

Enjoy!: Transgression (aga)in(st) Consumer Culture

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Abstract

This article seeks to offer a repositioning of the limits of transgression in contemporary popular culture against the backdrop of some theoretical articulations of postmodernist and poststructuralist theory. With an eye to testing the limits of the transgression-limit dichotomy, the opening part seeks to chart some major philosophical and theoretical articulations of transgression as a conceptual stepping stone towards the ensuing interrogation of the body, obscenity and pornography in contemporary culture. I argue that mainstream representations of the body in popular culture at present paradoxically both override and intensify transgressive energies: the paradox unfolding from the compliance with the dominant spurious logic of the marketplace as well as from a resistance to the limits registered in contemporary simulacrum culture.

Keywords: transgression, limit, capitalism, body, obscenity

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł proponuje rekapitulację granic transgresji we współczesnej kulturze popularnej w oparciu o wybrane teorie postmodernistyczne i poststrukturalistyczne. W celu zbadania dychotomii transgresja-granica, pierwsza część artykułu oferuje zarys filozoficzno-teoretyczny pojęcia transgresji jako punktu wyjścia do analizy zagadnień

ciała, obsceniczności i pornografii we współczesnej kulturze. Artykuł stara się dowieść, że powszechne formy reprezentacji ciała we współczesnej kulturze popularnej zarówno potwierdzają jak przeczą logice transgresji, skutkując tym samym paradoksem spowodowanym dominującą logiką późnego kapitalizmu.

Słowa kluczowe: transgresja, granica, kapitalizm, ciało, obsceniczność

Is it possible to think outside capital? If the ubiquity of the marketplace in the postmodern age begs no further commentary, as it has already inflated academic cultural debates to the brim, it still lends itself handsomely to productive considerations over the feasible limits of culture, or the human condition for that matter. The mercurial quality of these limits of sorts – passing their sell-by date rather too hastily these days – necessitate an unremitting, contemporized repositioning.

Protean, unstable, malleable; the limit now espouses the cultural logic of the marketplace: that is the state of permanent transformations and absorption of all manner of the cultural articulations that capitalism perpetuates. So structured, the indeterminacy of the limit entails no less complex interrogations of the functional validation of its transgression that thus legitimated the limit (and vice versa) in a rather candid dialectical cohabitation of these two poles. Transgression depends on the limit for its existence, and the limit can be defined as such only if the threat of transgression is viable: after all, why draw borders if the territory they demarcate risks no trespassing? When general Robert Nivelle first cried his timeless "You shall not pass!" against the Germans at the Battle of Verdun during World War I, the transgressor-limit relation could hardly be subject to questioning. With limits delineated, sides taken, goals set, transgression counted for more than an abstract notion. If this pattern serves the purposes of abstract dualistic reasoning (*pace* Foucault, an instrument of social ordering and domination effected by the totalizing enlightened mind rather than an unbiased reflection on the human condition) it is rather short of breath when exposed to the intricacies of human existence at the backdrop of cultural transformations of the simulacrum age and late capitalism (where the time-specificity of this failure is debatable).

Transgressing the limit; limiting the transgression

If anywhere, transgression begins, and delineates its own limits, within itself: in its own prefix. You might be forgiven for thinking, after Paweł Jędrzejko, that by “denoting liminality”, prefixes – these “seemingly innocent morphemes” – “have the power of collapsing binary oppositions upon which Western metanarratives so heavily depend” (2011, 13). Along these lines, standing for both *across* and *beyond*, the prefix *trans* – does inaugurate a liminal blind spot within itself which positions it both within and beyond what it transgresses. After postmodernism one cannot tell philosophy from the language it is constructed upon, and language – with every minute linguistic unit at that – always-already subject to deconstruction of its illusory stable meanings, cannot override its inherent polysemy. The double bind of this “dangerous prefix” renders the mapping of limits a serious, if unworkable, business, if only in denotative terms. After all, how may we apply the reassuring (in the western philosophical terms) dualistic transgression-limit stencil to any cultural phenomenon if the language that seeks to express it slips into semantic indeterminacy that traditional western dialectics takes pains to iron out?

If indeed the inherent polysemy of language poses a radical challenge to infiltrating intricacies of transgression, what further complicates such conceptual recapitulations is the encroachment of the liminal spaces into the problematic transgression-limit dichotomy. George Bataille’s reading of transgression has fuelled postmodernist reassessments of the concept:

There exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed (2006, 63).

Transgression... opens the door into what lies beyond the limits usually observed, but it maintains these limits just the same. Transgression is complementary to the profane world exceeding its limits but not destroying it (67).

In Bataille’s account, transgression is defined by the limit or prohibition which it endeavours to violate. Transgression underpins, rather than cancels the limit, as the latter calls for both obedience and infraction at one stroke. So staged, far from being antagonistic to the limit, transgression figures as its inextricable component.

In “A Preface to Transgression”, Foucault, quoted below at length, suggests a useful way out in terms of the undoing of this clean-cut dichotomy by introducing a spatial understanding of the liminality of transgression and the limit:

[I]t is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses... The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows. But can the limit have a life of its own outside of the act that gloriously passes through it and negates it? What becomes of it after this act and what might it have been before? For its part, does transgression not exhaust its nature when it crosses the limit, knowing no other life beyond this point in time? And this point, this curious intersection of beings that have no other life beyond this moment where they totally exchange their beings, is it not also everything which overflows from it on all sides?... Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as... the outside to the inside... Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust (1977, 33-35).

Taking the traditional transgression-limit interdependence as a valid point of departure, Foucault complicates the commonly sanctified loci of the dichotomy. Existing nowhere outside of the “moment” of their “intersection”, transgression is thought to inhabit the limit it seeks to intrude. Rather than perched on the opposite poles or otherwise constructed as perpendicular lines, transgression and the limit are configured as a “spiral”, which thwarts their accepted bipolar spatial formation. Such a proposition defies the totalising status of an assumed, purely uncrossable limit, or transgression’s unhampered access to the limit, and by so doing strikes at the very foundation of “a thought that centers on the ‘origin’” (37).

However radical the project of invalidating the traditional western conceptualisation of the limit, such deliberations never exist in a cultural or historical vacuum: interminably answerable to cultural and temporal repositioning. Speaking of functional staging of transgression, or its figuration within cultural precincts, the Marquis de Sade’s libertine indulgence in all manner of sexually deviant activities – acts of incest, murder, torture and humiliation of the body – strikes as a blatant pioneering case in point. Sade’s project – be it fictional or otherwise – is one promulgating unbridled sexual and personal liberties making a fetish out of running roughshod over the limits of the socially acceptable. With transgression on his banner, Sade attempts a rather uncomplicated venture that banks on the recognition of established ethical limits and their radical infraction. According to Foley, et al., so conceived, “transgression is always traced with, and limited by, its situation on the border of the norm and its reliance upon a limit” (2012, xvi). However extreme the acts he promotes, Sade does little to confound the pre-modern constitution of metaphysical (social, ethical, legal) limits. His venture sails closer to a theatrical

demonstration of the compulsion to violate the norm, rather than proffering a new-fangled paradigm shift in terms of rethinking the conventional ethical standards. Considered against its historical backdrop, such a venture appears as hardly surprising. Completed only three years prior to the storming of the Bastille in the advent of the French revolution, it should little surprise one that (although Sade was no Romantic himself) revolutionary sentiments, triggered by the urge to quash the obsolete and fossilised dictates of reason, were steadily growing rife in the collective European imagination. In the end, how else did Romanticism succeed in undoing the Enlightenment than by trading its tenets for their direct opposites in an act of deliberate reversal of the commonplace political, aesthetic and social values?

If Romanticism superseded the Age of Reason – if only tentatively – authoring its demise by means of the latter’s dialectical tools, the modern mind fails to avail itself of dialectics to overturn the collective standards. In this context Sade’s assailing of the norm proves ground-breaking only in limited terms: as a flagship trail-blazer for the forthcoming counter-cultural or pornographic texts of its own ilk. When applied during the fat years of modernism – tirelessly undermining the moral Victorian high-ground and aesthetic conventions of the Great Tradition – the representation of obscenity in literature still has the ability to shock. (Take the likes of Lawrence or Joyce, whose works proved so controversial as to become the subject of obscenity trials.) Postmodernity, however, absorptive of all manner of articulations of the obscene, takes such texts as rather forced, second-order attempts orientated at audience gratification with a limited shock value at best. To devise a sort of calculated transgression (or “pseudo-transgression” in Kristeva’s terms) is to operate according to “the law anticipating its own transgression” (Kristeva 1986, 42). A “pseudo-transgressive” artwork succeeds in generating transgressive ambience at best: viewers of a Gorno film know only too well they are about to indulge in a gory sexualised spectacle set in line with fixed generic horror conventions. This dramatization of pre-conceived limits that await infringement rescinds the transgressive impulse as the aesthetic, generic or visual laws of the spectacle are respected and kept intact. This flies in the face of the principle upon which transgression, as a dynamic singular event, operates.

In a similar vein, Nick Zedd’s 1980s movement, *The Cinema of Transgression*, depends on the shock value as well as manifest pornographic and obscene imagery of its output. The founder’s manifesto leaves little doubt as to its aesthetic and ethical agenda:

All values must be challenged. Nothing is sacred. Everything must be questioned and reassessed in order to free our minds from the faith of tradition... We propose to go beyond all limits set or prescribed by taste, morality or any other traditional value system shackling the minds of men... We violate the command and law that we bore audiences to death in rituals of circumlocution and propose to break all the taboos of our age by sinning as much as possible. There will be blood, shame, pain and ecstasy, the likes of which no one has yet imagined. None shall emerge unscathed (1985).

Again, rehashing such threadbare transgressive war-cries as: unrepressed sexuality, cultivation of profanity, rejection of tradition and moral values, breaking sexual taboos, promulgating sadomasochism, to list but a few, does little to make Zedd's subversive project live up to what it preaches. With the 1960s Counter-cultural sexual revolution far behind, after the entry of such taboo-breakers as de Sade or Henry Miller into the literary Canon, or (to recall an exponent from within the fold) with Porno Chic fad (inaugurated by *Deep Throat*) making it to the mainstream cinema back in 1970s, the 1980s Cinema of Transgression bursts forth as dated and untimely at its outset: not only when set against its cultural background, but first and foremost in purely theoretical and aesthetic terms.

Again, if in legal terms a criminal act does not immediately entail an amendment of the law it violates: thus nurturing the illusion of inalterability of law, the cultural logic has it that on entering the public awareness the transgressed limit necessitates its own repositioning as it fails to capture the collective imagination when reiterated. In view of that, transgression in the contemporary culture (as elaborated at length further) operates on the premise of measured testing of cultural perimeters as opposed to pushing the limits to their impossible extremes, such as stooping to devices calculated to entice the masses, characteristic of some lower forms of contemporary cinema or literary fiction. Needless to say, such sterile transgression is answerable to the injunctions of market economy as well as the cultural logic of late capitalism.

The market of/as transgression

As stressed by Jameson, "the axiomatic of capitalism decodes the terms of the older pre-capitalist coding systems and 'liberates' them for new and more functional combinations" (1998, 152-153). Late capitalism comes out as the system that not only recognises, 'decodes' and 'liberates' a variety of cultural 'combinations', past and present, but effectively sets straight and feeds on the antinomies the axiomatic generates. This constitutes

an unprecedented quality of the late-capitalist cultural order, whose “voids have been saturated and neutralized, not by new values, but by the visual culture of consumerism as such” (150). Irrespective of the systemic flaws, or ‘voids’, intrinsic to its inner workings, consumer capitalism still proves capable of overriding or absorbing the defective components, thus assuring its own survival.

If the axiomatic of late capitalism depends on the reclamation of constituents that seemingly undermine its logic, is it absorptive of transgression – this cancerous organism on the healthy body of law which it pushes to the outside? Jameson would answer in affirmative. With neo-liberalism as its status-quo, contemporary culture not only contains, but endorses and capitalises on the elements which the earlier conservatively-bent cultural and political paradigms marginalised. Put otherwise, in the law that no longer side-lines transgression, transgression becomes law. Vytautas Rubavičius notes,

The capitalist system not only replaces the feudal one by breaking relationships, norms, attitudes and various taboos prevailing to it, but itself evolves by constantly breaking all emerging relationships without letting them ‘ossify’. This means that transgressivity is considered as the necessary systematic characteristic of capitalism implicating individual acts of transgression (2006, 70-71).

The resistance to ‘ossification’ of relationships and identities is part and parcel of the neo-liberal model, where the system assimilates not only social, sexual and ethnic minorities, but also transgressive selves and subcultures. This new social order matches the postmodernist diagnosis of society structured as assemblage of fragmented, rhizomatic identities ricocheting from the crisis of postmodern subjectivity. Deprived of her/his formative identity, the postmodern subject neurotically looks for a new unique avatar, which consumer capitalism hastens to cater. The proliferation of subcultures and lifestyles marks capitalism’s to-have-the-cake-and-eat-it manoeuvre in that it does not only embrace transgressive characters, it *constructs* them for purely economic purposes. Cultivation of a distinctive lifestyle greases the wheels of consumerism through the production of culture-specific items and services (e.g. gadgetry, music, tourism, etc.) which the market is only too desperate to provide. In capitalism you can *be* whoever you wish as long as you find means of *celebrating* your identity, as such self-serving dramatizations of one’s unique self can hardly come to fruition without the liberating provision of capital.

This marks the moment when the Big Brother of consumerism compels the subject to join the parade, and the mandate to transgress comes with the package. Speaking of such, Slavoj Žižek identifies another powerful injunction characteristic of postmodern

society, which has the earmarks of both ‘totalitarian democracy’ and ‘permissive society’: “Enjoy!”

The superficial opposition between pleasure and duty is overcome in two different ways. Totalitarian power goes even further than traditional authoritarian power. What it says, in effect, is not, ‘Do your duty, I don’t care whether you like it or not,’ but: ‘You must do your duty, and you must enjoy doing it.’ (...) Duty becomes pleasure. Second, there is the obverse paradox of pleasure becoming duty in a ‘permissive’ society. Subjects experience the need to ‘have a good time’, to enjoy themselves, as a kind of duty, and, consequently, feel guilty for failing to be happy. The superego controls the zone in which these two opposites overlap – in which the command to enjoy doing your duty coincides with the duty to enjoy yourself (1999, 6).

The diagnosis of the postmodern society as occupying the mystifying liminal milieu mixing up and accommodating totalitarian orders and liberal freedoms does seem to sustain the argument. And one should not be deceived by the reassuringly neo-liberal course it takes. The pattern refuses to exhaust itself: we merely succeed (and Cadmean victory it is) in trading one Big Brother for another. This esoteric totalitarian-permissive injunction seems to have far-reaching consequences as it readily welcomes transgression. Because “you may” you are now given *carte blanche* to violate moral codes, traditional sets of values, feel free to speak your mind (against the tight corset of political correctness), engage in sexual pleasures of unlimited sorts, or what have you, but do not expect it will elude the watchful, regulating eye of the restless Big Brother, the ‘superego’ that regulates this antinomic and transgressive system.

‘Entertain me!’: Transgression and scopophilia.

The transgressive potential of the command ‘enjoy’ in the contemporary visual culture makes itself manifest in the peculiar interpellation of the viewer. If the Big Brother commands one to ‘enjoy’, s/he is bound to respond: “Entertain me!” Here the injunction allows the viewer to give vent to his/her guilty pleasures: it calls for transgressive enactments (like graphic representations of violence, torture or sexual explicitness) sealed off from the ‘real world’, sitting in the safety-bubble of entertainment. The spectacle may be nothing short of genuine acts of transgression, but transgression becomes annulled in an anticipation of itself. The scopophilic dimension of the performative space of the

injunction ‘entertain me’ speaks volumes. The performance gives rise to a sort of what-goes – on-tour-stays-on-tour effect wherein transgression is but a parade, and as such never totally real; now the law is, paradoxically, both in operation and suspended. The ancient Roman Gladiators or Spanish Corrida should ring some bells; in both cases the acts of transgression are justified on the grounds of their brief incorporation into the law. After all, why does the law seek to punish transgression? To help restore the belief in the infrangible law and order. Law is stable, authoritative; transgression – temporary, marginal.¹ Organised according to the fixed guidelines of state authorities, acts of transgression are tamed, controlled, approved, although no less cruel and barbaric. This is to suggest that such acts are never inherently contrary to the law; transgression is never merely outside the law which is capable of internalising transgression in order to preserve the illusion of its own normalcy and universality.

This unsettling interplay of law and transgression is revealingly portrayed in the 2013 thriller *The Purge*, directed by James DeMonaco. Setting the scene, in 2022 crime and unemployment rates in the US are at a record low as a result of the effective governance of the New Founding Fathers who introduce The Purge: one-day a year on which all major criminal acts are legal (including rape or murder). Overlooking the fairly obvious fact that such a regulation, as befits post-industrial dystopias, serves the purpose of population control as opposed to the lofty ideal of reducing crime rates, the idea of transgression being at the service of law does capture the public imagination. So posited, the theory comes fairly close to Bataille’s notion that transgression – far from being detrimental to the law – serves to complete the law it transgresses and institutes its fixed boundaries. In keeping with this greenhouse effect of law and transgression, the latter serves as the law’s constituent component, rather than a foreign parasite seeking to disrupt it.

Another instance of the pseudo-transgression, offering little else than scopophilic gratification endemic in postmodern visual culture, is instantiated in contemporary horror films. The British film critic Mark Kermode, in his interview with Nigel Floyd, discusses the prevalent contemporary horror filmmaking device which the latter critic has coined as *cattle-prodding*. Cattle Prod Cinema operates on the premise of “lull[ing] [the viewer] into a false sense of security” just to frighten him/her witless by means of a number of gimmicks (e.g. unexpected screams, chilling music, etc.) to which the

¹ But even this given order is subject to reversal. The constant possibility of transgression, helps perpetuate the illusive image of the firm law, which in its anticipation of transgression proves, in fact, fragile.

viewer “cannot but respond.” Whereas some more distinguished horror film directors (like David Cronenberg, to take a leaf from Floyd’s book) invest in the viewer’s attention by building up the suspense or “accumulative dread” consistently throughout the film, CPC depends on primitive, behaviouristic ploys that offer short-term indulgence at best (Kermode 2013).

Here, the fixated gaze of the spectator both invites and precludes transgression. Such acts appear as transgressive, but since anticipated (aware of the tricks of the trade, the viewer is only left unmindful as to *when* exactly s/he would become prodded) the gesture annuls transgression the moment it ushers it in, hence burning its own boat. But pseudo-transgressive representations are by no means limited to the cheap audio-visual tricks of popular horror films, e.g. *Gorno* or *Splatter Punk*. They are, I gather, part and parcel of what Martha Bayles calls “perverse modernism” (2001, 40) which introduces these aspects of cultural production in the contemporary mainstream that exploit vulgar aesthetics and tenets of modernism, like kitsch, obscenification of art, disregard towards tradition, etc. It appears that the subcutaneous needle of consumer capitalism makes its jab conspicuously felt here. If the reversal of the high and low aesthetics is the flagship modernist war-cry, the marketeers hasten to fish out the chunks they can best capitalise on. Bluntly, having been given *carte blanche*, after Joyce and Lawrence, to talk explicitly about sex which always sells, we think we may now skip the refined modernist stylistics underlying the transgressive impulses of the high-brow moderns, which makes, for a change, no easy sell. Put two and two together, and the staggering commercial success of *50 Shades of Grey* should strike as no surprise. As put forth by Adrian Hunter,

In the context of the academy, I find it interesting how the radical work of postmodernism – deconstructing authority, challenging regimes of absolute value, and so on – is celebrated, while the obvious complicity between such deconstructive and transgressive practices and the dominant logic of the marketplace (the state of permanent revolution capitalism seeks to induce) is passed over. The oddity here is that academics, at least in Britain, are never done complaining about the “marketisation” of higher education. It must be that we in the humanities draw sufficient satisfaction from the blows we believe we’re landing against hegemonic power not to notice that we are, by the same means, authoring our own demise (2014, 103).

A useful conduit to Bayles’s line of reasoning, Hunter’s argument shows, after Jameson, how postmodernism is complicit with the logic of consumer capitalism, and posits that not only marketeers, but also academics and critics (the presumed last bastions of

High Culture) unknowingly oil the cogs of their vulgar adversaries. Drawing on modernist premises, and legitimised by radical postmodernism, “perverse modernism goes beyond the usual run of sex and violence into a deliberate intellectualized attempt to make sex and violence as offensive as possible” (Bayles 2001, 45). Perverse modernism limits its shocking tactics to pushing the envelope: a further gradual violation of the already transgressed limits. If Molly Bloom’s fantasies about performing oral sex on Greek statues seemed obscene enough back in 1920s, Robert Mapplethorpe’s photograph *Self-portrait* of 1978 – depicting the author forcing a whip up his rectum – does raise the bar incomparably higher. And the political and cultural dominance of neo-liberalism over the past few decades, assuring unrestrained sexual liberties and expression, surely contributed to guarding artistic and popular manifestations fetishizing the breaking of sexual taboos in all manners imaginable. But how far can one effectively push the envelope? Just as one can exhaust the configurations and articulations of sexual acts, there must be limits to their (re)presentation in arts. This solicits a final enquiry: what happens if the last of the limits is transgressed? Is it that the principle on which ‘pseudo-transgression’ works no longer holds?

Fred Botting submits the logic of transgression in postmodernity to Baudrillardian notion of *simulacrum*:

In a world without limits transgression vanishes on a distant and receding horizon of some vestigial memory, or, holding onto an inchoate longing for some Thing Other, it beats its wings in a vacuum, plummets and implodes (2012, 53).

The infinite semiosis and homogeneity of cultural signs renders the world of functional values and limits of the real null and void. Incapable of recognising vestiges of heterogeneity, reclaiming nature, or instituting its limits, transgression, having “run its course” implodes (50). Of course, one generalises on such radical postmodern reasoning with trepidation: after all, how is one to test the limits of transgression (partial business of this article) with no limits left? Still, Botting’s argument feeds another worthwhile interrogation. To plant the final argumentative flag of this article, if pseudo transgression of perverse modernism manifests itself in tactics foregrounding transgressive articulations that heavily depend on social limits for their recognition, does contemporary culture participate in a production of transgressive acts that solicit, in a more postmodernist gesture, a renegotiation of the cultural limits? Let us tentatively accept Botting’s thesis at this point. If limits and transgression are no more, what are the plausible hypodermic cultural manifestations of transgressions, other than the relatively exhausted and

'limited' in-your-face overtness of pseudo transgression? Or else, is there a transgressive energy to pseudo transgressive representations?

Madelena Gonzalez offers a sound valuation of the aesthetics of post-realist contemporary fiction, which the critic deems pornographic, not least in that these authors tackle conventionally transgressive issues of "incest, violence, pornography, deviance, and so on," which they often do (2008, 125), but in "destroying their texts' mystique by overexposure and overkill, imposing an excess of the real (...) and vouchsafing unlimited access to that which should remain hidden" (126). Having contravened and relinquished all imaginable limits and taboos in the simulacrum age, transgression can no longer be recorded in overt subversive dramatizations to which the viewer/reader is desensitised anyway. Instead, the cultural logic of the marketplace foists its own ultra-pornographic dynamics. The simulacrum culture (defined by unbounded semiosis of signs, stripped of their symbolic anchoring, given to the over-accretion of multiphrenic, unrelated items) evinces itself as pornography par excellence, as it is informed by the same defining principle: "overexposure" of "that which should remain hidden."

By extension, if Cattle Prod Cinema misses the mark by feigning transgression, it appears that its subversive potential lies in the ultra-pornographic algorithm it acts in keeping with. To clear the air, CPC, unlike Torture Porn, should contain no (or at least is not defined by) pornographic imagery in a traditional sense. The perversion, however, unfolds in the pattern itself: the unexpected shocking tactics call to mind an act of exhibitionism, wherein, in the same vein, the victim is involuntarily traumatised by a totally unforeseen explicit spectacle. Or to recall another sexual metaphor, the viewer may feel pierced through, intruded, or 'penetrated' by the invasive visual ploys.²

The treatment of the body assumes a peculiar place in the considerations of scopophilic gratifications of the spectator in contemporary cinema and culture as well as those of the inversion of the transgressive vector: that is, overemphasis on explicit transgression at the expense of more organic transgressive enactments. One cannot but be amazed at the impossible body transformations that actors undergo to make it to a multi-million dollar Hollywood production.³ Money talks, of course, but why not just select an actor

² There are, however, foreseeable limitations to this infracultural reasoning. If applied as a universal pan-cultural stencil, it risks totalising all cultural acts, deeming them transgressive or pornographic. In so doing, it offers itself as little else than a Rorschach test funnelling multiple possibilities down to a single interpretative pot.

³ Examples multiply endlessly, but let us turn on some rather more telling examples: staggering body emaciation – Jake Gyllenhaal (for *Nightcrawler*, 2014), Christian Bale (*The*

that matches the exact physical proportions for the target role? Now we get it, actors are gladiators and we like to watch them suffer! Unmoved by the extremes of transgressive mimetic imagery (there is nothing CGI cannot reproduce), we now follow press conferences and fansites to find out to what great lengths our Hollywood darlings have gone to entertain us. In operation here is the tracing of bodily limits in the public imagination and discourse. Judith Butler, in her reading of Mary Douglas, posits that

any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalising certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies (2010, 2544).

Far from a private property, the body itself becomes the site of social inclusion, projections, inhibitions and taboos, transgression of which may entail social exclusion or marginalisation. Such a discourse, in Foucault's terms, seeks to internalise the body as the site of inscription securing its inclusion into the dominant ideology (*Discipline and Punish*). Hence, the metaphysical parameters of the body (including gender, race, aesthetics, size, functions) are established to comply with the systemic coding. Kristeva adds the notion of 'the abject' to the debate on the internalisation of the body, by showing the ways in which the subject is defined by those elements that the body expels (the abject) in order to constitute a conscious separation from between itself as subject and object. In both Foucault and Kristeva the body is the site of inclusion that consciously defines its limits by repudiating remnants of the Other: be they metaphysical or bodily. Hence the *othering* of the body marks the moment of transgression of its accepted limits; one of the jettisoning of the body out of its comfort zone – a milieu of inclusion. Since the body as the Other denotes the irruption of transgression, the extreme body transformations of the film stars figure as those sites of the Other that cannot but hook the viewer through their enticing transgressivity.

But what if the body diverts attention from – as opposed to offer itself up as the site of – transgression? Intriguing for these deliberations is the casus of *Shame* (2011), directed by Steve McQueen and starring Michael Fassbender. Brandon, a thirtyish yuppie, leads

Machinist, 2004), 50 Cent (*All Things Fall Apart*, 2011), Mathew McConaughey and Jaret Leto (*Dallas Byers Club*, 2013), Anne Hathaway (*Les Misérables*), Natalie Portman (*Black Swan*, 2010); excessive bulking up to get the superhero physique: Henry Cavill (*Man of Steel*, 2013), Tom Hardy (*The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012), Edward Norton (*American History X*, 1998); extreme weight gaining – Jared Leto (*Chapter 27*, 2007), Renee Zellweger (*Bridget Jones' Diary*, 2001), Russell Crowe (*Body of Lies*, 2008).

a peaceful solitary life in his deluxe New York apartment. Without biting into the details, the plot centres on the character's failure to control his sex life (he masturbates excessively, even at work, engages in chance sexual encounters, frequents brothels, regularly visits porn websites, etc.) and his existential struggle with the "addiction". Although the film is lavishly furnished with nude (though not clinical) scenes and shots (a dangling penis, gay sex, multiple female nude acts), the film cleverly avoids overegging the pudding in terms of pornographic display: shots are often taken from peeping angles rather than close-ups. This distancing is to make the viewer realise there is bigger fish to fry behind the graphic smokescreen. During one of the film's revealing moments, unnerved and agitated, Brandon embarks on a sex spree – including abusing a young girl in a pub, a brawl, gay oral sex, and capped by a threesome with two prostitutes. Particularly telling is the threesome scene: during Brandon's orgasm the camera, seconded by an uneasy violin soundtrack, moves close-up to Brandon's face which gives away a depressing fusion of pleasure, lust, and a sense of dejection: Fassbender's superb acting delivers it all. Far from ostracising sexual aberration, the logic of capitalism welcomes it not under the banner of consumerism, but one of sexual freedom inherited from the 1960s Counterculture and internalised. On this principle the sex industry thrives. (*Fight Club* and *American Psycho* act as spot-on cautionary tales – although there is infinitely more to them than their moral fibre – of what might befall you when you obsequiously toe the line of blithe Ikea boys or profiteering yuppies.)

But *Shame* is not about sex, of which the orgasm scene is an incontrovertible proof! *Shame* is transgressive, not because it strikes any moral cords – it does not; (hardly any sexually deviant acts – however mind-boggling – have the ability to push the envelope any further in the culture of no recognisable limits). It is transgressive because it emphasises so starkly the fact that perpetual obedience to the injunction "enjoy" because "you may", sooner or later ends up in guilt for failing to enjoy what we are supposed to enjoy. The film's evocative ending makes it evident that there is no escaping the shame inscribed in life's rich tapestry; shame is to be found in failing to conform to the pervasive all-singing, all-dancing template of happiness, just as there is no overriding the dictates of capital. By the same token, what is truly transgressive about Torture Porn, Cattle Prod Cinema, and celebrity body transformations is not their *othering* of the body or shocking tactics, but the market's crafty ways of inveigling us into relishing them, of which we are hardly proud. But we do obey the injunctions that the Lacanian Big Brother capitalises upon. Even if we are ashamed for failing to be happy, we must enjoy because we may! And we do. Check the box office...

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