Obscenity and the Limits of Liberalism

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JANUARY 1, 2007. My 22-year-old son rents a video from Kim’s, titled Clerks 2, telling me that Clerks 1 was pretty funny, and we sit down to watch it around 8:00 at night, the night before he returns to school. He explains that it is a sort of documentary, showing the lives of people who clerk in stores like a 7-Eleven or a McDonald’s in New Jersey, a place that to the enlightened people in Manhattan epitomizes obscenity anyway, full of SUVs, suburbs, chemical plants, and people too cheap to live in the city but come to Manhattan weekends to indulge in strip clubs, fancy restaurants, and Broadway shows. Well, after a few minutes we are pretty disgusted; not a single line of dialogue comes out of the mouths of these quintessentially ordinary people in their mid-twenties without reference to genitalia or lurid sexual activity, the movie drawing to a close with a fleshy bald male called Kelly in black leather long johns sucking off a donkey on an improvised stage with a smoke machine in what looks like a McDonald’s but for legal reasons, I guess, has an invented name. “It’s disgusting,” says one of the young women in the movie, referring not to McDonald’s but to the size of the donkey’s penis off screen, “but I can’t stop looking.” Georges Bataille could not have put it better with his mantra of attraction and repulsion. Is this the genius of the vernacular? That it can express convoluted highbrow ideas in a pithy phrase enlarged by the mise-en-scène? Bataille’s other term, made much of by
Julia Kristeva, namely, the *abject*, also springs to mind, a troublesome term that to me suggests a close kinship with the obscene—note the strange prefixes at work here, *abject* and *obscene*, and start to plot your etymologies. This movie, I say to myself, must be a particularly revealing instance of so-called popular culture, which I always feel I am missing out on and don’t really know what it is. Once you have bracketed it like that and given it a name, “popular culture,” I fear you have already lost it. Could the same apply to the obscene? Thank God I have this son of mine who knows popular culture inside out and when home from school acts as my guide, as did the pagan Virgil to Dante, lost and confused, making his way ever deeper underground to the nether parts of the devil himself on his way to redemption. They say it’s adults who educate children, but nowadays it’s so obviously the other way around, at least when it comes to popular culture. When I was a kid in Australia in 1952, I went to see a locally made movie called *Bush Christmas* in which two friends of mine from up the road, Nicky Yardley and his brother Michael, starred. What a thrill it was to see the credits flash on and then the sign, “Adults Only Permitted if Accompanied by Children.” The film concerned a handful of children, boys and girls, outwitting some bushrangers. How crazily innocent it all seems when viewed from today with movies like *Clerks 2*! What has happened in the intervening years, along with everyday reports of child abuse, hysteria about so-called sex offenders stigmatized as loathsome beasts, and pre-pubescent girls acting like sex kittens, as depicted poignantly toward the end of the wonderful movie *Little Miss Sunshine*? Which of these categories of behavior deserve to be called *obscene* and which do not? This question is made all the more complex by the fact that in *Clerks 2* the obscenities—if that’s a fair epithet—are so terribly natural, unstressed, unexcited and unexciting, like someone asking for a Big Mac or a Coke, in which case, why bother? Why the autistic lack of emotion about the obscene? Is this the new sitcom, sex without sex? Could this be the ultimate sanitization of society, de-eroticizing the erotic?

JANUARY 2. Downtown Manhattan in a bar waiting for my other son. I am thinking of writing something about obscenity and am pondering how much the Western world has changed with respect to the moving line separating the obscene from the non-obscene. When Thomas Hardy got his most celebrated novel, *Jude the Obscure*, published in England just over one hundred years ago, it was greeted with shock at the attack on marriage, class, and sexual mores, meriting a review entitled
Jude the Obscene. In Sister of the Road: The Autobiography of Boxcar Bertha, by the anarchist obstetrician-gynecologist and lover of Emma Goldman, Ben Reitman, Bertha tells us of her beloved mother’s father, a farmer in Kansas who, in the 1880s, was one of the organizers of the free-love convention at Worcester, Massachusetts. This man served three terms in jail, two of which were for sending birth control information through the mail, which the federal authorities called obscene. And as regards this moving line separating the obscene from the non-obscene, isn’t it a curious fact that I find it difficult, if not impossible, to define one or the other of these terms outside of their coupling as mutually antagonistic opposites, the same way as Émile Durkheim defines the sacred, as not the profane? I am early, so I sit by the bar after locking my bike outside on Sixth Avenue, where I notice a bearded muscle-bound guy in his forties dressed in black looking like Kelly from the movie last night sitting outside on this cold early evening by a lonely table smoking a cigarette and talking avidly into the cell phone cradled in his ear. A far cry from the haunts of the bridge-and-tunnel crowd from New Jersey, the bar has yet to fill up with its usual crowd of yuppie bohemians and academics like myself. A man and woman are sort of making out, seated at a table by the window, looking pretty glum. Three or four guys are at the bar talking chummily with the barman. A cute young waitress tying on her apron takes my order and over a glass of red wine balanced on a tiny copper-topped table I try to read my novel, Distant Star by the Chilean Roberto Bolano “the most influential and admired novelist in the Spanish-speaking world,” according to Susan Sontag. I notice a camouflage-patterned backpack hanging over the chair next to me. Immersed in the mysteries of the strange poet—or is he a spy?—in the time when Pinochet took power in Chile, I fail to notice the entry of the bearded muscle man from outside, sans cigarette, who, despite there being plenty of empty seats, sits down right beside me speaking loudly in an Oh! I am so Gay! manner of speech into his cell phone, so loudly and with such flair that you had to wonder if actually he wasn’t talking primarily to the few people in the bar for whom the supposed person at the other end of the phone was merely an excuse. “So we went to the hospital,” he booms, “and she’s gonna have . . .”—and he opens a note book and slowly reads out, syllable by syllable, “palliative treatment.” “This is good,” he goes on to say in a voice at once cajoling and authoritative, a voice that brooks no dissent, as he describes what happened yesterday, what happened today with the lung tissue slides at Sloan Kettering, and how all of that connects with what will happen tomorrow with the ambulance to White Plains. I am sitting there like
an idiot unable to shut out this saga. It seems like the other person on the phone never speaks, pulverized by this monologue and perhaps by grief and anxiety. It is sickening to be exposed to this intimacy, the intimacy of death, no matter how anonymous such dying might be with respect to the captive audience in the bar, and I have little hesitation, although I do have some, in designating this activity as obscene. The hesitation I have has to do with the way people often refer to something they dislike as “obscene,” thus injecting moral condemnation where it doesn’t seem to quite fit. This is puzzling to me, and its delineation might shed light on the meaning, today, of obscenity. To offer what might not be the best example of what I have in mind here, let me recall a strange moment in a collapsing Anthropology Department full of rancor. A first-year graduate student was giving a talk, accompanied by slides, on the eating clubs at Princeton where he had been a student, his talk being billed as one of those rare occasions where the secrets, or should I say sociology, of the rich and privileged are to be revealed. This was according to the senior professor, whose disgust at the rich and powerful was equaled only by her desire to become one of them. Her protégé, an untenured professor of similar disposition, chimed in when, trying to deal with the problem of whether it was ethical to show the faces of the Princeton students photographed, someone proposed that maybe the faces could be masked in some way or blurred. “That would be truly obscene,” he thundered, a statement I remember vividly as if it was yesterday, even though it occurred some twelve years ago. Turning this over in my mind, as has been my wont at unexpected moments over the years, I keep wondering why this would be thought of as obscene, indeed “truly obscene,” and frankly I have no answer. What I do feel sure about is that all of us in that room were with that remark being marshaled like sheep to pass into a scary place where one was to be morally strip-searched, and, worst of all, we had no idea what we had done wrong. In other words, it was not the suggestion about masking and making persons anonymous that was obscene, “truly obscene,” but that rejoinder itself, suggesting that those who would designate something as obscene are playing with fire and may well turn out to be far more obscene than what they rail against. The line dividing the obscene from the non-obscene is anything but clear, anything but stable, and, what is more, is such that even to name it, even to mark it, is to run the risk of adding to obscenity’s mysterious power and fall victim to its stigmatizing effluvium. But enough of this madness and back to the bar on Sixth Ave where, having finally laid his phone to rest, the bearded man, obviously a favored customer, perhaps a waiter himself or even the
PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

manager, calls over one of the young men waiting tables the second he has disposed of his phone and in an even louder voice than before says, “Hi Mark, you’re the worst sex I’ve ever had in my life.” Not even Bataille with his marked interest in the confluence of sex and death could have predicted the perfection with which his theory would manifest itself as it did that second day of the New Year, 2007. I pack my bag and take Roberto Bolano’s *Distant Star* over to a table as far away as possible in the back room aglow with Christmas lights.

JANUARY 3. Now that I’ve got this idea of an “obscenity diary” I am training myself to be more conscious of obscenity and am wondering why this so interests me. I am now in a more activist mode, fine-tuning my antennae to the obscene instead of just waiting passively for it to happen. Three years back my friend Jimmie Durham sent me a copy of his nature journal that he kept for many months in Berlin and I thought it wonderful, matter-of-fact whimsy concerning the odd bird that makes its appearance towards the end of winter, some new grass by the canal, the character of the frost. What made it charming was the basic idea that nature in the city is a fascinating topic, like an illegal immigrant hiding out between the artificial splendor of the well-ordered parks on one side, and car exhaust on the other. But it is the cast of mind that’s important here—not so much what one is looking for, but the way one looks—as when Jimmie writes his entry for December 24, 2000, about buying a wild goose, cooking it, then the first snow of the year falls around five in the evening, everything becomes white and quiet and he goes out onto the small terrace and hears a crow calling in the distance. This sense of nature as antithetical to the city, as a wild intruder lurking in the background waiting its time, is surely analogous to obscenity with its necessary affinities to what is deemed right and proper, reminding me of the story I was told by my British anthropologist friend Olivia Harris in the 1970s of how surprised everyone was when the British government built one of its first motorways, the M1, and instead of fleeing, the rabbits returned to the edges of the motorway and built their burrows right there, apparently enjoying the vibrations. Is that rabbit analogous to obscenity? Once conscious of my new mission I start seeing obscenity everywhere. In the swimming pool today there is this really fat man who looks so obscene in the shower with his tummy falling over his thighs and black hair over his back. Swimming he looks like a whale having a seizure. But now you have to be careful because fatness is not a laughing matter, what with juvenile diabetes, largely caused by fast
food joints such as the one in *Clerks 2*, and fatness has been dignified as a Civil Right. McDonald’s breathes a little easier. And anyway, aren’t we each and all free agents, responsible for how we look and what we eat? I ask myself, what would Jimmie’s diary have to say about this nature in the city? Leaving the pool, I get on my daughter’s vintage Schwinn bike and pedal through Central Park. It is a fine day. People are happy. In fact it is too damn fine, almost a summer day and it is the middle of winter. The radio tells me that 2007 will be the hottest year ever. The planet is in trouble. My dentist chuckles over my gaping mouth. She has a sunny disposition and can be very funny, an advantage, I would think, for someone who has to look down into smelly, cavity-riddled mouths and wobbling tonsils all the time such that it becomes just another boring day at the office. Well, maybe not quite, which is where a TV program like *MASH* gets its humor, mixing the sacred opening of the human body by scalpels and retractors with the routines of the operating theater, same as William Burroughs’s famous “routines,” he called them in his letters to Allen Ginsberg, concerning Doctor Benway throwing scalpels and swabs around in gay abandon. Not quite so funny are my memories of medical school, of the year we students spent in small teams of four or five dissecting the human corpse, one team at the top, head and trunk, the other team below that when, to my horror, I was told by a friend that one of our fellow students, a star athlete, was cutting out part of the female genitalia from several corpses and keeping them in a match box. We are used in anthropology to the concept of “licensed transgression,” those occasions societies set aside, such as initiation rites or Saturday nights, when the rules of decorum are relaxed or transgressed, by permission, as it were, thus making of transgression a complicated business indeed, partly rule breaking, partly rule conserving. In such a situation is obscenity truly obscenity, and what then of unlicensed transgression, as with the scalpel wielding medical student whom none of us informed on? “Well,” my dentist says, probing tooth Number Eighteen, “we ruined this one [meaning the planet Earth], let’s move on to the next!” “And everyone laughing and enjoying the lovely warm sunlit end of the world,” I say between opening and closing my mouth. And she laughs too. When I rode though the park, black nannies in droves were pushing white babies in baby carriages under the pines that the wealthy people on the Upper East Side have donated. A black man sat playing a drum with a small coat on the ground for coins. He was still there two and half hours later when I pedaled home, playing the tom-tom for the white folks. Opposite the Metropolitan Museum of Art a mammoth stretch limo black and shiny suddenly pulls
out. Could have killed me. Parks illegally and is still there when I pedal back hours later, motor running the full complement of carbon monoxide, the driver barely visible behind the dark glass of the window in his suit and tie peering into a small computer as his hedge fund boss does deals with the museum. Does anyone really know what a “hedge fund” is, by the way? And they say magic has been driven out of the world. Thinking about the history of the Louvre, in one of his more memorable Surrealist pieces for his famous dictionary in his 1930 magazine, *Documents*, Georges Bataille stated that the art gallery in our time has taken over as the sacred site in the center of the city that was the king’s palace. The story goes like this: When the king was beheaded in public view during the French Revolution—there in the center of the city where the Egyptian Obelisk was a few years later placed by Napoleon—at the same time as he lost his head, so the city’s abattoir, also in the heart of the city, alive with blood and offal, was moved to anonymous locations outside of the city and people could then enjoy their Sundays of purification by going to the art gallery while the obscene roots of the sacred such as sacrifice of the god or animals is nowhere in evidence. That was written almost eighty years ago, and while the general idea is as relevant and as riveting as ever, there are other sacred, or should one say *negatively sacred*, sites that undergo the same disappearance as Bataille’s abattoir. I am told for instance by a mechanic friend in upstate New York that none of the towns in the vicinity allow junk yards, which he calls *salvage* yards, to be exposed to the public, and they have to be situated outside of the towns. The county town planner and the town clerk both inform me that local laws demand high walls around such yards, which must be on the outskirts, never inside, the town, and the same applies to strip joints, which are not allowed to have blue lighting on the outside. In town planning parlance strip clubs are called “adult uses” and fall into the more general category of LULUS, meaning Local Unwanted Land Uses, which includes slaughterhouses as well. No prime space on Fifth Avenue like the Met for them! No wonder that a Mom in Texas got confused recently when her ten-year-old was taken on a public-school outing to the art gallery in Dallas and came home talking of statues of naked women and as a result the art teacher was fired. What are naked ladies doing in the center of town? The town of Rosendale near where I live upstate, a town with a population of roughly 5,000, two hours north of New York City, had a plan drawn up by a Republican councilman and chief of the Fire District a few years back for an industrial zone—“park.” I think they called it—which would destroy many beautiful acres of what remains of the forest by the river, and this, he
added earnestly, would be just perfect for “adult uses” as well. So is this the new sacred geography of America, walled off junk—I mean salvage—yards with gutted motor vehicles alongside windowless sex clubs—I mean “adult uses”—with low ceilings and dark lighting forming along with the slaughterhouses a ring of outposts around the perimeter of what passes for a town center of gas stations, churches, and convenience stores selling lottery tickets? As I cycle back through the park the sun is setting and it is getting nippy. The black nannies are wrapping up their charges and heading home. Some tourists are taking photos of the sun visible through the spaces left by the skyscrapers to the south as foregrounded by the trees of the park. The contrast is overwhelming. This is the New York sublime, better than the Grand Canyon. In front of me on a beat-up dirt bike an elderly man, Hispanic and poor looking, is leisurely cycling, hunched over the handlebars. From somewhere invisible on his person or his bike enchanting music is pouring out real loud. I mean really loud. It sounds like Coltrane and in this setting it is beyond all expectation and stereotype, which is why, I think, the gaggle of uncomforted looking Upper East side folk sitting on the benches admiring the sunset, find this obscene, yet sacred too, and don’t know what to do.

JANUARY 4, 2007. Many years ago as Europe took the first steps toward the Holocaust, Bataille’s colleague Michel Leiris gave a blessedly short talk to the College of Sociology in Paris as his contribution to what his Surrealist colleagues were calling “sacred sociology.” He called the talk “The Sacred in Everyday Life,” and after running through memories of his childhood, such as the mysterious yet familiar glow of the stove, La Radieuse, in the kitchen, his father’s silver plated revolver, secretive bathroom antics with his brother, and children’s games with language, Leiris concluded that the sacred was not restricted to formal situations such as the rituals of the church but existed as a living force in everyday life, the mark of which was danger, ambiguity, mystery, and the unexpected surprise or shock we might associate with the Surreal. This account differs remarkably from the notion of the sacred set forth in 1912 by Émile Durkheim in his famous work The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, in which the sacred was designated as a feeling of awe, reverence, and fear associated with something set firmly apart from the everyday, which he designated as the profane, a confusing word that means both mundane or ordinary as well as the negative sacred. Leiris challenged—or seemed to challenge—this distinction between sacred and profane by
locating the sacred in the profane, granting the sacred a light and playful character, but Bataille went further in emphasizing the obscene basis of the sacred, no less than the sacred basis of the obscene. Little more than an inversion of Leiris’s sacred in everyday life, my obscenity diary displays, I believe, something important to this montage-effect of purity coexisting side by side with impurity by having them run one after the other in daisy chains of uneven yet daily occurrence that tear at our logic no less than our language. As regards my diary approach, Wittgenstein does this too. He talks about our talk and wonders out loud about our apparent confusions and contradictions but most of all about our senselessness—of which we are blissfully unaware—especially when we adopt the high road of the meta-level and ask unanswerable questions such as What is the Sacred or What is obscene? Leiris spotted this dilemma too—for dilemma it surely is—as these questions are as important as they are unanswerable. In my hubris I have extended Wittgenstein and Leiris by writing little scenes or ethnographic sketches with each one serving as a comment on the one preceding, searching for a language that can perhaps do justice to the unsayable no less than the unsaid.