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## Toilet cultures: boundaries, dirt and disgust

Remo Gramigna

A lot can be learned about a culture from looking at their bathrooms and their toilets.

Claire Loos (Opel 1985, 79)

We are born between excrement and urine.  
St. Augustine<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The modern contemporary toilet (both domestic and public) has an important role in the daily cleanliness liturgy in occidental societies. The toilet is "the icon of the twentieth century" (Morgan 2002, 2). Undoubtedly, as conceived in the West, the toilet is the first place outside of bed where one begins one's day and the last place before bed when ending the evening (Kira 1976). Toilets display a multitude of meanings and involve different competences and practices. Loo culture is indeed a topic linked to a broad range of issues such as dirt and waste, cleanliness and hygiene, gender, sex and sexuality, embodiment and body excretions, human senses, social categories and divisions, spatial categorisations, socialisation and communication, language and symbols, personal privacy, the politics of waste management, obscenity, violence and taboo, art and graffiti, just to mention a few. One may ask why toilets ought to be a focus of academic enquiry. Why are restrooms of high relevance for cultural analysis? For some, the current topic represents a sheer scatological waste of time. The present account dwells on the opposite side of the fence, so to say, in as much as it claims that it is licit, fruitful and challenging to find a place within academia for an enquiry about lavatories. Thus, the current paper is written starting from the premise that toilets should be regarded as crucially important objects of research for semiotics and, in general, for disciplines that are concerned with culture and society. The toilet, I hold, is a rich and meaningful microcosm inasmuch as it provides clues for understanding the relationship between nature and culture, the perception of the human body and bodily waste in a given society, the collective representations

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of dirt and cleanliness embedded in urban and domestic landscapes and, last but not least, competences and practices of people who in diverse socio-cultural settings use (or do not use) such facilities. In a nutshell, the toilet is culture (Greed 2003, VII).

It is my intention to demonstrate the importance of the present topic by showing how toilet shapes the nature-culture relationship: how this connection contributes to enlightening conventional assumptions and perceptions of the human body and its excreta, and how it entails a particular relationship with socio-cultural representations of dirt and cleanliness, inscribed through design and urban landscape. As Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner pointed out in the introduction to the recently published volume *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender*: "Toilets become windows onto the processes by which cultures define, separate, and manage dirt, and thus they contribute to the maintenance or violation of ideal order" (Gershenson & Penner 2009, 13).

The first section of this article gives an overview of the state of the art by reviewing the most relevant studies on toilets and other related aspects of material culture. The second section formulates the main theoretical starting point and research question, namely the observation that one primary need that is common to all human beings – the elimination of bodily waste – is 'channelled' differently in diverse cultural settings. In other words, I will focus on the fact that, as Julia Kristeva among others has pointed out, "excremental abjection is the most striking example of the interference of the organic with the social" (Kristeva 1982, 75). This is followed by an overview of theoretical attempts to provide taxonomic categorisation of world toilets and European lavatories. The article proceeds to set forth a theoretical framework for the study of toilets that combines three concepts: the notion of *dirt* as elaborated by Mary Douglas (2002), Juri Lotman's concept of *boundary* (Lotman 1990; 2005) and William Ian Miller's theory on *disgust* (Miller 1997).

### The toilet as an object of research

There is an ample spectrum of approaches that tackle the issue at hand from different theoretical perspectives. Accounts on the evolution of the toilet as technology in different geographical settings and historical contexts are based on the civilising process with special regard to the development of the city, history of hygiene and the history of the bathroom as a social institution. The latter is sometimes treated together with the issue of bathing and body cleansing with a special focus on English and French societies (Corbin 1986; Dobell 1996; Lambton 1997; Miller 1997; Horan 1996; Kilroy 1984; Wright 1960). Accounts of



nineteenth-century European cities with specific attention to London and Paris and urban filth are abundant (Barnes 2006; Cohen & Johnson 2005). Dominique Laporte has provided an outstanding historical account informed by a psychoanalytic route in his *History of Shit* (1993 [1978]) in which he investigates the correlation between money and bodily waste. In his seminal work entitled *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (2000 [1939]), Norbert Elias has remarked that the rise of civilisation occurred by the increasing control over body excrements. In recent years lavatories have been the focus of sociological studies (Inglis 2001), and in particular public facilities have been analysed as sites for homosexual encounters<sup>2</sup> (Humphreys 1975) and from a feminist viewpoint as places of segregation and gender discrimination (Benhabib 1996; Butler 1993; Gershenson & Penner 2009). Within feminist and queer theory framework, Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection has often been used, obtaining popularity and a vast range of applications (Mills 2006; Schweder 2009). In addition to these perspectives, toilets have been linked to the issue of power relations with special attention to the social construction of space (Foucault 1977; Lefebvre 1974). Particular accounts on toilets in non-Western societies deal with India, Japan and Africa (Chun 2002; Mitchell 2009; Srinivas 2002; Yamaguchi 1988). A study of the bathroom, its internal design and functionality that is still considered to be a classic in the field of architecture has been made by Alexander Kira (1976), while the two most recent and accurate sociological histories of excretory experience were published in the last decade (Inglis 2001; Molotch & Norén 2010), and at least since Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), the *pissoir* entered the realms of art and art criticism (Persels & Ganim 2004; Lydenberg 2009). It is also worth mentioning that there have been studies of toilet signs (Sensemaya 2008) and toilet graffiti (Butler 2006) as well as accounts on Estonian outhouse culture (Jürgen 2004).

From a strictly semiotic viewpoint, toilets have received less attention. Only a few exceptions may be listed, namely the ethno-semiotic analysis of the bathroom by Francesco Marsciani (2007) and a recent account on the travelling body which includes an elaboration of the semiotics of "excrementitious cultures" by Massimo Leone (2012a; 2012b). Other theoretical contributions rather focus on cognate issues such as the semiotics of 'trash' and 'pollution' (Anderson & Adams 1994; Keskpaik 2001; 2004; Posner 2000; Yamaguchi 1988).

Structural anthropology, with particular reference to the works of Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]) and Edmund Leach (1964), represents a good starting point for the study of toilets, providing a useful conceptual framework through the category of dirt defined as "matter out of place" (Douglas 2002, 44). Before introducing the concept of dirt, as it has been conceptualised within the frame

of structural anthropology, an exposition on the biological ground of primary needs is in order.

### When nature meets culture

Anatomy is destiny, said Freud (1976, 320). Yet, biological processes are not limited to the sheer physiological aspect of human existence but intermingle with cultural and social aspects of life. Elimination of bodily waste reminds human beings of their inescapable and irreversible embodied condition as well as their 'animality'. Paul Rozin and his colleagues have argued that excrements are a cause of anxiety for man inasmuch as they are reminders of the close connection with animals (Rozin & Fallon 1987). Notably, bodily excrements are one of the most primitive and primordial indices in the evolutionary typology of signs. Signs are often related to the physiological processes of animals, such as metabolism. Each excrement is a 'natural sign' signalling the presence of that animal in a given environment – they are literally traces of their presence. For Lacan the disposal of body excreta is one of the features that marks the difference between humans and other animals.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, as Elisabeth Shove pointed out, the body is "a reliably constant source of pollution" (Shove 2003, 148). The issue at stake may be stated in the following terms. The embodied condition of man is culturally, socially and semiotically mediated by means of sign systems. Bodily functions are human 'levelers', so to say, regardless of sex, gender, ethnicity and social status, and toilets are the places where such bodily democracy emerges. The toilet is "a great equalizer"<sup>5</sup>; or, as William Ian Miller remarked: "The anus as endpoint of the reductive digestive process is a democratizer" (Miller 1997, 99). Yet, biological aspects are strongly related, linked, intermingled and shaped by cultural connotations and social differences.

Let us recall at full length Clyde Kluckhohn's *Mirror for Man* (1985 [1949]) in which the issue we are dealing with is pointed out with crystalline clarity in several passages:

Some sorts of behaviour will be manifested by all human beings regardless of how they have been trained. There is an organic 'push' in each different individual toward certain kinds of acts. But to each biologically given characteristics is imputed a cultural meaning (Kluckhohn 1985, 203).

There is thus no 'either-or' between nature and that special form of nurture called culture. Culture determinism is as one-sided as biological determinism. The two factors are interdependent. Culture arises out of human



nature, and its forms are restricted both by man's biology and by natural laws. It is equally true that culture channels biological processes – vomiting, weeping, fainting, sneezing, the daily habits of food intake and waste elimination (Kluckhohn 1985, 21).

Solving primary needs, biological and physical, constitutes the common denominator for each human being while coping with the environment. Following this line of thought, it may be argued that the way in which people cope with their biological need of getting rid of bodily waste, namely, people's excrementitious practices, may fall under Kluckhohn's rubric of culture conceived as the "total way of life of a people" (Kluckhohn 1985, 17).

It is sufficient to look back at history in order to notice how the reciprocal influences between nature and culture with respect to excretory practices and scatological manners have changed over time. Romans, for instance, developed an efficient system of sewers, and bath and body cleansing were part of social life (Hobson 2009). In contrast, in the Middle Ages biological excesses were tossed out of the windows. As many commentators have pointed out:

In medieval European cities, defecation was a problem. Both the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie defecated in chamber pots set in the bedrooms and parlours that were emptied onto the streets by maids and footmen. In fact, until the 19th century, one of the many hazards of the European city was excrement falling on one from the sky as one walked down the streets (Srinivas 2002, 379–380).

Flush toilet, thought of as a contemporary technology present in Western societies, is a relatively recent discovery. Historically, shared public latrines have been a common feature of most communities, and are still the main facilities accessible in many parts of the world.

Private, sex-gendered lavatories were a modern and Western European invention, bound up with urbanization, the rise of sanitary reform, the privatization of the bodily functions, and the gendered ideology of the separate spheres (Gershenson & Penner 2009, 4–5).

There is not enough room in the present paper to linger over the history of hygiene and of the toilet as a technological device. It suffices to notice, however, that toilets have assumed in the course of history an apparent typological differentiation. To such differences we now shall turn.

## Typology of toilets

Up to this point, the term 'toilet' has been used in a very generic fashion to indicate the place where one gets rid of one's bodily wastes. In this section I shall give an overview of the main differences of lavatories in terms of culture, style and design. In order to fulfil such a task I draw on Massimo Leone's account of taxonomic attempts in the study of toilets (Leone 2012b, 249–250).

Let us start with the world map of toilets<sup>6</sup> (Figure 1), which was originally designed by the Toto Ltd group, a leading company in toilet manufacturing based in Japan. The map is reproduced by Allen Chun in his analysis of Japanese toilet culture (Chun 2002), discussed by Leone (2012a; 2012b) and employed by the anthropologist Francesca Bray who, on her website, explores the history of flush toilets (Bray n.d.). The Toto world map of toilets displays a thorough typology of toilets and includes three elements:

1. "Style": the posture the body assumes in order to perform the eliminating process;
2. "How to wipe": the ways of body cleansing that follow the elimination of bodily wastes;
3. "Treatment of waste": the disposal of bodily excess.

Each of these elements includes various possibilities. The first one, "style", bifurcates into three options, namely "sitting down", "squatting down" and "standing in a river". The second element, that is, "how to wipe", includes the following six options: "paper", "water", "pebble", "rope", "leaf" and "spraying". The third and last element, "treatment of waste", includes six possibilities, that is, "bait of animals", "bait of fish", "burying", "compost", "sewerage", and "exposure". As Massimo Leone has noticed, such a map offers the possibility to articulate, for each geographical area, the "excrementitious syntagm" by choosing between the paradigmatic options offered by the map (Leone 2012b, 249–250).

It can also be noted, along with Leone, that in Figure 1 the world is mapped according to religious distinctions that are present in each area of the globe, and this seems to suggest a possible correlation between toiletry patterns and religions, which has, however, not yet been explored in contemporary anthropological research (Leone 2012b, 250).

It is worth mentioning that the Toto map of toilet cultures does not include, under the rubric "treatment of waste", the 'flying toilets', that is, a common widespread practice in Kenyan slums that consists of 'going' inside a plastic bag, tying a knot and throwing it as far as possible. To be more accurate, perhaps such a taxonomy of toiletry around the globe ought to include "wrap and throw" as well under the rubric of excreta disposal. If we consider data regarding the access



people have to 'proper' sanitation around the world, it can be stated that Western European flush toilets constitute only a relatively small part when compared to ways in which people get rid of their bodily wastes in other areas of the world. According to the World Health Organization and UNICEF monitoring report, in 2011 one billion people did not have access to a toilet and defecated in the open or in unsanitary places (WHO & UNICEF 2013).

With specific reference to the European context, an attempt to provide a taxonomy of toilets has been made by Slavoj Žižek who proposed a comparative analysis of German, French and British lavatories. Žižek started from the presupposition that toilets cannot be regarded only in terms of functional design. On the contrary, as he pointed out, looking at lavatories "a certain ideological perception of how the subject should relate to the unpleasant excrement which comes from within our body is clearly discernable" (Žižek 1997, 3). Drawing on Hegel's interpretation of the geographical triangle Germany-France-England in terms of different "existential attitudes" (e.g. German reflective thoroughness, French revolutionary hastiness, English moderate utilitarian pragmatism) and quoting a famous scene of Luis Buñuel's *Le fantôme de la liberté* (1974), which plays with culinary and scatological conventions by displaying an inversion of the habits of eating and excreting<sup>7</sup>, the Slovenian philosopher proposed a threefold typology of toilets that "form[s] a kind of excremental correlative-counterpoint to the Lévi-Straussian triangle of cooking" (op cit). As he has put it:

In a traditional German lavatory, the hole in which shit disappears after we flush, water is way in front, so that the shit is first laid out for us to sniff at and inspect for traces of some illness; in the typical French lavatory, on the contrary, the whole is in the back – that is, the shit is supposed to disappear as soon as possible; finally, the Anglo-Saxon (English or American) lavatory presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two opposed poles – the basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it – visible, but not to be inspected (Žižek 1997, 3).

Žižek concludes that by looking at the abovementioned types of lavatories three different attitudes towards excremental excess can be discerned, namely "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" (Žižek 1997, 4). In his analysis, Žižek briefly recalls Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) in which the writer indulges in an excursion of personal thoughts about toilets, describing the British, German, Italian, French and Japanese lavatories. Jong envisages the German

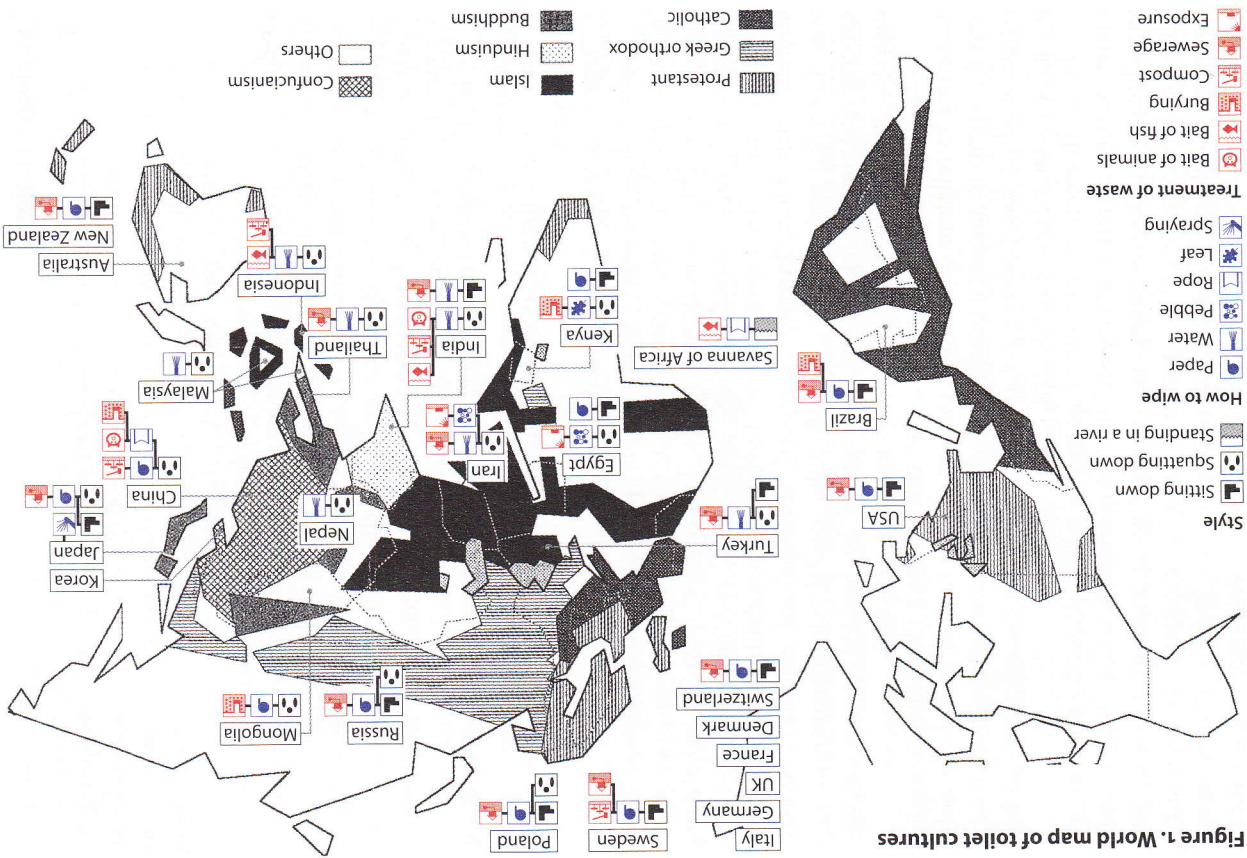


Figure 1. World map of toilet cultures



toilet as the most “unique”, so to say, inasmuch it has the strongest smell of them all (Jong 1973, 29).<sup>8</sup>

As Massimo Leone pointed out in his thorough discussion of Žižek’s analysis, despite the “thoughtless reference to its philosophical-psychoanalytical background, conspicuous propensity for stereotypes, and taste for boutades” Žižek’s comparative analysis shows that “excrementitious places and practices are elements that a semiotics of culture can put into a series” (Leone 2012b, 248). To the aforementioned remark, it can be added that such an analysis triggers the interrogation towards some other important issues. First and foremost, one ought to ask what matter toilets try to handle. In other words, before any analysis is put forward one should quest the nature of bodily excess or waste as such. What is it? Is it an object? Is it a thing? If so, what sort of ‘thing’ are we dealing with? How can it be described and classified? Another corollary that follows from these considerations, and is embedded in this kind of analysis as the one proposed by Žižek, is the investigation of the relationship between subject and object, that is to say, how human beings relate with their own (and others’) bodily excess. The focal question may be stated in the following terms: how do men handle this relationship and, most importantly, how is it mediated through the toilet? The rest of the paper shall attempt to dig into those issues by conceptualising bodily excess as belonging to the general category of ‘dirt’.

### Human waste: what is it?

A thorough investigation of toilets, whatever type of toilet one has in mind, cannot avoid tackling the problem of conceptualising human waste. What is human waste? How does it differ from other kind of waste, such as ‘junk’, ‘rubbish’, ‘garbage’, ‘trash’?

Waste as such is a pretty loose category and may refer to a very different range of phenomena. First and foremost, it must be distinguished between two types of material discard: “that which is common to all (living) systems, and that which is specific to humans” (Keskpaik 2004, 48). The latter comprises what goes under the rubric of ‘trash’, ‘garbage’, ‘rubbish’, ‘junk’ and other such waste. Among material discard that is specific to humans, two general categories in which cultural objects may be placed can be singled out, namely ‘transient’ and ‘durable’ objects. Objects placed in the former category are thought of as having finite life spans and their value decreases over time, whereas durable objects are thought of as having infinite life spans and their value increases over time (Thompson 1979, 7). In his *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and the Destruction of Value* (1979),

Michael Thompson identifies ‘rubbish’ as something that falls in between the two abovementioned categories of objects. As the author pointed out:

The two overt categories which I have isolated, the durable and the transient, do not exhaust the universe of objects. There are some objects (those of zero and unchanging value) which do not fall into either of these categories, and these constitute a third covert category: rubbish (Thompson 1979, 9).

Thompson’s concern is to explain how transfer from one category into another takes place in a system of objects. His hypothesis is that “this covert rubbish category is not subject to the control mechanism (which is concerned primarily with the overt part of the system, the valuable and socially significant objects) and so is able to provide the path for the seemingly impossible transfer of an object from transience to durability” (Thompson 1979, 9). Thus, it is apparent that bodily waste is not the same as rubbish. However, one may wonder whether there is anything that these two types of waste share. At a closer look, some similarities may arise.

At first glance, it seems that everything that is lacking economic value falls under the rubric of waste or rubbish. Rubbish is “undifferentiated” and “it has no use value, nor any value in an economic system of exchange” (Culler 1985, 6). Similarly, human excreta are considered to be matter without value. Therefore, both rubbish and (bodily) waste enjoy a similar lack of value. This is what the English word ‘shit’ suggests. As Harry Frankfurt pointed out: “Excrement is not designed or crafted at all; it is merely emitted, or dumped. It may have a more or less coherent shape, or it may not, but it is in any case not *wrought*” (Frankfurt 2005, 22; italics in original). Bodily excess is therefore something carelessly made, never finely crafted. Thus, it has apparently no intrinsic value. It goes without saying that this observation, although it may be true, does not exhaust the concept of human bodily waste, otherwise one could not make difference between say faecal matter and sheer junk or rubbish. What is it that makes the difference?

Before considering differences, let us first consider another similarity between rubbish and bodily waste. As pointed out above, ‘rubbish’ as conceived by Michael Thompson, is an in-between category. This view echoes Edmund Leach’s anthropological account on taboo. In his famous essay entitled “Anthropological aspects of language: animal categories and verbal abuse” (1964) the British anthropologist distinguished “things” and “non-things”, placing faecal matter in the latter category together with other kinds of “exudation of the human body” such as “urine, semen, menstrual blood, hair clippings, nail parings, body dirt, spittle, mother’s milk” (Leach 1964, 38). Similarly, Julia Kristeva grouped that



which is “neither subject nor object” and displays a high polluting potential as “abjection”. With specific respect to excrements and menstrual blood, Kristeva pointed out that:

While they always relate to corporal orifices as to so many landmarks parceling-constituting the body's territory, polluting objects fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual. Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to borders of the body, have any polluting value. Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death (Kristeva 1982, 71).

Notwithstanding the abovementioned similarities, namely the inherent lack of exchange value and the condition of ‘inbetweenness’, there are striking differences that separate rubbish from bodily waste. As Jonathan Culler pointed out, “ordinary old junk and rubbish – stuff that does not pollute or defile” normally does not have any relation with taboo (Culler 1985, 4). On the contrary, bodily waste is something threatening and repelling which possesses a high potential of contamination and pollution. Here lies perhaps the sharpest difference between ordinary junk and bodily waste. The simple fact that body excrements were, before the act of elimination, part of the body is an object of taboo. In this case waste comes from within. Whereas in the case of ordinary junk such as relics, remnants, mementos and souvenirs there is a drive towards collection – “[t]here is, at least, a feeling that if we throw out this junk we are being disrespectful to the past it memorializes [...]” says Culler (op cit, 5). In the case of bodily waste there is instead a push towards elimination and the feeling towards it is generally repulsion and disgust.

Some authors take ‘filth’ as an umbrella term that embraces both categories discussed above. This claim is apparent in the following passage:

As it breaches subject/object distinction in these ways, filth, in both its literal and figurative sense covers two radically different imaginary categories, which I designate *polluting* and *reusable*. The former – filth proper – is wholly unregenerate, contaminating, even toxic, and demands to be rejected and denied. But when polluting or filthy objects are thought of as trash, waste, junk, or refuse, they become conceivably *productive*, the discarded sources in which riches may lie, and therefore fecund and fertile in their potential. [...] Yet distinct as these two modes of conceptualizing filth are, they are not strictly

opposed, for an object can easily move from one to the other (Cohen 2005, X; italics in original).

It goes without saying that, seen under this light, human excrement can be conceived in a double perspective. What we extrude from our bodies – vomit, excreta, spit, urine, blood, dandruff – is thought of as ‘filthy’ for it appears useless in terms of intrinsic value. It is a stark reminder of our corporeality. Needless to say, bodily waste assumes value only if we choose to see it as such. For instance, chemically treated human sewage can be used as compost or to generate natural methane gas. In other words, “while filthy objects initially seem utterly repulsive and alien, then, they also paradoxically bear potential value” (Cohen 2005, X). In a nutshell, filth or dirt exists in a system of relations.

From what has been said so far, it may be concluded that, in conducting an analysis on toilet as place for the disposal of human excrements, it is at the human body as the centre and producer of such filth that we have to take a look, if we are to understand the role that restrooms play in everyday life. The following section will explore the implications stemming from such a claim, first considering the crucial role played by boundaries in the discussion of the notion of dirt.

### Boundaries, dirt and disgust

The notion of boundary plays a significant role both in Juri Lotman's semiotics of culture (2005 [1984]; 1990) as well as in Mary Douglas' anthropology of pollution (2002 [1966]). In this section I shall first review the ideas of these thinkers as they concern two main issues: the concepts of ‘boundary’ and ‘dirt’. Following this line of thought, I then seek to elaborate a theoretical synthesis of these concepts that allows conception of toilets as boundary places.

A boundless world is unimaginable. Boundaries delimit, demarcate, contain, and mediate. In so far as markers of semiotic differentiation, boundaries are at the heart of each culture as well as of each existence. At the macro-level of culture, boundaries distinguish the internal semiotic space from the extra-semiotic or non-semiotic space. A culture creates its own boundaries in order to differentiate identity and alterity, the inner from the outer space, life from death, the sacred from the profane, black from white, purity from dirt, text from extra-text, culture from non-culture.

Every culture begins by dividing the world into ‘its own’ internal space and ‘their’ external space. How this binary division is interpreted depends on the



typology of the culture. But the actual division is one of the human cultural universals (Lotman 1990, 131).

At the micro-level of the individual the limit of the self is defined by the absolute presence of the other. An existence without the co-existence of the 'other' is inconceivable. As Mihhail Lotman has pointed out: "[...] for its *own* existence every semiotic entity (sign, text, mind, or culture as a whole) needs *the other*" (Lotman 2002, 35; italics in original). At a biological level the skin operates as a borderline between the body and the outer surroundings. Jesper Hoffmeyer writes: "On the one hand, the skin thus serves as a kind of topological boundary; while, on the other hand, its semiotic capacity opens up the world to us" (Hoffmeyer 2008, 25).

In Juri Lotman's theory, the concept of boundary goes hand in hand with that of semiosphere, thought of as, by analogy with Vernadsky's concept of biosphere, "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages, not the sum total of different languages; in a sense the semiosphere has a prior existence and is in constant interaction with languages" (Lotman 1990, 123). Outside this semiotic space no form of semiosis is conceivable (Lotman 2002, 208). For Lotman, the boundary is a necessary part of the semiosphere and is described as follows:

The function of any boundary or filter (from the membrane of the living cell, to the biosphere which according to Vernadsky is like a membrane covering our planet, and to the boundary of the semiosphere) is to control, filter and adapt the external into the internal (Lotman 1990, 42).

Furthermore, the boundary is the locus of continuous translations and "the hot-test spot for semiotizing processes" (Lotman 1990, 136):

The border of semiotic space is the most important functional and structural position, giving substance to its semiotic mechanism. The border is a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Thus, only with the help of the boundary is the semiosphere able to establish contact with non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces (Lotman 2005, 210).

Juri Lotman stressed the ambivalent character of the boundary for it both separates and unites (Lotman 1990, 136). On the one hand, a boundary can be seen as division and demarcation; on the other hand, it can be seen as a transgressible and semi-permeable membrane, a filter through which communication and

dialogue happen between different domains. Needless to say, one viewpoint does not exclude the other. They are rather compatible, interdependent and complementary. As Peeter Torop has said: "Borders separate and thus create identities, but borders also connect and construe these identities by juxtaposing the own and the alien" (Torop 2005, 164). The description of borders as "the sum of bilingual translatable filters" (Lotman 2005, 218) provides us with the idea of a sort of dynamism for it takes into account the movements across the semi-permeable borders of the semiosphere. This move from the outer to the inner space, from the periphery to the core and vice versa is seen as a process of translation. Thus, one of the main functions of semiotic boundaries is to be the doors of translatability.

Lotman argues that boundaries also have another function in the semiosphere, being "[...] the area of accelerated semiotic processes, which always flow more actively on the periphery of cultural environments, seeking to affix them to the core structures, with a view of displacing them" (Lotman 2005, 212).

The periphery is therefore the place of catalysis and change. Continuous irruptions constantly undermine the inner equilibrium of the semiosphere. New meanings are generated via "semiotic invasions" from the outer, extra-semiotic, space (Lotman 2005, 215). The idea of dynamism across boundaries is a concern that Lotman further develops in his later writings:

The boundary [...] is constantly transgressed via intrusions from the extra-semiotic sphere which, when bursting in, introduce a new dynamic, transforming the bounded space and simultaneously transforming themselves according to its laws (Lotman 2009, 115).

It is worth noting that, for Lotman, the boundary may also be a spatial marker of differentiation. As he pointed out:

When the semiosphere involves real territorial features as well, the boundary is spatial in the literal sense. [...] Hence the appeal of the centre for the most important cultic and administrative buildings. Less valued social groups are settled in the periphery. Those who are below any social value are settled on the frontier of the outskirts [...], by the city gate, in the suburbs. If we think of this on a vertical scale then these 'outsiders' will be lofts and cellars, and in modern city the metro. If the centre for 'normal' life is the flat, then the boundary space between *home* and *non-home* is the staircase and entrance. [...] Other boundary places are public places such as stadia and cemeteries. There is a significant change in the accepted norms of behaviour when moving from the boundary to center (Lotman 1990, 140; italics in original).



It is apparent then, that seen through such a perspective, Lotman's insights may well be applied in order to describe the toilet as a boundary place. Although it may seem a truism, cultures delimit a specific space in which it is culturally acceptable to deal with one's excreta and at the same time control its potentially threatening power.

Having said that, I will now turn to Mary Douglas' account on the notion of boundary and the conception of dirt.<sup>9</sup> Douglas proposed her well-known anthropology of pollution in the seminal work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966). According to such a view, the distinctiveness of 'dirt' lies in the fact that it does not fit into a given system of classification. In other words, ambiguity and in-betweenness are what characterise dirt. It is an anomaly for a given cultural system. Viewed through this prism, dirt is something that blurs categorisations. For Douglas dirt encompasses many things inasmuch as it is a comprehensive category for that which is 'out of place', an "omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems" (Douglas 2002, 44). As the British anthropologist pointed out:

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table. Food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing, similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing leaving on chairs; out-door things indoors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where overclothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is in the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications (Douglas 2002, 44–45).

The underlying theoretical assumption is that by studying what is marginal in a given system one can get sense of the whole. Dirt, as a marginal category, entails a special relationship with the symbolic system it is part of, a relationship of exclusion that leads to the investigation of the underlying semiotic system. This is a classical structural theoretical claim: that is, the attempt to reconstruct a given code by means of that which is excluded, un-coded, and marginal. As Douglas clearly pointed out:

Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements (Douglas 2002, 44).

From what has been said so far it could be inferred that the contemporary Western obsession with hygiene and cleanliness is related to symbolic pollution. Dirt is a contextual factor. Thus, it may assume different meanings according to what viewpoints one decides to take. For Douglas, dirt is common to all cultures in so far as it enables us to distinguish between pure and impure, which is a feature of both 'primitive' and modern societies.

This paper draws on Douglas' theory of pollution for two main reasons. The first is that it sheds light on the impact that such categorisation, e.g. what is considered to be dirt in a given culture and what is not, has on the surroundings, in terms of material culture. This is apparent in the following passage:

Dirt offends against order. Eliminating is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment. [...] In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively reordering our environment, making it conform to an idea (Douglas 2002, 2–3).

Drawing on Douglas' insights, in their recent collection of works entitled *Dirt: New Geographies of Dirt and Contamination* Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox express a similar idea. The authors are correct in noting that "in eliminating dirt of all kinds we are involved in a perpetual spatial and visual process of arranging and rearranging the environment" (Campkin & Cox 2007, 69–70). In other words, this constant process of arranging the surroundings may be thought of as an instance of semiotization. As Lotman pointed out: "The outside world, in which a human being is immersed in order to become culturally significant, is subject to semiotization, i.e. it is divided into the domain of objects which signify, symbolize, indicate something (have meaning), and objects which simply are themselves" (Lotman 1990, 133). For Lotman the human body represents the basis for its semiotization, that is to say, the universal oppositions right-left, top-bottom are grounded on the body's asymmetry (op cit).

Similarly, Mary Douglas takes into consideration the body as locus where boundaries are marked. As she put it:

The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers



and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body (Douglas 2002, 142).

The human body is certainly a powerful metaphor in conceptualising boundaries. There is an immense literature that explores the nature of embodiment and focuses on the role played by the human body in relation to filth, dirt and disgust. It is not my intention to elaborate a fully fledged theory on embodiment and disgust. Rather, what this section seeks to point out is the simple fact that if we are to study the toilet we should look at the relationship between the human body and its own excrement.

As pointed out above, the body is the locus of polluting liquids, substances and matters. Body orifices not only provide access to the world being the portals by which living organisms perceive their *umwelt*, but they are also the doors through which body excesses are tossed out. Excrement, blood, spit, vomit, saliva, hairs, pus, sperm, and other substances and fluids that the body produces and expels are in most cultures considered taboo and regarded as dirty. There is a vast literature devoted to the ritual and magical use of such matters (Bourke 1891; Greenblatt 1982; Leach 1964; Passariello 1994). What is important for the present discussion is that those excrements have a capacity to repel and trigger disgust.

Charles Darwin was one of the first authors who theorised disgust as one of the basic emotions. He provided an example from his own experience in which he described it in terms of sense of taste and rejection of food:

The term 'disgust', in its simple sense, means something offensive to the taste. It is curious how readily this feeling is excited by anything unusual in the appearance, odour, or nature of our food. In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty (Darwin 1965, 256–257).

Let us put aside Darwin's ethnocentric impressions and focus on the description he provided about disgust. It can be noted, along with William Ian Miller, that "disgust undoubtedly involves taste, but it also involves – not just by extension but at its core – smell, touch, even at times sight and hearing" (Miller 1997, 2). Miller thus presents a wider definition of disgust that encompasses all body senses. In his view it is an emotion that centres on "a strong sense of aversion to something perceived as dangerous because of its powers to contaminate, infect, or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion" (*op cit*). It goes without saying

that body excreta are objects of disgust. According to some, faeces is a universal disgusting matter. For Andras Angyal "disgust is a specific reaction towards the waste products of the human and animal body" (Angyal 1941, 395).

A taste-based conception of disgust like the one set forth by Darwin cannot account for the complex semiosis of senses that goes on between a toilet user and such highly polluted space. Many other senses are indeed involved in the perception of the toilet as a contagious or contaminated place. The feeling of disgust towards body excrements opens up a new vista on toilets as containers of filthy 'things' inasmuch as it entails an analysis of sensory perception in such places. In other words, the consideration of disgust as the basis for the relationship with excrement pushes towards a sensory semiotics that takes into account sight, odour, smell, touch and sound in channelling disgusting things. Let us consider, for instance, what Miller writes about public lavatories:

We will sit on a public toilet seat with less upset when it is cold than when we discern that it is warm from the warmth of a prior user. Body heat is in some way as polluting as more material pollutants in that setting (Miller 1997, 64).

In this example of a public toilet, it is the presence of 'the other' and its traces that human senses perceive which triggers the feeling of revulsion. It is exactly such a presence that the toilet ultimately seeks to erase. Absence, void, deletion, blankness, water and fluids, all that characterises modern flush toilets as facilities for the disposal of excreta, aim towards erasing the presence of the object of disgust. Detachment, separation and deletion (of one's bodily excrement as well as of the presence of an unknown 'other') are processes at stake here. Controlling dirt entails a politics of concealment and deletion. Absence of smell, of touch and eventually of sight – all aim to delete what is meant to be present in the environment. A good example is given by the colour of modern Western toilets. The internal design of the toilet is usually dominated by white tints. As Baudrillard has noticed: "Anything that is bound up with the body and its immediate extensions has for generations been the domain of white, a surgical, virginal colour which distances the body from the dangers of intimacy and tends to neutralize the drives" (Baudrillard 1996 [1968], 33).

## Conclusion

The present study has explored toilet cultures with the intention to point out the relevance that such places may have for cultural analysis. The paper has provided an account of the main theories and authors that have dealt with topics such as



dirt, filth, body excrement and waste. Drawing mainly on Mary Douglas' concept of dirt and Juri Lotman's notion of boundary, this study has sought to provide theoretical insights for understanding toilets as spaces that mediate between culture and nature, in which dirt plays a crucial role as marker of difference in a given cultural setting. Following this line of thought, and anchoring such perspectives to the feeling of disgust triggered by bodily waste, the toilet can be thought of as a boundary place in between nature and culture. The restroom is seen as the locus where culture establishes a set of meaningful differences by relegating all that is thought of as 'filthy' to the peripheral zones of culture. Toilets transcode exterior space into interior space, public into private.

By considering toilets as boundary places, many different classes of binary opposition may be drawn. Masao Yamaguchi, for instance, suggested a similar approach and applied concepts of centre/periphery to the Japanese material culture. He states:

By building a house, man cuts out a culturally controlled 'inside', he wants to assimilate a space, in contrast to the outside. Then the model of in and out is brought into a house where the dichotomy between in and out is found. At present, houses try to wipe out what is dirty. But, in a house there is both a front and a back. The front is dignified (i.e. the living room), while the back is vulgar (i.e. the WC). In the back there is the notion of putrefaction (Yamaguchi 1988, 215).

A similar approach renders a long list of binary oppositions when applied to toilets: culture/non-culture, culture/nature, internal/external, body/spirit, male/female, ladies/gentlemen, clean/dirty, clean/decent, sit/squat, pure/impure, private/public. Obviously this list can be expanded (see Greed 2003, 28–29).

In this respect, toilets can be conceived as "technologies of concealment" (Barcan 2005, 10), containers of the unclean. Restrooms are boundary places where dirt is controlled and where the management of bodily waste becomes a private business: "Shit is the most personal and private thing we have. Anyone can get to know the rest – your facial expression, your gaze, your gestures. Even your naked body: at the beach, at the doctor's, making love" (Eco 2006, 86). Hence, the paradoxes of public toilets, places of ambiguity, at the same time public and private, open and closed, places where dirt is controlled and erased. Physical traces of the presence of the other, the markers of the body in terms of smell, sight, touch and hearing are concealed whereas the consciousness of the body – one's own body as a toilet user – and its biological processes remain present.

This perspective matches well with a consideration of toilets, and in particular public restrooms, as "backstage regions" in the sense that Erving Goffman gave to this term (Goffman 1959). Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical stance in sociology, Spencer E. Cahill and colleagues proposed an account of toilets that envisages these spaces as "private yet public settings" (Cahill et al 1985). Drawing on Goffman's term "stall", defined as "well-bounded space to which individuals lay temporary claim, possession being on an all-or-nothing basis" (Goffman 1971, 32), the authors pointed out that the physical space of public restrooms is divided into two different parts: one open region publicly accessible and a closed space, the cubicle or 'stall', in which one can find the needed privacy to empty one's bowels. Viewed from such a perspective, the authors defined "toilet stalls in public bathroom" as being "publicly accessible yet private backstage regions" (Cahill et al 1985, 33).

From what has been said so far, it may be argued that the toilet functions as a boundary place between nature and culture for the user who lives, accesses and perceives his or her surroundings, inasmuch as it renders culturally acceptable what is considered 'dirty'. To wit, the toilet makes the dirt clean, purifies the human body via concealment, occlusion, ablution, daily tasks, processes and routines that translate what is meant to be 'natural' or 'organic' into cultural. Dirt cleans, so to say. As we have seen above, along with Lotman, "there is a significant change in the accepted norms of behaviour when moving from boundary to centre" (Lotman 1990, 140) and vice versa. What is allowed inside the premises of toilets would not be tolerable outside. The toilet, therefore, works as a boundary between outer and inner space, a boundary that contains and deletes, which renders clean, decent and acceptable that which is considered to be filthy or profane.

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## Filmography

- Ferry Tales* (2003), directed by Katja Esson. Lifestyle International Production Service, Penelope Pictures, Schenk Productions.
- Le fantôme de la liberté (Phantom of Liberty)* (1974), directed by Luis Buñuel. Euro International Film, Greenwich Film Productions.

## Sources of illustrations

Figure 1 – Data: Toto world map of toilets (n.d.): <http://www.anth.ucsb.edu/faculty/bray/toilet/worldtoilettry.html> [accessed 1 June 2013].

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Inter faeces et urinam nascimus*. This Latin locution is usually attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), although it probably derives from a homily by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153).
- <sup>2</sup> Practices of what the British call 'cottage' and the North Americans call 'cruising'.
- <sup>3</sup> Special issue of *The American Journal of Semiotics* on the topics of trash and pollution.
- <sup>4</sup> The characteristic of a human being is that – and this is very much in contrast with other animals – he doesn't know what to do with his shit. He is encumbered by his shit. Why is he so encumbered while these things are so discreet in nature? Of course it is true that we are always coming across cat shit, but a cat counts as a civilized animal. But if you take elephants, it is striking how little space their leavings take up in nature, whereas when you think of it, elephant turds could be enormous. The discretion of the elephant is a curious thing. Civilization means shit, *cloaca maxima*. (Lacan in Turkle 1992, 231).
- <sup>5</sup> *Ferry Tales* (2003).
- <sup>6</sup> I owe knowledge of this map to Massimo Leone, and I thank Francesca Bray for providing me with further information about its origin. Here it is given in a slightly modified version.
- <sup>7</sup> For a semiotic analysis of Buñuel's film see Grimm 1997.
- <sup>8</sup> The German toilet, also known as 'washout toilet', is a particular type of flush toilet. "Many German toilet bowls have a ledge on which to inspect the outcome before flushing it away" (Greed 2003, 81). This is why the German toilet's design is sometimes referred to as 'lay and display'.
- <sup>9</sup> A similar attempt to link Juri Lotman's model of the semiosphere with the Douglasian category of 'dirt' has been put forward by Riste Keskaik who envisages dirt as a "category at the boundary of the semiosphere" (Keskaik 2004, 23).