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Conjuring the Cinematic Pissoir

Elena Gorfinkel

If shit has long operated as the primary figure of queer cinema's scatological experimentalism, from George and Mike Kuchar's films to John Waters excretory fabulations, perhaps it is time to attend to a cinema of piss.¹ Has it whizzed by without anyone knowing it, everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous and rarefied, quotidian yet elusive? While not exclusively anchored to queer bodies, cinematic urination might be one of the queerest acts in the medium's repertoire of corporeal gestures and attitudes. Pissing is a prominent site for the visibilisation of heterosexuality's tyranny and the hegemonies of cinematic form, even when it seems to suggest an intrinsic perversity, or invites it. In genres like the teen sex romp, gross-out comedy, the bromance and the rom-com, pissing is frequently an adjunct or a salve to an addled hetero masculinity. Various gags proliferate, from the duration of pissing as register of comic timing and social abjection, its punchline in the awkward discomfort of its duration; or as a glue that fuses men together in its acrid embrace – like

the demented buddies in *Dumb and Dumber* (1994). Not wanting to stop, one pees on the other while riding a motorcycle in frigid weather, and as they ascend into the mountains, are frozen together dorsally as the piss melds crotch to ass. One carries the other, ass cemented, as he dismounts the bike, their idiocy the shape of a frozen homosocial spoon. Or one can witness the blissful portraiture, suitable to Warhol's *Blow Job*, that delivers facial confirmation of climactic highs in the facial contortions of explicit pleasure in the unloading of an extended stream in Jim Carrey's slapstick *punim* in his role as Lloyd, again in *Dumb and Dumber*.



Dumb and Dumber, Peter Farrelly, 1994, U.S. *A Star is Born*, Bradley Cooper, 2018, U.S.

This gag of ceaseless flow—what “red blooded American male” in these films does not have too much piss to expend?—flows towards another transaction, a cop mistakenly drinking this copious ejecta, mistaking it for beer. In *Short Cuts*, Huey Lewis discovers a female corpse by peeing on it, peeing's phallic frequency resembling a homing mechanism, a tuning fork. Or in an extreme of abjected tragedy and straight masculinity vanquished, Bradley Cooper is Jackson Maine in *A Star is Born*, sad sack, washed up hack, peeing himself at the Grammy ceremony where his all-suffering Ally (Lady Gaga) is the hotter ticket. He soils the scene for his beloved who must clean up his mess as he scrunches like a used wet wipe stageward. Piss

liquefies and disorders, but in conventional narrative cinema secures a deceptive coherence around hetero performance that may in fact not cohere at all: yet again, the bromantic has pissed himself. Is this an equal failure to shitting the bed?

* * *

An exercise in associative thinking and image gleaning, this essay relies on a certain mimicry of its subject. It forms relationalities, episodic, and elliptical trajectories, pausing, lingering and loitering across a series of moments and passages of pissing in between and across bodies, along the axes of public and private spaces, queer and feminist profanations, and trajectories towards solitude, solicitude, and sociality. A methodological love child of Georges Bataille's *Encyclopaedia Acephalica* and Parker Tyler's entire oeuvre of proto-queer theoretical criticism, my thinking here follows a series of glossy anecdotes, loose prompts and promiscuous framings, meandering between texts and concepts, wayward rivulets, trickling digressions.² Animating these excursions are the stakes of cinema's tarrying with piss as a problem of time, a concern of social form and of mediating sticky attachments. Cinematic pissing oft interposes or contravenes the gendering of bodies, the social organisation of sexuality, and the implicit regulatory economies that structure public space.³

* * *

In film history, the pause of pissing marks a time that doesn't pass smoothly. Piss ruptures the flow of narrative eventfulness. A bodily process frequently absented from view, bathroom business was frequently affiliated with the story time that is removed from plot, rendered excessive or extraneous to the telos of propulsion. Pissing comes into post-war visibility through neorealism's attention to the body's imperilment and contingency by forces both historical and melodramatic. In his discussion of *Bicycle Thieves* in

Brutal Vision, Karl Schoonover details how the dawdling, meandering temporality of the boy Bruno and his father in the search for the stolen bicycle is lauded by French critic Andre Bazin, as the boy's lost focus and misdirection of narrative rests in his retreat to piss against a wall to his father's disdain.⁴ Bazin sees in this scene the triumph of the film's construction of an "anecdotal chronology" which bears a "phenomenological integrity."⁵ Figuring the potential of dead time as an exigency of the cinematic, such previously vulgar material proffered a new way of describing social reality; thus, the realism of this geopolitical moment embraced the fusion of wasted time and corporeal waste as both mercurial and functional trajectories for the camera's gaze.



Bicycle Thieves, Vittorio De Sica, 1945, Italy.

The cherubic Bruno's need to piss marks his innocence and naiveté, flung into the plot's exigency and ambiguity. Although the Production Code

Administration wanted this scene removed, skittish about the conjunction of childhood and potty business, De Sica prevailed. Even if not explicit in the Code, piss and eroticism were already entwined in the regulatory imaginary.

* * *

But the dead time of the pissing scene, unceremoniously peppering the history of cinema is undoubtedly threaded through with an erotics that the cherub as sanctifying pissor, as per histories of visual art, would and could not fully satisfy.⁶ Other trajectories of pissing as act and event of provocation, in a decidedly queer register, have long proliferated in and around the history of the toilet as a site of anonymous sexual encounter, as zone of contact, and momentary bliss from Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) onwards, in which the toilet is a site of fantasy's violent threat and subjective co-constitution. The tearoom as condensed site of masculine sociality also is navigated by the cinema as a domain for dissimulations, signs read and unread, signals lost in the shuffle of all that plumbing. Writing in another context, Lee Edelman would term this the "epistemology of the water closet."⁷

Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang's cinema, is a proponent of a durational idiom at odds with any countervailing narrative norms. The director has carved out a specifically queer space for exploring the ways bodies in urban spaces brush up against each other in anonymous contact and radiate detached longing. *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003) conjoins the movie theatre and the tearoom, cine-obsession and cruising, signalling the theatre space as the final frontier of both cinephile and queer desires, an anachronistic will for a serendipitous sexual contact across time, a traffic with ghosts of queer times past. Populated by the extensive presence of liquids, flows and overflows, where water is in excess or in shortage, Tsai's



Fireworks, Kenneth Anger, 1947, U.S.

cinema frequently deploys liquid as an untapped energy or resource, or an excess of libido, energy or currency that needs to be expended, converting into a figure of waste. The bewildered visitor to the theatre, the Japanese tourist (he goes nameless in the film) perseveres in a scene of such excess – in which a plethora of potential erotic objects appear in the loo, the multiplication of figures in the toilet begging veracity. We move into shadows of Méliès territory, in which a plasmatic flexibilization takes space over through their surprise appearance; or perhaps this is only a kind of farce, as bodies continue to accumulate over-clogging the toilet as zone of focalised contact, animation, and exchange.

As his toilet mate in the urinal next to him begins to smoke, the gag blooms into a fully developed set piece, smoke signalling a scrambling of before and after eros. Shouldn't one smoke *after* pissing, too? The duration



Goodbye Dragon Inn, Tsai Ming-liang, 2003, Taiwan.

of pissing emphasises how space becomes conditional to the limitations of performance, the actor's bodily capacities, capacious in time and bodily fluid, can step in and mark the time of narrativity's endurance. Waste becomes an excess of possibilities for contact, a confusing din of corporeal movements and sounds that jam the austere signalling architecture of cruising's protracted incitement to fleshy encounter.

A decade later, in what Tsai then claimed was his "last" feature length work, *Stray Dogs* (2013) the scene of pissing shifts to a marking of duration as labour's immiseration. His primary character played by Lee Kang Sheng, takes a work break from his job holding up signs, disappearing to piss into the reeds, returning enshrouded in a yellow translucent rain poncho, assailed from without and within by pounding rain and the interminable time of alienated labour. Piss break, followed by smoke break, marks the time of this exhausted body, depleted and propped up seemingly by this exhaust alone.

* * *



Stray Dogs, Tsai Ming-liang, 2003, Taiwan.

Pissing, as Tsai's film attests, links different traditions of cinematic duration with a biopolitics of the quotidian interval, the temporal space between toil and rest. The conjunction of the interval with a temporal aperture of heterotopic longing is imagined in a different register and context in Dane Komljen's *All the Cities of the North* (2016). Set in an abandoned, once operative Soviet era hotel resort, the Grand Hotel Lido, designed in a 1960s Brutalist style at the border of Albania and Montenegro, near the fishing village of Uline, the film observes the activities and movements of two men who seem to be subsisting, squatting, wordlessly here. This space, evacuated, has since been left to ruin and overgrowth amid the nearby ponds, fields of reeds and sapling trees. The film's opening appends scenes of one man cleaning, sustaining, and harvesting the resources necessary for survival, and these forms of tending, to land and space and to the body's subsistence – through eating berries, drinking, scrubbing – build a repertoire of bodily gestures and routines tied to a relationship to place that is not proprietary, only provisional. In the accumulation of these movements and activities a picture of habitation

emerges, one in which a homosocial potential is submerged, resident amidst the overgrown weeds of a socialist past and its tarnished utopic imaginings. Such clouded reveries are met with the revelation of not one but two inhabitants and cohabitators, ambiguously defined lovers and others who rest and glean wordlessly, without the burdens of speech. In perhaps the most striking moment of the sequence, the routine turns to piss, as the stream creates an arced shadow on the white wall of the hotel's ruin, a stream whose duration is bisected and darkened by a passing cloud that covers the sun. The time of pissing here is one that signals an erotics—as Komljen's gaze, in tracing that stream's arcing shape—attenuates the gaze of another, the partner, comrade, amant, revealed in the subsequent shot.



All the Cities of the North, Dane Komljen, 2016, Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, courtesy of Dane Komljen.

Caring for a temporary space and a potentially temporary attachment, *All the Cities* becomes a romance of a heterotopic lost world revived in its shadow, given space in the paused projects of History and the bending

refractions of historical time, rebuilt into a zone for the flowering of new attachments in the past's decay. *All the Cities* presents a relationality without a name – undefined, beyond the fundamental needs for pissing, sleep, shelter and the meshwork of care – a recalibration of the comradely ethos of mutual support in which *homeros* is not by default ejected, but a condition of its thriving.

* * *

What can be made of the woman pisser in cinema – what queer possibilities does her body open up for a way of imagining piss outside of its expected priapic economies? In his wide-berth survey of the pisseur in art history, *Pissing Figures*, Jean Claude Lebensztejn, marks both a historical and differential treatment of this figure in the history of the plastic arts when that subject is female.⁸ Lebenstejn seems to lament the loss of a concomitant erotics and a rise, in feminist art of a tarrying with obscenity in twentieth century instantiations of the pissing figure. If the angelic cherub marks out a sphere of sanctification, and the adult hetero phallus privileges pissing as a feat of direction, projection, speed and force, then what ways does the representational continuum of women's sexuality move towards posing other questions?

Catherine Breillat's 1976 Batailleian time capsule, *Une Vraie Jeune Fille/ A Real Young Girl*, stages the cinematic pissoir as the antechamber of nascent female sexual subjectivity, locating it in a singular articulation of the bracing drive for a corporeal *ars erotica* proffered through bodily leakage. Unreleased until 2000, shelved by the producer due to concerns of permissibility, the film treats the erotic awakening of Alice, a 14 year old girl. Away at boarding school, the toilet becomes a place for the confessions of this Justinian character's flesh, to herself. Night time is a zone of abandon and autonomy, in which she can write, masturbate and feel at one with its sibilant darkness. Alice explores the concomitance of shame with

that emergent sense of something both within and beyond genitality in what she calls the “futile vigil” of night’s non-productive time.



A Real Young Girl, Catherine Breillat, 1976, France.

Seen writing her name into the mirror after masturbating with her lubricating vaginal fluids, Alice describes her visits to the toilet where she would bend her flesh against the cold porcelain of the bowl, a place where the lucidity of wakefulness presses upon her, in the juxtaposition of sexual knowledge and embodied limit. Her bunkmate, Martine, curious, shut out, is the erotic spectator and potential supplicant to Alice, the mimetic force of her own body expressing itself in a communicative ejection, as her own pool of piss rises to meet Martine inside the locked toilet. Pissing, smoking, a shot of her pubis on the cold bowl, Alice looks down at the approaching puddle, continuing writing with her big toe on the floor, outlining a gesture of self-naming in the slick of shared urine on the tiles. Eugenie Brinkema writes on this passage:

Masturbation is a form of speaking, it requires a shushing; the body is a text and, to make this connection explicit, Alice wipes her wet finger on a mirror next to

her bed once the teacher is gone. ‘To make a trail with my name’, she muses as she writes A-l-i-c-e in vaginal clarity on the mirror. The particular visual resemblance between the clearness of the mirror and the clearness of her sex (one sees her name appear in a layered nothingness) is fitting. Still in the flashback, we see Alice go to the bathroom and watch her urinate; in this early film, the ontological real is not limited to sexual encounters, unlike in *Romance*, and the production of fluids, our encounter with the productive work of the body (or the pleasurable, non-productive play of the body) is the locus of the materialization of the film. This meditation on fluids continues back in the present as Alice grabs fresh eggs from her parents’ farm and crushes them in her hand, the sensuous yolks melting over her fingers.⁹

Breillat extracts from her actor’s material expulsions the force of those “pleasurable non-productive play(s) of the body,” ones at odds with reproductive aims. Piss as a properly leaky signifier punctures the brittle form of the Bataille egg of *The Story of the Eye*, which in its source text must remain whole, a text that Breillat is no doubt inverting in her pertinacious *femme* homage. Piss is thus for Alice a ludic portal towards the autoerotic frequency of subjective constitution, even as liquefaction signals a paradoxical drive towards some kind of sexual desubjectivation – that which remains nameless.

* * *

Bataille’s animating spirit lingers among these proceedings, directing one to the hedonic environment in which the pissing subject experiences the voided exaltation of depletion that adjuncts anarchic sexual encounters. In Peggy Ahwesh and Keith Sanborn’s *The Deadman* (1989), the only cinematic and seemingly impossible staging of Bataille’s short story, the character of Marie experiences an erotic vision quest upon the death of her lover, jettisoning outwards from the house in which his corpse rots, to experience sensate life and the limits of sexual experience. Like the lip of the toilet bowl as an edge to erotic recognition, Marie’s expulsion is into a

bracing self-possession, an exertion of sexual appetite. Bataille's non-productive expenditure, materialising in the form of sex, excretion, the burning sun as waste, joins in Ahwesh's imaginary with a feminist project of claiming a woman's *jouissance*.¹⁰ One agent of such expended energy is Marie's forceful exertions and evacuation. Pissing too is a signifier of an entry into the "softness" of nature as her habituation into the openness of organic landscapes. She falls upon a bar where she proceeds to engage in a play of sexual enticement and provocation, fighting, brawling and inciting its patrons in a scene of "scabrous" public sex. When confronted with a count who resembles the ghost of the dead lover, Marie erupts, pissing on him before a tussle that ends with her biting him on the dick.



The Deadman, Peggy Ahwesh & Keith Sanborn, 1989, U.S. Image courtesy of Peggy Ahwesh.

Balancing improvisation and the script written in translation of the story by Keith Sanborn, the function of Montgomery's pissing body evades and eludes fixity or capture, it tumbles into a liquefying contamination of the scene with a rough erotic sociality. Manifesting the female body's capacities to circlude, engulf and threaten submersion into the *formless*,

Ahwesh and Sanborn point to the potentiating queerness of Bataille's sexual scenography, full of relations of non-relation, organic matter, disjecta, urine and spit, the torn and the tangled. The count too becomes a deadman, putrefied into stillness and solidified into a hardened mass in the mud in the film's final images. Marie, unleashed, exhausts herself under the binding flashes of the sun.

* * *

Ahwesh's volley into the domain of women's public pissing foregrounds a problem of a fundamental inequity, one which Lebensztein alludes to, in that the construction of the toilet as a project of hygienic governmentality (also discussed in Dominique Laporte's *The History of Shit*) and the privatisation of pissing, no longer *en plein air* in the industrial age, coincided with techniques of marking matter as out of place, obscene, and immoral.¹¹ The female body became a site of both cathexis and regulation, bearing the brunt of this affiliation with indecency. The female "pisseuse" as per Lebentzjen, becomes a site of uneasy erotic gazing and voyeuristic relation. The early stag film *A Free Ride* (alt. *A Grass Sandwich*, 1915, U.S) attests to this: women spy a man pissing in the woods, and he subsequently spies them pissing in turn. Curious and aroused, one woman then another approaches the man, as a sexual triad is broached, actualized, alternated. Staging private bodily functions narratively as public, pissing is the veil through which the hetero pornographic gaze and the syntax of the sex act is constituted in one of its earliest documented instantiations, filtered, and accessed, even as the pair of women and their camaraderie complicates any neat mapping of phantasmatic positions and identifications.¹²



A Free Ride (alt A Grass Sandwich) Anonymous, 1915, U.S.

* * *

What happens when piss gets converted into gold? In a transvaluation of value that hearkens to *Lebenstzjen's* desire for sustainable reincorporation – in which urine as purification bestowed by angelic cherubs in the classical mode provides a tonic, a palliative salve – Nazlı Dinçel's perverse redirection of pissing closes their film *Instructions on How to Make a Film* (2018) which fuses a Wikihow instruction manual's sophomoric filmmaking tips on how to work with analogue film, with tightly composed images of a nude male figure in the style of statuary, a semi erect penis resting wreathed by gathered flowers, and an assiduously framed blow job, which frames the sex act as one acknowledged trajectory of film's ethnographic drive of capture. The explicitness of the sex nevertheless remains in many ways obscure, semiotically slippery, when placed against a soundtrack that quotes theoretical text from Barbara Kirshneblatt

Gimblett's expounding on exhibition, performance, and signification. The filmmaking manual instructions intersperse with advice on and gestures to farming and harvesting, closing the circle of technics, land, and embodied labors. Dialoguing with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's exposition on human artifacts and the ethnographic gaze, Dinçel films bodies as at once live and obtuse forms and irony-laced relics, objects of attention polysemously grasped by the camera. The film winds towards its final images – as film strips dry in the outdoor breeze, etched marks animate the surface of the celluloid image in patterned dashes and perforations. The contours of a squatting lower body fills the top of the frame, genitalia obviated by darkness; within the composition the body becomes a frame or viewfinder of a sort, functioning as a negative space against which twinkling illuminations of light emit through piss droplets as they fall onto blooming daisies in the grass below. This produces the film's final salvo of unfixed, discomposed embodiment, unraveled in tending and reaping. In Dinçel's imagining, pissing's *écriture* – aligned with the filmmaking process – functions like an alchemical watering can, soil irrigated, flora bedewed in waste and rejuvenation.

* * *

Recasting queerness in a rural context, Charlotte Prodger's *LHB* (2017) contends with piss as a logic girded to other bodily extensions and capacities, forms of movement and navigation. The film traces Prodger's obsession with the Pacific Coastal Trail, approximately 2600 miles in length, which spans between Mexican and Canadian borders and takes six



Instructions on How to Make a Film, Nazli Dincel, 2018, U.S. Image courtesy of Nazli Dincel.

months to walk. In her spoken investigation of the varied women and queer walkers of this and other trails, their habits and routines, Prodger simultaneously juxtaposes documentation of her own practice of walking along trails filmed on her iPhone, the camera moving in the opening minutes through a tactile density of yellow flowering brush, and her stopping to piss across these terrains and landscapes. Prodger's collation of these paths textures and these pissing images are overlaid with a tessellated image manipulation that mimics the patterns of the Northumberland flag. Prodger's expresses fascination with the minutiae of the walker's routines of subsistence on these paths, among them carrying bandanas with which to wipe, and the ways the body must be aided to wick sweat during the journey. The endurance strategies of walking meet the

necessity of piss as a spatial exercise, a tracing of presence, the leaving of remains, and a practice of autonomy that exceeds capture. Prodder's narration makes clear that the claim on space made by the presence of women and non-gender-normative walkers along the trails is hardly assumed or assured, but something that must be wrested from the regulation of land use and public spaces by specific kinds of bodies, not just those that are normalised and naturalised as belonging there. In one sense, the poignancy of this marking, rests far afield from the inscriptions of Breillat's *Alice* or the wry replenishments of Dinçel's watery flowery sublimity. But it also designates how nonunitary queer bodies' commitment to relationality with humans, landscapes, environments, their catalyzing of spaces and situations, builds alternative ecologies of habitation, duration, and care.

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Notes

- 1 On the scatological inflections of the Kuchar brother's brand of underground materialism, see Juan A. Suárez, "The Kuchars, the 1960s and queer materiality," *Screen* 56, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 25–45.
- 2 Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, et al. *Encyclopedia Acheperalica: Comprising the Critical Dictionary and Related Texts*, eds. Robert Loebel and Isabel Waldberg, (London: Atlas Press, 1995).

- 3 Popular discourse on public toilets in the contemporary moment in North America and the UK in the wake of a swelling, regressive trans panic have been roiled by the violent policing and enforcements of gender normativity and the reign of corrosive gender binarisms. In this the bathroom has expanded as a contested zone of needless regulation of acceptable genders and of trans, nonbinary and non-cis subjects. The toilet, and what it can and can't contain, is mobilized as a sphere for enforcing essentialist, patriarchal and reactionary gender norms which seeks to suppress non-cis bodies' and their public autonomy as well as their right to a private, unexceptional zone of respite in ordinariness, uneventful time as much as space of digressive and happenstance encounters bereft of threat, surveillance, and state power. It is hard to view the cinematic toilet from outside of these contexts that so cloud the present and demonize trans existence. Insisting on pissing's fundamental relation to corporeal mutability on one hand and autonomous self definition, a place where literalism battles metaphor, pissing must be demanded as an incontrovertible space of unremarkably quotidian self-definition.
- 4 Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 46-48.
- 5 André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 52.
- 6 Jean Claude Lebensztein, *Pissing Figures 1280-2014*, trans. Jeff Nagy (New York: David Zwirner Books/ Exphrasis, 2017).
- 7 See Lee Edelman "Tearooms and Sympathy; or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet", in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1994), 148 - 172.
- 8 Lebensztein, *Pissing Figures 1280-2014*, 61-70.
- 9 Eugenie Brinkema, "Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat)", *Women: a cultural review* 17, no. 2 (2006): 164.
- 10 For more on this film, see Elena Gorfinkel, "Corpse Corpus Contingency: On Peggy Ahwesh's Deadman Trilogy," *Screen* 55, no. 4 (2014): 514-521.
- 11 Dominique Laporte, *The History of Shit*, trans. Nadia Benabib and Rodolphe El-Khoury, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000).
- 12 While piss in hardcore porn would take me too far away from pissing as indirection and surplus, the volume of piss porn only attests to the potential queerness of pissing as a domain that converts genitility to the adjacency of waste's voluptuous subsumption.