Putrefaction

Dieter Roth, Sam Taylor-Johnson – and Peter Greenaway, *A Zed & Two Noughts*, 1985

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Abstract *The text presents, beginning with a prelude in the 1920s, the visual arts' engagement with processes of decay from about 1960 to 1985. Fundamental is the observation that it is generally not those artists who appeal to sensuality or culinary culture, but above all those who lay out their oeuvre in a highly conceptual, epistemologically reflective manner, who focus on processes that are commonly perceived as disgusting. The examination of the cycle of growth and decay is not defeatist, but rather serves the purpose of shattering simultaneously what is acceptable in culinary terms and educated bourgeois or liberal ideals of temporality, generally directed toward a future, progress or some achievement. Basically, the integration of mold into the process of life seems parallel to concerns of classical modernism: initially, the artists stage their attempt to sublimate even disgust and abjection by integrating them into the cyclic order of time. All such efforts are tantamount to an attempt at reaching a position somehow above the curve of life in its randomness and finiteness – and thereby to a certain extent relieved from it. However, in such systems, putrefaction is nothing but an abstract extreme. Initially unintended, the artistic experiment shows that the attempt to sublimate death and decay ultimately is deemed to fail. This turns out to be the sense of the whole endeavor – a postmodernist gesture? Finally, we are left with the evidence that there is no position that would allow us to oppose the vital cycles (and history) we are part of by means of objective understanding. Thus, the subject of this essay is rationalization, insofar as even it reveals itself as a vital process, abandoned to decay.*

1. Devouring and Understanding: Metaphor and Sublimation

"What you chew becomes mush," noted Kurt Schwitters in 1922, quoting a botanist named Ernst Lehmann who would later declare himself to be a Nazi (Schwitters 2005, 70–71, 397). For Lehmann, this was a descriptive remark about an ordinary process. But Schwitters was summoning up the slightly disgusting aspect of this process. Above all, he used the "mush" in our mouth as a metaphor to attack the art

criticism favored by the educated middle class, the same cultivated bourgeoisie that had impelled the peoples of Europe to throw themselves into the First World War. This was one year before the artist began to construct in his apartment-studio in Hanover his *cathedral of erotic distress* (Wiesing 1991; Elger 1999). The title alludes to sublimation, to the aesthetic and spiritual pleasures which we hope to be able to substitute for other, especially erotic satisfactions. Thus, Schwitters leads us to a double context: that of abjection and that of sublimation.

First of all, the state of abjectness and disgust (Menninghaus 1999; see also Rebecchi 2015). Here the artist mobilizes it like a metaphor: this is a matter of the comparison between food and knowledge, as well as between the act of eating and the activity, albeit futile, of (wishing) to understand (as with bourgeois art criticism). Examples abound in all languages: we swallow a lesson, devour a book, digest information, spit out what burdens thought, even vomit what we discover to be morally rotten. In his book *Rabelais and His World*, written in the 1930s, Mikhail Bakhtin traced out the trajectory of these metaphors (Sasse 2010; 157–176). We can use his key concepts, along with those of other intellectual witnesses – for example, elucidations by Nietzsche and by Freud – which will be discussed further on in this essay, in order to synthesize in a synopsis a series of oppositions that will serve as reference points in our discussion.

Devouring	Understanding
(living from) impure matter	episteme, the spirit, 'pure reason'
the (human) beast	Man
to be in the middle of the world, an embodied, participatory perspective	to adopt an objective position, as if one were not part of the world
desire lived collectively but hidden to reason	sublimation (substitutive pleasure)
experience of decay, the "death instinct" (Freud 1921) in the guise of the fear of death (or angst)	sublimation in the second degree: the rationalization of caducity
enjoyment and disgust (the appetizing and the rotten)	taste in an aesthetic sense, for example regarding a meal prepared according to a recipe (or an idea, artwork, book, etc.)

In his theory of the carnivalesque, Bakhtin showed that the body which swallows, devours, digests, spits or vomits tends to become collective when one shifts from a literal to a metaphorical meaning: it is an indistinct community, a singular collective that defends its social contours by its activities extending from orgiastic pleasure to defecation. Bakhtin situates the carnivalesque in a relationship of tension between

life as linked to impure matter on the one hand, and on the other the episteme, the mind or, we could even say, 'pure reason.' Other contrasting polarities correspond to this opposition: the dualities between the (human) beast and the human being, and between the participatory perspective of a person who sees the world as embodied within it and the pretension of adopting an objective position, as if one were not part of the world (Bakhtin 1984 [1968], 303–436). This list can be completed with the tension between the animality of desire, experienced collectively but hidden to reason, and culture as sublimation (a substitutional pleasure).

Sublimation, in a Freudian sense, plays a key role in what follows. Postponing the immediate satisfaction of our drives – especially those linked to eros or survival – is generally seen as a prerequisite for structured, cultivated forms of communication, of non-violent cooperation and regulated social life. However, it leaves us with discomfort in culture. Here, we can only mention that the history of cookery and culinary rituals has often been told in terms of sublimation. From the 17th century onwards, cooking became an art, and since the 18th century, 'nouvelle cuisine' has had to be respectful of nature – of the natural potentials of agrarian products as well as of the nature and health of the eaters. Nature, in this context, is understood in the sense of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, not as lived in an unconscious, animalistic sense, but as meaningful in and of itself. On that foundation, during the 19th century, the metaphor of eating as linked to reading, thinking or understanding became commonplace. According to Hegel, the spirit has to appropriate the whole of historical development by grasping that the whole of historical evolution was nothing but a process leading to the spirit's own freedom – a door-opener for comparing studying and digesting. As soon as cookery was sublimated in terms of style or even of art, it became a powerful metaphor for the spiritual appropriation of the world (Ott 2011, 55–132 – chap. *Gastromythen der Moderne*).

However, aside from the drives linked to life and procreation, there might also be a drive leading in the opposite direction. In 1921, shortly after the First World War, Sigmund Freud "dared," so he wrote, to think of a "death instinct" (Freud 2000 [1921]). Since then, "sublimation," the transformation of psychological energies into cultural work, is no longer conceived as being nourished solely by sexual and vital energies or, to use Schwitters' terminology, by "erotic distress," but also by *thanatos*, by a process of decomposition which accompanies all growth, doubled by an unconscious wish to return to the origins, that is, to non-being. Is this drive, so to speak, useless for the individual, and necessary only for the species? Or can the single subject draw some satisfaction even from it – perhaps only by understanding it? It is to reply to that question that I have augmented the list with the opposition between, on the one hand, an unconscious desire to be null and void, the "death instinct," in the guise of the fear of death or of angst, and, on the other, a sublimation to the second degree: the rationalization even of nullity and emptiness. From the perspective of secondary sublimation, focusing on the somehow perverse pleasure of understand-

ing even putrefaction, both pleasure and disgust (with regard, respectively, to the appetizing and to the rotten) stand in opposition to taste in the cultivated sense of the word, corresponding for example to the mere contemplation of a meal prepared according to a recipe, which in turn reflects culinary orders and myths.

We will see that certain artists who obsessively include decay and abjectness in their works are at the same time intensely involved with the conceptual, even the spiritual aspect here (for the study of a parallel topic, see Berger 2021). The central focus of this brief essay will be on the director Peter Greenaway. In a radical manner, he inserts decay into the second aspect of the context formulated by Schwitters: sublimation. One could also say: culture – and raise the question: opposed to nature?

2. Dieter Roth: Digesting Hegel and De-Romanticizing the Sunset

The Swiss artist Dieter Roth (1930–1998) explored the tension between sublimation and putrefaction in an exemplary manner. Here we can only allude to his investigation. Starting in 1960, a book becomes a sausage: Roth uses all the ingredients of a recipe for salami: fat, spices, salt. But in place of meat, he stuffs the gut of an animal with a book that has been entirely ground to bits. In 1961, he did so with a novel, *Halbzeit* by Martin Walser, male super-genius, written in a style not too far from that of Ernst Jünger or Lothar-Günther Buchheim and transformed into a "literary sausage" – which he then cut into two unequal pieces. Finally, in 1974, the most encyclopedic oeuvre of all: on a rack vaguely resembling the ones used by butchers to dry sausages, the Suhrkamp edition of the *Complete Works of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel*, the quintessential thinker regarding global and total history. We have seen that devouring Hegel's philosophy of historic evolution is sublimation to the highest degree (fig. 1). With Roth, these books containing the meta-narrative par excellence, the history of the *Weltgeist*, have been reduced to food (Vischer/Walter 2003, 74–75, 103). Around the same time, Roth showed what makes the world turn. He replaced the sun in pictorial representations of the sunset with a slice of salami in decay (Vischer/Walter 2003, 105).

Implicitly, Roth stages the beholder as a subject aspiring to self-realization while simultaneously grasping hold of the world as far as possible by means of understanding. Here, he can imagine himself devouring the food of intellectual faculty such as Roth conceives of it. From 1969 onward, he also created busts, among them an extensive series of self-portraits, cast not in bronze but in chocolate and sharing the fate of all that is mortal: first devoured by worms, then by all sorts of mold, the chocolate 'Roths' are transformed into spectacles of color, bursting into various metamorphoses that are both unpredictable and inevitable – before perishing (but this takes time, inasmuch as the work still has not been 'terminated'). If "the death of the author" ever existed, then this is it (Vischer/Walter 2003, 115).

Fig. 1: Dieter Roth, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: Werke in 20 Bänden, *1974, art object (books shredded and stuffed, together with all ingredients typical of sausages, into 20 guts, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Archiv Sohm (Inv. No. AS 1999/1271).*

Source: Graphische Sammlung Albertina (ed.): Dieter Roth. Gedrucktes, Gepresstes, Gebundenes 1949–1979, Köln: Oktagon 1998, p. 33.

3. Sam Taylor-Johnson: What Will Have Been and Putrefaction from a Neo-Baroque Perspective

Faced with the oeuvre of Sam Taylor-Johnson, one takes up the serious task incumbent on intellectuals, that of analyzing the spirit of their own times, the zeitgeist. Here is a photograph from 1993 (fig. 2) which, however, only becomes comprehensible upon realizing that it is the reenactment of another, formerly well-known picture. In 1980, only hours before the death of John Lennon, the photographer Annie Leibovitz created the mise-en-scène of the famous singer alongside his spouse Yoko Ono (Cohen 2019) (fig. 3). The two figures embody the post-1968 spirit in which

the desire for sexual liberation was linked with a political utopia. Leibovitz inverted the gender stereotype by which the man would have had the more knowing and the woman the more instinctive part. Viewed with the knowledge that a madman would assassinate Lennon on the same day after the photo session, the photograph acquires an aura of nostalgia. The photograph of Sam Taylor-Wood, as she was named at the time, and Henry Bond certainly does not achieve a similarly melancholic effect (fig. 3). In the postmodern world, another form of nostalgia latches onto this sort of mimicry: lamentably, one is no longer there where these heroes, these martyrs to emancipation, were in 1980. There is great plausibility to the interpretation of Julian Stallabrass, who links this reenactment to the end of grand hopes and the beginning of deep fears in the 1990s, the renewal of a sort of history bereft of utopia (Stallabrass 2006 [1999], 43–147). Henceforth neither Lennon and Ono nor Taylor-Wood and Bond are viewed in their actual presence, but instead with respect to what will have occurred in the future, the manner in which they will be seen later, when the present moment has become history.

Fig. 2 (left): Photograph of Sam Taylor-Johnson [then Taylor-Wood] and Henry Bond, *26 October 1993, color print, 58.5 x 48.5 cm [Bond claims authorship].*
Fig. 3 (right): Annie Leibovitz, Yoko Ono and John Lennon, *color photograph, December 8, 1980, Chromogenic print, 30.5 x 31 cm, Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland.*

Sources: Fig. 2. www.mutualart.com/Artwork/October-26–1993/C97C1AA0B59FB36C, screenshot 23–06-29; Fig. 3. Annie Leibovitz (1983): *Photographs*, New York: Pantheon Rolling Stone Press, n. pag.

Both photographs actualize a Baroque notion of time: according to Walter Benjamin, the bourgeois tragedy of the 17th and 18th centuries presents a narrative and its hero from the point of view of the denouement. Only at the end will the drama reveal whether the hero is a swindler or a martyr. Viewed from the perspective of its conclusion, the temporality of the play, as well as that of the world, will be annulled in a form of knowledge that surpasses time by synthesizing it (Benjamin 1974 [1925]; Menke 2010, 123–168). In Taylor-Johnson's photograph with her ex-lover, the future from which we now see it is imbued not only with separation and failure, but also with a prosaic disenchantment, a lack of sense of deep meaning. What remains of it is the quotation of Ono's and Lennon's picture, a form of sense based on transversal references and remaining on the surface.

An art of appropriation and melancholy can also be found in the famous still-lifes of Taylor-Wood that were done in 2001 and 2002 (Vincintelli 2006; Benthien/Berger 2021). In a highly personal way, the tension between death – what will occur? – and sublimation – what will have been? – is also a subtext of these images; the artist was fighting against breast cancer during the period she realized these works (Crutchfield 2008, 20). The motifs are vaguely derived from Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin, the quintessential artist of the aesthetic still-life, which, thanks to the abstract rhythms of objects and colors, has already been emancipated from the idea of edibility (Demoris 1991, 28–28, 78–83, 143–153) (fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Sam Taylor-Johnson, Still Life, *2001, 35 mm film, DVD on a plasma monitor, color, no sound, duration 3 min. 44 sec, single frame.*

Source: Sam Taylor-Wood. Still lifes, Exhibition catalogue Baltic Center for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, May-September 2006, n. pag.

These still-lifes are indeed time-lapse videos of the process by which fruits or rabbits are putrefying in a picture frame: putrefaction reduced to the play of light.

Are we confronted with an aestheticizing reenactment of *vanitas*, of the tension between pleasant appearance and nullity, between sensuality and the memento mori, which is a fundamental theme of the still-life painting in the 17th and 18th centuries, especially those specifically referring to death – but of all the others as well (Bertrand Dorleac 2020, 2022)? Or could it be that this appropriation of the museum picture, of the history of art, confronts us with another sort of futility, with "the end of art history" in post-history, which Hans Belting raised in 1984 as a question and repeated in 1995 as a diagnosis with no question mark (Belting 1983, 1995)? The pen seen in the fruit still-life, which is of course not decomposing, makes us understand that here, time is lifted by being written: after the end of avant-garde utopias, art history ceased to be charged with the promises of a secularized salvational history. Its revelations are no longer epiphanies, and what it offers is, along with time mirrored in illustrations or moving slides, the written temporality of libraries (Wattolik 2018, 34–41).

4. Peter Greenaway: Sublimating Putrefaction?

Finally, the artist who is at the center of our reflections (or ramblings, inasmuch as we are part of the game we are seeking to analyze) concerning abjection and sublimation: the English director Peter Greenaway. For most of its initial viewers, except for incorrigible cinephiles, his film whose title is written *Z00* and transcribed as *A Zed & Two Noughts* was at best beautiful but enigmatic, if not boring and pretentious (van der Pol 2005; Barber 2008). Greenaway had inquired into the myths surrounding cookery, whether refined or crude, as well as books and cannibalism in his film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989), and it would be interesting to dwell on the phantasms of sex and violence by describing the hero Michael, at the end stuffed, like one of Roth's sausages, with books from his library. Authors (who do not share the victimized hero's first name) have done so. Here, I will concentrate on putrefaction instead of how a bookish guy's sex is swallowed (Gras 1995, 134–138; Petrivola 2017).

Z00, first presented in 1985, shows slow-motion views of the cadavers of animals in decay; but it also opens the door to a cosmos of sublimation, a world composed of the substitute pleasures of comprehension and knowledge. A detour can help us to go back from Taylor-Johnson to Greenaway: The great scholar of Slavic studies Aage A. Hansen-Löve (2018, 627–680) demonstrated that the gesture of discovery, apo-calypse, is often closely connected with the (calyptic) strategy of an aesthetic of the surface – including surfaces used to cover unpleasant truths. Whereas metaphor promises to reveal a meaning located within depths (*Tiefsinn*), the calyptic aspect simply finds it – or rather covers it – on its surface, in a network of metonymical relationships. We can imagine meaning as situated on the surface of a soap bub-

ble, alluding to the rainbow-colored waves oscillating on its surface. To contextualize these observations in a perspective close to Nietzsche (1980 [1872]), metaphor and sublimation are inscribed into the relationship between the Dionysian and the Apollonian: whereas the raw forces of nature (revealed by murky fumes to the Delphic sibyl) lie concealed in the inscrutable depths of the earth and of metaphor, it is repression that weaves the beautiful surfaces, that designs contours, harmonies and the metonymic rhyming of forms – all protected, like the oracle, by the god of the sun. Evidently sublimation, the strategy of suppressing desire in order to suffocate it amid the labyrinths and ornaments of signs, involves covering through the activity of repression, thereby still keeping up the illusion of somehow being in touch with a deeper truth. Whereas Romanticism, Symbolism and Surrealism were Dionysian arts, postmodernism, with its skepticism regarding the promises of interpretations made by all sorts of exegetes, and with its fondness for allusive quotations, sings the praises of the Apollonian. In his study of Nabokov (2011 [1952], 2011 [1972]), Hansen-Löve demonstrates that this precursor of postmodernism brought superficiality to the fore. Thus the apocalyptic/calyptic process fuses in a temporality of procrastination: enjoy the time fleeting like a butterfly, even if thereby you also enjoy the fact that you know it is incalculable, albeit measured! A postmodern superficiality can indeed be marked by a behavior – often confused with cynicism – through which we actively try to defer death, a supreme form of procrastination. It is in this context that Greenaway's work is situated: rarely is the apocalyptic content as successfully uncovered and covered at the same time as in *A Zed & Two Noughts*, a masterpiece of the calyptic.

It is not even possible to recount the plot of this film (reconstructed, in the complexity of its narrative strands, in Kim 2003) because it is more through the logic of absurd images than by means of the presentation of a storyline that Greenaway creates narrational relationships. Let us begin with the different initial scenarios which the film presents to us. We are invited into a set of duplications: first two zeros, the "Noughts," who are the twins Oswald and Oliver. They are devoted to their research involving animals in the zoo which, in this film, is that of Rotterdam. Later one hears that the two twins – even the actors themselves were brothers – were Siamese twins at birth. In the early parts of the film, this is not supported by visual evidence. At the beginning, they bear no more resemblance to each other than as two brothers with different hair colors. Nevertheless, over time they come to resemble each other more and more and ultimately become almost indistinguishable, thereby gradually transforming themselves back into Siamese twins (fig. 5). Indeed, the director presents them in a suit with a single sleeve for the right arm of one and the left arm of the other.

Fig. 5: Peter Greenaway, Zoo – A Zed & Two Noughts, *[Zoo], 1985, single frame showing Oswald and Oliver standing beside Alba's bed after her second leg – the one remaining after an accident – has been amputated in order to restore symmetry, and after having suicided her; her last will: "don't do anything with my body I would not do. now, I lay still and quiet."*

Source: Screenshot (1:44).

Fig. 6: Peter Greenaway, Zoo – A Zed & Two Noughts, *[Zoo], 1985, single frame showing a zebra in putrefaction.*

Source: Screenshot (1:34).

There are other duplications, this time concerning the relationship between medium and content, and at the same time between signifier and signified. Step by

step, the film leads the spectator to question the semiotic fundament of meaning: early in the film, the zoo director raises the question as to whether a zebra is a black horse with white stripes or a white horse with black stripes. The zebra becomes an emblem of the film (fig. 6), which presents many striped or spotted animals. Moreover, the animals are often doubled, whether through the reflection in a mirror or on an actual physical level, in which case there is sometimes also a duplication between life and death – when, for example, two (striped) fish are in the process of decomposing. Slowly, the distinction between figure and ground is abrogated. At the same time, the difference between Oswald and Oliver is annihilated. More and more, sign and object, two basic sides of duplication in the activity of semiosis, collapse into each other. Without semiosis, it is not possible to develop a cinematographic narrative, so it is only in the end that we understand that they will disappear. And this annullation is linked to another history charted out in several branches: the story of growth and of decrepitude.

Despite its absurdity, the narrative framework is linked to these various aspects of duality. Everything starts with a double death. A woman named Alba ("the white one") is driving a white automobile, a Mercury (think of Mercury, the messenger of the gods) which collides with a white swan that is seen in front of the car. The swan is an allusion to the bird that gave birth to Castor and Pollux, the two mythical twins: a renowned sculpture showing them side by side, the famous Ildefonso group now at the Museo del Prado in Madrid (circa 10 AD), has been interpreted ever since Romanticism as the kinship between sleep and death, between *hypnos* and *thanatos*. In the accident involving the Mercury, the two women seated in the back, the wives of Oswald and Oliver, are killed. Alba, the surviving woman at the wheel, loses one of her two legs; it could not be saved. For reasons of symmetry – the central aesthetic strategy of this film – her other leg will be cut off as well by a surgeon (fig. 5). Thus, the film tells the story both of Alba's mourning – she regrets less the accident than the fact that she has lost a leg and thereby the allure of bodily symmetry – and of the sense of bereavement afflicting Oswald and Oliver (the two "noughts"), who are inconsolable at the loss of their wives. At the end of the film, all these persons will lose their lives.

Nevertheless, they initially try to console each other; this attempt constitutes the narration of the film. How to console oneself in the face of death? By trying to understand it. It is by means of experimentation with decomposition that Oswald and Oliver endeavor to grasp, to rationalize death. Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey studied the vital movements of men and animals by measuring them. To do this, they created a sort of black stage marked by geometric coordinates in white. They had animals or persons cross above it; Marey measured their "locomotion." Through applying chronophotographic techniques, both had an important role in the prehistory of cinema (Prodger 2003; Didi-Huberman/Mannoni 2004). In the experiment conducted by Oswald and Oliver, it is a matter of a different move-

ment: that of putrefaction. Instead of the early "bioscope" (as cinema was sometimes called), Greenaway made his heroes experiment with a thanatoscope.

They start with the Biblical beginning: The first living thing that Oswald and Oliver cause to perish is an apple, fruit from the tree of knowledge, that was stolen from Alba's room – to be specific, an apple into which someone has bitten. The brothers – along with the zoo personnel – measure the time that the fruit takes to decompose. Arising subsequently is a series of animals: a prawn, a crocodile and, among other creatures, a swan and a zebra, all of whose processes of decay they observe (fig. 6). At the end it will be the twins themselves, now having become almost identical, who arrange for someone to later observe their own decomposition (fig. 7). They poison themselves in a garden populated by snails, and the film explains that these are unisexual animals. Thus, even in the domain of sexuality, Greenaway continues his experimentation with a duality which, however, will ultimately be abrogated to reattain unity. In the end, the snails cover the lights, the camera, all the arrangements set up by the two suicidal heroes who intended to become martyrs for the sake of their experiment. Nature – traditionally conceptualized as singular and unambiguous – devours the twins' endeavor to understand death and decay by measuring the time it takes, and culminating in their sacrifice (see Gras 1995). Duality turns into unity – and their putrefaction, finally, will not have been recorded.

Fig. 7: Peter Greenaway, Zoo – A Zed & Two Noughts, *[Zoo], 1985, single frame showing the two "Noughts" Oswald and Oliver after having arranged themselves so that their own putrefaction can be filmed; which will not happen, as their legs are swallowed by snails (together with the whole equipment).*

Source: Screenshot (1:49).

5. (Un-)reading *A Zed & Two Noughts* – Undoing Difference and Taxonomic Orders

Various intelligent interpretations of this film have been offered: following Georges Bataille, a parallel has been identified between the museum and not only a zoo, but even a slaughterhouse. To grasp life through knowledge, through its classification and exhibition, etc., means to kill, even to cannibalize (Willoquet-Maricondi 2003, including a psychoanalytical reading of sublimation). Likewise recognized in the film has been a postmodernist playing with manifold ways of establishing meaning, even if thereby a first fixation is refuted through a second, and so forth (Barber 2008). Attention has been paid to the question of whether the film primarily addresses cinephiles, who can – briefly – be characterized as persons who delight in descrying quotes from other visual material (van der Pol 2005), thus taking *A Zed and Two Noughts* as a super-signifier disseminating meaningful relations to an unlimited number of other films. Finally, the readings of previous films by Greenaway add perspectives to *Zoo*, notably if they show food, thereby staging manifold aspects of desire (Gajda 2017). Offered with this present essay is an alternate reading that is complementary to several of those which have been proposed: if the film endlessly follows the passage from meaningful dualities back to amorphous unity, it also traces – before blurring it – the track that leads from signifier to signified, thereby exploring the trajectories of semiosis and sense, the peregrinations of meaning insofar as it is always aspiring to be fulfilled.

The separation between a material – which thereby becomes the material of a sign – and what it designates is a fundamental epistemic operation. The signifier and the signified – which, taken together, constitute a third entity, namely the sign – are the central paradigm in the *Course of General Linguistics* of Ferdinand de Saussure, which was compiled by his students and published in 1916 (Saussure 2011 [1916]). This basic semiotic relation would become the "structure of structures" in structuralism, even if in it the semiotic relation is not understood as quasi-natural: for example, when the sign within labyrinths (ornaments, fractals…) of ambiguities, so to speak, constantly searches for its meaning without ever finding it (Culler 2001 [1981], 3–46). Poststructuralism went further and endeavored to completely deconstruct this structure of structures, thereby dispelling the shadow of self-evidence in semiosis. Jacques Derrida (1967 a, 21–31, 149–202) understood it as a relationship that initiates the separation between nature and culture, comparable to the prohibition of incest such as analyzed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) in his famous book *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (his doctoral thesis from 1948, published in 1949). So the connection of the signifying material to a signified meaning, instead of being taken as natural, establishes the unequal relationship between the culture which we believe ourselves to have founded and nature from which we repel – thereby deluding ourselves that we master, even possess, it (Derrida 1967b, 9–49).

From 1950 to 1960, Lévi-Strauss had to teach, at the École pratique en sciences sociales, the religions of scriptless people, as his chair was denominated. The famous series *Mythologiques*, published between 1964 and 1971, was the result of his lessons (Loyer 2015, 483–586). In *The Raw and the Cooked*, first volume of this series, he also integrated putrefaction into his semiotically grounded, structuralist analysis of what is culturally accepted as edible (Lévi-Strauss 1964, 43–74, 340–347). In a triangular structure, a temporal trajectory fatally leads from what is raw to what is rotten. Only diverse treatments of cooking can, for a while, slow down or prevent that process. The cooked is what differentiates culture, in terms of nourishment, from nature. Four years later, after having inquired into a large variety of culinary practices and the myths linked to them, Lévi-Strauss added a second triangle that separates procedures of drying, whether by air-drying or by smoking food, from directly burning – by roasting and grilling – and finally from cooking: thereby, we need not only food and fire, but also a third thing, water in a vessel (Lévi-Strauss 1968, 390–411). So, boiling or steaming are often, but not always, considered to be cultural to the highest degree, and in most cases are practiced in a domestic ambiance – and thus coded as female, whereas roasting or grilling are considered as closer to nature, because they are based only on fire, not on a third, 'mediating' element (such as a jar or water), and moreover are related to practices of nomadic hunting, and therefore are often done by men, Lévi-Strauss argues. However, because of the smell or the aspect of the result, boiled food can also be associated with putrefied, for example fermented, nourishment. Lévi-Strauss does not intend to establish, with his culinary triangles, an all-inclusive structure according to which humans always rationalize food. However, he insists that they always establish some sort of an order in what they prepare and eat, and that they give some, most often mythic, reasons for it (see also: Walitschke 1995, 92–123).

All these strategies are aimed at integrating putrefaction into a cultural code, even if it is considered to be an extreme in it. However, phenomena of abjection suffice to demonstrate that the rotten also exceeds the mythology of cookery, even if mold and the rotten or even vomiting are inscribed into a semiotics of nutrition (Menninghaus 1999, 516–567). What is valid within the semiotic systems is pertinent also when we think about the strategies of understanding them. Also in methodological terms, putrefaction cannot be explained "away" by structuralist systems constructed by means of cross-over, intercultural comparisons. We no longer believe that the mythology of cooking is anchored in the structure of our brain or our neural system, and this cannot be inferred by anthropological generalizing on the basis of diverse ethnological observations. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur had linked Lévi-Strauss' attempt at uncovering general structures of human belief and behavior to Immanuel Kant's transcendental philosophy, aimed at implying from our epistemic practices the enabling conditions of all our experience. The French ethnologist agreed, in 1964, with Ricoeur (Lévi-Strauss 1964, 19; see: Walitschke 1995, 124–134).

Nowadays, such an attempt is recognized as yet another strategy of empiricizing, after Kant, the transcendental (the key word is borrowed from Ajouri/Specht 2019). Similar attempts at deriving anthropological universals from empirical observation of human culture – instead of just proposing useful but fallible models – are bound to fail.

Paradoxically, the idea to reduce human culture to what is inscribed in the genome is tantamount to naturalizing the human instead of understanding how it differentiates itself from nature (Kämpf 2015). In a more general way, Lévi-Strauss has rightly been criticized for basing the vast comparisons in his *Mythologiques* on an ethnology of the library (Moebius 2020, 97–101). Such criticism is often all too easily repeated by cultural scientists vaguely defining themselves as poststructuralists – without, however, having learned structuralism's lessons. It is certainly necessary to design models in order to understand the hidden roots regulating social practice, including cookery. However, thereby we always have to revoke our claims to knowledge to what can be observed from a perspective of participatory observation. James Clifford was highly successful by limiting ethnology, and cultural theory, to what can be reached by renouncing to an objectifying perspective which reduces culture to a text. He insisted that ethnography – and also cultural theory – instead of fixing its topic in texts, necessarily inscribes itself in contrast with other text producer's perspectives. Thereby, culture is not just described, but 'written,' that is, produced by means of interpretation (see, for an introduction to the 'writing culture' debate, and for further bibliographical indications: Moebius 2020, 123–129). Nowadays, 'praxeology' or 'inferentialism' invite us to revise our epistemological pretentions: yes, we need to propose reasonable models for how our practices are structured, but we have to be aware of our own historical position for doing so, and accept that our game of interpretation is itself part of an ongoing activity, and therefore constantly revised.

The division of culture from nature (for instance by forbidding incest and by cooking), as Lévi-Strauss and other early structuralists imagined it, has been critically reviewed already by early poststructuralists. They recognized that in such systems of totalized rationalization, nature always has the weaker part. Derrida, in the chapter in his *Grammatology* (1967, 235–378) which examines what Rousseau wrote about the origin of language, deconstructs the separation between everything that is considered to be nature and all that is viewed as the Other of nature, i.e., culture. For the author, nature and culture are not symmetric notions but a pair in which one concept – here nature, always elusive – is systematically weakened so that the other – culture – is strengthened. The deconstruction of the opposition of culture to nature was a primary interpretative gesture for Derrida – and thus for the very deconstruction that is behind deconstructionism. It does not leave intact the basic semiotic relation of signifier and sign. In our days, animal studies inquiring into the constant interdependence of human and other animals defined as the natureculture

go further in the same direction (Haraway 2008, 19–23, 249–263). In his *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, Nietzsche (1980 [1874]) had spoken of animals living in the unity of life itself, of livestock in its happy innocence, in contrast to human beings, who are distinguished from all that through the act of understanding their own mortality.

This opposition between animal innocence and spiritual awareness is at stake in Greenaway's *Zoo*. Well before Haraway proposed the concept of natureculture, Oswald and Oscar, by inquiring into decay and putrefaction, deconstruct the relationship between natural need (potentially blind) and cultural sublimation (imbuing blind urges with productivity): in their work, in itself a supreme attempt at sublimation, all kinds of need, following the promptings of the death instinct, collapse into a type of oneness in which the distinction of nature and culture is finally annihilated. Once again, I would like to emphasize that not only the mythological systems such as the differentiation between raw and rotten are concerned, but also whole systems of taxonomy, and finally the primordial separation between sign and signified. In all these structures, nature is nothing but the empty ground for sublimation, something that is only by means of being culturally described and categorized. In this context, the significance attributed by Freud to sublimation comes to light in all its radicalness, its contemporaneity: sublimation, instead of meaning an activity of annihilating nature by enclosing it into systems of signification, is recognized as being itself part of nature. It does not stand in opposition to drives and needs but is a form of their expression. Greenaway undoubtedly enters the vast current of post-structuralism which brings us to understand culture not as opposed to the animal world, but as an aspect of it.

From the relationship of the double signifier/signified, Greenaway goes on to integrate all sorts of taxonomies – first, the one by which animals are classified. Using animals as examples, children are introduced to the art of recognizing and classifying species (first by distinguishing a cat from a dog), and this occurs in the film as well. One does not immediately understand why the director introduces exactly twenty-six animals into the labyrinth of his cinematographic narration – in this case soft toys. But this figure is subsequently legitimized as being the number of letters in the alphabet. In interviews, Greenaway adds that in his opinion, there are also twenty-six ways to illuminate a film scene, something that, he says, was already understood by Jan Vermeer van Delft (Gras 1995; van der Pol 2005). Today we know of twenty-six works done by the painter. Nevertheless, the counterfeiter Han van Meegeren tried to add some more Vermeers. As is well known, he failed in that endeavor. Greenaway assigns an important role to van Meegeren in the film, that of the surgeon who cuts off the remaining leg of Alba merely for aesthetic reasons, for the purpose of symmetry. Greenaway himself plays with twenty-six ways to assign a dominant color to the scenes of the film, beginning – as we have seen – with the white of the swan, the Mercury, etc., in the first scene (Costa de Beauregard 2010).

Nonetheless, the primordial relationship of signification subsides at the end. Even the swan which, in the myth, as a metamorphosis of Jupiter, had given birth to Castor and Pollux, the primordial twins known as the Dioscuri (one of them shared his immortality with the other, mortal one), succumbs to the process of putrefaction. Everything returns to a state of unity. The twins reduce themselves almost to a single being (fig. 7). The signified collapses into the signifying material which thereby in turn can no longer be qualified in any sense. There is no further significatory activity, only unisex snails. And in the *Zoo*, the double oo after the "Z," the last letter of the alphabet, is reduced to two zeros: zero plus zero equals zero. A key aspect of the film is that understanding and any epistemic activity are conceived not as a search for truth (and ending in it once it is found) but as an activity which is inherently vital, and consequently not as imparting meaning to life from some realm beyond or above it. Greenaway meticulously constructs a parallelism between life and everything that is linked to the activities of interpreting it, of discovering its meaning, or of inventing a signification for it. The primordial nature of these activities involves using something as a sign for something else; then comes reading a surface as the medium for an inscription (the question about the black or white stripes of the zebra); and finally the taxonomies based on the figure 26. Greenaway explores many parallel ways of rationalizing life as in fact being part of life itself. They all involve temporality: the effort to interpret the time of growth or of decomposition by introducing systems of spatial measurement is also part of life – in this case, of the work that Oswald and Oliver undertake, ultimately to no avail, in order to overcome the death of their spouses.

In summary, it is in following the efforts of the protagonists to conduct a careful and mathematical study of putrefaction (fig. 6) that viewers come to understand that life and death are merely two sides of the same coin – just as mind and matter, life and consciousness, are not opposed to each other. But without biting into the apple, without emerging from a blind and paradisal unity, it is impossible to achieve an understanding even of that interdependence … Is it ultimately possible to understand life or death? It is this question that the challenging film of Peter Greenaway raises without, however, providing an answer. The paradox of the film, of the apple of knowledge that is not only enjoyed but also – right from the first mouthful – begins to decay, is that a sublimation aiming at opposing life will never succeed. Of course, Oscar's and Oliver's life has become intolerable because of the terrible experience of the death of the women, a symbolic annihilation of the duality of the sexes. But that only reveals death as consistently accompanying our life in general. Like any thinking animal, the heroes know about it, inevitably hoping to overcome it along with their grief. The lesson might be: one cannot escape death by seeking to understand it. But it is not that easy: nor can one escape from the urge to cancel death by trying to comprehend it…

The undertaking of Oswald and Oliver is a metapoetic radicalization of a practice which has become habitual in our culture: we generally conceive of the opposition between life and reason, thereby purifying rational thinking as an activity supposedly not inherent to life but removed from it. But the snails cause the heroes to fail. If one takes up the lesson of Greenaway's *Zoo*, the episteme constitutes part of life rather than separating itself therefrom. This is an invitation to accept radical contingency: even our thinking one day will be prey to putrefaction. The postmodernist version is this: there is no meaning hidden in depth and surpassing life in its superficiality. Everything is contained within the texts of life, with nothing behind their ornament. There is no *hors-texte*, no space outside the text. And in our post-postmodernist world, we may add: nor does anything exist outside nature.

This sheds also new light on eating, and cookery. The rituals of the hearth fire, or of the kitchen, are not a system separating us from nature, sublimating what grew and has been killed, but an activity placing us in the midst of what is raw, uncooked, or even slightly rotten (such as all the deliciously fermented products, coffee, tea, vanilla, chocolate, cheese, etc.). Eating is animalic, and overprocessing food is barbaric. Not by chance are the most intensely processed – and certainly not animalic – food products understood as not just unhealthy, but decadent: the putrefied goes to the garbage, and junk food is close to it. The rotten is not just an extreme, it is part of nature, and we are part of it – and not above it. However, the most delicious nourishments – for those who pose as proven connoisseurs – are slightly disgusting, such as snails, or even animals devoured not raw, but living, such as oysters.

That does not mean that transcendence is futile, only that even hope can only be contingent, 'embodied,' vital! There is no consolation by escaping this existence in cultural systems conceived of as spiritualizing nature, as above or outside history, outside flesh, outside our own story and that of our societies. To conclude with another aspect of the same insight: Claude Imbert would say along with Maurice Merleau-Ponty that one is neither inside nor outside the world, but towards it, *au monde* (Imbert 1999, 297–98; Imbert 2005, 15–20; Bachir Diagne 2011). It is only in this somehow unthinkable (but therefore the only livable) position that we can enjoy even our attempts at escaping from our fate by rationalizing it. If we never manage to succeed in this playful but futile attempt, necessary but purposeless, maybe we can at least live *au monde* with a little confidence.

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