

# A Taxonomy of Disgust in Art

Noël Carroll and Filippo Contesi

**This is a pre-print.  
Please refer to the published version (*Art, Excess, and Education*,  
Palgrave Macmillan):**

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21828-7\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21828-7_2)

# A Taxonomy of Disgust in Art

Noël Carroll and Filippo Contesi

## 1. Introduction

The association of art and disgust has been perennial. Populated by the likes of Polyphemus, Medusa and The Minotaur, classical legend is full of disgusting beings, while the Dark Ages served up Grendel, and into the contemporary period, we have creatures like Stephen King's Pennywise and Clive Barker's Rawhead Rex to round out our western, literary bestiary of abominable creatures.

From fine art, we are entranced by portrayals of the last judgment, such as Michelangelo's, by visions of Hell, like those of Bosch, and by installations exemplifying death and deterioration of the sort produced by Damien Hirst for the exhibition *Sensations*, or the huge pile-shaped fecal sculptures of the Viennese art collective Gelatin (as presented at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam).

From the East, we find similar preoccupations with images of disgust – both literary and pictorial – as in the skeletal images of Durga/Kali bent upon murderous rampages, her necklace decorated with a string of bleeding, decapitated heads.

Popular culture has whole genres whose predominant objects are disgusting, such as splatter-punk (e.g., *Family Tradition*, a novel by Edward Lee and John Phelan) and torture porn (such as movie series like *Saw* and *The Human Centipede*). Likewise, the currently ubiquitous, zombie apocalypses represented by televisual programs like *The Walking Dead* (based on the comic book series by Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore), which rule the airways.

This taste, so to speak, for disgust, has been evident outside the precincts of art and representation for at least four centuries as people have flocked to the fairgrounds to experience the thrill of witnessing so-called “freaks” – sometimes literally natural anomalies, like Siamese Twins, two-headed births, including

human fetuses – and sometimes counterfeits, such as P.T. Barnum’s “mermaids.” Similarly, Ripley (“Believe It or Not”) Entertainment Inc. operates ninety attractions (a.k.a. “museums”) around the world and has drawn over 100 million customers since 1933, hoping to see the collections of “weird” phenomena often of the kind found in circus side-shows. This suggests that the fascination with the disgusting in art rests upon and evolved from an appetite deep in the human psyche. That is, Tod Browning’s film *Freaks*, for instance, satisfies the same generic curiosity and craving for biological anomalies (and the accompanying experiences of disgust) afforded by “freak shows.”

And yet, despite the vast evidence for the existence of disgust as a significant theme of art, there is a possible traditional argument that denies that disgust is a legitimate subject of genuine art. This argument rests upon an enduring association between art and the beautiful. In the eighteenth century, art was often identified with the imitation of the beautiful in nature.<sup>1</sup> Beauty, in turn, was associated with pleasure, notably disinterested pleasure. Putting these two ideas together, it is suggestive to arrive at the view that artworks have as their function the affordance of disinterested pleasure. Call this an early version of the aesthetic theory of art.

However, at the same time, the sensation of disgust was regarded as inimical to pleasure. Genuine fine art portrayed what we might ordinarily find disgusting – say dead bodies – beautifully. But if the disgusting object were portrayed as such, that, it was believed, would preclude pleasure, and, thus, arguably art status. Or, at least, that is how the argument might go.

Perhaps the most authoritative source for the major premise – that disgust precludes pleasure – for an argument like this is Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. In section 48, referring explicitly to disgust, Kant writes:

For in that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it insisted, as it were, on our enjoying it even though that is what we are forcefully resisting; and

---

<sup>1</sup> See Charles Batteux, *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*, translated by James O. Young (Oxford University Press, 2015). Originally published in 1746.

hence the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of this object itself, so that it cannot possibly be considered beautiful.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, if one holds something like the aforesaid early version of the aesthetic theory of art, whatever putative artistic stimulus elicits disgust is not genuine art, properly so-called.

The problem with this argument, of course, is the narrowness of its conception of the aim of art. Art does not only aim at the beautiful, especially as that is conceived of in terms of the affordance of disinterested pleasure. Art has a diversity of functions, many of which are at odds with the contemplation of the beautiful, such as arousing hatred toward a despised enemy. Among those alternative ends are the elicitation of curiosity with the promise of rewarding it with fascination.

The objects of disgust are often abnormal in one sense or another – often impure or incomplete or unclean, excessive, categorically contradictory relative to a dominant cultural scheme, forbidden, freakish, particularly biologically. They are things to be hidden, shunned or avoided. They are not, or should not be, out in the open. For these reasons, they are the natural objects of the epistemic emotion of curiosity. But with such curiosity comes the risk of disgust.

Disgust is nature's defense (often re-purposed by culture) against our exposure to insalubrity. We gag or recoil in the presence of its objects. Thus, when we approach the "freak-show" tent, we pay for our

---

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), p. 180. In this, Kant is reiterating the view that he had put forward in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, where he stated that "Nothing is so opposed to the beautiful as the disgusting..." See Kant, *Anthropology, History, Education*, translated by Paul Guyer, edited by Loudon and Zoeller (Cambridge University Press), p. 44. Kant was not alone in holding the view that disgust is strongly antithetical to aesthetic pleasure, nor was he the first to express it. Moses Mendelssohn, in his "82<sup>nd</sup> Letter Concerning Literature" (1760), said that "The sensations of disgust thus are always nature, never imitation," and that in disgust "the soul does not recognize any obvious admixture of pleasure." See Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust. Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (State University of New York Press, 2003). Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1766) quoted Mendelssohn approvingly on this topic. See Lessing, *Laocoön: An essay on the limits of painting and poetry*, translated by E.A. McCormick (Bobbs-Merrill, 1766/1962). Even (almost) a century later, Arthur Schopenhauer rehashed the same view when he said that the disgusting had "always been recognised as absolutely inadmissible in art, where even the ugly can be tolerated in its proper place so long as it is not disgusting." See Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, translated by E.F.J. Payne (Dover Publications, 1859/1969), p. 208.

curiosity with pain. Yet that does not cancel the possibility of pleasure altogether. For, we may be rewarded with the experience of novelty, of something beyond ordinary and/or approved experience, something beyond our ken or even forbidden where the thrill of discovery outweighs the pang of revulsion.

Perhaps because this pleasure is mixed with the satisfaction of what is in part a cognitive *interest* (and, hence, not disinterested), this experience will be dismissed as aesthetically illegitimate. But surely cashiering our cognitive concerns from the domain of the artistic interests is as historically blinkered as discounting feelings of disgust as a source of art's provenance. Try imagining the history of Christian art without any gruesome crucifixions.

In this essay, we mean to use the notion of disgust as it figures in ordinary language and experience. Proceeding in this way, we will propose a taxonomy of disgust-in-art in terms of three categories. These categories are defined using two variables: the subject (or content) of the artwork (what it is about) and its vehicle (how that subject is embodied or articulated). Each of these variables, in turn, can be either disgusting or not.

For example, an artwork may be about something that is not disgusting in itself – say, a rival religion – but which is represented in a disgusting way – its priests portrayed as slaving cannibals, drooling blood and pieces of human flesh from their serrated maws.

Given this grid, we develop three categories: artworks whose subjects are disgusting and whose vehicles are disgusting; artworks whose subjects are not disgusting but whose vehicles are; and artworks whose subjects are disgusting but whose vehicles are not. We ignore the category of artworks where neither the subject nor the vehicle are disgusting for the obvious reason that these artworks are not disgusting in any way.

We admit that taxonomies other than ours may be useful.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, we feel that this classificatory scheme brings certain interesting phenomena to light.

## 2. Disgusting Subjects and Disgusting Vehicles

The first category contains artworks which aim to provide a treatment of a disgusting subject matter by means of a disgusting vehicle. One large class of cases that provide good candidate members for this category is constituted by works of literature, film etc. in the horror genre. Many horror fictions aim to represent a gory and violent subject matter in realistic ways, by disgusting means. Consider for instance Ridley Scott's *Hannibal* (2001), one of the films that follow the adventures of the fictional serial killer Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lecter (played by Anthony Hopkins), and the FBI's attempts to bring him to justice. In one central scene, Lecter has the US Justice Department official Paul Krendler (Ray Liotta) captive in his own (Krendler's) house. Lecter, a world-class psychiatrist, has sedated Krendler and removed the cap of his skull, which is now open with the upper part of his brain in plain sight of the audience. In almost ceremonial fashion, Lecter proceeds to feed Krendler tidbits from his own brain, after Lecter has freshly plucked and then stir-fried them. All the props and special effects employed to make this scene are designed to make it disgusting to watch, and to represent realistically a common disgust elicitor, viz. a living human brain in an open skull.

A similar case from the same film involves the elaborate make-up created for the actor Gary Oldman, most unrecognizable as Mason Verger, Hannibal Lecter's wealthy and vindictive former patient. As a young man, Verger disfigured his own face under Lecter's psychological influence. Multiple Oscar-

---

<sup>3</sup> For another categorization, see Filippo Contesi, *The Disgusting in Art* (PhD thesis, University of York, 2014), Chapter 4.

winning make-up artist Greg Cannom created Oldman's make-up with the help of medical doctors to ensure a high degree of realism.

Another large class of cases is provided by those contemporary artists Arthur Danto referred to as "the intractable avant-garde".<sup>4</sup> One case in point are (Oxford-educated South African artist) Lennie Lee's photographs and performances involving disgusting props (and often featuring the artist himself).

What the previous cases do with disgusting make-up and special effects, literature does with words. Consider for instance the first description of Dr Frankenstein's newly-created monster, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818):

His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriations only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.<sup>5</sup>

Once again, here the subject matter's disgustingness is conveyed realistically by means of a disgusting vehicle.

However, these are cases in which the disgustingness of the vehicle is achieved by using materials that, arguably, are only *fictionally* disgusting and/or *represent* disgustingness. Verger's face is disgusting in the film because physical deformities of that kind are commonly disgusting. By contrast, the make-up Gary Oldman used so that his face would appear deformed is itself not necessarily disgusting for it is not real skin or part of an actual, deformed face. Or, to take the *Frankenstein* case, Shelley's words are not themselves made of a disgusting substance; they only represent disgusting substances. All this is important to note insofar as, at least according to some, disgust is best understood ideationally, rather than sensorily.<sup>6</sup> In other

---

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the concept of art* (Open Court, 2003), Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (eBooks@Adelaide, 1831/2014), Chapter 5: <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/shelley/mary/s53f/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Filippo Contesi, "Korsmeyer on Fiction and Disgust," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 55, 109–16, 2015.

words, mere sensory properties or resemblance in appearance are not necessarily disgusting if they are not cognitively interpreted as belonging to something disgusting.

Some artworks, however, use non-fictional props as disgusting vehicles to represent disgusting subjects. A treasure trove of such works is contemporary artist Andres Serrano's *Shit* (2007). This is a series of sixty-six photographic close-ups of (actual) human, dog, jaguar and bull feces.

However, whether a work is fictional cannot always be easily determined. Such is sometimes the case in painting. It is not obvious whether for instance Rembrandt's *Carcass of Beef* (1657) depicts a real or a non-fictional carcass of beef. Another case is *The Wounded Man* (1919), one of the most powerful of Gert Wollheim's works, and certainly his best-known. Wollheim's painting dates from the immediate aftermath of the Great War and quite explicitly deals with the horrors of that war. Saliently, it portrays a man whose arms and legs are stretched in a pose of intense suffering. The man has a large and bloody wound on his stomach (Wollheim himself was shot in the stomach during the War, with near-fatal consequences) and blood on the palms of his hands. One cannot clearly determine whether the depicted wounded man is a fictional figure or an actual man, and perhaps it is Wollheim himself. Nonetheless, Wollheim's masterpiece is a memorable symbolic representation of the suffering that the Great War caused to tens of millions of women and men in Europe and elsewhere. It represents a disgusting subject, both bodily and morally, and does so by means of the disgusting depiction of blood flowing from a man's large stomach wound.

But fictionality is not the only layer of distance that art can interpose between its materials and subjects and its audience. Orthogonal to the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy, Derek Matravers has recently made the case for the usefulness of a dichotomy between *confrontations* and *representations*.<sup>7</sup> On this latter dichotomy, cases of representation are cases in which it is impossible to act on the represented object or

---

<sup>7</sup> Derek Matravers, *Fiction and Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 2014). For a critical take on Matravers' argument, see Noël Carroll, "A Critical Review of Derek Matravers's *Fiction and Narrative*," *Philosophy and Literature* 40, 569–78, 2016.



event. But the represented subject can be both fictional and non-fictional. For example, both a non-fictional recounting of the battle of Waterloo and Steven Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) are representation cases. Such cases are contrasted by Matravers to cases in which one is confronted with, or in other words can act on, an object or an event.

All the vehicles of the works discussed in this first category so far are on the representation side of Matravers' dichotomy. Whether fictional (*Hannibal* and *Frankenstein*), non-fictional (Serrano) or less straightforward cases (*Carcass of Beef* and *The Wounded Man*), confrontation is impossible in all of them. By contrast, works of performance art such as those produced, from the 1960's onwards, in Hermann Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theater* confront their audiences (or, perhaps better, participants) with non-fictional disgusting materials. In Nitsch's *Orgien*, actual animals are slaughtered and their carcasses paraded around, and touched and smelled, without any representational mediation.

However, there are some works that should be considered as candidate members of this first category that do not straightforwardly fall on either side of the confrontation/representation dichotomy. Some of these are cases in which something disgusting is presented to an audience that is also, in a sense, hidden to them. This is arguably the case of a work of performance art such as Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1971). In this work, visitors to the Sonnabend Gallery in New York were presented with the voice coming out of loud speakers of (what reportedly was) the artist, hidden under the gallery floor masturbating whilst he described his sexual fantasies out loud. It can be argued that in this case audiences cannot act on the situation being presented to them. They are thus not confronted (in Matravers' sense) with the artist masturbating. Instead, they are better described as being in the *presence* of the artist masturbating.<sup>8 9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> See Filippo Contesi, "Disgust's Transparency," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56: 347–54, 2016, 349–50n for some reasons to prefer a presence/representation distinction to Matravers' confrontation/representation dichotomy.

<sup>9</sup> A similar case in this respect is Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years* (1990), which we discuss later as a member of our second category.

Another kind of case that provides good candidate members for this first category of works is Andy Warhol's series of "oxidation paintings". Executed mainly between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, these paintings exhibit a characteristic visual style. This style is the consequence of various execution techniques, somewhat different one from the other, but all having in common urine staining and a subsequent process of oxidation or other similar chemical alteration. Basically, the paintings would go through a stage of being urinated on, often by one of Warhol's friends or acquaintances. A widely known item in this series is *Basquiat* (1982).

A similar, earlier example is Marcel Duchamp's *Paysage Fautif* (1946), featuring a colored splash, on black satin, of what is reportedly the artist's own semen. In this case, one could argue that the subject is not completely intended as disgusting. Given the general nature of Duchamp's oeuvre, *Paysage Fautif* certainly, at least partly, meant to shock its audience. However, the work was also reportedly a statement of sorts of Duchamp's sexual lust for Maria Martins, a fellow artist of his.<sup>10</sup> So Duchamp presumably saw the subject matter of the work to be also sexual attraction.

Whilst in Warhol's and Duchamp's cases the disgusting is present to the audience, a similar kind of case that involves representations is offered by Gilbert & George's series of microscopic photographs of bodily substances: such as *Piss on Piss* (1996), *Piss on Blood* (1996) or *Spunk on Sweat* (1997). These are images of bodily fluids as they really look under the microscope (although subsequently hand-dyed by the artists). It is worth emphasizing, however, that the vehicle in the Gilbert & George examples is disgusting only insofar as the microscopic pictures are (known to be) representations of commonly disgusting substances. Also worth noting is that, although the intended subject of these works is, at least partly, the disgusting substances their titles make explicit reference to, something decidedly non-disgusting may also be part of that subject. If the artists' own words are to be taken as a guide (even though it is unclear how much

---

<sup>10</sup> Saher Sohail, "Faulty Landscape," *Sartle*, available at: <https://www.sartle.com/artwork/faulty-landscape-marcel-duchamp>.

tongue-in-cheek they are in this case), the works in question are meant to manifest unexpected majesty and beauty. As they say:

Out of these drops of blood come stained-glass windows from fourteenth-century cathedrals, or Islamic writing [...] To see daggers and medieval swords in sweat: that's our aim. In piss you find pistols, flowers, crucifixes. Spunk amazes us... it really does look like a crown of thorns.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Neutral Subjects and Disgusting Vehicles

Perhaps the best-known examples of the category of disgust involving the marriage of a disgusting vehicle with non-disgusting content is the genre of the *vanitas* still-life in which assorted objects are juxtaposed with such symbols of death as a human skull, sometimes yellowed – not the sort of thing one is tempted to touch, fondle, or lick. For example, consider Pieter Claesz's 1630 *Vanitas*. A jawless skull, flanked by a bone from some limb, is propped up on a set of moldering books. Adjacent, there is an empty candle holder and a watch. Together these items – but especially the human remains – are meant to conjure the notion of time and, hence, mortality, reminding viewers that the pursuits of life, such as the knowledge represented by the books, are vain given our inevitable destiny.

These pictures were intended to remind us of death (*memento mori*) and to dissuade overinvestment in our temporal existence. Mortality is the content of these artworks; that is what they are about. But although mortality, as an abstract concept, is not disgusting, its conjunction with or figuration by means of repulsive imagery (in the Claesz case, for instance, the yellowed, jawless skull with a broken nose and several missing teeth) is.

---

<sup>11</sup> Tate Modern, "Room 13," *Gilbert & George; Room guide*, available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/gilbert-george/gilbert-george-major-exhibition-room-guide/gilbert-11>.

*The Prince of this World*, a fourteenth century sculpture in St Sebald's Cathedral in Nurnberg shows a comely figure in a cloak frontally. But as you move around the statue, his garment opens to reveal a swath of corruption. His back is pocked, flayed, and scarred, with worms festering, symbolizing inexorable decay.

The *memento mori* is still a contemporary theme. Damien Hirst's *Grand High Priest of the Abject #3* is an installation piece that involves a slab of meat enclosed in a plastic housing populated by swarming flies that collide with an insect-zapper, dropping to and littering the floor. It is an image capable of eliciting a gag-response. But, again, its higher purpose is to remind us of where the cycle of life and its omni-phagus pursuits end, namely in a pile of rotting tissue.

Mortality is not the only general or abstract subject that art figures by means of disgust. The incarnation of Jesus is frequently signaled through the revolting treatment of his body as in Mathias Grünewald's portrayal of his crucifixion in his Isenheim Altarpiece or as in the lacerating flogging to which he is subjected in Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*. By emphasizing the repelling violence done to Christ's body, his carnality as well as the magnitude of his sacrifice are symbolized physically.

Of course, the representation of things that are not disgusting by disgusting images is not always done for the sake of symbolism. Medical photos and biology movies may represent physical processes via imagery that the uninitiated may find disgusting to look at, such as birth – an event that is rumored to have caused many fathers to faint. Moreover, such imagery can be incorporated into artworks, such as Stan Brakhage's 1959 experimental film *Window Water Baby Moving*, a celebration of the birth of his first child, Myrrrena.

Although the conjunction of a viscerally disgusting vehicle in artworks with non-viscerally disgusting content need not be engaged for symbolic purposes, it is striking how often the rhetoric of disgust is mobilized to figuratively characterize the content of the artwork, often for moral or political purposes. George Grosz's caricatures portray the plutocrats of Weimar Germany and the prostitutes who service them as loathsome grotesques, overweight, slobbering, and gluttonous. In *Sunny Land* (1920), Grosz

makes his view of the upper class as porcine literal by giving the wealthy burgher sitting at the dinner table the head of a pig. But even in images such as his *Beauty, Thee Will I Praise* (1919), the nauseating brutishness of the bourgeoisie is unmistakable.

As is well known, although disgust originates as a physical response to unwholesome foods, like sour milk, and sources of infection, such as leprosy, it can be mobilized by culture to stigmatize by association everything from untainted foods, like lobster, to behaviors, such as amorous behaviors, like anal sex. Disgust, that is, can be transferred from the realm of biology to that of mores. Just as we can find rotten meat disgusting, so it is said we can find individuals and even groups of people morally disgusting. What Grosz is doing in many of his caricatures is trying to convey the thought that the plutocrats that he portrays as physically disgusting are, in fact, morally disgusting. That is, a physically disgusting vehicle is used to get across the idea that the subject – the wealth-holding, propertied classes – are morally disgusting.

Disgust, in other words, can provide a vocabulary – visual and/or linguistic – of ethical contempt. An essentially non-physically disgusting person or category – such as a politician or a political movement – can be characterized figuratively by way of being represented via a viscerally disgusting vehicle.

Obviously, this is not only a modern phenomenon. For centuries, Satan and his minions were portrayed as composite beings – part goat, part human. When Bosch wanted to castigate priests as morally disreputable, he gave them the visage of rats. In cases like these, categorical contradictions resulting in impure hybrids made moral evil manifest. Just as the beautiful images of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and various saints are meant to symbolize their moral goodness, disgust, the putative antithesis of beauty, can function as an outward side of moral loathsomeness.<sup>12</sup> Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* might be thought of as a fictional articulation of and comment upon this structural premise.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Noël Carroll, "Ethnicity, Race, and Monstrosity: The Rhetorics of Horror and Humor," in *Beauty Matters*, edited by Peg Brand (Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 37–56.

In modern art, disgust is often recruited to express moral indignation. In his film *Salò*, Pasolini, in part, depicted the moral degradation of the fascists' behavior by having them force children to eat feces, compelling viewers like me, at least, to actually choke at the sight – thereby, making moral disgust, so to speak, palpable.

Earlier, in his film *The Damned*, Visconti attempted to telegraph the moral depravity of the Nazis by portraying the Brown Shirts in general and Martin von Essenbeck in particular as homosexual where, in the historical context of the making of the film, homosexuality was (wrongly) thought to be a perversion and, therefore, disgusting. Although this device is no longer serviceable, given our present understanding of homosexuality, the rhetorical mechanism that Visconti was relying upon is still recognizable. To communicate moral disgust artistically embody the subject of the intended reaction in a putatively disgusting vehicle.

As has already been seen, this conjunction of content that is not literally, physically disgusting with a vehicle that is literally, physically disgusting provides a very serviceable strategy for socially critical art. Paul McCarthy's multi-media-installation extravaganza *WS* is, in large measure, a demented, debauched, obscene and disordered Disneyland – or better, “Disneyworld” – which, juxtaposed to images of McCarthy's childhood home in Utah, is meant to stand for America.

The title are the initials of Snow White inverted just as the scenography of *WS* is an inversion of Disneyworld. Snow White, the Seven Dwarves, and Walt Disney engage in every sort of sexual perversion, addiction, and orgiastic revel, including bouts of sadistic mayhem, buggery, even unto murder. Characters defecate, masturbate, copulate, vomit, draw blood, and so on frequently and fulsomely. Whereas Walt Disney's Magic Kingdom is spotless, McCarthy's is a miasma of slop. Where Disney's world is nice; McCarthy's is nasty – a veritable Black Mass of the values enshrined in the Disney universe.

Moreover, insofar as Disneyworld is an avatar for American culture writ large, the visceral disgust *WS* is stylistically predicated upon eliciting expresses the moral disgust McCarthy feels towards the United

States, unmasking its “Disney-fied” facade figuratively in order to reveal and denounce its underlying and repressed violence, lust, mean-spiritedness, and perversion.

The structure of this artwork, like that of many of the previous examples in this section, involves deploying the vehicle or form of embodiment of the piece as, in effect, a figurative comment upon the content of the work – that is what the work is about. The content of the work – say Disney-America – is not viscerally disgusting on its own terms. Rather it is characterized as morally disgusting by being represented by means of viscerally disgusting imagery. A suggestive analogy of the way in which it operates is to imagine the content as providing the subject as if it were a noun which the vehicle or form of embodiment like an adjective then goes on to modify as disgusting, and often, specifically, morally disgusting.

In the Introduction to this essay, it was claimed that drawing our taxonomy of disgust in terms of content and vehicle might bring to light certain interesting phenomena. Elucidating this structure for the articulation of moral disgust is the sort of thing that we had in mind.

#### 4. Disgusting Subjects and Neutral Vehicles

We now come to our third and final category: works that use a neutral vehicle to treat a disgusting subject. One kind of candidate members for this category is constituted by non-realistic representations of what is ordinarily disgusting. Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), for instance, portrays the bloody massacre of the population of the Basque town of Guernica, bombed by German and Italian war planes during the Spanish Civil War. The painting represents beheadings and dismemberments of men and animals. The subject represented is no doubt disgusting, both bodily as well as morally (the painting aims to denounce the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War). But the representations themselves are not, in large part because they lack sufficient realism.

A similar treatment, by non-disgusting means, of the subject of war and its bodily and morally disgusting aspects is provided by George Grosz's black-and-white lithograph *Quitting Time* (1919). Like *Guernica*, *Quitting Time* also denounces the horrors of war but is not disgusting. The disfigured face of the soldier lying on the floor should be a pretty disgusting sight if there is one, but it is not in Grosz's depiction. Here again, lack of realism, both in the coloring and in the *disegno* of the piece, is a crucial factor.

Music offers instances of art that aims to treat disgusting subjects by means of non-disgusting vehicles. Often, this is the case where the subject at hand is morally disgusting. One such instance is Gustav Mahler's so-called "cry of disgust" passage from the third movement of his *Symphony No 2* (1895). The passage is a piece of pure instrumental music and, arguably, no part of it is disgusting. However, a connection is often made between the response appropriate to the passage and moral disgust. Martha Nussbaum reports Mahler's own words:

the idea [behind the passage] is that of looking at "the bustle of existence," the shallowness and herdlike selfishness of society, until it "becomes horrible to you, like the swaying of dancing figures in a brightly-lit ballroom, into which you look from the dark night outside....Life strikes you as meaningless, a frightful ghost, from which you perhaps start away with a cry of disgust."<sup>13</sup>

Finally, two ambiguous, complex cases are provided in turn by conceptual and installation art. The first of these cases is Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* (1961), a series of 90 tin cans labelled in four languages and numbered. The content of the cans is, according to the labels affixed on the cans by the artist: "Artist's Shit/ 30 gr net/ freshly preserved/ produced and tinned/ in May 1961". Manzoni's work is arguably meant to call its audience's attention to the quasi-holy status of the artist in the post-Duchamp art-world. A sort of King Midas or a Jesus-as-Healer, whatever the artist gets in touch with, becomes art. His own faeces are no

---

<sup>13</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, shame, and the law* (Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 104, quoting from Mahler's "Letter to Max Marschalk", as reported in Deryck Cooke, *Gustav Mahler: An introduction to his music* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).



exception. Indeed, Manzoni sold some of the cans by weight (30 grams each) at the then-going market price of gold. Since then, the cans' worth has actually far surpassed the equivalent price of gold for their named weight.

While the subject matter of Manzoni's work is, at least in part, his feces, a less straightforward issue is whether or not the work's vehicle is also disgusting. Many have expressed skepticism concerning the actual content of the cans. For instance, Agostino Bonalumi, a collaborator of Manzoni's, famously stated in 2007 that Manzoni's cans contained just plaster. A French artist, Bernard Bazile, staked his claim to notoriety by opening up one of Manzoni's cans and turning it into a work of art of its own: *Boîte ouverte de Piero Manzoni* (1989). Bazile however did not solve the mystery as he only revealed an unidentified wrapped object inside the can.<sup>14</sup>

However, even if the mystery of the actual content of Manzoni's cans was one day resolved, the issue of the disgustingness of the vehicle of *Merda d'artista* may still remain ambiguous. If the cans turn out to contain actual feces, then the issue may be considered settled. If, however, the actual content of Manzoni's cans is found out to be non-disgusting (if it is, say, plaster), one may still argue that the verbal reference to feces (in the title and on the labels) is already sufficient to make the work's vehicle disgusting.

The second ambiguous case is Thomas Hirschhorn's more recent installation *Touching Reality* (2012). In this installation, audiences are in a cinema-type space where a video is shown of gruesome (ostensibly non-fictional) photographs of what the artist calls "destroyed human bodies". In the video, (what appears to be) a feminine, well-manicured hand flicks through these pictures like one does on a touch-screen: pinching to zoom in or out and moving around to show different bits of the pictures, sometimes in excruciating detail. On the one hand, the subject of the work is once more the bodily and moral disgustingness of violence and war. Its vehicle, on the other hand, is disgusting if one identifies it as

---

<sup>14</sup> See John Miller, "Excremental value", *Tate Etc.* 10, 2007, available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/excremental-value>.

consisting of the content of the gruesome pictures shown. Hirschhorn's work however differs from the typical video in that it has an additional layer, which is provided by the reference to touch in the title of the work and by the role of the hand flicking through the images. On this layer, the vehicle of the work is not constituted by the destroyed bodies represented, but by something (at least on one construal) non-disgusting: a touch-screen.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> We are grateful to the following for comments on earlier versions of this paper: Raciél Cuevas, Peter Lamarque, and audiences at the Universities of Milan and York. Contesi acknowledges the generous support of the US–Italy Fulbright Research Scholars Programme, the Temple University Department of Philosophy and the LOGOS Research Group (University of Barcelona).