

## GROTESQUE

by Maddalena Mazzocut-Mis and Claudio Rozzoni

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It. *Grottesco*; Fr. *Grotesque*; Germ. *Grotesk*; Span. *Grotesco*. Derived from the Italian *grottesca*, a term in use since the 15<sup>th</sup> century to denote a particular kind of parietal art inspired by decorations and combinatory figures found at ancient Roman excavation sites (Nero's *Domus Aurea*), which were explored by Renaissance artists as if they were "grottos". In aesthetic terms, the grotesque is that which goes against classical rules, against authority. More specifically, the grotesque is a genre of both rupture and innovation. Thus, in order to be recognized as art, it needs to be placed in a historical context that allows its legitimation as an aesthetic category. Historically, it is precisely Victor Hugo's *Preface* to the *Cromwell* (1827) that elevates the grotesque to the status of a true aesthetic category equating the sublime with dignity – a category that includes the monstrous, the deformed, the excessive, but also the caricatural and therefore the ridiculous.

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

In Hugo, the grotesque becomes a true symbol of the Romantic era as well as a powerful tool for investigating the boundaries of nature and art, that is, of *mimesis*. Besides viewing the grotesque as a manifestation of modernity, Hugo simultaneously sees it as an instrument for representing an unpacified totality, a synthesis – never resolved – of all the contrasts inherent to reality and of which the *monster* is the greatest manifestation. The grotesque imposes itself through a subversive strength that defies clichés. It breaks the monotony of entrenched forms with unexpected combinations and exaggerations.

It would hardly be possible to chart the variety and complexity of elements constituting this paradoxical category. In this regard, Frances S. Connelly remarked that "any attempt to define the grotesque is a contradiction in terms" (Connelly 2003: 2). Indeed, one essential characteristic of the grotesque is "its lack of fixity, its unpredictability and its instability" (Connelly 2003: 4). Similarly, Geoffrey Harpham asserted that the grotesque "is the slipperiest of aesthetic categories" (Harpham 1976: 461), a veritable "protean idea" (1982: xxi). Nevertheless, scholars are unflagging in their efforts to characterize this elusive notion, and their contributions have highlighted a constellation of traits that may shed light on this question.

The grotesque is a principle of deformation. Yet, as John Ruskin (2007) has shown already, it is not a transgression intended as an end unto itself. Our powers of imagination allow us to combine what is never joined in the real world, or to separate what in reality is always joined; the grotesque can thus mix up our distinctions between good and evil, low and high, human and non-human. To put it another way, the polymorphous strategies of the grotesque call into question every Manichean differentiation of principles. In the grotesque, the simultaneity expressed by the conjunction "and" (*et et*) replaces the "exclusive or" (*aut aut*) that forces us to choose between two opposites.

Testifying to the vast possibilities of imagination, the "monstrous-grotesque" is not only an aesthetic category, but also a gnoseological-heuristic instrument to understand the very same laws of reality it challenges. Thus, besides its subversive value, the grotesque proves to be a powerful instrument of discovery that allows revealing universal laws and different harmonies. The grotesque guarantees a peculiar relationship between opposites at the compositional level. It has its own structure, a monstrous logic, i.e. the parallel of the "deviant logic" (Tort 1989) that Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772-1844, a comparative anatomist who gave the science of deformities an autonomous status) and his son Isidore (1805-1861, who baptized "teratology" the study of abnormalities) already identified in the anatomical monster (Mazzocut-Mis 2013).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the pages Mikhail Bakhtin devoted to Rabelais' world (written in 1940 and published in 1965) are of fundamental importance as regards the constitutive elements of the grotesque. In Bakhtin's discourse, the notion of "carnavalesque" plays a pivotal role, since the carnival "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (Bakhtin 1968: 10). With its popular roots, the carnival "is a total event", primarily because it gives laughter (the popular comic type) a liberating and overthrowing function (Rosen 1991). Once again, this means celebrating a contradictory synthesis in which diametrically opposed forces – "low and high, folk culture and canonical, vulgarity and refinement" – meet and find new ways to combine (Edwards and Graulund 2013). Indeed, it has been suggested (Connelly 2003) that the essence of the grotesque lies in playing with the boundaries between these antithetical principles, in this movement between anticipated norms and unexpected manifestations. The fact that the grotesque serves as a reaction to recognized forms allows it to break the monotonous routine of our everyday life. Carroll (2013), in particular, highlighted the grotesque's ability of eluding our *expectations*. Still, scholars have emphasized that unexpectedness alone is not sufficient to constitute the grotesque. Bloom (2009), for example, states that the grotesque, like the sublime, is essentially related to astonishment, but unlike the latter, is "tinged with distaste". Likewise, Harpham (1976) pointed out that, in order for this element of surprise to fall under the label of grotesque, it has to arouse a defamiliarizing sense of the "uncanny", of what is "alien".

This is another reason why different kinds of grotesque can be identified. The merging of different types of opposites in order to blur distinctions, the exaggeration of different types of specific qualities over others are all features that can make us enter an "unfamiliar" space that could be defined as grotesque. For example, Foucault (2003) defines the grotesque (or also "Ubu-esque") as a category inherent to mechanisms of power, reflected not only in works of such artists as Balzac, Dostoevskij, Courteline, or

Kafka, but in reality itself, where the rigor of power finds its grotesque counterpart in a “clown” or “buffoon” who wields it. Under this definition, innumerable works of art qualify as grotesque. This is true not only when it comes to the many “classic” historical examples of the grotesque (Bosch, Rabelais, Poe, to name just a few), but also within the contemporary art scene, where Cindy Sherman, Douglas Gordon, Mike Kelly and Jeff Wall are just a few among the many artists who have been brought together in the name of grotesque (Storr 2004).

In this regard, several questions have recently been raised regarding the current status of the grotesque. If, as we have said, the grotesque is a reactive category defined through confronting and challenging classical canons, what remains of this subversive power today, when the grotesque is omnipresent throughout mass culture (visual and print media: television, films, video games, comic books, novels)? One need only consider the current “prestige of the monstrous”, which “is no longer a marginal concern of the culture”; rather “it has gone mainstream” (Carroll 2013: 304). This is why Carroll maintains that the question of “What is the grotesque?” has become more crucial than ever, which is why he has returned to undertake the arduous task of drawing a “taxonomy” that would capture a concept that seems, by its very nature, impossible to capture. According to Carroll, some of the most authoritative positions on the grotesque are either too wide in scope (that is, they also include elements that cannot be labelled as grotesque) or too narrow (that is, they exclude elements that can rightfully claim to fall under the grotesque) – or even both at once (such as Kayser’s 1957; Thomson’s 1972). Basically, according to Carroll, the issues emerged with previous definitions of the grotesque concern their attempt to reduce it to a single essential “function”; he proposes an alternative approach differentiating the “structure” of the grotesque from its “functions”. Within this framework, he can assert that something is grotesque only if it “subverts our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order” (Carroll 2013: 308) while also recognizing “the elicitation of horror, comic amusement, and awe” (Carroll 2013: 320) as the primary functions of the grotesque in our contemporary society.

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