Sleaze queen Divine in Pink Flamingos.
THE TERRAIN OF THE UNSPEAKABLE

Pink Flamingos and the culture of trash

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To me, bad taste is what entertainment is all about. If someone vomits watching one of my films, it's like getting a standing ovation.

John Waters

Theorizing trash culture presents cultural studies with some awkward problems. The issue is not just the way trash culture tends to position its audience with respect to gender and sexual politics. It is also that the term is used both descriptively and normatively: it designates a range of subcultural practices, but it also suggests a moral attitude, a cultural discourse on what is acceptable as representation — a discourse that emerged in overt confrontation with the guardians of high culture. In recent years the term has been used in the context of a continuing and increasingly sophisticated interest in the obscene, and also of a sustained intellectual inquiry into the dynamics of populism and mass culture, and the conditions of production and consumption in post-industrial society. Within cultural studies there has been a rigorous critique of the ways in which trash culture has come to be understood, how it is used and by whom, and the ambiguous political force it exerts within the domain of popular culture generally.

Philip Brophy has distinguished between the term trash ('all matter of refuse ... all the material left over') and its erstwhile synonym, junk ('all the material injected, invited, avowed, supported'), in terms of their relation to the process of consumption (culture). Brophy's collaborative 'Trash and Junk Culture' exhibition of 1989 skilfully represented the extensive and hierarchical nature of trash culture, from the overtly visible (exploitation advertising, video nasties, pornography) to the subliminal (body-building and wrestling magazines). The exhibition dramatized the extent to which social reality is driven by consumption, and its
themes of hunger, thirst, taste and appetite were contextualized in terms of the obsessive, the unhealthy and the unnatural.

Described by its producers as an 'educational exhibition recommended for the whole family', it drew attention to itself, ironically or otherwise, as a reflexive commentary on trash. Institutionalized within the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, the exhibition removed its subject matter from the contexts in which it was produced and circulated, and accordingly modified its meanings; this particular collection of trash became something to be regarded and thought about as culture. Increasingly, critical self-consciousness sanctions the representation of offensive material in the name of cultural critique. So, for example, Brophy's 1987 film *Salt, Saliva, Sperm and Sweat* has been described as an 'essay film' about how sex and violence 'are used in contemporary cinema, and how "good taste" techniques are used to seduce audiences', and Brophy himself has praised film-maker Russ Meyer for 'seriously dealing with the question, "What is pornography?"'.

If we see trash artefacts as constituting a meta-critical poetics of the obscene, it becomes possible to focus on the ways in which we speak of the unspeakable and develop strategies to legitimate its production and consumption. When *The Naked Lunch* began to receive critical attention in Britain in the early 1960s, it sparked a three-month diatribe in the hallowed pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*. This reactionary crusade invoked all kinds of metaphors to describe Burroughs' work, one of the most common being the analogy with walking through the drains of a big city. The underlying moral objection to Burroughs, which unified the views of all his detractors, was neatly summarized in the description of *The Naked Lunch* as life-denying, 'bogus-highbrow filth'; 'spiritually as well as physically disgusting, and tasteless to an almost incredible degree, it offends against value of any kind ... every bit as much as against public decency'. The so-called 'Ugh' correspondence (published in 1982 as an appendix to the John Calder edition of the book) also contained responses from Burroughs' supporters, who argued that Burroughs' work amounted to an important exploitation of the dark side of the human psyche, comparable to those of Sade and Baudelaire, Beckett and Genet. In the 'Ugh' correspondence, as well as in critical apologies such as Susan Sontag's 'The Pornographic Imagination' (1967), theories of the obscene developed defensively, as rejoinders to hostility and derision.

In recent years, however, more assertive claims have been made. Andreas Huyssen, for example, has argued that the thrust of the historical avant-garde of the first thirty or forty years of this century
was obliterated by conformism. In his analysis of postmodernism and mass culture Huysssen has noted a revival of the avant-garde's subversive iconoclasm. It is not hard to substantiate this claim. The Naked Lunch, for instance, has much in common with Bataille's surrealist classic of agonistic eroticism, Story of the Eye. The blasphemous, confrontational element in Bataille was itself reminiscent of Dada outrage, which, apart from the more traditional artistic forms (Duchamp's 'L.H.O.O.Q.') was channelled through public space, such as billboard posters and manifestos ('we demand the right to piss in different colours,' Tristan Tzara asserted in 1916). The use of the public spectacle as a site of political subversion can be traced, as Greil Marcus has demonstrated, in the slogans and activities of the Situationists of the 1950s and the Sex Pistols in the late 1970s. Similarly, as Frank Zappa has noted in a recent 'autobiography', the Mothers of Invention also conceived of their performances as Dada events.

One day, three Marines, in full dress uniform . . . sat down in the front row . . . I asked them if they knew any songs. One of the guys said that, yeah, they knew 'House of the Rising Sun' and 'Everybody Must Get Stoned'. I said, 'That's great. Would you guys like to sing with us tonight? We'd just LOVE to have Marines singing on stage with us'. They said, yeah, they would.

I said, 'Go across the street to the Tin Angel, have a few drinks, and come back when the show is on'.

When they came back, I brought them up on stage — although it must have been against regulations for them to do this kind of thing in full dress — and had them sing 'Everybody Must Get Stoned'. By that time they were pretty well wrecked, so I suggested, 'Why don't you show the folks in the audience what you guys do for a living'.

I handed them a big baby doll and said, 'Suppose you just pretend that this is a "gook baby". They proceeded to rip and mutilate the doll while we played. It was truly horrible. After it was over, I thanked them and, with a quiet musical accompaniment, showed the ruined parts of the doll to the audience. Nobody was laughing.

The representation and exploration of prohibited aspects of experience has been a staple of the historical avant-garde, and has brought about a liberation of the body as matter, as an organism of activity and consumption, digestion and evacuation. (Brophy's display of 'gross-out toys', which seem to turn the body inside out, makes it clear that this neo-Rabelaisian attention to the body can be found in the most 'innocent' and unexpected places.) The body has always been something of a cultural terror in Western art and morality, and avant-gardism has never been fully accepted as a
reasonable excuse or occasion for its display. When Ezra Pound, that staunch advocate of the new, removed a reference to masturbation from a typescript of the 'Nausicaa' episode of *Ulysses*, he was reinforcing a cultural assumption of his own time that very few of the body's secretions are mentionable. Similarly, Virginia Woolf had to forgo her initial solidarity with Joyce when his characters began to menstruate or urinate. When the American ban on *Ulysses* was finally lifted in 1933, the Hon. Judge John Woolsey commented that Joyce's treatments of the body were emetic rather than pornographic - a statement that aptly expresses the Manichaean conception of the body as something that repels rather than excites.

The conflation of the prohibited and the unnatural is provisional, and changes as morality comes to grips with new attitudes to censorship, permissiveness and sexuality. Menstruation, defecation and urination all feature nowadays in television commercials, usually in relation to products that either conceal them or keep them under control (the removal of condom commercials suggests that ejaculation is still *de trop* on television). But they also feature in less contiguous, more casual ways, such as men discussing insurance while assembled unselfconsciously at the urinal.

When representations of the body that were once considered taboo now turn up in something as pervasive as advertising, it is clear that the terrain of the unspeakable has fairly flexible boundaries. Susan Sontag's now famous articulation of 'camp sensibility' is useful in identifying how purveyors of the obscene have had to reinterpret and extend the boundaries of the unacceptable to keep ahead of a culture that manages to absorb and defuse the transgressive. In her 1964 essay 'Notes on "Camp"', Sontag describes a modern sensibility that is marked by artifice and the 'spirit of extravagance'. Camp is an exaggerated and self-conscious decadence, an elaborate and overdone indulgence in the 'off'. It is all a question of self-consciousness and degree, for even the most recuperated image or suggestion can shift from good to bad taste through overuse, exploitation or theatricalization.

John Waters' *Pink Flamingos* (1972) still occupies an important place as a cult classic of bad taste, and is very much representative of camp sensibility as Sontag described it. *Pink Flamingos* was promoted in America as an 'exercise in poor taste', and Waters has noted in his book *Shock Value* that he made the film for an audience 'that thinks they've seen everything'. The plot revolves around two rival groups of self-proclaimed perverts, who compete for the title of 'The Filthiest People Alive'. Fetishism, exhibitionism, crypto-
bestiality, exploitation of women, sexual violence, defecation and sacrilege figure prominently in this battle. When we witness the forced insemination of a kidnapped and abject hitchhiker (her captors run a baby ring that services lesbian couples), it appears that things have gone far enough. But Waters saves his final outrage for the last frames of the film, when his central character, the sleaze queen Divine, hungrily scoops up and eats a dog turd—a single, unedited shot foregrounded by an accompanying voice-over declaring that what we are seeing is 'the real thing'. Waters, by his own admission, wants to extend the bounds of the obscene, to shock an audience that presumes to be unshockable, and there is a kind of offensive authenticity in the designation of the shit-eating scene as being real. It purports to be a *ne plus ultra*, the ultimate trash statement. It is for many viewers the most memorable and notorious image from the film. Along with a recent example (an early scene in Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* where an unfortunate restaurateur is forced to eat dog shit), it remains a powerful association of abjection and consumption.

Waters' cult heroine Divine exemplifies the stylistic celebration of the tacky and the decadent. She represents cultivated bad taste—a rare quality in Waters' view ('To understand bad taste one must have very good taste''). Indeed, the entire film interprets decadence as high fashion, and revels in kitsch and outrageous retro costumery, quirky popular music of the '60s and early '70s, and an almost obsessive preoccupation with coiffure (especially the beehive). Waters has noted that *Pink Flamingos* is a 'very American film', and one of the effects of watching it is a sense of witnessing American popular culture on parade, with plenty of scratch-and-smell toilet stops along the way. One of the last exchanges in the film delights in the possibilities of fashion and filth, of depravity and style:

**COTTON:** Let's move to Boise, I always wanted to go there.

**BABS:** Boise, Cotton? Why, that might not be a bad idea.

**CRACKERS:** Were you ever there, Cotton?

**COTTON:** Only once. We robbed a transit bus there, remember?

**BABS:** I remember, the number forty-two.

**CRACKERS:** Let's sleep in gas-station lavatories this time, Mama. Fuck permanent residences. It'll strengthen our filthiness.

**COTTON:** Crackers, that's a wonderful idea. What do you say, Babs, let's move to Boise.
BABS: If that's what you want, my children, then that's what you'll get. Boise, Idaho, here we come! I hope Boise's ready for some star residents. Why, I'll have to change my appearance. I think I'll dye my hair another color and start dressing like a dyke.

COTTON: Me, too. I'll get a crew cut.

CRACKERS: Maybe it's about time I started dyeing my hair too.

BABS: What color do you want, honey? I'm gonna make mine hot pink with a DA and Elvis Presley sideburns.13

Such exchanges emphasize the problematic nature of speaking the unspeakable. If we enjoy its camp spectacle of perverted glamour, of fashion violations made in the name of good bad taste, do we implicitly support its misogynistic representations of women, and its construction of a masculine, scopophilic gaze? To critique what is in fact a common response to the film — a view of trash as pleasurable indulgence in bad taste — is to call into question what it actually means to view the film and formulate a position on it. The persistent reflexivity of interpretation and spectatorship these days makes it difficult to relate to any text without being hyper-conscious of other, potentially conflicting views. When addressing a popular culture seminar on transgression last year, for example, I found myself in a quandary as to whether or not I should refer to the film in favourable or unfavourable terms. How to frame it within that discussion became a more pressing concern than the theme of transgression itself.

The blurb describing Waters' films on a 1979 Valhalla cinema poster identifies a world of 'extraordinary moral perversity that is at once vulgar and gross yet exuberant, witty and innovative'. For part of the viewing community implied here, Waters' films provide an opportunity for the unashamed liberation of forbidden thoughts, emotions and practices. The viewers are provided with a generic context in which this is permissible. My memory of first seeing this film (during the halcyon days of the original Valhalla cinema in Richmond) is of an audience laughing and enjoying the film's excesses — the more gratuitous the offence, the heartier the guffaw. Parker Tyler has demonstrated how one of the functions of American underground cinema has been to introduce and record 'realms which have to some degree remained taboo — too private, too shocking, too immoral for photographic reproduction'. Its 'uncritical permissiveness' is symbolic of a kind of infantile eroticism, 'the moral stance of the child who stages absolute rebellion against
parents and all adults'. But such a code, like that of satire, doesn't take into account the fact that there are as many kinds of response to the obscene as there are varieties of obscenity. Totalizing accounts of films such as Pink Flamingos ignore elements of difference within the viewing community, and the sexual/textual politics that are concealed or neutralized by the juxtaposition of terms such as 'vulgar' and 'witty' in the promotional literature.

Scholarly readings of the film are perhaps even more influential, in that they can smooth over and reconcile complex issues of exploitation and subject positioning. A psychoanalytic reading of the film could eloquently portray it as a return of the repressed, a resurfacing of the destructive, anti-social energies of pre-Oedipal auto-eroticism. With its representation of infantile behaviour and perverse pleasures (the dyeing of pubic hair, various fetishes, the eating of human flesh), and its preoccupation with excrement (at one point a turd is presented as a 'gift'), the film appropriates Freud's representation of the pre-Oedipal libido in terms of atrocity ('the grotesque monsters painted by Breughel for the temptation of St Anthony'). But such a reading assumes an audience literate in psychoanalytic theory, and only has significance and value for that audience. Again, in attempting to reclaim offensive matter in terms of symbolic expressions of stages in the development of the psyche, a quasi-scientific reading may naturalize particular drives and confuse important differences between sex and gender, as feminist theorists have noted of Freud's work.

Annette Kuhn has observed that the task of writing about pornography is hazardous for a feminist, because of the very complexity of the questions pornography raises, the difficulty of constructing, distinguishing and sustaining positions, and so of producing coherent political programmes on the issue. This is also the case with theorizing trash culture. Cultural theory offers a diverse range of theoretical positions, yet that very diversity can destabilize any particular position. The identification and articulation of a culture of trash by the institution of cultural studies attests to yet another phase in what Adorno called the 'administration' of culture. As with the administration of the avant-garde, trash is co-opted into pedagogy, scholarship and the mass media, which can then govern how trash is represented and managed, and how its audiences participate in it. In accordance with prevailing theoretical agendas, the 'new humanities' institutionalize and standardize the new and the disruptive. University courses that incorporate attention to trash culture amount to a canonization of the
transgressive, in a way that resembles the institutional appropriation of critical theory. What was once subversive heterodoxy becomes a docile orthodoxy. Formal academic interpretation of trash culture is very much a revenge of conformism, a silencing of the unspeakable's powers of disruption.

Waters himself has contributed to the manufacturing of his work as administered culture. Since gaining notoriety with Pink Flamingos, he has regularly lectured on his films in American universities and colleges, and has been employed as a teacher in US jails, counselling inmates on the value of displacing criminal desires onto film. He has also given regular interviews in which he comes across as a criminal, attempting to secure our sympathy by appealing to his motivations in perpetrating such acts. Two of his later films, Polyester (1981) and Hairspray (1988), are much more 'acceptable' films, Hairspray in particular being a benign celebration of American youth culture of the early 1960s. The establishment of 'John Waters Day' in Baltimore following the commercial success of this film attests to the socialization of the 'anal anarchist'. Jonathan Ross put it well when he observed that with Hairspray 'it seems that the bad boy of Baltimore has finally made good — well, goodish'.

John Waters' films of the late 1960s and 1970s (Mondo Trasho, Multiple Maniacs, Pink Flamingos, Female Trouble, Desperate Living) may be recuperable, and could be anaesthetized by any number of elegantly turned theories. And, despite the terrestrial nature of his most recent films, Waters still has an underground past. The unspeakable is resilient; it defies total absorption. Tobe Hooper's Texas Chainsaw Massacre remains a horrifying and enthralling experience for me despite readings of it (by Robin Wood and others) as a kind of parable of the conditions of life within late capitalism. Commentary, exegesis, theoretical inquiry into the multiplicity of viewing positions, can never simulate or totally efface the experience of visceral encounter, no matter how persuasive they are in reinforcing the oppositional nature of such texts. In a review of the Marion Boyars edition of Story of the Eye, Angela Carter notes that Susan Sontag, in her essay 'The Pornographic Imagination' (appendix to the volume), refrains from mentioning the detail in the story where the Priest is made to quaff his own urine from a chalice (please imagine the preceding sous nature). Carter is trying to point out that, while Sontag attempts to define pornographic literature, she misses the point that the Story of the Eye is 'didactically lewd'. Carter herself, however, fails to perceive the significance of the fact that the story is surrounded by two critical essays, one of which is a
commentary on the text, as well as by a number of personal observations by Bataille himself. Given that it is marketed as a story already being read, and that these readings in one way or another defuse or transform its shock value (Bataille’s recounting of the unpleasantness of his ‘real life’), it seems to me fitting that Sontag refrains from mentioning that particular detail. It remains unmentionable; to take a memorable phrase of Lyotard’s out of context, the essay imparts a ‘stronger sense of the unpresentable’. 20

Carter’s celebration of the obscene, in the face of what she perceives to be Sontag’s Protestant squeamishness, is evidence of the problems of choice facing consumers of trash culture: one can acknowledge its facticity and the need to address it critically, only to encounter the ideological problems that arise from this procedure; or one can participate in its neo-Dada attack on bourgeois morality and revel in its offensiveness, at the risk of appearing oppressive and apolitical. Trash culture is the most recent manifestation of an aesthetics of silence that baffles and defies the practice of criticism, for, apart from the impossibility of describing it without domesticating it, it precludes what Rodolphe Gasche (with Mallarmé in mind) has referred to as ‘the decidability all criticism presupposes’. 21

It would seem that we have not yet developed the language with which to describe the unspeakable and yet retain a sense of its unspeakability, or accommodate trash culture’s questionable politics to the desire to revive a genuinely adversarial culture – one that can defamiliarize the social world, destabilize its habitual perceptions and values, in order to stimulate, through obsolescence if necessary, a radical critique of whatever it is that constitutes normality in our society. For it is quite often this normality that is truly shocking.

NOTES

2 This exhibition was held at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, in March 1989, after its original presentation at the Performance Space in Sydney in July 1988. It included the work of Maria Kozic, Ian Haig and Andrew Haig. Quotes are taken from the accompanying ‘Program Notes’, which are unpaginated.
3 These observations by Adrian Martin and Rod Bishop (respectively) are quoted in Tom Ryan’s interview with Philip Brophy and Rod Bishop, ‘Philip Brophy’s Fantastic Voyage’, Cinema Papers, 71, January 1989, p. 71.
8 In a letter from Pound to John Quinn (8 November 1920), the New York lawyer and patron of modern art, Pound admitted that ‘I did myself dry Bloom’s shirt’. One of the more famous instances of this policing of the vestimentary code involved the Church’s commissioning of ‘trousers’ to be painted on some of the more offensive figures in Michelangelo’s ‘Last Judgement’ in 1564 (Clare Robertson, ‘Italian Painting 1550–1600’, in Rubens and the Italian Renaissance, exhibition catalogue, Canberra, Australian National Gallery, 1992), p. 17.
10 Shock Value, op. cit.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.