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THE COUNTERCULTURAL GROTESQUE IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE, ART, AND OTHER CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

Tesis sometida a la consideración de la Comisión del Programa de Estudios de Posgrado en Literatura para optar al grado de Magíster Litteratum en Literatura Inglesa

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Resumen

En este estudio se analiza lo grotesco como un discurso contracultural y se pretende demostrar que a pesar de los esfuerzos por parte de los grupos hegemónicos por apropiarse de esta forma de expresión, aún existen grupos que utilizan representaciones grotescas como discurso de rebelión. Para tal efecto se estudia tanto el nacimiento de las sub y contraculturas desde el ideal hegemónico de nación, la evolución y los cambios de lo grotesco a través de diferentes periodos, así como la aparición de el grotesco contemporáneo y sus subdivisiones: el grotesco contracultural y el grotesco "pop" o vacío (conceptos nuevos que propone este trabajo).

El análisis de textos se divide en tres instancias representativas del grotesco contemporáneo: sexo, violencia y drogas. En ellas se explora y se expone una visión de la realidad distinta a la propuesta por la hegemonía o por las representaciones del grotesco vacío.

Al tomar lo grotesco como un fenómeno cultural representado de varias formas, tanto la teoría aplicada como los textos analizados pertenecen a diferentes disciplinas (como las artes, las ciencias sociales y la literatura entre otras) de forma que este estudio se convierte en un instrumento aplicable no solo al análisis literario sino también a otras formas de expresión cultural y los fenómenos culturales que estas representan.

Introduction

> *...an aggressive weapon [...] The shock-effect of the grotesque may also be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective.*
>
> Phillip Thomsom, The Grotesque.

> *Not one culture, but many, not one cultural perspective, but a host; not one interpretation of life, but countless numbers....*
>
> Charles E. Bressler, Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice.

My interest in the grotesque begins with Quentin Tarantino's film Kill Bill, Vol. 1. Very few movies have influenced me as much as this one. Since the first moment I saw it, I was overwhelmed by two revelations: one, my (newly discovered) taste for blood and violence, and second, the realization that others share this same attraction. Of course, while some people loved the movie, calling it excellent and even hilarious at times, others affirmed that it was the most horrible and disgusting film ever. Nevertheless, both "groups" coincided in one term to describe the film: "grotesque."

I noticed that this same adjective was frequently applied when describing certain movies, television programs, music videos, cartoons, and other cultural[1] manifestations developed in recent years. Thus, I became more and more interested in the subject matter of the grotesque as an aesthetic form in the contemporary cultural scene. I had always thought of the grotesque only as a way to provoke terror or repulsion in the viewer (like in

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[1] This study is based on the western social and cultural patterns, especially those under the influence of the United States cultural domination. Thus, the grotesque will be analyzed based on western preconceptions, cultural and social patterns since their perception of the grotesque can be totally different from that of the non-western societies. Therefore, the word culture will refer to the western culture that, though it may vary within its limits, there are many similar, sometimes imposed, aspects that these communities share.

It is also important to clarify that the word western, as well as the name of any other hegemonic institution such as the catholic church, will not be capitalized as a symbolic rejection of their traditional and imposed superiority.

the horror movies produced in Hollywood); however, I had the feeling that there was (and is) more in the grotesque than meets the eye. Therefore, I wanted to find a far more complex definition of what the grotesque encompasses, to explore the possible purposes for its use, and to consider its effects on people from a cultural studies approach.

The grotesque has been, since the first usage of the term, a countercultural[2] and underground art form that separates itself from the values and rules of the artistic canon and the ruling groups; thus, the grotesque works as a discourse of resistance and rebellion against the establishment. Its "anti-natural" aesthetic did not fit into the canonical concept of "art"; therefore, it was rejected as a minor form of expression. But how is this canon powerful enough to impose labels on art? What do these hegemonic groups have to do with our appreciation of art and even beauty? Let us begin by defining some concepts, related to these power relations, and their function.

The word "canon" refers to the laws for judgment and criticism imposed and used by artistic groups in power which establish the rules and characteristics that a work of "art" must possess in order to be considered "art." In other words, these groups in power define what art is and what is not, what is worth appreciating as "high art" and what is worthless, vulgar, trivial, and "popular." The groups that determine the canon are part of the major groups known as hegemonic groups. Now, the word "hegemony" refers to the groups in power (be it the church, aristocracy, the state, and so on) which can be local groups in a specific country or region or smaller groups such as the government and the church; or global such as the UN or the USA. These hegemonic groups establish certain patterns,

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[2] The sub and counter cultures are sub groups separated from the main social structures. According to Luis Britto, in El Imperio Contracultural: del Rock a la Posmodernidad, the difference between the two concepts is that the subculture only separates itself from the main group while the counterculture attacks this group in order to establish their place in society (16). These two concepts will be discussed in future chapters.

regulations, and conventions to which the whole social and cultural system must be adapted. Since the members of any given society are socially and culturally predetermined to obey and adapt themselves to the established patterns and rules of the ruling group and to view them as the "natural" order of things, there are behaviors, artistic forms, ideologies that are not socially or culturally validated by the hegemony because they go beyond or against the hegemonic ideology. These cultural manifestations are rejected or minimized as lower forms of expression from the lower social or certain cultural classes.

The grotesque in its beginnings shook the ground of the hegemony, and it has always suffered from exclusion in spite of the changes it suffered throughout the years (the grotesque of the Middle Ages is different from the contemporary grotesque) in order to adapt itself to the cultural and social changes. Since the grotesque opposes the hegemonic aesthetic and social patterns, it has been rejected either as an artistic form or as a valid cultural manifestation. It has also been manipulated by the hegemony in order to transform it into a merely aesthetic product without any countercultural ideological force. In short, the grotesque was quickly devoured by the same group it attempted to subvert.

Nowadays, the grotesque can be considered part of "pop" culture[3]. It has been made a product of mass consumption in order to nullify its subversive power, while making consumers, usually young ones, believe that they rebel against the hegemony (be it their parents, the church, the state, the school, and so on.) Just by turning on the TV, one is bombarded by different forms of grotesque aesthetics in diverse cultural expressions: They are fashionable, they are "in," and they are "on sale." However, there are some individuals and groups that still use the grotesque as a countercultural and underground discourse of

[3] It is necessary to clarify that *pop* and *popular* are not synonymous, being the first one the light and commercial version of the latter. I will give further explanations of my position towards these concepts in the course of this study.

rebellion. These people represent the ones relegated by the hegemony to the place of the others, the rejected ones, the excretion of society. I will explore the separation of these "others" from the hegemonic group, within the concept of the ideal of nation as an imaginary creation. People who do not fit in this "national" ideal become exiles in their own countries. This in turn results in the appearance of sub and countercultures that fight for a position in society, and some of them use the grotesque as their weapon. Thus, the countercultural grotesque makes a statement and sends a message that proposes ideals and ideologies that question, oppose, and challenge the imposed ideology of the main group.

What I propose is that, despite the efforts of the hegemony to control and appropriate the symbols of the grotesque aesthetic in order to suppress its countercultural message, some cultural manifestations manage to present a grotesque that portrays realities, different from the one imposed by hegemonic groups. Although still commercialized, these countercultural voices have not surrendered their subversive roots.

Since the study of the grotesque is a study of different cultural manifestations and power relations between different groups and subgroups, the study of its countercultural phase demands a cultural studies approach as well as a whole variety of theories and "texts." With this kind of analysis of the grotesque, it should be taken into account different cultural productions that best illustrate the cultural relations and the social changes that are taking place. Although my analysis will be based mostly on literary texts, I will also analyze paintings, photographs, music videos, films, cartoons, and whatever other cultural expressions that dare cross my path. In this way, the concept of art will refer to all kinds of cultural production, not only to the traditional concept of the *high arts*, a designation given by the hegemonic groups. I will also concentrate on three aspects of the grotesque which I

consider the most illustrative of the contemporary countercultural grotesque and which I name as chapters of this work: "The Dark Side of Sex," "A 'Horrorshow Tolchock[4]' or the Contemporary Fasination with Violence," and "Drugs: Pleasure, Destruction, and Control." Each of these aspects requires specific theoretical support besides the main theoretical frame; therefore, the texts and theories under study will be interdisciplinary.

The component of the human body—the imperfect and unfinished view of the human body characteristic of the grotesque, as opposed to the perfect and finished body in the canonic aesthetics—is unavoidably intertwined with the three major aspects of the grotesque under study. Therefore, the grotesque human body will be a recurrent element of analysis. Within the chapter called "The Dark Side of Sex," I will examine the vision of some authors who make use of grotesque sexuality—more specifically sexual acts that are socially prohibited—without degrading the minorities (such as women, as usually happens in traditional erotic and pornographic productions) as a means to break up with the patriarchal moral rules. The following two chapters, "A 'Horrorshow Tolchock' or the Contemporary Fasination with Violence," and "Drugs: Pleasure, Destruction, and Control" will discuss violence and drugs as grotesque elements of modern society, being both present in *pop* and *popular* cultures. These elements can be seen as tools of domination over the dissident forces or as means to break the rules of the hegemony. In both cases, the social and personal effects of violence and drugs, whether combined or viewed as separated phenomena, are slightly shown to the public. The grotesque offers a cruder, more realistic vision of the life of the addict instead of the casual user of drugs, and the effects of the unmeasured violence present in today's society: from gang violence to repressive state

[4] The name of this chapter comes from the nadsat (teenage) language used in Anthony Burgess' A Clockwork Orange. According to the "Glossary of Nadsat Language" for the novel, by Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Horrorshow" means good or well, while "Tolchock" means to hit or push; blow, beating. (Burgess, 187-188)

violence. Thus, the grotesque combines elements of sex, drugs and violence from a cruder perspective. These three aspects claim for a re-appropriation of our bodies which have been taken over by the hegemony and transformed into *subjected* subjects, into work force, into puppets, into numbed *junkies*— "The message sent to them by the dominant culture has been clear: Conform and be quiet; deny yourself and all will be well" (Bressler, 264), or as Emily Dickinson says: "Assent, and you are sane; / Demur, —you're straightway dangerous, / And handled with a chain."

It is my objective to rediscover the grotesque in its countercultural phase as a valid form of artistic expression and to differentiate it from the hegemonic empty version. That is why I find this investigation important and relevant, and I hope that at the end of this work, the concept and purpose of the grotesque as a countercultural discourse will be, though just in a few aspects, vindicated as an artistic expression. My purpose is to help re-write and re-appropriate the countercultural grotesque and help restore the power of this "aggressive weapon." Thus, I expect that the reader will be not only revolted, disgusted, and frightened by the encounter with the grotesque, but awakened by a perspective of an imperfect world, different from the one offered by the hegemony. Let the grotesque experience commence!

Hypothesis

In spite of the attempts of the hegemony to *pop*-ularize the grotesque by transforming it into a product of mass consumption, some groups still use grotesque elements in different cultural and artistic productions as a countercultural discourse of rebellion.

General Objective

Rediscover and re-appropriate the grotesque as a countercultural discourse of rebellion in contemporary society by redefining the concept and analyzing diverse grotesque cultural productions (mainly literary texts and examples of other cultural manifestations) in which the human body and its transformations represent a key grotesque element.

Specific Objectives

I. To demonstrate that the concepts of nation and nationality define how people should be and behave, which is why certain individuals do not fit in.

II. To re-define the concepts of "subculture" and "counterculture" and delve into their function within societies.

III. To define the grotesque and its transformation—from the first appearance of the term to its contemporary usages.

IV. To differentiate the countercultural grotesque from "empty" or "pop" grotesque forms.

V. To explore the role of the human body as a key element in the grotesque.

VI. To unveil the grotesque in erotic productions.

VII. To expose two sides of our contemporary violent society: irrational gang violence and repressive state violence.

VIII. To show the grotesque reality behind the use and abuse of drugs.

I. The Ideal of Nation and the Subversive Forces of Sub and Counter Cultures

A. Nation as Myth

> *Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist.*
>
> Ernest Geller, Thought and Change.

> *La insatisfacción con el sentido jurídico-político de ciudadanía está llevando a defender la existencia, como dijimos, de una ciudadanía cultural, y también de una ciudadanía racial, otra de género, otra ecológica, y así podemos seguir despedazando la ciudadanía en una multiplicidad infinita de reivindicaciones.*
>
> Néstor García Canclini, Consumidores y Ciudadanos.

The birth of the subcultures is not gratuitous. It results from a process of unification and rejection of the members of societies and nations by the various groups in power. The nations, or Imagined Communities as Benedict Anderson calls them, create around them ideals of nation and citizens (standards of *submission*, behavior, morality, productivity... imposed by hegemonic groups to satisfy their interests) in which certain individuals and groups do not "fit." The rejected groups and individuals become the *others*: foreigners in their own land, exiles.

Benedict Anderson explores the notion of the nation as myth, created by the hegemonies to unify people in a single feeling of communion and to make use of them as productive work forces or defensive military units under control. Anderson explains the conception of nations as imagined communities because:

> [. . .] regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this **fraternity** that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many

> millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (Anderson 7 emphasis mine)

These imagined comradeships generate a strong feeling of belonging within their members that pushes them to fight for their *mother-land*, no matter the price. The word "fraternity[5]" denotes the idea that the members of a nation are all *brothers* (not sisters,) and that it is their duty to respect and protect their nation as sons would do with their mother. After all, we have been programmed to believe that the nation is even worth dying for. Furthermore, Anderson adds that "[the nation] is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). As mentioned before, all of us, as members of a *nation*, call *brothers* even the people that live in the opposite side of "our" country, including those with different life styles, from different "social classes" and "education," and that we will probably never meet. However, if we were to have the opportunity of knowing each other, all those social, cultural or economic "differences[6]" would possibly separate us as foreigners. It is worth mentioning that these "differences" regarding social class, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, religion, and so on, are also highlighted strategically by the same hegemonic group or state (the group or groups in power that are in charge of the economic, political, social, cultural "administration" of a

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[5] Nations are patriarchal structures in which women are second class "members." Therefore, these nations present themselves as "fraternities" (not sororities) and the citizens are addressed as brothers, sons, fellows, and other sexist appellatives that do not include women as part of the group. Nation is presented as our "mother" not as a way to give women a position of power, but because of the idea of procreation that creates certain obligations with the being that "brought" us to the world. Men owe "her" their lives, so they must be ready to give it away to protect "her."

[6] I do not believe that everybody is the same. We have differences that must be celebrated because that plurality of people is what enriches the cultures. However, the hegemony emphasizes those differences (or creates others) in a negative way. It presents the "differences" as inequalities to exclude the minorities (which usually are the majority in number) from the power structures, and to ensure subordinated groups that will be manipulated (by means of ideology or force) by making them believe they are part of the nation. From now on, the negative "differences" will appear in quotation marks to emphasize its falsity and to separate it from the good, healthy, cultural differences.

nation) that want to "unify" us in a "fraternal" community. For instance, as Salman Rushdie states in "The New Empire within Britain," the British government refers to the citizens as "we," but that "we" is only directed to the caucasian population. He adds:

> One of the more curious aspects of British immigration law is that many Rhodesians, South Africans and other white non-Britons have automatic right of entry and residence here, by virtue of having one British-born grandparent; whereas many British citizens are denied these rights, because they happen to be black (133).

The states highlight the "differences" (in this case racial "differences") among the citizens as long as they are unnecessary. Thus, we have the "bad," the different, the rebellious brothers or sisters that must be *trained* to respect their mother (otherwise, they will be punished or eliminated.) However, when the states need *cannon fodder*, the "different" become equal, brothers, sons of the *mother* nation.

The state promotes the artificial union of "its" citizens by means of a series of images, symbols, and ideologies with the intention of controlling and utilizing them. It creates imaginary characteristics and relations of a particular country in a way that they seem *natural* (something embedded in our genetic code.) María de Los Ángeles Palacios explains that

> Dentro de esta conjunción que se da entre el estado y la nación, es que surge el nacionalismo, como el sentimiento de pertenencia a una comunidad cuyos miembros se identifican con un conjunto de símbolos, creencias y formas de vida concretos y manifiestan la voluntad de decidir sobre su destino. (17)

Of course, citizens do not have a genuine opportunity to decide or build their own destiny outside the nation because they are born in a system that trains and raises them (by means

of these preestablished ideological symbols) as members of a particular *nation* to serve faithfully its purposes. For example, if you, as I, grew up as a "Costa Rican[7]" you will probably be (or consider yourself) a "Costa Rican" all your life. As a "Costa Rican," even if you no longer live in the country, you will identify yourself with "Costa Rican" traditions, its nationalistic soccer[8], certain values, and so on. By "nature," you will *belong* to the group of people called "Costa Ricans," even though, the link is not natural, but cultural and ideological. Timothy Brennan, in "The National Longing for Form," refers to the words of José Carlos Mariátegui about the nation as a myth: "'the nation ... is an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined'" (49). Brennan adds to this idea that "[r]ace, geography, tradition, language, size, or some combination of these seem finally insufficient for determining national essence, and yet people die for nations, fight wars for them, and write fictions on their behalf" (49). As a result, the state is able to manipulate different people, from different contexts within the nation, under the terms of nationalism and patriotism: it is able to create an imaginary "equality" of rights and duties for all the members of the nation.

As an illustration, Roland Barthes, in Mythologies, discusses a photograph in the cover of a Paris-Match magazine in which a young "black" soldier in a "French" uniform is probably saluting the "French" flag. Barthes explains what the picture signifies to him: "[. . .] that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an

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[7] In a similar fashion as with the word "differences," which appears in quotation marks to show it is created or highlighted by the hegemonic groups, the names of nations and nationalities, as imagined entities and conceptions that promote false unions and arbitrary exclusions, will also appear on quotation marks.

[8] Soccer exemplifies the imaginary unions promoted by the national myth. In a game of the "Costa Rican" National Soccer Team, "different" people, including myself, get together in one whole group of brothers that want their team to defeat the foreign enemy as if it were a war in which the sovereignty of the country is in danger. We celebrate the victory and cry the failure while embracing the person next to us—no matter if we know him/her or not.

alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors" (116).

As shown here, the state, in this case the "French" Empire, manipulates the images of its mass media and shows a *colonized* subject immersed in a patriotic and loyal act to "his" nation. He does not question that it is an imposed nation that he believes to serve as a "French" citizen.

As Susan Sontag states, "Si los gobiernos se salieran con la suya, la fotografía de guerra, como la mayor parte de la poesía bélica, fomentaría el sacrificio de los soldados" (Sontag Ante el dolor de los demás 59)

What is not mentioned or reflected in the photograph is that, undoubtedly, the value of that "black" soldier lies only in his duties, service, and personal sacrifice to the nation as a soldier, not in his *rights* as a "French" (though colonized) citizen.

Ernest Renan mentions: "[. . .] the essence of a nation is that all the individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things" (11). Members of nations forget (or are driven to forget) about bloody past events, repressions and oppressions they or their antecessors might have had to experience, and, especially, the

"differences" between them, so that they will act in certain politically specific ways. For instance, the black soldier that Barthes alludes to has forgotten the colonization process in which the "French" Empire imposed its laws, culture and rules on his culture. In times of war, during natural catastrophes, even in a soccer game—all the members of the country are addressed as brothers, and their "differences" are minimized and forgotten. But when it is necessary to keep the dissident voices under control, the state reminds its members of those "differences" that separate the "good" citizens from the "bad" ones. Forgetting is a useful tool of manipulation and control employed by states to erase from and implant in the collective memory certain episodes that may drive people to upset the "order" (in the case of the dissidents,) or trying to gain control (in the case of the "normal" citizens). Rushdie, in "Imaginary Homelands," quotes a line from Milan Kundera that reflects this situation and the position of the dissident groups: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (14). The state implements this forgetting-and-reminding strategy that manipulates the "collective" memory of the subjects by means of the Ideological State Apparatuses—the ideological structures that help to construct and sustain the national myth.

Louis Althusser, in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," also refers to ideology as an *imaginary* creation to subject the individual. Ideology keeps people working under its control. Althusser explains how the system manipulates the images of the productive and unproductive subjects by stating that

> [. . .] the subjects 'work,' they 'work by themselves' in the vast majority of cases, with the exception of the '**bad subjects**' who on occasions provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus [the police, the army,

> among others]. But the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right 'all by themselves,' i.e. by ideology (whose concrete forms are realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses [the family, the school, the church, and so on]). (303 emphasis mine)

Thus, hegemonic groups create their own ideology and *make* their subjects work (for it) and believe (in it) as the *natural order of things*.

Notwithstanding, some individuals clash with the concepts and symbols of the ideal citizen and nation. Some feel excluded, or even persecuted, by the state and its apparatuses. The same ideology that pretends to unify people can also manifest its anger with the subjects (the *renegades*, the *others*) that contradict, confront or disobey its precepts. It deploys its repressive power to persecute, repress, and control them through intimidation or force. Luis Britto, in El Imperio Contracultural: del Rock a la Posmodernidad, maintains that,

> El marginador condiciona de manera angustiosa uniformidad en su propio círculo, al mismo tiempo que **exagera la diferencia del marginado**, al extremo de convertirlo en el *otro*, en lo no *humano*, en el *bárbaro*, el *infrahombre*, el pagano, el *hereje*, el *esclavo*, el *paria*, el *lumpen*, el *enfermo mental*, el *disidente*. Todo sistema cuya capacidad empieza a tener fallas, escinde así el universo en un núcleo conservador de bienpensantes conformistas, opuesto a un enemigo antihumano constituido por desviantes sobre los cuales se proyectan todas las formas del mal. (20-21 emphasis mine)

Ideology unifies (and uniforms) the nation's "good" members and creates within them the *feeling of being at home* while at the same time teaches them to hate, reject, and alienate the

"bad" subjects that "threaten" the stability of their "normal" lifestyle. As an illustration, the social manifestations in the streets of "Costa Rica" against the government's economic, political, or social policies are usually downplayed by a presidential speech that portrays the demonstrators as a "little" crowd of "unsatisfied agitators" who prefer "wasting" their time in the streets, confronting the police, and painting the walls with "silly," and "vulgar" messages, instead of being "productive." The effect of this kind of propaganda manifests itself in the attitude of rejection from the rest of the people towards these "dissidents": they are subjected to a series of insults and separated into university "troublemaking" students and "lazy" Union members who do not want to work and who need to be punished by the law.

Britto also insists that marginalized groups do not have the same possibilities as the hegemony has to alienate the opposers. They have to cohabitate with the same people that reject them and obey the rules of the system that marginalizes them. This creates a clash of values, since they are "sometidos a la valoración contrastante que resulta de regirse a la vez por los cánones de ésta y por los criterios propios" (21). They are in conflict between their own ideologies as a group and the ideology of the hegemony— after all, the reigning ideology represents social and even economic survival. For instance, one cannot tell if socialism is a functional, viable political, and economic ideology since it is immersed in the capitalist system (a system that dominates every aspect of life) that finally absorbs even the leftist groups. So, the members of the socialist groups, unfortunately, sooner or later fall in the discourse they want to subvert in an attempt to survive in a capitalist social and economic structure. The same happens with the feminist groups or individuals. It is almost impossible for a person raised in a patriarchal society to be truly and utterly feminist.

There are always moments in which a "simple," "innocent," sexist comment or an attitude reveals how the patriarchal background, in which all of us live, affects us to the point of contradicting our own ideology and beliefs. This phenomenon of course does not diminish the value of these groups; on the contrary, it manifests the negative domination of the hegemonic groups that try to eliminate any opposing action or ideology. The only option given to the subgroups is to reconcile with the hegemony and relinquish their fight, although this does not mean being accepted as equals but rather being absorbed by the system. Thus, the minorities, the marginalized, and the opposers are separated from the dominant group either by force or by means of ideology; they are rejected by their "fellow citizens," they are condemned by the church (often an important and helpful ally of the state), and are sometimes persecuted by the law. Finally, they become exiles in their own country.

Exiles are usually people who leave their homeland due to political, religious or cultural persecution. They settle in a different country in which they can feel relatively safe and where their lives are no longer blatantly threatened. In "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said discusses the feelings of the exiles: "Nationalisms are about group, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation" (177). A similar experience is felt by the alienated in their own land. They feel that they do no longer belong to the same group as the rest of their "fellow citizens"—they undergo an internal exile. Douglas Kellner, in Media Culture, refers to a similar situation seen in the conflicts of the creation of identity in modern society. He explains,

> The experience of *modernité* is one of novelty, of the ever-changing new, of innovation and transitoriness [. . .] One's identity may become out of date, or superfluous, or no longer socially validated. One may thus experience anomie, a condition of extreme alienation in which one is no longer at home in the world. (232)

Identity, as consequence of imaginarily being a member of a particular group or nation, is constantly confronted by changes (usually imposed by the dominant group usually based on economic benefit) that must be adopted to continue to belong to the group. If the individuals or dissident groups arise in response, they will be persecuted, alienated, and finally left behind. For instance, in Costa Rica, and in many (or most) Latin American countries, in the processes of economic aperture and free trade, privatization and a sly dolarization of the economies, the social groups that reject compromising the country's interest to the transnational companies are portrayed by the governments as reactionaries opposed to progress, as groups of rebels who do not know what is good for the country, and as a handful of traitors. This, of course, is presented in the whole national television network so the rest of "uninformed" citizens will also condemn, reject, and persecute, in one way or the other, these "traitors." Therefore, they have to surrender to the government desire or be discarded from the social sphere.

In spite of the rejection and persecution they undergo, some of these people, whether individually or organized in minor groups, create forms of resistance in order to minimize the hegemonic power, or at least to find a decent position within the social structure of the "nation" in order to be recognized as *human beings*. As a result, the false "equilibrium"

pretended by the hegemonic groups staggers, and the subgroups become a dangerous malady in the power relations.

Nations, thus, are not stable entities but are actually in a state of constant conflict with these subgroups. Anderson points out that "[. . .] many 'old nations,' once thought fully consolidated, find themselves challenged by 'sub'-nationalisms within their borders—nationalisms which, naturally, dream of shedding this subness one happy day" (3). These subgroups do not want to be in a *sub*-ordinated position all their lives since they find in themselves the qualities to be considered first-class citizens, to have access to the same rights as the people who belong to or sympathize with the hegemony, and also to express and celebrate their differences instead of hiding them. The symbols that hegemony creates in order to perpetuate the national myth become ineffective for these groups. They are not as willing to fight *for* as they are to fight *against* a "country" that does not recognize their rights because of "being different." Thus, from these "sub-nationalisms," the minorities, dissidents, and sub or counter cultures emerge in an attempt to vindicate their position as valuable members of society and as *human beings*. Here is where the struggle begins.

B. Subcultures and Countercultures

> *Todo proceso de cambio genera crisis, ya que las estructuras prevalecientes se resisten ante la presencia de nuevos elementos que luchan por instalarse en el sistema.*
>
> María de Los Ángeles Palacios, Estado-nación y nacionalismo.
>
> *Las subculturas son, por consiguiente, formas expresivas; lo que expresan en última instancia, sin embargo, es una tensión fundamental entre quienes ocupan el poder y quienes están condenados a posiciones subordinadas y a vidas de segunda clase.*
>
> Dick Hebdige: Subcultura, El significado del Estilo.
>
> *Holes in our spirit causin' tears and fears*
> *One-sided stories for years and years and years*
> *I'm inferior? Who's inferior?*
> *Yeah, we need to check the interior*
> *Of the system that cares about only one culture*
> *And that is why*
> *We gotta take the power back*
>
> Rage Against the Machine, "Take the Power Back"

Sub and countercultures are not isolated groups of rebels that appear from time to time in the social scene to create problems and to strike at the foundations of the "normal" standards of the *establishment* in order to entertain themselves. On the contrary, they are consequences of a constant natural process in every "healthy" society made up of a heterogeneous group of people. These minority groups or individuals who do not fit in the social, cultural, political or economic system struggle to gain acceptance and respect for their "different" views, lifestyles, ideals and values—for their human condition. But what is the difference between a subculture and a counterculture? Both are social and cultural subgroups separated from the main social or cultural structure. They are the rejected and alienated. They represent the exiles of the world and the excrescence of society. They are

the ones to be exterminated—even if that represents the decline of the social apparatus. Nevertheless, the difference between these groups is quite strong. Subcultures separate themselves from or are separated by the main culture to look for their own lifestyle while, at the same time, they try to be accepted and recognized as part of the main culture—differences and all. On the other hand, the countercultures are far more aggressive groups:

> Cuando una subcultura llega a un grado de conflicto inconciliable con la cultura dominante, se produce una *contracultura*: una batalla entre modelos, una guerra entre concepciones del mundo, que no es más que la expresión de la discordia entre grupos que ya no se encuentran integrados ni protegidos dentro del conjunto del cuerpo social. (Britto 18)

Countercultures are subcultures that rebel and attack, through various means, the hegemonic groups that alienate them and that are not willing to recognize their legitimate existence as members of society. The problems start when the differences that characterize these groups are exaggerated and used by the hegemonic group to alienate or exterminate them as if they were (and fortunately they *are* to a certain extent) a "menace" to the stability of the (imposed) social apparatus and the *status quo*. In this respect, Luis Britto affirms,

> [. . .] la cultura se transforma mediante la progresiva generación de subculturas, que constituyen intentos de registrar un cambio del ambiente o una nueva diferenciación del organismo social [. . .] Dichos procesos son indispensables para la supervivencia [. . .] [U]na cultura inalterable [produciría] la decadencia y desaparición del organismo social. (17)

These transformations are necessary for a culture and a society to develop and to renovate itself. Culture is not static; it is in constant change. Therefore, ideally, the response of the main culture would be to adapt itself to the social, political, environmental, cultural, and economic changes of the world. Britto refers to three different processes, or "styles," a culture can undergo when facing subcultures. A first instance appears when the culture modifies itself to be adapted to the new patterns: "Los procesos adaptativos se realizan con un costo mínimo y en el tiempo óptimo: es lo que llamamos evolución" (18). The second process corresponds to what Britto calls "revolution." It occurs when the culture responds too slowly to the social changes and begins "una violenta destrucción de instituciones e ideologías que han devenido inadecuadas" (18). Therefore, it still permits the social survival of the different groups, but with deeper social and political consequences. The last process and, unfortunately, the most common from my standpoint is "decadence." It ensues when the main culture ignores (on purpose) the changes that are taking place and falsifies or disables the subcultures: "la cultura puede falsificar sus mecanismos perceptivos para impedirles advertir las señales de alarma, o paralizar sus centros de decisión, o inhabilitar los mecanismos de respuesta de tal manera que esta [evolución] no se produzca nunca" (19). In this instance, the main culture responds to the subgroups with denial strategies, trying to nullify them and make them disappear. There is neither cultural benefit nor learning—an *evolution*, according to Britto, does not take place.

I held that this case is the most common; for instance, if we consider the route to globalization, one of the processes that different countries must undergo to unify the markets is to standardize the cultures as a way to ensure similar needs and tastes that will not interfere with the capitalist economic development. This is what Nestor García

Canclini calls "[. . .] un proceso de ensamblado multinacional, una articulación flexible de partes, un montaje de rasgos que cualquier ciudadano de cualquier país, religión o ideología puede leer y usar" (16). This desire of uniformity leads to an ideological attack (mainly through the mass media) in order to suppress the local cultural differences and, to a greater extent, the subcultural differences, and to impose a more "universal" or *Americanized* (as the best example) culture[9]. Moreover, the hegemonic groups, as the bearers of the dominant ideology, possess the power and the sources to spread that ideology. Marx and Engels, in The German Ideology, refer to this phenomenon:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.

[9] Many societies undergo a process of globalization that I rather call *Americanization*. The unification of the markets leads to a cultural uniformity following the "United States" model. So not only does English become the *lingua franca* for any kind of foreign relation (in business, conferences, air traffic control, tourism, technology, and so on) but also their cultural model, consumerism, inserts itself in every other culture—As the "German" band Rammstein says, "We're all living in Amerika." I also want to clarify that the term "America" is in itself a tool for ideological domination since America is a whole continent and not just a country. Some "Unite States" inhabitants consider themselves the "real Americans," implying that the rest of the countries are mere subdivisions, subcategories and inferior cohabitants of the continent. Therefore, as "supposedly" inferior, we, the "Central" and "South Americans" must be dominated. So, from now on, the word "American" will also appear in quotation marks as another imaginary, hegemonic creation.

In addition, Dick Hebdige, in Subcultura: El significado del Estilo, exposes the role of the means of communication in the imposition of an ideology—the dominant ideology—and the strategically restricted access to those same means for the opposing groups:

> [. . .] a poco que pensemos en ello nos daremos cuenta de que el acceso a los medios de difusión de las ideas en nuestra sociedad (esto es, principalmente los *mass media*) *no es* igual para todas las clases. Algunos grupos tienen más voz y más voto, más opciones de dictar normas, de organizar significado, mientras que la situación de otros es más desfavorable, tienen menos poder para producir e imponer al mundo sus definiciones del mundo. (29-30)

The minority groups, the lower economic classes, or the dissidents, among many others, do not have either the economic power to pay for a time in a private communication company (which usually belongs to the hegemonic groups) or the permission of the government to access the state's means of communication. Therefore, the watching population solely receives the ideological message of the most powerful side, and, since there is no significant counterpart, they take it as the only truth (a truth reinforced by the church, the school, and so on.) In "Censorship," Rushdie explains how this practice of censorship, part of the media domination,

> [. . .] can deaden the imagination of the people. Where there is no debate, it is hard to go on remembering, every day, that there is a suppressed side to every argument. It becomes almost impossible to conceive of what the suppressed things might be. It becomes easy to think that what has been suppressed was valueless, anyway, or so dangerous that it needed to be suppressed. (39)

The hegemonic discourse becomes the discourse of common sense, as the natural order of things, while the counterarguments are forgotten. Catherine Belsey, in "Criticism and Common Sense," explains that "Ideology is *inscribed* in discourse in the sense that it is literally written or spoken *in it*; it is not a separate element which exists independently in some free-floating realm of 'ideas' and is subsequently embodied in words, but a way of thinking, speaking, experiencing" (5). Therefore, the voice of the hegemonic group, through mass media, is the only ideology that reaches the population which takes it as the voice of common sense. The voices of the dissident groups are minimized since whenever the hegemony "allows" them to participate in news programs, for instance, their speech is "regulated," and "censored," and the ideological message is interrupted or blurred.

As a result, sub and countercultures confront the dominant ideology with a counter-ideology, the moral standards and values with anti-values and immorality, and, in some cases, the law and the police with crime and violence[10] (or war with manifestations of peace and love). Hebdigue mentions that

> [. . .] las subculturas[11] [and countercultures] espectaculares expresan contenidos prohibidos (conciencia de clase, de diferencia) en formas prohibidas (transgresión de los códigos de conducta y etiqueta, infracción de la ley, etc.). Son expresiones profanas, y a menudo se las censura, significativamente, como «antinaturales» (127)

The main ideology contrasts its own discourse as "true" and "natural" with the "antinatural" discourse of the marginalized as a way to invalidate and nullify their

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[10] Some countercultures recur to extremely violent actions to escape from their subordinated condition. For instance, the separatist group ETA, in "Spain," is a terrorist group that started a war (not only through ideology, but also with bombs) against the "Spanish" government in order to gain the independence of the "Basque Country."

[11] Hebdige does not differentiate between sub and countercultures. It is true that the countercultures are subcultures since they are subordinated to a lower position to the main culture. However, there is an important difference, which I already mentioned, that separates the countercultures from the rest of subcultures: their aggressiveness toward the hegemonic groups.

countercultural power. Thus, the counter groups identify themselves with other minorities that share a similar feeling of alienation and that fight for their rights in order to create stronger alliances and a more powerful voice. As Britto affirms,

> Las contraculturas, como veremos, hablan siempre de un ser humano concreto, definido por una particularidad: joven, mujer, negro, chicano, puertorriqueño, aborigen, homosexual, alienado. Y no lo hacen para invitarlo a disolverse en una humanidad abstracta e impersonal, sino para exhortarlo a manifestar esa diferencia: a enfatizarla hasta **lo agresivo**. (44 emphasis mine)

The discourse of the counterculture is aggressive and, instead of hiding the traits that "differentiate" it, it exalts and shows them proudly to the world as the elements that make up their cultural existence; moreover, the counterculture exhorts other minorities to grasp their diversity and to exhibit it. Otherwise, this group would fall in the same discourse it attempts to subvert: the discourse of universality and uniformity in which "difference" is punished with exclusion.

Sub and countercultures adopt their own cultural symbols[12] (music, clothing, language, and so on) which represent their "differences" and their position in the cultural life. Hebdige explains that

> [. . .] los objetos más triviales –un imperdible, un zapato de punta, una motocicleta—, objetos que pese a todo cobran [. . .] una dimensión simbólica, y acaban convirtiéndose en una especie de estigmas, en las pruebas de un exilio autoinflingido [. . .] objetos cotidianos dotados de un doble significado: por un lado, advierten al mundo «normal» de los peligros de una siniestra presencia –la de

[12] As I mentioned before, hegemony creates a series of symbols (such as national symbols—the flag) in order to control and manipulate its "subjects." As a result, the dissident groups must substitute them with their own symbols of rebellion and difference.

> la diferencia— y atraen sobre sí vagas sospechas, risas incómodas, «iras virulentas y mudas». Por otro lado, para quienes los erigen en íconos y los esgrimen como evangelio o como anatema, estos objetos se convierten en signos de una identidad prohibida, en fuentes de valor. (15, trans. Roche)

The different scares and shocks the "normal" because it represents the prohibited standards of behavior, the "dark side of the force," the anti-aesthetic style that violates all the rules of "normality," and the use of common things in uncommon situations. The effect: repulsion, hate, discomfort, annoyance, although sometimes tainted with admiration and envy because of the courage needed to adopt this position. After all, prohibited things are usually very attractive, but people are afraid of the social or legal punishment. The idea of a "self-inflicted exile," mentioned by Hebdige, may seem confusing since we have been discussing the situation of the sub and countercultures as rejected by the hegemony. However, what the author expresses is that these groups exalt the same differences that the hegemony uses to alienate them as tools to state their position in society.

In the case of the subcultures, as mentioned before, they separate themselves and try to live a parallel life to that of the main culture, while countercultures use their differences as tools of rebellion and as a counter discourse with the purpose of subverting the discriminatory ideology of hegemony and forcing, to a certain extent, a cultural evolution (in other words: a revolution.) This leads to a separation or exile that partly comes from the hegemony and partly from the counterculture. What the subgroups (in general) want is not uniformity without differences, but rather acceptance of those differences. Britto adds that the importance of the countercultural symbols lies in that, "[l]as contraculturas demostraron que movimientos distintos de las clases sociales—definidos por edad, sexo u origen

étnico—pueden convertirse en agentes del cambio social, a medida que lleguen a engendrar **símbolos supraestructurales definitorios de su identidad**, sus valores y sus objetivos" (211, emphasis mine). These symbols become part of the popular culture of these marginalized groups, and, therefore, become symbolic aggressions against the main culture and its own established symbols. Besides, these symbols represent a need for any subgroup that wants to make a statement, to propose a change and to be heard, to be made visible and taken into account. By means of representative symbols, a group creates its identity—it stands out from the crowd and explores its own experience as a living part of culture that is not ruled (though pressured) by hegemony.

The response of the dominant culture is to attack these groups with ideology: an ideological war whose purpose is to destroy dissident groups. As Britto sustains, the hegemony "Debe, pues, sostener una ofensiva ideológica, un tipo especial de ofensiva destinada a devorar a sus propios hijos, a negar su propia capacidad de transformarse" (16). The strategy is to falsify the symbols in which the identity of these groups is based on and, if possible, to make some money in the process. For instance, Britto holds that

> Apoderándose del *jeans* del trabajador manual, de la música del negro, de los deseos de los sectores reprimidos sexualmente, de la irracionalidad del alienado y de la droga del desclasado, [el grupo hegemónico] los promovió con las técnicas gráficas de la publicidad y del *comic*, los difundió con los métodos del mercadeo industrial y los asimiló como glorificaciones de la masificación del consumo. (58)

Formerly rebellious symbols are appropriated by hegemonic groups and transformed into massively consumed products. Consequently, countercultures are transformed by sly hegemonic groups into pop culture. Britto points out that "El pop [. . .] no fue otra cosa

que la masiva apropiación de una simbología de desviantes por una cultura de aparato: la conversión de una contracultura en subcultura de consumo" (36). The symbols that formerly represented a special group with a certain ideology and a particular view of a reality turn into products for the masses: the differentiation is no longer a *dissident* discourse but a *fashion.* It is essential at this point to clarify that every product, whether countercultural, subcultural, or pop is a commercial product. The difference lies in the market the product aims for, the symbolism it carries, and in those in charge of commercializing it. For instance, Britney Spears (the new Queen of Pop?) and the Punk band Crass are both commercialized musical products. The two sell (or used to sell in the case of Crass) their music and tour in diverse countries promoting their respective albums; however, Britney Spears' music sells more probably because it is meant to do so. Her appearance, her lyrics, and her style, for instance, are designed by her promoters and the record company with the sole intention of reaching as many *consumers* as possible, and selling copies of the albums along with other related articles, like clothing, make up, posters, toys, and so on. On the other hand, Crass' productions are composed, played, and recorded to transmit a countercultural message to the audience. Of course, they have a *look*, an image that "goes" with the kind of audience they want to reach, but the main intention is not to sell Crass jeans and perfumes or to win a Grammy or an MTV award, but to spread an ideology: a countercultural ideology. The *pop* market, with Britney Spears, receives an "empty" product that will match the needs of *all* and *none* of the consumers at the same time. As Britto expounds,

> Si el mercado, en fin, ha de preponderar en todos los aspectos de la vida, es obvio que asimismo debe reducir la estética a una mercancía despojada de todo discurso

> coherente, configurada por la complejidad técnica necesaria para atraer la demanda y el eclecticismo acrítico indispensable para cubrir la mayor gama posible del gusto de la misma. (222)

If the product does not carry a particular ideology, people will accept it as "universal" and "representative" of their "reality." Nevertheless, *pop* products are not totally empty of ideology; actually, they *hide* the ideology of the hegemonic groups: consumerism, capitalism, "Americanism," chauvinism, and so on. However, this ideology is not openly stated but hidden in a façade of teenager's problems, beautiful women, expensive cars, and the "perfect American" lifestyle. These visual and musical elements fit the desires or the actual lifestyle of many people, and the *pop* industry does not usually deal with controversial topics regarding politics or social issues unless they can be properly commercialized and accepted by a majority (like women's rights and sexual liberation, hunger, poverty, and so on.) And if it does, it presents these topics in a way that the hegemony is not directly addressed: it comments on the issue without proposing a viable solution. Let us take a song from each, Britney Spears and Crass, as examples.

In Spears' "Oops! I did it again," the persona narrates how she has broken a man's heart by making him feel she wanted a more serious relationship:

> I think I did it again
>
> I made you believe we're more than just friends
>
> [. . . . . .]
>
> It might seem like a crush
>
> But it doesn't mean that I'm serious
>
> 'Cause to lose all my senses

That is just so typically me

[. . . . . .]

CHORUS:

Oops!...I did it again

I played with your heart, got lost in the game

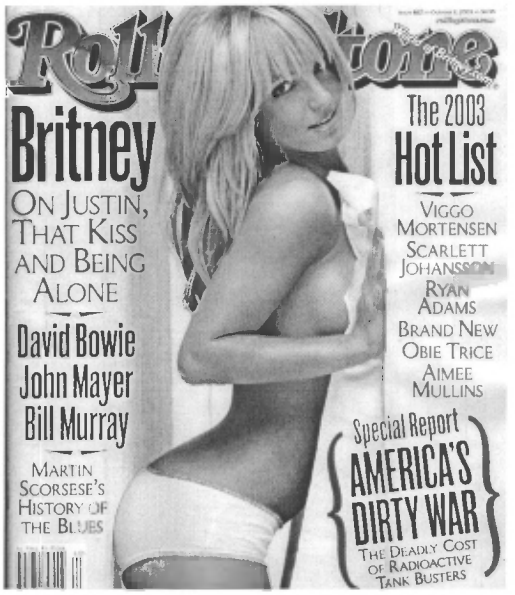
[. . . . .]

Oops!...You think I'm in love

That I'm sent from above

I'm not that innocent [. . .]

These lyrics represent an everyday situation with "love" affairs especially for teenagers who are one of the main targets of the pop industry. The text does not deal with any particular political or social issue. It just presents a pseudo-vindication of women by presenting a female "heroine" playing with boys instead of being cheated by them. However, the song does not proclaim equal rights for women on education, job opportunities and salaries or any reflection of today's gender issues. It is just a portrayal of a "modern" girl enjoying or trivializing the freedom that the Feminist Movement has achieved throughout years of fighting. Moreover, the song expresses a fake regret (Oops!) for playing with the feelings of men, and tells all the teenagers that it is good to betray and cheat others (women or men,) and that girls can be malicious, devilish creatures (a patriarchal view of rebellious women) and not angelic beings "sent from above." By means of the video, in which Spears appears with a very sensual red outfit, the producers ensure the attention of the male counterpart, both teenagers and adults.



On the other hand, "Do They Owe Us a Living? (Well?... Do They?)" by Crass, expresses their rage against a system that rejects them because of a different way of thinking, and exposes how this system tries to train the population by means of the educational system and the television:

> Fuck the politically minded, here's something I want to say,
>
> About the state of nation, the way it treats us today.
>
> At school they give you shit, drop you in the pit,
>
> You try and try and try to get out, but you can't because they've fucked you about.
>
> Then you're a prime example of how they must not be,
>
> This is just a sample of what they've done to you and me.
>
> [. . . . . .]
>
> Don't want me anymore, cos I threw it on the floor.
>
> They used to call me sweet thing, I'm nobody's plaything,
>
> And now that I am different, they'd love to bust my head,
>
> They'd love to see me cop-out, they'd love to see me dead.

[. . . . . .]

The living that is owed to me I'm never going to get,

They've buggered this old world up, up to their necks in dept.

They'd give you a lobotomy for something you aint done,

They'll make you an epitomy of everything that's wrong.

[. . . . . .]

Don't take any notice of what the public think,

They're so hyped up with T.V., they just don't want to think.

They'll use you as a target for demands and for advice,

When you don't want to hear it they'll say you're full of vice.

Do they owe us a living?

[. . . . . .]

OF COURSE THEY FUCKING DO.

Crass openly presents an opposing political ideology to that of the establishment. It also criticizes the conformist and careless position of people and how "they just don't want to think" by themselves. This song, as well as others by Crass, has a countercultural message that does not suit the ideology of the "general public." Besides, in the article "In Which Crass Voluntarily 'Blow Their Own'," the band explains how they not only fought against the hegemonic groups and in favor of social issues, but also how they showed their disappointment towards other famous punk bands (such as The Clash and Sex Pistols) that have "sold" themselves to that same system they were supposed to fight. They believe in punk as "people's music" and a means for revolution. They view the record companies as part of the hegemonic groups that want to transform them into marketable products:

> [. . .] realizing that we were a threat to its control, the first offers started coming in from the enemy. Mr. Big tried to buy us with cheap wine and an offer of £50000 if we'd join 'Pursey's Package'. He also informed us that he could 'market revolution' and that we'd never succeed without his help. It was the first of many offers that we refused, we never looked back and, incidentally, we didn't hear too much more of Jimmy Pursey.

Therefore, they created Crass Records, in order to produce their own records as well as other revolutionary bands. They ignored the persecution of the authority and its censorship and never abandoned their ideology for economic benefits.

The band sold records but also played for free in concerts, supporting other minority and countercultural groups. The ideology carried by Crass is not accepted by the masses of consumers that probably do not identify themselves with other socially marginalized people—the market is shorter as are the profits, but what matters is that they spread their dissident ideology.

Britto views no problem in a product being consumed by the masses, "Lo que sí gravita negativamente sobre la creación, es la apropiación de la misma por una estructura productiva cuyos valores no son **estéticos** [o ideológicos?], sino **mercantiles**" (34 emphasis mine). This commercialization and *massification* of the symbols of sub and countercultures neutralizes their social and cultural function and transforms them into mere products (33). In that way, jeans (mentioned previously as one of the best examples of the appropriation of a symbol by a market), once the symbol of the laborers and of the rebellious youth of the 60's, is now transformed into a new product that can be worn also by the upper classes:

> Del mismo modo el pantalón de *jeans* comprado por un adolescente en los años sesenta denota la intención de adquirir ropa barata, práctica y duradera que lo asimila simbólicamente a un sector excluido (la juventud); mientras que el pantalón de *blue jeans* de marca que adquiere la heroína cultural del *jet set* en la tienda de un modisto exclusivo, connota la afluencia económica y el anticonvencionalismo postizo de la clase parasitaria. (62)

Nowadays, jeans are used by almost every single person, no matter the social class. What is worth noting is that probably not even a quarter (or much less) of these users know about the past symbolism of this piece of clothing: "Mediante este incesante proceso de recuperación," states Hebdige, "se repara el orden fracturado, y la subcultura es integrada como entretenimiento dentro de la mitología dominante de la que en parte emana: como «folk devil» [«grupo maldito»], como Otro, como Enemigo" (130). The main culture steals the subversive significance of the symbols and creates a new one that fits into "normality." Thus, a former ideological symbol of rebellion which reflected the identity of a subgroup

degenerates into an "empty" product of mass consumption (empty of its subversive power, but full of the hegemonic ideology).

Fighting against this appropriation of symbolism of sub and countercultures, groups still strive to create a variety of forms, concepts, and aesthetics that continue to challenge the postulates of hegemonic groups. They evolve as a group in an attempt to survive and to avoid being absorbed by the main culture. As Britto manifests,

> Y toda una serie de estéticas basadas en la tradición, la localidad, la nostalgia y la experiencia íntima son respuestas culturales a las amenazas de fin de la Historia, Globalización y fin del Sujeto; así como el arte conceptual, el *performance*, el arte de la tierra y otras experiencias efímeras y difícilmente comercializables son una resistencia a la fetichización y la mercantilización de obra creativa. (223)

The sub and counter groups develop new techniques and adequate old ones to confront the constant appropriation of their symbols and lives. Everyday, the response of the counterculture becomes more and more aggressive, shocking or disgusting to the "normal," and the hegemony develops new techniques to transform these new shocking symbols into *pop* products. This situation continues in an endless process of creation-appropriation and re-appropriation of symbols and identities.

The grotesque, a rebellious tool for some countercultures, suffers from the same malady of being transformed into a pop product. The main culture employs grotesque elements in an "empty" discourse for the masses. It has become a "fashion": "«To shock is chic»," a statement Hebdige remembers from a Cosmopolitan magazine (133). Nevertheless, some people still use the grotesque discourse as a way to transmit a message of rebellion and of

identification with the alienated minorities through the language of horror, repulsion, and excess.

The following chapters will explore both the concept of the grotesque as a countercultural discourse that is still alive and which has not been completely consumed and appropriated, as well as its counterpart—the "empty" grotesque—as the endeavor of the hegemonic groups to swallow its countercultural symbolism in order to nullify a subversive and "dangerous" practice.

II. The Grotesque as a Countercultural Discourse: Towards a Definition of the Contemporary Grotesque

A. General Definitions of the Grotesque

> *¿Hay un factor que es común a los cuadros, las estampas gráficas, y las expresiones literarias de toda índole que acabamos de estudiar? ¿Tiene sentido el hecho de que el idioma al que nos hemos atenido en vasta medida, pese a la diversidad de acepciones dadas al vocablo, siempre haya vuelto a confrontarnos con la misma palabra 'grotesco'? Creemos que si, por más que a semejante concepto atemporal de lo grotesco no correspondan todas las cosas que en el transcurso del tiempo han sido designadas con esta palabra.*
>
> Wolfgang Kayser, Lo Grotesco: Su configuración en pintura y literatura

> *Las diferentes sensaciones de contento o disgusto obedecen menos a la condición de las cosas externas que las suscitan que a la sensibilidad peculiar de cada hombre para ser grata e ingratamente impresionado por ellas. De ahí proviene que algunos sientan placer con lo que a otros produce asco; de ahí la enamorada pasión, que es a menudo para los demás un enigma, y la viva repugnancia sentida por éste hacia lo que para aquél es por completo indiferente.*
>
> Immanuel Kant, Lo bello y lo sublime

The grotesque appears in the scene of *pop* and popular culture as a fashion and as a rebellious discourse. Its aesthetics shocks the viewer who feels terrified and disgusted by the "anti-natural" arrangement (or disarrangement) of its elements. It serves the purpose of some groups to present a different view of "the reality" exposed by hegemonic groups. At the same time, it is used as a fashion and a business that not only terrifies and disgusts, but also fascinates and attracts the attention of people. But what is exactly the grotesque? What do we see or feel when we use the term to describe something? Why do *I* refer to the "contemporary" grotesque instead of the grotesque in general?

The Dictionary of the Encyclopædia Britannica defines the grotesque as "a style of decorative art characterized by fanciful or fantastic human and animal forms often interwoven with foliage or similar figures that may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature," or "a piece of work in this style." As an adjective, it is defined as: "of, relating to, or having the characteristics of the grotesque as a: FANCIFUL, BIZARRE b: absurdly incongruous c: departing markedly from the natural, the expected, or the typical. Synonym see FANTASTIC." Wolfgang Kayser, in Lo Grotesco: su configuración en pintura y literatura, describes the grotesque as "el contraste pronunciado entre forma y argumento, la mezcla centrífuga de lo heterogéneo, la fuerza explosiva de lo paradójico, que son ridículas y al mismo tiempo producen horror" (60).

Additionally, Mikhail Bakhtin, in La Cultura Popular en la Edad Media y el Renacimiento, refers to the conception of the grotesque proposed in 1788 by the "German" critic Flögel: "lo que se separa considerablemente de las reglas estéticas corrientes y contiene un elemento material y corporal claramente destacado y exagerado" (38). But are these definitions representative of what we think of when describing something (a cultural production or even an everyday situation or object) as grotesque? Or do we have a different idea in mind? The concept of the grotesque has changed throughout time, depending on the context and the perception of the viewers. What a person, in the Middle Ages, considered grotesque might be seen as amusing by our grandparents and "normal" for today's teenagers. Therefore, I find it necessary to examine the variations that this form of expression has suffered until the current use of the term and to define the contemporary concepts of the grotesque

The grotesque has been, since the first usage of the term, a countercultural and underground[13] art form that separates itself from the rigid values and rules of the artistic canon. According to the classicist view, it represents an "aberration" of the traditional representations of "nature" and "reality." Bakhtin explains that the origin of the word *grotesque* took place during the 15th century when a kind of ornamental painting was discovered in grottos, in Rome and other parts of "Italy," and was given the name *grottesca*. He mentions that

> El descubrimiento sorprendió a la opinión contemporánea por el juego insólito, fantástico y libre de las formas vegetales, animales y humanas que se confundían y transformaban entre sí. No se distinguían las fronteras claras e inertes que dividen esos «reinos naturales» en el ámbito habitual del mundo [. . .] tampoco se percibe el estatismo habitual típico de la pintura de la realidad: el movimiento deja de ser de formas acabadas (vegetales o animales) dentro de un universo perfecto y estable; se metamorfosea en un movimiento interno de la existencia misma y se expresa en la transmutación de ciertas formas en otras, en la imperfección eterna de la existencia. (35)

These strange paintings did not correspond with the notion of art of the period; therefore, they amazed and shocked the critics who could not comprehend or accept the "anti-natural" mixture of elements. Expanding this notion, Kayser adds the element of the uncanny:

> Para el renacimiento, el término *grotesco* [. . .] encerraba no sólo el juego alegre y lo fantástico libre de preocupación, sino que se refería al mismo tiempo a un aspecto

[13] The Cambridge Dictionary of American English defines "underground" as something "secret or hidden, usually because it is not traditional or is shocking or illegal," or as "an organization that secretly works against those in power." The grotesque, as we will see, represents a *non-traditional* artistic expression that the hegemony tries to keep hidden because of its "abnormal" and "unreal" representations of the world. Moreover, dissident groups employ the grotesque as a tool to fight that same hegemony.

> **angustioso** y **siniestro** en vista de un mundo en que se hallaban suspendidas las ordenaciones de nuestra realidad, quiere decir, la clara separación de los dominios reservados a lo instrumental, lo vegetal, lo animal y lo humano; a la estética, la simetría y el orden natural de las proporciones. (emphasis mine 20)

In both instances, the inversion and suppression of the "natural" or established order of things, along with a feeling of anguish due to disproportion and inconsistency, were the key elements of this newly discovered art form which, as a consequence, was not considered "art" by the classicists. The artistic canon only recognized as art any "genuine" representation of the world in a "realistic" way. The classicists wanted a "reality" which they could distinguish—a depiction of the world in which the separation between animals, plants, objects and human beings was clearly established. Phillip Thomson, in The Grotesque, refers to Marcus Vitruvius Pollio and his reaction to this kind of "degradation" of the arts:

> He, the classical-minded critic, is outraged by the willful disregard of the principle of mimesis or realistic reproduction of the familiar world, and by the transgression against the laws of nature and proportion. It is an attitude towards the grotesque which has been common ever since, particularly in ages where classical notions of art and literature prevail.

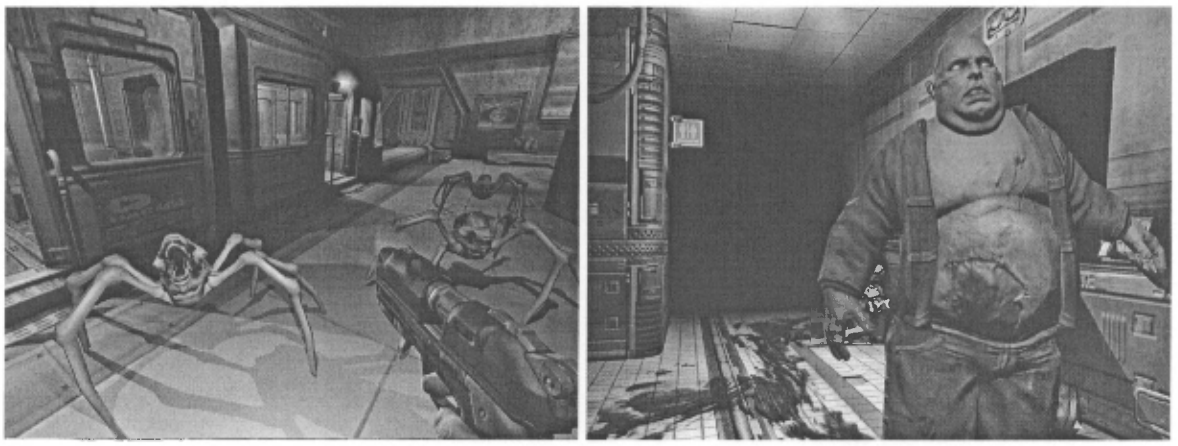
The grotesque representation of the world was not as "clear" and "beautiful" as nature; rather, it appeared as an exaggeration, an impossible mixture of different things, or an anti-natural or fantastic hallucination that provoked in the spectator, at the same time, laughter and horror, fascination and repulsion. This new aesthetic presented a type of language that rebelled against the ideal of a "real" and "perfect" world, as it was portrayed by the "high

arts"—a world which was (and is) actually anything but perfect. Moreover, as the grotesque evolved from just ornamental paintings to other artistic forms and artists experimented with it, it started showing an unusual, ambivalent perspective of the world and humanity which was unpleasant but true (and it was unpleasant precisely because it was true.) In fact, this is what separates the grotesque from the fantastic. Thomson explains that

> Conversely, if a literary text 'takes place' in a fantasy-world created by the author, with no pretensions to a connection with reality, the grotesque is almost out of the question. For within a closed fantasy-world, anything is possible. The reader, once he is aware that he is confronted with such a closed world, accepts the strangest things without turning a hair, for he is not being asked to understand them as real.

The world of the fantastic allows extravagances and excesses without troubling the viewer's perception of the world because he or she knows it is false. However, the world of the grotesque presents our world, our lives from a different angle.

For instance, video games present the horrors of war and all the violence and suffering in it as just that—a game. Doom is a famous ultra violent video game in which the players have to find their way through labyrinths while killing not only human beings, but also fantastical deadly and horrible beasts. The game presents high quality sounds and graphics that make the experience more realistic. The sound of the guns, the pieces of the enemy's bodies spread over the floor, the blood on the walls... These horrible images that in real life would be intolerable and shocking, in the game turn to be exciting. We know that the world of Doom is not our world. We know that it is a fantasy world in which we are safe and where those horrors (at least the beasts) do not exist.



Doom III adds more realism to the killing experience; however, we always feel safe since we know that it is just a fantasy world and that we are not killing anybody or at risk of being killed.

On the other hand, Dalton Trumbo's novel Johnny Got His Gun presents a different view of war from the point of view of a wounded soldier. The narrator describes Johnny's horrible memories of war as he, little by little, discovers that his whole body was mutilated:

> So he'd never hear again. Well there were a hell of a lot of things he didn't want to hear again. He never wanted to hear the biting little castanet sound of a machine gun or the high whistle of a .75 coming down fast or the slow thunder as it hit or the whine of an airplane overhead or the yells of a guy trying to explain to somebody that he's got a bullet in his belly and that his breakfast is coming out through the front of him and why won't somebody stop going forward and give him a hand only nobody can hear him they're so scared themselves. The hell with it. (10-11)

Just as we mentioned the fascinating sound and images in Doom (that we know are part of a fantasy world), Trumbo's novel explores the horrible sounds, the atrocious images, and the painful feelings experience by a soldier that, though fictional, lived a war that resembles the real wars that tormented our world: World War I and II, Vietnam, Bosnia... We are faced to a common war situation in real life. We know that it is not fantasy and that in war

time, people really die in horrible manners. We do not feel as safe now as when we play Doom. Nonetheless, if we have not experienced the horrors and crimes of a real war in our country and in our own body (or we just have conveniently forgotten them), we might still feel that Johnny's experience does not belong to our "reality"— since in our "beautiful" world, horrible things like wars and genocides, happen in far away countries.[14] The reason is that our "reality" is not always real but a creation of the hegemonic group and as such, it is beautified by artistic means. Kayser also explores the idea of the world of the grotesque as detached from the "real" world:

> [. . .] *lo grotesco es el mundo distanciado.* Pero esta afirmación requiere todavía algunas explicaciones. Podría decirse que, el mundo del cuento de hadas, visto desde fuera, es extraño y exótico. Pero no es un mundo distanciado. Para que así sea, deben revelarse de pronto como extrañas y siniestras las cosas que antes eran conocidas y familiares. Es pues, nuestro mundo el que ha sufrido un cambio. (224-225)

The fantasy world is not detached because it was never part of the "actual" world; therefore, it is viewed without disgust or fear. On the contrary, the world of the grotesque disturbs us because it represents the "real" world that appears "transformed" in front of us. We feel detached because even though we identify the elements in the grotesque world as

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[14] Angel Gonzalez, in his poem "Primera Evocación" portrays the way in which the governments minimize the dangerous consequences of wars by presenting them as harmless, small disturbs that are affecting others, not us:

[...]
la guerra ha comenzado,
lejos -nos dicen- y pequeña
-no hay por qué preocuparse-, cubriendo
de cadáveres mínimos distantes territorios,
de crímenes lejanos, de huérfanos pequeños...

part of our "reality," at the same time, we cannot connect those disarranged elements with the established organization of that "reality." However, the "transformation" is actually a *revelation* of the world from a different, though true, point of view. Moreover, Thomson refers to Chesterton's view of the grotesque and adds:

> 'that the grotesque may be employed as a means of presenting the world in a new light **without falsifying** it', i.e. that it may be a function of the grotesque to make us see the (real) world anew, from a fresh perspective which, though it be a strange and disturbing one, is nevertheless valid and realistic. (emphasis mine)

Therefore, the grotesque is not an entirely imaginary creation (although it possesses some imaginary elements) but a representation of a reality from a different perspective—not the classicist reality of the perfect world, but the side that we usually avoid seeing because it is not "beautiful.[15]" Thomson views this realistic element as what makes the grotesque so powerful. The world that we consider or were taught to believe as stable and familiar turns unknown and dangerous.

As mèntioned before, Kayser introduces the concept of the uncanny [*unheimlich*] as characteristic of the grotesque. He explains the duality or ambivalence of the grotesque (as its mixture of elements provokes opposing feelings and reactions in the spectator) as a result of the transformation of the familiar world. He adds that,

> El estremecimiento mezclado con la sonrisa tiene su base justamente en la experiencia de nuestro mundo familiar –que aparentemente descansa en un orden fijo—se está distanciando por la irrupción de poderes abismales y se desarticula renunciando a sus formas, mientras van disolviendo sus ordenaciones. (40)

[15] The concept of beauty, as will be developed in the course of this study, is an ideological imposition of the hegemony. Therefore, it is the hegemony which establishes the patterns of "beauty" and "ugliness" and not our "natural" response to people or things.

The term "familiar" refers to all those established patterns that we recognize as "normal," and its transformation represents not only a metamorphosis but also a change in the traditional arrangement of the elements. Moreover, Sigmund Freud refers to the uncanny as "...aquella variedad de lo terrorífico que se remonta a lo consabido de antiguo, a lo familiar desde hace largo tiempo" (Lo ominoso 220). It is not an unknown world that is presented to us. It is our world, our "reality," but it includes all the features we have wanted to keep hidden, unseen, and apart. Freud refers to Shelling's definition of the *unheimlich*: "Nos dice que *unheimlich* es todo lo que estando destinado a permanecer en secreto, en lo oculto, ha salido a la luz" (225). There are certain elements of our societies, families and ourselves that we want to keep concealed because they reveal aspects that we do not like to show, and, when they come to light, they shock. This is not because something different or unknown was revealed but because something familiar that was intended to be forgotten found its way back to us.

Societies portray the *unheimlich* features that are revealed by the grotesque, "monstrosities" we have to fear—everything that surpasses the line between order and disorder, beauty and ugliness, submission and rebellion becomes "monstrous," the cause of fear and hate. Monstrosity then is imposed by the hegemony as a way to control and alienate the opposers, the dissidents, or any other element that does not correspond to the established social or aesthetic "order." Notwithstanding, this monstrous transgression is used by some subgroups as tokens of their rebellion. The subversive nature of the grotesque lies in its contravention of the hegemonic aesthetic rules. Thomson sustains that

> The essentially abnormal nature of the grotesque, and the direct and often radical manner in which this abnormality is presented, is responsible perhaps more than

> anything else for the not infrequent condemnation of the grotesque as offensive and uncivilized, as an affront to decency and an outrage to 'reality' and 'normality'—or, expressed in the less obviously moralistic language of aesthetic criticism, as tasteless and gratuitous distortion or forced, meaningless exaggeration.

Therefore, the grotesque challenges, dislocates the established aesthetic patterns imposed on us by the hegemonic groups that alienate this "aberration" from the "high arts," along with a few exceptions of grotesque art that was (and is) appropriated and "exorcized" from the monstrosity of opposition and rebellion. The grotesque opposes and subverts the aesthetic regime and develops an anti-aesthetics—a variant from the canonical aesthetic that advocates for a more intellectual, not only emotional, response to social and political issues.

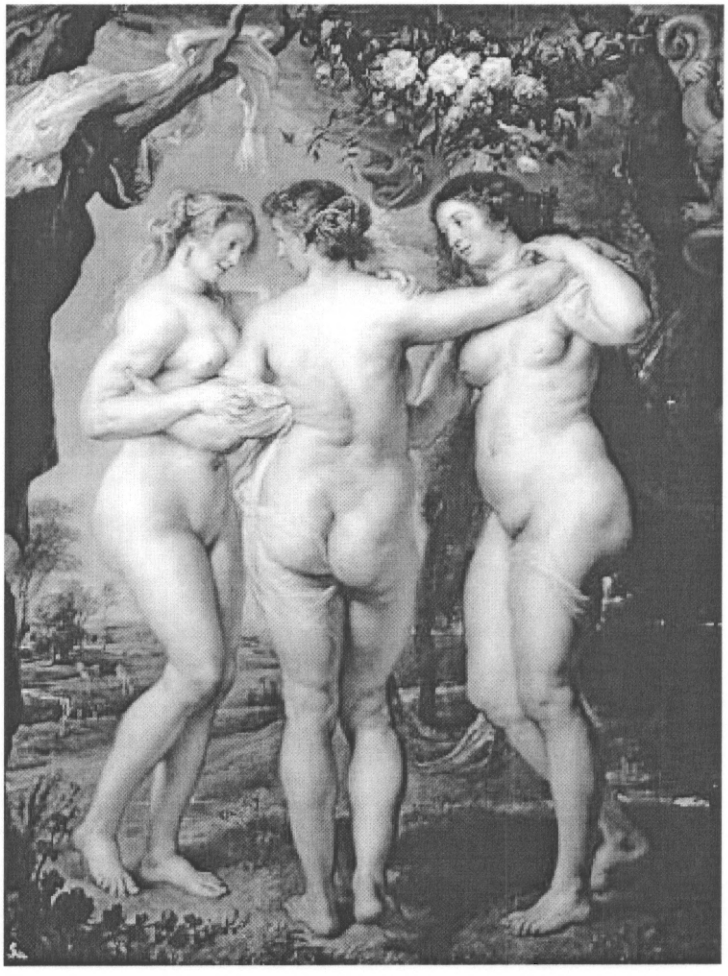
B. Dissident Monstrosity and Grotesque Anti-aesthetics

> *El Poder monstrifica a sus adversarios para aterrorizar. La monstrificación es razón de estado.*
>
> Rafael Ángel Herra, Lo monstruoso y lo bello
>
> *For only what does not fit into this world is true.*
>
> Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory
>
> *In short, the last word of the discourse of the anti-aesthetic is not the quality of experience but the action. (33)*
>
> Sung-Bong Park, An Aesthetics of the Popular Arts

The grotesque embodies a particular aesthetics that I would rather refer to as anti-aesthetics. It transcends the aesthetic conventions of the "high arts," continuously fighting the hegemony's attempts to appropriate this form of expression in order to regulate it and to diminish its subversive force. In the previous section, we discussed the role of the hegemonic ideology in the creation of fictitious social and cultural rules to control its subjects. The aesthetic field, which will be discussed in this chapter, does not escape from the influence of hegemonic ideology. Instead, it serves as one of the ideological tools of domination and alienation used by power structures. Aesthetics determines what must be considered art. Furthermore, it defines what should be judged as "good" or "bad" art, "beautiful" and "ugly," or "ugly" but "artistically beautiful." In Invitación a la estética, Adolfo Sánchez Vásquez defines aesthetics as "...la ciencia de un modo específico de **apropiación** de la realidad, vinculado con otros modos de **apropiación** humana del mundo y con las condiciones históricas, sociales y culturales en que se da" (57 emphasis mine). There are two main observations for this quote: first, Sánchez recognizes the historical, social, and cultural influences within the aesthetic practice. The aesthetic experience is not

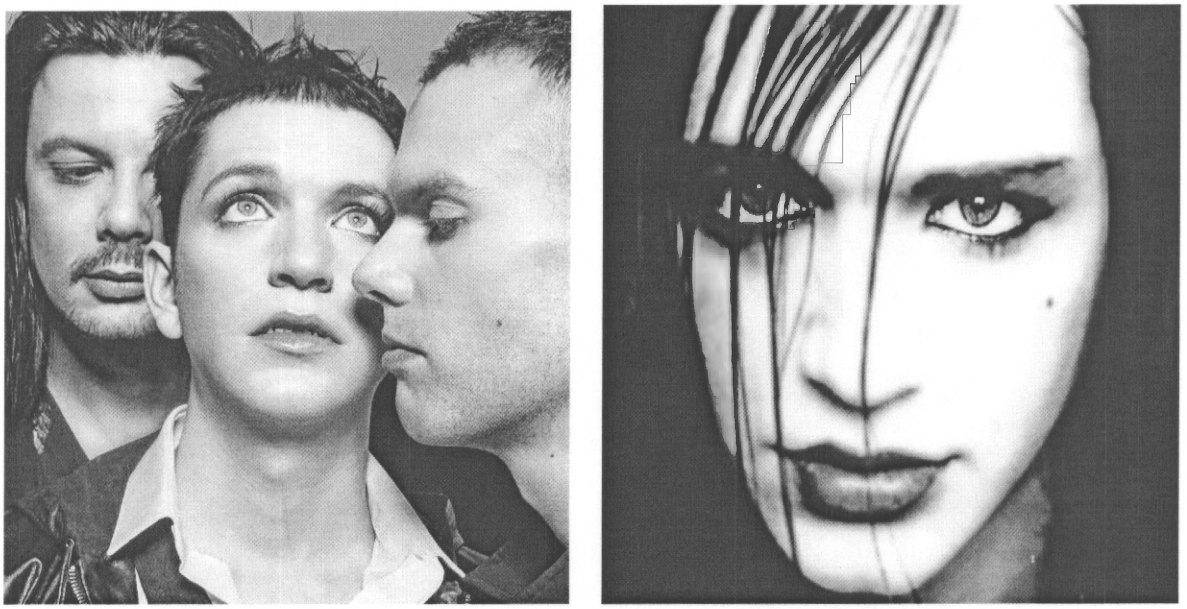
permanent or unchanging, but evolves along with the historical, social, and cultural changes of a particular society. Second, the word "appropriation" suggests that the dominant ideology—that of the hegemony— "appropriates" the aesthetic experience by ideologically imposing a series of models of beauty and ugliness.

Societies create patterns of beauty and ugliness that are depicted in the arts and also permeate our everyday life. These patterns change according to the contexts of specific societies. For instance, there were periods in which an overweight woman was considered beautiful; while today, the prototype is of a thinner (I would say skeletal) kind.



"The Three Graces," a painting by Peter Paul Rubens, represents the concept of beauty in the 17th century when beautiful women were portrayed with bodies that, according to the contemporary standards, are considered overweight and not pretty.

In the case of men, the concepts and appreciation of "virility" or "femininity" also change through time. For instance, the concept of the *metrosexual*[16] arises as heterosexual men started to take care of their appearance in the same way that homosexuals used to do. Eye makeup, lipstick, lotions, and other beauty products that were formerly exclusive for women become more and more everyday products for the metrosexual man—an attitude that is still condemned by the most conservative male and female groups as the "feminization" or "homosexualization" of men. Moreover, androgyny, "having the characteristics or nature of both male and female" (Merriam-Webster's) is seen by many people as a characteristic of beauty, especially in men.



Brian Molko, singer of the band Placebo, perfectly represents the contemporary androgynous man.

[16] According to Encyclopedia Wikipedia, Metrosexual is: "[. . .] a term coined in 1994 in an article in the *The Independent* by British journalist Mark Simpson, shortly after the publication of his book about contemporary masculine identity Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity. In his seminal essay, Simpson described the effect of consumerism and media proliferation, particularly the men's style press, on traditional masculinity. The metrosexual he says is an urban male of any sexual orientation who has a strong aesthetic sense and spends a great deal of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle."

There are, of course, what we can typically label as "universal" or "archetypal" symbols of "beauty" (a red rose for instance.) These symbols have been traditionally considered beautiful for centuries; therefore, their beauty is never questioned. However, there are many other examples of objects that were previously regarded as beautiful and now are considered ugly (or vice versa.) Edmund Burke, in On the Sublime and Beautiful, defines beauty as "[. . .] some quality in bodies acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses. We ought therefore to consider attentively in what manner those sensible qualities are disposed, in such things as by experience we find beautiful, or which excite in us the passion of love, or some correspondent affection."

Furthermore, Umberto Eco, in The History of Beauty, explains how the aesthetic theory defines the concept of ugliness as the opposition of beauty. He mentions that

> Various aesthetic theories, from discordance to the Middle Ages, see Ugliness as the antithesis of beauty, a discordance that breaks the rules of that proportion (cf. chapter III) on which both physical and moral Beauty is based, or a lack of something that a creature should by nature possess. (133)

It is difficult to determine to what extent (if it is at all) our reaction towards something "beautiful" or "ugly" occurs from a natural reaction, or if it has to do with that "universal" and "unchanging" beauty or ugliness of some things. Scientists have tested the reactions of babies toward "beautiful" and "ugly" people and discovered a preference for the "beautiful" ones. For instance, Alan Slater, researcher at the University of Exeter, claims that "Attractiveness is not in the eye of the beholder, it's innate to a newborn infant" (qtd. in Gosline). He showed pictures of women, previously rated by adult men in a 1-to-5 beauty scale, to newborn babies. Some of the babies were one day old. The result was that the

babies spent more time staring at the pictures with the higher beauty rate. Nevertheless, Slater suggests that the reason for that preference is that beautiful people have the characteristics of the prototype human which babies recognize. But, is it part of our instinct to distinguish these patterns of "beauty"? Could these archetypes be inherited from our parents in the genetic code? The answers are still unknown; however, what I propose is that a great part of our reaction toward objects, people, or situations is influenced by our cultural baggage and the ideological imposition of the hegemony and not only from an instinctual or natural reaction. In other words, those qualities that Burke alludes to are social conventions that we are trained to recognize. Moreover, in today's society the process of globalization helps the "universalization" or "standardization" of these conventions by means of the mass media and products of mass consumption.

Vitruvius disliked the grotesque because it did not represent a "real" view of the world (this attitude has been commonly found throughout time among the artistic canon.) However, what he considered "reality" was not truly realistic. It excluded the horrifying, disgusting, and ridiculous elements that do exist in our world, and, if represented at all, they were portrayed in ways that diminished the horrifying qualities by means of "artistic beauty." Rafael Ángel Herra, in Lo monstruoso y lo bello, refers to the arts as a means of creating fictitious worlds instead of showing a "reality:"

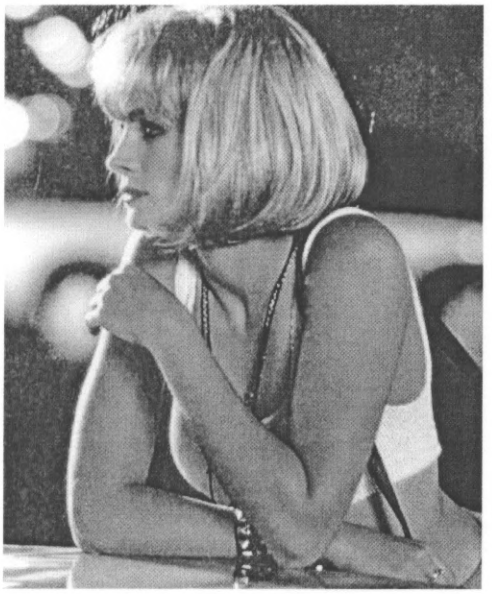
> Las bellas artes pertenecen a uno de esos tantos instrumentos de unión. Su recurso es negar el mundo, es decir, proponer y crear mundos ficcionales alternativos, adecuados a la conciencia, perfectamente normados, que eviten la desdicha del desgarramiento: si conciencia y realidad no se adecúan, si el hombre es o se cree

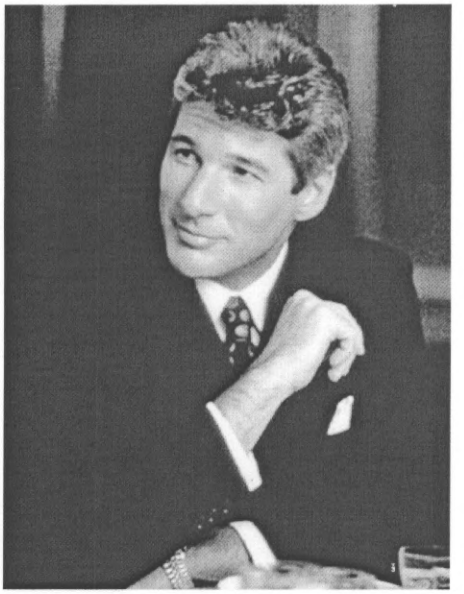
> infeliz, entonces inventa artefactos a su imagen y semejanza, artefactos propios para vivir en ellos y superar así la tensión. (85)

The artistic production creates fantasy worlds in which the real world appears less threatening and its repulsive, horrifying elements are "beautified." They deny the horrible, scary reality in which we live by illustrating that reality as beautifully as possible. Herra expands this idea by stating that

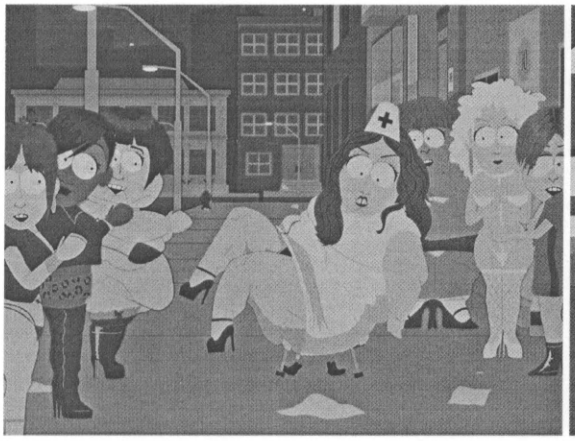
> Las bellas artes sirven para buscar el mejor de los mundos posibles. Nuestro mundo, así como es, resulta inaceptable. Produciendo lo bello, en el crear y en la recreación contemplativa de su plusvalor, se producen formas nuevas, fascinantes, ficcionales que no son el rostro mismo, el rostro desagradable de ciertas cosas. La condición ficcional del arte, aun cuando enuncie mimetismos espantosos y calcos de la vida cotidiana, hace tolerable lo que en vivo es intolerable. [. . .] En la vida cotidiana, representarse algo real como ficticio tranquiliza. (99)

Therefore, we can accept representations of horrifying things in "beautiful," fictional ways since that creates a feeling of tranquility because what threatens is not considered reality but fantasy. Art transforms an ugly, devastating reality in a beautiful work of art. Herra adds that "Lo real –la guerra, el crimen, el incesto, la mortificación-: he ahí lo feo en sí y por sí. Pero lo feo, cuando traspasa el límite de la realidad, gracias al trabajo formal del artista, se reordena de cierta manera y se vuelve irreal, ficticio, y es entonces hermoso" (Herra 74). Social problems such as poverty, child prostitution and pornography, drug abuse, and so on, are romanticized by means of the arts. Therefore, the "normal" citizen is able to look at those social problems without remorse or distress.





Movies such as Pretty Woman beautify and romanticize the life and problems of the prostitutes by presenting a gorgeous, sweet prostitute (Julia Roberts) who finds a "prince charming" (Richard Gere) that liberates her from her suffering (and only beautiful prostitutes are redeemed.) The social problem is manipulated so that it becomes safe enough to "face." On the other hand, the cartoon South Park presents a more realistic (grotesque) picture of prostitution. It reminds us that not all prostitutes are "pretty women," and that the "prince" is not always "prince" or "charming."



Eco also points out the role of art in the falsification of our reality. He says that "although ugly creatures and things exist, art has the power to portray them in a beautiful way, and the Beauty of this imitation makes Ugliness acceptable" (133). So, we are dealing here with a falsifying strategy that deceives the viewer (a viewer who probably wants to be deceived) by masquerading reality and alienating certain parts of life that exist outside the concept of beauty. Therefore, the ugly becomes the token of the alienated groups.

The process of classification of objects (and people) into "beautiful" and "ugly" is aesthetic and also political. By means of the "high arts," the hegemonic group not only puts make-up on our view of "reality"—it exposes only the beautiful things in life or manipulates the ugly ones to make them bearable—but also, it uses aesthetics to remove any discourse from the work of art, since aesthetics is considered an experience of the senses, not of the intellect. Therefore, the object that is being aesthetically analyzed (its original function, its ideological or historical background) is not important but its beauty and the sentiments it provokes in us. For instance, Sánchez gives some examples of artistic productions that were created without any aesthetic purpose: 1) The rupestrian paintings of a bison painted 15 thousand million years ago with magical purposes. It was believed that the more realistic the painting was, the more possible it would be to hunt the animal. 2) The Holy water basin from the 12th century, a bronze pile worked by Rainer van Huy for a church in "Belgium," that is used in the religious ceremony of baptism. 3) The sculpture of the "Aztec" goddess Coatlicue, the goddess of life and death, which provoked respect and fear in its believers (82-87). These three objects had a specific function when they were created; however, that purpose is not important for the aesthetic experience. The function of these objects is removed, as they cross the lintel of a museum, in order to allow just the senses, not the mind, to react towards them. The only object that is still used for its original purpose, in special ceremonies, is the bronze basin since it belongs to a hegemonic institution: the catholic church. Finally, the symbolism of Coatlicue's sculpture was strategically forgotten as it represents a pagan, anti-hegemonic religion. This practice of symbolic removal proved to be useful for the hegemonic groups as a way to neutralize the discourse of a possible countercultural expression, and to transform it into apolitical art.

From this position, I define the countercultural grotesque as an anti-aesthetic experience[17]. The shocking effect that the grotesque aesthetics had (and has) on people transforms it not only into a condemned art form, but also into a tool of rebellion for dissident groups and artists. H. Foster differentiates aesthetics from anti-aesthetics:

> 'Anti-aesthetic' also signals that the very notion of the aesthetic, its network of ideas, is in question here: the idea that aesthetic experience exists apart, **without "purpose"**, all but beyond history, or that art can now effect a world at once (inter)subjective, concrete and universal–a symbolic totality. Like "postmodernism", then, "anti-aesthetic" makes a cultural position on the present: are categories afforded by the aesthetic still valid? [. . .] More locally, "anti-aesthetic" also signals a practice, cross-disciplinary in nature, that is sensitive to cultural forms engaged in a politic (e.g. feminist art) or rooted in a vernacular—that is, to forms that deny the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm.' (33 qt in Park emphasis mine)

Anti-aesthetics, as opposed to the hegemonic position of aesthetics, goes beyond the aesthetic experience. It includes emotional reactions to objects, people, or situations, and expects an intellectual and political response (and, if possible, an action) toward them. In the case of the grotesque anti-aesthetics, it not only demands an emotional reaction but also an intellectual one. Following this intellectual urge to explore the differences between irony and the grotesque, Thomson states that

> Irony is primarily intellectual in its function and appeal, and the grotesque primarily emotional. This is somewhat baldly stated, but essentially true nevertheless. The impact of the grotesque is characteristically one of a sudden shock, which is likely

[17] Later on, I will analyze the concepts of the countercultural grotesque as the anti-aesthetics of the dissident voices, as well as the "empty" or "pop" grotesque as the appropriation by the hegemony of the grotesque countercultural power.

> to stun, bewilder or nonplus—**the mind takes a few seconds to function dispassionately again**. (emphasis mine)

Although Thomson places the emphasis on the emotional part (which is basic in the grotesque experience) the intellectual response is as important for the countercultural grotesque because the success of its original purpose depends on that reaction—transmitting a message and an ideology to the spectator. The grotesque shocks and distresses the viewer; however, the mind is also pushed to react after that shock. This is what differentiates the grotesque anti-aesthetics from the hegemonic aesthetics.

Grotesque anti-aesthetics is the "ugly" that has not been beautified by the falsifying artistic cannon. It shows the "ugly" as it is perceived in real life—the shocking experiences when we are faced with death, violence, excess, and so on. Bakhtin explains that

> [. . .] las imágenes grotescas conservan una naturaleza original, se diferencian claramente de las imágenes de la vida cotidiana, pre-establecidas y perfectas. Son imágenes ambivalentes y contradictorias, y que consideradas desde el punto de vista estético "clásico", es decir de la estética de la *vida cotidiana preestablecida y perfecta*, parecen deformes, monstruosas y horribles (29)

There is no perfection in the grotesque for perfection is a falsification (by means of ideology and the arts) of our "imperfect," "ugly" world. Theodor Adorno states that "According to traditional aesthetic, the ugly is that element that opposes the work's ruling law of form" (74). It is an "abnormality" within the perfect structure of the world that must be corrected by artistic means. The idea that hegemony tries to cover up from their ideal world—the "ugly"—is created and promoted by that same hegemony. It is the hegemony that establishes what is "beautiful" and what is "ugly" in art and in everyday life. The

hegemonic group creates "the monster" as the representation of anything that threatens social stability. As mentioned in the epigraph by Herra, the creation of monsters is "razón de estado" (79). It is part of the hegemony's role to create monsters so that public opinion will support the state in the process of alienating or exterminating these "aberrations" or monsters called subgroups. Herra questions the nature of the monster as the representation of dissidents and alienated subgroups:

> ¿Es necesario inventar (o producir) *lo otro*, lo ilegítimo, lo maldito, lo perverso, en otras palabras, la diferencia de lo monstruoso, para imponer la dominación política? Al hablar del monstruo, ¿hablamos también del antihombre (como excremento político-moral), y del anticristo (es decir el infiel, el pagano, el detractor, el disidente, el demonio en suma (como excremento político-moral-religioso)? (21)

The answer to these questions is yes. The hegemony creates the ugly, the devilish, and the bizarre as a way to present itself and its submissive subjects as good, and then to polarize the public opinion towards the opposers. Herra states,

> [. . .] el hombre necesita del mal para afirmarse como bueno. [. . .] El hombre suele arreglárselas siempre, con ideologías, religiones, éticas y estéticas, para situar al mal fuera de sí y jugarse la partida del bien, y entonces pretende que el bien, y sólo el bien, marque y por lo tanto purifique la totalidad de sus actos. (25)

The hegemonic group places itself in the position of savior, truth, God's will—while the opposers are portrayed as devils and infidels[18]. The hegemony *monstrifies* the dissident groups that oppose them in political, social, moral, or religious matters. Subgroups, especially the countercultural groups, are depicted as monsters that terrorize the social

[18] It is not a coincidence that in most Hollywood movies the "United States" always saves the world.

structure and that are on the prowl for "normal" people[19]. The monster also works as a scapegoat in which "normal" people can lay all the blame for "ugliness" in the world, as well as project their own "flaws"—those imperfections that we cannot stand in ourselves but that in others turn bearable and condemnable. Herra calls these monsters "símbolos de descargo":

> Estos símbolos son artificios que invento yo mismo *ad hoc* o que se me ofrecen, ya creados, como entes ficcionales. *En las bestias (imaginarias) descargo mi (real) duplicación, sin asumirla directamente.* Cuanto me disgusta de mí mismo y en mí mismo se me hace tolerable en el monstruo de ficción: infestándolo, me libero de los horrores excrementales. El monstruo funciona como chivo expiatorio del rencor que me profeso–enigmáticamente, pues no lo resistiría de otra manera. (29-30)

Although Herra refers to fictitious or imaginary monsters, the same phenomenon occurs with "real" ones. Adorno mentions that, "[t]he repressed who sides with the revolution is, according to the standards of the beautiful life in an ugly society, uncouth and distorted by resentment, and he bears all the stigmas of degradation under the burden of unfree—moreover, manual—labor" (48). The rebellious, "different," or "unproductive" subjects are portrayed by the hegemony as "monsters" that threaten the "normal" people. For instance, in the contemporary *bestiarium* we find the leftists, the immigrants, the Middle East, Marilyn Manson and his heretic music, the rebellious university students and union members, among others[20]. These opposers are *monstrified* so that the states can control or exterminate them while the rest of the population rejoices in their extinction. Herra

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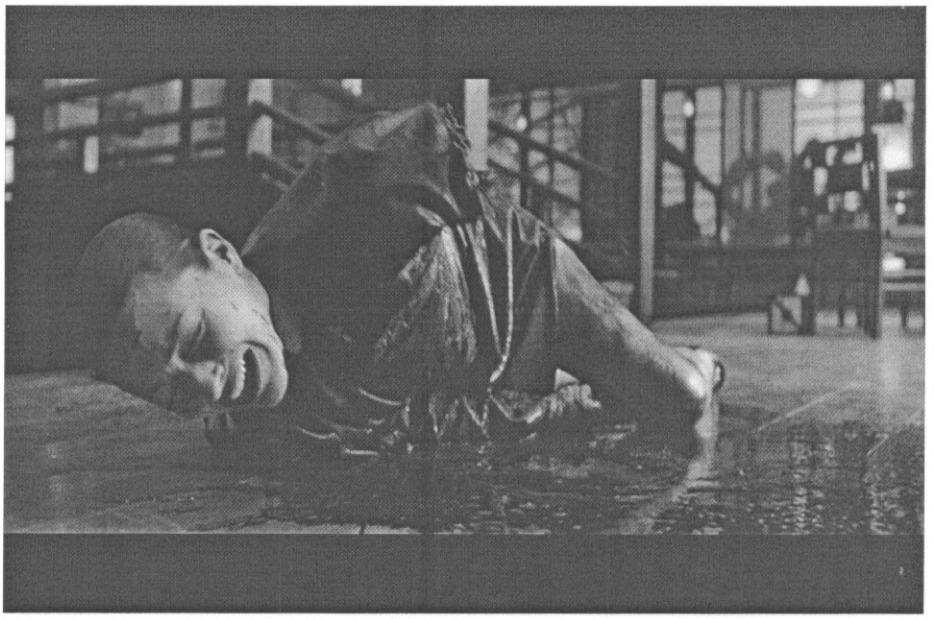
[19] For instance, one of the strategies used to *monstrify* the communists was to say that they eat little children.
[20] In Michael Moore's documentary Bowling for Columbine, the director shows how different people blamed Marilyn Manson, a contemporary monster, and his music for the massacre at Columbine since his lyrics are a "bad influence" for teenagers.

explains that, "[u]na vez reivindicado la existencia de semejante apriorismo de lo monstruoso y el del imperativo categórico de su destrucción, se hace fácil atacar a todo aquello que se nos *dé*, que se nos defina monstruosamente, por ejemplo, un criminal, un opositor político" (33). And then, millions of people celebrate the invasion of the "United States" in "Afghanistan" and "Iraq," the economic blockade on "Cuba," the disintegration of the "Soviet Union," and so on.

The countercultures use their "monstrosity" as an instrument of rebellion. The "differences" (physical, social, ideological) of the subgroups are condemned and monstrified by the hegemony. Therefore, the subgroups use those same "differences" to confront the authority that alienates them. Herra states that the word "'Monstruo' se liga etimológicamente a *monstrare*, indicar, señalar, denunciar" (70). The countergroups, by means of their "monstrosity," reveal the position in which the hegemonic groups have placed them—the position of the rejected, the devils, the criminals, the lower class. Furthermore, the countercultures recognize not only the repulsion but also the fascination that the grotesque provokes on people, and they use it to catch their attention. Thomson mentions that "...alongside our civilized response something deep within us, some area of our unconscious, some hidden but very much alive sadistic impulse makes us react to such things [grotesque images or situations] with unholy glee and barbaric delight." The ambivalent nature of the grotesque provokes a feeling of repulsion and attraction on people that disturbs but also captivates them. Moreover, fascination seems to be stronger than the feeling of disgust a grotesque image may provoke. Why is it that some people love watching movies about bloody massacres, such as Kill Bill, that disturb them? Why does a whole movie theater laugh as the Bride (Uma Thurman) chops heads and arms off?



The Bride: "[. . .] I went on what the movie advertisements refer to as a 'roaring rampage of revenge.' I roared. And I rampaged. And I got bloody satisfaction."

Ambivalence in the grotesque involves different aspects of the grotesque experience. It stands for the combination of contradictory elements and for the combination of opposing feelings and reactions on the spectator. For instance, there is a common factor in which Bakhtin, Kayser and Thomson agree: the presence of some kind of comic element in the grotesque. Thomson gives the example of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" in which

the author offers as a solution for poverty and hunger the feeding of poor children to be offered as food for wealthy people. An excerpt of this text reads:

> I shall now therefore humbly propose my own Thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least Objection. I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy Child well Nursed is at a Year Old a most delicious nourishing and wholesome Food, whether Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a Fricasie, or a Ragout.
>
> I do therefore humbly offer it to public consideration, that of the Hundred and twenty thousand Children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for Breed, whereof only one fourth part to be Males; which is more than we allow to Sheep, black Cattle, or Swine, and my Reason is, that these Children are seldom the Fruits of Marriage, a Circumstance not much regarded by our Savages, therefore, one Male will be sufficient to serve four Females. That the remaining Hundred thousand may at a year Old be offered in Sale to the Persons of Quality and Fortune, through the Kingdom, always advising the Mother to let them Suck plentifully in the last Month, so as to render them Plump, and Fat for a good Table. A Child will make two Dishes at an Entertainment for Friends, and when the Family dines alone, the fore and hind Quarter will make a reasonable Dish, and seasoned with a little Pepper or Salt will be very good Boiled on the fourth Day, especially in Winter. (qt in Thomson)

Thomson offers this example to exemplify the grotesque ambivalence on Swift's work. Thomson states,

> Here again one's response is likely to be confused. Horror will certainly be present in it, but surely also delight in the savage wit of Swift and a mirthful reaction to the utter incongruity between the appalling substance of the proposal and the reasonable, sober manner in which it is put. A full response to this text, I suggest, will not allow the mirth to be blotted out by the horror, or vice versa. Both will remain, in a state of tension. One might speculate, indeed, whether the comic element does not in effect make the whole thing even more shocking, even more difficult to stomach. [. . .] It is also worth noting that the incongruity mentioned above as comic is also the source of additional horror; that is, the grisly nature of the proposal is bad enough, but the mild and reasonable tone in which it is put makes it worse. This is important: it indicates that the extreme incongruity associated with the grotesque is itself ambivalent in that it is both comic and monstrous.

The comic element provokes a clash of feelings that disturbs the mind of the viewer that does not know how to react. Fear and joy, tears and laughter, revulsion and fascination, contradictory sensations, may occur when we are confronted with a grotesque image. But, is it necessary for the grotesque, in order to be so, to possess that comic element? Are there examples of the grotesque without a comic factor? According to Thomson, the comic is a necessary part of the grotesque, and that it is the labor of the critic to concentrate on more than meets the eye and trace the comic element as the cause of fascination:

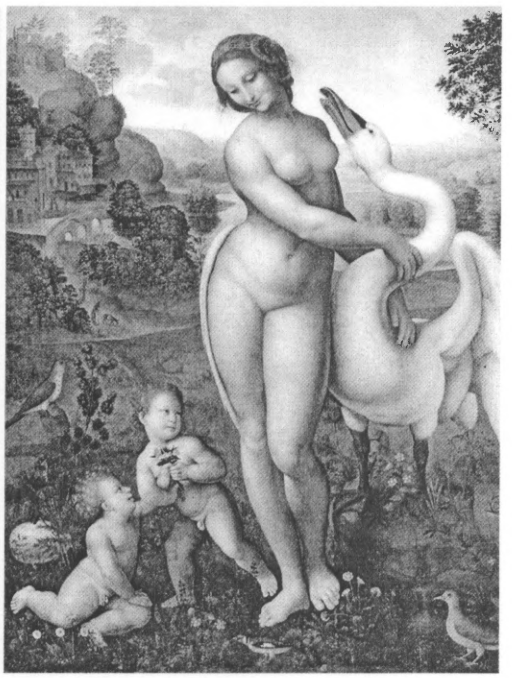
> It may perhaps be objected that the insistence on the comic as, so to speak, one half of the grotesque unnecessarily narrows the term, and that it is enough to speak of the paradox of attraction/repulsion to characterize the conflict which is basic to the grotesque. Certainly this paradox may be felt in many, perhaps all, instances of the

> grotesque, but as a defining factor it is surely inadequate. One needs to dig deeper and specify what may constitute the attraction and what the repulsion. And it is difficult to go past the comic as the source of attraction. If one tries to substitute, for example, something like the fascinating one will find, I suggest, that actually the fascination which the grotesque has about it is itself usually traceable to the peculiar mixture of the comic with something quite un-comic.

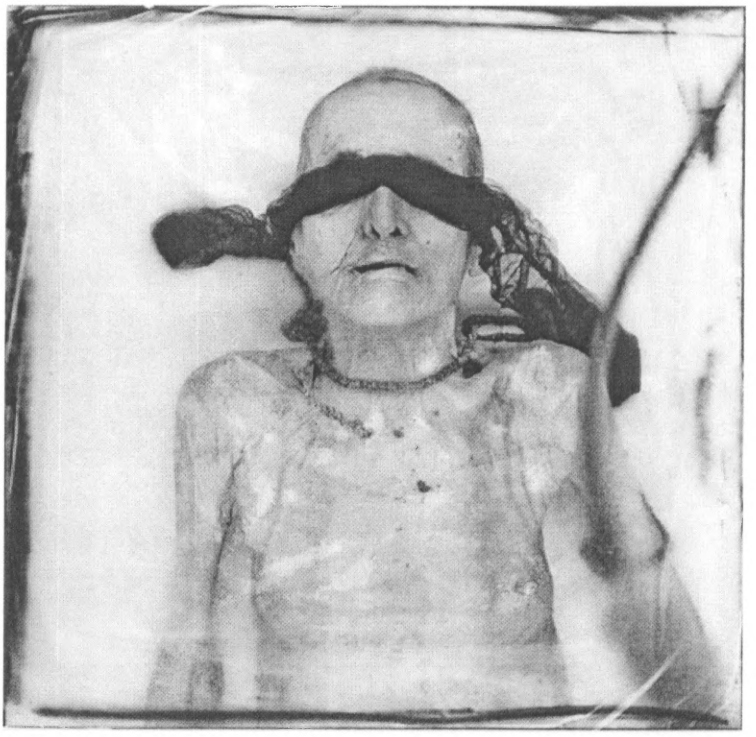
Thomson believes that the comic element is what attracts us, and, that without it, the grotesque becomes simple horror or disgust. Notwithstanding, I disagree with Thomson since I consider that the comic, as well as the grotesque, depends in the perception of the viewer. Therefore, the comic element not necessarily represents half of the grotesque nor must be present at all in the grotesque experience. It may be present in different amounts or even be absent according to the viewer's perception. For instance, there are pictures by Joel-Peter Witkin in which I recognize a remarkable comic element while in others, I just find revulsion and fear intertwined with a powerful attraction. (See page 57)

In Witkin's "Leda," the deformity of the body, the reference to the legend of Leda and the Swan and the opposition to other canonical representations of it (such as Leonardo Da Vinci's) and the fact that Leda has a penis are some elements that, from *my* perspective, have a comic effect. Moreover, the combination of the comic with the disgusting and terrifying gives the grotesque experience a particular, powerful, disturbing force. However,

Leda



Leda



Cadaver with Necklace

in "Cadaver with Necklace," I cannot feel any comic element but disgust and horror. Ambivalence is still present since, in spite of the absence of the comic and the

overwhelming presence of dread and repugnance, this picture, of a *real* corpse, also attracts and fascinates me. Ambivalence with the comic is, to a certain extent, easier to trace. On the other hand, the ambivalent nature of the un-comic grotesque is subtle and appeals to our most basic reactions of *pleasure* at the sight of terrible, sadistic, shocking experiences. Moreover, the laughter that some examples of the grotesque provoke in us is not always the result of the comic. It might result from a confusion of feelings, caused by the ambivalent nature of the grotesque, in which we do not know exactly how to react. Thomson disagrees with the idea of laughter as a defense mechanism, as being part of the grotesque:

> This is the purely defensive laughter with which a person seeks to ward off emotional shock or distress. In its extreme form, this sort of laughter takes on overtones of hysteria; but even in a milder form, the nervous laugh, it cannot be properly seen as a reaction to the comic. Laughter purely in defense means that the person concerned does not find anything comic in whatever causes it. Whether his [her] reaction is a conscious attempt to 'laugh off' something which distresses him [her] extremely, or whether it is an involuntary physiological reaction need not concern us. We must merely insist that one laughs 'naturally' at the grotesque because one perceives the comic element in it.

Thomson's insistence on the necessary presence of the comic as the source of ambivalence restricts the grotesque. Laughter may also come from a reaction towards the discomfort that the grotesque experience produces in us. It softens the effect of the shocking encounter of feelings since, in front of confusion, we would rather choose the most comforting response—laughter instead of tears. The grotesque experience, and the importance of the

comic elements in it, depends on the perception of the viewer as well as on the contexts in which it takes place.

In general terms, the grotesque as countercultural expression, reveals the dark side of "reality" opposed to the comfortable, perfect, romanticized, and falsified image of the hegemonic world. Its anti-aesthetics presents a world in which the traditional order of things is distorted in an "anti-natural," ambivalent way, and the "stability" to which we were accustomed—an imaginary and ideological construct—appears disturbingly transformed in front of our eyes. The grotesque evolves as a form of expression in different societies and in different periods. The comic factor within the grotesque used to have a primordial role in the Carnivals of the Middle Ages, while the contemporary grotesque tends to emphasize the horrifying and disgusting elements. Therefore, in order to define the characteristics of the contemporary grotesque, it is necessary to explore some of the changes the grotesque has suffered throughout different periods.

C. The Transformation of the Grotesque

> *La imagen grotesca caracteriza un fenómeno en proceso de cambio y metamorfosis incompleta, en el estadio de la muerte y del nacimiento, del crecimiento y de la evolución.*
>
> Bakhtin, Mikhail La Cultura Popular en la Edad Media y el Renacimiento

We have mentioned that the concept of the grotesque, and its uses, varies according to different contexts. The idea of the grotesque transforms itself along with cultures and societies, and it is subject to changes, whether from the hegemony or the subgroups that use it. The ornamental paintings from the 15th century, which were considered grotesque because of their incongruity with "reality," do not reflect the same kind of grotesque of the carnivals in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance or of the grotesque art of the Romantic period. Although they have some traits in common, such as the mixture and exaggeration of the elements, among others, the effects they provoke on people have varied throughout time.

Bakhtin explores the grotesque in the popular culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. For him, the carnival was the space in which people expressed, momentarily, their freedom and equality by means of a series of comic, grotesque images. Bakhtin offers the concept of grotesque realism as: "el sistema de imágenes de la cultura cómica popular" (23). The comic element played a primordial role in this form of the grotesque since it was part of the popular festivities. Bakhtin mentions that the grotesque realism represented the life and happiness of the people: "En el realismo grotesco [. . .] el principio material y corporal aparece bajo la forma universal de fiesta utópica. Lo cósmico, lo social y lo corporal están ligados indisolublemente en una totalidad viviente e indivisible. Es un conjunto alegre y bienhechor" (23). The carnival was a celebration of life and equality.

During the festival, the differences that separated people in daily situations were temporarily abolished, and every person could feel part of society (the same society that alienates them.) Poor and rich, cleric and laic, aristocrat and plebeian—opposite worlds joined in one single festivity in which excess, vulgarity, and carnal pleasures were permitted and celebrated in an environment of hedonism[21]. Although the carnival, as we

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[21] Joan Manuel Serrat's song "Fiesta" narrates a carnavalesque regional festivity:

Gloria a Dios en las alturas,
recogieron las basuras
de mi calle, ayer a oscuras
y hoy sembrada de bombillas.

Y colgaron de un cordel
de esquina a esquina un cartel
y banderas de papel
verdes, rojas y amarillas.

Y al darles el sol la espalda
revolotean las faldas
bajo un manto de guirnaldas
para que el cielo no vea,

en la noche de San Juan,
cómo comparten su pan,
su tortilla y su gabán,
gentes de cien mil raleas.

Apurad
que allí os espero si queréis venir
pues cae la noche y ya se van
nuestras miserias a dormir.

Vamos subiendo la cuesta
que arriba mi calle
se vistió de fiesta.

Hoy el noble y el villano,
el prohombre y el gusano
bailan y se dan la mano
sin importarles la facha.

Juntos los encuentra el sol
a la sombra de un farol
empapados en alcohol
abrazando a una muchacha.

Y con la resaca a cuestas
vuelve el pobre a su pobreza,

will see, suppressed the hierarchical divisions and gave people freedom and equality, it was a limited space permitted by the hegemony. Furthermore, it occurred for a relatively short period of time. After the festival, the "order" was reestablished again, as well as inequality and alienation. Bakhtin points out the difference between the popular feast and the official one:

> A diferencia de la fiesta oficial, el carnaval era el triunfo de una especie de liberación transitoria, más allá de la órbita de la concepción dominante, la abolición provisional de las relaciones jerárquicas, privilegios, reglas y tabúes. Se oponía a toda perpetuación a todo perfeccionamiento y reglamentación, apuntaba a un porvenir aún incompleto. (15)

In these festivities, not only the images had grotesque characteristics, but also the purpose and effect of the carnival possessed grotesque features such as the combination of "opposites," ambivalence, and the presence of a different view of the world as unfinished and imperfect. Bakhtin calls this a "second world:"

> Todos estos ritos y espectáculos organizados a la manera cómica, presentaban una diferencia notable, una diferencia de principio, podríamos decir, con las formas del

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vuelve el rico a su riqueza
y el señor cura a sus misas.

Se despertó el bien y el mal
la pobre vuelve al portal,
la rica vuelve al rosal,
y el avaro a las divisas.

Se acabó,
el sol nos dice que llegó el final,
por una noche se olvidó
que cada uno es cada cual.

Vamos bajando la cuesta
que arriba en mi calle
se acabó la fiesta.

> culto y las ceremonias oficiales serias de la Iglesia o del Estado feudal. Ofrecían una visión del mundo, del hombre y de las relaciones humanas totalmente diferente, deliberadamente no-oficial, exterior a la Iglesia y al Estado; parecían haber construido, al lado del mundo oficial, *un segundo mundo y una segunda vida* a la que los hombres de la Edad Media pertenecían en una proporción mayor o menor y en la que vivían en fechas determinadas. Esto creaba una especie de *dualidad del mundo*. (11)

The world of the carnival presented a different and ideal world in which hierarchical oppositions and restrictions did not exist. The "perfect" world, with its rules, standards, prohibitions, and alienation, temporarily disappeared. Therefore, imperfection and equality, concepts that do not coincide with the hegemonic ideal world, dominated the popular festival, and people indulge themselves in a pleasure spree, if only for a while. Bakhtin introduces the concept of degradation as a crucial element of grotesque realism. However, degradation is not a negative aspect; on the contrary, it stands for the lowering of the idealized and abstract rules into the earth-womb in order to renew and improve them:

> En el realismo grotesco, la degradación de lo sublime no tiene un carácter formal o relativo. Lo "alto" y lo "bajo" poseen allí un sentido completa y rigurosamente *topográfico*. Lo "alto" es el cielo; lo "bajo" es la tierra; la tierra es el principio de absorción (la tumba y el vientre), y a la vez de nacimiento y resurrección (el seno materno) [. . .] Rebajar consiste en aproximar a la tierra, entrar en comunión con la tierra concebida como un principio de absorción y *al mismo tiempo* de nacimiento: al degradar, se amortaja y se siembra a la vez, se mata y se da a luz algo superior. (25)

Degradation is the celebration of life and renewal. Society is degraded, killed, and buried to be born again, regenerated and improved.

Through grotesque humor, as it occurred during the carnivals, people degraded their universe—the official world—by mocking the sacred symbols, values, and institutions of the church and state and placing them at the level of the "common people." Laughter, instead of horror, dominated the popular festivity. It was a universal laughter that invaded every single individual and every single situation. It became one laughter and one body (the universal body of the people.) Explaining the nature of humor in the carnival, Bakhtin states that

> Es, ante todo, un humor festivo. No es en consecuencia una reacción individual ante uno u otro hecho «singular» aislado. La risa carnavalesca es ante todo patrimonio *del pueblo* (este carácter popular, como dijimos, es inherente a la naturaleza misma del carnaval), *todos* ríen, la risa es «general»; en segundo lugar, es *universal*, contiene todas las cosas y la gente (incluso las que participan en el carnaval), el mundo entero parece cómico y es percibido y considerado en un aspecto jocoso, en su alegre relativismo; por último es *ambivalente*: alegre y llena de alborozo, pero al mismo tiempo burlona y sarcástica, niega y afirma, amortaja y resucita a la vez. (17)

In the carnivalesque world, humor unified people in a "universal body" of happiness. Every situation, every symbol of authority, and every social rule was questioned and ridiculed during the carnival and brought to the lower levels to be purified and reborn. The human body also took part in the humoristic degradation of society and became the center

of grotesque mockery[22]. Bakhtin defines the material and bodily principle of the grotesque realism as "imágenes del cuerpo, de la bebida, de la satisfacción de las necesidades naturales y la vida sexual. Son imágenes exageradas e hipertrofiadas" (23). This fascination with bodily functions and fluids represents the universality and equality of all human beings. In carnivalesque terms, it means that all human beings—whether rich or poor, man or woman, king or peasant—eat, shit, fart, fuck... and that is why all those traits were exaggerated and emphasized.

Language, as used in the previous lines of this "academic dissertation," also became a means to break free from official perfection. As Hebdige explains, language is part of the official impositions of the hegemony:

> Las nociones concernientes a la inviolabilidad del lenguaje están íntimamente ligadas a las ideas de orden social. Los límites de la expresión lingüística aceptable son impuestos por una serie de tabúes aparentemente universales. Estos tabúes garantizan la ininterrumpida «transparencia» (incuestionabilidad) del significado (127).

The prohibitions and rules established by the hegemony are reflected in the "appropriate" language. As a response to the official languages, the popular culture created the language of the market place—a language that did not follow the rules of propriety and decorum. In this respect, Bakhtin states,

> En consecuencia, esta eliminación provisional, a la vez ideal y efectiva, de las relaciones jerárquicas entre los individuos, creaba en la plaza pública un tipo

[22] The human body is the key element in the grotesque. Transformation, mutilation, or deformation of the body are present in almost every representation of the grotesque. The body also plays a primordial role in the contemporary grotesque; therefore, we will explore its functions and characteristics as the main grotesque element in following chapters.

> particular de comunicación inconcebible en situaciones normales. Se elaboraban formas especiales del lenguaje y de los ademanes, francas y sin constricciones, que abolían toda distancia entre los individuos en comunicación, liberados de las normas corrientes de la etiqueta y las reglas de conducta. Esto produjo el nacimiento de un lenguaje carnavalesco típico... (16)

It was a familiar language that degraded the speaker as well as the receiver since it used prohibited words that usually alluded to bodily functions and were comic.

The grotesque realism was popular and comic. It belonged to the universal body of the people who laughed at the ridiculously disgusting images and the breaking of the social and moral rules. However, in what Bakhtin calls the grotesque romanticism, the grotesque experience became a more individual, rather than public, event. Bakhtin affirms,

> A diferencia del grotesco de la Edad Media y del Renacimiento, relacionado directamente con la cultura popular e imbuido de su carácter universal y público, el grotesco romántico es un grotesco de *cámara*, una especie de carnaval que el individuo representa en soledad, con la conciencia agudizada de su aislamiento. La cosmovisión carnavalesca es traspuesta en cierto modo al lenguaje del pensamiento filosófico idealista y subjetivo, y deja de ser la visión vivida (podríamos incluso decir *corporalmente* vivida) de la unidad y el carácter inagotable de la existencia, como era en el grotesco de la Edad Media y el Renacimiento. (40)

The universality of the carnivalesque grotesque changed for an individual grotesque experience. This provoked a transformation in the configuration of the grotesque elements. For instance, laughter did not have the same power of degradation as in the grotesque realism. Thus, Bakhtin asserts,

> El principio de la risa sufre una transformación muy importante, la risa subsiste, por cierto; no desaparece ni es excluida como en las obras «serias»; pero en el romanticismo grotesco la risa es atenuada, y toma la forma de humor[23], de ironía y sarcasmo. Deja de ser jocosa y alegre. El aspecto *regenerador* se reduce extremadamente. [. . .] se glorifica su fuerza liberadora, pero no se alude a su fuerza *regeneradora*, y de allí que pierda su tono jocoso y alegre. (40)

Laughter did not come from a reaction towards a comic, hilarious element but from a more sinister, dark form of humor. It was not happiness and joy what made people (individually) laugh; it was rather a confrontation with a sadder reality in unusual or uncanny situations that might be humorous (blackly humorous) or just incompatible with the official "reality." As Bakhtin declares, "Las imágenes del grotesco romántico son generalmente la expresión del temor que inspira el mundo y tratan de comunicar ese temor a los lectores («asustarlos»)" (41). This fear was not fictional; it came from the actual fear that the "real" world provokes in us, from the uncanny elements that we wanted hidden because of the horror they cause. Therefore, in addition to the diminished regenerative function of the comic, the romantic grotesque presented uncanny elements (even from the gothic tradition) such as the preference for dark, gloomy environments; while, in the grotesque realism, the light was an essential characteristic, for "el grotesco popular es primaveral, matinal y auroral por excelencia" (Bakhtin, 43).

After the grotesque romanticism, we have the modern grotesque[24]. According to Bakhtin, the modern grotesque shared the characteristics of the grotesque realism and

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[23] We assumed that the author refers to black humor since in other sections of his work, he talks about black humor as a negative aspect of the romantic and modern grotesque.

[24] Bakhtin does not explore the modern grotesque as deeply as the grotesque realism but provides an overview of the period.

romanticism in two separate tendencies:

> [. . .] la primera es el grotesco *modernista* (Alfred Jarry, los superrealistas, los expresionistas, etc.). Este tipo de grotesco retoma (en diversas proporciones) las tradiciones del grotesco romántico; actualmente se desarrolla bajo la influencia de existencialistas. La segunda línea es el grotesco *realista* (Thomas Mann, Bertold Brecht, Pablo Neruda, etc.) que continúa la tradición del realismo grotesco y de la cultura popular, reflejando a veces la influencia directa de las formas carnavalescas. (47)

However, in the modern grotesque Bakhtin views a darker portray of the world, even darker than the romantic period. In fact, he criticizes Kayser's definitions of the grotesque because of his lugubrious descriptions of the different periods as he views the grotesque through the modernist eyes. As Bakhtin explains, "Kayser destaca sobre todo el aspecto extraño" (48): the uncanny, frightening elements of the grotesque without seeing its regenerative function. The grotesque realism stood on the principle of regeneration (death/rebirth) as a means to keep the universal body alive: "la vejez está encinta, la muerte está embarazada, todo lo limitado, característico, fijo y perfecto, es arrojado al fondo de lo «inferior» corporal donde es refundido para nacer de nuevo" (53). The romantic period strongly diminished the regeneration process by concentrating more in the horrifying, distressing elements of the grotesque experience. Nevertheless, according to Bakhtin, in the modern grotesque there are not enough elements of the degradation and rebirth of the realistic period, and the regenerative principle disappears, "No queda más que un grotesco mutilado, la efigie del demonio de la fecundidad con el falo cortado y el vientre encogido.

Esto origina las imágenes estériles de lo «característico» [. . .] simples máscaras de un realismo falsificado y degenerado" (53).

In the last decades, we experience a revival of the grotesque in different forms of expression. It is a trend which has its own characteristics, as well as similarities, that, combined, distinguish it from the previous periods we have studied. This new movement, that I propose to call the contemporary grotesque, combines elements from the grotesque realism and the grotesque romanticism. I also divided it into two different types: the countercultural grotesque and the "empty" or *pop* grotesque. Although the objective of this study is to analyze the countercultural literary and artistic grotesque productions, it is also necessary to clarify the concept of the "empty" grotesque not only as part of the contemporary grotesque and counterpart of the countercultural grotesque, but also as a reaction of the hegemony to nullify the countercultural discourse and appropriate the power of the rebellious grotesque.

D. The Golden Age of the Grotesque

> *Los objetos culturales, las pantallas cinematográficas, los dibujos animados, los textos de ficción literaria, la televisión e incluso ciertos espacios fabulosos de la política y la cibernética están sobrepoblados de bestias. [. . .] Una invasión reciente y acaso nueva de lo monstruoso parece afectar, por un lado, el terreno de los juguetes, y, por el otro, el de los cortometrajes de rock (o videos propios del medio televisual): aquí la puesta en escena misma se torna monstruosa.*
>
> Rafael Ángel Herra, Lo monstruoso y lo bello

1. The Contemporary Concept of the Grotesque

The main title of this section, The Golden Age of the Grotesque, which comes from a Marilyn Manson's Album, perfectly depicts the contemporary cultural situation. Herra talks about an invasion of monsters (or grotesque images from our point of view) in different cultural manifestations such as music videos, movies, literature, among others. The word "invasion" is quite adequate to describe the phenomenon that has been taking place especially in the last two decades—an uncontrolled, excessive development of grotesque representations of various sorts. Thus, we might say we are living The Golden Age of the Grotesque. The grotesque appears everywhere and with diverse purposes. For instance, the countercultural groups see in the grotesque a powerful tool of rebellion against the establishment; while the hegemony uses it as both an appropriated ideological tool against those same countercultures, and as a business. Both tendencies, which I call the *countercultural* and the *pop* or *empty* grotesque, are part of what I perceive and name as the contemporary grotesque. In other words, both share basically the same elements and characteristics; however, their function fulfills different purposes. But, before we define the specific traits that differentiate each line of the contemporary grotesque, let us try to

answer the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter: What do we, in the contemporary context, think or how do we feel when we use the word "grotesque" to describe something?

In the interview called "Medios de comunicación, conocimiento y objetividad," Noam Chomsky employs the word grotesque when referring to The New York Times' purchase of The Boston Globe. Chomsky declares,

> La prensa de la costa oeste se ha deshecho en elogios al respecto y ha afirmado que no se va a producir ningún daño debido a los elevados principios de ética periodística sostenidos por *The Times*. Hay miles de páginas de documentación que demuestran que la ética periodística de *The Times* puede ser cualquier cosa excepto elevada. De hecho, son **grotescos.** (102 emphasis mine)

What does Chomsky mean by "grotescos"? Since we are dealing with an important and influential source of information (not only in the "United States," but also in the whole world) as The New York Times and its sense of ethics, we might deduce that the adjective selected by Chomsky has a negative tone. Furthermore, the disapproving manner in which the scene is portrayed does not allow a comic or amusing interpretation of the word, as Thomson would suggest. It seems that Chomsky refers to a more obscure, terrifying (to a certain extent) feeling of disgust, impotence, anger towards the hypocrisy in the mass media and the lack of professional ethics of such an influential (manipulative) source of information. We have discussed that even though in theory the term grotesque refers to a confrontation between comic and horrifying elements—as Thomson sustains, a "clash between incompatible reactions—laughter on the one hand and horror or disgust on the other,"—the common use of the word in our days refers to images that prompt more horror

and repulsion than comic laughter. Herra lists a series of contemporary monsters that represent the contemporary grotesque world:

> El *bestiarium* actual por antonomasia, diferido, disfrazado, arrinconado en el rito de marionetas monstruosas, se halla en otra parte, no en las ficciones, sino en la guerra, en la violencia callejera, en la miseria (constantemente recubierta de esplendores folklóricos por la publicidad turística), en la destrucción ecológica que metamorfosea el hábitat, en las hambrunas circunvaladas de abundancia, en la tortura, en la geopolítica, en la guerra, en el mercado internacional neodarwineano, en el chauvinismo, en la subhumanización de los congéneres... (35)

This list contains the sad and horrifying reality of our world—the same reality that the hegemony tries to hide or beautify. However, there are other elements that are missing from the list: other elements that hegemony transforms in ugly and horrifying monsters. As I mentioned before, the hegemony not only beautifies but also monstrifies according to its own profit, while the grotesque presents all these elements as purely and realistic, or even exaggerated, as possible so that the impact on the viewer will be stronger. Exaggeration in the grotesque does not distort the realistic element in it, nor is meant, as the hegemonic falsification, to deceive the viewer. Exaggeration in the grotesque serves the purpose of emphasizing those aspects of reality that were traditionally hidden or falsified. Moreover, the contemporary grotesque depiction does not allow a comic representation of the world in Bakhtinean terms; instead, the comical aspect, when present, turns into black humor. It is in its sad and dark tone, more than in the carnivalesque happy humor, that the contemporary grotesque holds its powerful regenerative force. In today's context, the term grotesque is used to describe horrifying, disgusting, shocking, and ridiculous experiences

sometimes with a tone of irony or sarcasm. It might provoke laughter in the viewer, but not always because of a joyful and happy experience. Laughter results from the confusion of opposites in "abnormal" and unusual realistic situations. Horror and disgust are not the only requisites for the grotesque to be so. Actually, this narrow conception would lead us to simple horror fiction and bad taste. The grotesque, in order to be called grotesque, must be excessive, overwhelming, confusing, and above all, realistic.

The contemporary grotesque borrows elements from the different periods of the grotesque that we have already mentioned. First, it is ambivalent, strange, and, sometimes, even ridiculous. The spectator does not know how to react in front of a grotesque experience due to the confrontation of opposites in extraordinary, uncommon situations. Moreover, the comic element, though different from the joyful and pleasant humor of the carnival, collides with the horrifying and uncanny. Second, it presents a new vision of the world in which it appears imperfect, unfinished and in constant change—a world in which all human beings from any given "social class," ethnic group, religion, gender... are at the same level of imperfection, ugliness, and vice. Third, imperfection leads us to universal equality and anti-hegemonic ideals. The world and the human beings are imperfect no matter how perfect the hegemony tries to portray its world.

The contemporary countercultures revived the traditions of the grotesque as a way to provoke a change in the imposed hierarchical division of society. Thus, the grotesque discourse confronts the established social and artistic patterns of beauty, morality, law, to mention some of them. The old canonical concepts of "beauty" and "ugliness" in art and in life are questioned. These three main points (ambivalence, imperfection, and universal equality) roughly summarize the general characteristics of the contemporary grotesque and

all of them are portrayed in the grotesque body—a symbolic element derived from the grotesque realism that forms the basis for the contemporary grotesque.

2. The Grotesque Temple of the Human Body

> *Luego la madre dijo: «Teresa no quiere hacerse a la idea de que el cuerpo humano mea y echa pedos». Teresa estaba roja de vergüenza pero la madre continuaba: «¿Hay algo de malo en eso?» y ella misma respondió de inmediato a su pregunta: soltó una sonora ventosidad. Todas las mujeres se rieron.*
>
> Milan Kundera, La Insoportable Levedad del Ser

The human body plays an essential role in the contemporary grotesque since through our body we perceive and experience the world around us. Moreover, it is directly related to suffering, horror and disgust by means of the senses. Those are the kind of experiences that the grotesque attempts to produce on people. It aims at the painful, disgusting, and unpleasant feelings we might bear on our own body by projecting them on the grotesque body. The human body, its fluids (blood, saliva, semen, pus...) and the actions and processes related to them (sex, physiological needs, death...) represents one of the most grotesque elements. It is the source and object of sin, shame, crime, sex, violence... social patterns of misbehavior and immorality we are trained to recognize in order to respond in a socially "appropriate" manner. It is the role of the grotesque to use those same hegemonic collective configurations and to question and degrade them. According to Bakhtin, degradation went on a process of decay. From the Middle Ages, where degradation was a primordial characteristic of the carnivals, the grotesque started to lose its regenerative force as it passed through the romantic and modern period. However, it is in the contemporary grotesque that we witness a revival of the power of degradation by means of the grotesque body.

In the grotesque realism, as we mentioned before, degradation consists on the lowering of idealized, canonical concepts or things into the earth (womb) in order to be born again.

That is what Bakhtin calls the "cosmic" aspect of degradation which is divided into heaven and earth. But there is also a "corporal" degradation in which the body and its parts become symbols of degradation and renewal. Bakhtin explains that,

> En su faz *corporal*, que no está nunca separada estrictamente de su faz cósmica, lo alto está representado por el rostro (la cabeza); y lo bajo por los órganos genitales, el vientre y el trasero. [. . .] Degradar significa entrar en comunión con la vida de la parte inferior del cuerpo, el vientre y los órganos genitales, y en consecuencia también con los actos como el coito, el embarazo, el alumbramiento, la absorción de alimentos y la satisfacción de las necesidades naturales. La degradación cava la tumba corporal para dar lugar a un *nuevo* nacimiento. De allí que no tenga exclusivamente un valor negativo sino también positivo y regenerador: es *ambivalente*, es a la vez negación y afirmación. (25)

The grotesque realism and now the contemporary grotesque utilize the human body as a symbol of regeneration and as a confirmation of human equality[25]— all of us, though some people do not like the idea, have similar body members, share the same physiological needs, secrete the same disgusting fluids, and feel similar sexual desires. Top models, movie stars, politicians, presidents, popes are symbols of authority, power or beauty that have; for instance, to complete the final act of the digesting process (defecate) as the janitor, the school teacher, the vagabond, or any other mortal does. The function of the grotesque bodily aspect is to remind us this equality by showing not only the body but also those physical needs in an emphasized or exaggerated manner. The hegemony presents an

[25] Equality is different from uniformity. We share similar characteristics that unify us as human beings. However, hegemony uses other kind of "differences," such as social class, ethnicity, gender, and so on, to alienate the "different" and to uniform the similar in order to have control over people.

ideal of the human body perfect, clean and beautiful in which the fragility, the disgusting, earthly aspects are erased or minimized. Bakhtin explains,

> Esos cánones consideran al cuerpo de manera completamente diferente, en otras etapas de su vida, en relaciones totalmente diferentes con el mundo exterior (no corporal). Dentro de estos cánones el cuerpo es ante todo algo rigurosamente acabado y perfecto. Es, además, algo aislado, solitario, separado de los demás cuerpos y cerrado. De allí que este canon elimina todo lo que induzca a pensar en algo no acabado, todo lo relacionado con su crecimiento o su multiplicación: se cortan los brotes y retoños, se borran las protuberancias (que tienen la significación de nuevos vástagos y yemas), se tapan los orificios, se hace abstracción del estado perpetuamente imperfecto del cuerpo y, en general, pasan desapercibidos el alumbramiento, la concepción y la agonía. La edad preferida es la que está situada lo más lejos posible del seno materno y de la tumba, es decir, alejada al máximo de los "umbrales" de la vida individual. (32-33)

"Completeness" and "perfection," as in the photograph of Playboy (see page 78,) symbolize beauty; therefore, the imperfections of the body, as the hideous anus, the ugly penis, the hairy vagina..., are eliminated or hidden from the public sight because they remind us of the disgusting bodily processes related to them. Moreover, age is also important since a child and an old man or woman are symbols of fragility, weakness and even decay. The new born and the very old person, are viewed as incapable of taking care of themselves even in matters such as urinating or defecating. Therefore, the hegemony looks for an age in which the person is independent and far from death; an age in which the body is strong and without traces of decay.

Playboy exemplifies the hegemonic vision of the human body. It follows the imposed standards of beauty by showing pictures of "angelical," "perfect," usually white women. Of course, this "perfection" is often reached by means of chirurgical, chemical procedures. Makeup and plastic surgery are big industries nowadays since they help people to correct their "imperfections" and; therefore, get closer to the ideal patterns of beauty imposed by the hegemony (as shown in Playboy.) Even magazines digitally manipulate the photographs of models to make them look "e-perfect" when surgery and makeup can't help.

On the other hand, the grotesque explores those aspects that the hegemony takes as imperfections and highlights their bodily universality. Bakhtin explains that

> [. . .] las imágenes grotescas conservan una naturaleza original, se diferencian claramente de las imágenes de la vida cotidiana, pre-establecidas y perfectas. Son imágenes ambivalentes y contradictorias, y que consideradas desde el punto de vista estético "clásico", es decir de la estética de la *vida cotidiana preestablecida y perfecta*, parecen deformes, monstruosas y horribles [...] el coito, el embarazo, el alumbramiento, el crecimiento corporal, la vejez, la disgregación y el despedazamiento corporal, etc. [. . .] Son imágenes que se oponen a las clásicas del cuerpo humano perfecto y en plena madurez, depurado de las escorias del nacimiento y el desarrollo. (29)

In short, the grotesque shows the bodily elements that the hegemony hides. It is a countercultural body that opposes the canonical patterns of beauty and perfection. The human body, from the hegemonic point of view, must be completed, finished, without worldly imperfections; in other words, artificial. The grotesque body is a natural, realistic and imperfect body—It is perfect in its imperfection. As opposed to the hegemonic ideal of the human body as a faultless beautiful structure, as a temple to perfection, the grotesque body is a temple to imperfection, ugliness and repugnance. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque presents a human body in which

> [e]l énfasis está puesto en las partes del cuerpo en que éste se abre al mundo exterior o penetra en él a través de orificios, protuberancias, ramificaciones y excrecencias tales como la boca abierta, los órganos genitales, los senos, los falos, las barrigas y la nariz. En actos tales como el coito, el embarazo, el alumbramiento, la agonía, la comida, la bebida y la satisfacción de las necesidades naturales, el cuerpo revela su esencia como principio en crecimiento que traspasa sus propios límites. (30)

The once "purified" body from which the protuberances and orifices where eliminated becomes a body in which these disgusting, unclean, shocking elements are highlighted and exaggerated. The incompleteness of the grotesque body and the representation of the natural bodily functions symbolize the constant evolution of the body as a living organism. Regeneration and rebirth are essential characteristics of the grotesque body. Bakhtin mentions that

> Una de las tendencias fundamentales de la imagen grotesca del cuerpo consiste en exhibir *dos cuerpos en uno*: uno que da la vida y desaparece y otro que es concebido, producido y lanzado al mundo. Es siempre un cuerpo en estado de

> embarazo y alumbramiento, o por lo menos listo para concebir y ser fecundado con un falo u órganos genitales exagerados. (30)

It is a living body. It is not finished or stable but in constant movement and change. It is a body that evolves and that gives birth to new life. It is not a lifeless, perfect body but a body in constant change. The contemporary grotesque shares the same vision of the human body as in the grotesque realism. It celebrates its "incompleteness" and "imperfection" as a natural, unifying characteristic. The difference, as mentioned before, lies in the comic characteristic of the grotesque realism as opposed to the horrifying, disgusting, sarcastic nature of the contemporary grotesque.

As we have seen, the contemporary grotesque is, by definition, a countercultural discourse since it breaks up with the hegemonic standards of beauty, morality, art, among others; however, there is a subdivision of the contemporary grotesque that comes from the hegemony. It appropriates the countercultural characteristics and transforms them into *pop* products emptied of their original subversive nature. I call this type of grotesque the "empty grotesque."

3. The "Empty" or *Pop* Grotesque

The empty grotesque emerges as a response from the hegemony to the countercultural grotesque. It adopts the same characteristics of the dissident discourse in order to neutralize its subversive power. The word "empty" does not mean that this kind of grotesque does not possess a particular discourse. On the contrary, it carries the hegemonic ideology hidden in a rebellious façade. It is "empty" because it trivializes the countercultural premises and transforms them into products of mass consumption emptied of their countercultural force; in other words, they become part of the *pop* culture.

In the first chapter, we discussed the characteristics of the sub and countercultures in the social apparatus and the techniques used by the hegemony to nullify them. In fact, this struggle between the hegemony and the rebellious groups is part of an endless process of appropriation and re-appropriation of symbols. First, the countercultures create their own symbols of rebellion that represent their ideology, and later, the hegemony takes those same symbols and transforms them into products for the masses. The symbols, then, stop being representations of the countercultural ideals and become fashionable products used by any person regardless of the original purpose of the object or the ideology of its user. Therefore, their countercultural force is nullified. Once the countercultures become conscious of the hegemonic appropriation of their symbols, they try whether to re-appropriate them or to create new symbols that will be eventually stolen by the hegemony, and so on.

The same phenomenon occurs with the contemporary grotesque. In its countercultural phase, the grotesque serves as a rebellious tool against hegemony. It presents a reality without the filters of the artistic, moral, religious... patterns. The sub and countercultures

adopted the grotesque as their token. They scare and horrify "normal" people and confront authority. They present their point of view of reality as they experience it—discrimination, alienation, persecution, repression due to a different way of thinking or acting. These groups adopted the grotesque in different aspects of their lives: their way of dressing, speaking or acting. For instance, the punk culture created a totally different way of confronting society. Their music and language represented their rebellious ideology and their discomfort towards the *establishment*. However, their way of dressing, that distorted all the patterns of "decency" and "good taste," was (and is to a certain extent) the most shocking aspect of this counterculture. This new style exaggerated certain symbolic elements that identified them with the lower social classes.

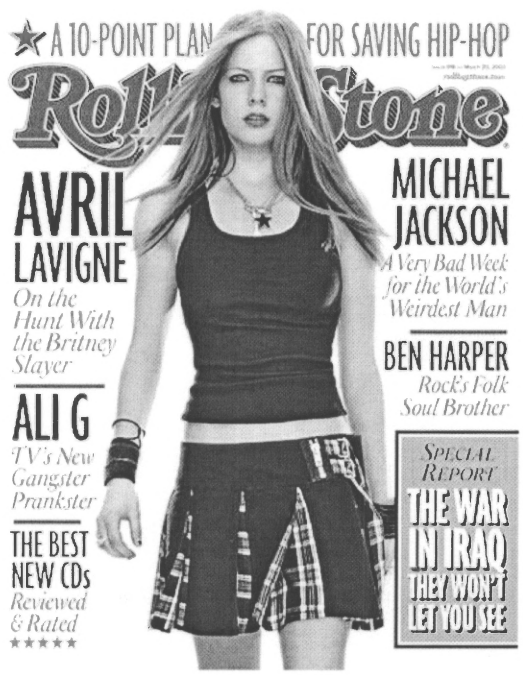
Leather clothing, chains, piercing, safety pins, and the notorious hair style known as Mohawk, are some of the elements that characterize the punk style.

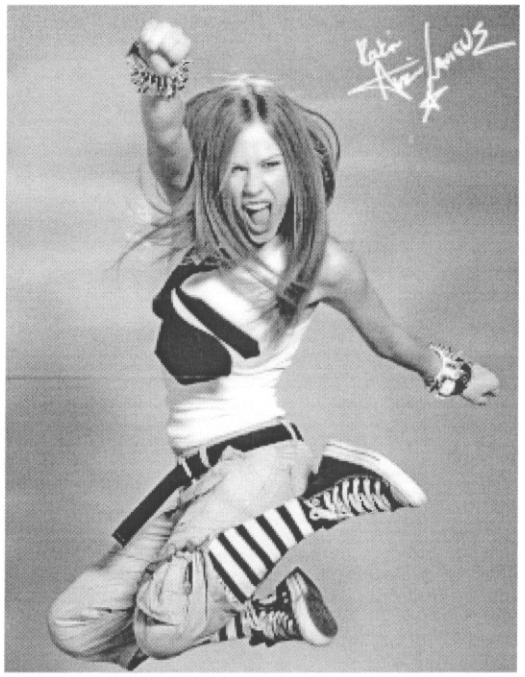
Punk anti-aesthetic was (and still is) considered grotesque by the hegemony and the "normal" citizens who view it as an aberration. The strategy used by the hegemony in order to neutralize the grotesque and shocking punk style is to modify their symbols so that they can be accepted by and sold even to higher social classes and to the masses of apolitical consumers.

In the article "¡Dios salve a la moda!: Antimoda 'punk'," Simmel Ortegarrieta explains how the punk anti-aesthetic was taken out of the streets and into the catwalks. Ortegarrieta states, "La diseñadora británica Zandra Rhodes le bajó el tono a la estridencia al emplear colores más brillantes (en vez de negro). Esta readaptación permitió que los estratos sociales altos aceptaran la moda. En años posteriores, diseñadores como Jean Paul Gaultier y Versace incorporaron elementos *punk* en sus modelos" (21). In this way, Punk symbols are distorted aesthetically and ideologically. They do not represent the lower working class anymore; on the contrary, they become expensive signs of status for the *wannabe* rebellious yuppies that do not really care about any political or social cause.

Hebdige also refers to the hegemonic portrayal of these ex-countercultural symbols: "El estilo, sobre todo, provoca una doble respuesta: es alternativamente ensalzado (en la página de moda) y atacado y ridiculizado (en los artículos que definen las subculturas como problemas sociales)" (129). On one hand, the hegemony promotes these symbols as fashion products in order to profit from them; on the other hand, it presents them as "rebellious" icons to make the countercultures continue using them and; therefore, be part of the possible horde of costumers[26].

[26] By "promoting" these harmless version of the grotesque, which still shock the conservatives, and saturating the pop arena with grotesque, horrifying images, the hegemony assures a negative response from the "good" citizens towards any kind of grotesque representation whether *pop* or countercultural.





The countercultural punk style becomes an expensive fashion for the high class. Its symbols, such as the bracelets with spikes, zippers, chains, socks with stripes, ties... that were cheap pieces of clothing and accessories, are now sold, at high prices, to the mass of consumers that do not view in them a political position but a symbol of status. Pop artists, such as Avril Lavigne, cooperate with the promotion of these new empty, commercial symbols.

For example, it takes just a little walk into a mall to realize the *pop-ularization* of the punk (and also the gothic) style. There are specialized punk-gothic stores where costumers can buy all the clothes and the accessories to be part of these subgroups. Ironically, the prices of the formerly lower class kind of clothing are not really accessible for the lower classes. The immersion of the countercultural symbols in the commercial machinery eliminates its subversive potential: "la creación y difusión de nuevos estilos está indisociablemente ligada al proceso de producción, publicidad e imagen que inevitablemente conducirá a la desactivación del poder subversivo de la subcultura..." (Hebdige 131) The symbols are *emptied* of their countercultural message and inserted into the list of marketable products for everybody.

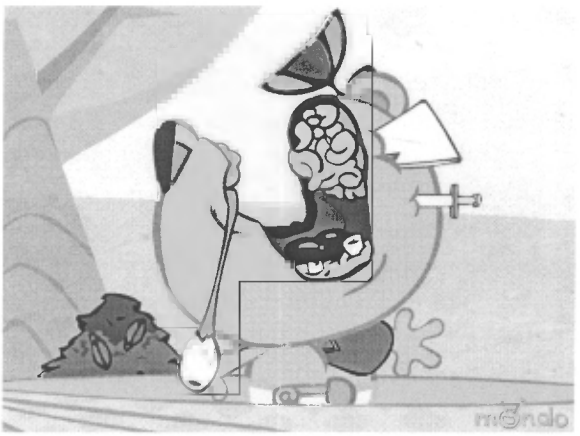
Going back to the "invasion" mentioned by Herra, the grotesque has overrun the media and also the commercial arena. We can find examples of the grotesque in T.V. programs, music videos, cartoons, magazines, and so on. The entertainment industry realized the attraction that the grotesque provokes on people. So we want to experience the grotesque. We have become addicted to the feeling of disgust, horror, and repulsion that the grotesque causes in us, and the media provides us our daily dose. However, most of these grotesque images are part of the "empty" grotesque. Pop culture is full of grotesque images of sex, violence or stupid behavior. Nevertheless, this kind of grotesque imagery does not teach nor create anything but stands just as a rebellion for the sake of rebellion. They do not carry a particular ideology so that it will fit in most people's expectations. There is no constructive discourse, purpose or ideals to fulfill, nor identification with a social or political cause. It is the grotesque just for fun, the grotesque "on sale."

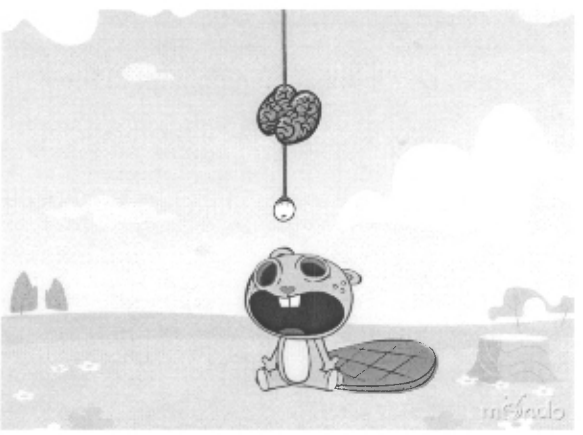
For example, MTV, the most famous music channel, became part of the pop culture that trivializes the countercultural discourses of the rebellious groups by presenting images of rebellion without a real social or political basis. It produces T.V. shows whose only purpose is selling symbols of the "American" lifestyle and reinforcing the patterns of beauty established by the hegemony. In "Latin America," it also utilizes the cultural symbols of the region (mostly "Mexico" and "Argentina") and gives them back to the audience in the form of products of mass consumption. This phenomenon also "helps" in the acculturation[27] process of the rest of the "Latin American" countries which adopt the fake "Latino" style from cultures already acculturated. This *pop-ularization* of MTV has reached the grotesque discourse. Among the frivolous reality shows and empty pop videos

[27] By "acculturation" I mean the loss of the original cultural tradition of a region due to the imposition of another one. It is not a cultural evolution but an ideological domination.

(with some exceptions) the music network presents grotesque imagery that shocks and entertains the viewer. Nevertheless, most of these shows are hilariously grotesque but empty and purposeless.

For example, the show Happy Tree Friends is a mini cartoon in which cute creatures, that seem to be taken from a children's show, are involved in horrifying crimes and bloody accidents. The role of the body is essential since the grotesque elements of the show lie in mutilation and physical suffering. What is amazing is the way in which one can feel the agony and the torment these little creatures are exposed to and still laugh at the incredible and exaggerated situations in which they are involved.





Rhode Montijo, one of the creators of Happy Tree Friends describe what the show is about: "The Happy Tree Friends are cute, cuddly animals whose daily adventures always end up going horribly wrong. No matter how innocently their day begins, it always ends in mayhem. The ensemble cast includes Cuddles, the cutest darn rabbit you'll ever meet, and Petunia, a sweet girl skunk always mindful to wear air freshener. Traveling through picturesque settings and speaking in a kooky language all their own, the Happy Tree Friends never know what chaos lingers just around the bend."

We recognize in their mutilated bodies the tremendous pain we would experience in our own bodies in a similar situation. We cannot deny the grotesque in the images; however, what is the discourse behind Happy Tree Friends? Is there a subversive social or political

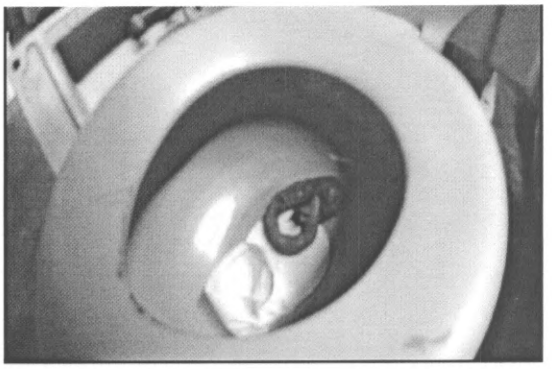
ideal in the bloody massacres of these little animals? Is a mutilated beaver or a brainless (literally) squirrel a symbol of rebellion for a sub or countergroup?

Happy Tree Friends is an example of the empty grotesque. It does not represent an ideology nor pursue a social cause. It results from the appropriation of the countercultural power of the grotesque by the hegemony. This cartoon possesses highly grotesque images that horrify and attract people. It can be seen by the capitalist or the socialist and cause similar feelings and reactions. They would not recognize a discourse in favor or against their ideology. It is empty of a particular discourse so even ideological opposers would accept it. However, the ideology of the hegemony is present in a subtle way. By using the grotesque, a countercultural discourse by definition, the hegemony trivializes its subversive power and the discourse behind it. Moreover, this grotesquely empty cartoon is sold to the hordes of consumers who think that if they watch the cartoon or buy the toys of the characters, they are rebellious.

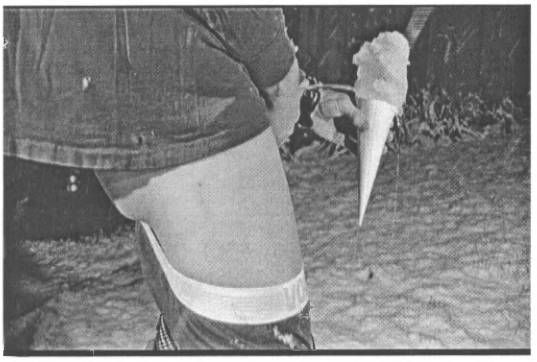
Another example of the empty grotesque shown on MTV is Jackass. As its name indicates, the program presents a group of friends involved in stupid, dangerous and disgusting practices that lead them, most of the time, to serious wounds and extreme pain. They provoke in the viewer laughter and disgust, pleasure (at other person's suffering) and nausea. In many an occasion, even the camera men end up vomiting at the sight of their revolting, grotesque acts which at the end become part of the show. But what is the purpose of Jackass? What are these masochists trying to say? Is there an ideal or goal behind their stupidity? My answer to these questions is no. Their show, though grotesque, does not correspond to the countercultural kind. The protagonists do not rebel as a way to change any standard of behavior, nor to question the established moral rules. They do not

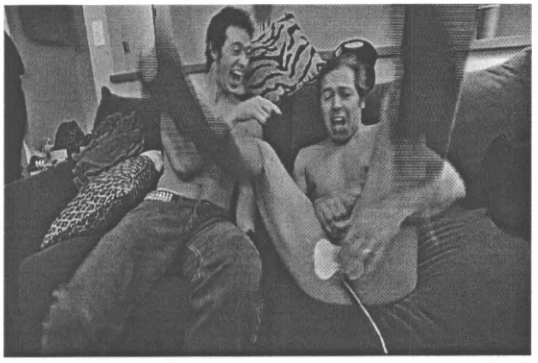
identify themselves with a social cause or political agenda. They just found a way to make money out of their imbecility while having fun. Let us take Jackass: the Movie as example.

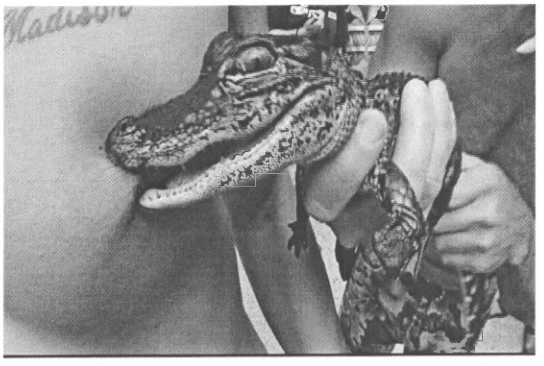
Jackass: the Movie is an anthology of grotesque stunts and tests performed by the Jackass members. They not only impose aggressive tortures on themselves, but also play jokes on innocent people. The human body, its fluids, and functions play a primordial role in their performances. The show is full of scatological images that are exaggerated to revolting limits. They also hit and cut their bodies whether on purpose or as a result of their dangerous stunts (see page 89). However, although their practices share the characteristics of the contemporary grotesque, and they also break up with patterns of decency, sanity, and appropriate behavior, the purpose of the show is not to spread a countercultural ideology or make a statement. The show is a business for MTV, which recognizes the attraction that the grotesque has on people especially on teenagers that view it as a confrontation to the adults' rules. There is no social or political discourse involved in their tortuous practices; instead, there is a self-centered, individualistic search for a masochist pleasure that will also reward the protagonists with money and fame. What countercultural discourse is there in defecating on a toilet on display at a small hardware store instead of attacking a big store such as Wall Mart? These jackasses are grotesque "terrorists" that come from the main stream. They attack people but not big industries, corporations or the government, that is, the hegemonic ideology. They are fake countercultural grotesque practitioners that fool the viewers with their silly behavior. They propose to enjoy life, be stupid, tease everybody, and to not care about anything. Let "boring," "old" people to worry about war, poverty, discrimination, starvation or let's just have fun and make our neighbor puke" seems to be their motto.



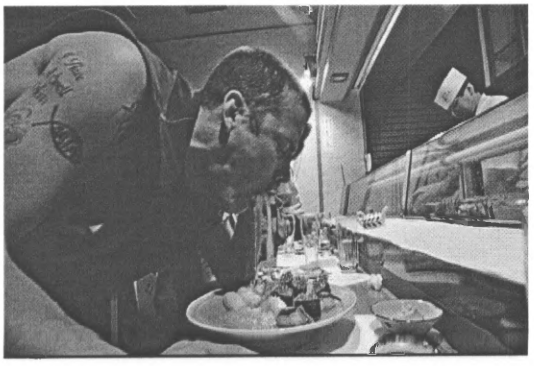
Among the Jackass deeds we find the shitting in a toilet on display at a hardware store (the first attempt failed!) and eating an ice cream made of snow and pee

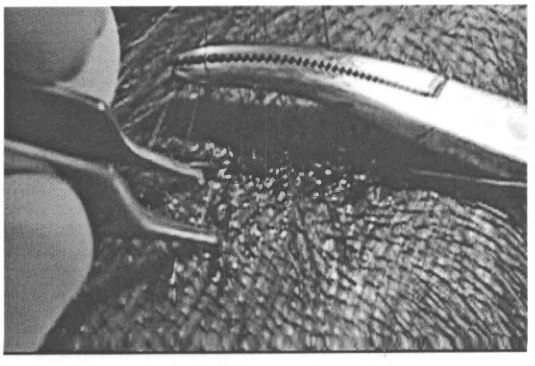






Electroshocks, animal and insect bites, inhalation of Wasabi (as if it were a cocaine hit)... drive the protagonist to faint, vomit, or to the Emergency Room.



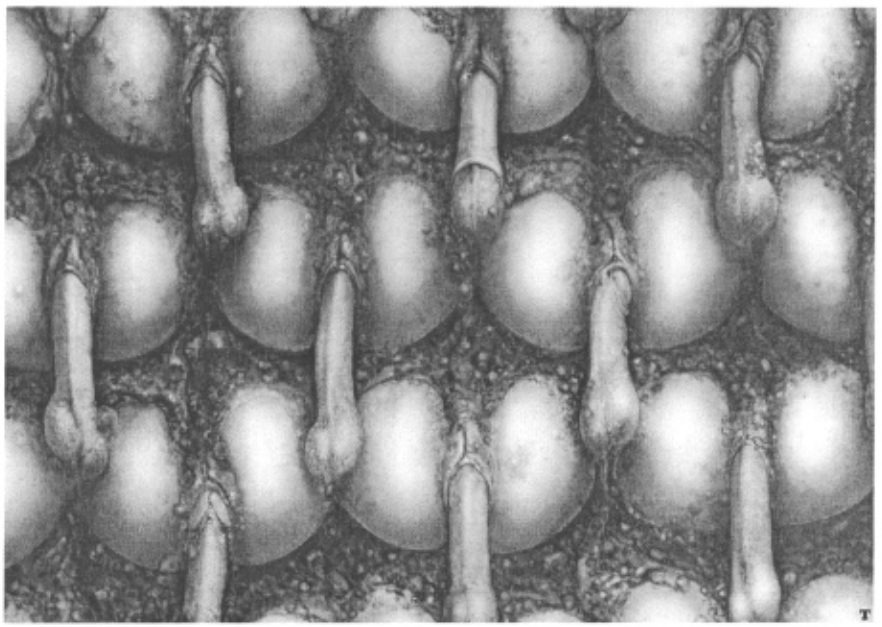


The empty grotesque dominates the media. Most of the grotesque invasion that we have mentioned comes from the pop grotesque instead of the countercultural form. Nevertheless, in spite of the constant pressure over the dissident groups, the countercultural grotesque makes its way through the pop culture and tries to reach the masses of consumers with a more politically and socially conscious grotesque expression in an attempt to share their ideology and to expose the hegemonic domination. These groups attack the hegemonic standards at different levels and through different images and strategies.

In the following chapters, we will explore three main areas in which the countercultural grotesque has developed. We will analyze "The Dark Side of Sex" in erotic art from the countercultural perspective instead of the romanticized, patriarchal view. Moreover, we will study the role of violence in contemporary society, as a tool of repressive domination and rebellion, and the resulting social consequences presented in a grotesque, realistic way. Finally, we will explore the grotesque world of drugs (licit and illicit) and all the implications that the abuse of these substances may have on people and society. As I mentioned before, the objective of this study is analyzing the countercultural grotesque in different areas of study. Therefore, the "empty" grotesque will not be considered in the analysis as thoroughly as the countercultural ones. However, examples of them might be mentioned just as illustrations, counterpoint or support to specific points.

III. The Dark Side of Sex: Grotesque Imagery in Erotic Writing and Art

> *These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on.*
>
> Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power, and Politics of Identity."
>
> *The highest levels of arousal are often reached with thoughts that frighten us, anger us, overwhelm us. What is awful, what is forbidden, what is taboo, what is dreaded, is exactly what is erotic.*
>
> Susie Bright, Introduction to Herotica 3



H.R. Giger, Landscape XX

Sex has been tabooed and condemned by many societies because it goes against the moral standards of behavior established by the hegemony. Although nowadays the situation is slightly different, traditionally, western culture has kept the subject of sexuality and sex hidden from the public view and opinion by means of a series of rules usually imposed and spread by the religious institutions. It was (and still is to a certain extent)

Foucault refers specifically to sadomasochist (S&M) practices; however, this can also be applied to any other sexual practice different from the traditional accepted ones.

prohibited to speak openly about sexuality and sexual acts, especially when it has no reproductive but pleasurable purposes. Some artists, however, transgress those rules by means of erotic works in which they picture sex explicitly and transform sexual practices into a series of grotesque acts. Giger's Landscape XX, shown on page 91, accurately portrays precisely how sex is now part of the contemporary scenery[24] as well as the dirty, obscure, and even monstrous appearance that this landscape comprises in the eyes of the traditional hegemonic morality. Nevertheless, we can once more find in the contemporary representations of sex the two forms of grotesque mentioned before: the empty and the countercultural grotesque. Some authors present grotesque sexual acts where the most important goal is men's pleasure, while women—"beautiful" women according to the hegemonic standards—are objects used to reach that sexual satisfaction. Moreover, other minorities, such as male homosexuals, are also socially condemned and repressed for what society considers a "distorted," "amoral," and "perverted" conduct: in this particular case, for having sex with another man and for "lowering" themselves to the position of a woman (according to a male-oriented society.)

For instance, the exploitation of little girls, as shown in the opening pages of Henry Miller's Under the Roofs of Paris, is celebrated and perpetrated because it stimulates men:

> I've never seen myself as a cradle snatcher [. . .] But now I must admit that Marcelle with her hairless little body is exciting me. It's not because she's a child, it's because she's a child with no innocence . . . look into her eyes and you see the monster of knowledge, the shadow of wisdom . . . she lies across my legs and

[24] The mixture of penises and buttocks without a body illustrates the contemporary obsession with sex, in which the genitals are highlighted as well as the sexual act: the rest is not important. Moreover, the fact that the viewer cannot distinguish a clear separation of the different genitals represents sexual activity with multiple partners (whether through an orgy or just the constant change of partners) that is becoming more popular nowadays.

squeezes her naked figlet against my finger . . . and her eyes mock my hesitance. (11)

The narrator tries to justify himself from being a "cradle snatcher" by transforming a little girl ("hairless" as a way to emphasize her young age) into a sexual being. This nymphet, as Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita, is a temptress, an Eve, an evil woman with the body of a child who makes men perform an act that is socially condemned. The girl has oral sex with her father, then she tries to have sex with the narrator: "She's fucking me now, has her sweet ass against my bush, the bareness of her cunt hidden by my hair...she's laughing, the puppy, she loves that cock in her..." (14). The fact that the narrator, after some minutes of meditation, stops the sexual act and runs from the girl does not soften the atrocious description of the previous scenes in which adults, sexually aroused, encourage the girl to perform sexual acts with the narrator and with her own father. Of course, they blame the girl for their own perversion. Because she laughs and enjoys the encounter, she is evil and perverse.

Although this abominable scene of pederasty and incest can be considered grotesque, it presents an ambivalent situation: a potentially stimulating erotic act horribly committed against a thirteen-year-old girl, cannot be considered countercultural as it promotes the sexual subordination and subjugation of women to male pleasure. Furthermore, after fleeing from the little girl, the narrator has sex with a prostitute in the street. He treats her as a sexual object with no value as a human being but as a sexual creature: "... I take the first bill I find in my pockets, wipe my cock on it, and lay it crumpled on her bare belly weighted with a coin" (17). The act of wiping the semen from his penis with the same bill

he is paying her with represents an affirmation of male economic and sexual power to which women have been subjected for centuries.

Another example of a failed countercultural grotesque (failed because it ends up promoting hegemonic standards instead of breaking with them) is Anne Rice's The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty,[25] the first book of an erotic trilogy based on the classic story of Sleeping Beauty. The author combines erotic and grotesque elements to narrate the story of Beauty, a princess who was sleeping under a spell and is awakened by a prince only to be taken, with other princesses and princes, as a sexual slave. The slaves are humiliated, raped, forced to do whatever their masters want, and punished without any reason. Prince Alexi, another slave, tells Beauty his experience in the kitchen, one of the numerous punishments they have to endure:

> I was once collared in leather, this collar linked to the cuffs on my wrist, and my wrist to my knees so that I could not rise from a hands-and knees position. A bit with a bridle was placed in my mouth, and bound so securely to my head that I might be pulled forward by leather straps with little ability to resist, my limbs reluctantly allowing me to follow. (187)

The elements described by Alexi characterize the sadomasochistic practice of bondage in which one of the participants *consents* to be tied (usually with handcuffs and leather objects) so the partner, the "master," can do whatever he or she wants to the "slave." Although in this kind of tendency there is a master-slave power relation in which the slave is tortured, there is no subjugation or imposition but a negotiation of roles. Michel Foucault, in "Sex, Power, and Politics of Identity" comments on this situation,

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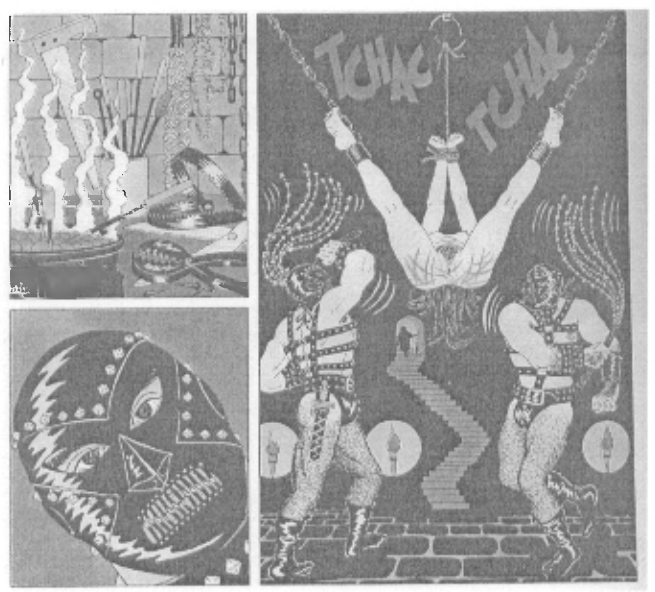
[25] This book was originally published under the pseudonym A.N. Roquelaure.

> On this point, the S&M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid. Of course, there are roles, but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed. Sometimes the scene begins with the master and slave, and at the end the slave has become the master. Or, even when the roles are stabilized, you know very well that it is always a game. (169)

The participants are willing to suffer because this gives them pleasure; nevertheless, in the case of Beauty and Alexi, they are enslaved against their will. Alexi explains how the cooks in the kitchen punish him with paddles, rape him one by one, and humiliate him in different ways and with different objects: "they stuffed into my anus some bit of food rather than throw it away, carrots, other roots, whatever they thought liken to a penis. I was raped over and over by these things, and had to expel them with great effort" (190-191). All the slaves suffer similar tortures: spanking, paddling, public exposure, forced homosexual intercourses, prohibition from having orgasms, and so on.



In the comic "Vírgenes y Mártires" Nazario presents Febronia, a virgin tortured in different ways that finally lead to her death as a punishment for adoring the christian god. Although the plot differs from that of Rice's novel, the similarity in the kind of punishments Beauty and the other slaves receive, the S&M theme, the unilateral pleasure, and impossibility of escape, are very similar.

However, although the characters confess to some level of pleasure as well as attraction to their torturers, suffering and anguish are the recurrent feelings of these sexual slaves who cannot change roles with their masters.

More than rebellious grotesque, these two examples of erotic literature reinforce the patriarchal views of the hegemonic group and promote the sexual subjugation, repression and oppression of women and sometimes men. Miller's and Rice's works present grotesque images of various acts, bodily fluids and body parts; nevertheless, there is no degradation and reconfiguration of the established order. After all the grotesque experience has passed, the hegemonic power relations prevail. On the other hand, some authors represent grotesque sexuality as a means to break with the moral rules without degrading the minorities. These artists present sex from a different perspective, neither in the traditionally romanticized fashion nor in the *porno-patriarchal* way. On the contrary, their works expose the hidden aspects of sexuality—aspects that are grotesque for the hegemony—such as the bodily functions and fluids related to it, non-traditional practices, homosexual intercourses, and other sexual elements and activities that the hegemony attacks and censors. But before we analyze some examples of countercultural grotesque in erotic writing, it is important to discuss the power structures that rule society in terms of sexuality.

Sexuality is not a mere biological, instinctive conduct but rather a learned cultural behavior with certain rules and regulating patterns. Kate Millet, in her work Sexual Politics, refers to the position of women in society and the power relations between sexes in which the patriarchal society grants total control and profit to the male part while the females are subordinated, repressed, and criticized. Women, according to these patriarchal

views, are considered inferior beings created to obey and serve men, and this doctrine affects every aspect of women's life, including sex. Millet mentions that,

> [w]hat goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalized nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females. Through this system a most ingenious form of 'interior colonization' has been achieved. It is one which tends moreover to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more enduring. However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power. (25)

This "institutionalized" idea of male superiority has been promoted throughout history by means of religious beliefs, science, social structures, among others, all of which are male creations. The worst part is that not only has this form of indoctrination and subordination been successful, but it has also been assimilated and internalized by women to the point that many of them believe and accept the male "superiority" and the female servile position. Millet manifests that: "Male supremacy, like other political creeds, does not finally reside in physical strength but in the acceptance of a value system which is not biological" (27). In this way, women have accepted their subordinated position as a natural, biological, and even divine design. Women are considered incomplete men since they do not have a penis, and this "lack," which makes women "inferior," is promoted by tradition, religion, and, more recently, by Freudian psychoanalysis. Millet mentions that, "Primitive peoples explain the phenomenon of the female's genitals in terms of a wound, sometimes reasoning that she was visited by a bird or snake and mutilated into her present condition. Once she

was wounded, now she bleeds" (47). In this way, women internalize the idea that their body is incomplete, that the penis is a symbol of wholeness, and menstruation is a stigma of their "inferiority." Freud says that women are jealous of the penis; however, even if that were in any way true, it is not a natural, innate psychological reaction but a culturally implanted belief.

Patriarchal forms of repression are particularly fervent regarding sex and sexuality. Sex is considered an unclean, immoral act especially when performed outside marriage, between same sex partners, and with other purpose than procreation[26]. Ideas like these have been promoted by the patriarchal institutions for years. However, the social double standard is more permissive with men as they are allowed a licentious premarital and extramarital sexual life. This situation promotes a variety of occupations (considered illegal and immoral) such as prostitution, created in order to please, for the most part, men. In that respect, Millet states that,

> Prostitution is, as Engels demonstrates, the natural product of traditional monogamous marriage. This assertion is capable of proof on a number of grounds, the simplest being numerical. When chastity is prescribed and adultery severely punished in women, marriage becomes monogamous for women rather than men. Yet there should not be sufficient females to satisfy masculine demand unless a sector of women, usually from among the poor, are bred or reserved for sexual exploitation. (122)

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[26] The following fragment illustrates the traditional position of society toward sex mentioned above:
'I will tell you a point of the elephant's honesty. An elephant never changes his mate. He loves her tenderly. With her he couples not, but from three years to three years. And that only for five days, and so secretly that he is never seen in the act. But the sixth day, he shows himself abroad again, and the first thing he does is to go directly to some river and wash his body, not willing to return to his troupe of companions till he be purified. Be not these goodly and honest qualities in a beast by which he teaches married folk not to be given too much to carnal and sensual pleasures?' (St. François de Sales qtd in Foucault 179)

Prostitutes are condemned for being sexually active outside marriage and for feeling love for anyone or anything but money; however, the same society that criticizes them is the one that allows them to exist and operate freely, to a certain extent, so they can cooperate in relieving male sexual needs.

On the other hand, "respectable women" are taught not to enjoy sex even inside marriage. Regarding this situation, Millet adds that,

> One also observes the paradoxical situation that while patriarchy tends to convert woman to a sexual object, she has not been encouraged to enjoy the sexuality which is agreed to be her fate. Instead, she is made to suffer for and be ashamed of her sexuality, while in general not permitted to rise above the level of a nearly exclusively sexual existence. For the great mass of women throughout history have been confined to the cultural level of animal life in providing the male with sexual outlet and exercising the animal functions of reproduction and care of the young. (119)

This social conditioning is so strong and effective that many women believe that enjoying sex is a sin and that the only two reasons to perform the sexual act are: to procreate as many children as their god wills and to please the husband when he "needs" it. Women are not sexual beings but rather sexual "objects." Besides, this power relation is present not only in situations where the woman is willing to participate in the sexual intercourse, but also in situations where women are forced into it.

Rape is probably the ultimate form of sexual *objectification* of women. They are forced to have sexual intercourse and are sometimes killed as a result of this violent act. This form

of aggression represents the dominion of men over women that can be "taken," as an object, without their consent. Millet mentions that,

> Patriarchal force also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape. The figure of rapes reported represent only a fraction of those which occur, as the 'shame' of the event is sufficient to deter women from the notion of civil prosecution under the public circumstances of a trial. (44)

Women are victims both of this terrible crime and of society's judgment. They are viewed as "impure" women with no value for the patriarchal standards of virginity and even as culpable of the rape for dressing or behaving in a "too provocative" manner—comments such as "She asked for it" are common in our society. These women are consoled and criticized at the same time; they are condemned for the rest of their lives to carry the stigma of impurity. The violator is also punished for spoiling another man's "property" and honor (be it a father, a husband, a brother or just the family name) but not for the violent exercise of force on another human being.

A different situation occurs when the subject of rape is a man. According to Millet, this situation implies a double humiliation: "It is interesting that male victims of rape at the hands of other males often fell twice imposed upon, as they have not only been subjected to forcible and painful intercourse, but further abuse in being reduced to the status of a female" (44). For a man, being "reduced" to the level of a woman represents a great humiliation. He is being used as a sexual object, as a woman, to provide pleasure to another man; therefore, he "descends" to an inferior position. Language perfectly exemplifies this situation as the worst insults for a man are typically female adjectives. For

instance, "pussy" or "cunt," two slang words that refer to the female genitalia, are common insults for a man who "fails" in his masculine roles. If this form of "degradation" (not in the grotesque sense) of the male into a female position is terrible for the patriarchal standards, the fact that some men take this position willingly is even worse. Millet refers to "[. . .] the 'femininity' of the passive homosexual." She describes him as "feminine because [he has been] ravished and subjugated by the male [. . .]" (18). Homosexuality, in the case of men[27], represents an act of betrayal to the *male-kind*, and it provokes serious reactions such as discrimination and public ridicule. Regarding this situation, Foucault refers to the condition of homosexuals as a struggle with the power structures:

> For instance, being homosexuals, we are in a struggle with the government, and the government is in a struggle with us. When we deal with the government, the struggle, of course, is not symmetrical, the power situation is not the same; but we are in this struggle, and the continuation of this situation can influence the behavior or nonbehavior of the other. (167)

Although this fight has taken place for several years and some people are accepting homosexuality, the discrimination and rejection towards this minority group of "male traitors" is yet strong and solid.

The role of the grotesque in sexuality is to present the other side of sex, the dark side that society tries to hide, condemn, and eliminate. It presents sex as it is practiced by

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[27] Sex between two women is condemned and, to a certain extent, accepted at the same time. Men do not want their sisters or daughters to become lesbians or bisexuals because it goes against the "natural" arrangement of things. However, a lot of men fantasize about participating in a threesome or just watching hegemonic beautiful, young, "perfect" women on a girl-on-girl intercourse. This behavior is promoted in movies and music videos where girls, and just girls, learn that to be bisexual is "cool." Homosexuality or bisexuality in men has the opposite reaction.

many people who do not follow the moral standards of sexual behavior. It promotes the elements that, according to Millet, a sexual revolution requires:

> [. . .] first of all, an end of traditional sexual inhibition and taboos, particularly those that most threaten patriarchal monogamous marriage: homosexuality, 'illegitimacy,' adolescent, pre- and extra-marital sexuality. The negative aura with which sexual activity has generally been surrounded would necessarily be eliminated, together with the double standard and prostitution. The goal of revolution would be a permissive single standard of sexual freedom, and one uncorrupted by the crass and exploitive economic bases of traditional sexual alliances. (62)

A sexual revolution means equality, freedom, dominion over our own body, respect toward oneself and the others. The results would be "an integration of the separate sexual subcultures, an assimilation by both sides of previously segregated human experience" (Millet 62).

In the following pages we will analyze three erotic short stories that show countercultural grotesque elements: Dawn O'Hara's "Dicks, Digits, Dildos," Bill Noble's "Recent Reports on Progress Toward Fusion" and Simon Sheppard's "The Boy who Read Bataille." These works let us see sexuality from a different perspective to that of the hegemony, and they question the hegemonic impositions and restrictions toward sex and pleasure. The human body plays a primordial role not only as the source of pleasure and "sin," but also as the instrument to break away from the traditional hegemonic standards of beauty and morality.

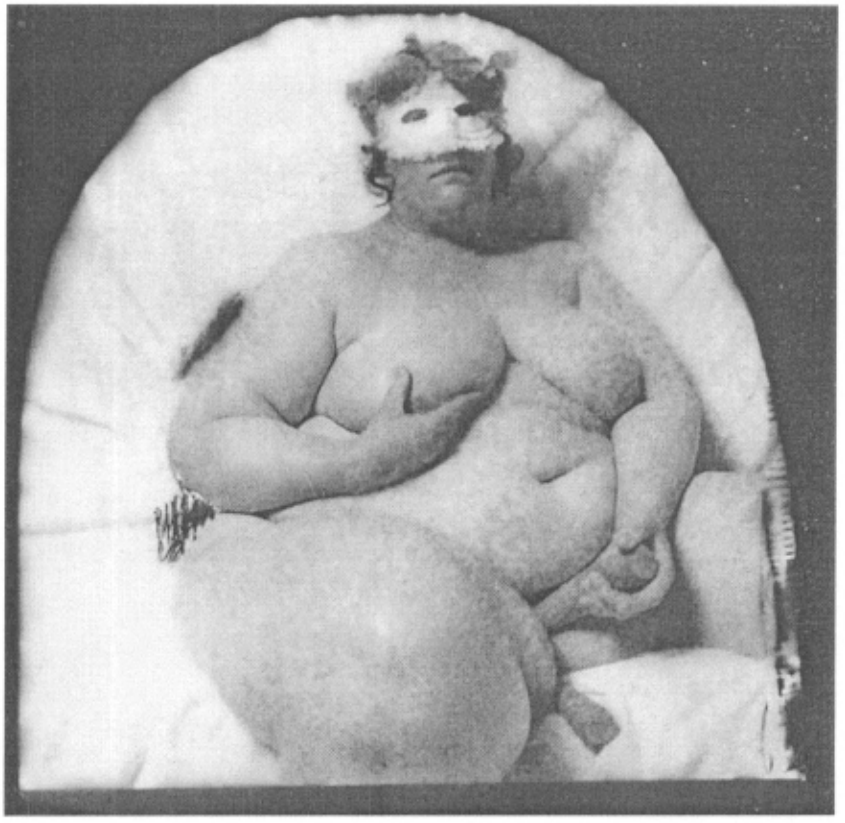
Dawn O'Hara's short story "Dicks, Digits, Dildos" reveals a different perspective of sexuality traditionally obscured by the hegemonic standards. We mentioned before (page

77 of this work) that hegemonic art represents beauty in a young body—a body that is separated from birth and death, from the womb and the grave, "La edad preferida es la que está situada lo más lejos posible del seno materno y de la tumba, es decir, alejada al máximo de los "umbrales" de la vida individual" (Bakhtin 33). As opposed to traditional erotic art, in which the performers of the sexual act are young, healthy, beautiful people (especially in the case of women), the author narrates one day in the sexual life of an older couple and all the problems related to the coitus and old age.

The short story begins with an account of the different items that the narrator has had in her vagina:

> Penises. Vibrators, dildos, tongues, even pens in my hungry youth. Fingers—as mine, men's, rubber-gloved doctors'. And one fumbling young girl's before boys occurred to me. Spermicides, sponges, diaphragms, condoms, lubricants. Seven-day yeast infection treatment—they didn't used to have the quick and tidy fixes they do now. Acidophilus tablets, vinegar douches, progesterone creams. Chocolate syrup. Tampons I could never tolerate—they just never felt as good as on those horseback-riding ads. Two miscarriages. Thermometers when we were still trying for kids. A quack regime of herbal vagi-packs during my holistic phase. Four hundred ninety-two periods. Sixty-seven speculums. Forty-three pap smears, One cryosurgery. One hysterosalpingogram, as difficult to tolerate as it is to pronounce. Two biopsies. Eleven ultrasound wands. And this particular cock, my husband's, 4,682 times. I'm sure I've left some things out. At my age I have a hard time keeping track of what's trespassed between my legs. (53)

The author presents aspects of female sexuality, such as masturbation with different objects and the first sexual experiences, mixed with more gynecological elements, such as menstruation, surgeries and pregnancy, which become grotesque as most men do not usually want to mix them with eroticism or even to know about their existence at all. In erotic works and hegemonic pornography, we are not usually exposed to female gynecological problems because they are not male problems, and they are considered repulsive and not sexy.



Witkin's Carrotcake I, transgresses traditional sexuality by showing an overweight, older woman masturbating with carrots instead of a thin, young woman (like playboy models) having sex with a healthy and powerful young man. The picture might be grotesque for the viewer not only for the dark aesthetics but also for the clash that arises from what people understand as beautiful and sexy.

Millet comments about female menstruation and society's depiction of it:

> The feeling that woman's sexual functions are impure is both world-wide and persistent [. . .] The event of menstruation, for example, is a largely clandestine affair, and the psycho-social effect of the stigma attached must have great effect on the female ego. There is a large anthropological literature on menstrual taboo; the practice of isolating offenders in huts at the edge of the village occurs throughout the primitive world. Contemporary slang denominates menstruation as 'the curse.' (47)

Women must be ready, "healthy" and "clean" for the man's satisfaction, and any "problem" such as menstruation, infections, and the like, are seen as repulsive, dirty *turn-offs*. Nevertheless, O'Hara exposes them as the natural, everyday situations that any woman, young or old, rich or poor... and any real-life couple must deal with. In O'Hara's story, the problem they face is lack of lubrication that makes it impossible to continue with the sexual act: "But I'm dry as a dead insect stuck in the lampshade [. . .] Even my husband's soft cock feels angry against my desert tenderness" (54). This apparently minor problem brings back to her all the social pressure for other "inadequacies" that she has as a woman:

> I'm twenty pounds heavier than on our wedding day, when I foolishly starved myself into a dress I couldn't fit into two days later [. . .] I have been inadequate in producing the requisite children. Deficient in jeans size, cooking skills, apologies, and in-law relations. I got over all that and concentrated on blow jobs and yoga stretches instead [. . .] But feeling sexually inadequate after all these years, when the lack of children gave us space for sexuality that so many couples don't have? When is my body going to cut me a break? (54)

The fact that she, as most women in the entire world, does not fit in the hegemonic standard of beauty or in her roles as a woman (mother, wife, sexual object, among others,) leads her to feeling devastated. She is losing what she thinks is the only thing in which she succeeds to please her husband. The word "inadequate" is not gratuitous; it represents the effect that social pressure exerts on women: if a woman cannot have children or cannot have sex with her husband, she is useless. However, the character of the husband helps to relieve this social pressure, thus redeeming him from the patriarchal male role.

First of all, it is important to mention that the narrator's husband does not fit either in the patriarchal standard of the "stallion." On the contrary, he arrives on the scene as a fifty-four year old man who is starting to have problems with his erections and whose physical appearance dissents from that of a handsome, virile man. The narrator says: "Not that he was rock-hard to begin with. Instantaneous erections only happen in the mornings, now" (54). The problems of erectile dysfunctions and flaccidity are hardly discussed either in fiction or in real life because "no man" suffers from those problems. However, this situation as well as his physical appearance do not represent an impediment for a man to enjoy sex, since men are not required such strict patterns of beauty as women are, and Viagra helps them with the erection.

The narrator states that: "His [her husband's] confidence remains firmly rooted in his slightly above-average cock size (he's measured), and nothing seems to shake it. Not weight gain, hair loss, or below-average height" (56). Society is more lenient and merciful towards men regarding their physical appearance. Nevertheless, the narrator's husband does not seem to be so confident about his penis size since he measured it. But as long as he can have an erection, sooner or later, he will always be a "complete" man; therefore, the

woman is the one in trouble. The turning point in the story takes place when the husband comes up with a new idea. He wants to try anal sex but not with his penis. For that purpose, he has bought a small dildo. She mentions that they have tried anal sex before, but it was neither successful nor pleasant: "we never attempted the back-door method again. I never saw the need while my other hole was cooperating" (57). The reason for the small dildo instead of his penis is that "last time it hurt" (57) as he reminds her. Anal sex is a prohibited act seen as dirty and perverted. It is forbidden by the catholic church as a sin since it is a form of sex with no reproductive but pleasurable purposes only. Moreover, a lot of people view this practice as a totally disgusting and dirty act because of the connection between the anus and feces. But there are also many people who practice anal sex as they find great pleasure in it. In the case of the story, it comes out of need. However, the narrator is the one who receives all the direct pleasure as her husband uses the dildo instead of his penis because of the pain the latter causes on her. She describes the act as follows:

> He spread me, and I let him. I know that my ripe and rippled derriére will never make a magazine photo spread, but I also know that these cheeks look good to him. He slips inside, a centimeter at a time. It's not difficult at all this time, like the last time we tried it in the prehistoric age of our careless youth. Maybe it's because of Bacchus's [the nickname given to the dildo] minute size, or the lubricant, or our ability to work together, or that my lifelong lover has learned patience and self-denial. Whatever the reasons, I moan. I let him enjoy pleasuring me while he receives no physical gratification in return, only the sensation of giving. (58)

Her husband treats her delicately and patiently. It is not the violent and quick act of "fucking" shown in pornography—as opposed to love-making—where there is no time for massages or small dildos or patience. Instead of exercising "male power" by forcing her violently to have sex (whether vaginal or anal) in spite of her pain, he really worries about her and tries to please her. They both get really excited with the new procedure, and the novelty of the game brings back feelings from a younger stage:

> [. . .] I'm well aware of the state of his cock. It rapidly returns to its instant fossilized state of youth [. . .] My vagina stretches, yawns, and blinks, discovering that her coveted spot in the hierarchy has been usurped. Worse, the instigator is not even a member of the immediate household, but a Lilliputian godhead. Jealous, she puts up a fuss, causing a commotion between my legs. She even resorts to calling in the reserves, and my clitoris joins the clamor. (58)

After the experiment with the small dildo—a sexual toy that, though common, is still tabooed—they recover some of their supposedly lost sexual qualities and end up having sex in a more traditional position: "Then I'm on top of him, our puzzle pieces connect, and my body swallows him in one easy gulp" (59). The dry season is over thanks to a sexual toy and to the willingness of exploring new horizons of pleasure rather than conventional genital sex.

O'Hara's story, though short, embodies different aspects of sexuality that are considered improper or non existent in the eyes of conservative society. On one hand, it deals with the female frustration towards the violent social campaign for perfection and plastic beauty as well as their role as wives and pleasure givers. On the other hand, it not only pictures non-traditional erotic characters in their fifties, far from those patterns of

beauty mentioned before, but also shows them practicing a sexual act that is condemned, criticized and that many young couples would not dare to perform. It also demystifies the use of sexual toys in a relationship as options when the traditional methods and positions do not work. The story encourages couples to look for alternate practices and elements that will help them enjoy their sexuality as long as they respect the position of their partner. Moreover, it teaches us that sexuality is not a matter of young "horny" teenagers and young adults but a human activity that can be performed as long as we have the physical capacity and the will to do it. While O'Hara's story challenges the notion that old people are asexual beings, other productions explore the forgotten sexuality of people with "abnormal" bodies.

Bill Noble's "Recent Reports on Progress toward Fusion" explores the sexual life of a woman who marries Siamese twins. This short story presents an uncommon relationship in which a grotesque human body and a homosexual intercourse between these brothers transgress the hegemonic standards of beauty and morality. The united body of Hannie and Steve Anderson swerves from the ideal hegemonic conception of a sexy man (or two); however, Meg Kapinski, the narrator, finds love, beauty and sex appeal where others may find ugliness and repulsion. This anti-aesthetic portrayal of sexuality deals with two main topics: First, that some people do not fantasize with "perfect" and "beautiful" sexual partners but have different tastes and tendencies that are socially labeled as "kinky." Second, implicitly, that "unbeautiful" people (people with disabilities, malformations or overweight, "ugly," and so on) suffer from discrimination in terms of sexuality, something that is never mentioned.

The Anderson twins have different personalities and ideas. Hannie is a Democrat and more extroverted while Steve is a Republican and a shy man. They also have a different upper body; nevertheless, they share the lower part, including the same penis that is connected with each other's feelings and thoughts. They will never be socially recognized as handsome men; on the contrary, their appearance is viewed as grotesque and repulsive. The text exposes the rejection to which they have been subjected their entire lives. Meg asks them about kissing and how they handle the situation. This question provokes different reactions on them: "Hannie laughed, but Steve looked away [. . .] Hannie said, 'Meg...' I said, 'I'm sorry,' talking to the tears in Steve's eyes. A klutz. I was a complete klutz" (61). Steve's tears demonstrate the painful condition of discrimination and alienation they have to confront. They lack sexual experience due to their physical appearance and the consequent rejection from other people. They are not fitted for a society in which appearance can influence a person's failure or success in the professional, emotional and sexual aspects. Nevertheless, Meg has a different view of sexuality and beauty.

Her narration of the day she met them and how she started feeling attracted to them reveals her particular vision of the twins and the sexual possibilities they offer: "I can't truthfully tell you whether it was Hannie's sunny face that got me, or Steve's elusiveness, or imagining one-and-a-half guys making love to me—one straight-home cock and all those hands" (61). As opposed to the hegemonic ideals that do not conceive Siamese twins as provocative and sexy, the brothers' proportions and multiple appendages caressing her body at the same time, as well as the fact that they are "virgins," stimulate Meg sexually: "That just made me hotter" (61). She starts by kissing each of them, an act that makes them

reach an orgasm and expel a large quantity of semen on their pants, an element that she emphasizes: "The two of them had just come for me. I stared at the **blotch** on their pants. Nobody knew what to say" (62 emphasis mine). Their inexperience transforms the kiss into an extremely exciting sensation for these twenty-six years old virgins. The narrator describes different sexual encounters after the first kiss and how she teaches the twins to explore their sexuality—a practice forgotten by these brothers because of shame. They confess to Meg that they have never "touched themselves" (63). The embarrassment of masturbating in front of someone else like a brother, even when they share not only the same organ but also the same feelings of pleasure, stops them from performing this common act also condemned by society but widely and secretly practice. Therefore, after carrying out a striptease and arousing them sexually, she commands them to masturbate:

> 'Touch yourself' C'mon. Both of you.' [. . .] They each put reluctant fingers on the shaft of their penis and gave a shudder of pleasure [. . .] They both shouted at the same time—I shouted, too, but I have no idea what—and a second later this fountain spurted out of them. They snapped nearly upright; a big glop of semen caught Steve across the neck. [. . .] I struggle to stay upright on the chair, deep in those two pairs of eyes. *Holy shit, this ain't kink anymore. You're in love, girl.* (64)

The image of the two-in-one brothers touching themselves, two different hands stroking the same penis and ejaculating "a big glop" of semen, incite Meg to the point that she discovers her feelings towards them become more than a mere sexual attraction. Again, the narrator highlights the bodily fluids spattering them (Steve in this case) as an element of arousal for her. As opposed to pornography where women are the ones who receive the semen in their

faces, it is one of the brothers, not Meg, who gets the load of the fluid. Until this point, however, the three of them have not had direct sexual contact.

The next encounter unfolds the pleasure the Siamese twins can provide Meg as well as her power and dominion over her body and sexuality. They start playing sexual games outdoors, in the woods next to a lake: "They'd been picking raspberries for me and they were licking raspberry juice off my nipples. This is why I've got two breasts. I may be the first woman in the history of the world to really understand that about boobs" (65). Besides playing with food as an aid for their libido, she discovers in her breasts a function different from that promoted by the hegemony. Instead of thinking of the purpose of her two breasts for feeding children (twins maybe?) she finds a more pleasurable utility: having her two men (twins actually!) giving and receiving pleasure from her breasts. This idea deconstructs the patriarchal idea that women should not enjoy sex but procreate children instead. Meg enjoys her sexuality and makes good use of her body and that of her partners too, to get that satisfaction. Her fantasy of different hands caressing her at the same time finally becomes a reality: "All the while I sucked there were hands wrapped in my hair, hands over my shoulders, fingers tracing the lines of my back [. . .] Two heads tickled up between my legs. Two mouths blew bubbles, one up my butt crack, the other tingling my clit" (65-66). The twins can provide her more pleasure by touching and licking different parts of her body simultaneously. This is something a "normal" man cannot do to her.

Although the relationship seems to work perfectly for her, the brothers start having problems with their closeness and inseparability. This situation, however, directs their passion to another level condemned by society. Being attached to each other makes it

difficult for the twins to perform certain sexual activities at the same time, and sometimes one of them finds himself inactive. Meg explains that,

> I was trying to hammer home the subtle arts of munching my puss. Problem was, the guy who wasn't employed never had any idea what to do with himself. Hannie was lying face down, listlessly stroking my belly and breasts, clearly uncomfortable. Steve was doing Olympic-level tongue-fu. But all those hands I'd loved so much were just distracting. (66)

Sibling rivalry appears when Meg interacts with one of them, and the other has to wait for his turn. She realizes that she makes love to one at a time while "The other one's always acting like they want to watch TV" (67). After an argument in which Steve becomes very angry and Meg is about to leave, Hannie reminds his brother (and himself) that they are bound together whether they like it or not. They are joined not only physically but also sexually, and Hannie wants to make his point clear: "'...we *are* in this together' [. . .] He lifted his brother's face up and kissed him on the mouth" (68). This act, condemned by society for its incestuous and homosexual nature, unleashes the passion of the brothers and makes them realize for the first time the sexual union and love between each other. Steve tells his brother: "'Whatever we feel, we both feel.' Steve reached and touched their cock with the greatest tenderness [. . .] Whatever we love, we both love. That's just the way it is'" (68). Both accept their situation and seal it by pleasuring each other in a man-on-man sexual intercourse which, by the way, kindles Meg's desire. She affirms, "I couldn't tell who started the kiss. I felt a sudden flood not just in my puss, but everywhere. I never knew men could be so tender" (68). She continues describing the scene of the Siamese twins having sex with each other,

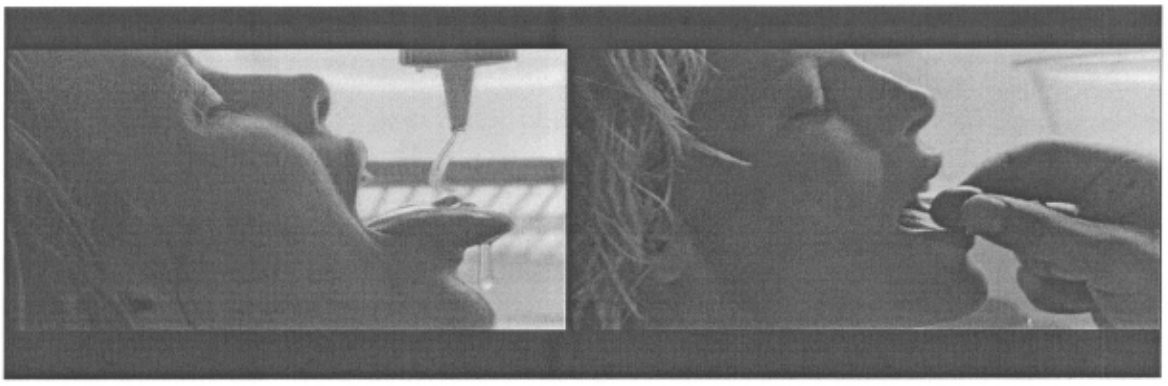
> Steve pulled Hannie's face closer, kissed him deep. Hannie took over stroking. We had some lube beside the bed, so I grabbed it and poured it all over their cock and Hannie's hands.
>
> Hannie stroked the shaft and Steve made a little tent with his fingertips for their cockhead. I watched the muscles in their one precious pair of hips bunch and release. They made tiny sounds into each other's throats while I held them. I don't know how long it went on. You can't believe what four hands can do. To a cock, to faces, to bodies, to two men who discover love. (69)

The difference between this sexual intercourse and their first masturbation is a matter of who they are pleasing. In the first one, although they share the same feelings, they were masturbating as individuals, in a more selfish search for pleasure. In the second instance, they were making love and trying to please the other. The mental separation of the siamese comes to an end; moreover, they make Meg a new part of them emotionally and physically: "Three separate, loving people, joined into one," Meg says, "I started to climb the hill of a gargantuan come. They climbed too, the three of us did" (70). They feel pleasure as one united body to the point that they have a simultaneous orgasm.

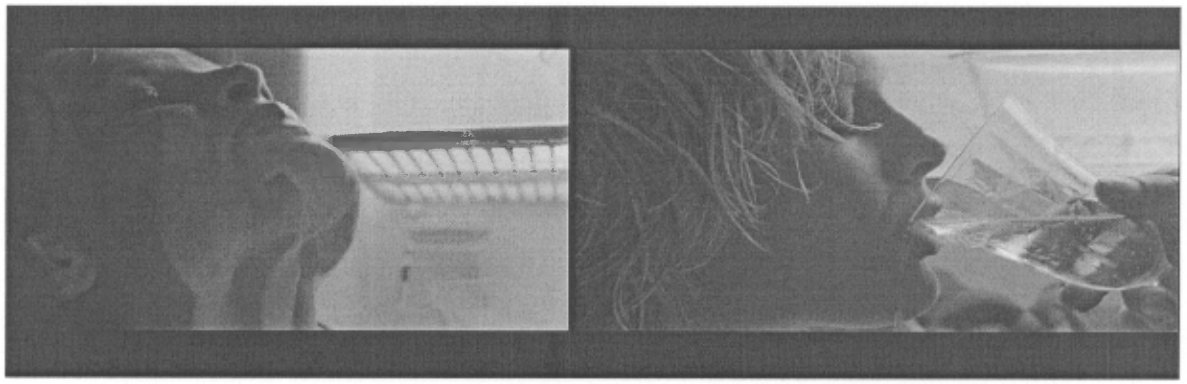
Noble's story transgresses the moral norms of sexuality as well as the aesthetic rules of beauty and sensuality. The "abnormality" of the Siamese joined body and the final homosexual act, the images of bodily sexual fluids, as well as the stimulus all of this provokes in the narrator, confront society's view of morality and beauty; therefore, the whole picture is seen as grotesque and depraved. Threesomes are common in traditional erotic writing, especially those involving two women and a man; however, this story deals with a far more complex kind of intercourse as two of the participants are inseparable. The

author provides a different perspective of sexuality in which a double body turns to be sexier and more pleasurable than a regular body or two. Moreover, the story opens the reader's eyes to the rejection "imperfect" people suffer and to the fact that they are sexual beings, even when society wants to keep this fact hidden.

The grotesque explores not only the sexual behavior and preferences of people, but also the elements used to stimulate the sexual appetite. Some of these elements have been appropriated by the hegemony and transformed into classic erotic practices applied in pornography and in hegemonic erotic productions. A countercultural reappropriation requires a reconfiguration and exposure of these formerly rejected and criticized components of sex and sexuality. The movie 9 ½ Weeks is a classic erotic film in which Mickey Rourke and Kim Basinger, two classy, hegemonic representations of men and women, perform different intense sexual acts. The film contains a famous scene in which the protagonists initiate the sexual foreplay in front of the refrigerator. They stimulate each other with what we might call "sexy food." The movie presents food like strawberries, champagne, milk, honey, among others, used as sexual toys that help the couple to create the appropriate atmosphere for sex.



In 9 ½ weeks, John Grey (Mickey Rourke) pours different kinds of liquids and food on Elizabeth McGraw's (Kim Basinger) mouth. The excess of it flows over her body to be finally massaged by Grey's hands. The good taste of the food used in this erotic game brings a different and particular "taste" to the sexual act.



This film changed people's view towards food as sexual stimulator, despite shocking the more traditional viewers. However, the different kinds of food used in the movie, except for the cough syrup and chili peppers employed as a joke, become sexy because of their delicious flavor. Strawberries, milk, jelly, though combined in untraditional ways and in an uncommon situation, are not disgusting mixtures and are perfectly eatable. But would other kinds of food provoke the same feeling of passion and sensuality?

On the other hand, Simon Sheppard's short story "The Boy who Read Bataille" narrates the sexual encounter of two boys who give an unusual erotic use to food in a combination that differs from that shown in 9 ½ Weeks. The combination of raw eggs with chocolate syrup and whipped cream used by two boys in an erotic experiment clashes with the traditional perspective of eroticism and good taste. Notwithstanding, by means of the protagonists, who find in this gastronomic mess an incredible source of excitement and sensuality, the author explores the "dirty" side of sexuality in which some people find some elements, that may be nauseating for others, pleasurable and exciting.

The narrator and his French partner, Philippe, attend a course in "Transgressive French Literature," or "Kink Lit 101," as they call it (Sheppard, 156). This course has opened their mind to other forms of sexual practices considered obscene, dirty and deviated. The narrator himself refers to the authors and the books they study (de Sade, Genet, Bataille) as

"twisted stuff" (156). Philippe shows special interest in some Bataille passages which, though filthy, he finds particularly arousing: "'*Oui*. Ah, Bataille. The scene with the piss and the wardrobe? *Magnifique*. And especially the one where Simone breaks raw eggs with her ass.' [. . .] 'I'd love,' he continued, 'to try that out'" (157). Mary Anne, a classmate of the boys, has a more conventional perspective of the scene: "'Oh God!' [. . .] 'Not me! That's gross'" (157). Although she is taking the same course, she does not find those practices sexually stimulating. Moreover, there is a tone of alarm in her reaction toward Philippe's tendencies.

The narrator is not sure about him liking the combination of sex and raw eggs; however, his attraction towards Philippe drives him to participate in the experiment: "Kink had never been my thing, not even in my masturbation fantasies, which generally centered on smooth-bodied guys bending over to show me their buttholes. But if this was my big chance to see Philippe with his clothes off, maybe even touch him..." (158) Thus, the interest of the narrator lies only in having sex with his partner, while Philippe is concentrated in performing his literary fantasy. Philippe allows the narrator to perform a foreplay in which the latter indulges in caressing Philippe's lower body. However, Philippe also stops it quickly and asks for the food game to start: "'*Les oeufs*...' Philippe said. The eggs. He was sounding impatient. All I wanted to do was fuck him, and he was thinking about groceries. Damn this kink stuff" (160). Although the speaker rejects the game of the eggs not only for its dirty nature, but also for its distracting effect from the actual sex, he finally finds himself enjoying the situation.

The narrator describes the game in an explicit manner. He develops from being in a position of negation to one of acceptance and pleasure. He breaks all the eggs right in

Philippe's anus and buttocks; he finally accepts this grotesque image as sexy, and he ends up getting pleasure from it:

> By the time I'd gone through most of the carton, the place was a mess and Philippe was thoroughly covered with viscous whites and bright streaks of yolk. I was about to suggest that we'd made enough mess, when he reached back with both hands and pulled his asscheeks wide apart. His deep pink asshole gleamed beneath a raw egg glaze: boypussy tartar [. . .] I dropped to my knees right between his kneeling legs, stuck my face into his sloppy-wet ass, and started lapping at his high-cholesterol hole [. . .] I reared back again, reached for an egg, and smashed it into his open hole. I was, my oozing cock and I agreed, beginning to really enjoy this. (161)

At this point, the narrator finds sensuality and excitement in a practice which had been formerly thought unclean and revolting. The explicit grotesque image of the anus gleaming with eggs, combined with the narrator's penis "oozing" with fluids from pleasure breaks with the standards of traditional sex. The narrator forgets his preconception and participates, now unrestrained and uninhibited. They continue adding chocolate syrup and whipped cream to create a filthy mixture that turns to be "beautiful" for the narrator as he admits, "I squeezed the bottle and a stream of sweet syrup hit his hole, drenching eggwhites, yolks, bits of shell. **It was beautiful**, that hole, those food-covered buttcheeks. As gorgeous as his ass had been when it was clean and white, **it was even sexier all sullied, filthy with food**. I wanted to fuck it" (161 emphasis mine). The narrator opens his mind and senses to a broader range of what he considers disgusting and what is beautiful, what is annoying, and what is pleasurable. The repulsive aspect of raw eggs mixed with

chocolate and whipped cream become as appealing and sexy as the strawberries, honey, milk, and the rest of food in 9 ½ Weeks.

The games end prematurely as Philippe is only interested in the egg fantasy rather than having sex with the narrator. Philippe stops everything when the narrator puts a condom on. He says "No" and starts to masturbate: "He grabbed his dick with his filthy hand, quickly jacking his foreskin back and forth over his swollen, shiny cockhead [. . .] I just stood there gaping as Philippe shot a big load of sperm, gush after gush, onto the swamp of eggs, chocolate, and cream" (162). Philippe completes the mixture of food with his own semen; nevertheless, he has left the narrator aside from his orgasmic plans. His fantasy does not include penetration; he only needed someone to help him break the eggs on his buttocks and anus. However, although the narrator does not have sex with Philippe, the experiment opens his mind to new forms of pleasure with unusual elements.

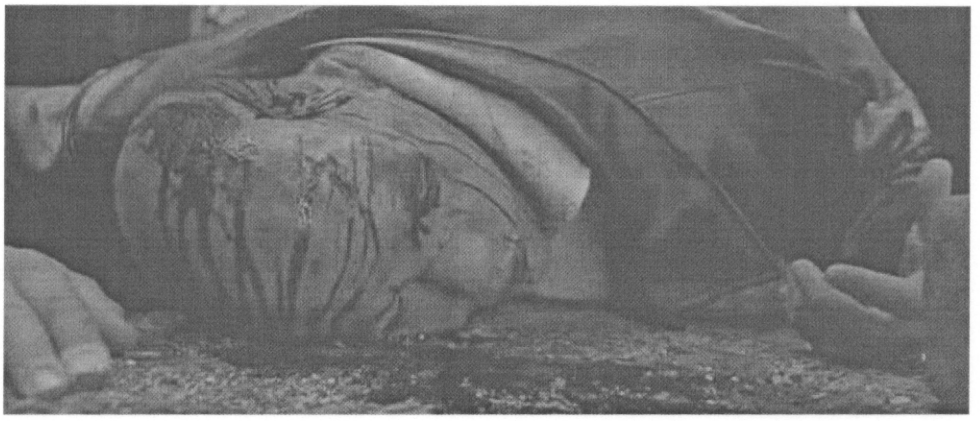
Sheppard's story contravenes the traditional moral rules of sexual behavior not only for the homosexual intercourse that is, as mentioned before, condemned by society, but also for the "inappropriate" use of food in repulsive combinations for sexual purposes. Society's morality views sex as a dirty practice due to the bodily fluids related to it, among other things. "The Boy who Read Bataille" and the movie 9 ½ Weeks add food to the combination of sexual "juices"; however, the difference between these two texts lays in the kind of food and their combination. Can we talk about hegemonic food? That would be the description of 9 ½ Weeks food as it comes from the traditional clichés of delicious, chic food that helps to cover the awful taste and appearance of the bodily fluids. On the other hand, "The Boy who Read Bataille" adds to the unclean, horrid hegemonic portrayal of the anus (especially the male anus) an element that, instead of covering the "ugliness,"

enhances the repugnance of it. At the end of the story, the characters become more receptive to different forms of pleasure even though these forms are not approved by society.

Sex is grotesque by nature, or at least, that is the portrayal society has imposed on us. We hear about AIDS and other sexual diseases, pregnancy in little girls, rapes and other monstrous, violent acts created or allowed by the same society that condemns them. Moreover, traditionally hegemonic morality has tried to eliminate all the pleasurable elements in the sexual act and to transform it into a merely reproductive act. Particularly, female pleasure has been left aside. Although the social view of sexuality has changed in recent years in certain cultures, there are still taboos rooted in the social apparatus that promote certain stereotypes. For instance, it is believed that a woman that is sexually active does not make a good wife. In addition, homosexual relationships are recognized as existing sexual preferences but not accepted as morally valid practices. Besides, the hegemonic concept of beauty exerts a strong psychological pressure over the individuals who do not fit into those standards (most of us.) Thus, the countercultural grotesque transgresses those taboos by explicitly presenting different erotic practices and non-traditional sexual tendencies as part of our reality. It confronts the social standards of beauty and moral behavior and exposes our minds to new forms of pleasure. Foucault's quote, at the beginning of this chapter, "These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on" (165), summarizes the purpose of the countercultural erotic grotesque: to show that pleasure comes from odd situations, body parts, objects, among others. It all depends of each person's preferences and tastes.

IV. A "Horrorshow Tolchock" or the Contemporary Fascination with Violence

> *Como todos han advertido, hay un creciente grado de violencia y sadismo admitidos en la cultura de masas: en las películas, la televisión, las historietas, los juegos de ordenador. Las imágenes que habría tenido a los espectadores encogidos y apartándose de repugnancia hace cuarenta años, las ven sin pestañear siquiera todos los adolescentes en los multicines.*
>
> Susan Sontag, Ante el dolor de los demás.
>
> *An eye for an eye, I say. If someone hits you you hit back, do you not? Why then should not the State, very severely hit by you brutal hooligans, not hit back also?*
>
> Anthony Burgess, A Clockwork Orange.



Eli Roth, The Hostel.

Rafael Ángel Herra, quoted earlier in chapter II (page 70), refers to an invasion of monsters in different aspects of popular culture. Susan Sontag, in a similar manner, describes the contemporary mass culture scenery and the invasion of grotesque elements—violent ones in this particular case—in our everyday life. Wim van Binsbergen, in Violence in Anthropology: Theoretical and Personal Remarks, goes deeper into the subject by stating that,

> Large sections of the media and entertainment industry today concentrate on the production and diffusion of images of violence, and often these images do nothing

> but depict true life situations. One of the most conspicuous aspects of the globalisation process (cf. Kloos & de Silva 1995; Appadurai 1996; de Silva 1996) in which the entire world has been increasingly involved in the course of the twentieth century CE, has been the enhanced presence of violence in places and situations where previously it was securely kept out. The forms which this expansion has taken is only too familiar: civil war, arms trade, terrorism, urban violence, state violence inflicted on citizens, repeated genocide in Europe, Asia and Africa, two world wars...

Although Binsbergen refers to a "true life situations," the depiction of these images is usually romanticized or altered when related to state's affairs (like wars, crime control, among others) or fantastically portrayed in the case of entertainment. We want war, blood, and dismemberment but without risk. In any way, the increasing desire for more realistic representations of violence and death has turned our existence into a constant, self-inflicted, masochistic experience of pain and displeasure but from the safe position of the spectator.

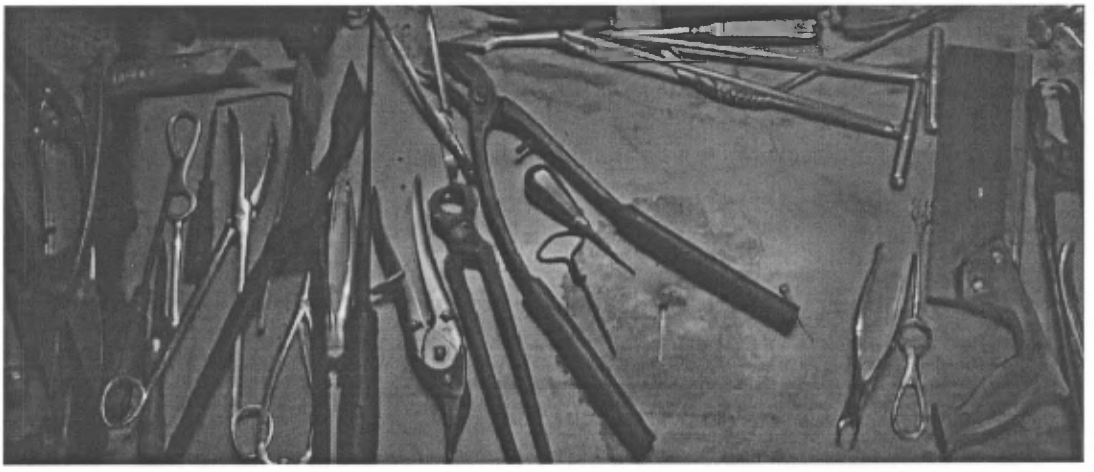
As perverse as it sounds, it seems that we adore the feeling of anguish we get from witnessing other people's suffering. Sontag reflects on this feeling of attraction toward the violently grotesque: "[. . .] para la mayoría es el deseo de ver algo espeluznante. Calificar esos deseos como «mórbidos» evoca una rara aberración, pero el atractivo de esas escenas no es raro y es fuente perenne de un tormento interior" (111). This torment becomes pleasurable and mesmerizing to the point that we cannot help looking at such images and even pay to watch them. Moreover, the on-line anthology Violence in Literature: Criticism and Essay, edited by Jennifer Baise, refers to the attraction to different forms of violence portrayed in literature:

> In many respects, twentieth-century literature defined itself by reflecting the prevalent violence of modern society—from the destruction of large-scale warfare to individual crimes of murder, rape, and abuse. Critics of modern literature have generally attributed this trend to both **the sensational appeal of violent behavior and its potential to shock readers by shaking their beliefs** [. . .] Thus, violence had become a subject that most modern writers who wished to convey the historical, psychological, and artistic landscape of the modern world could not fail to confront. (emphasis added)

This excerpt introduces the ambivalent character of grotesque violence by mentioning the appealing and shocking nature of these representations. Nevertheless, the power and the purpose of shocking the audience might be different: is it intended to transmit a message or just to entertain the spectators?

In previous chapters, we have mentioned Doom, the ultra-violent video game, Kill Bill, Tarantino's film "of bloody revenge," and Happy Tree Friends, the gory cartoon with cute dismembered animals, as examples of grotesque violence and extreme brutality. The spectator feels both revolted and fascinated at the same time when confronted to such forms of carnage and butchery. Another example of this form of ultra-violence; is Eli Roth's film The Hostel. Despite the fact that the movie is not particularly good regarding acting, dialogues and plot, it might still be considered a visual masterpiece of grotesqueness and grossness. It deals with a group of young backpackers in Europe who fall into the trap of an exclusive club for millionaires (Elite Hunting) who pay thousands of dollars to torture and kill other people in the most horrible, revolting, sadistic ways. The film shows mutilated bodies and body parts, excessive amounts of blood, vomit, and other bodily fluids

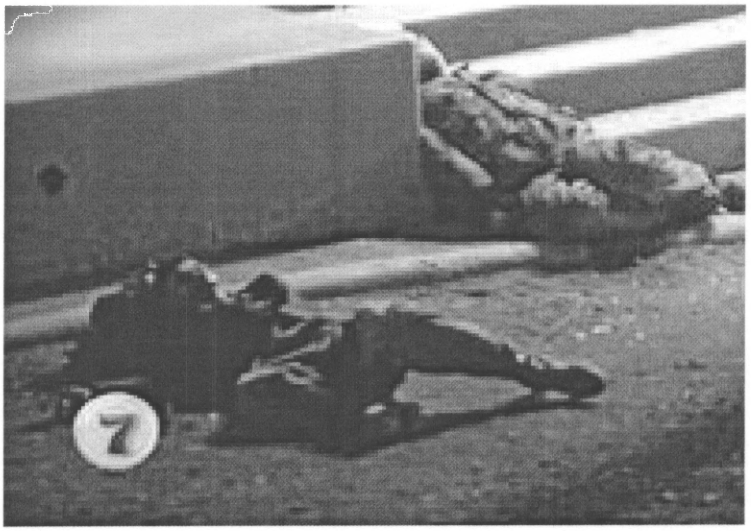
resulting from torture, as well as terrible screams of pain and agony. What the movie lacks in content, coherence and performance, it compensates with sadism, brutality and blood (especially blood). Although the audience feels sick at the sight of every violent scene, most of them (including myself) could not stop watching it. Some might say that these are symptoms of a "sick mind" since we are willing to suffer, to see others suffer, and even pay for it. They might be right to a certain extent; however, we do not have to go to the movie theater to witness such cruelty and bloodshed. We just have to turn the TV on and take a look at any news channels to find similar examples of violence and brutality, sometimes as explicit as the videogames and films mentioned.



These are some of the utensils of torture used by the members of "Elite Hunting" to mutilate and kill their victims

In addition, these news programs, designed to provide the current local and global news, supply us instead with a daily dose of violence, hate, and fear that most of us receive reluctantly but attentively. Who has never seen a report of an accident in which a bloody blanket covers the body of the victim next to his or her destroyed car, or the deaths after a bank robbery or shooting, or the casualties in a war (usually from the side of the "bad ones")?

In 2005 "Costa Rica," during a bank robbery in Monteverde of Puntarenas, two of the robbers got killed. The cameras of the news channels transmitted for hours the images of the dead bodies bleeding in the street, and the audience was stuck in front of the TVs, criticizing the channels, but still watching.



Sontag also refers to the use of violence in the news:

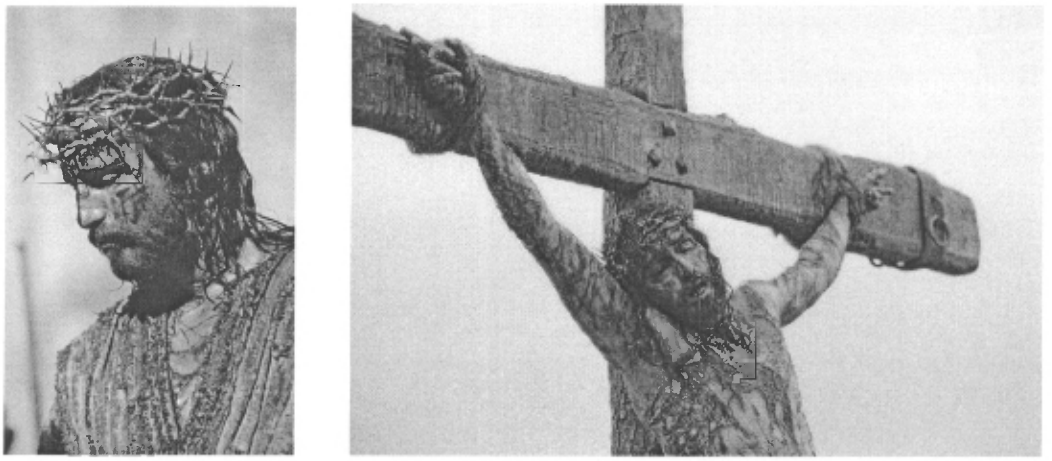
> La información de lo que está sucediendo en otra parte, llamada «noticias», destaca los conflictos y la violencia—«si hay sangre, va en cabeza», reza la vetusta directriz de la prensa sensacionalista y de los programas de noticias que emiten titulares las veinticuatro horas—a los que se responde con indignación o aprobación, mientras cada miseria se exhibe ante la vista. (27)

The position of indignation or approval mentioned by Sontag can occur at the same time because of the ambivalent response we get from such images. We consider immoral to exploit other people's misery; notwithstanding, the curiosity generated from fascination towards the grotesque is sometimes too strong for us to resist. Therefore, more and more of these kinds of "shows" appear everyday as the audience grows in number and enthrallment.

Violence can be a powerful tool in action as well as in its diverse representations. As mentioned before, news channels and newspapers show it in order to attract viewers; states both employ it and show it to control people when ideology fails; criminals apply it to impose their will on their victims (be it robbery, rape, murder, etc.); even religions see the power in violence as history reveals years of war, torture, genocides, and terrorist attacks all in the name of god in any of his or her representations. The catholic church, for instance, supports Mel Gibson's adaptation of The Passion of the Christ which portrays this religious account in an extremely violent and bloody way.

These are examples of hegemonic and antisocial violence—violence that supports the status quo, as in Gibson's film or the state's repression, or violence for the sake of violence, as in The Hostel, news, and criminal acts in general. However, there are also

countercultural works that question these forms of power abuse by showing violence from a different perspective.



Mel Gibson's film The Passion of the Christ focuses on the last suffering days in the life of Jesus. Some members of the catholic church affirm that the movie is an "accurate" representation of Jesus's torture and death.

Binsbergen, for example, provides a short account of different forms of violence present in modern societies,

> Given the variety of societies, therefore, violence is an extremely wide and diverse phenomenon, that invites vastly different social-science approaches, from a variety of levels ranging from face-to-face relations in small groups like the family or the village; via classes, genders, ethnic groups, religious denominations; or again, via violence experienced in the lives of individuals from the part of representatives of the state, from deviant and criminal strangers acting on their own initiative, or from members of their own family and neighbourhood; to the conflict between states and even alliances of states; and all sorts of shades in between.

The sources and causes of violence vary according to the specific context in which it takes place; however, because of globalization, as Binsbergen mentioned before, even the forms of violence, as well as our fascination towards them, become more and more universal.

But, what interests us the most about Binsbergen's comments are the repeated affirmations that violence comes not only from criminals or gangsters, but also from governments over individuals (not necessarily criminals.) Departing from this idea, in the following pages, we will analyze David Fincher's film Fight Club and Anthony Burgess's novel, A Clockwork Orange, as examples of grotesque countercultural depiction of violence. The film deals with a subculture of self growth and liberation transformed into an anti-consumerist counterculture, while the novel explores two aspects of violence in society: first, gang violence and the beauty the members of these groups find in their nonsensical, bloody deeds, and, second, governmental violence and repression as instruments to manipulate humans which are considered objects or machines that should be controlled.

A. Fight Club and a Violent Attack to Consumerism

> *You're 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 fuckin' khakis. You're the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world.*
>
> Chuck Palahniuk and Jim Uhls, Fight Club

Chuck Palahniuk's novel and Jim Uhls' film, Fight Club, explore the use of violence as a statement against modern society and capitalism. The self-inflicted pain, as well as the gruesome fights among partners and the destruction of private corporate property, stand for a rebellion against the established position of subordination of the low and middle (male[28]) working class. Grotesque images of blood, broken teeth and bruises represent the liberation that the participants experience through violence. The narrator, interpreted by Edward Norton,[29] unconsciously creates an alter ego, an imaginary friend in whom he reflects everything he wants to be.

The film ridicules contemporary society's obsession with possessions and physical appearance. The narrator considers himself "close to being complete" through the acquisition of furniture; however, his life is meaningless and boring: a fact reflected in his insomnia. Tyler, the narrator's alter ego, says that "We are by-products of a lifestyle obsession" and proposes the option of "never be[ing] complete." Tyler blows up the narrator's apartment in order to set him free from the prison of consumerism: "Tell him [a police detective] the liberator who destroyed my property has realigned my perception [. . .] reject the basic assumption of civilization, especially the importance of material

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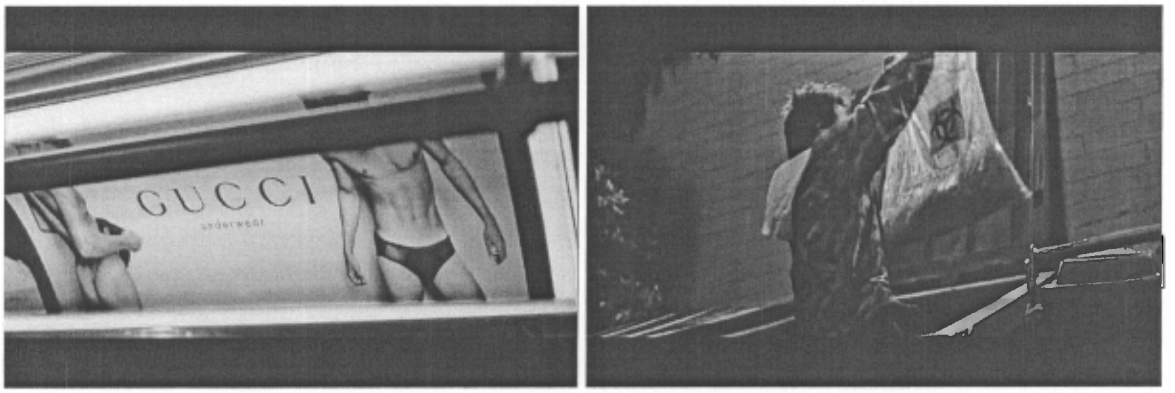
[28] The film presents violence as male centered, since no woman participates in the club. Actually, Marla is the only female character with a protagonist role in the whole film. Moreover, at one point, the characters express that they do not need women at all.

[29] The name of the character is never mentioned in the movie.

possessions." Completeness of the self does not come from material possessions but from freedom and truth—the truth of the pain and suffering in life as opposed to the beautiful "American Dream."

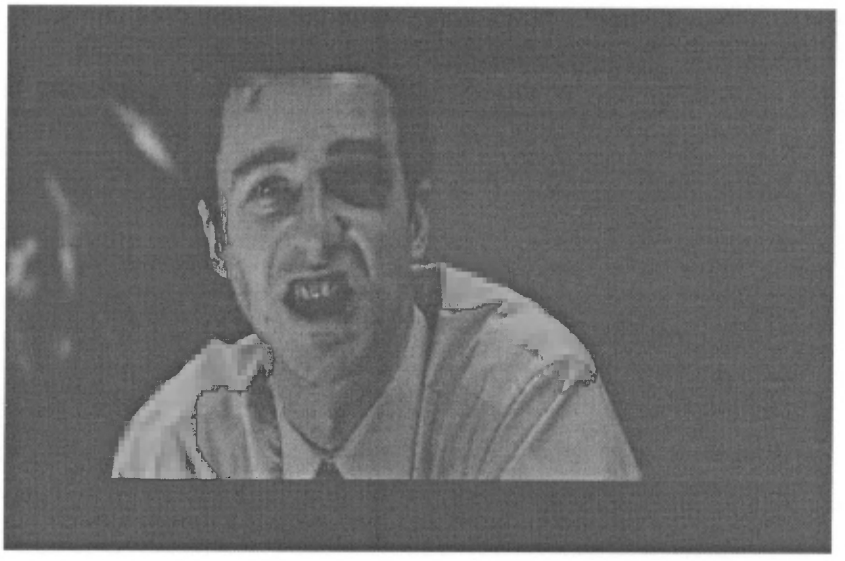
The protagonists attack society in different forms; for instance, the narrator and Tyler, urinate on rich people's food, criticize fashion advertisements, sell soap made of refuse human fat to fancy stores, and so on. They comment on the pressure that society imposes on people regarding appearance. One of them mentions: "I felt sorry for guys packed into gyms trying to look like how Calvin Klein or Tommy Hilfiger said they should." It is interesting how they present a problem typically associated to women, as a contemporary dilemma also for men. They also rejoice in the fact that they are returning rich women what they pay thousands of dollars to remove, as the fat used in their soap comes from the residues of liposuction: "we were selling rich women their own fat asses back to them."



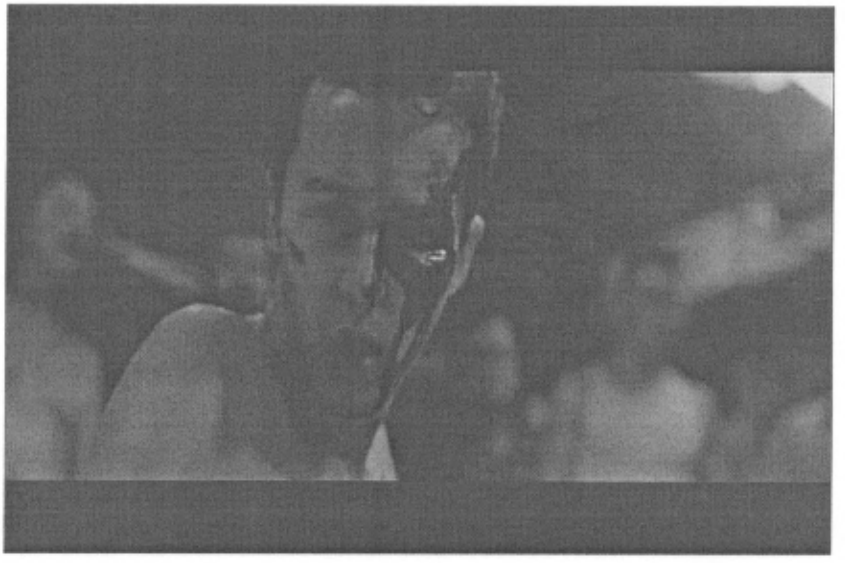
The billboard represents the imagery of hegemonic beauty that drive people to undergo painful, dangerous and disgusting procedures to fit in the patterns of beauty. The fact that these characters sell rich people their own fat is brilliantly grotesque.

Nevertheless, the strongest demonstration of violent rebellion starts with a fist fight among the protagonists. They get addicted to pain as a way to liberate themselves from this dehumanizing world of consumption, and other people start to join them: people who feel also imprisoned into the trap of consumerism. The bruises and black eyes are symbols of

their liberation. Fight Club seems to suggest that a good-looking body represents a decayed self while a broken one denotes a free soul. As the narrator says, "I got right in everyone's hostile little face. Yes, these are bruises from fighting. Yes, I'm comfortable with that. I am enlightened."



The narrator proudly displays his wounds as symbols of his rebellion and evolution as a liberated human being



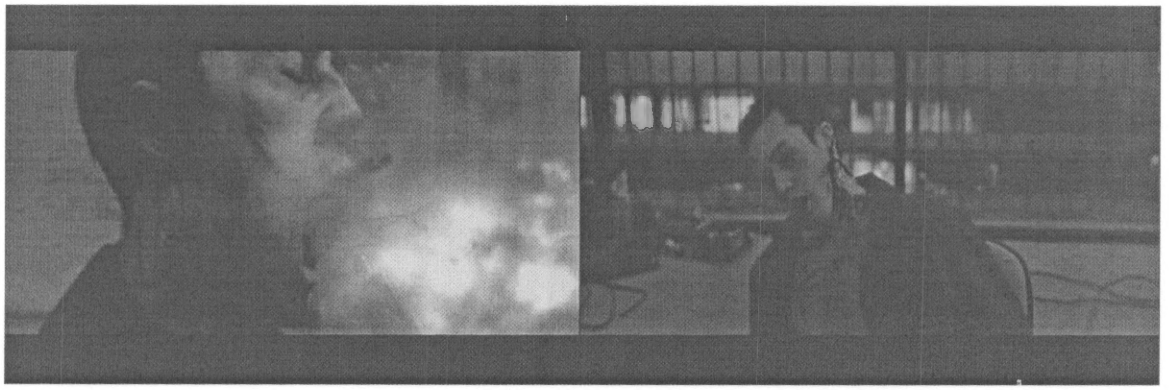
This state of insight through pain can only be reached by giving up everything that attaches us to the material world, even our desire to live. Tyler burns the narrator's hand with a

chemical and tells him that "without pain, without sacrifice we have nothing." This ritual of pain is intended to help the narrator to be aware of his mortal situation and to realize that after death, material possessions are useless.

Tyler not only reflects on the absence of a god (as a paternal figure) in their lives, comparing themselves as unwanted children, but also adds that, "It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything."

What starts as a violent subculture of individual detachment and illumination, ends up being a more countercultural army of aggressive anti-capitalists. Organized by Tyler, the members of the Fight Club, now spread all over the country. Their goal is to commit a series of terrorist acts, like the destruction of corporate art, advertisements, television antennas and satellite dishes, and videos on a video store, through what they call "Project Mayhem." The goal of the project, as its name indicates, is to generate chaos at the core of the consumerist society. Therefore, their last plan is to blow around ten office buildings of credit card companies. Tyler explains the logic behind this plan: "if you erase the debt

record, then we all go back to zero. It'll create total chaos." What is interesting about this project is that, as opposed to the fights in the club where participants hurt each other (despite some limits to protect them), in "Project Mayhem," the damage is done to material things and not to innocent people. Although the narrator confronts and kills his alter ego, as he does not agree with the project, he and Marla Singer (the only female character with a main role) contemplate the destruction of the buildings as the detonations illuminate the room.



After shooting himself in order to kill his alter ego, the narrator contemplates the beauty of destruction, holding hands with Marla.

Fight Club portrays two forms of violence resulting from the disillusionment that capitalist society represents for the working class. At an individual level, the numbing of the self caused by material possessions is neutralized by means of violence and physical pain: through the torture of the human body, our self is awakened. On a major social level,

the source of the problem, consumerism, is attacked in the form of an anti-capitalist guerrilla that destroys private property of corporations that imprison and enslave human beings in a chain of work and consumption. The words of Tyler, "The things that you own end up owning you," summarize the situation of the consumerist societies, as we work and work not in order to survive but to be able to consume more and more, ultimately leading us to a self-consumption. Although the means used by the members of Fight Club are extreme (as violence, from my point of view, should be avoided at all costs,) the purpose they pursue is valid and founded. However, in the following pages we will explore a form of violence that is frightening not only because of its brutality but also for its irrationality and aimless nature.

B. Irrational Gang Violence and Crime as an Aesthetic Experience

> *Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility.*
>
> Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection

Gang violence is a terrible and frightening phenomenon in every society where it appears because of the level of cruelty some of these groups attain. For instance, in the "United States," gangs born in the ghettos are in a constant war against the citizens, the police and rival gangs. This situation, of course, leads to vandalism, killings and other violent crimes. Moreover, different "Central American" countries also suffer from the attacks of the "Maras," groups of young *Latino* criminals who have neither respect for human life nor fear of the repercussions for their actions. Although the birth of these groups is usually connected with extreme poverty and ethnic marginalization,[30] their aggressive behavior is not part of a revolution or a claim for a better position in society. They use violence for the sake of violence: as a form of entertainment, as a way to form an identity, or because sometimes that is the only way of behaving they know. There is no purpose or goal behind the deaths, rapes, and assaults they cause, but it is a form of survival and a morbid search for pleasure.

For example, Kátia Lund and Fernando Meirelles's film City of God,[31] portrays the life in the "Brazilian" *favelas*[32] and how the misery in which people live in those places drives

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[30] Noam Chomsky states: "En la mayoría de los crímenes hay pobres entre los ejecutores y las víctimas" (122). The social situation drives people to find different forms of survival whether licit or illicit.

[31] Cidade de Deus is the original name of the film in "Portuguese."

[32] *Favela* is the "Brazilian" word for slum. In such places forgotten by governments, whether in "Brazil" or in any other country, people create their own rules, and violence and crime are part of the daily landscape, giving young people few opportunities of improvement or even survival.

youngsters to join a gang for different reasons: to survive (physically and economically,) to avenge a family member killed by a rival gang, to gain power and respect, or simply because they want to be part of something.

City of God represents the violent life of small children and teenagers in the *favelas*. For these youngsters, killing another human being is an everyday chore without remorse. One of these "kids" says: "I smoke, I snort, I've killed, I've robbed. I'm a man" representing the perspective of what a "man" must be in this kind of environment.

The crude images of cruelty and brutality in the hands of children and adolescents (the age of these gangsters being from around 6 years old on) shock and frighten the viewer who is not accustomed to see primary school boys carrying weapons, rampaging, and killing with a smile in their face.

Although situated in a totally different context, being the novel located in England, A Clockwork Orange exposes the problem of gang violence in a similar realistic, shocking way to City of God. The first chapters of the novel concentrate on the life of the fifteen-year-old protagonist, Alex, and his gang of friends. This group of teenagers, from low working-class families, has as its favorite leisure activities robbing, raping, and beating people in the street or entering their houses by force to steal and violate. The adolescents find great enjoyment in their criminal deeds without the least sign of remorse; on the contrary, they find a kind of artistic beauty in every violent act they perpetrate and in their fighting skills. For instance, Alex describes his ability with the "cut-throat britva[33]" saying that he "could flash and shine [it] **artistic**" (16 emphasis mine). He also compares his movements in a knife fight to a waltz: "And, my brothers, it was real satisfaction to me to waltz—left two three, right two three—and carve left cheeky and right cheeky, so that like two curtains of blood seemed to pour out at the same time, one on either side of his filthy oily snout in the winter starlight" (17). What we experience here is a frightening aesthetics of violence as a form of art. Alex's depiction of the blood in contrast with the night background resembles a beautiful description of a painting but with bloody aggressive elements (instead of a Van Gogh's Starry Night we have Alex's "Bloody Night.") Alex and his friends also constantly refer to the exquisiteness in viewing blood flowing from their victims by using adjectives such as "lovely," "horrorshow," and "beautiful." Moreover, the satisfaction Alex describes from their deeds comes not only from the real violent action on the streets but also from his thoughts and his dreams:

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[33] Razor

> As I slooshied[34] [to classical music] my glazzies[35] tight shut to shut in the bliss that was better than any synthemesc[36] Bog or God, I knew such lovely pictures. There were vecks[37] and ptitsas[38], both young and starry[39], lying on the ground screaming for mercy, and I was smecking[40] all over my rot and grinding my boot in their litsos[41]. And there were devotchkas[42] ripped and creeching[43] against walls and I plunging like a shlaga[44] into them... (33)

Even in moments of relaxation, when he listens to his favorite classical music, he enjoys thinking or dreaming of torturing, beating and raping other people. Instead of soothing his violent instinct, music seems to rekindle and intensify his desire for blood and suffering (others' suffering.) The statement "better than any [drug]" represents the level of pleasure and addiction these forms of violence generate in these gangsters.

The reason for all this brutality and sadism has no other purpose than the pure exercise of power over a weaker being and the pleasure derived from a violent aesthetic experience—aesthetic in the sense of a mere sensorial and emotional, not rational, experience. Thus their vandalism does not transmit a message to the people; it does not make a statement. They attack and confront the state and its rules just because they want to, not in order to change the social conditions and inequalities in any way. Furthermore, they also strike people in the same, or worse, social situation as theirs. For example, Alex

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[34] To hear, to listen
[35] Eyes
[36] Drug
[37] Chelloveck- person, man, fellow
[38] "Chick"
[39] Ancient
[40] Laugh
[41] Face
[42] Girl
[43] To shout or scream
[44] Club

and his gang beat a poor old drunkard in the street without any reason or provocation: "Then we tripped him so he laid down flat and heavy and a bucketload of beer-vomit came whooshing out. That was disgusting so we gave him the boot, one go each, and then it was blood, not song nor vomit, that came out of his filthy old rot[45]. Then we went on our way" (14). There is no higher cause or purpose in battering an old, drunk person but a mere egotistic search for power and sadistic pleasure. Alex also says: "Music always sort of sharpened me up. O my brothers, and made me like feel old Bog[46] himself, ready to make with the old donner and blitzen and have vecks and ptitsas creeching away in my ha ha power" (42). Through violence he achieves, or believes he has, a kind of divine power as the lives of his victims lie in his hands and will.

In chapter III of this thesis, we discussed the phenomenon of rape as a form of violence and subjugation of women. This aggressive imposition of male power is also present in Burgess novel under the name of "the old in-out in-out"—the expression these teenagers employ when referring to the sexual act. In every sexual scene in the novel, women are not willing to have sex with the protagonist or his friends; on the contrary, they are brutally forced, beaten and raped. We are going to discuss three instances in which sexual violence is present in the novel. The first one involves a rival gang that captures a young girl, as Alex narrates:

> Billyboy and his droogs[47] stopped what they were doing, which was just getting ready to perform something on a weepy young devotchka they had there, **not more than ten**, she creeching away but with her platties[48] still on, Billyboy holding her by

[45] Mouth
[46] God
[47] Friends
[48] Clothes

> one rooker[49] and his number-one, Leo, holding the other. They'd probably just been doing the dirty slovo[50] part of the act before getting down to a malenky[51] bit of **ultra-violence**. (15 emphasis mine)

The image of five teenagers threatening a ten-year-old girl with sexually aggressive words and intensions shocks and disgusts us. Even though the aggressors could not rape her, the intention of perpetrating an "ultra-violent" sexual act on her (and probably killing her at the end) is enough to terrify us as we are conscious of the existence of similar crimes in real life performed to younger boys and girls or even to babies (probably the vilest and most horrendous form of crime in my opinion). Furthermore, the word "ultra-violence" describes the acts as excessive in brutality and cruelty.

In the second example of sexual violence, the protagonist himself abuses of a couple of young schoolgirls in his own room:

> [. . .] then these two young ptitsas were not acting the big lady sophisto no more. They were like waking up to what was being done to their malenky persons and saying that they wanted to go home and like I was a wild beast. They looked like they had been in some big bitva[52], as indeed they had, and were all bruised and pouty. Well, if they would not go to school they must still have their education. And education they had had. (46)

Alex endows himself the authority to "educate" these girls in sexual matters even against their will, and he rejoices in this position of power he has over them. He refers to the girls' bodies as malenky (little) which reaffirms both their young age and *his* power of

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[49] Hand, arm
[50] Word
[51] Little, tiny
[52] Battle

subjugation. A sexually-pleased man and two violently dominated girls with their bodies all bruised from the aggressive rape is the result of the encounter (an act that, according to Alex himself, was a battle between him and the girls with him being victorious at the end.) The girls see an animal roughness in Alex as they call him a "wild beast"—an affirmation of his irrational violent behavior.

In the third instance of sexual violence in the novel, and probably the most brutal and aggressive, we have a similar depiction of the gangsters as wild beasts. Here, the protagonist and his friends rape a woman while her husband watches the whole scene, unable to intervene:

> So [Dim] did the strong-man on the devotchka, who was still creech creech creeching away in very horrorshow four-in-a-bar, locking her rookers from the back, while I ripped away at this and that and the other, the others going haw haw haw still, and real good horrorshow groodies[53] they were that then exhibited their pink glazzies, O my brothers, while I untrusted and got ready for the plunge. Plunging, I could slooshy cries of agony [. . .] Then after me it was right old Dim should have his turn, which he did in a beasty snorty howly sort of a way with his Peebee Shelley maskie taking no notice, while I held on to her. Then there was a changeover, Dim and me grabbing the slobbering writer veck who was past struggling really [. . .] and Pete and Georgie had theirs. (23)

In spite of the happy and excited tone in which Alex recounts the episode, the scene successfully transmits the desperation of the couple as all four boys take their turn to violate (do the "plunge" to) the woman and beat the man. The "cries of agony" that Alex mentions when he was penetrating the woman, do not interfere with his sexual pleasure; on

[53] Breasts

the contrary, they seem to stimulate him sexually. The description of Dim's intervention as "beasty snorty howly" emphasizes the aggressiveness and bestiality of the act as irrational and inhuman, being the woman the sexual prey of a monstrous creature and the husband a mere impotent and already struck witness. Both victims, and especially the woman, become objects of the gangsters' morbid and cruel desires since the criminals take turns (and pass them to each other like objects) to subjugate them.

The novel presents gang violence as a nonsensical, irrational act of violence in which the members of these groups use force and fear to perform whatever kind of cruel act for their own pleasure. Instead of a form of protest against the social conditions, the gangs take violence against everyone, including their own people. It is not a form of rebellion but a lifestyle that has as its main goal the sadistic satisfaction of its executors—a different and frightening perspective of violent reality. We are shown how the presence of blood, tears, bruises and other bodily fluids and marks constantly stimulate the violent desires of the young gangsters as a profound aesthetic experience. They become violent painters and sculptors of bloody and bruised human bodies. As shocking as gang violence can be, another form of violence that comes from the opposite side, the side of the status quo, can be also appalling and outrageous: violence from the power institutions.

C. Government's Violence and Repression: An Eye for an Eye

> *Is a man who chooses the bad perhaps in some way better than a man who has the good imposed upon him?*
>
> Anthony Burgess, A Clockwork Orange

Violence should not be justified in any instance; however, there are situations in which violent acts are seen as having "good" intentions though the means are excessive and terrible. For instance, revolutions in which the people rise up against a dictatorial or repressive government and where the main goal is achieving equality and freedom for every person usually involve great violence. Notwithstanding, this form of hostility and aggression comes as a response to governments' violence and repression over people, and a reaction against it might generate more violence and repression[54]. States' violence is brutal and unmeasured to a similar degree as gang violence. The difference lies in the power position of the governments and all the state apparatuses that support them as well as personal economic and power interests behind their deeds. Instead of solving the social problems that promote the birth of violence, the governments make use of more violence to control even pacific citizens: "El único tipo de respuesta que va a adoptar el gobierno," says Chomsky, "consiste en alimentar el miedo para reforzar el ataque a las libertades civiles y controlar a la población superflua especialmente mediante el uso de la fuerza" (122).

Some artists have denounced this form of governmental violence; for instance, The Wachowski Brothers' film V for Vendetta, explores the violent repression that governments can, and have exercised on people from a futuristic perspective. With images

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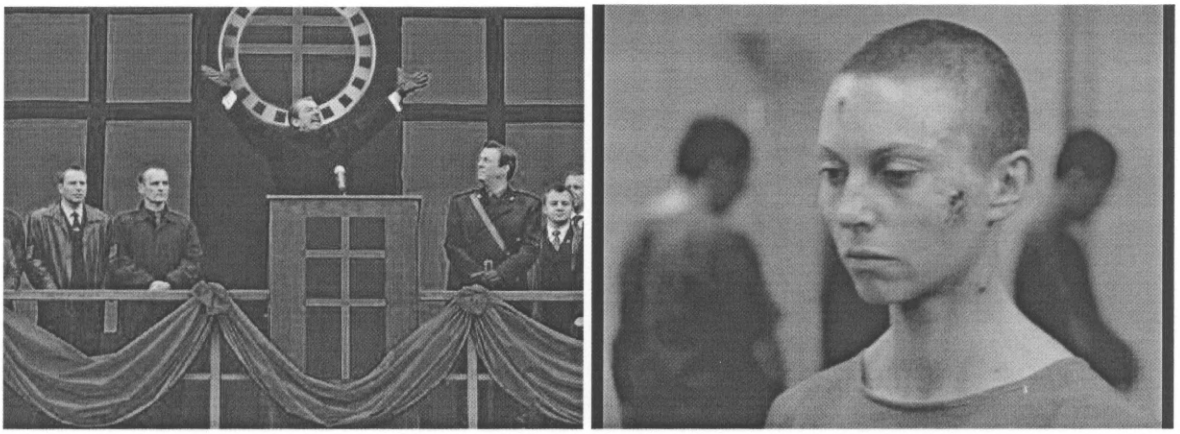
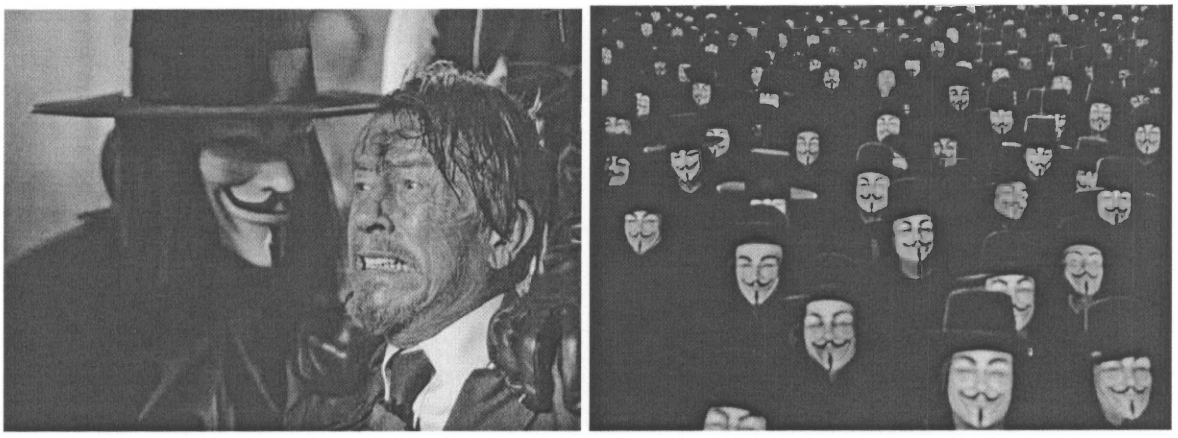
[54] When questioned if the government would be more benign if the people have guns, Chomsky answered: "Si la gente dispone de armas, el gobierno tiene tanques. Si la gente tuviera tanques, el gobierno tiene armas atómicas. No hay manera de enfrentarse a la situación utilizando la violencia, aunque se crea que es moralmente legítimo" (140)

that allude to the Nazi party and the execution of Jews, and the "United States'" aggression and abuses to prisoners in military prisons in the "Middle East," the movie criticizes the forms of aggressive repression and punishment that some governments impose on political opposers—imprisonment and burning of "prohibited books" for instance—as well as the elimination of the difference (different from the *establishment*) such as religion, sexual orientation, and so on.



The futuristic vision of a totalitarian "British" government resembles historic and current events in which governments use violence and misinformation in order to gain power. V, the main character, summarizes the proposal of the film when he says that, "People should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people." Then, we all become avengers as V: "He was all of us."



On one hand, the protagonist, V, exercises violence as his form of rebellion by destroying state's buildings and confronting the police face to face (or face to mask). On the other hand, he organizes the people for a pacific march in which every person will wear the same

Guy Fawkes[55] mask. The response of the government was a massive deployment of troops to contain, repel or even kill the rebels. Although the movie ends without casualties among the demonstrators, history reveals that the opposite is more likely to occur (remember "Bloody Sunday," Ireland 1972, "La Masacre de Tlatelolco," Mexico 1968, among many others.)

A Clockwork Orange also presents "England" in a near future, in which the government reacts to violence and crime with repression and inhuman treatments not only to the vandals but also to innocent people. "An eye for an eye" (Burgess 93) represents one of the solutions for the government to solve the problem of delinquency; the other one is brainwashing: the programming of a bad person into a good mechanical one, into clockwork. The protagonist describes a painting in the building where he lives: "In the hallway was the good old municipal painting on the walls—vecks and ptitsas very well developed, stern in the dignity of labour, at workbench and machine with not one stitch of platties on their well-developed plots" (31). This painting symbolizes what the governments supposedly expect the citizens to be: honest hard workers, producing for their rulers. Governments create their own standards or prototypes of subjects, and they also try to mold people into those standards. The method, as we have mentioned before, varies from ideological manipulation, like the beautiful municipal painting, to violence and force.

One of the state apparatuses used to control people and criminals is the police—a group of armed individuals who protect the "good" citizens from violent criminals. Although they perform a risky labor of protection, sometimes they become tools of coercion and

[55] Guy Fawkes was a conspirator who tried to kill King James I of England by blowing the Westminster Palace (the House of Parliament) on November 5, 1605, in what is known as the Gunpowder Plot. He failed in his attempt and was killed (taken form Wikipedia.org). The character of V wears the mask of Guy Fawkes not only to cover his disfigured face but also to symbolize his intentions against the government.

repression or abusers of their authority. Alex's narration of the treatment the police gives him represents this abuse of authority: 'Righty right, boys, we'll start by showing him that we know the law, too, but that knowing the law isn't everything.' [. . .] Then he clenched his stinking red rooker and let me have it right in the belly, which was unfair, and all the other millicents[56] smecked[57] their gullivers[58] off at that [. . .] (69). Ambivalence occurs at this point as the reader confronts a moral dilemma. Even though Alex is a violent, cold-blooded criminal who deserves punishment, the physical abuse to which he is submitted goes beyond the rightful force the police should use, and it ends up being pure violence and abuse of power. Ironically, one of the police officers says that, "'Violence makes violence,' [. . .] 'He resisted his lawful arresters'" (70). He not only lies about Alex resisting the arrest but also confesses a truth at the same time: what the police authority does is an act of violence similar to those committed by Alex and his henchmen. This brutal behavior coming from the protectors of the law appears as a result of the state's policies to eliminate crime. For example, the narrator explains the government's pride in their methods of "sanitization" of the streets:

> But what the government was really most boastful about was the way in which they reckoned the streets been made safer for all peace-loving night-walking lewdies[59] in the last six months, what with better pay for the police and the police getting tougher with young hooligans and perverts and burglars and all that cal.[60] (131-132)[61]

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[56] Policeman
[57] Laugh
[58] Head
[59] People
[60] Feces
[61] While interviewing Chomsky, David Barsamian refers to Bill Clinton's policies to reduce crime. They include: "[. . .]la contratación de 100.000 nuevos policías, la construcción de campos de reclusión para

The novel discloses the contradiction of being so pleased of fighting violence with violence, and of transforming the police into a group of aggressors and criminals with a license to do it. In fact, one of Alex's gang members and another from a rival one, are now part of the police force. However, their brutal and aggressive behavior remains intact in spite of their uniforms. They take Alex into the country to beat him. They say: 'It's light still. A little drive into the country, all winter-bare but lonely and lovely. It is not right, not always, for lewdies in the town to viddy[62] too much of our **summary punishment. Streets must be kept clean in more than one way'** (149 emphasis mine). They conduct "summary punishments" quickly and subjectively by judging and condemning according to their individual biased perceptions and violent instincts. This last statement reveals the government's arbitrary position to solve the problem of crime no matter the cost.

Ludovico's technique—a kind of *Pavlovian* conditioning method that turns bad people into good ones—stands for another form of control which the government violently imposes on people. The technique consists on showing violent images and videos to the subject after injecting him with a substance that will make him feel sick. The description of the process resembles that of a criminal being tied to the electric chair but in an even more disturbing way, since he is kept alive:

> And then I found they were strapping my rookers to the chair-arms and my nogas[63] were like stuck to a foot-rest [. . .] One veshch I did not like, though, was when they put like clips on the skin of my forehead, so that my top glaz-lids were pulled up

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jóvenes, destinar más dinero para prisiones, extender la pena de muerte a 50 nuevos delitos, y hacer que la asociación para delinquir sea un delito federal, lo cual es interesante, considerando que en la Carta de derechos civiles se recoge la libertad de asociación" (Chomsky 121). A similar policy takes place in Alex's Britain, where the government gives money to the repressive apparatuses instead to social causes.

[62] To see or look

[63] Foot, leg

> and up and up and I could not shut my glazzies no matter how I tried [. . .] And then I had like a cap stuck on my gulliver and I could viddy all wires running away from it, and they stuck a like suction pad on my belly and one on the old ticktocker [. . .] (101)

The torture of being tied in this painful position continues with the images of cruel acts committed by vandals against innocent people. The videos shown to Alex depict, in an extremely realistic and accurate way, those crimes perpetrated by him:

> All the time the music bumped out, very like sinister. And then you could viddy an old man coming down the street, very starry, and then there leaped out on this starry veck two malchicks dressed in the heighth of fashion, as it was at this time [. . .] and then they stared to filly with him. You could slooshy his screams and moans, **very realistic**, and you could even get the like heavy breathing and panting of the two tolchocking malchicks. They made real pudding out of this starry veck, going crack, crack, crack at him with their very fisty rookers (102-103 emphasis added).

Yet again, the state's solution is to fight violence with more violence. This time, they make use of the same kind of violence as the vandals by *re*-creating their violent crimes. The narrator insists in the realism of the films, which include images of real wars and massacres. This might be interpreted as a sadistic attraction to violence by the authorities as they created the films whether with actors (showing their sadistic skills in directing violence), by filming actual criminals without interfering in their deeds, or by performing these acts themselves, since the police force is constituted by former violent hooligans. Finally, the effect of the drug injected into Alex makes him feel sick, a feeling that after some more sessions he will connect to his violent desires. One of the doctors in charge of

the treatment explains to Alex: "What is happening to you now is what should happen to any normal healthy human organism contemplating the actions of the forces of evil, the workings of the principle of destruction. You are being made sane, you are being made healthy'" (108).

The question raised in the novel is whether the government has the right to condition a human being and transform him/her into a machine that will artificially respond in an appropriate way, to the social standards of morality and behavior. Is it so healthy, as the authorities affirm, to make a person feel sick about his/her own desires (either "good" or "bad")? "'The question is whether such a technique can really make a man good. Goodness comes from within, 6655321 [Alex's prison number]. Goodness is something chosen. When a man cannot choose he ceases to be a man'" (83), says the prison chaplain when considering the moral contradiction of the process. What they are doing is attempting to transform a person (in this case an extremely violent one) into a mere machine, created by the state, by denying him his power to decide between right or wrong. Supporting this idea, F. Alexander, a writer and previously a victim of Alex, opens his novel (A Clockwork Orange) with the following statement: "'—The attempt to impose upon man, a creature of growth and capable of sweetness, to ooze juicily at the last round the bearded lips of God, to attempt to impose, I say, laws and conditions appropriate to a **mechanical creation**, against this I raise my sword-pen—'" (21-22 emphasis mine). The phrase "mechanical creation" describes the result of the process: a person whose desires command him or her to do something (a violent act in this case) but whose mind and body are conditioned or programmed to react, violently, against him or herself. Alex has not changed into a good

person since he continues having violent desires. He just restrains them in order to avoid feeling sick.

In the previous chapter, we commented on the fact that some people cannot enjoy sexuality even in spaces permitted by society as a result of years of hypocritical moral conditioning; therefore, many people cannot get an erection nor have an orgasm. Although Ludovico's technique is a fictitious method, governments, religions, and other power institutions have their own systems of brainwashing and conditioning which seem less notorious and aggressive (as opposed to the sudden imposition that takes place in the novel) but are nevertheless constant, subtle, and effective. The novel questions not only the means by which governments attempt to reach their goals but also the motives which are not always noble and righteous. In the presentation of Alex as the first rehabilitated criminal, the motives of the government are revealed:

> 'Choice,' rumbled a rich deep goloss. I viddied it belonged to the prison Charlie.[64]
>
> 'He has no real choice, has he? Self-interest, fear of physical pain, drove him to that grotesque act of self-abasement. Its insincerity was clearly to be seen. He ceases to be a wrongdoer. He ceases also to be a creature capable of moral choice.'
>
> 'These are subtleties,' like smiled Dr Brodsky. 'We are not concerned with motive, with the higher ethics. We are concerned only with cutting down crime—'
>
> 'And,' chipped in this bolshy[65] well-dressed Minister, 'with relieving the ghastly congestion in our prisons.' (126)

On one hand, Dr. Brodsky does not care either about the moral or about the physical and mental effects the process may have on the subjects of the experiment. On the other hand,

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[64] Chaplain
[65] Big, great

the Minister of the Interior divulges the original situation of his concern: to make more space in prisons. As the number of opposers to the government increases, the need for jails to accommodate political prisoners also rises—a fact mentioned in different occasions in the novel.

If governments are allowed total control over right or wrong and over the methods to achieve social stability, these motives can change according to more personal interests of those in power. As F. Alexander mentions, "Before we know where we are we shall have the full apparatus of totalitarianism [. . .] Will not the government itself now decide what is and what is not crime and pump out the life and guts and will of whoever sees fit to displease the Government?" (160) The situation in "Cuba," where expressing discomfort towards the government is considered a crime, or in the "United States," where criticizing the government's military interventions in the "Middle East" makes you a suspected terrorist and subject of investigation, are current examples of violent imposition of interests and points of view that go against individual rights.

Governments' violence can be as brutal and cruel as gang violence, though their methods are different and legally supported. Ethics and morality seem to be of no concern for the authorities who abuse of their power and who just want to achieve certain political goals at the expense of other human beings. It is important to mention that the purpose of this analysis is not to question whether governments should or should not penalize criminality. It is a basic need to have an institution of protection for social stability. However, what is questioned is the level in which governments can interfere or decide over people's right to choose (even between right or wrong) or to impose a certain ideology according to a subjective perspective—the perspective of those in power—, and the means

employed to achieve that ideological imposition. When the government imposes its will through ideological apparatuses without allowing other ways of thinking to express themselves, or when these power institutions employ force and violence to oblige people to think in certain way, there is no social stability: there is totalitarianism (as realistically shown in A Clockwork Orange.) As stated by V in V for Vendetta, "People should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people." This does not imply that people should be afraid of people either; rather, they should respect each other's opinion and freedom of choice as well as the right to live peacefully and without fear.

The analysis of violence from different, opposite sources (dissidents, criminals and governments) broadens our perspective of a reality that is often hidden or partially shown. We are living in dangerous times in which violent acts are displayed to our daily horror and satisfaction. However, the core of these terrifying acts remains obscured behind political discourses and manipulated news. The role of states in these forms of violence is undeniable, being them byproducts of campaigns of terror and repression, of poverty and (economic) slavery, of consumerism, that drive some people to react violently and to receive again the violent response of governments in an endless process. Although the violence that we regularly receive from television seems grotesque, because of the realism of the images, it is a superficial grotesque, empty of reasons, purposes, and solutions. Its purpose is not to inform us about what is happening, but to fill our sadistic need for blood, and also to terrify us to the point that we will accept the need of the government intervention and repression as a form to control violence. Grotesque violence in works such as Fight Club and A Clockwork Orange exposes the brutal reality behind forms of

violence and also unmasks the role of governments and the state apparatuses in the emergence of them: terrifying indeed but not falsified.

V. Drugs: Pleasure, Destruction, and Control

> *Ah love nothing (except junk), ah hate nothing (except forces that prevent me getting any) and ah fear nothing (except not scoring).*
>
> Irvine Welsh, Trainspotting
>
> *[. . .]*
> *You're the one who's always bruised and broken*
> *Drunk on immorality, valium and cherry wine*
> *Coke and ecstasy, you're gonna blow your mind*
>
> Placebo, "Commercial for Levi"

Drugs are a source of constant debate between the groups who demonize the substances and the users who romanticize the benefits they get from them. In both cases, the reality of drugs is distorted from both sides as we cannot deny the pleasure drugs provide as well as the dangerous effects they might provoke from long-term use and abuse. Brian Musgrove, in Dealing with the Demon: Drugs, History and Society, explains how each generation has had its own evil drug: "'Drugs' were one of the 20th century's great demonologies, sparking a series of moral panics: from the cocaine craze of the 1920s, through the 'reefer madness' of the 30s and the psychedelia of the 60s, to the heroin crisis of the 80s and ecstasy raves of the 90s." Furthermore, the users are also monstrified and stereotyped as useless rebels and criminals from the lower social strata. Musgrove clarifies this idea:

> A recent ABC television 'Four Corners' documentary (20 March 2006) illustrates the point. Clearly intended as a contribution to drug policy debate—in this case the issue of how to deal with 'ice', or crystal methamphetamine—the program's consciously-chosen central character was a classic 'dope fiend': unemployed, ungroomed, uneducated, under class and bordering on petty criminal. But as serious researchers have continually discovered, reality defies stereotype: the 'ice' user is

> commonly a young urban professional, employed and paid well enough to support a habit without recourse to crime. But the [. . .] image of the 'dope fiend' is still used to fuel community outrage, and this has a potential impact on the impressionable public opinion that legislators take into account when they frame drug laws and policies.

The demon user, the intoxicated criminal, often turns to be also a typical hard-working citizen or a wealthy high-class yuppie (I wonder if any of the legislators that support these laws have, at least once, tried any kind of drug.)

In spite of persecution and *demonization*, the issue of drugs, instead of decreasing, seems to be growing stronger in popular culture. Michel Foucault states that drugs must be considered part of contemporary culture; therefore, they deserve a more profound study as a phenomenon that goes beyond good or bad, right or wrong, white or black. In "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity," Foucault declares that,

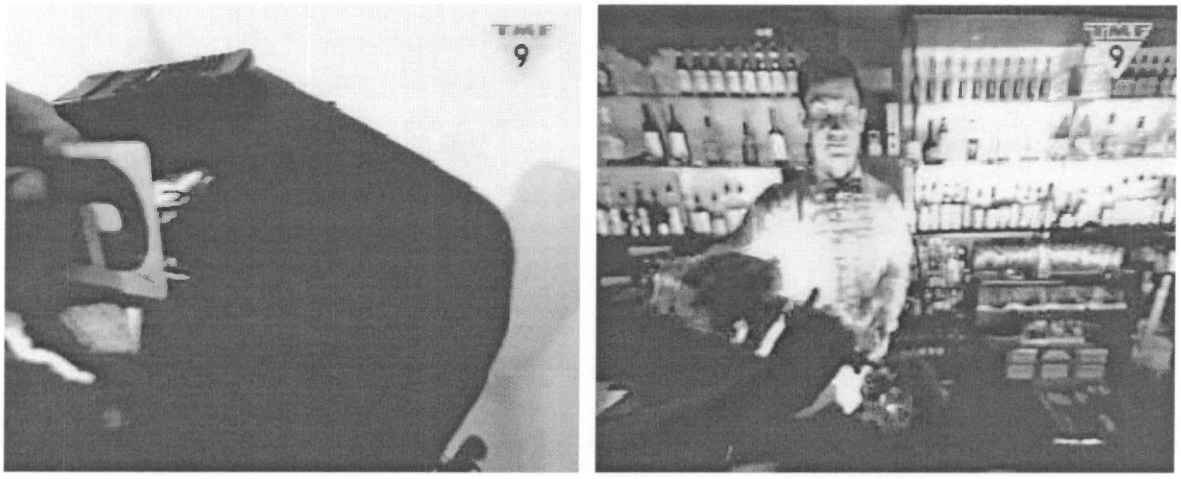
> We have to study drugs. We have to experience drugs. We have to do *good* drugs that can produce very intense pleasure. I think this puritanism about drugs, which implies that you can either be for or against drugs, is mistaken. Drugs have now become a part of our culture. Just as there is bad music and good music, there are bad drugs and good drugs. So we can't say we are "against" drugs any more than we're "against" music. (166)

By studying drugs as part of culture, we can differentiate drugs according to their benefits and risks.

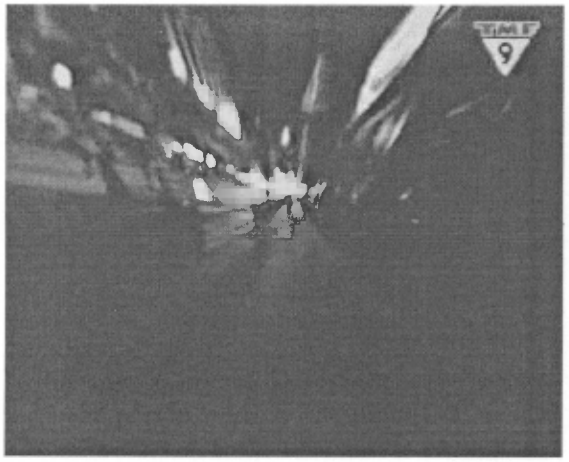
Drugs are represented in different aspects of the contemporary popular culture, like music videos, films, and so on. For instance, Musgrove refers to drug use represented in literature, and how these writings influenced culture. He states that,

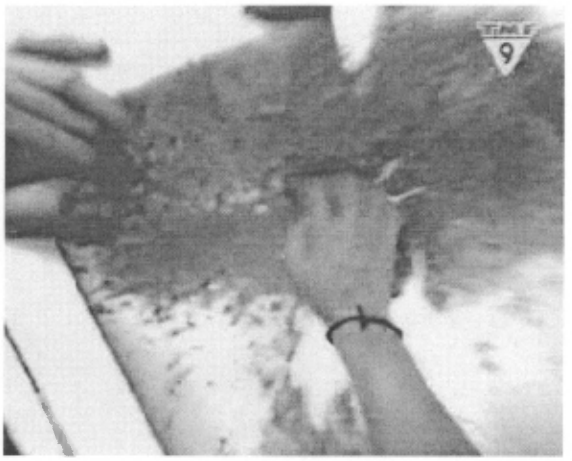
> This pattern of influence is a reminder that understanding drugs cannot be reduced or left to clinical or legal debate. The concept 'drugs' has an important aesthetic dimension, and this dimension has concrete social functions. As an historical appreciation of drug literature demonstrates, the aesthetic can direct life choices, and spawn subcultures and provide a rationale or value system for their codes and practices.

As a cultural phenomenon, drug intake manifests itself in popular culture which, at the same time, influences the cultural behavior. Prodigy's video for "Smack my Bitch up" is another example of the drug use manifested in popular culture. The video pictures the point of view of a woman who goes partying under the influence of drugs (legal and illegal).



In "Smack my Bitch up," the protagonist embarks on a coke and alcohol binge that not only gives her pleasure but also makes her sick to the point that she vomits on different occasions. The video presents this disgusting bodily fluid in its total splendor and magnificence. If the viewer has not felt dizzy by the distorted images, he or she will from disgust toward these images.





The distortion, dizziness, and fragmentation of the images illustrate the progress of intoxication and the alteration of consciousness resulting from consumption of such substances. This video shows both perspectives of drugs (pleasure and pain) in a very grotesque manner by explicitly revealing the quotidian character of this form of entertainment. Who has never seen a drunken person vomiting in the middle of the street? As part of our culture, and viewing drug use as a right people should have (the right to choose whether to *use* them or not), the role of the power institutions must change from prohibition and persecution, to regulation and, most important, to gathering and distributing information concerning drug use. However, there is a double standard regarding drug use and traffic since powerful economic groups may have some interests behind the illicit industry of these substances. Noam Chomsky, when questioned about the role of the "United States" supporting the traffic of drugs, explains,

> Si se dice que el gobierno apoya el tráfico de drogas creo que simplemente no es cierto. No obstante, habría que matizar esta afirmación. Y no se puede hablar de la misma forma sobre la cocaína que sobre la marihuana. Ésta no tiene el mismo efecto letal que la cocaína. No conozco ningún caso de sobredosis que se haya producido

> entre los más de seis millones de consumidores de marihuana. La criminalización de la marihuana tiene motivos y propósitos distintos que trascienden a los que se plantean ante otras drogas. Por otra parte, las drogas duras, a las que se ha empujado hasta cierto punto a la gente mediante la criminalización de las drogas blandas, son altamente nocivas y perjudiciales aunque el número de muertos producido por estas drogas se aproxima mucho al producido por el alcohol o el tabaco. Y es aquí donde empiezan a aparecer las complicaciones. Hay sectores de la sociedad norteamericana que se aprovechan del tráfico de drogas duras, como los bancos internacionales que se ocupan del lavado de dinero negro o la industria química que se ocupa de facilitar los reactivos necesarios para elaborar las drogas. (139)

Economic interests of groups not directly involved with the traffic of drugs promote (or at least do not interfere with) the illegal activity. Moreover, Musgrove views drugs and drug dealing as part of other goods and services in the market: "The drugs of today are amongst the most innovative products of industrial chemistry, and whether on the black market or the pharmacy shelf they circulate according to the principles of consumer economy." For instance, in times of shortage, the prices, of the already expensive drugs, rises up the same as in times of abundance when the prices go down.

It is interesting to note that Chomsky and Foucault differentiate "good" (soft) drugs from "bad" (hard) drugs—in terms of the particular effects the substances may have on the consumer. Moreover, Musgrove alludes not only to illegal drugs but also to legal ones in the form of medicines (the legal drugs are considered part of the "good" ones.) This same differentiation, though from a totally different perspective, has been applied by governments in terms of legal drugs such as alcohol, tobacco, and certain kinds of

medicines, all of which might also cause serious health problems and dependency in the consumer. The prescription of some medicines, for instance, seems to be arbitrary, as well as the reasons why they are prescribed. For example, school authorities, specialists, and parents give "hyperactive" children Ritalin in order to keep them under control (a state of abnormal passivity for a child.) However, the situation now reaches the point in which the drugs are prescribed, as if they were M&M's or candies, to normally-active individuals to maintain them quiet and silent. Therefore, can we criticize a person who decides to use illegal drugs when children are being doped (with legal drugs but without their consent), by doctors, teachers and parents? Thus, legal drugs and medicines are sometimes similarly harmful as the illicit drugs. Daniel Riche, in The Cyberpunks Reinvent Science Fiction discusses Timothy Leary's reflections on drugs and their prohibition:

> "Drugs are technologies," he says, and submits that individuals should have the right to change their consciousnesses any time they want to. "But Big Brother [the hegemony] doesn't want that," he says. "Every bureaucracy is against the CyberPunk use of drugs because drugs are a way to change your mind. Big Brother wants to control what you think. He finds the idea of individuals changing their consciousness alarming."

"Big Brother," as Leary calls the hegemony, differentiates good and bad drugs not on the basis of pleasure versus health risks but on the economic or political value and danger they might represent. As Leary states, drugs that alter our consciousness are "dangerous" because they can change our perspective of the reality that is imposed on us; therefore, these drugs are "bad" and must be regulated by means of the law. On the contrary, drugs that contribute to the passive assimilation and acceptance of the established order are

"good" ones, thus distributed in a sometimes irresponsible way. Leary comments on this issue:

> 'What is more deplorable than the use of drugs for pleasure or with intellectual intent,' says Leary, 'is that many of the people who take and abuse drugs often see no other means of personal reward. If you're a deprived person, say from a ghetto, you're more likely to use drugs because it's the only way you can reward yourself,' says Leary. 'And that's unfortunate. The answer is to give people better ways to cope.' (qtd. on Riche)

Although Leary is an advocate of psychedelic drugs, as a way to alter consciousness and to view reality (or realities[66]) from different perspectives, he notices the problem of drug use as a way to cover the sad and painful reality of poverty, violence, hunger, personal pain... Drugs as a form of escape from reality are common; nevertheless, the physical and mental results might be disastrous as reality will not change after the effect of the drug is gone.

In the following pages, we will examine the world of drugs illustrated in two texts: Darren Aronofsky's film Requiem for a Dream, and Irvine Welsh's novel Trainspotting. Both texts expose, in a grotesque realistic form, the corporal, emotional, social causes and effects of hard, illegal drug abuse, as well as the similar dependency and self-destruction caused by legally prescribed drugs. Although the tone of each proposal varies, since Requiem for a Dream possesses a more serious tone than Trainspotting—comic at times—both share similar perspectives towards topics varying from symptoms of withdrawal,

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[66] In his introduction to Psychedelic Prayers after the Tao Te Ching, Leary explains that drugs (particularly psychedelic ones) do not beautify reality. On the contrary, they expose different perspectives of the reality whether beautiful or ugly. He says:

> There are of course no pat solutions, no easy answers provided by LSD. On the contrary, every paradox, every ambiguity, every problem of static-symbolic life is intensified, raised to exponential powers. Where there once was a blind robot symbolic uncertainty [. . .] there is now an uncertainty compounded and multiplied by the knowledge of the illusory nature of routine reality and the existence of countless realities.

hallucination, delirium to amputation of body members and death resulting from drug abuse.

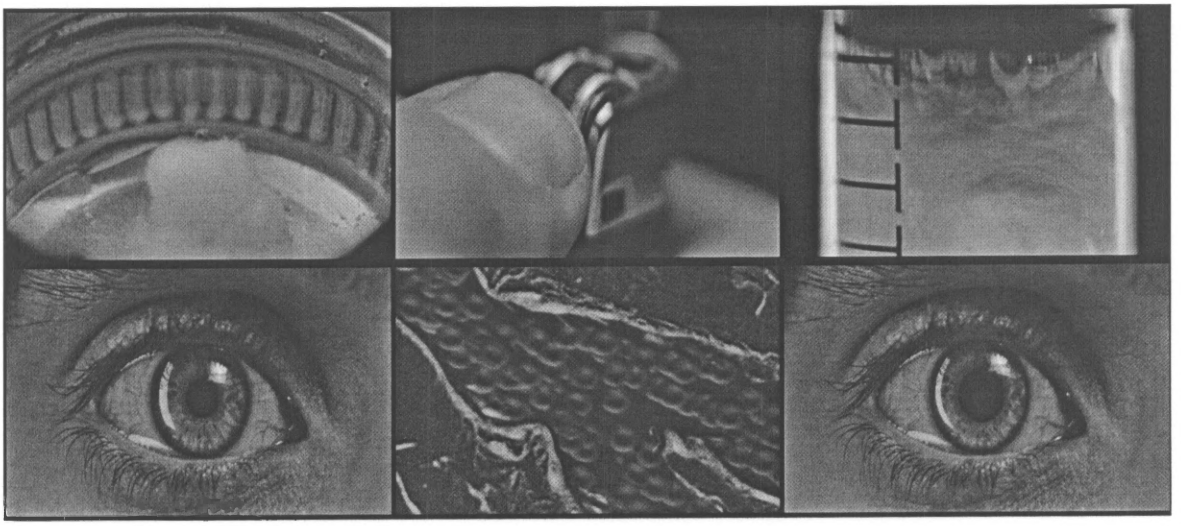
Requiem for a Dream narrates the life of four people (three friends and the mother of the protagonist) who try to fulfill their dreams through drugs (consumption or distribution) but end up destroyed instead, as the title suggests, because of their addiction. The film begins with a typical scene of a junky (Harry Goldfarb) stealing objects (a T.V.) from his mother's house in order to get money for drugs. The lack of money and his level of addiction drive him, along with Tyrone, his friend, and Marion, his girlfriend, to become drug dealers in order to accomplish their dreams.[67] Although they are aware of the risk of being dealers and junkies, the almost unlimited access to the drug intensifies their addiction. As a foreshadow, Harry warns Tyrone: "if we get wasted we would fuck it up," which is exactly what they finally do as a result of lack of money to support their new illicit business and desperation due to withdrawal.

Drugs become a form of escape from the cruelty of the reality the characters live in. For example, after Sara Goldfarb reveals to Harry (her son) her feelings of loneliness and sadness, he feels devastated. Therefore, in order to avoid the strong emotional pain, he gets a shot of heroin. The sequence of images clearly represents the before-and-after-shooting emotional change (see page 162.) These two opposed images, one of profound pain and sadness, the other of total peace and tranquility, represent the benefits the drug gives to the characters: a momentary escape from the crude reality.

[67] Each character has his or her own dream. For instance, Marion is a fashion designer so she and Harry want to open a store. Tyrone wants to be successful (in monetary terms) and Sara wants to be seen wearing her red dress on television.

Devastated (before shoot) Relaxed (after shoot)

The physical effects of the drug are represented in two levels: the first one shows the processes that take place in the body after shooting—the film presents a series of fast, fragmented images displaying pieces of the preparation of the drug (the "cotton balls," the lighter, and the syringe) and the effect over the body, such as the dilation of the pupils, and the drug entering the blood system,



The second bodily effect is represented by the posterior degradation of body and mind. As the film evolves from summer, when everything is balanced to a certain extent, to winter, when the characters' whole world and their minds disintegrate, we witness the progressive

physical, mental and emotional deterioration of the characters as their dreams progressively also die, only to be substituted by the horrible nightmare we call reality.

The degradation of Sara Goldfarb's character is probably the most notorious and amazing one, as her mental insanity reflects on her physical appearance.

Sara's physical degradation represents also her mental and emotional destruction

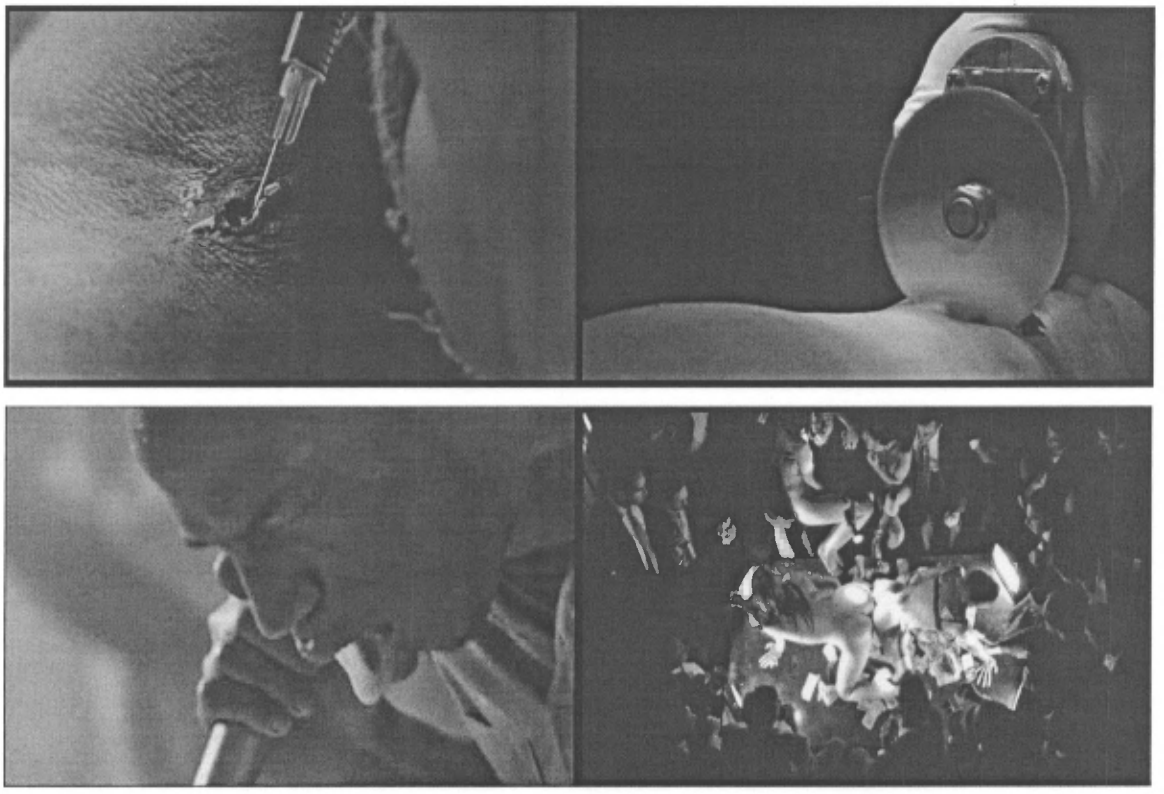
It is important to note that this transformation results from the abuse of legal drugs (weight-loss pills and Valium) instead of illegal ones. The social pressure regarding appearance, along with a profound depression from loneliness and old age, drives Sara, who is invited to appear on television (although that moment never arrived,) to take pills prescribed by a negligent doctor who never actually sees her[68]. As her need to lose weight, her depression,

[68] The California Narcotic Officer's Association in "Valium and Other Depressants" explain:

> 'What a drag it is to get old!' This classic line from the Rolling Stones rock group was the herald for the abuse of the world's most available drug: **Valium**. A supposed panacea for anxiety, nervous tension and depression, Valium and its many derivatives has become one of the most abused drugs in

and her dependence to the medication quickly increase, she starts taking the pills as if they were candies. As a result, she ends up hallucinating about a living, hungry refrigerator or a frightening TV show in which everybody (including her evil double) makes fun of her.

The other characters suffer a similar deterioration shown in a crude way. Harry's arm is amputated due to an infection from injecting heroin excessively. He prefers to inject the infected arm instead of finding another vein because of the risk of missing the shot. Tyrone suffers, in jail, from the terrible pains of withdrawal, and Marion is sexually used and humiliated in exchange for drugs.



The presence of bodily fluids, like vomit and blood, as well as physical and emotional suffering and degradation, grotesquely portray the terrible consequences of a drug

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modern pharmacopiae [. . .] The drug was loosely regulated and was prescribed for conditions that did not require the type of chemical intervention that occurs with Valium. The rather capricious use of the drug led to addicted patients throughout the world.'

addiction. At the end, images of the four characters prostrated, in a similar position, symbolize the final realization of their failure and resulting self-destruction after the search for a dream that is already dead.

Marion's dream (her designs) lies crushed in the floor while she embraces her drug supply. Harry cries at the lack of his amputated arm, and Tyrone suffers in jail from withdrawal and from shame of disappointing his dead mother. Sara, in a serious state of delirium, seems to be the only characters whose dream is still artificially alive in her distorted mind.

Requiem for a Dream shocks the viewer for the power of its grotesque images that portray the reality of drug abuse. Irresponsible medical prescription of addictive medicines, criminality and prostitution in exchange for drugs, inappropriate treatment of drug addicts, and the final destruction of body and mind are some of the factors approached by the film in order to show a side of drugs that, though mentioned, is not usually shown in its most appalling form by authorities. Moreover, the presence of legal drugs and the

terrible effects they provoke (similar to those from the illicit drugs) exposes the double moral that demonizes one side of the story and beautifies (or minimizes the consequences of) the other. In a similar way to Requiem for a Dream, Irvine Welsh's novel Trainspotting explores the life of a group of addicts (addicted to both legal and illegal drugs) and the consequences of their habit. The novel deals with causes of drug use and eventual habit, the pleasure and pain the protagonists find in the substances, and the dangerous effects and constant risks the users undergo.

The novel narrates different situations that are, most of the time, related directly or indirectly to drugs. Most of them are addicted to "skag" (heroin) which they inject in their veins. All the process of "cooking" the shot of heroin is accurately described in detail. For instance, Mark Renton (Rents), illustrates the moment in which his friends, Simon (Sick Boy) and Alison, prepare a shot,

> He [Sick Boy] droaps a cotton ball intae the spoon n blaws oan it, before sucking up aboot 5 mls through the needle, intae the barrel ay the syringe. He's goat a fuckin hùge blue vein tapped up, which seems tae be almost comin through Ali's airm. He pierces her flesh and injects a wee bit slowly, before sucking blood back intae the chamber. Her lips are quivering as she gazes pleadingly at him for a second or two. Sick Boy's face looks ugly, leering and reptilian, before he slams the cocktail towards her brain. (8-9)

All the procedure, narrated in a similar way as it is shown in Requiem for a Dream (see page 162), resembles a carefully performed ritual of pain and pleasure. The whole scene can be compared with an erotic description of the sexual act; however, in this case, the sources of pleasure are not the genitals but syringes and heroin penetrating the body.

Moreover, Rents relates the effect of the drug with an orgasm: "When it came, ah savoured the hit. Ali wis right. Take yir best orgasm, multiply the feeling by twenty, and you're still fucking miles off the place. Ma dry, cracking bones are soothed and liquefied by ma beautiful heroine's tender caresses. The earth moved, and it's still moving" (11). Although they are aware of the danger surrounding the use of heroin, as they call it a "life-giving and life-taking elixir" (10), the satisfaction seems to be worth the risk.

Although the novel concentrates mostly on addiction to heroin, it also approaches the issue of use and abuse of legal drugs, some of which are distributed by the same groups that condemn illegal ones. One example is alcohol, a licit drug that has high levels of addiction and that causes thousands and thousands of deaths (direct or indirect) whether from derived health problems or accidents provoked by people under the influence of liquor, among others. This drug also destroys lives and dreams as heroin might do. For instance, the novel explains how Rab McLaughlin (Second Prize) traded an opportunity for success for alcohol:

> He was a Scotland schoolboy international star of remarkable ability, who went south to Manchester United at the age of sixteen. By then, he already had an embryonic drink problem. One of soccer's unsung miracles was how Second Prize had managed to wring two years from the club before being kicked back to Scotland. The conventional wisdom was that Second Prize had wasted a great talent. (328)

It is remarkable that at such a young age (between sixteen and eighteen) Second Prize has already wasted his biggest opportunity and his talent in exchange for drunkenness. However, more amazing yet is the fact that a sixteen-year-old can have access to alcohol to

the point of becoming addicted. Although the text does not explore this subject explicitly, the problem of underage people accessing and abusing these substances (legal for adults) is unmistakably present.

Besides alcohol, medicines like valium are also mentioned in this novel as addictive drugs easily obtained by people since they are unrestrictedly and carelessly prescribed by doctors (the link with Requiem for a Dream is clear here too.) Renton, for instance, steals this medication from his mother in one of his numerous attempts to quit heroin. He narrates that,

> The most important item hus already been procured from a visit tae the parental home; ma Ma's bottle ay valium, removed from her bathroom cabinet. Ah don't feel bad about this. She never uses them now, and if she needs them her age and gender dictate that her radge[69] GP will prescribe them **like jelly tots**. (15 emphasis mine)

The comparison of the tablets with "jelly tots" stands for the easy access to the drug, arbitrarily distributed by doctors, like inoffensive candies, regardless of the possible addictive results.[70]

Another case in which drugs are prescribed to people without appropriate controls is discussed in the novel regarding the treatment of heroin addicts with other drugs. Notwithstanding, the solution seems to be worse than the problem. Sick Boy says that, "The state-sponsored addiction: substitute methadone for smack, the sickly jellies, three a day, for the hit. Ah've no known many junkies oan that programme whae didnae take aw three jellies at once and go oot scorin" (177). Instead of keeping the addicts away from

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[69] Crazy

[70] According to Psyweb Mental Health Site, the risk of developing an addiction for Valium (diazepam) is high: "It is possible to become dependent in only two weeks."

heroin, this medication serves as an alternative drug, proving the program useless without more strict controls.

Furthermore, these "junkies" experiment with combinations of legal drugs (the same drugs given to them to treat their addiction) in order to create totally new experiences. Johnny Swann explains: "—Ye goatay try that cyclozine. Shite oan its ain, but see whin ye mix it wi the methadone; phoah ya cunt! Best fuckin high ah've hud in ma puff. That includes that Colombian shit we hud back in eighty-four. Ah ken yir clean they days, but see if ye try nowt else, try that cocktail" (310). Although some of these drugs require a prescription, the addicts brilliantly manage to get them from other people in the same position of need for drugs: "Albo has a stack of cyclozine, prescribed for his cancer. Johnny will visit his sick friend this afternoon. Albo needs Johnny's jellies as much as Johnny needs his psychos. A mutual coincidence of wants" (321). Here the drugs are not intended for the treatment of a specific condition but just to get "high." The substances alone are not strong enough to alleviate neither their physical nor their emotional pain.

The novel explores the use of drugs as a form of escape from reality—or to find an alternative way to see reality—and as a statement of rebellion against society. Rents confesses that in difficult situations, the drugs ease the pain. For example, when Lesley's baby, Dawn, dies, Rents says: "Ah said whit ah always sais when somethin bad happens. – Ah'm cooking up in a bit, ah tell them" (51). Moreover, Lesley also pleads for a shot to stand the situation: "— Ye cookin? Ah need a shot Mark. Ah really need a fuckin shot. C'moan Marky, cook us up a shot..." (55). The need for drugs as an escape valve from reality's pain comes along with a more existential reasoning and justification for being an addict. When Tommy asks Rents about what the drug does for him, he explains:

> —Ah don't really know, Tam, ah jist dinnae. It kinday makes things seem mair real tae us. Life's boring and futile. We start oaf wi high hopes, then we bottle it. We realise that we're aw gaunnae die, withoot really finding oot the big answer. We develop aw they long-winded ideas which jist interpret the reality ay oor lives in different weys, withoot really extending oor body ay worthwhile knowledge, about the big things, the real things. Basically, we live a short, disappointing life; and then we die. We fill oor lives wi shite, things like careers and relationships tae delude oorsels that it isnae aw totally pointless. Smack's an honest drug, because it strips away these delusions. Wi smack, whin ye feel good, ye feel immortal. Whin ye feel bad, it intensifies the shite that's already thair. It's the only really honest drug. It doesnae alter yir consciousness. It just gies ye a hit and a sense ay well-being. Eftir that, ye see the misery ay the world as it is, and ye cannae anaesthetise yirsel against it. (90)

For Rents, our reality is distorted with "delusions," as he calls all those elements that, for our society, a successful person must achieve. Through drugs (heroin specifically), he reaches a point of awareness of the surrounding world and reality without any falsifying, deceiving adornments. He is able to see the reality as ugly and cruel as it might be (an echo of Leary's thesis.) The prize he pays for this clearer vision of reality is high (addiction, degradation of the body and death); however, he seems to be willing to pay for it. Furthermore, Rents questions society's intervention on the individual decision of using drugs. He says,

> Society invents a spurious convoluted logic tae absorb and change people whae's behaviour is outside its mainstream. Suppose that ah ken aw pros and cons, know

> that ah'm gaunnae huv a short life, am ay sound mind etcetera, etcetera, but still want tae use smack? **They won't let ye dae it. They won't let ye dae it, because it's seen as a sign ay thir ain failure**. The fact that ye jist simply choose tae reject whit they huv tae offer. Choose us. Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose siting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yersel in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye've produced. Choose life.
>
> **Well, ah choose no tae choose life**. (187 emphasis mine)

This eloquent reflection on society's control over people and on the individual's right to choose what to do with his or her own life and body, demonstrates the position of rebellion of some of these users against mental and physical control from the mainstream. For society, a person who does not want to follow the traditional, established standards of behavior but who rather lives a risky life under the influence of substances that might end up killing him or her seems inconceivable. "Rehabilitation means the surrender ay the self" (181) says Rents, as all the social machinery is employed to rescue the rebels and reintroduce them into the mainstream even against their will. Of course, if society fails, the reaction would be total rejection and demonization of the dissenters. The novel deals with the issue of drug use as a decision that each person has the right to make; however, it also presents the terrifying effects that drug abuse (especially hard drugs) can have on body and mind. Although some of these effects are shown in a comic way, we recognize the situations as unpleasant and sad.

Withdrawal symptoms appear recurrently through the entire novel. Rents says that, "Ye cannae turn your back oan it [Junk] sae easy. It willnae let ye. Trying tae manage a junk problem is the ultimate challenge" (90). The process of becoming "clean" after a prolonged use of drugs is painful. The suffering the characters go through is described in detail in an exasperating way. Rents describes the typical symptoms of withdrawal:

> The great decline is setting in. It starts as it generally does, with a slight nausea in the pit ay ma stomach and an irrational panic attack. As soon as ah become aware ay the sickness gripping me, it effortlessly moves from the uncomfortable tae the unbearable. A toothache starts tae spread fae ma teeth intae ma jaws and ma eye sockets, and aw through ma bones in a miserable, implacable, debilitating throb. The auld sweats arrive oan cue, and lets no forget the shivers, covering ma back like a thin layer ay autumn frost oan a car roof. (15-16)

The feeling of sickness and discomfort drives the users to "score" one more time in order to ease the pain: a last time that repeats itself endlessly. Another effect that comes with withdrawal is diarrhea. This fact could not escape a detailed description that leads to probably the most famous scene in the novel (and in the film version.) While trying to combat withdrawal, Rents is given opium suppositories. The situation disgusts him from the beginning. He says, "Ah excuse masel, retire tae the toilet and insert them, wi great diligence, up ma arse. It was the first time ah'd ever stuck ma finger up ma arsehole, and a vaguely nauseous feeling hits us" (22). The situation gets worse when diarrhea appears after he has inserted the suppositories. A disgusting but hilarious description of liberation of feces, in an out-of-order toilet full of other people's discharges, precedes panic and more disgust: "Ah whip oaf ma keks and sit oan the cold wet porcelain shunky. Ah empty ma

guts, feeling as if everything; bowel, stomach, intestines, spleen, liver, kidneys, heart, lungs and fucking brains are aw falling through ma arsehole intae the bowl" (25) When he realizes that, along feces, he has defecated the suppositories, he desperately inserts his arms in the sickening, semi-liquefied mass:

> Ah fall off the pan, ma keks[71] splashing oantae the pishy flair. My jeans crumple tae the deck and greedily absorb the urine, but ah hardly notice. Ah role up ma shirt sleeve and hesitate only briefly, glancing at ma scabby and occasionally weeping track marks, before plunging ma hands and forearms intae the brown water. Ah rummage fastidiously and get one ay ma bombs back straight away. Ah rub off some shite that's attached tae it. A wee bit melted, but still largely intact. Ah stick it oan toap ay the cistern. Locating the other takes several long dredges through the mess and the panhandling of the shite ay many good Muirhoose and Pilton punters. Ah gag once, but get ma white nugget ay gold, surprisingly even better preserved than the first. (26)

This ambivalent scene that provokes laughter and disgust also portrays the level of desperation that withdrawal generates on a sick "junky" as well as the bodily degradation that makes him descend to the level of excrement and getting mixed with it. Davie Mitchell undergoes a similar situation due, not to withdrawal, but to drunkenness after a drug binge in which he takes alcohol, cocaine, acid, and other drugs. In the morning, he realizes that he is in Gail's house (his girlfriend):

> Yes. I woke up in a strange bed in a strange room, covered in my own mess. I had pished the bed. I had puked up in the bed. I had shat myself in the bed. My heid is

[71] Underpants

> fucking buzzing, and my guts are in a queasy turmoil. The bed is a mess, a total fucking mess
>
> I take the bottom sheet up, then remove the duvet cover and wrap them together; the pungent, toxic cocktail in the middle. (92)

After a minor struggle with Gail's mother to take the sheets home to wash them, the disgusting content is spread all over the kitchen and over Gail's family: "The sheets flew open and a pungent shower of skittery shite, thin alcohol sick, and vile pish splashed out across the floor" (94). Again, the contact with excrements and other bodily fluids degrades the characters to a lower level: the level of bodily wastes. And so, Danny Murphy (Spud) refers to this form of descent: "[. . .] but it's a fuckin miserable life, likesay, man. It's nae life at aw, ken? Likesay whin yir sick man ... that is the fuckin lowest ay the low ... the grindin bones ... the poison man, the pure poison ..." (133). The disintegration of the body after withdrawal (and hangover) follows the disintegration of the mind as Rents explains: "[. . .] the pain is being replaced by an ugly, stark, black depression. Ah've never known such a sense ay complete and utter hopelessness, punctuated only by bouts ay raw anxiety [. . .] It makes the worse alcohol hangover seem like an idyllic wet dream" (201). But degradation of the body is not the only issue that takes place during withdrawal.

Addiction drives the users to dangerous practices of intake. Sometimes it is difficult for them to find a vein to inject the drug (remember Harry Goldfarb injecting his infected arm for the same reason); therefore, they look for substitutes. Renton recounts that,

> It's fuckin grotesque trying tae find an inlet. Yesterday ah hud tae shoot intae ma cock, where the most prominent vein in ma body is. Ah dinnae want tae get intae

> that habit. As difficult it is tae conceive ay it at the moment, ah may yet find other uses for the organ, besides pishing. (86)

The painful and shocking image of a needle piercing the penis and the possible consequences it might provoke on the organ (gangrene for instance) is difficult to conceive for a sound mind; however, the need for drug is stronger than reason and pain. In a similar way as in Requiem for a Dream, the addiction to heroin leads to disintegration and dismemberment of the body. Rents explains how Johnny's shooting practices end up with the mutilation of his body: "Johnny ran oot ay veins and started shooting intae his arteries. It only took a few ay they shots tae gie um gangrine. Then the leg hud tae go" (311). It seems that addiction always takes it's a prize in exchange for pleasure.

Another very real element of fear and destruction is AIDS. HIV is a recurrent monster, as Herra would call it, that threatens the heroin users. Throughout the whole novel, the shadow of this terrible illness lurks for the characters: some of them actually end up getting infected. In addition, the novel explores the constant risk of heroin users who, under certain circumstances (being under the influence of drugs for instance,) are exposed to possible sources of infection. At one point, Sick Boy, who is sick from withdrawal, is encouraged to share needles if he wants to get a shot:

> -- Ye git a shot, but only if ye use this gear. Wir playing trust games the day, he smiled, but he wisnae jokin.
>
> Sick boy shakes his heid. – Ah dinnae share needles or syringes. Ah've goat ma ain works here.
>
> -- Now that's no very social. Rents? Raymie? Ali? Whit d'ye think ay that? Ur you tryin tae insinuate that the White Swan, the Mother Superior, has blood infected by

> the human immunodeficiency virus? Ma finer feelins ur hurt. Aw ah kin say is, nae sharin, nae shootin. (9)

At the end, he manages to avoid sharing; however, the circumstances sometimes drive the addicts to participate in these dangerous practices. When the need is too strong, the addict does not think of the risk of infection but on "scoring." For instance, Rents says that,

> Ah tried tae remember which works wir mine. Sick Boy says that he'd never, ever share wi any cunt. That's shite. Whin yir feeling like ah am, the truth is thit ye dinnae care too much. Ah take the nearest, which at least isnae Spud's, as he's been sittin ower the other side ay the room. If Spud isnae HIV positive by now, then the Government should send a deputation ay staticians doon tae Leith, because the laws ay probability urnae operating properly here. (56)

He is willing to use other person's works, but on the other hand, he is selective on who that other person is. It seems that they can recognize which person is more likely to have the virus according to his or her shooting practices. Another instance in which HIV is connected with heroin is narrated by Davie, who comments on the causes of the HIV spread among heroin addicts:

> Most members of 'HIV and Positive' [a support group for infected people] were intravenous drug-users. They picked up HIV from the shooting galleries which flourished in the city in the mid-eighties, after the Bread Street surgical suppliers was shut down. That stopped the flow of fresh needles and syringes. After that, it was large communal syringes and share and share alike. (241)

The lack of safe ways to get the drug does not impede them to continue shooting, as the need is stronger than fear of an illness. One of the victims of HIV (we assume he acquired

it from sharing needles as he was also a heroin addict) is Matty. He dies after getting toxoplasmosis from a cat (a present he bought for his daughter, but that was returned by his ex-girlfriend). Gav narrates the situations:

> So thair's Matty stuck wi this kitten. Ye kin imagine whit happened. The thing wis neglected; the litter tray swimmin in pish; shite aw ower the hoose. Matty's jist lyin aroond, fucked ootay his eyeballs oan smack or downers; or jist depressed, ye ken the wey he goat. As ah sais, he didnae ken he wis HIV. He didnae ken thit ye could git that toxoplasmosis fae cat shit.
>
> [. . .]
>
> He died in the hoose. The perr bastard hud been thair fir ages before the neighbours complained aboot the kitten's miaows n the stench thit wis comin fae the place. The polis broke the door doon. Matty wis lyin deid, face doon in a pool ay dried vomit. The kitten wis fine. (289)

This scene portrays different sides of the problem: one is the fatal consequences of the virus as the individual can die of a cold if he/she is not treated properly. The other one is family disintegration, loneliness, and depression as many addicts are abandoned by their families and loved ones, or vice versa. This situation increases the need for drugs to keep them going. Mrs. Connell, (Matty's mother) refers to family disintegration because of drugs: "You lose them, she thought. After they get seven, they're no longer yours. Then, just when you adjust, it happens again at fourteen. Something happens. Then when you put heroin into it, they're no longer their own. Less Matty, more heroin" (293-294). Besides, Rents also recognizes the damage his addiction does to his mother:

> *Ah love Ma, love her too much, but in a way which is hard for us tae define, a way which makes it difficult, almost impossible, tae ever actually tell her. But ah love her nonetheless. So much that ah don't want her tae have a son like me. Ah wish ah could find a replacement. Ah wish that because ah don't think change is an option fir us. (57)*

Although he is aware of the pain he causes to his mother, and in spite of his love for her, his addiction makes it impossible for him to think of quitting as an option.

We have seen the grotesque side of drug abuse and the consequences this practice might have over the human body and mind through the analysis of Requiem for a Dream and Trainspotting. As we have discussed, these two texts portray the grotesque life of different drug addicts, and the people around them, in a shocking, realistic manner. Disgusting bodily fluids, dismemberment, and death, are some of the grotesque images use to depict the reality behind an addiction. Moreover, by exposing the similarities between abuse of hard illegal and legal drugs, both texts criticize the double standard regarding these substances. In fact, these texts do not question whether people should or should not use drugs—I would say that both texts are more pro-choice rather than judgmental. What is in question here is the shocking effect some of these drugs might have on a person when he or she is transformed into an addict. Since information from the side of the authorities regarding the risks of becoming addicted to a particular drug does not impress people, the grotesque imagery of Requiem for a Dream and Trainspotting gives the audience a clearer and more realistic perspective of the consequences of the abuse of these substances. The degradation of the characters, in Bakhtinean terms, serves as a form of regeneration and rebirth, as an attempt to change the social configuration regarding drugs. The shock

experienced through these texts reveals the real dangers and consequences that an uninformed and uncontrolled use of an addictive drug (be it legal or illegal) might cause on the body and mind of the consumer: utter decomposing of the body, as well as absolute destruction of the self.

VI. Conclusions

> *Think for yourself... Question authority*
> *Throughout human history, as our species has faced the frightening, terrorizing fact that we do not know who we are, or where we are going in this ocean of chaos, it has been the authorities, the political, the religious, the educational authorities who attempted to comfort us by giving us order, rules, regulations, informing, forming in our minds their view of reality. To think for yourself you must question authority and learn how to put yourself in a state of vulnerable, open-mindedness; chaotic, confused, vulnerability to inform yourself.*
>
> *Think for yourself... Question authority.*
>
> Timothy Leary

Hitherto, we have explored the grotesque discourse in numerous cultural manifestations, in various sources, and with diverse purposes, by attesting how the concept of the grotesque has changed throughout the different periods and mainly by emphasizing its characteristics in the contemporary cultural scene. Nowadays, the grotesque occurs everywhere; it is part of our culture, and different groups identify themselves with grotesque discourses and symbols in order to express their inconformity towards society's standards. Nevertheless, the appropriation and absorption of the powerful countercultural discourse of the grotesque by the hegemony, and its posterior transformation into products of mass consumption (commodities in terms of capitalism) have also created a grotesque that works as a mask of rebellion, a façade of freedom, and a fake expression of diversity.

Countercultures are born, die, and are reborn constantly, as the ideals and standards of governments, nations, and cultures evolve and decay. Therefore, acceptance, assimilation, rejection, and destruction of the sub and counter groups that appear in a society—the dissidents that do not fit into the prototypes of model citizenship—contribute to the

constant renovation, through conflict, of the social apparatus. Thus, new countercultural symbols, or previously neutralized ones, (re)appear in the cultural scene, and new discourses of rebellion and change confront the established perspective of reality, of "the truth." Fortunately, the countercultural grotesque provides tools, as Timothy Leary would say, to "think for [our]selves and to "question authority." It challenges, in shocking and disturbing ways, our perspective of reality by revealing the aspects that society wants to hide or to eliminate from the public view.

The human body, for example, appears as a crucial element for the grotesque anti-aesthetics as it is the source of the most disgusting processes and reactions. On other people's bodies, we see our own suffering and pleasure, disgust and attraction, fear and joy. In contrast to the hegemony's veneration of the human body as the temple of beauty, of god, our body is also the countercultural temple of the grotesque experience. While the hegemony (especially the religious institutions) advocates for a hypocritical abstinence of the flesh, the grotesque exalts and celebrates the excesses of pleasure and pain[72] one can experience through the body. Perfection, completeness, cleanliness, and beauty are stereotypical images questioned and degraded by the grotesque as fake symbols of the hegemonic ideals. The examples proposed in this dissertation, in which the human body plays a primordial role, are representative of the contemporary cultural panorama in which the hegemonic and countercultural perspectives collide.

We approached sex and sexuality from a perspective entirely opposed to the moral standards of the hegemony. As a "dirty" act, according to traditional morality and religious conventions, sex possesses a negative connotation when practiced with pleasurable

[72] An advertisement for a reality show on People and Arts, about tattoo artists, called "Miami Ink," mentions that pleasure and pain stimulate the same part of the brain.

purposes instead of reproductive ones. On the other hand, pornography, though rejected by the moralistic society, has given sex a wrong image since it presents hegemonic ideals of beauty and virility that falsify the reality of the sexual act and of the human body. Images of a man with a gigantic penis, who extends the sexual act, practiced on a "perfect," submissive woman for extremely long periods, generate an enormous pressure on both the average man and woman who cannot keep up with the porno standards of performance and appearance. Therefore, society goes to extremes which distort the reality about sex: one that minimizes and demonizes sex, while trying to hide the issue as much as possible, and the other that exposes everything while promoting dangerous stereotypes and behaviors that alter people's perspective of what sex is really about. At the end, people stop enjoying sex or avoid the intercourse due to low self-esteem and frustration.

The countercultural grotesque exposes these patterns of hegemonic control of sexuality and presents sex as a pleasurable activity that encompasses more than "the old in-out in-out" (as in A Clockwork Orange.) By means of the grotesque, we explore sexual practices traditionally condemned, such as homosexual intercourse, anal sex, and the use of sexual toys (portrayed differently than in pornography.) Furthermore, we were exposed to the grotesque ambivalence between "beauty" and "unattractiveness" reflected in the human body. In human "imperfection," be it old age, deformity, and natural bodily fluids, the grotesque finds beauty. But this beauty, not in terms of hegemonic aesthetics, is based on pleasure from the most horrible, most disgusting, or most unusual situations. The beauty of kinky behavior of an older couple that love each other (in "Dicks, Digits, Dildos"); the pleasure and love shared by Siamese twins who please their wife and each other too (in "Recent Reports on Progress Toward Fusion"); and the satisfaction a couple of homosexual

classmates experience with raw eggs and chocolate syrup rubbed in the anus (in "The Boy who Read Bataille"), are practices that detach themselves from the hegemonic values and principles. However, for the participants, these acts represent a beautiful and pleasant experience. Therefore, the grotesque teaches us that the concept of beauty, of righteousness, and morality is broader than meets the (hegemonic) eye.

We also confronted violence as a recurrent element in contemporary society. The increase of more explicit and realistic images of violence (in the form of wars, crime, violations, among others) shown on television, video games, news channels, and other cultural media, confirms our sadistic nature and thirst for blood and suffering. In addition, the hegemony criticizes and exploits violence at the same time by selling its representations as entertainment covered with a veil of fantasy: through the crystal of television, the spectator feels safe in the comfort of the living room. Nevertheless, violence is a real threat. Wars actually happen all over the world; brutal crimes take place everyday, aggressive rebellions strike back against governments and regimes, and these same governments that are in charge of our "protection" make use of violence in the form of repression. These realities are manipulated by governments in a clever form. They show enough reality to frighten people but at the same time, they assure people that, by giving the state apparatuses enough (repressive) power and control, all the "good" citizens will be safe. On the contrary, the grotesque shows a different perspective of the reality of violence.

We analyzed the film Fight Club as an example of violence as a means to attack consumerism and the numbing of the self. The disenchantment both from the social manipulation of the human beings and the fallacy of the "American Dream"—that transform people into working-consuming machines—, drive ordinary people, who cannot

cope with the social pressure and boredom, to flagellate their bodies and to attack corporations in order to awaken their selves from a dream of material commodities. In pain, people are enlightened, in mayhem they find revenge.

We also studied the irrational violence from gangs as well as the repressive violence of governments present in the novel A Clockwork Orange, and in films such as City of God and V for Vendetta. In both cases of violence, the imposition of power—one out of a sadistic, aesthetic pleasure, the other as a political tool of manipulation and control—derives into an equal reaction from the opposite side: as mentioned before, violence generates more violence. The description of the crimes, as beautiful artistic creations on the part of the gangsters, frightens the reader as the criminals do not show signs of remorse or compassion. Moreover, the imposition of ideologies and behaviors (represented in the novel, for instance, by "Ludovico's Technique") reveals the reality of conditioning of the mind and body of criminals and people in general that governments have implanted for years by subtler means (education, television, religion, among others.) As we have seen, violence is more than the dismembered body that appeared in the news channels, or the monster that we smashed with a bazooka in a video game, or the mutilated bodies in a Tarantino movie (though I love them.) Violence is "reality" that manifests itself in different forms and for different reasons, and that might come from the ones that are supposed to protect us.

Finally, we have been exposed to the cultural phenomenon of drug use and the grotesque reality surrounding the abuse of certain substances in terms of causes and effects. The grotesque portrays the shocking physical and mental damages caused by the abuse of hard drugs by means of disgusting images of bodily fluids and body mutilation. We have

seen how Requiem for a Dream and Trainspotting analyze the process of degradation "junkies" undergo as well as the dichotomy of pleasure and pain present in the life of the addicts. We have also discussed society's double standard concerning the difference between legal and illegal, good or bad drugs. Besides, the texts under analysis demonstrate that not only abuse of illegal hard drugs might lead to the ruin of body and mind, but also legal drugs, such as alcohol and addictive medication (medicines that can kill the patient), have similar harmful consequences. Moreover, social problems directly related to drugs, such as crime, violence, family disintegration, infectious diseases due to lack of information, parental negligence for being "high" (in the case of baby Dawn in Trainspotting,) are crudely depicted in these two texts. The role of these works is not to convince people to stay away from drugs. On the contrary, by showing us the grotesque reality that we do not want to know or that has been hidden from us, Requiem for a Dream and Trainspotting inform us of the dangerous consequences from the abuse of some substances (not necessarily illicit ones.)

Little by little, the authorities (especially health authorities and organizations) are making more use of the grotesque to inform people about the real consequences of certain habits. For instance, actual pictures of the lungs of a smoker with cancer become popular in anti-smoking campaigns. However, this is an isolated example, as the authorities do not dare to show to the public the shocking reality because it makes life even sadder and bleak. Therefore, one of the roles of the grotesque is to show these horrible aspects of drug abuse, in order to make people aware of the dangerous consequences.

The purpose of this research, as we have proposed in the opening pages, is to revive and re-appropriate the grotesque countercultural discourse and to unearth the groups, in the

contemporary cultural scene, that continue using this powerful symbolic instrument to make us not only think for ourselves, but also to question authority. We demonstrated that, in spite of the hegemonic attack and appropriation of the countercultural discourse of the grotesque, there are still groups that recognize the power this form of expression has on the public. Traditionally, certain works have been strategically rejected as lower artistic forms not only because of their contemporary nature (as opposed to the "classics") but also because of their grotesque aesthetics and their shocking approach to "reality." Therefore, these artistic cultural expressions are forgotten or barely taken into account. For that reason, this study is aimed to rediscover the grotesque as a valid artistic form and as an agent of social change. Anti-aesthetic as it is, the grotesque appeals not only to the senses but also to the intellect of the viewer, and it breaks up with the canonical standards of beauty and of what art, supposedly, "must be."

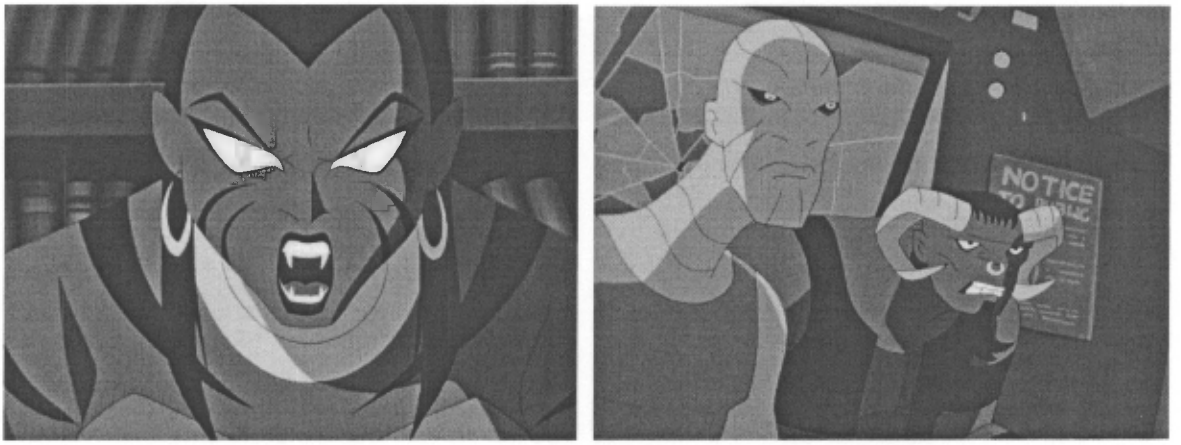
The interdisciplinary nature of the grotesque, as a cultural phenomenon, is reflected on the variety of texts we analyzed. With the purpose of rediscovering and re-appropriating the grotesque, and having a clearer and broader view of what this form of cultural expression encompasses, it is necessary to explore different cultural manifestations in which it appears. Consequently, the compass of this research serves diverse areas of study. As we have demonstrated, the analysis of the grotesque anti-aesthetics might be applied not only to literature, but also to other forms of art. Hopefully, this research will lead to new analyses of cultural artistic expressions that, because of lack of technical knowledge, we rather not cover (the grotesque in music, that according to Phillip Thomson does not occur, might be an interesting case of study for future analyses.)

Besides the variety of art forms that we analyzed, we also dealt with numerous social issues: poverty, sexuality, crime, oppression, gender roles, capitalism, among others. This diversity of topics— intertwined throughout the different chapters and reflected on the theoretical specificity of each one of them—opens the possibility to examine and question the contemporary social and cultural situation, represented by the grotesque anti-aesthetic, from a sociological, political, anthropological, and even psychological approach.

One of the most important, most valuable contributions this research has given to the artistic and cultural analysis and critique is the new concept of the contemporary grotesque and its two variations (the countercultural and the "empty" or pop grotesque.) I proposed these terms and notions in order to provide the appropriate tools to analyze the contemporary cultural scene and the different manifestations of the grotesque. As we have seen, the grotesque is ubiquitous in the contemporary cultural landscape. In other periods, the grotesque—countercultural in nature—was simply discarded, underestimated, and despised. Nowadays, the grotesque is not hidden anymore; however, the variation of the grotesque, to which we are exposed to, comes from the hegemonic groups. It manifests itself in the form of products emptied of any rebellious political discourse. Taking advantage of the ambivalent, dissident nature of the grotesque, the hegemony sells its representations as fashion products: people buy the mask of rebellion from the same group they are trying to rebel against. By giving a name to this form of hegemonic grotesque, we can differentiate its motifs from those of the countercultural side, and therefore, rescue the latter from generalizations and misconceptions.

A final question that might come to the mind of the readers is whether the contemporary grotesque (specifically the countercultural one) will resist the powerful machinery of the

hegemonic group and; therefore, be totally consumed by the *pop* counterpart, or if it will resist as the emblem of the dissidents and the rebels that fight for a social change. One might think that there must be a limit of grotesqueness, and that, after that point has been crossed, people will get accustomed (immune) to it, which I consider is part of the hegemonic strategy of massive exposure of the "empty" grotesque. Notwithstanding, the standards of grotesque appreciation varies from period to period, from culture to culture, and I think that there will always be shocking and disgusting elements as society and culture evolve. For instance, In "Splicers," the 14 episode of the futuristic TV series Batman Beyond, teenagers transform their bodies by combining their genes with those of animals. The result is a grotesque human body with monstrous characteristics and abilities.



The teenagers of the future modify their bodies by means of genetic manipulation. This episode reveals how society criticizes them because of their grotesque appearance: a similar reaction that people with tattoos and piercing receive nowadays.

This example, though unreal (so far,) might be a reality in the upcoming years, since genetic science is advancing incredibly fast. Therefore, sources for countercultural grotesque experiences will always exist, and appropriated pop versions of them will also appear as part of the hegemonic counteraction. The process is endless as well as the possible sources and manifestations of the grotesque.

At this point, we have suffered the horrors of the grotesque in some of its various forms. We have experienced not only disgust, fear, rejection, and the destabilization of our preconception of "reality," but also some kind of pleasure and fascination; otherwise, we would not be sharing these concluding lines and ideas. We have come to an end; however, the struggle between the grotesque countercultures and the authorities will continue in the cultural scene after you finish reading this page. So, let the grotesque experience continue!

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