

How Transparent is Disgust?

Filippo Contesi

Please refer to the published version (*European Journal of Philosophy* 25, 1810–23):

<https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12274>

Abstract

According to the so-called ‘transparency thesis’, what is disgusting in nature cannot but be disgusting in art. This paper critically discusses the arguments that have been put forward in favour of the transparency thesis, starting with Korsmeyer’s (2011) sensory view of disgust. As an alternative, it offers an account of the relationship between disgust and representation which explains, at least in part, whatever truth there is in the transparency thesis. Such an account appeals to a distinction between object-centric and situation-centric emotions.

How Transparent is Disgust?

1. The Transparency Thesis

According to what is often considered as the received view concerning the role of disgust in artⁱ, what is disgusting in nature cannot but be disgusting in art. This view has been defended, in different versions, by eighteenth-century authors such as Johann Adolf Schlegel (1751/9), Moses Mendelssohn (1760), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1766/1962), Immanuel Kant (1790/1978), as well as by such contemporary aestheticians as Carolyn Korsmeyer (2011) and Jenefer Robinson (2014).ⁱⁱ Moreover, those who endorse the received view have often considered disgust as a peculiar, or even unique emotion for its having the feature that the view attributes to it.ⁱⁱⁱ In this paper I advance an alternative account of the relationship between disgust and representation to the one provided by the received view. My account aims to capture the intuitive appeal of the received view, without endorsing its implausible features. On my account, disgust is much more similar to other emotions than is traditionally posited.

The most prominent recent defence of the received view—or, as she calls it, the ‘transparency thesis’—is to be found in Korsmeyer (2011). As I have argued elsewhere, however, Korsmeyer's transparency thesis needs more explicit disambiguation than she gives it.^{iv} Firstly, the thesis should be more charitably formulated with reference to artistic *imitations*, or realistic representations, of what is disgusting rather than to representations *tout court*.^v The thesis should also be most charitably understood as a *ceteris paribus* claim. For instance, on the transparency thesis, the picture of a surface smeared with faeces (or the picture of a fictional surface smeared with faeces) is as disgusting as the same surface (or the picture of a non-fictional surface) would, *all things considered* (i.e. when seen from a comparable viewpoint to that afforded by the picture: from the same distance, in the same lighting conditions etc.). Thirdly, the transparency thesis admits of a *strong* and a *weak* reading. On the first, the thesis claims that an imitation of a disgust elicitor is as disgusting as that elicitor would be if experienced in the flesh (or that the imitation of a fictional disgust elicitor is as disgusting as the counterpart imitation of a counterpart non-fictional disgust elicitor). On a weak reading, instead, the claim is just that the imitation and the real thing (or two fictional and non-fictional counterpart imitations) both elicit disgust—even though possibly to different qualitative degrees. Although Korsmeyer is not explicit on this point, her sensory view of disgust elicitation (see below) commits her to the strong reading.

Here I should add a fourth disambiguation, which I failed to make (at least sufficiently explicit) in the past.^{vi} This concerns the distinction between what I will call the ‘presence/representation’ and the ‘fiction/non-fiction’ dichotomies. For long, discussions of fiction and representation in art have been predominantly concerned with the differences between art and real life. However, there are finer distinctions than the one between art and real life. Not all art represents; nor is art the only context where representations are found. Similarly, not all art is fiction nor is fiction always art. It is appropriate to distinguish, on the one hand, between what is present and what is represented, and on the other between fictional and non-fictional representations. Accordingly, the transparency thesis should also be disambiguated between two different kinds of claims. One kind of claims draws on the comparison between (the potential for) disgust elicitation between a real-life, really present thing (or one that can potentially affect a prospective emoter or her significant others) and a representation of the same thing. Another kind of claim will revolve around the comparison between the potentials for disgust elicitation that are

proper to a fictional and to a non-fictional representations of the same thing. The former kind of claim concerns the difference between, say, a real encounter with a pile of faeces and seeing that pile of faeces in a photograph. By contrast, the latter kind of claims might draw on the differences—or lack thereof—between seeing a photograph of an actual and a photograph of a made-up pile of faeces. The most natural understanding of the transparency thesis, especially of its eighteenth-century versions, might seem to be about the presence/representation, rather than about the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy. Korsmeyer does not appear to draw a clear distinction between the two dichotomies.^{vii} Indeed, as what follows will make clearer, the presence/representation dichotomy is more relevant to disgust elicitation than the fiction/non-fiction one. However, it is best to consider both dichotomies, while keeping them distinct.

2. Disgust is Ideational

Korsmeyer's case for the (strong reading of the) transparency of disgust rests on her sensory view of disgust elicitation. On her view, disgust is normally elicited through the mere perception of certain sensory features that are characteristic of disgust elicitors. If such sensory features are realistically represented, it follows from this view that disgust elicitation will be the same in a fictional and in a non-fictional representation, as well as in a present elicitor and a representation of it. However, this is an implausible conclusion, insofar as it rests on the wrong view of disgust elicitation.^{viii}

Unlike distaste, disgust is primarily ideational, rather than sensory in nature; in other words, it is primarily elicited in virtue of the *idea* of a certain disgusting thing, rather than of its sensory features. This is the current consensus in the cognitive sciences, backed by the empirical evidence currently available.^{ix} Smelling the same substance will be either pleasant or disgusting, according to how the substance is labelled: say, as cheese or faeces. The idea, for instance, of eating insects or faeces disgusts many of us primarily in virtue of what insects or faeces are, rather than of what they smell or taste like. Very few of us have ever even tasted insects or faeces.^x

3. Disgust's Intentional Object

Still, this leaves open the possibility that a different case from Korsmeyer's might be successfully made for (a version of) the transparency thesis. There are however reasons for doubt. The transparency thesis is false, both in its strong and weak readings and with respect to both the presence/representation and fiction/non-fiction dichotomies.

To see why, I will first show that the mechanics of disgust elicitation in the case of representations are not different from those of many other emotions (including fear, pity, anger etc.) are. This is true in two important respects. First, disgust's intentional object in such cases is the subject of the representation. As a consequence, disgust requires a viewer, spectator, reader etc. to either believe in the existence and features of, or otherwise *imagine* (or suppose, entertain the thought of etc.) the subject of the representation.^{xi}

Consider a realistic painting of a festering wound. If a viewer of such a painting were to be disgusted by it, what would she be disgusted about? On the sensory view advocated by Korsmeyer, the answer is: the image in the painting itself.^{xii} On the view I advocate, the object of the appreciator's disgust is instead the depicted festering wound (whether existing or not). By either believing in or imagining a festering wound, the viewer is disgusted. Over the sensory view, my own view has the advantage of being compatible with the ideational character of disgust. In the case at hand, in fact, there is no other feasible alternative candidate for the role of disgust's intentional object.

An alternative candidate might be something like the *image interpreted* of the depicted festering wound. This would be a complex intentional object (sensory-features-cum-cognition), a combination of the sensory appearances of the depicted festering wound and a (cognitive) interpretation of those appearances as those of a festering wound. This is however an implausible object of our disgust in the relevant kind of situations. It may be possible that an emotion, like a thought, are sometimes about half-mental, half-material objects such as the 'image interpreted' in question. But that is not the normal case in our encounters with representations. However, this is not a strong enough objection for the transparency theorist. She will just need to reiterate that disgust is a peculiar emotion, and that it is therefore to be expected that it works in unusual ways.

Disgust normally does not come in isolation, though. The disgusting is often represented alongside objects and events that elicit other emotions and are the object of other non-emotional attitudes (perceptions, thoughts etc.). What is disgusting is itself in fact often also the object of other emotional and non-emotional attitudes. This is a reflection of the complexity of our mental lives (and of the world outside of us), so it is not just about disgust. But I see no reason to suggest that it is not (also) a feature of representations involving the disgusting. As a consequence, the transparency theorist (of the image interpreted persuasion) would have to claim that disgust and the host of other attitudes appropriate to most representations have radically different sorts of intentional objects. They would have to claim that the disgust aroused by the depiction of the festering wound is about an interpreted image; and yet the pity that, say, may be directed at they who are so wounded, or the perception of the location of such a wound on the body of the wounded (say, on their foot) are about those characters who are (represented as) so wounded. But the transparency theorist's claim here postulates too much of a disjointed processing mechanism for representations involving the disgusting to be a credible claim.^{xiii}

An additional, related problem with the image interpreted view is that the differences it is committed to accepting between the way disgust works in real-life and in representational counterpart scenarios are much more radical than those that are commonly accepted for many other emotions. It seems hard to deny that the disgust felt at encountering a pile of faeces in the flesh is about that pile of faeces. Similarly, the fear that one feels when a big angry bear approaches towards one in the wild is about that bear approaching. However, if the bear is only a fictional character on a cinema screen and is (fictionally) approaching the heroine of a story we are imaginatively invested in, it will be plausible to say that our fear as spectators will be about the fictional bear's approaching.^{xiv} To postulate a different mechanism for disgust is another difficult bullet to bite for the image interpreted theorist.

The same problem affects another alternative candidate to the role of disgust's intentional object in the case at hand, viz. the mental image of the festering wound. Again, accepting this candidate means accepting a radical difference between the way disgust and other emotions respectively work. Even when emotions are directed towards ourselves (in real life and in the case of representations alike), they are often directed towards features of us like for instance laziness, insecurity or flabby cheeks. Having emotions towards mental images like the one at hand can instead often be taken as a sign of being deluded. It is instead much more plausible to assume that the object of the disgust caused in a viewer by the depicted festering wound is the wound represented (whether actually existing or simply imagined). (Linguistic representations often require greater imaginative effort from readers, but work similarly.) Although the mental image of the wound may well be the causal medium through which our disgust is elicited, the intentional object remains the depicted wound.^{xv}

My focus on intentional objects may however be objected to. It may be objected that what matters in order to assess the truth of the transparency thesis is the *cause* of disgust elicitation, rather than the intentional object of the disgust elicited. Intentional object and cause of an emotion are distinct theoretical entities. They sometimes come apart, even though they often coincide. In a classic example, Wendy might be angry at Bernie for stealing her car, even though the thief was Marc. Wendy got angry by seeing someone she thought was Bernie steal her car, without knowing that the thief was in fact Bernie's identical twin, Marc. So Bernie actually played no relevant causal role in eliciting Wendy's anger but Wendy's anger is directed at Bernie.^{xvi} In the case I have been discussing, in fact, it can be both true that the intentional object of the disgust experienced is the festering wound as depicted in the painting *and* that the emotion is actually caused by the image in the painting (interpreted as a festering wound). (In the case in which the depicted festering wound is fictional, in fact, it obviously has no causal powers on its own.) Nothing of this however contradicts the picture that I endorse. One (or more) of the causes of the disgust felt by the viewer of the festering-wound painting will certainly be the painting itself or the mental image of the wound. However, if the intentional object of the disgust experienced is the one I claim it is, then an additional cause will be the viewer's *believing* or *imagining* that the painting is of a festering wound.^{xvii} This additional cause, in addition to the manner in which it plays out, make a difference in the process of disgust elicitation.

4. Transparency Refuted

Much as with fear, pity and many other emotions, then, 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 imaginative capacities (where beliefs are not appropriate). These similarities between disgust and other emotions provide reasons to reject the transparency thesis—both in its stronger and weaker readings and both with respect to 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. As a consequence, 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. As I have argued, in fact, the subject of such a picture will need to be imagined for disgust to be aroused. Imagining it as present, though possible, is a less direct, and hence typically less effortless and powerful, mechanism of elicitation than either perceiving or believing it as present. So the strong reading of the transparency thesis is implausible. As far as its weak reading is concerned, it will be generally easier to misinterpret the picture of a festering wound as being the picture of something different and non-disgusting, than it is to do the same with a real, really present festering wound. In the latter case, imagination will have to override other, more direct and powerful kinds of attitudes (e.g. belief) than in the former (in which the overridden attitude is also already an imaginative one).

Similarly, as far as the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy is concerned, it will be generally more difficult to misinterpret a representation if we believe it to be non-fictional than if we believe it be fictional. In response to a realistic film scene involving a gruesome, bloody crime, a spectator's disgust may be avoided (or, if she is immediately disgusted, later weakened or eliminated) by imagining the blood and gore as being something non-disgusting—ketchup, for instance. What can help her do that is the belief or the knowledge that the blood and gore in the scene are merely fictional, and their appearance achieved by a special effect involving ketchup.

Nonetheless, fictionality is generally less important for disgust elicitation than presence and power to affect the emoter (though not so much significant others). 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. Consider for instance Rembrandt's painting *Carcass of Beef* (1657). Whether the carcass of beef depicted is fictional or not changes much less in the disgust response appropriate to, or afforded by, the painting, than its being a mere painted rendering of a carcass rather than the real thing.

5. Disgust's Object-centricity

So the transparency thesis is implausible, for there is reason to think that, as is the case with many other emotions, representation and fiction sometimes make a difference in disgust elicitation. Nonetheless, there are also differences between disgust and other emotions. In particular, it seems hard to deny that disgust is often elicited by representations (and to some extent also fiction) much more easily and certainly than is the case with many other emotions. In fact, there are *prima facie* phenomenological truths behind Korsmeyer's (and eighteenth-century) endorsements of the transparency thesis that I do not want to deny. In what follows I will argue that such truths should be accounted for in terms of the greater ease and passivity of the imaginative effort often required with disgust, which are in turn motivated by disgust's *object-centricity* and by the consequent objectual emphasis that is proper to much disgust elicitation. Such object-centricity characteristic of disgust is opposed to the *situation-centricity* of emotions like fear.^{xviii}

Disgust exhibits a peculiarity in the relationships that typically hold between its targets and its intentional objects. These relationships in fact fall into a very limited set of types. Let me explain. Situations of a wide variety of types can elicit intentional objects of emotions like fear, anger, sadness etc. Emotional targets thus figure in a wide variety of relationships with the other elements of these eliciting situations. A tiger is fearsome in its walking towards me in the jungle, but much less so in a glass cage at the zoo. Inflation is scary for the money I have in my bank account, but not at all so if I have debts to repay. By contrast with this variability, disgust elicitation is more often sensitive to targets standing in a limited number of relations. These are mainly relationships between target and experiencer (or her significant others) and focus on the possibility of (direct or mediated) physical contact between them: being present or absent to, closer to, or more distant from them, or in contact with them through the mouth, or the skin, or otherwise.

Some further elaborations of these basic patterns of relationships *are* possible. A slice of cheese may not be disgusting on a plate on the kitchen table at dinnertime, but it can become so if seen in the reading room of a library in the morning, or laying in a litter bin. Here, of course, the disgustingness and lack thereof come from the prospect of eating the cheese: acceptable in the former case, disgusting in the latter.^{xx} Movement of or within the disgusting is a further frequent pattern of development of the aforementioned basic types of contact relationships. Teeming, wriggling worms are typically more disgusting than still ones; so is a spurt of blood when compared to a blood puddle. The reason is again the (likelihood of the) prospect of contact: the more mobile something is, the more one seems likely to get in contact with it.^{xx}

The limited number of types of relationships that are relevant for disgust is accompanied by the central importance of objects. Other emotions, e.g. fear, anger etc., can be elicited by, and directed to, situations that prominently involve all sorts of objects. One can be scared by knives, people, inflation etc. I can fear a bus coming towards me if I am standing in the middle of the road, but be thrilled at the sight of the same bus coming towards me, while waiting at the bus stop for my mother who is on the bus coming to visit me after a long separation. I can fear many, very different types of situations: fear to be hit by something pointed, fear not to be kissed by my wife of thirty years after a period of cold between us, fear to know that my bank account is in the red, fear to move my scalpel too quickly while performing a delicate surgical procedure etc. etc.

However, most, if not all of the objects in these fearsome situations, are, in different circumstances, objects of very different emotions or emotionally neutral. Disgust is also elicited by a wide variety of things (i.e. those on one's list of disgust elicitors, and, secondarily, by whatever gets in contact with the former), but the kinds these things fall into are arguably more limited in number (i.e. mostly concrete and organic kinds of substances).

More importantly, the items on one's list of disgust elicitors are more often disgusting no matter what situations they are found into; and, conversely, whenever there is disgust, this is very often traceable to an item on the list (either because it figures prominently in the direct object of disgust or in virtue of its past, perceived history of contact with the latter).^{xxi} By contrast, the objects that figure prominently in emotional episodes of fear, anger etc. are much less univocally linked with the emotions of fear, anger etc. A knife is sometimes involved in fear, sometimes in anger, other times it is involved in completely different emotional episodes, or it is emotionally neutral. What is much more important in fear, anger etc. are the situations or relationships in which objects are.

In other words, then, disgust is a peculiarly *object-centric* (rather than situation-centric) emotion. Disgust's object-centricity makes it possible for disgust to be often elicited by mere recognition (or imagination) of an object, thus diminishing the relevance of situations in its elicitation. By contrast, in order for fear to be elicited, recognition, imagination etc. will typically need to be directed at something more than just an object, i.e. a situation, which includes a relationship of threat with the emoter (or her significant others). In other words, the disgust appraisal mechanism will in many cases bracket off the details of the wider situation, including its presence to, or power to affect, the emoter (or her significant others), and in this way achieve a faster and more immediate response. These features of the disgust response can in themselves be advantageous for emoters, in terms of both quickness of elicitation and lesser cognitive demand on the emoter. Moreover, in virtue of disgust's object-centricity, the neglect of features of the situation does not make disgust much less effective at being triggered by the right kinds of things. There is a limited number of possible patterns of relationships between the target and other elements of a disgusting situation (including the emoter or the individual potentially affected by the disgust elicitor).^{xxii} Moreover, and as far as the emoter/ potentially affected person are concerned, these possible patterns of relationship all revolve around the *possibility of physical contact* between the potentially affected individual and the target/ disgust elicitor. The prospect of contact with the disgust target can therefore be assumed *by default* once a disgust elicitor (as a target) is perceived, recognized, or imagined. (The prospect of contact is in fact so integral to disgust that it is integrated into its very response, as its contamination sensitivity shows.)

This feature of disgust is likely to have been evolutionarily beneficial. For disgust one can come up with good reasons to go for an extra quick appraisal mechanism (in addition to the already high speed of emotion elicitation generally). One such can be found in the benefits of avoiding any contact with the potentially pathogenic elicitor. These benefits would be more easily achieved with an emotional reaction that fires at the minimal chance of pathogen presence. Given disgust's object-centricity, such a fast and immediate response may not lead to a higher frequency of false positives or misfirings; if otherwise, its benefits will nonetheless have compensated for the less precise elicitor identification.^{xxiii}

Although disgust appraisals of the kind just described centre on objects as targets of disgust, both situational elicitation and further cognitive monitoring are still, at least to some extent, possible. With such monitoring will sometimes come attention to details of the wider situation and, for instance, awareness of the locus of prospective contact (mouth, genitals, hands etc.).

This will sometimes have as an effect the down- or up-regulation of one's disgust response. However, such cognitive monitoring has limited scope and disgust remains a substantially object-centric emotion.

6. The Senses in Disgust

From disgust's object-centricity comes the accentuated importance of the senses in disgust, when compared to emotions such as fear. The senses mostly play a more direct or straightforward part in object recognition than they do in the recognition of situations. They do so insofar as they more directly capture physical features of objects; features of situations are captured by the senses only in a more complex way (e.g. through more complex coordination between different sense modalities, or with a greater role of more sophisticated cognition). It is in this respect, if any, that the senses have a central importance in disgust—not as part and parcel of a sensory view of disgust.

This view of the role of the senses in disgust is partly inspired by Aurel Kolnai. Kolnai in fact points out that, whereas fear is 'principally directed' towards—in Smith and Korsmeyer's translation—'being' [*Dasein*], disgust is primarily directed towards 'so-being' [*Sosein*].^{xxiv} Korsmeyer (2011) interprets Kolnai's remarks on disgust as 'resonat[ing]' with 'the strong sensory grounding of the emotion and the way it commands attention to the presentation to the senses, regardless of its [*sic*] mode of existence'.^{xxv} However, Smith and Korsmeyer's translated terms 'so-being' and 'being' are not completely felicitous. *Dasein* is in fact best translated with 'being present', and *Sosein* with 'being-so-and-so'. Since Kolnai's distinction is between being-so-and-so and being present, I am inclined to read him differently, i.e., summarily, as highlighting the primary role in disgust elicitation of the *features* of the elicitor, rather than of its presence to an emoter. The role of the senses only comes as a consequence of the role of the elicitor's being-so-and-so/features.

Immediacy of elicitation is accompanied by a relatively high degree of stubbornness, or resistance to revision.^{xxvi} This is easy to understand once one recognizes, in the way outlined above, the role that the senses, via an object's features, play in disgust. Once a large part of disgust triggering is handed over to the senses, then stubbornness of elicitation will follow, as cognitive penetration will become relatively arduous.^{xxvii} Also, of course (and generally speaking), the more *realistic* a representation is, the easier (or the harder) it will be to recognize, or imagine etc. (or stop recognizing, imagining etc.) its subject.

This is the way in which one should understand two cases documented by one of Paul Rozin and colleagues' most celebrated experiments. In one case, subjects in great numbers refused with disgust to eat chocolate desserts very realistically shaped as turds, even if fully aware of the decoy. In the second case, many subjects were disgusted by the prospect of drinking juice from a glass in which a completely harmless, sterilized cockroach had been dropped.^{xxviii} In these cases, disgust elicitation is especially immediate and stubborn in virtue of the combined effect of object-centricity and (realistic) appearance.^{xxix} Rozin and his colleagues present the phenomenon exemplified in the two cases described as an instance of the 'law of similarity', according to which 'the image equals the object'. On this account, the law of similarity is one of the 'laws of sympathetic magic'. However, the so-called 'law of similarity' should not be seen as a peculiarity of disgust, but of emotions more generally (although it may be more obvious in the case of disgust given the additional role played by object-centricity).^{xxx}

7. The Peculiarity of Disgust is the Peculiarity of Art

Disgust's object-centricity is important, as it accounts for the ease and relative unavoidability/un-attenuability of disgust

elicitation in the case of ordinary representations of disgust elicitors. In virtue of disgust's object-centricity, in fact, the relationship between the emoter/ art appreciator and the disgust elicitor as represented is typically bypassed in disgust elicitation. As a result, the art appreciator appraises a representation as disgusting, as soon as she recognizes (or imagines) a disgust elicitor in it. The fact that the elicitor is not present but is only represented, or even its complete fictionality if it is realistically rendered, have relatively little importance. More precisely, such circumstances have significantly less importance than they would have in counterpart cases involving fear, anger or sadness.

Notice that absence from an appreciator, or non-existence of an actual disgust-elicitor object does not mean lack of a necessary condition for object-centric disgust. The fact that strictly speaking there is no object (e.g. there are no faeces in a colour photograph of faeces) does not in other words impede object-centricity or disgust elicitation. Emotions are often elicited in the absence of direct perception or belief. Moreover, emotions are to a significant extent cognitively impenetrable. These are characteristics of emotions generally, and of basic emotions in particular. One central likely evolutionary benefit of emotion systems is that they allow faster, even if less accurate, or even occasionally unreliable, reactions than some other cognitive systems do. In this respect, disgust is not peculiar, or different from other emotions. Aside from what pertains to object-centricity, general immediacy and stubbornness of elicitation are not exclusive features of disgust. Fear has them, too, as well as other emotions.

Consider for instance the fear that one feels while standing on a glass floor, on top of a mountainous precipice. The greatest amount of (scientific) faith in the solidity of the glass floor structure will generally not be enough to prevent one from feeling afraid to fall on the rocks down beneath. In this case, the realistic *appearance* of a fearsome situation is enough to trigger fear. The same thing happens with disgust at a colour photograph of faeces. The appearance of a disgusting object is enough to elicit disgust. The object- vs situation-centricity distinction is a different distinction from the appearance/reality one. Nonetheless, object-centricity and sufficiency of appearance both contribute in making emotion elicitation faster and more immediate: the former relative to situation-centric emotions, the latter relative to non-emotional responses.

In fact, the greater ease and immediacy of disgust elicitation (as opposed to fear elicitation) is, at least in part, not a necessary accompaniment of all representations but is contingent on a set of features that are very often proper to art. With some possible exceptions, such as some cases of interactive or landscape art, artworks are very often *disconnected* from the appreciator, in the sense that the latter is not part of, a subject of, or a contributor to, the work. This makes a lot of art independently prone to affording an object-centric experience in the sense at issue. To this one should also perhaps add the overall staticity and bi-dimensionality of much art. In principle, in fact, one can for example imagine an art installation, which had audiences stand over a glass floor on a mountainous precipice (real or realistically portrayed).^{xxxii} In such a case, fear would ensue with comparable levels of ease and immediacy to those more often achieved in disgusting art. As a matter of fact, however, such an imagined art installation would be very much unlike what has so far been produced in traditional, and even in most contemporary art.

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, is implausible. I have furthermore suggested an alternative account, which aims to capture what is intuitively plausible about the transparency thesis, but avoids the latter's shortcomings.^{xxxiii}

Filippo Contesi

filippo.contesi@gmail.com

Institut Jean Nicod, Pavillon Jardin, École Normale Supérieure, 29 rue d'Ulm, 75005 Paris, France

References

- Filippo Contesi (2015), 'Korsmeyer on Fiction and Disgust', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 55, 109—116.
- Charles Darwin (1872/1892), *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, available at <http://darwin-online.org.uk>.
- Ronald de Sousa (1987), *The Rationality of Emotion*, MIT Press.
- Rachel Herz et al. (2001), 'The influence of verbal labeling on the perception of odors', *PERCEPTION-LONDON*, 30, 381—392.
- Immanuel Kant (1790/1978), *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by J.C. Meredith, Oxford University Press.
- Aurel Kolnai (1929/2004), 'Disgust', in Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer (eds), *On Disgust*, Open Court.
- Carolyn Korsmeyer (2011), *Savoring Disgust*, Oxford University Press.
- Peter Lamarque (1981), 'How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 21, 291—304.
- Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1766/1962), *Laocoön*, Bobbs-Merrill.
- Liu Jiangang et al. (2013), 'Neural correlates of covert face processing: fMRI evidence from a prosopagnosic patient', *Cerebral Cortex*, First published online: February 28, 2013.
- Moses Mendelssohn (1760), '82nd Letter Concerning Literature', partially translated in Menninghaus (2003).
- Winfried Menninghaus (2003), *Disgust*, State University of New York Press.
- Jenefer Robinson (2014), 'Aesthetic Disgust?', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 75, 51—84.
- Edward B. Royzman and John Sabini (2001), 'Something it takes to be an emotion', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 31, 29—60.
- Paul Rozin et al. (1986), 'Operation of the laws of sympathetic magic in disgust and other domains', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50, 703—712.
- Paul Rozin and April Fallon (1987), 'A perspective on disgust', *Psychological Review*, 94, 23—41.

Johann Adolf Schlegel (1751/9), 'Notes to German translation of Charles Batteux's *Les beaux arts*', partially translated in Menninghaus (2003).

Laura L. Vernon and Howard Berenbaum (2002), 'Disgust and fear in response to spiders', *Cognition and Emotion*, 16, 809—830.

Kendall Walton (1990), *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Harvard University Press.

Alan R. White (1990), *The Language of Imagination*, Basil Blackwell.

Wicker et al. (2003), 'Both of us disgusted in my insula', *Neuron*, 40, 655—664.

Notes

ⁱ This paper will only focus on what is customarily called 'bodily', 'physical', or 'visceral' disgust, rather than on such responses as 'moral disgust'. My focus is consistent with the focus of the authors I discuss. Bodily disgust is typically elicited by objects such as bodily excreta, corpses or wounds. The distinction between bodily and moral disgust (as well as the distinction between bodily and other disgusts) are disputed issues, but this paper will not discuss them.

ⁱⁱ A well-informed account of many of the eighteenth-century sources mentioned is offered by Menninghaus (2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ Disgust's peculiarity in this sense is endorsed by all of the aforementioned authors, with the possible exception of Robinson (2014) (who does not explicitly commit to it (see 68—69)).

^{iv} See Contesi (2015), 110ff.

^v This is somewhat more explicit in Robinson (2014), 69.

^{vi} See Contesi (2015).

^{vii} See Korsmeyer (2011), 47, 53—56.

^{viii} I argue for this in full in Contesi (2015).

^{ix} A dissenting voice is instead Royzman and Sabini (2001).

^x See Rozin and Fallon (1987) and Herz et al. (2001).

^{xi} For present purposes, I do not distinguish between the psychological phenomena referred to by 'imagining' and 'entertaining thoughts' (and by their cognate expressions): cf. White (1990): 'To imagine something is to *think of it* as possibly being so' (184).

^{xii} '[Disgust's] intentional object is immediately present as a component of the artwork' (Korsmeyer (2011), 56).

^{xiii} Please note that I am not denying that sometimes the intentional object of some of our attitudes may be of a different kind from that of our other concomitant attitudes. I am simply denying that in the kind of cases at hand this happens systematically for disgust vs most (or all) of our other attitudes. It is perhaps worth emphasizing that, as throughout, the claim made by the transparency theorist is a general claim, concerning *all* representations involving the disgusting.

^{xiv} See e.g. Peter Lamarque (1981). Moreover, even theories postulating a much greater difference between the real-life and representational cases, such as e.g. Walton's (1990), would have no compelling reason to accept differences between disgust and other emotions of the kind that the image interpreted view recommends.

^{xv} See Lamarque (1981) for the analogous distinction between 'thoughts' and 'thought-contents'.

xvi Cf. de Sousa (1987), 110ff.

xvii Moreover, elicitation of other emotions, too, is in many cases likely to involve (mental) images as causes. Whether images are necessary for disgust elicitation is a question that deserves to be addressed, and is in fact neglected in both the scientific and philosophical literature. For the purposes of the present paper, I will leave this as an open question.

xviii The object/situation distinction henceforth used is best not understood in any kind of heavy metaphysical sense. In fact, perhaps other expressions might do a better job of avoiding marginal counter-examples. One such is local vs global (with thanks to Paul Noordhof for this suggestion). However, I will use ‘object’ and ‘situation’ (and their cognate expressions) for their greater intuitiveness.

xix Darwin famously has an example of this kind involving droplets of soup on someone’s beard; cf. Darwin (1872/1892), 257—258.

xx Some such cases, paradigmatically those involving spiders or cockroaches, may however be best understood as typically eliciting mixtures of fear and disgust. The respective role in them of the two emotions is at the very least difficult to determine. Cf. e.g. Vernon and Berenbaum (2002).

xxi Cases such as rubbish should not be seen as exceptions to this rule. It is true that perfectly non-disgusting objects, a brand-new book for instance, can become disgusting if they are thrown into a rubbish bin. However, rubbish, and the rubbish bin, are best seen as themselves objects of disgust, objects of which the brand-new book becomes a part as soon as it is thrown away (brand-new-book-as-rubbish). Similar considerations apply to spit-inside-the-mouth vs spit-outside-the-mouth, fossil-faeces vs fresher-faeces, and other such cases.

xxii I make a distinction between emoter and potentially affected individual in order to include the case of what one might call ‘empathetic disgust’; cf. Wicker et al. (2003) for evidence indicating mirror-neuron activity in disgust.

xxiii Cf. also Kelly (2011).

xxiv Kolnai (1929/2004), 44.

xxv Korsmeyer (2011), 47.

xxvi I am here talking of the emotional reaction had during exposure to a representation. About what happens after exposure ceases, disgust seems to be relatively easy to vanish. Fear, on the other hand, or, more appropriately, the *disposition* to fear, can last quite a long time (after, say, one goes home after watching a gripping thriller film at the cinema).

xxvii An additional degree of immediacy (and hence stubbornness) might be proper to recognitional or imaginative projects involving disgust elicitors towards which we had a hard-wired preparedness. There is in fact evidence in analogous phenomena, for instance facial *pareidolia*, of an innate, especially stubborn propensity to recognize significant figures or patterns, such as, for instance, faces on pieces of toasted bread; see e.g. Liu et al. (2013).

xxviii See Rozin et al. (1986).

xxix Notice that the first case is not only similar to, but an actual instance of the representational case discussed in the next paragraphs. The chocolate turds in question are effectively tridimensional representations.

xxx Royzman and Sabini (2001), 48—9, take instead these cases as evidence of the sensory, as opposed to ideational, character of disgust elicitation. But this is unwarranted, as they can be more straightforwardly accounted for by appeal to object-centricity and sufficiency of appearance.

xxxi ‘Step into the Void’, in the Mont Blanc Massif in the French Alps, might be considered as an actual instance of such an installation.

^{xxxii} For helpful feedback while developing this paper I am very grateful to workshop audiences at Antwerp, Sheffield and York, as well as to an anonymous referee for the *European Journal of Philosophy*, to Angelo Cei, Greg Currie, Chris Jay, Uriah Kriegel, Peter Lamarque, Jerry Levinson and Enrico Terrone. I am also grateful for the generous support provided by the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and by the Jean Nicod Institute (Département d'Études Cognitives, École Normale Supérieure and Paris Sciences et Lettres Research University, and Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique).