



DIRT

Why it disgusts us – and fascinates us.

Dirt is a book about impurities, founded in the author's own experiences, from farm life and sheep shit to urban high culture. We're constantly at war with dirt, from the excrement we flush down the drain, to invisible germs. In the world of ideas, a similar struggle has been fought: from Christianity's bouts with impure thoughts, through enlightened ideals of pure reason, to modern kitchen interiors with designs so clean the doors can't have handles.

At the same time, dirt has had its own appeal. Farting and sex was as much fun in old fables as in recent Hollywood incarnations. Gore and blood has been central to ancient rituals, and still draw audiences to movies and art galleries. Shabby chic furniture and stained jeans have conquered the masses.

Dirt invites the reader on a journey through historical and cultural examples, combined with the author's personal voice, from his rural upbringing to urban youth and international travels.

Published in Norway by Pax forlag, 2011. This book was awarded the Norwegian Booksellers' prize for Nonfiction in 2012. International sales are handled by Hagen Agency, Oslo. hagenagency.no

Why *Dirt* is different

There are a number of books about dirt and disgust currently on the market. Some are in the field of anthropology and cultural analysis, some deal with hygiene history or psychology and neuroscience. Bår Stenvik's *Dirt* is different in that it allows itself to roam all of these fields and search for the points where they intersect. The book still stays consistent in style because of its strong personal voice and the author's use of his own life experiences. Historical facts, brain research, and the aesthetics of architecture, music and fashion are all tied together in a playful narrative that explores our thoughts about dirt and purity.

The way this book effortlessly incorporates insights from both the humanities and sciences answers calls that have been made for the "two cultures" to come together, since C.P. Snow's famous 1959 lecture; ambitions that are shared by successful non-fiction writers such as Malcolm Gladwell, and radio and podcast hits such as Radiolab and TED.com

The author's personal and essayistic style allows him to search relentlessly for what our relations to dirt and impurities tell us about the human condition, both physically and spiritually. This approach separates the book from existing dirt literature, and invites a comparison with works such as the recent best seller *The most Human Human: What Talking with Computers Teaches Us About What It Means to Be Alive* by Brian Christian.

About the writer



Bår Stenvik (b. 1976) is a Norwegian writer and journalist. He has studied English, literature, and musicology, graduating with an M.A. in Liberal Studies from the New School for Social Research in New York. He has published two nonfiction books, *Skitt (Dirt)* and *Dataspill (Computer Games)*.

Statement from the jury who awarded *Dirt* the Norwegian Booksellers' Prize for Nonfiction:

«In an entertaining and essayistic manner, Bår Stenvik takes on the cultural history of dirt, through descriptions of our relation to muck and droppings through the ages. He illustrates his points by skipping elegantly from popular culture to heavy philosophy, from Iggy Pop and Tom Waits to Plato and Descartes, and it is all founded on the writer's own life experience, from growing up on a farm in Nord-Trøndelag. The author is knowledgeable and shares his reflections in an entertaining way. Stenvik is an exciting debutant with a distinctive voice, whom the jury looks forward to following in the years to come.»

Quotes from reviews by Norwegian critics:

Good shit. Like shit hitting the fan with a wise élan, the author digs through the history of dirt and depravity in an entertaining and personal manner (...) Engaging stories combined with exciting new knowledge is plenty enough for me!

– Stein Roll in Adresseavisen

The writer's debut *Dirt* is a cross between a cultural history of dirt, a diagnosis of our contemporary lives as seen from the margins, and a personal coming of age-story. The result is a collection of surprisingly funny, thought-provoking, and informative essays – surprising because one might think that all these personal anecdotes about the long journey from Namdalseid to New York would come across as irrelevant and trivial to anybody but the author's closest Facebook friends. But in the same way that he uses «dirt» as a stepping stone to explore adjacent concepts such as «disarray», «chaos», and «disgust», his private stories are departure points for clear-sighted, often scientifically informed and philosophy-fuelled reflections on anything from tattoos to ripped jeans and kinky sex.

– Stian Bromark in Dagsavisen

As in an alternative bildungsroman, Stenvik performs a reading of the pure and impure aspects of his own life, and the changes of values that happen with time--and social ascension: Bår the child feels disgust for all kinds of normal food, the teenager loves shaggy punk-and stoner-aesthetics, the established man wants to live in a delicately furnished home with as clean lines as possible. Through this self-portrait Bår Stenvik becomes a sort of miniature of the history he is trying to describe, where definitions and functions are in constant flux.

– Tina Åmodt in Klassekampen

He quotes weighty philosophy and light entertainment: Plato, Descartes, Freud, Kristeva, Žižek, Iggy Pop, Tom Waits, Vivienne Westwood, and Ole Bull, there are no limits as to who gets to come along for the ride.

– Sigrun Hodne in Stavanger aftenblad

Taken altogether, *Dirt* is a likable book, because it at times forces new ideas to surface by strolling unaffected across a number of thresholds that we have created for ourselves.

– Trond Berg Eriksen in Aftenposten

Full review of Bår Stenvik's Dirt from the weekly literary supplement Bokmagasinet in National newspaper Klassekampen, September 3., 2011.

Pure and impure

Educational journey: Bår Stenvik's literary debut on dirt is an entertaining journey through mud and shit.

I was once at a dinner party where the conversation turned towards pigs, since a friend had had an involuntary close encounter with a hungry family of swine. During a stay in a warm country, with no toilet nearby, she had to go in the forest. Immediately a sow followed her, trailed by her piglets, and they gathered around to watch while she squatted. She had barely finished, when the mother signaled to the kids, who dived in and devoured the brown material. I was amused and appalled by the story (but I didn't lose my appetite), and responded with a giggling frenzy. No wonder some cultures consider pigs inedible, our hostess concluded.

Shit in literature was the subject Olaug Nilssen and Gunnhild Øyehaug challenged writers to take on, when they launched the first issue of the literary magazine *Kraftsentrum* in 2005, and one can safely say that Bår Stenvik has answered their calls. In *Dirt* he dives deep into the filth of history: Sewer floats under the cities, the sausage on granny's dinner plate takes on the form of a penis, a Greek philosopher is whipped while masturbating in the city square, and people rub themselves against pestilent boils and drink the pus in attempts of self-vaccination. *Dirt* is fun and bothersome, disgusting and fascinating, and something we all have to deal with. But what leads to the belief that something is unclean, how should we interpret disgust, and how are we shaped by cultural and private conceptions of dirt?

Bår Stenvik is a journalist who sometimes writes about literature, and his non-fiction debut has grown out of a Master thesis. Of course, it consists of more than filthy anecdotes. In the hunt for dirt's true nature Stenvik maps the territory of dirt and many beliefs about impurity. Told in an effortless and dynamic prose, *Dirt* emerges as a piece of engaged research, a book where the writer's personal zeal is apparent from the first page. Stenvik's initial reflections on dirt doesn't start in his encounter with academic texts, but in the family barn in the seventies—represented by the horse Luna:

I walked in next to the youngest, Luna, between her dark brown body and the worn-out planks in the wall, blackened by old sweat and grime. Patting her on the flank, I stirred a small cloud of dust.

«She's dirty,» I commented.

«It's a dirty world,» my father said.

Dad's dry statement stakes out the road for Stenvik's own thinking and cynical approach: «The Christian view carries in it a promise of an end, a time when all the filth will be taken away [...] unlike the Cynics, who say that the world is dirty, and that's ok.» The concepts of a dirtied world and a dirty world have been in opposition since ancient times, Stenvik writes. In the more theoretical segments of the book the writer presents relevant ideas from a number of philosophers and scientists who have dealt with these conceptions, such as Plato, Diogenes (the masturbator in the marketplace, who seemingly also liked to defecate in front of people), Nietzsche, Julia

Kristeva and her concept of the abject, and anthropologist Mary Douglas, who in the fifties treated dirt as a socially constructed phenomenon. On this level the text is introductory, rather than heavily analytical: A bit *fast* at times; when successive voices are presented in limited space, they risk drowning each other out. But Stenvik keeps weaving insightful theory together with odd experimental research and personal reflections on themes like the function of disgust and the mirroring of values in language.

This book wouldn't have been as much fun without the colorful anecdotes, and Stenvik's love for a good story. Under the auspices of the book's wide-ranging title, he throws himself at the opportunity to include *everything* that might be related to the subject. In the name of science he interviews a dominatrix in New York who on assignment urinates on her clients. In Disneyland, «a model of the world with all filth removed,» employees run around in subterranean corridors to pop up on a moment's notice, if a piece of trash falls to the ground. And did you know that people who occupy a fart-filled room make more strict moral judgments than people in ventilated spaces?

The opening scene of the book is indicative, the writer allows himself to take a lot of space, as an academic at work, and at a physical level of personal experience. I'm glad to see that he avoids an ironic and removed stance; instead, honesty and a low level of self-censorship characterize a text that tends to edge towards taboos.

As in an alternative bildungsroman, Stenvik performs a reading of the pure and impure aspects of his own life, and the changes of values that happen with time—and social ascension: Bår the child feels disgust for all kinds of normal food, the teenager loves shaggy punk- and stoner-aesthetics, the established man wants to live in a delicately furnished home with as clean lines as possible. Through this self-portrait Bår Stenvik becomes a sort of miniature of the history he is trying to describe, where definitions and functions are in constant flux.

From the large amount of dirt he has dug up, Stenvik has shaped a text that is amusing, attractive and solid.

Tina Åmodt

Translation of full review of Dirt from the nationally distributed newspaper Dagsavisen, October 3 2011.

GIRLS PICKING UP SHIT

Playful, entertaining and enlightening about stuff that stinks, as well as many other phenomena unrelated to dirt. Like, for instance, pretty girls.

Because that's what you'd think, right, that shit has nothing to do with pretty girls. And it doesn't. Pretty girls smell like jasmine, lavender and cinnamon, never have stinky feet, and they produce neither sweat nor excrement. That's exactly why there exists (supposedly) a webpage called hotchickspickingupdogshit.com, containing photographs of elegant women in very short skirts picking up canine excrement from the sidewalk. Some have been photographed without consent; others flash alluring smiles to the photographer as they hold poo-filled black bags aloft. High and low, clean and unclean, ugly and pretty can appear as contrasts, but just as often these opposites attract. Us, that is.

Women are «a temple built on top of a sewer», opined the roman thinker Tertullian, known as the «founder of Western theology». Holy shit. By the way, web pages (supposedly) exist that show beauties putting their fists in their mouths or washing toilets. The links are (likely) to be found on hotchickspickingupdogshit.com.

Bår Stenvik grew up on a farm. Thus he has a more relaxed rapport with dirt than those of us who prefer our cows shrink-wrapped. The writer's debut *Dirt* is a cross between a cultural history of dirt, a diagnosis of our contemporary lives as seen from the margins, and a personal coming of age-story. The result is a collection of surprisingly funny, thought-provoking, and informative essays – surprising because one might think that all these personal anecdotes about the long journey from Namdalseid to New York would come across as irrelevant and trivial to anybody but the author's closest Facebook friends. But in the same way that he uses «dirt» as a stepping stone to explore adjacent concepts such as «disarray», «chaos», and «disgust», his private stories are departure points for clear-sighted, often scientifically informed and philosophy-fuelled reflections on anything from tattoos to ripped jeans and kinky sex.

There are so many things we do not know. For instance, that research has shown people to respond harsher to moral dilemmas when their surroundings are messy or dirty: Is it okay for cousins to marry? The answer depends on whether the research lab has been sprayed with a synthetic odor mimicking that of fart (or not), or whether there are pizza remains on the desk in front of you (or not). So now you know why the religious right are so moralistic.

What is he? A sosiologist, a charlatan, a doting disciple of «Born that way or become that way?¹»? Bår Stenvik is first and foremost a purebred offspring of [Norwegian writer and anthropologist] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, who is in turn a

¹ *Translator's note:* This phrase refers to a controversial Norwegian TV series that propagated the nature argument at the great cost of nurture proponents.

distant relative of the French ruminator Michel de Montaigne. Nobody was writing nonfiction like this in Norway 20 years ago. The disciplines were strictly separated, the science more introvert, the journalism more superficial, the language more elevated. Then a saxophone-playing, chain-smoking, talkative anthropologist came along and exploded all the norms. Like with Hylland Eriksens books – incidentally, he just published his own book on the threat of impurity, *Garbage* – one might object that Stenvik has a hard time sticking to his subject. Witches, the fashion industry and S/M-activities are only metaphorically dirty, and only as long as you ask the puritans.

But digressions and sidetracking is built into the essence of essayism, the unpredictable «mess» that adds to the genre's appeal. And so we'll just have to deal with the fact that we never get the answer to the fundamental question: Does dirt obscure the true nature of the world? Or is dirt the true nature of the world? It doesn't matter. Nobody has still figured out whether humans «really» are good or evil. Meanwhile, the world keeps turning. The 484 293 characters leading up to the last full stop in *Dirt* are worth every minute and every cent.

STIAN BROMARK

DIRT
Bår Stenvik

(Excerpts translated from the Norwegian edition, pages 5–20, 166–168, 178–182)

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1. A DIRTY WORLD

Once when I was a boy, maybe ten years old, I was out in the barn with my father. The sheep were calm after the feeding, quietly chewing, and we were tending to the horses. The smell of the sawdust on the floor mixed with the warmth from the heavy, longhaired work-horses, and I walked in next to the youngest, Luna, between her dark brown body and the worn-out planks in the wall, blackened by old sweat and grime. Patting her on the flank, I stirred a small cloud of dust.

«She's dirty,» I commented.

«It's a dirty world,» my father said.

He didn't say anything more, and neither did I. Still, everything around me seemed somehow different after that. A while earlier I had been introduced to a well-known optical trick, the drawing that's either a vase or two faces, depending on how you look at it. Now I realized that in a similar way, there was two ways to see the world. One perspective interprets dirt as something external that muddles any object's true nature. The other says that dirt *is* the world's true nature.

If my father had been a puritan, living a hundred years ago, his statement might have been resigned or resentful. The Christian, Western tradition assumes that the world is a defiled place, something we just have to endure until we are allowed into heaven. Heaven is free of dirt, to the point that there is no matter there at all. For extended periods of history, the church has pointed to a connection between sin, body, and matter, all trials that we must suffer while we await ascension.

My father probably didn't have the fall of man in mind; he is, after all, an atheist, born in 1946. I interpreted his words as an appeal to reconcile oneself with the material character of this world: Don't be a prude, he seemed to be saying –

dirt isn't an aberration, it's the natural state of things. It is only by creating an idea of purity we make dirt's name mud. I took heed, and began to view the world warily, trying to pick out these two perspectives and choose the right one. Many years would pass before I realized that we can't choose. We all see the world in two ways at the same time. We fear dirt – and we're fascinated by it.

The barn

Growing up as one of 2000 inhabitants in Namdalseid, Norway, I was caught in the intersection of nature and civilization, old and new. I was outside, working with the soil, among sheep, horses, and dogs. And I had to shovel shit. At the same time, Norway in the eighties was a modern, urbanized country, despite the fact that we only had one TV channel. Even such a rural district couldn't escape the impact of the media: I wanted to be a cool kid, I wanted the same sneakers as the boys in the brochures, and I wanted to breakdance, like the kids I saw on TV.

Until 1989, Norway enforced a prohibition against skateboards, and when it was lifted, a skateboard fever swept across the country. All the cool guys in school had skateboards, and more importantly, all the even cooler, urban kids on TV did. I managed to nag my parents into buying me one, but unlike my role models, I didn't live in an urban area. I didn't even live in the townish district center where my classmates were skating around in front of the town hall. I lived on a small farm at the end of a dirt road.

When I had assembled my skateboard, I soon found that it wasn't made for gravel or dirt. The only place on the farm where I could really use it, was in the wooden aisle in the barn, between the sheep pens. I decided to give it a try, but right away I faced the dilemma of what to wear. Skating in my rubber boots and overalls didn't feel right, so I put on my regular jeans and sneakers, defying my

fear that they'd be infected with barn smell.

The moment the sheep heard the rumbling sound of wheels amplified by the hollow floor, they panicked and started running around in their pens wide-eyed, and I hadn't rolled more than ten feet before some of them jumped over the fence. Normally that wouldn't be much of a problem, but I didn't want to soil my nice jeans wrangling them back in. I reckoned I'd deal with it later, after skating a little more, see if they got used to the sound. However, when I turned my attention back, something felt a bit off with the board, and I picked it up to have a look. One of the wheels was jammed with sheep droppings. I studied the brown shit on the pink PVC wheel for a minute, while the images I'd seen on TV seemed to be receding far into the distance. Then I went out and put the board in the garage, never to pick it up again.

I moved away from the countryside when I was sixteen, but I still have a deeply ingrained sense of sheep shit, horse manure, and cow dung, being able to recognize each by their appearance and smell. From the moment I could lift a shovel, I routinely cleaned out behind the horses, while the sheep droppings fell through the metal grid in the floor, continuously gathering in the huge basement under the pens, waiting to be spread on the fields in springtime.

When I was a child, I was repeatedly warned against falling into the manure pit. I remember kneeling on the floor, peeping down at the excrement floating beneath the barn. It looked like a bowl of old soup, a dark scab with glistening parts. My parents told me that I had to be careful when the lid was open: If I fell down, I wouldn't be able to get back up. Many times I imagined what it would be like. Would I be sucked down into the brown gumbo, flailing and screaming for help? Maybe I would be able to reach the bottom with my toes, my mouth just above the surface, so I could breathe, but not open it to call out?

Though Namdalseid was definitely countryside, farmers were a minority, sheep farmers even rarer. The kids at school would sometimes tease me by claiming that I was dirty, or smelled like manure. But it wasn't personal. Since I showered regularly, I was pretty sure I didn't actually smell, and the scent was purely metaphorical. Also, in my opinion, cow manure smelled far worse than sheep droppings, and I didn't hear anybody picking on the larger minority of dairy farmers' kids. My conclusion was that all the talk about dirt didn't have anything to do with an objective description of the world, but rather about power and social hierarchies.

Somehow the implication was that farmers were not only marginal, but somehow a bit more primitive than their neighbors who worked as storekeepers, electricians, or truck drivers, and that some animals were more primitive than others: Dairy farms were more industrialized, and the farmers tightly connected to society through the tank truck that arrived every morning, while the sheep farmers were regarded as more isolated, old-fashioned, and odd. It was hardly a coincidence when the Norwegian comedian Klaus Joachim Sonstad in the 2000s made his eccentric trade mark character, Odin Jensenius, a sheep farmer.

This whiff of ancient times, as well as the proximity to animals, placed farmers one rung farther from civilization than locals employed in secondary or tertiary industries. As if the animals didn't only transfer their «barn smell» to us, but some of their animal nature. Still, we farm kids happily joined in on making fun of the kids from the nearby coastal school district, calling them «fishermen,» and complaining about the disgusting «fish smell.»

Earth to earth

According to the King James Bible, soul and body were first joined when God

made Adam from «the dust on the ground.» However, a better translation of the Hebrew word *apar* might be «dirt,» or «soil.» The name Adam actually refers to the Hebrew word *adama*, which means «earth,» «ground,» or «arable land.»

The image of God making sort of a clay man is easy to conjure, since most of us have made something from clay at some time. To the early Hebrews, soil and earth also was important as a life-giving agricultural material, substantial for their survival. In Norway today, dirt still has a positive ring to it in expressions such as «stick your finger in the dirt» (get a grip on what's real) and «dirt under the fingernails» (proof you've done some real work). But the creation myth is also a step towards the demeaning of dirt. God takes this material, and, being God, he doesn't shape it into a pot or plant seeds in it, but actually makes it alive. In the King James Bible he breathes unto it and it becomes «a living soul». This later translation refers to a long Christian tradition of viewing man as a fusion of «soul» and matter, leaving no doubt about which ingredient is the most valuable.

Our idea of the division between soul and body is often thought to have its origin in the thoughts of the philosopher Plato. There was a concept of soul and body in earlier Greek thought, but—as cultural historian Morris Berman notes in his book *Coming to our Senses*—«...the soul, prior to Plato, was regarded as the spirit of the body, not as its prisoner.» Early theology then inherited Plato's disdain for the body through Gnosticism, and Manicheism. According to the Gnostics, who were influential during the first three centuries of the Christian era, our material world was the creation of a lesser god called the Demiurge. This god, whether evil or merely inadequate, stands between us and the actual God, and at the same time hides the real world from us. For the original Gnostics the real world was a world of purity, whereas the world of human bodies, earth and dirt, was just a trap we should try to escape. The body's name was mud.

This idea was picked up and developed by the Manichees, who considered matter to be evil and spirit good. Anything bad in the world was the result of the pure soul being soiled by matter, on account of its being bound to the flesh. One young follower of Manicheism later converted to neo-platonistic theology, and is still well known as St. Augustine, one of the most influential medieval philosophers. He writes in his work *City of God* that «The first man, however, was ‘of the earth, earthly’, and he was made as a ‘living soul’ ... there is no doubt that his body was animal, not spiritual.» In other words, the good, pure, part was what God breathed into him, the rest was inferior. According to St. Augustine, the soul is «a special substance, endowed with reason, adapted to rule the body,» and the flesh needs ruling because it represents a constant danger. It isn't evil as such, but since the soul is divine and comes from God, any evil in man must somehow come from the part that once was dirt.

And so the story goes through our Western history of ideas. Plato describes the body as something foreign that is glued to us. Augustine and Descartes regard it as a cage that the soul strives to escape. The body weighs the soul down, so it can't soar, and the flesh fills us with desires, fears, and impulses that distract us from pursuing the purity of the spirit. John Bunyan's 1678 allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* tells the didactic story of young Christian and the challenges he faces on his journey from the «City of Destruction» to the «Celestial City.» He hasn't wandered far before he notices the burden of the body, as he sinks into the «Slough of Despond,» a slimy bog. Covered in dirt, he is pulled out by the good citizen «Help.» The mire turns out to be a symbol of evil and a gate to hell: there they are sucked down, all those insufficiently pure in spirit.

Three hundred years later the writer Arthur Conan Doyle found it equally fitting to use a damp and muddy moor as backdrop for evil deeds in the Sherlock Holmes story *The Hound of The Baskervilles*, where dreadful dogs and murderers roam the soggy land. Between Doyle and Bunyan other famous names appear, such as Charles Dickens, a writer who seems totally absorbed in his own renditions of dirt. *Our Mutual Friend* opens with an encounter between

two competing «salvagers» on the stinking Thames river in London, each looking for a floating corpse to ransack for valuables. *A Tale of two Cities* immediately introduces us to a suspect figure on a wet and grimy road, a man who will also turn out to be a body snatcher. Lest we should have any doubts about the man's character, Dickens makes it clear that «both horse and rider were covered with mud, from the hoofs of the horse to the hat of the man.»

The beast within

The philosopher Diogenes opposed Plato's lofty idealism in his own time, and is considered the founder of the philosophical tradition known as Cynicism. While idealists have had an ally in shame as an incentive to rise above the world's sordid realities, the Cynics suggested that animal shamelessness could be a virtue as much as a deficiency, and the word *cynic* is actually thought to be derived from the Greek *Kunikos*, which means dog-like: «the dog is a shameless animal, and [the Cynics] make a cult of shamelessness, not as being beneath modesty, but as superior to it.»

Without knowing it, I was threading in Diogenes' footsteps in elementary school, when I spent a lot of time trying to inform my classmates that humans were really animals. I was angry about what I saw as everybody's grand attempt to pass us off as non-animals, and probably a bit full of myself for being able to recognize the conspiracy. In my opinion, we were all animals, and shouldn't make ourselves up to be anything more fancy. As far as I remember, my classmates thought my whole point was a bit academic.

For Plato and his followers, humans were nobler than animals because their souls gave them access to rational thinking and the world of ideas, where everything existed in its purest form. For them, everyday horses were only muddled copies of the pure *idea* of a horse. And probably a dirty horse was even further removed from that idea than a clean horse. The cynics, on the other hand, embraced the material horse with all the grime and sweat that came

with it.

Diogenes' rhetorical devices included provocation and shock. Not only could he be sarcastic—he might bark or spit. He challenged the social conventions of his day by eating, drinking and masturbating in the marketplace. These acts were supposed to be conducted in private, but Diogenes spurned such rules, as he spurned hypocrisy, hierarchy and riches. He was known to not only eat and have sex in public, but also to defecate in full view of others, really rubbing it in, what kind of creatures we are.

Even though I didn't know my Diogenes at such an early age, I had somehow come across the Mark Twain quote «Man is the only animal who blushes, or needs to,» which I wrote down and pinned to my corkboard. How true, I thought. Everyone should just do what he or she wants without shame, like all other animals. Nobody should be ashamed of feeling desire, even if it was for something forbidden. Nobody should feel embarrassed because her shit stinks. The truth is it does. And it is ok.

I had, after all, despite my feeble attempts at picking up urban habits, grown up on a farm, and knew one or two things. In the eighties in Norway, the soap opera *Dynasty* caused a bit of ruckus when one of the characters was revealed to be a homosexual. At that time I may have had little knowledge of human sexuality, but I knew perfectly well that rams would try to copulate with other rams, just as well as ewes. To me that indicated that homosexuality was perfectly natural, and nothing to be bothered by. I also knew that manure was spread on the fields and made the grass grow. Actually, in old days it was common to feed horse manure to the sheep in winter, since they can make good use of the nutrients still left in it. The sheep didn't mind, because nobody had told them they should.

The intuitive cynicism I adhered to is, I think, pretty common in teenagers, and can actually be considered a sort of reverse Platonism or Gnosticism. I had the feeling that the world was a sham, full of trickery and false pretensions, and I also tended to believe that I

could see the real world behind it. But the hidden truth wasn't that of a pure world—it was a dirty world.

Ethics and excrement

If Christian lore tells us we are made from dirt, science doesn't offer a more appetizing recipe. Natural history books describe a slimy «primeval soup» as the origin of all life on earth. Step by step, evolution has produced new organisms, from amoeba to dinosaurs and mammals, until we finally arrived, built from the same matter as other creatures, but with a more advanced brain—the same brain that gave us the ability to do scientific research to figure out how it all came about. While Christianity averted its eyes from the material world, scientists have studied earth, rocks, animals and meat with great enthusiasm. Biology and botany is based on field research and rooting in the dirt, but something slightly alchemical happens to those physical experiences when the scientific method is applied. In the laboratory even poo can turn into something strangely clinical, a sample of dry matter content and minerals. And all the matter examined by the scientists isn't interesting in itself—they are only really after proof for underlying principles and structures that they can base their theories on. Science seems to contain a legacy from Plato's doctrine of ideas, just like Christianity. Both aspire to something higher, something that transcends the material world.

In spite of the cleansing effect of science, some things have traditionally had a low status as objects of research. Someone who wants to study disgust, will have to take a close look at all the stuff we have wanted to look away from through history. Entities that cause disgust-tend to be appalling: slime, rotting flesh, excrement. Corpses have been important study objects in anatomy and medicine, but only as a necessary evil, a regrettable detour in order to understand the secrets of the living body. And the disgust itself has been something to be overcome.

Maybe that is why disgust research didn't get seriously going until the 1990s, even

though disgust is considered one of our basic emotions, alongside fear, anger, joy, surprise and sadness. Charles Darwin, the originator of the theory of evolution, wrote about the unpleasant sensation in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, in 1872. The subject lay dormant for the better part of a hundred years, until researcher Paul Ekman claimed to have established that facial expressions and reactions of disgust seemed universal, as did the other basic emotions. If you ask any European to imagine a rotting corpse or a filthy toilet, she will involuntarily wrinkle her nose and pull up her upper lip. A native of Papua New Guinea will do exactly the same.

As disgust gained popularity as a subject of scientific investigation late in the previous millennium, several other researchers agreed with Ekman: People seem to have an inborn reaction to disgusting stuff. And when it comes to which substances occupy that category, some scientists thought they could find broad alignments across cultures. British hygiene researchers Valerie Curtis and Adam Biran has pointed to five categories that are considered unwholesome and appalling in several continents:

The primary unease stays close to us, and is connected to our own emissions. The gold standard of disgust is shit. Then other secretions follow, complemented by physical irregularities such as wounds, growths and amputations. The next circle includes immediate threats to the body, like spoiled food and dead things. Subsequently we must beware of the animals that partake in the putrefaction, or can infect us with disease, including insects and rats. A further danger is «other people,» who might bring dangerous maladies and foreign customs from «other places,» or threaten to corrupt society from «the inside.» Finally we have the kind of disgust that is reserved for sexual offenders, lying politicians, and white collar criminals.

This parade of disgusting entities moves in concentric circles away from the body, moving towards abstraction: From excrement to ethics. We can almost read the story of human evolution written in disgust objects, all the way to our current state as creatures of

culture. It should come as no surprise that disgust is thought to be the last of our basic emotions to arrive on the scene. Many animals experience fear, anger, and joy, while disgust seems to be a characteristically human sentiment.

Psychologists Paul Rozin and Jonathan Haidt write that everything starts with the fundamental: nutrition. Before we develop disgust, we experience distaste. Animals and small children react spontaneously to unpleasant tastes, like when something is very bitter. Distaste is a mechanism that serves to dispel bad food, and so far we're like the animals. But we are unique in having a fully developed disgust that seems to include a built-in theory of contagion. When something unwholesome has been in contact with our food, the meal is still considered spoiled after the offensive element has been removed.

Even though many cultures agree on some elicitors of disgust, there are also differences. Some peoples like to eat snails and frogs. Others even consume pork. Our rich variety of culinary habits could actually be part of the reason why disgust is so important to us. Rozin thinks that disgust may have developed when humans started eating meat. Food with an animal origin exposes us to disease and infection, and we're especially vulnerable, since we adapted to a carnivorous diet relatively late in the evolutionary process. Some scientists have also made a connection between this adaptation and the evolution of our big brains; with our heads consuming so much energy, we needed powerful nutrition. Eating other animals enabled us to develop the intellect that allows us to think of ourselves as better than them.

«One of the most widely shared features of disgusting events, we believe, is that they remind us of our animal nature,» Rozin and Haidt writes. As soon as we move one step beyond the core disgust associated with food, disgust soon accumulates moral and symbolic overtones. We need to confirm the belief that we are special beings, to «hide the markers of our animal nature behind humanizing rituals and practices.» We run the risk of being reminded of that animal nature every time we eat, excrete, or copulate. Haidt and Rozin tells a story of the well-known New England Puritan Cotton Mather, who was once

filled by disgust when he observed a dog urinating while he was doing the same thing. Struck by the vile and beastly nature of his body's needs, he wrote in his diary: «Yet I will be a more noble creature; and at the very time when my natural necessities debase me into the condition of the beast, my spirit shall (I say at that very time!) rise and soar...»

We mostly prefer to avoid contact with spit, slime, excrement, and other secretions. The only emission that doesn't readily arouse disgust among humans, is tears. Human tears are, in popular belief, special in the way that they are associated with emotions (unlike, for instance, «crocodile tears»), and that uniqueness is rewarded with a prominent place in poetry. All the body products we share with the animals, on the other hand, tend to be referred to dirty jokes. Until quite recently, poetry and high art tended to deal with spiritual and mental phenomena. Body functions are portrayed in porno and «low comedy.» Everything tends to be sorted vertically: The «higher» and «lower» arts; mind and body; the human and the beastly.

8. DIRTY DESIRES (pp. 166–168)

I remember well the first time I bought a porn magazine. When I was in my teens, there was no Internet, and I sought out a deli well away from my usual territory, where I wouldn't run into any acquaintances. The adrenalin roared in my ears as I made my way between the shelves, recognizing the tacky covers through my tunnel vision, and mechanically picking up one of them. Stiff-faced, I put the magazine on the counter along with a newspaper, and fumbled with the change. Well back home, I unpacked my catch, and looked wide-eyed at the pictures. After reading through the pages once or twice, however, all life seemed to be drained from them. The sizzling feeling was gone, and I understood that the most titillating about the whole experience was the anxiety I had felt walking into that shop.

Our animal nature

The word «obscene» has at least two possible origins. One is the Latin *obscenus*, which means «of or with dirt.» The other candidate is *obscaena*, a term for off stage, or something that's not suitable for the stage. And so it is with sex in the public mind: It is dirty and it should preferably take place well out of sight. In parts of Christian thinking not only fornication, but women as well, are associated with dirt, since they are, after all, to blame whenever a man is thinking about sex. Jerome called woman «a sack of filth» and Tertullian compared her with «a temple on top of a sewer.»

Sexual lust reminds us of our animal side, and undermines the controlling powers of moral and reason over our bodies. The term «a dirty mind» feels appropriate as a metaphor, since these sordid images stick in our head and are hard to rub out, they keep showing up like dust bunnies in the dark corners of our consciousness; constantly we must flush them out, if the soul is to remain pure, and the temple of the body unsullied. For a species that maintains civilization and society through the vigilant control of its own impulses, our most

fundamental desire becomes a natural nemesis.

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud thought that we defended ourselves against unwanted urges by way of a principle called «reaction formation.» In order to behave as civilized beings, we need to deny a number of natural impulses, and shame, guilt, and disgust are the superego's tools for suppressing what we really want to do, but society won't allow.

Even though many of Freud's ideas are considered dated by modern psychologists, empirical studies have lent a certain support to the theory of reaction formation. In a 1985 study, psychologist Patricia Morokoff rated a group of women according to their amount of sexual guilt, before exposing them to a collection of erotic movie sequences. The prissiest women reported of a low degree of arousal, but measurements of their vaginal secretions actually gave them higher scores than the other women. A similar experiment was conducted by Henry Adams, Lester W. Wright, and Bethany A. Lohr in 1996: They presented homosexual erotica to a group of men, and found that the most homophobic among them claimed to be less aroused than the others, while the physical data once again indicated the opposite.

Freud thought that the divide between what we really desire and what we allow ourselves, amounts to a feeling of cultural «discontent»: Norms and rules become a straightjacket for our spontaneous bodily impulses. Lust is original, disgust and shame later additions. The revulsion elicited by the rectum and excrement is due to potty training during the anal stage, while the disgust for sex in its natural and perverse incarnations springs from a sexual code that is enforced from above. In both cases curiosity and lust is considered natural, while disgust is «artificial,» a cultural structure that confines physical urges.

(pp. 178–182)

Civilized perversions

The hen and the crow are very different birds. The former has a small brain, hidden inside a thick skull, while the crow is a most intelligent fowl. Since the crow's brain takes up so much space, the encasing cranium is paper thin, and offers minimal protection. While the crow can die from flying into a windowpane, it takes an immense blow to kill a hen.

Daniel Bergner writes in *The Other Side of Desire* about sadomasochism and fetishism, and interviews a number of sexologists and psychiatrists. Very few of them claim to have a thorough explanation to why human desire sometimes chooses unconventional paths, but one view is repeatedly voiced: It is a side effect of our brain's advanced state. Animal desire is simple and uncomplicated; it does its work in the instinctive segments of the brain. In people, however, part of the job is done in the more complex cognitive brain regions, with more opportunities for derailment. This is an alluring idea, since it makes the paraphilias proof of our sophistication: even the most primitive desires can be shaped into thousands of intriguing variations.

The marketplace in ancient Athens wasn't reserved for Diogenes, when it came to exhibitionist behavior: The philosopher Peregrinus Proteus supposedly ordered his disciples to flagellate him while he masturbated in public. The combination of pleasure and a good whipping shows up sporadically in historical sources from the 15th century on, mainly in the form of stories of noblemen who crave spankings from wives and lovers, or depictions of bordellos, as in John Cleland's literary classic of eroticism, *Fanny Hill*—which not only finds space for a whipping, but also rape fantasies and hair fetish. However, it is not until the threshold of the twentieth century that the practice really claims its turf in the public sphere. Psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing established the terms sadism and masochism in his *Psychopathia Sexualis; eine Klinisch-Forensische Studie* (1886),

and his colleagues Freud and Havelock Ellis would soon follow with their own views on the subject.

Krafft-Ebing thought that sadism and masochism in a sexual context didn't really have as much to do with pain as the amount of whipping would have one believe. The central aspect was power: Masochistic pleasure came from total submission to the will of the sadist, and the sadist enjoyed being in control. Mary Douglas proposes in *Purity and Danger* that what is considered impure or taboo with regards to the body, probably is symbolic for the societal structures: «I suggest that many ideas about sexual dangers are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system.» S/M play certainly appears to be a stage where power relationships are symbolically played out. One thing is the foundational exchange of power that it rests upon, the titillating prospect of handing over control of one's body to someone else. Even more striking is the assortment of popular variations of role-play in a scene, all closely modeled on cultural stereotypes: *master/slave, teacher/student, boss/secretary, cop/criminal and even human/animal.*

«I have a client who owns a hedge fund company, and basically he wants to be treated like a dog,» says Mistress Ekko [a New York dominatrix who is introduced earlier in the chapter], «because, you know, everybody licks his ass, figuratively speaking, because he is a really powerful guy, in terms of the business world. So I have him chained up, with some mobility, and then he wants to play naughty pit-bull. Usually he lunges at my arm and bites me, and what I do is I slap the shit out of him.» Ekko told me about a time when the client had come to her during the financial crisis that had struck the U.S. «You could tell he'd lost millions of dollars,» she said. She breathed sharply in and made her body stiff to show how tense he was.

«He can't even talk to anybody, he's hyperventilating, and he's collapsing right now in my apartment. So the first thing I do is, I sit him down and blindfold him, and slap the shit out of him. Put a collar on him, choke him, slap him. You know, he has to calm down. Mind you, this guy is like six foot seven, and I'm five two; and I have him down, and all the chains are locked up, but one has a bad lock. He lunges at me, and I fall backwards and he comes right on top of me. It was the first time he'd become violent. And you know, I took him by the neck—I've done martial arts, so I actually know how to restrain people very quickly. So I got him in a strangulation hold, I locked him up with my legs, and then I said, you know, you really need to calm down.»

Ekko explained the incident as a case of *transference*; he wasn't really attacking her, but rather his own demons. Like several of the dominatrixes I talked to, she often expressed herself through psychoanalytic terms. She described herself as thorough and selective, and told me how she would work with relatively few clients over long periods of time, and submit them to long email interviews before the initial session. «I know more about my clients than their shrinks do,» she said. «I'll get a history of their childhood, relationships with their mothers and fathers, how old they are, when their birthday is, what kind of school they had, when they first had sex ... You know, because there's a pattern.»

Many of the stories I was told about clients' desires, were reminiscent of some kind of «exposure therapy.» Homophobic American-Italian family men who wanted to be forced to wear a dress. A fat man who craved to be hit in the stomach and taunted as a «fat pig.» A black man who asked to be verbally humiliated with «slave» and the «N-word.» The professional dominas I talked to, told me that most of their clients are well-off—to be sure, anyone who can afford visiting a pro domme regularly is likely to have a decent income. But even more often they emphasized that

these are highly powerful men in important jobs, with a lot of responsibility and stress. This also helps to explain why there are so many dungeons in Manhattan, where the bosses can stop by on the way home from the office, for a dose of good humiliation before supper.

Ekko's own theory is that their regular lives, these men are all about being in control and wielding power. In their culture there is no place for powerlessness, humiliation and humility, so all those feelings are repressed and taboo. But in her dungeon, they get to play passive. «Normally, they're in charge, *everything* gets done as *soon* as they open their mouths.» Ekko rolled her eyes. «And I'm thinking, God, you really need a ball gag.»

Since Plato established Dualism's imperative of mind over body, there has been a whole lot of responsibility resting on the mind's non-existent shoulders. All the time it has to act as the master, call the shots and keep the flesh in check, without ever getting a break. One might consider the S/M scene a temporary suspension of the mind's responsibility, when the submissive delegates the power over his body to another mind for a while. Like a mini-vacation for the big decider inside the head. Symbolically, the bottom is often blindfolded, disabling Plato's favorite sense, the one that makes us human. Often the submissive is gagged to take away his ability to speak, and he is made to kneel or crawl on the floor. As if evolution is reversed, he is reduced to a mindless, soulless beast. Finally, a bit of peace and quiet.