

a paper read at

“Considered Unsightly”

a transdisciplinary conference on the Freakish and Monstrous

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

October 25-26, 1997

Considered Unsightly

DAVID HOLT

I have taken as my title for this talk "Cunt kissing, Her Majesty's Customs, and the Selfish Gene". I want to argue that if we wish to negotiate questions of obscenity we must allow for religious feeling. Let me repeat: if we are to negotiate questions of obscenity we must allow for religious feeling.

Sometime last year I ordered a copy of this magazine of lesbian erotic fiction, "Bad Attitudes", from the U.S.A.

It was seized by Her Majesty's Customs. In their letter advising of the seizure, they listed various pictures in it which they considered unsightly (though the language they used was more threatening). One of these was of cunt kissing.

In my reply I wrote:

The pictures you describe may well be shocking. Not having seen them, I can't say. But we do these things, and we know we do. What is problematic is why we find it difficult, even impossible, to share that knowledge.

In my work I have to address that knowledge. Like you, I have to work with censorship. Only the rules I have to work with are personal as well as social, law making rather than law enforcing.

For instance, thinking of the pictures you describe. Sexuality is mixed in with many other aspects of our bodily functioning. Like eating and excretion. Sex introduces us to connections between eating and being eaten, between reproduction and the generation of waste, that are aesthetic, economic, religious. Connections of this kind are not necessarily decent, and are frequently obscene (notice how politicians often describe the policies of their opponents as obscene).

I am interested in helping people make these connections for themselves. Which we can't do (and here I think you and I probably agree) without taking into consideration the feelings of others.

In this talk I want to enlarge on that letter, by telling you a dream.

For fifty years I have been recording my dreams, talking about them to others, keeping them around so that I continue to reflect on them and they continue to work on me. And for the last thirty years I have been listening to other peoples' dreams, talking about them, aware of their imagery becoming confused with that of my own dreaming.

This affects the way I see the world. My attention is geared to dialogue between waking and sleeping images and narratives. I listen differently. The functioning of my body, eating, sex, excretion, aging, seeps, or at times floods, into what I read in the newspapers. Awake, I am aware of expectancies that derive from my sleeping.

Considered Unightly

Think of the public events of the last fifty years. The beginning and ending of the Cold War, the nuclear arms race, the growth of environmental and ecological politics, the rise of feminism, the recognition of homosexual community, strikes in the mining and printing industries, Chernobyl and the Gulf War, civil war in Ireland: I remember them all coloured and textured by dreams. And the dreams mix these public events both with the events of my private life, recent and long past, and with those odd and astonishing and disturbing images which dreams give us so abundantly, images which seem to derive from experience that I myself have never had, from what we might call truly imaginary experience.

I must try to give you some idea of what these images are like if you are to understand my approach to religious feeling. Jung taught me to think of these dream images as derived from an inherited past. He talked about archetypes and the collective unconscious. I find myself thinking of them today more in terms of our genetic inheritance. There is fresh energy and confidence pulsing through the biological and evolutionary sciences, following the revolution in genetic studies. I have found that these are combining to give me a new kind of assurance that our dreams are indeed worth listening to. Because in mixing personal story, public event, and genetic inheritance, they play nature and history across each other. Dreams let us in on the interaction of nature and history.

In particular the phrase "the selfish gene" catches my imagination because it allows for something wrong, but necessary and effective, in that interaction. The idea of our genes as having an agenda of their own irrespective of us allows for the range of sexual dreaming in a way that I find hugely reassuring. Because it seems to make room for a sense of *fundamental dislocation* as going hand in hand with adaptation and survival.

This sense of fundamental dislocation allows for the way I dream about sex. It allows for a sense of there being something essentially wrong with sex, which comes packaged together with an experimental fascination with the ways in which sex is both natural and artificial. It is as if my sexuality is finding a new home, which is also a very old home, a home where what I call the "it" language of sex can find its voice and make itself heard, a home that allows for the terrible and the unforgivable as well as the sociable and comforting.

But my understanding of the selfish gene and all that it implies differs from that of the evolutionists. Reading their books I get the impression that they feel that the new evolutionary science has explained religion away. I have nothing approaching their range of biological research with which to challenge them. But I do have my dreams, twenty six volumes of them.

And when I read their books with my dreams all round me, welling up and jumping in with sudden association, I feel something which it appears they do not. I feel fear.

Considered Unightly

Dreams have a dramatic or theatrical structure. We are author, actor, audience, plot, in one. If we make a practice of working with our dreams we explore, and in exploring energise, this dramatic field. We learn to move between the various positions, to understand what it is like to be caught in the raw material of plots which are nevertheless of our own making, to be an audience calling forth performance which has its own access to text, unknown to us. Within such a field the search for direction in our lives becomes an exploration of dramatic intention.

It is here that what I think of as the fundamental dislocation of selfish gene theory is so helpful. Because it allows sex an intentionality other than that of the body. It encourages us to imagine that in being sexual the body may be at cross purposes with itself yet nevertheless inhabitable.

There are dreams in which viruses prey sexually on human flesh. Bodies are turned inside out and outside in, so that our skin is indeed what the medical text books say it is, visceral. Bodies sponge on others. They are host to plants that eat animals. Sexuality and eating and wasting and killing cannot be simply distinguished. They change into each other. This changing into each other seems to be what the dream is all about. But plot develops, narrative suggests that behind the changing there is intention. If that is what our bodies are like, how do they learn to "take direction", as we say in the theatre?

Selfish gene theory helps by linking intention to chance. Mutation is intentional, but random, random but intentional. Questions, momentous and very sticky questions, are raised about the consistency of time. The playfulness, inconsequentiality, bloody mindedness, of dreams are full of this momentous, sticky, questioning. They allow us to entertain the most unlikely of possibilities, and in doing so to examine the role of the body between history and nature.

That is a brief attempt to describe to you my experience of dreaming. Or rather, to use Freud's pregnant word, dreamwork. This is the work to which I refer in my letter to Her Majesty's Customs. It is work that I can enjoy, but it can also terrify.

Evolutionary theory does seem to explain the originative originality of life in a way that is truly comprehensive to the detached observer. The explanation can feel satisfying, beautiful even, in the way that mathematics is beautiful. But approached through our dreaming, when we are simultaneously agent, victim and witness to what is going on, the explanation can also be terrifying. The originality that makes for adaptation and survival is fearful.

Perhaps I can make my point through amazement. Approached through our dreams, evolution is amazing, in the full etymological sense of the word. It can stun, craze, terrify. It is astonishing, astounding, stupefying. To respond to it, we have to be able to feel, simultaneously but distinctly, wonder, curiosity, fear.

Considered Unsightly

This is the feeling I am trying to share with you today: amazement as a holding together of wonder, curiosity, fear, but which allows each its own freedom. I don't believe we can share feeling of this kind unless we allow ourselves to be religious.

So here is an example, an example which I hope complements the letter I wrote Her Majesty's Customs.

It is a dream I had on December 24, 1991, shortly before I was due to stand down after four years as Chair of the Jung Club in London.

A long reconstruction, renewal paper has been submitted to the Club by two African male, negro, christian, members, whom we had hardly noticed. New committee structures, and members willing to serve on the committees. This paper is already known to, and discussed by, others on the continuing committee, but only now, just prior to the AGM, being made known to me.

There is a wonderful feeling of energy, know how, and vision, flowing from an unexpected, unrecognised, quarter.

As it is presented it is either signed by or read out by two names, brothers, very short, three letters. Then someone else takes over the presentation, a woman, European, addressing the central point of religious belief, revelation, calling.

She is presenting it to a younger than myself 'me'. She says: "I am nothing" as if that is what (her) God is saying, and she leans over to emphasise the point (I am behind her) and she is 'met' by the man she is addressing coming to meet, engage with her, in a (combined) gesture which is a mixture of

1) single hand cupped under tap to catch water to rinse mouth (assoc grandson staying)

2) cunt kissing

3) the home made Christmas card of marzipan figure, a bit like an Xmas bird, but also like human body lying on its back with legs up and over to expose the arse and anus.

In this shared gesture, which is like some kind of intercourse between them, he can somehow take her (God's) 'nothing' and turn it into tremendous affirmation.

On waking the great feeling of relief that, independent of myself, there is such life to come in the Club.

I would need a whole weekend of seminars fully to open up, amplify and contextualise that dream. All I want to do now is to take the image of that threefold gesture as an example of how dreams can speak with religious intensity and conviction about sexuality and tastes that can be both sweet and disgusting.

So let us take the three aspects of that image in reverse order, and start by showing you the Christmas card.

Considered Unsightly



Considered Unightly

First. We had received this Christmas card a few days before my dream. It is a photograph of a marzipan sweetmeat. I had found it disturbing, a bit amusing, but also, very moving, a way out appeal for help. My personal associations were with much enjoyed Mother's cooking of birds in wartime; with "rude" phrase "parson's nose" (the fatty extremity of a fowl's rump) as a 'bit' that is not nice, even disgusting, to eat. So the enjoyment and disgust of eating cooked flesh, as background, with the 'this is a sweet' (sweetmeat) as foreground. There is also an important cluster of feeling round the legs and wings: the obscene sexual invitation of the raised folded back legs has to be thought of in conjunction with the wings. For instance, the question when carving the bird: do you want leg or wing or breast?

There are also associations with the wings alone: chickens as birds that do not fly.

And with 'chicken' as meaning coward, as in "don't chicken out".

Second. We have the cunt kissing, the image I have chosen for my title. Here I give you just one of my associations, the words "Fuck my face". I spoke earlier of a sense of some fundamental dislocation as going hand in hand with evolutionary adaptation and survival, of finding a home that allows for the terrible and the unforgivable as well as the sociable and comforting, a home where what I call the "it" language of sex can hear itself speak. "Fuck my face" is an example of what I mean by the "it" language of sex.

It is a language familiar to us all, at times exquisitely affectionate, at times simply pornographic. It is the language we speak in those moments of exchange when the personal finds itself caught up in an agenda which is not its own. Here, in this dream, it speaks of cunt kissing as the fucking of the man's face. It is my thesis here today that if we are to negotiate language of this kind it helps to remember the selfish gene. Not as supposedly impartial scientists. But as dreamers, allowing for input from all of our brain. The juxtaposition of cunt and face, with cunt as agent, admits to an agenda which is not our own. It is an image that consciously collapses agent, witness, victim, into one.

Third. We have the single hand cupped under a tap to catch water to rinse the mouth. Some amplification is necessary here to show a connection with evolutionary theory.

The immediate association was with my grandson, who had been staying with us recently, seeing him rinse his mouth after cleaning his teeth: the simplicity and economy of the gesture, but behind that a whole host of associations with teeth and being taught how to look after them and visits to the dentist and how all that has changed in my life time.

But behind those more immediate associations there was the memory of a strange story from the Bible, the Old Testament, which had intrigued and puzzled me as a child, probably aged about six or seven when I first heard it. It is from the Book of Judges, chapter 7. The settlement of the Israelites in their promised land is being described, which involved the military conquest of the indigenous people, the Midianites. God wants to show evidence of his

Considered Unightly

power to his chosen people, so he arranges for their army to be reduced to, limited to, only three hundred, so that their subsequent victory can be recognised as proof of a power other than their own. In order to get this reduction in numbers, he has them drink from a stream. Only those that use their hands to bring the water to their mouths are allowed to fight.

I don't know why that story caught my imagination as a child. It must have had something to do with manners, table manners, the right and the wrong way to eat and drink being made such an issue of by God and the military reasons for his doing so. But now, in 1991, it associated immediately with all that I was reading about survival through adaptation. It is as if I am being reminded that what we can think of as superficial, manners and taste, reach into fear and expectation of a kind that we can only talk about in terms of the absence or presence of God.

To use the language of the evolutionists, the adapted mind is both fearful and expectant. Manners and taste commit us into the presence of originality. To use the language of the publicity for this conference, "difference" is about God, "the other" is frightfully familiar. The argument I am bringing you is that to do justice to both the familiarity and the frightfulness we have to allow for the presence and absence of God.

Conclusion

I can't say more about the dream now. But I want to repeat its central, threefold, image, and remind you of the religious feeling with which it is presented. Because this image, with the feeling it carries, is essentially all that I am offering you in this talk. If I have anything to say worth saying it is in this image.

A woman's face and a man's face, approaching each other. Between them there is a shared gesture, which is like some kind of intercourse. In that gesture her God's "I am nothing" is turned into tremendous affirmation. And the gesture is a mixture of

- 1) a single hand cupped under a tap to catch water with which to rinse the mouth
- 2) cunt kissing
- 3) this home made Christmas card.

Her Majesty's Customs offered me the opportunity to go to court to challenge their seizure. If I'd been younger I would have gone. I would have argued that we are caught between nature and history, as simultaneously agent, witness, victim, of what goes on between them. Being so caught, our bodies will always behave obscenely. Such obscenity does not deprave and corrupt if we can share it. Which is admittedly not easy. We have to know how to respect difference. And to do that, we must allow for feeling that is religious in its power to stun, craze, terrify, astonish, amaze.

Whether I'd have been heard is another question. If it had been before a jury I think I might have made my case. But of that you are now the judges.