

Robert R. Clewis on Serena Feloj's "Estetica del disgusto"

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SERENA FELOJ | Estetica del disgusto. Mendelssohn, Kant e i limiti della rappresentazione | Carocci 2017

By Robert R. Clewis

Contemporary aesthetics continues to show great interest in negative aesthetic experiences, especially ugliness and disgust, with numerous books and articles recently appearing on both topics. While *The Aesthetics of Disgust: Mendelssohn, Kant, and the Limits of Representation* is best characterised as a study of the history of (eighteenth-century) philosophy, it is also informed by the contemporary debates in aesthetics and empirical psychology.

It is a stimulating study of how disgust (*Ekel*) has been developed in the work of Mendelssohn, Kant, and contemporary researchers. Feloj, who recently translated Winfried Menninghaus's impressive study *Ekel* (1999), not only investigates the writings of Mendelssohn and Kant, but also examines recent work on disgust by psychologists (Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, Clark McCauley) and phenomenologists (Aurel Kolnai) as well as Martha Nussbaum and Jacques Derrida. The book is divided into equal parts on Mendelssohn (pp. 21–81) and Kant (pp. 83–144), followed by a shorter, third part on contemporary philosophy and empirical research (pp. 145–67).

Even after Menninghaus's *Ekel*, the topic of disgust is still relatively overlooked in the study of eighteenth-century German philosophy, especially by Kant scholars, who have tended to analyse ugliness more than disgust. *The Aesthetics of Disgust* helps to fill this gap, and one learns many things along the way. For instance, the book brings to light passages such as Kant's claim that the repetition of even funny jokes can elicit disgust due to its monotony (p. 115; see Anth, AA 7:157). Indeed, the book profits from an admirable familiarity with Kant's minor writings, notes, and lectures as well as a broad command of the relevant literature, both philosophical and empirical.

Disgust is not to be confused with the ugly (*il brutto, la bruttezza, das Hässliche*) (p. 63) or with (moral) repugnance (*ripugnanza, Abscheu*) (pp. 58, 117, 69n.76). Disgust is likewise different from fear and hatred. Feloj criticises authors such as Kolnai (p. 152), Rozin (et al.), and Nussbaum (p. 158) who do not recognise a distinction between physical and moral disgust.

Many of the topics will be familiar to Kant scholars: symbolisation, adherent beauty, fine art as beautiful representation of nature, Kant's rejection of perfectionism. The author discusses the relation between anthropology and ethics (p. 119), favouring Robert

Louden's (p. 123) view that anthropology is the 'second part of morals' (i.e. the empirical counterpart to pure moral philosophy). She prefers this view, also supported by Werner Stark, to positions such as Reinhard Brandt's, which draw a more fixed line between transcendental-critical philosophy and (empirical) anthropology.

Although the book examines figures such as Burke, Wolff, Baumgarten, Lessing, Sulzer, Schiller, and above all Mendelssohn and Kant, it is not "mere" philosophical history (p. 20). Rather, one of Feloj's basic claims is the following: "The insuperability, unrepresentability, educability, and morality of disgust are all elements that can be individuated in the writings of Mendelssohn and Kant on disgust" (p. 165). In other words, she examines metaphysical-epistemological issues concerning the unrepresentability of disgust, and she also looks at ethical-social issues concerning the proper use of disgust in society. Below, I will summarise both of these elements (unrepresentability and aesthetic-moral education), and then offer thoughts on unrepresentability.

Disgust's unrepresentability

One of the central claims of the book is that disgust is unrepresentable. The relevant notion of representation derives from Baumgarten, who takes up the term from Leibniz and Wolff, and in turn is appropriated by Mendelssohn and Kant. "The path I have here followed takes its departure from Mendelssohn's re-reading of Baumgarten's concept of perfection and the redefinition of the *Vorstellungskraft*" (p. 79). In defining the limits of the newly recognised aesthetic discipline, disgust stays on the outside of these limits, as it cannot find a place in aesthetics' new thematisation of the *vis repraesentativa* (p. 79).

According to Kant, too, disgust is excluded from aesthetics (p. 91). Kant suggests that disgust reveals the limits of aesthetics or artistic representation (p. 93). A key passage appears in §48:

Beautiful art displays its excellence precisely by describing beautifully things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing. The furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like can, as harmful things, be very beautifully described, indeed even represented in painting; only one kind of ugliness cannot be represented in a way adequate to nature without destroying all aesthetic satisfaction, hence beauty in art, namely, that which arouses **loathing** [*Ekel*]. For since in this strange sensation, resting on sheer imagination, the object is represented as if it were imposing the enjoyment which we are nevertheless forcibly resisting, the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation itself from the nature of the object itself, and it then becomes impossible for the former to be taken as beautiful. (KU, AA 5:312)

That one finds key claims about 'representation' in a book on 'aesthetics' casts light on how the discipline was carried out by the Baumgartenian tradition in the middle of the eighteenth century. Feloj places Kant in that tradition, emphasising that for Kant art is a mode of cognition (*Erkenntnisart*) (p. 92; KU, AA 5:305). This reading is a welcome counterbalance to interpretations of Kant's aesthetics (like those of Hannah Ginsborg and Frederick Beiser) that downplay Kant's intellectualist-rationalist heritage or that

emphasise his break from it.

Aesthetic-moral education

Feelings of disgust are modified by and through culture and developed through education (p. 159). For instance, whereas ancient Roman spectators may have delighted in watching gladiatorial combat, to “an educated taste” the latter can only elicit disgust (p. 73n.). But disgust is not just the *result* of education and civilisation; it can also be *used* in moral education, Feloj claims.

Naturally, it lies beyond the scope of Feloj’s book to clarify the exact nature of such education, civilisation, and moralisation. Yet presumably her view follows Kantian lines: what it is permissible to take aesthetic delight in is (or *ought* to be) constrained by moral limits. “If aesthetic disgust indicates the limits of artistic representation, moral disgust is instead part of the representation of the law of reason” (p. 142). *Aesthetic* disgust would be a servant of morality in applying the law of reason, even as we interact with aesthetic and artistic objects. *Moral* disgust would function as a kind of (practical) antenna, allowing us to be repulsed by moral wrongs. Aesthetic feelings of disgust could thereby (indirectly) help us actualise the moral law in the empirical world, and, to put it in more systematic Kantian terms, thereby contribute to our making a transition from nature to freedom (KU, AA 5:176). Aesthetic and moral disgust would not ground the moral law, but just be useful in supporting it.

All this may sound a bit Schillerian. Indeed, inspired by Friedrich Schiller (pp. 166, 147–9) Feloj applies some of Kant’s moral-political ideas and recommends a kind of aesthetic-moral education via disgust. Chapter 2, for instance, is called “Educating to Disgust: Kant and the Aesthetics of Morals”. Here Feloj discusses Nussbaum, who would appear to be opposed to such a Kantian-Schillerian project. Nussbaum criticises disgust for its liability to be used as a tool to oppress racial, religious, and sexual minorities. Feloj recognises such risks and acknowledges potential criticisms of theorists who propose to use disgust as an instrument of morality (as she does) (p. 158). She goes on to sketch a programme nonetheless.

Since Feloj recommends using disgust in a kind of aesthetic-moral education, one might expect Feloj to claim that disgust has a kind of normativity or that it is normative. She does not. She claims disgust works in a “non-normative” manner for the education of humanity (p. 128). But the claim that disgust is non-normative, it turns out, only means that one does not decide beforehand what is disgusting and what not. By saying she uses disgust in a normatively neutral way (p. 162), she means that it is not defined by the breaking of a *particular* norm. It is not possible to indicate, in a normative way, what we should find disgusting (p. 166).

Likewise, Feloj suggests that we should not tell artists what to represent in their works. It is not advisable to decide for artists what they should or should not represent (p. 166). This latter point seems plausible enough.

Still, it was a bit surprising to read that a Kantian aesthetic feeling was non-normative. I would have expected disgust to be normative in the sense that others share our feelings of disgust, even if not in the same way people are expected to agree about unbiased judgements of beauty or sublimity.

Perhaps she claims disgust is non-normative because she does not consider it to be a pure negative aesthetic judgement. (She denies that there are pure negative aesthetic judgements, taking a position in a wider debate that usually concerns the ugly.) Perhaps she sees disgust as non-normative because disgust is more of a contingent feeling or sensation than a shared judgement, and shared judgements are normative in a way contingent sensations are not. Finally, she may also make this move in order to avoid Nussbaum-inspired criticisms of disgust. If disgust is non-normative in that it does not determine what we should find disgusting, it cannot be used to exclude this or that group.

Thoughts on Disgust's Unrepresentability

The claim that disgust is excluded from aesthetics, or is unrepresentable, is found throughout the book (e.g. pp. 17, 121). The claim is so important, it is alluded to in the title (*i limiti della rappresentazione*). The thesis does not apply to Kant alone. For Mendelssohn, too, "there can certainly be a perception of disgust, but one cannot give it a representation" (p. 39).

The unrepresentability claim seems to follow from the definition of disgust: as soon as you represent disgust, it is no longer disgust. To overcome disgust would mean to assimilate it. But if that were possible, it would not really be disgust, which by definition cannot find any form of inclusion (p. 157). If disgust were represented, "it would be immediately annulled" (p. 156).

Feljo's unrepresentability thesis is meant in a metaphysical sense—showing what the possibilities and limits of the faculty of the subject are—rather than a normative, ethical one in which one indicates what an artist should or should not reproduce in their art (p. 79).

(1) Disgust vs. the disgusting

But, one might think, surely the disgusting can be represented. So perhaps it would be useful to distinguish more clearly between disgust and the disgusting. One intuitive way of understanding this distinction is to say that disgust is the (nauseating) feeling or sensation, and the disgusting is the object that elicits that response. Feljo seems to grant that the disgusting can be represented in general and (specifically) depicted in art, but denies this of disgust (following passages such as KU, AA 5:312).

It would appear that art poses a kind of dilemma. If the artwork very closely imitates or reproduces (disgusting) nature, it may elicit disgust, but would not be *artistic* enough. An example of this would be an artist's canned bodily waste: it is repugnant, but not sufficiently artistic. But if a work is artistic (in the eighteenth-century sense), then it cannot evoke disgust. So, disgust cannot be represented in (eighteenth-century) art.—

But note that parenthetical qualifications about the 'eighteenth century' were needed for this argument. To *represent* disgust here means to beautify it and thereby make disgust acceptable or palatable, because (on the eighteenth-century beaux-arts view Kant accepts) artistic representation must be beautiful.

But this is exactly what is questioned by some contemporary artworks. They blur the line between 'represented disgust' and the 'in fact disgusting'. Artworks such as Piero Manzoni's 'Artist's Shit' place excrement or bodily waste in a container. (While Manzoni's cans are closed, we can easily imagine an artist bringing in open cans of shit, vomit, or bodily fluids.) Would freshly made, open jars of waste be *representations* of disgust, or just disgusting? If the former, that would appear to be a problem for her thesis (unless qualified by eighteenth-century views of art). And do such artworks *represent* disgust, or just evoke it?

If contemporary audiences are less willing to buy tickets to go to (some) modern art shows because they find them boring or even nauseating (and I would hypothesise that they *are* less willing), or conservative politicians are apt to criticise works such as piss jars and shit cans, perhaps it is precisely because such artworks come too close to eliciting *real* disgust, nausea, or boredom.

(Kant and Mendelssohn could never have thought of these kinds of cases, and Feloj understandably does not explore them. But it seems reasonable to ask how these ideas could be applied today. To her credit, Feloj examines contemporary work in the philosophy and psychology of disgust. So recent examples and variations on them seem to be fair game, too.)

This raises questions about what it means to say that a thing/event/feeling cannot be represented. In general, it is problematic, on pain of performative contradiction, for a theory of *x* to say that *x* cannot be represented (at the very least, a theory is a kind of representation). And it is surely difficult to have a theory about something that cannot be represented. So perhaps the unrepresentability thesis is meant to be restricted to art.

(2) Unrepresentability in art

Accordingly, I read her unrepresentability thesis as being about *artistic* representation. She holds that disgust is excluded from art. She follows not just Kant here but Derrida too: disgust constitutes art's limits and at the same time gives art its form (p. 156). She approvingly quotes Derrida's view that disgust cannot be digested, represented, articulated (p. 156). Disgust marks the boundaries of the aesthetic. Like a border or frame, disgust defines the form and contours of aesthetics. (It would have been useful if Feloj had clarified her conception of the *aesthetic*. For Kant, we can have aesthetic experiences of nature; the aesthetic is not the same as the *artistic*. But she tends to write as if the aesthetic had the same extension as the artistic; such a position is widely disputed. While it would have been beyond the scope of her book to give a full account of the aesthetic-artistic relation, more consideration may have preemptively addressed some of the points raised here.)

In short, the distinction between representation tout court and representation in art could have been made more clearly (at least in the opinion of this reader). To her credit, there are occasional glimpses of the distinction. For instance, her commentary on Mendelssohn (p. 36) recognises both representation as such and representation in art. “The disgusting [*il disgustoso*] does not resist just *artistic* illusion [...]. It also resists the *representative* process [i.e. representation tout court]” (p. 36, italics added).

Assuming that one accepts a disgust/disgusting distinction, it may be useful to distinguish among the following: representing disgusting things (e.g. describing or painting vomit), representing-and-eliciting disgust (artistically showcasing or displaying real vomit), and *eliciting* feelings of disgust (as when one sees and smells real vomit).

(3) Absolute displeasure?

Finally, I sometimes had a peculiar feeling reading a book about something that was defined as being unrepresentable. Feloj claims that disgust resists the representative process (p. 36), and then quotes Mendelssohn:

It is not possible to have a representation that elicits disgust because no representation can be totally unpleasant: insofar as it is a determination of the soul, it will always also have a pleasing effect on the subject. (p. 36)

In commenting on Derrida, Feloj likewise characterises disgust as “absolute displeasure” (p. 157) and affirms this view when concluding (p. 166). If disgust is *absolute* displeasure, it would seem that there cannot be any disgust. And disgust’s non-existence would seem to pose trouble for anyone aiming to write or read about it.

Perhaps, to calm such worries, one could appeal to some of the distinctions introduced above (e.g. representability tout court vs. representability in art; represent vs. elicit, etc.).

Conclusion

In sum, Feloj’s carefully argued book shows how Kant appropriates Mendelssohn’s work on disgust. The relation between the aesthetics of Mendelssohn and that of Kant has been fairly well covered in the non-anglophone literature. But this relation has received less attention in anglophone scholarship, even if it was reevaluated by John Zammito and Paul Guyer in the early 1990s, as Feloj observes (p. 83). Still, that work appeared almost three decades ago. Disgust deserves more attention. So does Mendelssohn’s aesthetic theory and its importance for Kant. Feloj’s book makes a contribution to both of these.

Overall, *Estetica del disgusto* is an impressive book. Mendelssohn’s aesthetics (and its relation to Kant) and the concept of disgust (and its relations to ugliness and moral repugnance) deserve more emphasis in studies of modern German philosophy. If the future holds more discussions on these topics, Feloj’s book will prove to be an important resource.

References:

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