Aesthetic Disgust in the Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales: How Disgust in Fairy Tales Contributes to Our Intellectual Understanding

Madeleine Sada

1. Introduction

Conventionally, in accordance with the eighteenth-century view on aestheticism, people have often treated disgust as a preclusion to aesthetic pleasure. However, in her book *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics,* Carolyn Korsmeyer challenges their incompatibility. She argues that when viewed through a cognitivist perspective, disgust can coexist with, or even enhance, aesthetic experience. Her work offers new perspectives through which to analyze the Grimms' fairy tales, many of which include graphic or grotesque elements now considered unsuitable for modern audiences. Stories such as Cinderella, where the stepsisters cut their feet to fit into the glass slipper, once derived part of their impact from the discomfort modern versions censor. This paper is especially concerned with Disney's modification of the Grimm fairy tales to become more "aesthetically pleasing." By tracing the transformation of these tales from their unsettling eighteenth-century depictions (Grimms' fairy tales) to their "more pleasurable" contemporary forms (Disney adaptations), this paper argues that the erasure of disgust from fairy tales overlooks the powerful and meaningful role that disgust has historically played in storytelling.

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were first popularized for their collection and publication of German tales, the Grimms fairy tales. These stories were unique due to one common attribute they featured: gory imagery. Cannibalism, infanticide, murder, beheading, and other violent imagery in more innocent folktales became their trademark. It is without a doubt that their trademark violent features are what made these books beloved by young children, who would indulge in such stories in Germany's early 1800s. Repulsion quickly became a common emotion associated with reading their books; the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales inculcated feelings of gagging, nausea, and turning away and one might have appropriately have called their stories "disgusting".

However, as times progressed and parents deemed the grotesque imagery "too violent" for children, Disney's, and other translations, began to adopt a modernized (and sanitized) approach to the stories—one that was soft on the eyes and framed an idyllic lifestyle. The beautiful princesses who were quixotically saved by the prince slowly dominated children's view of fairy tales, overshadowing the decades-old, classic Grimms fairy tales. Little girls dreamed of meeting their prince charming who, unbeknownst to their sheltered eyes, were cruel and violent in the Grimms fairy tales' version. Cinderella replaced Aschenputtel. Snow White and The Seven Dwarves replaced Schneewittchen. Sleeping Beauty replaced Dornröschen. Most notably, in these newer adaptations, there was no longer any mention of unwanted pregnancies, dismembered body parts, mutilated feet, or vicious punishments. Instead, all the disgusting components that the Grimms fairy tales were known for were censored and substituted with the traditional ending "and they lived happily ever after." Disgust was widely erased as an emotion incited by fairy tales, demonstrating the modern media's role in transforming these classic tales. As more "disgusting" stories become sanitized, it begs us to reconsider the questions: What components of a story truly make up a fairy tale? What defines a fairy tale? More specifically, did the erasure of disgust from fairy tales decrease the aggregate aesthetic pleasure and understanding derived from reading these books? This essay will delve deep into the answers behind these complex and multifaceted questions.

2. Introduction to Korsmeyer's Argument

For convenient purposes, I shall first begin by defining disgust and aesthetic pleasure. In *Savouring Disgust*, Korsmeyer describes disgust as a visceral emotion that functions to repel us

from unpleasant substances and objects. Its defining reflexes include nausea and gagging. Categorized as a negative emotion, studies of disgust have largely been cursory (excluding a few works, including Korsmeyer's earlier dissertations), previously having failed to address its role in contemporary aesthetics (Contessi 1). Filippo Contessi, on the role of disgust in modern artwork, writes, "Since disgust falls in the category of so-called negative, or unpleasant emotions, the question of its role in aesthetics is naturally framed in terms of a puzzle that has a long philosophical history and is now usually referred to as the paradox of negative emotions" (1). The paradox of negative emotions describes the enjoyment or interest one displays towards conventionally distasteful scenes. As for the definition of aesthetic pleasure, it is the enjoyment derived from engaging with the sensory, emotional, and intellectual aspects of an artwork or object. One other important term Korsmeyer often uses is aesthetic disgust: "a response that, no matter how unpleasant, can rivet attention to the point where one actually may be said to *savor* the feeling" (9).

Furthermore, an important distinction to make about pleasure is that it is almost always circumstantial. In the subsection "Pleasure," Korsmeyer explains the multivalence of pleasure and how, more specifically, the tenor of pleasure is highly sensitive to its occasion. Aristotle's account of pleasure expands on her claim. In Korsmeyer's words, Aristotle posits that "different instances of pleasure do not have similar causal conditions; pleasure does not designate an identifiable sensation or feeling state; and it is not directed to objects that share a particular pertinent feature" (Korsmeyer 182). Simply put, pleasure is not unitary; it can change depending on your environment or antecedent conditions. For example, if someone has not eaten all day and is extremely hungry, eating will be a pleasurable endeavor. On the contrary, if they are completely full, and are forced to eat more, eating will not be pleasurable. In this way, Korsmeyer concludes "rather than rendered as a noun, 'pleasure' seems to behave more like a modifier of attention, intensifying for a host of reasons some experience that the participant would rather have continued than not" (186).

Chapter 5 of *Savouring Disgust* is where Korsmeyer begins to seek the answer to the paradox of tragedy, an age-old question presented in Aristotle's *Poetics* that goes as follows: what compels seemingly ordinary human beings to seek out experiences that incite feelings of unpleasantness, and sometimes even pain? This query requires us to understand yet another paradox, the paradox of aversion. While similar to the paradox of negative emotion, the term differs in that it details the phenomenon when people deliberately seek out things they would typically avoid (fear, disgust, horror) because those negative emotions can often be interesting, enjoyable, and exciting. The most common example of the paradox of aversion is wanting to watch a horror movie despite knowing it will prompt fear.

To explain why this counterintuitive enjoyment occurs, Korsmeyer begins by analyzing the meaning of pleasure and how it should be understood to highlight the appreciation of art that arouses unpleasant emotions. She claims that this will allow us, rather than viewing the paradox of aversion through a purely hedonic lens (whether it produces pleasure or not), to also approach it from a cognitivist perspective. The cognitivist approach focuses on how unpleasant emotions in art can give us insights or deeper understanding, which can feel rewarding or satisfying even if they are not "pleasant" in the usual sense. In this chapter, Korsmeyer does not presume a single explanation for aesthetic disgust but rather, engages with insights from various perspectives.

3. Disgust Through a Cognitive Lens

To expand upon the cognitivist approach first suggested by Aristotle, he proposes that artworks that evoke disgust are intellectually valuable because they serve as vehicles for understanding. Experiencing disgust in a controlled setting provides us with the necessary distance to contemplate what disgust truly means: why it bothers us, what moral lines it crosses, what cultural taboos it reveals, and to confront the uncomfortable truths about the human body and/or behavior. Since artworks allow the viewer to experience disgust in a safe environment, they are more inclined to face it head-on and explore its nuance. In this sense, disgust becomes a means of intellectual growth, providing the viewer with a platform to reflect upon the tense scene by forcing them to confront what they would typically avoid (decay, death, shame, moral corruption, etc.).

However, some non-cognitivists counter this argument by expressing that exposure to disgust in artworks does not necessarily translate to a greater understanding, in any sense. Instead of opening up a space for reflection, disgust can shut it down because of its immediate and visceral reaction (Korsmeyer 196). Non-cognitivists may then argue that the sudden emotions overwhelm the viewer's ability to think about what they are seeing. Rather than allowing them to analyze moral boundaries and cultural conventions, the feeling of disgust can initiate disengagement. In this view, disgust becomes more of a barrier than a pathway to understanding. Disgust, then, can feel empty and sensationalistic, offering little to no genuine intellectual value.

Yet one could respond that even if disgust is visceral, it does not automatically inhibit understanding. In many cases, the intensity of the reaction is precisely what prompts viewers to think more deeply about what they are encountering. Disgust is able to draw attention to issues that would otherwise be overlooked, prompting viewers to confront uncomfortable realities—not avoid them. The initial shock of the emotion may even act as a catalyst for reflection rather than an obstruction, pushing viewers to question why their initial response was so intense and what values or assumptions it reveals. Even when artists use provocative material, the viewer's discomfort can still open up a space for examination, both in the moral or cultural sense. From this perspective, disgust remains capable of producing insight, not despite its intensity but because of it.

Therefore, while disgust in art can provoke intense reactions that risk overwhelming the viewer, it also offers a unique opportunity for reflection. By confronting disgust in a controlled and safe environment, viewers are able to explore moral, cultural, and human complexities, making disgust not just an aversive emotion but a powerful tool for understanding.

4. Application to the Grimms' Fairy Tales

In order to solidify the claim that the Grimm Fairy Tales are subjectively more intellectually stimulating, and therefore better, than Disney's adaptations, it becomes of utmost importance to demonstrate that Disney's and the Brothers Grimms' fairy tales are comparable in nature. Beginning with their script, it is important to note that while Disney published their works as films rather than literary texts, each movie is grounded in a written screenplay. This origin underscores that there exists a written version of every Disney film. Similarly, the Grimm Brothers chose to publish their stories in a book form, making their work explicitly literary from the outset. Secondly, Disney chose to adapt several of the most popular Grimms' fairy tales including Aschenputtel, Schneewittchen, and Dornröschen. Thirdly and perhaps most notably, both forms were made to appeal to a larger audience—not just adults, but also children.

Originally, the Grimms' Fairy Tales were more scholarly and therefore intended for adults who could understand the complex language. Their use of language, both in terms of difficulty and violence, prevented children from constituting their primary audience. The first edition is proof of their original intentions to appeal to adults and the scholarly masses. However, Jakob and Wilhelm, after a conversation in which they discussed how the first edition did not sell well, stated, "I do not think we can print it as it was" (Tatar 12). Ultimately, the first edition's lack of sales inclined the brothers to censor some of their stories to suit children. Their discussion evinces that with time, the Grimm Brothers gradually accommodated to child audiences by adjusting their language to be more simple and comprehensible to children through the use of illustrations.

The first instance of censorship this essay examines is "Aschenputtel" (ATU510A), better known today as *Cinderella*. The modern version of Cinderella popularized by Disney tells a tale of charm, kindness, and perseverance, highlighted when Cinderella's glass slipper is returned to her by Prince Charming. This familiar tale centers on a young woman who endures poverty and abuse at the hands of her stepmother and stepsisters until her fairy godmother intervenes, granting her the chance to attend the royal ball, and drastically altering her future.

In contrast, the Grimm Brothers' version presents a much darker narrative. Their *Aschenputtel* depicts the stepsisters as outwardly beautiful yet inwardly corrupt, so desperate to marry the prince that one cuts off her toe and the other her heel to force their feet into Cinderella's slipper (Zipes 160). Their story does not shy away from gore: pigeons pecking eyes out and mutilated body parts are embedded within the story's morals (Zipes 161).

Another example of censorship this essay looks at is "Schneewittchen" (ATU709), better known now as *Snow White*. Disney's version tells a softened, idealized story: the innocent princess escapes her jealous stepmother, makes friends with seven dwarves, and is awakened from her enchanted sleep by a prince's kiss. This retelling focuses on themes of purity and innocence, removing much of the violence found in earlier versions.

The Grimm Brothers' version (Schneewitten), however, includes several gruesome details that Disney purposefully removed. A notable detail from Schneewitten is when the queen orders the huntsman to kill Snow White and bring back her lungs and liver as proof of her death (Zipes 308). After the queen's malicious plan is discovered, she is forced to wear red-hot iron shoes and dance until she falls down dead at Snow White's wedding (Zipes 317). Unlike the sanitized tale we know today, the Grimms' story includes cruelty and gore as key elements, reminding readers of the harsh consequences that stem from envy and malice.

The last example examines the modification of "Dornröschen" (ATU410) into Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*. Unlike the previous tales, where cruelty and gore were erased almost entirely, this tale's alteration is more subtle. Disney's version features romantic and victorious imagery: lavish castles, magical fairies, and an epic battle with an evil dragon. What emerges is a dazzling fairy tale that boasts of love's ability to defeat evil, echoing the famous mantra "love conquers all".

The Grimm Brothers' Dornröschen reads quite differently. In comparison to Disney's Sleeping Beauty, where Aurora was awakened by the prince's kiss, Dornröschen adopts a storyline where the prophecy the thirteenth's wise woman made can not be avoided: Briar Rose is cursed to sleep for a hundred years and no prince can save her from her deep sleep. Death is

a recurrent image as princes try and fail to penetrate the thorn-covered castle. After long efforts, the destined prince finally arrives and he awakens the sleeping princess with a kiss after a century of deep rest (Zipes 293). Whereas Disney dramatizes conflict and triumph through love, the Brothers' Grimm text emphasizes the struggle of countless men to reach the inner castle with no success: "From time to time princes came and tried to break through the hedge and get to the castle. However, this was impossible because the thorns clung together tightly as though they had hands, and the young men got stuck there. Indeed, they could not pry themselves loose and died miserable deaths" (Zipes 295).

The comparison of these tales highlights one central theme: the removal of gore/disgusting/grotesque details from Disney that originally gave these stories much of their impact. By stripping away these elements, the modern adaptations ignore how disgust has historically helped to add depth and meaning to stories. Korsmeyer's and Aristotle's proposed "cognitivist perspective" embraces this claim. The cognitivist philosophy resolves how unpleasant emotions in art—the very ones we experience when reading the Grimm Brothers' tales—can deepen our understanding of human experience and provide a cognitive reward, even if they are not pleasant in the conventional manner. In the Grimm Brothers' tales, bloody feet, mutilated bodies, and grotesque punishments were not gratuitous details but literary devices that forced audiences to confront themes of envy, cruelty, and mortality. The imposing of such disgusting details onto the audience ultimately helps to stimulate their intellect, leading to a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the mortality of life. By sanitizing these elements, Disney's adaptations remove the cognitive depth from the tales, reducing complex moral encounters into simplified, recreational, and child-like entertainment. The value in Disney's movies, then, lies less in encouraging reflection on complex moral structures and more in providing temporary, surface-level enjoyment. In contrast, the Grimm Brothers challenge readers with unsettling, thought-provoking, and disgusting content, fostering deeper intellectual engagement that stays with the reader long after the story ends.

5. Conclusion

The evolution of the Grimm Fairy Tales into their modern Disney adaptations encapsulates a broader cultural shift in the perception of aesthetics. The Grimm Brothers' original tales, characterized by grotesque and violent imagery, exemplify what Carolyn Korsmeyer identifies as *aesthetic disgust*: the deliberate use of repulsion to promote cognition and engagement by the viewer. Their stories derived much of their impact in part due to the tension between aesthetics and aversion embedded within the narratives, evoking contemplation and cognitive rewards through the visceral disgust. In contrast, Disney's sanitized reinterpretations remove these elements of tension, substituting cognitive engagement with visual ease and censored storylines. The removal of disgust from these classic fairy tales, in particular, Aschenputtel, Schneewittchen, and Dornröschen, not only alters the underlying principles of these stories but also diminishes the complexity of the aesthetic experience they once had. Korsmeyer's cognitivist framework shows that negative emotions can deepen aesthetic pleasure by encouraging thought and understanding—pushing against the common thought that negative emotions preclude aesthetic pleasure. Removing disgust from these stories therefore represents a greater loss: the replacement of active reflection with passive enjoyment. Recognizing the aesthetic value of disgust allows viewers to face the disturbing aspects of human experience rather than continually censoring what is raw and natural. By

confronting disgust, viewers gain cognitive rewards such as deeper moral insight, heightened empathy, and a more nuanced understanding of human behavior and cultural norms.

Works Cited

Contessi, Filippo. "The Meanings of Disgusting Art." *Essays in Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 1, 12 Feb. 2016. *PhilPapers*. Accessed 19 June 2025.

Contessi, Filippo. "Review of Carolyn Korsmeyer, Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics." *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2011, pp. 113-16. *PhilPapers*.

Grimm, Jacob, et al. *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. 3rd ed., Bantam ; Turtleback Books, 2003.

Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Savoring Disgust : the Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. E-book ed., Oxford UP, 2011.

Tatar, Maria. *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Princeton UP, 1990.