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Scenes of the Obscene

The Non-Representable in Art and Visual Culture, Middle Ages to Today

Edited by Cassandra Nakas and Jessica Ullrich



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Preface

Kassandra Nakas, Jessica Ullrich

“The ‘aesthetic’ is a slippery term, with a complicated history in Western philosophy.”¹ This recent claim by Frances Mascia-Lees, expressed in regards to the anthropological underpinnings of aesthetic discourse since its very beginnings in the 18th century, may rightly, and even more so, be made when it comes to the “other of the aesthetic”², the Obscene. The “obscure origin”³ of the word already hints at the fact that at all times, the Obscene has been an unstable and challenged category in Western culture. It remains open to dispute whether the word derived from the Latin “ob+caenum”, i.e. relating to dirt, mud and filth, or, harking back further to Greek origin, from “ob+scaena” (or “ob+skene”), thus indicating the space “against”, or behind, the scene, or stage.⁴ Accordingly, while the general meaning of “obscene” is defined by words like offensive, indecent or disgusting,⁵ the latter etymological thread clearly connects the idea of the Obscene with the realm of representation, for which the (theater) stage is the most obvious embodiment.

The book at hand presents a collection of essays that cast a light on some “Scenes of the Obscene” from the Middle Ages to today, thus taking into account the malleable nature of socio-cultural assumptions and theoretical reflections of obscenity. The contributions focus on historically distinct artistic acts and social sites where established cultural categories and legal norms are violated, with artists and publishers deliberately testing moral taboos and offending the public taste. By examining those, often historical, moments of representing of the “Non-Representable”, or the Obscene, the authors address the question of which, and how, “indecent, offensive or disgusting” issues are negotiated in the respective context, and ask how society and its guardians of public morals and aesthetic sensibility reacted to these transgressions.

The structure of the book follows, in a sense, the ‘representational’ interpretation of the Obscene, with its three sections reflecting the spheres of life (and death) that were meant to be kept out of the public view in classical Greek theater: coprophilic / urophilic acts, sexual acts and any scenes of murder. “Section 1: *Bodies of Transgression*” thus presents three contributions that ponder the defecating, abject or wounded body, the transgressive body that exposes waste and bodily fluids. With obscene imagery of the Middle Ages becoming an increasingly considered topic of art historical study, Anja Grebe’s contribution, “Inside Out. Scatology in Medieval Art”, focuses on the (still neglected) role and function of scatological motifs in medieval culture. She shows how medieval scatology was linked to social norms and hierarchy, thus becoming an artistic strategy and productive power in its own right: “Just as feces are used as fertilizer in agriculture, artists took them as a fecund starting point for artistic creation by overtly displaying obscene material.” A similarly ‘subversive’ character has long been attributed to the manifold depictions of corporeal violence in the art of William Hogarth. Bernd Krysmanski, an acknowledged expert on the work of the 18th century British artist, thinks about common interpretations of Hogarth’s art as didactic “Warnings of Morality”, raising the question if these ambivalent, often sensational everyday scenes of horror and brutal entertainment in the streets of London should not rather been seen as “Downright Twisted Pleasure”. The Abject as an aspect of the Obscene is discussed in Patricia Bass’ essay, where she explores the (covert) role of “The Post-edible in Art”, i.e. of digested or decomposed food especially in the controversial 1993 exhibition at the Whitney Museum, *Abject Art*. Tracing the migration of the term from French theory (Kristeva, Bataille) to American art critical discourse, Bass argues that the latter’s “priorities of embodiment and symbolism” ran counter to the concept’s transgressive potential, annulling its cultural impact.

“Section 2: *Visual Pleasures and Sexual Acts*” brings together essays that reflect pornographic content in early modern Europe, German *fin de siècle* and international contemporary visual culture. Thomas Martin outlines different concepts of the “silent sin” – bestiality – in Western European culture from Antiquity to today, pointing out that the apparently ‘realistic’ depictions of human-animal sexual intercourse

in Enlightenment book illustrations, which replaced the mythologically embellished interpretations of such tabooed subjects, were nonetheless and primarily interpretations of elitist male phantasies, informed by a tellingly clear gender dichotomy. Rococo illustrations of human sexuality offered role models for highbrow pornography in German *fin de siècle*, as Cassandra Nakas demonstrates with some art historically marginalized examples. Rather than offending public taste, these illustrations and publications aimed at “taming” their delicate subjects through aesthetic refinement, thus countering emerging female emancipation movements and expanding photographic pornography alike. Coming back to the topic of human-animal sexual relationships, Massimo Perinelli pleads, from a queer and animal studies perspective, for a “queering” of bestiality, in the sense of not only presenting the Non-representable (in animal porn), but of transgressing even this taboo by thinking the Un-thinkable: “the potentiality of a polymorphous desire that slips the intrinsic logic of animal porn, and yet is its very foundation”.

The final “Section III: *Violence and Death*” meditates upon depictions, and enactments, of (self-)violating and killing acts. Barbara Baert develops a thorough account of the iconography of the severed head in the motif of the *Johannesschüssel*, linking it to an equally exhaustive etymological reading of the very word “obscene”. She reads the culturally powerful phenomenon of the *Johannesschüssel* as an intricate embodiment of the concept of obscenity, averting and attracting the beholder at the same time. In her essay “Cocking the Trigger”, Karen Gonzalez Rice sheds light on a rarely discussed aspect of 1970s performance art: the sexually explicit, self-destructive and highly controversial work by artists Wolfgang Stoerchle, John Duncan, and Paul McCarthy. As Gonzalez Rice argues, the latter’s strategies of displacement and distance helped him establishing a commercial career, whereas the other two artists’ radical exhibition of male sexuality, aggression, and vulnerability resulted in their artistic isolation, infamy and art historical oblivion. The excessive visibility, and thus “reality”, of animal death in contemporary art is at the center of Jessica Ullrich’s contribution. She discusses the artistic and rhetoric strategies of displaying the killing of animals in the work of Hermann Nitsch, Katarzyna Kozyra and Kim Jones, questioning the quasi-ethical, sometimes hypocritical artistic approach by arguing that “a

fragile inevitability of socio-cultural circumstances is transferred into the allegedly just as obligatory logic of an artwork”.

The diachronic focus on three central aspects of obscenity – abjection, sexuality and violence/death – shall help to trace the historical and semantic shifts in conceptions of the Obscene. As the essays in this book demonstrate, artists have always been challenging moral assumptions and value judgments; their socio-ethical interests and aesthetic approaches, however, must be conceived of as just as versatile and shifting as moral concepts are evolving through the ages. Together, they shape the cultural physiognomy of their respective time and society. In a time of full-blown visibility, when the Un-representable (and Un-thinkable) is only a mouse click away, their study can provide some food for thought; after all, it is the eye which functions, beyond the pleasures of the Visual, as a primary means of knowledge.

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Endnotes

- 1 Frances E. Mascia-Lees (ed.): *A companion to the anthropology of the body and embodiment*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2001, p. 3.
- 2 Kerstin Mey: *Art and Obscenity*. London: Tauris 2007, p. 2.
- 3 Eric Partridge: *Origins. A short etymological dictionary of modern English*. London: Routledge & Keganan 1958, p. 446.
- 4 See Partridge: *Origins*, p. 446; Mey: *Art and Obscenity*, p. 6.
- 5 Ernest Klein: *A comprehensive etymological dictionary of the English language: dealing with the origin of words and their sense development thus illustrating the history of civilization and culture*. Vol. 2: L–Z, Amsterdam et al.: Elsevier 1967, p. 1068.

Inside Out. Scatology in Medieval Art

Anja Grebe

The Violet Prank

On August 1, 1979, the Viennese Gerhard Bocek made an extraordinary discovery in his apartment situated on the first floor of his house Tuchlauben 19 in the town center of Austria's capital.¹ In a large room, which must once have served as a banquet hall or ballroom, he found traces of a medieval fresco cycle from *c.* 1400. The scenes, which are considered to be the oldest secular murals in Vienna, run along the upper part of the wall. They do not represent a continuous story, but single episodes from different songs and farces by the Austrian poet and minnesinger Neidhart von Reuenthal (*c.* 1180/90–1240/49), whose works enjoyed constant popularity during the Middle Ages and well into the sixteenth century.²

One scene of the murals is particularly interesting when it comes to the question of obscene representations in medieval art. It shows a group of three men wandering through a landscape with a castle in the background (fig. 1). The man on the right, fashionably dressed in an elegant long-sleeved robe and equipped with a dagger hanging from his girdle, has raised his arms expressing astonishment and horror. Due to the severe damages of the fresco the cause of his dismay can no longer be discerned. From comparisons with better documented murals from the South Tyrolian Trautson Castle,³ from the Swiss towns Winterthur and Diessenhofen, and early woodcut illustrations it becomes clear that the Tuchlauben fresco represents the so-called *Violet Prank*, one of Neidhart's most popular stories.⁴ In this farce, the first-person narrator discovers the first violet of spring while taking a walk through the meadows in the month of May. He quickly covers the flower with his hat in order



Fig. 1: Neidhart Murals: *The Violet Prank*, Vienna, Tuchlauben 19,
Copyright: G. Ulrich Großmann

to show it to his mistress, the Duchess of Bavaria. But when the duchess lifts the hat she finds a pile of shit, left by a malevolent peasant who had clandestinely defecated on the violet. The lost part of the Tuchlauben fresco very probably showed the lady uncovering the turd and insulting the horrified narrator who then cruelly revenges himself on the peasants.

The *Violet Prank*'s plot is built upon a range of intertwining contrasts, in particular the contrast between nobles and peasants ("Dörper"), woman and man, beauty and repulsiveness, fine and putrid smell, delight and disgust, magnificent and abject, flower and turd, lust and horror, showing and hiding, covering and un-/discovering, promise and disappointment, understanding and misunderstanding, crime and punishment. In this contrasting juxtaposition, excrements are clearly put on the 'bad' side. By leaving his excrements on the violet the peasant commits an act of offense against the rules of civilized behavior. This becomes obvious from the reaction of the deceived duchess, who feels herself disgraced by her stinking discovery and falsely accuses the narrator of the malefaction:

Neidhart, this is your fault! / I am very sure of what I say. / You brought disgrace on me / and you will bitterly regret it! / Never before in my life / I have endured so great a humiliation. / Yes, I must put it like this: / I have lost all taste / as my suffering will never stop.⁵

The episode clearly shows that Neidhart's contemporaries associated defecation – though biologically an act of purification – with impurity. The peasant in Neidhart's farce committed a literally dirty act by

defecating on the violet, but the first person narrator also committed an offense by (unwillingly) exposing the duchess to the turd. The indignant reaction of the noble lady and the other courtiers makes clear that feces, especially someone else's feces, were conceived as something indecent, which had to be banned from view. By uncovering the turd, the dirty material invades and sullies the 'pure' world with its unpleasant sight and smell. The existence of feces and related matters was tolerated as long as it was kept private and 'off scene', but once the tabooed substance got public – and hence in sight and literally 'on scene', it was perceived as obscene. It became an offense to the senses and was regarded as something clearly beyond the limits of decency, which must not be exposed to the sight of others.

Imagining that the Tuchlauben fresco once displayed an impressive turd to which all the attention of the figures in the image was directed, the Viennese murals probe the limits of representation. The scene surely caught the eyes of the guests of Michel Menschein, the wealthy Viennese merchant who very probably commissioned the fresco cycle around 1400.⁶ One might wonder about the reasons why Menschein chose this unappetizing episode for decorating his banquet hall instead of some more 'pleasing' scene. According to contemporary reports, Neidhart's pranks were performed in front of bigger audiences – usually nobles or commoners – who enjoyed them as juicy entertainments, and Neidhart recitals may well have been part of Menschein's receptions.⁷ There is no account on contemporary reactions to these and other pictorial representations of the *Violet Prank*, but the majority of the medieval beholders did not seem to be offended by the permanent aspect of the fecal matter.

Taking the Neidhart murals as a starting point, this article aims to analyze the relevance and meaning of scatology in medieval art in both sacred and profane contexts. Following Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim, I define scatology as the verbal or visual representation of both the process and product of elimination of the body's waste products, especially feces, urine, and flatus.⁸ As we will see, the *figurae scatologicae* have been interpreted very differently by modern scholars. Up to now, however, there is no generally accepted explanation of the phenomenon. Compared with the multitude of textual and visual sources related to this topic, the

scholarly literature on medieval scatology is relatively scarce. Most of the research falls into the domain of literary studies, whereas there are only a few contributions devoted to art historical topics. Up to now, there is neither a comprehensive study on scatology nor on obscenity in the Middle Ages.⁹ One of the problems in studying obscene representations in art is the fact that it is almost impossible to fully understand the phenomenon without putting it in relation to medieval life in general. Framed in this way, scatology is no longer seen as something marginalized, but is rehabilitated as an important part of medieval art and culture.

The Dialogue between Solomon and Marcolphus

The *Violet Prank* is not the only poem by Neidhart in which he associates feces with the peasant world. As Erhard Jöst has shown, the narrator who designates himself as a knight constantly mocks the bawdiness of the “Dörper” (pejorative for “villager”) and contrasts their dull way of life to refined courtly manners.¹⁰ Neidhart’s “courtly village poetry”¹¹ generally opposes the noble to the peasant world. The allegedly fecal affinity of peasants plays a major role in an equally popular medieval text, the *Dialogue between Solomon and Marcolphus*. Originally composed as a Latin didactic text in the tenth century, it was translated into the vernacular in the fourteenth century and re-edited in several printed versions throughout the sixteenth century.¹² The satirical dialogue confronts the biblical king Solomon, who is the proverbial incarnation of wisdom, with the filthy, but astute peasant Marcolf. In his answers to Solomon, Marcolf demonstrates his rustic smartness by drawing extensively on scatological imagery. He thus perverts Solomon’s religious and moralistic reflections largely based on biblical proverbs into ‘fecal wisdom’ as the following examples will show:

Solomon: Between good and wicked people the house is filled. /

Marcolf: Between ass-wipes and shit the privy is filled. [...]

Solomon: Four evangelists uphold the world. / Marcolf: Four support-posts uphold the privy, so that the person who sits over it will not fall. [...]

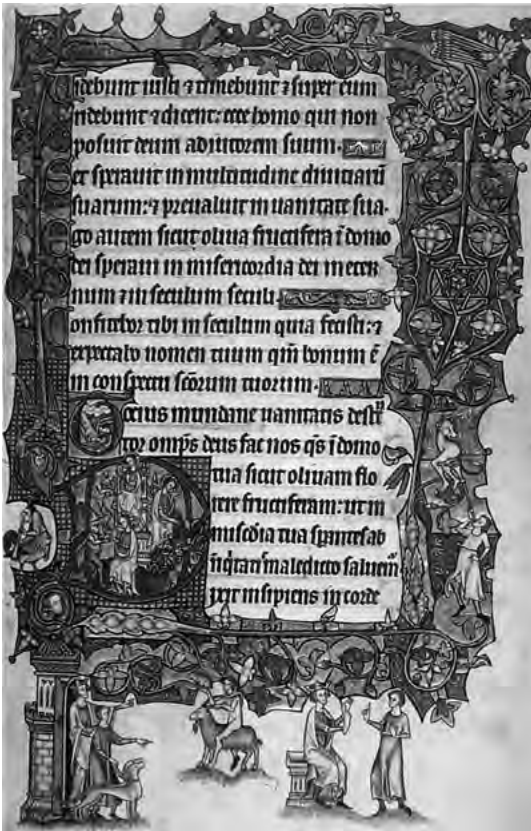


Fig. 2:
Ormesby Psalter, Marginal
Illustration with Scenes
from the Dialogue
between Solomon and
Marcolphus, Oxford,
Bodleian Library,
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from Michael Camille:
*Image on the Edge. The
Margins of Medieval Art.*
London: Reaktion Books
1992

Solomon: Give a wise man an opportunity, and wisdom will be added to him. / Marcolf: Stuff the belly, and shit will be added to you.¹³

From all that is known, the *Dialogue between Solomon and Marcolphus*, at least in its Latin version, was widely used as a textbook in medieval grammar schools.¹⁴ Obviously, its fecal language and ‘dirty’ narrative, which derides the wise king Solomon, were not considered as harmful to young students. Scenes from the *Dialogue* also occur in other more ‘serious’ contexts such as medieval prayer books. In the lavishly illuminated early fourteenth century psalter known as the *Ormesby Psalter*, we find Solomon and Marcolf represented in the margins adorning Psalm 52,