

# Negative Aesthetics, Grotesque Bodies and Disgusting Fashion in the 21st Century

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## Abstract

The aesthetics of body and dress are in a continuous flux. The body, being the locus where fashion challenges the traditional norms, escapes from the narrow boundaries of the conventionally beautiful; the disgusting soma, in the realm of Negative Aesthetics, takes its place. In this paper, I attempt to define what is disgusting fashion and how can contribute to the deliberation of the body from the restricting margins of the aesthetically beautiful. The distorted imagery of the feminine soma is the center of the analysis of the *non-beautiful as an aesthetically pleasing phenomenon*. Different examples of repulsive clothing are analyzed from a philosophical point of view, in order to understand the relation between the negative emotional responses towards disgusting fashion and its aesthetic value.

**Keywords:** Disgust; Soma; Negative Aesthetics; Feminine; Fashion.

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## Introduction

Body and dress live in a tight symbiosis. Through time, the ideals of body and dress transformed, evolved, and changed one another. The aesthetics of the body as well as the aesthetics of the dress not only have affected the beauty standards but also challenged them. The body became the locus where fashion criticizes what is conventionally beautiful, appealing or sexual. In this context, the distortion of the body, the signs of decay, the disgusting truth of bodily characteristics such as hair, scars, fluids etc. can be re-interpreted and analyzed in the realm of Negative Aesthetics.

This essay attempts to analyze the grotesque bodies as a crucial part of disgusting fashion, in the theoretical framework of Negative Aesthetics. Negative Aesthetics, as part of the Everyday Aesthetics, consist of aesthetic objects which are considered painful, distressing or repellent. While the distorted, imperfect body used to be covered with clothes, fashion of the 21<sup>st</sup> century highlights the violated, grotesque soma; modifications, prosthetics and unconventional materials and techniques violate (aesthetically and physically) both body and dress. The term “disgusting fashion” refers to clothing linked to negative emotions such as horror, fear and repulsion and usually has to do with clothes that restrict, distort, deform the body or make it seem as decayed, sick and violated. In this way, the dressed body becomes disgusting, almost monstrous (an idea that is strongly related to femininity). The anti-aesthetics of the repulsive fashioned body and the distorted imagery of the feminine soma are the center of the analysis of the non-beautiful as an aesthetically pleasing phenomenon. Regarding the terms “body” and “soma” in this essay, the former is used to refer to the physical body (the body parts, the skin etc.) while the latter refers to the conceptual body (the philosophical, political, artistic perspective of the body). This distinction is based on the philosopher Thomas Hanna’s theory; he defined them as two distinct viewpoints for observing a human: the body as a phenomenon perceived from the outside (a third person perspective) and the soma as the body internally perceived (first person perspective).

In order to understand the place of the grotesque bodies and the disgusting fashion in the realm of Negative Aesthetics, disgust should be analyzed as an aesthetic phenomenon. According to Aurel Kolnai, disgust is an emotion that causes us to feel repulsed but also captures our attention; he uses the term *macabre allure* to describe the way that disgust draws our attention, despite the fact that we want to keep the object of disgust at distance.<sup>1</sup> Plato (Rep. 4.439e ff.) is the first author to discuss the allure of disgust. When Leontius was unable to take his eyes off the executed bodies, he experienced the repulsion that Plato describes.<sup>2</sup> Kolnai also claims that what is inherently repulsive “traps” the attention, piques curiosity, and draws the subject. In differentiating disgust from fear, Kyprianidou states *that the latter is an avoidance response that distances us from the repulsive item, but* disgust avoids the repulsive object yet remains attached. Disgust has a contradictory and confusing relationship with its object.<sup>3</sup> Disgust, according to Sara Heinämaa, “alternates between repulsion and attraction and is able to combine instantaneous, even violent rejection with persistent fascination.”<sup>4</sup> In a very similar context, Korsmeyer in her work *Savoring Disgust*, refers to the paradoxes of aversion, in which she includes disgust. She states that there is a specific kind of disgust, namely *aesthetic disgust*, which can be expressed by taking pleasure or having a positive emotional response towards works of art that are disgusting.<sup>5</sup> Richard Shusterman in his work *Wittgenstein’s Somaesthetics: Body Feeling in Philosophy of Mind, Art and Ethics* that “the purely corporeal can be uncanny”; the relationship between corporeality and uncanniness can be understood in the framework of Somaesthetics.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Somaesthetics of the Everyday (and, by

1. Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 42.
2. Donald Lateiner and Dimos Spatharas, *The Ancient Emotion of Disgust* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.
3. Efi Kyprianidou, “On Moral Disgust in Art: Imaginative Resistance and Empathic Engagement,” in *Art and Aesthetic Experience*, ed. K. Batinaki (Heraklion: Crete University Press). (forthcoming)
4. Sara Heinämaa, “Disgust,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotions*, eds. Thomas Szanto, Hilge Landweer (London: Routledge, 2020), 9.
5. Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair of Aesthetics* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9.
6. Richard Shusterman, “Wittgenstein’s Somaesthetics: Body Feeling in Philosophy of Mind, Art and Ethics,” *Revue interna-*

association, fashion as part of Everyday Aesthetics) cannot be characterized as a wholly negative or a wholly positive aesthetics but as a melioristic aesthetics. In this context, disgusting fashion can also have an aesthetically pleasing perspective.

Julia Kristeva, in her book *Powers of Horror* (1980), analyzes the connection between the female body and the despicable. Kristeva claims that the corpse (as well as the wound or bodily fluids such as blood) does not indicate death but is instead “what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death”, by elucidating the connection between the fear of the violation of our physical boundaries, the disgust that this violation evokes, and our desire to stare at it.<sup>7</sup> In her book *Hiding from Humanity*, Martha Nussbaum discusses the feeling of disgust toward particular groups (such as women, homosexuals, Jews, and others) that are stigmatized as having animalistic traits in an effort by privileged groups to “step further away from being animal and mortal themselves.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, she contends that there is a particular kind of “misogynistic disgust”; through sexuality, femininity is connected to disgust, fear, and desire. In *Fashion at the Edge*, Caroline Evans examines the idea of a wound in relation to clothing, illuminating the aesthetic function of trauma, the pleasure derived from the disgusting representations of femininity, and the connection between disgust, the traumatized woman, and clothing as a protective armor.<sup>9</sup> According to Jonathan Sawaday, whom she quotes, “the body’s interior is a Medusa’s head that speaks directly of our own mortality and that, regardless of the sex of the body, interiority is first feminized and then sexualized in representation”, while she also examines the relationships between mortality, “interiority,” and the female body.<sup>10</sup>

In this framework, this essay tries to answer the following questions: a) what is disgusting fashion and can it fit the narrow boundaries of the traditionally beautiful ideals and b) can repulsiveness liberate the restricting boundaries of the traditional norms?

Since the emotion of disgust is a multicultural phenomenon with different layers of understanding, it is crucial to note that in this essay the research interest is focused on physical disgust rather than moral disgust. Although there is a strong connection between those two kinds of disgust, the latter can be considered as part of Ethics, therefore it should be explored independently.

## Shapes, Textures and Traces

The body coexists with the dress, both changing form and meaning through the process of wearing. Changing the form or the anatomy of the body can be the source of disgust. Clothes that constrict, modify or violate the body tend to be not only uncomfortable, but are considered as ugly, anti-aesthetic, uncanny, even monstrous or provocative. Portraying the female body as imperfect (traditionally characterized as Ugly), and especially when it is made to seem “ugly” in many cases is interpreted as offensive. In the case of Alexander McQueen, a designer that “found beauty in grotesque,” most of his collections embodied the idea of disgust as something aesthetically pleasing.

The grotesque body is usually the disgusting body. The disgusting soma is strongly related to monstrosity and the uncanny. Human beings are socially trained to feel repelled by anything that seems “abnormal” — disgust has an evolutionary role in protecting health (distaste/core disgust), protects the psyche from fears about mortality and decay (animal nature disgust), so when the body is presented as disfigured, the first emotional response to this image is negative. In terms of fashion, there was a turn in fashion history, especially with the influence of Japanese designers such as Rei Kawakubo, when the dress stopped being a way to beautify, correct, improve or make the body look attractive (in traditional

*tionale de philosophie*, Vol.219, n. 1 (2002): 93–94.

7. Julia, Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

8. Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 107–108.

9. Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2003), 145.

10. Evans, 224.

terms); Soma became a mean of communication of ideas, a philosophical ground where the designer is able to express and challenge oneself. In this way, Beauty started to separate itself from the idea of the aesthetically pleasing.

In order to understand the nature of disgusting fashion, Noel Carroll and Filippo Contesi's *Taxonomy of Disgust in Art* should be applied.<sup>11</sup> Similar to art, disgusting fashion can be categorized as follows: a) clothing whose subject is disgusting and whose vehicles are disgusting, b) clothing whose subject is not disgusting and whose vehicles are and c) clothing whose subject is disgusting and whose vehicles are not.

Disgusting fashion is related to the use of disgusting materials. Clothes that have slimy or sticky texture, or they are made of unconventional materials (meat, worms) can be extremely repulsive, despite their design or their aesthetic value. The contact of the skin with these materials that remind us of decomposition turns the body itself into a disgusting object. In the case of Alexander McQueen's worm-filled bodice (Hunger Collection 1996), both subject and vehicle are disgusting. The designer's attempt to portray the decay of the body and the rotting flesh had a shocking result, as the worms were trapped between the corset and the model's skin. In a very similar context, the provocative and controversial appearance of Lady Gaga in the 2010's VMA Awards with the infamous "meat dress", is considered as disgusting because of the use of raw meat but the meaning behind the dress, namely the visibility of gay people in the Army, was not disgusting at all.

Disgust, in terms of fashion and clothing, is a feeling that may be also provoked by the traces that the body leaves in the clothes. Blood, sweat, breast milk, bodily fluids and secretions (not only as stains but also as odors), hair have been the sign of poor hygiene and, in many cases, poor morals as well. The association between moral and physical disgust in the context of fashion and the body is a research area out of the focus of this essay. What is important to highlight is the power of the body's imprint on dress, which is able not only to be the source of disgust but also to morally characterize the wearer. Of course, in this case the subject is not disgusting per se, but the vehicle is. For example, the creations of the brand LeMÁine are made of disgusting textures that remind of decayed or slitted flesh. While the vehicle is disgusting (or actually is a reference to something disgusting), the subject is not, since the materials only serve the gore aesthetics of the brand.

In terms of morally disgusting fashion, there are some particular examples where clothing can elicit disgust, because it reminds or it refers to morally disgusting actions (pedophilia, rape etc.). In this case, the subject is disgusting but the vehicle is not. There are two characteristic examples of the references of disgusting actions in fashion. Alexander McQueen in his collection Highland Rape turned his models into rape victims and survivors (as a historical reference to the "rape" of Scotland by the English). The use of ripped and stained materials was not something revolting but the models walking in a strange and discomforting way, with bruises and an empty look in their eyes were enough to elicit disgust. The second example is the Balenciaga advertisement that portrays young children with their teddy bears dressed in BDSM costumes, while they are surrounded by different items with very controversial meanings. The references to pedophilia and the indirect sexualization of children are enough to elicit disgust, even if the advertisement was supposed to be just "a cool ad."

## A Brief History of Disgusting Bodies

Starting from its physiology, the body sweats, enjoys, desires, hurts, creates and destroys (itself). The Soma has been through a lot of challenges-starting from Greek Mythology and the images of Mythical Monsters, which more often than not were females such as Medusa, Skylla, Syrens etc. Monstrosity seems to be strongly related to disgust and the animalistic femininity — especially when it comes to the depiction of the monsters, they usually have "the head of a woman" and, in some of the cases above,

11. Noel Carroll and Filippo Contesi, "A Taxonomy of Disgust in Art," in *Art, Excess and Education*, eds. Kevin Tavin, Mira Kallio-Tavin & Max Rynänen (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 21–38.

female breasts or even female genitals. Fashion theorist Caroline Evans also analyzes the relations between mortality, “interiority” and the female body, quoting Jonathan Sawaday and stating that “the body’s interior is a Medusa’s head that speaks directly of our own mortality and that, regardless of the sex of the body, interiority is first feminized and then sexualized in representation.”<sup>12</sup> The connection between monstrosity, disgust and the female body was followed by the demonization of the body by the Christian Church. The flesh is a gift from God but is also evil- the soma is a holy temple but also sinful. In this context, clothing’s role was not only to protect but also to cover, to hide the shameful body and erase any sexual connotations.

There are some very characteristic examples of how disgusting fashion and disgusting bodies are related and how the dressed, violated soma becomes an aesthetic object. The artwork “Les Chiffons de La Chaire”, exhibited in Museum Pompidou by Gerard Deschamps, is a synthesis of worn female underwear, corsets, bras and briefs. The stains of bodily liquids make this piece unique, since they are there to remind us that a body used to live in them. Particularly, the fact that these garments touched the most intimate areas of the female body triggers the question “what do we feel when we look at these stained underwear?”. Undoubtedly, this is a unique piece of art but this does not change the fact that is actually made of dirty underwear. The feeling of disgust is an almost automatic reaction to this exhibit but this does not diminish neither its artistic or aesthetic value. It is easily understood that something such a dirty brief could be conventionally non-beautiful and aesthetically pleasing at the same time.

## The Ancestors of Disgusting Fashion

During the 20th and 21st century the animalistic, monstrous female body predominates the catwalks.<sup>13</sup> Designers played a major role in the depiction of the female models as hybrids with otherworldly characteristics- women with animalistic attitude, monsters that pose as women, bodies without boundaries. Rei Kawakubo and later Alexander McQueen were two of the most representative examples of this era. Kawakubo’s bodies are limitless-they have no start or end, they restrict the body, binding it closely and tightly and, at the same time, creating unnatural volumes, limiting the ability to move and changing the way that the body works. In this way, she created a new form of body, with different layers and textures that challenged the traditional ideals of beauty. Kawakubo was probably the first designer that was aware of the difference between the aesthetically pleasing and the beautiful. In the late 90’s, Galliano and McQueen changed the history of fashion — their work was a realization of aesthetic violence. What was considered as aesthetics in fashion until then, was violated by these two designers, taking a dark, twisted, distorted turn. Dresses depicting wounds, dirt and several connotations of violence and gore made the catwalks a place where the female body triggered the deepest fears.

The work of McQueen was a disarming attempt to present all the potentials and the alternative realities of the feminine soma. The body can be vulnerable, imperfect, masculine, sexual, fully restricted, completely free, concealed or revealed. What seems particularly uncanny in the work of McQueen is the fact that the bodies seemed fragmented, since they are visibly decayed, distorted, like open wounds and, as a result, capable of contamination and causing revolt. Maybe one of the most iconic disgusting moments in fashion was the Highland Rape Collection, where models walked the catwalk as victims of rape. The role of the body in this example is crucial: clothing is ripped, destroyed and filthy but the image of the violated dressed soma is the one that reminds us of the repelling action, which is the source of disgust. Of course, in this case the disgust is mainly moral, but also imaginary-we see the violated body and we feel repelled not by the body itself but by the action that happened to it.

The bodies of McQueen are grotesque: sharp objects penetrate the mouth, naked bodies are covered by moths or worms and the human silhouette is transformed. His bodies seem in pain, decayed, quite disturbing in the eye of the beholder — we could characterize them as “poetically disgusting”. The decayed body in McQueen’s work is strongly related to the idea of Death and the idea of decomposition

12. Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness*, 224.

13. Evans, 224.

(or the connotation of these), which also frequently lead us to the emotion of disgust. The performance in the end of the collection Voss, with the writer Michelle Olley laying in a glass cube filled with moths is strongly connected with the idea of the insects touching the human skin and is, by association, linked to the idea of the decayed body. While this imagery has strongly negative associations, its aesthetic value remains important, since the brutal (death) and the divine (the woman) are merged through the aesthetic violence. What is particularly interesting is that these bodies are indeed uncanny, since their purpose is to present something fashionable and appealing and, while they do that, they also nauseate the audience.

## Women as Open Wounds

By employing revulsion as a response to the widely accepted notions of femininity, the designers such as McQueen, who were inspired by the violated bodies of women, their fear, their sexuality, and their scars, question the ideal feminine.<sup>14</sup> Fear is an avoidance emotion that distances us from the horrible item, but disgust avoids the repulsive object yet remains tied to it. This creates a contradictory and confusing relationship between disgust and its object. The philosopher and psychiatrist Julia Kristeva supports the notion that a cut with blood does not indicate death by elucidating the connection between our fear of the breach of our physical boundaries, the revulsion that this violation elicits, and our need to stare at it. Martha Nussbaum's notion of "misogynistic disgust" associated femininity with negative emotions. She refers to specific groups (such as women, homosexuals, Jews, et al.), that are attributed with animalistic characteristics in an effort of privileged groups to "step further away from being animal and mortal themselves."<sup>15</sup> Particularly, the fear of death and loathing are linked to misogynistic disgust properties — Nussbaum uses as an example the woman during her menstrual period— slimy, smelly, closely linked to the continuity of animal life and the mortality of the body.<sup>16</sup>

Two ensembles from Alexander McQueen's Spring 1996 Hunger collection, which was titled after the sexual vampire film of the same name, are a defining illustration of the way in which women are shown as a wound — open, contaminated, bleeding, disgusting. The first is a white dress with a pencil shape that is semi-transparent and has an upright cut from the bust to the hips. A black, fog-like print surrounds the cut, emphasizing it and exposing the skin beneath the dress' opening. Another McQueen dress from the same collection, with a see-through, worm-filled bodice, is provocative enough to inspire repulsion. The odd top keeps the worms imprisoned between the skin and the garment, while the vivid red leather skirt emphasizes the bloody associations. Both appearances conjure images of a wound that eventually became infected and degenerated. The Anemone Collection, which was inspired by the anemone flower, was introduced by the Alexander McQueen label in 2021. Particularly, a white dress with an abstract anemone pattern drew criticism for the flower's representation because many people thought it looked like a gory wound. Among others, a user of Twitter platform claimed that "it's distasteful and gives me slavery vibes of a woman being raped or having a fucc'n abortion or something. That's all!"

Since it incorporates the features of the garment, the image of the wound or gap on the dress and, as a result, the fashioned body is sexual, obscene, and repulsive. However, in the case of the worm-filled corset, the body is presented as rotten while the garment serves as a window to the internals. The decay of the dress denotes the decay of the body. It is disgusting to see imprisoned worms caressing the model's exposed skin behind the translucent top "undermines or endangers the division between life and the non-living."<sup>17</sup> The reason for revulsion is that there are no clear borders between the flesh and the creatures. The focus on distaste, according to Heinämaa's examination of Kolnai's ideas on the subject, is "the extravagant life that feeds on the body and multiplies without boundaries or directions." Kolnai

14. Danae Ioannou, "Women as Open Wounds: Fear, Desire and the Ideal Feminine in the Works of Alexander McQueen and John Galliano," *The Journal of the Aesthetics of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture*, vol.2 (2022): 32–35, [https://www.popularinquiry.com/s/Popular-inquiry\\_Vol11\\_2022\\_2\\_Ioannou\\_def.pdf](https://www.popularinquiry.com/s/Popular-inquiry_Vol11_2022_2_Ioannou_def.pdf).

15. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law*, 107–108.

16. Nussbaum, 111.

17. Sara Heinämaa, "Disgust," in *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotions*, eds. Thomas Szanto and Hilge Landweer (London: Routledge, 2020), 5.

asserts that more than the corpse itself, what is repulsive is the high fertility and maggot proliferation. The worm-filled bodice is therefore repulsive for two reasons: first, the notion that the worms, a lower form of life linked with decomposition, touch the skin thus potentially contaminating it, and second, the abject image of a person (even symbolically) decomposing before our eyes.

The Anemone dress is a prime example of the horrific allure of fashion. According to Kolnai, repulsive things have the power to grab our attention while also evoking disgust. The image of an open wound in the context of the “poetically disgusting” clothing is connected to the risk of contamination; concurrently, this area of black and red that conjures up feelings of fear, anguish, and death is the focus of our attention. The model is “bleeding” an anemone flower, giving the picture a somewhat theatrical quality. The dress’s unpleasant side has nothing to do with the wound itself; rather, it has to do with the connection between the body’s abdominal region and its interior organs. The dress’s “wound” serves as a reminder that there are no distinctions between the interior and external. According to Evans, “women’s bodies, their internal and external parts, have come to represent the space of danger, desire, and unconscious fears about both sexuality and mortality.”<sup>18</sup>

## The Designer and the Disgusting Body

Richard Shusterman identifies the body as the locus of creative self.<sup>19</sup> In the case of Alexander McQueen, the designer used the body of the models as canvases and he explored the boundaries of what was considered fashion and art. For the common mind, these terms are almost identical to beauty, but McQueen showed that the distorted imagery of the female soma can still be aesthetically pleasant without being beautiful. But what happens when the designer or the artist uses her own body as a form of expression? Michaela Stark is an upcoming artist and couturier, who also explores the boundaries of the female body, through methods, such as binding. Stark’s artistic practice includes her handmade corsets so tightly strapped on around the waist that the body’s form changes and bulks, lumps and heavy wrinkles appear. The image that is created is so uncanny, that the body seems fluid, as if there is no bone structure or organs. The lack of boundaries in the image of the body is the main source of disgust once again. Stark recreates the image of the female soma, by dressing or undressing it in ways that the flesh becomes part of the garment. The way that the skin folds and sluices out, creates unnatural curves, which remind us of body deformations, while the movement is restricted and breathing seems extremely difficult in these garments. These images make the common mind wonder: is this the way to liberate the body from the restricted boundaries of the traditional norms? Stark’s garments do not “sculpt” the body based on the contemporary ideals of beauty, rather they seem to create repelling hybrids that defy those standards, while they highlight what was considered as “disgusting” for many years. Inspired by the decayed flesh, the lingerie itself emulates skin wrinkles, folds or veins and swallows the soma. The real impact of the garment is in the way that the body has been manipulated — it is not a homage to the natural body — it has no intention to beautify the “ugly”, the socially unacceptable or the disgusting but to prove that the body, even in its most exaggerated form can still be repelling and aesthetically pleasing at the same time.

## Conclusion

The external appearance and the aesthetic quality of the inner experience find a common ground in fashion, since the garment is inevitably linked to the soma and is used both for aesthetic purposes but also as a way to express ourselves. When the physical boundaries between garment and body are abolished, the aesthetics of the uncanniness and the disgust are established through the modification of the body. Quoting Shusterman, the body is a means to overcome repressive ideologies. It can be considered as a

18. Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness*, 224.

19. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 267.

way to embrace the non-beautiful and accept the human body as imperfect, disgusting, repulsive, horrific without the need to beautify it. The disgusting dress and, by association, the disgusting body does not negate the value of the female body or the designs. There are different philosophical perceptions of disgusting femininity -the repulsion is usually associated with female vulnerability and the abject imagery of the female soma. Nevertheless, I argue that the distorted female body and dress can still be aesthetically pleasing without being conventionally beautiful or losing its sexual and feminine character.

The attempt to include imperfections in the realm of Beauty only reinforces the idea that the body can only be accepted when it is considered as conventionally beautiful. Through the dialogue between Disgust and Negative Aesthetics bodies are not defined as beautiful or ugly but as aesthetic objects/subjects that exist beyond the consolidated beauty values and belong to the realm of the independent aesthetic experience.



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