Research Article

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Experiencing Revulsion: Aesthetic Discomfort and Ordinary Life

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Abstract: Drawing on recent theories and debates concerning the everydayness of non-artistic and even private aesthetic experiences, this article aims at differentiating new ways of dealing with revulsion at the intersection of negative and everyday aesthetics, as another manner of extending or transcending the scope of traditional art-oriented aesthetics. The paradigms that I will trace in the history of negative aesthetics are not mere occurrences of disgust or repulsiveness in art and in everyday life, but ways of addressing the repulsive in relation to the culturally variable scope of art and aesthetics. Besides the classical paradigm that associates repugnant subjects with their pleasure-inducing imitations in art, and the transgressions of modern and contemporary art that increasingly shocked their audience, revulsion can also be regarded as a form of displeasure linked to the quotidian, yet aesthetically relevant forms of life. By virtue of this ordinary nature, which is not unfamiliar to other (non-Western) cultures, revulsion could be placed at the core of everyday aesthetics, since it confirms both the transition from contemplation to action in recent aesthetics, that is, the practical preoccupation with the aesthetic quality of living, and the broader redefinition of aesthetics in terms of sensory reactions.

Keywords: everyday aesthetics, art, negative aesthetics, disgust, ugliness, experience, Japanese, haiku

1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine how recent developments in aesthetics, most notably the aesthetics of everyday life, offer a new, yet problematic way of accounting for the problem of negative aesthetics, in particular that of revulsion or repulsiveness as a form of aesthetic displeasure. In general terms, "negative aesthetics" will signify here the problem of the unpleasant derived from the repertoire of aesthetic categories typically opposed to the beautiful and to the pleasure aroused by beautiful objects, primarily the disgusting and the repugnant, which are among the most visceral and radical negative responses in living human beings. Besides the classical theories from Aristotle to Immanuel Kant and Karl Rosenkranz that I will briefly examine, which have long addressed the issue of revulsion and disgust, recent approaches that seek to extend, reshape, or transcend the scope of traditional or mainstream art-oriented aesthetics offer a relatively novel insight into the aesthetically negative experiences and qualities of everyday objects, interactions, and phenomena.[1] First of all, most of these theories are aimed at overcoming the traditional prevalence of beauty or pleasure that used to equate the aesthetic with an honorific status usually ascribed to the works of art.[2] Second, the repertoire of

1 See for example Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, 138–57; Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 37–8; Saito, "Everyday Aesthetics in the Japanese Tradition," 151–6; Forsey, "The Aesthetic Force of the Unpleasant," 17–22.
2 Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 10; Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 29–30.

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aesthetic properties, whether positive or negative, is thereby enriched with categories that are to be found in everyday life itself, not very different from what this article will try to address while dealing with revulsion or disgust: the clean, the neat, the messy, the dirty, and so on.[3] Third, what remains to be examined, in light of these recent developments, is a new possible interplay between aesthetics and ethics which is no longer grounded in any direct metaphysical parallelism between aesthetic categories and ethical or metaphysical values such as the traditional association of the beautiful and the ugly with the Good and the Evil, respectively. Yet, as already indicated by Yuriko Saito and Dan Eugen Rațiu, everyday aesthetics also challenges any rigid separation of the aesthetic, the practical, and the moral insofar as aesthetic evaluations may have practical implications in people's choices and ways of life.[4] One of the ways of dealing with revulsion or aesthetic discomfort is, thus, cultivating a habit such as eliminating, avoiding, or hiding repugnant objects in the modern waste management. It is precisely this type of practical response that indicates the object of this article: revulsion is something that has to do with objects that are usually either hidden from view and avoided or widely considered unworthy of appreciation, although their unusual deployment in art or everyday life seems, first and foremost, to pertain to an apparent paradox of negative aesthetics. In order to provide a preliminary ostensive definition of the aesthetic category that this article will mainly deal with, it is worth recalling one of Karl Rosenkranz's illustrations of the disgusting (*ekelhaft*) in his famous *Aesthetics of Ugliness*:

> If one could take a large city like Paris and turn it upside down once, so that the bottommost came to the top, so that not merely the sludge of the sewers, but also the light-avoiding animals were brought to the light, the mice, rats, toads, worms, who live from the decay, it would be a terrifyingly disgusting picture.[5]

I will briefly discuss the theories of Aristotle, Kant, and Rosenkranz not only because they are among the most significant insights into this topic in philosophical aesthetics, but also because they reveal a fluctuating attitude towards the representation of disgust. Aristotle posits the pleasure of recognizing the representation of a corpse or a disgusting animal thanks to the power of imitation and the human pursuit of knowledge, while Kant, following Lessing,[6] excludes the sensation of disgust from artistic representation, whereas Rosenkranz turns disgust into a specific aesthetic category subsumed under the concept of ugliness. In spite of theories such as the Kantian doctrine of natural and artistic beauty, which, as I will briefly show, posits the incompatibility between disgust and aesthetic liking, the mere mention of negative *aesthetics* here seems to suggest that the displeasure in question is not simply an absence of aesthetic pleasure which would denote a state of indifference or avoidance and, hence, disqualify an artwork on the grounds that it failed to aesthetically appeal to the public.[7] Although a certain aversion or dissatisfaction can be manifested towards several negative aesthetic categories (including the sublime), revulsion interests me in this article mainly as a reaction to the disgusting, both in its extraordinary occurrences and in the routine of everyday life. I will first try to reexamine the classical seeming paradox whereby displeasure and revulsion do not simply oppose aesthetic pleasure by dissolving it, but coexist with it in a higher-order experience.

Yet, this higher-order experience has traditionally been associated with the pleasure of art, namely the aesthetic "distance" of representation that would elude the real and immediate incompatibility between beauty and repulsiveness, proposing another kind of beauty or pleasure, that is, the pleasure of the representation itself, which can include the repulsive by converting the negative emotion usually associated with it. However, what remains to be sought is precisely a new way of dealing with the aesthetic relevance of the repugnant in everyday life itself, apart from the art-mediated experiences of repugnant objects. By doing so,

3 Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 152–73. See also Leddy, "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities."

4 Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 205–13; Rațiu, "Everyday Aesthetic Experience," 29.

5 Rosenkranz, *Aesthetics of Ugliness*, 191.

6 For further details regarding the disgusting in Enlightenment aesthetics, see Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 43–7; and Peker, "Le Spectacle de l'Immonde," 216–7.

7 Arnold Berleant, who coined the term "negative aesthetics," also discusses this concept in reference to art criticism, artistic failure, and bad taste, but he argues that "negative aesthetics has a far broader range of application than the criticism of art." According to him, aesthetic negativity also includes environmental and social phenomena that are aesthetically and physically damaging, such as air and noise pollution, violence, and so on. See Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, 142–7.

I will inevitably take into account the paradigm shift concerning the very notion of aesthetics itself. As Yuriko Saito points out, aesthetically converting displeasure into pleasure and negative into positive is symptomatic of an aesthetic attitude which grants aesthetics an honorific status.[8] Since the same honorific status tends to disqualify a work of art that fails to positively transform the negative, it becomes important to address a non-artistic and non-honorific type of aesthetics that includes the negative *as such*. What an aesthetic movement such as Saito's everyday aesthetics seems to address in the case of the negative is then, on the contrary, the possible absence of aesthetic *pleasure*, but not the absence of the aesthetic *character* of an experience altogether.

But even this way of redefining aesthetics leads, in terms of negative categories, to two different solutions. As I will show in the following, one is epitomized by haiku tradition in the sense that it tolerates the negative *qua* negative insofar as the negative (such as the extreme heat of a summer day) is regarded as part of the natural variety of an environment, whose purpose, as poet Masaoka Shiki puts it, is to encompass all things within a wide scope.[9] A similar solution, albeit closer to politics and ecology, applies, for instance, to the attempt to conserve biodiversity in spite of the existence of repugnant species (even though it is true that animal rights are often discriminatorily established on the basis of aesthetic and emotional sympathy for certain animals). The second solution is that of practical responses aimed at eliminating the negative, ranging from the ordinary to the extraordinary, that is, from the quotidian domestic chores aiming at eliminating dirt at massive protests expressing discontent over the transformation or deterioration of an urban or natural landscape. Finally, as other theories suggest, the positive value resulting from the transformation of the negative is not to be ascribed to the properties of the objects themselves, but to the process of attention or contemplation. Even though the positive value of this contemplative process is most commonly found in art, it is worth noting that curiosity, as a quasi-contemplative and disinterested relation to negative things, is also manifest in ordinary life.

2 Tackling Some Prejudices

One can easily notice that the most basic philosophical reflections on art and its emotional effects have long recognized the existence of negative emotional responses that define the very task of art itself, at least in the case of subjects whose artistic depictions, while arousing horror or revulsion, lead, through a paradoxical effect similar to the Aristotelian *catharsis*, to an indirect state of pleasure. However, the prevalence of taste, beauty, and pleasure in mainstream aesthetic doctrines makes it hard to accept that displeasure and disgust would qualify as experiences to which one would voluntarily turn when seeking an aesthetic object of contemplation. A certain veil of prejudices seems to distort the relationship between the pleasant and the unpleasant, reducing it to a mere opposition or incompatibility which in turn seems to draw the very boundaries of aesthetics. This opposition is, primarily, the reason for dismissing as non-art an artwork that falls into the category of revulsion: the case of the outraged spectator who interrupts the contemplation of a painting, a performance, or a film is not merely the case of a "faint-hearted" person, but of a severe aesthetic judge who pronounces the famous verdict (which has become so familiar to modern artists and critics) "this is not art!," on the grounds that the work of art failed to *aesthetically* appeal to them. While, of course, not all repudiations of an art form are based on revulsion (for there is also an appreciation of form, style, and so on), most states of revulsion towards art trigger a rejection of the work of art from the realm of art itself. At a common sense level, this difficulty can hardly be counterbalanced by the argument of the paradoxical aesthetic pleasures derived from displeasure, since, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer's analysis of pleasure in an aesthetic context also points out, a simple anthropological observation provides a brief hedonist explanation: the origin of art in most societies seems to be the pursuit of beauty or pleasure,[10] which have been, in turn,

8 Saito, "Everyday Aesthetics in the Japanese Tradition," 151.
9 Shiki, *The Collected Works*, 406.
10 Schaeffer, *L'expérience Esthétique*, 205.

usually equated with aesthetics in the honorific historical sense identified by Saito. Yet, given this traditional aesthetic focus on beauty and pleasure, non-artistic aesthetics often seems to be characterized by the same privilege of the beautiful and the pleasurable: the more beautiful or pleasant a thing, situation, or phenomenon of everyday life is, the more likely it is to be identified as aesthetically relevant by whoever experiences it. Thus, the negative categories seem to be aesthetic only insofar as they do not impede a pleasant contemplation.[11]

Although it seems obvious that this is not always the case, Katya Mandoki is right to note that a certain "fear of the undesirable" seems to have characterized, although with notable exceptions, the history of Western aesthetics, as a tendency to deal primarily with beautiful or pleasant objects and to superficially address negative categories.[12] In addition to the ugly, the sordid, the banal, the insignificant, the course, and the obscene, Mandoki also lists the disgusting among those categories that have often been neglected by aesthetics despite the fact that they are an intrinsic part of everyday sensibility.[13] Even though these negative categories have not been completely ignored in the history of aesthetics, it is important to note the way in which the new focus on negative categories extends or reshapes the scope of aesthetics. In this respect, one of the arguments offered by Mandoki is particularly important: the fear that the alleged "panaestheticism" would lead to a dilution or trivialization of the object of aesthetics is unfounded insofar as the aesthetics of everyday life does not say that all objects are aesthetic in an *honorific* sense (which Yuriko Saito also aims to overcome), but that it is precisely the condition of the subject as a living being and of its sensitive life that is "aesthetic" in the sense of *aisthesis*.[14] If that is the case, phenomena related to sheer sensibility such as violence or cruelty are not only moral, but also aesthetic, not in the sense of being contemplated in art or media under the form of a positive experience, but in the sense of having a sensitive effect on a living being.[15]

One can thus grasp the double nature of the moral issue raised by the negative aesthetic categories: the difference lies, on the one hand, in regarding the ugly and the repugnant as visible or symbolic manifestations of Evil, as has traditionally been the case, and, on the other hand, in perceiving the same negative categories as issues directly connected with the quality of the sensible life. This obvious distinction seems to correspond, of course, to the difference between traditional, metaphysically shaped aesthetics (including, to some extent, Rosenkranz's aesthetics of ugliness) and the contemporary aesthetics of everyday life. Whilst the two paradigms seem to oppose each other as the new opposes the old, I will briefly examine both, before recalling the cultural alterity of the Japanese haiku tradition which, albeit already familiar to the everyday aesthetic movement developed by Saito, is characterized by a peculiar tolerance towards revulsion that can finally be explained by essentially aesthetic criteria, part of which have been suggested by the aesthetics of everyday life. Although I address the issue of revulsion and disgust in a broad aesthetic sense, without limiting the analysis to the realm of art and the classical paradigm of converting repugnance into aesthetic pleasure, my article will not insist on sociological, historical, anthropological, biological, psychological, and psychoanalytical insights, although contributions in these fields, from Darwin and Freud to Lévi-Strauss and Norbert Elias, are certainly noteworthy.[16]

The precise meaning of the terms "revulsion" and "disgust" that I tend to use interchangeably here will emerge most prominently from several examples that pertain to a scatological aesthetics insofar as they often address the taboo of bodily secretions and excremental experience. Although it does not neglect the historical insights, this approach takes into account the difficulty of positing a direct correlation between the historical and social customs regarding waste management, hygiene, and toilet use regulations, on the one hand, and their reflection in art, on the other hand. Remarkable work has been accomplished in attempting to document, for instance, the scatology of early modern Western culture, including literature and art,[17] since the

11 See Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, 115.
12 Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 37–8.
13 Ibid., 38.
14 Ibid., 73.
15 Ibid., 38.
16 See for example Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 1–23; Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 87–98; Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 15–38.
17 See for example Stewart, "Expelling from Top and Bottom."

Renaissance liberation of the human brought with it, as the case of Rabelais' *Gargantua* demonstrates, the liberation of its otherwise erotic, obscene, and loathsome facets at different levels of society.[18] On the other hand, Winfried Menninghaus is right to suggest that it is precisely the Classical canon of the ideal, athletic, youthful body that seems to cultivate the aesthetic illusion which, *mutatis mutandis*, is also noticeable in modern industries of cosmetics and fitness: from the Greek body admired by Renaissance and neoclassicism to modern supermodels, this appearance of gracefulness, non-obscenity, youth, and health builds the hygienic facade behind which the repulsive corporeal processes of degeneration, ageing, sweating, or defecation are hidden.[19]

The point I want to consider, however, is precisely the continuity or discontinuity between the experience of art and that of everyday life in terms of the different conditions of experiencing the aesthetic relevance of the disgusting. The fact that life situations such as excretory activity serve as source of inspiration for art by means of imitation does not preclude the fact that the artistic depiction of the disgusting leads to an aesthetic experience which is qualitatively different from that of everyday life. But if the broad definition of aesthetics that I mentioned earlier is accepted, then the everyday experience of the same objects and situations cannot be described as non-aesthetic either, even if it preserves its repulsiveness. On the other hand, the focus on the scatological cases of transgression in modern and contemporary art that I will briefly examine points to two hypotheses. First, the increasing frequency of the disgusting in modern art might stem from the rejection of the academic hierarchy of artistic genres insofar as revulsion can be associated, among other things, with the artistic or literary depiction of the quotidian filth and decadence in modern urban life. Second, it is precisely the modern habit of dealing hygienically with issues such as human waste and dirt as part of what, in Norbert Elias' terms, one could call a "civilizing process" in reference to the emergence of the bourgeois class consciousness that leaded to a sense of modesty, oversensitivity, and unfamiliarity with the public display of faeces that modern art would nevertheless use in its most daring transgressions.

3 Revulsion and Representation: The Classical Regime of the Negative

3.1 The Cognitive Psychology of Imitation

Despite any basic preference for the agreeable and direct pleasure, one may be accustomed to experiencing those particular aesthetic states in which the relationship between pleasure and displeasure is one of paradoxical association: attending a tragic play and listening to melancholic music are cases of strongly negative emotions which nevertheless appeal to the subject of an aesthetic experience. The most typical form of these paradoxical experiences is the concept of *catharsis* that Aristotle initially used to define tragedy in *Poetics*: the aesthetic experience arouses negative emotions (namely pity and horror), but ultimately purifies the spectator of these very negative emotions,[20] thus having a positive hedonic effect. As for tragedies, the usual explanation given for the cathartic effect is that the audience is aware that the representation is only a representation and not a real event, so that the negative emotion ceases. But this explanation does not address the experience of revulsion, since psychology and empirical observations show that a subject can experience the same physiological reactions to a representation as to the real object. In this respect, revulsion is more persistent than fear: when confronted with the *image* of something horrifying, such as a snake or a spider, one will overcome their fear – insofar as the image has not the power of the real object it represents – to a much greater extent than they can overcome their revulsion. While the object "acts" through fear and revulsion, its image, although

18 Eco, *On Ugliness*, 142–50.
19 Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 92.
20 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 37.

deprived of the power to inspire fear that the real object has, still maintains its repulsive force. The basic factor that seems to make purification impossible in the case of revulsion is the very physiology of the negative visceral response it entails. One can indeed replace the famous "myth of the aesthetic attitude" with an explanation that emphasizes the role of those conventions which teach us how to react when confronted with a work of art, a film, or a play. However, it seems that any convention concerning the spectator's behaviour, such as not intervening on stage during the performance of a play, is ineffective in the case of involuntary reactions such as the activity of attention itself, which can be disrupted almost involuntarily, as the case of revulsion shows us. Therefore, revulsion can be defined precisely as the reaction which involves the least degree of voluntary control and the greatest degree of spontaneity in the physiological response. Such is the case with phobias or personal predispositions towards certain reactions connected to experiences that are associated with subjective, private mental images. Furthermore, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer also points out following Norbert Elias, there are cross-cultural variations concerning the somatization of negative emotions,[21] for what seems repugnant in one culture may pass as acceptable in another, whereas what arouses tears in one society may be experienced with serenity elsewhere, and so on.

On the other hand, it seems there are universally human (and therefore natural) reactions of repulsion to specific objects or themes that have nonetheless been represented by art even in its classical forms: eviscerated bodies, repugnant creatures and monsters such as Hydra or Medusa, rotting corpses such as Antigone's brother, torments of the martyrs, and so on.[22] Drawing on cognitive psychology, Jean-Marie Schaeffer has given an important insight into Aristotle's way of dealing with the negative in his *Poetics*: the paradox of the tragic indicated by the Aristotelian theory of *catharsis* can be better understood, according to Schaeffer, by taking into account another fundamental idea of the treatise, by which Aristotle authorizes the mimetic representation in art of themes that typically arouse revulsion when experienced in ordinary reality[23]: the pleasure Aristotle identifies in the case of the representations of repulsive things is a cognitive pleasure, consisting in the satisfaction of recognizing in the representation the object it depicts. Thus, the apparent paradox of negative emotions in an ultimately pleasurable aesthetic experience is solved in terms of a cognitive process: the tension between negative and positive emotions is explained, according to Jean-Marie Schaeffer, by adding the notion of attention as a derivative of the cognitive process that is itself pleasurable, at least at the moment of its outcome.[24] In other words, Schaeffer suggests that displeasure here is nothing but the negative hedonic value assigned to emotions such as horror or revulsion and counterbalanced by the positive hedonic value of focusing attention on the representation.

3.2 Attention and Curiosity

Yet, as Schaeffer argues, the hedonic value that can maintain and prolong the attention process (whether in an artistic or everyday context, from the prolonged contemplation of a painting to the enthusiasm one feels when watching a football match) does not necessarily result in conscious states of pleasure or displeasure,[25] as it can take the form of an intentional relationship such as curiosity, interest, or vigilance, which does not necessarily involve a very high degree of physiological arousal. By the same token, it would be characteristic of aesthetic experiences that the emotions they involve, albeit associated with a certain hedonic value, result in a lower level of behavioural or physiological arousal.[26] Although Jean-Marie Schaeffer's theory of aesthetic experience explicitly opposes the common limitation of aesthetics to the realm of art, it does not simply equate the aesthetic experience with any sensory experience whatsoever: despite the fact that it uses the same mental

21 Schaeffer, *L'expérience Esthétique*, 145.
22 For a more detailed catalogue, see Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 91–5.
23 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 34.
24 Schaeffer, *L'expérience Esthétique*, 187–93.
25 Ibid., 224.
26 Ibid., 230.

processes, the aesthetic experience differs from other experiences in that it constitutes a kind of "unproductive expenditure," in the sense that the attention and emotion invested by the subject represent a cost that has no pragmatic purpose beyond itself.[27] Schaeffer's theory seems to differ from the Aristotelian account of the recognition of imitated objects in that the positive hedonic value lies not so much in the cognitive outcome as in the process itself: otherwise it would be impossible to explain why one continues to contemplate an image even after cognitively apprehending the object of perception. Hence, aesthetic attention is, according to Schaeffer, polyphonic and cognitively divergent.[28] While the ordinary perceptual and cognitive experience limits its attention to a finite and small number of relevant properties of the object in question in order to achieve its task (such as the number of sides of a geometric figure in order to identify it as a triangle), there is nothing to prevent aesthetic attention from considering an infinite number of properties (such as the colour of the lines, the play of light and shadows, and so on).[29] This theory seems to endorse older theories such as the effect of "de-familiarization" that a formalist conception of art might ascribe to an artwork: seeing things not so much as what they are, but rather as pure shapes and colours also seems to explain the aesthetic appreciation given to otherwise neutral, trivial, or even repugnant objects.

However, Schaeffer's theory of attention in an aesthetic context, that is, the attention separated from its pragmatic ordinary use, seems difficult to reconcile with those theories which, as suggested earlier, ascribe the aesthetic status to sensible experiences even more broadly: why would an experience of attention in a pragmatic and action-oriented engagement with the environment not count as aesthetic in the broad sense of the term? On the one hand, as I will show in the following, approaching repulsion from the perspective of the everyday aesthetics cannot ignore pragmatic reactions and actions that may arise from perception, such as the act of cleaning a space as a result of perceiving it to be dirty. On the other hand, the theory of an attention process performed for its own sake accounts for the classical explanation of the paradoxical attraction exerted by the repugnant. One might recall that the classical doctrine of art has already captured the ability of art to transfigure the negative emotions of revulsion, as Nicolas Boileau, following Aristotle, wrote in his *The Art of Poetry*: "A slithering snake, a monstrous wriggling reptile/Drawn with art, will bring a happy smile./Refined and well-schooled brushes thus create/Delightful objects out of things we hate."[30] One might infer that the main opposition here is that between the contemplation that defines the experience of art and the actions involved in the actual experience of repulsion, such as the gesture of removing the actual repugnant object or simply interrupting the perception. But, of course, this is not necessarily so. On the one hand, the transgressions of modern art that I will examine in the following have already demonstrated that serene contemplation, as well as an uninterrupted attention, is not the only possible reaction to a work of art, insofar as the most controversial works of art have elicited protest precisely by disrupting the contemplative aesthetic engagement. On the other hand, Schaeffer's theory of aesthetic attention is also right to stress the impossibility of limiting aesthetic experience to the realm of artworks, since the aesthetic experience itself deals with ontologically heterogeneous objects. What is particularly significant is that, according to Schaeffer, one of the factors which influence the attentional activity by increasing its positive hedonic value is curiosity.[31] Similar to the contemplation of a work of art, curiosity appears to be an activity of seeking knowledge for no other purpose than itself, insofar as it does not pursue an external benefit, albeit it is not limited to the field of works of art alone. This point is instructive here, as it leaves room for further discussion. In the tenth book of his *Confessions*, Augustine discusses the various pleasures that arise from the senses, from smell to hearing and sight. Like Aristotle, Augustine notices the paradoxical attraction to repugnant objects, but unlike Aristotle, he does not refer solely to their artistic imitations. In addition to the *voluptas* arising from pleasurable objects, the *concupiscentia oculorum*, that is, the lust of the eyes also includes *curiositas* as a mode of knowledge, thus explaining, according to Augustine, why people are strangely attracted to images of repulsive things such as

27 Ibid., 278.
28 Ibid., 102–28.
29 Ibid., 64–70.
30 Boileau, *Selected Poems*, 27.
31 Schaeffer, *L'expérience Esthétique*, 267–73.

corpses.[32] While constituting a potential sin in Augustine's view, curiosity is a kind of human vanity inasmuch as it takes delight not in the objects it is concerned with but in itself, which is another way of recognizing the hedonic value of the attentional process itself, according to Schaeffer's theory.

3.3 Taste, Disgust, and Ugliness

Two consequences follow from this. First, there is no fixed correlation between everyday aesthetic experience and action-oriented attitude, although everyday aesthetic experiences prove to be rather morally and pragmatically engaged than purely contemplative. While the ordinary experience of categories such as dirt or disgust usually involves a pragmatic action-oriented response which, unlike contemplative attention or curiosity, is not autotelic, such as the act of tidying up for the purpose of cleanliness or personal well-being in the context of domestic chores, an everyday experience can also be characterized by a peculiar contemplative tolerance towards the negative (as in watching a Spanish bullfight, for instance), often in spite of moral objections or psycho-physiological discomfort. Second, ascribing a positive hedonic value to the cognitive process of attention itself, as in Schaeffer's theory, casts a fresh light not only on Aristotle's idea of the pleasure of recognizing imitations of repugnant things, but also on Kant's theory of pure aesthetic pleasure, which essentially stems from the free play of the faculties of cognition, although this play does not produce knowledge as such. As for Kant, one might notice that the author of *Critique of Judgment* follows the classical tradition when arguing, in an Aristotelian manner, that the artistic representation of an otherwise ugly natural object can be beautiful. Although he is an advocate of the superiority of nature over art on the grounds of the freedom of natural beauty, Kant is also aware that nature is not, however, limited to the beauty of butterflies and flowers or the sublime of mountains and oceans. As he argues in section §48 of his *Critique of Judgment*, the difference between nature and art with regard to the aesthetic appreciation of an object is, thus, the difference between a beautiful thing and the beautiful presentation of a thing which is not necessarily beautiful in nature:

> A natural beauty is a *beautiful thing*; artistic beauty is the *beautiful presentation of a thing*. … Fine art shows its superiority precisely in this, that it describes things beautifully that in nature we would dislike or find ugly. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war and so on are all harmful; and yet they can be described, and even presented in a painting, very beautifully.[33]

Although ugliness is not, in Kant, the object of a distinct theory, it seems to encompass, in this context, the whole range of negative aesthetic categories, including the repugnant. However, at this very point, Kant introduces an important limit, namely an extreme category of the ugly that is nevertheless incompatible with the aesthetic satisfaction:

> There is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be presented in conformity with nature without obliterating all aesthetic liking and hence artistic beauty: that ugliness which arouses *disgust* [*Ekel*]. For in that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it insisted, as it were, on our enjoying it, even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting; and hence the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of the object itself, so that it cannot possibly be considered beautiful.[34]

Admittedly, Kant's personal taste for beauty and art was alien to the experience of all the transgressions committed by art in the past centuries. As a matter of fact, the effects of reality in the naturalist literature of the late nineteenth century have already been interpreted as foregrounding precisely the disgusting in its contradictory form, thus defying the very limit previously imposed on aesthetics.[35] One could even go back to

32 Augustine, *The Confessions*, 273–4.
33 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 179–80.
34 Ibid., 180.
35 Rossi, "Writing Disgust," 283–5.

early modern art and literature to find François Rabelais' visceral scatological descriptions of purgation and flatulence, as well as the depictions of urination, defecation, and vomiting in the peasant festival imagery before Pieter Bruegel.[36] But, although he gives no clear example of disgust, Kant touches on two fundamental problems in that brief passage: on the one hand, he observes that a disgusting object, as the extreme manifestation of the ugly, involves a far too close connection with sensations of aversion to be aesthetically judged according to its form, as the Kantian principle of pure aesthetic judgement demands. Kant also notes what empirical psychology also demonstrates: with regard to sensation, the representation of a disgusting object has the same effect as the object itself. On the other hand, however, the displeasure is generally counterbalanced by satisfaction in the case of the transposition of ugliness into the realm of art, albeit this pleasure might be cognitive for the classics and purely aesthetic for Kant. With the significant exception of the disgusting, which seems to constitute for Kant the very limit of the aesthetic satisfaction of taste, the various versions of the ugly allow this effect of aesthetic distance which separates the presentation of the object from its re-presentation.[37] But while the satisfaction resulting from the process of attention, *mutatis mutandis* the Kantian free play of the faculties of knowledge, assures the spectator that, although they perceive something repulsive, they are in the realm of art or, at least, of beauty, the interruption of this process is, as I anticipated earlier, a way of repudiating from the realm of art the work that arouses repulsion. According to Kant, who makes this remark in reference to the disgusting, the distance between the real object and its representation is suppressed.

Although the German terms *Geschmack* and *Ekel* do not suggest the opposition that the French versions *goût* and *dégoût* express when it comes to disgust as the opposite of aesthetic taste, Kant's remark on disgust as the outer limit of aesthetic satisfaction echoed in fact an eighteenth-century German debate over the aesthetic banishment of disgust, given the rich philosophical semantics of *Ekel*.[38] It is noteworthy, as Winfried Menninghaus points out, that this debate faded precisely with the rise of the Romantic and Hegelian objective and absolutized philosophies of art, wherein subjective sensations of pleasure and displeasure lose their importance in defining the absolute beauty[39] (albeit such an interest will eventually revive with the influence of modern psychology on aesthetics[40]), while Schopenhauer, following Kant, maintains that disgust has no place whatsoever in arts since it stimulates the will and thus obliterates aesthetic contemplation.[41] It is in Rosenkranz's aesthetics of ugliness that, contrary to the Kantian view, disgust becomes immanent to the aesthetic discourse on metaphysical and dialectical grounds. Following from the main definition of ugliness as the positive negation of the beautiful, the disgusting as a species of ugliness is to be found in a classification that systematically contrasts the categories subsumed under the ugly with those subsumed under the beautiful. The repulsive (*Widrig*), which is the opposite of the pleasant form of beauty,[42] includes the hideous (*Scheußlich*) as the opposite of charming, which, in turn, includes the disgusting (*Ekelhaft*) as the negation of the sensuous appearance of beauty.[43]

What is noteworthy here is the fact that, although the disgusting is not excluded from Rosenkranz's aesthetic discourse, its aesthetic relevance is not emancipated from a metaphysical postulate that points to a kind of *kalokagathia*. This does not mean the mere use of disgust to express moral disapproval, nor the simple causal correlation between evil and ugliness, which, according to Rosenkranz himself, is by no means free of exceptions.[44] Since beauty is the expression of freedom, not only as self-determination in ethics and art, but also as an organic process in nature and life, whereas ugliness comes from a lack of freedom in the same broad metaphysical sense, it is no coincidence that Rosenkranz identifies the disgusting primarily with putrefaction and physical decay: a disgusting object is thus something which simulates the appearance of

36 See Stewart, "Expelling from Top and Bottom."
37 See Peker, "Le Spectacle de l'Immonde," 226–7.
38 Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 25–6.
39 Ibid., 123.
40 Ibid., 125.
41 Ibid., 130–1.
42 Rosenkranz, *Aesthetics of Ugliness*, 174.
43 Ibid., 184.
44 Ibid., 115–6.

life in something which is already dead, thus expressing the non-freedom through a fake life.[45] This point is crucial, since Rosenkranz marks an important milestone in "the evils of modern taste," if only because he was a contemporary of Charles Baudelaire.[46] After all, they both shared the awareness of the filth of the modern city that would fuel the syndrome of decadence. The main solution Rosenkranz envisages for the self-overcoming of ugliness in art is, however, the transition to satire and comic, especially since he associates filth and excrement with grotesque humour only,[47] which might be one, but not the only, topos related to revulsion in modern Western art. On the other hand, though, starting with the symptom of Romantic art that Rosenkranz is also addressing in reference to the decay, the "hunger for strong sensations" that Winfried Menninghaus identifies as the "modern shock-aesthetics" begins to take shape.[48] Its consequences merit closer attention since, although it often aims at challenging our cultural perspective on filth and obscenity, it always ends by shaping and confirming it.

4 Revulsion as Transgression: The Modern Scandal

Since it has often proved to be scandalous and controversial, modern art seems to have discovered at least since Baudelaire the difficult pleasure of the paradoxical beauty extracted from ugliness and negative categories, including, but not limited to, the category of the disgusting which used to constitute the very limit of aesthetic satisfaction for Kant, Schopenhauer, and the tradition before them. It is probably not an overstatement to say that it was precisely this feature of modernity that paved the way for repugnant sensations in art, taken to their extremes a century later. It is not a coincidence that, in the history of modern art, it is precisely revulsion that becomes one of the main forms of transgression, as well as one of the causes of scandal and rejection. It would suffice to select a few examples from the recent art. In this respect, it is instructive to examine the artistic use of the repugnant by considering two types of offences identified by Anthony Julius in his famous theory of artistic transgressions. The first type would thus be directed against art itself, that is, against artistic conventions and judgements of value that pertain to the world of art. In this respect, revulsion seems to be a prevailing tool for artistic protest, since shocking the audience constitutes one of the means of protest itself, insofar as it makes the protest more radical and forceful. Judy Chicago's *Red Flag*, depicting a dirty menstrual tampon, must be understood, beyond its peculiar shocking effect, as a protest against the art tradition that has systematically deprived women of the images of their typical experiences such as childbirth and menstruation.[49] Duchamp's protest against "retinal" art also falls into this general category, although the reversed urinal that he baptized *The Fountain* also leads one to think of the taboo of bodily secretions. The gesture points, therefore, not only to the banality of an arbitrary ready-made, but also to the broken taboo of the filth as depiction of the inferior, which, as I suggested earlier, fuelled the outrage with which the verdict "This is not art!" was pronounced: it was no coincidence, then, that the painter George Bellows protested by disapprovingly suggesting that after Duchamp's urinal, one might expect horse excrement stuck to a canvas in an exhibition.[50]

The violation of this kind of taboo already points to the second category of offences identified by Julius: the offence against the public as society and its system of moral, religious, and aesthetic values.[51] In this respect, revulsion can be publicly experienced as outrage in reaction to the alleged attack on religious and moral values, as was the case with Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, that is, the crucifix dipped in urine: the offence appears nevertheless to be conceptual rather than aesthetic–physiological, since the work itself is not

45 Ibid., 117. See also Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 133.
46 Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 128.
47 Rosenkranz, *Aesthetics of Ugliness*, 192.
48 Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 8.
49 Julius, *Transgressions*, 104–5.
50 Ibid., 108.
51 Ibid., 107–9.

repulsive (on the contrary, it can even be considered beautiful), so that the transgression lies in the symbolical submersion of the sacred in the inferior realm of the repugnant. However, the taboo concerning the secretions of the body is not limited to the desecration of the divine. The ninety tin cans presumably filled with artist's faeces which constitute Piero Manzoni's famous work *Merda d'artista* (*Artist's Shit*) represents in this regard a double transgression: it constitutes an offence directed against the world of art itself, since it can be interpreted primarily as a satire on the fetishization of the artist and the commodification of the artworks, that is, as protest against the hierarchy of materials and the traditional relationship between artist and work. But the offence is also aimed, of course, at the public sensibility traditionally shaped by the hierarchical values of decency, shame, and rejection of waste. It is precisely for this purpose that contemporary artist Paul McCarthy exhibited in 2007 *Complex Piles*, an outdoor artwork consisting in air-filled balloons in the shape and aspect of giant excrements, thus satirizing the prudent criteria by which a society judges its public monuments. The same scatological aesthetics seems to apply to *Spit on Shit* by Gilbert & George for nearly identical reasons: by joining the two repulsive body secretions, the image constitutes a similar attack on decency and shame, combined with an uncanny way of dealing with the very feeling of anxiety it arouses in connection with the most natural aspects of life. This neo-cynicism highlights a psychological phenomenon rooted in the conventions it denounces: the contemplative pleasure of focusing attention on a work of art is in all these cases undermined by the strong feeling of anxiety that the display of faeces, as in the case of Gilbert & George's work, seeks, in a second step, to dispel. In short, the work appears as an indicator of the extent to which the hedonic value of the emotion in its relation to the physiological arousal resulting from the aversion the image provokes depends on a socially or culturally conditioned response strictly linked to the norms that the work itself violates for this very purpose. A similar remark on the sense of shame and embarrassment in contemporary art applies to Kiki Smith's *Tale*, the frank and abject portrayal of a woman's naked body in a prostrate position, caught in the act of eliminating a long tail of excrement while crawling on the floor: the gruesome sculpture is thus intended to challenge the social ideologies related to the graceful representation of femininity, as well as the strong anxiety about the hidden aspects of human mortal bodies such as illness, incontinence, and dirt.

By far the most complex and elaborated work dealing with the taboo of the faeces in contemporary art is *Cloaca* by Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, who draws on Manzoni's suggestion of faeces, albeit he also elaborates a critical view that is vaguely reminiscent of the famous scenes of coprophagia in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò*. Delvoye's *Cloaca* consists in an installation replicating a sophisticated industrial machine made of tubes, pumps, pipes, containers, and so on, which converts food into excrement, using a pastiche version of Coca-Cola and Ford logos. The taboo of faeces and the revulsion associated with its violation are here deployed for the purpose of the same critical and satirical strategy: if Manzoni's *Artist's shit* was referring to the early industrial revolution era, Wim Delvoye's faeces-producing installation, according to the author himself, is the metaphor of a new phase of consumer society, namely the replacement of man by machines and technologies which have become the new producers of waste. Needless to say, scatological aesthetics is not the only instrument of contemporary art that stands out through shock and revulsion: echoing Hermann Nitsch's gory and visceral performances, the seeming piles of bloody flesh used in 2022 by artist Anish Kapoor to fill the exhibition halls of the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice are equally disturbing due to their gory appearance.

I have discussed all these examples from recent Western art in order to show precisely that the way artistic transgressions deal with the problem of revulsion does not exhaust the aesthetic potential of this negative category, one reason being that, as I have noted earlier, pre-modern art had also been familiar with repugnant imagery. But for the modern consciousness, revulsion linked to the motif of faeces, body secretions, flesh, dirt, filth, or waste represents a radical element of social criticism combined with the neo-cynical confrontation with the impure (and therefore hidden) side of nature. For all the variations in the degree of modesty and sensitivity towards the ugly, as well as the variable tolerance towards obscenity and distaste in each society and epoch, these aesthetic and literary motifs associated with the revulsion or discomfort they provoke were most often situated, in Western culture, relatively far from the natural and the ordinary, as well as from order and harmony, as a residue in the hierarchy of the world, as privation, as deviation, as absolute inferiority, as an element of social criticism, as a depiction of gluttony, lethal illness, and promiscuity, as a portrayal of oppressed social classes and decadence, as a metaphor of corruption, as source of grotesque

comedy, as dystopian scenarios, as horror imagery, and so forth. Speaking of the literary or visual depiction of disgust in Western culture, one might easily think, for instance, of the grotesque and scatological stories of François Rabelais, the Kafkian absurdist tale of a sick boy whose festering wound is crawling with worms in *A Country Doctor*, the body of a prostitute repugnantly disfigured by a lethal disease in the ending scene of Zola's naturalist novel *Nana*, the excretory eroticism of George Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, the ravages of disease in Albert Camus' *The Plague*, the coprophagia scenes in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò*, the public vomiting in Ruben Östlund's *The Triangle of Sadness*, and the list might go on. What prevails in most of these cases is not only the relation of disgust to the social criticism and world view it engenders, but the unmitigated effects of discomfort and revulsion themselves which disrupt the ordinary routine of everyday existence taken either to the extreme of grotesque humour, or to the extreme of aversion, shock, or horror resulting from a kind of "épater les bourgeois" strategy.[52]

5 Beyond Revulsion: The Japanese Regime of Filth

While the symbolic values artistically assigned to disgust seem extremely numerous, they hardly cross the boundary that separates the extraordinary from the ordinary in modern Western culture. Albeit excretory activity is part of the ordinariness of everyday life, the recent Western art seems unable to preserve this status without linking it to the grotesque, the absurd, the obscene, the subversive, and so on. The question that arises is the following: is this universally and necessarily so? In other words, is the phenomenon illustrated by the aforementioned examples a matter of human nature or of cultural contingent features?

From a Western cultural perspective, the exploration of another culture, namely the Japanese culture and, especially, the haiku literature, reveals a puzzling aspect for Western aesthetics, thus constituting a third paradigmatic moment, in addition to the classical regime of representation and the modern artistic transgressions mentioned earlier. Masaoka Shiki, a Japanese poet and essayist of the Meiji era, pointed out at length in a 1900 essay entitled *Haiku on Shit* that in the Japanese tradition, faeces, urine, and latrines were rather recurrent literary motifs used by authentic haiku poetry. They have been integrated into poetry in a way that, comparatively speaking, is unusual for anyone accustomed either to the Western lyricism which describes the beauty of nature in a manner that excludes such elements, or to artistic depictions that integrates them through offence, impiousness, or grotesque comedy. One can think, by way of comparison, of the restriction that Rosenkranz suggested concerning the aesthetic use of excrement, which he associated either with the "roughness of popular speech" or, when it comes to poetry, with grotesque humour only.[53] The essential point to make is that the excrements mentioned in haiku are by no means described for the sake of violating a taboo or developing a vulgar humorous style, as it is often the case in Western aesthetics when body secretions are described or displayed. Instead, the description of excrement in haiku appears as part of the description of typical, common, everyday, ordinary situations and landscapes, in which faeces or urine are elements of nature among others, aesthetically combined and united in an overall atmospheric effect which mitigates their repulsiveness. We can thus consider some examples from those listed by Shiki[54]:

> Fallen red plum blossoms
> appear to be ablaze
> on clumps of horse shit
> (Buson)

52 Rossi, "Writing Disgust," 288–9.

53 Rosenkranz, *Aesthetics of Ugliness*, 192.

54 The following haikus are extracted from Shiki, *The Collected Works*, 392–406. The English version of his essay is also available at: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/157753/haiku-on-shit.

A hazy moonlit night –
a bird has left its shit
on the fence post
(Jyoin)

As I piss on a lotus leaf,
the Buddha's cremated bones
come into view
(Buson)

In the hot grass,
an earthworm swims
in horse piss
(Suisatsu)

A high priest
empties his bowels
in the withered fields
(Buson)

Unnoticed, I release an easy fart –
staying indoors
this winter
(Shōzan)

Unexpectedly,
the scent of chrysanthemums
rises from the outhouse
(Sekikō)

In the outhouse,
I purify my spirit –
is it December?
(Toshi)

Taking a shit after peeing –
a late autumn bird
(Tojaku)

These examples alone suffice to make the difference clear. As Masaoka Shiki, a haiku author himself, points out, the occurrences of these seemingly filthy literary motifs in haiku should not lead us to believe that Japanese poets had a penchant for repulsiveness or filth *per se*.[55] Their attempt was primarily to capture the beauty in everything: an idea not exactly unfamiliar to the Western art and aesthetics either. In some cases, however, literary motifs considered disgusting are used figuratively, such as in comparisons (there are haikus in which spring rain is compared to urine, and the sound of bamboo wood is compared to flatulence), and sometimes literally, as elements of an aesthetically experienced landscape or environment. Masaoka Shiki and the haiku tradition do not, of course, deny the repugnant character of these elements considered separately, but the justification for their presence in Japanese poetry stems from the fact that the composition of haiku facilitates both a special attention to what seems insignificant and the harmonization of repugnant elements by combining them with the recurring elements described by the poem into a higher aesthetic unity.[56]

One might be tempted to explain the occurrence of these motifs in haiku in the light of religious phenomena related to the dominant religions in Japan. As Yuriko Saito points out in reference to the aesthetics of

55 Shiki, *The Collected Works*, 405–6.
56 Ibid., 392–4.

everyday life, one of the main doctrines in Zen Buddhism posits an egalitarian view when it comes to the omnipresence of Buddha as ultimate reality which can indiscriminately be found in all objects and phenomena, including unpleasant or vulgar ones,[57] while Shinto in particular deals with the relationship between purity and impurity both in a spiritual and in a physical sense by prescribing, for instance, ritual practices of purification that include bathing or washing. Although the explanation that Masaoka Shiki himself offers is, as I have noted, rather aesthetic, this does not dismiss the possibility of explaining the phenomenon in terms of a widespread concern for cleanliness, wholesomeness, and order specific to the Japanese civilization. Addressing the fate of the Japanese aesthetic traditions in the face of Western modernization in his 1933 essay *In Praise of Shadows*, Japanese novelist Jun'ichirō Tanizaki also discusses toilet aesthetics in stark contrast to the Western attitude towards it. As genuine work of Japanese architecture, usually situated "in a grove fragrant with leaves and moss," the traditional toilet is, according to Tanizaki, a place of connection with the whole of nature, whose elements, ranging from the twittering of birds and the hum of mosquitoes to the colour of the sky and the sound of leaves, are aesthetically discovered precisely during the morning trip to the outhouse. This is the reason why, unlike the modern sanitary facilities, the Japanese toilet facilitates an experience that Tanizaki describes as "spiritual repose" and "physiological delight."[58] Hence the explanation for the seemingly scatological motifs in haiku:

> Our forebears, making poetry of everything in their lives, transformed what by rights should be the most unsanitary room in the house into a place of unsurpassed elegance, replete with fond associations with the beauties of nature. Compared to Westerners, who regard the toilet as utterly unclean and avoid even the mention of it in polite conversation, we are far more sensible and certainly in better taste.[59]

A non-artistic aesthetics of the everyday that aims to integrate even the unpleasant sensations and situations of everyday life can draw inspiration from this model. Despite the fact that she insists precisely on the discontinuity between the traditional art-oriented aesthetics and the realm of everyday aesthetic experience, Yuriko Saito already pointed out that the same tradition of haiku epitomizes the presence of unpleasant sensations in the aesthetic experience. Although she also insists on aesthetic categories such as the dirty, the messy, the clean, and so on, Saito evokes in this regard not only the experience of the filth in everyday life (such as garbage, toilets, junkyards, etc.), but also the unpleasantness as intensity of sensations which also pertains to the negative aesthetics of the everyday: the haiku tradition has not ignored the description of unpleasant states caused by the intensity of stimuli, such as the summer heat or the winter frost. Saito's observation coincides with the remarks the poet Masaoka Shiki made a century earlier:

> What is noteworthy of the Japanese aesthetic sensibility toward the ambience is that what otherwise may cause discomfort, dissatisfaction, or dislike often becomes subsumed under an umbrella of aesthetically positive, unified atmosphere.[60]

For Saito, insofar as the aesthetics is no longer an honorific title designating the prevalence of beauty and pleasure in art, but rather a classificatory name for the experience derived from sensory perception, the negative aspects are inescapable, even when everyday aesthetics addresses the appreciation of things in the moral terms of care, hospitality, respect, wholesomeness, consideration, courtesy, civility, thoughtfulness, patience, or responsibility.[61] Revulsion, as a form of negative aesthetics, becomes pertinent to the aesthetics of the everyday for several reasons, which pertains to the premises of life-oriented aesthetics as identified by Saito in her seminal *Everyday Aesthetics*. First, the aesthetics of everyday life rejects the hierarchy of the senses and the traditional privilege of sight and hearing, while embracing the aesthetic relevance of the traditionally inferior senses.[62] Consequently, it becomes possible to address the category of revulsion insofar

57 Saito, "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection," 381–2.
58 Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, 3–4.
59 Ibid., 4.
60 Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 127.
61 Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar*, 214. See also Saito, "The Moral Dimension," 89.
62 Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 22; Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 39.

as revulsion is often inseparable from an olfactory, tactile, or gustatory experience. In fact, it is precisely this strong connection of disgust with the lower senses of smell, taste, and touch that might explain why the disgusting had been prohibited in certain traditional aesthetics insofar as taste as faculty of aesthetic appreciation was separated from the literal meaning of taste as sense of flavours.[63] Second, everyday aesthetics accentuates the degree of bodily engagement of the subject in any aesthetic experience,[64] in the sense that physiological arousal and pragmatic responses triggered by negative categories cannot be ignored. It is worth recalling that revulsion is, in this respect, one of the strongest bodily felt responses to sensory perceptions. Third, the aesthetics of the everyday refuses the formal separation between the aesthetic object and the environment posited by the traditional experience of a clearly demarcated artwork, proposing instead a rather atmospheric model in which the aesthetic experience is frameless.[65] While this already applies to the aesthetic experience of nature evoked in haiku, given its sensibility towards details that are integrated into a higher atmospheric unity, the same mode of perception can also encompass a wide range of experiences which are not culturally specific. From this point of view, one might say, for instance, that the aesthetic experience of visiting Paris is not complete without paying attention to the filth of the sidewalks, just as a visit to Venice may include the smell of the canals, while a walk through the centre of Vienna reveals the smell of the excrements of the horses harnessed to kitschy carriages.

6 The Private Aesthetic Solution

A final mention should be made about the discursive, judgemental, or critical dimension of a negative, repugnant aesthetic experience in an everyday aesthetic context. It is worth recalling Michel de Montaigne's astonishment at the fact that the most profoundly and typically human experiences, namely sexuality and defecation, are, paradoxically, the object of the strictest taboo in the social conventions concerning the public discourse.[66] A recent theoretical model proposed in contemporary aesthetics of everyday life by artist Kevin Melchionne restricts everyday aesthetics precisely to the private sphere of repetitive, ongoing, ordinary activities, wherein the dimension of inter-subjective critical judgement that typically characterizes the art world is excluded. Listed by Melchionne, these activities are: eating (but not the culinary arts), wardrobe (but not fashion design), dwelling (but not the art of decoration), going out (but not tourism), daily rest (but not vacations).[67] Although Melchionne, as well as Saito, envisages the practical values of "subjective well-being," which he associates mainly with the high frequency of positive hedonic emotions through ongoing activities,[68] it is not impossible to argue that the negative, repugnant experiences of everyday life (such as garbage, toilets, rotten food, or street filth) can also be integrated into a private, non-discursive aesthetic regime of experience (Masaoka Shiki also admitted that, apart from haiku, one could hardly speak aesthetically of faeces, urine, and latrines), insofar as they belong to an aesthetic regime not in the honorific sense identified by Saito, that is, as theory of artistic beauty and judgements of taste, but in the sense of those sensory experiences, activities, and reactions which, to paraphrase Kevin Melchionne, are "typically but not necessarily aesthetic."[69] This does not mean, of course, an aesthetic paradigm whose predilection is the repugnant *per se*, but an aesthetic experience of atmospheres, situations, and activities that include the presence of the dirt, such as in the private, everyday act of domestic chores intended to remove it by cleaning. While Melchionne concedes that not all everyday activity, such as taking out the trash, is implicitly aesthetic, since its aesthetic character must stem, according to him, from

63 Peker, "Le Spectacle de l'Immonde," 227.
64 Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 20–1.
65 Ibid., 19.
66 Eco, *On Ugliness*, 131.
67 Melchionne, "The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics," 1–7.
68 Melchionne, "The Point of Everyday Aesthetics," 1–6.
69 Melchionne, "The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics," 6.

the *typicality* of the action, and not from the logical possibility or necessity,[70] two solutions are still possible, apart from any "artification" or art-oriented beautification of everyday practices. One can either recognize the aesthetic character of an everyday activity as its typical feature, in the sense that cleaning, for instance, pertains to the quotidian activities concerned with positive aesthetic features and subjective well-being, or argue that the "aesthetic" applies to any sensory experience of sensible beings, either positive or negative.

In order to grasp the difference between the repetitive, ordinary everyday aesthetics and the extraordinary artistic aesthetics precisely with regard to the repugnant, one might compare the negative experience of a bad or stinky meal in the everyday life (which is a non-artistic, ordinary, yet potentially aesthetic experience once regarded as a sensory phenomenon that triggers typical reactions, albeit it is not subjected to any kind of readymade artistic transformation) with a work of art such as Robert Gober's *Short Haired Cheese*, namely an exhibit consisting of a haired cheese, which, although inspired by the ordinariness of life while adding a surrealist aura to it, still belongs to the realm of the exceptional, the artistic, and the out-of-the-ordinary that characterizes the art world with its own rules and modes of experience. Admittedly, however, the risk intrinsic to this model, once aesthetics is freed from the prevalence of positive categories and their corresponding hedonic values, is the undecided status of aesthetic relevance and triviality. Today, the question "Can anything be art?" seems to be replaced by the question "Can everything be aesthetic?". The answer can be affirmative as long as the everyday aesthetics ceases to borrow its characteristics from artistic aesthetics and theories of taste. On the one hand, one can accept that aesthetics covers the whole area of sensory experience without opposing the ugly and the negative. On the other hand, one can still seek the beautification of any social or natural environment by working to remove or convert the repugnant or seemingly neutral elements of experience.

However, the ordinariness of the everyday negative experiences seems to have already been assimilated into artistic and literary aesthetics, besides the case of haiku. In fact, as long as haiku expresses the reconciliation with nature whose diversity peacefully includes filthy elements, one can find sufficient examples in the literature that address the problem of a particular kind of revulsion whose social provenance raises objections against it. One might think again of realist and naturalist literature for its depiction of modern pathology and dehumanization such as the life of peasants and prostitutes in novels such as Zola's *La Terre* or *Nana*. But other, more recent examples are instructive here insofar as they epitomize the way in which revulsion may still belong to the ordinary, daily routine while, on the other hand, reflected in art or literature. For instance, in the aftermath of the political changes of 1989, part of the Romanian literature, as well as some films of the "Romanian new wave," has become symptomatic of the use of a certain "miserabilist" aesthetics which depicts the repugnant and austere quotidian life in communist and post-communist Romania, albeit with a hint of black humour or social criticism. An interesting case is Mircea Cărtărescu's short story *Anthrax*, for it constructs precisely the antithesis I have already outlined. In this story, the narrator receives a "mail art" letter mysteriously sent by an artist from Denmark who is later revealed to be the author of some scatological and pornographic forms of art. The artist's transgression is perceived to be all the more extraordinary given that it disrupts the daily routine of post-communist Bucharest, having initially been misinterpreted as an attempt at anthrax poisoning via the envelope in which the letter was sent. In fact, the satire in Cărtărescu's story contrasts this negative aesthetics of the extraordinary artistic transgressions with another aesthetics of the negative, namely the repugnant, yet ordinary elements of everyday life that Cărtărescu himself describes: communist apartment buildings immersed in the smell of overflowing dumpsters, hideous Bucharest boulevards, snow mixed with mud, subways smelling of sweat, kitchens smelling of stew, that is, recurring motifs of late postmodern Romanian literature, but also elements of a negative aesthetic of everyday life. Equally illustrative is Cristian Mungiu's 2007 film *4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days*. Although it tells the story of a singular event that can be perceived as both repugnant and out of the ordinary, namely a clandestine and medically dangerous abortion in a hotel room followed by the shocking act of dropping the aborted foetus in a trash chute, the film focuses nevertheless on the ordinary way of life in an Eastern European communist country in the 80s, thus making the events seem to occur routinely and repeatedly, despite their strong negative impact.

70 Ibid., 6.

7 The Negative in the (Extra)Ordinary: Further Remarks

The issue of negative aesthetics has been addressed here not only in relation to the universal-human psychology of emotions and its hedonic values, but also in the context of historical and cross-cultural variations wherein the most difficult species of the ugly, namely the repugnant or the disgusting, has been both theorized and deployed. I have therefore traced three main paradigmatic moments in the aesthetics of revulsion: the classical-Aristotelian regime of representation, the modern artistic transgressions in shock-oriented aesthetics, and what I would eventually call the everyday, private paradigm of the ordinary. These paradigms are not mere occurrences of disgust or revulsion in art and in everyday life, but ways of addressing the repulsive in relation to the culturally variable scope of art and/or aesthetics. The classical paradigm used to associate displeasure and its conversion into pleasure mainly with the deployment of representation, since it recognized the aesthetic use of the negative only insofar as it belonged to an exceptional *raison d'être* of artistic genres wherein displeasure differs from itself, while setting as its limit the disgusting that Kantian aesthetics also addresses under the concept of *Ekel* as sensation which obliterates any aesthetic satisfaction. The modern paradigm seems to associate, in turn, revulsion with a certain subversive and shocking potential of art, thus making aesthetic use of the repugnant by placing it in a second category of the extraordinary, that of the violations of taboos, transgressions, and social criticism. Finally, the everyday-private paradigm addresses negative categories and responses in a regime of repetitive, private, less inter-subjectively shared experience.

One could, of course, challenge this classification. The main difference that has already been noted by proponents of the everyday aesthetics is that while the use of the negative in art entails its conversion into an aesthetically positive outcome insofar as artistically depicted ugliness may also point to a higher existential truth or form of beauty, the everyday is nevertheless the realm in which the negative manifests itself as such.[71] However, the most shocking cases of scatological aesthetics I have mentioned demonstrate that art itself does not necessarily lead to an aesthetically positive transformation of the negative, either because it is not willing or because it is unable to do so. While it is true that most of the artistic depictions of the negative lead one to think of the social, moral, or existential truth embodied by art in the honorific sense Yuriko Saito points to, it is equally true that they may also lead to the interruption of the spectator's engagement. It is worth noting that Schaeffer's theory of aesthetic attention admits the possibility that the positive hedonic value of attention fails to compensate for the negative hedonic value of emotions, so that the aesthetic experience could be interrupted.[72] When artist Mike Bouchet exhibited at Manifesta 11 his 2016 installation *The Zurich Load*, displaying in collaboration with a local waste management plant the human waste produced by the population of Zurich and packed into dozens of cubic bricks, many visitors were overcome by the repugnant smell of tons of excrement. While the artwork itself bears indeed a positive meaning concerning human nature and its shamefulness, defecation as the hidden side of consumption, and so forth, the sensitive experience characterized by repulsion in the most visceral form can scarcely be considered positive. Admittedly, it is however true that while the artistic negativity is open to a conceptual or moral (if not aesthetic) appreciation, the aesthetic negativity in life might signal that the quality of life itself is at stake.

This might suggest that art, given its cathartic effect, is closer to the subjective well-being than everyday aesthetic experience. However, I take Melchionne's thesis that the ongoing and self-controlled activities of everyday aesthetic experience are more likely to support subjective well-being than intermittent art experiences to be true. In Melchionne's words,

> It is all fine and good that there are dissonant musical compositions, novels of abjection, and sprawling gallery installations of detritus. Such art offers engaging intellectual and moral challenges for audience through the negative emotions that it generates. The art may be appealing on many levels, but what makes art support well-being is the quality of our engagement with it.[73]

71 Saito, "Everyday Aesthetics in the Japanese Tradition," 151.

72 Schaeffer, *L'expérience Esthétique*, 194.

73 Melchionne, "The Point of Everyday Aesthetics," 5.

Melchionne is thus right in stressing that engagement with art is exceptional and intermittent and, except for the artists themselves, art is usually an experience of the artistic products rather than the activity itself. While any cathartic effect of a play one attends might fade, continuous activity involves more persistent hedonic values, although its very routine can become a hedonically negative factor. Finally, the last question I am trying to answer is this: is it true that the negative experienced *as negative* in everyday experience only involves activities as practical responses? In addition to the main difference already established between the positive artistic use and the purely negative presence of the negative, another distinction equally germane to the problem of repulsion arises. As I have suggested by contrasting the seeming scatological motifs in haiku with Western transgressions in modern art, the aesthetically negative elements range from ordinary to extraordinary, and so do the responses to them. For instance, the nausea experienced in front of an exhibit such as *The Zurich Load*, the daily act of cleaning or a protest against bullfights, as various attitudes towards the negative, can be classified to varying degrees as ordinary or extraordinary, but also as visceral, physiological, aesthetic, moral, political, or ecological. But the presence of the negative in its ordinary form does not necessarily trigger such responses. Thus, a final mention must be made of the negative motifs in haiku tradition. One might be tempted to classify the repugnant or negative motifs in haiku as artistic presentations of disgusting things whose real negative value is artistically converted into its exact opposite in the Aristotelian sense, thus reducing the negative motifs of haiku to a matter of aesthetic transformation. And yet, even though haiku itself is poetry, hence art, the beautification of those elements does not lie in the typical relation between the object and its image (if only because haiku represents objects through words and not visual images[74]). It is no coincidence that Masaoka Shiki stresses that, albeit all arts are accustomed to aesthetically looking at things which are otherwise dismissed as insignificant, it is haiku's privilege over other art forms to be able to render significant in the most aesthetic manner the most repugnant elements. However, I claim that this feature does not result from haiku as art, but from haiku descriptions as modes of experiencing an aesthetic atmosphere by means of harmonization which also belong to the quotidian life. As Yuriko Saito also points out with regard to negative elements in haiku, their aesthetic experience does not necessarily mean denying their negative value *per se*.[75] Therefore, the negative details that haiku tradition pays attention to can be tolerated as negative in an aesthetic atmosphere which results precisely from combinations, juxtapositions, and harmonization between various, disparate, and even contrasting motifs, ranging from bad smells and excrements to flowers, pine trees, and bird songs.[76]

8 Conclusions

In conclusion, I claim that the best alternative to account for this mixed experience mentioned earlier might be an engagement model which encompasses not only a practical aesthetics of responses and actions in relation to the negative, but also an environmental aesthetics that replaces the dogma of aesthetic distance and pure disinterested gaze with the physical, bodily participation in the heterogeneous world of the senses.[77] Since the article is concerned with a certain (negative) quality of a non-artistic aesthetic experience, it may be surprising that the examples I used belong mostly to the realm of art and not to everyday life. However, I have insisted on artistic examples because I wanted to demonstrate *a contrario* that the experience of revulsion in everyday life, although it may belong to aesthetics in a certain sense, cannot be reduced to any of the main paradigms that explain disgust or revulsion in art. First, there is a formalist explanation which mitigates the revulsion towards the content of a repugnant representation by emphasizing the form or the artistic mastery of

74 In Aristotle's, *Poetics*, the famous 1448b paragraph from chapter 4 discusses the gift of imitation in connection with mimetic arts and poetry in general, but seems to be referring by analogy to visual images in particular, since it addresses primarily the overcoming of disgust and fear.

75 Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 128–9.

76 Saito, "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection," 379.

77 See for example Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, 169–70.

depicting an object. As Diderot's famous remark on Chardin's still life depicting an eviscerated skate shows us,[78] the quality of a representation can "save" the representation of disgusting or trivial elements. While it is true that in everyday aesthetic experiences there may also be moments of a purely formal appreciation of an object's shape, colour, or light, an eviscerated fish perceived in an everyday experience is no longer bounded by the frame of a painting so as to be identified as the work of an artist such as Chardin. Second, there is a critical explanation, which marks the transition from the literal form of disgust as sensation to more abstract forms of disgust as moral, social, or political expressions of disapproval, indignation, satire, or criticism, as Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* shows us. Even if the experience of revulsion in a non-artistic context can have a critical dimension, as in the case of a garbage dump expressing the vices of a consumer society or the damage caused to the environment by human negligence, most of the everyday forms of disgust do not have a prominent critical dimension, but are rather part of the natural routine of life. This applies, of course, to immediate forms of disgust addressed from an aesthetic perspective: the same repulsive objects related to bodily secretions, waste, dirt, or excretory experience have much fewer meanings in everyday life than in scatological artworks where they can symbolize the social or political views of an artist. I have thus left aside the more abstract forms of *social* disgust that, as Martha Nussbaum points out, constitute one of the dangers of social life by threatening mutual respect, that is, disgust that targets the human dignity of a person or group of people and produces the shame and stigma on which social hierarchies and discrimination have often been based throughout history.[79] Third, there is a cognitive explanation positing the pleasure of recognizing (the representation of) a repugnant object. Although this explanation is usually associated with the power of artistic imitation, it is not impossible that the everyday experience of repugnant objects presupposes, as I have shown by citing Augustine, a positive hedonic value related to the curiosity with which repugnant objects are experienced even outside the context of their artistic imitation.

However, while everyday aesthetic experience can be characterized by a cognitive, formalist, or critical attitude, none of these features expresses its specific nature. This is why I have emphasized both the practical engagement in an experience such as cleaning and the concept of overall ambience, as described by haiku. If the display of disgusting elements in art can provoke the public disapproval of the work of art *as art*, the same elements perceived in everyday life elicit reactions aimed at eliminating them even when a public sufficiently familiar with artistic transgressions has become accustomed to accepting them in the extraordinary context of the art world. Perhaps the biggest difficulty raised by this article with regard to disgust is one already noted by Thomas Leddy in one of his articles: "We have deeply ingrained attitudes against display of human waste, attitudes that, although they might be challenged in an art gallery, probably should not be challenged publicly."[80]

Leddy further argues that there is no reasonable moral prohibition against someone finding in the image of a plastic bottle filled with urine on the side of the road a positive aesthetic property such as interesting or aesthetically pleasing, just as there is no moral obligation to find it *aesthetically* disgusting. The photograph of such an object, which most people would find repugnant, is not, according to Leddy, incompatible with positive categories when it comes to aesthetic appreciation. This does not amount to the Kantian claim that everyone is expected to find beautiful the object of a pure judgement of taste. Instead, it signifies that people with the same training in modern and contemporary visual arts are likely to find images of roadside litter interesting or aesthetically pleasing.[81] However, based on the contrast I noted earlier discussing the series of examples from the Western art world and haiku poetry, as well as Cărtărescu's antithesis in *Anthrax*, I wanted to show that the everyday experience of disgust as aesthetic experience does not depend on training in modern or contemporary art. A strictly formalist approach in art, which identifies the beauty of certain shapes and colours beyond their particular content, does not imply a similar formalist attitude in everyday aesthetic experience except in isolated cases, based on their similarity to the experiences of art. Otherwise, the ordinary

78 See Tunstall, "Diderot, Chardin."

79 See Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 321.

80 Leddy, "The Aesthetics of Junkyards," 9.

81 Ibid., 9.

experience of the negative is not a matter of artistic interest in form, nor a matter of social criticism expressed through the means of art. As I have tried to show, although we often associate the potential aesthetic value of negative objects with one form of art or another, Western art is no longer the only model for conceiving an aesthetic object, in particular a negative one. As Yuriko Saito points out, although repugnant objects have traditionally been associated with the labour of people of low status, we all have the everyday experience of waste, dirt, defecation, and so on, although not all of us have the experience of scatological artworks.[82] Therefore, the second case cannot be a model for the first. A farmer in a remote area has probably never attended an exhibition such as Manifesta 11 to see Mike Bouchet's *The Zurich Load*, but has been able to experience the overall ambience of a rural or natural landscape in the smell of pig manure or outhouses. In this respect, although it constitutes art, haiku poetry has the merit of describing a certain lived experience with the simplicity of one who perceives the surrounding nature and the simple everyday activities, and not the high art from museums and galleries. This does not mean, of course, that an experience of revulsion in everyday life is always absorbed into an overall experience of contemplation, nor does it mean that revulsion experienced beyond the realm of art is devoid of any meaning. Repulsive objects can also be expressive at times in non-artistic situations, insofar as they express, for instance, a certain side of human nature. Of course, repulsiveness as an integral part of everyday life fluctuates inevitably between aesthetic relevance and triviality, but an aesthetic paradigm which integrates the repugnant aspects of the sensible existence can be a way of reasserting the fundamental truth that nothing that is human or natural can be alien to us.

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82 Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 153.

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