

NEGATIVE AESTHETICS AND THE DE-BEAUTIFICATION OF FASHION

THE TAXONOMY OF DISGUSTING FASHION

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Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of “disgusting fashion” as a deliberate aesthetic strategy within contemporary design, positioning it within the frameworks of Negative Aesthetics, abjection, and art-horror. Drawing on philosophical theories from Georges Bataille, Julia Kristeva, Carolyn Korsmeyer, and Noel Carroll, the paper examines how fashion engages with disgust not simply as a reaction, but as a generative force that challenges normative ideals of beauty, identity, and the body. Using Carroll and Contesi’s taxonomy of disgust in art, the study proposes a tripartite framework for analyzing garments based on whether their subjects and/or materials (vehicles) evoke disgust. Through case studies of designers such as Alexander McQueen, Lady Gaga, Alessandro Michele, and Michaela Stark, the paper demonstrates how fashion utilizes grotesque materials, symbolic violence, and bodily excess to provoke visceral responses and engage in sociopolitical critique. It argues that the incorporation of disgust functions as a transformative tool—destabilizing traditional boundaries between the self and the other, the inside and the outside, and the beautiful and the abject. Ultimately, disgusting fashion reveals how negative emotions can generate powerful aesthetic experiences, offering new ways to understand fashion not as adornment, but as a philosophical and cultural force.

Keywords: *Taxonomy, Disgust, Art, Fashion, Negative Aesthetics*

INTRODUCTION

Noel Carroll and Filippo Contesi in their chapter “A Taxonomy of Disgust in Art” categorize disgust in art, explaining how the aesthetics of disgust were developed from the depiction of mythological monsters such as Polyphemus, Medusa and Minotaur to contemporary monstrous creatures from cinema and literature. The philosophers use references from popular culture’s disgusting moments of the horror genre while they parallelize it with the concept of “freak show” and the “craving of biological anomalies”. Although it was initially rejected from the aesthetic spectrum of art, especially due to Kant’s argument on the identical emotions evoked by the real and the represented object, the alluring effect of disgust is

recognized as a secondary experience – an idiosyncratic pleasure, a mixture of cognitive satisfaction and painful curiosity (Korsmeyer, 2011). This paradoxical pleasure aligns closely with what Carroll describes as *art-horror*—an aesthetic category in which negative emotions like fear and disgust are intentionally evoked by fictional or stylized representations, yet consumed with interest and even enjoyment. In *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), Carroll argues that audiences can appreciate horror art because it engages cognitive processes: we are fascinated by the monstrous and the disgusting, not despite the revulsion they produce, but because they provoke reflection and complex emotional responses. This framework can be extended to fashion: just as the horror genre

uses fictional monsters to elicit structured emotional reactions, avant-garde designers use grotesque or abject elements to disrupt, disturb, and yet captivate. Carroll and Contesi define two variables for the categorization of disgust in art: the artworks that depict or refer to something disgusting and the artworks that are made of disgusting materials. Based on these variables, they present three categories of disgust in art: a) artworks that both their vehicles and their subjects are disgusting, b) artworks that their vehicles are disgusting but their subject is not and c) artworks that their subjects are disgusting but their vehicles are not.

Using this philosophical framework, the aim of this paper is to taxonomize the emotion of disgust in contemporary fashion. Disgusting fashion changed the way we perceive aesthetics, contributing to our perception of inclusivity and challenging the old-fashioned norms of what is considered as conventionally beautiful. This process of de-beautification of fashion is part of Everyday Aesthetics and Negative Aesthetics. Drawing the examples from contemporary fashion collections and the current beauty trends, disgusting fashion can be categorized as follows: a) clothing whose subject is disgusting and whose vehicles are disgusting, b) clothing whose subject is not disgusting and whose vehicles are and c) clothing whose subject is disgusting and whose vehicles are not. Disgusting fashion is related to the use of disgusting materials; meat or textures that reminds us of it, animal byproducts such as skins, living or dead organisms are only some of the examples of how fashion becomes a source of disgust. Clothes that have slimy or sticky texture, or they are made of unconventional materials (meat, worms) can be extremely repulsive, despite their design or their aesthetic value. The contact of the skin with these materials that remind us of decomposition turns the body itself into a disgusting object. Therefore, the grotesque body is usually the disgusting body, which becomes a means of communication of ideas, a philosophical ground where the designer is able to express and challenge oneself.

In the contemporary history of fashion, there are some provocative examples of how disgust can be incorporated in clothing. In 1996, Alexander McQueen presented his Spring Summer collection inspired by the vampire movie "Hunger." Among the outfits, there was a corset molded in the shape of a clear buster, filled with dirt and (alive) worms. In 2001, he presented his collection "Voss."

McQueen, being very theatrical in his practice and his approach of fashion, finished the show with a riveting performance by fetish writer Michelle Olley, being naked in a glass box filled with moths touching her bare skin. On a similar note, one of the most iconic moments in the latest fashion history was the "Meat dress" that Lady Gaga wore in the 2010 MTV Music Awards, made by raw meat pieces and designed by the artist Frank Fernandez. In 2018, Alessandro Michele, the previous creative director of Gucci presented his Fall-Winter collection in Milan (GQ Magazine, 2018). The models walked the runway keeping in their hands their own decapitated domes. Last, there are several contemporary examples such as the brand LeMÁine, specialized in "imitation flesh" textile, which exclusively creates horrific, graphic clothes that resemble bloody skin, while the artist Michaela Stark designs underwear and corsetry that are made to modify and restrain the body in such way, that create uncomfortable and repulsive figures.

Based on the previous examples, the emotion of disgust is a phenomenon strongly related to the aesthetics of avant garde fashion. Similar to art, fashion was considered to serve the ideals of beauty and harmony; when it comes to negative emotions, such as horror or disgust, the question remains the same "is this fashion?" Provocative designers seem to use elicitors of disgust, in order to communicate their thoughts and beliefs or to make a statement about sociopolitical matters. In addition, contemporary fashion uses negative emotions to trigger intense responses, since the audience seems to become more and more indifferent to beauty. While fashion during 2000-2010 used to be all about perfection and presenting the best version of oneself, with the popularization of plastic surgeries, the last 10 years more and more designers present creations that remind us of a "freak show." Carroll and Roversi (2019) argue that the thrill or craving of witnessing freaky images satisfy the curiosity of the audience and, as result, it is pleasurable. Therefore, the disgusting representations in fashion have an aesthetically pleasing aspect, that mainly has to do with the "painful" cognitive pleasure and the evoking of intense emotions.

The introduction of disgust in the broader realm of aesthetics and art is also discussed by Carolyn Korsmeyer. Korsmeyer (2011) analyzes the paradoxical attraction of disgust, stating that it is usually accompanied by an "unsettling

eroticism.” In this framework, disgust is explored also as a cultural phenomenon, introducing the term aesthetic disgust. Korsmeyer defines aesthetic disgust as “a response that, no matter how unpleasant, can rivet attention to the point where one actually may be said to savor the feeling.” Savoring disgusting images or objects is one of the reasons that it is important to taxonomize disgust in art and fashion, in order to understand how this negative emotion can be turned into a pleasurable experience. Previous studies on the emotion of disgust proved that it spreads like an infection from the disgusting object to the disgusted subject (Kolnai, 1929). Kolnai also explored the triggers of disgust, by examining their traits and defining them as “materially disgusting”, and listed decay, waste, bodily fluids, and dirt, and extending to repulsive animals, particularly insects when they swarm in excessive numbers; food in specific states; human bodies that are overly close; excessive reproduction; illness; and physical deformities. Kolnai’s theory has been used as a corner stone for the research of other scholars, such as Winfried Menninghaus (2003), who highlights the intertwined relationship between disgust and aesthetics, arguing that this emotion can serve as a vehicle for understanding cultural values, ethical boundaries, and the limits of beauty or taste. One of Menninghaus’ key points is that disgust, while often seen as a “base” or “primitive” emotion, has an important role in shaping aesthetic experiences. He argues that disgust helps define boundaries between what is considered “acceptable” or “beautiful” and what is perceived as “contaminated” or “repulsive.” In this sense, the emotion of disgust can influence our perception of art, literature, and culture, where it often evokes strong reactions or prompts reflection on issues like morality, health, and social norms. As Georges Bataille (1985) argues, disgust marks a moment of transgression where societal order collapses and the sacred emerges. Through bodily decay, filth, and eroticism, he links the repulsive to a kind of sublime power. His idea of formlessness, central to Surrealist aesthetics, connects abjection to the visual and material realm. Artists like Duchamp, Manzoni, and Warhol used bodily secretions to challenge norms—an approach echoed in fashion by designers like McQueen and Michaela Stark. Their work, like that of Cindy Sherman or Andres Serrano, draws on this avant-garde tradition where disgust becomes a tool

to question beauty, identity, and the boundaries of the body.

CLOTHING WHOSE SUBJECT IS DISGUSTING AND WHOSE VEHICLES ARE DISGUSTING

In 1996, fashion designer Alexander McQueen (1969-2010) started establishing himself as one of the most prominent and at the same time radical designers of his generation. Inspired by the erotic horror vampire film *Hunger*, McQueen presented his Spring Summer 1996 collection at London’s Natural History Museum. Themes of sexuality, violence and death had always been the inspiration and the main motives behind McQueen’s macabre creations. As Caroline Evans (2003) discusses, McQueen’s fashion exemplifies what she terms the aesthetics of “deathliness,” where spectacle, trauma, and decay operate as central visual strategies. His work aligns with a wider movement in late 20th-century fashion that engages with the uncanny, the morbid, and the grotesque as ways of disturbing conventional beauty. Nevertheless, this collection put forward one of his most controversial creations in the history of contemporary fashion. Among the sharply tailored garments and the oversexualized outfits, the designer presented a translucent plastic bodice filled with alive worms, touching the bare breasts of the model. This piece rapidly became the object of hard criticism, because of its disgusting nature and its provocative messages.

The bodice, which is now part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection, encased the worms between the plastic and the skin, creating a revolting image. This creation belongs to the category of clothing that both its subject and its vehicle is disgusting, since the designer used one of the main sources of disgust to communicate a deep, disgusting truth about life. The material that the corset is made of can be considered disgusting since it includes alive worms crawling on the model’s skin. According to Kolnai (1929), lower animals such as insects tend to arouse disgust due to their appearance, behavior and association with filth or decay. Worms belong to the first categories of the elicitors of disgust because of their association with decay, rotting as well as their associations with death and excessive fertility. For McQueen the symbolism of worms on the naked flesh was a means to communicate his own ideas on death, putrescence and decomposition. The contradic-

tion between the filthiness of the worms and the pale skin intensifies the emotion of disgust; what once seemed pure, now it was infected by decay, and we are the spectators of this process. The contrast between what is visually attractive and the emotional reaction they provoke highlights the tension between the narrow definitions of beauty and the emotions associated with it (Korsmeyer, 2011). The bodice was intended to evoke a sense of alien-like, organic forms, emphasizing McQueen's fascination with the body, the grotesque, and the natural world. It also plays with ideas of sexuality, fragility, and strength, with the body both concealed and exposed at the same time. The role of repulsion is major in the aesthetic admiration of the piece. McQueen deliberately incorporated disturbing elements into his work to challenge the viewer's conceptions of beauty and femininity.

Carroll and Contesi emphasize on the dichotomy between *confrontation* and *representation*, a distinction formerly introduced by Derek Matravers (2014), explaining that in art the materials are not always made of disgusting substance, but their references are strong enough to provoke disgust. In particular, representation refers to fictionally disgusting cases, whose object (fictional or not) is distant enough, so the audience is not directly affected by disgust but the representation of it. On the other hand, confrontation places the audience in a disarming position; the materials are not only disgusting but also real (non-fictional). McQueen's worm bodice is at first glance a case of confrontation. The designer did not only use real worms touching the model's torso, but at the same time he created a transparent piece of clothing, wanting the audience to be fully aware of this disgusting creation's bizarre materials. Nevertheless, the audience could not actually touch or feel the worms. What is important to highlight here is the role of the transparent corset, which "locked" the worms between the plastic and the body, and at the same time it kept them in a safe distance from the audience. Considering that Contesi states that "disgust is best understood ideationally, rather than sensorily," it seems that even the idea of the worm's touch is enough to elicit disgust. Nevertheless, this is not the same as someone having the worms on oneself, exactly like the model had. A fair answer to the question of the representation/confrontation dichotomy could be that McQueen's worm bodice is a case of disgusting representation for the audience, but it would be considered a case of confronta-

tion for the model, who wore it. In both cases, McQueen successfully challenged the traditional fashion sensibilities, by combining art, nature and the human body and creating an emblematic and unsettling piece.

CLOTHING WHOSE SUBJECT IS NOT DISGUSTING AND WHOSE VEHICLES ARE

In 2018, Alessandro Michele, the former creative director of Gucci, presented his Fall-Winter collection in Milan. The models walked the runway carrying with them duplicates of their own decapitated domes. The inspiration behind the collection was said to be cyborgs and post-human aesthetics. Matters of identity were central to this collection, with Michele highlighting that "a figure that can overcome the dualism and dichotomy of identity." The hyper realistic props created an eerie atmosphere, eliciting disgust to the shocked audience. They were made from silicone and featured incredibly detailed, almost unsettling features, including realistic hair, eyes, and skin textures. They were intended to create an almost alien or unnatural sense of disconnection between the model's body and their face. Alessandro Michele explained that the head replicas were an exploration of identity, transformation, and the loss of self, reflecting his interest in selfhood and the idea of masking or altering one's appearance. The use of prosthetic heads mirrored themes of humanity vs. artificiality and explored the idea of the mask as a way to both conceal and reveal.

Alessandro Michele's bodiless heads were a very controversial moment of contemporary fashion history. Blending art, surrealism and fashion, the director created a very unsettling environment, where disgust plays the most important role in the communication of his vision. The means that he chose were grotesque, balancing between horror and fascination. Carroll and Contesi underline that "the rhetoric of disgust is mobilized to figuratively characterize the content of the artwork." In Gucci's case, the use of repulsive imagery as a comment on matters of identity and body image is interpreted as Michele's critique on the commodification of identity in fashion suggesting that the "head" — which often symbolizes the mind or spirit — can be treated as a decorative object, further blurring the lines between authenticity and artifice (Bourdieu, 1984). The disgust evoked by the disruption of the normal

expectations of the body aimed to confront the dehumanization of the human form. At the same time, a disembodied head can be interpreted as a transgressive object that breaks social and biological norms, eliciting disgust because it is a reminder of mortality and the fragility of the human body (Korsmeyer, 2011). In this sense, disgust can be seen as a reaction to the violation of the integrity of the human body, which is often idealized and normalized in fashion.

Despite the fact that the Gucci case is taxonomized as a case of non-disgusting subject/disgusting vehicle, it is interesting to think about the negative implications of the heads' symbolism and how their meaning is potentially disgusting too. The use of a severed head as an accessory reflects a deeper critique of commodification in fashion. At the same time, disgust is one of the most powerful ways to challenge cultural assumptions about beauty, taste, and the body. The disembodied head challenges the idea that the human form should be whole and integrated, which evokes a sense of discomfort and revulsion. This emotional response can provoke critical thought about societal norms and the nature of fashion itself. Therefore, the visceral reaction could not only be directed to the image of the heads, but also to the dehumanization and objectification of the individual, when human dignity and identity are violated and the body is reduced to an object for consumption.

The same question applies to the following example, which phenomenally belongs to the same category. Undoubtedly, one of the most disturbing moments of fashion has been Lady Gaga's meat dress appearance in the MTV Awards in 2010. The singer appeared to the nomination event dressed in real pieces of meat from head to toes; her headpiece, her dress and purse as well as her shoes were all made of raw beef, veal and pork. The outfit was designed by artist Frank Fernandez and was constructed in a corset-like frame and intended to look like a high-fashion gown. The choice of the material had as an ultimate aim to shock the audience and to make a strong political statement. According to fashion theorist Francesca Granata "it is the ultimate abjection," since what shocked people the most was the combination of raw meat on bare skin. She also argues that "it troubles the inside versus outside of the body, literally having flesh on the outside of the body. It reminds people of their own mortality. I don't think

any of her other looks were so explicitly disturbing." Carroll and Roversi also mention that the pictures that remind us of the disgusting nature of death function as memento mori. The higher purpose of the outfit was to communicate a message about the US military's policy "Don't ask, don't tell," which prevented service people from disclosing their sexual identity (source: BBC), and the disgusting creation played an important role for the symbolic representation of the freedom of expression.

The disgust evoked by losing the boundary between the inside and the outside is also mentioned by Julia Kristeva (1982) in her work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Kristeva's theory of *abjection* focuses on the ways in which certain things are expelled from the body (e.g., bodily fluids, excrement, corpses) and how these things evoke feelings of disgust and horror. For Kristeva, the experience of disgust is tied to the breakdown of boundaries between the self and the other, the inside and the outside, and it plays a crucial role in the formation of identity and social order. In the meat dress' case, the meat and, by association, its decomposition signifies also the objectification and the need to claim our rights "For me this evening it's [saying], 'If we don't stand up for what we believe in, if we don't fight for our rights, pretty soon we're going to have as much rights as the meat on our bones'" (source: BBC). The lost boundary between inside and outside, which evokes disgust, is similar to the lost boundary between what we are and what we are obliged to show, in cases such as the military service. The symbolism of the meat dress can also be read through Bataille's lens of sacrificial expenditure, where the rawness of flesh—devoid of function and displayed publicly—becomes a site of erotic horror. Bataille identifies the corpse, the wound, and the abject as liminal states—neither life nor death, self nor other. Gaga's meat dress operates as a Bataille—an object par excellence: it externalizes the internal, eroticizes decay, and stages a public offering of the body as a sacrifice that resists commodification while also exploiting it. It's not merely political—it is ritualistic. The meat dress is disgusting because they needed to show their intense remonstrance against the irrational policies of the army. But, the policy itself, which required from the soldiers not to talk about their sexual preferences, could be also considered as morally disgusting since they removed their right to express themselves freely. Carroll and Contesi explain that "this conjunction

of content that is not literally, physically disgusting with a vehicle that is literally, physically disgusting provides a very serviceable strategy for socially critical art.” This resonates with Martha Nussbaum’s (2004) argument that disgust is often misused in legal and political discourse to marginalize certain identities. She critiques the role of disgust in lawmaking, especially when it is used to justify the suppression of individual rights, suggesting that such uses of disgust reflect fear rather than reason.

CLOTHING WHOSE SUBJECT IS DISGUSTING AND WHOSE VEHICLES ARE NOT

In 1996, Alexander McQueen presented his collection *Highland Rape*, one of the most iconic, controversial, and talked-about collections in the history of fashion. The collection was titled “*Highland Rape*,” a provocative reference to Scotland’s historical and cultural trauma (Bolton, 2011). The title, which was deliberately shocking, was intended to evoke the violent history of the British treatment of Scotland, particularly focusing on the 18th-century English invasion and the aftermath of the Highland Clearances, a period of intense violence and displacement. *Highland Rape* directly referenced the trauma and violent oppression suffered by the Scottish Highlands during and after the English occupation. McQueen used this as a metaphor for the broader themes of victimhood, violence, and the expression of power and vulnerability in fashion. In *Eroticism* (1986), Bataille asserts that eroticism is intimately connected with violence, taboo, and the breakdown of boundaries—particularly the boundary between subject and object. The *Highland Rape* collection, while not erotic in a conventional sense, draws from this idea of transgressive exposure—where violence is aestheticized not to titillate but to shock, to rupture social norms, and to evoke reflection. The beautiful dresses become sites of moral and bodily degradation, aligning with Bataille’s notion that true beauty often lies adjacent to horror. The collection sparked a massive controversy due to its raw and violent imagery. The press and public were polarized, with some praising McQueen for his boldness and others accusing him of glorifying abuse. The combination of the collection’s name and the designs that featured women in distressed states, including the appearance of rips in their clothing and makeup that resembled bloodstains,

was viewed as either art or exploitation, depending on perspective.

McQueen presented his models semi-naked walking on a catwalk strewn with heather and bracken, the clothes seemed destroyed. According to Andrew Bolton (2011), “the torn and far-from-finem lace”, bought for a very low price, the damaged tartans and the uncensored exposure of the female body made the collection so scandalous. The dresses seemed decayed, ripped, functioning as a connotation of the sexual abuse. In this case, disgust is evoked by the meaning of the dress and not the material of it. The deconstructed lace is symbolic to the loathsome act of rape. In the case of Gaga’s meat dress, the viscerally disgusting imagery signifies the violence of a non-physically disgusting practice, while in the case of *Highland Rape* collection, the act is both physically and morally disgusting, but it is represented in an almost aesthetically pleasing way. There are two crucial matters occurred in this example: first, the fact that rape – even in a symbolic content – is represented by aesthetically pleasing means and secondly, the fact that wording – in this case the title of the collection - is so powerful that can define the whole collection as (morally) disgusting. In the first case, the use of an avant garde fashion collection to represent the act of rape (in literal or metaphorical level) could be interpreted as a subtle critique to the romantization or the idealization of morally disgusting acts. In addition, the aesthetic discomfort created by the tension between the vehicle (which may be aesthetically pleasing or emotionally comforting) and the morally disgusting content is central to the experience. In the second case, the power of the word “rape” bores into the collection, charging the collection with a deeply disturbing and disgusting meaning, which also affects the appreciation of the designer’s aesthetics and craftsmanship.

In conclusion, the incorporation of disgust into contemporary fashion challenges traditional perceptions of beauty and aesthetics by exploring negative emotions as a means of conveying complex sociopolitical and philosophical messages. As this paper has demonstrated, disgust in fashion operates in various forms, whether through the choice of materials, such as raw meat or bodily fluids, or through symbolic representations of violence and decay. Drawing on the taxonomic framework proposed by Noel Carroll and Filippo Contesi, we have seen that disgust can manifest in fashion both

literally, through the use of repulsive materials, and figuratively, through the representation of morally or culturally disturbing themes. Designers like Alexander McQueen and Alessandro Michele use these unsettling elements to provoke thought and engage audiences in a dialogue about identity, power, and societal norms.

At the heart of this phenomenon is the paradox of aesthetic disgust, as described by theorists such as Carolyn Korsmeyer and Julia Kristeva. Disgust, while inherently unpleasant, is often accompanied by a cognitive pleasure derived from its ability to push boundaries, defy conventional standards of beauty, and challenge our discomfort with the body and its functions. This interplay between revulsion and fascination allows fashion to transcend its role as mere adornment, transforming it into a medium for deeper cultural critique.

In many ways, contemporary fashion's embrace of disgust reflects a broader shift in cultural values, where the idealization of beauty is being replaced by a more inclusive and complex exploration of human experience. As fashion continues to evolve, the tension between the grotesque and the beautiful remains a powerful tool for designers to question, subvert, and ultimately redefine the limits of aesthetics in our time. Whether through McQueen's decayed lace or Lady Gaga's meat dress, the use of disgust in fashion invites us to reconsider the boundaries of art, morality, and taste, ultimately offering a new way to understand the transformative potential of fashion as both a reflective and provocative art form.

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