

The Ugly, the Comic and the Obscene

I. Priapus

Humans (at least in Western society) –uncomfortable with the excremental and sexual

Consider excrement ugly, disgusting

Freud *Civilization and its Discontents* “the genital organs in themselves, the sight of which is always exciting, are nonetheless never considered beautiful.”

Shame varies culturally

Ancient Greece and the Renaissance- sexual attributes contribute to beauty of body

“In those cultures with a strong sense of shame a taste for its violation is manifested through its opposite, which is obscenity.”

Obscene behavior or language most often arouses laughter- children- jokes – excrement

Cult of the phallus- (since antiquity) – united characteristics of obscenity, ugliness and comicality

Eg. Priapus- son of Aphrodite- protector of fertility- equipped with enormous genital organ

Images placed in fields (protect crops/scarecrow)

Obscene, ridiculous, ugly, proportion

Amusing and likeable

Close relationship between ugliness, lewdness and comicality

II. Satires on the Peasantry and Carnival Festivities

Comicality – obscenity. Cathartic act – laughter at expense of oppressor

Type of rebellion found in Roman Saturnalia- slaves took the place of masters

Early Christian world- not indulgent in laughter (quasi diabolical)

Epistle of Lentulus (Christ never laughed) debated for centuries

Read St. Basil *Lesser Rules* 4th century

Some church leaders defended ‘healthy merriment’

Humorous texts in circulation in early medieval centuries

**Supper of Cyprianus* – parody portraying biblical characters in irreverent light

**Joca monachorum* (Monk’s jokes)

**riso pasquale* (Easter laugh) Resurrection celebrations (make jokes in church, even during sermons)

Middle Ages full of contradiction-
public- piety and austerity

- concessions made for sin
- short stories (Reading Rutebeuf 13th century)
- tolerated prostitution
- eroticism of courtly poetry
- songs of the goliards (clerics)
- satires on the peasantry
- carnival festivities

Satires on Peasantry- many texts- villain shown as fool, ready to swindle his master, dirty, stinking... peasants at times portrayed as Priapus, with Disfigured genitals

- not popular comicality- contempt of feudal lords/church leader
- laughed at, not with

Carnival-

1. grotesque representation of human body (eg. Masks)
2. parodies of sacred things
3. complete license in language, including blasphemy

Specific times set aside for forbidden and the ugly

Social order and hierarchy overturned (elected king of activities)

Excrement replaced incense in church

Excrement thrown onto crowds

Ugliness redeemed

III. Renaissance and Liberation

1532 Rabelais *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (5 books)

Applies carnival to literature and the upper class

Becomes a satire on the world of ecclesiastical customs- philosophical

Humanity- obscenity the proud assertion of the rights of the body

Read: Rabelais

Classical and medieval criteria- Gargantua and son disproportionate

Deformity becomes glorious

Gustave Dore Illustration 1873

Illustration for Gargantua and Pantagruel 1565

grotesque

adjective

1 *a grotesque creature* malformed, deformed, misshapen, misproportioned, distorted, twisted, gnarled, mangled, mutilated; ugly, unsightly, monstrous, hideous, freakish, unnatural, abnormal, strange, odd, peculiar; informal weird, freaky. antonym normal.

2 *grotesque mismanagement of funds* outrageous, monstrous, shocking, appalling, preposterous; ridiculous, ludicrous, farcical, unbelievable, incredible.

Etymology- Italian- grotto, cave- grottesche, cave-like
Nero's Domus Aurea (100 bc) and the Baths of Titus

“The word “grotesque” was coined by the architect Brunelleschi in the middle of the sixteenth century. When he went to Rome to look at the underground caves in the city, he kept coming across shallow reliefs with odd-looking monster-like faces, which he called ‘grotesque.’ Basically the term can be applied to decorative combinations of human and animal figures or expressive images in sculpture and painting in a wide variety of cultures, both Western and non-Western. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York recently showed a series of bronze masks and figures that were discovered in a clay pit in China and made approximately 6,000 years ago. This form died out in Chinese art by the middle of the nineteenth century. There are other non-Western cultures whose art can be tied to the grotesque, notably the Aztec civilization in Mexico, as well as cultures in certain parts of Africa and Melanesia. In the West, there was a Roman decorative style and a large amount of sculpture in medieval times in Europe. In the fifteenth century a painterly style began with the work of Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516), who represented the images of the torments of hell. A painterly grotesque also emerged in the Netherlands with the painting of Pieter Bruegel (1525/69). Strongly influenced by Bosch, Bruegel portrayed the crudeness of contemporary peasant life with all of its follies. Other artists followed. In France, Jacques Callot (1592-1635) who made over 1,400 etchings of beggars, court festivals, landscapes, theater performances, battle scenes, religious subjects, and fashionable aristocrats. In England, the cartoon-like work of William Hogarth (1697-1764) made scathingly satirical representations of lowlifes in London, and Johann Heinrich Fussli (1741-1825), a Swiss artist who lived and worked in England, created images with

a nightmarish quality. Fusli's principle subject matter was frightened horses with snorting nostrils and protruding eyeballs. Then, in Spain, there was Francisco Goya (1746-1828), whose bitter satires on human nature and his search for a deeper reality within human emotions and the subconscious inspired expressionism and surrealism. In Belgium, James Ensor (1860-1949), whose figures often wore brightly colored but devilish masks that serve to threaten the viewer; his most famous painting is the 'The Entry of Christ into Brussels.' The principle modern artists of the grotesque were Giorgio di Chirico (1888-1978) who constructed in his paintings a menacing architectural aura. The surrealist contingent consisted of Yves Tanguy (1900/55), Salvador Dali (1904/89), and Max Ernst (1891-1976). Probably the most influential artist on my work is Hans Bellmer (1902/75), with his dismantled and reconstructed dolls. Some of the more violent works of contorted women by Pablo Picasso can be thought of as contributing to the grotesque. Nor should the bizarre dream world of Philip Guston be overlooked. Also, I have seen early work involved with the grotesque by Clyfford Still, which he later suppressed. Perhaps the last contemporary painterly artist of stature is Francis Bacon." -John Coplans

Mikhail Bakhtin- 3 books, especially Rabelais and His World

Positive view of the grotesque

Demonstrates how festival and carnival are primary sources of the grotesque art.

new order of things

Carnavalesque is an anti-classical counter aesthetic

Dialog (the enemy of which is monologue)

Modern human beings- victims Bourgeois culture

undercut understanding of the self as social creature -dialogue reveal

victims by perpetuating an atomistic, individualistic view of the self that

assumes that authenticity lies beyond the social

representation and objectification of the other

values and social structures of hierarchy, dogmatism, formalism, and

absolutism- patterns of life sanctioned and reinforced by official

culture. “

“They all create a world that divides the self from itself, the other, the body, and the larger community, and they all undercut dialogue.”

Leveling of value distinctions regarding class, age, gender, body or status

“Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. . . . It has a universal spirit, it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world revived and renewed, in which all take part.” Bakhtin

Deals with the body and its most basic needs. Sexual. Scatological.

Orifices- ear, eye, nose, mouth, vagina, anus

Processes- eating, spitting, sucking, pissing, and copulating

“In the imaging of the body, body parts are juxtaposed and connected, defying easy recognition and leveling any sense of one part as private or public, good or bad, repulsive or attractive.” (This now can be a metaphor for the social body)

Private and Degraded becomes Accepted and Celebrated

Laughter, central to understanding the grotesque, especially Bakhtin’s grotesque.

Excessive scenes of laughter.

1. regenerative laughter of carnival in medieval and grotesque, festive
2. post Renaissance laughter, which entices horror, laughter in response to dread rather than exuberance and is associated with madness.

“Carnival laughter, the intrusion of everything forbidden or slanderous or joyfully blasphemous into the purified domains of officialdom, expressed a complex sense that the material body was not unequivocally base: every death contains within it the meaning of rebirth, every birth comes from the same region of the body as does the excremental. And the excremental is itself a source of regeneration- it manures life... References to the lower body were. . . used to produce a regenerative, an affirmative, a healing – finally a politically progressive laughter.”

Ongoing cycle, birth, death, generation

“Official culture severed the whole, disembodied the self, abstracted life, and created authoritarian structures and status that deny the regenerative powers of nature.”

Kayser- grotesque theologically explores evil as an aspect of humanity
Bakhtin- grotesque can free us from forces that distort true humanity and provide a new vision of social existence.

“Rabelais exuberantly uses scatological and sexual language, bawdily tells of copulation and birth, and offers through his style of language and bizarre characterization of incidents fascinating considerations of death. The body in its processes and regenerative expressions is integral to his heroic tale. Pantagruel eats his cow mother; Gargantua’s wife, while giving birth, swallows the pilgrims. He has extraordinary scenes of orgiastic drinking and eating, and the story of Gargantua’s birth offers an amazing presentation of distortion and excess. The church is mocked, the monks twitted, and its hierarchy buffooned. But in the midst of this there is also a balance of order. Furthermore, an idyllic world is spelled out, a new order, with freedom and pleasure which contrast sharply with the order of the dominant culture at the time he is writing.”