

## **“This is my Body; Take this all of you and have some fun with it!” Reading *Rock DJ* .**

By Rodney Sharkey



Right, it's Robbie Day! Where's that video?

I pull it from the shelf and head down to the basement where my impending class of young and lethargic minds text their way towards the morning's first coffee break. Yesterday I tried to explain to them how all of their thinking was either/or, and how they needed to try and think outside of dualisms such as bad/good black/white true/false and so on. To this end I instructed them to read Levi-Strauss on nature/culture and his treatment of the raw and the cooked as part of a sign system and I tried to show them how this was binary thinking. I also gave them “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences;” Derrida's alteration to Levi-Strauss's shapely little machine, in which Derrida suggests “bricolage” as a way to break free from binary thinking. I compared and contrasted these writers' approach to nature and culture, and the students . . . . . slept. Well, they didn't all sleep; the disinterested dozed on semi-conscious auto-pilot and the interested, struggled. They wanted to know, they wanted to understand, but the two French intellectuals challenged assumptions buried so deeply in the students' belief system that for the latter to grasp the ideas of the former meant questioning everything they ever took for granted. That's why I've got Robbie Williams under my arm; there are more ways than one to skin a cat, or even a likeable little English lad from Stoke.

For those who have never seen the *Rock DJ* video, a brief summary. Whereas once music video was a narrative ordeal, precipitated by Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, it is

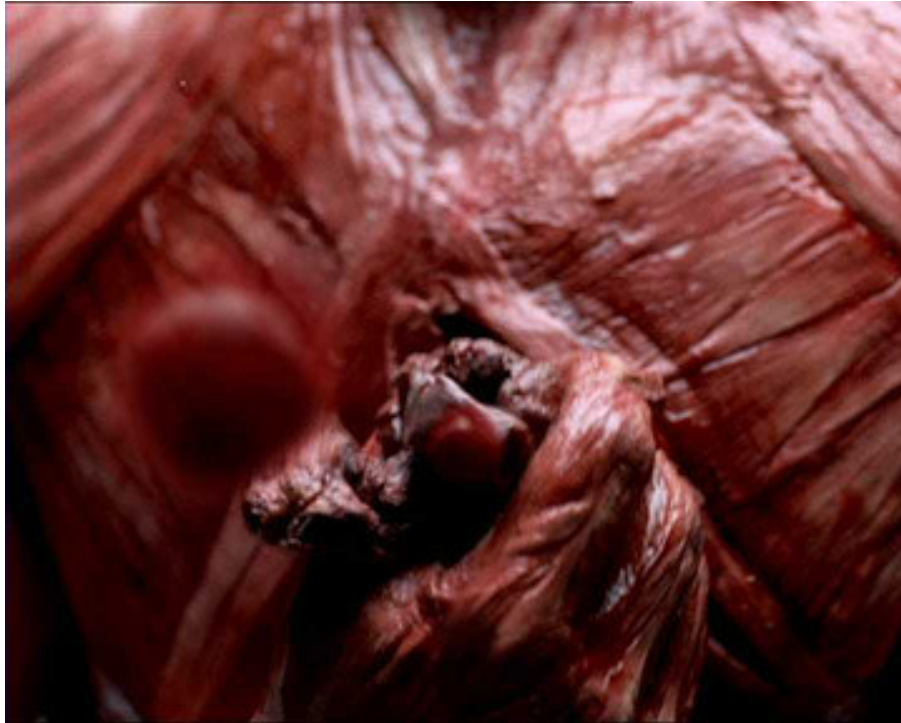
now pretty much an exercise in eroticized bodies. Phat women shake their booty by the truck load as the new wave of hip-hop rakes in the Benjamins. The song *Rock DJ* appeared as an exemplar of mainstream irrelevant fodder. Even Williams triumphantly proclaimed the lyrics “a load of nonsense about nothing” when receiving a Brit Award for “Single of the Year” in 2001. But as a mainstream pop video, *Rock DJ* is different because it first satirizes the allure of the buffed male body, and then deconstructs it as flesh gives way to organs and bones. This literal skin strip takes place as Robbie Williams dances in what may be referred to as a post-modern roller disco. He is ignored by aloof young women and a female DJ, all of whom only begin to pay attention when he peels off his skin and throws them his flesh.



The video concludes with the nubiles chewing on Robbie right down to his bony little “ego”-skeleton, while the DJ descends from her box to dance with this digital version of Boney Maroney.



The reason I am carrying the video down to class is that I have a suspicion it might constitute alternative food for thought. Of course I have this suspicion about everything that is banned. In any case, I will show it to my class for two reasons: to help illustrate the nature/culture paradigm at the root of the proposed critical exercise, and to contextualize notions of cannibalism in order to bear witness to the trace of Marx. In effect, can a pop promo with a bit of bite in it make us more wary about intellectual masturbation such as when academics blithely announce that nature is all culture? Could it remind us, as Michael Stipe once did (a long time ago) that when we drift off to sleep, we still have our teeth in our mouth? Oh, and there is a third reason. I'm also using the video to provoke the students to read some books, to watch some decent films, to listen to some decent music, to consider some quality painters, and generally think about the politics of living. I've got fifty minutes.



I run the video and the students watch it. I watch them. Although it makes many of them uncomfortable, only the most anally retentive and, frankly, retarded of them, are horrified. They definitely wince when some internal organ is whipped out squirming, and they laugh uproariously when the Ford Catalogue on roller-skates start to scoff him with gusto.

And, predictably, before we can address the visuals, there has to be some nudge nudge analysis about the double entendres:

“Sir, when Robbie says that the DJ is keeping him ‘up all night’ does he mean that she’s making him horny?”

“Yes, I think that’s implied.”

“Sir, that’s why he says ‘I don’t wanna rock’. He means a rock in his trousers.”

“Yes, that’s one meaning but it could also be a reference to cocaine. A rock of cocaine would keep you, in directly inverse proportions to your penis, up all night, which might be why he asks Ground Control can it ‘hear’ him, because he’s high on drugs.

This by the way is a series of references that Williams has quarried from Major Tom, - David Bowie’s *Space Oddity* character - who turns up in *Ashes to Ashes* over twenty years later having progressed from being a pot smoker to a junkie. As always, be careful out there kids.”

“Who’s David Bowie?”

“One of the most intelligent musicians in the history of popular music. Try listening to anything between 1967 and 1980.” I write album titles on the blackboard but there is a conspicuous absence of scribbling. It’s too early yet even for the committed to start contemplating study.

“Sir, when he sings ‘Babylon’s back in business’, what’s Babylon?”

“An ancient, magnificent city in Mesopotamia famed for its debauchery and decadence. Its ruins are said to lie about 50 miles from Baghdad, which is very interesting. It is linked in the mythic consciousness to the tower of Babel.”

“Babel?”

“Ancient peoples tried to build a tower that would rise to Heaven but when God saw what they were at, he waved his magic wand and they could no longer communicate with each other because they now spoke in different tongues; this is the mythic explanation of diverse languages.”

“Ahh.”

“Now, do you see how we have already identified three different meanings to the lyrics; sex and drugs and space travel? It could also be about simple love of the music the DJ is playing and the need to dance to it. This shows that any one language, never mind multiple languages, has many meanings which we silence in order to make one of its meanings function. How is this possible, four meanings coexisting in the same lines?”

“Metaphor” they drone in monotone unison.

“Exactly. And metaphor works by one meaning substituting for a first meaning but retaining the primary meaning in order to allow for the secondary meaning to signify, which itself can be replaced by another metaphor, retaining associations of the secondary meaning. So we have a chain of language substituting centres for centres. How do we stop this chain, albeit artificially?”

More monotones, “transcendent signifiers”.

“Such as?”

“God. . . . Truth. . . . . Origin.”

The droning response is designed to signal that they know the answer because I have repeated it to them mantra-like for a month, which means that they don’t necessarily understand it.

“Any sign of God in this video?”

Momentary pause, shaking of heads, “No”.

At this stage I produce a nice A4 print of the *Tower of Babel* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, painted in 1563, and scribble details about when and where it came from on the board.



“Well then, consider this Bruegel painting of the tower of Babel. It strikes me that the interior of the building in the video is the same shape as this exterior here. Couldn’t the environment of the video be the inside of this building?”

“WHAT???”

“Think about it for a second, before you bite my head off. The interior in the video is circular like this, and conical towards the top. The doorways we see in the painting on the exterior of the tower, parallel the apertures we see on the interior of the building in the video. Further, why does Robbie appear out of a hole in the floor at the beginning of the video? Why do all of the lyrics refer to going up, getting higher and higher, elevation? In history, such metaphors are always about getting to God and art is intertextual, often unconsciously so. Why not this painting a link in the chain of metaphors signifying Heaven aspiring creativity?”

They look at me like I have two heads, and say nothing.

“OK, what about the cannibalism?”



“What cannibalism?”

Now *I* do a double take. I expect to have a hum-dinging debate about the morality of cannibalism, but I don’t expect them to blank its presence completely.

“OK, Freud is here! In the classroom. Repressed desires are in the air. This video quite clearly features cannibalism and you’re denying it! Could this be because, unconsciously, we desire to eat people? Freud’s return of the repressed, the desire for the prohibited? You’re well versed in Freud, after all.”

Unexplained truism Number 1: Arts students love Freud.

“No way,” they say. “It’s funny, that’s all. It’s not really cannibalism. It’s just a bit of fun.”

“Fun? Why is the image of a young man being devoured by attractive women appealing to you, both male and female alike? I propose that there is a repressed, collective desire here, perhaps a Jungian archetype revealing an innate cannibalistic urge and therefore repressed?”

“It’s just *funny!*”

“Ah, but isn’t the laugh the release of the pressure cooker environment controlling the prohibited memory?”

“No way, there’s nothing funny about cannibalism, it’s disgusting.”

“Why?”

“Because human beings have souls. You can’t eat people.”

So much for any real conviction that ‘God’ is just a transcendent linguistic signifier.

“So you wouldn’t eat a person?”

“No way!”

“But what if you had to, to stay alive, like the Rugby team, in 1972, up in the Andes; these people didn’t want to but they did.”

“Yeah, a rugby team! Not really surprising.”

“If you were forced to eat someone else to survive, would you?”

At this point, a few say they would, a few say they would not, and a few say they wouldn’t know unless they were in that position, and then go back to studying their finger nails. So I discourse about tradition and the Fore tribe in New Guinea and about how the elder is partially eaten to retain his knowledge. I point out to the students that they wouldn’t eat another person as a mark of respect, and that the Fore ate each other as a mark of respect, and that these differences are essentially cultural,

not natural; both tribes do what they believe is right because of their cultural conditioning.

“They do it for the same reason that you don’t do it, respect, and perhaps it’s better than being buried . . . . like Elvis, out in the back garden!”

At this juncture one of the traditionally quiet students speaks up firmly and with conviction.

“Sir, you are completely wrong, it’s unnatural, and people who do such a thing, like that German man recently on the news, they get punished.”

“Issei Sagawa, he didn’t get punished, did he? He ate his Dutch girlfriend in Paris in 1981, got extradited back to Japan, got off, and had a hugely successful career as a Japanese national celebrity. The Rolling Stones even wrote a song about him! How is that punishment?”

She’s irate. “Well, then punished in the afterlife.”

“By God?” I enquire.

“Precisely” they say. She is now supported.

“What do you do on Sunday?”

A disturbing number of them go to mass.

“And do you not have a nibble on the son of God every Sunday?”

Most have no idea what I am suggesting but one generally bright spark observes “but that’s figurative. It’s a metaphor.”

“No actually, it’s a central tenet of your Roman Catholic faith, trans-substantiation, when the priest does the dingalingaling thing, he has the power, invested in him from on high to turn the wafer, the thing that continues to taste suspiciously like a wafer, into the body and soul and blood, and *ouns*, of Jesus Christ. It is not then a metaphor but a literal transformation; indeed it flies in the face of the metaphoricity of damn well everything else. That’s why it’s supposed to be a miracle.”

“NO WAY!”

“Yes way.”

And now, thankfully, it begins to come together. One of them in her own informal way is running the cognitive software. Her eyes light up as she says “so the girls eating Robbie is quite like Christians eating Jesus!”

“Yep, this is my body, take this all of you and eat it. The video is a metaphor for Christian divine regeneration, death and resurrection. Robbie is scorned while human, he is outcast despite his positive demeanour and his best efforts, so he sacrifices



himself and is reborn and in return the women eat him. He is the new messiah of the twenty-first century.”

At this point one habitually astute cynic says “but how do you know that the wafer just tastes like wafer, it could taste like a person? You’d need to know what a person tasted like to know that a wafer doesn’t taste like a person.”

Eyes arch around the room, a judiciously placed question; they’re good at this. Does he know what people taste like? Throw it in there quickly and we might catch him off guard.

“Well, I did eat a bit of my finger!” I hold up the mangled remains of the little finger on my left hand, thin, broken boned, emaciated, with clear circular rivulets of skin illustrating where it had been de- and then reattached. In truth, it was chewed upon by fifteen feet of spiked corrugated iron when I misjudged the jump on a school mitch 25 years ago.

“What the hell did you do that for?”

“To see what it tasted like.” This a line I remember from urban myth, or fact? A school kid somewhere, propped up his leg on a stool, packed it around with cushions, placed the house phone nearby on the table, shot himself in the thigh and then rang an ambulance. When asked why he had mutilated himself thus, his response; to see what it felt like. . . . .

They stare at me in disbelief, and then start laughing, heartily. Necessary tactics, keep them entertained, do a bit of stand up, greater chance that they’ll listen and follow the argument.

“OK, talk to me about Robbie’s body in the video.”

“Well fit” giggle a gaggle of girls.

“Very tasty?” I offer.

“Very tasty” they concur, oblivious to the semantics. “Been in the gym hasn’t he?”

“He’s got good tattoos” a chap with Arabic script on his forearm interjects.

“Tell me about the tattoos.”

“He’s got that design on his shoulder, like the New Zealand Rugby team, you know, that New Zealand tribe that have the tattoos on their face.”

“Yes, the Maori.” “Did you know that it is alleged by historical sources that the Maori once engaged in cannibalism?”

“What are you suggesting? Does Robbie Williams know this? Is that why he got the tattoo?”

“The sign of a cannibal, perhaps?”

“But Robbie Williams is not a cannibal?”

“Perhaps not intentionally, but given that all art is intertextual and we’re caught up in a chain of meaning, oh yes he is! For a start he’s cannibalised myth and popular culture. I just showed you how he has reconfigured the Christ archetype to write himself into the myth as a new manifestation. He also cannibalizes popular culture. He said himself that the video is ‘just carnage pieced together from 80’s pap to make some 2000 pap’ but he didn’t say what pap. If I had time I’d show you two old 70’s films, *The Warriors* and *The Wanderers*, because this video has borrowed images from both, the gangs on roller skates and the clothes, so he’s mistaken about the decade, although the Eighties are there in the stage set which echoes the underground world from *Total Recall* with its giant fans and claustrophobic closeness. So both the archetypal, quasi-mythic religious signs and the popular culture references are rehashed as ostensibly new signs signifying the same thing; everything here is a reworking of the past. Just as the trace of ancient human sacrifice and possible cannibalism was transformed in the Roman Catholic ritual into transubstantiation, so too we have this post-modern cultural cannibalism where Robbie Williams is a new God of rejuvenated entertainment signs, including religion. In effect we have religion as popular entertainment. And when you think about it, where - to give you just one example - would the old biddies get their kicks if there were not half a dozen novenas to attend of a morning? Whether it is bingo or the boy from Bethlehem, at one point or another it becomes a form of entertainment. And, let me say at this point that we have reached this juncture in our debate through using bricolage, the conjunction of apparently unrelated details. You remember? The idea I was trying to explain to you yesterday. Derrida’s way to try to think outside of binary oppositions. We’ve just moved from Breughel to a boy band icon to cannibalism. Are you getting it?”

They begin to nod in unison. Things are starting to connect and then suddenly the little God lover is back on her feet, running interference.

“But all this is metaphoric cannibalism. It’s not real cannibalism. It’s not the idea with blood in it.”

“Ok” I say, happy to concede, “what then is real cannibalism?”

“Eating people” she asserts with firm conviction.

“Like fellatio or cunnilingus?”

“NOOOOO” rings out as a collective howl of pseudo-scandalized objection from around the room, but Mother Teresa stands firm: “Swallowing parts of them.”

“Sperm, blood loss from a period, placenta, these are parts of people that are swallowed.” Some are now doubled over in what might be mirthful convulsions, others are glaring at me, and some are so red they may yet explode.

Yet she will not give up without a fight: “Ok ok, chewing on them, with your teeth.”

“Love bites?”

She pauses, jaw clenched in concentration until . . . “OK, causing them pain by eating their flesh.”

“Thank you” I holler loudly and applaud her. “PAIN. Causing them pain, that’s it, isn’t it? The pain factor. The perceived possibility of pain to either party is the primary working definition of cannibalism. Truth is, when it comes to cannibalism you put the mockers on it because it might involve having to think of pain, or suffering, or dying. That’s why you won’t even recognize cannibalism as a hypothetical starvation antidote, because contemplating starvation involves contemplating pain, and possibly death. Like Terry Eagleton says, students today are all for analysis of the eroticised body, but not the starving body.

“Did you really try to eat your finger, sir?”

“No, Andrew, I didn’t, can you keep up with the direction we’re taking, please. I suggest to you all that we are afraid of cannibalism, like starvation, because it involves pain and so both are displaced, forgotten about, ignored. There’s a great black hole at the centre of our modern urban experience about starvation, pain, suffering and consequent death.”

“Are you saying that Africans should practice cannibalism to avoid starvation?”

“Absolutely not, because that’s what colonial powers said they were doing 100 years ago, and because Africans and other tribal societies have been previously misrepresented in such a way it’s no longer possible to talk openly about cannibalism because it’s now framed in the sign system of western imperial morality. This is why I said ‘allegedly’ in relation to Maori cannibalism because it may not have ever been so. The history of western civilization is also a history in which organized religion frames the pagan, and distinguishes itself as superior through moral criteria, chief among which is this problematic idea that savages will devour their own children. Meanwhile, we sit around and discourse on the eroticized body because we have fast become pampered, self-indulgent neo-bourgeois twats.”

“No we have not.”

“Eagleton says you have.”

“Well, he’s wrong.”

“Disprove him then.”

“Ok, where?”

“After Theory.” I scribble the publication details on the board.

“We’ll read it.”

“For next week?”

“Ok.”

“The whole book?”

“OK.”

And we’re off on the “catch me if you can and I’ll read it” routine.

“Further in relation to that point I was making, you don’t have to go so far from home to find comment on the imperialist attitude to the self-consuming savages. You know a famous Irish author once suggested that hungry Irish people should eat their children.”

“Well, he was a sicko.”

“Actually he was an influential member of the clergy!”

“Well he obviously had mental problems.”

“He believed all Irish people, including himself, had mental problems. He referred to Ireland as the world’s largest open-air mental asylum and he donated a sizable proportion of his last will and testament to the building of a mental hospital right here in Dublin, name of Saint Patrick’s. Can you identify the author?”

“Samuel Beckett?”

“No, but interestingly there is a Beckett ward in Saint Patrick’s, which, given his novels, particularly *Murphy*, is a delectable irony when you consider that they probably just named all of the wards after famous Irish writers. You should read *Murphy*, it’s a riot, in fact if you read it and don’t find it funny, I’ll go and get a job in an asylum, sorry, a psychiatric institute. The lunatics have erased the asylum.”

I scribble the publication details of *Murphy* on the board and continue talking: “The author in question is Jonathan Swift and he wrote *A Modest Proposal* about how the English were devouring the Irish, metaphorically of course, so the Irish might as well eat their children too, metaphorically of course.”

“So it’s a metaphor?”

“Yes a delicious metaphor, one that is so powerful you can taste it.”

“Can you taste a metaphor sir?”

“The very word ‘taste’ is a metaphor for cultural choices determined by economic privilege, hence ‘you’ve got good taste’ because you’ve got a horrendously expensive handbag, you see? Which is why Peter Greenaway’s *The Cook, the thief, his wife and her lover* is so finally, well, wanky.

“What’s that?”

“Wanky? Or the film?”

“The film.”

“Ah, you don’t want to see it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s by this director who thinks he’s the Renaissance personified, civilization personified actually, and he’s got this movie where the bad guys are evil, utterly amoral, for no other apparent reason than that they are working class and concomitantly boorish, and they like to scoff good food, really meat in teeth and farting and belching, almost as good visually as Joyce’s description of lunch in the Ormond hotel is textually. What I mean by that is that Greenaway does on film what Joyce does in words, but the difference with Greenaway is that he presents cannibalism as the repressed desire of the uncultivated swine, whereas Bloom alludes to it as our mythical inheritance, neither bad nor good, simply there. Ultimately Greenaway appears to be suggesting that we are in stages of development and the poor are the least developed and therefore culturally inferior. After all, in the film the forefather of the celebrity chef offers up cooked reality in the form of the lover who has been murdered and the ruffians are really torn about whether to eat him or not, until finally repulsed by their own actions, cannibalism is averted. In the end, Greenaway can’t separate the metaphors in ‘taste’ because he probably believes that the concept of cultured taste is genuine. In Greenaway’s world th -”

“They try to eat a cooked man?”

“Yep.”

“In the film?”

“Yep.”

“What’s it called again?”

I scribble details on the board, and add the “Lystragonians” chapter from *Ulysses* as a point of linguistic comparison.

“But sir, can’t you taste food as a literal thing, your sense of taste, and have tastes in music, literature, even tastes in food?”

“Good question. My point is this. In reality, and insofar as ‘reality’ is language, language is a chain of signs, metaphor for metaphor. Put it this way. When you eat food and someone asks you how it tastes you undertake a metaphoric substitution where language replaces or stands in for the eating experience. It was ‘delicious’ or it ‘tasted like Heaven.’ Wine is the best example. Taste the wine, how does it taste? Like chocolate and strawberries, and cherries, and barnyard floor, or whatever. Now there’s a clever film called *Sideways* in which the description of the wine becomes a description of the people describing the wine. They are defined by their drinking habits. The drinking is replaced by the description, and the description becomes not only of the drinking but of the drinker. This shows that the metaphoricity of language is potentially very powerful, and that language can replicate both subtle and overwhelming experiences in words. So when Swift writes that Irish people should eat their kids, and Peter O’Toole reads it publicly to a lot of rich Irish people at a charity fund-raiser to save a theatre, and everyone in attendance is outraged, the metaphoricity of language comes close to reproducing the shock of the act of cannibalism, and by definition the shock of the act of exploitation which produces the cannibal motif. After all, Swift was satirizing those blind to the poverty of their unpaid labourers. The politics of starvation disturbs the comfortable and forces them to focus on the existence of starvation, in a theatre where precisely this type of challenging confrontation is supposed to take place! Like John Lennon said to the rich seats ‘don’t applaud, shake your jewellery’ meaning ‘what the hell are you doing here anyway?’ Now, at the same time language might be a series of metaphors standing in for experience but that doesn’t stop bodies starving and people dying, and we shouldn’t hide from it in language, or in art. We should confront it . . . . . like Nick Cave.”

“Who’s he?”

“The most confrontational popular musician of the age. Songs about the electric chair, about starvation, and murder. I believe that one criterion for art is that it should bite your fucking head off. Listen to *No More Shall We Part*. Cave sings about his piano with “all its teeth bared,” and there is the suggestion throughout the songs that the narrator, the speaking persona, has murdered his wife. In fact, perhaps he ate her?”

They take down the details about the album quickly; they're always keen for a bit of music.

"The difference between someone like Nick Cave and Robbie Williams couldn't be more acute. I suggest to you that Robbie Williams is popular culture cannibalizing cannibalism for entertainment, because there is no real pain or gore, or sickness in it. There isn't any shock value beyond a shocking image in an unexpected medium which is quickly neutralized by all the other signs which define the medium as unobtrusive.

"But we're unshockable now in any case" one of the sharp ones announces, "that's the effect of post-modernism".

"Oh no you're not."

I write the details for Chuck Palahniuk's *Haunted* on the board. I tell them to hold their breath and I recount the plot of "Guts" in which the narrator describes an incident where he masturbates while sitting on the water filter in a swimming pool because it stimulates his anus. However, the suction causes his rectum and lower intestines to prolapse and become entangled in the filter so that he has to eat through his own intestines in order to avoid drowning. Somewhere around the prolapsing most of them exhale in horror, but some persevere as far as the chewing and then gasp and splutter their disgust all over their neighbours.

"So are you shocked, or are you really impassive post-modern casualties?"

My in-house Torquemada has had enough: "But all this, your story, cannibalism, it's against nature, you appal me, I think you do this to us on purpose. It's unnatural, you're unnatural."

With that, she ups sticks and leaves. In her wake I attempt to nail the hour.

"OK, let's address this nature business. What's natural?"

"Beauty."

"Plastic surgery, next?"

"Inner beauty?"

"Oh for fuck's sake, what else?"

"Nature, that's natural inn't it?"

"Well, not really, the world is now littered with genetically modified crops and a whole host of simulated environments. Monsanto, the corporate devil incarnate, are trying to patent the pig, I kid you not, and the metaphoric capacity of legal language may allow them to eventually own the pink lads." I scribble details of the GreenPeace web site so they can go and see details of Monsanto's project for themselves.



“Besides, Darwin proved that nature isn’t fixed, it changes in order to survive, nature is not an inviolable rule, its fluid, aspects of it may last millennia but it changes. Your insistence that ‘nature’ has an inbuilt prohibition that protects you from the fact that cannibalism is relative doesn’t necessarily stand up to scrutiny. I think it’s more a case of being shielded from the realities of slaughter.

“What do you mean?”

“Who likes steak?”

Many do.

“I had a colleague once who had a panic attack, fainted, and had to be hospitalized because she went for a side street walk during Bayram in Istanbul and happened to see a sheep get its throat cut. If I slaughtered a cow in front of you, skinned it, fried it up quickly, and gave it to you to munch on, might you be repulsed?”

“Maybe?”

“So, you accept that part of the revulsion to cannibalism is meat immediacy. It’s the unmediated immediacy of the act of slaughter, including human slaughter. Ultimately we’re hiding from pain, from slaughter, and from the reality of on-going widespread starvation.”

The bell rings.

“Sir, tell us a joke”.

“Why?”

“So we can resist having to think about pain, starvation and cannibalism!”

“OK then. Paddy Englishman, Paddy Scotsman and Paddy Irishman are stranded on a desert island where they are discovered by a local tribe. The local tribe stoke up a big pot and ask Paddy Englishman if he has any last request. He announces that he would like to drink tea while reading *The Times* so the tribe consult each other and then three of them jump into a canoe, paddle to England, pick up *The Times* and some Earl Grey tea and paddle back to the island. Upon arrival, they make the tea, give Paddy Englishman his paper and watch him as he sits back, sips, and reads. After what seems like a relatively civilized interlude, they pounce on him, cook him, eat him and use his skin to make a canoe. They turn to Paddy Scotsman. He announces that he wants a “bottle a’ whisky and me bagpipes.” Exasperated, a new trio paddle to Glasgow, go round to his house, pick up his pipes, stop off at an off-license and paddle back, wherewith Paddy Scotsman treats them to a blast of “Flower of Scotland” downs the bottle in one go and jumps into the pot; cooked, eaten, they use

his skin to make a canoe. They turn on Paddy Irishman. He announces that he would like a pitchfork. The tribe are bemused. From amid the tools in one of their sacks, a tribesman produces a pitchfork and hands it to Paddy. Taking a deep breath he turns the prongs towards himself, repeatedly plunges them into his chest and declares “You’re not makin’ a fuckin’ canoe out ‘a me!”

Some laugh; most mirror the tribe’s reaction to Paddy’s Pitchfork request.

I ask a laugher “what do you think of that?”

“Funny.”

“Yes, a funny, tastefully tasteless response to imperialism.”

They scuttle off towards tea and coffee and discussions about my sanity. As they leave I look at the black board with its things to read, see and listen too:

Breughel

Eagleton, *After Theory*

Beckett, *Murphy*

Swift, *A Modest Proposal*

Greenaway, *The Cook, the thief, his wife and her lover.*

Alexander Payne, *Sideways*

“Lystragonians” from Joyce’s *Ulysses*

Nick Cave, *No More Shall we Part.*

Palahniuk, *Haunted*

Not bad for 50 minutes. I am acutely aware that some will read little or nothing, most will scan some of it and perhaps relish something, but a few, a minority, will devour the lot.

Job’s a good ‘un.

### **Image Credits.**

Rock DJ featuring Robbie Williams is a Clear Post Production production. Dir. Vaughan Arnell. Based on an original idea by Godman Production Company, 2001. See [http://www.audiomotion.com/news\\_archive.html](http://www.audiomotion.com/news_archive.html) for full details.

The images utilized in this essay are available at [www.clipland.com](http://www.clipland.com) and the full video for “Rock DJ” is available at [www.robbiewilliams.com](http://www.robbiewilliams.com),

The *Tower of Babel* (1563) and other works by Pieter Bruegel the Elder can be viewed at [www.artnet.com](http://www.artnet.com)