

Can We Get Pleasure from Disgusting Things?

Filippo Contesi

Originally published in: *Aeon Ideas*, 2015.

Pimple-popping, zit-zapping, cyst-squeezing videos are all the rage on the Internet. Many of them have hundreds of thousands, often millions of visualizations. Much as for porn, entire websites are available that collect such disgusting videos and even pay users for submitting their own videos. If one has to believe the accounts given by the people who regularly watch these videos, two things seem clear. First, they like doing so. In other words, they get some kind of pleasure—some say they are “soothing”, or “satisfying”—from watching in close detail happenings that many others would find completely repelling. Secondly, such pimple-popping aficionados agree with the rest of us that the videos they like so much are disgusting, even “sickening”. In other words, it is not that they get pleasure from the videos in question because they are not disgusted by the activities that the videos document. On the contrary, they like what they themselves find disgusting.

I myself am not an avid consumer of such videos, and in fact I will avoid watching them (almost) whenever I can. But I also take the pimple-popping aficionados’ accounts at face value. I believe them when they say that something disgusting is pleasurable for them. Why shouldn’t I? After all I, too, have experienced similar (seemingly) paradoxical pleasures. *The Dead Lovers* (ca 1470), one half of a medieval *memento mori* painting, is a case in point. I find it an aesthetically intriguing, even beautiful, depiction of something fantastic and otherworldly. But there is no denying that the flesh in decomposition of the two naked lovers, and the frogs and snakes that are wrapped around, and through, them, cause me a (mild) pang of disgust.

Consider also horror cinema and literature, in all its more or less gruesome variants. It is a favourite of many teenagers and adults. In fact, such disgusting pleasures are not only confined to art. Although it may be more difficult to talk as openly about them, other pleasures come to mind. Some of these are probably more sexual than aesthetic in nature: pornographic material and activities involving golden showers, used-underwear fetishes, and so on. Other pleasures are culinary: the gourmet pleasures of the *haut-goût*, decaying meat, and smelly cheeses. Others still are perhaps even more unmentionable, like the pleasure of smelling our own fingertips after ear fingering.

In a sense, in fact, that the disgusting can be pleasurable should not be so surprising. Disgust is a typically unpleasant emotion, but so are fear, anger, and sadness. Yet these emotions are often at the root of many of our pleasures, from rollercoaster thrills to tearjerker films. However, there seem to be differences between disgust and those other emotions. As prominent German-speaking eighteenth-century authors such as Moses Mendelssohn noticed, other unpleasant emotions have pleasurable components to them. Fear has the adrenaline rush; anger feels good when it is vented; and sadness makes you slow down or take repose, which can be soothing and pleasurable. Disgust is different, says Mendelssohn, as it “does not recognize any perceptible admixture of pleasure” (“82nd Letter Regarding Literature”, 1760). Another reason to be puzzled by the pleasure of the disgusting is that disgust seems to be an especially sensorial affect. Contrary to fear, anger or sadness, something disgusting disgusts in virtue of the way it looks, smells or feels (or so it seems anyway). As a consequence, its unpleasantness appears as more unreflective and visceral than the unpleasantness associated with fear, anger or sadness. As such, disgust may strike one as an unmediated, unalloyed kind of unpleasantness, and one that is completely incompatible with pleasure.

Yet pleasure is compatible with disgust: the kind of evidence I discussed at the beginning is too clear and widespread to be denied or defused. Rather than question *whether* we can get pleasure from what is disgusting, it is more interesting to ask *why* or *how* we do. To put it another way, what is it that we find pleasurable when we get pleasure from disgusting things? If pimple-popping videos lovers find their watching habits soothing or satisfying, what is it that they find soothing and satisfying in them? Furthermore, how is their soothing and satisfaction compatible with their disgust? Do they efface their disgust, or make it pleasurable, or do they simply outweigh it? The answers to these kinds of questions may well of course be different, depending on the activity investigated, and even perhaps vary from person to person. Nonetheless, an investigation of such questions is worth pursuing.