

YOUR TONGUE HERE (OR NOT): ON IMAGINING WHETHER TO TAKE A BITE (OR NOT)

Sue Spaid

ABSTRACT

Inspired by recent visits to the Disgusting Food Museum (DFM) in Malmö, SE and “FOOD: Bigger than Your Plate” (2019) at the Victoria & Albert in London, UK, this article explores the saliency of “disgust” given its role in the “attention economy,” hipster allure and emotional encoding. Initially appalled by the DFM’s demonizing national delicacies as disgusting, the author soon realised that doing so has a “silver lining” in terms of attention. One aspect that remains under-explored is the connection between imagination and attention. The relationship between taste and disgust grants us a vehicle for working this out, since human beings are wired for disgust, yet what disgusts is learnt. Unlike basic emotions for which we have salience and/or memories, we deploy our imagination to anticipate disgust. To defeat disgust’s alarmist ploys, “food adventurers” must block their imagination. “Disgusting food” not only grabs people’s attention, but it tends to deceive.

KEYWORDS

Attention, Disgust, Deception, Exhibition, Emotion, Imagination

INTRODUCTION

Malmö's Disgusting Food Museum (DFM) not only demonstrates how repellent smells grab our attention, but it proposes a vehicle for working out the imagination's role in directing our attention. The notion of imagination discussed here follows that of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, such that we employ the imagination to finetune perception.¹ If we see cat food, we are likely to imagine the disgusting smell wafting from a just-opened can of tuna to be cat food. If our assessment is corrected, the smell may no longer disgust and we may even eat it!

Researchers have found that negative smells attract, distract and detract people's attention.² Human beings are wired for disgust, yet *what* disgusts is learnt and unlearnt. For example, food identification tends to render originally disagreeable food smells, whether curries, canned tuna or fromage de Herve, tolerable. Like beliefs, negative reactions to stinky delicacies are *dispositional*. Not only do we *act on* our reactions, but evidence modifies our reactions.

Smell is especially contextual, yet the imagination too is shaped by its context. If there are no cats in our vicinity, we are less likely to imagine cat food when we get a whiff of tuna. That sight influences smell is called cross-modal perception, yet smell itself entails *multi-modal imagination*, since identification requires imagining *what* one smells. Doing so requires one to recall smells that are not obviously present. As Barry Smith notes, "We do not just smell odors, we learn them in a context where we experience the properties of their sources."³ Out of context, we not only perceive smells differently, but familiar smells suddenly seem unrecognizable. I thus suspect that disgust functions more like an alarm that sounds when our noses detect unidentifiable smells.

In the *Anthropology*, Kant downplayed smell in comparison to sight and hearing.⁴ I rather consider olfactory perception a complex process whose judgements are subject to cognitive processing, and thus depend on the imagination's capacity to assign the appropriate linguistic tag to enrich our understanding. To explore the connection between the imagination and attention, I first analyze the DFM to show how emotional salience gives way to empathy. I next canvas several olfactory experiments that demonstrate negative smells' attention-seeking capacities. Finally, I use this information to assess the imagination's role in directing our attention.

STINKY DELICACIES' SUPER POWERS

The DFM displays 80 dishes from around the world. Being a museum, sight plays a partial role in eliciting feelings of disgust, yet unidentifiable malodors predominate.⁵ In fact, the signboard directing visitors to the entrance reflects smell's omnipresence: "So Close You can (Almost) Smell It." While reading the sign, one suddenly gets a whiff of a ghastly scent that likely detracts potential visitors. In retrospect, this encounter serves as a litmus test to split the merely curious who flee from the truly adventurous who venture forth despite fair warning.

DFM co-founder Samuel West considers disgust a universal emotion, yet:

The foods that we find disgusting are not. What is delicious to one person can be revolting to another. [The] Disgusting Food Museum invites visitors to explore the world of food and challenge their notions of what is and what isn't edible. Could changing our ideas of disgust help us embrace the environmentally sustainable foods of the future?...Adventurous visitors will appreciate the opportunity to smell and taste some of these notorious foods.⁶

Hardly 'gross-out' theatre, the DFM draws our attention to foreign food smells. I initially worried that this museum might fan the flames of Denmark and Sweden's already explosive far-right political parties, such as the Nordic Resistance Movement, which since 2015 has also been a Swedish political party. My concern was not so farfetched. Describing things as disgusting has been shown to trigger biases against certain people, including immigrants, gays and liberal politicians; actions deemed illegal/illicit; or purchases deemed unwarranted.⁷

Fortunately, the DFM has a "silver lining." Evidently, pumping out smells that prompt racist tropes not only stops racists in their tracks but dissuades them from entering. Even its name conveys a core racist belief: "other people (though not me) eat disgusting foods." People who hold such views probably consider the DFM unremarkable. Given that people tend to over-estimate soft sounds and dim lights,⁸ odd smells likely overwhelm those for whom strange odors both confirm and aggravate said biases. Unfamiliar smells thus deter haters from venturing forth. Alarming aromas that dissuade racists simultaneously lure hipsters through the door. It is well known that negative information "draws and holds our

attention,”⁹ so describing food as disgusting achieves far more than identical museums named the Awesome Sustenance Museum, Memorable Bites Museum, or Astonishing Dishes Museum (fictional museums exhibiting identical displays). In fact, the DFM ensures that surprise trumps disappointment. I imagine people arriving with a list of foods they expect to find such as Stilton cheese; so its line-up of even stinkier cheeses surprises all the more. Unfortunately, the smells all blend together as one overarching stink bomb, making parsing scents difficult. Although a modest tasting bar awaits the especially curious, those keen to sample kiviak (GL), Rocky Mountain Oysters (CA), Witchetty Grubs (AU), and Casu Marzu (IT) are left to their imaginations.

Rachel Herz remarks that it’s “easier to make someone feel noticeably anxious than to make them feel particularly good....the imbalance of bad over good is adaptive. Avoiding bad things gives us much more of a survival advantage than approaching good things does.”¹⁰ Disgust quiets our anxieties by drawing our attention to potential danger. “When we are more emotionally involved our attention is piqued and when we pay attention to scents, we become more psychologically sensitive to them. For example, a potent way to make odors emotionally salient and make us pay more attention to them is to advise us that they are dangerous.”¹¹ Unfortunately, several truly deadly odors are odorless.

NEGATIVE SMELLS’ ATTENTION-SEEKING CAPACITIES

The following experiments show that negative scents attract attention, terrible smells boost concentration and feelings of disgust prime people to dispose of potentially disgusting objects.

ATTENTION/DISTRACTION. An 1897 experiment indicates that our suspicion that scents attract our attention, lead us adrift, and inevitably alter our plans is not new. This experiment enabled a researcher to assess 50 different smells’ capacity to distract four listeners from attending to two ivory balls being dropped on an ebony plate at five-second intervals. In between drops, each listener sniffed a scent and then listened to determine whether the second ball was dropped from a higher or lower height. The researcher ranked each scent according to its having caused participants to get so wrapped up in smelling that they failed to report the second drop. Initially, the researcher hypothesized that “an odor would distract when it was either (1) familiar, but [could] not be named, or 2) so familiar as to set up a vivid train of associated

ideas”¹² (a form of priming). Varying wildly from nose to nose, the four sniffers found nitro-wurtzite, rye whiskey, tincture of arnica, and oil of turpentine the most distracting. Such scents are described as “sulfurous,” “off-putting,” “pungent,” and “horrid,” respectively.

STIMULATION. This experiment found that “least distraction or [greatest] stimulation can be set up in two ways: by very familiar scents (attention on the sound) and by uncertainly familiar scents (attention tending away from the experiment and now held upon it).”¹³ Stimulating scents lead “subjects to work better under distraction than under standard conditions.”¹⁴ Although garlic was not among the 50 samples tested, garlic too is stimulating since babies tend to nurse longer when mothers ingest garlic capsules.¹⁵ Researchers have since discovered that some disgusting smells, such as perspiration, actually *arouse* concentration, which might explain OCD sufferers’ heightened attention to danger and pregnant women’s smell sensitivities.

OLFACTORY MEMORY. While easily retrieved scents tend to distract less, repellent scents not only distract us, which grabs our attention, but their retention rates are comparable to sight.¹⁶ Consider nosewitnesses, whose sniffing of body odors (BO) to identify suspects is akin to eyewitnesses and sniffing dogs. Like eyewitnesses and earwitnesses, nosewitness accuracy decreases as lineup sizes increase, but it far exceeds chance rates.¹⁷ They found that “[o]dors that are unfamiliar (and non-identifiable by name as is the case with [body odors]) are typically more difficult to retrieve, but are forgotten at the same rate as familiar and identifiable odors.”¹⁸

CONTEXT DEPENDENCE. As noted earlier, smell is special since both perception and detection is context dependent. As Alison George points out, “With smell the meaning is based on context much more so than with vision...A vomit smell in an alley beside a bar will immediately conjure up a mental picture of a disgusting source, but exactly the same aroma would evoke deliciousness in a fine restaurant.”¹⁹ As Herz details, “[T]he scent of feces is only revolting once you’ve learned that feces means waste and it varies in pleasantness depending upon whose you think it is.....The context in which we encounter an odor is a further influence.”²⁰

PRIMING. A 2013 experiment showed that neutral odors initially perceived as neutral were later perceived as aversive and took longer to detect, following subjects' exposure to anxiety-provoking images chosen from the International Affective Picture Set.²¹ The researchers found that "human olfactory processing is affectively charged long before an odorous molecule makes contact with the nose."²² Depending on the odor, smells tend to dissipate rather rapidly (within twenty minutes). When an otherwise benign balsam, woody odor was *categorized* as hazardous, healthful, or an experimental standard, its intensity varied significantly. Participants reported that the dangerous scent actually got stronger with time, yet the latter two cases weakened after twenty minutes. When given a physical test, it turned out that those who reported it stronger no longer actually smelled it, though thoughts of it lingered. "This shows how our emotions, especially anxiety, can amplify our perceived sensation of odors, even though in reality we are no more and perhaps even less, sensitive to them than we were before the 'threat'."²³ To discern disgusting aromas from those that provoke disgust, we learn to smell-in, as Carolyn Korsmeyer terms it, lest we risk self-deception.²⁴

EMOTIONAL ENCODING. One issue that remains under-explored is the connection between emotional encoding for disgust and our imagination, which facilitates scent and/or source identification, yet proves vulnerable to priming, as the invigorating "smell of money" experiment showed. Participants who counted actual cash (not images of money) not only ate way more chocolate, but they endured pains for significantly longer and were less likely to help others as if money's aroma arouses self-absorption. According to Adrian Furnham, "Primes have an effect on beliefs and behaviors because they activate powerful associations."²⁵

WHAT IS THE IMAGINATION'S ROLE FOR ATTENTION?

As compared to other emotions (happiness, sadness, fear, surprise and anger) for which we have salience and/or concrete references, we grant our imaginations an out-sized role when we use it to conjure up the appropriate linguistic tag for disgusting smells.²⁶ The repellent smell wafting outside the DFM is real, but until we read the signboard, we erroneously associate it with the restaurant next door. This demonstrates imagination's multi-modal capacity for error.

With its slow, deliberating reasoned approach, the DFM demonstrates stinky delicacy's alarmist ploys and poses good reasons to mistrust disgust. Not only do we employ the imagination both to *spark* and *disarm* reactions of disgust, but malodors facilitate retrieval and retention, thus rendering stench a potential learning tool. Apparently, putting a pencil between people's teeth prevents them from making snarled-lip faces, which reduces their feelings of disgust while looking at revolting images. This "grin-and-bare-it" scheme may lessen visual transgressions, but unsavory smells are comparatively omnipresent.

With its capacity for multi-modalities, the imagination not only bridges our world and our emotional reactions, but it grants us access to fitting references that enrich experiences, facilitate epistemic clarity, and underlie information-bearing smells. No doubt, disgusting smells are powerful tools of manipulation (they readily distract/attract, stimulate/accelerate, aid recall, defer to context/deceive, prime, encode emotions), sometimes prompting oppositional dispositions.

Such findings contradict centuries of philosophical work that considered smell a "stimulus-produced pleasure," and thus inferior to sight and sound. Herz adds, "Though we learn to turn off our outward zeal for these fascinations, the questions, temptations and fears never go away. This is why we remain lured by disgust throughout our lives."²⁷ Only life's rich experiences can teach us when to trust disgust. Let's just say the imagination remains in constant training, which is why Kant considered productive imagination so indispensable.

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