

Éva Török

Roles of the Grotesque in Contemporary Visual Arts

Absztrakt

In order to find out the roles of the grotesque in contemporary visual arts, I introduce four recent critical books on this topic. These critical writings prove that the grotesque is supported by notions borrowed from other disciplines. For example we meet Kristeva's *abject* from psychoanalysis and most often Bakhtin's *grotesque realism* from the socio-cultural discourses. These terms are all productive in describing the grotesque in visual culture, but I nevertheless emphasize the return to the etymology of the word "grotesque". Describing the role of the grotesque I start with the re-interpretation of the Bakhtinian idea: grotesque is the border of art and life. This leads to the description of the perception of grotesque artwork, where the openness (Eco) of the artwork insists on the intrusion of the spectator. This intrusion is executed with the help of the grotesque that provokes and wins the attention of the spectator and with the involvement of the spectator, s/he becomes the spectacle itself.

Szerző

Éva Török was born in 1982 in Senta. She received an MA in English Literature in 2007 at the University of Szeged. From 2008 on she has been a member of the PhD Literature Program in Szeged. Research field: workings of the motive "grotesque" in post modern performances of Shakespearean tragedies.

Roles of the Grotesque in Contemporary Visual Arts

1. Introduction

In order to answer the question “What are the Roles of the Grotesque in Contemporary Visual Arts?” we need to describe what we refer to with the words that constitute this question.

Examining writings on the grotesque appearing in visual culture, we encounter notions taken from diverse discourses, such as psychoanalysis, philosophy, ethnography, sociology and politics. In psychoanalysis Freud’s *uncanny* has been almost completely replaced by Kristeva’s *abject*. In ethnography Victor Turner’s *liminoid*, in philosophy Bataille’s *formless* and in the socio-political discourse it is Bakhtin’s *grotesque realism* that dominate the description of the grotesque. From all these notions, it is Bakhtin’s effect that is the strongest in 21st century visual culture, in spite of the fact that Kristeva’s *abject* is used increasingly in connection to the grotesque. To illustrate Bakhtin’s legacy, I examine four books, including two collections of critical essays. Frances S. Connelly’s edition concentrates on the grotesque in visual arts, while the edition of Alice Mills deals with the grotesque in different fields. Ralf Remshardt’s book formulates the role of the grotesque in post modern theatre, while the collection of Pamela Kort is based on an exhibition, titled *Grotesk!*. Apart from discussing the impact of Bakhtin’s *grotesque realism* in the contemporary discourse of visual arts, I also try to deal with the influence and currency of Kristeva’s *abject* as the second most popular term in the context of the grotesque in visual arts.

My aim to examine the above mentioned four books is double. I want to show the legacy of Bakhtin, but I also want to show that grotesque is a notion that has outgrown Bakhtin’s definition. The *grotesque realism*, *abject*, *liminoid*, *uncanny*, *formless* are notions borrowed from fields not strictly understood to belong to visual culture, however, they may help in describing the grotesque in visual culture. We should remember that, according to the etymology of the word “grotesque”, it initially belonged to the visual culture of the Renaissance. Therefore I propose that critics using the word “grotesque” should be conscious of its origin, and not necessarily rely on borrowed terms before clearing this point.

Keeping in sight the legacy of Bakhtin in the critical discussion of the grotesque in visual culture and also being conscious of the openness of arts in contemporary culture, as a last step I formulate the role of the contemporary grotesque in visual arts. As I will argue, this role can be detected in the ‘post modernisation’ of Bakhtin’s idea of the grotesque understood as the border between art

and life. How does the grotesque work in the act of perception? Which borders are violated by the grotesque? Answering such questions will lead us to see the effects, and also the role of the grotesque in contemporary visual arts.

2. Mikhail Bakhtin's *grotesque realism*

To prove the legacy of Bakhtin in 21st century visual culture, let me first summarise the most important ideas connected to Bakhtin's *grotesque realism*. I will rely on these notions below when examining texts on the grotesque in 21st century visual culture. Mikhail Bakhtin's book, *Rabelais and His World* was published in 1965 (the English translation came out in 1968). Since then it has had an enormous effect, mainly on literary criticism and socio-political studies. In this book Bakhtin analyses the works of Rabelais in a way that he relates them to popular festivities, and especially to the carnival of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Thus Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais becomes a description of popular culture. The notion *grotesque realism* is used as an important feature of the carnival.

Bakhtin divides reality, or the cultural context of Rabelais into official reality governed by the church and the state, and into the unofficial reality appearing during carnival. Carnival exists as second reality for people. It is a social and collective phenomenon, all the people of that culture participate in it, and the official culture ceases to exist for the time of the carnival. During carnival people only live according to the disorder of the carnival and disrespect the rules of the official culture (Bakhtin 1968:6-7). Carnival cannot be compared to the festivities organised by the church, as these festivities only strengthen the authority of the church and thus the authority of the official culture (Bakhtin 1986:9). Carnival means the liberation from this official culture; it makes all the people socially equal (Bakhtin 1986:10). The *carnivalesque* means for Bakhtin not exclusively phenomena related to the carnival, but any festivity of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance where elements of the carnival appear (Bakhtin 1968:218). Such festivities are wedding or baptising ceremonies, but these ceremonies are acted out according to the rules of the state or the rules of the church. Carnival is the only festival that remained untouched by the church or state, therefore it is the only festival that is able to make the official culture relative (Bakhtin 1968:220, 256). Bakhtin claims that people, like reality's official and unofficial part, have also two sides, a serious and a foolish one. Bakhtin compares man to wine barrel and claims that the barrel from time to time should be aired to prevent fermentation, just as men should sometimes behave foolishly, in order to free from seriousness, from the "constant fermentation of piety and fear of God" (Bakhtin 1968:75).

During carnival there are different tools to parody the official reality. Such tools in the language are the elements of marketplace speech as billingsgate, street cries, jurons, curses, profanities, oaths (Bakhtin 1968:153, 165, 181, 188). In written form parodies of religious texts and rituals, as well as parodies of law belong to the same category (Bakhtin 1968:184, 86). The performative mode of acting out parodies was also present in the forms of performances, games and feasts (Bakhtin

1968:15). They often aimed at subverting social hierarchy. A mode of that was when people from the lower social status changed places and clothes with people from the higher social status; or women changed clothes with men (Bakhtin 1968:81).

The above mentioned tools of parody are often accompanied by laughter, where laughter is ambivalent in that it means laughing *with* as well as laughing *at* someone. Laughter is an important element of the carnival. Renaissance laughter in Bakhtin's understanding has a deep philosophical meaning, it is as good for dealing with universal problems as seriousness. Moreover, Bakhtin claims that the world has certain essential aspects that could only be understood through laughter (Bakhtin 1968:66-7). Bakhtin claims that laughter in Rabelais is based on the theories of Hippocrates, Aristotle and Lucian, who all claim that laughter has a healing, regenerating function (Bakhtin 1968:70). Carnival laughter is universal, it is free (not official, but tolerated by the official culture), and it expresses the truth of the unofficial reality of the people. This truth is that with the help of laughter, people defeat their fears related to the official culture: fear of God, death, Hell, natural forces. Laughter purifies the mind and makes people see the world from a different perspective, where the fearful becomes grotesque (Bakhtin 1968:89-91). It is important to emphasize here that laughter means the purification of inner fears and not only ridding oneself from the outer oppression of the official culture (Bakhtin 1968:94). This philosophy of laughter is present in the examples of eating as well (Bakhtin 1968:285). Eating has a similar meaning as laughter. While eating, we make a part of the outer world part of ourselves, and thus symbolically we defeat the world (Bakhtin 1968:281). Life and death are also formulated in the form of eating, where death means to be swallowed (Bakhtin 1968:301).

Eating is a kind of materialisation of the philosophy of laughter. Bakhtin connects the idea of materialisation to grotesque bodies. General features of the grotesque for Bakhtin are oversize, hyperbole and excess. The grotesque body is never closed or finished, but it always changes. Therefore those parts of the body are important for Bakhtin that open it to the outer world. On these points of the body the world becomes part of the body (as by eating) or the body becomes part of the world (as by urination). Grotesque for Bakhtin means that the body crosses its own borders and becomes part of the world (dripping nose, defecation), or when the world or another body violates the integrity of this body (eating, drinking, copulation). All these activities happen on the border of the living body and dead things, or on the border of two living bodies (Bakhtin 1968:317-8). Bakhtin brings an example to the grotesque body from the Kerch terracotta collection. He describes a figure of a laughing pregnant hag (Bakhtin 1968:25). There is a considerable ambivalence in this picture: death (the hag) is pregnant with life (a baby). It is, however, not a static ambivalence, but Bakhtin insists that we imagine the birth of the baby and the death of the hag at the same point in time, in order to understand the continually transforming grotesque body. The border between the two bodies is difficult to decide in the process of birth. The senile pregnant hag possesses not only the ambiguity of death and life, but she also laughs. Most often topics of laughter have material connotations. These topics are mainly linked to the points of the body

Bakhtin also focused on, and are important because Bakhtin claims that the grotesque body in *grotesque realism* is absolutely positive. He argues that the death of one body is followed by the birth of another, and as a result humankind will not die out but renew itself. The positive feature of the grotesque body is based on the immortality of people (Bakhtin 1968:274, 324). Bakhtin perceives the body in *grotesque realism*, not as an individual, but as a representation of the ancestral body of the people (Bakhtin 1968:322). The main point in *grotesque realism* is that during the carnival season the high becomes low, while ideals and abstractions are materialised (Bakhtin 1968:18-9). This materialisation symbolises the philosophy of laughter in the form of physical activities.

3. Grotesque in 21st century visual culture

Bakhtin's idea of *grotesque realism*, requiring that the ideals of the official culture are parodied, degraded and materialised, seems to be liked by theoreticians. In the following four chapters I bring examples to show how theoreticians of visual culture see the bakhtinian grotesque in arts of the recent years, and how they formulate their own definitions of the grotesque. I examine a book treating a contemporary exhibition entitled *Grotesk!*, that chose the bakhtinian comic grotesque as its topic. I also introduce Ralf Remshardt's understanding of the way the post modern stage works, as he also uses Bakhtin's *grotesque realism* as a starting point. The other two books are collections of critical essays written on the grotesque. Concerning these, I concentrate on the editor's introductions and on articles dealing with the grotesque in 21st century visual culture.

3.1. Pamela Kort: *Grotesk!*

Pamela Kort edited a collection titled *Grotesk! 130 Jahre Kunst der Frechheit*, where she turns her back to the so-called "black" German Romanticism. She has collected the comic grotesques of the last 130 years of German art. In the Introduction to this collection, Max Hollein and Chris Dercon describe the most important feature of the grotesque to be its relation to borders. Grotesque "transgresses, blows up, undermines, blurs" borders (Hollein and Dercon 2003:7). According to the authors a "grotesque artwork" is not only unnatural, but it also roots in the lively element of opposing all kinds of cultural, historical or mythical hierarchies (Hollein and Dercon 2003:7). The grotesque is a "Grenzphänomen", a border-phenomenon that, according to Hollein and Dercon, can be melancholic, but also nasty and even funny (Hollein and Dercon 2003:7). This collection of artworks edited by Pamela Kort concentrates on the nasty and funny effects the grotesque is able to create.

In the collection texts are arranged by theoreticians chronologically, introducing artists or whole movements of art. In the chronology Arnold Böcklin is followed by Paul Klee, Hugo Ball and Carl Einstein. Around 1900, popular culture in the forms of circus, variété, cabaret, "Witzblatt" and

“Jugendstil” introduced a certain grotesque style that questioned classical aesthetics (Jelavich 2003:85-88). These new movements, according to Peter Jelavich, could have inspired Bakhtin in the production of his *grotesque realism* theory (Jelavich 2003:80). The DADA movement starting around 1920s and renewed in 1958 is also discussed before contemporary artists are focused on.

In Kort’s collection, Harald Flackenberg formulates the role of the grotesque in contemporary arts. He claims the grotesque is present in various discourses as psychoanalysis, sociology and philosophy, and that it is often bound with the notions of absurd and laughable, but its most important feature is marginality (Flackenberg 2003:183). Flackenberg claims that the grotesque is not definable in contemporary culture because of the innumerable meanings it had in the past. He claims that the grotesque builds an oppositional world to the one that exists, that the conventional categories and hierarchies are changed by the grotesque into chance and decoding. In his interpretation the grotesque uses inversion and promotes anything that serves the idea of the “verkehrte Welt”, the world turned upside down. Similarly to Bakhtin, Flackenberg uses examples from the carnival of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to support his ideas (Flackenberg 2003:184). He claims that Dadaism and Surrealism can be called oppositional cultures, because they did oppose the existing order, but the later movements, such as Expressionism, Futurism, Constructivism and Cubism are only tools for the artists to express their subjective opinions, not to go against the order. Therefore, at the beginning of the 21st century, Flackenberg sees the grotesque to lose its quality of opposing orders, especially because during the 20th century clear-cut orders disappeared. From the margins, the grotesque slipped into the centre, where it dissolved and became unrecognizable (Flackenberg 2003:188). Flackenberg continues to argue that because of the lack of political and ethical hierarchies in culture since around 1985, art has no other choice than to represent the politically and ethically correct, in case opposition as a basic element of art is to be kept (Flackenberg 2003:189). This could have meant the end of the grotesque, but Flackenberg claims that some lonely artists of the comic grotesque remained. If we had a close look at these “lonely artists” of the grotesque Flackenberg lists, we would see that their basic ideas of the grotesque are somehow related to *grotesque realism*. Flackenberg mentions Franz West who, with his paper “Pass-Stücken,” relies on Bakhtin’s theory and especially on emphasizing the profane (Flackenberg 2003:189). Dieter Roth is also famous of his profanities, especially of using chocolate to represent excrement (Flackenberg 2003:189). Martin Kippenberger is named a trickster of his time, who will not turn the world upside down, but he stores the vertical references in a horizontal connection (Flackenberg 2003:190). The performances of John Bock are carnivalesque; they show marginality, especially extracts from the lives of those people who live outside of the social order (Flackenberg 2003: 191). Jonathan Meese uses garbage as a symbol of the leftover of our society (Flackenberg 2003:191). Meese, by promoting garbage, concentrates on the seemingly unimportant, but from the perspective of *grotesque realism*, a very important part of our culture (Flackenberg 2003:192). Flackenberg discovers certain elements, like excess or waist or profanities that can all be considered as specimens of the *grotesque realism* in contemporary artworks.

The essays in the Kort collection are rather descriptive and emphasize chronology instead of the critical reading of the photos, paintings, collages, statues that were part of the exhibition titled *Grotesk!*, on the basis of what this collection was put together to see. However, Bakhtin's *grotesque realism* can be read in these artworks, let us now consider a photo of Martin Kippenberger's statue that is not mentioned in the texts, but is presented in the book. According to Robert Storr, *Martin Kippenberger: Was ist der Unterschied zwischen Casanova und Jesus: Der Gesichtsausdruck beim Nageln*, Kippenberger is one of the most important contemporary artists of the grotesque (Storr 2003:263). Kippenberger, consciously or not, uses motives we cannot pass by without discovering *grotesque realism* in it. The wooden statue I focus on shows a crucified frog reminiscent of usual representations of Jesus on the cross. However, this frog has his "mouth" half open with his tongue trust out, and he holds a beer glass in his right hand. The title is the following: *Was ist der Unterschied zwischen Casanova und Jesus: Der Gesichtsausdruck beim Nageln (1990)* (What is the difference between Jesus and Casanova: the face expression when being nailed). The title of this work is a grotesque joke, but to understand it, we have to understand the second meaning of the German word "nageln" referring to copulation. Relating Jesus to Casanova is a degrading, materialising move that qualifies as *grotesque realism*. Bakhtin claims that the degradation of church rituals and symbols were parts of the carnival and *grotesque realism* (Bakhtin 1968:74). The double meaning of "nageln," its holy and at the same time material relevance fits to this philosophy that degrades the suffering of Christ to copulation. But let us turn to the statue itself. The frog on the cross trusts his tongue out. According to the Gospel, one of the last words of Jesus is "I am thirsty" (John 19:28). This sentence is parodied in taking the words of Jesus literally, by showing the tongue of the frog. An additional allusion to the last words of Jesus is the glass full of beer in the hand of the frog that he cannot drink, because his hands are nailed to the cross. The open mouth is in any way the most important physical element of *grotesque realism* (Bakhtin 1968:317).

3.2. Alice Mills: *Seriously Weird*

The edition of *Seriously Weird* by Alice Mills concentrates not exclusively on visual culture, but one of the four articles dealing with it is worth mentioning. In her introduction to this book, Alice Mills claims that the grotesque cannot be defined, but is best "understood as a boundary phenomenon masquerading as part of a sign system, like the edge of a map which itself can never be mapped" (Mills 1999:2, 5). The impossibility to define the grotesque roots in the fact that it will always change, as it is always articulated from the perspective of the perceiver. The response of this perceiver is always formulated by "measuring the phenomenon against some norm and judging it worthy of remark" (Mills 1999:1). This "norm" shows a discourse-bound relativity of the grotesque, which can be found in the critical texts themselves. During the discussions of the grotesque in visual culture in *Seriously Weird*, we meet the discourses of philosophy, psychology,

social criticism and technical description of painting.



Patsy and Edina from Absolutely

Fabulous, BBC comedy series

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/abfab/vault/index.shtml>)

Terrie Waddell's article starts out from Bakhtin's *grotesque realism*. Waddell analyses the British sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* and shows how Bakhtin's *grotesque realism* can be used even today. Waddell problematizes the female grotesque and claims that the main characters in *Absolutely Fabulous* are women obsessed with the women ideal produced by their culture, but they parody this ideal at the same time (Waddell 1999:218). Waddell claims that Patsy and Edina realise a kind of carnival. They live under the control of the official culture, but at the same time they parody it as well. They live in *grotesque realism*: one hand bound by the official culture, the other mocking the same. *Absolutely Fabulous* is made important by its revealing effects. Waddell claims that some rules and their potency are not clear until they are ridiculed (Waddell 1999:216-7).

The other three articles all take up different discourses to discover the grotesque within their own context. Michael Carter finds the grotesque in the perspectival techniques of the Renaissance oil paintings, where Hell is represented by using imagination and emphasizing the bodily aspects of the creatures presented in Hell (Carter 1999:188). Annita Boyd describes how horror films are used in experimental psychology to describe emotional reactions of individuals, and coin those with psychosomatic reactions to be "grotesque" (Boyd 1999:229-33). Linda Gordon tries to separate herself from those who interpret Surrealism with psychoanalysis and ground Surrealism in the existential grotesque developed from Sartre's existentialism. She describes the existentialist grotesque as "being-in-itself-for-itself", where being-for-itself is consciousness and being-in-itself is dread, the awareness of death (Gordon 1999:193, 201-3). This collection of Alice Mills meets its goal to present how various discourses can make use of the grotesque (Mills 1999:11). In the

introduction grotesque is described as something judged against the norms. This norm in painting techniques is a structure that can be neglected in the creation of the “grotesque” figures of hell. In psychology this norm is the not-pathological reaction to horror films, while pathological reaction becomes “grotesque”. In *Absolutely Fabulous* the social norm of how a woman should behave is overacted, and thus made “grotesque”. In this brief survey we can see that three out of four articles discussing grotesque in relation to various aspects of visual culture prove the definition of the grotesque to be a deviation from the norm. This deviation appears in the forms of imagination, psychosomatic reaction and overacting a social role. Deviation from the norm is the essence of Bakhtin’s understanding of *grotesque realism* as well and imagination, as well as psychosomatic reactions and overacting social roles are not alien elements of *grotesque realism*. Carnival has a “strong element of play,” as Bakhtin put it, and imagination is an essential part of play (Bakhtin 1968:7). Psychosomatic reactions, for example robbery is not alien to carnival as well (Bakhtin 1968:266). Patsy and Edina use exaggerated gestures, costumes and acts in order to express an overacted social role of a woman. Such exaggerations and excess are basic features of the grotesque body for Bakhtin as well (Bakhtin 1968:303).

3.3. Frances S. Connelly: *Modern Art and the Grotesque*

The collection of essays, *Modern Art and the Grotesque* edited by Frances S. Connelly also shows various discourses where the grotesque appears. All the essays treat objects of visual culture. In the introduction Connelly claims that central to grotesque is its “lack of fixity, its unpredictability and its instability” (Connelly 2003:4). To promote this idea she uses a quotation from Bakhtin on the “body in the act of becoming” (Bakhtin 1968:317). Connelly continues that the grotesques are better to be understood as “trans-“, and better “described for what they do, rather than what they are” (Connelly 2003:4). The grotesque denies any order, and therefore it is better perceived in its effects than in its definition. Moreover, Connelly claims, the grotesque exists only on the boundaries, borders, and merging points (Connelly 2003:4).

Michel Chaouli is inspired by “Van Gogh’s Ear”, a novelty item he comes across in a shop. Chaouli borrows the idea of grotesque as border phenomenon from Connelly, but he goes further and asks the following: “What is the boundary of this body and its violation?” (Chaouli 2003:48). He claims that the grotesque is about the body’s boundary violation. He could have as well quoted Bakhtin’s idea on the holes of the human body that connect the body to the outer world (Bakhtin 1968:317). Bakhtin is not referred to here, but the idea of disgust is discussed, supported with Bataille’s *formless* and Kristeva’s *abject*, to make sense of the grotesque (Chaouli 2003:56).

Noël Carroll’s essay “The Grotesque Today” claims that grotesque has not only entered, but has also a leading role in mass culture (Carroll 2003:293). For the comic grotesque the example of *The Simpsons* and *South Park* are mentioned, while any horror film or science fiction can stand as example for the dark grotesque (Carroll 2003:292). The structure of the grotesque, as the author sees it, is made up of “mixing categories;” especially biological and ontological categories are

violated. Carroll considers the grotesque to be an animate being (Carroll 2003:296-8). The functions of these grotesque beings are to evoke horror, comic amusement and awe in the spectator. Horror is described as a mixture of fear and disgust (Carroll 2003:300). Awe or the feeling of wonder comes from the human curiosity that astonishes and then makes the spectator experience joy when seeing something miraculous (Carroll 2003:306-7).

Connelly in her introduction differentiates three forms of the grotesque. The first form of the grotesque she compares to collage, where elements not fitting together are combined, or when already existing things are distorted with the aim to question existing realities or to create new realities. This “combinatory grotesque” can be perceived as wondrous, monstrous and ridiculous. An example for this can be the paintings of Arcimboldo (Connelly 2003:2). The second type of grotesque is the “aberrant grotesque” that shows aberration or deviation from any ideal or convention, creating ugly exaggerated forms. These forms are ugly, they are caricatures, formless, and abject. Photos of people with deformed bodies belong to the aberrant grotesques (Connelly 2003:2). The third type is the “metamorphic grotesque”, which relies on illusion and is best illustrated by surrealist imagery (Connelly 2003:3-4). The first two types of grotesque can be found in *grotesque realism* as well. They share the idea of opposing, questioning existing ideals or realities. This is the essence of Bakhtin’s *grotesque realism* as well, and it can be well seen in the practices of carnival, such as turning things inside out, degrading, caricaturing, distorting things belonging to the official culture, thus creating “combinatory grotesque”. But also the “aberrant grotesque” can be seen in the carnival in all the deviations from the official norms that are considered to be aberrations. Thus Connelly’s “combinatory grotesque” and “aberrant grotesque” can both be found as elements of *grotesque realism*.

Pamela Kort’s essay “Double Take” discusses Sigmar Polke’s art as “grotesque-comic” (Kort 2003: 265). Instead of imitating, Kort claims that Polke executes mimicry in his art, as he “wilfully exaggerates, in order to achieve surprising forms that possess an unusual eidetic power beyond the reach of the mere imitation” (Kort 2003:265). Kort emphasises the creative nature of Polke’s art and claims that “by mimicking the very ideal of mimesis, the grotesque comic artist achieves work that despite its resemblance to certain givens knows next to nothing of imitative realism” (Kort 2003:266). Polke’s dot-screen pictures use unnaturally arranged dots in order to “break with replicative practice by pretending to idolize it” (Kort 2003:271). Thus Polke began to question “all art that depends upon imitation” (Kort 2003:273). Similar to the dot-screen pictures, his *Druckfehler* (Printing mistake) paintings also employ mimicry of imitation. The *Druckfehler* paintings have two motives: mistakes of technology (mistakes of mass printing procedures) and mistakes of nature (imagined or real freaks). These mistakes of machines and mistakes of nature, as Kort argues, show that there is something wrong in the otherwise trustworthy reproductions (Kort 2003:273). The overt exaggerations lead to the point that the painting “diverges from itself,” it “gives rise to a literal double take in the viewer” (Kort 2003:277). The uncertainty of what we see on the *Druckfehler* paintings are created on purpose, as Polke himself put it: “uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy ... than those which are more clear and determinate” (Kort 2003:277). Kort’s

interpretation of Polke's art fits the aberrant grotesque of Connelly, as it uses mistakes as the main topic of his *Druckfehler* paintings, but it also fits the combinatory grotesque as Polke, by mimicking the imitation of art, questions and distorts the idea of art. Polke's dot-screen pictures are especially interesting to compare with the above examination of *Absolutely Fabulous*. In *AbFab* the female ideal is imitated and mimicked at the same time, just like on Polke's dot-screen pictures, where the American reproduction style (perhaps most known from the works of Andy Warhol) is mimicked, although it seems to be imitation for the first glance.

Next to Bakhtin's grotesque, it is Kristeva's *abject* that is most often used to support arguments on the grotesque. Christine Ross in her essay "Redefinitions of abjection in contemporary

performances of the female body" proposes that the contemporary use of gender allows the redefinition of the body that produces "excessivity and uncontrollability," and that it is the *abject* that

reintroduces the grotesque in contemporary visual culture (Ross 2003:281). While examining *Sigmar Polke Druckfehler, Beherrschung des Raumes* (1998), *Sigmar Polke Druckfehler, Gesellschaftselbstwert* (1996), *Mona Hatoum, Corps étranger* (1994), and *Mona Hatoum, Corps étranger* (1994), Ross wants to "disrupt the Kantian definition of aesthetic as pure pleasure" (Ross 2003:282). One of her examples is Mona Hatoum's video installation *Corps étranger* (Stange/Foreign Body) that was shown in a relatively small closed space on the floor. The videos show internal and external features of Hatoum's body (the internal is a visceral body shown with the help of an endoscope or colonoscope). Kristeva describes this performance as "productive of the abject" (Kristeva quoted in Ross 2003:283). Ross describes the body projected as

"simultaneously incorporating and incorporated," as first the camera shows the surface of the body as an incorporated entity, then it shifts into the cavities of the body that absorb the viewers as well as transform the body into an "incorporating power" (Ross 2003:284). The *abject* is in the process of denial, denial of the visceral body, as well as the otherness of the female Palestinian Hatoum (Ross 2003:285). Ross uses Judith Butler's idea of the body as materialisation of a norm. For Ross abject performances of the body mean failing the norm and they "bring into play unpredictable disorganizations and reorganizations" (Ross 2003:286-8). The aim of the grotesque artist, like Hatoum, is to break with categorizations through the use of the paradoxical category of the abject (Ross 2003:286). Although Ross does not draw on Bakhtin, the excessive and noncontrollable body she presents reminds one of the grotesque body produced during carnival. All the performances of the bodies during carnival aim at violating the norms of the official culture. For example the cross-dressings of men and women, or the material representations of saints or Christ aim at the violation of the norm through materialisation in *grotesque realism* (Bakhtin 1968:81-86).

3. 4. Ralf Remshardt: *The Grotesque in Performance*



*Unknown photographer showing
Marina Abramović during her
performance, titled Rhythm 0 in
Naples (Studio Morra), 1974.*

The aim of Ralf Remshardt in his book *The Grotesque in Performance* is to show that Bakhtin's grotesque realism is only a part of a wide spectrum of the grotesque (Remshardt 2004:46). Remshardt claims that grotesque realism cannot fit to modernity because of its deeply positive nature. After seeing the victims of Nazism and Stalinism, Remshardt claims that the signs of grotesque realism used in the carnival (e.g. bulging eyes or opened mouth) can be easily misunderstood, and death interpreted not as regeneration but as destruction (Remshardt 2004:48). From a post modern perspective, Remshardt claims that the Bakhtinian grotesque realism suppresses a reality in the same way the carnival suppresses official culture. The reality suppressed thus is the dead body (neither subject, nor object, but the Kristevan abject) that stands for limitedness and final destruction. According to Remshardt this suppressed reality is the ethical side of the grotesque that is present in post modern performances, and especially in the extreme examples of body art (Remshardt 2004:50). Let us see how Remshardt comes to this conclusion.



*Unknown photographer showing
Marina Abramović during her
performance, titled Rhythm 0 in Naples
(Studio Morra), 1974.*

Art based on performance aims at the pure experience of the spectators. To achieve this, all possible tools are used to stimulate the senses of the audience and thus, through perception, the audience will experience the performance on stage as if it happened to him/her. In this way the

positions of the actor and spectator can be easily changed (Remshardt 2004:51). *Body art* rejects symbolism, which is often expressed in situations where the integrity of the performer's body is physically endangered. This danger can be caused by the performer him/herself, but he/she can also create situations for the audience where it is the responsibility of the audience to resist causing danger. For the latter Remshardt brings the example of *Rhythm 0, a performance of Marina Abramović in Naples (1974)*. *Abramović offered her body as well as different tools for torture to the spectators. The performance had to be stopped as an audience member wanted to shoot Abramović. Remshardt finds this performance ethically dangerous, because here the border between the performance as art and the performance as the reality of the spectator is demolished (Remshardt 2004:55)*. For Remshardt, *body art* resembles the carnival in a way that it denies rules, but it also resembles the reality suppressed by the carnival in a way that it presents the artist as a victim of a ritual. Instead of laughter, *body art* uses terror and thus develops a negative *grotesque realism* (Remshardt 2004:58-9).



*Unknown photographer
showing Marina
Abramović during her
performance, titled
Rhythm 0 in Naples
(Studio Morra), 1974.*

Remshardt borrows the term *Kunstfigur* from Oskar Schlemmer and concentrates on this “artificial human figure” in the modern theatre (Remshardt 2004:168). *Kunstfigur* is a “humanoid puppet” or “puppetlike human,” it is the mechanical human figure, the automaton (Remshardt 2004:171). Remshardt starts his examinations of the *Kunstfigur* in Alfred Jarry's *Ubu* plays. The figure of *Ubu* is presented simultaneously as a “god, man, and savage beast” (Remshardt 2004:179). Finally Remshardt finds an extreme example for the dehumanisation of the performers in the machine theatre of Mark Pauline. Pauline in his Survival Research Laboratory (SRL) stages machines that are remote-controlled by humans sitting among the audience. These machines most of the time perform kinetic violence. Remshardt names these performances “carnivals of the late industrial age” (Remshardt 2004:253).

The inhuman feature of the *Kunstfigur* leads us to ethics. Remshardt is convinced that without morality, there is no grotesque theatre. He believes that post modern theatre and the grotesque are linked by the morality embedded in culture. The violent grotesque in post modern theatre shows what should not exist. This strong immorality, non-humanity presented provokes and strengthens the moral, human reactions in the audience. Via perception of immorality, the audience receives a kind of “moral vision” that is aimed to shake the members of the audience, not from immorality but from amorality. The grotesque theatre advertises those moral principles it violates, therefore it strengthens morality through violating it (Remshardt 2004:261-2). Remshardt claims that the grotesque in post modern theatre is a challenge, as well as an affirmation of the culture’s order, and especially the affirmation of ethical principles. Ethical principles are challenged in the *Kunstfigur* characters and in its extreme example, the kinetic violence of machine theatre. However, ethical principles are also secured, strengthened, as the audience’s denial of the *Kunstfigur* and its actions awaken the moral view of the audience. Thus in the post modern theatre the grotesque provokes an “ethical contradiction”, it presents immorality to evoke moral reactions (Remshardt 2004:261). Remshardt brings a new discourse, ethics in theatre to discuss the grotesque. In his arguments, he relies most of the times on Bakhtin and Kristeva.

3.5. Which discourse?

In this section I provide three answers to the question “Which discourse?”. These answers shift as the perspective of the questions shifts. Let me formulate the three questions to be answered: “Which discourses appear in the descriptions of the grotesque in contemporary visual culture?”, “Which discourse is most often used by theoreticians when describing the grotesque in contemporary visual culture?” and finally “Which discourse do I use to formulate the grotesque?”

Let me now summarise what I have focused upon so far in the four sources that discuss the grotesque in contemporary visual culture. In this short summary, we also see which discourses are activated in the discussion of the grotesque in 21st century visual culture and thus we can answer to the first question: “Which discourses appear in the descriptions of the grotesque in contemporary visual culture?” In the collection of Pamela Kort, the introduction promises grotesque as the margin of cultural, historical and mythical. Harald Flackenberg claims that the contemporary grotesque is present in psychoanalysis, sociology and philosophy (Flackenberg 2003:183). However, as the texts have more of an informative than critical character in the Kort collection, we can instantly turn to the collection of Alice Mills. Mills also claims in her introduction that the grotesque is a “boundary phenomenon” that is measured against a norm (Mills 1999:5). The discourses of philosophy, psychology, social criticism and technical description of painting are used to define the grotesque in visual culture. In the collection of Connelly, she introduces the grotesque to be a “trans -“, but she does not specify the boundaries (Connelly 2003:4). Chaouli and Ross claim that the grotesque is similar to the psychoanalytical *abject* and the grotesque is about the body’s boundary violation, but Ross also connects the body to the social (Chaouli and Ross

2003:48 and 281). Ralf Remshardt in *The Grotesque in Performance* claims that the grotesque in post modern theatre is a challenge, as well as an affirmation of the culture's order, and especially the affirmation of ethical principles in a way that the immorality staged shakes the audience out of its amoral state and promotes an opposition to immorality that strengthens morality (Remshardt 2004:261-2). Thus Remshardt chooses ethics as a discourse to discuss the grotesque. From these four sources discussed above, we can say that the grotesque in visual culture is discussed in the discourses of psychology, ethics, socio-cultural discourse, and philosophy. What is similar in these definitions of the grotesque is that it is considered as a boundary phenomenon, a trans-phenomenon, a border phenomenon, but in which discourse this border is to be found is not fixed at all.

From the paragraphs above, we can not only see the diversity of the discourses used in describing the grotesque in contemporary visual culture, but we can also answer the second question "Which discourse is most often used by theoreticians when describing the grotesque in contemporary visual culture?". The answer is Bakhtin's *grotesque realism* that works on the socio-cultural level. *Grotesque realism* is realised in the violation of the body's borders and/or the violation of the norms of the official culture. Next to Bakhtin's *grotesque realism*, Julia Kristeva's *abject* appears more and more often. The *abject* comes from psychoanalytical discourse and is often used to describe identity formation. It is also linked to the body, but it signals not the violated border between official and unofficial culture, but the *abject* becomes a material that is defined as other than the subject (Kristeva 1982:1, 3). The *abject* becomes the negative definition of the subject's identity, "the place where I am not" (Kristeva 1982:3). Bakhtin's and Kristeva's thoughts come from different discourses and are applied to different epochs in history, but in how they function, they are closer to each other than we think. Bakhtin describes a culture where the social enjoys priority to the individual (Middle Ages and Renaissance), while Kristeva describes an other culture where the individual enjoys priority to the social (late 20th century). What is described (social or individual) also defines how, in which discourse that topic should be discussed. Bakhtin, focusing on the social writes in a socio-cultural discourse, while Kristeva focusing on the individual turns to psychoanalysis. Body is important for both Bakhtin and Kristeva, but while Bakhtin means the social body under body, Kristeva means the individual body.

Foucault may help us here to see the similar powers working both in the *abject* and *grotesque realism*, in identity formations of the modern state and in the Middle Ages. Foucault argues that during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance *pastoral power* existed. This power aimed at internalizing the moral values through the priest as an equivocator of truth, and it also controlled this process of internalization via confessions (Foucault 1982:213-4). In the modern state Foucault discovers the same laws of power relations, and he names this phenomenon the *modern pastoral power*-which is a modified version of *pastoral power*. The *modern pastoral power* spreads out into the social body with "individualising 'tactic'," and it is not the priest alone, but several organisations that fulfil the function of equivocation, and thus salvation is ensured already in this world (Foucault 1982:215). *Modern pastoral power* appears not only in politics and church, but it is distributed between family,

medicine, psychiatry, education and employers as well (Foucault 1982:215). Foucault claims that the clever thing in power, what we could also name ideology, is that it tricks the subject in such a way that the subject also becomes not only a subject, but also an agent of the ideology production (Foucault 1982:216). Foucault links in history the power structures and the subject's identity formation, by claiming that power continues to exist and function, no matter that collectivism is replaced by individualisation in power structures. *Grotesque realism* is a tool in carnival that helps people 'let off steam', defeat the official culture in order to be able to live under this official culture as soon as the carnival season is over. It is then the official culture that needs the carnival and *grotesque realism* to maintain its power for the rest of the year. *Grotesque realism* therefore has a double importance in the social identity formations. On the one hand the rulers (church and state) need it to sustain their power, on the other hand the society needs it to have access to control the official culture for the short time of the carnival through laughing and eating. So the power structure and social identity formation are linked in *grotesque realism*. The *abject*, the waste of the subject has a function of identity formation, just as well as *grotesque realism* has a function in social identity formation. The *abject* has a negative power to form identity, just as carnival (and within it *grotesque realism*) forms official culture. As we turn from *grotesque realism* to *abject*, we can see a shift in the emphasis that is first on the social, then on the individual. *Grotesque realism* deals with the body of the people, while *abject* deals with the body of the individual. *Grotesque realism* is performed in the forms of laughing and eating, while *abject* can also be realised in the act of eating. However, while *grotesque realism* has a tendency toward incorporation, *abject* denies incorporation, it closes, separates the individual body. *Abject* loses the joy value of incorporation. From these comparisons we can see a way how the medieval carnival's *grotesque realism*, and the *abject* may be linked as formations of the social identity or the formations of the individual identity.

Next to Foucault, Victor Turner also connects what he calls the pre-industrial and the post-industrial societies. Turner describes the *liminal* based on the studies on the rites of passage of Arnold van Gennep. Gennep differentiates three phases of initiation rites: separation, transition and reaggregation. It is the phase of transition, or "limen" that Turner calls *liminal* and that he develops further (Turner 1982:24). The *liminoid* is in relation to the *liminal*, as the ending "oid" means that *liminoid* resembles to *liminal* phase (Turner 1982:32). The *liminal* phases of pre-industrial societies change into *liminoid* phases in post-industrial societies. However, there is no sudden shift, but continuity between these two cultures (Turner 1982:44). Turner claims that while the tribal *liminal* is compulsory, social, it secures the order it diverges from, *liminoid* is individual and optional, it is an "antistructure" that stands for latent potential alternatives (Turner 1982:44-5). Sutton-Smith calls the *liminoid* phase "protostructural system because it is the precursor of innovative forms. It is the source of new culture" (Sutton-Smith quoted in Turner 1982:52). The *liminal* secures, while the *liminoid* threatens the culture. In describing the *liminal* and *liminoid*, Turner also shows how the ideas of community-centred, compulsory, 'work as play' of the pre-industrial cultures become ideas, like individual, optional and 'work and play' in post-industrial cultures. Turning back now to *grotesque realism* and the *abject*, and at the same time referring back to Foucault, it is possible to detect the tendency in history to turn from social-centred

communities to individual-centred communities. This tendency can also be seen in critical discussions of the grotesque where the socio-cultural discourse of *grotesque realism* is closely followed by the psychoanalytical discourse of the *abject*. However, we can hardly find an article that is not explicitly quoting Bakhtin, or that does not use one of the ideas from *grotesque realism* when describing the grotesque in contemporary visual culture. But in these articles *grotesque realism* is already changed by applying it to 21st century works of art. Even Ross, who bases his ideas on the *abject*, refers to Judith Butler, who parallels the individual and the social body and so puts Bakhtin and Kristeva next to each other. *Grotesque realism* is used, formed, modernised by contemporary critics writing on the grotesque in visual culture, but its legacy as a starting point in developing theories is unquestionable.

Like Remshardt, I also think that Bakhtin's *grotesque realism* is constructed for the pre-industrial Medieval or Renaissance cultures and it cannot stand unchanged in post modernism (Remshardt 2004:48). But instead of forcing negativity into the *grotesque realism* as Remshardt did, I support (based on the above arguments on Foucault and Turner) the subjectivisation, individualisation of this highly social term. To find subjectivisation, we can turn to Kristeva's *abject*, but with doing so, we enter the psychoanalytical discourse. My aim is to find the grotesque there, where it originally (i.e. etymologically) comes from, and not in the socio-cultural discourse of Bakhtin, neither in Kristeva's psychoanalysis, even less in philosophy as Gordon does. So have we arrived to the answer for the third question, "Which discourse do I use to formulate the grotesque?". I want to find the grotesque in visual culture as a subjective experience. The basis for that is quite simple, the etymology of the grotesque leads us back to visual arts. In my opinion we have to make clear what the grotesque means in visual culture before using terms from other discourses to help defining the grotesque that is dragged out of its original context of visibility, and related to terms likely indefinable, like *grotesque realism*, *abject* or Bataille's *formless*. I do not deny interdisciplinary discourse, on the contrary, I believe that it stimulates a nuanced understanding of the grotesque, but only when the grotesque itself is already studied as a notion of the visual arts born in the Renaissance.

Let us summarise the answers to the question of this section "Which discourse?". Various discourses are used in 21st century visual culture to describe the grotesque. Among these, one can find philosophy, psychology and socio-cultural discourses. From a perspective of frequency, *grotesque realism* is the most used theory to describe the grotesque in 21st century visual culture, however it is closely followed by Kristeva's *abject*. It is in socio-cultural discourse that the grotesque in contemporary visual culture is most often interpreted. The third answer to the question "Which discourse?" refers to the etymological origin of the grotesque, where I would like to interpret the grotesque in visual culture itself.

4. Role of the grotesque in contemporary visual arts

As introduced above, I would like to go back to the roots of the grotesque in visual culture and there find out why it is important for the visual arts to preserve the grotesque. I start my investigation with the etymology of the word “grotesque”. Then I explore the idea of the grotesque as a border phenomenon and try to show the two sides of the border of grotesque, or in other words, to answer the question of Chaouli: “What is the boundary of this boundary violation?” (Chaouli 2003:48). One side of the border will be described as the life of the individual perceiving the grotesque in the artwork, the other side defined as art, while the border between them will be the sphere where the two are interconnected, where the one influences the other. This border is that which revitalises visual arts by reaching back to its roots rather than searching for answers in other discourses.

4.1. The etymology of *grotesque*

To have a notion more trusted and grounded in visual culture and not only used as an adjective, we have to go back to the roots, to the etymology of the term “grotesque”. Such a beginning is searched for by theoreticians such as Neil Rhodes, Wolfgang Kayser, Frances Barasch or Philip Thomson (Rhodes 1980:8, Kayser 1966:20, Barasch 1971:17, Thomson 1972:12). During the fifteenth century excavations in Rome Nero’s *Domus Aurea* was found. On the walls of this building strange figures were discovered. These figures combined an irrational juncture of human, animal and plant forms. These frescoes are thought to be copies, and if we want to discover the originals, we should go as far as Asia (Harpham 1982:xvi, Kayser 1966:20). This new-discovered style became and spread as a fashionable decoration in the Renaissance. As these forms were discovered during excavations, they were named as *grottesca/grottesco*, based on the word *grotto*, meaning “cave” in Italian. Vitruvius was against this style celebrated by his contemporaries, as it appears from the following description:

For our contemporary artists decorate the walls with monstrous forms rather than reproducing clear images of the familiar world. Instead of columns they paint fluted stems with oddly shaped leaves and volutes, and instead of pediments arabesques, the same with candelabra and painted edicules, on the pediments of which grow dainty flowers unrolling out of roots and topped, without rhyme or reason, by figurines. The little stems, finally, support half-figures crowned by human or animal heads. Such things, however, never existed, do not now exist, and shall never come into being. For how can the stem of a flower support a roof, or a candelabrum pedimental sculpture? (quoted in Kayser 1963:20)

One of the most important features of the grotesque, next to the fusion of human, animal and plant forms is that it neglects the laws of static and proportionality. Therefore the grotesque is also named as *sogni dei pittori*, or the dreams of painters. Perhaps the best known examples from the Renaissance are the loggias of the Vatican, planned and supervised by Raphael. [12. kép] On frescoes from *Domus Aurea*, as well as on Raphael's frescoes the human, animal and plant elements are fused into one. Next to the *sogni dei pittori*, the word *antico* was also a synonym of the grotesque. It referred to the period the frescoes of *Domus Aurea* were painted. The word "grotesque" spread as a fashionable decoration style from the sixteenth century Italy into whole Europe. In France it appeared in the form of *crotesque* already in 1532. This form was also used in England until 1640 when the word *grotesque* appeared (Clayborough 1965:2).

4.2. Grotesque as the border of art and life

After seeing the roots in visual culture, the context in which I attempt to explore the function of the term *grotesque*, I would like to go a step further by answering Chaouli's question "What is the boundary of this boundary violation?" (Chaouli 2003:48). From the previous passage only, we could find at least two answers to this question. The boundary can be considered as a violation of the human or animal bodies by fusing their parts to one another. But the style of the grotesque is also perceived as a violation of the arts, the laws of statics and that of proportionality. My interpretation of the boundary is closer to the second, where the boundary violation takes place not in the image itself, but in the act of perception. Of course both interpretations can be considered as results of our perception, but while in the first, solely the image itself is considered, in the second, a wider context of the image is taken into consideration what I wanted to emphasize with the word "act" in the act of perception. This "act" emphasizes the presence of the perceiver, not only the perception itself. It is essential to identify the spectator who perceives the grotesque, as obviously contemporaries of Vitruvius considered the grotesque to be fashionable, while Vitruvius himself damned it.

We have previously discussed that the grotesque is a border phenomenon and that Bakhtin's *grotesque realism* is the starting point where most critiques of the grotesque in contemporary visual culture reach back in order to find their own ways. Bakhtin says that *grotesque realism* in the carnival is where the official and unofficial culture meet and the official culture is defeated. Mills names Bakhtin's *grotesque realism* to be "performative" (Mills 1999:4). It means a kind of performance or play that people were involved in when they caricatured the official culture. They needed creativity to such activities. For example one had to know the laws and have talent to express him/herself in order to make fun of the laws (Bakhtin 1968:86). Therefore people let loose their artistic and creative energies during carnival and employed them against the official culture. Bakhtin claims that carnival images resemble the medieval spectacles that are artistic but do not belong to art (Bakhtin 1968:7). He further claims that the carnival, where *grotesque realism* exists, is a "borderline between art and life" (Bakhtin 1968:7). This social interpretation of grotesque as

borderline between art and life is what I would like to transform and subjectivise in order to apply it to post modern visual culture.

To reach a contemporary interpretation of grotesque as the *border of art and life*, I first need to describe the perception of the grotesque, the playground of the *border* as subjective experience, involving the individual and the artwork alone, opposed to the social character of Bakhtin's *grotesque realism*. The post modern "I" is practically my protagonist, whose experience of the grotesque as a border of art and life should be described in a more intimate way. For the technical description of the perception of art, I use Hans Belting's perception theory. Belting differentiates the image and its transporter, the medium and claims that the image is mediated through the medium. He claims that observing a painting we can either see the canvas (medium) or the image on the canvas, and points out that there is a competition between the media and the image for our attention, while in case "visual media becomes self-referential, [it] turn[s] against their images and steal[s] our attention from them" (Belting 2005:304-5). What we actually see depends on what we concentrate on. If we look at the image that is grotesque for us, it will both violate and fascinate the "I" of the spectator. This violation and intrusion in our identity is the experience of the visual grotesque. To reject a longer intrusion, the perspective is changed and shifts from the grotesque image to the medium. While observing the medium, the "I" tries to figure out how a canvas can transport an image that violates identity. Then the curious eye focuses again on the image and is amused by the parts until the image becomes familiar and ceases to be grotesque any more. This second look is what Vitruvius failed to reach. It is aimed to satisfy our curiosity that already Aristotle praised in humans:

[E]veryone delights in representations. An indication of this is what happens in fact: we delight in looking at the most detailed images of things which in themselves we see with pain, e.g. the shapes of the most despised wild animals even when dead. The cause of this is that learning is most pleasant ... For this reason they delight in seeing images, because it comes about that they learn as they observe, and infer what each thing is, e.g. that this person [represents] that one. For if one has not seen the thing [that is represented] before, [its image] will not produce pleasure as a representation, but because of its accomplishment, colour, or some other such cause. (Aristotle: *Poetics* 4,1448a in *Norton Anthology*)

The grotesque is something that has not been seen before, or that has not been seen from that perspective before, and therefore it hides a newness in itself that can be in the colour, in the lightning, in the shape, in anything. It is developed in the subjective perception of the subject perceiving what part of the image actually will make the grotesque. Harpham claims that the perception of "[c]onfused things lead the mind to new inventions" (Harpham 1982:17). This second look also has an important function in the identity formation, it is like a shock that needs to be revisited in order to be able to formulate it, to deal with it. The shock effect of the grotesque can either strengthen the already existing identity image of oneself, or make it instable by showing its

weaknesses and thus provoking a change. Violation of any values we respect make us strongly support these values, as we have seen by the arguments of Remshardt, who described the function of the immoral scenes in post modern theatre to promote the moral reactions in the audience. The grotesque is provoking, but its effect ceases to exist before one is able to put it in words. One can only remember it, but remembering it lasts long and bothers the mind.

Grotesque as the *border (of art and life)* is described as an individual's perception of an artwork. Let us now see how this individual is formed, how his *life* is patterned by contemporary circumstances from the perspective of the grotesque. Harpham claims that modern grotesque is not about the fictitious forms we have seen in *Domus Aurea*, but it is about reality (Harpham 1982:xix). He claims that the more grotesque an image appears, the higher reality it betokens (Harpham 1982:19). Here I would like to refer back to the term *liminoid* defined by Victor Turner. Turner argues that in post-industrial societies work and leisure are divided, although they belonged together in pre-industrial societies (Turner 1982:34-7). He claims that during leisure, creative power is released and the *liminoid* becomes "an independent domain of creative activity" (Turner 1982:33, 37). The *liminoid* is more individual and optional than the *liminal*. As an example, Turner mentions the individual artists and experts executing experiments at universities who "dare" and "opt" "to create" (Turner 1982:33, 42). The creative phase of our life during leisure is during watching theatre performances, or movies, or art exhibitions, or listening to an opera, etc. Here arrive we back to the connection of the grotesque artwork and the life of the viewers. These creative works we expose ourselves to make the perceiver create as well. The more contemporary an artwork, the more we need our creativity to make sense to it. During such creative activities we not only create a meaning, we create ourselves as well, we form our identities.

The grotesque appears when the image jumps out of the medium and violates our identity, or when it disturbs our life. A radical example is witnessing the potential murderer of Marina Abramović during the performance *Rhythm 0*. But it can also be the claustrophobic experience that Ross describes while watching the video installations of Hatoum or the disturbing meaninglessness of Polke's *Druckfehler* series or when we laugh on Patsy and Edina from *Absolutely Fabulous* while they make fun of the female ideals what we also pursue. Remshardt's example of how performances of immorality shake the spectator out of their amoral existence and pushes them towards reactions against immorality, thus strengthening its morality is also an example. These are only some examples I have discussed above, but violation can happen in uncountable ways, as it is subjective what violates identity, or to put it otherwise, what forms identity. There is no single grotesque, it cannot exist as there is no single interpretational frame, since we all are different. The most interesting feature of the grotesque is that it smuggles self-reflection into the art-work, it drags the spectator into a meta-perspective. Forming identity/self cannot happen extracted from the body, as we have embodied selves. Therefore, if the grotesque is experienced, and it violates our identity, forms our identity, it should also produce physical reactions of our body. What the physical reactions to the grotesque can be should be left to psychologists to study.

Harpham claims that the grotesque is embraced by "aesthetic" artists, who insist on the

nonmimetic character of artistic creation (Harpham 1982:5) As grotesque means the *border of art and life*, and such a subjective thing that one's experience of life we cannot really describe, only the definition of *art* can let us categorise the grotesque in an incomplete way. While searching for the grotesque in contemporary visual arts, I came across with two quite different related concepts of art. The first way to perceive art is to use it as a socio-political weapon, often using already existing elements of culture, or even artworks. Irony and critique plays a major role in this perception of art. Polke's *Druckfehler* series, *South Park*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, as well as the works of Kippenberger can be mentioned as examples. The second way to perceive art is practically the opposite of the first. Here the artist concentrates on his/her inner flows, on the individual instead of the social and tries to express it on the canvas, or with the camera, etc. Art as a transporter of any kind of message is neglected, it is defined as flows of energies. Gómez-Peña's performances concentrate on such an understanding, as well as performances of Abramović, or the paintings of Willem de Kooning. With the terminology of Kristeva I could also claim that the first perception of art concentrates on the symbolic, while the second focuses on the semiotic. As the symbolic needs a social context, as it appears outside the body, the semiotic deals with flows that are inside the individual body. In these two ways to perceive art one can discover an echo of the *grotesque realism* vs. *abject*, as well as of socio-cultural vs. psychoanalytical discourses.

Why was Vitruvius so upset about the grotesque in the works of his contemporaries? It was something opposed to the norm. What can one say in this respect about contemporary grotesque? Does grotesque provoke today as well as it provoked Vitruvius? Harpham writes his book *On the Grotesque* in a time where grotesque becomes less and less possible because of the growing tolerance of disorder, the grotesque becomes "increasingly invisible" (Harpham 1982:xx-xxi).

Flackenberg mention, the *mainstream bizarre*. Being a performance artist, Gómez-Peña experiences how the audience changes. He claims that in *mainstream bizarre* the "spectacle replaces content," that meaning is lost in the process of styling and that it "blurred the borders between pop culture, performance, and 'reality'" (Gómez-Peña 2004:287-8). About this 'reality' he claims that our culture is supposed to be "interactive" where everyone is encouraged to express his/her opinion "as a kind of placebo or substitute for action" (Gómez-Peña 2004:289). He claims that, opposed to Harpham and Flackenberg, he as a performance artist sees the challenge in such a time to keep up with the changes and finds it necessary to open up a space for the audience where the audience can reflect upon itself (Gómez-Peña 2004:298). I do not share the fears of Harpham, because the grotesque, irrespective of its mainstream or underground status, works through its creativity and surprising effects. The border that links art and life is the one that maintains the existence of grotesque in visual culture. What Umberto Eco has claimed about the *open work* already in 1962, seems to hold and even to become natural today. Eco meets contemporary works of art as *open works*, under what he understands that these artworks have no single meaning, their aims are to give special experience to the spectator and invite spectators for various interpretations (Eco 1989:6). About the *open work* in visual culture Eco claims the following:

Its signs combine like constellations whose structural relationships are not determined univocally, from the start, and in which the ambiguity of the sign does not (as is the case with the Impressionists) lead back to reconfirming the distinction between form and background. Here the background itself becomes the subject, or, rather the subject of the painting is a background in continual metamorphosis. Here, the viewer can (indeed, must) choose his own point of view, his own connections, his own directions, and can detect, behind each individual configuration, other possible forms that coexist while excluding one another in an ongoing relationship of mutual exclusion and implication (Eco 1989:86).

Having a look at this quotation from the perspective of my technical definition of the perception of the grotesque, we find similarities. However, I go beyond the choice of the individual's point of view, and focus on what happens in the discourse between the viewer and the artwork. In my perception, not only "the background itself becomes the subject", but the spectator him/herself becomes the subject. Faults in the *open work* are seen by Eco in either the artist's inability of forming a message or the viewer's inability to perceive it. He claims that the more obvious a message is, the more one's interpretation sticks to the schemes, but the more unstructured the received message is, the more possibility of structuring it has (Eco 1989:93). However, he adds that if there is too much information in one artwork, it ceases to be *open work* and rather confuses than informs (Eco 1989:96). Eco himself sees the visual *open work* as an "epistemological metaphor," meaning that contemporary works of art reflect the "discontinuity of phenomena" detectable in the inability to form a unified image of the universe (Eco 1989:90). The openness of the *open work* reflects this discontinuity. In order to gain this special experience described by Eco as discourse between the viewer and the artwork on the one hand, and Gómez-Peña as self-reflection on the other, the spectator him/herself should become the spectacle itself. The role of the grotesque is thus in the moment of perception, when the roles change and the perceiver becomes the object of perception at the same time. The role of the grotesque is in its effect on identity formation. This identity formation is a result of the shock of the grotesque that either strengthens or questions the identity of the spectator by offering a crisis; it requires re-estimations of the identity.

I have discussed here the grotesque as a discourse between the spectator and the artwork, as the *border of art and life*. The *border* I defined with the help of Belting's perception of art, where the medium and the image are in continual fight for the attention of the spectator. *Life* I have described following Harpham, who claimed that reality is the focus of the grotesque and also following Turner, who claims that creative energies are set free when perceiving artworks. The idea of *art* I came across while studying the grotesque can be categorised as social or individual, but most important is its *openness* that Eco defined, or its self-reflexive aspect that Gómez-Peña emphasizes. Thus we could see that the perception of the grotesque from the perspective of *life* focuses on the creative energies one can receive from art, while from the perspective of *art*, it

focuses on how the identity is questioned, formed. The surface where these meet and begin a discourse is in the perception of and the reaction to the provoking, violating, rebelling, hilarious nature of the grotesque.

5. Conclusion

After summarising Bakhtin's grotesque realism, I searched elements of this notion in critical writings on contemporary visual arts. Next to ethnography, philosophy and psychology, it is the field of socio-cultural studies, and concretely the *grotesque realism* of Bakhtin that proves a legacy in contemporary discussions of the grotesque. Next to the socio-cultural discourse (where Bakhtin's *grotesque realism* belongs), psychoanalysis, and especially Kristeva's *abject* is widely used by theoreticians. This shift, however, is not surprising if we compare the two time periods and two cultures these two theorists deal with. With the help of Foucault and Turner, I have argued that the power structures moving the *abject* and *grotesque realism* are similar. They differ so far as in *modern pastoral power* as well as in *liminoid*, individualisation and the seemingly or factual freedom to choice is strong. To such a discourse psychoanalysis applies better than socio-cultural studies. Socio-cultural studies fits more to the pre-industrial societies where the strong social feature of the community is emphasised, that also supports *pastoral power* and the *liminal*. Thus we can discover continuity as well as change in the societies of the Medieval and the Renaissance when compared to contemporary culture. This parallel shows the shift that can also be seen in the studies of the grotesque in contemporary visual arts, where the legacy of Bakhtin is still present, but cannot stand without changes, and also Kristeva's *abject* becomes more and more fashionable.

A reformation of Bakhtin's *grotesque realism* is unavoidable because this theory was written to be applied for the Middle Ages and the Renaissance socio-cultural context. The etymology of the term "grotesque" reveals a strong connection to visual arts, but nevertheless in some studies on visual arts the "grotesque" is often only used as an adjective next to such words as *abject*, *formless*, *realism*. My aim was to propose a revised understanding of the notion via going back to where it comes from: to visual culture and more specifically to the perception of visual arts. Thus from the roles of grotesque in visual arts, I began focusing on a specific role detected in the perception of the grotesque.

Respecting the legacy of Bakhtin, I quote him as my starting point. He claims that carnival, where *grotesque realism* is the most prominent, is a "border between art and life" (Bakhtin 1968:7). Leaving the social and the strong communal aspects of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance where Bakhtin used his *grotesque realism*, I propose subjectivisation and individualisation in reforming this quotation. The border thus becomes the space between the individual subject perceiving and the work of art perceived. Grotesque is generated when the image of this work of art touches the subject, intrudes into his reality, becomes a part of his identity formation. It is when the medium cannot withhold its content, when the painting/film/theatre performance/sculpture ceases to exist, and the grotesque image violates the identity of the spectator. This is a creative process as the

artwork with its violation of the identity, forms the identity at the same time. It either questions or strengthens the existing identity. Answering the question, "What is the role of the grotesque in contemporary visual arts?", I have to say that the grotesque is essential to contemporary visual arts because through the grotesque the perception of visual art becomes not a look, neither a gaze, but an experience of the spectator that will not be forgotten, but that requires interaction, creativity, interpretation, hatred, disgust, laughter – whatever activity that contributes to the identity/self-formation of the spectator.

Irodalomjegyzék

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *Rabelais and His World*. Transl. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge and Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1968.
- Barasch, Frances K. *The Grotesque. A Study in Meanings*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971.
- Belting, Hans. "Image, Medium, Body" *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Winter 2005), 302-19.
- Connelly, Frances S. ed. *Modern Art and the Grotesque*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Clayborough, Arthur. *The Grotesque in English Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Massachusetts: Cambridge, 1989.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power". In Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rainbow eds. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 208-226.
- Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. "Culturas-in-extremis. Performing against the cultural backdrop of the mainstream bizarre." In Henry Bial ed. *The Performance Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. 287-298.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *On the Grotesque. Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. New York and Toronto: Indiana UP, 1966.
- Kort, Pamela. ed. *Grotesk! 130 Jahre Kunst der Frechheit*. München, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel, 2003.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Approaching Abjection". In *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. 1-31.
- Leitch, Vincent B. eds. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York and London: Norton, 2001.
- Mills, Alice. ed. *Seriously Weird. Papers on the Grotesque*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.
- Remshardt, Ralf E. *Staging the Savage God: The Grotesque in Performance*. Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.
- Rhodes, Neil. *Elizabethan Grotesque*. London, Routledge, 1980.
- Thomson, Philip. *The Grotesque*. London, Methuen, 1972.
- Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ, 1982.

© Apertúra, 2010. tél | www.apertura.hu

webcím: <https://www.apertura.hu/2010/tel/torok-roles-of-the-grotesque-in-contemporary-visual-arts/>

Apertura.hu

Image not found or type unknown