Luminol Theory

Laura E. Joyce

Published by Punctum Books

E. Joyce, Laura.
Luminol Theory.

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Elements drawn from the familiar appear to be blurring and combining, their ordinary domestic contexts jettisoned. A packet of Coleman’s Instant Mashed Potato can be seen next to some worn lady’s stockings. Next to this is a large piece of polythene and other textile garments, with what looks like underwear discarded on a large pile of unprotected LP records (fragile objects, designed to be carefully returned to their sleeves), a torn book cover, a broken lampshade, fragments of crockery, a lone hair curler.

A wider view of the scene — photograph 4.2 — reveals a saucepan inexplicably placed on a bedroom cabinet, waste receptacles overturned or unused. In photograph 4.3, a suitcase is depicted with a large hole [in] it — the contents accessed unconventionally.

— Henry Bond, *Lacan at the Scene*
1. Polyester Gothic

Will something that looks almost exactly human extract my brain stem, cloak me in polyester, and chain me to the gas barbecue?
— Kim Ian Michasiw, “Some Stations of Suburban Gothic”

Luminol theory uncovers what I am describing as Polyester Gothic, that is, the romantically bewitching contemporary narratives of trailer parks, motels, shopping malls, and tract housing—spaces where the cheap, decaying, toxic materials that make up the prefabricated dwellings, the polka-dot bikinis, and the disposable jewelry that litter the landscape of this genre are not incidental but central to the horror invoked. Each object becomes freighted with meaning, its surface in contact with human matter—matter that can be read with luminol.

As a study of Middle American banality as romance, The Memoirs of JonBenét Ramsey by Kathy Acker is a perfect example of Polyester Gothic. The snow-soiled, faded fabrics that crinkle through Memoirs represent the postindustrial decay of a pretty mountain town. In fact, Du Plessis is clearly still obsessed and romantically entangled with Boulder, and this break-up note is more of a renewal with that obsession than a clear escape. Because of this, he manages a tender, affectionate tone, even.

The fictional inhabitants of the fictionalized Boulder in Memoirs suffer a microcosmic imprisonment in a camp, tasteless object. The tract housing that the characters occupy within the snow globe is brutally conformist, ugly, and decaying; beige carpet spreads from the apartments out into the landscape; there is no escape from the banality of horror. The narrator elides the claustrophobia of the tract houses, with their windowless seclusion and dilapidated furnishings, with the overall conceit of the snow globe that covers the fictionalized Boulder. Landscape and home are blurred; the exterior and the interior have no real meaning for the narrator, JonBenét. No matter how many times she shape-shifts, no matter how powerful her knowledge or how witchy her resurrection, she is always stuck in this airless, tacky pod. The curiously adult voice proclaims, “I’m drowning in a
vacuum, surrounded on all sides by the yards of gravel and bark that my neighbors consider landscaping.”¹ The snow globe can be thought of as pre-existing the fictionalized Boulder, and at the same time being a disposable, cheap, and arbitrary object. Additionally, the snow globe, described explicitly as “bought in a cheap airport gift store,” is part of the capitalist project, an item whose inception has caused several potential harms: sweatshop labor, environmental pollution, and economic oppression.² Before capitalism, this version of Boulder could not have existed and would not have made any sense. This object, a remnant of capitalism, would perhaps continue to exist even if capitalist structures became obsolete. The explicit reference to the “ugly” nature of the object means that it occupies the aesthetic domain and yet is found wanting. In Memoirs, the environmental is the plastic and the aesthetic is the political. This connection to assembly-line capitalist practices is not accidental; in fact, plastic is often aligned with the capitalist project, derived as it is from oil. The disposability of plastic is also an ecological concern and linked to fears around mortality through the specter of global warming.

It is not only the snow globe that is made of plastic; all of the private tastes and furnishings in the Boulder of Memoirs are composed of cheap plastic materials. The character of Kathy Acker in the book has a long soliloquy on the “unmitigated horror of the domestic space in Boulder.” It is worth reproducing this passage in full:

Structures of the 1970s, they promised the good life of the American Bicentennial in the raw materials — particle board, polyresin, reinforced tupperware, drywall, polyester, pressed wood shingle, polyurethane — the flammable and cheap fabric on which the American Dream is spun. All apartments are alike: beige carpeting, grey from years of snow stains, pet stains, brown kitchen sticky from years of unsavory veg-

¹ Du Plessis, Memoirs, 4.
² Ibid., 3.

This speech argues that decisions about taste and furnishing that are made in private in Boulder have had a direct correlation with war, capitalism, and other violent crimes against humanity. Du Plessis sees the structural inequalities of the American Dream as being tied directly to matters of domesticity. The avocado bathroom suite is interchangeable with the camouflage worn by soldiers in Vietnam. Truly these are crimes of taste.

This sinister banality is figured through the cheap raw materials that build the uniform A-frame houses. Their lack of individuality and lack of engagement with natural resources displays a short-term toxic relationship with the environment and a lacuna of imagination that negates empathy with those who are different. The environment enacts brutal indifference. There is also a strong sense of fakeness, and a lack of authenticity that attaches to materials that are not considered natural: fiberboard, polyester, etc. These materials are designed to mimic those found in nature, such as wood, silk, and wool; yet they are non-biodegradable and potentially toxic. This fakeness is both physical and political. Not only does the plastic matter in Memoirs damage the environment of Boulder, it also subdues radicalism and dissent. The Boulder of this novella is uncanny. It shows us the mundane and the homely, and then undercuts this coziness with shifting perspectives, characters who fluctuate, and a death that recurs over and over; a human sacrifice on an epic scale. Boulder is also an abject zone and there is a psychopathic drive

3 Ibid., 22–23.
to murder JonBenét to sacrifice her in order to generate tourism and interest, or, in a term coined by writer and critic Johannes Göransson, *atrocity kitsch*.4

Göransson coined the term atrocity kitsch to describe the interconnectedness of the kitsch and the tacky with atrocities of all descriptions.5 Göransson uses “atrocity kitsch” to describe work by a variety of artists, filmmakers, and writers, primarily poets, whose work centers sacred, contaminated artifacts. As well as established artists such as David Lynch and Sylvia Plath, the concept includes Charles Manson and the Abu Ghraib photographs. Göransson’s own work, the obscenely unperformable *Entrance to a Colonial Pageant in Which We All Began to Intricate*, is explicitly positioned as an example of atrocity kitsch; one of the characters, Mimesis, says directly to the audience: “I want to be your atrocity kitsch.”6 So is Olivia Cronk’s *Skin Horse*, a book-length poem that Action Books, the radical press run by Göransson and his partner, poet and scholar Joyelle McSweeney, published in 2012.7 When I asked McSweeney via email why they decided to publish *Skin Horse*, she replied, “I would say the uncanny power in this book comes from its peaks and declivities, its fragmentation which ends up hosting an infernal and illimitable pow’r.”8 This description references both the supernatural, occult aspect of the poem, and also the palimpsestic, contaminated function of the text as it “hosts”: it is a crime scene, burial ground, or horror film. Cronk explicitly links *Skin Horse* to the cinematic, arguing that “poetry and film are siblings.” She also contends that in film “(1) the images (text(s)) can bleed into/leak onto/become others and one another; and (2) the medium

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5 Ibid.
7 Olivia Cronk, *Skin Horse* (Notre Dame: Action Books, 2012). *Skin Horse*’s pages are unnumbered.
8 Joyelle McSweeney, email exchange with author, January 2015.
itself, especially given the current iterations via YouTube, phone culture, etc., transmits and explodes.” In Skin Horse the mode of writing itself can “transmit,” “leak,” and “bleed,” contaminating and infecting culture.

For Göransson, Americana, ephemera, and junk do not conceal atrocities, but rather are the means by which atrocities function. In Skin Horse, this means that the most heinous moments of sadistic violence can be enacted through kitschy objects like lipstick, ketchup, and crystal balls. Skin Horse converts ephemera into aesthetic material. The poem also pays special attention to those artifacts that have some relationship with futurity and natural cycles. Fakeness, plasticity, toxicity, and metamorphosis are all important concepts in Skin Horse.

Skin Horse does not distinguish between the natural landscape and man-made artifacts, as evidenced by lines such as “The pond was a bad window” and “The place is polyester.” There is an apparent privileging in Skin Horse of throwaway objects; items such as lipstick, blisters, flyers, and ketchup take on occult and sacred resonances. The objects in Cronk’s work bring theoretical pressure to bear on the text. In this way they can be closely aligned with the hyperobjects of Timothy Morton’s formulation, that is, they are objects that do not conform in any way to linear or spatial regularity; they are objects that are beyond.

Skin Horse does something complex and strange with its ephemera. Not only does the poem refuse to distinguish between separate categories of the plastic and the static and the authentic and the fake, it also insists on a specific kind of futurity — one that relies on the melding of the banal and the sacred in lines such as “a crystal ball flyer in my bag” and “What lipstick lights. / Through a branch, one creeped to scream.” The crystal ball flyer is the perfect example of the sacred throwaway

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9 Olivia Cronk, email exchange with author, September 2014.
10 Cronk, Skin Horse.
12 Cronk, Skin Horse.
object. Both the flyer and the crystal ball it represents are plastic objects: the flyer is made from cheap, toxic materials and the crystal ball, though glass, is a symbol of the plasticity of future and present. The weight accorded to the occult potential of the crystal ball is undercut by the tackiness and commerciality of the flyer. The “lipstick lights” that call to mind a cosmetic artificiality are also, somehow, luminous. This image of bright, glowing colors illuminating a part of the forest where one “creeped to scream” is unsettling; the childlike innocence of the lipstick is displaced by the potential site of violence and trauma invoked by the scream. This tension is present throughout the poem, and the theme of violence to children is repeated in the line:

a concrete head rises doomily from a parking lot
to watch children come falling in their own awful ketchup.\textsuperscript{13}

This line is, again, a melding of the banal and the numinous, the natural and the synthetic. “Ketchup” is a widely understood signifier for fake blood and calls to mind both the ultimate Americana of low-budget slasher films and Halloween costumes, as well as junk food and diners. To have the children “falling in their own awful ketchup” hints at a sadistic desire to enact violence and perhaps even murder. Though this desire is focalized through the “concrete head” rising “doomily” from a “parking lot,” which on first read could be considered a detached, potentially absurd point of view, there is an alignment between the man-made concrete and the man-made ketchup. The line invokes an entire world of human endeavor: it is not nature that is to be feared, but the humans who watch impassively as children continue to suffer violence from man-made causes. There are other places in the poem where death is presented as a Freudian nightmare:

My morbid, awful dying in clean boots.
Nostalgia

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
for teeth clattering out\textsuperscript{14}

This death is so horrific that the loss of teeth, a hyper-Freudian symbol of humiliation, is considered nostalgic. This death is more “morbid,” more “awful”: an utterly humiliating death that does not respect clean boots or any other human strategy to combat fear through control and order.

There are several instances in \textit{Skin Horse} of the natural world functioning as a technological space or museum. The narrator writes near the beginning of the poem that they “came to cringe at the miniature eggs,” then announces shortly afterwards, “I heard of the trees typewritering.” In these statements there is a sense that a human entity is dominating the landscape of \textit{Skin Horse} and applying cultural content to it. The museum-like appropriation of the “miniature eggs” has an echo of Carl Fabergé’s decadent creations for the Romanov imperial family, while the “typewritering” trees present an uncanny image of automatic writing, the fusion of the natural and the technological.\textsuperscript{15} Other examples of artificial matter include gloves, an ashtray that “spills on and on the edge of a pink seat,” and nylons, a quaint term for hosiery that reminds the reader of war shortages and American soldiers and is a clear example of Cronk’s invocation of Americana.\textsuperscript{16} These everyday objects take on a plastic significance. The ashtray is a repository for waste, and the mingling

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Of Fabergé’s eggs, Toby Faber writes: “Whether fairly or not, their opulence and occasional vulgarity mean that they have come to symbolize the decadence of the court for which they were made. ’Now I understand why they had a revolution’ is the common remark of someone viewing these creations for the first time. They may be masterpieces, but they also embody extravagance that even the Romanovs’ most ardent supporter would find hard to justify. After 1917’s inevitable cataclysm, the eggs disappeared in the chaos of the times.” The “opulence and occasional vulgarity” to which Faber refers is foregrounded in a March 2006 story he cites about supermodel Kate Moss, who “smuggled the drugs Ecstasy and Rohypnol in a £65,000 gem-encrusted Faberge egg — clearly a replica.” Toby Faber, \textit{Faberge’s Eggs: One Man’s Masterpieces and the End of an Empire} (London: Pan, 2009), 4, 3.

\textsuperscript{16} Cronk, \textit{Skin Horse}. 
of the ash with the “pink seat” suggests an uneasy disruption of categories. The used, carcinogenic ash despoils the homely pink seat. The gloves become “enchanted” and “The place is polyester.” Cheap, everyday materials take on transcendent properties in the world of Skin Horse. This transcendence can also take on a strong erotic charge when artificial objects are put to sadomasochistic use: “the dress-shoe blister gone wet”; “This pleather strap”; and

On a lap I dress for dinner.
I see to my old man’s tongue
caught on a tooth
just as the word tunnel
finishes.
I smack it out on a leather wall. 17

The “dress shoe” and the “pleather strap” are both related to notorious elements of fetishism: high-heeled shoes and spankings. The pinching of the dress shoe, causing blisters, indicates physical pain associated with the foot: a congruence of masochism and fetishism at a single site. That the blister has “gone wet” has overt sexual connotations. The pleather strap, made of a plastic, artificial material that replicates the cruelty of animal leather, is discussed in relation to “lap,” “tooth,” and “tongue” and has clear sexual overtones. The final line in this stanza, “I smack it out on a leather wall,” commingles the natural and the artificial and describes an act of onomatopoeic violence that brings the reader back to the image of the strap.

The fetishized element becomes abject: it is partialized, synecdochic, and cast out of a symbiotic wholeness. Yet it also regulates sexual practices and confines them to specific strictures. Kristeva’s formulation of the abject could be described as regulatory. By understanding the abject as that which is “cast out of the symbolic order,” she defines what the symbolic order is. Hal Foster asks whether the abject, rather than being “disrup-

17 Ibid.
tive of subjective and social orders,” could be “somehow foundational of them.”\footnote{Hal Foster, \textit{The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century} (Cambridge: mit Press, 1996), 114.} This reading of the abject suggests that the exclusion of “the alien within” turns abjection into a regulatory operation.\footnote{Ibid., 115.} Cronk, however, does not perform abjection in such a definitive manner. She does not use abjection to regulate, but rather to reveal, in the tradition of apocalyptic texts. The natural world in \textit{Skin Horse} is a disaster zone. The characters, and by implication the reader, are “stepping on a million glass roaches.”\footnote{Cronk, \textit{Skin Horse}.} They “die and rush into the planet.”\footnote{Ibid.} Animals, humans, and objects are interchangeable elements of atrocity kitsch. In this interconnected, multivalent universe there is no radical exclusion.

Objects in \textit{Skin Horse} are often plastic, man-made, and artificial and yet interact with sublime planes such as weather, seasons, and landscape. \textit{Skin Horse} imbues its objects with a non-linear relationship with time in a way that is similar to the futurity outlined in Timothy Morton’s \textit{The Ecological Thought}, when our descendants’ “treatment of hyperobjects may seem like reverence to our eyes.”\footnote{Morton, \textit{The Ecological Thought}, 132.} In \textit{Skin Horse}, the horror is even more temporally acute where the apocalypse is perpetually in the present. In this way, the Book of Revelation is a clear intertext for \textit{Skin Horse}. The perpetrator of evil in Revelation is a nebulous, multifaceted presence, but perhaps the most infamous incarnation of evil in the book is the Whore of Babylon. She is introduced in chapter 17, and the description is rich and poetic, though utterly misogynistic: “And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication.”\footnote{Revelation 17:4.} This scene is excessive — she is wearing purple, scarlet, and gold, and she is decked with “precious stones and pearls.” These excesses signal a lack of modesty;
in fact, we are then told that the cup she is holding is “full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication.” There could be no clearer sign that aesthetic indulgence is directly linked to sexual impropriety. As the Whore of Babylon is invoked in Revelation as a warning sign of the coming apocalypse, there is a clear indication that women who attain economic and sexual freedom are imagined as frightening and dangerous. Cronk reverses this misogynistic omen by creating a set of revelations of her own and transmuting the high drama of Revelation into a work of atrocity kitsch. Where the Whore of Babylon has a golden cup filled with abominations, the narrator of Skin Horse says, “I know that can see the strings of glue where the stone was joined to the cheap gold crown and its chain.” By seeing how cheap and man-made the gold crown is, by understanding the constructed nature of this kitsch item, Cronk draws attention to the constructedness of the patriarchal, feudal power systems that the crown represents.

Later in the poem Cronk writes of an analogous item to the golden cup filled with abominations, but in Skin Horse, the vessel is a gym bag:

and they found a gym bag and opened it and in it found many terrible things and it was autumn and whearty and blue and in it many terrible things, the unzipping, the terrible unzipping noise while we were combing

The gym bag mentioned in this passage functions in a similar way to the golden cup of Revelation in that it is a vessel for numinous, unknowable horror. However, this item is a cheap, throwaway, and mass-manufactured plastic object. There is a

24 Ibid.
25 Cronk, Skin Horse. I have replicated the large spaces used by Cronk in the poem here.
26 Ibid.
narrative weight to the image of the gym bag as it is an item that can easily be imagined as an element of a crime or horror story, where typically it would be full of cash, guns, or drugs. The confusion between concrete and abstract here (i.e., the bag is purported to contain “autumn”) echoes the earlier use of the golden cup to contain “fornication.” The gym bag can therefore be read as the atrocity-kitsch version of the Whore of Babylon’s golden cup.