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Alberto Siani on Serena Feloj's "Estetica del disgusto"

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By Alberto L. Siani

"Beautiful things" may be "difficult", as Socrates reminds us in Plato's *Hippias Major* (304e7–9), but Serena Feloj's *Estetica del disgusto. Mendelssohn, Kant e i limiti della rappresentazione* ('Aesthetics of Disgust. Mendelssohn, Kant, and the Limits of Representation') shows that ugly, or more precisely disgusting, things are not necessarily easier. Customary uncertainties on the philosophical status of beauty beset disgust too. Is disgust universal or subject-relative? What is its relation to knowledge and morality? Is it an immediate fact of nature or the result of education and culture? Does it have limits, and if so, which ones? Besides, disgust has troubles of its own. Is it something negative or positive? Is it something that can even be represented at all? There is, however, an important difference between beauty and disgust (or other forms of ugliness).

Beauty has always been a central topic of philosophy, whereas the position occupied by disgust in philosophy has been at best a marginal one. Partly, disgust shares this marginality with other negative or allegedly negative notions, which, in aesthetics and beyond, have mostly been conceived of *via negationis*, that is, as the absence of a positive notion. In Plato, Kant, or Hegel, the ugly does not possess an autonomous philosophical status: it is rather the 'other' or the 'absence' of the beautiful, which on the contrary has an autonomous philosophical status. Only relatively late does the ugly become an autonomous subject of philosophical inquiry—most notably, with Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics of Ugliness* from 1853. Certainly, disgust follows the same course. However, as we shall see, only partly.

Right at the outset, Feloj ties the origin of the debate on disgust to a central passage in the eighteenth century birth of aesthetics:

> *Mendelssohn's thought gives voice to a central passage of the eighteenth century. Starting from a Wolff-inspired aesthetics, defined by the concept of perfection, Mendelssohn progressively outlines an aesthetics based on the feelings caused by the beautiful and the ugly in view of human perfectioning. (p. 16)*

If a perfection-based aesthetics can simply ignore disgust, a feelings-based aesthetics has to consider what is possibly the least ignorable of all feelings. Furthermore, an aesthetics that aims at the perfectioning of the subject, and not at the perfection of the object or of the knowledge thereof, can go as far as reevaluating disgust as a positive feeling. While recovering a specific moment in the history of philosophy, namely the discussion of disgust by Mendelssohn and Kant, Feloj's book thus offers a significant contribution to a contemporary theory of disgust. This is particularly important in view of the fact that, while disgust occupies a significant share of the contemporary art scene (one thinks only of some works by Hermann Nitsch or Cindy Sherman), the philosophical and aesthetic debate on it is relatively recent and underdeveloped.

Feloj is well versed in the debate, beginning with what is probably to date the most complete and accurate historical investigation of disgust, namely the book published in 1999 by the German comparatist scholar Winfried Menninghaus, *Ekel: Theorie und Geschichte einer starken Empfindung* (translated into English in 2003), which Feloj masterfully translated into Italian in 2016. Moreover, exactly because of the recent nature of the debate, Feloj's book, despite not aiming for a complete overview of theories of disgust, should also be read as a complement to Menninghaus's exposition insofar as it also takes into account the developments of the almost two decades following the latter's book.

Admittedly, one may object that the presence of disgust on the artistic scene should not be overemphasised. As a matter of fact, the objection goes, disgust is but one of several possible traditionally 'negative' aesthetic attributes reclaiming a space in the twentieth century. The ugly in all its possible forms, kitsch, neo-kitsch, horror, deformity, the grotesque, etc.: the contemporary artistic landscape has 'rehabilitated' each and every negative aesthetic attribute. However, one of the merits of Feloj's book is to show that disgust is marginal in a double sense: not only as a negative concept, but also among other negative concepts. The double marginality of disgust marks its radicality, even when compared to other negative attributes. Contrary to the pervasive ubiquity and mediocrity of other negative aesthetic attributes such as ugliness or kitsch, disgust is a radical, extreme experience. In fact, this is possibly the leading thread of the book: this extreme, yet at the same time universal human emotion or reaction becomes an opportunity for reformulating aesthetics and of the relationships between aesthetics, morality, education, humanism, etc. The book thus sets itself an ambitious aim: moving from the double marginality of disgust, it ends up claiming the centrality of disgust based on its very marginality.

Hastily set aside, or even actively ignored for centuries, disgust gets its own back on traditionally more appealing aesthetic concepts, in a situation in which the latter seem to have lost much of their attractive appeal. In the general uncertainty about the value of the most famed aesthetic terms (beauty, taste, art, etc.), about their counterparts (ugliness, distaste/bad taste, industrialisation of culture, etc.), and about the status of aesthetics as such, disgust paradoxically establishes itself as an anchor and a possible new starting point for aesthetics. Feloj's defence of this thesis is based on a careful, focused historical reconstruction of Mendelssohn's and Kant's positions and articulated around several interconnected claims on both disgust and aesthetics. In Feloj's introductory words:

> *Mendelssohn and Kant provide, then, the conceptual tools to define disgust as insuperable, i.e. as a peculiar human reaction that cannot be completely revoked; as unrepresentable, i.e. as a sensation that points out something by definition unsayable and unassimilable; as cultural and subject to education; and, finally, as a physical reaction endowed with a moral character. The theory of disgust that will emerge through this definition will only be understandable in the framework of a non-normative aesthetics. (p. 20)*

1. The Eighteenth Century Debate

After the Introduction, the book offers three concise, but dense chapters: the first on Mendelssohn, the second on Kant, and the third on contemporary reprises on disgust, including Feloj's own actualisation proposal. The book is to be commended for its clarity and readability. It is both historically well-documented and theoretically appealing. The only wish it leaves unfulfilled is in fact that of a fully-fledged elaboration of Feloj's own theoretical proposal. While throughout the book we gain some substantial (and convincing) clues as to her views regarding the possible application of some central worked-out threads to contemporary debates, Feloj does not provide us with a concrete example of what such an application would look like. Given the insightfulness of the reconstruction presented, this may come as a bit of a disappointment, as one truly wishes to learn more about Feloj's view of the contemporary relevance of disgust. The final part of the book, presenting her own proposal, is really just a program sketch, and I wish Feloj will soon carry out that programme! In the meantime, I have taken the freedom to give it a go (see below, Sections 2 and 3).

The borderline nature of disgust fully comes out already in the first pages of the first chapter, dedicated to "disgust and the birth of aesthetics" before Mendelssohn (p. 22). For example, Johann Adolf Schlegel (the father of the two Schlegel brothers who were to be among the main theorists of early Romanticism) noted already in 1751:

> *Disgust alone is excluded from those unpleasant sensations whose nature can be altered through imitation. Art would here fruitlessly expend all its labour. (quoted on p. 23)*

Exclusion from artistic representation implies, for Schlegel and others, also the exclusion from philosophical consideration. Also Mendelssohn, possibly the most important voice in the aesthetic debate between Baumgarten and Kant, excludes the disgusting from the possibility of aesthetic representation. However, contrary to his intellectualist predecessors, Mendelssohn is interested in the theoretical implications of disgust. He maintains that disgust is an immediate sensation in which it is not possible to distinguish between reality and fiction. A painting representing a disgusting object does not, strictly speaking, affect the sense through which painting works, namely sight. Instead, a representation "can also become unbearable to the sense of sight through a simple association of concepts, in that we remember the displeasure they prompt for taste, smell, or touch. But, properly speaking, the sense of sight has no objects of disgust" (quoted on pp. 27–8). The only difference between smelling something disgusting and seeing it in a painting is the higher intensity of feeling in the first case. The very presence of the object, continues Mendelssohn, is

enough to 'offend' the spirit, independently of whether it is a real or a depicted object. This also means that the feeling of disgust, with its utterly immediate character, never displays a reflective, intellectual aspect (something that, on the contrary, is possible to have both in the experience of the beautiful and of the ugly). On this ground, disgust is excluded from artistic representation, not however because it should not be represented, but because it cannot be represented (p. 79).

This is another important point of departure of Mendelssohn from other eighteenth century aestheticians, for whom the thesis that disgust can never be redeemed through art sets normative limits to specific forms of art. Probably the most famous case in this sense is the debate on the Laocoon sculpture group. Arguing against the art historian and 'founder' of Neoclassicism Johann Winckelmann, G.E. Lessing claims that poetry and figurative arts are specifically different forms of expression, and that each of them has to respect precise limits. These limits are set, among others, by the need to avoid disgust. More specifically, in the case of the Laocoon, the physical pain cannot be represented in the same way through poetry and sculpture. Poetry, being a form of art with a temporal dimension, can offer a beautiful representation of an ugly moment (Laocoon screaming with physical pain). Sculpture, by contrast—since it develops only in space but not in time, and therefore cannot present a sequence of events but only one point of time—has to avoid the direct representation of pain. In the sculpture group, Laocoon is represented as sighing or moaning, not as screaming, as a static image of a gaping mouth immortalised in the sculpture would not have evoked the dignity of Laocoon's noble reaction to pain, but only the feeling of disgust connected with someone's oral cavity. Since in the experience of disgust the distinction between reality and fiction collapses, if the sculptor had depicted Laocoon in an attitude of extreme pain while shouting with a fully open mouth, we would have perceived real disgust, not its aesthetic transfiguration. More generally, since it cannot render that kind of ugliness in an aesthetically pleasing way, art should simply avoid any disgust-associated representation.

In Lessing, therefore, disgust sets precise, normative limits to art: some things just *should not* be represented. By contrast, for Mendelssohn, disgust *cannot* be aesthetically represented. What is more, for him, "whether it is a pleasant or an unpleasant one, we prefer to have a representation rather than none at all" (p. 72). This is because, in Mendelssohn's sentiment-based aesthetic humanism, representative activity as such puts in motion and vivifies our spirit, thus contributing to its development. Thus, rather than normatively forbidding certain representations as unworthy or even bad (none are), Mendelssohn phenomenologically investigates the limits of representation itself, and disgust as constituting these limits.

Now, there are two ways in which disgust sets a limit to representation. The first is the obvious case, already seen, of a violent repulsion. The second is the subtler, but not less important case of disgust by saturation, i.e. disgust provoked by an unmixed, persisting pleasant feeling. The typical example would be a food that is completely, sickeningly sweet. Thus,

> *disgust marks not only the outer border of aesthetics, that which cannot be the subject of aesthetic illusion. It also insinuates itself deep into the concept that defines aesthetics as a discipline, i.e. it is found within the very concept of beauty. (p. 31)*

Based on the idea of the superiority of "mixed feelings" (p. 30), pure, unmixed beauty turns into its opposite. Just like disgust as violent repulsion, also the idea of disgust by saturation through excessive beauty or sweetness is widespread in the eighteenth century debate. This idea, besides being intuitively appealing, adds a theoretical depth that is highly relevant for contemporary reprises. Put simply, we cannot compartmentalise beauty and disgust as if they were two independent hostile territories. Beauty and disgust seem to be actually homogeneous: if what is disgusting sets a limit to the beautiful, this is an internal limit, not one set by an external force. An image or an expressive form can offend our spirit not only because of its extreme deformity or ugliness, but also because of its excessive beauty/sweetness. This is because a sickening beauty does not offer any resistance, any edge to our gaze, thus blocking the vital motion and expansion of our spirit in the very moment in which we expect it to be vivified. Sickening beauty ultimately makes representation impossible insofar as it refers the perceiving subject only to himself, without providing him with the multiplicity and contrast that are necessary for spiritual activity and growth.

Kant's theory of aesthetic disgust—Feloj tells us at the outset of Chapter 2—seems to be an almost identical restatement of Mendelssohn's position (pp. 83–4). For Kant, nausea (*Ekel*) is "a strong vital sensation" given to human beings primarily as a defence mechanism to expel ingested elements that may threaten their very existence or their moral freedom (p. 114). Again, we can be disgusted by something that is physically or morally too alien to us to be assimilated (excrements, some morally repelling crime), but also by something—again either physical or moral—lacking contrast so much so that it inhibits our vital movements (pure, unmixed sweet, or boredom stretching to existential nausea). Therefore, in general, the experience of disgust is the experience of a limit: a limit to our perception, to our own existence, to our freedom and, of course, also a limit to art. This is very clear in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, §48, where he gives us a powerful characterisation of disgust:

> *Beautiful art displays its excellence precisely by describing beautifully things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing. The furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like can, as harmful things, be very beautifully described, indeed even represented in painting; only one kind of ugliness cannot be represented in a way adequate to nature without destroying all aesthetic satisfaction, hence beauty in art, namely, that which arouses disgust [Ekel]. (KU, AA 5:312; trans. modified)*[1].

Thus, art is most excellent when it is able to offer beautiful representations of ugly or displeasing objects, like war, diseases, death etc. But, Kant tells us, there is one, and only one kind of ugly or displeasing objects that not even beautiful art can redeem: namely the disgusting. The disgusting object marks the limit of aesthetic representation, that which can never be made beautiful. This is because, Kant goes on,

> *in this strange sensation, resting on sheer imagination, the object is represented as if it were imposing the enjoyment which we are nevertheless forcibly resisting, [and] the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation itself from the nature of the object itself, and it then becomes impossible for the former to be taken as beautiful. (KU, AA, 5:312)*

Basically, disgust is such a strong, violent sensation, that it cancels the borders between reality and fiction. An artwork representing something disgusting tries to impose on us a pleasure that we resist with all one's might, because the represented object is real to us. When an artistic representation disgusts us, our disgust is real, not fictional, or better said: the borders between object and representation, between reality and artistic fiction collapse, so that the representation of a disgusting object can never be beautiful. Thus, while other forms of ugliness can be artistically represented—in other words, there can be beautiful representations of ugly objects—disgust cannot. This also means that the category of disgust, despite having clearly to do with perception and sensation, seems to fall outside the borders of aesthetics, or at least to constitute those very borders. Menninghaus's words may help us sum up the limits-setting function of disgust in the context of the eigtheenth century foundation of aesthetics:

> *Eighteenth century's foundation of modern aesthetics can be described negatively as a foundation based on prohibition of what is disgusting. The 'aesthetic' is the field of a particular 'pleasure' whose absolute other is disgust: so runs its briefest, its only undisputed, yet almost wholly forgotten basic definition. (Menninghaus 2003:7)*

Nevertheless, disgust is not just a physical reaction to some obscure dimension of the human being that cannot be intellectualised or moralised:

> *In a moral-anthropological context, disgust is an admittedly physical reaction marking the civilized and cultivated human being's aversion against what he abandoned throughout his civilization process, against his animal, anti-human part. In this sense, the reaction of disgust is not at all a renunciation of the bodily dimension, but is on the contrary a moral agent's empirical reaction, however requiring some form of education. (p. 127)*

The topic of education, in its relation with disgust and aesthetics, is another central thread in Feloj's reconstruction and proposal sketch. Her view is

> *that the reaction of disgust can acquire value in the empirical-moral sphere, and that also aesthetics, even though it excludes disgust from its transcendental inquiry, can make use of it in the anthropological context, in order to contribute to the education of humanity, in a non-normative way, and through art. (p. 128)*

Building on the late eighteenth century idea of an "aesthetic education" or an "aesthetics of morals" (p. 128), Feloj suggests that disgust, while excluded from artistic representation, can act as a concretisation of moral ideas and moral progress. There can be an education *to* or *of* disgust, constituting a kind of immediately recognisable, wholly empirical, culturally determined yet universal blueprint of the individual and collective process of civilisation:

> *Art thus has its limit in disgust, an unredeemable, insuperable displeasure, which can however be educated. Educating to disgust means recognising it as unrepresentable, but at the same time using it as a tool for the concretisation of morality, drawing the boundaries for the advancement of the tendency to civilisation. (p. 166)*

Given the central place disgust is given within aesthetics based on its very marginality, education to/of disgust becomes, in Feloj's reconstruction, a powerful innovative instance of the traditional idea of an aesthetic education.

Now, clearly there would be much more to say about disgust in Mendelssohn and Kant and in the eighteenth century in general, or, for that matter, in the later debate not covered by Feloj, where, as Menninghaus notices, we rather witness a fascination for disgust, and the psychological-anthropological and cultural investigation of its nature and the reason for its repression (e.g. in Kafka, Freud, Kristeva etc.). In order to avoid trying to cover too much ground, however, I prefer to close this brief examination by recalling some of the tensions in the concept of disgust that Feloj's first two chapters bring to light. Disgust is at the same time marginal and central, excluded by and constitutive of aesthetics, stemming from an outright violent rejection and by the excess of an otherwise pleasant reaction, an immediate physical reaction and the blueprint of moral civilisation and progress. How does this complex, apparently even contradictory nature of disgust reflect on what Feloj attempts to do in the third and final chapter of her book, namely an appropriation and actualisation of disgust in the aesthetic debate of our own time? Feloj offers us some clues through a brief critical review of later positions, from Schiller, via Kolnai and Derrida, up to Nussbaum and empirical psychology, before concluding with some programmatic observations on the possible developments of her own suggestion of a non-normative aesthetics of disgust.

However, as already mentioned, the book does not provide an instance of a concrete application of this theory of disgust to contemporary debates. Instead of commenting on the third chapter, then, I have chosen a different, more direct way to engage with the topic: by discussing a specific case of application of the coordinates sketched here to an issue of our own time. In this way I shall be able to present and at the same time test the implications of Feloj's programmatic proposal, while touching on some other of its aspects that I have not discussed up to this point.

2. An Actualisation Attempt: Disgust and Religious Satire

In this section, I consider a specific case of application of some main threads of the theory of disgust presented above, namely to the topic of offence, and more precisely of the offensiveness of images containing religious satire. I should say in advance that this choice is the result of a coincidence, and not based on any hints in Feloj's book. Simply put, I read her book while teaching and doing research on the issue of the offensive character of religious-satirical images against the background of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack. This topic—while prominent in the headlines of newspapers at the time of the attack and in the political and public discourse since—has seldom been the subject of philosophical investigation. Admittedly, offence is a common topic for ethics and the philosophy of law, however, the offensive character of religion-satirical images as such has been scarcely thematised.

In order to do so, one needs to weigh not only ethical and juridical factors, but also aesthetic ones. I attempted to frame a distinction between moral offence and aesthetic offence, and began focusing on the latter. The questions I had in mind included, but were not limited to, the following ones: are there images or forms of expression in the first place that we find offensive independently of our moral judgement because they offend our taste, say? If yes, what are the characteristics of such images? Is it possible to formulate general principles in this regard? Is

there a symmetry with the peculiar 'subjective universality' of the judgements on the beautiful? Are aesthetically offensive images ugly, tasteless, disgusting or, if not, what are they? What about the so-called 'negative pleasure', that is, the one elicited by grotesque, ugly, terrifying forms of expression? Are there 'limits' to be set to artistic representation? What is the relationship between aesthetic offence and education?

In order to begin to unravel these topics, I started investigating different instances of the aesthetically offensive, disgust among them. And there I decided to combine my own hopelessly vague questions and intuitions with Feloj's meticulous historical reconstruction and ambitious theoretical programme, to see whether each may benefit from the other. While pursuing this aim here, my own intuitions may become more precise, and Feloj's programme could be put to test. Clearly, any operation of 'application' of a philosophical theory to a specific concrete issue runs the risk of making the theory fit the issue at hand. The risk here is even higher, as neither of Feloj's primary sources, Mendelssohn and Kant, thought of disgust in connection with religious satire. In order to minimise as far as possible this 'loss in translation', let me here briefly state the threads in Feloj's reconstruction that I shall be mostly drawing upon, and how I intend to apply them.

(1) The idea of disgust as setting limits to artistic representation, which I employ to investigate the issue of the limits of satire.

(2) I shall argue that the twofold nature of disgust—disgust as unassimilable otherness and disgust as sickening sweetness—can be used to determine the limits to what each person may accept as satire.

(3) Feloj's suggestion of an education to/of disgust will be reformulated in the sense of an education to satire, as one of the possible forms of the concretisation of morality and moral progress via aesthetic education.

(4) Finally, in my attempt I shall follow and try to undergird Feloj's non-normative and non-moralistic, yet morally relevant conception of aesthetics.

Now, as we saw, on the one hand disgust can be a qualitative experience of unassimilable otherness. On the other hand, disgust can have to do with a quantitative excess of something that is, in moderate amounts, pleasant. Using simple examples, the first case might be eating excrements, while the second might be eating something overly sweet. Excrements are qualitatively disgusting no matter the quantity, whereas sugar is disgusting only in excessive amounts, not qualitatively. Thus, we may say that disgust can be caused both by the too unpleasant and by the too pleasant. Accordingly, this section is divided into two subsections, Section 2.1 dealing with the former, and Section 2.2 with the latter.

2.1

As for the first case, the unassimilable other is at the root of the collapse of the distinction between reality and artistic fiction: certain objects, situations, etc. just cannot be aesthetically redeemed. This seems to be the case with a possible reaction of complete rejection to the Charlie Hebdo images. Let me quote a short comment I found in an online article published right after the attack on Charlie Hebdo, with the title 'Finding Something to Say about Charlie Hebdo', by Justin Erik Halldór Smith, a professor of philosophy in Paris. He writes:

> *Today when the assassins were fleeing toward their getaway car, they shouted: "On a vengé le prophète Mohammed. On a tué Charlie Hebdo." One cannot help but think: there is a double confusion here. Not just one but two fictional characters have been mistaken for real people. And twelve real people have been killed as a result. (Halldór Smith 2015)*

So the idea is that the killers have avenged a fictional-symbolic character by killing another fictional-symbolic one. But through this action twelve real people have been killed. From the point of view of this kind of reaction, a satirical image of Mohammed just cannot be seen through the lenses of representation or symbol: it is for all intents and purposes an attack on a real person, an attack that calls for a real defence, or, sadly, a real counterattack. Of course, here I cannot even touch upon the question of the meaning of religious symbols in different religions and cultural contexts, the representability of the sacred and the divine, the aniconism, etc. I just want to focus on some aesthetic aspects and suggest that it looks as if the terrorists, in the terms we have been exploring, experienced disgust at the sight of the images. It was no longer an image to be interpreted, criticised, or laughed at, but a real beloved person who was defiled and insulted. This is actually a persisting motive in several articles on this topic written by Muslim intellectuals. Many of them tell us that they were not outraged by the offence to a symbol, but by the offence against a real, living character. Accordingly, one may argue that one way of putting the virulent controversies over the Charlie Hebdo case (and similar ones) is to say that some of the people who were offended by the images did so because they felt disgusted by them. They may have found themselves, in the terms of Menninghaus's starting definition of disgust, in "a state of alarm and emergency, an acute crisis of self-preservation in the face of an unassimilable otherness" (Menninghaus 2003:1). We may think of the reaction to Charlie Hebdo cartoons as a fanatic overreaction to the mocking of an eminent religious symbol; in fact, it would probably be more accurate to say that it was, in the eyes of the offended, a direct assault coming from an "unassimilable otherness" evoking a visceral response. In a quite specific sense, this perception of being in "a state of alarm and emergency, an acute crisis of self-preservation" sets a limit to what one can accept as satire.

In such cases, the distinction between reality and fiction becomes unavailable. Any attempt to argumentatively counter such reactions without addressing the collapse of the distinction between reality and fiction will most likely miss the point. It will not help to be reminded of the importance of freedom of satire and speech, of the possibly critical and non-insulting intentions of the cartoonists, of the opportunity for the offended to reply with satirical images in like manner, etc. The point is that the experience of someone showing such a reaction is a radical, extreme one, hardly accessible to any argumentative strategies. If we want to address the possibility of such reactions of extreme, apparently unwarranted offence-taking, we need to go to their roots, which means, among others, considering how to deal with the aesthetic aspects of the "unassimilable otherness" and the collapse of the distinction between fiction and reality. I elaborate on this in Section 3.

2.2

Let us now turn to the other extreme, that is to disgust as a result of excessive sweetness. After the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack, many claimed that the cartoonists had violated the limits of satire, that satire should avoid being offensive, and that more in general, in a pluralistic society, we should be careful

to employ a politically correct language in order not to offend different sensibilities. While this may seem to be a reasonable claim, it hosts in fact the possibility of a 'disgusting' outcome. Once we eliminate all the potentially offensive or harsh tones from satire (and from art and communication generally), we are left with comfortable, reassuring, hackneyed expressive forms that still pretend to communicate deep contents, or even to unveil uncomfortable or revolutionary truths. This is the case, for example, of the allegedly 'satirical' and 'cynical' images in an article on the website trueactivist (http://www.trueactivist.com/these-12-satirical-cartoons-depict-the-disturbing-reality-of-modern-day-society/). Imagine someone is actually looking for cynical images on the "disturbing reality of modern day society", and bumps into such images. Instead of the expected reaction of shock, provocation, and possibly outrage, he will find only a cheesy, self-comforting sentimentalism disguised as corrosive satire. Such images are hence not only of poor taste, but, given their higher moral claim, even disgusting in that they lack any edge, any thought-provoking potential that would be necessary to support that claim. Their softness and sweetness, and the lack of any contrasting element will instead provoke a feeling of saturation, even though they might seem morally unproblematic and preferable to potentially troubling or offensive images. In fact, I claim, they should be taken as the outer limit to what may legitimately be considered as satire, i.e. "the use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues" (definition as given in The Oxford Dictionary (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/satire)). While one may legitimately enjoy or be comforted with sentimentalism as such, the satire-disguise ought, if one is aware of the nature of satire, to provoke disgust stemming from an overdose of sweetness or a sickening beauty. Hence, we should be careful, while trying to avoid the form of disgust presented in Section 2.1, not to fall into the opposite extreme of disgust.

One could also think of a third case, that of a racist image posing as satire. It may look as if this case is similar to the one discussed in Section 2.1 insofar as the image is not a harmless one. However, I argue that it is instead closer to the one addressed in Section in 2.2, insofar as a subject enjoying it is a subject that is not challenged in his immediate, comforting beliefs (we could in fact blame such an image as populistic), and the image itself is fake, insofar as it does not expose 'people's stupidity or vices', but simply confirms their ungrounded prejudices. The proximity between the first and second cases will hopefully become clearer in the next section, where I turn to the issue of education.

3. Disgust, Education, and Aesthetics

Based on the application of the notion of disgust to the issue of satire, I want to suggest that disgust as unassimilable otherness (Section 2.1) and disgust as sickening sweetness (Section 2.2) constitute the opposite boundaries of what we are able to enjoy as satire. Following Feloj, I do not intend this as a normative statement: each subject will set their own boundaries as to what he/she enjoys in terms of satire. Moreover, these boundaries may be repositioned over time and at any point in time, based on personal experiences and education. We may be more or less sensitive to certain topics, and our taste may be more or less refined.

It is to be expected, for example, that someone with an educated taste will be able to enjoy satire that is closer to the unassimilable otherness border, and would be easily dismissive of the satire closer to the sickening sweetness. On the contrary, someone with less education would probably be more inclined to enjoy the apparent harmlessness of the latter, and be easily repelled by the shocking effect of the former.

Now, what does education look like vis-à-vis the two extremes? I should start by pointing out that I am interested only in what education would mean in this specific context, and which goals it should promote. I shall completely leave aside, due to space and topic constraints, the fundamental issues of *how* such an education should be implemented, of the relationship between socio-cultural context and individual development, the role of public/private institutions, etc. Similar issues should obviously be taken up by a fully-fledged theory of education, which is however not my aim here.

This being said, let us begin with the case described in Section 2.1, that is, disgust as unassimilable otherness. Here a violent reaction of disgust ensues from an expressive form that is too far away from, and apparently incompatible with, the religious and cultural horizon of the receiving subject, leading the latter to an immediate 'expulsion' of that absolute other, as if he had swallowed poison. Here, education would have to take the form of a mind-opening experience. Educating this subject would mean to try and lead him to be able to assimilate more and more, not to dismiss as totally alien to himself the possibility of representing, and criticising, religious values and conceptions. In this way, he will be able to conceive religious satire not as reality, but as representation, and to react to it accordingly, whether positively or negatively. This can be an actual case of education of disgust: certain contents and expressive forms are no longer the unassimilable other, but simply instances of communication that can enter and be appraised or criticised within the individual spectrum of reflection and the public discourse. The change in the 'disgust range' of this subject would be a concrete, sensible display of morality and moral education. Even some prima facie disgusting images—like some Charlie Hebdo cartoons—may then acquire a moral significance, showing that disgust can be educated and grow into an important piece of concrete morality.

As for the account in Section 2.2, I have argued that the case of an utterly uncontroversial, harmless image posing as satire constitutes the other limit of this form of communication. It is disgusting because of its sickening sweetness: the artistic medium—in this case the satirical pretence—cannot redeem the pompous hollowness of the real message. However, because of their comforting harmlessness, the appreciation of such images is often taken to be a token of a healthy morality. Here, education should take the opposite direction to the case discussed in Section 2.1. Its aim should not be to be receptive to, but rather to reject these images as disgusting, insisting on their absolute lack of edge and utter inability to contribute to the perfectioning of the subject by offering him something new or different. If in the case discussed in Section 2.1 we had the necessity to deal with the absolute other, in the case addressed Section 2.2 we are dealing with the absolute same, with the total lack of multiplicity and difference between subject and object. Just like in the previous case I argued that education can help *against* a disgusted reaction, here I suggest that education should lead to the subject's ability to experience disgust, so it should be an education *to* disgust. In this case, education aims at provoking a negative reaction against an

expressive form that is not challenging, and hence not contributing to perfectioning, and at the same time fake insofar as it poses as something that it is not.

Also in third case, like the one discussed in Section 2.2, the image constitutes an objective, insuperable limit. Here education cannot aim at opening the mind and opposing a spontaneous reaction of disgust. On the contrary, education has to establish and motivate the disgusting nature of such images insofar as they do not take the perceiving subject a single step beyond himself and cannot contribute to his perfectioning, while at the same time claiming to do so. Thus, in the third as well as second cases education will not question or try to suspend the reaction of disgust, but will instead take the form of education *to* disgust. In all three cases, however different, disgust becomes a concrete, sensible display of morality and moral progress.

Summing up, applying the notion of disgust to the issue of satire seems to lead to the following conclusions. First, in order to get to the roots of extreme reactions to satire, such as the ones in the Charlie Hebdo case, we need to consider the collapse of the distinction between reality and fiction as a decisive point. Second, satire should not, in order to escape the possibility of such reactions, turn to the opposite extreme, namely renouncing edgy, ridiculing and controversial forms of expression, as this would mean the very dissolution of the satirical form into something 'disgusting' on the grounds of its excessive, sickening sweetness. In the first case, education must fight the disgust-producing point of view that certain images can never be assimilated into a morally permissible discourse, thus expanding the moral-aesthetic horizon of the subject. In the second case, we have images that are similar to a sickeningly sweet food in that they offer no contrast and no boundary: the aesthetic-satirical pretence cannot redeem the actual hollowness of the content. Despite the subject/culture relativity of the experience of disgust, there are some objective facts imposing some (minimal) constraints. On the one hand, if certain controversial contents can become less controversial, less disgusting, less unassimilable through a process of education of the reaction of disgust, then at least in some cases the offence is not located in the satirical image, but truly in the eye of the beholder. This beholder's gaze can and should be put in the condition of seeing farther. On the other hand, an image that is completely uncontroversial, on which we can all agree without any challenge, is not a satirical one, just like overtly offensive images having the sole aim of insulting or humiliating, e.g. racist, homophobic, or sexist images. A subject enjoying the kind of images discussed in Section 2.2 is a subject with bad taste and/or with ethical shortcomings.

Satire that works occupies the space between these two extremes set by disgust: between what we *should not* accept as satire (disgust by sickening sweetness) and what we *cannot* accept as satire (disgust by unassimilable otherness). This space is not only differently configured depending on the subject and the context, but also constantly being reconfigured for both individuals and groups. Education here should work at firmly establishing the former boundary, and at progressively extending the latter. Nonetheless, the existence of boundaries, as fluid as they can be, testifies to disgust's non-normative capacity to set limits to at least one instance of artistic representation. Just like Feloj suggests, the main point of an aesthetics of disgust is, *pace* Lessing, not to determine what art (or specific art forms) should or should not do, but rather (1) to show what art (or a

specific art form) can or cannot do, and (2) to offer some clues about the moral connotation of certain aesthetic reactions and emotions, their development, and their educability.

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Notes:

Ekel is translated as "loathing" in the Cambridge translation.↩

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