Notes on Matthew Stokoe, *Cows*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

**Why Is Extremely Violent and Disgusting Subject Matter Inimical to Literature?**

I was led to this book by various reviews that said things like “the most extreme novel you’ll ever read” (from the back cover copy), “gruesome beyond reason,” “most intense book I have ever read,” “most gruesome book I have ever read,” “I almost felt like I was doing something wrong reading it.” Those are from Amazon, and it’s worth looking on Amazon for the review titled “Most disturbing book ever written. Period.,” posted June 29, 2011. That review is almost as off as this book.

The question COWS raises (the book seems to be cited in all-caps, which is appropriate to the way it shouts its perversions and obscenities) have to do with the place of extreme subject matter in art. In visual art, it’s common for students to become interested in extremely violent or disturbing images, such as photos of car crash victims or medical deformities, and to try to use them in their work. Often it turns out to be unexpectedly difficult to use such images simply because they are so strong. A photograph of a man with Ebola just won’t fit with a collage of other images of Africa. Artists who have tried such experiments have found they need to work hard to aestheticize the difficult images: Andres Serrano’s beautiful, nearly abstract morgue photographs are an example, and so are some of Joel-Peter Witkin’s elaborately staged, faux-antique photographs of people with various medical conditions. It shouldn’t matter that the resulting artwork is harmonious—the purpose, after all, is to shock—but somehow it does. Despite the aesthetics of discontinuity, collage, and bricolage instituted by postmodernism, we still find that very strong images don’t work as fine art unless they are elaborately altered and contextualized. It’s a puzzle that we still want our art to be nominally harmonious, coherent, and aesthetic. And it’s interesting that given all the pressure contemporary artists face to be avant-garde, difficult, new, politically visible, strong, persuasive, and in general to stand out against a crazily crowded field—that given all that, it’s somehow not appropriate to use the very strongest images.

COWS is a way of thinking about that. It is not a good novel by a number of standards. It’s awkwardly constructed; its inner monologues and dialogues are sometimes awkward and seldom persuasive; it doesn’t respond to the last fifty years of fiction except in glancing allusions to some other extremist authors; and its writing is dull and often mechanical. He doesn’t seem to have thought about the fragmented consciousness of Naked Lunch, or the ecstatic prejudices and violence of Céline. His rebellion is presented in the mold of simple fictional forms and basic narrative devices.

I don’t think Stokoe is an especially good writer. But the book is more than memorable: it is, I think, entirely impossible to forget. And that is because of things that happen in it. I will mention just one: the main character breaks off his mother’s teeth, fixes his anus over her bleeding mouth, and shits into it, forcing her to eat. What matters in this book is extreme violence, perversity, and repulsion. I think those three shock effects (as Roland Barthes would have called them) are different. Extreme unexpected violence is repellent in one way; perversity works differently; and
visceral repulsion is partly another matter. When these three are used together, the effects are disorienting partly because they are mixed in ways that are hard to separate. I think that to make headway on this problem of extreme subject matter (or images) it is necessary to distinguish these, and probably others, and consider them one by one. (Barthes distinguishes five species of photographic “shock.”) A purer version of this book could be imagined, in which nothing violent or perverse happens, but the world is full of stench, slime, and opportunities for nausea. Then it might be easier to see what kinds of narrative work would need to be done to bring the nauseating elements into dialogue with the rest of the book.

This kind of problem has been well studied in the case of de Sade, where repetition plays a central part in the creation of the pornographic effect. But it strikes me a lot more work needs to be done to understand why a book as wildly imaginative and consistently extreme as COWS can be a minor novel, one that doesn’t need to be on the must-read list of everyone interested in contemporary writing. By the same token, more work needs to be done on visual artists like Joel-Peter Witkin to understand why they feel the need to work so hard on their extreme images in order to bring them into the domain of fine art. Why should the extremely violent, the extremely disturbing, the extremely repulsive need to be aestheticized? It has been almost forty years since the inception of the anti-aesthetic, and longer since Duchamp: we have questioned nearly every sense of unity, harmony, and coherence that once existed, not to mention every sense of beauty, decorum, and moderation. So how do we know so clearly that COWS is not an important book?