**‘“A knife to cut your dreams up”: on Rachel Maclean’s acuteness’**

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*The most difficult performance in the world is acting naturally, isn’t it? Everything else is artful.*

Angela Carter, ‘Flesh and the Mirror’, 1979

‘Once upon a time, there was a little girl…’ We know very well how to elaborate a story from this prompt. Just picture that girl alone, walking through a dark forest: she stands for innocence itself, for all the risks inherent in being visible while menaced on all sides by the as-yet-unseen. The outcome seems inevitable—all the better to fascinate us with. This fated scenario, deeply familiar but inescapably unnerving, is the implicit point of departure for Rachel Maclean’s *upside mimi !m!m umop.* The work,a digital animation housed within a meticulously fabricated environment, was first made in 2021 for the outdoor sculpture park at Jupiter Artland. In that setting, the viewer herself follows a ‘breadcrumb’ trail of bespoke sculptural broken heart emojis through woodland before discovering, incongruously, what seems to be a derelict shop unit standing alone in a clearing. Before we even cross its threshold, we sense that we are her invited to enter an uncanny fairy-tale world—following a perilous path haunted by Hansel and Gretel, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White or Little Red Riding Hood, perhaps. This initial impression is fully borne out in the diegetic universe of the film we encounter within the shop. In its very first sequences, indeed, we meet a little girl—cuteness personified—who introduces herself from within a virtual rendering of that fabled wood. Yet it is also immediately apparent that the timeless scenography of the fairy tale is disrupted here, or displaced—most obviously to the recessionary high street and therefore to a recognisably contemporary urban scene. Maclean’s ‘mimi’*,* the protagonist of the film that loops within the decaying shop is, in every sense, from the anxieties about self-esteem that she details to her very existence as a digitally-generated image, a girl lost not so much in a mythical past as in the confusions of a fraught present. To reconstruct the work for an actual disused high street retail space, as the artist will do in the autumn of 2022, is only to deepen its synthesis of age-old fables with the disenchanted realities of our times.

In *upside mimi !m!m umop* Macleancrafts a space in which we might ourselves get lost. Experienced from the inside, it seems entirely self-sufficient and self-referential. In this, it is equally true to the dream-like logic of the fairy tale, to the labyrinthine rabbit holes and echo chambers that punctuate extremely-online existence, and to the immersive retail strategies of consumer culture. Maclean’s shop, in all its artfully constructed details—from the graffiti on its exterior walls to the interior decor and its dilapidated stock—reiterates a tightly-bound set of stylised typefaces, repeated phrases, images and forms. All these point back to mimi, whether to give voice to her thoughts, to embody her as so many decrepit boxed-toy versions of herself or to mould details of the shop’s interior after the film’s iconography. Even mimi’s speech obeys this pattern: her first-person pronoun is always ‘Mi’ and never the more abstract signifier ‘I’. Everywhere we look, and everything we hear, is ‘mi, mi, mi’—mimi ad infinitum. Through such devices, we understand that *upside mimi !m!m umop* is entirely reflective of this character and her dilemmas.

Reflection is, indeed, at the heart of the matter for mimi. She may address herself to us through the screen, in the intimate, confessional mode so ubiquitous in contemporary visual culture. But she is more preoccupied by her image as it is reflected in a hand mirror that—like the Queen’s in *Snow White*—seems possessed. While in Disney’s 1937 telling of that story the Queen addresses the mirror as her ‘slave’, here it seems to have an authority and agenda of its own. When mimi asks it the inevitable question of who is ‘the cutest in the land’, she is delighted to hear the answer ‘mi’ (though perhaps the mirror has really said ‘me’). She trills her name jubilantly in response. However, it is made patently clear that her self-regard is precariously contingent on this other’s agency—an agency markedly judgemental and punitive, in the mode of the super-ego. This is all the more evident when another, deeper-pitched call of ‘mi, mi, mi…’ is visualised as so many contaminating blemishes bursting on mimi’s youthful face. The mirror assails her with unwelcome close-up views of her resulting ‘flaws’: hair sprouting on her top lip, eyes bloodshot, snot dripping from her nose. As if that were not already manipulative enough, the mirror—voiced and characterised as male—will later grow an elongated arm with which it constrains, harasses and gropes mimi. It even administers ‘aesthetic surgery’ with cartoon exaggeration, grotesquely inflating her lips and breasts before—with the plastic grace so often afforded animated characters—she returns to her original form.

The mirror, then, is more antagonist that accomplice in mimi’s journey towards the self-acceptance and self-love that she avowedly seeks. But, eventually, the conflicts she has with her own image, and with its distorted reflection, set in motion a startling discovery about herself. Tracing that other voice calling ‘Mi’ to beneath her own skirts she—with great reluctance—confronts another, conjoined mimi. This alter ego is grey, haggard and seemingly drawn from the repertoire of classical *vanitas* imagery, and visually reminiscent, too, of the Queen’s disguise as an aged crone in *Snow White*. In the context of mimi’s anxiety, this other self reads easily enough as a projection of her psyche—the self she fears she is or will fall into being, if she fails to be perfectly cute enough. We are still, that is to say, inside mimi’s world, where everything is ‘me’. Beyond its extraordinary commitment to artifice and visual detail, the real power and the wit of *upside mimi !m!m umop* lies in the means Maclean has devised for representing the relation between mimi’s internalised and doubled selves, and the surprising narrative trajectory she plots for that relation, which breaks from the well-worn paths taken by the typical little girls of fairy tales. The artist’s iconographic and narrative inventiveness here both turn on her appropriation of a peculiar kind of real-world toy: the topsy-turvy doll.

Topsy-turvy dolls typically feature two seemingly opposed or contrasting characters joined vertically at the waist, with the join covered by a reversible skirt. To invert the doll, therefore, is to have the skirt fall down to cover whichever character now constitutes its lower half. These dolls, which have long existed in folk and commercially-produced variations, might feature, say, Cinderella as both princess and maid. In the United States, versions featuring a white doll joined to a black one were in production well into the twentieth century. And as a child, Maclean herself had a doll which flipped between Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf who, in canonical versions of the tale, eats the child and her grandmother. Ingeniously, *upside mimi !m!m umop* takes up the potential of such inversion to play with how meaning and value is made. The stylised texts Maclean uses read differently when turned upside down: ‘Help me!’ becomes ‘I’m fine’, for example, and we wonder which, if either, of these phrases rings true to mimi’s situation. The many boxes of topsy-turvy dolls that line the shop’s walls can be read either way up too, meaning that the cute and the grotesque versions of mimi have equal claims to priority. And the shop itself boasts upside-down signageand a chandelier that rises from its floor, so that the viewer herself has the impression of standing on an inverted ceiling. Within the film, meanwhile, Maclean fully exploits the capacity of animation to ignore the laws of gravity: mimi continually falls upwards, as do other objects in her cartoon universe. This, of course, allows for the two versions of mimi to oscillate and, crucially, means that any sense of hierarchy between them is rendered provisional at best: we are never sure who is, in any sense, the ‘lower’ or more fundamental of the two selves.

In utilising topsy-turviness in this way, Maclean is following in the carnivalesque tradition of ‘the world turned upside down’. Extending from actual collective festivities in Renaissance Europe to modern literary and visual tropes, the carnivalesque is a mode in which supposedly lowly cultural figures can—however temporarily—usurp the place of the ideal, powerful or privileged. In their brilliant study of this tradition, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue for the profound importance of carnivalesque practices in exposing—if not overcoming—constrictive cultural norms. In their view, ‘the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and the social formation are all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low… Cultures “think themselves” in the most immediate and affective ways through the combined symbolisms of these four hierarchies.’[[1]](#endnote-2) Against the illusory stability and ‘rightness’ of particular bodily, psychic, and social hierarchies, the carnivalesque varyingly deploys tactics of demonisation, inversion, and hybridization. These are not to be understood as innately radical or transformative of dominant values. As Stallybrass and White show, demonisation is often politically regressive (think of racist or anti-semitic projections of monstrosity onto others), while inversion can reverse binary hierarchies without actually changing their terms—a comic etching showing a rich man taking alms from a beggar does little to contest structural inequality, after all. It is when these strategies are combined that the most interesting effects can be attained. And it is *hybridisation* in particular that allows the practice of inversion to attain its critical power. On Stallybrass and White’s account, it is hybridisation which ‘produces new combinations and strange instabilities in a given semiotic system. It therefore generates the possibility of shifting *the very terms of the system itself*, by erasing and interrogating the relationships which constitute it.’[[2]](#endnote-3)

As a topsy-turvy doll, Maclean’s mimi has an internal hybridity of her own and one which simultaneously brings demonisation and inversion into play. Despite these thematic affinities, however, it is the artist’s attentiveness to the fragility of contemporary selfhood that most closely connects her with the ‘carnivalesque diaspora’ that Stallybrass and White theorise. This phrase names the historical situation in which the communal social practices that once made up carnival are increasingly fragmented, dispersed and privatised in the modern period, coming to haunt above all the individual bourgeois subject and its sense of propriety and self-possession. Such a self is propped up by its rejection of all that, in a cultural script that precedes it, is deemed base, shameful or disorderly. As such, like our fairy-tale heroine alone in the forest, it is inevitably threatened on all sides by what is projected as ‘not-me’.

To flesh out the interior world of the fantasy figure of mimi so thoroughly, then, turns out to be a way to take stock of much larger cultural predicaments. How can a self reflected everywhere ever locate herself and her limits? How can a self recognise and enjoy her own multiplicity and still cohere? In Maclean’s hands these questions are clearly feminist ones. To show idealised cuteness and fantasised ugliness to be literally joined at the hip in the psyche of a female protagonist is to ask how gendered selves are formed and deformed by assumed ideals and disavowals, by what one *must be* and what one *must never be* to be a viable subject at all.

Herein lies the brilliance of using the topsy-turvy doll for this purpose. It serves as a readymade real-world expression of how a woman is compelled, in Laura Mulvey’s phrase, to ‘construct her own sexual surface into an armour of fetishistic defence against the taboos of the feminine upon which patriarchy depends.’[[3]](#endnote-4) Through mimi’s demonised, inverted and hybrid form, Maclean suggests a way to flip this script. In a carnivalesque revolt of the lowly and the grotesque, the aged mimi emerges *from within and from below ‘*cute' mimi’s body, and at first appears monstrous to her, as per the patriarchal narrative. But to her counterpart’s surprise and ours, the older mimi refuses to embody—and the younger one finally declines to enforce—the role of phobic object. Speaking up for herself, and using the personal pronoun ‘I’ for the first time in Maclean’s film, it is the older mimi who most directly refuses *the very terms of the system* by which she and her other self are constructed through their opposition. Breaking with the antagonism for which the film seems to have destined them, the two mimis at last join forces against the mirror. In the confusion of the struggle, which flips dizzyingly between different vertical orientations, the woodcutter’s axe they have wielded falls athwart their joined bodies. Its blade seems to separate the two mimis painlessly and to their mutual relief. The older one now finally destroys the mirror: it expires in a satisfying convulsion of glitches and digital stuttering (a cue to its true nature as an animate device). Mimi then vanishes from sight, but her voice persists, to express her delight in a new-found invisibility, something her ‘cute’ self had longed for at the start of the film. This fairy tale of a little girl in a dark wood seems to have a happy ending, then, and one that runs against the grain. But what, we might well ask, is the moral of the story?

To try to answer that question, we could turn to some equally subversive stories about girls discovering themselves. Once upon a time—in 1964 to be precise—there was a little girl who had terrifying dreams. Her name was Gabrielle, but her parents affectionately called her ‘the Piggle’. In February 1964, when she was two years and four months old, they took her to see the renowned child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott and she began over two years of intermittent ‘on demand’ sessions in his care. As the published notes on the therapy set out, the Piggle’s troubles had begun with the birth of her little sister Susan. Winnicott glossed her parents’ account of the case as follows: ’It was difficult to put into words what the matter was. But *she was not herself*. In fact she refused to be herself and said so: “I’m the mummy. I’m the baby.” She was not to be addressed as herself.’[[4]](#endnote-5) The Piggle suffered night terrors in which she felt herself to be persecuted by an internal ‘black mummy’ who made her black too, and an even more enigmatic being, ‘the babacar’ about whom she turned to her helpless mother and father for explanation.[[5]](#endnote-6) Fearing that their daughter was in real psychological danger, they took her for psychoanalytic treatment. Following his trusted method, Winnicott engaged the little girl in play. His aim was to allow her to make use of various toys in his clinic—and indeed *to* *make use of him* in his role as a playmate—to work through the dilemmas and confusions personified in the black mummy and the babacar, and to allow the Piggle to find herself amidst that chaos.

The transcribed dialogue between child and therapist makes for extraordinary reading as they work out who they can be for each other in their games. Here is the Piggle instructing her therapist in their third meeting: ‘Be a Winnicott. Daddy will look after you. Will you Daddy? If I close the door Winnicott will be frightened.’[[6]](#endnote-7) And here is Winnicott, ventriloquizing or mirroring back to the Piggle a game played during their fourth consultation: ‘Winnicott is the angry Piggle and the Piggle was being the baby born using daddy instead of mummy. She was frightened of me because she knew how angry I must be, and the new baby was sucking daddy’s thumb… The black mummy is now Winnicott and he is going to send the Piggle away. He is going to put the Piggle in the wastepaper basket, like the water lily.’[[7]](#endnote-8) The question, as for mimi, is what makes up ‘me’ and what can be done with all that is ‘not-me’.

Winnicott’s conventionally Freudian analysis of the Piggle’s Oedipal anxieties about sexuality is ultimately less interesting than the mobility of identities and roles emerging in their play, and the girl’s inventive use of the space of that play to locate herself. And it is precisely in signs of the capacity to *use* external objects playfully—including toys, her parent, and her therapist—that Winnicott sees the Piggle’s psychic health returning. He observes of a game she played with her father, in which she acts out being born, that ‘somehow she managed to keep control of the situation so that she was *playing at it rather than being in it*.’[[8]](#endnote-9) Here, he notes a ‘new ability to *play at* (thus coping with) rather than *to be in* the frightening fantasy…’[[9]](#endnote-10) When, in the eight consultation, the Piggle is content for the first time to leave without tidying up the toys, Winnicott’s notes cheer her on: ‘Compare this with her previous careful tidying up and denial of muddle. Gabrielle showed growing confidence now in my ability to tolerate muddle, dirt, inside things, and incontinence and madness.’[[10]](#endnote-11) That this is not, or not only, a reflection of her increasing trust in him is made clear at the end of the analysis. Winnicott lets Gabrielle—as she is now happy to be called—know that the ‘Winnicott’ she played with was of her own invention. She is now free to internalise and use it, he assures her. ‘You can be a mender, so you don’t need me as a mender now’, Winnicott says.[[11]](#endnote-12) She concurs, asserting her own capacities: ’No, I don’t break any more. Now I break things into pieces.’[[12]](#endnote-13)

To become herself, Gabrielle must become capable of playing with, breaking, and thereby using, what she inherits from her parents and from her culture. She must come to terms with ‘inside things’ and above all with sexuality as a facet of the self. Once upon a time—1979 to be precise—exactly these struggles were given dazzling literary form by Angela Carter in *The Bloody Chamber*, her famous retellings of fairy tales such as Little Red Riding Hood. Carter’s gambit was to bring out into the open the sexual and bodily allusions of such inherited tales, and to give full expression both to the dangers girls face in the world and to their capacity to survive and accommodate danger. For instance, in ‘The Werewolf’, a dutiful daughter is dispatched to take food to her ailing grandmother. She wears a sheepskin, like a sacrificial lamb, but when she is attacked by a ravening wolf she is undaunted—she grabs her knife and cuts off its paw. When the child reaches her grandmother’s sickbed she finds her missing a hand and knows the old woman for the same wolf that tried to eat her. After the neighbours brutally stone the old woman to death, Carter tells us, ‘the child lived in her grandmother’s house; she prospered.’[[13]](#endnote-14) In ‘The Company of Wolves’, Carter again sets a young girl off on her own, where ‘the forest closed upon her like a pair of jaws.’[[14]](#endnote-15) There she meets a young huntsman, who bets her he can reach her grandmother’s house first. This he does, and true to the tale’s origins, consumes the old woman ravenously. When the girl arrives on the scene, she surmises as much, and knows she is in mortal danger. But when he tells her his big teeth are ‘all the better to eat you with’, Carter has her heroine ‘burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody’s meat.’ We leave this remarkable girl ‘sweet and sound in granny’s bed, between the paw’s of the tender wolf.’[[15]](#endnote-16) These heroines ingeniously and bravely discover their own wildness, even as they must fend off the most monstrous threats to do so.

In her history of fairy tales, Marina Warner succinctly describes Carter’s mission as threefold: ‘to expose the prerogatives of aristocrats, fathers, and other authorities, to liberate the libidos of young women from the taboos of *politesse*, to tell things how they are—and how they could be.’[[16]](#endnote-17) In this project, Warner contends, the fairy tale provides malleable imaginative resources with which ‘to probe and test the conditions of daily survival, and then imagine alternatives and redress.’[[17]](#endnote-18) Maclean’s aim in *upside mimi !m!m umop* could be compared to Carter’s I think. For both, the challenge is to locate those fragments of culture that speak doubly—both of the constricting binds of an existing patriarchal social order *and* of the capacity to grasp and break these, however provisionally, the better to use them to say, and be, something different. Like Carter’s fearless girls finding themselves in a threatening world shaped by misogyny and violence, or like the Piggle learning to trust in her capacity to break and mend, mimi is testing out how much she can reshape herself and the world that impinges on her. And Maclean, in taking up the double form of the topsy-turvy doll and the inherited format of the fairy tale as a way to acutely examine her own contemporary moment, enacts a similar capacity for creative play in an exemplary manner.

The object of Maclean’s inverting, hybridising play could even be said to be cuteness itself, that quality which mimi so desires to embody and which permeates every facet of *upside mimi !m!m umop* from its candy-coloured palette to the film’s twinkling soundtrack. In her wonderful book on contemporary aesthetics, philosopher Sianne Ngai places critical importance on cuteness as a register of contemporary hypercommodification, including the commodification of the self. The cute, she argues, is ‘an aesthetic disclosing the surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbour toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities.’[[18]](#endnote-19) In its pose of powerlessness, the cute solicits our love and care, just as mimi’s plight seems to call up a mama (of sorts) to protect her. Ngai writes that ‘the cute commodity flatteringly seems to want us and only us as its mommy … conversely, in a perfect mirroring of its desire, as if we had already put ourself in its shoes, we adoptive “guardians” seem to “choose” it. The cute commodity, for all its pathos of powerlessness, is thus capable of making surprisingly powerful demands…’[[19]](#endnote-20) Maclean sees this power in the cute perfectly well. She refuses to look down on it (as if it were beneath high art), but neither does she accept its demands as a given. Playing with cuteness, she picks it up, turns it over, makes it talk—just as she may once have done with her own topsy-turvy doll. More than that, she bring us into the interior of that world of play, asking us what we might use it for in our turn. The moral of the story is that the very devices in which we find ourselves reflected, that implore us to choose them, to *be them*, can be used differently, if we can learn to break and mend them just so.

1. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 2-3 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid., p. 58 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Laura Mulvey, ‘Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture,’ *October*, Vol. 65(Summer 1993), p. 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Donald W. Winnicott, *The Piggle: An Account of the Psychoanalytic Treatment of a Little Girl*, (Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1977), p. 13. The title of this text is taking from a letter from the Piggle to Winnicott, dictated to her parents, in which she promises to send him ‘a knife to cut your dreams up’. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. For a thorough review of this case, and a reflection on the racialised character of the ‘black mummy’ see Debra Anne Luepnitz, ‘The Name of the Piggle: Reconsidering Winnicott’s classic case in the light of some conversations with the adult ‘Gabrielle’, *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 98: 2 (2017), pp. 343-370. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Winnicott, *The Piggle*, p. 45 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Ibid., pp. 60-61 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Ibid., p. 43 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Ibid., p. 47 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Ibid., p. 105 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Ibid., p. 166 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Ibid., p. 167 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Angela Carter, ‘The Werewolf’ [1979] in Carter, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Stories*, (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 211 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Angela Carter, ‘The Company of Wolves’ [1979] in Ibid., p. 215 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Ibid., p. 220 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A short history of the fairy tale*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 156 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Ibid., p. 157 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Ibid., p. 64 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)