

# Contemporary Aesthetics

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Volume 9 (2011)

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2011

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## Disgust and Ugliness: a Kantian Perspective

Mojca Kuplen

### Abstract

Contemporary discussions of the problem of ugliness in Kant's aesthetic theory have, to my knowledge, left unexplored the relation of disgust to ugliness. At most, they have explained away disgust as merely an extreme form of ugliness or displeasure, as Guyer did in his interpretation of ugliness in Kant's aesthetic theory,<sup>[1]</sup> and by that strayed from the phenomenological and conceptual uniqueness of disgust in comparison to ugliness, while Kant, as I argue, did not. As a matter of fact, careful investigation of the concept of disgust in Kant's writing will reveal the distinctive and multifaceted character that he ascribed to this phenomenon. By examining Kant's treatment of disgust in comparison with more comprehensive contemporary studies given by phenomenologist Aurel Kolnai, psychologist Paul Rozin, and the social study of William Ian Miller, I will address the ways in which disgust can penetrate artistic representation without subverting it and, more closely, interrogate the role of disgust in contemporary art. Furthermore, within Kant's aesthetic framework, I will suggest a theoretical difference between disgust and the concept of aesthetic ugliness.

### Key Words

aesthetic appreciation, beauty, contemporary art, disgust, Kant's aesthetics, ugliness

### 1. The Concept of Disgust: An Overview of Kant's Treatment of Disgust in Comparison with Contemporary Studies

Whereas Kant did not give any theoretical explanation of the concept of disgust, he did nevertheless anticipate symptoms that accompany it and that have been adopted in the contemporary analysis as fundamental conditions of disgust. Going beyond linking the phenomenon of disgust with oral consumption, the idea of disgust in Kant's analysis also encompasses ethical conditions, and thus it is introduced as a rather complex phenomenon. Above all, he expounded the concept of disgust by examining its aesthetic implications in artistic representation. A brief exposition in §48 of the *Critique of Judgment* reveals a rich insight into the nature of disgust: "For in this singular sensation, which rests on mere imagination, the object is represented as it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment, while we strive against it with all our might. And the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and thus it is impossible that it can be regarded as beautiful."<sup>[2]</sup> There are two particularly striking features that must be stressed: (1) disgust's imposing nature, and (2) the anti-aesthetic effect resulting from it. Let me begin with the first one.

The fact that the object of disgust has the ability to impose upon us, especially through its visual representation, indicates its indispensable relationship with sense experience. This is taken later on, in contemporary examinations, as a condition *sine qua non* of disgust, particularly its elemental relation with

the senses of taste and smell. In the *Anthropology*, Kant characterizes disgust as a vital sensation connected particularly with the “lower” senses of smell and taste.

Compared to the “higher” class of senses (touch, sight, and hearing), smell and taste do not contribute to the cognition of objects, but are more related with producing pleasure: “...the idea obtained from them is more a representation of enjoyment.”<sup>[3]</sup> That is, smell and taste are less responsible for perceiving the surface of an object than they are pleasure-related senses; that is, linked with the oral intake. Because such intake is less free in the case of smell than in taste and since we cannot choose entirely what will be taken in, the aversion through smell is particularly forced on our enjoyment: “For taking something in through smell (in the lungs) is even more intimate than taking something in through the absorptive vessels of mouth or throat.”<sup>[4]</sup> The intimacy of the intake is conditioned by the fact that smell more directly consumes the material feature of the object than taste does, and thus provokes disgust more straightforwardly as a defensive physiological reaction manifested through nausea or vomiting. “Therefore it happens that nausea, an impulse to free oneself of food through the shortest way out of the esophagus (to vomit), has been allotted to the human being as such a strong vital sensation.”<sup>[5]</sup> Disgust’s biological relation to the sense of taste and smell, as well as its dependence on direct sensory information about the object, is well established here.

Paul Rozin refers to such food-related emotion as “core disgust,” and defines it as “[r]evulsion at the prospect of (oral) incorporation of an offensive object.”<sup>[6]</sup> The offensiveness of an object, contrary to mere bad taste or sensory dislike, intrinsically includes an idea of contamination. He makes a considerable step forward by suggesting that it is not necessary that the object of disgust is actually a contaminant, but merely that the idea of it is sufficient to provoke disgust.

“Disgust is triggered not primarily by the sensory properties of an object but by ideational concerns about what it is, or where it has been.”<sup>[7]</sup> For disgust to be triggered, it is sufficient that the object be associated, by means of other senses, with the contaminant object; for example it is highly plausible that we will avoid eating or even touching a chocolate in the form of excrement.

Disgust, however, is not triggered merely through the senses of taste and smell but also through visual perception. Kant, for example, distinguished a type of disgust that concerns violation of ethical, hygienic, and sexual appropriateness. He writes, “An old woman is an object of disgust for both sexes except when she is very clean and not [a] coquette.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Unfortunately, he does not offer any explanation of the nature of such disgust. The most thorough attempt to define the nature of visual disgust has been given by contemporary writers. Paul Rozin defined such type of disgust as “animal-reminder” disgust, which threatens particularly through visual perception by reminding us of our animal origins. This category of disgust includes violations of the body envelope (amputations, injuries), sexual deviations, and hygienic concerns, that is, deviations from well established standards of cleanliness and purity in all three spheres. “We fear recognizing our animality because we fear that, like animals,

we are mortal. We thus attempt to hide the animality of our biological processes by defining specifically human ways to perform them.”[9]

The phenomenological explanation of disgust given by Aurel Kolnai alludes even more explicitly to the issue of mortality. He interprets substances that evoke disgust as embodying the idea of putrefaction, dissolution, decay, and rottenness, and as being intrinsically related to the idea of transformation from living into dead matter.[10] Accordingly, what is inherent in the nature of disgust is the idea of life and vitality; an object must first exist and live in order to be decomposed into death. Only an object that evokes an idea of life can elicit disgust, a life that is vanishing, decaying. For this reason, inorganic or non-biological items are excluded from the subject of disgust.[11]

The idea of an abundance of life and vitality inherent in disgust is not an exceptional one. William Miller in *The Anatomy of Disgust* interprets disgust as a reaction mechanism against a surplus of unconscious and conscious pleasures. While the first type functions as a blockade of unconscious desires, the second one punishes the gluttony of it; it is “a time-activated barrier that judges (usually too slowly) when enough has been enough.”[12] Disgust originating from the excess or overindulgence of pleasure and vitality was also emphasized by Kant: “The disgusting is excess. Very sweet or fat.”[13]

Furthermore, it does not arise merely from oral consumption but also from intellectual or mental enjoyment: “...there is also a mental pleasure, which consists in the communication of thoughts. But if it is forced on us (...) the mind finds it repulsive (as in the constant repetition of would-be flashes of wit or humor, whose sameness can be unwholesome to us).”[14] Disgust, in this case, also functions as a defense reaction; it serves as a protector from “drowning in pleasure.”[15] In this “satiated disgust” the object does not simply cease to be pleasant, but the accumulation of enjoyment itself presupposes its own failing. “One cannot say that what we have here is simply a pleasure that has ceased to be pleasurable; rather, that the pleasure involved becomes merely shallow, barren, reduced to a state where it is in perceptible contrast with the will to life of the person.”[16]

Kolnai, who favors the explanation of disgust as inherent in satiation, interprets excess of pleasure as a surplus of vitality, an exaggeration of an aspect of life such as aggressiveness, brutality, and sexuality, all of them “disorderly, unclean, clammy, the unhealthy excess of life.”[17]

Common to all such interpretations is an understanding of disgust as a product of cultural and social determination. Beside animal-reminder disgust that has roots in social preferences for distinguishing the rational side from the animal one, psychological studies of “core” or food-related disgust have shown that it is not so much a biological instinct against contaminated objects but more a result of cultivation.

“Disgust may have some roots in evolution, but it is also clearly a cultural product. Like language and sexuality, the adult form of disgust varies by culture, and children must be “trained-up” in the local rules and meaning.”[18] Kant anticipated the necessity of cultural and social conditions for

disgust's existence long before: "We also find that disgust at filth is only present in cultivated nations; the uncultivated nation has no qualms about filth.

Cleanliness demonstrates the greatest human cultivation, since it is the least natural human quality, causing much exertion and hardship."<sup>[19]</sup> The idea that the boundaries of disgust (what offends and what not) are culturally and socially determined demarcates the displeasure of disgust from the mere unpleasantness of sensations (distaste), and thus defines it as a high cognitive emotion. Whether the object has the quality of being disgusting is determined by the culturally developed ideas of physical and moral contamination. Hence, as Miller concludes, a feeling of disgust, even though highly physiologically effective and visceral, is nevertheless an emotion "connected to ideas, perceptions, and cognitions and to the social and cultural context in which it makes sense to have those feelings and ideas."<sup>[20]</sup>

An explanation of disgust as originating from the decline of vitality, life, and pleasure reveals its compelling and ambivalent nature. In spite of the initial rejection of the object of disgust, we are, on the other hand, attracted to it (there is a special appeal in watching horror movies, peeking at disgusting events such as car accidents, or visiting disgusting art exhibitions). It is not merely curiosity or a peculiar pleasure that we have in the transgression of standards but the pleasure that is contained in disgust itself that allures us.

The phenomenon of fascination with disgust and its celebration in mainstream art can thus be explained by dissecting its very ambivalent character: desire and displeasure. However, the latter moment must, in the end, prevail in order to evoke repulsion in order to judge an object as disgusting. Disgust is after all a defense mechanism (in its purest form indicated by nausea and a tendency to vomit) against threatening (contaminated) objects. Although the insinuation of fear does not have rational validity, it is nevertheless inherently present in disgust. Fear of being contaminated (defiled, dishonored) by the repulsive object guides our rejection of it: "...every feeling of disgust, without necessarily including fear, yet alludes to it somehow."<sup>[21]</sup>

But what exactly is being fearsome and, for that matter, rejected? Not the fullness and vitality of life or pleasure which is potent in the abhorrent object, but its decline. What is being discarded, as Kolnai writes, is the surplus of life coming to the end of its existence; either actual decline of living material (decomposition of body or food) or the threatening collapse of an escalating vitality (in mental or ethical disgust), "...as if through the surplus of life that is here so pronounced we were to become caught, as it were, in a short-circuit towards death, as if this intensified and concentrated life should have arisen out of an impatient longing for death, a desire to waste away, to over-spend the energy of life, a macabre debauchery of matter."<sup>[22]</sup> Such an explanation of disgust as an integration of disturbed pleasure and rejection captures its alluring nature in many works of art.

## **2. The Nature of Visual Disgust and Its Anti-aesthetic Behavior in Art**

The primal origins of disgust are to be found in the senses of

smell, taste, and touch because, as pointed out, they grasp the material essence of the object more fully; they are properly to be regarded as the transmitters of contamination.

Nevertheless, seeing a flying cockroach or someone picking their nose in public equally arouses aversion, despite the fact that senses of smell, taste, and touch are not involved in such a situation. Here we have a genuine example of visual disgust, that is, disgust being evoked by the mere visual appearance of the object. Even though there is no danger of being contaminated by merely seeing a disgusting object, the fear of being touched by it is still present, sometimes intensified to the point of a physical reaction of nausea.

How does the idea of contamination sneak into visual cases? One of the reasons, as Kolnai writes, is that the visual sensation grasps the object more comprehensively and in its more fully constituted way. It represents the object's features more clearly and thus it is capable of bringing up the imaginative powers of other sensations.<sup>[23]</sup> To be repulsed by the mere sight of an object is to be disgusted by it through the associative thinking of how the object must be felt by tasting, touching, or smelling it. Visual cases presuppose that the imaginative working of the other senses is necessary. The idea that the object of visual disgust is contaminated is then brought in by linking it with other senses. Similarly, Miller points out, "[S]ight works by suggesting the prospect of unnerving touches, nauseating tastes, and foul odors or by suggesting contaminating processes like putrefaction and generation."<sup>[24]</sup> It is not even necessary that the object that visually evokes disgust have a bad taste or smell. Even seeing a chocolate in the form of feces, although pleasing to taste, is still highly repulsive. The reason for this is that the mere visual form, by associative thinking of an object that is contagious (feces), brings up the idea that this object is also contagious, and thus elicits disgust. Similarly, an object can look good, as, for example, a delicious looking steak, but if it is made out of dog meat, it will nevertheless arouse disgust (in some cultures). Such cases illustrate that visual disgust need not be aroused by the way things look but by the fact of knowing what the object is or what it represents.

The behavior of visual disgust in non-fictional situations is comparable to its effect in fictional situations, such as in the arts of painting, photography, cinematography, the plastic arts, or performance art. As Carl Plantinga points out, the difference is merely in the degree of disgusting feeling and not in the type of emotion.<sup>[25]</sup> In fictional visual representation, we still experience disgust as a unique defense reaction manifested as nausea, turning away from the image or even physically distancing oneself from it (as was the most common reaction to the violent sexual scene in the movie, *Irreversible* (2002), by Gaspar Noe).

What I am interested in here is the question of the validity of Kant's thesis about the anti-aesthetic behavior of disgust in art; that is, whether an object that excites disgust by its visual representation necessarily fails to be aesthetically appealing. I will reexamine this question by considering three different types of disgust, as distinguished by Paul Rozin, and their behavior in the case of fictional visual representation.

Let us begin with the first one: “ ‘core’ disgust,” where repulsion is provoked by the senses of smell and taste. In this case, there is no necessary connection that an object that excites disgust by the mere sense of smell and taste will also excite disgust by its mere visual appearance. For example, seeing chocolate made with cockroaches, while otherwise orally disgusting, does not excite visual disgust. A similar case can be found in Dieter Roth’s work, *Shit Hare*, a chocolate Easter bunny made out of excrement. While taste-disgusting, this fact alone does not alter its visually pleasing properties.

However, such orally disgusting objects can provoke visual aversion in the case of seeing someone eating the object. Such a reaction of visual disgust is suggested by Kant: “The sight of other enjoying loathsome things (for example, when the Tunguses suck out and gulp down the mucus from their children’s nose) causes the witness to vomit, just as if such a pleasure were forced on him.”<sup>[26]</sup> Visual disgust is here evoked not by the object itself that is taste-disgusting but by the image of someone consuming that object. This illustrates a special power of transmittance between different types of disgust, which Miller also pointed out: “We see the thing chewed on and swallowed; we have, in other words, muscular actions that can be sympathetically triggered by the sight.”<sup>[27]</sup> Visual disgust is in this case evoked by the suggestive imaginative powers of the sense of taste, but there can be a similar transference between visual and tactile disgust, for example, seeing someone touching a rat.<sup>[28]</sup>

Cinematography, in particular, has recognized this principle of communication between oral and visual disgust, and thus deliberately provokes them in horror and other intentionally repulsive movies. Moreover, it uses this principle to accentuate visual disgust by connecting “animal reminder” and oral disgust. For example, in *Pink Flamingos* (1972) by John Waters, the highlight of disgust is not when Crackers (Danny Mills) and Cotton (Mary Vivian Pierce) slaughter and cut off the ear of Cookie (Cookie Mueller) but when Divine eats it.

Similarly, in the movie *Hannibal* (2001) by Ridley Scott, the most repellent scene is not when Hannibal (Anthony Hopkins) opens Paul Krendler’s (Ray Liotta) skull and cuts out part of his brain, but when he fries it in the pan and feeds Paul with it. The violation of the body envelope heightens the emotion of disgust when connected with oral consumption. This demonstrates the intrinsic relation of disgust with the sense of taste, and in general with the sense experience of an object.

There are two types of disgust that are, on the other hand, more perplexing in their visual behavior: the animal reminder and social moral disgust. Social moral disgust is, as Rozin writes, aversion at the violation of the “spirit envelope” or “human dignity in the social order.”<sup>[29]</sup> For example, the photograph of a crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist’s urine, called *Piss Christ*, by the American artist Andres Serrano, was proclaimed by many as an offending, abhorrent work of art for the reason that it violates the purity and holiness of Christian faith. Nevertheless, in spite of the moral disgust that the object elicits, the aesthetic properties of it are not altered by such disgust; moreover, the art work itself remains extremely pleasing aesthetically. Moral disgust in Serrano’s art work is not caused by the sight of the object nor



solely by the knowledge that it uses the artist's urine, but by the fact that a crucifix is placed in the urine: something that is sacred is associated with a bodily excretion. Serrano's art work was not judged as morally repugnant because of its aesthetic properties but because of its meaning, that is, the message it conveys.

The notion of aesthetic properties I employ here refers to the object's formal properties, such as the perceptual structure of the object's elements, which, in a Kantian spirit, brings about a self-sustaining activity of our cognitive powers (imagination and understanding). Non-formal properties, such as the knowledge that Serrano's *Piss Christ* is submerged in urine and not colored water, do not count as aesthetic properties.

For example, the aesthetic evaluation of Serrano's art work can remain unchanged even after gaining knowledge that it was made using the artist's urine. What does change, however, is appreciation of Serrano's *Piss Christ* as an art work, which is not determined merely by its aesthetic value but also by its other, non-aesthetic qualities, such as the cognitive ideas it brings about, its originality, and so on.

Hence, although the knowledge of the material used does not affect its aesthetic value, it does affect the interpretation and judgment of it as an art work.

To conclude, even though Serrano's art work may be morally displeasing, this does not affect its aesthetic properties, since the source of both feelings is different. An art work can be judged by its moral message, but this does not necessarily bring about its aesthetic devaluation. This is especially evident in the opening scene of the movie *Antichrist* (2009) by Lars Von Trier. In this rich and haunting sequence, it becomes clear that a mother, while making love to a man, allows her child to fall from a window. Despite the reaction of moral revulsion at this act, this does not alter our ability to recognize the striking beauty of the scene.

The aesthetic value of artistic representation is, however, endangered more by the depiction of animal-reminder disgust, which elicits repulsion most entirely through the sense of sight. For example, depictions of disgust-provoking animals (cockroaches, rats, maggots), decaying or mutilated bodies, or perverse sexuality do not elicit disgust through the senses of smell and taste, but through sight. What is more important, aversion is not provoked by the way they look (by the arrangement of visual properties) but how we look at them as a violation of body envelope. The feeling of disgust, as already pointed out, depends on what the object represents, on the meaning hidden behind it.

Nevertheless, visual disgust is highly controversial in the realm of art because it provokes the tension between the nature of the disgusting object and its artistic representation, which can easily collapse. When this happens, it is impossible to aesthetically enjoy the depicted object. It is for this reason that disgust implies aesthetic dysfunctionality. If the nature of the represented object interferes with the artistic image, we cannot distinguish artistic representations of that object from the nature of that object itself. Thus disgust breaks the aesthetic illusion or what Kant calls disinterested reflection, which is necessary for the successful aesthetic representation



of an object. We can no longer distinguish between the cognitive effect of the real existence of that object and its mere representation; hence the aesthetic reflection is destroyed.[\[30\]](#)

As already mentioned, even the mere visual representation of the disgusting object is deeply experienced sensibly and it evokes a feeling of nearness that, in the end, is responsible for an aesthetic collapse and, consequently, the inability to find the object aesthetically pleasurable. Such anti-aesthetic effect of visual disgust is captured well by art works such as *Sex and Death*, by Chapman Brothers, depicting the skull of the corpse with a red clown nose covered by snails, maggots, spider, snakes, and flies. The nature of the object as realistically represented in the work obstructs any possibility of finding this work aesthetically attractive. A similar anti-aesthetic eruption of the portrayal of mutilated bodies, coprophagia, physical violation, sexual degradation, urophilia, and humiliation of moral dignity is evident in the infamous movie, *The 120 of Sodom*, by Pier Pasolini. While some have judged it a masterpiece because of the idea it embodies and its technical aspects, the movie is visually hard to follow and is enjoyed because of its abhorrent visual attributes.

What exactly is the disruptive factor that determinates the negative aesthetic evaluation of such works? One reason lies in the realistic manner with which the disgusting object is presented: its nature is forced more strongly on the artistic representation. This could explain why, for example, Frida Kahlo's painting, *Las Dos Fridas* (1939), does not disturb, in spite of its use of animal-reminder disgust (violation of the body envelope). It skillfully beautifies the object with colors, lines, and shades so that disgusting depiction that remains is merely a shadow. While the painting still represents a discomforting subject matter, it is nevertheless a pleasurable one. This explains further why depiction of disgusting objects in photography provokes rejection more directly than in painting. This is because the nature of the object is more sensibly presented and thus more easily provokes our imaginative powers, on which disgust depends.

However, such a technique of beautification is not the only method of overcoming disgust for there are many examples of art works of extraordinary beauty in spite of the vivid and cruel depictions of repulsive objects. Slavenka Drakulić, in the novel *The Taste of a Man*, describes an event in which the protagonist murders, slaughters, and eats parts of the body of her beloved man with such an explicit description that would in ordinary cases provoke repulsion, yet in this case renders the enjoyment beautiful. It is not merely the intelligent style with which this episode is written that furthers the suspension of the disgust's anti-aesthetic effect but the context of the depicted object. We are not confronted here with a mere body violation for its own sake because of the protagonist's mere enjoyment in the brutality, but because this act embodies an idea of spiritual sacrifice. Defiance of the body, which would in an ordinary case excite disgust, as an animal reminder reaction, is in this case associated with the idea of love. The context of the disgusting object alters the feeling with which we enter into it.[\[31\]](#)

Many art works illustrate that disgust's anti-aesthetic effect and our receptivity to those works can be suspended either by stylistic control or by connecting the object with ideas. These latter are contrary to the reminder of animality that marks the object, and emphasizes rationality, love, moral and ethical dignity, and humanity, thus imbuing the object with a more profound meaning. This is one of the reasons, I argue, that Kant insists on the importance of aesthetic ideas in art. The influence of aesthetic ideas is not just in prolonging and enhancing pure formal aesthetic pleasure, which has a tendency to exhaust itself if not connected to rational ideas.

As an embodiment of the ideas of reason, the ideas have the capacity to transubstantiate the displeasure of disgust into aesthetic enjoyment.

An experience of disgust is a strong emotional reaction. Even though the object is perceived only by sight, its strong sensuous nature gives an impression of its nearness, increasing the feeling of being threatened by it and making us reject it. In general, the feeling of disgust is described as the most visceral emotion of all, being essentially tied to sensory experience. A disgusting object, even though perceived merely visually, affects all our senses and, as Miller writes, "invokes the sensory experience of what it feels like to be put in danger by the disgusting, of what it feels like to be close to it, to have to smell it, or touch it."[\[32\]](#)

Because of this feeling of sensory nearness, disgust acts anti-aesthetically. Since it prevents the possibility of distinguishing between the nature of the object and its artistic representation, it makes it impossible to perceive it in the mode of disinterested reflection. This means that such an object does not satisfy the condition of falling under reflective evaluation at all, and thus cannot be possibly regarded as beautiful. Nevertheless, the possibility of overcoming disgust is intriguing for resolving the problem of so-called "object art" and the opportunity of appreciating it positively. The disgusting, after all, is not a formal defect but by its very nature contains something that captivates and fascinates.

What I am interested in here is the question of how the embodiment of disgust in art works functions aesthetically. Accordingly, two different types of the "incarnation" of disgust can be distinguished: (1) art that manipulates the depiction of the disgusting for its own sake, and (2) art works in which the disgusting subject material is extrinsic to the purpose of art.

### **3. Disgust for Disgust's Sake**

The first type of disgust "incarnation" is apparent in contemporary art and recognized by the name "object art." It operates with strong realistic visual manifestations of the disgusting objects, such as feces (Mike Kelley & Paul McCarthy, *Secession*, 1998); a disturbing mixture of disgusting substances, such as food, vomit, and blood (Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #175*, 1978); sexually obscene uses of plastic body parts juxtaposed distortedly (Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #250*, 1992); or mutilated and slaughtered bodies (Chapman Brothers, *Great Deeds Against The Dead*, 1994). Manipulation of such disgusting substances is an essential part of most of these art works.

It is the nature of disgust itself that is being analyzed here. For this reason, such art intentionally uses those art forms through which the nature of the object can be more explicitly presented, such as photography and plastic art. Its aim is to decode the psychological, social, and cultural components of disgust. In order to do this, it uses its own idiomatic style: the more violent the experience of the subject matter, the more the subject matter presses on artistic presentation, and the more we are forced to deal with it. Contrary to Kant's principle of aesthetic deception (for the sake of aesthetic appreciation), such art demands aesthetic breakdown. The collapsing of the difference between reality and art is needed in order to achieve the cognitive function at which such art aims in order to bring art closer to every-day human experience. And disgust, by its strong physiological and sensual nature, can perform such collapsing especially successfully.

It must be understood that such examples of art works do not aim to be beautiful or aesthetically appealing, and they do not require being such by their own definition. Their artistic aspirations surpass the aesthetic ones, which is to grasp the intellectual and experiential disclosure of disgust. The artist, Jenny Saville, indicates the motivation of such art by saying, "I don't make paintings for people to say we should look at big bodies again and say they are beautiful. I think that it's more that they are difficult. Why do we find bodies like this difficult to look at?"<sup>[33]</sup> As Saville points out, the art of disgust investigates the meaning of disgust and the existential, philosophical, and social issues that are provoked by it.

Carolyn Korsmeyer writes that the most common issues that the art of disgust interrogates are mortality, age, and illness.<sup>[34]</sup> And Matthew Kieran puts forward the importance of experiential knowledge that the art of disgust explores.

"Through engaging with such art works we may learn and develop our cognitive understanding of what certain human possibilities would or could be like."<sup>[35]</sup>

For some of the art works this is true. For example, the Chapman Brothers' sculpture entitled *DNA Zygotic* (2003), which depicts mutated children's bodies, explores the issues of genetic damage and forces us to reflect on its experiential possibility. And the more the creation of disgust permeates our sense experience, the more imperative becomes the cognitive inquiry into its essence. This makes the art valuable and, to some extent, enjoyable, although the enjoyment may have merely cognitive rather than aesthetic value. Because such art lacks positive aesthetic aspirations in the first place, the representation of disgust does not destroy its artistic function but completes it, and for this reason it can be a successful artistic representation. Therefore, the art does not contradict Kant's fundamental principle of excluding disgusting objects from the aesthetic realm, since such art does not aim to be aesthetically pleasurable from the beginning. Hence, it does not need to be preoccupied with the preservation of an aesthetic illusion. This is, however, needed if the purpose of art aims to elicit aesthetic pleasure, as Kant's conception of fine art suggests. It is challenging to reexamine not whether the art of disgust is possible, since, as I have argued, it is, but whether the aesthetic of disgust is achievable. That is, can there be an aesthetically pleasurable representation of

disgusting subject matter?

#### 4. The Possibility of a Positive Aesthetic of Disgust

There are many examples of art works with positive aesthetic qualities in spite of their disgusting subject matter, such as Frida Kahlo's *Without Hope* (1945), depicting Frida lying ill in the hospital bed and vomiting; Matthias Grünewald's *The Dead Lovers* (1528), depicting the bodies of a couple, riddled with snakes, worms, and leeches; or Francisco Goya's *The Disaster of War* (1810), portraying brutally butchered bodies hanging from a tree. How can the existence of an aesthetically pleasurable representation of a disgusting object be consistent with Kant's thesis on the aesthetic dysfunctionality of disgust? In order to resolve this problem, we must turn to Kant's argument.

What Kant argued in §48 is not that disgusting subject matter ruins the aesthetic representation by itself, but it does so only if the object is depicted in such a way that its repulsive nature forces itself on the aesthetic enjoyment of the object and thus threatens it. This happens when the nature of the object is represented so that it activates our associative sensuous experience of it (by the means of imagination), which results in the rejection of the representation completely. Because disgust is a strong visceral and physiological emotion, we are unable, in such a depiction, to remain indifferent to, or disinterested in, its artistic representation. In Kant's words, this means that we are unable to distinguish the nature of the object from its formal representation and consequently to find it aesthetically appealing. The depiction of disgusting subject matter is aesthetically dysfunctional only if its nature is represented in such a way that it destroys disinterested reflection; that is, when our attention is not focused on the imaginative representation of disgust but on its existence.

On the other hand, if the representation of the disgusting object does not threaten its artistic image; that is, if we are still able to retain distance to the nature of the object, the aesthetic representation can remain successful. In this case, we have a genuine situation in which the visceral reaction to the disgusting object has been suspended. To remain in the mode of disinterested reflection on the object is partly conditioned by the type of the art form. For example, visual and plastic arts are, in comparison to literary art, more sensitive to such aesthetic collapsing, since they are more inclined to represent an object with regard to its nature. This is particularly true for plastic arts, and it is not without reason that Kant suggested substituting any depiction of disgusting material in the art of sculpture by its symbolic or allegoric representations.<sup>[36]</sup>

In the visual arts, photography is again more inclined to provoke aversion than painting is (for example, compare the portrayal of a naked old female body in the painting by Matthias Grünewald *Death and the Age of Man* (1540), and in the photography by Andres Serrano: *Budapest* (1940), or the depiction of butchered bodies in the painting of Francisco Goya, *The Disaster of War* and as represented by the sculpture made by Chapman Brothers, *Great Deeds Against The Dead*). On the other hand, literary art has the most power to manipulate the beautification of a disgusting topic.

This is because the representation of the disgusting object through words is more distant from the appeal to our senses, and hence we are more able to focus our reflection on the formal portrayal of the subject matter. The more the artistic representation of the disgusting matter is distant from the nature of the object, the more its aesthetic appreciation can be successful.

Properly speaking, there can be no positive aesthetic of disgust, because, by definition, disgust contains a rejection of the object before an aesthetic evaluation of it could even begin. Disgust by its own logic contradicts aesthetic beauty because it contravenes the fundamental condition of entering into aesthetic apprehension: the principle of disinterestedness.

Aesthetic properties in general, as well as disgust, are related to sensuous experience, yet disgust is an experience that, contrary to pure aesthetic beauty (and ugliness), is essentially connected to the cognitive ideas of contamination and putrefaction. For this reason, disgust is more attached to the material nature of the object and to what it represents than with its formal configuration, as beauty and ugliness are. This is evident from the phenomenological experience of disgust, which is not a reflective experience but a visceral one; we feel disgust with the entire body.

Even in visual representation, there is a feeling of physical nearness with the aversive object. Thus, when we do find a disgusting object aesthetically attractive, as in the case of some works of art, it is because we do not have a genuine disgust reaction but the displeasure of disgust in which the original disgust reaction is suspended. What we have is a deceptive or "pseudo-disgust" experience that is still painful, yet without the sensuous impact that would destroy the aesthetic illusion. I believe that such works of art, rather than being named "disgusting beauties," more properly deserve to fall under the category of what Korsmeyer calls the phenomenon of terrible beauties, "...beauty that is bound up with the arousal of discomforting emotions."[\[37\]](#)

##### **5. The Phenomenological and Theoretical Demarcation of the Concepts of Disgust and Ugliness**

In the context of everyday discourse, there is a habitual use of the words 'disgust' and 'ugly' when referring to objects of displeasure, frequently interwoven with each other when describing our dislike towards offending, incongruent, and distorted objects. The concept of ugliness has a predisposition, like disgust, to pervade moral evaluations and disagreements, much more than its opposite, beauty, has.[\[38\]](#)

Leaving aside the semantic oddity of the concept of ugliness, what I am interested in, in the context of this topic, is merely its aesthetic function. That is, the use of the word 'ugly' as we insistently employ it in purely aesthetic evaluations, is reserved for the features of an object that do not fit together (as, for example, hearing discordant musical tones or seeing an arrhythmic dance performance or the image of an office building beside a beautiful gothic church). The evaluative word 'ugly,' as used in these cases, refers to the judgment of formal discord or disharmony among features of an object. It is thus a mark of negative aesthetic judgment taken explicitly in the Kantian understanding of aesthetic values.[\[39\]](#)

Disgust and ugliness have in common a dependence on a negative feeling value, a feeling of displeasure. Furthermore, this feeling is in both cases intentional. In the case of ugliness, it is a conscious response to the formal arrangement of qualities, that is, to its disharmonious display. In the case of disgust, it is a conscious response to the idea of putrefaction or contagiousness of the offending object, and, hence, the feeling of displeasure in a repulsive object necessarily alludes to the emotion of fear. There is, then, a strict and apparent phenomenological difference between the feelings of ugliness and disgust. While feelings of danger and fear are essential for the emotion of disgust (which is, after all, a defense reaction feeling), the displeasure of the ugly is an effect of a mere dissatisfaction with the disagreement between formal qualities in which any kind of reference to ideas or concepts is excluded. In order to find an object's features discordant, there is no need to know what the object is about (leaving aside Kant's category of dependent aesthetic properties). What matters is merely its formal appearance as it affects our aesthetical common sense.<sup>[40]</sup>

Furthermore, both disgust and ugliness have their own phenomenological feeling tonalities of displeasure. An object can be more or less aesthetically ugly, depending on the level of discord between formal qualities. Likewise, an object can more or less evoke disgust, depending on how strongly the idea of putrefaction pervades it. We are usually less disgusted at the sight of filth<sup>[41]</sup> than at an injured body, although it also depends on the individual sensitivity for the disgusting.<sup>[42]</sup> That the concepts of disgust and ugliness have different sources is evident more clearly from the fact that we can find some objects strongly repulsive, without a trace of any pure aesthetic ugliness (for example, snakes can be quite repulsive animals for many of us, though in some cases they can exhibit high aesthetic beauty in the arrangement of their colors, such as coral and corn snakes).

Also, the opposite is the case. There can be aesthetic ugliness for example in listening to a concert, where players consistently play the wrong notes, yet without any kind of trace of disgust. As a matter of fact, dance and music (such as instrumental music) are the only art forms in which disgust does not feature. The reason why the arts of dance and of pure music cannot be disgusting is because they are merely a perception of pure formal qualities; the play of bodily movement in space in the first place, and play of sound in time in the latter.<sup>[43]</sup> Disgust can be found only in the art forms that are not merely expressions of pure formal qualities but where content is explicitly involved.

This observation reinforces the argument for the dissimilarity of disgust and aesthetic ugliness. While ugliness refers exclusively to the composition of pure formal properties of the object, disgust refers to the meaning of the depicted, the idea that the object represents or embodies. Moreover, the fact that disgust can be found merely in organic and biological items (or in items associated with them), while ugliness is not limited in this way, supports the view of their different natures. Disgust is inherent in the idea of putrefaction (because only living things are destined to die), while ugliness is in the formal configuration of an object.



The conceptual demarcation of disgust and ugliness can be reinforced by Kant's appeal to the different cognitive faculties that disgust and ugliness employ. As he writes in §48, disgust depends on nothing else but the imagination of the senses, while aesthetic feelings of beauty and ugliness are partly intellectualized feelings. The aesthetic perception of ugliness and beauty is a reflective perception. It employs a mental state of free harmony (or disharmony) between the faculty of imagination and the faculty of understanding. After all, according to Kant, aesthetic pleasure (or displeasure) demands universal validity, and it could not do that if not linked with the understanding, which is thus indispensable for aesthetic perception. Aesthetic feeling is the feeling of a free harmonious (or disharmonious) play between imagination and understanding; this is the fundamental structure of its aesthetic purity and universal validity, which is lacking in disgust. In the light of these considerations, it is legitimate to argue that disgust and ugliness, although both negative evaluative judgments, are dissimilar in the most fundamental phenomenological and theoretical aspects. The feeling of ugliness is an effect of a reflective mental state in which the faculty of understanding is necessarily employed, whereas disgust belongs to the special domain of sensory experience.<sup>[44]</sup>

Nevertheless, as Kant writes, the disgusting can be a mark of aesthetic displeasure, and, hence, its jurisdiction reaches aesthetic territory also. In this context, disgust and ugliness both characterize an aesthetic failure, though their approach differs significantly. While ugliness, understood as pure formal disorderliness, is a mark of so-called "inner" reflective failure, which is discernible by a universal aesthetic dissatisfaction as an effect of interference between the play of imagination and understanding, disgust is properly a mark of a so-called "outer" aesthetic failure. An object that is disgusting simply influences aesthetic appreciation from a non-aesthetic realm.

The content prevents the possibility that an aesthetic reflection even enters into our perception of the object. It does that by hindering the possibility of a disinterested attitude to the object in the first place. To disinterestedly regard the object means, in other words, to subsume it under the aesthetic apprehension that determines whether the object is beautiful or not (depending on the harmony or disharmony of aesthetic qualities through the feeling of pleasure or displeasure). And if disgust prevents the possibility of an object to be evaluated aesthetically in the first place, that is, if the object cannot be aesthetically evaluated at all, then *a fortiori* it cannot be evaluated positively, that is, as beautiful.

It is for this reason that disgust functions anti-aesthetically, because it interferes with the aesthetic process "from the outside", that is, from the meaning of the depicted.

The feeling of ugliness, on the other hand, does not interfere with aesthetic reflection as disgust does but, on the contrary, is an outcome of aesthetic apprehension. To evaluate objects as aesthetically ugly is to acknowledge that the reflective operation took place and that its outcome was a negative aesthetic feeling of ugliness (aesthetic displeasure), which therefore must be regarded as a counterpart to beauty, more than disgust is. An object that is aesthetically evaluated as ugly can, by definition, never be regarded as beautiful, while



an object of disgust can exhibit, on certain occasions (when the aesthetic illusion between the nature of the object and its representation does not collapse) aesthetic beauty.

Both ugliness and disgust are aesthetic counterparts to beauty and to aesthetic success. While ugliness as a negative aesthetic partner of beauty is its proper opponent, disgust, on the other hand, is much more resistant to beauty than ugliness is. Kant nevertheless writes that there can be a beautiful portrayal of an ugly object, but not of a disgusting one.<sup>[45]</sup> Disgust is the most hostile opposition to beauty, not because disgust would be the most extreme form of ugliness, but precisely because of its different nature. Disgust is a sign of an immediate failure. In contrast to ugliness, disgust fails without aesthetic examination. It is a symptom of failure before even entering into aesthetic reflection, just as a feces-like chocolate fails to be appreciated before even tasted and sensibly evaluated. Disgust is the enemy of beauty precisely because it prevents any aesthetic evaluation. It is a turn-off without even being aesthetically inspected.

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Published on April 7, 2011.

## Endnotes

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[1] Paul Guyer, "Kant on the Purity of the Ugly, " in *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2005), pp.141-162.

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H.Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), §48.

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2006), p. 46.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

[6] Paul Rozin, *et. al.*, "Body, Psyche, and Culture: The relationship Between Disgust and Morality," *Psychology and Developing Societies*, Vol. 9 (1997), 107-131; ref. on p. 107.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

[8] Immanuel Kant, "Bemerkungen zu den Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen," p.155, quoted in: Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (New York: SUNY Press, 2003), p. 106.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 113.

[10] Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004).

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[12] William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U.P., 1997), p. 110.

[13] Immanuel Kant, "Reflexionen zur Anthropologie" in *Kants Gesammelten Werken*, Vol. 15, p. 473.

[14] Kant, *Anthropology*, p. 50.

[15] Kolnai, p. 63.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

[18] Paul Rozin *et. al.*, p. 110.

[19] Immanuel Kant, "Reflexionen zur Anthropologie," quoted in: Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (Harvard U.P., 2003), p. 108.

[20] Miller, p. 8.

[21] Kolnai, p. 32.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 48-52.

[24] Miller, p. 80.

[25] Carl Plantinga, "Disgusted at the Movies," *Film Studies* 8 (2006), 81-92.

[26] Kant, *Anthropology*, p. 71.

[27] Miller, p. 81.

[28] However, no such communication between visual and olfactory disgust is to be found. This is because the activation of olfactory disgust does not need a presence of the object.

That is, we do not need to see the object in order for its smell to be disgusting. Kant wrote that smell is "taste at a distance" (*Anthropology*, p. 50). Consequently, visual representation does not translate well the sense of smell.

[29] Paul Rozin *et. al.*, p. 115. Examples of such moral disgust, according to their studies, are racism, hypocrisy, and brutality.

[30] For Kant, it is most important, when evaluating an object aesthetically, to leave aside all non-formal properties that would impinge on the disinterested aesthetic evaluation. Such an act of "aesthetic insulation" is an act of reflecting on an object irrespective of its existence. For example, flowers, which are for Kant paradigms of natural beauty, should not be regarded in aesthetic reflection as real flowers but merely as a picture of flowers. This presupposition of the aesthetic attitude is highlighted in Kant's saying that nature can be regarded as beautiful insofar as it looks like art. See: Kant, *CJ*, §45.

[31] Similarly, Miller emphasizes the idea of love, in general, as one of the sufficient ways of self-overcoming disgust

(Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, pp. 132-142); and Kolnai pronounces sacrifice for humanity as one of the factors of disgust's transcendence (see Kolnai, *On Disgust*, p.88).

[32] Miller, *op. cit.*

[33] Drohoyowska- Philip Hunter, "Back to Painting, Thanks to Photos," *Los Angeles Times*, January 13 (2002).

[34] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[35] Matthew Kieran, "Aesthetic Value: Beauty, Ugliness and Incoherence," *Philosophy*, 72 (1997), 383-399.

[36] Kant, *CJ*, §48.

[37] Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Terrible Beauties," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Malden, Ma: Blackwell, 2006), p. 52.

[38] For more on the discussion of the multifaceted nature of the concept of ugly, see G.P. Henderson, "The Concept of Ugliness," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 6, 3 (1966), 219-229.

[39] Kant does not much discuss negative aesthetic judgments or judgments of ugliness, and there is a controversy as to whether the existence of ugliness is even compatible with his general aesthetic theory. See Paul Guyer, "Kant on the Purity of the Ugly." However, for the purpose of this paper I leave aside these discussions and take aesthetic ugliness to depend on formal properties, as beauty does.

[40] This however does not preclude the possibility that unpleasing concepts and ideas can be represented as elements in the overall formal structure of an art work. That is, an art work may represent unpleasant subject matter occasioning feelings of pain, sadness, pity, and fear, or depict an ugly object itself, yet still be aesthetically satisfactory. What determines the aesthetic value of an art work is not the represented object, itself, but the way it is executed, processed, or carried out. That is, even though the elements that constitute the work are displeasurable and, hence, exhibit aesthetic disorder, what matters aesthetically is the unified combination of these elements. Such works can therefore produce aesthetic satisfaction. For example, Otto Dix's painting, *The Salon I* (1921), is a depiction of old and worn-out prostitutes sitting at a table. While depicting their sagging breasts, wrinkled faces painted with distasteful makeup, trying to cover up what old age and a hard life have so brutally left on them, the painting elevates their ugliness almost to the point of being grotesque. Yet even though it is painful to look at them, the overall aesthetic experience is a memorable and powerful one. The painting is not merely an imitation of their ugliness but a novel expression and understanding of it.

[41] Kolnai explains the minimal feeling of disgust at dirt as the consequence of the fact that that dirt is less related to the idea of life in decay but is merely a sign that there was life. See Kolnai, *On Disgust*, p. 56.

[42] For example, in the movie *Repulsion*, by Roman Polanski,

the main character Carol (Catherine Deneuve) vomits from being disgusted by the smell of men's clothes.

[43] I am referring here to the art of dance in the strict sense, that is, merely as an expression of formal qualities, such as composition of bodily movements of one or more dancers and all art of bodily movements that do not involve any other activities or performances. Similarly, in the art of music, I refer to music in the narrow sense, without any verbal communication.

[44] This, however, does not suggest that disgust, after its initial visceral and shocking experience has subsided, cannot occasion reflection. On the contrary, disgust can initiate reflective engagement; however, this is not a play between imagination and understanding, as in the case of ugliness, but an intellectual reflection. An example of disgust's occasioning reflective experience is apparent in the recent controversial movie, *A Serbian Film* (2010), by Srdjan Spasojevic, which is an outstandingly and constantly disgusting movie. The fusion of core (oral), animal reminder, and moral disgust in this movie is intensified to the point where it is almost unbearable to watch it. Yet, in contrast to other movies, especially of the horror genre, where disgust has no other purpose but the visceral experience it produces, in *A Serbian Film* it also works as a powerful metaphor for the post-war Serbian people's political abuse. The experience of disgust serves here as a sort of catharsis that is intended to open up emotional and intellectual awareness, and understanding of the social, political, and existential situation of the post-war Serbian people. Reflection occasioned by disgust is also apparent in the infamous movie, *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), by Ruggero Deodato. The repugnance of the realistic depiction of animal slaughter and psychical and sexual violence is supposed to work as a critical commentary on Western brutality towards indigenous tribes and their traditions. In both cases, the visceral reaction of disgust is distinct from the reflection that it occasions.

[45] Kant, *CJ*, §48.