



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Imprisoned in disgust: Roman Polanski's Repulsion

Laine, T.

**Publication date**

2011

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Film-Philosophy

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Laine, T. (2011). Imprisoned in disgust: Roman Polanski's Repulsion. *Film-Philosophy*, 15(2), 36-50. <http://film-philosophy.com/index.php/f-p/article/view/275>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## Imprisoned in Disgust: Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*

**Tarja Laine**

University of Amsterdam

In both psychoanalytic and film theoretical discourse there has been a long tradition of considering disgust in close connection with the concept of pleasure. Possibly the most well-known example of such an approach to disgust is Julia Kristeva's discussion of the abject in terms of 'horrendous delight' in *Powers of Horror* (1982). In her account, the disgusting is simultaneously fascinating and frightening, pleasurable and painful (Kristeva 1982, 137). Similarly, Noel Carroll writes that 'disgust engendered by the fiction appears to be essentially [...] connected to the relevant audience's pleasure' (Carroll 1990, 193). This alluring power of disgust might appear to be based on how its ultimate goal is to separate the self from what is outside the self. As Sianne Ngai notes, disgust strengthens and polices the boundary between the subjective and the objective, the self and the not-self (Ngai 2005, 335).

In these theories, disgust exists as something to be overcome, converted into something else once the threat of a breakdown between self and other is vanquished. But what of the experience of disgust itself? What are we to make of moments when this threat is very much alive, when we are literally taken over by disgust without any room for pleasure? What can we learn by focusing on the overwhelming experience of disgust itself, as a process that paralyzes the spectator's emotional agency? As Philip Fisher notes, in such moments of disgust: 'we are overwhelmed by something outside ourselves or by something else we believe may damage or destroy us [...] we are the victim or the potential victim of something coming towards us in the world, something that undermines, for at least the moment, our capacity to think ourselves as agents' (Fisher 2002, 15).

Bringing the immediate experience of disgust itself into focus will help to demonstrate how, in the context of cinema spectatorship, our experience of disgust is not always generated by (delightfully) entertaining revolting

properties in thought.<sup>1</sup> This is because the capacity to ‘think’ disgust as something separate from ourselves undermines the cinematic *experience* of disgust as an overwhelming physical sensation, which threatens both the cognitive and emotional agency of spectators. What interests me, then, are the ways in which disgust is embodied in, and experienced through the film itself. By this I mean the aesthetic specificity of the film that threatens the spectator’s sense of emotional agency, and inhibits the conversion of disgust into pleasure.

This essay discusses Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1965), a masterpiece of psychological horror, in terms of its treatment of disgust as a mechanism that systematically works to prohibit the pleasurable sense of mastery that is so often construed as disgust’s necessary corollary in theories of spectatorship. I will argue that, far from depicting disgust as an emotion to be overcome *en route* to pleasurable self-affirmation, the film imprisons its protagonist in madness and disgust. Moreover, this sense of overwhelming disgust is also communicated to the spectator in a way that ‘drains the life out of us with a sense of despair’ (Shaw 2008, 41). This film shows how a powerful cinematic event can become an overwhelming – or rather an overwhelmingly disgusting – experience, as the film’s affective influence, I argue, overweighs the spectator’s emotional agency.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I develop a means of reading disgust as part of *Repulsion*’s active, emotional intentionality. Although the spectator is drawn into an embodied and affective relationship with the film’s ‘emotional core’, able to respond to the affects that the film embodies, the emphasis on disgust in *Repulsion* makes this process a particularly overwhelming experience, which works to entrap the spectator within this particularly strong sensation. Or to put it in

---

<sup>1</sup> This is Noel Carroll’s solution to the so-called paradox of fiction, an answer to the question as to how can anyone be emotionally moved by what he or she knows does not exist. According to Carroll, the emotions – such as disgust – that we experience when we engage with fiction are results of cognitively entertaining in thought, say, the impure properties of Count Dracula. In other words, the fictional story provokes thoughts about the disgusting, horrible, and dangerous properties of Count Dracula in ways that mirror, but do not duplicate, the emotions of their characters. These thoughts are the real objects of our emotions insofar as they structure our disgust: “The thought of a fearsome and disgusting character like Dracula is something that can be entertained without believing that Dracula exist. [...] If we grant that thought contents can frighten [...] thought contents we entertain without believing them can genuinely move us emotionally” (Carroll 1990, 81).

<sup>2</sup> By affective influence I do not mean emotional manipulation, but forms of emotional interaction on the agential level between the film and the spectator. In the cinematic experience, there is a reciprocally affective process between human agency and cinematic agency in its own right. To say that the film’s affective influence can overweigh the spectator’s emotional agency is not to say that the film merely induces emotion. On the contrary, it means an agential (power) asymmetry between the film and the spectator.

psychoanalytical terms, to be overwhelmed is to lose (illusory) mastery over the film, thus denying the illusion that the film is constituted for or geared exclusively to the spectator and not *vice versa*.

In *Repulsion*, Catherine Deneuve plays Carol, a young Belgian woman living in London with her sister Helen (Yvonne Furneaux), to whom she is pathologically attached. At the same time, Carol appears overtly disgusted by men, and especially by men touching her, such as her would-be suitor Colin (John Fraser) and Helen's married boyfriend Michael (Ian Hendry). Afraid of being left alone, Carol gradually develops a psychosis when Helen is off to Italy with Michael, locking herself into their apartment that soon becomes a living hell for her – living in the literal sense of the word, as we shall see. First the walls start cracking up with loud noises. A 'man' – who earlier on in the film verbally harassed Carol in the street – appears in her dressing mirror for a split second and then disappears. That night in her bed Carol hears footsteps behind the closed door, even though she is alone in the apartment. The next night this man forces his way through a barricaded door into Carol's bedroom and brutally rapes her. Potatoes sprout and the rabbit that was seasoned but never cooked by Helen, rots away in the corner of the room as Carol's condition worsens. She kills Colin with a heavy candlestick and puts him in the bathtub, bleeding. Walls become flesh and start bleeding and sweating. Carol forgets to eat and does not bathe, while in the beginning of the film she did nothing but. Her landlord attempts to rape her and she attacks him with a razorblade. In the most memorable scene of the film, hands protrude from the walls of the dark narrow hallway, grabbing at Carol as she forces her way to the other end of it. Upon their return Helen and Michael finally discover Carol in a catatonic state under the bed. Michael takes her in his arms away from the prying neighbors that by now have invaded the apartment. For Michael it is a 'heroic' gesture, but it is performed without any awareness whatsoever of the repulsion that his touch must make her feel.

For many *Repulsion* illustrates the workings of psyche in a particularly suggestive way. One could claim for instance that both Carol's feelings of disgust towards men and her pathological attachment to her sister are symptoms of failing in the original organization of the ego in the mirror stage, as Jacques Lacan would have it. Evidence for this is found for example in the scene in which Carol sees her reflection in the surface of a teapot. This reflection is distorted and suggests Carol's alienation from the Symbolic/law of the father. In other words, it could be argued that Carol has failed in making the transition to heterosexual adulthood. According to Lucy Fischer: 'Clearly, Carol's mental illness involves regression – a move from psychological adulthood to a stance associated with youth, and there are many hints of this inversion in the film' (Fischer 2006, 84). Equally common

are the interpretations that attribute Carol's psychosis to a childhood of sexual abuse. Indeed, the film begins with a shot in which the camera zooms out from Carol's eye pupil, filmed in extreme close-up, after which the opening credits appear on top of her cornea. And there is the final shot of the film of a family photo in which Carol stares into nothingness without even a trace of a smile, standing apart from the rest of the joyful family. The camera zooms in on Carol's eye until the image goes grainy, closing the circle between the opening and the closing shots of the film. This operational similarity between the two shots suggests that the explanation for Carol's severe mental breakdown as a whole can be found in her childhood, but the film does not explicitly address the issue of sexual abuse. Finally, a feminist reading of the film might argue that Carol's repulsion equals agony over her body, which does not fit into the social categories offered to her in the form of marriage and motherhood. Helena Goscilo even reads the film in terms of male instrumentalization of the female body (Goscilo 2006, 30). Carol's disgust can be seen as a symptom of unsuccessful refusal to commit to what Judith Butler terms a gendered cultural identity (Butler 1990). In other words, Carol's reluctance to enter into heterosexual relationships is thoroughly entrenched in her body in the form of disgust.

By contrast, I suggest that *Repulsion* is about being ultra-sensitive to the world and the resulting state of insane fear of intimacy, into which the spectators are directly induced by the film itself. Jennifer Barker makes a similar claim when she describes how the film:

draws us in with a caress, but that caress quickly becomes a repulsive smear. *Repulsion* insidiously invites us to get close [...] only to horrify us when those images begin to slither, creep, and erupt with things we'd rather keep at a distance (Barker 2009, 48).

For Barker cinema functions as a tactile membrane that touches the spectators and leaves traces on their skin through a visceral connection, a sensuous exchange between the film and the spectator. Like Barker, I too move away from the idea of character engagement to highlight the importance of the cinematic experience as enacted through the encounter between the body of the film and the body of the spectator. But for me the exchange between cinema and the spectator is first and foremost affective, where the aesthetic system of the film serves as an 'emotional core' with its own affective intentionality. The exchange enables the spectator to pick up the affects that the film embodies, to resonate with them, and to respond to them (Laine 2011).

However, this notion of film spectatorship as an affective exchange is complicated when disgust comes into the frame. In my view, the affective intentionality in *Repulsion* is premised on the notion of being a threat to the

spectator, such that the film tangibly and continuously threatens to overpower the spectator's emotional agency, to compromise our ability to respond. This is analogous to the way in which Carol is kept captive in her own disgust. The disgust that Carol feels is not merely disgust towards men, but disgust towards the world in general. In this sense, it might be claimed that Carol's disgust is related to Sartrean nausea, an attempt to run from the challenge of 'becoming with' the world authentically. Yet, Carol cannot find refuge from fundamental freedom in the safety of roles defined for her by society, such as the roles of a wife and a mother, for instance. Carol's rejection of her 'thrownness' is suggested in the scenes in which Carol walks the streets. Already in the beginning of the film the camera follows her very closely in the outdoor scenes, suggesting the obtrusive nearness of an incorporeal presence, the camera functioning as a pure point of view. A 'pure' point of view is different from a perceptually subjective point of view, because it derives its force from being recognized only as a presence but not as a person – a visual equivalent to Michel Chion's *acousmètre*, a voice that is neither outside nor inside the film. The pure point of view enhances the horror-effect of the scene, as it shares with us an embodied viewpoint of a presence within the scene that lacks bodily materiality. At the same time the pure point of view exerts its hold over the spectators as an *external* force or entity more powerful than they are themselves, just like Carol's own disgust exerts its hold over her in ways that are beyond her control.

In a similar manner, I argue, a powerful cinematic experience – repulsive, horrifying – can be an overwhelming event, in which the film takes over the spectators by exercising its affective influence – repellent, malevolent – upon them, operating too close for comfort. Aurel Kolnai has characterized the experience of disgust precisely as this kind of proximity, when the object of disgust comes obtrusively close and almost penetrates the body (Kolnai 2004, 47). In a later scene, when Carol's mental collapse has already begun, the camera gets even closer to her, and her nervous, aversive gestures imply an attempt to get rid of the disgusting presence. Meanwhile, the music that accompanies the scene has changed from cheerful jazz to chaotic drumming and trumpeting that drowns out every other sound. In the beginning of the film Carol resists the outside world by securing her personal boundaries through compulsive cleansing. Later, however, she attempts to shut out the exterior world altogether by barricading her apartment and covering all the windows. But the exterior world refuses to stay outside, and penetrates through the walls, taking the shape of the man that rapes Carol night after night.

The boundaries between the self and the non-self, the subjective and the objective, the inside and the outside get dissolved in Carol's apartment. The fleshy, porous walls turn the apartment itself into a body. Better yet, the

apartment is a lived body in the Merleau-Pontyan sense: it is both a physical (architectural) and a mental (conscious) structure with an agency and intentionality of its own, aiming to drive Carol insane. Furthermore, by inviting the spectator to participate in Carol's insanity from the inside, the film touches on the fear of our mind and body being taken over beyond our control, thereby asking us to live through the effects of agatheophobia, the fear of insanity.

Some theorists, such as Steven Shaviro argue that there is always an emotive mechanism of pleasure in cinematic events that make us lose control over our emotions, even when they evoke disgust and unpleasure, since it may be deemed fundamentally pleasurable to 'surrender to [...] cinematic fascination, [...] seduction and violence' (Shaviro 1993, 65). On George Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985), Shaviro writes:

I watch these films, finally, with an alarming, ambivalent, and highly charged exhilaration. [...] I am seduced and transfixed by the joy and the terror – the disgusting, unspeakable pleasure – of the human body's exposure and destruction. [...] As I witness this cannibal ferment, I enjoy the reactive gratifications of *ressentiment* and revenge, the unavoidable delights of exterminating the powerful Others who have abused me. But such intense pleasures are deeply equivocal, ironically compromised from the outset, participatory in a way that implicates my own inferiority. [...] I enjoy this sordid spectacle only at the price of being mimetically engulfed by it, uncontrollably, excitedly swept away. I find myself giving in to an insidious, hidden, deeply shameful passion for abject self-disintegration (Shaviro 1993, 103).

Even though in many cases being 'swept away' by a film can undoubtedly be experienced as pleasurable, in my view pleasure is not the essence of the cinematic experience of disgust, but part of a process by which disgust is overcome and converted into pleasure. In other words, if there is any pleasure to be found, it is arguably found only afterwards, in the emotional evaluation of the cinematic event, rather than in the affective experience itself. Yet I would argue that *Repulsion* resists such emotional appraisal by imposing itself viscerally and affectively upon the spectators. Affective experience is the instinctive, pre-reflective, and pre-semantic 'dimension' that underlies all emotion in the cinematic event. It concerns things that matter to the individual as an organism, which are not dependent on memory or reflective processing. By contrast, emotional evaluation concerns things that matter to the individual as an autobiographical person. It is reflective monitoring of a situation that can be given semantic meaning (Damasio 1999, Robinson 2007). Affective experience is situational, the 'with-ness' in the midst of the world, whilst emotional evaluation is contextual, subject to

reflective interpretation (Massumi 2002, Manning 2007).<sup>3</sup> As affective experience, disgust violates the ‘with-ness’ of a person in the world by disturbing the safety conditions of the specific border at which the self and the non-self meet. As a result of this disgusting disturbance the non-self threatens to overwhelm the self.

Similarly, in the cinematic event a disgusting image or scene violates the ‘contract of looking’ between the film and the spectator based on ‘safe distance’ (Tan 1996), so that the spectators can no longer be sure of the boundary between the film’s emotional agency and their own. In *Repulsion* disgust-horror overwhelms by undermining, at least momentarily, the spectators’ capacity to think themselves as emotional agents. At the same time their affective attention is compelled to remain focused on the film as a cause of their experience of disgust-horror. We may ‘enter’ *Repulsion* with a conviction that we can handle the disgust-horror it imposes upon us, because of our knowledge of genre conventions for instance. Nevertheless, in my reading, the actual affective impact of the film lies outside the reach of our emotional agency, a situation that can be experienced as unpleasurable. For the same reason it is very difficult if not impossible to overcome or work around the disgust-horror in *Repulsion* by reminding oneself that the ‘film is just a film.’<sup>4</sup>

Thus, even if the affective intentionality of *Repulsion* is totally beyond our control, we are nevertheless forced to become one with it. Similarly, Carol’s apartment can be seen as an analogy for her embodied mind that is utterly beyond her control. On the level of film style this is achieved through the organization of sound and mise-en-scène. The first sign of Carol’s pending insanity is the emergence of cracks in the walls and the ceiling of her apartment. Already at an early stage of the film Carol forgets her date with Colin. This is due to what appears to be an unusual fascination with a rupture in the pavement that she stops to stare at for a long period of time.

---

<sup>3</sup> Although this does not mean that affective experiences are lacking contextual structure altogether, or that they are devoid of hermeneutic interpretation, as Sianne Ngai points out (Ngai 2005, 27).

<sup>4</sup> Another strategy to work one’s way around disgust – apart from dropping the very viewing situation – would be to renegotiate one’s relationship with the object of disgust through an emotional (re)evaluation that can render the scene pleasurable or amusing. In this vein Julian Hanich writes about the film *National Lampoon’s Van Wilder* (Walt Becker, 2002) that it ‘bristles with short revolting moments – for instance [...] when a stripper farts loudly into the face of one of her spectators. Like the brief bursts of startle in the slasher movie, these jolts of disgust are both sufficiently short and thematically harmless enough not to overwhelm the viewer completely but rather ‘tickle’ him or her pleurably’ (Hanich 2009, 305). In Hanich’s example affective experience is the jolt of disgust that later turns into a pleasurable tickle as a result of the emotional evaluation that the object of disgust is ‘thematically harmless.’

Later, after Helen has left for Italy, a crack that has the exact same shape as the pavement rupture appears in the kitchen wall. In a previous scene Carol has stumbled on Michael's worn undershirt, which has made her vomit violently. In this scene, Carol is drinking water by the kitchen sink, when suddenly a sharp jolting sound that one might expect to hear during an earthquake, can be heard. The camera moves into a close-up of Carol's eyes, and sharing her perceptual point of view (POV), we witness the newly-formed crack in the wall too. She seeks safety outside, only to lock herself up again in order to protect herself from the world. But then this sought-after protection turns out to be the means of perpetual torment, as the outside forces its way in through the ruptures, thereby shattering the boundaries between the self and non-self, threatening the foundation of Carol's sanity.

Simultaneously, the spectators get confused about the where and how their state of mind meets Carol's, as the film forces upon them the effects of her loss of sanity from the position of her perceptual and mental subjectivity. The organization of the shots in the scenes where the cracks appear often follow the same pattern: they are always unexpected and they are accompanied by a loud bang. Moreover, they are often arranged around a structure that involves a POV shot and an extreme close-up shot of Carol's wide, frightened eyes. According to Murray Smith, this combined structure of the POV shot and the reaction shot prompts us 'to imagine seeing as the character does' (Smith 1999, 417). Yet, I actually think that this process is more immediate, an embodied vision uniquely shared between the film and us, without mediating imagination. Or better yet, here the affective appraisal of the situation is a precondition for central imagining, i.e. the spectator's embodied awareness of the protagonist's perceptions, thoughts and emotions.

In *Repulsion* disgust and madness obtrude upon Carol from within, even though she fights against this obtrusion with all her might. Trapped inside Carol's apartment the spectators too feel the effects, if not the experience, of being driven mad by disgust. I argue that *Repulsion* not only expresses disgust and madness, but that it also embodies these affects, as an overwhelming aesthetic system. For cinema is an emotional event that offers itself to be engaged with by means of its aesthetic system that is inextricably interwoven with the spectators' affective experience of the film. And in this sense *Repulsion* is an emotional event that seeks to overwhelm, to undermine the spectator's share in that affective interplay.

As a case in point there is the way in which the outside world forces its way into the 'safety' of Carol's apartment in the shape of the imaginary man, first as a reflection in the mirror, then as footsteps behind the barricaded bedroom door, and finally as an intruder of 'flesh and blood.' Again this intrusion is filmed in a combined structure of Carol's POV and her horrified

face, inducing the effect of the intruder coming right up to us as well. The scene is silent, except for the ticking of a clock that is reminiscent of an earlier scene, in which Carol listens to the sounds of her sister's lovemaking with a similar clock ticking sound in the background. In the second scene the man is already waiting for Carol in bed, suddenly appearing from out of nowhere as Carol removes the duvet. Again the clock is ticking prominently, and the mobile frame highlights Carol's helplessness and her lack of control of the situation – even though the events take place in her mind only. The third time the man appears, Carol actually prepares herself for his nightly visit. Playing what she must imagine to be a good housekeeper, she irons Michael's dirty undershirt, although the iron is not plugged in, and puts lipstick on before going to bed, smiling in 'joyful' anticipation. Yet when the man appears she responds in terror once more. This time the intruder's appearance is announced by the booming bells of a neighboring monastery, the same as had been heard earlier in a scene in which Carol's landlord assaulted her. It is especially the way in which the sounds are organized in these scenes that demonstrate the violence by which the external world enters the apartment, leaving Carol disgusted and shattered on the inside.

In *Repulsion*, this is how disgust and madness overwhelm. They enter a person without mediating distance, and it is precisely by this frightening, violent attitude that the film 'enters' its spectator as well. Hence, there is an operational similarity between disgust and madness, but in experiential terms there is naturally a distinction to me made, which concerns the duration of each. Phenomenologically speaking, disgust is a transient experience, while madness threatens to overtake a subject completely. However, in *Repulsion* disgust threatens to become permanent too, since the affect cannot find an outlet through action. Thus the film haunts the spectator for an exceptionally long time after it has finished. From the cognitivist perspective, Torben Grodal and Ed Tan have written that cinematic emotions function as motivational forces for potential actions, in that they stimulate our action tendencies. In other words we experience an urgency that something is done for or done by the characters. These action tendencies ease off for instance, when the characters finally catch up with what the spectator already knows and take action, which in turn is experienced as a pleasurable release of tension (Grodal 1997, Tan 1996). Such action tendencies never occur in *Repulsion*. Instead disgust and horror persist, bespeaking the enduring reality of complete mental isolation with no means of escape. What makes *Repulsion* overwhelming, is that the film denies its spectators release from their emotional stress by identifying with the action on the screen. This is partly related to the way in which the film seems both to emulate Carol's perceptual viewpoint, but ultimately it withholds any kind of clear psychological or empathetic motivations. *Repulsion* does not invite

'identification' with the character, but with the film itself. In other words, as I have been arguing, we 'resonate emotionally' with the direct affective quality of the film.

In turn, instead of a gratifying release through identification, what the film emphasizes is a progressive descent into the material and sensorial qualities of disgust and madness with no reprieve. This is shown in the state of Carol's apartment, which is often rightly seen as an analogy for the progress of her mental deterioration. The apartment conveys the sense of Carol's lived experience. In the beginning of the film, the place is bright and tidy, but as soon as insanity stealthily moves in, the apartment starts showing signs of neglect and decay. First Carol leaves the uncooked rabbit to rot outside the refrigerator. Then she leaves the bathtub water running and shuts out all daylight, so that the apartment turns into a cavernous, shadowy chamber. She leans against a wall in search of support only to find that it has turned into flesh, on which she can leave imprints with the palms of her hands. Later on in the film the walls literally touch her back, grabbing and clutching at her as she walks by, an event accompanied by cacophonous drumming. All this is filmed with harsh lighting and a wide-angle lens, often from a low height with a straight-on angle that emphasizes the claustrophobic atmosphere of the apartment. Carol endures constant terror and isolation, but cannot escape her situation. For Carol the outside world triggers her anhedonia, the inability to gain pleasure from enjoyable experiences. But for the spectator, what is truly frightening in this film, is the feeling of helplessness and lack of control that are implicit components of disgust. While Carol is under the delusion that she is being controlled and menaced by an external force, the spectators are 'swept away' by the force of the film, the events seeming to occur without any narrative motivation. The effect of this is the devastating, schizophrenic terror of being unable to trust one's own senses. But again, it is the film itself that forces the spectators to live through this effect rather than to merely imagine it.

Throughout this article I have suggested that the disgust-horror in *Repulsion* is explicitly unpleasant and noncathartic, offering neither delightful narrative satisfaction nor any 'purifying' release of emotional tension. In my reading, disgust-horror does not refer to the feelings the spectator regularly experiences when watching gory exploitation films such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) or 'torture-porn' such as *Saw* (2004) which make use of aesthetics of shock (Menninghaus 2003, 124). My understanding of disgust-horror refers to the agonizing, enduring feelings of entrapment that result from what we might rather call aesthetics of possession. As Edgar Morin has argued, cinema not only produces states of mind, it also embodies states of mind, with life and power of its own that can physically possess us (Morin 2005). The question that arises out of this idea

of possession is why do we keep watching the film even though the experience can be thoroughly disagreeable. This question could be asked of *Repulsion*, as well as of equally agonizing Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (*Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, 1975) as well, to name just one other example. This paradox of disgust is related to another aesthetic dilemma, namely the paradox of tragedy that concerns works of art which are so emotionally negative that one would expect the spectators to avoid them at any cost.<sup>5</sup> This kind of unpleasant and agonizing film experience is Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997). Although here we keep watching the agony for different reasons, as we hope (against hope) that things will eventually turn out well for the tortured family. In the case of *Repulsion*, it is the film itself that imposes an emotional effect upon the spectator by means of its aesthetic patterns of salience, which enable the spectator to 'tune in' to the disgust-horror that the film embodies.

This means that, in my view, *Repulsion* denies empathetic and sympathetic engagement with its protagonist and foregrounds disgust-horror as a 'subjectified emotion' (in contrast to Deleuze's de-subjectified affect). In other words, the film is present for us as an emotional agent that possesses affective intentionality – the 'aboutness' and 'towardness' of emotion. In his recent book *Filmosophy*, Daniel Frampton argues that films have agency in that they 'think' about their subject matter by making their 'thoughts' visible and audible (Frampton 2006). Yet not only is the film a self-thinking 'filmind' but it is also a 'film-heart' that feels about its subject matter and moves the spectators affectively by maintaining an emotional attitude towards them (Laine 2009). In case of *Repulsion*, it is the film's aural, visual, and haptic textures which terrorize us in a manner similar to the immaterial presence that terrorizes Carole in the street.

In turn, this reading has important implications for the way we imagine the relationship between disgust and agency in terms of spectatorship. By my interpretation of disgust as an overpowering effect of the film, I do not mean to suggest that spectators of *Repulsion* are passive victims of the film's sadistic aggressions. The overwhelmingly disgusting experience of watching *Repulsion* does not equate to passivity, since our affect remains continually directed towards the film. True, in *Repulsion* this intentionality takes the form of a clogged-up, paralyzing interaction with the film, which enhances the intensity of our emotion. But a truly passive response would be a lethargic, apathetic one, insofar as lethargy and apathy are the opposites of motion as well as emotion. According to Fisher: 'The passions occur around an *active* [agency], one that expects to fare well in the world and can, for that very reason, be startled, surprised, and even angered

---

<sup>5</sup> For a number of possible explanations for this paradox, see Levinson 1997.

by insults and injuries to [the individual] and [his] expectations about the future' (Fisher 2002, 160, my italics). But to be unpleasurably 'startled' or 'surprised' by a film does not equal being passively at its mercy. Rather, it is to be situated inside the film's 'force-field' as a weakened, overwhelmed emotional agent, where weakened and passive are not the same. This is the result of the film's powerful affective force drawing the spectators into its life-space.

Of course, this does not yet explain why we do not turn away from the film that elicits an affective response of this kind, or whether there is a 'reward' (and what kind of?) for the spectator after going through such a negative emotional experience. The 'reward' for this kind of negative experience would normally be appreciation of the film's virtuosity, esteem for the aesthetic force of the film that is able to move us so powerfully. A similar argument has already been formulated by David Hume who stated that the negative emotions in an aesthetic experience could be overcome by the delight of the artistic expression that overwhelm and absorb them, instead of simply cancelling them out (Hume 2007). In *Repulsion*, the opposite is true: the disgust-horror it evokes works concertedly to overwhelm this kind of appreciation, but in spite of this we stay with the film.

Therefore, the disgust-horror that *Repulsion* evokes, is marked by its paralyzing and obsessive quality. In comparison, in real life 'regular' disgust and fear are imperative emotions that direct our attention to relevant details in a dangerous situation. They also alert us to be on the lookout for more indications that are crucial for a closer assessment of the situation, and they encourage us to form expectations about how we should respond to a possible evolvment of the situation. This means that, unlike what is popularly believed, we are not merely passive victims of our emotions, but we often employ them in order to gain insight and knowledge that is especially meaningful and important to us. This is valid for cinematic emotions as well; Murray Smith argues for instance that emotions aid us in confronting and exploring unfamiliar experiences through fictions by inviting us to assess our likely emotional responses to certain situations, after which we can use this newly-gained knowledge to act in the world in new ways (Smith 1995, 127).

Yet another explanation for our choice to stay with the film, is that we hope that things will eventually turn out well for the tormented protagonist. However, *Repulsion* never gives us a false promise of a happy end. Finally one might argue that we keep watching because the film eventually offers us a 'purifying' release of emotional tension in the form of catharsis. As the scene of suffering comes to an end, a relief of disgust-horror discharges the threat that the film poses to our well-being. Yet *Repulsion* does not provide the spectators with a source of catharsis, since the disgust-horror it embodies,

provokes a form of paralysis that cannot be overcome. In other words, in *Repulsion* disgust lacks the transformative power, which would cancel out our negative emotions. Instead they endure, prompting the spectators to feel the effects of disturbance in a sensuous relationship with the world, even after the film has finished. Thus, disgust circulates in *Repulsion* as a discerned inability to change one's situation, which is felt by the spectator in the flesh – in the affective operations of the body and the senses that take place when one participates in the film.

So why do people keep watching something so unpleasurable? I would argue that we simply keep watching because the film obliges us to watch. In other words, films can make demands on our spectatorial responsibility in ways that override our own demands for cinematic pleasure, so that we feel compelled to watch. This responsibility is born out of reverence that we might feel for the film. It would be easier to just turn away from the film that arouses negative emotions in us, but that we do not consider worth our while aesthetically, intellectually, emotionally, or in any other way. Yet our gain is not connected to pleasure *per se*. Perhaps it could even be argued that we seek vivid, immediate cinematic experiences for their own sake, regardless of their unpleasurable, unrewarding features. Through these experiences the spectators are organically apprehended by the affective force of the film, which relates to their innards, their emotional and bodily existence. In its insistence on disgust as a particularly strong sensation, this is an effect that *Repulsion* demonstrates particularly well.

### Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Charles France, Tina Kendall and the anonymous reviewer.

The ideas developed in this article are based on parts of chapter 1 of Tarja Laine, *Feeling Cinema: Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies*. New York: Continuum (2011).

## Bibliography

- Aaron, Michele (2007) *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking on*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Barker, Jennifer M. (2009) *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Carroll, Noel (1990) *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge.
- Damasio, Antonio (1999) *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. San Diego: Harcourt.
- Fischer, Lucy (2006) 'Beauty and the Beast: Desire and its Double in *Repulsion*' in *The Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World*, John Orr and Elzbieta Ostrowska, eds. London: Wallflower Press: 76-91
- Fisher, Philip (2002) *The Vehement Passions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Goscilo, Helena (2006) 'Polanski's Existential Body – As Somebody, Nobody and Anybody' in *The Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World*, John Orr and Elzbieta Ostrowska, eds. London: Wallflower Press: 22-37.
- Grodal, Torben (1997) *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings and Cognitions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hanich, Julian (2009) 'Dis/liking Disgust: The Revulsion Experience at the Movies.' *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, v. 7, n. 3: 293-310.
- Hume, David (2007) 'Of Tragedy' in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume, Vol. 3*. Boston: Elibron: 237-247.
- Kolnai, Aurel (2004) *On Disgust*. Ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer and Barry Smith. Trans. Elizabeth Kolnai. Chicago: Open Court.
- Kristeva, Julia (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Laine, Tarja (2009) 'Affective Telepathy, or the Intuition of the Heart: *Persona* with *Mulholland Drive*.' *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, v. 7, n. 3: 325-338.

- Laine, Tarja (2011) *Feeling Cinema: Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies*. New York: Continuum.
- Manning, Erin (2007) *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Massumi, Brian (2002) *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ngai, Sianne (2005) *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Olatunji, Bunmi O. (2007) 'Disgust and Psychiatric Illness: Have We Remembered?' *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, n. 190: 457-459.
- Robinson, Jenefer (2007) *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shaviro, Steven (1993) *The Cinematic Body*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shaw, Daniel (2008) *Film and Philosophy: Taking Movies Seriously*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Smith, Murray (1999) 'Imagining from the Inside' in *Film Theory and Philosophy*. Richard Allen and Murray Smith, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 411-430.
- Tan, Ed S. (1996) *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

### Filmography

- Becker, Walt (2002) *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*. USA.
- Haneke, Michael (1997) *Funny Games*. Austria.
- Noé, Gaspar (2002) *Irreversible (Irréversible)*. France
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo (1975) *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma)*. Italy.
- Polanski, Roman (1965) *Repulsion*. United Kingdom.
- Romero, George (1985) *Day of the Dead*. USA.