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**ON THE GOOD LIFE OF DISGUST.
L'ÉSTHÉTIQUE DU STERCORAIRE
AND THE POSTMODERN SOCIETY**

Le temps du dégoût a remplacé l'âge du goût. Exhibition du corps, désacralisation, rabaissement de ses fonctions et de ses apparences, morphings et déformations, mutilations et automutilations, fascination pour le sang et les humeurs corporelles, et jusqu'aux excréments, coprophilie et coprophagie: de Lucio Fontana à Louise Bourgeois, d'Orlan à Serrano, de Otto Muehl à David Nebreda, l'art s'est engagé dans une cérémonie étrange où le sordide et l'abjection écrivent un chapitre inattendu de l'histoire des sens. *Mundus immundus est?*
J. Clair, *De Immundo*, Paris, Galilée, 2004

There is, significantly, very little notice given to the disgusting in the history of aesthetics from Kant to Jean Clair. This shows that however bloody the history of Europe has been, most particularly in the twentieth century, we remain very much men and women of the Enlightenment in our philosophies of art. Aesthetics itself has been regarded as part of what Santayana designates as the Genteel Tradition, in which the disgusting, because unmentionable, was unmentioned, and art was taken as logically incapable of giving offense: if it gave offense, it was after all not art. So art itself continued to conform to Enlightenment imperatives, dedicated to the production of beauty.
A.C. Danto, *Marcel Duchamp and the end of taste: a defense of contemporary art*, «Toutafait» 3 (2000)

1. Premise: the 'disgusting turn' and the end of the twentieth century art

The twenty-first century opened with an interesting debate on contemporary art, and the art critics who encouraged it were

people like Arthur C. Danto and Jean Clair. The latter presents a very cutting thesis on the recent 'state of the art' where he claims that contemporary art has changed its standards and goals, and reshaped the idea of art itself and, thus, of aesthetics. As Clair himself has been writing for years, «from taste we have passed on to disgust». He expressed and argued his opinion at first in his book *On Marcel Duchamp and the end of art*¹, where he basically accused the art of the second half of twentieth century of being chiefly dominated by a new aesthetical category – 'disgust' – which brought genuine twentieth century art to an end. According to Clair, this all originated from Duchamp's installation, *Fountain* (1917), an urinal he exhibited as a piece of art during the *Exhibition of independent artists* in New York. He «insinuated the disgusting into the contemporary artistic repertoire» as Danto summed up² and, in Clair's own words, he «instigated change»³. However, for Clair, twentieth century art did not end in 1917.

In the *Courte histoire de l'art moderne* («courte» having the same meaning as in Hobsbawm's *The short twentieth century*, as Clair himself explains⁴), he briefly shows that twentieth century art began in 1905 and ended in 1968, and identifies it as well with the *avant-garde*. Afterwords, art has entered the disgust era, advanced and inspired by the Duchamp's *Fountain*. This new disgusting art is characterized by

olfaction, taste for abjection, for horror, fascination for human humours, for blood, sperm, piss, excreta, nasal mucus (Serrano, Pierrick Sorin, etc.), but also for auto-mutilation, and monstrosities (Orlan, Van Leemswerde, Cindy Sherman). In brief, nowadays, an aesthetics of disgust seems to have taken the place of the aesthetics of taste, which dominated art from 1750, in gross, to 1970.⁵

In the last pages of his short book he seems to briefly allude to a sort of clash between *avant-garde* and contemporary art, which could be basically simplified to good and bad art. What surprises Clair is that today art (the latter, then) would have never been

¹ J. Clair, *Sur Marcel Duchamp et la fin de l'art*, Paris, Gallimard, 2000. In the present paper we will refer to a partial English translation: Id., *Duchamp and the turn of the centuries*, trans. by S.S. Kilborne, «Toutfait» 3 (2000),

http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_3/News/clair/clair.html.

² A.C. Danto, *Marcel Duchamp and the end of taste: a defense of contemporary art*, «Toutfait» 3 (2000), http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_3/News/Danto/danto.html.

³ J. Clair, *Duchamp and the turn of the centuries* cit.

⁴ Id., *Courte histoire de l'art moderne*, Paris, L'échoppe, 2004, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

«applauded, celebrated, encouraged»⁶ before the late 1960s. And it is precisely this that we are planning to discuss in this paper.

Indeed, we wish to focus on the aesthetics itself, which has taken the place of the aesthetics of taste. We will concentrate on the link between art and disgust. Not because we want to give an interpretation of art, but rather because we want to show what art is now 'doing' with disgust. Our hypothesis is that *volens nolens* art is part of the general process of self-reshaping that is underway in today's capitalist societies. Therefore, we believe that if there is an interest in contemporary art for disgust, it could lead to the understanding of the current *condition post-moderne*. Although we do not propose to offer another *rapport sur le savoir*⁷, we will try to show how disgust could be a crucial factor in the above mentioned process, not only in a conservative sense. In fact, we are convinced that disgust has to do with good life. In the following pages, we will investigate and try to understand what it actually means.

2. What is art all about – scatological beauty or meaningfulness?

In his essay on Duchamp, Jean Clair proposes to explain this state of affairs by working on the strict nexus between birth of the culture, art, and beauty. He begins by observing that «since the time of the ancients, the experience of the *stercus* has been linked to the birth of culture. Our ontological position faced with the concept of Beauty is first a scatological position»⁸. Clair adds that the first concept of beauty has to be identified with the 'scatological', and that, consequently, beautiful would be what we call today an «inopportune 'pit stop' by which man, like animal, marks out his territory»⁹. According to Clair also scatological beauty and demarcation of human territory have been the same, thus he can conclude that «from the mud of the *stercoraire* is born the treasure of our culture»¹⁰. Following Freud's psychoanalytical theory of society, Clair was able to link the latter situation to that of today. Firstly, he diagnoses «the collapse of the collective *Super Ego*», and adds that «Duchamp would be one of the most resounding symptoms of

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ J.-F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, Minuit, 1979.

⁸ J. Clair, *Duchamp and the turn of the centuries* cit. Bold by Jean Clair.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

it»¹¹. Secondly, he states that «in such a turnaround of values, such a transmutation *à rebours*, of gold into bones [...], art can suddenly get strength and be reborn, by and in the waste, even»¹².

Clair's idea is clear – the collapse of *Super Ego* thus implies the disintegration of society with its accompanying norms, values, and boundaries. While at the origin of the human culture 'scatological beauty' was the driver giving birth to culture and civilization, at least in defining its territory, nowadays, art and society are reproducing the same dynamics. The same 'waste' from which society originates, now becomes the possibility of its rebirth. And Duchamp is seen as a symptom which advanced this critical situation and, as well as, example of how it can be overcome.

Clair's opinion on contemporary art is not shared by all art critics. Arthur C. Danto does not agree with his point of view, and since the publication of Clair's book on Duchamp he has criticized the interpretation we have summarized above. Danto actually sees contemporary art as an attempted «closing the gap between art and life»¹³. Let's look at Danto's idea more closely. Firstly, for him, what originated by Duchamp's artwork

does not mean that the era of taste (*goût*) has been succeeded by the era of disgust (*dégoût*). It means, rather, that the era of taste has been succeeded by the era of meaning. The question is not whether something is in good or bad taste, but what does it mean.¹⁴

Thus Arthur C. Danto also thinks that Duchamp was revolutionary and that we are living in a different aesthetic (and, one might add, cultural) era because of his ground-breaking artworks. However, it appears that Danto sees Clair's claim as basically wrong – the problem having nothing to do with disgust in art. To understand what has changed in art since Duchamp, we must change our mindset first by losing our obsolete and reductively regulated concept of aesthetics as taste (and its aesthetic opposite, disgust) – «It is only against the thesis that it is the purpose of art to gratify taste (*goût*) that an art aimed instead at arousing disgust (*dégoût*) will be considered at odds with itself»¹⁵. If Clair thought art should gratify taste, of course contemporary art would not sa-

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ A. Danto, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

tisfy this aesthetic norm. But, for Danto, the point is that art has precisely changed its aesthetic norms, with no inference that it should no longer be considered art or a worse form of art. In fact, Danto speaks of «the era of meaning» to explain this change, whereas contemporary art demonstrates that there is no logical standard for art at all. Of course an example of this could be ‘pleasure’ itself when it becomes part of the artist’s wider aesthetical view according to its actual «meaning». After Duchamp, and this is Danto’s point, what counts as worthy in an artwork is no longer «whether is in good or bad taste, but what does it mean». Good or bad taste (pleasure or offense) become options within a broader picture which ‘thickens’ and ‘clots’ in the work of art. Danto explains his point of view:

It is true that Duchamp made it possible to use substances and forms that do or can induce disgust. That is now an option. But whether or not to exercise that option is entirely a matter of what meaning an artist means to convey. I might add that it is also an option, rather than an imperative, to induce pleasure of the kind associated with beauty. That too is a choice for artists for whom the use of beauty has a meaning.¹⁶

According to Danto ‘disgust’ is actually not a problem today. It would become one if, and only if, it served to express the meaning which the artist wished to evoke in her/his artwork. This is the revolution Duchamp began and carried through into contemporary art. Finally, in Danto’s diagnosis of contemporary art, we see that the problem of meaning seems to occur mostly today in the form of the above-mentioned gap between art and life,

a project shared by a number of movements, united by a common mistrust of the claims of high art, but differing, like sects of a new revelation, with reference to which sector of common reality to redeem. [...] Each of these efforts aimed at bringing art down to earth, and transfiguring, through artistic consciousness, what everyone already knows.¹⁷

In choosing that, contemporary artists are also approximating art to real life, purifying the former from norms or standards which do not coincide with the latter, and trying to overcome any distance between the objects of art and of everyday life. Of course, the rehabilitation of what is disgusting and abject fits in perfectly with this general thinking and with the idea of a meaningful art.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

'Meaning', 'art', 'disgust', 'society' – these four categories will be our *Gestell* (in Heidegger's sense, if you wish) to point out what is happening in contemporary societies. We are convinced that art, the disgusting form, is the *speculum* to open up our reflections.

3. What is at stake for disgust

Arthur Danto and Jean Clair provide us with two important diagnoses. However, we have found their conclusion unsatisfactory. On the one hand, Danto's art-focused view provides no help in understanding disgust and its effects on society. Even if it is a simple option, disgust remains something extremely impressive, always seeming to have a significant impact on us. Jean Clair understood this but, on the other hand, his conclusion cannot allow us to see the propulsive function of disgust, because, in the end, he simply judges disgusting art... disgusting!

Jean Clair's surprise, when faced with the great social and public approval, a real triumph, of contemporary disgusting art, cannot thus surprise. And his very political answer – that the 'authorities' impose on us only a *certain* type of contemporary art, the one that can legitimize them – cannot be accepted. It is an idea that is as interesting as it is radical, but far from the truth. What we would like to retain from Clair's idea is that, as already mentioned in the previous paragraph, since the 'scatological' defines the 'beautiful' boundaries of a human society, then, now, society needs the 'scatological' to become disgusting, to get the boundaries it lost. But Clair goes beyond. In fact the 'scatological' metonymically means the body, and at its very end today's artist:

In the general collapse of canons and normalcy, it seems that the body has become the immediate reference to creation. It's also the ultimate form of infantile regression, when all social taboos, little by little forged by the repression of instincts, which is to say by culture, have been lifted. The contemporary artist refers to his own body and in particular to the productions of his body that are *excreta*, as if they were immediate proof of his existence, following the example of the infant who finds in his own body the first frontiers of his identity.¹⁸

Infantilism, instincts, cult of the body and of its products, what is normally supposed to be scatological as a proof of existence and creativity – this portrait of contemporary artists is of course raw and rough, and it could not give a worse view of contemporary art.

¹⁸ J. Clair, *Duchamp and the turn of the centuries* cit.

In this situation the 'body' becomes a lifeline to re-establish the boundaries and the values – (at an individual as well as social degree) in individual and social terms –, and art seems to be able to do exactly that. Indeed, the real problem is not at all art. Art reflects what is happening in contemporary society. Focusing on the body also means understanding its wider metaphorical sense:

we will be able to say that there where neither religion nor traditional art can any longer guarantee the 'cultural' existence of the body (the social body as much as civil society), the *fin de siècle* state has manifested into an absolute bipartisan power that needs contemporary scatological art in order to find esthetic and moral legitimization in the sacrificial practice as we know it. We're no longer dealing with a Christian redemption founded on the primitive death of the Father but a *sacer per nefas* that is exercised upon the naked body of every citizen.¹⁹

Like art, the social body is reshaping itself and each individual body through art. Clair's idea is that one has to begin again from the body and its scatological productions in order to face the crisis, since the social body is to be identified with religion and, thus, to what is supposed to be *sacer*. Sacredness of the social bond, thus, *re-ligio*, and political power are combined here in order to explain how disgust has been able to take the place of taste and beauty. Clair's central accusation is that politics does not want to lose its power and promotes *this* kind of art for its own legitimization, as art has done in replacing the role of religion: «the state of today, with its ministers, representatives, deputies, and officers who test the obscure need, no more violent than horrible, the sordid, the excremental, like extreme incarnations of a necessary *sacer* to hold society together, must be ritually presented»²⁰. Therefore what is at stake, according to Jean Clair, is both the survival of politics and its real crisis – the exercising of power on our naked bodies, trying to survive by returning to what imposes the boundaries and tightens the bonds. That is because in Clair's terrible view, «contemporary art, as exultation of waste and horror, became thus the post-modern liturgy of a society in quest of a new bond with the *sacratio*, a *re-ligio* in the proper sense»²¹.

Here, we would like to stress two points – disgusting art as art enslaved (*volens nolens*) by politics and disgusting art as politi-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

cal art. The first one refers to Clair's catastrophic idea. In the following pages we will see that his own view is too focused on the 'policy of disgust' carried out by «the state of today», concealing the *real* political and social *machine* that is at the heart of disgusting art. What the hidden power of disgust actually is. We don't think that Jean Clair's genealogical view suffices, as he does not start from disgust. His problem lies in the boundaries of the social and individual body. According to him, disgust is the only possible way today for the politicians to maintain their power. But this is not enough, as he cannot nor wants to explain what disgust really is, what its function is, and how it can actually intervene in the life of an individual as well as of a society. However, Clair's insight has highlighted this problem – that disgust can actually shape and reshape society and its boundaries. It is for this reason that it is so often used, for instance, to discriminate or describes enemies²² and to distinguish ethnical groups or social classes²³. Indeed, many purity laws in traditional societies seems to be linked to disgust²⁴. In the following pages we will expand more on this issue.

4. «Il Girone della Merda»

In his 1975 *Salò, e le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, Pier Paolo Pasolini shows the extremes human power and cruelty can reach in inflicting pain. After having kidnaped eighteen young people in the surroundings of Salò and Marzabotto, four powerful men (Blangis, Durval, Durcet, and the Bishop) and their small army lock them up

²² For instance, P. Roy, *Alimentary tracts. Appetites, aversions, and the postcolonial*, Durham - London, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 64-70. In his interesting book, he also describes the disgust rhetoric used during the Indian Munity in 1857 by the British. There is also the essay of C. Larrington, *Diet, defecation and the devil: disgust and the pagan past*, in N. Macdonald, *Medieval obscenities*, Woodbridge - Rochester, New York University Press and D.S. Brewer, 2006, pp. 138-155. For the political theory viewpoint on disgust, there are M.C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from humanity: disgust, shame and the law*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004, and J. Deigh, *Emotions, values, and the law*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, in which Deigh criticizes Nussbaum regarding emotions.

²³ Of course D. Kelly, *Yuck! The nature and moral significance of disgust*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2011, in particular, pp. 122 ff. We must also not forget the impressive book of William Ian Miller, *The anatomy of disgust*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1997. At page 240, for instance, he recalls the famous George Orwell's witness about the dominant class of its time: «the lower classes smell».

²⁴ T. Kazen, *Dirt and disgust: body and morality in biblical purity laws*, in B.J. Schwarz et al. (eds.), *Perspectives in purity and purification in the Bible*, New York - London, T&T Clark, 2008, pp. 43-64. It is very interesting as he tries to ground in disgust the alimentary laws of Leviticus, and again W. Miller, *op. cit.*, at least p. 107.

in a villa in the countryside in order to torture and humiliate them. Jokes, mockery, taunting, insults, threats, beatings, rape and abuse. In a terrifying climax, Pasolini leads us through an ambiguous field where the stories about prostitution and sexual perversion and the act of sexual intercourse turn into the exercise of power over another person. The third chapter of the movie is called *The Circle of Shit*. It begins in the *Sala delle Orge* with a tale of Signora Maggi (one of three prostitutes who recounts incredible stories of sexual depravity) about a man who ejaculates by eating his own excrements. Excited and aroused by the story and by one of the kidnapped young woman's crying, Blangis relieves himself on the ground and forces her to eat his feces. The scene is extremely disgusting and utterly humiliating for the victim. The four men then decide to prepare an entirely feces-based meal in order to celebrate the make-believe marriage between one of them and one of the young men. During the meal, the leaders and their gang eat with relish the victims' feces («the most delicious of all foods» according to Signora Vaccari), who are also forced to eat it, suffering and trying not to vomit fearing what the men would do if they didn't. The more disgusting the situation becomes, the more the men eat, enjoying and mocking the suffering victims.

In these scenes, Pasolini not only arouses disgust in the audience but also, and primarily, he highlights the close connection between disgust, social rules and individual life. In their laughter and delight, the four men are fully conscious of what they are doing – coming up against disgust and, thus, breaking its rules. In their exaggerated jokes and remarks, in the disgusting fact of eating feces, they are also celebrating their own small and childish carnival, where, for a short period, a subversion of all values occurs. Disgust marks out individual and social boundaries, and crossing over them could be either a reason for feeling proud and superior or more powerful, or for feeling humiliate, afraid, or sickened. What is important to note is that the disgusting experience of the kidnaped young people reaffirms the very same limits that the men wish to step over.

Boundaries and limits – this is what disgust highlights and what we wish to investigate. But what kind of boundaries and limits? Not geographical ones, of course, nor perceptual ones. Maybe, moral ones. For the moment, there is no need to go deeper into this. It's enough to know that disgust is a form of aversion against organic (often living) things. Disgust also protects and preserves

someone by defending him from something that is alive or originating from life.

However, representing these boundaries and limits using disgust as a mean does not lead us to Clair's *esthétique du stercoraire*. Probably, Pasolini's film can produce a strong (moral) reaction in its audience, aim to defend what the violent kidnappers were trying to break. In the film, we are not facing a meaningless, or simply disgusting, representation of disgust, and as Danto might say, we are watching an artwork which opts for arousing disgust in order to enrich and get across its meaning. Therefore, in a certain sense, we could experience a kind of pleasure – the pleasure which stems from an emotional breaking out, which revoltes *against* any form of power.

Pasolini provides us with a good example. Even if Jean Clair wished only to criticize the overabundance of bad art, his view does not allow us to understand what happens when we look at a disgusting artwork and why an artist chooses to opt for disgust instead of opting for taste. Let us recall a picture which Jean Clair himself chose to include in the magnificent exposition on *Mélancolie* he organized in the *Grand Palais* in 2005. Among the different photographs exhibited there was a particularly disgusting one. It was one of David Nebreda's well-known self-portraits, *Le cadeau de la mère, le couteau nouveau portant*. It is really 'revolting'. It shows a completely nude Nebreda, perhaps wounded by the same knife we see in front of him. Maybe because of the particular play of light in the photo, his thinness is exaggerated and comes across as especially disgusting. However, besides arousing a feeling of repulsion, this photograph exercises an intensely strong force over us, attracting us and raising questions. Today's art also provides many other similar examples, where disgust is not simply bad and, above all, is not the only emotion a piece of art arouses. Carolyn Korsmeyer has worked precisely on this – what she calls «aesthetic disgust». In her recent book, *Savoring disgust: the foul and the fair in aesthetics*²⁵, she states that it is «the arousal of disgust in an audience, a spectator, or a reader, under circumstances where that emotion both apprehends artistic properties and constitutes a component of appreciation»²⁶. However that means «the aesthetic effect need not be parsed as a mingling of a negative and

²⁵ C. Korsmeyer, *Savoring disgust: the foul and the fair in aesthetics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

a positive affect. There are not two things but one dense and complex phenomenon»²⁷. I think it's now necessary for us to go a little deeper into this paradoxical state of affairs and focus only on disgust for a while.

5. «Food for worms»: disgust, phenomenology, death

Over the last two decades studies on disgust have multiplied. From social psychology to cultural studies, from philosophy of law to political philosophy, and, of course, to aesthetics a lot of scholars have shifted their interest to disgust. First and foremost, they ask what disgust can tell us, what its function is and what its origins are. They do this to understand to what extent this emotion is involved in processes of human self-construction or society/culture construction. Among scholars there is full agreement on disgust's expressive features and also on the fact that «disgust is never related to inorganic or non-biological matter»²⁸. Instead, on a lesser degree, there is less agreement on defining its meaning, function and genesis. Below we find a shared common opinion on what people think is disgusting:

Pick a random person off the street and ask him to name five disgusting things off the top of his head, and you are likely to get an earful about filth, disease, death, bugs, and perhaps the mention of some sort of exotic food he finds particularly unpleasant, like pickled snake or boiled sea cucumber.²⁹

These are Daniel Kelly's opening lines in his book. He recognizes the question at stake for disgust – how can so many different things be lumped together under the same title of *disgusting*? In order to fully respond to this question, it would be worthwhile to begin by viewing disgust from its perceivable side and then enter into what its theory and interpretation involves. Charles Darwin, in his *The expression of emotions in man and animals*, published in 1872, provided one of the best descriptions of how disgust is expressed facially:

Its expression should consist chiefly in movements round the mouth. But as disgust also causes annoyance, it is generally accompanied by a frown, and often by gestures as if to push away or to guard oneself against the

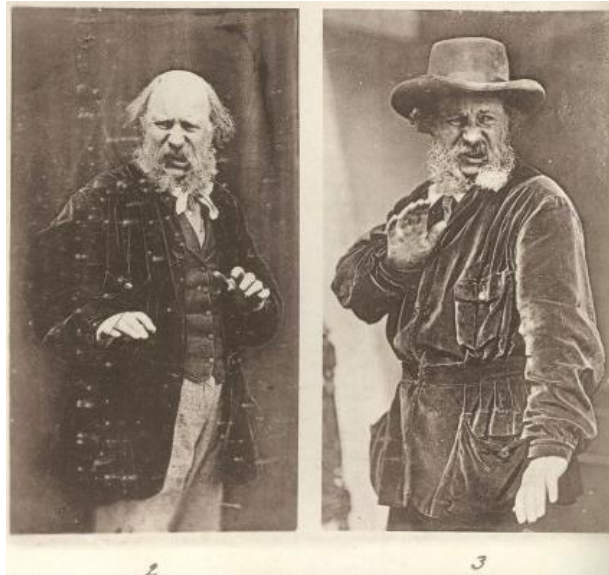
²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁸ A. Kolnai, *On disgust*, ed. by B. Smith - C. Korsmeyer, Chicago - La Salle, Open Court, 2004, pp. 29-91, here p. 30.

²⁹ D. Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

offensive object. In the two photographs (figs. 2 and 3, on Plate V) Mr. Rejlander has simulated this expression with some success. With respect to the face, moderate disgust is exhibited in various ways; by the mouth being widely opened, as if to let an offensive morsel drop out; by spitting; by blowing out of the protruded lips; or by a sound as of clearing the throat. Such guttural sounds are written *ach* or *ugh*; and their utterance is sometimes accompanied by a shudder, the arms being pressed close to the sides and the shoulders raised in the same manner as when horror is experienced. Extreme disgust is expressed by movements round the mouth identical with those preparatory to the act of vomiting. The mouth is opened widely, with the upper lip strongly retracted, which wrinkles the sides of the nose, and with the lower lip protruded and everted as much as possible. This latter movement requires the contraction of the muscles which draw downwards the corners of the mouth.³⁰

Here's the picture which Darwin is referring to:



Darwin's description is universally agreed on and requires no further comments. On the contrary, there is no shared position regarding its function, origin and meaning. We will propose and defend a phenomenological interpretation, which is very far from that of Darwin's.

In carrying out a phenomenological inquiry, our most important reference must be one of the few essays written before the 1980s – Aurel Kolani's *Der Ekel*, published in 1929 in *Jahrbuch für*

³⁰ C. Darwin, *The expression of emotions in man and animals*, London, John Murray, 1872, p. 258.

*Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*³¹. An earlier essay of some importance – according to all the studies we have read, which often, however, don't take into account Kolnai's contribution – is the one written by Darwin, which was the real trailblazer for most of the empirical inquiries on disgust³².

The phenomenological approach to disgust is quite a peculiar one, as it does not appear to be interested in the genesis of disgust, but asks directly what disgust *is*. Aurel Kolnai and Carolyn Korsmeyer try to explain what this emotion is by showing its essence. In fact, phenomenological analysis aims at the very essence of the object. One can then assume – on the basis of Husserl's *Second logical investigation* – that disgust (like every other emotion) has an essence (an ideal law, a field of possibility), which tells us what it is. Let's examine this hypothesis.

From a phenomenological point of view disgust is an intentional emotion. Korsmeyer recalls Peter Goldie's theory of intentionality of emotion as a 'feeling towards'. According to him «feeling towards is *thinking of* with feeling, so that your emotional feelings are directed towards the object of your thought»³³. At least for Korsmeyer, this idea has two consequences: first, it means that, if emotions are able to properly understand what is occurring in their surroundings, they exhibit an «intelligent element» which lies «in dispositions to react appropriately to galvanizing circumstances»³⁴; second, emotions are also «means of insight. Terror is the ground for the sublime because it registers the overwhelming character of its specific objects. [...] [Therefore] the experience gives rise to an *apprehension*, a grasp of an idea that is so embedded in affective response to the [art]work that provokes it as to be virtually inseparable»³⁵. When we are looking at an artwork or facing a real situation, our emotions react appropriately, grasping at something ideal, that is, something one cannot get from empirical and factual means. Normally, Korsmeyer adds, the general import of emotions

³¹ Now in English, A. Kolnai, *op. cit.*

³² But P. Rozin, A.E. Fallon, *A perspective on disgust*, «Psychological Review» 94 (1987), 1, pp. 23-41, here p. 23, does not consider Kolnai, and states that the most important essay on disgust after Darwin's is Andras Angyal's *Disgust and related aversions*, «Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology» 36 (1941), pp. 393-412.

³³ P. Goldie, *The emotions: a philosophical exploration*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 19; C. Korsmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 22 ff.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

is rarely revelatory. [...] But as a rule we know these things only in the abstract, and when stated in bald paraphrase, such insights usually flatten into truism. However, it is the nature of the aesthetic encounters to be singular; they bring home general truths in a particular vivid manner, deepening their apprehension more profoundly than straightforward statement can accomplish. When strong emotions come into play, these insights are grasped not only with the mind but also with palpable somatic resonance.³⁶

Disgust does not differ from other emotions. Analyzing them also involves going deeper into the specific «palpable somatic resonance» and, thus, reaching the ideal 'epistemic' content – the rational one –, which underlies every emotion, that is, its meaning. A phenomenological account, therefore, states the unavoidable affective patina of every meaning. In fact, emotions actually enrich the rational side of the very same meaning. This means that when an idea instantiates it is not only something rationally meaningful, but it is also affective and palpable – it requires these elements due to its very nature. Of course, the meaning of the emotion differs from the meaning of its elicitor. The latter is normally something factual and even contingent with regard to the essence of the emotion. However, on this point we beg to disagree with Kolnai and Korsmeyer.

According to them, disgust allows us to emotively access our condition as mortal beings. Korsmeyer puts it very clearly, «disgust is a constant signifier of death»³⁷. More precisely, «disgust recognizes the communion of death with the process of disintegration, along with the subsequent devolution to life-forms where discrete individual identity is insignificant, giving way to swarms, nests, hives, infestations»³⁸. Moreover, she adds that «reflection on the emotion leads to the nasty realization that the time will come when our own integrity will suffer the same indignities, that the exalted human will become one with the worm»³⁹, or, as Aurel Kolnai describes, «food for worms»⁴⁰. Kolnai tried to show that between disgust, death and life there is an essential relation, which is at the base of every relation between the emotion and its

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ A. Kolnai, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

triggers: «what we can draw to conclusion that disgust is provoked by the proximity or by the challenging or disturbing effect of certain formations which are constituted in such a way that they refer in a determinate manner to life and to death»⁴¹.

What we wish to criticize is that this description does not say anything about disgust, but only about its triggers. We want to point out that disgust and death are not essentially related. This relation is constituted by something else, since disgust, simply and clearly, *only* involves emotional boundaries and limits that one might *not* choose to cross over, as they trigger the emotion. We will try to show that one cannot anticipate these elicitors, because disgust does *not* constitute *alone* what is supposed to be disgusting. An evidence come from Rozin and Fallon's very important empirical study on disgust. By concluding it they ask themselves:

In every culture, adults like some foods or drinks that are decayed or fermented. Cheese is a salient example in Europe and America, and other decayed milk products (e.g., yogurt) are widely consumed in other parts of the world. Decayed eggs are consumed in China, decayed meat in the Arctic, decayed fish in the widely consumed fish sauces of Southeast Asia, and so on. The critical question is, are these items excluded from the disgust category from the beginning, or do they first become disgusting and then become acceptable secondarily?⁴²

The above simply shows that disgust cannot be rigidly labeled under any category (for instance, death, or decay), but delineates boundaries which are sometimes simply contradictory from a taxonomical point of view. This one can be either logical or ontological, whereas the appearance of disgust seems to depend on experiential, contextual and environmental factors, and its elicitors do not speak of disgust as such but of the disgusted subject. Let us read Kolnai's description of disgust.

Kolnai's first step is to mark out the emotion. It «belongs a 'defense reaction', or [...] to the modes of aversion»⁴³. Kolnai describes this reaction as «the occasion [...] is nothing other than the *proximity* of the object in question»⁴⁴. This concept is very important because «proximity is of course not merely an occasion; it is itself also a concurrent object of the disgust sensation»⁴⁵. Thus,

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴² P. Rozin, A. Fallon, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁴³ A. Kolnai, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

'proximity', which can become *intimacy*⁴⁶, is one of the principle ways of how the disgusting object appears. Of course only organic and biological matters can be object of disgust, but they all need to be in proximity in order to disgust, that is, they must have crossed over the boundary. Then he goes on by stating that: «it is rather that one particular aspect of proximity that constitutes – though by no means alone – the character of disgust. This is its will to be near, its non-self-containedness, or, [...] its shameless and unrestrained forcing itself upon us. The disgusting object grins and smirks and stinks menacingly upon us»⁴⁷. We don't believe that this 'will' could be a relevant element for feces or decaying corpses. However, from a phenomenological point of view, we can experience this 'will' when confronted by any living being which is disgusting (for example, cockroaches). The elicitor appears phenomenologically to the subject, rather than as something psychological – a kind of practical intention to touch us.

However, we totally agree with Kolnai, when he states that disgust «involves more the intention of removing the object of disgust out of the environment of the subject in order to leave the latter 'in peace'»⁴⁸. In fact, what is phenomenologically undeniable is that whenever we get near or touch these organic or living entities, disgust immediately comes into play and causes us to withdraw. The problem of the disgusted subject seems to be to avoid crossing over the boundary that separates from the revolting object, and not to be disturbed by it:

What is disgusting is in principle not threatening, but rather *disturbing*, even though a mere disturbance by itself, however strong, cannot evoke disgust. A thing which is perceived as disgusting will always be something which is not going to be regarded as important, which is neither to be destroyed, nor something from which one has to flee, but which must rather be put out of the way. That is to say, where fear coerces me principally to retreat from my surroundings, to alter my circumstances or my situation, disgust leads me much more to a cleaning up of my surroundings, to a weeding out of what is disgusting therein.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50, the page that describes the sense of smell.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Winfried Menninghaus, providing a theory of disgust through the history of modern philosophers and authors who wrote on it, argues as well that «disgust is the experience of a nearness that is not wanted» (W. Menninghaus, *Disgust. Theory and history of a strong sensation*, New York, Suny, 2003, p. 1). He is one of the few scholars who have read Kolnai.

⁴⁹ A. Kolnai, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

What is disgusting is disturbing, it must be distanced, even by weeding it out and removing its traces cleaning up our surroundings. That is, it and each part of it cannot or must not remain where I am. Disgust raises emotional barriers, as if it were a warning-alarm programmed in order not to let *in* what is supposed to be disgusting and not to let *out* the subject toward its elicitors.

Although we agree with Kolnai (and with Korsmeyer) in stating that «the intention of disgust [is] principally [directed] towards features of the object, towards a type of *so-being*»⁵⁰, we don't agree with the fact that *so-being* is logically anticipated and that there is an essential connection between disgust and factual disgusting objects such as corpses, worms, «the tactile impressions of flabbiness, sliminess, pastiness, and indeed of everything soft»⁵¹, etc. Disgust and «deathly life»⁵² do not logically go hand in hand. Nevertheless, we find that Kolnai's description of «*The disgusting*»⁵³ is one of the best we have, even if we think that its multifold identification (with which a lot of scientists and philosophers would agree) with putrefaction, excrement, bodily secretions, viscous, insects, crawling animals, rats, snake, foods, human and animal body, blood, and so on, is much more the result of who *we* are and where *we* live, than an essential effect.

Our thesis lies in the concept that there is no logical or essential reason to raise these barriers against a certain object, and that being a disgust trigger is absolutely contingent. We conceive disgust as a possible boundary (thus, an ideal one) which instantiates whenever the life of the person concerned may be worse than it actually is, or when he or she could be damaged in some way, or simply disturbed. Disgust, in fact, is a watershed for the life which is good within the boundaries it establishes. But the genesis of disgust (and of its boundaries) constitutes beyond its essences, which is its fundamental ground. Therefore, one could say that when this emotion instantiates, one actually and intentionally senses – that is, «*thinks of with feeling*», as Goldie taught – a boundary, a limit which is founded on a certain perception or thought. Disgust warns the subject off from the object and prevents the subject from being damaged by the 'disgusting'. Maybe the concept of 'damage' – which of course has to do with the emotion –

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵³ The third chapter of his essay, *ibid.*, pp. 48-80.

must be determined in the experiential context in which disgust appears. In principle, everything can count as element of this experiential context –it could be culture, body features, education, quality of life, etc. –, however, when disgust appears, the objects that appear disgusting also become damaging to this context. A cultural example is the eating of animals rendering impure (Leviticus).

For these very reasons we are forced to reject John Deigh's very interesting solution to the question of how disgust comes about. He thinks of:

some emotions, including disgust, as having two forms, which I call primitive and tutored. The primitive forms are direct responses to certain objects in virtue of their sensory properties. The subject's discernment of these properties, when he experiences a primitive emotion, supplies the emotion's cognitive content and determines its. The tutored forms of these emotions develop out of their primitive forms through socialization. Specifically, children are taught, with respect to each primitive emotion, what things are the appropriate objects of that emotion and what things are not, and in the course of this teaching they acquire evaluative concepts that enlarge their understanding of the world and alter the range of things to which they respond with that emotion. In general, as result of this teaching, children become liable to experience emotions whose cognitive content consists in evaluative thoughts formed through the application of these concepts to the world. They become liable, in other words, to tutored forms of emotions that, prior the acquisition of these concepts, were felt exclusively in response to objects by virtue of those objects' sensory properties.⁵⁴

John Deigh is not a phenomenologist, but a philosopher of law, who plays here the role of metaphysician. We don't agree with his idea of the primitive form of emotion, but we agree in part with his thesis of the tutored form of emotion. The first point, speaking of objects' sensory properties «that make something foul»⁵⁵, such as «smells, tastes, sights, and tactile feelings that offend the senses»⁵⁶, presupposes a sort of pre-established harmony between our human body and these properties – as if they were done for us and we for them. This, in our opinion, is quite difficult to believe. Moreover, it establishes an *a priori* set of disgusting properties which may change by means of disgust tutoring – something which at least sounds contradictory. The undoubted

⁵⁴ J. Deigh, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

advantage of his view is that one has not to explain ‘why disgust?’; however, that cannot completely satisfy us. On the contrary, the phenomenological view of the emotion as an ideal possibility allows us: a) not to decide what is disgusting and what is not; b) not to determine disgusting independently from the experience of disgust; c) not to have to presuppose the necessary instantiation of disgust; and finally d) to avoid the above-mentioned pre-established harmony.

Instead, we could agree with the theory of the tutored emotions, but it is too simple. In considering the experience- and context-based theory we have presented *in nuce* above, the actual situation described by John Deigh seems to be much more complicated. The problem is that, *de facto*, disgust cannot come about only by virtue of society. Firstly, because, as we have just seen, it is not society-dependent, but appears whenever our life is at risk, and, secondly, because we have to consider at least our experience of the body, the environment and the culture in which we live, in order to take into account the formation and stabilization (so: the factual genesis) of disgust. One could say that this is quite evident. Still, it must be explained why everyone reduce the emotion and its manifestation either to a social construction⁵⁷, or to a function of our desire⁵⁸, or to an evolutionary product. Instead, by phenomenologically differentiating a logical and factual level in disgust, it is possible to take into account a multifold factor explanation of its genesis without both presupposing it and reducing it to what it is not.

6. «Put it out of the way»! Other theories on disgust

Concerning other theories on disgust, our main objection is based on the fact that they don't provide us with any tools to understand disgust in its core structure and possibilities. Apart William Ian Miller's *The anatomy of disgust*, other essays often stop either to its genesis or to its function. Neither the first nor the second concepts, however, seem to answer the questions on what disgust is and what the life that it emotionally suggests is.

Paul Rozin and April E. Fallon claim that disgust is the «revulsion at the prospect of (oral) incorporation of an offensive object. The offensive objects are contaminants; that is, if they even

⁵⁷ S. Miller, *Disgust: the gatekeeper emotion*, Hildale, The Analytic Press, 2004.

⁵⁸ W. Miller, *op. cit.*, or C. McGinn, *The meaning of disgust*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.

briefly contact an acceptable food, they tend to render that food unacceptable»⁵⁹. We can see immediately that Rozin and Fallon think that disgust is necessarily linked with food-rejection (as did Darwin, the father of the tradition of empirical investigations on disgust) and contamination. This means that they considered disgust (as revulsion) to be linked to and derived from fear, and recognized food as the main 'disgusting' object. Fear and disgust are, however, quite different and it would be a mistake to confuse them. Moreover, food is only one of the possible elicitors of disgust. Naturally Rozin and Fallon's essay is more complex, their tests and questionnaires provide results which seem to support their thinking. However, this is a matter of interpretation, as we will see below:

There is substantial overlap between disgusting and dangerous objects. In fact, an adult's first justifications for rejecting many disgust items (e.g., feces, cockroach) are often that they will cause harm. Upon further questioning, however (e.g., "would you eat a sterilized cockroach?"), it almost always becomes clear that over and above any possible harm, the item itself is offensive. This is not the case for dangerous items. Detoxified poison mushrooms or an allergenic food that no longer produces symptoms in a previous sufferer are acceptable items.⁶⁰

The above description brings to light how difficult it is to distinguish, on the one hand, disgust from fear, and, on the other hand, the disgusting from the dangerous. However, in our opinion, the above implies other evidence for what disgust is – an emotional (so not physical at all, and thus permeable) wall, which arises to distance us from the disgusting object. Rozin and Fallon interpret their data as evidences of contamination, they get bogged down in a fear-based framework. Fear refers to something really dangerous, disgust no, as their own investigation shows:

We can sometimes eliminate the possibility of physical danger in contamination situations. The 'danger' reasons often given by subjects to explain why they reject foods contaminated by a disgust substance often seem to mask a seemingly less rational disgust contamination. For example, when subjects explain rejection by contamination with feces or a cockroach in terms of potential harm from microorganisms, we follow with the example of sterilized feces or roaches [...]. Subjects then recognize that they still have a strong rejection and explain this in terms of the

⁵⁹ P. Rozin, A. Fallon, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

offensiveness of the object itself, often with some surprise and embarrassment at their own beliefs and motivations.⁶¹

Thus, it is now clear that disgust appears whenever there is something contingently supposed to harm and disturb our life *having crossed over the boundary* which separate us from it.

Another strongly-based empirical investigation, conducted by Daniel Kelly, tries to explain disgust from fear. Kelly claims that «disgust was created when a mechanism dedicated to monitoring food intake and protecting against poisons functionally focused with a mechanism dedicated to monitoring of potential signs of disease and protecting against parasites»⁶², and then it would have been «co-opted to also play a number of roles in regulating the increasingly complex system of human social interaction. In acquiring these new functions, however, disgust retained many of the features that allow it to effectively protect against poisons and parasites, rendering an imperfect fit between the emotion and the social issues on which it has been brought to bear»⁶³. The double level that Kelly identifies in the genesis of disgust shows again that disgust comes from the necessity of protecting human individuals, and disgust, to some extent, does it. The idea of the imperfect fit, however, demonstrates the 'big deal' represented by the 'irrationality' of disgust concerning its objects as well as the strange sense that the concepts of 'defense' and 'protection' acquire once applied to the emotion. We assume that the problem here is that what was taken as the leading principle for the investigation is the idea that every living entity aims, firstly, at surviving. As well, Kelly follows a functional principle which reduces disgust to the function of protecting the body from disease and parasites. We agree, of course, with the idea that disgust implies functions (it feels the boundary), but we don't agree with the idea that disgust can be understood only with regards to surviving disease and parasites, simply because survival has conceptually something to do with the risk to lose one's own life. On the contrary, disgust hints at life and its boundaries in order to suggest and preserve the *good* life.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶² D. Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

7. «The lower classes smell». On what a good life is

Another theory on disgust presented by William Ian Miller is also in conflict with our thinking as he identifies disgust as a curb to contain and even arrest our desires (in Freud's sense)⁶⁴. However, we do agree with him when he writes that:

Disgust helps define boundaries between us and them and me and you. It helps prevent *our* way from being subsumed into *their* way. Disgust, along with desire, locates the bounds of the other, either as something to be avoided, repelled, or attacked, or, in other settings, as something to be emulated, imitated, or married. [...] Disgust helps mark boundaries of culture and boundaries of the self. The boundaries of the self extend beyond the body to encompass a jurisdictional territory, [...] which may be defined as any space that if intruded upon would engender rightful indignation or disgust in us. The size of this jurisdiction varies by culture, age, gender, class, and status.⁶⁵

Disgust draws the line on how we know *where* we are, and *what status* is to be preserved. Disgust is the emotion of 'citizenship', as it provides (or not) the right to live where *I* (as an individual as well as a social body) live. Disgust is of course a self- and environmental-centered emotion, always referring to a subject's experience, though it is directed to the environment and its objects. Thus, the good life at which disgust aims is not foreseeable, because it depends on many factors, which contribute to creating a culture and the individual within it. For instance, disgust may draw the lines «that separate pure and impure, good and evil, good taste and bad taste»⁶⁶, and this is exactly what has happened in our Western tradition. Disgust always creates barriers and frontiers that identify where we are, if we are pure or impure, clean or dirty, etc. Therefore, where there is something that arouses it – «the lower classes smell», as George Orwell reported – , disgust immediately labels it negatively, and affirms our part of the world and ourselves as better than... For these reason we must agree with Miller when he writes about «the importance of disgust in structuring our world and our stance toward that world»⁶⁷. This does not mean that the factual epistemic content

⁶⁴ See also C. McGinn, *op. cit.* for the same thesis.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶⁶ W. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18. This is maybe the reason for Rozin and Fallon's following consideration: «People ordinarily avoid opportunities that would provide for the extinction of the disgust response. Although individuals may frequently view disgust objects at a distance, they rarely allow close contact with these items, especially if there is any threat of inges-

(on the disgusting and, consequently, on the good life) is necessarily true, thus there really is something ontologically disgusting (as John Deigh would like). It simply means that we emotionally revolt against the idea of touching anything which is on the disgusting 'part' of the world. Subsequently, we can either trust it or not, but, for us, what is very interesting is that we can use it. That brings us back to the initial questions – what makes the nexus between art, disgust, society and meaning so interesting? How can art and disgust reflect society? And how can they change it?

8. What is at stake for art. The good life at issue.

On 24 September 2007, in Milan, several billboards were uncovered revealing an anorexic French model, Isabelle Caro, posing for Oliviero Toscani and advertising Nolita, a fashion company. Its title was *No-anorexia*. After few hours, there was an explosion of public opinion from all over the world, divided between those supporting Toscani's work, and those who criticized it⁶⁸. The picture was quite shocking and disgusting. However, it could not be classified under Clair's *esthétique du stercoraire*. It belonged to another *stercoraire* indicating another *esthétique*. Sometimes, there can be an overlapping with that of Jean Clair's, but the sign changes completely. It is no longer something simply negative, since it embodies an aesthetical force – affective, moral, and intellectual –, which impresses and questions, creating the dense and complex phenomenon of which Korsmeyer speaks. Simply bad art may also impress and question, but it is not such a dense and complex phenomenon – it is simply disgusting. This is not of course a general rule for art, it counts – we guess – for disgusting. Thus, in Toscani's shot we can find something meaningful, whose «very purpose [...] is to upset»⁶⁹ in order to make people aware of

tion. When someone is consistently forced into close contact, the strength of the disgust response can weaken by a process of extinction or adaptation. Thus tourists, in maintaining politeness or out of nutritional necessity, may feel compelled to consume an item accepted in the culture they are visiting but disgusting within their own culture. Under these circumstances, there is probably a gradual weakening of disgust» (P. Rozin, A. Fallon, *op. cit.*, p. 38).

⁶⁸ We would recommend the book that results from this experience, in which Toscani gathered the newspapers articles, opinions from the world of fashion and the Italian show business, political documents, etc. along with a CD talking of the *No-anorexia* project: O. Toscani, *Anorexia. Storia di un'immagine*, Milano, La Sterpaia, 2008. The book is in Italian (with Italian translations) and with numerous extracts in English and French.

⁶⁹ C. Korsmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

the problem of anorexia and perhaps begin to think more deeply about it.

Disgust can change the life of a person, the way of being of a society. This is its real importance. It can be used either to reactivate a certain sensitivity or to indicate something bigger which includes disgust as a necessary step. When art makes use of disgust, the boundaries of our *good* life and the lines beyond which life becomes *bad* open up the possibility for individuals not only to become aware of these, but also to actually 'break out in revolt' either for or against these boundaries (at least individually), because the unbearable proximity of disgust is oxymoronically distanced and, thus, weakened.

Considering the present interest of art in disgust, then, it is possible to infer that, at least, artists need to explore the different boundaries highlighted by disgust in order to become newly aware of them, to either cross over or preserve and protect them, or to reveal the work of a political power or a promise of freedom, etc. And, when people gather to strike or break out in a revolt for the same goal, it is possible to gain real political results, that is, actual changes in society. Let's look at a couple of examples.

During an interview on *Salò*, Pasolini utters that in the movie sex is nothing but the «representation or metaphor, of this situation: [...] sex as duty and ugliness»⁷⁰, and, in his opinion, after 1968, sex had become the «satisfaction of a social duties, not a pleasure against social duties»⁷¹. Besides the representation of power relations, there is an image of sex which is definitely damning – it has become a mere duty. Disgusting sex images, thus, aim at a different type of emancipation which gives rise to true sexual freedom.

Perhaps, we can also find a similar moral (and political) intention in Paul McCarthy, as Arthur Danto himself writes: «So possibly McCarthy is a kind of moralist, and his works are meant to awaken us to awful truths and their disgustingness as a means of edificatory ends. That still leaves intact the revulsion their contemplation evokes»⁷². When confronted by revulsion, people sometimes revolt, they say «no!», go away – in a word, they take a

⁷⁰ P.P. Pasolini, *Appendice a 'Salò'*, in *Per il Cinema*, II, Milano, Mondadori, 2001, pp. 2063-2067, here p. 2065.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2064.

⁷² A. Danto, *Unnatural wonders: essays from the gap between art & life*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 87.

stand against it. However, this must not be understood only in a conservative way. In such reactions there is often a powerful progressive force, which is the desire to cross over the boundaries shown by disgust. In both cases, a human and political process can begin and change people's sensitivity, way of seeing and feeling the world, etc.

As Arthur Danto often says there is an aesthetic vogue nowadays that can be called «'disturbatory' art: this is art that does not just have disturbing contents [...]. Disturbatory art is intended, rather, to modify, through experiencing it, the mentality of those who do experience it»⁷³. We have presented some cases here. Cases which have tried to change today's actual states of affairs (concerning aesthetics, politics, social norms, people's mindsets). In fact, we agree with Clair's view regarding the crisis of our Western capitalistic societies, and we think that the association between art and disgust could help in exiting from this crisis. Among other things, this crisis is characterized by the necessity of being aware, to some extent, of the boundaries which delimitate our lives. This is due to the need of knowing and conceptually grasping who we are, where we are living, and where we are going to as individuals and society. What is at stake here, subsequently, is the understanding of the lines drawn, or which are being drawn, that guide, make authoritative and give value to ourselves and our societies; it is what deserves to be defended, and what to be dropped or overcome. At issue, then, there is the good life, and disgust highlights its perimeter and allows us to either renegotiate or to accept and fight for them. Art, for its part, through disgust and its features provides suggestions, mainly emotional ones, showing possible ways forward. However, the artist does not have to find and design strategies to change the world, although he/she could do so and maybe should do so.

9. Two ways, in conclusion

Disgusting art represents at least an occasion to reform society, to initiate people into a different way of thinking and viewing some aspects of our world, and to encourage the rehabilitation of old thoughts and systems of values, maybe to «convert preferences into values», setting in motion an important process of moraliza-

⁷³ Id., *Bad aesthetic times*, in *Encounters and reflections: art in the historical present*, Berkeley - Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990, p. 299, in C. Korsmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

tion⁷⁴ and social cohesion. Choosing disgust for an artwork is something more than a mere option. It means trying to create waves with repercussions, even political ones, on society, on the individuals and on their respective ability to self-comprehend. Nevertheless, Clair's specter of an art that is simply disgusting is far from being false, while the complex phenomenon that Korsmeyer tried to describe can be reduced to something that is just disgusting and senseless. Therefore, we have two possibilities for disgusting art. Jean Clair seems to know both of them though, of course, he would never agree with us in referring both to the same kind of art:

Lucian Freud aura attiré 60 000 personnes à Beaubourg, et Raymond Mason, un sculpteur contemporain, a connu un grand succès populaire pour sa rétrospective au musée Maillol – malgré le silence de la presse dite 'artistique'. On ne le doit pas au fait qu'ils produisent des images, mais à ce qu'il existe chez eux une sensualité, une carnalité, une humanité, la prise en compte parfois d'une charge sociale ou même politique qui intéressent le public. Il y a un sens, un engagement humain, un drame. Sans ce drame, l'œuvre ne vaut rien, ne dit rien, est 'irresponsable'.⁷⁵

Cela laisserait penser que ces phénomènes de l'art actuel illustrent parfaitement ce que Marcel Gauchet appelle 'l'individu total', c'est-à-dire celui qui considère n'avoir aucun devoir vis-à-vis de la société, mais tous les droits d'un 'artiste', aussi, 'total', 'totalitaire', que l'État l'a été naguère, à travers qui transparait le fantasme de l'enfant qui croit posséder toute la puissance du monde, et qui impose aux autres les excréments dont il jouit.⁷⁶

Disgusting art, as every other kind of art, can only be good or bad art. Disgust, however, is always the same negative emotion which art needs to really push us to revolt.

⁷⁴ P. Rozin et al., *Moralization and becoming veteran: the transformation of preferences into values and the recruitment of disgust*, «Psychological Science» 8 (1997), 2, pp. 67-73; p. 67.

⁷⁵ J. Clair, *Courte histoire* cit., p. 28.

⁷⁶ Id., *L'hiver de la culture*, Paris, Flammarion, 2011, p. 76.