TEXTS AND IDEAS: REVULSION, NAUSEA, AND DISGUST
CORE-UA 400-050 • SPRING 2022
LECTURES: T/Th 2:00–3:15pm • Silver 206

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COURSE DESCRIPTION
This course explores the peculiarly central role the negative emotion of disgust has played in modern thought and writing. Our primary object of study will be the relationship between literature, art, and disgust, from the grotesque satires of François Rabelais and Jonathan Swift, through Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist Nausea, and on to Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy and Cindy Sherman’s self-portraits. Tracking the different meanings and values that literary authors have attached to the experience of disgust at different historical moments, we will analyze how the roles played by our most seemingly reflexive, “hard-wired” forms of sensory and emotional response can change and evolve. We will also supplement and contrast our literary readings with philosophical, sociological, psychoanalytic, and scientific texts about the nature of disgust, starting with the aesthetic theory of the Enlightenment and Charles Darwin’s speculations on the evolution of vomiting, and moving on to more recent psychological accounts of revulsion. The relationship of disgust to five areas of inquiry will be of special interest to us as we read: the aesthetics and psychology of disgust; satire and invective; sexuality and obscenity; sociology, socioeconomic class, and the study of social antagonism; and prejudice, race, and the psychology of exclusion. Prerequisite: strong stomach.

COURSE AIMS
This course has a pair overarching goals that reach beyond our focus on disgust. First, by focusing our attention on the significance of one particular emotion in modern thought, the course aims to emphasize the importance of thinking critically about affect and emotion more generally. Our other goal is to introduce the humanities as areas of active inquiry and imaginative interpretation. Emotions can be studied from various scientific and physiological perspectives, but they are inextricably bound up with human culture and are fundamentally interpretive. In this respect, the study of the emotions is especially useful for
modeling humanistic scholarly inquiry, and for complicating our understanding of how different kinds of knowledge are formed. As a part of the College Core Curriculum, the course is designed to extend your education beyond the focused studies of your major, helping you be a thoughtful, active member of society in whatever line of work you choose.

REQUIRED BOOKS
Octavia Butler, Lilith's Brood
Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea
Jonathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels
Émile Zola, The Belly of Paris

FILMS
Parasite, dir. Bong Joon-ho (2019)  
(available to stream on Kanopy: https://nyu.kanopy.com/video/parasite-2)
(available to stream through the NYU library: https://digitalcampus.swankmp.net/nyu305164/watch/4E8482B2FDDDC7C?referrer=direct)

OTHER REQUIRED READINGS
In addition to the course books, there are numerous required readings for the class, that are listed in the reading schedule below. These readings will be easily accessible to download as PDFs from the course Brightspace site. Please print out these readings and bring a hard copy to your discussion section.

ASSIGNMENTS
In addition to class participation, there are four written assignments for this course: a disgust journal, due every third week (5 total); a midterm and a final exam; and a final paper.

I. Disgust Journal
You are responsible for keeping a disgust journal throughout the semester, in which you record and analyze personal experiences of disgust in light of at least one text from the course. Each entry should address one sensory or physical experience of disgust/nausea/repulsion and/or one experience of moral or political repugnance. Additionally, each entry should engage with at least one of the readings from our course. The journal is meant to help you reflect on the meaning of your experience of your disgust, with the goal of developing working hypotheses about whether or not you think this meaning is subject to change, and about how moral/political and sensory disgust are related. Journal entries should be 1-2 typed pages and are due every third week via email (as .docx or .pdf files). You are required to complete a minimum of 5 entries over the course of the semester.

II. Midterm Exam
There will be a written midterm exam, covering the course material from the first seven weeks of the semester, in class on Thursday, March 10.
III. Final Paper
The final paper for the course (6-7 pages) should address one literary and at least one theoretical or philosophical text from the course. I will distribute topics in advance. This will be a traditional academic paper, with a clear thesis statement and a coherent and well-organized argument. The final paper will be due on the last of class, May 5.

IV. Final Exam
There will be a written final exam, covering material from the entire semester, at the end of the term.

CLASS PARTICIPATION
Classroom discussion will be essential to our ongoing exploration of the literature of disgust, and I expect you to participate at least once per section meeting. I also encourage participation during the lectures. Please note that since most of what we will be reading and discussing is by definition offensive (to someone, somewhere, at some point in time, at least), it is especially important that we strive to create a respectful, open-minded and tolerant intellectual environment. We are trying to understand and to analyze the nature of this particular form of offense, not to offend each other. Respectful and engaged class participation will constitute a significant part of your final grade. Please refrain from using laptops, phones, or tablets during class.

ATTENDANCE
Regular attendance is also crucial to the success of our class. Please do your best to attend all course meetings and to arrive on time. Apart from absences due to illness, family emergencies, and religious observances, your grade will be affected if you miss more than one session.

TECHNOLOGY POLICY
Please print out all readings and turn off all devices before class begins so that we can have a screen-free classroom—no phones, laptops, tablets, etc. If you are unable to print out the readings, please let me know and we will figure it out.

ACCESSIBILITY
NYU is committed to ensuring the full participation of students in its programs, and academic accommodations and support are available to any student who requires them. Students should register with the Moses Center for Student Accessibility (https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/student-accessibility.html; mosescsd@nyu.edu; 726 Broadway, 3rd Floor; tel. 212.998.4980). If you have an accommodation in place, please be in touch with me at the beginning of the semester.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY
Any instance of academic dishonesty will result in an F and will be subject to disciplinary action. If you are unsure about whether or not something constitutes plagiarism, please come see me before turning in your assignment. Here is a resource with information about
how to cite and use other work appropriately: 
https://guides.nyu.edu/plagiarism/overview, and here is NYU’s full statement on academic integrity: http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity.

**FINAL GRADE BREAKDOWN**

- Disgust Journal: 15%
- Midterm Exam: 20%
- Participation: 20%
- Final Exam: 20%
- Final Paper: 25%

**READING SCHEDULE**

**WEEK 1**

T 1/25

Course Intro: *Yummy/Yucky*
Plato, excerpt from *The Republic*, Book 4

**Unit 1: What is Disgust? (And: What is an Emotion?)**

Th 1/27

Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*
Paul Rozin and April E. Fallon, “A Perspective on Disgust”

**WEEK 2**

T 2/1

Watch: Lisa Feldman Barrett, “You Not at the Mercy of Your Emotions” (20m)
Rachel Herz, *That’s Disgusting: Unraveling the Mysteries of Repulsion*
Andras Angyal, “Disgust and Related Aversions”

Th 2/3

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Chapter 4 (Footnotes)
Freud, Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, November 14, 1897
Silvan Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*

**Unit 2: Is the Disgusting Beautiful? From Psychology to Aesthetics**

**WEEK 3**

T 2/8

Introduction to Enlightenment Aesthetic Theory:
David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757)
Immanuel Kant, from *The Critique of Judgment* (1790)

Th 2/10

The Aesthetics of Disgust
Immanuel Kant, from *The Critique of Judgment* (1790)
Carolyn Korsmeyer, from *Savoring Disgust*
Images from Cindy Sherman, “Fairy Tales and Disasters,” et al.
WEEK 4
T 2/15    Charles Baudelaire, “Une Charogne [A Carcass]”
           Georges Bataille, “Formless”
           Julia Kristeva, from Powers of Horror

**Unit 3: Sex, Satire, Scatology**
Th 2/17    George Saunders, “Sea Oak”
           from Francois Rabelais, Gargantua and Pantagruel
           from M.M. Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World

WEEK 5
T 2/22    Jonathan Swift, “Excremental Poems”

Th 2/24    Swift, Gulliver’s Travels

WEEK 6
T 3/1     Swift, Gulliver’s Travels

Th 3/3     Sigmund Freud, from Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality

WEEK 7
T 3/8     Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public”
           Samuel Delaney, from Time Square Red, Time Square Blue
           Martha Nussbaum, from Hiding from Humanity

Th 3/10    Midterm Exam

WEEK 8   **SPRING BREAK – NO CLASSES**

WEEK 9
T 3/22    Swift, “Description of a City Shower”
           Friedrich Engels, “London”
           Karl Marx, from the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts
           George Orwell, from The Road to Wigan Pier
           Alain Corbin, from The Foul and the Fragrant, “The Stench of the Poor”

Th 3/24    Zola, The Belly of Paris

WEEK 10
T 3/29    Zola, The Belly of Paris
           Edmondo De Amicis, “Preface to Zola’s L’Assommoir”
           Erich Auerbach, from Mimesis
Th 3/31  Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life
Georges Bataille, “Attraction and Repulsion”

**WEEK 11**
T 4/5  Norbert Elias, from *The Civilizing Process*

Th 4/7  Film: *Parasite* (dir. Bong Joon-ho)

**WEEK 12**
T 4/12  Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

Th 4/14  Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*
Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (excerpts on stickiness)

**Unit 5: Racism and the Psychology of Exclusion**

T 4/19  Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*
Jiayang Fan, “Yuck! The Gatekeepers Who Decide What Food is Disgusting”
Kyla Wazana Tompkins, from *Racial Indigestion*
Darwin, “Disgust”

Th 4/21  Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Elements of Anti-Semitism”
Sara Ahmed, “The Performativity of Disgust”

**WEEK 14**
T 4/26  Octavia Butler, *Dawn*

Th 4/28  Octavia Butler, *Dawn*

**WEEK 15**
T 5/3  TBD

Th 5/5  Wrap up
**Final Paper Due**

**Final Exam**