

# MODERN ART AND THE GROTESQUE

Edited by

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# ONE

## INTRODUCTION

**Frances S. Connelly**

Since the early nineteenth century it has not been possible to describe the grotesque as peripheral to the visual arts. The romantic period marked the entrance of the grotesque into the mainstream of modern expression, as a means to explore alternative modes of experience and expression and to challenge the presumed universals of classical beauty. The modern era witnessed an explosion of visual imagery that in various ways incorporated the grotesque. A remarkable number of canonical works of modernism, including Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, Ensor's *Entry of Christ into Brussels*, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. 1911)*, Ernst's *Elephant of Celebes*, or Bacon's *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, employ structures deeply rooted in the western tradition as grotesque. The grotesque figures prominently in romantic, symbolist, expressionist, primitivist, realist, and surrealist vocabularies, but it also plays a role in cubism and certain kinds of abstraction.

The reemergence of the grotesque in the fine arts was only one of a remarkable range of new expressive modes through which the grotesque was extended, expanded, and reinvented in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These cultural vehicles for the grotesque included such disparate developments as psychoanalysis, photography, mass media, science fiction, ethnography, weapons of mass destruction, globalization, and virtual reality. The grotesque was first linked to the notion of "primitive" expression in this era, with profound repercussions for modern art and aesthetics. The grotesque gave expression to other primal realities. In *Le monstre*, published in 1889, J. K. Huysmans contended that the microscope revealed an entirely new field of monstrosities equal to any of those animating medieval art. Odilon Redon's biological fantasies corroborate Huysmans's claim. Similarly, Freud's exploration of the unconscious was embraced by surrealists who employed grotesque modalities. A striking number of the period's most influential thinkers, including Baudelaire, Ruskin, Nietzsche, Freud, Bataille, Bakhtin, and Kristeva, have drawn from and reinterpreted the grotesque tradition.

Given the prominent role of the grotesque in modern image culture, there are surprisingly few significant studies on these issues, a failure that reveals a blind spot in art-historical theory and practice.<sup>1</sup> The neoclassical foundations of art history and aesthetics, with their emphasis on ideated beauty and rational inquiry, set up an intrinsic hostility toward the grotesque.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, an even greater chasm between the history that modernism wrote for itself and the grotesque character of modern life. The experience of modernity is one of unprecedented disjuncture and shifting boundaries, with the collision of cultures and scientific challenges repeatedly stripping away the veneer of familiar reality from the chaos of raw experience. The essays that follow explore the subversive undertow of the grotesque within the modern.

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Acknowledging that any attempt to define the grotesque is a contradiction in terms, we begin with three actions, or processes at work in the grotesque image, actions that are both destructive and constructive. Images gathered under the grotesque rubric include those that combine unlike things in order to challenge established realities or construct new ones; those that deform or decompose things; and those that are metamorphic. These grotesques are not exclusive of one another, and their range of expression runs from the wondrous to the monstrous to the ridiculous. The combinatory grotesque describes creatures ranging from the centaur to the cyborg. Readily associated with images like Arcimboldo's bizarre portraits, it also animates Joan Miró's frolicking harlequin and Otto Dix's horrific image *The Skat Players* (Figure 1). Inasmuch as the combinatory grotesque brings together things from separate worlds, it also has provocative connections to collage.

Grotesque also describes the aberration from ideal form or from accepted convention, to create the misshapen, ugly, exaggerated, or even formless. This type runs the gamut from the deliberate exaggerations of caricature, to the unintended aberrations, accidents, and failures of the everyday world represented in realist imagery, to the dissolution of bodies, forms, and categories. The individuals portrayed in Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*, their red-faced plainness merging with fleshy, trowelled paint, were castigated as grotesque by critics accustomed to the laminate perfection of French academic classicism. Dix's mutilated figures are at once a kind of bricolage, patched together with the most unlikely objects, but they also function as caricature and mediate a living horror too real to dwell on. Photography created a whole new vehicle for exploring the grotesque in the real, not only broadening the field, but fixing moments, places, and events that were rarely seen before and exposing them to a mass audience.<sup>3</sup> The abject and the formless also hover on the boundaries of this grotesque, each in its own way resisting form or coherent entity altogether.



1. Otto Dix. *The Skat Players*, 1920. Oil and collage on canvas. Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart. © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

While the gaps, or disunities, of the combinatory and aberrant grotesques require an imaginative leap, the metamorphic grotesque does much of this work for the viewer. This grotesque can combine or deform in the same way as its static counterparts, but the metamorphic exists in the process, the “morphing” from one thing or form to another. It also seems much more reliant on mimesis and illusion, transgressing them for its impact. While this grotesque immediately calls to mind surrealist imagery like Dalí’s *Apparition of Face and Fruit Dish on*

*a Beach*, it has suggestive links to analytic cubism as well, where monochromatic planes blur boundaries, merge hands with violins, tables with torsos, wine bottles with walls. The fullest exploitation of the metamorphic grotesque can be found in the media that combine the greatest illusionism with the element of time, such as film and computer animation.

Central to the grotesque is its lack of fixity, its unpredictability and its instability. Victor Hugo's observation has special resonance here: that ideal beauty has only one standard whereas the variations and combinations possible for the grotesque are limitless.<sup>4</sup> Consider how a grotesque such as *The Skat Players* inverts the legend of Zeuxis: instead of the artist fusing the most beautiful individual components of the human body into one whole, perfect, proportioned form, Dix's bodies are made monstrous, jumbling categories, confusing orifices and wounds, creating their own horrific kind of non-sense. Confronted with the embodiment of *Unlust*, the impulses to scream and to laugh come at once. A premise central to Kant's idea of the beautiful, that it makes us feel as though the world is purposive, that it is here for us, cannot be more brutally and specifically refuted than in the disfigured humans playing a game of chance. Grotesques are typically characterized by what they lack: fixity, stability, order. Mikhail Bakhtin emphasized the creative dimensions of this flux, however, describing the grotesque as "a body in the act of becoming . . . never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body."<sup>5</sup> In other words, grotesques may be better understood as "trans—", as modalities; better described for what they do, rather than what they are.

We can go a step further to add that these modalities are at play on the boundaries and nowhere else. The grotesque is defined by what it does to boundaries, transgressing, merging, overflowing, destabilizing them. Put more bluntly, the grotesque is a boundary creature<sup>6</sup> and does not exist except in relation to a boundary, convention, or expectation. Griffins merge boundaries between lion and eagle; Dix's figures subvert the expectations of both machine and man, merge horror with humor, and challenge the boundaries of propriety in order to attack the nationalism that created this result. Anamorphosis also plays against boundaries, transgressing the rules for looking into an idealized, perspectival space but depending on those rules for its impact. Boundedness is a critical feature of the grotesque's relationship with both the beautiful and the sublime. In aesthetic discourse, clear and discreet boundaries are integral to the apprehension of beauty, a point Edmund Burke makes explicit.<sup>7</sup> But, as Bakhtin observes: "the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths."<sup>8</sup> The issue of boundaries differentiates the grotesque from the sublime in revealing ways. The boundlessness of the sublime, dynamical or numerical, overwhelms reason and exceeds its powers to contain and define. The grotesque, by contrast,



is in constant struggle with boundaries of the known, the conventional, the understood.<sup>9</sup>

One can also take a historical and cultural view of these boundaries. For example, representations of a Nkisi from Congo or a Ganesha from India were neither intended nor defined as grotesques *until* they crossed into the European cultural sphere.<sup>10</sup> As they were drawn into the peripheries of European art and aesthetics in the nineteenth century, these images were repeatedly described as monstrous and grotesque because of their perceived deformation of European rules of representation. Within one hundred years, however, these images were so completely assimilated into western culture that they ceased to be grotesque, appearing in art museums and academic curricula. In short, they were grotesque only while they troubled an established boundary.

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As we shall see, the grotesque identifies a class of imagery that has never fit comfortably within the boundaries traditionally set by either aesthetics or art history for its objects of inquiry. The term “grotesque” is itself problematic, exemplified by the fact that it springs from a fortuitous mistake. The term first appeared in the mid-sixteenth century to describe the fantastical figures decorating a Roman villa. Because the rooms were excavated below ground level, Renaissance observers “misconceived” them to be grottos.<sup>11</sup> These decorative Roman designs preexisted the term, of course, as was the case with many types of images gathered under the grotesque rubric. Likewise, the term was extended to imagery completely outside the cultural purview of the West. Over the last two hundred years, other terms proliferated to describe aspects of experience that attach in one or more ways to the grotesque, among them arabesque, abject, *informe*, uncanny, bricolage, carnivalesque, convulsive beauty, and dystopia.<sup>12</sup> Yet at the same time, the complex and contested meanings of the word “grotesque” have lost their resonance and devolved to describe something horrible, or something horribly exaggerated. Accordingly, the decision to use “grotesque” as the term for this study’s object of inquiry requires some explanation.

First of all, “grotesque” arguably remains a broader and more inclusive term than those listed, notwithstanding its diminished use in modern times. The many connotations of the grotto – earthiness, fertility, darkness, death – link to all the variants of grotesque imagery discussed herein. At the same time, employing a term whose inadequacies are obvious has unexpected benefits. Its classical framework long since displaced, the limitations of “grotesque” as a term are readily discernible and as such, reinforce the notion that no name can bind these modalities to a fixed, discrete meaning.

Using what seems so outmoded a term has another value in that it draws attention to the complex history of how the grotesque has been “disciplined” in modern art history and aesthetics. Compared with its classical forebears,

who relegated the grotesque to a subservient, ornamental role, modernism has a far more complex and conflicted relationship with the grotesque. Although nineteenth- and twentieth-century imagery engages and expands the grotesque more than ever before in western imagery, modernist theory and history have (until recently) almost completely written out the grotesque and its associations with the material, the flesh, and the feminine. Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, one of the most influential works in modern aesthetics, effectively banishes the grotesque from consideration. As demonstrated in Michel Chaouli's essay, Kant rejects the grotesque as a threat to form and to the act of representation itself. And yet, the grotesque permeates modern imagery, acting as punctum to the ideals of enlightened progress and universality and to the hubris of modernist dreams of transcendence over the living world.<sup>13</sup>

"Grotesque" is also a peculiarly western term, as its coinage in the Renaissance as a way to describe the "estranged world" indicates,<sup>14</sup> as does its use in modern times to describe so-called "primitive" imagery. Many image traditions throughout the world include structures that resemble the western grotesque, but they do not carry the same cultural associations. On one hand, this belies modernist (and primitivist) myths of universality, but it also demonstrates the extent to which the grotesque is rooted in the powerful mind-body duality of western thought. This study concentrates on the grotesque in modern European and American art for these reasons, because its meanings are culturally specific to the West.

\* \* \*

The grotesque is at the heart of contemporary debates and integral to the arts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but it is conspicuous by its absence in modern art-historical and aesthetic scholarship. This project is by its nature a revisionist study of the modern period, but it also adds an important chapter to the history of the grotesque. A key motivation for this study is to establish a body of cohesive scholarship on the modern grotesque, but also to demonstrate that the grotesque was conceived and expressed in significantly different ways from the Enlightenment onward. This is a critical point in David Summers's lead essay, where he argues that Cartesian philosophy sets the stage for a radical change in the nature of the grotesque. This is not to say that the modern grotesque exists apart from the past, but that it deserves a long-overdue examination in its own right. To better situate the modern grotesque in relation to its past history, I will briefly describe three strands of discourse that carry over into the eighteenth century, which I will identify here as ornamental, carnivalesque, and emblematic.

The ornamental strand is a learned, classical version originating with Horace and Vitruvius, reinterpreted in the Renaissance and again by the art academies

of the Enlightenment. Horace's relatively brief and dismissive characterization of the grotesque in *Ars Poetica* is remarkable to the extent to which it touches on many of the enduring issues attached to this modality. This text is the genesis of the phrase *ut pictura poesis*, which means "as in poetry, so in painting," and presents literature and painting as sister arts.<sup>15</sup> *Ars Poetica* situates the discussion of images within the expectations of the written word, an intellectual tradition that plays a dominant role in western thought. Not surprisingly, it singles out the grotesque as confused and excessive. Horace exclaims that there is no rational reaction but to laugh out loud at these ridiculous, ill-conceived hybrids that jumble categories and confuse beginnings and ends. But the argument that the grotesque does not conform to the structures of language also demonstrates that the grotesque is peculiarly and adamantly imagistic. Too thick and contradictory to be manipulated in an abstract, linear realm, it is fundamentally resistant to language. The modalities described earlier – combinatory, aberrant, and metamorphic – are difficult, if not impossible, to mimic in language.

The particular images discussed by Horace are ornamental ones, much like the wall decorations unearthed in Renaissance Rome in which human torsos sprout leafy tendrils for legs or faun's ears spring into architectural volutes. Horace's text is most often interpreted as a warning against artistic license. Vitruvius, too, decried the improper use of ornament in architecture, where these hybrid inventions are put in the place of structural elements. In classical aesthetics, ornament was the product of the imagination, and both were subservient to rational order. Ornament might enhance the design or make the idea more appealing, but it must not subvert either one. Horace and Vitruvius, then, established the grotesque as a particularly extreme kind of ornament and relegated its discussion to debates concerning the balance of power between artistic license and the rules of design.

These debates reemerged in the High Renaissance and Mannerist periods. Significantly, it is during this time that both Giorgio Vasari and Benvenuto Cellini directly linked the term grotesque with the recently discovered wall decorations of the Domus Aurea.<sup>16</sup> Horace's dictum was reinterpreted by sixteenth-century Italian theorists as a defense of artistic license, asserting the artist's right to dare.<sup>17</sup> Vasari argued that an artistic genius such as Michelangelo should not be constrained by rules of design and decorum; rather, his fantastic inventions and virtuosity revealed his divine talent. In his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, Vasari expanded the definition of *grotteschi* from a technical term for a specific ornamental type to include the deliberate exaggerations and distortions of Michelangelo's sculpture and architectural designs.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the sixteenth century, artists put all the modalities of the grotesque into play as they challenged the boundaries of Renaissance style (Figure 2). Distortions, anamorphoses, and fantastic combinations proliferated, moving those

visual forms that were considered peripheral to a central role. Mannerism was “the confident assertion of the artist’s right . . . to make something that was first and last a work of art.”<sup>19</sup>

The characteristics of mannerism and the interpretation of this period have important connections to modernism. Mannerism’s emphasis on formal invention, unfettered play of the imagination, and individual artistic virtuosity has strong parallels with the values by which we judge artists today. Yet these associations were often problematic: the excess and overt artificiality of mannerism were frequently branded as degenerate and self-indulgent, a style enamored of style and little else. As early as 1672 Bellori lamented the decline of the arts: “the artists, abandoning the study of nature, poisoned art with *maniera*.”<sup>20</sup> Jacob Burckhardt’s assessment of mannerism as a “false, pompous style” greatly influenced the art-historical assessment of the period as decadent.<sup>21</sup> By the early years of the twentieth century, critics of avant-garde experimentation drew direct corollaries between modern and mannerist and repeated the charge that it was a degenerate style. The historiography of mannerism and of this Horatian grotesque serves as a microcosm of western aesthetic debates concerning ornament, style, and artistic license.

The carnivalesque strand is a populist one expressed in medieval imagery, given voice in the work of Rabelais, and theorized later, most influentially by Mikhail Bakhtin. This carnivalesque type is a bodied one in every respect. As Bakhtin writes: “The body that figures in all the expressions of the unofficial speech of the people is the body that fecundates and is fecundated, that gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, drinks, defecates, is sick and dying.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike the ornamental, Horatian type, this grotesque originated in folk culture and was appropriated into a literary and fine arts tradition in the sixteenth century. While the Horatian grotesque prompted aesthetic debates about artistic license, the carnivalesque was overtly transgressive in realms beyond the aesthetic. Bakhtin summed up the nature of the grotesque body when he pointed out its emphasis on orifices and protuberances<sup>23</sup>; in essence exposing all those parts and processes by which the body takes in or spews out the world alien to it, all those parts and processes that are suppressed by social codes of behavior. The grotesque body in no way abstracts into forms or figures, but remains resolutely a body of flesh and blood. These grotesque bodies perform a coarse and comic burlesque, but when they upend hierarchies and social conventions, they shift into the carnivalesque. Carnivalesque refers to the pre-Lenten merry-making, a brief period of revelry that traditionally involved actions and images representing “the world upside-down,” with fools crowned as kings or donkeys consecrated as priests. Bakhtin interpreted the carnivalesque as the voice of the people, as the vehicle of self-expression for the suppressed and regulated proletariat.<sup>24</sup> Although this may ascribe too much of twentieth-century politics to peasant revelry, it is certainly the case that the grotesque body fundamentally and often



2. Giovanni Antonio de Brescia, after Nicoletto da Modena. *Ornamental Panel Inscribed "Victoria Augusta,"* c. 1516. Engraving. Rosenwald Collection. Photograph © 2002 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

violently transgresses entrenched social codes and cultural values. In this way, the carnivalesque has provocative links to the more contemporary notion of the abject.<sup>25</sup> As Christine Ross observes, abjection has become a powerful means of transgression and reinvention for many feminist and postcolonial artists (see Figures 90 and 91) whose works often fuse the creative and destructive processes of the body in much the same manner described by Bakhtin.

Another populist tradition that intersects with the carnivalesque, known as *Traumwerk* or *diablèrie*, was inhabited by more fearful grotesques, whose bodies are monstrous, tormented, or decomposing. These include the frequent representations of the dance of death and the last judgment in medieval imagery and carry over into the work of artists such as Bosch, Holbein, and Grünewald. These grotesques do not play on the body's appetites, but rather on its inevitable failure and death. They exude their own brand of dark humor, but it is a humor absurd enough to make the horrible bearable and to mitigate our responses of fear and disgust. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the grotesque body dominates the work of artists from Goya to Ensor, Dix to Beckmann, Bacon to Kiki Smith. But in the work of these and many other moderns, the carnivalesque merges with the darker associations of the *diablèrie*.<sup>26</sup> Goya's *Caprichos* (see Figure 12) are harbingers of this critical shift: the bitterness of these prints confounds their designation as caprices, and whatever laughter they provoke is conjoined with feelings of repulsion and dread.<sup>27</sup>

The connections of the carnivalesque grotesque to modern caricature are many and complex, and are far beyond the scope of these introductory paragraphs. Several points bear consideration, however. Despite the sixteenth-century origins of the term, caricature truly came into its own in the modern era.<sup>28</sup> In certain respects, caricature continued the transgressive functions of the carnivalesque, yet through a fundamentally different means (mass media) and within a radically new social and political terrain. While not all caricature is grotesque, and only a fraction of grotesque expression appears as caricature, it is significant that from the eighteenth century onward, commentators and theorists came to link the two. In the Enlightenment era the ornamental, fantastical images first described as *grotteschi* in Renaissance Italy were increasingly associated with the French style and identified as "arabesques."<sup>29</sup> The term "grotesque" was more often equated with the kinds of figures inhabiting *diablèrie* and the carnivalesque, and was discussed in terms of comedy and satire. This is corroborated in the early studies of the grotesque by Justus Möser, *Harlequin, or the Defense of the Grotesque-Comic* (1761), Christoph Martin Wieland, *Conversations with the Parson of \*\*\** (1775), and Karl Friedrich Flögel, *History of the Grotesque-Comic* (1788). The principal nineteenth-century theories of the grotesque, particularly Victor Hugo's "Preface" to *Cromwell* (1827), Baudelaire's seminal essay, "De l'essence du rire et généralement du comique dans les arts plastiques" (1855), and Friedrich Theodor Vischer's *Über das Erhabene und*

*Komische* (1847), focus on the relationships of the comic with the ugly, the horrible, and the fantastic, and explore the boundaries between caricature and the grotesque. As with the grotesque, caricature was frequently tied to folk and “primitive” expression by nineteenth-century observers. Rodolphe Töpffer, Swiss educator, theorist, and illustrator, defended the caricatures found in the art of “savages” and the graffiti of street urchins as “a sign of elemental beauty, unpolished, coarse, but nonetheless absolutely . . . born from thought,” an opinion shared by Champfleury in his *Histoire de la Caricature* (5 vols., 1865–80).<sup>30</sup> Baudelaire, too, drew a sharp distinction between the *comique significatif*, a sophisticated and topical satire, and the more elemental *comique absolu*, which had no intention of parody but produced expressions of such creative force as to provoke both laughter and awe.

A third, emblematic strand interpreted the grotesque as a kind of imagistic language, primitive and mystical. Paradoxically, this particular interpretation took shape just as the rationalist turn of the Enlightenment caused many to reject the use of emblems as well as mythical and allegorical figures.<sup>31</sup> The Abbé DuBos’s *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719) characterized the growing preference for didactic, prosaic narratives. DuBos could barely contain his exasperation with any sort of figured language, arguing that the modern mind could no longer comprehend allegorical or mythical creatures and had no desire to do so. In this same period, however, the nascent social sciences sought to map the origins and development of culture, and combinatory grotesques such as centaurs and griffins, as well as emblems and allegories, were often reinterpreted as an early form of language, one now inscrutable to the modern mind. In one of the first and most ambitious of these studies, *La scienza nuova* (*The New Science*, 1725), Giambattista Vico attempted to reconstruct the origins and development of human society and believed that by doing so he could explain both the prehistory of “civilized” cultures and the current status of “primitive” cultures.<sup>32</sup> He argued that a sense of collective identity began with the establishment of “imaginative universals” (early peoples having no ability to reason and to form abstract concepts) and that these were “bodied forth” through pictures. These pictures, which Vico identified as “poetic monsters,” were similar to what we would describe as emblems, forming thought by combining disparate things. As reason superseded imagination, Vico argued, this pictured language was superseded by the abstract characters of the alphabet. Text became the principal vehicle for abstract thought, and the combinatory and metamorphic grotesques that made up the poetic monsters were relegated to subservient roles. In literate cultures, they appear in the peripheral roles of allegorical figures, emblems, and heraldry, as well as colorful figures of speech in rhetorical orations. Nonetheless, Vico maintained that imaginative universals and their monstrous incarnations never completely disappeared, but were buried deep within the collective reality of the culture that created it.<sup>33</sup>

Variations on Vico's thesis were proposed throughout the following decades and generated a great deal of scholarly debate.<sup>34</sup> John Ruskin advanced these ideas further with the publication of *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853) and *Modern Painters III* (1856), in which he extolled the grotesque as the expression of the common man. As I discuss in Chapter Seven, Ruskin, identified as a particularly noble grotesque (see Figure 42) that sort of poetic monster that embodies profound meanings in a way impossible or impractical in the linear and logical structure of text: “in all ages and among all nations, grotesque idealism has been the element through which the most appalling and eventful truth has been wisely conveyed.”<sup>35</sup> The idea of an ancient or hidden pictured language exerted considerable influence on many modern artists and writers unsympathetic to a rational, secular, mechanical modernity. We are, of course, much more familiar with the story of how the avant-garde's rejection of “painted literature” opened the way toward abstraction (often by cultivating the links between painting and music). A closer look finds that many modern artists, especially those in movements such as romanticism, symbolism, and surrealism, took other routes away from prosaic narrative and often made use of poetic monsters to do so.

Why and how is the grotesque redefined in the modern era? The essays that follow comprise the first extensive inquiry into the diverse means by which the grotesque shaped the history, practice, and theories of art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This study is not intended as a historical survey of the topic; in fact, the protean and particular character of the modern grotesque resists such a scheme. Instead, these essays present important manifestations of the grotesque in modern culture by examining specific images and historical moments in depth. As a whole, the essays draw on the principal theoretical models proposed for the grotesque during the last two hundred years and apply them to painting, sculpture, photography, prints, medical illustration, architecture, performance art, film, and popular culture. It is, in short, a combinatory strategy, conjoining diverse methods and topics to explore the fertile, cacophonous, monstrous, and ever-changeable realities of imagery in the modern world.

Three essays consider the intellectual and philosophical questions posed by the grotesques in modern imagery. David Summers takes up the complex transition from the Renaissance *grotteschi*, conceived in terms of the ornamental, to the more powerful and threatening forces attributed to the modern grotesque. In doing so, he first provides an indispensable history of this Renaissance phenomenon and a concise inquiry into the central debates provoked by the grotesque, before turning to an unexpected source, the *Meditations* of René Descartes. Descartes's mechanistic view of the human body leads him to redefine the role of the imagination, Summers argues, blurring the boundaries between perception and fantasy in a way that fundamentally changes the role of the grotesque in the modern era. In “Van Gogh's Ear,” Michel Chaouli explores the nature of disgust, a response deeply tied to the grotesque. Scholars have often relied on Victor Hugo's



formula that the grotesque simultaneously elicits gasps of horror and howls of laughter, but disgust has received little attention despite the fact that it has been cultivated by numerous artists working in the grotesque mode. Chaouli argues that disgust is the response most subversive to Kantian aesthetics precisely because it poses the greatest threat to form, in fact, ruins representation and the formation of form. Chaouli's argument is critical to our understanding of why art history and aesthetics elided the grotesque from their field of inquiry and how the formless overlaps with the grotesque. He draws valuable distinctions between the sublime, a kind of formlessness prized in *The Critique of Judgment*, and the disgusting, a kind of formlessness summarily rejected in those same pages. In the concluding essay, Noël Carroll takes the explosion of grotesque imagery in popular culture today, from *X-Files* and *Friday the 13th* to *South Park* and Japanese *animé*, as his starting point for an extended analysis of the grotesque. Carroll considers the structures that define the genus of the grotesque, the common theme being that a grotesque violates accepted biological and ontological categories, and then examines how these structures elicit the affective states of horror, awe, and comic amusement we associate with the grotesque.

Barbara Stafford's essay, "Conceiving," explores the fertile and creative aspect of the grotesque by examining the complex aesthetic, biological, and cultural debates in the eighteenth century concerning the nature of conception, both corporeal and cerebral. These Enlightenment discourses on generative forces, and the virtual explosion of imagery accompanying them, reveal a deep-seated fear of the mixed, the aberrant, and the heterogeneous, as well as concerted efforts to impose abstract classifications on the material world. By contrast, many Romantic artists, particularly in France, embraced the grotesque as a means to subvert academic classicism and to push the boundaries of feeling and expression. Delacroix was in the vanguard of these explorations of horror and satanic forces. Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer takes up the devastating cholera epidemic of 1832 as the setting for Delacroix's famous portrait of Paganini (Figure 14) to show how the grotesque was reinterpreted as the visual link between artistic creativity and the diseased body, artistic genius and the diabolical. In 1832, Ingres painted a portrait of equal fame, that of Louis-François Bertin (Figure 34). Heather McPherson uses Barthes's idea of *punctum* to consider the implications of the grotesque hand planted squarely in the middle of the portrait. Arguing that Ingres, too, pursued a poetics of the grotesque, she demonstrates that his work is best understood not as an exemplar of academic classicism but as a permeable boundary between ideal and monstrous, illusion and distortion.

John Ruskin was one of many moderns who associated the grotesque with primitive expression. *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3) is remarkable, however, because Ruskin discerned that the imagery made by medieval artisans required a radically different methodology than that constructed for fine art traditions. I argue that Ruskin drew on the modalities of the grotesque to create a radically

anti-aesthetic approach to imagery and non-Apollonian art history, one that is concrete, disjunctive, polysemous, excessive, and contingent. Ruskin emphasized two aspects of the grotesque not often recognized in the modern era: its potential to embody the wondrous and, to use Lévi-Strauss's term, its *bricolé* character. Exploring the association of the grotesque with both the "primitive" and the feminine, Elizabeth Childs demonstrates that Paul Gauguin's Tahitian paintings are not so much representations of exotic and idyllic islands as they are ambiguous psychic and cultural borderlands. Observing that Gauguin's images are routinely inhabited by grotesque figures, she reveals the dystopian side of Gauguin's imagery: his representation of Polynesians as animalized, fearful, and distorted, prey to bizarre superstitions, a culture in collapse.

Dada and surrealism provide fertile ground for the proliferation of the grotesque. The politically charged photomontages of Hannah Höch employ the grotesque as a savage critique of Weimar ideals. Maria Makela draws fascinating connections between Höch's use of the inherent disjuncture of montage and the combinatory creatures she creates to jumble the carefully maintained social order and to satirize the modern mania to impose systems of classification on all aspects of life. Makela delves into the rapid advances in cosmetic surgery following the Great War, noting that the techniques devised to ameliorate the horrific wounds of battle were quickly appropriated to shape bodies and faces to conform with Germanic ideals of beauty. Höch's actions of cutting and pasting create a commentary on these practices that is simultaneously horrific and comic. Surrealist photographers also push the boundaries of their medium and of the bodies they portray in their efforts to create a new, convulsive beauty. As Kirsten Hoving demonstrates, Surrealist photographers violate the body as a means to express primal psychic states, and through these ruptures (as with Bataille's *informe*) to reveal the chaotic and strange realities underlying the familiar.

Willem de Kooning's *Women* series celebrates the anarchic, instinctual body, argues Leesa Fanning, and its deep connections to the grotesque become apparent through the theories of Julia Kristeva. In particular, the flux and excess of de Kooning's images match Kristeva's concept of the semiotic body, as well as her notion of the Phallic Mother. Moreover, Fanning makes the case that, although the *Women* have often been described as frightening and monstrous, they are conceived in the burlesque mode and their hilarity is key to their meaning. The grotesque-comic is integral to the work of Sigmar Polke, and Pamela Kort situates this work as part of a tradition of modern Germanic art, theater, and scholarship that has received little attention. Kort draws on Baudelaire's definition of the absolute comic to describe the creative destructions of Polke, but she argues that the playful mimicry, deliberate inversions, and missteps that characterize Polke's imagery are best understood through Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque. Christine Ross looks at a very different aspect of contemporary art, the work of artists such as Mona Hatoum, whose video installations and

performances concern the abjected female body. The strangeness and grotesqueness of this imagery undercuts all expectations of aesthetic pleasure we attach to viewing the feminine body. Ross argues, in counterpoint to Childs's essay on Gauguin, that these feminist artists use abjection to destabilize western notions of the other, both the feminine and postcolonial other. These "foreign" bodies have become politically charged, to be sure, but they operate on a more fundamental level, using the excessive and uncontrollable character of the abject to both break down the discrete categories of self and other, and to provide the material possibilities that new identities might be reformulated. Ross's essay brings a contemporary focus to a theme that runs through these essays: the grotesque, whether subversive, comic, abject, wondrous, or caricatural, is at once a profoundly destructive and creative force.

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In little more than a decade there has emerged a cross-disciplinary exploration of the monstrous, the formless, the abject. What generates this work on monsters? As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes: "The monstrous body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy, giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' that which warns."<sup>36</sup> These millennial monsters suggest that humanistic studies have reached the limits of the modernist frame: the closed, familial dialectic with postmodernism has little play left in it. Another source may be a resistance to the growing imposition of text, grids, lenses, digital matrices, and genetic codes on lived experience. But possibly the most powerful generative force comes from the emergence of vital new voices in competition with the western Enlightenment underpinnings of modernism. The pressures of other worlds and other narratives have ruptured the modernist frame just enough to reveal (what seems to some) the formlessness beyond. Transgression against boundaries being one of the constants of the avant-garde and its historians, the fixation on the *informe* expresses a deep anxiety about the collapse of its own boundaries and transgressions from without. On the other hand, the rupture of these boundaries is full of creative possibilities to those cast as outside and other by modern art and aesthetics. The abject, tied to the body, the maternal, the material, has also come to the fore, but abjection carries the promise of regeneration, creating a new body. It is no accident that many feminists have embraced abjection as their expressive mode. These ruptures have generated new perspectives from which to explore the past two hundred years and reveal, not surprisingly, that the universalist aspirations of modernism obscured a robust grotesque tradition in nineteenth- and twentieth-century art. "The horizon where the monsters dwell might well be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself."<sup>37</sup> To be sure, a study of the grotesque implicitly

critiques the modernist narrative, bringing into focus those subjects, styles, and theoretical viewpoints traditionally marginalized by the discipline's Enlightenment foundations. Considering the grotesque in modern art ties directly into concerns central to humanistic debate today, including representations of race and gender, abjection and the other, globalization, and appropriation.

#### NOTES

1. Twentieth-century surveys of the grotesque in art are Wilhelm Michel, *Das Teuflische und Groteske in der Kunst* (Munich: Piper, 1911); Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (1957; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Gustav René Hocke, *Die Welt als Labyrinth: Manier und Manie in der europäischen Kunst* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1957); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (1940; reprint, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968); Frances Barasch, *The Grottesque: A Study in Meanings* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971); Geoffrey Harpham, *On the Grottesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Ewa Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex: The Grottesque: Origins, Iconography, Technique* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987); and André Chastel, *La grottesque* (Paris: Le Promeneur, 1988). A reevaluation of the grotesque in modern imagery is in its early stages. Important works include Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997); Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996) and *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993); Allen S. Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Excess* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989) and *Shattered Forms: Art Brut, Phantasms, Modernism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); all heavily influenced by the work of Georges Bataille. Joseph Koerner edited an issue of *RES* 31 (Spring 1997) devoted to the abject and, more recently, Timothy Hyman and Roger Malbert published the catalogue to the exhibition *Carnivalesque* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2000). On the grotesque-comic in twentieth-century German art, see the exhibition catalogue edited by Pamela Kort, *Grottesk!* (Munich and London: Prestel, 2003).
2. In the Renaissance, *grotteschi* were typically seen as decorative, but they could also serve as the expression of inspired genius. See David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), esp. "L'alta fantasia," 103–43. There was no room for such inventions in the more rationalist classicism of the Enlightenment.
3. In 1998, the photography journal *Exposure* (vol. 31) published an issue concerning the grotesque in photography and film edited by Martha Langford and M. A. Greenstein. See also A. D. Coleman, *The Grottesque in Photography* (New York: Summit Books, 1977).
4. Victor Hugo, preface to *Cromwell* (1827), in *Oeuvres dramatiques et critiques complètes* (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1963), 139–53.
5. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.
6. Donna Haraway explores the conjunction of the body and machine in one of the ultimate combinatory grotesques in her study, *Cyborgs, Simians, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991). I borrow the term "boundary creature" from Haraway (2).
7. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).