FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Introduction: Tarrying with Disgust

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I believe that nothing is more important than for us to recognize that we are bound and sworn to what provokes our most intense disgust.
-Georges Bataille, 'Attraction and Repulsion II'

…to learn to taste again, so that we can learn to maintain our disgust more easily than we can learn to maintain what disgusts us. But this will require a transformation of the five senses, a new perspective, a new aesthetics.
-Stanley Cavell, 'On Makavejev On Bergman'

Though disgust has long been a subject of anxious speculation for a range of Western thinkers—from Kant, Nietzsche and Freud, to Sartre, Bataille and Kristeva—the critical stakes of such discussions have, until recently, remained relatively unexplored in the discipline of film studies. Historically, the specificity of disgust as a distinctive component of film aesthetics and spectatorship has been sidelined in favour of an exploration of cognate concepts—abjection, unpleasure, *l'informe*, horror, or the unpresentable, for instance—which offer different explanatory frameworks for the range of objects or experiences that might be encompassed by the notion of disgust. Recently, there has been a revitalisation of debates pertaining to disgust from across a range of disciplines, as witnessed by publications in the fields of philosophical aesthetics, phenomenology, cognitive and moral psychology, literary theory, and feminist and queer theory.[1] Film scholars, too, have

[1] A sampling of these works include: Miller 1998, Probyn 2000, Menninghaus 2003, Kolnai 2004, Nussbaum 2004, Ahmed 2004, Ngai 2005, Schnall et. al 2008, Korsmeyer 2011.

started to re-assess the significance of disgust in recent years.[2] What unites much of this interdisciplinary work on disgust is a shared concern with thinking through the relations between bodily sensation, emotion, and cognition (especially as these are mediated by films and other cultural forms), and with probing the political, moral, and ethical implications that arise from those particular conditions of embodiment. In this context, disgust is a uniquely privileged concept, which allows us to telescope questions of corporeality and cognition, and affect and emotion, with those of socio-morality, ethics, and politics. As Carl Plantinga points out, 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"' (Plantinga 2009, 205). Indeed, disgust's distinctly polymorphic nature—at once a visceral reflex (physical, primordial, 'unthought') and learned emotional response (cognitive, culturally-conditioned, evaluative), a form both of repulsion (inciting nauseated recoil and rejection) and attraction (sticky and contagious, it entices us to look, to linger, to tarry with the disgusting thing)—makes it a particularly useful focal point for some of the questions that have concerned film theory and philosophy in recent years. From the so-called 'sensuous' turn in film theory, with its emphasis on visceral and carnal aspects of spectatorship (Vivian Sobchack, Laura U. Marks, Martine Beugnet), or the recent work on cinematic emotions, affective agency, and the 'aesthetic paradox' of disgust (Berys Gaut, Torben Grodal, Carl Plantinga), to the renewed interest in the ethics of spectatorship, including an address to the ethical value of unpleasure (Sarah Cooper, Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, Michele Aaron), the strategic positioning of disgust makes it a useful critical device for thinking through some of the most pertinent questions in film-philosophy today.

This special issue of *Film-Philosophy* recognizes this strategic location of disgust at the crossroads of some of the most recent film theoretical debates around questions of embodiment, sensation, affect, emotion, cognition, philosophical aesthetics, politics, ethics, and so on. Taking its cue from Bataille's entreaty that we should acknowledge that we are 'bound and sworn to what provokes our most intense disgust', and, equally, from Stanley Cavell's suggestion that we should 'learn to maintain our disgust more easily than we can learn to maintain what disgusts us', the aim of this special issue is to respond to the critical—and deeply ethical—challenge of tarrying with disgust. Contributors to the issue respond to this challenge in a variety of ways: the issue synthesizes a range of theoretical perspectives—drawing together insights from the work of Freud, Kant, Kolnai, Deleuze, Bataille, and Derrida, to name a few—and opens new reflections and orientations

[2] See in particular: Barker 2009, Hanich 2009, Plantinga 2009, Kleinhans 2009 and 2010.

through close readings of an eclectic selection of films. Although each piece focuses on a distinctive dimension of disgust, points of intersection emerge around key conceptual strands, including a shared emphasis on cinematic disgust as a form of 'affective contagion', on disgust's structural, formal, and temporal qualities, and its ethical, intersubjective nature, or its relation to questions of radical alterity, absence, and the void. Collectively, the issue's wide-ranging and provocative insights amply demonstrate the value of disgust for film-philosophy, and signpost points of entry for future research.

One important reference point for several contributors to this issue, and for reflections about the role of disgust for film-philosophy more generally, is Noël Carroll's *Philosophy of Horror*. In this influential work, Carroll examines disgust as one of the variants of unpleasure that is central to the experience of horror. Working from a cognitivist framework, Carroll reads disgust as one of the main 'cognitive emotions' that horror films work to produce in spectators through an appeal to the slimy, viscous, and culturally transgressive presence of monsters (Carroll, 1990). Carroll's account does register something of the phenomenological experience of compromising closeness between spectator and filmic materiality transacted through the encounter with the disgusting object; yet for Carroll, the strong physiological and emotional claims made on the spectator in the experience of disgust are inextricably bound, and even subordinate, to the spectator's active intellectual curiosity and cognitive participation in the narrative and its resolution. Disgust, he notes, 'might be seen as part of the price to be paid for the pleasure of [the monster's] disclosure' adding that '[i]t is not that we crave disgust, but that disgust is a predictable concomitant of disclosing the unknown, whose disclosure is a desire the narrative instills in the audience and then goes on to gladden' (Carroll 1990, 184-5). While Carroll's account of disgust has in many ways laid the groundwork for film-philosophical discussions of disgust, and has been exceptionally productive for thinking about the complex relays between physiological response, affect, emotion, and cognition at work in the cinematic experience, his account of disgust tends to 'clean up' much of what it would attempt to analyse, swiftly converting the intense phenomenological experiences relayed by disgust into a fixed and neatly contained moment to be left behind by narrative teleology. In his view, the physiological 'revolt' implicit in disgust appears as something to be mastered and redeemed by cognitive processes. This emphasis on the narrative and cognitive processes at the expense of an up-close, phenomenologically-inflected look at disgust's myriad manifestations is something that each of the contributors to this special issue seeks to redress in different ways.

Julian Hanich's article, 'Toward a Poetics of Cinematic Disgust' represents just such a call for a more balanced approach to thinking about

the role of emotion, cognition, and physical sensation in the experience of disgust. Building on his previous work on disgust and other negative emotions in cinema, Hanich's essay for this special issue lays the foundations for a 'poetics of cinematic disgust', whose aim is ultimately to 'enable a more fine-grained discussion about one specific cinematic emotion'. Challenging the common-sense notion that the evocation of disgust is as straightforward as simply putting something disgusting in front of the camera, Hanich's piece demonstrates that the poetics of cinematic disgust are much more complex and nuanced than they may first appear. Central to Hanich's taxonomy of disgust are the five categorical distinctions that he establishes for thinking about the choices filmmakers have at their disposal when trying to disgust us, including decisions regarding 'temporality', 'presence', 'character engagement', 'synaesthetic audiovision', and 'affective co-occurrence'. In demonstrating the multiplicity of techniques and the complexity of response involved in cinematic disgust—and providing examples of these from a dizzying array of filmic case-studies—Hanich's article amply demonstrates the variety and often-overlooked subtlety of disgust. As Carolyn Korsmeyer points out in her recently published book *Savoring Disgust: The Fair and the Foul in Aesthetics*, it is precisely the more nuanced possibilities embedded in disgust that are often disregarded. She notes that although 'disgust is almost always taken to be an extreme emotion', it has many more 'subtle variants' and components ranging from eroticism and beauty, to humour, irony, and sorrow (Korsmeyer, 9-11). Hanich's findings in this essay demonstrate that the same insight holds for thinking about cinematic disgust, and in a similar vein, he concludes: 'Precisely because we think it is such a primitive or basic emotion, we tend to overlook its intricacy at the movies.'

Tarja Laine's article, 'Imprisoned in Disgust: Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*', shares an interest in the role of cinematic emotions, and her essay develops a reading of the spectator-screen relation as a complex exchange between the film's 'affective influence', and the spectator's 'affective appraisal' and 'emotional agency'. Such a model of film spectatorship as an affective exchange, she notes, is 'complicated when disgust comes into the frame'. Through a close reading of Roman Polanski's masterpiece of cinematic disgust, Laine concludes that disgust can have the effect of confusing the distinction between a film's 'emotional core' and the spectator's own emotional agency. *Repulsion*'s 'ultra-sensitivity to the world', she writes, creates an affective, physical, and emotional experience of disgust that is overpowering, and which leaves no room for the kind of cathartic pleasure or cognitive mastery described by Noël Carroll. Rather, disgust is something embodied and lived through by both the film and its spectators, whether they "like" it or not. However, Laine is careful to note that this 'overwhelmingly disgusting experience of watching *Repulsion* does

not equate to passivity', since, in her view, 'our affect remains continually directed towards the film' as something we actively engage with at the level of affective appraisal. As with other contributors to this issue, Laine's insights on disgust have important implications for thinking about the aesthetic paradox of unpleasure. In her assessment, *Repulsion* offers a particularly pertinent limit-case in which disgust is not readily convertible into pleasurable cognitive satisfaction. Ultimately, her reading of the film suggests that we may need to re-think theories that construct unpleasure as antithetical to aesthetic experience. In this, she joins Korsmeyer and other thinkers who have recently suggested that we may need to abandon the pleasure-unpleasure binary, in favor of thinking about disgust as '*modifier of attention*, intensifying for a host of reasons some experience that the participant would rather have continue than not' (Korsmeyer 2011, 118). Indeed, as Laine puts it, it is possible that what we value in cinematic renderings of disgust is precisely the 'vivid and immediate experience' that it offers us, 'regardless of its non-pleasurable, non-rewarding features'.

Eugenie Brinkema's article, 'Laura Dern's Vomit, or, Kant and Derrida in Oz' takes up Derrida's reading of the central, structuring role of disgust in Kant's aesthetic philosophy, in order to perform an intricate reading of two films by David Lynch. Beginning with a discussion of Lynch's early short film, *Six Figures Getting Sick*, Brinkema calls for an understanding of disgust not as substance but as structure: Lynch's film is not about 'men getting sick' so much as, for her, 'the sickness of and on form'. Following Derrida's reading of vomit in 'Economimesis', Brinkema reads disgust as that which 'structures the very *form* of exclusion in Kantian thought'; at the absolute limit of the beautiful, it is the 'unintegratable aspect of the aesthetic that the aesthetic cannot speak'. This understanding of disgust as that which cannot be spoken has important implications for thinking about disgust in cinematic terms, as it suggests that one of disgust's hallmarks is that it is never fully present to itself, never locatable in its reputed objects or in relation to its possible provocations (the disgusting thing). Brinkema's piece reads disgust through the fugitive designation of 'something *worse than the worst*': 'not substance but structure around which forces bend, contract, mobilize'. Brinkema's essay teases out this distinction between disgust-as-substance and disgust-as-structure through an illuminating comparison between the role of vomit in Lukas Moodysson's *A Hole in My Heart* and David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. Instead of 'recuperating disgust for the visual', as the vomitous climax of Moodysson's film arguably does, Laura Dern's vomit in *Wild at Heart* figures disgust primarily through the parasensual dimension of smell. In *Wild at Heart*, Brinkema notes, the smell of sick lingers, permeates, and yet—as smell—is not fully locatable within the film's audio-visual economy. As Brinkema argues, this displacement from the visual onto the olfactory has the

effect of holding open the place of 'the something more disgusting than the disgusting', of asking us to tarry with disgust's sensual workings, and with a 'worse that is always yet to come'. For Brinkema, it is ultimately Lynch's 'commitment to letting his vomit smell' that grounds an ethical promise: in keeping the movement and possibility of disgust open, refusing to fill it in with the 'merely disgusting', Lynch's work may well be a step in the direction of the sort of 'new aesthetics' called for by Cavell when he advocates that we should 'learn to maintain our disgust more easily than we learn to maintain what disgusts us' (Cavell in Rothman 2005, 36).

A similar emphasis on the ethics of disgust is at the core of Jennifer Barker's contribution to this special issue. Her article, 'Chew on This: Disgust, Delay, and the Documentary Image in *Food, Inc.*' suggests that a similar distinction be made between the depiction of objects and subjects of disgust, and the process by which films might be said to directly *perform* physical and moral disgust through cinematic means. Drawing from the work of Sara Ahmed, Barker considers the constitutive 'betweenness' of disgust, noting that disgust is 'less about objects or subjects than it is a relation in time and space'. For Barker, it is the distinctive movement of disgust—defined as a trajectory from a compromising closeness to a turning away in revulsion—that is key for thinking about the cinematic relations that *Food, Inc.* establishes between its subjects and its spectators. Barker's subtle account discloses how *Food, Inc.* sometimes performs this movement of disgust by referring spectators to its own embodied agency, encouraging an empathy with its bodily movements toward and away from objects of disgust. However, as Barker notes, the film performs its visceral disgust most powerfully when it pointedly does not reveal its objects of disgust. Barker writes, '[w]hereas some laudible activist documentaries relish and rely on the "in your face" immediacy of documentary images', *Food, Inc.* emphasises instead the ambivalence of disgust, in which there is never a 'strict division between subject and object, but rather involves the movement between them'. Drawing from the work of Malin Wahlberg, she describes such moments, when the disgusting thing is withheld from our vision, as 'frame-breaking events' in which the viewer's affective response to the screen is heightened by an emphasis on delay and absence, rather than immediacy and presence. For Barker, such 'frame-breaking events' in *Food, Inc.* bring into focus a phenomenological similarity between disgust and the documentary image. Both, she writes, 'operate in and as the space in-between presence and absence, here and there, now and then, subject and object'. Ultimately, the ethical value of disgust for Barker derives not from its capacity to deliver an intense visceral charge in the present, but from its sticky, residual nature, and its ability to re-structure relations between spectator and screen, past and

present, and between the corporeal, the affective, and the reflective dimensions of film spectatorship.

Steven Shaviro's work has long been interested in the way that cinema structures relations between bodies and affects, and politics and economics. His piece for this special issue, 'Body Horror and Post-Socialist Cinema: Györgi Pálfi's *Taxidermia*', takes up such questions through a detailed analysis of Pálfi's epic—and epically disgusting—masterpiece of post-Soviet cinema. Shaviro's article focuses on the contradictory extremes that the film holds in tension, noting that it is at once 'intimately physical in its exploration of masculine desire and physical disgust' and 'sardonically distanced' and 'icily allegorical' in its portrayal of Hungary's social and political past. Through an intricate reading of *Taxidermia*'s tri-partite structure, which charts a trajectory from fascism, to communism, to capitalism, Shaviro considers the way that the film mobilises physical disgust (amongst other affects) in order to make visible and audible the 'concrete bodily practices' that articulate power relations in each successive regime. The value of *Taxidermia*'s exaggerated deployment of disgust, for Shaviro, is its ability to 'literalize, to implant directly in the flesh, and to present to us onscreen' what is otherwise a 'diffuse and impalpable network of power relations, social norms, and ideological background assumptions'. Each of the male bodies on screen present what Shaviro refers to as direct 'body-images': in all three cases, 'the men's bodies directly register, and suffer, the social forces that pass through them and mold them'. As Shaviro is careful to note, although the film charts a historical trajectory through these 'body-images', it systematically avoids presenting this trajectory as a process of organic development. Rather, it presents them as a series of 'spatial juxtapositions' and 'analogical correspondences'; its body-images, presented without development or psychological explanation, are 'immediately visceral, and indeed disgusting'. The film, he notes, 'operates by a sort of affective contagion. It *forces us to feel*', but also operates through an allegorical mode that implies the opposite: distance, abstraction, intellectualism. Shaviro notes that the 'cognitive dissonance' produced as a result is 'itself the whole point of *Taxidermia*': the film's superimposition of the visceral and the intellectual, the affective and the cognitive, leads, in Shaviro's assessment, to 'a flattening, a reduction of dimensions' in which '[r]eflection is folded back into immediate experience'. But given all of the 'fleshy excesses' of the film, Shaviro's reading of *Taxidermia* suggests that the political value of disgust might ultimately lie elsewhere. Just as *Taxidermia*'s final sequence refers us precisely to 'the void of Lajos's evacuated insides', so, too, do its disgusting images refer to another, more profound variety of disgust—that of Bataille's 'inner experience'—as the form of 'exclusion that haunts the capitalist order'. This excluded disgust may perform a more profound political diagnosis, even

if, in Shaviro's view, it does not constitute a direct challenge to our current capitalist reality.

There is much still to be considered about disgust, and it is hoped that the range of reflections on cinematic disgust in this special issue will continue to provoke questions and incite future research into the value of disgust for film studies. I would like to thank each of the contributors for the lively and stimulating articles that have come about as a result of their own efforts to tarry with disgust. Thanks too, to all those at *Film-Philosophy* who provided valuable feedback and suggestions. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to David Sorfa for his expert guidance and advice, and for his reflections on vomit, which served as a particular source of inspiration for the special issue.

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