

Thinking Disgust Plural

di Robert Rawdon Wilson

The paper explores the connections between disgust and contempt, arguing that contempt as a visceral and intellectual affect emerges out of a knowledge of disgust. Just as contempt can constitute a polished performance, so too disgusting objects can be transformed into art.

A small local mythology develops within the particular the aversive ones such as disgust. Scraps of argument, literary reference now cut loose from its original context, other peoples' scholarship preserved in worm-like footnotes, borrowed authority and the self-defining authority that comes from persuasive analysis, no doubt fleshed out by those mythological bits already mentioned, create the local mythology that surrounds our understanding of affects. In this way, visceral affects become elaborated, split into narrative capsules and given what may seem to be a striking individuality: Anger, for instance, can become outrage; longing (or heartache), nostalgia; fear, terror; disgust, contempt. When this happens, what we take to be (in the disordered trappings of our chosen mythology) a straight-forward visceral and spontaneous affect may undergo a transformation into a complex, theatrical and highly allusive performance of what we do feel as an affect and what we know, or what we remember, concerning the scope and uses of the affect now co-opted for use in our production.

A half century ago, more or less, I traveled on a French ship from Sydney to Panama. A French steamship line, *Messageries-maritimes*, operated between Marseilles and Sydney carrying copra and multitudes of Australians returning home or setting off. Because passengers in steerage class were not allowed the freedom to roam, we mostly collected on the afterdeck or, in truly lousy weather, in the gruesomely terrible steerage lounge. The day I am now recalling was clear and warm, just a bit of tropical breeze to make things right. Entertainment was our own problem. And so on that day a kind of circus atmosphere began to develop. A number of young travelers from the

United Kingdom were demonstrating gymnastic moves. I watched for a few minutes when, quite quickly, something happened, an accident in clothing shocked a few, made others laugh, a few to turn away. Another traveling Englishman, a freelance journalist he had informed me, turned his head away as if a cobra had suddenly curled upwards beneath his toes. I watched his face screw into furrows, his eyes bulging, his nares tightened, his lips pursed outwards. He pointed his horn shaped lips towards the deck, unnoticed, I believe, by every one except myself, and made hawking noises deep in his throat as if on the explosive edge of vomiting,

At the time, I failed to grasp what I had seen. The incident among the gymnasts which had shocked some and made others laugh, had caused an upwelling of disgust crowned by a contorted, ugly face. Once I had understood the significance of the expression on the man's face (the "disgust face"), I was left with two larger problems: how common is this expression; how important is it to the analysis of disgust as a basic, recurring affect. I am not going to discuss the disgust face other than as a position on a continuum, a step in the creation of a more complex expression, the face of contempt. There is a fairly widespread belief that disgust is a commonplace affect, easily recognized and obvious in both its identifying aspects and its significance. The "face", then, is a universal characteristic of the human response to rot, stench, loss of definitive qualities (the downward decomposition into slime, muck and physical indeterminateness). Or, perhaps, it isn't universal, but only a commonplace, a repetition in existence. And, if a commonplace, then it is one on the level of aversion. Aversion may be defined as a barrier between a person and a threatening object reeking of its decay and fairly bursting with suggestions of infection, disease and death. If I were to claim that disgust, and its identifying marks, is universal, I would probably find quite a bit of agreement, especially in Social Science departments and among such oddities of the academic world as literary theorists. However, not everyone does agree. The disgust face imposes a discipline on observers from many different angles, but it also imposes a huge problem, not easily solved. The academics who seem most often to deny disgust's putative universality are precisely the ones who spend the most time thinking about human difference, the

Anthropologists. Nearly twenty years ago, Jason Kapalka published an interview with three Anthropologists (interlaced so as to create a single interview) on the concept of disgust. The Canadian Anthropologist, Jean Dibernardi, reflecting on the problem, packages her thought in a minimalistic nutshell: «I have a hard time believing in a universal facial expression of disgust»¹. Great world travelers, comfortable in their bluff ways of thinking, Anthropologists are also ever-alert Nominalists. Wary of quick inferences, and all intellectual short-cuts, they seldom jump to conclusions. If they find the supposed universality of such concepts as the ‘disgust face’ suspect, then perhaps we should pay attention. Universals are shifty concepts. Dancing away from definition, they make it hard even while claiming a permanent upper hand.

Another approach to the problem of the disgust face would be to reverse it, to stand the problem on its head, The English journalist’s expression that I glimpsed on the deck of the French passenger ship was striking, but what actual significance did it hold? It was contorted, drawn into furrows, nares tightened, eyes cloaked. Later, I understood that I was not peering briefly into an image of the disgust face, but rather into another face, one further along the continuum, almost at the furthest end. The face of contempt. Beginning with Darwin, the disgust face has been recognized as a natural response to something seen, something capable of rousing a “natural” response to something unpleasantly aversive, ugly, disgusting. The “face” is part of, perhaps a chief part, a spontaneous, but very powerful, response to a complex of aversive stimuli. The face of contempt, always a work of art, winks good-humoredly.

Whatever spontaneous bits still inhabited the face the English journalist presented the world, they were hidden in his polished performance. His face, now theatrically rehearsed, called attention to something he had seen and had not liked. However, the ease with which he brought the detail of his face into play also suggested previous encounters, rehearsals with others who crossed his path inspiring his loathing, his disgust (but transformed into his intricately polished contemptuous face). This is what I have called a “local”

¹ J. Kapalka, “Anthropologists on Disgust: 3 Interviews”, *Mattoid*, 48, 1994, pp. 165-86.

mythology. What is known and felt can be enhanced and expanded, its reach deliberately shaped into, borrowing an important phrase from Deleuze and Guattari, a personal war machine. A concept, Deleuze observes, is a brick. You can build with it. What you have already learned lies ready to be further used as conceptual bricks. Consider the journalist's pursed but open lips. The iconography of the disgust face always indicates a response to aversive stimuli, the face narrowed and tightened in several ways, blocking entrance from objects that display rot, that stink, that indicate the slippage of the object from solidity and definite shape into formlessness and uncertain being. The Englishman's lips were pursed in an open fashion, horn-shaped, as if preparing to spew filth upon the loathed object of his present experience. The hawking noises from deep within his throat added to the impression that he felt a strong sensation of disgust, though of course there was little reason to believe he had actually felt disgust, but only the desire to be thought that he had done so. He had built contempt out of the bricks his knowledge of disgust had given him. Still, there was much lacking. For example, his face contorted into a judgment, but there was no sneer. His upper lip did not arch to reveal an aggressive canine tooth. Even without a sneer, his face was wonderfully hostile. Clearly, he had loathed what he had seen. All compound emotions are, I think, rich in the uses they make of past experience and the distant flutters of memory. Contempt is to disgust as outrage is to anger or nostalgia to heartache and longing: a visceral affect enhanced by allusion, elaborated and consciously constructed to become an intellectual dimension of the mind. It becomes a compound affect, at once visceral and intellectual, drawing from raw experience of the primary affect and, ransacking the local mythology, the memories of personal experience, books and films.

Disgusting objects can be transformed into art. It may not be easy to do, or easily successful, but it can be done. Parts of objects, such as stench, rot, deformation or an unexpected collapse into amorphicity, experienced as disgusting, can be distinguished from each other in order to exist freshly as motifs and supportive imagery. Entire objects, deeply disgusting both as things in themselves and as representations, can be transformed into art, or at least into challenges to received notions of art. The current American TV

series, *Hannibal* (starring the stunning Danish actor, Mads Mikkelsen), offers a large number of transformations in which human bodies become exquisite cuisine, high art, musical instruments or just about anything the genius of the killer can imagine. (It is worth noting that the U. S. Network that produces *Hannibal*, NBC, has canceled it, announcing termination after its third season, this past summer just as I began writing. A “heartbreaking” decision one TV critic remarked.) Successful through three seasons, *Hannibal* demonstrates the huge diversity of cultural material available for the construction of disgust scenarios, modifying both the obvious and the arcane. Reviewing *Hannibal*, Emily Nussbaum observes that the power of art possesses the ability «to make us crave something we thought we’d find disgusting»². Enriching and enhancing both private stories and local mythology, disgust makes contempt possible as well as the many brilliant tales from its human archives.

² E. Nussbaum, “To Serve Man”, *The New Yorker*, June 29, 2015, p. 62.