

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dis/liking disgust: the revulsion experience at the movies

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Disgust is a frequent and often powerful part of the cinematic experience – from horror movies and teenage comedies to fantasy films and art-house pictures. This paper aims in three directions: (a) it sheds light on the structure of the cinematic disgust experience; (b) it points out aesthetic strategies that provoke disgust effectively; (c) it tries to identify what aesthetic functions disgust might have. In the first part I argue that the revulsion experience implies the obtrusive closeness of a disgusting filmic object (or act) and a peculiar constriction of the viewer's lived body. Both characteristics can lead to aversive reactions like looking away or moaning, which in turn have a relieving quality since they enable a more appropriate aesthetic distance and an expansion of the lived body. Looking at Pasolini's *Salò* and the teenage comedy *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*, I subsequently show how disgust can be produced and intensified aesthetically: through the choice of potent disgusting objects, the use of close-ups as well as the involvement with characters via somatic empathy and sympathy. The paper ends with a discussion of the main functions of disgust: pleasure and provocation.

Keywords: aesthetics of disgust; *cinéma vomitif*; phenomenology; synaesthesia; Pasolini's *Salò*; *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*

No doubt, watching movies can be an utterly disgusting experience. Some films have the power to put us off, to sicken us, to make us feel queasy and nauseous. When *The Exorcist* came out in 1973, newspapers and magazines reported incidents of public vomiting with blatant fascination (Paul 1994, 481). Moreover, after a San Francisco screening of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), critic Michael Goodwin remembers, 'people began to emerge from the theatre in a state of shock. Some of them made it to the bathroom before they threw up. Some didn't' (Staiger 2000, 181). Together with sexual arousal, moments of startle, fearful responses to horrific violence and monstrosity as well as melodramatic weeping, scenes of disgust belong to the strongest affective instances at the movies. Vis-à-vis a disgusting filmic *object* – sometimes also a character in the *act* of being disgusted – we are overcome by an emotion that suddenly takes

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possession of our body, causing physical loathing or shuddering and forcing us to look away, gag, or even vomit.

Disgust is the hallmark of such diverse directors as David Cronenberg, the Farrelly brothers, Jörg Buttgerreit, Takashi Miike, or John Waters who bring it into play for either appalling or comic ends. Since disgusting scenes can function in such diametrically opposed ways, it should not surprise us that they occur in a wide range of genres, modes, and media. First and foremost is the horror film with infamous examples like *The Exorcist* or Dario Argento's *Phenomena* (1985). One might also think of comedies such as *Borat* (2006), *There's Something About Mary* (1998), or Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* (1983) in which an outrageously fat man bursts alive while eating dinner in a restaurant. Moreover, fantasy films like *Lord of the Rings* (2001) or *Pan's Labyrinth* (2007) come to mind with revolting creatures like the Gollum or the child-eating Pale Man. Not to mention TV series like *Beavis & Butthead* or *Jackass* with their indefatigable (some would say: indecorous) exploration of excretions and exhalations. Furthermore, there are thrillers such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) or *Seven* (1995) which include images of a bloated female corpse found in water and a putrefying torture victim with a skull-like head, protruding eyes, and rotten teeth. And how could we disregard art-house movies? Films like *The Piano Teacher* (2001), *Happiness* (1998), and perhaps most notoriously, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) with its extremely revolting 'Circle of Shit' chapter also strongly evoke disgust. Mikal Brotzman (1997) even came up with a filmic meta-genre that capitalizes on this reaction – he calls it *cinéma vomitif*.

Before we dismiss disgusting scenes as cheap and literally repulsive, then, we should ask what specific aesthetic experience they enable and why they are used so widely. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the structure of the cinematic disgust *experience*, point out *aesthetic strategies* how to provoke disgust effectively, and answer the question what *functions* it might have. Accordingly, I will advance my argument in three steps.

In the first part I will provide a phenomenological description of how we, as viewers, experience the cinematic *ugh!* or 'yuck factor', as Stephen King calls it (1981, 186). My focus on phenomenological *description*, however, entails that I will not search for causal *explanations*, that is, the question *why* we are disgusted at specific filmic acts or objects. To be sure, the *intensity* and *expressivity* of individual viewer reactions depend on a number of variables, among them differences in physiological disposition, gender, age, culture, etc. What is more, the intentional *objects* of disgust differ from individual to individual, from culture to culture (Korsmeyer 2002). However, phenomenology is not so much interested in examples of *specific* individual viewers but in *types* of experience and their common structure. I will argue that the experiential structure of disgust at the movies is characterized by (a) the obtrusive *phenomenological closeness* of the disgusting film (an experiential proximity that can be amplified through but does not depend on the use of close-ups of disgusting objects or acts); (b) a peculiar

constriction of the viewer's lived body; (c) typical *aversive reactions* of revulsion; and (d) a *precarious intertwinement* of viewer and film. Disgust will turn out to be an illuminating example of cinematic synaesthesia.

In the second part I will analyse the aesthetic strategies that are used to evoke disgust most powerfully: the choice and combination of potent disgusting objects as part of the *mise-en-scène*, the use of close-ups and the viewer's relation to characters via somatic empathy as well as somatic sympathy. The argument is developed with reference to two extremely disgusting movies: Pasolini's *Salò* and the teenage comedy *National Lampoon's Van Wilder* (2002). As the choice of these two radically different movies underscores, disgust is far from mono-functional – the disgust experience may involve the satisfaction of cognitive interest and somatic pleasure, but it can also be provocatively displeasing and thought-provoking. Hence to argue that scenes of disgust have a common experiential core does not imply that they cannot eventually veer into different directions and serve different goals. In the third and final part I will therefore show how the phenomenological characteristics of cinematic disgust suggest and make possible its two major functions: pleasure and provocation. My argument relies exclusively on what the phenomenological description has revealed about our *conscious* experience, that is, I will refrain from hypothesizing about unconscious drives and wishes (for psychoanalytic speculations about the functions of disgusting films, see Creed 1993 or Bell-Metereau 2004).

Close encounters: a phenomenology of the cinematic disgust experience

When we watch a movie, we are so involved in following what goes on in the filmic world that we reflect upon *how* we experience it only occasionally. We are certainly *conscious* of our own experience, but in most cases it remains *pre-reflective*. In order to take note of the experience itself, we have to step back, reflect, and describe. In this section I explore the question what the viewer experiences phenomenologically when he or she is grossed-out by a movie: how does it feel when one is suddenly overcome by cinematic disgust? As we shall see, this discussion of the experiential structure will prove essential for the subsequent analyses of aesthetic strategies and functions of disgust.

(a) Obtrusive nearness

The phenomenologist Aurel Kolnai points out that in order to be experienced as disgusting an object must come overly near and penetrate the intimate area of the senses. He talks about the 'non-self-containedness' (2004, 41) of the disgusting object that shamelessly forces itself upon us: 'The disgusting object grins and smirks and stinks menacingly at us.' When the moviegoer watches Erika Kohut (Isabelle Huppert) probe a tissue filled with male sperm in *The Piano Teacher* or sees how Father Karras (Jason Miller) in *The Exorcist* gets covered with the demon's green vomit, he or she experiences the film aggressively closing in.

All of a sudden the integrity and cleanliness of the body seems threatened by a film that was relatively distant a moment before. Hence the first and central feature of cinematic disgust is the *obtrusive nearness* of the disgusting film, instigated by a revolting object or act perceived in the filmic world. However, if we do not want to throw overboard the fact that film is an *audio-visual* medium, how can something that relies on the so-called ‘distance senses’ seeing and hearing come *overly close* – particularly if it is of a different ontological order?

Obviously, we must not consider the obtrusive nearness exclusively in *objective* physical terms. Neither the sperm-filled tissue nor the green vomit reaches our immediate, physically measurable vicinity. However, *subjectively* we can be disgusted at the sight and sound of something that is objectively quite distant or even of a different ontological order – like the moving images of the tissue and the vomit on the screen. The crucial aspect is a phenomenological *experience* of proximity that is actively felt. This is why it is not just metaphorical speech but the description of an *actual* experience when Mikal Brotzman argues that a disgusting movie like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is characterized by a ‘lack of distance between the real and the textual’ (1997, 175).¹ Phenomenological film theory strongly rejects constructs of spectatorship that treat the viewer as a disembodied mind or subject-eye ‘reading’ a filmic ‘text’. Against the widespread, totalizing understanding of vision as a ‘distance’ sense, we should emphasize that the act of seeing is not identical with the object seen – we always also experience ourselves as the ones who see.² Although in vision we are mostly *directed-at*, to a certain extent we are always also *affected-by*. Hence in and through seeing we can have haptic, olfactory, and gustatory experiences as well – a fact that is particularly obvious in moments of cinematic disgust.³

(b) Bodily constriction

It should not surprise us, then, that an audio-visual medium relying on the alleged ‘distance’ senses can cause the strong bodily responses typical of disgust, even if the ‘bodily’ senses of touch, smell, and taste are not directly called upon. Through synaesthetic perception we not only feel an obtrusive *nearness* of the disgusting film, however, but also experience its aggressive closeness resulting in a spatial *constriction* of the lived body. In his enormously detailed phenomenology of the lived body, the philosopher Hermann Schmitz convincingly describes our bodily experience in spatial terms, arguing that it shifts on a highly nuanced continuum between constriction and expansion. The emotions of joy and yearning, for instance, have strong expansive tendencies. In joy we jump cheerfully into the air and feel an urge to embrace the whole world; in yearning we reach out for the spatial or temporal distance. Guilt and sorrow, on the other hand, are characterized by a negative constrictive experience. Think of the phenomenological – not physically measurable – heaviness that pulls you down in sorrow or the strong feeling of guilt that leaves you little air to breathe. Similarly, Schmitz describes the experience of disgust as a peculiar form of *constriction*

(1965, 243). Comparable to fear and pain, disgust therefore entails an urge away: we try to get rid of the obtrusively close object that constricts us. When the disgusting film overwhelms us, we wish to free ourselves from bodily constriction and therefore resort to responses whose *outward-directedness* imply a more expansive state. This is where expressive aversive reactions like *ugh!*-ing, moaning, screaming, laughing uneasily, and even vomiting come into play.

(c) *Aversive reactions*

The experience of the revolting film's excessive *closeness* and the lived body's *constriction* can therefore also be inferred from our various disgust reactions. Once we experience the proximity of the movie too intensely and constricting, we *re-act* with strong *re-pulsion* or *re-vulsion*. Both expressions indicate an urge *away*. Repulsion derives from the Latin word *repellere*, meaning 'driving away or back'. Revulsion comes from the Latin word *revulsio*, describing the 'act of pulling away'. An object of disgust neither provokes an active urge to destroy it (as in hatred) nor to flee its danger (as in fear); it simply evokes a tendency to put the disgusting object *out of the way* (Kolnai 2004, 100). In the movie theatre reactions like looking away or giggling must be understood as appropriate active aversions, that is, they are acts of disposal. This might remind us of our response to overwhelming scenes of horror, to which we sometimes react in comparable ways. However, a crucial difference exists: while in fear we close our eyes in order to *escape* from the frightening *impact* of violent sights and sounds, in disgust we simply *get rid of* the perceptual neighbourhood and possible contact with the disgusting film (Kolnai 2004, 100).

While the range of aversive reactions is quite broad, a phenomenological distancing is always implied. Hence one distancing strategy, for instance, would be looking *at* the formal qualities of the movie rather than immersively *into* the filmic world. Among horror aficionados it is a common response to concentrate on and judge the craftsmanship of special effects in order to avoid the (overly) emotional effects of the 'effects' (Hills 2005, 87). Hence I could focus my attention on how the filmmakers created the pool filled with filth and rotting bodies in *Phenomena*. Or by drawing on my extra-filmic knowledge I might distance the demon's green vomit in *The Exorcist* by considering what it actually was: pea soup. But distancing can also take on a more classically erudite form. Outraged during her first viewing of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, film scholar Janet Staiger changed her attitude when she watched the film for the second time: she interpreted it on intertextual grounds. Staiger notes (2000, 185):

By using the intertextual frame 'Tobe Hooper has used Hitchcock's *Psycho* as an intertext for *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and I am smart enough to see this,' I am constructing for myself the role of a listener to a joke I am attributing to Hooper. Thus, I become complicit with Hooper in the mechanisms of a tendentious joke, rather than the joke's victim – the 'average' viewer of the movie.

While these strategies rely on a *mental* change of aesthetic attitude (from the filmic world to the film as formally constructed object), there are also a number of aversive reactions that rely on *body* movements as a means of pulling away. When we flinch, shut our eyes, raise our hands in defence, or turn away completely in order to focus on our neighbour or the exit sign, we try to keep the disgusting object at bay by turning to the body in order to recreate a more comfortable distance. In most cases, however, these aversive strategies come an instance too late: we are *already* grossed-out and thus pestered by the obtrusively close object. Some viewers find it adequate therefore to distance themselves more forcefully by resorting to *audible* reactions. Apart from their communicative function (which I will largely bracket in this paper), responses like repulsed moaning and screaming ‘Gross!’, *yuck!*-ing and *ugh!*-ing, uneasy giggling and laughing can have a relieving quality.⁴ Their eruptive, outward-directed character not only entails a more expansive state (as argued above), but also helps to push back, as it were, the disgusting object. The distancing that results from these expressive responses helps to cleanse the ‘polluted’ or ‘befouled’ self.⁵ As the examples from *The Exorcist* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* at the beginning underline, in some cases the proximity of the disgusting object is experienced as so overwhelmingly strong that our body uses the final way out – by turning, as it were, its *inside* out. Vomiting as the ultimate breaking out of the lived body literally ‘throws up’ *something* – paradoxically something quite disgusting itself – that promises the relief of bodily expansion and distance.

(d) *Precarious intertwinement*

Since the appearance of the disgusting object or act depends on sound-supported moving images (and hence is of a different ontological order), it can only bridge the gap from the filmic world into our own spectatorial position via the senses of seeing and hearing. Once we look away or put the hands over our ears, the intertwinement is cut and the proper phenomenological distance can be re-established. While in real life an awful smell might linger in the air for minutes and we might be unable to remove a repulsive substance from our clothes, in the cinema we do not have to run away or physically get rid of the object, but can rely on closing our eyes or screaming in order to detach the object of disgust. Hence the preceding description suggests that in moments of disgust the viewer’s intertwinement with the filmic world becomes precarious.

Similar to the *frightened* spectator of horror films and thrillers, the *disgusted* viewer balances on a thin line: she tends to be fascinated and nauseated, to probe the object and to shun it, to look and to look away. While potentially immersed in the filmic world, the viewer is always on the verge of turning her head. Once she disposes of the disgusting object by looking away, she partly (and sometimes fully) cuts her intertwinement with the film – she is literally grossed-out of the film by the film’s disgusting object. The viewer might still *hear* the sounds that spark her *imagination*, but she does not see the moving *images* anymore.

Hence depending on the intensity and the frequency of the gross-out scenes as well as the idiosyncratic dispositions of the audience members, disgusting movies can initiate quick vacillating back-and-forth movements between moments of extricating revulsion and periods of immersion, between being pushed away by the movie and being pulled into it.

As we will see in the next part, our tacit understanding that we can rely on the ontological difference between the movie theatre's 'here' and the film's 'there' – and hence the possibility to recreate an appropriate aesthetic distance – is a precondition for both the pleasurable and the provocative function of disgusting scenes. Even if a *sensorium commune* synaesthetically integrates the allegedly isolated senses and therefore allows for *indirect* haptic, olfactory, and gustatory experiences, the cinema appeals *directly* only to the senses of vision and sound (exceptions like Smell-O-Vision or the Odorama scratch-and-sniff cards that John Waters provided for his movie *Polyester* [1981] left aside). Precisely because sight and sound are the only senses actively called upon – both not ranked prominently in lists of the most significant senses of disgust (Rozin and Fallon 1987; Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2000; Kolnai 2004) – it is much easier to withdraw and hence to avoid serious displeasure. Would we be able to come through a horror movie like *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) if we smelled, touched, and even tasted the rotting zombies? Would we not be overwhelmed by the phenomenological proximity of the 'the worst toilet in Scotland', if we had to smell, touch, and even jump into it like Renton (Ewan McGregor) in *Trainspotting* (1996)? The *already* close multisensory object of disgust (based on seeing and hearing) would force itself *too* strongly on us if the other senses were addressed directly as well. Hence it is doubtful whether odour-releasing systems like AromaRama and Smell-O-Vision – had they survived their short life-span in 1959 and 1960 – were endurable if used in a cinematic encounter of the disgusting kind. What André Bazin has described as the cinema's irresistible march towards an ever-more 'perfect illusion of the outside world' – the 'total cinema that is to provide that complete illusion of life which is still a long way away' (1967, 20) – has to come to an abrupt halt when confronted with foul, slimy creatures or, for that matter, an utterly repulsive bathroom in Scotland.

Close up and personal: aesthetic strategies of cinematic disgust

In this part I will show that the production of revulsion is based on recurring aesthetic strategies that – tacitly or explicitly – take advantage of the experiential characteristics described in the preceding phenomenological section. When filmmakers intend to use the audio-visual medium of film in order to address the viewer's sensorium synaesthetically, they can rely on these tried and tested strategies. The following list is not meant to be exhaustive but merely specifies what I consider the most prevalent aesthetic strategies of disgust.

(a) Choice and combination of objects

Since the experience of disgust frequently implies being intentionally directed at a *revolting object*, the most basic aesthetic strategy is obviously the effective selection of the object. Here the filmmaker can rely on a plethora of objects considered disgusting outside the cinema as well (cf. Kolnai 2004, 52–62). There are, for instance, phenomena associated with putrefaction: corruption, decomposition, dissolution of living bodies and organic matter in whole as well as in parts. There are viscous, semi-fluid, obtrusively clinging products excreted and secreted from human or animal bodies like pus, vomit, faeces, slime, mucus, sweat, semen, and menstruation blood as well as intestines. There is dirt with its formal traits of adulteration, shapelessness, and stickiness as well as everything that is simultaneously formless, slimy, and deliquescing. Animals like vermin and invertebrates also come to mind, characterized by crawling glueyness, pullulating squirming, or cohesion into a homogenous teeming mass. Furthermore, we might think of animals strongly related to dirt, decay, or death – like rats, hyenas, and vultures – or certain foods and the way they are prepared. Moreover, one could list bodily deformation in terms of exaggerated living growth (tumours, ulcerations, abscesses) or life in the wrong place in so far as it exceeds purposeful organic unity (six fingers, three breasts). But there is also bodily deformation in terms of a lack of living growth, that is, corporeal incompleteness: a missing eye or no toes. As the great variety of monsters in the horror film indicates, the items of this list can be variously combined and permuted: outsized, slime-spitting bugs in *Mimic* (1997); Freddy Krueger's burnt flesh and rotten teeth in *New Nightmare* (1994); a teeming mass of slimy alien cocoons inhabiting *Alien: Resurrection* (1997).

(b) Close-ups

The phenomenological section has established *obtrusive nearness* as a key experiential feature of disgust. Consequently, filmmakers keen on nauseating their audience might enforce closeness by aesthetic means – through sound effects suggesting proximity and above all through extended visual close-ups taking us near the object or act of disgust. Three intertwined features come into play. First, the close-up is a means of directing the viewer's *attention* to the object, a fact that early film theorist Hugo Münsterberg has underscored and that was later taken up by Noël Carroll (Münsterberg 1915; Carroll 2003). Second, the close-up often implies a slowing down or retardation of the narrative progress: its disruption of the story's continuity is a kind of spectacle in its own right. As such it contains an information surplus that often cannot be justified in narrative terms, but assumes an important affective function: it magnifies our *emotional response* to the object. Hence Tony Kaes calls it 'a stylistic device charged with affect that causes different effects depending on genre and film' (2000, 156, my translation). Third (and closely connected to points one and two), the close-up draws us *phenomenologically closer* to the object of the filmic world. In a sentence that is

very much aware of the synaesthetic qualities of the close-up, Béla Balázs writes: ‘the magnifying glass of the *kinematograph* draws us close to the individual cells of the texture of life, once again lets us feel the fabric and substance of concrete life’ (2001, 49, my translation; see also Doane who notes that the close-up ‘provokes a sense of the tangible, the intimate’ (2003, 109)). For Balázs the close-up implies ‘a kind of naturalism’ since it presents the object in detail (2001, 51, my translation). Because we see and hear more than enough of the disgusting object in ‘naturalistic’ detail, the senses of seeing and hearing can more easily veer in a haptic, gustatory, or olfactory direction.

This is rather obvious in the ‘Girone della Merda’ (‘Circle of Shit’) chapter of *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*. In this scene of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s utterly disturbing adaptation of a Marquis de Sade novel a fascist and sadist libertine named ‘the duke’ (Paolo Bonacelli) defecates on the living-room floor of a country house and then forces a naked young girl to eat his faeces, while a group of fascists, guards, and sex slaves follows the scene. In a veritable crescendo of disgust, Pasolini gradually ups the ante. Initially, he relies on the viewer’s visual *imagination* of the disgusting act and object to fill in a filmic blank: while squatting to excrete, the duke – first in long shot, then somewhat closer – is partially hidden behind a wooden table. At this point we cannot see but have to imaginatively infer what he does. Then Pasolini takes us one step closer: in a medium shot we can see the duke get up and close his pants, thereby revealing the excreted heap and bringing in the viewer’s visual *perception* of the disgusting object. Subsequently the crying girl is aggressively forced to approach the excrements on her knees. The duke hands her a spoon. He furiously commands her to eat. Eat! EAT! Finally, Pasolini cuts to a close-up of the desperate, intimidated girl who spoons up the nauseating excrements – a move with considerable consequences. Pasolini knew that it makes a difference if we hear little of an object’s disgustingness or everything in suggestive detail, if we see it in a panorama shot or are literally close up.

In *Salò* this is not a blessing but a curse. In a film that consists in large parts of distancing tableaux-like long shots, every close-up implies the threat of bringing us overly close to what we would like to avoid. As Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener remind us, the close-up not only directs our attention toward an object’s *detail*, but simultaneously depicts it as *monumental* (2007, 92): looking at the object closely it makes the object look as big as several square metres on the screen. Hence what celebratory accounts of the close-up (like Balázs’) leave unmentioned is the fact that the close-up can also create a wish to escape the monumental object’s proximity – as when Pasolini confronts us with a whole salver full of warm, stinking excrements later into the episode. As long as the shot range allows it, attention can wander and concentrate, for instance, on Dante Ferretti’s impressive set design. Once this escape route is blocked by the close-up and attention is forced toward the obtrusively near object, however, for some viewers closing their eyes might be unavoidable. As a consequence the ‘Circle of Shit’ chapter becomes almost literally unwatchable.

(c) Somatic empathy

Another way to create obtrusive nearness and enforce lived-body constriction – and thus to intensify the viewer’s disgust response – is a strong somatic relation to the characters. While disgust often derives from the viewer’s directedness at a repulsive *object*, it can also rely on the intentional relatedness to a character in the *act* of being disgusted. Consider the clichéd strategy of showing a character putting a finger into a disgusting substance, sniff it, and then look disgusted – somatic empathy helps to explain why it is used so often (for a cognitivist perspective on somatic empathy, see Smith 1995; for a phenomenological point of view see Morsch 2007 and Hanich 2010): the typical, possibly even universal facial expressions and body movements of disgust can be contagious (Ekman 2003). Without a conscious thought we relate to the character’s intentional *act* of being disgusted – rather than the intentional *object* of disgust – and hence feel disgusted in a similar (albeit not identical) way. Again, *Salò* is a good example. As if the close-up was not enough, Pasolini amplifies our synaesthetic perception of the duke’s excrements through somatic empathy. While the depiction of faeces is certainly repulsive itself, the somatic empathy that we feel with the completely disgusted and retching characters by way of *affective* and *motor* mimicry further stimulates the synaesthetic capacity to transfer sight and sound to our other senses.

Character engagement also helps to explain our desire for vicarious purging and hence the distancing of an overly close disgusting object. When, say, a hairy spider crawls over the hero’s bare chest, we want him to get rid of it instantly; when a filthy piece of cloth is pressed into the heroine’s mouth, we wish for a quick removal. Hence it is one thing for Pasolini to present a disgusting object (faeces) and quite another to depict the object close to or inside a character’s bare body (a naked girl). What is more, similar to our disgust reaction in real life, the intensity of our empathetic response grows the closer the disgusting object moves from the periphery to the centre of the self, from the surface to the inside (Straus 1956, 394). Had the girl stepped on the duke’s faeces with her foot, the scene would have been less disgusting than if one of the guards had rubbed it on her breasts, in her ears, or even her nostrils. Amplifying the effect to its maximum, Pasolini chooses the worst of all options: the mouth. Watching a character chew and swallow someone else’s faeces is so utterly gross because the mouth brings into play not only the viewer’s sense of touch and smell, but via empathy it also synaesthetically involves the sense of taste.

(d) Somatic sympathy

Interestingly, strong disgust reactions based on character engagement do not only derive from somatic *empathy*, but can also rely on somatic *sympathy*. In his essay on filmic disgust Carl Plantinga argues that disgust is a ‘direct emotion’ which makes it unlikely that the viewer experiences disgust in sympathy with

a character: 'It is an emotion that is by nature nonsympathetic' (2006, 87). I think that Plantinga's observation is inaccurate. My disagreement is based on an outrageously disgusting scene in the movie *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*, which depends almost fully on the somatic sympathy the viewer feels for the characters. In this scene a sorority girl delivers a basket full of pastries to a couple of annoying fraternity guys. The guys are unaware that the pastries are meant less as a present than as an act of revenge – they are stuffed with still warm dog sperm. While the guys enjoy the pastries, confirm each other how delicious they are, and even gurgle the canine semen, the viewer could not feel more disgusted. His or her disgust experience depends on somatic sympathy.

Somatic sympathy functions complementary to somatic empathy and should not be mistaken for the *compassion* that we might feel for the tortured victim in *Salò*. In *Salò* we empathize *with* the humiliated woman who is grossed-out herself *and* we simultaneously feel *compassion for* her suffering and humiliation. Somatic empathy and compassion coexist. In *Van Wilder*, on the other hand, we cannot feel compassion because the guys do not suffer and we cannot feel *like* the characters because they enjoy the situation. Instead our surplus of knowledge – quasi-automatically and possibly against our will – forces us to sympathetically feel grossed-out *for* the guys (and this is true even though we feel antipathies *against* them throughout the movie). In this case disgust cannot derive from affective or motor mimicry, but must depend on an imagination of a possible personal involvement: what if *I* had to eat dog semen? In fact, the affective mimicry that we might otherwise feel with the pleased and grateful fraternity boys is trumped by our sympathy-based disgust.

What makes the dog-sperm scene in *Van Wilder* so different from the faeces scene in *Salò*, is the fact that a huge amount of *schadenfreude* – a cruel joy about someone else's misery – is interspersed with disgust and therefore colours the latter more enjoyably. In fact, *Van Wilder* puts us in a curious state of in-between. On the one hand, we cannot avoid sympathizing with the characters who are presented as antagonists throughout the film. While we obviously do not feel like them, our surplus of knowledge makes us asymmetrically and sympathetically feel grossed-out for the guys. On the other hand, the movie simultaneously grants us the possibility to laugh about the obnoxious fraternity guys with malicious glee – an enjoyable reaction made possible only because we feel disgusted *for* the characters in the first place. What is more, in contrast to the depressing mood of *Salò*, in which the disgust experience is amplified negatively by the suffering of the tortured victims, a comedy like *Van Wilder* couches its disgust scenes in an overall light-hearted atmosphere. This is necessarily so, otherwise an extended moment of disgust like the dog-sperm scene would not be part of a popular teenage comedy. However, this is not the only reason why such scenes can be enjoyable – which eventually brings me to my last point: the functions of disgust.

Pleasure and provocation: the functions of cinematic disgust

Aesthetic theory has often treated disgust with strong suspicion. As an aesthetic response it has been – and often *is* – considered too close to its real-life equivalent. Winfried Menninghaus summarizes this position:

Mendelssohn and Kant had defined disgust as a ‘dark’ sensation that so categorically indicates something ‘real’ that it strains the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ – and therewith the condition for aesthetic illusion: *I am disgusted – therefore I experience something as unconditionally real (not at all as art)*. (2003, 9)

Plantinga expresses a comparable contemporary view:

Disgust in the movies is not an aesthetic emotion, in which the spectator is distanced by the knowledge of the fictional status of what is seen. The strength of the disgust reaction may be attenuated, since the film medium typically emits no smells, and since there is no threat of bodily contact with the disgusting entity. Yet seeing and hearing the disgusting object causes aversive tendencies that are identical to those we might experience outside the movie theatre. [... the difference between] our reactions to actual and photographically represented disgusting objects is one of degree and not of kind. (2006, 86)

What Mendelssohn, Kant, and Plantinga do not mention is the fact that disgust often serves significant aesthetic ends. In this final section I change perspective and draw attention to the *functions* of disgust. In my opinion two broad categories stand out (even if the functions of disgust are certainly not limited to them): *pleasure* and *provocation*.

Since disgust recurs in so many popular genres, we should expect some positive, even pleasurable value attached to it. Hence it is not surprising that – from Kolnai to Kristeva (1982) and Menninghaus – most theorists underscore the *paradoxical* or *ambivalent* nature of disgust. While we are strongly repelled by the intentional object (up to the point of vomiting), it often involves some degree of attraction, fascination, and even somatic pleasure. Menninghaus, for one, defines disgust as ‘(1) the violent repulsion vis-à-vis (2) a physical presence or some other phenomenon in our presence, (3) which at the same time, in various degrees, can also exert a subconscious attraction or even an open fascination’ (2003, 6). Likewise, Kolnai argues that the tip of our intention sometimes penetrates the disgusting object, probing and analysing it, as it were, and thus becomes immersed in it – in spite of essential hesitations and a reluctance which may also lead to a sudden cessation of contact with the object (Kolnai 2004, 39; see also Peucker 2007, 189). To the extent that we do not pull away from the disgusting object, we certainly reveal *some* interest or curiosity in it. Hence while the disgusting object generally *forces itself upon us*, we are sometimes fascinated by it and therefore carefully *approach it* on our own terms by devoting attention to it.

This is hardly astonishing since the disgusting is rarely part of our everyday experience – and precisely because it is rare and unusual it may raise an ambivalent curiosity. Drawing on Mary Douglas’ classic anthropological study *Purity and Danger*, Noël Carroll argues that disgusting monsters raise our

curiosity because they transgress or violate standing cultural categories (1990, 31–5). They are incomplete or formless; they mix what is otherwise distinct; they are magnified beyond proportion. Carroll's account underscores the ambivalence of disgust by calling revulsion 'the price to be paid' for the satisfaction of curiosity: 'One wants to gaze upon the unusual, even when it is simultaneously repelling' (1990, 184 and 188).

But the satisfaction of curiosity is not the only pleasure that comes with disgust. At times viewers even deliberately enjoy the peculiar lived-body experience connected to revolting scenes. The reason is obvious: if allotted correctly the disgust experience contains a potential for pleasurable bodily *stimulation*. Menninghaus explains:

Confronted with abominable [*abscheulichen*] actions, the 'soul' of the spectator breaks through its anaesthetized state in the banal everyday, or in gloomy boredom, and feels itself to be 'alive,' because agitated by strong sensations of great emotional amplitude. To the extent that they are 'passionate' and intense, disagreeable sensations [like disgust] may thus be 'agreeable' and conducive to pleasure. (2003, 8)

The emotional amplitude that Menninghaus talks about implies a back-and-forth transformation of our lived-body experience that is potentially stimulating: out of a comparatively expanded state right into constriction and subsequently out of the constriction of disgust into a more expanded state once the scene is over. The correct allotment most often comes with brevity. In contrast to the relentless persistence of disgust in *Salò*, *National Lampoon's Van Wilder* bristles with short revolting moments – for instance, when the eponymous college student character Van Wilder (Ryan Reynolds) has to kiss an old, ugly, lecherous woman from the administration or when a stripper farts loudly into the face of one of her spectators. Like the brief bursts of startle in the slasher movie, these jolts of disgust are both sufficiently short and thematically harmless enough *not* to overwhelm the viewer completely but rather 'tickle' him or her pleasurably.

The comparison with moments of shock is apposite also because in both cases the intense and quasi-automatic response can initiate a pleasurable experience of collectivity among members of the audience – a third type of pleasure connected to disgust. Precisely because disgust (just as shock) is experienced strongly and unavoidably, it can foster an intersubjective understanding that the other viewers do not only see and hear the same but also *feel* alike. This impression is particularly forceful in moments when the performativity of the aversive reactions described in the phenomenological part reaches its peak. Think of the collective 'ugh!-ing', moaning, and uneasy giggling often encountered among teenage and young adult audiences. Just like screams of shock (in the horror movie) and the roars of laughter (in all kinds of comedy), the collectivity of the audience in these jolting moments of disgust forces itself upon the individual viewer through clearly perceptible common reactions – reactions largely foreclosed to and felt inappropriate by the less expressive audiences of the serious art-house film. As a consequence, eruptive, outward-directed responses like

ugh!-ing or moaning have a third function: they not only help to distance the disgusting object and enable a more expanded lived-body experience (as mentioned earlier), but also create a pleasurable ‘community’ of feelings in the face of a disgusting object.

However, since disgust strongly forces the object of revulsion upon the viewer, addresses the body powerfully, and thereby shifts the focus toward the ‘lower’, ‘bodily’ senses of touch, smell, and taste, disgusting films also *affront* the traditional Western preference of the ‘higher’, ‘distance’ senses of seeing and hearing. This is why the emotion of disgust is often considered irritating, excessive, and provocative and recurrently plays a major part in the scandals of art (see Liessmann 2004). *Salò* most certainly is a case in point; the film ranks among the biggest scandals in film history.⁶ But Pasolini’s unyielding elicitation of disgust via close-up and character engagement is not provocation for provocation’s sake (a tendency found in many John Waters films). Instead, its strong and unpleasant bodily experience makes us *feel* the humiliation of the sex slaves precisely because in his relentlessness Pasolini humiliates us, the nauseated viewers, as well. Through almost unbearable bodily disgust Pasolini achieves an acerbic critique: in the ‘Circle of Shit’ chapter he provokes us to suffer from the displeasure of disgust in order to make us *understand* – viscerally, not just conceptually – the consequences of unabashed, unleashed power. The contemporaneous German trailer of *Salò* therefore described the film rather accurately as a ‘provocation in the name of truth’.

However, this is possible only because we attend a movie and therefore *know* that we can distance ourselves once the experience of disgust becomes overwhelming. While on the one hand the movie forces us to empathize somatically with the shit-eating characters, on the other hand it might entail an anti-illusionist distance precisely because disgusted viewers tend to look away. If creating distance is a modernist aesthetic device par excellence, the distancing effect of a modernist film like *Salò* works quite literal. This see-saw process of looking and looking away, of being captivated by the film and disentangling from the fetters of the movie, of immersion and extrication is essential: if we had no possibility to recreate a proper aesthetic distance, we would be wholly (and not merely partially) involved in humiliating disgust and therefore remain unable to reflect on what Pasolini wants to convince us of. Precisely because disgust is part of an *aesthetic* experience, a highly provocative film like *Salò* can also be thought-provoking. Hence in the hands of a masterful director the disreputable emotion of disgust in the end turns out to be a valuable contribution to an ethical aesthetics.

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Notes

1. The aspect of phenomenological *closeness* is also present in Walter Benjamin's famous formula of the film's 'tactile' quality that 'periodically assail[s] the spectator' (1968, 238). In our context it might be interesting to note that at this point in his text Benjamin draws a tight connection to the Dadaist work of art with its 'obscenities' and 'waste products of language' whose foremost requirement was to cause a 'scandal' and to 'outrage the public'. For Benjamin, the Dadaist work of art functioned like an 'instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality.' As such, it resembles the film in *general* – and, we might add, disgusting scenes more *specifically* (1968, 237, 238).
2. As phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels notes: 'The oculo-centrism of a certain occidental tradition relies on a misconception of the view which equates seeing with the seen' (1999, 127, my translation). Similarly, Erwin Straus points out: 'In seeing, too, we not only experience the seen but also ourselves as someone who sees' (1956, 393, my translation). While in the phenomenological tradition it was Erwin Straus who underscored the affective (or 'pathic') aspect of *all* sense modalities most vigorously, in film studies Laura Marks reminded us that instances of visuality mark a continuum between the distant and the embodied, the optical and the haptic (Marks, 2000, 132).
3. Against the analytical tendencies of the natural sciences, which presume that the singular is the primary and therefore dissociate what we in fact experience as unified, phenomenological film theory holds that the sense organs of the human body are not functionally independent – a centralizing self always synthesizes the empirically discrete perceptions (Sobchack 2004). The concept of *synaesthesia* is therefore at the heart of our disgust experience at the movies. Although I cannot touch Freddy Krueger's revolting skin directly; although the smell of faeces in *Salò* remains vague; although I am not able to taste the flavour of the parasites crawling out of the characters' mouths in Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975), I nevertheless have a *partially* fulfilled sensory experience of disgusting touch, smell, and taste. The multisensory quality of the film's disgusting object is, of course, modified and restrained in comparison to the real thing. Each sense provides a specific access to the world, and they are transposable into each other's domain only within certain limits (Sobchack 2004, 72).
4. For the communicative function and pleasurable potential of *screaming* in moments of shock (or 'startle'), see Hanich, Forthcoming. For the non-communicativeness of *weeping* (not crying!) at the movies, see Hanich, 2008.
5. The outward tendency of laughing or giggling is, by the way, the reason why splatter movies can easily move from humour to disgust and back again. Think of horror films like Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* trilogy or Peter Jackson's *Braindead* (1992). It also helps to explain the possibility of combining disgust and humour in comedies like *There's Something About Mary* or *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*, of which I have more to say at the end of the paper.
6. In her monograph on Pasolini, Naomi Greene argues that the director was 'impelled by a desire to be scandalous': 'Pasolini's decision to set Sade's novel in Fascist Italy – like the very choice of *Les 120 Journées de Sodome* – reflected nothing less than a desire to fashion one of the most extremist, perhaps the most extremist, films ever made' (1990, 207).

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