

UNEXPRESSED

THE GROTESQUE, NORMS
AND REPRESSIONS

A 35 Aalto-yliopisto

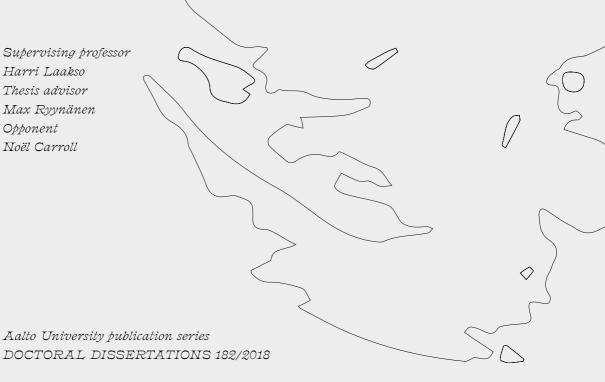
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UNFOLDING THE UNEXPRESSED:

THE GROTESQUE, NORMS AND REPRESSIONS



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Aalto ARTS Books Espoo, Finland shop.aalto.fi

© Henriikka Huunan-Seppälä Graphic design: Tytti Halonen Materials: Invercote Creato 260 g, Colorit Light Grey 120 g

ISBN 978-952-60-8192-2 (printed) ISBN 978-952-60-8193-9 (pdf) ISSN 1799-4934 ISSN 1799-4942 (electronic)

Unigrafia Helsinki 2018





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ABSTRACT

Under the guise of fantastic fiction, grotesque representations have a unique, yet unacknowledged role in affecting cultural valuations, idealizations and discriminations.

Devoted to exploring the flourishing grotesque, carnivalesque and abject imagery of contemporary culture, the thesis dives into filmic representations of the odd or anti-ideal body, the fantastic or monstrous body, the transgressive or caricatural body, the grotesquely gendered body, or the mutilated body. Understood in a wide sense, the grotesque is characterized by category violation, metamorphosis and the surpassing of body limits.

The main problematic of the thesis concerns the role of contemporary grotesque imagery with respect to cultural norms and repressions, including taboos and ideals, fears and fantasies. The aim is to explore the way in which the grotesque interacts with norms, ideologies and interests of power. Pursuing the unexpressed within society by examining the grotesque, the thesis offers a novel outlook on the construction and unraveling of social difference through the grotesque.

The research material encompasses seven films: *Pink Flamingos*, *Antichrist*, *Alien: Resurrection*, *Fight Club*, *Kill Bill*, *Satyricon*, and *The Cook*, *the Thief*, *His Wife* & *Her Lover*. As a cornucopia of myths, archetypes and narratives, the films present features of widely shared cultural phenomena.

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, feminist theory, semiotics and aesthetics, the methodological approach entails an astute interplay of theories that all conceptualize margins from different perspectives. The devised analyzing method, *critical visual analysis*, enables the most elusive significations within visual imagery to be accessed.

As discovered by the thesis, the grotesque body is a regulatory and revelatory agent through which culture readjusts its limits. As a multifunctional device, the grotesque materializes, exacerbates and reverses; embodies ultimate fears and fantasies; and thereby makes visible both the repudiated and the taken-forgranted. As a materialized fantasy of the absent, the grotesque can even represent the unrepresentable.

Moreover, the grotesque sustains or dismantles taboos, ideals, myths and stereotypes; constructs or dissolves identities; and rearranges categorical limits. It constantly redraws the lines between what is considered normal or abnormal, desirable or

despicable. As a versatile meaning-making tool, the grotesque can be harnessed to serve different ideologies.

The grotesque can be used as a powerful identity political strategy and as a tool for psychologically effective image construction. Applied to media education, the grotesque can enhance the ability to discern ideological meanings embedded in images. The thesis demonstrates how representations interact with our conscious and unconscious thinking modes, drawing on our fears and fantasies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my super-supervisor Max Ryynänen: thank you for your inexhaustible support and availability, your inspiring presence and genuine interest in my work. In particular, I cherish all the discussions we had on the subject matter and beyond. So many constitutive ideas sprouted from these absorbing, aptly odd sessions. I will never stop admiring your insightfulness and out-of-the-box-and-ball-and-pyramid thinking. Your advice was sometimes concrete, sometimes abstract – like when I asked you about my methodology-to-be, and you replied, "Just ski toward the eye of the storm." I am deeply touched by your unwavering faith in my skiing skills.

I owe very special gratitude to the Finnish Cultural Foundation, which awarded me three consecutive one-year grants for my research. Without the foundation's contribution, my thesis would not have seen the light. The grants – that each year caused me a delirium of joy – also made me feel that I was on the right track. I also thank Susanna Välimäki for kindly being my referee in several grant applications.

Within Aalto University, I am most grateful to my supervising professor Harri Laakso: thank you for your insightful, pertinent comments on my work. Special thanks also to Kevin Tavin: thank you for your seminal course on Lacanian theory and for your appreciation of my article-in-process that you helped me publish. That gave me confidence to continue on the same path. I also value very much Juha Varto's philosophically invigorating seminars and thought-provoking comments on my research. Finally, I want to thank Aalto University's staff for all their assistance and excellent courses, and my fellow doctoral students for their peer support and inspiring conversations.

My thanks also go to Aalto ARTS Books, its helpful and professional personnel, for publishing my book, to Tytti Halonen for the book's elaborate graphic design, and to Liz Dexter and Aakkosto for the manuscript's skillful language revision.

Finally, I owe my deepest gratitude to my family. Irja, Antti, Anne, Risto and my sister Karoliina: thank you for supporting me in all ways imaginable. You shared my joys and sorrows, took care of my children, kept me afloat. Also, my dearest friend Louise: thank you for your uplifting presence and your belief in me. My warmest thanks obviously go to my incredibly resilient, steely life partner, Tero, and to my daughters, Helmi and Vilma, the two mesmerizing hearts of my existence.

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INTRODUCTION







TOPIC AND MOTIVATION



In the idea of men of modern times, however, the grotesque plays an enormous part. It is found everywhere; on the one hand it creates the abnormal and the horrible, on the other the comic and the burlesque. ... The beautiful has but one type, the ugly has a thousand. ... What we call the ugly, on the contrary, is a detail of a great whole which eludes us, and which is in harmony, not with man but with all creation. That is why it constantly presents itself to us in new but incomplete aspects. (Hugo 2001 [1827])

In contemporary visual culture, the grotesque appears in myriad forms. No longer synonymous with the ugly, the grotesque is implicated in an aesthetic play of shifting limits, drawing anew the lines between the ugly and the beautiful, the desirable and the despicable.

Devoted to exploring the heterogeneous field of grotesque imagery, my thesis dives into representations of the grotesque body, including the female grotesque, the subversive carnivalesque, and a whole abject culture drawing on the repulsive and the obscene.

CONTEXT AND SUBJECT

Contemporary visual culture consists of images that remain in large part unexplored, yet with a great potential for affecting people. It is an unacknowledged fact that grotesque representations have a unique role in influencing cultural valuations and discriminations, unavoidably shaping our reality.

As the thesis claims, grotesque bodily imagery is deeply intertwined with cultural norms, taboos and ideals, especially as regards issues of corporeality, identity and difference. In contemporary society, grotesque representations function in dynamic interaction with norms related to, for example, appearance, gender and age, giving rise to social hierarchies and power relations.

As a meaning-making tool, the grotesque is used in representations both consciously and unconsciously, intentionally and unintentionally. War-time caricatural drawings of the enemy nation are a clear example of highly intentional meaning-making. A contemporary, paradigmatic example is the grotesque representation of the female body, coded into such stereotypes as 'the witch,' 'the hag,' 'the monstrous mother,' 'the vamp,' 'the fat woman,' 'the uncanny doll woman' and 'the female hysteric.' These codings are deeply entrenched in our everyday imagery from children's books and games to films and stereotypes nurtured by the media.

A reverse case is the subversive use of grotesque imagery. Grotesque or carnivalesque counterimages are encountered in feminist avant-garde art as well as in culture jamming and subcultural rebellion. By carnivalizing the idealized or the disparaged female body – or any object of othering – grotesque imagery may reveal hidden structures and ridicule norms, thereby promoting equality, aesthetic plurality and human diversity. A well-known example is Cindy Sherman's photography, for instance her Sex Pictures series (1992) depicting monstrously sexualized prosthetic female bodies.

However, most of the time, grotesque imagery doesn't seem to serve any purpose, appearing as devoid of intentions. For example, in fairytales, the old women are not depicted as witchlike to intentionally denigrate old women. The question is what happens when the grotesque is brought into play. What kinds of significations are generated through the grotesque, what is the ideological import of grotesque features, and whose interests do they serve?

Structuralistically thinking, the grotesque gets its meaning in relation to other concepts within the same conceptual system. In the contemporary world, for example, the grotesque takes shape against the prevailing conception of the body, including such trends as the beauty and health imperative, the cult of slenderness and the obsession with youth. Submitted to commodification, these have led to the rise of fitness culture and to the expanding body makeover industry and recourse to cosmetic surgery, supported by the unrealistic body image propagation carried on by the media. A less-acknowledged phenomenon is the blossoming of physiognomic attitudes. For example, in representations, a woman's long gray hair and pointy crooked nose connote a witch-like quality, while corpulence fallaciously signifies lethargy and lack of self-discipline.

A novelty marking our era is that even an 'ordinary' body – a body deviating from the narrowly defined beauty ideal – may be constructed as grotesque. In certain media environments, it is increasingly common to portray an ordinary body as an object of mockery and disdain. As a result, the grotesque is no longer confined to what is actually abnormal or extraordinary. The grotesque body is inevitably implicated in the system of social difference and power.

In this context, the grotesque refers to various deviant, monstrous, carnivalesque or abject elements within the research material. These elements can be characters, bodies, deeds and

themes, or just about anything within the art of the grotesque.¹ The characters

¹ In the thesis, the notions of the 'grotesque' and the 'grotesque body' are used somewhat interchangeably, as the grotesque ultimately reverts to the grotesque body.

include various monstrous, fantastic or mythical creatures: actual monsters or monstrous humans, demonic or godlike figures, ghosts and witches, human–animal hybrids and humanoid robots, aliens and superheroes. The material also presents deformed, excessive or lacking bodies – and minds. From a gendered perspective, there are representations of the female grotesque, exemplified by the witch, the nymphomaniac and the monstrous mother. Moreover, some bodies are rendered grotesque through the acts in which they participate, often of a violent or sexual nature, and some bodies are abject, characterized by a display of the body's insides and body fluids.

The context of the thesis is media imagery and visual culture. The objective is to gain insight into grotesque imagery by exploring the grotesque in films. Endeavoring to apply knowledge from filmic material to the wider field of culture, the work's ultimate focus is on deep structures shared by all visual imagery and arts.

Media imagery refers to a wide field of imagery. In the research, the analyzed material, comprising a few films, is far from being representative of media imagery in its entirety.² However, films are seen as illustrative representatives because they are popular and widespread, and because they contain a multiplicity of signs that correspond to widely shared cultural phenomena. Entangled in the ample field of visual culture, the thesis is interested in all cultural texts – regardless of their status as high, low, or something else – thus operating at the intersection of visual arts, popular culture and media imagery. The leading idea is to explore imagery that is pervasive and potentially influential, and the ambitious aim is to make discoveries about visual culture in general.

The point of view is limited to the contemporary Western culture of the twenty-first century.³ Notwithstanding this, the

perspective still covers an impossibly heterogeneous field of culture, both temporally and geographically.

The subject of my thesis is thus grotesque bodily imagery in its various forms – whether the odd or anti-ideal body, the fantastic or monstrous body, the transgressive or caricatural body, the grotesquely gendered body, or the mutilated and bleeding body. The key question,

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² The field of media imagery is incredibly vast and heterogeneous. For example the TV Tropes website presents a list of media that encompasses advertising, art, audio, film, games, the internet, print media, sporting events, stand-up comedy, television, theater, theme parks, toys and multiple media. And all these categories have further subdivisions. The internet is subdivided into fora, friending networks, online games, virtual worlds, web animation, web comics, web logs, web original, web video, websites, and so on. Print media includes for example billboards, comic books, literature, magazines, manga, newspapers, picture books and school study media. (TV Tropes.) Despite its ambition to explore media imagery – even at the level of deep structures – the thesis cannot make any claims regarding the whole area.

³ The term 'contemporary' is understood here quite vaguely, and used faute de mieux. The work's focus is on present-day culture, even though the research material precedes the most contemporary era. The chosen films are iconic representatives of the current boom of grotesque media imagery.

however, doesn't concern the bodies *per se*, but the way in which these bodies are represented: how the representations construct and what they reveal about our society's norms and repressions.

The main problematic of the thesis relates to cultural norms inscribed on the grotesque body, and to the unacknowledged potential of the grotesque to unveil and alter cultural valuations. In this sense, the subject surpasses the sphere of the grotesque. While the grotesque is the signifier, the signified is constituted by the incredibly wide range of meanings conveyed through the grotesque. The crux of the study is the relation between the signifier and the signified: the mechanisms and functions of the grotesque in conveying significations.

But why the grotesque, instead of some other approach? As I see it, the grotesque is a device that encloses and unveils the hidden within a culture. Throughout the research, an ultimate interest is attached to significations that are elusive and fragile, evasive and vacillating. The target is beyond the apparent and the reassuring: it is the fuzzy zone, even the unrepresentable, that the grotesque is somehow capable of expressing; acting as a vessel for the unknown.

AN EXAMPLE

The grotesque can be preliminarily illustrated through *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), a camp film famous for its cult following and boisterous audience participation. A tribute to the B-movie, the film is a parodic combination of different genres, including comedy, rock musical, horror and science fiction.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show abounds with grotesque, carnivalesque, monstrous and abject elements. It elucidates the main characteristics of the grotesque, the variety of grotesque bodies, and the intricate alliance between gender and the grotesque. In its eclectic nature, the film exemplifies at once the horrific, comic and miraculous currents of the grotesque, as well as its less evocative variant, the 'ordinary grotesque.' The viewer's emotional reaction may be laughter, disgust or awe – or indifference.

In the film, a young bourgeois couple, Brad and Janet, arrive at a gloomy gothic castle in which a zany crowd is celebrating the 'Annual Transylvanian Convention.' The host of the castle is Dr. Frank-N-Furter – similar to a vampire in his black cloak and pale skin. In his garish makeup, corset and extravagant style, Frank is also an ambiguous, drag-like transgender figure. As revealed later on, Frank is actually an alien "from the planet Transsexual in the galaxy of Transylvania," thereby representing a category violation,

a grotesque fantasy body. The queer host is also a mad scientist who has created in his lab Rocky, a handsome and athletic version of Frankenstein's monster. As a hybrid half-human creation, Rocky is also a grotesque figure. In the castle, Frank becomes intimate with Rocky, Janet and Brad, and launches an orgy in the swimming pool. In his hyperbolic sexuality and exuberant gender performance – drawing on the feminine – Frank represents grotesque excess. Through his sexual and violent deeds, Frank's body concretely transgresses its own boundaries.

The castle's inhabitants are all somehow grotesque. Frank's servant Riff Raff is a monstrous figure because of his vampire-like appearance, his grotesquely deformed humpbacked body and alien provenance. Frank's domestic Magenta, in her vampiric vamp-like presence and hybrid alien origins, is also an instance of the female grotesque, representing feminine excess. Riff Raff and Magenta are siblings and yet intimately related, which constitutes an incestuous transgression. In the castle is also Eddie, Frank's former lover and brain donor to Rocky. Marked by a long wound on his forehead, Eddie's is a grotesquely lacking body. Brutally killed by Frank with a pickax, Eddie's body becomes an abject body, his blood spread on the floor. His mutilated corpse is located inside the table, revealed at the end of a cannibalistic dinner in which the guests unwittingly eat a roast made of Eddie's remains. Cannibalism is a prime example of a taboo-breaking grotesque act surpassing the bodily limits between devoured and devouring bodies. Moreover, in the film, all of the violence is presented in a carnivalesque manner, contrasted with hilarious singing and dancing.

In their gaudy, clamorous, topsy-turvy presence, the Transylvanian guests form a collective grotesque body, a carnivalesque crowd. Celebrating chaos and decadence, oddity and ambiguity, the crowd expresses freedom from social constraints and limitations. The visitors also undergo a metamorphosis: Frank transforms them into lifeless statues that are soon revived, bursting into a boisterous cabaret show, women and men alike wearing corsets and garters. The initially timorous bourgeois visitors are turned into audacious freaks. The transformations entail a grotesquely cosmic intermingling of genders, objects, lifeless and living human bodies, and a metamorphosis from lethargy to vitality. In the end, Riff Raff and Magenta kill Frank with a laser gun and return to their home planet, whereas Janet and Brad are pictured as creeping in the dirt - literally representing human degradation. As the narrator concludes, "And crawling on the planet's face, some insects called the human race. Lost in time, and lost in space... and meaning."

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There is a lack of studies as regards grotesque imagery in its social and ideological dimensions within contemporary visual culture.⁴ Among the applications of the grotesque in visual arts, studies often concentrate on redeemed artworks from distant enough periods, or when including more recent examples, still remaining in the context of art history. The analyses typically focus on describing the grotesque features of the artwork, with the aim of appraising the artwork itself, giving it more depth through its grotesque dimensions. This type of approach may be found, for example, in Timothy Hyman and Roger Malbert's *Carnivalesque* (2000) and in *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (2003) edited by Frances S. Connelly – both important contributions to the study of the grotesque.

From the point of view of my research, the two most influential studies come from Noël Carroll and Barbara Creed. Carroll's article "The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes Toward a Taxonomy" (2009 [2003]) not only represents one of the rare recent attempts to seriously define the grotesque, but also focuses on contemporary mass culture. Carroll's ideas attest to the prevalence of the grotesque in visual culture, constituting a crucial assumption for my study. As for Creed's book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993), it fruitfully associates the grotesque with gender, and thereby society. Utilizing psychoanalytic concepts, the book represents a critical feminist perspective on the grotesque in film. Creed's insightful work has been a great inspiration for my work. Another shrewd example of a gendered view on the grotesque is Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1995).

Previous research on the grotesque in the field of visual arts – in the context of 'high art' – includes Geoffrey Galt Harpham's On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature (1982) and Wolfgang Kayser's The Grotesque in Art and Literature (1981 [1957]), both sharing their interest between visual arts and literature. In literature and literary studies, accounts and applications of the grotesque are abundant, exemplified by Philip Thomson's The Grotesque (1972), Rémi Astruc's Le Renouveau du grotesque dans le roman du XXe siècle (2010) and Irma Perttula's Groteski suomalaisessa kirjallisuudessa (2010). Some more recent studies also include film, such as Grotesque by Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund (2013).

Mikhail Bakhtin's influential work on the carnivalesque and the

grotesque, *Rabelais and His World* (1984 [1965]) is constitutive to my research – not

⁴ At the same time, there is an abundance of studies on the grotesque, especially in the literary context, and in some specific fields closely related to the grotesque, such as the horror genre.

only because it represents the initial spark for my interest in the grotesque, but because it determines the study's leading idea of the grotesque. Bakhtin's work is a study of literature that focuses on the folk culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, explored through Rabelais's oeuvre. With Bakhtin, the central interest is thus directed to popular arts. Quite surprisingly, the applications of Bakhtin's ideas – and of the grotesque – in visual arts and culture are relatively scarce. One of the few examples are Deborah J. Haynes's *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* (1995), and, as applied to film, Robert Stam's *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (1989).

Moreover, research on horror, monsters, the monstrous and the impure overlap the study of the grotesque. This is visible, for example, in Noël Carroll's texts (2009, 1990, 1987, 1981) that deal with horror, monsters or the grotesque. Within an anthropological framework, Mary Douglas in her renowned study *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (2002 [1966]) explores impurity as a function of cultural categorization, coming very close to the idea of the grotesque.

Affiliated to the grotesque in its comic guise, the study of the carnivalesque and carnival, started by Bakhtin (1984 [1965]), is abundant, exemplified by Hyman and Malbert's Carnivalesque (2000) and Daniel Fabre's Carnaval ou la fête à l'envers (1992). Many studies apply or concentrate specifically on Bakhtin's ideas, such as David Shepherd's (ed.) Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects (1993) and Joel C. Relihan's Ancient Menippean Satire (1993), along with articles on specific subjects such as Bryce Dwyer's "Pariah to Paragon: James Ensor and the Carnivalesque" (2007). To studies of the carnivalesque may be added research on the comic, satire, caricature and burlesque, all related to the grotesque, extending the field of study to massive dimensions.

Within the research on the abject – closely related to the horrific vein of the grotesque – the most notable work is Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982 [1980]), followed by several studies and applications, including accounts of abject art. Applied to feminist avant-garde art, one example is Christine Ross's "Redefinitions of Abjection in Contemporary Performances of the Female Body" (2009).

Finally, within the sphere of aesthetics, the study of ugliness partly overlaps the study of the grotesque, exemplified by Umberto Eco's On Ugliness (2011) and Karl Rosenkranz's Aesthetics of Ugliness (2015 [1853]). On this path, one may go all the way to Immanuel Kant's ideas on ugliness as the opposite of beauty, explored in Critique of Judgment (2007 [1790]) – and even further to the much earlier sources of Antiquity.

Hence, especially if considering the previous research on ugliness, horror and the comic, the field of study associated with the grotesque is overwhelmingly vast. This seems evidence of the crucial position of the grotesque at the crossroads of several major aesthetic notions and genres.

MOTIVATION AND NICHE

The path that led me to this research topic is as follows. Years ago, wandering in a library, I haphazardly grabbed a book that happened to be Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*. I was instantly mesmerized by the oeuvre that exposed an intriguing system of significations, hidden behind the obscene appearances of the grotesque. To my astonishment, the grotesque was revealed as a highly philosophical matter, diving deep into the ultimate questions of life, death and humanity.

The grotesque – with its forms related to the carnivalesque, the caricatural, the parodic, the burlesque, the monstrous, the horrific, the macabre and the abject – suddenly seemed to be everywhere. I became curious about the reason for the appeal of the grotesque.

Captivated by the grotesque, I wrote a Master's thesis about carnivalesque visuality. In the process, I became increasingly interested in the potentially subversive role of the grotesque in contemporary society. In particular, one sentence in Mary Russo's book *The Female Grotesque*: *Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1995, 65) struck me. It referred to the potential of the category of the female grotesque "to destabilize the idealization of female beauty, or to realign the mechanism of desire." Anxious to find in-depth accounts of the 'hidden powers' of the grotesque – enlightening its ability to shift categorical limits and affect valuations – I couldn't find any, apart from some sporadic mentions. It was my eagerness to explore this idea that triggered the thesis.

Hence, the niche of my thesis is related to the powers and mechanisms of the grotesque, its ability to affect valuations and reveal concealed structures within society. The core idea is to explore the unsaid, the unexpressed and the repressed by examining the grotesque. ⁵ Grotesque elements are thus considered as symptoms or metaphors for cultural phenomena, an 'emer-

5 The 'unexpressed,' also in the title, does not refer to 'expression' as related to representation in visual arts, or to expression of emotions. It rather draws on the literal sense 'to press out' of the Medieval Latin term expressare. (See Online Elymology Dictionary.) In this context, the unexpressed refers rather to what remains unsaid or hidden, or what is unspeakable, unnameable or unsymbolizable in the psychoanalytic sense.

gency exit' for something that is not part of common discourses.

Such 'alternative' truths may be easier to find in the world of fiction and fantasy than in the real world. Certain things – like the most morbid fantasies and abhorrent fears – are loaded into fiction, far from the constraints of the real world. In contemporary society, film in particular seems a privileged vehicle for disguised meanings, for human experience uncensored.

Because of its fantastic freedom, the grotesque is particularly well suited for conveying ambiguous, obscure and illicit desires. In its excesses and transgressions, the grotesque is wild and free, appearing as reassuringly 'unrealistic.' And yet it is more real than one thinks.

Although widely propagated and highly influential, the grotesque is often neglected, misunderstood or despised. Grotesque monsters, aberrant bodies and brutal violence are easy to dismiss as childish creations, as trashy or cheap entertainment, judged either harmless or debauching. Socially, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986, 4-5) point out, the grotesque corresponds to the excluded 'low-Other' as opposed to the 'high' discourses of higher socioeconomic groups at the center of cultural power. However, what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central, as the 'top' symbolically appropriates the 'bottom' as an eroticized ingredient of its fantasy life.

As the main novelty value, the thesis offers a new perspective, with societal relevance, on the role of the grotesque at the intersection of cultural norms, ideologies, power hierarchies and social change. It offers a novel outlook on the construction and unraveling of social difference through the grotesque. Moreover, merging societal views with the domain of arts, the thesis provides an interdisciplinary opening onto research on visual culture.

SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of my thesis stems from the relevance of the grotesque in today's culture of visibility. This culture is characterized by a mediatized battle for recognition as regards the social hierarchies of gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, class, disability and appearance. In this culture, various competing representations of normativity and otherness efficiently mold attitudes, persuading and dissuading people in their beliefs and stances. This study focuses mostly on the gender-related dimensions of the grotesque, with scattered observations on other forms of social difference.

Even though it is an ancient notion, the grotesque is also a very current matter, even characteristic of our era. According to Noël Carroll (2009), the grotesque has become one of the leading formats of mass culture today. Similarly, Omar Calabrese (1992,

50-61) considers 'excess' a sign of the times – in contemporary culture taking the form of excessive sexuality, violence, horror, monstrosity and obscenity, visible in the rebirth of the monster and the aesthetic of the ugly, as observed by Calabrese.

Moreover, there seems to be an increasing demand for the grotesque, visible in the abundant offer of cultural products with grotesque bodily imagery. This concerns contemporary media culture from top to toe, including television, film, Internet and print media; the domain of contemporary art and popular culture alike.

Explored in this context, the grotesque may have far-reaching aesthetic, ethical and social implications. The grotesque may reveal its applicability in various identity political and body-related challenges – for example as regards body image, identity construction and attitudes toward bodily difference. This encompasses the female body, the differently gendered or sexualized body, the aging body, the disabled body, the racialized body and a whole range of bodies of different shapes, sizes and characteristics. Considering the increasing demands and constraints targeted at the body in contemporary society, the thesis provides an important perspective on bodily representation.

As regards practical applications, the grotesque could be deliberately used in emotionally effective meaning-making and image construction. Applied to media education, knowledge of grotesque mechanisms could enhance critical thinking toward media representations, supporting the ability to discern embedded ideologies and interests, disguised norms and ideals.

As is widely acknowledged, representations should be regarded as constructing our reality, giving shape to our experience of the world. According to Leena-Maija Rossi (2015, 74-83), the question is not how accurately the representations reflect our 'true' reality; the question is what kind of signs produce our reality, and what kind of reality that is. As performative deeds that construct regimes of truth by naturalizing or mythologizing phenomena, representations have very concrete effects on people's lives.

Within representations, the grotesque is one type of sign, strongly involved in processes of naturalization and denaturalization, familiarization and othering. With its highly evocative and affirmative character, the grotesque is a particularly powerful sign

6 "Representation" refers to "the act of portrayal, picturing, or other rendering in visible form" (Dictionary.com). Representation may simply correspond to a picture or an image, but it also conveys the idea that someone or something has the power to act on behalf of a person, group, state or the like. Accordingly, the concept also gets the meaning of "a description or statement, as of things true or alleged" (ibid).

constructing our reality.

Ultimately, the significance of the thesis stems from the very nature of the grotesque. The grotesque is

deeply entrenched in our ancient cultural heritage and collective unconscious. Drawing its force from primeval history and archaic strata of the psyche, the grotesque opens up insightful views on present-day phenomena. Considering the power of the grotesque to affect people and to bring about social change, research on the grotesque should extend far beyond the present thesis.

No research is completely free from ideology. In my thesis, the ideological premises are quite explicit. Above all, the research adheres to the humanistic tradition, committed to human rights and equality among all people. Pertaining to the ideologically engaged field of cultural studies, the thesis also contains elements of feminist theory, with particular interest in social difference. In the tradition of critical theory, the thesis has a critical stance toward prevailing ideologies, oppressive power structures and structural violence. A leading ideal is the valuation of human diversity and multiplicity. Treasuring objectivity, the thesis has no further political agenda.

RESEARCH QUESTION

To explore the power of the grotesque, the research makes use of four core notions that point to cultural valuations and discriminations: taboo, ideal, fantasy and fear. Within the problematic, a crucial aspect is power, as the grotesque body is inextricably implicated in the system of social difference and power.

The main research question concerns the role of contemporary grotesque imagery with respect to cultural norms and repressions: taboos and ideals, fears and fantasies. The idea is to explore the dynamic relation between grotesque bodily imagery and cultural norms; the fears and fantasies that dominate our cultural imaginary; and the way in which the grotesque body is constructed with regard to ideology and interests of power.

An ultimate ambition is to unfold modern myths, stereotypes and concealed structures, and to trace out the implications for society at large. With regard to social significance, the objective is to disclose the mechanisms by which grotesque imagery affects the cultural pattern of valuations, idealizations and discriminations.

In practice, when applying the research question to the research material, the first thing to do is to examine the presence of norms and repressions within that research material. The idea is to find out which taboos, ideals, fears and fantasies the grotesque body encloses or unfolds, and how these norms are conveyed through the grotesque. Attention is focused on the concealed

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power structures, tropes and stereotypes – functioning as carriers of ideology – embedded in the grotesque body.

The next step is to investigate what the grotesque does to these norms and repressions. Does it strengthen or weaken, naturalize or denaturalize them? Does it rearrange the categorical limits? And where are the limits drawn between the normal and abnormal? To gain such an insight, the analysis pays heed to the representational biases of the grotesque body.

The final task is to explore the mechanisms and functions of the grotesque. The idea is to figure out what kind of structural operations the grotesque performs within representations, and for what purposes and needs it is used. How can the grotesque, deliberately or unintentionally, affect the viewer, or convey an ideological message?

DEFINITIONS



Within the thesis, the key concepts in need of preliminary clarification are the grotesque, the carnivalesque, the abject, the monstrous, the female grotesque and the monstrous-feminine. The grotesque is used as an umbrella term for these nearby concepts, semantically overlapping with the grotesque. Despite their different significations, the terms are sometimes used interchangeably with the grotesque. Another set of concepts that require elucidation are norms and repressions, including the notions of taboo, ideal, fantasy and fear. At the heart of the research question, these notions form the conceptual framework of the study.

THE GROTESQUE

As there is a separate chapter dedicated to definitions of the grotesque, it is enough to make only a few remarks here. Above all, as regards the meaning of the grotesque, the thesis leans to the views of Noël Carroll and Mikhail Bakhtin. In Carroll's (2009) view, the grotesque refers to category violation, to something that violates our common biological or ontological concepts and norms. Category violation is complemented by a reaction of horror, comic amusement or awe, as experienced by the viewer. The idea of categorical infraction is also supported by other thinkers such as Mary Douglas (2002), and the idea of reaction by, for example, Wolfgang Kayser (1981). In Bakhtin's (1984) view, the grotesque is essentially related to the principle of degradation and to the idea of metamorphosis – expressing ambivalence, incompleteness and renewal – as well as to the surpassing of body limits, realized for example through eating, defecation, sex and violence.

Within the thesis, the notion of the grotesque is used in a very wide sense, covering a range of related concepts and phenomena. Moreover, in practice, it is often impossible to draw an exact line between the grotesque and the nongrotesque; for example, between grotesque violence and 'regular' violence. There seems to be an elusive 'factor X' that favors a grotesque interpretation. Highly context-dependent, this element is related to exaggeration and aestheticization, and to some bizarre, comic or macabre ambiguity.

There are clearly different sides to the grotesque. Carroll (2009) identifies at least three types: the 'horrific grotesque,' the 'comic grotesque' and the 'miraculous grotesque.' Drawing on the Kayserian and Bakhtinian views, Mary Russo (1995, 8-9) differentiates between two types: the 'uncanny grotesque' and the 'carnivalesque.' The 'uncanny grotesque' is a cultural projection of an inner state pertaining to the psychic register, with an emphasis on the monstrous and the abject, while the 'carnivalesque' refers

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to a social body, identified with the lower bodily stratum, with an emphasis on degradation and rebirth.⁷

Carroll's third type, the awe-inspiring 'miraculous grotesque,' is not always perceived as grotesque. It enables, however, supernatural creatures that are neither horrific nor comic to be included into the sphere of the grotesque. In contemporary culture, a prime example is the superhero, an ontological anomaly endowed with extraordinary qualities and otherworldly powers. Like in ancient mythological figures, in the superhero the grotesque also coincides with what is ideal and desirable.

THE CARNIVALESQUE

The carnivalesque is intertwined and partly synonymous with the grotesque. Coined by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984 [1965]), the notion above all refers to a conceptual system derived from ancient carnival festivities. The carnivalesque is commonly associated with upside-down logic and topsy-turvy aesthetics, characterized by a playful and subversive spirit that celebrates reversal of hierarchies and transgression of body limits. Also expressed through material bodily abundance and regenerative laughter, the carnivalesque is based on the principle of degradation focused on earth, the lower body, fertility and rebirth.

THE ABJECT

The notion of the abject and the idea of abjection have been most notoriously developed by Julia Kristeva (1982). In her psychoanalytic account, abjection is regarded as a violent feeling of repulsion – entwined with attraction – toward bodily insides, body fluids, wastes and the corpse as a reminder of sickening materiality. Notably, abjection is ambiguous: both Georges Bataille and Kristeva emphasize not only the horror but also the attraction of the abject (Creed 1993, 10). For Kristeva, abjection represents ultimately the process of separation from the mater-

- 7 Irma Perttula (2010, 27-31) has named the two main branches of the grotesque the 'carnivalesque grotesque' and the 'subjective grotesque'.
- 8 'Transgression' refers generally to an act that goes against a law or rule. Stallybrass and White (1986, 17-18) associate transgression with 'symbolic inversion' that designates, in Barbara Babcock's words, "any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political." In this context, transgression indicates a specifically grotesque surpassing of body limits, or a prohibited deed of grotesque nature. The grotesque body is called 'transgressive' when surpassing its own limits and opening itself to the world.

nal body, entailing a hidden yearning for undifferentiated unity between self and other. Threatening to engulf self, the abject presents a threat to identity, to the 'clean and proper' self, constructed through the exclusion of the other. The abjected element is also perceived as contrary to social

order. Paradoxically, it is also something on which society is based. As Kristeva (1982, 56) notes, quoting Bataille: "Abjection [...] is merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things (and that act establishes the foundations of collective existence)."

THE MONSTROUS

The monstrous is partly synonymous with the grotesque through the shared feature of category violation. According to Carroll (1990, 32-42), monsters are often categorically interstitial, contradictory, incomplete or formless, violating the natural order. However, not all monsters are necessarily ugly, grotesque or evil, like E.T., Superman, or the sharks in the Jaws movies. Sometimes a creature's extraordinary powers and attributes are enough to make it a monster.

Likewise, the grotesque is not necessarily monstrous. Monstrosity entails agency, referring to an active agent performing monstrous deeds. The grotesque, by contrast, may also refer to a victim, such as a disfigured, mutilated or bleeding body – not monstrous but a consequence of monstrosity.

Furthermore, the grotesque is sometimes associated with the notion of *informe*, referring to formlessness, as coined by Georges Bataille (1929). Representing an objection to philosophies that want to give everything a specific form, Bataille uses the notion of *informe* to designate the ultimate formlessness of the universe, a universe that is "something like a spider or spit."

THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

AND THE MONSTROUS-FEMININE

The female grotesque and the monstrous-feminine are nearly interchangeable, yet with slightly different connotations. Referring to the grotesquely attuned female body, both notions conceptualize the alliance between the grotesque and the female body or the feminine. While the monstrous-feminine is more geared toward monstrosity, the female grotesque refers to any type of grotesque associated with the female body. The term 'female grotesque' is used by Mary Russo (1995), and the 'monstrous-feminine' by Barbara Creed (1993).

The two scholars also explore the alliance from slightly different angles. Russo (1995) detects a cultural connection between the grotesque and the feminine, associating woman on the one hand with the depths of the body and the abject, and on the other with the body surface, superficiality and ornamental detail. Creed (1993) argues that the prototype of the monstrous is the female

reproductive body, as constructed within patriarchal ideology, reflecting male fears of female sexuality. These ideas may be traced back to Kristeva (1982), who associates the abject with the maternal and thereby the female body.

NORMS AND REPRESSIONS

Within the thesis, norms refer mainly to taboos and ideals, while repressions refer to fears and fantasies. The core notions of taboo, ideal, fantasy and fear constitute the conceptual framework on which the analysis is based, complemented by some gender-related concepts issuing from psychoanalytic and feminist theories.

As widely shared understandings, norms are prevalently imposed on the subject from the outside, and then internalized. By contrast, repressions more clearly emerge from the inside and then become cultural projections. Altogether, both are culturally transmitted.

TABOO

Taboos are practices that are proscribed by society as improper or unacceptable, that are prohibited or excluded from use. Taboos may be social, religious or moral by nature. (Dictionary.com; Psychology Dictionary.) In Sigmund Freud's (1919, 54) view, "[t]he basis of taboo is a forbidden action for which there exists a strong inclination in the unconscious."

Strong prohibitions exist in all societies. In practice, it is often difficult to draw a line between taboo and something that is 'merely' unacceptable, vile or disgusting. Moreover, many taboos are taboos only for certain social groups. Applied to a filmic content, the notion of taboo is used quite loosely, indicating something that *might* evoke severe rejection or moral panic among many people. The point of reference is the 'prevailing ideology,' an undoubtedly heterogeneous notion itself.

What complicates the matter further is the difference between 'representational' taboo and 'real world' taboo. The average film audience is for example so accustomed to killing in film that it is hardly a taboo in such a context. Some taboos, however, are so strong that they remain taboos even in the fictive context, exemplified by incest and cannibalism. Some other matters, such as sexual ambiguity – in the thesis labeled as taboos – are more controversial: weaker taboos, if taboos at all.

Within the thesis, the categorization into taboos (or ideals, fears and fantasies for that matter) is ultimately a subjective choice serving the cause of the research.

IDEAL

An ideal is a standard of perfection or excellence, an object of endeavor or something highly desirable. Ideal may refer to a person or a thing regarded as perfect. It may also point to something that is unlikely to become reality, existing only in the imagination. (Dictionary.com; Oxford Dictionaries.)

Within the thesis, ideals are regarded as collective norms that are part of the prevailing 'mainstream' ideology, therefore referring to quite conservative ideas. One example is the ideal of the gentle, nurturing and self-sacrificing woman. Like with all culture-specific norms, with ideals as well, there is a lot of geographical, temporal, social and individual variation.

Beside ideals, in the research material there are features that I call 'anti-ideals.' These refer to various nonconformist elements that appear as antithetical reflections of ideals.

FANTASY

Fantasy refers to mental images and imaginative conceptualizing, to daydreams, and to extravagant and unrestrained imagination. Fantasy may fulfill a need not gratified in reality. (Dictionary.com). Fantasies may be conscious, like daydreams, or unconscious. For example, they may articulate repressed desires, such as the fantasy of returning to an undifferentiated fusion with the maternal body. In Jacques Lacan's (2004, 60) view, "the phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary."

According to Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (1968), fantasies can be divided into primal and secondary fantasies. Secondary fantasies refer to individual fantasy scenarios and conscious daydreaming, but also to unconscious fantasy. Instead, primal or original fantasies, limited in number, relate to the questions of origins puzzling all humans. Primal fantasies include the fantasy of the primal scene, related to the origin of the individual; the fantasy of seduction, related to the origin of sexuality; and the fantasy of castration, related to the origin of sexual difference. Moreover, fantasies are both universal and particular, circulating in the public sphere through such media as film, television and literature (Homer 2005, 85).

Within the thesis, fantasy is understood in a wide sense, referring to any kind of conscious, preconscious or unconscious fantasy; to repressed desire, and to any scenario, object or person that may plausibly serve as a fantasy.

FEAR

Fear is a distressing emotion or a response to threat, whether real or imagined (Dictionary.com). In the psychoanalytic context, fear is inextricably intertwined with fantasy. In the thesis, there are several instances in which fear and fantasy coincide – exemplified by the fantasy of the castrating woman.

Fear is obviously a very subjective emotion. In this context, it is considered a cultural matter, a collective repression, referring to all kinds of phenomena, persons or deeds that are recognized as frightening or threatening.



RESEARCH STRUCTURE



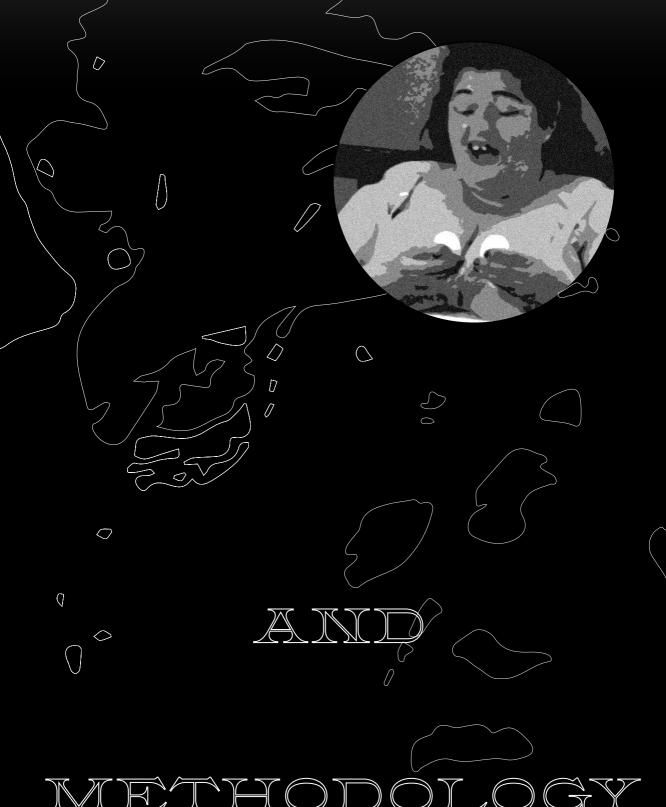
The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The introduction and the chapter on the research material, theory and methodology are followed by the chapter 'Definitions of the grotesque' that offers a tentative account of the notion of the grotesque, presenting definitions and theoretical reflections on the notion. The fourth chapter, 'The grotesque today,' concentrates on the meaning of the grotesque in contemporary visual culture, as part of the everyday image flow, and with considerations of viewer experience.

The main corpus of the study, the fifth chapter presents an analysis of grotesque elements in the research material, consisting of seven films. Explored one by one, the films are: Pink Flamingos, Antichrist, Alien: Resurrection, Fight Club, Kill Bill, Satyricon, and The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover. Complementing the analysis, the sixth chapter provides a comparative discussion of the films as regards norms, repressions, ideological aspects and representation in relation to the grotesque.

The final chapter, 'Conclusion,' offers a summary and the main findings of the study regarding the role of the grotesque: the mechanisms and functions of the grotesque, and the implications for society at large.

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RESEA MATE



METHODÓLÓGY



The research material encompasses films that are artistic or visually ambitious, yet popular and widespread, representing contemporary visual culture with its undercurrents. First and foremost, films are considered here as texts containing signs of widely shared cultural phenomena. Importantly, the chosen films stand for various aspects of the grotesque.

In this section, I first try to answer the question 'Why films?' – instead of some other art forms. I will then explore the question 'Why this choice of films?' exposing some general criteria behind the choice. Finally, I will try to explain 'Why these seven films?' presenting preliminary thoughts about each film. The choice of the research material is explored in detail because it constitutes the data collection method of the thesis.

WHY FILMS?

The main problematic of my thesis focuses on cultural norms and the social significance of grotesque representations. The research material should level this challenge. With regard to the research question, film appears as the optimal choice for several reasons.

Firstly, films undeniably have a prominent position in our contemporary visual culture. Films are widespread, ordinary, popular and entertaining; they arouse strong emotions and provide material for identifications, participating in identity building. For this reason, films are also consequential in regard to prevailing norms.

Films have become increasingly accessible, and may be considered today as part of the everyday media image flow. The kind of everyday imagery that is ordinary and widespread, that is naturalized and 'taken for granted' has a huge potential for affecting people. As representations, films necessarily propagate worldviews and ideologies and present power structures and social hierarchies. In films, cultural valuations are veiled under the alluring cinematic form.

Film is also a quite democratic form of culture, penetrating all social strata, obviously with some variation as to the types of films watched. Films – like television series – are not only accessible and easily digestible, but also something that people dwell on for an hour or two. Moreover, with the variety of filmic expression, including speech, cinematography, scenography, music, and so on, there is a redundancy of signs. Films thereby appeal to the emotions, at the level of the unconscious, too. With their indexical and iconic quality, films appear as 'real'– sometimes even more real than the real world, setting models and standards for reality. All this makes films efficient carriers of norms and ideologies.

As an heir of the age-old storytelling tradition, film constitutes a cornucopia of ancient myths, legends, archetypes and narratives – together with modern tropes. Expressing something that is deeply and widely radicated in culture, film is an efficient means to transmit cultural knowledge.

Finally, with all the cinematic techniques, film is well suited for conveying fantasies, constituting a real dream factory. Films are laced with human hopes and desires, illusions and fantasies, together with fears and horrors, traumas and anxieties.

Nonetheless, the thesis is not a film study. The films are approached as specimens of media imagery and visual culture. They are regarded as cultural texts that could be replaced by other forms of visual arts. Moreover, the object of study is merely the grotesque imagery within the films – not the films per se, nor the cinematographic material in its entirety. The point is not to make a complete analysis of the films. Instead, the aim is to apply the conclusions to the wider field of culture and society.

WHY THIS CHOICE OF FILMS?

The chosen films are *Pink Flamingos* (1972) by John Waters, *Antichrist* (2009) by Lars von Trier, *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, *Fight Club* (1999) by David Fincher, *Kill Bill* (2003–2004) by Quentin Tarantino, *Satyricon* (1969) by Federico Fellini, and *The Cook*, *the Thief*, *His Wife & Her Lover* (1989) by Peter Greenaway.

Admittedly, the choice is subjective, arbitrary and even tendentious. Amongst thousands of possible films I chose just these seven. And why exactly seven? Loaded with mythological significations, seven sounds more complete than six or eight.

Based on the presence of grotesque elements, the set could include any vampire, werewolf, witch, ghost or zombie film, such as *Dracula*, *Harry Potter*, *The Grudge*, *or Night of the Living Dead* – or any horror film or one of its subcategories, a slasher or a splatter film – or a porn film. The selection could encompass any film from

9 My perspective is purely pictorial and the focus is on images, whatever the medium. Also the work's theory basis doesn't lean on film studies. Many relevant things remain unsaid about cinematography, editing, set design, costume and sound. The analysis mostly concentrates on grotesque features within the characters, within the visual narrative supported by the dialogue, and occasionally within the setting. In the analysis, time codes aren't indicated.

10 The research material could also consist of television or online streaming series – or any other imagery with grotesque figures, bodies and acts.

John Waters, and almost any film from Federico Fellini, David Cronenberg or David Lynch. It could include *Delicatessen*, A Serbian Film, Alice in Wonderland, a Monty Python film, The Rocky Horror Picture Show, and the list goes on.

Altogether, there are several general criteria behind my choice of the seven films.

The first major criterion is that the films should be particularly representative of our culture: representative of certain major traditions, genres or categories of representations within the global culture. The films should be good specimens of these traditions, and thereby interchangeable to a certain degree.

Secondly, the point is not to choose the most grotesque films of all times, renowned for their grotesque character. Instead, the idea is to opt for films that are not so obviously grotesque. A limited presence of grotesque elements gives the possibility to reflect on the role of the grotesque within a larger structure.

Another criterion is that the films present some thematic, philosophical or psychological depth. The films should somehow level the ultimate complexity of the human mind. With more one-dimensional films, it would be difficult to discover the variety of significations that characterizes human culture.

Moreover, the chosen films should be bold or audacious enough to tackle the biggest taboos, the most repressed fears and morbid fantasies, in order to provide answers to the research questions. This excludes films that are too cautious, polished or 'embellished.' In fact, the chosen films happen to all be 18-rated films.

Because of this, the films' status, as regards how artistic, popular, mainstream or marginal they are, represents a kind of compromise. The chosen films are more or less artistic, but yet quite popular and widespread, with some success or some reputation – at least directed by renowned filmmakers, if not box office hits. Some of the films have an underground cult reputation, while some others are quite mainstream, the rest of them falling somewhere in between. All of them are characterized by exceptional visuality, and by intellectual sophistication, visible in their philosophical content, thematics and refined symbolism. And yes, the John Waters film, too.

The research material is also a compromise between the massively circulated Anglo-American popular film and the more experimental and unconventional art film aimed at smaller audiences. Regarding geography, the research material presents an Anglo-American bias – characteristic of today's globalized media culture. Four films out of seven are from the United States, and three from Europe (the United Kingdom, Denmark and Italy). As for the time span, the films were produced during four decades, between 1969 and 2009. More recent films are missing, because the choice has favored iconic representations that have made a mark on the collective memory, or that hold, to date, a stable

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position in contemporary visual culture. The chosen films are regarded as precursors and part of the ongoing boom of grotesqueries in films and series.

It can always be questioned how representative the chosen films are – of the grotesque, of film, of media imagery, and of visual culture. For example, those parts of media imagery that are devoid of grotesque features remain unrepresented. In film, all mainstream dramas, family films and romantic comedies are excluded. In comparison to all films produced in Western countries during the past few decades, the chosen films are probably more artistic, and present more disturbing, explicitly violent or sexual content.

The final and perhaps the most important criterion for the choice of films is that they are complementary, as representing the various aspects, or types, of the grotesque. At the same time, they represent various viewpoints to the world, or different modes of being in the world. In this context, the types and modes include the 'comic,' the 'horrific' and the 'miraculous' grotesque types, and the 'anxious,' the 'raging,' the 'heroic' and the 'hedonistic' modes of being.

With these ontological modes, the films adhere to different genres, or genre combinations, although not offering a complete set of them. *Pink Flamingos* is a transgressive black comedy and underground film. *Antichrist* could be described as an experimental horror drama, while *Alien: Resurrection* represents more traditional science fiction horror and action. *Fight Club* is a combination of psychological drama and black comedy, *Kill Bill* a mixture of the martial arts film and the Western. *Satyricon* is a kind of epic fantasy drama, while *The Cook*, *the Thief*, *His Wife* & *Her Lover* appears to be an eccentric crime drama. All the films contain elements of heightened realism.

The chosen films present different kinds of settings for the grotesque to appear in. In *Pink Flamingos*, the grotesque emerges from a frenzied cavalcade of taboos, and from the spectacle of the female body. In *Antichrist*, the grotesque stems from the unknown forces within the human mind, and from ruthless nature, whereas *Alien: Resurrection* presents the grotesque as a cosmic, monstrously procreating alien body. In *Fight Club*, the grotesque billows from an identity crisis and repressed desire, while in *Kill Bill* the context is a justified revenge enacted through gory dismemberments. *Satyricon* presents a setting of cultural heritage and mythology, while *The Cook*, *the Thief*, *His Wife & Her Lover* displays a constellation of tyrannical oppression, the grotesque emerging from material bodily abundance and sadism.

The films are all particularly dense concentrations of their characteristic grotesque element. While *Pink Flamingos* is a boot camp of trash and obscenities, *Kill Bill* is a theme park of spectacular violence, and so on. The films are also complementary because their protagonists are grotesque in different ways. The main characters include an extravagant sexually ambiguous figure, a tormented sexually excessive woman with inner demons, a cloned half-human half-alien creature, a ghostly side personality, an invincible superhero, a bunch of mythological figures and a sadistic human monster.

And yet, with all monstrosity, the films are ultimately about humanity, exploring what it means to be human in contemporary society.

WHY THE SEVEN FILMS?

PINK FLAMINGOS

In *Pink Flamingos* (1972), the drag-like protagonist Divine, proud to be known as "the filthiest person alive," is challenged by an envious bourgeois couple, the Marbles. Trying to appropriate the title for themselves, the Marbles initiate an absurd 'battle of filth,' translated into a series of obscene deeds. In the end, Divine notoriously eats dog feces. *Pink Flamingos* is an extremely low-budget (\$10,000) film realized by John Waters with his friends. Reflecting the filmmaker's eccentric underground taste, the film has a very cheap, trashy look.

As for the type of the grotesque, *Pink Flamingos* represents the 'comic grotesque,' and unlike some other films, is thoroughly grotesque. The depicted violence is at the same time horrific. There are also traits of the 'hedonistic' and 'raging' modes of being.

Regarding cultural traditions, the film is clearly part of the ancient carnivalesque tradition – explored by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) – dating back to the Middle Ages, Antiquity, and further. In a carnivalesque manner, the film depicts a world turned inside out, a world where everything is permitted – with the resulting outrageous elements. *Pink Flamingos* also represents the black comedy genre, however, with its excesses of scatological humor and awkward sex, being far more extreme than most black comedies.

The main reason for choosing *Pink Flamingos* is its exhibition of all the major taboos one can imagine. These include cannibalism, scatophagy, incest, castration, exhibitionism, sex with animals involved, killing of an animal during filming, close-ups of male and female genitals, and a graphic portrayal of a

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hilariously singing anus. With all its obscenities, the film is reminiscent of abject art.

From a gender-related point of view, *Pink Flamingos* is a very queer film. Importantly, it contains grotesque exaggeration and parody that reveal structures. An example of this is the main character Divine, an extravagant male drag queen, yet in diegesis a 'normal' woman. Following Judith Butler's (2002) ideas, Divine's exaggerated performance of femininity exposes what is falsely naturalized. By imitating gender, Divine reveals the imitative structure of gender itself. In the film, this logic also applies to other phenomena.

ANTICHRIST

In Antichrist (2009), a child falls out of a window while the parents are having sex. In a remote cabin in the woods, the grieving wife tries to recover from depression with the help of the psychotherapist husband. Forced to confront her deepest fears, she starts to act in an increasingly violent manner, committing a series of cruel acts against the husband. Antichrist stands out visually with its highly appealing cinematography and compelling depiction of nature.

The grotesque type prevalent in *Antichrist* is the 'horrific grotesque,' arousing fear and disgust in the spectator. The prevailing 'anxious' mode of being constitutes a seedbed for the grotesque.

As for the tradition, *Antichrist* resembles a tragedy in which things go from bad to worse and that ends miserably, possibly leading to a catharsis. The film also pertains to the tradition of narratives depicting a tormented protagonist that is gradually taken over by some inner demons, thereby undergoing a grotesque metamorphosis. An example of Nordic art-horror, *Antichrist* also represents modern North European cinema.

The thematics is centered around the protagonist woman's anxiety and fear, directed toward nature, in the film ultimately representing the unknown, or the human unconscious. At the same time, the film offers a peculiar representation of nature, depicted as a hostile and frightening place with disgusting features. In terms of Jacques Lacan's ideas, the forest could be seen as a representation of the "Thing," unknowable in itself, but filling the void at the core of subjectivity (Homer 2005). The forest is ambiguously inside the characters, and yet clearly outside, reflecting the characters' fears and desires.

The main reason for choosing *Antichrist* is the way in which it revolves around the unrepresentable; the way in which the grotesque gives a sensible, concrete form to the invisible forces of the unconscious, of guilt and anxiety.

In Alien: Resurrection (1997), the cloned protagonist woman, Ripley, tries to save the Earth from a lizardy Alien species. The Aliens get loose in the spaceship and start to breed fast, using humans as hosts and nourishment for the newborns. After a number of brutal Alien attacks and births, Ripley as the 'mother of Aliens,' with the help of a humanoid robot, leads a group of survivors through the ship. Alien: Resurrection's visuality is dominated by the gloomy sci-fi milieu and the impressive figure of the Alien monster, designed by H. R. Giger.

If in *Antichrist* evil emanates from the inside, in *Alien: Resurrection*, evil is a threat from the outside, embodied in a life form far from humans. The prevailing grotesque type is the 'horrific grotesque.' Contrasted with the fear experienced by other characters, the protagonist represents the 'heroic' mode of being.

Regarding the relevant tradition, *Alien* is part of the ancient heritage of horror stories in which apocalyptic beasts rise up from some abyss and demolish people in horrendous ways. Beside apocalyptic fiction with biblical allusions, the film represents the action genre, giving a central role to an action hero. *Alien* is also an illustrative example of science fiction horror, presenting alien monsters that symbolize humans' deepest fears.

The film's main thematics is related to the opposition between human and non-human, along with the theme of monstrous female reproduction. The latter is concretized in the uterine imagery, the hatching of eggs and the birth scenes. According to Barbara Creed (1993), female monstrosity, as constructed within patriarchal ideology, is based precisely on woman's maternal and reproductive functions.

Among the Alien film series, Alien: Resurrection stands out through its emphasis on the theme of maternity, reproduction and cloning, with the resulting reflections on identity. An additional reason for choosing an Alien film in the first place is the intriguing morphology of the Alien monster.

FIGHT CLUB

In Fight Club (1999), the insomniac protagonist starts organizing clandestine fighting sessions with his odd new friend. An intriguing self-confident man, Tyler is eventually revealed as his hallucinatory alter ego. Seeking to empower men alienated by futile work and consumerism, the underground club expands into widespread anarchistic action, orchestrated by Tyler's hilariously reckless figure. Fight Club's elaborate visuality is marked by appealing fighting scenes and a pale nocturnal atmosphere.

Fight Club is a combination of various grotesque types. With its black comedy features, the film represents the 'comic grotesque,' yet with dark undertones. The prevailing mode of being is 'raging,' translated into frustration and repressed rage that evolves into masculine bluster and masochistic enjoyment.

As for the tradition, *Fight Club* represents narratives that articulate the existence of 'another self.' It also depicts a sort of pact with the Devil: the protagonist man's frustrated self is replaced by his ideal self; a victorious, self-confident demonic self. Embodied in a stud with perfect abs and total freedom from withering society, this character is aptly played by Brad Pitt.

The grotesque splitting of the subject is, according to Noël Carroll (1981), a way of articulating conflicts concerning identity, aggressiveness or sexuality, representing a repressed aspect of the self. Such splitting also characterizes Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, doubles, werewolves and other changelings. In *Fight Club*, the repressed side of the personality is curiously the ideal self.

The motivation for choosing the film is, besides the split identity, the insightful way in which it depicts contemporary consumerist culture, along with the film's markedly masculine point of view. The grotesque is present above all through the carnivalesque anarchistic action and the diligent implementation of the idea of degradation. The grotesque also dwells in the mind of the protagonist, revealed through his ghostly new identity.

KILL BILL

In Kill Bill (2003–2004), Beatrix, a former assassin, wakes up from a four-year coma to realize that her fiancé and unborn daughter were killed by her ex-lover Bill. With her amazing fighting skills, Beatrix sets off on an odyssey of revenge full of martial arts-style sword fighting and gory killing. Visually Kill Bill is an eclectic mixture of Asian warrior imagery and stylized Western and B-movie aesthetics.

Presenting a combination of various grotesque types, *Kill Bill*'s dominant mode of being is the 'heroic.' As a kind of superhero, the heroine also represents the 'miraculous grotesque' type.

Tradition-wise, the film depicts a fantastic odyssey of a legendary hero that alone kills the insurmountable enemy, in the end settling the past injustice. Placed in a martial arts context, the film reiterates the age-old, panhuman theme of a battle between the good hero and the bad enemy. With its thematics of justified revenge and frontier justice, the film also resembles a Western. Moreover, in *Kill Bill*, there are features that pertain to the ancient literary genre of Menippean satire – characterized by odd

stylistic combinations, by rapid changes between high and low and a carnivalesque attitude toward violence (Bakhtin 2011).

The main reason for choosing *Kill Bill* is the graphic grotesque violence in its most spectacular and ecstatic form – reminding of 'Rabelaisian thrashings,' as depicted by Bakhtin (1984). Performed in a joyous atmosphere, a carnivalesque thrashing is festive but brutal, presenting a detailed description of injured organs and dismemberments, reminiscent of a 'bodily harvest.' The film also creates a kind of fantasy space that favors the enjoyment of such grotesque violence.

Another important factor behind the choice is the protagonist, a female killing machine coded into a mythical invincible hero, or a superhero.

SATYRICON

In Satyricon (1969), the unfortunate protagonist Encolpio travels with his friend through strange adventures and odd encounters in a dreamlike Roman empire. After participating in an orgy-like banquet and being captured on a pirate boat, Encolpio fights with a Minotaur man and becomes impotent in a clamorous fertility ritual. He then struggles to regain his potency with the help of a witch. Satyricon's oneiric, studio-shot visuality is marked by a multitude of odd figures, gaudy costume and décor.

Satyricon represents mostly the 'miraculous grotesque' type, combined with the other two types. The prevailing mode of being is the 'hedonistic,' yet with a twist of fear and anxiety.

The film is situated in imperial Rome, but marked by imaginative dreamlike imagery – resembling a journey into the unconscious. Fellini himself has described the film as "science fiction of the past" (Wikipedia). Satyricon clearly belongs to the Menippean satire genre tradition, as defined by Bakhtin (2011). Characterized by eccentricities and anomalies, fragmentation and abundance, the genre is marked by a carnivalesque sense of cheerful relativity. Its ultimate interest lies in ideological and existential questions, presented in a concrete, material bodily form.

Moreover, Satyricon is a treasury of ancient myths and legends, yet altered by Fellini. These include the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, Hermaphroditus, Witch Oenothea, and Mother Earth.

The reason for choosing the film is the role of mythology, as part of the collective unconscious, and the ultimately grotesque nature of myths. As a matter of fact, many myths contain grotesque features – if thinking about all the half-man, half-animal, half-god figures, or such events as the births of Aphrodite and Athena, or the story of Oedipus. Genderwise, the myths also

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expose our culture's deep-seated attitudes, for example, as related to misogyny.

Another major motivation is the great variety of bodies present in the film – bodies that are deformed, crippled, mutilated, sexually ambiguous, exuberantly stylized, and so on.

THE COOK, THE THIEF, HIS WIFE & HER LOVER

In *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989), the wife, Georgina, oppressed by her brutal husband, starts a secret affair with a lover in a luxury restaurant. Discovering the affair, the husband kills the lover. With the help of the cook, the wife avenges herself on the sadistic husband and makes him eat the lover's cooked body. The film's exuberant visuality is made up of contrasts between the grotesque and the sublime, characterized by sumptuous food imagery.

In *The Cook*, *the Thief*, *His Wife & Her Lover*, the prevailing grotesque type is the 'horrific grotesque,' yet complemented by a 'miraculous' setting and carnivalesque abundance. The dominant mode of being is divided, composed of rage and fear, but also of hedonistic enjoyment.

As for the tradition, the film represents a story about oppression and a love story. It is reminiscent of the ancient fairytale structure in which an innocent maiden lives with a monster that sadistically enslaves her. One day, Prince Charming arrives and liberates her, and they fall in love, and live happily ever after. However, the film ends somewhat differently, breaking the structure.

The oppressive dynamics, as displayed in the film, is representative of all oppression, of any reign of terror, tyranny and sadism. As a true human monster, the oppressor is a caricatural, demonic embodiment of evil. Another conspicuous theme is food. Its cultural importance is highlighted through the hyperbolic, sumptuous representations of foodstuffs and meals, the depiction of cooking and constant hedonistic eating – wrapped up in amazing carnivalesque visuality.

Beside the thematics, the main reason for choosing the film is its striking duality: prominent sensuousness combined with violent surpassings of body limits; the pleasures of eating and sex mingled with brutality and disgust. In the film, carnivalesque abundance and regenerative sexuality meet grotesque destruction and death.

THEORY





The theoretical framework of my thesis consists primarily of psychoanalytic theory and feminist theory, and secondarily of semiotics and aesthetics. The thesis uses concepts from these theories selectively, without pretending to seize the theories' full potential. The psychoanalytic approach enables the unconscious dynamics and bodily drives within visual information to be taken into account, pointing at the ultimate motivations within the production and consumption of grotesque imagery. Feminist theory is crucial because of the work's overall focus on gender. Entwined with issues of social difference and marginalization, feminist theory provides a valuable tool to tackle the power relations entrenched in grotesque imagery. In addition, semiotics helps to explore the significations, concealed structures and ideologies within grotesque imagery. Finally, aesthetics offers a philosophical device to reflect on the characteristics and developments of the grotesque itself, seen as an aesthetic category and a type of experience.

The theoretical palette covers thus the societal, psychological and philosophical levels of knowledge, all fundamental to grotesque imagery. A multiplicity of perspectives is valued over a more focused policy: what the study loses in not thoroughly deploying one theory, it gains in creating a multifaceted view on the topic.

Tailored to suit the specificity of the subject, the interdisciplinary approach entails an interplay of theories that all conceptualize margins from different perspectives. Whereas semiotics and feminist theory unfold ideological blind spots and social injustice, psychoanalytic theory dives into the murky depths of the human psyche. This serves the study's endeavor to unveil the elusive, silenced and disturbing significations of bodily representations, insidiously influential in contemporary culture.

PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

Psychoanalytic theory is here regarded as a philosophy. Its utility stems from the fact that representations cannot be fully decoded within the linguistic domain, within the discernible: something always remains unsaid, unrepresented. Psychoanalytic theory offers a way to account for this elusive, unspeakable or unfathomable surplus, associating it with the unconscious and the drives. It provides tools to approach the ultimate motivations behind human behavior and the cryptic constituents of human experience. With its focus on deep psychic structures – a shared human basis – psychoanalysis applies both to the individual and to the sociocultural.

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Psychoanalysis seems particularly useful when exploring certain kinds of phenomena – like horror, or the grotesque. As Noël Carroll (1981) observes, the horror genre is a privileged vehicle for expressing psychoanalytically significant themes such as repressed sexuality and sadism. Like in my research material, the nightmarish is entwined with the grotesque, embodied in grotesque monsters and abject deeds.

My analysis makes use of several psychoanalytic concepts. The most important are the unconscious and the conscious mind; the Lacanian registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real; Kristeva's notions of the abject, the semiotic and the symbolic; Freud's idea of primal fantasy; Freud's and Lacan's reflections on the phallus and castration; Lacan's self-other division, and the notions of lack, desire, fantasy and *jouissance*.

Many concepts can be traced back to Sigmund Freud with his Standard Edition (1956–1974 [written ca. 1890–1940]), and to Jacques Lacan (2004 [1973], 2006 [1966]). In this study, Lacan's elaborate ideas are often accessed through Sean Homer (2005), proficiently interpreting and making the ideas more accessible to aficionados. Psychoanalysis is also present through other theorists, especially Julia Kristeva (1985, 1984, 1982), a psychoanalyst herself, applying Freud's and Lacan's ideas in her writings, as well as Barbara Creed (2007, 2005, 1993, 1986) and Slavoj Žižek (2008, 2000, 1997, 1992).

Despite its patriarchal foundation, psychoanalysis is a discipline that offers valuable tools for analyzing the psyche, and thereby human culture – including patriarchal structures. With its emancipatory potential, psychoanalysis is used by several feminist theorists and psychoanalysts such as Kristeva, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Bracha L. Ettinger and Jacqueline Rose. At the same time, psychoanalysis is widely criticized for its obvious sexism and heteronormativity. For example, Irigaray (1991) blames traditional psychoanalysis for its ahistorical, patriarchal and phallocentric bias, turned into a universal truth.

Psychoanalysis has a steady foothold in Western culture. Even if scientifically 'suspect,' psychoanalysis is culturally 'true' – if judged by the widespread belief in the existence of the unconscious and several other psychoanalytic concepts. In this work, psychoanalysis is considered a cultural theory among others, a philosophy that doesn't need scientific accuracy to justify itself.

In the thesis, an important psychoanalytically informed assumption is that visual images and representations strongly participate in the construction of subjectivities and identities. As asserted by Gillian Rose (2012, 154), subjectivity is constantly



reworked through its encounters with structures of meaning, such as visual images. In this way, grotesque representations – deeply involved in the dynamics of self and other – may also have a significant role in the construction of identity.

FEMINIST THEORY

The work's ideological focus on margins is sharpened through feminist theory, enabling a critical approach to questions of corporeality and identity. A major reason for applying feminist theory is the urge to explore the grotesque through its gendered expressions, to examine the intrinsic relation between the grotesque and gender. Moreover, the thesis aspires to integrate feminist theory into a wider theoretical framework, convinced of its usefulness, as a complementing point of view, to any cultural study.

A crucial question is how sexual difference is articulated through the grotesque. This is explored through the notions of the female grotesque (Russo 1995) and the monstrous-feminine (Creed 1993). Moreover, issuing from feminist and psychoanalytic theories, the concepts used in the analysis include subjectivity, identity, sexual difference, the role of woman, the female beauty ideal, reproduction, motherhood and misogyny. The main focus is on gender, which is complemented by some remarks motivated by intersectionality, i.e., the idea of intertwined differences regarding gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, class and disability.

Within the field of feminist theory, the analysis leans most importantly on the ideas of Julia Kristeva (1982), also as aptly explicated by Kelly Oliver (1993). With her in-depth insight into Kristevan theory, Oliver's study enables indirect access to Kristeva's oeuvre in its entirety. Another important theorist is Barbara Creed (1993, 1986), as she deals with the grotesque and the monstrous-feminine and bases her reflections on Kristeva's and Freud's theories.

A major, underlying influence comes from Judith Butler (2002 [1990]). With her concept of performativity, Butler reformulates the idea of gender, characterizing it as a construction made of deeds, instead of an essence. In the thesis, grotesque representations are regarded as performative deeds constructing our reality, and therefore worthy of scrutiny.

Another constitutive idea is the structuralist theory of binary oppositions (see e.g. Claude Lévi-Strauss 1963). Traceable to Cartesian dualism, binary thinking is also visible in the gendered body/mind dichotomy. As claimed by Susan Bordo (1993), gendered dichotomies still have a major impact on women and the female

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body today. Through such dichotomies, the feminine is associated not only with the body and nature, but also with impurity, sin, evil and death. On this idea is premised also the concept of the female grotesque. An underlying claim within the thesis is that binary oppositions, and their effects on contemporary society, need to be acknowledged and deconstructed in order to change ossified, socially pernicious modes of thinking. With its increasingly abrupt divisions, contemporary Western culture would certainly benefit from the dilution of black-and-white dualism.

The apparatus of feminist theory is far from being fully exploited. This also concerns the domains of queer theory, feminist media theory, feminist film theory, feminist philosophy and feminist psychoanalysis. At the same time, several potentially useful concepts are left out.

SEMIOTICS

The thesis is all about significations and meaning-making, with a focus on grotesque signs and their ideological connections. As in the field of cultural studies, semiotics is used to explore social effects and power relations. In the analysis, the use of semiotics is often more implicit than explicit, constituting an underlying mode of thinking. The work also wants to avoid unnecessary use of semiotic jargon, obscurantism and pretentiousness – a pitfall mentioned by Gillian Rose (2012, 145).

Semiotic views influence the basic assumptions of my study. For example, cultural artifacts are regarded as signs or texts that signify and refer to some internal human reality. In line with the semiotic conception of art, as formulated by Jyri Vuorinen (1997, 168), artworks are considered as iconic embodied meanings. Their greatest value relates to knowledge: to the idea that artworks enable a connection with certain sides of reality that without them would be missed altogether.

Another basic assumption is that signification is dynamically made up of interpretations building on each other. This stems from the Peircean (1931–1958, *CP* 5.484, 2.303) idea of *semiosis*, referring to the interaction between the constituents of a sign, and to the idea of the unlimited concatenation of signs. The meanings of signs are thus yet other signs, potentially *ad infinitum*. Another Peircean idea is that beyond signs there is no underlying reality: at the intersection of the physical and the phenomenological world, there are only relationships, references and interpretations.

Yet another assumption is that concealed structures within representations sometimes correspond to things that are even



'too' visible. Such taken-for-granted things are regarded as universal and non-ideological, referring to the Barthesian (1957) idea of myth and naturalized culture.

Among the arsenal of semiotic concepts, several can be traced back to the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure with his *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), and to Charles Sanders Peirce with his *Collected Papers* (1931–1958). The most important one is obviously the concept of a sign, in Saussure's theory seen as a relational unit composed of the signifier and the signified, and in Peirce's theory a triadic structure composed of the representamen, the interpretant and the object. The concepts used include Peirce's trichotomy of icon, index and symbol; the notions of syntagm and paradigm, originally discovered by Saussure; Jakobson's notions of metaphor and metonymy (Jakobson 1956); the Barthesian conception of denotation and connotation (Barthes 1986 [1964]), as well as myth (Barthes 1957), code (see e.g. Jakobson 1971), and ideology (see. e.g. Althusser 1971).

These concepts are used quite loosely, sometimes following their developers' ideas, sometimes conforming to their meaning in standard language. For example, the concept of myth may appear in the more restricted Barthesian sense but also in a wider sense, referring to any kind of legend or fallacy. The thesis doesn't take into consideration the diverse meanings, subtleties and uses of these concepts, nor the controversies related to them.

In addition, among the most important references, semiotic logic is implicitly present in Mikhail Bakhtin (1984 [1965]) and explicitly present in Julia Kristeva (1982).

AESTHETICS

Within aesthetics, a key concept is aesthetic experience. It is considered from the point of view of viewer experience: of experiencing something as grotesque, as opposed to merely recognizing something as grotesque. Related to the idea of experience, the reactions elicited by the grotesque are explored by Noël Carroll (2009). Within the field of aesthetic study on the grotesque, Carroll (2009) and Wolfgang Kayser (1981 [1957]) have valuable observations on the concept. These sources also foreground the discussion on 'grotesque experience' and on 'the grotesque-as-experienced.'

The aesthetic approach is most prevalent in the chapters 'Definitions of the grotesque' and 'The grotesque today.' Aesthetics also constitutes an underlying philosophical current in the thesis, even when not explicit, through the use of aesthetic terminology. As a matter of fact, the grotesque is an irremediably

aesthetic notion – which is necessarily at issue each time its nature is discussed. Altogether, with aesthetics, it is possible to account for the philosophical dimensions of the grotesque.

In summary, with its interdisciplinary cluster of theories, the thesis is congruent with the current paradigm as characterized by the questioning of normativities, expressing a revived interest in cultural margins. On the other hand, at least for the time being, all the four disciplines – psychoanalysis, feminist theory, semiotics and aesthetics – represent relatively marginal theoretical approaches within humanistic research.



METHODOLOGY



My methodological approach consists of the collection, analysis and discussion of grotesque elements within the research material, through the chosen theoretical framework, in view of the research questions. The analyzing method, *critical visual analysis*, is conducted through close reading. The work's methodological peculiarity stems from an interplay of theories that resonate with the grotesque, and that all conceptualize margins from different perspectives – from aesthetic anti-ideals through ideological blind spots to the murky depths of the psyche.

DATA COLLECTION METHOD

The first phase of data collection is explained above, under the heading 'Research material.' The seven films constitute the 'population' among which the 'specimens,' i.e., the grotesque elements, are then chosen. The second phase of data collection consists of identifying, selecting and grouping the grotesque elements for further analysis. The elements are identified as grotesque on the basis of certain definitions of the grotesque (see the chapter 'Definitions of the grotesque').

The analyzed elements include characters with grotesque or monstrous features; grotesque deeds or scenes; substances like filth, excrement and blood; places or settings with grotesque features; and themes like reproduction, degeneration and death, related to the grotesque. Each element – such as 'Filth and excrement' in *Pink Flamingos* – may refer to several images or scenes within the film.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The method of analysis – that I have named *critical visual analysis* – is designed to suit the purposes of the thesis. It is a qualitative, descriptive analyzing method targeted at the study of visual material. The eclectic method applies elements from different methodologies and analyzing practices, including thematic analysis, semiotic analysis, and feminist and psychoanalytic readings.

Critical visual analysis is conducted through close reading, entailing a detailed discussion on chosen elements within representations. The method is critical in the sense that it aims at exposing the ideological premises on which the representations are based. It endeavors to unveil hidden structures and relationships, latent meanings and underlying formations – be they tropes, myths, fallacies or stereotypes – in the service of ideologies. Conveniently, in line with my aspirations, Gillian Rose (2012)

uses the notion of 'critical visual methodology' in the sense of a successfully critical approach to visual culture.

In practice, the method amounts to dissecting significations and references of grotesque elements. Placed within the conceptual framework of the core notions of taboo, ideal, fantasy and fear, the material is delineated and tuned into answering the research questions.

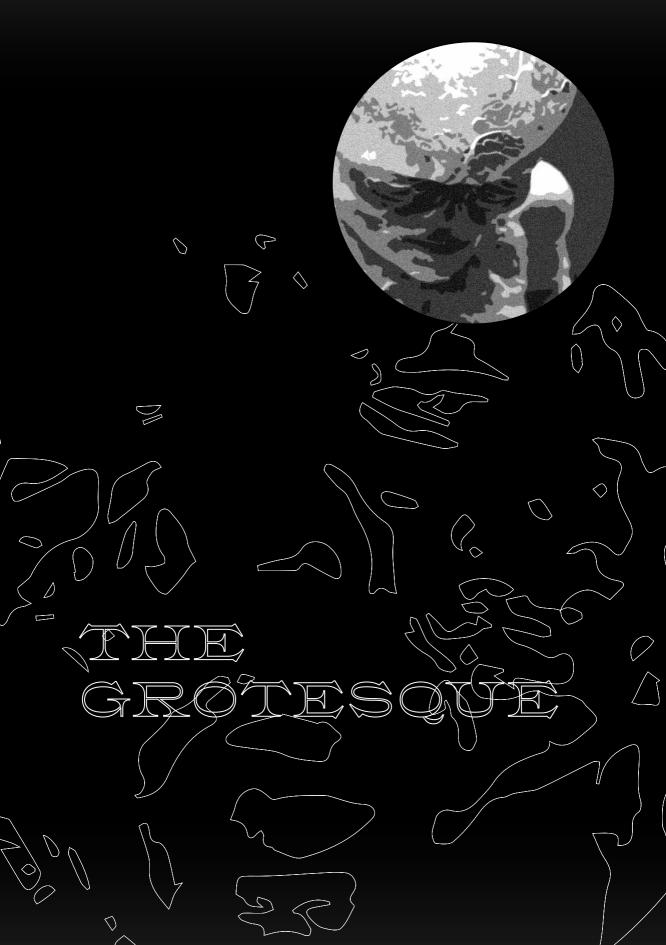
During the analysis, conducted film by film, the grotesque elements are first described and contextualized. Theoretical concepts are then transposed onto the grotesque elements, anchoring them into psychoanalytic and feminist theoretical traditions. The set of concepts used in the analysis includes, most importantly, the unconscious and the conscious mind and the triadic system of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real; the abject, the semiotic and the symbolic; primal fantasy, the phallus, castration, the self–other division, lack, desire, fantasy and *jouissance*; binary oppositions, subjectivity, identity, sexual difference, the role of woman, the beauty ideal, reproduction, motherhood and misogyny. The auxiliary concepts include signs and the trichotomy of icon, index and symbol; syntagm and paradigm; metaphor and metonymy; denotation and connotation; and myth, code and ideology.

The descriptive, theory-based analyzing phase is followed by a comparative discussion of films, with a focus on the dynamic role of the grotesque, both unveiling and altering meanings.

As a highly qualitative method, *critical visual analysis* produces subjective interpretations that are unique and hardly reproducible. There is thus always a possibility of alternative readings and interpretations. To gain in objectivity, the analysis aims at extreme clarity and transparency with a kind of down-to-earth attitude. To compensate for the problem of representativeness, the thesis presents a detailed description of the selection criteria for the research material.

Altogether, *critical visual analysis* appears as a productive, creative and critical analyzing method that helps to dissect the elusive significations, unruly meaning-making and potential social reverberations that are specific to the grotesque.





As a highly unstable and heterogeneous concept, the grotesque refers to a wide range of phenomena. There can be no all-inclusive definition that would account for all objects and phenomena that all people at all times in all places have considered as grotesque. My thesis is concerned with the way this notion is used in Western visual culture in the early twenty-first century. Even with this restriction, the variation is overwhelming.

The etymology of *grotesque* is merely a starting point to the later semantic development of the word. The origin of the term is attributed to a Roman ornament, excavated at the end of the fifteenth century and given the name *grottesca* (it.), referring to a cave. The ornament was found in a subterranean location, a buried Roman building. (Bakhtin 1984, 31-32; Online Etymology Dictionary.) According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the ornament depicts an interplay of vegetable, animal and human forms, intertwined as if giving birth to each other, expressing a joyful freedom of artistic fantasy, "the inner movement of being itself."

Grotesque forms have often been neglected, misunderstood or despised. The grotesque has also been marginalized in the standard narratives of art history – analogically to the notion of ugliness, "relegated to passing mentions in marginal works" (Eco 2011, 8).

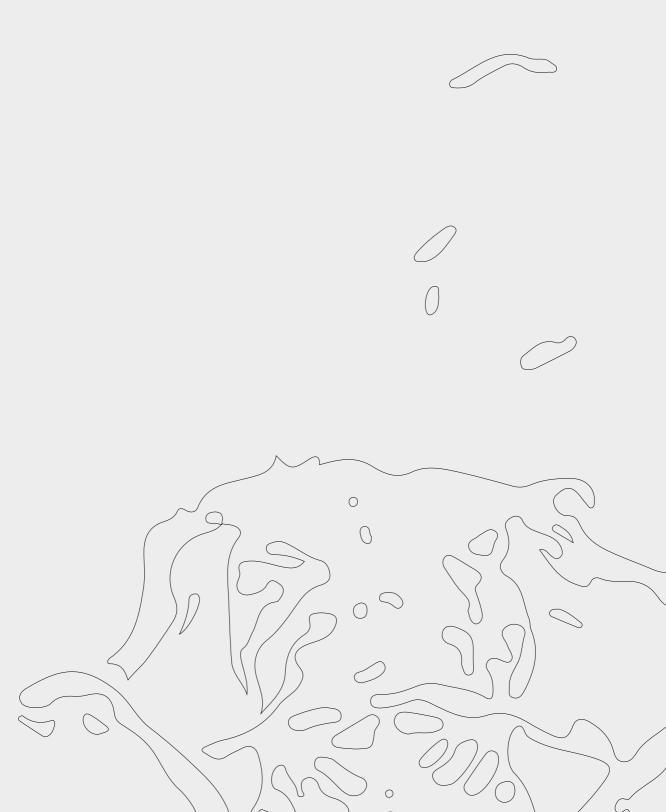
Nowadays, the grotesque still tends to have a pejorative meaning. For instance, it is defined as "odd or unnatural in shape, appearance, or character; fantastically ugly or absurd; bizarre," and given the synonyms "distorted, deformed, weird, antic, wild" (Dictionary.com). In official contexts, its expression has been marked by euphemisms and censorship. The grotesque has also been subjugated and tossed into categories that seem more established or univocal – including humor and the comic, medicine and sickness, and perversion and pornography. Such recategorization enables the grotesque to be demarcated from the 'normal' and 'healthy' society.

When exploring the grotesque, it is useful to resort to studies on nearby concepts, such as ugliness, disgust, the monstrous, the abject and the carnivalesque. These concepts semantically overlap the grotesque, making the terms interchangeable in some cases. However, an essential difference between the nearby concepts and the grotesque is that the realm of the grotesque is perplexingly extensive, including instances that are beautiful, ideal and desirable.

This chapter is dedicated to an account of the notion of the grotesque, keeping in mind the impossibility of definition. After some preliminary thoughts on the grotesque, I will explore the three recurring characteristics of the notion. The account ends with some remarks on the multifaceted nature of the grotesque.



NEGATION AND RELATIVITY



First of all, the meaning of the grotesque can be clarified through what it is not. This approach is based on the structuralist idea that concepts are defined as part of a conceptual system by their difference in relation to other concepts within the same system.

The grotesque is often defined by what it is missing. For example, in his account of the notion, Wolfgang Kayser (1981, 24, emphasis added) talks about "a definite *lack* of proportion and organization," and about grotesque bodies "without distinct form." In the same way, according to Umberto Eco (2011, 16), ugliness has been traditionally defined as the opposite of beauty, understood as harmony, proportion and integrity. The grotesque is thus marked by lack and absence.

Binary oppositions seem deeply rooted in the practices of perceiving, structuring and categorizing the world. Whether opposed to proportion, normality or normativity, the grotesque is defined by its deviant nature. In terms of Roman Jakobson's theory of markedness - referring to a semiotic opposition's division into unmarked and marked forms - the unmarked form is regarded as something more generic, natural and fundamental, hierarchically prior to the marked form. By contrast, the marked form represents not only something more complex and specific but also something semantically negative, derivative and subordinate. Sometimes the marked form is suppressed or removed altogether. (Chandler 2007, 93-99.) Other oppositions include the dichotomies of mind/body, reason/emotion, and male/female. Affiliated to the marked form, the grotesque is a deviation, opposed to the norm. However, as the unmarked form is also necessarily defined by what it seeks to exclude, the norm is based on the grotesque.

Even though the grotesque is not the opposite of beauty, it is in certain respects an antonym of features associated with the beautiful. For Bakhtin (1984, 28-29), the opposite of the grotesque body is the body of classical canons, "the aesthetics of the beautiful" of the Renaissance. The canonical body is strictly completed, inert and separated from other bodies. The body's protuberances

are removed and apertures smoothed out, and its age is most distant from the thresholds of birth and death, with an emphasis on the self-sufficient individuality of the body.¹¹

In its ambiguity, the grotesque can also be viewed as the outcome of binary 11 An interesting point of reference is Kant's conception of dependent beauty, based on the idea of truthful appearance, a thing's faithfulness to its own kind without any distortion, misrepresentation or masking of its character (Wicks 1999). As an antithesis of this kind of beauty, the grotesque involves exaggeration, parody and masking, celebration of bodily diversity and oddity, inappropriate combinations and breakdown of categorical limits. Moreover, some forms of the grotesque can be assimilated into the Kantian conception of disgust. For Kant, disgust represents an aesthetic failure that prevents an object from entering into aesthetic apprehension in the first place, connected with the 'lower' senses of smell and taste, the realm of sensory experience, resulting in the rejection of the representation (Kuplen 2011).

models, a reaction against the strictly dualistic view. Similarly, it is possible to think that the grotesque doesn't merely amount to a transition between two poles, but instead dwells in liminal spaces between several thresholds. For example, the *Alien* film's cloned protagonist is both dead and alive, newborn and adult, with and without identity, and neither human nor animal.

The nature of the grotesque can also be clarified through the limits of the notion. It is clear that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for the grotesque, as attested by Noël Carroll (2009). The grotesque can even appear as independent of any sensible features, based uniquely on the cognitive, or background knowledge. For instance, consider there are two identical pens on the table, and that someone informs you that one has been in someone's rectum, without any sensible sign of that. Doesn't that pen instantly seem disgusting, based solely on the cognitive idea of contamination? Perhaps even the non-contaminated pen might seem disgusting, for fear of confusing the pens. As Paul Rozin notes, "[d]isgust is triggered not primarily by the sensory properties of an object but by ideational concerns about what it is, or where it has been" (Kuplen 2011).

Even though the grotesque seems an intrinsic property, it may on certain occasions appear as a relational concept, such as kitsch or camp, dependent on contextual factors and interpretation. There might even be a conscious choice to see something through the 'lens' of the grotesque, like in feminist or queer discourses, entailing an alternative reading of a text. Such an approach grants a more constitutive role to the viewer, to subjective interpretations. For example, Harri Kalha (2002) makes a grotesque interpretation of Marilyn Monroe's body, based on the excess, voluptuousness and sensuousness of this iconic figure. Paralleled to a force of nature, the grotesque of this body is ultimately based on its excessively feminine nature, its profound otherness from a male point of view.¹²

Similarly, following the ideas of Kendall Walton (1987) on the role of categories in aesthetic judgment, the grotesque and its aesthetic effect can also be influenced by the category in which it is perceived – whether a horror film, an amusing caricature or a reli-

12 The above-mentioned qualities also apply to the grotesque within the analysis. The grotesque appears both as lack and as excess, and is often intertwined with binary oppositions. It may coincide with ugliness or beauty – as attested by a humanoid robot. The grotesque is also based on the cognitive – like with characters embodying human monstrosity. Finally, the relational aspect is visible through the work's focus, including into the sphere of the grotesque elements that are often regarded as nongrotesque – like an attractive superheroic protagonist.

gious image. For instance, the representations of bodies in pornographic films can be viewed as erotic, horrific, comic, grotesque, or just pornographic, depending on subjective associations and categorization. Obviously, this also concerns other aesthetic concepts – and yet it is especially pertinent to the grotesque because of its ambiguity and elusiveness. With categorization, the role of knowledge and expectations, cultural conventions and socially established ways of classification are of crucial importance.

Finally, it is important to realize that the grotesque often functions as an *aesthetic* notion, entailing a certain distantiation from the 'real world.' For example, the horrific side of the grotesque coincides with what Carroll (1990, 15, 189) calls 'art-horror.' Art-horror refers to the horror genre, corresponding to the emotion of fear and disgust felt in the face of fictional monsters or other supernatural beings. In this way, art-horror differs from 'natural horror' pertaining to the sphere of 'real life.' As Carroll points out, monsters or other horrific creatures are able to fascinate us for the same reason: when knowing them to be imaginary, we can afford a sense of curiosity and fascination toward them.



Despite the relative nature of aesthetic perception, there are features that either support or undermine a grotesque interpretation. It is thus useful to make conceptualizations of the non-aesthetic features often associated with the grotesque – even with the risk of distorting the heterogeneous nature of grotesque reality. Because of this heterogeneity, the characteristics brought up here are mostly of a structural and functional nature, and they only affect the probability of something being considered as grotesque. The following characterization is based on a study of literature and on empirical evidence of grotesque representations (see 'Previous research' in the chapter 'Introduction').

The recurring characteristics of the grotesque can be subsumed under the following three rubrics: category violation, reaction of the viewer, and metamorphosis with surpassing of body limits.¹³

CATEGORY VIOLATION

Firstly, the grotesque can be structurally determined as a category violation, a deviation from cultural norms. In her anthropological study on taboos of uncleanness, Mary Douglas (2002, 36-50) associates the idea of impurity with the violation of a cultural scheme of categorization. Uncleanness is thus a relative idea: dirt is matter out of place, such as shoes on the table, outdoor things indoors or bodily emissions outside the body. As a residue rejected from the normal system of classifications, impure and anomalous things may threaten the defining lines between categories. On the other hand, when classed as anomalous, they may also clarify the outlines of the categories from which they are rejected.

According to Douglas, when facing an anomaly, an individual may ignore it, condemn it or try to create a new pattern of reality where it has a place. In cultural pollution behavior, ambiguity is often reduced by creating established explanations, by labeling the anomalous thing dangerous, by getting rid of the ambiguous being by, for example, killing it, or by bestowing on the symbol of anomaly some sacred powers, to be used in rituals. (Ibid.) Governed by the same structural principle as impurity, the grotesque appears as a category violation, a surplus that cannot be unequivocally classified. It is thus subject to cultural repression, but also equipped with the ability to haunt categorical limits.

In his account of the grotesque, Carroll (2009) notes that the grotesque subverts our categorical expectations – as do fusion figures, giants

13 These characteristics represent the view adopted on the grotesque within the thesis. In the analysis, category violation, metamorphosis and surpassing of body limits are used as criteria for something to be considered as grotesque. As a question of reception, reaction is a more elusive, context-dependent issue.



and monsters. An impure object or being may be categorically ambiguous or interstitial, contradictory, misshapen, incomplete or excessive. Examples of these include zombies, shape-shifters, cyborgs, headless bodies and giant spiders, dirt and disintegrating things. As Carroll concludes, "something is an instance of the grotesque only if it is a being that violates our standing or common biological and ontological concepts and norms," specifying that "[f] usion, disproportion, formlessness, and gigantism are the most frequently recurring ways of realizing this structural principle."

Moreover, as Carroll points out, something that falls outside a culture's conceptual scheme is potentially dangerous, a threat to common knowledge, which is why the grotesque is frequently associated with evil. It is this association that is exploited when portraying one's political adversaries as grotesque. (Ibid.) Through its built-in idea of alterity, the grotesque may thus have considerable propagandistic power.

People from different cultures seem to share an urge to imagine fantastic creatures combining distinct ontological categories, defying the idea of a world divided into fixed classes. Since ancient times, people have innovated various hybrid creatures as part of their myths, legends, religions and arts. Such creatures include the gods of Antiquity, the holy figures of Christianity, the embodiments of good and evil forces, such as angels and demons, as well as all kinds of monsters, vampires, extraterrestrials, santa clauses and superheroes.

For example, hybrid creatures are a recurring motif in the grotesque artworks of Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel, Matthias Grünewald, James Gillray, Francisco Goya, James Ensor, and many others. The grotesque is equally present in the twentieth century art of Cindy Sherman, Louise Bourgeois, Paul McCarthy, Salvador Dalí, Francis Bacon, Kalervo Palsa, Wim Delvoye and Carolee Schneemann, to mention only a few.

The grotesque also proliferates in contemporary mass culture, including film, television, game and print media, in particular pervading the horror and science fiction genres.

REACTION

The grotesque can also be characterized functionally, by the reaction it elicits in the viewer. This happens, however, in co-operation with the structural principle. As Carroll (2009) claims, the three leading functions of the grotesque today are horror, comic amusement and awe. The grotesque can promote these divergent mental states, supporting the appropriate

cognitions, because all these states obey the structural principle of category violation.

The first one, horror, is composed of fear and disgust that work together, engendering the 'horrific grotesque.' The criterion of disgust is impurity, felt as something repulsive or toxic, such as blood, vomit or pieces of flesh. Impurity is directly connected to the structural aspect of the grotesque. As for fear, it acts as a catalyst in transforming the object of conceptual anomaly into an impurity, conceived as something dangerous. (Ibid.)

Secondly, in an unthreatening context, the grotesque can function as a vehicle for comic amusement, producing the 'comic grotesque.' It is directed at something that is perceived incongruous or absurd, like the comic monsters of *South Park*, or clowns with their humanly anomalous character. In a joyful atmosphere, without concern for human harm, such category mistakes and anomalies yield laughter. (Ibid.) The 'comic grotesque' is also affiliated to the carnivalesque, characterized by a playful and subversive spirit, upside-down logic and topsy-turvy imagery.

The third possibility is that the grotesque elicits awe, the object being perceived as miraculous, such as the forest spirit in *Princess Mononoke*, or the brachiosaur in *Jurassic Park*, both impossible beings and thus category mistakes. Defying our conception of nature, the 'miraculous grotesque' engenders curiosity, exultation or appreciation. It is not perceived as horrific since it is not associated with fear, nor as comic, as awe entails a kind of acceptance – unlike laughter, which involves an element of rejection, for example, as representing an aborted fear-response. (Ibid.)

Hence, with the 'horrific grotesque,' categorical anomaly takes the form of impurity, with the 'comic grotesque' the form of incongruity, and with the 'miraculous grotesque' the form of the miraculous. (Ibid.)

Supporting Carroll's view, Eco (2011, 16) notes that 'ugly' – along with adjectives like 'deformed,' 'monstrous,' 'grotesque,' 'obscene,' 'abject,' 'repellent,' 'horrible' and 'terrifying' – involves a reaction of disgust, repulsion, horror or fear. Similarly, Douglas (2002, 45-46) observes that the experience of confronting ambiguity may involve laughter, revulsion or shock at different intensities. Finally, Kayser (1981, 30-31) also asserts that the feelings engendered by the grotesque include laughter, disgust and surprise.

In addition, at the unconscious level, the reaction toward the grotesque may involve identification, related to abjection. For Julia Kristeva (1982), the violent sense of repulsion stems from resistance to the compelling sense of identification, as one tries to ensure one's subjectivity by abjecting the (m)other, while being



at the same time drawn toward the abject. Like the abject, the grotesque is also associated with the maternal and the feminine, engendering both attraction and aversion. The sense of identification contributes to the confusion of reactions – and to the uncanny allure of the grotesque.

Altogether, there are several functions that the grotesque can perform. As Carroll (2009) points out, the entire sphere of the grotesque should not be identified with a single function: besides provoking amusement and horror, the grotesque can be used to allegorize the human condition, to satirize, to delight the eye decoratively, and so on. This is why a structural account prevails over functional ones. Kayser (1981, 181) also warns us against defining the grotesque solely on the basis of its effect, even though a vicious circle is not to be avoided: when defining the grotesque structurally, it is necessary to refer to its reception.

METAMORPHOSIS AND SURPASSING OF BODY LIMITS

The third main characteristic of the grotesque is metamorphosis, related to the surpassing of body limits. Metamorphosis is linked to category violation, as a being in transformation inevitably falls between static categories. The notion of metamorphosis stems from Bakhtin's (1984) study on the carnivalesque in Rabelais's novels, based on an ancient folk culture and its system of carnivalesque forms, themes and symbols, marked by a grotesque conception of the world. As Bakhtin suggests, the grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in an incomplete transformation, intertwining death and birth, growth and becoming. In this image are present the two poles of transformation, "the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis." (Ibid., 24-26.) Metamorphosis is thus characterized by continuous change, incompleteness, ambivalence and a coexistence of categorically opposing elements.

Metamorphosis represents the body as a twofold entity. This can be a pregnant body, a fusion of bodies united through sex or violence, or a single body merely alluding to another body, such as a lustful body yearning for a bodily union. With its tendency to metamorphosis, the grotesque also produces paired images, figures and scenes. As Bakhtin (2011, 126) observes, paired images are characterized either by contrast or similarity, engendering twin figures and doubles, or combinations of high and low, wisdom and stupidity, the corpulent and lean. Metamorphosis manifests itself typically through the variants of the grotesque 'double body.'

Related to metamorphosis, the surpassing of body limits is also quintessential to the grotesque. In Bakhtin's view, the grotesque body transcends its boundaries, exalting all the excrescences and orifices that enable communication with other bodies and the world. Based on this interaction, the grotesque expresses the practice of bodily life – including the events of eating, drinking, secretion, defecation, intercourse, pregnancy, aging, sickness, violence and death. These acts are performed at the intersection of the body and the outer world, or within the confines between two bodies. (Bakhtin 1984, 26, 317).

Body limits are thus literally surpassed, like in the act of eating, when a body incorporates food – a piece of the world – into itself through the mouth. In effect, the body parts that are emphasized in grotesque imagery include the mouth and the nose, the genitals and the buttocks, the stomach and the womb (ibid., 316-339). With emphasis on these prosaic body parts and functions, grotesque aesthetics represents an alternative approach to the body, rejecting the classical canon's idealized, static and closed body.

The transgressive body is eventually open to the world, constituting a 'cosmic grotesque body.' Surpassing its own limits, the grotesque body is mingled with animals, objects, and the cosmos (ibid., 27.)

It stresses elements common to the entire cosmos: earth, water, fire, air; it is directly related to the sun, to the stars. It contains the signs of the zodiac. It reflects the cosmic hierarchy. This body can merge with various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands, and continents. It can fill the entire universe. (Bakhtin 1984, 318)

The cosmic grotesque is visible for example in giant legends that connect natural phenomena and topography like mountains, rocks and rivers to giants, their body parts and bodily emissions. For instance, in Rabelais's text, Pantagruel's urine is associated with flood and sea water. While urine represents a cosmic link between body and sea, feces constitutes a link between body and earth. In cosmic dimensions, these substances lend a bodily character to the material world that thereby becomes closer to humans. (Ibid., 328-336.) The cosmic aspect of the grotesque also conveys the idea of metamorphosis and surpassing of body limits.

Besides the natural and material world, the grotesque body is 'cosmically' linked to other bodies, generating the Bakhtinian



(ibid., 19) idea of the 'collective grotesque body,' referring to human bodies seen as a whole.

Metamorphosis is further affiliated to the grotesque principle of degradation, based on an ancient topographical hierarchy. Degradation is associated with downward movement and earth, the lower body and the reproductive organs, representing the grave and the womb, and having not only a destructive but also a regenerative function (ibid., 21). As a paradigm example of the grotesque, Bakhtin mentions a collection of terracotta figurines: "senile pregnant hags" that are laughing. Combining decaying flesh with new life, they represent death that gives birth, showing life in its contradictory process. (Ibid., 25-26.).

The twofold nature of the grotesque is ultimately characterized by a fundamental unity of the opposites. The opposites are displayed as indissociable and complementary, ambiguously coalescing with each other. Altogether, for Bakhtin, metamorphosis is a wide concept ranging from the double body to the collective or the cosmic body; from a singular image to the incompleteness of all existence.

The grotesque ultimately reverts to the grotesque body. Grotesque deeds like cannibalism, or substances like feces, are necessarily bodily in nature. A nymphomaniac's grotesquely excessive sexuality is enacted through bodily action, and a grotesque object, like the spaceship in the *Alien* film, bears bodily connotations. In fact, lack or excess becomes grotesque precisely when embodied. On the other hand, the grotesque body may also refer to an abstract idea, as does the collective grotesque body.

THE PROTEAN GROTESQUE

Since its origins, the grotesque has evolved into an aesthetic category – referring to certain creative attitudes, contents, structures and effects on the beholder (Kayser 1981, 179-180). If considering the characteristics of the grotesque from the point of view of the aesthetic division between the object, its creation and its reception, the characteristics cover all these aspects.

Category violation belongs to the realm of the object itself, not concentrating on particular forms and contents, but on the structure. The reaction toward the grotesque represents reception. Metamorphosis and surpassing of body limits are mainly object-oriented: partly structural and partly content-related, as referring to certain themes and symbols. Metamorphosis and transgression also enclose creation-oriented and reception-oriented aspects. This stems, firstly, from Bakhtin's emphasis on folk culture and the 'carnival spirit' that gave birth to the grotesque –

related to creation. A second factor is Bakhtin's focus on the constitutive role of the viewer/participant, based on the model of the carnival – related to reception. This explains the appeal and usefulness of Bakhtin's model, even though it is limited in its focus. As the schematization reveals, the three main characteristics of the grotesque all reflect different sides of the notion, complementing each other, and thereby offering a more complete picture of the grotesque.

Moreover, the grotesque is inextricably connected to the notion of control. Associated with the archaic forces of sexuality and aggression, the undisciplined grotesque body represents precisely the uncontrollable, the visceral flux, at the same time horrifying but strangely alluring.

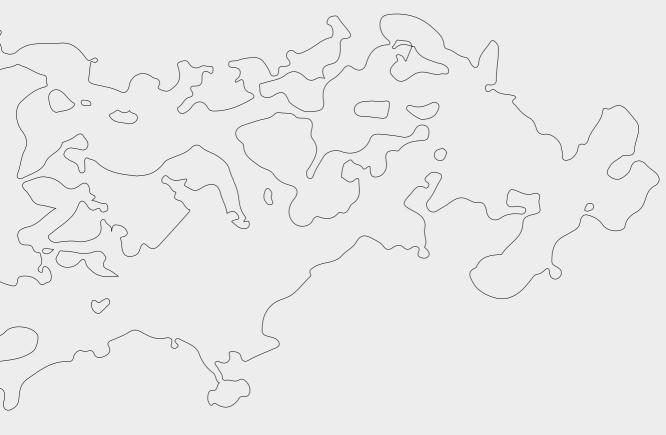
As seen, the attributes of the grotesque include category mistake, lack and excess, translated into amusing incongruity, or expressing the horror of loss, decay and chaos. However, if seen on its own terms, without predefined categories, the grotesque can reveal its multifaceted beauty, reflecting the multiplicity and ambiguity of the world.



According to its definitions, the grotesque violates cultural categorizations, embodies metamorphosis, surpasses body limits, and arouses reactions in the viewer. These characteristics were examined in the previous chapter, and also briefly exemplified through *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (see 'Introduction'). In the contemporary world, traditional mythological creatures coexist with modern monsters and fantasy figures, along with a variety of grotesque bodies and acts, eagerly commercialized by the media and entertainment industry. Due to changes in society, such as mediatization and secularization, the notion of the grotesque, or the experience of it, has also changed. Part of grotesque imagery has become increasingly ordinary, no longer arousing intense emotional reactions.

In this chapter, I firstly explore this change, concentrating on the mundanization of grotesque imagery, and on the reverberations of this development on viewer experience. A special interest is attached to the emerging category of the 'ordinary grotesque' and to the idea of 'grotesque experience.' Secondly, to provide a wider view on the grotesque in today's visual culture, I will present some examples of the grotesque within popular culture, contemporary art, and media imagery. Finally, I will reflect on the variations of the grotesque body in contemporary culture.

THE CHANGE



The study of visual culture, according to Gillian Rose (2012, 29), should concentrate more on the experience of images: the ineliminable subjective 'feel' is an important part of interpreting and understanding images. In meaning-making processes, the audience, the act of reception and experience are of great significance.

In contemporary visual culture, 'the grotesque-as-experienced' also represents an unexplored territory. How, then, is the grotesque experienced today, and what has changed?

First of all, the grotesque has gone everyday. With its protean forms, it seems to be everywhere. As Noël Carroll (2009) claims, not only has the grotesque gone mainstream, but it has also become one of the leading formats of mass culture today.¹⁴

This development is likely to influence the viewer's experience of grotesque imagery. My claim is that a significant part of grotesque imagery is today experienced as ordinary and commonplace, instead of extraordinary and fantastic. This imagery no longer involves the reactions traditionally associated with the grotesque, including horror, laughter and awe. Hence, 'the grotesque-as-experienced' may be more or less affectless.

A significant factor behind the change is the considerable increase in the availability and diffusion of grotesque imagery. The widely shared visual encounters with the grotesque started with King Kong, Frankenstein and other early movie monsters of the 1930s, and became more recurrent with the horror and science fiction films of the 1970s and 1980s. Today, there is an uncontestable proliferation of grotesque figures, such as vampires, witches, monsters and superheroes, and of grotesque violence, divulgated by a wide range of media – including games, virtual worlds, theme parks and merchandise. The grotesque is a constitutive part of the horror, science fiction and fantasy genres, with a strong foothold in the mainstream.

The availability of grotesque imagery has been enhanced by cultural and technological changes such as mediatization, digitalization and the overall expansion of the media and entertainment industry. In the social sphere, influential factors include secularization, democratization and changes in norms and taboos. Contemporary culture is increasingly tolerant as regards what can be legitimately represented in terms of nudity, sexuality, violence and slander. As a result, grotesque representations with outdated taboos are more likely to be received with indifference. Along with secularization, grotesque figures' religious connotations and affiliations with biblical beasts and hellish mythology have also become less important.

Thereby the affective impact of this imagery has weakened.

14 Carroll uses the term 'mass art,' a conception overlapping the notion of mass culture.

The increased availability of grotesque imagery has resulted in habituation. People have become accustomed to such figures as fictional vampires – no longer evoking the shudder-provoking idea of a real vampire. Media consumers have certainly become more difficult to impress.

The change in the reception of the grotesque seems a natural part of the ongoing semantic change of the notion. Some grotesque forms necessarily become obsolete with time, yet without being expelled from the sphere of the notion. The capacity of the grotesque to arouse emotional reactions in the viewer appears as the most volatile part of its characteristics.

Because of this change, it is possible to postulate the category of the 'ordinary grotesque.'

THE ORDINARY GROTESQUE

The 'ordinary grotesque' designates something that is recognized or defined as grotesque formally, but that is yet ordinary and commonplace, or experienced as such. Its opposite would be the 'extraordinary grotesque,' something that is truly exceptional and unusual, conforming to the traditional conception of the grotesque as something essentially abnormal and anomalous. However, the ordinary grotesque is only relatively ordinary, as grotesque representations are intentionally created images, however mundane in the category of representations. Ultimately, the experience of ordinariness depends on contextual factors and on the individual. Someone that is more rarely exposed to grotesque material may have a strong reaction in response to an 'ordinary' grotesque figure.

At first look, the grotesque and the ordinary may seem irreconcilable. The most widely acknowledged characteristic of the grotesque, category violation, is clearly at odds with the idea of ordinariness. As Carroll (2009) notes about the grotesque, "[a] lmost by definition, it is a departure from the ordinary." Wolfgang Kayser (1981, 179-189) goes as far as defining the grotesque as "the estranged world," a world that has become strange and alien.

However, the grotesque is associated with the ordinary in at least three ways. Firstly, with the everyday practice of media consumption, even the basically extraordinary media content may be imbued with ordinariness. Within the field of everyday aesthetics, Kevin Melchionne (2013) observes that everyday life is characterized by "an economy of effort, a minimum of planning." Watching television and following a series are examples of this kind of unplanned, widely practiced activity. As Ossi Naukkarinen (2013)

confirms, it is the everyday attitude that eventually constitutes the everyday. This attitude is marked by familiarity, habits, routines, easiness, superficiality and a kind of half-consciousness. These attributes perfectly describe the everyday media space and consumption.

Secondly, some of the media content has become so recurrent that it can be regarded as ordinary. A good example is the well-known monsters proliferating in media imagery. For instance, as listed by the TV Tropes site, the classical vampire figure of Dracula is recurrent in all media environments, including advertising (e.g. Count Chocula of General Mills), anime and manga (e.g. Hellsing), comic books (e.g. The Tomb of Dracula), film (e.g. F. W. Murnau's Nosferatu), literature (e.g. Dracula by Bram Stoker), theater (e.g. Frank Wildhorn's Dracula: the Musical), TV (e.g. Dracula: The Series), video games (e.g. Castlevania), webcomics (e.g. Dracula Everlasting), and Western animation (e.g. The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy). The 'classical movie vampire' trope is also present in Yamp You, a vampire porn site. (TV Tropes.)

Thirdly, there are also further, deeper connections between the grotesque and the ordinary. If considering the Bakhtinian view, the grotesque body is associated with the ordinary through its down-to-earth bodily life, including the mundane events of eating, defecation, intercourse, birth, violence and death. Moreover, the grotesque is related to the notion of filth through the principle of impurity and metamorphosis. As discussed by Yuriko Saito (2010, 149-151), filth, mess and decay are part of the everyday as an expression of transience, a deviation from an object's optimal state.

The 'ordinary grotesque' could also be called the 'affectless grotesque,' with an emphasis on the idea that the grotesque is *experienced* as ordinary. Stressing the role of contextual factors, this brings ordinariness into the fuzzy sphere of human experience. The grotesque may even be extraordinary and ordinary at once – extraordinary as a real-life phenomenon, but ordinary as a representation, like the all-too-common fictional vampire.

The opposite of the 'affectless grotesque' would be the 'evocative grotesque,' designating the kind of grotesque that is likely to arouse a strong emotional reaction. These concepts certainly form a context-dependent continuum, as a large part of representations fall somewhere in between the extremes. For example, one can easily imagine a mediocre horror film oscillating between the horrific and the indifferent, the nauseating and the boring.

Ordinariness and lack of emotion appear as a chasm between the structural principle of the grotesque and the reaction it is supposed to evoke. Within traditional definitions of the grotesque, these two characteristics have been seen as complementing each other. This no longer is necessarily the case.

In contemporary visual culture, there seems to be plenty of room and demand for grotesque representations of minor intensity and evocativeness. Today, a major motivation behind the creation of a grotesque figure may be to endow a character with sex appeal, mystery and intrigue, as attested by the many recent vampire films and series.

Altogether, ordinary grotesque representations may be viewed as 'diluted' or 'degenerate' forms of the grotesque, and as such not good representatives of the notion, nor worthy of study. Emerging from popular arts and mass culture, these representations may seem less meaningful than some imposing grotesque works within fine arts. From the point of view of social significance, however, this kind of ordinary, widespread imagery is all the more influential, as it has a huge potential for affecting people on a large scale.

GROTESQUE EXPERIENCE

Grotesque experience designates an experience in response to a grotesque representation. It is related to the reactions associated with the grotesque, including horror, laughter and awe. Like a reaction, experience is based on a lived feeling instead of mere recognition. Experience, however, refers to a more pervasive and consistent state of mind than reaction. Grotesque experience thus corresponds to an aesthetic experience associated with an aesthetic concept – the grotesque.¹⁵

Grotesque experience can be particularly intense as evoked by something highly affective and evocative. Like the grotesque, the corresponding experience is also extremely heterogeneous. It can vary in terms of the type of feelings involved, the prevalence of pleasure or displeasure, and the degree of intensity. For example, grotesque experience can range from a sensuous savoring of corporeality to a horrifying feeling of nausea – and these may also alternate or intertwine. There are yet some limits to grotesque experience. As an aesthetic notion, the grotesque entails some dis-

15 For John Dewey (2005 [1934], 42-59, 81, 267), aesthetic experience is based on an interaction between a live creature and its environment. Aesthetic experience is not distinct from other emotional experience, and it is pursued for its own sake. Filled with need, desire and affection, it intertwines the practical, the intellectual and the emotional. Marked by unity and intensity, aesthetic experience is dynamic, fulfilling and consummating.

tantiation. It is thus easy to consider a representation as 'only fictional,' which undermines its effect. On the other hand, when the representation is 'too real' – for example a photograph of a real-life car accident – it might no longer produce grotesque experience. A gory real-life event, however visually fascinating, involves practical concerns that prevail over aesthetic considerations.

What, then, is the particularity of grotesque experience, as against other kinds of aesthetic experience? It seems to me that it stems from two factors: deep ambiguity and effective taboos. These are supported by a third factor: the cognitive construction of the grotesque. These elements also demarcate the evocative grotesque from the affectless grotesque.

The first factor, ambiguity – together with incongruity and discrepancy – is a core element of the entire notion. It is embedded in Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) idea of metamorphosis, referring to the ambiguous coexistence of categorically opposing elements. In Kayser's (1981, 118-119) view, the grotesque uses discrepancy as its means, characterized by a fusion of incompatible elements, and engendering a feeling of profound alienation. For Carroll (2009), incongruity, as related to categorical anomaly, is the basis for the reactions elicited by the grotesque. As Kayser (1981, 31) notes, the effect may also be humorous and horrible at once, as the spectator is simultaneously amused and appalled by the grotesque.

Moreover, ambiguity needs to be 'deep' in the sense that it is *experienced*, instead of being present only formally. For example, with the figure of the vampire, this is necessarily not the case, as the vampire is no longer experienced as ambiguous. The modern spectator can easily locate the figure into a culturally established category – that of the fictional vampire.

A strong effect stems from ambiguity that is emotionally charged, or markedly disturbing for the spectator. For example, an ambiguity based on cognitive dissonance, or on discrepancy between the unconscious and the conscious mind can be very confusing. It may entail a conflict between biological and social reality, between instinctual impulses and cultural restrictions. Abjection also is based on deep ambiguity, engendering repulsion and attraction, identification and resistance.

The second factor constituting the specificity of grotesque experience is the presence of effective taboos. Taboo is also related to the idea of impurity, the structural base for the grotesque. To be influential, a taboo needs to be 'effective'; truly valid in the culture. An outdated taboo can even undermine a representation's evocativeness, as has happened with religious imagery tamed by secularization. Taboo's connection to grotesque experience can be compared to Sigmund Freud's (1991, 144, 201-203, 299) idea of the relation between laughter and a joke. The joke-work overcomes

the internal inhibitions of the hearer, and the psychical cathectic energy used for the inhibition suddenly becomes superfluous. This energy is discharged by laughter, with a yield of pleasure. In the same way, an effective taboo produces energy that is discharged within grotesque experience.

Ambiguity and taboos are not the only elements involved in the complicated mechanism of grotesque experience. A third constitutive factor is the cognitive construction of the grotesque.

As regards viewer experience, a category violation or ambiguity is not enough for something to be experienced as grotesque. There may be grotesque experience even when the structural characteristic is missing – thus based merely on the cognitive. For example, in the case of a grotesque movie character, the cognitive amounts to the viewer's knowledge about the character, and the character's position in a larger structure: the narrative and the action through which the grotesque is performed. Other characters' reactions are also influential through identificatory processes. Such factors become even more important when the grotesque character, or the 'monster,' is physically normal-looking, like Hannibal Lecter. A figure may thus be grotesque only because it is cognitively constructed as such. Besides the narrative or the plot, the contextualization may also be realized intertextually, or through the narrativization of a single image.

In fact, Kayser (1981, 57-58, 184) wonders whether physical ugliness or deformity are sufficient to render things grotesque, and whether something beyond external appearance is needed anyway. For him, an isolated figure belongs to the grotesque only within a context, entailing an unexpected outburst of the grotesque in a familiar world, or a situation with ominous tension. Regarding monsters in horror film, Carroll (1981) also stresses the crucial role of the narrative context, largely determining the affective significance of these figures.

Besides fiction, grotesque experience may be supported by a real-life context, referring to actual bodily deformation or transformation. It may be created through aesthetic surgery and piercing, or through deliberate injury done to one's body, either documented online or presented within a piece of performance art.

On the other hand, grotesque experience may be obstructed by elements that undermine the grotesque effect. In a film, for example predictability, implausibilities, worn-out cinematic devices and clumsy details can make a formally horrific figure appear lame, pretentious or mildly amusing, making room for a camp attitude. However, the experience may also be sustained, only changed from a horrific to a grotesquely comic experience.

Altogether, the weak spot of these reflections on grotesque experience is that the discussed factors form a kind of vicious circle related to the necessity of experiencing things. Ambiguity is needed for experiencing the grotesque, but in turn ambiguity also needs to be experienced.

EXAMPLES



Within contemporary grotesque imagery, there are two opposing tendencies. The first is the proliferation of the 'ordinary grotesque,' as discussed above. The second is the abundance of the 'evocative grotesque,' in particular representations that provoke extreme disgust, outrage or shock.

In popular culture, the iconic individualized monsters include such figures as Dracula, King Kong, Frankenstein, Godzilla, E.T., Alien and Freddy Krueger. In the superhero section, these are accompanied by Superman, Spider-Man and Batman. 16 Wellknown grotesque characters issue from films like Star Trek, Star Wars, Terminator, Blade Runner, X-Men, Men in Black, Matrix, Transformers and Harry Potter. Such figures keep fascinating people, and they sell, judging by the continuous film remakes and the characters' preponderance within media environment. Due to media convergence and image flow across media, grotesque figures originally known as movie characters also proliferate in videos, games, toys and merchandise.

Within the category of the ordinary grotesque, the characters may be structurally grotesque and yet not generate a reaction associated with the grotesque. One example is Edward Cullen, a well-known vampire and the male protagonist of the Twilight Saga film series (2008–2012). As a vampire, he crosses the categories of living/dead and human/non-human. He has endured a metamorphosis from human to vampire, and his bite turns humans into his kind. Besides the blood-sucking act, Edward's body surpasses its own limits through his cosmic powers. Characterized by both lack and excess, he is endowed with bestial desire: a lust for blood - a clear metaphor for sexual desire, intertwined with aggression.

Despite - or perhaps because of - his anomaly, Edward is a perfect romantic hero, a fantasy boyfriend who is loving and protective toward his human girlfriend, and yet exciting and dangerous, with the sex appeal of a lethal transcategorical figure. TV Tropes mentions Edward Cullen as one example of the 'romantic vampire boy' trope. In terms of reaction, Edward is neither horrific nor comic. There might be some moments of awe when Edward is shown flying or running at high speed, or glimmering in sunlight, but most of the time he doesn't seem that awe-inspiring. Physically he looks like a (handsome) human, with only slight allusions to his vampire origins.

As for the second trend, in today's visual culture there is a pro-

liferation of intentionally 16 Carroll (1990, 40-41, 222) argues that "Superman is provocative representations.

shocking, disturbing and a monster, but not a horrific monster" - in the sense that it violates the natural order as defined by contemporary science - not because it is ugly or frightening, or cruel or evil.

As Max Ryynänen (2015; 2017) critically points out, one major factor in this tendency is that artworks based on bodily excesses have sensational value. In these works, the body is used as "an experimental stage, sculpture, symbol of excess and exhibited *object*." From Pasolini to Pussy Riot, such transgressions have certainly engendered groundbreaking works and statements. However, in focusing too much on excess, the discourse on contemporary arts is skewed. Scandalous extremes and provocations invade the media space and leave a mark on art history, overshadowing the less sensational, more moderate artworks and artists, worthy of attention. (Ibid.)

Shock value is often produced through the grotesque, by definition based on bodily excess and transgression of limits. There have been several well-known grotesque provocations performed during the past few decades. Within the field of 'abject art,' Andres Serrano's legendary Piss Christ (1987) photograph depicts a plastic crucifix submerged in the artist's own urine. Wim Delvoye's Cloaca installation (2000–), with its different versions, consists of an industrial machinery that produces feces, imitating the natural digestive process. An early example of transgressive performance art, Paul McCarthy's Class Fool (1976) presents the artist throwing himself around a ketchup-spattered classroom, injuring himself for real, vomiting and inserting a Barbie doll into his anus. Stretching the limits of the human body, the performance artist Stelarc has had an artificial ear surgically implanted onto his arm (2007).

Within the sphere of feminist avant-garde art, Cindy Sherman's photography is a renowned example of grotesque exploration of the female body, aiming at unveiling the absurdity of conventional representations. In her Sex Pictures series (1992), Sherman uses mannequin body parts and genital prostheses, displaying the female body as monstrously sexualized, reiterating the conventions of hard-core pornography (Smith 1997, 24). A different example, involving the male body, is the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, depicting sadomasochistic excesses with idealized bodies within The Perfect Moment (1989) exhibition. A particularly provocative feminist case is the work of Annie Sprinkle, known for such performances as Public Cervix Announcement (an ongoing project), in which she invites the public to view her vagina with a flashlight. In fact, contemporary female performance art has frequent recourse to abjection, to the display of the uncontrollable body, exploring the relation of feminine monstrosity to identity questions (Ross 2009). Moreover, there are today several 'activist artists' that use bodily substances, such

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as menstrual blood, to create art and to advance a specific cause. Regarded as powerful tools, grotesque elements are thus used in activist, abject and shock art, along with various subcultural and antisociety movements.

Within visual and performing arts, the grotesque is present in performance and photography, as already seen, but also in painting, drawing, sculpture, comics, theater and dance – in more or less disturbing or digestible forms. Contemporary artists using grotesque elements in their art include Francis Bacon, Frida Kahlo and Kalervo Palsa, Touko Laaksonen and Stiina Saaristo; in sculpture, Louise Bourgeois, Damien Hirst and Paavo Paunu; in comics, Tony Moore and Juho Juntunen; in theater, Philip Ridley and Leea Klemola; and in dance, Dave St-Pierre – to name only a few.

Grotesque excesses also proliferate in film. Films that are regarded as particularly disturbing or controversial – that pop up in Internet listings of 'the most disturbing movies' – include such films as Antichrist (Lars von Trier, 2009), A Serbian Film (Srđan Spasojević, 2010), Cannibal Holocaust (Ruggero Deodato, 1980), The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973), The Human Centipede trilogy (Tom Six, 2009–2015), I Spit on Your Grave (Meir Zarchi, 1978, with several sequels and directors, 1993–2016), Nekromantik (Jörg Buttgereit, 1987), and Salò (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975). In fact, film appears a particularly auspicious seedbed for body horror.

Within media imagery, the grotesque has a strong presence in television and online streaming services, along with viral media. Besides films and series, videos and games also abound with grotesque elements. Sticking with vampires, for example, on Netflix (2017) the titles with vampires include: The Yampire Diaries, The Originals, From Dusk till Dawn, Shadowhunters, Hemlock Grove, Penny Dreadful, The Vampire's Assistant, Van Hellsing, Being Human, Bitten, Kiss of the Damned, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The Twilight Saga, Vampires Suck and Underworld. And the grotesque is certainly not limited to vampires. Even though representatives of quite moderate, 'mainstream' body horror, some of these titles include also fairly shocking elements of gore and viscera. Obviously, much more extreme material is easily found in the murky abysses of the Internet, including displays of gut-wrenching bodily insides and oddities, snuff films, the utmost sexual violence and hard-core pornography.

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THE MULTIFACETED GROTESQUE BODY



Emphasizing different sides of the grotesque, there are different 'faces' of the grotesque body, including the 'Fantasy body,' 'Freak body,' 'Ordinary body constructed as grotesque,' 'Female grotesque body,' 'Body transgressing its boundaries' and 'Abject body.' These faces necessarily overlap each other, and by no means provide an exhaustive view of the grotesque body. Above all, they illustrate the multifaceted nature of the grotesque body in contemporary media imagery.

FANTASY BODY

The most traditional face, the 'Fantasy body,' refers to fictional transcategorical fantasy figures that represent a category violation. Such figures may be combinations of human and animal, of living and dead, of animate and inanimate, or of this world and the otherworldly, thereby endowed with cosmic powers. This category includes traditional and modern monsters, vampires, witches, ghosts, zombies, aliens and humanoids, but also superheroes and mythological or religious embodiments of good and evil powers.

Heroic, good and beautiful figures are not always regarded as grotesque – like the angel, even though it is formally a fusion of a human and a gigantic bird. Some figures may evoke mostly awe, instead of horror or laughter, and the reaction may also be missing altogether. For example, contemporary vampires may be perfectly beautiful and seemingly *un*grotesque. There are also formally monstrous figures that are recognized as grotesque, but not necessarily experienced as such.

FREAK BODY

Unlike the 'Fantasy body,' the 'Freak body' represents 'real-life' bodies. This face is the current version of the former 'circus freak' category, nowadays exemplified by the deviant bodies within the highly voyeuristic TV documentaries or websites dedicated to bodily oddities. The oddities can be deformities, embarrassing characteristics or 'showy' medical conditions, such as extreme obesity or underweight, excessive body hair, gigantic tumors, and so on.

Today, the 'Freak body' may also refer to representations of bodies subjected to excessive or failed plastic surgery. In addition to involuntary conditions, there is a marginal category of the voluntarily acquired grotesque body. In addition to 'the largest fake breasts in the world' type of imagery, a well-known example is the 'Lizardman,' Erik Sprague, who has meticulously shaped his body to obtain a lizard-like appearance through plastic surgery and tattooing. With his bifurcated tongue and green scale-patterned skin, he resembles a fictional 'Fantasy body.'

Such extreme cases circulate massively in the Internet, while minor forms of bodily transformation have become mainstream. Because of the current proliferation of grotesque figures, there might be some kind of shift from fictional to real-life figures, entailing a preference for bodies subjected to real-life transformation, as against fantastic bodies created through masking and digital effects.

ORDINARY BODY CONSTRUCTED AS GROTESOUE

The 'Ordinary body constructed as grotesque' demonstrates how the body doesn't need to be a 'freak' or conspicuously anomalous in order to appear as grotesque. This face refers to the reality of natural bodies of all shapes and ages - to bodies that deviate from the narrowly defined beauty ideals of contemporary Western culture. In the media, ordinary bodies are increasingly often portrayed as targets of body makeovers, or as objects of mockery and laughter. For example, there are websites that display paparazzi photos of celebrities appearing as 'shockingly' old, or that zoom in on the armpit hair of celebrity women, presenting them as ridiculous or aversive. Besides celebrities, 'ordinary' people are also targeted through websites (e.g. People of Walmart) that laugh at all those unbalanced, bumpy and wiggling bodies wrapped up in tacky clothing - represented as grotesquely comic. In film, ordinary bodies, deviating from ideals, may even be represented as embodiments of evil, in the tradition of physiognomy.

A major factor behind this tendency is the confusion between the ideal and the norm. In media representations, the (increasingly unrealistic) beauty ideal is presented as the norm. In this way, the 'ordinary' body – that ought to be the norm – collapses into the category of the grotesque.

FEMALE GROTESQUE BODY

The main characteristic of the 'Female grotesque body' is that it somehow 'overrepresents' feminine otherness, contrasting it with the masculine norm. This is a very heterogeneous category,

17 Mary Russo (1995, 14) detects such traditional codings, persistent in Western culture, as "the Medusa, the Crone, the Bearded Woman, the Fat Lady, the Tattooed Woman, the Unruly Woman, the Hottentot Venus, the Starving Woman, the Hysteric, the Vampire, the Female Impersonator, the Siamese Twin, the Dwarf." Barbara Creed (1993, 1) notes that the monstrous-feminine wears many faces: "the amoral primeval mother, vampire, witch, woman as monstrous womb, woman as bleeding wound, woman as possessed body, the castrating mother, woman as beautiful but deadly killer, aged psychopath, the monstrous girl-boy, woman as non-human animal, woman as life-in-death, woman as the deadly femme castratrice."

encompassing such grotesque stereotypes of the female body as 'the witch,' 'the monstrous mother,' 'the castrating woman,' 'the vamp,' 'the nymphomaniac' and 'the doll woman.' An example of the doll woman is the online imagery of



Valeria Lukyanova, known as the 'Human Barbie.' With her meticulously transformed Barbie-like body and look, obtained through plastic surgery, the figure appears caricaturally feminine – to the point of being grotesquely excessive. As an uncanny half-woman half-doll, she represents the animate/inanimate ambivalence. The Barbie doll, as an icon of feminine beauty, is obviously not generally associated with the grotesque. The grotesque of the Barbie body goes unnoticed in our culture, because of its familiarity and congruence with the ideal. The Barbie woman's creepy side is made perceptible by the horror and science fiction genre, when placing the doll woman, or the humanoid robot, in a fearsome context.

The Barbie-like body may be rare in public swimming pools, and yet common in media representations – in the all-pervasive imagery of surgically attuned bodies pursuing the impossible ideal. The Barbie-like body also proliferates in 'erotic' representations, including music videos and pornography – with its voluminous image production and obscene allure, expanding its aesthetic into the wider field of visual culture.

In addition to this 'beauty facet' of the female grotesque, there is the more traditional 'ugly facet,' referring to such grotesque figures as the witch and the female monster. Some figures may be so familiar, like the witch – a paradigmatic example of the 'ordinary grotesque' – that they are not even regarded as grotesque. A monstrous female figure may also be 'normal-looking,' or even 'beautiful,' thereby pertaining to the next category.

BODY TRANSGRESSING ITS BOUNDARIES

The 'Body transgressing its boundaries' is the most conceptual category, as based on contextual factors. Instead of the formal configuration, the common denominator is the context, or the action in which the body participates. The body becomes grotesque because it is involved in grotesque acts, often of violent or sexual nature, and characterized by excess or graphic display. In these acts, the body's actual limits are literally surpassed or violated. Such transgressions include splatter film mutilations, spectacular dismemberments à la Tarantino, and within the pornographic context, hyperbolic sexual acts – in which the body limits are ostentatiously surpassed.

By extension, the category refers to characters that are monstrous and yet quite 'normal-looking' – such as Norman Bates, Hannibal Lecter, or the Evil Queen in Snow White. As the category demonstrates, the grotesque is ultimately based on the cognitive: what we know about the character, and the narrative context, enacted through the character's deeds. This kind of bodily

imagery, exemplified by grotesque violence, is extremely common, and more or less evocative or affectless.

ABJECT BODY

The 'Abject body' is equally a body transgressing its boundaries, the emphasis being on the materiality of the body. This face has an affinity with the 'Female grotesque body,' based on the psychoanalytic connection between the abject and the female body, the maternal body and the monstrous-feminine. A visible characteristic of this category is the graphic display of body's insides and body fluids - including blood, gore, excrement and entrails, along with filth and decay. The abject body is typically explored by the horror film, but is also present in abject art and performance. For example, The Exorcist deals with female monstrousness expressed through the protagonist's rebellious abject body – a body excreting bile, urine, shit, mucus and blood (Creed 1993, 34-38). As for the Alien film series, it depicts the Alien's maternal reproductive system that is extremely visceral and repulsive. Through the male victims, the films also present an abject male body: attacked by the Alien, the body's insides are violently revealed, and integrated into the maternal system.

The abject body is nowadays quite common in certain media environments. Despite its ordinariness, the sight of bodily insides may have special affective power, built into the human psyche, so that it is prone to elicit a strong reaction in the viewer.

To sum up, the different faces of the grotesque body encompass the 'Fantasy body,' referring to mythical or fantastic creatures in popular fictions, the real-life 'Freak body' issued from voyeuristic media displays of aberrant bodies, the 'Ordinary body constructed as grotesque' as a leftover of the narrow beauty ideal, the 'Female grotesque body' overrepresenting feminine otherness, the 'Body transgressing its boundaries' involved in grotesque acts, and finally the 'Abject body' displaying the body's insides.





PINKFLAMINGOS



Pink Flamingos (1972) is a transgressive black comedy with cult reputation, made by John Waters aka the 'Pope of Trash.' The film stars Divine / Harris Glenn Milstead as Divine (aka Babs Johnson), Edith Massey as Edie, Danny Mills as Crackers, Mary Vivian Pearce as Cotton, Mink Stole as Connie Marble, David Lochary as Raymond Marble, and Channing Wilroy as Channing. Other important characters include Suzie (Susan Walsh), Linda (Linda Olgierson), Cookie (Cookie Mueller), and The Egg Man (Paul Swift). 18

Within my repertory of films, *Pink Flamingos* represents a carnivalesque comedy with a sharp-eyed gaze at society. The following analysis focuses on the narrative, but the film is also thoroughly carnivalesque through its tacky realization, its campy cinematography and trashy style. A queer microcosm of Divine and her friends, *Pink Flamingos* presents a world turned inside out; a place in which vice is virtue and filth is an object of desire. The main reason for choosing the film is its impudent presentation of all the greatest taboos one can imagine, including the archetypal taboos of incest and cannibalism.

Moreover, in the film's reverse universe, everything is so extreme – so grotesque – that hidden cultural structures are brought to light. The film is a great example of outrageous elements functioning as metaphors for contemporary culture. The flagrantly grotesque elements thus have a strong ideological meaning and a clear target: the dominant ideology. The grotesque also embodies fantasies that are repressed by normative culture, tossed into the cultural margins. In particular, the character of Divine, in its excess and ambivalence, presents a fascinating conglomeration of fantasies and fears, opening up enlightening interpretative dimensions. Altogether, the film's emphasis is both on hegemonic ideals that are smashed down, and on major cultural taboos that are cheerfully broken.

In the storyline, Divine is a notorious underground figure living harmoniously in a trailer with her zany family: her mother Edie, her son Crackers, and her friend Cotton. Divine is proud to be known as "the filthiest person alive," a title that an envious couple, Connie and Raymond Marble, set off to pursue, with the intention of destroying Divine. Initiating a 'battle of filth,' they send a piece of excrement to Divine. Divine soon organizes a birthday party that is transformed into a cannibalistic feast as the police arrive, summoned by the Marbles. In retaliation, Divine attempts to 'curse' the Marbles' house by having oral sex with

her son on their couch. In the cellar, Divine finds three captured women and learns

18 Directed, written, filmed and edited by John Waters. Production design and set design by Vincent Peranio. Divine's costume and makeup by Van Smith.

about the 'baby ring' business run by the Marbles, helped by their servant Channing. Divine liberates the women, who then castrate Channing. Meanwhile, the Marbles burn Divine's trailer. To conclusively vanquish the Marbles, Divine organizes a 'press conference,' a parodic trial and execution event. In an epilogue, Divine eats a piece of dog feces.

The grotesque elements and scenes chosen for further analysis include the character of Divine, the character of Edie, the women in the cellar, the sex scenes, the notion of filth and excrement, the cannibalism scene, the incest scene, the castration scene, and finally the dog feces scene.

THE FILM BEGINS

The film starts with an image of garden statues representing pink flamingos, placed in front of Divine's pink trailer, parked in the woods. 'Mr. Jay,' a voiceover narrator,¹⁹ introduces Divine as "the notorious beauty" and "the filthiest person alive," who, because of this tabloid-given title, has been forced to go underground, adopting the alias of Babs Johnson. The voiceover also tells that with Divine live "her trusted traveling companion, Cotton, her delinquent son, Crackers and her mentally-ill mother, Miss Edie."

DIVINE

Divine, the protagonist woman, looks like an excessively extravagant drag queen. The actor is a man, but in diegesis Divine is a 'real' feminine woman.

In her transgressive, grandiose and abundant presence, Divine is a grotesque character par excellence. In a grotesque manner, she presents an ambivalent fusion of two bodies: the resiling male body of the actor is intertwined with the emerging female body of the character. Also the visible signs of femininity are pushed to the limit: besides her excessive makeup and voluminous coiffure, she wears ostentatious feminine dresses and high heels. There is even an allusion to her magnificent vagina: in a grocery store, she puts a big raw steak between her legs, and later on tells that she warmed it up in her "little oven."

Divine's flagrant makeup is reminiscent of a clown's face, of a grotesque mask. Her unnaturally drawn eyebrows invade the entire forehead, extended to the hairline that is shaved to allow even more space for the eyebrows and eye makeup. Her mouth is augmented through an abundance of lipstick and meticu-

lous lip lining beyond the edges. According to Mikhail

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Bakhtin (1984, 39-40), the mask is related to joyous relativity, metamorphosis, violation of natural boundaries and negation of conformity to oneself.

Divine is also grotesquely excessive and transgressive through her behavior, attitude and deeds. She is like the carnival queen of the underworld, a woman from carnival hell.

From the point of view of feminist theory, Divine is a curious representation of woman. Most evidently, she embodies Judith Butler's (2002) idea that gender is culturally constructed through performativity, a repetition of bodily acts. Even sexual orientation is for Divine a matter of acts. When being asked whether she is a lesbian, she replies: "Yes. I have done everything."

As Butler argues about drag performance, it parodies the idea of an original gender identity. Revealing a dissonance between sex, gender and performance, drag denaturalizes them and exposes their fabricated unity, the fiction of 'heterosexual coherence.' Drag thus unveils the imitative structure of gender itself. (Ibid., 174-175.) The dissonance is made highly visible by Divine with her free-floating, self-defined identity. In the cinematic construction of Divine, the importance given to her expressive manners, style and makeup also emphasizes the performative, even theatrical nature of gender.

According to Joan Riviere's (1929) famous idea, femininity is constructed, and can be considered a masquerade: a mimicking performance of womanliness that can be assumed like a mask. For Luce Irigaray (1991, 78, 135-136, 169-170), the masquerade of femininity – as an artificially created appearance – covers a fundamental lack. It is a role imposed on women and adopted by women in order to participate in *man*'s desire, covering an absence of their own desire. This makes women objects for sexual enjoyment, not those who enjoy.

In Jacques Lacan's view, feminine masquerade stems from the constructed nature of feminine identity. Through this masquerade, 'not-having' the phallus is transformed into 'being' the phallus, which entails that woman rejects an essential part of her femininity. As a result, genuine womanliness and womanliness as masquerade appear to be the same thing. (Homer 2005, 99-102.) As Lacan (2006, 583) observes: "It is for what she is not that she expects to be desired as well as loved." Hence, underneath there is no 'real' woman, which makes Divine, paradoxically, a prototype of the Lacanian non-existing woman.

When proclaiming her 'politics' at the press conference, Divine says: "Kill everyone now. Condone first-degree murder. Advocate cannibalism. Eat shit. Filth are my politics. Filth is my life. Take whatever you like." A grotesque parody of desire, Divine's desire for filth communicates the anarchistic energy of desiring itself, stressing the courage to determine one's object of desire. The formulation encloses the idea: "Desire whatever you like."

Altogether, Divine's untroubled and playful masquerade not only questions the idea of 'original' identity, but also presents Divine as the one who enjoys. Moreover, Divine's rebellious character doesn't conform to the norms imposed on womanhood. With her impudent attitude and lifestyle, her ostentatious appearance and tabooed acts, she has broken with a proper feminine role, 'making a spectacle of herself.' She is also far from the prevailing female beauty ideal. However, in the film's topsy-turvy world, Divine not only is a 'notorious beauty,' but also gets to represent a whole and intact subjectivity. With her unfailing self-assurance, self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency, she can be taken for a role model.

As regards Divine's family, the family members are related to each other through sexual bonds. Divine and Cotton have an alluded lesbian relationship, Divine and Crackers practice incestuous sex, and Cotton watches Crackers having sex with other women. In the absence of fathers and paternal law, everything is permitted – even the Oedipal transgression does not result in guilt and tragedy. Following a carnivalesque upside-down logic, what is normally forbidden is even prescribed, or sanctified.

Divine also embodies a 'castrating woman.' In opposition to Freud's view that woman terrifies because her genitals appear castrated, Barbara Creed (1993, 6, 110, 130) maintains that woman terrifies rather because her genitals might castrate. The two figures, the *castrated* woman and the female *castrator*, are to be found in the mythology of all patriarchal cultures. Taking the form of the 'domesticated woman' and the 'savage woman,' both figures are potentially harmful to men. For Creed, yet another possibility is that woman is *not castrated*, being physically whole and intact – and thereby endowed with terrible powers. Divine appears as a castrator that is not castrated, which makes her an ambiguous, powerful figure.

At times Divine also appears as a 'phallic woman.' The phallic woman is an image created to sooth male fears of female sexuality, supporting the idea that woman is like man (ibid., 116). Even though acting like a 'savage woman,' Divine is also soothing because doubly phallic: inside the diegesis a phallic woman, and outside the diegesis phallic as the male actor.

Ultimately, Divine is a great parody of the archetypal phallic woman that is fetishized and fantasmatic. As Creed (ibid., 158)

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points out, the archetypes of the 'phallic woman' and the 'castrating woman' represent two different fantasies: the former is related to comforting sexual sameness, and the latter to terrifying sexual difference. In Divine's thoroughly parodic character, these archetypes coalesce, engendering an oscillation between several fantasies.

EDIE

Divine's mother, 'Miss Edie,' is introduced as sitting in a playpen in Divine's trailer, impatiently asking for eggs.

In the playpen, only wearing a white undergarment and negligently applied red lipstick, Edie is a grotesque sight, embodying the stereotype of 'the fat woman.' Following carnivalesque logic, the mother is turned into a child. Masses of white flesh bulging out of the underwear, Edie is like a hyperbolic baby – like the baby Pantagruel – with an insatiable appetite for eggs.

Like a monomaniac, Edie is pictured as constantly demanding and devouring eggs, having conversations about eggs, and waiting for the 'Egg Man' to come – to whom she eventually gets engaged. In Lacanian framework, the egg obsession represents a materialization of desire, and a manifestation of lack in the subject: something that cannot be satisfied. The object of desire, or the 'objet a,' is something that momentarily fills the void of the Real within our symbolic reality. (Homer 2005, 72, 87-88.) The objet a is the index of desire that points to an absence (Lacan 2006, 571). It may be an ordinary object that has been upgraded into the 'Thing'; an empty space on which fantasy is projected (Žižek 1992, 133). In the film, the banality of eggs reveals the arbitrariness, and idiocy, of any desire.

Genderwise, the banal object of desire happens to be a woman's desire. An ancient symbol of birth and new life, the egg also refers to procreation. Symptomatically, in the film, the only person who wants to get married is Edie – a regressed childlike woman. Literally conforming to the proper feminine role, Edie is a grotesque travesty of the patriarchal ideal of the domesticated woman.

At the same time, Edie is a representation of the 'abject mother.' Fed by her family members, she stays immobile in the playpen, reminiscent of a hatching mother or a queen bee surrounded by worker bees. With her appetite for eggs, she is a cannibalistic mother devouring her offspring. In her regression, Edie embodies the repressed, the semiotic maternal body, and the unsettling aspects of maternity.

WOMEN IN THE CELLAR

The film's main events are organized around the mysterious 'battle of filth.' It is initiated by the Marbles, who scheme against Divine in an attempt to seize her title of "The filthiest person alive." At the beginning of the film, Connie and Raymond Marble are introduced as "two jealous perverts," a married couple who lead a seemingly bourgeois, upper-class life. In reality, they run a 'baby ring': they kidnap women, lock them in the cellar, inseminate them with the help of their servant, and sell the babies to lesbian couples. The money is then invested in pornography shops and in heroin that is sold to school children.

Excessive immorality and outrageous deeds make the Marbles grotesque figures, pertaining to the category of the 'Body transgressing its boundaries.' The couple is defined by a sharp contrast between their corrupt inner life and their pretentious outward appearances, extending from the house décor and formal language to Connie's fancy dresses, eyewear and jewelry. Only worried about their 'social standing,' the Marbles attest how beneath the irreproachable surface lie unscrupulous morals and perversion.

The Marbles' wealth is explicitly based on grotesque exploitation and abuse. In their cellar, there are three captive women. Alice has already given birth and is now dead, negligently left lying on the floor. Suzie, kept in the cellar for some months, is pregnant. Linda, who has just been captured and narcotized, is to be impregnated. In the vulgar 'insemination scene,' Channing masturbates and then inseminates the unconscious woman with a syringe – which makes Suzie vomit. There is a close-up of the vagina as Channing performs the operation.

The grotesque condition of the three captive women – all dirty and in rags – is a clear metaphor for women's exploitation, for society's control over the female body. Revealingly, the women expose the three normative phases of the female reproductive cycle: not yet pregnant, pregnant and no longer pregnant. The corpse represents a female body that has already accomplished its mission and has become worthless. The narcotized body is put on hold, merely waiting to be impregnated, and the pregnant body is deprived of all control over itself. With the three women, the film exposes the compulsory association of womanhood with motherhood. As Kristeva (Oliver 1993, 6, 87) claims, the oppressive representation of women, in which women's bodies are reduced to the maternal function, is a major cause of women's abjection and oppression within patriarchy.

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SEX SCENES

In the film, there are altogether four sex scenes.

As part of the 'battle of filth,' the Marbles send a spy, Cookie, to gather information about Divine. Presenting herself as the date of Crackers, Cookie comes to the trailer to have sex with him, prepared to endure "unheard of atrocities." In the first sex scene, taking place in a shed, Crackers thrusts live chickens between their bodies. The scene is also marked by voyeurism: Cotton secretly watches the act, as agreed with Crackers.

The use of chickens grotesquely combines humans and animals in an improper sexual relation. The scene reminds of the famous episode of 'Gargantua's swabs' that displays a long list of unexpected objects that Gargantua reports using as "arse-cloth." The ultimate, most efficient swab turns out to be a soft and warm goose. According to Bakhtin, in the process, the used objects are uncrowned in order to be regenerated. In this way, "[t]heir half-effaced image reappears in a new light." (Bakhtin 1984, 371-377.)

In the scene, a chicken is also injured for real, the blood spreading on the couple's naked bodies. In the *Pink Flamingos* DVD (in the introduction to scenes that were cut), John Waters comments on the use of chickens, saying that animal rights activists often ask him how he could kill a chicken for a movie. His response to that is: "I eat chicken. I know the chicken didn't land on my plate from a heart attack. We bought the chicken from a farmer who advertised freshly-killed chicken. I think we made the chicken's life better. Got to be in a movie, got fucked. And then right after filming the next take, the cast ate the chicken."

Because of the embedded voyeurism, the scene also appears as a reworking of the 'primal scene.' In Freud's view, children come up with certain theories to explain the mysteries of sexual difference, conception, pregnancy, birth, and sexual relations or marriage. These infantile sexual theories, according to Freud, "go astray in a grotesque fashion," and yet contain a seed of truth. Children who witness parental intercourse may adopt the 'sadistic theory of coitus,' confusing the event with an act of violence. The infantile theories may be revived in adulthood "in cases of insanity." (Freud 2001, 209-226.) A child may also imagine that animals are involved, which is reflected in mythological stories about people copulating with animals or other creatures (Creed 1993, 17-18). In *Pink Flamingos*, the grotesque scene thus reiterates a repressed infantile sexual vision.

In accordance with Lacan's view of fantasy, the sex act is ultimately devoid of satisfaction, and the fantasy is turned into a repulsive, ridiculous act. For Lacan, fantasy is something that should never be realized. The pleasure derives from the imaginary setup, not from the achievement of its object. (Homer 2005, 87.) For Lacan (2004, 30), this applies to the unconscious even more widely: the unconscious "is neither being, nor non-being, but the unrealized." In the film, the voyeuristic scene pictures a somewhat naturalistic, clumsy sex act: Crackers struggles to keep the chickens in place, Cookie is hurt by the chickens' claws, and the chickens desperately try to escape. As Slavoj Žižek (1992, 110) remarks, as soon as the sexual act is shown – for example in pornography – its charm is dispelled: "Instead of the sublime Thing, we are stuck with vulgar, groaning fornication."

The position of the peeping woman reflects the spectator's positioning, based on a voyeuristic gaze. However, there is no subjective shot of the sex act from the peeping woman's perspective, but only an objective shot from the opposite direction. It is thus the spectator that is watched by the peeping woman – reflecting Lacan's idea of gaze: we are always already looked at, from all sides, instead of merely viewing the world from one point (Lacan 2004, 72).

The second sex scene presents Connie and Raymond lying naked on a bed, frenetically sucking each other's toes while praising their love to each other. The two naked bodies form a symmetrical image of the grotesque double body, in a sort of sixty-nine position. Hilariously, Connie's hair and pubic hair is tinted in red, and Raymond's in blue. The similarly colored upper and lower parts constitute a carnivalesque 'cartwheel,' the bottom and the face changing places. The manners of the couple are also highly theatrical as they exalt their love for each other by enumerating 'filthy' things that their love surpasses – including their "hair color," "the sound of babies crying, of dogs dying" and other absurdities. The love confession parody is reminiscent of the ancient carnivalesque mode of speech that confuses abuse and praise.

The third sex scene includes Raymond's two 'exhibitionist escapades.' In the park, wearing a long jacket, Raymond follows women and exposes his genitals to them – with a turkey neck or a sausage tied to his penis. The human body is thereby confused with food and animals, and the penis is made grotesquely ludicrous and hyperbolic. The first time, the female victims start screaming, but the second time the victim is revealed to be a transsexual woman, who in turn exposes her breasts and penis to Raymond – to Raymond's horror.

According to Freud (1991, 141-145), the desire to see the sex organs is an original, archaic component of the libido. In this

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desire, looking has replaced touching. The inclination to self-exposure is easily recognizable in children, later on repudiated by the repressive activity of civilization and internalized censorship. In *Pink Flamingos*, the obstacle of censorship is overcome through the grotesque: Raymond is enjoying the act like a child, ludicrously shaking his penis with the groceries attached.

In the first episode, the aggressed women are victimized, while the second turns the power relation upside down. The male aggressor becomes the victim himself, while the (transsexual) woman, triumphant, laughs at the man. The transsexual woman terrifies man because she is *not castrated*.

The fourth, incestuous sex scene is discussed later. Importantly, all the sex scenes make explicit what normally remains implicit fantasmatic content. As Žižek (2000, 12) notes, a direct staging of underlying fantasies "renders innocuous their subversive impact, and provides a new confirmation of the old Freudian thesis that perversion is not subversive, i.e., that there is nothing effectively subversive in the pervert's direct staging of disavowed fantasies."

FILTH AND EXCREMENT

As part of the 'battle of filth,' the Marbles send Divine a package with excrement in it. Sending a "turd" is supposed to be "the filthiest gesture in the world," as the Marbles reckon; a way to become "the filthiest people alive." Divine considers the turd a highly offensive act, regarding filthiness as her own trademark, and decides to "outfilth the asshole or assholes that sent this."

The notion of filth, both literally and metaphorically understood, has a prominent role in the film. It refers both to concrete filth, like excrement, and to more abstract phenomena, like immorality, aberrant sexual behavior and grotesque violence. Ambiguously, filth is also represented as something desirable, and the title of "the filthiest person alive" is a highly desired status.

As Bakhtin (1984, 152) observes, excrement is most suitable for degrading all that is exalted, because it is ambivalent, simultaneously debasing and renewing. Excrement is a grotesque substance by excellence, as it is an intermediary between body and 'no-longer-body.' In the film, the excremental also equals freedom. In the end, Divine and her family decide to start sleeping in gas station lavatories. "Fuck permanent residences," Crackers concludes.

Ambiguously, Divine considers the gift turd as "an outrageous attempt to humiliate and disgrace" her private life. On the other hand, Divine ends up eating dog feces, which boosts her coveted position as the filthiest person alive. Also in the dialogue, the word

"shit" sometimes has a negative and sometimes an extremely positive meaning, for example when Connie declares: "Even more than my own shit do I love you, Raymond."

By extension, the excremental covers all substances considered as impure. Among body fluids, the film displays images of blood, sperm and saliva. When spread by Divine and Crackers over the Marbles' house, saliva is represented as something polluting – and magically powerful. It is assimilated into poison that makes the house 'react,' causing the couch and the table to move by themselves.

As Kristeva (1982, 71-74) claims, polluting objects fall into two categories: excremental and menstrual, both issued from the maternal sphere. Excrement and its equivalents, such as decay and corpses, threaten identity from the outside, while menstrual blood presents a threat from within the identity. To protect itself, culture represses the maternal authority and institutes a system of ritual exclusions. In the film, the prohibitions crumble, as the maternal bodily territory prevails over the social order.

In *Pink Flamingos*, filth is also eroticized. For example, saliva and blood are presented as sexually arousing for the characters. Speaking of blood, Divine claims: "It does more than turn me on, Mr. Vader. It makes me come." Sexuality is thus grasped in the infantile sense – presented under the guise of the grotesque. According to Freud (1991, 141), the sense of sexuality in childhood is marked by an undifferentiation of what is sexual and what is excremental. It is as if there were a 'cloaca' within which these are not distinguished. As Kristeva (1982, 53-55) notes, within the "erotic cult of the abject," the abject substances – whether excrement, urine, blood or sperm – become the object of sexual desire, empowering the person with the "bad object" of the maternal body. On the other hand, as Creed (1993, 13) confirms, representation of bodily wastes can cause pleasure because it violates the taboo on filth, also referred to as 'pleasure in perversity.' It may provide a return to the early period in the mother-child relationship when playing with the body and its wastes was a source of untrammeled pleasure. Altogether, the film speaks to the repressed side of self, fascinated by the visceral universe. Through grotesque erotization of filth, Pink Flamingos explores the ambivalent attitude toward bodily substances.

An important sequence in the film, Divine's birthday party is a carnivalesque celebration of abundance, conviviality and freedom. At the party, there is also a hilarious 'singing anus' performance. In this episode, a naked man 'sings' with his anus, alternately contracting the anal muscles and stretching the surrounding

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skin with his hands, at the pace of the speedy Surfin' Bird song. The performance is yet another manifestation of the theme of excrement, and of ludicrous exhibitionism. In a carnivalesque manner, the face is topographically substituted by the buttocks, and the mouth by the anus, following the carnivalesque logic of the "wrong side out" and of "bottoms up" (Bakhtin 1984, 411).

CANNIBALISM

Raymond finds out about the party and calls the police to report "a lewd and disorderly party." When the police officers arrive, the party guests start to thrash them with hammers, axes and rolling pins. Suddenly Divine and the guests – like it was the most natural thing to do – proceed to ripping the flesh off the bones of the officers, tearing with their teeth the bloody flesh shreds and eating them, the fast-paced <code>Pink Champagne</code> playing in the background. In a low-angle shot, shown from below, Divine and her flock look imposing, forming a circle around the policemen. As the camera adopts the point of view of the cannibalized policemen, the spectator is also symbolically devoured and debased.

The thrashing is suddenly transformed into a celebration of Edie's and the Egg Man's engagement. In her worn-out underwear, Edie is lifted into a wheelbarrow in which she hardly fits, decorated with empty cans and "Just engaged" signs. In fact, the birthday party episode portrays a carnivalesque 'Rabelaisian' thrashing that consists of graphic violence and hyperbolic dismemberments, performed in a cheerful atmosphere. The thrashing is a symbolic act directed at the old authority and the dying world, represented here by the police officers. As the blows help the new to be born, the punishment is transformed into festive laughter, bringing forth the collective body of the people. With the engagement, the party is also compared to carnivalesque bridal cuffings and mock weddings, a symbol of fertility and procreative force. (Bakhtin 1984, 198-206.)

Such a joyful representation of cannibalism alienates the act from its denotative content, stressing instead its symbolic meaning. The battle is turned into a triumphal banquet, a "feast for all the world," stressed by the use of kitchen utensils and household wares as weapons. Through the devouring mouth, the grotesque body transgresses its limits, encounters the world and triumphs over it. The scene thus celebrates change and renewal, "the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities." (Ibid., 11, 22, 79, 281.)

During the cannibalistic act, Divine occupies a prominent place in the shot. In her white glamorous party dress, she is an imposing sight as she devours the red fleshy bone, with her teeth and mouth covered in blood, laughing. As the matron of her microcosm, Divine appears as a monstrous, cannibalistic maternal figure. Representing an infantile fantasy, cannibalism is characterized by the wish to bite, to incorporate and to destroy the object (IDP, 1203).

INCEST

Constituting a turning point in the film, Divine makes a counter-attack on the Marbles. With her son Crackers, she enters the Marbles' house in their absence. As an act of 'filth,' the mother and son start to lick various objects, with the aim of 'poisoning' the house. Saliva flows out of Divine's mouth as she licks the stair railing, the couch and the table, glasses and plates. Sexually aroused, they imagine aloud all the 'filthy' things that the Marbles do in the house. As a grotesque culmination of the film, Divine performs fellatio on Crackers in pornographic style.²⁰ The two bodies form a grotesque double body par excellence. Divine and Crackers also theatrically exalt their relation. The utmost perversity of the act is grotesquely underscored by the verbalization stressing their mother-son relation. For example, Divine addresses Crackers as "my own flesh and blood, my own heritage, my own genes," and says, "Let Mama make a gift to you, a gift that only a mother can make." Not without black humor, in the spirit of carnivalesque religious blasphemy, Divine says, "Oh, Crackers, let Mama receive you like communion." The abysmal act is supposed to 'ruin' the Marbles' house forever. Divine and Crackers get interrupted as they hear Channing make noise in the house.

The scene constitutes a grotesque reworking of the Oedipal fantasy. For Freud, the Oedipus complex is a way of mapping the child's ambivalent, both loving and hostile feelings toward its parents. In Lacan's view, the Oedipal situation represents a triangular structure that breaks the closed circuit of mutual desire between the mother and the child. The intervening third party is the symbolic position of the Name-of-the-Father, representing the symbolic law that prohibits the child's desire. (Homer 2005, 52-53.) In the world of *Pink Flamingos*, this authority is missing.

Moreover, Divine's open mouth - highlighted by her blatant

20 "John Waters has stated that the only scene in the film he regrets is the unsimulated fellatio sequence between Divine and Danny Mills; he claims it was awkward to film because the two actors were friends. He also feels it is the most 'dated' part of the film; Deep Throat (1972) had just been released and this scene was Waters satirizing the rise of 'porno chic'." (IMDb.)

- nighlighted by her blatant lip makeup – appears as a signifier of the mythical vagina dentata, based on Freud's transposition theory, whereby the lower body

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parts are transposed onto the upper ones (Freud 2010b, 398). Such an overturning also represents carnivalesque upside-down logic. Confused with the vagina, the open mouth becomes the grotesque 'jaws of hell,' a gateway to the terrifying maternal body. In this way, the abject mother comes to represent an inverted castration threat, the fear of being sucked back into the mother through her vagina (Oliver 1993, 55). The scene expresses abjection in its original signification as the process of separation from the maternal body – here translated into a grotesque reunion.

With this scene, the film pokes at one of the greatest taboos of humanity. As Irigaray (1991, 35-36, 39) notes, the relationship with the mother is the 'dark continent' of our culture; a 'mad desire' that is repressed and censored by the law of the father. The bodily encounter with the mother is something that must remain forbidden.

CASTRATION

At the Marbles' house, Divine and Crackers find Channing in the closet. Channing had earlier disguised himself as Connie by wearing her clothes, using her makeup and dyeing his hair red. The Marbles surprised Channing in the middle of his one-man masquerade, and locked him in the closet. In the cellar, Divine and Crackers also find the captive women who explain the situation, furious with Channing, who captured and raped them. Channing tries to defend himself, saying, "I was only doing my job." Finally, one of the women castrates him with a knife – constituting an act of grotesque dismemberment. The carnivalesque spirit is stressed by Divine's and Crackers' reactions: during the operation, the camera focuses on their enthusiastic faces, pictured as laughing in an airy manner, like at a harmless joke.

Meanwhile, the Marbles burn down Divine's trailer, rejoicing at their victory over Divine. When the Marbles arrive at home, they find Channing lying on the floor. As if verbal specifications were needed, Connie shouts, "He's been castrated! His penis is gone!" In his pink butler coat, with his flaming red hair and gaudy makeup, Channing looks like a grotesque clown. Representing the oppressive system, Channing is turned into a carnival monster that is ridiculed, degraded and torn apart.

In the film, the castration scene is the moment when 'tables turn.' It is reminiscent of medieval comic images of death, in which the symbols of power are turned inside out, representing victory over fear (Bakhtin 1984, 91). The cellar is turned into a carnivalized underworld, a place where everything is inverted

compared to the outside world: the highest are debased, and the lowest are crowned (ibid., 383). Channing as the masculine oppressor becomes the feminine oppressed, whereas the women are empowered.

Channing is doubly feminized through his feminine disguise and his castration. In fact, according to Creed (1993, 19), when male bodies are represented as grotesque, they acquire characteristics associated with female bodies. However, it is not cross-dressing or transgender activity per se that is denigrated: Divine, a 'non-diegetic' drag queen, is represented as admirable. Altogether, the act of castration is an attack on oppressive phallic power. Through the exposure of Channing's cowardice and feminine aspirations, phallic power is revealed as a scam.

Channing's character, finally, expresses something that is constitutive of ideology. As Žižek (2000, 26-27) notes: "the difference between 'subjective' pathologies and the libidinal economy of the 'objective' ideological system is ultimately something inherent to the subject(s): there is an 'objective' socio-symbolic system *only insofar as subjects treat it as such.*" The dimension of symbolic institution also applies to the Lacanian notion of the 'big Other,' and is crucial for the understanding of the functioning of totalitarian systems.

THE FILM ENDS

As the final resolution of the film, Divine organizes a 'press conference' in the woods next to the burned trailer. The event includes an interview, a 'trial' and an execution. Journalists and cameramen arrive, and the Marbles, tied up, are brought to the venue. Reporters ask Divine several unrelated questions, for example about her political beliefs and sexuality. Finally, adopting the role of the judge, Divine declares that the Marbles are found guilty of "first-degree stupidity" and of "asshole-ism," and that the verdict is death. Tarred and feathered, the Marbles are shot by Divine, saying, "Kill kill kill. Shoot shoot shoot."

The press conference is a parody of the legal system, a carnivalesque mock trial. Through tarring and feathering, the Marbles are ridiculed. More contemporarily, they are also humiliated in front of the media. In the carnivalesque worldview, death is seen as a prerequisite for renewal, and that is why it is a merry event.

THE EPILOGUE

As an epilogue to the film, Divine eats dog feces – which the actor notoriously does for real. Divine sees a little dog defecating in the street, rubs her belly and licks her lips, grasps a piece and eats it.

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She smiles – a bit strained – and shows the feces in her mouth, on her tongue and between her teeth.

The theme of filth reaches its peak in the grotesque completion of the film. Eating feces turns upside down the act of defecation, confusing food and waste, the mouth and the anus. As an ancient invention, the idea of scatophagy is embodied by the *scatophagus*, a figure who devours excrement in antique comedies and medieval *facéties* (Bakhtin 1984, 179). According to Bakhtin (ibid., 224, 335), excrement has a special role in overcoming fear. As a link between body and earth, it is an expression of man's awareness of his materiality. Excrement grants a bodily character to the world that becomes closer and less terrifying. As "gay matter," excrement turns terror into a joyous carnival monster. Divine's chewing mouth, full of this matter, is a grotesque statement *par excellence*, repulsive and yet exhilarating.

As Freud (2010a, 67) points out, children – unlike adults – do not consider excrement as disgusting or despicable. They see it as something valuable, as a part of their own body. The uncomplexed attitude toward excrement also defines *Pink Flamingos*. When asked by a reporter why Divine ate dog dirt for the film, John Waters replied: "It was just a little piece of dogshit, and it made her a star" (IMDb).

THE ROLE OF THE GROTESQUE

In *Pink Flamingos*, the grotesque conveys markedly infantile fantasy. It unfolds the repressed side of self, resuscitating prohibited desire and morbid fantasy. Concretizing taboos, fears and fantasies, the grotesque mediates between the unconscious and the conscious mind. Free from constraints, it pictures sexuality and filth as ludicrous and immensely fascinating. In this way, the grotesque enables an ephemeral return to the infantile world – a world full of play and exciting possibilities.

The grotesque enhances the enjoyment of the prohibited by presenting it as appealing, hyperbolic or laughable. Especially the comic grotesque has the power to remove obstacles to satisfaction. At the same time, the grotesque provides a safe encounter with the abject. An imminent threat is thereby replaced by a threat that is distanced because it is aestheticized, eroticized or humorized – like the abject elements in *Pink Flamingos*. The grotesque embodies repressed fantasy, like incestuous desire, but by representing it also destroys it, undermining its power.

Grotesque fantasy is however subversive, because it is antithetical to cultural norms and ideals. With its ambiguous allure, fantasy is able to resist normative thinking. Through ambivalence, upside-down logic and fantasy, the grotesque expresses imaginative freedom, enabling a different world to be imagined. The grotesque thus liberates the human mind from prevailing truths and conventional ways of conceiving the world.

The grotesque may also turn a phenomenon into its opposite, mixing up the underlying binary structures. Creating transfers of signification – like with Divine – the grotesque naturalizes and denaturalizes, makes the beautiful appear as monstrous and the monstrous as beautiful.

Through exaggeration and distortion – in the portrayal of gender and society – the grotesque reveals structures. It exposes falsely naturalized ideals and their culturally constructed nature.

ANTICHRIST²¹



Among the range of films constituting my research material, Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) is probably the most crucial one because it attests to the most intriguing function of the grotesque. In the film, the grotesque serves as a stand-in for the unrepresentable, the unknown. The film's ambiguous allure derives from the collision between the breathtaking beauty of cinematography and the nauseating grotesque of sexual cruelties.²²

Moreover, the grotesque is entwined with the film's thematics of nature, evil and the feminine. Laced with analogies between the ominous forest and the abhorrent depths of the human mind, the film is a gloomy representation of humanity. At first sight about humans in nature, the film is ultimately about nature in humans.

An experimental combination of drama and horror, *Anti-christ* stars Charlotte Gainsbourg as the unnamed woman and Willem Dafoe as the unnamed man. Apart from brief apparitions, other people are absent.

The film tells the story of a grieving couple who, after the death of their child, retreat to a remote cabin in the forest. The therapist husband intends to treat the wife's depression himself, making her confront her deepest fears in the woods. However, the grieving process takes an unexpected direction, as the woman manifests increasingly violent sexual behavior. A constellation of mysterious symbolism and hallucinations, philosophical discussion and acts of cruelty, the journey develops into a quest into the darkest sides of human nature.

The grotesque elements and scenes chosen for further analysis include the child's falling, the woman as a grotesque subject, the woman's grotesque actions – comprising the castrative attack, the grindstone episode, the burial and the self-castration – as well as nature, evil and the relation between the man and the woman.

THE FILM BEGINS

The film starts with a prologue consisting of two concomitant scenes paralleled by crosscutting. The prologue is displayed in an extremely slow-speed slow-motion, in black and white, and accompanied by music from Händel's opera *Rinaldo*. The scenes portray the child falling out of a window while the parents are having sex.

The painfully slow falling movement is echoed by snowflakes floating down, and by water drops falling on the woman's face in the shower. The moment of

²¹ The current chapter on Antichrist is an augmented, modified version of my previous article "The Lacanian Real in Lars von Trier's Antichrist" (Synnyt/Origins, 2/2014, 10-22). The two texts present considerable similarities.

²² Written by Lars von Trier. Cinematography by Anthony Dod Mantle. Edited by Anders Resn and Åsa Mossberg. Visual effects by Peter Hjorth. Music by Kristian Eidnes Andersen.

sexual climax is synchronized with the end of the child's fall. The camera constantly focuses on the woman's face, on her orgasmic pleasure.

FALLING

The prologue constitutes an atrocious, yet cinematographically stunningly beautiful scene. Creating an initial trauma, the episode lays bare the crucial connection between sexuality and death. With a nascent sense of guilt, the scene makes the woman's pleasure appear illegitimate, odious, grotesque. Death and anxiety are further symbolized by the mysterious concept of the *Three Beggars*, composed of *Pain*, *Grief* and *Despair*. In the scene, these take the form of toy figurines close to the fatal window. Later on, the *Three Beggars* are embodied in an ominous star constellation, as well as in the deer, the fox and the crow making sinister appearances throughout the film.

A recurring element in the film, falling is traceable to an ancient, vertical conception of the world. Representing a topographical hierarchy between high and low, it is visible in the triadic structure of heaven, earth and hell. Within the grotesque worldview, according to Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 21), downward movement reflects the principle of degradation, associated with earth, the lower body and sexuality.

The flagrant juxtaposition of the tragic fall and the ecstatic sex act is a highly grotesque feature. For example, the close-up image of penetration is grotesquely followed by an image of the child's toothbrush falling down, caused by the parents' lustful movements in the bathroom. The sexual zeal of this couple – yet representing regular heterosexual marital sex in a perfectly 'legitimate' setting – appears as inappropriate, even horrifyingly lascivious, when contrasted with the fall.

The initial scene represents the first major moment of the Real, an extremely traumatic rupture, an object of anxiety par excellence. The Lacanian concept of the Real is part of the triadic structure of the psyche, composed of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real (see e.g. Homer 2005, 17-31, 33-49, 81-94). The Imaginary is the sphere of illusions and self-image, while the Symbolic is the domain of language and culture, of rules and the Law. Characterized by fundamental inaccessibility, the Real represents a pre-Symbolic state of fullness and authenticity that is irrevocably lost through the child's entrance into language. The Real is the lack at the core of our being, the void of the lost fullness we constantly try to fill (ibid., 87-88).

The prologue also depicts a Freudian primal scene, whereby the child witnesses a sex act between the parents, which creates a repressed trauma for the child. According to Freud (1989, 200-203), the primal scene is a highly recurrent fantasy, whether based on a real memory, on the sight of animals copulating, or imagined. In the film, just before heading for the window, the child is portrayed as observing the parents' love-making. Disturbingly, it remains unclear whether the traumatized child jumps out of the window or falls accidentally.

THE WOMAN

The focal character of the film is the unnamed woman. After the initial loss, the woman becomes depressed and anguished, suffering from a tremendous sense of guilt for the child's death. She is also phobic of the woods around the cabin.

Profoundly derailed and metamorphosing, the woman is a grotesque subject with grotesque desires and grotesque actions. Among the grotesque body types, she represents the 'Body transgressing its boundaries,' the 'Female grotesque body,' and finally the 'Abject body.' At the same time, the woman is a Lacanian lacking subject: a subject who has lost her being, who has no permanence or consistency, never emerging as a stable and complete entity (Homer 2005, 74). In the subject, there is lack, related to separation, that "results from the constitutive loss of one of his parts, by which he turns out to be made of two parts" (Lacan 2006, 716).

In this way, lack and the grotesque coincide. The attributes of deformation, disfiguration and decenterment, commonly associated with the grotesque, also apply to the Lacanian subject, disembodying itself, demonstrating the impossibility of a unified being (Yuan 1996).

In *Antichrist*, the woman is characterized by overwhelming anxiety, mysterious transformation, excessive sexuality and outrageous actions.

Anxiety is aptly approached by very corporeal and intimate images. For example, the extreme close-up of the pulsating vein on the woman's neck is an attempt to express how anxiety really feels. As for the woman's fear of the woods, it can be seen as a pervasive condensation of fears and nameless frustration, without a definite object, as Julia Kristeva (1982, 35) describes a phobic object, "a hieroglyph having the logic of metaphor and hallucination." Beyond rational explanations, the woman's anxiety emerges from the Real as far as it remains unsymbolizable, impossible to put into words and entwined with unknown elements.

Fear also relates to aggression and guilt. As Kristeva (ibid., 38) notes, fear hides an aggression, "a violence that returns to its source, its sign having been inverted." For Freud (2010a, 128-138), aggression is a cultural matter, since the aggressive tendencies of individuals, expressing the death instinct, need to be repressed to enable cultural development. Aggression is then internalized and transformed into a sense of guilt that prevents it from turning into violent actions.

The woman's guilt is expressed for example through the 'voice of the unconscious.' As shown in a flashback, during her prior sojourn in *Eden* with her son, the woman suddenly hears an inexplicable voice of a crying baby. In the voice are concentrated the mother's agonizing fear, terror and guilt in the face of the ultimately impossible task of keeping her child alive. The anxious woman starts to look for the son, only to realize that the voice originates elsewhere, in her own mind.

Gradually, the woman's guilt and fear are traded off against violent actions, as if overcoming fear has triggered the release of dangerous powers. The agonizing woman is set free only through the abandon of culture, of the Symbolic. However, in Lacan's view, with the dissipation of external prohibitions, the subject is forced to face the anxiety-provoking Real of the drives (Johnston 2002). With the woman, this process takes the form of grotesque metamorphosis.

The woman experiences a conversion from a reproductive loving mother into a destructive ferocious beast. In Bakhtin's (1984, 24) view, grotesque metamorphosis refers to an incomplete transformation between the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end. Through metamorphosis, the grotesque body surpasses its own limits. The woman's grotesque metamorphosis from a 'civilized' person into a 'savage' creature translates into the breakdown of the Symbolic order, and the escalation of the domain of the Real.

The decisive moment of the woman's metamorphosis also represents a turning point in the film. After the man refuses to hit her during sex, the woman rushes into the forest, lays herself down under a tree, and begins masturbating frantically. Encircled by the rootstock of the tree, as if merging with the wild forest, she is no longer afraid of it. When the man joins her, consents to hit her and they have sex, their bodies seem a grotesque fusion of white flesh against the dark soil. In a dreamlike vision, they are suddenly surrounded by a profusion of white human arms emerging from the rootstock, as of buried people, in flesh but lifeless. This pivotal image dramatically binds together the forest,

the man and the woman, the collective grotesque body, and the fundamental union of violence, sexuality and death.

Genderwise, the woman is reminiscent of an 'avenging heroine,' as described by Barbara Creed (1993, 123-129): the all-destructive 'femme castratrice,' enduring a transformation from an ordinary woman into a deadly killer. The woman also represents a symbolically 'castrated woman.' Deprived of her rightful destiny, the castrated woman becomes a psychotic female monster that is eventually punished for her transgressions. Because of her loss, she seeks revenge, targeted at society and at the nuclear family. (Ibid., 122-123.) In Antichrist, however, instead of wicked men and their direct abuse, the malefactor is the oppressive patriarchal order – indirectly represented by the husband as the only man present. The actual villain – that is to blame for the woman's loss – is the arbitrarily cruel nature.

As Kristeva suggests, woman's 'phallus' is her psyche, and the castration threat is thus directed at her psyche (Oliver 1993, 63). In *Antichrist*, along with her child, the woman loses her mind. Hysterized by the lack, she becomes 'the female hysteric,' expressing herself through violent somatic symptoms.

Significantly, the woman's lack finds an expression in grotesquely excessive sexual activity. Taking increasingly destructive forms, her sexuality is portrayed as frenzied and hysterical, lascivious and nymphomaniac, masochistic and sadistic. Destructive sexuality relates to Lacan's idea of a single drive: a death drive that is also sexual in nature, associated with the Real and with *jouissance*, an amalgam of pain and pleasure (Homer 2005, 76, 89).

For Lacan (2004, 106-107), the splitting of a being, observable in mimicry, "comes into play, quite obviously, both in sexual union and in the struggle to the death. In both situations, the being breaks up, in an extraordinary way, between its being and its semblance, between itself and that paper tiger it shows to the other."

In the film, the ultimate connection between sexuality and death is expressed in the grotesque paired image of the woman's orgasmic face at the beginning and her dying face at the end, mouth open, reminiscent of a primal scream.

With her terrifying sexuality, the woman becomes an instance of the monstrous-feminine. Besides the myth of woman's insatiable sexual appetite, pictured as horrifyingly abysmal, she embodies the myth of *vagina dentata*. As a representation of *vagina dentata*, woman is endowed with bestial sexuality that is enigmatic, devouring and castrating for men (Ross 2009). The toothed vagina signifies thus the threatening aspect of female sexuality: it presents woman as the 'mouth of hell,' or the 'Devil's

gateway, suggesting the duplicitous – alluring but dangerous – nature of woman (Creed 1993, 105-106).

In the film, the woman's demonization is enacted through grotesque actions, reflecting what Kristeva (1982, 64-65) calls "the abject or demoniacal potential of the feminine."

THE WOMAN'S GROTESQUE ACTIONS

Pertaining to the Real, the woman's grotesque actions resist symbolization insofar as they remain unfathomable and disturbingly shocking for the viewer. The actions also correspond to Lacanian unconscious fantasies, devoid of the filtering layer of Imaginary fantasies and their defensive processes. With her actions, it is as if the woman desperately endeavors to rejoin the lost fullness of the Real. Eventually, the woman's actions attest how the actual fulfillment of a primal fantasy turns it into a nightmare, unveiling its abhorrent, grotesque nature.

CASTRATIVE ATTACK

The woman's violent behavior culminates in the horrifyingly grotesque moment when she suddenly crushes the man's penis with a log – constituting a point of no return. The man loses consciousness, and after that she masturbates him. As a veritable eruption of the Real, a mixture of sperm and blood spills out of his penis. Procreation turns into death, blemishing the woman's shirt, creating a concrete stain.

Such hostility is a symbolic attack against the phallus that represents paternal authority, cultural order and systemic oppression. With the act, these values are literally surmounted by the feminine, natural chaos, and instinctual release. This opposition is reflected in the split, described by Kristeva (1982, 74),

between, on the one hand, the body's territory where an authority without guilt prevails, a kind of fusion between mother and nature, and on the other hand, a totally different universe of socially signifying performances where embarrassment, shame, guilt, desire, etc. come into play – the order of the phallus.

The phallus becomes thus the focal point of the woman's lack, desire and guilt.

For Lacan, the phallus is the central organizing signifier of lack and sexual difference, the 'original' lost object of desire that we always search for, but never had in the first place. The phallus represents the rupture of the mother-child dyad and the fundamental splitting of the subject itself. (Homer 2005, 54-57.) The woman's attack is thus targeted not only at the Symbolic order and the Name-of-the-Father, but also at the original lack for which the phallus is the signifier.

GRINDSTONE

Another constitutive grotesque action is the grindstone episode. The woman drills a hole into the unconscious man's leg, inserts a metal bar into the hole, and attaches a heavy grindstone to it. This burden, binding the man to the ground, can be seen as a metaphor of the vanity of resisting the inevitable, of escaping the Real.

In a concrete manner, the heavy weight expunges the man's autonomy, annexes him to the woman, as if suturing the fissure of a split subject. A grotesque subject is characterized by a narcissistic desire for a symbiotic closure with the other, an impossible reunification with the other (Yuan 1996).

The portrayal of the humiliated man, painfully dragging the weight with a pierced leg, also bears religious connotations. The man appears as a Christ figure that with his suffering redeems the sins of mankind. Also the man's symbolic burial and resurrection are reminiscent of the religious narrative.

BURIAL

In the forest, trying to escape the demonic woman, the man hides himself in a foxhole, finding brief refuge there. A metaphor of the womb, the nest is simultaneously a grave – as implied by the image of the man's face appearing in an aperture in the ground, surrounded by soil. Inside the foxhole, the man discovers a crow's nest and, in order to survive, is forced to kill a noisy nestling with his bare hands. Once again, birth and death intertwine. Storming around furiously, the woman eventually finds the man, but after a while digs him out of the foxhole, as if momentarily liberated from her demonic possession.

According to Bakhtin (1984, 21), earth is at once destructive and regenerative, assimilated into the bodily grave and to the womb that swallow up and give birth. The man is nearly buried in the nest, losing control and yielding to his fate – before being symbolically resurrected, re-empowered by the experience. Back in the cabin, he is finally able to liberate himself from the grindstone, mysteriously helped by the crow.

As prophesied by the woman, the constellation of the *Three Beggars* appears in the sky. The woman tries to kill the man with scissors, but fails.

SELF-CASTRATION

As a grotesque culmination of the film, the woman performs an act of self-castration, a clitoridectomy. The act is needed for the ultimate resolution of the unbearable conflict of enjoyment and guilt experienced by the woman. Re-enacting the initial scene of the child's falling and her sexual enjoyment, she imagines the event, masturbates and finally cuts off her clitoris with a pair of rusty scissors.

Castration, from a Lacanian perspective, is a symbolic act that entails the cutting off of one's *jouissance* and the recognition of lack (Homer 2005, 95). For the woman, the literal self-castration is a way to disable her own *jouissance*, reaffirmed by the previous castrative attack. Having internalized the mythology of woman's inherent evil, and the horrifying power of female sexuality, the woman's feminine fury reverts to itself.

As the clitoris drops on the floor, the woman becomes a representation of the 'bleeding wound,' a metonym for the female body. As Creed (1993, 70-71) notes, 'woman as bleeding wound' ultimately signifies the abject maternal body, reminding of its opening and bleeding at childbirth. In *Antichrist*, the blood spilling out of the woman's genitals is evocatively reminiscent of menstrual blood, displayed as an element of body horror, constituting a representation of the 'Abject body.'

NATURE

In the film, a major role is given to nature: metonymically represented by the forest, intertwined with the feminine and ultimately referring to the human unconscious.

Situated deep inside the forest, the cabin with its surroundings is ironically named *Eden*. In tenuous condition, the cabin seems a metaphor of the transience and vulnerability of human culture at the mercy of nature. Its inhabitants – like Adam and Eve – are seemingly abandoned, on their own with hazardous nature.

The film's focus is on the repulsive, grotesque side of nature. As a crucial paradigmatic choice, the forest is depicted as a hostile and frightening place with disgusting features. An illustrative image is the little nestling falling from the tree to the ground, instantly covered with bustling voracious ants, only to be caught a moment after by a big bird, mauling it to pieces and devouring it. A deer is also presented with an aborted fetus hanging from the animal in an amniotic sac. Ambiguously, the forest is at times depicted as stunningly beautiful.

The film's grotesque images of nature reflect nature's arbitrariness and hostility, its alien and mysterious character. In Wolfgang

Kayser's (1981) view, the grotesque is an 'estranged world': something incomprehensible and inexplicable, abysmal and ominous, entailing a tension between the familiar and the unknown. In the film's forest, surreal hailstones and perplexing acorns fall from the sky. In dreamlike visions, the forest unfolds masses of lifeless, unblemished human bodies lying on the soil. A self-disemboweling fox utters the words "chaos reigns."

In its interaction with human bodies, this nature is also affiliated with the Bakhtinian idea of the grotesque body, as blended with other bodies and the world. It is a cosmic and universal body that can merge with natural phenomena, with mountains, seas, stars and the entire universe (Bakhtin 1984, 27, 318). Accordingly, the woman's rebellious body surpasses its boundaries and unites itself with the man's body, with the forest and the collective grotesque body – materialized in the mysterious lifeless bodies and the enigmatic crowd of wandering women.

The ultimate referent of this nature is the unconscious, the human mind. The forest appears as a representation of the Lacanian Thing: unknowable in itself, a *no-thing* that owes its existence to the desire that constitutes it, filling the void at the core of subjectivity (Homer 2005, 85). The Thing "is what is closest to him while escaping him more than anything else" (Lacan 2006, 550). In the film, the forest as the Thing acts as a chimeric mirror of the characters' emotions, fears and desires. As an *extimate* Thing, it is both inaccessible and intimate, internal and external to the subject's reality (Libbrecht 2001). It is thus ambiguously inside the characters, and yet outside, 'out there.'

One cinematographic rendering of this is the use of nearly subliminal images in which nature and the woman's mind intertwine. In the train, during the couple's journey to *Eden*, hardly perceptible images are projected on the passing forest, including the woman's terrified face, mouth open as if screaming.

The theme of the unconscious pervades the entire film. With her primal fantasies and fears, the woman appears as an embodiment of repressed unconscious forces. The dreamworld is present through the dreamlike visions and constant sleeping – portrayed as one of the main activities of the couple in the cabin, in addition to therapy discussions and sex. In the dialogue, the woman reckons that Freud is dead, as modern psychology isn't interested in dreams.

For Lacan, the unconscious is a gap, a rupture in the symbolic chain, between the signifier and the signified (Homer 2005, 68-69). The unconscious is "[i]mpediment, failure, split ... manifested as that which vacillates in a split in the subject" (Lacan 2004,

25-28). The film refers to the idea of impediment and inadequacy of language through the inability of the woman to name or even grasp her biggest fear – a central enigma in the film. The idea of repressed knowledge is conveyed through the inexplicable but highly signifying dreamlike visions.

The forest-as-the-unconscious represents eventually an encounter with the repulsive Real, in Lacan's words an ugly "gift of shit," revealed by the dissipation of the Symbolic-Imaginary veil of fantasies (Johnston 2002). This is crystallized in the woman's comment about the forest: "everything that used to be beautiful about it, was perhaps hideous."

NATURE AND THE WOMAN

In *Antichrist*, the relation between nature and the woman is, firstly, symbolic or culturally constructed. The widespread historical convention of assimilating the feminine into Mother Nature is based on the life-giving and nurturing aspects they allegedly share.

The relation is also based on iconicity. On the level of the signified, the film's woman is iconic to nature as imitating its logic, as embodying nature's uncontrollable powers, the unknown within nature. On the level of the signifier, the woman's gestures and facial expressions convey elements of natural wilderness. The iconic relation is supported by some dreamlike scenes providing implicit claims. In one, wild animals gather around the woman – represented thus as one of these creatures. In another, the woman, while going through a therapeutic exercise of lying on the grass, gradually merges with it, turning green herself.

Yet another manifestation of the woman-nature relation is the image of the aborted deer fetus, a key sign in the film's symbolic constellation. The deer – an endearing bucolic animal par excellence – first arouses delight in the man, rejoicing at the sight of this beautiful wild creature. When the animal turns, the man notices the dead fetus, arousing disgust in him. The fetus in amniotic sac is a direct reference to the premature death of their child, and to the female reproductive body – through which the female deer becomes a symbol of the unnamed woman. As attested by the man's double reaction, the deer conveys the contradictory idea of woman as beautiful but abject, as life-giving but deadly.

According to Creed (1993, 7, 49), woman is represented as monstrous precisely in relation to her reproductive functions. One rendering of this association is the image of the 'monstrous womb.' The womb is a signifier of the 'debt to nature,' of woman's sexual otherness perceived as being closer to nature.

In the film, the feminine is also associated with the idea of 'contingent knowledge.' According to Lacan's formulation, "t does not exist," which refers to the idea that she is "not-whole" (Lacan 1999, 7-10). Woman is thus not altogether subject to the Symbolic order, and because of that, has access to something more than men (Homer 2005, 102).²³ In addition, in the film, it is the woman that gets to represent that which is beyond the Symbolic. It is as if she had access to some unknown knowledge, beyond the reach of rational thought and modern science, like the persons scientifically qualified as mentally ill who 'just know.' For example, the woman is somehow aware of the 'imaginary' star constellation, the *Three Beggars*, and 'just knows' that its apparition coincides with someone's death, as happens.

The idea of contingent knowledge also resonates with Bakhtin's (1984, 39, 49, 260) view of madness. Representing "inverted wisdom, inverted truth," madness liberates the subject from the "false 'truth of this world," no longer dimmed by commonplace ideas. In psychoanalytic theory as well, truth can only emerge in contingency, come out in the fall of knowledge, which implies an encounter of radical Otherness within oneself. "For Lacan, truth is real because it cannot be fully said." (Tavin 2010.) Constituting an epistemological 'proof' of the woman's contingent knowledge, the man finally sees the star constellation in the sky, thereby being forced to encounter the Otherness within himself.

Finally, contingent knowledge relates to the Lacanian idea of 'knowledge in the Real.' When the subject gets too close to the "unconscious truth," he knows too much – like Oedipus – and his ego dissolves. Such knowledge may include the subject's perverse, illicit desires. (Žižek 1992, 43-45.) In the film, the woman's unconscious yields an evil truth about herself, a truth she cannot live with.

EVIL

In the tradition of misogyny, woman's association with nature, body and emotions has evolved into assimilating the feminine with evil, death, witchcraft and dangerous powers. For Kristeva (1982, 77-79), fear of women is based on the archaic fear of wom-

en's life-giving power, embodied in the uncontrollable generative mother and translated into a fear of feminine defilement. With its culturally determined

2.3 As Lacan (1999, 72-77) specifies: "There's no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital W indicating the universal. There's no such thing as Woman because, in her essence ... she is not-whole." However, as not-whole, "she has a supplementary jouissance compared to what the phallic function designates by way of jouissance." It is "a jouissance that is beyond," that "one experiences and yet knows nothing about."

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misogynistic symbolism, *Antichrist* explores the contradictory myth of women, seen as treacherous and evil, but also more empathic and nurturing 'by nature.'

The stereotype of feminine evil stems from the idea that abjection comes from the inside. The myth of woman's duplicity entails that woman may appear innocent and beautiful on the outside, yet evil may reside within. (Creed 1993, 42, 151.) According to Kristeva (1982, 113-114), Christianity brought about a shift from external abominations into an interiorization of abjection. This means that "the emphasis is henceforth placed on the inside/outside boundary, and that the threat comes no longer from outside but from within." In *Antichrist*, the woman is associated with evil precisely through her inner being, her connection to the Real, as opposed to the apparent goodness of the man. With the prevailing viewpoint of the woman, however, it is made evident that civilization and the Symbolic do not account for all sides of subjectivity. Acculturation and repression are doomed to fail with the 'return of the repressed.'

Through the protagonist woman, the film reiterates several widespread myths of feminine evil. The woman is represented as insane and hysterical, malignant and vindictive, castrative and murderous; closer to abominable nature, and associated with witchcraft. She seems possessed – not by an external demonic power but by inner evil.

In the film, misogyny is explicitly referred to through the subject of the woman's unfinished thesis, named *Gynocide*, and the grotesque imagery of hunted and tortured women or 'witches' as part of her research material, displayed in the cabin's attic. As is finally revealed, the woman has started to identify with this evil, believing that the historical persecution of women is a proof of their inherent evil.

The woman's overwhelming sexuality is also linked to witch-craft and to male fears of castration. During the witch-hunts of the past centuries, many of the witches' alleged crimes were sexual in nature. Witches were accused, for example, of having intercourse with the Devil, and of stealing men's penises. According to this view, woman is seen as man's sexual other, "the weaker but dangerous complement of man." (Creed 1993, 74-75.)

In the film, an equivocal sign of the woman's evil is the child's autopsy report revealing a slight deformity in the bones of his feet. This was caused by the woman repeatedly putting his shoes on the wrong feet – whether on purpose or by neglect, remains unclear.

In the end, the woman enters the 'sorority' of persecuted women by experiencing their fate: tortured (by herself), killed

and burned in a bonfire. The sorority is materialized in the crowd of women with blurred faces, heading for the cabin to rejoin their 'sister,' as shown in the man's final vision in the woods. Representing a gloomy version of the Bakhtinian collective grotesque body, this collective female body is fundamentally cosmic, surpassing the individual level, the limits of life and death – and the boundary separating reality from the Real.

The crowd of women also adheres to the long tradition of haunting women. Like the mythical troop of enraged women who haunt Orestes, these women are "women in revolt, rising up like revolutionary hysterics against the patriarchal power in the process of being established" (Irigaray 1991, 37). The faceless women are the feminine sacrifice on which the patriarchal order is based, saving it from madness.

Moreover, because of her affiliation with the Real, the woman seems to have access to *jouissance*, a painful pleasure in the Real. The woman's *jouissance* is intertwined with sexual enjoyment, representing for her the initial trauma, the event without which, as she reckons, the child might still be alive. For her, the sex act is a way to painfully repeat the traumatic event. The destroying force and apparent senselessness of her actions unfold *jouissance* that is located beyond the pleasure principle, entailing 'living out of the drives,' with complete indifference to the consequences of one's actions (Johnston 2002).

Beyond biological essentialism, Lacan's conception of sexual difference is defined not merely through the phallus, but through the distinction between phallic *jouissance* and feminine *jouissance*. The former is characterized by disappointment, a sense that our desire has not been fully satisfied. The latter, which Lacan calls 'Other *jouissance*,' is something beyond the Symbolic, difficult to explain, but involving an experience of unspeakable ecstasy. For Lacan, femininity and masculinity are thus not biologically given, but indicate two subject positions, and two types of *jouissance*, that are available to both men and women. (Homer 2005, 96, 102-105.)²⁴

In the film, the woman's sexuality is endowed with features that psychoanalytic theory associates with male sexuality. It is characterized as self-centered, masturbatory and nonreciprocal, in accordance with Lacan's idea that "there is no sexual relationship" (Tuck 2011). In Lacan's (1999, 7-9) words, phallic *jouissance* is limited to the "jouissance of the organ," "not related to the Other as such." The meaning imposed on the woman's autoeroticism is the insatiability of desire,

the sense of alienation and 24 For feminine jouissance, see Lacan 1999, 73-77.

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lack. Ambiguously, the woman assumes elements from both the phallic unsatisfactory and the feminine unspeakably ecstatic *jouissance*, expressed through her utterly orgasmic face.

THE MAN AND THE WOMAN

The woman and the man are intimately bound through acts of sex and violence surpassing their individual body limits. The images displaying the two bodies united in copulation or in violence present a grotesque double body, a struggle between the dying and the surviving part.

The couple's conceptual character, or their status as empty signifiers, is underlined by the fact that they are unnamed. This is further emphasized by their physical isolation in *Eden*, by the absence of other persons and locations.

The role assigned to the man is a helper, a mirror image of the woman. This is underscored by the paradigmatic choice of his profession, a psychotherapist. This makes their relation a sexualized therapist-patient relationship. For the man, the task of healing the woman is also a professional challenge – that overpowers the woman's needs. During their stay in *Eden*, the woman gets increasingly frustrated with the constant therapeutic scrutinizing, blaming the man for his arrogance. She also accuses him of being distant and condescending even before the accident. Altogether, the man disvalues fear as experienced by the woman, calling it 'only' panic, and underestimates the woman's experience, saying, "Your thoughts distort reality, not the other way round." In an objectivist manner, the man believes in an underlying objective reality, independent of individual experience and of interpretants.

An advocate of reason, logic and order, the man pushes the woman to confront her deepest fears, to unfold the darkest sides of her mind. In doing this, he resorts to scientific knowledge, practices and reasoning, symbolized by the triangular diagram he draws in order to schematize the woman's fears. His attempt to bring the uncontrollable into control – to transfer elements of the Real onto the Symbolic level – however fails. In Lacan's view, anxiety and suffering cannot be entirely put into language, as there remains always a residue, an excess that is the Real (Homer 2005, 84).

The woman's ensuing hostility is sharply contrasted with the apparent kindness of the man. Despite a certain emotional coldness, the man is to the woman a loving husband and a source of security, representing for her a prospect of healing, the possibility of a new child, a future. The woman is the problem, the man the solution, but apparently not the one that she wants.

In the narrative structure of the film, what could be expected is a painful but purgative healing process of the woman, leading to a liquidation of the initial misfortune. However, neither the child nor the sane woman is ever found. The irremediable, unfulfillable lack persists. The woman realizes that neither the man, nor no one ever, will be able to fill it. Perhaps she discovers the deception of love that Lacan (2004, 268) refers to between the analyst and the analysand who says: "I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – the objet petit a – I mutilate you."

At the narrative level, the couple's gender roles are subverted and confused, like Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* turned upside down. While the man acts in a more life-preserving manner, the woman becomes the persecutor, the 'evil beast' eventually killed by the 'good hero.'

The couple's subjectivities intermingle even more profoundly. Considering the volatility of their roles, their bodily and sexual affinity, and even certain congruence of their physical appearances, the woman and man could be viewed as the two sides of a human being. For Lacan, the subject is the gap that opens up between the Symbolic and the Real (Homer 2005, 79).

As signifiers acquiring value in their mutual relation, they also remind of the self-other opposition, the woman standing for the self, and the man for the necessary other. In Lacan's thinking, our sense of self is reflected back by the other, with whom we identify. The self is thus defined in terms of the other. (Chandler 2007, 93.)

In the film, the borders of identity are blurred as the woman abandons the Symbolic, loses her Imaginary sense of a coherent self and approaches the realm of the Real, in which the subject has no clear boundaries between themselves and the external world. Targeted both at the man and at herself, the grotesque double castration as self-punishment is necessary, since self is remerged with other, made of the same flesh.

Ultimately, the concept of Antichrist represents a failed attempt to symbolize the Real, to domesticate it by naming. Illustrating a yearning for concrete entities with a definite meaning, Antichrist represents an attempt to designate traumatic existence, nonmeaning and the void.

THE FILM ENDS

As the final resolution of the film, the husband strangles the woman to death, and burns her body in a bonfire. The woman's suffocation is an ultimate grotesque event through her death throes, according to Bakhtin (1984, 353), one of the principal acts of the grotesque body. Just before dying, the woman's face is

pictured as endearingly innocent, expressing childlike sadness – a final sign of the woman's duplicitous nature.

An ineluctable redemption, the woman's death is also an ultimate communion with the Real, and a return to the cosmic whole. The burning conclusively dissolves the body limits, and the ashes re-enter the cycles of nature. At the same time, the woman experiences the fate of persecuted witches. As a grotesque subject, she begins by challenging the paternal law, but ends up exactly as predetermined by the law (Yuan 1996). Terminally united with nature, the dead woman stays in the forest with the sorority, whereas the surviving man limps out of the forest, to rejoin human culture.

The film ends with an epilogue, parallel to the prologue, displayed in black and white and accompanied by opera music. As the man leaves the forest, he sees for the last time the deer, the fox and the crow, now pictured as transparent, as if fading away. In his final vision, he witnesses the mysterious crowd of faceless women, rising up the hill to rejoin the woman in death.

THE ROLE OF THE GROTESQUE

In *Antichrist*, the grotesque has a deconstructive role. With its gritty naturalism, the film denaturalizes the conception of nature, breaking the illusion of nature's benevolence and purposefulness marked by anthropocentrism. It also shatters the delusion of people controlling nature. Moreover, the grotesque exposes a lacking human that is ultimately immoral, driven by primitive desires. The grotesque thus shows the world from a different perspective.

Most importantly, the grotesque represents the unknown. Grotesque imagery communicates repressions, blurry sensations and existential issues by giving them a concrete form, a corporeal expression. In the film, the grotesque gives a sensible form to the invisible forces of the unconscious, of guilt and anxiety. Anchored in the materiality of existence, a grotesque sign represents something that cannot be represented, providing the closest possible representation of the unrepresentable.

Perhaps nothing less extreme and ambiguous than the grotesque could level the deepest emotions and anxieties, the ultimate questions of life and death. What could be a more adequate expression of guilt for prioritizing one's sexual enjoyment over the child's safety than brutally cutting off one's clitoris? At the same time, the grotesque provides a perspective of liberation: it is easier to conceive of a material thing than to face abstract, nameless anxiety.

The grotesque embodies both lack and excess. Claiming kinship with the Real, the grotesque itself lacks organization and integrity. Reflecting the lost wholeness of the Real, the grotesque represents material bodily abundance and feminine excess. Whether marked by lack, excess or anomaly, the grotesque reaches out for the unexpressed.

Finally, the grotesque is attuned to the logic of the unconscious, its transgressive and archaic nature. The grotesque is inextricably connected to the uncontrollable, a prominent element in *Antichrist*. The idea of control is embodied in the undisciplined grotesque body that represents the visceral flux, at the same time horrifying but uncannily alluring.

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ALIEN: RESURRECTION









Directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) is the fourth part of the *Alien* film series. It stars Sigourney Weaver as Ellen Ripley and Winona Ryder as Annalee Call. From the point of view of this study, other important characters are General Martin Perez (Dan Hedaya), Doctor Mason Wren (J. E. Freeman), Doctor Jonathan Gediman (Brad Dourif), Larry Purvis (Leland Orser), Johner (Ron Perlman) and Vriess (Dominique Pinon).²⁵

The main reason for including Alien: Resurrection in my research material is the grotesque Alien monster: an apocalyptic beast that is extremely threatening and repulsive. As a life form far from humans, it represents utmost alterity; the hostile, unknown side of nature and the cosmos. The monster's intricate morphology and reproductive system unveil intriguing views on humans' greatest fears. The film is an illustrative example of horror and science fiction films with horrific monsters presenting a threat to humanity.

Besides the opposition between human and non-human, the film delves into the thematics of maternity, reproduction and cloning. Through its female protagonists, it explores questions of identity, femininity and alterity, deeply intertwined with the grotesque.

Alien: Resurrection is a story about the Alien monster that is resuscitated within a secret army operation, carried out in a spaceship. Ripley, the protagonist woman, is brought back to life, cloned by 'evil men,' because she is carrying an Alien embryo in her body. In search of profit and glory, the men want Ripley to give birth to the Alien Queen. With its rapidly growing offspring, the Alien invades the spaceship, and starts to kill the humans on board. The ship enfolds many dark secrets, including the monstrous failed clones of Ripley, the cargo of living human bodies used as nourishment for Alien newborns, and an enormous Alien hatchery. In the end, the Alien Queen breeds with Ripley to produce a new generation Alien, the Newborn. A group of survivors, including Ripley and Call – a humanoid robot – struggles to escape from the exploding ship.

The grotesque elements and scenes chosen for further exploration include the theme of monstrous female reproduction, the character of Ripley, the evil men, the character of Call, the Alien monster, the clones, Ripley in the Alien nest, the birthing scenes of Ripley, Purvis and the Alien Queen, and finally, the Newborn.

THE FILM BEGINS

The film starts with a scene that depicts birth through

25 Written by Joss Whedon. Characters by Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett. Cinematography by Darius Khondji. Edited by Hervé Schneid. Set decoration by John M. Dwyer.

cloning. Inside a spaceship, in a gloomy medical lab with armed guards by the door, there is a big glass tube with a naked female body inside, floating in liquid. The body is shown transforming from an infantile into an adult body, belonging to Ripley. We hear Ripley's voice saying: "My mommy always said there were no monsters. No real ones. But there are." The body is surrounded by male scientists, one of whom comments: "She's perfect."

REPRODUCTION

The beginning lays bare the main theme of the film: monstrous female reproduction. The theme is present everywhere, explicitly or metaphorically, starting with the symbolism of the principal setting, the spaceship USM Auriga. As a dark, cavernous and moist place, it is a metaphor of the female reproductive body, of the womb. As in horror films that explore the theme of artificial creation, the uncanny uterine landscape reflects man's desire to appropriate woman's generative powers (Creed 2005, 42). However, as a monstrously mechanical place dominated by black and metallic elements, the spaceship also bears connotations of masculinity. The ominous atmosphere is accentuated by constant vapor discharges and scanty, bleak lighting, created with fluorescent tubes.

The entire spaceship is invested in monstrous reproduction: as Alien starts breeding, the ship is turned into one big reproduction organism. The Alien reproduction is depicted as excessive, chaotic and out of control; as disgusting, slimy and toxic. The yellow substance spewed by the creatures is corrosive, generating new fatal holes in the ship's structure. No one knows exactly where and how the reproduction takes place. Later on, a huge hatchery is found at the bottom of the ship.

In Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) view, reproduction is a core element in grotesque metamorphosis, related to the reproductive lower stratum. In the film, however, reproduction is associated with monstrosity and ominousness. The spaceship represents an estranged grotesque world, marked by terror and alienation, as described by Wolfgang Kayser (1981). In this world, the intruding, demonic powers remain incomprehensible and inexplicable – as do the Aliens.

The spaceship is also characterized by a grotesque topographical logic: the lower part refers to the reproductive organs and to the underworld, a place of death and rebirth (Bakhtin 1984, 21, 354). The bottom of the ship represents literally the bodily lower stratum, the zone of conception and birth, as it hosts the Aliens' reproductive center, the hatchery. The flooded area constitutes a

watery feminine abyss. The bottom of the ship is the universe of Aliens: when they attack, they pull the victim down, through the floor, toward the reproductive area.

Psychoanalytically, the ominous womb-like spaceship invaded by the Aliens is an embodiment of threatening female sexuality and reproduction. It evokes the threat of annihilation and loss of subjectivity: the threat of becoming a part of the Alien reproductive organism, either as a host for an embryo or as nourishment for eggs. This entails losing one's independence, being permanently stuck to the maternal organism.

The womb, the hatchery and eggs are all feminine elements. The spaceship as an analogy of the female reproductive system creates a transfer of signification: both of them are thereby characterized as visceral, demonic, unknowable and out of control.

The idea of threatening, castrating female sexuality is in line with Freud's view on female sexuality – which is a thoroughly ideological and patriarchal view, deeply entrenched in culture. As Luce Irigaray (1991, 41, 119) asserts, female sexuality has been defined as the negative complement of male sexuality. Men have fantasized the womb as a devouring mouth or a cloaca, constituting a threat that is extended to woman's sex as a whole. In the absence of accurate representations of female sexuality, the related affects are anxiety, a haunting fear of castration and disgust. These affects are also very much present in the *Alien* film.

The misogynistic view of female sexuality has led to the creation of taboos and rituals. As Barbara Creed (1993, 120) observes, man has instituted a range of taboos against woman related to her sexual functions, including menstruation, sexual intercourse, pregnancy and childbirth. The *Alien* film also dwells on the taboo aspects of pregnancy and childbirth, culminated in the grotesque birth scenes and the hatchery, depicted as a monstrous womb that is horrifyingly generative and all-incorporating.

For Creed (ibid., 2-7), the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within patriarchal ideology, is based precisely on woman's maternal and reproductive functions. This reflects man's fascination and fear of female sexuality, the idea of sexual difference grounded on monstrousness and castration anxiety.

RIPLEY

Ellen Ripley is a spaceship lieutenant who died 200 years ago, trying to kill the dangerous Alien species. Before dying, she got 'pregnant' by an Alien. The scientists of a suspect military organization, the United Systems Military, have clandestinely cloned Ripley in order to bring to life the Alien species and to benefit from it. Conducting

illegal experiments, the military organization operates in the USM Auriga, a medical research vessel run by General Perez.

Soon after Ripley's own birth, the Alien baby is taken out of her body. In this first Alien birth scene, Ripley is lying in a big incubator. Her belly is incised, and the small alien creature is brought out, immediately revealing its teeth and screeching. One of the medical officers wonders if they can keep "the host" alive.

Stunned by her cognitive capacities, quick learning and physical strength, General Perez and the leading medical officers decide to keep Ripley alive. Her strength, instincts and 'inherited memories' are genetically transmitted qualities from the Aliens. Ripley is kept in captivity: examined, trained and taught to speak, but treated inhumanely and condescendingly, like a test animal. At one time, Ripley grabs the medical officer in charge, Doctor Wren, and tries to choke him. Ripley finds out about her clone origins from another medical officer, Doctor Gediman. In exchange, she informs him that the newborn Alien is an Alien Queen who will breed. She warns him that people will die. However, the male officers plan to tame the animal, considering it "the real payoff."

As a biologically and ontologically transcategorical being, Ripley is a grotesque character. As a clone of Ellen Ripley, she is both dead and alive, with and without an identity. Because of the Alien embryo in her body, she was genetically altered, adopting some Alien qualities. She is thus the mother of Aliens, enmeshed with monstrous reproduction and offspring. As Barbara Creed (2005, 61) notes in her analysis of *Alien: Resurrection*, "Ripley is neither human nor monstrous – she is an uncanny configuration of the two."

The status of Ripley is also approached in the dialogue. When Ripley and Call discuss her identity, Ripley maintains that she is lieutenant Ellen Ripley, while Call claims that Ellen Ripley died, which makes her a "thing," a "construct" grown in a lab. Later on, Call tells other crew members that Ripley is "not human." The leading male officers refer to her as "Number Eight," "it," "the host" and "the predator."

A combination of human, monster and animal, of dead and alive, of identity and non-identity, Ripley is a categorical anomaly, an otherworldly figure with supernatural and cosmic powers. For example, her wounds heal impossibly quickly and she is amazingly strong. As a proof of her animal-like characteristics, Ripley is shown sniffing, sensing, unpredictably attacking, and so on. She even presents a very subtle iconic resemblance to Aliens, created through her body language, and cinematographic juxtaposition: the shape of her chin and her teeth, when she exposes them, are

distantly reminiscent of the Alien's teeth. Despite her deficient condition as a subject, a human, or even a living being, Ripley is however the most humane character in the film.

In her grotesque anomaly, Ripley is a revealing representation of woman: a mysterious creature without proper identity. Considered as a savage piece of nature, she is reminiscent of woman's alleged alliance with Mother Nature. For the men, Ripley is merely an object to be oppressed and exploited – a position to which she doesn't submit. She releases herself from captivity, and starts to act as an independent agent with her own rules and agenda. As observed by Creed (2007), Ripley represents an archetypal woman warrior, assuming the role of a female savior. With her exceptional courage and integrity for a higher ideal, she rises up against the male Symbolic order. Ripley is a female hero, like Joan of Arc, Thelma and Louise or Sarah Connor, who "reject the roles society has carved out for them." They "struggle against dominant stereotypes of female sexuality, and come into conflict with male power in their attempts to define their own identities." ²⁶

Importantly, Ripley manages to turn her ontological 'deficiency' into strength. She takes advantage of her aberrant motherhood, her bestial and monstrous qualities in order to survive, and to save the others, finally even the Earth. These qualities include heightened instincts, genetic knowledge and corrosive blood. In her struggle against evil, the qualities associated with the feminine and the maternal prove the most powerful and crucial. For example, Ripley's corrosive blood can be interpreted as a signifier of the feminine threat, based on the taboo of menstrual blood, extended to woman's blood altogether. Another pivotal advantage is her mother—child bond with the Aliens, entailing an almost telepathic connection with the beasts.

Through her maternal instincts, Ripley 'just knows' things. For example, her connection with the Alien Queen is mysterious: she can feel it "behind her eyes." Later on, through her heightened instincts, she discovers that the spaceship is moving. Following Lacan's (1999, 7-10, 72-77) idea, as a woman that is 'notwhole,' she has access to something more than men – like the Antichrist woman. In this way, the unknowable 'feminine jouissance' is demarcated from 'phallic jouissance,' characterized by irremediable dissatisfaction. The feminine 'excess-in-lack' entails

a departure from the Symbolic, from language and culture – and convergence with the Real and the drive. Ripley is thus in possession

26 In feminist literature, there is controversy regarding Ripley's emancipatory role. Applauded for being an exceptional, unconventional female hero, Ripley has also been criticized for being a 'pseudo male' because of her androgynous looks, her masculinized behaviors and repudiation of the feminine (Creed 2007).

of some mysterious capability and contingent knowledge beyond the Symbolic order, reason and science.

Moreover, Ripley is the only one who doesn't abhor physical contact with the Aliens' slimy, toxic existence. Able to orient herself in the reproductive environment, she proves more apt and powerful than the men. At a certain moment, Ripley kills an Alien and then tears off its tongue, offering it to Call, saying, "Make a nice souvenir." Disgusted, Call throws it away. Later on, Ripley threatens to do the same with Johner's tongue. In its morphology, the Alien tongue looks like a penis: not flat but cylinder-shaped, used by the beast to strike and pierce its victims. This makes the incident castrative, and the organ becomes a metonym for phallic power. With the organ as an emblem of victory, Ripley demonstrates her power over the phallus, over patriarchy and its exploitative power. Significantly, the tongue is tossed away as a disgusting object, sluggish and powerless.

Ripley's maternity and bond with the Aliens is depicted as an ambivalent matter for her – determined as she is to destroy the Alien species. When being asked who she is, she replies with a faint smile, as if with pride: "I'm the monster's mother." When she hears roaring, just after the Aliens get loose, she also smiles, with a hint of maternal affection. In the end, when killing the Newborn, Ripley is heartbroken.

EVIL MEN

The main role of the leading male characters is to represent antagonistic power within the film's ideological pattern. At certain moments, the men are allotted grotesque characteristics serving particular narrative purposes.

General Perez, Doctor Wren and Doctor Gediman are the three leading male officers in charge of the cloning project. Operating in the field of science, medicine and the military, they are representatives of exploitative phallic power and patriarchy, based on their ruthless attitude and use of power. The 'evil men' consider Ripley as a natural resource, a piece of nature to be tamed, controlled and exploited at will.

The three men represent the Symbolic order in its grimmest guise, characterized by corruption, cruelty and sadism; by arrogance, greed and stupidity. In the end, they all get punished in most grotesque ways, matching their evil specificity.

In charge of the spaceship, General Perez is pictured as an especially malevolent character. He is endowed with grotesque features through his inner monstrosity, through the action in which he participates. Before he gets killed, he is pictured in an undershirt that reveals his excessively hairy shoulders, a signifier of excessive masculinity. After realizing that the Aliens have escaped and intruded into a final evacuation vessel, Perez blows up the vessel. During the explosion, he is portrayed, in his military officer suit, performing a military hand salute. At that precise moment, an Alien attacks the general from behind, and with its tongue pierces his neck. The general touches his neck and finds a detached piece of his own flesh: his eyes bulge out, and he falls down. Nature, which he thought he could exploit, strikes back at him.

The general's supposedly honorable act is turned into a ridiculous, pompous ritual of phallic power. Penetrated by a phallic organ, he is humiliated and 'feminized.' With the grotesque event, the general is degraded into a representative of obsolete power, a foolish false king.

A representative of exploitative scientific practices, Doctor Wren experiences an even more grotesque fate. As the medical officer in charge, he is responsible for the cloning project and the experimentation on humans used as Alien hosts. Wren ends up being killed by a newborn Alien, after his final battle with the 'pregnant' man, Purvis. When the Alien is about to be born, Purvis grabs Wren by his shoulders, and as the Alien emerges from Purvis' chest, it simultaneously penetrates Wren's head, coming out of his forehead. Turned into an abject body, Wren is grotesquely unified with the birthing man and the Alien baby. Wren is thus implicated in a monstrous birth that he is responsible for, suggesting a grotesque payback.

The third evil man, Doctor Gediman – earlier shown as sadistically training the Aliens – is taken to the hatchery. He is first kept alive, in reserve for later use as nourishment for Aliens. His body is tightly attached to the hatchery, entirely covered with some sticky reproductive matter. As a representative of phallic power, Gediman is engulfed by a female reproductive system, reattached to the womb and deprived of autonomy. He finally gets killed by the Newborn, biting off the vertex of his head as its first meal. As a carnivalesque turnabout, the exploiter becomes the exploited, and the masculine is feminized, literally devoured by a feminine organism.

In the film, the true monsters are these men. In her study of the male monster, Creed (2005, xiii, xvi, 14, 43, 51) distinguishes a 'womb monster' or 'mad doctor,' whose monstrosity emerges from his attempt to create life without woman, trying to usurp the powers of the womb. Through his endeavor, monstrosity is doubled:

the man becomes a monster himself, and also brings forth monsters. In this way, the male monster is associated with the 'primal uncanny,' i.e., the realm of woman, death and the animal. Moreover, after his inevitable failure, the male scientist becomes increasingly disturbed, presenting signs of 'male hysteria.'

The mad doctor and his monstrous creation also form a grotesque double body, in the *Alien* film composed of the three evil men on one side, and Ripley and the Aliens on the other. As Creed notes (ibid., 54, 60), it is usually the creation that is the sympathetic figure, the scientists representing the "civilized" savagery of science and technology.

In the spaceship – when the feminine prevails over the masculine – the speaking computer system, 'Father,' is also symbolically destroyed. Doctor Wren tries to address the system, but Call informs him: "Father's dead, asshole!" The broken computer becomes a metaphor of obliterated paternal authority.

In the film, other important male characters include Johner and Vriess from the 'Betty crew.' The Betty Commercial Freighter is a small merchant ship that arrives at the mother ship, the USM Auriga, to deliver a cargo. The cargo consists of people in individual coffins, with a big brown egg in front of each person. When the eggs start opening, a terrified man inside a coffin is heard screaming. Later on, the 'coffin people' are found dead with their stomachs mauled, devoured by the newborn Aliens.

Part of the Betty crew, Johner is a big, muscular man with a disfigured scarred face, characterized by aggressive, stereotypically masculine behavior. He is also coarse and condescending toward women. When first introduced, Johner imitates a monkey and, to amuse himself, throws a knife into Vriess' thigh.

Vriess is a man seated in a wheelchair, with an irregular face, and his lower body paralyzed, with no feeling in his legs. The opposite of Johner, Vriess is a pleasant, altruistic figure. Call is also introduced here for the first time, as part of the crew, clearly at odds with Johner. As an attractive young woman, she is described, by some men, as "severely fuckable."

The first encounter between Ripley and the Betty crew takes place when Ripley is playing basketball by herself. Eager to challenge this mysterious, strong woman, Johner harasses Ripley until she knocks him down. Another crew member hits Ripley with a barbell, but to everybody's astonishment, she is not hurt. Only her nose starts bleeding slightly. When the blood drops to the floor, it starts sizzling.

CALL

In *Alien: Resurrection*, the second most important female character is Call. She turns out to be a humanoid robot, hot-tempered but goodhearted. When she gets shot by Doctor Wren, she falls into water and apparently dies, but after a while returns. Noticing an odd cavity in Call's chest, Ripley discovers that she is a robot, and says, "I should have known. No human being is that humane."

The relationship between Call and Ripley evolves from initial suspicion to mutual understanding, solidarity and friendship. In their first encounter, Call offers to help Ripley by killing her, aware of her distress at being a clone. Ripley grabs Call by the throat, but at the same time caresses her face. Call also asks for Ripley's help to destroy the Aliens. Later on, when Call has just been revealed as a robot, she confesses to Ripley: "At least there's a part of you that's human ... look at me ... I'm disgusting." Outlaw identity turns out to be something that the two women have in common.

Call may be a robot, but in her appearance, behavior and feelings she seems exactly like a human. A mixture of animate and inanimate, of flesh and machine, she is categorically ambiguous. As an example of the 'technical' grotesque, her figure is based on an alienating fusion of organic and mechanical elements – either mechanical objects that are brought to life, or human beings that are made mechanical (Kayser 1981, 183). There is however nothing ominous about Call, who is a rather soothing figure: beautiful, righteous and heroic. In her character, the grotesque and goodness coalesce.

Call's flawless beauty parallels her to the stereotype of 'the uncanny doll woman.' Call embodies the misogynistic myth of woman with a treacherous appearance: a woman that is beautiful on the outside but hideous within. Call's femininity is thus based on a beautiful surface that conceals a grotesque body – a body that consists of emptiness, mechanical parts and a white foamy substance, as revealed through the bullet hole in her chest.

Moreover, as a robot, Call corresponds to a lower-class servant. Breaking the robot (and the doll woman) code, she is neither obliging nor malevolent, and far from being docile. Call turns out to be an independent subject who boldly defies the oppressing masculine order. More humane and apt than the men, Call constantly challenges them, and is not even very interested in them: her interest lies more in Ripley. It remains unclear whether their relationship is a matter of friendly, maternal or lesbian love. Revealingly, the film's only tender moments among the main characters take place between Ripley and Call, and between Ripley and her Alien 'baby girl,' the Newborn.

Altogether, the female protagonists embody a monster and a machine, both categorical anomalies. Neither of them is a real woman, or a real human being. This supports the idea that a human being is primarily man, and woman is necessarily something else: a representative of nature, of the inanimate, of the otherworldly. In this sense, Lacan's statement about the nonexistence of woman proves accurate.

Besides being a representation of femininity, the ontological status of Ripley and Call appears as an allegory of race or ethnicity. As a clone with impure Alien genes and as a humanoid robot, Ripley and Call represent different 'species,' differing from the norm of genetically 'pure' humans.

ALIEN

While still in captivity, the Alien Queen starts to breed, rapidly producing a brood. The close-ups of the creatures' roaring mouths and sharp teeth foreshadow the forthcoming horrors. Doctor Gediman is shown training and sadistically punishing the Aliens by releasing freezing vapor into their chambers, causing them great pain.

Constituting a first major turning point in the film, the Aliens obviously get loose in the spaceship. The breakout takes place as the Aliens get agitated and start to spew a yellow, highly corrosive substance. The substance instantly creates an opening in the floor, and to multiple floors below, forming a deep rift. When Gediman peeps down into the opening, an Alien limb grabs his face, pulling him down to the abyss.

The Alien's intricate morphology – created by H. R. Giger – is a combination of organic lizard-like features, technological traits and human attributes, with a disturbing resemblance to sex organs. The creature is also defined by excessive sliminess and moisture: its metallic teeth are covered with slime, and liquid is constantly flowing out of the mouth. It communicates by screeching and roaring. The Alien skin is black and moist with a metallic shine, and its composition includes mechanical details, which gives its demeanor a technological, machine-like dimension. Besides its big lizardy tail, its most conspicuous body part is the pointed head with a phallic posterior extension, together with the mouth with salient sharp teeth. Its tongue, that it thrusts out to strike its victims, has another pair of teeth, unfailingly reminiscent of a toothed penis.

The Alien is an extremely grotesque being, a hybrid monster that is exceptionally disgusting and threatening. As Noël Carroll (1987) describes horrific monsters, they elicit fear and disgust, and are often associated with filth, decay and slime. Identified as impure and loathing, monsters may be related to rotting flesh, chemical waste, vermin, or crawling creatures, inciting the desire to avoid physical contact with them. Monsters originate in places that are unknown, hidden or abandoned, like a graveyard, or outside the human world, like under the earth or in outer space.

With its slimy and toxic secretions, the Alien appears a prime example of such monsters. Its most particular feature, however, is its association with threatening sexuality. In line with the theme of monstrous reproduction, sexual threat is present both in its morphology and its typical behavior: it aims at massive breeding, and uses humans as hosts or nourishment for its eggs and newborns. The Alien's breeding, hatching and birthing functions are particularly brutal, visceral and gory. In this way, the Alien, together with Ripley, adheres to the long tradition of female monstrosity. As Creed (2005, x-xi) notes, it is woman that has been traditionally more closely associated with monstrosity and the production of monsters – because they are closer to nature, more carnal, and thought of as capable of copulating with animals.

Moreover, the Alien represents ominous grotesque powers, as described by Wolfgang Kayser (1981, 185-188). These powers remain mysterious, incomprehensible and impersonal, as the ghostly "It" intruding into our world. Invoking the demonic aspects of the world, these forces may be embodied by apocalyptic beasts and demons, emerging from the abyss.

The Alien is also reminiscent of biblical abominations, of the unholy confusion of species and categories. As explained by Mary Douglas (2002, 69-70), the abominated species include the creeping, crawling and swarming animals, considered as unclean because of their indeterminate moving mode. Like the worm, they belong to the realm of the grave, death and chaos.

In horror texts, monsters are quite commonly loaded with features of 'low' animals: reptiles, spiders and insects, often found disgusting and fearsome by humans, because they are considered far from the human species. The protean Alien anatomy could also be paralleled with *grottesca*, the Roman ornaments as the etymological source of the grotesque. These ornaments express a free play of imagination, interweaving plant, animal and human forms, as if giving birth to each other (Bakhtin 1984, 31-32). The Alien, however, is devoid of the ornament's gay tone, closer to apocalyptic visions.

It seems that the Alien has stood the test of time, constituting a good example of the 'evocative grotesque,' the kind of grotesque that potentially creates a strong reaction in the viewer.

Within the psychoanalytic framework, the Alien monster can be seen as a fetish object, something that stands in for the allegedly castrated female genitals. According to Freud, the fetish object is created as a substitute for the missing penis of the mother, because for a male child the sight of the female genitals is terrifying, a proof that castration can occur. An example of a fetish object is the Medusa's head: however frightening, yet a mitigation of the horror, confirming both the absence and the presence of the female phallus. The Medusa's head can also be seen as a version of the *vagina dentata*. (Creed 1993, 23, 110-116.)

With its prominent mouth and teeth, the Alien constitutes an image of the *vagina dentata*, also leaning on Freud's transposition theory, whereby the lower body parts are confused with the upper ones (Freud 2010b, 398). Such overturning defines the Alien's sexual functions even more widely, as insemination and birth are also performed through the upper body. The liquid flowing out of its mouth is also a feminine element. At the same time, considering its head and tongue, the Alien's morphology is quite phallic as well. With its tongue, it strikes and penetrates its victims, sometimes also inseminating them through the mouth.

However, the sexual references remain ambivalent, as the penis-like tongue is hidden inside a vagina-like mouth. Like a conglomerate of archaic fears, the Alien constitutes a doubly terrifying image: the phallic and the vaginal threat all in one, the castrator and the penetrator combined.

The Alien is also an abject creature, in the sense described by Julia Kristeva (1982, 12-13). It is an object of primal repression, confronting us within the domain of the *maternal*, but also in the *animal* sphere, connected by primitive societies to sex and murder. The Alien represents horror that interferes with identity, operating on the fragile border where identities, barely existing, are fuzzy, animal and metamorphosed (ibid., 207). Because it is abject, the Alien is also uncannily fascinating: the spectator both fears and expects its apparition, mesmerized by its mysterious demeanor. The Alien is rarely shown in its entirety, and its appearance seems to change from image to image, which makes it a chameleon creature in continuous metamorphosis.

As Creed points out (1993, 11), the function of the monstrous is to create an encounter between the Symbolic order and that which threatens this order. The monstrous is thus generated within the boundary between human and non-human, normal and abnormal, good and evil.

With the Alien, monstrosity also emerges from the demarcation between proper self and abject otherness, between autonomy and dependence, and between reproduction and annihilation.

In the film, the crew soon realizes that the Aliens are loose. 'Father,' the computer, declares that the main vessel is now uninhabitable, because of a non-human presence, and instructs the residents to proceed to lifeboats. The surviving crew members discover that the mother ship is autopiloting toward the Earth as an emergency procedure. They decide to destroy the mother ship by blowing it, and to use the Betty ship to escape. To rescue themselves, they start an eventful journey through the ship invaded by the Aliens.

CLONES

On their way, Ripley discovers a room with the text "1–7" marked on the door. She enters and sees in big glass tubes the previous failed clones of Ellen Ripley. Floating in yellowish blurry liquid, the dead clones are severely deformed creatures combining human and Alien features, all mixed up in horrible ways: tails and teeth attached to misshapen female bodies, a second mouth on the cheek, an eye placed on the back, and so on.

Suddenly Ripley hears moaning, and arrives at a living clone woman lying on a bed. Endowed with some Alien features, she has a face almost like Ripley's. Her upper body is naked, which reveals her breasts and incisions on the chest and stomach, left open. A tube goes into her body through an incision by the navel. She is gasping for breath, and strenuously manages to utter the words: "Kill me." Deeply upset, Ripley grabs a flamethrower, and furiously burns the clone woman, and after her all the clones, the glass tubes blowing around. The clones are a dreary expression of grotesque metamorphosis, a desolate version of the ambivalent fusion of birth and death. The clones are misshapen versions of one single person, Ellen Ripley, unnaturally duplicated, and spread among seven clone bodies. Seeing them, Ripley is forced to encounter herself as a grotesque monster, as one of these dreadfully hybrid, incomplete creatures; a macabre product of hideous scientific experiments.

Ripley finally realizes why she has a number 8 tattooed on her arm. Ripley's role in the narrative is underlined by the fact that the number 8, if turned, is also the infinity symbol – and that her name, Ripley, is almost homonymous with the word 'replay' – signifying infinite repetition of life. In addition, in the Bible, the number 8 symbolizes a new beginning, the rebirth of man when resurrected from death into eternal life (BibleStudy.org).

The clones, encountered in this way, are an uncanny phenomenon. For Freud, the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, is something frightening because it is simultaneously familiar and strange; long-established in the mind, but alienated through repression. The uncanny refers, for example, to things that express the idea of the 'double,' such as a lookalike, a shadow, a ghost or a split ego; to things that are associated with death, such as spirits or souls of dead people; to dismembered limbs or castration; and to involuntary repetition or the 'magical' recurrence of things. (Freud 2003, 124, 132, 141-155.) For Freud, the uncanny is "that which should have remained repressed ... but which has come to light" (Creed 2005, ix, 5).

For Ripley, the clones in glass containers represent her own prehistory, her cloning process – a kind of uncanny return to the womb – but also an alternative present time. The room of clones is simultaneously a parallel universe showing what might have been, and an uncanny present state where she *is* each and every one of these clones. The clones are ambiguously her and not-her, familiar and unfamiliar, constituting a fantasy space where identity, the limits between self and other, and the categories of time and place, collapse.

The monstrosity of the living clone woman is generated through the ambivalence between her twofold status as a speaking being and as a hideous mass of flesh grown in a lab; a suffering mass with human consciousness. The clone woman is the point where human and beast converge in a very concrete manner. As an object of horror and compassion, the clone woman embodies the Deleuzian idea of the common zone between man and beast. reduced to a piece of meat through suffering, as in Francis Bacon's paintings (Deleuze 2005, 21-22). With her bare breasts, and open wounds as signifiers of the feminine, the clone is a markedly feminine body. An expression of the monstrous-feminine, the clone woman is a reminder of humans' link to nature, of human fragility and of human cruelty. As Creed (2005, 61) concludes, the clone scene represents "a bizarre futuristic scene of couvade in which the male mother is essentially more monstrous than any of his creations."

After leaving the room of clones, the crew encounters Purvis, the 'pregnant' man who carries an Alien fetus in his body, as discovered by Ripley. In spite of the threat, they decide to rescue him. To reach the Betty ship, the crew descends to the bottom of the mother ship that is flooding. Water is everywhere: it is showering and rushing, and they need to dive a long way to proceed. Two Aliens, at home in the water, follow them, and yet another crew member is lost.

When the survivors rise up from the water, they arrive at a huge hatchery. In this hyperbolic uterine space, there are rows of big pulsating eggs, alien body fluids or pulp, and mysterious reproductive parts spread all over the place, vaguely reminiscent of the fetal membrane and networks of blood vessels. Some crew members that disappeared earlier are found still alive, stuck in the pulp for later use. The hatchery represents a place of birth and death made palpably real, an encounter with abjection, as Kristeva (1982, 3) describes it: "These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being."

THE ALIEN NEST

While hurrying up to reach the rescue ship, Ripley suddenly hears the 'call' of the Aliens, sensing that the Alien Queen is in pain. Like an irresistible biological necessity, as if with her consent, Ripley is pulled down through the floor. She falls into a space full of Alien bodies, a kind of Alien nest reminiscent of a black, pulsating ocean made of swarming Aliens. It is like a collective cosmic Alien body, the cosmos' own flesh and blood.

Ripley is shown lying on this mass, with her arms spread wide, looking drowsy, even voluptuous. Visually she seems like fused into the black mass of Alien bodies. With her black wet hair and dark glossy leather outfit, reminding of the Alien skin, she seems united with them, only her pale face and arms standing out. As she drowsily opens her eyes, she finds herself in an Alien creature's embrace, tenderly carrying her somewhere.

The nest is an oneiric place marked by dissolution and reunion, oblivion and reminiscence. Psychoanalytically, the Alien nest appears as a materialization of the loss of self, of the unknown, reminiscent of the Lacanian Real. In the nest, the boundaries between self and other, between Ripley and the collective Alien body, disappear. Like the abject, it is a place where identity dissolves and meaning collapses (Kristeva 1982, 2-4). Reminiscent of the archaic mother—child relation, the nest embodies the semiotic *chora*, an undifferentiated maternal space; "an endless movement and pulsation beneath the symbolic" (Homer 2005, 118). Lying in the nest, in an odd mother—child unity, Ripley becomes one with the creatures, transcending the limits of the symbolic, the possible and the known.

According to Creed, the Aliens convey the idea of the archaic mother, existing as a 'non-presence.' The archaic mother is the ancient, generative figure giving birth to all life. At the same time, it is a destructive force that threatens to take back what it once gave birth to. The archaic mother is totally dedicated to the procreative principle, but also oriented toward death and extinction, the original oneness of things. In horror texts, the archaic mother is present in its phantasmagoric aspect, materialized in the voracious maw or the enigmatic black hole. Signifying female genitals, the primeval hole generates horrific offspring, but also threatens to incorporate everything. (Creed 1993, 17-28.) "If, as Georges Bataille argues, life signifies discontinuity and separateness, and death signifies continuity and non-differentiation, then the desire for and attraction of death suggests also a desire to return to the state of original oneness with the mother" (Creed 1986).

A materialization of the black hole, the Alien nest is a place of mysterious conception: a transfer of Ripley's human reproductive system to the Alien Queen. The Alien Queen is thereby able to breed in a new way, become pregnant and carry an Alien creature in her womb.

The abject Alien nest is obviously repellent, but also attractive, drawing Ripley toward its depths with an irresistible force. While in the nest, Ripley's serene, nearly orgasmic presence suggests *jouissance*, in Lacanian thinking referring to pure enjoyment in the Real. In fact, the abject is inextricably related to *jouissance*, as the abominable Real is accessible only through this mode of enjoyment, through which the subject violently and painfully rejoices in the abject (Kristeva 1982, 9). The nest may also be seen as a 'sinthome,' a libidinally invested bearer of *jouissance* that simultaneously attracts and repels. A materialization of the subject's nauseous enjoyment, it is the abyss that exerts its fatal attraction, threatening to swallow the subject, and demanding identification with it. (Žižek 1992, 135-137.)

BIRTH SCENES

Alien: Resurrection constructs "elaborate birthing fantasies against an intra-uterine landscape that is grotesque in the extreme" (Creed 2005, 43). In the film, there are three or four birth scenes.

In the first one, Ripley gives birth to the Alien Queen. The Cesarean section is performed by doctors in sterile conditions, calmly and without drama. A special grotesque twist comes from the penis-like morphology of the newborn Alien, projecting out of a retractable fold of skin resembling a foreskin. The first birth merely introduces the monstrous newborn.

The second birth scene is Purvis' childbirth. Blood springs up from his mouth and ominously bulging chest, as the Alien baby bursts its way through his ribcage. Doctor Wren shoots at Purvis, and they start a furious fight. As Purvis emits a long, fierce labor roar, the camera grotesquely 'enters' his body through the open mouth, down the gullet, until encountering the face of the screeching Alien. Finally, the Alien exits the body through the chest. The crew members shoot the newborn Alien.

Purvis giving birth to an Alien is an extremely grotesque event; an exaggerated, aestheticized and macabre travesty, in which the horror and violence of childbirth is pushed to the limit. The scene is an antithesis of idealized depictions of happy births with cute babies: the baby is a monster, joy is replaced by horror and birth is turned into death. The scene also provides a grotesque representation of the birthing male - a reworking of 'couvade,' or the ancient fantasy of man giving birth. In the process, Purvis' birth-giving body becomes an open wound, a signifier of the maternal body. As Creed (1993, 19) claims, male bodies that become grotesque are endowed with characteristics associated with the female body. Also for Kristeva (1982, 102), a fully symbolic body must not bear any traces of its 'debt to nature.' A cutting is a sign of the nonsymbolic, the non-separate, the impure. The body limits between Purvis and the Alien are ravaged as Purvis' body is mutilated from the inside. As the Alien bursts out of Purvis' chest, it simultaneously penetrates Doctor Wren's forehead. In this way, the two males and the Alien form a grotesque conglomerate of bodies. Moreover, the visual analogy between the newborn creature and an erect toothed penis shakes the intelligible order of bodily categories. The second birth represents thus the horror scenario of childbirth, focusing on the monster atrociously ravaging the vulnerable maternal body from the inside.

Thirdly, the Alien Queen gives finally birth to a 'next-generation' Alien. This happens mysteriously with the help of Ripley's reproductive system, transmitted to the Queen in the Alien nest. When the Alien Queen goes into labor, she is pictured as morphologically very different from her former appearance as a 'regular' Alien. She has a more insect-like anatomy, with small jointed front legs and a differently shaped head, vaguely reminiscent of a pirate hat. Most conspicuously, she has a huge, pulsating abdomen, large enough to accommodate a creature bigger than an adult human. Finally the abdomen cracks in the middle, the Queen roars, and the Newborn, covered by a transparent membrane, pushes itself out.

The Alien Queen in labor is a horrifyingly grotesque sight. Looking like a giant arthropod that is about to burst and reveal its horrible insides, the Queen constitutes a hyperbolic image of monstrous pregnancy. The birthing mother is thus represented as totally abject. In fact, according to Jane Ussher (2006, 86-87),

the prototype of the grotesque body is the pregnant, birth-giving female body with its corporeality as a culmination of abjection. Moreover, reflecting the demonic mystery of reproduction, everything is horribly mixed up: the Alien Queen is Ripley's child, now giving birth to their child. The third birth scene represents thus the horror of the birthing maternal body.

A fourth depiction of birth or incubation is embedded in the clone imagery – including the initial image of Ripley in the glass tube, together with her encounter with the other seven clones. These images represent an uncanny return to the maternal body. The clone imagery thus points to the horror of the hybrid, metamorphosing fetus.

As if exploring the fantastic possibilities, all these birth scenes represent different versions of the primal scene, a primal fantasy depicting birth or the origin of the subject (Laplanche and Pontalis 1968). Based on Freudian infantile sexual theories, such fantasies are persistent and widespread. Myths and legends abound with depictions of illegitimate breeding between humans, animals, monsters and divinities, of aberrant births and fanciful newborns. As Creed (1993, 17-19) notes, the mythological stories of interspecies copulation are possibly reworkings of the primal scene – which is also a major concern of the science fiction horror film. Analyzing the first *Alien* (1979) film, Creed detects in it several representations of the primal scene.

THE NEWBORN

The newborn descendant of Ripley and the Alien Queen – here called 'the Newborn' – is a mixture of Alien and human, endowed with more human traits than an 'ordinary' Alien. Its face is reminiscent of a human skull devoid of flesh, with deep eye sockets and a nose stump. It has feminine human breasts, and it is beige in color. However, its complexion is leprous, lumpy and slimy, and from its mouth comes vapor and slime. Its mouth and the back of its head, with the posterior extension, resemble those of an Alien. Even though a newborn, it is bigger than a human, and seems fully developed.

After being born, the Newborn kills its mother, the Alien Queen. As it detects Ripley, it approaches her, and roars softly. With a tender gaze, recognizing Ripley as its mother, it licks her face with its long pink tongue.

The Newborn is a grotesque monster – perhaps even more grotesque because it is closer to humans. It is born from an incestuous-like union, even though the parenthood is not that articulate

with Aliens that are less individual beings, and more ghostly replicas of the Alien species. The hybrid morphology of the Newborn includes features of a lizard-like animal, of a dead human – and of an old woman. With its flat, hanging breasts, it is vaguely reminiscent of the grotesque stereotype of 'the hag.'

In fact, the original design of the Newborn contained both female and male sex organs that were removed during post-production (Wikipedia). The hermaphrodite monster was apparently too daring for the distributor. This characteristic supports the idea of Alien's sexually hybrid morphology with both feminine and masculine features.

The first encounter between Ripley and the Newborn is a grotesque travesty of the idealized mother-child relation. And yet, unexpectedly, it is a nearly tender moment. Precisely because of the huge imparity, there is something strangely fascinating in this dyad – in the manner of the legends depicting the titillating union between a human and a monster, like the Beauty and the Beast.

In the film, the remaining crew members – Call, Johner, Vriess and Distephano – are already in the Betty ship, ready to leave the USM Auriga. At the very last minute, Ripley jumps into the ship, followed by the Newborn, and the ship takes off. The Newborn sees Distephano, and with its bare hands effortlessly crushes the man's head, bloody pulp flowing from its hands. It seizes Call to kill her next, but Ripley orders it to stop. To win the child's confidence, Ripley hugs the Newborn, who tenderly rubs its face against hers.

As an ultimate measure, Ripley throws a bit of her own corrosive blood at the vessel's window, eroding a small hole in it. The Newborn, unprepared for an attack by its 'loving' mother, is blown toward the hole. Because of the pressure and suction, the creature starts to come apart, roaring in pain, its blood spreading into space through the hole. In tears, Ripley silently utters "I'm sorry." Finally the Newborn's bowels and entrails burst out. With several cuts, the camera shot outside the vessel shows how the creature's blood and dismantled flesh is sucked into outer space, through the tiny hole, soon vanishing from sight.

The scene constitutes a grotesque culmination of the film. The creature is literally turned inside out, its insides bursting outside, as it is hurled into its nonbeing. At the same time, the scene is very touching. The Newborn is certainly a terrifying monster that needs to be destroyed. And yet one has a strange compassion for the creature, so credulous, pictured with a miserable face, as terribly betrayed by its mother. One also has compassion for Ripley, the mother who is forced to let her child go. Regardless of its fictionality and absurdity, the scene arouses sadness for the

unavoidable losses in life, for the imminent separation between mother and child, between loved ones.

Significantly, the Newborn is sucked into outer space by a tiny hole, a lethal vortex. Within the film's thematics, the hole becomes a signifier of female genitals. Blood is shown running through the hole, connoting a bleeding vagina. The Newborn goes back to where it came from: the cosmos, or the archaic mother who retrieves what she once generated. Through the bottomless vagina, the creature is sucked back into the black hole of extinction.

THE FILM ENDS

The USM Auriga explodes, with the Aliens on board, and the bumping Betty ship reaches Earth's atmosphere. Because of the hole in the window, Ripley and Call have difficulties hanging on, squeezing themselves against one another. As they approach Earth, the ship is suddenly stabilized. In the cabin, Johner kisses Vriess – stupefied by the gesture. As Ripley and Call gaze in the same direction, their faces look very much alike. This constitutes an iconic relation between them, stressing their role as the prototype of woman. They see the blue sky, gracefully floating clouds, the gleam of day, the land. Call asks what happens now, and Ripley answers, "I don't know. I'm a stranger here myself." Ripley's line is reminiscent of the fragile borders of subjectivity, and of human society, marked by a profound sense of otherness and alienation.

Within the film's thematics of reproduction, the ship's arrival on Earth symbolizes rebirth, a new beginning. The dark and ominous spaceship, the abject maternal womb, has propelled the survivors out toward light and open air, a better future.

The syntagm of final survivors – Ripley, Call, Johner and Vriess – is a curious set of characters. All with some 'deficiency,' they represent the seed of future humanity, in this case, based on alterity. Ripley is a human clone with some Alien genes, and Call is a humanoid robot. Vriess, in a wheelchair, is represented as physically lacking, while Johner is excessive, filled with testosterone. It could be expected that Johner, a representation of vulgar masculinity, would have been killed by the Aliens like the other brute males. However, the man has evolved in the process: the knife thrown into Vriess' thigh is replaced by the homosocial kiss, stressing the possibility of change. As an allegory of the outlaw Adam and Eve, 'man' is an amalgam of Johner and Vriess, while Ripley and Call together represent 'woman.' Even though grotesquely anomalous, a monster and a machine, it is the women that get to be the biggest heroes, the saviors of humanity.

THE ROLE OF THE GROTESQUE

In *Alien: Resurrection*, most prevalently, the grotesque embodies alterity. Alterity may relate to any kind of identity issue or marginalized position in society, extending to a sense of otherness inherent in all humans.

Importantly, the grotesque concretizes fears and fantasies, including the most concealed or forbidden repressions and desires. It represents the return of the repressed, embodied in the Alien monster and its reproductive organism. The grotesque thus functions as a mediator between the unconscious and the conscious mind, between the Symbolic and the Real, or between the social order and undifferentiated chaos.

Through abject corporeality, the grotesque provides an experience of the uncontrollable. Grotesque experience may be both horrifying and fascinating, purely disturbing or empowering, cathartic or even ecstatic. Paradoxically, the grotesque also offers an illusion of control. A grotesque monster is more manageable than nonspecific evil or nameless anxiety.

The grotesque also materializes abstract ideas, gives them a sensible form. For example, the Newborn's nauseating suction into outer space is a grotesque materialization of death and annihilation, the unfathomable transition from being into nonbeing.

Through the grotesque, it is possible to express something extreme – like death, or the semiotic drive force. Because of its hyperbolic and degrading nature, the grotesque is particularly well-suited to creating a satisfactory payback. In this way, the evil men get to taste their own medicine, grotesquely served to them by the very object of their exploitation.

The grotesque can be used to support an ideology, to allure the viewer to embrace an ideological bias. In the *Alien* film, the grotesque promotes social justice and tolerance toward otherness, functioning as a tool to question pre-established truths. At the same time, the grotesque instigates taboos and regressive ideas, consolidating the detrimental association between monstrosity and the female reproductive body. With monsters and robots, the grotesque makes visible naturalized ideological assumptions, such as the view of female subjectivity as a deficient version of male subjectivity.

Finally, the grotesque offers an alternative view of the world. In *Alien: Resurrection*, it reveals the exploitative and cruel side of science. It also dismantles the idealized image of nature – and of maternity – bringing forth the pernicious side of nature and procreation, based on a battle for survival. With its imaginative forms, the grotesque liberates the audience to see things differently.

FIGHT CLUB



The main reason for choosing *Fight Club* as part of the research material is its display of a grotesquely split identity, and its focus on degradation, a grotesque transfer to the material bodily level. Embodied in a hallucinatory alter ego, the repressed side of self is entwined with the grotesque in more ways than one. The grotesque is curiously present in the mind of the protagonist, revealed through his narration and the dialogue – therefore this is taken into account in the analysis. The depicted fighting, at once degenerative and regenerative, and its marks on the body, also present grotesque features.

Another reason for adopting *Fight Club* is its emphatic portrayal of consumerist culture – constituting an insightful representation of contemporary society. The grotesque and the carnivalesque appear as a counterforce to this culture, a means to rise up against the overwhelming dominant ideology. Interestingly, the film's astutely masculine point of view seems a deliberate paradigmatic choice, not an unwitting state of affairs.

Directed by David Fincher, *Fight Club* (1999) is based on a novel written by Chuck Palahniuk, starring Edward Norton as the unnamed narrator, Brad Pitt as Tyler Durden and Helena Bonham Carter as Marla Singer. The side characters mentioned in the analysis include Bob / Robert Paulson (Meat Loaf) and Chloe (Rachel Singer).²⁷

Fight Club tells the story of a white-collar middle-class worker, the unnamed narrator, who suffers from insomnia. To get relief, he starts attending support group meetings for people with serious illnesses. Marla Singer, his decadent girlfriend-to-be, attends the groups for similar reasons. During a business trip, the narrator encounters Tyler Durden, an intriguing self-confident man. They become friends and found 'Fight Club,' a clandestine forum for organized fighting, meant to provide the male members with momentary liberation from their frustrating lives. Orchestrated by Tyler, the activity expands into anarchistic action and large-scale vandalism. The narrator becomes finally aware of his split identity and discovers the truth about Tyler, revealed to be a product of his imagination.

The grotesque elements analyzed here are the narrator's split identity, Tyler as the ghostly alter ego, Marla as the decadent mistress, the fighting activity and marks of violence on the body, the orientation toward the bottom, the notion of death and the carnivalesque anarchistic action.

27 Screenplay by Jim Uhls. Cinematography by Jeff Cronenweth. Edited by James Haygood. Set decoration by Jay Hart. Costume design by Michael Kaplan.

THE FILM BEGINS

Fight Club's initial scene shows the protagonist man, the unnamed narrator, with a gun barrel in his mouth, seated in a dark and empty office building. The narrator starts to tell about his life as an office worker suffering from insomnia, describing how he met Bob, Marla and Tyler, how he moved to Tyler's house, and how they together founded Fight Club. In the film, all this is displayed in flashback, finally leading back to the initial scene.

THEMATICS AND BACKGROUND

The film is a depiction of contemporary consumerist culture, focusing on the frustration that it entails for an individual, exemplified by the male protagonist. As the narrator explains, he had become "a slave to the Ikea nesting instinct," and with his wardrobe and stereos, he was "close to being complete." But then there arrives Tyler Durden, in his red leather jacket, asking, "Why do guys like you and I know what a duvet is? Is this essential to our survival in the hunter-gatherer sense?" Tyler's conclusion is: "We're consumers. We are by-products of a lifestyle obsession." And his solution is: "So fuck off with your sofa units and Strinne green stripe patterns. I say never be complete. I say stop being perfect. I say let's evolve."

The theme of consumerism is coupled with the theme of masculinity in crisis. No longer conditioned by raw physical strength, bare instincts and survival, masculinity has been domesticated and 'feminized' by modern society. Muscles have been replaced by 'man boobs,' and pornography by household furnishings, as observed by the narrator.

Yet another aspect of the men's frustration is the 'grand deception,' related to missed dreams and a missing bigger purpose, replaced, at best, by white-collar slavery. As Tyler declares, "We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars. But we won't. We're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off."

All this has turned men into emasculated, submissive consumers. In the place of 'glorious' masculinity, defined by respect and freedom, there is only an annoying job, meaningless entertainment, compulsive consumption, and advertising foisting impossible standards and vain desires. In Tyler's words, "Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes. Working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need."

In the film, as an initial turning point, the insomniac narrator – out of curiosity – attends a support group meeting for men with testicular cancer. The collective grieving and hugging

leads to an emotional discharge, which enables him to sleep again. The narrator becomes addicted to support group meetings and starts to attend several of them, for various diseases. In his very first meeting, the narrator meets Bob, a former champion body-builder, now with testicular cancer and "bitch tits." As the narrator explains, it was hugging Bob, pressed against his "huge sweating tits that hung enormous" that made him let go, find freedom. Significantly, Bob's aberrant body is a grotesque body, for the narrator aversive but alluring, liberating and soothing.

In the meetings, the narrator also meets Marla, an eccentric decadent woman, making her dramatic first appearance wearing sunglasses, with a smoking cigarette in hand. With no diseases, she attends the groups for relief and pleasure. For the narrator, Marla "ruined everything" – her lie reflecting his – making his insomnia return.

The narrator works in a major automobile company as a 'recall coordinator,' assessing cars' durability after car accidents, which makes him travel all around the country. During yet another business trip, the bored narrator meets on the airplane Tyler, an intriguing, assertive man with a cool, eccentric look.

When the narrator arrives home, he sees his apartment burning. He contacts Tyler, and over a beer, they have an eye-opening discussion related to consumption and masculinity. In the parking lot outside the bar, *Lou's Tavern*, the narrator asks if he can stay at his place for the night. Tyler agrees, and, in return, asks the narrator to hit him as hard as he can, which he does. They have their first fight, and the narrator moves in with Tyler.

SPLIT IDENTITY

In the latter part of the film, the truth about Tyler is revealed: he is the alter ego of the narrator, a hallucinatory creation of an insomniac. For a long time, the narrator – and the spectator – is unaware of this, considering Tyler to be another person.

The theme of split identity is ultimately a metaphor of something much more casual, concerning all people. As Tyler points out, "People do it every day. They talk to themselves. They see themselves as they'd like to be."

An analogy for split identity may be found within the decline of grotesque realism, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 36-53). Thereby the grotesque double body is cut in two, alienated and removed from the flux of becoming, from the ultimate whole. "The result is a broken grotesque figure, the demon of fertility with phallus cut off and belly crushed." In the film, the

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missing side of the double body is represented by Tyler's ghostly figure, a phallic embodiment of regenerative degeneration.

Tyler and the narrator together represent a carnivalesque 'paired image,' with opposing qualities, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. According to Bakhtin, paired images are characterized either by contrast or similarity. Notably their dialogue is significant, reflecting the ancient carnivalesque dual-tone speech, and the dialogue between the two ends of metamorphosis. (Bakhtin 1984, 433-434; Bakhtin 1991, 184-185.) In *Fight Club*, such a carnivalesque dynamics is embedded in the illuminating dialogues and battles between the two characters, enfolding the core message of the film.

Psychoanalytically, the grotesque splitting of the subject is, according to Noël Carroll (1981), a way of articulating conflicts concerning identity, aggressiveness or sexuality, with an emphasis on the repressed aspect of the self. Such splitting concerns, for example, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, doubles, werewolves and other changelings. Significantly, in *Fight Club*, the repressed side of self is the ideal self. The protagonist is like the wolf-man that gives birth to himself, turning himself inside out (Creed 2005, xiii).

In Lacan's view, the subject is considered as fundamentally split, inherently lacking and insatiable, as determined by the Symbolic order. The imaginary mother–child unity is broken by paternal intervention, which induces the child from the world of infantile plenitude into the universe of lack, the Symbolic order. (Homer 2005, 55-57, 71, 104.)

In *Fight Club*, the subject is split in a very concrete manner. Within the Freudian topography, the split entails a cleavage between the ego and the id, as if the narrator's superego was excluding the unruly element altogether, projecting it onto a separate entity. On the other hand, since the alter ego is displayed as a separate person, the narrator's 'self' is brought into a dialectic relation with the 'other' of the unconscious. At some level, this connection momentarily unravels the recognition of lack. For and through Tyler, lack is fulfilled, and desire satisfied.

The split between the narrator and Tyler can also be conceptualized as a re-enactment of the Lacanian mirror stage. The self is reflected in the other, so that the subject sees itself only as a reflection in the mirror. This leads to a primary frustration: the child's real body is experienced as a fragmented body that cannot be mastered, whereas the reflected image is whole and perfect. A struggle begins, when the child realizes that the reflected body is alien, uncontrollable, and yet a part of its identity. (Oliver 1993, 37.) Representing an imaginary misrecognition, the narrator's

defective real body is reflected in Tyler's perfect mirror body. This echoes Lacan's (2004, 38) idea that "man's desire is the desire of the Other." Accordingly, the narrator's desire is the desire of Tyler.

With the advent of Tyler, the limits between the narrator and the external world start to crumble, and the imaginary cohesion of identity is lost. As the narrator wonders, after discovering the existence of his alter ego: "Is Tyler my bad dream, or am I Tyler's?" The outcome is a battle over conflicting desires, culminating in the final fierce fight between the narrator and Tyler, ending in the latter's loss. In the mirror stage, too, paradoxically, the subject must first be doubled, through its reflection in the mirror, in order to become one, a unified subject (Oliver 1993, 20). By the end of the film, Tyler – the other – vanishes after fulfilling his function, forcing the narrator – the subject – to acknowledge his split nature.

As Julia Kristeva points out, subjectivity is always in process. Emphasizing process over identification and struggle over structure, the subject invests desire in transformation, putting themselves on trial. (Kristeva 1984, 178-179.) Subjectivity is thus never a stable identity, which undermines the idea of a unified subject. Moreover, through the unconscious, the logic of alterity is already found within the subject, other to itself. (Oliver 1993, 13, 149, 183.) As an incarnation of the split subject, the narrator is a subject-in-process par excellence, a subject whose unity is put on trial by Tyler, the other within.

Recognizing the subject-in-process relates to the recognition of the death drive and Eros (ibid., 184). What Tyler specifically puts in motion in the narrator is the discharge of semiotic drive force.

TYLER

Tyler Durden is a fascinating, electrifying character. He is extremely self-confident and straightforward, and yet full of mystery, like a legendary hero who has come from nowhere. With men, Tyler is a respected natural leader; with women, according to Marla, "spectacular in bed." With his optimally muscular lean body and visible abdominals – the appearance of Brad Pitt – Tyler is the embodiment of the narrowly defined contemporary male ideal. A final touch comes from his original style, combined with confident body language and manly mannered smoking. Most importantly, Tyler is in full command of his life: he has jobs he likes, acts the way he wants and sets up his own rules, with total freedom from withering society.

As Tyler states to the narrator who has just discovered the truth about him: "All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I

look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck. I am smart, capable and, most importantly, I'm free in all the ways that you are not."

Tyler is the kind of literary character that enfolds a mystery, and that, in his omnipotence, verges on the demonic. Tyler is an apt manipulator: wrapping the world around his little finger, he makes everyone fall under his spell. As a product of the narrator's imagination, Tyler is a ghostly, hallucinatory figure, both existent and nonexistent. It is Tyler's ambiguous, ghostly and demonic quality that makes him a grotesque character, a transcategorical figure.

Seemingly immortal, Tyler mysteriously masters death: embraces and yet avoids it, as if negligently juggling with death. Despite his predilection for destruction, Tyler is also full of life and energy; an inexhaustible source of ideas, tricks and ploys.

Tyler is also a very 'bodily' character, practicing violent fighting and zealous sex, and performing grotesque deeds. He manufactures soap out of people, mixes his bodily fluids with restaurant food, and inserts pornography into family films. Tyler's style also bears traces of the carnivalesque: he sometimes wears subtly clownish clothes – such as the red checkered jacket, the shirt with big autumn leaves, and, the most hilarious example, the cozy bathrobe with the steaming coffee mug motif.

Tyler, as the narrator's ghostly incarnation, is the kind of male 'monster' that is immensely sympathetic because it is stuck between the opposing forces of culture and nature, of the civilized and the primitive (Creed 2005, xv).

Psychoanalytically, for the narrator, Tyler is an idealized all-powerful figure. Through Tyler, elements of infantile narcissism and omnipotence are reactivated. The narcissistic fusion with Tyler turns the narrator himself into a victorious hero, the object of love and admiration. Curiously, Tyler resides both within the narrator's unconscious, as his alter ego, and in his conscious mind, as a separate person, his friend.

Most importantly, Tyler is the narrator's highly seductive fantasy, procuring him libidinal satisfaction that is simultaneously self-aggrandizing, aggressive and erotic. In consequence, getting rid of Tyler turns out to be extremely difficult. In the end, as Tyler pleads with the narrator, "You need me. ... You created me. I didn't create some loser alter ego to make myself feel better."

According to Laplanche and Pontalis (1968), fantasy is the setting of desire, a scenario in which the subject participates, characterized by continuity between conscious and unconscious fantasy forms. Within Lacanian thinking, fantasy is the *mise-en-scène* of desire that covers over the fundamental lack in the Symbolic

order, something that compensates for our impossible relation to the Real, that gives consistency to our being (Žižek 1992, 86, 132, 167). In the film, the narrator's fantasy consists of not only Tyler, but of the entire narrative structure around Tyler – including Fight Club, the house, Marla, and a whole series of events. Besides being a source of pleasure, the fantasy becomes constitutive to the narrator's subjectivity.

In terms of underlying binary structures, Tyler and the narrator form a couple in which Tyler represents body, nature and instincts, as opposed to the narrator who represents mind, culture and reason. Tyler's attributes are paradoxically those that have been historically allocated to women. It is also to Tyler that the narrator's loss of identity, the 'abyss' of the feminine, threatening to engulf the self, is ascribed. Within the couple, Tyler is also the more spiritual one, the representative of both body and soul – which 'safeguards' him from feminization – in the film's world a major threat. Tyler represents the redemption of 'authentic masculinity,' but also stands for the uncanny realm of the feminine, the animal and death, considered as 'other' as designated by the male Symbolic order as outside the sphere of proper phallic masculinity. As a fluid and mutable creature, he lacks clear and distinct boundaries. (Creed 2005, xiii-xv, 14-15.)

Paradoxically, it seems that Tyler is made only more powerful and appealing by his subtle association with the feminine, in no way compromising his masculinity. Appropriating certain elements outside the symbolically masculine sphere, while also fostering markedly masculine elements, Tyler is a grotesque configuration of the conflicting demands faced by men today.

In his double presence, Tyler/the narrator embodies the male monster that corresponds to the failure of man to achieve a masculine ideal – in Lacanian thinking, unobtainable in the first place. Demonstrating the failures and inconsistencies of the Symbolic order, the male monster creates 'phallic panic,' an uncanny form of anxiety based on the realization that civilization is a myth. (Ibid., xvi-xix.)

In the end, Marla breaks up with Tyler and ends up with the narrator, renewed by the splitting experience – while Tyler remains an impossible fantasy.

MARLA

The film's only significant female character, Marla Singer, is an eccentric, charmingly decadent figure. Her decadence is reflected in her 'heroin chic' look: her skinny body, troll-like hair, pale complexion and heavy eye makeup; her somber second-hand clothes,

sunglasses and constant smoking. Marla is also depicted as morally suspect, negligent about her personal hygiene and sexually uninhibited. She steals clothes from a self-service laundry to sell them, keeps a dildo on her table, and, after having sex with Tyler, comments: "I haven't been fucked like that since grade school." According to Tyler, she needs a wash.

Marla has a special relationship with death: she regularly attends support group meetings and socializes with dying people, negligently walks on the road between the cars, and makes a nonchalant suicide attempt by taking a non-lethal overdose of tranquilizers. The sex between Marla and Tyler is wild and extremely noisy – never shown but only heard, with sounds of ecstatic moaning and squealing, making the house literally shake.

In her decadent, macabre existence, Marla presents some grotesque features. With irony, she calls herself a "monster" and "infectious human waste." As part of her nonconformist behavior, she does things that other people abhor, for example pretending that she has a lethal sickness. As the narrator explains, Marla's philosophy of life is to be prepared to die at any moment, and for Marla, the tragedy is that she doesn't. Like a tragicomic suicidal clown figure, she keeps on surviving.

As a representation of woman, Marla's character presents both misogynistic and emancipated features. For the narrator, initially, she is an intruder who invades his support groups, and then his home, starting to visit the house every night to have noisy sex with Tyler. For a long time, Tyler and the narrator consider Marla as strange and annoying, only good for sex. As the narrator describes her, "If I did have a tumor, I'd name it Marla." Tyler calls her a "silly cooze," commenting on their relationship, "This isn't love, it's sport fucking." At first happy with her relationship with Tyler, at some point Marla has had enough of Tyler's/the narrator's rude, inconsistent behavior and leaves him. In the end, Marla and the narrator are brought back together.

As a mistress figure, Marla is a reflection of man's desire. If applying Slavoj Žižek's (1992, 65-66) ideas to Marla, she is merely 'the symptom of man,' a woman embodying pathological enjoyment for man within a particular fantasy frame. Like the femme fatale in *film noir*, she conforms to the Lacanian claim that "Woman does not exist." In fact, according to a *Fight Club* fan theory, "Marla does not exist," analogously to Tyler, being merely a creation of the narrator's psyche (Movies & TV Stack Exchange). Marla is also a female representative of death for the male protagonist, in line with Luce Irigaray's (1991, 159) proposition that women are used to symbolize death for men, to mediate their

death drives. For Creed (2005, 20) as well, woman can signify "what Cixous described (and Freud ignored) as 'the fiction of our relation to death made concrete."

Seen through the 'regressive lens,' Marla appears as a 'fallen' woman with low moral standards. Conforming to misogynistic clichés about femininity, she is depicted as mentally unstable, unpredictable, untruthful and unscrupulous. Contradictorily, Marla also appears as an independent, emancipated and delightfully nonconformist female figure.

In this sense, Marla is reminiscent of the 'new femme fatale' who is, according to Žižek (2000, 9-11), "characterized by direct, outspoken, sexual aggressiveness, verbal and physical; by direct self-commodification and self-manipulation; by the 'mind of a pimp in the body of a whore." Unlike the classic noir femme fatale, the new femme fatale is not punished and destroyed for presenting a threat to the male patriarchal dominance. Moreover, "the new femme fatale who fully accepts the male game of manipulation, and, as it were, beats him at his own game, is much more effective in threatening the paternal Law than the classic spectral femme fatale." Through her audacity, the male fantasy is brutally realized and thrown back to man, which effectively undermines the male domination.

Importantly, Marla is also messy, which means that she doesn't submit her body to rigorous control. Behind all the messiness, however, the character perfectly conforms to the prevailing female beauty ideal – in the tradition of strict appearance criteria for the leading female figure in a film.

Altogether, Marla is likable, because she doesn't try to conceal her defectiveness – which makes her more truthful than most people.

FIGHTING AND THE MARKS ON THE BODY

Tyler and the narrator make fighting a habit, first in the parking lot outside *Lou's Tavern*, with more and more men coming along to join them. The expanding activity soon moves to the bar's basement, and is given the name 'Fight Club.' The fighting is regulated by rules, guaranteeing the club's secrecy, and fair play: one can stop the fight anytime, there is only one fight at a time, and so on. However, as the narrator points out, Tyler and he didn't invent Fight Club – it was already there, "right in everyone's face," and they just made it visible, gave it a name.

Sweaty, shirtless and with bare feet, the men fight in pairs, the other men cheering around the fighters. They hit each other hard

with their fists, even on the face, and at times forcefully bang each other's heads on the floor – in an unrealistic manner, as they never get severe injuries. The fighting is portrayed as the most natural thing in the world, yielding great pleasure to the participants. As the narrator confirms, "you weren't alive anywhere like you were there." For him, the fighting wasn't about winning or losing, nor "about words." Comparing it to a religious experience, he concludes, "When the fight was over, nothing was solved. But nothing mattered. Afterwards, we all felt saved."

The fighting gives the men an opportunity to excel beyond their ordinary lives, granting them a second identity: "Who you were in Fight Club is not who you were outside of it." The fighting enables the men to see the world through different eyes, as if also made stronger mentally. For example, the narrator tells how he feels sorry for the guys packed into gyms, trying to look like Calvin Klein or Tommy Hilfiger said they should. Seeing such an advertisement, the narrator asks Tyler, "Is that what a man looks like?," and Tyler, with a condescending laugh, answers, "Self-improvement is masturbation. Now, self-destruction ..."

Due to the fighting, the narrator has the courage to defy his annoying boss. His rebellion culminates in an incredible self-beating scene, in which the narrator starts to brutally beat himself, in front of the astonished boss, in order to blackmail him. The narrator manages to hit himself several times in the face so that he is knocked to the floor, with a bleeding nose. Security guards arrive and see the narrator on his knees, seemingly begging the boss to stop hitting him. Setting the boss up as an assailant, the narrator keeps his salary as an 'outside consultant,' with no more work. "We now had corporate sponsorship," the narrator rejoices – able to fully concentrate on Fight Club.

The violence depicted in the film is not particularly grotesque *per se*: bodies are not mutilated or dismembered, no one dies when fighting, and so on. Yet the violence is exaggerated, the men cheerfully hitting each other as hard as they can, by their own choice. Afterwards, with bruises and covered in blood, the sweaty fighters give each other a warm hug, with a joyful demeanor, as if nothing even slightly negative has happened.

In this sense, the fighting is reminiscent of 'Rabelaisian thrashings,' performed collectively in a cheerful atmosphere (Bakhtin 1984, 197, 203-206). In addition, in Fight Club the blows have a clearly symbolic, ambivalent meaning: they simultaneously kill and regenerate, destroy the old world and help the new to be born. As within Rabelais's imagery, the fighting resembles a 'feast of death' in its comic guise. According to Bakhtin, thrashing

corresponds to metamorphosis and travesty, revealing the true face of the thrashed, tearing off his disguise. Like the uncrowned king, the one who is beaten is symbolically decorated. In the film, symptomatically, the narrator specifically wants to be beaten and receive the blows.

The fighting also becomes carnivalesque when the narrator beats himself in front of the boss, or when the members are given the 'homework assignment' of starting a fight with a stranger. The men's tragicomic attempts at initiating a fight are pictured as ludicrously strenuous. For example a gas station worker needs to spray a passer-by several times with a hose before managing to provoke the man into a fight. As the narrator notes, most people – normal people – do just about anything to avoid a fight.

Psychoanalytically, the fighting is marked by a clearly masochistic element, procuring a fleeting moment of *jouissance*, or ecstatic pleasure in pain, for the fighting men. The pleasure in receiving the blows is pictured as superior to the pleasure in giving them, which concerns in particular Tyler/the narrator, with his apparent masochistic enjoyment. The narrator's fights with Tyler are finally revealed as ecstatic self-beatings.

The fights represent a kind of return to an era 'when men were men' – a return to nature or to a simplicity of life, defined by the necessity to fight in order to survive. Adequately, the basic drives related to survival are reproduction and aggression. At the same time, the fighting is something that binds the men together. As Freud (2010a, 97-98) points out, the death instinct is always mingled with Eros. In this way, the men's collective fighting activity, satisfying their aggressive urges, also forms a libidinal homosocial bond between them. In fact, the real target of their hostility is the surrounding society, and hegemonic power – an enemy that strengthens the group's inner cohesion. In this way, the upright violence of fighting is contrasted to the pernicious systemic violence of capitalism, as explored by Žižek (2008, 9-13).

Importantly, the fighting stands for a return of the repressed, a counterblow to civilization. In Freud's (2010a, 102-112) view, civilization represses the tendency to aggression that is an innate instinctual disposition. To restrain its detrimental forces, civilization internalizes aggression in the superego, producing a constant sense of guilt. As forbidden wishes cannot be hidden from the superego, the subject is compelled to renounce instinctual gratification. However, the wish and guilt persist, leading to 'inner unhappiness.' In the film, the narrator experiences a release of instinctual energy through the creation of a reckless alter ego. With its ecstatic, glorified fighting, Fight Club seems a celebration

of the drive itself. Instead of being justified by external reasons or excuses, aggressiveness is valued for its own sake.

Ultimately, the fighting brings the men toward the sphere of non-identity, of bestiality and of becoming, reflecting Gilles Deleuze's (2005, 20-22) idea of 'becoming-animal.' Becoming-animal – performed through the fighting – expresses the common zone of man and animal, the man reduced to a piece of meat, the moment of being nothing but a beast.

MARKS OF VIOLENCE

The fighting leaves visible marks on the body – bruises, black eyes and scars. Indexical signs of the joyous thrashings, the marks are in diegesis considered as something positive. Among the club members, the bodily marks act as signs of complicity and mutual respect. Outside Fight Club, when a member encounters another man with visible injuries, they give each other a certain look, as a sign of recognition. In the depicted society, the marks are the Barthesian punctum standing out from the background of smooth businessmen and plastic ideals.

In addition, the progression of the narrator's condition is punctuated by these marks. For example, in a tedious job meeting, the black-eyed narrator is asked a question, and he responds by showing his teeth, covered with dried blood, leaving his colleagues and boss speechless. It is as if he is using the bloody teeth as a weapon against futility and insignificance. The incident marks the moment when the narrator's normative, socially acceptable image starts to crumble. As another milestone, in his bathroom, the narrator notices that his tooth is loosened. He pulls it out, and throws it into the filthy sink, with tentative indifference. To encourage him, Tyler comments, "Hey, even the Mona Lisa's falling apart."

In a key scene, Tyler chemically burns a 'kiss scar' on the narrator's hand – deliberately marking the body. This happens by 'kissing' the back of the hand – to spread saliva on it – and by pouring lye on it, which leaves a lip shaped scar on the hand. In the film's dramatic structure, this highly painful act marks the escalation of violence, reflecting the upcoming darker overtones. The scar also bears religious connotations. While burning the scar, a frenzied Tyler talks about their fathers that abandoned them, their models for God, and concludes that God must also hate them: "Fuck damnation, fuck redemption. We are God's unwanted children? So be it!" Associated with the theme of God's abandon, the wound on the hand is reminiscent of the stigmata of Jesus.

Some injuries are even quite severe: faces deformed by scars, missing teeth, a halo brace – and yet the men don't seem to

worry about them. Instead, they carry the marks with pride, with a strangely lighthearted attitude, as if the marks were a natural element on a man's body. As Tyler declares: "How much can you know about yourself if you've never been in a fight. I don't wanna die without any scars." The final mark carved on the body of the narrator, the bullet hole in his cheek, is also curiously treated with indifference, merely earning him respect.

Ultimately, all the scars, bruises and other marks of violence on the body gain an additional, carnivalesque meaning. As signs of repressed rage bursting to the sleek surface, of defeated frustration and submission, the marks become grotesque signs of revolution, of the world turned inside out. Celebrating the material bodily dimension of life, and victory over fear, the marks become signs of 'authentic manhood,' through which the men's inner metamorphosis is made visible. Ambiguously, the marks are both abusing and praising, signifying vile aggression and glorious bravery.

TOWARD THE BOTTOM

Fight Club is all about getting to the bottom, topographically and metaphorically. Firstly, the fighting represents 'low' instinctual desires as opposed to 'high' sublimated activities. In addition, the body's internal organs – low in the bodily hierarchy – are curiously present in the film's narration. The narrator finds some old magazine articles that are allegedly written by an organ in the first person. One of them is titled I am Jack's Colon. From then on, the narrator seasons his narration with comments like "I am Jack's raging bile duct," "I am Jack's cold sweat," "I am Jack's smirking revenge," and "I am Jack's wasted life." Through the astutely metonymic word play, the human is reduced to anatomy, while the bodily organs are heightened to have a voice of their own.

Another expression of the bottom is the house. The narrator moves to a dilapidated house in a toxic waste area. As he describes the place, it is a "shithole" that looks like it is waiting to be torn down, smelling like fart and hamster cage. The house is portrayed as extremely dirty and grungy, leaking and crumbling, with filthy bathtubs, toilets and sinks, brown water trickling from the taps, with soiled mattresses as beds, a flooding basement, and a dangerously defective electrical system. Later on, when more men move in, the narrator characterizes the house as a "living thing," due to all the sweating and breathing inside the house. A 'hatchery' for Tyler's underground army, the house becomes a strategic head-quarters for terrorist operations, a factory in which dangerous substances like nitroglycerin are manufactured.

If one could imagine a paradigmatically grotesque house, it would be this one. With constant close-ups of its sleazy details, it is reminiscent of a perfect dwelling for an old witch. As Creed (2005, xiii, 17-18) notes, the uncanny, ghostly house often functions as an analogue of the human body, marked by a memory of women. In fact, considering the film's gendered approach, the house – as an old, decorative, formerly beautiful but now rotten place – could be seen as a metaphor for an old woman, or its misogynistic stereotype, a place of feminine degradation. According to Jane Ussher (2006, 126-127), the aging reproductive body, "the horror of this living decay," is the epitome of the abject. The old house thus becomes the abject menopausal body, a body that is raging, sweating and toxic, dangerously out of control.

In the film, the idea of degradation is also present through the narrator's new acquaintances, above all Marla, a representative of decadence and death.

Moreover, the bottom signifies loss of control, advocated by Tyler who continuously talks about "hitting the bottom," as an aim to be pursued. This idea reaches its culmination when Tyler deliberately crashes the car he is driving, the narrator trying to prevent him. Tyler shouts at him: "Look at you. You're fucking pathetic! ... Hitting bottom isn't a weekend retreat. It's not a goddamned seminar. Stop trying to control everything and just let go! Let go!"

Ultimately, the bottom and loss of control refer to death. As Tyler burns the kiss scar on the narrator's hand – before pouring on vinegar to neutralize the burn – he preaches: "First, you have to give up. First, you have to know, not fear, know that some day, you're gonna die. ... It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything." In the last resort, loss of control and the prospect of death represent liberation: it is only by degrading oneself, by acknowledging one's mortality, that one becomes free.

Marked by a great movement toward the bottom, the film reflects the grotesque principle of degradation. According to Bakhtin (1984, 19-21, 435), degradation refers to the lowering of all that is high, a transfer to the material bodily level, to the sphere of earth and the lower body – the bodily grave that simultaneously devours and reproduces. The central idea within degradation is the death of the old, enabling the new to be born.

Fight Club is a place where the old world is killed through the blows, and the new world is born, with a prospect of revolution. As Bakhtin (ibid., 370-374) observes: "We also see the downward movement in fights, beatings, and blows; they throw the adversary to the ground, trample him into the earth. They bury their victim. But at the same time they are creative; they sow and harvest."

Through the blows, the narrator endeavors to be liberated from his obsolete identity, from his imprisonment in a life without meaning, a life without life.

In the film, the idea of degradation is also embedded in the narrator's grotesque metamorphosis and progression from a seemingly high position to his abasement: from an organized, hygienic lifestyle and polished business world to a world of messy bodily violence and clandestine criminal activity. Debasement is concretized in the narrator's topographical transfer from his 15th floor stylish 'condo' and tidy office to the dilapidated, rotten house and the bar's sweaty basement. His experience also constitutes a 'descent' into the unconscious.

As a reference to the lower body, the main threat used in Fight Club against disobedient men is cutting off their testicles. The symbolism of this grotesque act is evident, referring to the feared emasculation, the loss of the phallus. This castrative act never happens, but is close to realization. Also the narrator's identification with 'Jack's' bodily organs expresses the grotesque idea of organs detached from the body, leading a life on their own.

The film's key line is pronounced by Tyler, in the house's basement, with a close-up of his sweaty face, the image starting to shake as if in a troubled broadcast: "You are not your job. You're not how much money you have in the bank. You're not the car you drive. You're not the contents of your wallet. You're not your fucking khakis. You are the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world." Later on, Tyler shouts at the men: "We are all part of the same compost heap," and "You are the same decaying organic matter as everything else."

With an emphasis on the brute materiality of existence, beyond the Symbolic reality, Tyler's message reflects the Lacanian notion of the Real. In addition, when burning the narrator's hand, it is as if Tyler incites him to encounter the Real, to make him acknowledge his materiality and mortality through extreme pain, telling him not to shut it out, shouting, "This is your pain, this is your burning hand."

Tyler's advent, in the first place, already appears as a traumatic gap in the Symbolic order, a return of the repressed. Orchestrated by Tyler, the fighting becomes a means to approach the lost state of fullness and authenticity, the Real. Despite its repulsive, anxiety-provoking nature, the Real represents for the men liberation, an eclipse of the Symbolic: a fleeting exit from their frustrating lives marked by meaninglessness, alienation and falsehood.

DEATH

The downward movement toward the bottom ultimately refers to death. The narrator's job is related to lethal car accidents, the support groups present dying people and there are suicide attempts. While Tyler, the demonic master of the Underworld, advocates the acknowledgment of death, Marla, the bride of Frankenstein, flirts with death.

The film's special relation with death unveils a carnivalesque attitude toward it. Within grotesque imagery, according to Bakhtin (1984, 25, 50, 395), death is ambivalent: a pregnant, regenerating and laughing death, a "gay carnival monster." It is celebrated as an indispensable part of life, not as negation but as the condition of its renewal, marking a crisis of change between the dying and the reborn world.

In *Fight Club*, death is also turned into a carnival monster, uncrowned and ridiculed. Even dying people are presented in a comic light, like the initial scene where the narrator hugs Bob, or the scene of 'guided meditation,' showing the narrator imagining his power animal to be a ridiculous penguin. As a culmination of macabre humor – that is simultaneously heart-braking – Chloe, a woman with terminal cancer, gives a speech. Speaking into a microphone, she desperately pleads for anyone to have sex with her – reporting that she has pornographic movies, lubricants and amyl nitrite at home – saying, "I'm so close to the end, and all I want is to get laid for the last time."

Diseases are also rendered comic. The narrator and Marla argue about who gets to attend which groups without the other: if one gets blood parasites, the other one gets brain parasites – but not brain dementia. Bowel cancer is the favorite of both of them, and so they divide the weeks. Lethal car accidents are shown in a grotesque light as well. The man presenting a crashed car to the narrator jokes about the driver whose fat and polyester shirt have burned onto the seat, pointing at the seat, commenting, "Very modern art."

In a carnivalesque manner, death is seen as something that valorizes life, because it puts things into perspective. The narrator and Marla justify their attendance at support groups by the fact that – as they explain – when people think you're dying, they listen to you, instead of waiting for their turn to speak. For the narrator, the experience is overwhelming: "Every evening I died. And every evening I was born again. Resurrected." As Tyler advocates, death should be embraced, in order to truly *live*. As Tyler rejoices after the deliberate car crash, "We've just had a near-life experience!"

The film's portrayal of death is reminiscent of the ambiguous death instinct, or the corresponding death drive, the instinct's mental counterpart. Freud (2010a, 97-101) considers the death instinct as a universal force that, in interaction with Eros, ultimately explains the phenomena of life. The death instinct enfolds an innate tendency to aggression, destruction and cruelty, and it combines with sexuality in varying proportions. It may be directed both outwards, as in aggression and sadism, and inwards, as in self-destruction and masochism. When directed toward objects, it provides intense narcissistic enjoyment.

In this sense, the Freudian drive comes close to the Lacanian idea of a single drive. For Lacan, there is only a death drive that is sexual in nature, and related to *jouissance* (Homer 2005, 76). The death drive entails aggressiveness, (self-)destructiveness, primary masochism, a return to stasis and a pursuit of inorganic stability; an aspiration for absolute Being-in-Itself (Oliver 1993, 42; Whitford 1991).

In *Fight Club*, the death drive mingles with the narcissistic enjoyment, erotic pleasure and *jouissance* associated with the desire for death. This desire is visible in Tyler/the narrator and Marla, geared toward masochistic self-destruction, and capable of drawing pleasure from it. Moreover, the death drive directed toward the surrounding society, in the form of anarchistic action, provides the protagonists with intense feelings of omnipotence and satisfaction. Due to its ability to resist the homologizing culture, the death drive appears as a culturally regenerative force.

ANARCHISTIC ACTION

Fight Club portrays various anarchistic activities, starting with Tyler's jobs. Firstly, Tyler works as a part-time projectionist in a movie theater. As the narrator explains, this job affords him 'interesting opportunities' – like splicing a frame of pornography into a family film, subliminally flashing the image. To illustrate this, the film displays a quick close-up of a penis. "Nice, big cock," as Tyler comments. In the movie audience, a child is shown crying. In the film, this 'changeover' maneuver, performed without the audience noticing, is allotted a wider symbolic meaning. It reflects the switch between the narrator and Tyler, and what they represent.

Secondly, Tyler works occasionally as a banquet waiter at the luxurious Pressman hotel. As the narrator tells, Tyler was *the* guerrilla terrorist of the food service industry: he urinated into the lobster bisque, farted on meringues, and ejaculated into the mushroom soup. Tyler finally gets a lawsuit from the hotel, over

the 'urine content' of their soup. Later on, the food contamination activity is spread further, as an increasing amount of club members working in restaurants adopt the practice. When the narrator goes to a random restaurant with Marla, seeing staff with black eyes, he needs to ask specifically for 'clean food.'

Thirdly, Tyler manufactures soap. The process starts with a fat gathering operation: Tyler and the narrator trespass on the garbage area of a liposuction clinic, taking big plastic bags of fat from a bin. According to Tyler, the best fat for soap comes from humans: "fat of the land," as he calls it. In his kitchen, he then prepares the product that he sells to department stores at a good price. As the narrator comments: "It was beautiful. We were selling rich women their own fat asses back to them."

Endowed with carnivalesque features, the anarchistic operations entail a world turned upside down. Through the mixing of pornography and family film, the 'holy' status of children and family is degraded. Through the confusion of restaurant food and bodily emissions, expensive restaurant food is reduced to waste, while body waste is elevated to the status of food. Through their use as a soap ingredient, humans, the crown of creation, are comically uncrowned, while fat as bodily waste is crowned, made a luxurious commodity.

Gradually, Fight Club extends its operations into wider anarchistic activity, starting with 'homework assignments' that Tyler gives to the men. These include various acts of culture jamming and vandalism, such as adbusting. One laborious operation consists of the replacement of aircraft safety cards: the original graphics are altered to represent more 'realistic' emergency situations - involving chaos and flames, hysterical passengers with terrified faces, piles of dead bodies, and so on. The anarchistic activities also include breaking TV antennas, blowing up computer stores, riddling car tires, and feeding pigeons on business buildings to make the pigeons defecate on businessmen's cars. In these activities, the comic partly stems from a discrepancy between the banality of the result and the great effort put in scheming and implementing the action. For example, the massive operation of a squad of men feeding pigeons on business buildings' roofs results in a few cars covered with pigeon droppings.

As part of the expanding activity, Tyler starts to build himself an 'army,' setting up Fight Clubs all over the country. In the end, wherever the narrator goes, he meets club members, including the staff at a police station, clandestinely following Tyler's orders. At the same time, in the film, the general atmosphere changes from cheerful to gloomy. The narrator realizes that his will is being overpowered by Tyler's will, and that he is being left out of Tyler's plans, the operations getting out of hand.

In its final stage, Fight Club's focus shifts into something called 'Project Mayhem,' a clandestine mission orchestrated by Tyler and implemented by his army. It consists of blowing up the headquarters of several credit card companies, with the aim of erasing the debt record, of going "back to zero."

THE FILM ENDS

The narrator finds out about 'Project Mayhem' and tries to abort it, without succeeding. In the end, in an empty office building, Tyler and the narrator have a furious final battle – which leads back round to the initial scene in the film. By shooting himself in the mouth, the narrator manages to 'kill' Tyler. Miraculously surviving the gunshot – with a hole in his cheek – the narrator, holding hands with Marla, watches the surrounding buildings blow up and crumble. Bleeding but seemingly relieved, he assures her that everything's going to be fine. As Tyler said: "This is it. The beginning. Ground zero."

According to Bakhtin (1984, 403), the point of deliberately mixing the hierarchical levels is to expose the real being of an object: its concrete, material bodily reality outside all hierarchies, norms and values. The aim is thus to reveal the object's potentialities that manifest themselves only if placed outside the usual, conventional order. In *Fight Club*, the protagonist's creation of a 'downside' identity – the self's grotesque negation – and the changeover between the two identities, is also supposed to reveal the narrator's true being. It is supposed to purify him from the superfluous, stifling cultural norms, and replacing them with the quality that the narrator most admires in Tyler, "the ability to let that which does not matter truly slide."

THE ROLE OF THE GROTESQUE

In *Fight Club*, above all, the grotesque degrades and positions the human as part of the world. The grotesque encloses the ultimate truth about humans as "the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world," made of "the same decaying organic matter as everything else."

At the same time, the grotesque articulates the authentic and the unauthentic, differentiating the genuine and meaningful from the artificial and insignificant. Authenticity is thus found within the bodily, the pure materiality of existence – reminiscent of the Real. In the film, the grotesque and the carnivalesque are used as a weapon against the fallacious, alienating culture, revealing its

true colors. With grotesque materiality, the world is relativized, made more open for change.

The grotesque also celebrates the regenerative power of destruction. It shows the fullness of life through negation and undersides, in the film embodied by Tyler, the repressed side of self. The destructive side of self is yet more insightful and courageous – able to discern what truly matters in life – inducing a rebirth of the lethargic timorous self.

Moreover, the grotesque exteriorizes an inner state. Through the marks of violence on the body, the grotesque gives a visible form to inner tumult – to repressed aggression, frustration and revolt – enabling them to surface. Hidden anxiety and subsurface effervescence are made perceptible through the grotesque, signaling impending social change.

With the help of the comic, the grotesque overcomes repression and facilitates the enjoyment of the prohibited. Packaging the forbidden into a fantasy form, the grotesque enables one to dwell in tabooed and feared matters. The advent of Tyler, with his otherworldly appeal, and the protagonist's romanticized immersion in filth, represent a highly pleasurable return of the repressed.

The grotesque either reinforces or dismantles cultural norms and ideals. Through caricatural, compelling characters like Tyler or Marla, the grotesque defies norms – such as the ideal of bodily control, or the ideal of productive existence based on work and consumption. In this way, the grotesque denaturalizes the ideal, and naturalizes the anti-ideal.

Finally, the grotesque makes the invisible dominant ideology visible. Taken-for-granted ideas are made perceptible through grotesque concretization, exaggeration, contrasting and overturning. When grotesquely distorted, ideology's constructed nature is revealed, and its foundations are exposed. The grotesque thus enables a more perspicacious judgment on the prevailing values, and points to the existence of ideological alternatives.



The principal reason for including Kill Bill in my research material is its grotesque violence. Exuberant, strongly aestheticized and stylized, the violence is particularly spectacular. Another important factor is the female protagonist that is paralleled with an invincible superhero, a transcategorical fantasy figure.

The grotesque stems also from the film's casting and other 'quotes' that intertextually pay homage to grotesque Asian classics. Exemplified by the presence of such actors as Sonny Chiba or Chiaki Kuriyama, the quotes evoke for connoisseurs an impending threat of brutal violence.

Directed by Quentin Tarantino, and divided into *Yolume 1* (2003) and *Yolume 2* (2004), *Kill Bill* is a heterogeneous mixture of Asian martial arts film and other genres, such as the Western. It stars Uma Thurman as Beatrix Kiddo (or 'The Bride'), David Carradine as Bill, Lucy Liu as O-Ren Ishii, Vivica A. Fox as Vernita Green, Michael Madsen as Budd, and Daryl Hannah as Elle Driver. The side characters, mentioned in my analysis, include Pai Mei (Gordon Liu), Hattori Hanzo (Sonny Chiba), Tommy Plympton (Christopher Allen Nelson), Gogo Yubari (Chiaki Kuriyama), Sofie Fatale (Julie Dreyfus), Buck (Michael Bowen), and Esteban Vihaio (Michael Parks).²⁸

Kill Bill tells the story of Beatrix Kiddo, a former contract killer in the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. The head of the Squad, Bill, is later on revealed to be Beatrix's partner. While still working for the Squad, Beatrix found out that she was pregnant. Eager to leave her hazardous life, she vanished without explanation. The film starts as Bill finds her, about to get married. With four other Squad members, Bill arrives at the wedding rehearsal, massacres the people present, and shoots at Beatrix. She miraculously survives but goes into a coma for four years.

When Beatrix wakes up, she starts an odyssey of revenge toward Bill and the other four members of the Squad, responsible for murdering her husband-to-be and her unborn daughter. Later on, it is revealed that her daughter is alive, living with Bill. Beatrix devices a death list, with the names: O-Ren Ishii, Vernita Green, Budd, Elle Driver, and Bill. The film's main plot consists of the protagonist killing the persons on the list, one by one. The odyssey entails a lot of fighting, killing and gory violence.

Chosen for further exploration, the elements with grotesque

features are the following: the character of Beatrix – as far as it represents a superhero and a castrating woman; the killer women and the bad

28 Written by Quentin Tarantino. Character The Bride by Quentin Tarantino and Uma Thurman. Cinematography by Robert Richardson. Edited by Sally Menke. Costume design by Kumiko Ogawa, Catherine Marie Thomas, Mark Zunino and Alexander AD. Music by RZA and Robert Rodriguez.

men; and grotesque violence, including the attempted rape, the dismemberments and stabbings, the group fight, the snakebite, the burial, and the exploding heart. In the end, there are some general remarks on *Kill Bill*'s violence and on the film's carnivalesque 'Menippean' features.

THE FILM BEGINS

Kill Bill 1 starts with a black and white flashback scene of the initial massacre, the cause of all the subsequent events. At first, all that is shown is the face of Beatrix – referred to as 'The Bride' – lying on the floor badly injured, shaking, her face bruised and covered in blood. A man, revealed to be Bill – not yet shown to the spectator – walks up to her, assuring that there is nothing sadistic in his actions, and that he, on the contrary, is being most masochistic. The pregnant Bride manages to utter the words: "Bill. It's your baby," just before a gunshot is heard. The shot is depicted with an extreme close-up image, in slow-motion, showing the bullet entering the body.

In the initial scene are already detectible the themes of violence, death and maternity, laying the ground for the theme of 'justified revenge.'

BEATRIX

The film's protagonist, Beatrix Kiddo, is a highly skilled contract killer and a markedly beautiful blonde woman. Importantly, Beatrix has a kind of split identity. Firstly, as a heroine endowed with nearly superhuman powers, with the code name Black Mamba, she is represented as an invincible *superhero*. In diegesis, she is however a 'normal' woman, only with incredible fighting skills. Secondly, she is characterized as a *mother* longing for her child. Thirdly, all through the film, she is referred to as 'The Bride,' emphasizing her position as the avenging bride, a *castrating woman*. Her name, Beatrix, is not even mentioned until the latter part of *Kill Bill 2*. Revealingly, in the end credits, Beatrix is described as "AKA The Bride AKA Black Mamba AKA Mommy."

AS A SUPERHERO

A superhero is generally a transcategorical combination of a human being and of some otherworldly element. As a structurally grotesque figure, a superhero represents the 'Fantasy body' type. A superhero is often endowed with an ideal appearance, hidden in a mask and a costume – like Superman. With her skills and powers, Beatrix is reminiscent of an awe-inspiring superhero. She for

example all alone beats dozens of highly skilled fighters, climbs up walls and performs impossible martial arts jumps. Her physical strength, endurance and wit are unparalleled. In this sense, she is reminiscent of monstrous superheroes like Batman, Spider-man and Catwoman that draw on the 'primal uncanny,' particularly the animal, to boost their superhuman powers (Creed 2005, xviii).

Beatrix's grotesque deeds also associate her with the grotesque, making her a 'Body transgressing its boundaries.' As a 'castrating woman,' constantly slashing people, she represents the 'female grotesque.'

Moreover, Beatrix is paralleled with a warrior, a legendary hero that embarks on an odyssey, and alone kills the insurmountable enemy. In this role, traditionally granted to men, she is endowed with exceptional strength, determination, courage and honor. The mythical aspect is supported by her magical sword, corresponding to a 'charm' made by Hattori Hanzo, a legendary swordsmith. As for her fighting skills, they allegedly derive from Pai Mei, a legendary Kung Fu Shifu, a pre-eminent godlike figure in possession of esoteric powers.

Following the 'Journey of the Female Hero,' as established by Barbara Creed (2007), Beatrix's odyssey starts with a 'Call' that changes the status quo for her. Putting her life in danger, she also fights for a 'Cause.' Unlike the male hero, the female hero typically fights for love, as distinct from sexual desire, and makes sacrifices for her child or family. In her journey, Beatrix also encounters 'Obstacles,' and has an open conflict with 'The Paternal Symbolic Order,' embodied by an authority figure or institution representing patriarchal values. Differing from male heroism associated with the preservation of the male Symbolic order, female heroism commonly questions the values of patriarchal civilization. However, as an 'Action Heroine,' Beatrix might also support the existing structures, not presenting a serious threat to patriarchy. Finally, the heroine often experiences an actual or symbolic death – as does Beatrix.

Like a superhero, Beatrix seems immortal, repeatedly managing to avoid death. She miraculously survives the bullet in the head and wakes from a coma as if literally resurrecting from death. She evades lethal sword strikes and gunshots, as if impervious to bullets, and finally manages to escape from the grave, representing yet another resurrection. Even a black mamba – representing 'death embodied' – leaves her intact, as if revering her. Like the indestructible carnival clown, she mimics death, tumbles into the grave and then vigorously jumps up alive, as if resurrected (Bakhtin 1984, 354). As in superhero legends, the bullet in her head and

the four-year coma are an important part of her very legend, the 'incubation' of her existence as a superhero.

In her trademark yellow motorcycle outfit with black stripes, Beatrix even looks like a superhero – bearing iconic resemblance to superheroes in their tight-fitting, streamlined costumes. In the scene where she blackmails Sofie Fatale, Beatrix seems just like a superhero delivering justice, a helmet covering her face like a mask, her magnitude stressed cinematographically by being shot in low-angle.

At the end of the film, Bill gives a long monologue about superhero mythology, in particular Superman – explicitly assimilating Beatrix as a superhero. However, what ultimately distances Beatrix from a superhero is her morality and central interest: unlike most superheroes, she is only after her personal justice, not interested in fighting crime more widely.

AS A MOTHER

Beatrix is also characterized as a mother. In the film, there are no images of the birth of the child, nor of the child's first months or years. Beatrix is pictured as being pregnant during the initial massacre, and the next apparition of the child is when she is four years old. With no images of sexual relations between the parents, the baby could have been brought by the stork.

The film is thus marked by an absence of maternal bodily imagery; an absence of the anguish-provoking 'debt to nature.' Yet the theme of maternity is strongly present. The film starts with it, the pregnant Bride uttering the words "It's your baby," and also ends with it, Beatrix watching cartoons with her daughter.

In the film, there is also a long flashback scene in which Beatrix takes a pregnancy test in a hotel room. As a contract killer woman arrives to kill her, Beatrix tells her about the pregnancy, begging the woman to look at the test strip. The stunned killer woman starts to read the test instructions aloud, and leaves. The scene constitutes a sudden portrayal of feminine experience, right in the middle of a superhero gore film. As Beatrix says to the killer woman, "I'm the deadliest woman in the world. But right now, I'm just scared shitless for my baby."

Even though she is a deadly killer, Beatrix is represented as a loving and caring mother. Protective toward the child, she is paralleled with a lioness – an animal that is also mentioned in the film's final song. As Julia Kristeva (1985) claims, the representation of femininity is falsely confined to maternity, or to an idealized fantasy of maternity. In fact, Beatrix's 'feminine' side – her vulnerability and tenderness – is in the film expressed only through her maternity.

Altogether, Beatrix seems a fantasy created within the male imagination. She is beautiful but lethal, tempting but unattainable, a sexy superwoman out of reach, and as such, an adolescent male fantasy par excellence.

AS A CASTRATING WOMAN

Slicing up heaps of people with her sword that she always carries with her, Beatrix is also a representation of the 'castrating woman,' an instance of the monstrous-feminine. According to Creed (1993, 1-7, 87, 127, 151), female monstrosity wears many faces, including 'woman as beautiful but deadly killer,' and 'woman as the deadly *femme castratrice*.' The castrating woman exists in the discourses of myth, legend, religion and art. The figure stems from male fantasies and anxieties about woman's imaginary powers of castration.

In psychoanalytic thinking, castration is not necessarily of a genital nature. In $Kill\ Bill$, castration anxiety is thus present through all the slashing and dismemberments, the severed limbs and body parts.

In the film, Beatrix becomes a *femme castratrice*, as described by Creed (ibid., 122-129), seeking revenge on men who have abused her, thereby transformed into a deadly killer filled with justifiable wrath. Instead of being a psychotic 'slasher,' like the *Antichrist* woman, Beatrix is more like a 'heroine' with audience sympathy. Deprived of her 'rightful destiny,' Beatrix is marked by a lack, which makes her a Lacanian lacking subject. As a vindictive woman, she also reiterates the myth of woman that is revengeful and castrating toward men because she is (symbolically) castrated herself. The protagonist's lack, however, is eventually filled as she regains her daughter. As a monstrous-feminine figure, Beatrix "offers a great deal of pleasure to spectators encouraged to identify with her wildly excessive, anarchic, deadly behaviour" (Creed 2005, 16).

Beatrix is also an eroticized figure – unlike all the men in the film – reflecting the pernicious appeal of woman. The castrating woman not only arouses fear of death and castration, but also engenders a masochistic desire for death, associated with erotic pleasure (Creed 1993, 130). In the scene of attempted rape – the closest possible representation of sex in the film – Beatrix bites the man's lip, nearly ripping it off with her teeth, and instantly kills the man.

The sexual allure of Beatrix is articulated subtly through the male gaze, detectable in the way the camera adores her face, hair and body. In such moments, the offered spectator position seems to coincide with the male filmmaker sexually desiring the woman.

In Tarantino's fetishistic manner, there are also shots focusing on Beatrix's bare feet. With her sexy yellow leather outfit and the sword as a fetish object, she appears as a fetishized woman.

With her looks and maternal-feminine side, Beatrix is ultimately a 'soothing' figure, alleviating the castration anxiety she might evoke. In addition, her killing activities are restricted and logical: she is determined to kill primarily those on her list – and those who try to stop her – not to recklessly kill all the males she encounters.

KILLER WOMEN AND BAD MEN

On Beatrix's death list, the female members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad are O-Ren Ishii 'AKA Cottonmouth,' Vernita Green 'AKA Copperhead,' and Elle Driver 'AKA California Mountain Snake.' They are all endowed with exceptional physical strength and fighting capabilities, and by appearance they conform to the Western beauty ideal. Constituting a kind of paradigm of female killers, they are reminiscent of action figures, imaginary characters issuing from comics or games. The paradigm idea is supported by their snake-related code names, special abilities and different ethnicities: O-Ren's Asian origins, Vernita's African American background, and Elle's blond, blue-eyed 'Caucasian' ethnicity.

Even though they represent Beatrix's enemy, the 'killer women' are not depicted as particularly evil: they are more like ruthless, professional killers. With her sadistic manners, the meanest character is Elle. The category also includes O-Ren's personal bodyguard, Gogo Yubari, a 17-year-old girl in a schoolgirl uniform, depicted as a particularly fierce killer. As is explained, what she lacks in age, she makes up for in madness. The only slightly 'softer' female character is Sofie Fatale, O-Ren's assistant.

The killer women perform grotesque actions, which associates them with the 'Body transgressing its boundaries.' As attractive but castrating women, they represent the monstrous-feminine, and reiterate the myth of woman's pernicious allure. At the same time, they are endowed with some 'masculine' characteristics, related to their straightforward manners and status as action figures. The killer women echo Beatrix's figure, constituting a set of characters in which Beatrix stands out as the most apt one, also morally superior to them.

As for the 'bad men,' the great majority of male characters are depicted as evil, vile and cruel. Unlike the women, the men are not represented as physically attractive, even quite the opposite. The main male characters are Bill 'AKA Snake Charmer,' the

leader of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, and Budd 'AKA Sidewinder,' Bill's brother and also a member of the Squad. Other clearly negative male characters include Ernie 'the gravedigger,' Buck 'the raping nurse' and Trucker 'the rapist,' as well as Esteban Vihaio 'the pimp,' Bill's stepfather.

The only somewhat positive male characters are Tommy Plympton, Beatrix's killed husband-to-be, only briefly shown in the massacre flashback; Hattori Hanzo 'the swordsmith,' and Pai Mei 'the Kung Fu Shifu.'

The bad men are grotesque through their 'inner' evil and grotesque deeds, representing a case of male monstrosity. They are depicted as morally low and even disgusting. A prime example is Buck, an aficionado of sexual violence verging on necrophilia, raping coma patients in a hospital. As he says, cackling, and with a hideous smile, "My name is Buck, and I'm here to fuck." No wonder he has been named Buck.

Conforming to negative stereotypes of masculinity, the bad men are violent, exploitative and sexually abusive toward women. They also assess women's appearance in an objectifying manner. For example, Buck says to Beatrix: "Well, ain't you the slice of cutie pie they said you was?," which is an opinion shared by Trucker: "You are the best-looking girl I've had today." Before burying Beatrix alive, Budd notes to Ernie: "Is she the cutest little blond pussy you ever saw?." As a response, Ernie cackles, drinks up his beer and belches. Even the sheriff, when finding the beaten unconscious protagonist in the chapel, makes appreciative comments on her appearance. In all these scenes, Beatrix is pictured as the helpless target of violence, the men commenting on her as if she was nothing but a showpiece. In the end, even Beatrix's daughter calls her "the most beautifulest woman" in the world. The point is made clear.

In the film, the main function of the bad men, with their exploitative attitude and actions, is to justify the female protagonist's increasing wrath, and the impending revenge.

The archenemy of the protagonist is Bill. However, surprisingly, Bill is not portrayed as very bad, when he is finally presented in the final sequence of the film. With his broken heart, he seems more human than the other bad men. Apparently, he has also taken good care of the daughter. As he admits to Beatrix in their final discussion, he is a "murdering bastard," however, acting out of grief and anger toward Beatrix, who let him believe she was dead.

Among the 'good men,' Pai Mei is a contradictory figure. He allegedly hates Caucasians, Americans, Japanese and women.

In spite of this, during Beatrix's long training, an affective bond develops between Pai Mei and Beatrix, who has great respect for the master. In the end, it is to Beatrix – an American woman – that Pai Mei chooses to teach his most secret technique.

VIOLENCE

Imaginative and cruel, the violence in Kill Bill takes many forms.

ATTEMPTED RAPE

At the hospital, right after waking up, Beatrix learns that Buck, a male nurse, has repeatedly raped her while she was in a coma, also letting other men rape her for money. In the scene of attempted rape, believing that Beatrix is still in a coma, Buck brings in a man, 'Trucker,' who is supposed to rape her.

The scene culminates in the grotesque close-up image of a jar of lubricant, labeled 'Vasalube.' The jar is filthy and stained, with pubic hair stuck on its sticky surface. "Bon appétit, good buddy," Buck says to Trucker, and leaves the room. As Trucker approaches Beatrix, she bites his lower lip and instantly kills him. In the next image the man is shown dead, his face and chest covered in blood. When Buck comes back, Beatrix stabs him in the ankle and crushes his head in the door. To leave the hospital, she takes Buck's car, a yellow truck decorated with the text "Pussy Wagon."

The function of the scene is to grotesquely concretize exploitation, to highlight the appalling nature of the bad men, and to further justify the protagonist's revenge. It is also an illustration of Beatrix's amazing skills: even as a convalescent, she is able to kill the men with her bare hands. Significantly, Buck also loses his cherished car, 'Pussy Wagon' – a symbol of flagrant exploitation – now appropriated by a woman.

DISMEMBERMENTS AND STABBINGS

In the film, there are several scenes in which a body is slashed, stabbed or sliced with a sword – representing a grotesque surpassing of bodily limits. For example, Beatrix kills Vernita Green by throwing a knife into her chest. Moreover, Gogo Yubari stabs the 'Tokyo Businessman' in the stomach with a sword. When the man is about to die, blood abundantly rushing out of him, Gogo asks, "Do you still wish to penetrate me, or is it I who has penetrated you?." The sexual connotations of stabbing are thereby made explicit. Beatrix also throws an ax into a man's forehead, and kills Gogo by hitting her head with a piece of wood with protruding nails. In a horrifyingly poetic image, blood flows out of Gogo's eyes like red tears.

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of the *Kill Bill* violence is its presentation of hyperbolic, spectacular dismemberments executed with a sword, followed by imposing jets of blood. The most impressive is the killing of O-Ren Ishii, taking place in a serene snow-covered Japanese garden. After a long sword fight, Beatrix cuts off the top of O-Ren's head, which flies through the air, landing on the snow. "That really was a Hattori Hanzo sword," O-Ren says before falling to the ground.

Another showy dismemberment happens earlier, when O-Ren slashes Boss Tanaka's head off in a yakuza meeting. The head rolls on the table, and blood bursts with great pressure from the decapitated body right up to the ceiling. Yet another nauseating dismemberment takes place when Beatrix kills Elle Driver. Elle has earlier lost her right eye and wears an eye patch. After a furious fight, Beatrix rips out Elle's left eye, drops it on the bathroom carpet, and smashes it with her bare foot, the eye gushing between her toes.

Psychoanalytically, while dismemberment is a more feminine, 'castrative' act, stabbing is a more masculine, 'penetrative' one – as attested by Gogo's comment. In both cases, the victims are 'feminized,' turned into a representation of the bleeding wound. Symptomatically, the person who bleeds for the longest, her arm cut off, is Sofie Fatale, the most 'feminine' woman in the film. Within all the dismemberments and stabbings, the union of sexuality, violence and death also suggests *jouissance*, ultimate pleasure in pain.

GROUP FIGHT

In Kill Bill, the martial arts-style group fight, called the 'Showdown at House of Blue Leaves,' abounds in sword fighting, with an abundance of severed body parts, jets of blood and bleeding bodies. In the tumult of the fight, the fighters' swords, body parts and blood grotesquely entwine to form a mass of smashed flesh.

In the scene, Beatrix tries to get to O-Ren in her headquarters. She first needs to vanquish O-Ren's bodyguards, 'the Crazy 88' – a crowd of men in black suits and domino masks, armed with swords. Beatrix miraculously manages to beat them all, using all kinds of fighting and killing techniques, leaving the men lying on the floor, dead or severely injured, covered in blood. With their masks and uniform costume, the group of men seems like a multibodied monster or gatekeeper, eventually vanquished by the hero.

With its hyperbolic nature, joyous atmosphere and detailed anatomical cruelty, the group fight reminds of 'Rabelaisian thrashings.'

As described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 203-205), carnivalesque thrashings have a solemn and festive character, representing a 'feast of death' in its comic aspect. Rabelais's images are full of torn flesh, with long lists of injured organs and members, reminiscent of a "bodily harvest." As Rabelais writes: "They laid on so heartily that blood spurted from his mouth, nose, ears and eyes. Catchpole was beaten to a pulp; his shoulders dislocated; his head, neck, back and breast pounded into mincemeat." (Ibid., 196-207.)

With all the severed body parts, and accompanied by cheery music, the group fight seems just like a 'bodily harvest.' At the end of the fight, Beatrix shouts: "Those of you lucky enough to still have your lives, take them with you! However, leave the limbs you've lost. They belong to me now." However, what distances the film's violence from Rabelaisian thrashings is the lack of collective, symbolic fighting against the old regime.

From the point of view of gender, however, the group fight could be interpreted as a fight against exploitation and the old order. The fight presents a sharp contrast between the female heroine and the faceless crowd of men, with their masks and masculine suits, a representation of the overwhelming, official male order. According to carnivalesque logic, the blows and slashes the crowd receives from the heroine are therefore regenerative, a joyous matter.

BURIAL

In the burial scene, Budd tries to kill Beatrix and buries her alive in a coffin closed with nails, placing it in the ground, and covering it with earth. At first the protagonist is desperate, whimpering and crying. During the one-minute shot of mere darkness in the coffin, the spectator also starts to feel claustrophobic. Then Beatrix remembers Pai Mei's teachings: the technique of breaking a wooden board at a short distance. She starts to hit the wooden lid with bleeding fists. The next thing shown is her hand emerging from the ground above the grave. Beatrix then walks into a bar and asks for a glass of water. Covered in dust and dirt, she looks like a zombie, as if literally resurrected from death.

Within the grotesque worldview, burial and earth have great symbolic meaning. According to Bakhtin (1984, 21), the grotesque principle of degradation is based on the reproductive lower stratum and the fruitful earth, associated with the womb and the grave. Also with Beatrix, the burial ultimately represents a rebirth, enabling her to access her utmost strength, and to vanquish death. The burial constitutes a decisive turning point in the film. After her resurrection, Beatrix is no longer oppressed: she becomes invincible.

SNAKEBITE

Before Beatrix manages to get back to Budd, Elle kills the man in his camper with a highly venomous black mamba. Released by Elle, the snake bites Budd's face. The snakebite is followed by Elle's long monologue, reading aloud an informational text about the black mamba. The agonizing man, with his swollen sweaty face, unable to talk, lies on the floor and moans. As Elle explains, the black mamba's neurotoxic venom is one of nature's most effective poisons, causing paralysis and death within twenty minutes. The amount of venom that can be delivered from a single bite can be 'gargantuan,' she concludes.

The grotesqueness of this scene emerges from such excess, supported by the black mamba's symbolic status as 'Death Incarnate,' as told by Elle. At the same time, the snake appears as an incarnation of Beatrix – whose code name in the Squad was Black Mamba. When Beatrix arrives at the camper, the snake merely watches her passing by.

Elle's displaced monologue represents the kind of irrelevant and lengthy talk, often preceding death, that is typical of Tarantino. The speech also signifies death's uncrowning with trivialization: a carnivalesque profanation of death, based on a contrast between high and low, between the solemn and mundane.

Psychoanalytically, in the snake, the masculine and the feminine combine. It is a phallic animal, but it is also associated with the feminine, the realm of abominable nature and death, like the Medusa's head. In the religious sphere, the snake is a symbol of man's fall from grace, a sign of woman's culpability. In the film, as a deathly incarnation of Beatrix, the snake as the oppressed feminine strikes back at the exploitative masculine.

THE FILM ENDS

Beatrix finally finds Bill, living in a hacienda with their four-year-old daughter B.B. The reunion of the mother and daughter is warm and emotional. After the child goes to bed, Bill shoots Beatrix with a dart that contains truth serum, wanting to know about her disappearance. With his lengthy 'superhero monologue,' pondering the qualities of superheroes, Bill makes his point about Beatrix being a natural-born killer, like a superhero. Because of the serum, she is forced to admit that all the killing she did "felt damn good." Beatrix also reveals that she left Bill to protect her unborn child, and Bill explains that he shot her because of a broken heart.

EXPLODING HEART

Finally, Beatrix and Bill start a sword fight, and Beatrix kills Bill with the legendary 'Five-Point-Palm Exploding-Heart Technique.' It consists of hitting the person at five different pressure points, and then letting him walk away. Once the person has taken five steps, his heart explodes, and he falls to the ground. It is widely believed that Pai Mei never taught anyone this technique. However, he did teach Beatrix, to Bill's surprise.

In a final sentimental moment, Bill admits to Beatrix that she is his 'favorite person.' In response, Beatrix merely looks at him, her eyes full of tears. A trickle of blood starts to run out of Bill's mouth. He rises, starts walking, and after the five steps falls to the ground. Beatrix takes her sword, picks up the child, and leaves.

As an antithesis to all the spectacular violence in the film, the violence of the exploding heart scene is realized in a highly minimalistic manner. There is no spectacle, no surpassing of body limits, and practically no blood. One can only imagine the damage inside the body.

In the scene, the female killer prevails over the male killer. The female protagonist's superiority stems from an enigmatic killing technique – a form of mystical knowledge received from a mythical figure – reminiscent of the power of a sorceress. This resonates with Lacan's idea that woman is 'not-whole,' not completely defined by the Symbolic order (Lacan 1999, 7-10; Homer 2005, 102).

In the end, as Beatrix manages to kill Bill and gets her child back, her initial lack, and the need for killing, is effaced. With the tender mother—child union, the end of the film expresses the idea of maternity as the completion of happiness for a woman — the fulfillment of the unfulfillable lack.

KILL BILL VIOLENCE

A significant feature of the *Kill Bill* violence is the abundance of blood and gore. In a hyperbolic manner, blood bursts out of dismembered bodies, forms high-pressure jets in the place of cut organs, and puddles under bleeding bodies. Blood flows out of eyes, and turns into a splashing pool of blood.

The abundance of blood amounts to literally 'gargantuan' volumes of body fluids. In Rabelais's text, for example Pantagruel's urine is associated with flood and seawater (Bakhtin 1984, 334-336). As a grotesque substance, blood is considered as a seed fertilizing the earth, representing renewal through death (ibid., 327). Furthermore, blood is ambiguously both inside and outside the body, and associated with the 'Abject body.' With its deep red color, blood is a highly aesthetic element, ingeniously utilized by the film.

In *Kill Bill*, there are factors that favor the enjoyment of grotesque violence, creating a kind of 'fantasy space' in which the pleasurable or ecstatic experience of violence is made possible. These factors are carnivalization, justified revenge, and aestheticization.

The first factor entails a carnivalesque attitude toward violence: a remorseless, lighthearted, 'everything is permitted' type of attitude. Moreover, with its hyperbolic nature, the *Kill Bill* violence is clearly distanced from real-life violence. The carnivalesque, boisterous and defiant ambience gives the violence an air of liberation, of purification and renewal.

Another factor enhancing the enjoyment is the sense of justified revenge. As Budd observes about Beatrix, "That woman deserves her revenge. And we deserve to die. But then again, so does she." In the film, revenge is elevated from contemptible status to a sublime idea, explicitly compared to God's will. It is also depicted as highly satisfying for the avenger. As Beatrix narrates, "I roared, and I rampaged, and I got bloody satisfaction." The spectator's revengeful feelings are further sustained by the scenes of exploitation over the heroine, such as the attempted rape scene. In the film's fantasy world, a fierce payback seems perfectly justifiable, because it is directed at despicable men.

A third major factor contributing to the experience of the violence is aestheticization. The aestheticization of violence makes the images, despite the horrors, highly alluring and pleasing to the eye. In this way, the sword fight in the Japanese garden finds its aesthetic culmination in the red trace of blood drawn on the white snow. Similarly, O-Ren's story, full of gore and dismemberments, is presented in a beautifully drawn anime sequence, accompanied by wistful harmonica music. The aesthetic appeal of the *Kill Bill* violence also derives from the highly aesthetic martial arts moves and samurai swords, the fighters' costumes, the locations and the music. Yet another tool is cinematography. For example, in the group fight, for a moment the fighters appear as dark silhouette figures against a bright background.

Altogether, with such factors, the allure of the violence is maximized, and the spectator is lured into enjoying the violence in its ecstatic guise. Interestingly, the *Kill Bill* violence also illustrates some core characteristics of the grotesque itself, including aestheticization, hyperbolic exaggeration, transgression of body limits, and the union of the macabre and the comic.

KILL BILL AS MENIPPEAN SATIRE

Kill Bill presents features that pertain to the ancient, carnivalesque literary genre of Menippean satire. As described by Bakhtin

(2011, 106-120), the genre is deeply multi-styled and multi-toned, making use of 'inserted' genres. *Kill Bill* is also a fusion of various styles and genres, including elements from martial arts film, the Western, exploitation film, woman's revenge film, splatter film, and anime film. The styles also clash with each other, creating odd combinations.

Moreover, the Menippean genre is marked by eccentricities, scandals and oddities, sharp contrasts and combinations of high and low (ibid.). Such elements are also present in *Kill Bill*, characterized by rapid changes between the sublime and coarse, tragic and comic, pathetic and banal. What assimilates *Kill Bill* into the carnivalesque genre is also the way in which it combines fantastic or mystical-religious elements with 'slum naturalism' – worldly evil, vulgarity, and the criminal underworld (ibid). *Kill Bill* is situated in the world of crime and contract killing, intertwined with mystical elements issuing from Asian warrior legends and mythical combat techniques.

Finally, Menippean satire deals with 'ultimate questions.' Creating extraordinary situations, it aims at provoking and testing a truth or an idea. Situations may be determined by impending death, which gives birth to the 'dialogue on the threshold.' (Ibid.) In Kill Bill, this takes the form of lengthy, absurd talks preceding death – like Elle's monologue about the black mamba, or Bill's monologue about superheroes. This kind of speech is also reminiscent of (pseudo)philosophical dialogue, and of 'internal dialogicality,' a discussion with an absent interlocutor or with oneself. Sometimes the aim is to provoke the truth out of people through anacrisis, by forcing them to spell out their opinion. (Ibid.) This is concretized in Bill's resorting to the truth serum, making Beatrix unveil what Bill calls "The Undisputed Truth."

THE ROLE OF THE GROTESQUE

In Kill Bill, most conspicuously, the grotesque turns violence into something spectacular and ecstatic. By exaggerating, aestheticizing and distancing it from the viewer, the grotesque highlights the unrealistic side of violence. It makes the sight of the vulnerable, bleeding body aesthetically appealing. The grotesque intensifies characteristics, invigorates impressions and stimulates sensations. It makes fantasies all the more appealing, and fears all the more terrifying.

Through grotesque exaggeration, power relations – such as the exploitation of women – are made visible. At the same time, the grotesque either constructs or deconstructs myths by

naturalizing or denaturalizing them. In the film, the grotesque, for example, supports the myth of duplicitous femininity and the myth of exploitative masculinity – but unravels the myth of feminine weakness.

With its upside-down logic, the grotesque reverses power relations. In this way, with her grotesque superpowers, the protagonist defeats her malefactors and the power elite. By uncrowning and crowning, the grotesque deprives the powerful of their power and makes the powerless powerful. Moreover, as the film shows, the grotesque is able to provide a satisfactory payback, to function as an instrument for cosmic justice.

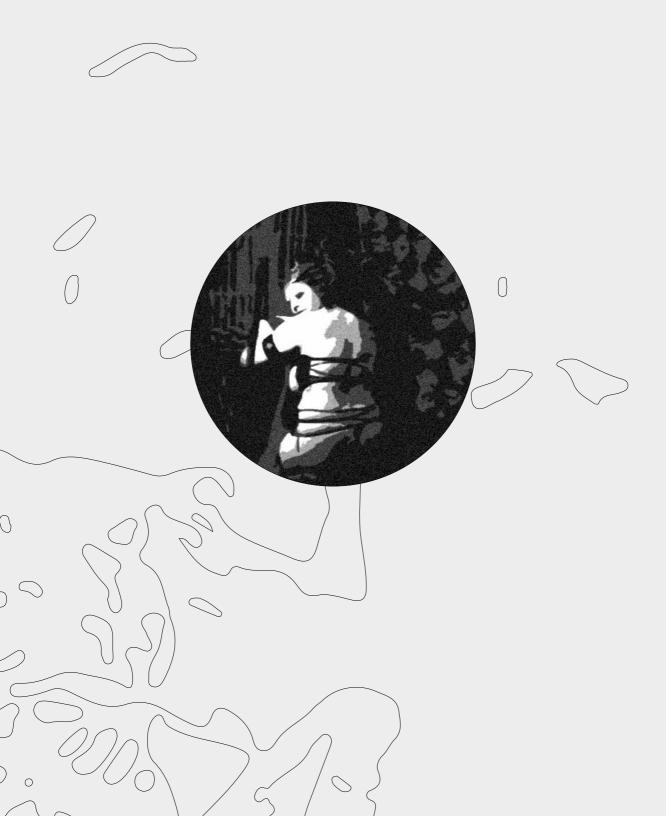
The grotesque can also support or undermine ideologies. In the film, grotesque violence is an elementary part of the 'jungle law' ideology. At the service of the skillful heroine, the grotesque subtly promotes an entire value system. The grotesque also disguises the presence of ideology by highlighting a character's fictional status, her position as a fantasy figure. For example, because of her superpowers and grotesque deeds, Beatrix's role as an ideal woman is concealed.

The grotesque can construct identity, either by inclusion or exclusion. Grotesque features, such as the female protagonist's superheroic qualities, may sustain identification with the character. On the other hand, the grotesque may present a character as repulsive, as other – like the bad men. The grotesque thus embodies alterity with which one can identify, but also alterity that is purely repulsive.

Most importantly, the grotesque embodies fantasies, and conveys ultimate feelings, such as repressed rage and forbidden desire. Embodying aggressive and sexual impulses, it appeals directly to the viewer's unconscious. In *Kill Bill*, the grotesque also conveys repressed sexual significations, in which fears are inseparable from fantasies, expressing a yearning for *jouissance* and death.

Finally, the grotesque gives death signifiers and signifieds. It makes death 'something' instead of nothingness. Sometimes comic and boisterous, sometimes solemn and dramatic, grotesque death seems more conceivable, and definitely more fascinating.

SATYRICON



Directed by Federico Fellini, Satyricon (1969) is a free adaptation of Petronius's Satyricon (1st century AD). The film stars Martin Potter as Encolpio, Hiram Keller as Ascilto, Max Born as Gitone, and Salvo Randone as Eumolpo. Other characters, important for my analysis, include Vernacchio (Fanfulla), Trimalcione (Mario Romagnoli), Lichas (Alain Cuny), the Nymphomaniac (Sibilla Sedat), the Hermaphrodite (Pasquale Baldassarre), the Minotaur (Luigi Montefiori), Arianna (Elisa Mainardi), Witch Enotea (Donyale Luna) and Mother Earth (actress unknown).²⁹

The first reason for choosing Satyricon is that the film pertains to the ancient carnivalesque genre of Menippean satire, representing important cultural heritage associated with the grotesque. Another reason is the connection between mythology and the grotesque: the film abounds in mythological figures and legends, resonating with the grotesque, as part of the collective unconscious. Finally, the film also constitutes a fascinating study of the grotesque body in its exuberance and variety.

Situated in imperial Rome, the fragmentary story of Satyricon depicts Encolpio's and Ascilto's drifting journey through various adventures and encounters, indulgences and adversities. The two young men are both romantically involved with Gitone, a young boy that Ascilto has sold to an actor, Vernacchio. Together with Eumolpo, a poet, the protagonists attend Trimalcione's banquet. They are captured on a boat, and Encolpio is wedded to Lichas, the vile captain. Arriving in a desert, Encolpio and Ascilto encounter the Nymphomaniac, have sex with her, and proceed to see the Hermaphrodite, a demigod, whom they steal and accidentally kill. Encolpio gets involved in a ritual restaging the fight with the Minotaur. He is supposed to have sex with Arianna, but loses his potency. For re-empowerment, Encolpio spends time in the Garden of delights, and goes to see Witch Enotea who finally restitutes his potency with the help of Mother Earth. Ascilto dies. Eumolpo also dies, and as his final wish, his body is eaten.

The grotesque elements explored in this section are, firstly, bodily variety, secondly, setting and places, and thirdly, characters and events, including Encolpio and Ascilto, Vernacchio, Trimalcione's banquet and mock funeral, Lichas's mock wedding, the Nymphomaniac, the Hermaphrodite; the Minotaur, Arianna and loss of potency; the Garden of delights; Witch Enotea, Mother Earth and the restitution of potency; and, finally, Eumolpo's can-

nibalistic will. In the end, there is a summary of film's mythological characters.

²⁹ Screenplay by Federico Fellini, Bernardino Zapponi and Brunello Rondi. Cinematography by Giuseppe Rotunno. Edited by Ruggero Mastroianni. Set decoration by Danilo Donati and Luigi Scaccianoce. Costume design by Danilo Donati. Makeup by Rino Carboni.

THE FILM BEGINS

Satyricon starts with a scene in which the protagonist, Encolpio, holds an agitated monologue in front of a rock wall covered with inscriptions and drawings. In the speech, Encolpio expresses his anger toward Ascilto, his friend who betrayed him, and Gitone who abandoned him for Ascilto.

Thematically, the film is an exploration of life's profound diversity and oddity, of sexuality and love, of change of fortune; the joys and sorrows embedded in life. *Satyricon* is ultimately about time passing; about life, death and human nature – condensed in mythology.

BODILY VARIETY

A central feature of Satyricon is that it presents a great variety of bodies. Some of them are excessive, some defective, and some otherwise aberrant or deformed. Among the grotesque body types, the 'Fantasy body' is present through such transcategorical fantasy figures as the wizard and the sorceress, the Minotaur man and even Vernacchio in his animal-inspired disguise. The 'Freak body,' reminiscent of the ancient circus freak category, is represented by the dwarfs and humpbacked figures, as well as the obese female body in the brothel - breasts uncovered, foxily jiggling her flesh – embodying the grotesque stereotype of 'the fat woman.' There are also several instances of the 'Female grotesque body,' including the Nymphomaniac, Witch Enotea and Mother Earth. The 'Body transgressing its boundaries' and the 'Abject body' types are present through grotesque violence and the display of bodily insides, yet in a minor role. Some bodies become grotesque as associated with abnormal mental states or insanity, like the Nymphomaniac and all the madly laughing characters.

With the spectrum of different morphologies, sizes, ages, ethnicities and sexualities, the bodies as a whole express carnivalesque abundance and multitude. It is as if the whole paradigm of all possibilities has been brought in. Moreover, in a Felliniesque manner, there are many odd-looking characters with distinctive faces and peculiar bodies. Such figures may not be grotesque per se, but their presence as part of the crowd has carnivalesque overtones.

Many characters are sexually ambiguous. The most obvious examples are the Hermaphrodite and Gitone, a feminized boy. The teenage Caesar is androgynous by appearance, played by a female actor. In addition, there are men dressed in women's clothes, and with flashy makeup. The idea of variety and diversity is also extended to sexual desire and fantasy, visualized through the brothel.

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The bewildering diversity of bodies also stems from extravagant styling, including fantastic (or trashy) clothing, coiffure, makeup and jewelry. The makeup is extremely gaudy and unnatural. For example, several faces are painted all blue. An old woman's wrinkled face is given a thick layer of white paint, cracked on the rugged surface of the skin. People's clothes resemble those used in ancient Rome, but with an odd peekaboo twist. Sometimes the fabrics are very transparent, revealing the naked body underneath, and sometimes the dress-like garments are so short that they reveal the buttocks. Sometimes the clothes consist of golden strings more reminiscent of decoration than of clothes.

Finally, the oddity issues not merely from the appearance but also from the mysterious, ritualistic behavior, including chanting and gesturing. Some gestures are clearly grotesque, such as rhythmic farting or the waving of bare buttocks. A peculiar, grotesque gesture is the tongue sign, performed by several figures, consisting of thrusting out the tongue and wiggling it.

Genderwise, it is noticeable how sexual ambiguity is represented as something 'normal.' The sexually ambiguous characters are often shown in passing – not pointed out, nor explained – as a natural part of the world in its diversity. In fact, the sexually ambiguous bodies don't stand out from the rest of the bodies, because all bodies are pictured as somehow estranged. In a pansexual spirit, sexual desire is also ambiguous, directed at all genders, not dualistically restricted to heterosexuality and homosexuality.

This is also the case with Encolpio's and Ascilto's sexual orientation, influenced by Antiquity's sexual customs. For them, apparently, young men are for passionate 'true' love, while women are for frivolous entertainment. The film also refers to the myth of Ganymede, the ancient model for pederasty, embodied by Gitone. Altogether, subtly built into the spectator position, the film offers a queer look at the male characters. In fact, Satyricon has been declared "the most profoundly homosexual movie in all history" (Wikipedia).

Regarding social class, divergent features more often characterize the representatives of the lower class, or of the class of parvenus. For example the pair of short men, the 'dwarfs,' are servants on the ship, and the obese woman is a prostitute in the brothel. This makes them 'others' through their social standing, in relation to the more upper-class protagonists who only frequent the lower-class society. Moreover, the noble family in the white palace is devoid of grotesque features. The lower-class people, however, are depicted as more fascinating in their gaudy demeanor.

As regards age, the representation of old people deviates from the normative way of picturing (or omitting) aged people in films.

Old bodies are conspicuously present, and pictured as independent and functional, outside their 'proper' role. Only with the old wizard is age represented in negative terms.

Importantly, 'ordinary' bodies and bodies conforming to common beauty ideals are also represented as odd through styling. Even the beautiful is thus represented as grotesque, as part of the overwhelming carnivalesque multitude.

SETTING AND PLACES

The film's eccentricity has affinities with the Menippean satire genre tradition. ³⁰ According to Mikhail Bakhtin (2011, 106-120), the genre expresses a "carnival sense of the world," marked by an "atmosphere of joyful relativity." As its most important characteristic, Menippean satire aims at testing a philosophical idea, a truth. To this end, it creates most fantastic adventures, extraordinary and provocative situations, crises and turning points. This also applies to *Satyricon*: the film's archetypal characters with their different worldviews are coded into 'carriers of ideas,' put to the test through extraordinary events.

The film and the genre also converge on other points. Menippean satire contains a fantastic or mystical-religious aspect that combines with 'slum naturalism,' referring to baseness, vulgarity and worldly evil. The genre favors scandals and indecencies, obsessions and dream visions. It is also characterized by sharp contrasts, abrupt changes and unexpected combinations of distant things. As a multi-styled genre, it mixes prose and verse. (Ibid.) In addition, Satyricon is marked by mysticalities and dream visions, indecencies and abrupt changes. Italian is supplemented with Vulgar Latin, mysterious jabbering, mumbling, chanting and signaling.

Menippean eccentricities are perpetuated in the film's setting and places. Its structure reflects the Menippean three-planed construction of heaven, earth and the underworld. According to Bakhtin (1984, 390-396), the imagery of the carnivalesque underworld draws on various sources, including Roman Saturnalias, the gods of antique mythology, the material bodily lower stratum, and banquet imagery. In *Satyricon*, the underworld imagery is present through two places or scenes. The first is Trimalcione's banquet, taking place in a red-walled steamy place. Reminiscent of an orgy attended by decadent guests, the feast presents an abundance of food, wild dancing, sexual gestures, vulgar speech and disorder. Secondly, the underworld is present through the

30 For an overview of the film's carnivalesque features, see also Huunan-Seppälä 2010, 64-67.

brothel, located in the lower-class Subura area with no

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daylight. It is a morbid but fascinating place consisting of several cells in a row, occupied by prostitutes in fantastic costumes, either busy with odd chores, or luring passers-by to join them in aberrant pleasures.

Reflecting grotesque duplicity, the brothel imagery is duplicated in an underworldly and a heavenly representation. In this way, the dusky underground brothel is contrasted with the bright open-air 'Garden of delights.' While the former represents a carnivalesque underworld, the latter represents a carnivalesque heaven in its eroticized, pagan version. Reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, the Garden is a fantastic place with a frivolous atmosphere. Filled with light, joy, play and laughter, it is a sexual paradise for men, entertained by women.

At the same time, the representation of heaven is duplicated in a pagan version – represented by the Garden – and a Christian version, present through the palace of the noble family. The environment is all white, luminous and serene – with white sand, flowers, horses and peacocks. Birds sing, water burbles, and little girls have blonde curly hair. The master and mistress of the house have a benevolent, noble demeanor, like the holy figures of Christian imagery. Along with the arrival of a new Caesar, the holy family is expelled from the paradise. The couple commits a serene suicide in the palace. With his wrists cut and bleeding, the master is reminiscent of the crucified Jesus.

The places that represent earth are no less bizarre than heaven and hell. The fields, the ship and the desert are all odd places, functioning as locations for curious rituals and encounters. The conceptual nature of these settings is expressed through their flagrantly artificial nature – like the prop-like immobile skies with strangely glowing sunrises. In fact, the entire film is artificial and alienating from tip to toe, including the setting, the characters and the manner of acting.

The four elements – earth, water, air and fire – have an important role within the grotesque conception of the world. According to Bakhtin (1984, 318), the grotesque body is cosmic, interwoven with cosmic elements: earth, water, fire and air; the sun and the stars, mountains and seas. The four elements are conspicuously present in the film, linked to the characters, their bodies and their fates. The most recurrent element is fire, used in numerous rituals, present through the lethally burning sun and the legend of Witch Enotea, incubating fire in her vagina. Water is present through the sea and the bathing ritual, and earth through the desert and the figure of Mother Earth. Air is present through the constantly blowing, howling wind.

Altogether, Satyricon's visuality, including the setting, places, décor and characters, could be described as "gaudy carnival trash" – as Bakhtin (2011, 126) characterizes a vehicle called "hell" used in carnivals. The film's visuality wavers somewhere between historical reality and dreamlike imagery, between collective myths and subjective fantasy. Fellini himself has described the film as "a science fiction of the past" (Wikipedia).

The repeated decorative motifs – such as the blue faces, gaudy jewelry or the tongue sign – evoke what Slavoj Žižek (1997a) notes about filmic repeated motifs as *sinthomes* in the Lacanian sense. As "characteristic details which persist and repeat themselves without implying a common meaning … they are what resists interpretation, the inscription into the texture of a specific visual enjoyment."

In Satyricon, several elements are reminiscent of dreams, delirium and memories, commonly associated with the unconscious. Combining reality and fantasy, the present and the past, the unconscious is at once subjective and cultural, intertwined with myths. According to Freud (1991, 220), the dream-thoughts are submitted to distortions, amalgamations and substitutions, making the dreams seem alien and incomprehensible to the conscious mind. Moreover, in Satyricon, the oneiric places and phantasmal characters resemble the distorted products of the unconscious – marked by endless permutation.

As Žižek (1992, 152) notes, the unconscious, beside all the wild fantasies, also contains prohibitions and injunctions, fragments of 'irrational' traumatic law. In the film, the cruel and capricious law is reflected in Encolpio's anxiety, remorse and punishment, materialized in the mysterious forced marriage, the fight with the Minotaur, and loss of potency.

In Lacan's (2004, 129-131, 149) view "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other." The big Other is essentially the locus of speech that is inherently present in the unconscious. The unconscious is thus formed by the effects of speech on the subject. In Satyricon, the Other speaks through the subject in the form of fate – like an almighty agency pulling the strings of marionettes – and in the form of a transcendental presence to which Encolpio addresses his words. But Encolpio's words are not his, as they pertain to the Other, permeated with the logic of dialogue. According to Bakhtin (2011, 154), dialogue is characterized by words that are addressed to oneself and to all people, to one's creator and to the universe.

In this sense, Satyricon resembles Hitchcock's universe in which "the heroes are at the mercy of 'Dieu obscur,' of the unpredictable Fate epitomized by the gigantic stone statues ... blind in their blessed ignorance" (Žižek 1997b).

CHARACTERS AND EVENTS

ENCOLPIO AND ASCILTO

The protagonists Encolpio and Ascilto – students in their twenties – are not grotesque characters per se. Together with Gitone, they constitute a particularly homogenous specimen of idealized male beauty. In their syntagmatic relation, however, the protagonists constitute a carnivalesque pair, referring to the phenomenon of 'paired images,' marked by contrast or similarity (Bakhtin 2011, 126). While blond-haired Encolpio is sensible, irritable and insecure, dark-haired Ascilto is bold, boisterous and self-confident. During their adventures, Encolpio's misfortune and distress is contrasted to Ascilto's luck and laughter.

From a gendered perspective, Encolpio, the point-of-view character, expresses openly misogynistic ideas. In his initial monologue, the abandoned, rancorous man compares both Ascilto and Gitone to women. He comments on Ascilto, saying, "He hires himself out as a woman does, that bastard!," and on Gitone, saying, "He sits down to piss like a woman does, him!" Woman is thus contemptible because of her anatomy, low morals and prostitute-like nature. The way in which Vernacchio praises Gitone is also revealing: "He will make you a perfect woman." This means that a truly perfect woman is actually a man.

VERNACCHIO

A famous actor, Vernacchio appears as a hybrid grotesque figure in his disguise. He wears lipstick and rouge, a mask with an odd nose, and a kind of shark fin on the top of his head. A long tail is attached to his bottom, and his buttocks are nearly uncovered. In his theater performance, other actors also wear masks, laugh and cackle oddly. Vernacchio farts rhythmically, and a man crows like a cockerel. The performance culminates in a dismemberment: a sobbing slave is brought to the spot, and Vernacchio, with a large ax, cuts off his hand, replacing it with a golden prosthetic hand. The detached, bloody hand remains on the log. People applaud.

TRIMALCIONE'S BANQUET AND MOCK FUNERAL

Trimalcione is an aged, extremely rich and vainglorious man: a former slave and parvenu that made a fortune. As he says, "Once I was a cockroach, now I'm a king. Such is life." Embodying the idea of abrupt changes of fate, he is like a carnival king. As a major event in the film, Trimalcione organizes an extravagant banquet, or an orgy.

Just before the banquet, there is an odd bathing ritual with lots of candles, vapor, chanting and tingling. In a pool, a flock of

naked bodies mysteriously bounces up and down at the same rate – reflecting the idea of the collective grotesque body.

As an expression of carnivalesque abundance, the banquet consists of excessive eating, luxurious dishes and wine. There are also discussions and recitals, music and frantic dancing, amorous glances and kisses, and disorder. Fortunata, Trimalcione's young and beautiful wife, kisses another woman. Trimalcione belches and expects the fortune teller to predict the future based on the sound of the belch. Disorder begins when Trimalcione pompously calls himself a poet. Eumolpo, the 'real' poet – with contempt for the upstart entourage – wants to show himself to be better and recites in Latin – but people laugh at him. Infuriated, Eumolpo calls the guests "suckers of chancres, lickers of lies, shit-eating mange." Trimalcione gives an order to throw Eumolpo into the huge furnace full of flames, in the midst of cooking the animal carcasses, but the order is not executed.

Within the banquet, the grotesque elements amount to overeating, belching and coarse language. There are also verbal references to vomiting, scatophagy and sex with a goat. At some point, Trimalcione gets angry with Fortunata and calls her a harpy – referring to a mythological rapacious winged female monster. Throwing a bowl of food in her face, he also calls her old, ugly, fat and vicious. In return, Fortunata calls Trimalcione 'a miserable old fungus.' In the end, however, nothing truly transgressive happens. Trimalcione's banquet is also a more elitist feast than the "banquet for all the world" that Bakhtin (1984, 278) talks about, referring to ancient carnival festivities with an inclusive, universal spirit.

The banquet is followed by a 'mock funeral,' whereby Trimalcione stages his own death. This reflects the grotesque connection between eating and death, or the otherworldly. Tragicomically, when Trimalcione walks into his tomb and lies down in the grave, he instructs the guests: "Now mourn for me. I am dead." When Trimalcione rises up from the 'dead,' the guests rejoice at his resurrection – and at the same time try to benefit from him, asking for presents.

Mock rituals, masses, weddings and funerals are an example of parodia sacra, expressing carnivalesque upside-down logic. In the mock funeral ritual, the living body symbolically turns into a corpse, and back into a living body. For Bakhtin (ibid., 75, 82, 87) the aim of carnivalesque mockery is to travesty the serious and imbue it with laughter. Through the ritual, the high and the old is cast into the material bodily lower stratum for symbolic death and rebirth.

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In the film, the banquet and the mock funeral serve a satirical purpose. Satire is targeted both at the class of parvenus and at the double standards of the moralists. After all, Trimalcione – with his excessive vanity and infinitely sad face – appears as quite human, in comparison to those who eat his food but laugh at him behind his back. In the spirit of carnivalesque ambiguity, the satire is ultimately targeted at the vanity and baseness of human nature.

LICHAS'S MOCK WEDDING

The mock funeral is soon followed by a mock wedding. Encolpio, Ascilto and Gitone are kidnapped onto a ship by Lichas, a villain capturing and delivering people as slaves to Caesar. An elderly man with a glass eye, Lichas becomes infatuated with Encolpio, and they are wedded on the ship. Dressed as a bride, wearing a white short garment and a wreath, Encolpio is seemingly humiliated, and resentful. A calf is butchered, and Tryphaena, the 'priest,' predicts from its blood that the gods bless the union. The spouses vow faithful love, and disappear under the deck to have sex, the crowd chanting "Felicitas."

Also a form of parodia sacra, the mock wedding overturns the church's sacrament. A civilian woman acts as a priest and blesses the union between the two men. Apparently organized for Lichas's sexual pleasure, the ritual is turned into a grotesque affair, ambiguously combining sexual abuse with joyful celebration.

After a while, the news arrive that Caesar is dead, replaced by a new Caesar. A soldier comes to seize the ship and to kill Lichas: with his sword, he slashes Lichas's head off. The decapitated body falls onto the deck, and the detached head lands in the sea, soon vanishing from sight. In a carnivalesque manner, the Wheel of Fortune keeps rotating, bringing luck for some and misfortune for others.

NYMPHOMANIAC

Encolpio's and Ascilto's journey continues to the desert, where they encounter the Nymphomaniac. In the hope of a cure, her desperate husband and servants are taking the woman to see the Hermaphrodite. As the servant explains, men that agree to have sex with her are generously paid by the husband. Ascilto volunteers. Before entering her wagon, Ascilto is supplied with a protective chest shield.

The Nymphomaniac is a grotesque representation of 'the mad woman,' lying in the wagon, her hands and feet tied down, with a frantic look in her eyes, sweating and moaning. As Ascilto approaches her, she starts to lick her lips, with protruding eyes,

convulsively moving her hands. Through this figure, woman is pictured as excessive, insane in her desire, assimilated with a female beast in heat. As the servant explains, the woman is "like a wolf for fuck-fuck." The tragic figure is also ridiculed: the protagonists are depicted smiling when told about her condition. The Nymphomaniac thus arouses mixed feelings in men: wonder, fear and amusement – reminiscent of the reactions typical of the grotesque.

There is a long tradition of picturing woman as mad or bad through her sexuality. According to Jane Ussher (2006, 1-2, 15-18), the female body is positioned as monstrous, dangerous and defiled due to the alleged power and threat inherent in woman's fecund flesh. At the same time, woman's sexuality has been pathologized, associated with disease. Unleashed emotions and behaviors have been associated with the unruly female body – a body that needs to be contained. Symptomatically, in *Satyricon*, the Nymphomaniac is concretely tied to the wagon.

For Luce Irigaray (1991, 39-41), woman's insatiable sexual appetite is a male fantasy based on the repression of the archaic relationship with the mother. Within the male imaginary, the female genitals become bottomless, and the womb becomes an abyss, because the relation with the maternal body is censored. In this way, the Nymphomaniac becomes a projection of the tabooed bodily encounter with the mother, the abysmal primal womb.

The opposite pole of the monstrous *sexual* woman is the beneficent *asexual* woman. For Ussher (2006, 1), the asexual woman is represented as a sacred, nourishing and soothing figure. Similarly, for Julia Kristeva, the threat of maternal power is domesticated through the symbol of the Virgin mother. Issuing from the repressed semiotic and the abject maternal, women's power is seen as something archaic and mysterious, something that needs to be put under patriarchal control. (Oliver 1993, 51, 55, 108.) In *Satyricon*, perhaps Witch Enotea could be seen as a grotesquely inverted Madonna figure, a morbidly re-sexualized asexual maternal figure, living in celibacy but continuously giving birth to fire.

HERMAPHRODITE

After the desert, Encolpio and Ascilto arrive at a temple in the mountains, the dwelling place of the Hermaphrodite. He is said to be the son of Aphrodite and Hermes, a demigod with healing powers, to whom people come to pray for recovery or miracle. A fanciful cave-like space with luminous minerals, the temple is full of people with illnesses, crippled bodies or mental disturbances. According to the legend, the demigod is also capable of vindictive

deeds: he once punished a city by transforming its inhabitants into chickens.

As a hybrid creature with magic powers, the Hermaphrodite is a grotesque character. When lifted from the black cradle in which he reposes, his luminously white body is revealed to be half-male, half-female, with breasts and a penis. With his small stature and puerile face, he is neither adult nor child. Eyes barely open, he seems half awake, half asleep, between this world and the otherworldly.

The Hermaphrodite resonates with Rabelais's depiction of the emblem in Gargantua's hat. The emblem portrays a double body with two heads, four arms and feet, with both male and female sex organs, referring to human nature in its mystical origins, as described in Plato's Symposium (Bakhtin 1984, 324). Within the grotesque worldview, hermaphroditism symbolizes the tendency to duality, and the fundamental unity of opposites. Expressing metamorphosis and the transgression of limits, the opposites ambiguously coalesce with each other, complementary and indissociable.

In mythologies, intersex people have been associated with divinity – like the Greek god Hermaphroditus. In the film, despite the demigod's alleged healing powers, no magical deeds or miraculous recoveries are witnessed. The creature's divine role tells more about people's spiritual urges and physiognomic attitudes. It exposes the firm conviction that a figure with deviant biology and morphology cannot be 'normal' – only monstrous or divine.

As a turning point in the film, Encolpio and Ascilto commit a crime that leads to their subsequent misfortune. Enticed by a villain, they steal the Hermaphrodite in order to profit from the offerings brought to him. At night, Encolpio ruthlessly kills the demigod's old custodian, and they leave the temple with the Hermaphrodite in a cart. As they transport him through the desert, they run out of water, and the feeble Hermaphrodite dies. Encolpio blames the sun for the demigod's death.

THE MINOTAUR, ARIANNA AND LOSS OF POTENCY

In the desert, Encolpio and Ascilto arrive at a festival of laughter, a celebration of *Dio Riso*, the God of Laughter, associated with the sun. The festivities include an enactment of a mythological story: the fight with the Minotaur in a stone labyrinth. To his bad luck, Encolpio is forced to play the part of Theseus and fight with a gladiator disguised as the Minotaur. Encolpio loses the fight, but the Minotaur man sympathizes with him and spares his life.

Echoing the Roman "Laughing festival," the event is full of boisterous, mannered laughing – reminding of carnival laughter.

According to Bakhtin (2011, 126-127), carnival laughter is linked with ancient ritual laughter, directed toward the highest earthly authority or a deity – like the sun. Evoking death and rebirth, ritual laughter represents a reaction to crises in the life of man. In this laughter, ridiculing is fused with rejoicing. Carnivalesque laughter, both mocking and triumphant, is ultimately directed against the finite world, the limited seriousness and the pretense to any extratemporal, unconditional value (Bakhtin 1984, 11-12, 42, 49). Moreover, manic laughter, as present in the film, evokes folk culture's 'festive' madness, enabling one to see the world with different eyes (ibid., 39).

As a prize for his ordeal, Encolpio as Theseus is given the chance to have sex in public with a woman in the role of Arianna, waiting for him on a stand in the middle of the square. The performance is soon interrupted, as Encolpio fails to get an erection. With great hostility toward Encolpio, the enraged woman calls him a "mangy fucker," exclaiming, "Bad luck to us all, you are." Encolpio once again blames the sun for his misfortune. The infuriated people throw stones at him, and leave the place. "I've lost my sword," Encolpio laments to Ascilto – who laughs at him.

Within the carnivalesque worldview, great importance is attached to procreation and fertility, along with the symbolic value of the phallus. As portrayed in the film, the failed enactment of the venerated reproductive act disgraces and ridicules Encolpio. Altogether, the scandalous, hyperbolic act is a grotesque, Menippean event.

From a gender-related point of view – despite the focus on Encolpio's distress – the scene blatantly denigrates woman. 'Arianna' is presented as a commodity, a prize given to man, put into the position of a prostitute for the sake of the community. Arianna's big breasts, plump lips and long curly hair – signifiers of desirable femininity – underscore her feminine excess, her status as a sex symbol, assimilating her with the stereotype of 'the vamp.'

Symptomatically, just in front of Arianna's stand, there is a big statue portraying an obese, voluptuous female body without a head. Its excessively feminine curves constitute an iconic relation with Arianna's body. An obvious symbol of fertility, the statue is shown several times during the scene. The statue's headless condition is reminiscent of woman's association with the body, as opposed to the mind. By contrast, in some other scenes, there are colossal male heads without bodies. Issuing from broken statues, the male heads refer to the mind, to the association of man with civilization, philosophy and culture.

SATYRICOM

Encolpio's loss of potency occurs just when he is on top of the woman, trying to have sex with her. This creates an impression that the woman is to blame for the incident, mysteriously depriving the man of his power. According to Freud (1918, 198-199), man fears woman because she is different, forever mysterious, and therefore potentially hostile. Sexual intercourse with a woman is associated with the threat of castration, or with debilitation: "The man is afraid of being weakened by the woman, infected with her femininity and of then showing himself incapable." This association also exists in mythology. As Barbara Creed (1993, 74-75) points out, witches have been blamed for such crimes: for causing male impotence and stealing men's penises.

GARDEN OF DELIGHTS

Eumolpo arrives at the festival just in time to witness Encolpio's misadventure. Formerly a poor poet, Eumolpo has suddenly become a wealthy man – thanking Eros for his fortune. As he observes, Priapus has failed Encolpio.

Eumolpo offers to help the unlucky man by taking him to the Garden of delights. Decorated with murals of erotic motifs, the Garden is an open-air place full of women, of different ages and ethnicities, devoted to entertaining the male guests. At their arrival, Eumolpo asks the mistress: "What positions are on today? They ought to invent some more. More permutation and combination." In effect, the idea of *permutation* crystallizes the film's core characteristic, the bodily variety and carnivalesque abundance, reflecting grotesque metamorphosis.

In the Garden, Encolpio is submitted to an odd ritual supposed to cure him of his impotence. Lying down, he is slapped on his bottom with colorful sticks, while the women around him chant, drum, play the flute and burn incense. Encolpio is seemingly suffering, in contrast to Ascilto, depicted as rejoicing; flirting and kissing with the women. The ritual however fails, and as a last resort, Encolpio is advised to pay a visit to Witch Enotea.

In the film, the potency issue has a major role: it constitutes an important part of the plot, thematically dominating the latter part of the film. The importance given to the issue is a grotesquely exaggerated example of phallocentrism. In the film's dialogue, male potency is associated with fire and with life, and the loss is portrayed as a major collective outrage. It immediately disgraces and 'feminizes' Encolpio, pictured as skulking around in a big black scarf worn over his head. The issue also reflects the valuation of male and female sexualities more generally. As Irigaray notes, the valuation of phallic erection is contrasted to the demonization

of the womb. Freud also defines female sexuality in terms of deficiency, only with respect to male sexuality and the valued male organ, rejecting the idea that female sexuality might have its own specificity. (Irigaray 1991, 40-41, 118-119.)

As for the Garden of delights, its female employees – portrayed as altruistically happy to please the men – exist only to serve the male guests. Conforming to Irigaray's (ibid., 28) idea, woman is thus represented as a resource for men, which is characteristic of male systems of representation.

WITCH ENOTEA, MOTHER EARTH AND RESTITUTION OF POTENCY

According to the legend, Witch Enotea is a powerful good sorceress able to 'suck up winds, spew water from rocks, and stub out the stars.' As a witch, she is a transcategorical fantasy figure, and a representative of the female grotesque. With her cosmic powers, Witch Enotea expresses the idea of the cosmic grotesque body.

When Enotea was young and beautiful, an old wizard fell in love with her, but Enotea found the man old and ugly. Enotea played a trick on him, humiliating the man in public. For revenge, the wizard doused out the fires in the village, made Enotea the only source of fire in the village, and told people to search for fire "in the skirts of Enotea." Ever since, Enotea has been forced to let the villagers light their torches with the fire of her vagina. In an illustrative scene, Enotea is shown lying on her back legs opened, as if giving birth, screaming in pain each time a torch is lit, the men coming to her in a row, one by one.

Encolpio arrives at her village, and finds Witch Enotea sitting in a dark cave, behind a large fire, silent and beautiful, with an enigmatic smile. Suddenly, through the flames, she appears dead, her head like a skull with melted flesh. In the blink of an eye, she appears alive again. This makes her a representative of death, of the otherworldly.

The most peculiar feature of Witch Enotea is that she emits fire from her vagina. This associates her with mythical creatures like fire-spitting dragons or devils. Her castrative, fiery vagina is also reminiscent of hell's eternal fire. The element of fire is however ambiguous, signifying both life and death, both danger and necessity. Enotea thus reiterates the myth of woman's duplicity: besides her life-giving property and allure, she also signifies horror and death. As if giving birth to fire, Enotea is clearly associated with motherhood – also called a "generous mother" by Encolpio. Witch Enotea's monstrosity is thus essentially linked to her reproductive and maternal functions, in line with Barbara Creed's (1993, 83) claim about the monstrous-feminine.

SATTRICOM

The men's role, seeking fire, is to sadistically exploit the woman, as if taking part in a collective, consecutive rape. In this way, Enotea is represented both as the victimized woman and as the culpable woman, having humiliated the wizard. The male wizard is also pictured in a negative light, appearing as vindictive and cruel, and also physically unpleasant with his wrinkled grumpy face.

As regards ethnicity, a notable feature about Enotea's character is that she is black. In a potentially offensive manner, the paradigmatic choice coincides with certain regressive stereotypes, underlying the character's 'mysterious' and 'magical' nature.

After Enotea, in the cave, Encolpio encounters an incarnation of Mother Earth. This figure is embodied by a corpulent, black woman, coded into a 'primitive' figure: wearing only a small loincloth, her naked breasts are decorated with glimmering ornamentation, and her protruding hairdo is adorned with straws. The Mother Earth figure's ethnicity is even more problematic because of her 'savage' look, resuscitating offensive stereotypes.

Encolpio pleads with the woman to help him, confessing to her his recent crimes related to the Hermaphrodite's death. He also regrets the loss of fire 'in his loins.' Standing in front of the large fire, the Mother Earth figure, without saying a word, lies down on the ground. Far from libidinous, Encolpio is pictured as distressed in his encounter with the imposing, silent woman. He however gets on top of her, and they have sex. After his re-empowerment, Encolpio rejoices that the gods have restored his health, "Mercury slid potent metal into my bones." The conspicuous role of fire in the scene highlights the cosmic grotesque body and the regenerative signification of fire within the grotesque worldview.

The Mother Earth figure is clearly associated with the element of earth – articulated through her gesture of grabbing a handful of earth from the ground, slowly letting it trickle down. Moreover, she is emphatically represented as a mother – also called *mammina*, a 'mommy' by Encolpio. Encolpio's sexual encounter with the universal mother figure thus represents a re-enactment of the maternal relationship. This encounter is, according to Irigaray (1991, 35-36), a forbidden, repressed desire; in representations appearing in a threatening or fantastic form; a ghost of the matricide.

Altogether, Witch Enotea and Mother Earth present many similarities. Both of them are mysterious maternal figures in close connection with earth and fire. As witch-like creatures, they are endowed with cosmic powers, practicing their magic through their reproductive functions. Not uttering a word in the film, they are silenced women, associated with the body and nature, as opposed to the mind and culture.

THE FILM ENDS

Out of the cave, Encolpio learns that Ascilto has just been lethally stabbed. Holding Ascilto's hand, Encolpio grieves, "Your arrogance, your wild glory is gone like the shadow of a cloud. Fishes will have you, beasts rend parts of you." As a carnivalesque pair of characters, Encolpio's misfortune turns into fortune only at the expense of Ascilto's luck.

EUMOLPO'S CANNIBALISTIC WILL

Encolpio plans to embark with Eumolpo, the poet, to sail to Africa. But the poet has died and left a will allowing his companions to take possession of his fortune on the condition of eating his body. As Eumolpo ambiguously prescribes, "My friends, stain not your hands or your knives, but devour my dead flesh with the same gusto as you sent my soul to hell." In the hope of riches, several men decide to fulfill the poet's last will – soon depicted as chewing his tough flesh.

Thereby the poet's body is united with other bodies, and with the world. The act of cannibalism entails an extremely grotesque surpassing of body limits, between the eaten and the eating bodies. Like in Rabelais's description of the 'feast of cattle slaughter,' "[t]he bodies are interwoven and begin to be fused in one grotesque image of a devoured and devouring world" (Bakhtin 1984, 220-221).

Meanwhile, the men not participating in the cannibalistic feast, including the protagonist, get onto Eumolpo's ship. The film ends as Encolpio, later on narrating their journey, says, "And on an island spread with sweet-scent grass, a young Greek told me that in years..." The sentence remains unfinished. Encolpio's image freezes and changes into a painted image fragment on ruins by the sea, along with Ascilto, Gitone, Vernacchio and others – all turning into history.

MYTHS

Satyricon abounds in mythological figures endowed with grotesque features. They are either generic figures – like the witch, the wizard, the nymphomaniac and Mother Earth – or characters issuing from classical Greco-Roman mythology, including Hermaphroditus, Minotaur, Priapus, Venus and Eros.

The *witch* and the *wizard* are transcategorical fantasy figures. The *nymphomaniac*, associated with madness and hysteria, represents a grotesque stereotype of the female body, owing its etymology to the Nymphs, frivolous female spirits of nature in Greek

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mythology. *Mother Earth* is also a transcategorical figure and an instance of the female grotesque. She is a rather pan-cultural creation with her mythological counterparts, the Greek goddess Gaia and the Roman goddess Terra, responsible for earth and fertility.

The Hermaphrodite is based on the mythological character of *Hermaphroditus*, the two-sexed son of Aphrodite and Hermes. According to the legend, a water nymph fell in love with a handsome boy, and was eternally united with him by a god who merged their bodies into one androgynous body. (Wikipedia.) In its ambiguous duplicity, Hermaphroditus is also an embodiment of grotesque metamorphosis.

The *Minotaur*, with the legend of Theseus and Ariadne, issues from Greek mythology. A half-man half-bull creature, the Minotaur is a hybrid grotesque monster. *Satyricon* also presents *Eros* with his bow and arrow, as played by Gitone. The Greek god of love, Eros is associated with sexual desire. His ability to make humans fall in love, fortuitously and incongruously, makes him a carnivalesque prankster figure.

The film also refers to other mythological figures. Two statues represent *Venus* – the Roman goddess of love, sex and beauty. As a deity with a human bodily existence, Venus is also a transcategorical figure. Her Greek counterpart Aphrodite is a prime example of a mythological deity that represents canonized beauty, but whose legend of origin presents highly grotesque elements. According to the legend, Cronus castrated his father Uranus and threw the severed genitals into the sea, forming a sea foam from which arose Aphrodite (ibid.).

Mentioned in relation to the potency issue, Priapus is a Greek god of fertility, protector of gardens and of male genitals. The god is characterized by an oversized penis in a permanent erection. (Ibid.) With his hyperbolic genitals, Priapus is a grotesque figure.

Mythology is an archaic layer of human thought that lives on in art, religion, philosophy and science. Several basic structures of thought can be traced back to ancient mythologies. For example archetypal characters and notions of heaven and the underworld are perpetuated in belief systems – and in the grotesque conception of the world. In an attempt to explain the human mind, psychology also resorts to the world of myth – including Oedipus, Electra, Narcissus, Eros, Thanatos and others. Cultures thus contain a multitude of archetypes and 'model phenomena,' in the sense of Jungian archetypes (see Jung 1959), but also in the sense of modern 'tropes.' In their universality, myths are an expression of the collective unconscious. Intertwined with the grotesque, myths express culture's archaic fears and fantasies.

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THE ROLE OF THE GROTESQUE

In Satyricon, the grotesque serves to mystify woman and to abjectify female sexuality. It instills the misogynistic stereotypes of the insane nymphomaniac, the debilitating seducer, the castrating witch and the archaic mother. Through these figures, the grotesque sustains the myth of abject female sexuality. On the other hand, through carnivalesque paired images, the grotesque also points to male insecurities and vulnerabilities.

The grotesque also represents the repressed. In the form of Mother Earth, a phantasmagoric maternal figure, the grotesque represents the haunting unconscious desire, the relation with the maternal body. Symptomatically, in the grotesque encounter with the repressed, the protagonist is healed, empowered.

In the film, the carnivalesque expresses a sense of relativity, presenting a world with endless possibilities. Through relativizing power, the taboos related to sexual ambiguity are diluted and homosexuality is normalized. With mythological characters, ideals and anti-ideals are naturalized or denaturalized. In this way, the ideal of fertility is turned into grotesque travesty. Within all the carnivalesque abundance and grotesque multiplicity, the beautiful and the odd are also confused. Limits between categories are thereby weakened.

Finally, the grotesque either invigorates fear, due to its horrifying potential, or soothes fear by concretizing its object, by making it more fathomable or appealing. For example, the grotesque fantasies of the afterlife, including the banquet and brothel imagery, associate carnal pleasures with the afterlife, engendering a reassuring illusion.

THE COOK, THE THIEF, HIS WIFE & HER LOVER



An eccentric crime drama, Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989) stars Helen Mirren as Georgina Spica, Michael Gambon as Albert Spica, Alan Howard as Michael, the lover; and Richard Bohringer as Richard Boarst, the cook. Minor characters mentioned in the analysis are the kitchen boy Pup (Paul Russell) and Mitchel (Tim Roth).³¹

The main reason for choosing the film is its striking duality that draws on carnivalesque abundance – most visible in the hyperbolic presentation of food – and grotesque brutality, enacted through violent surpassings of body limits. The film is also a study of human monstrosity, of oppressive dynamics and tyranny. Yet another incentive is the film's amazing, markedly carnivalesque visuality.³²

The story consists of the depiction of the oppressive relation between Albert and Georgina, a married couple, and of the secret love affair between Georgina and Michael. The love triangle takes place in Albert's restaurant, *Le Hollandais*, which he rules by fear and violence, terrorizing the entire entourage. A major role is given to the cook, Richard, who helps Georgina and gives the lovers a hideout in the kitchen. The brutal husband finally discovers the love affair, and kills the kind lover. In revenge, Georgina has the lover's body cooked and makes the husband eat a piece of the lover's flesh before killing him.

The explored elements include the grotesquely monstrous character of Albert, a glance at the other main characters, the film's carnivalesque setting, the role of food, grotesque violence, the cannibalistic scene, and finally the duality and contrast characterizing the film.

THE FILM BEGINS

The film begins with a cruel scene in the parking lot outside the restaurant. The restaurant owner Albert Spica grotesquely chastises a man: undresses him, makes him eat dog feces, dirties his body with excrement, and finally pees on him. Symptomatically, Albert calls the dog feces a "good dinner" and the urine a "nice drink." Violence is also connected to the lower body and genitals, as Albert says, "Or next time I'll make you eat your own shit after

forcing it through your dick like toothpaste." When heading back to the restaurant, Albert calls his wife a "tart."

The beginning lays bare the main thematics of the film: oppression and food.

³¹ Written by Peter Greenaway. Cinematography by Sacha Vierny. Edited by John Wilson. Production design by Ben van Os and Jan Roelfs. Costume design by Jean-Paul Gaultier. Music by Michael Nyman. Prop food design by Giorgio Locatelli.

³² The carnivalesque is here understood in a wide sense as also including gloomy tones, expressing regeneration through destruction. Here it mostly refers to abundance, ambiguity and contrast.

While food expresses carnivalesque abundance, oppression is manifested through grotesque violence, thematically associated with sexuality, excrement, sadism and misogyny.

ALBERT THE THIEF

The film's male protagonist, Albert Spica, is a gangster who runs the restaurant with the cook. Portrayed as a human monster, a demonic embodiment of evil, Albert is a grotesque character. With his 'inner' monstrosity, he represents the grotesque body type of the 'Body transgressing its boundaries.'

By appearance, Albert is quite an ordinary-looking man in his fifties. His hair, beard and eyebrows are all black, creating a contrast with his pale skin. As a sign of monstrosity, his face is often distorted by anger or sadistic pleasure. When infuriated, he has a demonic demeanor.

Albert's deeds are extremely grotesque in nature. Stuffing things into bodily cavities is his trademark. He stuffs dog feces into a man's mouth, soup into the mouth of a restaurant customer, and buttons into the mouth of the kitchen boy, followed by the boy's own belly button. Moreover, he kills the wife's lover by stuffing book pages into his mouth, and Georgina tells that he stuffs objects into her vagina – including a toothbrush, a spoon, a plastic train and a wine bottle. Albert is also obsessed with the idea of people eating excrement or bodily emissions. Besides making a man eat dog feces, he claims that Indians drink their own pee. When a gang member, Mitchel, throws up, Albert threatens to stuff the vomit back down his throat.

In fact, for Albert, food, excrement and sexuality are inextricably related. As he declares, "And Georgie's my pleasure too, though in a more private kind of way than stuffing the mouth and feeding the sewers. Though the pleasures are related, because the naughty bits and the dirty bits are so close together that it just goes to show how eating and sex are related. Georgie's naughty bits are nicely related, aren't they?"

Albert regularly abuses his wife: practices sadistic sexual violence, beats her and rapes her. However, as Georgina comments, Albert is not that interested in having sex with her, or with women altogether – suggesting hidden sexual preferences. Albert is violent and oppressive toward practically all people, including his fellow gangsters, the restaurant staff and customers. His mode of action consists of intimidation, humiliation and coercion, torture and killing. Referring to the film's title, Albert is the 'thief' who steals from other people their liberty, happiness, and life.

Within the grotesque worldview, Albert's character compares to the exact opposite of carnival culture: the official culture, as depicted by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 94). Defined by seriousness, falsehood and hypocrisy, the official culture exercises its oppressive power through threats and prohibitions, through intimidation, humiliation and submission.

Albert never ceases talking, which makes him not only cruel but also very annoying. His speech is coarse, offensive and full of obscenities. Despite his own vulgar behavior, Albert constantly gives instructions and teaches manners to others. He tells his fellow gangster not to eat with their fingers, and advises his wife to wash her hands when she goes to the toilet. At the same time, Albert is openly hostile to culture, reading and books. His pretense of sophistication makes him hypocritical and ridiculous.

Albert is also highly misogynistic, holding deep hatred for women. He denigrates women, and repeatedly refers to them as prostitutes. For example, he comments on a waitress by saying, "Adele is no good with cash and figures. She's just decorative, all lips and tits." Albert's main target is Georgina, whom he constantly harasses and humiliates. In public, he gropes her breasts, and makes lewd observations about her "big tits" and "bladder like a leaky marrow" – finding himself witty and funny. Albert considers the wife his property, a toy he can sadistically play with. The only woman he values is his own mother.

Besides being misogynistic, Albert is depicted as racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic and ageist. He claims that Ethiopians like starving, and is convinced that Michael is a Jew. When Albert first hears Michael's name, he asks if it is a Jewish name, and if he eats kosher food. Michael answers that he is not Jewish. "He's Jewish," Albert concludes. Later on, before killing Michael, Albert comments on his age: "Disgusting to be that old and to be her lover." His henchman observes that Michael is the same age as Albert. "The same age as me – 40, almost," Albert says – obviously lying about his age. He also disapproves of Georgina talking about her gynecologist. To tease Albert, Georgina makes up the following facts about the gynecologist: "It's a man. He's Jewish. And he's from Ethiopia. His mother is a Roman Catholic, he's been in prison in South Africa, he's as black as the ace of spades and he probably drinks his own pee."

When infuriated and raging, Albert appears truly demonic. When he finds out that his wife has a lover, he starts storming around furiously, looking for them in the kitchen, ravaging everything, throwing things around. With a knife and a fork in hand, a table napkin hanging from his collar, his face distorted in

the kitchen's green light, he roars: "I'll bloody find them and I'll bloody kill him! And I'll bloody eat him!" Albert's position as the evil host of a continuous banquet – and the cannibalistic threat he pronounces – assimilates him with the Devil itself. In medieval presentations of the underworld, devils are sometimes pictured as devouring sinners (Bakhtin 1984, 390). With his mad, greenish face and Angry Birds eyebrows, Albert even bears some iconic resemblance to the fierce, gluttonous Devil.

With all the evil in the world stuffed into Albert's character, he becomes a caricatural emblem of the evil oppressor. Through his grotesque character, oppression is brought closer to the body, concretized and personalized. The character's hyperbolic atrocity stresses his conceptual, symbolic nature, revealing the anatomy of monstrosity. Noticeably, Albert is also characterized as ridiculous – which assimilates him with a carnival monster. According to Bakhtin (ibid., 212-213), in medieval folk humor, the mighty representatives of old authority and truth are depicted as hypocrite pretenders. "They continue to talk with the majestic tone of kings and heralds announcing eternal truths, unaware that time has turned their speeches into ridicule." In carnivalesque imagery, the old authority becomes the uncrowned king that is ridiculed and turned into a comic monster, torn into pieces by the crowd.

Psychoanalytically, Albert's mind is marked by a total confusion between sexuality, excrement and violence. For him, these elements are also associated with food and eating, suggesting coalescence between the oral and the anal. According to Freud (1991, 141), the confusion between the sexual and the excremental represents an old, infantile way of conceiving sexuality. The connection between sexuality and violence is also of an archaic nature. As Freud (2005) notes, within infantile pregenital sexuality, there are two currents: the oral, 'cannibalistic' sexual organization, and the sadistic-anal organization. In the oral current, sexual activity has not yet been differentiated from the nutritional instinct. In Albert's character, infantile instinctual confusions take up grotesque dimensions, constituting an ingredient of his monstrosity.

Albert's character may also be enlightened through Julia Kristeva's (1984, 24-29) theory of the symbolic and the semiotic. For Kristeva, the symbolic refers to the formal linguistic structure, to syntax, linguistic categories, and the entire symbolic law organizing social relations. The semiotic refers to the pre-symbolic primary processes, related to the maternal body, drives and rhythm. The two modalities are inseparable and together constitute the signifying process. In the film, with his never-ending speech, Albert represents the symbolic in its most violent and tyrannical form, with

a repression of the semiotic that, however, bursts out through his grotesque deeds, in the form of semiotic body horror. Paradoxically, Albert himself becomes the grotesque monster that threatens the stability of the Symbolic order. As Barbara Creed (2005, xvii) notes, the male monster signifies the ruin of the male Symbolic order, destroying the symbolic economy from within.

As Albert's character attests, the symbolic is ultimately constructed on the repressed. Albert's exaggerated Madonna-whore complex is reminiscent of the repressed maternal, for him an abject threat. He also abhors gynecologists, and is repelled by the clean toilet, associated with maternal-feminine defilement. As Creed (ibid., vii, xv, xvii) argues, the horror of the male monster stems from his alignment with the uncanny realm of the feminine, the animal and death. With his abject deeds and abhorrence of the feminine, Albert expresses the repressed desire to become the other.

THE WIFE, THE LOVER AND THE COOK

The film's female protagonist, Georgina the 'wife,' is a woman in her forties, always dressed in elegant, ultra-feminine red or black dresses. Unlike the brute husband, she is emphatic and cultivated. Her role is to be the main victim of the husband, living in fear, and seemingly suffering to see the husband maltreat other people. She however practices subtle resistance: disobeys the husband and brings attention to his ignorance, for example by correcting his French pronunciation.

Within the ancient fairytale structure, Georgina would be the damsel in distress, a modern version of the innocent maiden. She lives with a monster, and is rescued by Prince Charming. In the end, she rises up to defy her oppressor, becoming a brave but cruel female avenger.

Michael, the 'lover,' is a regular customer in the restaurant, always silently reading a book. Michael's advent rocks Georgina's oppressed existence and Albert's oppressive reign. As in fairytale, Michael comes to Georgina's rescue, as if liberating the maiden from an evil spell.

With his ordinary looks and modest behavior, Michael is coded into the prototype of an 'ordinary,' decent middle-aged man. At first sight, he seems shy and reserved, not heroic, nor flirtatious. In his brown jacket, Michael is an outsider in the restaurant's red-and-black milieu.

Michael is the absolute opposite of Albert: silent and gentle, cultivated and erudite – which is underlined by the paradigmatic choice of his profession, a book store owner. He is especially interested

in history, in particular the French Revolution. In their polarity, Michael and Albert form a carnivalesque pair of characters – and in the end, even a grotesque double body.

Georgina soon notices the silent man, and they start to give looks at each other, seemingly attracted. After their first encounter in the toilet, Georgina and Michael begin to have little escapades, first in the toilet, and later on in the kitchen, where they have sex – passionately, tenderly, and in absolute silence. Even though the relationship is a love affair between middle-aged persons, the couple is actually shown as having sex, their naked bodies exposed. In a carnivalesque spirit, the relation represents a 'regenerative' view of sexuality. Naked, in the kitchen – in the middle of material bodily abundance – the couple is one with each other, with nature and the world.

With Georgina as the point-of-view character, the relationship also represents female fantasy. For Georgina, Michael represents above all silent mutual understanding, an ideally fulfilling relationship. Reflecting Kristeva's idea of the semiotic, the relationship is defined by silence, joy, touch and bodily communication, similar to the early mother-child relation. The symbolic is however included in Michael's character through his erudition – in the same way as the semiotic, in its horrifying guise, is included in Albert's character. In this manner, the two modalities necessarily mix with each other.

Besides the love triangle, a fourth major character is Richard, the 'cook,' an ally of Georgina and Michael. Hiding the lovers in the kitchen, the cook's narrative role is to be the helper, the good fairy. A curiously omniscient figure, the cook is also the artist engendering beauty and pleasure, a carnivalesque equivalent of the Almighty. Holding a prominent position in carnivalesque tradition, the cook represents the alliance between kitchen and battle, converging in the image of dismembered, minced flesh (Bakhtin 1984, 193-194).

In the film's fantasy world, Richard has an eminent, ubiquitous presence. After the lover's death, it is with him that Georgina has an intriguing philosophical discussion, wanting to know what the cook has seen about their relationship. She wonders how she can know that her relationship was real, unless someone else was watching. The cook tells Georgina what he has seen, having mysteriously witnessed their love affair in detail.

From a Lacanian perspective, *I is an other*, as the subject and the individual are not the same entity. It is thus Georgina's *I* that doubts her experience as an individual. For Lacan (2004, 35, 75) – following Freud's ideas – instead of truth, the question is about

doubt, indicating that there is resistance, something to be preserved. Moreover, the gaze of the all-seeing world makes us beings that are looked at. In Sean Homer's words: "To exist one has to be recognized by an-other. But this means that our image, which is equal to ourselves, is mediated by the gaze of the other. The other, then, becomes the guarantor of ourselves." (Homer 2005, 26, 45, 71.) Without the certainty of self-consciousness, Georgina seeks an answer in the Other, personified by the cook in his transcendental, intersubjective aspect.

Curiously, the syntagm of the four titular characters bears also religious connotations. While Albert 'the thief' appears as the Devil, terrorizing the world through evil and condemned at the Last Judgment, Richard 'the cook' echoes God, the omnipresent supreme being and creator of the universe. Like the long-awaited Messiah, Michael 'the lover' recollects Jesus, bringing salvation to Georgina, but eventually sacrificed for love. As a 'promiscuous' saved woman, Georgina is reminiscent of Mary Magdalene: first possessed by the Devil, but then redeemed, eventually witnessing Jesus' resurrection.

SETTING

The film's principal setting is the restaurant: the dining room, the kitchen and the toilet. Some scenes take place in the parking lot outside the restaurant. Combining realism and fantasy, the restaurant milieu is marked by fabulous and surreal features, such as the immensely high ceiling and the emphatically red and green color palette. In fact, the three main spaces, with their emblematic colors, form a peculiar cosmic hierarchy, reflecting the medieval three-level structure of earth, heaven and hell (Bakhtin 1984, 348). 33

The first space, the luxurious dining room is excessively red, including the décor, lighting and the waiters' costumes. Even the customers' clothes are mainly red and black. The tables abound with sumptuous food and magnificent meals. The dining room is the realm of Albert, the demonic lord of the underworld, a place where he mostly spends his time. Albert's table group consists of "small-time crooks and pimps, gigolos, busted boxers, cheap whores, bullies, hairdressers, faggots," as explained to a newcomer. The place also hosts decadent cabaret shows. With Albert's escalating fury, the room's lighting becomes increasingly red and dim. The space evokes the carnivalesque underworld, with its ongoing banquet, reflecting the alliance between food, death and hell (Bakhtin 1984, 301).

The second space, the toilet, is an emblematically

33 For an overview of the film's carnivalesque features, see also Huunan-Seppälä 2010, 146-149.

white, serene and clean place, a momentary refuge for Georgina. Ambiguously, it is reminiscent of paradise, but is also linked to the lower body and excrement. It is the place where the wife and the lover first meet to have sex. Symptomatically, the demonic husband abhors the place, finding it dirty.

The third space, the immense kitchen with conspicuously green lighting, is a thoroughly carnivalesque earthy place. Representing material bodily abundance, it is full of stoves, steaming kettles, groceries, animal carcasses, birds and giant seashells. Within carnivalesque imagery, kitchen, food, hearth and kitchen utensils have a universal, utopian and even cosmic meaning. With its hyperbolic foodstuffs and serene atmosphere, the kitchen represents paradise on earth: material wealth and peace, the golden age of Saturn. (Ibid., 184-185, 399.) A metonym for the natural world, the kitchen provides a paradisiac hideout for the wife and the lover, naked like Adam and Eve in the middle of nature's goods and treats. The kitchen boy sings with a soprano voice, enhancing the sublime atmosphere. A place of artistic culinary creation, the kitchen is the realm of the cook.

A fourth space is the parking lot outside the restaurant, lit with blue light. Like in the dark blue cosmos, in the parking lot it is always night.

As regards the emblematic colors, the film presents a mysterious peculiarity: when people move from one space to another, some of their garments change color. In the dining room the garments become red, in the kitchen green, in the toilet white, and in the parking lot blue. For example Georgina's dress is first red in the dining room, but when she goes to the toilet it becomes white, and again red when she returns. The peculiarity stresses the spaces' symbolic value, and provides an example of original carnivalesque visuality.

The film's setting also reflects the tradition of Menippean satire. 34 Characterized by sharp contrasts and carnivalesque *mésalliances*, the film combines high and low, artistic beauty and repellent brutality, the sublime and the grotesque. The fantastic element is present through the carnivalesque setting and the mysteriously changing colors, combined with 'slum naturalism': the criminal underworld, inappropriate speech and scandalous events. Ultimate philosophical questions are explored at the material bodily level. Valuing sensuousness, the film appeals to all the senses. The comic element, characteristic of Menippean satire, is present in the form of extremely black humor.

FOOD

In the film, a prominent role is given to food, eating and cooking. The characters' life is organized around eating, the film's scenes intertwine with the courses, and the daily changing menu of specialties marks the passing of time.

The hyperbolic, sumptuous presentation of food foregrounds the cultural importance of food, its concrete and symbolic value. According to Bakhtin (1984, 281), eating and drinking are among the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. In the act of eating, the body concretely transgresses its own limits, interacts with the world. One of the most ancient objects of human imagery is the open, biting and swallowing mouth that devours the world, and grows at its expense. Eating means man's encounter with the world, an encounter that is joyful and triumphant, celebrating the victory of life over death.

Besides life, eating is related to death, with its connotations of 'being swallowed' or 'eaten up.' Earth and the womb swallow, and hell resembles a banquet. (Ibid., 21, 301, 386.) In the film, eating connects with death, killing and cannibalism. As the cook notes, eating black food is like consuming death, like saying, "Death, I'm eating you."

The carnivalesque aspect of food is expressed through the hyperbolic kitchen and food imagery. However, as observed by Bakhtin (ibid., 283, 302, 388), a carnival banquet is a feast for all the world, a joyous event and an occasion for the merry truth. By contrast, in the film, the ongoing banquet is an image of private eating, a stiff elitist event dominated by the brute husband, spreading an atmosphere of fear. In his mouth, degradation turns into humiliation and the merry truth into sad lies.

Moreover, constant eating expresses a hedonistic search for pleasure, similar to sexuality. This is highlighted through Georgina's and Michael's love affair. Their amorous encounters take place between the courses, and even their love-making is associated with cooking through cinematographic crosscutting. However, most of the time, culinary pleasure remains out of reach, attested by images expressing indifference to food, or even displeasure. In the film's world, besides nourishment, food is also a measure of sophistication.

Food is also related to filth and excrement. Within carnivalesque logic, excrement is the upside-down image of food, the final stage of food's metamorphosis on its way through the human body. The act of defecation is the reverse image of the act of eating, concretely surpassing the limit between the body's insides and the outer world.

As a major turning point in the film, Albert finds out about the love affair between Georgina and Michael. The maiden and Prince Charming don't live happily ever after, as the monster violently kills the prince.

VIOLENCE

The film is full of grotesque violence that stems from Albert's monstrosity and the oppressive dynamics. Under his vicious influence, food, excrement and sexuality all revert to violence. The sadistic oppressor makes a man eat excrement, kills the lover by making him eat book pages, rapes the wife and stuffs objects into her vagina. Such extreme acts violently transgress the victims' body limits. The grotesque takes the form of horrible, purely destructive violence.

Albert's sexual activity represents a sadistic enactment of oppressive power relations. In the film, ambiguously, the image of sexuality is dual. On the one hand there is grotesque sexual violence, performed by Albert, and on the other, carnivalesque regenerative sexuality, emerging from Georgina's and Michael's relationship.

Oppression, as depicted through Albert, can be seen as representative of all oppression in any reign of terror or tyranny. Revealingly, Albert mentions historical rulers such as Napoleon, Churchill, Caesar, Hitler and Mussolini, claiming that they were all keen on seafood like himself. In this way, a parallel is drawn between Albert and the great oppressors of Western history. Oppression also corresponds to what Slavoj Žižek (2008, 9) calls 'objective violence,' that is, "the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence."

In the film, objective violence takes the form of fear, submission and obedience *vis-à-vis* Albert's rule. It also intertwines with 'subjective violence,' the most visible form of violence enacted by evil individuals or repressive apparatuses (ibid., 10-11). The violent effects of oppression are present in such scenes as Georgina's and Michael's escape, and Michael's killing. Georgina and Michael become 'refugees,' trying to escape the infuriated husband and his oppressive reign. Entailing a grotesque dissolution of body limits, they are transported in a van full of decayed animal carcasses and body parts. The smell is truly nauseating as they enter the vehicle. A pig's head hangs in the middle, and worms squirm over a rotten piece of meat. In the tightly packed van, their naked bodies intertwine with the abject, putrid carcasses.

Finally, Michael is tortured to death. In Albert's command, a gang member, Mitchel, tortures Michael by stabbing him, and by stuffing his mouth with book pages until he chokes. When Georgina finds him, Michael is a horrifyingly grotesque sight, almost buried under a pile of books, his body covered in blood, his mouth full of book pages. Georgina takes them off, and finds a page of Michael's favorite book, *The French Revolution*. In this way, Michael appears as a symbolic victim of resistance to oppression, concretized in his grotesque treatment. In a carnivalesque spirit, Georgina treats Michael's dead body as a living person: talks to him, sleeps next to him, kisses him.

CANNIBALISM

As the final resolution of the film, Georgina asks Richard to cook the lover's dead body. In a Rabelaisian 'anatomical enumeration,' Georgina wonders which body parts would taste best: the heart, the liver, the buttocks or the testicles. The cook first refuses, thinking that Georgina wants to eat the lover out of love, but finally accepts, learning that it is Albert who will be forced to eat the lover.

THE FILM ENDS

In the final cannibalistic scene, Michael's cooked body is solemnly brought to the dining room, as in a funeral procession. As Georgina pulls the covering cloth off, the body is revealed in its entirety, with a brown shiny crust, lying on a bed of vegetables. The body seems intact: the face is still recognizable, and even the penis is in its place. Pointing a gun at Albert, Georgina commands him to eat, saying, "Try the cock, Albert. It's a delicacy. And you know where it's been." Albert, terrified, vomits but then eats a piece of the body. Calling him a cannibal, Georgina shoots him.

The grotesque image of a hyperbolic sumptuous human meal overturns the codes of the abject and of delicious food. In carnivalesque manner, the scene intertwines food, human flesh and a corpse; death, sexuality and violence. The husband's and the lover's bodies are literally united through eating, through the breakdown of body limits, constituting a grotesque double body. The wife's comment about the 'cock' also makes her body an imaginary part of the monstrous bodily conglomeration. In this union, the two men represent the dying part, and the woman the surviving part. In the popular comic tradition, woman is seen as the bodily grave of man, simultaneously degrading and regenerating. Representing conception and renewal, she dooms all that is old and finished to death. (Bakhtin 1984, 240.) In the film, the woman

becomes the grave of both the husband and the lover, the former enclosed in her hatred, the latter in her love.

Albert, the feared monster, is turned into a carnival monster, degraded and defeated – like in carnival hell, where the highest are uncrowned, and the lowest are crowned (ibid., 383). The ultimate revenge also seems an instance of 'divine violence' – as if God himself was brutally intervening and delivering justice. Through divine intervention, "the wrongs are registered, the tension grows more and more unbearable, till divine violence explodes in a retaliatory destructive rage." In this domain, killing is neither a personal pathology, nor a crime, nor a sacrifice. Divine violence is "just the sign of the injustice of the world, of the world being ethically 'out of joint.' It is a sign of God's (the big Other's) own impotence." (Žižek 2008, 178-179, 198-201.)

As a fulfillment of cosmic justice, the sadistic glutton is forced to devour the utmost in abjection, a corpse. According to Freud (1919, 136), cannibalism is associated with the primitive idea of acquiring the power and qualities of the person whose body is eaten. By forcing Albert to eat Michael's body, Georgina makes the husband acquire qualities from the lover. Symbolically, tyranny is turned into empathy, and brutality into erudition.

Through the final scene, Michael becomes an abject grotesque body. At the same time, ambiguously, he becomes a sublime piece of art, created by the supreme chef. As for Georgina, she becomes the fearless female avenger, and an instrument of divine justice. In her dress made of black threads, with black feathers attached to the collar, she is reminiscent of a spider, ready to attack the prey. Managing to kill the monster, the oppressed wife is turned into a victorious heroine. Despite all the abject horror, the film's ending is marked by a solemn carnivalesque atmosphere, a sense of victory over fear.

DUALITY AND CONTRAST

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover is built on striking duality and contrast, characteristic of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. In the film, artistic beauty and sophistication combine with sadistic brutality and disgust. Food is compared to excrement, and Eros meets Thanatos, as sex and love are juxtaposed with destruction and death. Carnivalesque abundance is contrasted with grotesque violence.

In the film's composition, the high is reflected in the luxurious surroundings, the sumptuous meals, the haute couture clothes – with a decadent cabaret-style twist – and the pompously dramatic

classical music. Ambiguously, the cabaret or brothel-style clothing is also a signifier of decadence and 'low' morality. Similarly, with the décor, the line between luxury and trash is vacillating, entailing luxurious trashiness or trashy luxury, with connotations of brothels or parvenu lodgings. Altogether, the carnivalesque extravagant visuality is combined with an ominous ambience, and the sophisticated air constitutes a striking background for vulgarity. Duality is further supported by the conspicuous presence of red and green, a contrasting pair of colors.

Moreover, the brutal, oppressive husband and the kind, erudite lover form a carnivalesque pair. Through these characters, rage and fear are opposed to pleasure and serenity. With the husband, the wife is in hell, with the lover, in paradise. In their relation, everything is counterbalanced by its opposite: noise by silence, hatred by love, pain by enjoyment. In a carnivalesque manner, the top and the bottom of the world are both strikingly present.

Ultimately, the film's duality stems from grotesque metamorphosis, the continuous transformation between the dying and the procreating. A culinary metaphor for metamorphosis is caviar that – as the cook ponders – signifies both death and birth, the end and the beginning. In its dazzling duality, the film is all about extremes, of upsides and downsides, upside downs and inside outs. A culmination of carnivalesque logic, the final scene transforms fear into its opposite, laughter. The mighty oppressor is turned into a dethroned king; a humiliated cuckold and a despicable cannibal. His grotesque ending signifies degradation, renewal through destruction.

Finally, the film's combination of enjoyment and agony expresses *jouissance*, located between ultimate pleasure and pain, between aversion and allure. The duality opens up a place for *jouissance* to emerge, issued from the Real. In the film, *jouissance*, as well as the wife's pleasure, is conditioned by grotesque cruelty, necessitating both the husband and the lover.

THE ROLE OF THE GROTESQUE

In *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, the grotesque concretizes the abstract and sometimes distant idea of oppression. Through Albert, the grotesque makes visible concealed ideological features, like sexism and structural violence. Personified by his monstrous character, social prejudices and racism are represented as ridiculous, as grotesquely 'other.' Through Albert's violent deeds, the grotesque enhances the ability to relate to other humans' suffering.

Albert's grotesque character materializes the monstrosity and evil that resides within humanity. Through the presentation of a grotesque dystopia, the film advocates resistance. The depicted horrors show the necessity of defiance toward oppressive structures and authorities, thereby promoting social justice.

The grotesque can thus support or question a value system and influence people's valuations. It may eventually bring about social change, promoting certain values, and contributing to the creation of new social structures. On the other hand, in the film, the grotesque also glorifies an extremely violent payback. The grotesque can sensitize people in one way or another.

Moreover, the grotesque communicates the repressed in an aestheticized form. In the film, the grotesque embodies forbidden desire: repressed aggression, sadism and revengeful feelings. In this way, the grotesque functions as an outlet for the accumulated psychic energy.

Grotesque transgression, carnivalesque overabundance and abject fantasy ultimately point to desire, and to *jouissance*. The grotesque materializes the idea of fulfillment, of the satisfaction of the insatiable desire.

Finally, also in this film, the grotesque shows humans their place in the world. Assimilated with food and excrement, humans appear as part of the world, not above it. Through grotesque bodily transgression, people are connected to the world, made of the same flesh.





The current chapter focuses firstly on norms and repressions, as conveyed through the grotesque in the seven films; secondly on the films' main ideological import in relation to the grotesque; and thirdly on the grotesque in representation, drawing on the previous analysis.

THE GROTESQUE, NORMS AND REPRESSIONS



Cultural norms and repressions are here approached through the core notions of taboo, ideal, fantasy and fear. The four categories may also overlap. For instance, in *Alien: Resurrection*, the theme of monstrous female reproduction contains elements that are simultaneously taboo-like, anti-ideal, fantastic and fearsome.

TABOOS

Pink Flamingos is a collection of ultimate taboos. The character of Divine evokes firstly the taboo of ambiguous sexuality, referring to transgender and nonbinary sexuality. In the film, however, 'aberrant' sexuality is represented as totally 'normal.' Marked by highly exaggerated features and striking contrasts, Divine's sexuality reaches grotesque proportions, which makes gender structures visible. The grotesque elements also legitimize Divine's non-normative sexuality by making it affirmative, aesthetically fascinating and compelling for the viewer.

The taboo of female genitals is present through the close-up image of the vagina, as part of the 'insemination scene.' In various exposure scenes, the film presents a whole gender paradigm, as not only female and male but also transgender genitals are exposed.

In *Pink Flamingos*, all the sex scenes are full of taboo elements. The first sex scene presents the taboo of sex with animals involved, the taboo of voyeuristic sex, the taboo of sexual violence and the taboo of harming and killing an animal. The second one evokes the taboo of fetishistic sex, and the third one the taboo of exhibitionism and sexual harassment. The embedded grotesque elements highlight the ludicrous side of sexuality. The grotesque might relativize the threat, and perhaps even attenuate some taboos, because it presents them in a comic light.

The biggest sex-related taboo is obviously incest. Flagrantly breaking this taboo, the incestuous oral sex scene horrifyingly transgresses prohibited cultural boundaries, presenting a grotesque travesty of the primary relationship. The film also erotizes body fluids in a taboo-like manner.

Yet another taboo is scatophagy. The grotesque aspect makes the incident appear strangely liberating, because it joyously counteracts the habitual efforts to keep bodily wastes at a distance. The taboo of cannibalism is also presented in a carnivalesque manner. Grotesque exaggeration highlights the act's symbolic meaning, distancing it, and thereby enabling the viewer to enjoy this primitive mode of violence.

Similarly, in the castration scene, the grotesque emphasizes the act's symbolic aspect, enhancing the satisfaction of justified revenge. Some taboos are also harnessed to make visible structural violence – represented by the Marbles' baby ring and drug business. Finally, the grotesque is used to debase religion and undermine its power. Religious blasphemy reaches tabooed dimensions, as fellatio is paralleled with the Holy Communion.

Like *Pink Flamingos*, *Antichrist* also pokes taboos conspicuously, even though there are fewer of them. In *Antichrist*, the taboos revolve around female sexuality that is out of control, violent and destructive, reduced to lust and individual enjoyment. Endowed with grotesque features, female sexuality is portrayed as abject, as other, and thereby separated from the masculine sphere. Like in *Pink Flamingos*, a clear taboo element is the exposure of female genitals. At the same time, the grotesque brings forth the question of female sexuality, which might eventually enlarge its sphere in representation.

The taboo-like presentation of female sexuality is accompanied by a taboo-like presentation of motherhood. It is the mother's orgasmic pleasure that is grotesquely contrasted to the child's death – presenting mother's sexuality as illegitimate, and yet questioning the myth of an asexual, altruistic mother. Yet another taboo is the association of sex and childhood, realized through the primal scene scenario and instigated by grotesque elements.

The depicted violence also contains taboo elements, such as the grotesque act of clitoridectomy and the graphically displayed castrative attack on the man – yet not fully executed like in *Pink Flamingos*.

In Alien: Resurrection, all the taboos emerge from sexuality and reproduction. The taboos are mostly present at the connotative level, rather than the denotative. Through a transfer of signification, female sexuality is assimilated with monstrous female reproduction, concretized in Alien's visceral reproductive practices. The bodily relation with the mother is also represented as abject through the characters' encounters with the Alien maternal organism. Moreover, the protagonist's corrosive blood is reminiscent of the taboo of menstrual blood, signaling the feminine threat. The aged female body is present through the Newborn's hanging breasts, signifying monstrosity. In this way, the grotesque intensifies the taboo association between the female body and monstrosity.

In a taboo-like manner, birth is represented as an extremely grotesque event. A birthing woman is assimilated with the Alien Queen, an abominable insect-like creature. The representation of a birthing man brings the event out of the feminine sphere, stressing the horror of the act. The grotesque strengthens the taboos

related to the female reproductive body, because it represents female reproduction in such horrifying terms.

Moreover, Alien: Resurrection presents a taboo association between male sexuality and monstrosity. The Alien newborns, when emerging from the host body, have the grotesque appearance of a toothed penis. The fully developed Alien's morphology also presents equivocal allusions to male sexuality, from its phallic head to its penis-like tongue. By representing male sexuality as threatening, as other, the grotesque makes visible hidden fears, relativizing the feminine sexual threat.

Finally, the taboo of human cloning is approached through Ripley and the other clones. The horror of this taboo is enhanced by the clones' grotesque deformity and condition.

The taboos in *Fight Club* relate to death, bodily wastes and female sexuality. Through the grotesque and the carnivalesque, the taboo of death is broken with flying colors. Illness, suicide, dying people and car accident victims are all carnivalized, turned into a source of black humor. In this way, death is disdained and ridiculed. The grotesque also brings forth the appealing side of death. For a fleeting moment, death is made less of a taboo.

Female sexuality is presented in a taboo-like manner through Marla. With her uninhibited sexuality and bodily negligence, Marla reveals the dominant ideology's ultimate hypocrisy – as only seemingly tolerant, but in reality judgmental of 'promiscuous' female sexuality. With her taboo-like behavior, Chloe, the dying woman, also shatters the myth of asexual ill people, and the myth of a nobly spiritual dying person, as if without bodily urges. The taboo association of sexuality and children is evoked through Tyler's work as a porno-propagating projectionist.

Moreover, Tyler's professional occupations break taboos related to filth and bodily wastes. Tyler urinates and ejaculates into food and manufactures soap out of humans. In restaurants, people then eat human bodily emissions, grotesquely transgressing bodily limits. Through such activities, the human body is reduced to an ingredient, and to filth.

Unlike the other films, *Kill Bill* is actually devoid of clear taboos – if considering that grotesque violence and killing is a commonplace feature of film. On the other hand, graphic depictions of bodily mutilation, sadistic violence and pleasurable killing can have a taboo-like effect on the viewer.

The necrophilic rape of a coma patient would definitely be a taboo, but it is not actualized. The transgression is however present in the failed attempt, and in the text, the character narrating his past rapings. The initial massacre also verges on blasphemy: the victim is a pregnant woman, the killer is the unborn child's father, and the massacre takes place in a church.

In Satyricon, taboos are conspicuously present, and mostly relate to sexuality – considering that sexual orientations outside heterosexuality are still a taboo matter for many people. In the film, the taboo aspect of homosexuality is expressed through the mock wedding based on unilateral lust, reminiscent of sexual abuse. The grotesque characteristics of the glass-eyed, lecherous Lichas underline the illicit nature of the event. On the other hand, the carnivalesque nature of the wedding scene also relativizes the threat. Altogether, like in *Pink Flamingos*, in *Satyricon*'s fantasy world, homosexuality and bisexuality are depicted as something 'normal' – even as an ideal form of sexuality.

Another apparent taboo matter is sexual ambiguity. Gitone is feminized through his styling and his role as the *erômenos* within the Ancient Greek custom of pederasty. From a contemporary perspective, Gitone's young age assimilates his relations with adult men with pedophilia. However, the film treasures the grotesque idea of endless variety, as regards sexuality, too. Other taboo elements are Encolpio's and Arianna's attempt to have sex in public, and Encolpio's ensuing impotence. Represented as a public humiliation, impotence is ridiculed in a grotesque manner.

Like *Pink Flamingos*, *Satyricon* also presents the ultimate taboo of cannibalism. Eumolpo's wish to be eaten suggests a grotesque communion with other bodies and the world, reflecting the idea of living on in other bodies, of entering nature's cycles through the dissolution of individual bodily limits. Such grotesque connotations may show the cannibalistic act in a new light.

Finally, in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* as well, the most evident taboo is cannibalism, along with sadistic violence. Beside his cruel deeds, Albert's outrageously racist and misogynous comments should also be regarded as taboos – and yet they are not, because they are all too common in a more tempered form. However, it is grotesque exaggeration that makes the misogyny and racism visible, denaturalizing what has been falsely naturalized.

The cannibalistic scene obviously represents the ultimate taboo of cannibalism. The grotesque dimension – in particular the presentation of the body as intact on a bed of vegetables like a roasted pig with an apple in its mouth – only enhances the taboo, making it all the more horrifying. Within the scene, an additional taboo element is the focus on genitals: Georgina suggests that Albert eat the penis – horrifyingly still in place, only with a brown shiny crust. Following an upside-down logic, like in *Fight Club*, the human is grotesquely degraded into food – and yet elevated into a culinary piece of art.

IDEALS AND ANTI-IDEALS

Parodying norms and ideals, *Pink Flamingos* celebrates 'anti-ideals.' A conspicuous anti-ideal is the role of woman, as displayed through the protagonist, counteracting the ideal of a traditionally feminine, docile woman. Divine has made a grotesque spectacle of herself, while Edie is a grotesque travesty of the patriarchal ideal of a domiciliary woman. The grotesque elements thus deconstruct the myth of woman, confusing the ideal and the idiotic, the nonconformist and the heroic.

Through Edie and Divine, and the captive women, mother-hood is also represented in a grotesque light. Through the women held in captivity, reproduction appears as a means to exploit women. With such striking anti-ideals, the grotesque draws attention to the unquestioned ideals of reproduction and motherhood.

Family ideals are also shattered through grotesque parody. The marriage institution is denigrated with the Marbles – appearances hiding the hideous reality of corruption and perversion. Edie's engagement with the Egg Man is also a grotesque travesty of the dominant narratives of heterosexual coupling, marked by sexist roles and rituals.

As for *Antichrist*, it also presents anti-ideals. Most importantly, in an anti-ideal manner, the film pictures nature as repellent and threatening. In the film, the grotesque features denaturalize the idealized myth of nature, shattering the romantic illusion of beneficent, healing nature. The grotesque itself, fallaciously conceived as 'unnatural,' is revealed as 'natural,' an intrinsic part of nature.

The grotesque also contributes to an anti-ideal image of humanity, offering a new understanding of the unbridled forces of nature in humans. The grotesque thus shatters the ideal of inherently good and humane humanity.

Through the anti-ideal depiction of the protagonist woman, the grotesque sustains the myth of an insane hysteric woman. Simultaneously, the grotesque deconstructs the myth of a perfect, nurturing woman, in perfect control of herself. Like with the differently 'insane' female protagonist of *Pink Flamingos*, this might enhance the construction of alternative feminine identities outside the ideal model.

Moreover, in *Antichrist*, love doesn't save, and the loved one is merely used for a person's egoistic aspirations. Heterosexual 'regular' sex is represented as somehow wrong, marked by guilt and anxiety. With its grotesque features, the film is a grim depiction of the dissolution of the nuclear family, this idealized, mostly unquestioned societal unit – also undermined by *Pink Flamingos* and *Alien: Resurrection*.

As a dystopian film, *Alien: Resurrection* displays mostly anti-ideals and defies ideals. Most importantly, science is presented in a negative light, against the common ideal of beneficent science. Maleficent science takes the form of grotesque cloning and interspecies breeding experiments, and the ideal of individuality is compromised through clones and humanoid robots. The grotesque thus erodes the polished image of scientific progress. Moreover, like in *Antichrist*, in *Alien: Resurrection* nature – represented by the Alien beast – is pictured as cruel and repellent. It appears as fully dedicated to monstrous reproduction and the prospering of the species, to the detriment of other species. The grotesque thus brings forth the amoral, pernicious side of nature, dismantling its idealized image.

Defying the ideal role of woman, the transcategorical protagonist woman is represented as savage and lethal – in this sense resembling Divine and the *Antichrist* woman. On the other hand, Ripley is also the victorious and righteous heroine, a human ideal. Both Ripley and Call, the humanoid robot, are likable in their anti-ideal nonconformism and justified rebellion.

Like *Pink Flamingos* and *Antichrist*, *Alien: Resurrection* pictures motherhood in negative terms. Far from the ideal, motherhood is represented as a biological necessity for perpetuating the species. The mother is merely a 'host' that may die after fulfilling its procreative purpose. Even the mother–child relation is a matter of 'survival of the fittest': the Newborn kills its Alien mother, and Ripley kills her newborn Alien 'baby.' A mother against her will, Ripley is as far from an indulgent mother as the Newborn is from an endearing baby. On the other hand, motherhood is also displayed as strength, an insuperable advantage for Ripley in her battle against evil. The grotesque thus liberates motherhood from customary idealizations.

In *Alien: Resurrection*, the leading male characters are corrupt, selfish and weak – the antithesis of ideal masculine integrity and strength. The values of love and family are replaced by friendship and solidarity, constituting an alternative ideal.

Compared to the other films, *Fight Club* presents more clearly an interplay of ideals and anti-ideals. It also articulates the discordant relation between ideal and fantasy. In this way, Tyler's anarchistic, anti-consumerist activity represents a grotesque mockery of dominant middle-class ideals. Through carnivalesque action, the narrator's 'ideal' white-collar work is denigrated, represented as tedious and meaningless, which creates a contrast with his new 'anti-ideally' decadent lifestyle, represented as exciting and fulfilling. By denaturalizing and ridiculing the prevailing norms,

the grotesque breaks petrified illusions; turns ideals into anti-ideals, and vice versa.

As regards the male ideal, the film asserts that manhood – no longer conditioned by physical strength and survival – has been debilitated. Unlike the other films, *Fight Club* re-introduces the ideal of strong and 'glorious' masculinity, defined by muscles, freedom and a clear focus. The embodiment of this ideal is Tyler, in full command of his life. At the same time, Tyler's character goes against the ideal of material wealth, fancy career and sleek appearances. Through a grotesquely split identity, the film is able to express conflicting ideals.

With his perfectly muscular body, Tyler also embodies the impossible male ideal in his appearance. Incoherently, the character however preaches against gyms and 'self-improvement.' The fighting men's appearance is altered by 'anti-ideal' marks of violence, such as scars and missing teeth. As symptoms of frustration and rebellion, the grotesque marks create a sharp contrast with the depicted society, characterized by the ideal of unnaturally flawless bodies.

As for the female ideal, Marla is a nonconformist, even antiideal figure – like the female protagonists of *Pink Flamingos*, *Antichrist* and *Alien: Resurrection*. As if issuing from Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, Marla is decadent and impudent, and at the same time gloomily fascinating and lovable. It is Marla's grotesque features that make her a caricaturally imperfect human – more real than a plastic ideal. Here also, the grotesque enlarges the sphere of conceivable femininity, reveals the narrowness of prevailing ideals and offers an alternative model that emphasizes one's own desire.

Differing from the other films, Kill Bill introduces a fairly normative female ideal. The protagonist woman, even though a killer, is ultimately an emblem of the contemporary female ideal, if looking behind her criminal activity and violent odyssey. In her triple role, Beatrix embodies an apt career woman, a sexually desirable woman and a loving mother. Professionally, she is like a high-performance machine, determined and persevering – an ideal contemporary worker. She is also venturesome, considering the work's hazardous, 'out-of-the-box' nature. And yet she is instantly ready to give up her work for the sake of her child – like a sacrificing, protective mother. She is the 'Madonna,' the 'cool mom' and the 'hot mom' in one package. However, unlike Divine or the Antichrist woman, Beatrix is not a desiring woman, as her own sexual desire is framed out.

As opposed to Beatrix, the 'killer women' constitute a rather anti-ideal representation of woman. As beautiful, apt contract killers

devoid of empathy, the women – with their grotesque deeds – support the idea of woman as an alluring but dangerous creature.

The film also conveys an anti-ideal image of men. The 'bad men' appear as vile, coarse and cruel – like the evil men in *Alien:* Resurrection. The men are also clearly less attractive than the women. The men's grotesque manners and deeds sustain their exploitative nature.

In contrast to *Alien: Resurrection*, *Satyricon* embraces the ideal of procreation and fertility. This takes the form of 'sexually serviceable woman,' embodied by the prostitutes and Arianna, obediently playing the part allotted to her by the community. Should a woman refuse to be sexually available, as does Witch Enotea, she is punished, and forced into productivity. The fertility ideal is also visible in the lengthy quest for potency, a central theme in the film. Ascilto is an emblem of 'sexually performative man,' reminiscent of the ever-erect Priapus. Anti-ideally, Encolpio becomes impotent in a grotesque fertility ritual.

Regarding appearance, Encolpio and Ascilto, with their pretty faces and perfectly slender muscular bodies, represent the narrowly conceived male ideal. Ideal beauty is also embodied by a man, Gitone – taking the place of woman. An idealized object for the male protagonists, the docile and silent young boy is also elevated into an emblem of perfect love. However, anti-ideally, love is represented as a site of competition and deception, as an ephemeral moment of passion and joy.

In Satyricon, ideals and anti-ideals are also crystallized in mythological figures. The grotesque features of the Nymphomaniac, Witch Enotea and the old wizard clearly enhance their anti-ideal nature. With the Hermaphrodite and Mother Earth, the grotesque rather stresses their mysterious, awe-inspiring character.

Finally, *The Cook*, *the Thief*, *His Wife* & *Her Lover* presents both an ideal and an anti-ideal side of humanity through Albert's and Michael's characters. Albert is the despotic, sadistic and ignorant husband; an annoying braggart with grotesque features. By contrast, Michael is the empathic, loving and erudite lover; a silent good man who understands history and wants to live in peace. The carnivalesque contrast between the two characters stresses their symbolic, ideological nature.

Georgina conforms to the ideal role of woman as a docile, elegant and feminine figure, in this sense differing from the other films' female protagonists. However, through the brute husband, her role is turned into a grotesque travesty of a wife's role. Georgina and Albert's marriage is strikingly anti-ideal, corresponding to an unequal, sadistic power relation, while Georgina and

Michael's relation conveys the ideal of love. As a deviation from a common ideal, Georgina is older than the average romantically involved female protagonist in mainstream film – the same age as the male protagonists.

FANTASIES

In *Pink Flamingos*, the fantasies revolve around sexuality. As a transgender figure, Divine represents the fantasy of becoming a woman – and the fantasy of self-defined identity, built on grotesque extravagance.

In addition, Divine embodies a set of woman-related fantasies, including the phallic woman, the castrating woman and the woman that is not castrated, representing both sexual sameness and sexual difference in relation to man. Divine is a fantasmatic and fetishized monster woman. She also embodies the mother-related fantasies of the abject mother, the Oedipal mother and the cannibalistic mother. As for Edie, she represents an abject, cannibalistic and hatching mother.

In the film, the fantasy of instinctual freedom takes a prominent position. It is expressed through all the sexual and violent acts without limits and consequences. Unrestrained aggression takes the grotesque form of castration and cannibalism, performed in a carnivalesque atmosphere. At the same time, the sex scenes represent various sexual fantasies, related to voyeurism, exhibitionism, fetishism, and so on. Also the Oedipal fantasy is present through the incest scene – attesting how the actualization of a primal fantasy turns it into a grotesque nightmare. In fact, through their explicit *mise-en-scène*, the fantasies lose their fantasy nature: they become grotesquely hideous or comic.

The fantasy of the abject and of self-loathing is present both literally and metaphorically through all the manifestations of filth and excrement. It takes the form of infantile free play with one's body, its erotogenic parts and wastes. When carnivalized or grotesquely exaggerated, the abject bodily substances become empowering, paradoxically mitigating the fear of the abject.

Finally, *Pink Flamingos* conveys the fantasy of a world turned upside down. Imagining a place where anything is possible and everything is permitted, the film expresses the fantasy of a world without limits.

Antichrist is also a treasury of fantasies, with an emphasis on unconscious fantasy. Intertwined with fears, the fantasies are particularly gloomy. Among primal fantasies, the fantasy of the Freudian primal scene has an important role. The child witnesses

the parents' sex act, immediately followed by the fatal fall, which creates an indexical relation between the events. The grotesque juxtaposition of the two events invigorates the fantasy, makes it appear horrifyingly consequential. The primal scene of witnessed copulation is also present, in some form, in *Pink Flamingos* and *Satyricon*.

The primal fantasy of castration is intertwined with the fantasy of self-loathing and self-harm, expressing the woman's desire for the abject, and an experience of the uncontrollable.

The fantasy of symbiotic reunion with the (m)other is concretized through the grindstone episode and the compulsively repeated sex acts. The unconscious fantasy of the womb is present through all the animal nests. The womb is fantasized as a place of death, attested by the two unfortunate nestlings and the aborted deer fetus. The grotesque elements related to these deaths reflect the collective denial of the arbitrary arrival of death, threatening all life right from the beginning.

Altogether, the fantasy of death, and of afterlife, has a central role in the film. Death is personified by the mysterious *Three Beggars*, embodied as toy figurines in the world of objects, as stars in the cosmic sphere and as the deer, the fox and the crow in the animal world – together constituting a grotesquely cosmic, multiform Grim Reaper. The afterlife is present through the haunting images of grotesque bodies in the forest – not clearly dead or alive – lying on the ground, wandering or reaching their arms toward the living ones.

As regards power, the woman's grotesque metamorphosis weakens but also empowers her, expressing the fantasy of appropriating nature's powers, and of gaining evil powers by entering the 'dark side.' The woman's grotesque actions also express the fantasy of sadistic control over the other. All these power fantasies are constructed through the grotesque.

Like in *Pink Flamingos*, in *Antichrist* the fantasy of instinctual freedom takes a prominent position. The fantasy of unbridled sexuality and aggression means surrender to the temptation of brute bodily action instead of futile civilized talk. Materialized in grotesque actions, it entails utter disregard of consequences, reflecting the idea of *jouissance*. Communicating excess and surpassing of limits, the grotesque atrocities enfold morbid fantasies originating in the Real.

Within the range of fantasies concerning the feminine, the fantasy of the castrating woman reflects the pernicious allure of vampiric female sexuality. In the film, this fantasy coexists with the fantasy of the lacking, symbolically castrated woman, inferior to man. From the woman's point of view, the castrative attack

represents violent revenge toward the oppressive patriarchal system. An important fantasy is the woman's appropriation of feminine mysterious powers as in witchcraft, bringing forth the monstrous-feminine aspect.

Finally, the fantasy of madness is expressed through the woman's empowerment, supreme knowledge and freedom from strenuous self-control. Surrendering to her illness – and to the death drive – the woman is represented as painfully enjoying – or enjoyably suffering – her condition, conveying the idea of *jouis-sance*. The woman's madness and illness are enacted through her rebellious, grotesque body.

As a science fiction horror film, Alien: Resurrection also abounds in fantasies intertwined with fears. The fantasy of the primal scene, as related to the origin of the individual, is present through the four birth scenes. The first pictures the Alien Queen's birth out of Ripley's body, representing the fantasy of a perfectly controlled birth. The second suggests the fantasy of male pregnancy. Extremely brutal and gory, the scene emphasizes the violence of birth, the monster baby ravishing the maternal body from the inside. The third scene, the Alien Queen giving birth to the Newborn, focuses on the abject bodily nature of the birthing mother. The fourth scene depicts Ripley's own birth by cloning, representing the wish for eternal life and resurrection from death. The fantasy of the primal scene is also indirectly present through all the uterine imagery, 'hosts' and procreative practices. All in all, the grotesque scenes express profound wonder and fear in the face of the mysteries of conception, pregnancy and birth.

Compared to Antichrist, in Alien: Resurrection the fantasy of return to the womb is present even more strongly – starting with the dark and cavernous spaceship, and the hyperbolic hatchery. The hatchery is a visceral image of the monstrous womb, while the enigmatic Alien nest is a nightmarish but alluring uterine place, promising symbiotic closure and jouissance. Ripley's encounter with the clones also provides a fantasy-like return to the maternal body. The grotesque elements clearly enhance the horror of the womb, turning it into a place of disgusting otherness – yet with uncanny appeal. Moreover, the primal fantasy of castration is implicitly present through the Alien monster's teeth and all the dismemberments, including Ripley's act of tearing off an Alien tongue.

Ripley's character is a real conglomerate of fantasies: she is the superhero, the bestial woman and the monstrous mother all in one. With her Alien genes, Ripley represents the fantasy of an ontologically hybrid being, recurrent in myth and legend. Resurrected from death, and endowed with superhuman powers, she also embodies an insurmountable hero and an almighty savior. In fact, her grotesquely attuned character expresses the human desire for a supreme, otherworldly leader. Like the *Antichrist* woman, Ripley embodies the fantasy of appropriating the mysterious powers of nature and of the maternal-feminine, yet with a different outcome. As an emblem of outsider identity – with no respect for the established order – Ripley appears identifiable and admirable, turning her deficiency into strength. In her transcategorical constitution, Ripley embodies a universal sense of otherness and defectiveness, to be found in all humans. As an aberrant being, paradoxically, she is perfect.

The other female protagonist, Call, is also a hybrid figure, representing the (male) fantasy of a mechanical doll woman. However, instead of being docile and serviceable, Call is intractable and rebellious. As a humanoid robot, she conveys the fantasy of durable mechanical existence, contrasted with vulnerable human existence.

As for the Alien monster, it embodies the fantasy of an apocalyptic beast as an avatar of evil. With its sexually attuned morphology and procreative *raison d'être*, the Alien is a grotesque materialization of repressed sexual threat. In its hermaphrodite elements, it also echoes the fantasy of the phallic mother. The Newborn, along with Ripley, also reflects the age-old fantasy of illegitimate breeding between humans and animals or monsters.

The fantasy of instinctual freedom is expressed through unbridled aggression and monstrous reproduction. The fantasy of justified revenge, and of cosmic justice, gets its culmination in the grotesque payback executed by the Aliens, targeted at the corrupt system of institutional violence. In this sense, the Alien monster is reminiscent of the evil avenger of *Antichrist*, embodied by the woman and her 'inner demons.' The fantasy of filth and abject bodily substances is also strikingly present through the Alien monster. Its slimy, pulpy and toxic secretions, along with its gory, visceral reproductive practices, make it an epitome of abjection – expressing the forbidden desire for the abject. As regards instinctual freedom, the unrestrained aspect is aptly expressed through the grotesque, surpassing all limits.

Finally, the apocalyptic beast also embodies the fantasy of death, intertwined with the fantasy of the archaic mother. As a grotesque culmination, the Newborn's dismantlement into black, boundless outer space is a grotesque transition from being into nonbeing; a fantasy of final reunion with the cosmic whole.

As for *Fight Club*, it is organized around a set of fantasies crystallized in Tyler and the fighting activity. A central fantasy in the

film is that of a perfect self, embodied by Tyler. Expressing the fantasy of omnipotence, Tyler is an all-powerful figure, mastering even death. Reflecting the fantasy of infantile narcissism, he is an object of admiration, respected by men and desired by women.

Importantly, Tyler represents the fantasy of freedom – from both social constraints and self-regulation – in this sense reminiscent of Divine and the *Antichrist* woman. Tyler's exaggerated character and grotesque deeds point to the irreconcilable relation between reality and fantasy. The fantasy of instinctual freedom is also channeled through Tyler. Tyler fights fervently, has zealous sex and orchestrates frantic anarchistic action. Through the fighting activity, the fantasy of brute bodily action – replacing civilized talk – takes a prominent position. The hyperbolic grotesque elements mediate repressed rage and materialize the unconscious desires of the narrator.

The Fight Club movement conveys the fantasy of a return to a more primitive society, defined by a struggle for survival that gives life a clear focus. The alienated protagonist fantasizes about an era 'when men were men,' representing the idea of 'authentic masculinity.' Fight Club provides a fantasy scenario that enables men to connect to their masculinity, and to execute a higher purpose. With its grotesque, material bodily elements, Fight Club appears as something authentic, making 'civilized' life seem artificial.

Moreover, the men's fighting activity expresses both unrestrained aggression and masochistic pleasure, verging on *jouis-sance*. As a collective, nearly religious experience, the fighting represents an opportunity to rise above a petty life and meaningless existence. Presented in a grotesquely exaggerated, aestheticized form, fighting appears as something highly appealing and pleasurable, even ecstatic.

In the film, the notion of filth also plays a major role. Filth is involved in the activities of food contamination, soap manufacturing and film 'pornification.' Tyler's creative use of filth makes it a source of infantile pleasure – like in *Pink Flamingos*. Moreover, the narrator's bodily negligence and immersion in filth through his dwelling and lifestyle represent the fantasy of self-loathing. As a counterreaction to the contemporary demand for bodily control and regulation, the narrator's grotesque existence seems perversely attractive and exhilarating. Filth thus becomes a grotesque emblem of freedom, representing liberation from oppressive norms and polished ideals.

Finally, the fantasy of destruction is materialized through grotesque self-degradation and carnivalesque anarchy. At the fantasy level, for Tyler/the narrator, death symbolizes life, a rebirth from lethargy, numbness and alienation.

Kill Bill also abounds in fantasies. Besides being an ideal woman, Beatrix is a fantasy woman that encompasses several fantasies. As a superwoman, and an all-powerful warrior, she represents the age-old fantasy of omnipotence and superpowers, reminiscent of Ripley. This raises the character above regular humans, and naturalizes the idea of heroic femininity. With her sword and yellow motorcycle outfit, Beatrix even looks like a superhero, at the same time embodying the tempting but unattainable fetish woman.

As the avenging bride, Beatrix embodies the fantasy of the castrating woman, fiercely slashing and dismembering heaps of men with her sword. The fantasy of the killer woman stems from the myth of woman's hidden desire, of her ultimately rancorous and monstrous nature. In the other films, the female protagonists also act as avengers, including Divine, Ripley, the *Antichrist* woman and Georgina.

In Kill Bill, the fantasy of justified revenge has a prominent role. The bad men's grotesque deeds justify the upcoming feminine revenge on the male exploiters, sustaining the viewers' revengeful feelings – satisfied by the equally grotesque reprisals. Ultimately, the protagonist's revenge represents the fulfillment of cosmic justice, or 'God's will,' as claimed by Beatrix.

The fantasy of instinctual freedom is expressed through violence. Grotesquely hyperbolic, the Kill Bill violence reflects the fantasy of unbridled aggression, also containing sadistic and masochistic features, as depicting the pleasure involved. Fantasy-like violence is based on a grotesque aesthetics that highlights the actions' flamboyant, boundless and uncontained character. Moreover, the violence's ecstatic quality derives from the unholy union of aggression and sexuality, and from the grotesque merger of repulsion and fascination. With these elements, the film creates a fantasy space that enables an ecstatic experience of violence.

Finally, the fantasy of death is present through the idea of 'warrior death.' Death appears as the inevitable outcome of a fierce and just battle, a dignified end of a journey, calmly approved by the moribund – like Bill and O-Ren. Warrior death is hyperbolic and solemn, conveying the idea of a higher power determining the fate. In the film, death is also carnivalized: trivialized or profanated, represented as joyous and comic, like within the Rabelaisian group fight.

Satyricon could be characterized as one big fantasy that is both fascinating and alienating. In the film, the fantasy of instinctual

freedom is present through all the excesses and carnal pleasures – such as excessive eating in the orgy-like banquet – in this sense resembling *The Cook*, *the Thief*, *His Wife & Her Lover*. The fantasy of sexual liberty (for men) is displayed through the carnivalesque brothel imagery in its underworldly and heavenly versions. The fantasy of pederasty is present through Gitone, and Encolpio – the young and beautiful *erômenos* in his relation to Lichas, the old and ugly *erastês*. The carnivalesque atmosphere points to hedonistic pleasure as a way to embrace life in its precariousness.

Like in the other films, several fantasies relate to female sexuality. The fantasy of woman's insatiable sexual appetite is embodied by the Nymphomaniac, grotesquely excessive in her desire – reminiscent of the *Antichrist* woman. The fantasy of castrating female sexuality is originally embodied by Witch Enotea, incubating fire in her vagina. The fantasy of the archaic mother is present – here very concretely – through the character of Mother Earth. As a universal maternal figure, she represents the Oedipal fantasy of bodily reunion with the mother. The Freudian primal scene is grotesquely reflected in Arianna and Encolpio's attempt to copulate in public. Hyperbolically, in the place of the child witnessing an intimate act, there is a large audience observing a public performance.

The fantasies in *Satyricon* also relate to the afterlife. A metaphorical representation of the carnivalesque underworld, Trimalcione's banquet celebrates material bodily abundance. Another underworldly fantasy is the dim Subura brothel with its array of grotesque bodies, obscenities and aberrant pleasures. The fantasy of heaven, in its carnivalesque version, is conveyed through the Garden of delights. As a traditional male fantasy, the place is filled with serviceable women dedicated to pleasing men. The carnivalized afterlife appears full of pleasure.

The fantasy of death as a controllable event is expressed through Trimalcione's carnivalesque mock funeral. Staging his own death, Trimalcione executes the narcissistic desire to witness one's own death, celebrated through collective mourning, and also entailing a 'miraculous' resurrection.

In its duality, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* is marked by a disjuncture between fantasy and fear. Contrasted with the marital relation, Georgina's and Michael's love affair embodies the fantasy of impossible and thus perfect love. In the style of *Romeo and Juliet*, it is determined to end – in this way also evading a less perfect ever after. The love affair is also a reworking of the primal fantasy of seduction, depicting the birth and burgeoning of desire.

The fairytale-like idea of the damsel rescued by a prince stands for a fantasy of liberation from oppression, of the advent of the savior. It also corresponds to the battle between good and evil. In its final moments, the film also presents the fantasy of the female avenger, turning Georgina, for a moment, into a monstrous-feminine figure.

The fantasy of instinctual freedom is expressed mainly through Albert, functioning here as the main channel for unbridled aggression. Embodying infantile rage, he storms around furiously, throws things around and threatens to eat his enemy. He also uses feces and urine to soil his victim. In Albert's mind, the violent, the sexual, the excremental and the oral are monstrously confused. Through grotesque exaggeration, oppression is made sensible. With its prohibited, abject nature, Albert's unrestrained action also appears alluring, expressing 'pleasure in perversity.'

The release of instinctual freedom is coronated by the cannibalistic act. Expressing the fantasy of ultimate revenge, the act represents the law of retaliation, a response to violence by equal violence. The grotesque thus provides an appalling, but most satisfactory, payback. Because of Albert's monstrosity, the viewer is lured into enjoying the horrifying cannibalistic scene.

Altogether, the film is characterized by material bodily abundance, conveyed not only through hyperbolic food, but also through excessive brutality and filth. Through such abundance, the grotesque expresses the yearning for ultimate pleasure, for the lost wholeness of the Real. Abundance promises satisfaction of the insatiable desire.

Like in *Satyricon*, here also the fantasy of the afterlife is indirectly present through the three-level structure of earth, the underworld and paradise. Reminiscent of the Last Judgment, the sinner gets his just deserts, forced to eat a corpse and killed by his former victim. The fantasy of cosmic justice is thus materialized in the carnivalesque power reversal and the grotesque punishment.

FEARS

In the carnivalesque world of *Pink Flamingos*, nothing is really too frightening. However, some fantasies also embody fears. As regards castration, Divine and the captive women evoke the fear of the castrating woman. The fear of the woman that is not castrated is embodied by Divine and the transsexual woman in the park. Divine is also a cannibalistic and incorporating figure.

Beside the feminine threat, the threat of phallic power is also evoked. The terror of structural violence and patriarchal oppression – translated into women's exploitation and sexual violence – is embodied by the Marbles and Channing. However, these characters are carnivalized to a point where they merely seem ridiculous – representing defeated fear. Their grotesque features make the underlying cultural structure visible, highlighting its inherent injustice.

In *Antichrist*, the fears are related to losses. The woman loses her child, her mind, and her life. The grotesque mutilations express the fear of castration and bodily fragmentation. The fears of being buried alive and of being stuck to the ground revert to loss of control. Fears also result in the fear of fear, at the heart of anxiety. The grotesque elements take the horror to the next level, bringing the experience close to the body.

An important source of fear is evil. It is revealed as something that resides within humans, instead of being an external menace, like in *Alien: Resurrection*. Within the woman, evil takes the grotesque form of sadistic, destructive action. Through the woman, evil is associated with feminine otherness.

Paradoxically, *Antichrist* expresses a fearsome absence of higher power – whether God, Antichrist or cosmic justice. God is replaced by ruthless amoral nature, and people are left alone in their misery. The absence of an external figure, whether divine or diabolic, shatters the illusory sense of security emerging from embodiments of good and evil powers.

Finally, a major role is given to the fear of the unknown. The fear of nature, evil and the feminine, and the fear of death, absence and the void all revert to the unknown. The ultimate unknown within humans is the unconscious, translated into the fear of oneself and of the other. As the man finally discovers, the woman's biggest fear is 'herself.' The unconscious is the most dreadful thing, as it can neither be escaped nor attained. It will always remain beyond the reach of language and the Symbolic – not clearly inside or outside, but within the subject's relation to the outer world.

In Alien: Resurrection, the most salient fears relate to the threat of self-annihilation and loss of subjectivity, expressed through the grotesque. Monstrous female reproduction entails the threat of being engulfed by an abject maternal organism, of one's body being taken over. The Alien thus represents the primal fear of the breakdown of the boundaries between self and other.

The sexual threat conveyed by the Alien monster encompasses both the fear of incorporating female sexuality and the fear of striking male sexuality. Through its castrative and penetrative practices, the creature evokes the threat of castration, feminization and rape. Moreover, the lizardy Alien species, extremely far from humans, materializes the fear of otherness, of the unknown. The hybrid clones are reminiscent of the monstrous metamorphosis on which life is based; the mysterious origin of every mammal, either human or animal.

Finally, death is represented as annihilation and perdition, with no prospect of an afterlife. Through the Aliens as heralds of death, death is pictured as ruthless and arbitrary. However, the grotesque beasts also serve as an instrument of cosmic justice, as attested by the horrendous deaths of the evil men.

Like *Pink Flamingos*, *Fight Club* is also quite a fearless film. The only fears that are represented, from the protagonist's point of view, are emasculation and meaningless existence as a petty consumer. Compared to this 'horror,' falling teeth, cancer or car accidents are minor adversities – even though these obviously count as fears in real life. In the film, even death, represented in a grotesquely comic or macabre light, doesn't appear as an object of fear.

In the film's world, emasculation or feminization entails lethargy and submission. The fear is grotesquely symbolized by Bob, a former bodybuilder with testicular cancer and huge hanging breasts. The fear is also grotesquely concretized through the fear of castration, the threat of having one's testicles cut off.

In the end, the narrator shoots himself in the mouth to kill Tyler. The grotesque hole in his head becomes an ultimate limit between self and delirium; a sign of victory over fear.

Unlike the *Fight Club* violence, the *Kill Bill* violence points to several fears, including the fear of bodily fragmentation, loss of control over one's body and death. Certain elements express common phobias: the venomous black mamba corresponds to phidiophobia, Beatrix's burial evokes claustrophobia and taphophobia, and the hyperbolic display of blood points to hemophobia. All these fears are instigated by grotesque excesses and surpassings of bodily limits.

The violence also contains elements that indirectly represent threatening sexuality. The frequent grotesque dismemberments and stabbings appear as metaphors of castrating female sexuality and penetrating male sexuality. Both lead to the loss of phallic power, to symbolic castration and humiliation. Through the killer women and the bad men, fears are gendered.

In Satyricon, genderwise, the fears relate mainly to women and female sexuality, taking the form of grotesque female figures. Like Witch Enotea and the Nymphomaniac, the figures draw on mysterious feminine powers originating in woman's sexual otherness.

Related to the fear of women, the fear of loss of potency echoes the primal fantasy (and fear) of castration – a recurrent feature in the films. With their fascinating but ominous sexuality, the transcategorical female figures are all potentially castrating or debilitating for men.

In Satyricon, both the fortunate and unfortunate events are ultimately induced by fate, Rota Fortunae. A major target of fear is thus capricious fate – frightening in its random, blind nature; comparable to the gods, the sun, the universe. Encolpio's calamities, as well as the poet's sudden prosperity and death, are all inflicted by the Wheel of Fortune, with its ups and downs executing abrupt carnivalesque turnabouts. Ambiguously, within carnivalesque logic, the Wheel of Fortune is also strangely comforting: luck can always change.

Finally, in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, the main fears are embodied by Albert, a caricatural emblem of oppressive power, human monstrosity and evil. His reign of terror suggests the fear of torture and killing. The fear of loss is present through the lover's death.

In the film, a salient fear is the threat of sadistic penetration – a sign of threatening male sexuality – entailing violent surpassing of bodily limits. Fearsome male sexuality is also implicitly present in *Alien: Resurrection* and in *Kill Bill*. The grotesque enhances the sense of fear – but may also liberate from it.

THE GROTESQUE AND IDEOLOGY



In all the seven films, gender appears as a major ideological issue. Another important aspect is power, concretized through an oppressive power system. In *Pink Flamingos*, the oppressive system corresponds to bourgeois cultural hegemony. In *Antichrist*, the system amounts to human culture and the Symbolic, represented by the scientific worldview and religion, as opposed to the sphere of instincts and emotions emerging from the Real. The antagonistic system in *Alien: Resurrection* is exploitative power, represented by science and technology. In *Fight Club*, the system corresponds to contemporary consumerist culture, and in *Kill Bill* to 'the underworld.' In *Satyricon*, the system coincides with human culture born of human nature, and in *The Cook*, *the Thief*, *His Wife & Her Lover*, with oppressive rule.

Moreover, the films make some references to the social hierarchies of sexuality, age, ethnicity, class and disability. However, these categories are mostly out of focus or framed out. Besides gender, Pink Flamingos deliberately brings up questions of sexuality and class, opposing Divine's lower-class entourage and the bourgeoisie. The categories of age, ethnicity and ability are out of focus, if not counting Edie's mental condition. The main characters are all white and young or middle-aged. In Antichrist, too, as a given, the protagonists are white, middle-aged, middle-class and heterosexual. The category of ability is indirectly present through the woman's mental condition – strengthening the myth of mentally ill people as violent and dangerous. As for Alien: Resurrection, it brings forth questions of social class and race. As members of disvalued 'races,' the heroines represent second-class citizens, at odds with the corrupt power elite embodied by the leading male officers. Regarding disability, the most sympathetic male character in Alien: Resurrection – and one of the four survivors - is a paraplegic man in a wheelchair. His best friend is a black man, represented as loyal and heroic, sacrificing his life to save the others. Altogether, the film presents a positive bias toward marginalized social groups.

Focused on masculinity, *Fight Club* isn't interested in other forms of social difference – except for social class. In the film, all men are represented as equal within the Fight Club movement. Middle-class white-collar workers, such as the protagonist, are thus assimilated into the working class – represented as 'in the same boat.' All the workers are however implicitly opposed to the invisible ruling class, represented by 'faceless' corporations. As for *Kill Bill*, it takes some stances regarding ethnicity and age. The question of ethnicity is approached through Pai Mei's alleged racism. In an unusual manner, from a Western point of view,

racism is targeted at the 'white race.' Moreover, the white 'Caucasian' ethnicity is represented as one ethnicity among others. The protagonists are white, but there are also other ethnicities among the important characters. As regards age, old age is represented in a positive light through the aged Kung Fu Shifu. With his oriental wizard beard, he represents perfected skills and wisdom – beside a certain narrow-mindedness and stubbornness. At the same time, the female characters' youth, if compared to the men's age, reaffirms the female youth imperative and the invisibility of older women. With the considerable age disparity between Beatrix and Bill, the film reproduces the normality of young woman–old man relations. The question of class is also present at some level, as the depicted underworld is divided into a 'lower' class, consisting of employees and petty crooks, and a 'higher' class of criminal elite, represented by Bill, O-Ren and the yakuza.

Satyricon clearly addresses the question of sexuality, embracing the idea of sexual ambiguity and variety. Unlike most of the other films, Satyricon also displays aged people, various ethnicities and disabled bodies – that are thereby made visible. The protagonists are yet young, white, handsome, upper-class males – but not heterosexual. Finally, The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover refers to race and age by presenting Albert as ridiculously racist and ageist. Moreover, the leading female character's age defies the youth imperative. The question of social class is indirectly present through the implied class difference between Georgina and Albert, or between Michael and Albert. Based on his ignorance and lack of sophistication – combined with wealth – Albert represents the class of parvenus, associated with vulgarity. As a mighty restaurant owner, he also represents the power elite.

GENDER

Regarding gender, *Pink Flamingos* addresses a wide range of questions including the representation of woman, motherhood and reproduction, the female beauty ideal, female desire, and women's exploitation.

Through Divine, as the female protagonist, woman is represented as self-defined and nonconformist. Playing with various stereotypes, she however doesn't conform to any. In her grotesque presence, Divine constitutes an artificial (but genuine) woman-sign that exposes the naturalized female ideal – based on a careful removal of anything that is grotesque. Instead of concealing, Divine embraces the grotesque in herself. Through Divine's character, the film celebrates self-defined, ambiguous sexuality.

Divine's powerful position is contrasted to Edie's powerless role as a woman 'incarcerated' at home, constituting a parody of the 'proper' feminine role. Through Edie's grotesque regression, the assimilation of women with children is also pushed to the limit, made visible and denaturalized.

As regards appearance, Divine, in her robust body and trashy drag looks, is far from the prevailing beauty ideal. In her neo-baroque excess, she is however fascinating, having an unwavering confidence in her charm. As a proof of cultural norms' arbitrary nature, in diegesis, she is positioned as a 'notorious beauty.' Edie also deviates from the norm, while Cotton and Connie conform to the traditional beauty ideal.

Moreover, Divine is endowed with her own desire: a desire for 'filth.' Divine's desire is an expression of her grotesque self-creation, not imposed on her by the dominant ideology and its seducing narratives.

Finally, women's oppression and exploitation is concretized through the three captive women. In a grotesque setup, the women are literally deprived of their freedom, abused, raped, and left dying. Treated as 'baby-making machines,' the women are reduced to commodities with only use value. Through the exploited women, reproduction appears as a social compulsion that serves the capitalist ideology. At the same time, the film points to the imperative association of women with motherhood. Both Edie and Divine present features of the 'abject mother.'

Altogether, *Pink Flamingos* is all about women: Divine, her mother, her friend Cotton, her enemy Connie, and the captive women. Men are more auxiliary characters, and principally needed for sex, semen and eggs.

In *Antichrist*, too, an important starting point is that the focal character is a woman. In the film's ideological pattern, the woman and man constitute two gender-signs, a strong female/male opposition. This opposition is aligned with other binary oppositions, such as mind/body, reason/emotion, culture/nature, and life/death. In this way, the woman appears as the hysterical, murderous counterpart of the cold-blooded, life-preserving man. Man remains the prototype of a civilized, rational, moral human. However, the man's mind changes in the process, as indicated by his dreamlike visions.

Crucially, the woman is associated with the abominable, unfathomable nature, attested by her metamorphosis from a civilized human into a savage creature. Through the woman, the dreadful forces of female sexuality are let loose, and associated with the original sin – allegedly causing the child's death. With the

woman's sexual behavior, female desire is represented as insatiable, abysmal and monstrous.

Through the woman, the film reveals the concealed attitude that a woman cannot be at once a good mother and a sexual being. Due to her feminine excess and lack, the woman is a grotesque subject with abject sexuality. In fact, the grotesque stereotypes of female monstrosity, including 'the castrating woman,' 'the monstrous mother,' 'the nymphomaniac,' 'the female hysteric,' 'the possessed woman' and 'the witch,' all apply to the unnamed woman. In this way, woman represents illness, lust, evil and death.

However, in *Antichrist* the woman also gets to be the author's alter ego, the more complex and fascinating character – like in some others of Lars von Trier's films. The film no doubt reiterates misogynous ideas, but also cunningly plays with misogyny, shaking the foundations of gendered cultural categories. By spreading before the eyes all the misogyny in the world, and by grotesquely exaggerating it, the film also deconstructs myths and stereotypes.

Moreover, by abandoning culture, the woman rejects the paternal rules, refusing the traditional role of a nurturing woman, of a 'little wife.' Despite her overflowing sexuality, the woman is not sexually objectified, but presented as a subject that instrumentalizes the man for her pleasure. Beside the negative stereotypes, the film emphasizes the woman's active role, her aggression and open sexuality, nonconformity and rebellion.

Altogether, the film plays on the ambivalence of simultaneously being misogynistic and emancipatory. As if defying its own misogynous import, the film curiously values the feminine, the abominable and the unfathomable, as opposed to the orderly, bigoted masculinity.

In Alien: Resurrection, the ideological stance toward gender is also ambivalent. Through the film's two protagonist women, woman is represented as independent and self-sufficient, not sexually available to men. The rebellious heroine, Ripley, is a woman who doesn't submit to the position imposed on her by the men. The two women also represent female bonding, a feminine friendship that prevails over relations with men.

At the same time, in relation to the (male) norm, woman is represented as deficient: an impure being closer to nature, or to the world of objects. Conforming to the misogynistic myth of woman's duplicity, she is beautiful on the outside, but grotesque within – as attested by Call's mechanical insides or Ripley's corrosive alien blood. However, in the film, both women manage to turn their ontological 'deficiency' into an advantage. What the two women lack in humanness, they gain in humaneess. The film's

core ideological message could be: otherness is an asset, and what really counts is how humane one is.

If judged by the leading male characters, the representation of man is fairly negative. Verging on inner monstrosity, man is evil and exploitative or weak and fearful. In addition, the Alien creature's monstrosity is partly phallic, as a case of the 'monstrous-masculine,' intertwined with the 'monstrous-feminine.' In the end, the evil men are grotesquely punished, symbolically feminized and deprived of their phallic power.

Metaphorically, through the Alien monster, motherhood is represented in negative terms. Embodying reproduction in its monstrous-feminine guise, the Alien stands for the threat of the repressed maternal, represented as abject. The Alien appears as a grotesque materialization of the patriarchal unconscious, its unspoken fear and disgust of female sexuality, associated with the female reproductive body. The repressed returns with unprecedented force, striking back at the patriarchy.

Culture's ambivalent relation to the maternal body is also translated into fascination and yearning for the undifferentiated. This is visible in the fantasies of the loss of bodily limits between self and other, expressed through the phantasmagoric Alien nest, and the horrific male pregnancy. The repressed desire on which culture is based is made visible through the grotesque, presented in a hyperbolic, nightmarish form.

Differing from the other films, *Fight Club* explores gender above all through the theme of masculinity in crisis. Women are absent or in a minor role. With its all-male Fight Club, the film presents a uniquely masculine point of view, or more precisely a 'white middle-class heterosexual male' point of view. Admittedly, there should be more films about women, and more complex representations of women instead of stereotyped male fantasies. However, in *Fight Club* the masculine point of view seems a premeditated choice – instead of an unwitting, self-evident, sexist structure.

With its psychological depth and philosophical insight, the film manages to capture a significant human experience with universal importance. The film's male point of view is convincingly pictured as the voice of the oppressed, of the hoaxed middle-class 'losers' in existential agony despite their modern comforts.

At the same time, the film's representation of sexual difference is problematic, marked by the heteronormative ideal of male masculinity. In fact, the film suggests a return to an earlier, more restricted conception of masculinity. Representing the redemption of 'authentic masculinity,' Tyler, the ideal male, is pictured as physically strong, straightforward and self-confident.

The only significant female character, Marla, gets to represent the feminine. Holding a girlfriend position, she is endowed with clichéd feminine characteristics. Yet with her nonconformism, Marla deviates from the prevailing ideals imposed on women, constituting a potentially empowering representation of woman.

Misogynistically, the film suggests that the distress of modern man stems from the fact that his masculinity has been 'feminized' by civilization and contemporary society. Feminization is presented as a site of debilitation for man, depriving him of the ability to think and act independently – turning him into a sluggish slave of consumerist culture. On the other hand, in the end, through Tyler's fate, the masculine male ideal is also shattered, revealed as impossible and detrimental.

Altogether, the film's gendered ideology is presented in such an exaggerated, carnivalesque manner that it might actually work against sexism. It could expose the weak spots within the dominant ideology, indicating what is falsely naturalized within our culture.

Kill Bill's representation of gender also contains both progressive and regressive features. A clearly progressive element is that the protagonist is a woman assimilated with a great warrior and a superhero. As a brave, strong, intelligent and skillful figure, the protagonist is an empowering role model for women.

At the same time, the protagonist is a stereotyped male fantasy. She is the sexy but deadly *femme castratrice*, a monomaniac, unstoppable killing machine that makes use of her femininity to advance her cause. Together with the 'killer women,' the protagonist represents man's fascinating but deadly other. In addition, the warrior woman trope is directly based on the masculine model, constituting a reflected image of heroic, aggressive masculinity.

Beatrix's character is also problematic because of her perfection. As a perfectly apt career woman, a perfectly beautiful woman, and a perfect mother, Beatrix is a strongly idealized representation of woman, setting the standards too high. Celebrating a narrow beauty ideal, the protagonist's beauty is praised by several men, over and over again. Woman's value is thus made dependent on male judgment of a woman's appearance.

Moreover, even though the protagonist is coded into a savage warrior woman, the film's ending puts her right back into a 'proper' mothering role. The protagonist's emphatic characterization as a mother in the first place also reflects the imperative association of womanhood with motherhood. Altogether, in Beatrix's character, ideals coincide with fantasies: it is on the fantasies of patriarchy that the female ideals are based.

Regarding sexual difference, the film creates an opposition between women and men, based on the 'killer women' and the 'bad men.' Reproducing negative stereotypes, woman is represented as deceptive and lethal, while man appears vile and exploitative. With the help of the grotesque, masculinity is represented in far more negative terms than femininity: as disgusting, as other – culminating in Buck, the necrophiliac rapist with his hideous jar of lubricant. Genderwise, Beatrix's odyssey can be conceptualized as a feminine revenge against masculine exploitation. Through the protagonist, in the end, the feminine prevails over the masculine, as attested by Beatrix's final victory over Bill.

As for sexual relations, a prominent feature in *Kill Bill* is that there are hot women and eager men, but no sex. The coarse male attempts at having sex result in the men's death, like with Buck, Trucker and the Tokyo Businessman. Between the sexes, there is only violence, or sexual violence – which is reminiscent of the infantile confusion between violence and sexuality. Sexuality seems merely a function of power relations: for men, as loathsome exploiters, it is a way to dominate and to subordinate, and for women, as inaccessible targets of desire, to manipulate and to allure.

Satyricon's representation of sexuality is progressive in the way it portrays sexual ambiguity and homosexuality. At the same time, the film is deeply regressive in its portrayal of sexual difference – and even misogynistic in its representation of women.

In the film, women are altogether more marginal characters than men, without nuances in their characterization. Women are mostly present as (trophy) wives, mothers and prostitutes – as commodities used for procreation or entertainment. Major female characters include a nymphomaniac, a sex/fertility symbol, a witch and an abject mother. The most prominent male characters include the two students, a lover and a poet, as well as monarchs, an actor, a vile captain and a wizard. Among both women and men, there are servants, idle elder people and parvenus.

The prototype human is male, and society is thoroughly patriarchal – also reflecting the epoch. All the identifiable characters are male, and the film concentrates on male fantasy. Female fantasy is conspicuously absent. On the other hand, through Encolpio's, the point-of-view character's, fears and misfortunes,

the film also points to male insecurities and performance anxieties, opening curious perspectives for men's studies. 35

35 For example, the male point-of-view character's subordinate role is enhanced by the presence of the self-confident performative alpha male, Ascilto, the character's antithesis that he envies or admires. A humorous example of this structure is the Finnish Kummeli sketch Panomies (English, The Pussyman) (See Kummeli on YouTube). Altogether, the film conveys a deep-seated fear of female sexuality. All the prominent female figures express feminine excess. The Nymphomaniac is out of control and thereby dangerous, whereas Arianna, in control, is debilitating because of her excessive femininity and whimsical hostility. The feminine threat culminates in Witch Enotea who, with her fire-emitting vagina, is literally castrative; a gateway to hell. As an incarnation of the archaic mother, Mother Earth is a sublime embodiment of the fertile but all-incorporating earthly bosom. All these figures are intimidating, ominous or hostile – or empowering at will.

In Satyricon, femininity is thus equated with maternity, fertility, lust and mysterious powers. The feminine difference translates into monstrousness, making female sexuality appear abject. Importantly, through the mythological and archetypal figures, the transfer of signification between the monstrous and the feminine is naturalized. Moreover, Gitone, the 'perfect woman' and the coveted object of love, is a man – perfect precisely because he is not a woman. In his gendered performance of a silent beautiful object, Gitone *is* a woman. Altogether, through the cultural heritage, as depicted in Satyricon, the modern world is influenced by ancient misogynistic values, embodied in myths and legends.

Finally, in *The Cook*, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover, the representation of oppression and violence is gendered, as the oppressor is a man, and the principal victim is a woman. The male protagonist is explicitly associated with war history and the great oppressors of the past, including Hitler and Mussolini – all men. Albert thus represents patriarchal tyranny, yet counterbalanced by the presence of Michael. As Albert's direct opposite, Michael represents humanity, empathy and erudition, constituting a positive image of masculinity.

Through the empathic and sophisticated female protagonist, femininity is pictured in a prevailingly positive light. Unlike in the other films, female sexuality is depicted as mature, separate from motherhood and yet regenerative; not marked by lack or excess. At the same time, the woman's main role is to be the suppressed trophy wife, a fearful victim. In the end, however, the woman adopts the ambiguous role of the female avenger, representing feminine wrath, vengeance and death – but also cosmic justice and victory over fear.

The oppressive relation between the wife and the husband is contrasted with the perfectly equal relation between the wife and the lover. Depicted from the point of view of the woman, the love affair grows into a representation of female fantasy.

Through Albert's character, the film contains misogynistic elements. For the husband, woman's role is to be decorative and sexually available: a whore, or a wife who is also a whore. His comments and actions are exaggeratedly derogatory, objectifying and abusive. However, as associated with Albert, misogyny is ridiculed and condemned.

Albert is the only properly grotesque character in the film. In the cannibalistic scene, the abject human body presented as a meal is also a male body. This makes the film a case of the 'male grotesque,' instead of the 'female grotesque.' Importantly, the feminine abject threat is present merely in Albert's twisted mind. This seems a grotesque allegory of contemporary society in which the feminine threat is a hidden thing, lurking within the collective unconscious.

THE SYSTEM

Pink Flamingos not only mocks but frantically attacks the system. With its grotesque and carnivalesque elements, the film assails the exploitative power system and bourgeois cultural hegemony based on capitalism, family and religion, law and order. The grotesque is also used to reveal the system's hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness.

In the film, the ruling class is represented by the Marbles. The grotesque features that the film assigns to them are a way to pinpoint their low spirit, dubious social climbing and corruption. Through the Marbles, the bourgeoisie appears thoroughly hypocritical and self-righteous, corrupt and exploitative. In her trashy trailer (and with no business activity), Divine and her family represent the lower class, portrayed as bizarre but sympathetic. Rising up against oppression, Divine becomes an emblem of social justice.

Within the system, the Marbles embody capitalist culture in which everything is on sale: reproduction is commercialized, and women and babies are considered commodities. In this culture, only the most unscrupulous people prosper thanks to their criminal business and audacity.

At the heart of bourgeois values, family is represented as a function of capitalist exchange. Once married, the Egg Man is supposed to provide Edie with lots of eggs in exchange for Edie's 'charms,' and Connie's and Raymond's marriage is synonymous with corrupt business partnership. Religion is also part of the system – considering its traditional role as a conservative, patriarchal, misogynous and homophobic social institution. In the film, marriage and religion are grotesquely degraded.

Law and order, represented by the police and the court system, is an important part of the power system. In the film's carnivalesque world, policemen end up cannibalized, and the Marbles are sentenced to death in a mock trial. Convicted of "asshole-ism," the Marbles represent systemic structural violence.

Within the ideological pattern of the film, the role allotted to Channing – the man who 'only did his job' – is an embodiment of blind obedience, constitutive of the system. Corresponding to the anonymous power structure enabling oppression, he is the Nazi officer claiming 'I was just following orders' – which is why his punishment is grotesquely hyperbolic.

Altogether, the film is a big middle finger to the dominant ideology. 'Filth,' a major theme in the film, is ultimately a metaphor for being free, not enslaved to the system. In this constellation, Divine's entourage represents an alternative, subversive ideology; a carnivalesque utopian society.

Also characterized by rebellion against the 'system,' Antichrist exposes the fragility of human culture and the Symbolic – easily swept away once the illusion of life's normality has been broken. Torn by the ultimate feelings of pain, grief and despair – represented by the Three Beggars – the thin layer of civilization is reduced to bare instincts and emotions emerging from the Real. To express this, the film's logic is undeniably gendered: the woman is the epitome of existential transformation, a return to the undifferentiated chaos. While the woman represents the abominable fantasy, however, it is the man who represents the miserable reality, the cultural legacy of authoritative oppression.

The film expresses the failure of the Symbolic in face of the Real – displayed as repugnant, yet irresistibly alluring. The failure reveals the open wound of the fundamental lack, concretized in the death of the child and the loss of mental sanity. While the woman represents the lack of the Real, the man embodies the lack of the Symbolic, standing for the rationalist scientific worldview, its logocentrism, arrogance and violence.

Ideologically, the scientific worldview constitutes a major opposing force to the feminine – considering that historically psychiatric treatment has been used to contain the undisciplined female body, and that science has served as an excuse for coercive measures targeted at humans. In modern culture, science is perhaps the most widely accepted ideology, also serving the interests of capitalism, because it offers a commercialized solution to any problem.

In the film, the man states that it is 'a scientific fact' that obsessions don't materialize. He is proven to be terribly wrong, as just the opposite happens, and the woman identifies with what she

fears the most. The human mind is revealed to be far too complicated to be treated with a simplistic scientific method. The film makes its point through the woman's mind that remains unknown and incurable, and through her rebellious grotesque body that refuses to be part of the system. By denigrating science, the film attacks the dominant ideology.

Yet another force antagonistic to the unruly feminine is religion, present in the film through religious references, and through absence. Religions have also been (and still are) used to control the female body and sexuality. For the woman in agony, religion is of no help: it is merely oppressing because of its guilt-provoking, dualistic worldview, not to mention the atrocities committed against humans in the name of religion – exemplified by the witch-hunt and gynocide that haunt the woman.

As part of the collective unconscious, religions are however deeply entrenched in the thinking modes of modern secular culture. Defying the prevailing Christian ideology, the film questions religious logic. If not divine, is nature 'Satan's church,' as the woman calls it? And where is God? In the film's desolate world, there is only the immanent, abhorrent Thing, and behind all atrocities, a profound sense of meaninglessness.

As a dystopian film, *Alien: Resurrection* also takes a critical stance on institutional power. Medical science, technology and the military together constitute a system that is severely attacked. The evil men, including the general and the two scientists, not only represent the system, but also patriarchy, the ruling class, and the 'pure' race, allowing itself to exploit the others. The exploitative phallic power is diametrically opposed to the subordinate feminine, represented by the female protagonists and the Alien. At the core of the film, there is an ideological struggle between the maternal Real in its horrific guise and the paternal Symbolic in its cruel guise. Ultimately class, race and gender all revert to the same opposition between the hegemonic and the marginalized, the powerful and the powerless.

The corrupt power elite is supported by the dominant ideology; its blind belief in science and the military – the authoritarian paternal leadership. In the film, however, the ruling class is characterized by immorality and inhumanity, committing horrible actions in the name of scientific progress. The rulers grotesquely exploit the subordinated populace, using them as a commodity, as exemplified by the 'coffin people.'

The reverse side of sleek scientific success is represented by the hidden failed clones, one of them living in excruciating agony. As the grotesque underside of 'civilized' society, the clones are an expression of legitimate structural violence, whether targeted at humans or animals, causing them immense suffering.

Focusing on the capitalist system, *Fight Club* with its anti-consumerist ethos challenges the dominant capitalist ideology, marked by the ideal of endless consumption. The film depicts a typical contemporary Western society, characterized by a massive advertising and media industry, a large middle class and deteriorating working conditions even for the well-off. In a carnivalesque manner, the film replaces the prevailing values with the more down-to-earth Fight Club philosophy, based on straightforward fighting and anarchistic action.

The actual target of the protagonist's hostility is hegemonic power, represented by multinational companies – including credit card companies – in possession of true economic power. The most significant division is thus drawn between the financial power elite and the workers, constituting one big middle class. Representing both blue- and white-collar 'slavery,' the middle class is deprived of true liberty and power, despite its material well-being. As the film points out, simple maintenance and customer service work is also undervalued – and yet constitutes the infrastructure that keeps society going. Work is meaningless for the worker, as it merely serves the system of capitalist production and profit maximization.

As a result, the workers are turned into alienated, anxious, solitary insomniacs. Controlled like marionettes, enchanted by the fallacious ideals of capitalist society, workers are persuaded to consume ever more to find happiness. Fight Club offers a remedy to this misery: through the fighting activity, 'untrue' capitalist social relations, marked by self-interest, solitude and futility, are replaced by 'true' human relations, based on real bodily interaction, solidarity and a shared higher purpose.

The depicted conflict can also be traced back to the nature–culture opposition. In the film's world, culture appears artificial, restrictive and meaningless, whereas nature represents authenticity and simplicity of life, with the bonus of instinctual satisfaction. At the core of the film is the return of repressed nature, expressed through the grotesque.

Despite all the 'misery,' the depicted problematic is however a highly elitist issue – if thinking about poverty, marginalization and global injustice. Only people who have too much have the privilege of fantasizing about losing their material possessions and encountering their mortality, and consider that as true freedom. The have-nots might fantasize just the opposite.

Considering the present state of the world, the seductive fantasies and conflicting ideals depicted in Fight Club offer one

explanation for the popularity of various militant and terrorist movements, whether political, religious, nationalist or racist.

In Kill Bill, the oppressive system amounts to the underworld, or the world of organized crime, defined by the law of the jungle. The film's social network is made up of killers, crooks and crime bosses, of pimps and rapists. Unlike in the other films, in Kill Bill official social institutions and state authorities are absent, non-existent. The power elite corresponds to criminal organizations – a metaphor of oppressive institutional power – represented by Bill with his Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, and by the Tokyo yakuza. Within the power hierarchy, the protagonist woman represents an oppressed individual that rises up against the corrupt system. Beatrix's transformation from a helpless coma patient into an invincible heroine is the fulfillment of the fantasy of the powerless: to defeat the powerful and to get justice.

Ideologically, the film's underworld is characterized by extreme individualism, self-reliance and the use of brute force. Existence is a struggle for survival – survival of the fittest: either one kills or gets killed. In fact, the depicted society and its power relations are based on grotesque violence and killing. Ostentatious and impressive, grotesque violence is an effective tool to control people: it sets a premonitory example – like Boss Tanaka's decapitation – thwarting others in their attempt to defy the system.

Moreover, the film's ideological ethos is related to the ideas of stateless society, frontier justice and the American Wild West spirit – in support of the conservative values of the individual's precedence over the state, and even of gun rights. Ultimately, the film's anarchistic attitude questions the validity of the institutional power system and the legitimacy of a privileged power elite.

Altogether, *Kill Bill* depicts a world in which grotesque superpowers and deeds enable one to survive, and to reach happiness. Grotesque violence appears as fascinating, and in the right hands, even glorious and heroic.

While the other films attack power systems like capitalism and the scientific worldview, Satyricon deals with the 'system' of human culture, based on human nature. In this sense it partly resembles Antichrist. In Satyricon, the main antagonistic force is 'fate.' However, the film doesn't clearly support or attack anything, and its message remains as ambiguous as the film itself. In the tradition of Menippean satire, it merely juxtaposes different ideas.

In the film, the notion of civilization is explicitly contemplated by Eumolpo. As the poet convincingly laments in his monologue, civilization – including art, philosophy and science – has been sadly dilapidated. As he reckons, the main reason for this

is greed, pursuit of money, and hedonism. "Wine and women" have numbed people and degenerated culture.

Representing an ideological turnabout, Eumolpo soon becomes exactly what he first condemns. As a result of his sudden prosperity, the poet starts to live hedonistically, consuming wine and women in abundance. Far from judging the enriched poet, the film portrays his new lifestyle as a happy change of luck – as if rejoicing with the poet, exalting the carnal pleasures of life.

Eumolpo's turnabout is an indication of the contradictory nature of humans, both moralistic and self-seeking in their pursuits. Trimalcione's character is also a study of human nature. An immensely rich parvenu, Trimalcione is depicted as complacent and vainglorious, pretending to be a great man and a great poet, a benefactor and a king. In his transparency, Trimalcione is however nearly sympathetic, if compared to the hypocrites within his entourage, ingratiating him only to profit from him. Altogether, Trimalcione appears as a prototype of human nature in all its frailty, vanity and greed; its immense thirst for love, respect and admiration.

In Satyricon, the main ideological system is ultimately human nature, giving birth to human culture. The characters have a firm belief in fate, the Wheel of Fortune that regulates their lives through carnivalesque turnabouts. At the same time, fate exonerates people from responsibility and from social justice: whether one is a slave or a king, the social status is a given. Capricious fate is also to blame if one accidentally kills someone, or if one is born poor or becomes rich. Supporting people's belief in their limited power to affect their lives, the idea of fate ultimately serves the interests of the ruling class, helping to maintain the status quo.

As for *The Cook*, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover, Albert's reign in the restaurant compares to any system of tyranny. His reign is a grim metaphor of a world in which people are ruled by terror and violence. With his financial power and petty criminal leadership, Albert embodies the corrupt power elite. In the restaurant's microcosm, Albert is the embodiment of the ignorant ruling class, its bigoted appreciation of capitalist values and outer signs of prosperity.

Albert's knowledge of the world is based on prejudice and hearsay. This makes him a caricatural representative of ignorance – entailing the rejection of scientific knowledge and humanistic values. In the film, ignorance is sharply contrasted with culture and civilization, embodied by Michael. The cleavage is expressed through the carnivalesque pair of the husband and the lover: a book lover and a book hater.

The film clearly stands on the side of the oppressed and the powerless, embodied by Georgina and Michael. With his misogynistic and racist attitudes, Albert's reign appears as a caricatural image of social injustice. With Albert's grotesque deeds, structural violence is turned into direct violence. Albert's rule is a grotesque reflection of contemporary society – a reflection that brings attention to the institutionalized forms of racism and sexism. Moreover, the community that submits to Albert's rule – whether out of fear, profit, hedonism, ignorance or lethargy – represents the dominant ideology and its silently accepted values.

Through the grotesque, the film undermines the prevailing system, exposing a world full of violence and injustice. The solution offered by the film is resistance, at all costs, and the valuing of civilization; the ability to learn from history. This entails dialectical interaction being forced on patriarchal tyranny – symbolized by grotesque incorporation. Ultimately, the restaurant's name, Le Hollandais, refers to the ominous ghost ship, Le Hollandais Volant, doomed to sail the oceans forever. Associated with the ship, the restaurant becomes an allegory of a community with blurred vision, doomed to repeat history forever, always with new reigns of oppression.

THE GROTESQUE IN REPRESENTATION



The recurring characteristics of the grotesque – category violation, reaction of the viewer, metamorphosis and surpassing of body limits – are visible in all the seven films. Category violation and transgression of body limits seem most ubiquitous, while metamorphosis is most prevalent in *Antichrist* and *Fight Club*.

The films differ more from each other as regards the different types of the grotesque, related to reaction. In *Pink Flamingos*, the prevailing grotesque type is the 'comic grotesque,' based on laughter, as even the most horrific deeds are presented in a comic light. The comic grotesque also predominates in *Fight Club*. In *Antichrist* and in *Alien: Resurrection*, the most important type is the 'horrific grotesque,' grounded on fear and disgust. The horrific grotesque also prevails in *The Cook*, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover, yet contrasted with the carnivalesque. In *Satyricon*, the main type is the 'miraculous grotesque,' supplemented with comic and horrific features. Kill Bill is a combination of the comic and horrific types. In this way, the grotesque type also reflects the film genre.

Moreover, the films present different emphases as regards the different 'faces' of the grotesque body. The most prevalent face in Pink Flamingos is the 'Female grotesque body,' mainly due to Divine's conspicuous presence. The 'Body transgressing its boundaries' is also strikingly present through the shocking acts. Because of the protagonist woman and her grotesque actions, in Antichrist the most outstanding faces are the 'Body transgressing' its boundaries' and the 'Female grotesque body.' Alien: Resurrection is most strongly marked by the 'Abject body' type, present through the victims with their insides revealed, and through the viscerally reproductive Alien organism, also connoting the 'Female grotesque body.' In addition, Ripley, as a transcategorical figure, and the Alien monster represent the 'Fantasy body.' With its carnivalesque action, Fight Club is dominated by the 'Body transgressing its boundaries. The same applies to the Kill Bill violence, ostentatiously surpassing the body limits. Kill Bill also displays the 'Abject body' through all the massively bleeding victims. Satyricon's bodily variety brings forth several faces, including the 'Fantasy body,' the 'Freak body' and the 'Female grotesque body.' Finally, in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover, the most prevalent face is the 'Body transgressing its boundaries.' Perhaps to these faces should be added the 'Male grotesque body,' conspicuously present in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover through the male protagonist.

The seven films also differ from each other as regards the main source of the grotesque, its main function and ideological role, thereby emphasizing various aspects of the grotesque.

In sum, in *Pink Flamingos*, the grotesque stems from an insolent realization of taboos and repressed fantasies, together with a carnivalesque masquerade of gender. The main role of the grotesque is to expose myths and to denaturalize cultural constructions. The grotesque also offers an alternative view on the world, celebrating a childlike sense of wonder and open-mindedness. Ideologically, the film treasures the idea of self-defined gender identity and attacks the oppressive, exploitative power system based on the prevailing ideology.

In *Antichrist*, the grotesque emerges from the woman's grotesque metamorphosis and actions, reflected by the surrounding nature. As its most important function, the grotesque gives a bodily form to the unrepresentable, the unfathomable and the unknown. Ambiguously, the grotesque both deconstructs and instigates misogynous myths, especially as regards female sexuality. With its grotesque atrocities, the film attacks the rationalist scientific worldview, and celebrates the power of the unknown.

In *Alien: Resurrection*, the grotesque takes the form of a horrific alien monster, along with a heroic transcategorical figure. As its main function, the grotesque embodies alterity and materializes fears and fantasies, especially as regards the female reproductive body, sexuality, annihilation and the unknown. Ideologically, the grotesque fiercely attacks exploitative phallic power, and promotes the valuation of otherness, incompleteness and humanity.

In *Fight Club*, the grotesque stems from the clash between repressed desire and society. In the film, the grotesque takes the form of a ghostly alter ego, implicated in a vehement process of degradation. As its main function, the grotesque positions humans as part of the world. It celebrates the drive force and freedom from cultural norms – through dystopian exaggeration – helping to seize what truly matters in life. Ideologically, the grotesque attacks the alienating capitalist culture and its fallacious ideals. It shows the dominant ideology in a new light, open for change.

In Kill Bill, the grotesque takes the form of spectacular violence. The protagonist's superhero quality and monstrous-feminine rancor are also conveyed through the grotesque. Creating a fantasy space, the grotesque carnivalizes, aestheticizes and 'resignifies' violence, making it instinctually gratifying and even ecstatic. In the film, the main role of the grotesque is to act as a vehicle for justified revenge and cosmic justice. Ideologically, the grotesque reaffirms but also unravels gendered stereotypes. Supporting the idea of self-reliance, the grotesque is used to attack the corrupt power elite.

In Satyricon, the grotesque emerges from the Menippean setting and atmosphere, from the presence of myths and from the variety of bodies marked by endless permutation. In the film, the main role of the grotesque is to undermine categorical limits, to confuse ideals and merge taboos and oddities into one fantastic whole expressing the multiplicity of the world. Ideologically, the grotesque exerts its power by sustaining the myth of feminine otherness and the myth of abject female sexuality. Treasuring continuous change, the carnivalesque endorses the idea of transience, the acceptance of ephemeral joy and agony, of time passing.

Finally, in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, the grotesque takes the dual form of fantastic carnivalesque abundance and brutal grotesque violence. As its main function, the grotesque concretizes oppression. With its excesses and atrocities, it makes visible concealed attitudes and structural violence. Ideologically, the grotesque ridicules and condemns intolerance and oppression. At the same time, drawing on repressed desire, the grotesque provides an ecstatic payback through taboo infringement.

Moreover, in all seven films, the grotesque performs structural operations that affect form and representation. As regards form, the grotesque most typically exaggerates, deforms, degrades, transgresses and reverses. It disharmonizes and combines discordant elements. In this way, it breaks or deconstructs forms. With oppositions, the grotesque can either emphasize the contrast, contribute to a polyphonous structure ³⁶ or merge the opposing elements into a whole, expressing the ultimate unity of the opposites.

The grotesque also has an impact on representation. The grotesque attracts attention, and arouses desire or disgust. It affects implicit claims of representativeness and instigates impressions, as it appeals to affects and to the unconscious. Conjuring approval or rejection, the grotesque may idealize or demonize, and undermine or consolidate a stereotype. With representations of social difference, the grotesque can work to empower the marginalized, or boost the marginalizing effect.

At the level of ideology, the grotesque may subvert conventional ways of thinking, pointing to the profound ambiguity and multiplicity of the world. Used as a parodic tool, it may reveal the shortcomings of dominant ideologies. As Georges Bataille (1985 [1931]) writes in his cosmogony:

Everyone is aware that life is parodic and that it lacks an interpretation. ... The terrestrial globe is covered with volcanoes, which serve as its anus. Although this globe eats nothing, it often violently ejects the contents of its entrails. ... The solar annulus is the intact anus of her body at eighteen years to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun, even though the anus is the night.

The grotesque also has implications for filmic expression. In the seven films, the grotesque coincides with the significant turning points within the films' dramatic and narrative structure, along with other key scenes and images. The grotesque thus appears as an essential element within the catalyst, the climax and the final resolution. For example, in *Pink Flamingos*, the climax coincides with the grotesque episode of incestuous transgression. In Antichrist, the atrocities mark all the dramatic moments, including the child's death as the initial catalyst, and the peak of the woman's metamorphosis. The pivotal image of the couple having sex in the woods, with white arms rising from the dark soil, is also profoundly grotesque. In Alien: Resurrection, the grotesque clones mark a moment of ultimate truth for the protagonist, and the Newborn's grotesque suction into outer space, a return to the original oneness, constitutes the film's final resolution. As for Kill Bill, the grotesque burial and resurrection represents a major turning point in the film's gendered power balance. In The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover, the final resolution coincides with the utterly grotesque cannibalistic scene.

In this regard, the role of the grotesque is greatest in *Anti-christ* and in *Fight Club*, as these films' entire dramatic structure is based on grotesque metamorphosis and the protagonists' degradation into grotesque subjects with grotesque desires and deeds. *Pink Flamingos* is also structurally grounded on a series of grotesque transgressions, the narrative and the plot serving the supreme cause of taboo infringement.

In the seven films, the grotesque also gets to be associated with the key characters. The grotesquely attuned character may be either the protagonist – as in most of the films – or the nemesis – as in *The Cook*, the *Thief*, His Wife & Her Lover or Alien: Resurrection. It can also be associated with a side character with an important dramatic function – such as the necrophiliac rapist in Kill Bill. The heroic characters embody the positive aspects of the grotesque, representing 'power-in-difference' or 'carnivalesque insight,' whereas the evil characters epitomize the disgusting side of the grotesque.

Finally, to summarize the outcome of the analysis as regards the theory of the grotesque, a first remark is that the grotesque not only breaks but also supports existing norms and ideologies. Paradoxically, even though its central characteristic is deviation from the norm, the grotesque may sometimes coincide with the norm – like with heroic characters or misogynous myths. In doing this, the grotesque breaks the rule that it is by necessity subversive, transgressive and norm-breaking. Beside the subversive grotesque should be acknowledged the possibility of grotesque representations with a conservative effect.

Another remark related to the study of the grotesque is that the grotesque may also be ordinary. The ordinary grotesque is the other extreme within the tendency of highly shocking, disturbing and provocative representations, conveyed through the evocative grotesque. The ordinary grotesque stems from the idea that the reception of grotesque imagery has changed over time, which affects the way in which viewers negotiate the meanings of grotesque images. Considering the proliferation of grotesque figures, bodies and acts within contemporary imagery, the grotesque has become an everyday phenomenon. In consequence, a significant part of grotesque imagery is experienced as ordinary and commonplace, instead of extraordinary and fantastic. The grotesque-as-experienced is thus opposed to formal definitions of the grotesque and to the presumed impact of grotesque imagery. Such ordinary imagery is all the more consequential, as it may affect people widely and unnoticed.

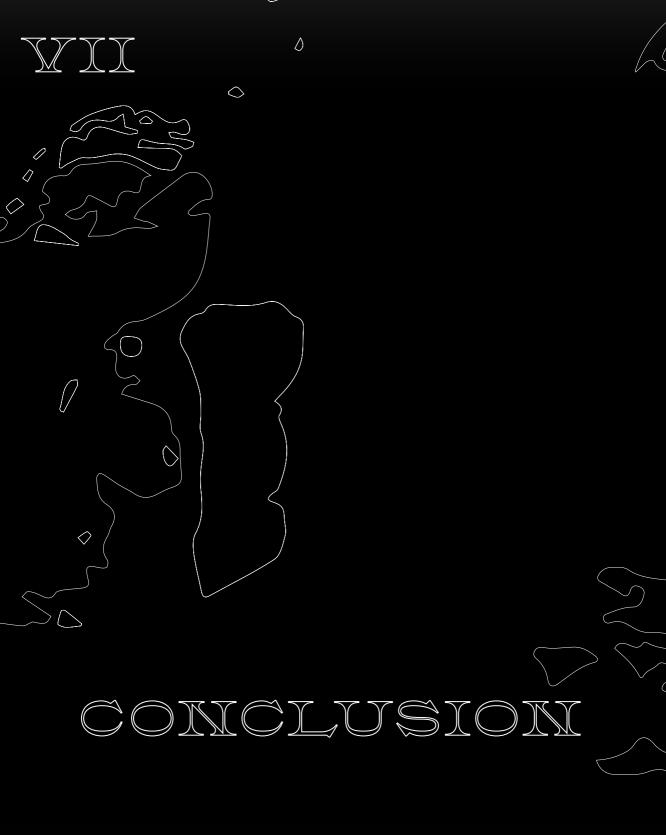
In the end, the grotesque admittedly points to what is out of control. However, there is a difference between the grotesque, such as monsters, that refer to a controlled space merely threatening disintegration, and monsters that represent a complete

disintegration of meaning (Creed 2005, xviii-xix). In this way, the grotesque may also engender a sense of control over the uncontrollable, giving a concrete form to the unknown.³⁸

37 For example Irma Perttula (2010, 17, 32-33, 62) claims that norm-breaking and incongruent combining, as a norm-breaking strategy, are the two major features of the grotesque.

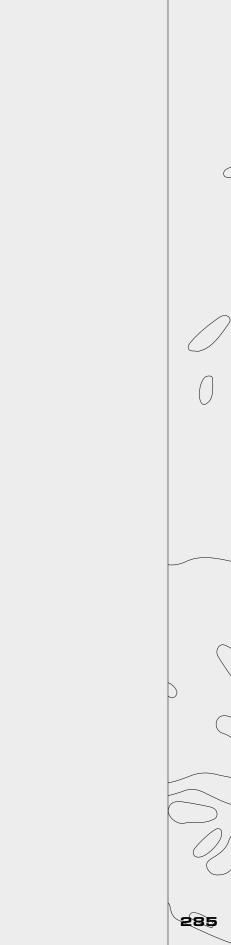
38 At this stage, a post-research self-reflective remark imposes itself. It turned out to be difficult to combine the approach based on case study and close reading – enabling diving deep into each film separately – and the comparative approach through which the films, as a complementary set, offer an overall view of the role of the grotesque. The current chapter was conceived to patch the gap.

Moreover, it was challenging to deal with such an evasive notion as the grotesque, especially when considering its dependence on the viewer's reaction and experience. To be used in the analysis, the grotesque had to be forged into a simplifying definition. On the other hand, as the grotesque was also used in an 'all-inclusive' way – for fear of distorting its heterogeneous reality – quite miscellaneous elements got to be included in the study.





The first part of this final chapter summarizes the norms and repressions, and the second part the ideological aspects, as discussed in the previous chapter. The third part is dedicated to the role of the grotesque, focusing on three matters: the functions of the grotesque, the relation of the grotesque to the unrepresentable, and finally, the implications and applications of the grotesque.



NORMS AND REPRESSIONS



The detected taboos, ideals, fantasies and fears are intricately intertwined. The line between fears and fantasies is particularly fuzzy. Through their grotesque presentation, unconscious and primal fantasies become nightmarish, while fears and taboos become fantastically alluring. Ideals are often replaced by anti-ideals, reminiscent of 'outlaw' fantasy. Norms and repressions, as embedded in grotesque forms, may expose crucial cultural concerns that don't find an outlet elsewhere.

In the seven films, the taboos concern mostly sexuality, death and excrement. As regards sexuality, the taboos relate to female sexuality, sexual ambiguity or aberrant sex – including sadistic sexual violence – and all the sex acts in *Pink Flamingos*. The abundance of taboos related to female sexuality reveals the patriarchal origins of taboo production. Female sexuality is often associated with excessive desire, abject motherhood or monstrousness. In some cases, male sexuality is also associated with monstrosity. Sometimes taboos emerge from the association between children and sexuality. Death reaches tabooed dimensions when related to children, sexuality or sadistic pleasure. As associated with eating, the excremental becomes a taboo through scatophagy, while cannibalism combines eating with the human corpse.

All the taboos are materialized through the grotesque. The grotesque either mitigates or instigates the taboos: increases the horror, or represents the taboos in a comic light, relativizing the threat. Grotesque aesthetics also emphasizes the morbidly attractive side of taboos.

One taboo that is almost absent in the research material is the aged female body, especially as associated with sexual desire. Only *Alien: Resurrection* subtly hints at the grotesque stereotype of 'the hag' through one of its monsters, and in *Fight Club* the grotesque house can be seen as a metaphor for the repelling aged female body.

In the films, the ideals often relate to gender. Idealized womanhood entails traditional femininity: a beautiful, sexy body and tender maternal side, as exemplified by the superheroic <code>Kill Bill</code> protagonist. Accordingly, idealized manhood means traditional masculinity: physical strength and sexual capacity, determination and freedom, exemplified by the ghostly <code>Fight Club</code> alter ego character. The ideal male appearance is muscular and slender – or insignificant. In the films, the protagonist woman is often represented as 'anti-ideally' but positively nonconformist, self-sufficient, rebellious and lethal, and yet righteous and heroic. Sometimes the woman is negatively duplicitous and pernicious. The anti-ideal depiction of males either stresses their

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coarse and exploitative nature, as in *Kill Bill*, or their weakness, like in *Satyricon*.

Beside gender, the anti-ideals concern humanity, society and nature. For example in *Antichrist* nature, including human nature, is depicted as cruel and disgusting. In *Alien: Resurrection* and *Pink Flamingos*, society is represented as thoroughly corrupt and oppressive.

The grotesque can either boost the despicable side of a character – like Albert, or celebrate nonconformism – like with Ripley, Marla and Divine. The grotesque is most typically used to loathe the prevailing ideals, to expose their detrimental nature – like science in *Alien: Resurrection*, consumerism in *Fight Club*, or capitalism in *Pink Flamingos*. The grotesque can also support ideals when associated with transcategorical beings like superheroes. Either through subversive treatment of ideals, or celebration of anti-ideals, the grotesque can defy detrimental norms.

Within the research material, the fantasies relate principally to four categories: woman, power, death and instinctual freedom. The fantasies are expressed through the grotesque.

Woman functions as a vehicle for several ambiguous fantasies, fused with fears. A recurring figure is the 'castrating woman' or the 'female avenger' – like the *Antichrist* woman, Beatrix, Ripley, Divine or Georgina – often endowed with mysterious feminine powers. While some women are objects of distant fantasizing – like Beatrix or Ripley – others are sexually excessive and out of control – like the *Antichrist* woman or the Nymphomaniac. Yet another recurring figure is the 'abject mother' or 'archaic mother,' embodied by the Alien Queen, Mother Earth, and Miss Edie.

Many fantasies concern power, whether masculine exploitative power, mysterious feminine power or nature's evil power. Reflecting the fantasy of omnipotence, characters are endowed with superhuman or otherworldly qualities – like Ripley, Beatrix or Witch Enotea. In many cases, there is a reversal of power relations: a shift from oppression to empowerment and revenge. Power is commonly expressed through grotesque elements.

All the films present fantasies about death, immortality or the afterlife. These are materialized through symbols and heralds of death, through depictions of all the imaginable ways of killing and dying, and through portrayals of places resembling the underworld or paradise.

Finally, all the films abound with fantasies of instinctual freedom. Several events are characterized by unbridled sexuality and aggression, by ecstatic violence and infantile rage, by *jouissance* and sadistic or masochistic pleasure. Instinctual freedom is also

expressed through monstrous reproduction, abundant eating and reckless anarchistic action; through filth, decadence and loss of control, reflecting desire for the abject. Presented as ecstatic, violence is sometimes justified by legitimate revenge, like in *Kill Bill*, but also celebrated for its own sake, like in *Fight Club*. Sexuality is excessive and insatiable, multiform and ambiguous, and also redirected to violence. Instinctual freedom may be conveyed through grotesque material bodily abundance and the transgression of limits.

In the films, the objects of fear can be divided into three categories: the feminine, the masculine and the unknown. The fears are expressed through the grotesque, a phenotype of fear. Sometimes the grotesque instigates the horror, but sometimes it alleviates fear through comic presentation.

The fear of the feminine is typically expressed through castration or bodily mutilation executed by a woman. The fear is also translated into incorporation, embodied by the insatiable female figures. In *Alien: Resurrection*, the maternal-feminine threat takes the form of a monstrous, all-incorporating reproductive system, and in *Pink Flamingos* the form of a devouring incestuous mother. Yet another threat is the fear of feminization or emasculation, in *Fight Club* causing debilitation, and in *Satyricon* loss of male potency.

The masculine threat is present through exploitative measures, or through sadistic, 'penetrative' violence performed by men. In *Alien: Resurrection*, monstrous organs pierce bodies and powerless humans are submitted to cruel scientific experimentation. In *The Cook*, *the Thief*, *His Wife & Her Lover*, objects are sadistically stuffed into bodily cavities.

The unknown refers both to external and internal threat: evil within humans or 'out there,' in mysteriously hostile nature or in the unfathomable cosmos. The object of fear may be the human mind, like in *Antichrist*, the cruel beast, like in *Alien: Resurrection*, or blind fate, like in *Satyricon*. Death also conveys the horror of the unknown. Death is depicted either as the cosmic void, like in the *Alien* film, or as hallucinatory post-death presence, like in *Antichrist*.

IDEOLOGICAL ASPECTS



In the analysis of the seven films, the ideological focus areas are 'gender' and 'the system.' Both elements constitute an underlying power structure within the films. The grotesque appears as a tool to support certain ideological features and to undermine others.

GENDER

Among the films, *Pink Flamingos* stands out as a deconstructive presentation of femininity. Divine's grotesquely exaggerated character appears as a parody of feminine masquerade and of gendered stereotypes. The transgressive protagonist celebrates the idea of self-creation.

In *Antichrist*, the protagonist woman is associated with monstrosity and sexuality out of control. The woman represents abominable nature and the threatening unknown. At the same time, she is a self-imposed antiheroine, and yet another victim of the patriarchal legacy of misogyny.

In *Alien: Resurrection*, the protagonist women are associated with transcategorical monstrosity. As an ontologically deficient being – either a beast or a machine – woman is however the brave hero, more humane than man or the 'regular' human. Misogynistically, the Alien monster embodies monstrous female reproduction – but also bears traces of threatening male sexuality.

Dealing with masculinity in crisis, *Fight Club* offers a regressive but identifiable fantasy of strong masculinity, which is yet revealed an impossibility. The representation of woman features misogynistic clichés about femininity but at the same time offers an emancipatory, nonconformist image of woman.

In Kill Bill, the protagonist is a sexy killer woman, a female avenger, but also an embodiment of the contemporary female ideal. She is both a stereotyped male fantasy and an inspiring heroine, a righteous warrior reminiscent of a superhero. Moreover, in the film, the 'killer women' prevail over the 'bad men.' Men are represented as particularly vile and exploitative.

In Satyricon, misogynistically, the female characters include a sickly nymphomaniac, a fertility symbol causing impotence, a witch with a fire-emitting vagina, and a primitive Mother Earth figure – all embodiments of abject female sexuality. A counterbalance comes from the film's valuation of sexual ambiguity and homosexuality.

Finally, based on striking contrasts, *The Cook*, *the Thief*, *His Wife & Her Lover* presents a dual image of gender. The female protagonist is a victimized trophy wife that yet rises up against the sadistic husband, growing into an emancipated female avenger. In the representation of masculinity, the kind, erudite lover is contrasted with the evil, brutal husband.

In these films, on the one hand the grotesque works to denigrate woman, propagating the idea of abject female sexuality. In their seemingly 'harmless' existence, grotesque female characters, like the *Satyricon* women, are naturalized through mythology, functioning as an implicit justification for misogyny. On the other hand, grotesque features also work to appraise women, like in *Alien: Resurrection*, in which the protagonist's grotesque alterity is associated with her heroic quality.

NEGATIVE REPRESENTATION OF WOMAN

Taking a closer look at the depiction of gender in the research material, the grotesque is involved in the representation of woman in many ways. Woman's ontological deficiency, alliance with nature, sexual difference and feminine stereotypes are all intertwined with grotesque forms of representation.

Firstly, woman's alleged 'ontological deficiency,' or the Lacanian 'nonexistence' of woman, is expressed through grotesque means. In *Antichrist*, woman represents lack, the terrifying abyss beneath the civilized surface, translated into grotesque actions. In *Alien: Resurrection*, woman is either a clone without proper identity or a humanoid robot – a beautiful shell of femininity with hideous machine-like insides. In *Pink Flamingos*, beneath the masquerade of femininity, there is no woman, but a man. In *Satyricon*, the perfect woman is a man. In *Kill Bill, Fight Club* and *Satyricon*, woman is a male fantasy – which means that beneath the idealized or the disparaged fantasy figure there is no other 'womanly substance.'

Woman is also grotesquely assimilated with nature and bestiality. In *Alien: Resurrection*, the protagonist is partly an Alien beast, enmeshed in barbarous reproduction. The *Antichrist* woman experiences a grotesque metamorphosis into a savage piece of nature. *Satyricon*'s nymphomaniac is assimilated with a female beast in heat, and even the *Kill Bill* heroine is compared to a lioness defending her offspring. In *Pink Flamingos*, the protagonist appears as a savage, cannibalistic woman. In this way, the feminine excess translates into grotesque bestiality.

Woman's sexual difference – intriguing and threatening for man – has produced stereotypes in which female sexuality, abjection and malevolence coalesce. To thwart the threat, motherhood has been glorified and womanhood idealized, regulated by strict taboos and unrealistic ideals – as exemplified by Beatrix. The feminine threat is reflected in representations of the monstrous-feminine. Miss Edie, the *Antichrist* woman, the Alien Queen, Witch Enotea and Mother Earth are all examples of abject motherhood or womanhood.

Grotesque stereotypes of the female body are all-encompassing and persistent. The old female body becomes 'the hag,' the voluptuous feminine body becomes 'the vamp' or 'the fat woman,' and the flawlessly beautiful body becomes 'the uncanny doll woman' or 'the robot woman.' Even a young woman, if out of control, is always at risk of becoming 'the witch.' The mother becomes 'the monstrous mother,' and the woman who loses her child becomes 'the mad woman.' The strong woman becomes 'the female beast,' the sexually active woman becomes 'the nymphomaniac,' and the anxious woman becomes 'the female hysteric.' The female grotesque, or the monstrous-feminine, is a privileged tool for conveying such stereotypes.

Masculinity may also turn into grotesque stereotypes. In the films, the most common stereotype is the vile, sadistic and exploitative male.

POSITIVE REPRESENTATION OF WOMAN

The grotesque can also clearly support the positive representation of woman, as with Ripley, celebrating the idea of power-in-difference. Grotesque features may also express self-defined identity and emancipation, like with Divine and Marla, exemplifying grotesque self-creation.

Alterity is something that all people ultimately share. The grotesque points to the *shared difference*, whether based on bodily insides, on the unconscious, or on a sense of alterity and alienation. This forms a basis for representing difference as identifiable. In their grotesque difference, Ripley and Call are paradoxically more identifiable than the men.

Significantly, grotesque characters are ambiguous, which leaves more room for the spectator to negotiate their meaning. Grotesque female figures can be at the same time misogynistic and emancipatory. Even though Ripley, Call and Marla conform to sexist stereotypes and male fantasy, they also represent self-defined identity. They leave the impression that behind the shell of femininity there is after all something substantial but hidden. Paradoxically, grotesque ambiguity – entailing semiotic openness – makes these characters less stereotyped than characters with more fixed significations. Defying the Madonna/whore and monster/angel dichotomies, a grotesque character may easily be both. As Ripley's character attests, the ambiguity of the grotesque applies even to the grotesque itself: Ripley is neither grotesque nor nongrotesque.

The characters' commensurability with male fantasy ensures their free circulation within mainstream imagery. Such an ambiguous character is like a Trojan Horse with emancipatory insides. A fantasy woman is thus possibly more influential than her more subversive, less soothing sister, like the *Antichrist* woman, Divine or Miss Edie, left in the abject margins. The potential of grotesque ambiguity also applies to the queer conception of gender, to an enlarged view of masculinities and to all forms of social difference.

Finally, grotesque fantasy figures may have greater liberty to perform their gender 'wrong,' defying the idea of gender essentialism. As in the films, grotesque female characters may be promiscuous or aggressive without losing their integrity or appeal. Like Ripley, they are also free to not express sexual interest in men – not flattering the male ego like a Bond girl – and yet appear in a positive light, without marginalization or punishment.

THE SYSTEM

In all the films, there is a powerful 'system' that constitutes an antagonistic force for the protagonist. In the protagonist's rightful battle against 'the bad system,' the grotesque functions as a weapon or a remedy; a tool for justified revenge or cosmic justice.

In Antichrist, the bad system is represented by science and religion, concretized in the arrogant scientific worldview and misogynistic religious inheritance that drive the woman over the edge. In Alien: Resurrection, the system corresponds to science and technology, embodied in the cruel, greedy scientists representing exploitative phallic power, ultimately responsible for the Alien invasion. Pink Flamingos portrays a corrupt system based on middle-class values and capitalism, while Fight Club depicts a stifling system of consumerist culture and working life ruled by global financial power. Kill Bill pictures an immoral world of organized crime, a society ruled by the law of the jungle, whereas The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover presents a tyrannical reign comparable to the regimes of Hitler and Mussolini. In Satyricon, the system amounts to capricious fate, randomly causing humans' ups and downs.

The system thus corresponds to a power institution in support of the prevailing ideology, serving the interests of patriarchy and capitalism. Whether characterized as oppressive, exploitative, corrupt, hypocritical or arbitrary, the system is clearly detrimental to the individual. At the level of binary deep structures, the system, as a product of human culture, is opposed to nature. Representing the (paternal) symbolic, it is contrary to the (maternal) semiotic. The system is thus an authoritarian, markedly masculine order expressing patriarchal dominance over the powerless or the marginalized.

The system also requires blind belief in its values, and blind obedience – embodied by Channing in *Pink Flamingos*. Based on silent acceptance of the majority, the system works through such cultural institutions as the church, the military and the financial system. It makes use of intimidation, coercion and direct or institutionalized violence, like in *Alien: Resurrection* or in *The Cook*, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover. More subtly, the system works through self-regulation and internalized guilt, like in *Antichrist*, or through fallacious ideals imposed on people, as in *Fight Club*.

Ultimately, the system appears as a grim image of practically any society. Perhaps not truthful in its grotesque details, the image is however emotionally realistic, as depicting the *experience* of a society full of oppression, exploitation and structural violence. Moreover, the system is reminiscent of the medieval system of 'official culture,' as described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 9, 94), referring to "the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable." In Bakhtin's view, the main challenge to the official culture comes from carnival culture.

Altogether, in the films, the grotesque appears as a powerful tool to defy the oppressive system and to empower the oppressed. The grotesque takes the form of superhuman powers, the power of degradation, the power of the abject, the power of the unconscious, nature's cosmic powers and maternal-feminine powers.

THE ROLE OF THE GROTESQUE



The final part of my thesis constitutes a departure from film, a return to the view of films as cultural texts and representatives of visual culture, as stated in the 'Introduction.' Conclusions drawn from the films are here applied to the wider field of culture and society.

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE GROTESQUE

As detected in the research material, the grotesque may perform several functions. These may be actualized in certain conditions, in certain others not, and not all at the same time.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The grotesque constructs identity, either by exclusion or inclusion. The grotesque functions as a way to encode difference: it enables building an identity so that alterity, regarded as 'not-self,' is excluded, placed into the category of the grotesque. Through the grotesque, the subject or the group can thus differentiate itself from the foreign, the despicable or the disgusting. The representatives of alterity may then be turned into petrified grotesque stereotypes.

Grotesque alterity can also be identifiable and seductive, entailing identity construction through inclusion. For example, the subject may identify with a transcategorical fantasy figure, and even with a monstrous figure, acting as an empowered reflection of one's own deficiencies or hidden desires. Ambiguously, the grotesque either sustains identification with a character, or presents the character as other.

NORM-BUILDING

The grotesque strengthens norms, taboos and ideals and sustains myths and stereotypes. For example, the representation of an old female witch may strengthen the taboo of the aged female body, or naturalize the myth of the malevolent old woman. Similarly, the grotesque may reinforce the physiognomic association between certain kinds of appearance and mental qualities. The grotesque representation of a vamp or a nymphomaniac may consolidate the myth of woman as a pernicious seducer.

DECONSTRUCTION

The grotesque also weakens or breaks norms, taboos and ideals and dismantles myths and stereotypes. A grotesque representation may posit alterity as something acceptable, or even desirable. In fiction, it is common to see representatives of imaginary minorities – such as vampires or humanoids – portrayed as heroic and appealing. Moreover, through caricatural,

norm-breaking grotesque characters it is possible to expose and ridicule prevailing ideals.

CONCRETIZATION AND MATERIALIZATION

The grotesque concretizes, materializes, embodies and visualizes what is immaterial, abstract or invisible. The embodiments are often symbolic or metaphorical. For example, through grotesque monsters and fantastic creatures, people's fears and fantasies are given a concrete, bodily shape. Even death is given a body through otherworldly figures. The grotesque also exteriorizes an inner state, such as rage or frustration. Privileging the undersides, the grotesque picks up the frightening or instinctually tickling aspects of things, and builds monstrous figures and fantastic visions out of them. The grotesque also participates in the creation of idealized figures, such as mythological gods and superheroes.

Moreover, through the grotesque mechanisms of exaggeration and reversal, society's hidden structures are exposed. The grotesque thus makes visible the 'invisible' dominant ideology, the taken-for-granted myths and power structures. As a deconstructive agent, it unveils the arbitrary nature of cultural constructions, also distinguishing the 'authentic' from the 'inauthentic.'

INTENSIFICATION, EXTREMITY AND ENJOYMENT

Besides making visible, the grotesque intensifies. Through exaggeration and aestheticization, it invigorates fears and fantasies, and makes violence spectacular and ecstatic. By boosting aesthetic pleasure, it enables the enjoyment of the prohibited, such as the sight of gore and mutilations. Through laughter and horror, it overcomes inhibitions, and provides a legitimate way to experience the forbidden. The grotesque reminds one of candid infantile pleasure, enabling contact with one's 'inner child,' the playful and unconstrained side of oneself.

In its hyperbolicity and transgressiveness, the grotesque is able to express something that is truly extreme. It can embody unlimited rage and boundless grief, the darkest fear and craziest desire, the greatest joy and highest ecstasy. Similarly, the grotesque levels the most flagrant injustice or atrocity, and can therefore provide satisfactory payback, functioning as an instrument of cosmic justice.

ALTERITY AND THE REPRESSED

By definition, the grotesque embodies alterity and negation. With its topsy-turvy logic, it focuses on the downsides and undersides of things, privileging the marginalized, the oppressed, the neglected and the denigrated – whether a social group, an animal species or a body part. On the other hand, the grotesque can also embody evil forces and oppressive power. The grotesque can represent alterity in a positive or negative light.

Accordingly, the grotesque represents the repressed within the human mind. Bearing traces of the regressed and the repudiated, it is linked to the unconscious, having an affinity with dreams. As a materializing agent, the grotesque mediates between the conscious and the unconscious mind. For example, grotesque forms may convey repressed sexual significations or repressed rage – representing a return of the repressed.

RELATIVIZATION AND WIDER PERSPECTIVES

Because of its focus on undersides, the grotesque shows a phenomenon in a new light, and offers an alternative view on the world. With its relativizing power and imaginative freedom, the grotesque liberates the human mind from the prevailing truths, and reveals unforeseen possibilities.

With its concretizing function, the grotesque also makes things more understandable. By emphasizing the material bodily dimension of a phenomenon, like power, the grotesque makes it more approachable. By focusing on what all people share, the grotesque presents identifiable experience, potentially enhancing understanding between people.

CATEGORICAL CHANGE AND REARRANGEMENT OF SENSIBILITIES

Categorical change is an intrinsic quality of the grotesque. Already in Bakhtin's view, the grotesque signifies change: metamorphosis and transgression of body limits; renewal, existential transfer and ambiguous merger. Typically, the grotesque turns things upside down and reverses power relations; crowns and uncrowns.

The grotesque can also rearrange categorical limits, and even turn something into its opposite. The grotesque may blur or redraw the lines between the normal and the abnormal. Through naturalization and denaturalization, it can present the strange as beautiful, and the beautiful as strange; make the odd appear as desirable, and the desirable as odd. Appealing directly to the unconscious, the grotesque may turn something into the abject, or into an object of ultimate desire. In the grotesque, various opposites, such as the monstrous or the ugly and the beautiful, can ambiguously merge.

The grotesque may question what is considered natural or unnatural, familiar or alien, desirable or undesirable. Ultimately, it may engender new aesthetic sensibilities, and new kinds of identities. Categorical change may be turned into social change.

ILLUSION OF CONTROL

On the one hand, the grotesque creates an illusion of control. By giving a concrete form to the uncontrollable – to chaos and death – the grotesque sustains the fantasy of control over the unknown; over the chaotic flux of life and the desolate destiny of humans. A concrete mythological figure, such as Satan, Hades or a monster, is more conceivable than an abstract notion. Anything with a body is potentially defeatable, possible to be turned into a carnival monster. The grotesque thus brings the uncontrollable semiotic within the sphere of the symbolic.

EXPERIENCE OF THE UNCONTROLLABLE

On the other hand, the grotesque offers an experience of the uncontrollable. In the form of art-horror, it enables safely dwelling in the abject, the chaotic and the abominable. Apparently despising lack of control, people are however drawn toward the uncontrollable – embodied by the undisciplined grotesque body. Through the abject, the grotesque may engender a sense of loss of boundaries between self and other, or between self and the world, providing a cathartic experience of disintegration and reintegration.

THE GROTESQUE AND THE UNREPRESENTABLE

Most intriguingly, the grotesque can represent the unrepresentable. This capacity is based on two of its functions, 'Concretization and materialization' and 'Alterity and the repressed.'

The unrepresentable is basically something that cannot be represented, turned into linguistic or pictorial signs. In this context, it is however assumed that the unrepresentable can be approached indirectly: that it somehow signals its existence, and that it can be induced from some signs within the symbolic. Whether called the inexplicable, the unnameable, the unspeakable, the unthinkable or the nonsymbolic, the unrepresentable presents an affinity with absence, the unconscious and the unknown.

The relation between the grotesque and the unrepresentable can be illuminated through two major factors: psychic depths and absence.

The first factor is that the grotesque is connected to deep psychic mechanisms and archaic aspects of the mind, conceptualized under such notions as desire, the unconscious, and the Real.

Desire and the grotesque are compatible because the grotesque – in its extremity and ambiguity – somehow levels the compelling force of desire. Ultimate desire is embodied most clearly in the grotesque character of the vampire, at the same time horrifying and alluring, promising full *jouissance*. With this figure, desire *for* and *of* the vampire fuse into one insatiable yearning for the ultimate pleasure in pain. As Mario Perniola (2004, 79-80) formulates the inorganic appeal of the vampire, it generates "an anguish full of infinite sweetness and total oblivion," invigorated by the thought of sexuality extended beyond life.

To present a convincing experience of desire, its representation probably needs to be based on such a strong metaphor, channeled through myth and fantasy, and constituting an image in which sexuality, bestiality and death ambiguously merge. Desire is all the more irresistible as it is illicit – exemplified by the vampire who doesn't want to suck blood. As Jacques Lacan (2004, 235) notes, "not to want to desire and to desire are the same thing."

Beyond the psychoanalytic interpretation, it is possible to imagine an even more elusive zone of desire. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004, 359-361) conceptualize this zone through the idea of 'schizophrenic desiring-machines.' As material elements of desiring-machines, the 'body without organs' and the 'partial objects' constitute a chain of desire composed of signs. These signs of desire, however, are no longer signifying, resembling abstract machinic figures. Distinct from any code, and without structured configuration, the signs play freely on the body without organs. For Deleuze (2005, xxix-xxxii, 39-40), the body without organs refers to 'the intensive fact' of the body, the immanent substance beyond the organism - exemplified by the grotesque figures of Francis Bacon. Beyond all narrative and symbolization, these figures render visible the invisible forces and the violence of sensation, conveyed through the figures' distorted, spastic and screaming flesh.

Besides desire, the grotesque speaks the language of the unconscious. In the research material, the unconscious manifests itself through dreamlike and nightmarish images, through fears and fantasies, infantile transgressions and pleasures; through metaphors and oddities caused by condensations and displacements. The grotesque is able to convey unconscious elements, because it passes through the censorship of the superego by means of laughter, distortion and negation, in the guise of fantasy and fiction.

The unconscious is ultimately a cultural construct, conceptualizing an unknown territory. The unknown may be called the unconscious or something else, referring to a hidden part of identity, humanity and society. Fascinated by murky depths, the grotesque reaches out for the occult zone, and lends to the unknown a body, thereby converting it into a sensible, culturally understandable form.

The unconscious is associated with the repressed, including the repressed maternal. For Julia Kristeva, the unconscious is projected onto the excluded other – whether the woman, the foreigner or the outcast (Oliver 1993, 150, 189). Through the female grotesque and the monstrous-feminine, the gendered other adopts a grotesque form. The more compelling are society's ideals and prohibitions, the more violent is the return of the repressed, translated into grotesque excesses or atrocities, as attested by Atien: Resurrection and Fight Club. The repressed also corresponds to the unbearable, to what is too painful for consciousness. Expressing the extreme, the grotesque takes the place of the unbearable, like in Antichrist, covering not only the ultimate feelings of pain, grief and despair, but also 'knowledge in the Real.'

In fact, beside desire and the unconscious, the grotesque has a deep affinity with the Real – characterized as inaccessible and unsymbolizable. The Lacanian concept of the Real refers to the state of fullness that is lost through acquisition of language and entrance into the Symbolic. Associated with the unspeakable anxiety and brute materiality of existence, the Real finds its closest possible expression in the grotesque. In representations, the Real is thus converted into grotesque fantasy. The Real and the grotesque coincide for example in the material bodily horrors of *Antichrist* and *Alien: Resurrection*.

Conveying both the representable and the unrepresentable, the grotesque itself can also be seen as divided into symbolic and nonsymbolic forms. On the one hand, conforming to the linguistic-semiotic order, the 'symbolic grotesque' can be submitted to semiotic analysis and decoding. On the other hand, the 'non-symbolic grotesque,' expressing the elusive zone beyond linguistic concepts, beyond operations of coding and decoding, reverts to 'pure' corporeality, abjection or horror.

The second major factor enlightening the relation between the grotesque and the unrepresentable is the position of the grotesque with respect to absence.

39 The unconscious remains a controversy. For example Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 122), eager to 'de-oedipalize' the unconscious, bring attention to the tendency to lend to the unconscious horrors that actually pertain to consciousness. As they see it, it is rationality that engenders monsters, while the unconscious represents the view of a priest.

In the grotesque, the tangible and the transcendental ambiguously coincide. Extreme corporeality and

materiality combine with absence and lack. Against Western metaphysics, the grotesque values negation, related to destruction and renewal. As Bakhtin (1984, 410-411) contends, negation and destruction signify the reconstruction of the destroyed object, emphasizing its becoming. "The object that has been destroyed remains in the world but in a new form of being in time and space; it becomes the 'other side' of the new object that has taken its place."

The grotesque is also particularly apt for representing the missing signified, functioning as a material support for the absence of meaning. The outcome may be an absurdity with no apparent meaning – like the Felliniesque oddities of Satyricon. The grotesque can also take the place of the missing signifier to convey a signified, like deep anxiety, for which no other signifier exists – like the von Trierian atrocities of Antichrist. As a materialized fantasy of the absent, the grotesque remedies the broken link between the signifier and the signified. In this sense, the grotesque is reminiscent of hysteria, a physical expression of something that cannot be processed mentally, or a stand-in for a lost meaning.

An extreme example of 'the grotesque-as-the-unrepresentable' is death, the unbearable ultimate limit. Besides giving a symbolic, distanced form to death – like a demonic character symbolizing death – the grotesque can also convey an unsymbolized, undistanced experience of death. The soothing distance may be momentarily lost in the face of an abject image – like a close-up of a corpse. According to Kristeva (1982, 3-4), there is a difference between *signified* death, as within the context of science or religion, and death as directly *shown*, as an unmediated experience. The latter corresponds to the abject, taking one to the verge of annihilation, to the place where meaning collapses.

Altogether, the grotesque appears as the closest possible representation of the unrepresentable.

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Social change is constantly carried out by representations functioning as performative acts. Grotesque representations have important implications, potentially affecting the subject's relation to oneself, to others, and to the world.

PREJUDICES AND SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION

The grotesque performs operations through which differences and identities are constructed, dissolved and rearranged. As a device that strengthens norms and stereotypes, the grotesque may instigate prejudices against different social groups. Through transfers of signification between certain types of alterity and disgust or fear, grotesque figures can engender detrimental associations and reaffirm myths. For example, grotesque stereotypes of the female body or racist caricatural images – like the black female figures in Satyricon – can function as metaphoric, metonymic representatives of an entire social group. When reiterated often enough, the associations become unquestioned truths that eventually support an unequal system in real life. An abject female monster may thus act as an implicit justification for women's real-world denigration.

Grotesque representations may also support regressive aesthetic preferences and discriminations, enhancing intolerance toward bodily difference. Representations can strengthen physiognomic attitudes that stigmatize people on the basis of their physical characteristics and appearance.

In terms of its effectiveness, the grotesque has a cutting edge thanks to its uncanny appeal, its affinity with impurity and its ability to evoke disgust, fear and laughter. Under the guise of unrealistic fiction, the grotesque may function unnoticed. It can also affect people at the level of the unconscious. For example, the repressed forms of sexism, ageism, racism and disableism, beyond the reach of consciousness, can be fueled by elements that appeal directly to the unconscious. The grotesque may thus increase discrimination and promote social injustice.

EOUALITY AND TOLERANCE TOWARD DIFFERENCE

The grotesque can also advance equality and tolerance in society, promoting social justice. With its deconstructive and subversive powers, the grotesque can break norms and myths. For example, as seen in the films, a grotesque representation of woman may carry transgressive, emancipatory potential.

As regards the subject's relation to others, the grotesque may support positive attitudes toward social difference and bodily difference. Accordingly, within the subject's relation to oneself, the grotesque may enhance a positive body image – in the spirit of body positivity – and an affirmative image of one's identity and reference group.

It is difficult to represent difference in a nonmythifying, nonessentializing, nonstereotyping manner. Within carnivalesque logic, it is however possible to turn myths and stereotypes against themselves. The grotesque also operates at the level of myth and metaphor. With its archaic power and its affinity with desire, the grotesque can trouble the categories of social difference. For instance, sexually anomalous vampires may function as an analogy for sexual minorities. When presented as highly attractive and sympathetic characters with amazing abilities – and yet marginalized and unduly oppressed in the depicted society – vampires may arouse desire and sympathy. Such representations can pave the way for wider acceptance of sexual variety.

All kinds of grotesque characters, in which alterity meets heroism, potentially convey a message of equality and tolerance. The effect is strongest in popular fiction, in which the context is regarded as ideologically and politically neutral – as primarily 'entertaining.' The spectator is thus lured into accepting the embedded ideology. Moreover, in films, ideological stances are efficiently conveyed through identifications with point-of-view characters.

In the contemporary battle for visibility and acceptance, the question is whose identities and experiences are acknowledged and represented as valuable. Through grotesque characters, it is possible to make marginalized existence visible, and identifiable. The grotesque may also enhance the valuation of ambiguity, the idea of non-exclusive oppositions and identities in motion. As attested by the films' ambiguous female characters, the grotesque enables seamless combinations of myth and self-creation.

As regards bodily difference, the grotesque may have similar implications. Far from being a minority issue in contemporary society, attitudes toward bodily difference affect most people sooner or later. Health, youth, beauty and athleticism are highly valued, and the related ideals have turned into normative demands, functioning through social sanctions and self-regulation. The ideal has become the new normal, and the old normal has become grotesque, in the negative sense of the term.

However, with its potential for categorical change, the grotesque can turn the negative into something positive. Through fictional grotesque characters, it is possible to give affirmative visibility to different kinds of bodies. However, this seems still a utopia, as attested by the films in which the likable grotesque characters also conform to narrowly defined body and beauty ideals – including Ripley, Call, Beatrix, Marla and Tyler. On the other hand, with its capacity to dismantle ideals, the grotesque can attack the prevailing body ideals. With exaggeration and overturning, the grotesque may ridicule and denaturalize ideals, exposing their artificiality – as exemplified by Divine.

The grotesque can be harnessed to fight appearance discrimination, bullying and exclusion. By offering 'positively deviant' objects of identification, the grotesque can remedy problems of body image and self-esteem. Moreover, anything that increases

tolerance toward difference in others also enhances the acceptance of one's own difference.

The grotesque is a prime example of the arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified. As the grotesque illustrates with its ostentatious operations, an arbitrary link may also be relinked differently. All significations are constantly constructed, and thereby subject to change, always possible to challenge.

COPING WITH THE WORLD

Besides questions of difference, the grotesque may affect the subject's relation to one's own psyche, and to the world. Grotesque material gives people concrete images with which they can process their experience and identity, including the repressed. The grotesque enables dwelling pleasurably and safely in the abject and the repudiated; reconnecting with the archaic layers of the psyche, the infantile kernel of self. By giving access to prohibited pleasure, the grotesque tempers conflicts emerging from friction between instinctual cravings and the social order. The aesthetic experience of the grotesque can act as a purifying ritual, a spiritual praxis that is invigorating for the individual.

The grotesque can also affect the human—world relation. Similarly to dreams, the grotesque may help people face the challenges of the real world: to cope with finiteness, lack, loss and chaos. Moreover, as in *Fight Club*, the grotesque positions humans as part of the world, assimilating them with other life forms and organic matter. As seen in the film, this alleviates the protagonist's alienation, and helps him discover what truly matters in life. By focusing on the undersides, the grotesque exposes humanity and the world in all its hideousness and depravity. At the same time, it shows the beauty of the stripped-down version of humanity, reduced to its bare being.

In its fantastic existence, the grotesque might provide a more truthful image of the world in its ambiguity and insanity, complexity and simplicity. The grotesque reveals a reality that is ultimately absurd and agonizing, but enables us to rejoice in it.

APPLICATIONS

The potential of the grotesque is far from being fully exploited. Knowledge of the grotesque and its functions could be useful in various fields, including the visual arts, communication and media education.

The utility of the grotesque is most obvious in activist art and in ideologically engaged imagery. Within the popular arts, because of its appeal, the grotesque can also be used to boost a commercial product's success. In visual communication, the grotesque provides a powerful tool for emotionally, psychologically and ideologically effective meaning-making and image construction – whether performed at the individual, organizational, corporate or governmental level. It can be harnessed to fight social discrimination, including sexism, misogyny, heterosexism, racism, classism, ageism, ableism and appearance discrimination. The grotesque can be used as an identity political strategy.

Moreover, the grotesque may have an important role in media education, targeted at children and adults alike. In an era marked by appearances, by an overabundance of images, information and disinformation, media education is needed more than ever. Visual imagery, and its mechanisms in affecting people, particularly deserves more attention. Differing from texts, images make more subtle visual claims, engendering influential impressions on reality that necessitate critical examination going far beyond simple assessments of reliability.

The development of a critical stance toward media representations entails the realization of their constructed nature. The ideologically biased aspects of representations are revealed by the mechanisms of the grotesque, the manner in which the grotesque produces significations in interaction with norms and repressions. The grotesque participates in the ongoing battle of signs, constantly redrawing the lines between what is considered as normal or abnormal, desirable or despicable, thereby affecting our stance on normativity and difference.

In media education, the grotesque could serve as an educational tool to increase awareness of the ideological interests embedded in representations. The analysis of grotesque representations could function as an illustrative example enabling people to detect, question and challenge the significations – including the prevailing ideals, myths and stereotypes – found everywhere in visual culture. The study of the grotesque can make media imagery more transparent to us, demonstrating how representations interact with our conscious and unconscious thinking modes, drawing on our fears and fantasies.

THE END

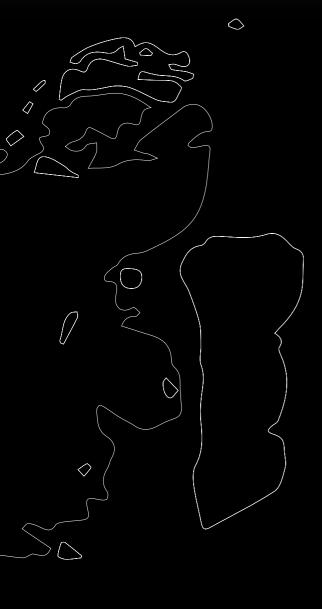
The power of the grotesque stems from its very nature. The grotesque body is a regulatory and revelatory agent, something through which culture explores and readjusts its limits. Wild and free, grotesque forms enclose the unexpressed, and even the unrepresentable.

As a multifunctional device, the grotesque materializes, concretizes and exacerbates; reverses and merges; embodies ultimate fears and fantasies. It thereby makes visible both the repudiated and the taken-for-granted. The grotesque rearranges categorical limits and shows the world from alternative perspectives.

The grotesque is itself thoroughly ambiguous: polysemic, polyvalent and polymorphous. It simultaneously affirms and denies, attracts and repels. Semiotically open, the grotesque leaves room for negotiable obscurity and the coexistence of opposites.

Finally, the grotesque enfolds a great transformative power. As a versatile meaning-making tool, it can be harnessed to serve different ideologies. Reworking myths, the grotesque contributes to the transformation of cultural mythology and imaginary. Grotesque images possess us, mold our values and direct our behaviors.

[T]he carnival-grotesque form exercises the same function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (Bakhtin 1984, 34)



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ILLUSTRATIONS

Henriikka Huunan-Seppälä. Original images issued from DVDs mentioned in Filmography.

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