

# The Consumption of 'Touching' Images

## Reflections on Mimetic 'Wildness' in the West

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This article examines several mimetic manifestations of excessive 'wildness' in Western societies and cultures. It focuses on their appearance in novels, (horror)films, theatrical plays, ballets, operas, pop music, videogames, digital highways and the metaphysical funfair attraction Virtual Reality. The hypothesis is launched that one cannot properly understand the outburst of 'wildness' in these different genres without paying attention to the tabooization of touching others whom one wants to love or redress. Through the consumption of 'wild' products one remains in *con-tact* with an essential dimension of the self. Finally it is argued one should systematically study the relation between 'wild' and 'civilized' phenomena in order to avoid an overemphasis on our degree of civilization.

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“Wer heute auf sich aufmerksam machen will, tut gut daran, Grenzen zu überschreiten. Am besten die des 'guten Geschmacks.' Doch was schockiert uns denn noch, nach Benetton-Werbekampagnen, bei denen ein sterbender Aids-kranker oder ein Mafia-Opfer in der Blutlache den Absatz von Freizeitmode in die Höhe treibt?” (Stern 42, 14.10.93)

“And this is the *métier* of the anthropologist. He has to break down the barriers of race and cultural diversity; he has to find the human being in the savage; he has to discover the primitive in the highly sophisticated Westerner of today, and, to see that the animal, and the divine as well, are to be found everywhere in man” (Malinowski 1966:vii).

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Already for some time I have been trying to develop what I have called 'the anthropology of the wild [in the] West' (cf. Verrrips 1993a). Actually this means that I attempt to chart, and gain insight in, the 'dark' sides of Western civilization. One of my starting points is that ethnologists, anthropologists, and sociologists up till

now have paid too little attention to the 'uncivilized' or 'wild' facets of Western societies and cultures in past and present. However, the number of social scientists involved in mapping out and analyzing these intriguing facets is growing (cf., for example, Duerr 1988, 1990, 1993; Zulaika 1988, 1993; Zijdeveld 1991; Feldman 1991; Mestrovic 1993; Port 1994; Bax 1995).<sup>2</sup> It won't do to close our eyes for the 'wild' reverse of the proces of civilization in past and present as well as for the presence of 'wild' men and women *among* and, more importantly, *in* our forbears and each of us. For the civilization process does not push aside 'wildness,' but rather runs parallel to the history of that 'wildness,' to its manifestations in an actual and mimetic, that is, fictive re-presented sense (cf. Bartra 1991:120; 1994:145).<sup>3</sup>

As yet I see two reasons why it may be very relevant to focus on the 'uncivilized' facets of Western societies and cultures. Firstly, not only European history, but also our present time abounds with gruesome manifestations of 'wild' or 'uncivilized' behavior. Secondly, in the West there currently appears a proliferation of collective re-presentations of and fantasies about

'uncivilized' people who with pleasure break all sorts of sexual taboos and act very violently in different fields, in other words people who do not at all respect the physical integrity of other persons' bodies. Such fantasies are not only encountered in and consumed through such classical genres as (biblical) myths, fairy tales, folk narratives, novels or the art of painting and sculpture, but also through theatrical and opera performances, pop-music, movies in cinemas and on TV, and, recently, also through videogames in gambling dens or sitting-rooms, CD-Is and CD-ROMs and, last but not least, all sorts of digital highways and virtual reality machines. As a result of technological progress the number of media through which one can receive notice of, be confronted with, and even be actively involved in this kind of mimetic manifestations of 'wildness' increases rapidly. It seems that technology offers a variety of new ways to make use of leisure time.<sup>4</sup>

It is striking that to a large extent this pastime is dominated by the supply and consumption of particular collective re-presentations and fantasies. As I already remarked they pertain to two areas: excessive sex and excessive violence or a combination of the two, in other words, *eros* and *thanatos*, matters as old as humanity. This brings me to a short clarification of my terminology, in particular my use of the terms 'wild' and 'wildness' as opposed to 'civilized.'<sup>5</sup> For me 'wildness' in a formal etic sense refers to taboo-breaking or excessive (collective) re-presentations and fantasies, especially with regard to sex and/or violence, and their enactment in mimetic as well as actual ways. This means that the particular emic content of 'wildness' in a mimetic and actual sense is context dependent and has to be studied from case to case. Thus, I use the term in a sensitizing sense, in the same way as its counterpart 'civilized.' 'Wildness' so conceived can be a very patterned and far from chaotic, unstructured phenomenon. In other words, there can be a lot of method or system in the 'wildness.' The main question this paper will address is why people nowadays seem to be inclined to increasingly produce and consume all sorts of 'wild' products of a mimetic nature. But first I shall illustrate how 'wildness' currently crops

up in novels, strips, theatre and opera performances, (video)movies and videoclips, the hardrock and heavy metal scene, videogames and the farthest corners of the digital and virtual landscape, in short, in the recreational (techno)sphere. Next I shall try to explain the enormous popularity of the excessive representation of sex and violence as recreative means of people who usually regard themselves as considerably or even hyper-'civilized' and who would probably become rather angry if one would dare to compare them – to take a far away cross-street – with the members of a so-called 'primitive' or 'savage' tribe in New Guinea. In my interpretation I will mainly concentrate on the sort of experience that is at issue in the consumption of these representations. I will not deal in this article with all sorts of actual 'wildness,' that is excessive violent behavior resulting in really hurting the physical integrity of others.

## 'Wild' products and their consumption

Let me start my short tour with a recent literary product in which the reverse of everything that borders upon civilization has been put into words in utmost detail: Bret Easton Ellis' best-seller *American Psycho*. In that novel we encounter in a bewildering yet fascinating fashion a modern version of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde in the shape of the New York yuppie Patrick Bateman, who has taken to tear into pieces, barbecue or cut up people, above all beautiful young women (so-called 'hard bodies'), or to kill them in other brutal ways. *American Psycho* is a full-fledged, modern variant of the work of De Sade, a work which, by the way, still is extremely popular and which forms the source of inspiration for the manufacture of all sorts of products of the imagination from strips to movies (cf. *Der Spiegel* 4.06.90). In a magnificent essay about *American Psycho* the anthropologist Marina de Vries says the following:

"Ellis describes the events with so much detail that your heart starts beating faster and the need to vomit is closer than laughter. You quickly read further to take up the thread of daily dawdling with relief and feel almost blessed.

*American Psycho* is not just a book. It is terribly shocking, hallucinating and exciting. (...) Ellis makes us face the facts and shows us who we are: civilized monsters" (1993:114 – translation JV).

The monstrous in Ellis' novel is shocking, but attractive and exciting at the same time.<sup>6</sup>

The same can be said with regard to strips-for-adults-only, which often excel through bizarre sex, not rarely in combination with a considerable sort of gruesome, graphic violence. But also in cartoons for children one may encounter forms of terrible violence applied to the human body which are hardly inferior to the violence exposed in adults' strips. A good example forms the sticker album *The Sloppy Slobs* for which my neighbor's young sons recently bought plates with much enthusiasm from the authorized tobacconist in the neighborhood. These plates offer a large series of illustrations of ill-treated, disintegrated, scalped, exploded, fried, cut up and pierced children's bodies.

A true treasure-house of extreme violations of existing taboos with regard to sex and violence are movies, above all the genre of the horror film that became the vogue in the 1930s (cf. Twitchell 1985; Tudor 1989). In the last fifteen years this genre has reached a hitherto unknown popularity and there seems to come no end to the inventivity of the makers as to let blood flow and bodies transform or disintegrate in a monstrous way, often after being sexually abused intensively. One common feature of many horror films is the almost unbridled violence towards the human body which they show extensively (cf. Verrips 1993b). Here emerge the ultimate antipodes of the 'civilized' Westerner<sup>7</sup> who knows to master his impulses and treats his neighbors decently. Currently, for example, there is much talk about what has been called the phenomenon of the 'nouvelle violence' in films. Who is not familiar with the discussions about Oliver Stones' movie *Natural Born Killers* in which a young couple sends more than fifty persons into death and about the taboo-breaking films of the Ex-South African Ian Kerkhof which depicts utmost extreme forms of violence and sexuality? Other examples of extremely violent recent movies are, among oth-

ers, *C'est Arrivé Près de Chez Vous*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Henry*, *Portrait of a Serial Killer*, *La Haine* and *The Doom Generation*.<sup>8</sup> About the maker of *Pulp Fiction* Quentin Tarantino the journalist Kristine Kruttschnitt remarked:

"Seine Fusion von Subkulturgut und Gangsterfilm trifft wie die Faust das Auge einer Zuschauer-Generation, die gelangweilt ist von den immergleichen, immersüssen Märchen aus der Traumfabrik" (*Stern* 44, 1994 – emphasis JV).

Recently theatrical performances have also come up with seminal, taboo-breaking depictions of sex and violence, in short, the exposition of awe-inspiring naked and/or destructed bodies. In this context the so-called 'faeces dramas' of the Austrian dramatist Werner Schwab<sup>9</sup> have to be mentioned immediately, namely *Overweight unimportant: without form*, *The presidents*, *Holocaust*, or *my liver is senseless* and *My dog-mouth* (translation JV). In the last years, these shocking plays were performed in the Netherlands by theatrical company *De Trust*. In the first play *Overweight unimportant* a couple is raped, murdered atrociously and devoured by a number of horrible pub-crawlers. In the *Cultural Supplement (CS)* of the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* (26.08.94) Joyce Roodnat wrote the following about the public watching the play:

"Some people continued listening while averting their eyes, others left the hall ghastly...many a person, however, could not help but be *watching and listening* – tremulously but with fascination – to where horror and lunacy led" (translation and emphasis JV).

About the tenor of the play *The Presidents* Pieter Kottman stated in November 1993: "It is comparable with that of *Without Form*: Man is a wolf towards man and apparent civilization always loses on the inclination towards violence" (translation JV). But next to Schwab there are similar playwrights<sup>10</sup>, for example, the Flemish dramatist Franz Marijnen, who transformed two narratives of Bataille (*Histoire de l'Oeil* and *Le Mort*) into one play (titled

*Bataille/bataille*) for the *Noord Nederlands Toneel* (NNT) in 1992. Central to that play is the dark side of eroticism or how voluptuousness can lead to violence and murder. In an interview Marijnen remarked that he had read Bataille's stories "with increasing unbelief, with a feeling as if my intestines were torn out. All of a sudden everything bourgeois morals prescribed were thoroughly turned upside down" (*NRC Handelsblad* 9.10.92, translation JV). And this he wanted to show in a shocking manner in his stage version of these narratives. Shortly before the performance he remarked:

"Our performance has to slide on without anything being able to stop it, as it were, so that we break through the membrane of interdictions. (...) If I together with my frolic dogs, as I call the actors caressingly, can transmit such a sort of emotion I am a happy person" (*Ibid.*).

In this context the scandalizing work *The Law of the Remains* by the American stage-manager of Iranian origin Reza Abdoh, in which next to Andy Warhol the repulsive serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer also figures,<sup>11</sup> may not remain unmentioned. During the performance in the Netherlands the public was almost literally called to join a massacre, for

"The offender scoops hands full of blood out of a bucket he brought with him and as a wild animal he tears into pieces the liver he collects from that same bucket" (*NRC Handelsblad* 5.05.93, translation JV).

In Germany, where the play was performed shortly before, things went probably even more 'wild,' witness the following quote from *Stern*:

"Als Kirchenglocken die Vorstellung einläuten, beginnen für die Zuschauer 90 gehirnerschütternde Minuten. Da rammt sich eine Darstellerin einen silbernen Vibrator in die Vagina. Ihrem Mitspieler wird der Lauf eines Revolvers in den Anus getrieben. Auf zwei Bildschirmen ist eine Autopsie in Grossaufnahme zu sehen. Und mit dem Dezibel-Level eines Speed-Metal-Konzerts rotzt eine glatzköpfige Amazone Rap-Vulgarismen: 'Lick me, stick me, prick me,

smash me, rape me, beat me, eat me, fuck me.' Besucher werden in Geiselhaft genommen. Mit barschen Kommandos treiben Ordner die Menge zwischen den vier Bühnen hin und her. Und immer wieder stürzen nackte, blutverspritzende Schauspieler ins Publikum" (nr. 23 3.06.93).<sup>12</sup>

The work of American choreographer Lisa Marcus who is working in the Netherlands suggests that ballet, too, is in the grip of the urge to shift boundaries. Her ballets *Overlust* and *S* drip with eroticism and violence, which is no great wonder if one knows that like Franz Marijnen she received her inspiration from Bataille.

"In theater-dance-productions by Lisa Marcus dancers are to commit themselves. They survey..impudently and sometimes stark naked the boundaries of eroticism" (*Volkscrant* 11.02.94, translation JV).

Recently Peter Greenaway, together with the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen, extended the opera repertoire, wherein of old sex and violence play an important role, with *Rosa, a Horse Drama*. In this modern opera there is much "explicit presentation of cruelty and corporeality" in a way that may elsewhere have caused an enormous scandal. Raymond van den Boogaard answered the question whether Greenaway's first opera contained enough violent sex:

"Indeed! Opera connoisseurs even assure that one of the highlights in this respect, a naked Esmaralda screaming in pains who is taken anally by [her husband] Rosa on stage, in good visibility, forms a primeur in the history of opera" (*CS NRC Handelsblad* 28.10.94, translation JV).

It strikes me that after all Greenaway confronts the public of the opera house with no other images than those which are shown day and night in the porno cinemas and theaters in the center of Amsterdam. I see him as a 'noble' pornographer who cleverly makes use of artistic genres and entourages in order to confront people with what fascinates them over and over again: sex and violence.<sup>13</sup>

In the world of popular music, too, one may notice continuous attempts to shift and surpass boundaries, especially in rock music. This happens through song texts, covers of records and CDs, videoclips as well as the performances given by bands and the names with which they adorn themselves. Especially in the heavy metal scene which, by the way, consists of various subgenres, there are cases that are telling in this respect. In this scene song titles as *Killing is my business ... and business is good*, *Some heads are gonna roll*, *Bring your daughter to the slaughter*, *Eat the rich*, and *Shoot to thrill* are quite normal.<sup>14</sup> On covers of records and CDs one may come across extremely bloody images of people destroyed by biting, cutting or sawing. For instance, the group *Cannibal Corpse* came up with a CD depicting slaughtered children on the cover. The splatter-metal-group *Gwar*, which toured Europe some years ago and also came to Amsterdam, confronted the public with an atrocious horror show, in which it was completely spattered with (imitation) bodily fluids such as blood and sperm.<sup>15</sup>

“Seminal emissions last for minutes and the (menstruation-)blood squirts into the hall for meters (...) The dancer Slymenstra Hymen stabs somebody’s eyes with her pointed Bra and the other musicians are enthusiastically tearing off arms, heads and legs (...) Unsavouriness reaches a climax when a female doll appears on a turning wheel who is assaulted by the singer Balsac the Jaws of Death with his knotty penis” (*NRC Handelsblad* 27.08.92, translation JV).

Someone who did his utmost best to really overcome all taboos pertaining to sex and violence was the punkrocker GG Allin who died in 1993 from an overdose. At one time this man, to whom it became a habit to masturbate and go to stool on stage and throw his faeces into the public, wrote: “I want to go as far as I can to break laws and make blood flow” (*Het Parool* 11.12.93).<sup>16</sup> Fortunately his plan to commit suicide on stage and take part of his public with him into death – a reason why some of his fans accompanied him to any place – was not realized.

These cases are admittedly extreme, but it is

my conviction that they reveal much about the other side of the civilization coin. A fascinating phenomenon in this context, which amuses a great number of adolescents (not to speak of adults), is that of the MTV-video-jockeys Beavis and Butt-Head, two teeners with pimples, who continuously give evidence of a complete disrespect with regard to existing norms pertaining to sex and taboos concerning the use of violence. Talking about amusement: what should one think about the immense stream of videogames whose only goal it seems to be to shoot to pulp as many supposed enemies – in human or non-human shape – as possible and ... to help its consumers recreate themselves. If one does not wish to make use of it in gambling-dens, whose number has been rising rapidly in the big cities over the last years, after some investments one can do it at home with a gameboy or with a disk or CD-Rom on the PC-screen. The Japanese companies Nintendo and Sega undercut each other in bringing this sort of games on the market. This competition seems to involve large sums, for there is evidently a great demand for games through which one can manifest oneself as a dexterous destroyer of living and lifeless matter. There is a great number of magazines on the market which inform the consumer of videogames about the latest violent game of skill, for example the magazine *Sega Power*. On the cover of the December-issue of 1994 one can read: “Bloody ... violence WARNING DO NOT turn to page 16.” Of course the first page I turned up was page 16, and what could one read there? Among other things the following:

“*Doom* is a stalking, raggedly intense meditation on blind, ugly violence. I have under my control an impossibly pumped-up ... fearless BLOKE who has taken it upon his ... muscular self to descend into a nightmarish pit ... to shoot some rather unspeakably evil creatures repeatedly in the forehead.”

It would only require little effort to present here an endless list of examples of violent games with appropriate texts similar to the one presented above, but I contend that this quote is sufficient.<sup>17</sup>

In case one is not satisfied with the possibil-

ity to chase opponents to the other world on screen, since a short time one can also enter laser labyrinths, in which one can dress in a particular suit and indulge in chasing and killing others with laser pistols.<sup>18</sup> This can be considered as a modern version of the old game of playing with soldiers, a game with which above all little boys amused themselves before this type of technological breakthrough. However, a striking difference between gameboys and computer games on the one hand and tin soldiers and tanks, and plastic stenguns on the other is that the former do not allow its user to employ much fantasy in being destructive because they are completely programmed in this respect. In the same way as one can witness the destruction of bodies on TV both in reality and fancy, these new games demonstrate this in detail, and with smell and color. The main difference between watching such things on TV and being actively involved in such games is that in the latter case one is the cause of the destruction whilst one consumes it passively in the former.

Finally I would like to briefly go into manifestations of 'wildness' in the enormously expanding cyberspace and the world of virtual reality. In recent times, quite a few travellers in the cyberspace have not only used the diverse digital 'highways' for decent and 'civilized' purposes, but also – and as it seems increasingly – for the exploration of one's less 'civilized' sides. And we find that, even in this completely new space, which – as the Dutch comedians Koot & Bie have shown so magnificently – one can enter from the bed, the old familiar phenomena reappear: perverse sex and bizarre violence. Internet, currently one of the most important digital highways harbours dark rooms in which 'wildness' reigns supreme. Coen van Zwol wrote about this phenomenon:

"Filthy talk is all the vogue. Recently the paper *Wired* presented an overview on the ten most popular news-groups on the Internet. Among the top seven four were about sex, with half a million to 370,000 readers. There are all sorts of sex groups: bondage, watersport fetishism and bestialities... Often under pseudonym such matters are discussed as the use of sanding

machines in masturbation, or anal sex with German sheep-dogs" (*NRC Handelsblad* 13.08.94, translation JV).

According to the journalist Francisco van Jole who regularly reports about what happens on that digital highway Internet is "worse than marquis De Sade" (translation JV). He called the newsgroup *alt.tasteless* a "musty dump area" in which

"... is discussed what nobody dares to say in society. Shit and piss form a permanent part of the daily menu, but also fantasies about sex with corpses, ill-treatment of epileptics, all sorts of sacrilege, and the consumption of vomit, to give just a few prudent examples" (*Volkskrant* 20.06.94, translation JV).

Thus, also in the cyberspace the maltreated naked and destroyed body appears in all vehemence and there, too, people amuse themselves by writing about it and/or looking at it.<sup>19</sup> In the Netherlands a certain Mo Vollebregt manages the company *Intensive Care Computer-informatie BV* through which it is possible to enjoy sex by computer in a way similar to PTT sex-lines (*VPRO-gids* 39 24/30.09.94).<sup>20</sup> A quickly expanding phenomenon, at least if we may believe Van Jole, is 'digital turtling' or entering into a 'net relationship' with a 'fellow-traveller' in the cyberspace. For example, via Internet Relay Chat people know to arouse each other to large heights; electro-romanticism flourishes, because people exchange intimate things which one would not utter easily elsewhere (*Volkskrant* 9.07.94).<sup>21</sup> According to Van Jole next to anonymity this is due to the absence of "any stimulation of the senses." I shall shortly make clear that I do not agree with this.

A field in which technicians are busy to approximate reality as closely as possible and to offer users utmostly complete experiences is that of virtual reality. Also in this field violence and sex appear in a way similar to the genres mentioned earlier on. At the moment there are two types of VR: one which one can experience via a stereohelmet, a glove and even a complete dress (cybersuit), and one which one can experience in a videodrome. Especially in the case

of the first variant all sorts of laboratory experiments take place with regard to sexual stimulation. For example, there are attempts to accompany the process of *looking* at three-dimensional images of beautiful (naked) men and women with the adequate *feeling* of sexual arousal by way of a costume full of refined *sensors*.

“By way of a helmet with glasses and headphones the user is led into the virtual world visually; on the screen a partner appears, whose image is based on a photo model, a film star or a true sweetheart. Gloves (*datagloves*) and a penis quiver or teledildo are to do the rest. Stimuli are passed on electrically under the *datasuit* to the body part concerned and diverge from maximally 3,5 volt for a slight touch to maximally 49 volt for the lovers of a more hard approach” (Spaink *De Groene* 20.07.94, translation JV).

What we face here is an extremely intricate technical manifestation of a mechanics of masturbation, an ingenious combination of bodily lust experience and technological genius. Let me, by the way, remark, that one reaches here the fascinating field of the sexual relation(ship) between human beings and things (above all machines), or, put differently, the mechanization of sex and the erotization of the machine.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas in the case mentioned above a single person entertains himself or herself, there are currently also experiments with persons in cyber- or datasuits, who try to arouse each other at a distance by way of electronic impulses which are evoked by computers and passed on via modems and telephones (Spaink *De Groene* 20.07.94). In 1990 Howard Rheingold wrote an article titled *Teledildonics: Reach out and touch someone*:

“Twenty years from now, when portable teledilders are ubiquitous, people will use them to have sexual experiences with *other people*, at a distance, in combinations and configurations undreamt of by precybernetic voluptuaries. Through the synthesis of virtual reality technology and telecommunication networks, you will be able to reach out and touch someone ... in

ways humans have never before experienced” (1990:52).

He advocated to call the technology necessary to develop this experience “tactile telepresence.” However, the development of this sort of technology is still in its infancy.<sup>23</sup> With this I have finished my brief overview of mimetic manifestations of ‘wildness’ in a number of recreative genres or media, ranging from novels to VR.<sup>24</sup>

## Discussion

It is striking, that again and again these manifestations seem to concern the same two matters: (excessive) sexuality and violence, the manhandled naked and awfully destructed body, or *eros* and *thanatos*. All the time it is the ‘wild’ ‘caress’ of and ‘blow’ on the body, so to speak, which fascinates people so much that they entertain themselves by *looking at*, and *listening to*, these manifestations. This fascination is shared by young and old, men and women, and people of all classes, though not always to the same degree and intensity. At most, they differ from each other with respect to the medium through which they prefer to consume the ‘wild’ ‘caress’ and ‘blow’: film or opera, novel or game-boy, laserlabyrinth or VR-helmet. In a review of Paglia’s book *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* the critics Gracie & Zarkov postulate the following:

“We sometimes imagine ourselves to be extraterrestrial anthropologists examining the shards of Western Art. What to make of the recurring motif of sex and violence exfoliating through its artifacts?”

And their answer is:

“Jung called it the Shadow – the repressed biological energy of sexual and aggressive drives... The Shadow looms over history, manifesting itself in war, political oppression, and sexual violence. But in the realm of the artist, the Shadow can defuse and amuse, enlighten and instruct” (Gracie & Zarkov 1991:118).

And they are in favor of the latter, because in this way people would be prevented from committing actual misdeeds; fantasizing over sexual outrages, for example, would prevent that they take place in reality. Gracie & Zarkov's idea is very close to Lévi-Strauss' on myths, for according to him in myths extreme positions are represented in order to explain that in practice they are untenable (Levi-Strauss 1967:30).<sup>25</sup>

A somewhat different view on the fascination with (perverse) sex and (heart-rending) violence, or the 'uncivilized' 'caress' of and 'blow' on the body, is offered by Bataille who inspired quite a few artists as we saw above. For Bataille asserted: "The prohibition exists in order to be violated" (1993:81, translation JV). On the one hand there are all sorts of taboos to warrant the physical integrity of human beings, on the other hand the very existence of these taboos entices the lust to transgress them and to violate the physical integrity of others in order to escape from the negative emotions associated with these taboos and to enjoy the positive emotions associated with trespassing them. Viewed in this way it is possible to interpret the excessive mimetic re-presentations of sex and violence which I sketched earlier as surrogates which are to lead people back to a sort of emotion from which they have become alienated.<sup>26</sup>

However fascinating I find this view, still there is something missing; there is need to extend and aggravate it. Before I start to outline this, I would first like to briefly deal with the question as to what the specific ways in which the mistreated naked and destroyed body currently figures in various genres and media can teach us about the nature of Western societies. For according to Mary Douglas the characteristics of the social body which people form together influence the way in which they perceive the physical body.

"The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other" (1982:65).

If this is correct, then the frequent appearance of the ill-treated naked and destructed body in all sorts of recreative genres reflects a particular view of society: namely as an extremely fragile and vulnerable whole which can easily be raped, dislocated and destroyed by a number of very 'uncivilized' 'caresses' and 'blows.' Of course, such a view is embedded in a particular context which only arises under certain societal circumstances, circumstances under which people fear for the maintenance of their own physical integrity. Reasoned in this way, it would be possible to relate the mimetical manifestations of excessive 'wildness' which I dealt with in the last instance to fundamental uncertainties regarding social life in Western societies (cf. Carroll 1990:213). The attraction of these manifestations could then be attributed to the fact that through their consumption people are able to face their own anxieties via the mechanism of projection.<sup>27</sup> Whether this leads to catharsis or rather to an increase of fear is a question with which I do not want to deal here because it would lead us too far off.

Let me now try to indicate what I consider indispensable to gain deeper insight into the fascinating phenomenon that, as I noted above, there is a steady extension of the sort of media with which people entertain themselves in their pastime and yet again and again they fall back on the very ancient themes of sex and violence and an excessive trespassing of the taboos surrounding them. Since I remarked that it would be possible to supplement Bataille's view, I want to end my account by indicating how to do so.

I think that it is important to realize that among the five sensual capacities distinguished in the West, that is, vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch, the so-called 'distance senses' of seeing and hearing prevail over the so-called 'proximity senses' of smelling, tasting and touching (cf. Howes 1991; Synnott 1993:128 ff.; Falk 1994:11). While Westerners were predominantly audio-oral before the invention of bookprinting, afterwards they became increasingly audio-visually oriented. In the West, the experience of the world and everything it contains went more and more by eye and ear. We consider what we hear less reliable than what we see and our



ideas about knowledge are closely related to visual perception: we look at something, develop insights, see, have a view or perspective, etcetera (cf. Fabian 1983: ch. 4). Moreover, taking photographs and making videofilms holds a central place in our lives. Among all sensual experiences in our culture the touch is the least valued and feared most.<sup>28</sup> Westerners (and especially people of Christian background) are not in favor of tactility, neither in the positive nor negative sense. As far as that goes our proxemic rules have become very strict. The sexual touch of others except one's own partner (at least if it is not of a rapelike nature) has become a taboo, in the same way as the aggressive touch of others who threaten our feeling of self-esteem, our honor or our physical integrity. Caressing and beating bodies except one's own is generally speaking surrounded by a great number of rules, which one should better respect in order to avoid difficulties with neighbors, the government or both. In the context of showing affection as well as in the context of assuming power, the 'touch' got increasingly ostracized.<sup>29</sup> And this happened despite the fact that the touch can be seen as the most fundamental sensual experience, because it is directly related to the reproduction and protection (possibly by destruction) of the human species (cf. Montagu 1971). The touch also is the most fundamental of all senses, because the four others can be reduced to it, that is, they can be seen as variants of the touch. Seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting are in the last instance nothing else than tactile processes.

I would like to propose that there is a direct relationship between the imprisonment of the actual 'touch' in Western societies (that is, the tabooization of touching others whom one wants to love or redress) *on the one hand*, and, *on the other*, the recurrence of the two manifestations of mimetic 'wildness' in people's leisure time which I signalled earlier on, namely the 'wild' 'caress' and 'blow' by which the naked body can transform into a terribly destroyed body. In my view it is possible to restrict people's inborn inclination to caress or beat others to some extent, but not in such a way that this inclination ceases to manifest itself at all. The stronger the restrictions, the more ingeniously this incli-

nation seems to crop up through other channels, for example, via the production and consumption of mimetic audiovisual manifestations of sexual and aggressive 'wildness' in order to be *touched by it*.<sup>30</sup> What one is about to lose (in the case of children) or has lost already through learning (in the case of adults) – namely the possibility to touch uninhibitedly in order to love or attack or even to destroy as an act of self-preservation – is retrieved through the intermediation (consumption) of novels, films, theatrical plays, ballets, operas, concerts, videogames, digital highways and the metaphysical funfair attraction Virtual Reality.<sup>31</sup> Thereby one remains in *contact* with an essential dimension of the self which is for social reasons not permissible in its rude, uncultivated form, but which can never be denied or even abolished. In this way, albeit temporarily, we learn to become masters of the world in which we live and are enabled to get rid of the alienation resulting from the imprisonment of our ambivalent tactile needs. I am convinced that the emergence of the naked and destroyed body, of an exuberant *eros* and a horrible *thanatos*, in all sorts of contexts is related to Westerners' desire to not only better *grasp* the world in which they live, but also to get it better into their *grip* than is the case now and ... to be *touched* by it. No civilization without its own sort of recreative (and, alas, actual) 'wildness.' In the West this is above all a mimetic tactile 'wildness' (mediated by the eye and the ear) in the field of sex (the naked body) and aggression (the destructed body), because here the idea prevails that only these persons are really 'civilized' who have learned to keep their hands to themselves, also in their social relations with others in their leisure time.

## Notes:

1. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Congress *Vrijetijd: tussen genot, verbod en verleiding* held in Rotterdam 15–16 December 1994 and at the Fifth Interdisciplinary Conference on Research in Consumption *Learning to Consume* at the Department of European Ethnology Lund University 18–20 August 1995. I want to thank the participants of the latter conference, especially Ayse Caglar, for their critical but constructive comments. I am indebted to Jaap Lengkeek for stimulating remarks, to John Wiersma for directing my attention to a lot of interesting sources and to Birgit Meyer for her indispensable help in clarifying my 'pensée sauvage' with regard to the 'Wild West.'
2. In other disciplines, such as history, English, (comparative) literature, and philosophy the interest in the 'wild' side of Western civilization now and in the recent past also seems to be growing (cf., for example, Twitchell 1985, 1989; Showalter 1991; Massumi 1993; Warner 1994 and Boomkens 1996).
3. A very interesting development is that several epigones of the sociologist Norbert Elias, who became famous for his study (1969) of the civilization process in Europe, recently started with research on processes of 'decivilization.' See, for example, Mennell (1989) and Bax (1995). For a long time they were not interested in the 'wild' reverse of the process of civilization. For them it formed a kind of residual category, with which they hardly ever dealt as far as the present was concerned and which they pushed to the background and projected back into time in a fashion common among evolutionary anthropologists at the end of the nineteenth century. Typical for these epigones is that they see particular manifestations of 'decivilization' and 'barbarization' as a kind of temporary backsliding and not as structural phenomena running parallel to the civilization process as such or, in other words, never absent uncivilized or 'wild' 'counterpoints' in society and culture.
4. Recently the Dutch philosopher Boomkens (1996) called this whole ensemble of media bombarding us with horrific and shocking images and information the 'angstmachine' ('anxiety-machine'), which he sees, just as some epigones of Elias, as the inevitable outflow of the fact that people live in a very 'civilized' and therefore boring society, which he qualifies as a 'geborgenheidsmachine' ('security machine'). See also the work of Massumi (1993), who emphasizes the political side of this media shower of fearsome imagery.
5. In a nice essay on the occurrence of extreme violence in fairy tales Mallet (1993) uses the same contrast 'wild'/'uncivilisiert' versus 'civilisiert.' I fully agree with the last sentence of that essay: 'Wir alle haben eben mehr oder weniger unzivilisierte Regungen, mit denen wir fertig werden müssen, und es ist allemal besser und für den seelischen Haushalt bekömmlicher, um seine Wildheit zu wissen, als sie zu verdrängen oder sich gar einzubilden, nur die anderen seien schlecht.'
6. Of course, the novel of Ellis is just an example; it does not stand by its own. There were and are many writers who produce this kind of 'wild' literary products. In Europe Elfriede Jelinek's works, for example *Lust*, abound with sketches of excessive sex and violence. It would be interesting to examine the relation between gender and writing 'wild' novels. See Armstrong & Tenenhouse (1989) and Howlett & Mengham (1994) for the relation between literature, art and (the history of) violence.
7. In this connection it is interesting to note that Europe is invaded by a particular kind of animation movies from Japan, the so-called *Manga*, in which all sorts of perverted sex and horrific violence are shown, at least if one can lay hands on uncensored copies. In this case the Western consumer is confronted with the ultimate antipodes of the civilized Japanese. It would be interesting to conduct research on the global spread of these and similar products of mimetic 'wildness' and how consumers appropriate them at a local level.
8. All these films are considered ordinary cinema-movies. Next to this, there is a videocircuit in which products with perverse sex and extreme forms of violence abound. It is possible to hire these products of imagination in any videoshop or to order them through specialized shipment-companies. The following quote is an example of an advertisement by such a company (*Psychotronics* nr. 17, 1994): "SADISTIC SEX, VIOLENCE & TORTURE" \* EurAsia Video Search of America, Inc. can help you unlock the floodgate of your filthy desires and make all your depraved dreams come true.'
9. Before turning to writing plays, Schwab was engaged in the creation of works of art made from perishable materials, such as the heads of slaughtered cows. One is reminded here of the shocking happenings of the Austrian artists Mühl, Nitsch and Brus (cf. Durgnat 1972: ch. 13). At present the Briton Damien Hirst is famous in certain avant garde circles for making 'Skulpturen aus versägten Kühen, fetten Maden und konservierten Fisch-Leibern' (*Stern* 5.05.94) – which is thus not particularly innovative.
10. What I find rather remarkable is that Austria seems to harbour a whole reservoir of Schwab-like playwrights. Elfriede Jelinek wrote plays in which outrageous violence and sex occurred, for example *Raststätte oder Sie machens Alle*, which caused a lot of fuss when it was the first time played in Hamburg in January 1995 (cf. *Stern* 26.01.1995). Peter Turrini, sometimes compared

with a 'wild man,' is another one who likes to stage ultra-violent scenes. He did it, for example, in *Alpengluhen* and *Die Schlacht um Wien*. In the last play the main role is played by a murderous band of people who intend to burn down an asylum, but end up killing each other. Gustav Ernst, the creator of a very rough variant of the classical Faust story, and the South German Tankred Dorst, who wrote *Korbes*, a piece full of extreme violence, also fit in this tradition. The work of the filmer Michael Hancke (*Der siebente Kontinent*, *Benny's Video*, *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*) is of a similar violent nature. It shows the 'wild' side of the Austrian society and culture.

11. The recent widespread interest in serial killers now and in the past, their criminal acts and motives is striking. Except that they play key roles in films, they have also attracted the attention of quite a few popular writers and serious scientists/researchers, especially when they practiced cannibalism as Dahmer did.
12. A play in which cruelty and sexual perversity also play an eye-catching role is *Before the end [Voor het einde]* by Ramon Gieling, performed in 1993 by Wolfsmoed (*NRC Handelsblad* 18.01.93). In this context *The Wedding House Party* by Lodewijk de Boer, in which a ritual murder, incest and discrimination occur, is also interesting (*NRC Handelsblad* 11.11.94). Last but not least I want to mention *Allegro Barbaro* by director Frans Strijards. He commented: 'In *Allegro Barbaro* I have wittingly been looking for a recognizable situation. Look, the human mechanism does not change. When people feel cornered, they exceed boundaries, not even out of conscious cruelty, but because they feel to be put in a hole by powers which they can only fathom half. Their fear makes that escalation takes place. You can simply claim this, but you have to render it *able to be shared*' (*CSNRC Handelsblad* 26.11.93 – translation JV).
13. In this connection it is interesting to note that frequently it is the kind of bourgeois public visiting taboo-breaking plays and operas abounding with excessive sex and violence that can make a lot of fuss about the corrupting nature of certain films consumed by people not belonging to their social stratum, for example the working class, and advocate the introduction of powerful (legal) measures with respect to their consumption (cf. Verrips 1995).
14. Interesting in this context are the songs by the so-called gangsterrappers, such as Ice-T and Ice-Cube, in which calls for murdering and descriptions of violently killing persons do not form an exception at all. It is bizarre that some of these musicians actually took to the deeds which they describe in their songs (Carvalho *NRC Handelsblad* 28.01.94). See Weinstein (1991:237 ff.) for a refutation of the view that the texts of heavy-metal-songs would stimulate or at least refer to sexual perversion and violence.
15. Often these acts are clearly mimetical manifestations, that is, performances in which rape, abuse of the human body and murder is merely re-presented. Yet a genre of performance exists in which real abuse of the body stands central. This is, for instance, the case in certain SM-shows and fakir-happenings such as the (Jim Rose) *Circus Side Show* in which people demonstrate what sort of violence towards their own body they can endure, from stinging the handle of a spoon into the noose to filling the stomach with a liquid and pumping it out again (*NRC Handelsblad* 16.07.93).
16. It occurs rather frequently that groups splash their public with bodily fluids. For instance, next to abusing the public, the female rock band L7 who performed in Amsterdam in November 1994 also spit on it (*NRC Handelsblad* 17.11.94).
17. *Doom* recently got a successor in the form of *Quake*, an even more violent game that became an immediate success in the USA. According to Marina Warner in the world of videogames it is no more slyness that is brought into action against brute violence, as happens in all sorts of old myths, but rather the war hero and the fittest survivor (1994:25).
18. This is a variant of the game of shooting at one another with paintpistols, an activity in which some people indulge in particular clubs.
19. In April 1994 a 25-year old employee of the institute of metallurgy at the university of Birmingham was arrested because – without his superiors being aware of it – by way of the university computer he had offered child porno to the users of Internet (*Guardian* 15.04.94).
20. Some more expensive brothels currently make use of computers by way of which it is possible to watch interactive porno-films on CD-ROM (*Volkshkrant* 26.09.94).
21. A special phenomenon is the occurrence of the so-called 'cyberrape' or 'digital violation', that is, sexual harassing of persons who enter certain corners of cyberspace under a female name (Karin Spaik *De Groene* 20.07.94). The use of a female name, by the way, does not indicate a person's gender, for on the digital highways 'genderbending' seems to be a normal phenomenon.
22. All over people are reflecting on this problem. Mazlish (1993), for example, is sure that we are heading towards a situation in which the difference between persons and machines is about to wane. After all, human beings are increasingly mechanized (a.o. by way of artificial organs) while machines are increasingly humanized. In 1993 this was the theme of the fifth *Manifestatie voor de instabiele media* (*NRC Handelsblad* 30.09.93). According to the American cultural critic Mark Dery the erotization of the machine and the mechanization of sex are currently in full

swing (1991:42 ff.). One response to the rise of cyborgs or post-humans is, in his view, modern primitivism, that is, the trend which is focused on 'the remapping of corporeal territory' by way of 'piercing, binding, "tribal tattooing," and ritual scarification' (1992:103). See in this context also the special issue of *Re/Research* (Primitives 1989) which is devoted completely to these modern primitives.

23. Touching one another at a distance will remain problematic in the near future. For instance, Myron Krueger, who developed the videodrome technique, wrote: 'It is a pity that tactile feedback, the sensation of surfaces or resistance, is so difficult to realize without awkward, expensive and bulky installations. To make contact with matter and the sensation of touching is very important. This is the greatest challenge for the interface designers, but presently it is not yet possible to realize it' (Sala & Barnouw 1990:47/8).
24. It would not have been difficult to extend the series with more genres. Thus I contend that there is a clear family resemblance between watching splatter movies or readings such a novel as *American Psycho*, on the one hand, and practicing disaster-tourism, visiting boxing-matches or cage-fights (where men often hit each other unconscious, beautiful girls – dressed as sparsely as possible – announce rounds and the public is dressed in smokings and evening dresses to emphasize the contrast between the 'wild' and the 'civilized') and other life-threatening sports (such as car and motorbike racing), on the other. For in the latter cases one can also notice this queer combination of excessive *eros* and *thanatos*. A phenomenon which I did not deal with but which fits perfectly in the series is the recent upsurge of reality TV showing all sorts of extreme behavior and activities (e.g. operations on sick bodies) in almost the same way as the mondo 'shockumentaries' so popular in the late sixties.
25. Compare this with the following statement of a boy who was about to hire the videofilm *Faces of Death*: 'True reality tv... So you can learn what you are not to do' (*NRC Handelsblad* 8.02.94). If this kind of 'shockumentary' functions in this way, if its (hidden) moral message is rather conservative, then people fearing its morally disrupting effects and campaigning for a stronger censorship should better be glad that they are produced and consumed. See for this kind of interpretation that is in line with Lévi-Strauss' view on myths (and films which he regards as modern myths) Krasniewicz (1992:45/46) and Verrips (1995).
26. By surrendering themselves to (mimetically) trespassing taboos, people come into contact with aspects of themselves from which they have become alienated through the very existence of these taboos. In this sense the consumption of excessive mimetic manifestations of sex and violence or *eros* and *thanatos* could be understood as an interesting and important expedition towards repressed aspects of the self which have a correcting effect on the self image. Through a temporary surrender to or 'possession' by the 'wild' one is able to get to know the 'other' (the 'other' who one also is) within oneself (see also Kramer 1987). Here one touches upon the way in which that what is repressed and surrounded by taboos is evaluated. In the work of Elias it appears to be evaluated in a rather negative sense, whereas in the work of Moscovici, for example, it is valued in more positively (cf. Kielstra 1981).
27. This view sharply contrast with that of Boomkens (1996) who states that the 'anxiety machine' functions because life in our (post-)modern society has become so boring that one needs excessive kicks in the sphere of film, literature and music, etc.
28. "Nichts fürchtet der Mensch mehr als die Berührung durch Unbekanntes. Man will *sehen*, was nach einem greift, man will es erkennen oder zumindest einreihen können. Überall weicht der Mensch der Berührung durch Fremdes aus.(...) Nicht einmal die Kleider gewähren einem Sicherheit genug; wie leicht sind sie zu zerreißen, wie leicht ist es, bis zum nackten, glatten wehrlosen Fleisch des Angegriffenen durchzudringen. Alle Abstände, die die Menschen um sich geschaffen haben, sind von dieser Berührungsfurcht diktiert" (Canetti 1980:9).
29. It is striking that, according to my observation, couples kissing each other in public form less and less part of (urban) street life, at least in the Netherlands. Moreover it has to be noticed that the sexual touch within a marriage can become a dangerous affair for a man, if his wife experiences it as a form of rape. For then she can charge him for that officially (e.g. in Germany) with the consequence that he could end up in jail. Of course, I am not talking of the SM-scene, which seems to be rapidly expanding nowadays and in which this kind of excessive touch amongst other things is especially strived for. In the same way the touching of young children by their parents can become risky, for parents nowadays are rather easily accused of committing incest.
30. Interestingly, the Dutch expression 'beroerd worden' (which I use in the original version of this paper) has two meanings: to become miserable and to be touched. This double meaning captures nicely the implications of people's audiovisual consumption of 'wildness.'
31. In his *magnum opus* Elias postulates a direct relationship between a decrease of the possibilities for individuals to concretely live out their 'Angriffslust' through a process of rigorous tabooization and an increase of a passive, well-mannered desire to watch ('Augenlust') more or less stylized violent sports events, such as boxing

and football matches, instead. "Die Kampf- und Angriffslust findet z.B. einen gesellschaftlichen erlaubten Ausdruck im sportlichen Wettkampf. Und sie äussert sich vor allem in 'Zusehen', etwa im Zusehen bei Boxkämpfen, in der tagtraumartigen Identifizierung miteinander Wenigen, denen eingemassigter und genau geregelter Spielraum zur Entladung solcher Affekte gegeben wird. Und dieses Ausleben von Affekten im Zusehen oder selbst im blossen Hören ... ist ein besonders charakteristischer Zug der zivilisierten Gesellschaft. Er ist mitbestimmend für die Entwicklung von Buch und Theater, entscheidend für die Rolle des Kinos in unserer Welt" (1969 Erster Band: 280). Though my main argument may appear to resemble that of Elias, the main difference is that I refuse to subordinate the 'wild' to the 'civilized' and thus regard the inclination to watch and/or listen to all sorts of excessive mimetic 'wildness' as merely another indicator of a high degree of civilization. I reject the idea that one can discern a kind of unilinear evolution from 'Angriffslust' to 'Augenlust' and propagate instead the view that the (actual and mimetic) 'wild' and (actual and mimetic) 'civilized' are always existing next to each other and have to be studied as 'twin-phenomena' or as two sides of the same coin. If one fails to do so one is tempted to exaggerate or underestimate the relevance of the one or the other.

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