

Carnival and Carnivorous Plants – Gender and Humor in the works of Ruth Landshoff-Yorck

By Diana Mantel, LMU München, Germany

Abstract:

My article focuses on the connection of gender and humour in some works of the German-American author Ruth Landshoff-Yorck. My analysis will show that, while both topics are important, their connection changes over the course of Landshoff's work: it is light and easygoing in the early works, full of joyful transgression in aspects of gender and sexuality, like in her novel *Die Vielen und der Eine* (1930), but carnal and sometimes disgusting in the later ones, like in the short story *The Opening Night* (1959) and its German version, *Durch die Blume* (1957) – especially in the omnivorous (and omnisexual) plant appearing in these stories. The theoretical foundation for the analyses carried out in this article is provided by Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the Grotesque and Carnavalesque. Bringing together Bakhtin and Landshoff and investigating their parallels and contrasts can not only illuminate Landshoff's works, but also widen the understanding of Bakhtin's theory of humor, in order to demonstrate the extent to which these ideas are helpful in relation to aspects of gender.

Es ist nur gut dass auch fast alles andere in dieser Welt unerklaet [!] bleibt. Sonst koentts [!] einen ja bedruecken. Aber so? Der Welt gegenueber kommt man sich eh mehr und mehr wie der Valentin vor. der von Muenchen. [...] Ich sollte eigentlich auf [!] mich ins komische flueecten [!]. (Landshoff, zwiespalt 6)

1 Humor, and taking refuge in it, as described here in one of Landshoff's later articles, is a theme common to Landshoff's writing – even if she seldom wrote it as explicitly as here. Especially her early works have been characterised as an “Amalgam aus ästhetischer Avantgarde und leidenschaftlich-leichter Unterhaltung” (Grisko 255) and are unique because of the combination of artistic claim and nonchalant humor. Even though her writing in her last years was less blithe and demonstrated confusion between the author's two languages, English and German, as can be seen in the first quotation (Landshoff, zwiespalt 1), - it also showed a more sarcastic side of her humor.

2 The exploration of gender in her works follows a similar pattern and the way the subject is handled changes over the course of her complete works: the easy-going and amusing understanding of gender and sexuality in her early works is replaced towards the end of her writing career by a strict separation of them, accompanied by much black humor. This article describes this change and the particular characteristics of her humor in an analysis of her first novel *Die Vielen und der Eine* (1930) and one of her short stories *The Opening Night* (1959). The latter exists in two versions, one in German and one in English published two years later. The two editions differ not only in their titles (the German is entitled *Durch*

die Blume), but also in their endings – thus offering a grotesque form of the stories themselves. This article concludes with a comparison of the two versions.

3 The theoretical foundation for the analyses carried out in this text is provided by various works by Mikhail Bakhtin. While the focus is placed on Landshoff's works, Bakhtin's theory of humor offers a theoretical framework which illuminates aspects of Landshoff's writing – even though many aspects of Bakhtin's theories have to be left aside, for example the historical context of his works or his anthropological ideas. Landshoff and Bakhtin's ideas are, of course, non-congruent and do not explicitly correlate to each other, however many aspects of Bakhtin's theory are reflected in Landshoff's works. This is especially the case for ideas of transgression, the carnival as an actual festival (see *Die Vielen und der Eine*) or the emphasis of particular parts of the body (see *The Opening Night / Durch die Blume*).

4 But while gender plays an important role in Landshoff's works, it never appears in Bakhtin's theories. Even if many elements of his theories, such as the openness of the transgressive or the grotesque body touch on subjects such as gender, a direct relationship is never explicitly established. Landshoff's experimentation with gender, in contrast, is often analog to Bakhtin's theories, but also demonstrates many differences. Thus bringing together Bakhtin and Landshoff and investigating their parallels and contrasts can not only illuminate Landshoff's works, but also widen our understanding of Bakhtin's theory of humor, to demonstrate the extent to which these ideas are helpful in relation to aspects of gender.

5 *Die Vielen und der Eine* is not only a typical example of Landshoff's early writing, it also marks an important turning point in her career as this was the only one of her three novels written in the Weimar Republic to actually be published. Before the takeover of the Nazis abruptly ended her thriving career, Landshoff had been one of the pillars of the Berlin bohemia in the 1920s:

Im Berlin ihrer Jugendjahre war [Ruth Landshoff-Yorck] ein Liebling der damaligen Edel-Boheme – schön, klug, unternehmend, vorurteilslos. Sie hatte sich ihr eigenes Milieu geschaffen, das aus den Kreisen der Kunst, der Bühne, der jeunesse dorée, der Avantgarde aller Gebiete bestand. (n.N., Memoriam 8)

6 She was friend of many contemporary artists, such as Annemarie Schwarzenbach and Klaus Mann, and tried her hand at many professions such as painting, modelling and acting before she started writing (For a closer look at her life c.f. Schoppman or Pendl, *Exilantin*). Her next two novels, *Roman einer Tänzerin* und *Die Schatzsucher in Venedig* were supposed to be published in 1933, but never made it into print. The reasons for this were not only Landshoff's Jewish ancestry (she was the niece of the publisher Samuel Fischer) and her

political views, but also the novels themselves, which contained radical ideas on gender and sexuality.

7 In Landshoff's first novel, "carnival" appears in its literal meaning as an actual fancy dress party: "Das war es, was sie berauschte an Berlin. Das gab es in keiner anderen Stadt. Tausend glückliche Leute, lachend, tanzend, liebend und ein Krach, daß man betäubt die Hände an die Ohren hielt, um dann sofort mitzumachen, zu lachen und zu tanzen." (Landshoff, *Die Vielen und der Eine*, from here on abbreviated to DV). At this party in Berlin not only the novel comes to an end, but also the love story of the protagonists Louis Lou and Percy. Their story can be summarized in a few words: the German journalist Louis Lou travels to New York where she meets the rich idler Percy. They subsequently split up, travel independently through America and Europe, meet again, argue, split again and finally reunite in Berlin. While the story itself seems to be simple and consists of a conglomeration of many different stories, the playful display of gender and its narration is not simple at all.

8 Of course Bakhtin understood the term carnival not only in the sense of an actual festival (Karnevalistisches 61); rather he widens his definition of the term by saying that "Karneval wird gelebt. [...] Das karnevalistische Leben ist ein Leben, das aus der Bahn des Gewöhnlichen herausgetreten ist." (Karnevalisierung 48), that is to say that 'carnival' is not only used to describe a special kind of festival, but also to depict a kind of style, a turning of established values and categories into something new. This style becomes especially visible in Landshoff's novel in the experimentation with gender and sexuality – and also in the style of narration, for example at the beginning of the novel:

Man könnte so anfangen: Depuis sa plus tendre enfance elle a toujours adoré les matelots und alles, was mit ihnen zusammenhängt : Signalpfeifen, Leuchttürme, Sturmband und Kap Horn. [...] Das hat aber mit folgendem nichts zu tun: Wenn zufällig ein Matrose auftauchen sollte, so denken Sie nicht, aha, endlich eine Bezugnahme auf den Beginn. Ich nehme nicht Bezug. Ich nehme vorweg. Überlassen Sie doch bitte mir, Beziehungen herzustellen. Depuis sa plus tendre enfance bevorzugte sie Matrosen. (DV 5)

Although it is left open as to where the references ("Bezugnahme[n]") and where the presumptions ("Vorwegnahmen") start (and why that should make any difference), some lines later a new beginning comes up (which is suggesting a new and different start of the novel):

Man könnte auch anders anfangen: Wie wäre es mit einer Hauptperson, die nachher in die Fabel führt? Mit ihrer Personalbeschreibung in einer Landschaft mit einem besonderen Wetter? (DV 5)

The openness of the discours in the novel is mirrored in the openness of its characters, "die jung waren und noch oft ein neues Leben anfangen konnten." (DV 124) – everything is

possible, nothing is strictly defined. For these characters there are no boundaries between gender, sexuality or language(s).

9 While the beginning of the novel is marked out by an openness and plurality in the style of the narration, this is also explored in several other elements of the plot. Percy's and Louis Lou's travels end at a particular kind of party: a fancy dress party. Louis Lou, the female yet androgynous protagonist, attends in a pink aviator's uniform while her friend Jack wears a blue uniform "weil Jack ein Junge ist" (DV 152); this seems to be a typical display of gender clichés. Yet Percy, unaware of the costumes the others chose to wear, also arrives in an aviator's uniform – only his overall is white. The situation becomes a versatile play on colors and their clichés: While pink might be typical for girls, Louis Lou is anything than an ordinary girl; she is said to be a look-alike of the famous statue of David several times (e.g. DV 29 or 36). For Jack, the color blue seems to be most appropriate; although he is still a boy, hardly 15 years old, he is continuously pretending to be a grown-up man. Percy's white is, in contrast, most equivocal as it suggests him having no gender at all and marks him as undefined. Indeed, his sexuality is scrutinized several times in the novel (e.g. DV 35), although he seems to love Louis Lou. Here colors do not establish a classification, instead they show that the idea of a system based on colors is ridiculous. Gender and sexuality become fashions, something to turn on and off again, a simple question of what to wear.

10 An amusing aspect is the fact that Percy is indeed an aviator – flying is the only profession he actually manages to learn in his otherwise non-industrious life. Moreover, wearing his actual working clothes becomes absurd: the other guests are also wearing uniforms at the fancy-dress party, and doing so no longer shows a special status. Furthermore, in the time of the Weimar Republic, flying was not considered a particularly masculine activity (Koschorke 153). Rather it was only considered exotic when women became aviators – Percy does thus not underline his masculinity by becoming an aviator, he just does something that would be considered progressive for women (Fell 216). In putting on his actual flying dress for a costume party he devalues his own status by reducing his profession to a simple costume.

11 Using a uniform for fashion is also addressed in the passage on the gay subculture in New York, but in this case the uniform in question is a sailor's instead of an aviator's:

Es gibt hier nicht sehr viele Frauen auf diesem Weg und nicht sehr viele Mädchen. Aber dafür gibt es viele junge Burschen in Uniform – [...] obwohl sie doch hier kaum im Beruf sein können. [...] Die breiten Kragen haben einen Rand aus Seide, und am Ende des tiefen Ausschnittes, der ungeheuer nackt wirkt, glüht manchmal eine rote Nelke. Hugh weiß, daß

viele von ihnen keine richtigen Matrosen sind. Sie tragen diese kleidsame Tracht wohl als eine Art Abendkleid, als eine Art Pyjama. (DV 38)

12 In this passage the constant transgression back and forth between party costume and professional uniform is taken to the extreme. The idea behind a real uniform is a performance of masculinity (at work and war). Here, however, uniforms are being used for the purposes of courtship, as a costume representing excessive masculinity that is, in turn, used to attract other men. The typical male uniform becomes an “Abendkleid” or pyjamas, something to be worn on special occasions or in bed respectively, and the former definitely has female connotations. The uniform itself has been altered with accessories and is no longer martial. The uniform is now worn for love, not war. It no longer signifies a profession or a status, it now signifies sexual orientation and the search for attraction. The old uniform is dissolved into a costume of sex(es). This is close to what Bakhtin calls “profanation”: the former status of the uniform is changed – but here the change is entirely positive, and not a kind of degradation, especially not in a religious sense.

13 As is the case for fashion in the novel, so the relationship of Percy and Louis Lou reveals the performativity of gender. Their relationship goes through several ups and downs and one of their meetings is especially remarkable:

Sie flirtete: “Nie werde ich Ihnen die Sache mit Jack verzeihen. Ich finde Sie widerlich.“ Und Percy rachsüchtig, aber mit schmerzdem Herzen: “Maria tanzt viel weicher als Sie. Sie ist so eine sanfte richtige Frau. Ein schönes, schwarzhaariges Tierchen. Sie tanzen ja wie ein Junge, Louis Lou, wie ein kräftiger Junge aus einer Wildwest-Bar.“ “Und sie tanzen wie ein Mädchen mit Hüftbewegungen und ganz lose.“ “Und Sie sind ein moderner Typ – pfui – ein Zwitter. Nicht richtig lieben könnt ihr modernen Mädchen. Vielleicht lieben Sie ihren Hund, diesen Bastard.“ Aber da hatte er ihre Faust im Gesicht. Louis Lou wollte das gar nicht. Sie wollte viel lieber weiblich sein und sich küssen lassen, aber er hatte Cecil einen Bastard genannt. Und Percy, der sonst so hart im Nehmen war, weinte. (DV 85)

Their dispute is defined from the outset as “flirting” – a courtship and a playful fight of the sexes. To invoke Judith Butler's ideas, this scene demonstrates performative acts of gender being constantly reproduced as a performance, instead of existing separately (Butler 25). Interlaced with classical clichés such as referring to a woman as “Tierchen” and modern stereotypes of gender such as a cowboy, everything about their flirtation is role play. Describing their conversation as “flirtation” underlines the fact that their talk is not about an arbitrary topic, rather that there is a specific aim in mind: seduction. Both partners accuse each other of not conforming to their gender. The “abnormality” of their behaviour is emphasized by the next moment when Louis Lou throws a punch and Percy cries. Even if it were noted that Percy normally behaves differently, this would obviously be an ironic remark,

as he never acts tough. This is also true of Louis Lou, who never demonstrates her alleged wish to be female, neither with Percy nor with her other affair, Ingo. In a subversive turn, the novel places a man and a woman facing each other, only in each other's position. This results in the irony that the positions are revealed to be simple roles with no fixed points in a game called "flirting".

14 While the twenties were a time when gender issues (such as the New Woman) were constantly discussed, and such discourse is also to be found in this passage. The topic is not simply shown, rather it is to be found in the characters' discourse, notably when Percy calls Louis Lou a "moderne[r] Typ", a "Zwitter" – a accusation that was typically levied against women at the time (Kessemeier 201-202). Yet the true joke here lies in the fact that Percy is so undefined; he is also a modern type and yet cannot be classified as he also breaks ranks.

15 The discussion of gender stereotypes also scrutinizes the characters' bodies. As previously mentioned, Louis Lou's appearance is not described as feminine rather as boy-like with a strong resemblance of the statue of the naked David (DV 36). Percy is obsessed with Louis Lou, with the statue of David and their resemblance. Furthermore, he wants to make a statue of this, and while he has a picture of the famous statue hanging as inspiration in his atelier, he has his own ideas for his creation:

„Ich werde eine Plastik modellieren, mit Beinen wie du sie hast und mit deinem Lächeln, aber sie wird einen Busen haben – einen zwitterhaften, kleinen Busen, der rund ist wie zwei Mandarinen. Und vermutlich wird der Rücken sehr schön sein – vermutlich mit zwei Grübchen am Ende der Wirbelsäule.“ Und wie er das sagt, wird Percy sehr rot. (DV 37)

This nearly impossible body, consisting of Louis Lou and the statue, becomes Percy's ideal, combining many aspects. But the humor develops further: ultimately Percy will not be able to create this statue as he is not the great, male artist of the avant-garde able to recreate the female form as Pygmalion did. Instead, he is only able to dream of something which already partial exists and bares resemblance to a clearly-defined body, adding hermaphroditic, rather than typical female, breasts. By imagining creating a statue resembling David, who in turn resembles Louis Lou, a round dance of copies of copies of copies evolves – and no definite original is definable. An endless circuit of quotations is created with no start, end or result – everything is an imitation of something else.

16 Louis Lou's body forms the center-point of this discussion. Even her name seems to reflect her androgynous nature; a combination of a male name (Louis) and a female name (Lou) – and the name creates the figure. While staying in Oxford, Louis Lou plays the part of Eurydice in a boarding school's play because the original actor had fallen ill. Ironically, the

boarding school is exclusively for boys and Louis Lou takes on a role formerly played by a boy. Nobody is supposed to find out that Louis Lou is female as it would have caused a scandal in conservative Oxford (“Ein Mädchen wäre ein Faustschlag in das Gesicht der Tradition, sagten sie.“; DV 128). Louis Lou manages to pretend she is a boy, even evoking the criticism of one of the (female) viewers:

“[...] hätte man für diese Rolle nicht einen Jungen finden können, der eine Idee fraulichere Allüren hatte? [...] Früher gab es doch immer irgendeinen Jungen in der Schule, der ganz besonders für Frauenrollen geeignet war. [...] Wie gesagt, eine Idee zu knabenhaft, diese Eurydice.” (DV 129)

Again Louis Lou defies all expectations. Not only she is too masculine to be a female, she also, in her role of a woman in a play, tricks the audience with her gender performance. It is a play within a play, a performance within a performance. The real humor lies in the fact that it is not her role in the play that is well performed, rather her role of a male actor playing a woman in a play which everybody believes should only be performed by a boy. Thus, a mocking circle of gender imitation is created and taken to the extreme. Again, this passage reveals the open way in which gender is handled in the novel. Gender is depicted as a construction made of copies and endless performances.

17 What is true of this performance within a performance – namely that nothing is what it first seems - is also true of the characters' sexuality. This is most apparent in Ingo, the sailor. He is picked up by Louis Lou on her journey back to Europe which, at first, proves the earlier statement suggesting her preference for seamen. However, this is then taken to the point of absurdity. Ingo, who initially is the ideal of a man, becomes insecure when he has to leave his usual surroundings and prove himself as a man: “Er, vollkommen blond, schön, ritterlich und gut fundiert, musste anfangen, sich zu beweisen, und da wurde er unsicher.“ (DV 97). He finally annoys Louis Lou so much that she abandons him in front of a – of all places – ladies' restroom, while she escapes through a back exit. Here, he soon is picked up by Percy's male secretary Hugh and without further explanation they become a couple. It is here that the real admirer of sailors appears: it is Hugh, who „sehnte sich nach einem schönen jungen Gott, der gewaltsam war und süß, und ganz für ihn verloren auf dem Meere schwamm.“ (DV 123). Ultimately Ingo is able to prove himself to be the “real man” he wants to be – although in doing so he becomes a homosexual man's ideal instead of a woman's. Hugh and Ingo leave together some chapters later to live with Ingo's family by the North Sea – the homosexual couple is given a happier ending and an easier ride than any of the other couples in the novel. Not even sexuality is what it seems: it can change without any problem – and without being described as a problem. The borders of sexuality are not only fluid, they hardly exist at all.

18 The motif of the sailor appears from the very beginning of the novel, without ever being a type of symbol or metaphor (or a simple reference as the beginning suggests). The sailor is the constant representation of this new life and appears as an ideal for both women and gay men, as a performance of masculinity (as in Ingo's case) and also as a costume, which is no longer a uniform. The sailor is a recurrent thread throughout the novel: he constantly and playfully changes and transforms within the discourse on gender in the same way as everything else in the novel. Everything is in motion, defying expectations and this fluidity sweeps away the borders of sexuality, gender, bodies, language, discourses. Borders that could lead to classifications simply no longer exist. There is no support of a fixed point of view, either in the narration or the language(s). Highlighting the strangeness of modern life here offers a new kind of freedom. At the same time, the genre of the novel is in motion, through its constant playful and ironic use of discourse resembling pop literature – pop in the sense of a definition of style, as a “Transformation”, “im Sinne einer dynamischen Bewegung, bei der kulturelles Material und seine sozialen Umgebungen sich gegenseitig neu gestalten und bis dahin fixe Grenzen überschreiten.” (Diedrichsen 274). There is a constant use of discourse and quotation which is used to cross any kind of border. Nothing is fixed and exactly this is celebrated.

19 In mentioning pop, another connection to Bakhtin comes to light: Alexander Kaempfe emphasizes the parallels between pop and carnival:

Auch das Selbstverständnis der zwei Lachkulturen ist ähnlich. Karneval wie Popkultur behaupten, der „gute“ Pol in einer doppelpoligen Gesellschaftsstruktur zu sein, der lachende Feind des Ernstes. Starren und Gewordenen: das Anti-Establishments. Beide Lachkulturen bescheinigen sich Fortschrittlichkeit, Jugendlichkeit und Utopie. In ihrem Anspruch gleichen sie sich noch mehr als in ihrer Wirklichkeit. (Kaempfe 146)

However, one large difference between Landshoff's novel and Bakhtin's theory is that she writes about glamorous, young people, while Bakhtin emphasizes the simple people. While in Bakhtin's theory the hierarchies and authorities become the laughing stock of the carnival, here the ambiguous and androgynous characters are seen in a more positive light than the novel's bourgeois elders such as Percy's grandfather, who is „[s]ein ganzes Leben [...] anständig. Warum nur, fragte sich Percy immer wieder verzweifelt. Sicher nur, weil ihm nichts anderes einfiel. Er merkt nicht mal, wie peinlich das ist für seine Mitmenschen, das Anständigsein.“ (DV 18). The new bohemia establishes a new lifestyle independent of bourgeois attitudes and dependent only on their own ideas and wishes. This creates a kind of utopian world, in which at least the young and glamorous can live as they wish. The emphasis of freedom in this utopian world reflects Bakhtin's description of the carnival as a “utopian

vision of the world” (Stallybrass 7), although Landshoff’s work is populated with glamorous twentysomethings rather than simple folk. Landshoff’s world, however, is not just a simple holiday and that differentiates it from Bakhtin’s ideas. It has no limits in time – it is to go on eternally, at least for the right group of people.

20 Landshoff’s own playful life as a Berlin bohémienne (which no doubt bore many similarities to her novel) was not eternal and ended in 1933 when she went into exile. Her life was to change radically. After some years of exile in several European countries she eventually emigrated to the USA in 1937, not only switching completely from German to English, but also changing her writing style from the playful pop to political propaganda literature against Nazi Germany. Gender and humor took a back seat to her political intentions which played a more important role and led to the production of three novels, several poems and radio pieces. At the same time her style became refined and more aware of stylistic subtleties.

21 After the war Landshoff returned to some of her old topics. However, even though she still dealt with subjects such as homosexuality in her work, for example in her novel *So cold the night* (1947), the tone had changed. There was less playfulness, but more stylistic and narrative subtlety and more experimentation with style, language(s) and genres. Furthermore, Landshoff became an important mentor (and writer) in the blossoming Off-Off-Broadway (OOB) of the ‘50s and ‘60s in New York and was even known as the “poet lady” von Greenwich Village” (N.N., Memoriam 8). Again she made gender a topic: “Ruth Landshoff Yorck [!] revolutionized gender-bending and sexual identity in her plays and her lifestyle, beginning as a young artist in Weimar Germany. Her work helped link the European avant-garde and OOB.” (Peculiar Works Project). She not only put young American artists in contact with her older friends in Europe, she did the same vice versa for young European writers such as Günther Grass and Uwe Johnson (Landshoff, Grass 1-6). At the same time, however, Landshoff was living under the poverty line. Although she was writing a lot, only a small amount of her work was published. Much of her writing was declined because of its progressive nature and only a few of her short stories were published in Germany and the USA, but also in other countries like Great Britain. The difficulty Landshoff had getting her work published, especially after the rise of the Nazis but also in the years after the War, goes some way to explaining why she was largely forgotten in both American and German literature.

22 Alfred Andersch, the publisher of most of her German works, wrote about her:

Übrigens schreibt unsere Dame ein wundervolles schlechtes Deutsch. Da sie nämlich seit ihrer Emigration einen Teil ihrer Dinge auf Englisch schreibt, [...] rutscht ihr manchmal die englische Grammatik in die deutsche Feder. [...] Aber ich finde, dass der leicht englische Timbre ihrer Prosa gut bekommt. Der englische Satzbau ist trocken, sanft und lustig. Wie die Prosa von Ruth Landshoff-Yorck. Die ist auf keinen Fall langweilig, sondern amüsant. Die deutsche Abneigung gegen alles Amüsante wird ihr eine Weile im Wege sein. Denn was amüsant ist, kann nicht tief sein. Meint man. (Andersch 232)

He describes her writing as funny and light whilst not missing depth, which he sees as caused by her bilingualism –ignoring the problems she had with this (“Ich leb in einer [...] nervenzerrüttenden schizophrenischen Literaturphase, schreibe Gedichte entweder deutsch oder amerikanisch. Feuillitons immer deutsch und Bücher und Erzählungen immer amerikanisch, übersetze vieles dann später von einem ins andere. [...] Ich muss leider annehmen, dass ich ein zweiseitig Charakter bin doppelzüngig, als Schaffender schizophren. Wir werden ja sehen wie das weiter geht. Ich bin etwas besorgt.“; Landshoff, unaussprechlich 6). Indeed most of the short stories are very cynical stories with fantastic elements (for example her only published anthology, in: Ruth Landshoff-Yorck: *das ungeheuer zärtlichkeit*. Frankfurt: Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt 1952).

23 While Andersch emphasizes the humor in her stories, Landshoff herself perceived the times in which she lived as anything but amusing. Even if she often drew parallels between the 1920s in Germany and the early 60s in the USA, she also saw differences:

Ruth Yorck hat einmal gesagt, daß die Künstler hier im Village das Deutschland der späten zwanziger, Anfang der dreißiger Jahre neu durchleben. Der einzige Unterschied sei, daß es uns keinen Spaß mache wie ihr damals. Und das ist sicher richtig, weil über allem eine Anspannung lagert. (Heilmeyer 81)

There was less fun to be had and the problems of the age made a strong impression on Landshoff. She wrote about the schizophrenic situation of the McCarthy era (Landshoff, Hörner) and complained about the strong conservatism in the USA (Patrick 159) and post-war Germany. These subjects did not only appear in her articles, but also often influenced her short stories – especially *The Opening Night*.

24 The English version of this short story was published 1958 – two years after the German edition. There is no clear evidence confirming which language the story was actually written in. The earlier publishing time in a German magazine suggests the German is the original and the English version is a translation; however neither blurb mentions that the story is a translation. Furthermore, Landshoff mentioned in an article that she only wrote prose in English after her emigration, while she wrote, for example, articles mostly in German and then translated them (Landshoff, unaussprechlich 6). She noted in the same article how hard it

was to get these new stories published in any language – thus the publishing date does not provide a reliable indication of the actual time frame the novel was written in, as she was keen to have her stories published in any language. This article discusses the differences between the two stories, treating them simply as two versions and not one as the original and one as the translation. The focus is centered mainly on the English version for the reason that, despite the additional ending, the German version is very similar.

25 The stories' titles have ambiguous meanings: *The Opening Night* invokes besides the literal opening of the flower, the notion of a beginning and of a (sexual) first time. It also reflects the openness of the story and its open end. The title *Durch die Blume*, on the one hand, emphasizes the way Ronny is changed “through” the flower, but also the way the characters talk at the end of the story: they talk in a (not so secret) code about sexuality and most associations with sex in the story happen through the (appearance of the) flower.

26 From its very beginning the story shows the gap between the prude and conservative surface of New England society and its true nature of hidden and suppressed sexuality and lust, as revealed by the strange flower. The special flower opens every seventh year, an event that brings the friends of the West-Morton family together in a society event celebrated proudly each time. The flower is an Arcantythian (Which is, of course, an invention of Landshoff: there is no real flower with this name), also called “flower of manhood” (Landshoff, *Opening*, 13, from here on abbreviated to ON), and had been brought back from an unknown exotic country by an ancestor decades previously. The story is told by one of the guests, a mother who is worrying about her grown-up son Ronny because she has observed, as she tells it, that her son shows an ostentatious “eagerness [...] to please his boy friends, or older men who came to call, or even, and here my heart grows faint to acknowledge such a thing, the milkman and the plumber [...]” (ON 15). Not only is Ronny’s attraction to men a problem for her - she never dares to use the word “homosexual” - but his attraction to men of a lower social class worries her especially. The mother places her hope in Janet, the daughter of the West-Mortons, that she would be the girl who would “turn out right for Ronny” (ON 14) – or, to be more explicit, who would turn Ronny “right”.

27 All in all, the mother is a classic example of an unreliable narrator: it remains unclear what the mother indeed sees and knows, and what she constructs to hide her own feelings. Not only does she show strong affection towards her own son, but her descriptions of Janet also reveal more attraction to the girl than she realizes herself: “Those pure blue eyes, that mouth of hers, longing and soft – could Janet not reach where I was shy to fathom unknown

depths? Might not her blossoming figure strike a spark from his armour of placidity?” (ON 15). Clearly, the true depths the mother does not dare to fathom are her own feelings.

28 The mother also shows some comical tendencies in her unreliability. There is, on the one hand, her continuous competition with the West-Mortons, whose pride for their flower seems ridiculous to her, because, as she points out, she has seen a cactus which blooms in red, blue and white – and is thus a true American cactus (ON 16). On the other hand, she bursts out angrily when someone dares to criticize the West-Mortons for their way of feeding the plant (they feed it with milk, but it is implied also with some smaller animals). Ronny’s mother remains unpredictable in her opinions and often defends the things she fought against a moment before – and she does the same with her own feelings.

29 Into this circle of attraction, consisting of Ronny as the object of the desire of his mother and – possibly – of Janet (who is several times described as being “devoted” to Ronny), the flower becomes the new object of everybody’s attention in the second half of the story. The flower stands out because of its exotic and unusual appearance, especially because of what it resembles: „the inside of the flower bears a resemblance to a human mouth, pink and rather fleshy“ (ON 13-14). Bakhtin emphasizes that the mouth is the “wichtigste Gesichtsteil der Groteske”, “Das groteske Gesicht läuft im Grunde auf einen aufgerissenen Mund hinaus. Alles andere ist bloß die Umrahmung dieses Mundes, dieses klaffenden und verschlingenden leiblichen Abgrunds.” (Bakhtin, Gestalt 16). In Landshoff’s novel, this accentuation is taken to its extreme in the flower: the flower consists of little else – although the mouth is also the inside of the flower and is hidden at first – until it suddenly appears when the flower opens. The similarity with genitals, especially a vagina, is unmistakable. Moreover, Janet describes the inside of the flower as similar to “a fur muff hiding the hands. And the hands making forbidden gestures nobody can see.” (ON 14). Even if hands do not play a prominent role in Bakhtin’s theories, cursing does as a form of a freer language (Bakhtin, Rabelais 383). At the same time, this quote seems to show that Janet is not as innocent as the mother had thought – Janet, who must have seen the opening at least twice before, feels scared by the flower in some way.

30 While the guests of the party celebrate inside the house until the flower is due to finally open, Ronny’s mother lures her son into the garden to give him some private time with Janet, who, at that time, was still waiting inside the house. When both women arrive in the garden, they see something unexpected:

Ronny’s face showed complete concentration, the kind last seen when he held his bottle in his loving, chubby fist. The Arcantythian was open. And I found Ronny with his mouth on the fat lips of the corolla. The long silky multi-coloured petals playing

around his face, caressing it, tickling his ears, reaching around his neck. And I saw my son's tongue flick in and out of those shiny pink depths where bees should go, not he, and the stamen responding. (ON 18-19)

One the one hand, this is a regression of Ronny to his days as Baby – on the other hand, it is an unconcealed depiction of sex – sex with a flower. That makes it unbearable for his mother: “I had never dreamed I could be that terribly shocked by my own child. Had I found him without his clothes at the sideboard in the West-Mortons’ dining room, smashing the blue china, I believe I would have been less shaken.” (ON 18) Even being naked AND smashing property of the West-Mortons would not have been as shocking for the mother as Ronny having sex with the property of the West-Mortons – which enhances the absurdity of the situation. This is further stressed by the flower appearing to be hermaphrodite with both a stamen and a calyx within the same flower, which are paralleled with genitals in their description.

31 Hermaphrodite plants are often used in literature as Achim Aurnhammer points out (Aurnhammer 177-200). But unlike the examples of Romanticism and Enlightenment he analyses, the flower here is not a metaphor for uniting or harmonizing the sexes – the flower is pure and obtrusive sex. The flower is omnivorous, but also omnisexual and “omni-sex” – its genitals and its desire are so blatant that there is nothing more to the flower – and that makes it quite unappealing. It has no eyes, makes no gestures - it is just a mixture of mouth, genitals and plant parts. Here Bakhtin’s theory seems itself stretched to its maximum: while Bakhtin only talks about sexual elements in the carnival, the flower here seems to represent everything sexual in one body. It is “a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing all limits, obscenely decentred and off-balance, a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration”, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe the characteristics of the grotesque body (9), – only this body is not human, but the body of a plant. The plant is no longer amusing, but simply dangerous for the protagonists.

32 Ronny tries to stop this kind of “French kissing foreplay” when he notices the presence of his mother and attempts to draw back, but the flower does not want him to leave:

He attempted to loosen his lips but they were caught and held fast, and I saw agony in his eyes There was rustling of [...] a silk gown, Janet had joined us. Her voice was rough hoarse, when she called but once, ‘Ronnie’ [sic!]. The petals, at this sound, gathered around my boy’s face and hid what he was doing in a dark and furry embrace. The girl stood still like a statue. (ON 19)

Before the rest of the party can approach, Janet suddenly starts to fight with the flower and “her fingers tore and scratched at the furry muff, the protective outer petals gave way, the blossom opened reluctantly again, and at last [Ronny] was free.” (ON 19) None of the guests

notices what has taken place and while Janet and Ronny stand apart from the others, the flower starts to transform: “the pink lips of the Arcantythian bent upwards at the corners as in a smile, and I watched the mouth, slowly, stickily, exclude clear drops of moisture, nectar of gods.” (ON 19) The description goes on:

The crowd stood silent. By now the broad-faced blossom was spitting dew drops in quick succession, hitting some of the bystanders. The luscious lips of the flower, gleaming with moisture, trembling, pulsating, were crying, shedding tears. [...] And then, before our very eyes, the circle was completed. The generous open face of the flower faded, wilted. The glorious petals drooped and shrivelled and dropped. And finally, inside wet bits of fur, the tiny heaps of ashes. (ON 19-20)

The scene depicted here is an explicit portrayal of an orgasm and an ejaculation. This sexual outburst occurs within the crowd; furthermore, the flower actually involves the surrounding persons by ejaculating/ spitting on them. The flower subsequently turns to ashes, as if it had never existed. To the West-Mortons' utmost anger, they are unable to collect any semen to reproduce the plant.

33 But what happens to Ronny? He suddenly appears to have changed: “[he] asked like a dreamer for her [Janet’s] hand. He pleaded, he offered no price, only himself, dejected, pitiful. And I [Ronny’s mother] could not bear the expression on Janet’s face when she said, ‘No. No, Ronny. No.’” (ON 19). Janet now seems different, almost disgusted by Ronny, who is suddenly infected with something: a lust for women. Obviously the flower was not infertile after all: it was able to impregnate people with its lust, but it acted brutally in doing so. The ending is ambiguous: “Janet and Ronny were still standing at the dwarf pears, and again I could not see his face. His head was enclosed by Janet’s long moonlit hands and overhung by her thick brown hair. I wonder if the Arcantythian will ever bloom again.” (ON 20) Janet did not reject Ronny as it had previously seemed – rather she appears to have transformed into the flower, her hands explicitly resembling the petals of the flower, she holds Ronny as the flower did before. As the flower lured animals into its calyx (ON 16), so Janet seems to have caught Ronny. The unanswered question is what Janet is going to do with him: is she going to kiss him, to marry him or to eat him – or maybe all at once?

34 Suddenly Ronny is full of devotion to Janet, while she appears to be the strong one: she had combated the flower and thus seems to have achieved the dominant position. Not that this implies that the sexes have changed simply because of that new positions – rather that the flower appears to have represented a turning point, changing people’s behavior towards the other sex.

35 While the flower seems to have had some influence on the people of this world, this also marks a large departure from Bakhtin's theories: The story does not take place in a carnival world, it is neither a special holiday nor an alternative world. It is the conservative, puritan world of New England, a world interlaced with materialism and sexual suppression – however the world itself is not changed. In its ejaculation, the flower seems to be mocking society, to be cursing it - literally spitting on it. However, the flower then collapses and falls to ashes and it remains uncertain whether it will ever bloom again. Where the story diverges most from Bakhtin's ideas is that the flower had been – literally and metaphorically – planted in good soil. It is the society that is problematic, it “produced” and owns the flower.

36 There is some tension created between the mouth of the flower and the eyes of the characters in the story. It is important to note where the characters look: the mother watches her son, Janet watches Ronny and both watch Ronny kissing the plant – which is nearly the only physical contact to take place (except for at the very end; when Janet's hands around Ronny's head suddenly remind the reader of the flower's mouth). While the mouth in Bakhtin's theory represents the freedom of the Grotesque, the constant gazing (especially at the flower's sexual act) shows the distance of the society. The characters remain at a distance, and even if they are participants in their impure world, they hardly dirty their hands. Moreover, the spitting becomes an act of transgression: it involves the people in the sexual act and does not give them a chance to flee.

37 While the English version ends with a narrative zoom onto Janet's hands around Ronny's head, this is not the case in the German version. While there are otherwise only small differences between the two versions, the German edition has an additional ending, going on after the zoom to Janet and Ronny:

Ronny machte sich los, stand gerade und lachte beglückt. Ich hörte wie sie sagte: “Oh, ja, Ronny. Natürlich. Wenn einer eine Blume so küssen kann, dann kann er auch ein Mädchen lieben.“ Mein Sohn sah lächelnd in ihr Gesicht und fragte: “Wirst du mich so halten können wie die Arcanthythia?“ [...] “Oh ja”, sagte sie. “Und ich werde sehr aufpassen betreffend halboffener Knospen und verschlossener Blüten. Ich laß keine nah an dich heran, verlaß dich darauf.“ Ich gab den beiden heimlich meinen Segen. Und trat dann wie von ungefähr dazu und fragte: “Glaubt ihr, daß die Arcanthythia je wieder blühen wird?“ “In sieben Jahren kann viel geschehen“, sagte Ronny. “Wer weiß.“ Und Janet sagte träumerisch: “Wenn ich eine kleine Tochter bekomme, nenne ich sie nach einer Blume.“ “Selbstverständlich“, sagte Ronny. “Wir nennen sie Rose. Oder Margerite.“ Da wußte ich, daß alles in Ordnung war.

This terribly happy ending can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it is reminiscent of the artificial happy endings in melodramas, where a happy ending is required, however implausible it may seem in relation to the developments in the story before. This reading is

plausible, because an important part is missing in the German version: the spitting. Here the flower simply collapses after blooming - having no orgasm-like outbreak or associated rebellion against society. This can lead us to postulate that Landshoff was perhaps forced to write another ending to make the story more acceptable, which would demonstrate how negative the reception of grotesque and experimental writings in post-war Germany had been. It might be that the story itself, due to its topics of incest and homosexuality, was considered so scandalous that it had to be moderated with this alternative ending.

38 However there is another possible interpretation: the happy ending is not so happy after all. Janet and Ronny seem to behave like sleep walking and the dialogue is written in the style of a text decades older. The flower is omnipresent in their words, they cannot talk to each other without the flower – the flower is still there, as a third partner. It will even become a part of their family, becoming the godmother/ godfather, at least in name, of their child. What is more, the mother is as omnipresent as the flower. She is constantly near the couple and will probably never leave them – as if she were obsessed with them both. The dialogues themselves are quite funny: they suddenly obscure all the sexual openness which had appeared before in conventional words. Although everybody knows from the earlier story what is actually meant, this is hidden prudishly again. Not only does this dialogue itself seem strange, it is made stranger still by the voice of the mother constantly slipping into a conversation which should be exclusively between the two lovers. Thus in the discourse of the German version there appears to be an internal rebellion against the pure meaning of the words by creating a strangeness in them.

39 The suddenness of the happy ending is also absurd: No explanation is provided for the characters' sudden changes of mind. Janet holds Ronny as if he were prey, but subsequently wishes to be held like that herself. All of this happens within the context of marriage and partnership, which reveals much black humor. After everything the flower had done, Janet's wish to be held like it or to be kissed like Ronny had kissed the flower seems simply absurd. Their "love" is planted in the same strange soil as the flower was and the happy ending comes so suddenly and is so improbable and unexplained, that it could be ironic and appears rebellious in its indecisiveness.

40 There is no reason given by the magazines for the different versions. *The London Magazine*, was at that time edited by John Hartley, who was always trying to encourage experimental writing (c.f. *The London Magazine*). The German magazine *Texte und Zeichen* and its editor Andersch also "promoted the avantgarde revival" (Parker 163) and the magazine was said to be – compared with other German literary magazines – to have

“extremsten Charakter” (Kasack). This description is from a review of Arno Schmidt’s novel *Seelandschaft mit Pocahontas*, a novel which had been published in the first issue of *Texte und Zeichen* and caused a scandal, including a notification, due to accusations it would be pornographic and blasphemous. Thus, despite *Texte und Zeichen* efforts to be as avant-garde as possible, it might be that a less controversial ending to the novel was required to reconcile readers and prevent possible new notifications. This is speculation; however the text has a kind of grotesque form, with unclear versions and no distinct original.

41 But the openness relating to sexuality and its emphasis were handled differently than in the works of the Weimar years: in *Die Vielen und der Eine* a new life was celebrated, juggling roles of gender and sexuality. Everything was fashion and costume, but also amusing and easy-going, mocking only the strictness of the – literally and metaphorically – old-fashioned (like Percy’s grandfather). In Landshoff’s later works this happiness had faded. The rest of it seems constrained by a restrictive surrounding – which might be a reason for the use of the fantastic to make everything sexual more tolerable.

42 This is most visible in the treatment of homosexuality: while in *Die Vielen und der Eine* the homosexual couple is described as positively as the heterosexual couples, in *The Opening Night* homosexuality is described by the anxious mother as dark and strange. The easy-going lightness is replaced with a gloomy strictness, although it is interwoven with black humor. Even if gender and sexuality are no longer treated as fluid and borderless, they are still regarded in the later stories with an ironic smile. The bourgeois society, rejecting everything unknown, is again the subject of mockery – only that in the later works no more exceptions are possible: there are no more young heroes living beyond conventions.

43 Neither work creates a complete “Grotesque of gender”, but both remain close to Bakhtin’s ideas in their own distinct way. *Die Vielen und der Eine* celebrates openness in every possible respect, partially as a notion of openness of the body – an idea which is reflected in Bakhtin’s theories, albeit without the role of gender. But while Landshoff’s writings focus on a universal openness of the body, to the extent that the body is so open it is no longer male, female or even hermaphroditic, they also become somehow vague by not providing any distinct descriptions. This vagueness collides with the variegation and concreteness explicated in Bakhtin’s theory, yet also widens it to include notions of eternalness and universality.

44 The short story *The Opening Night/ Durch die Blume*, is similar in a different way: the description of the flower is very analog to Bakhtin, though it exaggerates the grotesque aspects and becomes thus hard to withstand. The flower is depicted extremely graphically and

is also the only body described in such way, but in the end it dies or at least vanishes, but leaves the world partially transformed – as if at least something grotesque survived.

45 Despite the humor of the '20s being different to that of the '50s, it can be seen that Landshoff did not lose her wit – and that it was more than a refuge. Ranging from sailors to sexual flowers, her ways of writing about gender had undergone a clear transition from writing with an easygoing freedom to using very physical and often vulgar descriptions, from a utopian vision to a nearly nightmarish one. However, gender remained one of the main subjects in her works. Bakhtin's theory becomes very helpful in the examination of the portrayal of gender when it is based on ideas of transgression, even if Landshoff sometimes transcends or undermines such ideas in her works. Thus, while Landshoff's works can be elucidated with Bakhtin's theories, an interpretation limited to this would not be complete, but her works can also help to broaden the scope of Bakhtin's theories to cover aspects of gender.

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