

# Wassard Elea Rivista

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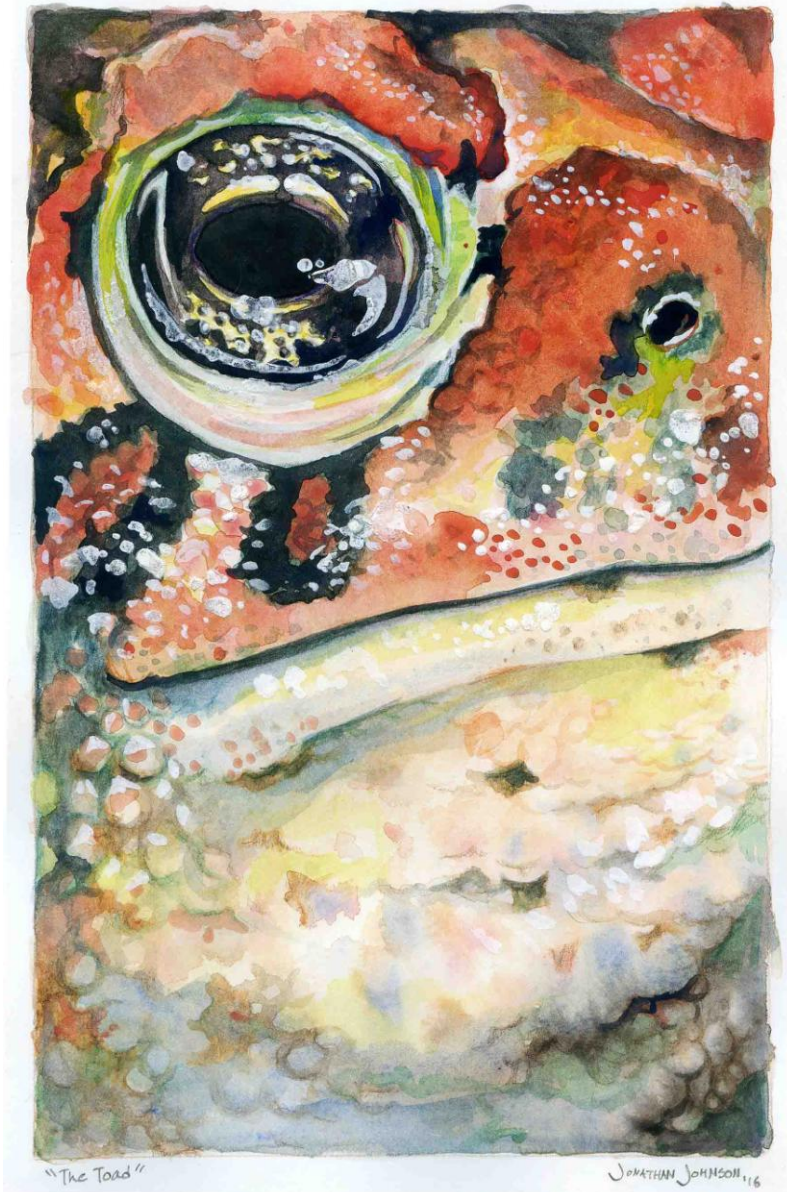
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## **This Might Be Unpleasant**

Jane Forsey  
(University of Winnipeg)

When I bought my current home, I announced that I simply could not live in it until the rooms had been painted. They were what might euphemistically be described as somewhere between apricot and salmon, but to my mind they were really what once was called “fleshtone” Crayola crayon (one in a package of children’s colouring sticks). Further, the walls had a slight sheen to them, making them sweaty fleshtone Crayola crayon, or feverish fleshtone Crayola Crayon. Never mind the structural work required on an old wooden house exposed to Canadian prairie winters – it was the paint that had to go. Immediately.

It should be clear that I found the walls ghastly, even dreadful. And it should be equally apparent that my response to them was aesthetic, although in this case negatively so. But what is also interesting is that my judgement was attended by a spur to action: I did not simply dislike or reject the walls – I strove to change them. And this kind of aesthetic response – that is simultaneously negative but motivating – seems to me to not yet have found a home in the literature. Following Kant, I will call this the unpleasant, and my goal today is to make a case for it as an aesthetic notion worthy of consideration.

When philosophy talks about aesthetic experience, it is most often in terms of our responses to art and (predominantly natural) beauty, and largely with responses that are pleasurable and positive. But I think that the aesthetic tenor of our lives is more complex than this, and can engage us more actively, as the recent Everyday movement has sought to demonstrate.<sup>1</sup> Finding a way to articulate the centrality of the aesthetic for our quotidian lives and activities is what underlies my interest in those moments when its force is, at least initially, negative. For my case, those fleshtoned walls presented an obstacle to where and how I would live – an obstacle, in fact, to the aesthetic quality of my life. And in seeking to change them, I had to

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jane Forsey, *The Aesthetics of Design*, OUP, 2013, ch.4.

creatively reimagine the space in which I would dwell, with all of its possibilities, and what was needed instead of that colour to make the space one which would provide me with experiences that were positive rather than negative. In short, I had to be aesthetically creative rather than merely responsive. To begin this discussion, let me distinguish the unpleasant from two other negative notions – those of the ugly and the disgusting – in order to bring out its distinctive features.

The unpleasant is not the ugly. A sick person can look ghastly without also looking ugly.<sup>1</sup> A certain shirt can look dreadful on you without thereby being an ugly shirt. And apricot, while perhaps awful on a wall, is not itself an ugly colour (when found on an apricot). We tend to use such terms in common language as though they are synonymous with ugliness, but there is a conceptual difference that needs to be made here. The purely ugly, or what is judged to be ugly *tout court*, if one takes a Kantian approach to the matter, will have certain characteristics that the unpleasant does not have: the judgement will be disinterested, subjectively universal, and somehow involve the free play of the cognitive faculties. That is, judgements of the ugly will have the same logical structure as judgements of free beauty, acting as a negative mirror of them.

Over the past 10 years or so, there has been a great deal of debate about whether ugliness can be made consistent with Kant's aesthetic theory. Those who argue that it can, such as Henry Allison, Christian Wenzel and Mojca Küplen, wish to allow for a *disharmonious* free play of the imagination and the understanding that results in the *displeasure* of a purely reflective judgement of the ugly. Others, such as Paul Guyer and Serena Feloj, argue that Kant's epistemology does not allow for this kind of disharmony, and hence judgements of ugliness are impossible. However this debate is resolved, if there *is* such a thing as pure ugliness, it will, like beauty, invite us to *linger*. As disinterested, the ugly will not provoke desire or aversion, but it can fascinate us.<sup>2</sup> In this way, judgements of the ugly – and warty toads get a lot of press here – are judgements made by us as mere spectators, about the way things look, or how they appear, and like those of the beautiful, involve no direct call to action. The ugly will be something

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<sup>1</sup> G.P. Henderson, "The Concept of Ugliness", *BJA*, 6 (1966): 219-229; 222. Henderson uses the term "ugliness" throughout his paper, but distinguishes between *kinds* of ugliness in a way that is similar to Kant's distinction between the ugly, the unpleasant and the disgusting.

<sup>2</sup> C. Wenzel, "Kant Finds Nothing Ugly?", *BJA*, 39, 4 (1999): 416-422, 418.

that catches our attention, or comes upon us, and our judgement that “this toad is ugly”, or “this Francis Bacon is ugly” need not imply any revulsion or desire to turn away from what we are viewing. Our judgement, as subjectively universal, will also be imputed to others, and we will expect them to agree with our assessments.

The conceptual difficulties with the freely ugly – as with the freely beautiful – have prompted some suggestions that these judgements will be quite uncommon, if possible at all. As Marcia Muelder Eaton notes, “‘pure’, conceptless ... uses of ‘beauty’ [or the ugly] are rare ... It has been a mistake for aestheticians to take [these] as the paradigm aesthetic concept[s]”.<sup>1</sup> Paul Guyer muses that Kant “may even be suggesting that there is no such thing as the free experience of beauty [or ugliness] at all”<sup>2</sup> – that his complex aesthetic theory was the solution to a theoretical problem, rather than a description of the way that we actually respond aesthetically to the world around us. That is, whether or not the notion of ugliness can be made consistent with Kant’s aesthetic theory, the question remains as to whether the purely ugly, like the purely beautiful, accurately reflects our lived aesthetic experiences.

In contrast with ugliness, a focus on the unpleasant has certain features that are advantageous: (i) it avoids the conceptual difficulties associated with a Kantian account of the ugly, as it does not involve the free play of the cognitive faculties and does not require such a complicated philosophy of mind; (ii) it is much more common than occurrences of the purely ugly, and so plays a greater part in our everyday lives; (iii) it does not make a claim to universality, as imputing the same judgement to others. This renders the unpleasant more modest as an aesthetic category and perhaps even admits to a certain aesthetic relativism, but it also allows the unpleasant to avoid the demands of objectivity that have made some theorists skeptical about beauty and ugliness altogether. And, (iv) the unpleasant, as interested, uniquely involves both desire and a call for action.

The unpleasant is also not the disgusting. The disgusting, Kant writes, destroys all “aesthetical satisfaction”; when encountered we “strive against it with all our might”.<sup>3</sup> Serena Feloj calls it an “immediate and really

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<sup>1</sup> M.M. Eaton “Kantian and Contextual Beauty” *JAAC*, 57, 1 (1999): 11-15,13.

<sup>2</sup> P. Guyer “Kant on the Purity of the Ugly”, *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics*, Cambridge UP, 2005: 141-162, 162.

<sup>3</sup> I. Kant *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard, NY: Hafner, 1951, §48, AK 312.

strong feeling”<sup>1</sup> and Mojca Küplen notes that it “contains a rejection of the object before an aesthetic evaluation of it could even begin”.<sup>2</sup> Disgust is visceral; it does not just repel us but physically revolts us, as with rotten food, decaying corpses, or the contents of a cesspit.<sup>3</sup> What disgusts us is immediate, subjective, personal. The disgusting need not be ugly: snakes, human entrails, a placenta display what many would find to be beautiful colours or shapes in another context. But if and when we are disgusted by these things, our capacity for aesthetic reflection is destroyed through their imposition on our sensory (visual, olfactory) experiences. The disgusting is *like* the unpleasant in that both find their source in physical sensation but it is *unlike* the unpleasant in that it repels us so strongly that any aesthetic response becomes impossible. Our reaction to the disgusting is often manifested as nausea. The unpleasant, on the other hand, while it involves displeasure, is a different kind of reaction because, as I wish to suggest, it is not purely negative, it remains aesthetic; and it does not merely drive us away but can motivate us to change the object or situation with which we are confronted. With the disgusting, we are either simply repelled, and seek to escape, or at best attempt to eradicate the offending object, as when one finds maggots in the garbage, or cockroaches on the stove. But the disgusting is not an aesthetic response, and from a direct confrontation with it we are never *inspired*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Feloj “Is There a Negative Judgement of Taste? Disgust as the Real Ugliness in Kant’s Aesthetics”, *Lebenswelt*, 3 (2013): 175-185, 185.

<sup>2</sup> M. Küplen, “Disgust and Ugliness: A Kantian Perspective”, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 9 (2011): 1-21, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Henderson, 220.

<sup>4</sup> My emphasis here is on our direct and personal experiences of the disgusting and the visceral reactions they occasion. Of course we can think about, and talk about, disgusting things without thereby being disgusted by them in this immediate way. And so we can imagine arts inspired by ideas of the disgusting, or arts which attempt to represent the disgusting, but which still allow us to have an aesthetic response to them. Kant suggests that arts like sculpture can represent the disgusting through allegory, or through “attributes with a pleasant guise” (§ 48, AK 312), and so indirectly, inviting interpretation by the artist or spectator. But the disgusting at this remove will not have the imposing visceral power over us that direct experiences of those objects will. Kant’s point is that if the disgusting is represented with sufficient verisimilitude, it will destroy the possibility of aesthetic response as effectively as the real thing.

With these differences established, at least for the sake of argument, as purely reflective and disinterested judgements of ugliness on the one hand, and totally repellent and completely visceral responses of disgust on the other, let me turn now to the unpleasant itself, and see what it has to offer. I've used the terms 'ghastly' and 'dreadful' to describe the walls of my house in an attempt to avoid using the word 'ugly' but I am less interested in what we *say* when confronted with the unpleasant than in what occurs when we make this kind of aesthetic judgement. And I would like to suggest that the unpleasant bears a similar logical structure to judgements of the pleasant in Kant's theory.

The unpleasant is a feeling – of displeasure (and the pleasant a feeling of pleasure) – that is grounded in direct sensations rather than mediated by the complex workings of our cognitive faculties. Even so, the story of the unpleasant is not a strictly causal one, as it also involves an aesthetic judgement. We have a sensation – of a certain taste or sound or sight – and feel displeasure from that sensation. Experiences of the ugly also bring about feelings of displeasure: the difference between them, Kant notes, is in the “relations of representations to the feeling of pleasure and pain”<sup>1</sup> and not in the feelings themselves. That is, the displeasure of the unpleasant is interested, and provokes desire, where the displeasure of the ugly is disinterested and desire-free. What Nick Zangwill calls his “representational interpretation”<sup>2</sup> of the pleasant helps to explain this.

As Kant's primary examples of the pleasant involve gustatory pleasures, let me begin with one of the same kind. Black licorice, I claim, has an extremely unpleasant taste. That is, when I taste it, when I give it my attention as an object for what it is in itself rather than for what its uses or benefits or consequences may be, I experience displeasure and my judgement about it is negative.<sup>3</sup> Now, my displeasure at the taste of licorice will

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, § 5, AK 209.

<sup>2</sup> N. Zangwill “Kant on Pleasure in the Agreeable”, *JAAC*, 53, (1995): 167-176, 168.

<sup>3</sup> I want to distinguish this kind of attention and evaluation from other gustatory experiences, as when we eat merely to satisfy hunger, or out of boredom, or because we are trying to quit smoking – these other instances may also be attended by pleasures, but these are not what I would call aesthetic experiences. The kind of attention or appraisal I am after is “something of an entirely different order from the having of a bodily sensation” (Gilbert Ryle and W.B. Gallie, “Symposium: Pleasure”, *PASS*, 28 (1954): 135-164; 164). It is not the kinds of pleasures that are different, or the kinds of physical sensations, so much as the way in which we attend to them that brings out their aesthetic character. Ryle and Gallie call this “appraisive



only occur if it really does taste that terrible; it cannot be a matter of appearing to, or seeming to, but of how it actually is. So there is what Kant calls an interest in the actual existence of the thing in question, as that which provokes my displeasure. Second, according to Zangwill,<sup>1</sup> it is my judgement that the thing is unpleasant which leads to desire – it is not merely the sensation itself that has this force. I judge licorice to be unpleasant, and when I represent that object as being what has given me displeasure, my desire is then provoked; in this case a desire to avoid not just licorice, but all similar things that would prompt the same feeling: ouzo, Sambuca, fennel, aniseed, and so on.

Kant claims that the pleasant brings with it “a satisfaction pathologically conditioned” by stimuli<sup>2</sup> – as the unpleasant brings dissatisfaction – but this is not a purely automatic response because of the roles played by both judgement and representation. As Zangwill states, while our satisfaction or dissatisfaction is pathologically conditioned by sensation, our desire is not: “the production of desire from pleasure in the agreeable, and from the judgement to which it gives rise, is a rational-causal matter; it involves a representation”.<sup>3</sup> Thus when Kant claims that the pleasant and unpleasant “concern[.] irrational animals also”,<sup>4</sup> he is talking about the feelings of pleasure and pain rather than the judgements that relate our mental representations *to* those feelings. The displeasure may be unfree and pathological because of the way it was occasioned (by direct physical stimuli) but not because of what it gives rise to – that is, a rational desire. The feelings associated with the pleasant and unpleasant are thus purposive, as Rachel Zuckert has suggested: they result in a “willed activity directed and described by concepts”,<sup>5</sup> and in this way, aesthetic judgements of the unpleasant and pleasant are indeed restricted to human beings as rational

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attention” (see p. 160) which I find an infelicitous term, but which is intended to capture those moments when we look to the object for its own sake, or for the sake of the experience itself. In Kant’s terms, our judgement is aesthetic when we do not refer a representation to the understanding for the purposes of cognition, or to Reason for practical action, but when we refer that representation to the feelings of pleasure and displeasure that alone are occasioned by it (§1, AK 203).

<sup>1</sup> Zangwill, 170.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, §5, AK 209.

<sup>3</sup> Zangwill, 170.

<sup>4</sup> Kant, §5, AK 210.

<sup>5</sup> R. Zuckert “A New Look at Kant’s Theory of Pleasure”, *JAAC*, 60, (2002): 239-252, 246.

agents. While animals can certainly feel displeasure and pain, they do not have aesthetic experiences so long as they lack the rational capacity to form mental representations, think conceptually, or generate rationally directed desires. While the unpleasant begins with physical sensations, it still engages our higher faculties even though it does not engage them in the purely reflective free play that Kant demands for judgements of beauty (and ugliness).

Judgements of the unpleasant are aesthetic responses to objects, even if they are subjective ones. Kant writes that the feeling of the pleasant (or the unpleasant) “presupposes, not the mere judgement about it, but the relation of its existence to my [mental] state, so far as this is affected by such an object”.<sup>1</sup> As we learn from his famous Canary wine example, when I say licorice is unpleasant, I really ought to say it is unpleasant *to me*, as I relate the sensation to my own feeling of displeasure. This, the “taste of sense” as Kant calls it, “lays down mere private judgements”<sup>2</sup> which are empirical rather than universal. However, like other empirical rules, they can make claims to general validity. Kant notes that “actually there is often found a very extended concurrence in these judgements”,<sup>3</sup> as we can see with cultural preferences in gustatory tastes – pigs’ feet for some, goats’ heads for others – and with historically changing trends in fashion and decorating: from bell bottoms to skinny jeans, and from shag carpeting to hardwood floors.

This mere general validity of judgements of the unpleasant is not a weakness, first, because it is only *one kind* of aesthetic response we make to objects – it is not meant to replace the notion of beauty. And, second, because it can account for cultural and historical differences in aesthetic matters in a way that the demands of universality make beauty unable to. It is these demands, in part, that invite skepticism about the possibility of free beauty and ugliness in the first place, and whether or not such skepticism can be overcome, there needs to be room in aesthetic theory for a more common, if more modest, form of aesthetic experience. This is the taste of sense.

What I have offered so far is a basic structure of judgements of the unpleasant. Before moving on, I would like to pause here to consider a possible objection to my account. Some might question how the unpleasant

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, §1, AK 204.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, §7, AK 212.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, §7, AK 213.

can be an aesthetic notion at all. Many experiences, such as a trip to the doctor to have a check-up, getting drenching in a sudden rainstorm, or stepping into a puddle of mud are also what we would commonly call unpleasant, as are our descriptions of unpleasant people, or tones of voice, and so on. Is everything unpleasant thereby an aesthetic response to the world? If not, what distinguishes my judgements of the taste of licorice or the colour of my walls from these other instances?

To this, I have two responses. First, I think it important to make a distinction between our metaphorical and non-metaphorical usage of these terms. For example, to describe a painting as warm or cold, or a musical composition as passionate or cerebral, is to describe it metaphorically in our aesthetic judgements. There is no temperature difference in the paint, after all, and notes on a page are not themselves passionate in any literal sense of the term. But to describe an object as beautiful or ugly is a typically non-metaphorical use of aesthetic terms, *except* when it comes to *non*-aesthetic contexts. To say of someone that they are in an ugly mood, or that they have a beautiful poker hand is a metaphorical description and not an aesthetic judgement *per se*.<sup>1</sup> The same is true of our metaphorical and non-metaphorical uses of the unpleasant.

Second, and related, it is important to isolate the aesthetic character of our experience of the unpleasant from other non-aesthetic factors. Is the feel of rain itself unpleasant, or only because we fear catching cold? Is the squelch of mud itself displeasing, or only because we think it will wreck our shoes? The challenge is to distinguish the sensation and its attendant judgement of the object or experience for its own sake from many other complicated and multi-faceted ways in which we respond to the world. This challenge is no less difficult for the unpleasant than it is for the beautiful or the ugly. We need to be sure that we are referring to a particular kind of experience, and a specific form of judgement, in our analysis of its aesthetic character, as opposed to the moral, political, instrumental or other ways we have of interacting with the objects and experiences that make up our quotidian lives. If and when we can be said to be having an aesthetic experience of licorice, our judgement will be of a certain kind, and our use of the unpleasant will be non-metaphorical. What characterizes an experience as typically aesthetic is a larger question that it is beyond the scope of this paper to answer.

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<sup>1</sup> N. Zangwill "The Beautiful, the Dainty and the Dumpty", *BJA*, 35 (1995), p. 321.

If we grant this basic account of the unpleasant thus far, we can see that there is clearly more that I want these judgements to do. The desire provoked by my distaste for licorice is merely to avoid its flavor in all its forms: it is a desire for less, just as a judgement of the pleasant, as of chocolate, provokes a desire for more. Indeed, an *aversion* to certain foods indicates an attempt to avoid the feeling of unpleasantness that eating them brings about. There is little creativity or inspiration associated with these aversions, except of a simple or marginal kind: if there were nothing to eat but licorice, I may be prompted to creatively mask its flavor, as when children use ketchup to cover the foods they don't like. But this is hardly the positive aesthetic engagement I first proposed.<sup>1</sup>

Let me call what prompts our avoidance a minimal account of the unpleasant, a largely negative outcome of a negative aesthetic judgement. We all have experiences of things that are unpleasant, and we generally, and quite naturally, seek to avoid such experiences in the future. What I am after is a positive outcome to this negative judgement, one that provides a more interesting aesthetic response. For this, let me return to the more complex example of the walls of my house. The visual sensation brought about immediate displeasure but, having bought the house, I could not merely avoid them. To live in the house was to encounter those walls on a daily basis. Nor could I eradicate them: a house needs walls, after all. And to get rid of the fleshtone was not to get rid of colour altogether: whatever I did, I would still have walls, and they would still look like *something*.

The question that emerged was what I wanted *instead* of fleshtone, and here the creative space opens up. This "instead of" is open-ended and rife with possibility. To attend to my desire to be free of fleshtone, I had to consider what *would* please me, what in effect I could replace it with. And this could be a great range of things: a different colour of paint, rolled, sponged or splashed on the walls; wallpaper; hung fabrics; wood paneling – even shag carpet, I suppose. But whatever it would be, I would have to engage imaginatively with the problem that the unpleasant posed to me, and produce a solution to it that would turn this displeasure into something positive.

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<sup>1</sup> And I am open to the idea that the unpleasant could even lead to the disgusting, that the distinctions I have made between them do not amount to categorical conceptual boundaries. Were I force-fed licorice, I do believe I would quickly become revolted by it. Yet then my experience would no longer be aesthetic, but that of a purely visceral reaction. My thanks to Dr. B. Savickey for this example.

How creative and engaged I was in response to the unpleasantness of the walls is open-ended: there are no *prima facie* limits to our purposive activities, other than their being rationally willed. I could have undertaken a study of colour theory; taken courses in interior design; experimented; called in a consultant; or simply hired a decorator. But even in the last instance, I would still have had to make a choice from suggestions posed to me. If I did not – if I simply said “do *something*”, I would have been no more engaged than I am with the avoidance of licorice. (And, as avoidance goes, I could probably also have taken a drug that would have made me oblivious to the walls, but this is not the positive aesthetic activity I am trying to illustrate here).<sup>1</sup> The unpleasant provides an *opportunity* for aesthetic action: it is not one that we are compelled to accept. But when we do accept it, when our initial negative judgements give rise to an imagining of what the “instead of” could be, we are, I think, more fully engaged aesthetically in our lives than when we simply respond to the beauty or ugliness that we see around us. A more robust account of the unpleasant brings with it – in fact, initiates – creative action, and the unpleasant is perhaps the only form of aesthetic judgement to do so. The beautiful and the ugly do not motivate on a Kantian account; the disgusting merely repels.

An experience of the unpleasant acts as a catalyst for our future aesthetic actions; it provides a particular problem to be worked on, that can help focus our attention. And in so doing, it gives rise to quite complex and nuanced aesthetic choices and decisions. With the walls, just as mere avoidance was insufficient, so too was simply choosing another colour that I liked better than fleshtone: some colours I like – black, for example – would not have improved the walls of the house at all. How to improve the walls involved considerations of the style of the house, the size and shape of the rooms, the amount and direction of the light, the colour of the hardwood, and so on. By the aesthetic engagement the unpleasant offers, I mean forms of engagement that are open-ended yet at the same time quite specific to the problem at hand. They involve choices, desires, and actions. They are constrained – by the negativity of the original judgement, and by the physical, logical, economic and even conceptual limitations of the problem posed to us. But they are free and open-ended in that within these empirical parameters, our activities are guided by the full spectrum of our imagination and creativity (or, we hire decorators).

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<sup>1</sup> This example is again thanks to Dr. B. Savickey.

The unpleasant has been overlooked because it is most often associated with gustatory displeasure, as the pleasant has been associated with similar pleasures. But this is misleading, and rests on what I have called a minimal account of it alone. Kant states that these forms of aesthetic judgement regard not only “the taste of the tongue, the palate and the throat, but ... whatever is pleasant to anyone’s eyes and ears”<sup>1</sup> – that is, to the full range of our sensations, including those that have long been considered the sole domain of beauty and pure reflective judgements of taste.

When we consider our daily lives and activities, experiences of free beauty are just not that central to them (unless we are very fortunate). We are more often mucking about with what pleases and displeases us, with what to preserve – or have more of – and what to avoid, or alter, or eradicate, or transform. We are concerned with – and affected by – questions of how and where to live; of gardens and homes and offices; cars, kitchens and fashions; of making these spaces and things ones of comfort and pleasure. This mucking about, however much it has been neglected by the discipline, constitutes the larger part of our lives and activities and has an important aesthetic element. To make something better, or good enough, or just right, begins with a judgement that it is somehow lacking and needs our attention and care. And, while subjective and empirical, this judgement does indeed concern a community of others, if not a universal one. Painting the walls of my house was not merely an act designed to bring me a private satisfaction, but to make my home a welcoming place for friends and family, a space of hospitality and enjoyment. By countering the unpleasant, I strove to make my home a place not only where I would want to live, but where others would want to come, and return to again. In this sense, the unpleasant is not purely private; when expanded beyond mere gustatory tastes, it involves us communally. At the end of the day, though, I would not have been inspired to undertake the wall project at all, were it not for that initial judgement of the unpleasant: as it stood, the house was simply unlivable.



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<sup>1</sup> Kant, §5, AK 212.

## Philosophical An(n)ales

Marina Christodoulou  
(Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt)

*inter urinas et faeces nascimur*<sup>1</sup>

*En ce moment même – c’est affreux – si j’existe, c’est parce que j’ai horreur d’exister. C’est moi, c’est moi qui me tire du néant auquel j’aspire: la haine, le dégoût d’exister, ce sont autant de manières de me faire exister, de m’enfoncer dans l’existence. Les pensées naissent par-derrrière moi, comme un vertige, je les sens naître derrière ma tête...si je cède, elles vont venir là devant, entre mes yeux – et je cède toujours, la pensée grossit, grossit et la voilà, l’immense, qui me remplit tout entier et renouvelle mon existence.*<sup>2</sup>

Ugliness Abject Disgust  
... as an allergy to the (Feminine) Other

*On gendered art and aesthetics.* A male artist is referred to by a simple noun: “the artist”, while when the artist happens to be a female, an attributive adjective is added: “the woman-artist”. Empirical and statistical analysis has made clear how men outnumber women as artists; *Guerrilla Girls*<sup>3</sup> have visually depicted this through use of monstrous statistics. Statements from philosophers, such as Schopenhauer, are not absent on women being unable to be artists for various reasons or with no reasons stated. So, when we speak of artists, and therefore the philosophy of art, it is necessary to keep in mind that we are mainly speaking about the most powerful among humans, who is the white, heterosexual male.

Feminist critiques on aesthetics are kept aside, being labelled mainly, but not directly, as “hysteric”, like any other feminist speech.

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<sup>1</sup> Freud uses this phrase several times, which is attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo: “we are born between urine and feces”. I will quote some Freud passages later.

<sup>2</sup> J-P. Sartre *La Nausée* [1938], Paris: Gallimard, 1981, p. 119. In other words, I am the disgust, I am the nausea, or nausea is my existence, or it makes me exist.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.guerrillagirls.com>.

*Why disgust is (or can be considered as) sexist (phallographic and misogynistic): An Allergy to the Other.* Aesthetics is a term mainly meaning an inquiry on the senses, from the Greek *aesthesis*. A simple philosophy of the senses goes like this: humans have divided the body into different parts, out of which some have the role of being aesthetic, which means being able to sense the world or the environment, each by different means. So it is the nose that smells, the tongue that tastes, the skin and especially the hand-skin that touches and is touched, and therefore feels, the ears that listen, and the eyes that see. Aesthetics as mainly a philosophy of art in its classical and canonical form, is occupied with seeing and listening, namely with the sensations and perceptions coming from the eyes and the ears. These two bodily organs have been given the burden and the honour of sensing and receiving Beauty: one of the highest ideals in the history of ideas, of civilization and of philosophy.

Why are taste, smell and touch being neglected? Because they are evaluated and appreciated as lower senses. Therefore the data coming from them are considered of less importance, and the organs where they originate and are responsible for this data, are considered of lower importance. These senses are more on the side of the *bodily* and the *sensual*, more preoccupied with pleasure, pain and perseverance. Among the acts that are associated, with those three outsiders, are eating, having sex, crapping, vomiting, keeping safe and alive, through smelling, or tasting poisonous or rot food, through smelling a sex partner, through reacting to painful intrinsic or extrinsic situations, etc. Vision and hearing may well take part in those but their potency spreads further. Through vision and hearing we sense artworks, music, theatre, paintings, etc. So, these two senses are more on the side of the *aesthetic*.

Vision and hearing rise above the bodily or the body-ness; they mediate the material environments, through the material body, to the considered of higher ethereal molecules, mind, which is based on the material brain. Therefore, the three outsiders, being of the body, represent and remind of the fate of the body and of matter: decay and mortality. They are also very personal and private issues; they are *physical*: they are related to the self only, they concern no one else and can be communicated to no one else: for instance, nobody can feel your pain, or swallow your food, or shit your poop. Whereas, the data being received to the brain-mind, through vision and hearing, are universal, communicable, and sharable. The mind is believed to be a part of a network of a universal mind, consciousness, for somebody, even God. Through the mind or the soul, someone is immortal,



in one or the other way; always according to the canonical-classic theories and beliefs. Taste, smell, and touch, clash and violently attach you to your own perishable physicality; they embody you; vision and hearing rise you above it. This is why Beauty is sublime, it is an ideal found in the mind/mental-networking.

In other words, the senses are arranged in a hierarchy, according to their cognitive value, or their contribution to the intellectual, and therefore this other large ideal of *Truth*. They are contributing to the rationalization path towards Knowledge. Truth is considered as power: power over fate, material fate, bodily fate: namely death.

The keywords in the above analysis are: mind, rationalization, hierarchy, truth, power. Those words could sum up, at least partially, human culture, the history of ideas, and in general, human civilization. Axiomatically, taking for granted the fact that this is a masculine civilization, then they sum up the male mentality. I do not intend here to proceed with arguments, evidence and proofs regarding this masculinity of the civilization; that is a project of its own. Let's simply, empirically, and historically ground it in observation and common historical sense-awareness. And another piece of evidence is the fact that in the field of Aesthetics, and, more accurately, in Art Aesthetics the world is reduced to the visual and the aural. Of course artists are trying to bring this boundary down especially the avant-garde ones (i.e. "Food Artists" in Brooklyn, and "Smell Artists" in Belgium).

The aforementioned would not be enough as arguments, if the following one did not exist: taste, smell and touch<sup>1</sup> can be associated with the female, because the female is directly associated with the physical and nature in general. It is known that femaleness, for several reasons (basically its genital difference, its menstruation, its act of giving birth and breast-nurturing, with milk, the child, its dark mysterious inverted-ness, which contrasts with the extrinsic smoothness and luminousness of the feminine) is considered as monstrous, unclean, or even gross and disgusting. Accordingly, the senses associated with it, in many cases, evoke disgust. The eyes and the ears are not associated with disgust, because the subject can see and hear from a distance, so no physical contact is necessary. With this approximation and physical closeness to matter, the gross can be inflicted. In artistic or aesthetic appreciations, no physical contact is necessary. The subject gazes

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<sup>1</sup> Touch is problematic in a way, because it is often viewed differently from taste and smell, but let's leave it as it is for the purposes of this argument. Many philosophers, such as Jean-Luc Nancy have written on touch, and even more did some feminists.

at and listens to. Art is neither put in the mouth nor sniffed through the nose. (At least, according to the prominent and most known theories of art).

Feminist critics of art and philosophers have spotted this sexist disposition of aesthetics and have produced work that tries to incorporate all the senses in aesthetics. In postmodern art, artists, male and female, that react to modern and previous eras, have produced highly gross works of art. This is due to the fact of a need to probe the boundaries of the artistic, the aesthetic and the humane. Artists are also known to be effeminate, in their actual art (but rarely in their life and especially their marketing and work-ethics), because, works that are often revolutionary, opposing the common macho-mind and canonical culture, are produced by them.

Summing up, disgust is linked to the *Ugly*, as a binary or polar opposite to the Beautiful. The Ugly is anti-aesthetical, because the Beautiful is the epitome of the aesthetic. Women are surrounded by beauty “commandments”, for the exact reason that they are subconsciously and deeply regarded as ugly. They are disgusting and therefore in need to conceal their grossness. This axiomatic predisposition of culture and civilization (or patriarchy), has led to innumerable rules and instructions of how the woman must be and act, literally, at *all* times.

Carolyn Korsmeyer in her book *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*<sup>1</sup> argues that the disgusting might be the ineffable, or more accurately, the *unpresentable*. Lyotard already talks about such ineffable aesthetic experiences, which are experiences that fall outside the capabilities of language to put them into words and syntax. Speaking in Lacan’s language, they are experiences outside the “symbolic order”; or experiences, as Korsmeyer adds, outside “patriarchy”.<sup>2</sup> Patriarchy is the realm one is not born into, but one enters after being weaned off the mother’s body and entering language. Then the mother’s body becomes a lack, an absence, and from then on, the female is doomed by this absence and defined by it, in the realm of language. The realm of language is reigned by fathers, therefore the masculine is associated with language, rationality, and has positive subjectivity, in contrast with the feminine.

The feminine, maybe because of this order of things in infancy, is always associated with the realm of the ineffable, the unpresentable, and the intuitive. It is the “eternally creative primordial mother”, as Nietzsche de-

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<sup>1</sup> NY: Routledge 2004.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

scribes the Dionysian.<sup>1</sup> From this I can conclude, using Irigaray's words from the title of the homonymous chapter in the *Speculum of the Other Woman*, that "any theory of the 'subject' has always been appropriated by the 'masculine'".<sup>2</sup> So, it is clear why the masculine is the carrier of theories and of Philosophy. In the realm of patriarchy, the unrepresentable is not permitted, it becomes taboo, it is a private exclusiveness of the female: it is ugly and disgusting. It evokes discomfort (*δυσχέρεια*). Here is an example of the unrepresentable but yet completely and essentially feminine:

The girl pulled her menstrual pad to one side and dipped two fingers into her blood. Forcing herself, because she was doing something she had neither read nor talked to anyone about, and seducing herself with the pleasure of knowledge through sensation, she licked the fluid from her fingers. It tasted like blood from a cut, but the flavor was denser, the texture thicker. Part of her felt that this act was nothing unusual, that it had been nothing to fear, so she did it again. As she repeated the dipping and licking, a feeling earlier submerged by her sense of the ordinary overwhelmed her.

Words tumbled over one another, waves that seemed to knock the wind out of her like imagined breakers that would swell, then draw her underwater, groin first.

The words in her mind, made by her lips with no sound, went on and on, impossible to remember later. Arms around her knees, rocking back and forth, then side to side, she listened to the language brought by her blood, the liquid world of words.<sup>3</sup>

Disgust could well be the antipode of the beautiful of Burke, of Classicism and of Renaissance. Both the beautiful and disgust are aesthetic responses. While Beauty is the very positive aesthetic response, disgust is the emotion or affect that in no way can become a positive aesthetic response.<sup>4</sup> As Kant noted, disgust is what is aroused by a kind of ugliness.<sup>1</sup> Ugliness is the ground where disgust is evoked.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* [1872], trans. C.P. Fadiman, NY: Dover 1995, pp. 59f., and Korsmeyer, *op.cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> See L. Irigaray "Any Theory of the 'Subject' has always been Appropriated by the 'Masculine'", *Speculum of the Other Woman* [1974], trans. G.C. Gill, Cornell UP 1985, pp. 133–146.

<sup>3</sup> J. Frueh *Erotic Faculties*, California UP 1996, p. 162; and Korsmeyer, *op.cit.*, pp. 143f.

<sup>4</sup> Korsmeyer, *ibid.*, p. 145.

Disgust is characterised as a “visceral emotion”, “closely connected to physical responses, such as gagging and nausea”; its “two primary senses ... are taste and smell, but the aversion may arise by means of any of the senses or by imagining sensations”.<sup>2</sup> Disgust is “one of our more aggressive culture-creating passions”.<sup>3</sup> This is the reason that post-modern art (and other revolutionary works of art at all ages) use a lot this aesthetic response that disgust evokes. With Beauty you might please and pleasure, but you do not shake. Tragedy’s resolution (*lysis*) is cathartic (*katharsis*) and movies’ happy endings, only restore equilibrium. When you step out of the theatre or the cinema, you are exactly as you entered it, only maybe a bit more pleased and calm; even besotted.

This sedative capacity of art is as much needed as its agitating one (like the “Theatre of Cruelty” position – Artaud). Beauty can fulfil the first, ugliness, and especially disgust, the second. Official organs of government and other societal controlling authorities, do strategically censor art’s agitating capacity, while they are encouraging its sedative one. Beauty *restores*, Ugliness *changes*.

What is the predecessor of Lacan’s ‘symbolic order’ is Kristeva’s ‘semiotic chora’: “a space with meaning but no determinate articulation”.<sup>4</sup> As long as the human (as achild) is in this “semiotic chora”, the boundaries between the self and the other, the mother and the child, are confused or (for the child) even non-existent. When the human enters the space of symbols, or language, (which is an essential quality and step that differentiated the human from the other animals), it experiences and develops “abject” (Kristeva’s term); firstly to the *m-other* and then to every-*other*. Thus it circumscribes the independent subjectivity or the self. Without excluding or abject the other, the subjectivity and independence of one’s own is in danger to be

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<sup>1</sup> I. Kant *Critique of Judgement*, trans. W.S. Pluhar, Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co. 1987, p. 180.

<sup>2</sup> Korsmeyer, *op.cit.*, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> W.I. Miller *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Harvard UP, 1997, p. xii.

<sup>4</sup> Korsmeyer, *op.cit.*, p. 147. As Derrida writes, in his critique of Foucault, “Sentences are normal by nature. They are impregnated with normality, that is, with meaning”. The normal is the meaning, in other words, and this is the presumption, on which civilization is built, or western culture, or patriarchy: meaning is the normal, or the normal is the meaning. Cf. Shoshana Felman quoting Derrida’s *L’écriture et la différence*, trans. J. Derrida *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge 2001, p. 65, in S. Felman & M.N. Evans *Writing and Madness: (Literature/Philosophy/Psychanalysis)*, Stanford UP 2003, p. 44.

fluid and interconnected; at least, a threat for language and the patriarchal order. The patriarchal order might be the adult order, the adult-human-male order. Anything that evokes danger to this circumscription of the self,<sup>1</sup> or of one's own "own" (property), is abject and evokes among other things, disgust. Anything that has no strict form, or its form is fluid, like the skin that forms on hot milk when exposed to the atmosphere (Kristeva's example), is an in-between, neither solid, nor liquid, nor air. It is like Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* (2002), an example of an in-between-er sex that could evoke society's and people's abjection and disgust. Accordingly, in-between-ers are the mad, which are located between "symbolic order" ([in my terms:] *rationalism – the civilized-sanity – paternal-male*) and "semantic chora" (*irrationalism – the primitive/the savage – magic-insanity – maternal-female*), the ill and the healthy, the corps (or the corpse) in decay, which is between of life and death, the being and the non-being, and anything else that rots, old age as well: their loss of proper and strict form and identity, is a reminder of one's own "own" loss of identity and proper form, at some point in time (death). Old age is, thus, the counterpart and the inversion of this abject experience of childhood: it is the antistrophe of forming a strict self-form; it is becoming dead, or formless. Old age evokes disgust and we are obsessed with concealing or delaying it. However old age is the natural aid or step towards dying. Disgust is death made easier; disgust is, even, death becoming euthanasia.

An artist that plays with the above in her photography is Cindy Sherman. Laura Mulvey<sup>2</sup> and Rosalind Krauss<sup>1</sup> have written about her.

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<sup>1</sup> See an interpretation of Clarice Lispector's *Passion According to G.H.* (1964): "Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector's *Passion According to G.H.* (1964), which could be read either as a philosophical meditation or a religious parody, is fundamentally the story of a woman smashing – and finally eating – a cockroach. It is also the story of how the experience leads to the narrator's "depersonalization", which she describes as "the greatest externalization one can attain" (PGH, p. 168). This "externalization" which allows G.H. to discover that "the world interdependent with me" parallels the fate of the cockroach in the story, pointing to a striking identification between the disgusted (human) and the disgusting (object)", Sianne Ngai *Ugly Feelings*, Harvard UP, 2004, p. 346. See also, Adrienne Rich "Diving into the Wreck", *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971–1972*, NY: W. W. Norton 1973, p. 23: "the thing I came for: / the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth".

<sup>2</sup> *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Indiana UP; British Film Institute, 1996.

Adorno observes something similar on the *ugly*, as being what escapes a proper form, or I should add, the “symbolical order” or civilization:

the element of the ugly is bound up with art's spiritualization; George clearly recognized this in his preface to his translation of *Flowers of Evil*. This is alluded to by the subtitle "Spleen and Ideal": Back of the word spleen is the obsession with what resists being formed, with the transformation of what is hostile to art into art's own agent, which thus extends art's concept beyond that of the ideal. The ugly serves this purpose in art. But ugliness and cruelty are not merely the subject matter of art. As Nietzsche knew, art's own gesture is cruel. In aesthetic forms, cruelty becomes imagination: Something is excised from the living, from the body of language, from tones, from visual experience. The purer the form and the higher the autonomy of the works, the more cruel they are. Appeals for more humane art, for conformity to those who are its virtual public, regularly dilute the quality and weaken the law of form. What art in the broadest sense works with, it oppresses: This is the ritual of the domination of nature that lives on in play. It is the original sin of art as well as its permanent protest against morality, which revenges cruelty with cruelty. Yet those artworks succeed that rescue over into form something of the amorphous to which they ineluctably do violence. This alone is the reconciling aspect of form. The violence done to the material imitates the violence that issued from the material and that endures in its resistance to form.<sup>2</sup>

Horror is another emotion or affection relative to disgust. Kristeva explores the dimensions and lengthiness of horror in the same book she discusses abject and disgust: *Powers of Horror*.<sup>3</sup>

Korsmeyer cites Elizabeth Grosz, who summarizes this reminder or realization of body-ness or embodiment thus:

Abjection is a reaction to the recognition of the impossible but necessary transcendence of the subject's corporeality, and the impure, defiling elements of its uncontrollable materiality. It is a response to the various bodily cycles of incorporation, absorption, depletion, expulsion, the cycles of material rejuvenation and

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<sup>1</sup> *Bachelors*, MIT Press, 1999, and *Cindy Sherman, 1975-1993*, NY: Rizzoli, 1993. See also C. Sherman *et al. Cindy Sherman*, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Athlone Press, 1997, pp. 49f.

<sup>3</sup> *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia UP, 1982.

consumption necessary to sustain itself yet incapable of social recognition and representation.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, while the abject is horrifying, as it is the loss of identity and subjectivity, at the same time there is an *attraction* to it,<sup>2</sup> because one also longs for the loss of identity, which impedes the return to oneness after-life as before-life and as the first experiences in life, with the oneness with the mother, after birth.

Disgust can also be thought of as the antipode or counterpart of “love, desire, and appetite”<sup>3</sup> (or even of *jouissance*) because the latter ones aim to a wanted nearness and union with the other, while disgust wants distance. It is a “strong vital sensation”<sup>4</sup> that affects “the whole nervous system”,<sup>5</sup> a “defence mechanism”, an “act of saying ‘no’ (Nietzsche)”, or even more accurately “a compulsion to say no, an inability *not* to say no”, (*ibid.*, p. 2). Aesthetically the word “disgust” appears in the seventeenth century, and along with the words *Ekel* and *dégoût* it becomes more used in everyday life. In the French word (*ibid.*, p. 3f), one can easily see how disgust is a lack of *goût*, which is the aesthetic taste. Taste, however could be socially determined<sup>6</sup> and learned. Therefore people of certain classes possibly have different perceptions of what is acceptable as in the realm of cleanliness and purity and of what falls into the realm of the contaminated and the disgusting.

Summarizing all of the above, disgust is evoked in every “invasion of a heterogeneity” and “it processes elementary civilizing taboos and social distinctions between what is foreign and one’s own” (*loc.cit.*), therefore it is closely connected with Freud’s *uncanny* and what he calls *neurosis*, which

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<sup>1</sup> “The Body of Signification”, J. Fletcher & A.E. Benjamin, eds. *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, London: Routledge 1990, p. 87f.

<sup>2</sup> On how Kristeva connects the sublime with the abject see Korsmeyer, *op.cit.*, p. 149: “both are unbounded, formless, threatening”; and K. Oliver *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind*, Indiana UP 1993, p. 61. On the attraction to the abject, see Kristeva *Powers of Horror*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Winfried Menninghaus *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, SUNY Press, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 1, Menninghaus cites Kant *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. V.L. Dowdell & H.H. Rudnick, Southern Illinois UP, 1996, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, citing Kant again, p. 40f (translation modified by Menninghaus).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4f; P. Bourdieu *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard UP 1984; and M. Douglas *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge 2002.

is a symptom of civilization that is opposed to the natural – the libido. I conclude that the fact that disgust arises mostly from others' bodily excrements or parts, and not one's own, beyond this fact's evolutionary mirroring of perseverance, it also mirrors and reflects the general disposition of a human being's aversion to the Other, along with the consequent intellectual and philosophical allergy to the *Other* that is one of the very basic problems philosophy forever deals with. More specifically and keenly, the mind's, the intellect's, and consequently, using Françoise D'Eaubonne's expression, philosophy's allergy to the feminine.<sup>1</sup>

*Appendix: Towards a Philosophy of Poop  
The Anti-Aesthetics of Scat, the Philosophy of Disgust and the Scato-Libidinal Economy*

Philosophy of food is fine to do, but what about when the food transforms to poop? Then we enter the land of taboo, even for one of the most open fields existing: that is, philosophy.

Is philosophy too sanitized? Too sanitized to be true, or in touch with reality or to touch reality? Definitely our body and our thoughts are shit-full. Why is Philosophy so purified? Is the evolutionary mechanism of disgust getting in our way, and being incorporated in the thought-mechanism, too? When disgust enters the soul, it evokes strong moralizations, puritanism, and conservatism; experiments in psychology have shown so. What if we speak of shit publicly, namely, a private act being exposed? Transparency is our society's mastery, but only eclectic transparency. Even when "shit" becomes transparent (violence, evil, shameful actions, nakedness, bad behaviours, etc.), this "shit" never ever covers poop. We feel more comfortable exposing every and any kind of "shit" but we back out (κωλώνω in Greek, is the perfect word, because it means to hesitate, and etymologically it comes from the word κόλος, which means ass or fanny) as to expose the most natural, necessary and defining "shit", that of poop. Poop is the Original Shit. And we are scared of it as shit!

Have you ever thought that poop is inside your "libidinal economy"? That shit is the remaining combustible of your body and therefore your life? Shit is inside you all the time, in your intestines. But you are only disgusted by it when it shows up in your toilet. That's a common human behaviour: to

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<sup>1</sup> *Féminin Et Philosophie: Une Allergie Historique*, Collection L'ouverture Philosophique, Paris: L'Harmattan 1997.



ignore anything that is not in the phenomenal realm, or the realm of the senses, or the *aesthetic* realm, even if it is really there. What is not shown does not exist, does not bother, does not disgust. Shit in the intestine, in the inside of the body, should be more rampaging or rioting than a poop on the toilet marble. However, the moment it falls from the sacred body, from the sacred intestine, we rush to flush.

“Opening the Libidinal Surface” instructions:

Open the so-called body and spread out all its surfaces: not only the skin with each of its folds, wrinkles, scars, with its great velvety planes, and contiguous to that, the scalp and its mane of hair, the tender pubic fur, nipples, nails, hard transparent skin under the heel, the light frills of the eyelids, set with lashes - but open and spread, expose the labia majora, so also the labia minora with their blue network bathed in mucus, dilate the diaphragm of the anal sphincter, longitudinally cut and flatten out the black conduit of the rectum, then the colon, then the caecum, now a ribbon with its surface all striated and polluted with shit; as though your dress-maker's scissors were opening the leg of an old pair of trousers, go on, expose the small intestines' alleged interior, the jejunum, the ileum, the duodenum, or else, at the other end, undo the mouth at its corners, pull out the tongue at its most distant roots and split it, spread out the bats' wings of the palate and its damp basements, open the trachea and make it the skeleton of a boat under construction; armed with scalpels and tweezers, dismantle and lay out the bundles and bodies of the encephalon; and then the whole network of veins and arteries, intact, on an immense mattress, and then the lymphatic network, and the fine bony pieces of the wrist, the ankle, take them apart and put them end to end with all the layers of nerve tissue which surround the aqueous humours and the cavernous body of the penis, and extract the great muscles, the great dorsal nets, spread them out like smooth sleeping dolphins. Work as the sun does when you're sunbathing or taking grass.<sup>1</sup>

When shit is inside your body, it is part of your body, it is part of you: it belongs to you. But when it appears outside, it is excrement, out of libidinal context, an *uncanny* visitor: the familiar becoming unfamiliar – a stranger in your toilet. [By the way, do you even realize that you are not that much of a person, but more of a microbiome? You are your microbiome

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<sup>1</sup> J-F. Lyotard *Libidinal Economy*. London: Athlone, 1993.

with a bit of you. Biochemistry, biology and microbiology agree on that,<sup>1</sup> it is not just I, the philosopher].

Here, I find it useful to cite a passage from David Foster Wallace's "The Suffering Channel":

'Your own saliva', said Laurel Manderley. 'You're swallowing it all the time. Is it disgusting to you? No. But now imagine gradually filling up a juice glass or something with your own saliva, and then drinking it all down'.  
'That really is disgusting', the editorial intern admitted.  
'But why? When it's in your mouth it's not gross, but the minute it's outside of your mouth and you consider putting it back in, it becomes gross'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Bernard Dixon *Power Unseen: How Microbes Rule the World*, Oxford: W.H. Freeman 1994.

<sup>2</sup> *Oblivion: Stories*, London: Abacus 2004. And he continues with poo, menstrual blood, and skin:

"Are you suggesting it's somehow the same thing with poo?"

'I don't know. I don't think so. I think with poo, it's more like as long as it's inside us we don't think about it. In a way, poo only becomes poo when it's excreted. Until then, it's more like a part of you, like your inner organs'.

'It's maybe the same way we don't think about our organs, our livers and intestines. They're inside all of us -'

'They *are* us. Who can live without intestines?'

'But we still don't want to see them. If we see them, they're automatically disgusting'.

...

'Menstrual blood is disgusting, but it doesn't make you lightheaded', Laurel Manderley said almost to herself, her large forehead crinkled with thought. Her hands felt as though they were shaking even though she knew no one else could see it.

'Maybe menstrual blood is ultimately more like poo. It's a waste thing, and disgusting, but it's not wrong that it's all of a sudden outside of you and visible, because the whole point is that it's supposed to get out, it's something you want to get rid of'.

...

'Skin's outside of us', Laurel Manderley continued. 'We see it all the time and there's no problem. It's even aesthetic sometimes, as in so and so's got beautiful skin. But now imagine, say, a foot square section of human skin, just sitting there on a table'.

'Eww'. 'Suddenly it becomes disgusting. ... She said: 'Maybe again because it implies some kind of injury or violence.'

In literature, art and their criticism, there is a lot about the grotesque (see, e.g., Mikhail Bakhtin *Rabelais and His World*)<sup>1</sup> and scatology. It is not to ask why it did survive there; literature is fiction, we can hide there our truth. In a comedy of Aristophanes, in *Ancient Greek Literature*, we happen to stumble upon these passages,<sup>2</sup> among many other similar in his comedies:

Talk away to your heart's content; you must come to a stop at last and then you shall see that this grand power only resembles an anus; no matter how much you wash it, you can never get it clean. (*Wasps*, 602-604)

First my daughter bathes me, anoints my feet, stoops to kiss me and, while she is calling me "her dearest father", fishes out my triobolus with her tongue; (*Wasps*, 607-609)

It farts like a whole army (*Wasps*, 619)

the stench of a seal, the unwashed balls of a Lamia, and the arse of a camel. (*Wasps*, 1035)

Bataille considers laughter a type of excrement, disgusting as much as anal excrement:

L'interprétation du rire comme un processus spasmodique des muscles-sphincter de l'orifice buccal, analogue à celui des muscles-sphincter de l'orifice anal pendant défécation ... la place primordial dans l'existence humaine de tels processus spasmodiques à fin excrétoire.<sup>3</sup>

In philosophy, however, only a few people have touched the subject: Zizek for example. Zizek is famous and provoking because of his obsceni-

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... 'It seems more like the skin is decontextualized'. Laurel Manderley felt along the side of her nostril again. 'You decontextualize it and take it off the human body and suddenly it's disgusting"', *ibid.*, p. 307-309.

<sup>1</sup> Indiana UP 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Aristophanes *Wasps*. The Complete Greek Drama, vol. 2. Eugene O'Neill, Jr., NY: Random House, 1938 (available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>). The original can be found in Aristophanes *Aristophanes Comoediae*, eds. F.W. Hall & W.M. Geldart, vol. 1, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1907 (likewise at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>).

<sup>3</sup> *OEuvres complètes*, II, *Écrits Posthumes 1922-1940*, ["La valeur d'usage de D.A.F. de Sade (2)"], Gallimard 1970, p. 71.

ties and his scatological ways of speaking. Here I quote his “Afterword” in *Revolution at the Gates*:<sup>1</sup>

The first lesson of *Fight Club* is thus that we cannot go *directly* from capitalist to revolutionary subjectivity: The abstraction, the foreclosure of others, the blindness to the other’s suffering and pain, has first to be broken in a gesture of taking the risk and reaching directly out to the suffering other – a gesture which, since it shatters the very kernel of our identity, cannot fail to appear extremely violent: However, there is another dimension at work in *self*-beating: the subject’s scatological (excremental) identification, which is equivalent to adopting the position of the proletariat who has nothing to lose. The pure subject emerges only through this experience of radical selfdegradation, when I allow/provoke the other to beat the crap out of me, emptying me of substantial content, of all symbolic support which could confer a modicum of dignity on me. (p. 252)

And, of course, Žizek’s famous speeches<sup>2</sup> and quotes on toilets and ideology. I quote from *The Plague of Fantasies*:<sup>3</sup>

In a traditional German lavatory, the hole in which shit disappears after we flush water is way in front, so that the shit is first laid out for us to sniff at and inspect for traces of some illness; in the typical French lavatory, on the contrary, the hole is in the back - that is, the shit is supposed to disappear as soon as possible; finally, the Anglo-Saxon (English or American) lavatory presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two opposed poles - the basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it - visible, but not to be inspected.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Žižek & V. Lenin *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, London: Verso 2002.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzXPYCY7jbs>.

<sup>3</sup> London: Verso, 2008 [1st; 1997].

<sup>4</sup> And he continues: “No wonder that Erica Jong, in the famous discussion of different European lavatories at the beginning of her half-forgotten *Fear of Flying*, mockingly claims: ‘German toilets are really the key to the horrors of the Third Reich. People who can build toilets like this are capable of anything/ It is clear that none of these versions can be accounted for in purely utilitarian terms: a certain ideological perception of how the subject should relate to the unpleasant excrement which comes from within our body is clearly discernible - again, for the third time, ‘the truth is out there’. Hegel was among the first to interpret the geographical triad Germany- France-England as expressing three different existential attitudes: German reflective thoroughness, French revolutionary hastiness, English moderate utilitarian

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pragmatism; in terms of political stance, this triad can be read as German conservatism, French revolutionary radicalism and English moderate liberalism; in terms of the predominance of one of the spheres of social life, it is German metaphysics and poetry versus French politics and English economy. The reference to lavatories enables us not only to discern the same triad in the most intimate domain of performing the excremental function, but also to generate the underlying mechanism of this triad in the three different attitudes towards excremental excess: ambiguous contemplative fascination; the hasty attempt to get rid of the unpleasant *excess* as fast as possible; the pragmatic approach to treat the excess as an ordinary object to be disposed of in an appropriate way. So it is easy for an academic to claim at a round table that we live in a postideological universe - the moment he visits the restroom after the heated discussion, he is again kneedeep in ideology. The ideological investment of such references to utility is attested by their *dialogical* character: the Anglo-Saxon lavatory acquires its meaning only through its differential relation to French and German lavatories. We have such a multitude of lavatory types because there is a traumatic excess which each of them tries to accommodate – according to Lacan, one of the features which distinguishes man from the animals is precisely that with humans the disposal of shit becomes a problem”, *ibid.*, p. 3f.

Let us recall how we experience the death of someone close to us: even if we directly witness his or her death, the trauma is redoubled, since often the most unbearable moment comes afterwards, when we visit the deceased's home and observe his private quarters: cupboards full of his clothes, shelves lined with his books, the bathroom with his toilet utensils... It is usually only at this moment - when we are compelled to acknowledge that the person to whom all this relates is no longer here, that all these personal belongings are now entirely *useless* - that we become fully aware of, fully take in, his final departure”, *ibid.*, p. 52 (footnote).

“The old Marxist formula about 'second nature' is thus to be taken more literally than usual: the point is not only that we are never dealing with pure natural needs, that our needs are always-already mediated by the cultural process; moreover, *the labour of culture has to rein- state the lost support in natural needs*, to re-create a 'second nature' as the recompense for the loss of support in the 'first nature' – the human animal has to reaccustom itself to the most elementary bodily rhythm of sleep, feeding, movement.

What we encounter here is the loop of (symbolic) castration, in which one endeavours to reinstate the lost 'natural' co-ordination on the ladder of desire: on the one hand, one reduces bodily gestures to the necessary minimum (of clicks on the computer mouse...); on the other, one attempts to recover lost bodily fitness by means of jogging, body-building, and so on; on the one hand, one reduces the bodily odours to a minimum (by taking regular showers, etc); on the other, one attempts to recover these same odours through toilet water and perfumes; and so on”, *ibid.*, p. 173f.

Denis Hollier writes a chapter on Scatology while writing on Bataille:

Just as philosophy unites what is serious with theory, scatology thus connects laughter and touch, which philosophy will have nothing to do with. But it is more important to see how philosophy manages to repress scatology, how philosophy speaks out as antiscatology (first of all by depriving scatology of speech), than to dwell at length on the connotation of the word scatology, even if the juxtaposition of filth, pleasure, and laughter is already in itself worthy of attention. (p. 100)<sup>1</sup>

Psychoanalysis has also touched this apocryphal subject and coined it as “the anal stage”. Freud pioneered it in *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* (1905).<sup>2</sup> Freud also talks a lot about coprophilia and feces in general. It is important to see how he relates excrements with genitals and the erotic. The fact, he says, that anatomically the vagina is placed between

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<sup>1</sup> D. Hollier & B. Wing *Against Architecture: Writings of Georges Bataille*, new ed., MIT Press 1992, pp. 98-115 (‘Scatology’). Yet a passage:

“In the dialogue bearing his name, Parmenides would like for Socrates to tell him what things, according to him, have an idea (or form, depending on the translation): for example, is there an idea of similarity, an idea of one and of many? Is there an idea of the just, the beautiful, the good? Is there even an idea of man, an idea of fire or of water? To the first two sets of examples offered by Parmenides, Socrates answers affirmatively and without hesitation, but faced with the last group, having to do with physical beings, he admits to some confusion, which Parmenides, with a new set of examples, will further increase. Here is this last, “scatological” set: “And what about these, Socrates they would really seem ridiculous [γελοῖα]-hair and mud and dirt, for example, or anything else which is utterly worthless and trivial [ἄλλο τι ἀτιμώτατον τε και φωλότατον]. Are you perplexed whether one should say that there is a separate form (εἶδος) for each of them too, a form that again is other than the object we handle [χειριζόμεθα]?”

The criteria Parmenides calls upon to characterize the type of object his question concerns mark off the scatological space in terms that will hold: these terms could perfectly well be repeated by Bataille. On the one hand, these objects are silly, ridiculous, laughable; on the other hand, they have to be touched, have nothing to do with visual, theoretical perception, but rather with physical contact. The question of scatology, starting with its appearance in Platonic texts, is introduced as an obstacle opposed to the theory of forms: Parmenides evokes hair, mud, and dirt, just as Bataille will evoke spit or spiders in the article “Informe”. In both instances exactly the same thing is at stake: to determine the limits of Idea”, *ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> S. Freud & A. Richards *The Pelican Freud Library Volume 7 on Sexuality Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*. [S.I.]: Penguin 1977.

the urethra and the proctus designates a fate of the human and the human life. We are literally being born between between urine and feces. The human in civilization denies the fact or tries to control it, or built it by himself. Here are is an excerpt from Freud's texts:

It is to the effect that, with the assumption of an erect posture by man and with the depreciation of his sense of smell, it was not only his anal erotism which threatened to fall a victim to organic repression, but the whole of his sexuality; so that since this, the sexual function has been accompanied by a repugnance which cannot further be accounted for, and which prevents its complete satisfaction and forces it away from the sexual aim into sublimations and libidinal displacements. I know that Bleuler(1913) once pointed to the existence of a primary repelling attitude like this towards sexual life. All neurotics, and many others besides, take exception to the fact that '*inter urinaset faeces nascimur*'. The genitals, too, give rise to strong sensations of smell which many people cannot tolerate and which spoil sexual intercourse for them. Thus we should find that the deepest root of the sexual repression which advances along with civilization is the organic defence of the new form of life achieved with man's erect gait against his earlier animal existence. This result of scientific research coincides in a remarkable way with commonplace prejudices that have often made themselves heard. Nevertheless, these things are at present no more than unconfirmed possibilities which have not been substantiated by science. Nor should we forget that, in spite of the undeniable depreciation of olfactory stimuli, there exist even in Europe people among whom the strong genital odours which are so repellent to us are highly prized as sexual stimulants and who refuse to give them up. (Cf. the collections of folklore obtained from Iwan Bloch's questionnaire on the sense of smell in sexual life published in different volumes of Friedrich S. Krauss's *Anthropophyteia*).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Freud & J. Strachey (ed.) "*Civilization and its Discontents*" [1930], *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Standard Edition, Vol. 1-24), NY: W. W. Norton & Company; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (March 17, 1976): 4499 (Part IV, Footnote). Freud elsewhere writes: "Secondly, we know that the sexual instinct is originally divided into a great number of components - or rather, it develops out of them - some of which cannot be taken up into the instinct in its later form, but have at an earlier stage to be suppressed or put to other uses. These are above all the coprophilic instinctual components, which have proved incompatible with our aesthetic standards of culture, probably since, as a result of our adopting an erect gait, we raised our organ of smell from the ground. The same is true of a large portion of the sadistic urges which are a part of erotic life. But all such developmental processes

Donald C. Williams writes about philosophy, psychoanalysis and scatology:

It is easy enough, in fact, to settle the hash of Mr. Lazerowitz's professed reasons for his two theses, that all philosophy is verbal chicanery and that it is due to secret scatology, so that we might make bold to say the extreme contrary, that no philosophy is tainted either by verbal confusion or by subconscious desires. This is indeed much nearer the truth than Mr. Lazerowitz's contention, and a wholesomely error, but in honor let us register that it is an error. In so far as our ideas are not consciously incubated, they must be unconsciously so; and in so far as we are haggises of impulse and appetite, the appetite for truth must be extremely vigorous to win out. These thoughts,

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affect only the upper layers of the complex structure. The fundamental processes which produce erotic excitation remain unaltered. The excremental is all too intimately and inseparably bound up with the sexual; the position of the genitals - *inter unrinās et faeces* - remains the decisive and unchangeable factor. One might say here, varying a well-known saying of the great Napoleon: 'Anatomy is destiny'. The genitals themselves have not taken part in the development of the human body in the direction of beauty: they have remained animal, and thus love, too, has remained in essence just as animal as it ever was. The instincts of love are hard to educate; education of them achieves now too much, now too little. What civilization aims at making out of them seems unattainable except at the price of a sensible loss of pleasure; the persistence of the impulses that could not be made use of can be detected in sexual activity in the form of non-satisfaction", in Freud & Strachey (ed.) "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love", *Contributions to the Psychology of Love II*, *op.cit.*, p. 2346; and "If I may suppose that the scene of the kiss took place in this way, I can arrive at the following derivation for the feelings of disgust. Such feelings seem originally to be a reaction to the smell (and afterwards also to the sight) of excrement. But the genitals can act as a reminder of the excretory functions; and this applies especially to the male member, for that organ performs the function of micturition as well as the sexual function. Indeed, the function of micturition is the earlier known of the two, and the *only* one known during the pre-sexual period. Thus it happens that disgust becomes one of the means of affective expression in the sphere of sexual life. The Early Christian Father's '*inter unrinās et faeces nascimur*' clings to sexual life and cannot be detached from it in spite of every effort at idealization. I should like, however, expressly to emphasize my opinion that the problem is not solved by the mere pointing out of this path of association. The fact that this association *can* be called up does not show that it actually *will* be called up. And indeed in normal circumstances it will not be. A knowledge of the paths does not render less necessary a knowledge of the forces which travel along them", cf. S. Freud "The Taboo of Virginity", *Contributions to the Psychology of Love III* (1918), *op.cit.*, p. 1370.



however, are no more than philosophers have drummed into each other and every listener they could get for millennia. What I deny is not that philosophers benefit from a pathology of their subject, but that they need more of it or provide less of their own than other people, and specifically that Mr. Lazerowitz's Freudian diagnoses are true or useful.<sup>1</sup>

Nicholas Delbanco in *Speaking of writing: selected Hopwood lectures* and N.W. Hoad in *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* mention the journalist Sagoe and his scatological philosophy; the fictional character in *The Interpreters* by Wole Soyinka. I quote:

Sagoe then recalls his inter-view for his journalist job, which had to go through several levels of petty bureaucratic approval. Sagoe then outlines his scatological philosophy of voidancy for the office clerk, Matthias.<sup>2</sup>

The journalist Sagoe's scatological philosophy of Voidancy ("the most individual function of man") – a lavatory philosophy with the smallest room in the house as its temple of meditation – is send-up of negritude along with the hairsplitting of orthodoxy and revisionism in the fad philosophies of East and West.<sup>3</sup>

Queer Theory and studies on homosexuality introduce the term too. For example there is an article, reflecting on this, titled "Masculinity, Scatology, Mooning and the Queer/able Art of Gilbert & George: On the Visual Discourse of Male Ejaculation and Anal Penetration" by Cüneyt Çakırlar.<sup>4</sup> I quote the article's abstract:

The aim of this essay is to investigate the intersections between masculinity, shame, art, anality, the abject and embodiment by focusing on a particular period of the British art duo Gilbert & George's work in the 1990s. In their series *The Naked Shit Pictures* (1994), *The Fundamental Pictures* (1996) and *The Rudimentary Pictures* (1999), the duo's artistic self-performance opens a scatologi-

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<sup>1</sup> "Philosophy and Psychoanalysis", S. Hook ed. *Psychoanalysis, Scientific Method and Philosophy. A Symposium*, NYU Press 1959, p. 164f.

<sup>2</sup> N.W. Hoad *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization*, Minnesota UP, 2007, p. 24, and elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> Michigan UP 1990, p. 250.

<sup>4</sup> *Paragraph* 34.1 (2011), pp. 86-104.

cal narrative territory where the male body encounters its own abject fluids strategically magnified. Situating itself within the boundary between queer theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis with a particular focus on the phallus and the abject, this essay argues that Gilbert & George's art-works mentioned above could be regarded as visual commentaries on and queer interventions into bodily anxieties of normative masculinities. It thus reads the artists' visual discourse of performative hypervisibility as a queer/ing one where the conventional male masculinity confronts simultaneously its ejaculatory bliss and its fear of anal penetration.

Judith Butler writes:

Spinoza writes in *The Ethics* that the desire to live the right life requires the desire to live, to persist in one's own being, suggesting that ethics must always marshal some life drives, even if, as a super-egoic state, ethics threatens to become a pure culture of the dead drive. It is possible, even easy, to read Levinas as an elevated masochist and it does not help us to avert that conclusion when we consider that, when asked what he thought of psychoanalysis, he is said to have responded, *is that not a form of pornography?*<sup>1</sup>

Pornography might be philosophical in the sense that it introduces themes, considered, outside of it, as taboos. It first and openly introduced to the viewer homosexual sex, vices, sadomasochism, Kama Sutra guidelines, and "scat" porn movies. So, pornography pioneers and primes over and then mainstream thought and media (writing, visual, etc.) follow. Pornography is like the mysticism sect of private life, where taboos are de-tabooed, and they slowly spread into areas other than the sex-life, the life in general, and even in public manifestations, speeches, depictions, visualizations. Philosophy is still sceptic about de-tabooing and debunking the mysticism around some topics, such as shitting and other bodily excrements or secretions, but especially the poop. This paper could have been suitably titled *The Philosophy of Secret Secretions*.

In *reddit* I found, accordingly, this very precise quote:

Perhaps acknowledging the "shitty lives" we lead, shitting daily as we do, we can "fuck this shit up" and create a real "insurrection at the ontological level" (Judith Butler); perhaps a new move for queer

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<sup>1</sup> *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London: Verso 2004, p. 140.

theorists to take up the call for reality-neurosis contra neo-manifest destiny psychotic withdrawal (I am using psychotic here in Lacan's terms) along with a move into a scatological position of deconstructive propositions making embodied antagonisms to the structural-Symbolic issues of patriarchy, class and other oppressions. (posted by "petite\_squirrel":  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/iamverysmart/comments/2ceof0/queer\\_theor\\_y\\_scatological\\_investigations/](https://www.reddit.com/r/iamverysmart/comments/2ceof0/queer_theor_y_scatological_investigations/))

As for the aforementioned Levinas' response, I would add another two aphorisms from Antonio Porchia's *Voices*, that can be applied for Psychoanalysis, they basically (in this interpretation, here) says this: do not clean or sanitize that much your inner self, because you might end up with nothing!

Te depuras, tedepuras... ¡Cuidado! Podría no quedar nada.<sup>1</sup>

You scrub (purify/clean) and scrub yourself... Careful! You might be left with nothing (/There might be nothing left – of you).

No descubras, quepuede no habernada. Y nada no se vuelve a cubrir.

Don't uncover, because there might be nothing. And nothing can't be covered again.

Is (a/the) philosophy of poop or scatology disgusting and therefore repulsive? If the answer is yes, then all bodily excrements and fluids must also be disgusting, but we consider some of them as *jouissance* when excreted in the context of the sexual act.

I am sure amidst Kant's writing of Pure this and Pure that, his hand was also used for wiping his philosophical ass. And Socrates must have urgently abandoned a dialogue because of an attack of diarrhoea.

Philosophy is (*should be!*) by its essence politically *in-correct*.

PS: After a discussion with my friend A.T., I am also wondering about this: these famous 21 grams that we supposedly lose when we die, people say it is the soul that leaves the body. What actually leaves the body is liquids from all body holes, excrements, and all the bacteria and other microorganisms (the "existential" microbiome) that live on us while we are, too, alive. What does that now say about the human soul, as the anatomy, to Freud, said about the human fate?

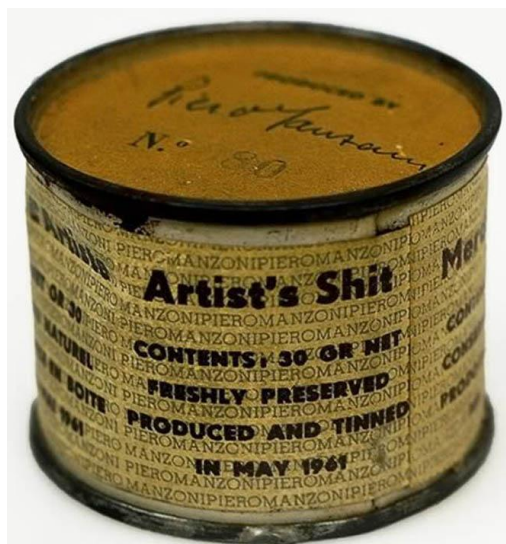
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<sup>1</sup> *Voces*, Buenos Aires: Edición de Impulso 1943. The first translation is mine, from the translation of *Voces* in Greek as  $\Phi\omega\nu\acute{\epsilon}\varsigma$ ; the second is from online databases.

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## On Christodoulou's "Ugliness Abject Disgust ...as an allergy to the (Feminine) Other"

Erin Bradfield

Marina Christodoulou's paper contains a lot of interesting ideas about the intersections of ugliness, abjection, and disgust. I am almost at a loss for a starting point here, in that there are so many things I'd like to talk about and ponder together. Since my main areas of interest regard ugliness, disgust, and Kant, I will take these as my point of departure as a way to motivate some questions about the relationship of avant-garde art, disgust, and abjection. The key question that I would like to explore by the end of this commentary regards the relationship of the avant-garde and disgust. In particular, I'd like to explore how boundary crossing and transgression (in art and in culture) might lead us to a new understanding of disgust as a "culture creating emotion" as William Ian Miller frames it.

*Kant.* As MC notes in her paper, negative aesthetics (which for me includes concepts of the ugly, disgusting, horrific, grotesque, monstrous, etc.) have historically been neglected in favor of a focus upon the beautiful, the pleasant, and so on. While this has been changing in recent years, with panels, articles, books, and conferences like this one, we must still grapple with the marginalization and exclusion of these ideas from many discussions of aesthetics. In order to recuperate and restore these concepts to their rightful place within the discipline, we must do our best to be as clear as possible about their conceptual limits as well as about their relationship to each other when making comparative statements.

Early in the essay, MC treats ugliness and disgust as nearly interchangeable terms, or at least, in such a way that their conceptual distinction is not fully clear. For instance, MC claims, "As Kant noted, disgust is what is aroused by a kind of ugliness. Ugliness is the ground where disgust is evoked".<sup>1</sup> This is a bit too quick – I'd like to hear more about how you understand the relationship of ugliness and disgust. In particular, what do you mean by claiming that "ugliness is *the ground* where disgust is e-

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<sup>1</sup> This issue, p. 122.

voked”? Does this indicate not just a close kinship of concepts, but their very interchangeability? Or something else entirely?

In an effort to pin down these negative aesthetic concepts, let’s turn to Kant in order to better understand his sense of the relationship between ugliness and disgust. You mention briefly that Kant considers disgust to be that which is “aroused by a kind of ugliness” (*loc.cit.*). But it is important to note *what kind* of ugliness he has in mind specifically. 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.<sup>1</sup>

While throughout the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant says precious little about ugliness, this passage provides a hint of what Kant’s views on this issue might ultimately be. First, Kant distinguishes how we respond to *nature* and *art* with respect to beauty, ugliness, and disgust. To be clear, he does not claim that in nature we would approve of or be pleased by ugliness.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he asserts that fine art “surpasses nature” because ugliness can be *described* or *presented* beautifully.

Going a step further, it is worth noting that Kant classifies that which arouses disgust as a kind of ugliness that is “beyond the pale”. We cannot be disinterested about it in principle or in practice. “It obliterates all aesthetic liking and ... artistic beauty”<sup>3</sup> according to Kant. Reading between the lines, our reaction to that which is disgusting is so viscerally rooted in

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<sup>1</sup> *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. Pluhar, Cambridge, MA: Hackett Pub Co 1987, §48, p. 180, 312.

<sup>2</sup> This includes that which arouses disgust.

<sup>3</sup> Kant, §48, p. 180, 312.

*interest* (in this case, *negative interest*) that we are unable to separate ourselves from it in order to make a pure judgment of taste. As Kant argues, “the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of the object itself”.<sup>1</sup> Disgust is a direct reaction to something towards which we cannot be unbiased – it immediately interests us in a negative fashion.

Kant argues that in this state of visceral 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”.<sup>2</sup> This further complicates our experience of that which disgusts us. The object presents itself for positive consideration, while what we feel is negative: displeasure, pain, or even revulsion. There is a push-pull experience here; we are repulsed, but also drawn towards that which disgusts us.<sup>34</sup> We cannot separate ourselves from the object; we are too directly concerned with its existence and its potential to contaminate or harm us. This is why we cannot be disinterested in that which arouses disgust. For this reason, disgust is a limit case of the ugly for Kant – the extreme end of the scale, that which is beyond the pale, that in which we cannot take disinterested interest.

Flash forward – What I refer to in Kant as the “push-pull” disgust response reappears in later arguments as the “aversive-attractive” response in disgust. A cross section of the contemporary literature highlights the primal, visceral nature of disgust; its potential to contaminate; and its aversive effect, among other characteristics. (See Korsmeyer, Miller, Daniel Kelly, Colin McGinn, Daniel Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, etc.). Such work also emphasizes the notion that disgust is intrusive.<sup>5</sup> As Miller claims, we must be conscious of our disgust; we cannot rid ourselves of the thoughts or their attendant feelings. We might reflect this intrusiveness back into Kant’s argument: the simultaneous insistence on enjoyment and our experience of the opposite spurs cognitive tension that we may experience as *intrusive*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Korsmeyer points us to a helpful example in Plato 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”, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul & the Fair in Aesthetics*, OUP 2011, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> I also wonder about the relationship of disgust and the sublime in Kant’s thought, especially on the issue of the push-pull response. But that is a topic of another essay.

<sup>5</sup> W.I. Miller *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Harvard UP, 1997, p. 8.



There is a push-pull between pleasure and our forceful resistance of it due to revulsion. Put another way, there is a conflict between what the object (the work) demands and what we experience as subjects. To reiterate the key point I want to take from Kant: We cannot be disinterested in that which disgusts us, in that which affects us on such a visceral level, physically or morally. This is its primary mark of distinction in comparison to ugliness.

*Korsmeyer.* This leads to my next point about disgust as a potentially productive quality – and the work of Korsmeyer. First, one question: MC focuses on Korsmeyer’s *Gender and Aesthetics* (2004), as she thinks through questions about abjection, disgust, and gender. I’d like to hear more about her arguments from this work, especially as they relate to disgust and bodily fluids. Does Korsmeyer claim that female bodily fluids are a *special source* of disgust above and beyond that which is generated by bodily fluids more generally? Or merely that *all* bodily fluids – urine, feces, blood, pus, semen, menstrual fluid, and so on – are a source of disgust? Does Korsmeyer claim that disgust is connected or intertwined with *femininity*? Or is her point more about challenging and transgressing boundaries? (I will return to this point momentarily).

Rather than just utilizing *Gender and Aesthetics*, MC might also consider Korsmeyer’s 2011 work, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and Fair in Aesthetics*. This work is crucial to bring to bear on the kinds of questions MC is asking about disgust, gender, and culture and could be quite helpful to her project as a whole.

In *Savoring Disgust*, Korsmeyer outlines three commonly held criticisms of aesthetic disgust as a way to frame her argument about the power of disgust: First, it is so “polluting, lowly, and foul”, that it is “aesthetically discountable”. Second, it spurs a visceral reaction or gut level response that cannot be aesthetically manipulated through mimesis. Third, artists’ renderings of that which is disgusting often redirect us towards aesthetic qualities and emotions apart from disgust, such as the tragic, the grotesque, comic, or those that arouse pity, compassion, and amusement, among others.<sup>1</sup> (This part might be interesting for MC’s work, especially based on her wide-ranging interests in negative aesthetics). In response to criticism two, Korsmeyer argues that disgust’s direct and visceral response can actually be an advantage of sorts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Korsmeyer, p. 39f.

<sup>2</sup> For more on these arguments, see Korsmeyer’s *Savoring Disgust*, especially Chapter Two, “Attractive Aversions”. Throughout the book, Korsmeyer explores the

I have argued elsewhere in an essay entitled, “Negative Aesthetic Response and Community” (as part of a panel on Negative Aesthetics at the American Society for Aesthetics Annual Meeting put together by Jane Forsey) in a Korsmeyerian vein that disgust has dual power to motivate extreme engagement based on its aversive-attractive nature. It may spur reactions that are protective, destructive, or both. In particular, I have argued that disgust can be an important factor in community formation and consolidation – with particular emphasis on communities of resistance and refusal.

*Nietzsche.* Resistance and refusal lead me back to the point about disgust and the transgression of boundaries – and to my second question: Is that which disgusts us truly “ineffable”, “unsayable”, or “unpresentable”? If so, *why*? What qualities or characteristics point in this direction? Is it actually *unspeakable*? Or merely unsayable in the sense that it is *transgressive, taboo, boundary crossing, and beyond the pale* (to return to Kant’s distinction between ugliness and disgust)? Say more here. So too, why is the *source* of the unspeakableness of disgust the *feminine*? To be clear, I am on board with the notion that disgust is that which is transgressive/taboo/boundary crossing/beyond the pale. The move that I don’t fully follow occurs with the connection of those notions of transgression and subversion with the female subject specifically as someone or something that disgusts or sickens.

For example, MC states, “The feminine, maybe because of this order of things in infancy, is always associated with the realm of the ineffable, the unpresentable, and the intuitive. It is the ‘eternally creative primordial mother’, as Nietzsche describes the Dionysian ... In the realm of patriarchy, the unpresentable is not permitted, it becomes taboo, it is a private exclusiveness of the female: it is ugly and disgusting. It evokes discomfort”.<sup>1</sup> (MC follows this argument with the example of menstrual blood masturbation from Joanna Frueh – from *Gender and Aesthetics*). I have a lot of questions about this passage, but I will limit myself to a few regarding Nietzsche: Is Nietzsche’s *Dionysian* meant to be a stand-in for the feminine?

On a straightforward reading of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian is associated with intoxication, ecstasy, revelry, the collapse of individuality, and the recollection of the primordial unity of humans.<sup>2</sup> Dionysus, the god of wine, drinking, and revelry, activates this aesthetic force. According

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paradox about whether disgust can be turned from a negative quality into a positive aesthetic experience.

<sup>1</sup> p. 121f.

<sup>2</sup> Trans. W. Kaufmann, NY: Vintage Books, 1967, §1-2.

to Giacomo Gambino in “Nietzsche and the Greeks: Identity, Politics, and Tragedy”, the Dionysian is “a celebration of life’s creative cycles, [which] opened the Greeks to the richness of undifferentiated life beyond all established identities”.<sup>1</sup> The Apollinian, on the other hand, is associated with dreams, illusion, and mere appearance. According to Gambino, it is connected with “poetic immortalizing, myth, the state, and the agonistic affirmation of the individual [who] provide[s] a measure of permanence against time”.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the Apollinian serves as a seduction to life and the extension of the will through the presentation of beautiful appearances.<sup>3</sup> Given these definitions, what would it mean to map the Dionysian on to the feminine as MC has suggested? Is it even possible to do, given the notion that the Dionysian has pushed beyond all established identities to undifferentiated life? Gambino’s reading of Nietzsche is borne out by the first section of *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which Nietzsche discusses the Dionysian – as giving us access to oneness and “primordial unity”. This makes it difficult to connect the Dionysian with the feminine in such a direct fashion. But even if we grant the idea of the Dionysian as a stand in for the feminine, what would the implications of this gender assignment mean for *The Birth of Tragedy* as a whole? Would this necessarily imply that the Apollonian is the *masculine*?

To further complicate this question, we must recall that Nietzsche establishes a dynamic, agonistic relationship between the Dionysian and Apollonian. That is, when the Dionysian strengthens the advance of its cause, the Apollonian, in turn, will strike back against this surge with ever increasing reinforcements. Nietzsche states, “And so, wherever the Dionysian prevailed, the Apollonian was checked and destroyed. But, on the other hand, it was equally certain that, wherever the first Dionysian onslaught was successfully withstood, the authority and majesty of the Delphic god exhibited itself as more rigid and menacing than ever”.<sup>4</sup> As Nietzsche frames these forces, the Dionysian and Apollonian are rival tendencies locked in unending combat. It must be noted that even in their opposition, the Dionysian and Apollonian are *necessary to each other* and that this conflict is required for the production of art. Especially if we read these claims regarding the Dionysian as the feminine in the backdrop of this agonistic relationship regarding combat and destruction, the idea that the Dionysian may actually be the

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<sup>1</sup> *Polity* 28 (4) (1996): 415-444., p. 416.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, §3, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, §4, p. 47.

feminine takes on a rather sinister valence – perhaps with implications not intended by MC.

*Boundaries/Boundary Crossing/and Culture.* As a way to close out this commentary, let me return to the question of transgression and boundary crossing. It seems that this is one of the key characteristics of disgust with which we need to grapple. I want to return to the idea MC raises in conjunction with Miller, author of *The Anatomy of Disgust*, about disgust as “one of our more aggressive culture-creating passions”.<sup>1</sup> The key point about boundaries regards inclusion and exclusion – what inside or central as contrasted with that which is outside or marginal. This idea has implications not just regarding sources of bodily disgust (wherein that which is inside is now outside in a seemingly problematic and/or uncomfortable way), but also in terms of community formation and maintenance. Disgust – whether aesthetic or moral – can be used as a way to police boundaries of communities or of culture. The paradoxical attraction or perverse magnetism of disgust can have important implications for community – whether with the intent to protect a worldview, hence policing the boundaries of community or culture, or with the intent of developing or galvanizing a subculture around a work, movement, or artist. Perhaps all this points back towards questions about transgression: what is excluded from the center, what is treated as marginal, what is censored or silenced by those in positions of power.

Boundaries are there, on the one hand, to set limits: to keep things in/keep things out/keep things tidy. On the other hand, I argue that boundaries are there *to be transgressed*. This is where art that presses on, challenges, subverts, or traverses boundaries aesthetically, morally, or politically is so powerful. As MC points out, there is more than one function of art. Especially in terms of the importance of transformation and expansion of aesthetic expression, I lean heavily towards the second she names – art’s agitating function. She states, “This sedative capacity of art is much needed, as much as its agitating one ... Beauty can fulfill the first, ugliness, and especially disgust, the second. Official organs of government and other societal controlling authorities, do strategically censor art’s agitating capacity, while they encourage its sedative one. Beauty *restores*. Ugliness *changes*”, (p. 123).

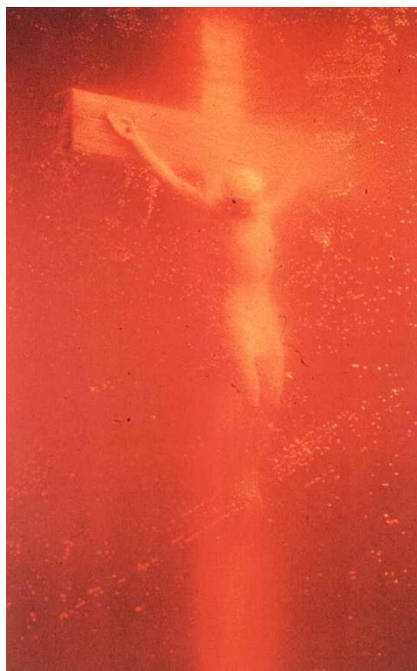
With this agitating function of art in mind, we must consider anew challenging or subversive art that breaks boundaries and aims to elicit an intense response from us – one that might in turn, spur change. This can be

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, p. xii.

found in avant-garde art, works of genius in Kant's sense – that set the new rule to art, or, to the case most present at hand, to works with ugliness or those that elicit disgust. Art that is subversive in such ways has the potential to expand and transform the limits of expression and culture. As such, they have great importance to the formation and maintenance of communities.

To return to Nietzsche for a moment, the dynamic agonistic relationship of the Dionysian and Apollonian seems apt here. Disgust pushes our boundaries and we continually renegotiate our position going forward with respect to aesthetic expression, but also with respect to our social and political relationships in the world. This means the continual negotiation of boundaries, the development and transformation of expression, and the introduction and preservation of communities of all sorts, including subcultures, counterpublics, and even cults.



## On Andy Warhol's Ugly Aestheticism

Jonathan W. Johnson

In Bertrand Naivin's insightful discussion of ugliness within the life and artistry of Andy Warhol, we find ourselves encountering ugliness in a multitude of ways and forms. Like the skin and layers of an onion, or the multiple self-containment of Russian *Matryoshka* nesting dolls, Naivin leads us on a journey of both uncovering and discovery in Warhol's work – which is a delightful irony because the artist's work was often so very flat and seemingly banal. I find that the questions raised by Naivin's observations also relate to this layering of multiple uglinesses. As such I will begin my review with a focus on this spectrum of ugliness, which then leads into consideration of photographic reference, self-reference, and the selection of ugly references.

In keeping with the spirit of Naivin's paper I will remain, as does he, in treatments of art criticism, history, and personality rather than fashioning an argument or counterargument out of the writing. This approach (as much as the subject at hand) allows us to ask questions about Warhol himself as we see him through Naivin's lens, questions which are summarized in my closing remarks.

*Various Kinds of Ugliness.* Naivin's exploration of Warhol's life allows the reader to find ugliness around every bend. This is not a subtle revelation, for we are instantly introduced to forms of ugliness in Warhol's crafting of himself as an artist. Depending on how one might parse the themes, I noted around fifteen occasions of ugliness in just the first two pages of Naivin's article. Among these exemplary *kinds* of ugliness are:

- Uglification of concept of artist and artistic process
- Ugly depictions of ugly culture
- Ugliness of ugly events (further uglified by their re-representation)
- Making of ugliness consumable
- Ugliness of contemporary numbness to tragedy and pathos by overexposure and “a loss of sense”
- These are just in two pages (also formal, medium, etc)
- A recurring theme which seems to come through is what Naivin describes as an aesthetization of the ugliness of the

times. A quote: “Warhol makes aesthetic the ugly actualities of his time...” also that there is a “gap between reality and it’s Warhol’s version, the pop artist represents post-modernity as a farce, a joke”.

This quick enumeration is only the start of Naivin’s discussion of ugliness within Warhol, but they do represent some of the themes of ugliness weaving through the work. We are led to a few questions about the evident variety of ugliness in Warhol, which Naivin convinces us with by force of multiple examples. Firstly, is there a guiding theme, or singular thread that weaves together the kinds of uglinesses in Warhol? From Naivin’s conclusion it seems this should be the aesthetization of that which is in itself ugly, namely the vanity and commercialization of modernity. Yet for us to label modernity as such there must be a beautiful – or at least a positive – which has been lost or marred. This also leads us to an interesting secondary question: Because the artist seems to have deliberately chosen these banal, commercialized, or even tragic images (as in the disaster series) we may imagine some distance between the artist and the artwork. But Naivin brings our attention to the important role of self-styling and self-photographing in Warhol’s life, and so the line between the producer and the product blurs.

We may suppose that Warhol was creating a persona which echoed the statements of his artwork. Against this view of a sophisticated crafting of self as art, we encounter statements from Warhol (noted below) which embrace the commercialism and celebrity-obsession of his era. Is this simply an act? We also read of stories in which his seed-ideas were wrapped in layers of commerciality: from depictions of money because of it’s attraction for the artist to paying friends for their ideas. Was Warhol himself an intentional example of this idea (in his work and person) or a somewhat unwitting (or half-witted) example of this idea – living out this ugly aesthetization? I would suggest there may be an interesting tension here of an artist taken to be a chief herald of portraying post-modernity, against one who is actually being caught in the frame, caught in the moment himself – whose impact lies more in his modeling the predicament than even his model making.

*The Photographic Element.* One of the insights in Naivin’s approach is the depiction of such ambiguity through the lens of Warhol’s obsession with photography. He calls our attention to Warhol’s use of photography in an attenuated form (the Polaroid – harbinger of the ‘selfie’), which is presented as a natural linkage to mass communication. In seeing

this important element in Warhol's work we are also led to wonder if mass media as we know it, and the pop art which derived from it, could have come about without photos? It seems an inevitable consequence of the medium as Naivin's quotes from Benjamin and others predicted. This sense of necessity both to mass media and to pop then transforms the novelty of Warhol's use into a type of inevitability.

In her work *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag explores the failure of photographic images to move cultures morally (in particular, against war and violence). Though many purveyors of photographic reportage had hoped the images would awaken consciousness and move the public to end conflicts, in an ironic turn the very exposure to images of violence became *overexposure* and desensitization. Is this loss of connection intrinsic to the medium and – importantly for our view of Warhol as a purveyor of pop novelty – therefore already dead on arrival for Warhol? Or can his work be viewed as an attempt at revival? Are the colored smears on shoddy photos mocking the image or enlivening it? Or (less intriguingly for the art but no less for our view of the artist) are they simply a way to sell more prints?

*The Artist as Image.* It seems that we cannot escape the question of the uglification of the artist as well as his artistry in Naivin's depiction of Warhol's ugly works. In his self portraits Warhol crafts an image which is not beautiful – it is ugly. Expressionless, artificial, as banal as the pop pieces he was producing. Where there is a smile it is wooden. If we are to view these as artworks, which was the obvious intention (there are candid photos of Warhol at parties and gatherings in which he is not merely the mask of makeup his self-portraits depict), what are they saying to us? That this is who he wished to portray, or how he felt *we* must view one another?

His snapshots of himself and others may have the aura of spontaneity, but are selective as well. Naivin reminds us of the artist's affinity for the Polaroid camera, which in turn begs for a connection to selfies in today's society. It would be a welcome inclusion for Naivin to here explore the overlap or perhaps genealogy (if there is one) in the rise of instant photography and self-obsessive photography. Indeed, I would enjoy hearing if Naivin feels that the work of Warhol and other Pop artists elevating the trivial and commercial might have laid the groundwork for the acceptance and ubiquity of selfies. Like selfies, many of Warhol's photos, though seemingly quick glimpses of life or activity still peer into an artificially posed reality.



*Selection of Ugly References.* This posed reality in photography or in aesthetic, artistic portrayal of commercial products *seems* selective and therefore highly original. Though Naivin notes in the outset of his article that Warhol went against the Renaissance-onward ideal of the genius-master artist, the ideal of the artist as a person of ingenious inspiration lingers in the mythos of Warhol's creativity. Yet what are we to make of the supposed "given-ness" of his ideas? Might Naivin also include this as an uglification of the artistic process as we (or Warhol) perceive it?

To exemplify the above, Eric Shanes in *Pop Art Tradition* recalls the well-known story of how in 1961 a friend gave Warhol the ideas to portray money and soup cans.<sup>1</sup> It has been claimed that these were the two things he liked most. Is this myth or marrow? Further, in the next year an art curator told him to "stop affirming life and instead portray the death that pervaded America" yet connecting the first quote with the second makes us suspicious of Warhol's intent again – was the decision to portray death because there was something that needed to be communicated, raised, or even excised, or was it simply what the friend knew would sell? Was Warhol exemplifying or himself an example of the times?

Naivin also focuses our attention to the content of the disaster series. With the exception of Evelyn McHale (which I maintain as an image of beauty, though the tragic content is a species of ugliness), Warhol repeatedly chose images of ugly tragedies and the ugliness of modern voyeurism relating to them. In doing so he made profound statements about the commercialization of tragic images. But if we allow ourselves to pair this process with Warhol's own (pretended or not) interest in profiting from the commerciality and celebrity of his own art, do we not find him complicit in the ugly exposure?

*Valuing Ugliness or Ugly Values?* Naivin ends his article on a provocative note, one that was raised by his examination of ugliness in the work of Andy Warhol. It is a note about value – or absence of value – in the culture in which the artist operated. "The ugly aestheticism of our post and hyper-modernity reveals a valueless society ...." For those engaging with Warhol and his art, we see him as both creator and a 'creature' of his era. So may we extend the concern with value from Warhol's work to Warhol himself?

The Andy Warhol Museum has compiled hundreds of Warhol quotes to accompany images of his work, and provides us with a quixotic claim from the artist in reference to ugliness. While claiming that he was not a

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<sup>1</sup> E. Shanes *The pop art tradition: Responding to mass-culture*, NY: Parkstone 2006.

“social critic” in regard to American culture, Warhol goes on to say, “I’m not trying to criticize the U.S. in any way, not trying to show up any ugliness at all”.<sup>1</sup> Yet as Naivin so convincingly shows us, ugliness runs throughout the process and production of Warhol’s oeuvre. The last line of Naivin’s article briefly raises the specter of “a society without an absolute”. If we view Warhol as caught up in his culture, yet profiting from it, we see him as a tragic work himself. But more intriguingly might be the alternative of the savvy commentator-creator beyond the makeup mask, who expressed the longing for such absolutes. After his death, many in the artworld were puzzled to learn that the notoriously free-thinking Warhol had secretively maintained – even obsessively – the Catholicism of his upbringing. How strange to learn this pop artist, a herald of modernity’s ugliness, was personally engaged – in some manner – with the values of antiquity. And so we leave the purveyor of ugliness, and Naivin’s insightful harvestings, with more questions still.



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<sup>1</sup> Andy Warhol Museum *Andy Warhol 365 takes*, London: Thames & Hudson 2004.

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