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## 14 Producing Disgust

### Profanation, the Carnavalesque, and Queering as Keys for Understanding the Unsettling Pop Cultural Performance of Die Antwoord

*Susanne C. Ylönen*

#### Introduction

What concepts do we have for describing turns towards the ugly, the odd, the irreverent, the disrespectful, and the disgusting? The English language provides terms such as profanation, the carnivalesque, and queering. But what do these terms reveal about the social, political, and psychological significance of pop cultural or artistic performances that make us feel uneasy, annoyed, dirty, even sometimes amused or intellectually stimulated by taking recourse to the disgusting? Performance artists such as South African rap rave trio Die Antwoord, famous for their highly aestheticized, at times politically incorrect music videos, stir up controversy, because they play with race and racist imagery in a parodic manner that some find outright disgusting. But what is the role of disgust in drawing audiences towards such performances?

In this chapter, I focus on the terminology that we use to talk about cultural processes or performances that feed disgust or that portray something that might otherwise be sacred, nice, or conventional in a grotesque or disgusting light. My approach is based on aesthetics and art education and motivated by the question: what attracts audiences in sociomoral violations that draw on the unsavory and the politically incorrect? The terms that we use to describe such acts disclose much about our own positions and values. As language produces reality, the terms that we use to describe our disgust in response to a performance become part of it, by highlighting some aspects while staying silent about others. A look at the terminology of disgust production may thus shed light on the nuances of disgust, the interconnectedness of different emotions, and the normative systems that define the disgusting.

In what follows, I look at three terms that may be used to describe deliberate disgust production: profanation, the carnivalesque, and queering. Profanation is an action or act that desecrates or violates that which is sacred, is obviously related to disgust, since it may also be defined as a sort of defilement (OED 2021c). Swearing, for example, becomes especially profanatory (as in blasphemous or degrading) in a religious or otherwise “high” profile context. The carnivalesque is related to disgust in that it has been described as a folk cultural style of expression, frank and free, “liberating from norms of etiquette and decency” (Bakhtin 1984, 10). In Mikhail Bakhtin’s account, the carnivalesque includes parodies, travesties, humiliations and profanations, and revels in reversals of hierarchy – top to bottom and front to rear (1984, 11). Queering is related to disgust via its deviant and mischievous connotations. In its broadest sense, queering may be understood as the disruption or deconstruction of categories,

binaries, and norms (Lanser 2018, 924). Some theorists speak of “perverse” readings in order to stress the non-normative, deviant nature of their queer approach (Rossi and Sudenkaarne 2021).

To explore the field of the disgusting in these terms involves various assumptions. I depart from the assumption that disgust is induced by norm violations. That is, something deemed morally wrong or otherwise unfitting may be described as disgusting. This is not to say that norm violations are always experienced as disgusting by all. In some, they may evoke laughter or amusement, depending on the situation. Yet many researchers in this field start by defining disgust as a sociomoral reaction that seeks to preserve social order. Rozin and colleagues (2008, 759) argue that disgust is an emotional expression of or reaction to distaste, danger, and inappropriateness or a sense of offensiveness. In a moral sense it encompasses issues such as betrayal, hypocrisy, and racism (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2008, 762). Jones and Fitness (2008) attest that reading about criminals such as con men and fraudsters produces signs of disgust in individuals. Russell and Giner-Sorolla (2011) add to this the claim that disgust responds to bodily norm violations and abnormality, which distinguishes it from anger as a response to harm and intentionality. Whereas anger is a reaction to violations of autonomy such as unfair, harmful behavior, sociomoral disgust may be directed at something that is merely unfitting or “does not fit in with society” (Russell and Giner-Sorolla 2011, 4).

A further assumption that underlines my inquiry is that disgust is not only an involuntary reaction, but also something that may be deliberately produced and sought out. As an aesthetic choice it brushes shoulders with the irreverent, the laughable, the grotesque, and the weird. To disgust is thus to challenge, to entertain, to seek out a strong reaction. There is no shortage of words to describe the antithesis of beauty and sublimity. Yet our vocabulary for the processes and entanglements of disgust-related production and consumption seems incomplete, as some of the more recent attempts at coining new terms such as “stuplimity” (Ngai 2005) or the “sublate” (Korsmeyer 2011) attest. To make something seem inappropriate or offensive is to defile or to corrupt, to make disgusting. Yet offensiveness is always a matter of perspective, interpretation, and context. While defilement and incorrectness may be experienced as funny, they may also be experienced as hurtful. Parodic performances are interpreted differently depending on recipients’ positioning as targets or as audiences (Kleinhans 1994, 198–199).

In the sections that follow, I describe how profanation, carnivalesque parodying, and queering have been used in theoretical fields ranging from philosophy to literature, performance and gender studies, or queer theory. After this, I apply these three terms to a case: the disgust-inviting performances of the South African rap rave group Die Antwoord. My aim is to understand the push and pull reactions that the band exerts on its audiences in terms of disgust. I seek to complement readings of the band in music studies, critical race studies, and performance studies by focusing on the terminology used to describe the band’s output. To me, it seems obvious that the band uses profanation, the carnivalesque, and a sort of queering in their output to evoke strong responses in their audiences. But how are these descriptive concepts and approaches related to them used by academics studying the band?

### **Profanation, the Carnivalesque, Queering**

Profanation is a concept related to ideas of sacredness and degradation. It may refer to the degradation of anything considered worthy of reverence or respect; a cheapening or vulgarization of something (OED 2021b). It is a good starting point for explorations

of the processes of inducing disgust, because it describes acts in which sacred or quasi-sacred objects or ideas are presented in a seemingly inappropriate context, or manipulated inappropriately by an inappropriate or unqualified person, to yield an unusual interpretation instead of a prescribed one (Bouissac 1997, 196). Paul Bouissac, who examines the concept of profanation in the context of circus clown performances, claims that profanation is essentially the exposure or explication of some fundamental social rules.<sup>1</sup> From a performance studies perspective, Bouissac argues that:

Profanation is not so much the breaking of a rule made explicit in a legal code as the exposure of the rule of the rules, the principle of principles that are so fundamental for the holding together of the regulative system that they cannot be formulated.

(1997, 197)

The sacred, in this secular context, consists of the culturally tacit axioms and silent dogmas that form the basis of cultural conventions. According to Bouissac, these cultural axioms are “undemonstrable, unjustifiable and ultimately impotent,” but nevertheless powerful. What distinguishes profanation from simple rule breaking, is thus the nature of the rule that is broken. Profanation is the breaking of an unformulated, rather vague but still powerful rule or cultural axiom. To apply the term profanation in everyday, secular contexts, one would thus have to assign at least a quasi-sacredness to some ideas, things, or practices. Bouissac assigns such a status to conventions related to birth, marriage, and death as he analyzes how circus clowns perform ritualistic profanations of these key life events – usually through selective transgressions and profanatory subversions that perform the unspeakable and unthinkable (1997, 194–207).

In secular contexts, profanation may be used as a term to expose the range of prohibitions concerning anything inappropriate. Moreover, the term may reveal how sacred, untouchable things can be used in a playful way. Giorgio Agamben shows this in his essay “In praise of profanation” where he discusses profanation in relation to play, religion, and capitalism (with brief examples from defecation and porn). First, Agamben defines profanation as the opposite of consecration, which is the “removal of things from the sphere of human law” (Agamben 2007, 73). He thus defines profanation as returning things that once were sacred to the free use of men. In religious contexts, profanation may occur through contact (touch), or “a special form of negligence” that ignores the separation of the sacred and the profane. As such, it may be characterized as a free and distracted approach to things and their use. Yet profanation is not simply secularization. Like play, it has a ritualistic function that is central to human behavior. Children make playthings out of anything, thereby (carelessly) profaning things that may belong to “serious” spheres of economics, war, or law. (Agamben 2007, 73–77.) Capitalism does not provide room for profanation, because its central item, the commodity, transforms use-value and exchange-value into “an ungraspable fetish” that cannot be appropriated (Agamben 2007, 81).

## The Carnavalesque

Despite its playful aspects, profanation may seem somewhat stern. This is what distinguishes it from the carnivalesque, a characteristic or style of the carnival season, a time of “revelry and riotous amusement” (OED 2021a). The carnivalesque may be described as a dynamic, playful, and gay approach to things (Bakhtin 1984, 11), a

joyous upside-down turning of existing social hierarchies. Mikhail Bakhtin relates it to marketplace style expressions and the festive, ambivalent laughter of the carnival season, and describes it as universal, deriding, triumphant, and vulgar (11–12). His account of grotesque realism is related to disgust in that its laughter-evoking grotesqueries may be considered norm violations, departing from the neat and the tidy into areas of hyperbolism and excessiveness (303).

Bakhtin's account of carnivalesque folk humor focuses on highlighting the positive, renewing, and reviving aspects of grotesque realism. Critics of this “self-consciously utopian” (Stallybrass and White 1986, 9) account have focused on the temporary character of the carnival, arguing that it is merely a means to maintain the status quo by offering short-term respite to the downtrodden and controlled strands of society: the urban poor, the marginalized, and the subcultural. This criticism highlights the fact that the carnivalesque is ambivalently dependent on authorized culture and dichotomies such as official – popular, or classical – grotesque (16). Some things that are normally considered inappropriate, disgusting, and indecent (bowels, genitalia, mouth, anus, eating, drinking, defecation – see Bakhtin 1984, 317) are celebrated, but only for a limited time, forming an exception that confirms the rule to uphold existing customs and power hierarchies. A further critique notes that carnivalesque laughter may also abuse and attack weaker social groups such as women, ethnic and religious minorities. As such it is uncritically populist, complicit in upholding the status quo. As Stallybrass and White put it:

The grotesque physical body is invoked both defensively and offensively because it is not simply a powerful image but fundamentally constitutive of the categorical sets through which we live and make sense of the world.

(1986, 23)

Yet the carnival spirit has been acknowledged as a vehicle for social protest, a “mobile set of symbolic practices . . . employed throughout social revolts” (Stallybrass and White 1986, 15) and in the decades following Bakhtin's investigation of popular humor and folk culture in Rabelais' work, it has become “an indispensable instrument for the analysis not only of literary and filmic texts but also of cultural politics” (11, quoting Stamm 1982, 47). One merit of the carnivalesque is the demystifying potential of its laughter-evoking grotesqueries and hierarchy reversals. Even in its temporality, the carnival exposes the fictive foundations of social formation. Its focus on materiality may be invoked to degrade all that is spiritual and abstract. Understood in this way, “the cheerful vulgarity of the powerless” may be seen as a weapon to be used “against the pretense and hypocrisy of the powerful” (Stallybrass and White 1986, 18; quoting Stamm 1982, 47). In the carnivalesque, ecstatic collectivity thus meets the demystification of class hierarchy, political manipulation, sexual repression, dogmatism, and paranoia, resulting in a sort of creative disrespect.

### Queering

The connection between queering and disgust may seem less obvious than in the case of profanation and the carnivalesque. In the field of queer theory and gender studies the term has mostly been used to describe disruptive readings related to sex, gender, and sexuality. It can, however, also describe the troubling or deconstruction of

categories, binaries and norms in general (Lanser 2018, 924). Since norms are often guarded by disgust and anger (Heerdink et al. 2019), queering may induce such reactions. It may even seek them out. After all, what disgusts us has the capacity to draw us in and enhance our concentration, turning aversion into fascination (Korsmeyer 2011, 113–119).

The historical meanings of “queer” relate it to the strange, odd, peculiar and eccentric as well as the confounding or puzzling (OED 2021c). In its early uses, “queer” denoted “an array of meanings associated with the deviation from normalcy” including “of obscure origin” and “the state of feeling ill or bad . . . obscure, perverse, eccentric.” As a verb form, “to queer” also incorporated meanings such as to quiz, to puzzle, to ridicule and to cheat. (Butler 2011, 130). The originally pejorative term was positively reclaimed in the late twentieth century when queer theorists and activists started to apply it to describe the disruptive, intersectional readings, performances and sensibilities of their field (Walters 1996, 833, 381). As V. Spike Peterson (2014, 604) puts it:

A key insight of queer analytics is that codes and practices of ‘normalcy’ simultaneously constitute ‘deviancy,’ exclusion, and ‘otherings’ as sites of social violence. To reveal how power operates in normative codes and normalizing practices, queer theory aims to ‘make strange’ – disrupt, destabilize, deconstruct, effectively *to queer* – what is considered normal, commonplace, taken-for-granted, or the ‘natural order of things.’

Queering as the troubling of normative structures and the highlighting of power relations is thus often politically motivated. In Judith Butler’s words: “As a term for betraying what ought to remain concealed, ‘queering’ works as the exposure within language – an exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language – of both sexuality and race” (1993, 130).

Sara Ahmed’s account of the performativity of disgust exemplifies the power of queer readings quite well. By tracing how expressions of disgust shape their objects, Ahmed troubles normative notions of disgust as an emotional response to something that may be contagious. Her analysis highlights the political motives and networks of power behind acts of disgust-making. According to Ahmed, disgust implies something that offends taste. What is bad or disgusting is also often seen as strange and other (Ahmed 2014, 82–83). Performativity, in this context, implies that disgust is not just felt, but also discursively produced by labeling something as offensive. Although disgust is always directed at an object, it does not merely arise from that object, but may be projected upon it. Hence, a speech act that designates something as disgusting by exclaiming that it is so, works as a form of vomiting. It expels an idea formed in the mind of the perceiver and then cast on the object as if it was an essential feature of that object (Ahmed 2014, 92–95). This performative stickiness may be used to explain how even experiences like grief may be turned into exclamations of disgust. Following the events of 11 September 2001, shock was transferred onto the bodies of the attackers by means of wordings that cast the terrorists as twisted, depraved, subhuman vermin. Through sticky associations, this transference molded a view that conflated the “disgusting” terrorists with the Middle East and Muslims in general (Ahmed 2014, 96–100).

In the next section, I apply these concepts of profanation, the carnivalesque, and queering to a case that seems to invite “troubled” approaches: the irritating,

exuberant, and norm-violating performances of the South African rap rave trio Die Antwoord. The band, which rocketed to fame in 2010 when their music video *Enter the Ninja* went viral, has produced many carefully crafted music videos. With the rest of their musical output and their live performances, these provide a dense patchwork of intricate, intriguing texts that defy easy readings. Moving forward, I describe parts of Die Antwoord's output and the scholarly writing that has followed it in light of the three terms.

### **Die Antwoord's Performances as Profanation, Carnivalization, and Queering**

Die Antwoord make what they've described as "car crash music," music that makes people stop and look (Scott 2012, 757). They rely on a combination of rap and rave, the cute and the cool, the seductive and the weird or frightening, and the performative and the parodic, all of which results in a performance that exerts a curious push and pull reaction on their audiences. As a Reddit.com user (2017) put it:

Die Antwoord is like the smell of gasoline. Objectively I don't think it's good, and it probably isn't too healthy for me, but it's got a strangely euphoric quality that just can't be ignored.

Like the smell of gasoline, Die Antwoord may be conceived as rather nasty. This is not only due to their music, which is shrill in a rave style, condescending and dissing in the beefing tradition of rap, and irritatingly childish in its recourse to "nyah-nyah" tunes. Much of the controversy revolves around the parodic performances of race and class within their visual output. Challenging political correctness, the band takes up their own South African whiteness and their proclaimed low-class status in a manner that can easily be interpreted as humorous or exaggerated (Krueger 2012). This has divided audiences, with some viewing their act as more or less insightful conceptual art or (meta)parody (Bekker and Levon 2020; du Preez 2011; Van der Watt 2012; Milton and Marx 2014, 24–25) and others claiming that it is nothing more than "deodorized dog shit" or impoverished "ersatz entertainment" (Haupt 2013; Kitchiner 2013, 79; O'Toole 2012, 398). Besides charges of cultural appropriation, homophobia, misogyny, and blackface (Kitchiner 2013; Haupt 2012, 2013; Obbard and Cork 2016, 423–426; Schmidt 2014), the band has gained success and intensely committed fans (Noakes 2014; Murray 2014, 2016; Parry 2015; Ryder 2015). Aesthetics wise, they claim to have taken the white trash aesthetic called "zef," which denotes bad or undeveloped kitsch-like taste, "like wearing high heels with a tracksuit" (Krueger 2012, 402; du Preez 2011, 106; Van der Watt 2012, 411; Marx and Milton 2011, 735), to the next level as a sort of cool, weird whiteness (O'Toole 2012, 397).

Previous research has focused on Die Antwoord's act as either a racial project or as an artistic performance that raises issues of authenticity. Questions like "are they blackface/racist?" (Haupt 2012, 2013; Schmidt 2014) mingle with questions like "are they real?" (Van der Watt 2012; Parry 2015; Smit 2015) as scholars seek to understand the act in the contexts of both post-apartheid South Africa and contemporary art and performance studies. Some researchers have concentrated on the racialized gender performance of Ninja (Watkin Tudor Jones), the band's front man (Falkof 2012; Rossouw 2015). The trio's other rapper Yolandi Vi\$\$er (Anri du Toit) and the

third member, DJ Hi-Tek (Justin De Nobrega), also known as the producer GOD, have been discussed somewhat less intensively in academic treatises.

Dirtiness, trashiness, non-normative corporealities, violent imagery, and inappropriate sexuality are only one part of the band's controversial aesthetic. The most forceful disgust reactions to their output are related to their humorous style and performances of race (blackface, exaggerated whiteness). My perspective on their violations of good taste is white, privileged, and Nordic. I am intrigued by disgust as an artistic means and hence generally tolerant in what comes to performances of this kind. Yet I find that my fascination with Die Antwoord's output is accompanied by some shame. I feel that my interest in them taints me a bit like admitting the use of porn publicly might. Hence my aim here is not to propose a simply appreciative reading. Rather, I want to demonstrate how using the terms profanation, the carnivalesque and queering may tease out different interpretations of the band's unsettling performances.

### Profaning, Carnivalizing, and Queering Race in the South African Context

Reading Die Antwoord's performances as profanation, carnivalization, and queering provides various lenses through which to make sense of their irritating ambivalence. Take the much-quoted lines that Ninja delivers in the beginning of the band's first hit *Enter the Ninja* (2010) "I represent South African culture. In this place you get a lot of different things, Blacks, Whites, Coloureds, English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, watookal. I'm like all these different things, all these different people, fucked into one person."<sup>2</sup> The imagery that accompanies these lines shows Ninja in a basement-like space, its dirty walls bathed in dark shadows. The camera zooms in on his naked upper body and the prison tattoos that adorn his white, dirty skin; the soundscape is eerie, menacing. During the speech, the face of South African DJ Leon Botha, marked by progeria, emerges from the shadowy backgrounds and fades away again. The beginning is dark, menacing, and mysterious, evoking themes such as cultural plurality and marginalization in the South African context. After this dark and mysterious beginning, the electronic dance beat that starts blaring, accompanied by high-pitched singing of an almost albino-like super blonde Yolandi, is surprising in its kitschy exuberance and Ninja's performance at once turns zany, that is, amusingly unconventional and comic, marked by "a desperate quality" (Ngai 2012, 185). The wannabe character that Ninja adopts in the rest of the song even comes across as cute. As Sianne Ngai puts it:

Far from being 'divinely untroubled,' zaniness projects the 'personality pattern' of the subject wanting too much and trying too hard: the unhappily striving wannabe, poser, or arriviste. The utter antithesis of ironic cool, the perspiring, overheated zany is a social loser.

(2012, 189)

The theme of social lowness/loserdom is especially visible in the white trash aesthetic that the band members adopt. Despite their middle-class, educated background and by now well-off status as world-renowned musicians, Ninja and Yolandi sport a poor white, trashy identity at the core of their zef style. According to Roberto Filippello (2021), "white trash" is a working-class aesthetic, whiteness in its racialized,

non-appreciated form, that has been used in fashion photography since the 1990s to mock and trouble beauty ideals enforced by the fashion industry. In Filipello's account, the profanatory aspects of white trash performances expose the desire within the social imperative to reject or debase the "low." This exposing takes place through the rejection of middle-class good taste – especially moral norms related to sexuality (2021, 2). At the core of the profanity of the white trash aesthetic sweat, tan, and porn references meld in a monstrous whiteness (10). This excessive whiteness and the monstrosity that accompanies it is highlighted by Die Antwoord's self-titled enfreakment, exemplified by their bleached-white, tacky appearances in the music video *Baby's On Fire* (2012), or their freak parade in the music video *I Fink you Freaky* (2012). This is in line with the band's proclaimed appreciation of the art of the marginalized. Front man Ninja has stated that he is "only interested in the art that children make, that retarded people make and that criminals make" (du Preez 2011, 114).

In terms of profanation, the question about Die Antwoord's act becomes: what are the sacred or quasi-sacred cultural axioms, rules, or conventions they are seen as breaking? Charges of cultural appropriation and racism are a good starting point for answering this question. Lanisa Kitchiner (2013) argues that Die Antwoord engages in "strategic acts of erasure" that reduce gangsta rap and African American culture to negative stereotypes. In her view, Die Antwoord's performative "thug minstrelsy" in the music video *Fok Julle Naaiers* (2012) erases and essentializes Black identity by appropriating the most unsavory and nihilistic elements of hip hop culture in the name of material gain. Adam Haupt (2012, 2013), who analyzes the music video *Fatty Boom Boom* (2012), further claims that Die Antwoord's parody of Lady Gaga is misogynistic and that Yolandi's blackface performance (complete with a pickaninny attire) is racist in nature. According to Haupt, the band uses their privileged access to media and technology to propagate conservative race and gender politics.

In profanatory terms, the cultural axiom that Die Antwoord are breaking in these accounts could be the rule that "you cannot make free use of race." By trying to pass as non-white or as racialized hyper-whites in their visual performances and music, the band highlights their own racial position. The inappropriateness of their performance stems from the context (South Africa, with its notorious history of racial segregation) and their own position as white, thus privileged, South Africans. Critiques such as Kitchiner's and Haupt's are not simply directed at the band's aspiration to transgress race as a fixed and essentializing category. Rather, the critique highlights the position of privilege from which they produce their humorous, exaggerated performances of race. For any socio-culturally sensitive twenty-first-century liberal, a fundamental social rule is that race is a troubling notion that must be handled with care and sensitivity because of all the inequality, misery, and violence caused by racial segregation. Die Antwoord's rude parodic style may be seen as exhibiting blatant disregard for this rule. Following Agamben's ideas on profanation, it can be regarded as a "special form of negligence" (2007, 75) that seems to ignore any need for seriousness. Scholars studying Die Antwoord speak of "tactical ignorance" (Parry 2015, 114), and the "almost too casual dismissal of a long history of repression and segregation" (Van der Watt 2012, 415). The most forcefully profanatory aspects of Die Antwoord's performance are thus directed at white, "woke" audiences, who may find their "whatever" attitude towards race both insulting and appealing because of the shame and guilt that they feel for being part of an unjust, racially segregating system. The band's performances may, of course, also be enjoyed and critiqued from a racist or racialized

perspective, but for these viewers, the profanatory edge might lie elsewhere or remain irrelevant/non-existent.

In what comes to the carnivalesque, the most carnivalesque aspect of Die Antwoord's performances is probably the celebratory party spirit. As blaring techno beats and tribal drums meet frenzied dancing, what objectively speaking might be considered bad may become intoxicating and euphoric. The carnivalesque affects that the band has on its audiences have even been identified as their "post-hegemonic potential" (du Preez 2011, 114). Amanda du Preez, for example, notes that "hardly any boundaries remain intact and unproblematized by Die Antwoord's zef performativity." Their exaggeration and hyperbole; the grotesqueries they revel in; the non-normative corporealities; the figure of the monster, freak and, alien; the obsessive occupation with orifices, excretions, and bodily processes all create a sort of carnival revival (du Preez 2011, 107).

Vulgarity, hyperbole, and irreverence do indeed abound in Die Antwoord's output. Their whole zef style rests on an ambivalent celebration of the degraded and the material, a sort of violent and vulgar agency assigned to the lower strands of society that they claim to be part of. Many of their videos also recall the duality of birth and death via references to childhood and violence. Their short video *Umshini Wam* (2011, directed by Harmony Korine), for example, shows Ninja and Yolandi as onesie-wearing, jobless "fuckups" rolling around in wheelchairs on the streets of a deserted South African suburb, shooting shopkeepers to "pimp their rides." In this video, the endless summer days of innocent bourgeois childhoods are contrasted with lullabies corrupted by violent lyrics such as "I'm old enough to bleed/I'm old enough to breed/I'm old enough to break a brick in your teeth while you sleep." In this weird video, even the murders that the pair commit become part of a childlike, playful existence. But can this be read as a social protest? Does it expose the "fictive foundations" of social formation? Does it degrade the spiritual and abstract? Demystify class hierarchy? Or is it a mere "time out," that ends up upholding existing customs and power hierarchies via temporal role reversals? Furthermore, what roles or hierarchies are reversed here?

Die Antwoord's carnivalesque features have led many critics to regard their act as mere superficial spectacle or a "comedy of degradation" (Krueger 2012) that parodies and thus perpetuates class and race stereotypes (Milton and Marx 2014, 35). In this vein, the band has been accused of "calculated and empty commercialism" (O'Toole 2012; Van der Watt 2012, 414) and "flamboyant display without any fixed enemy or goal" (Krueger 2012, 407). Amanda du Preez's reading, too, ends up viewing Die Antwoord's carnivalesque affects as privatized hedonism that lacks the societal resistance of medieval carnivals (du Preez 2011, 111–112). Yet, later analyses also discuss Die Antwoord's performances as Baudrillardian simulation, capable of destabilizing myths of authenticity (Smit 2015). Some academic readings even stress the consumer's own culpability in producing/interpreting their acts (Schmidt 2014). Commenting on Adam Haupt's criticism of Die Antwoord's performances as blackface minstrelsy, Bryan Schmidt (2014, 146), for example, retorts that rules such as "blackface is never OK" ignore the "texture of what blackface produces in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality" thereby offering an easy, non-reflexive assessment of such cultural performances.

Readings such as Schmidt's stem from performance studies, and they lead us to questions of queering. Concepts such as meta-parody (Bekker and Levon 2020) or

“fictional realness” (Parry 2015) are used in some of the later readings to trouble interpretations that see Die Antwoord’s act as simply parodic or deceitful. Ian Bekker and Erez Levon (2020, 122), for example, show that Die Antwoord’s performances may be read as “[t]he act of deauthenticating one’s own parodic practice,” since one cannot always be sure what they are mocking. Are they parodying rap scene coolness, or the idea that white trash cannot be cool? Are they laughing at the non-normative subjects and tacky style that they evoke, or their own attempt at trying to pass as cool, weird, white rappers? According to Owen Parry (2015, 113) Ninja and Yolandi are not only imitating the zef style but actively inhabiting its forms and textures, which elicits a series of ethical questions about their integrity or realness. The fact that they do not answer these questions, or their tactical ignorance on them, only fuels the radical potential of their performance as a sort of trauma work (Parry 2015; Truscott 2016). In Parry’s words:

By staging multiple references, from South Africa’s grim political struggles and intermeshing them with references of thugs, football hooligans, blackface, whiteface, and Gaga, they draw on the energies of violent histories and practices, putting them to work differently, incorporating them but “subverting them from within” to produce strange, celebratory fictions.

(2015, 114)

This liminal positioning between imitation and inhabitation, and the involvement of audiences, may be interpreted as a sort of queering. Ninja and Yolandi are trying to “pass” as disadvantaged, racialized whites, but they do it so flamboyantly as to highlight the staged nature of their act. In terms of gender, this attempt at passing extends to Ninja’s aspirations of hip hop coolness, troubled or made ambivalent via his at times deliberately awkward or failed hypermasculinity (Falkof 2012; Rossouw 2015). Researchers have spent less time on Yolandi’s childlike yet highly sexualized and horror-tinged appearance – possibly because violence-imbued renditions of cuteness are already quite mainstream due to the global influence of the Japanese *kawaii* aesthetic (Yano 2013, 1–41, 49–53). Yet, in terms of a Western notion of cuteness as a sort of childlike innocence, Yolandi’s cuteness may still be considered a tool for subversion in scenes like the one where she throws a brick in Ninja’s face (*Baby’s On Fire* 2012), or in the multiple cases in which her feminine appearance is made frightening, grotesque, or perverse with all-black contact lenses (e.g. *I Fink U Freeky* 2012), face paint (*Fatty Boom Boom* 2012), or references to pedophilia (*Cookie Thumper* 2013). Instead of occupying only the role of objectified cheerleader (*Enter the Ninja* 2010), Yolandi also adopts the roles of a freaky enfant terrible (*Cookie Thumper* 2013) and pickaninny (*Fatty Boom Boom* 2012) highlighting the fact that cuteness has traditionally been a white, bourgeois aesthetic associated with childlike innocence (Bernstein 2011). As such, she turns the assumed powerlessness and passivity of cuteness and femininity into a rebellious, loud existence that both seduces and attacks.

Read as a sort of queering, Die Antwoord’s act hence becomes a project of questioning the intersections of race, class, and gender. In some instances their approach is even presented as perverse. In his psychoanalytically oriented paper “Post-apartheid rhythm: Beyond apartheid beatings” Ross Truscott (2016) reads Die Antwoord’s performance of obscene South Africanness as a masochistic – thus perverse – beating fantasy, relating it to an unconscious desire to be punished. To Truscott, overidentification

with racial and gendered stereotypes and repetitions of apartheid-derived violence dramatize, in a musical, rhythmic form, a contradiction “at the heart of the post-apartheid social contract.” This contradiction, stated in the preamble of the South African constitution, is to both recognize and disavow past injustices, simultaneously carrying them and not conceding too much complicity.

## Conclusions

To return to the questions posed at the very beginning of this chapter, one could claim that all the three terms discussed here may be used to describe processes in which a society’s norms and power relations are attacked, highlighted, and/or questioned. Yet they emphasize different aspects of this process as the case of *Die Antwoord* attests. Using the term profanation may reveal something about what a critic holds sacred in terms of cultural rules and norms. Read as profanation *Die Antwoord*’s transgressions shift attention to the social rule that race is a troubling notion heavy with the weight of past and present injustices. From a liberal, socioculturally alert perspective, the band may be seen as inappropriately manipulating their own racial position, falsely denying their privilege (see disgust reactions to fraudsters) and violating the anti-racist cultural convention. Exposing any discontent of white South Africans may be regarded as an almost taboo act as past injustices of the white supremacist apartheid regime still haunt the social structure of South Africa. Hence, *Die Antwoord* may be seen as using imagery and claims related to race inappropriately, profaning ideals that the community around them holds dear or sacred.

Reading *Die Antwoord* as carnivalesque parody, in turn, discloses a gravitation towards attributions of empty, commercialist spectacle, even if the social, celebratory character of their performances is noted. Since the carnivalesque is ambivalent, simultaneously overturning and upholding existing societal hierarchies, studies that center the carnivalesque are almost sure to stress the conservative underpinnings and fleeting nature of the transgressions. This makes carnivalesque transgression seem politically toothless. “Queer” readings that emphasize the performative, the meta-parodic, and ultimately political character of the act (Parry 2015; Smit 2015; Schmidt 2014; Truscott 2016) challenge such accusations of mere frivolity. They highlight the staged aspects of the band’s performances and draw parallels to ballroom cultures (Schmidt 2014; Parry 2015). They also direct attention to the intersectional nature of the band’s transgressions. In these readings, zany aspirations to hip hop coolness become signs of troubled white, poor hypermasculinity and grotesque cuteness questions associations that link childlike femininity with innocence, passivity, and whiteness. Notions of perversity, or masochism, further link the act to psychologically meaningful processes of atonement.

These three concepts thus differ in how they shift attention from the religious to the social and the political. Profanation, the carnivalesque, and queering all interweave in their attention to the inappropriate or disgusting, but they provide a different framing. Profanation evokes breaches of sacred or taboo issues; the carnivalesque highlights the communal and celebratory; and queering likely shifts attention to intersections of gender, race, and class.

All these terms may be understood as positive, when used as tools of inquiry. Yet the force of all profanatory, carnivalesque and queer performances rests on the fact that they may be understood as disrespectful, violating, and even disgusting. In light

of claims made about moral disgust in psychological research, disruptive acts such as Die Antwoord's may be met with aversion, contempt, and anger, because they contort the social roles, norms, and codes of ethics (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2008, 763, Rozin et al. 1999) that structure our cultural landscape. Die Antwoord specifically has been criticized for being fraudulent, misogynistic, homophobic, and racist.<sup>3</sup> The analysis presented here shows that these accusations and the feelings that they mirror are a prerequisite for any attempt to understand the ambivalent aversion and attraction of the performance. The disgust reactions and puzzlement that the band has been met with are hence an essential part of their act. Whether the act is interpreted as upholding or subverting reprehensible practices ultimately rests on the perspective adopted by the viewer. The terminology used to describe and make sense of the grotesqueries that the band produces is part of constructing that perspective.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. This resonates with Mary Douglas' ideas on dirt as matter out of place. In Douglas' account, ideas of dirt are always connected to systems of thought as dirt "is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification" (Douglas 2002, 36–41, quote on p. 36).
2. Watookal is Afrikaans for "whatever".
3. See Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley's (2008, 762) account of betrayal, hypocrisy, and racism as elicitors of moral disgust.
4. I would like to thank the Finnish Cultural Foundation, the University of Jyväskylä and the Witwatersrand University as well as all the colleagues who offered comments on the manuscript for their support.

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