Don’t Touch That, Don’t Go Near That: Cultural Purity and The Acceptance of Corruption

The most effective for me and even the most touching scene of the entire [movie] Psycho, is after the shower murder, when Norman Bates tries to clean the bathroom. I remember clearly when in my adolescence I first saw the film, how deeply I was impressed not only by the length of the scene, it goes on almost for 10 minutes, details of cleansing and so on and so on, but also by the care, meticulousness, how it is done, and also by our spectator’s identification with it. I think that this tells us a lot about the satisfaction of work, of a job well done. Which is not so much to construct something new, but maybe human work at its most elementary, work, as it were, at the zero level, is the work of cleaning the traces of a stain. The work of erasing the stains, keeping at bay this chaotic netherworld, which threatens to explode at any time and engulf us. I think this is the fine sentiment that Hitchcock’s films evoke. It’s not simply that something horrible happens in reality. Something worse can happen which undermines the very fabric of what we experience as reality.

Slavoj Žižek – *The Perverts Guide to The Cinema*

‘The ethical cleansing of our dreams.’

Slavoj Žižek – *The Need to Censor Our Dreams*

Anthropology has often, directly or indirectly, concerned itself with the subject of corruption. If we look at systems of culture through traditional forms of structural analysis (e.g. that of Levi-Strauss) then we can see how various oppositional terms have often been deployed to understand that which is pure on the one hand, and that which is corrupted or dangerous on the other. These terms are evident in eating structures (i.e. the raw/cooked; fresh/stale; edible/inedible), religious structures (e.g. humans/Gods; heaven/hell; life/death; sacred/profane) clothing structures (e.g. covered/uncovered; hidden/exposed; beautiful/ugly; simple/decorated), and health structures (e.g. well/sick; clean/dirty; sterile/germ-infested; hygienic/polluted).

These simple binary terms often help us to make sense of what appear to be diverse and otherwise inexplicable cultural phenomena. Yet in practice it quickly becomes clear that the conclusions to be drawn from this theoretical framework are not as straightforward as they might seem. This is because these various concepts resonate in different ways across very different cultures at different times. Indeed, once we start to consider the complexity of the workings of the oppositional concepts of purity and corruption (along with the danger that corruption implies) in particular, it quickly becomes clear that there is often a two-way dependence that operates between them. In other words, it is often a condition of achieving purity that we already have a recognised state of corruption and it is a condition of corruption that we have a pre-existing notion of how we might oppose this in order to achieve purity. In fact, it may be argued that we have to go through a state of corruption to get to one of potential or actual purity, and that we may only have arrived at a state of corruption because we have already tried to insist too much on making some aspect of culture pure.

So the various concepts above not only have structural polarity, they also reflect forms of acculturation that require that we view them through the master-signifiers of purity and corruption too. In view of this, then, we should recognise that whilst the conceptual ideal of purity is evidently seductive for human beings, it is vitally important that we think through to the end all of the dangers that might result in our willingness to involve ourselves too much in such an abstract ideal. After all, the protecting ‘of abstract constitutions from being subverted’ as Douglas claims, is often our aim (Douglas, 1966/2002, p. xix). However, when purity itself is an abstract constitution that dominates practice we may, ironically, only tame it by the cultural recognition and acceptance of the permanence of corruption. For not to accept this is to be in a situation where we are continually wanting to clear up after ourselves; to purify every thought, idea, emotion, belief, desire, action, ritual, culture, society, and way of being. In short, achieving a practical form of purity itself via some form of ideal or idol (whether this is attempted by means of war, genocide, or racism) becomes the danger. Purity, in short, creates danger, whilst an acceptance of corruption is sometimes the only response.

Whilst it is easy to produce an oppositional list by placing two sets of concepts in columns that appear to reflect some abiding structural totality (see below), in practice there is a certain amount of practical fluidity and movement between the beliefs, desires, actions, rituals, and events that surround each of the two of them. Below is a list of possible oppositional features that on the surface might seem to conform to this intellectual model:

Raw
Edible
Fresh
Unspoiled
Gods
Heaven
Life
Sacred
Purity
Covered
Hidden
Beautiful
Simple
Naked
Female
Chaste
Child
Peace
Healthy
Well
Clean
Sterile
Hygenic

Cooked
Inedible
Stale / Rotting
Spoiled
Humans
Hell
Death
Profane
Danger
Uncovered
Exposed
Ugly
Decorated
Clothed
Male
Sullied
Adult
War
Diseased
Sick
Dirty
Germ-infested
Polluted

To see how some of these oppositional forces move together, or else come apart, take cooking. By cooking certain foods we are thereby corrupting them from what might be seen as their “natural” and raw state. We may think that by engaging in this process that we are thereby purifying them and making them edible. Yet, at the same time, we know that by cooking certain foods we are at the same time purifying them by killing certain unwanted bacteria that might otherwise be dangerous. So that which is pure and that which is corrupt can cut across the nature (the raw)/culture (the cooked) distinction. Naturally produced food (say, the food that might drop from trees) can be seen as pure or as corrupt depending on social and cultural circumstances. The same is true of culturally produced food (e.g. that which has been processed in some way). Food, then, can be seen as intrinsically pure or intrinsically corrupt in its “natural” state; or else purifiable or corruptible due to some cultural process – it just depends on the set of circumstances.

Moving down our table a little, we can see that the same sort of point holds in the case of religious practices. The journey of the imperfect and corruptible human being (via the purificational practices of religious discourses and activities) is only rendered ready for a transfer to an uncorrupted and incorruptible after-life (at least in many religions) in the face of the putrefaction (and corruption of the body) following death. For in death there is a literal corruption and decay of the body that leads (so the religious may say) to a spiritual transfer from an Earthy existence to a place where the company of an all-knowing and wholly good God can be enjoyed. Or else, to take a slightly different and more contemporary example of this, consider the Muslim woman in the burka. Here we are told of the obvious dangers of potential or actual sexual corruption (of women or men) that might result from the bodily exposure of the female form. Here the thought is that corruptible or corrupting “male” gaze needs to be countered. And thus it is that the purity of the “virgin” body (perhaps along with the purity of what may be taken as desexualised female thinking and feeling) is socially compelled to hide behind a veil of cloth. That which is hidden is preserved in its purity, and is thereby made safe – at least for the time being. For the actual or potential corruption from the outside in this case is always present. And so it is condition of the retained purity of the woman by being clothed in this way that there is the constant potential of corruption from the outside that continues to compels its existence. (1)

The thought that we are required to remove corruption in a wider sense is evident from the various ways in which there is an attempt to purify the dangerous pleasures of Capitalist consumerism. In this case numerous well-known forms of contamination and danger are tackled – usually without any seeming effort on our part. This is an idea familiar to all those who have read the Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek. On his view we have entered a world in which we expect, and appear to get, pleasure with the corrupting, dangerous, or unpleasant elements removed. Thus following his lead we might identify the following as examples (here I have felt free to add some of my own):

– Beer without alcohol (e.g. Bavaria Premium Non-alcoholic Malt)

– Coffee without caffeine (e.g. Nescafé Classic Decaf)

– Sodas without sugar (e.g. Coke Zero)

– Yoghurt without fat (e.g. Total 0% Fat Greek Yoghurt)

But things don’t stop there. Other aspects of the culture have been overtaken with the same idea.

This gives us such things as:

– War without casualties (e.g. drones and laser guided missiles)

– Learning without trying (e.g. the ‘MBA in 80 Minutes’)

– Dating without exertion (e.g. via Internet dating sites such as OKcupid.com)

– Work without boredom (i.e. work, in much of the West at least, is now presented as being “fun”)

– Sex without inefficiency (e.g. via various advanced “sex” manuals such as the classic book ‘The Joy of Sex’)

– Friends without human face-to-face interaction (e.g. Facebook)

– Smoking without cancer (e.g. E-cigarettes)

– Comedy without offence (e.g. via various forms of socially sanctioned political correctness)

– Luxury without expense (e.g. Glamour Salons: “we treat luxury as standard”)

What do these attitudes to purity and danger add up to then? What, taken together, might these tendencies towards a purging of corruption mean? Here is one answer: the thought that the best human ideology is one that constantly relies on the idea there might be a form of purified rational completeness that will provide happiness and well-being for us (2). The problem is that all the while this answer is repeated human beings will be in trouble. And that is because we need finally to recognise that that which is uncorrupted (or pure) relies, both theoretically or practically, on that which is, has been, will be, or could be, corrupted. And that which is, has been, will be, or could be, corrupted relies on that which is deemed pure.

The corrupted and the uncorrupted, the pure and the tainted / dirty / dangerous / impure are not just polar concepts, they are polar (and inter-dependent) forms of culturation. In short, they often provide a practical and embodied structural contrast and equilibrium that helps to explain various diverse sets of beliefs, desires, feelings, actions, and social and institutional attitudes. (Sometimes it is as if there is a continuing social process whereby infection is followed by purification, and purification is followed by infection.) Whilst humans may aim to achieve a stable and cleansed ontology and concomitant social reality – which, is sometimes, dealt with in current intellectual culture by the production of a tabulated series of classifications – the truth is that instability and corruption will intervene. Theory and practice, along with new processes, events, things, thoughts, beliefs and desires, inevitably act as both purifiers and corruptors.

Conclusion

With the world (and the things in it) there always comes a chaotic netherworld that seeks to undermine it; and this means that there is always a need to clean, purify, and clear up. In view of this, then, we might end with a simple question: What is the lack in purity that we always seem to need to discover in the world? The lack results perhaps from the fact that purity cannot sustain itself. Purity is inherently unstable. And so it needs, and thus brings with it, some form of corruption. In other words, for something to become pure or to be purified we need to find corruption either in it or outside it. The purity of ambition in some of us is constant though, and this results in us wishing constantly to purge corruption in its various forms (3). But it is a purge that, deep down, we know that we can never complete. We want the world to exist at ‘zero level’, to use Zizek’s phrase. However, the ‘zero level’ is that which never has, and never will have, corruption in it. Corruption is the active agent that breeds action, reaction, and interaction. It makes things happen. It represents the constant human need for there to be something wrong in the world, or the need for there to be something not quite right about it. We can never have purity without corruption or danger being there, lurking in the background.

**Footnotes**

(1) Alternatively, when it comes to clothing, there is also the opposite thought, which is that we should cover up certain bodies not because they are pure but because they are impure and therefore might corrupt others. This applies to the attitudes of those in the Victorian past who believed that some form of bodily deformity or abnormality should be hidden by coverings when in the public realm lest it somehow act to debase others. The famous case of John Merrick, the “Elephant Man” is instructive in this regard.

(2) An example of this obsession with purified rational completeness might be collecting. The cultures of collecting seem to pre-suppose the idea that we could one day have a complete (and thus pure) set of whatever it is that is being collected: stamps, coins, beer mats, decorative plates, records, etc.

(3) The seduction of purity as an idea might come partly from its quasi-embodiment in the master-signifiers of God, the supreme leader, or of Nature itself. This raises some questions: If God, the supreme leader, or our sense of Nature is pure and complete then might it be that human beings can be made complete and pure too? Why is it that religious or political conversions have the aim of completeness and purity? Wherein lies the uneasiness at human incompleteness and impurity? It is this yearning for purity (and the wish to destroy the impure) that also stands for some form of constant desire for totality? Is this the basis of the ideological justification of mental manipulation, fear, terrorism, murder, etc.? Do self-help books perform the same purifying function, but in more of a secular way? Will our sense of self feel incomplete if we don’t try to revolutionise life and thereby gain the purity of authenticity? Is purity a form of containment that can’t contain itself?

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