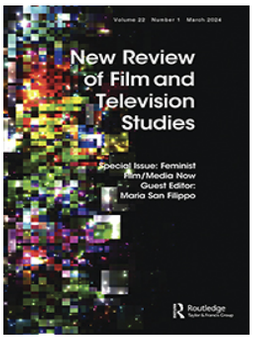

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Shit happens on the big screen: faecal motifs in contemporary film

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyse various excremental motifs and their functions in selected contemporary films. Drawing on concepts such as Julia Kristeva's abject, Mary Douglas's taboo and Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque body, the authors demonstrate that dirt in the form of excrement holds metaphorical and symbolic potential in cinematic representations. Faecal tropes selected for discussion range from the use of excrement as a means of humiliation (*The Help*, *Green Book*, *Kornblumenblau*) or resistance (*Silent Grace*, *Hunger*) to an understanding of defecation as an ideal and peaceful act (*Jarhead*, *Halkaa*) or as a trigger for culturally conditioned disgust (*Death at a Funeral*, *Daddy Day Care*), to the use of faecal matters as a demarcation line between 'us' and 'them' in the world of the future (*Uncanny*, *The Platform*) or as a productive substance entangled with multiple life forms (*The Martian*). Since filmic texts can be regarded as a taxonomic representing of faecal motifs that have received considerably little scholarly attention, the discussed examples do not exhaust the topic, but lay the foundation for more detailed analysis in the future.

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Despite a perhaps primordial longing for cleanliness and order, people have always been surrounded by different types of dirt both in its physical and metaphorical form. One of the most obvious examples occupies our everyday existence: our own waste produced on a quotidian basis. Despite faeces and defecation constituting a regular feature and taken for granted routine of daily life, in cinematic worlds such matters are rarely shown without reason. Their presence is nearly always significant as they serve numerous narrative functions. Excrement is often a metaphor for the fight for dignity and humanity, a means of punishment and humiliation, and an element that marks a clear demarcation

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line between 'us' and 'them'. It also frequently exposes the hypocrisy and weaknesses of contemporary consumer society; it shocks and invites the audience to the dark world of matter, unbridled nature, dirt, waste and secretions. Sometimes faeces and defecation feature as telling detail of the cultural background in stories presented or recounted, revealing of the mores at a given historical moment or a person's attitude to their body and health. Excrement can be also positively valued as a sign of life and vitality, sometimes even becoming a source of pleasure, joy or creativity. Hence, faeces, in association with the abject as conceptualized by Julia Kristeva (Kristeva 1982), can evoke ambivalent feelings: on the one hand, intriguing and fascinating, on the other, repulsive and disgusting. The unclear status of the excrement – does it belong to me or is it separate? – evokes a sense of horror as well as the sublime and even sacredness.

Given scatological motifs' employment in any number of films in thoughtful and deliberate ways, it may seem surprising that the body of research on cinema's thematic use of faeces and defecation has been quite limited. This may stem from the very subject of defecation remaining hidden on screen, as in life, due to its perception as shameful and impure (Drzał-Sierocka 2019, 127); consider how many film characters appear to function without food and drink let alone excretion (Drzał-Sierocka 2018, 14). Nevertheless, some scholars have realised the interpretative potential that the occurrence of excreta carries. Much of the research on this subject has been centred on a few flagship examples, including three well-known provocative 1970s films commenting on the distortions of neocapitalism, overwhelming overconsumption of 'worthless refuse' (Greene 1990, 217), cultural degradation and bourgeois hypocrisy: *The Big Feast* (*La grande bouffe*, dir. Marco Ferreri, 1973), *The Phantom of Liberty* (*Le fantôme de la liberté*, dir. Luis Buñuel, 1974) and *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (*Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975). Furthermore, studies on trash cinema with its (in)famous representative *Pink Flamingos* (dir. John Waters, 1972), offer an aesthetics or even 'poetics of scatology', with the 'holy shit' considered sublime or (with a nod to Waters' memorable muse) 'divine' (Gross 2009). Scholars have also explored the motif of coprophagia in horror films, in which excreta designate the punitive power of humiliation (Phillips 2013). Last but not least, much has been written on arguably the most famous toilet dive in the history of cinema, namely that into 'the worst toilet in Scotland' scene from *Trainspotting* (dir. Danny Boyle, 1996) and its relation to the transgressive dimension of corporeality (Harold 2000) in allowing the hero to inspect 'dark matter' up close (Drzał-Sierocka 2019, 130–133).

Given that academic consideration of cinema's scatological themes remains sparse, in this article we offer an overview of various faecal motifs in selected feature films that have remained relatively underexamined for the scatological and connotative meanings they yield. Drawing on such concepts as Julia Kristeva's abject, Mary Douglas's taboo and Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque body, we demonstrate that faeces carry metaphorical and symbolic

potential, as explored by these filmmakers. As these works constitute a catalogue of faecal cinematic tropes and possible methodological perspectives, we hope it will offer an invitation to further in-depth analyses of cultural texts that thematise human relations with regard to the material products of our bodies.

Between nature and culture

Before turning to particular examples of faecal motifs in the selected films, it is vital that we take a closer look at the history of our relation to excrement and defecation, understood as 'a field of polar tensions between nature and culture, private and public, singular and common' (Agamben 2007, 86). This will allow us to outline the historical and cultural background that constitutes a fascinating context for the cinematic images of excretions and their often contradictory meanings. Beginning with ancient cultures, defecation and bodily secretions aroused fear and apprehension due to their ambiguous, mystic status and transgressive nature. 'Shit always occupies a strange and fascinating proximity to God' (Laporte 2000, 111)[1] and it crosses the boundary between what is known – what remains inside, and what is unfamiliar – what accrues outside. The inability to accurately define the essence of secretions specifically was most frightening, as 'dangerous bodily excreta are benign if in their proper place inside the body. (. . .) feces in the colon (. . .) are basically not present, being safely where they belong as long as attention is not called to them' (Miller 1997, 97). The ambiguous, hybrid status of faeces led to their tabooing. Within this logic, one who touches excreta becomes defiled[2]; for this reason, body secretions (sputum, urine, faeces) can be used to dishonour and annihilate the enemy. Similarly, in the Christian culture of shame and fear, which rejects carnality as sinful, excrement was also considered unclean and detestable. One result of these restrictive practices was the emergence of a medieval folk culture fascinated by the so-called material bodily lower stratum (Bakhtin 1984), its functionalities and products. During Carnival time, this specific affection is able to reverse the hierarchical order of everyday life, establishing a grotesque defecating body as an emblem of the carnivalesque. The grotesque, lively, 'ever unfinished, ever creating body' (Bakhtin 1984, 26) ignored restrictions, at least for a brief moment, and uses its own physiology as a form of opposition to the official order and as means to transgress its own limits.

The modern era brought about further bodily restrictions as legalistic culture valued restraint and social convention, which influenced 'the compulsion towards self-control' (Werner 2017, 64). Defecation and faeces thereby evoked feelings of shame, embarrassment and disgust. Since then, a civilised and cultured person has been expected to hide the bodily urges that have been regarded as remnants of a wild nature. Generally,

physiological needs, including defecation, were expected to remain unseen,[3] becoming a taboo that should not be discussed, except in toilet humour. A classicist paradigm of the flawless body emerged: the body that did not eat, copulate, masturbate, and certainly did not defecate. In the late modern period, along with the development of the medical gaze that closely observes the body and its physiology, excreta came under scrutiny.[4] Michel Foucault described 'an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies' (1978, 140), regulating life in its biological dimension as 'bio-power', a supervising and disciplining structure organising the world of social relations. The anarchic, transgressive and subversive nature of corporeality (and faeces for that matter) required continuous control. As a result, to some extent excrement became no longer entirely invisible; it is not a merely private or embarrassing matter anymore. It is a 'dark matter' which calls for increased attention. Nowadays, excreta are perceived as physical, tactile, manageable, productive matter (Reno 2014) and 'matter for thought' (Mole 2013, 30). Serving various functions, excreta have appeared in cultural and literary texts dating back to the Middle Ages and early modern era (see, for example, Morrison 2008; Persels and Ganim 2016). Since the second half of the 20th century, they have often become material for numerous artistic projects: visual art, stage plays, performance art and also films and television series (see, for example, Verrips 2017).

Dung and (de)humanisation

Aforementioned in the introduction, excrement, as abject and taboo, can be used as a means of drawing clear boundaries between different social groups or in more extreme cases as a form of punishment and humiliation. In colonial discourses, 'the other' was often described with the use of various adjectives associated with dirt, such as unclean, filthy, impure and contagious (see, for example, Plumwood 2003). As 'dirt offends against order and certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion' (Douglas 2001, 2–3), in order to maintain the established norms 'the other', associated with filth, needed to be kept separate, along with his or her waste. Three films set in the Southern states of the US, namely *Once Upon a Time... When We Were Colored* (dir. Tim Reid, 1995), *The Help* (dir. Tate Taylor, 2011) and *Green Book* (dir. Peter Farrelly, 2018), explore the contagious potentiality of excrement of African Americans. All three films take up issues concerning racial segregation in the Deep South, including Jim Crow laws administering the separation of toilet facilities for whites and Blacks (see, for example, Abel 1999).

In *Once Upon a Time... When We Were Colored* a five-year-old boy on the trip with his grandfather goes to use the toilet at a filling station and is stopped by a white attendant pointing at the bathroom door sign stating

'White Only'. As the boy cannot read, his grandfather writes the letters 'W' and 'C' on a piece of paper, explaining: 'This is a "W". That's the first letter of the word white. Now, when you see this, whether it's on a door or a sign or a water fountain, you don't use it. Now, this is the letter "C". This is the first letter of the word color. Now, that's what you look for. That's what you use'. Elizabeth Abel explains that 'initials are the instrument of initiation', through which the boy is taught to adhere to the existing 'racial regime' (1999, 436). Similarly, *Green Book*'s Dr. Don Shirley (Mahershala Ali), during intermission at his concert held in a Southern mansion, is heading towards the bathroom when he is stopped by the host, who walks him to a back door, points at an old outhouse and says, 'It's right out there 'fore the pines'. Although Shirley's performance receives great acclaim and gratitude, he is still 'the other', who despite being a famous virtuoso, is not equal to the Southern white population. In *The Help*, which abounds with references to the use of toilets by African American domestic workers, the separation of 'dark matter' from clean 'white' waste is most vividly illustrated through the endeavours undertaken by the white antagonist, Hilly Holbrook (Bryce Dallas Howard), who introduces the 'Home Help Sanitation Initiative'. As she explains to her friends during a game of bridge, the initiative concerns 'a disease preventative bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help'. According to Hilly, faeces of Black people are 'plain dangerous' as those people 'carry different diseases than we do', therefore, she is prepared to 'do whatever it takes to protect our children'.

As Stephanie Rountree explains, 'the physical expulsion of the African American body from the white bathroom demarcates a racial boundary of excretion: it implies excretion from Black bodies is not good enough for white folks' toilets' (2013, 64). Although Mary Douglas illustrates that 'eliminating [dirt] is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment' (2001, 2), in the context of the aforementioned films only the dirt of Black people carries harmful and contagious potentiality, hence placing it outside the domestic sphere serves as a clear demarcation line between clean whites and dirty Blacks. As in the case of the treatment of Don in *Green Book*, *The Help* presents African American domestic workers barred from using indoor toilets even as they play an essential role in white households, in which they clean, prepare food, and most importantly take care of white people's children, to whom they are often closer than are their own mothers. As Douglas states, there is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder (2001, 2). The understanding of dirt is a matter of the individual's attitude, one which is necessarily socially and culturally constructed. In the films we discuss, it is up to white characters to decide in which spheres dirt functions as a demarcation line and in which it does not impinge on the established order.

While in the above-mentioned examples the issues concerning waste management becomes a key vehicle through which notions of difference are emphasised, the films discussed below illustrate various ways in which defecation and excrement can be used in order to humiliate, dehumanise and subjugate individuals or groups in question.[5] Restricting defecation deprives human beings of their basic physiological needs as they cannot, in Kristevan sense, discard the abject (Kristeva 1982, 2). Defecating's governance by strict rules and regulations is especially apparent in the context of prisons and concentration camps, as exemplified by such films as *Kornblumenblau* (dir. Leszek Wosiewicz, 1988), *Silent Grace* (dir. Maeve Murphy, 2001) and *Hunger* (dir. Steve McQueen, 2008). In *Silent Grace* and *Hunger*, set during The Troubles (also known as the Northern Ireland Conflict), inmates are not allowed to leave their prison cells to regularly empty their chamber pots, which finally leads to the so-called 'dirty protest', analysed in more detail in the next section. Where the restrictive use of toilets is only implied in *Hunger*, it is directly explained in *Silent Grace* by one of the inmates, Eileen (Orla Brady), who during conversation with the Governor says: '[You] have us on a twenty-three-hour lock-up with no access to toilet facilities, what do you expect?' Being offered a bonus food parcel and the future possibility of extra visits to stop the protest, she asserts her position: 'We're prisoners of war. We're looking for political status not a bloody bar of chocolate and an orange'. Refusing the offer, the Governor tells her, 'We will break you, Eileen'. As Florian Werner points out in reference to concentration camps, different kinds of degradations involving faeces were applied 'to arouse a sense of self-disgust and self-revulsion in the prisoners: they [the guards] wished to break their self-respect, and with it to also dissolve any solidarity between the captives amidst the germs and the shit' (2017, 76).

This phenomenon is also found in *Kornblumenblau*, in which ill prisoners vomit and defecate together in an open space toilet in the camp, thereby transforming that which in the Western world has long been regarded as a private and singular experience into – referring to Giorgio Agamben's 'polar tension' – a public and common activity (2007, 86). What's more, the prisoners are further debased as they are treated like animals. When a prison functionary with the help of a few inmates runs into the toilet and switches on the light, it illuminates a repulsive image of the prisoners crawling through their own faeces. Hit with a stick and called names, they are thrown, or more precisely, expunged from the toilet together with the waste. The functionary orders one of his wards to disinfect the place, telling him, 'It must be clean like in the chemist's, clear?'; in so saying, he dips his finger in excreta and makes the prisoner lick it. Since 'to touch excrement is to be defiled' (Douglas 2001, 125), being forced to consume it seems to constitute the most abhorrent form of humiliating practices, thus emphasising the power relations within the camp. Similarly, power hierarchies and the

humiliating potentiality of faeces are explored in *The Power of One* (dir. John G. Avildsen, 1992), in which Geel Piet (Morgan Freeman), a Black prisoner suspected of distributing tobacco leaves, is forced by a guard to eat dung off his boots. Suggesting that Piet and other prisoners 'are a bunch of shit eaters', the guard dips his boot in the dung and tells the prisoner to 'get eating'. Piet's response reflecting back on the episode, 'We eat shit every day, all of us', transforms the word's meaning from the merely physiological to that of the symbolic sphere, as it implies the inmates' inhuman treatment at the hands of the prison authorities. Although the guard attempts to debase Piet as he, in the eyes of his inmates Piet gains respect as he has taken sole blame so as to save other prisoners from punishment. Significantly, these examples illustrate that excremental activities aimed at dehumanising the oppressed in fact dehumanise the oppressors, who lose their humanity through the application of such cruel activities (see, for example, Césaire 2000, 41).

Excremental power

While on the one hand, as illustrated above, excrement can be a source of humiliation, on the other, it can become a tool of resistance against the established order, a method of revenge or even a means of dignity and power reclamation. Nowhere does the subversive potential of faeces seem more apparent than in the cinematic representations of the 'dirty protest', organised by male republican prisoners of the Maze Prison (known as Long Kesh) then joined by female prisoners of the Armagh Prison. To oppose the discriminatory and inhuman prison conditions referred to in the previous section, to obtain political status of prisoners of war and to condemn the British occupation of Northern Ireland, both male and female prisoners refused to wash themselves, finally resorting to smearing their excrement on the walls of their cells (see, for example, Weinstein 2007; Yuill 2007). Whereas those events together with their escalation into a hunger strike in 1981 features in a considerable number of films, including *Some Mother's Son* (dir. Terry George, 1996), *H3* (dir. Les Blair, 2001), *Silent Grace*, and *Hunger*, the body politics of interest to this article come to the fore especially in the latter two films. The motivation for representing such events seems to be similar for both directors. *Silent Grace*'s Maeve Murphy explains that she 'wanted to humanise these women and show that in a situation of total deprivation, human beings endeavour to retain their dignity' (cited in Cantacuzino 2004), whereas *Hunger*'s Steve McQueen states that his film 'is essentially about what we, as humans, are capable of, morally, physically, psychologically. What we will inflict and what we can endure' (cited in O'Hagan 2008).

The audience of *Hunger* is introduced to the dirty protest through the figure of new prisoner Davey Gillen (Brian Milligan), who after asserting his

identity as a political prisoner by refusing to wear a standard prison uniform and taking an unseen beating, enters the cell housing another prisoner called Gerry Campbell (Liam McMahon). With growing revulsion, Davey slowly looks at the dirty cell walls. Absent any dialogue, the camera lingers on the filthy floor and walls covered with excrement. In a subsequent scene, Gerry is shown smearing faeces on the walls with his hand while Davey eats his food, then scrapes some bits of the unfinished meal from the plate into the corner of the cell, where remnants are crawling with maggots. While juxtaposing the acts of eating and spreading faeces on the wall may seem shocking and repulsive, it is presented as a mundane quotidian activity. Faeces, despite their politicized usage for the inmates, are here as natural as they are for babies 'before repression and separation intervened' (Agamben 2007, 86). The scene concludes with all of the prisoners simultaneously spilling their urine under the cell doors into the corridor. Similarly to the defecation scene in *Kornblumenblau*, Agamben's 'polar tension' is exemplified here as both the excreta and urine are transformed from the private and singular to the public and common experience (2007, 86). Furthermore, through such joint actions, 'despite the humiliating practices and the dirty cells, the inmates are shown to keep their dignity and pride, and the guards seem to be by-and-large unable to break their resolve' (Merivirta 2015, 130).

While the scenes in *Hunger* are based mainly on striking visual compositions, *Silent Grace* explores the dirty protest through the dialogue of the main characters. When Eileen decides to smear her faeces on the wall, she tells her cellmate: 'We gonna have to'. In contrast to Gerry from *Hunger*, Eileen does not use her bare hand to spread her excrement, but scoops it out on a bit of toilet paper before putting it on the wall.[6] As in *Hunger*, the dirty protest in *Silent Grace* is presented through the eyes of a new inmate, Áine (Cathleen Bradley), who after entering the cell covered in excrement, vomits into the chamber pot. Later on, Eileen tells Áine that she should join the protest, which despite being revolting, can be performed with dignity. Verging on getting sick, Áine lifts the chamber pot, puts the excrement on a piece of toilet paper and starts spreading it on the wall, accidently dirtying her hand. She sits on the bed beside Eileen and after a few seconds of silence starts crying. Although 'there is no evidence that Áine has become politicized', as Aileen Blaney explains, 'the dirty protest is presented as an object through which Áine, as Eileen's protégé, channels her respect and affection for her role model' (2008, 402).

Although by that stage the viewers of both films are undoubtedly repulsed by the conditions in which the prisoners have lived, the intensity of the protest is conveyed mainly through reactions of people, including guards and priests, entering the cells. In *Silent Grace*, the priest visiting Eileen covers his nose with a tissue to block the stench in the cell; one of the guards offers to cover for his female colleague who feels sick from the smell while on duty;

and food is delivered to inmates by guards wearing masks and gloves. The unbearable smell is illustrated even more vividly in a scene in *Hunger* in which a man wearing special protective clothing comes to steam clean the cells. This scene is meaningful for another reason, namely the excremental patterns on the walls. With a look of disbelief, the man removes his protective face shield to inspect circular patterns resembling a kind of artistic creation. Indeed, real life prisoners used their excrement to write messages and to create Gaelic graffiti on their cell walls (Feldman 1991, 217). They were, however, more than just artistic creations. As Allen Feldman emphasises,

> Through the sedimentation of its many strata – interrogation white, H-Block feces, Gaelic graffiti – it had become an archeological artifact, a place for the storage and the liberation of memory. An entire genealogy of resistance was etched with pain and endurance into the material imprisonment. Both the mind and the bodies of the prisoners passed into this cell membrane through the media of their writing and the fecal transcription of their political condition. (1991, 217)

Through this kind of creativity, the prisoners were able to mark their presence, tell their stories, express their cultural distinctiveness and highlight their political views. Using Foucault's terminology, both male and female prisoners through the use of their own faeces placed themselves 'outside the reach of power and established law' (1978, 6). The marginal filthy substance was transformed into a symbolic weapon against prison authorities and the British state.

The subversive potential of faeces is also illustrated in the context of *The Help* and a short dramatic film entitled *Eat My Shit* (dir. Eduardo Casanova, 2015). The latter is already linked at the linguistic level to the scene from *The Help* entitled 'Minny's Chocolate Pie' by means of the phrase giving Casanova's film its title and uttered by Minny (Octavia Spencer), for whom it constitutes a turning point in the maid's power relation with her former employer Hilly. Having been fired for using her employer's private toilet, Minny returns to Hilly's house bringing her favourite chocolate pie. Hilly greedily consumes two slices before discovering that apart from *that good vanilla from Mexico*, Minny has made her cake *with something else real special*, namely her own excrement. Minny's gift to Hilly is thus a form of revenge as well as a means of resistance against the long-lasting repression and devaluation. As Rountree argues, Hilly figuratively forces her racist politics down everyone's throat, so Minny physically forces her own political resistance down Hilly's, adding that Minny and Hilly are mortal enemies across a racial demarcation line, on either side of a pie that is full of shit (2013, 66–67). Although

somehow humorous, the scene is ironically subversive as well, for Hilly – who has been doing her utmost to enforce through her 'Home Help Sanitation Initiative' that Black maids' waste will be disposed of outside – invites the maid's shit, though unconsciously, inside her home and body in consuming the pie. Elizabeth Ezra rightly concludes: 'As revenge for her unjust dismissal, Minny's feces pie, consumed by Hilly with such relish, brings about the very comingling of waste materials that Hilly feared in the first place' (2018, 52).

While the use of faeces in the on screen representations of dirty protest was based on actual events, the 'Minny's Chocolate Pie' scene and the utterance by a Black maid to 'eat my shit' would have been inconceivable in the South at the time. Casanova's film *Eat My Shit* presents another highly unlikely scenario in a scene lasting a bit over three minutes. The film begins with main character Samantha (Ana Polvorosa) explaining during a phone conversation with her mother that a selfie she posted on Instagram 'has been deleted for sexual content'. Only after a few seconds are we shown that Samantha's mouth has been replaced by a hairy asshole.[7] As she orders soup in a restaurant and consumes it with the use of funnel and tube placed in her rear end, it appears as if she has an inverted digestive system, her anus and mouth interchanged. In the Bakhtinian sense, Samantha's digitally manipulated self becomes the embodiment of the grotesque body with 'the substitution of the face by the buttocks, the top by the bottom' (Bakhtin 1984, 373). As in the aforementioned films, here too defecating and excreta serve a subversive purpose. Samantha, whose strong sense of exclusion is set off by the mocking of her waitress, who finds the video hilarious, decides to pay her tab with her own faeces. She defecates on top of the bill that the waitress delivered placed on a saucer, takes a photo and posts it on social networking sites with the phrase 'eat my shit'. Again, faeces is deployed as a means of revenge and a form of opposition to the unfair treatment both by the waitress and social media. Foucault rightly asserts that 'the judges of normality are present everywhere and that it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based' (Foucault 1995, 304). In the context of Samantha's performance, critique is visited upon social media's enforcement of body standards and policing forms of otherness, treated as violations of so-called normality. Significantly, despite exploring disparate issues, Casanova's *Eat My Shit* as well as McQueen's *Hunger*, Murphy's *Silent Grace* and Taylor's *The Help* feature characters who, far from becoming vulnerable to authority and established norms, are empowered through the use of faeces. As Foucault explains, 'power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power' (2003, 29). As evidenced, these characters choose the latter.

(Dis)pleasures of everyday life

The fact of defecation accompanies a human being every day, 'from the cradle to the stretcher' as 'one of the basic conditions of life' (Werner 2017, 63, 67). Defecation is often presented in screen narratives as a long-awaited respite from the hardships of everyday life, a break from duties, a moment of solitude, an ideal peaceful act or even a kind of ritual, even if sometimes unexpectedly interrupted by unforeseen circumstances or interlopers. Usually, the juxtaposition between the peaceful act on the toilet seat anticipated by the protagonist and the events that disturb this moment contributes to a scene's dramatic potential. In *Jarhead* (dir. Sam Mendes, 2005), the main character, Swofford (Jake Gyllenhaal), takes laxatives inducing diarrhoea in order to evade his duties in the military. We witness him sitting on the toilet reading *The Outsider* by Albert Camus. The tranquil act is interrupted by Staff Sergeant Sykes (Jamie Foxx), not misled by Swofford's subterfuge, calling his subordinate to order, before ruthlessly throwing Swofford's book into a dustbin. As Werner notes, our interest in a 'dark matter" may point to 'a romantic desire to escape the western world's civilizing mechanisms of repression' (2017, 67). Swofford, hiding in the toilet, rebels (unsuccessfully) against those mechanisms. In another sequence, Swofford, addressing the offscreen viewers, recounts unpleasant memories of his life, including visiting his sister in a psychiatric institution and baking muffins with his depressed mother. These are painful events that he will not discuss openly, but significantly engages viewers in these and intimate matters of a different type while sitting on the toilet 'taking a dump', with a comic book in hand. It seems that the predictability of an excretory act offers an escape from the torments of his everyday life, particularly from the protagonist's disturbed family relations.

The image of the ideal act of defecation in 'one's own bathroom in one's own deserted house, with no time limit' (Lea 2001, 105) interrupted by sudden events is also depicted in *Lethal Weapon 2* (dir. Richard Donner, 1989) and *Pulp Fiction* (dir. Quentin Tarantino, 1994). In the first, policeman Murtaugh (Danny Glover), discovers he is sitting on a bomb attached to the toilet. Outlining the situation to his partner, Riggs (Mel Gibson), he says: 'First time in 20 years I get the bathroom to myself. No kids banging on the door. No wife asking me to hurry up. Just me and my new "Saltwater Sportsman" magazine!' Moments later, a team arrives to disarm the bomb, and proceeds to work around Murtaugh still sitting on the toilet. In *Pulp Fiction*, the death of Vincent Vega (John Travolta) occurs immediately after a peaceful act of defecating when, bathroom reading still in hand, he is shot with his own gun after leaving the toilet (Lea 2001, 104–106).

Neither does 'peacefulness' and 'defecation' go hand in hand in non-Western film stories. The heroes of *Halkaa* (dir. Nila Madhab Panda,

2018) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (dir. Danny Boyle, 2008) are often characterised by the defecation conditions in their neighbourhood, and sometimes, like the protagonist of *Halkaa*, they fight fiercely for the right to use a secluded place for this private act. Mary Douglas, writing of Indian society's 'normal attitude' towards defecation, states that they do not treat it as dirty or secret (2001, 125). She emphasises that it involves 'slack disregard (. . .) to such an extent that pavements, verandahs and public places are littered with faeces until the sweeper comes along' (2001, 125). However, in recent years this issue has garnered increasing attention. Since 2014, the government of India, in partnership with UNICEF, has taken action to end open defecation in the country (UNICEF n.d.).[8] The director of *Halkaa* does not hide the propagandistic intent of his motion picture: 'We hope this film in some way helps the country to become 100% open defecation-free' (Ians 2018). Obviously, this logic holds, defecation in a 'civilised' country should occur behind closed doors. As Werner explains: 'Our western understanding of civilization is (. . .) intertwined with the disappearance of shit; the degree of its (in)visibility signifies the position of a country on a scale of civilizational development' (2017, 65).

The main character of *Halkaa*, a boy living in the Delhi slums, dreams of having a toilet built in his neighbourhood. Currently, he has to take care of his business amongst others by the railroad tracks or using a chamber pot in his house. He does not feel comfortable in any of these places – on one occasion, during the act of defecation, his father knocks on the door, causing panic and embarrassment in his son. A scene in which the boy visits an elegant bathroom showroom in the city centre is also suggestive; amid the display of shiny bathroom equipment, the salesperson praises one of the toilets, calling it a 'door that opens to heaven' – the image of the toilet thereby representing a vision of escape to a better world. Similarly, the life of the protagonist of *Slumdog Millionaire* is founded on a significant fecal act: Jamal is using an open latrine, 'the most sordid physical manifestation of urban marginality' (Anjaria and Anjaria 2013, 61) when he hears that his beloved Bollywood film star has visited the neighbourhood. Without thinking twice, he makes his way out of the closed latrine by jumping into the pit that collects excreta. Jamal, covered with faeces, runs for the actor's autograph, seamlessly making his way through the crowd that parts due to the boy's odour and repulsive appearance. In this situation, 'the ignominy of the beshitted body (. . .) becomes an asset' (Phillips 2013, 37). This scene illustrates 'the productive mobilizations of marginality (here symbolized by shit) for navigating urban life' (Anjaria and Anjaria 2013, 61). Excrement is not necessarily disgusting or repulsive, but it can also be a mobilising agent, a driving force.

In everyday life defecation induces both hope and horror as, on the one hand, it is inseparably connected with life – in Mikhail Bakhtin's words, 'the

element of reproductive force, birth, and renewal is alive in it' (Bakhtin 1984, 175) – and on the other hand, with death.[9] Perhaps it is because of this, its connotative ambivalence, that we are so eager to laugh at faecal matters. One of the most clichéd comic uses of defecation appearing on the silver screen is the motif of diarrhoea. Shit as overwhelming power of nature, that which cannot be resisted, plays prominent roles in *Death at a Funeral* (dir. Neil LaBute, 2010), *Bridesmaids* (dir. Paul Feig, 2011), *Dumb and Dumber* (dir. Peter Farrelly & Bobby Farrelly, 1994) and many other works. The powerlessness of the characters in the face of the faecal prerogative triggering feelings of horror, embarrassment and disgust constitutes a source of humour. In *Death at a Funeral* one of the protagonists is accidentally flooded with his uncle's excreta. While he attempts to quickly clean the dirt off his hand, he shrieks in terror: 'Please come off, please come off! (. . .) No, no, no, please God, no!' Of course, this type of disgust does not need to be connected with touching the excrement, as frequently its repulsive smell alone is enough to make one feel ashamed and embarrassed. As Miller notes, 'Disgust undoubtedly involves taste, but it also involves – not just by extension but at its core – smell, touch, even at times sight and hearing' (1997, 2). For example, in the opening scene of *Hungry Hearts* (dir. Saverio Costanzo, 2014), the main characters are trapped in a restaurant toilet soaked with a horrible odour; for one woman in particular the reek causes a feeling of overwhelming helplessness. On the whole, the aforementioned films under the guise of comedy demonstrate their characters' acute awareness of the existence of a vital material-bodily element related to defecation. Human physiology has become the subject of scatological humour for a good reason. We often try to disregard this element as an uncomfortable part of our life. However, it is sometimes not possible and in such cases 'laughter about shit comes in handy, proposing a way (. . .) to attempt to distance ourselves from its physical reality' (LaCom 2007).

We also laugh at the attempts of adults to curb children's faecal matters. Changing diapers in *Life as We Know It* (dir. Greg Berlanti, 2010) or *Three Men and a Baby* (dir. Leonard Nimoy, 1987) serves as a consummate example of 'handling excrements, marked by significant negotiations of power relations between parents and the child' (Werner 2017, 74). Child characters also play with their own faeces, to the dismay of adults, as in *Daddy Day Care* (dir. Steve Carr, 2003). While we are not shown the result of playing with poop, the noticeable pride on the boy's face after leaving the toilet and the shock of an adult peeping into the bathroom are self-evident. One might conclude that the figure of an innocent child who can defecate anywhere, uncontaminated by a culturally conditioned disgust towards excrement, appears in filmic representation to indicate a kind of longing for innocence, playfulness and carelessness concerning faecal matters. Imaginably, an adult subconsciously yearns for 'that lost paradise of shit' (Werner 2017, 67).

Could it be that the future will bring us this kind of wonderland? At the final stop of our journey through faecal motifs in feature filmmaking, we turn to the science fiction genre to observe how filmmakers imagine faecal issues in the future.

Shitty futures?

It should be noted that motifs of defecation and excreta do not appear frequently in science fiction; problems of physiology and especially issues of biological waste produced by the human body seem largely absent in the genre. Archetypal 'cool, rational, competent, (...) male, and sexless' (Sobchack 1985, 46) classic science fiction films' archetypal astronauts conquering new planetary frontiers in the depths of space are not occupied with such prosaic activities. They reject biology and sexuality (Sobchack 1985, 48); the sterile futuristic interiors discourage thinking about such all-too-human uncomfortable and embarrassing activities as eating, excreting or intercourse. Sex especially is often understood as a useless relic, a remnant of the past to be replaced by more advanced technologies.[10]

However, the functions of the digestive and excretory systems still seem to fascinate some sci-fi filmmakers as well as creators of artificial organisms. A flagship example of this interest is the design of the famous automatic duck brought to life by French inventor Jacques de Vaucanson. The duck was to simulate the vital functions of a real bird so as 'to test the limits of resemblance between synthetic and natural life' (Riskin 2003, 606). The eighteenth-century technicians, including de Vaucanson, captivated by this possibility of simulating life, constructed 'devices that emitted various lifelike substances' machines that breathed, bled and defecated (Riskin 2003, 606). Allegedly, the mechanical duck was able to consume bits of corn and grain, only to excrete it after a while in a changed 'faecal' form.

At first glance the concepts of 'defecation' and 'artificial creature' may seem unrelated, as sci-fi films' most famous androids or robots are devoid of any traces of digestive or excretory systems. Despina Kakoudaki emphasises: 'Artificial bodies are designed to remain immune to many of the needs and processes of organicity, to sleeping, eating, breathing, and other such functions' (2014, 76). This does not mean, however, that faecal issues are unimportant in these filmic stories; quite the opposite: once they appear on screen, they perform key functions. Firstly, defecation may serve as a source of humour, as filmmakers imagine what excretion could look like and what actually the faeces of a mechanical being, e.g. a humanoid robot or a robotic dog, could consist of. The character referred to is worthy of mention here. American talk show *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, broadcast on NBC from 1993 to 2009, sporadically featured a costumed character known as 'Robot on the toilet', whose skits build their comic potential on the character's crude

construction and the absurdity of the juxtaposition of a large, heavy, angular robot with the small white toilet he uses, and of the very idea of an artificial creature defecating. The suspense raised in waiting for the final 'toilet success' also prompts comedic response; upon the studio audience (and viewers at home) hearing the hollow, metallic sounds of a 'poop' hitting the toilet bowl, it bursts out laughing. In a similar vein, in *Sleeper* (dir. Woody Allen, 1973), the main character acquires 'a computerised dog' of whom he most wishes to know: 'Is he housebroken or will he be leaving little batteries all over the floor?' In another example of laughter-provoking excretory-related matters, the farting scene in animated film *Robots* (dir. Chris Wedge, Carlos Saldanha, 2005) significantly has robots use their armpits to make farting noises because, obviously, they have no digestive system. As Kakoudaki notes, 'approaches to anthropomorphic designs revolve (. . .) around imitation' (2014, 18).

Secondly, 'dark matters' related to the digestive and excretory systems contribute to defining 'humanity' and marking the line between 'human' and 'non-human', 'us' and 'them' in sci-fi films. Such narratives distinguish artificial beings from humans in multiple ways: 'They are not real people (. . .) because they don't have a soul (. . .), because they cannot procreate, die, or kill, because they cannot love (. . .), because they are too limited by their bodies, or because their bodies are too limitless (. . .)' (Kakoudaki 2014, 215–216). By the same token, these characters' ability to eat and defecate provides proof of (non)belonging to the human species. In the TV series *Humans* (AMC, Channel 4, Kudos, 2015–2018) and *Real Humans* (*Äkta människor*, Sveriges Television, Matador Film AB, 2012–2014), which focus on the social and cultural implications of creating sentient anthropomorphic robots, the ability to eat and drink is a feature that distinguishes artificial entities from humans. In order to penetrate the human environment, one of the series' protagonists must demonstrate adherence to social norms by eating and drinking in the company of others. The fourth episode of the first season reveals how the non-human heroine can consume food without damaging her internal mechanism: she has a plastic bag installed in her oesophagus, which she empties in private, pouring the contents into a dustbin or toilet, and thus 'defecating'.[11] The distinction between human and non-human on the basis of excretion is also made to seem evident in a scene in the film *Uncanny* (dir. Matthew Leutwyler, 2015), in which a builder of robots scolds an android after learning it has been harassing a woman in the restroom. He tries to embarrass the android by asking 'What on Earth were you trying to do? Were you trying to figure out how to take a shit? Because the last time I checked, you don't even have an asshole!' Here the robot's attempts to fit into human categories are mocked. The existence of an anus provides hard evidence of the division between human and non-human. Thus, having one's private parts erased can be read as a deprivation of humanity. In an episodes

of the dystopian anthology TV series *Black Mirror* (Zeppotron, 2011–) entitled 'USS Callister', digital copies of human characters are trapped in a computer game and forced to play roles in its sadistic creator's sci-fi fantasies. It turns out that the imprisoned avatars have been deprived of their genitals to prevent them from experiencing bodily sensations. One of the protagonists complains about the situation, saying that now she 'can't even have the basic fucking pleasure of pushing out a shit'. An excretory act is presented here as a symbol of freedom and human dignity. Overall, 'USS Callister' reveals the misery that might be caused once we discover how to 'digitize ourselves, creating clones that can be imprisoned, abused, forced to work for us' (Schopp 2019, 66). Taking away the pleasure connected with experiencing human physiology and biology could constitute a means with which to create a kind of dystopian horror.

Another compelling depiction of faecal matters in sci-fi arises in dystopian or post-apocalyptic films presenting a world 'after the eradication of all we know' (Gurr 2015, 1), in which many of the rules governing social life, including those related to human behaviour in the sphere of physiology, cease to exist. In films such as *Waterworld* (dir. Kevin Reynolds, 1995) and *Blindness* (dir. Fernando Meirelles, 2008), we witness 'an end of civilized decorum' (Stifflemire 2017, 218). As a result, the excretory functions, including urination and defecation, are made public. According to Brett Samuel Stifflemire, post-apocalyptic visions 'mobilize the carnivalesque to highlight the scatological nature of human corporeality' (2017, 219). Noticeably, in a world without norms and structures, transgressive carnal behaviours related to death, sex, eating and excretion come to the fore. Stifflemire emphasises that such stories often criticise rituals and institutions, especially those of organized religion and government (2017, 237). In addition, these narratives often use the metaphor of 'shit' to comment on social inequalities. This is the case in *The Platform* (*El hoyo*, dir. Galder Gaztelu-Urrutia, 2019), in which prisoners of a mysterious institution occupy various floors of a skyscraper that indicate their social position at a given moment. A peculiar experiment carried out in this institution relies on the titular platform, overflowing with food, descending from the penthouse to the basement, stopping on each floor for a short period; once the platform reaches their level, the prisoners can eat as much as they wish. By the time the platform opens onto the lower floors of the building, there is no food left. One of the characters residing on a higher level, hoping for a collective rebellion, seeks to convince his fellow prisoners to eat only their designated portions. Unless they obey his orders, he is going to 'shit in their food every day'. This threatening vision of contaminating food with faeces works more effectively than a previous appeal to a sense of collective solidarity. However, the aspiring revolutionary addresses his request only to those on the lower floors, as he realises that the prisoners on the higher

floors will undoubtedly ignore him. 'I can't shit upwards, you see', he explains. Here, faeces are not recognised as 'a great democratizer, erasing distinctions among us' (Miller 1997, 135). Even if everyone defecates, in a dystopian world of social inequality, people from society's upper echelons remain unaffected by the 'shitty matters'.

A final noteworthy faecal motif appearing in a sci-fi film comes from one of the most striking examples of recent years, namely *The Martian* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2015). Astronaut Mark Watney (Matt Damon), accidently left on Mars by his team, must use all available resources to survive on the foreign planet. He lands on a brilliant idea to use human faeces, his own and those left by other team members, as fertiliser for the cultivation of potatoes. Needless to say, the hero succeeds as he manages to grow crops using his own waste. *The Martian* explores the weighty discourse of waste productivity, in which excreta are treated as generative material suitable for creative reuse. Faeces do not evoke a sense of horror in Watney or lead him to feel shame or disgust. They are no longer 'something unwanted and discarded' (Reno 2014, 2); on the contrary, they are perceived as both desirable and indisposable. This correlates with the posthuman anti-anthropocentric perception of waste as connecting human and non-human elements. Joshua Ozias Reno points out that we tend to imagine waste as 'something static and undead, when in reality it is unavoidably entangled with multiple life forms' (Reno 2014, 20). This enlivening discourse is evidenced in *The Martian*, in which human waste 'continues to be microscopically lively and readily gives way to more macroscopic arrangements' (Reno 2014, 20). Moreover, this is not the case in *The Martian* alone; much of the faecal matters depicted in contemporary film are laced with a notable optimism. Faeces have come to function as a means of resistance against normativity discourses. Excrement serves as an attempt to dehumanise the victim, yet ultimately debases the abuser. Sitting on a toilet is considered an escape from societal repression mechanisms. Excreta are lively and productive. Defecating equals, and equalizes, humanity – alongside other species and AI entities. Perhaps the future will not be so shitty after all.

Notes

1. The relation between sacredness and bodily secretions often appears in popular culture in satirical contexts, for example, in one of the episodes of the comedy series *Avenue 5* (HBO, 2020–2022), wherein a cloud of illuminated faeces drifting around a spacecraft miraculously forms the face of Pope John Paul II.
2. Mary Douglas writes about excreta in the context of caste society in India, while noting that the ritual, 'official' faecal impurity does not translate directly into the everyday life of Indians, who usually did not treat defecation in public as unclean or secret (2001, 125–126). We will return to the issue of defecation in India as depicted in film later in the article.

3. A person higher in the social hierarchy could expose their private parts in the presence of those lower on the social ladder. The king's exposure to courtiers, therefore, did not evoke a feeling of inferiority or shame (see, for example, Elias 2000, 417–418). At this point, it is worth recalling the memorable scene from the *Outlander* series (2014–) in which we see King Louis XV of France taking care of his physiological need in front of his courtiers and royal guests. The king is clearly constipated. One of the main characters of the series, Jamie Fraser, advises the king to eat porridge, which may help him with this issue.
4. An interesting filmic example of a doctor analysing human faeces can be found in *The Last Emperor* (dir. Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987). The court physician examines the infant emperor's stool by checking its smell and texture in order to make appropriate dietary recommendations ('No bean curd today and no meat!'). These instructions aim at changing the consistency of the excreta as the hard and black stool of the emperor can indicate constipation (Yang 2015).
5. Faeces used as a means of humiliation feature also in such films as *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, *Jarhead* and *Black Book* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, 2006), to mention only a few.
6. During the dirty protest in the Armagh prison, female prisoners also used their menstrual blood (see, for example, O'Keefe 2006).
7. Samantha appears also in Casanova's feature film *Skins* (*Pieles*, 2017), which explores issues related to various disabilities of the characters.
8. See 'An open defecation free India: Towards maintaining an open defecation free India', *Unicef.org*, http://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/ending-open-defecation (accessed: 23.03.2021).
9. Bakhtin speaks here of the so-called 'Malbrough theme' present in world literature and oral tradition. It considers 'the interweaving of death throes and the act of defecation, or the closeness or defecation to the moment of death' (Bakhtin 1984, 151). The juxtaposition of these elements would customarily serve to connote the degradation of death and dying.
10. Traditional sex is eradicated from the future as neither hygienic nor aesthetically pleasing. Instead, for example, the heroine of *Barbarella* (dir. Roger Vadim, 1968) 'makes love' by consuming a special 'exaltation transference pill', kneeling and pressing her palms to those of her partner. Similarly, in the distant world of the future presented in *Sleeper* (dir. Woody Allen, 1973), the traditional unsightly, unsanitary forms of sex have been replaced with a brief, contactless encounter between partners in a futuristic, tube-shaped machine (see, for example, Łapińska 2020, 72).
11. The device of storing in a sack the food 'eaten' by an artificial human is also found in Isaac Asimov's novel *The Caves of Steel*.

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