

# Disgust's Transparency

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**This is a pre-print.**

**Please refer to the published version (*British Journal of Aesthetics*, 56, 4: 347—54):**

<https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayw054>.

## **Abstract**

The transparency thesis for disgust claims that what is disgusting in nature is always also disgusting in art. Versions of the thesis have been endorsed by, among others, Kant, Lessing, Mendelssohn, and, more recently, Arthur Danto, Carolyn Korsmeyer, and Jenefer Robinson. The present paper articulates and discusses different readings of the thesis. It concludes that the transparency thesis is false.

## Disgust's Transparency

Disgust, at least in the philosophical literature, has often been seen as a peculiar emotion with respect to its role in art appreciation. In fact, the received view concerning the role of disgust in art<sup>1</sup> has it that what is disgusting in nature cannot but be disgusting in art as well.<sup>2</sup> Versions of this view were endorsed by those who, in the eighteenth century, argued against the compatibility of disgust with aesthetic pleasure (by e.g. Johann Adolf Schlegel (1751/9), Moses Mendelssohn (1760), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1766/1962) and Immanuel Kant (1790/1978)); but the view has also more recently been endorsed by aestheticians with more varied attitudes towards the value of artistic treatments of the disgusting (see Carolyn Korsmeyer (2011 and 2012), Arthur Danto (2001) and Jenefer Robinson

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the focus of the authors discussed, this paper will only discuss disgust as is typically elicited by objects such as bodily excreta, corpses or wounds. It is customary to call this “bodily”, “physical”, or “visceral” disgust, mostly in order to distinguish it from ‘moral’ disgust. I will not enter here into the disputed issue of what, if anything, differentiates moral from physical disgust. For my purposes it is simply sufficient that my reader accept a distinction between two different classes of (typical) disgust elicitors, one for bodily and another for other disgusts, including the moral. Moreover, in choosing examples of disgust elicitors, I will focus on those that are most widespread and least controversial. Although there is cross-individual and cross-cultural diversity in the set of things that elicit disgust (as well as some degree of contextual sensitivity, change over time etc.), empirical investigations show a substantial degree of convergence across cultures and individuals over a core set of disgust elicitors (see e.g. Curtis and Biran (2001)).

<sup>2</sup> The import of the alleged similarity between emotional responses to nature and art lies in the constraints it poses on the value of disgusting art. In particular, the eighteenth-century authors who endorsed the similarity in question took it as a reason why representations of the disgusting should be avoided in art, insofar as they afford the same unpleasantness—and hence as little aesthetic pleasure—as their real-life (counterpart) subjects.

(2014)).<sup>3</sup> The view is often accompanied by the statement of the uniqueness, or peculiarity, of disgust amongst all emotions, in having such a feature.<sup>4</sup> In this paper I challenge the received view.

Korsmeyer (2011 and 2012) has prominently revived the case for the view just described, a view that she has labelled the ‘transparency thesis’: “when it is rendered artistically, that which is disgusting in nature remains disgusting in art”.<sup>5</sup> In other words, disgust always makes its effects felt *through* the shield of representation.<sup>6</sup> (It is also perhaps worth emphasizing that the thesis is a general claim about disgust elicitation. As such, even a single counterexample case is sufficient to refute it.) Although Korsmeyer's discussion of the transparency thesis is significantly clearer and more articulate than any of its antecedents, it leaves room for a number of ambiguities. On one possible disambiguation, the transparency thesis states that:

(WTT) *Ceteris paribus* and on a considered judgement, a realistic representation of a disgust elicitor is disgusting if the same elicitor encountered in real life (or its non-fictional counterpart) is.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Menninghaus (2003) for a well-informed account of the eighteenth-century sources mentioned.

<sup>4</sup> All of the aforementioned authors in fact endorse versions of this statement, except perhaps for Robinson (2014), who does not explicitly commit to it (see 68—69).

<sup>5</sup> Korsmeyer (2011), 53.

<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on representations is shared by Korsmeyer (see e.g. 2011, 47, 55) and by the rest of the aforementioned authors alike. This emphasis may appear inappropriate, given the reference to *art* in “what is disgusting in nature cannot but be disgusting in art as well”. Art is not necessarily representational, nor are representations necessarily artistic. Representation is however most important in, as it were, modifying or extinguishing emotional responses ordinarily had towards real-life, really present situations. Other factors, such as merely understanding some situation as being artistic (as opposed to non-artistic) are not generally nearly as important. Moreover, such factors are much more difficult to test, even just (or perhaps especially) in the case of thought experiments—not least on account of the relatively controversial nature of the artistic/non-artistic distinction. (For an empirical attempt to work on the artistic/non-artistic distinction, albeit one that also focuses on representations, see Wagner *et al.* 2014.)

Nonetheless, there is also a stronger formulation of the transparency thesis, according to which:

(STT) A realistic representation of a disgust elicitor, *ceteris paribus* and on a considered judgement, is *as disgusting* as the same elicitor (or its non-fictional counterpart) would be if encountered in real life.<sup>7</sup>

Korsmeyer is not consistently committed to either formulation, and the stronger one is in fact more in line with her argument in support of the transparency thesis.<sup>8</sup> Her argument is in fact based on a sensory understanding of disgust elicitation. For her, disgust is elicited through the mere perception of certain sensory features that are characteristic of disgust elicitors. Therefore, if these sensory features are realistically reproduced in a representation, there will be no difference in disgust elicitation between a fictional and a non-fictional representation, as well as between a present elicitor and a representation of it.

However, as Contesi (2015) shows, (STT) is implausible for it rests on the wrong understanding of disgust elicitation. According to the current consensus in the cognitive sciences, in fact, disgust is—unlike distaste—a primarily ideational, rather than sensory response. In other words, disgust is primarily

<sup>7</sup> For both (WTT) and (STT), I focus on cases in which appreciators are aware of the circumstances of the works they attend to: if it is fiction, that it is fiction; if it is not fiction, that it is not; if it is a representation, rather than the real thing really present (or potentially affecting), that it is a representation etc. This focus is in line with the kind of considered appreciation that it is most appropriate for a large part of artworks, especially in the more traditional kinds of artistic experience.

<sup>8</sup> This is argued for by Contesi (2015), 110—113, from whom I also borrow the following two disambiguations: (1) the addition of a *ceteris paribus* clause (limiting the similarity alleged by the thesis to equal viewpoints—e.g. same distance, same lighting conditions etc.—and sensory access—e.g. same sensory modalities involved etc.); and (2) a restriction to realistic representations, considering examples of non-realistic representations that are obviously non-transparent (e.g. Picasso's *Guernica* (1937)).

elicited in virtue of the *idea* of a certain disgusting thing, rather than in virtue of its sensory features. Distaste is the response that one has to what is sensorily unpleasant (in one or more sensory modalities). Some do not like the taste of broccolis for instance, or the smell of petrol, or the touch of velvet. By contrast, disgust is a response that is primarily elicited by the idea of something being (or having been contaminated by) a token of a particular kind of thing. Not all disgusting things are distasteful and not all distasteful things disgust. For instance, a subject who sniffs decay odours from two opaque vials containing the same substance will like the odour coming from the vial that, she is told, contains cheese, and be disgusted by the odour of the vial that she is told contains faeces. Moreover, substances that many would be disgusted at the prospect of eating—e.g. insects or faeces—are disgusting in virtue of what they are, rather than of their sensory properties. Many of us have never actually tasted insects or faeces. And some in fact come to like eating insects if they try them and manage to overcome their initial disgust.<sup>9</sup>

Although Korsmeyer's argument fails,<sup>10</sup> it remains to be seen whether some other argument can more plausibly support the transparency thesis. In doing that, it is worth considering different possible formulations of the transparency thesis. The two formulations I will focus on more than others are the aforementioned strong and weak formulations: (STT) and (WTT). In those, I consider both sides of the distinction between what can be called the 'presence/representation' and the 'fiction/non-fiction' dichotomies.<sup>11</sup> The claim that what is disgusting in nature cannot but be disgusting in art might concern the (absence of a) difference in (the potential for) emotion elicitation between a real-life, really present

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<sup>9</sup> See Rozin and Fallon (1987) and Herz *et al.* (2001).

<sup>10</sup> Other interpretations of Korsmeyer's view are possible. In particular, she suggests that the ideational view of disgust elicitation advocated by the aforementioned empirical literature is mistaken for it presupposes the separability of sensory and ideational appraisals (Korsmeyer (2011), 65). On the basis of such remarks, one might be inclined to attribute a hybrid, sensory-ideational view of disgust elicitation to her. Nonetheless, as Contesi (2015), 114—115 argues, and the discussion of the "image interpreted" view later in this paper contributes to show, this would not be a coherent view to take.

disgusting thing (or one that can potentially affect the prospective emoter or her significant others) and a representation of that thing. Alternatively, the claim might concern the dichotomy between a fictional and a non-fictional representation of a disgusting thing. The former might seem like the most natural understanding of the transparency thesis, and it is also the most appropriate understanding of (at least most of) the aforementioned eighteenth-century texts. Instead, Korsmeyer appears to merge the presence/representation and fiction/non-fiction dichotomies into one single issue.<sup>12</sup> However, it is worth considering both dichotomies, while also making sure that they are appropriately kept distinct.

Moreover, (WTT) and (STT) both include a 'on a considered judgement' clause. This refers to the distinction between immediate and considered disgust responses.<sup>13</sup> This is not necessarily a distinction in kind: process theories of emotions, amongst others, describe emotional episodes as a continuum of adjustments or revisions of the first, immediate appraisal and response.<sup>14</sup> I focus on considered responses

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<sup>11</sup> Matravers (2014) has independently put forward a similar set of distinctions: the confrontation situation / representation situation and fiction/non-fiction distinctions (45 ff.; Matravers traces back the former distinction to Gerrig (1993), 189). Matravers construes the distinction between confrontation and representation situations on the basis of the distinction between situations on which audiences can vs cannot possibly act. As a consequence, situations which would intuitively be construed as involving representations (e.g. drone-mediated military actions) become confrontation situations on Matravers's account. In part to avoid such counter-intuitive consequences, I prefer to adopt the more natural distinction between presence and representation. Where appropriate, I will still be able to add any further considerations that may be relevant for the particular emotions and situations discussed (e.g. those concerning an appreciator's possibility to act on, or be acted upon, or the situation's power to affect an appreciator). Nonetheless, as far as my main theses and arguments are concerned, nothing would change by translating them in the appropriate fashion into Matravers's terminology.

<sup>12</sup> See Korsmeyer (2011), 47, 53—56.

<sup>13</sup> I am greatly indebted to an anonymous referee for the *BJA* for pressing me on paying more attention to this distinction.

<sup>14</sup> See Robinson (2005) for process theories. I talk of both appraisals/judgements and responses since I assume the largely uncontroversial view that appraisals play a central role in emotion processing. This assumption is compatible with a very wide sub-class of the emotion theories that are currently debated, including cognitive theories of various stripes as well as process theories and new Jamesian theories *à la* Prinz (2004).

because they are usually considered as the most decisive in the context of art appreciation and attributions of aesthetic value—especially in the case of the more traditional artistic experiences. But more immediate judgements and responses are also interesting, and I will not completely neglect to consider them in what follows.

Can a different case from Korsmeyer's be successfully made for (WTT) or (STT)? I will argue that it cannot. I will argue that both the weak and strong readings of the transparency thesis, and both with respect to the presence/representation and fiction/non-fiction dichotomies, are false. In the following sense, disgust is elicited by a (fictional or non-fictional) representation in the same way as many other emotions (including fear, pity, anger etc.) are. Firstly, the intentional object of disgust is the subject of the representation (whether existing or not). Secondly, where belief is not appropriate, a viewer, spectator, reader etc. will entertain the thought of, or *imagine* what is represented if she is to be disgusted.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, let us consider what happens when a representation elicits disgust. Say there is a realistic painting of a festering wound. There is an appreciator, she looks at the painting, and she is disgusted. One question to ask is: what is she disgusted about? On Korsmeyer's sensory view as I have outlined it, it is the image in the painting itself.<sup>16</sup> On my view, it is the depicted festering wound (whether existing or not). The appreciator feels disgust at the depicted festering wound by either believing that there is a festering wound, or by entertaining the thought of a festering wound. Since the sensory view is ill at ease with the way disgust as an emotion actually works, an alternative is needed. My view has the obvious

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<sup>15</sup> Here, and throughout, I use 'imagine' and 'entertain thoughts' (and their cognates) to refer to the same psychological phenomenon, thus ignoring more subtle differences between the standard meanings of the two expressions. Cf. also White (1990): "To imagine something is to *think of* it as possibly being so" (184; author's emphasis).

<sup>16</sup> As she puts it: "[disgust's] intentional object is immediately present as a component of the artwork" (Korsmeyer (2011), 56).

advantage of being compatible with the ideational character of disgust. Before embracing the view that I suggest, however, one should look around to see if there are other, better alternatives.

One possible candidate is: the image interpreted. This is not a simple intentional object. It is constituted by the sensory features of the depicted festering wound (e.g. red-ish colour, irregular shape etc.) and by our cognition that it is a festering wound. Although this may perhaps sound appealing as a mid-way view between mine and Korsmeyer's,<sup>17</sup> it is actually an implausible suggestion. The complex object postulated by this view (sensory-features-cum-cognition) is not a typical object of emotions. It is a rather spooky one, rather hovering unstably, as it does, between world and mind. Sensory features are standardly located in the external world; cognitions are instead mental.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, it would be a big bullet to bite for a disgust theorist to accept that disgust is intentionally directed towards psycho-material, or half-mental, half-material objects. On standard views of emotions, these are not directed towards such composite objects, but towards objects either out in the world (e.g. fear for a big bear approaching) or within us (e.g. anger at oneself for not teaching one's son more self-discipline).

Another alternative could be that the disgust felt at the picture of the festering wound is directed within us, at our mental image of the wound. Again, this sounds like an implausible characterization of the phenomenon under scrutiny. There is an image of a wound out there, and it seems much more plausible that the object of disgust is the wound represented (whether actually existing or simply imagined). Neither are linguistic representations any different, even though they often involve greater imaginative

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. however note 10 above for the alternative hypothesis that the image interpreted view is in fact Korsmeyer's own view.

<sup>18</sup> There certainly are non-standard metaphysical theories that would be at ease with mind-world composite objects, or with an overcoming of the mind-matter dichotomy. John Gibson (1979) seems to have a conception of this kind in mind in his understanding of *affordance*. Merleau-Ponty (1964a and 1964b) can also be interpreted as endorsing a view of this kind, in his "overcoming the subject-object dichotomy" (Moran (1999), 429). But these theories are counter-intuitive, they are indeed non-standard, and come with the problems typically associated with non-standard theories.



work on an appreciator's part. Even when emotions are directed towards ourselves, it is towards features of us like for instance laziness, insecurity, or flabby cheeks. Hearing of someone having emotions towards mental images will generally make us think of them as a victim of delusions.

But, one might object, what matters really is not the intentional object of disgust, but its *cause*. Although they often coincide, intentional object and cause of an emotion can of course come apart. Consider for example Wendy, who is angry at Bernie because she believes he stole her car, when in fact the thief was Marc. It is possible to construct this scenario in a way that attributes no causal role to Bernie (say for example that Wendy saw Marc steal her car, unaware of the fact that Marc is Bernie's identical twin and looks almost exactly the same as Bernie); but Wendy's anger is directed at Bernie.<sup>19</sup> So, the objection goes, it might be that, although the intentional object of disgust is the festering wound as depicted in the painting, the emotion is actually caused by the image in the painting, interpreted as a festering wound. But this objection misses the target, because it does not offer an alternative picture to the one that I endorse. The image interpreted is indeed likely to be one of the causes of the disgust felt by the viewer of the festering-wound painting. Also a cause, however, is the viewer's imagining the depicted festering wound (supported by the interpreted image).

Finally, what if the intentional object of the aforementioned viewer's disgust is any one instance of the class of festering wounds that looks like the wound in the painting—rather than the particular wound that is represented? I am not sure that this option makes much sense. It is worth remembering here that the example representation at hand is not necessarily a representation of something that exists. But if it is a picture of a non-existent, made-up wound, then there would seem to be no relevant difference between disgust at a particular, imaginary festering wound and disgust at a generic festering wound

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. de Sousa (1987), 110ff.

(assuming that there are no differences in imagined appearance between the two). The mechanism of the viewer's disgust will in both cases involve imagining a festering wound of the appropriate kind.<sup>20</sup>

So, just like in the case of fear, pity and many other emotions, the disgust felt before a representation of something disgusting is directed at the subject of the representation (whether existing or not) and elicited via the appreciator's recognitional, or imaginative capacities (where beliefs are not appropriate). This means that the object of an appreciator's disgust is the subject-as-imagined and its cause is the thought entertained.

The line of argument presented so far makes both the stronger—(STT)—and weaker readings—(WTT)—of the transparency thesis of disgust implausible. It is again worth distinguishing here between the presence/representation and fiction/non-fiction dichotomies. As far as the former dichotomy is concerned, disgust is sensitive to the presence, or power to affect, of a disgusting object. A direct encounter with an actually present, or potentially affecting, disgusting thing will in many cases be more disgusting than an encounter with a picture, however realistic, of the same thing. In fact, a realistic representation of the disgusting can even be non-disgusting to a viewer who, for instance, managed to imagine its subject as being something different (i.e. misinterpreted it) and non-disgusting.

Similar considerations are appropriate to the fiction/non-fiction case. Consider for instance a realistic film scene involving a gruesome, bloody crime. Although it is unlikely that a spectator avoids some immediate disgust at the scene, it is possible for her emotional reaction to weaken, or even for her to grow out of her disgust completely. What can help her do that is to imagine the blood and gore as being something non-disgusting—ketchup, for instance. This squeamish spectator's imaginative endeavour can

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<sup>20</sup>I am grateful to [redacted] for very helpful conversations on the issues discussed in the last few paragraphs.

in turn be aided by knowing or believing that the blood and gore in the scene are merely fictional: it is in fact not blood and gore, but, say, a special effect involving ketchup.

Nonetheless, presence and power to affect the emoter (but not so much significant others) seem generally more important for disgust elicitation than fictionality. In fact, the difference in power of disgust elicitation between a really present, potentially affecting object and a representation of it is generally significantly greater than the (counterpart) difference between fictional and non-fictional representations of the same disgusting thing. Take Rembrandt's painting *Carcass of Beef* (1657). The fictionality/non-fictionality of the subject of this painting appears to bear much less relevance to the disgust response that the painting affords (or that is appropriate to it), than the fact that there is no real-life, really present (or potentially affecting) specimen of a carcass—this is just a painted rendering of a carcass.

However, the argument against the transparency thesis is more difficult to make in the case of more immediate emotional appraisals and responses. More immediate, quicker appraisals mean less time to consider the (potentially) eliciting situation carefully. As a consequence, the differences along both presence/representation and fiction/non-fiction dichotomies in the case of immediate responses may not all be appropriately appreciated. If they are not, then it is an interesting issue which features of the eliciting situation are more quickly processed, and which ones are instead left out from more immediate or primary appraisals. On the face of it, recognition as a member of a kind of things, or even possibly as an instance of a pattern of sensory features, will be more prominent in primary appraisals than awareness of presence, power to affect, or non-fictionality. And, in fact, presence and power to affect will *prima facie* be more immediately processed than non-fictionality.

If this all turns out to be true, then two consequences may follow. Firstly, the two cases of immediate and considered responses would be similar in the greater importance for disgust elicitation that the presence/representation has over the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy. Secondly, however, the transparency thesis would find more grounds for support in the case of more immediate than in the case of more considered responses. This, however, would still not establish the transparency thesis overall. The transparency thesis as a general claim about disgust elicitation would still be refuted by the counterexamples earlier advanced for considered appraisals.<sup>21</sup>

In this paper I have argued that the transparency thesis, i.e. roughly speaking the claim that what is disgusting in nature cannot but be disgusting in art, cannot but be false. Nonetheless, my arguments should not be taken as a denial of the claim that there are important differences between disgust and other emotions (e.g. fear) with respect to the ease and certainty with which they are elicited by representations. Only future research will be able to establish or disconfirm that claim.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In fact, the existence of differences between primary and more considered responses is not peculiar to disgust, but is a general feature of emotions—and of basic emotions especially (see e.g. LeDoux (1998) and Robinson (2005)). So, as far as immediate responses are concerned, there may be grounds for support for the transparency of a number of other emotions besides disgust.

<sup>22</sup> For helpful feedback on previous versions of this paper, I am very grateful to workshop audiences at Antwerp, Sheffield and York, as well as to Greg Currie, Peter Lamarque, Jerry Levinson and Enrico Terrone. I am also extremely grateful to an anonymous referee for the *BJA* and for the generous support to my research projects that both the Institut Jean Nicod and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales provided.

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