

Slime

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For a while there was a craze for slime amongst the young, and it still persists, though at a lesser degree of visibility. It involved making or buying lumps of slime, of all types, fluffy, clear, thick, stretchy, thin, aerated, any type as long as it was gloopy enough to knead and pull, consistent enough to droop only slowly into whatever surface or vessel contained it. There are countless recipes for home-made slime circulating on the net. Combinations of white glue, borax powder, contact lens solution, shaving foam, laundry detergent, baking soda are mixed with the colourful and glinting elements of food colouring, clay, glitter, perfumes, iron filings. Desirable matter is made. A highpoint of fascination with slime began in 2016 and it lasted a year. The craze returned in 2019. In 2021, interest in the stuff, according to Google Trends data, was climbing again. As the moral panic that attaches to any craze cranked up, my daughter's school, like many others, left an urgent text message in the first wave, in March 2017, insisting that we prevent our children from bringing in to school their home-made slime. Shortly afterwards, indicating the wide reach of the trend, the *New York Post* reported on the symbiosis of the fad with DIY videos that circulate on YouTube and Instagram. The emergence of selling platforms such as Etsy contributed to the inflated presence of the material in the world, as well as its inventive extensions. Slime hung around for some months, left, returned, or went underground, a tenacious alien presence, and it took up residence between the fingers and in the bags of the young.

What is it about slime, this handmade or industrial gloop, that attracts children, or anyone? What is it about slime that makes it contribute to an aesthetic experience – or be in itself - an aesthetic experience? Slime is a contradictory thing. It generates the

Yuck Factor, under certain circumstances, if it possesses specific aesthetic qualities, while also being, under other circumstances, and displaying other aesthetic qualities, a desired substance for touching. Slime, not just playground slime, but slime itself, any slime – the slime on the ocean’s floor, the slime of a snail trail, the slime of human mucous - appears as animated substance, an infinitely reshaping, endlessly possible, impossible, glorious tactile body, much as it might also be a repellent, self-forming, self-deforming thing. Slime is wild and domestic. It persists through time and yet is impersistent, having left from its early days barely a fossil record. Slime is deathly and it has a life of its own. It is the thing itself and its residue, excess or trace. It is human – we produce slime – and it is alien, at least in fantastical terms, as countless horror splice SF movies attest. Slime straddles multiple realms, our world and the otherworldly – and if the splurging of slime from the mouths of actors in horror films was seen by millions in 1984 in *Ghostbusters*, that is not to say that oral ectoplasm, as fascination, does not have a longer history. If slime is of the moment, it is also of the past. In the form of ectoplasm, through Charles Richet’s experiments in psychic phenomena and through F. W. H. Myers, who used the word ectoplasm in his *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, it became the name for a substance or spiritual energy which is produced by mediums when in a state of trance (Myers 1903). Ectoplasm is ‘a viscous substance ... from which spirits make themselves visible forms ... alive, sensitive to touch and light ... cold to the touch, slightly luminous and having a characteristic smell’ (Warner, 2006, p. 290). The slime is an expression of the possibility of an unseen brought into vision, an otherness made palpable, brought before human rationality and an undermining of it. Slime is sublime.

The sudden fixation on slime in the schoolyard does not convey the mysticism of ectoplasm, though it hints at every horror film and at what lies beneath the horrified yet fascinated relation to slime as an otherworldliness. It might also evoke another sublime, the sublime of new materiality, which is current and pervasive. Contemporary science expends much energy on advanced materials, engineered substances that improve on nature. Sometimes they draw on nature, in order to find ingenious ways to do things that were previously done elsewhere or never done before. Biomimetics applies principles from engineering, chemistry and biology to the synthesis of

materials, synthetic systems or machines that have functions that mimic biological processes. Slime moulds for one have been used for urban design, specifically road planning. *Physarum polycephalum*, the 'many-headed slime', is a plasmodial, single-celled organism that expands from a single point, in its quest for food sources. Having located them, its many branches die off, leaving a slimy, single-celled efficient route between the nodes of food sources. There are suggestions, not fully comprehended, that the slime may possess a memory of those lost routes, which could be operationalised one day.

And here is the contemporaneity of slime in its various forms. It casts inherited notions of matter aside, in alignment with much of the work of contemporary science, which turns its focus to advanced materials and a re-imagination at the atomic scale. Soft matter – liquids, colloids, polymers, foams, gels, granular materials, and liquid crystals – are self-organising, atomically capricious materials. They possess capacities, such as liquid crystals' birefringence, generalised elasticity, mesoscopic, intermediate scale, symmetry-breaking, degrees of freedom coupled with responsiveness to inputs. These odd physical chemical components lend themselves to complex systems approaches. Liquid crystal is slimy. Mucus, slug trails and cell membranes are liquid crystals, existing between solid and liquid, as are detergents and soaps when dissolved in water.

Slime in the playground is a trivial craze, but there was a moment when it was forwarded as on-trend by a trend analysis group, called WGSN (World's Global Style Network), the self-described world's trend authority or decoders of the future, the kind of publicity agency who put out press releases on the colours of the next season, and, for all their boosterism, they could indeed be engaging in a Kracauerian collation of various surface manifestations, even if this is for purposes of advice to advertisers, rather than in order to understand something more trenchant about contemporary capitalist society. The WGSN report from Spring/Summer 2015 was titled *Bio Dynamic* and it was illustrated with an image of a model, whose head and face was largely covered in drippy blue goo as if a can of emulsion had been poured over her. Evidence for the bio-dynamic trend was gleaned from a variety of sources, science, art, design,

philosophy. It included a reference to Ben Woodward's Zero pamphlet *Slime Dynamics*, from 2012, which the report noted 'celebrates the dark vitality and unpleasantness of life'. It evoked the Human Microbiome Project, which tracks how the human body is colonised by a myriad of microbes, some existing within slimy biofilms. The report invoked an MIT project to improve 3D printing, whereby tiny magnets were attached to the heads of silkworms to discover how they 'print' their pupal casings around themselves, using various gradients, a tough exterior, a soft interior, its head rotating in 8-figure movements as it distributes different densities and thickness of silk. Art was brought in as evidence of the turn to slime and bio-dynamism. Stefan Gross' melted plastic toy artworks, Vibha Galhotra's paintings using contaminated waste, Anne Buscher's hardened goo slippers. Present too is the work done with what they call 'brainless, single-celled slime moulds', which 'can be programmed to function like biological computers and which can design networks for mobile communication, and transport and blood flow.

The trend analysis opens with this observation:

"Bio-dynamic sees the way we understand form, structures and even our own bodies completely revolutionised. It inspires us to create products and systems based on the fluid intelligence of basic microbial life forms. Scientists, sociologists, artists and designers are embracing the mutability and unpleasantness of slime and bacteria, finding hidden secrets in the vital substance of life." (WGSN, 2015)

It goes on to note:

"Scientists search for the key to complex networking in slime mould, a natural organism with intelligent navigation abilities. Cultural theories look towards the vibrancy and vitality of basic life forms as a way of understanding contemporary culture." (WGSN)

This all translates for WGSN into minglings of styles, ugly pretty, micro-networks, the aesthetics of ooze and goo with the clean lines of modernism now melted, morphed and liquefied and 'ickiness' celebrated in jumble heterotopias. The concept of mutation from microbiology becomes a style-tic that merges well, of course, with constantly re-stimulated consumer desire. But more than that, the object of the trend becomes an active maker of what is trendy, usurps the role of designer, embodies itself, or constitutes itself that which is so desired. As WGSN writes in relation to slime mould: "Despite being a brainless substance, slime mould creates complex networks that equal those of our best designers."

Of interest here is the way in which the basic life form of slime is endowed with more creativity and also more life. Creativity and life appears where it is, or was, thought it would not be and our life, human life, becomes life reloaded as we humans are evaluated as microbial rainforests, teeming sites of multiple lives. Other actors, or actants, sublime slime, feisty yeast, fluidly intelligent bacteria, border phenomena, in-between realms, provide a dramaturgy of and for things and people, at a time when human life is life reloaded as the human is recoded as holobiont, microbial rainforests, teeming sites of multiple lives, hodgepodge heterotopias. Intelligence, but not as we know it, and potentially better, because it could not be worse than the one that has messed up the planet. And anyway, perhaps it is time to shift humans away from centre stage and give the cosmos over to other lives, other beings that can shape and reshape it divergently.

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