# 13 Generative Disgust, Aesthetic Engagement, and Community

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## Introduction

How do individuals and communities respond to negative aesthetic experience? Historically, philosophical aesthetics has devoted much thought to positive aesthetic experience, including the beautiful, agreeable, charming, and tasteful. But this is only a partial picture. Some aesthetic experience displeases: the ugly, disgusting, and horrific are but a few examples with which aestheticians have grappled in recent decades. The aversive and visceral nature of disgust has generated particular interest. But as Carolyn Korsmeyer points out in *Savoring Disgust: The Foul & the Fair in Aesthetics* (2011), there is also a paradoxical attraction to that which arouses disgust. Following Kant and Korsmeyer from the Western philosophical tradition, I claim that the aversive-attractive response is integral to disgust's power to motivate aesthetic engagement. On the one hand, people might feel its force and refuse to engage with that which disgusts. On the other hand, unshakeable interest may spur active responses including the exchange of judgments of taste; protests of a given artist, work, or exhibition; or even violent actions intended to damage or destroy a particular work. While the negative dimension of disgust response is often regarded as a liability from an aesthetic standpoint, disgust also has a corresponding productive dimension that has important implications for communities.

In this chapter, I coin the term "generative disgust" in order to explain the productive capacity of disgust to inspire communal, often subcultural, activity.[1] On my view, generative disgust has two orientations – destructive and constructive. Both forms activate the community in question based upon the valence of the group's comportment towards a particular work of art. As such, destructive generative disgust galvanizes the community and spurs increased activity based upon *negative* response to art, whereas constructive generative disgust galvanizes the community and spurs increased activity based upon *positive* response to art. I explore two examples that reveal the dual character of generative disgust in communities: Andres Serrano's *Immersion (Piss Christ)* (1987) (destructive deployment) and Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal* (2013–2015) (constructive deployment). In the case of *Piss Christ*, the intensity of generative disgust spurred some Christians to police moral-religious boundaries and restrict aesthetic expression in order to protect a community. Their activity culminated in vandalism and destruction of Serrano's photograph. In the case of *Hannibal*, the intensity of generative disgust, combined with hedonic ambivalence inspired the "Fannibals" (the *Hannibal* fandom) to forge community, make art, and to try to find the show a new home when it was not renewed by NBC. Both instances manifest how

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generative disgust can incite aesthetic engagement and increase organized activity on the part of subcultural groups.

In this chapter, I approach concepts developed and refined in the history of philosophical aesthetics and contemporary psychology and use them to make sense of the reception of *Piss Christ* and *Hannibal*. I begin by outlining some historical and contemporary accounts of disgust, with particular emphasis on Kant's and Korsmeyer's views, in order to establish disgust's visceral nature and its relationship to unshakeable interest. I then extend this theoretical analysis to the reception of *Piss Christ* and *Hannibal*, to reveal complex aesthetic experiences marked by hedonic ambivalence that provoke increased engagement. I explore the dual character of generative disgust in order to better understand its capacity to spur social cohesion and inspire communities to engage in organized activity that can be deployed destructively or constructively.

## Disgust Then and Now

**In *The Critique of Judgment,* Kant writes,**

> Fine art shows its superiority precisely in this, that it describes things beautifully that in nature we would dislike or find ugly. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war, and so on are all harmful; and yet they can be described, or even presented in a painting, very beautifully. There is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be presented in conformity with nature without obliterating all aesthetic liking and hence artistic beauty: that ugliness which arouses *disgust*. 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 just what we are forcefully resisting; and hence the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of the object itself, so that it cannot possibly be considered beautiful.
>
> (Kant 1987, §48, emphasis in the original)

While Kant says precious little about ugliness, this passage provides a hint of his overall view. Here, he distinguishes responses to nature and art with respect to beauty, ugliness, and disgust. Since ugliness can be described or presented beautifully in it, Kant argues that fine art "surpasses nature" in this respect. After all, one would not approve of or be pleased by ugliness in nature; one would experience it as harmful or even devastating. Kant's examples are telling. Only in art can subjects like war, diseases, and the Furies be presented in a beautiful way. Thus, one can be pleased by the *presentation*, but not by ugliness as such.[2] Consider Picasso's 1937 painting, *Guernica*, from Kant's perspective. This work presents the devastations of the Spanish Civil War, but does so in a beautiful way.

According to Kant, that which arouses disgust is a kind of ugliness that is beyond the pale. It "obliterates all aesthetic liking and . . . artistic beauty" (Kant 1987, §48). One cannot be disinterested in that which disgusts because "the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of the object itself" (§48). Kant argues that in this state of intense engagement, "the object is presented as if it insisted, as it were, on our enjoying it even though that is just

what we are forcefully resisting" (§48). The work of art presents itself for positive consideration, but also elicits displeasure, pain, or even revulsion. This combination of conflicting demands and responses complicates the experience. The individual is repulsed, but also drawn to that which disgusts (Korsmeyer 2011, 5).

The push-pull disgust response occurs outside the realm of aesthetic experience, too. Korsmeyer points to an illuminating example regarding the strange allure of corpses: "Plato used the attraction of disgust in one of his most powerful pictures of the warring factions of the soul when he described Leontius, who admonished his own eyes for desiring to look upon the corpses of executed criminals" (Korsmeyer 2011, 5). Even though Leontius is repulsed by the sight of the dead bodies, he still feels compelled to gaze at them. He experiences a lurid fascination and is enticed to look. This example reveals how one can experience the alternation of repulsion from and attraction to the same stimulus. Disgust accounts for this push-pull feeling. This toggling reappears in psychological and aesthetic literature as the "aversive-attractive" response. Contemporary sources highlight the primal, visceral nature of disgust; its potential to contaminate; and its aversive effect, among other characteristics. Authors also emphasize disgust's intrusiveness (Miller 1997, 8). Feelings of disgust are difficult to dispel, which likely explains one's conscious recognition of having them.

Reflecting the intrusiveness of this feeling back into Kant's argument, the simultaneous insistence on enjoyment and the experience of the opposite spurs cognitive tension. There is a push-pull between pleasure and the forceful resistance of it due to revulsion; there is a conflict between what the object demands and what the subject experiences. Due to its visceral nature, one cannot be unbiased about that which disgusts. Concern about the object's existence and its potential to harm prevents the establishment of aesthetic distance; this undermines disinterested aesthetic judgment. For Kant, interest in that which disgusts prevents one from making pure judgments of the beautiful. Contra Kant, I argue that disgust can nonetheless function as a potentially *productive* quality for communities based precisely on this interest and the aesthetic engagement it spurs. So too, I hold open the possibility that positive aesthetic judgments may be compatible with disgust, even though Kant rejects this idea. I return to this issue in my discussion of hedonic ambivalence and *Hannibal*.

Following Kant, Korsmeyer describes disgust in several ways, including "paradoxical attraction" (Korsmeyer 2011, 3), "paradoxical magnetism" (3), "perverse magnetism" (37), "grisly relish" (11), "the eroticism of disgust" (6) and the "vortex of summons and repulsion" (6; Kristeva 1982), among others. She claims:

> The survey of emotion theory . . . situates disgust as an aversion so intense that it occasions uncontrollable visceral recoil from its objects. At the same time, the peculiar attraction of the disgusting has not gone unnoticed. Kolnai even argues that the very structure of the emotion is prone to induce one to dwell upon loathsome sensory qualities. Certain artworks afford especially compelling examples of the allure he identifies, the most obvious cases – though neither the only nor the most interesting – coming from the genre of horror. Nonetheless, of all the emotions, disgust seems to present the greatest barriers to actual enjoyment, and thus it also raises some of the most recalcitrant problems for understanding an emotion in its aesthetic contexts.
>
> (Korsmeyer 2011, 39)

Rather than minimizing the significance of this emotion, Korsmeyer makes it central to her inquiry. She outlines three common criticisms of aesthetic disgust. First, disgust may be treated as if "aesthetically discountable," because its objects are considered "foul, polluting, lowly, and base" (Korsmeyer 2011, 39). Second, due to its visceral nature, disgust cannot be aesthetically manipulated through imitation or representation (39–40). Third, artists' renderings of that which disgusts often lead to other aesthetic qualities such as the tragic, grotesque, or comic that arouse emotions such as pity, compassion, or amusement (40). Some claim that such transferals cause works to "lose their capacity to disgust" (40). In response to these claims, Korsmeyer constructs an argument designed to recuperate aesthetic disgust. She not only highlights the insight and visceral power of this feeling, but also makes a compelling case showing how aesthetic disgust can be an advantage (See Korsmeyer 2011, Chapter 2). Aligning with and building upon Korsmeyer's position, in the next section I argue that generative disgust has the capacity to motivate increased engagement and organized activity on the part of communities. Its power is two-fold; it may be deployed destructively, as in the case of *Piss Christ*, or constructively, as in the case of *Hannibal*.

## Unlocking the Generative Power of Disgust

### *Piss Christ*

Andres Serrano's *Immersion (Piss Christ)* is a well-worn example of controversial art from the Western tradition. Why provide one more investigation of this work and its associated scandal? My aim is to shed light on the interrelationship of moral-religious disgust and community, especially because *Piss Christ* shows how generative disgust response can be deployed destructively in the service of cultures or subcultures. I begin with a description of the work, with special attention to its medium in order to ascertain the types of disgust involved in its reception and to facilitate understanding how a photograph inspired so much organized and destructive activity.

*Immersion (Piss Christ)* is a 1987 photograph depicting a crucifix submerged in Andres Serrano's urine. Examined formally, and apart from its title, some have described the work as "darkly beautiful" (Freeland 2001, 19) and claimed that *Piss Christ* shows Serrano's careful preparation and enormous skill working in the glossy Cibachrome medium (Freeland 2001, 18–19). According to critic Lucy Lippard, "*Piss Christ* – the object of censorial furor – is a darkly beautiful photographic image . . . The small wood-and-plastic crucifix becomes virtually monumental as it floats, photographically enlarged, in a deep golden, rosy glow that is both ominous and glorious. The bubbles wafting across the surface suggest a nebula" (quoted in Freeland 2001, 19). Given the way Lippard describes the work, *Piss Christ* has the ability to transport the viewer into another world – one inflected by beauty and possibly even sublimity. Commenting on color, shape, and composition, it is clear that Lippard finds much to admire in the image.

Despite this positive formal and material analysis,[3] response to *Piss Christ* varied. For example, some refused to view the photograph based upon its title alone. Others were curious or even excited to view the work; they evaluated the photograph based upon their experiences of it. Still others were offended by the title, but nonetheless chose to view *Piss Christ*. Among that group, some admired the photograph, while others were disgusted by it. A subset of the latter group may have experienced the

force of this feeling as a spur to increased engagement both with the work and with other people, resulting in social cohesion and organized activity.[4] I call this phenomenon "generative disgust." When the activity is inspired by negative response, I refer to it as "destructive generative disgust."

In order to understand the nature of *Piss Christ*'s reception on a deeper level, a moral examination is necessary. While Lippard describes the photograph as "darkly beautiful," (quoted in Freeland 2001, 19) she also notes that the title could transform one's experience of the work. The awareness that Serrano photographed a crucifix immersed in urine could alter one's perception, transforming the once beautiful glowing galaxies into disgusting urine bubbles. Thus, the titular indication of bodily fluids may be enough to spur core or contamination disgust,[5] while their combination with a crucifix may elicit moral disgust.[6]

It may be difficult to achieve Kantian disinterest in response to *Piss Christ*, due to moral considerations. On his view, one could only achieve proper aesthetic distance if one were not disgusted by the photograph. For example, if a religious individual considered Serrano's work to be blasphemous, they might find it difficult to establish the distance necessary to make an unbiased judgment of taste. Moreover, Kant would likely argue that individuals who were offended exercised moral rather than aesthetic judgment. Put differently, some who turned away from *Piss Christ* may have been "too interested" from a moral or religious standpoint to engage with the work aesthetically. In fact, the phrase "turned away" may be too weak to capture the force of this experience. As indicated above, some may be *repulsed* by *Piss Christ* based upon its title alone.

In the 1980s, Serrano's work caused an uproar among American conservatives and the Religious Right as part of the Culture Wars.[7] In 1987, *Piss Christ* debuted in New York and gained notoriety two years later when it was shown as part of a tour sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) (Lacayo 2009; Andrews 2017). Senators Jesse Helms and Alfonse D'Amato spoke out against Serrano's work during a session of the Senate, even going so far as to dramatically tear apart the catalog for the show in which *Piss Christ* appeared (Lacayo 2009; Chrisafis 2011). The NEA found itself under increased pressure in the wake of the scandal due to its federal funding. Institutions that showed Serrano's work, notably the Corcoran Gallery and the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, experienced increased scrutiny due to the ongoing debate about federal arts funding in the United States (Lacayo 2009). Some protested these controversial exhibitions; others sought to shut them down entirely.

The furor over Serrano's images was not merely a product of the American sociopolitical climate of the 1980s. Serrano's work has continued to garner similarly extreme responses from different communities over time. In 1997, a print of *Piss Christ* was destroyed while it was on display at the National Gallery of Art in Melbourne, Australia (Vogel 2007). In 2007, Serrano photographs included in "The History of Sex" exhibition in Sweden were also destroyed (Chrisafis 2011; Vogel 2007).

Now on to the incident that is the focal point of my analysis: In 2011, religious protests culminated in an attack on *Piss Christ* at the Exhibition at the Collection Lambert in Avignon, France. The work was quietly on display for four months as part of the "I Believe in Miracles" exhibition. But about a month before the show was set to close, a protest campaign took hold. Civitas, a group interested in re-Christianizing France, sought to rally fundamentalist groups in the country (Chrisafis 2011). As a result, the gallery received tens of thousands of emails and spam messages protesting

the exhibition (ibid.). Ultimately, 1,000 Christian protestors marched to manifest their opposition. In response, the gallery increased its security, put plexiglass in front of *Piss Christ*, and appointed guards to stand beside the work (ibid.). The situation came to a head when four people stormed the exhibition in order to destroy *Piss Christ*. They broke through the protective screen and slashed the photograph with a sharp implement. An image of a meditating nun was also damaged during the incident (ibid.). The gallery was forced to close, but the director, Eric Mézil, was insistent about restoring access as soon as possible. In fact, he decided to show the works in their altered state in order to make a point about what, in his words, "barbarians can do" (ibid.).

The destruction of *Piss Christ* manifests the power of what I call "generative disgust." This example shows how interest can spur extreme engagement with that which disgusts, including violence against or destruction of a work of art. Not only did *Piss Christ* spur social cohesion, but it also inspired communal activity, as seen with protests of the photograph in France. Intense aversion combined with perverse magnetism provoked organized communal action with the intent of destroying *Piss Christ*. From the perspective of the protestors, Serrano had desecrated a religious artifact. Based on the moral disgust they may have felt, protestors sought not only to limit access to *Piss Christ*, but to eliminate it entirely, perhaps to ensure that no one else would be able to experience the work.[8] Generative disgust served as the impetus for this communal, destructive activity. From one perspective, the protest and destruction of *Piss Christ* is a defensive move, intended to protect the Christian worldview and its iconography. From another, it is an antagonistic move, intended to attack a differing point of view. Here, I confess my own perspective: I am committed to upholding the right to freedom of expression, even of expression that cuts against or fails to confirm my worldview.

As a final note on its reception, it is important to consider *Piss Christ*'s position with respect to culture more broadly. As aforementioned, *Piss Christ* was a flashpoint during the Culture Wars in the United States in the 1980s. The very fact that American politicians felt the need to weigh in on the status of this work – and whether it ought to be considered art at all – reveals a struggle for meaning and signification. It was a battle for the ability to determine what was included in or excluded from culture, and in particular, to demarcate what was illegitimate and beyond the pale. In short, some American conservatives and traditionalists sought to position *Piss Christ* as a marginal response to mainstream culture. Dick Hebdige's sociological examination of the dynamics of youth subcultures with respect to authority, expression, and meaning is relevant here. Applying Hebdige's analysis of subcultural refusal to Serrano's art, we can see the artist as engaged in a struggle for signification and "possession of the sign" (Hebdige 1979, 17). In this case, the sign being reflected upon, critiqued, and possibly subverted is the crucifix and its meaning within Western culture. On this reading, Serrano's exploration of taboo and disgust in conjunction with religious iconography signaled a subcultural refusal of the dominant cultural order in the United States. In *Piss Christ*, Serrano sought to recuperate embodiment by highlighting the significance of bodily fluids in Christianity as well as to critique the commodification of religious icons (Freeland 2001, 19–21). Interpreted this way, the work manifests the struggle between mainstream culture's use of the crucifix and Serrano's aesthetic use of it. Decades on, *Piss Christ*'s position with respect to culture seems to have shifted. The artworld continued its support and mainstream culture has also embraced the work.

As such, I claim that *Piss Christ* moved from a marginal to a central position with respect to culture. If this is the case, recent violent responses to *Piss Christ* inspired by generative disgust may have emerged from subcultural positions.

### *Hannibal*

Now let's turn to the generative power of disgust in its constructive rather than its destructive deployment. Recall that generative disgust occurs when the force of this feeling spurs increased engagement both with a work of art as well as with other people, resulting in social cohesion and organized activity. When the activity is inspired by positive response, I refer to it as "constructive generative disgust."

Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal* is based upon Thomas Harris' novels and stars Mads Mikkelsen in the titular role and Hugh Dancy as his FBI Special Investigator counterpart, Will Graham.[9] Fuller diversified and updated Harris' narrative by altering the race, gender, and sexual orientation of some of the characters. During its three-season run on NBC (2013–2015), the show became a cult hit. Part police procedural, part gothic-horror[10] romance, the show is styled with the look and feel of arthouse cinema.[11] What's more, the grisly case-of-the-week murders and Hannibal's culinary creations, often made of human flesh, provide ample opportunities for aversive-attractive disgust response. It's surprising that NBC carved out space for such an adventurously gruesome show that not only depicts horrific murders, but also thematizes cannibalism. Across several episodes, the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit investigates a "mushroom garden" composed of people who have been placed in diabetic comas and partially buried (Season 1, episode 2); a motel room containing "blood angels" whose flayed back skin has been arranged to form elaborate wings (Season 1, episode 5); a musician fitted with the neck of a cello so that his vocal cords serve as replacement strings (Season 1, episode 8); and a corpse folded origami-style into the shape of a heart and put on display in the Norman Chapel in Palermo, Italy (Season 3, episodes 1 and 2).[12]

It is obvious that *Hannibal* provides much to disgust the audience – note the blood and body envelope violations for starters![13] The writers and directors of *Hannibal* entice viewers to gaze upon these murder-of-the-week corpses with lurid fascination. Viewers are invited to adopt Will Graham's point of view as he performs crime scene reconstructions. Using imagination and empathy, Will enters the mind of each killer in order to understand their motives and methods. Depicted from Will's perspective, these crimes are neither shoddy nor ill-conceived; Fuller, et al. have crafted some horrifically artful images. In fact, Will ends each reconstruction by intoning, "this is my design," in place of the killer. Viewers are duly invited to *enjoy* the imagery represented by Will, as horrific or disgusting as it may be.

*Hannibal*'s brutally stunning aesthetic intertwines the beautiful and the horrific (Hyman 2015; García 2019).[14] Recall Kant's analysis of disgust here: "the object is presented as if it insisted . . . on our enjoying it even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting" (Kant 1987, §48). Kant's statement tracks what *Hannibal* is up to elegantly: the show holds aversive-attractive images up for aesthetic delectation within a horror frame of reference. "Darkly beautiful" might aptly apply to *Hannibal*, too.[15] Therefore, contra Kant's conclusion that disgust negates the possibility of aesthetic liking, Fannibals are able to positively appraise *Hannibal*'s gruesome images.[16] In fact, the community makes fan art and memes reflecting the beautiful, horrific, and comedic aspects of the show. Put another way, Fannibal art mirrors the complexity

of the aesthetic experience of *Hannibal*. A cursory review of Tumblr and social media reveals art that is often blood-drenched and grotesque, but also creative and beautiful (Baker-Whitelaw 2013; McLaren 2017; Wild 2021). While making art is a common practice among fandoms, what distinguishes Fannibals' work is its intermixture of horror, beauty, and disgust.

At least two interpretations of the aesthetic experience of *Hannibal* fans emerge. One option would be to argue that viewers experience the aversive-attractive disgust response, toggling back and forth between repulsion and fascination. As articulated above, the murders and corresponding crime scenes are meticulously constructed in order to create darkly disturbing, but brutally captivating phantasmagorias. The show's high production values and disquietingly alluring images call for positive aesthetic evaluation. Under this interpretation, viewers are not enjoying *Hannibal* "in spite of" its gruesome and disgusting depictions, but precisely *because* of them. The audience is both repulsed by and attracted to the show's grisly imagery. Matthew Strohl's notion of hedonic ambivalence is illuminating here. Strohl argues that fans can enjoy and positively appraise works that engender fear and disgust (Carroll 1990; Strohl 2012). He distinguishes two types of hedonic ambivalence in order to explain experiences of pleasure that involve some painful elements (weak ambivalence) and experiences of pleasure that are derived, in part, *due to* their painful elements (strong ambivalence) (Strohl 2012, 203).[17] Strohl's notion of strong ambivalence helps elucidate Fannibal response. Given the way in which disgust is woven into the narrative, it would be implausible to claim that fans enjoy the show "in spite of" its disgusting and disturbing imagery. Instead, per strong ambivalence, they enjoy *Hannibal* because of it.

A second interpretation of the aesthetic experience of *Hannibal* fans would be to argue that viewers toggle between experiences of beauty and disgust. Here, the poles of aesthetic experience are more divergent than presented in interpretation one. On interpretation two, the toggling moves between beauty and disgust, rather than merely between the captivation and repulsion internal to disgust. Throughout the series, an impeccably dressed, cannibalistic serial killer prepares haute cuisine. When inspiration strikes, Hannibal flips through his recipe cards, articulated in a neatly calligraphic hand, in order to select the perfect recipe before assembling and preparing the ingredients. Viewers witness Hannibal create several meals from start to finish – chopping, searing, flambéing, and performing whatever special techniques are required for the plat du jour. Critics have referred to the exquisite culinary creations of Janice Poon, food stylist, and chef-consultant, José Andrés, as "food porn" (e.g. Jung 2014). Given the prevalence and popularity of cooking programming on television and streaming services, the pleasures of watching people cook may be obvious. What is remarkable in the case of *Hannibal* is the narrative context for such enjoyment: these preparations involve cannibalism.

Throughout Fuller's series, Hannibal manifests taste in all things.[18] From his immaculate three-piece suits, complete with Balthus-knotted ties and coordinating pocket squares, to his technical drawing abilities, his talent playing and composing music on the harpsichord and theremin, his extraordinary culinary skills, and his medical expertise as a psychiatrist, Hannibal is presented as a cultured man of arts and letters. As portrayed by Mads Mikkelsen, Fuller's Hannibal is easy on the eyes, too. Such beautiful appearances contrast Hannibal's darker proclivities as a cannibalistic serial killer. Who would suspect that such a refined individual could commit such grisly murders?

Returning to interpretation two with these positive aesthetic evaluations in mind, *Hannibal* fans may toggle between exceedingly divergent aesthetic experiences. An individual might enjoy the sight of Hannibal's delectable dishes, only to recoil in moral disgust at the recognition that this gorgeous cuisine is composed of human flesh. One may find the images alluring, but their moral implications repugnant. Rather than simply having an aversive-attractive disgust response, the individual alternates between poles of aesthetic experience that are even further apart.[19] Given that beauty may be involved in the assessment, there is greater potential for positive aesthetic evaluation under interpretation two.[20]

In "*Hannibal* and the Paradox of Disgust," Alberto N. García makes an argument that supports my second interpretation. He claims that while *Hannibal* traffics in dark, disturbing depictions, its scenes are carefully framed and shot in order to attract and engage viewers. García analyzes the human cello example from "Fromage" (Season 1, episode 8) to illustrate how viewers are invited, even seduced, into appreciating the show's imagery. In this episode, the crucial sequence takes place in the aesthetically pleasing location of a concert hall captured in long shot, starting at a high angle and tilting to the stage, which is highlighted by a "zenithal beam" encircling the crime scene and macabre corpse display. The light intensifies as Will uses empathy and imagination to reenact the murder (García 2019, 557). Based on this analysis, it is clear that *Hannibal* doesn't use disgust or gore as blunt instruments with which to assault viewers, but instead, builds enticing presentations that reveal the intermingling of the beautiful, horrific, and disgusting (ibid.). Drawing on Strohl, García argues that *Hannibal*'s layering forges a complex aesthetic experience designed to lure viewers into *Hannibal*'s world. On my view, such enticement can also spur communication and community.

In accord with García, my dual interpretations of hedonic ambivalence highlight the complexity of aesthetic experience in *Hannibal*. The show invites viewers to contemplate their aesthetic delectation and to recognize that it may be laced with disgust. In season three, the call for moral reflection is made explicit. Dr. Abel Gideon, portrayed by Eddie Izzard, addresses the camera directly to ponder how viewers will feel when *they* are ensnared by the titular cannibal and eaten alive. Considering the fact that Hannibal's exquisite meals are composed of human flesh, and that he tricks his guests into unknowingly ingesting said flesh, one must reevaluate their enjoyment *even of the images*. Upon reflection, one may feel morally compromised savoring art that depicts such morally disgusting actions. Fuller presses viewers to (re)consider the images they have been relishing in order to examine whether this enjoyment makes them morally complicit in Hannibal's actions. Food for thought, indeed.

Building on García's claims about the seductive quality of *Hannibal*'s complex aesthetic, I argue that hedonic ambivalence, coupled with constructive generative disgust draws Fannibals into the show's world and inspires community engagement with *Hannibal* and with each other. As articulated above, Fannibals enjoy *Hannibal* due to its intermixture of beauty, horror, and disgust. The works created by Fannibals mirror this complicated aesthetic. Furthermore, the *Hannibal* fandom is marked by Fannibals' direct and positive interactions not only with each other, but also with the showrunner, stars, producers, and crew (McLaren 2017; Wild 2021). Fan art and fan fiction are shared and discussed among these parties online, in interviews, and at conventions in a welcoming and respectful way. Mads Mikkelsen has reflected on Fannibals in interviews, warmly noting their creativity and expressing appreciation for how the

fans forged a supportive, cohesive community (Wild 2021, 57–58). When *Hannibal* was not renewed at the beginning of season three, Fannibals banded together. Within hours, a #SaveHannibal social media campaign was launched, garnering thousands of tweets, shares, and likes (Fitz-Gerald 2015). These various Fannibal responses reveal how generative disgust can be deployed constructively to facilitate aesthetic engagement and organized activity.

Finally, I want to address a potential objection regarding the relationship of aesthetic appreciation and disgust with respect to Fannibals. My analysis is founded upon the notion that watching *Hannibal* is a complex rather than an atomistic aesthetic experience (Strohl 2012, 209). The show elicits a variety of feelings, thoughts, and perceptions, some of which may be embedded within each other (ibid.). Leveraging the notion of hedonic ambivalence, individuals can have multifaceted experiences and evaluations of *Hannibal* including disgust, beauty, fascination, and horror; as I have argued above, they may even toggle among them. Disgust is integral to the aesthetic experience of *Hannibal*. Based on my notion of generative disgust and its capacity to inspire increased engagement, disgust shapes the show's reception, including Fannibal response. Given the way in which disgust is woven into the narrative, it would be implausible to claim that fans enjoy *Hannibal* "in spite of" its disgusting and disturbing imagery. So while some of the aforementioned activities may be common to fandoms more generally, I claim that generative disgust plays a uniquely productive role in Fannibal response.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the aversive-attractive disgust response in order to better understand its generative capacity in communities. My goal here is to grasp not only the desire to turn away, refuse to engage, or remain silent when confronted with aesthetic experience that disgusts, but also to clarify the kinds of increased aesthetic engagement that this feeling can provoke, especially for communities. On the one hand, response to Serrano's *Piss Christ* shows how generative disgust can spur actions aimed at destroying a work or eliminating a threat (destructive deployment). On the other hand, response to *Hannibal* shows how generative disgust can spur interaction, communication, and creativity that mirrors the aesthetic complexity of the show (constructive deployment). These cases manifest the dual character of generative disgust response.

As my analysis has shown, generative disgust is complex. It operates viscerally to spur increased aesthetic engagement. It can be deployed destructively or constructively and harnessed in order to facilitate organized social and communal activity. Generative disgust can be used to protect a worldview, while simultaneously attacking, marginalizing, or destroying a competing worldview. Alternatively, generative disgust can spur communication about art and inspire creative activity and expression regarding the same. In both cases, generative disgust response incites aesthetic engagement with a work of art as well as with other people. When properly understood, generative disgust has important implications for community identity and expression.

## Notes

1. "Subculture" often has a pejorative connotation. Here, I use the term neutrally to indicate a group with interests, values, and expressions distinct from and often critical of mainstream culture, while noting the power differential among these groups. Culture is often

not open to or accepting of subcultural styles, expressions, or critiques (See Hebdige 1979). My sense of the term is also influenced by Nancy Fraser's concept, "subaltern counterpublic" (See Fraser 1990).

2. Scholars debate whether Kant's system can accommodate pure judgments of taste regarding ugliness (See Shier 1998; Wenzel 1999; McConnell 2008; Bradfield 2019).
3. *Piss Christ* raises several questions that extend beyond such analysis. One regards whether an individual can achieve the aesthetic distance necessary to evaluate the work impartially.
4. This is merely a sketch of reception options; it is not exhaustive.
5. Animals, body products, and food can elicit core disgust, which serves as a form of protection against the threat of contamination or harm (Haidt et al. 1997, 115). The contamination threat would likely not be very strong in the case of *Piss Christ*, since this work does not co-locate audience members in the same room with body products. Andy Warhol's oxidation paintings could serve as a contrast case. Warhol used copper metallic pigment and urine as materials in his "piss paintings" (Christie's Auction House 2008). Dried bodily fluids may not be a powerful disgust elicitor, either.
6. Moral disgust is spurred by the violation of social or moral norms.
7. The American usage of the term, "Culture Wars," dates back to the 1920s. It refers to the social and political conflict over "traditionalist" and "progressive" values. My usage of "Culture Wars" refers specifically to the battle over morality, art, and culture in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States. During that era, debates about American culture played out in terms of proposed restrictions on paintings, photographs, pop music, television shows, and radio programming that were alleged to be lewd, sexually explicit, sacrilegious, or otherwise immoral. Andres Serrano's and Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs were Culture War targets (See Lacayo 2009).
8. Ironically, censoring art in this manner can backfire; the target of silencing often receives more attention in the wake of destructive protests. Such actions may raise questions not only about the incident, but also about the work itself. When publicized by the media, destructive protests can actually stoke curiosity and increase gallery visits. So rather than limiting or eliminating access to the work, such activity may inadvertently increase it.
9. Fuller is often referred to as *Hannibal*'s "showrunner"; he served as creator, developer, writer, and executive producer of the show.
10. Alberto N. García argues that *Hannibal* is permeated by gothic horror and the grotesque. He writes, "The grotesque is not only present in the actual aesthetics of the weekly murders, . . . but also infuses the way the narrative is structured, the dramatic engagement with the characters, the underlying motifs, as well as the acute symbolism *Hannibal* exhibits" (García 2020, 84). I added romance to this description as a nod to Hannibal and Will's relationship. Fans often refer to the pair as "Hannigram" and the "Murder Husbands." As Jacquelin Elliott notes, Fuller combines some characters from Harris' novels, specifically Will Graham and Clarice Starling (Elliott 2018, 250). This compositing has important implications for the intimacy of Hannibal and Will's relationship.
11. Fuller explicitly instructed the show's directors to think of *Hannibal* as a "pretentious art film from the 80s" (See Thurm 2015).
12. This heart serves as a "valentine" from Hannibal to Will.
13. Body products (e.g., blood, urine, feces) often evoke core or contamination disgust, especially if they are not one's own, since these feelings can serve as an evolutionary form of self-protection. Body envelope violation regards the rupture of bodily integrity by some form of breach, puncture, mutilation, or maiming (See Haidt et al. 1997).
14. Fuller has even commented that there is "whimsy and light" in everything (See Hyman 2015).
15. Recall Lippard's description of *Piss Christ* (Freeland 2001).
16. I depart from Kant's view here, but pause to note that he distinguishes between judgments of taste of the beautiful that are subjectively universal and judgments of taste of the agreeable that are merely personal. The latter type expresses the claim that something is "beautiful *for me*." For more on this distinction, see Kant (1987). On my view, both forms of positive aesthetic evaluation can be compatible with disgust.
17. Strohl focuses on hedonic ambivalence with respect to pleasure and pain; I apply this concept to aversive-attractive disgust response.

18. This is how Alana Bloom tracks Hannibal in Europe. His taste for bottles of Bâtard-Montrachet and tartuffi bianchi give him away (Season 3, episode 5). Articles have been devoted to Hannibal's delectable cuisine as well as to his flawless wardrobe (See Jung 2014; Franich 2015).
19. This interpretation raises additional questions: Can an image be both beautiful and disgusting at the same time? Or is toggling a necessary feature of this aesthetic experience? Due to space constraints, I cannot address these admittedly interesting issues here.
20. In this instance, positive aesthetic evaluations could regard beauty, style, taste, culture, charm, etc.

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