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A Cultural History of Disgust

HANS J. RINDISBACHER

(1) William Ian Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge/Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1997. 336p. – (2) Winfried Menninghaus, *Ekel. Theorie und Geschichte einer starken Empfindung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1999. 591p. – (3) Robert Rawdon Wilson, *The Hydra's Tale: Imagining Disgust*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press 2002. 445p. – (4) Silvia Bovenschen, *Über-Empfindlichkeit. Spielformen der Idiosynkrasie*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2000. 265p.

»The disgusting is marvelously promiscuous and ubiquitous.«
W.I. Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 89.

Twentyone years ago, Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf, as editors of the essay collection, *Das Schwinden der Sinne* (1984), noted the »disappearance« or at least, the »fading«, of the senses. The collection, following their 1982 volume on the »reappearance of the body«, *Die Wiederkehr des Körpers*, marked the beginning of a theoretical discussion on the body and the senses that has since, in a postmodern and cross-disciplinary spirit, ramified in many directions. The September 1997 edition of *Kursbuch*, titled *Ekel und Allergie* (No. 129) thus took up a beginning trend, uniting a number of essays, both fictional and scholarly. In the process, the senses, together with the body as their physical location, have been rethought in philosophy, aesthetics, linguistics, as well as anthropology, medicine, the neurosciences, and the law. Body and senses have also been subjected to new modes of inquiry and expression in the arts and literature. Historically, within the extended framework of Enlightenment thinking, the body and the senses had stimulated a wide range of concepts, emphasizing their archaic and pre-individual functions as well as their hermeneutic roles in fully individualized subjects in search of transcendental meaning. In the resulting broad spectrum of inquiries, the body tended to be pulled increasingly toward the cerebral pole and framed discursively as *the body in the mind*. More recently however, in one of the significant turnarounds the postmodern mindset brought in its wake, *the mind in the body* has emerged as a new center of scholarly and scientific attention. Growing neuroscience data suggests that the Kantian theatre of the mind, where such abstract and purely intellectual forces as »will«, »reason«, »passion«, or »imagination« were acting out an intricate power play, is just that: an imaginary stage. Instead, the new focus has been on the concept of the »embodied mind«, drawing on scientific data to suggest an irreducible physiological base for human consciousness and the intellect. Lakoff's and Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), among others, put out these (neuro-)science-based ideas for philosophy and the humanities to engage with. Ekbert Faas, in his recent history of aesthetics, *The Genealogy of Aesthetics* (2002), also points out the recent trend toward a body-based approach to aesthetics, although his account is based more on the idealist-materialist divide and focused less on the cognitive-science and linguistic turn than, for instance, Lakoff's and Johnson's.

The transition from modernity to postmodernity over the past couple of decades has thus led to a rethinking and reevaluation of the connections between the body and the senses on the one hand and social reality and cultural production on the other, as manifested in the four books under discussion here; but they are merely the tip of the

iceberg. One consequence of this refocused interest in sensory and perceptual issues is the overall shortening of the distance between humans and animals, also exemplified along another vector of contemporary inquiry, namely in the behavioral sciences and anthropology. That this distinction can hardly be maintained as categorical but increasingly appears as gradual, has been the general tenet in genetics and anthropology for some time; but just *how* gradual it seems to be has been reemphasized in recent years. Partially as a consequence of this development, another shift has taken place within this refocused discourse of the body and the mind: a growing interest in, and recognition of, the importance of the »lower« senses, the »Nahsinne«, and specifically the two chemical senses of taste and smell. Not surprisingly, they feature prominently in a discussion of disgust. In literature, Patrick Süskind's 1985 novel, *Perfume*, initiated this trend. Menninghaus, Miller, and Wilson, however, have added yet another subtle shift of emphasis and deepened the analysis by combining *sensory perception* with the accompanying *emotions*, the strong *affective qualities* inherent in disgust. And they address their topic across a dividing-line that has traditionally split the discourse of the body and its sensory apparatus into the realms of actual things and actions in the world on the one hand and their artistic, notably textual (but also visual) manifestations on the other. Bovenschen's book on idiosyncrasy approaches disgust more indirectly; but she provides a broader frame of reference for the unpredictable ways of triggering the affect of disgust in individuals – besides other peculiar reactions.

Miller's book was the earliest among the four, and it is referenced and critiqued by both Menninghaus and Wilson. Menninghaus's criticism is milder overall, but with its touch of resignation concerning the decreasing international scope of German intellectual history, it is more sweeping:

Miller's *Anatomie des Ekels* ist in Unkenntnis nicht nur der gesamten deutschen Tradition im Denken des Ekels von Mendelssohn bis Nietzsche, sondern auch seines direkten Vorläufers, eben Kolnais großer Studie *Der Ekel*, geschrieben worden. So entspricht es dem dramatischen Bekanntheitsverlust deutschsprachiger Wissenschaft an amerikanischen Universitäten in der Spätfolge des 2. Weltkriegs (33).

However, apart from this growing rift in the global network of academic cultures, where one side is increasingly less aware of the other, there also exists a significant difference in approach between the two inquiries. Menninghaus's book is a brilliant and magisterial study of (predominantly) German aesthetic theory and its rhetorical, visual, and textual repercussions, covering roughly the past 250 years. Miller's interest in disgust is colored by his social, specifically legal, interests in the role of disgust as a culturally useful deep structure for shaping human behavior, norms, and values.

Wilson, like Menninghaus a literary scholar with broad cultural and philosophical interests, chides Miller repeatedly for his failure adequately to distinguish between real-life disgust and disgusting behaviors and their rhetorical, textual, symbolic forms. This borderline and the different effects disgust and the disgusting have in the actual and the symbolic realms are, in turn, at the center of Wilson's inquiry, significantly shaped by the role of the *imagination* and, hence, the cultural fluidity – as opposed to, say, historical stability or even anthropological universality – of the phenomena of disgust. All three books are scholarly, with extensive bibliographical documentation and notes – especially detailed in Wilson's case with over 140 pages of apparatus – and with both Miller and Wilson providing a useful index. Bovenschen's study does not have this full academic heft. It is, in the very best sense of that term, an *essay*. As such, it is less systematic but more allusive and far-reaching – idiosyncratic in itself. »Es wurde keine historisch-systematische Untersuchung angestrebt, eher schon die

Spielform des Kaleidoskops« (10). Disgust, then, appears tangentially, as one among many forms of unpredictable individual psycho-physical reactions to what often would appear to be minor irritants to most of us. The phenomena to which people react idiosyncratically far transcend the world of the disgusting, strictly speaking.

William Ian Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1997. 336p.

In accordance with their respective »Erkenntnisinteresse«, the authors emphasize different aspects of their topic. Miller constructs a (western) »phenomenology of disgust« (11) with regard to the affect's capacity for social ordering. To this end he begins with the distinction of disgust from its neighboring affects (chapter two), providing a useful framework for analyzing strong sense-based emotions. Arguing that disgust »knows no distinction between the moral and the aesthetic« (21), Miller's enterprise aims from the outset in a socio-moral direction. In chapter three, »Thick, Greasy Life«, Miller builds a taxonomy of disgusting objects and behaviors in real life, with animal products generally more prone to evoking disgust than plants or even mineral or technical products. He emphasizes skin, which, as a liminal realm, is especially prone to flip-flopping between the disgusting and the attractive – a point informing Menninghaus's account too, when he discusses the smooth body surfaces of classical sculpture. In chapter four, Miller switches the perspective on the disgusting from object to subject by investigating the five senses and their connection to disgust. Not surprisingly, the chemical senses and the sense of touch (again, the skin) provide the channels most apt to report disgust. Continuing in the subjective vein, chapter five addresses »Orifices and Bodily Wastes«. Going from the eye to the ear, the nose, mouth, anus, and the genitals, Miller works with a dual perspective. If the body is understood as the locus of the soul, then the orifices mark vulnerable points of entry for damaging things, both physical, but even more so, spiritual. Accordingly, the eye and the ear are particularly at risk. On the other hand, if the body appears merely as a disgusting sack of intestines and excrements, then its orifices become potential points of embarrassing leakage. This perspective focuses more on the lower orifices – but the mouth (vomiting) is not exempt from this risk.

Whereas the first half of the study focused on the material world of disgust, the second half moves on to »the moral, the historical, and the social« (108), in short, the cultural frames of reference for the disgusting. Accordingly, in chapter six, Miller develops and elaborates two basic disgust structures: a repressive Freudian one that serves »as a barrier to satisfying unconscious desire« (109); and a second type based on surfeit and overindulgence (that Menninghaus will call »Sättigungsekels«). This setup allows Miller to discuss transgressions of social norms that can be either comical or leading to guilt and shame. It allows him to discuss literature, Shakespeare in particular, but also the figures of Faust and Don Juan, and it further facilitates the broader development of disgust in the direction of class issues, ennu, desire and its economics, and, above all, love as a »state in which various disgust rules are relaxed or suspended« (132). Along this track, Miller discusses intimacy and private vs. public standards of disgust by drawing on Goffman's »territories of the self« and certain types of (privately) permitted transgressions. Chapter six then has Miller increasingly drawing on autobiographical experience, namely married life with children – a rich source for the observation of disgust rules or their breakdown, as the case may be. Chapter seven is a socio-historical and linguistic digression. It looks at descriptions and roles of disgust

in Nordic sagas, pointing out the differing standards compared with modern society, but emphasizing that a certain delicacy is never absent. This use of literature as a source of social data quite naturally leads to an integration of elements from Norbert Elias's *Process of Civilization* and the insight that »Disgust, in effect, starts to make the private possible« (162) in a development which, central to Elias's beliefs, characterizes the civilizing process as the continuous expansion of the private sphere at the expense of the public. The third element of this chapter is linguistic: Shakespeare never used the word »disgust« – because it had not yet entered the English language at the time. »Disgust« emerges in English only together with the expansion of »taste« from the purely gustatory to broader implications of aesthetics and style in the course of the seventeenth century. In contrast, the German word »Ekel« is older, but it is of different etymological lineage than the romance-language terms based on the oral sense of »gustus«. »Ekel« is related to the English »irksome«, describing something grating, bothersome, upsetting, without particular sensory associations. As such, it offers richer connections to the realm of the idiosyncratic, as we will see below. It is also related to »heikel«, that touchiness that is so often, well, idiosyncratic.

With chapters eight and nine Miller moves away from disgust as a visceral affect into the realm of »moral sentiment« (197). But only by diluting this strong gut feeling with emotions like indignation, outrage, loathing, and above all contempt does he succeed in tying it into the social organization of democracy – »Mutual Contempt and Democracy« being the title of chapter nine. With its dematerialization, disgust becomes hyperbolic shorthand for a conglomerate of emotions we may feel when faced with cruelty, hypocrisy, betrayal, and other social vices: we are »disgusted« by these kinds of behaviors. However, in the process, the register of disgust becomes increasingly a figure of speech, loses its visceral edge, blends with frustration, indignation, anger, and may well be reduced to a peeve, a »pet peeve« even – which takes it into the realm of the idiosyncratic, away from its much more fundamental, gut-churning, material parent. In contemporary American usage, people are indeed »disgusted« or some act or behavior is seen as »disgusting« in many situations where hardly any concrete physical affect is in play. Being disgusted has become an overused idiom.

No doubt both disgust and contempt are emotions of (social) status demarcation as Miller wishes us to see them, but he draws primarily on contempt in order to illustrate his point, distinguishing a class-based »upward« and an older and more common »downward« contempt. While upward contempt is democratic, its downward version, blended with disgust, is inherently un- or anti-democratic. Thus, just as Miller is building up to the climax of his argument for the broad structural role of disgust in social ordering and border drawing, he increasingly amalgamates the affect with other emotions, less physiological and more discursive. While he prepares the reader for this development by admitting that »seldom [...] is an emotion ever experienced unalloyed with other emotions« (214), it is nevertheless a moment of terminological and conceptual slippage, a blurring of the contours of the central topic of investigation, disgust, that he has spent so much time outlining. By conceding the admixture of numerous other emotions in the key argument of his work he reaffirms the – still – precarious status of the disgusting and its liminal position *between* the phenomenological or physiological on the one hand and the discursive and intellectual on the other rather than its full member status *within* the second of these realms. Despite this criticism, our sensitivity to the topic of the disgusting has increased through Miller's study and his last chapter, an analysis of Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), with its prominent role of the olfactory sense as an unshakable marker of class distinction, is, even if not entirely novel, quite convincing. »Disgust may not

be necessary to all rank orderings, but it appears as an insistent feature in some of our most common social orderings« (245), the irreducible material connection of social structures and the body.

Winfried Menninghaus, *Ekel. Theorie und Geschichte einer starken Empfindung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1999. 591p.

In contrast to Miller, Menninghaus's approach has a narrower focus. He largely avoids the question of disgust's ontological dimension by treating it strictly within an intellectual discourse of aesthetics (while Wilson foregrounds precisely the dividing line between »real« and »discursive«, i.e. imagined, disgust). He expressly is not writing »eine Geschichte des – weithin undokumentierten – 'wirklichen' Ekels« (9) but instead is interested in the »maßgebliche Theoretisierungen des Ekels in den zurückliegenden 250 Jahren« (9). This stance results in a predominantly German history of aesthetics, brushed against the grain of »the beautiful« and revealing disgust as a key element in the very construction and theoretization of beauty, from eighteenth-century Enlightenment, through Romanticism and the nineteenth century – where Nietzsche emerges as a »master of disgust« by turning the affect into a broad figure of thought and a central point in his philosophy – to Kafka's writings and Sartre's, Batailles', and Kristeva's theories in the twentieth.

Within his framework of analyzing the construction of beauty, especially the beautiful human body and beauty's origin in, and ongoing references to, classical sculpture in the eighteenth century, Menninghaus concentrates on the same two kinds of disgust as Miller: »Freudian« disgust and a »disgust of surfeit« or »Sättigungsekel«. But unlike Miller, Menninghaus's disgust is generally imagined, not »real«, intellectually conceptualized, not physically threatening. Along the vast span of his theoretical arch, Menninghaus emphasizes the classical obsession with (body) surfaces and the effort to establish *within* the aesthetic the very boundary between the surface and what lies below it. Disgust is the means to doing this; it is the dark and dangerous undercurrent, always threatening to break through from just below the classical surface, spoiling and soiling its beauty. Whereas for Miller the orifices of the body marked the precarious boundary between the physical individual and the discursive norms of society, for Menninghaus they are »das eigentliche Skandalon der klassischen Ästhetik und Politik des Körpers« (86); they need the most careful regulation *within* aesthetics. The classical aesthetic discourse, centered on the beautiful statue-like body and its insistence on ideal, unblemished surfaces, is thus eminently comparable with the body aesthetics of our own time.

Menninghaus's trajectory, sketched here only in broad outline, establishes disgust as the necessary *other* of the beautiful and illustrates this strand of thinking from Lessing, Mendelssohn, and Winckelmann via Kant into the romantic period. Whereas in classical thinking disgust, categorically excluded from aesthetics, is nevertheless the very precondition for the beautiful, understood as infinite but infinitely incomplete reflection, in romantic thinking disgust is always already present *within* the field of the aesthetic and makes possible an aesthetics of decay that may now well include the sense of smell that Kant had deemed too subjective and dark, mostly due to its poor linguistic anchoring. But already Kant, followed by Nietzsche and Freud, had held that disgust was socially encoded and, as the negative correlate of »Genuß«, could be used to establish social norms. »Erziehung zum Ekel« (168) therefore facilitates the internalization of (social) norms and reduces the need for their possibly violent enforcement.

Nietzsche, known for relentlessly questioning ideas and ideals for what they hide and deny – often by tracing them back to their physical and corporeal roots – develops »Ekel« into a major figure of thought, turns this mechanism inside out: »Wir lernen den Ekel um« (226) in order to use it as a tool of »Erkenntnis«. In Freud, finally, disgust undergoes a similar reevaluation. The enforcement of disgust norms in mapping the standards of civilization onto the individual, centered in sexuality, often leads to hysteria and neuroses, with perversion the afflicted person's – however inadequate – reaction. Freud's concept of perversion is nothing but the absence (the overcoming) of disgust in areas where the process of civilization thought to have established solid disgust barriers. Acting out the perversion is Freud's version of »den Ekel umlernen«. For the observer upholding the norms of civilization, however, the perversion then is itself disgusting

Menninghaus's subsequent analysis of Kafka's writing confirms both the Freudian views of the role of disgust for the individual (*qua* fictional characters as well as the person of the author), the key tenets of the aesthetic history of disgust Menninghaus has outlined, and the effectiveness of Kafka's writerly strategies that make disgust almost unnoticeable. The latter point is confirmed in the general tenor of Kafka's reception; he rarely appears as a »disgusting« writer, but rather gets praised for his cool visual, objective-distanced style. Menninghaus's analysis reveals the extent to which disgust is a key feature in Kafka's oeuvre and how it functions. The application of his historical and theoretical findings to a literary work, combined with the insight gained from Kafka's own extensive autobiographical accounts, can be seen as the culmination of Menninghaus's study.

Robert Rawdon Wilson, *The Hydra's Tale: Imagining Disgust*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press 2002. 446p.

Wilson's story is based on a mixture of both »real-life« disgust and its metaphoric and symbolic uses; it is »both empirical and theoretical« (xix). Establishing the line between these two aspects is at the center of his study. Beginning with the title, and continued in his chapter headings, Wilson sets up in chapter one the metaphor of the Hydra to express the multidimensional ramifications of the phenomena of the disgusting. In this exposition he is closer to Miller than to Menninghaus, opening up a broader and multidisciplinary range of possible inquiries and spicing up his account, more than any of the other writers, by examples and personal anecdotes, some of them quite disgusting indeed. Chapter two, »The Hydra's Lair«, is an overview of five models of the disgusting which it is useful briefly to survey here as they pull together many of the observations made in this review. The first is »a moral-legal model according to which disgust is a powerful affect underlying social prohibitions«. This is, Wilson provides the reference himself, Miller's model. The second model »is based on the principles of social construction«. The third is Freud's. None of these three, however, »addresses the moral issues that disgust raises« (xx); rather, they all have a »built-in propensity to fix disgust and see it as inflexible and unyielding« (xxi). Model four, therefore, is based on Sartre (*L'Être et le Néant*) and Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger*) and addresses the shortcomings of the first three by emphasizing »the power of the human mind to imagine delinquency and invent small narratives, whether of horror or loathing, to expand the immediate experience of disgust« (xxi). The emphasis on *imagination* in the realm of the disgusting is indeed the strength of Wilson's book as it allows him to address what he calls the »metamorphicity« of the phenom-

enon, its many-headedness. The fifth model, emphasizing transgression, builds on Bataille and can be read as a complement to the fourth. It also provides a direct connection to Menninghaus's chapter eight with its focus on Sartre and Bataille. And both authors' last chapters are again closely linked, with »the abject«, the issue of self-disgust, at the center. Kristeva's writings feature prominently in Menninghaus but more tangentially and somewhat critically assessed in Wilson.

Wilson's chapter three works out the distinctions between real disgust phenomena and their literary, theatrical, in short: imaginary and imagined representations. *Ulysses* is one of his sources here as well as some excrement-flinging punk bands. Chapter four continues the discussion of imagined and performed disgust in »small, private disgust-worlds« (xxiii). Although increasingly focusing on the cyborg, the »hybrid form produced by integrating a machine into the human body« (146), this chapter, together with the following, subtitled »Imagining Disgust« (159), treats issues that are at the center of Bovenschen's inquiry, too: pain, the unpredictability of the disgusting, the emphasis on individual imagination, understood by Wilson as »often involuntary and always a supplement to, enhancing or reconfiguring, experience« (166) – a view that counters the predominant (romantic) concept of the imagination as voluntary and deliberate. In Wilson's juxtaposition of a »cultural« and a »personal imaginary« (170) he provides two further concepts that carry over into Bovenschen's understanding of idiosyncrasy: the seemingly inappropriate and strictly individual emotional reaction to an objectively trivial and harmless stimulus that may go unnoticed by everyone else. As if to underscore this point, Wilson makes a lot of the apparent disgustingness of tattoos, clearly one of his own personal aversions. In chapter six, he expands and elaborates on imagined disgust, the »make-believe versions of disgust that operate in moral judgments« and points out that »representations of disgust in art, literature and film ... are not themselves disgusting or not in the same way that the objects and acts they represent would be«. Wilson therefore draws a clear line between »aesthetic disgust« and »actual disgust« (186). This distinction is key for the analysis of the films (the *Alien* series, *Eraserhead*, Polanski's *Repulsion*) that is a central issue of chapter six. In this connection an additional important differentiation is made: that between terror (»Terror is abrupt«, 194) and horror (»In horror, there is a path to follow«, 223). While both these affects can be based on disgust, in horror, the viewer sees it, coming, being exposed to a growing sense of apprehension and dread. Terror, by contrast, is only accidentally linked to disgust. An additional strand of the argument in chapter six, based on (Muslim) reactions to Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, takes Wilson far afield to the claim that disgust at a certain belief system that is seen to constitute »a genuinely alien set of concepts« is more difficult to overcome than disgust at certain eating or toilet habits. For fundamentalist Muslims, Wilson argues, the very worldview of Modernism may well be a »test case« (203) of such a system.

Silvia Bovenschen, *Über-Empfindlichkeit. Spielformen der Idiosynkrasie*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2000. 265p.

By emphasizing imagination and the imaginary in his culturally broad treatment of disgust and in revealing, by way of numerous personal anecdotes, the often unpredictable reactions, Wilson comes closest to Bovenschen. While disgust is his central theme, he nevertheless allows the idiosyncratic to be often visible just under the surface of his broader claims for the disgusting. For Bovenschen, within the broad range of the idiosyncratic, the disgusting, as one of its special cases, is never far off. Her essay

can be read as pursuing precisely the ramifications that inevitably accompany disgust into that broader realm of emotions the other authors all admit as admixtures of disgust, yet have to exclude as much as possible for the sake of limiting the debate. To the disgusting as just one domain where idiosyncrasies may manifest themselves, Bovenschen adds – explicitly thematized in topics such as physiognomy, eccentricity, friendship, family relations, and pain – a broad range of possible affective triggers and our reactions and hypersensitivities to them. What happens in idiosyncrasy is that »Wir reagieren unwillkürlich bei wachem Bewußtsein [...] Wir nehmen etwas genau, übergenu, wahr und gleichzeitig uns selbst. [...] Wir sind vom Wahrgenommenen nicht paralysiert, wie etwa beim Schock oder dem grellen Entsetzen, oder der schieren Angst, oder dem überwältigenden Ekel« but we are momentarily thrown off balance. »Der Grund für diese Irritationen ist uns nicht immer zugänglich [...] Wenn nichts mehr an diesem Phänomen erklärbar scheint, werden wir uns selbst fremd« (13).

It must be pointed out to speakers of American English that »idiosyncrasy« for Bovenschen means something more profound than a slightly odd, but certainly acceptable individual mannerism, a little personal tic, a »this-is-just-may-way-of-doing-it« kind of behavior commonly associated with the term in everyday parlance. For Bovenschen, idiosyncrasy means heightened perception and exaggerated sensory or emotional reactions, an allergic effect in an emotional or intellectual rather than a biological sense, a sensitivity as apt to trigger novel insights as requiring psychological or psychiatric attention – in short, a state of mind, body, and soul that is more on edge than the average person's. Very informative is her chapter »Über Verwandtschaftsverhältnisse«, where she traces historical frameworks of idiosyncrasy as well as related concepts, such as allergy, eccentricity, spleen and – part of the title of her essay – hypersensitivity. It is here also that she addresses the roots of the concept in humoral theory, the proper mixture of the *humores* in eucrasy, from which idiosyncrasy departs, without, however, reaching the outright pathological dyscrasy (173). Is idiosyncrasy becoming more common in modern society where increasingly »anything goes«? Or is it, whether increasing or not, »going mainstream«? Does our world of speed and impatience promote idiosyncrasy or even irritation? Or, on the contrary, does our endless exposure to nervous stimuli of all sorts make us duller, deadening our sensitivities? Bovenschen does not answer these questions, but she offers a rich field of intriguing associations and connections for the reader to indulge in – each in his or her own way, in a »mixture of one's own« as the etymology of the word »idiosyncrasy« suggests. And this is perhaps the most precise anyone can get. For whereas disgust can, even if just barely, be treated in the standard academic format of the scholarly book, idiosyncrasy, by its very nature, threatens to explode that framework. The pursuit of a wide range of affects and nervous states such as irritation, aversion, repulsion, fear, horror, loathing, apprehension, etc. that emerge as unpredictable individual reactions at unpredictable moments and in unpredictable situations – in short: the pursuit of the idiosyncratic, therefore may well only be possible in the form of the essay.

In juxtaposing these four studies, the reader becomes aware of their numerous intersections and fairly broad overlap. Yet each also maintains its own emphasis – with the authors revealing their own idiosyncrasy not only in approaching the topic, but also in their own susceptibility to the disgusting. For Miller, for instance, hair seems almost as offensive as feces; Menninghaus, although mostly on behalf of the authors he focuses on, but perhaps on his own too, is barely able to tear himself away from the *vetula*, the repulsive, ugly old woman as the epitome of the disgusting, the haunting specter of European autonomous aesthetics; and Wilson, quite obsessively given

to autobiographical examples to start up his chapters, reveals his own near-trauma with the »golden shower« he returns to repeatedly. But beyond the broad commonalities and individual interests and peeves, there also emerges a network of secondary connections via the references and sources our authors draw on. Not only do the later studies refer to Miller, all of them in turn refer to Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger*, 1966), Miller and Wilson quite extensively, Menninghaus more in passing. Sigmund Freud is a key point of departure, especially the Freud of *Civilization and Its Discontents* and the studies of childhood sexual development. In fact, one is amazed to realize the extent to which Freud still provides the intellectual and conceptual armature for vast tracts of cultural analysis. Kant and Nietzsche are, of course, at the center of Menninghaus's work (they both receive their own chapter, as does Freud), but are referred to by Miller and Wilson as well. Paul Rozin's work on disgust is referenced by Miller, Menninghaus, and Wilson; and both Wilson and Bovenschen quote Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (1985). Surprisingly in light of the fact that he explicitly connects smell, disgust, and social development, Alain Corbins *Le miasme et la jonquille* (1982; English 1986), is absent from Miller but referred to by Menninghaus and Wilson. Menninghaus laments the fact that Miller is unacquainted with Aurel Kolnai's *Der Ekel* (1929) – whom Menninghaus discusses in depth. Kolnai's study, one of the few and earliest systematic treatises of the topic, deals precisely with the social and even political roles of disgust that are central to Miller's own account. It seems, then, that the dense network of references to the same authors confirms Menninghaus's sense, expressed early on in his book, that the scholarly attention to disgust has been rather scanty so far, with his own only »die vierte größere Studie zum Ekel überhaupt« (28). This does not include Wilson's, though. If my own sense is correct about the postmodern turn toward a kind of structural phenomenology of issues of perception, cognition, and aesthetics and their social function – an enterprise that may well include findings in the »hard« sciences – the last word on disgust, both as a subjective and a material phenomenon, has not been spoken yet. I see the texts discussed here as nodal points of a network that is rapidly expanding.

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