

## The plumbing of modern life

MARGARET MORGAN

The toilet is the icon of the twentieth century. Octavio Paz observed that beauty was once bound to two realms, the sacred and the secular; that is, religious art and craft.<sup>1</sup> Under the forces of industrialisation, art became independent of religious purpose and craftsmanship was supplanted by industrial design. Some vestige of religious beauty persisted in art and, indeed, Paz has argued that ‘the religion of art was born of the ruins of Christianity’. Nor is industrial design as secular as the craft it replaces: an industrial object is at its most elegant, indeed its most beautiful, when its form most perfectly follows its function. As that which approaches an ideal, it lends itself to worship. As with modern art, a vestigial religiosity clings to its form: the toilet is such a beautiful thing and its iconography has been long in the making. When John Wesley argued that ‘cleanliness is next to godliness’ he unwittingly initiated hygiene as a new religion. Thus, by the Victorian period, John Ruskin would declare that, ‘A good sewer was a far nobler and a far holier thing ... than the most admired Madonna ever printed.’<sup>2</sup> And in the early twentieth century, a urinal was once famously described as a ‘Madonna—or was it a Buddha—of the Bathroom’.<sup>3</sup> But if the toilet is iconic, then the sacrament is reversed: in the Eucharist we imbibe the blood and body of the Christ figure. Here, in inversion, we present our blood and shit and piss before the shrines to hygiene and modernist aesthetics. That is, if god is said to enter our bodies in the pre-modern ritual, then it is we, as gods, who enter the body of the State and Metropolis in the modern ritual that is the adoration of the cubicle.

Let us examine more closely then that supreme object of utility, shining, hygienic, gleaming in all its ostensible neutrality, that grand signifier of twentieth-century modernism, that white porcelain of the toilet bowl. After all, ‘a lot can be learned about a culture from looking at their bathrooms and their toilets’.<sup>4</sup>

### Porcelain<sup>5</sup>

Porcelain. [a. F. *porcelaine*, a Venus shell, cowrie or similar univalve; hence the dense polished substance of these shells, and (from its resemblance to this) china-ware; ad. It. *Porcellana* (13th c. in Marco Polo) ... the fine cockle or muscle shells which painters put their colors in; ... ] 1. A fine kind of earthenware, having a translucent body and a transparent glaze ... b. *fig.* With allusion to the fineness, beauty or fragility of this ware ... 1640, Brome, *Sparagus Gard.* v. viii. She is herself the purest piece of Purslane ... 1875, Tennyson, *Q. Mary II i*, That fine porcelain Courtenay, Save that he fears he be crack’d in using ... should be in Devon too.<sup>6</sup>

Porcelain. The name of the ceramic used for toilets is the same name used to

describe a tea cup, a baby doll, a woman's face, the pearl of womanhood, the exquisite corpse that is femininity in patriarchal culture. The associations between porcelain and the feminine are centuries old, so naturalised as to seem unremarkable. Venus rode the waves upon her porcelain shell, and painters used that self-same vessel to mix the colours by which to create her likeness. In the eighteenth century porcelain was a virtual currency, and the mania for its smooth, translucent form caused many an intrigue, excess and squandering of fortunes. Perhaps most famously, the then King of Poland, Augustus II, was known for his excessive tastes in porcelain *and* in women, fine and delicate commodities both.<sup>7</sup>

By the twentieth century, the porcelain figurine would transmogrify into a porcelain fixture, a feminine form still, albeit one with a signification relayed across an even more complex mesh of associations. At the level of the symbolic, the feminine is said to be on the side of the abject, the irrational, the unformed, the horizontal, the liquid, like bodies of water that take the form of their vessel; just as the masculine is said to be on the side of the subject, the rational, the normative, the distinct, the vertical, the categorical, the specific. By the nineteenth century, 'woman', then long associated with open waters and floods,<sup>8</sup> came to be associated with the control of floods, the control that was modern plumbing.<sup>9</sup> In the history of American plumbing, this control was particularly precarious, always threatening failure, and the oscillation between reassurance and threat served only to heighten the charge that plumbing accrued. This very ambiguity puts plumbing on the side of the feminine so that 'woman' and 'plumbing' become mutually reinforcing tropes, juxtaposed in a tender and horrific embrace—from nineteenth-century sanitary engineers, to histories of modern art, to the films of Hitchcock, to the boys in the suburbs of my youth—whose charming sobriquet for girls was: *muck-holes*.

### Muck-holes

I'll trade you for your candy some gorgeous merchandise  
My camera, it's a dandy, six by nine, just your size,  
You want my porcelain figure,  
A watch, a submarine,  
Black lingerie from Wien,  
I sell my goods behind the screen ...<sup>10</sup>

Marlene Dietrich sings of a melancholy trade in the ravages of post-war Europe: she trades her goods, *her porcelain figure*, behind the screen, 'no feeling, no stealing, a very smooth routine'. She is the abject, impassive hooker, selling her sexual services as she does the other contraband in her possession. She understands the irony of the sales pitch—for surely her listener thinks the porcelain a little sullied from use—while simultaneously rehearsing the older coupling of woman and that pellucid 'white gold'. From our vantage this porcelain recalls less a teacup or a figurine than it does a toilet bowl. Woman as prostitute has been synonymous with hidden disease for as long as the notion of disease has existed, ascribed a moral impurity that, slippery metaphor that it is, segues easily into physical dirt, filth, mire. And woman has for centuries and

misogynist millennia been associated with dirt: *Inter faeces et urinam nascimus*.<sup>11</sup> Here we see the poles between which this figure, woman, is consigned to vacillate. Under modernity, the chain of association from woman to filth to cleanliness—and back again—is sent underground, via plumbing.

In nineteenth-century Paris the equation of women and filth was manifested in the regulation of sex-work and sewage alike, via various ordinances, technologies and taxonomies:

If, without scandalizing anyone, I was able to enter the sewers, handle putrid matter, spend part of my time in the refuse pits, and live as it were in the midst of the most abject and disgusting products of human congregations, why should I blush to tackle a sewer of another kind (more unspeakably foul, I admit, than all the others) in the well-grounded hope of effecting some good by examining all the facets it may offer?<sup>12</sup>

So argued the great nineteenth-century sanitary engineer, Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, in his study of Parisian prostitution. He developed his major designs in sanitary engineering at the same time as he conducted an intensive investigation of prostitution, moving with apparent ease from the sewer to that 'sewer of another kind'. It should be noted that Parent-Duchâtelet was an avid empiricist. Thus, in order to disprove a belief popular at the time that miasma caused disease, he—it seems with great gusto—used himself as a case-study, by immersing himself in sewage and by smearing excrement on the walls of his rooms. He was quite comfortable living in such malodorous states, busily classifying effluvia into many different types. His study of prostitution was equally in-depth, a detailed sociology that afforded rather sympathetic and unsensationalised glimpses into the ordinary circumstances of nineteenth-century Parisian sex-workers. Yet in spite of his findings about her material lot, against the evidence of his very own empirical research, he still saw fit to judge the prostitute *more unspeakably foul*. To Parent-Duchâtelet, as Alain Courbin reads him, 'the moral bases of such a conviction are evident: in the author's mind the virulence of the illness transmitted by female sewers, by the vaginal filth of fallen women is naturally linked to the mire and to excremental effluvia'.<sup>13</sup> Of course Parent-Duchâtelet was not alone in his views. By the end of the nineteenth century, civic-minded Americans, especially New Yorkers, went on a 'social hygiene crusade' to rid their cities of moral as well as material dirt.<sup>14</sup> And in the First World War, government pamphlets and posters warned US soldiers of potential sexually transmitted disease by arguing that *German Bullets [are] Cleaner than Whores*.<sup>15</sup>

The fantasy of the feminine is one of plenitudinous sexuality, be it damnable and detestable, or elsewhere, clean and pure:

What is it that gushes out of our water pipes then? If the desire for a flowing sexual yet clean woman has merged with the boundless oceans ... Then what we wash ourselves with every day is that same ocean in its domesticated form, tamed within our water pipes. We use that substance, that 'pure mother', to cleanse ourselves of the dirt of the world ... the dirt that we are ourselves. In other words, tap water has become (among other things) the material incarnation of the anti-sexual abstraction 'White woman' ('pure mother' ... ).<sup>16</sup>

Madonna and whore. Idealised and denigrated. Purity and filth. Modern plumbing, in its connection to woman, has acquired these associations, both revered and reviled. Plumbing is the uncanny embodiment of the sexualised and maternal figure of woman—erotic, comforting, horrific. Tap water is our pure mother, waste water our slut. We shall see this ‘woman’ juxtaposed with toilets, plumbing, drains, in some of the key narratives of the twentieth century. Let us take a glimpse at that most famous of shower scenes, the shower scene in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960).

Elisabeth Bronfen, in her treatise on the hysterical body, takes the navel as the imperfect knot, the mark on the body, of the first and primary castration, a castration that both men and women experience, the castration that is the separation, at birth, from the maternal body.<sup>17</sup> Her brilliant reading of the shower scene in *Psycho* identifies the gaze of Norman Bates, formally, filmically, linked to the body of his soon-to-be-victim, Marion Crane, whose torso we see mid-murder with the weapon pointing directly to her navel. Bronfen links this momentary flash—the view of the victim’s navel—with the murderer’s incommensurable desire to possess and return to his mother. The character, Marion Crane, for her part, is sexual, self-possessed, fast-moving, a woman who takes charge of her destiny—she is the bad girl with whom we identify; the bad girl who, although with misgivings about her decisions, sets in train a sequence of events that leads her to the Bates Motel and ultimately to her demise, her life blood literally draining down the waste pipe, her slumped body in close-up against an almost Edward Weston-like view of the toilet bowl, and then, the denouement of the first half of the film, her dead, open eye in close-up, famously dissolving into the drain itself, the gurgling admixture of water and blood draining into waste, the only sound we can hear.<sup>18</sup> In Bronfen’s analysis, the navel, or *omphalos*, is the non-site of the initial castration that is childbirth and separation from the mother, while it is also the knot that is at the centre of subjectivity.

I would take the *omphalos* a step further and apply it to the *mise-en-scène* itself, in this case, a drain-eye-navel configuration, to argue that that other non-site, or mark in the surface of the architecture, the drain, itself functions as an *omphalos*, an imperfect residue, a return of the repressed that cuts into the fantasy of seamless subjectivity and individual agency (of course here it is the woman’s agency that must be cut). The drain returns to us its blank eye, half reminding us of that which we would rather forget. In the symbolic order of a patriarchal, body-phobic culture, woman and plumbing are the barely acknowledged holes in the symbolic through which seeps anxiety. Of course, I am speaking of a normative culture against which there are aberrations, deviations. Yet the dominant culture is no less compelling for being discontinuous; indeed it is its generality and exceptions that make it all the more cogent and invisible. In the normative culture, then, ‘woman’ and ‘toilet’ both cause anxiety about the porousness of embodied subjectivity that must deny or abhor that which undoes its finitude: to shit, piss and bleed is to leave part of oneself behind, which is to have blurred one’s margins, to have destabilised a phantasmagoric individuality. Similarly, to invoke a forgotten maternal body is also to deny one’s identity as discrete and whole, and to acknowledge the profound interconnectivity of human

subjecthood, the confusion of identities, the dissolution of self. Woman, toilet: these are the apparatus by which we are undone and which we abjure, in order to be who we are.<sup>19</sup>

### **The sewer is the conscience of the city<sup>20</sup>**

Just as the self must be split from *everything else* in order to be, so the dialectic of the modern wants to split the private from the public, the individual from the mass, the domestic from the civic. Modernity necessarily presumed the split between, on the one hand, the expansion of individual sovereignty—the right to privacy if you like—and, on the other, the greater common ownership of public spaces and institutions. In its taxonomic drives, it relied on that split to keep ‘a place for everything and everything in its place’,<sup>21</sup> to appropriate Catharine Beecher’s famous adage. Modernity sought to shore up intimacy in the hallowed sanctity of coupledom-domesticity whilst maintaining a monumental public-ness, erected without any of the inevitable dirtiness, out-of-place-ness, that personal touch might entail. Inevitably, however, the personal does touch the public and a psychic charge accrues to the places where these different registers of modern entitlement converge. Like sticky stuff to a wall, like shit in a public bathroom, this charge attaches to the intimate ‘non-spaces’ of modern public life. Griselda Pollock identified those interstitial spaces for modernity in nineteenth-century Paris: the brothel, the bar, the theatre.<sup>22</sup> In Pollock’s analysis the figure of ‘woman’—specifically the sex-worker—becomes a cipher for the complex workings of modern anxiety not only around sexuality, disease and embodiment, but also the incommensurability of the public/private split. The prostitute’s ‘work places’ afforded intimacy in public and semi-public space. Intimacy of the erotic kind that could include sex, conversation, and the badinage and flirtation that may precede sex, was thus open to public scrutiny and not sequestered into the drawing rooms and bedrooms of private space. Sex was part of a spectacular public culture in which commodities and pleasures circulated, and money—that most promiscuous of flows—was *lube* to them all.

People have key self-constitutive relations with strangers and acquaintances; and they have eroticism, if not sex, outside of the couple form. These border intimacies give people tremendous pleasure. But when that pleasure is called sexuality, *the spillage of eroticism into everyday social life seems transgressive in a way that provokes normal aversion, a hygienic recoil, even as contemporary consumer and media cultures increasingly trope toiletward, splattering the matter of intimate life at the highest levels of national culture.*<sup>23</sup> (My emphasis)

Berlant’s comments recall the Jerry Springers and Jenny Joneses of afternoon and late-night talk shows, and the spate, pre-September 11, of so-called Reality TV shows, all of which indulge a voyeuristic *schadenfreude* in the spectacle of violence, sex and emotional betrayal. It is interesting that even she describes these phenomena in metaphors of the toilet. The spillage, then, of privacy into public confounds the classification of the spaces of modernity, and the persons

and behaviours ascribed to each. Consider for a moment the Salon of 1865 in which Manet's *Olympia* first appeared. What was most provocative about the painting's appearance was the look of the model, Victorine Meurent, whose gaze was direct and unidealised. Her contemporary look squarely put the genteel, middle-class heterosocial world of Salon viewing up against what would usually be reserved for a homosocial viewership. It was conventionally the blokes of the bourgeoisie who got to ogle, and on occasion more than ogle, women who might be sex-workers; slummingly crossing class boundaries while their wives and lady friends remained demurely cloistered in the domestic sphere, away from such lurid realities of masculine public life.

If, in the twentieth century, these once contaminating *and* titillating marginal spaces of modernity are relatively normalised, consider the persistent discomfort around those other marginal spaces of modernity, the bathrooms and toilets of public and semi-public space. Plumbing, with every sanitary flush, with every gleaming knob and valve, every glint on the surface of the porcelain, is meant to allow you efficiently to forget about the fact of your personal self (Figure 1). One quick flush and you're gone. The public bathroom is meant to be clean, devoid of matter-out-of-place—shit, piss and homey decoration—devoid of signs of the very human presence for which it is intended. But with each raised and lowered seat, every splash of urine, every tear of toilet paper littering the floor, the bathroom and its plumbing point to the impossibility of keeping intimacy (the personal) out of the public, and of keeping the sovereign individual free of contamination (Figure 2). Thus, paradoxically, plumbing also connects you to every other denizen in the communal rush to separation. In this, the fact of a necessary cleanliness gives way to a symbolic cleanliness in which the shine and sparkle of smooth, white fixtures creates a flare, a flash, that covers over the irreconcilable conflict. But when you're sitting there in the stall of a public toilet, caught with your pants down, olfactories sensing someone in the adjacent stall, such separation is undone. Small wonder these are the places used for the exchange of gossip and sex and cigarettes, contraband, violence, illicit encounters of all kinds. And it is the intersection of contamination and titillation that drives the charge of these interstitial, intimate semi-public places.

The toilet functions as *omphalos*, that non-place we refuse to acknowledge, lest we recall that which is 'best left alone'. It is the site of nervous laughter, loathing, fascination. A marker of the repressed, it recurs again and again in the narratives of the twentieth century: from the annals of art history to modernist architecture to the most quotidian aspects of contemporary mass culture. Recall, for example, the 'don't ask, don't tell' fiasco about gays in the military under the first Clinton Administration: it was the *shower scene* that became the fulcrum of homophobic anxiety. How could straight men, comfortable with other straight men, still reliably *look the other way*, with men who were openly gay, in the same communal shower stall? The shower closet functions here as the scene of repression and desire, the butting up, so to speak, of the fantasy of a private, sexualised body with the public organ, the military.<sup>24</sup> Or think of the 1997 police brutality against one Abner Louima in NYC in a local precinct bathroom: it was the detail of the implement used to sodomise the Haitian immigrant—popularly



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**Figure 1.** Margaret Morgan, *Untitled Bathroom No. 993007*, 1999, from the exhibition, *Porcelain*, Galerie Inge Baecker, Cologne



**Figure 2.** Margaret Morgan, *Untitled Bathroom No. 990531*, 1999, from the exhibition, *Porcelain*, Galerie Inge Baecker, Cologne

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reported to be an ordinary toilet plunger—that made the injustice all the more incendiary to the plunger-waving protesters.<sup>25</sup> Plumbing, so often aligned with bodily trauma, is a volatile signifier of that which cannot directly be acknowledged in the symbolic order—a toilet, a plunger, a shower stall to take the place of the unspeakable—and to make it all the more charged.

**A good drain implies as much as a beautiful statue<sup>26</sup>**

Let us now consider in greater detail a scenario in which a private fixture, in this case, a urinal, moves into bourgeois public view, into the heterosocial spaces of genteel art viewing: let us review again that most famous of art historical toilet narratives, the pseudonymous presentation by Marcel Duchamp, alias R. Mutt, of *Fountain* to the Society of Independent Artists. When Duchamp exhibited in New York in 1913 he functioned as an unofficial attaché of avant-garde culture. Direct from Paris, that centre of all things modern, the work he exhibited was Cubist painting. The local art scene was challenged by this difficult, ultra-modern work, the more sceptical critics haplessly searching Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* for a nude or a staircase. Yet the nascent New York art scene was keen to be seen to be sophisticated—at least to itself—and eager to be abreast of all that was new from Paris. So by the time Duchamp himself arrived in 1915 his notoriety had given way to a certain cachet. As Duchamp observed: 'I wasn't on the fringes in New York ... When I was introduced I was always the man who had painted the *Nude Descending a Staircase* and people knew who they were talking to.'<sup>27</sup> Nearly a decade after Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, New York arrived at the idea that avant-garde art was Cubist painting—and Duchamp its imported incarnation. The press warmed to him; one critic remarking with a touch of surprise that Duchamp dressed quite correctly, was rather handsome and, indeed, looked 'more like a well groomed Englishman than a Frenchman'.<sup>28</sup>

Allow me a digression: our American critic implies that to be English was to be neater, cleaner and more presentable than the French. I am reminded of Žižek's distinctions between the German, French and English as manifested in the design of their lavatories:

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 hole 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.<sup>29</sup>

In Žižek's triangulation, German, French and English toilets reveal 'German reflective thoroughness, French revolutionary hastiness and English moderate, utilitarian pragmatism'.<sup>30</sup> We shall see how these characteristics, the German, the

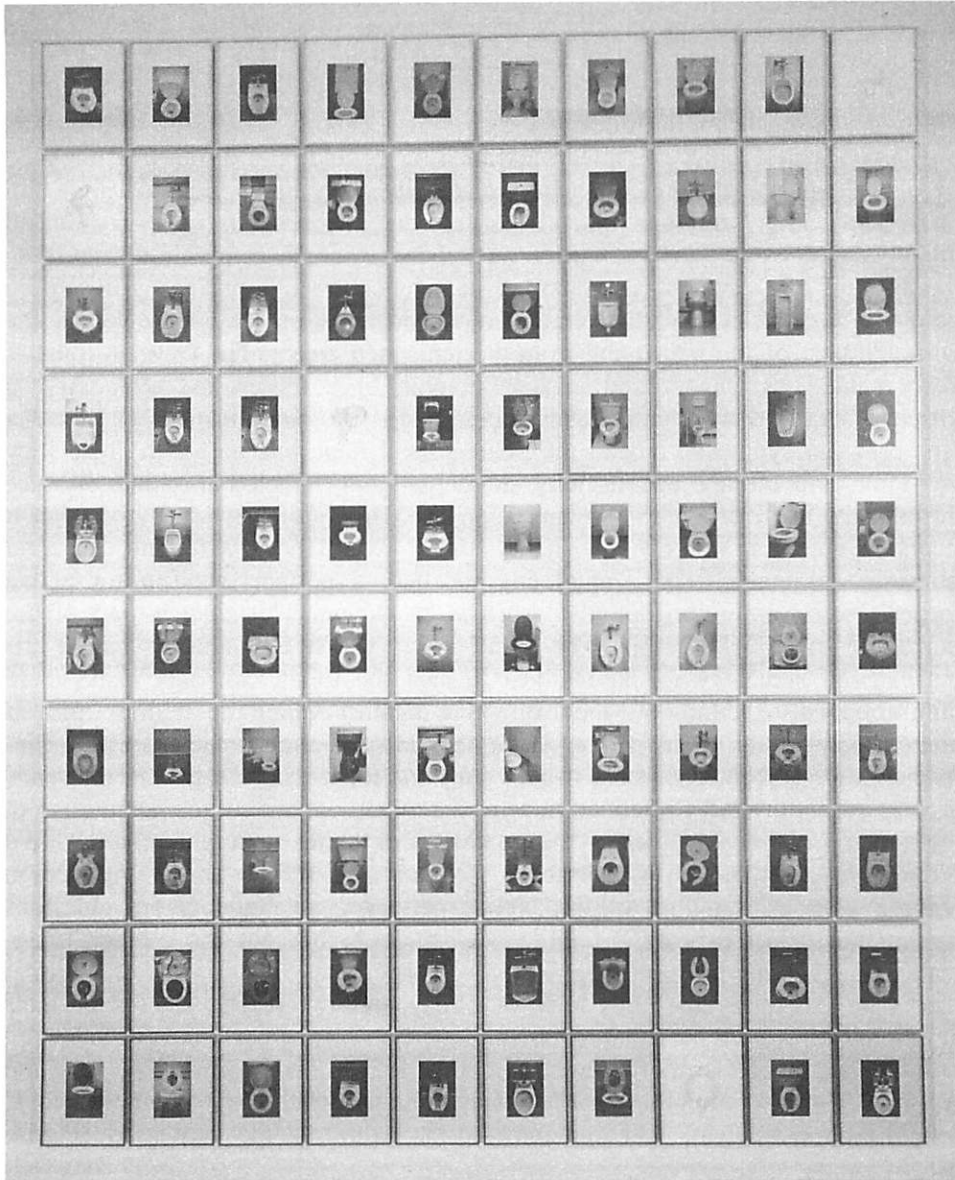


French and the Anglo-Saxon, apply in the ideology of plumbing's physical form and in the 'symbolic toilets' of the narratives of modernism.

But first, let us dwell awhile on the details of Žižek's observation. Consider the typical French public toilet of the twentieth century: dimly lit, two islands only upon which to set one's feet, and then far behind, at a distance heightened by one's semi-upright stance, a barely discernible hole into which one must aim one's shot. Many fail this marvellous feat and the remains of their botched attempts spatter the surrounding tile—revulsion as much as revolution pressing the haste of one's retreat. The German stall, by contrast, is brilliantly lit, all the better to inspect the toilet itself and one's business on its middle ledge, the veritable heat of life still rising from the jettisoned abject. The German toilet is accompanied by papers and sanitary napkin bags, order and symmetry, a group of stalls conveniently arrayed, ready for thorough inspection. For the Anglo-Saxon synthesis, indeed the floaters shall float and, as for the rest, they will sink, as if into the unconscious, submerged and refracted at middle distance through the bowl of water. We can gauge the density of the turd by whether it floats or not; it is mass, not visuality, that's crucial here: a feeling, a partial glimpse, an image to be imperfectly recalled: a perfect scenario for active forgetfulness, repression bound to surface elsewhere. This then is part of the horror of the blocked toilet, the overflow of which threatens to engulf the mesmerised subject who, having just flushed the toilet, can only stand there dumbfounded, watching as the excrement against which he defines himself comes back to stick to his person, ankle deep in symbolic as much as actual shit. In the Anglo-Saxon toilet stall, usually only the toilet itself is spot-lit, the space around the fixture left ill-defined in semi-darkness, lest one all too easily disrupt the fantasy of privacy that is the condition of being in a public toilet. We ignore the gaps in the partitions of the stall and refuse to see the person waiting without.<sup>31</sup> In the Anglo-Saxon experience, we maintain our ablutions in the illusion of privacy-in-public: we can look, but not too closely, pragmatic, sensible, not too shocking, and if we concentrate only on the well-lit toilet itself, we can deny the proximity of others and ignore the sounds of their ablutions.<sup>32</sup>

In short, the German shows all, the French nothing much and the Anglo-Saxon just enough to leave a residue that percolates into the unconscious, only to appear again, half remembered, a return of the repressed (Figure 3).

To return to our narrative: within a year of his return, this nice fellow, Duchamp, challenging but not too confrontational, became a member—and Director of Installation<sup>33</sup>—of the newly formed Society of Independent Artists. By the time of the Independents' inaugural exhibition, Duchamp was firmly ensconced in the New York scene. He was a fixture, so to speak. That is, of course, until that other fixture came into the picture. Thousands thronged that first exhibit but were not to see the suppressed ready-made, Duchamp's *Fountain*. As Beatrice Wood put it, 'a small hurricane of controversy'<sup>34</sup> ensued and, in the form of an absented artwork, the 'dark hole' of Frenchness reappeared. Duchamp, in the guise of R. Mutt, was revealed to be not as English as the



**Figure 3.** Margaret Morgan, *Another Century*, 2000, 96 11 × 14" cibachrome photographs, and 4 urine drawings, each aluminium framed. All images are of public toilets, from Europe, the United States and Australia from my archive gathered over the past twenty years.

critics might have imagined, but actually very like a French toilet: unfathomable, a dark occlusion, an impulsive revolutionary, he who would be blasted for the dirtiness of his habits, for the immorality, the vulgarity of that 'artwork'—his veritable self-portrait. Beatrice Wood recalls an altercation over *Fountain* between Walter Arensberg and George Bellows:

'We cannot exhibit it,' Bellows said hotly, taking out a handkerchief and wiping his forehead.

'We cannot refuse it, the entrance fee has been paid,' gently answered Walter.

'It is indecent!' roared Bellows.

'That depends upon the point of view,' added Walter, suppressing a grin.

'Someone must have sent it as a joke. It is signed R. Mutt; sounds fishy to me,' grumbled Bellows with disgust. Walter approached the object in question and touched its glossy surface. Then with the dignity of a don addressing men at Harvard, he expounded:

'A lovely form has been revealed, freed from its functional purpose, therefore a man clearly has made an aesthetic contribution.'

The entry they were discussing was perched high on a wooden pedestal: a beautiful white enamel oval form gleaming triumphantly on a black stand.

It was a man's urinal turned on its back.

Bellows stepped away, then returned in rage as if he were going to pull it down.

'We can't show it, that is all there is to it.'

Walter lightly touched his arm, 'This is what the whole exhibit is about; an opportunity to allow an artist to send in anything he chooses, for the artist to decide what is art, not someone else.'

Bellows shook his arm away, protesting, 'You mean to say, if a man sent in horse manure glued to a canvas that we would have to accept it!'<sup>35</sup>

'I'm afraid we would,' said Walter, with a touch of undertaker's sadness. 'If this is an artist's expression of beauty, we can do nothing but accept his choice.' With diplomatic effort he pointed out, 'If you can look at this entry objectively, you will see that it has striking, sweeping lines. This Mr. Mutt has taken an ordinary object, placed it so that its useful significance disappears, and thus has created a new approach to the subject.'

'It is gross, offensive! There is such a thing as decency.'

'Only in the eye of the beholder. You forget our bylaws.'<sup>36</sup>

Echoing Arensberg's argument, Beatrice Wood, Pierre Roché and Duchamp argued in an anonymous article in *The Blind Man* that '[w]hether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view, creating a new thought for that object.'<sup>37</sup>

Yet Duchamp had been making ready-mades—'choosing ordinary objects and placing them so their usual significance disappeared'—since 1913 (think of *Bottle Rack*, *Bicycle Wheel*, *In Advance of The Broken Arm*), and he had been exhibiting them since 1916. None had caused a furor anything like that around *Fountain*. It is at the level of reception that this particular ready-made distinguished itself and set the tone for the reception of an entire artistic strategy. Its detractors argued that *Fountain* was a 'plain piece of plumbing'.<sup>38</sup> Of course such protestation begs the question: if a piece of plumbing is *just so plain*, why did it cause so much wiping of brows, raising of voices, contravention of bylaws and, to this day, writing of articles? Plumbing is no neutral, merely utilitarian object.

Duchamp's urinal was at one point renamed 'Madonna of the Bathroom'<sup>39</sup> and was to its supporters a beautiful, flowing form; to its critics a desecration, an

outrage to decency, the very antithesis of cleanliness and purity—feminised along that familiar axis, literally as Madonna and whore. But our slutty artwork goes further, by crossing the territories from masculine privacy-in-public to being public in a wider sense. What is usually reserved for male viewership is presented for the gaze of all. A urinal, albeit an inverted one, suddenly shifts the private spaces of masculine modern public life into the centre of attention. Suddenly the public toilet, the men's public toilet, is revealed for all to see. Even the Plumbing Showroom, the other place to view a urinal, was not a place for bourgeois women to frequent; to this day, women in plumbing showrooms are often treated as oddities. In the proprietary spaces of bourgeois cultural exchange, the urinal is 'matter out of place'.<sup>40</sup> It is unclean, immoral, precisely because it reveals the personal, the intimate, the insinuated bodily workings, its abject wastes, all of this, all that is precarious and usually unspoken in modern masculinity, and by doing so, reveals the veil behind which the phallus normally hides. Duchamp inverts not only the urinal's physical form but its symbolic form as well. This in a gesture that puts the urinal on the side of the feminine, by destabilising its signification, by making it oscillate between obscenity and beauty, between the private and the public, and between an all too close reminder of the abject and a profound expression of artistic autonomy. This object—or is it abject—neither lost nor found, a between thing, a dissolution, marked yet another boundary between modern privacy-in-public and public space: *Fountain* marked the shift from the relative privacy of the bourgeois Salon, to the infinitely more vast and open public spaces of mass culture, manufacture, engineering, spectacle—a harbinger of the late modernity that is our lot.

But to return to the scene of the crime: George Bellows' outrage was underpinned by his sense that the Independents were being ridiculed, that the modernity of New York art was being affronted by a fishy joke, a watery inversion that could, would that it were actually plumbed, spray them in the face like a cheap, trick corsage. Bellows and the Directors of the Independents considered *Fountain* to be a mockery of their new modern institution, and, in a misguided bid to emulate their Parisian namesake, they suppressed the entry (albeit by a slim majority). Of course by abandoning its principles of 'no jury, no prizes', the Society of Independents proved itself a rather empty vessel, justifying any mockery to which it was subject. What made R. Mutt's entry all the more pointed was the fact that, as Duchamp's supporters argued, 'The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.'<sup>41</sup> Imagine how new modern cities, like Chicago and New York, would have appeared to a generation of European artists and intellectuals fleeing the ravages and displacements of the First World War and the old modern cities of Europe? Certainly the New York Dadaists were aware of the contrast between French *dark holes* and the efficiency of American plumbing; and, *methinks*, the stridency of the Independents' reaction was directly proportional to the cogency of that argument. To acknowledge a plumbing fixture as art would be to make the Independents redundant, their efforts moot: in the pursuit of cultural supremacy, American sanitary technology had already beaten them at their own game.

### Pipe dreams

Europeans who visited the USA in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seemed to recognise this point all too well; in matters of sanitary technology and modern culture, European artists, architects and intellectuals readily acknowledged US engineering and design as the *sine qua non* of modern form. Which brings me to the Germanic corner of Žižek's triad. Let us consider the argument of that great evangelist of modern culture, the Austrian architect, Adolf Loos:

A home without a bathroom! An impossibility in America. The mere idea that at the end of the nineteenth century a country with a population of millions exists whose inhabitants cannot have a daily bath seems monstrous to Americans ... Germany needs a bath. Let's consider the matter carefully: we don't really need art. We haven't even got a culture of our own yet ... . Instead of spending money on art, let's try producing a culture. Let's put up baths next to the academies and employ bath attendants along with the professors ... .The plumber is the pioneer of cleanliness. He's the State's top tradesman, the quartermaster of civilization, the civilization that counts today.<sup>42</sup>

So wrote Loos, in his seminal (*sic*) manifesto, 'Plumbers', nearly two decades before the *Fountain* affair. And by Loos' own account it took him some years to come around to this, his most famous position on plumbing and modern life.

In 1893 Loos had visited Chicago and the World's Columbian Exposition. At the time, as he later admitted, he 'was still totally convinced of the superiority of German crafts and handiwork ... . My years of residence [in the USA] have had the effect that I still today blush with embarrassment when I think of the disgraceful representation of the German crafts in Chicago.'<sup>43</sup> The Americans, meanwhile, in misguided and unnecessary efforts to attain cultural ascendancy, were trying to emulate Europe, in this case, its Beaux Arts tradition. As one commentator in *The Nation* put it, 'It is not unreasonable to fear lest the Court of Honor [main pavilion at the Fair] mark the beginning of an outbreak of white classicality over the land, which will make the vagaries of Queen Anne and colonial style appear the height of good sense and taste.'<sup>44</sup> Indeed, with its brilliant white neoclassical facades reflecting all the brightness of the opening days, the exposition was dubbed the 'White City'. Yet surely this whiteness must also have been connected, in the symbolic register—at least in Loos' mind—to the white of the sanitation made available to the exposition's public. It was around the time Loos wrote of the shame he felt, retrospectively, at the paucity of the German contribution to the exposition, that he, in the article quoted above, extolled the virtues of plumbing—English and American plumbing—as the great exemplars of contemporary modern culture. In the early 1890s Loos had been living first-hand with an American plumbing system that was the culmination of a decades-long effort by urban sanitary reformers, with their white-clad street cleaners, their 'White Wings', their white caps on the heads of newly converted children, their white tiles and white porcelain to symbolise hygiene and purity.<sup>45</sup> And surely Loos must have been deeply impressed, even if unwittingly at the time, by the three thousand toilets installed, the filtered drinking water, the paved streets and the nightly street cleaning of the Chicago World's Fair (as it is also

known)—and all this in the shadow of Sullivan's Chicago, with its new skyscrapers, its practicality, its technology. I cannot help but imagine the profound impression this other 'white city' must have made on Loos.

Our [Austrian] bathroom fixtures are the weakest of the lot. Instead of using white tiles for the bath, we prefer colored ones, so that, as a manufacturer naively assured me (he didn't actually demonstrate) the dirt would show up less. Tin baths, instead of being enameled white, the only suitable color, often come in dark colors ... Thus at M. Steiner's [designed by Loos] we may see excellent, smooth and hence elegant, American shower fittings, a new invention.<sup>46</sup>

As different as are the strands of modernism represented by Loos and Duchamp, each, in its own way, grapples with that fundament of modern culture, the plumbing of modern life. They, the Frenchman and the German, embody what Žižek describes as different attitudes toward excremental excess: ambiguous contemplative fascination, as Loos' diatribe would seem to suggest, and the hasty attempt to get rid of the unpleasant excess as fast as possible, witness the vanishing of *Fountain*. Here I might usefully apply David Trotter's notions of 'waste theory', related to system and metaphor, and 'mess theory', concerned with chance, contingency and metonymy. Trotter argues that waste is a condition and mess an event and that there are 'two styles of commentary on modern life, one drawn consistently towards and into determinism, the other an acknowledgement of chance as matrix and occasion'.<sup>47</sup> Adolf Loos, then, might be readily put on the side of waste theory, and Duchamp, with the mess.

**Every tap and plughole is a mark of progress<sup>48</sup>**

But what of Žižek's triangle: if Loos is to the Germanic toilet and 'waste' as Duchamp is to the French and 'mess', what of the 'Anglo-Saxon' synthesis? Loos argued that 'Our [Austrian] taps, sinks, water-closets, wash basins, etc. are far behind the English and American fittings ... [It] seems most shocking to the Americans.'<sup>49</sup> In the Anglo-Saxon (especially American) corner of Žižek's triangle, it is mass culture, *per se*, that is represented by the American toilet. As we have seen, these are overlapping formations, German, French, Anglo-American, and none can stand on its own without its relation to the others. Their interconnectedness multiplies Žižek's triad into a kind of pyramid. For the American part, mass culture, manufactured objects, plumbing and bridges, as the Dadaists knew back in 1917, have proved to be the ascendant cultural forms. For contemporary American mass culture, its McDonald's signs, its Disney Worlds, its Hollywood blockbusters, its TV sitcoms, have become the heirs of modern mass culture: cheap, multiple, entertaining, spectacular. They are the icons of a very late modernity, themselves objects of laud and derision, across the country and around the globe. Interestingly, in the shift from late- to post-modern culture, both Disney and McDonald's are losing market share, their hegemony on the wane. What replaces them is yet to be seen. But let us return to those early motifs of the modern, that which literally embodied progress and domination.

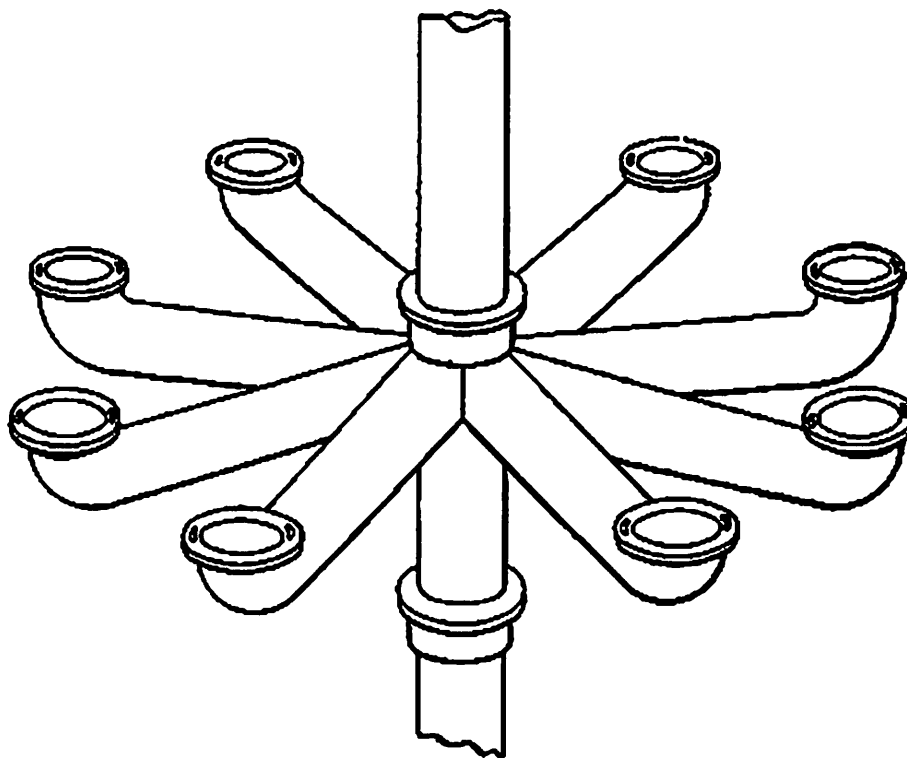
'It is hardly an exaggeration to summarise the history of four hundred years

by saying that the leading idea of a conquering nation in relation to the conquered was in 1600 to change their religion; in 1700 to change their laws; in 1800 to change their trade; and in 1900 to change their drainage.<sup>50</sup> So argued an American sanitary engineer, unwittingly confirming the Dadaists, thirty years before him. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, plumbing was intimately bound up with modern mass culture—in the conjoining of individual toilets, in discrete bathrooms, to separate water and sewer lines that then connect to the larger system of water supply and waste disposal. Plumbing literally, physically, linked the individual home with the larger state. Just as it linked the *man on the street* with the public sphere: you could stroll all day and still find somewhere to urinate without going home (and without necessarily just unfastening in the open). *Pissotière* or *urinoir*, a barely private space in public, a simple structure with walls to cover only the mid-section of the man whose gaze could still return the look of the public, this humble structure *gave a man vent*. Or else that man could stare ahead, in the common knowledge that those other staring men, standing around a circular public toilet, would all be urinating *into the centre*, as if into a primordial camp-fire (Figure 4). In Europe this interconnectivity was more permanently a part of the development of modern plumbing. Symbolically it bespoke the integral connection between individualism and the public sphere, as if plumbing, connected to the larger waste and water systems, correlated to a more general understanding that the common good was also good for the individual. This is not to say that the Frenchman's experience of being private in public, being simultaneously individual *and* mass, was without psychic conflict; only that, for the American, for reasons we shall see, it became even more so. That is, as conflicted as the individual and the mass could be, they were, have been, held in uneasy suspension, albeit suspension none the less. American plumbing evolved rather differently from its European counterparts and in ways that suggest one basis for the on-going American obsession with hygiene/bodily anxiety. For the Americans, plumbing's etymology is at the level of the individual, its hooking up to a larger system coming only much later.

### **Filthy beast**

According to travellers in the early nineteenth century, Americans were a 'filthy, beastly lot' who bathed rarely and for whom dirt was simply a fact of life, or, if anything else, a sign of hard work, and nothing to be ashamed of.<sup>51</sup> The vast majority lived rather isolated lives in rural areas. Water was difficult to access, requiring that it be hauled long distances by hand and/or, in the colder months, chipped from blocks of ice.<sup>52</sup> Even as more Americans moved to more densely populated regions, water access remained a problem, and bathing was of lesser import than neatness and order.<sup>53</sup> John Wesley's adage that 'cleanliness is next to godliness' was hardly observed, except perhaps in middle-class homes, where bathing on a Saturday evening, before Sunday church, was a way to distinguish oneself from the lower and labouring classes, who did not have resources or servants enough to do the hard work of drawing a bath. In mid-century America, indoor plumbing was introduced to the homes of ordinary folk for the sake of convenience, the healthful aspects of plumbing to do, not with sanitation, but





**Figure 4.** 'A waste fitting for water-closets set in a group at the center of the toilet room', from R. M. Starbuck, *Standard Practical Plumbing*, New York, NY: The Norman W. Henley Pub. Co., 1910, p. 206

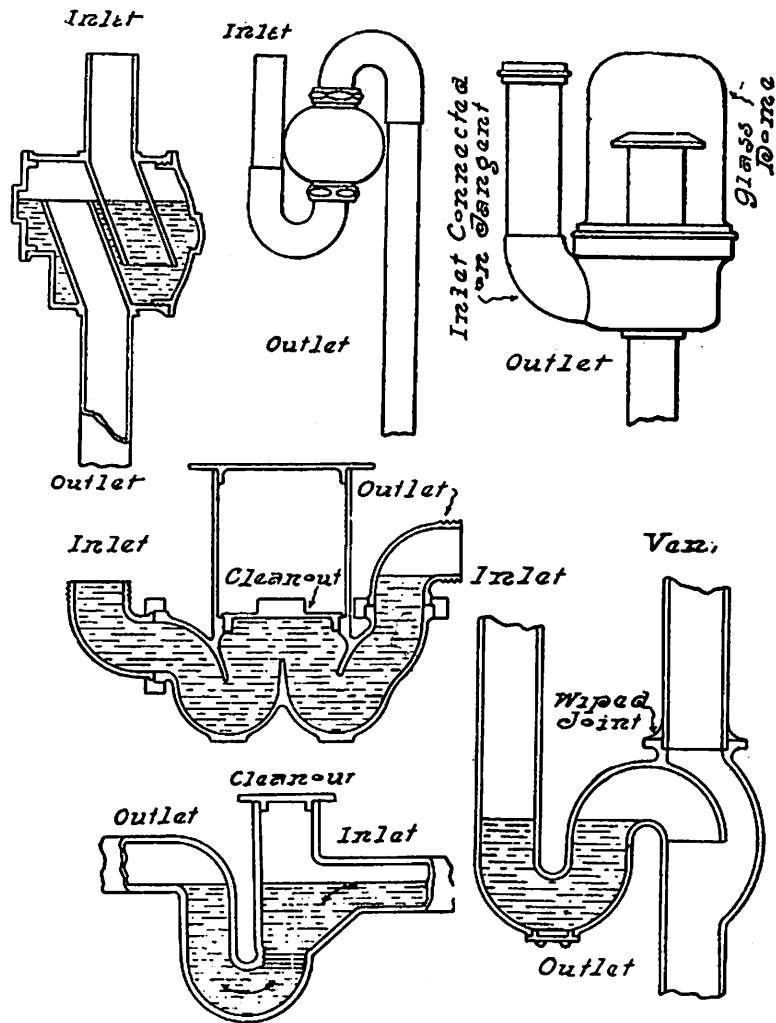
with labour-saving: household running water was considered good for the health only in as much as it reduced the amount of back-breaking work required to carry water long distances.<sup>54</sup> Plumbing was one of a long list of conveniences, from doorbells to speaking tubes, furnaces to gas lighting, that were developed to improve the efficiency and comfort of the home; and the home was that individual sanctuary wherein the family could develop and prosper—a kind of 'family that bathes together stays together' attitude.

The advent of hydropathy as a fashion in the 1840s also enhanced the American attitude to water. Sebastian Kniepp (1821–1897) was a German priest, healer and hydro-therapist whose remedies included 'various kinds of baths and ablutions, exposure to cold water, and prescribed water drinking, as well as healthful dietary habits and the medicinal use of herbs. The trend continued and by 1890 his book *Meine Wassercur* (My Water Cure) was widely read; cures, spas and other products bearing his name were sold internationally and were especially popular in the United States.'<sup>55</sup> Again, the individual was key to the ideology of hydropathy: self-discipline and self-improvement were integral to its workings, as they were to the many other reform movements popular at the time, personal and civic progress an individual concern.<sup>56</sup>

Plumbing, too, was highly individuated, a matter of personal taste, choice and affordability, from the myriad contraptions by then available on the market. It was very much a private affair—there were no state or municipal regulations or standards to which one must comply—and the limits of its technology went only so far as a dwelling's cistern and cesspool. Communities had reserves of water for civic purposes such as fire fighting and street cleaning, but individuals within those communities were responsible for their own separate water and waste supplies. This reliance on individual access to water and waste disposal created its own set of concerns and solutions. In the 1860s, for example, in order to maintain both water pressure and reserves, households were often equipped with large elevated cisterns, unseen but *felt*, in the attic. The elevated cistern became as much a source of expense and anxiety as convenience, the threat of flood, engulfment and collapse literally looming right over head. And here we begin to see a shift in the symbolic value of plumbing: before the development of proper traps (Figure 5) and adequate venting, the unpleasant odours associated with cesspools and with early toilet designs for pan closets and long hoppers (Figure 6) were, though distasteful, inevitably tolerated in the name of progress and convenience. It was only later, in the 1870s, that the inadequacy of plumbing design became an object of great fear.

Americans had for much of the nineteenth century embraced the theory that miasmata arising from stagnant waters were the source of disease. As a consequence American sewers were open to air and sunlight so that waste waters could, in theory, quickly evaporate. Epidemics of typhoid, cholera, yellow fever and other devastating diseases were, in the 1870s, finally linked to open sewers and to the 'abominable filth' generated by individual households. Household waste turned into 'liquid poison', seeping from cesspool to water supply and into 'gaseous poison' escaping poorly engineered, inadequately vented soil pipes. Contaminated drinking water, overflowing cesspools, and sewer gas became the new enemies, made all the more fearful because of the invisibility of their threat and because they were *enemies from within*. George E. Waring, the great American sanitary reformer and 'Apostle of Cleanliness', crusaded against sewage and sewer gas with such zeal as to make New Englanders 'fear it perhaps more than they did the Evil One'.<sup>57</sup> Suddenly, in the new age of Sanitary Reform, plumbing was no longer a convenience in the home but the very vehicle by which germs and disease were stealthily introduced into the hearth of the individual family, sewer gas seeping right into the parlour, 'the odorless, mawkish exhalations first announc[ing] themselves by headache and debility'.<sup>58</sup> Suddenly, this place of comfort, the home, was the site of disease and potential death, and its plumbing, model convenience, the carrier of it all.

"'Be sure your sins will find you out'", applies with particular force to the plumber; an ill-compacted joint will proclaim itself in a leak that will ruin a frescoed ceiling or a satin-covered suite in quick time.'<sup>59</sup> Thus wrote Harriette Plunkett, in whose treatise visions of the sullied finery of the middle-class home, and elsewhere in the same volume, of the cellar's 'dark, damp, spaces [that] were weird, forbidding, uncanny', operate within a symbolic register that, from our point of view, is, itself, quite uncanny: certain passages in her practical advocacy of sanitary reform read like the story of a haunted house or



**Figure 5.** 'Various patented forms of traps', from R. M. Starbuck, *Standard Practical Plumbing*, New York, NY: The Norman W. Henley Pub. Co., 1910, p. 68

something out of a horror film. The plumber, too, who knew as little about venting as anyone else, was more demonised than simply blamed for his apparent incompetence, ignorance and sometimes for the blatant exorbitance of his fees. Again, if I am permitted to read influence in reverse chronology, I am reminded of Peter Weir's 1979 film, *The Plumber*, in which a strangely persistent, obnoxious plumber wreaks havoc on the lives of two visiting professors at a local university. But more of that—later.

In short, in the USA toward the end of the nineteenth century, all things to do with plumbing were excoriated in the rather alarming realisation of decades of ignorance and misconception. And here is where American plumbing gets interesting: the response to germ theory and the greater understanding of the



**Figure 6.** 'Seat operated water closet with long hopper without trap', from George B. Clow, *Practical Up-To-Date Plumbing*, Chicago, IL: Frederick J. Drake and Co., 1906, p. 156

causes of contagion was quite hysterical; all manner of ordinary objects that passed from hand to hand—including library books, streetcars and, somewhat ironically, paper money—were suddenly fearsome threats to individual well-being.<sup>60</sup> To touch another, in passing on the street, was to become contaminated. Immigrants, 'the Great Unwashed' (the new prostitute), were sources of disease to be avoided at all costs, save in the name of sanitary reform. Public space was a threat. Private space was a threat. There was nowhere to go to avoid contamination. And indoor plumbing? Many, in the first wave of reaction, had it removed completely, water closets replaced with earth closets, in a futile effort to reconcile the 'safety' of pre-modern forms with the necessity of the modern. Saner, and in the end, lasting, responses included the realisation that in order for plumbing to be hygienic it was necessary for it to be standardised, regulated and hooked up to public water and waste systems. That is, at the symbolic level, the individual had to concede connection to the very organs that seemed to threaten it most. In the USA, where extreme individualism had for so long been the sustaining ideology, especially when it came to the regulating of personal ablution, individual integrity could now, paradoxically, only be maintained by embracing connection to a civic order. This suddenly discovered anxiety around contamination in the public and, at the self-same time, the compelling need to

connect a private individual plumbing system to a common and public one is what gives American culture both its obsession with hygiene and its ambiguous iconography of the toilet.

In the past one hundred years, plumbing design and technology have stabilised, their principal venting and flushing mechanisms basically the same as they were at the beginning of the last century. But lest one imagine that fear has abated in plumbing's symbolic register, let us look, to use Siegfried Kracauer's term, at the 'surface manifestations' of twentieth-century culture. Here we will see that the idea of plumbing as a source of horror and threat is alive and well. We will see that plumbing still articulates the deepest fears of our anxious modern subject and that the watery, abject reflection in the toilet bowl still holds us transfixed. Where does this still occur with startling regularity?—in the bathroom scenes of cinema.

### Toilet training

As we sit in the darkened theatre, our individual subjectivities collectively forgotten, we watch the toilet serve as the setting for murder, mayhem and terrifying denouement. In popular film the bathroom, the basement, the sewer, the down-pipe swelling with unnatural unctious, these are the cinematic non-spaces wherein personhood is let go: the figure of the human is murdered, massacred, sucked into the plumbing's apparatus, its tenuous grip on the fantasy of stable subjectivity loosened, dispersed, annihilated, only to rise again, undead indeed, from the drains and sewers of cinema. And we watch the bathroom juxtaposed, in an endless loop, with a woman's gaping/screaming mouth, her dead eye, her bleeding body, from drain to misogynist drain, one hole substituting for another: ancient associations of woman with engulfment, woman with floods, and woman with the abject persist in these very modern plumbing tropes.

The relationship between fantasy and the horror of the Real it conceals is much more ambiguous than it may seem: fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference.<sup>61</sup> Fantasy travels without necessarily revealing its origins, no stamps in its passport, only a vague sense of compelling reason—a common sense—that begs scrutiny. It is as if one senses the fear that surrounds an object, and, its own contagion, we *catch* that fear, that subliminal association, that persistent, nagging, vague feeling, like the flu about to come on. And that which we have caught catches onto other things, setting up a network of associations, chains of fear, none articulated, just floating, image mid-water in an American toilet, not quite acknowledged in our conscious minds. When this fantasy is located in the intertextuality of Hollywood film, the repetitions—as motifs, images, camera angles, certain shots, sound effects—perform a doubling, a tripling, a multiplying of the force of the fantasy that at once distances the viewer from the Real and is therefore reassuring (the fun of horror-movie watching), while at the same time disorienting (and producing an effect of extreme alienation). Yet it also produces an *alias* for the Real that itself attains something approaching the Real's horror.

Thus, for example, we re-experience the initial horror of Hitchcock's *Psycho*

in its repetition in films as diverse as *Carrie* (1976) or the remake of *Psycho* (1998) or even the not very good Michelle Pfeiffer flick, *What Lies Beneath* (2000). The shower scene from *Psycho* blurs the line between the filmic representation of psychic trauma and film as the very source of trauma. Its endless quotation in so many subsequent films produces the shower scene as a kind of 'primal scene', itself as unapproachable as the Real, as something which must be repressed and which then returns, at the level of mass culture, in those subsequent films. For if in my first viewing of the shower scene in *Psycho*, I was traumatised by the castration that it invoked; by the *omphalos* of the drain that articulates a sense of personal vulnerability within the architecture of the childhood home wherein I first viewed the scene (late at night, as a 10-year-old, with my mother—we liked to watch the Hitchcock Hour on *telly*); and if the scene recalls that ancient split from deep within one's individual pre-history, the split between mother and child that is childbirth; then the scene itself sinks, like the turds in the toilet, into that place of partial recall, forgotten, repressed, only to reappear in so many films thereafter. The fantasy functions as a Real and our viewership as a kind of psychosis, a repetition of the incommensurable, beyond recollection but unforgettable, that never goes away. Does the viewing of *Psycho* recall a pre-existing trauma or is it its very cause?

Have you ever met someone with whom you've had a rapport, only to realise that all those things you have in common are in fact the movies you saw and were horrified by, the movies you loved, the movies you saw again and again? Memories of the movies, over time, can feel not so different from memories of actual things that happened to you. It's the inverse of the sensation when you realise you're recalling a photo of an event and no longer the event at all. If in Freud's terms, the source of trauma can be real or imagined, then, so too can the scene in the movie be the provocation of psychic effect, as real or imagined as anything else. What of this psychic effect if we think of all the bathrooms at the movies, their anxious subjects, their bodily anxiety, their gynophobia, their fear of the contradictions of being private in public? These scenes in the toilets at the movies are a *Toilet Training* indeed.<sup>62</sup>

For the child, toilet training is one of the landmarks by which is measured access to subjectivity and the symbolic order. The mirror stage, in Lacan's terms, is that period in her development when the child recognises an ideal of herself—whole, finite, discrete—an image 'in the mirror' (metaphorically if not actually), a version of bodily self-hood that corresponds with, but always supersedes, the 'I'. The child is learning verbal language by which to enunciate the 'I' who wants, the 'I' who is. The child is also learning social control over bodily functions which are necessary but intolerable to this notion of 'I', of finite selfhood. In her individual pre-history—that plenitudinous time, in Kristeva's terms, when the child knew neither 'she' nor 'me' but only the 'everything' in a continuity of non-self/breast—toilet training was moot. As baby grows into child all this changes.

The incorporated/expelled objects—food, faeces, urine, spit—designate the various zones of the body, later to become erotogenic zones—mouth, anus, eyes, ears, genitals. According to Lacan, sexual zones are structured as a *rim*, a space between

two surfaces that can be seen as the boundaries between the body's inside and outside.<sup>63</sup>

There is another toilet training we undergo, so often at the movies, itself a kind of *rim* between public and private space. These rims, these liminal places, on our bodies and in the built environment, are reiterated again and again, in the sewers, bathrooms and basements at the movies.

This feature of cinematic space appears in the latter half of the twentieth century, coincident with 'the American century' finally coming into full force, as if after all that struggle for cultural ascendancy there is still a persistent residual anxiety, almost a habit of phobia, a deep uncertainty, about the integrity of US culture and the conflicted individuals who inhabit it. *The Third Man* (1949), a joint British-American production, sets the tone: set in just post-war Vienna, it is an allegory of European culture, high and low, and American mass culture; the threshold from war-torn Europe to its pragmatic, mass-cultural successor, the United States. Its dialogic runs between the titular 'third man', played by Orson Welles, with his savvy, charm and worldly cynicism, who undoes hygiene by conducting a trade in (very) diluted black-market penicillin, and the naïve, but dogged, pulp fiction writer of the Holly Martins character played by Joseph Cotten. Welles, as he often does, finds his fate in the filth, in this case also the very mechanism by which he kept his cover for so much of the film: he is shot and killed in the sewers of Vienna, his corruption echoed in the 'sweet smelling' bile of the city itself. In *Touch of Evil* (1958), Welles' corruption, this time as a border town cop long gone bad, reaches its denouement in the stinking refuse of a filthy river, a polluted flow indeed, as his bloated, corpulent form falls backward with a giant splash (again he has been shot), into the mire of the river's edge. The figure of the prostitute is there, in the guise of Marlene Dietrich, sporting a black wig, hooker with a heart of gold, as the only person who understood him, who rushes to the watery scene to witness his demise. Borders upon borders, marginalia multiplying, a *mise-en-abîme*, our old companions, moral and physical corruption, return yet again.

And what of the drains of horror film, the beasts and botched experiments that run amok in the sewers of cinema? Think of *The Blob*, and recall the girl in the 1988 version who struggles to save her little brother, her discredited boyfriend, her entire town, as she dives and grimaces and chokes on the sewage, the monster snapping, like a giant vagina (or is it an anus?), groping after her, its tangle of medusa-like tentacles out to get her. And think of the basements of Hollywood, where pipes are never fixed but always leaking, steaming, wreaking a permeability that is subjectivity. Across genres, from psychological thriller to schlock horror to drama, when trauma needs to be heightened, plumbing and bathrooms are the tropes to employ. And always, juxtaposed with the pipes, the feminine lurks in the associations, quoting ancient myths and recent phobias alike. And yet, to return to my other theme of this article: have you ever noticed that the bathrooms, toilets and basements of Hollywood horror are almost always from public and semi-public places? School showers, hotel bathrooms, city-wide sewers, colleges, hospitals, libraries, motels, holiday places: these semi-public



institutions are where the modern subject must confront both their bodily porousness and their conflicted relation to being, *en masse*, in public.

As I wrote my narrative, my 'plumbing of modern life', I had to stop myself from adding endless references, along the way, to scenes from Hollywood film, the overflowing tubs, the phantasmatic blood gurgling up from toilets, the axe murderers behind the shower curtains, the bodies sucked into drains, the gunnings-down in the toilet or the bathroom, the corpses rising from bathtubs, the Freddie Krugers in the tub, Carrie's menstrual trauma in the high school shower, and on it seems *ad infinitum*.<sup>64</sup> These are the images through which I dimly know the world and which stay with me, a toilet training indeed. And apparently, in 'this immense toilet of a universe',<sup>65</sup> I am not alone.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cited in Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993, pp. 95–97.
- <sup>2</sup> Cited in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 142.
- <sup>3</sup> See Beatrice Wood, *I Shock Myself*, San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, revised ed. 1988, reprinted 1992, p. 30.
- <sup>4</sup> Claire Loos, fourth wife of Adolf Loos, paraphrasing Loos in Adolf Opel (ed.) *The Private Life of Adolf Loos*, trans. Constance C. Pontasch, Vienna: Hermann Bohlaus Nachf., 1985, p. 79. Thanks to Catherine Lord and Carrie Paterson for bringing this volume to my attention.
- <sup>5</sup> See my 'Porcelain', in *A Plumber's Guide*, Los Angeles, CA: Plumb Productions, 1999, pp. 31–35.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*.
- <sup>7</sup> See Janet Gleeson, *The Arcanum*, New York, NY: Warner Books, 1998.
- <sup>8</sup> See Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Vol. 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- <sup>9</sup> See Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 51, 73. In the Civil War, 'Whitewash and women were the best disinfectants' and in the nineteenth century women were enlisted to be the most activist sanitarians.
- <sup>10</sup> Marlene Dietrich, 'Black Market', on *Her Complete Decca Recordings*, Los Angeles, CA: MCA Records, 1982, Side 2, Track 1.
- <sup>11</sup> 'We are born between excrement and urine', St Augustine, cited in Bernard Tschumi, 'Architecture and Transgression', in *Architecture and Disjunction*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994, p. 73.
- <sup>12</sup> Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, cited in Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 15.
- <sup>13</sup> Alain Corbin, 'Représentation', in Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, *La prostitution à Paris au XIXe siècle*, Paris: Seuil, 1981, cited in C. Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute*, p. 16.
- <sup>14</sup> S. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, p. 80.
- <sup>15</sup> James F. Gardner, 'Microbes and Morality: The Social Hygiene Crusade in New York City, 1892–1917', Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1974, p. 372, cited in S. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, p. 81.
- <sup>16</sup> K. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 422.
- <sup>17</sup> See Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- <sup>18</sup> This juxtaposition of (bad) woman and plumbing is reiterated even in her name, Crane, which is of course a bird but is also the brand name of a popular porcelain fixtures manufacturer.
- <sup>19</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon Roudiez, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- <sup>20</sup> Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Charles E. Wilbour, New York, NY: Modern Library, 1992, p. 1090.
- <sup>21</sup> Catharine E. Beecher, *Letters to Persons Who Are Engaged in Domestic Service*, New York, NY: Leavitt & Trow, 1842, p. 211.
- <sup>22</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, New York, NY: Routledge, 1988 (reprinted 1989), pp. 50–90.
- <sup>23</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, 'Sex in Public', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Winter 1998, p. 560.
- <sup>24</sup> Kendall Thomas, 'Shower/Closet', in Mark Wigley (ed.) *Assemblage, Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*, No. 20, April 1993, pp. 80–81.
- <sup>25</sup> The plunger was a phantasmatic object, a misnomer in the press subsequently taken up as a symbol of the

- obscurity of police brutality; the actual weapon was a broken broomstick. For a fuller account, see my Letter, 'System Failure', *ArtForum*, XL, No. 3, November 2001, p. 20.
- <sup>26</sup> See J.C. Stobart, *The Glory that was Greece*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1915.
- <sup>27</sup> Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett, New York, NY: Viking Press, 1971, p. 58. Thanks to Amelia Jones for her help with this account of Duchamp in New York.
- <sup>28</sup> Francis M. Naumann, *New York Dada 1915–23*, New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1994, p. 36.
- <sup>29</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London: Verso, 1997 (reprinted 1999), p. 4.
- <sup>30</sup> S. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 4.
- <sup>31</sup> One might wonder: why are those gaps there at all? Surely the stalls could be constructed without those narrow spaces through which looks into and out of the stall can be exchanged? It is almost as if to heighten the tension between public and private and to raise the possibility of ostensibly prohibited exchange.
- <sup>32</sup> Modernisation in Japan has had yet another effect on toilet design: unable to deny the public-ness of the public toilet, many Japanese women took to the habit of flushing as they peed or shat, to literally drown out the noise of their ablutions, only to flush again to remove the waste, thereby doubling their consumption of water. That is, of course, until in late modern Japan, customers were given the option of pushing a button which activated a recording of the sound of water flushing. [Editor's note: For further discussion of the Japanese case, see Allen Chun's essay in this issue.]
- <sup>33</sup> At that time, the plumber in Europe was commonly known by the French appellation, *installateur*.
- <sup>34</sup> B. Wood, *I Shock Myself*, pp. 29–30.
- <sup>35</sup> I am reminded of the 1999 altercation between the then pre-9/11 Mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani and the Brooklyn Museum of Art over the exhibition, *Sensation*, and in particular Chris Ofili's paintings of Madonnas with elephant dung. Marx's words were never more true. History repeats itself, first as tragedy then as farce.
- <sup>36</sup> Cited in William A. Camfield, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917', *Dada/Surrealism*, No. 16, 1987, pp. 69–70.
- <sup>37</sup> From *The Blind Man*, No. 2, May 1917, reproduced in B. Wood, *I Shock Myself*, p. 30.
- <sup>38</sup> From *The Blind Man*, No. 2, May 1917, reproduced in B. Wood, *I Shock Myself*, p. 30.
- <sup>39</sup> B. Wood, *I Shock Myself*, p. 30.
- <sup>40</sup> See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, New York, NY: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
- <sup>41</sup> From *The Blind Man*, No. 2, May 1917, reproduced in B. Wood, *I Shock Myself*, p. 30.
- <sup>42</sup> Excerpts from Adolf Loos, 'Plumbers', in *Neue Freier Presse*, July 17, 1898, this translation in L. Münz and G. Künstler, *Adolf Loos, Pioneer of Modern Architecture*, New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966, pp. 220–221.
- <sup>43</sup> Adolf Loos, 'The Leather Goods and Gold- and Silver-smith Trades', *Neue Freier Presse*, May 15, 1898, reprinted in *Spoken into the Void*, trans. Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982 (third printing, 1989), p. 7.
- <sup>44</sup> S. K., 'The Columbian Exposition — IV', *The Nation*, No. 1469, August 24, 1893, p. 133.
- <sup>45</sup> See S. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*.
- <sup>46</sup> A. Loos, 'Plumbers', pp. 221–222.
- <sup>47</sup> David Trotter, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth Century Art and Fiction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, cited in Marjorie Garber, 'Spitting, Sneezing, Smearing', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 22, No. 1516, August 10, 2000, p. 16.
- <sup>48</sup> A. Loos, 'Plumbers', p. 221.
- <sup>49</sup> A. Loos, 'Plumbers', pp. 221–222.
- <sup>50</sup> A. Lawrence Lowell, President of Harvard University, cited in Abel Wolman, 'The Sanitary Engineer Looks Forward', *Water and Sewerage Works*, Vol. 93, No. 11, November 1946, p. 409.
- <sup>51</sup> See S. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, pp. 4–15.
- <sup>52</sup> Among the rural poor, plumbing remained pre-modern well into the twentieth century: witness the efforts of the Works Progress Administration, the Tennessee Valley Authority and the documentary photographs of Walker Evans.
- <sup>53</sup> See Catharine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, Boston, MA: Thomas H. Webb & Co. 1842, revised edition.
- <sup>54</sup> See Maureen Ogle, *All the Modern Conveniences*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- <sup>55</sup> A. Loos, 'Plumbers', in *Neue Freier Presse*, July 17, 1898, reprinted in *Spoken into the Void*, pp. 44–49. This citation appears in an endnote by the editors of the volume, found on p. 139 of the reprint.
- <sup>56</sup> M. Ogle, *All the Modern Conveniences*, pp. 12–13.
- <sup>57</sup> Cited in S. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, p. 66.
- <sup>58</sup> George E. Waring, cited in S. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, p. 71.
- <sup>59</sup> Harriette Plunkett, *Women, Plumbers and Doctors*, New York, NY: D. Appleton and Co., 1865, p. 95.
- <sup>60</sup> S. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, p. 99.
- <sup>61</sup> S. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 7.
- <sup>62</sup> See my *Toilet Training*, a 26-minute montage of Hollywood bathroom scenes, Plumb Productions, 2000.

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<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989, p. 72.

<sup>64</sup> See *The Nanny* (1965), *The Conversation* (1974), *Friday the 13th* (1980), *The Blob* (1988), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Blood Simple* (1985), *The Shining* (1980), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and DePalma's homage to Hitchcock in *Carrie* (1976), respectively.

<sup>65</sup> Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Koury, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000 (first French ed. 1978), p. 131.