

The Secret Blue Book – MJ Weller,
Home'Baked Books, London, 2005

– Stephen Mooney

MJ Weller's three part *Secret Blue Book* is a work that very successfully walks the line on the pornographic issue (so to speak); it is clearly not a pornographic work in that it scrutinises, and speaks about, the pornographic gaze, and the language of porn, and is not in this sense reducible to these forms; at the same time it is equally clearly a work of undisguised pornography, utilising as it does, both pornographic content and technique to achieve a form of linguistic pornography that it uses to critique the genre itself.

Made of three distinct aspects, the work is presented as:

- 1) *The Secret (but-not-so-secret-anymore) Blue Book – some notes towards a poetics of porn* by Professor Michael J Cox, University of Hard Knockers
- 2) *The Fifth Form At St Elmo's* by Ewa Yennep
- 3) *Porno Fun* by Manka

The first is a pseudo-academic essay purporting to examine a poetics of porn, the second a raunchy tale of intrigue and sexual awakening in a fictional boarding school setting familiar from girls' comics such as *Bunty*, packed with actively 'porno' flavoured filling, and the third a pocket sized hand drawn pornographic 'sex comic', suitably entitled *Porno Fun*, which assumes a central role in the 'transgressive transformation' that befalls the protagonists in the aforementioned tale.

All in all we have sexy schoolgirls, horny housewives, aroused encyclopaedia salesmen, lesbian action, cross-dressing, voyeurism, randy teenage boys, a voracious dominatrix, homoeroticism, prostitution, exhibitionism, verbal, sado-masochism, plus '3 big studs from Hollywood' who reveal their oversized excitement at being 'looked at by you'. This, and all the male and female 'knicker-tossing' one could want, to use the effectively employed language of *Porno Fun*.

The pseudo-academic essay, *The Secret (but-not-so-secret-anymore) Blue Book – some notes towards a poetics of porn*, obviously parodies literary style in a manner that locates titillation. This is not entirely successful ... the reference to Carol Ann Duffy's poetry in such favourable terms, amongst other markedly literary strategies undertaken, for example, clearly locates the effect of the poetics essay within a particularly unchallenging, and self-congratulating, or self-propagating, sphere of academic discourse, one that bears little relation to the poetic interests of the contemporary non-traditional poetry readership this composite work is presumably aimed at, or indeed the poetics of the work itself.

In this regard, while the essay is clearly parodying forms of the academicised poetic deadening of poetry, its interactions with the languages employed in this are not entirely effectual, invoking perhaps too much of what it seeks to parody. The effect of this tends towards an isolation of the poetics essay part of the project (poetically) from the remaining, more substantial parts, and a mild feeling of dissatisfaction about this part of the work ... which given the form being parodied is not inappropriate; instead perhaps not sufficiently convincing in its remove from the form it parodies. It might be said, of course, that such a thorough remove is impossible to invoke while maintaining a parody in relation to its source, and that as such, some degree of what I have called 'dissatisfaction' is inevitable.

The demonstration of the poetics of porn being described here is exemplified best not in this poetics essay, but rather through the composite work itself, within which the essay is itself reflected and parodied, nicely emphasising the point, it should be noted, that poetry is always bigger than poetics!

There is an immediate concern throughout the three texts with the work's action, and its status as hidden language; the very title *The Secret Blue Book* refers obliquely to its own poetic operation; language in vision, sexuality as sublimated language.

There is a constant playing and replaying of the language of pornography (*Porno Fun*) in the composite poem, in its re-reading, its quotation, and the complicated narrative/non-narrative referential effect. The embeddedness of the *Porno Fun* comic trope

within the narrative, and within a non-narrative structuring of the composite poem poetically (and linguistically) privilege the operation of the language of pornography that so concerns the poetics of this work. *Porno Fun* functions as a representation, within the poetics of the piece, of pornographic language, and its operation. It is the titillation of the characters, and their sexualisation, and present in the self-perpetuation, and pervasiveness of the imagery as function. This is examined to some degree in the pseudo-academic essay that functions curiously pornographically itself, with the fetishism of language it strategically overemphasises.

Chapters 10, 28, & 31 of *The Fifth Form At St Elmo's* are particularly effective in their explicit staging of *Porno Fun* as language, profiling as they do the dialogue-as-presence of the pornographic comic:

The fifth picture was the one that got Johnnie going everytime. It had the woman laying nude on the bed, legs open, her bush of pubic hairs drawn in rich detail, saying to herself *Think I'll have a look at the boys' cocks in this Porno Fun mag*. By the bed was a copy of *Porno Fun*. Johnnie liked the idea of a magazine featured in a magazine with the same title. A neat touch.
(*The Fifth Form At St Elmo's*, page 125, ch 28)

Throughout the book, the presence, and language, of *Porno Fun* is evident, even without the direct references to the comic that are so effective in manifesting its transformational efficacy.

The porno omnipotent eye/I is represented not so much by the narrator in any (or all) of the three texts, but rather by the knowing figure of the school caretaker Mr Barnes in *The Fifth Form At St Elmo's*, whose presence filters the setting, action, and characterisation through a particularly sexualised older male gaze, one that is both constitutive in the construction of particular sexualities that the work engages with, and receptively re-formed by those constitutions.

This constitutive action in the formation of particular narrative and visual 'sexualities' is central to the examination the text undertakes into the operation of the language of pornography.

The secret cabinet that so tantalises the new chaplain at St Elmo's, as it does the all-relating caretaker Barnes, can be seen to represent the hidden *Secret Blue Book* that is concerned with this hidden language of *Porno Fun*:

In the wall of the secret room, another, much smaller panel opened the secret cabinet. Barnes was certain he was the only school employee who knew about it. Its perfume he inhaled, and Barnes was transported to his youth and his own love affairs with beautiful women who had passed through the school as girls. The odour came from Barnes' found and collected objects. The cabinet itself was the perfume's fixative capturing the scent's notes. Barnes was the chemist of a mysteriously preserved and original *odor di femina*.
(*TFFASE*, page 40, ch 8)

Whilst reading *The Secret Blue Book* I came across a particular track on my iPod that burrowed its way into my consciousness again and again in relation to Weller's text, inevitably finding its way into the 'repeat one' function. Whilst perhaps coincidental (in the nature of these things), this track assumed a place in my mind similar to that occupied by Weller's text. In its insistence on that status, and its access of a certain teenage realisation of sexuality it appeals to my sense of the hidden operation of pornographic language:

*I see boys romancin', and dancin'
Trying to snatch some of my candy
when they get Down
Down
Down
Down*

'Candy' (Radio Edit) by Rocket Men

The lyrics (limited as they are to this refrain), and female vocals concerned combine with a synthesised early house feel in the music to invoke precisely the sunny, plasticized sense of the pornographic, for this listener/reader, that Weller's text so thoroughly engages with, and specifically the construction of female sexuality that this project very successfully caresses/spotlights.

Weller's use of sophisticated erosive textual action nicely complicates the operation of the poetic language, and subtly emphasises the operation of the hidden language of porn it interacts with. For example, his use of textual cliché can be cleverly misleading, as in the phrase

Over the months the girls had smuggled in an eider-down for the purpose of holding midnight feasts
(*TFFASE*, page 12, ch 3)

How exactly does one smuggle the *one* eider-down into a room over a period of months? The implication is of a validation of clichéd terminology as it overcomes literal meaning, and suggestive of the power of repetition in language games, particularly here in the hidden language of pornography.

Likewise with the weaving through the text of the teenage investigator motif;

'It is unfair to make unfounded accusations. But it looks jolly suspicious.'
A case for the four Marys?'
'I think so, Cotter, yes' said Mary Radleigh [;]
(*TFFASE*, page 69, ch 16)

the translation of the narrative motif upon the subversive, yet conspicuously used porno-language familiarises and fetishises the latter. As with the repetition of the fetishised embroidery of the school initials ('S' and 'E') throughout, there is a translation of visual pornographic technique into the poetics of the work. The representation of the pornographic, particularly in relation to the construction of the relationship of a male sexuality to the female, is noticeable for its lack of the undiluted male aggression directed towards the female in sex that pervades so much of heterosexual (and to a lesser degree, bisexual) visual porn:

"Oh...Oh...Oh...Oh...Oh...just a...few more..(pant)..seconds inside me if you can manage..(pant)...them before you...come...Oh..."
(*Porno Fun*, page 13)

This spoken as it is, via speech bubble, by the horny housewife to the intervening encyclopaedia salesman suggests, in the numerous episodes in which it appears within the composite work, rather than a violence of sexuality, a female complicity in the language of pornography, and in the construction of male heterosexual sexuality, and somewhat challenges the normally aggressive and forceful aspect of visual pornography. The submissive portrayal of women in straight pornography, even in scenarios where the woman is ostensibly 'on top' (inevitably reinforcing patriarchal power-relationships, rather than challenging them), is examined in the interaction of the parts of this work, particularly the construction of particular sexualities, both male and female, and especially as related to the gaze.

They can chuckle, Barnes thought. He knew who the graffiti artist was – they all ended up driven to it – but Barnes was keeping mum.
(*TFFASE*, page 8, ch 2)

This three-part text, as mentioned, is not so much expounding a poetics of porn itself, as a successfully articulate poetics of the pornographic gaze, and that alongside an equal articulation in the poetics of the hidden language of porn, a much more interesting, and tricky endeavour. Sticky too.

Weller's reading of extracts from the SBB recently at the Opened night in The Foundry in London (March 6th) was in all senses of the phrase 'a sight to behold' – hopefully you didn't miss it!

Stephen Mooney