

Fabula

Turning to look at adaptations that distance themselves from the plot of the adapted work, the negotiation between the rewritten text and the rewriting seems to acquire greater relevance, at least at first glance. In their historical survey of comic art adaptations, Baetens and Hugo Frey suggest that a traditionally 'low-brow' genre of literature such as comics, in its confrontation with canonical culture, has long been reluctant to alter the plot of the great classics or in other ways intervene with the chain of events in the source material, instead assuming a 'didactic and reverential attitude toward the literary masterpiece and the big book'.²⁷² They observe that the event of the 'graphic novel', which was positioned in the literary system precisely as a form of 'literature' – culturally, formally, and visually different from the 'lower', more popular, comic strips – has encouraged adaptations in the comics format to take greater creative liberties with the adapted material, thus establishing a new, less compliant relationship with the canon.²⁷³ If, today, the relationship between an adaptation and its source text is often more revisionary than reverential, this current artistic freedom resonates with the zeitgeist of an era famously occupied with the death of the author and postmodernist modes of rewriting, rather than with the confirmation of hypothetically 'stable' and 'ultimate' meanings in a work of art.

From intericonic homages to commentaries, from inspiration to dialogue, from parody to parasitage, the process of adaptation offers a boundless spectrum of possibilities to negotiate with the source text.

If we followed Sanders terminological distinction between ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’, the case studies gathered in this central section of the book should be seen as appropriations of a forerunner, or, in Krebs’s wording, as reimaginings. Given the radical reworkings of fabula and characters known from the source work, discussing these comics in terms of adaptations is certainly dependent upon the specific access that only prior knowledge of the forerunner provides – without that knowledge the works stand firmly on their own as independent artworks. Thus, as Krebs observes, the identification of an adaptation is governed by a certain fluidity.²⁷⁴ The question of how works such as *Bianca in persona*, *Reflets d’écume*, and *Baby Blue* can be read as adaptations of their forerunners despite the thorough changes to the plot as we know it, is a matter of interest because considerations on the connections established may enrich the understanding of the comics and bring certain features of the adapted works sharply into focus. Decoding these three works as adaptations requires the reader–receiver to actively establish parallels between hypotext and hypertext, in line with an extensive use of the term adaptation. When Krebs defines adaptation “as a process of forming connections”, which may be seen as acts of violence, or of radical updating, or anything in between or beyond’, she underlines the role and position of the spectator in this process:

Importantly, however, all such forming of connections needs to be understood as enacted by the spectator, at the point of reception, as much as (if not more so than) by the adaptor/translator/(re)writer. Thus, the connections are anything but stable entities fixed in time and place.²⁷⁵

On another note, the arts have also been influenced by the use of the term ‘adaptation’ in the natural sciences. In Bortolotti and Hutcheon’s reassessment of the process of adaptation, they move beyond the enduring question of the extent to which an adaptation is ‘faithful’ to its source. In the essay ‘On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and “Success” – Biologically’, they advance an evolutionary-developmental view on the relationship between source text and

adaptation, suggesting that ‘the “source” could be more productively viewed as the “ancestor” from which adaptations derive directly by descent; as in biological evolution, descent with change is essential’.²⁷⁶ Thus, from an ‘evo-devo’ perspective, an intermedia adaptation, too, is seen as a descendant from an ancestor which has undergone a creative, diversifying process to reappear in a new medium and survive in a different environment equipped with unprecedented resources. Bortolotti and Hutcheon’s discussion sets the infamous fidelity discourse aside, without, however, forsaking to give credit to the ‘artistic significance’, the ‘cultural impact’ or the ‘vitality’ of the adapted text.²⁷⁷

Despite her extensive use of the term adaptation, Hutcheon however also reflects on the degree to which a revisitation needs to exhibit the presence of its source of inspiration in order to be regarded as an adaptation. She concludes that even a radical reworking has to connect to the ‘story’ of the adapted work if it is to be perceived as such: ‘For an adaptation to be experienced *as an adaptation*, recognition of the story has to be possible: some copying-fidelity is needed’.²⁷⁸ A ‘recognition of the story’ is hardly limited to the act of tracing elements from the source plot in the adaptation. Awareness of the adapted work can emerge on different levels in the rewriting, and to subtle degrees; it can be expressed by revoking recognisable key figures or recovering a central motif, by imitating a style or rendering visual homage to the earlier work, as the examples will show. According to Hutcheon, ‘Sometimes homage is all that is possible – or allowed.’²⁷⁹ While in the following three case studies, the comic art creators affirm their individual voices with a highly personal use of the source text, the connections to their forerunners are still stated in paratextual information (title, foreword, interviews), through hidden or explicit quotations from the source work, through iconographic references, or by transferring themes and motifs from the adapted text to the context of the adaptation. As Patrick Catrysse has observed, where the shared features between an adaptation and its source are few and discrete, the analytic focus needs to shift ‘from the definition of an adaptation (as an end-product) to the study of the adaptation as process’.²⁸⁰ Like ‘water and steam are “similar” to

each other because one entity can be transformed into the other entity', he writes, by looking at the partial and gradual process of change that the source material has gone through in the adaptation procedure, a continuity between the two works can be perceived, although this connectedness does not involve 'fidelity' and 'equivalence', but gradual change and transformation.²⁸¹

The question of fidelity to style becomes relevant in comic art transpositions drawing on another visual source, which is the case of Crepax's works that partly derive from films. Here I will consider the short story *Bianca in persona*, an adaptation that immediately strikes the reader as a visual tribute to Bergman's *Persona* while a more attentive exploration of Crepax's script opens up for a self-referential appropriation of the film's plot. Despite the strong iconographic references to Bergman's visual language, Crepax deconstructs the Swedish cult film by featuring his own 'darlings', Bianca and Valentina, as the two female protagonists, and proceeds to unearth the autobiographical theme of the artist's crises, present also in Bergman's original work. By concentrating on the autobiographical motif as the 'icon', or the 'dominant', in the transposition, *Bianca in persona* is read here as a reflection on Crepax's own double identity, in this comic art adaptation expressed as a 'schizophrenic' trade dangling between the mission of an independent artist and the necessity of a commercial adman to earn his living.

Andersen's iconic Little Mermaid is a literary character whose mythical potential has been exploited in diverse contexts; a protean figure with a thousand lives. In *Reflets d'écume*, the Little Mermaid undergoes a revisionist treatment relocating her to a Gothic setting of conspiracies and abuse. Ange and Varanda's rewriting of *The Little Mermaid* can be read as an attempt to resist what has been termed the Disneyfication of Andersen and of the fairy tale genre in general, while the choice of anchoring the timeless tale in a specific historical context of the Inquisition ties in with recent trends in the adaptation of fairy tale material.²⁸² According to Sanders:

If fairy tale and folklore make themselves particularly available for continuous re-creation and rewriting it is partly because of their essentialist

abstraction from a specific sociohistorical or geopolitical context ... The castles, towers, villages, forests, monsters, beasts, ogres and princesses of fairy tales exist seemingly nowhere and yet everywhere in terms of applicability and relevance. But a detectable counter-movement in twentieth-century reworkings of the form can be located in the desire to tie the stories back into a social, even social-historical, context, constituting in some respects an attempt to rationalise their magic.²⁸³

Ange and Varanda's reframing of Andersen's protagonist calls for a study not only of *Reflets d'écume* in relation to Gothic literature, but also of how the medium affordances of comics serve this particular approach to the source. I unravel the tangle of genre and medium using Julia Round's exploration of the connections between comics and Gothic in conjunction with Groensteen's semiotic study of graphic narratives.²⁸⁴

I round off by examining Bim Eriksson's graphic novel *Baby Blue*, which, according to its author, is freely based on Karin Boye's dystopic novel *Kallocain* of 1940. As many aspects of the sci-fi dystopia that Boye imagined in her novel were recognised as problems relevant to the audience of the 1940s so *Baby Blue*, despite its fanciful characters and updated setting, speaks to its readers about the anxieties of the 2020s. Even though the graphic novel's plot strays far from its source, I will look at how Boye's discourse is evoked and its complexities maintained in the adaptation.

A variety of patterns are recognisable in the reorganisation of the *fabula* in these case studies. All signal their connection to a well-known forerunner, but use its material freely: Crepax pays stylistic homage to Bergman and relates the film's autobiographical content to his personal situation; Ange and Varanda use the genre conventions of the Gothic as a filter to subvert *The Little Mermaid* into a tale of terror and horror; and, while evoking the malignancy of themes and motifs in *Kallocain*, *Baby Blue* updates its futuristic scenario.

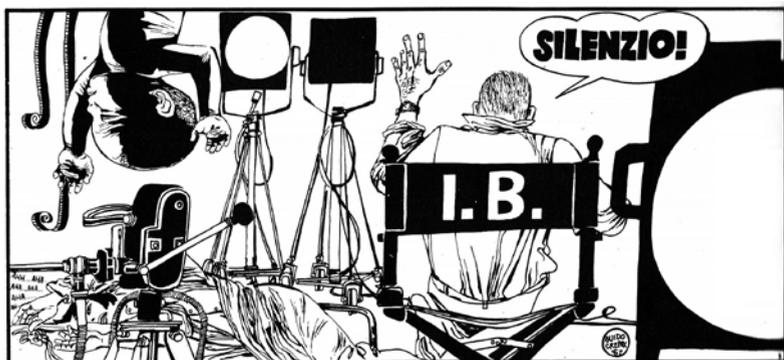


Fig. 44

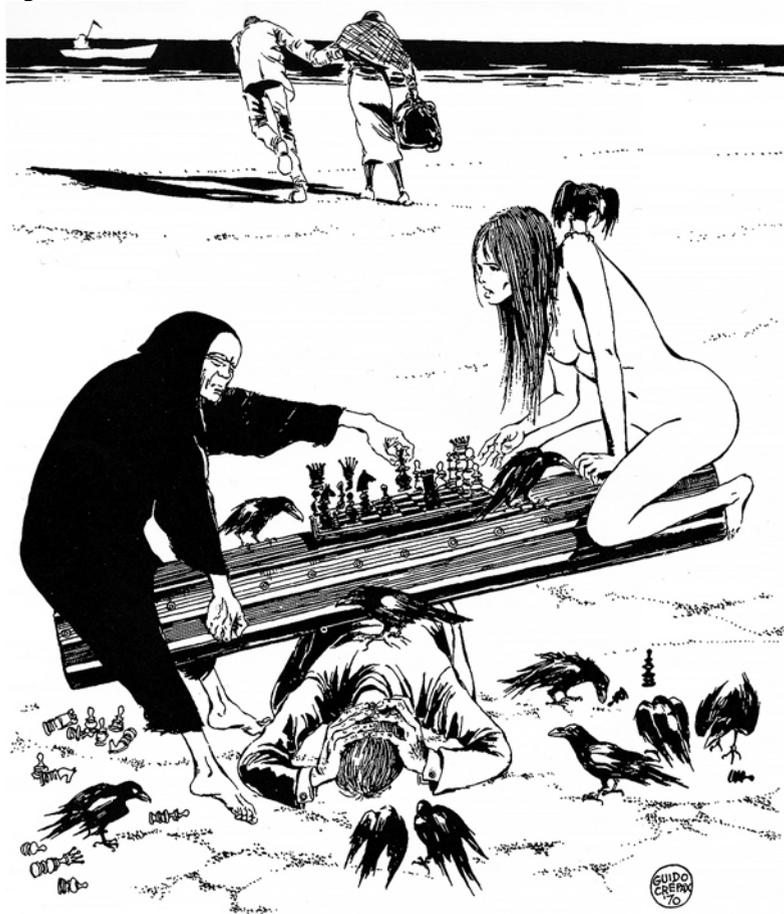


Fig. 45

Guido Crepax's *Bianca in persona*

In analysing the medium-specific features of comic art adaptation earlier, Crepax's revisitation of *The Immortal Story* was discussed. Blixen, however, was not the only Scandinavian celebrity to have crossed Crepax's drawing board. The Swedish actress Anita Ekberg was allegedly the source of inspiration for his character Anita, the heroine of the homonymous albums which appeared in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁸⁵ In addition, several other works penned by the artist testify to his fascination with Ingmar Bergman's films. Bergman himself has a brief cameo in the short graphic narrative *Funny Valentine: Tautology* (Fig. 44), while a single-panel vignette referencing *Det sjunde inseglet* (*The Seventh Seal*) of 1957 appeared in the Milanese comics magazine *Horror* in 1970.²⁸⁶ This drawing, titled *Omaggio a Ingmar Bergman* (Fig. 45), represents the Grim Reaper playing chess with one of the artist's famous female characters, Bianca, and is evidence of the special nexus between the Swedish film director and the enigmatic Bianca already at an early stage in Crepax's career. Some twenty years later this connection resulted in a short story in the comics format based on Bergman's 1966 film *Persونا* with Bianca as one of the two protagonists.²⁸⁷ The adaptation bears witness to Crepax's appreciation of the aesthetics of Bergman's artistic language, but is also an appropriation of what he took to be the film's philosophical message. With its four-page-long narration, *Bianca in persona* is even more compressed in form than *La storia immortale*, but still succeeds in creatively redistributing the autobiographical subtext of the film to make it fit the comics creator's own self-referential discourse.

In the beginning was the film

Crepax is known as an artist with a passion for cinema, as exemplified by *La storia immortale*. In 1945, as a 12-year-old, he made his debut as a comics creator by retelling in sequential drawings his mother's description of a film she had seen at the cinema the night before, Victor Fleming's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.²⁸⁸ The adaptation of film plots to comics is but one part of this interest, however. In Crepax's comic art production, the world of film is integrated in several ways, by paying

homage to favourite directors such as Fellini, Visconti, Buñuel, Eisenstein, Truffaut, Godard, Kubrick (and Bergman), or to actresses, above all Louise Brooks, who, as we have seen, has inspired the looks of the photographer Valentina Rosselli. In *La curva di Lesmo* ('The Lesmo Corner') of 1965, where Valentina made her first appearance as the protagonist of Crepax's comics, she is hired to immortalise the divas at the Venice Film Festival. In addition, as Alberto Fiz has observed, in Crepax's production the reception of films is also used as a theme, and film plots often break into the storylines of his comics.²⁸⁹ The aesthetics of storyboards and the imitation of cinematographic techniques inform the formal organisation of his pages and panels: close ups and panorama shots are alternated to set the scene, extreme close ups of faces, eyes, and mouths are used to transmit emotions. Details in the surroundings and interiors are framed and isolated in single panels as if to zoom in on their symbolic meaning. Shifts in point of view are frequent, as are changes in perspective. Crepax also makes extensive use of split-screen techniques, shattering the page into several complementary or simultaneous images of the same episode.

Bianca in persona

Like its cinematographic source of inspiration, *Bianca in persona* is a work designed to offer its audience an insight into the artistic and existential vision of its creator. It can also be said to represent a moment of truth. The adaptation replaces Bergman's two female protagonists, the mute actress Elisabet Vogler (Liv Ullman) and her nurse Alma (Bibi Andersson), with two of the characters closest to Crepax's own heart, Bianca and Valentina. In the late 1960s, Bianca, as suggested by her name, was brought into being as a symbol of pure beauty and total freedom; in Crepax's artistic universe she is eternally young and unchangeable, virtually mute, always naked, uninhibited, and unaffected by the rules and conventions of society. She has no regrets, she feels no sentimental longing and is untouched by grief. In *Bianca in persona* she is placed with Crepax's figurehead and alter ego, Valentina. Unlike Bianca, the fashion photographer Valentina Rosselli lives her life within the boundaries of society and daydreaming is her only form of escapism. She has

a name and a surname, a profession, a family, and an address – 45, Via De Amicis, Milan – she shares with her creator. She even has an ID card and, as the Valentina series continued to be published throughout the years, she was doomed to age alongside Crepax himself, whose life took an abrupt turn shortly after having confronted Bianca with Valentina in *Bianca in persona*. In the early 1990s Crepax was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a condition that would affect his work as a comics creator and his style of drawing. In retrospect, the core message of Bianca's insistent monologue, which makes up the entire verbal discourse of the short story, is almost prophetic about Crepax's own situation:

your whole existence is schizophrenic... on the one hand you sell yourself... on the other you escape into an abstract and obscure world of fantasies... everybody knows your name but nobody knows the real you... even if you have not said anything, I know that you envy my free and happy life, maybe you would not want to exist... maybe you would just want to dream.²⁹⁰

As if by design, Bianca calls attention to how artists are defined by their *oeuvre*. Her words foreground the fluid and unstable dividing line between artistic freedom and the laws of the commercial market, a dilemma which Crepax personally came up against as an artist, and projected on his alter ego, the photographer Valentina. Bianca's prediction is that the commercialisation of artistic genius will cause the artist's identity to dissolve into two distinct personalities. She also points to the flickering creative flame which results from mercification and the focus on profit: 'your fire is out, your involvement is half-hearted... you are shutting yourself away' (Fig. 46).²⁹¹

As for the 'dominant' steering the adaptation process, one theme present in the source work similarly concerns the reflection on the relationship established between the artist and his *oeuvre*, a theme heavily laden with autobiographical allusions in Bergman's film. According to a frequently quoted statement made by Bergman, *Persona* originated in a crisis which was both personal (autobiographical) and artistic, and the film that 'saved his life'.²⁹² *Persona* was his salvation while recovering



Fig. 46



Fig. 47

from pneumonia in 1965, and the film that showed him the way back to creativity after years when he had lost faith in the trade. With this autobiographical reading, Bergman's own creative crisis can be projected onto the muteness that plagues the actress Elisabet Vogler in the film; she has chosen silence to avoid playing false roles. Even if this understanding does not hold the key to the work in its entirety – *Persona* has been described as 'one of the most complex films ever made' and has lent itself to countless critical interpretations, in line with Bergman's advice that receivers 'dispose freely' of the material – the autobiographical reading of the work resonates with Crepax's own reflection on the subject of his adaptation.²⁹³ For its publication in the April issue of the magazine *Il Grifo* in 1991, Crepax added a short preface (Fig. 47) sharing his personal idea of the tug-of-war between the two female characters, the mute and the loquacious, and noted his initial concerns regarding the casting:

The role of the nurse could just as well have been taken by Bianca instead of Valentina, and the same goes for the role of the actress. In the end, I decided to cast Bianca as nurse although she almost always is the mute protagonist of her adventures. Valentina, on the other hand,

who paradoxically is the most verbal creature I have forged, became the unwaveringly mute actress. It seemed to me that this contradiction was only superficial.²⁹⁴

Form and content

Bianca and Valentina share an environment just as bare and essential as the space surrounding Alma and Elisabet in the film. The setting in *Bianca in persona* is, however, different. The sterile hospital room borrowed from Bergman's film is represented in only one panel of the adaptation, and the rest of the narrative unrolls on an island. While Bergman used Fårö, Gotland, as location for the film, Crepax chose Ponza, an island in the Mediterranean, where he had been on holiday. This connection to a personally lived experience foreshadows the motif of alienation in a familiar context, involving a sense of self-referential estrangement and questions of identity. The natural beauty of the landscape with its trees, cliffs, caves, and water is an efficient contrast to Bianca's (and Alma's) ruthless monologue.

Despite these parallels with the source work, *Bianca in persona* tells its own story. Its message cannot be found in the chain of events, which remains rudimentary and open-ended, even more so than what is the case of Bergman's film. Since Crepax reduces Bergman's wide range of narrative elements to a single, dominant theme of central importance, *Bianca in persona* discards the intricate entanglement of identities, the erotic intrigue, and the motif of leave-taking in *Persona*. The nurse's monologue is, however, as unyielding. To a greater extent than in the source work, her words are directed at the mute interlocutor and can hardly be understood as therapeutic or revelatory of her own inner life. Bianca's monologue dissects her mute adversary, making it clear that at the centre of the discourse in the adaptation is not a complex of problems proper to the speaking protagonist, but Valentina's personal dilemma:

I'm always appreciated ... nobody can criticise me ... since I've never set any rules for my behaviour, I've never crossed any lines ... you have come to a point where you want people to see you differently ... you compromise ... you accept roles that do not suit you.²⁹⁵



Fig. 48a

At stake in Crepax's adaptation is the self-referential problem of the commercialisation of art, limiting the freedom of the artist, as is also clarified in his preface. Crepax is alluding to his own double life as a convinced communist and salaried adman in the service of capitalism when he poses the following question: 'Is it possible to write "Viva Trotsky" on the window of a train compartment during a trip from Venice to Milan with one hand, while creating an ad for a perfume or a note pad with the other?'²⁹⁶ The preface ends with a subtlety which not only works as an allusion to the adaptation's exploitation of one of Crepax's own successful trademarks, Valentina's raven-black bob (which seems to have faded in the adaptation), but also to the medium-specific possibilities of photography and film, both inspiring the narration: 'Valentina has not dyed her hair – this would have been a bad offence to the commercial laws she has to obey – she is rather exposed "as a negative"'.²⁹⁷

A glance at the last page informs the reader of Crepax's fascination for the simple but strikingly appropriate stylistic choices made by the film's costume designer Max 'Mago' Goldstein, functioning as an extension to the theme of duality in *Persona*.²⁹⁸ Liv Ullman's white straw hat with its black ribbon and Bibi Andersson's black sunglasses have been transferred



Fig. 48b

to the comic art adaptation despite the women's nudity (Fig. 48a and Fig. 48b). In Crepax's composition, the legacy of Ingmar Bergman's and Sven Nykvist's eyes for structure is visible, and so is their preference for extreme close ups. The on-screen confrontation between the two protagonists is recreated in the adaptation not only by positioning the two women face to face in the monologue scene, but it is also visible in the slender 'filmstrip' dividing the second page into two halves (Fig. 49).²⁹⁹

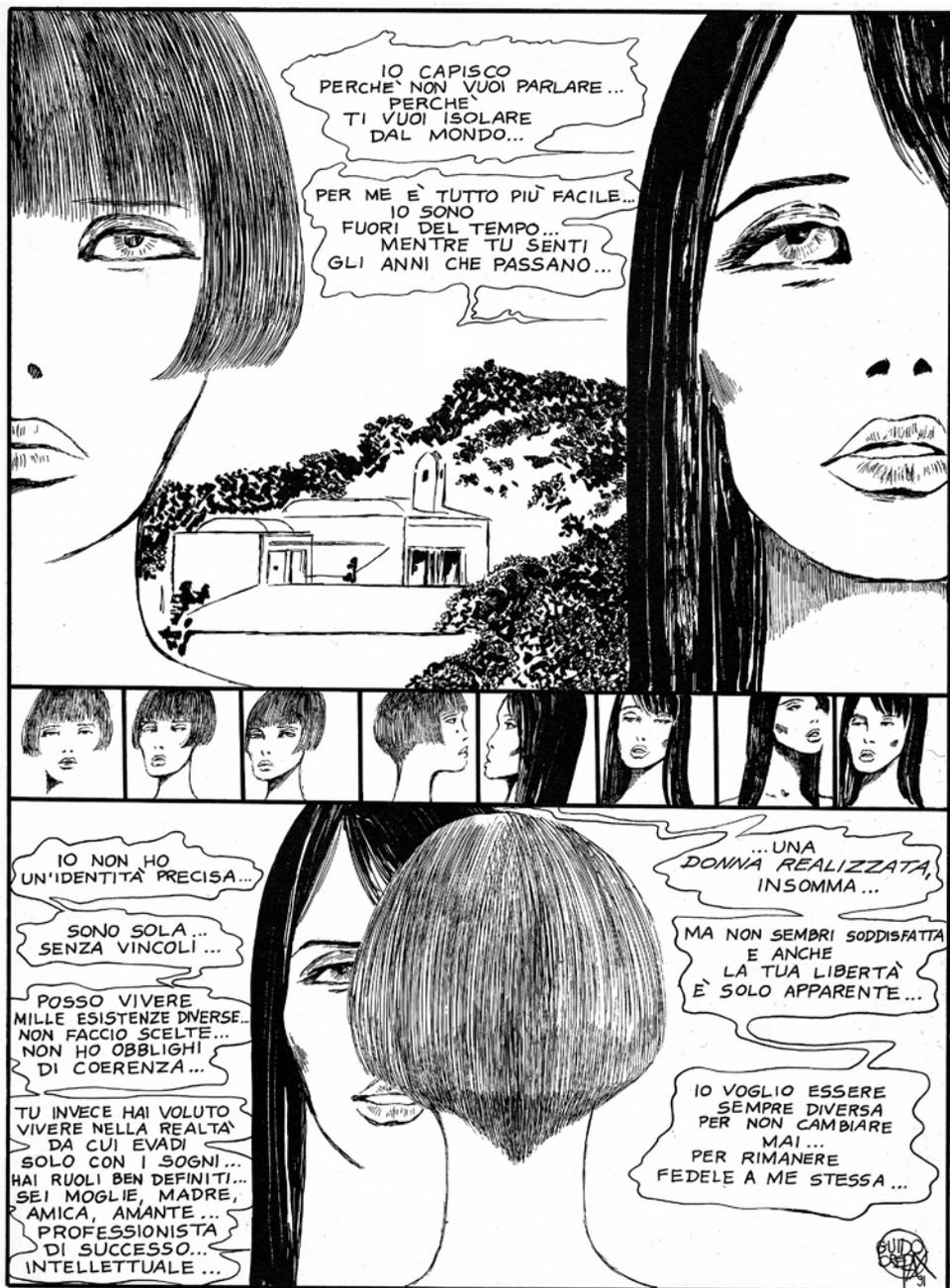


Fig. 49



Fig. 50a



Fig. 50b

Reflections

Bergman's *Persona* has also been seen as a revisitation of the theme in Federico Fellini's self-reflexive film *8 1/2* of 1963, dealing with the writer's block of a suffering film director. Around the time of the publication of *Bianca in persona*, Crepax also adapted Fellini's film to comics, titling his adaptation *Bianca in '8 1/2'*.³⁰⁰ In this transposition, Crepax himself appears in the role of protagonist, playing the part of the anguished artist who is consoled by Bianca, again acting as nurse. Despite their brevity, these two adaptations based on cinematographic sources are linked not only thematically, but also visually, as the first panel of *Bianca in persona* is replicated in *Bianca in '8 1/2'*. Both panels have been separated from the rest of the sequence by a gutter: in the former panel, Bianca is represented as one of the three Graces, a goddess of beauty and pleasure, a marble-white statue by the Mediterranean Sea; in the latter, her sculptural body is decomposed in an almost surrealistic way (Fig. 50a and Fig. 50b). Helped by these two introductory drawings, Crepax addresses the painful interdependency of artist and *oeuvre*, both as identification and slavery. Bianca's disjointed body also suggests the words used by Crepax to illustrate his fascination with characters with a double life. From his early drawings based on Fleming's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* to the mature artist's vision of Bergman's *Persona*, this proved artistically fertile, while unsettling. Crepax himself spoke of the attraction to duality as an obscure trait of his, an obsession with sequence and seriality: 'If I had not been occupied with serial drawing, I would have become a serial killer,' he claimed.³⁰¹

Ange and Alberto Varanda's *Reflets d'écume*

In the opening remarks of *H. C. Andersen og det uhyggelige* ('Andersen and the Uncanny'), a collection of essays exploring manifestations of the uncanny in Andersen's production, the editors observe that many translators of Andersen have taken great liberty with the original fairy tales, producing revisionist versions judged to be more 'suitable' for the young readership that, in their view, the author was addressing:

Translators have often taken special liberties in the translation of Andersen; because he has been considered a writer for children they have granted themselves a special license to reformulate and change his texts in order to address the readership, an audience of children speaking the target language, as flawlessly as possible.³⁰²

More often than not, the editors conclude, the international Andersen comes across as 'tamed, domesticated, and harmless', and his narrative is rendered void of any unsettling qualities.³⁰³ In Oxfeldt's analysis of cinematographic transpositions of the fairy tales, *H. C. Andersens eventyr på film* ('Andersen's Fairy Tales on Film'), it is likewise pointed out that Andersen's own efforts and personal strategies to suit his storytelling to a dual readership of both children and adults seem to have been overlooked in many adaptations for the screen.³⁰⁴

Although the bowdlerising of Andersen is also common among comic art creators, his darker fairy tales have inspired sombre alternative readings, as exemplified by AKAB's *Storia di una madre*. Here I will look at *Den lille Havfrue*, one of Andersen's best-loved tales for children, and its transformation into a Gothic narrative aimed at adult readers. Scripted by Anne and Gérard Guéro (Ange) with artwork by Alberto Varanda, *Reflets d'écume* ('Sea-foam Reflections') is a graphic novel in two volumes unveiling the fairy tale's full Gothic potential.³⁰⁵ In it we find complotting patriarchal tyrants and a protagonist, Louise D'Escandras, playing the role of both the innocent nun and the female victim; there are evil representatives of the clergy, a wicked bishop and nun in disguise, characterised by absence of reason, decency, and morality;

there are scenarios of entrapment and suffering such as hedge mazes and underground torture chambers, and a setting very far from Andersen's palace with its white marble, precious textiles, sparkling fountains, and glass dome that lets the sunshine in. In its place we have a decaying medieval castle with a candle-lit room covered in cobwebs where children are ruthlessly murdered. When showing the Little Mermaid around his residence, the Prince turns to his mute guest with these words: 'You would be surprised at the number of little boys of royal descent who have passed away in a foolish manner, suffocating on their breakfast so that a cousin, an uncle, or a brother could succeed to the throne' – a statement representative of the fact that the child-oriented message in Andersen's fairy tale is long gone.³⁰⁶

In contrast to the global tendency in the remediation of Andersen, Ange and Varanda catch hold of the author's nightside and contact that adult readership so often overlooked in the adaptation of his fairy tales. Of relevance in the transposition process is the strong emphasis on the unsettling qualities in Andersen's text, expanded and intensified to the point of being the element – the 'icon', 'dominant', or 'intentio' – that specifies *Reflets d'écume* and creates unity in the adaptation. The fabula of *Den lille Havfrue* is rewritten as Gothic horror, an interpretation enhanced in the visualisation to the point where it becomes splatter and abandons the subtleties of Andersen's own handling of terror.

The Little Mermaid's Gothic new clothes

Readings of *The Little Mermaid* have taken many directions. As Jacob Bøggild and Pernille Heegaard observe in an essay dedicated to the reception of this fairy tale, biographical knowledge has led critics to look at the text as a literary enactment of Andersen's personal traumas, while the final scene, in which the mermaid is lifted up from the abyss by the Daughters of Air, has been judged both an artistically misplaced act of compensation and an aesthetic failure, as well as an ending perfectly in line with the text's Christian message.³⁰⁷ This much-debated final scene is discarded in *Reflets d'écume* and, with it, the duality between the abyss of damnation and heavenly salvation is subverted. The Little Mermaid is instead lowered (forever, it would seem) into an uncomfortable realm,



Fig. 51

dense with less simplistic ambivalence: cross-contaminations not only of reality and fantasy, but also of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ occur as a male *ondin* appears in Volume II to blur boundaries in a way that resonates with the Gothic, ‘where monstrosity is associated with the copying, mirroring, or incursion of one gender form onto or into the other’.³⁰⁸ In the mermaid’s descent, one could argue, the text acquires a circular structure. Her return to the abyss at the end of this dark adaptation echoes the opening scene in which the newborn mermaid is lowered into the ocean, supposedly by her biological mother (Fig. 51). As Andersen’s famous opening lines are quoted in translation, the sombre hues characterising both volumes of the graphic novel turn transparent and fairy-tale blue for an instant:

Far out in the ocean the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower, and as clear as the purest glass. But it is very deep too. It goes down deeper than any anchor rope will go, and many, many steeples would have to be stacked one on top of another to reach from the bottom to the surface of the sea. It is down there that the seafolk live.³⁰⁹

This is the only direct quotation from Andersen’s original; elsewhere the reader’s knowledge of the fairy-tale plot is taken for granted or judged irrelevant for the understanding of the story. When the mermaid appears at the castle entrance as a mute, bipedal young woman, only readers of Andersen will spot the intertextual reference to the sea witch, embedded in the puzzled Prince’s question: ‘How did this happen? I will never know, I suppose. Were you mute from birth? Or has a witch stolen your tongue?’³¹⁰

The team behind *Reflets d’écume* has transposed Andersen’s tale by a shift of focus. From the underwater kingdom of the Little Mermaid where the fairy tale begins, the action is transferred to the medieval court of the Prince and to the realm of his adversary, King Lahr, and concentrates on a complex political intrigue in a society devastated by the Inquisition. In this overwriting of the fabula, the Little Mermaid saves a drunkard of a Prince, who falls overboard while spending a night on his ship with prostitutes. He then returns to the castle just in time



Fig. 52

for his own funeral, arranged by untrustworthy relatives and conspiring courtiers, celebrated in a Gothic cathedral by a vicious bishop. In a plot against the Prince, the Duchess of Valès tricks him into believing it was her niece, the novice nun Louise D'Escandras, who saved him from death by water. On discovery that Louise is carrying an heir, the bishop, now allied with King Lahr in the East, plans to kill the girl. In this plot of political intrigue, the love-struck Little Mermaid, who is found on the shore, mute and eerie, is but a ghostly presence. Being a mermaid, she is banned by the Inquisition as a demonic creature alongside witches, vampires, werewolves, and the sexually depraved, and fears for her life and mental sanity as people around her are being persecuted, tortured in the dungeons, and burned on pyres because of their inability to reveal the satanic rituals they supposedly use to evoke sea creatures. As the second volume comes to a close with the words *à suivre* (to be continued), King Lahr is planning to profit from the disorder in his rival's territory by overthrowing young Prince Louis, heir to the throne following to his father's mysterious death.³¹¹

As these ingredients reveal, horror and fear – bloodshed and violence – are the defining features of *Reflets d'écume*. This imagery of gore and rage, and appearances such as the zombie-like combatants involved in a sword fight (Fig. 52), have little to do with the instances of suspense to be found in Andersen's text. Although there are episodes in *Den lille Havfrue* incorporating elements of nightmarish atrocity, Andersen treads the line between a concrete display of these elements and the suggestion of an atmosphere of dread. In the central scene of the fairy tale, which sees the Little Mermaid approaching the witch's den in the forest, details make fear a tangible experience: skeletons; black blood spilling out of the witch's chest; snake-like creatures reaching out for the girl. But there are also obscure parts redolent of almost supernatural dread in the accounts of the witch's telepathic qualities and the irresolvability of the demonic pact:

She reached a large muddy clearing in the forest, where big fat water snakes slithered about, showing their foul yellowish bellies. In the middle of this clearing was a house built of the bones of shipwrecked men ... 'I know exactly what you want,' said the seawitch. 'It is very foolish of you, but just the same you shall have your way, for it will bring you to grief, my proud princess.' ... 'Once you have taken a human form, you can never be a mermaid again. You can never come back through the waters to your sisters, or to your father's palace. And if you do not win the love of the Prince so completely that for your sake he forgets his father and mother, cleaves to you with his every thought and his whole heart, and lets the priest join your hands in marriage, then you will win no immortal soul. If he marries someone else, your heart will break on the very next morning, and you will become foam of the sea.' ... Then she pricked herself in the chest and let her black blood splash into the caldron. Steam swirled up from it, in such ghastly shapes that anyone would have been terrified by them.³¹²

In accordance with Ann Radcliffe's reflections on the two schools of Gothic writing, Andersen's register can be said to span from uncensored horror to suggestive terror, and back again. In her posthumous essay

'On the Supernatural in Poetry', Radcliffe explained terror as a narrative mode suggesting dread and obscurity while leaving the visualisation of these categories to the imagination of the reader.³¹³ Horror, by contrast, is for Radcliffe characterised by graphic detail. Building on this distinction, an authority in Gothic scholarship such as Devendra Varma has suggestively clarified the difference between terror and horror as the gap between 'the smell of death and the stumbling against a corpse'.³¹⁴

Although *Reflets d'écume* offers no equivalent to the Little Mermaid's encounter with the witch, the examination of Andersen's juxtaposition of disturbing elements, on the one hand, and anxiety and suspense on the other, takes account of what the adaptation has no ambition to recreate. In a visual medium, a display of splatter and violence comes easily and, if compared to the instances of Gothic terror in Andersen's tale, unambiguously sprawls across the pages of the adaptation to be contemplated in detail.

A medium-specific analysis of the Gothic

Beyond a cast and setting that exploit standard Gothic tropes to create an atmosphere of horror and decay, there is the question of how the medium-affordances of comics are used to signal the Gothic overwriting of Andersen's tale. Visual strategies concerning the representation of space (both domestic and outdoors) persuasively render the sense of entrapment of the imperilled heroine Louise D'Escandras and enhance her psychodrama. The pages visualising Louise as she reveals her pregnancy (the consequence of rape) to her maid, make use of changes in perspective to create a feeling of vertigo, while heavy curtains and dark labyrinthine castle corridors represent her imprisonment.³¹⁵ In Volume II, suiting the action to the word and the word to the image, young and innocent Louise is led into a hedge maze accompanied by the ambassador's words: 'A woman should not take part in power games, but be content with her role as wife and mother ... A wise philosophy in times of trouble'.³¹⁶ The maze also articulates the Prince's descent into folly as he gets lost in its twisting pathways and in his own subjective universe, where he is the only one to catch glimpses of the mermaid.³¹⁷

While the portrayal of Louise D'Escandras resonates with the standard interpretation of the Gothic heroine as an oppressed victim, the representation of the Little Mermaid emphasises the turn towards the uncanny that the original tale takes on in this adaptation. The mermaid's presence in *Reflets d'écume* recalls and embodies the Gothic concept of haunting from several perspectives: on an intertextual level, she is the uncanny echo of Andersen's familiar fairy-tale heroine; in the narrative universe of the adaptation, she is both a repressed creature belonging to a pagan past and a revenant ghost, persecuting the Prince and causing him to have a mental and physical breakdown. Through the visualisation of water and sea foam that unexpectedly materialise to torment the characters, the grip of the past and the foreshadowing of a dreadful future is suggested, and the mermaid is reminded of who she is: an unwanted presence that has gone underwater to resurface unexpectedly. On several occasions, the panels are submerged by masses of water and the colouring changes to indicate a psychic relocation from the castle's domestic space to a supernatural underwater world.³¹⁸ When the Little Mermaid overhears a conversation and learns that the Prince will marry Louise D'Escandras, she is touched by reflections of light and transferred to a surreal abyss where anonymous voices urge her to kill the Prince (Fig. 53).³¹⁹ In addition to its function as an explicit reference to the title of the work, this recurring water detail resonates with Round's view on braiding in the context of 'graphic Gothic'. Here, Round asserts, the technique of braiding corresponds to 'a haunting, an echo of something previously existent in the story'.³²⁰

Braiding, as a form of visual alliteration through which the comics creator connects single panels or details in panels to one another, is commonly founded 'on the remarkable resurgence of an iconic motif'.³²¹ As Groensteen clarifies in his addendum to the chapter on the art of *tressage* in *Système de la bande dessinée*, connections are established *in praesentia*, when details in different panels in the single page relate, or *in absentia*, when visual parts on distant pages communicate.³²² While on a first level, braiding, like verse rhymes, is an 'embellishing' pattern of repetitions creating coherence and unity in the narrative, on a higher level it also says something about the relationship of a part of the narrative to



Fig. 53

the work in its entirety. In this latter occurrence, as already mentioned, braiding creates meaning by emphasising a certain element or by visualising how episodes, even if thematically, spatially, or chronologically distant, tie up with each other. In addition, Groensteen also suggests that instances of braiding can be hierarchically ordered, depending, for example, on the number of elements connected and their extension in the narrative.³²³ Despite the different lines of action that have brought the narration to this point, certain forms of repetition that occur in *Reflets d'écume* decoratively link the two albums to each other: the title page of *Noyade* is scattered with bloodstains, mindful of the gory battle at the end of *Naiïade*; the image of the Prince literally drowning in his madness on the following page echoes that of the mermaid in a nightmarish underwater world which introduces *Naiïade*, and tells of his obsession with the sea creature. In addition, both volumes open and close with similar settings (a seascape and a desolate shore) and with the same motif (sea foam reflections). On other occasions the artist's use of braiding instead works as a dialogue with sematic consequences. By selecting a few examples, I will look at what braiding can tell us about media affordances and how visual codes are combined with verbal

messages to help build up an eerie atmosphere and communicate the true nature of these deceitful characters.

A full moon partially obscured by clouds is a recurring element throughout the two volumes of *Reflets d'écume*. It appears on the opening page of the first volume and its presence surrealistically goes along with most scenes of the narrative.³²⁴ The moon is also framed in a panel of its own, thus inviting the reader to stop and contemplate its importance. The constant replication of the full moon accentuates the gloomy atmosphere in which the transposition is cast, and works with other elements, such as character enunciations or image combinations, to create the mood. By having one character metafictionally comment on its ghostly omnipresence – ‘but is not the full moon a pagan symbol?’ – by inserting the full-moon panel into sequences alternating the moon and the characters, as in page 32 of Volume II, where close ups of the unreliable counsellor come with the image of the moon or, on page 33, where panels representing the bishop and one of his victims are positioned in a sequence concluding with the moon, or by visualising the moon beclouded by the flapping wings of ravens, Ange and Varanda play on Gothic stereotypes.³²⁵ The same function is held by the archetypical black cat which appears intermittently throughout the work.³²⁶

Like braiding, gridding and page layout can express both function and ornamentation. In Round's analysis of the parallels between the Gothic trope of the crypt and the use of gridding in comics, she notes that both spaces host events and moments not fully revealed to readers and characters.³²⁷ Not only is the gridding black throughout both albums of *Reflets d'écume*, it is also, occasionally, smeared with blood (Fig. 53).³²⁸ The bloodstains around the panel framing a close-up of the bishop seem to foreshadow the evil deeds of which he will prove capable a few pages later.³²⁹ If the bleeding gutter hints at the bishop's devilish nature, it is made explicit as the blood extends to his speech bubbles, especially to the ones connecting his victims. The potential of the visual medium is put on display as the bishop's statement, ‘I know what shapes his [the Devil's] servants take’, is combined with his own revelatory shadow cast on the wall, visualising the true embodiment of the dark powers (Fig. 54).³³⁰



Fig. 54

A final structural interference with the Gothic in literary texts concerns the possibilities of comics to break down the page layout to represent simultaneous episodes. Where Gothic literature experiments with narrative layers, transposing the trope of the labyrinth on

a structural level by working with multiple perspectives, stories within stories, narrators introducing their own subjective worlds, dreams and nightmares, letters, manuscripts, and footnotes, comics can make use of medium-specific qualities to visualise the same complexity. On the subject of simultaneity, Round writes that ‘A Gothic structure is thus apparent in comics, as the narrative is presented in a non-linear manner where all moments co-exist on the page’.³³¹ An emblematic example taken from Volume II showcases four instalments simultaneously on a double page spread: witches being burned in public; the Prince drowning in his madness; the mermaid at little Prince Louis’s bedside; and Louise D’Escandras confronting her aunt, the Duchess of Valès.³³²

Reflections

Measured against the child-friendly revisitations and representations of the Little Mermaid, Ange and Varanda’s Gothic account comes across as a welcome counternarrative to the global trend in intermedia translations of Andersen looking to reduce the complexity of the fairy tales and sanitise the author. In *Reflets d’écume*, tropes stemming from the Gothic tradition are handled with narrative techniques specific to comics and conspire with a gruesome intrigue to create a work of horror, decay, and haunting folly. In a graphic–Gothic guise, Ange and Varanda’s mermaid succeeds in drawing out the odd and uneasy ‘adult’ Andersen, but the subtle terror proper to the adapted text is overshadowed by the repertoire of ‘graphic’ horror on display in the adaptation.

Bim Eriksson's *Baby Blue*

In its subtitle, *Roman från 2000-talet (Novel from the 21st Century)*, Karin Boye's *Kallocain* of 1940 is presented to the reader as a work of science fiction.³³³ Like many other dystopian visions of future societies, the text was also forged to articulate the author's anxieties over her current reality: the threat of rising totalitarian systems on the verge of the Second World War, and the dark side of the investigations into the human mind cultivated by depth psychology. *Kallocain*, Boye's most renowned work both in Sweden and abroad, and last literary achievement before her death in 1941, is a fictional autobiography written in the first person by the chemist Leo Kall, a citizen of the futuristic Worldstate and a prisoner of the enemy, the Universal State, as he informs the reader in

the introduction to his memoirs.³³⁴ His dual role dealing in the two extremes in the fictional world – scientific research in the service of a police state and a private, diaristic form of literary writing in a context where culture has become a crime – reveals Kall’s ‘illicit’ split personality right from the start.³³⁵

Betty Pott, the protagonist of Bim Eriksson’s graphic novel *Baby Blue*, published in 2021, is likewise an unruly citizen with a split personality in a Swedish kingdom not too far distant. In the wake of a ‘culture purge’, she revels in any censored sentimental pop music that she can get her hands on with the help of a mysterious dealer.³³⁶ In her miserable state she googles forbidden information on the internet: ‘Why don’t I fit in?’ ‘What’s wrong with me?’ ‘Is this the way life should be?’³³⁷ Like Leo Kall, her public manifestations of ‘negative’ emotions raise the authorities’ suspicions in a regime where no tragic or dark thoughts are allowed. These faux pas, of which both protagonists are guilty, set the action in motion.

In analysing *Baby Blue*, I will consider it a spin-off and parallel to *Kallocain*. This understanding of the work is grounded in Eriksson’s own comments that Boye’s novel was her loyal companion throughout the creative process. As with *Kallocain*, the artist claims in an interview with Karin Bergström, *Baby Blue* was conceived as a critical commentary on the politics and values of contemporary society, despite its futuristic setting:

Kallocain was with me throughout the process. My main inspiration was the atmosphere and the creation of a new world. Karin Boye created one of the great dystopias in literary history, before both George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. From what I’ve gathered, Boye wanted to speak about her own contemporary age, about politics and about the values of the time, and she did it in a new and unconventional way. This is exactly what I have tried to do by using our contemporary society as springboard.³³⁸

This interpretive approach to *Baby Blue* is further sustained by several rather specific features shared by the two works: both the source text and its modern revamping can be defined as ‘drug dystopias’, near-future

societies 'where pharmacology produces or reinforces a social order'; in both works a resistance movement, organised by women or, at the very least, feminine 'in spirit', defies the tyranny of the totalitarian regime; both texts present protagonists incapable of putting aside their antisocial and obsolete 'sensibility' (expressed as a longing for forbidden forms of art or shown in the spectre of their human feelings) in the name of a 'sense' dictated by a state where the individual is only a cell in a totalitarian organism, as long as it is a 'happy, healthy cell'.³³⁹

The translation of an 'atmosphere', as Eriksson asserts in the quotation above, reads as the recreation of a near-future Swedish society which Boye envisaged as characterised by the suppression of cultural expression and individual differences, censorship, whistle-blowing, interception, monitoring, and pharmacological abuse of citizens by public officials. The common problem in the set-up of these brave new worlds is represented by the split personality protagonists and an opposition movement. If these motifs can be seen as 'dominants' in the interrelationship between *Baby Blue* and its source of inspiration, as an adaptation, the graphic novel also shares the adapted text's use of the genre of dystopia to denounce contemporary social and political ills.

What to do with them?

If dehumanisation through the elimination of 'negative' personal feelings is the ultimate goal of the authoritarian states conjured up by Boye and Eriksson, the narrative function of the fictional drugs is to corroborate this part of the dystopia. Though serving the same purpose, the two drugs operate differently: Kallocaïn is a truth serum administered to extract the citizens' innermost antisocial secrets and condemn thought-crime as traitors of the regime; Magnazapin, in *Baby Blue*, is instead a therapeutic substance with effects like anaesthetics or antidepressants. It is described as a 'chemical, impermanent lobotomy', pacifying negative thoughts and eradicating existential anguish to produce docile and pleasantly euphoric citizens.³⁴⁰ As Betty Pott is suspected of crying in public after witnessing a suicide and refuses to admit that she is experiencing 'problems' – instead blaming her condition on an allergic reaction – she is shopped by a community hostess. When her manifestation

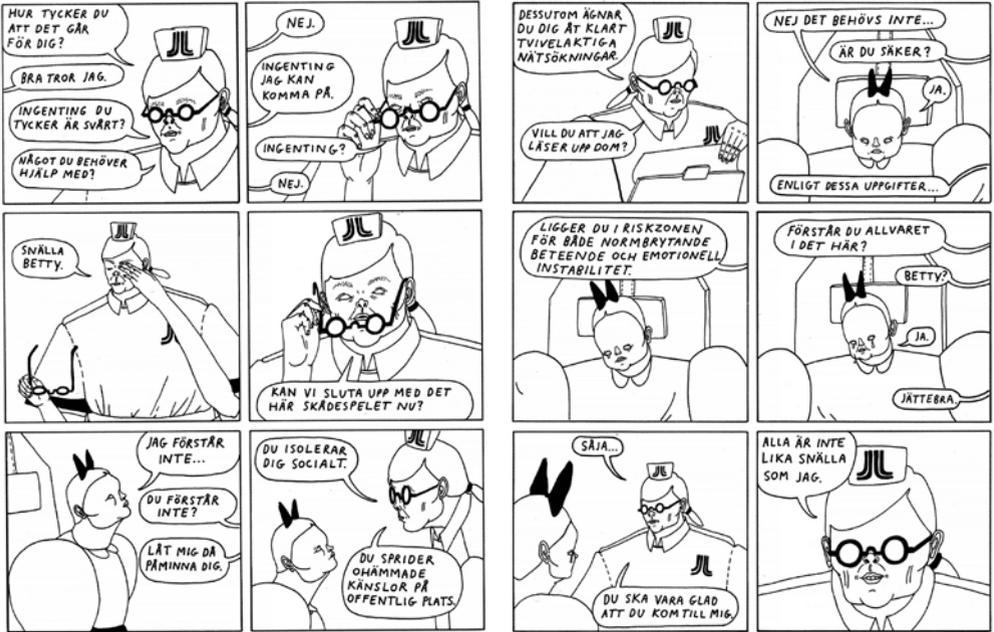


Fig. 55

of uninhibited emotion is reported to the authorities, Betty is evicted from her home and subjected to compulsory pharmacological treatment.

While Leo Kall has to justify his outburst of emotion in front of faceless administrators at the Propaganda Ministry's Seventh Bureau, Betty Pott is taken care of by frightfully cheery or methodically inquisitive nurses at the Public Health Agency. The dialogue between Betty and head nurse Solveig (Fig. 55) states her case:

'How do you think you are doing?' | 'I think I'm fine.' | 'You're not experiencing any difficulties? Anything you need help with?' || 'No. Nothing I can think of.' | 'Nothing?' | 'No.' || 'Betty, please.' || 'Can we just stop playing now?' || 'I don't understand.' | 'You do not understand? Let me just remind you.' || 'You are isolating yourself socially. You are spreading unrestrained emotions in public.' || 'You are searching for clearly dubious information on the internet. Do I need to read it out loud?' || 'Oh no, no need to.' | 'Are you sure?' | 'Yes.' | 'According to

this data ... you are in the danger zone of being accountable for both norm-breaking behaviour and emotional instability.' || 'Do you understand how serious this is? Betty?' | 'Yes.' | 'Very well.' || 'Well, then ... You've been very lucky to find a person like me.' || 'Not everyone is as nice as I am'.³⁴¹

Betty's first dialogue with the patronising nurse covers eight pages and has been designed to envelop the reader-spectator in the miasma of disbelief and defeat emanating from the protagonist. The line drawings are clean and relevant, the gridding is befittingly regular and the number of individual frames dedicated to the two partners involved in the conversation does not significantly differ. However, any first impression of equality is contradicted by how the 'reverse shot' technique is mastered as the narration proceeds. Towards the end of the sequence, the head nurse, when seen from Betty's viewpoint, occupies the whole frame and careful attention is given to her mannerisms. Betty sits motionless and seems to disappear into her big chair as she is represented top-down from Solveig's perspective, a subdued position confirmed when both women are seen together from the viewpoint of the onlooker.

When not talked down to, Betty is treated like a child by ecstatic nurses who compliment her on her beautiful name and gorgeous photo ID. After her first treatment she is given a sticking plaster designed to look like a smiley, bearing the text 'A clean mind – my duty' (Fig. 56).³⁴² The text printed on the sticking plaster, the euphemistic coinages such as *sambällsvård* (community hostess) and *kulturrensning* (culture purge), and the head nurse's jargon exemplify how the language of the graphic novel contributes to recreating an atmosphere reminiscent of Boye's Worldstate, where propaganda is modelled on the discourse of the nascent welfare state in the Sweden of the 1930s, with its accent on collective solutions instead of individual needs. In Boye's novel the emphasis is on 'purpose' and 'method', on a matter-of-fact order and discipline regulating everything from military defence to demographics, while coinages such as 'individualistic-romantic thought' and 'sentimental existence' describe the obsolete past.³⁴³ In *Baby Blue*, the prime minister's complacent wording in a television interview further ties in with



Fig. 56

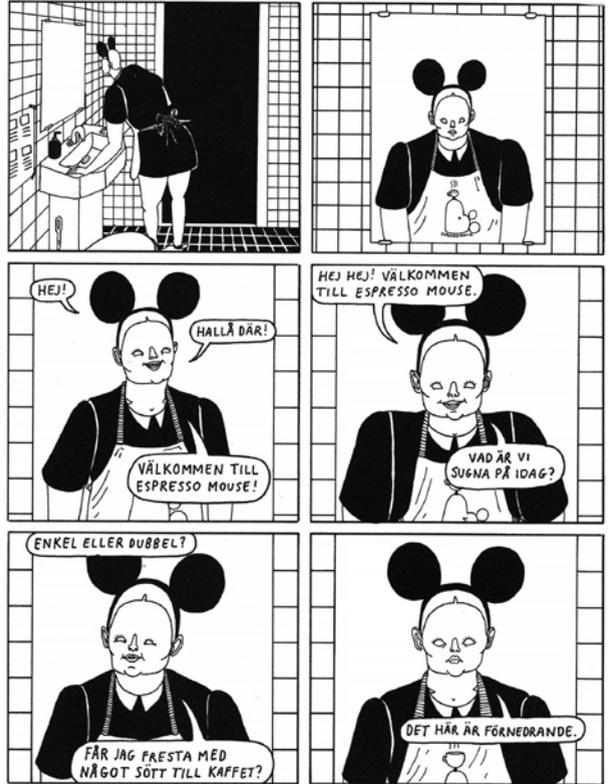


Fig. 57

Swedish interwar eugenics and racial biology. When speaking of the Swedes as the strongest nation on earth, and of majority society as a strong tree with healthy branches bearing the occasional rotten fruit, the politician's words echo the pseudo-scientific 'findings' of the racial biologist Herman Lindborg, according to whom the Nordic race, genetically superior to all races, was 'more prominent in Sweden than in other countries'.³⁴⁴

Both Leo Kall and Betty Pott are intensely aware of their own difficulties in conforming, but adopt different strategies to deal with their inner dislocations. With her Mickey Mouse-ears, Betty does her best to hide her 'splintering, dissatisfaction, and personal sentimentality under a controlled mask of happiness' (Fig. 57), an approach which is highly discouraged in *Kallocain*. Here, Leo strenuously sides with the

authorities as a defence mechanism, certain to be believed and forgiven because of the drug he has developed for the regime.³⁴⁵ Thinking back to the night when he received the warning letter from the ministry, he writes, ‘here I lay, worrying over the splintered ones, as if I myself were one of them. ... I did not wish to be splintered; as a fellow-soldier I was wholehearted, without a drop of deceit or treason. ... *Shoot the splintered ones!* would from now on be my motto.’³⁴⁶ While Kall makes it his mission to hunt down ‘the splintered ones’ and trace members of the resistance movement through his experiments with Kallocain, Betty makes friends with Berina, a rebel, during her first intravenous drip, and joins the all-female community of activists at their base in the woods.

A female justice league

The design of the font used for the title *Baby Blue* (Fig. 58), with its block letters melting away, recalls the fluid, psychedelic typography invented by pioneering poster artists in the 1960s, such as the San Francisco-based ‘Big Five’ (Rick Griffin, Alton Kelley, Victor Moscoso, Stanley Mouse, and Wes Wilson). The choice of a style of lettering tied to the hippie scene connects with Betty Pott’s love for ‘transgressive’ music and mind-altering drugs, but also to the utopian counterculture of communal living, which is promoted by the resistance movements in both *Kallocain* and *Baby Blue*.



Fig. 58

While the 'organic' sect in Boye's Worldstate is a movement of non-aggression based on blind trust between loosely connected members who occupy an underground territory of ancient wells and timidly sprouting plants, the countermovement in Eriksson's graphic novel is a collective of women encouraging free expression of suppressed feelings such as despondency, erotic want, and aggressiveness – even armed resistance. The headquarters of the resistance far out in the woods is a place to hide or not to hide, depending on one's needs, according to the leader Hazel.³⁴⁷ Dressed in boots and briefs, the rebels owe their looks partly to Wonder Woman, thus offering an alternative to Betty's girlish hair ribbon and puffed sleeves. The women in the collective share the superheroine's courage, strength, determination, and independence, though Hazel's feminist agenda is indebted to Virginia Woolf: 'A woman needs a room of her own with key and lock ... enough money to support herself ... and maybe a firearm'.³⁴⁸ Among these women Betty Pott is reborn as Baby Blue after having suffered a panic attack and accepted her mental fragility.

This all-female justice league stands as a parallel to the 'organic' sect representing an alternative way of living in *Kallockain*. Although Boye's underground movement is not exclusively made up of women and is not limited to supporting a female cause, it has been seen as an expression of a 'common feminine desire for an essence which is original and organic'.³⁴⁹ In opposition to the totalitarian state, the underground sect has no official organisation, only bonds built on mutual trust. Its members live outside the militarised community in a subterranean area with uncontaminated soil suited to agriculture, among stacks of scrolls with musical scores no one can read. Despite the obvious differences, both forms of rebellion indicate the possibility of a philosophy of life in contrast to the one imposed by the regime. The 'anti-symbol', by which the female guerrilla in *Baby Blue* recognises its members, represents the humility of accepting that the same norms and conventions cannot regulate the lives of every individual.³⁵⁰ In addition, the women's location in the verdant forest on the margins of society is a setting offering a visual alternative to the sterile hospital environment where Betty undergoes treatment. The rich vegetation occupying the entire

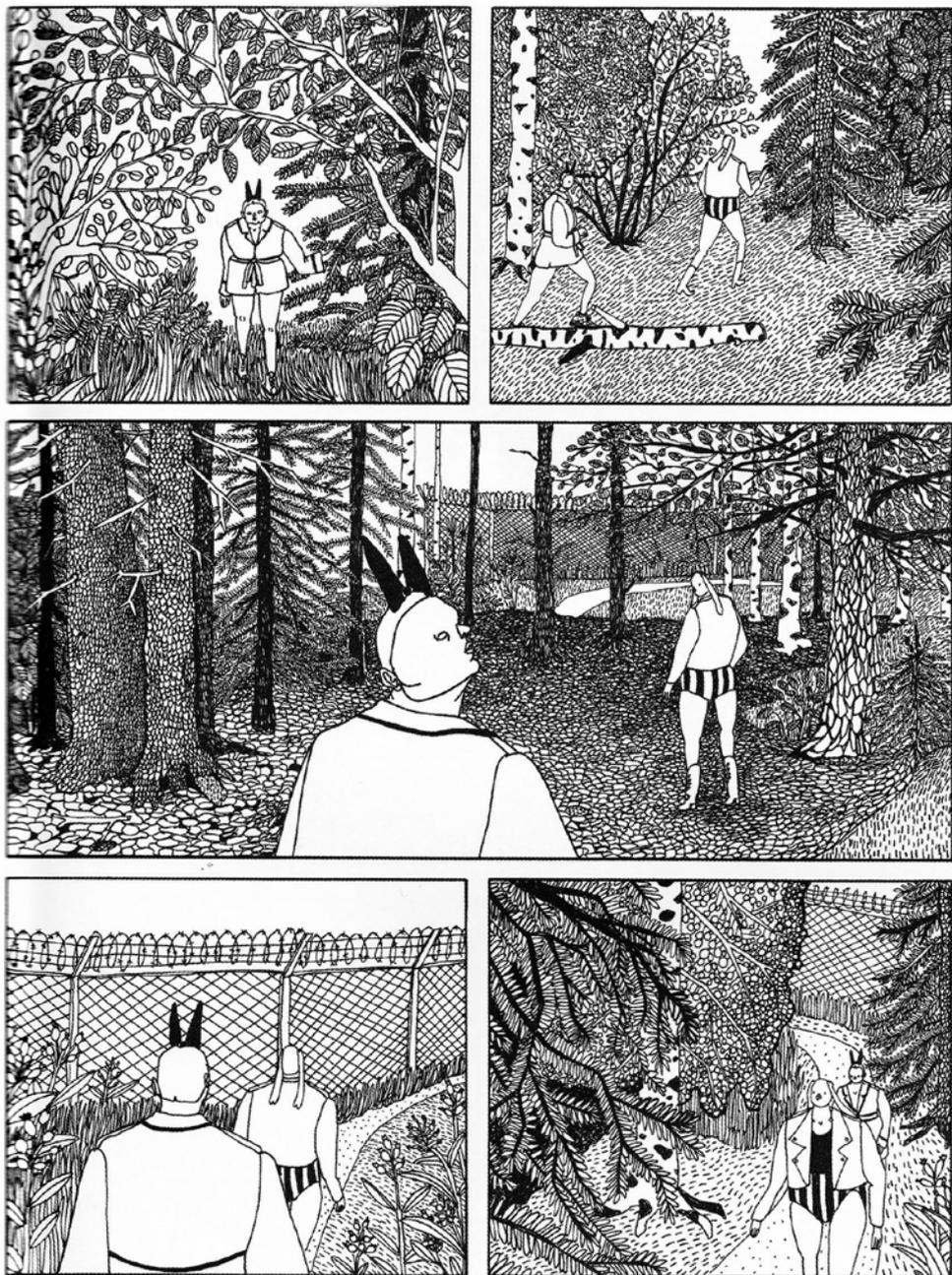


Fig. 59

space of the frames in a sort of *horror vacui* is a striking contrast to the whiteness and clean panels of the dystopian world (Fig. 59), while the vaguely medieval country house with its irregular shapes differs from the functionalist hospital architecture with its closed doors and straight corridors.³⁵¹ In this community of uncontrollable women, Betty goes from conforming to reconfiguring.

Slaves to sanity and happiness

Bim Eriksson's graphic novel has been described as a work picturing a case of *lyckofascism* (happiness fascism) and a society where the welfare state's provisions for a good life have turned into a *hälsodiktatur* (health dictatorship).³⁵² In *Baby Blue*, it is the duty of every citizen to show a rational brain in a sound body. In creating a social order where anguish is a crime, Eriksson's dystopia simultaneously references both the past and the present. Berina is quoting the Swedish idea historian Karin Johannisson when she states that 'aspects such as gender, class, culture, and societal norms have always established when a condition descends into madness and when it can be tolerated as personality trait or an intriguing individual characteristic'.³⁵³ Addressing the aesthetics of madness in relation to public mental health programmes, Johannisson's study *Den sårade divan* ('The Wounded Diva') focuses on the 'therapeutic passivation' imposed on women in the early twentieth-century Swedish welfare state.³⁵⁴ Using methods ranging from restraint to lobotomy, the madwoman in the hospital ward was acclimatised to her role as patient, Johannisson claims.³⁵⁵ She further observes that in the years 1944–5, 58 out of 65 lobotomised patients at the Seraphim Hospital in Stockholm were women, and that, according to the gendered logic of the time, lobotomy was seen to return 'bad girls' to their traditional role as 'good girls' by correcting rebellious behaviour.³⁵⁶

Reflections

The references to mental healthcare in the Swedish welfare state again connect *Baby Blue* with the backdrop of Karin Boye's novel of 1940. However, in terms of 'adapting' a message from its forerunner, more important are the parallels that both works establish with their own

age. In *Baby Blue*, details in the representation of space tell of a contemporary or near-future Stockholm, and place names, institutions, city sights, monuments, familiar foodstuffs and common everyday objects indicate that pursuing chronic happiness and universal sanity really distinguishes present-day Scandinavia, not a dystopian future. The prospering Scandinavian concepts of *mys*, *kos*, and *hygge* can also translate as oppressive positive thinking and as a feel-good cult working to suppress unpleasant emotions, while contemporary phenomena such as genetic screening and compulsory vaccine passes could be likened to the duty to stay fit which has become law in *Baby Blue*.