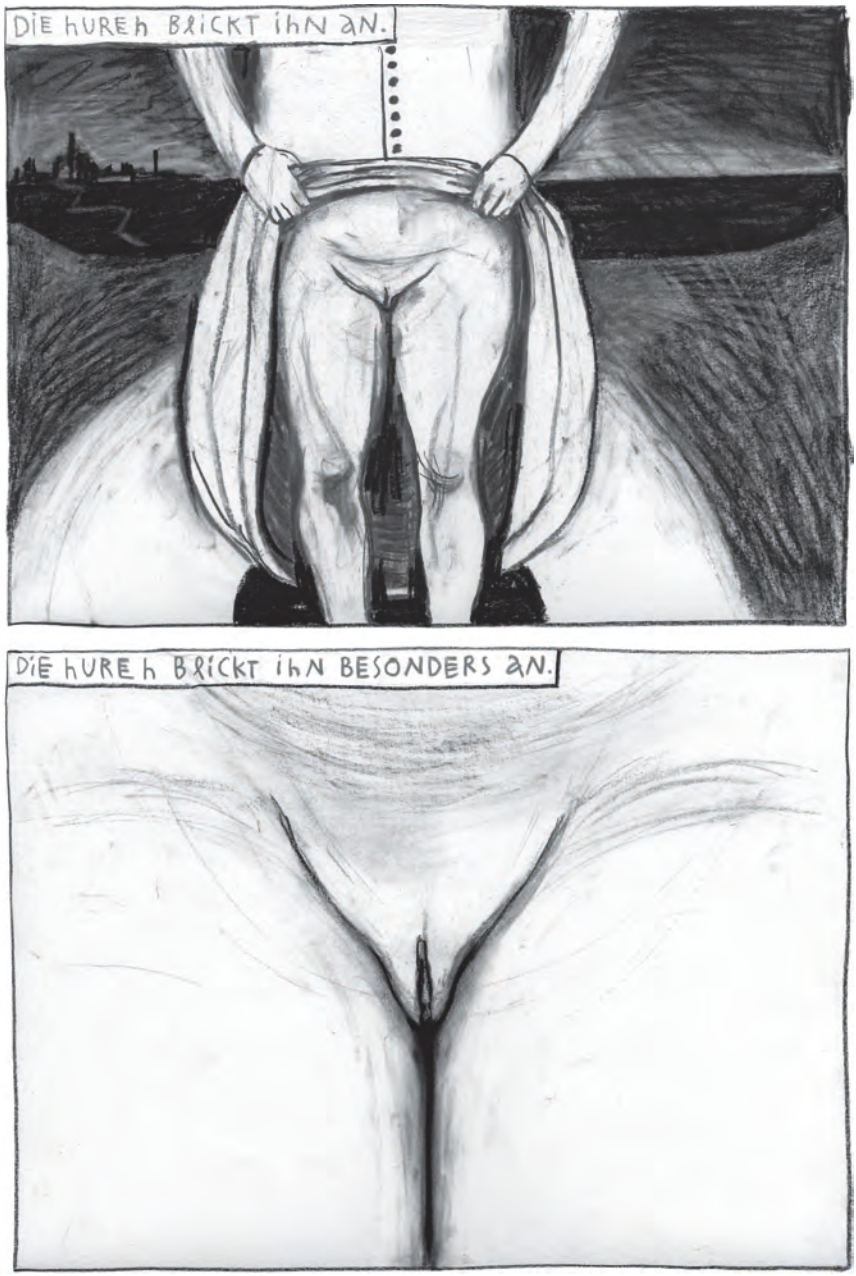

Figure 7.6 © Reprodukt, Anke Feuchtenberger and Katrin de Vries, *Die Hure h wirft den Handschuh*, Reprodukt, 2007, n.p.

with her vulva. The vulva is not a passive object of male vision, but actively looks back. In this way, the look of the "great modern man" is not simply marked as a male* gaze or mirrored, but is rather opposed to a gaze that functions quite differently. The assignment of actively seeing and passively viewing is not reversed, but rather irritated and ambiguous. A simple binary assignment of male* as active and female* as passive, or a neat reversal of those categories, is no longer possible.

The changing focalisation is irritating. As such, the discourse – i.e., the way it is presented – or more precisely the focus itself, is brought into the centre of the reception. The usual act of looking is not simply and seamlessly (re-)produced, but disturbed. Ambiguous and irritating images can thus draw attention to the process of constructing and receiving gender. Chute, too, emphasises the visual potential of comics to bring the "how" of narration to the foreground: "I claim instead the capaciousness of comic's visual form an ethical and troubling visual aesthetics, or poetic – a complex literary location for theorizing embodiment and narrative" (Chute 2015, p. 202). The process of constructing gender is therefore not only negotiated in terms of content about the figure of Hure h and the social attribution and exclusion practices, but also in terms of the representation itself, which makes every form of representation clear as something historical and social, and thus influenced by power.

The story goes on: Hure h stays, and now Hure h stands behind the levers and moves the light cone through the dark: "*Und bald hat die hure h auch Macht*" (Feuchtenberger and de Vries 2007, n.p.) [And soon Hure h has power too]. Hure h can be seen from just below the chest to just under the eyes. Half of her head is cut-off, and her breasts are now larger and are emphasised by the image section. The body of Hure h has changed: As Hure h's power increases, her breasts also grow, as if the changed social role on the side of the "great modern man" has an immediate transformative effect upon the corporeal markers of gender in Hure h's body. The physical representation of Hure h is tied to the social expectations and norms of the situation. This highlights the performative relationship between what is told and how it is told. But Hure h does not stay. After the body of Hure h gets rounder, she faints and lies in front of the lighthouse, and experiences something reminiscent of a birth. The images and texts are not causally linked, such that irritating images repeatedly break through the narrative (Kupczynska 2013, pp. 221–222). It is difficult to clearly relate events or to make a connection between image and text. The narrative comments do not contribute to an easier understanding. Rather, they stand unevenly next to the pictures without integrating them into a progressive, coherent, or causal narrative. Reading and viewing habits are irritated and thus the subject of analysis. Again, the plot's attention is drawn to the "how" of representation.

Conclusion

Using four examples of German-language comic art, I have presented various strategies of ambiguity that question the binary system of gender. The analyses have shown that comics contain narrative figures and characters as well as narrative strategies that can be described as queer, insofar as these are strategies of ambiguity that question constructs of gender, sex, and/or sexuality.

The first three examples mainly used strategies aiming exclusively at questioning gender. The examples have shown that there are different strategies for using comics signs to avoid a clear attribution of gender to the characters. This is possible because comics are drawn, consist of many different signs, and are fragmented into panels, text, and images. A subsequent question was how these strategies are integrated into the narrative. In *Trouble X* and *Lightfaden*, the authors write and draw themselves into the story, while *Ach, so ist das* is based on biographical stories. All have intradiegetic narrative characters, and all of these narrative characters are overt. They are narrators who are participants in the world of stories, who reflect on the depictions, and who act as witnesses. Their use can be theorised as an authentication strategy. If we think back to Lanser's considerations, we are mainly dealing with the first type, which Lanser relates to narrative instances: "(1) a voice belonging to a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject by virtue of sex, gender, or sexuality" (Lanser 2018, p. 926). On the one hand, there is a certain stability in the stories: The intradiegetic narrative characters reflect what is shown, refer to its relevance, and incorporate it into social discourse. On the other hand, the explained strategies of ambiguity destabilise parts of the narration. However, the ambiguity mainly shapes the representation of gender. The main narratives remain stable, while the gender representation is ambiguous. In the last example, the ambiguity begins to spread to the entire presentation.

In the second part of the analysis, I examined a narrative in which the ambiguity strategy pervades all levels of the narration. Hure h, protagonist of the fourth example, has no clear identity and no coherent story. While a coherence between text and image could be established in the first examples, the narration of Hure h refuses such an approach. Although the first part of the analysis shows examples that can be assigned to the first of Lanser's categories, the ambiguous focalisation in Hure h is not bound to any figure or clear narrator. This example thus corresponds to the second of Lanser's categories: "(2) a voice which is textually ambiguous or which undermines the conventions of sex, gender or sexuality" (Lanser 2018, p. 926). The effect is an ambiguity of narrative and focalisation, such as Young claims for queer representations and narratives, which "deny the reader mastery by breaking down the binarisms on which conventional realism depends and dispersing focus [...]" (Young 2018, p. 916).

I have identified two strategies in these comics that can be related to Lanser's typology of queer voices. The first category – narrative characters or characters that "can be identified as a queer subject" (Lanser 2018, p. 926) – leads to a diversification of gender. The stories of the first three comics show that there are more genders than just male* and female*, and inform about trans* and inter* identities and homosexuality. The homodiegetic narrative characters function as a form of authentication here, and they embed these topics in coherent, easily comprehensible stories. The second type – narrative strategies that "undermine the conventions of gender, sex or sexuality" (Lanser 2018, p. 926) – tends to lead to a deconstruction of gender. The narrative strategies in the stories of Hure h aim less at gender diversification but more at the deconstruction of gender as such. Hure h eludes not only the attribution of a clear gender identity, but the comics also prevent an understanding of a coherent story.

Notes

1 www.facebook.com/comicsolidarity/
2 http://feministische-comics.net/ (Accessed 29 March 2020).
3 https://femgeeks.de/ (Accessed 29 March 2020).
4 www.instagram.com/crushclubcollective/?hl=de (Accessed 29 March 2020).
5 www.comic-salon.de/de/preistraeger-innen.
6 To name some German language scholars: Frahm (2010), Sina (2016), Backe et al. (2018), Packard et al. (2019).
7 I use "they" and "them" to refer to non-binary identities and to avoid gendered personal pronoun (cf. Young 2018, p. 916).

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8 Feminist and queer aesthetics in Tove Jansson's Moomin comics

Mike Classon Frangos

> They warned me the neighbors were queer…
>
> Mrs Fillyjonk in "Moomin Mamma's Maid"

Introduction

Tove Jansson's Moomin newspaper comics have only recently begun to attract attention from researchers in comics studies and children's literature since their republication in high-quality English-, Swedish-, and Finnish-language collected editions. Nevertheless, the Moomin comics have not yet been analysed from feminist and queer perspectives to the same extent as Jansson's Moomin suite of illustrated children's novels. Juhani Tolvanen has written a book-length history of the Moomin comics, published in Swedish as *Vid min svans! Tove och Lars Janssons Tecknade Muminserie* (2000) [*Moomin Every Day: Tove and Lars Jansson and the Creation of the Moomin Comic Strip*, 2012]. Tolvanen's book is an invaluable starting point for further study of the Moomin comics, as it is based on his own interviews with the author, including extracts from the letters between Jansson and her English editors and publishers. Boel Westin's authorised biography of Jansson, published in English as *Tove Jansson: Life, Art, Words* (2014), similarly documents the context for the creation of the Moomin comic with reference to the author's correspondence and interviews.

In the fields of comics studies and children's literature, only a small number of academic articles and chapters have focused on the comics themselves. Westin (2017) has written a short overview in Swedish of the transmedia context for Jansson's comics alongside her work in other media, especially the illustrated novels and picture books. Jansson scholar Elina Druker (2015) has also published a short chapter in Swedish focusing on the first episode of the collected Moomin comic. In comics studies, Björn Sundmark (2014) has written a useful analysis in Swedish of another episode of the Moomin comic, "Moomin and the Sea," in comparison with the later Moomin novel *Pappan och havet* (1965) [*Moominpappa at Sea*, 1974]. K. A. Laity's chapter in *Tove Jansson Rediscovered*, "Roses, Beads, and Bones: Gender, Borders and Slippage in Tove Jansson's Moomin Comic-Strips" (2007), explores the

first episode of the Moomin comic through Jansson's innovative use of panel borders. Laity's research is foundational for examining how Jansson uses the comics form to interrogate conceptions of gender, but, like Sundmark, her analysis is limited to only a single episode of the comic. Laity's chapter is so far the only English-language academic study of Jansson's Moomin comics.

In this chapter, my purpose is to examine the Moomin comics written and illustrated by Tove Jansson between 1954 and 1957 from feminist and queer perspectives. Acknowledging that this archive is too extensive to consider in a single treatment, my approach will be to focus on the central themes of gender and sexuality, the family, women's emancipation, masculinity, and femininity – themes that are evident across Jansson's rich oeuvre. My argument is that gender politics are already at the forefront of the Moomin comics written and illustrated by Jansson herself. I argue that the overlapping themes between Jansson's Moomin comics and novels published during the same years highlight the relevance of her comics for analysis in terms of gender and sexuality. Jansson published the Moomin novel *Farlig midsommar* (1954) [*Moominsummer Madness*, 1955] during the same year she began work on the newspaper comic. The following novel in the Moomin suite, *Trollvinter* (1957) [*Moominland Midwinter*, 1958], was published the same year she left the comic to her brother Lars.

In Jansson research, the transition between *Farlig midsommar* and *Trollvinter* is considered to mark a major shift in the Moomin suite, from children's adventure stories to introspective, philosophical meditations. As Jansson researchers have pointed out, feminist and queer themes are evident in the earliest Moomin books and only continue to develop as the styles and forms employed in Jansson's writing become increasingly high-literary and complex (Witt-Brattström 1996; Österlund 2002). I will examine the Moomin newspaper comics, both in their own right and in terms of how they prefigure and adapt elements of the novels, in order to give an account of their feminist and queer aesthetics. I begin with an overview of the context for the publication of the comics with the Associated Newspapers syndicate.

Gender and sexuality in the Moomin comic strip

The Moomin newspaper comic was a transnational production, eventually reaching distribution in ca 40 countries and 120 newspapers, including all the Nordic countries, placing it among the most widely distributed daily comics of the period (Tolvanen 2000, p. 94). Jansson was approached to write and illustrate the Moomin comic strip by the British newspaper syndicate Associated Newspapers, appearing first in the London-based daily newspaper *The Evening News* from 1954 to 1957. After 1957, the writing of scripts and eventually the illustrations were taken over by Tove's brother Lars. As Tolvanen documents, the first synopsis for the Moomin comic was originally written by Tove Jansson in English, but the stress of writing in English proved too much for the demanding pace of production, and the

remaining episodes were written first in Swedish and later translated for English-language publication by Lars (*ibid*., pp. 94–95).

Tove Jansson's first published comic was the short-lived (1947–1948) *Mumintrollet och jordens undergång* [Moomintroll and the End of the World], published in the Finland-Swedish newspaper *Ny Tid*. Jansson's early comics were designed with both speech balloons and text underneath the panel, a prevalent style in European cartooning before the influence of American-style newspaper comics. Among the early influences for Jansson's comics, Tolvanen lists Oscar Andersson's *Mannen som gör vad som faller honom in* [The Man Who Does Whatever Comes to Mind], a wordless serial cartoon often considered Sweden's first comic, as well as Per Lindroth's *Jocke, Nicke och Majken*, [Jocke, Nicke, and Majken], a staple of Swedish-language newspaper comics of the 1920s and 1930s (2000, pp. 11–12). Jansson's first synopsis for the Moomin comic for Associated Newspapers leaned in the direction of her earlier comics, with text underneath the panels so that speech bubbles would not disrupt the flow of images (ibid, p. 51). Formally, the Moomin comic published in *The Evening News* resembles to a great extent the newspaper comics of the period, albeit with a number of innovative elements. Specifically, Jansson developed a style of using visual elements from within the comic as panel borders to comment metatextually on the action. The fourth wall is routinely broken, not only by having characters directly address the reader, but also by placing background figures outside the panels and allowing them to comment on the events of the comic. As Tolvanen suggests, Jansson's playfulness with the medium approaches the experimentalism of George Herriman's iconic *Krazy Kat* (*ibid*., p. 98).

In her short story "Serietecknaren" [The Cartoonist], first published in 1978, Tove Jansson gives a fictional account of life as a comics artist, partially based on her own experiences working on the Moomin comic. Here, Jansson describes an exclusively male-dominated milieu for the production and distribution of newspaper comics.[1] In the story, a cartoonist named Samuel Stein is hired to take over a popular newspaper comic named Blubby whose creator has mysteriously disappeared mid-episode, causing problems for the syndicate. Obsessed with the mystery surrounding the comic's original creator, Stein eventually tracks him down, leading to a denouement with a clearly homoerotic subtext. The conspicuous absence of women from Jansson's depiction of the scene of newspaper comics in "Serietecknaren" may be seen as an aesthetic device allowing her to emphasise the homoeroticism of the encounter between the two men. In reality, Jansson was by no means the only female comics artist active during the 1950s. The years in which the Moomin newspaper comic was written and illustrated by Tove Jansson also saw the likes of Dale Messick, Marie Severin, and Ramona Fradon, to name only a few.[2]

Jansson's editor from Associated Newspapers, Charles Sutton, encouraged her to design the episodes of the newspaper comic not only with children as intended readers but also adults (Tolvanen 2000, p. 49; Westin 2014, p. 272).

Despite the ambition to write something more "sophisticated" (in Sutton's words, quoted in Westin 2014, p. 273), Jansson herself had expressed the desire to avoid references to politics entirely. As she would write to Sutton, "absolutely no politics! It would completely destroy the whole idea of something that is universally human, make the series too obvious and take away my joy in working on it" (quoted in Karlajainen 2013, p. 184). By avoiding overtly political statements in her work, Jansson seems to place herself on the side of "art for art's sake," or purely aesthetic detachment. Theorists of modern art and literature typically view stances in favour of aesthetic value as opposed to active political engagement.[3] As Rita Felski has influentially argued, feminist literary aesthetics typically resist a straightforward division between "aesthetic" expression and "instrumental" politics (1989, pp. 3–7). My argument is that Jansson's Moomin comics articulate feminist and queer politics on the level of both form and content, through the use of backgrounds, panel borders, and metatextual references, as well as representations of gender and sexuality, masculinity and femininity, and the bourgeois family. In other words, by calling attention to the feminist and queer aesthetics of Jansson's Moomin comics, I wish to suggest the way in which aesthetic politics are interwoven through both form and content.

For example, throughout Jansson's works, the Moomin family appears as a satire of the bourgeois nuclear family as such. Family members are given names according to their roles in the family, and Moominmamma and Moominpappa are clearly distinguished by the use of gendered attributes: a purse and a top hat. As Mia Österlund puts it, "*Hon [Jansson] bildar rentav ett begrepp, det att vara moominmamma*" ["Jansson establishes a concept, being a moominmamma"] (2002, p. 59). In the Moomin books, Moominmamma's purse takes on nearly mythical properties, capable of carrying an entire world of accessories. For the newspaper comic, it was Sutton's suggestion to distinguish Moominmamma even more with the addition of the apron (Tolvanen 2000, p. 59). This detail from the comics would make its way into the novels beginning with the illustrations for *Farlig midsommar*. Ebba Witt-Brattström has argued (1996, p. 469) that the refusal of sexual difference is a foundational myth of the Moomin universe, particularly the shapeshifting episodes in *Trollkarlens hatt* (1948) [*Finn Family Moomintroll*, 1950]. Though these episodes from *Trollkarlens hatt* are not repeated directly in the Moomin comics, Westin also points out how Jansson "*laborerar … med mumintrollens fysiologi, förstorar och förminskar dem*" ["works … with the Moomins' physiology, enlarges and reduces them"] (2017, p. 196). Indeed, Jansson works with the visual form of the Moomins' neutral, asexual bodies as a challenge to the conventions of gendered representation throughout the comics.

By the time she began work on the Moomin comic, Jansson had already published four Moomin novels and one picture book for children. During the years she wrote and illustrated the comic, Jansson also wrote the Moomin novels *Farlig midsommar* and *Trollvinter*. Surprisingly, few Moomin comics

directly adapt stories from the novels, but plot elements and motifs are nevertheless shared across the books and comics. As Westin puts it, the Moomin world can be seen as a "transmedial phenomenon" (2017, p. 189), consisting of illustrated children's books, picture books, comics, plays, animation, and so forth. Major and minor characters from the Moomin novels often appear in the comics in different roles, such as the unhappy Misabel from *Farlig midsommar* who features in the sixth episode of the newspaper comic as the Moomin family's maid. Tofslan and Vifslan, whose names refer to Tove and her lover at the time Vivica Bandler, are not specifically mentioned in the comics, but can be found in the background of certain panels. The jungle in *Trollkarlens hatt*, the flood in *Farlig midsommar*, and the winter awakening in *Trollvinter* all have their equivalents in the Moomin comics. The outlines of the plot of the later novel *Pappan och havet* (1965, published in English as *Moominpappa at Sea*, 1974) can be found in one of the last episodes of the comics to be both written and illustrated by Tove Jansson, "Moomin and the Sea."

As I will be arguing, the earlier Moomin novels and comics develop a number of themes that are crucial for understanding Jansson's feminist and queer aesthetics. The Moomin family is from the beginning a chosen family including not only the nuclear triad of Moominmamma, Moominpappa, and Moomintroll (called only Moomin in the comics), but also the brother–sister pair of Snork and Snork Maiden, and the sisters Little My and the younger Mymble. Numerous other occasional guests also fill the Moomin household, such as Moomintroll's best friend Snufkin. The foundation for the open and welcoming family depicted in the Moomin books is undoubtedly Moominmamma. As Janina Orlov puts it, "the Moomin world turns out to be a matriarchy. Moominmamma is simply the centre of the universe" (2006, 86). The chosen family provides a refuge extending well beyond the boundaries of the nuclear family as new houseguests seek asylum in Moomin Valley. In the early books, it is the family that provides structure and stability, for both Moomintroll and the narrative as a whole. Maria Nikolajeva argues that in the early Moomin books, "[i]t is not the child going on adventures on his own yet, but once again the whole family experiencing something new and exciting" (2000, p. 237). The family provides the framework not only for adventure in the Moomin books but also for the return to normality that concludes the adventure. In the comics, even when Jansson tests story ideas that would make their way into the later novels, such as the winter awakening or the voyage to the lighthouse, it is the family that experiences these events collectively.

From the earliest Moomin books and comics, queerness is represented in the form of obliquely coded references, cross-dressing, and other instances of gender non-conformity. The homosocial bond between Moomintroll and Snufkin is a major focus of the early Moomin books, expressed in the rhetoric of male friendship and triangulated by mutual objects of desire.[4] The cross-dressing Hemulens and Too-ticky appear in both the comics and

the novels. The couple Tofslan and Vifslan, referring to Tove and Vivica Bandler, are never named specifically in the English-language comic, but make their debut in Jansson's first Swedish-language comic, the short-lived *Mumintrollet och jordens undergång*. Queer desire in the Moomin comic is represented as well by ghosts and ghost-like creatures that fill the panels of the comic. According to Westin, "*spöksidan*," literally "spook side" or "ghost side," was a code word for lesbianism (2014, p. 260). In Jansson's comics, visual elements often spill out across the fixed lines of panel borders. As Laity puts it, "The borders themselves often arise from elements of the panel art and suggest a dangerous instability to the usually safe Moomin world" (2007, p. 166). As we will see, opposition to fixed positions of masculinity and femininity is expressed throughout the novels and comics. While the Moomin family exemplifies the bourgeois, nuclear family, discontent with and resistance to the fixed positions of "mamma" and "pappa" are expressed on numerous occasions. Many of the most radical moments in the Moomin comics are those incorporating elements from *Farlig midsommar*, such as when Moominmamma leaves the home and housework for an adventure of her own. The heteronormative frame of Moomin and Snorkmaiden's implied romance organises many of the episodes of the comic, yet the expectations of conventional gender are satirised throughout their relationship. Moomin is repeatedly called on to demonstrate his manliness, a demand he only fulfils temporarily and with difficulty. Indeed, the critique of hegemonic masculinity in the comics prefigures and reflects the much deeper questioning of fixed identities that would preoccupy Jansson's later Moomin novels.

Moomin's chosen families

The first episode of the Moomin comic that Jansson submitted to Associated Newspapers is titled "Moomin and the Brigands." At this moment in the comic, the Moomin family as such with Moominmamma and Moominpappa make no appearance. Instead, Moomin and Sniff serve as a comic duo whose antics motivate and advance the plot. "Moomin and the Brigands" does not directly adapt any of the Moomin books, but story elements from the books are recognisable, such as the plant-collecting Hemulen from *Trollkarlens hatt*. Moomin Valley in the comics is not the idyllic world that undergoes catastrophe only for the idyll to be restored, as Nikolajeva describes the scene of the early Moomin novels (2000, pp. 233–239). Rather, readers are introduced to a chaotic world without the Moomin home as a fixed centre. The Moomin home does not appear in Jansson's first strip as a refuge for all, but instead constitutes an inhospitable scene in which Moomin himself is made to play the role of host for ungrateful and unwelcome guests. "I have 15 guests and relations in my house! It has given me an awful headache!" (1.1), exclaims Moomin to Sniff at the end of the first episode's first strip.[5] In the third strip of the episode (Figure 8.1), the reader sees that the unwelcome

Figure 8.1 © Moomin Characters™, Tove Jansson, "Moomin and the Briggands," *The Evening News*, 1954

"guests and relations" are none other than Hattifatteners, referred to as "poor relations." Overrun by unwelcome guests, the home at the beginning of "Moomin and the Briggands" is not the locus of the nuclear family but a conflicted and complicated space for dealing with chosen families based on elective affinities.

Readers of the earlier Moomin novels have already been introduced to the Hattifatteners, vaguely threatening creatures without language or reason who move in large groups. As Westin reports, Jansson's first draft of the synopsis in English named the unwelcome houseguests specifically as Hattifatteners, but Sutton was hesitant about their potentially phallic connotations and suggested "poor relations" as a translation (2014, p. 277). While the Swedish publication of Jansson's comic retains the original name Hattifatteners in the strip, Sutton's label "poor relations" emphasises the difference of class as a threat to the respectable bourgeois family. The overwhelming number of "poor relations" filling the panels suggests an uncontrollable force unsettling the conventions of bourgeois domesticity, not unlike the Mymble with her unmanageable number of children. In the episode's fourth strip, a panel is drawn against a black background showing Moomin welcoming the "poor relations" into an unconventional home filled with figures who might be recognisable to readers of the Moomin books, including the older Mymble's daughter and Tofslan and Vifslan (though they

are not named as such). Upon seeing the Hattifatteners, the guests of the Moomin household ask, "Who are these extraordinary types?" (1.4).

The form and content of this panel illustrate Jansson's distinctive style of comic art and her creative response to the limitations placed on her by her editors and publishers. According to Tolvanen, avoiding dark or highly detailed backgrounds was among the advice that Jansson had received from Associated Newspapers (2000, p. 51). Jansson's contrasting use of light and dark backgrounds not only emphasises the ambivalence of home as a space of refuge, but also tests the boundaries of the newspaper medium. The label "extraordinary" in the panel might seem to apply equally to the Hattifatteners and the diverse group of houseguests, suggesting that the Moomin home is one where "extraordinary types" are usually welcomed and encouraged. Though readers of the Moomin novels may have learned that Hattifatteners cannot speak, the "poor relations" that fill the Moomin home come demanding "cocktails" and "supper," a demand presented without reason or compromise. In this sense, the comics provide support for the argument, often advanced within Jansson research, that the Hattifatteners represent the depersonalised and inexorable desire of the Freudian "id" or unconscious.[6]

Though the Moomin house seems to be restored at the end of "Moomin and the Brigands," Moominmamma and Moominpappa remain conspicuously absent until the next episode, titled "Moomin and Family Life," written in 1954. In the first strip of the episode, the reader meets Moomin in a dramatically transformed condition: "house gone, money gone, girlfriend gone" (2.1). Moomin is drawn in a series of panels containing reflections such as, "Mine is not the happy family life!" and "I guess I had better drown myself…" (2.2). In the Moomin comic, life outside the nuclear family is filled with existential dread, an uncertain and precarious existence whose dangers are continually implied, and at times become intolerable. In the following strips, Moomin encounters two figures who any reader of the Moomin novels will immediately recognise as Moominmamma and Moominpappa. Moomin is first greeted as a complete stranger when Moominpappa says "Hullo stranger" and is answered by Moomin with "Hullo yourself" (2.4, Figure 8.2).

The Moomin family's misrecognition of their son echoes the scene in *Trollkarlen's hatt*, where he is transformed into an animal and recognised by no one, until his identity is confirmed by his mother after considerable consternation. Moomin's body is concealed in the panel under water and is thus invisible, an example of visual transformation that is typical of the way that Jansson works with the representation of the Moomin's bodily form throughout the comics (cf. Westin 2017, p. 196). Eventually, Moomin is invited home to Moominmamma and Moominpappa after explaining his longing for a mother and father, a moment of hospitality that we know to be characteristic of the Moomin family. But Moomin turns out to be not just another houseguest. Recognising the mug that he himself had used as a child, Moomin discovers himself to be the "long, lost son" (2.6) of the Moomin

Figure 8.2 © Moomin Characters™, Tove Jansson, "Moomin and Family Life," *The Evening News*, 1955

family, at which point he is embraced and acknowledged as the family's true son. Moominmamma's exuberant recognition of her son in "Moomin and Family Life" recalls the scene of recognition in *Trollkarlens hatt*, but the comic's moment of recognition is both more radical and more uncertain. The comic provides no assurance that Moominmamma and Moominpappa are indeed Moomin's true parents beyond their mutual claim of shared memories and the desire for the family as such. The Moomin family is thus shown to be not a natural relation but a contingent arrangement based on elective affinities. Moments later, Sniff too is wholeheartedly welcomed into the family as an adopted child, as is Snorkmaiden when she and Moomin are reunited at the end of the episode – thus establishing the image of the Moomin family as a welcoming home and safe refuge for all.

Moominmamma's emancipation

Already in "Moomin and Family Life," the seemingly indivisible bond between Moomin and Moominmamma is severed in one dramatic example when Moominmamma decides to leave her son and join Moominpappa to live in a cave. The attachment between mother and son, such a central theme in the early Moomin books, is called into question repeatedly throughout the comics. While Moominmamma's unconditional love and acceptance of her son legitimates the ideals of home and family, readers are also shown a rebellious Moominmamma who not only wishes to join Moominpappa in outrageous exploits, but also expresses dissatisfaction with the traditional role of the mother in the home.

In the sixth episode of the Moomin comic, "Moomin Mamma's Maid," the Fillyjonk is introduced as "a housekeeping and mother-craft expert" (6.3). Coming to the Moomin house for the first time, Mrs Fillyjonk expresses dismay over the lack of a maid to keep the house in order, to which Moominmamma replies, "Oh no… You see, we love housekeeping – sometimes, when we feel like it…" (6.5). Mrs Fillyjonk appeals to Moominpappa, ostensibly the head of the household, to employ a maid: "You *must* have a maid to look after you!" (6.7). The promise of hiring a maid, further described as "quite a *small* maid" (6.8), so as not to pose a threat to Moominmamma, appears to offer the reestablishment of patriarchal authority in the household. Patriarchal order is repeatedly threatened throughout this episode, as, for example, when Moominmamma's minor provocations cause her to be suspected for murder after the sudden disappearance of Mrs Fillyjonk. In fact, Mrs Fillyjonk has only left to visit her aunt, but her absence coincides with the arrival of the Moomin family's maid, whom readers of the Moomin books will recognise as the perpetually dissatisfied Misabel from *Farlig midsommar*. Moominmamma very quickly abandons the pretence of employing Misabel as a maid and instead seeks to understand the roots of her discontent and help her discover her own inner strength and self-confidence.

In "Moomin Mamma's Maid," Misabel's role is very different from the character who appears in *Farlig* midsommar. At the end of *Farlig midsommar*, Misabel is transformed by her experience of acting in the theatre, allowing her to explore different versions of femininity and express her melancholic temperament in the role of a tragic heroine. In the comic, Misabel articulates discontent with the expectations of female domesticity, and particularly women's unpaid or low-wage labour in the home.[7] Though Moominmamma acknowledges her "bad conscience" (6.52) for Misabel's unhappiness as a maid, she seems unable to help beyond maintaining the pretense that work is fun, which she claims is "why we have such a good time" (6.63). Misabel's attitude that "work is work" (6.49) and "one should respect work!" (6.50) seems unamenable to the Moomin-minded approach that work is fun. Misabel's unhappiness is an insistent reminder of the power dynamics of the Moomin household. As a maid, Misabel is first and foremost a paid labourer who takes on housework *as work* and not because it is fun. Misabel's alienation is compounded when Moominmamma suggests that washing dishes is more fun "in the sea" (6.67). When a storm washes the dishes away, Moominmamma asks the "children," in this case, Moominpappa, Moomin, and Snorkmaiden to dive after them. Standing alone on the shore, Misabel thinks, "How do they manage to make everything into a pleasure? Oooh, how lonely I am…" (6.68, Figure 8.3).

Moominmamma's central position in the strip's centre panel reinforces the impression of the Moomin household as a matriarchy, with Moominpappa, whose hat remains on the shore, as just another adult child. But Moominmamma's central position is contrasted with the alienation

Figure 8.3 © Moomin Characters™, Tove Jansson, "Moominmamma's Maid," *The Evening News*, 1956

and loneliness of Misabel, whose efforts cannot be compensated by the promise of happiness in domestic labour. The use of perspective in this strip, observing Misabel first from the shore and then from the sea, emphasises her alienation by contrasting her loneliness with the Moomin family's sense of ease. In the last panel, the Moomin family's humorous and playful attitude to the home and housework is juxtaposed in the foreground with Misabel's loneliness and alienation in the background.

The drawing style throughout this episode is reminiscent of the illustrations in *Farlig midsommar* in which the ordinary perceptions of the space of the home, the dishes, and the furniture, are defamiliarised against the surrealistic backdrop of the flood and the theatre. At the end of the episode, it is Snorkmaiden who teaches Misabel the value of performance, not just as a form of pleasure but of power: "Now remember! Self-confident, happy, nonchalant. One must pretend at times" (6.76). Through this moment of sisterly care and attention, Misabel gathers the courage to face her fears, first by falsely confessing to the murder of Mrs Fillyjonk, of which she is immediately declared innocent. In an even more provocative act of courage, she confronts Mrs Fillyjonk's own maid (who it turns out is Misabel's own long-lost sister who has represented herself as a film star in letters). This much bolder act of defiance results in Mrs Fillyjonk's maid leaving to start a new life of her own, yet another act of rebellion. In the final panel of the episode, Mrs Fillyjonk says to Moominmamma, "Oh dear! Have you spoiled your new maid already!" to which she replies, "We have. Thank goodness!" (6.82).

In the next episode, "Moomin Builds a House," the theme of domestic labour continues, this time with the introduction of the older Mymble and her children, including Little My. The Mymble's daughter, referred to only as the Mymble in the comic, had already been introduced in the earlier episodes when she is rescued from pirates by Moomin. "Moomin Builds a House" opens with a characteristic scene of hospitality as the Moomin family once again welcomes new, troublesome houseguests. The older Mymble

arrives uninvited and leaves her 17 children in the care of her daughter, who describes the situation as "rather embarrassing with this many little sisters and brothers" (7.8). The group of children proceed to harass and abuse Mrs Fillyjonk's own well-behaved children, for which they earn the label "a menace to society," with Little My as "the very worst!" Österlund describes the Mymble with her unabashedly large group of children as the female equivalent of the sexual drive represented by the Hattifatteners (2002, p. 61). The threat to the respectable, bourgeois family posed by out-of-control reproduction is emphasised in the comic by the Mymble's children who fill each panel, intruding into every corner of the home. Little My appears in a coffee pot, causing Moominmamma to remark, "But dear, we make coffee in that," to which Little My replies, "Not now!" Not only is the home and its normal functioning disrupted by the arrival of the children, but Moomin himself is once again cast out of the Moomin home. Yet, if the nuclear family could function as a refuge for outcasts and misfits in the earlier Moomin books and comics, we find at this point, a family in need of reconstitution and reinvention to accommodate the increasing demands placed on it. When Moomin is cast out of the house to make room for the Mymble children, it is Little My who gives him the idea to "build yourself a new house of your *own*! Where all the rooms are yours!" (7.21). And in the course of establishing a new home, it is also Little My whose tricks and pranks prevent the construction of the house, disrupting the project of establishing a newly constituted household for Moomin and Snorkmaiden. At the end of the episode, the new home is given over to the older Mymble and her children as Moomin and Snorkmaiden realise that living in a tent is "more romantic" than owning a home, and, after all, the new house's lop-sided frame makes for the perfect playground.

Moomin masculinities and femininities

As Nikolajeva has pointed out, the relationship between Moomintroll and Snorkmaiden in the Moomin novels is one between children and is hardly described as romantic at all (2000, p. 233).[8] In the comic, by contrast, Snorkmaiden and Moomin's ongoing romance is featured in nearly every episode, though only at the level of innocent flirtation required by Jansson's editors and publishers at Associated Newspapers. Yet, in keeping with the themes of the Moomin novels, Snorkmaiden and Moomin's romance in the comics is mediated by idealised images of masculinity and femininity which serve as opportunities to try out and explore differently gendered positions of identity and desire. At the beginning of the ninth episode of the comic, "Moomin Falls in Love," the reader meets Moomin in a pastoral setting, on his back with a book of poetry, thinking aloud, "I wonder why the heroine in a book is always more beautiful than the one at home." Examples of Moomin's aestheticism can be found throughout the books and comics in the appreciation of beauty for its own sake, a clear contrast with characters

like Sniff who are primarily motivated by money and material considerations. In the comics, Moomin is more frequently lured by images of romance than by any actual romance with Snorkmaiden. Even in the novel *Pappan och havet*, when Moomintroll seems to develop his own, highly sublimated sexual identity, his objects of desire take the form of beautiful creatures like seahorses.

In "Moomin Falls in Love," plot elements from *Farlig midsommar* are again prefigured, such as the flood and the floating theatre, which in the comic takes the form of a circus. The discovery of the prima donna's horse leads in turn to Moomin's infatuation with the prima donna, later revealed to be, in the words of Snorkmaiden, "a terrible vamp" (9.27). The prima donna is drawn with the characteristic shape of the Moomins but with a more conventional feminine appearance, a long, sleek body and curls in her hair. When the flood waters rise further after a thunderstorm, Moomin fails to protect either Snorkmaiden or the prima donna, thinking to himself, "Now I have messed things up. This is no situation for a male" (9.25). With Moomin having failed to live up to the requirements of conventional masculinity, the rivalry between Snorkmaiden and the prima donna is replaced by sisterhood, as they move to live in a "Ladies only!" tent with the Mymble, Little My, and the prima donna's horse. At the end of the comic, Snorkmaiden and Moomin are reunited at the prompting of the Mymble who stages a dramatic "scene of reconciliation" in which they both utter clichéd lines like "I beseech you" and "My heart is like the still white snow" (9.51). Both *Farlig midsommar* and "Moomin Falls in Love" conclude their respective narratives by collapsing the distance between life and art, emphasising the performativity of the identities of the characters, and the scenes of desire in which those identities are performed.

In the Moomin comics, the masculine equivalent of the prima donna is no doubt Mr Brisk, the boisterous ski instructor who attracts the attention of both Snorkmaiden and the Mymble in "Moomin's Winter Follies." In the novel *Trollvinter*, it is Moomin and Little My alone who choose to break with the tradition of the Moomin ancestors and stay awake through the winter. In the comic, the entire family chooses not to hibernate and experiences winter together. As Tolvanen recounts, the decision to write a winter adventure for the Moomin family was necessitated by the daily format of the newspaper comic (2000, p. 57). Readers could not be expected to continue reading stories about summer in Moomin Valley when it had become winter in real life. Mr Brisk might well remind readers of the skiing Hemulen in *Trollvinter*, but the plots of the two winter narratives are very different. Mr Brisk, it turns out, is a fascistic character who sees the Moomin family as "degenerate weaklings" for their inability to master skiing. In *Trollvinter*, Moomintroll learns to appreciate the winter with the guidance of Too-ticky, but in the comics, Too-ticky would not make an appearance until the later episode, "Moomin and the Sea." In "Moomin's Winter Follies," it is in fact the Mymble who undergoes the greatest transformation, dealing with

her unrequited love for Mr Brisk and finding solace in the changing of the seasons from winter to spring. When Snorkmaiden asks, "Say – *Why* do you love Mr Brisk?" the Mymble responds, "He's a He-man. But he doesn't seem to think me a She-miss…" (5.33). Rather than shoring up her own femininity, the Mymble attempts to attract Mr Brisk's interest by becoming an expert skier, eventually beating him in a skiing competition. To compensate for his pride that has been injured by such a defeat, the Mymble arranges a number of contests with predetermined outcomes to bolster Mr Brisk's fragile masculinity. These staged contests result in a return to normalcy in the form of a winter party arranged by Moominmamma, giving the Mymble the courage to approach Mr Brisk romantically. Not surprisingly, Mr Brisk is revealed to be more interested in competition than romance, leaving for the North Pole without saying a word to the Mymble. Finally, spring is announced in Moomin Valley by "a brook where little mymbles can quickly forget their unhappy love!" (5.82).

In the Moomin comics, masculinity and femininity are repeatedly staged as performances in the theatrical sense undertaken by characters in scenes of desire. Magnus Öhrn argues that Jansson was increasingly conscious in her writing of masculinity as a "construction," particularly in the later Moomin novels (2011, p. 429).[9] In the comics, it appears that when performances of masculinity are successful, conventional romance is possible, as is frequently the case for Moomin and Snorkmaiden. Those who are unable to manage the expectations of conventional masculinity and femininity are depicted as melancholic, like the Mymble, or subversive rebels, like Little My. Gender performativity is thematised most explicitly in "Moomin and the Sea," one of the last of the Moomin comics to be written and illustrated by Jansson herself. In this episode, Moomin begins to reflect on the gendered expectations that he is repeatedly called on to live up to in his ongoing flirtation with Snorkmaiden. "Pappa," he asks, "why must men pretend to be brave?" Moominpappa answers, "Pretend? We *are* brave, of course. At least that's what I've always been told…" (12.28, Figure 8.4). The qualifier, "what I've always been told," undermines the certainty of the assertion that male bravery is not a pretense but a fact. In the same strip, Moomin's suspicion that all gender is a performance is confirmed by Moominmamma who lets on that she only "pretended" to be afraid of the dark "because of your father."

The alienation and confusion caused by the awareness of gender performativity is not resolved in the comic. Moomin and Snorkmaiden are reunited in this episode as well, but their willingness to go through the motions of gender performativity for the sake of heterosexual romance appears increasingly strained. At one point, Snorkmaiden thinks of Moomin, "I would never have forgiven him if I had to pity him still more!" (12.73). In other words, Snorkmaiden herself seems to tire of the repeated performances of gender that are expected of them both. When Björn Sundmark reads this strip in his comparative analysis of the comic "Moomin and the Sea" and the

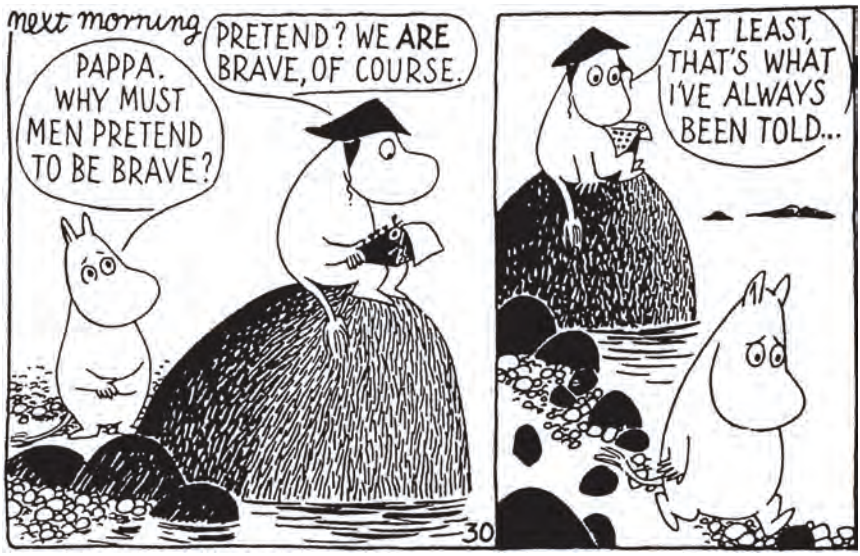

Figure 8.4 © Moomin Characters™, Tove Jansson, "Moomin and the Sea," *The Evening News*, 1957

novel *Pappan och havet*, he calls it "*romantisk i dubbel mening*" ["romantic in a double sense"] (2014, p. 20), evoking both the deep emotions of romantic literature and the conventions of heteronormative romance. But it is at this moment that the comic's romantic narrative reaches a limit point, as the heteronormative expectations on which it is built can no longer sustain its credibility. Tove Jansson would only write two more Moomin comics after "Moomin and the Sea" before allowing Lars to take responsibility for writing and, eventually, illustrating the entire comic. In "Moomin and the Sea," the last of the Moomin comics written by Jansson herself, discontent with the expectations of heteronormativity becomes a nearly insurmountable obstacle for the continuing romance plot between Moomin and Snorkmaiden.

Conclusion

According to Witt-Brattström (1996, p. 470), the emancipation of Moominmamma is first declared in the novel *Farlig sommar* when she proclaims, "I'm not washing any dishes today." As I have been describing, there are many similar moments in the Moomin comics. But Moominmamma's most dramatic moment of emancipation occurs in the comic "Moomin Begins a New Life," when two competing prophets come preaching versions of hedonism and asceticism that by turns attract and

repel the residents of Moomin Valley. Moominmamma begins to wonder why everyone but her undergoes a process of emancipation: "I'm fed up with all this! Now I'm going to lead a free life as well" (8.38). In the end, Moominmamma returns after her own journey of self-discovery and explains to both prophets, "Both of you teach nice things, but you must understand it's all a little unpractical for ordinary people" (8.60). Moominmamma's wisdom may seem to be a reaffirmation of the norms of home and family against the extremes of emancipation and conformity.[10] But this would be to ignore the context and setting of the Moomin world in which the comic takes place. It is the extraordinary Moominmamma who appeals to the values of "ordinary people" only after returning from her own journey of self-discovery to reclaim her rightful place as the household's undisputed matriarch.

Throughout the Moomin comic, Jansson immerses readers in a world of constant change. As I have argued, the family is maintained in Janson's comics as a stable ground, but one based on elective affinities, welcoming and open to all. As Österlund has pointed out, the Moomin world encompasses a broad variety of representations of femininity (2002, p. 62). In the comics as in the novels, Moominmamma, the Mymble, Little My, Snorkmaiden, Mrs Fillyjonk, Misabel, Too-ticky, the prima donna, and many others, stand for an array of femininities within, outside, and adjacent to hegemonic gender norms. Just as she does in the Moomin novels published during this period, Jansson uses her comics to explore the performativity of gender through theatrical scenes of desire. In this chapter, I have shown that, despite the heteronormative framework of the flirtation between Moomin and Snorkmaiden, Jansson works against the constraints of normative gender in the comic's romance plot. Indeed, not long after Moomin comes to terms with the fact that all gender is "pretend" in "Moomin and the Sea," Tove Jansson herself would leave the comic to be continued by her brother Lars.

Notes

1 The situation of the story may be closer to the one Tove's brother Lars Jansson must have found himself in when he took over the writing and illustration for the Moomin comic. Like the main character in "Serietecknaren," Lars Jansson's first manuscript for the Moomin comic was a Wild West adventure.

2 For the American context for women in comics, see Robbins (2001). For the British context, in which Jansson was active, see Streeten and Tate (2018). Research on women in comics is an emerging field to which the current anthology is a contribution. For the Swedish context for feminist comics since the 1970s, see Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin (2019.) As Tolvanen notes, Tove Jansson is unparalleled among Finnish comics artists of any gender for the influence and reach achieved by the Moomin newspaper comic.

3 See in particular Felski (1989) for an overview of debates regarding aesthetics in the context of feminist art and literature.

4 For homosexual references in Jansson's later work, see Gustafsson (2007). On queer themes in the Moomin novels specifically, see Öhrn (2011) and Österlund (2016). Historically, homosociality has often provided a coded language for expressions of queer desire. See most influentially Sedgwick (1985).
5 Episode and strip numbers are cited continuously in the text. All references are from the English-language edition of the Moomin comic published by *Drawn & Quarterly* (Jansson 2014). I have chosen to cite the English edition since the comic was originally produced in English, translated by Lars Jansson. I have, however, noted where there are significant departures from Jansson's original Swedish.
6 Österlund identifies the Hattifatteners with (masculine) sexual desire (2002, p. 61; cf., Witt-Brattström 1996, p. 469). According to Witt-Brattström, the subtext of the Moomin universe is the Freudian unconscious, charged with an underlying infantile sexual fantasy (1996, pp. 467–468).
7 Jansson's depiction of women's happiness and unhappiness in the home evokes common discussions during the 1950s and afterward of the figure of the "happy housewife." Further study of the historical context for Jansson's representations of femininity would be a topic for further research, but see for example, Ahmed (2010, pp. 50–87). In Ahmed's terms, Misabel in the Moomin comic can be seen as representing the position of the "feminist killjoy" who insistently points out the unhappiness on which the happiness of bourgeois domesticity is grounded.
8 As Nikolajeva also points out, Snorkmaiden herself somewhat mysteriously disappears from the series after the novel *Trollvinter* when Moomintroll seems to have undergone his own process of individuation and maturation (2000, p. 233).
9 The point of departure for Öhrn's reading of Jansson is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, or, in Butler's terms, the idea "[t]hat gender reality is created through sustained social performances" (Butler 1990, p. 180).
10 Dan Zahavi reads this comic from a philosophical perspective in an insightful analysis that nevertheless does not take into account other Jansson research or comics studies. Zahavi argues, "One might read Moomin Begins a New Life as a corrective to any simpleminded existentialist ('Sartrean') emphasis on boundless freedom and the limiting and constraining character of normality" (2018, p. 15). I would add that a feminist perspective on Moominmamma's emancipation is also necessary in this analysis.

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Part IV

Addressing violence in Finnish comics

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9 Feminist education and empowerment

The individual and the collective in Emmi Nieminen and Johanna Vehkoo's comic on online violence

Ralf Kauranen and Olli Löytty

Introduction

A group of women stand close to each other. The women, portrayed *en face* and in nearly full figure from their knees up all look down at the smartphones in their hands, their faces with frowning eyebrows and turned-down mouths express anger, disbelief, and revulsion. Something black is exuding from their phones and filling the bottom of the image. This is the cover of artist Emmi Nieminen's and journalist Johanna Vehkoo's journalistic comics album *Vihan ja inhon internet* (2017) [The Internet of fear and loathing] about online violence targeting women in Finland (Figure 9.1a). The title on the cover suggests to the reader that the group of women in the cover image are in the process of encountering these sordid aspects of the internet.

Nieminen and Vehkoo's publication is a large-format (250 × 345 mm), colourful, and with its approximately 150 pages, rather long comics album. The final page of the comic itself, followed only by an afterword and acknowledgements, is a full-page image again depicting a large group of women (Figure 9.1b). Here, the overall feeling is much lighter than in the cover image; this is accentuated by the lighter colouring. The women are now looking at their phones in amusement, boredom, or indifference. The two images – the cover and the final page of the comic – are in narrative interconnection and display the message that the meaning and reception of the hateful, violent messages directed towards these women have changed. The caption in the final image emphasises this: "We will not be silenced." The strong message of empowerment submitted by the final image is only the culmination; between these images in the beginning and the end of the book, the message is built up through different visual–verbal techniques of narrating and showing.

The caption in the final page denotes a "we" and both the cover image and the final image depict a group of women. The problem of the culture

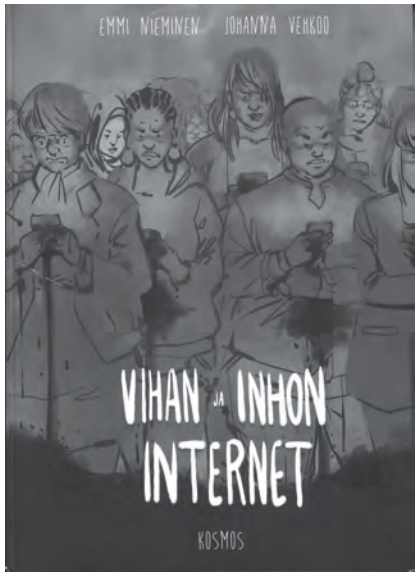

Figure 9.1a © Emmi Nieminen and Johanna Vehkoo, *Vihan ja inhon internet*, Kosmos, 2017, front cover

Figure 9.1b © Emmi Nieminen and Johanna Vehkoo, *Vihan ja inhon internet*, Kosmos, 2017, p. 144

of hate flowering on the internet is thus depicted as a collective problem, affecting women in numbers. The positioning of the women in the two images suggests how this collective is constituted: in the cover image, the women are standing in straight lines focusing on the devices they are holding in front of themselves. In the final image, the women are no longer separated by regular empty spaces, but are standing close to each other in a seemingly disorganised fashion. Still, it could be claimed that these women, in contradiction to those in the cover image, are organised – that is, in connection with each other and finding power in the collective.

Both the change in the reactions to the online messages and the change in the organisation of the collective of women occurring between the two images are enabled by the interim narrative. The comic's depiction of the problem of online violence against women fluctuates between the collective and the individual, and the comic not only shows that the personal is political, as the famous slogan connected to second-wave feminism (Heberle 2016, p. 594) states, but also that the political is personal. It also shows that the problem at hand calls for collective solutions. In its movement between and interaction of the personal and the political, the individual and the collective, the comic manages to inform and educate on a current social problem as well as provide a message of feminist empowerment.

As a historical slogan, "the personal is political" has gained multiple meanings. In addition to the feminist movement, Renée Heberle (2016) traces the thinking around the personal and political to the civil rights movement in the US. The gendered inequalities within this movement for racial equality provided a reminder of the contradiction of separating the personal from the political, and aspirations in the public sphere from the circumstances in the private sphere (Evans 1980, p. 23; Heberle 2016, p. 596). The origin of the phrase has been attributed to Carol Hanisch's eponymous article first published in 1970 (Hanisch 2000).[1] Writing on consciousness raising groups, Hanisch (2000, p. 114) notes that they have taught her "that personal problems are political problems," and that these collective problems call for collective action and collective solutions. Furthermore, Heberle (2016, pp. 598–599) emphasises the connection between consciousness raising in women's groups and the radical feminist practice of speak-outs, where problems viewed by society at large as private or personal were brought into the public sphere and shown to be common and structural.

Within black feminism, the assertion that the personal is political gained an identity-political meaning. The Combahee River Collective's manifesto and perspective emphasised the multiple "interlocking" systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective 2018 [1977], p. 270), and highlighted, consequently, what later has been dubbed an intersectional perspective (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016, 55). This adds a crucial adjustment to the understanding of personal circumstances as something diverse and non-essentialist. In her analysis of the debates concerning third-wave feminism and post-feminism, Ann Braithwaite (2002, p. 342) calls for an acknowledgement of the pluralism of positions and explorations of how the personal and political are intermingled in different contexts.

Our analysis of *Vihan ja inhon internet* is a modest contribution to the analyses of the various formations of the personal and the political in feminist practices. In a study of the relevance of the second-wave feminist proposition that the personal is political in the age of digital information and communication technologies, Frances Rogan and Shelley Budgeon (2018) show that online activities and social media may well provide a platform for the formation of feminist knowledge, political subjectivities, and collectives. On the other hand, for the young women studied by Rogan and Budgeon, social media also implies surveillance and self-monitoring. However, their study does not testify to experiences of online violence and the effects of this on the possibility for women to act as political subjects. This dark side of online communication is the topic of *Vihan ja inhon internet*.

How does *Vihan ja inhon internet* use and represent the ideas encapsulated by "the personal is political?" We see here multiple connections that are not only limited to the idea that life circumstances, problems, and choices deemed personal are, in fact, political and structural. *Vihan ja inhon internet* invites public and political scrutiny of a social problem affecting women,

and it shows that women as a collective are affected. The comic presents and builds this collective through different narrative means which position the targets of online violence together with the creator–narrators, the readers, and those providing solutions to the problem. The collective is further strengthened through the depiction of the online haters as generic, dehumanised, literal trolls. Furthermore, *Vihan ja inhon internet* shows that the political and collective problem affects and is felt differently on the individual level by different women. The comic also strongly emphasises collective solutions to the problem. This means, on the one hand, that those affected by online violence need not act on their own and that cooperation is necessary, and, on the other hand, that political solutions on the societal level are called for. However personal the problem of online violence might seem when affecting individual women, it is political to the core, *Vihan ja inhon internet* asserts.

Our analysis in this chapter is structured as follows: First, we analyse how the prologue and epilogue set into motion the dynamic of the personal and the political or the individual and the collective in the comic; second, we look at the individual case studies of women who have been targeted by online violence; third, we focus on the narrator–creators of the comic; fourth, we approach the online haters; fifth, we focus on the narrative device of the "ascension story" in the part of the comic on help available to women targeted by online violence; and, finally, in conclusion, we analyse how the reader is drawn in. Taken together, the segments of our analysis point at the ways in which *Vihan ja inhon internet* creates a collective of diverse, even individual, women who are able to cope with online violence and refuse to be silenced by this threat. Before the analysis, however, we will situate *Vihan ja inhon internet* in its Finnish and transnational milieux of comics.

Feminist comics and comics journalism in Finland

Vihan ja inhon internet is, in terms of ambition and amplitude, a unique work in Finnish comics culture, both with regards to the tradition of comics journalism and considering the culture of feminist comics. Both creators of *Vihan ja inhon internet*, journalist Johanna Vehkoo and comics and visual artist Emmi Nieminen, are established in their respective fields.

Vehkoo (b. 1976) is a journalist and author of several books of non-fiction. She has received prizes for advancing the openness of society (Finnish Society of Investigative Journalism 2016) and freedom of speech (Finnish PEN 2019). In addition, she keeps a popular blog on critical media literacy (*Valheenpaljastaja*) [The Lie Detector] on the website of the national broadcasting company.[2] Emmi Nieminen (b. 1988) has published five longer comics in addition to *Vihan ja inhon internet*: *Keskiviikko* (2012) [Wednesday], *Vagina Dentata* (2013), *Vahinkoraja* (2014) [Damage Limit], *Planeetta Funk* (2016) [Planet Funk] (together with the musical ensemble TRE Funk III), and *Emmi Kendalissa* (2019a) [*North to North*, 2019b].

She has also contributed to numerous comics anthologies, including the Tampere-based, long-lived comic book *Sarjari*[3](2018) and *Sisaret 1918* (Laitinen 2018) [Sisters 1918], an anthology of stories, depicted by female comics artists, of women in the Finnish Civil War of 1918. Vehkoo and Nieminen's cooperation has continued, as the latter illustrated Vehkoo's book on dis- and misinformation in current media and political culture (Vehkoo 2019).

Nieminen's comics have been published in the 2010s, a period in Finnish comics culture when gender diversity among creators seems self-evident. The field started changing in the 1990s when the number of women cartoonists increased (on the Finnish comics scene, see also Beers Fägersten et al. and Romu in this volume). Also, since this period there have been gender-associatively named outlets for women's and feminist comics: the anthologies *Naarassarjat* (1992–1993) [Female Comics] and *Irtoparta* (2001–2007) [Fake Beard], the publication series *Parrakas nainen* (2001–2003) [The Bearded Woman], and the online anthology *Nettinarttu* (2004–2009) [Web Bitch]. At this point, the concept of "women's comics" (*naissarjakuva*) became a part of the vocabulary of comics culture (Vistilä 2008, p. 7; Romu 2014). The rather unpopular essentialising term signified not only the rise in the number and activity of women comics artists, but also the broadening of themes represented in comics, as women's experiences and lives became more visible in them (Sinisalo 1996, p. 161). Comics scholar Leena Romu (2014) suggests that the comics by Finnish women artists were more overtly political in the 1990s than later, when the position of female artists was already more established.

While feminist comics have been successful and popular in the neighbouring country of Sweden, in Finland, they have not made their way to broader audiences outside the relatively small markets of avid comics readers. The overtly political, satirical, ironic, and humorous feminist comics so popular in Sweden (Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin 2017; see also this volume's chapters by Beers Fägersten et al., Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin, and Beers Fägersten) have not had as strong a presence among Finnish artists. Critic and comics artist Miia Vistilä aptly summarised the impact of women on Finnish comics in 2008: "Women have brought to Finnish comics culture more themes of the everyday and autobiography, racy and soft humour, sharp social criticism, and much more" (Vistilä 2008, p. 8; translation by the authors). In more recent years, the epithet "feminist comics" has gained ground, for example, in the collective Femicomix Finland (http://feministinensarjakuva.sarjakuvablogit.com/) drawing together a large number of artists of different genders.

Whereas some documentary genres have had a significant presence in Finnish women's and feminist comics, comics journalism is relatively rare (cf. "reportage" comics explored by Vuorinne in this volume). Autobiographical narratives and travelogues have been very important, represented in the works of, among others, Kaisa Leka, Aino Sutinen, Tiitu Takalo, and Katja Tukiainen.

Feminist comics journalism is scarce and has been represented in the short format, such as in Johanna Rojola and Ilse Rautio's (2006 [1999]) report on the Miss Finland pageant and Hannele Richert's (2019) comic on a Roumanian Roma woman in Finland. *Vihan ja inhon internet* presents a true milestone in the genre in the Finnish context. It is the first journalistic comic of such a grand scale (Kolttola 2020, p. 39), based on interviews with representatives of both targets and perpetrators of internet violence as well as experts conducting research in the area and, of course, on reference literature. To date, the work has been translated into French in 2019, and a part of the book has been published in English on the *Drawing the Times* website for comics journalism.[4]

Formations of the individual and the collective

The cover and the final image of *Vihan ja inhon internet*, both portraying a collective of women, frame the book's narrative of education and empowerment which is built through a combination of the individual and the collective, the personal and the political. The images of collectives of women at the beginning and end of the book also show individuals: the collectives are made up of women who look different and are in that sense individualised and recognisable. Taken together, the different parts of the comic, continually combining the personal with the political, construe a powerful feminist collective of women consisting of different individualised and personalised positions.

The book is divided in four thematic parts illuminating the studied phenomenon from different perspectives. The first part focuses on the targets of online hate, the second on research concerned with the phenomenon, the third on the perpetrators of hate, and the fourth on help available to the targets of hate speech and campaigns. In addition to the four main parts, there are a prologue and an epilogue in comics format as well as an afterword and acknowledgements in written form. In line with the cover image and the final image in the comics narrative bringing the collective to the forefront, both the prologue and epilogue approach the book's theme in a generalised fashion. Still, the general or abstract depictions of the problem also have traits of a more individualising perspective.

The prologue presents a prototypical case of a female person with an opinion being targeted by online violence. However, the case is narrated in the metaphorical form of an animal fable (Figure 9.2): The prologue consists of two spreads (VJII, pp. 8–11) of unframed images in sequence depicting anthropomorphic animals, among which a rabbit and a (teddy) bear are the main characters. Stylistically, the characters resemble those of Richard Scarry's picture books for children. Walking along the street in a cityscape, the rabbit says to the bear that it has been thinking that "rabbits should get equal pay with cats if they do the same work."[5] This

Figure 9.2 © Emmi Nieminen & Johanna Vehkoo, *Vihan ja inhon internet*, Kosmos, 2017, p. 9

statement seems to bring to a halt all animals surrounding them in the street. Next, a full-page image depicts the rabbit being physically attacked and punched in the face by a group of animals, while onlookers shout at the rabbit: "Fatso! / Feminazi! / Rabbit-whore! / Stupid shit! / Cat-hater!"[6] In the following pages, the hateful mob has moved on, and the rabbit and bear are left to themselves. In reply to the bear's idea to call the police, the rabbit, whilst stuffing back its torn innards, retorts that "[i]t's no use. They haven't turned up before." Surprised to hear that this has happened before, the bear asks the rabbit "How come you haven't learned to keep your mouth shut?"

The cute animal characters and the warm colours of the prologue are in stark contrast to the violence depicted. The prologue's association to children's literature – accentuated by the large format of the book – and the contrast between style and content attune the reader to the topic of the journalistic work, that is, the realities of social media, in which one may encounter both cute cat videos and violent, hostile language and behaviour. The prologue plays with the potential readerly expectations concerning comics and with the shock effect enabled by the generic cute animals familiar from both comics and children's literature.

While the prologue depicts an individual case of violence – physical violence metaphorically depicting online violence – the use of generic fable characters turns the individual woman's story into abstracted form. Not only does the story depict a typical case instead of a series of particular events happening to one particular and personalised individual, but it also does this in the detached form of animal characters.

The epilogue presents the topic in a more matter-of-fact style. It consists of three pages, ending with the aforementioned image with the group of women who will not be silenced. The first two pages present answers to the question posed in the beginning of the epilogue: what happens if nothing is done to the problem of online violence? The answer consists of four discrete scenes of a woman's life being confined by the threat of online violence. In one scene, a female journalist, having written a newspiece on refugees, asks an editor to sign it with the name of a male colleague. In another scene, from a meeting discussing potential candidates for a referendum, it is stated that hardly any women want to stand for election. The element that ties together these separate scenes are the red-coloured and very concretely troll-like internet trolls lurking around every situation.[7] The four scenes depict speculative answers concerning a potential future. The characters are stereotypical in the sense that they do not represent real-life individuals. Still, the characters are individualised and personalised in the diegetic world; they look different and are separable from each other. They are, for example, not simple stick figures with uniform facial expressions. In this sense, the depiction of the collective problems in each scene draws on individualising representation.

The targets of hate: Individual case narratives

The first part of *Vihan ja inhon internet*, focusing on the female targets of online hate, comprises about half the book. It starts by presenting the case descriptions of eight Finnish women, who for slightly different reasons have been targeted by various forms of online violence: Threatening and insulting messages on different platforms, contact information having been publicised, i.e., doxing, troll targeting, and campaigning.[8] The common denominator of the women is that they have publicly expressed opinions found provocative by a largely anonymous group of people or trolls on the internet. They may have expressed opinions on fake media, gender roles, Islam, migration, feminism, or may have been visible in media outlets through their artistic practices. Another common feature in the women's stories is the negligent attitude of police and prosecutors to these kinds of crime.

Each story, between five and seven pages in length, starts with a title page containing a portrait of the woman in a decorative frame and ends with her having somehow coped with the situation. The stories narrate and depict a chronological process. Narrative captions frame the images depicting the women and the words voiced both by them and in the hateful communication. The individual woman is the centrepiece of these stories. The protagonist of each story is present in practically every panel in the story, most often also narrating her own story, which the creators of the journalistic comic have learned through interviews.

The individuality of experiences of online violence is also emphasised by the way in which the hateful messages the women have received are depicted. There is remarkable variation in this. In one story (VHII, pp. 15–21), the messages are encased in speech balloons surrounding the protagonist. While her own words are depicted in the same handwriting as the narrative captions, the online messages are typeset, showing that they have been digitally mediated. In another story (VJII, pp. 23–29), on blogger Emmi Nuorgam, whose blog text on the stereotypical gender roles assigned to children in a department store's toy advertisement caused a stir, the hateful messages appear from amidst toy shelves in the store. Finally, the shelves start tumbling over the protagonist.

Yet another example of the depiction of the hateful messaging is offered in the story about visual artist Emmi Mustonen (VJII, pp. 39–45). Mustonen received a great deal of hateful responses to her T-shirt design presenting various takes on the Finnish national emblem, a lion. The design features various Finnish lions – one carrying a rainbow flag, one with brown skin, and one dressed in a niqab – commenting on the usage of the lion emblem by racists, xenophobes, and nationalists. Traditional symbols of the nation, such as the flag or the emblematic lion, have increasingly become a site for struggle, where "banal" symbolism (Billig 1995) is gaining in more radical connotations (cf. Hakokoöngäs, Halmesvaara, and Sakki 2020). In this story,

the reactions to the T-shirt are depicted in the form of dialogue appearing from small characters looming around Mustonen in her studio and home, speaking and wording the slurs and threats received by her (Figure 9.3; VJII, pp. 44–45).

While the source of hate speech in Mustonen's case is visualised in the form of these characters, in most of the stories, the slurs appear in speech balloons with no visible source, underlining the anonymity of the speech acts. The variation in depictions of hateful messaging not only highlights the individuality of the cases and the reactions of women, it also emphasises the importance of an intersectional understanding of how online hate and misogyny function and affect different women (see Bordalejo 2019).

While other dimensions of intersectionality such as class or sexual orientation are absent in the narratives, the particular hostility directed at women of colour is depicted innovatively in the comic. The narration in Nuorgam's aforementioned story notes that she is "a green, a feminist and a Sámi," and she herself continues: "Consequently almost the perfect target for net haters. But I look Finnish. If I didn't, I'd be an even better target" (VJII, p. 24). Her comment points at the connection between misogynist and racist discourses in online violence. Two of the longer case studies of the book present women of colour, that is, people who do not "look Finnish" according to the tenacious conceptions of Finnishness and whiteness (Rastas 2005; Seikkula 2019, p. 1005): Habiba Ali, a city councillor in Espoo who moved from Somalia to Finland at the age of five, and the journalists Yagmur Özberkan and Susani Mahadura, who together moderate a talk show on national radio. In contrast to other stories, the mediated violent messaging in these cases is posited in the public space that the characters move in. The messages are shouted at them by other people, for example, in the streets or on the subway platform. The reader can assume that the name-calling and slurs are authentic replications of the electronic messages these women have received, but the representation technique effectively illustrates how online violence, not to mention face-to-face violence in public spaces, is affected by processes of racialisation and the racist assumptions associated with national belonging (El-Tayeb 2011, pp. xi–xlvi).

The emphasis put on the intersections of gender and "race," furthermore, strengthens the altogether central characteristic of the individual case stories: online violence targets different women, who react in different ways to the situation. The collective of women whom this social and political problem affects is also constituted of individuals or women characterised by differences. Still, they all are part of the group of women who have managed to deal with the problem at hand, and who will not be silenced.

The women in the stories are not merely targets of online violence, and they certainly are not represented as helpless victims. Rather, the women's stories are narratives of coping, which end with the women having dealt with the problem in one way or the other. One story ends with the notion that the police are finally taking the case under investigation. More importantly,

Figure 9.3 © Emmi Nieminen & Johanna Vehkoo, *Vihan ja inhon internet*, Kosmos, 2017, pp. 44–45

the women themselves get the final say in every story; they get to define the situation in their own words. It is significant that in many of the stories, this happens by direct address to the readers and a breach of the fourth wall (Cook 2016, p. 259) with the protagonist turned towards the readers and in a few cases seeking eye contact with them. In the story about visual artist Mustonen, the priority of her voice is especially strongly represented as the small characters having harassed her in the previous panels turn silent in the end, when Mustonen calmly notes that people must and can not be threatened into silence (Figure 9.3; VJII, p. 45).

Colours are significant in this context: in the final spread depicting closure in terms of the silencing of the small characters, the dominant colours change from one page to the other (Figure 9.3). The dark blue dominating the story while the hatemongers are active turns into a lighter turquoise mixed with a light orange. The orange colour first appears on the left-hand page, at the same time that the narrative caption states that, "No longer is Mustonen afraid," and becomes dominant on the right-hand page. Blue or turquoise and orange are complementary colours, intensifying each other when adjacent. Colours are of narrative significance in *Vihan ja inhon internet* more broadly, too. In the case stories of the targeted women, orange is combined with blue. In the final section of the comic, on the "helpers," orange reappears in combination with turquoise (also present at the end of the case story just discussed). Thus, two parts of the comic, one on the targets of violence, the other on helpers, are tied together through colour, a form of braiding (Groensteen 2007, pp. 144–158), suggesting a relationship between targets and helpers in cases of online violence as well as a collectivity of the two.

The image of the targeted women as survivors or at least coping with their situation is accentuated by the title page of each story. The framed images of the women present them as the heroes of their stories, appearing confident, content, and even happy. The decorative framing ties the women to a tradition of portraying remarkable historical figures and conveying high status (West 2004, p. 71). These frames, however, also evoke another association, that of mirrors. Thus, the portraits also function as a means for the readers to reflect and place themselves in the images and situations of the women. We will return to the question of how the reader is drawn into the collective of women, but we next analyse the role of the narrator in the creation of this collective.

The situated knowledge of the creator-narrator-characters

In the first part of the book, the narrator is present only as verbal narration, while in the beginning of the second part depicting interviews with experts and research on online violence, the verbal and visual narrators appear in the diegetic world as visualised characters. The narrator and its visual counterpart, the monstrator (e.g., Groensteen, 2013, p.95), are important

in the argumentation of the comic: The way the story makes the role of its creators visible strengthens its message of "the personal is political" as well as broadens the collective of women whose lives are affected by online violence.

In Figure 9.4 (VJII, p. 78), the comics' two creators present themselves or, rather, the two comics characters "Johanna Vehkoo" and "Emmi Nieminen" introduce themselves as the creators of the comic: "Hello! I am Johanna Vehkoo, journalist and the author of this book. / The other one here is Emmi Nieminen, the illustrator of this book. Here she is drawing in the void." Both characters are turned towards the reader, offering them eye contact and thus indicating whom "Johanna Vehkoo" is addressing. Further on in the comic, "Johanna Vehkoo" visibly performs as a driving force in the narrative. She is present as verbal narration, which began already before she was introduced, but also as a character talking to the reader or interviewing people on the book's subject. That is, she is seen doing her work as a journalist but also as the function or authority responsible for the work at hand, its posited, feminist perspective on issues.

Further on in the comic, the character "Johanna Vehkoo" tells the reader that she, too, has filed a report to the police concerning an email threat that she had received, but that, as in so many other cases presented in the book, the authorities decided to terminate the investigation as the suspected crime was not considered severe enough (VJII, p. 88). She thus positions herself not only as a reporter on the subject, but also as a fellow woman who has been targeted by online violence. This broadens the understanding of her as creator and narrator.

The monstrator or visual narrator is not visible as much as the verbal narrator. When she is, she is usually seen drawing. In the aforementioned image, she is holding a pencil and drawing herself at the very moment. This act draws the reader's attention to the embodied nature of the comics characters and, by extension, to the embodiment of the women responsible for the book and the other women depicted in the book. Of course, showing the act of drawing also is a strong reminder that the characters as well as the comic's visuals in general are the result of creative work, of artistic and journalistic practices. Altogether, the visibility of the creators reminds the readers that the book which they are in the midst of reading is a work told from a particular perspective and a result of the choices made by its creators. Instead of presenting itself as a neutral piece of journalism, it displays the creator-narrator-characters identifying with the situation of other women and sharing their experiences. When the narrators appear before the readers as drawn characters who not only work on the book at hand, but also present themselves as personally affected by the social problem being addressed, they are seen as part of the collective, not watching it from the outside.

The acts of drawing point at the constructedness of the journalistic comic. This constitutes one aspect of how *Vihan ja inhon internet* foregrounds the positionality of knowledge associated with feminist knowledge. As

Figure 9.4 © Emmi Nieminen & Johanna Vehkoo, *Vihan ja inhon internet*, Kosmos, 2017, p. 78

the creators are brought in front of the reader, shown in their work, and presented as women with similar experiences as other women, the comic actualises a feminist standpoint epistemology (e.g., Harding 1991) in comics journalism. Rachel Rys (2019) has suggested that comics are especially apt for the presentation of feminist knowledge. According to Rys, comics are suited for "the circulation of contested narratives," can "connect experiences across time, place and scale" as well as provide a space for "reflexive and situated writing" (Rys 2019, p. 3). In *Vihan ja inhon internet*, this reflexivity and situatedness is brought to the fore with the introduction of the creators and narrators as characters whose actions – doing research and interviews, drawing – further enhance this. The appearance of the comics creator in the comics pages is common in documentary comics. Writing about Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Hillary Chute proposes that it is instantiating "a feminist methodology *in its form*" (Chute 2010, p.136; original emphasis) as the witnessing and remembering protagonist/narrator appears in manifold verbal and visual forms. According to Wibke Weber and Hans-Martin Rall (2017), the presence of the creator is an authentication strategy in comics journalism. Similarly, comics journalist Joe Sacco, writing on objectivity, has called comics an "inherently interpretative medium," that makes it "difficult to draw myself out of scene" (2012, p. xiv). Just like Sacco, who is ever present as a character in his comics, Vehkoo and Nieminen also put this narrative specificity of comics into good use.

The haters as contrast to the collective of women

The section in *Vihan ja inhon internet* on research about online violence, in which the narrators introduce themselves, is dominated by dullish grey and brown tones, perhaps signifying the seeming dryness and demanding character of veracious knowledge. The section ends with a powerful image of the two creator-characters sitting at and on a desk covered by the tools of knowledge – a laptop and piles of books and papers. What is striking is that the women are watched over by two giant monsters or, to use a term more apt in the context of online violence, trolls. This image indicates the transition to the following section called "The haters."

The section on the perpetrators of online violence begins with an expert on information warfare, Saara Jantunen, explaining to the reader some central terms related to online violence. The grey tones of the scholarly and sober discourse, emphasised by the setting of a scientific laboratory, now begin to be infused with a bright red, the colour of hate in the comic. It first appears in smaller amounts, for instance, underlining the terms explained by the expert, and gradually becomes more dominating. When the narration moves to the presentation of interviews with former net trolls and active haters discharging their messages to women, the patches of red become larger.

In an image where "Vehkoo" is interviewing a net troll in a chat, the large, ugly, and dark red monster is visually overpowering her own small character (Figure 9.5a, left hand side; VJII, p. 118). The chat continues over four pages, when gradually the monstrous and large appearance of the troll character becomes more human and smaller. Accordingly, the patches of red also diminish. Finally, the characters of "Vehkoo" and the now completely human male troll are equal in size (Figure 9.5b, VJII, p. 122). The conversation has, on the one hand, positioned the target and the hater on equal level, in that the large, unknown, and monstrous threat has disappeared. On the other hand, the characters in the page are not equal: one is standing still looking backwards, while the other is active and dynamic, leaving behind the no longer threatening but rather insignificant adversary.

The trolls are in stark contrast to the collective of women targeted by them, which is visually emphasised by the clear contrast of the colour red to the other, surrounding colours. Furthermore, the literal visual depiction of the metaphor of trolls strengthens the contrastive position of these, often anonymous, vicious characters. And finally, the humanised troll is shown to be a rather insignificant, backwards-looking man not really capable of explaining his actions. Left behind, however, he still provides a contrast to the active woman rushing forward towards the following section of the journalistic narrative.

The collective risen above the problem

The last part of *Vihan ja inhon internet* is dominated by a greenish turquoise mixed with orange and white, a colouring scheme in luminous contrast to the dark tones of red and murky browns and greys of the previous section. The change in colours reflects and strengthens the message of the final part of the book, building a narrative of ascension, coping, and survival. In this part, we see "Johanna Vehkoo" meeting with different women who give advice on how to cope with the situation of being harassed on the Internet. The verbal narration interspersed with interview quotes suggests in a matter-of-fact fashion different solutions to various problematic situations. The visual narration, however, tells a different, more emotional, and uplifting story.

The beginning of the chapter shows a cross-section of an ocean, and underneath the bottom of the sea "Johanna Vehkoo" is crawling in a cave filled with cables and circuit boards symbolising the internet (VJII, pp. 126–127). All through the scene, the verbal narrator advises the reader on how to proceed in case of online harassment. While moving in the cramped spaces, "Vehkoo" meets different characters who help her move forward. These are experts and "helpers," according to the title of the section, such as "Michelle Ferrier," the founder of TrollBusters, a network offering help to journalists who have become targets of online violence. While opening

Figure 9.5a © Emmi Nieminen & Johanna Vehkoo, *Vihan ja inhon internet*, Kosmos, 2017, p. 118

Figure 9.5b © Emmi Nieminen & Johanna Vehkoo, *Vihan ja inhon internet*, Kosmos, 2017, p. 122

doors to "Vehkoo," the other characters "think out loud" different strategies to tackle the problems of online hate (Figure 9.6; VJII, p. 129).

The last hatch, opened by the already mentioned "Saara Jantunen," leads "Vehkoo" from the submarine cave up to the water (VJII, pp. 132–133). The verbal narrator continues to discuss the right kind of reactions to online hate, for example: "The Internet is a public space that belongs to us all. It is not right to make the victims responsible and tell them to leave places where others can hang about freely" (VJII, p. 133). Simultaneously, "Vehkoo" rises to the surface of the water and climbs into a rowing boat as the visual world becomes more ethereal with more and more white surfaces on the page. At the end of the chapter, the point-of-view rises up in the sky amidst the clouds where the reader meets two characters observing the ocean underneath. They are journalist, artist, and ex-porn actor Rakel Liekki, and economist and first transwoman to attend the Miss Gay Finland contest Tuuli Kamppila, who both have been targets of online hate, but who nevertheless have coped with the situation and whose experiences can therefore prove helpful to the readers.

This collective of "helpers," people who are working on these issues, who have experienced online violence, and who share with the reader different means of handling the situation, become part of the collective constructed in the album. The final part strengthens the message of survival and empowerment through a story of coping and, visually, a narrative of ascension – not completely unrelated to the biblical stories of resurrection and ascension in which a protagonist rises from the grave to the sky – while simultaneously the colour white as well as lighter shades of turquoise gain more space in the pages. This use of colours connects the scene to the final page and its collective of women (Figure 9.1b). Furthermore, the collective of women in the final image is faded at the edges as if surrounded by the clouds from the previous celestial imagery. But the orange and turquoise of the helpers and the final image also tie the women – who in the beginning of the book are presented as the "targets" – to the collective. This combination or bringing together of two groups separated in the narration is also a very strong message of coping and survival.

The narrative of ascension in the book's final part is interrupted by a spread in which the guidelines suggested by the helpers are presented in more matter-of-fact discourse in an instruction table (VJII, pp. 130–131). Hence, the comic not only describes a current issue, but it also speaks to the reader as a potential target, as a part of the community of women being harassed and whose preconditions for speaking out are threatened. In this way, the different forms of showing and narrating alternate in the last chapter. The visual world and visual narration construct a story that one – and, as the ethos of the album propagates, we – can overcome the trouble, while the verbal narration and the dialogue provide an analysis of the situation as well as straightforward practical advice.

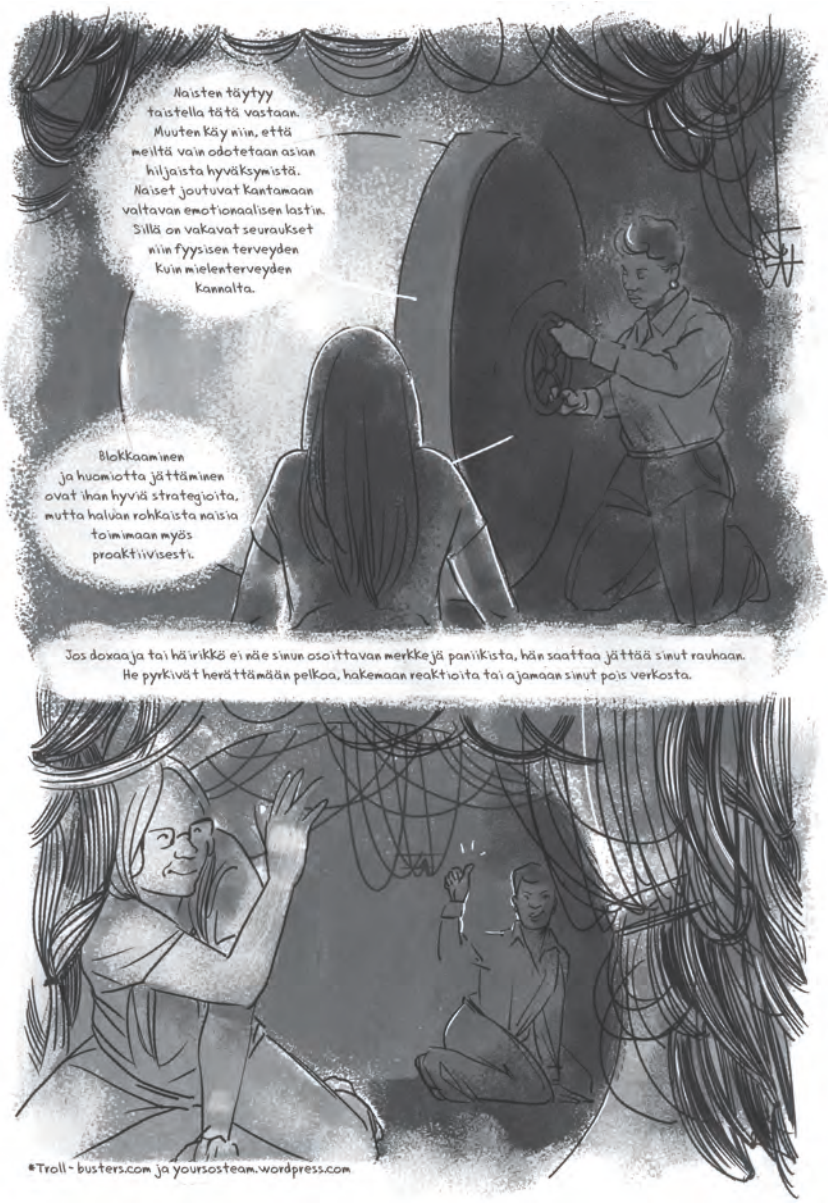

Figure 9.6 © Emmi Nieminen & Johanna Vehkoo, *Vihan ja inhon internet*, Kosmos, 2017, p. 129

The inclusion of the reader

In our reading of *Vihan ja inhon internet*, we have emphasised its formulation of online violence against women as a problem affecting women both as individuals and as a collective. While the experience of online violence has individual features, as depicted by the case stories in the first part of the comic, the problem is also collective in many ways. It is collective in the sense that the personal problems are also common, structural, and political. It is also collective in the sense that the problem calls for political and collective solutions. In our analysis, we have shown how *Vihan ja inhon internet* includes both individual(ised) and intersectionally different women targeted by online violence as well as women helpers working on the problematic in its collective of women. We have also discussed the online trolls as a contrastive adversary of this collective. One final addition needs to be made to the collective constructed in *Vihan ja inhon internet*, that of the reader.

We have already referred to different means of drawing in the reader. The individual case stories and their breadth perhaps offer the reader points of identification with or recognition of women who have been the targets of online violence, even though the reader would lack this experience. The portraits offer the reader insight into experiences to mirror oneself in. This aspect of the narration of the individual case stories is accentuated in the final part on the targets of online violence. In a section called "The rest of us," the cases of 15 people are described in one paragraph each, the text attached to a framed portrait. The series of portraits ends with an empty frame with only the text "You" written on the empty canvas. The text underneath reads: "Anybody can end up a target of online hate and harassment. When someone is being attacked in a hateful manner, you can offer your help publicly or privately" (VJII, p. 75). The setting thus invites the reader in the collective in a dual role, both as a potential target and as a helper.

The personal address of the reader is also present in the instructional spread interspersed in the final part of the book, where the headline reads: "When you are harassed on the net, do this" (VJII, pp. 130–131). In addition to the items in the book, where the reader is addressed literally as "you," numerous other occasions strengthen this personal communication between the author–narrators and the reader. Both the targets of online violence as well as the characters representing the creator–narrators break the so-called fourth wall of the comic between storyworld and reader: they direct their gaze at the reader and thus attest to a shared vision of a social problem affecting all parties collectively.

Conclusion

As an illustration of the shared experience of being targeted by online violence, the reader of *Vihan ja inhon internet* is confronted throughout with

numerous quotes from actual hateful messages. The words directed at the women presented in the book are positioned in various ways in the visual–verbal milieux of the comic: sometimes, they are placed in speech balloons in the diegetic world, but sometimes they are more loosely connected. Occasionally, the aggressive words "jump out" of the pages. The visual positioning of the words outside of the diegesis together with their bold lettering and large size render the quotes of hateful messaging into threats and insults directed personally at the reader and enable as such the readerly identification with the targets of online violence. *Vihan ja inhon internet* thus not only addresses its reader but also initiates the reader as yet another member of the collective of women and people who are affected by the detrimental effects of online violence. Both directly addressing and including its readers in the collective of women illustrate how the personal and the political are intertwined in *Vihan ja inhon internet*.

In our analysis, we have focused on the dimensions of the personal and the political, the individual and the collective as a means for *Vihan ja inhon internet* to convey its message. Through both verbal and visual means, the comic fluctuates between and conjoins the two perspectives both to provide the reader with educational analysis and information as well as to empower the reader with a message of feminist collectivity and coping.

Notes

1 According to Hanisch, the title of her article was given by the editors of the collection in which her text appeared, Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt (Hanisch 2006).
2 After the publication of *Vihan ja inhon internet*, Vehkoo has been involved in a legal process that has placed her in the eye of a storm similar to what is depicted in the comic. Vehkoo was accused of defaming a city councillor in the city of Oulu, by referring to him as a "racist" and "nazi clown" in a 2016 Facebook post that was visible only in a closed group. There is a remarkable paradoxical irony here, as the councillor is known for his anti-immigration stance and has referred to himself as a nazi and published a photo of himself giving a nazi salute in front of the parliament building in Helsinki. He has also been convicted for inciting hatred against a minority group. In its ruling, the court sentenced Vehkoo to pay a 15-day fine. Consequently, Vehkoo has appealed the court decision in a higher court instance.
3 The title *Sarjari* is not directly translatable, referring to the Finnish word for comics, "*sarjakuva*" and more specifically to the first part of the word, "*sarja*," meaning series.
4 https://drawingthetimes.com/
5 All translations to English are provided by the chapter's authors.
6 The slashes indicate that the lines have separate sources (though there are no speech balloons in this image).
7 In fact, originally "trolling" refers not to the fairy-tale world but to a particular fishing technique – to seeing if anyone "takes the bait."

8 There are seven case narratives, but one of them depicts the case of two journalists working together.

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10 The narrative complexity of showing and telling sexual harassment and violence in Kati Kovács's comics

Leena Romu

Introduction

In a short comics story from 2007, Finnish artist Kati Kovács shares an autobiographical experience of a date rape. The protagonist and her friend meet two local men in the city of Rome – where the artist has lived since 1986 – and spend a nice day together until the protagonist gets raped at the other man's home. Panel after panel, the story shows how the man forces her into a toilet, threatens her life, and rapes her violently. The story ends by the protagonist shouting angrily to the wall surrounding the Vatican, which as the home of the Catholic Church represents a centre of patriarchal power. After realising she will not get any help or protection from the church, the protagonist decides that if life is a jungle, she must learn to identify the "poisonous beasts" herself (Kovács 2008, p. 38).

During her over 30-year-long career in comics, Kovács (b. 1963) has tackled the subject of sexual violence repeatedly in both short comics stories and longer graphic narratives. When the artist was interviewed in connection with the release of her book *Quo vadis Katalin?* (2019), the interviewer made note that Kovács had been making comics about sexual harassment and violence already decades before the #metoo movement (Vistilä 2019). Starting in the autumn 2017, the #metoo movement has helped to raise awareness about sexual harassment and especially encouraged and supported women to share their experiences of it. In comics culture, several comics anthologies and zines have appeared as a reaction to the movement both in Finland and around the world. In Finland, a group of young cartoonist students compiled a zine called *#me too Impivaara*[1] (2017), and artist Elina Lahdenperä self-published the info comic, *Game Over* (2019). In Sweden, comics artists reacted to the #metoo movement by publishing an anthology called *Draw the Line* (2018), and in the United States, a similar but more extensive anthology *Draw the Power – Women's Stories of Sexual Violence, Harassment, and Survival* was published one year later (2019). In India, there was already momentum for such action as early as 2015, when a group of cartoonists decided to react to the brutal assaults of 2012 by creating the feminist anthology *Drawing the Line – Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015).[2]

Just the titles of these anthologies call attention to the political power of comics by playing with the double meaning of the verb "to draw" referring, on the one hand, to the medium-specific quality of comics to provide stories in a drawn form, and on the other hand, to the act of resistance. In each case, making comics is a political act that has potential to change the world. Kati Kovács's comics are not published as a part of or a reaction to a certain feminist movement. Nevertheless, her comics can be regarded as highly feminist in how they discuss women's experiences in a world ruled by patriarchal values.

While thinking of how Kovács's comics are feminist, I am reminded of feminist thinker Sara Ahmed's words about feminism. For her, the word feminism brings to mind, "books written, tattered and worn, books that gave words to something, a feeling, a sense of an injustice, books that, in giving us *words*, gave us the strength to go on" (Ahmed 2017, p. 1; emphasis mine). With the risk of stating the obvious, feminist comics give us not only words but also images that encourage us to think in feminist terms. Feminist comics may represent injustices that we recognise from the actual world, provide stories that help us to recognise our own experiences not only as personal but also as political, and show how transgressions of social norms and patriarchal values are possible. Not always are sexual harassment and violence represented as explicitly in Kovács's comics as in the above-mentioned story. However, as I show in this chapter, they are always represented in relation to patriarchal values or sexist behaviour.[3]

This chapter analyses two of Kovács's long graphic narratives, *Vihreä rapsodia* (1994) [Green Rhapsody] and *Kuka pelkää Nenian Ahnavia?* (2010) [Who Is Afraid of Namow Dlo?] that discuss sexual harassment and violence. The comics represent different styles and different points in the artist's career, but they share an intriguing complexity of playing with the medium's affordances to both show and tell.[4] The theoretical framework of my analysis combines feminist visual studies and comics research with rhetorical narratology that sees narratives as purposive communication from a teller to an audience (Phelan and Rabinowitz 2012, p. 3). The idea of narratives as communication pushes to ask how the elements of a narrative are shaped in the service of larger ends, and what the affective, ethical, and aesthetic effects of those narrative choices are (ibid.).

The main questions in this chapter are: How does the use of verbal narration and other verbal elements interact with the visual information, and how does this interaction affect the narrative's aim to discuss sexual violence? I argue that Kovács's narratives utilise complex visual–verbal narration techniques to remind the reader[5] that sexual harassment and violence are not only individual acts, but that they are also connected to gendered and sexualised abuses of power. By concentrating on the formal choices of comics storytelling, the chapter participates in recent discussions of how creative strategies of representing sexual violence in comics may help us to read about the difficult subject matter and thus enhance our awareness

of it, and on the other hand, how the representations may challenge the ways we interpret and understand sexual violence (see Precup and Scherr 2017, p. 226).

Kovács's comics in the Finnish comics scene

Born (1963) in Finland but living in Italy since 1986, Kovács is a transnational cartoonist whose comics, life, and career have been influenced strongly by at least two cultures. She makes comics mainly in Finnish and for the Finnish comics market, but ever since the first long graphic narrative *Vihreä rapsodia*, her comics have been translated into several European languages, e.g., French, Swedish, Hungarian, and German. Kovács's comics celebrate the corporeal, sentient, and sexual aspects of living, which has led critics to connect her art to the corporeal imagery of grotesque and the taboo-smashing art of American underground comix. Similarities in drawing style (e.g., exaggeration of body proportions) have inspired critics to compare her art especially to that of Robert Crumb, but the female perspective connects her work even more to the Women's underground comix.

No matter how intriguing these comparisons sound, it is important to bear in mind that, in addition to Kovács, there have been several Finnish female comics artists who have not shied away from sharing women's views on gender, sexuality, or corporeal experiences. Entering the Finnish comics field at the end of the 1980s, Kovács participated in the change of gender dynamics that ruptured the former male-dominance of the field and introduced several female artists who actively challenged and renegotiated the conventions of the medium.[6] Women artists of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Riitta Uusitalo, Johanna "Roju" Rojola, Tiina Pystynen, and Kovács, paved the way for new generations of girls and women by experimenting unconventionally with styles, topics, and techniques, thus challenging the existing ideals and norms of the field.

Before moving to mainly longer graphic narratives, Kovács made short comics stories in comics magazines, such as *Suuri Kurpitsa* (1981–1993) [Great Pumpkin] that introduced alternative comics from Finland and abroad, thus showcasing Kovács's work side-by-side with artists such as Julie Doucet, Carel Moiseiwitsch, and Anke Feuchtenbecher (for an analysis of Feuchtenberger's comics, see this volume's chapters by Nijdam and Beckmann). The comics magazines created transnational connections in several ways: They introduced artists and their styles to one another, but they also showed the Finnish audience that there were interesting women artists abroad, and thus they might have encouraged many of their (female) readers. During the 1990s, the transnational influences travelled also in the other direction: Many Finnish comics artists started to include English subtitles in their work in order to reach international audiences and collaborated internationally by making comics in often multilingual anthologies and

showcasing their work at international comics festivals (Beaty 2007, p. 130; Kauranen 2020, p. 66).

During the 1990s and early 2000s, more female comics artists joined the field, considering their female predecessors or contemporaries as an inspiration while also contributing with their own ideas, practices, and feminist thoughts. This can be seen in the appearance of "women only" publications, such as *Naarassarjat (*1992–1993) [She-Comics], the very first Finnish comics magazine devoted to women's comics. The magazine's aim was to encourage more girls and women to make comics and in this way make the Finnish comics field more diverse. In this sense, the magazine was a forerunner of the later feminist publications and collectives, such as the feminist small press comics magazine *Irtoparta* (2001–2007) [Fake Beard], the web-based comics magazine *Nettinarttu* (2004–2009) [Web Bitch], and the feminist collective Femicomix Finland, active since 2013 (see Beers Fägersten et al. in this volume).

From the late 1980s, the Finnish comics scene has changed considerably in terms of the amount of female and feminist artists. In Finland, feminist comics are neither the headlining, cultural phenomenon they are in neighbouring Sweden, nor are their artists as visible in the mainstream culture. However, Kovács can be regarded as one artist who, during her long career, has continued to tackle feminist issues and themes in her work.[7] Since her books are nowadays published by a rather large publishing company (WSOY), they benefit from good visibility and promotion, for example, in book catalogues. Kovács has also been one of the few comics artists to have addressed gender-based violence throughout her career.[8] By gender-based violence, I refer to a definition where gender roles and status in society keep shaping the forms and structures of violence. In patriarchal culture, gender roles and expectations, male entitlement, sexual objectification, and discrepancies of power and status have taken part in legitimising, rendering invisible, sexualising, and perpetuating violence against women (Russo and Pirlott 2006, p. 181). Sexual harassment and violence are forms of gender-based violence, and as such they are connected to the above-mentioned problems of the patriarchal culture.

Since Kovács has lived in Italy since 1986, Italian culture could be regarded as an important cultural and societal context for her representations of sexual violence. In many ways, Kovács's work resembles the Austrian comics artist Ulli Lust's widely acclaimed graphic memoir *Heute ist der letzte Tag vom Rest deines Lebens* (2008) [*Today is the last day of the rest of your life*, 2013), where the young female protagonist must negotiate and renegotiate her sexual agency among the sexism of Italian macho culture (for Lust's way of tackling sexual agency, see Vuorinne in this volume). Lust's work uses visual metaphors in innovative ways to represent sexual harassment and violence (see Vuorinne 2018) – and the same holds true for Kovács's work. However, in her case, visual and verbal narration form tensions that often rather hint about the harassment than reveal it. This narrative strategy invites the reader to ponder sexual harassment and violence not only as

individual acts but as parts of a large and complex web of gender-based violence and abuses of power. However, to be able to understand the rhetorical strategies in Kovács's comics, it is necessary to ponder first what kinds of representational risks are included in representing sexual violence visually.

Sexual violence in comics and the challenge of representation

Visual representations of sexual violence have been a challenging question for feminists, because of the worry that representations may titillate the audiences and work as devices of voyeuristic pleasure (Horeck 2003, p. 3). The risk of representing sexual violence, according to Sarah Projansky (2001, p. 95), is that despite the author's original intentions or the text's general ideological position, the representations can participate in antifeminist discourse that builds upon hatred for and violence against women. For example, elaborate and detailed representations of incestuous abuse resulted in the censorship of Phoebe Gloeckner's comics because, on many occasions, they were considered pornographic (Chute 2010, p. 77). In Gloeckner's case, the problem was that her comics showed sexual abuse in graphic detail instead of leaving it to the reader's imagination. Projansky's (2001, p. 96) rather pessimistic view is that even feminist texts may elicit pleasure in the very thing that they are working against. However, many comics scholars consider Gloeckner's work an example of "feminist art activism" that refuses to hide the harsh reality of sexual objectification of female bodies (Marshall and Gilmore 2015, p. 96; Michael 2018, p. 246). Gloeckner's strategy to visualise the abuse of a young girl is then understood as a feminist representational strategy that asks the reader to cope with their possibly conflicting affective responses in order to understand the complex power relations of the incestuous relationship (Chute 2010, p. 79). The images in her work are at the same time powerful and problematic because they may elicit all kinds of emotions and reactions, pleasure and disgust included.

Nevertheless, comics portray images usually in sequences, and sequentiality could work as a strategy of guiding the reader's reactions to the representations of violence. Instead of portraying sexual violence as singular spectacles or decontextualised fragments, comics can provide narrative context that can orient the reading (Mickwitz, Horton, and Hague 2019, p. 4). Comics can also utilise one of the medium's affordances to tell without showing by leaving events to the empty space of the gutter. By only hinting about sexual abuse without showing it, the narrative can then dodge what Hillary Chute (2016, p. 209) calls "sensory immersion," a phenomenon where the reader is invited to take the place of the visual observer of the events in order to see and feel closely what happens. If the narrative wants to concentrate, for example, on the after-effects of sexual violence, the absence of explicit representation might be a good strategy (Streeten 2019, p. 120). By omitting the representation of the act of sexual violence, the narrative does not ask the reader to witness the act itself but rather its consequences for the victims. To leave sexual violence outside of the panels can also be an efficient

strategy to represent the trauma caused by the abuse, as Chute (2010, p. 13) proposes when discussing the comics of Lynda Barry. According to Chute (2010, p. 101), the cognitive gap created by the omission demands the reader to piece together the associations based on the visual and verbal information in the panels in order to imagine the sexual violence taken place.

On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret the omission of sexual violence as a technique that mirrors the culture of silence and invisibility around sexual violence (Marshall and Gilmore 2015, p. 109). By not showing what happens, the narrative then reiterates the society's indifference and ignorance towards the victims of sexual violence (ibid.). However, many examples prove that the decision not to visualise the violence can be effectively used with other narrative choices to actively negotiate the culture of silence and invisibility.[9] Already the comics' medium-specific quality of visualising the characters' body language can be used as a tool to "force the viewer to 'see' an often-invisible culture of shaming and silencing," as Jane Tolmie (2012, p. xi) suggests.

To consider what is a feminist strategy of representing sexual violence in comics is not a simple formal question of to show or not to show. It is rather a larger question of the text's overall rhetoric, that is, how the narrative techniques affect the narrative itself and its ways of inviting the reader to think about sexual violence. Indeed, while discussing representations of sexual violence in fiction and film, Tanya Horeck (2003, p. 120) problematises the idea of one particularly effective way of representing sexual violence that would please everyone. Instead of deciding on one particularly feminist technique, the task is rather to examine how the text communicates the feminist idea that sexual violence is about power, not about sex. How does it give validity to the victim's perspective, and how does it connect the violence to sexism and other reasons for gender-based violence?

What is at stake is also the ways in which comics can tackle harmful rape myths that persistently serve to deny and justify sexual violence against women. As Tammy Garland, Kathryn Branch, and Mackenzie Grimes (2016, p. 64) show in their study of superhero comic books, comics can reinforce stereotypical ideas about rape as always a violent and brutal event that is brought on by the victim, thus providing a very narrow and harmful view of what is considered sexual violence. Instead of promoting one artistic decision as better than the other one, it is more fruitful to consider the context of the representation and the overall narrative structure that surrounds the representations. In this task, narrative theory can provide useful insights, which I will illustrate next in my analysis.

Naïve protagonist, experienced narrator? – Narrative tensions and the discrepancy of knowledge

A typical feature in Kovács's long graphic narratives is that they convey a story of a protagonist whose life situation suddenly forces her to start a process of self-reflection. These journeys – which are sometimes physical but

more often psychological in nature – connect Kovács's works to the genre of female *Bildungsroman*, in which the female protagonist's self-realisation and transformation are depicted as results of her interaction and engagement with social and cultural paradigms (McWilliams 2009, p. 27). In *Vihreä rapsodia*, a 10-year-old girl Kiti is sent to Hungary where she is supposed to spend the summer vacation with the family of her Hungarian pen pal. Due to unfortunate misunderstandings, Kiti decides to run away from the family and starts a journey in weird surroundings facing threatening situations. Evoking the carnivalistic and fantastic elements of Angela Carter's feminist classic *Nights at the Circus* (1984), the story takes the protagonist first to a brothel, where she meets a group of prostitutes, and then to a circus where she is forced to perform. The narrative concentrates on the development of the main character during a few summer days, whereas the other book, *Kuka pelkää Nenian Ahnavia?*, includes the whole life story of the protagonist, whose name Nenian Ahnav ("Namow Dlo") – "old woman" in reverse spelling – is a discursive reminder of the patriarchal oppression she is destined to face since birth. Married and widowed at the age of ten, Nenian tries to find happiness in a world that is haunted with the memory of her sexist father and dead husband.

In *Vihreä rapsodia*, the main narrative tension develops between the naïve protagonist and more experienced narrating-I. This is a common narrative technique in many autobiographical comics and often causes irony in the narration, as Charles Hatfield (2005, p. 128) has noted. According to the classic definitions of first-person narration, the narrating-I should have all the information about the events and the protagonist's feelings and experiences, since she herself has been the protagonist (Cohn 1978, p. 145). Thus, the reader can expect the narrator to play with the amount of information provided for the reader. S/he can either reveal everything s/he has experienced or withhold information from the reader to create suspense. Irony is just one of the results that can be created in the relationship between the older narrating-I and the more naïve experiencing-I. As narratologist Dorrit Cohn (1978, pp. 148–149 and pp. 155–158) explains, the author can choose to make the narrating-I judge the protagonist's feelings and experiences as naïve, or she can identify with the experiencing-I and resist any kind of judgement or hindsight.

Taking a close look at the relationship between narrating-I and experiencing-I is important for the analysis of sexual violence in *Vihreä rapsodia*, since it reveals how the work's rhetorical power operates on the tension between visual and verbal, showing and telling. In applying rhetorical narratology to comics analysis, the analysis of the relationship between verbal and visual narration provides a good starting point to see how narrative tensions are built in comics storytelling. According to James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, narrative tensions arise often from the discrepancies of knowledge, understanding, or values among author, narrator, and their audiences (see Phelan and Rabinowitz 2012, p. 59). In the case

of *Vihreä rapsodia*, the main narrative tension builds on the discrepancy of sexual knowledge between the retrospective adult narrator and child protagonist. Since the reader is expected to be an adult (as is the case in all Kovács's comics), the discrepancy of sexual knowledge builds also between the adult reader and child protagonist.

In the beginning of the narrative, Kiti is a naïve little girl whose knowledge about sexuality gradually increases during the story. However, her realisations are not verbally articulated by the more experienced-I or by the protagonist herself, but the reader must pay attention to the visual information provided in the panels. For example, when the protagonist realises that the nightly noises heard in the host family's house are sexual in nature, it is the image that hints about the change in her knowledge (see Figure 10.1). What Kiti thought were nightly poetry reading sessions, reveal to be sexual activity to which the parents refer by using euphemisms as "blowing the horn" and "sticking with a needle." In the example, the host family's mother shouts "A HORN!" while looking delighted at the husband's naked crotch. Despite the fact that neither the narrating-I nor the experiencing-I verbalise her epiphany, the image hints that Kiti understands something of the sexual implications: On her face is a sheepish smile and her hands reach between her legs as if to hide her possible sexual sensations or embarrassment.

The interplay between visual and verbal information together with the narrating-I's verbal silence ask the reader to do the thinking and to ponder: What happens to Kiti's lack of experience, or "greenness," as the title of the book suggests? On a thematic level, the book thus asks: What is the sexual knowledge that little girls learn when growing up? During the narrative, Kiti's own sexual knowledge increases because she is continuously harassed by male characters. A frenzied dog tries to attack her who, in the eyes of the dog, is a Little Red Riding Hood ready to be licked and tasted

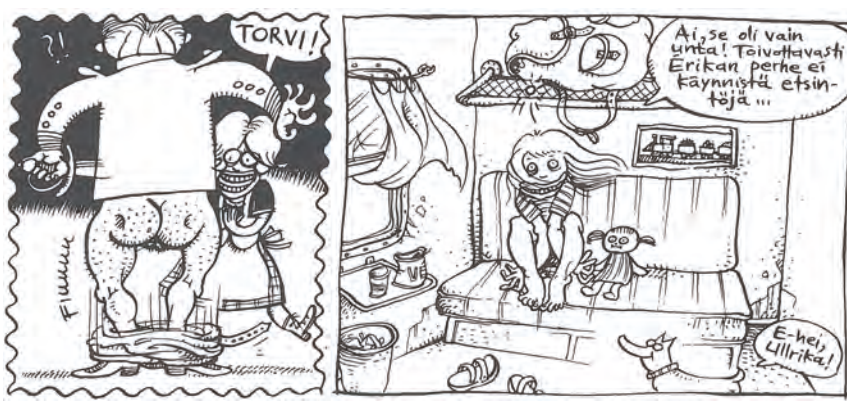

Figure 10.1 © Kati Kovács, *Vihreä rapsodia*, Like, 1994, p. 14

(see Figure 10.2): "Crazy woman! … .fantastic tension in my groins! / Where can I find a cute female dog? / I go crazy. If I won't find a female dog soon enough, the wolf must lick the Little Red Riding Hood… ." After sacrificing her beloved doll to the dog's mouth while shouting, "I'm just a child!," Kiti manages to escape the dog who, according to the girl's wording "is thirsty

Figure 10.2 © Kati Kovács, *Vihreä rapsodia*, Like, 1994, p. 22

for her fresh nectar." During the three last panels on the page, the knowledge and discourse of the narrating-I and experiencing-I intertwine, resembling a narrative technique called free indirect discourse (McHale 2005, pp. 188–189) blurring the line between the adult-narrator's and child protagonist's sexual knowledge: "Oh shit! This must be a crazy world! I just wrote to one girl, Érika, and suddenly I'm here in hell and I'm running away from a crazy wolf…" / "…who is thirsty for my fresh nectar…" / "I'm just a child!" / "I know, I know… but there was nothing else I could do."

On the one hand, the dog/wolf is a fairy-tale character who has the magical ability of speaking. On the other hand, he is a representative of male sexuality, who threatens the protagonist. The dog is only one of several hybrid characters that occupy the fantastical world of *Vihreä rapsodia*. After escaping from the dog, Kiti ends up in a brothel that she first naively mistakes as a very nice hotel. Resembling the cast in Carter's aforementioned novel *Nights at the Circus*, the employees are designed to please the male clientele: One of the prostitutes has an extra pair of old woman's breasts on her back to please customers demanding something special, whereas another one has her mouth in the place of her vulva and no ability to speak, remaining always smiling but silent. In a party celebrating Kiti as a new employee, the protagonist is almost choked by one of the prostitutes, a hybrid of a man[10] and snake. Snakes are a recurring visual motif in Kovács's work, referring often to male sexuality. In Kiti's case, the attack of the snake/man figure is sexual in nature and it is connected to the previous scene of the attacking dog. Like the dog, the snake is eager to taste the girl which can be seen in a visual detail of the snake trying to lick the escaping girl (see Figure 10.3).

The allegory of the attacks as sexual harassment builds upon a conceptual metaphor of eating as sex, which as a conceptual pairing is common in Western popular culture, literature, and art. As literary scholar Sarah Sceats (2000, p. 22) notes, the word "appetite" is used both about eating and sex,

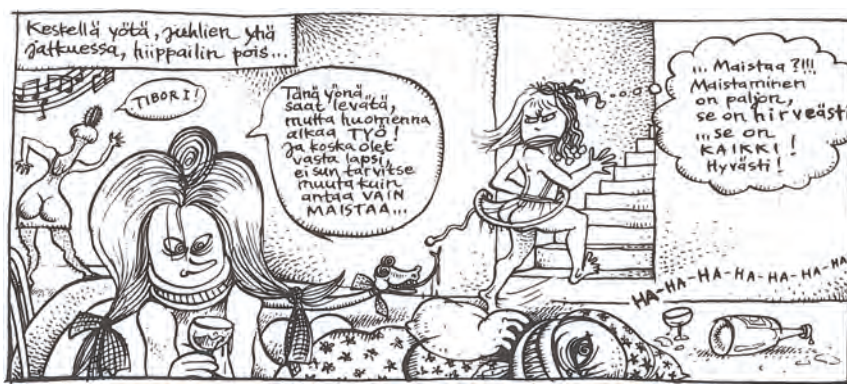

Figure 10.3 © Kati Kovács, *Vihreä rapsodia*, Like, 1994, p. 29

and commercial imagery constantly plays with the erotic double-meanings of food and eating. In *Vihreä rapsodia*, the characters refer to their acts as licking or tasting and it is left for the reader to realise the sexual implications. In this sense, the reader is asked to do a similar kind of decoding of sexual implications as the protagonist, but the difference is that the reader has the knowledge and experience of an adult. Kiti learns the conceptual link between eating and sex only gradually, and she seems to have understood by the time she decides to escape the brothel. After the celebration, a prostitute reminds Kiti that due to her young age, she is expected only to provide a taster for the customers to which Kiti replies: "A taster?!!! To taste is a lot, it is an awful lot… it is EVERYTHING! Goodbye!" (Kovács 1994, p. 29). The protagonist does not explicitly say what she means by stating that tasting is not a partial but a total act which, again, leaves unclear how much the experiencing-I understands about sexuality. However, the reader is expected to form the conceptual link between eating and sex and to understand that, for a young girl, all kind of sexual harassment violates bodily integrity and threatens her agency as she becomes the object of male desire.

Unreliable narrator in the interaction between words and images

Unlike *Vihreä rapsodia*, *Kuka pelkää Nenian Ahnavia?* does not utilise a first-person narrator, but rather the life story of the protagonist is told by her ex-partner after the protagonist's death. The ex-partner begins the story from the protagonist's birth which already raises suspicion in the reader: How could he know about the protagonist's birth since he could not have been there himself? The author's choice of using a character narrator highlights the story as one possible version of the protagonist's life.

In rhetorical narratology, an unreliable narrator is one of the sources for narrative tensions (Phelan 2005, pp. 51–52). In these cases, the narrator's reporting, values, or attitudes turn out to be suspicious in relation to other information in the narrative. An unreliable narrator can, for example, perceive or judge things in a wrong way, or withhold information from the audience (ibid.). In comics narration, the visual information participates in the creation of unreliable narration, since the images can contradict what is visually shown. Kovács utilises the contradiction between verbal and visual narration in many of her comics, but in *Kuka pelkää Nenian Ahnavia?,* she maximises the tension with techniques that I call: (1) unsettling, (2) negating, and (3) contradicting. All the techniques affect the reliability of the narration and, as I next demonstrate, the representation of sexual violence.

From the beginning of the narrative, the verbal narrator creates uncertainty around the protagonist's life: He introduces the protagonist's childhood environment as a remote island and adds that it was easy to "imagine" that the protagonist's family had not been affected by worldly horrors (Kovács 2010, p. 12). The choice of the verb "imagine" leaves room for doubt about the family idyll, which after a few pages certainly crumbles when we realise that the family's father is a misogynist patriarch who values

women only as servants for men. Thus, the technique of unsettling plays with the degree of probability by making the verbal narrator use words that hint about the uncertainty regarding the told, but the image does not explicitly provide information that would reveal the truth.

In the technique which I call negating, the verbal narrator builds the storyworld by describing what it is not, which raises the question of why the narrator wants to mention the things he negates. According to narratologist Laura Karttunen (2008, p. 420), negative structures involve "a sense of what is possible or probable in the world" and they can thus direct the reader to think about the social norms or conventions that are being discounted. Negation is a narrative technique similar to the disnarrated, where the narrator or character mentions possible scenarios that could take place in the storyworld, thus indicating that the narrative could have been different or that usually these kinds of narratives are different (see Prince 1992, p. 36; 2010, p. 118). When the protagonist's father decides to marry off his ten-year-old daughter in order to improve the family's livelihood, the narrator quite markedly describes Nenian's new home as an island where there were "no bombs, no booze, no women, no gambling…" (Kovács 2010, p. 264). This denial raises questions of whether these kinds of things are the norm in the storyworld, which would make Nenian's new home an exceptional place. At the same time, the denial creates an ominous atmosphere especially since the image that accompanies the description includes a fish trapped in a fishing net. When interpreting the image as a visual metaphor, Nenian's destiny as a child-bride does not seem bright.

A negative structure is used also when the narrator wants to highlight that "Fred Calamaro [the new husband] never abused Nenian. Unlike many would imagine. Never" (Kovács 2010, p. 22; see Figure 10.4). However,

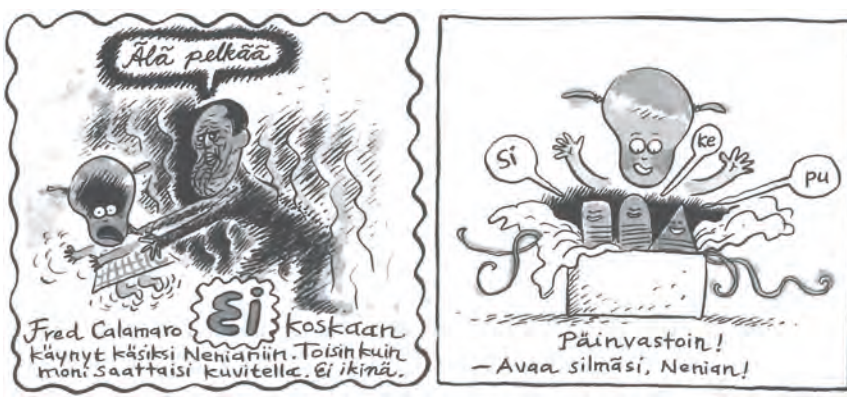

Figure 10.4 © Kati Kovács, *Kuka pelkää Nenian Ahnavia*?, Arktinen Banaani, 2010, p. 22

in this case, the visual information proves the contrary: The panel shows how the husband grabs the horrified young girl. Here, the techniques of negating and contradicting form a narratively complex tension between word and image, which prompts the reader to consider the plausibility of the abuse and the reliability of the narrator. Wavy panel borders create further complexity since, as a formal convention in comics, they can indicate, for example, a dream sequence. Against this convention, the panel borders could insinuate that the depicted sexual abuse is imagined but not real in the storyworld. However, there are visual and typographical details that might weaken the narrator's reliability and create ambiguity by contradicting the negation: The negative word "EI" ("no") is surrounded with wavy borders diminishing the power of the negation, and the phrase "Ei ikinä" ("never") seems to be written in Italics compared to the rest of the lettering. Ambiguity created by the interaction of word and image leads to many unresolved questions, including whether the husband abuses the girl, and if this kind of sexual abuse is common in the storyworld? By raising such questions, the techniques of negation and contradiction can prompt the reader to think about the situation in reality: How common is sexual abuse, how much is it a cultural taboo, is it something that takes place in the domestic space of homes, and what kinds of power hierarchies are at play in intimate relationships?

Thus far, my analysis of *Kuka pelkää Nenian Ahnavia?* has considered only individual panels. Graphic narratives progress, however, from panel to panel, and to understand the panel's meanings, the reader must consider one panel in relation to its surrounding panels and their organisation on their own and facing pages. The reading of panels one after another creates a rhythm that Thierry Groensteen (2007, pp. 45, 61; 2013, pp. 133–134) has compared to the rhythm created by music, or bodily rhythms of heartbeat, breathing, and walking. When analysing Gloeckner's comics about sexual abuse, Chute notes that reading comics may also be a less pleasant experience, and that contradicting effects of pleasure and disgust can intertwine or alternate in the reading process, thus making the rhythm of reading erratic. Chute calls this alternation "a rhythm of rupture" (Chute 2010, p. 71). In the case of *Kuka pelkää Nenian Ahnavia?*, the tensions between word and image create uncertainty but also uncomfortable reactions that are amplified by a spatial technique which I analyse next by way of concluding my analysis and to illustrate how the uncertainty created by the unreliable narration works together with spatial organisation of words and images.

The panel depicting sexual harassment of the protagonist in *Kuka pelkää Nenian Ahnavia?* is surrounded by images of Nenian enjoying her new life after being released from the domination of her father. Just one panel after the depicted sexual harassment, we see delighted Nenian getting a present that includes the primary colours of blue, red, and yellow, which in this context symbolise a happy childhood. Even the verbal narration in the panel tries to assure the reader that, contrary to their expectations, Nenian can live

her new life without any fears or threats. However, the atmosphere changes when turning the page; tranquil and happy sceneries change into images of shock, horror, and violence. Without any warning, the protagonist's husband dies in a mysterious bombing leaving the child widowed and traumatised (see Figure 10.5).

The page-turn as a spatial technique is conventionally used for persuading the reader to find out what happens next (Groensteen 2007, pp. 29–30), but in this case, it is used as a technique of shocking the reader. In *Kuka pelkää Nenian Ahnavia?*, the violent image is of course disturbing, but it intensifies when the narrative progresses, and a dream sequence connects the bombing to sexual harassment. Kovács typically utilises a multitude of symbols in her works, and in this case, the seemingly unimportant mushrooms are revealed to be visual symbols for male genitals. This symbolical connection is revealed rather late in the narrative, which forces the reader to return to the scene of bombing to reinterpret and reconsider the imagery of mushrooms.

Once the symbolical connection is made, the word choices and the spatial arrangement of visual and verbal elements on the page turn into implicit indicators of sexual violence in the marriage of the adult Fred and child Nenian. In the narrator's wording, "Among all that was good, way too many bombs in such a small place," the word "place" is written in bold and situated on top of the horrified girl making the word–image combination amplify the girl as the target of the violence. In retrospective reading, the protagonist is the real object of the violent act. However, due to the complexity of the complete narrative, the perpetrator is not necessarily her husband but the larger misogynist culture that forces the protagonist to be foremost an Other, a woman whose identity, desires, and hopes are controlled by men. The narrative techniques at play prompt the reader to tackle the uncomfortable feeling that sexual violence is only one part of the gender-based violence that the protagonist must deal with.

When comparing the two works, it is possible to find both similarities and differences in how they address the theme of sexual abuse and violence. Neither of the books represents rape or sexual violence in an explicit manner, but instead utilise allegorical and metaphorical means. In both narratives, sexual harassment and violence are also tied in with the protagonist's development. Whereas Kiti can turn her negative experiences into a positive power of self-defence in the end, for Nenian, traumatic childhood haunts her throughout her life. And whereas Kiti learns to speak her mind and to defend herself, Nenian is trapped in a patriarchal world where she is destined to be defined as the Other. Here, the book recalls Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) classic and often repeated idea of women historically being considered as the "second sex," an anomaly to the norm, which is a man. Nenian's destiny is decided for her by her father as soon as he names her "Nenian" ("woman" spelled backwards). Combined with the surname Ahnav ("old" spelled backwards), the name is a riddle for the protagonist in a life-long search for her identity and subjectivity: If she is destined to be an

Figure 10.5 © Kati Kovács, *Kuka pelkää Nenian Ahnavia?*, Arktinen Banaani, 2010, p. 24

Other who is valued only by how she is seen by men, how can she function as an active agent in her life?

Conclusion

Kati Kovács has been making comics since the late 1980s and has continued to discuss sexual harassment and violence in comics form throughout her career, which establishes her as one of Finland's key feminist comics artists. During her career, Kovács has developed ways of taking advantage of the affordances of the comics medium to play with aspects of showing and telling to affect the readers. In terms of Ahmed's (2017, p. 1) notion of feminist books as resources that give us words and the strength to keep on and to fight injustices, Kovács's comics show how feminist comic art can provide not only words and images but also an intriguing interplay between them. Gaps, ruptures, and conflicts between visual and verbal information may challenge us to think in new ways.

This chapter has focused on asking how comics can use narrative strategies of combining words and images, and of showing and telling to represent sexual abuse and violence in a feminist way. By using Kovács's comics as a test case, I have illustrated how the combinations of verbal and visual narration can create ambiguity in the narratives, thereby provoking the reader to actively process and think sexual abuse and violence, firstly, on the story level, and secondly, thematically in relation to the reader's knowledge about gender-based violence in the real life.

A feminist strategy of representing sexual abuse and violence cannot be reduced to one particular narrative technique or word–image combination; rather, it should be viewed as a broad selection of different means which together aim to serve certain ethical purposes of the narrative. I suggest that feminist strategies of representing sexual abuse and violence connect the representations to larger cultural paradigms, such as sexism, misogyny, and the culture of shaming. The ways in which comics can achieve this are manifold. My analysis of Kovács's comics illustrates how tensions between the narrating-I and experiencing-I, visual symbols and metaphors, contradictions between visual and verbal information, and spatial rhythm create ambiguity and unresolved questions in the narrative process. While the narrative progresses, the accumulated ambiguity makes it difficult to consider the represented sexual abuse and violence as random acts or separate events; instead, the narrative guides the reader to consider them belonging to larger structures of gender-based violence.

While Kovács continues her career, there are increasingly more Finnish comics artists who approach gender-based violence from different angles bringing into discussion, for example, online violence, violence experienced by those other than cis-gender people, and the relationship between forms of gender-based violence and mental health. The widening variety of tackling gender-based violence shows not only how the comics medium constantly

develops new ways of combining the visual and verbal, but it also gives us better tools to understand what the consequences of gender-based violence are and how it takes different forms in our societies.

Notes

1 The name Impivaara refers to the Finnish novel *Seitsemän veljestä* ([*Seven Brothers*], 1870) by the national author of Finland, Aleksis Kivi. In the novel, five of the seven brothers living in Impivaara are wooing the same woman. In Finnish idioms, Impivaara is used for describing an isolated and somewhat naïve place compared to the surrounding world. As social scientist Tuija Virkki (2017, pp. 1, 10) notes, violence against women and partnership violence have long been grave problems in Finland, but politicians have been slow to recognise them as larger gender issues, instead treating them as problems that affect mainly individual victims. Via the intertextual reference, the name of the zine hints that sexual harassment is a deep-rooted phenomenon in Finland.

2 Most of the stories in the anthologies concentrate on violence against women, which does not infer that violence experienced by other genders would be non-existent or less important. Furthermore, I agree with the notion that gender is not the only factor that affects the predictors, dynamics, and outcomes of violence but "the complex interplay of the intersections of gender and other dimensions of difference" (such as age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, class, physical ability, and size) may "elicit prejudice and discrimination, confer differential access to power and privilege, and converge with gender to magnify or diminish risk for experiencing violence" (Russo and Pirlott 2006, p. 180). Since Kovács's comics focus on violence against women, I have chosen to limit my analysis on sexual violence in women's lives.

3 The chapter is based on my doctoral dissertation (Romu 2018) about Kovács's comics. In the dissertation, I developed a model for analysing visual, verbal, and spatial aspects for representing gender, sexuality, and embodiment in comics storytelling. In this chapter, I elaborate my findings on the ways in which Kovács uses complex narrative techniques to represent sexual harassment and violence.

4 To use the verbs "show" and "tell" as a part of a narratological analysis of comics is not without problems. In classical narratology, the terms refer to the degree of how much the narrating instance is present in the text (Genette 1980, pp. 163–164). In this chapter, I use "showing" synonymously with visual representation. In comics, showing is always mediated in the sense that panels are not neutral windows to the storyworld but bear traces of the author's narrative and stylistic decisions (Mikkonen 2017, p. 75). In this sense, both showing (visual representation) and telling (verbal representation) take part in the narration of comics.

5 I use the term "reader" to refer to what James Phelan (2005, p. 213) calls an authorial audience, a constructed ideal reader for whom the author designs her text. The concept is highly theoretical as it leaves out the real, flesh-and-blood readers, but it serves the needs of a rhetorical analysis to a certain point. For the criticism of the concept's implicit universalism, see Warhol (2012, p. 205).

6 Although there had been women cartoonists in Finland before the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, e.g., probably the most famous Finnish cartoonist Tove Jansson, women were a minority in the comics culture until the turn of the 2000s (for the analysis of Jansson's comics and their feminist ethos, see Classon Frangos in this volume).

7 Kovács's long and notable career with graphic storytelling has been awarded with the most prestigious prizes in the Finnish comics scene, including the first-ever state prize for comic art in 2014. The jury of the state prize acknowledged that the strong female characters in Kovács's comics challenge traditional gender norms, and her comics inspire younger comics artists to question the standards of the industry.

8 Other important Finnish comics artists tackling the subject of gender-based violence are Tiitu Takalo, Johanna "Roju" Rojola, Katja Tukiainen, and Emmi Valve whose comics discuss sexual violence to differing degrees ranging from sexual harassment (Rojola, Takalo, Tukiainen) to rape (Takalo, Valve). In the digital era, gender-based violence has also taken the form of cyberviolence, which is the topic in *Vihan ja inhon internet* [2018, The internet of hate and loathing], a collaboration between journalist Johanna Vehkoo and comics artist Emmi Nieminen (see Kauranen and Löytty in this volume).

9 For example, Swedish comics artist Hilding Sandgren hides the rape of the young protagonist in black panels leaving the reader to imagine the violence. Sandgren's graphic narrative *Vägarna är som tvättbrädor här* (2016) [The walls are like washboards here] can be described as a young adult comic, which might explain the choice of non-explicit representation of the violence. The same holds for Finnish Tiitu Takalo's *Tuuli ja myrsky* (2009) [Wind and storm], where a group of friends must find a way to react to the rape of one of their peers. Despite omitting the rape, Sandgren's and Takalo's comics do not reiterate the culture of silence and invisibility, but through their characters, both narratives actively negotiate and discuss the problem and ways to deal with the perpetrator and the culture of gender-based violence. Both Sandgren's and Takalo's comics move beyond the culture of shaming by using the power of companionship and collectivity to make the perpetrators accountable for their actions.

10 The character is dressed as a woman and bears both feminine and masculine traits. The sexual ambiguity leaves open to interpretation the character's sex and gender in several ways. In my analysis, however, it is the snake symbol that connects the character foremost to male sexuality, since the snake is a recurring symbol for that in Kovács's works.

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Part V

Memoir and remembering in Polish and Russian comics

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11 "After all, we must be our own heroines"

The power of feminism, *Fun Home*, and form in Wanda Hagedorn's graphic memoir *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*

Małgorzata Olsza

Introduction

In her 2017 graphic memoir entitled *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* [Totally Not Nostalgia: Memoir], illustrated by Jacek Frąś, Wanda Hagedorn relates her childhood and adolescence set in communist Poland in the 1960s and 1970s (Figure 11.1).[1] Hagedorn examines her, as she puts it, "depressive–oppressive–repressive" upbringing in a "traditional" family (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 17), authoritatively controlled by a violent and misogynistic father.[2] The memoir chronicles Hagedorn's development from the victim of psychological, physical, and emotional abuse to a survivor who finds in herself the courage to challenge gender and social norms of communist Poland.

Hagedorn presents the reader/viewer with a complex narrative of trauma, remorse, and guilt, trying to accept the fact that in order to heal she has to, metaphorically speaking, kill her father – his severed head still haunts her in her dreams (see Figure 11.6) (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 230).

Hagedorn cites Alison Bechdel and Kate Zambreno as her inspirations, pointing to the importance of both graphic and literary memoir tradition in her work. She repeats after Zambreno that "after all, we must be our own heroines" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 15) and tell our stories to the world. Drawing on Zambreno, who writes "[m]y sisters, my mistresses, the spiders stalking the center of the web. I circle them, I weave their tales (or unweave the tales spun about them)" (2012, p. 72), I aim in this chapter to "unweave the tales spun" about Hagedorn's memoir. Moving between the political, the personal, and the formal, I address the following four issues: (1) the paradoxes associated with the history of feminism in communist Poland and the manner in which they condition the narrative of feminist growth; (2) intertextual and intervisual relations with Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*; (3) self-portrayal, self-acceptance, and visual representation of the female "beautiful/ugly" body, which has been presented in the memoir

Figure 11.1 © Wanda Hagedorn and Jacek Frąś, *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*, Wydawnictwo Komiksowe and Kultura Gniewu, 2017, front cover

as an integral part of growing feminist awareness; and (4) visual metaphors of trauma and emancipation employed in the memoir in the wider context of the question of "limits of representation." Ultimately, I argue in this chapter that *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* not only demonstrates the power of female vision in comics, but also does so from a unique transnational perspective.

The paradoxes of feminism in communist Poland

The question of Western feminism in relation to Eastern European feminism is crucial for the understanding of *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*. As an adult, Hagedorn emigrated to Australia, where, as she observes, she "discovered feminism" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 159). She then worked in various NGOs, raising awareness of gender-based violence. Hagedorn's adult narrating-I is thus firmly rooted in "Western feminism." She refers to a number of Western literary, artistic, political, and theoretical feminist figures, including, as noted above, Bechdel and Zambreno, but also Julia Gillard (p. 12), bell hooks (pp. 92–93), Nancy Friday (pp. 92–93), Colette (p. 97), Carol Hanisch and the Redstockings Manifesto (p. 159), and Germaine Greer (p. 159). Hagedorn also quotes Gillard's "Misogyny Speech" (2017, p. 12) (Figure 11.2) at the beginning of the memoir, signalling to the reader/viewer that her story of growing up in communist Poland will be filtered through and critically reassessed with Western feminist principles in mind.

Indeed, the younger experiencing-I in the memoir may only relate to the perspective of Eastern European feminism in communist Poland, which was shaped by different cultural, political, and social factors. While there always

Figure 11.2 © Wanda Hagedorn and Jacek Frąś, *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*, Wydawnictwo Komiksowe and Kultura Gniewu, 2017, p. 12

exists "a dilatory space between the event and the writing of the event" in a memoir (Schmitt 2017, p. 141), the "dilatory space" that opens up in *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* is conditioned by a different understanding of what feminism(s) is(are). Thus in this section, I discuss the history of feminism in communist Poland in connection with young Wanda, i.e., the experiencing-I. The problematic lack of "feminist consciousness" (Watson 1992, p. 128) in communist Poland is also addressed, demonstrating how Wanda had to resist not only her father, but also systematic patriarchal oppression of the communist state.

In accordance with Karen Offen's (1988, p. 152) classic definition, feminists may be described as people who:

> recognize the value of women's own interpretations of their lived experience and needs and acknowledge the values women claim publicly as their own (…); they exhibit consciousness of, discomfort at, or even anger over institutionalized injustice (or inequity) toward women as a group by men as a group in a given society; and they advocate the elimination of that injustice (…).

While it unites feminists and emphasises the shared awareness of patriarchal oppression, such a definition is productive only in specific contexts. The transnational perspective of looking at feminisms in the Baltic Sea region requires that differences between feminisms be foregrounded, rather than deemphasised, in order to, as Offen (1988, p. 152) argues, acknowledge how women in different countries interpret their lives. And since "Western feminist discourse is hegemonic in feminism" (Funk 1993, p. 319), the fact that Wanda's life is firmly rooted in the history of feminism in communist Poland needs to be recognised.

While the "American bias" or the "Anglo-American bias" (Offen 1988; Funk 1993; Puar 2012) has been recognised in feminist theory, from the perspective of Eastern Europe, and a post-communist state in particular, the "Western European bias" in feminist studies needs to be acknowledged as well. Over the years, it has led to the marginalisation of women's experiences in post-communist Baltic states, including Poland. "In practice, United States feminists may constitute Central and Eastern European women as an 'Other'," Elisabeth Olsen (1997, p. 2227) writes, "validating the progressiveness of the United States (Central and Eastern Europe serves as the 'Other' that Western Europe increasingly refuses to be.)." In fact, the interests and goals of Western and Eastern European feminisms differed, and the latter was often misunderstood in the West (Goldfarb 1997, p. 237). Eastern European feminism was and still is conditioned by the paradoxes associated with communists' treatment of women's rights and "the pompous claim of official discourse that women's 'emancipation' had been achieved under state socialism" (Einhorn 1993, p. 2). In this section, I discuss three such paradoxes specific to the Polish context.

I refer to these paradoxes of "communist feminism" because the status of women's rights in communist Poland was indeed complex. On the one hand, women in communist Poland enjoyed some freedoms that women in the West had to fight for. For one, at least in theory, communism postulated the equality of all comrades. Both men and women were obliged to work and received equal state-regulated salaries. In the years 1949–1953, women were actively encouraged to work either in the industry or in the services sector (Fidelis 2010, p. 238). The system of state-funded kindergartens was available to everyone and, in case of Poland, abortion had been legal until 1993. However, as Barbara Einhorn (1993, p. 91) observes, in the communist regime, abortion was not recognised as a women's right but as "an extension of population policies." As Małgorzata Fidelis (2010, pp. 170–203) further points out, it was only after the death of Stalin in 1953, in the period of the so-called "thaw" (de-Stalinisation), that the postulated gender equality, especially in the workplace, was questioned. "Gender difference," Fidelis (2010, p. 175) writes, "would be at the forefront of [the] revised understanding of the communist system." The financial freedom achieved by some women was seen as threatening to the patriarchal family model which the communist party began to (unofficially) support since 1954 (Fidelis 2010, p. 190). Peggy Watson (1992, p. 128) further explains that:

> while the mass induction of women into the labour market was to be the economic basis for equality within marriage, the interests of the industrialising State were articulated in the preservation of patriarchal values in the public domain and in the family.

Similarly, Mihaela Miroiu argues that "[t]he traditional family patriarchy was never officially questioned, apart from some courageous individuals" (2007, p. 199). Thus, the first paradox of "communist feminism" was that there existed systematic discrimination against female workers in communist Poland, which found its continuation in family dynamics – patriarchy was present and promoted both in the workplace and at home. Equality, one of communism's main ideological pillars, was a myth.

The second paradox of "communist feminism" was that apart from the communist party, patriarchy was also upheld by the Catholic Church. Although the party and the Church were officially at war, insofar as communists actively sought to destroy religion, and the Church continued to criticise the communist regime, their approach to gender equality and women's rights was very similar. It should be added that the Catholic Church played an important role in a fundamentally conservative Polish society. This unlikely marriage between communism and religion strengthened patriarchy and misogyny in communist Poland.

The third, and perhaps greatest, paradox of "communist feminism" was that Polish women did not recognise feminism, as both theory and practice,

as a relatable notion. Eastern Europe in general was plagued by, as Watson observes, "absence of feminist consciousness" (1992, p. 128) or "an allergy to feminism" (Einhorn 1993, pp. 182–215). Miroiu further argues that "communist feminism is a contradiction in terms" (2007, p. 198), while Stachniak (1995, p. 69) was even compelled to asked "Why did we not become feminists?" Even Fidelis (2010, p. 4) in her book on women and industrialisation in communist Poland writes more about anti-feminism than feminism itself, arguing that "the viability of the communist system depended (…) on the regime's successful enforcement of gender boundaries in many spheres of social, economic, and political life." Under the influence of state propaganda and the Church, women in communist Poland – and often other countries of the so-called Soviet bloc – did not refer to themselves as feminists (which was seen as a "Western ideology"), and for the most part, feminist literature was either illegal or available only in English (a language barrier).

All three of the paradoxes of "communist feminism" are reflected and commented on in *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*. As observed above, Hagedorn constantly navigates between the perspective of the mature "Western" feminist self and the childhood, somewhat unaware or naïve, self. She structures the narrative of her coming of age in (Western) feminist terms and identifies the paradoxes of "communist feminism" and their influence on her life. Only the mature narrating-I refers to Zambreno, who in *Heroines* observes that:

> the decision to write the private in public, it is a political one. It is a counterattack against this [historically sexist] censorship. To tell our narratives, the truth of our experiences (…) Why write one's diary in public? (…) To refuse to scratch ourselves out. To refuse to be censored, to be silent.
>
> (Zambreno 2012, p. 291)

The memoir devoted to the pathological and patriarchal family model in communist Poland and the decision to "write one's diary in public" represents Hagedorn's resistance against the very structures that were meant to silence her.

From an early age, she was only meant to be "a good girl," playing "the role of a little Catholic, (…) obedient daughter, good student, and diligent babysitter for the younger sisters" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, pp. 21, 23). Her father, Zygmunt, was an ardent communist who had made a career (and achieved a high social status) within communist bureaucratic structures. As the narrating-I observes, marriage and family were for him the spheres where he could uphold "the dictatorship of the dysfunctional proletariat" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 40). Zygmunt terrorised not only his wife but also his daughters, who were "collateral damage" to the mother's "main target" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 44). Emotional and physical violence

were endemic to the traditional conservative communist family. At the same time, and this appears to be equally problematic for Wanda, her mother did not offer her the emotional support she needed. In a panel on page 49, an eight-year-old Wanda is seen running away from her abusive father, who is holding a belt with which he wants to hit her, and chasing after her emotionally repressed mother (Figure 11.3). In the corresponding caption, she sarcastically observes that when combined, her father and her mother provided her with a perfectly "balanced" childhood, as her father's aggression and, as she ironically puts it, "emotional expressiveness" provided a counterweight for her mother's "emotional coldness." At this point in the narrative, it is only thanks to the critical perspective of Western feminism that Hagedorn, the narrating "I," is able to expose and evaluate such a behaviour. She explains and rationalises trauma she experienced as a child, when both the state and the Church sanctioned gender-based violence. At the same time, in the act of comparing and contrasting the feminist consciousnesses of the narrating-I and the experiencing-I, as well as the feminist consciousness of her and her mother, she emphasises the difference between Eastern and Western feminisms. By referring to her mother, she also demonstrates that in communist states "an antifeminism" often "preced[ed] feminism" (2017, p. 2).

The personal perspective of Wanda's family is further meant to provide the reader/viewer with an insight into Polish communist society and its treatment of women. In a visual shortcut, a two-page spread on pages 160 and 161 shows a façade of a typical communist block of flats. Word balloons, which "come out" of the windows, contain the insults which men are shouting at their wives: "You've deserved it, you slut!," "You whore!," "Is it too much to ask to have dinner on the table when I come home," and

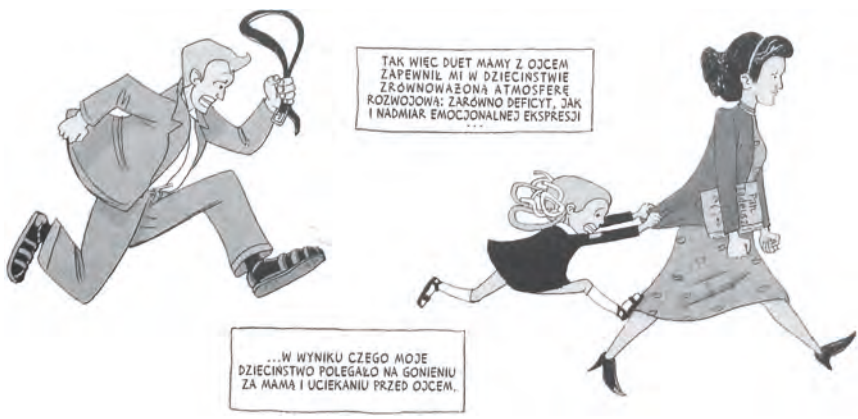

Figure 11.3 © Wanda Hagedorn and Jacek Frąś, *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*, Wydawnictwo Komiksowe and Kultura Gniewu, 2017, p. 49

"It's all your fault." A patriarchal family lives behind every window. There were thousands of such blocks of flats in communist Poland.

And while, contrary to Watson's claim, Wanda appears to possess a very developed "feminist consciousness" – she actively opposes her father, supports her sisters in their fight against him, and continuously refuses to be objectified and abused by men (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 211) – the experiencing-I does not use the word feminism. The older narrating-I, educated and immersed in Western feminism, which gave her the language to describe her experiences, is able to identify "male supremacy," "misogyny," "gender inequality," and "gender-based violence" in her childhood and teenage years. Hagedorn reclaims her and her sisters' experience, and "refuses to be silent" (Zambreno 2012, p. 291).

The past is present: *Fun Home* and the power of the graphic memoir genre

The questions of feminism, but also visuality and (self-)representation (which are explored in the following sections), intertwine on the transnational plane also in relation to the graphic memoir tradition in which *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* is firmly rooted. In this section, I address a number of formal issues related to the (transnational) format of the graphic memoir and its feminist potential in relation to the possible intertextual and intervisual relations between *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* and *Fun Home* (which, as Hagedorn observes in her memoir on page 136, she had read at least six times prior to beginning the works on her text). Before I focus on this question, however, I will first briefly outline the history of comics by women in Poland, allowing for the intertextual and intervisual connections between Hagedorn's and Bechdel's memoirs to be highlighted.

The history of comics in Poland had also been influenced by communism and, similarly to the history of feminism, is complex. Indeed, until the fall of communism in 1989 comics in general functioned on the margins of culture. They were regarded as an "imperialist" and "American" invention at worst and entertainment for children and teenagers at best. It was only after 1989 that a more liberated approach was adopted, and for the first time, comics began to be recognised as reading material for adults. Still, the role played by women on the Polish comics scene, both before and after 1989, was difficult. The Polish comics scene was so dominated by men that it prompted Kinga Kuczyńska to refer to it as "a world without woman" (2011, p. 385). In a telling transnational gesture, it was the publication of *Fun Home* in Polish in 2009, three years after its original English edition, and its critical and commercial success that fully opened the door for Polish female artists. That is not to say that women had not created comics prior to that moment (they had, often on the alternative and underground scene or online), but it was only after 2009 that Polish publishing houses began investing in Polish female talent. The transnational Polish-American

connection played an important role in that process. The first anthologies of comics by women were published in 2012, including *Polski Komiks Kobiecy* [Polish Female Comics] and *Polish Female Comics*: *Double Portrait*. The latter was published in English, engaging in a transnational intertextual dialogue with *Wimmin's Comix* and Bechdel. Respectively, in a purely commercial (but also critical, generic, and intervisual) sense, the publication of *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* in Poland would not have been possible without the success of *Fun Home* (publishers had believed there was no market for graphic memoirs by women).

As noted above, Hagedorn is not a cartoonist, but she nevertheless chose the format of the graphic memoir in order to convey her feminist message. She explains that she was inspired to create her memoir by reading Zambreno and Bechdel, combining writing and drawing. At the end of the prologue, Hagedorn, the narrating-I, talks to her sisters and mother via Skype, asking their permission to create the memoir (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 15). More or less enthusiastically, they all agree. In a slightly ironic scene that follows, Hagedorn informs everyone that it will be a graphic memoir (created with the help of a professional illustrator) and the mother, turning away from the camera and leaving the room, resignedly says, "Oh God, in addition, they'll be able to see us!" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 15). The question of looking and being looked at is posed at this point in the wider context of visualising one's life, or to be more precise, the understanding of one's life.

Indeed, the mother's reluctance towards the visual format of the memoir (as if implying that the memoir in itself is difficult for her to accept, as all family secrets will be made public; however, showing the secrets is still worse) may seem misguided, yet engages with the wider questions of 21st-century visual culture in which the graphic memoir, as a format, functions. Michael Chaney (2016, pp. 23–24) points out that "autobiographical graphic novels function both as symbols of consciousness and as visual figures scarcely different from any other represented object. (…) [The 'I' in autobiographical comics is] always on view, being viewed rather than revealing the view." What else does the graphic memoir offer that the written memoir does not? For one, as Gillian Whitlock (2006, p. 966) explains, "[c]learly we live in times when attending to the relation between visual cultures and the transmission of memories of trauma and violence is both urgent and necessary." Autobiographical comics and graphic memoirs, or "autographics" as Whitlock (2006, p. 966) refers to them, through their form and format not only visualise, document, and represent, but in the process, problematise "the shifting jurisdictions and limits of autobiography." The graphic memoir creates new and complex networks of meanings, because as Monica B. Pearl (2008, p. 302) observes, "[t]his is what an illustrated narrative allows most of all: juxtapositions of text and image, to make distinctions and parallels at the same time."

As noted above, the road to the creation of *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*, conceived of as a complex verbal–visual "autographics," has led through the

experience of *Fun Home* as a seminal feminist graphic memoir, creating a transnational American–Polish–Australian web of intertexts and intervisuals. While the basic similarities are obvious, both memoirs talk about and show the development of a strong female self who has to face and overcome domestic trauma; they also share further affinities on the level of the structure. Bechdel interprets and thus narrates her story in a double perspective of fact and fiction, observing that "[her] parents [are] most real to [her] in fictional terms" (2006, p. 67) and drawing on a vast body of modernist and feminist texts. Hagedorn (the narrating-I) engages with the question of fact and fiction in relation to her developing identity (p. 96). She quotes and refers to a number of different texts, literary characters, and authors, including Robinson Crusoe (pp. 19–20), Mary Poppins (p. 41), Colette (p. 97), and Anne Sexton (p. 120), acknowledging their formative influence. Young Wanda, the experiencing-I, also envisions herself as a fictional character, such as Jane Eyre and David Copperfield (p. 168), in an attempt to mitigate and represent her pain, which is a strategy used by Bechdel (2006). Respectively, drawing on *Fun Home*, though on a much smaller scale than in Bechdel's memoir, Hagedorn tries to discover the truth about her family through photographs. She learns (supposes, guesses, assumes) that her beloved grandmother was bisexual when she discovers photographs of her with her close "female friends" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, pp. 151–152). The photographs are mutilated. In an act of personal iconoclasm, the grandfather tried to erase all "female friends" from the photographs.

Last but not least, the power of *Fun Home* lies in the fact that it "both enacts and reflects on processes of autobiographical storytelling and exploits the differences of autographic inscription in the art of cartooning" (Watson 2011, p. 123). *Fun Home*'s title refers to the family's mid-century funeral home which proves to be a catalyst and a central metaphor for Alison's story, embodying the complex family dynamics (a sense of alienation and the rule of the dominant father) and the family drama as such. The home, as an actual place and as a metaphor, allows one to read the self against the family's official and unofficial or repressed stories.

In relation to *Fun Home*, *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* also addresses the problem of the self in relation to other family members by means of a central visual metaphor. In the prologue, Hagedorn, the narrating-I, recounts a singular and recurring dream she had as an adult woman (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, pp. 8–10) (Figure 11.4): she is being followed by an angry rhinoceros. Terrified, she tries to run away only to realise that the rhinoceros is chasing her because it is hungry. She further realises she has not fed the animal in months. Suddenly, she feels guilty and ashamed. The rhinoceros, which we can also see on the cover of the memoir (Figure 11.1), is meant to symbolise the past that haunts Hagedorn (while she does not comment on it, this is an unmistakably masculine force and a phallic image that may refer to traumatic memories of her father). She realises that she cannot ignore it any longer and that she finally must address it in a tangible form. In other

Figure 11.4 © Wanda Hagedorn and Jacek Frąś, *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*, Wydawnictwo Komiksowe and Kultura Gniewu, 2017, p. 8

words, she must finally begin her graphic memoir and "feed her rhinoceros" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 10).

By using such a visual metaphor, Hagedorn endows her traumatic past with a physical and material presence. As such, alongside Bechdel, she partakes in, to paraphrase Gillian Whitlock (2006, p. 966), "autographic therapy." The traumatic past is represented and thus present.

(Don't) look at me: The body and the self

Hagedorn presents her body, seen as an important element of her feminist development, in a similarly complex manner. The acceptance of the body is

part of her growing feminist awareness. In fact, the body is an integral part of the life-story recorded in the memoir – rarely commented on in words, but constantly visualised and tangible.

Leigh Gilmore observes that "[a]lternately vulnerable, injured, desiring, pregnant, grieving, and haunted by history, the body offered life writers a way to think through public space, relationships, precarity, and survival" (2016, p. 674) and further explains that the representation of the body in autobiographical texts is crucial for the understanding of the self. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in turn, point out that "the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied" (2001, p. 49). When the questions of embodiment, autobiography, and female authorship intertwine, still further interesting critical perspectives open up. And, as Elisabeth El Refaie points out, "the notion of embodiment is very relevant to the graphic memoir genre, since producing multiple drawn versions of the self entails an explicit engagement with physicality" (2012, p. 8). The connection between (drawing) the female body and feminism may be further conceptualised in the theoretical framework of corporeal feminism and the new materialism (see e.g., Bordo 1993; Diprose 1994; Grosz 1994; Alaimo and Hekman 2008). Susan Bordo (1993, p. 5) points out that "woman [is] cast in the role of the body." Hagedorn also casts herself in that role in her memoir, albeit only to work through this concept and arrive at the form of (self) representation that she accepts.

The manner in which Wanda's body is drawn changes throughout the memoir. In the beginning, as an eight-year-old girl, she is presented in an almost cartoonish and very simplified manner – her facial features are not distinct, and her comics avatar looks more like a "typical" schoolgirl than a real person (see Figure 11.3). The (self-)representation style changes when Wanda becomes a teenager; this is the time when she begins to acknowledge the sexual element inscribed in the body and is first sexualised by others. Indeed, as Elizabeth A. Grosz explains:

> Adolescence is also of significance in understanding the development of the body image, for this is a period in which the biological body undergoes major upheavals and changes as an effect of puberty. It is in this period that the subject feels the greatest discord between the body image and the lived body (…). The adolescent body is commonly experienced as awkward, alienating, an undesired biological imposition.
>
> (Grosz 1994, p. 75)

Wanda's comics avatar reflects this process. It is more personal and individualised but also alien(ating) to Wanda. As a teenager, Wanda struggles with her body image, stating that she could not help but look at herself, in particular her face, thighs, and belly, "with disgust;" an entire page is devoted to the process of critical self-examination (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 195). In a three-panel sequence at the top, Wanda is looking at her

reflection in a glass door (it is clearly a public building, perhaps a shop) – she is on the one side of the glass door, while the reader/viewer is on the other. The double frame, and the double focus, provided by the borders of the panel and the doorframe reinforce the notion of being subjected to investigation, as if "framed" like a picture on display. This picture is examined by both Wanda, who has internalised the male gaze, and the reader/viewer, who is made aware of subjecting others to such a gaze. Indeed, as John Berger (1972, p. 46; original emphasis) argues, "[a woman] comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman." Michal Chaney (2016, pp. 20–24) writes in *Reading Lessons in Seeing* that mirrors and reflective surfaces function in comics as visual expressions of self-analysis. On the said page, Wanda examines herself in unique reflective planes: the glass door of a public building and (in the two-row, five-panel sequence at the bottom) in a window in her room. As noted above, she knows what society demands from her and internalises that view, but she also wishes to transgress it – windows and glass doors are not only reflective but also transparent surfaces. It is possible to look through them, silencing the inner surveyor and the inner surveyed. As Chute observes, it is through form that comics "provoke us to think about how women, as both looking and looked-at subjects, are situated in particular times, spaces, and histories" (2010, p. 2).

At the same time, however, the view from the inside and from the outside draws our attention to the "plural self," the narrating-I and the experiencing-I, characteristic for autobiographical texts (El Refaie 2012, p. 53). Indeed, "the drawn performance of the autobiographical self [is] a site of ideological struggle" (Køhlert 2019, p. 4). In *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*, the teenage experiencing-I is the most vulnerable and critical. And it is the older narrating-I that ultimately makes sense of the self-deprecating episodes of body shaming. Grosz argues that "misogynistic thought has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women's secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed as frail, imperfect (…)" (1994, pp. 13–14). The mature self (see Figure 11.1, Figure 11.4, and Figure 11.6) is drawn as "liberated" from the constraints of the controlling gaze. Hagedorn does not judge herself as a view but instead simply *is* – often dressed in somber black, with short hair, rejecting stereotypical markers of femininity.

While the questions of the body, the self, and feminism are addressed by means of rather realistic images, *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*, as Gilmore (2001, p. 8) observes in her discussion of autobiography, also derives its "authority less from its resemblance to real life than from its proximity to discourses of truth and identity, less from reference or mimesis than from the cultural power of truth telling." *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* does not simply document the development of the self, whose integral part is the body image, but also questions the notions of looking/being looked at in the process.

Drawing trauma and the "ethics of the image"

The starling image of the hungry rhinoceros that demands to be fed or otherwise it will continue to charge, similarly to traumatic memories that cannot be silenced, is not the only effective visual metaphor employed in *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*. In this section, I will discuss two visual metaphors of trauma and emancipation employed in the graphic memoir in the wider context of the so-called "ethics of the image."

All forms of representation, and especially representation of violence, engage in the reciprocal relation between representation and responsibility, which W. J. T. Mitchell describes as follows:

> "Responsible representation" is a definition for truth, both as epistemological question (the accuracy of faithfulness […]) and as an ethical contract (notion of the representor is "responsible for" the truth of a representation and responsible *to* the audience or recipient of the representation). […] [R]epresentation is a form, an act of taking responsibility.
>
> (Mitchell 1994, p. 421; original emphasis, MO)

In other words, when the authoress decides to represent, for example, violence, the questions that need to be asked and answered beforehand are not only, Is this representation truthful? but, more importantly, Is it ethical?, Who will look at it and in what context?, and Can I hurt someone with this image? The questions concerning the context seem to be the most important. When taken out of its ethical and "responsible" context, an image of a violent scene may be dangerous, even destructive:

> When we speak of ethics of an image, we always affirm the dual role: images perform as both content and form. It is the latter that produces spectral, even chaotic effects. For while images depict a certain stillness and impact of a moment – or the what of representation – their ethical effects arise from their contextual resonance, or the how of representation and relation. […] An image shocks, and triggers ethical concerns or responses, for what it represents (or alludes to) but even more so, upon closer inspection, for how it represents […].
>
> (Tautz 2019, p. 3)

It is not only the subject matter but also the form that should be taken into consideration. In the case of comics, it concerns the drawing style (and how realistic it is), the perspective, the scale, and the placement of a given image or panel in the context of the sequence (see Groensteen 2013). The dilemma that presents itself is between accuracy, fidelity, and truthfulness (i.e., presenting the traumatic event as it really happened, conveying its full emotional weight) and specifically defined "voyeurism," which involves

exploiting both the author of the memoir, as very often the victim of the presented situation, and the reader who is forced to look.

Hagedorn's answer to this dilemma is the visual metaphor. As El Refaie (2018, p. 1) observes, metaphors in general allow us to convey complex and often inexpressible information about our mental and emotional state to others. The role of the visual metaphor in comics is the same: it makes representation, and thus communication, possible without compromising the ethics of the image. In general, as El Refaie (2018, p. 14) further argues:

> any aspect of visual representation should be regarded as potential visual metaphor if it invites us to consider one thing, concept or experience in terms of another, regardless of whether this underlying thought process represents a conventional conceptual metaphor or an entirely novel mental mapping.

Thus, in keeping with the theoretical considerations concerning the ethics of the image, not only may the subject matter (e.g., the what) be metaphorical but also the form (e.g., the how) may trigger new associations. For the purposes of my analysis, I would like to refer to two more specific categories of visual metaphors proposed by El Refaie in reference to two sequences found in *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*. I will discuss the "apple in my cheek" sequence (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, pp. 224–228) (Figure 11.5) and the "severed head of my father" sequence (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, pp. 230–231) (Figure 11.6) in reference to the category of pictorial allegory. El Refaie defines pictorial allegory as "the use of an extended visual scenario that functions in its entirety as a metaphor" (2018, p. 117), which, as suggested by the word scenario, is not limited to a single panel but is played out in several panels, and in the case of *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*, several pages. Both pictorial allegories employed in *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* exemplify how Wanda, the experiencing-I, and Hagedorn, the narrating-I, respond to violence inflicted on her by her father. In both sequences, she refuses to be portrayed as the victim or to "project an identity that is defined by trauma" (Chute 2010, p. 2).

Both sequences may be found almost at the very end of the memoir and, although they represent different ways of responding to violence and trauma, I believe that they should nevertheless be read in conjunction. The "apple in my cheek" sequence begins innocently enough. The teenage Wanda (the younger experiencing-I), her sisters, mother, and father were getting ready to go out for their Sunday walk, a family tradition. The father, as Hagedorn says, hit her in the face for no apparent reason. The panel shows Wanda with her head turned slightly to the side. Her father, with extended hand, is standing in front of her. The onomatopoetic "smack" can be seen next to them (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 224). In the following pages, the father disappears, and the reader/viewer focuses on Wanda and her perspective. In the three panels placed in a vertical sequence on the next

page, Wanda can be seen going to her room – her cheek is glowing red and she is trying to come to terms with what happened. In the corresponding caption, she says that her father has never before hit her, or her sisters, in the face "without emotions, effectively, with satisfaction, and some irrational hatred" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 225). Distressed and upset, she nevertheless realises that she must "break free" of this event, she must "distance" herself from it (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 225). She realises that she is the object of violence but refuses to define herself as a victim. It is only after this realisation that the reader/viewer is presented with the actual "apple in my cheek" sequence on the following two pages. The same event, that is, the act of being hit and the aftermath of the attack, is repeated, in effect retold, in the form of a pictorial allegory on the following two pages.

On page 226, a full-page panel shows the moment of the attack. However, instead of hitting Wanda, who has in the meanwhile transformed into a giant black insect with only her face and her arms still distinguishably human, her father is now throwing red apples at her. This is a reference to Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (made clear earlier in the text): Wanda is Gregor and her father is Mr Samsa. Similar to Kafka's short story, the father attacks his offspring because of hatred and disgust. It should be noted that in this scene, Wanda is both represented as and associates herself with the insect – something revolting and pitiful, as if displaying the vision of her father. The attack has degraded and humiliated her, and this emotion is conveyed through the image of the insect. On page 227 (Figure 11.5), the reader/viewer can see that one of the apples has hit Wanda in the cheek and got stuck (in Kafka's story, Gregor was hit in the back and eventually died because he could not extract the apple). Instead of giving in to abuse and internalising it by allowing the apple to stay in her cheek, Wanda literally pulls it out of her body and thus distances herself from violence. She also turns back into her human self in the process.

While, as has been pointed out before, "a form of violence is intrinsic to the very act of representation" (Noys 2013, p. 12), the pictorial allegory of the apple is a conscious revisioning of that idea. The act of violence is neither hidden nor omitted – it is represented, but the focus shifts, showing how Wanda manages to overcome it. By transforming back into a human and extracting the apple from her cheek, she refuses to give in to her father's, as she puts it, "misogyny under the guise of being a strict parent" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 228). The act of repetition, in the form of pictorial allegory, is a retelling of the real attack, and also points to the complex connection between repetition and trauma in terms of Freudian reenactment. However, and this appears to be a crucial difference, this repetition is not compulsory but voluntary. Hagedorn has not confined herself to, as Roger Luckhurst (2008, p. 9) puts it, "cycles of uncomprehending repetition" but has managed to achieve the "healthy analytic process of 'working through.' "

Figure 11.5 © Wanda Hagedorn and Jacek Frąś, *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*, Wydawnictwo Komiksowe and Kultura Gniewu, 2017, p. 227

Hagedorn engages with her traumatic past again in the epilogue, which directly follows the "apple in my cheek" sequence in the structure of the memoir. This time the pictorial allegory shows a dream sequence: Wanda, in her own words documented in the caption, "is sitting on a stool, like a defendant, in a clinic in which some illegal procedures must be carried out" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 230). Shocked, she realises that the surgeon is holding in his hand the severed head of her father. While she does not mention it explicitly in her commentary, her mother is also in the room, sitting quietly in the corner (Figure 11.6). Before I relate what happens in the following panel (this is a two-panel sequence which extends over two pages; the reader/viewer has to turn the page in order to see the next panel), let us concentrate on this powerful visual.

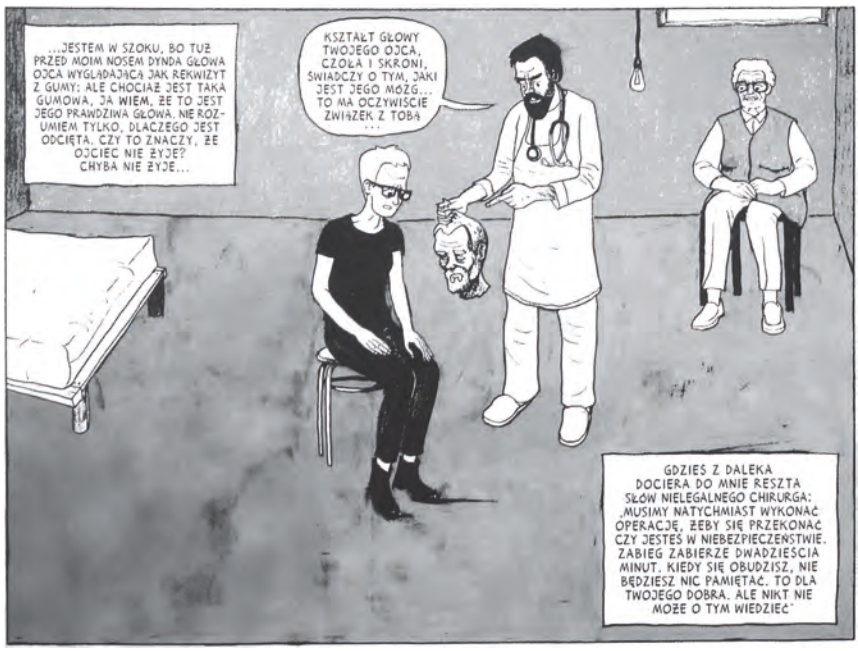

Figure 11.6 © Wanda Hagedorn and Jacek Frąś, *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*, Wydawnictwo Komiksowe and Kultura Gniewu, 2017, p. 230

At first sight, this image seems to be a pictorial allegory of "killing the father." In Freudian psychology, and usually in relation to the father–son relationship, patricide is seen as an expression of the Oedipus complex. This is not the case for Hagedorn. In the image, her avatar appears to be caught between the act of "killing the oppressor" (her abusive father) and distancing herself from the abuse. She witnesses a violent (and cathartic?) act, but her body language, the manner in which she is sitting on the stool, suggests that she is far from inflicting violence on others. She almost looks as if she is sorry for the father. Similar to the first sequence, "the ethics of the image" is respected. The severed head almost functions as an index, as defined in Pierce's semiotic theory (1960, pp. 51–52), which is associated with its referent – a violent act that is nevertheless not explicitly represented. Concurrently, this image appears to be a retelling of the "running away from the father and chasing after the mother" panel (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 49) (Figure 11.3). The paradoxical combination of violence and emotional coldness is still there, but this time everyone is static. While stasis does not necessarily represent acceptance, Hagedorn does not have to run either away from or after her parents.

The second panel in the sequence (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 231) further engages with the problem of "working through" trauma (Luckhurst 2008, p. 9). The doctor informs Wanda that she has to undergo a surgery on her brain in order to save her life. It will take 20 minutes and as a result, she will not remember anything. In the second panel, Wanda is lying on the operating table and the surgeon is operating on her brain. He does not have good news: "You have a toxic plague in your head that is killing you. I'm afraid nothing can be done." The nurse confirms that "[t]he situation is very bad" (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, p. 231). In *Resisting Representation*, Elaine Scarry (1994, p. 3) argues that "the problematically abstract" and "the problematically concrete" are the most difficult to express. "In both instances," Scarry (1994, p. 3) writes, "what is overtly at issue is the knowability of the world, and that knowability depends on its susceptibility to representation." Both "the problematically abstract" and "the problematically concrete" clash in this panel. Trauma is represented as a physical condition that requires surgical intervention. And while the operation is difficult, it may eventually help. The image does not surrender in the face of trauma; an effective pictorial allegory is employed.

Hillary Chute comments on this unique feature of comics, pointing out that comic art "pushes on conceptions of the unrepresentable (…) that have become commonplace in discourse about trauma" (2016, p. 17). Hagedorn appears to be doing exactly that. She "refuses to scratch [herself] out. [R]efuses to be censored, to be silent" (Zambreno 2012, p. 291). She engages in the feminist practice of making the personal political, demonstrating the power of female vision in comics.

Conclusion

While feminism was an alien concept to Hagedorn, who, growing up in communist Poland, was constantly exposed to the state and Church propaganda of patriarchy and misogyny, she nevertheless managed to escape from that environment, both metaphorically, by criticising the relations in her own family, and literally, by emigrating to Australia. It was in the "mental" and "civilisational" West that she was first exposed to feminist literature, mostly in English, which allowed her to revisit her past. This unique transnational perspective, in which her feminist consciousness was not so much triggered but identified and strengthened by her contact with feminist theory and the graphic memoir tradition, especially the works of Zambreno and Bechdel, then gave rise to the structure of her work. Suspended between the East and the West, her "self [is] formed both in and against various communities of others" (Griffiths 2003, p. 138). By engaging with and visualising her body, her fears, and her traumas, in a responsible and ethical manner, she works through her problematic past. She is her own heroine.

Notes

1 The fact that the memoir was not drawn by Hagedorn herself complicates the discussion on the role played by the images. Hagedorn cannot draw, but she has a sound background in visual arts. She studied film directing at the Film School in Łódź and has made short movies (Hagedorn and Frąś 2017, pp. 148–149). The collaboration between Hagedorn and Frąś was indeed a dynamic one, as evidenced by extracts from their, sometimes heated, email exchange concerning the visuals that are included on the inside front and back covers of the book. While Frąś's contribution is of great importance, it is the power of female vision that lies at the heart of the memoir. In one interview, Hagedorn states that: "Gdy Jacek [Frąś] chciał zaproponował coś innego, ja bardzo okrutnie mu przypominałam, że to jest mój memuar (…). [C]zuwałam nad osiągnięciem zintegrowanego przekazu – nie mogłam pozwolić, żeby nasze wizje były zupełnie inne. Nie chciałam żeby mój memuar był interpretacją Jacka, więc filtrowałam wszystkie kadry i rysunki przez moją retrospektywną i współczesną percepcję" [When Jacek [Frąś] wanted to suggest something else, I cruelly reminded him that this was my memoir (...). I wished to arrive at a comprehensive message – I could not allow for our visions to be completely different. I didn't want my memoir to be Jacek's interpretation, so I filtered all the frames and drawings through my retrospective and contemporary perception] (Latos 2017). Hagedorn also observes that initially she wished to work with a female artist, which, for a number of reasons, was not possible at the time (Latos 2017). Her newest memoir, entitled *Twarz, Brzuch, Głowa* [*Face, Belly, Head*], was illustrated by the female artist Ola Szmida. Hagedorn observes in *Twarz, Brzuch, Głowa* that when she began the works on her first memoir in 2014, she had to fight to make sure that it was her story that was recounted in both words and images, and not somebody else's (Hagedorn and Szmida 2021, pp. 187–189). Hagedorn further comments on the dynamics of working with a male artist, referring to Rebecca Solnit's book *Men Explain Things to Me and Other Essays* (2014). She quotes Solnit who says that, "billions of women must be out there on this seven-billion-person planet being told that they are not reliable witnesses to their own lives" (after Hagedorn and Szmida 2021, p. 189). Thus, she asserts that her memoir presents her vision.

2 Throughout the chapter, I use the artist's last name (Hagedorn) to refer to her creator role (narrating-I) and her first name (Wanda) to refer to her in-comic role (experiencing-I).

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12 Staring back at history

Varvara Pomidor and Russian comics

José Alaniz

Introduction

With the 21st-century rise of Putinism, with its patriarchal and heteronormative views of gender, a viable new Russian comics industry finally emerged more than two decades after the fall of communism. Respectable sales, scores of comics shops, large-scale inclusion in mainstream bookstores, critical success, conventions, and academic conferences – they all date to no earlier than the third Putin administration.[1]

In the 2010s, adult-oriented alternative comics, including non-fiction, memoir, and (auto)biography, helped change the popular perception of graphic narrative in Russia to something like its acceptance and appreciation in Europe, the US, and Asia. Women proved key players on the leading edge of this vibrant new movement. In particular, a resolutely post-Soviet generation of female comics artists, unaffected by their predecessors' discomfort with the medium as "bourgeois trash," injected a vital new strain of social justice activism and political resistance into Russian comics culture. Their works focus on the marginalised and socioeconomically dispossessed of Putin's Russia: Immigrants, sex workers, rape victims, the disabled, the chronically ill, and LGBTQ+ people, among others. They have also galvanised popular interest in comic art through new modes of distribution: Public exhibitions, workshops, lectures, international collaborations, social media, and the internet. In so doing, they continue to redefine the possibilities for comics in Russia, demonstrating the form's potency as an expressive medium for demanding and visualising social change.

Members of the younger generation of Russian women comics artists, like Olga Lavrenteva,[2] Yulia Nikitina (aka Ner-Tamin), Kamilla Mamedova (aka Kameelah), Masha Foot, Yulia Tar, and Katya Dorokhina have built on the work of figures who were breaking ground as early as the 1990s. These include Lena Uzhinova[3] and Viktoria Lomasko.[4] Despite sharing a gender, these artists of course vary in their conception both of comics and of feminism itself. And, as is not uncommonly the case for women in the post-Soviet era, some of them flat-out reject identity labels.

This chapter aims to show, through close reading of one work by a member of this cohort, how contemporary comics by Russian women confront a less-than-benign Russian past – one that often refuses to stay past.

Varvara Pomidor's *Pravda* and late Soviet history

St. Petersburg's Varvara Pomidor (Varvara Vladimirovna Karkhalyova, b. 1975) graduated from the Nikolai Roerich Art Institute and studied at the Leningrad Vera Mukhina Higher School of Art and Design (later renamed the Saint Petersburg Stieglitz State Academy of Art and Design). She also studied printmaking and photography at the Georg Simon Ohm Fachhochschule in Nuremberg, Germany, and later served as art director of the design studio Mediamama. From book illustration and design,[5] Pomidor eventually turned to comics. Her work is characterised by a whimsical, childlike but at the same time disconcertingly adult sensibility; her at times elliptical stories (which often star anthropomorphised animals) tend to touch on questions beyond the personal, to tragedy and historical trauma.

As one unnamed critic evocatively described Pomidor's work:

> Her characters – deranged [*rasteryannye*] little girls that seem to be smarting from someone's insults; shaggy little dogs; evil-looking rabbits; and autistic wolves – would speak for themselves just fine without the intermediary of text. Varvara's sad-eyed kids, somehow recalling Nara Yoshitomo's shifty surrealist little girls – though less freakish and more grounded in human psychology – can provoke no shortage of emotions with one look of their big dark eyes, with the way they like children puff out the prominence along their upper lips *(tuberculum labii superioris)*, but also how, like grown-ups, they turn down the corners of their mouths (making "marionette lines").
>
> (*Afisha* n.d.)

Another described her work, perhaps with some condescension, this way:

> She doesn't seem to care about conveying any grand sense of scale. And her little pictures certainly don't. Simplistic, laconic, in two to three colors, compact in their plots and in their style, one could easily imagine them in a little girl's diary, a gift album or a comic book.
>
> (Iordanov 2008, n.p.)

In a move not uncommon for a Russian artist, Pomidor entered comics-making through a circuitous route. After graduation, she took up the creation of graphic series, the distinguishing feature of which were their long titles, made up of randomly selected quotes from literary works by different authors or from her own incidental notes. At some point, she started including the quotes within the visual array of the works themselves.[6] In this

manner, Pomidor came to make what she insistently called drawn stories (*risovannye istorii*) – not comics.[7]

Most of her early pieces were short, moody, and with ambiguous meaning, among them *My prosto ne govorili ni slova* [We Simply Didn't Say a Word] (2010); *Istoriya nomer 3* [Story No. 3] (2011); and *K okeanu* [Towards the Ocean] (2012), produced while at an arts residency in Rennes, France. Pomidor often experiments with format, blurring the line between conventional graphic narrative and fine art, as seen in her mixed media work *Russkiy les* [Russian Forest] (2012), a sort of three-dimensional comics. Her work appeared in the Swiss comics journal *Strapazin* in 2015.

Notable longer productions, mostly made in collaboration, include the dual travelogue *St. Petersburg-Bordeaux* with French artist François Ayroles (2013), made to commemorate 20 years of sister–city relations; *Mona Oulala* with Hélène Mallet (2020); and *Puteshestviya po Ermitazhu. Tsaritsa Tiul'panov* [Journeys Through the Hermitage: Queen of the Tulips] with Darya Agapova (2018), produced under the auspices of the State Hermitage Museum. The latter book earned Pomidor the Russian comics industry's Malevich award for "Best Work With Color."

In *Pravda* [Truth] (2010),[8] Pomidor combines memory fragments, politics, and collage to depict a late Soviet-era childhood. Painting directly on old pages from the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda*, Pomidor counterbalances the ordinary events of her young life and that of her relatives with the grand narrative of history. The effect is comical and at times chilling; as young Varya makes use of the family's outdoor latrine, she gazes into the newspapers (showing portraits of *apparatchiks*) that line the walls: "I froze in the dark. If you looked long and hard, you'd start to feel as if you were seeing something more than was there" (n.p.).

As Pomidor explained to me how she conceived of the piece:

> I remembered our *dacha*, where we would holiday for three consecutive months in the summer, *Ogonyok* magazine, our wooden toilet in the yard, whose interior was all wall-papered with Soviet newspapers. There it was, a place for any reading material in all eras![9] Finding myself in this very toilet in the present day, and thinking about a theme for my piece, I saw my own childhood stories atop the history of our nation, reflected in the Soviet newspapers and magazines of that time. Right there at the *dacha* I found clippings from the Soviet press. I took a few double-page spreads and started drawing, right on top of them, my own childhood recollections. That's how the story *Pravda* was born. A truth unique to everyone.
>
> (Pomidor interview, December 2015)

History that stares back at you, prompting a multilayered creative pastiche which literally enlaces one's own experiences with those of the motherland, invites a consideration of how graphic narrative evokes and articulates

the national past. For Hillary Chute, comics' verbal/visual cross-discursivity, as well as its capacity to juxtapose differing time units on the page, serve as something like an ideal medium for such public/private introspection:

> [G]raphic narrative offers compelling, diverse examples that engage with different styles, methods and modes to consider the problem of historical representation. An awareness of the limits of representation … is integrated into comics through its framed, self-conscious, bimodal form; yet it is precisely in its insistent, affective, urgent visualizing of historical circumstance that comics aspires to ethical engagement.
>
> (Chute 2008, p. 457)

At the same time, Pomidor's very personal exploration of self/nation drinks deeply of another of comics' advantages as a medium – one of its "specialties," in fact – irony.[10] And while one may argue that any contemplation of one's own distant childhood is inevitably tinged with ironic detachment (even as one might mourn its loss), the task is made even more complex in the case of the last Soviet generation,[11] brutally cut-off from its formative years by the traumatic chasm of 1991. As literary scholar Svetlana Boym, herself of this cohort, put it:

> Everyone is always a bit nostalgic for the time and space of childhood, wherever and whatever that might have been, and whether this childhood was, or could have been, happy. I feel that I am lucky I belonged to the last Soviet generation, and thus cannot be uncritically nostalgic for my beautiful childhood in a Leningrad Pioneer Camp and communal apartment, in the epoch of totalitarian decadence, in the skeptical age of late Brezhnevism. So I can only develop a genre of nostalgia mediated by irony, which combines estrangement with the longing for the familiar – in my case this happens to be a familiar collective oppression.
>
> (Boym 1994, p. 290)

I will now examine how Pomidor's ironic reflective nostalgia operates in *Pravda*.[12] The story, each of its pages made up of one large image with no gutters, begins by showing a lush green lawn by the forest, with the family *dacha* in the background. The family seem to have just arrived from the city, with a stern-looking grandmother there to meet them. A word balloon leading off-panel says, "Hi, grandma." Mother has her back to the reader, already walking off, perhaps into the forest. "Help grandma unpack the suitcases," she says, in parting. "We didn't say anything," the narrator adds, in a tailless balloon. Immediately, in this first page, a highly generative ambiguity emerges. Whose mother is Mother? Are we witnessing Pomidor's memories of visiting the *dacha* as a child (in which case, that is her own mother we see), or the present day (which means that it is Pomidor herself, giving orders to her children)? The artist's penchant for drawing short,

blocky figures with large heads makes everyone, even nominal adults, look at least a little child-like – even Grandmother, whose angry expression and position next to the *dacha* introduces another slight tension: she somewhat recalls Baba Yaga, the child-devouring witch from Russian fairy tales, and her house on chicken legs. Furthermore, who is the "we" in "We didn't say anything"? The children, presumably – but again, which children? Is it 2010 or 1980?

The next page both clarifies and further muddies the temporal waters. A caption in large letters against the green of the foliage informs: "2010. July 17. Summer. This year I turn 35. But she's only five. And grandfather has been gone ten years already." We see who, we assume, is Pomidor, looking directly at the reader, closing the door to the latrine after her. "Just a minute …" *(Ya seichas)* she says. Inside, through the crack of the open door, we catch a glimpse of the newspaper-covered wall. But once more, Pomidor's style makes things less straightforward than that text might suggest. For in her purported self-portrait, Pomidor has the proportions of a female child (including a lack of breasts). Already, I want to suggest, a slippage of both identity and time is occurring; in ways not dissimilar to Phoebe Gloeckner's haunting little girl/woman hybrids in *A Child's Life and Other Stories* (created to address child abuse, among other adult topics),[13] Pomidor is blurring the lines between present and past. The child is mother to the woman. Hence again I would ask, who is the "she" in "She's only five"? Most prosaically, the narrator means her own present-day daughter. But might not that sentence instead (or also!) be referring to a split subject: Pomidor herself as she was then, as a five-year-old? The "I" as "Other." At any rate, the connection between the page-sized panels is loose enough throughout this work that any of several interpretations could apply.

The third page pulls us in deeper: Varya/Pomidor (again, we could be looking at five-year-old Varya or 35-year-old Varvara; I will say both) on the toilet, seemingly floating against a backdrop of newspaper *apparatchik* faces – which among other things destroys any sense of privacy. The space is figurative: The newspaper, which obliterates not just the walls, but the door as well (we can see only the handle and latch) looks impossibly large – representing not just background but the diminutive Varya's point of view, no less than a sort of Sovietised subjectivity (see Figure 12.1).

Apart from the suggestively intrauterine circumstances, which "I froze in the dark" reinforces, Pomidor's statement, "If you looked long and hard, you'd start to feel as if you were seeing something more than was there," makes for an apt description of Soviet citizenship – the willing of something (a just society) that simply did not exist. In a repudiation of Benedict Anderson's imagined community (fostered by mass media like newspapers), the confrontation with communist propaganda instils not fellow feeling, but repulsion and contempt (Anderson 1991).

Furthermore, Varya/Pomidor's bathetic journey to the netherworld (after all, what this is) partakes of popular late-Soviet associations between the

Figure 12.1 © Varvara Pomidor, *Pravda,* Boomkniga, 2012

state and shit. For one thing, it was not uncommon – given the persistent shortages of consumer products – for citizens then to use publications like *Pravda* as toilet paper (and not, in many cases, without some relish). Apart from parodying children's classics like *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (ordinary object as portal to elsewhere) and the Persephone myth, Pomidor reduces the USSR to an outhouse (a portal only to the cesspit). The figure here is enhanced by the artist, who – contrary to her usually more genteel practice – actually depicts the shit, seen in its container through a cross-section of the wooden crate Varya sits on.[14]

Other pages in *Pravda* show Varya in her Young Pioneer uniform, complete with red kerchief and pin;[15] Varya coming home from school at her usual hour ("around 2pm") as her mother departs for work; Varya sleeping in a bunk bed above her grandfather, and hearing voices from the radio; Varya crying over Misha, the 1980 Moscow Olympics mascot, pulled up into the sky by helium balloons ("Goodbye, our dear Misha, go back to your fairy-tale forest"). A page in which Varya's mother knits from a ball of yarn, with the defaced word *Pravda* behind her, plays on a late-Soviet joke. Pomidor has inserted the negating prefix "ne" next to the newspaper's masthead, producing *nepravda* ("not true" or "untrue"). The "vandalised"

title recalls the punning adage: *Pravda ne izvestiya, a Izvestiya ne pravda (*"*Pravda* is not news and *News* is not true").[16]

Elsewhere, Varya makes a caustic remark on the death of Leonid Brezhnev, who had served as Soviet Premiere since the mid-1960s. Over the front page of a newspaper covering the momentous historical event, Pomidor paints the absurdly overstylised title "Overwhelming Grief," from which blue tears cascade down across the canvas, and the caption, "November 11, 1982. It's already morning, but still so dark." Underneath the dripping title, a devastated little girl (a schoolmate of Varya's) says only, "He's dead," while weeping black tears over her desk. At her feet lie dismembered dolls. This very public and exaggerated display of mourning is undercut, however, by smug Varya in the lower left, brushing her teeth with a self-satisfied expression. Next to her the text reads, "For me it was the most ordinary day" (see Figure 12.2).

This sequence in particular underscores a gendered facet of Pomidor's piece evident also in much Russian philosophy and women's prose,[17] according to literary scholar Benjamin Sutcliffe. In these traditions, *byt,* referring to the ineffable, omnipresent but nearly invisible quality of the everyday or banal, is often counterposed to *bytie* (spiritual or intellectual life). The

Figure 12.2 © Varvara Pomidor, *Pravda,* Boomkniga, 2012

two opposite values skew sharply along gender lines: "Masculine actions often involve sweeping claims to permanent change, whether through philosophical generalizations or the USSR's doomed attempt to build a Marxist utopia. The gender of *byt,* however, is feminine" (Sutcliffe 2009, p. 5).[18] The overarching, logocentric, male-centred cataclysms of history (like Brezhnev's death) flounder on the shoals of a feminine, day-in-day-out, "most ordinary" facticity of a little girl brushing her teeth.[19]

Varya suffers what to her is a far greater cataclysm in a page illustrating her outrage and bitterness at receiving an undesired boy's coat. "Look how nice it is," her mother tries to assuage her, "with a fur collar, and checkered, and warm, and it's got a strap … ." But on the bottom right, we see the mother earlier in the day, at the end of a long line of people. She asks a child, "Little boy, are you the last in line?" We are given to understand that, rather than endure the long line into the department store, where disappointment likely awaited her in the guise of the wrong size or sold-out stock, she instead buys the boy's coat for her daughter. As background, an advertisement from a Soviet magazine shows a girl with a summer dress; Pomidor's hand-lettered title "Overcoat" seems to unite with the words "for girls" from the magazine, yielding "Overcoat for girls" – what Varya wanted. The picture of the girl breaking up the two halves of the title crystallises the idealised feminine image for which Varya strives – and which the Soviet deficit economy denies her.

In the penultimate page, we see Varya staring pensively at the reader, inside the outhouse, with different semi-transparent portraits of her on the walls (including one of her on a pony), appearing as if projected over the Soviet photographs of men in suits and kids at play (see Figure 12.3). In the lower right, a tiny Varya is opening the door to the bright greenish world outside. "She calmed down," the text reads, "after taking an especially deep breath in parting." Having had her fill of memory and murk, Persephone returns on her own to the surface world.

In the final page, we see the grown-up Pomidor[20] in the background, leaving the outhouse (nothing is any longer visible through the open door, only darkness). "I'm sorry. The story went on a long time," she says. This sentence activates a highly productive pun. On the one hand, the sly Pomidor could here be commenting self-reflexively: "Sorry, reader, this story sure went on a long time!" But in addition to "story," the word she uses, *istoriya,* can also mean "history." We could therefore translate her speech balloon: "That history went on a long time." In other words, the history of the USSR, with all its infelicities and humiliations, took a long time. (And, of course, she's also simply using a euphemism to apologise for taking so long in the toilet.) But now it is over, at least for Varya/Pomidor – unlike for the millions who did not survive the era, who died from natural or unnatural causes. Given *Pravda's* insistent fluidity of identity between the different stages of life of the same person, the transition from one page to the other strongly implies that in the penultimate image our heroine opens the door

Figure 12.3 © Varvara Pomidor, *Pravda,* Boomkniga, 2012

of the outhouse as pre-pubescent Varya, but in the final page emerges as the grown-up Varvara – Soviet experience as rite of passage on the way to adulthood.

In the foreground of this last panel is the brave new post-Soviet world: We see a figure that resembles the girlish Varya, but is more likely Varvara's present-day daughter, sitting in the green bare yard in a pose which strongly recalls the paintings of Paul Gaugin. The narration bubble (if that is what it is), with the words "Mama's coming," would seem to confirm her as the daughter. She has a cocksure expression. Next to her sits what looks like a large doll or mannequin in a fancy, "girly" pink dress – the same size as the live girl – staring vacuously at the reader.[21] A speech balloon indicating off-panel dialogue obscures the doll's mouth with the words, "The land's not cheap. If you're gonna buy it, then it's for your whole life."

In other words, the young girl desires the doll, no less than her mother in her own time desired a girl's overcoat – the feminine ideal still seduces, still tantalises. Yet, this ideal seems inert, hollow: its mouth is occluded by vaguely nationalistic pronouncements about being tied to the land for life. It is uncertain who is speaking here, but it is not Pomidor, her daughter, or the doll. Could it be Pomidor's partner, the daughter's father?[22] If so, the intrusion of male speech from beyond the visual plane reinstates the *byt/*

bytie fissure, itself a reification of split masculine/feminine and personal/national values.

In our interview, Pomidor told me she feels compelled to "find the authenticity *[dostovernost']* of history, the authenticity of the past" in the face of its perpetual interpretation and reinterpretation. She explained:

> Even memoirs, even those by eyewitnesses, the fact remains that they are not written immediately after the events described. As a result, they take on the patina *[nalyot]* of the time that has since passed, of the analyses, the reflection acquired through life experience. Right now I'm interested in documents. At home in our archive I found letters written to my grandmother by a young man who served in the army right before the Second World War. In September, 1941, he should already have returned home to embrace his beloved (my grandmother) – maybe even propose to her. But he died in 1943. These letters are truly interesting, as exceedingly authentic facts, with genuine thoughts and feelings. I would like to write a story with pictures based on them.
>
> (Pomidor interview, December 2015)[23]

Though I recognise the temptation to access a higher, "authentic" history, it is difficult for me to see this as anything other than a romanticisation – or less generously, fetishisation – of the past, which will always appear more idyllic and "pure" than the messy, inadequate, endlessly absurd present.[24] Furthermore, as Hayden T. White notes (1981), there is in essence no history without interpretation, without narrative – i.e., ideologically based frameworks for organising (read: manufacturing) meaning out of raw data. *Istoriya* is no mere pun: history *already is* story. And stories, always told from particular points of view, exclude more than they include by their very nature.[25]

That said, in *Pravda* Pomidor does an extraordinary job of representing how human beings actually do relate to the past: imperfectly, in flashes, and through incessant revision. That its nostalgic reflections are fact suffused with "the patina of the time that has since passed" should only recall to us that any history worthy of the name *is alive*. The artist visualises those multidimensional aspects of the past through a sort of palimpsest, an overlaying of one's own life and worth onto the sprawling canvas of "official" reality. Given the Soviet leadership's proclivity, over seven decades, to forcefully substitute its own ideologised version of events (*bytie*) at the expense of its subjects' own perceptions (*byt*), Pomidor's work is no mean feat of recuperation.

In this story as in life, *pravda* does and does not mean "truth."

Conclusion: "I of course wanted a 'lady's' coat"

In *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*, Elisabeth El Refaie extols the influence of female comix creators on the early development of the graphic memoir, through which they gave vent to "the messy, intimate

details of their everyday lives" (El Refaie 2012, pp. 38–39). In the Russian context, *Pravda* too proves an important achievement in this regard – it in fact was one of the earlier works to put Russian comics autobiography on the map – though it treats not the physiological messiness of life (like sexual matters or abuse) but, as noted, the messiness (read: multidimensionality) of one's relationship to personal and national history.

As Pomidor explained in an interview:

> These are my childhood impressions of official events. The story about a little hooligan girl from my kindergarten, who cried when she found out about Brezhnev's death. The memories of a boy's coat that my parents bought me, since there wasn't any other kind in the shop. Mama tried to calm me down, telling me that it was actually warmer, but I of course wanted a "lady's" coat.
>
> (*Metro News* 2012)

To bring capital-H history down to earth, Pomidor makes brilliant use of what Chute calls: (1) "the necessarily non-threatening figure of the charming female child" (2010, p. 138) and (2) "the inbuilt duality of the form – its word and image cross-discursivity – to stage dialogues among versions of the self, underscoring the importance of an ongoing, unclosed project of self-representation and self-narration" (2010, p. 5).

Chute indeed seems to be describing *Pravda* itself when she writes:

> This emphasis on the child affords a conspicuous, self-reflexive methodology of representation. It is a way to visually present a tension between the narrating "I" who draws the stories and the "I" who is the child subject of them […]
>
> [T]he comics form not only presents a child protagonist and an adult narrator but also gives voice simultaneously to both perspectives, even within the space of a single panel, layering temporalities and narrative positions.
>
> (Chute 2010, p. 5)

Furthermore, one key facet of Pomidor's self-identification – her rejection of gender identity as a significant factor in her arts practice – seems no impediment to her introspective process of "interpreting her memory, her recollections, as a visual procedure" (Chute 2010, p. 5). Our "woman artist" sees no problem with her child-self "of course want[ing] a 'lady's' coat" or yearning for conventional bourgeois femininity. In fact, she might very well object to how I just described her. "I don't particularly feel that I'm a 'woman artist,'" she told me. "Or wonder what it would be like if I were a 'male artist.' I'm interested in people and their relationships with each other" (Pomidor interview, December 2015).

In a comics culture such as Russia's, one without a long history of feminist representation, works like Pomidor's *Pravda* stand out. That they may not express an explicitly feminist outlook renders their art no less complex or fascinating.

Notes

1 Alaniz, J. (forthcoming).
2 In the 2010s, Lavrenteva produced four works of long-form graphic narrative, including the biography *Survilo* (Boomkniga 2019), which tells the story of her 93-year-old grandmother Valentina, who lived through the arrest of her father; the family's exile during the 1930s Stalinist repressions; and Leningrad's horrific 900-day siege by the Germans during World War II.
3 Uzhinova was producing short autobiographical pieces in the first post-Soviet decade (See Alaniz 2010, chapter 8). In 2014, she released the controversial memoir *Moi Seks* [*My Sex*], under the pen name Alyona Kamyshevskaya. This "confessional" work stripped the veil off Soviet-era sexual mores; inadequate sex education; lack of women's hygiene products and contraceptives; and rape culture, all in the author's trademark tragicomic style.
4 Lomasko, the internationally best-known Russian comics artist (though she chafes at that label), produces startling works of reportage, documentary and graphic witness. Her 2011 debut, *Zapretnoe Iskusstvo* [*Forbidden Art*] (made in collaboration with Anton Nikolaev), dealt with the 2008–2010 trial of Andrei Erofeyev and Yury Samodurov for inciting religious discord in a 2006 exhibition, one of the great scandals of post-Soviet art. Her 2017 collection, *Other Russias*, gathers several hard-hitting short pieces such as "The Girls of Nizhny Novgorod," on modern-day prostitutes, and "Slaves of Moscow," on the plight of immigrant workers. (This book appeared in English and other European languages, but not in Russian.) In 2012, Lomasko curated the first Feminist Pencil exhibit in Moscow.
5 Pomidor's varied book illustration work includes Semyon Pivovarov's *Nauki bez skuki* [*Lessons Without the Yawns*] (LabirintUm 2012); Margarita Albedil's *Marus'kiny rasskazy: pro pechku i zhivoi ogon'* [*Marusya's Stories: The Little Stove and the Living Flame*] (MChS 2012); and the Russian translations of Norwegian children's author Rune Belsvik's *Dustefjerten: Winter from Beginning to End* (2015) and *Dustefjerten: Summer and Something Else* (2017) (both published by Samokat). She also served as designer and illustrator for the museum project "Children's Days in Petersburg," and designed the logo for the annual Boomfest Comics Festival.
6 As she told one interviewer: "To me it was interesting to juxtapose what I had written down with what I had drawn. That's precisely how, in part, I began to make comics" (Viktoriia Slepneva 2015). She told another that she saw her illustration work as an extension of the text, and that she enjoyed the unexpected meanings that emerged at the juncture of a short phrase or a small utterance and imagery (Kot Oksiumoron 2016). See also Pskovskoe Agentsvo Informatsii (2015).
7 When asked what attracts her to comics, she pointedly answered, "No, not comics – I would say the genre of drawn stories. For me this is like a film, in

which you are the screenwriter and the director, and the set decorator, and the cinematographer – all in one" (Oksiumoron).

8 It first appeared in France, at the 2010 Angoulême International Comics Festival, as part of an exhibition by Russian artists titled "Born in the USSR." Boomkniga later published it in 2012.

9 Tatyana Tolstaya's 2000 short story *Belye steny* [*White Walls*, 2007] recounts a similar situation, in which a family renovating their *dacha* finds Soviet-era (and older) newspapers used as wallpaper.

10 See Charles Hatfield's (2005, chapter 4) arguments on "ironic authenticity" in autobiographical comics.

11 An influential term coined by anthropologist Alexei Yurchak in his book *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More* (2006).

12 For Boym's description of restorative vs. reflective nostalgia, see Boym (2008, chapter 5).

13 Chute calls these and similar manifestations "hybrid subjectivities" (2010, p. 5).

14 The linkage of the USSR with shit recalls the work of a very different comics artist, Vladislav "Slava" Sysoev, whose drawings of late-Soviet life rendered it in often revolting coprophilic hues – which led to his imprisonment in the 1980s under an anti-pornography statute. See Alaniz (2006). The theme also evokes the opening to Yuri Olesha's 1927 novel *Envy,* with the hero's nemesis Babichev in the WC, as well as Vladimir Sorokin's conceptualist novel *Norma* [*The Norm*] (1983), in which all citizens must consume a daily ration of feces, and Vladimir Voinovich's dystopian novel *Moskva 2042* (1987) [*Moscow 2042*], in which excrement serves as a medium of exchange. "The Soviet Union is a shithole," all these artists are saying, to different degrees.

15 The Young Pioneers were a Soviet youth organisation.

16 *Izvestiya* (News) was another communist party publication.

17 For example, see Lyudmilla Ulitskaya's early 1990s short story *"Marta togo zhe goda"* [*March of that very year*], about a girl who experiences menarche on the same day that Stalin dies. A translation, "March, 1953," appears in *Present Imperfect: Stories by Russian Women*. Ed. Kagal and Perova. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996: 11–15.

18 As Sutcliffe elaborates further: *"Byt* is the world of the mundane made invisible by unimportance, omnipresence, and its subordination to the symbolic cosmos of *bytie*. The gap between *byt* and *bytie* reiterates the Eastern Orthodox separation of body and soul and their gendered equivalents, female and male. This dichotomy is analogous to the modernist distinction between masculine high and female mass culture" (2009, p. 8).

19 For other examples of "masculine" text in tension with "feminine" imagery in Russian comics, see Alaniz (2010, chapter 8).

20 Unequivocally grown-up this time; she has wrinkles.

21 The "girly" imagery recalls, along with the dismembered doll in the "Overwhelming Grief" sequence, Alisia Chase's observation about women's autobiographical comics dealing with childhood: "The frames are quite often filled to the brim … packed with a visual 'clutter' that can be read as symbolic shorthand for the emotional confusion that accompanied the lived experiences of the protagonists as well as their subsequent artistic narration by the creators" (2013, p. 211).

22 It could also be the grandmother, who we also know is residing at the *dacha*. Another possibility: In an unconventional rendering of dialogue, the tailless word balloon covering the doll's mouth signifies that it is speaking. In any case, Pomidor does not explicitly indicate if the voice is male or female, or where exactly it's coming from.
23 Olga Lavrenteva to some extent did in *Survilo* what Pomidor is describing. Lavrenteva based the graphic memoir both on period documents (including her great grandfather's KGB file) and on interviews with her grandmother.
24 Pomidor also told me what she considers the *wrong* way to remember the past. When I asked for her thoughts on the 2000s vogue for wearing T-shirts with the slogan "I Was Born in the USSR," she disdainfully replied: "This means nothing to me. This is just some new pop fad. The ones who wear that don't remember the USSR. It doesn't convey anything about the meaning of that history. They do it just for kicks, it's funny, a game with an old-fashioned image" (Pomidor interview 2015).
25 White goes on: "[N]arrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralise reality, that is, to identify with the social system that is the source of any morality we can imagine" (Hayden T. White 1981, p. 14). For more on the representation of history in comics, see Alaniz (2013).

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