

# DISGUST

## Monster Talks: a Monster Network Podcast

### **Aino-Kaisa Koistinen:**

Welcome to this episode of Monster Talks. Today we are going to be talking about Disgust. I'm Aino-Kaisa Koistinen from the *Monster Network*. I have here with me two of my colleagues from the University of Jyväskylä, Susanne Ylönen and Heidi Kosonen, who are also the organisers of the *Disgust Network*. Welcome Heidi and Susanne.

### **Heidi Kosonen:**

Thank you.

### **Susanne Ylönen:**

Thank you for the invitation.

### **Aino-Kaisa:**

We were supposed to make this podcast during a conference on *Disgust* that we were all organising at the University of Jyväskylä. But due to the Coronavirus situation, the conference had to be cancelled. Also due to that situation, we are now doing this podcast completely virtually. Exciting!

### **Heidi:**

Very!

### **Aino-Kaisa:**

But first I'd like for you to introduce yourselves and your relationship to Disgust. What is interesting in Disgust?

Susanne, if you go first.

### **Susanne:**

My name is Susanne Ylönen. I'm also from the University of Jyväskylä, the Music Arts and Culture Studies department. My subject is officially art education...well something in that

direction. I think I'm dealing more with aesthetics and different kinds of cultural phenomena and less with education or art per se.

What got me interested in Disgust was probably my research on horror. There is a component of Disgust in horror as we probably all know.

**Heidi:**

Fear and disgust, wasn't it, according to Noël Carroll?

**Susanne:**

Yes, fear and disgust. The *Disgust Network* was something that we kind of came up with later with Heidi, as we saw that our kind of interests coincide on that particular point.

**Heidi:**

And many others.

**Susanne:**

Yes, and many others.

**Heidi:**

But I think this is the most prominent.

**Susanne:**

And of course, disgust is something that has multiple forms and is somehow very interesting, very sticky as a subject. Something that kind of draws you in. So that's, I guess, how we got into it.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Thanks, Susanne. And how about you, Heidi?

**Heidi:**

I'm also from the Department of Music, Arts and Culture Studies, like Susanne. I'm Heidi Kosonen, by the way.

I've just returned to my PhD dissertation. I think it was my research that got me into disgust. In my PhD, I'm studying the taboo and recognised that very many contemporary taboo topics

are discussed through frames that we could describe as filthy or contagious. I got interested in the political disgust, in that sense. How visual culture features disgusting frames when discussing taboo topics. So that reeled me in.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Yes, very interesting. Before we started this podcast, we were actually talking about disgust and what kinds of things disgust can actually mean.

Do you want to elaborate a bit on that? What does disgust mean to you in your research, for example?

**Susanne:**

In my research, disgust came in as a part of a methodological tool or heuristic model that I was building in which I discussed different approaches to horror as something that you can approach. Horror in a kind of beautifying or aestheticising manner, or you can try to create horror and pass this sublime fear and naive combination. Or you can aim for the gross-out, the kind of lowest level of horror according to Stephen King. Because he, I think it was in *Dance Macabre* in one of his books, about how he does what he does, and not one of the novels, when he explains that he will try to kind of go for the higher quality horror, the eerie one first. But if all else fails, then he'll go for the gross-out, which is kind of the lowest level of horror.

In my research, I was kind of interested in this because I was looking at child-cultural horror and how horror is kind of controlled or managed, the kind of frightfulness of it. This kind of disgusting approach or this kind of approach that makes horror disgusting was to me one of the ways to control it, to kind of also bound to the humorous or humorous interpretations. I see it, horror is also kind of linked to humour.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Well, actually, before moving on to Heidi. Susanne, you have also done something with cuteness. So does cuteness also relate to disgust and how?

**Susanne:**

Well, yes, it does. I'll give you an example. If you kind of picture an adult approaching a child or a toddler and resorting to this baby talk. It can be very cute in an adorable and kind of

friendly way, but it could also come across as kind of disturbing or annoying. And that, I think, is the case when it's kind of misplaced somehow. It's also talking down to someone. Consider an older male person starting to take that kind of tone with a younger female researcher, for example. It's just baby talking and making it more simple. I think disgust is very much situation-related.

And in what comes to cuteness, well, cuteness is something you talk very much more about, but there are definitely some kind of violent traces to it as well. There's very interesting research on how cuteness makes us kind of want to squeeze, squeeze cute things, like baby animals, hard.

**Heidi:**

Like we say that you're so cute, I want to eat you up.

**Susanne:**

Yeah, exactly. Or this kind of older aunt who comes to a child and then squeezes their cheek. Can you imagine somebody coming to you and like, then just like kind of like taking a handful of your meat in between their fingers?

**Heidi:**

I'm also thinking, aren't children disgusting in many ways? Disgusting in many areas, relating to such things that adults aren't supposed to do or have or be. Then children who are that are kind of disgusting. So when we call them cute, instead of disgusting, isn't that trying to tame their danger or their reaction? The reaction we have to some of the things they do? Instead of trying to focus on what is good.

**Susanne:**

Yeah, it's kind of managing of filth. It's like what I do with my baby, I praise her for any pee or poo that she does. Maybe not if it lands on the living room floor. But if it's in the potty or even in the diaper, you can say, wow, that's a nice poo. Thank you!

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Yes, well, it's just the same that I do with our cat.

Heidi, do you want to continue now? On that. On what disgust means to you in your research.

**Heidi:**

Yes, I was also thinking, when Susanne was talking about the categories or talking. Talking in a different category, talking like a baby when you're an adult. That border crossing, or putting yourself in the wrong box.

**Susanne:**

Category violation.

**Heidi:**

Yes! My work with taboos is obviously very much related to those categories and border crossings. Because taboo has been argued to be, in anthropology, such a mechanism that seeks to keep the borders as they are, or seeks to keep the categories as they are in their pure condition. And it's seeking to push out hybrids of all sorts. To me, it's very much related to border crossings. I see in my work, that disgust is one of the functions that taboo has or one of the mechanisms it has to push those things out, that we don't want to see.

**Susanne:**

If you, for example, think about period blood, and how it's a taboo and it's sort of disgusting; it's something that's been constructed as filthy, even though it's a really natural thing.

**Heidi:**

Yes, and it's not like so simply filthy. Nowadays it is, but once it could have been something else, sacred, for instance.

**Susanne:**

Yes, isn't it in old Finnish culture also? Hasn't it been something more powerful than something filthy?

**Heidi:**

Yes, with magical purposes. And nowadays we just seek to push it out through naming it as disgusting, whereas it can be also other things.

**Susanne:**

Yeah, in relation to this, have you thought about when you have sanitary pads? You have those kinds of ads in which you have the blue liquid instead of the red one. They pour it over them. In that case, it is thought that blue is a better colour. But if you think about food, like the drink that Aino-Kaisa had in her hand, it looked to me like it was blue because the glass was blue. But blue is normally a signal colour: "Do not eat this, it might be mouldy, it might be dangerous." This kind of blue liquid is not that "fresh." If you take it out of that context.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

So disgust is very much related to the context.

**Susanne:**

Yes.

**Heidi:**

And funny, we were talking about the colour. When we're talking about those menstrual pad advertisements, to me blue speaks about hygiene. Also one of the ways of trying to tame the perceived disgust of something. It's a signal of purity.

**Susanne:**

Yes. But at the same time, in these colours of environmental crisis, it has also become a sign of something very synthetic. When my mom had these toilet flush things, every time you flush it colours the liquid blue, the water. I was telling her it smelled really strongly of something like detergent. I asked; why do you need to do this? Every time I flush I feel bad for putting such amounts of something into the water, which we shouldn't even, it's totally unnecessary.

**Heidi:**

Yes, but couldn't we... since I see our time with all the discussion about being more eco-friendly and looking for nature, I see it as a new turn towards nature. For instance, the modern era in Western cultures has been a turn away from nature. Maybe, we nowadays perceive the signal of hygiene as something disgusting and being able to pollute. Then it kind of pertains to a turn or culture or era.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

That's very interesting. And that actually leads quite nicely to our next topic of discussion.

(Loud slurping sound)

(Laughter)

**Heidi:**

Thanks for that!

**Aino-Kaisa:**

I wanted to ask you something about disgust as boundary-making or keeping boundaries. Actually, that already came up quite nicely in Heidi's talk of her research.

When something is disgusting, you usually want to stay away from it. This is also visible, for example, in this sort of xenophobic or homophobic cultural discussions, that politically we make something disgusting. In this sense, disgust can be connected to the monstrous if we consider monstrous as something other than the self, something horrifying and something disgusting.

But, for example, Donna Haraway has argued for the monstrous as a more hopeful figure as a boundary-breaking figure. So, as a hopeful figure, the monster can, for example, show us the constructed nature of these boundaries. And obviously, of course, there's a lot of fascination towards disgust, which Susanne can maybe elaborate on in the context of horror. I do have a question here. So, do you see any hopeful potential in disgust?

**Susanne:**

I definitely see hopeful potential in disgust. I don't really adhere to the view that disgust itself would be somehow a negative thing. As we have already said, it's something that helps us construct different kinds of categories. And as such, it's not really bad. It's of course what you do with the feeling. How you, for example, glue it onto people, as you mentioned, in a kind of different harmful way. That is, of course, a kind of bad part of disgust.

But as we noted just a week ago or so, we published a short piece on slime, the slime phenomenon.

**Heidi:**

Do-it-yourself slime.

**Susanne:**

Yes, DIY slime. The kind of slime-making craze that we had in 2017.

**Heidi:**

And also termed childish.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

You and Heidi actually published it together.

**Susanne:**

Yes, we wrote something. First, we did a conference talk on this subject and we published a small paper on it. I think we mentioned in this paper, as well, that disgust is also something that in, for example, peer cultures or child cultures or subcultures is used to mark out your own territory and kind of like something that disgusts others. It might be used as such to keep others away. So you can mark something as yours. You kind of think: "This is disgusting to those people but I enjoyed it because I can see some qualities in it."

In children's culture, a very common example is sweets and the kind of consumption of candies that in themselves are like the trash of foods because they are not nutritious. They are not the kind of real foods that children are expected to eat every day. But something rather like treats. They are good to a certain point. If you if you eat a few sweets, it's OK. But if you really start eating them, you'll start to feel nauseous at some point. For children especially, there are a lot of candies on display or on sale that kind of play with the dirty. You have these lollipops that you can dip into toilet lookalikes that have some kind of a powder. You have different kinds of candies that explode in your mouth or kind of start to fizzle, or whatever, or that colour your tongue. Or even candies that are very, very hard to eat and so big that you kind of cannot eat them at once, but you have to kind of put them back. Or you get all these sticky fingers from them and so on.

These are also something that is very much enjoyed by children, but not so much by adults who dislike the sticky fingers feeling. Perhaps, they approach it in a different manner than children.



**Heidi:**

But if I may break you, when you would think of the do-it-yourself slime phenomenon, it's also enjoyed by adults. Even if they call it: "I'm just doing this with my child."

**Susanne:**

Yeah. And candies obviously are also enjoyed by adults. Also if they are a bit weird.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

So in that way, disgust can also be a sort of identity thing. What comes to my mind is maybe body modification. That you embrace something that is culturally considered as disgusting. Heidi, do you want to continue here?

**Heidi:**

Yes, I think that would play into two different directions. First of all, I was thinking of... I can't remember his first name. Instead, I'll call him Roden Wilson (R. Rawdon Wilson), who has written this literary book called *The Hydra's Tale*, in which he sort of embraces disgust precisely as a subculture or counterculture way of resistance, like affirming your own status described by disgusting by the hegemony. He sees tremendous potential in that and encourages everybody to embrace their disgusting status as a way of evoking change.

And then the other one was, if we kind of think in the Sartrean sense, in which disgusting is sort of life without borders, life as it is, in its oozing and then fertile sense. Then I think, isn't it very pleasurable in many ways to be disgusting? Sort of to put yourself into the dirt and enjoy the sensory pleasures?

**Susanne:**

In this, I'd like to add that a lot of sexual acts, or sex itself, are very often in different kinds of contexts seen as inappropriate or filthy or disgusting, something that you should really take care of what you do; and where you do; and what you enjoy. That is really much culture related also. But sex includes different kinds of bodily fluids that you otherwise would probably like to wash yourself clean of, before you enter the public sphere. That's something I was thinking about.

**Heidi:**

I was actually thinking about Ian Miller, who argues that what makes sex beautiful instead of disgusting is love. So you can only consider it as beautiful when you do it with somebody you love, or when you have love for the person you do it with. Otherwise, it is perversion, which is, of course, very cultural.

**Susanne:**

Yeah. Very normative.

**Heidi:**

Normative thinking. Yeah.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

So it seems to me that disgust is easily bound to excess and nature, the body. It's just something that is, in a sense, culturally uncontrollable. So it, maybe, shows us the boundaries of our knowledge, maybe. Or what do you think?

**Heidi:**

Could you repeat that? The question? I zoned out.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

I'm not sure if I can, but I will try. Do you think that if you see disgust as something that is kind of culturally uncontrollable, it's excessive, it's more connected to nature if you think about the culture and nature boundary? So does disgust also tell us something about the boundaries of knowledge or knowledge production?

**Susanne:**

If you think about the kind of horror factor, we often fear what we don't know. If horror is a combination of fear and disgust, then there might be some kind of mechanism that easily turns fear into disgust.

And I think that is something that we experience in the face of otherness, for example, or in the way in which certain groups of humans are like portrayed as disgusting. That's actually, probably, just a kind of a mechanism of trying to cope with something that you do not know.

I definitely think there's some relation to knowledge.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Yes. Thanks, Susanne.

**Heidi:**

Yeah, I think I could continue with a story from a personal life. So I'm an academic, obviously, since I'm in this podcast, but in my life, I'm also a dancehall dancer. Dancehall is a Jamaican dance style, where it imitates both sexuality and violence. The female style is very sexual and carnivalistic and involves booty movements and body movements that you're not supposed to have, especially when you're a Western academic. And to me, it shows the boundaries of what an academic is supposed to be like, and also how Western our academia is. And what kind of limitations the Western context we have, puts on being an academic in this world.

**Susanne:**

Yeah, and also being a white Western academic. And also a female academic who isn't supposed to be sexual because then I'm only my sexuality, not my brains at all.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Yeah. Actually, just yesterday, I watched this documentary about Hedy Lamarr, the Hollywood actress who has been considered the most beautiful film actress ever. And who actually was also an inventor and was never really taken seriously because of her beauty. So that doesn't really, really relate to disgust, but just norms, norms about femininity.

**Susanne:**

I think that what we consider beautiful also really relates to disgust because it's just another category. We do a lot of beautification in relation to what we think is disgusting, for example, in bodies.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Isn't also calling sex: love, one of those manners of beautification?

**Susanne:**

Yes, definitely.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Yeah, thank you for that point, Susanne! Because that's actually really important. And that got me thinking that it's really true also in the case of Hedy Lamarr, because when she started getting older, she started getting, in a sense, disgusting. She didn't fit the norm of a Hollywood star any longer. Even during her career, due to the simple fact that she had done a sort of a film in her teens when she was 16, where she had a nude scene. She was after that, she was always seen through her beauty and through her sexuality. So in a sense, she was only given those roles where she played with her sexuality. And then when she started getting older, it started to turn, in a way, into a parody of her previous self.

Then what happened was that she got addicted to plastic surgery. And in a sense, she turned herself into something disgusting, something that was a cultural joke.

**Susanne:**

Maybe some kind of a monster, a reminder, a person on display, a kind of a warning: this is what you might become if you overdo this.

**Heidi:**

But I also think it's very hard for a female not to be a monster because every moment of transition, from childhood to adulthood or from adulthood to old age, is monstrous because you're making a transition from one category to another. You, obviously, as a female, where you're put into very strict boxes when you start to move away from one, you immediately become a monster.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Yeah, thanks, Heidi.

If we think about Hedy Lamarr, it's about the connection with femininity and excess that has been culturally made. For example, Hedy Lamarr was accepted when she was young and beautiful. Then when she got into plastic surgery, she sort of got into the excessive. So you are accepted if you stay within these really strict norms. But you can't really, for example, beauty, you need to have this sort of natural beauty, you can't really go overboard with it, or you will then be also deemed disgusting and wrong.

But I think that we are soon approaching the end of this podcast. So I wanted to ask if there is something contemporary, like a contemporary interesting phenomenon that you would like to mention briefly here at the end of the podcast.

I know that Heidi, you are doing something with insects as food. So would you maybe want to say something about that?

**Heidi:**

Yeah, it is a brief moment in my career, I don't think I'm gonna stay with that. But I'm currently writing a little essayistic piece on entomophagy, which is the tamed term for insect-eating, and how disgust seeks to keep insects out of the Western plates. But also we cannot know what insects...what their minds are like, or what their suffering is like. So we're not sure if it's ethical, even in comparison to cattle farming, which has its own issues. Like the immense amounts of Carbon dioxide emissions.

So in relation to the amount of Carbon dioxide emissions, insects are more ethical, but they are living breathing creatures with the ability to feel pain. I'm sort of thinking about the practice of entomophagy in that frame. The moral possibilities, portraying them as disgusting or portraying even the most disgusting still might have.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

That's very interesting. And also brings the question of context again because there are certain cultures where eating insects isn't disgusting, it's commonplace.

**Heidi:**

Yes, that's interesting. Because one of the problems in portraying insects-eating through disgust is that we often associate the practice to the third-world countries where it is practiced; and turn the cultures disgusting through their practice of eating insects which we see as disgusting. So it's related to keeping up the boundaries between the Western countries and the Third World.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Yeah, it also relates to the question of hygiene that we already discussed, that we kind of see insects as something dirty. Even though what is interesting is that Finns, for example,

like to eat chocolate, a lot, you know that you eat a lot of insects, because chocolate usually contains also insects.

**Susanne:**

I didn't know that. I might have to think about my chocolate consumption again. Now within the quarantine or this kind of like special time. I've been eating two bars of chocolate, big bars a week.

**Heidi:**

And then you will have to buy the cricket chocolate that they nowadays sell and know what you're eating.

**Susanne:**

The cricket crisp!

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Susanne, would you like to continue?

**Susanne:**

I was thinking about the current corona epidemic or pandemic, and the kind of crisis that it has created. The other day, of course, there's a lot of humour also going around, a lot of memes related to the epidemic.

**Heidi:**

Toilet paper.

**Susanne:**

Yeah, how people go crazy about buying all the toilet paper. Why do they buy that toilet paper? you cannot eat it. Just a few days after the whole panic escalated in Finland, there was an avalanche of all these memes and this kind of corona humour. Then I also encountered one of my Facebook friends, calling out: "Hey people, don't laugh about this subject, we're all gonna lose somebody who we love, and I'm really disgusted by how people make fun of this. It's really a grave matter." And this is also something that I've been thinking about in relation to humour, that there is a kind of a moral part to disgust as well. It's a lot related to the kind of glasses, or the lens, that we are wearing; how we approach certain

subjects, and humour, of course, can be very insulting. It can be kind of a laughing *at* something or *at somebody*, in a hurtful manner.

Even in this kind of situation where we are now, where we have this faceless threat, which can be somewhat controlled through humour, and through this, maybe, morally dubious approach of laughing at the panic that people have. That's something I think is very kind of current to this situation that we're living in.

**Heidi:**

I was also thinking about how in some discussions we blame the disgusting eating practices of the Chinese people, for making coronavirus happen, which is one good example of how those borders play out in times of epidemic.

**Susanne:**

And this comes back to your question of the promising potential of disgust. Because now with the whole Corona crisis, we have a lot of pieces of news that explicate how this crisis is related to our manner of living. The way in which humanity has spread into and taken into possession most of the planet and leaving very little space to the natural species. This could also be a kind of a slash back off of the planet.

Because now we are the locusts eating through everything and kind of spoiling everything; and there, there has to be some kind of a stop to this. And there is all this promising news about how air pollution has gone down and whatnot.

**Heidi:**

Dolphins returning to channels.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Even though that was actually fake news.

**Heidi:**

Yeah, but it was beautiful and it was like straight from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Yes, I think that the dolphins didn't return to the channels of Venice, but they were at the docks of Sardinia or something.

**Heidi and Susanne:**

So close enough.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

We end this discussion with this promise of hope. Maybe there was a promise, I think.

But before we end, Do one of you want to say just a bit about the *Disgust Network*? What does the network do? Can one join the network, and how?

**Heidi:**

Well, should I start?

**Susanne:**

I think you can totally take this question, Heidi.

**Heidi:**

I think we seek to open channels for approaches from the humanities and areas of culture studies to a field that is quite prominently being discussed within high biology and only later within the more social and human sciences. That is what we seek. Anybody from anywhere can join by sending us an email. We'll add the people to the email list.

I think we don't have so many activities going on, but every once in a while we organise a reading group meeting or or something like that.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

If you google the disgust network at JYU, University of Jyväskylä, you will find this network.

This was it for the Monster Talks today.

(Loud slurping)

Thank you for listening and thank you also Heidi and Susanne for participating.



**Susanne:**

Thank you Aino-Kaisa. It was fun.

**Heidi:**

It was our pleasure.

**Aino-Kaisa:**

Thank you. And don't forget to tune in for the next episode. Bye!