

VISUALIZING THE THIRD REICH

In her graphic novel *Voices in the Dark*, Ulli Lust looks back into history

By BRIGID ALVERSON

Austrian comics creator Ulli Lust burst onto the English-language comics scene in 2013 with *Today Is the Last Day of the Rest of Your Life*, a hefty graphic memoir of her summer as a rebellious 17-year-old hitchhiking around Italy. The book was chosen as a *PW* Best Book of 2013, won both the indie-comics-focused Ignatz Award and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for best graphic novel, and was nominated for an Eisner Award. Now Lust is back with a fictional graphic novel that is equally compelling but very different: *Voices in the Dark*, to be published in English by New York Review Comics on October 10. It's an adaptation of Marcel Beyer's 1995 novel *The Karnau Tapes*, a story of the Third Reich that

intertwines the lives of the children of Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's notorious minister of propaganda, with the fictional tale of a sound engineer who is obsessed with collecting and cataloging human voices.

Lust, who turns 50 this year, didn't start drawing comics until she was almost 30, but she has been making up for lost time. In addition to her memoir, *Voices in the Dark* (which was published



novel had many elements that attracted her. She was fascinated by the book's focus on sound and by the challenge of representing it in a visual medium, and she thought that the intricate structure of the novel, with its two intertwining stories, would be interesting to translate into the language of graphic novels. Lust also wanted to tell a story with a female protagonist, and one of the main characters in the book is the oldest Goebbels daughter, Helga.

Lust was intrigued by the six Goebbels children, who were surrounded by the war and even incorporated it into their games, although their parents tried to shield them from it. She says: "I like that these girls were in the center of the evil during the Second World War, like in the eye of the hurricane. They played the war. It's really creepy. I think it's a very interesting setting for a Second World War story."

Several years ago, Lust drew some short comics based on essays by German schoolchildren written during the war. "It was a terrible situation, but for them it was their life and they had to manage somehow to survive," she says. She saw something similar in the six Goebbels children.

The downside of adapting the book was spending so much time focusing on Hitler's bunker, where the last part of the story takes place. The narrative of the

in Germany in 2013 as *Flughunde*), and short pieces that are available on the Electrocomics digital comics site, Lust has published a new graphic novel in Germany, *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein* (How I tried to be a good person). It's a story about the relationship between two men, one Austrian and one African.

With *Voices in the Dark*, Lust was looking for material to adapt, and Beyer's

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novel mirrors real-life events: the Goebbels family took shelter in Hitler's bunker as the Allied troops drew near to Berlin, and at the end, Joseph and his wife Magda murdered the children and then committed suicide. The fictional Karnau also spends time in the bunker.

"I had to stay two years in the bunker," Lust says, speaking figuratively. "That was terrible. I worked on it a long time, and when I work, I am in the story."

Lust also visited other sites mentioned in the book, including the Goebbels home, which has now been abandoned, and she watched the many Nazi propaganda films that featured Hitler and the Goebbels family. The extra research was important, she says, because the graphic novel includes visuals that Beyer didn't have to concern himself with. "The children are real figures, and he did them quite well," she says. "But I had to show how it feels. I had to show these people in these rooms, and I needed their real faces."

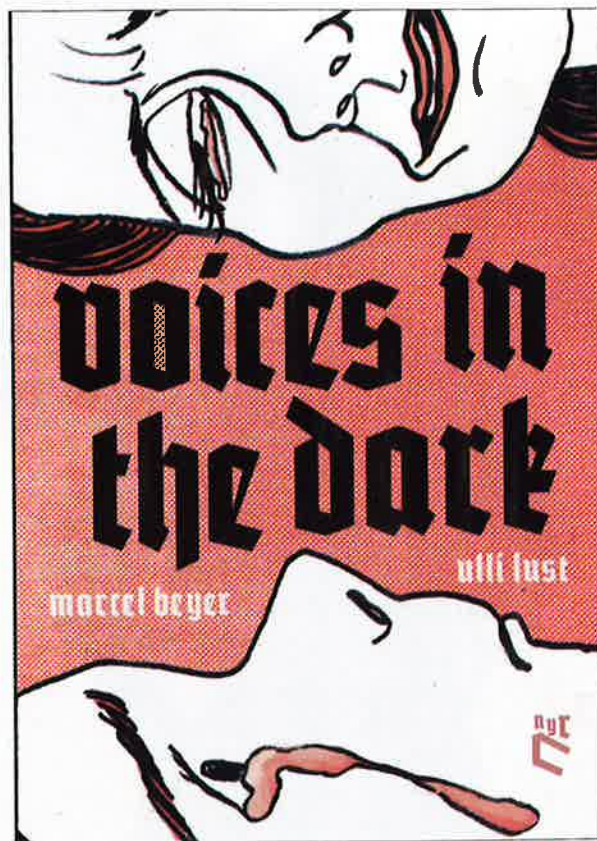
Despite this difference, Lust sees the book as one that should appeal to a general readership—novel readers, like herself, not just comics fans. "It's theme based, not medium based," she says.

Lust grew up reading more novels than comics. In Austria, she remembers reading very few comics aside from *Prince Valiant*, Harold Foster's classic 1930s comics strip, set in the days of King Arthur and Camelot, which ran in the local paper. But the artistic impulse was always there. She studied textile design as a teenager, and though she quickly decided that it was not for her, she did learn something valuable: how to develop ideas by sketching. "Sit and sketch until something happens," she says. "It's a very important process for a designer or an artist."

Armed with this technique, she taught herself how to illustrate chil-

dren's books. Art school was not an option as long as she was in Vienna. "They didn't want students who had narrative drawings in their portfolio," she says. "They [believed] that narrative drawings were lower than abstract drawings, and they didn't want to teach it."

Things changed when Lust moved to Berlin, where she currently lives, at the age of 28 to attend art school. "It was a very small school with 12 students, and



we could do everything," she says. "The group of students was very interested in comics, so we went together to festivals and we had a very good energy."

At that point, Lust discovered American and Canadian alternative comics. She was an enthusiastic reader of the works of Eddie Campbell and Alan Moore (who collaborated on the acclaimed graphic novel *From Hell*), whose work she feels influenced her own.

After doing some short comics, Lust decided she wanted to create a longer work, and she began *Today Is the Last Day*

of the Rest of My Life. "I need the long flow," she says. "I cannot pack it into a concentrated, short story. I like the novel format, maybe because I am a novel reader too—I like big books when I am reading." *Today* took her five years to complete; it was first published in German in 2009.

While drawing *Today*, Lust says she spent a lot of time reliving her early adventures, but from a safe distance: "I enjoyed drawing it very much, and to draw such a dangerous story from a safe place like a drawing table was fun. I was chewing a very juicy piece of meat."

Her previous project, a historical comic about theater in Berlin, had required a lot of research. This one did not. "I have the research in my head," she says. "I know how the protagonist feels, and I can do everything without wondering, will I offend him?"

Lust may return to memoir again—"if there is a story, absolutely, but not every part of my life is that interesting," she says. She's looking into other possibilities: "One option would be something historic about female figures in art. I would appear as narrator and talk about what kind of research I did. Let's see if I can manage it. This will be very difficult for me because the writing has to be more serious."

At any rate, after years of work, Lust feels confident enough to tackle whatever comes her way. "Now I think I can draw what I want to, what I have in mind," she says. "It feels extremely freeing, to be so experienced you can just express your ideas. It's a wonderful and great feeling which I didn't have for a long period in my life, and now I enjoy it very much, doing one book after the next." ■

Brigid Alverson writes regularly about comics for PW.