

THE shit show

Loose projects, 11 January to 27 January 2007

The car is churning up the highway, clipping small towns as it goes, swallowing the familiar signs and landmarks and leaving them quivering in its wake. The half open passenger window roars with wind-noise as it provides crude relief from the summer heat. Now and then I have to close it so that I can hear my french tapes... je voudrais bois du vin, et vous? Vous voulez bois ce soir? A quelle heure? Six heure ou sept heure? Je ne, je n'aime, je..... They are speaking too fast for me! Merde! Now that's one French word which arrives trippingly to my tongue. And it refers to a subject which I have cause to ponder in these two weeks as I wander the north coast.

Merde eh! Imagine my enthusiasm at the prospect of writing on the lyrical theme of shit! Actually, given what a fascinating and, well, essential, subject it is, I am surprised to find so few texts about it... I looked through a book of famous film lines and there was nary a mention... they had a section of quotes about faces but none on faeces! I don't know that I have ever seen an article in other mainstream media about the pleasures of a good crap... or even about many of the other intriguing social, cultural, biological, and personal off-shoot points of interest to which the subject lends itself.

Of course, silence on the subject of shit is in keeping with long held historical-cultural mores around it - it has been socially segregated in fact and in word - shit, and its various connotations, is taboo.

This silence may be partly because the words one might use to name shit are actually profane... so cultural taboos about what is acceptable are activated. If you can't mention its name, how can you talk about it? Even the words which are not four letter ones like "defecate" and "excreta" have a discomfort about them. And of course the object itself is completely untouchable - wherever possible locked away and segregated into that one little room...

It makes some sense - human faeces as a waste product, smelly, potentially germ carrying, the rotting detritus of our biological processes... yet this characterisation speaks not at all of the fabulous, exquisitely organised, pure relationship between what we take into our bodies to sustain them and the later act of voiding oneself of the vestigial waste products. Biologically speaking, shit is part of a highly evolved and superbly orchestrated cycle of survival.

Unavoidable when talking about shit are thoughts about that quintessential feeling that the act of shitting provides: it is such an enjoyable, life affirming event. When pushed most people will escape the shackles of social taboo and acknowledge just how enjoyable this everyday (if you are lucky!) experience can be. Even as we incorporate it as a standard part of our routine, habituate to it and ignore it, there is still, conscious or unconscious, a frisson of pleasure to be derived from that moment of expulsion, every time. What a simple, bodily delight

it is if we are mindful in the moment and take the time to notice it. It is true that the pleasure relates to the excretion of the shit... perhaps I am making an argument that shit is bad, since excreting it from one's body is so good... but then the feeling of completeness would not occur if the shit did not exist in the first place, so sophistry brings me to the inevitable conclusion that shit is good, even if it is bad. Or perhaps shitting is good because shit is bad... But the shit itself, the object, can be taken as a sign, in the Saussurien sense, of the intangible pleasure experienced during its expulsion from the body.

Although discussion of one's culturally inferred "private" bodily functions doesn't generally occur outside the gastroentologists office, at least in psychoanalytic history the importance of the act of excreting has been explored. Freud's fascination with human sexuality and his drive to develop a structural approach to the human mind meant that he described the 'anal stage' as a stage in the infant's developing sexuality before she moves to the more "mature" 'genital stage'. Aligned with this sexuality was a sense of having control over something: the ability to withhold or give and seek satisfaction at will. I'm not convinced that it was valid to invariably connect defecating with sexual pleasure and I'm damn sure he should not have assumed that the child must move away from experiencing this pleasure! However at least he acknowledged the act of defecating as a source of human satisfaction. I can't help but wonder though, with Freud's propensity for obsessing about issues which were of concern for him personally, whether his interest in anality suggests he may just have suffered from chronic constipation.

As I continue my journey up the highway, intermittently practising my French and delivering myself to various households as I go, my personal rhythms, which rely on my daily rituals, become unsettled. The issue of my own digestive cycle becomes more pertinent. It's not surprising really: travelling is the one activity which can rock the daily rhythm of arising, having a cup of tea and then feeling those sweet familiar yearnings in the lower bowel. There is nothing more thrilling than hitting the road and not much can sully this delight, but if anything could, it would be the assault on digestive regularity that travelling seems to inevitably unleash.

As I idly glance down at the toilet bowl after my own expulsion of waste, just checking.... I don't know what... its existence? Its shape, colour, texture? I experience this as an automatic, perhaps instinctive gesture, and wonder if it is so because shit-inspecting is a evolutionarily adaptive activity, a way of gauging health and nutrition.. I suddenly notice that the satisfaction of the crap is rendered complete if I am also satisfied in some ill-formed way by what I see afterwards.

The amazing cleverness of the plan of human evolution! Is there a connection with the fact that shit smells in a way which is unappealing, aversive for humans, and the fact that it is a potential source of ill-health and bacteria... isn't that incredible, from an evolutionary/biological perspective? Yet

when shit breaks down or dries, and is useful for fertilisation, it loses its smell, it becomes much more approachable, just at the time it becomes much more useful. Of course it is its smell which has partly helped it achieve its position as outcaste... what would our relationship with it be if it didn't smell?

Taken for granted though it is, separating ourselves from our bodily waste is a deceit, a privilege of wealthy people living in countries which can afford sewerage systems. That is, in cities anyway... I guess country people not matter where they live are able to easily bury shit, return it to the soil, allow it to break-down and begin again at the other end of the life cycle. The use of 'night soil' by gardeners strikes me as a lyrical, beautiful thing, and not only because of this poetic renaming and reconstruction of shit as a thing of mystery and beauty, but because it is so earthy, so real, to use it to fertilise the growth of our food, which will later be rendered into "night soil" once more.

During my pedestrian and domestic little driving trip, meandering up the north coast highway, I immerse myself in a rather more exotic journey, living vicariously through Paul Theroux and "The Great Railway Bizarre". Here he often sees, in the fields and plains of India, families stretching, stretching the negligible resources at their disposal to provide themselves with the very basics of a self-actualised life: food and shelter. He describes frequently the use of cow pats, watches them being flattened and patted, never identifying what they may be for since he is flying so fast past on his express. Probably they were used for sealing the found-object shanties or for feeding the fires. Another constant sight is that of people squatting to relieve their bodies of its least discrete waste products – there is no room for discretion in poverty, and this cultural reality may have been accepted as a historical fact by these people by now... no shame, no hiding, life and death, sustenance and its waste products: all equally privileged parts of the same story: life.

Although for the most part we are segregated from shit, we do make the opportunity to connect with it through jokes, puns and language. The fertile, even fecund, world of jokes and inferences, the fart joke, the poo joke, joking being a chance we have to reconnect with the taboo, even use its taboo nature of as an opportunity to get some illicit pleasure from that which we are meant to avoid. So, what is brown and sticky and found on the ground? I And who was that guy in the red suit who brought the smelly presents last month?2

There is a certain visceral satisfaction in using words like crap and shit as pejoratives perhaps related to a need to reconnect with these taboo subjects which are so intimately connected to our bodies, yet from which we are forced into estrangement. We dally with the forbidden when we use swear words like fuck, shit and crap, hence the existence of a scholarly journal – Maledicta - which exists to sift through the intricacies of the use of the abject in language and communication. And some go much further, encouraged by De Sade and his cohort's embracement of the taboo, indulging in sub-cultural sexual behaviours and fetishisation of shit in scatological practices.

I realise as I write that I am full of shit! I genuinely find it a fascinating and compelling subject, an crucial inalienable part of our lives which is however relegated to the symbolic, the inferred, the disguised, the hidden. There is something entertainingly symbolic about this fact also - the crucial part of our lives which is denied: an analogy for the Freudian unconscious: that part of our personality, the part of ourselves which we cannot bear to acknowledge even exists – our base, id-driven urges, our less polite and pleasant personality features, knowledge of them secreted in our unconscious.

During this period when I've been thinking a lot about shit and had many conversations about it, various thoughts and memories have cropped up (speaking of the unconscious). I've recognised that shit can be unspeakably poignant. Talking about chocolate soft-serve icecream with one of the artists in this show I had a chain of visualisations... and ended up remembering the pale brown meringue-like poos which our cocker spaniel, Vanessa, deposited as she made her unassuming way towards the end of her life. I picture those soft, perfectly peaked, meringues she left on the buffalo grass. They tore at my heart for what they told me about the immanence of her death – obviously my inspection skills were already well honed. Now, picturing those little confections in my mind's eye, I am poignantly reminded of her and her sweetness.

So, yeah, there's so much to say about shit, and I have only cursorily passed over some of these things... some of the things deserve much fuller consideration... shit is part of the rhythm of life and is a powerful force. Say it clear: shit is here!

So, I can fully appreciate the desire of this group of artists to engage through their art practice with this theme so full of depth and complexity, so various in shape, colour and texture. Is it a subject worth pondering and developing, thinking about, acknowledging and making visual? Hey, does a bear shit in the woods?

Anyway, I'm back in town now. Finished my car-trip, and been expelled by the M3 into the streets of Sydney. My bowels are back to their normal peaceful rhythm. I've thought about shit a lot and written down some of what I've thought in a somewhat undisciplined and diarrhoeic manner. Not at all anally retentive. And now I'm feeling quite satisfied thanks.

Virginia Ross

1. A stick
2. Farter Christmas