

# THE PARADOX OF DISGUST REVISITED: THE META-EMOTIONAL ENTERTAINMENT EXPERIENCE OF *HANNIBAL*

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## ABSTRACT

Using García's "paradox of disgust" as an example, this paper addresses paradoxical entertainment experiences. Building on the psychological concept of multidimensional meta-emotions (comprising suspense, enjoyment, appreciation, and artistic value), an empirical survey with 876 fans of the quality TV series *Hannibal* (NBC 2013–2015) was conducted. Results showed that respondents assessed the show as quality TV that was aesthetically appealing as well as quite violent. Moreover, the study indicated that *Hannibal* elicited a complex entertainment experience: Besides hedonic enjoyment and suspense, viewers also found meaningfulness and artistic value in it. This is in line with the theoretical assumption that a (positive) meta-emotion is a result of retrospective monitoring processes in which (negative) emotions that arise during media

exposure are reflected upon, appraised, and responded to. Additionally, meta-emotions can be elicited directly by the media content, for instance by the aesthetized depiction of violence. In this study, the more viewers perceived *Hannibal* as aesthetically pleasing, the more they felt entertained by it. A more pronounced perception of the violence of the content, on the other hand, was associated with a diminished entertainment experience (and vice versa). If we concede effects of violent media content on individuals or the society as a whole, less (violence) might be more, not only to enhance viewing pleasure but also to lessen the potential for harmful effects.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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In his 2019 paper, Alberto N. García discusses the paradox of disgust. For him, disgust is an aversive reaction to something repulsive, such as graphic violence (see also the “paradox of aversion”; cf. García 2019a). Similarly, disgust is understood in this paper as a basic negative emotion triggered by the mere sight or sound of a fictional scene (Tan 2018; Reizenzein 2018) as opposed to moral disgust elicited by witnessing immoral actions (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2019). Despite its negative valence, the feeling of disgust can be enjoyed, for example, when appreciating a work of art (Silvia 2009; Wagner et al. 2014). Drawing on Strohl’s (2012) concept of ‘strong hedonic ambivalence’, García asks how aversion can become a matter of aesthetic delight (García 2019b: 554). Using a close reading of scenes from the TV series *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015) as an exemplar, he states that a hedonistic response to gruesome content “does not deny the negative aspects of particular emotional experiences, but instead proposes that the reflective assessment of those emotions can, in the right circumstances, be desirable” (García 2019b: 555). Building on this description, I want to introduce the notion of meta-emotions (cf. Bartsch 2008) from media psychology as an explanation of this phenomenon and test its appropriateness empirically also with regard to the TV series *Hannibal*.

## 1. THE PARADOX OF DISGUST

In relation to the TV series *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015), García makes the valid point that “bloody carnage as the pinnacle of artistic enjoyment” is odd (García 2019b: 554). This phenomenon he describes as the “paradox of disgust”, has in other circumstances been termed “the paradox of sad-film enjoyment” (Oliver 1993), “of suspense” (Carroll 1996), “aversion” (Korsmeyer 2008), or “horror” (Strohl 2012), to give but a few examples. Apparently, the observation that experiencing negative emotions during media use can be pleasant is quite common. Drawing on Korsmeyer (2008) and Strohl (2012), García argues, that there is some kind of reflective assessment of those emotions in play that might be desirable. His close reading of selected scenes of *Hannibal* suggests, that the series forces the viewer “to question the limits of aesthetic enjoyment, and potentially allow for a more ‘complex’ experience” (García 2019b: 562). This complex experience refers to Strohl’s concept of ‘strong hedonic ambivalence’, “i.e. taking pleasure in an experience partly in virtue of its painful aspects” with the subject’s enjoyment being embedded within pleasure (2012: 203f). Strohl distin-

guishes so called atomic experiences from complex ones, that is, experiences with internal structure. Atomic experiences interrelate and synergize into complex ones (Strohl 2012: 209):

In some cases when one watches a horror movie, one experiences emotions of fear and disgust that have the pain structure. They would be outright painful and one would be fully averse to them if one were outside of an aesthetic context. In an aesthetic context, however, these emotions may fit well with one’s more general condition and make a vital contribution to the pleasant character of the complex experience of engaging with an artwork. (Strohl 2012: 210)

This double-layered experience Strohl describes, has also been examined within media psychology under the term meta-emotion.

## 2. META-EMOTIONS AS COMPLEX EXPERIENCES

Audio-visual content might instigate all kinds of psychological responses: enjoyment, pleasure, enlightenment, but also suspense, melancholy, sadness, horror, disgust, or fear (cf. Bryant and Vorderer 2006). That viewers perceive even rather distressing feelings as overall pleasant can be explained with regard to the concept of meta-emotions (Bartsch 2008; Bartsch et al. 2008; Oliver and Bartsch 2010, 2011; Oliver and Raney 2011): A positive meta-emotion is the outcome of a retrospective monitoring process in which emotions that arise during exposure are reflected upon, appraised, and responded to. The basic idea of this evaluative meta-structure is that people can have “emotions about emotions” (Bartsch et al. 2008: 8). Meta-emotions can thus be understood as a retrograde emotional summation with an overall positive outcome (Bartsch 2008: 45). In Strohl’s (2012: 209) diction: To understand the phenomenon of strong ambivalence one has to allow for the possibility that atomic experiences (like disgust) interrelate and synergize to compose a complex entertainment experience.

Bartsch (2008) states that successful shows do more than to represent and elicit first-level emotions. They also “communicate meta-emotions about the emotions that are represented and/or elicited in the viewer. The redundant cueing of positive meta-emotions provides an explanation of why

media entertainment succeeds at making negative emotions like anger, fear, or sadness feel good.” (Bartsch 2008: 52). In the case of *Hannibal*, I would argue, that the aesthetized depiction of gruesome acts of violence is supposed to cue positive meta-emotions (cf. Ziomek 2018).

Positive meta-emotions are not limited to enjoyment. Rather, they are multidimensional. To fully capture the concept, Oliver and Bartsch (2010: 75) propose three different dimensions: one which refers to the experience of fun and positively valenced emotions, a second one describing experiences characterized by emotional arousal and negative valence, and a third one which captures moving and thought-provoking experiences. With reference to this school of thought, I will term these three aspects enjoyment (hedonic in nature with positive valence), suspense, and appreciation (a reaction that is gratifying in an eudaimonic way, i.e., meaningful, thought provoking, or insightful) (cf. Oliver and Bartsch 2010, 2011; Oliver and Raney 2011). As Oliver and Bartsch (2011: 30) put it: “one plausible characteristic of content that gives rise to feelings of appreciation is meaningfulness, conceptualized in eudaimonic terms via the extent to which the entertainment fare inspires viewers to consider questions regarding human virtue [or lack thereof] and life’s purpose”. Enjoyment and appreciation are not mutually exclusive categories of entertainment experiences, nor opposite ends of a continuum. Rather, they cooccur (Oliver and Bartsch 2010: 76). This multifaceted notion of enjoyment is helpful to better understand pleasure derived in the context of cinematic entertainment, from dramas or art films (Oliver and Bartsch 2010: 45). I would argue that this also holds true for a television series like *Hannibal*.

The concept of meaningfulness also helps to explain the conflicting attraction to violent media content (Bartsch and Mares 2014; Weaver 2011; Weaver and Wilson 2009): A meta-analysis of empirical studies from almost 40 years of research by Weaver (2011) showed that overall perceived violence is detrimental to enjoyment. In an experimental study, Weaver and Wilson (2009) also showed that viewers preferred non-violent versions of quality series to violent ones, even if they had an affinity for violence, challenging the notion that violence is enjoyable because of some inherent or aesthetic appeal (p. 457). An alternative explanation of the attraction of violent media content was presented by Bartsch and Mares (2014). They suggested that watching violent, gory material might allow viewers to reflect on their personal lives as well as on life in general in a meaningful way. They argue that a need for meaning-making might be aroused by negative events that

violate an individual’s belief in the world as a just place where bad things do not happen to good people (including the self): “Therefore, we propose to conceptualize individuals’ experience of meaning-making in the context of media violence as a form of eudaimonic appreciation” (Bartsch and Mares 2014: 960). Their empirical study supported this hypothesis: the generally negative influence of perceived gore on viewing interest was compensated by high levels of anticipated meaningfulness. This means that media violence is appreciated if it allows for a meaningful experience.

The entertainment experience of complex media, although quite new, has been researched extensively (Oliver et al. 2021). There is also a large body of work on aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic emotions (cf. Menninghaus et al. 2019; Schindler et al. 2017; Wagner et al. 2014; Leder et al. 2004; Leder and Nadal 2014). Less common, however, is the empirical exploration of non-narrative aspects of media content like aesthetic qualities within entertainment research (Oliver et al. 2021: 195). In this paper, I will therefore analyse both the aesthetic assessment and the entertainment experience of the quality TV series *Hannibal*, a show that combines horror and art by aestheticizing violence (Ziomek 2018).

### 3. *HANNIBAL*: COMPLEX ART-HORROR

A contemporary exemplar of a paradoxical, meta-emotions eliciting content is the TV series *Hannibal* (NBC 2013–2015) by Bryan Fuller. It is part of the story world of the titular serial killer and cannibal Hannibal Lecter created by Thomas Harris. The Lecter-corpus comprises four novels, five movies (with *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) being the most famous one) and two adaptations for television (*Hannibal* and *Clarice* (CBS, 2021-)) so far.

*Hannibal* is an example of “art-horror” (Carroll 1990), it is a “a crowning moment in the aesthetics of disgust in contemporary television culture” (García 2019b: 562); it is “repugnant television” (García 2019a: 210). The protagonist transforms his victims “into artistic displays” (Ndalianis 2015: 2), drawing inspiration from medieval (i.e. the *Wound Man*) as well as more contemporary art (like Van Gogh, Picasso and Damien Hirst). At the same time, it “creates an effect of the appetizing yet repulsive by its juxtaposition of beauty and terror” (Schwegler-Castañer 2018: 625). In doing so, *Hannibal* aestheticizes violence: “Beautified depictions of violence often mask the horrific aspect of crime, encouraging people to enjoy the murder without being overwhelmed or repulsed” (Ziomek 2018: 135).

Furthermore, Abbott (2018) argues that *Hannibal* is an apt example for a complex text (Mittell 2015). It is part of a transmedia network of connected content with the show blurring the lines between prequel, adaptation, remake, and reboot (Abbott 2018: 564). Abbott compares the show to “a televisual palimpsest (one text being superimposed upon another) in which elements of previous adaptations, narrative and aesthetic, are embedded within the matrix of the series, reworking and transforming Harris’ stories, not only making them suitable for TV but signalling the changing face of twenty-first century TV” (2018: 553).

I would argue that the series bares all the hallmarks of quality TV (Schlütz 2015: 101), that is complexity (in terms of storytelling, cast, narrative ambiguity, and intertextuality), authenticity (due to realistic execution, controversial subjects, and ambiguous characters), and signature style (high production values, distinctive visual style, and techniques fostering reflexivity). Because of these features, *Hannibal* is particularly suited to an experience that encompasses both hedonic (enjoyment) and non-hedonic (appreciation) dimensions of pleasure, complemented by artistic evaluation.

#### 4. CASE STUDY: THE ENTERTAINMENT EXPERIENCE OF *HANNIBAL*

The theoretical discussion has raised two sets of questions with regard to the entertainment experience of an art-horror series like *Hannibal*:

- RQ1. How do viewers perceive a complex quality TV series that elicits strong hedonic ambivalence by cuing positive meta-emotions? Or, to put it more precisely:
- Do viewers perceive *Hannibal* as quality TV?
  - To what extent do they assess it as violent and/or aesthetically valuable?
  - How are these assessments related?
- RQ2. How do viewers experience the show, i.e., which dimensions of the entertainment experience does *Hannibal* elicit? In other words:
- To what extent do viewers experience suspense, enjoyment, appreciation, and artistic value?
  - How are these dimensions associated with each other?
  - How does the overall entertainment experience relate to the perception of violence and aesthetic value, respectively?

These questions are addressed empirically by a survey with German *Hannibal* fans.

##### 4.1. Survey Design and Sample

In order to explore the entertainment experience of *Hannibal* and answer the research questions above, an online survey was conducted in 2017 with German viewers of the show. At this point in time the third season of *Hannibal* had been aired. Participants were recruited on fan platforms and via a snowball system leading to a convenience sample. As a trigger warning, we informed prospective participants that the survey would touch upon the topic of violence, requested their age (they had to be 18 years or older in order to take part) and asked for their consent. Only then the survey started.

876 participants filled the survey in completely (50% male, 49% female, 1% did not specify their gender). On average they were 29 years old ( $SD=9,3$ ). The majority (77%) had watched the complete series, i.e., three seasons with 39 episodes (another 15% watched at least two seasons, 6% watched at least one season, and 2% less than one season but more than two episodes). Most of the respondents (68%) watched it on streaming platforms. 19% of them had watched the series less than a month before participating in the survey, 36% less than half a year, 20% less than a year and 24% a year or more before filling in the questionnaire.

##### 4.2. Measures

All concepts specified below were measured by multi-item Likert-type scales. After reversing items with negative polarity (for a more intuitive display of the index values) and testing for internal reliability, mean scores were calculated for use in subsequent analyses (for a comprehensive list of items, mean scores, and values see appendix, tables A1 to A4).

**Quality TV.** The concept of quality television series was operationalized according to the definition by Schlütz (2015: 101) using 5 items. Respondents were asked how they perceived narrative complexity, authenticity, controversial content, multi-layered characters, and distinctive style in *Hannibal* (scale ranging from 1 ‘do not agree’ to 7 ‘agree completely’). After testing for internal reliability, the items were collapsed into a mean index (for all descriptives see table A1).

**Aesthetic judgement.** In order to captivate perceived aesthetic value we adapted a semantic differential proposed by Holbrook (1986). It was originally developed to measure aesthetic responses to product features. Therefore, items

that did not fit our object of study were omitted and supplemented by four items based on Leder et al. (2004). The complete scale comprised 14 items which were also rated on a 7-point-scale. After reversing some of the items (in order to indicate a more positive aesthetic judgement by a higher score) and testing for internal reliability, the items were again collapsed into a mean index (see table A2).

**Violent content.** The semantic differential also included 7 items for the perception of violence contained in the show (own wording). These items were processed in the same way as the aesthetic judgement above, albeit separately. High scores also denoted a more pronounced perception of violent content (see table A3).

**Entertainment experience** was measured using the scale proposed by Oliver and Bartsch (2010) without the items regarding lasting impression (7-point scale). We translated all items into German (cf. Schneider, Bartsch, and Gleich 2015) and adapted the wording for our purpose by replacing the term “movie” with “series”. As in the original version of the scale, we included items regarding artistic value (Oliver and Bartsch 2010: 63). An exploratory analysis into the different facets of the entertainment experience showed that a four-dimensional solution (containing the subscales enjoyment, suspense, appreciation, and artistic value) worked for our sample (principal components analysis, varimax rotation, 78% explained variance; cf. Field 2009: 638ff). Testing for Cronbach’s Alpha, each subscale as well as the entertainment experience as a whole displayed high internal validity. Items were thus compiled into corresponding mean indices (see table A4).

**Further measures.** Additionally, we recorded affinity for media violence (one-item measure) as well as sociodemographics such as age, gender, and educational background.

## 5. RESULTS

Research question (RQ) 1a (Do viewers perceive *Hannibal* as quality TV?) could be affirmed for our sample. Descriptive analyses showed a quality TV mean index of 6.1 ( $SD=0.8$ ) on a 7-point scale with item means ranging from 5.8 (complex plot) to 6.4 (signature style) (see table A1). The high rating of signature style was a first indication of *Hannibal* having distinctive aesthetic value. An additional one-item measure supported this: asked for their personal opinion of *Hannibal* being a quality series, 98% of the respondents answered “(rather) yes”.

RQ1b addressed the perception of *Hannibal* as having both aesthetic value and violent content. On a 7-point scale, overall aesthetic value was rated an average of 5.8 ( $SD=0.7$ ). The standard deviation indicated that the assessment was rather consistent across the sample. The items participants rated highest were ‘stylish’ and ‘sophisticated’ (both  $M=6.5$ ,  $SD=0.8$ ). The attribute the series was less credited for (still above scale midpoint, though) was ‘pleasing’ with an average rating of 4.5 ( $SD=1.7$ ) (for more see table A2). In contrast to this, violent content was rated 4.3 ( $SD=1.0$ ) on average on the same scale with items ranging between ‘aggressive’ ( $M=3.0$ ,  $SD=1.5$ ) and ‘gloomy’ ( $M=5.0$ ,  $SD=1.5$ ). Thus, the *Hannibal* fans we surveyed perceived the series as more aesthetically pleasing than violent on average.

The relation of these assessments was addressed in RQ1c. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to denote the linear relationship between aesthetic judgement and perceived violent content. A coefficient of +1 indicates a perfect positive relationship, a coefficient of -1 indicates a perfect negative relationship, while a coefficient of 0 indicates no linear relationship at all. In this case, there was a medium sized<sup>1</sup> negative correlation between the two variables ( $r(874) = -.31$ ,  $p = .000$ ). A negative correlation means that as one of the variables increases, the other tends to decrease, and vice versa (no causal relationship in one or the other direction is alleged). Apparently, perceived aesthetic value and violent content do not go together very well (at least for the fans interviewed). This might be an indication that violent content interferes with a positive entertainment experience. Alternatively, one could say that fans who particularly liked the show seemed to be less bothered by its violence (for whatever reason).

The second group of RQ dealt with the entertainment experience. RQ2a asked to what extent viewers experienced suspense, enjoyment, appreciation, and artistic value when watching *Hannibal*. Retrospectively, fans reported a very high overall entertainment experience ( $M=5.6$ ,  $SD=1.1$ ). The indices of the subscales ranged from 6.0 for both enjoyment and artistic value to suspense ( $M=5.3$ ) and appreciation ( $M=4.8$ ). That means that the respondents found *Hannibal* to be fun while cherishing its artistic value; they assessed it as suspenseful and, slightly less so, meaningful.

To address RQ2b (the association between the subdimensions of the entertainment experience) again Pearson

1 Values of  $\pm 1$  represent a small effect,  $\pm 3$  is a medium effect and  $\pm 5$  is a large effect (Field 2009: 173).

correlations were performed. The correlations of the indices showed mostly large and positive effects: The association between enjoyment and artistic value was strongest ( $r(874)=.68, p=.000$ ), followed by appreciation / suspense ( $r(874)=.65, p=.000$ ), appreciation / artistic value ( $r(874)=.60, p=.000$ ), suspense / artistic value ( $r(874)=.58, p=.000$ ), enjoyment / suspense ( $r(874)=.57, p=.000$ ), and enjoyment / appreciation ( $r(874)=.47, p=.000$ ). These results were in line with the assumption of Oliver and Bartsch (2010: 76) that enjoyment and appreciation do cooccur. In addition, the sub-dimensions of the entertainment experiences are positively related to each other reflecting the extremely positive overall assessment of the show.

RQ2c connects the perception of the series as being aesthetically valuable as well as violent with the entertainment experience (How does the overall entertainment experience relate to the perception of violence and aesthetic value, respectively?). Correlational analyses showed that an aesthetic appeal was positively and strongly related to the entertainment experience as a whole ( $r(874)=.52, p=.000$ ) with slight variations in the sub-dimensions (enjoyment: .46, appreciation: .41, suspense: .36, artistic value: .52). The perception of violence, on the other hand, had a negative association with the overall experience ( $r(874)=-.10, p=.004$ ) as well as with the sub-dimensions except suspense (enjoyment: -.16, appreciation: -.07, suspense: n.s., artistic value: -.10). This was even true for respondents with an affinity for media violence as a partial correlation (where the item “I like violent TV series” was held constant) showed ( $r(874)=-.09, p=.007$ ). A partial correlation determines the relationship between two variables while the effects of a third variable is held constant (here affinity for violence), thereby making sure that it is not this variable that causes the relationship.

## 6. DISCUSSION

This paper’s starting point was García’s (2019b) observation of the paradoxical pleasure of art-horror series like *Hannibal* where seemingly natural aversion is transformed into aesthetic delight. In theoretical terms this can be explained by Strohl’s (2012) notion of strong hedonic ambivalence. He argues that atomic experiences (individual sensations like recoiling due to a jump scare) interrelate and synergize into complex ones (cumulative experiences like watching a movie). While atomic experiences might be negative in valence, complex ones based thereon can still be experienced as positive.

This basic idea is mirrored by the concept of meta-emotions in media psychology (Bartsch 2008; Oliver and Bartsch 2010). In entertainment research, a meta-emotion is the outcome of a retrospective monitoring process in which emotions that arise during media exposure are reflected upon, appraised, and responded to. More often than not, the valence of this emotion is positive or at least mixed (Hemenover and Schimmack 2007; Oliver and Hartmann 2010). Meta-emotions can also be elicited directly by the media content (Bartsch 2008), for instance by the aesthetized depiction of gruesome acts of violence. Positive meta-emotions are not limited to enjoyment, however. Rather, they are multidimensional and comprise (at least) the hedonic affect of enjoyment, an eudaimonic affect of appreciation, suspense and, in some cases, artistic valuation (Oliver and Bartsch 2011; Oliver et al. 2021). The entertainment experience of a quality TV series like *Hannibal* is thus prone to elicit fun and suspense but also artistic appreciation and meaningfulness.

Building on these theoretical underpinnings, we designed an empirical study. It dealt with the complex quality TV series *Hannibal* (NBC 2013–2015) as research object (Abbott 2018; Schlütz 2015). It can be argued that because of its depicting paradoxical content (art-horror) and cueing meta-emotions (by way of aestheticizing violence), the show is an apt example to work with (García 2019b; Ndalianis 2015; Ziomek 2018).

The empirical study addressed two broad research questions that dealt with the perception and experience of *Hannibal*. To answer them, 876 German *Hannibal* fans were surveyed. The standardized interview comprised questions on the assessment of the series (its quality TV status, perceived aesthetic value and violent content) and on the multidimensional entertainment experience (suspense, enjoyment, appreciation, and artistic value). Results showed that respondents overwhelmingly assessed *Hannibal* as displaying all components of a quality TV series (that is narrative complexity, authenticity, controversial content, multi-layered characters, and distinctive style). They also rated it as highly aesthetically appealing as well as quite violent. These aspects (perceived aesthetic value and violent content) were correlated negatively, meaning that a more positive aesthetic judgment went along with a diminished perception of depicted violence, and vice versa. This could be interpreted as a sign that the aesthetization worked in that it sanitized the gore and made it more bearable or even appealing for some viewers.

The study further showed that *Hannibal* elicited a complex entertainment experience including enjoyment and appreciation as well as suspense and artistic valuation. This

supports Strohl's (2012) concept of strong hedonic ambivalence in complex experiences, as well as the notion of positive meta-emotions as the outcome of a retrospective monitoring process in which emotions that arise during exposure are reflected upon, appraised, and responded to. It is also in line with theory, in that a show containing violence can also evoke meaningful thoughts and feelings, i.e. appreciation (Bartsch and Mares 2014). In the same vein, Korsmeyer (2008: 374) argues that disgust is a death alluding emotion and therefore prone to provoking meaningful thoughts (like pondering the nature of existence or the vulnerability of material nature). Furthermore, a more favourable aesthetic judgement of *Hannibal* goes along with a better evaluation of the entertainment experience, while a stronger perception of the show's violence is associated with a more negative assessment of the experience. This result also applied to respondents who had a general affinity for media violence. One explanation of these findings might be that the depicted violence is tolerated rather than particularly enjoyed by fans of *Hannibal*, even hard-boiled ones. This is in line with outcomes from Weaver and Wilson (2009: 457) who showed that viewers preferred non-violent versions of quality series to violent ones, even if they had an affinity for violence. Thus, violence might not be enjoyable because of some inherent or aesthetic appeal. Perhaps, the authors argued, "when shows feature quality story and character development, violent content may distract viewers and diminish the viewing experience" (Weaver and Wilson 2009: 458). An alternative explanation would be in line with Bartsch's (2008) argument that the direct communication of meta-emotions can induce enjoyment if the primary emotional content has a negative hedonic valence. In the case of *Hannibal*, the aestheticized depiction of violence might serve this purpose of masking the negative aspects and supporting – or rather not getting in the way of – being entertained by the show.

## LIMITATIONS

Despite the conclusive results of our study, we have to discuss several limitations. First and foremost, it must be acknowledged that the empirical study did not deal directly with disgust as a basic emotion but rather with the paradoxical relationship between aversive media content and positive experiences. Further studies should examine the specifics of this emotion in relation to aesthetic as well as entertaining experiences in more detail. Furthermore, such a complex

theoretical concept can hardly be implemented empirically to a satisfactory extent. In particular a standardized survey (with a convenience sample of German fans, moreover) aiming at aggregated data is more of an approximation than a complete test of the model. Additionally, it might be worthwhile to use more complex measures of aesthetic emotions better fitted to quality TV series in the future (e.g., Schindler et al. 2017; Tarvainen, Westman, and Oittinen 2015). Another limiting aspect with regard to method is that all retrospective measurements are problematic because they are too far removed from the viewing experience. To remedy this, in-situ methods would be helpful (Naab, Karnowski, and Schlütz 2019). The fact, however, that the empirical results supported the theoretical ideas rather well, suggests that the study has its merits. Having said that, aesthetic judgement and aesthetic emotions are much more complex concepts than modelled here (cf. Leder et al. 2004; Leder and Nadal 2014; Menninghaus et al. 2019). As the study was but a first approach to including non-narrative aspects with regard to experiencing entertainment, this was good enough for now. Further research, however, should include aspects from Leder et al. conceptualization of the aesthetic experience like context, pre-classification and expertise. Another important aspect in this regard is textual interpretation. It might be a fruitful path to conduct qualitative or mixed-method studies to explore sense-making processes of paradox content in order to better understand individual readings (cf. Reinhard and Dervin 2012). Such interpretive studies could also examine the quality of aversive responses in more detail to better distinguish disgust, aversion, and revulsion (to name but a few possible notions).

## CONCLUSION

With regard to *Hannibal* and the paradox of disgust, García (2019b: 564) argues that in presenting the disgusting as beautiful, viewers are forced "to question the limits of aesthetic enjoyment, and potentially allow for a more 'complex' experience". This study showed empirically that viewers indeed experienced the show in a positive, albeit multidimensional way. Besides hedonic enjoyment and suspense they also found meaningfulness and artistic value in it. The perceived violence, however, – no matter how beautifully it was depicted – seemed to have been tolerated rather than enjoyed or appreciated.

If we concede that there is an enduring relationship between TV messages and viewers' conceptions of social reality (Hermann, Morgan, and Shanahan 2021) and that narrative entertainment in particular has persuasive effects (Oschatz and Marker 2020; Ratcliff and Sun 2020), it is probable that violent media content affects not only the entertainment experience (Weaver 2011) but also society as a whole, be it for good or bad (Eitzen 2013). Bearing this in mind, in terms of violent media content less might be more – not only to enhance viewing pleasure but also to lessen the potential for harmful effects (cf. Weaver and Wilson 2009). If shows were even more cherished by the audience when they abstained from depicting gruesome violence, this should at least be taken under consideration by producers; particularly, as long as we do not know for certain how this type of content affects viewers in the long term. Alternatively,

producers could profitably focus on meaning-making and eudaimonic appreciation as a strategy for increasing audience appeal, rather than escalating the level of blood and gore per se. ... Perhaps, depictions of violence that are perceived as moving and thought-provoking can foster empathy with victims, admiration for acts of courage, and moral beauty in the face of violence, or self-reflection with regard to violent impulses. (Bartsch and Mares 2014: 973).

Making violence meaningful instead of beautiful might be the way to go.

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## APPENDIX

### Quality TV

*Hannibal* has ...

(Scale from 1 'do not agree at all' to 7 'agree completely')

	M	SD	n
a complex plot	5.8	1.2	
realistic execution*	4.4	1.7	
controversial subjects	5.9	1.2	
ambiguous characters	6.3	1.0	
a signature style	6.4	1.0	
Index (without flagged item due to insufficient reliability)	6.1	0.8	876
Cronbach's Alpha (without flagged item)		.725	

TABLE A1. MEASURES AND DESCRIPTIVE VALUES QUALITY TV

	M	SD	n
pleasing – displeasing*	4.5	1.7	
dressy – casual*	6.3	1.0	
tasteful – tasteless*	5.7	1.5	
complex – simple*	5.7	1.3	
quite – loud*	5.7	1.3	
liked it – disliked it*	6.0	1.3	
plain – flamboyant	5.9	1.3	
lively – dull*	5.2	1.3	
ugly – beautiful	5.5	1.4	
stylish – in bad style*	6.5	0.8	
interesting – boring*	6.3	0.9	
sophisticated – uninspired*	6.5	0.8	
aesthetic – unaesthetic*	6.3	1.2	
high contrast – flat*	5.7	1.2	
Index (flagged items reversed)	5.8	0.7	876
Cronbach's Alpha (flagged items reversed)		.816	

TABLE A2. MEASURES AND DESCRIPTIVE VALUES AESTHETIC VALUE

**Perceived Violent Content**

(Scale from 1 'left item' to 7 'right item')

	M	SD	n
scary – soothing*	4.6	1.6	
violent – peaceful*	3.8	1,7	
gloomy – cheerful*	5.0	1.5	
brutal – harmless*	4.3	1.5	
merciful – cruel	4.9	1.4	
aggressive – even-tempered*	3.0	1.5	
Index (flagged items reversed)	4.3	1.0	876
Cronbach's Alpha (flagged items reversed)		.775	

TABLE A3. MEASURES AND DESCRIPTIVE VALUES VIOLENT CONTENT

**Entertainment Experience**

(Scale from 1 'do not agree at all' to 7 'agree completely')

	M	SD	n
It was fun for me to watch this series.	6.1	1.3	
I had a good time watching this series.	5.8	1.4	
The series was entertaining.	6.0	1.3	
Index enjoyment	6.0	1.2	876
Cronbach's Alpha		.89	
I found this series to be very meaningful.	4.4	2.0	
I was moved by this series.	5.2	1.6	
The series was thought provoking.	4.8	1.8	
Index appreciation	4.8	1.5	876
Cronbach's Alpha		.82	
I was at the edge of my seat while watching this series.	5.3	1.5	
This was a heart-pounding kind of series.	4.9	1.7	
The series was suspenseful.	5.8	1.4	
Index suspense	5.3	1.3	876
Cronbach's Alpha		.83	
I found the series artistically valuable.	6.0	1.3	
I found this series aesthetically strong.	6.3	1.2	
This series is a cinematic masterpiece.	5.9	1.3	
Index artistic value	6.0	1.1	876
Cronbach's Alpha		.86	
Index overall entertainment experience	5.6	1.1	876
Cronbach's Alpha		.92	

TABLE A4. MEASURES AND DESCRIPTIVE VALUES ENTERTAINMENT EXPERIENCE

