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Disgust

Introduction: art and emotional paradox

The classic tragic emotions, according to Aristotle, are pity and terror; but pity and terror share company with other emotional responses as well. When Sophocles describes the terrible plight of the abandoned Philoctetes, he emphasizes how no one can tolerate the polluting stench of his wounded foot and his unbearable, agonized cries. »His foot was festering, oozing pus/ From a foul wound,« explains Odysseus. »Even at festivals/ We hardly dared touch the wine or meat.«¹ Philoctetes' fellow soldiers bemoan his loneliness, but their senses are so revolted by his suppurating flesh that they cast him out of their company. His festering wound arouses the powerful aversive reaction of *disgust* – both in his companions in the story and on the part of the audience of the play.

Of all the emotions that art can inspire, disgust is the most difficult to reconcile with positive aesthetic response, especially when that response is cast in the standard terminology of aesthetic pleasure. Of the painful emotions, fear is the one that has chiefly occupied philosophy of art, and indeed it has always been acknowledged as an indispensable component of certain types of art such as tragedy. But disgust is a relative newcomer as a subject for sustained theoretical analysis, having been traditionally considered uniquely disqualified from the lists of aesthetically enjoyable emotions. As Kant emphatically states: »There is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be presented in conformity with nature without obliterating all aesthetic liking and hence artistic beauty: that ugliness which arouses *disgust*.«²

Kant was evidently wrong. In addition to the case of Philoctetes, there are numerous other examples from the history of art where the arousal of disgust is an important component of appreciative understanding. (Some of the paintings of Titian, Géricault, and Goya come to mind.) Moreover, contemporary culture seems positively obsessed with the presentation of the disgusting – in stories and novels, in the visual arts, and in the powerful

¹ Sophocles, *Electra, Antigone, Philoctetes*, trans. Kenneth McLeish (Cambridge University Press, 1979) p. 109.

² *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987 [1790]) p. 180.

combination of narrative and visual effects that film and video avail. With the refinement of computerized special effects, audiences can now savor a corpse decomposing before their very eyes or human bodies invaded by rot or fungus, not to mention all manner of repulsive alien species. High or gallery culture features the same titillating shocks, such as Odd Nerdrum's depictions of evisceration, amputation, and excrement in unsettling classic pictorial style. Cindy Sherman's virtual trademark has become the disgusting, notable in this unappetising still life (*Figure 1*). It would strain credibility to claim all such examples as objects of artistic beauty, but their affective power and ascendance in art testify to the »aesthetic liking« they arouse, a phenomenon that demands explanation.

Perhaps it is the sheer number of works that arouse disgust and companion emotions such as horror, loathing, and dread, that has helped



*Figure 1: Cindy Sherman,
»Untitled #172« (1987)
Courtesy the artist and Metro
Pictures*

to propel the recent industry of studies on emotion in the arts and the familiar philosophical paradoxes they present. Disgust joins the venerable paradox of tragedy and the paradox of horror, variations on the general puzzle presented by the fact that seemingly well-balanced people seek out experiences in art that they would flee in reality: the painful, the terrifying, the disturbing, the perverse, and the repulsive.³ To add to the paradoxes of the painful or aversion emotions, we have the more general paradox of fiction, made acute with the now widely-accepted cognitivist theories of emotion, that is, theories that maintain beliefs to be constituents of emotions. If works of art describe worlds we recognize as not real (fictional), then they do not present us with facts in which to believe. How, then, do they succeed so effectively in arousing emotions, absent relevant beliefs?⁴ I shall direct these familiar questions to the emotion of disgust, adjusting the terms of debate to fit this powerful aversion. What kind of an emotion is disgust? And what about *aesthetic disgust*, by which I do not mean disapproval but rather *an emotion appropriately aroused by art that is indicative of aesthetic appreciation*.

At this point I should stipulate the scope of disgust that will be my focus, for »disgust« and kindred terms are used in a variety of contexts. I may report my disgust at the slime that has accumulated in a clogged drainpipe, and I may claim to be disgusted by the hypocritical behavior of a colleague. While the latter sort of mental or moral disgust can be an interesting constituent of aesthetic response, it is probably only a metaphorical extension of the kind of disgust that interests me here.⁵ I refer to the kind of emotion that typically follows encounters with sour milk, sewage, and slime; slugs,

³ Disgust in art is rarely encountered alone. Its close cousin is fear, which is why these two emotions are the major candidates for the emotions of horror. (See Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* [New York: Routledge, 1990] ch. 4.) But fear is also the painful emotion that is classically understood to underlie the powerful and transcendent aesthetic response that would seem to be the diametric opposite of disgust: the encounter with the *sublime*. These footnotes carry on suggestions regarding sublimity in comparison with disgust.

⁴ The different paradoxes of emotional arousal by art are comprehensively analyzed by Jerrold Levinson, »Emotion in Response to Art: A Survey of the Terrain,« in *Emotion and the Arts*, ed. Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also various other essays in this volume.

⁵ Those who write on the subject tend to include all such categories among the phenomena that disgust. William Ian Miller, for example, refers to moral revulsion as a reflective response that occupies a more complex place on a continuum that begins with physical revulsion and nausea. Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject begins with nauseating food and ends with hypocrisy. I doubt that visceral disgust represents the bottom point on a continuum ending with moral repugnance. Of course, an author might exploit disgusting physical features in the service of expressing a moral point about a character.

centipedes, maggots, and lice; infected sores, gangrened flesh, and decomposing corpses. These things prompt visceral disgust, which is closely tied to unpleasant involuntary responses, including the gag reflex, nausea and even vomiting. Even if we do not reach the latter stages of reaction, the physical recoil of disgust is palpable.⁶ This kind of revulsion is the hardest to account for in terms of attraction – indeed, it seems to represent the very bedrock of aversion. Yet at the same time that which disgusts sometimes exerts a peculiar allure, what Julia Kristeva calls »a vortex of summons and repulsion.«⁷ Indeed Plato used the fascination of disgust in one of his most powerful pictures of the warring factions of the soul when he described Leontius, who admonished his own eyes for desiring to look upon the corpses of executed criminals. The upsetting fascination of the disgusting has been recognized for a long time, and its puzzling nature is deepened when we consider what kind of emotion disgust is.

Theories of emotion

What one surmises about disgust is influenced by the direction from which one approaches emotions in general. In the course of this paper I shall chiefly employ insights from philosophical theories of emotion that dovetail with neurobiological and psychological research. Ideally, science, philosophy, and art theory should converge towards an enriched understanding of aesthetic disgust. However, we shall find that answers that satisfy some of our questions generate problems as we try to answer others, stirring us to further perplexity about what appears at first to be one of the simpler emotions. General theories of emotions usually regard them as complex mental events involving intentional objects, propositional grounding, dispositional and immediate causes, and affective states that have physiological, interpretive, and subjective components.⁸ The cognitivist theories of emotion now popular among philosophers hold that relevant

⁶ In English this can be characterized as the »yuck« response, which interestingly compares to startle, a reflex that is heavily exploited in theater and film. With startle, the typical reaction is a physical jump and a gasp, a quick intake of air. The disgust response is also a physical recoil, often with a notable gesture of repulsion as the body folds inward and turns away. But the verbal response is the opposite of startle: it is an expulsion of air, a »yeech!« sound, expelling the presence of the disgusting object as though it were a bodily contaminant.

⁷ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p. 1.

⁸ The analyses covered in this paper concern occurrent emotions.

beliefs or (a weaker version) non-asserted propositional thoughts are components of emotions.⁹ The propositional content of thoughts differentiate one emotion from another, for the raw »feelings« accompanying emotions are not determinate enough to distinguish their characters. Many emotions are incomplete without a grounding belief. Grief or embarrassment, for example, are incoherent in the absence of a belief that loss has been sustained or dignity compromised. Most philosophers of art adopt a cognitivist perspective, and it is this picture of emotion that exacerbates the paradox of fiction: For if emotions are dependent upon beliefs, and we do not hold (existential) beliefs about entities we acknowledge to be fictional, how can we account for the emotions we feel in response to art? This question has prompted a host of theories that attempt to soften the belief requirement for emotions or to qualify the emotions aroused by art such that they are not quite the same as those aroused by real situations.¹⁰ I shall not engage in these debates because I favor an analysis of disgust that bypasses them altogether. I take my cue from scientific and philosophical studies of disgust that analyze this emotion as a reactive response that does not depend upon the complex cognitive components that emotions such as pity, embarrassment, and guilt require. As we shall see, this approach to disgust solves some problems and exacerbates others.

According to neurologist Antonio Damasio emotions are triggered at two distinct sites of the brain. One site is the prefrontal region of the neocortex, which governs what Damasio calls »secondary« emotions.¹¹ Secondary emotions are reflective and cognitively sophisticated. They include empathy, moral approval and disapproval, and caring in general, whether about others or about events that affect one's own well-being. The other site of emotional stimulation is in a part of the brain that is considered old from an evolutionary standpoint: the region sometimes called the limbic system that contains the cingulate gyrus, the hypothalamus, and the amygdala. It is here that Damasio locates »primary emotions,« including disgust. While the secondary emotions require not only consciousness but self-consciousness,

⁹ Varieties of cognitivism are usefully reviewed in John Deigh, »Cognitivism in the theory of Emotions,« *Ethics* 104 (July, 1994).

¹⁰ For example, Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Harvard University Press, 1990); Peter Lamarque, *Fictional Points of View* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Susan Feagin, *Reading with Feeling* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

¹¹ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon Books, 1994) Part I. Patients who suffer impairments of the prefrontal cortex are dysfunctional in practical terms, quite unable to make decisions and to hold positions of even minimal responsibility, although they continue to perform well on tests designed to test reasoning and cognitive ability.

the primary emotions are more reactive and appear to be rather »hard-wired« in the brain. That is to say, they substantially involve the autonomic nervous system and are hence less voluntary, being harder or impossible to control with conscious effort.¹² Primary emotions appear to be pan-cultural, and they are correlated with standard physical reactions, including cringing, blinking, typical facial expressions, and measurable responses such as skin conductance of electrical charge. Disgust is among the emotions apparently controlled in the limbic centers. It is also on the list of what some psychologists consider »basic« emotions, joining anger, fear, surprise, joy, and sadness.¹³ They are considered more or less automatic and involuntary, though just how consciously manipulable they may be is a matter for debate.¹⁴ Damasio proposes that such emotions are innate responses that are »pre-organized.« For example, though one learns that certain foods are taboo according to social or religious tenets, thereafter those foods provoke disgust as a visceral reaction because the pre-organized response is easily trained and locked into place.

The division of emotions according to the physiology that grounds them is continued in some philosophical analyses. Paul Griffiths, in his widely-acclaimed book, *What Emotions Really Are*, is among those who argue that »emotion« is not a univocal label for the disparate phenomena to which it is applied. Disgust and the other limbic-centered responses are among the emotions that he prefers to label »affect programs,« which are roughly

¹² This is a part of the brain that we have in common with other animals, and scientific studies of these emotions sometimes deliberately pay little heed to conscious experience. Biologist Joseph LeDoux argues that fear is best explained without reference to consciousness at all, for not all species that fear are conscious in any full sense of the term. *The Emotional Brain* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

¹³ Experiments show differentiated autonomic nervous system activity for six basic emotions: anger, fear, sadness, happiness, surprise, and disgust. See e.g. Paul Ekman, Robert W. Levenson, Wallace V. Friesen, »Autonomic Nervous System Activity Distinguishes Among Emotions,« *Science* 221 (September, 1983) 1208-1210; Levenson, Ekman, and Friesen, »Voluntary Facial Action Generates Emotion-Specific Autonomic Nervous System Activity,« *Psychophysiology* 27:4 (1990) 363-384). The number of basic emotions varies by theorist. The term may be used to mean a set of fundamental responses out of which more complex emotions are built; emotions shared by non-human animals; pan-cultural emotions displayed by all social groups. There are many who dispute the soundness of the idea of basic emotions at all. See *The Nature of Emotion*, ed. Paul Ekman and Richard J. Davidson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) pp. 5-47.

¹⁴ The startle reflex, a feature of several emotions, is completely uncontrollable. Jenefer Robinson analyzes the startle response in an argument against the cognitivist trend in philosophical studies of emotion. »Startle,« *Journal of Philosophy* XCII:2 (Feb., 1995) pp. 53-74.

equivalent to Damasio's primary emotions.¹⁵ Affect programs are patterns of automated and coordinated response that are »biased learning mechanisms« sensitive to objects with significance for the organism's well-being. In the case of disgust, we are evolutionarily programmed for quick response to things that are foul: dangerous or noxious to contact or ingest. Such emotions are subject to a degree of learning, but they set patterns of rapid response that become immune to override from higher-level cognitive systems such as conscious beliefs. An important feature of affect programs is that they do not require assent to beliefs to make sense of their occurrence. For example, while grief is only plausible on the premise that one believes that one has suffered a loss, disgust is »modular« and »informationally encapsulated.«¹⁶ This means that the response occurs quickly and automatically without input from other cognitive systems.

There are features of this approach to disgust that require modification. In particular, Griffiths refers to affect programs as »...phylogenetically ancient, informationally encapsulated, reflexlike responses which seem to be insensitive to culture.«¹⁷ But disgust, whether aesthetic or natural, is clearly not insensitive to culture, no matter how visceral its character. Despite this shortcoming, which I shall address in the next section, in many respects affect program analysis is particularly apt for an emotion such as disgust, including aesthetic disgust. The reactive, involuntary character of disgust is accommodated, as well as its recalcitrance in the presence of contrary belief.¹⁸ (For example, one may believe that a slug is quite benign and yet recoil at

¹⁵ Paul E. Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are* (University of Chicago Press, 1997) ch. 4. Unlike Damasio, Griffiths does not speculate that higher-level cognitive emotions are dependent on affect program emotions. The two systems may operate independently. (See pp. 103-106.)

¹⁶ Griffiths offers this picture of the affect program emotions: »These emotions consist of complex, coordinated, and automated responses.... There is a flow of perceptual information to the mechanisms controlling these responses which is separate from the flow of information from perception to the higher cognitive processes responsible for intentional action. This element of modularity is required to account for the lack of fit between emotional responses and conscious evaluations of the significance of stimuli. In some cases higher cognitive processes may be able to trigger emotional responses directly, but in other cases the associations which lead to the response must be separate from the evaluations made by higher cognition.« Griffiths, op. cit. p. 93. Griffiths adopts the terms »modular« and »informationally encapsulated« from Jerry Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983). The term »affect program« comes from Paul Ekman's research.

¹⁷ Griffiths, op. cit. p. 16. In fact, Griffiths allows for modification of affect programs.

¹⁸ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) asserts that in order to find something disgusting, we must believe it is in a category that warrants disgust. While many instances of disgust require cognitive activity such

its touch. Or – slightly closer to art – one may be embarrassingly unable to pick up a tarantula that one knows is made of rubber.)¹⁹ Affect program analysis makes it both more difficult and easier to resolve paradoxes generated by arousal of emotions by art. In fact, we can introduce some »limbic puzzles« into the paradox of disgust. What happens when responses supposedly so primitive and hard-wired come to be features of the highly acculturated and theorized products we call art? Many of the limbic-based emotions are aversion reactions probably designed through evolution to protect an organism from immediate threat. This is why they are modular – so that the organism can respond quickly before slower cognitive deliberation can make its assessment. But how and why do they become – in humans – a focus for attraction? The paradox of aversion is heightened by the analysis of disgust as an affect program. However, the paradox of fiction is solved.

The standard formulation of the paradox of fiction focuses on the problem of belief. How can a reader feel grief on behalf of Anna Karenina, for example, if he or she does not believe that any real woman has been harmed?²⁰ Whether or not this is a sensible problem for propositional emotions or merely an academic conundrum, with affect programs we can invoke the fact that responses are encapsulated and thus independent of other cognitive systems, including beliefs.²¹ There is no paradox because there is no inconsistency of belief such that one responds with an emotion that requires a belief or propositional attitude that one does not hold.²²

More importantly, this analysis of disgust permits us to answer the question of whether emotions aroused in response to art are *genuine* emotions of their type. Although art arouses experiences that certainly feel like emotions, if we do not hold the beliefs that constitute the emotions we

as recognition, I think this may be accomplished through the training of the affect program and need not require belief in the sense of assent to a proposition.

¹⁹ Psychologist Paul Rozin has experimentally demonstrated the inability of subjects to eat foods they like that have been molded in the shape of feces. (See discussion in Miller, *ibid.*)

²⁰ See Colin Radford, »How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?« *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 69, suppl. vol., (1975).

²¹ Note that psychologists who study emotive response often use pictures or descriptions of emotion-arousing scenes to test their subjects, and they do not consider the scientific validity of their findings to be compromised by these »fictional« situations.

²² Nor do we have to resort to any of the alternative proposals for the cognitive content of emotions, such as simulation theory or the so called thought theory, which holds the emotive response to art to be responses to non-asserted thoughts rather than beliefs. Of course, there is a sacrifice involved in accepting this solution to the paradox of fiction, since it jettisons the cognitive constituent of emotions that provides the strongest grounds for establishing their rationality.

apparently feel, perhaps we need to modify our understanding of this element of aesthetic response.²³ Many conclude that although the emotive responses art arouses may be powerful and meaningful, they are not the same as emotions aroused in real life. But aesthetic disgust is an unambiguously and completely real case of the emotion, and its target object is the work of art. It is *this image* of food and vomit that arouses aesthetic disgust (Figure 2), and aesthetic disgust is real disgust that is occasioned as a part of the appreciative response to this work of art.²⁴ I suspect that the same argument could be made on behalf of other emotions such as some varieties of fear, and it certainly can be made for surprise. Other important aesthetic emotions, including the venerable pity, require a different analysis.²⁵

However, this is not to say that the disgust aroused by pictures and



Figure 2: Cindy Sherman, »Untitled #175« (1987)
Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures

²³ Philosophers have suggested various modifiers to append to artistic emotions: fictional emotions, quasi-emotions, simulated emotions, and so forth. These modifiers are intended to account for the fact that our emotive responses to fiction are just that – to fiction; to an entity that presents a world we acknowledge not to be real.

²⁴ The imitation-reality distinction is further confounded by the work of Damien Hirst, famous for pickled animals, and Gunther von Hagens, who reportedly preserves human bodies and exhibits them as sculpture.

²⁵ See Alex Neill, »Fiction and the Emotions,« in Neill and Ridley, *Arguing About Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995). Jerrold Levinson suggests that »Darwinian« emotions, that

narratives occasions exactly the *same experience* as the disgust that would be aroused if one came upon the scenes in reality that are pictured in visual art or described in fictions. There is a difference, and in the case of disgust that difference is best explained by reference to the *senses* that are assailed by the disgusting object.²⁶ Philosophy is so biased in favor of the distal senses of sight and hearing that the other sense experiences that trigger emotions are often neglected. Works of visual art and narrative typically appeal to the imagination via the so-called higher or intellectual senses of vision and hearing. While visual scenes may disgust, the primary senses of disgust are the »bodily« senses of touch and smell and taste. The sensory conduits for disgust are limited in art, and the more basic sensations that occasion disgust are absent (though sometimes the visual display is sufficiently vivid that we can kinaesthetically smell or feel the object as well).²⁷ If with our technical resources we had developed not just movies but the »feelies« that Aldous Huxley describes in *Brave New World*, our aesthetic disgust might be pushed to such extremes that Kant would be correct: this species of reaction cannot be converted to a positive aesthetic response. (Leontius rushed over to *look* at the corpses, not to *smell* them.) But as things stand, the most powerful avenues for the disgust affect program are bypassed, and the emotion is triggered by senses that can tolerate the experience and even dwell upon it.²⁸ This observation provides us with one hint of how aesthetic disgust might become an experience to enjoy – or at least to savor. Sometimes we might

is, those necessary for survival of the organism, are the ones that may be directly stimulated by art (*The Pleasures of Aesthetics* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996] Ch. 15.) While this is consistent with the position I adopt, I do not think that the appeal to evolution can be sustained; if Damasio is correct, higher-level cognitive emotions are just as necessary to survival of the species as limbic-based emotions.

²⁶ »What the idiom of disgust demands is reference to the senses. It is about what it feels like to touch, see, taste, smell, even on occasion hear, certain things. Disgust cannot dispense with direct reference to the sensory processing of its elicitors.« (Miller, p. 36.)

²⁷ Edmund Burke observed that primary sensations easily merge into metaphorical sensations, such that, for example, the taste of sweetness transfers to a sweet shape or sound or expression. If this is correct, then the transfer of disgust from smell and taste – where it would likely occasion gagging or retching – to vision, renders the response less visceral than the primitive aversion reaction that occurs when the more direct sense is stimulated. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J.T. Boulton (University of Notre Dame Press, 1968 [1757]) Part 4, Sects. XX-XXI, pp. 151-152.

²⁸ The question of the senses involved in the arousal of disgust is generally interesting for aesthetic theory, since it is the eyes and ears that are traditionally considered »aesthetic senses.« Most scientific researchers on disgust assume that taste is the basic sense for this aversion response, and subjects from rats to humans display disgust reaction to

dwell on the disgusting simply because we *can*. Although it is an involuntary response, it takes place over a sufficient span of time that we are permitted to dwell upon our own reactions – unlike the sudden and momentary startle reflex, which is a stock component of horror movies. At least when disgust is aroused via the eyes and not the nose, we have an opportunity to focus on and even relish a limbic response for its own sake, taking a look at the machinery, as it were. It is rather like watching your own heart beat. I don't know if savoring an aversion counts as pleasure. Indeed, the issue of pleasure in disgust has now grown even more puzzling.

So far we have answered two of the standard questions about emotive responses to art. Affect program analysis has helped us avoid the paradox of fiction, and we have demonstrated that aesthetic disgust is a genuine case of disgust. Now, as we turn to the issue of aesthetic attraction to this aversive response, we discover that in formulating these solutions, we have effectively cut off one of the time-honored ways to answer the paradox of aversion. The classic answer to this question was first supplied by Aristotle and has many modern variations: we are by nature imitative creatures who take pleasure in learning. The mimetic forms of art permit us to learn about painful and important matters without suffering the consequences of encountering them in reality. But I have just argued that in the case of disgust there is no distinction between imitation and reality, for the atypical sensory conduit for arousal only makes disgust tolerable and contemplable; it doesn't diminish its genuineness nor screen us from its target object. So I cannot now revert to the imitation-reality distinction to account for the enjoyment of aesthetic disgust. How much of a theoretical sacrifice have I made?

The imitation-reality divide has shielded human nature from unworthy enjoyment of nasty emotions by means of the assumption that certain emotions are by definition painful and must therefore be enjoyable *only* when their objects are fictional. However, such a distinction between venues of enjoyment does not survive scrutiny, as Edmund Burke observed long ago. He speculated that a theater would quickly empty of its audience were they to learn that a public execution was being held nearby. All would readily abandon art and hurry to the scaffold to gaze at the condemned prisoner in his final agonies.²⁹ Burke thus anticipates what is now a fairly widespread

foods that once made them sick. William Ian Miller makes an alternative case for touch and smell as the primary senses of disgust. He also considers disgust a peculiarly human trait that develops between the ages of two and six. The questions of which sense is basic and of whether disgust is a human development or a response we share with other animals are important, though they exceed my attention here.

²⁹ Edmund Burke, Part I, sect. XV, p. 47. See also John Morreall, »Enjoying Negative Emotions in Ficton,« *Philosophy and Literature* 9, 95-103.

willingness to acknowledge that there is a real interest in witnessing painful emotions themselves, not just their artistic rendering. Indeed, if we can do so safely, we even want to experience them first-hand. However, if disgust is an emotion that is best understood as an affect program designed for protection, then it is doubly difficult to account for the appeal of the experience. Can the very reaction that nature seems to have evolved to be experienced as acute aversion be a source of pleasure?³⁰ Or is its aesthetic power better understood in other terms?

Objects of disgust: Aversion and Attraction

There are three related questions that can be posed regarding the source and nature of the aesthetic power of disgust: (1) What objects trigger the experience? (2) What about the disgusting object is profound or valuable enough to convert aversion to attraction? And (3) When aesthetic disgust is aroused, does either the object or the experience itself become valued, savored, or pleasurable? Or is disgust a negative experience which gains its value by being a component of a larger positive experience? These turn out to be remarkably difficult issues to settle, partly because it is not clear what kinds of questions they are. At first they seem to request an empirical answer, but as I shall argue, this is a fruitless task. Exploring these questions also reveals a shortcoming of affect program analysis that requires repair if we are to understand disgust.

Let us start with the question of the trigger, the target object of disgust. There is a notable convergence among those who have written about disgust when it comes to compiling a catalogue of disgusting things. The typical elicitors for disgust are objects that are *foul*. They stink and nauseate; they are slithery, gooey, sticky, and oozing. In addition to these sensory properties, disgusting things fester and decay; they generate low or monstrous forms of life; they pollute and contaminate. Excrement, maggots, slugs, vermin, and

³⁰ The issue of aesthetic pleasure blends with the question of the components of emotions in general, for one can make a plausible case that all emotions contain an element of pleasure or pain. Spinoza, to cite a famous example, analyzed emotions as compounds of desire, pleasure, and pain. See also Patricia Greenspan, *Emotions and Reason* (London: Routledge, 1988).

Spinoza introduces disgust in an interestingly ambiguous context when he refers to the pain a man feels when he imagines an unfaithful lover: «...being compelled to associate the image of the object of his love with the sexual parts of his rival, he feels disgust for her.» (*Ethics*, trans. Samuel Shirley, [Indianapolis: Hackett] p. 125 [Part III, Prop. 35, Scholium].)

things that have not too recently died – all these figure on typical lists of disgusting items compiled by theorists of vastly different stripes: anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers; empiricists, psychoanalysts, existentialists.³¹ But, as David Pole observes, despite this agreement about its objects and its sensory roots, »Disgust is no ultimate datum of experience, like the sweet taste of sugar...; it is a complex phenomenon requiring to be made intelligible.«³²

In his recent book, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Ian Miller proffers several general features of objects that arouse disgust: They are organic; they enter consciousness chiefly through the senses of touch and smell; and they have to do with life – its generation and its end. He summarizes the most basic and characteristic object of disgust as »life soup«:

What disgusts, startlingly, is the capacity for life, and not just because life implies its correlative death and decay: for it is decay that seems to engender life. Images of decay imperceptibly slide into images of fertility and out again. Death thus horrifies and disgusts not just because it smells revoltingly bad, but because it is not an end to the process of living but part of a cycle of eternal recurrence. The having lived and the living unite to make up the organic world of generative rot – rank, smelling, and upsetting to the touch. The gooey mud, the scummy pond are life soup, fecundity itself: slimy, slippery, wiggling, teeming animal life generating spontaneously from putrefying vegetation.³³

Miller's description is consistent with the idea of disgust as an affect program, because the decay and stench of the disgusting is often a signal of the noxious, poisonous, and dangerous, those objects we are well-advised to avoid before our slower cognitive efforts to investigate them get us into trouble. At the same time, the objects that arouse disgust obviously exceed that which is actually dangerous; they are charged with larger, culturally scripted meaning that affect programs alone would be strained to accommodate. As Miller observes:

Here we have the most embodied and visceral of emotions, and yet

³¹ Many theorists who speculate about the disgusting invoke the support of anthropologist Mary Douglas, whose insights into the categories of the clean and the unclean are richly transferrable to food taboos, religious practices, myth, and art. Psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva uses Douglas to substantiate her theory of abjection; philosopher Noël Carroll, who rejects psychoanalytic explanations, invokes Douglas in his own Aristotelian account of the pleasures of horror. See Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, (London: Routledge, 1991 [1966].)

³² David Pole, »Disgust and Other Forms of Aversion,« in *Aesthetics, Form, and Emotion*, ed. George Roberts (London: Duckworth, 1983) p. 229.

³³ Miller, *op.cit.* pp. 40-41.

even when it is operating in and around the body, its orifices and excreta, a world of meaning explodes, coloring, vivifying, and contaminating political, social, and moral meanings. Disgust for all its visceralness turns out to be one of our more aggressive culture-creating passions.³⁴

Life soup, in virtue of being *life* soup, comes freighted with meanings that insert themselves into what are supposed to be more or less involuntary responses to general qualities, such as that which is foul. But despite its reflex-like character, disgust – especially aesthetic disgust – requires that we attend to its *objects* and their many varieties with great care for nuance and the relation of the emotion aroused to other objects and emotions. For as Spinoza observed, »The explication of the nature of every ... emotion must necessarily include an expression of the nature of the object by which we are affected.«³⁵ Emotions, even affect programs, are partially and importantly constituted by their objects. Depending upon the degree to which context is included in »object,« allowing the intentional object partially to shape or constitute an emotion permits a wide latitude for variation among experiences that ride under the same name. I endorse this pluralism, for the appeal, attraction, pleasure, meaning, or value of disgust aroused by art cannot be addressed the same way for all instances. Just as a careful approach to emotions advises that one assess them case by case, so a judicious study of disgust advises us to look at particular cases of that emotion. Aesthetic disgust can be a component of tragedy, as we saw in the case of Philoctetes; it can be a feature of response to comedy, as the gross burlesques of Rabelais demonstrate. It is a presiding response to science fiction and horror. And it can be foregrounded (as in the work of Cindy Sherman) in such a way that the disgusting is an object of aesthetic attention in itself. In all of these artistic venues disgust is part of an appreciative reaction. But the character of the emotion varies. In some instances, disgust is entirely aversion – a deep and unambiguous pain; with others, disgust exerts an appeal and attraction that invites understanding as a pleasure; and with others, there is an oscillation and ambiguity to the experience that is hard to stabilize.

Much debate over the pleasure in disgust has focused on science fiction and horror, partly because it is a common response both to strange or rival forms of life and to agents of decay, features of the »life soup« Miller describes. Because this type of narrative makes little pretense of representing the world as it is, it also affords obvious examples of how disgust is deliberately and sometimes extravagantly employed to propel narrative with

³⁴ Ibid. p. xii.

³⁵ *Ethics*, op. cit. Part III, Prop. 56, p. 138. Spinoza is referring to passive emotions, which include disgust, though his comment obtains for all emotions.

»culture-creating« zeal. Precisely because of their roots in the generation of life, disgusting objects are invested with meaning that complicates and increases their fascination. Just one theme can illustrate how the natural and the cultural are manifest in the disgusting: reproduction – examples of which abound in popular film and television. The science fiction horror movie *Alien*, now with three sequels, features a female monster whose sole purpose appears to be to propagate, which it accomplishes by invading host bodies, including those of humans.³⁶ She is a relentless engine of life, predation, and death, and she is brutally disgusting. Or consider the many reproducing monstrosities featured in the popular television series *The X-Files*, including an explosively phallic fungus which erupts from the necks of its hosts to spray invasive spores into anyone unfortunate enough to be in the vicinity; or a predatory human fluke worm, pale and bulbous like a huge, toothed maggot, that invades the livers of its hosts to perpetuate its kind. This latter creature is supposed to be a mutation resulting from the Chernobyl disaster, perhaps a parasitic version of the nobler Godzilla, also generated from nuclear fallout. Environmental catastrophe, political disputes, sexual politics, history – all are manifest in the spectacle of the disgusting. Doubtless the possibilities recently opened up for technological interventions in the reproductive process drive the current obsession with reproducing monsters (including the most recent incarnation of Godzilla) and with invasions of human bodies to aid their generation. They are the contemporary equivalent of ancient myths of demon lovers who seduce and corrupt, and in the realm of the disgusting they are shadowed by all the muck and slime that oozes primordial life. The visceral, aversive character of disgust is deployed in fictional objects which, in addition to their entertainment value, achieve potent meaning and awful allure. But what exactly is their attraction?

One possible explanation of the appeal of the disgusting sees it as the purchase price of the discovery that eventuates from the unpleasant experience. This approach has its roots in Aristotle's idea of the pleasure of learning, and it is the one that Noël Carroll advocates in his explanation of the paradox of horror. Carroll believes the painful horror emotions of fear and disgust acquaint us with that which is monstrous, alien, and impure. Horror, like tragedy, stimulates curiosity, the satisfaction of which in the course of a narrative is a pleasure. The aversive quality of disgust is not transformed to pleasure. Rather, it is the pain one must endure for the sake

³⁶ Barbara Creed argues that such monsters represent the »archaic mother,« a parthenogenic reproductive machine that is psychologically primitive to the pre-Oedipal mother recognized by psychoanalytic theory. *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).

of discovery at the far side of the horrid moment.³⁷ When one first views »Firewalker,« the episode of *The X-Files* in which the parasitic fungus bursts from the neck of its host, the eruption is preceded by scenes of choking and gagging in which the ripening parasite visibly pulses in the swollen neck. It is tempting to close one's eyes, but one is also intensely curious to find out what is going on. Perhaps aesthetic disgust in this example is a pain that is necessary to experience in order to earn the pleasure of discovery at the end of the story. On the other hand, isn't there a desire to look, like Leontius, on the parasite itself, indicating its attraction? If so, is this attraction to something perversely *pleasurable*?

When I first began thinking about aesthetic disgust, the paradox of pleasure seemed to me to be the most interesting puzzle to solve. However, as I explore the subject further, the questions generated by this issue appear to be badly formulated. There are two alternatives typically posed: either disgust is an experience in which aversion and pleasure mingle, or it retains its painful character but gains aesthetic value in virtue of its role in a larger experience. How in fact is such a dispute to be understood? This sounds at first like an empirical question, as though if we were to examine our own reactions very attentively, we might discern whether aversion and attraction occur in sequence or simultaneously, separately or blended. But can this be determined? Some writers on horror classify their experience of the disgusting as partly pleasurable; others do not.³⁸ These are (presumably honest) subjective reports, and there is no vantage from which to adjudicate the dispute. Introspection is not a finely tuned instrument, and if the question of pleasure is construed empirically there is no way to settle the issue. Alternatively, one may suspect that the question affords only a stipulative answer dependent upon prior theoretical commitments. If this is the case, then one who adheres to the idea that disgust is an evolved aversive response might insist upon its intrinsically negative quality, whereas someone who subscribes to Freud's theory that disgust is a reaction-formation obscuring sexual desire would insist upon its combined aversion and attraction. (Perhaps the old oxymoron »negative pleasure« had its roots in the obscurity of this issue.)

We can elaborate the difficulty of resolving the ambiguities of attraction

³⁷ Carroll, op.cit., chapter 4. Compare Kant's critique of Burke: fear cannot be a component of sublime pleasure, because once the fear is overcome it brings relief and the desire never to experience *that* again. Kant jettisons all fear from the encounter with the sublime, whereas Burke retains it in the notion of sublime delight, which always teeters on the brink of terror and sustains both a positive and negative affective valence.

³⁸ See the exchange among Carroll, Alex Neill, and Susan Feagin in *Philosophical Studies* 65 (1992) pp. 53-90.

and aversion in objects of disgust by noticing how a similar theme occurs in fairy tales – the enchanted frog who in amphibian form must be embraced by the maiden before resuming his royal countenance, or the loathsome Laidly Worm who must be kissed by the returning adventurer Childe Wynde, whose touch of the revolting monster (which is more of a dragon than a worm) restores the form of his beloved sister. These examples tantalize with the balance of pleasure and pain they indicate – for the worm is a hideous and fearsome creature, but the enchanted girl trapped within is an object of love. In these tales it is somewhat easier to separate elements of attraction and aversion, for they are externalized and personified as frog and prince, worm and sister. However, frog and prince are only extensionally identical. If they were entirely the same, one would get no credit for kissing a frog and would not merit the standard reward of living happily ever after. The story trades on the duality of – and possibly oscillation between – love and aversion, disgust and affection. Moreover, this comparison points out a further ambiguity in the pleasure question: If there is pleasure in aesthetic disgust, is it pleasure in the *object* that arouses disgust, or an enjoyment of the *feeling* itself? Given that intentional objects are constituents of emotions, this is an even more difficult distinction to draw than that between frogs and princes. But it directs our attention to the right place: to the various contexts and objects that occasion and constitute disgust. Whether there is one »mental event« here (a combination of pleasure and pain) or two (separate pleasures and pains co-existing), is impossible to determine with exactitude and probably differs from occurrence to occurrence. What is clear is that something about aesthetic disgust invites one to repeat the experience, not to flee from it as a simple aversion. It may be grimly pleasurable, it may be awful but valuable for its meaning and consequence. Or both. Much depends on the particular object of aesthetic disgust.

Some art works without narrative seem rather compellingly to require the savorability of aesthetic disgust. (I leave open whether the savor constitutes a pleasure.) Cindy Sherman's photographs, all called »Untitled,« only hint at the sketchiest of narrative contexts. Disgust here cannot be alleviated by the satisfaction of curiosity.³⁹ In fact, curiosity is aroused but thwarted, left in stasis, a permanent unsettled disturbance. The pictures elicit a somewhat inchoate anxiety about the borders of human and non-human, and about personal identity (heightened by the fact that nearly every picture is of Sherman herself). When art enters such territory, it prods at one's sense of self and prompts acute attention to the emotions aroused and what they might disclose about oneself. Sherman's pictures, with their air of the

³⁹ Although Carroll suggests that his solution is appropriate for non-narrative arts as well.

uncanny, the familiar, and the strange, seem to tug at memory and recognition as if to pull to the surface something deeply buried. They invite an inward-directed account of their power that probes deep into the recesses of the mind, suggesting a psychology of disgust that invokes regions of the unconscious where deeper elicitors of this emotion lie in wait.

Julia Kristeva regards disgust as an emotion that recognizes the threat of slimy, oozy, life-generating and death-dealing decay, which is not only an offense to the senses but also a threat to identity. Things that disgust represent the overtaking of form by formlessness, of distinction by undifferentiation. They call to mind the tenuousness of our own identity, under siege from the first moments of its formation.⁴⁰ The attraction-aversion duality of disgust in Kristeva's analysis is underwritten by her psychoanalytic framework and her theory of abjection: Each developing consciousness forms its own identity through distinguishing itself from other things. The most primitive stage of the process of self-differentiation, in Kristeva's view, requires separation from the fusion state of pre-natal oneness with the internal matrix of the mother's body. The maternal body lurks beneath consciousness as invitation to regain this state of oneness, and so abjection attracts. But at the same time this invitation is a horrific threat to the formed self that would lose identity were it to succumb to the lure of the abject.

The centrality of the maternal in Kristeva's theory provides a way to understand the eerie attention to gender and the female body of these photographs (*Figure 3*), a prominent feature of Sherman's work that is also found in many other works of the gallery and theater.⁴¹ Indeed, the appropriateness of the concept of abjection for a good deal of contemporary art invites the suspicion that emotions have cultural form and moment, and that we might be playing out an obsession with this particular species of disgust more or less globally in art and entertainment. The confluence of preoccupations with femaleness and the grotesque body affords another way

⁴⁰ To draw what I hope is not too farfetched a comparison: In a way Kristeva's theory partakes of similar virtues and problems as does the solution Kant posed to the pleasure of the sublime. Kant also directed our attention inward away from the raging seas and starry heavens we thought we were enjoying; the proper object of sublimity is our own minds and our awareness of the supersensible dimension of reason that gives rise to the autonomous moral will. The unsympathetic might find Kant's sublime a bit self-congratulatory.

⁴¹ See Laura Mulvey, »Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-87,« in *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Indiana University Press, 1996). Barbara Creed, op. cit., makes interesting use of Kristeva in her film analysis. See also Claire Kahane, »Freud's Sublimation: Disgust, Desire and the Female Body,« *American Imago* 49:4 (Winter, 1992) 411-426. See also the Lacanian analysis of disgust of Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) esp. pp. 76-79; 132-136.

to discern disgust as a culture-creating passion. A response that appears hard-wired and natural emerges in art at a particular time in history with a prevalence and intensity that far exceeds deliberate manipulation of the theory employed on its account.

However, all the independent interest of disgust itself, the grisly titillation of horror and science fiction, the difficult epiphanies that ensue, the intellectual recreation, and the occasional sheer fun of disgust, should not obscure the fact that the function of aesthetic disgust is often – perhaps most often – fraught with grave moral significance. Disgust alienates; it may both prompt and block sympathy; it evokes scorn and contempt as well as pity, and it certainly provokes fear, for the ills to which the flesh is prey are handed out at random. This is another way that the disgusting object represents a threat, for it presents the discomfort that we ourselves may become disgusting,



*Figure 3: Cindy Sherman,
„Untitled #160“ (1986)
Courtesy the artist and
Metro Pictures.*

at least for that interlude before one becomes nothing at all. Befitting its modular character, disgust is very difficult to interrupt, and it can be deployed in art – and in life as well – both to evoke compassion and to ostracize. Aesthetic disgust in contexts that are tragic or otherwise difficult is rarely ambiguous in its affective valence, for appreciative understanding requires arousal of these emotions in their purely painful forms. Many scenes of Steven Spielberg's movie *Schindler's List*, for example, evoke difficult emotions, including disgust, in the course of appreciating its complex narrative. One unforgettable shot shows a child in the concentration camp at Płaszow hiding from the military detail which is rounding up inmates and shipping them to Auschwitz. He has desperately sought a hiding place by crawling down one of the barracks toilets. We see him awash in a pond of human excrement, which has splashed across his nose and mouth. The scene is difficult to endure, and the disgust evoked is one of an indispensable sequence of aesthetic emotions aroused by this film. This disgust matches its painful character as aversive response, and because this is a child, an utter innocent, disgust summons attendant emotions of pity, anger on his behalf, and dreadful hope that he will not be discovered. But it might have had a different effect, for when one becomes disgusting to others, it can take supererogatory effort to overcome the aversion and muster compassion. We may think again of Philoctetes, who although a hero had the misfortune to tread on forbidden ground, suffered his unhealable wound, and became an object so disgusting that no one would come near him. Disgust is a powerful and treacherous emotion. Sensitive to danger, it becomes itself a dangerous affective state, causing us to reject and degrade objects that we find disgusting.

Though for the sake of simplicity I have tried to focus my discussion on disgust as a response to art, sometimes I have slid into consideration of this emotion as it is experienced in real circumstances. Some such slippage is inevitable; aesthetic emotions have moral salience both in and out of art. As we have seen, the border between imitation and reality, art and life, is thin and permeable at many sensitive points. Especially with an emotion such as disgust, the boundary can drop away altogether. Disgust incorporates its objects so deeply into consciousness that they become components of visceral, bodily aversion, thereby dramatizing the potency with which such emotions attach us to the world.