

CAN DANCE BE DISGUSTING OR IS IT FOREVER DOOMED TO AESTHETICISM?

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As Terence Deacon writes in *The Symbolic Species*, simple questions often touch upon fundamental issues, opening up a Pandora's box "that unleashes troubling doubts about many other questions that once seemed all but settled".¹ Why aren't there any simple languages? Deacon realized he didn't really have an answer when a child in his son's elementary school class asked him this seemingly innocent question. In his efforts to answer it Deacon was forced to revisit questions that were once thought to have been resolved and to reexamine answers that turned out to be less informative and definitive than they had long appeared.

Some years ago I wondered whether dance could be ugly or disgusting. The smell of vomit is enough to make most people's stomach turn. Many people can't fathom eating worms, insects or slimy substances of unknown origin and the sight of severed bodies and festering wounds fills many people with disgust, effects exploited in almost any horror movie. Those who have seen the movie will recall with horror the famous banquet scene from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) or the scene in *Requiem for a Dream* (2001) when Harry and Tyrone are driving to Tennessee and Harry inserts a needle into his severely infected arm. But what about dance? More than once I have racked my brain if I could recall a dance performance that revolted me as much as say, the smell of vomit, or made me want to look away, as some film scenes do. I have seen many avant-garde dance and theatre performances, but no performance has ever made me feel physically sick. I should hasten to add that I am probably not be a typical observer though. Because of the frequent exposure to dance and art I may have become a little blasé and of course my own experience is necessarily bound both by time and geography. Any negative answer that I give now says nothing about the possibility of future performances. For all that I know disgusting dance performances could be the new new thing. But given the fact that even for dance insiders naming disgusting dance performances or dance performances that some people find or once found disgusting is not as straightforward as naming disgusting scenes in horror movies², the question whether dance

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¹ Deacon, T. (1998), *The Symbolic Species. The co-evolution of language and the human brain*. Penguin Books, p. 12.

² Another one of my favourite examples is the sushi bar scene in *Oldboy* (2003) by South-Korean director Chan-wook Park. Please note that movie scenes mentioned here may be found on YouTube.

can be disgusting seems justified. The obvious subsequent question is why this is so. Why aren't there any or few disgusting dance performances? As I thought about this question I also wondered why there aren't any buildings or songs that make me laugh. As a choreographer I also asked myself what I myself would do to disgust the audience.

First I should note that by "dance" and "dance performance" I refer to dancing *sec* as a pure sequence of movements performed by one or several persons. It would be easy to revolt the audience by having someone throw up on stage or engage in other activities commonly perceived as disgusting, as in the tradition of grand guignol and television shows such as *Jackass*.³ But that, to me, would not count as dance, but as a form of theatre or performance art. This is not to disqualify any hybrid forms of theatre or the performing arts, but to make the question I am asking more specific.

Along with fear and anger, disgust ranks as one of the strongest felt emotions, stronger than guilt or jealousy and perhaps even stronger than joy and happiness. This need not be surprising since all three of these emotions serve to protect the body or the self from harm. Anger can be seen as a response to threats to one's rights or one's property, which can be challenged. Fear can be defined as a response to actual or perceived threats to the body, the self or one's property, which cannot be challenged and to which fleeing is the best response. Disgust can be theorized as a bodily response to a heterogeneous set of threats, which are not easily challenged or avoided and which involves drawing a protective line between the self and the source of the threat.⁴

A survey of things that are generally considered disgusting shows that the domain of the disgusting is structured around a number of qualities. Slithery, slimy, sticky, moist and greasy things are more likely to elicit disgust than objects bearing the opposite qualities.⁵ It is hard to imagine a rock or snow evoking a sense of disgust and unless they smell bad flowers tend to be considered beautiful. Disgust also appears to be associated with food or food related items and waste products. Ask anyone what he or she finds disgusting and chances are that the first things that come to mind include various sorts of food and feces. There is also evidence suggesting that disgust elicits a unique, universally recognized facial expression.⁶ Both aspects are illustrated in the famous scene at the beginning of *Pulp Fiction* (1994) when Vincent asks Jules if he knows what they put on French fries in Holland instead of ketchup. Viewers around the world instantly understand Jules' expression when Vincent gives him the answer: mayonnaise. "I've seen them do it. They fuckin' drown them in that shit".⁷

³ In *The Crying Body* (2004) by Jan Fabre, the female dancers are peeing on stage, one leg lifted. The piece also contains spitting and simulated masturbation. *Giulio Cesare* (1997) by Romeo Castellucci features (partially) nude actors with bodies mutilated by cancer or other illnesses. In her performances Marina Abramovic has explored the physical boundaries of her body sometimes inflicting physical harm on her own body.

⁴ Haidt, J., Rozin, P., McCauley, C. and Imada S. (1997), Body, Psyche, and Culture: The Relationship Between Disgust and Morality. *Psychology and Developing Societies* 9, pp. 107-131.

⁵ Miller, W.I. (1997), *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, chapter 3.

⁶ Ekman, P. (1999), Facial expressions, in: Dalglish, T. and Power, M., *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*, New York: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

⁷ The reason is that in Holland mayonnaise is salted whereas in the U.S. it isn't. The reader with a strong stomach may be interested to know that in Holland some people also put ketchup, curry, peanut sauce, onions and applesauce on French fries. Together, in one serving.

As the above example shows, the picture is complicated by the fact that in some cultures people enjoy food that in other cultures is considered disgusting. Dog meat, snails, worms, beef, pork, rats, tripe, eggs that have been preserved for weeks or months in a mixture of clay and salt, the list goes on and on. The fact that there is no absolute measure of disgust does not mean that the emotion as such isn't universal. It just means that disgust elicitors are best thought of in terms of a Wittgenstein-ian family resemblance structure.⁸ All members are related, but they may not share a single defining trait.

In one of the most cited papers on disgust, Paul Rozin and April Fallon define disgust as: "Revulsion at the prospect of (oral) incorporation of an offensive object. The offensive objects are contaminants; that is, if they even briefly contact an acceptable food, they tend to render that food unacceptable".⁹ Thus, according to Rozin and Fallon, disgust is not primarily a matter of distaste. Grilled dog meat and cat food may taste quite good in a blind test, until it is revealed what one has just consumed. This may induce an instant feeling of disgust and the desire to throw up, to rid oneself of the offending food. Conversely food that tastes bad need not be contaminating. Radish, endive, brussel sprouts and onions are supposedly very healthy, but they rarely top people's favourite food list and children tend to utterly dislike them. Disgust also appears to center on singular items. There is no overall threshold of disgust. Porn actors who regularly engage in sexual activities that other people may find disgusting (but perhaps secretly arousing), may still be disgusted when finding a hair in their rice bowl or by the idea of sharing the toothbrush of the actor they just had oral sex with. The same applies to butchers, surgeons and aid workers, who in their professional life override their disgust response, but privately still experience it.

Rozin and Fallon distinguish between core disgust, which focuses on food and food contaminants, and elaborated disgust, which evolves around sexual practices, poor hygiene, violations of the body and moral violations. Core disgust is a visceral response, ejecting food because it looks, tastes or smells bad or because its origins are contaminated. Elaborated disgust is a form of indignation in response to behaviour we judge wrong, inappropriate or offensive. In the words of Rozin and his co-workers, disgust has thus expanded from being a guardian of the mouth to a guardian of the 'temple' of the body and of human dignity in the social order.¹⁰

Disgust is not unique to humans. A food avoidance response has been demonstrated in a range of animals, from slugs to birds and higher mammals.¹¹ Different species may thus share a common neural network of old evolutionary origin associated with the avoidance of food that may be harmful to the body. A key region in this network appears to be the anterior insula. Various neuroimaging studies have shown that in humans the anterior insula is activated when people view disgust-inducing pictures¹², smell an unpleasant odorant¹³ and watch

⁸ Wittgenstein, L. (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell.

⁹ Rozin, P. and Fallon, A.E. (1987), A perspective on disgust, *Psychological Review* 94, 23-41.

¹⁰ Haidt, J., Rozin, P., McCauley, C. and Imada, S. (1997), Body, Psyche, and Culture: The Relationship Between Disgust and Morality. *Psychology and Developing Societies* 9, 107-131.

¹¹ Garcia, J., Quick, D. F., and White, B. (1984), Conditioning disgust and fear from mollusk to monkey, in: Alkon, D. and Farley, J., *Primary neural substrates of learning and behavioral change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 47-61.

¹² Stark, R., Zimmermann, M., Kagerer, S., Schienle, A., Walter, B., Weygandt, M. and Vaitl, D., (2007), Hemodynamic brain correlates of disgust and fear ratings, *Neuroimage* 37 (2), 663-673.

images of people expressing disgust. Activation of the insula has also been found when people view images of social outcasts such as drug addicts and homeless people, thus showing that moral feelings in the cultural domain share the same neural substrate as core disgust.¹⁴ Some neuropsychological studies report that damage to the anterior insula leads to impaired experience of disgust and impaired recognition of the facial expression of disgust in others.¹⁵ A vintage study, which may not pass today's methodological standards, reported that electrical stimulation of the insula in conscious patients elicited unpleasant tastes in the mouth.¹⁶

It should be added that the insula has been implicated in a variety of tasks and behaviours from drug craving to interoception, - that is, perception of the state of the body -, and economic decision-making.¹⁷ One experiment showed significantly heightened activity in the anterior insula in response to unfair offers in a simple game where players have to split a sum of money.¹⁸ As suggested by Paul Rozin and his colleagues, disgust and moral indignation may therefore share the same neural substrate.

Based on these and other findings Judith Toronchuk and George Ellis have proposed that, evolutionary, the mammalian disgust system arose from a primitive distaste response system. In primates this system, at the core of which lies the anterior insula, may have further developed through a direct pathway connecting the cortex and the insula by way of the thalamus.¹⁹ As Stanislas Dehaene has argued, given the available evolutionary time it is impossible that the architecture of the human brain has adapted to novel cultural inventions such as reading and arithmetic. However, according to Dehaene this may not be necessary if such inventions can somehow 'invade' or tap into older brain circuits. But as Dehaene argues, such adaptations thereby inherit the structural constraints of the existing brain circuits.²⁰ Threats to the self and one's cultural dignity may share some traits with threats to the body and may thus activate the same neural circuit. But the characteristics of this system may limit its output in much the same way as core disgust.

Now that we have a better understanding of disgust we can return to our question why there aren't any horror ballets, when the horror movie and horror novel have become genres in themselves. One possible explanation is that it may be or have been believed that dance should be beautiful and joyful. As in the other arts, in the 20th century various choreographers have challenged this notion using a number of artistic strategies. However, the purpose of

¹³ Wicker, B., Keysers, C., Plailly, J., Royet, J.P., Gallese, V. and Rizzolatti, G. (2003), Both of us disgusted in My insula: the common neural basis of seeing and feeling disgust, *Neuron* 40 (3), 655-664.

¹⁴ Harris, L.T. and Fiske, S.T. (2006), Dehumanizing the lowest of the low: neuroimaging responses to extreme out-groups, *Psychological Science* 17 (10), 847-853.

¹⁵ Calder, A.J., Keane, J., Manes, F., Antoun, N. and Young, A.W. (2000), Impaired recognition and experience of disgust following brain injury, *Nature Neuroscience* 3, 1077-1078.

¹⁶ Penfield, W. and Faulk, M.E. (1955), The insula. Further observations of its function, *Brain* 78, 445-470.

¹⁷ For a review: Craig, A.D. (2002), How do you feel? Interoception: the sense of the physiological condition of the body, *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 3, 655-666.

¹⁸ Sanfey, A.G., Rilling, J.K., Aronson, J.A., Nystrom, L.E. and Cohen, J.D. (2003), The neural basis of economic decision-making in the Ultimatum Game, *Science* 300 (5626), 1755-8.

¹⁹ Toronchuk, J.A. and Ellis, G.F.R. (2007), Disgust: Sensory affect or primary emotional system? *Cognition & Emotion* 21 (8), 1799 – 1818.

²⁰ Dehaene, S. and Cohen, L. (2007), Cultural recycling of cortical maps, *Neuron* 56(2), 384-398.

these strategies may have been the expansion of the range of beautiful or otherwise interesting movements beyond the accepted vocabulary at the time, whether by including everyday movements or deconstructing the language of ballet, rather than creating something explicitly distasteful or revolting. Some dance performances caused a scandal at the premiere and may have disgusted part of the audience by transgressing the boundaries of good taste and of what was considered appropriate on stage.²¹ In some Islamic countries some dance performances may still cause a scandal or are banned before they can be performed. But what about the cultural capitals of Europe today? Every year sees the release of at least some films containing scenes that make part of the audience want to look away.²² Again I ask, what about dance?

It may also be that dance, theatre and art in general, by their very nature, risk aestheticization and thereby neutralization, whenever something is incorporated into art or performed on stage in front of an art audience, who know that what they are watching is (only) “art”. The question remains why this doesn’t appear to be the case in horror movies. There is of course something paradoxical about horror movies, which people pay to see in order to look away during the scenes they have come to watch. An analysis of the tension between curiosity and sensation-seeking on the one hand and fear and disgust on the other would require another study though.²³ As Kant wrote of the sublime, the sight of thunderstorms, hurricanes, volcanoes, waterfalls and so on “becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place.”²⁴ The same applies to comfortable cinema and theatre seats.

Perhaps more controversially, there may be a neurological limit to possible experience. The disgust system is selectively activated by only some stimulus categories. Signals associated with the perception of human motion may not activate the brain regions associated with disgust, because of the way human motion is processed in the brain. The same argument may also explain why architecture and music are rarely funny in the sense that people spontaneously burst into laughter when they see a building or hear music. The limit may also be cognitive or conceptual. The disgust system may be activated, but the output signals may not be conceptualized as disgust in relation to the source or object of the emotion.

So can dance be disgusting or is it forever doomed to aestheticism? Ultimately the answer to this question has to come from artists and choreographers. As I have argued elsewhere effectively artists, like scientists, probe the thresholds and limits of the brain’s capacities by varying stimulus intensity, the context in which it occurs, its duration etc.²⁵ So even if the functional organization of the brain puts a limit to possible experience, this limit can be tested.

In 2003 the Scandinavian filmmaker collective Traktor directed a commercial for Siemens in which they envisioned a future in which all people look like replicants, trams resemble inline

²¹ For example, the (first) butoh performance *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colours), by Tatsumi Hijikata is reported to have caused an outrage at its premiere in 1959.

²² I am not talking about horror movies such as the *Saw* cycle, but about ‘arthouse’ films such as *Oldboy* (2003) and *Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days* (2007).

²³ A good starting point might be: Nell, V. (2006), Cruelty’s rewards: The gratifications of perpetrators and spectators. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29, 211-257.

²⁴ Kant, I. (1790), *The Critique of Judgment*, § 28 On Nature as a Might, 261.

²⁵ Hagendoorn, I.G. (2004), Dance, perception and the brain, in: McKechnie, S. and Grove, R., *Thinking in Four Dimensions*, Melbourne University Publishing.

skates and dancing is illegal. When a man starts dancing in the street, bystanders flee in all directions, a young girl who spots the man screams in terror and her mother quickly covers her eyes and calls the police.²⁶ I think we should be glad we live in a society in which dance does not elicit disgust and in which artists are free to go to great lengths to evoke it.

²⁶

The commercial can be viewed at <http://www.traktor.com>.