

Guys and Dolls

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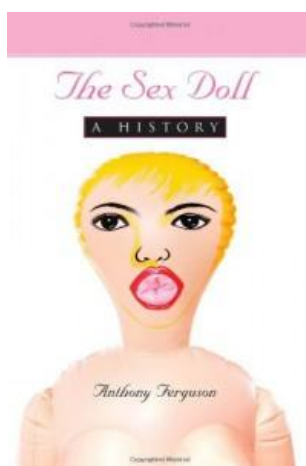
The doll has become a figure for the objectification of women, especially in the form of the sex doll, which is routinely taken to be the image of the women reduced to a condition of pure passivity. All the things it seems necessary to say about sex dolls are said in a paragraph near the beginning of Anthony Ferguson's *The Sex Doll: A History*:

the female sex doll represents woman in her most objectified form. The female sex doll is man's ultimate sexually idealized woman. It is never more than the sum, of its fully functional parts. A woman rendered harmless, it is immobile, compliant, and perhaps most importantly, silent... Perhaps the real function of the sex doll is to provide a simulacrum – a representation, an image, a semblance (of reality), a phantom, or a sham. The sex doll offers verisimilitude, the appearance of truth. The aim of the image is to displace reality. The evidence suggests that there are those who would prefer a simulacrum to living flesh, just as there are those who seek mute subjugation in the sexual partner. (Ferguson 2010, 5)

And that, said John, is that. We can count on this kind of thing being said reliably, soothingly, over and over. Have no fear: nothing I can possibly manage to say is likely to make any difference to this. We might put this down to inertia, just idol-indolence. But I have a feeling that it represents something much more positive than that. I think it may be an active and determined effort to avoid acknowledging or perhaps even noticing anything about the sex doll that refuses this model of male-active-aggressive-alive set against female-passive-objectified. Men should not treat women, or even want to treat women, as purely compliant objects. But I think that uninteresting moral sentiment (uninteresting because so obviously right and compelling) has much less to do with the sexual force of dolls than is usually thought.

There has been a long preoccupation with the idea of the female doll or android ('gynoid') who comes to life, or who possesses a mimic life that it is impossible to distinguish from the real thing. There is, of course, the myth of Pygmalion, of which the most familiar narrative is that in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 10.243, which seems to have exerted a particular fascination from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, when engineers and imagineering writers began to think sustainedly about automata and animated human figures. Not all of these figures were female: the statue in Condillac's thought experiment, endowed progressively with different senses, seems to be male, and the animated statue of the Commendatore in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* most definitely is. But many of the androids and automata that proliferated from the nineteenth century onwards are female. Examples include the animated doll Olimpia in E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman'. Particular attention seemed to be focussed on the creation of speaking automata, like the model Euphonia displayed by a Viennese inventor known only as 'Professor Faber' at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly in 1846

(Connor 2000, 354-6). Villiers de L'Isle Adam's novel, *L'Eve future* (1886) tells of the creation of a perfect female android by a fictionalised Thomas Edison, for his friend Lord Ewald, whose lover, Alice Clary is herself a kind of doll, physically perfect but unresponsive.



The face that stares out from the cover of Anthony Ferguson's book is that of the stereotypical inflatable doll. Its head is simply an oval with eyes, nose and even chin drawn in. The salient feature of the doll is its open mouth, with red lips and shyly extruding pink inner lining. Of course this is not really a face of any kind; it is something much more like a kind of defacement, like the graffiti added to the beautiful photographic model in Philip Larkin's 'Sunny Prestatyn':

Huge tits and a fissured crotch
 Were scored well in, and the space
 Between her legs held scrawls
 That set her fairly astride
 A tuberous cock and balls

Autographed *Titch Thomas*, while
 Someone had used a knife
 Or something to stab right through
 The moustached lips of her smile. (Larkin 1988, 149)

But there is another way of reading the image (perhaps it will turn out to be the same way, but in brackets). For the doll that reduces the woman to an orifice summons up its putative user as the convex to its concave, the mere plug for its pink void. Men, or 'the man', are what fill the gaps, or fit in the holes. If the doll is an inviting vacuity, a mouth that is nothing more than its availability for a penis, then in another sense the entire doll is itself no more than a grotesquely enlarged penis, its engorgement as fragile, insubstantial and ridiculous as air, the air that maintains its erectness. This is like a lewd, pantomimic version of the Deleuzian conceit, borrowed from Jakob von Uexküll, of the spider's web that contains 'a very subtle portrait of the fly' it is designed to trap (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 185). It is an image, not of the object of the man's desire, but of that desire itself, simultaneously diminished and puffed out into absurdity, the caricature-object formed from the ridiculous male need to

objectify. When Marina Warner calls the Galatea-image ‘the figure of male desire fulfilled to perfection’ (Warner 2014, 27), her formulation has within it an exquisite grammatical swivel, since the perfect woman can easily flip into the ‘perfect woman’, the grotesque effigy of what women are taken to be by men (or what women take women to be taken to be by men). The image may be *of* a woman, but what it unmistakably *shows* is male desire, objectified and made immediately recognisable and mechanically predictable. *Ecce homo*.

This, surely, accounts for the fact that sex dolls are usually so ludicrous, like so much else associated with male sexuality. The objectification of male desire in the sex doll accords with the Bergsonian logic of the comic, in reducing something free and self-determining into a fixed or merely mechanical form. When sex dolls are employed in S&M play, for example, it is as likely to be as part of rituals of female domination and male diminishment than the demonstration of male power (though this is not to say that this diminishment is not itself primarily for male ‘gratification’). But only the most downmarket kinds of sex doll are nowadays of the inflatable kind, and these will much more often be purchased as jokes than as objects of use. A company called *Last Night of Freedom* advertises a male blow-up sex doll as a novelty hen-night gift, its website promising that ‘The hen is bound to be happy with your choice of man to be her chaperone on her big night. This life size blow up male doll absolutely guarantees laughs among the girls as well as making the photos of the event that much more entertaining.’ The link between the airy and the erectile is confirmed by the specification that ‘he doesn’t say a lot though and, like most men, will require a good blow to get him going’ - <http://www.lastnightoffreedom.co.uk/hen-night-shop/novelties-&accessories/inflatable-male-doll/>. There is transgression in using an image for copulation, but here the point of that image is that it will itself be displayed *as* an image (in the wedding photos). An image that accompanies the advertisement shows a woman holding the doll facing outwards and laughing. The doll has no sex organs, though it is unlikely that there would be any gain in dignity if it did. A real man will always risk looking ridiculous with a blow-up doll, whereas with a real woman it is the doll that will look ridiculous.

Referring to Bubble Baba, the white-water rafting competition that takes place on the Vuoksi River in St. Petersburg using inflatable sex-dolls, Marina Warner laments ‘Pussy Riot, where are you?’ (Warner 2014, 27). But it is not at all clear to me who is meant to be ridiculed here. The point about an inflatable doll, made time and time again in cartoons and jokes, is that they are all the time so close to decompression. Inflatable dolls are both alarmingly fragile and also immune to assault, precisely *because* they are so fragile, so liable to come apart at the seams. They literally will not stand for being assaulted, they cannot take it. The other feature of this cover-illustration to Ferguson’s book we may notice is the strange pathos of the creases in its upper arms, which suggest that the object is less than fully inflated, this a proleptic hint of the melancholy or sniggering detumescence that is always a risk in the inflatable doll. There is a long history of the balloon and the bubble as images of the vanity of human wishes, and the inflatable sex doll is among the most telling images we have of the absurdity of male desire, made up of vapid, fit-to-bust puffery, the glory of ejaculation a breath away from bathetic flatulence. Verily, it is the man that is the blow-job.

Pussy Riot certainly have better things to protest about than sex-doll surfing, but wherever there is idolatry, or the belief in its existence, there will be iconoclasm. A Youtube video entitled 'What To Do With a Rubber Doll?', uploaded by the thinknewgroup, a German organisation concerned about gender in media, shows a figure, initially of indeterminate gender, violently and repeatedly smashing a rubber sex doll against a garage door, on which is inscribed 'Einfahrt freihalten' – 'keep clear'. It is hard not to assume that it is a man subjecting the image of a nude, pink, defenceless female body to violent abuse, this reinforced by the laddish heavy-metal that growls and grinds along as a soundtrack. It is only at the end of the video, when the figure turns round after a culminating double-handed forehand drive of the doll's head against the door, raising its arms in triumph, that the slight bulge of the chest and widening of the hips seems to make it clear that the exultant batterer is female.

At this point everything changes, for the sex doll now seems to be, not an idol, but the image of idolatry, meaning that the violent action we have been watching is not doll-bashing (boo) but idoloclasm (hooray). I have just said everything changes, but perhaps nothing does really. I am only 90% certain that the image is female, since the video is rather blurry. But, even if this were a man, exactly the same point would inevitably be made, whether through male rage at the female body, or female rage at male rage at the female body.

If women are objectified as dolls, female sex-contrivances go in the other direction, since they so rarely bother to provide anything like a body for the man. The man is represented abstractly, by the dildo, or the 'Sybian', or the admittedly ingenious pedal-driven 'Onanierapparat für Frauen' (masturbation machine for women) advertised by Magnus Hirschfeld in Berlin in the late 1920s (Levy 2008, 257-9).

This guying of the man, to use the word that would enter English with the burning of Guy Fawkes in effigy, is a repeated feature of stories of female animation, which regularly put male protagonists to a kind of mock-death, or death by mockery. This pattern is established in what we may think of as the inaugurating text of the animation tradition, Ovid's version of the story of Pygmalion and his statue (she would not be known as Galatea until after Rousseau's 1762 version of the story). Pygmalion is appalled by the immorality of the women he sees around him, who, Ovid tells us in the immediately preceding story, have been turned by the goddess Venus into stone: *utque pudor cessit, sanguisque induruit oris/in rigidum parvo silicem discrimine versae* – 'so that their blushing ceased, the blood went rigid in their cheeks, and only a small change was needed to flip them into flinty hardness' (Ovid 1976, 2.80). Pygmalion's response to is to carve a statue, not from flint, but purest white ivory. Enchanted by his own creation, Pygmalion prays to Venus to let him have a bride just like his own ivory girl, Ovid emphasising that he does not dare ask for an ivory girl as such: '*opto, non ausus 'eburnea virgo'/dicere, Pygmalion 'similis mea' dixit 'eburnae'* - ' "I would like," he said (not daring to say "an ivory girl") "a girl like my ivory one" ' (Ovid 1976, 2.84). But he does not get the similitude he asks for, instead being given an animation of the statue itself. Pygmalion wants a *coniunx*, a real wife, but is fobbed off with a dummy.

Effigies of women similarly figure the assumed fixations of male desire throughout post-classical European culture. The male lover is turned into a dummy or automaton by the force of the desire excited by the doll, a desire which hardens him

into a petrified object. In the anonymous *Adollizing* published in 1748, a young libertine called Clodius falls in love with a young woman, Clarabella, whose adamantine unattainability drives him to have made a doll in her image. Clodius himself is a kind of idol to the other young women whose love he easily inflames and as easily ignores: ‘Tho’ idoliz’d by more than half the sex,/None have the pow’r the libertine to fix’ (Anon 1748, 12). Yet Clodius is fixated by his fantasy of his idolised condition: ‘“All, all my fame, strait CLODIUS replies,/ Is to stand favour’d in the sex’s eyes:/To be the general idol of the fair’ (Anon 1748, 11). As Julie Park suggests, the story may be more about the animation of the fixated Clodius than the objectification of his Clarabella: ‘To be a real man himself, rather than an idol, he needs to reject both his worship of female dolls and his tendencies to regard real women as dolls to manipulate and collect’ (Park 2010, 81). But, far from being real, his Clarabella has much less presence in the poem than the vividly-particularised Claradolla (well, her vividly-particularised vagina at any rate). Clodius’s love for the real Clarabella is secured and perpetuated by ‘her fix’d disdain’ (Anon 1748, 17). Indeed, there is a suspicion that idolisation is somehow intrinsic to the ‘quality transmutative’ (Anon 1748, 7) of love. The first canto of the poem gives us a list of the power of love to create idols from fleshly beings:

Perfection all! The fancy once impress’d,
Gives marble firmness to a flabby breast;
The sounds of angels to a screech-owl’s cry;
A diamond-lustre to a whiting-eye;
Iv’ry to teeth of *Aethiopian* hue (Anon 1748, 8)

The very subtitle of the poem – ‘*A Lively Picture of Adoll-Worship*’ – suggests that the worship of simulations can make one over into a simulation oneself, with more picture in it than liveliness. The movement between reality and simulation is connected to the curiously insistent wagging in the poem between hardness and softness. Eventually, Clodius’s revulsion from his doll, by now diversified into a ‘whole Seraglio’ (Anon 1748, 22) by exchangeable heads, persuades Venus to thaw Clarabella’s ‘frozen heart’ (Anon 1748, 27). But throughout the poem, sexual desire is animated by the movement between the hard and the soft, the dead and the living, the real and the phantasmal. It is not just men who draw on ‘mimic art’ (Anon 1748, 17), for woman too, ‘when of copulation she despairs/At once a dildo softens all her cares’ (17). The play between ‘idolizing’ and ‘adollizing’ alerts us to the near-anagram of dildo and idol. The mimic art itself exists between something and nothing, for its ‘fertile thought/Can raise a solid entity from nought’ (Anon 1748, 17). At the moment that the real Clodius is accepted by the real Clarabella, all sexual and comic tension drain away, and the poem ends.

In E.T.A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’, the young man Nathanael is driven insane by discovering that the woman Olimpia with whom he has fallen in love is a mechanical doll. At the climax of the story, he attacks his real love Clara on the top of a tower: now, in his insane rage, it is Nathanael whose movements are mechanical, and who repeats like a broken machine the words ‘Spin, puppet, spin’ (Hoffman 1982, 123). Eventually, spellbound by the mesmeric gaze of the artificer Coppelius, he tumbles from the tower, and dies, his head smashed like that of a doll.

A similar guying takes place in the most celebrated instance of doll fetishism in twentieth-century art history, the doll that Oskar Kokoschka had made of his wife Alma Mahler after she left him. The story has been told many times of the elaborate instructions that Kokoschka gave to the dollmaker Hermine Moos over the course of nine months for the construction of the doll. Bonnie Roos describes the process as a kind of ‘womb-envy (Roos 2005, 297), the Pygmalionising Kokoschka trying to in the process ‘to reinvent himself as the modernist masculine art-genius’ (Roos 2005, 292). The difficulty came with the Moos’s decision to reject Kokoschka’s suggestion of silk or linen for the skin of the doll in favour of feathered swanskin. Kokoschka was astonished and appalled, describing the skin as ‘a polar-bear pelt, suitable for a shaggy imitation bedside rug rather than the soft and pliable skin of a woman ... Even attempting to pull on one stocking would be like asking a French dancing-master to waltz with a polar bear’ (quoted in Keegan 1999, 114-15).



For Loos, Moos’s defiance ‘critiques male artistry as dehumanizing and fetishizing, she challenges the ideal of the creative “male artist genius”’ (Loos 2005, 300). In her reading of the two paintings that Kokoschka made of himself and his ghastly abortion of a doll, *Woman in Blue* and *At the Easel*, Loos proposes that his paintings show the painter becoming ever more similar to his creation. And yet the doll is a caricature of a real woman, so that he ends up looking ridiculous. The problem with Loos’s reading is not a bit that it is not true. It is that it seems not to have noticed that it is *always true*, that the objectifying male is always reduced by his doll-making to the condition of a guy, dummied by his dummy-desire.

This effigial contagion is the sign that the doll is not always a piece of inanimate matter made compliant to the will of a living exploiter. The doll talks back and looks back. In being roused from insentience by the desire of the male user, and then in its turn arousing that user, the doll may also serve to figure tauntingly for the male what is impersonal, mechanical and thinglike in his own sexuality, the very sexuality that he is supposed to identify with his life – ‘his’ ‘life’. Sexual desire brings the doll to life just enough for it to be able to figure back to the man the ‘itness’ (this is what Freud’s ‘id’ means), the blank automatism of his sexuality. So I think Marquard Smith is quite right when he says ‘Make no mistake: the doll is an it’ (Smith 2014, 245).

This may be one reason that dolls seem to attract so much assault as well as adoration. It is perhaps not the 'woman' figured in the doll that is the target of the 'ferocious brutality' that Smith describes being directed at dolls (Smith 2014, 244). Or perhaps this figuring is really the vehicle for a deeper antagonism, an antagonism between the living and the particular kind of death-in-life that Rilke, in his essay 'Some Reflections on Dolls' called the 'thing-soul' (Rilke 1978, 49). Noting the link between doll-adoration and extreme actions such as sexual murder and necrophilia, Anthony Ferguson proposes that:

The key element in achieving sexual and emotional fulfilment in these taboo acts is gaining control. The perpetrator gains control of the self and of others for sexual gratification, but more importantly, gains control over death itself. Part of the fascination with taboo acts like necrophilia is that they represent a response to our universal fear of death. Thus we confront an issue that terrifies us and attempt to tame it by eroticizing it (Ferguson 2010, 139-40)

But the eroticisation of the doll plainly does not in the least tame the fear of death. Rather, the point of the doll seems to be to arouse the fear that eros is threaded through with thanatos, that desire is not possible without some changeling substitution, some alloy of death and life.

The doll brings together the histories of sexual desire and religion. For, even in their secularised form, dolls always connote idolatry, the worship of false idols. (A character called 'Dol' in a Renaissance play is pretty much certain to be a prostitute.) In the absence of a divine principle that consents to reveal itself fully and indubitably, most religions both allow and are extremely suspicious of such mediations. The deprecation of the idol takes many forms: religious in the rage of the fundamentalist against false images, economic in the Marxist horror of the mediations and substitutions that yield the fascinating but vampiric desire for the commodity fetish, psychosexual in the reading of perversion as the pathological displacement of the proper aim of sexual desire. Perhaps all the forms of rage against the worship of false gods are a kind of rage against objects, against the insinuation of the unliving or object world into what would otherwise be immediate relations – of the individual soul to the divine, of the subject meeting with its own desire without impediment or diversion. Somewhere, in the immaculately tautological hand-in-glove of subject and subject, the object world enters, becoming in the process something other than simply object, becoming undead. Something, some *thing*, or foreign body, it seems, is always in the way, on the way to the object of desire - and sometimes it is not just in the middle of the way, but is the way itself. An object is that which is literally thrown up against one – *ob + iacere*. For Michel Serres, in his book *Statues*, the death of the subject represented by the object is actually what gives the subject to itself, in the humiliation that makes the human:

Subject. This word retains the trace of an act of humility. The subject subjects itself to the dominion of that which forms and loses it. Yes, kills it. Only the object exists and I am nothing: it lies before me and I disappear beneath it. (Serres 1987, 211; my translation)

Such intervening objects can often seem or become diabolical – indeed, the *diabolos* is that which is *thrown between*: the object is diabolical when what comes up against

one also comes between one and oneself . The longing to abolish mediation, to reach to the thing itself, will often lead to zealous, jealous rage against what stands in the way. At its extreme, according to Peter Sloterdijk, there is the zealot's loathing of the world, which aims to mimic and even outdo God's assumed regret at having created the world's unfortunate and culpable otherness to himself (Sloterdijk 2009, 24).

Recent years have seen a new development in relation to the sex-doll, namely the phenomenon of the 'living doll', people (well, men) who furnish themselves with prosthetic additions including full face-masks that allow them to seem to become dolls, or doll-like women. This may be seen as a libidinised form of the fashion for the living statue, or the pleasure of the entry into the agitated inertness of the machine to be found in body-popping and allied dance forms. It is not clear, at least not to me, if men who form themselves into living dolls are the same men who might once have wanted to own dolls, or, if they are, if it is the same desire in them. But this development does at least seem to hint at the possibility that there can be identification in desire, that being might here be an enhanced form of having. It would be hard to say that the statue is brought warmly and amorously to life in the living doll; rather life is given over to the undeadness of the statue. The doll is not only adored as a substitute for some other real object, it is envied as what it is, that is, as a thing, with a thing's power of declining to be subjected to subjecthood. What are we to make of this passion for passivity? Is this just another ruse of the objectifying sadism of male desire? If there is nobody wanting to tell us it is, I am a Dutchman, or Dutch wife.

As David J. Getsy has recently suggested (2014), the stillness and passivity of the idol or doll may often be regarded as a kind of resistance, an unreadability that is itself determinable neither as hostility or indifference. In the master-slave dialectic of Hegel, the master requires not only the slave's servitude, but the slave's free acknowledgement of that servitude. The difference between a doll and a mere lump of wood, or other unshaped matter, is that a doll seems to possess, or to allow the suggestion of, just enough sentience to seem to be able to have withheld its consent. The user has power over the doll because it cannot refuse its consent; but the doll has power over the idolator because it can – or should that be will? – never really give that consent. Like the dead-weight protestor being lugged away by the riot police, its passivity forces the use of force. Possessed of what Giorgio Agamben calls *impotential*, being able not to be able (Agamben 1998, 182), the doll holds back, it keeps itself in reserve. It could consent but perhaps, like Bartleby, it prefers not to. Whatever intimacies may be forced upon it, it can never do more than intimate its willingness.

Dolls are for playing with, but we should pause on this. What does it mean to play? Playing is always a kind of subjection of the player to limits, which accounts for the fact that there is always some material form involved in playing. The point of what we call a 'plaything' is that it allows the overcoming of some unnecessary constraint. If the doll is played with, pampered, cared for, etc, if it is adored, as an idol is, then there is also the shadow of violence or violation in this play. During the Reformation, Catholic religious artefacts were sometimes degraded into the condition of toys, as a way of keeping them under erasure, in a condition of visible degradation. To be a toy is to be able to be injured as well as caressed. There is a kind of deathliness in play – not the simple deathliness of the inanimate object, but the impulse which all play

releases and allows, of putting the toy to death. As Baudelaire says, in ‘Morale du joujou’ (‘Philosophy of Toys’), the child is never satisfied until it has found the answer to the question ‘*where is the soul?*’ (Baudelaire 1986, 203), or proved through destruction that it does not have anything inside it.

Much has been made of the interplay between life and death involved in the figure of the doll, and the uncanniness evoked by that which seems to hover uncertainly on the border between life and death. Sexual desire may be characterised as desire that is closely wedded to death – a desire that is linked most intensely to the desire for its own annulment, a desire for there always to be more of desire, more of the desire for desire to be put to the death of consummation. Sexual desire interweaves eros and thanatos in the way that Freud works at without ever being able quite to work out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, life hanging on for dear life in the deferral of the death-drive, which is simultaneously the dilatory effort of death to get a life, or live itself off through life (Freud 1955, 54). The desires aroused and satisfied by dolls are desires that oscillate between life and death in the same way. It is in this sense, perhaps, that all sexuality is idolatrous, and all dolls are sex-dolls.

Human beings find many ways to keep alive the idea that there is a thing that may be called ‘life’, on whose side human beings are, which must be rescued or resuscitated from the deathliness of the object world, the sepulchral generality of the *it*. But this generality is generative, for there are many forms of the *it*, and recent history has made the object world seem a more and more lively and varied participant in human life, making it harder to know what it might mean to defend life against death, or expel the *it* from the life that knows and names itself as human. Philosophers such as Michel Serres and Bruno Latour have helped us begin to understand the strange and growing salience in our lives and loves of these quasi-objects. We are increasingly becoming aware of how we are formed by the *it* that we would wish to take a stand against, and that the distinctive rage we might bring to bear to put it in its place as an *it* has all the automatism of the *it* itself. Thinking about gender is often sustained by such efforts to secure the category of the living, and to put the *it* in its place, absolutely on the other side of the *I*. Indeed, everything seems to operate under the influence of the twin imperative, first that there must be life, and second that, whatever else may dissolve, there *must be always* be gender. The generativity of the *it*, in which the doll participates, perturbs both of these imperatives.

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