

The Lacuna of Usefulness: The Compulsion to ‘Understand’ Transgressive Fiction

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Abstract

This article takes a brief look at why Transgressive Fiction from the 1990s has been under represented in academic circles and then examines why it was so often misread by reviewers and critics from this period. Transgressive Fiction intentionally frustrates readers using traditional referential modes of criticism by refusing to provide an objective meaning, ideology or structure. This refusal forces the reader to either engage in the text personally or begin a process of rejection and assimilation. This practice can be avoided if Transgressive texts are considered via subjective affectivism (the reader’s reaction and involvement) rather than by the quality of their execution and subject matter. This opens the way for the text to function as a place for consequence-free exploration and the enactment of taboos and their transgression.

Keywords: *Barthes, Bataille, Transgressive Fiction, value, subjective affectivism*

The term “Transgressive Fiction” was popularized in 1993 by *LA Times* columnist Michael Silverblatt¹ and has since been used to describe a range of texts which expound the Sadean paralogy of violence, mutilation, cruelty and deviance for the pleasure of the sovereign individual, where the desires of the depersonalizing subject can be projected onto the passive object. This is evidenced in Will Self’s *Cock and Bull* when Carol assaults her husband with her newly emerged penis:

He barely noticed when she turned him over. But he did notice when she entered him. He couldn’t fail to, her cock was such a big, hot, hard thing; and his anus, although casually lubricated, was still tight with self-repression, bugged up with the enduring legacy of auto erotic toilet training. She pushed into him and rent his sphincter, tore a crack into one of its muscular segments. But hold up! *Tolle!* How was it for *her*? Surely that’s the important thing. Fuck him, He’s a passive thing, an empty vessel, a field upon which the majestic battle may rage, but Carol? Well... Isn’t she beautiful?²

Transgressive Fiction emerged as a recognizable genre during the 1990s with the publication of Dennis Cooper’s *George Miles Cycle* (*Closer, Frisk, Try, Guide, and Period*), Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, Helen Zahavi’s *Dirty Weekend*, Self’s *Cock and Bull* and A. M. Homes’s *The End of Alice*; since then the genre has received modest scholarly attention. Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney’s collection

¹ Michael Silverblatt. “SHOCK APPEAL / Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us?: The New Fiction of Transgression,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 1, 1993, accessed May 12, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-08-01/books/bk-21466_1_young-writers.

² Will Self, *Cock and Bull* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 126.

Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction offers critical insight into several subversive texts, including *American Psycho* and *Frisk*, and analyses why these texts have received limited scholarly attention. More recently, Robin Mookerjee's *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* outlines Transgressive Fiction as a form of social commentary while Keith Booker's *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnavalesque* discusses transgression as a technique, rather than the basis of a genre. Smaller studies which offer readings of particular texts that are considered 'transgressive' include Julian Murphet's *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A Reader's Guide*. Compared to other postmodern genres, however, Transgressive Fiction has received little critical attention.

The relative lack of interest in Transgressive Fiction in academic circles can be extrapolated from the processes that Richard Ohmann outlines in "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975". Ohmann describes the progression through which works of fiction move on their way to being considered "literature".³ Transgressive Fiction's absence from scholarly circles can in part be explained by its inability to make it past the 'popular' stage into the pre-canonical phase. Ohmann notes that

[...] [Readers] were responsive to novels where they discovered the values in which they believed or where they found needed moral guidance when shaken in their own beliefs. Saul Bellow's remark, "What Americans want to learn from their writers is how to live," [...] three of the main interests people carried into their reading were a "search for personal meaning, for some kind of map to the moral land-scape"; a need to "reinforce or to celebrate beliefs already held, or, when shaken by events, to provide support in some personal crisis"; and a wish to keep up "with the book talk of friends and neighbors."⁴

Transgressive Fiction satisfies none of these needs, and Ohmann's arguments suggest that its consequent inability to pass the initial stage of popularization and commercial success has hindered its movement into scholarly circles. This is not to say that Transgressive texts never bridge the gap between popular and more theoretical criticism but the few works that do win academic consideration do so either through notoriety, such as Ellis's *American Psycho*, or through an academic's involvement with the niche communities such as Elizabeth Young. Respected literary figures are often seen to disregard these texts. Salman Rushdie, for example, dismissed *Dirty Weekend* as a "hideous, kinky little revenge-novel",⁵ while Norman Mailer belittled *American Psycho* with the quip that "the writer may have enough talent to be taken seriously."⁶

Transgressive texts' inability to progress into the pre-canonical phase means that the largest percentage of critical attention given to them is from magazine and newspaper reviews. These reviewers and critics, at a loss as to how to read Transgressive texts, have described them as sophomoric, misanthropic and psychotic, as

³ Richard Ohmann, "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975," *Critical Inquiry* 10.1 (1983): 199-223.

⁴ Ohmann, "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction," 201.

⁵ Salman Rushdie, "20-20 Vision," *Independent on Sunday*, 17 January, 1993, accessed May 12, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books--2020-vision-the-best-of-young-british-novelists-campaign-has-met-with-sneering-condemnation-fiction-isnt-what-it-was-say-critics-or-has-our-culture-become-one-of-cheap-denigration-1479072.html>.

⁶ Roger Cohen, "Bret Easton Ellis Answers Critics of 'American Psycho'," *New York Times*, March 6, 1991, accessed May 12, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/06/books/bret-easton-ellis-answers-critics-of-american-psycho.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

too hackneyed, too boring and too despicable to have any claims to literary or cultural merit. The future poet laureate Andrew Motion found *American Psycho* “[...] numbingly boring, and for much of the time deeply and extremely disgusting. Not interesting-disgusting, but disgusting-disgusting: sickening, cheaply sensationalist, pointless except as a way of earning its author some money and notoriety.”⁷ Motion’s sentiments are echoed in the bemusement of critic Jonathan Dee:

We look to writers to help make comprehensible the reasons why people act the way they act, why they transgress, why they fail to transgress. [...] One of contemporary fiction’s most frustrating tropes, however, holds that even the most shocking transgression is made psychologically credible when the character carries it out not for exotic or obscure reasons but for no reason whatsoever. The technique itself is less startling than its rate of critical success, for the credibility of such inventions depends on accepting the propositions that they are not inventions at all but something more profound, more authentic, than mere art.⁸

These negative responses are produced by the dominant mechanism of Transgressive Fiction, which is not transgression but frustration. Transgressive texts systematically set about to frustrate all the desires that a reader brings to the text: the quest for meaning, the desire for escape, the consolations of mimesis, the pleasures of voyeurism, even the desire to transgress. Any reader hoping through these texts to realize violent fantasy is confronted by the impossibility of any such fantasy as is evidenced with the endings of *Frisk* and *American Psycho*, where the violence is revealed to have been imaginary, or the endings of *The Dice Man* and *Cock and Bull* where the story unravels into reflexive incoherence.

The Transgressive text’s refusal to be entertaining, thought provoking or pleasurable, rather than its content, is what drives readers away from the text. As Wolfgang Iser claimed of Henry James’s *The Figure in the Carpet* the text is not a site for “meaning [...] that can be excavated through interpretation”.⁹ The ‘trans’ in “Transgressive Fiction” refers not only to the crossing of boundaries, but also to its back-and-forth movement between text and reader. The text’s ambiguity and playfulness forces the reader to provide the moral and structural boundaries that the text refuses. Transgressive texts are actually dialectical; they manipulate the reader into becoming involved in a poetics of play. The work of Roland Barthes and Wolfgang Iser can be used to explain why the lack of pre-existing boundaries within the Transgressive text frustrates readers who approach them using a traditional referential framework, causing the reader either to assimilate or reject the text. The work of Georges Bataille and Mikhail Bakhtin offer the basis for a theory of how Transgressive Fiction can function as a site for consequence-free exploration and enactment of taboos and their transgression.

In *The Act of Reading* (1976) Iser notes that “even now literary criticism so frequently proceeds to reduce texts to a referential meaning, despite the fact that this approach has already been persistently questioned, even at the end of the last century.”¹⁰

⁷ Sam Jordison, “Guardian Book Club: Bret Easton Ellis’s ‘American Psycho’,” *The Guardian*, July 14, 2010, accessed May 12, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/jul/14/bret-easton-ellis-american-psycho>.

⁸ Jonathan Dee, “Ready-made rebellion: The empty tropes of transgressive fiction,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April, 2005, accessed May 12, 2014, <http://harpers.org/archive/2005/04/ready-made-rebellion/>.

⁹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 5.

¹⁰ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 5.

The continued use of traditional referential modes of criticism in book reviews is understandable; it provides critics with the ability to decide textual merit by comparing the text to genre criteria. But while literary theory has experienced many changes since the 1970s, the practices of popular reviews have changed little. Reviewers are still asking “What’s it supposed to mean?”¹¹

In 1965 Barthes noted that

[...] one must talk of a book with “*objectivity*”, “*good taste*” and “*clarity*”. Those rules do not belong to our time: the last two come from the classical (seventeenth) century and the first from the positivist (nineteenth) century. Thus is made up a body of diffuse norms, half-aesthetic (from the classical notion of beauty), half-reasonable (from “common sense”): a sort of reassuring turnstile is established connecting art and science, which allows people never to be completely in one field of the other.¹²

Barthes’s comment on the supposed need for “objective criticism” is of particular interest to the theoretical problems raised by Transgressive Fiction with its emphasis on emotional response. Objective criticism resists the dialectical and ambiguous nature of Transgressive Fiction. As Transgressive Fiction is written in order to create an extreme emotional reaction, looking at it from the arm’s length of critical distance is always going to produce an unsatisfying experience, such as that experienced by Laura Miller when she reviewed Chuck Palahniuk’s *Diary*:

Imagine some crappy novels. Imagine that they’re all written in the same phony, repetitive, bombastic style as this paragraph, all hopped-up imperatives and posturing one-liners. Imagine that they’re sloppily put together. Imagine that everything even remotely clever in them has been done before and better by someone else. Imagine that each one flaunts the kind of “research” that can be achieved by leafing through a trade magazine for 30 minutes and is riddled with grating errors. Imagine that these books traffic in the half-baked nihilism of a stoned high school student who has just discovered Nietzsche and Nine-Inch Nails. Does it hurt yet? Now, imagine that every five pages or so the author of these novels will describe something as smelling like shit or piss because the TRUTH is fucking ugly, man. Imagine that he affects to attack the shallow, simplistic, dehumanizing culture of commodity capitalism by writing shallow, simplistic, dehumanized fiction. But, heck, why go to all the effort of imagining any of this when a new Chuck Palahniuk novel arrives at your local bookstore annually?¹³

Iser noted that postmodern art works are aware of the traditional assumptions of viewers, thereby “denying the viewer the pleasure of interpretation or shocking them when they use their tried and tested methods of viewing art.”¹⁴ This denial is one result of Transgressive Fiction’s open stance on ideology. Barthes described ideology as “the process whereby what is historical and created by specific cultures is presented as if it were timeless, universal and thus natural,”¹⁵ in which case Transgressive Fiction is a-ideological, neither for nor against cultural norms; it refuses to comment on the

¹¹ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 18.

¹² Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (London: Athlone, 1987), 53.

¹³ Laura Miller, “Diary,” *Salon*, August 21, 2003, accessed May 12, 2014, http://www.salon.com/2003/08/20/palahniuk_3/.

¹⁴ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 11.

¹⁵ Graham Allen, *Roland Barthes* (London: Routledge, 2003), 35.

ideology from which it is written, maintaining its ambiguity through the constant movement and play of signs.

This ideological ambiguity is evidenced in the treatment of rape in Self's *Cock and Bull*. The first rape scene, in which Carol assaults her husband, is depicted in tones of righteousness and pleasure while the second in which Carol rapes the narrator is portrayed in the passive voice of a self-loathing victim:

He raped me. And it's an unusual thing to be able to say this, in this day and age and in this successfully plural society, but he defiled me as well. Defiled me insofar that as he raped me he screamed and ranted, gibbered and incanted the most awful mish-mash. [...]

And for him, it was plain, this rape had a resolving character. In forcing himself into me I could sense that the don was forcing himself back into the now.

[...] He had me now, no mistaking. I had wanted it, hadn't I, I had asked for it.¹⁶

Carol's initial conquest is the result of her years of sexual frustration but the second rape is an un-romanticized return to the realities of human objectification.

This ideological ambiguity relates to the dialectical nature of Transgressive Fiction. For Barthes, traditional texts are rhetorical, attempting to persuade the reader of a meaning: "In actual fact, clarity is a purely rhetorical attribute, not a quality of language in general, which is possible at all times and in all places, but only the ideal appendage to a certain type of discourse, that which is given over to a permanent intention to persuade."¹⁷ So, when critics look at Transgressive texts from traditional referential approaches, the inevitable conclusion is that Transgressive Fiction is "adolescent and misanthropic"¹⁸ or "Sophomoric".¹⁹

Transgressive Fiction can also be "unproductive" in the sense in which Georges Bataille uses the word. Its refusal to offer any key with which it can be decoded renders it what Bataille calls "an expenditure of excess". In *The Accursed Share* Bataille outlines his conception of the "General Economy", the co-existence of the homogenous and heterogeneous elements of our culture.²⁰ The "Restricted Economy" is the world of utility and production. It is a place of value and cohesion. The General Economy is the heterogeneous material that exists outside this world of production. In *Visions of Excess* Bataille describes how all value is designated by the ability of an action, product or person to be productive within the larger society: "any general judgment of social activity implies the principle that all individual effort, in order to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation."²¹ Pleasure is acceptable so long as it is 'productive', meaning it will make the participant a more efficient and compliant member of the economy, "The goal of the latter is, theoretically, pleasure – but only in a moderate form, since violent pleasure is seen as pathological."²²

¹⁶ Self, *Cock and Bull*, 124.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), 49.

¹⁸ Sean O Hagan, "Fright Club," *Observer Magazine*, May 8, 2005, accessed May 12, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/may/08/fiction.chuckpalahniuk>.

¹⁹ Jennifer Reese, "Books in Brief: Fiction," *New York Times*, May 27, 2001, accessed May 12, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/27/books/books-in-brief-fiction-368032.html>.

²⁰ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 21.

²¹ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 117.

²² Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 116.

Man may consume in order to keep producing, but the heterogeneous material in the general economy is “unproductive”; it does not add to the value system or the functioning of the culture. It is pleasure as an end in itself, *expenditure*. Transgressive Fiction can be seen as a mode of cultural and semiotic expenditure. Its lack of objective meaning denies it justifiable purpose, making it a pure, purposeless luxury, which is not acceptable in the restricted economy:

Pleasure, whether art, permissible debauchery, or play, is definitively reduced, in the intellectual representations in circulation, to a concession; in other words it is reduced to a division whose role is subsidiary. The most appreciable share of life is given as the condition – sometimes even as the regrettable condition – of productive social activity.²³

Because Transgressive Fiction does not ‘do anything’ it is a senseless luxury and so belongs in the General Economy, but its depiction of death, violation, deviance and sex links it also to the direct opposite of production: eroticism.

Bataille describes humans as “discontinuous beings” who

[...] perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find this state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with the primal continuity linking us with everything that is.²⁴

For Bataille, the erotic is that which brings us close to our “lost continuity”; it is “assenting to life up to the point of death.”²⁵ Transgressive Fiction can be seen as a vicarious way of achieving this closeness, of bringing as much destruction as possible into the world of production. The removed yet participatory reader is allowed their brush with continuity. Bataille is however quick to qualify our destructive urges: “Continuity is what we are after, but generally only if that continuity which the death of discontinuous beings can alone establish is not the victor in the long run.”²⁶ For Bataille, through its violence and sexual mutilation, subversive fiction can be seen as a form of religious eroticism, a way to bring “into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain.”²⁷

Bataille claimed that its vicarious relationship with sacrifice and religious eroticism makes literature the natural heir of religion,²⁸ as nowadays “sacrifice is outside the field of our experience and imagination must do duty for the real thing.”²⁹ The sensation of religious eroticism is connected to the power of witnessing sacrifice:

This sacredness is the revelation of the continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite. A violent death disrupts the creature’s discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one. Only a spectacular

²³ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 117.

²⁴ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: John Calder, 1962), 15.

²⁵ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 11.

²⁶ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 19.

²⁷ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 9.

²⁸ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 87.

²⁹ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 92.

killing, carried out as the solemn and collective nature of religion dictates, has the power to reveal what normally escapes notice.³⁰

In the final rape scene in Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* the reader becomes "the tense onlooker":

We rolled the corpse onto its stomach. I enlarged the asshole with the Swiss army knife and worked one of my hands to the wrist inside. It was wild in there, like reaching into a stew that had started to cool. But it was tight too, a glove or whatever. [...] I pumped my hand in and out of the ass feeling weirdly furious, with the dead kid I guess. Then we cut him apart for a few hours, and studied everything inside the body, not saying much to one another, just the occasional, look at this or swear word, until there was nothing around but a big, off-white shell in the middle of the worst mess in the world. God, human bodies are such garbage bags. [...] We'd demolished him to the extent that there was no sense of what he'd looked like in the pieces of him that were left. It was like we'd erased him.³¹

The vicarious yet intensely visceral nature of Transgressive Fiction means that its violent acts function in the same way as bloody sacrifice in a religious ritual. The reader is both safe and confronted; the safety of text allows the reader to be fascinated, rather than horrified, by the acts depicted. In the moment the readers of Transgressive Fiction witness sacrifice, they see that which "normally escapes notice", but as in religious sacrifice the death of the human reemphasizes the taboo of taking a life. *Frisk* is an extended exploration of religious eroticism. It puts the reader through several scenes of sexual disaffection and gratuitous mutilation, but is, in the end, an extended exploration of the role of violence and death in fantasy. As the narrator confesses to a young male hustler,

[...] I *know* that if I killed you, and it wouldn't have to be *you*, just someone who, like you, fits a particular physical type that I'm into, it would be unbelievably profound. I'd be... free? That sounds stupid, I guess. But I see these criminals on the news who've killed someone methodically, and they're free. They know something amazing. You can just tell.³²

Transgressive Fiction can not only be a-ideological and unproductive, it can also be seen as a form of anti-communication. Graham Allen writes:

Committed writing, for Sartre, must convey a message, an image of the world and a sense of what it is and might be to be human. For Sartre it makes no sense to talk about a committed form of literature without discussing the message which literature communicates to its audience. Indeed, for Sartre, a defining sign of the lack of commitment in a good deal of modern literature is found precisely in its refusal to communicate to its audience in this fashion. Barthes disagrees with Sartre's position and argues that writing is, in its extreme forms, an "anti-communication."³³

For Barthes the text's 'commitment' comes not from the message but from the medium; he believes that form itself is political.

In *Writing Degree Zero* Barthes outlines what he called *écriture*, the *form of writing*, which he distinguishes from *écrivance*, writing for the sake of communication.

³⁰ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 22.

³¹ Dennis Cooper, *Frisk* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1991), 106.

³² Cooper, *Frisk*, 74.

³³ Allen, *Roland Barthes*, 16.

For Barthes, *écriture* concerns that which is expressed outside or beyond any message or content. It differs from language and style in that it is purely voluntary on the behalf of the author. Rather than the message being evidence of the author's commitment, *écriture* evidences the author's commitment to what the text expounds. *Frisk* serves as an example here too. With its narrative gaps and *fabula/syuzhet* confusion, *Frisk* is itself the dismembered body, and the reader is left to pore dutifully over the butchered pieces in the impossible attempt to try to understand the text. The *écriture* of Transgressive Fiction shows its commitment to its poetics of play, openness and ambiguity. Barthes regarded this playfulness as one of the elements which distinguished the comfort of the readerly "text of pleasure" and the *jouissance* of the writerly "text of Bliss". In *The Pleasure of the Text* he outlined the two distinct forms of literary work, referring to the first group as texts of pleasure or 'readerly texts': "The text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading."³⁴ These texts support the cultural background of the reader but they lack the fragmentation, and that is offered by the second type of literature.

The Text of Bliss "imposes a state of loss, [...] discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language."³⁵ Transgressive Fictions are texts of Bliss. These fictions that accuse and agitate readers, violate and titillate those that read them, offer *jouissance* through their depiction of violence and fracturing of language. Barthes writes:

This bliss of the text is often only stylistic: there are expressive felicities, and neither Sade nor Fourier lacks them. However, at times the pleasure of the text is achieved more deeply (and then is when we can truly say there is a Text): whenever the "literary" Text (the Book) transmigrates into our life, whenever another writing (the Other's writing) succeeds in writing fragments of our daily lives, in short, whenever a *coexistence* occurs. The index of the pleasure of the Text, then, is when we are able to live with Fourier, with Sade. To live with an author does not mean to achieve in our life the program that author has traced in his books...it is not a matter of making operative what has been represented, not a matter of becoming sadistic or orgiastic with Sade...it is a matter of bringing into our daily life the fragments of the unintelligible ("formulae") that emanates from a text we admire.³⁶

Barthes also noted that the originality and shock that is created by texts of bliss is tragically short-lived. Theory and criticism eventually consume everything, as Barthes claimed: "Once the cutting edge of new language is blunted, the bourgeoisie raises no objection to accommodating it, to appropriating it for its own purpose."³⁷

All of these frustrations: the absence of objective meaning, open stance on ideology, unproductive nature, and the ambiguity of form, has driven readers applying traditional modes of criticism to Transgressive Fiction into the process of "Appropriation and Excretion."³⁸ This rejection manifests itself in several ways.

Bataille described this process in detail in "Notions of Expenditure" and *The Accursed Share*. After giving a list of heterogeneous elements (death, cadavers, gods,

³⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 14.

³⁵ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 14.

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 7.

³⁷ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 68.

³⁸ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 94.

involuntary defecation, jewels, gambling, the decomposition of bodies, genitals, bowel movements, laughter, sacrifice) he explains that they

together present a common character in that the object [...] is found each time treated as a foreign body (*das ganz Andere*); in other words, it can just as well be expelled following a brutal rupture as reabsorbed through the desire to put one's body and mind entirely in a more or less violent state of expulsion (or projection). The notion of the (heterogeneous) *foreign body* permits one to note the elementary *subjective* identity between types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, fecal matter) and everything that can be sacred, divine, or marvelous: a half-decomposed cadaver fleeing through the night in a luminous shroud can be seen as characteristic of this unity.³⁹

Thus Transgressive Fiction is rejected not only because of its frustrating elements but also because it is the exploration and exposé of the heterogeneous.

Bataille's exemplar for this process is the history of the reception of the work of the Marquis de Sade. For Bataille, the rejection of Sade's work was less offensive than its eventual assimilation. In his open letter 'The Value Use of D.A.F de Sade' (1930) Bataille does not admonish Sade's attackers but his defenders and apologists, claiming that they are the ones who have neutered and sterilized his writing by confining the work within a purely literary framework: "They could easily affirm that the brilliant and suffocating value he wanted to give human existence is inconceivable outside of fiction, that only poetry, exempt from all practical applications, permits one to have at his disposal, to a certain extent, the brilliance and suffocation that the Marquis de Sade tried so indecently to invoke."⁴⁰ For Bataille, the literary or philosophical criticism of Sade serves to deny the revolutionary potential of the text. He argued that Sade's "suffocating brilliance" should be allowed to enter public and private life, and that once its revolutionary aspect had been removed, Sade's work served only as food for "cathartic excretion":

The behavior of Sade's admirers resembles that of primitive subjects in relation to their king, whom they adore and loathe, and whom they cover with honors and narrowly confine. In the most favorable cases, the author of *Justine* is in fact thus treated as any given foreign body; in other words he is only an object of transports of exaltation to the extent that these transports facilitate his excretion (his peremptory expulsion).

The life and works of D.A.F de Sade would thus have no other use value than the common use value of excrement; in other words, for the most part, one most often only loves the rapid (and violent) pleasure of voiding matter and no longer seeing it.⁴¹

Like Barthes, Bataille has to concede that absorption into the body social is inevitable:

It must even be added that there is no way of placing such elements in the immediate objective human domain, in the sense that the pure and simple objectification of their specific character would lead to their incorporation in a homogeneous intellectual system, in other words, to a hypocritical cancellation of the excremental character.⁴²

The process Bataille describes was repeated in the 1990s in the publication, reception and analysis of texts such as *American Psycho* and *Dirty Weekend*. Sections of each

³⁹ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 94.

⁴⁰ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 94.

⁴¹ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 91-92.

⁴² Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 98.

appeared before the texts were published in full; Ellis's novel actually earned him threats of castration and was almost not published at all. After publication both novels received contradictory reactions, rave reviews for their originality and calls to have them banned, but as the years passed both found increasing acceptance. *American Psycho* is now considered by many a modern classic and *Dirty Weekend* a manifesto against female passivity.

Despite Bataille's rage against the assimilation of the subversive text, it must be conceded that Transgressive Fiction (mainstream or otherwise) has by 2014 been absorbed into the body social. Whilst it explores heterogeneous and sacred matter, its very existence as a printed and published work is evidence that it has moved into the realm of the homogenous. As a consequence, the task is not to try and convince ourselves that Transgressive Fiction is indeed still beyond the pale, but to avoid housebreaking it any further. What is now needed is to resist the drive to neuter the text further, resisting the temptations to "produc[e] a new paradigm to which they can be shown to conform"⁴³ and instead develop a reader-focused framework which imagines the text and its 'meanings' in terms similar to that of Iserian potential. This can be achieved by focusing on the Transgressive text's affective power and the reader-text relationship. Barthes recognized that standardized interpretations of texts fail to recognize the legitimacy of multiple interpretations:

The very definition of the work is changing; it is no longer a historical fact, it is becoming an anthropological fact, since no history can exhaust its meaning. The variety of meanings is not a matter of a relativist approach to human mores; it designates not the tendency that society has to err but a disposition towards openness; the work holds several meanings simultaneously, by its very structure, and not as a result of some infirmity in those who read it. Therein lies its symbolic nature; the symbol is not the image but the very plurality of meanings.⁴⁴

Barthes claimed that to read a text "in pleasure" is to read without critical forethought: "If I agree to judge a text according to pleasure, I cannot go on to say: this one is good, that bad. No awards, no social "critique," for it always implies a tactical aim, a social usage, and frequently an extenuating image-reservoir."⁴⁵ The text "can wring from me only this judgment, in no way adjectival: that's it! And further still: that's it for me!"⁴⁶ For Barthes, bliss is a purely personal matter which excludes critical examination and social consideration.

In *Criticism and Truth* Barthes imagined a potential Science of Literature which focused not on the content or quality of a work but rather on the "conditions of content, that is to say of forms; it will concern itself with the variations of the meanings engendered and, so to speak, engenderable by works; it will not interpret symbols but only their polyvalence; in a word, its object will no longer be the full meanings of the work but on the contrary the empty meaning which it underpins."⁴⁷ This plurality of meaning is best for fronted by the works of Iser and the reader-response theorists. For Iser 'meaning' is not something that exists, it is something that happens in the gestures

⁴³ Keith Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnavalesque* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1991), 211.

⁴⁴ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 67.

⁴⁵ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 13.

⁴⁶ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 13.

⁴⁷ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 73-4.

between the text and its reader. That meaning is an event rather than an instruction and is created by the reader's interaction with the text, by its dialectical, playful nature. 'Meaning' in Transgressive Fiction can only be an event because its emphasis on the poetics of play (a-ideology, unproductive eroticism, anti-communication and *écriture*) prevents the solidifying and objectifying of interpretation. Barthes is preceded in this belief by thinkers like Mikhail Bakhtin, who addressed the dialogical nature of the Human Sciences and defended the text as unlike the "voiceless" object of the exact sciences, instead describing the movement between a novel and its reader as a gesture between two unknowable subjects. In the words of Tzvetan Todorov, "[t]heir object is not one but two spirits (the studying one and the studied, which must not fuse into a single one). Their true object is the interrelation and interaction of the spirits."⁴⁸

Once the emphasis shifts from the value and qualities of the text's content and construction to the text's ability to affect a reader, the Transgressive text can be read as a consequence-free space for the exploration, vicarious enactment and transgression of taboos. To this extent Transgressive Fiction is a mode of carnivalized literature. Philip Holland described carnivalized literature as an expression of the dialogical:

[...] the seriocomic genres are united not only from within but from without, through their common opposition to the serious genres. [...] The serious genres, in Bakhtin's terms, are monological, i.e. they presuppose (or impose) an integrated and stable universe of discourse. The seriocomic genres, by contrast, are dialogical: they deny the possibility, or more precisely, the experience of such integration. As Tragedy and epic enclose, Menippean form open up, anatomize. The serious forms comprehend man; the Menippean forms are based on man's inability to know and contain his fate...seriocomic forms present a challenge, open or covert, to literary and intellectual orthodoxy, a challenge that is reflected not only in their philosophic content but also in their structure.⁴⁹

The emphasis on the poetics of play in Transgressive Fiction reveals it as a recent manifestation of carnivalized literature. Whilst Transgressive texts are investigations of taboo, they are also explorations of comedy and hyperbole. But it is not only the use of humour that marks Transgressive Fiction as carnivalized literature. It is actually a metafictional reflection of the carnival environment.

Bakhtin defines the carnival as a place of merging boundaries: "Carnival brings together, unifies, weds and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid."⁵⁰ As with Transgressive Fiction it is an environment specifically constructed for the experimentation and enactment of taboos and their transgression. The participant in the world of carnival is invited to suspend his morals and assumption, as is the reader of Transgressive Fiction: "The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival; what is suspended first of all is a hierarchical structure and all forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it."⁵¹ But while the environment of carnival is one of rebellion and exploration, it maintains a duality because it has been created specifically for the expression of latent impulses. This is why we can describe the environment of the

⁴⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 21.

⁴⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 106.

⁵⁰ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 123.

⁵¹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 123.

Transgressive text as safe and consensual. Transgressive Fiction demonstrates this doubling offering a safe environment for the exploration of taboo that is free of consequence. Here too the reader can experience what Hegel termed *Aufhebung*; the reaffirmation of the taboo through its transcendence. No matter how violated the taboo, it always holds firm, often just reaffirming its necessity in the mind of the reader. The fictional nature is essential to its ability to create the environment of exploration and doubling, allowing the reader to participate in the most lurid of crimes whilst still practicing literary "safe sex".⁵²

Critics of Transgressive Fiction are not disgusted by the text's subject matter. What motivates most readers to discard or dismiss this genre is its total dedication to frustration and the poetics of play, movement and ambiguity. Readers and critics who approach these works with traditional referential modes of criticism are unfulfilled by its lack of objective, extractable meaning, its refusal to commit or comment on ideology and its disinterest in clarity and communication. These frustrations cause the reader to either reject or assimilate the text. If, however, the Transgressive text is considered on the basis of its ability to affect the reader, then new paths of interpretation are opened. Subjective affectivism offers this new option, and it seems fitting that an often rejected mode of reading be used for an equally frequently rejected genre. The works of Roland Barthes, Georges Bataille and Wolfgang Iser, whilst being nearly forty years old, are pivotal in justifying this refocusing, offering a framework that provides the gravitas and patience that Transgressive texts have thus far, quietly, gone without.

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⁵² Silverblatt, "SHOCK APPEAL / Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us?: The New Fiction of Transgression."

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Fără folosință: obligativitatea de a „înțelege” ficțiunea transgresivă

Articolul de față investighează pe scurt motivele pentru care ficțiunea transgresivă din perioada anilor nouăzeci este slab reprezentată în cercurile academice și e adesea interpretată eronat în recenziile și în articolele critice din aceeași perioadă. Ficțiunea transgresivă frustrează intenționat așteptările cititorului folosind moduri de referință critică tradiționale și refuzând să ofere un sens, o ideologie și o structură obiective. Acest refuz obligă cititorul să adopte una dintre următoarele două atitudini: să se implice personal în interpretarea de text sau să inițieze un proces de respingere și de asimilare. Această practică ar putea fi evitată dacă textele transgresive ar fi descifrate prin prisma afectivismului subiectiv (care definește reacția și implicarea cititorului), mai degrabă decât prin intermediul calității scrierii și subiectului lor. Acest mod de interpretare ar permite textelor să funcționeze ca locuri ale explorării libere, gratuite, și ca punere în scenă a anumitor tabuuri și a transgresării lor.