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Implicit acts of filth: the parodic virtues of cleanliness

Abstract:

From ‘the Wolf’ Wolfe in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* to the laundress in Kate Grenville’s *Joan Makes History*, the act of *nettoyage* is called into service as an intertextual gesture toward decoding all that is virtuous (or not), all that is filthy (or not). As an inevitable repetition or agent of redundancy, complete with all the recursive energies of concealment and discovery, cleaning and the cleaner serve a parodic practice that has been entirely overlooked in its representation in various forms of narrative (fiction, film, and image). Parody may be, as Hutcheon claims, ‘a more restricted form, in pragmatic terms, than allusion or quotation’ (1985: 50), but it has also not been accorded the power that it wields in a quotidian presence, its gestural and recitative marking performing a contestation that is ignored because it is ‘unmarked’ (60). In short, its association with the erotic and the criminal, erasure and commodification, make *nettoyage* a transgressive site in disguise. Scouring and laundering’s ‘trans-contextualizing’ power resides in its invisibility, and its work as an ‘authorized transgression’ (Hutcheon 1985: 101) enunciates a persistent parodic presence in an aesthetically incognizant world. The play of disinfectant as part of Foucault’s ‘writing of things’ thus alludes to parody’s most powerful affect: its connection to the most ordinary and quotidian of gestures, doubled by cultural aesthetic and instructional pragmatism.

Biographical note:

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The alienated laundress

In one of the tantalizing fragments that Barthes gathers in *Roland Barthes*, the theorist muses, under the heading, ‘*Qu’est-ce qui limite la représentation?*’ (‘What limits representation?’):

Brecht had wet laundry put in the actress’s laundry basket so that her hip would have the right movement, that of the alienated laundress. Well and good: but stupid too, no? For what weighs down the basket is not wet laundry, but time, history, and how *represent* such a weight as that? It is impossible to represent the political: it resists all copying, even when you turn yourself out to give it all the more verisimilitude. Contrary to the inveterate belief of all social arts, where politics begins is where imitation ceases (1977: 154).

Barthes circles here the idea of representation as representational, questioning how simulation can counterfeit assertive meaning. His search for a ‘neutral’ zone in reading ultimately argues that the dislocating power of parody is dangerously complicit with established values; he claims that ‘parody, or irony at work, is always *classic* language. What could a parody be that did not advertise itself as such? This is the problem facing modern writing: how [to] breach the wall of utterance, the wall of origin, the wall of ownership?’ (1974: 45). All provocative, but in the larger frame of parody, we have lost sight of the hip of the ‘alienated laundress’. We believe that parody gestures toward that which is obtrusively loaded as a site of meaning and implication, while ignoring how parody performs as a sub-text, occupying a zone peripheral or unimportant, but wielding by virtue of such inconsequential location even greater power than might be supposed. It is invisible parody that carries lethal impact, for its commentary performs *sotto voce*, tempting the reader to ignore its import. If as Nabakov claims, ‘Satire is a lesson, parody is a game’ (Appel 1967: 138), there are depths to be mined in the wet laundry weighing down the basket and the jut of the laundress’s hip.

Barthes’ example of Brecht’s trying to capture the verisimilitude of the weight of a laundry basket certainly contains situational irony: Barthes died in 1980 from injuries sustained a month earlier when he was struck down by a laundry van while crossing a street in Paris, after a lunch with French socialist politicians. The potential for parody in that scene (the collision between the body of the person who declared the author dead, and the unfeeling metal force of a laundry truck delivering or gathering fresh and soiled linens), has not been exploited, but indirectly recites the very heart of the question I wish to explore here. What narrative legacy does grime enable and how does laundry perform parody?

Selling dirty laundry

Filth and cleansing are so overused a thematic that they have become normalized to the point of invisibility. Virtue and honesty, fidelity and faithfulness, all appear as antidotes to dirt, disorder, and waste, their commonplace binary virtually erasing the category. The constant replication of this trope relegates it to impotence. Within the wider sphere of

pollution and cleanliness, real dirt – not just moral and metaphorical smut – has lost its putrid power and now become a fetishistic focus of scrutiny. Literal foulness is exposed in television reality shows about the dirtiest houses or humans as hoarders. Reportage and social media hunt down and celebrate gossip and scandal; note Australia’s successful *Dirty Laundry Live*, the current panel game show that is part celebrity tabloid gossip and part quiz. The trash-mag element makes the process and the subject ‘grubbier than ever’. Touted as ‘dangerous’ television by virtue of its live feed, the prurient interest in celebrity ‘dirt’ reduces laundry to metaphor. The lyrics of the 1982 Don Henley song, ‘Dirty Laundry’, summarize the urge toward voyeurism and mockery: ‘Dirty little secrets, dirty little lies/We got our dirty little fingers in everybody’s pie/Love to cut you down to size, we love dirty laundry.’ Still, for all its figurative application, laundry remains laundry, and while advertising touts its degrees of immaculate whiteness, it has not been accorded attention as ‘serious’ parody. Mary Douglas argues that, ‘if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained. To recognize this is the first step towards insight into pollution’ (1966: 50). And if parody’s ultimate task is to destabilize order through imitation, exaggeration and mimicry, then dirt’s recurrence and eradication readily connects to parody’s pattern of reenactment and reproduction. Laundry’s connection to impurity occupies a destabilizing zone that implicitly echoes that of parody.

As an inevitable redundancy, complete with all the recursive energies of concealment and discovery, cleaning and the cleaner serve a parodic practice that has been entirely overlooked. Parody may be, as Linda Hutcheon claims, ‘a more restricted form, in pragmatic terms, than allusion or quotation’ (1985: 50), but it has also not been accorded the power that it wields in a quotidian presence, its gestural and recitative signal performing a contestation that is ignored because it is ‘unmarked’ (1985: 60). In short, its association with the erotic and the criminal, erasure and commodification, make *nettoyage* a transgressive site in disguise. Scouring and laundering’s ‘trans-contextualizing’ power resides in its invisibility, and its work as an ‘authorized transgression’ (1985: 101) enunciates a parodic presence in an incognizant world. The play of disinfectant as part of Foucault’s ‘Writing of Things’ thus alludes to parody’s presence and instructional pragmatism in the most ordinary of tasks, laundry.

Parody, as Hutcheon indicates, ‘self-consciously and self-critically points us to its own nature’ and ‘refers both to itself and to that which it designates or parodies’ (1985: 69). But if parody operates under the assumption that it must transcend the limits of the quotidian world, situations coded by daily life do not meet its benchmark. Hutcheon argues too that ‘authorized’ transgression enables the power of parody. I would contend that it is into this fissure of unsettled ‘authorization’ where laundry seeps, part of ‘the circumstances, the events, the physical senses’ that make this quotidian activity ‘part of the social world, human life, and of course, the historical moments’ available for parody (Said 1983: 4). Laundry’s peculiarity is that it is both ‘authorized’ and without a scrap of authority, except for its domestic persistence. The clothing that we wear and the linen we use need cleansing. But is laundry itself art, or a cultural form? It metonymizes a

disciplinary aesthetic, cleanliness emblematic of health or sexual continence, but this conjunction between theoretical and practical activity is the crux that would argue that laundry cannot parody, even if it serves as metaphor. The symbolic function of laundry is so commonly employed that its very ubiquity enables its invisibility, makes it erased and erasable, its function reduced to function alone. That essentialism then can only become a parody of its function by virtue of its implicit and explicit role as palindromic *nettoyage*, echoing the old joke, ‘Why can’t the comedian tell a dirty laundry joke? Because it always comes out clean’.

The discomfort of dirt/soil, a motif that requires eradication rather than celebration, offers itself then as a site of parody less self-reflexive than disguised, a removable sign employed to amplify a contrasting cultural element, particularly applicable to the cleaning and maintenance of clothing. Much theoretical discussion addresses the grammar of clothing, its ‘play between visible outward appearance ... and an essence which may not be visible but is nonetheless held to be more “real” than appearance’ (Kuhn 1985: 45). This attention to dress as surface or veneer, signaling status, political affiliation, availability, disguise, and the celebration or subversion of sexual identification, deflects entirely from clothing’s affect, how it signifies not only a possession, but a mobile and declarative adjunct to the body. The attention to clothing’s role in code switching, subversion, and declaration has skirted its requirements in terms of storage, transportability, repair and maintenance. Laundry as incumbent act becomes mere servant then to more urgent questions populating the hierarchy of what clothing demonstrates; it is pressed into service as a vehicle for play and pedagogy, as a means by which to background the multiple choices of dress. In short, laundry’s ‘material intervention’ (1985: 62) as per Terry Eagleton, in the conceptualizing of how art parodies its own performance, has been woefully under-estimated. Can laundry transcend its limited mythology? Or is it relegated to the narrow field of self-parody? I would argue that the metaphorical power of laundry is amplified by the larger subjects it serves: violence, gender, comedy, and class. Referent and reference, laundry then escapes auto-referentiality and its limited sphere.

The washerwoman sings

Pace Brecht’s ‘alienated laundress’, the figure of the washerwoman is again and again resurrected as a symbol of recalcitrance, mockery and indignity, as well as hardened labour and repetitive work. The laundress has been the instrument of literary wars, the butt of ridicule, a romanticized figure, and a rude mechanical, all prime subject matter for parody. For example, Leigh Hunt’s 1814 piece, ‘On Washerwomen’, was meant to argue for a ‘democratic aesthetic for the nineteenth century’ (Dart 2012: 93), despite Hunt’s characterizing washerwomen as ‘tub-tumbling viragoes, with ... brawny arms and brawling voices,’ giving rise to ‘hot, disagreeable, dabbing, smoaking, splashing, kitcheny’ (Dart 2012: 43) associations. He paints a picture that is close to caricature, of the grumbling, fatigued and always-hungry laundress, but concludes the depiction with a

moral that reprises Brecht's intention: 'whenever we hear a washerwoman at her foaming work, or see her plodding towards us with her jolly warm face, her mob cap, her black stockings, clattering pattens, and tub at arm's length resting on her hip-joint, we look upon her as a living lesson to us to make the most both of time and comfort' (Dart 2012: 44). Hunt's comic vignette triggered in 1823 a further parody, 'Letter from a Washerwoman,' by Caroline Bowles. In that piece, a semi-literate and heavily colloquial laundress named Patience Lilywhite laments the absurd notions and loose morals of her poet-lodgers and their abduction of her young daughter, in the process parodying 'the absurd pretensions of these [would-be] pagan poets' (Dart 2012: 95), and mocking as well Hunt's 'democratic' argument. That a laundress undercuts pretentious poets and their posturing only makes the disparagement more farcical.

The powerful voice of the washerwoman, however ill spoken, reverberates through narrative, from Joyce to Orwell. Although it parodies and is parodied, although this voice is scrambled and shrill, it is resolutely memorable. The Anna Livia chapter in *Finnegan's Wake* comprises 'a chattering dialogue across the river by two washerwomen who as night falls become a tree and a stone' (Ellman 1975: 299). In George Orwell's *1984*, Winston and Julia's escape to their secret flat is accompanied by the singing of the washerwoman in the courtyard below, a seeming marker of credulity, although her drudgery belies both innocence and happiness. 'There seemed to be no hour of daylight when she was not marching to and fro between the washtub and the line, alternately gagging herself with clothes pegs and breaking forth into lusty song' (1949: 200). As the object of their scrutiny, she is a distant figure, waging a drudgery of infinite rehearsal and repetition, doubling and mimicry both. Winston observes she is beautiful despite her menial routine: 'her life had been laundering, scrubbing, darning, cooking, sweeping, polishing, mending, scrubbing, laundering, first for children, then for grandchildren, over thirty unbroken years. At the end of it she was still singing' (1949: 219). Watching her, he speculates that the proles would someday awaken, and become 'conscious' of their disaffection. This attribution of value to the lowest rung of menial service performs the sleight of hand that argues for encoded intent, the laundress re-reading her own inscription, and inscribing yet again her discursive role as an echo, a chatterer, a singer, and a mouthpiece, full of sound, even though she has not the power to speak.

Two historical depictions of laundresses in contemporary fiction demonstrate the continued role of the silent washerwoman as 'the fusion of art and social praxis' (Eagleton 1985: 132). A figure of fun, mocked by those who deride the hands that expunge feculence, the washerwoman embodies powerlessness. She must play the role of an unpretentious figure who does not understand the truths she encounters or the economies that she enables. Her participation in her own silencing cousins parody in terms of the servant who knows the master's secrets but must turn a blind eye, and the master who must pretend that the servant does not know his secrets. Their mutual deception illustrates participatory parody.

In Margaret Atwood's 1996 novel, *Alias Grace*, Grace Marks routinely does laundry work, and it is around laundry that she garners a sense of her own place in the pantomime

of class enacted by servants and their employers. Her fellow maid, Mary, offers to her an ironically transposed interpretation of the role of servants:

She said that being a servant was like anything else, there was a knack to it which many never learnt, and it was all in the way of looking at it. For instance, we'd been told always to use the back stairs, in order to keep out of the way of the family, but in truth it was the other way around: the front stairs were there so that the family could keep out of our way. They could go traipsing up and down the front stairs in their fancy clothes and trinkets, while the real work of the place went on behind their backs, without them getting all snarled up in it, and interfering, and making a nuisance of themselves (Atwood 1996: 182).

The effacement that keeps the employers out of the way of the servants, a parodic inversion of power, is amplified especially by laundry's cryptic project. 'In the end, she said, we had the better of them, because we washed their dirty linen and therefore we knew a good deal about them; but they did not wash ours, and knew nothing about us at all. There were few secrets they could keep from the servants' (1996: 183). If knowledge is power and parody is a rebound from all that is prior, the lesson that Grace learns from Mary, that the role of servant is the superior position, inverts the class hierarchy. The same inversion is present in Kate Grenville's 1988 novel *Joan Makes History*, where we learn the 'true' history of Australia through the eyes of women who have access to the story behind the story, 'unofficial' truth. A washerwoman offers her perspective:

Women who wash other people's soiled garments learn a thing or two, and there were curious secrets ... I would as soon not have learned. I was nothing but the laundry woman: I, Joan, was a down-at-heel person who came humbly to the back entrances of all the grand houses on the hill, and spent my days scrubbing things on a ridged board, my hands growing puffy from the big bar of yellow soap. I scrubbed at soiled collars, cuffs full of gravy, socks full of holes: I poked at bed linen tangling in the copper, and heaved and grunted afterwards, hoisting the dripping sheets up into the sun on the clothes-prop (Grenville 1988: 86).

Joan's work week is an inescapable litany of toil: 'from Monday to Saturday my hands were in suds and starch or struggling with the heavy linen of gentry's tables and beds, and I had plenty of time and mind left over from these activities to consider the whims and fancies and all the tricks and little secrets that my gentry got themselves up to in the garments I knew so intimately' (1988: 88). The laundress's effortless reading of secrets from the clothing she scours undermines her 'gentry's' assumption of privacy. Through her association with filth and its erasure, the washerwoman and the work she does become a discursive site that argues for the multiplicity of its references, a 'repetition with critical difference that allows ironic signaling of difference at the heart of similarity' (Hutcheon 1985: 26). While the dual manipulation and dismissal of laundry (whether action or object) has made it seem predictable, it performs in fact with a subversive energy that calls into question its own repudiation. While laundry is treated as superficial, domestic, and of no importance, background or sub-ground, its power resides in its ability to parody not only its ubiquitous presence but those elements that choose to disregard it.

Traditionally a stand in for sin and shaming, cleansing and disinfection, purification and purgation, because it is 'laundry', that feminized and domestic activity, it is inevitably accorded a secondary and trivial role, *de minimis* to matters of political or historical importance. But that same peripherality enhances its parodic power. By virtue of its inconsequential affect, laundry can exert a powerful punch in terms of what shouted or silent, what is known or not known, and what is important or unimportant.

The stinking buck basket

Laundry's marginalization has meant that it frequents comedy. Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* extracts much of its slapstick effect from laundry, soiled clothing and misbehaviour parts of the same equation. While the play is very much a comedy of manners (and one of Shakespeare's weaker efforts), the buck basket or laundry basket becomes the item that parodies the 'weapons' that the men deploy. Men rely on property and power in order to gain their ends, but the women need no such heavy artillery. Instead, their witty employment of the laundry basket as hiding place, punishment, and alibi altogether decrees the parody that pushes the play past its emblematic isolations. Falstaff wants to make love to Mistress Ford because he believes that her husband has money and she has the keeping of his purse; Falstaff means to make them 'exchequers' (I, 3, 369; all references are to Act, Scene, lines in common editions) to himself. The women, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page are well-acquainted with the flattery of men; 'I will find you twenty lascivious turtles ere one chaste man' (II, 1, 642-43) declares Mistress Page. Their husbands, obtuse and suspicious, worry that their wives are unfaithful; their goal is to 'test' them to see if they are to be trusted. But the women are more than ready for the false flattery of Falstaff and the jealousies of husbands. Mistress Ford, says 'Go to, then: we'll use this unwholesome humidity, this gross watery pumpion; we'll teach him to know turtles from jays' (III, 3, 1440). And Mistress Page says, 'Look, here is a basket: if he be of any reasonable stature, he may creep in here; and throw foul linen upon him, as if it were going to bucking: or, – it is whiting-time – send him by your two men to Datchet-mead' (III, 3, 1520-1524). When Falstaff arrives at the home of Mistress Ford, she evades his advances until, as pre-arranged, Mistress Page comes running to warn them that Master Ford is on his way. Falstaff is stuffed into the laundry basket and under the nose of the jealous husband, is carried out in that basket of fetid linen, and thrown into the Thames. He deludes himself that he has escaped detection, but his recounting of the event is pure farce, doubled because he is unwittingly telling his tale to Mistress Ford's husband, the man he sought to elude.

Falstaff: By the Lord, a buck-basket! rammed me in with foul shirts and smocks, socks, foul stockings, greasy napkins; that ... there was the rankest compound of villanous smell that ever offended nostril.

Ford: And how long lay you there?

Falstaff: Nay, you shall hear ... what I have suffered to bring this woman to evil for your good. Being thus crammed in the basket, a couple of Ford's knaves, his hinds, were called forth by their mistress to carry me in the name of foul clothes to Datchet-lane: they took me on their shoulders; met the jealous knave their master in the door, who asked them once or twice what they had in their basket: I quaked for fear, lest the lunatic knave would have searched it; but fate, ordaining he should be a cuckold, held his hand. Well: on went he for a search, and away went I for foul clothes. But mark the sequel ... I suffered the pangs of three several deaths; first, an intolerable fright, to be detected with a jealous rotten bell-wether; next, to be compassed, like a good bilbo, in the circumference of a peck, hilt to point, heel to head; and then, to be stopped in, like a strong distillation, with stinking clothes that fretted in their own grease: think of that, – a man of my kidney, – think of that, – that am as subject to heat as butter; a man of continual dissolution and thaw: it was a miracle to scape suffocation. And in the height of this bath, when I was more than half stewed in grease, like a Dutch dish, to be thrown into the Thames, and cooled, glowing hot, in that surge, like a horse-shoe ... (III, 5, 1827-1858)

Falstaff's humiliation, compressed together with foul linen, is both comedy and parody. In Foucauldian terms, the power and resistance of the Mistresses resides in what is washed and how, the accumulation of filth the best repository for importunate or jealous men. When Mistress Ford's husband begins rooting through the dirty linen in search of the man he is convinced is hiding there, she says drily, 'If you find a man there, he shall die a flea's death' (IV, 2, 2108). These women use dirty clothes to defend their positions, affirming their domestic authority and their competence as well as wreaking playful revenge, which re-balances the order of their domestic lives.

Blood and Laundry

It is a short step from the cleansing of clothing as a symbol of rectitude to money laundering, the process of making the proceeds of criminal activity appear legal. Those who commit crime may launder their intake themselves, but complicit bankers and accountants can provide 'Laundering services', an ironic connection to the eradication of filth. The link between laundry and violence persists, and the ironic task of cleaning amplifies this coupling. Witness its presence in the 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*, a movie that focuses around the contents and possession of a mysterious case that contains something precious. Having accidentally shot a man in their car, the two characters of Vincent and Jules must call in help in the form of a famous 'cleaner', Winston Wolf. Wolf, played by Harvey Keitel, instructs Vincent and Jules (in considerable detail) how to clean the inside of the car, which is coated with blood and brains. 'The cleaner' speaks to his role with clipped and business-like direction. 'You got a corpse in a car, minus a head, in a garage – take me to it.' He peers into the car and then they go back to the kitchen and he asks Jimmy, the homeowner, 'This looks to be a pretty domesticated house. That would lead me to believe that in the garage or under the sink you've got a bunch of cleaners and cleansers and shit like that.' When Jimmy agrees, Wolf tells Jules and Vincent, 'You two

fellows take those cleaning products and clean the inside of the car ... Get to work.' His 'domestic' instruction and his setting them to the task that he is a master of, a task they could have undertaken without his high-priced supervision, lampoons all criminal messes and clean-ups. And Jules and Vincent's scrubbing of the hateful mess spectrums parodic space, ironically commented on when Jules says about the splattered brains and blood (and implicitly about the movie itself), 'This is some fucked up repugnant shit.' Having completed their task, Wolf instructs them to take off their bloody clothes, and he launders them, hoses the men down with a high-pressure hose before dressing them in spare t-shirts that make them look 'like a couple of dorks'. The inherent subtext of laundering crime and violence parodies the violent mess that death demonstrates.

Having been 'cleaned up', they go for breakfast, dressed as 'dorks', to a diner (where Jules makes his famous pork speech). The diner is held up by 'Honey Bunny and Pumpkin', a couple of gun-waving amateur gangsters, whose lovey-dovey talk to one another contrasts with their aggressive robbery of the patrons. When the robber comes up to where Jules sits, calmly waiting, he gets Jules to drop his wallet in a plastic garbage bag, and then demands, 'What's in the case?' 'My boss's dirty laundry', Jules responds. The thief sneers, 'Your boss makes you do his laundry?' 'When he wants it clean', Jules replies. 'Sounds like a shit job', the gun-toter replies, and Jules says, 'Funny, I've been thinkin' the same thing'. These circular references to laundry reflect the extent to which these characters parody bad guys and good, gangsters and innocents, philosophers and miscreants. Tarantino's desire in the movie is not plot and its complications but the trajectory of parody itself, resulting in a pastiche utilizing offensive elements of racism, homophobia, and sexism, mashing them together in a bricolage of random violence that lurks in ordinary places in the middle of the day. Tarantino, in effect, does his laundry, throwing the whites in with the darks, the delicates with the work clothes, and the baby with the video store clerk. The excess of *Pulp Fiction* satirizes iconic expectations of violence to the point where the viewer becomes nostalgic about the way violence was once presented, thus effecting a parody of the viewer's relationship to that violence. But Jules' laundry reference, which occurs at the end of the film, is entirely missed by theorists and critics. It is relegated to the 'what's in the briefcase?' question, vaguely answered by the golden glow that suggests gold, and related to laundering money. But the glow that emanates from the briefcase is of course the best aid to clean linen, the disinfecting effect of sunlight, a light that shines past the darkness that pervades the film. And while laundry is not given its own monologue, it serves as parodic trajectory. Laundry, at the end of the day, will be what gangsters and small time hoodlums do when they return to their domestic worlds, when they, like Tarantino himself, playing the domesticated Jimmy, employ those 'household cleaners'. The movie's usurpation of linearity is a key aspect of its success, but the focus on food and foot rubs distracts the viewer from the most interesting gesture, laundry and the hyper-real over-writing the unlikely real.

The parodic exercise of laundry can bestow on extreme violence a tender reverberation. Witness the 2012 fan film, *The Punisher: Dirty Laundry*. Thomas Jane, who plays Frank

Castle, the Punisher, made the vignette independently as a nod to the fans and friends of the comic franchise. Jane re-visits his role as a vigilante at the same time as he does his laundry, the two activities simultaneous, but the tension between them enabling cross-commentary. As the short film opens, Frank Castle awakens from the shreds of a nightmare in the back of his van in a derelict neighbourhood. He gets up, takes his plastic laundry basket across the street to a Coin Laundry, while a street gang harasses three prostitutes before the leader drags one of them into a back alley and rapes her. Despite hearing screams in the distance, Frank ignores them and places his laundry in a washing machine (or is it a dryer? – has he been driving around with wet laundry?), and patiently inserts coins. He reads a magazine, watches his clothes tumbling. Meanwhile, a young boy named DeShawn walks past, and is set upon by the gang, who want him to sell drugs for them. The boy refuses and the gang members threaten and beat him. All this Frank appears to ignore.

Finally, he exits the coin laundry, and crossing the street, encounters the leader, who asks him, ‘What the fuck you doing here?’ Frank answers, ‘Laundry’. The gangster shows Frank that he is carrying a gun and asks, ‘Do you like breathing?’ to which Frank replies, ‘Usually’, and continues without incident. In the liquor store, a handicapped clerk tells him that a couple of years ago, he tried to interfere in a similarly violent situation and wound up in a wheelchair for confronting the gang. Frank pays for a chocolate drink, and then buys a quart of Jack Daniel’s whiskey. He walks out of the liquor store and uses the square heavy bottle to subdue the gang members, breaking bones and slashing throats one after another, spilling blood in an effortless choreography of violence that beggars belief. After killing them all, he breaks the leader’s arm and legs, then standing above the thug’s incapacitated body, asks him if he knows the difference between justice and punishment, and pours the whiskey (from the strangely unbroken bottle) all over him. Frank pulls out a lighter, flicks it to flame, and tenderly places it on the ground at the feet of the downed and grovelling thug before returning to the laundry, where he resumes watching his clothes tumbling.

The battered and raped prostitute returns to the scene. She picks up the lighter and despite his whispered ‘I’m sorry’, sets the gang leader on fire. Ignoring the fire, Frank carries his laundry basket and clothes back to his van. DeShawn, the boy, approaches him, and says, ‘Hey Mister, you dropped this’, holding out a black t-shirt, but Frank tells him to keep it, saying, ‘It’s got a hole in it anyway.’ Frank drives off and the boy unfolds the shirt to reveal the Punisher symbol.

Filmed independent of Marvel, who own the imprint, the conflict mirrors the bloodshed inherent in the Punisher mode, complete with the POW! WHAM! effect of comics. But the brutal violence, the focus for most viewers, performs an alternative choreography to the frame of Frank simply doing his laundry, complete with a plastic laundry basket, and all the innocuous gestures of a person’s connection to clothing. While the ferocity it parodies, especially in light of Frank’s unlikely subduing of five or six men, focuses the viewer’s attention, that same violence is undercut by the hero’s performing the domestic ritual of cleaning his clothes. The most obvious interpretation of this juxtaposition would

be that the laundry symbolizes Frank's 'cleansing' of the foulness of the gang's control over the neighbourhood, but the metaphor is not so simple in its equation. Laundry is a chassis for the disturbing disorder on the street, and while it appears to purport Frank's innocence, in fact it implies that his own violence (worse than the gang's) is carried along with his dirty laundry. When he loads the basket of clean clothes into the back of his van and drives away, he enacts an escape from his own culpability. Although naïve audiences will read him as a righteous avenger, his cold fury is more frightening than that of the gang because he has eradicated the traces of his own bloody deeds. The interpolations of one kind of 'filth' with another blur the distinctions of 'justice' and 'punishment' as key measures of 'rightness' and thus effectively parody both.

The laundress cometh

As Giroux points out, parody enables the politics of transgression, and nowhere is transgression so coded as in the performance of laundry as metaphor and mythology. Contemporary parody's scuffle with the distinction 'between elite culture and the culture of everyday life' (1993: 462) is particularly relevant to laundry, which has no connection to 'elite' cultural performance in any sense, and thus decries its own utilization as a device peripheral but central in terms of its suggestive power. And if parody treats all cultural forms as potential tests, it also includes in that testing the 'spheres of the everyday that are often excluded from the realm of political analysis and pedagogical legitimation. In this case the field of political contestation ... includes the family, mass and popular culture, the sphere of sexuality, and the terrain of the refused and forgotten' (1993: 462). While commonly a resort or vehicle, laundry does occupy the terrain of the refused and forgotten, or more directly, the realm of the useful but invisible. With laundry's aim to expunge smut and dirt, its complicity with its own erasability makes the parodic potential of cleanliness and its achievement a metaphorical transformation that speaks to a silenced but vociferous space.

And so, beware the washerwoman in the corner of the text. The laundry basket on her hip is filled with more than soiled shirts and underwear. It contains foul matter, grime and slime and smut, the stew and ordure of sweat and effluent, the sleaze and sludge that cannot be erased with any measure of hot water and soap, bleach and bluing. She sings with the potential of disruption and mockery, the 'constructive misrepresentation' (Herman 1993: 171) available to a signifier both innocent and lewd, inconsequential and yet profound. Laundry may parody itself, but it also parodies our blind refusal of its corporeal and satiric significance.

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