Shortcut

Knee-Deep in Ideology

Slavoj Žižek

Claude Lévi-Strauss's semiotic triangle of preparing food (raw, baked, boiled) demonstrated how food also serves as 'food for thought'. We probably all remember the scene from Luis Buñuel's *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974) in which relations between eating and excreting are inverted: people sit at their toilets around the table, pleasantly talking, and when they want to eat, they silently ask the housekeeper - 'Where is that place, you know?' and sneak away to a small room in the back. So, as a supplement to Lévi-Strauss, one is tempted to propose that shit can also serve as a *matière à penser*: do the three basic types of toilets not form a kind of excremental correlative-counterpoint to the Lévi-Straussian triangle of cooking? In a traditional German toilet, the hole in which shit disappears after we flush the water, is way in front, so that the shit is first laid out for us to sniff at and inspect it for traces of some illness; in the typical French toilet, on the contrary, the hole is in the back, i.e. shit is supposed to disappear as soon as possible; finally, the American toilet presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two opposed poles - the toilet basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it, visible, but not to be inspected... No wonder that, in the famous discussion of different European toilets at the beginning of her half-forgotten *Fear of Flying*, Erica Jong mockingly claims that 'German toilets are really the key to the horrors of the Third Reich. People who can build toilets like this are capable of anything'. It is clear that none of these versions can be accounted for in purely utilitarian terms: a certain ideological perception of how the subject should relate to the unpleasant excrement which comes from within our body, is clearly discernible in it - again, 'the truth is out there'.

Hegel was among the first to interpret the geographic triad of Germany-France-England as expressing three different existential attitudes: German reflective thoroughness, French revolutionary hastiness, English moderate utilitarian pragmatism; in terms of political stance, this triad can be read as German conservatism, French revolutionary radicalism and English moderate liberalism; in terms of the predominance of one of the spheres of social life, it is German metaphysics and poetry versus French politics and English economy.

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The reference to toilets enables us not only to discern the same triad in the most intimate domain of performing the excremental function, but also to generate the underlying mechanism of this triad in the three different attitudes towards excremental

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excess: ambiguous contemplative fascination; the hasty attempt to get rid of the unpleasant excess as fast as possible; the pragmatic approach to treat the excess as an ordinary object to be disposed of in an appropriate way. So, it is easy for an academic to claim at a round table that we live in a post-ideological universe - the moment he visits the restroom after the heated discussion, he is again deep-knee in ideology. The ideological investment of such references to utility is attested by their dialogical character: the American toilet acquires its meaning only through its differential relation to French and

German toilets. We have such a multitude of the toilet types because there is a traumatic excess which each of them tries to accommodate - according to Lacan, one of the features which distinguishes man from animals is precisely that, with humans, the disposal of shit becomes a problem. And, to reach in an even more intimate domain, do we not encounter the same semiotic triangle in the three main hair-styles of the feminine sex organ's pubic hair? The wildly grown, unkept pubic hair indexes the hippy attitude of natural spontaneity; yuppies prefer the disciplinary procedure of a French garden (one shaves the hair on both sides close to the legs, so that all that remains is a narrow band in the middle with a clear-cut shave line); in the punk attitude, the vagina is wholly shaved and furnished with rings (usually attached to a perforated clitoris) - is this not yet another version of the Levi-Straussian semiotic triangle of 'raw' wild hair, well-kept 'baked' hair and shaved 'boiled' hair? One can see how even the most intimate attitude towards one's body is used to make an ideological statement.

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Jong, E. (1973) *Fear of Flying* New York: Henry Holt & Co.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, C. (1969) *Mythologiques, vol. I: The Raw and the Cooked*, (tr. John and Doreen Weightman). London: J. Cape.

Buñuel, L. (1974) *The Phantom of Liberty*. Producers: Serge Silberman & Ulrich Picard, France/Italy: 104 min.