

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

**International Society for the Study of European Ideas**  
in cooperation with the University of Cyprus



**Unsettling Classical Ideas about Female Beauty in Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a***

***Teenage Girl: Minnie as Gabrielle d'Estrées***

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**Introduction: Re-Inventing the Passive Female Erotic Spectacle**

Phoebe Gloeckner is an American cartoonist whose graphic memoirs, *A Child's Life and Other Stories* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* were published in 1998, and 2002, respectively. Based on the combination of image and text, they narrate stories concerning the sexual development of, and the sexual abuse suffered by the protagonist, Minnie, in a period between the eighth and the sixteenth years of her life. The two memoirs largely engage with the status of the adolescent female body as a spectacle, one

that is sexualized through the heterosexual male gaze. Indeed, the female body and specifically the nude, has and continues to be, one of the most significant artistic objects. However, from the Renaissance to the mid-nineteenth century, it has been created in Western art through and by the gaze of the male artist. This paper will discuss an example of how a female artist negotiates at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century the history of the female spectacle in art through her graphic memoirs. More particularly, it will examine Gloeckner's re-appropriation of the Renaissance painting *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters*, and the construction of Minnie as a new version of Gabrielle d'Estrées. It will explain how Gloeckner reproduces patriarchal traditions of Western visual arts that created a particular ideal with regards to the beautiful female body, while simultaneously subverting them. In so doing the artist will be shown to construct a new version of masqueraded female beauty that opens up new possibilities in relation to the representation of femininity in visual arts. Lastly, this discussion will demonstrate how the particular example introduces the child protagonist and victim of sexual abuse as a survivor and a powerful phallic girl, whose beauty no longer serves the male heterosexual gaze.

Gloeckner's first graphic memoir, *A Child's Life*, concerns Minnie's early and rather premature familiarization with adult sexuality and the idea that she as a female spectacle is sexualized through the male gaze. For example, in the chapter entitled "Honni Soit Qui Mal y Pense," translated into English as "Evil to Him Who Thinks Evil of It," readers come across an incident where the male spectator gazes at a scene of intimacy between Minnie and her mother and invests it with sexual undertones, demonstrating how the male I/eye of the spectator sexualizes the mother-daughter bond.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the child protagonist, Minnie, is depicted as a victim of male sexuality, which gradually becomes abusive and readers come across very explicit sexual scenes like the one depicted in one of the panels in "Minnie's 3<sup>rd</sup> Love or: Nightmare on Polk Street," where Minnie is crying with a bottle of wine next to her

in a laundry room, kneeling next to an adult man, who forces her into sexual acts that she is unwilling to perform (73). Gloeckner's second book however, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, demonstrates a development of the protagonist from a passive victim of abusive male sexuality to an active adolescent survivor. Gloeckner will be shown to own and use the tools that created the autobiographical avatar, as an abused passive sexual object and spectacle, to visually represent her as overcoming that position and emerging as a powerful phallic girl. One of the ways in which the re-creation of the female spectacle is achieved in the memoir is through the use of parody. Ingeborg Hoestery defines parody as 'a work of literature or any other art that imitates an existent piece which is well-known to its readers, viewers, or listeners with satirical, critical, or polemical intention.'<sup>ii</sup> This is precisely the procedure followed by Gloeckner in an effort to introduce a new version of female beauty that refuses to provide voyeuristic pleasure to the heterosexual male spectator.

### **The Female Nude in Western Art from the Renaissance to the Twenty-First century: a Feminist Perspective**

To understand the importance of Gloeckner's work as an intervention in Western artistic traditions with regards to the construction of female beauty therein, it is important to explain how the nude female body became emblematic of pure, classical beauty, while it also affirmed the male gender of the ideal artist. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock explain how "the term artist ... had become equated with masculinity and masculine social roles" from the Renaissance to the mid-nineteenth century, further pointing out that women artists were not allowed to view nude models during the particular period, being therefore automatically excluded from achieving a male artist's status of greatness.<sup>iii</sup> Hence, while women were excluded from the tools and the power to construct themselves and their culture, the creation of the female body in art became a task of the male artist, who projected his own anxieties

and desires onto it. In the current turn of the century however, a shift takes place that allows women to take-up the traditionally “male” role of the artist, to voice their own experiences and to create their own bodies. Gloeckner’s use of parody will be shown to create links between the past and the present, to introduce a new form of female spectacle. As already mentioned, an example that demonstrates the emergence of this radical female artistic object is the artist’s re-appropriation of the painting *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters*, painted in 1594 and currently exhibited in the Louvre.<sup>iv</sup>

The painting (figure 1), introduces two classically beautiful, nude female bodies as constructed in male-dominated, high-artistic circles. The woman depicted on the left side is Gabrielle D'Estrées, the mistress of the French king Henry the IV, who became pregnant with his child while he was married to another woman as Katherine Crawford explains in her analysis.<sup>v</sup> Both Gabrielle and her sister are depicted without clothes, from their waists up, in the privacy of their bathroom and the latter engages in an act that alludes to the illegitimate pregnancy of the former by pinching her nipple. Annette Michelson explains that apart from indicating Gabrielle’s pregnancy, “that ostensive gesture,” is also invested with “eroticism.”<sup>vi</sup> The painting therefore, provides the (male) spectator with voyeuristic pleasure by introducing two nude female bodies as erotic spectacles.

While the identity of the original commissioner of the painting is, according to Katherine Crawford, unknown, it is important to examine its potential viewers so as to demonstrate how the female nude body is created for the always, already heterosexual male spectator from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century. Crawford explains that, “the message contained in the painting seems intended for the king, as a viewer of the image, if not the owner of it.”<sup>vii</sup>

Rebecca Zorach’s interpretation focuses on its lesbian erotic dimensions. Despite the homoerotic undertones in the depiction of the two sisters that reject the male heterosexual

partner *mise-en-scène* however, their eventual outcome is still in the service of the external male heterosexual spectator. Hence, the privacy of the bathroom and the intimacy between the two women in this painting, are penetrated by the male voyeuristic gaze.

As the Zorach points out, “for the men who depicted or wrote about lesbian encounters in the court of France, such stories are always in the eventual service of heterosexuality [and] they have the approximate status of modern lesbian pornography for men.”<sup>viii</sup> Despite its initial function as a private display for the King however, three hundred years later in the context of *fin-de-siècle* culture and artistic obsession with the female body, the painting was elevated to the status of high art as Zorach observes (199). While the reception of the painting within the space of a museum or an art gallery could differ from that of its first viewers in the court of France during the Renaissance however, it is necessary to note that the nude female body continues to serve the male gaze.

From the late nineteenth century onwards however, the two female spectacles are elevated from the status of potentially homoerotic soft-core pornography, to that of high art. The nudity and the beauty of the female body is there to provide voyeuristic pleasure and to be simultaneously appreciated by male experts who determine through their traditions what they consider as ideal femininity, constructed through the male gaze. In her discussion on the female nude in Western art, Linda Nead explains that the nude body is always already female and inscribes the artist and the spectator as always already male.<sup>ix</sup> When created and interpreted through Western patriarchal high-artistic traditions, the female body becomes therefore “clothed” with the male perspective on what female beauty is. Hence, its female essence is veiled and rendered invisible and absent. Instead, what remains visible is the male view of the female body. In John Burger’s words then, the nude emerges as “a way of seeing,” and not an essence of the spectacle.<sup>x</sup>

## **Challenging the Tradition: Carnavalesque Female Beauty and a Feminist Way of Seeing**

In Gloeckner's contemporary re-appropriation of the painting in *The Diary*, we observe an effort to emancipate the female body from the male gaze and to introduce a feminist view of the female spectacle, one that attempts to reinstate its female essence and to re-imagine an alternative beauty that challenges the dominance of the male eye/I. The illustration shown in figure 2, demonstrates an example of how the adolescent nude female body is no longer in the service of the male spectator, but of that part of the woman who surveys the self as Burger explains in his book *Ways of Seeing* (46). Minnie is alone, possibly in her bathroom, standing naked in front of a mirror, with a towel around her head and Noxzema cream on her face, pinching her own nipple and looking at herself.<sup>xi</sup> The ring held by d'Estrées in the first painting, possibly indicating her potential marriage with King Henry, decorates Minnie's neck, excluding any implications for a union with a male partner. Attention and erotic desire focus on the self through Minnie's act of auto-eroticism. The female spectacle is depicted exploring the sensuality of her own body while also appreciating its unconventional beauty. Her gaze in the mirror and her praising of her own image despite its carnivalesque dimensions ignores the male spectator and demonstrates a narcissism that refuses to provide voyeuristic pleasure. In identifying her gaze with that of readers, Minnie treats herself as an erotic spectacle. The mirroring that takes place invites readers either to identify with her in appreciating the beauty of her body while masqueraded or to reject it. However, failing to appreciate Minnie's beauty in the way that she does, is to remain restricted within patriarchal artistic discourses that create the classically beautiful female nude for the male spectator, artist, or connoisseur. Minnie's depiction has a sense of calmness and ritual which is parodied by the Noxzema cream and the towel on her head. In addition by being an active erotic spectacle, Minnie symbolically owns the phallus, the symbol of patriarchal agency and superiority over the always already castrated woman. Indeed, her auto-erotic act and the

towel on her head – a grotesque version of a crown, but also a phallic symbol – construct the abused adolescent protagonist as a powerful phallic girl and a survivor. By owning a grotesque version of the phallus in this representation, Minnie mocks its overwhelming power, which prevails in Gloeckner's first graphic memoir. Her carnivalesque beauty is one that rejects a potential sexualisation of the protagonist through the male gaze and the abuse she suffered because of her adolescent seductive beauty is no longer possible in her visual representations in *The Diary* and more particularly in the example with Minnie as a new version of Gabrielle d'Estrées.

Moving beyond the protagonist's rejection of the male gaze, the particular representation introduces further possibilities in relation to the depiction of the female spectacle in Western visual arts. Mary Russo discusses the female grotesque and explains how the exposure of a non-ideal naked female body has the potential to be threatening and dangerous for patriarchal hierarchies and ideals.<sup>xii</sup> She describes for example, her experience of seeing women openly exposing old and large female bodies, and thinking of them as having done “something wrong” (319). Moreover, she explains that the experience of being a woman is different than what has been represented in Western male-dominated art and culture (120). She introduces the carnivalesque and grotesque “speech and spectacle [as] heterogeneous, in that they contain the protocols and styles of high culture in and from a position of debasement. The masks and voices of carnival [she notes,] resist, exaggerate and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society” (325). She further suggests that:

The carnival [is] set apart from the merely oppositional and the reactive;  
carnival and carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or a counterproduction

of culture, knowledge, and pleasure. In its multivalent oppositional play, carnival refuses to surrender the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class, and in this sense, carnival can be seen above all as a site of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal (ibid.).

Russo's discussion on the carnival and the grotesque as procedures that reproduce while unsettling hierarchies contains precisely the implications behind Gloeckner's parodic re-appropriation of the Renaissance painting of Gabrielle d'Estrées. In a similar mode to Russo, Janet Wolff mentions "the devastating idea that women's bodies (particularly the nude, though not just that) cannot be portrayed other than through regimes of representation which produce them as objects for the male gaze, and as the projection of male desires."<sup>xiii</sup>

However, she also proposes that the grotesque female body has the potential of going against these regimes of representation. "What happens," she asks, "when the female body is affirmed and displayed in defiance of the ideals of the 'perfect body', acknowledging the reality of actual women, the diversities of shape and size, the functions of corporeal existence (eating, excreting, menstruation, sex, pregnancy, aging, illness)?"(ibid.). Proceeding, Wolff proposes that,

Beginning from the lived experience of women in their currently constituted bodily identities – identities which are real at the same time as being socially inscribed and discursively produced – feminist artists and cultural workers can engage in the challenging and exhilarating task of simultaneously affirming those identities, questioning their origins and



ideological functions, and working towards a non- patriarchal expression of gender and the body (424).

### **Conclusion: Adolescent Female Beauty Constructed for and by the Female I/Eye**

While re-creating Minnie's lived experience, Gloeckner's re-visioning of the *d'Estrées* painting, also creates the adolescent protagonist as mocking patriarchal ideals and rejecting the male gaze. Moreover, it introduces a new version of female beauty, as seen and perceived by a female artist and spectator, embodied in the figure of Minnie. The protagonist's carnivalesque beauty therefore, points to the possibility for the female body to be introduced as other than the object of heterosexual male gaze. Gloeckner's representations of the adolescent female spectacle demonstrate a development from the status of passive and abused sexual object, to that of an aware active survivor. While narrating the story of survival in her second graphic memoir, Gloeckner's combination of image and text also forms a radical intervention in Western artistic traditions to introduce a female artistic object and spectacle that is no longer colonized by the male gaze. The female body has been shaped and re-shaped for centuries in order to function as a locus of projection for the anxieties and desires of the male artist and spectator. Minnie's radical feminist beauty is one that speaks for and embodies the distinctly female experience of the survival through sexual abuse, offering a model for a feminist art that re-imagines the status of women in cultural visual and verbal representations, through a parodic reading of patriarchal traditions.



Figure 1. School of Fontainebleau (16th century), *Gabrielle d'Estrées and one of her Sisters*, c.1594. Oil on wood panel. Louvre, Paris.

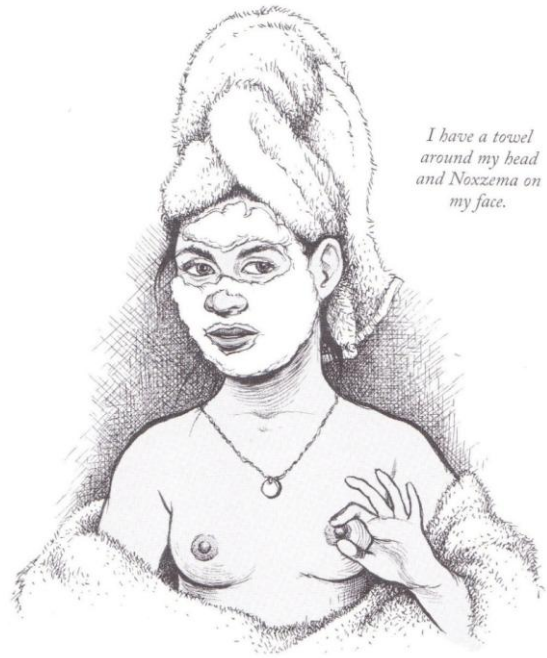


Figure 2. p. 163, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* by Phoebe Gloeckner published by Frog Books/ North Atlantic Books, copyright © 2002 Phoebe Gloeckner. Reproduced by permission of publisher.

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<sup>i</sup> Phoebe Gloeckner, *A Child's Life and Other Stories* (Berkeley, CA: Frog Books, Ltd., 1998, 2000), 22-26.

<sup>ii</sup> Ingeborg Hoesterey, "A Discourse History of Pasticcio and Pastiche," *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 13,14.

<sup>iii</sup> Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, "Painted Ladies," *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: HarperCollins, 1981), 114-116.

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- <sup>iv</sup> Annette Michelson, "On the Eve of the Future: The Reasonable Facsimile and the Philosophical Toy," *October*, Vol., 29, (Summer, 1984), 8.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/778304> Accessed, 15/10/2011.
- <sup>v</sup> Katherine B. Crawford, "Politics of Promiscuity: Masculinity and Heroic Representation at the Court of Henry IV," *French Historical Studies*, Vol.26, no. 2 (Spring 2003), 236.  
[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/french\\_historical\\_studies/v026/26.2crawford.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/french_historical_studies/v026/26.2crawford.html) Accessed, 16/10/2011.
- <sup>vi</sup> Michelson, "On the Eve of the Future," 8-10.
- <sup>vii</sup> Crawford, "Politics of Promiscuity," 234.
- <sup>viii</sup> Rebecca Zorach, "Desiring Things," *Art History*, Vol., 24, no.2 (April 2001), 209.  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8365.00260/pdf> Accessed, 20/11/2011.
- <sup>ix</sup> Linda Nead, "A Discourse on the Naked and the Nude," *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 13.
- <sup>x</sup> John Burger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 53.
- <sup>xi</sup> Phoebe Gloeckner, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* (Berkeley CA: Frog Books, Ltd., 2002). 163.
- <sup>xii</sup> Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Melinda and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 318.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics," *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed., Amelia Jones, (London: Routledge, 2003), 418.