"a joint rolled in toilet paper": Funkadelic’s Funky Soul / Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.

Abstract: Through an examination of Parliament-Funkadelic’s lyrics and music, this paper explores shit, dirt, and the funk, investigating their relationship to George Clinton and his band’s desire to darken the Humanistic project of Enlightenment, their desire to soil language, and thereby question conventional, bourgeois values. The author argues that Funkadelic participate in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the “peculiar logic” of the carnivalesque, detourning status quo notions of culture and society, creating complex contortions through the blurring of the good and the bad, the cerebral and the carnal, the sublime and the mundane. In essence, Funkadelic are a musical carnival that exists to dismantle the normal and the everyday, that provides a new lens through which to look at contemporary culture and engage with its many contradictions.

Hey lady, you can be my dog  
I can be your tree  
And you can pee on me.

Funkadelic,  
Standing on the Verge of Getting It On

Caca is the raw material of the soul.  
Antonin Artaud  
Selected Writings

<1> Parliament-Funkadelic, an ever-shifting group of touring and recording artists—sometimes under the name
Parliament, sometimes Funkadelic—may not seem to be, on first analysis, an intellectual band. Indeed, when I first submitted a version of this paper for publication in another journal, one of the anonymous reviewers was less than charmed by its preoccupation with the lower stratum, with dung, with its claim that P-Funk’s music is a sort of musical and linguistic stercorary, that is, a home to shit and related concerns. But more so, s/he seemed bothered by the subject of Funkadelic itself: “I am tempted to say,” the reviewer wrote, “[that] this essay is just a pile of shit, but I’d be caught in a very bad pun.” S/he continued, admitting that

This essay is not ‘just a pile of shit,’ [sic] it’s an attempt to place in an intellectual context a group that consciously resisted intellection. The paper’s analysis of carnival, pee and shit comes primarily in terms of Bakhtin, with help from Gramsci [sic], Langston Hughes, Martin Pops, Artaud, Guy Debord, Laurence Sterne, and the Marquis De Sade. Unfortunately, there is more in the analysis than in the matter being analyzed[.] (my emphasis)

Parliament-Funkadelic tend to elicit this response in listeners. Concerned as they are with the body (and largely the lower half of that), the band, with their good-time lyrics, unpredictably wild stage antics, and legendary indulgence in drugs, seems to resist, as the reader puts it, “intellection,” and thereby they alienate the intelligentsia. However, under George Clinton’s guidance, the many incarnations of the band embody the revolutionary tendencies prevalent in the black culture(s) of the 1960s and early ’70s. No, George Clinton’s funksters aren’t traditional intellectuals (save, perhaps, classically trained Bernie Worrell). But they do harness the working-class sensibility of Antonio Gramsci’s “homo faber” (9), tooling in their first few albums an elaborate cosmology that permeates music even today.[2] George Clinton’s band does not simply “participate in a particular conception of the world” (Gramsci 9). Rather, they—in typical postmodern fashion—have digested a meal of gospel, soul, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, inchoate funk, and psychedelic music and passed a musical bricolage that “brings into being new modes of thought,” modes that vacillate between body and mind, sublunary and cosmic, controlled groove and chaotic carnival (9).

<2>This paper, then, explores shit, dirt, and funk, investigating their relationship to George Clinton and his band’s desire to darken the Humanistic project of Enlightenment, their desire to soil language, and thereby question the values of the racist civilization that surrounded (and continues to surround) them. In Civilization and its Discontents, Sigmund Freud claims that the three requirements of civilization are cleanliness, order, and beauty.[3] If these are the elements of civilization in its current form, it is no wonder Funkadelic resist them—not systematically, but chaotically, using the intuitive logic of the
carnivalesque in their music and lyrics, indeed, in their very orthographies. In his History of Shit, Dominique Laporte traces back to the 16th century France’s impulse to “clean” its language of impurities and to “discharge” it of “corruption,” linking that impulse to the West’s desire to, in Freud’s terms, “subjugate the earth” (14-15). He continues, noting that

Purified, language becomes the crown jewels, the site of law, of the sacred text, of translation and exchange. There, the muddied voices and their dialects are expurgated of their dross, losing their pitiful “remnants of the earth” and the vile fruits of their dirty commerce. (18)

As we will see, Funkadelic plays with language as radically as they play with musical forms. Certainly their use of “dirty” language—including their recurring references to shit—serves to poke holes in the tight, odorless, white bourgeois body, showing it to be animal and raw. But it also works metaphorically to liberate the earthy, the “muddied voices” of the long subjugated, the vulgar class from whom we get our word for the obscene. In “Icky Prick,” for instance, from The Electric Spanking of War Babies (1981), Funkadelic proudly use “Graffilthy” language, insisting, “you ain’t seen obscene yet” (playfully rhyming “ain’t seen” and “obscene”), inviting the listener to

Follow me to the men’s room
Watch me write on the wall
I’ll tell it all
Flush you before I go
Wash out my mouth with soap
And shit-talk some mo’!

This legendary “shit-talk” is seen even in their earliest albums, in which they are just beginning to craft the hybrid musical forms that would undergird the suggestive, carnivalesque cosmologies so important to their later works.

<3>Early Funkadelic exist within a peculiar negotiation between gospel and blues.[4] Ever dialectical, the themes they create are in constant play between the mundane (the world of the body) and the cosmic (the world of the mind). No song demonstrates this interplay better than the title track of their third release, Maggot Brain (1971), a piece that is, like much of Funkadelic’s catalogue, supremely carnivalesque. “Maggot Brain” is a ¾ blues number, overlaid with an extended guitar solo by the late Eddie Hazel. Rickey Vincent calls this solo “one of rock and roll’s legendary performances,” a “tour de force, challenging the late Jimi Hendrix” (236). Melancholy as this solo often is, it is nonetheless tinged with humor, with sly turns and changes, clicks and buzzes and finger noise that question conventional notions of virtuosity, while the speed and precision of many of the phrases testify to Hazel’s technical prowess. The bluesy quality of the solo recalls Langston Hughes’s claim that, despite the “despondency” of the blues, “people laugh” (26), so
witty and surprising are the melodic and tonal shifts in his solo.

Hazel’s impassioned solo is prefaced by a peculiar Clinton rap, one best quoted in full:

Mother Earth is pregnant for the third time,
For y’all have knocked her up.
I have tasted the maggots in the mind of the universe.
I was not offended,
For I knew I had to rise above it all
Or drown in my own shit.[5]

These suggestive lyrics sketch out the carnivalesque cosmology I touched on earlier, a cosmology on which Parliament-Funkadelic would continue to elaborate for the next several decades. Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque provides a useful lens through which to view Funkadelic’s seemingly incoherent topos, as their cosmology rests upon the fundamental tension between body and mind, is infused with carnivalesque imagery, and suggests hierarchies even as it maneuvers to dismantle them.

The tensions in the rap threaten to tear it apart: bodily waste (“shit”) is paired with renewal (“pregnant”), and renewal is again paired with death (“maggots”), life that feeds off the dead, off waste and refuse. The physical senses (“tasted”) rub against the celestial (“universe”), just as rising (“I had to rise above it all”) suggests its opposite, the burying of the dead in the ground of “Mother Earth,” a strange reconfiguration of copulation (“knocking her up”). Again, Bakhtin helps make sense of these bizarre images:

Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts). Such is the meaning of “upward” and “downward” in their cosmic aspect, while in their purely bodily aspect, which is not clearly distinct from the cosmic, the upper part is the face or the head and the lower part is the genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks. (21)

Clinton collides the cosmic and the earthy, eating the maggots that are themselves feasting on the “mind of the universe,” and in doing so he has achieved some sort of enlightenment: he knows he “must rise above it all or drown in [his] own shit.” Bakhtin calls carnival “the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (10). In the opening lines to “Maggot Brain” we witness this feast, a grotesque parody of spiritual communion, Clinton eating maggots instead of wafers, larval insects instead of the body of Christ. The rap rejects completion just as the melancholy blues does (after ten minutes the solo fades out) by only hinting at a cosmology rather than fully articulating one (besides the opening rap, the
number is an instrumental). It concerns “becoming, change, and renewal.” The earth is pregnant. The universe is dead, paradoxically feeding new life, maggots.

<6>“Maggot Brain” is surrounded by legend and speculation. Vincent writes that George Clinton thought the song so “melancholy,” so “compelling,” that he “urged [Hazel] ‘to play like your mother just died,’ and let Eddie Hazel loose in the studio” (236). Whether true or not, this legend emphasizes the carnivalesque tensions found in the song; the imagined death of Hazel’s mother proves reascent, providing inspiration for musical creation. Another legend—this one often denied by Clinton, but relevant nevertheless—is that Clinton wrote the song after finding “his brother’s decomposed dead body, skull cracked, in a Chicago apartment—thus the Maggot Brain” (Vincent 236). Again we see the piece being associated with death bringing forth life, a process that provides the impetus for music. Drummer Harvey McGee, Hazel’s Plainsfield, New Jersey childhood friend and band-mate, recalls a different genesis, however. He points us to Maggot Brain’s “Super Stupid”:

Super stupid bought a nickel bag
Thought it was coke, but it was skag
Super stupid did a one and one
Then his eyes begin to water and his nose begin
to run

Oh! stupid with your ups and downs
Your maggot brain, your grins and frowns
Super stupid you’re here today
You’ve lost the fight and the winner is fear

McGee maintains that these lyrics are based on Hazel, for while touring he was known for searching out cocaine in unfamiliar neighborhoods:

It was in Boston. Eddie said, ‘Man, I’m gonna
get high, I’m gonna get me some coke.’ . . .
Eddie went out and bought what he thought to be
cocaine, but it was hard cold heroin. He come
back to the room, dumped it out, chopped it up—
whooop, whooop. And soon as he did it, his
eyes [bulged] and his nose start running. We
called him Maggot Brain ‘cause he did stuff like
that. (Marsh 58)

The scene McGee limns is much less romantic than those
posited by fans: Hazel playing like his momma died,
Clinton stumbling on the tragic, senseless death of his
brother. But this story still participates in the same
body/mind dialectic. Trying to get “high” (the drug
terminology is apt), Hazel instead is forced to experience
an all-too-bodily reaction: his eyes water, his nose runs—
we can imagine what else might have happened. He stands as
an embodiment of the carnivalesque, grinning and frowning
like a clown. He is “super stupid,” grotesque, “Maggot
Brain.”

<7>”Bahktin is useful in examining the lives, or at least
the images, of the funkateers, reminding us that the “Clowns and fools” associated with carnival “were not actors playing their parts on a stage . . . but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance” (8). He continues, “As such, they represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar mid-zone as it were” (8). Clinton consciously desired to enter into this “mid-zone,” this liminal space, turning himself and his band into representations of the carnivalesque. While talking about staging a love affair between him and Iggy Pop, Clinton remarks, “Like, whatever you could do; it was always about theatrics” (Marsh 38). This insight led Clinton to eschew the suits and clean-cut look indicative of his earlier band The Parliaments, metamorphosing himself and Funkadelic into carnival fools–clowns–dressed in fantastically silly costumes. He tried to collapse the wall between life and performance, an element crucial to Bakhtin’s concept of carnival: “Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators” (7). The recurring trope of concert-as-party plays into this blurring of the line between performer and spectator. Rather than a concert, a Funkadelic show is a party, one that doesn’t end until the last patron leaves or the band is forced to stop playing.[6] Furthermore, working with a notion similar to Viktor Shklovsky’s defamiliarization, Clinton wanted to shock his audience, to make them uncomfortable with their preconceptions concerning so-called black music, overindulging in the absurdities of both rock and soul conventions.

<8>This defamiliarization did not stop when Clinton and his band stepped off the stage. In fact, it began off-stage, for they participated in the carnival spirit wherever they went. Sidney Barnes, an early songwriting partner of Clinton’s, recalls an illuminating exchange between him and Clinton:

So [George] said, “Sidney, the way I gotta do that, I gotta shock people. So I put on a sheet, and I cut my mohawk, and I walked from Broad and Market to East Orange Avenue. And if nobody kick my ass or arrest me, I knew I had something.” And that’s what happened. And he said, “Man, I just took it to the stage.” (Marsh 40)

Soon after Clinton’s walk to East Orange, his look had evolved to become even more outlandish, more clownish. Catfish Bob Hodge recalls his first encounter with Clinton, one which took place in an anonymous club. Accompanying Westbound president Armen Boladian,[7] Clinton was dressed in a costume reminiscent of Bakhtin’s “clowns and fools”:

And George had on, like, pink hot pants, fishnet stockings, some kind of shoes I can’t even remember, but they were like space shoes. A fox, mink thing, and all these beads and jewelry and these crazy pink sunglasses. (Marsh 38)
That Clinton “took it to the stage” is telling, for he blurred the line between art and life. Clinton tried this imagery first on the street, then took it to the stage, then put it on tape, provoking us to question commonplaces of musical style, personal subjectivity, and the semiotic codes by which we make sense of the world.

<9>Clinton and Funkadelic begin crafting their cosmology on their eponymous first album (1970), where it is still only a suggestion, never explicit. Here Clinton coins the word Funkadelic, the term itself containing within it the tensions of carnival. Funk is ripe with earthy connotations: moldy, smelly. It also suggests the unsophisticated, the crude, the natural. And funk music is known primarily for low, repetitive bass sounds—the heavy kick-drum on the one, the thump, the bottom, the groove. In *Blues People* Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones)[8] discusses the adjective “funky.” He argues that using the term “funkiness” is a strategy that “soul brothers” employ to “recast the social order in [their] own image. White is then not ‘right,’ as the old blues had it, but a liability, since the culture of white precludes the possession of the Negro ‘soul.’” He continues,

Even the adjective *funky*, which once meant to many Negroes merely a stink (usually associated with sex), was used to qualify the music as meaningful (the word became fashionable and is now almost useless). The social implications, then, was that even the old stereotype of a distinctive Negro smell that white America subscribed to could be turned against white America. For this smell now, real or not, was made a valuable characteristic of “Negro-ness.” And “Negro-ness,” by the fifties, for many Negroes (and whites) was the only strength left to American culture. (219-20)

Although, as Baraka maintains, “funky” became too fashionable in the fifties and sixties to have much meaning (as its new use was appropriated by the wider, whiter culture), Funkadelic sought to resuscitate the term. Clinton coupled the term with “delic,” derived from *psychedelic*, reframe The Funk, giving it added resonance. A quick etymology of *psychedelic* proves illuminating: the first morpheme, “psych,” is derived from the Greek *psukhikos*, meaning of the soul, or *psukho*, soul or life. The second, “delic,” is derived from *dēlos*, meaning clear and visible. Funkadelic music turns psychedelic music on its head, while simultaneously recovering “funky” from the cultural ash-can. Instead of a music that provides clear insight into the soul, into the spirit, it provides insight into the *funk*, the earthy and gritty. But the metaphor is more complicated than this. The word *soul* is problematic. It refers both to the ethereal location of our selves and to the music that has been caricatured by white culture as wild, untamed, and base, music that depends, as Baraka maintains, on cultural roots unavailable to whites: soul music.[9] “Funkadelic” evokes the conventional, spiritual sense of soul (by suggesting *psychedelic*), even as “soul” is erased,
replaced with the ever more material funk.

<10>On this first album, Funkadelic probe the issue of soul, the last track titled “What is Soul?” Here Funkadelic interrogate the presuppositions of European philosophy, seeing soul not as the pure, incorruptibly fine material posited by Descartes, but rather as grit, filth, “nastyness”:

What is soul?  
I don’t know.  
Soul is a hamhock in your cornflakes, yeah.

What is soul?  
I don’t know.  
Soul, soul is the ring around your bathtub.

What is soul?  
I don’t know.  
Soul is a joint rolled in toilet paper.

Here we see the playfulness indicative of the band. Soul is “debased” from the spiritual heights with which it is normally associated, reduced to the nasty ring around a bathtub. For Funkadelic, soul is that which remains after we clean ourselves, the inescapable presence of the earthy. Just as the music itself incorporates many competing stylistic and musical elements, the surprising and comic lyrical juxtapositions in the piece stress the bricolage that is Funkadelic—a combination of good things, necessary things, in ways that seem wholly unappetizing: gospel elements combined with blues, rock, soul, psychedelia, and the call-and-response tradition: “A hamhock in your cornflakes.” Furthermore, the tension between the mind, the celestial, the upper body and the earthy, the lower body, is still evident, if subtle. The meditative, calming drug marijuana—used to “get high”—is rolled with “toilet paper,” associated with the bowels, the lower body, the realm of shit and urine and waste.

<11>The album Funkadelic is a wandering—a drifting—through the roots of soul music, a search for beginnings and a charting of possibilities. It begins with “Mommy, What’s a Funkadelic?” evoking the mother, the source of new life. Ever ostentatious and pschuedelic, the band begins the track with a funky rap, stereo-panning each phrase from left to right:

If you will suck my soul  
I will lick your funky emotions

Again we see the soul—the ethereal—tied to the body; it is something that can be “suck[ed]”; “emotions” can be “funky,” dirty, can be “lick[ed].” The song, featuring Clinton on vocals, continues in this vein, Clinton singing, “Let me kiss your mind [laugh], Let me slide a yard of tongue down your throat.” The grotesque imagery is apparent, as is the continued reification of the spiritual: the mind is as bodily as the throat, as a tongue. Later Clinton proclaims, “my name is Funk, I am not of your world,” suggesting the delightfully
paradoxical, cosmic Mothershhip origins of funk that become central to Parliament-Funkadelic in later recordings.

<12>“Mommy, What’s a Funkadelic?” expands the trope of mind-in-body, of cosmic-on-Earth. Searching out the origins of funk, Clinton re-appropriates the backwoods “hillbilly” music of the south, combining it in hamhock-in-your-cornflakes fashion with downtown, citification:

I recall when I left a little town in North Carolina, I tried to escape this music
I said it was for the old country folks
I went to New York
Got slick
Got my hair made, [laugh]
I was cool, [laugh]
I was cool
But I had no groove [laugh]

Groove, the essence of funk, is not found in the city, in slickness, in being “cool,” but rather in the music of “the old country folks,” in places like “Keeprunnin’, Mississippi,” in “what you call way-back yonder funk,” in “old funk” (“Music for My Mother”). [10] Locating groove in the country makes sense, especially when one considers that it is in the country that, according to Laporte, shit is most welcome, as fertilizer, as the nourishment of nourishment: “Beautified, ordered, aggrandized, and sublimated, the town opposes itself to the mud of the countryside” (39). However, for Funkadelic, neither city nor country, old nor new is privileged. Although all the songs on the album suggest the re-kindling of a music lost, a time “When the funk it was goin’ strong” (“Good Old Music”), it is only in the musical conversation between these opposites that funk is possible.

<13>The album is supremely dialectical, self-consciously moving beyond the roots of soul and funk to the uncharted realm of Funkadelia. The searing solos of Hazel suggest blues but consistently quote Jimi Hendrix’s rock and roll tones and licks. The vocals evoke gospel, but refuse to settle stylistically. Baraka rightly questions the efficacy of the “return to the roots” that characterized hard-bop, a form of music Clinton was quite influenced by, noting that such returns can smack of “burlesque, or cruder, a kind of modern minstrelsy” (Blues 218). He writes,

Many times this re-evaluation [of “the roots”] proved as affected and as emotionally arid as would a move in the opposite direction. The shabbiness, even embarrassment, of Hazel Scott playing ‘concert boogie woogie’ before thousands of white middle-class music lovers, who all assumed that this music as Miss Scott’s invention, is finally no more hideous than the spectacle of an urban, college-trained Negro musician pretending, perhaps in all sincerity, that he has the same field of emotional reference as his great-grandfather, the Mississippi slave. (Blues 218)
Funkadelic music, however, is not so much a “return to roots” as a recovering and reimagining of those roots, referencing painful history (found, for example, in the place names in “Music for My Mother”), musical pride, and future trajectories all in the same album. As Baraka notes, the “re-evaluation” of musical roots found in hard-bop was “as much of a ‘move’ within the black psyche as was the move north in the beginning of the century. The idea of the Negro’s having ‘roots’ and that they are a valuable possession, rather than the source of ineradicable shame, is perhaps the profoundest change within the Negro consciousness since the early part of the century” (Blues 218). Funkadelic reifies such a “move,” as it looks back and forward, wandering associatively from genre to genre, historical moment to historical moment, an act reminiscent of Guy Debord’s Situationist concept of dérive, or drifting. Indeed, as Parliament put it in their 1975 hit “P.Funk (Wants to Get Funked up),” “Funk not only moves, it re-moves.”

According to Debord, dérive is a “psycho-geographic” tool, a method of resistance, a procedure that allows a group to explore urban settings and create ethnographic maps which reveal the “constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones” (Debord 50). Dérive occurs when one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. (50)

In this instance, the group of explorers is the band Funkadelic. They don’t explore urban terrain on this album, but map musical terrain, re-visionsing musical possibilities, reconstructing and blurring boundaries, foreshadowing the sentiment found on the tune “Who Says a Funk Band Can’t Play Rock?” featured on their 1978 release One Nation under a Groove:

Who says a jazz band
Can’t play dance music?
Who says a rock band
Can’t play funky?
Who says a funk band
Can’t play rock?

These questions—suggested in 1970 and made explicit in 1978—are radical, for they interrogate the stark lines demarcating musical genres, while still holding true to the carnivalesque tensions discussed by Bakhtin. Furthermore, it should be noted that Funkadelic would come to consciously reference and lampoon European operatic traditions—particularly in tunes like “(Not Just) Knee Deep” (on Uncle Jam Wants You, 1979)—questioning hierarchies of value and, in the process, problematizing assumptions like those implicit in Alain Locke’s 1936 claim that “Negroes [...] must build up [...] a class of trained musicians who know and love the folk music and are
able to develop it into great classical music" (American Negro 4). Like Miles Davis, who fused early funk, jazz, and rock in his 1969 album Bitches Brew (released the year before Funkadelic), Parliament-Funkadelic value the fusion of forms as an end in and of itself: their goal isn’t the “develop[ment]” of “great classical music,” but, rather, an extended exploration and interpenetration of modes and styles. Funkadelic rejected closure and prescribed roles, remaining “hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (Bahktin 10).

<15> The same themes are taken up in Funkadelic’s 1971 release, Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow. Legend has it that the album was recorded in one day, all of the players tripping acid. If the sound quality of the LP is any indication, the legends may be true. The album is by far the rawest of the Funkadelic catalog, from the playing to the production value. Yet the nasty sounds that greet listeners on the title track are pure funk (another wonderful paradox), recalling Clinton’s words on “What is Soul?”: “All that is good is nasty.” The title, again, inverts the typical relationship between body and soul. For Clinton, freeing your mind is merely a means to an end: and that end is your ass. The body is what is important, particularly the lower parts of the body, the realm of copulation and defection. Funkadelic’s music, erotic and scatological simultaneously, suggests Freud’s work on anal-eroticism, a phenomenon Freud characterizes as animal and beneath civilized man.[11] Although in “Maggot Brain” Clinton’s desire to eat the maggots in the mind of the universe is to avoid drowning in shit, Funkadelic’s relationship to waste and urine is not consistently negative. [12] On Funkadelic’s Standing on the Verge of Getting It on, for instance, the speaker, George Clinton, with his voice sped up, eroticizes pee, saying to his lover in the intro to the title track,

Hey lady, won’t you be my dog
And I’ll be your tree
And you can pee on me.

This statement recalls Parliament-Funkadelic’s joint name, P-Funk, usually thought to mean either Parliament-Funkadelic or, better, “Pure Funk.” Yet the band seems to be simultaneously playing with the idea of urine: Pee Funk. This is appropriate, since P-Funk singer/guitarist Gary Shider’s stage-wear is generally nothing but a diaper and his guitar, his character remaining in the infantile state before one is socialized by toilet training.

<16> Martin Pops’ essay “The Metamorphosis of Shit” is relevant to this discussion. Pops writes,

All agricultural communities subscribe to the Chinese proverb “waste is treasure,” in which the least valued is the most valued: in this equation, shit is death which gives life, the last which shall be first. Shit carries a very powerful double charge, positive and negative, and that is why it is the body’s most magical substance. (107)
The “magic” of shit is a recurring theme in Funkadelic’s music, although the magic is, as Pops suggests, an ambivalent one. Recall: one of the reasons Funkadelic’s celebration of the body and all its products is so off-putting to many is that, in the Western tradition, the body is contaminated with original sin (which is why the body and its pleasures are so often condemned). This sad state of affairs means that “the body’s legacy of original sin contaminates even its waste” (Laporte 35, my emphasis). Thus, agronomic treatises and hygienic literature from at least the first to the nineteenth centuries hold that human manure needs to purified by water or be aired for a specific duration before it can be used as fertilizer:

There is a wickedness in shit that must be given time to dissipate, or it will turn on man, burn his fields, and nourish the malevolent snake [.....] But if waste is decanted or purified [...] its noxious properties evaporate, leaving behind only beneficial effects. Shit is not pernicious in and of itself—only through its recent association with the flesh. (Laporte 35-36)

Again, shit has a “double charge,” for it “changes” according to Pops, “from neutral to negative valence on being excreted” (107). That is, shit becomes pernicious after expulsion from the body. To illustrate, Pops points to Mahatma Gandhi’s predilection for twenty-minute sessions on the chamber pot each morning, a ritual of “riddance and purification. The machine of the body processes shit in the temple of the bathroom: the fuller the expulsion, the more bounded the body” (107). However, if Gandhi purified himself by expelling waste, the French historian Jules Michelet, when “short on inspiration, [...] lingered in latrines in order to inspire (breathe in) the suffocating stench that awoke in him the spirit of creation” (37).[13] In this case, the nasty, the funk, the shit, is a means to enlightenment by way of inhalation.

<17>However, Antonin Artaud’s famous pun, “caca is the material of the soul” complicates our little discourse on shit even further (qtd. in Pops 108). The pun is elaborate, kaka meaning shit in French, and ka meaning soul in Egyptian. Thus, Pops notes, “The body doubles the soul; shit doubles the body” (109). Put more cleverly, “Loss of shit is loss of soul” (109). Here we see an interesting anticipation of the same cosmology that informs Funkadelic’s view of soul, especially as intimated in “What is Soul?” Soul is shit; soul is the body. Laporte rightly argues that even to this day Western civilization maintains the “ambivalence toward shit” that I’ve been describing (37), an ambivalence illustrated by examples less esoteric than those we’ve encountered thus far. We are all familiar with the many negative uses of shit linguistically. For instance, the vulgar among us might refer to something negative as “a piece of shit,” or call a regrettable situation “shitty.” However, we may signify something exceptional with the phrase “the shit,” as in, “This new album is the shit.” Another positive use of the
word (for some, I suppose) is found in drug parlance; it is common to call marijuana “shit,” as this rhyme by Dr. Dre, a riff on Parliament’s “P.Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up),” illustrates:

Make my bud the chronic
I wants to get fucked up
Make my shit the chronic
I gots to fire it up

In addition to reefer, shit can refer to a fine rhyme, as it does, for instance, in Dre’s “Nothin’ But a G Thang” (again from The Chronic—and this time, shit is fittingly coupled with funky):

Droppin the funky shit that’s makin the sucka niggaz mumble
When I’m on the mic, it’s like a cookie, they all crumble

Funkadelic revel in our cultural ambivalence about refuse, refusing to hide it. Instead, they underline it, celebrating openly a view in which, as Laporte puts it, “the stercus could be as much a principle of life as of death” (36), a view that contains both the possibility of “drown[ing] in [our] own shit” and, as we will see in the Funkadelic song “The DooDoo Chasers,” the existence of “Holy Shit,” funky music that helps us “get [our] shit together.” So determined are we to be civilized, to live up (an apt phrase, live up) to Freud’s triumvirate of cleanliness, order, and beauty that we sublimate our cultural preoccupations with shit, refusing our impulse to get down, to get funky.

<18>Tying this back to Bakhtin, we can turn to Tristram Shandy, which Pops employs to link shitting and laughing:

In order, by a more frequent and more convulsive elevation and depression of the diaphragm, and the succussions of the intercostal and abdominal muscles in laughter, to drive the gall and other bitter juices from the gall-bladder, liver, and sweetbread of his majesty’s subjects, with all the inimicitious passions which belong to them, down into their duodenum. (qtd. in Pops 108)

Pops continues, again, unknowingly articulating the philosophy Funkadelic made explicit some six years earlier in their song “Promentalshithbackwashpsychosis Enema Squad (The DooDoo Chasers)”:[14] “Comic relief (so called) ‘takes a load off our minds’ (it relieves us) as shitting takes a load from our bodies (we relieve ourselves). Laughing and shitting lighten us and confer buoyancy” (108). This recalls Bakhtin’s “festive laughter,” which is not “an individual reaction to some isolated ‘comic’ event,” but is instead “universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants” (11). Pop associates this laughter with the lower stratum of the body, the realms emphasized in the carnivalesque. “The DooDoo Chasers” quite clearly makes
this connection as well. Mocking both the rhetoric of the black revolutionary movements of the early ’70s and the gospel call and response tradition, the hilarious tune calls funk “the P-Preparation, / The mental musical bowel movement,” extending the scatological implications in the Parliament lyric we encountered earlier: “Funk not only moves, it re-moves”:

Funk, the P-Preparation  
The mental musical bowel movement  
Groovalax  
One swipe a clean wipe  
And with no extra charge  
A psychological trend  
A neurological enema  
Holy Shit  
(let me try one-crap)  
Corpolite  
Prehistoric doo doo  
Helping you get your shit together

The passage doesn’t need much explication: the same tensions found in “Maggot Brain” are evident here. Seemingly contradictory phrases like “neurological enema,” “Holy Shit,” “mental musical bowel movement” all point to the carnivalesque, the conflation of the body and mind, the psyche in psychedelic and the funk in funkadelic. The mind and the body are irrevocably mixed: Clinton urges us to clean “the tidy-bowl of our brain” via his “musical bowel movement,” while also insisting that the goal of this purgation is to “get your shit together.” [15]

<Bakhtin notes that the carnival participates in the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (à l’envers), of the ‘turnabout,’ of the continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. (11)

As we’ve seen, Funkadelic also participate in this peculiar logic.” They, in effect, detourne conventional notions of culture and society, and like Debord, they are aware that “simple reversal is always . . . the least effective,” for reversal “conserves . . . the values of [the] metaphysics” it reverses (“Methods of Détournement”). Instead, they warp and bend, create complex contortions, blurring the good and the bad, the cerebral and the carnal, the sublime and the mundane. Funkadelic reflect the world through a carnival glass, a fun-house mirror. For Clinton and Funkadelic, nothing is sacred but the Funk, and Funk is nothing but a party, nothing but a carnival. Funkadelic are a musical carnival that exists to dismantle the normal and the everyday, that provides a new lens through which to look at the world and engage with its many contradictions.

Works Cited


Dre, Dr. The Chronic. Death Row, 1993.


Notes

[1] I would like to thank Katie Elizabeth Strode for her close and repeated readings of this essay: I could not have completed it were it not for her help and advice. [^]

[2] Taken together, Parliament and Funkadelic have been sampled hundreds of times by scores of artists, including The Beastie Boys, Coolio, Cypress Hill, De La Soul, Easy E, Ice Cube, Ice T, Kool Moe Dee, LL Cool J, Public Enemy, Chris Rock, Run DMC, Salt-N-Pepper, and Tupac (see http://www.the-breaks.com/perl/stats.pl for a surprisingly thorough list of the most commonly sampled recording artists. The site also features links to lists of sampled songs and the tunes in which the samples are found). Parliament-Funkadelic’s catch phrases and the cosmology these phrases often suggest (such as “the bomb,” “give up the funk,” “the Mothership has landed,” “tear the roof off the sucker,” “uncut funk,” and others) have become so ingrained within the discourses of rap, hip hop, R&B, and contemporary funk and fusion, that they have practically become cliché. [^]

On his 1993 release The Chronic, Dr. Dre famously appropriated and modified the music and lyrics to the Parliament hit “P.Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up),” turning the celebration of funk into the celebration of marijuana (the chronic): “Make my bud the chronic / I wants to get fucked up.” Although Dre and Snoop Doggie Dog’s G Funk (gangster funk) is ultimately a narrowing of the possibilities of P.Funk (focusing myopically on the gangster lifestyle), its roots are nevertheless deep in the pure funk of Parliament-Funkadelic.

[3] See specifically chapters three and four of Civilization and its Discontents, translated by James Strachey. [^]

[4] In The Dream Keeper and Other Poems, Langston Hughes makes a distinction between the blues and gospel—or the spiritual—relevant to this discussion. For Hughes, spirituals are, as their name implies, forever reaching upward toward heaven and the celestial realms, whereas the blues remains rooted firmly in the Earth, in the material reality of day-to-day life:

Whereas the spirituals are often songs about
escaping from trouble, going to heaven and
living happily ever after, the blues are songs
about being in the midst of trouble, friendless,
hungry, disappointed in love, right here on
earth. The mood of the blues is almost always
despondency, but when they are sung people
laugh. (26) [^]

[5] Most of the lyrics reprinted here can be found in
their entirety on *The Motherpage*, a wonderful site devoted
to Parliament-Funkadelic and their spin-off bands:
http://www.duke.edu/~tmc/pfunk.html [^]

[6] Rickey Vincent notes in his *Funk* that Funkadelic
“Prid[ed] themselves on playing until the crowd would
leave” (234). At a relatively recent concert I attended in
Normal, Illinois, Clinton prompted both his band and fans
to chant, “There ain’t no party like a P-Funk party, and a
P-Funk party don’t stop.” They proceeded to play until
authorities literally pulled the plug on them, enforcing
local ordinances.[^]

[7] The first eight Funkadelic albums, from *Funkadelic*
(1970) to *Tales of Kidd Funkadelic* (1976), were released
on the Westbound label, after which, they moved to Warner
Brothers with *Hardcore Jollies* (1976).[^]

[8] Although Amiri Baraka wrote *Blues People* under
the name LeRoi Jones, I will refer to him as Baraka throughout
the text. To avoid bibliographic confusion, however, I
attribute *Blues People* to LeRoi Jones in the works cited.[^]

[9] This is not to say that the funk hasn’t been co-opted
by mainstream culture. In “Miles Davis: ‘One of the Great
Mother Fuckers,’” Baraka writes, “The corporations water
[black music] down so that it can be merchandized more
easily, but the essence of this ‘modification’ is to cool
out what is too hot to handle” (*The Music* 292-93).
Elsewhere, in “The Phenomenon of Soul in African-American
Music,” Baraka notes that “The tendency to dismiss [black
music] as ‘primitive,’ on one hand, and to imitate it and
utilize it for profit, on the other, are the twin social
relationships of the rulers’ ethic” (*The Music* 271). This
ethic is evident in white-culture’s answer to The Funk: a
watered down, dance-oriented, rather vanilla and radio-
friendly disco-music, often sung by attractive, blonde,
blue-eyed white-folk, all to the beat of the cash-
register’s ching. This co-opting is exemplified by the
Nordic sensation, Abba, and the cinema smash *Saturday
Night Fever*, which features a hodge-podge of pop-funk by
the likes of Kool and the Gang and The Bee-Gees.[^]

[10] Baraka insists that the term “cool” came to imply an
“alienation,” a “myth of weirdness,” that was
“sufficiently important to white America for it to re-
create the myth in a term that that connoted not merely
Negroes as the aliens but a general alienation in which
even white men could be included” (*Blues* 219). Thus, in
“Mommy, What’s a Funkadelic?” coolness is not enough. In
this tune, Funkadelic acknowledge the move from “cool” to
“soul,” a move which Baraka characterizes as a “form of social aggression,” one that imbued “soul” with a meaning that could not be divorced from race: though anyone can be cool, one must be black to have soul. In recent years, “soul” has been losing this racial prerequisite. The discussion surrounding the young, white singer Joss Stone, whose teenage years were spent in the rural English town of Devon, testifies to this shift in meaning. Born April 11, 1987, Stone was only 16 years old when she recorded her debut album, The Soul Sessions (2003, S-Curve Records). Produced by soulster Betty Wright, this album includes such funky luminaries as Cindy Blackman (drums), Jack Daley (bass), Willie “Little Beaver” Hale (guitar), Benny Latimore (piano), Angelo Morris (guitar), and Timothy “Timmy” Thomas (organ). Tom Moon of The Philadelphia Inquirer begins his review with the rhetorical question, “Do you have to be black to possess that elusive quality known as ‘soul’?” His answer: “[One] doesn’t need to argue the point these days. All [one] has to do is put on The Soul Sessions” (on-line). I leave the reader to make her or his own judgment.[^]


[^]: [12] However, since maggots may dine on shit, his feast does remind one of The Marquis de Sade’s infamous coprophilic interests, particularly his desire to eat the feces produced by slaves dieting on feces: “He has girls A and B shit. Then he forces B to eat A’s turd, and A to eat B’s. Then both A and B shit a second time, he eats both their turds” (579). [^]

[^]: [13] Laporte directs the interested reader to Roland Barthes’s Michelet (1952) and George Bataille’s preface to La Socrate (translated in English to Satanism and Witchcraft, although without, sadly, Bataille’s preface). [^]

[^]: [14] I reprint the first verse of “The Doo Doo Chasers”:

The world is a toll-free toilet
Our mouths neurological assholes
And psychologically speaking
We’re in a state of mental diarrhea
Talking shit a mile a minute
Or in a state of constipated notions
Can’t think of nothin’ but shit
And in this world of
Stinky futures, shitty memories and
Constipated 19 now-nows
Emerges from the hINE of your head
The Doo Doo Chasers,
The Promentalshitbackwashpsychosisenemasquad
The prune juice of the mind
The Doo Doo Chasers
Friends of roto-rooter
Bringing you music to get your shit together by
The band in the tidy bowl of your brain
(What was that long word again—Promental?) [^]

[15] If one considers *One Nation under a Groove* a concept album, this song can be seen as its fourth “movement,” a characteristically clever pun. [^]