

Disgusted at the Movies

- Carl Plantinga

The elicitation of affect in the audience stands firmly at the core of the film-going experience, figuring into the poetics, aesthetics, rhetoric, and ideology of film viewing. If our goal is to understand how mainstream viewers experience films, if we want to explore the cultural role of movies, if we wish to expand our conception of the poetics of the cinema, then we cannot ignore the place of emotion elicitation and affective experience within film viewing.

Cognitive film theorists, broadly speaking, have explored affect in film through the study of particular genres (horror and comedy, for example), or in reference to particular films, film sequences, or even film techniques.¹

Alternatively, theorists could examine individual affects, as has been done with suspense and startle, for example.² Such an approach would first need to clearly individuate and examine the particular affect, and thus might be thought to delay too long the analysis of actual films while the researcher is preoccupied with understanding the affect in question. But this approach may have benefits that other methods lack, enabling us, by focusing intensely on one particular aspect of the film viewing experience, to see what we otherwise might have missed.

In this essay I explore the nature of film-elicited disgust, primarily in mainstream films, and primarily within the American cultural context. But I concentrate on one particular aspect of film-elicited disgust that I find to be particularly interesting: the relationship between what I will call *physical disgust* and *sociomoral disgust*. I will argue that the elicitation of disgust in the cinema establishes a clear connection between bodily reactions and ideology, and that the study of



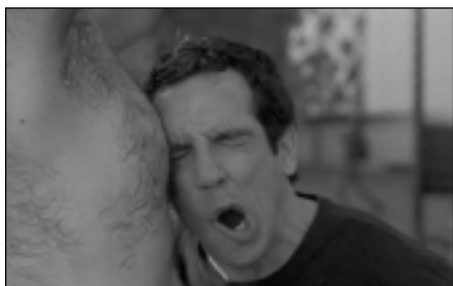
- A policeman accidentally drinks urine in *Dumb and Dumber* (1994).

film-elicited disgust may well provide a template for establishing the cultural significance of other film-elicited emotions.

Disgust has been a topic of discussion among Western thinkers for hundreds of years, in German philosophy and aesthetics, in the thought of Freud, Nietzsche, and Sartre, and most recently, in several extended studies dealing exclusively with the emotion of disgust and its implications.³ As we shall see, disgust is squarely implicated in issues of morality and ideology, and this implication raises some of the most intriguing questions regarding the uses of disgust in movies.

When considering disgust in American movies, what initially came to my mind was the body humor that has become a staple of contemporary Hollywood comedy. This is perhaps best represented by the Farrelly brothers in their films *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), *There's Something About Mary* (1998), and *Shallow Hal* (2001), and in films such as *Jackass* (2002) and *Along Came Polly* (2004).⁴ These films, with their

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• Reuben (Ben Stiller) gets his face rubbed in sweat in *Along Came Polly* (2004).

obsessive interest in the body and bodily products (whether noises, smells, wastes, or fluids), gleefully exploit the disgusting aspects of bodily existence to offer viewers pleasure in a kind of adolescent rebellion against the norms of polite society, albeit a rebellion that remains firmly regulated within the institutions of mainstream entertainment. The uses of disgust in film, however, extend far beyond this, to the horror genre, to the work and obsessions of directors such as David Lynch and David Cronenberg, and to the prominent place of disgust in films such as Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1989) and Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965).

Disgust Defined

Most researchers agree that disgust has a universal component; visual, tactile, or olfactory contact with rats, cockroaches, urine, feces, and vomit has a similar affect on people across cultures. In the 1870s, Charles Darwin, considered disgust to be an evolved response to things that might harm human prospects for survival. This view is shared by British researcher Val Curtis, who says that disgust 'is a form of evasive action to protect us against signs of threat, such as disease'. The biological determinants of disgust, she argues, clearly influence who experiences disgust and to what extent. For example, women tend to be more prone to the experience of disgust than men, because they 'need to have a higher level of

sensitivity to infection or disease, because they are the main carriers of infants'. And as Curtis further notes, 'as reproductive ability declines with age, so does disgust'.⁵

Yet what initially might seem to be a relatively simple instinctive reaction firmly rooted in biological necessity turns out, on closer inspection, to be a complex emotion that is very difficult to define. Psychologists and philosophers disagree about how to conceptualize disgust, in part because disgust often has a marked social component. Take food, for example. Haggis is a delicacy in Scotland, but turns the stomachs of most Americans and English. Orthodox Jews find the eating of pork to be disgusting, while Hindus have similar reactions to the eating of beef. Of all of the palatable mammals, insects, and birds in any given geographical area, particular human cultures tend to choose a few select species for ingestion, and consider the eating of other palatable species to be disgusting.

The social components of disgust can perhaps be best seen in the way that physical disgust quickly shades into sociomoral disgust. This division between physical and sociomoral disgust stems in part from the work of Paul Rozin and his colleagues, who conceive of disgust as a tri-faceted emotion, consisting of what they call (1) 'core,' (2) 'animal-reminder,' and (3) 'sociomoral' disgust.

Core disgust, they write, 'is a food-related emotion that makes us cautious about what we touch or put into our mouths'.⁶ It thus has its roots in our sense of taste. But disgust is also elicited by encounters with violations of the body envelope (including amputations, sores, and injuries), diseases and vermin, and certain kinds of sexual phenomena. Rozin *et al.* call this second type of disgust 'animal reminder' disgust, because such phenomena remind us of our animal origins. At its heart, they claim, animal-reminder disgust (in the United States, at least) is rooted in the belief that the body is a kind of 'temple' which houses our souls, our spirits, or our essences as persons. Animal reminder disgust, then, can be regarded as a kind of guardian of the temple of the body, protector of a kind of self-image people have, an assumption

that personhood is not in essence physical, but rather spiritual or transcendental.

The biological manifestations of disgust give way very quickly to 'sociomoral disgust'. Rozin notes that in the United States, the discussion of moral and political issues in disgust terms is extremely common. We often hear about someone finding another's behavior to be disgusting, or we think of certain sorts of activities as morally 'contaminating'. Neither physical nor sociomoral disgust is merely biological, then; they also include cultural patterns of feeling and behavior. In the contemporary United States, Rozin *et al.* argue, the social functions of disgust may well be more important to human society than the biological functions.

To summarize, Rozin *et al.* write that disgust begins as a guardian of the mouth, extends to the protection of the 'temple of the body,' and finally becomes the guardian of 'human dignity in the social order'.⁷ For the sake of simplicity, I will use the term 'physical disgust' to refer to both core and animal-reminder disgust. We might next ask an intriguing question: How are physical and sociomoral disgust linked? In other words, how does such a simple biological emotion become harnessed to psychological, social, and ideological concerns?

To answer this question, Rozin and his colleagues turn to George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's 'experiential realism,' a theory in which human cognition is thought to be tied to bodily experience.⁸ In short, experiential realism holds that cognitive schemata are largely derived from our bodily existence, and that categories of abstract thought are metaphorical distillations of our biological being. Thus metaphors of the body have been extended throughout human history to the domain of the social and the moral.

We can see this clearly in the case of disgust. A recent biography of the eighteenth century American theologian and Calvinist minister Jonathan Edwards features a passage that illustrates well how physical disgust is mobilized into the realm of morality. Edwards, who is famously known for his sermon, 'Sinners at the

Hands of an Angry God,' is here, in another sermon, attempting to frighten his congregation into imitating Christ's holiness. Edwards says that God is not only angry but disgusted at his disobedient creatures:

There is no expressing the hateful and how hateful you are rendered by [your sin] in the sight of God. The odiousness of this filth is beyond all account because 'tis infinitely odious. You have seen the filthiness of toads and serpents and filthy vermin and creatures that you have loathed and of putrefied flesh . . . but there was but a finite deformity or odiousness in this . . . 'Tis but a shadow. Your filthiness is not the filthiness of toads and serpents or poisonous vermin, but of devils which is a thousand times worse. 'Tis impossible to express or conceive or measure how greatly God detests such defilement.⁹

This is one of many examples of such a movement or slippage between physical and sociomoral disgust. In many cultures, physical and sociomoral disgust are linked metaphorically; this seems to be a more or less universal quality of the emotion. Yet cultures differ markedly in what they take to be morally disgusting, or in other words, in their means of mapping physical onto sociomoral disgust.

Disgust has an important political dimension. It is interesting to note that Rozin *et al.* claim that in the United States, as in the West generally, sociomoral disgust is marshaled primarily to protect a sense of individual human dignity in the face of a looming suspicion of meaningless in life, and as a means of enforcing strong feelings against cruelty. In Japan, on the other hand, the threat of failing to find a proper fit within the social system is more often described in terms of disgust.

Disgust, then, can function to regulate social norms. Disgust is also used to maintain social hierarchies and even to demonize certain groups. The caste system in India (which designates the lowest caste as 'untouchables')¹⁰, the recent genocide in Rwanda (during which Tutsis were referred to as 'cockroaches'), the Nazi vilification of the Jews (which construed Jews as 'rats'), and various manifestations of homophobia in the

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United States – all of these demonstrate how physical and sociomoral disgust can be fused to marginalize, stigmatize, and even justify the murder of members of a society.¹¹

Rozin *et al.* write of sociomoral disgust as an adaptation of the older core disgust, an adaptation designed to take advantage ‘of the schemata of core disgust in constructing . . . moral and social lives, and in socializing . . . children about what to avoid.’¹² Sociomoral disgust, then, is largely a matter of social construction. But physical disgust is also in part culturally determined, influenced by cultural assumptions and by what cultures find to be sociomorally disgusting in particular historical periods. Disgust is not wholly a social construction, however. As William Ian Miller writes, the social construction of disgust does have limits: ‘Cultures . . . have much more leeway in admitting things or actions to the realm of the disgusting than in excluding certain ones from it.’¹³

The Rise of Movie Disgust

With a basic understanding of physical and sociomoral disgust, we now turn to the functions of disgust elicitation in the movies. We might begin by noting the trend in American movies toward the increased prevalence of disgusting subject matter. One could attribute this to a general coarsening of popular culture, but it is also part of a larger movement in which, as Winfried Menninghaus puts it, the vulgar, low-minded, and perverse have enjoyed an epidemic and generally affirmative treatment in the arts, literature, and humanities.¹⁴ The centuries-long trend has been toward the increased acceptance, and in some cases, the promotion of what traditionally has been thought to be disgusting. In the eighteenth century, physical disgust was thought to do a healthy job in protecting humanity and civilization. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, writers begin to see the costs of overextended disgust and the forbidden attraction of its objects. By the end of the twentieth century, Menninghaus writes, artists were reevaluating disgust in artistic and academic



• Hermann Nitsch performance art.

work, perhaps even cultivating it. In the contemporary visual arts, Bill Viola, Sarah Lucas, Melanie Manchot, and Hermann Nitsch all confront us with conventionally disgusting subject matter.

In the United States, representations of physical disgust in the popular arts such as movies were rare and sporadic before the 1970s. For the authors of the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, the very possibility that a filmmaker might want to display the physically disgusting was scarcely entertained. It is as though such a thing had never occurred to the code’s writers. Why would anyone want to do that? Any explicit treatment in the Code of the disgusting, revolting, or vulgar is limited to prohibitions on vulgar language, with the exception of some sexual matters. The Code prohibits, for no stated reason, the representation of potentially repugnant sexuality: sexual ‘perversion,’ miscegenation, sexual hygiene, and venereal diseases (all examples of what Rozin *et al.* call ‘animal-reminder disgust’). It should be noted that the prohibitions on the representation of miscegenation embodies the worst sort of racist presumption and highlights the association of disgust with ideas of ‘impurity,’ for the assumption seems to have been that the mixing of the races threatens the ‘purity’ of the races, and most likely of the ‘white’ race.

Although it does not mention them explicitly, the Hays Code does presume the categories of contamination and purity, using such language in its discussions of ‘unclean art’ and ‘pure’ and

'impure' love. Thus we can see that the Code metaphorically extended the language of physical disgust into the arena of morality, or to put it differently, it presumed a kind of equivalence between physical and sociomoral contamination. Thus the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 well illustrates the broader social phenomenon of the conflation of physical and sociomoral disgust.

The elicitation of sociomoral disgust directed toward evil acts, unlike the elicitation of physical disgust, was not prohibited by the Code, but neither was it sanctioned. The Code merely held that evil should not be shown as attractive or beneficial, either morally or practically. Many years earlier, Samuel Johnson advocated a more strenuous approach to evil when he wrote of vice in fiction:

Vice, for vice is necessary to be shewn, should always disgust; nor should the graces of gaiety, or the dignity of courage, be so united with it, as to reconcile it to the mind. Wherever it appears, it should raise hatred by the malignity of its practices, and contempt by the meanness of its stratagems; for while it is supported by either parts or spirit, it will be seldom heartily abhorred.¹⁵

After the fall of the Production Code, the turn to increasingly graphic representations of sex and violence was accompanied by an increased freedom to explore all types of uncomfortable, shocking, disgusting, and formerly taboo subject-matter on the screen. Today, representations of the conventionally disgusting figure prominently in the body humor of adolescent comedies, in the



• Reuben (Ben Stiller) on the toilet in his date's apartment in *Along Came Polly* (2004).



• Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) begins to turn into a man/fly hybrid in *The Fly* (1986).

contemporary horror film and its hybrids, and more intermittently in a wide variety of films in which the disgusting appears intermittently. A recent example of the increasing centrality of the disgusting in mainstream American film is *Along Came Polly* (2004), in which the protagonist Reuben (Ben Stiller) is portrayed to be highly fastidious, in part to exaggerate the affective power of his encounters with the disgusting in the form of a hairy, sweaty man rubbing his torso against his face (in slow motion), a plugged toilet in the apartment of his girlfriend (Jennifer Aniston), the discomfort of public urination in close proximity to others, being touched by those with dirty hands, and his friend (Philip Seymour Hoffman) accidentally defecating ('sharting') in his pants at a party. This type of subject-matter is very common in contemporary Hollywood comedies.

Some less mainstream directors seem to specialize in the foregrounding of conventionally disgusting subject matter. Here, the Canadian David Cronenberg and the American David Lynch come to mind. Although I do not have the space to explore such issues here, an extended critical explication of Cronenberg's and Lynch's films that takes into account the aesthetic and ideological implications of their elicitation of disgust would be very illuminating. Various scholars and critics have begun to explore these issues, although most who explore the psychological implications of the films take a psychoanalytic perspective and do not show a familiarity with more contemporary discussions of the psychology of disgust.

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The Nature of Movie Disgust

The emotions elicited by film can be roughly divided into those which are primarily *sympathetic* in nature (i.e., experienced through or in response to the subjective experience of a character) and those which are primarily *direct* (i.e., experienced by the viewer directly rather than primarily in response to the plight of a fictional character). The sympathetic emotions are what Andrew Ortony calls ‘fortunes-of-others’ emotions.¹⁶ Sympathetic emotions in fiction – for example, compassion, pity, and fear – always differ from their counterparts in our everyday lives, because our concern takes into account the fictional nature of the situation to which we respond.

In the case of direct emotions and affiliated affects, on the other hand, the viewer responds to her or his direct concerns. One example is suspense, which can occur independently of character engagement. Two more examples are erotic desire and startle. Psychologists disagree about whether these should be characterized as emotions, strictly speaking. But whether they are emotions proper, or more broadly, a type of affect, they are also direct. The viewer will respond to an attractive character if the viewer finds the character to be alluring, and it may matter little whether the protagonist or some other fictional character finds her or him to be alluring. Similarly, a sudden loud noise may elicit startle in the spectator independent of the protagonist’s reactions.

Disgust is also a direct and not a sympathetic emotion, since it depends on the viewer’s direct exposure to its stimulus. It is among the most visceral of the emotions. As William Ian Miller writes, disgust demands reference to the senses: ‘Disgust cannot dispense with direct reference to the sensory processing of its elicitors. All emotions are launched by some perception; only disgust makes that process of perceiving the core of its enterprise.’¹⁷ In other words, to feel disgust means to feel what it is like to see something, smell something, to be put in the presence of something disgusting. An excellent writer may be able to elicit disgust through vivid description,

calling into play the imaginative faculties of the reader. The moving image media are more directly sensual, and can afford a direct sensual representation of the disgusting object, apprehended through sight and hearing.

What Rozin *et al.* call core disgust is primarily invoked through taste and smell, and moving image media may invoke this sort of disgust by eliciting the imagination of tastes and smells though the evocative presentation of sights and sounds. In the case of ‘animal-reminder’ disgust – disgust at violations of the body envelope and various sorts of sexual phenomena – hearing and especially seeing are central. And it is the representation of this sort of disgusting object that has captured the attention of many filmmakers.

Disgust in the movies stems from the sensory stimulus put directly before the spectator. 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. While fearing an actual monster is much different than fearing a fictional one, our reactions to actual and photographically-represented disgusting objects is one of degree and not of kind. Both cases could result in similar aversive action, such as closing one’s eyes,



• Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan) picks up a severed ear in *Blue Velvet* (1986).

averting one's gaze, crinkling up the face in the characteristic facial expression, and in strong cases, vomiting or moving away from the object of disgust (for example, walking out of the theatre or stopping the DVD).

Since disgust is a particularly visceral, direct emotion, it is unlikely that we will experience physical disgust merely in sympathy with a character. It is an emotion that is by nature non-sympathetic.¹⁸ This does not imply, however, that the viewer's response is never influenced or manipulated in relation to the response of a character in the fiction. Although disgust is direct, the audience may still take its cue for response from a character, restraining the effect or allowing it to take its full force depending on character cues. The reactions of a favored protagonist are often used to cue spectators about the desired response to various stimuli in the film. An example of what we might call 'mimetic cueing' is in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), in which the young Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) comes upon a severed human ear in a field near his home. Lynch gives us an extreme close-up of the ear, and we see that dozens of ants are crawling in and out of the ear canal (perhaps in a reference to the ant-ridden hole in the hand in *Un chien andalou* (1929)). Jeffrey is neither frightened, disgusted, nor horrified. Neither does he make a 'disgust face'. Instead, he touches the ear, calmly picking it up (albeit with as little contact with his fingers as possible), depositing it in a paper bag, and delivering it to the police. Thus the audience is cued to take a calm, curious approach to Lynch's explorations of the seamy underside of suburban American life, where viewers will come into contact with a diverse array of conventionally disgusting objects, practices, and persons. The spectator is asked to suppress feelings of disgust to allow for the satisfaction of solving the mystery of the origins of the ear, and to engage in this filmic journey into the impure, unclean, and contaminated areas of American life.

Within the context of film viewing, disgust tends to be a short-term emotion. Unlike suspense or anticipation, which may extend through long periods of the film and build to

climactic levels, the elicitation of disgust tends to be only intermittent. Its elicitation can be repeated, however, as it is in many of the films of David Lynch, for example, becoming a motif or even an essential element of a world view and outlook.

Disgust also has a distinct phenomenological feel and associated action tendencies. It is an unpleasant emotion, causing aversion to its object. When disgusted, people tend to want to distance themselves by moving away from, removing from their presence, spitting or vomiting out, avoiding and censoring that which elicits disgust. Its characteristic movement is to reject the disgusting object, person, or event. The experience of both physical and sociomoral disgust encourages persons to flee, avoid, ignore, suppress, and otherwise shun that which is unclean or contaminated. Yet in the realm of art, at least, disgusting things may also attract the viewer, creating a push and pull between curiosity and fascination on the one hand, and aversion and repulsion on the other.

The Rhetoric of Filmic Disgust

The disgusting in film can be used as an 'attraction,' that is, as a device designed to create a momentary sensation with few global or narrative functions. Yet it often takes on more complex functions, becoming a thematic motif, figuring into structures of sympathy and antipathy, and promoting the film's ideological perspective. As such, the elicitation of disgust is often used to manipulate the spectator's stance toward characters and narrative events, playing a central role in a film's poetic and rhetorical system.

Of particular interest here is the melding of physical and sociomoral disgust. Since disgust is by nature an emotion which moves toward rejection, it is hardly surprising to find that physical disgust is used to create – whether explicitly or implicitly – moral or ideological antipathy toward certain characters and their actions, and to promote their condemnation. Conventional physical disgust may be elicited by any number of bodily deformities, mutilations,

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and injuries, by body piercing, tattoos, and by the mixing of genders. If anthropologist Mary Douglas is correct, any categorical mixing that might be considered to be 'impure' or 'dangerous' is likely to elicit disgust.¹⁹ One can see this in the history of the representation of race, homosexuality, and disability in the movies, where in many cases the minority, homosexual, or disabled person is shown to be both physically and morally repulsive by conventional standards.

Many James Bond films, for example, feature a criminal mastermind and lesser evil associates whose physical deformities, disabilities, and otherwise unusual physical attributes become metaphors for their malevolence. Many Bond villains are foreigners, by the way, and they also feature, for example, amputated hands that have been replaced by metal ones (Dr. No), pronounced scars, a dead eye, and being bound to a wheelchair (Ernst Blofield), enormous height, a mouth full of metal teeth, and muteness (*Jaws*) or diminutive smallness (Nick Nack). This in distinction with the smooth and sophisticated Bond, a man who is seemingly incapable of arousing the least wave of disgust or repugnance, and whose fastidious appearance and clean, flawless body often serve to soften the viewer's possible repugnance toward his libertarian sexual behavior.

In vengeance narratives, physical disgust is often used to make dispatch of the criminal an act which ritually purifies society of an unwanted contaminant. Thus physical disgust becomes wedded to sociomoral disgust, and this disgust is so exaggerated that it is meant to contribute to the justification of murder or execution in the name of a larger social good. We can see this tendency in many Western films, for example, or in the *Lethal Weapon* films with Danny Glover and Mel Gibson. A fine example of this strategy is *Dirty Harry* (1971), the Clint Eastwood vigilante story in which Harry, the renegade cop, faces down his nemesis, the killer Scorpio. The sadistic serial killer Scorpio is the classic example of a character who is both morally depraved and physically repulsive. His sniveling demeanor, putrid-looking skin and complexion (as though his face is partially decayed), and sadomasochism

all make his murder at the end of Harry's Magnum .45 seem not merely welcome and justifiable at the film's end, but positively necessary and pleasurable (to those that allow the film to do its rhetorical work). Harry rids the world not only of an evil criminal, but of a biological being who is represented as a kind of vermin. During Harry's confrontation with Scorpio in the football stadium, Harry steps on Scorpio's injured leg and twists his foot, as though he were squishing a bug. The camera reveals the look of disgust on Harry's face, then moves quickly away from Harry in a rapidly retreating crane shot. The action tendency of disgust is either to remove the physically disgusting object from one's presence, or to remove oneself from *its* presence. This camera movement, rushing the spectator away from the disgusting Scorpio, is a filmic equivalent.

The whole weight of human history and biology predisposes filmmakers to use disgust as an aversive emotion and a means to create audience antipathy for characters, events, or objects. It is much rarer, but not unknown, for a film to deliberately minimize the elicitation of disgust in its representation of conventionally disgusting objects. Usually to encourage the audience to look behind physical deformities or grotesqueries in order to celebrate the common humanity or spirituality of a character. Such films differentiate and attempt to decouple the relationship between physical and sociomoral disgust, implying that the former need not, and indeed should not, imply the latter. Among such films we might include *The Elephant Man* (1980) and *Mask* (1985).



- Harry (Clint Eastwood) looks down in disgust at the villainous Scorpio in *Dirty Harry* (1971).

Both of these films elicit strong sympathy for characters with severely deformed, and thus conventionally disgusting, bodies. *Mask* sympathetically portrays the travails of a young boy afflicted with elephantiasis. Here I will give more attention to David Lynch's *The Elephant Man*, which develops a similar rhetorical project. Set in the nineteenth century, *The Elephant Man* gives an account of John Merrick, who suffered from Proteus Syndrome, which horribly deformed his whole body such that, as is said in the film, 'Nervous persons fly in horror from the sight of him'. Although the body of the Elephant Man is conventionally repulsive, the film's overarching intention is to cause us to look beyond appearances to his essential humanity, to his extraordinary refinement in personality and demeanor, to his desire 'to be good' that he might be loved.

Many of the characters in the film must overcome their initial disgust at Merrick's appearance, including Dr. Frederick Treves (Anthony Hopkins), his wife Ann, and various nurses and acquaintances. Persons who are conventionally repulsive or grotesque are more so when we imagine them sexually, or in some sort of intimacy with ourselves or others. Thus it is a powerful moment in the film when the elegant society woman, Mrs. Kendall (Anne Bancroft), leans forward and kisses the hideous Merrick on his misshapen cheek. This is another mimetic cue for the audience, showing the viewer that just as Mrs. Kendall is able to overcome her disgust in recognizing Merrick's humanity, dignity, and inner beauty, so should the viewer respond.

Polyester and Ironic Disgust

The elicitation of disgust functions in diverse other ways in fiction films, but for now I note one other such use, which occurs in John Waters' cult film *Polyester* (1981). We might call this *ironic* and *reflexive* disgust. *Polyester* details the travails of Francine Fishpaw, a suburban Baltimore housewife whose life is falling apart. Francine's travails are legion. Her cheating husband runs a pornographic film theatre which



- The camera rapidly cranes back as though to mimic the aversive action tendency associated with disgust.

leads her neighbors to picket in front of the family house; her son is the infamous serial 'foot stomper', who heavily stamps on the feet of unsuspecting women at malls and grocery stores; her nymphomaniac daughter socializes with drug-addicted ex-cons; her hateful mother is scheming to steal Francine's house. This film is the Jerry Springer of melodrama, or like the work of a drunken, teen-aged Douglas Sirk, an over-the-top parody of suburban domestic troubles.

What interests me in relation to disgust is this: Francine is played by Divine, an obese



- Mrs. Kendall (Anne Bancroft) kisses the cheek of Merrick (John Hurt) in *The Elephant Man* (1980)

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- Francine (Divine) makes herself up in *Polyester* (1981).

transvestite. The very choice of Divine for this role marks the film as counter-cultural parody. A gay man, director John Waters is clearly interested in poking fun at conventional middle-class life and mores. If the suburban housewife is thought to be the primary guardian of bourgeois morality, then casting a transvestite in that role takes on a clearly subversive function. (John Waters also parodies the conventional image of the suburban housewife in his film *Serial Mom* (1994), in which Kathleen Turner is willing to defend family values to the point of becoming a serial killer.)

By having an obese transvestite play the lead role here, and by subjecting Francine to such a series of trials and humiliations, Waters is doing a curious thing. The director seems to relish the ways he makes Francine the object of exaggerated disgust. This goes far beyond Francine's transvestism and obesity. It even extends beyond Waters' showing Francine on the toilet. Waters seems to be interested in the ritual humiliation of Francine. After reaching the depth of her troubles, she drinks so much that it becomes repulsive. At her nadir, we see her unable to stand, crawling on the floor of her house on hands and knees, drunk, sweating profusely, her mascara running down her cheeks. She is helpless and simpering. Later that day, suffering from a hangover, a friend takes her shopping, where she vomits into her purse at the clothing store.

Waters could be taken to be more interested in eliciting the audience's disgust by humiliating Francine than he is in eliciting its sympathy. Francine triumphs in the end, in a kind of tacked-

on parody of a happy ending. The images and experience of her travails, her appearance, her behavior – all of which make her conventionally disgusting – are much more powerful and convincing than her eventual triumph. Waters does not encourage the audience to overcome its disgust, as Lynch does in *The Elephant Man*, but rather to revel in it, to enjoy it, and to find it amusing.

Waters' irony extends to many different levels. Erving Goffman writes that a trait that stigmatizes an individual, whether it be homosexuality, race, disability, or deformity, 'assumedly taints every aspect of the person, pervasively spoiling social identity'.²⁰ Sociomoral disgust draws lines of behavior, and those who cross them are called disgusting. The Zimbabwean dictator Robert Mugabe compares homosexuals to dirty animals, once saying that they 'are worse than dogs and pigs'.²¹ In the United States, some groups identify homosexuality as disgusting, treating it as a disease that can be 'cured'. Martha Nussbaum claims that 'the central locus of disgust in today's United States . . . [is] male loathing of the male homosexual'.²²

Goffman notes that those stigmatized may be likely to internalize the disgust and opprobrium of which they have become the target. One could argue that the film gives evidence of Waters' internalization of the stigmatization of transvestism and homosexuality. For rather than defending Francine against the audience's potential disgust, John Waters exaggerates that disgust and asks the viewer to wallow in it.

Such an interpretation would be wrong, in my opinion, because in *Polyester*, Waters also



- Francine drunk and degraded in *Polyester* (1981).

encourages delight in his reflexive parody of the disgust response itself. For Waters asks his audience to laugh at themselves being disgusted (and thus to ironically dispel the force of the disgust). As a cult film, *Polyester* will attract an audience that is informed about the 'rules' for spectatorship that a John Waters film demands. The savvy spectator of *Polyester* will recognize the film as a parody, not only of the melodrama, but also of the very conditions for the elicitation of disgust found in conventional melodrama and perhaps also in middle-class culture. These conditions could be characterized as a fastidious attachment to cleanliness and a rigid social order. Thus the film is a parody that functions in part through the gross exaggeration of disgusting behavior and objects.²³ In this way the film encourages laughter at that sociomoral disgust which serves as a kind of 'gatekeeper emotion', functioning as it can to stigmatize and ostracize various members of society.

Disgust in Context

Any wholesale rejection of sociomoral or physical disgust on the grounds that it enforces some hated 'bourgeois' or 'repressive' morality would be simplistic indeed, although this has not stopped some observers from promoting such a rejection. Like many other emotions, the elicitation and experience of disgust can be evaluated only in relation to particular moral and social systems. When disgust is marshaled against miscegenation or against homosexuals, it is clearly being misused. Yet to entirely reject sociomoral disgust would also be to reject all boundaries between the beautiful and the repugnant, between the morally good, indifferent, and reprehensible. It would constitute a blanket denial of the usefulness of emotion in enforcing any sort of social or moral norms, or the proscription of abominations such as cruelty and torture. The sociomoral functions of disgust in the movies must be evaluated in particular contexts and in particular films.

To conclude, I will make a general comment about the study of emotion in film and media studies. Cognitive film theory is sometimes

thought to be unable or unwilling to consider questions of ideology, and is thought to assume only, or merely, universal viewing strategies rooted in the unchanging human mind. Cognitive film and literary theorists will recognize this as a caricature, but it is nonetheless true that cognitive film theorists could do more to demonstrate the link between universal human capacities, culturally-specific variation, and ideological concerns in the viewing and reception of films.

The study of film-elicited emotion promises to offer just such a link, integrating a consideration of the human body, cognitive capacities, and cultural differences into an approach to film poetics, film rhetoric, audience response, and issues of ideology. Disgust might be a particularly telling emotion through which to discover the means by which film-elicited affect moves from the biological to the ideological, and vice versa. This is because disgust, like the emotions of guilt, shame, and embarrassment, is a primary means for the internalization of cultural prohibitions, and thus for socialization. In discovering the links between physical and sociomoral disgust in film-elicited emotion, we thus may work toward a general understanding of film response in terms of its biological, cognitive, and cultural components.

Notes

- 1 The term 'affect', as I use it, is broader than 'emotion', encompassing not just emotions proper, but also reflexes, instincts, desires, moods, and a variety of 'moving' psychological phenomena. I use the term in this and other instances to avoid controversies about whether this or that phenomena – startle, for example – is an emotion, strictly speaking, or some other kind of affective phenomenon.
- 2 On suspense, see Noël Carroll, 'Toward a Theory of Film Suspense', in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 94–117; and Dolf Zillman, 'The Logic of Suspense and Mystery', in Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman, (eds), *Responding to the Screen: Reception and Reaction Processes* (Hillsdale, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991), pp. 281–303. On startle, see Robert Baird, 'The Startle Effect: Implications for Spectator Cognition', *Film Quarterly*, 53:3 (2000): 12–24. For

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- a philosophical consideration of startle, see Jennifer Robinson, 'Startle', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 92:2 (1995), 53–74. There is some debate about whether amusement and startle, for example, are emotions proper or affects of some other type. For the purposes of this paper I remain agnostic on these debates.
- 3 These are (1) Aurel Kolnai, 'Der Ekel', in Edmund Husserl (ed.), *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* vol. 10 (Halle and Saale. Max Niemeyer, 1929); the book *On Disgust*, by Aurel Kolnai, Carolyn Korsmeyer, and Barry Smith includes Kolnai's essay (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2003); (2) a series of essays by Paul Rozin and others, for example, 'Disgust', in Michael Lewis and Jeanette M. Haviland-Jones (eds), *Handbook of Emotion*, 2nd edn (New York, Guilford, 1993), pp. 575–94; (3) William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1997); (4) Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003); (5) Robert Rawdon Wilson, *The Hydra's Tale: Imagining Disgust* (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2002); (6) Susan Miller, *Disgust: The Gatekeeper Emotion* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 2004), and (7) Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding From Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004).
 - 4 The Farrelly brothers' upcoming film, *The Three Stooges* (2006), will be an interesting test case, since the original Three Stooges films, while relying on simply slapstick violence and inane behavior for their comedy, did not elicit physical disgust. If the Farrelly brothers introduce physical disgust into their remake, it may fail to capture the particular tone and feel of the original Stooges movies. This would, of course, be a tragedy.
 - 5 Quoted by Gaia Vince 'Disgust is good for you, shows study.' Available online at: www.newscientist.com/news/print.jsp?id=ns99994563.
 - 6 Jonathan Haight, Paul Rozin, Clark McCauley, and Sumio Imada, 'Body, Psyche, and Culture: The Relationship Between Disgust and Morality.' www.people.virginia.edu/~jdh6n/misra.html, accessed 4/28/04. Originally published in *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 9:2 (1997) 107–131.
 - 7 *Ibid.*
 - 8 See, for example, Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987).
 - 9 George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), p. 165.
 - 10 The recent Bollywood hit *Lagaan* (2001) features the Indian superstar Aamir Khan as the leader of a cricket team fighting for the village honor (and for freedom from taxes) against a British cricket team. From the standpoint of disgust and its implications, it is especially interesting that against the protestations of his team members, Khan welcomes onto the team a member of the lowest caste, an 'untouchable', and the film makes very apparent (with close-ups and medium shots) Khan's willingness to touch him, thus counteracting the disgust reactions that have been used to reinforce the caste system.
 - 11 'Anatomy of Disgust'. Available online at: www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/A/anatomy_disgust/t_index.html.
 - 12 Rozin et al., 'Body, Psyche, and Culture': 9.
 - 13 Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, p. 16.
 - 14 Menninghaus, p. 15.
 - 15 Samuel Johnson *Works*, 3, 24. Quoted in William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 179.
 - 16 Andrew Ortony, Gerald L. Clore, and Allan Collins, *The Cognitive Structure of Emotions* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988).
 - 17 Miller, p. 36.
 - 18 Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film* (Mahwah, New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996), p. 83.
 - 19 *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York and Washington, Praeger Publishers, 1966).
 - 20 *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), p. 3.
 - 21 'Anatomy of Disgust'.
 - 22 *Hiding From Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. Quoted in John Wilson, 'I Stink, Therefore I Am', <Boston.com/News/Boston Globe/Ideas/You stink, therefore I am>, accessed 7/15/04.
 - 23 Mathew Tinkcom makes a similar point about Polyester in his *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 170–2.