

## Korsmeyer on Fiction and Disgust

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### Abstract

In *Savoring Disgust*, Carolyn Korsmeyer argues that disgust is peculiar amongst emotions, for it does not need any of the standard solutions to the so-called ‘paradox of fiction’. I argue that Korsmeyer’s arguments in support of the peculiarity of disgust with respect to the paradox of fiction are not successful.

You watch a thriller film, or read a novel with a happy ending, and react to it by being scared or happy. But you know that the stories told by the film and by the novel are just fiction. So how is your behaviour even possible, given that those stories would seem to be nothing to be afraid of or happy about? Questions of this kind are central to the so-called ‘paradox of fiction’ and have been widely discussed in contemporary analytic aesthetics. The paradox has been raised with regard to several different emotions and types of art, and several solutions have been proposed for it. Disgust is one emotion whose analysis in this respect has lagged behind in contemporary debates.<sup>1</sup> In her recent *Savoring Disgust*, Carolyn Korsmeyer has taken up the issue and argued that disgust occupies a radically different place from the emotions standardly considered with respect to the paradox of fiction.<sup>2</sup> The paradox of fiction is,

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware of only two notable exceptions in this sense. One is to be found in Noël Carroll’s discussion of the paradox of fiction in relation to horror in his *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*, Routledge, New York; London, 1990 (ch. 2). There Carroll briefly discusses the case of disgust with respect to the paradox of fiction (77–78) and suggests that it is easily accounted for by thought theory. The same conclusion is reached by Berys Gaut in a paragraph of his "Reasons, Emotions and Fictions" (17), in Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds.), *Imagination, Philosophy and the Arts*, Routledge, New York: London, 2003, 15–34.

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Korsmeyer. *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. Oxford University Press, New York; Oxford, 2011, especially 53ff.; but see also Carolyn Korsmeyer. “Disgust and Aesthetics”. *Philosophy Compass*, 7(11): 753–761, 2012. In-text page references in what follows are from *Savoring Disgust*. In accordance with Korsmeyer’s focus, this article will only discuss disgust as typically elicited by objects such as bodily excreta, corpses or wounds. It is customary to call this “physical” or “visceral” disgust, in order to distinguish it from “moral” disgust. I will not here enter 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 physical and another for moral disgust.

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in the case of disgust, “easily resolved” (53), and “the need to choose among [the solutions standardly required for the paradox] is avoided altogether” (55). In this paper, I unpack and clarify Korsmeyer’s statement of the peculiarity of disgust with respect to the paradox of fiction and her arguments in its support. I argue that her case for the peculiarity of disgust is not successful.

Korsmeyer’s case ultimately rests on the truth of what she calls the ‘transparency thesis’ for disgust. According to this thesis, whether, say, the pile of faeces I see over there really is a pile of faeces, or is only a painted rendering of a pile of faeces, does not make any difference as to my emotional reaction of disgust to it. In other words, representation is transparent to disgust. The explicit inspiration for this thesis comes to Korsmeyer from a set of remarks made in the eighteenth century by some of the most prominent German-speaking aesthetic theorists, including Moses Mendelssohn, Gotthold E. Lessing and Immanuel Kant.<sup>3</sup> But Korsmeyer develops the transparency thesis into a theoretically articulated position, in particular by advancing a novel and interesting case for it.

A few clarificatory remarks on what Korsmeyer’s transparency thesis amounts to are in order. First, the thesis can either be about representations or imitations. Korsmeyer is not consistent in her terminology, talking sometimes of one, at other times of the other.<sup>4</sup> However, the difference between the two is far from irrelevant. Representations of the disgusting need not be disgusting if the subject is not represented naturalistically (or “imitated”). Take for instance Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937). It portrays the bloody massacre of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Winfried Menninghaus. *Disgust: The theory and history of a strong sensation*. State University of New York Press, 2003, 25ff. for a historical account of these remarks.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, within the same page she uses “rendered artistically” as well as “[m]imesis” (*Savoring Disgust*, 53).

population of the Basque town of Guernica, bombed by German and Italian war planes during the Spanish Civil War. The painting represents beheadings and dismemberments of men and animals. The subject represented is no doubt disgusting, but the representations themselves clearly are not. In the absence of a clear word on this issue from Korsmeyer, I will, in the interest of charity, restrict the analysis that follows to imitation or naturalistic representations. As the *Guernica* example suggests, the transparency thesis is least plausible when applied to non-naturalistic representations.

There is a second issue concerning the transparency thesis that needs disambiguation. On a *strong* reading, the thesis claims that an imitation of a disgust elicitor is as disgusting as that elicitor would be if experienced in the flesh. On a weak reading, the claim is just that the imitation and the real thing both elicit disgust—even though perhaps to different qualitative degrees. Korsmeyer does not express an explicit commitment to either reading, sometimes claiming more prudently that:

when it is rendered artistically, that which is disgusting in nature remains disgusting in art (53);

whilst at other times she more explicitly leans towards the strong reading:

A narrative or work of art arouses disgust by the mere description or picture of something that is disgusting in nature, and when this occurs, the description or picture is itself disgusting in just about the same way.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, for reasons which will be evident later on in this paper, the motivations

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<sup>5</sup> “Disgust and Aesthetics”, 757.

she puts forward for the transparency thesis commit her to its strong version.

Finally, although Korsmeyer is not explicit on this point, it is a fair reconstruction of her view to say that, for her, the transparency thesis makes a *ceteris paribus* claim. For instance, on Korsmeyer's transparency thesis, the picture of a surface smeared with faeces will elicit the same disgusted response that the same surface would, when seen from a comparable viewpoint to that afforded by the picture (from the same distance, with the same light conditions etc.). This makes the import of Korsmeyer's transparency thesis for art appreciation less momentous than it may appear at first. In real life, in fact, we ordinarily encounter objects by means of various different senses. By contrast, art mostly provides us only with partial sensory cues (mainly visual and auditory). Thus ordinary, real-life encounters with, say, faeces will, as a rule, be more disgusting than Andres Serrano's *Romantic Shit* photograph (2008).<sup>6</sup> This is in line with the following remark of Korsmeyer's:

disgust in art usually has its own mitigation—if not mediation—because its [gustatory and olfactory] sensory triggers are rarely present in art at all (57).

Having looked at the characterization of Korsmeyer's transparency thesis, I now want to discuss the reasons she advances in support of it. These lie, I argue, in her *sensory* model of disgust elicitation. She says for instance that:

disgust can be aroused by an image that is not taken to be real. It can be induced by the *presentation of sensory qualities alone*, regardless of whether one believes in the existence of the object possessing those

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<sup>6</sup> One of 66 photographic close-ups of human, dog, jaguar and bull faeces, exhibited in "Andres Serrano: Shit", at the Yvon Lambert Gallery in New York.

qualities (55, my emphasis).

But, Korsmeyer adds, “disgust is not alone in having sensory triggers” (55). Here she draws a parallel with the case of startle as presented by Jenefer Robinson.<sup>7</sup> On Robinson’s account, startle is an emotion that does not require cognitive mediation to be triggered. The mere perception of certain characteristics of one’s environment (e.g. a sudden loud sound), without any interpretation of the nature or provenance of the sound, is typically sufficient for startle elicitation. The same, Korsmeyer says, happens with disgust. In films, for instance:

[t]he object of startle is in the film itself, so like disgust its intentional object is immediately present as a component of the artwork (56).

In other words, the intentional object of the disgust elicited by a (cinematic) image (i.e. the object one’s disgust is about) is the image itself. In parallel to what happens with startle, disgust is, according to Korsmeyer, elicited by the un-interpreted perception of certain sensory qualities.

Korsmeyer’s sensory model of disgust elicitation naturally supports the transparency thesis. If disgust is elicited by the mere perception of sensory qualities, then it follows that, *ceteris paribus* and given all the caveats earlier specified, a representation of something disgusting, one that naturalistically reproduces its sensory features, will be as disgusting as the real thing. Moreover, on Korsmeyer’s model, disgustingness will also be independent of the assumed existence of an object that actually possesses those sensory features. Thus it is a corollary of Korsmeyer’s sensory view that disgust occupies a very peculiar

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<sup>7</sup> In Jenefer Robinson. “Startle”. *Journal of Philosophy*, 92(2): 53–74, 1995.

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place amongst emotions with respect to the paradox of fiction. She in fact concludes that:

[d]ifferent emotions require different solutions to the paradox [of fiction], but the need to choose among these alternatives is avoided altogether by the transparency of disgust (55).

The paradox of fiction, as is customarily understood in contemporary analytic aesthetics, is a puzzle about the prima facie evidence that we have emotional responses directed at objects or events that we believe to be merely fictional. The paradox arises from the joint inconsistency of the following three claims:

1. We often have emotions towards objects or situations that we know to be merely fictional;
2. Emotions had towards objects or situations require beliefs in the existence of those objects or situations as possessing certain features;
3. We do not believe in the existence and features of objects or situations known to be fictional.<sup>8</sup>

Note that the fictionality that is relevant to disgust often concerns not so much the mere *existence* of these objects or situations, as their *being present* to an audience. For instance, is the subject of Rembrandt's *Carcass of Beef* (1657) a real carcass of beef or a non-existent one? The answer to this question would not seem to bear much relevance to the disgust response afforded by the painting. Much more important in this respect is instead that the viewer

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<sup>8</sup> Here I loosely follow Jerrold Levinson's formulation; see Jerrold Levinson. "Emotion in Response to Art". In *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics*. Oxford University Press, New York; Oxford, 2006, 41.

sees the carcass as the subject of a painting, instead of being present to a real specimen of carcass.

A solution to the paradox will either have to reject one (or more) of the claims 1–3 or show that the inconsistency is in fact acceptable. Nevertheless, Korsmeyer contends, one need not follow any of the major routes that have been proposed for other emotions. The major alternative routes that she considers are three. One route is to reject claim (2) by suggesting that entertaining the possibility of the existence of certain objects as having certain features is sufficient for disgust elicitation (this coincides with a class of solutions standardly grouped under the name ‘thought theories’ or ‘anti-judgementalism’, and heralded by Peter Lamarque).<sup>9</sup> A second route goes through recognizing an existence of sorts for the (apparently) fictional objects of emotion (for example as “abstract artifacts”, as Amie Thomasson proposes).<sup>10</sup> This route calls claim (1) into question, as either false or not relevant. The third route surveyed by Korsmeyer also calls claim (1) into question. It does so by reclassifying the emotional reactions we have to fictions as make-believe emotional experiences, rather than genuine instances of garden-variety emotional states (“quasi-emotions”, rather than emotions, on Kendall Walton’s influential account).<sup>11</sup>

In virtue of the transparency of disgust, Korsmeyer suggests, “the need to choose amongst these alternatives is avoided altogether” (55). In fact, she adds, the paradox of fiction “is easily resolved” in the case of disgust (53).<sup>12</sup> Given

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<sup>9</sup> See especially Peter Lamarque. “How Can we Fear and Pity Fictions?” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 21: 291–304, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> In Amie L. Thomasson. *Fiction and Metaphysics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> See Kendall L. Walton. *Mimesis as Make-believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Harvard University Press, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Korsmeyer is not consistent throughout. Although she mostly talks of disgust’s peculiarity in terms of its affording an easier solution to the paradox of fiction than other emotions, she also concludes her discussion of



Korsmeyer’s sensory view of disgust elicitation, in fact, her favoured route to the solution of the paradox must go through calling (1) into question. On her view, the disgust elicited by an artistic representation of something disgusting is not caused by the disgusting thing that one knows to be fictional. Instead, it is caused by the sensory qualities present in the representation. These are the intentional object of the disgust and are, as Korsmeyer says, “a component of the artwork” (56). By contrast, claim (2) need not be rejected, for one need not doubt the existence of the objects that one’s disgust is directed towards—which are, on Korsmeyer’s view, sensory qualities.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Korsmeyer’s sensory view of disgust elicitation supports both the transparency thesis and a peculiar approach to the paradox of fiction. However, the sensory view of disgust should be resisted, for it is not borne out by the available empirical evidence. The mainstream view of disgust elicitation amongst experimental psychologists is in fact *ideational*, rather than sensory.

The paradigm in disgust studies in contemporary experimental psychology was set by the pioneering research conducted from the late 1980s by the psy-

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the topic by saying that: “The immediacy of the arousal of disgust by art converts one of the characteristics of this emotion traditionally considered an aesthetic deficiency to a small advantage: there is no paradox of fiction that arises with disgust” (*Savoring Disgust*, 58). This sentence would seem to suggest that the peculiarity of disgust, for Korsmeyer, is that the paradox does not even arise, and not that it is “easily resolved”. I can see no way to make the sentence fit in with the rest of Korsmeyer’s discussion. The best account of the sentence is as an inconsistency on her part.

<sup>13</sup> There are two sentences of Korsmeyer’s that may seem inconsistent with this account of her views. In both she is making the point that, contrary to the case of fear, it is obvious that the disgust had towards disgusting things in films is real, unalloyed disgust. In one, she says that: “We are really disgusted even when we know the intentional object of disgust is a fiction.” A few lines later, she adds: “No matter that we know it [i.e. a disgusting image in a film] is not real; it is disgusting whether or not a real-life equivalent stands before one” (56). The question here arises: why does Korsmeyer say that the intentional object “a fiction” and “not real”? The intentional object of disgust in these cases is the image (i.e. a sensory object), Korsmeyer has already told us; and the image as a sensory object surely is real, and not fictional. I do not think Korsmeyer is contradicting herself here; she is merely choosing her words somewhat confusingly. The intentional object of disgust is indeed the disgusting image, yet Korsmeyer misleadingly says it is “a fiction”, or “not real”, in the sense that it is an image of something fictional, or not an image of anything real. In fact, this is not the first time that she qualifies images as “not real” in this sense: a page earlier she had said that “disgust can be aroused by an image that is not taken to be real” (55). I am grateful to Peter Lamarque and a member of the Mind & Reason Group at the University of York for pointing out this potential inconsistency to me.

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chologist Paul Rozin and his colleagues. At the basis of Rozin’s view there is a distinction between distaste and disgust. Not all things that taste bad are disgusting, while not all disgusting things taste bad. (The same point holds for other senses as well and for their correlative reactions of “dis-smell”, “dis-touch” etc.).

Whilst distaste is a reaction primarily motivated by the sensory features of objects, disgust primarily concerns the nature of objects (and their history). On the basis of informal observations, for example, Rozin and April Fallon found that 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.<sup>14</sup> Rozin and Fallon’s informal observations were then subsequently confirmed experimentally by Rachel Herz.<sup>15</sup> 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.

The sensory features of an object are thus, typically, not sufficient to elicit disgust; and it is in fact ideational considerations that have a primary role in disgust elicitation. The same sensory qualities elicit different emotional responses, depending on their interpretation. Contra Korsmeyer, disgust elicitation is fundamentally ideational in nature—not sensory.

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<sup>14</sup> See Paul Rozin and April Fallon. “A perspective on disgust”. *Psychological Review*, 94(1): 23–41, 1987, n. 1.

<sup>15</sup> See Rachel S. Herz, Julia von Clef, et al. “The influence of verbal labeling on the perception of odors: Evidence for olfactory illusions?” *PERCEPTION-LONDON*, 30(3): 381–392, 2001.

In fact, in a different section of her book, concerning disgustingness and deliciousness of foods, Korsmeyer does briefly discuss the issue of ideational disgust elicitation as it is raised by Rozin’s work. In this context, she objects to the ideational view by rejecting the *de facto* separability between the sensory and the ideational. Rozin’s ideational view of disgust, she suggests,

assumes that sensory properties are severable from properties of something, that is, that there is such a thing as full and complete sensory properties *tout court*. [But] there is no coherent sensation without cognition—that is, without taking the object of sensation to be something or other. Different interpretations of the object of taste or smell yield different sense experiences. This is not the claim that one has a sensation that is then interpreted and categorized, but rather that without a category the sensation itself is inchoate and indistinct (65).

Some of Korsmeyer’s suggestions here are not implausible. In particular, it may well be the case that a sensation is “inchoate and indistinct” if it is not accompanied by an ideation concerning its object. But the ideational view of disgust does not need to deny that. The ideational view only points out that ideation has the primary role over sensation in the elicitation of disgust. Different ideational interpretations of the same sensory features can result in different emotional reactions.

Beyond this, there is Korsmeyer’s point that “full and complete sensory properties” do not exist in isolation from a cognition concerning the object that they are properties of. But this cannot be taken to deny that there is a distinction in principle between a sensory and an ideational component within a “full and complete” sensory property. Korsmeyer herself has to rely on such a distinction when she claims that “[d]ifferent interpretations of the object

of taste or smell yield different sense experiences”. This is a *ceteris paribus* claim that assumes that everything else is kept constant, apart from ideational factors. Whether what is kept constant is called ‘sensory properties’ or ‘the sensory component’ within “full and complete sensory properties” is nothing more than a terminological matter.

Once one gets past terminological differences, one sees that Korsmeyer’s suggestions can only bolster my criticism of her view of fiction and disgust. It is perhaps worth repeating that what Korsmeyer needed for her claims on fiction and disgust to go through is that claim (1) would be false of disgusting art. In other words, she needed it to be the case that the art appreciator would *not* have emotions towards objects that they believed to be fictional. But this cannot be the case if, as she maintains now, coherent sensations are always sensations *of* some object. When the object is fictional, then the sensation will trigger an emotion towards a fictional object.

Moreover, consider again Korsmeyer’s earlier quoted claim that the intentional object of our cinematic disgust is “a component of the artwork”. This cannot be the case. In fact, the kinds of behavioural responses we typically have to disgusting fictions overlap only partially with those typical of real-life disgust. For example, we tend to turn our heads and shun our glances away from a disgusting object represented on a cinema screen; by contrast, in the presence of a real-life disgusting object that could touch us we keep our eyes steadily on the object, to make sure we do not get in contact with it. Moreover, reaching with our hands towards an actual disgusting object is behaviour only very few of us would ever willingly engage in (if we can avoid it). But if the disgusting object is only pictured on a cinema screen, I think most of us, at least most of the time, would raise no objections to the prospect of touching

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the screen. What our behaviour in such circumstances shows is that the intentional object of our disgust are the represented objects and situations—not their representations.

What we typically find disgusting, then, are not the mere un-interpreted sensory features offered by a representation, but the objects or situations represented through it. However, it is worth stressing that an ideational view of disgust is compatible with the *possibility* of disgust elicitation without ideation. It is in other words possible that, in some cases, disgust may be elicited independently of ideational considerations. Indeed, there is some empirical evidence supporting the existence of quick-and-ready elicitation for emotions in general, and not just for disgust.<sup>16</sup> This possibility has been interpreted by some as involving sensory, or non-cognitive elicitation.<sup>17</sup>

Even assuming this is a correct interpretation of the empirical data,<sup>18</sup> this would not provide support for Korsmeyer's statement of the peculiarity of the case of disgust amongst emotions. Theorists of non-cognitive persuasions take their theories to account for many more emotions besides disgust. In fact, the empirical evidence they appeal to is predominantly obtained for other basic emotions, particularly fear (and in members of animal species such as rodents, which are often considered not to have evolved full-blown disgust).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, and more importantly, according to such theorists, cognitive modulation kicks in soon after the initial non-cognitive stage of emotion elicitation.<sup>20</sup> Cognitive

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<sup>16</sup> See Joseph LeDoux. *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> See Jenefer Robinson. *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Although, see for instance Martha C. Nussbaum. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, 114–5 for a criticism of non-cognitive interpretations of this kind.

<sup>19</sup> See Rachel Herz. *That's Disgusting: Unraveling the Mysteries of Repulsion*. W.W. Norton, New York, 2012, 82–3.

<sup>20</sup> See again Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*.

modulation in turn results in continuation, modification or discontinuation of the initial emotional reaction. But aesthetic appreciation is typically a matter of longer-than-instantaneous exposure to a representation. Accordingly, the paradox of fiction for disgust cannot in general be solved by appeal to initial, instantaneous emotional reactions.

The upshot of the foregoing discussion is that, as things stand after Kormeyer's contribution, the solutions standardly suggested for the paradox of fiction are also the most promising solutions available for the case of disgust. In principle, this does not rule out the possibility that a better and ultimately successful case might be made for the transparency of disgust to representation or for the peculiarity of disgust with respect to fiction. But such a case will have to be found by following different lines of thought from those against which I have here argued.<sup>21</sup>

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