

ON CUSSING

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THE VICEROY

by Gus Van Sant

In the 1980s, Katherine Dunn liked to frequent the Virginia Cafe in Portland, Oregon. There she could glean information from shady Subterranean Locals to use in a *Portland Weekly* column that she wrote—anonously—called “The Slice.” Sitting at a rainy front window of the cafe in her usual booth of old wood, a hand-rolled cigarette in her hand spiraling smoke around her, she often told me about daily boxing matches she was covering in a voice that sounded like a handicapper giving a hot tip. “In the boxing ring, fighters favor a swing

they call 'the Bolo.' But I've heard some fighters refer to it as 'the Viceroy,'" she said, adding, "you know at the time of the Dutch tulip fever, the Viceroy was the name of the tulip that was the most desirable."

"Boxers," she went on, "have a serious yet delicate nature."

Katherine didn't cuss as I remember. She preferred more lyrical expletives.

Once I told her that I was I was looking for a Mexican actor for Walt Curtis's semi-gay love story. "Walt told me you have some ideas."

I was referring to a film adaptation of Walt Curtis's novel *Mala Noche*.

Her owl eyes peered over the top of big round glasses. "I think it's a luscious, noirish idea," she said about the film, taking a pull on her cigarette, "Let's see . . . You really ought to look at Knott Street Boxing Gym. There are some fine young Mexican fighters that work there."

I said, “Fighters? That’s interesting, but . . . would they punch me out?”

“Oh, pshaw,” she said, “boxers are as propitious as kitty-cats, and they can take directions in the ring, so why not in the movies.”

Instances of Katherine swearing in her work are way entertaining. Take this one, from *Geek Love*: “Sudden gratitude for the nuns, realizing that is she had stayed with me all the years of her growing up I would have murdered her—the arrogant, imbecile bitch, my baby, beautiful Miranda.”

Or this doozy: “And Crystal Lil herself must imagine that Miranda is just one more of the gaudy females who trails their sex like slug slime over the rooms for a month at a time before moving on.”

And one more favorite: “‘Wait till you see my tea cabinet,’ she says, slapping the swaying loop of canvas meant to cradle an ass.”

In her prose, Katherine’s sentences often have a surprise inside like that. Her writing can be ear

candy, like the music you hear during parades as people march down the street on American holidays. Sometimes there are intimate facts to wow us, or a velvet glove with a strong fist enclosed that can pack a punch.

Much like “the Viceroy.”

ON CUSSING

“Language is a tool box. Swearing is a hammer. You can pound in a nail with a screwdriver or a wrench, but a hammer is designed for the job. Sometimes only swearing will do.”

—MELISSA MOHR, PhD, linguistic historian

“When I want it to stick I give it to them
loud and dirty, so they’ll remember it.”

—GENERAL GEORGE PATTON, when
asked about using vulgar language to his troops

So. We cuss. Some of us cuss by saying *mercy me* or *suffering succotash*. I like to say *shooty-pooty*, which I learned from a nice Baltimore boy back in 1963. It's a Cub Scout version of *shitty-pity*, which is a cutesy diminutive for just plain *shit*.

This kind of substitution for a cuss word is what linguists call an *amelioration*. It softens the blow while still addressing the topic. This is not the same as a euphemism, by the way, which tries to evade or screen the subject. Americans are big on substitute amelioration. We invent thousands of them daily, it seems. *Darn* for *damn*, *gosh* for *God*. They often sound as though we started to say the taboo word but caught ourselves.

Almost all of us have darker vocabularies if we're pushed. We all have strong vocal reactions to pain and surprise, to anger or fear. We often use the same language in response to the strong positive stimulus of pleasure or awe or humor. Cuss words and phrases, whatever they may be in our individual vocabularies, are the most potent words we have for expressing emotion.

However, as writers, we now face a loss of power in the classic obscenities—the draining of shock value, the depletion of such terms' ability to offend. Our challenge is to revive the language with vivid reinvention.

Case in point: I was out on my balcony a while ago as two young men walked by on the sidewalk and one of them was telling a story in which every other word was *fucking*. It went along the lines of, “So I fucking told the fucking guy that it wasn't my fucking beer, I'm just fucking here for fucking apples . . .” And so on.

Now this made me sad. Here is this potent word being drained of all its juice and snap by overuse. We often call such cuss words *expletives*. Technically an expletive is any word or phrase that adds nothing to the meaning of the sentence. A few years ago, for instance, TV reporters took to sticking in the phrase “if you will” in the most inane way. That was a smarmy, Uriah Heep-style expletive. For the guy under the balcony, the word *fuck* was an expletive. It had no more weight or meaning than *like* for the proverbial Valley Girl or *um* for the tongue-tied. It’s superfluous filler. It isn’t shocking. It isn’t vivid or engaging. It’s simply monotonous. He was boring and his story was unintelligible.

In real-life cussing we are probably at our most creative when on a furious roll, and ranting. At a time like that we might discover profound reservoirs of image and vocabulary. Or we might find

ourselves stating the same lame word repeatedly. But we must always be on guard against mediocre cussing in our writing. If you're a fiction writer, please don't create a primary character who talks like the guy beneath the balcony. If you're a non-fiction writer stuck with someone who talks like that, don't quote him much. As writers we are not just allowed, we are required to decide how and when or whether to use cussing language.

A writer's aim should be to give genuine thought to the use of this limited but significant vocabulary, and above all to avoid cliché and tedium.

Other cultures and tongues have their own powerful taboo language, and we can certainly learn from them. As English speakers, it's worth thinking about the ways we use bad words and how to make our own use more vital and effective.

Now, the linguistic researchers tell us that we learn to cuss early, usually between the ages of two and four. So this is primal stuff. We each have our

own history and cussing language. For example, I remember how and when I learned the meaning of the word *fuck*.

This was back in 1950. I was not quite five years old and had heard the word all my life. My big brother and his friends said it when they were angry or upset. On the rare occasions when my mother said it, it meant we were all in serious trouble. My dad, the mechanic, made it into a poem. He'd be sweating under the hood of some gasping Ford or Chevy on a hundred-degree day, and he'd chant it. "Fuck the fuckity fuckin' fucker." Now this music of his delighted me. It became my secret song. Later in school I used it to learn the parts of speech and the forms of a sentence. This chant had it all. Verb, adverb, adjective, noun—action, modifiers, and subject—all in this one magnificently dangerous word.