Translation

Translated from the German original by Tereza Kuldova & photography by Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty
Werner, Florian (2011) *Dunkle Materie: Die Geschichte der Scheisse*, © Nagel & Kimche im Carl Hanser
Verlag München 2011 (translated with permission of the copyright owner), pp. 7-15, 169-188.

Excerpts from

Dark Matter: The History of Shit

Florian Werner

From the Depth

Human culture is built on shit. Not only because our cities, the paradigmatic example of our modern civilization, are built above gigantic sewage systems. Not only because our metabolism and with it our life itself would be impossible without the excretion of shit. But also because it is only when we draw a line of separation from shit, we come to know what culture is. Without shadows, there is no light, without dirt, no cleanliness. We need an uncultured opposite in order to be able to think of ourselves as civilized beings. We need shit in order to do away with it and in order to affirm our sophistication. Shit is indispensable to our self-understanding as modern people. This accompanies us throughout our whole life. Already the saint Augustin knew that ‘we are born between shit and piss’, and that it is precisely in this moment that our confrontation with the dark matter begins. It is through excretion that we acquire the social grammar of disgust, of hygiene and a sense for what is pleasant and what not in the realm of smells. We learn that the word ‘shit’ is a taboo, and we learn immediately to use it as a weapon, as a provocation or as a punch line of our dirty jokes. During the anal stage of our development, we learn to control, keep or let go of our bowel movement; this is how we explore the boundaries, openings and muscles of our bodies. And when we turn old, we chat with our excrements – as Alfred Lambert does, the father from Jonathan Franzen’s novel *The Corrections*, who suffers of dementia. From the cradle to the stretcher, shit shapes our understanding of culture, society, health, decency, humour and identity.

And yet, as a rule we do not like to admit to this fundamental meaning of excrements to our life: there is hardly any other matter that is so consistently repressed as the one that emerges on a daily basis within our insides. While only two thirds of the world population have an access to the toilet, and some 2,6 billions of people lack any access to sanitary facilities whatsoever, in the vast majority of our industrialized western world shit has almost completely disappeared from the public eye. If we consider that the inhabitants of a city of the size of Berlin daily produce around 800 tons of shit, then it is indeed pretty astonishing that we only occasionally stumble upon a piece of dog shit (fig. 1). The majority of excrements disappears, invisibly and odourlessly, in the bowels of the city, as if they have never existed.

Naturally, this elimination of excrements from the everyday life is not a new development – since thousands of years, shit has been considered a strange matter that one tried to keep away from and segregated from the sites of eating, sleeping or praying. Even the *Old Testament* provides exact guidelines on how to keep the war camp clear

Fig. 1. '7-eleven' © Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, 2016.

from faecal matter, it advises us to have a place outside of the camp to visit upon the call of nature, as the Fifth Book of Moses suggests. 'And thou shalt have a paddle among thy weapons, and when thou wouldest sit down without, thou shalt dig therewith, and returning thou shalt cover thy excrements' (Dtn 23, 13-14). Old Norse proverbs scold the birds who dirty their own nests with *skitta*, and along with them, also the people who would act in a similar manner. At the end of the 11th century, the first English record of the 'Great Survey' of England and Wales, the so called *Domesday Book*, turned defecation in the cathedral of Chester illegal under punishment. And the Jewish philosopher and doctor, Moses Maimonides, called upon people to remove themselves when shitting as far as possible from their fellow humans: either

into the innermost chamber of the dwelling, or outdoors at least as far away, so that other people cannot hear the bowel sounds.

However, it was first in the beginning of the early modern era that human excretion became a real taboo connected to feelings of shame and embarrassment; that is when people began living in ever closer and ever more complex social systems and the compulsion towards self-control grew as a result. Modern regulations of decency pertaining to excrements have over the time moved from the paper to the psyche: rules that were still in the 16th century codified in moral guide books, were progressively internalized by the majority of adults and thus integrated into their sense of shame and modesty.

Our western understanding of civilization is thus intertwined with the disappearance of shit; the degree of its (in)visibility signifies the position of a country on a scale of civilizational development.

Gradually, along the path of this psychosocial development, the techniques of both hygienic and symbolic cleansing became increasingly sophisticated. In 1857, toilet paper was invented by the American Joseph Gayetty. In 1928, the German businessman Hans

'Hakle' Klenk introduced the first toilet roll with a guaranteed amount of sheets to the market. These days, even the excrements of toddlers are taken care of by disposable diapers stored in diaper pails that completely eliminate the smell of those little turds. The adults flush their shit into the toilet deep hole that has in the past centuries replaced the traditional central European toilet with the 'inspection shelf'. Toilet deodorants and sprays help cover up the smell. Even the sounds of defecation are being silenced these days, and made inaudible for those standing nearby. Japanese toilets equipped with a machine called *Otohime*, or else 'Sound Princess', are enjoying increasing popularity: the machine imitates the sound of running water.

Our western understanding of civilization is thus intertwined with the disappearance of shit; the degree of its (in)visibility signifies the position of a country on a scale of civilizational development. Functional underground canalizations and individual toilets with a lock – those are the harbingers of a modern industrial nation. If they are missing, it is immediately considered a sign of a lower civilizational standard. Is it not rather emblematic that the Latin word for excretion, *excrementum*, has the same root as the word for a secret, *secretum*? Shit is a hidden and mysterious substance. Similar to the dark matter, a construct of theoretical physics that aims to explain the economy of mass in the universe, it is omnipresent and yet invisible. Shit is the reverse of culture; the misshapen child of civilization that one hides from one's neighbour in the cellar. First, it is hidden deep inside of our bodies; and then we discharge it in a silent, often windowless room only to flush it into the depths of canalization.

Shit experiences these days an astonishing renaissance...

But: what goes down must come up, as one could say, modifying the English proverb. Precisely that which is repressed has the tendency to force itself to the surface. Precisely that which is hidden, calls to be freed from the dark sewer grave, in order to be discovered and brought to daylight. The ostracized matter returns like an undead from the depths of the earth and from the unconscious; it knocks audibly against the canal and toilet cover that keep it imprisoned.

Shit experiences these days an astonishing renaissance, and that too precisely in those areas of our culture that traditionally probed the boundaries of the respectable and the permissible. Excrements can no longer be thought apart from the artistic: artworks like Mark Quinns *Shit Head* – a portrait bust created from the artist's own faeces – or Wim Delvoyes' *Cloaca*, the 'poop machine', whose only purpose is to create a substance similar to human excrement, are sure to grab the attention of the fascinated, amused, and outraged public. Movies like *Borat*, *Jackass*, or *Slumdog Millionaire*, engage playfully and even funnily, if one is susceptible to these forms of faecal humour, with shit. Play with faeces and anal eroticism is experiencing a boom in pornography. And even in literature we can find an increasing pleasure taken in excremental transgressions, like the bestseller *Wetlands* by Charlotte Roche, dedicated to the anus and to excretion. The picture book, *The Story of the Little Mole Who Went in Search of Whodunit* has become a bestseller, too, even against its disreputable topic. And in the literature of fact, books like *Bullshit* are also celebrating surprising successes. Shit, as it seems, is *en vogue* (fig. 2).

Fig. 2. 'Floater' © Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, 2016.

But what has turned in this particular moment this most ordinary of all human substances into the currently favoured material in art, cinema and literature? Maybe the reason for the current renaissance of the faecal is the fact that shit can be prosaic, but for that matter no less capable of challenging our late capitalistic society. In an overregulated world, where little is still left to be explored, a world oriented towards maximum efficiency and smooth functioning, shit becomes the last frontier: a seemingly meaningless and valueless substance that resists its own incorporation into the world of market economy. Every day, every human spends a considerable amount of time and energy only in order to create a matter that is immediately eliminated

following its production. The bottom line is: one spends almost a year of one's lifetime with an activity that has no presentable or saleable result. Shit is the absurd and the redundant per se; a lumpy substance in the gears of our economic machine. Its presence questions the ideal image of the rational and profit oriented *homo oeconomicus*.

Moreover, shit represents a kind of authentic matter that has become increasingly rare in our virtual, postmodern and mediated society. A cowpat on the village square, dog shit on the pathway or skid marks on the public toilet cannot simply be erased, clicked away or 'cut and paste' on another place. It may disgust us, but it is nonetheless real. The fascination that one experiences when exposed to Quinn's *Shit Head*, or any other excremental artwork stems from the aura of the real that a deceptive imitation from a man-made material never can achieve. The famous scene from the movie *Pink Flamingos*, where the actor Divine eats hot dog shit, leaves us with a more profound impression than any computer-animated scene from the high-tech DreamWorks Studios. Maybe even the more we are surrounded by simulacra and copies in cinema, art and communication the more we appreciate the presence of shit. From the depths of the mediated bullshit that daily surrounds us, rises the steaming shit – a proud bastion of authenticity.

...Maybe we are missing that innocent childhood when we were not yet subject to the anal-retentive imperative, but could poop when and where the hell we wanted. Maybe we are sometimes dreaming about that lost paradise of shit...

However, in this contemporary nostalgia for shit we can also discern a romantic desire to escape the western world's civilizing mechanisms of repression, or to oppose them through a holistic design for living that does not disavow the stinky shady sides of existence. When Borat brings a plastic bag full of shit to a sophisticated American dinner party, do we then really laugh about that country bumpkin, a supposed Kazakhstani reporter? Or do we laugh more about the consternated reactions of the hosts – those hygiene and control obsessed Americans, who, as the writer William Burroughs once formulated it, would be at their happiest if they could 'jump down their stomachs and digest the food and shovel the shit out'? Maybe, amidst of all those wash-down WCs, toilet deodorants and sensitive wet wipes, we are longing for more filth in our lives. Maybe we are missing that innocent childhood when we were not yet subject to the anal-retentive imperative, but could poop when and where the hell we wanted. Maybe we are sometimes dreaming about that lost paradise of shit.

Our increased interest in shit can also possibly be explained by the fact that we are, in a metaphorical sense, constantly surrounded by shit. After all, our contemporary consumer world is full of products that were carelessly produced, that possess only minimal spiritual and physiological nutritional value and that are disposed of very soon after being manufactured, just like shit. Simultaneously, relentless bullshit keeps oozing from our televisions, radios, computers and billboards in order to convince us to purchase these excrements of late capitalism. While real shit has mostly disappeared from our lives, it appears that it has been replaced by industrially produced and mediated bullshit. When the artist Wim Delvoye constructs with great effort a machine for the industrial production of shit, when he advertises the product with a mascot imitating (of all things) Mister Proper accompanied by banal slogans like 'Buy Cloaca Shit now!', and when he then actually really sells the excrements of his machine to interested buyers – then he merely drives the emblematic principle of our epoch of market economy to its extremes. Maybe we are also fascinated by shit because it represents the model, the archetype of the fetish objects of our commodity world, because it is the key to the understanding of our consumer society. (Fig. 3).

But maybe this is not the way it really is. Because, in the last instance, shit is distinguished by the following quality: it is a glittering, colourful, matter (fig. 4). The more we think about it, the more difficult it becomes to grasp. Shit is one of the basic conditions of life, and yet, it is considered a dirty, even deadly substance. It is the epitome of worthlessness, and yet it can be, according to the old alchemy's beliefs, transformed into gold. It exists deep inside of our bodies, and is in a way part of our selves, but the moment we expel it, it is perceived as foreign and offensive. Shit is the most ordinary thing in the world, and yet, together with the word that describes it, it is loaded with taboos. A principal question arises in face of these ambivalences and contradictions: what is, in fact, shit?

Fig. 3. 'Just full of it' © Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, 2016.

The Dark Side of Power

'Of soft consistence / and strangely nonviolent' as Hans Magnus Enzensberger writes in his poem 'Shit', 'she is - of all works of man / presumably the most peaceful. Just what has she done to us?' Naturally, nothing: most of the time shit is strikingly calm; well, as long as there are no tapeworms, flukes, or threadworms crawling in it. But the human would be no human if he did not find ways to use even such a pacifistic matter as a weapon and as an instrument of power.

... the shit thrower degrades the dirtied victim also symbolically, turning him into ... the lowest abject of his body. The shit thrower's victim then dissolves in the faeces of the other, becoming an extrapolated part of the perpetrator's body. Within one and the same paradoxical gesture, the shit thrower both incorporates the other and expels him.

Fig. 4. 'Glittering Turd' © Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, 2016.

When shit is used as a weapon, it is often considered as a subversive matter: a 'means of non-violent resistance' (Marielouise Jurreit), used preferably by those oppressed, excluded and unarmed in order to defend themselves against a presumed or real superior power. In antique literature and art, excrements were used as missiles against supernatural heroes who were considered invincible. In the fragmentarily preserved satirical play by Aeschylus, *Ostologoi* (or *Bone-gatherers*), a filled chamber pot lands on Odysseus' head; also diverse antique vases are decorated with illustrations of similar vessels being emptied on the face of Herakles. In the middle ages, throwing shit was an indispensable part of the Fool's day and of Charivari rituals, that is whenever time and the world order were dismissed and when spiritual and worldly authorities could, exceptionally, be caricatured and dragged into the dirt. Even in the children's book *The Story of the Little Mole Who Went in Search of Whodunit*, the title hero does not rest until he repays the stupid butcher's dog Hans-Heinerich with the same, placing a 'sausage' on his head. Revenge is a shit sausage.

The humiliating meaning of such gestures is evident and of universal validity. The affected person is in fact dirtied and thus, at least temporarily, socially excluded: almost nobody likes to be in the vicinity of someone who smells like shit. At the same time, the shit thrower degrades the dirtied victim also symbolically, turning him into a part of his digestive system, turning him into his shit – into the lowest object of his body. The shit thrower's victim then dissolves in the faeces of the other, becoming an extrapolated part of the perpetrator's body. Within one and the same paradoxical gesture, the shit thrower both incorporates the other and expels him. The dirtied victim thus finds himself in a symbolic middle position of double negativity: he is no longer himself – but

he is also not someone else. He is that, which the other has eliminated, a foreign body in his shit.

...Those who fall back on such an archaic and symbolic form of ridicule, reveal that they have no other means of power at hand or that their other weapons have failed them...

‘Wiping one’s ass’ with something (unedifying writing, disadvantageous contract, an image of an unloved person) is a protestation that points in the same direction as shit throwing. The hated opponent (the contract partner, the bailiff, the ex-partner) is not really attacked with shit, but is still dirtied in effigy: the paper on which his thoughts, words or image are prominently displayed is only just good enough to wipe one’s ass with it. The toilet paper with the image of Osama bin Laden represents merely an institutionalized and industrialized version of this form of insult, a depreciative ass wiping in the ages of technological reproducibility. In order to make the purpose of this Osama bin Laden toilet paper clear even to the most slow-witted buyer and to pep up the humoristic humiliating gesture, the images on the toilet paper were accompanied with hardly original and racist word plays, like *Wipe out terrorism* or *Get rid of your Shiite*.

At the same time, however, the sales of this toilet roll testify not only to rage and greed for profit, but also to a great sense of helplessness. After all, when the Americans successfully, at least temporarily, ‘eliminated’ Islamic terrorism by bombing Osama bin Laden’s cave complex Tora Bora in December 2001, they did not have to throw shit on the image of the terrorist leader. Those who fall back on such an archaic and symbolic form of ridicule, reveal that they have no other means of power at hand or that their other weapons have failed them. When it comes to this degrading gesture, we are, even against all its humorous nonchalance and cultural-chauvinistic arrogance, in principle dealing with an expression of total powerlessness.

... linguistic signs always fall short of the superior power of reality, and always bounce back when they hit the wall of reality – especially when the reality is as harsh as that of a hydrogen bomb.

Even the simple use of the word ‘shit’ is often an expression of helplessness. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the nuclear physicist and father of the atomic bomb, called his intellectual child *shit*. Looking back, he told his colleague Leo Szilard: ‘the atomic bomb is shit. (...) Well, this is a weapon which has no military significance’. (Similarly, the former chancellor Helmut Schmidt called in interviews the second world war a ‘big shit’ or ‘all the shit of the war’). We can, of course, on one hand interpret this statement as questioning the dubious strategic use of a weapon of mass destruction. But on the other hand, it also speaks to the bitter realization that linguistic signs always fall short of the superior power of reality, and always bounce back when they hit the wall of reality – especially when the reality is as harsh as that of a hydrogen bomb. ‘He meant something that eludes naming is automatically relegated, he is saying, to the status of shit’, writes

HØSTUTSTILLINGEN

I GUESS THAT ANY OLD SHIT WILL DO

Fig. 5. 'Høstutstillingen' © Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, 2016. (A visual response to the National Art Exhibition in Norway, the biggest state exhibition of contemporary art taking place each year in autumn in Oslo, and to the notorious elitism of the selection process).

the American novelist Don DeLillo in his *Underworld*: 'You can't name it. It's too big or evil or outside your experience'. If we stand vis-à-vis someone a bit helplessly, be it an enemy that cannot be touched by military action, or a matter eluding the language's grasp, we often reach to shit.

If the excremental attack is permanently impossible, if we are the only ones left at whom aggression can be directed, then the form of resistance takes an even more powerless form, namely, the form of dirtying one's own house, one's own nest, with faeces. When in 1978 around three hundred IRA and INLA prisoners in the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland protested against their prison conditions, they resorted in their distress to a strategy that went down in history books as the 'dirty protest': they stopped washing themselves, they refused to use the toilet and refused to leave their cells

for cleaning by the prison staff, they spread their faeces on the walls of the prison cell. The archbishop from Armagh, Tomas O’Fiaich said, following the visit to the prison: ‘One would hardly allow an animal to remain in such conditions, let alone a human being. The stench and filth in some of the cells, with the remains of rotten food and human excreta scattered around the wall, was almost unbearable. In two of them I was unable to speak for fear of vomiting’.

When the prisoners denied themselves the most fundamental standard of civilization, they did not only make the stay in their vicinity unbearable for the visitors and prison wards, but they also demonstrated in a visible and sniffable way that they find their prison conditions inhumane. Akin to Kafka’s Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, who withdraws from his surroundings, transformed into a dung beetle, the prisoners are manifestly transformed into the role that the society assigned to them: they transformed themselves to a certain degree into animals.

As we can also see on the example of the work of the actionist artist Günter Brus, conscious violations of the rules of decency, shame and hygiene belong to classical antiauthoritarian gestures. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s love of faecal words can be also understood along similar lines (‘now I wish you a good night, but first shit in your bed and make it burst’, as he wrote to one of his cousins); namely, as an expression of a bourgeois rebellion against the pretentiously noble language of the Austrian court. Julianne Vogel writes in her commentary on Mozart’s notoriously explicit Bâle letters that ‘the fluency of their usage testifies to the fact that in the rendering of the faecal by language, a social transformation directed against the feudal forms could take place (...) the informality of Mozart’s letters, conscious of their form, rebels (...) against the reign of the feudal language’ (fig. 5).

However, even after the feudal structures were torn down, the faecal language did not lose its potential to provoke: it merely turned into the preferred weapon of the Bohemians against the pretentious values and sense of shame of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois-phobic writer Gustave Flaubert advised his friend Ernest Chevalier in a letter from 1842 to: ‘let diarrhea drip into your boots, piss out of the window, shout out “shit”, defecate in full view, fart hard, blow your cigar smoke into people’s faces (...) belch in people’s faces’. Almost a century later, in his novel *36 Hours*, the novelist Ödön von Horváth lets the guests of a Schwabinger art pub sing in protest that they, at least when drunk, are happy to leave all the boundaries of the bourgeois propriety behind them:

We want to intoxicate ourselves with cognac
We want to exchange our women
We want to besmear ourselves with shit
We want to lead a free live!

Were we to add the consumption of psychoactive drugs on top of that, the scene could play out in the year 1969 instead of 1929.

In fact, an image of a shitting man became an icon of the counterculture even in the notorious anti-authoritarian 1960s: it shows the musician Frank Zappa sitting naked

with his pants down on a toilet, staring at the observer with a challenging gaze. The fact that the motif is wrapped in a stale-bourgeois art deco frame makes it all the more ironic: this is namely *not* your typical photo of your son or son-in-law that one would proudly displays above the fireplace – but rather a photo that the wayward children display in their student rooms, house-share kitchens or on their toilet walls. Frank Zappa is the cool anti-father, who leaves the door open when he goes on the toilet – out of political reasons.

In a certain way, however, through his public display of shitting Zappa also provides us, consciously or not, with a parody of the shameless behaviour of absolute monarchs (according to our contemporary standards). ‘In stratified societies of the old type, every distinction, including the hygienic one, pertained to the system of status differences’, writes the literature scientist Albrecht Koschorke. ‘This made it possible that in the absolutist court the most intimate daily bodily needs of the sovereign were a matter of a public ceremony’. It is known that Louis XIV of France used to cleanse his colon every month in full view in front of his court. And about his oldest son, the Dauphin, we know from Louis’ sister-in-law Elisabeth Charlotte of the Palatinate, that he liked to be paid honours to while sitting on the shitting throne. After all, a Venetian envoy at the French court should, when on official visit, specifically due to this reason, sit on the shitting throne. Such a behaviour was the privilege of the powerful – those below in rank had to keep their bodies under perfect control in the presence of those above. Frank Zappa, taking on the same posture as the absolutist rulers, reverses the asymmetry of intimacy: he rebels against the ruling bourgeois morality with the weapons of the pre-bourgeois age.

...Why is it that human faeces are used time and again as an actual or symbolic weapon against authoritative figures?

Because of Zappa’s faecal provocations, the rumours for some time had it that the musician shits on the stage during a concert and then eats his own excrements; it was also claimed that he ran a contest in shit eating against the Heavy-Metal musician and horror-clown Alice Cooper. However, according to Zappa, these rumours have no bearing on reality: ‘For the record, folks; I never took a shit on stage and the closest I ever came to eating shit anywhere was at a Holiday Inn buffet in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in 1973’.

But why is shit and shitting always afforded such a subversive role? Why is it that human faeces are used time and again as an actual or symbolic weapon against authoritative figures, preferably those of the parents’ generation? Maybe it is because our struggle with shit, from the beginning of our lives, is a fight over power.

At least once, in our earliest childhood, it is a personal battle against an ‘inner enemy’: an opponent that hides himself for a long time, invisible, inside the body and causes inexplicable pains and can embarrass us through its sudden appearance. Once the child learns to control the muscles of the rectum and anus, it finally gains power over its body and the bodily boundaries. ‘This is where the child gains the first experience of sovereignty over its body’, writes the philosopher Hermann Schmitz. ‘Once it learns to

Fig. 6. 'Sticky Poo' © Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, 2016.

playfully control the bowel movements, it acquires the possibility to elevate its self above its body'. Once the child succeeds at pushing the will of his head against the need of his butt, it becomes the chief of his little social body. Moreover, the process of consumption and digestion represents a sort of symbolic power struggle, during the course of which the eater demonstrates his authority over that which is being eaten. 'One tends to see only the thousand tricks of power which are enacted above ground', writes Elias Canetti, 'but these are the least part of it. Underneath day in, day out, is digestion and again digestion. Something alien is seized, cut up into small bits, incorporated into oneself and assimilated (...)'. The excrement, which is what remains of all this (...) is the age-old seal of that power-process of digestion, which is enacted in darkness and which, without this, would remain hidden forever'.

And not least, the early anal phase of child development is also, on top of handling excrements, marked by significant negotiations of power relations between parents and the child: when the parents attempt to bring their child up to be bodily and linguistically clean, they demonstrate the boundaries of its surroundings and of their parental authority. When the child recognizes or transgresses these boundaries, it also realizes its own power and self-understanding as an autonomous being: 'the first manner in which the child influences its surroundings (...) is through the regulation of its bowel movements', writes the psychoanalyst Ernest Borneman. 'The child discovers: when I do my business quickly, after my mother puts me on the potty, I will make her happy (...) but if I defy her and I poop in the bed or refuse to do my business (...) I can provoke her into anger. Hence, I can do what I like with this big being on which I have been until now dependent'. The anal phase thus represents an important step in the development of the child towards an autonomous being. The free will of people expresses itself in the power of disposition over one's shit – vis-à-vis their own bodies, as well as their surroundings (fig. 6).

However, this free will, as we know, can be broken or prevented in its development. Illnesses like dysentery and typhus make people lose control over their excretion processes; soldiers, prison wards or the accomplices of totalitarian regimes can violently dirty them, and take away from their possibility for self-determined, humane defecation, and in extreme cases even feed them theirs or someone else's shit.

In his war manual *Bellifortis*, the inventor Conrad Kyeser of the Late Middle Ages, even proposed that one should, during the besiegement of the enemy fortresses, use wooden barrels filled 'with stinking manure' as missiles, in order to make the adversary resign, both physically and morally: 'you will throw them, wherever you want, this will make the enemies weak / and the locality will be smeared, trade and traffic will be destroyed'. In *Simplicius Simplicissimus*, we can read how people during the Thirty Years' War were made to drink the 'Swedish drink', a bucket full of manure water in order to force them into submission. 300 years later, the Italian movie director Pier Paolo Pasolini showed in his *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, in the section *Girone della Merda*, how the representatives of the fascist republic of Salò forced during the last days of the World War II their slaves of pleasure to eat their excrements. Other food had to be eaten very quickly in order to result in a sufficiently hard stool for consumption: the whole metabolism of the slave boys and girls in this modern day inferno was subjected to the dictate of coprophagy. It was through the control of the digestive systems and of the thresholds of disgust of their prisoners that the absolute domination and arbitrariness of the fascist libertines was expressed.

These few examples already reveal to us that shit is not only a weapon of the weak and powerless – but also rulers know how to put it to use in order to dehumanize, humiliate and subject those in a socially lower position, or those militarily inferior. Shit is maybe even predestined for the use and abuse by the powerful. To put it in a graphic language: while the powerless and those on the bottom of society take shit in their hands and throw it up above, making their hands dirty, the powerful, in order to defile the people, just pull down their trousers and shit on them. Gravity is on their side. 'Every bearer of dirt is powerful', writes Christian Enzenberger in his *Größeren Versuch über den Schmutz* (...), 'and every owner of power uses dirt to establish his rule (...) the one who can defile the other (...) is the boss'.

...shit is not only a weapon of the weak and powerless – but also rulers know how to put it to use in order to dehumanize, humiliate and subject...

The leaders and guardians of the concentration camps knew, in a particularly ghoulish and cruel way, how to use such strategies of faecal defilement. The inmates in death camp, as Terrence Des Pres reports in his book *The Survivor*, were exposed to repetitive excremental attacks. This began already in the trains in which the prisoners were transported into the concentration camps: in the cattle wagons there were no toilets, the transport could take many days. While there were mass latrines in the concentration camps, their size was too small for the amount of prisoners, and the times when they

could be visited were strictly regulated: 'there was one latrine for thirty to thirty-two thousand women', reports one female survivor of Bergen-Belsen, 'and we were permitted to use it only at certain hours of the day. We stood in line to get into this tiny building, knee-deep in human excrement. As we all suffered from dysentery, we could rarely wait until our turn came, and soiled our ragged clothes, which never came off our bodies, thus adding to the horror of our existence by the terrible smell which surrounded us like a cloud'.

Since there was no toilet paper, the prisoners had to use parts of their own clothing in order to wipe their buttocks. Many used their soup tureens as chamber pots for fear of being shot by the SS on the way to the latrine. In Birkenau, the guards used to throw the crockery of the prisoners into the latrines, only to let them fish for it before the food was served. Even during the so called death marches, the survivors of the concentration camps were forced to take part in, the excremental humiliations continued – those who stopped in order to relieve themselves risked being shot. 'Urine and excreta poured down the prisoner's legs', reports one survivor, 'and by nightfall the excrement, which had frozen to our limbs, gave off its stench. We were really no longer human beings in the accepted sense. Not even animals, but putrefying corpses moving on two legs'.

These degradations were not merely grounded in some sadistic inclinations of the guards, but were consciously perpetrated. It was precisely the intent to arouse a sense of self-disgust and self-revulsion in the prisoners: they wished to break their self-respect, and with it to also dissolve any solidarity between the captives amidst the germs and the shit. 'How much self-esteem can one maintain, how readily can one respond with respect to the needs of another if both stink, if both are caked with mud and faeces?', asks Terrence Des Pres. Moreover, the systematic defilement of the prisoners was intended to lower the hindrance to kill on the side of the guards: 'And here is a final, vastly significant reason why in the camps the prisoners were so degraded. This made it easier for the SS to do their job. It made mass murder less terrible to the murderers, because the victims appeared less human.' When the prisoners were robbed of the control over their bodily hygiene and bowel movement, they lost, at least in the eyes of the SS guards and at least for the period of their defilement, their human dignity.

... the euphemism for Auschwitz-Birkenau, anus mundi...

Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest concentration camp of the Nazi regime, where more than million people were killed, used to be called by the SS-*Obersturmführer* (senior assault leader) and the concentration camp doctor Heinz Thilo the *anus mundi*, or else the 'asshole of the world'. (The survivor Wiesław Kielar used this formulation in 1972 as the title for his memoirs about his five-year imprisonment in Auschwitz-Birkenau). Firstly, this Latin euphemism degrades the terror of the camp into a bad joke: to say something supposedly drastic, while hiding it like a smart ass behind a coat of classical language, formulating it in an inappropriately high style, belongs to basic strategies of schoolboy humour. Secondly, this Latin expression casts the perpetrators of the atrocities that began in the Nazi camps in a particularly terrible light: those were not only butcher boys at work here, but also academics with doctoral degrees, people educated in humanities.

Actually, the Nazis, as Victor Klemperer showed in his notes on the 'Language of the Third Reich' (*Sprache des Dritten Reiches*), displayed a particular 'preference for grand-sounding foreign words', for a pretentious linguistic register. In the midst of all the killing, dying and inhuman living conditions in the concentration camps, they even took the great pains to find a Latin sophisticated euphemism for an asshole.

Last but not least, the euphemism for Auschwitz-Birkenau, *anus mundi*, also, in a literal sense, captures the damning judgement about those detained there. The one who resides in the asshole of the world has hit the rock bottom of human society: he is at the very bottom, at the end, there, where one is eliminated from the body, or crushed under its weight. In this context, it is rather revealing that the Nazis captured the social form that they wanted to put into effect time and again through concepts of bodily health and integrity: the 'racial body' (Volkskörper) was infested with 'vermins' or sucked out by 'parasites'; one and the same 'blood' ran through its 'organs'; it should be 'free of Jews' and only a 'racial hygiene' could help it heal itself. All these metaphors have one underlying idea in common. Namely, an idea of the Nazi state as a closed, homogenous community, governed by one singular will that, like any other individual being, marches in unity and in the same direction. The language of the Third Reich, writes Victor Klemperer, was 'bent to rob individual of his or her individuality'. Instead, it should make him or her part of a bigger and more powerful organism.

However, while this concept was particularly popular during the Nazi era, it was in no way its invention and thus not limited to it. As the social anthropologist Mary Douglas has shown, the perception of our physical body invariably influences our perception of the social body – and in reverse, our social imaginaries influence our understanding of a body as a small society, as a social microcosm. 'The scope of the body as a medium of expression is limited by controls exerted from the social system', writes Mary Douglas in her *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, 'the relation of head to feet, of brain and sexual organs, of mouth and anus are commonly treated so that they express the relevant patterns of hierarchy'. In other words, every social body carries on its top a head: countries have a president, corporations a CEO and construction workers their foreman. Similarly, most social bodies also have their anus: this is where the socially excluded and eliminated members of society are accumulated. And it is precisely this part of the social body, with its diverse gates between the inside and outside, that often enjoys most attention: 'Interest in its apertures depends on the preoccupation with social exits and entrances, escape routes and invasions'.

This superimposition of the political and the physical body is captured in a particularly evocative way in the hallucinatory work of the American, Beat Generation writer William S. Burroughs. The junkies, law-breakers, and freaks who populate his novels, and preferably dwell in political bodies marked by badly controlled entrances and escape routes: like for instance the North African city of Tangier that was until 1956 an international zone popular with smugglers, dropouts and outsiders, or in the fictitious, historical Tangier with its 'Interzone'. On the other hand, the bodies of these anarchic figures also often possess a grotesque number of entrance and exit devices, which resist any hierarchical bodily logic or control.

'That's the sex that passes the censor, squeezes through between the bureaus, because there is always a space between' preaches the psychopathic Dr. Benway about the inhabitants of the Interzone in the monster of a novel *Naked Lunch*: 'some would be entirely made of penis-like erectile tissue, others viscera barely covered over with skin, clusters of 3 and 4 eyes together, criss-cross of mouth and assholes, human parts shaken around and poured out any way they fell'. Moreover, there are people with protein bodies, whose boundaries are relentlessly changing and thus refuse to be controlled, 'rectums open, defecate and close...the entire organism changes color and consistency in split-second adjustments'. And finally, there is also the Spare-Ass Annie, a woman, who has, there where the yogis have the third eye, an extra rectum, a spare-ass in the middle of her forehead. Where there is no state control anymore, where social organs can be pushed around like the organs on the operation table of a crazy professor – there, as Burroughs' modern mythological creatures suggest, the order of the bodies is turned on its head. Where there is anarchy, even anatomy plays crazy – an equally borderless and unrestrained 'anarchtomy'.

In a more realistic manner, the pensioner Alfred Lambert in Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections*, suffering of Parkinson's and Alzheimer, undergoes the same experience. Alfred is in fact the incarnation of the anal-retentive character: pedantic, order fixated, tyrannical, thrifty – the classical *pater familias* from a small town in the Midwest of the USA. With the age and because of his illness, he increasingly loses control over himself and his surroundings. The dirt that he has been so arduously trying to keep under the lock, pushes itself suddenly on the surface: the shit strikes back.

It all begins with an insult. Alfred is travelling with his wife on a Scandinavian cruise ship, as he, in the middle of the night and in the darkness of his cabin, hears a whisper: 'Asshole! Asshole!', reducing him to the bodily part that has been troubling him for a while (out of precaution he wears adult diapers). Firstly, the sleepy patriarch believes that the voice belongs to a mouse. Then, 'with dismay Alfred recognized the visitor. First he saw the dropping's slumped outline and then he caught a whiff of bacterial decay. This was not a mouse. This was the turd'.

This speaking turd is, as becomes quickly clear, not only an evil product of Alfred's mind in crisis, but rather an almost mystical being: the turd is Alfred's nemesis, his private goddess of revenge, a brown Erinyes that confronts the old man with all his repressed power and control fantasies that he had so far largely managed to contain within him. As the slippery pile refuses to conform to his directions and just runs down the leg, spoiling his pyjamas, Alfred becomes convinced that this stinky being can be nothing else than a convict, a piece of human waste that belongs in prison. In Alfred's hallucinatory faecal phantasies, the social body and the physical body overlap – where the control of the body is demanded, the anal-retentive man obsessed with cleanliness calls for social punitive sanctions. And as Alfred expresses this opinion of his and tells the turd that it belongs behind the lock, the turd answers – and through it also Alfred's unconscious – with a litany of social and ethnic groups that Alfred would also like to eliminate from the social body: children, teenagers, African Americans, Polynesians, Jamaicans, Chinese, South Europeans, French, Jews, homosexuals, women, proletariat ... The turd points out that it looks like all those anally fixated types would like to have

everything behind a lock: ‘Hey, funny thing, Fred, the only people that don’t belong in your jail are upper-middle-class northern European men.’

This racist, chauvinistic, and homophobic freak show turns the turd into an exemplary alternative worth imitating, as its own unleashed existence stands precisely in opposition to this freak show: that is, a principle of the anal desire and anarchy of early childhood, that resides in every human and every intestine. The turd makes fun of the American Declaration of Independence, calling it a piece of toilet paper besmeared with shit. It ridicules Alfred and his prudish brothers as ‘fascist schoolteachers and Nazi cops’. It assembles other shit rebels around it to attack all cultural forces of constraint. ‘Civilization? Overrated. I ask you what’s it ever done for me? Flushed me down the toilet! Treated me like shit!’ – ‘But that’s what you are’, Alfred pleaded, hoping the turd might see the logic’. The only thing that he could do, in order to deal with this faecal superior power, was to subject himself to it – to succumb to this turd and its dirty lessons. When he asks the turd what he has to do in order for it to leave the room, the turd just tells the old man to release the muscle, let it out. Alfred does what it wants and the hallucinated turd disappears. The next day, the bed, the bathroom and the floor of the cabin are covered with his lively excrements (fig. 7).

Irrespective of all the good arguments and attempts to civilize, the turd has in the end the upper hand. It always wins, time being on its side. The human, may it be the biggest patriarch or dictator, can fight it with utmost dedication and power their whole life, but at the latest, in the old age, it fights him with his own weapons – that is, with himself. Shit has the last dirty word.

Fig. 7. ‘Smiley Poo’ © Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, 2016.

- Augustinus, A.** (1998) *De Magistro/Über den Lehrer*. Ditzingen: Reclam.
- Borneman, E.** (1973) *Psychoanalyse des Geldes: Eine kritische Untersuchung psychoanalytischer Geldtheorien*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Burroughs, W.** (2013) *Naked Lunch*. New York: Grove Press.
- Canetti, E.** (1962) *Crowds and Power*. New York: Viking Press.
- DeLillo, D.** (1997) *Underworld*. New York: Scribner.
- Des Pres, T.** (1980) *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in Death Camps*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Douglas, M.** (2003) *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. London: Routledge.
- Enzenberger, Ch.** (1980) *Größerer Versuch über den Schmutz*. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin und Wien: Ullstein.
- Enzenberger, H. M.** (2006) 'Die Scheiße', *Gedichte 1950-2005*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Franzen, J.** (2001) *Corrections*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Holzwarth, W.** (1994) *The Story of the Little Mole Who Went in Search of Whodunit*. London: Chrysalis Children's Books.
- Jurreit, M.** (1969) 'Alles über Scheiße', *Twen* 12 (December).
- Klemperer, V.** (2007) *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen*. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Koschorke, A.** (1999) *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr: Mediologie des 18. Jahrhunderts*. München: Wilhelm Fink.
- Kyeser aus Eichstätt, C.** (1967) *Bellifortis*. Düsseldorf: Verlag des Vereins Deutscher Ingenieure.
- Schmitz, H.** (1965) *Der Leib: System der Philosophie*. Bonn: H. Bouvier & Co.
- Von Horváth, Ö.** (1987) *36 Stunden: Gesammelte Werke*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Florian Werner studied English literature, and American and German studies in Tübingen, Berlin and Aberdeen, and received his doctorate with a work about hip hop and the apocalypse. He is the author of numerous literature of fact books and novels, and teaches as a guest professor at several universities. His books have been translated into English, Japanese and Spanish. Corresponding author: post@florianwerner.net