



External Space

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We've Met Before **Maya Ben David** **February 16th – May 9th, 2016**

My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean, a Scottish folk song with fuzzy origins, twists and distorts, confusing and attracting the viewer as they try to make sense of the gestaltian bricolage of Maya Ben David's *We've Met Before*. This grating nostalgic tune is incongruously matched with an dancing, pink-haired hentai-appropriated girl¹, but both evoke a shared craving... a pining to reach across distances—whether physical, digital or between species. Written more than 200 years ago, some believe *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean* was penned for the defeated—and later exiled—Jacobite leader Charles Edward Stuart, but more popularly the song is sung by those pining for one's 'bonnie', a term not attributed to any particular gender, but a stand-in for the object of one's lonely longing desire.

Vorarephillia comes from the Latin *vorare* meaning to swallow and *philia* from Ancient Greek, meaning love, and as vorarephilia within the contemporary medical context is categorized as a paraphilia, a sexual fetish/disorder that exists mostly in the realm of shared fantasies.² Vore is characterized by a desire to engage in the imagined act of being swallowed or swallowing whole another in the pursuit of erotic pleasure, which is, like other more impractical sexual acts, usually imaged or played out in fantasy. This phantasmagorical community thrives within the disembodied, yet curiously

¹ Hentai in Japanese according to M. Ortega-Brena means "changed or strange figure" that can be used to denote metamorphosis aberration, and sexual perversion or abnormality. In modern Japan hentai magna refers to a specific genre of magna or anime that features extreme or perverse content. In English, hentai has become a catch-all phrase for anime or magna depicting explicit forms of sexual activity and animated sexual experiences in in Ortega-Brena, Marion. "Peek-a-boo, I See You: Watching Japanese Hard-core Animation." *Sexuality and Culture*. 13.1. (2009): 18. Web

² Vorarephilia. Wikipedia. Web. Accessed 5 Feb. 2016

embodied plane of VR, and anime culture.

Online vore forums like Eka's Portal is a space for vore enthusiasts to congregate, theorize, and solicit partners, either as prey or predator—a process often accompanied by debates addressing the contentiousness of gender divisions and identifications of such roles. Anime, and hentai in particular, more than live action films, is a malleable conduit for the expression of vore fantasies. The visible two dimensionality of the animated hentai figures (usually well-endowed female figures) precipitate the gap of recognition between the two dimensional character and the viewer's physical body. This gap in recognition, scholar M. Ortega-Brena argues is distinguishable between viewer and the stylized representations — the hentai girl's animated breasts trigger a series of “barely conscious analogies” and invite a “heightened sense of sensorial input.” The viewer is on some level is aware of the unreality of the animated characters, but is presented with enough signifiers to activate the mind in search of sensorial input from the real. M. Ortega- Brena suggests it's through this tension between the real and unreal that the viewer is able to fill in these scenarios with their own “corporeal awareness” or the “imaginative projection of one's corporeality.”³ This slippage between the real and unreal, are an ample playground for enacting impossible fantasies restricted by the limitations of the human body like vore.

Vore itself is the umbrella term under which sub genres exist: soft vore, which finds an allegiance with BDSM, and is complexly intertwined with murky gender politics that are constantly in a precarious dialogue attempting to negotiate the tricky territory of domination and submission. Undeniably, highly eroticized female figures are often the focal point of these soft vore fantasies, which Ben David exposes for their unequal power dynamics with numerous eroticized female figures being both the object of consumption and the penetrated, from hentai girls to cheerleaders.⁴ However, unlike hard vore, soft vore refuses to transgress the boundary that permits the mastication of

³ in Ortega-Brena, Marion. “Peek-a-boo, I See You: Watching Japanese Hard-core Animation.” *Sexuality and Culture*. 13.1. (2009): 18. Web.

⁴ Female predators being more widely accepted than male, as a female predator is sometimes described as being penetrated, and doubly the female characters are often sought out prey. From forum discussions on Eka's portal. <http://aryion.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=18&t=45233>. Web. Accessed 3 Feb 2015.-

flesh (furry, anime or human). Cannibalism is not the objective, which would render the participant inactive, although absorption of the victim by the predator occasionally does occur through the natural processes of digestion.

In female genital vore, also referred to as vaginal vore a sub-genre that is rife with Oedipus complexes and maternal fetishisms, the individual enters through the vaginal canal to nestle into the womb initiating a regression, or an un-birthing.⁵ Ben David's *We've Met Before* is an act of ingestion, consensual or otherwise. Through the work, the viewer is slurped, gulped and taken in via various canals and deposited in the insides of their 'pred.' Simultaneously a meta-consumption occurs between the viewer and the screen as each of the layers of the video, overlap, fade, and fold into one another -- our pink-haired guide is particularly vulnerable to the dissolution and reconfiguration of the digital code

Aspects of vore can be traced back into various cultural expressions—illustrations from Hokusai Katsushika 1814 novel *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*, the quintessential example of Japanese erotic art called shunga⁶ depicts the sexual engulfing and domination of woman by octopus. Although the devouring of the whole body is absent in shungu, there is an emphasis, both in style and in objective, on the sexual consuming of one's prey/lover (often female), suggesting a possible genealogical connection to contemporary hentai vore. But vore-like tendencies are also found within a number of folklore, fairytales, and biblical tales that tell of human victims engulfed by wolves, whales, cats, while the human remains intact and sentient throughout the inner space voyage.

Jonah is one such biblical character and makes an appearance in *We've Met Before*. In the work, he appears as a low-budget, shabbily drawn cartoon reminiscent of those popular in Christian Sunday schools shown in musty church basements. In this

⁵ Unbirthing as described on Eka's Portal involves some sort of digestion, and "consists of an umbilical cord and/or age regression, absorbing both physical and spiritual energy until the victim is either at a younger point, or absorbed completely, going back into other lives and absorbing the soul entirely." <http://aryion.com/content/unbirth>. Web. Accessed 28 Jan. 2016.

⁶ Shunga is a terms for Japanese erotic art that is usually made using woodblocks that reached its height of popularity during the Edo period from 1603 to 1867 in in Ortega-Brena, Marion. "Peek-a-boo, I See You: Watching Japanese Hard-core Animation." *Sexuality and Culture*. 13.1. (2009): 21. Web.

biblical tale from the Hebrew bible, Jonah is cast overboard, given over to the mercy of ocean and finds salvation during his three-day respite in the belly of a whale. By weaving together hentai, furry fandom, biblical stories, and the proverbial cheerleader eating mascot trope⁷, Ben David transverses linear time and provokes connections between historical contexts to create “one long vore video.”⁸ Ultimately, it is a video that belies some sort of collective preoccupation and infatuation with the act of sensual consumption.

Vore may have more recently found a kindred spirit in the plasticity of the digital realm, but an animus desire to consume or be consumed predates the emergence of the computer age. Returning to the opening song of the video, *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean*, there is a deep rooted and insatiable loneliness that presumes it can only be satisfied by the physical presence of another being. Vore is a nuanced and fluid space that is both straightforward and complicated in its handling of gender—the predilection in vore imagery to either hunt or penetrate the female figure is undeniably problematic. But at the same time there is also internal and inescapable loneliness inherent in the idea of consuming or being consumed. This insatiable desire to intimately bond with another being—whether by searching endlessly for one’s bonnie, or swallowing them whole—belies a very basic human yearning across an almost impossible expanse between two beings.

- Amber Christensen

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⁷ Even in 2010 a YouTube clip of the Toronto Raptors mascot devouring a cheerleader went ‘viral’ with close 3 million views. Engelhart, Katie. Raptor devours cheerleader: Hey haven’t we seen this before? Macleans. 2 March 2010. Web.

⁸ An observation made by Maya Ben David in conversation with author.