

GROTESQUE

*Justin D. Edwards and
Rune Graulund*



2nd
edition

ROUTLEDGE

the NEW CRITICAL IDIOM



GROTESQUE

The new edition of the bestselling *Grotesque* offers an accessible introduction to the use (and abuse) of this complex literary term. Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund explore the influence of the grotesque on cultural forms throughout history, with particular focus on its representation in literature, visual art and film.

The book presents a history of the literary grotesque from Classical writing to the present, examining theoretical debates around the term in their historical and cultural contexts, and introduces readers to key writers, artists and film makers of the grotesque, including Homer, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Carson McCullers, David Cronenberg, Ottessa Moshfegh and Bong Joon Ho. It analyses key terms such as discord and transgression, deformed and distorted bodies, misfits and freaks, and explores the grotesque in relation to queer theory, post-colonialism and the carnivalesque. Updated and expanded throughout, the second edition reveals how grotesque is always on the move, pushing against the boundaries of shifting standards of what is and is not normal. It includes insightful new chapters on the absurd and ecocriticism. It also features fresh insight into fat studies, sophistication and the grotesque, decolonial grotesque, planetary grotesque, the New Weird and Ecogothic.

This invaluable guide offers an original and distinctive overview of this vital genre. It is essential reading for students of literature, art history and film studies.

Justin D. Edwards (1970–2023) was chair of Gothic Studies at the University of Stirling, UK, and co-president of the International Gothic Association. He published widely on horror and on gothic, including *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic* (2003), *Gothic Canada: Reading the Spectre of a National Literature* (2005) and the co-edited anthology *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: The Gothic Anthropocene* (2022).

Rune Graulund is Associate Professor in American Literature and Culture at the Center for American Studies at the University of Southern Denmark. In addition to the co-edited anthology *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: The Gothic Anthropocene* (2022), he has published widely on gothic, the New Weird, science fiction, cli-fi and grotesque.

THE NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

SERIES EDITOR: JOHN DRAKAKIS, UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING

The New Critical Idiom is an invaluable series of introductory guides to today's critical terminology. Each book:

- provides a handy, explanatory guide to the use (and abuse) of the term;
- offers an original and distinctive overview by a leading literary and cultural critic;
- relates the term to the larger field of cultural representation.

With a strong emphasis on clarity, lively debate and the widest possible breadth of examples, *The New Critical Idiom* is an indispensable approach to key topics in literary studies.

Metafiction

Yaël Schlick

Ecocriticism

Third edition

Greg Garrard

Fictionality

Karen Petroski

Tragedy

John Drakakis

Travel Writing

Second Edition

Carl Thompson

The Historical Novel

Second Edition

Jerome de Groot

Grotesque

Second Edition

Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/The-New-Critical-Idiom/book-series/SE0155

GROTESQUE

Second Edition

Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund

Designed cover image: *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch

Second edition published 2027

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2027 Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund

The right of Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

For Product Safety Concerns and Information please contact our EU representative GPSR@taylorandfrancis.com. Taylor & Francis Verlag GmbH, Kaufingerstraße 24, 80331 München, Germany.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

First edition published by Routledge 2013

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Edwards, Justin D., 1970- author | Graulund, Rune author

Title: Grotesque / Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund.

Description: Second edition. | Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2026. | Series: The new critical idiom | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2025053660 (print) | LCCN 2025053661 (ebook) | ISBN 9781032796765

hardback | ISBN 9781032796789 paperback | ISBN 9781003493334 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Grotesque in literature | Literature, Modern--History and criticism | LCGFT: Literary criticism

Classification: LCC PN56.G7 E39 2026 (print) | LCC PN56.G7 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025053660>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025053661>

ISBN: 978-1-032-79676-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-79678-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-49333-4 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003493334

Typeset in Times New Roman

by SPi Technologies India Pvt Ltd (Straive)

CONTENTS

<i>Series Editor's Preface</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements to the Second Edition</i>	vii
1 Grottesquerie	1
2 Grotteskology; or, Grottesque in Theory	16
3 Monstrous and Grottesque	36
4 Grottesque Bodies	51
5 Discord and Transgression	67
6 Attraction/Repulsion	82
7 Laughter and Grottesque	99
8 Queerly Grottesque	119
9 Postcolonial Grottesque	137
10 Planetary Grottesque	153
Coda: Weird Grottesque	169
<i>Glossary</i>	179
<i>Bibliography</i>	185
<i>Index</i>	195

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO THE SECOND EDITION

This book is dedicated to Justin who passed away in January 2023. Having in true grotesque fashion compiled the book in all haste over a surprisingly compressed period of time, Justin and I had on several occasions discussed the need for a second edition of this volume. The speed but also rambunctious manner in which the first edition of this volume came about was fitting for the subject, yet we always felt there were some topics we passed over too quickly and wanted to return to at a later date. Moreover, when one is dealing with something as culturally and temporally specific as grotesque, any take on the subject is bound to feel outdated almost immediately. This is the nature of grotesque and always will be.

I am grateful to Routledge and in particular to the General Series Editor John Drakakis (who happens to be a former colleague also of Justin's at Stirling University) for his generous and insightful feedback on the proposed changes for this the second volume, as also to Senior Editor Karen Raith. Karen, John and Routledge as such very quickly agreed to publish a second edition in Justin's memory, which I remain very thankful for. It has been an emotional but also rewarding journey to speak to Justin and our co-authored text a decade after it was first published. I hope it stands the test of time for at least another decade.

Further thanks must go out to Elliott, to Agnethe, to Katrine, to Rebekah, and to Erica, Andrés and to Adam for stimulating discussions and feedback on ideas. And as always of course a massive thank you to Rebecca, Johan and Nanna. You know why. Finally, of course, a very large Justin shoutout to Anne, Clara and Madeleine.

Rune Graulund, Copenhagen, 2025



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

1

GROTESQUERIE

What *do* we mean when we speak of the grotesque? Depending on the observer, grotesque can mean many different things. In Patrick McGrath's novel *The Grotesque* (1989), for instance, we follow the later life of Sir Hugo Coal, a once successful palaeontologist who is now paralysed and confined to a wheelchair. Sir Hugo cannot speak, but he can observe, effectively becoming a scientist of the many perverse and macabre events taking place in his stately manor tellingly titled Crook Manor. Unable to communicate with his staff or family, Sir Hugo is left largely with his own imagination for companionship. As he concludes, the human mind, left unattended, is drawn to grotesque: 'There is one thing I have learned since being paralyzed, and that is that in the absence of sensory information, *the imagination always tends to the grotesque* The scene I construct will be one of venereal depravity, of sex This is what I mean when I speak of the grotesque – the fanciful, the bizarre, the absurdly incongruous' (McGrath 1989: 69).

Peculiar, odd, absurd, bizarre, macabre, depraved, degenerate, perverse: all of these attributes are, for Sir Hugo, the first-person narrator of McGrath's novel, part of what he calls grotesque. Yet weird and peculiar thoughts and visions are not, Sir Hugo

continues, just figments of the imagination. Nor are they confined to the abnormal creatures of books or the deformed bodies of some Flemish paintings. For grotesque also manifests itself in the corporeal, material world of the physical body. A bone-collector and amateur palaeontologist in his youth, Sir Hugo's ageing body has broken down; he can no longer control his movements. He suffers from complete paralysis, so he is unable to walk, drink or feed himself. All he can do is to sit in his wheelchair with his body deteriorating, his bones atrophying, as he stares at the blank walls of his now unhomely estate. In this, the grotesque is not only something he observes from a distance, or imagines in moments of despair; rather, it defines his life, his very identity: 'I have come to believe', he explains, 'that to be a grotesque is my destiny. For a man who turns into a vegetable – isn't that a grotesque?' (McGrath 1989: 16).

It may well be. But it comes in other forms too. For grotesque bodies are, at times, incomplete, lacking in vital parts, as they sometimes have pieces cut out of them: limbs are missing, to be replaced sometimes by phantom limbs, and bodily mutations become dominant traits. In some cases, grotesque figures combine human, non-human, animal and, in the case of Sir Hugo, 'vegetable' attributes. In other cases, the corporeal deformity consists of extra body parts: eleven toes, a human tail, a third nipple, or the two heads of conjoined twins. These can be considered excessively grotesque.

McGrath's novel *The Grotesque* employs its title with a peculiar accuracy. For the narrator's description of grotesqueness is consistent with conventional definitions of the term: 'repulsively ugly or distorted', the *OED* tells us, 'the grotesque is incongruous or inappropriate to a shocking degree'; or, it can consist of 'comically distorted figures, creatures or images'. The distorted and deranged characters of grotesque representations, of the sort we find in the deformed bodies of Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), can, according to this definition, fade into black humour or the wittily bizarre, as in the bitter irony of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930). These aspects of grotesquerie are vital to McGrath's novel: the repulsive images of decaying bodies and dug-up skeletal bones, as well as the butler, Fledge, who is, according to the narrator, 'the source of the evil', combine with elements

of grim social comedy and dark irony as the plot meditates on the master/butler relationship. The distortions of class in the fluid movements between master and servant offer elements of comic grotesquerie alongside themes that are deadly serious.

INCONGRUITY AND UNCERTAINTY

Disjunctions between the vile and the comic, disgust and irony, provoke incongruities and uncertainties arising out of the irreconcilable dimensions of grotesque forms. With this in mind, the literary critic Philip Thomson offers a helpful definition of the grotesque in literature and visual culture: he calls it '*the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*' and, he continues, 'it is significant that this clash is paralleled by the ambivalent nature of the abnormal as present in the grotesque' (Thomson 1972: 27; italics in source). Thomson's words in this passage – unresolved, incompatible, ambivalent, clash – speak to the ambiguities, juxtapositions and uncertainties surrounding the term. Yet the attributes of incompatibility and ambivalence do not simply lead to a conceptual dead-end or a place where meaning is absent and unattainable. Instead, the grotesque offers a creative force for conceptualizing the indeterminate that is produced by distortion, and reflecting on the significance of the uncertainty that is thereby produced. This means that the discombobulating juxtapositions and bizarre combinations found in grotesque figures in literature and the other arts open up an indeterminate space of conflicting possibilities, images and figures. A grotesque body that is incomplete or deformed forces us to question what it means to be human: these queries sometimes arise out of the literal combination of human and animal traits or, at other times, through the conceptual questions about what it means to deviate from the norm.

The questions prompted by these ambiguities lead to a sense of instability and uncertainty. But this is not just uncertainty for the sake of uncertainty. By acknowledging the lack of certainty at the heart of grotesque texts, we remain open, multiple, and, as such, we can embrace uncertainty over certainty: this, then, resists totalization, in all its many forms, and offers many routes into multiple readings.

Why is this significant for an understanding of grotesque forms? An answer to this query lies in our ungrasping of forms that challenge absolute authority and aesthetic measure as a guiding principle. This process of systematic unattachment, in turn, acknowledges the possibilities of an open structure in which there can be no certainty, no exclusive or permanent state of something which does not already contain within it something else: there is no beauty without ugliness, no comedy without tragedy, no black without white. Opening up a space of possibilities, where humans merge with animals and disgust mixes with laughter, the grotesque does not inhabit a stable or predetermined ground. Nor does it provide a simple measure for prearranged decision-making about literature and aesthetics. The grotesque can, at times, lead to anxious indeterminacy, but where the emphasis is on anxiety as much as it is on creativity.

Grotesque fiction, in a general sense, violates the laws of nature. Here, clear-cut taxonomies, definitions and classifications break down and, as a result, there is a built-in narrative tension between the ludicrous and the fearful, the absurd and the terrifying. A salient example of this is William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), an Orientalist tale of terror that employs an ironic mode of narration. The transgressive excesses of the protagonist, Caliph Vathek, include the construction of five palaces, each designed to gratify one of the senses, that are tributes to his insatiable appetites and his pursuit of pleasure. Excessive consumption is, throughout the text, a manifestation of grotesque corporeality and this is combined with a series of grotesque themes such as necrophilia, libertinism and incest. The novel also includes many grotesque figures: fifty one-eyed, mute black servants, various ghouls, several eunuchs, and scenes involving skeletons and mummies. These bizarre creatures are introduced by the mad and zany Giaour, whose influence over Vathek drives the protagonist far beyond the bounds of human decency as he commits horrific atrocities to attain eternal sensual completion. Described as a grotesque stranger, Giaour is so abominably hideous that the very guards who arrest him are forced to shut their eyes as they lead him to the dungeons.

The physicality of grotesque bodies that 'hurt the eyes' is repeated in the corruptions of human behaviour to represent

ethical disorder and the chaos of the human condition, and this unruliness is reflected in the text's setting. At a crucial moment, a grotesque sage, a heavy-drinking, anti-Islamic palm-tree climber, leads Zulkais, who has confessed a passionate physical attraction to her brother, into a cavernous grotto surrounded by reptiles with human faces. This place of terror is paved with flesh-coloured marble that is marked with the veins and arteries of the human body. Human heads grow out of lizard-like forms and the rock-face appears to have human innards: the animals and the caverns are physically anthropomorphized. The caverns are particularly significant, for they include an etymological reference. The word 'grotesque' is linked to the word 'grotto': the English word derives from the Italian *pittura grottesca*, meaning a work (or painting) found in a grotto and refers to the rooms in ancient buildings in Rome which were excavated to reveal murals in a grotesque style. Indeed, the grotto is, like the labyrinth or the crypt, a disorienting and threatening place that induces anxiety and fear. It is also a place of potential spatial internment that echoes the state of being confined within the physical limits of grotesque bodies.

But bodies are not only trapped within the limits of their own physicality; they are also defined by grotesque traits. In *Vathek*, for instance, the rebellion of the body, due to excessive consumption, does not engender a morality tale warning against the dangers of insatiable appetites; after all, the narrative voices of the text do not always express disapproval. Rather, Beckford's mastering of the stratagems of the horror tale (the gloom-ridden atmosphere creating suspense, the display of bloodstains left by horrendous murders, the depictions of imprisonment and torture) is conveyed with a comic twist. The tone throughout most of the text is 'coolly sardonic' and even the most horrific events are related with 'ironic reserve and understatement' (Punter and Byron 2004: 182). In fact, the scenes of terror often include touches of humour through an ironic treatment of the characters and the development of a bathetic contrast between drama and absurdity. The darker tones of the mordant sections of prose are fused with the ludicrous and the comic, thus creating emotional uncertainty by swiftly changing mood while still retaining a sinister undertone. A tale of terror *and* a mawkish narrative, *Vathek* illustrates the structural dynamics of

grotesque forms: the text fluidly moves between horror and terror, the ludicrous and the absurd, the humorous and the comic, the material and the mysterious.

UNCANNY GROTESQUE

The grotesque and the uncanny both reflect an ambiguity that relates to an interior condition and can produce a range of responses, from alienation and estrangement to terror and laughter. The grotesque has the power to move from the material world into the uncanny realm of mystery through its experience of disorientation, bewilderment, confusion and bafflement. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe a unique form of the grotesque not limited to that which is completely alien to what we accept as normal. Rather, they point to a liminal form of the grotesque that is not monstrous Other, but one that emerges as a 'boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which the self and the other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone' (Stallybrass and White 1986: 193). They assert that many methods of hybridization integral to bourgeois society produce 'new combinations and strange instabilities in a given semiotic system' that surpass the conventional oppositions of refined/foul, high/low or culture/savagery. This version of the grotesque as a liminal phenomenon disturbs the coherence of these kinds of logical oppositions. Within this liminal form, the grotesque derives from both the play upon the bodily form and a play upon the conceptual form that we associate with the uncanny.

In his essay, 'The Uncanny', Sigmund Freud defines the uncanny experience as 'that class of the frightening which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar' (Freud 1985: 336). The experience of something being both foreign and familiar engenders the emotive responses of discomfort and alienation. Indeed, for Julia Kristeva, the concept of 'the uncanny' is a significant source for her theory of abjection in which the human corpse can be simultaneously experienced as alien (object) and also strangely familiar (resembling the subject). Within the liminal grotesque, then, the body merges with forms of repression so that the uncanny is nothing new or alien, but something that is familiar

and old, for it is formed in the mind and yet becomes alienated from the subject through repression. ‘The uncanny’, writes Christoph Grunenberg,

describes the return of repressed events, memories, and fantasies – the encounter with one’s own most intimate fears. [&] The invasion of the private and secure sphere of the home by some unknown evil force exemplifies the conflict between interior and exterior world, between individual and society, and between the intra- and intersubjective.

(Grunenberg 1997: 213)

Indeed, the etymology of ‘*unheimlich*’, the German word for ‘uncanny’, includes a link between the uncanny and the domestic space of the home, for the German ‘*das Heimlich*’ means that which is homely, comfortable and familiar. The inversion of ‘*das Unheimlich*’, then, negates feelings of comfort, triggering an estrangement or the feeling of not being at home, ‘unhomely’.

The uncanny, like the grotesque, depends on a conflict or confrontation based on the notion of incongruity or the juxtaposition of opposites. Moreover, the grotesque and the uncanny resist the resolution of conflicts, and those who emphasize the terrifying quality of the grotesque often shift it toward the realm of the mysterious and the uncanny. An uncanny text might become grotesque, not because of some shocking oddity of invention, but because of the fluctuations or confusions of a variety of shifting perspectives. The stamp of the grotesque in the realm of the fantastic is the conscious confusion between fantasy and reality. But the uncanny, for Freud, can also arise out of that which is gruesome or physically grotesque: the return of the dead, being buried alive, corpses and cannibalism, can engender an uncanny response. Regarding cannibalism, the literary critic Nicholas Royle points out that ‘The Uncanny’ does not address the uncanniness of cannibalism, but he goes on to write that ‘we might surmise that cannibalism, for Freud, would be uncanny because it is “too much intermixed with what is purely gruesome”’ (Royle 2003: 210). Dreadful, hideous and macabre, cannibalism is seen to be the taboo desire *par excellence*, for it breaks down artificial distinctions between the human and the animal, even the human-as-animal, and figures the flesh of

the human body as meat. Such conceptions of human consumption blur the boundaries between civilization and savagery, not just in the discontents of civilization, but also through a rupture in the relationship between self and other. After all, cannibalism plays out, materially and figuratively, the integration of the self into the other, the other into the self, the abnormal into the normal.

AB/NORMAL

Some literary and cultural critics suggest that the 'normative' is denied in the grotesque insofar as the extreme, the decadent, the excessive and the bizarre are the 'real' of the text. Other critics argue that a vital component of grotesque representations are the distinctions between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal'; or, to put this another way, the grotesque illustrates how the normal is defined in relation to the abnormal. But to consider these distinctions, or even categories, as mutually exclusive, or as binary oppositions, would be misleading. For to understand grotesquerie in all its complexity we must acknowledge that it provokes two key questions: 'what is normal?' and, by extension, 'what is abnormal?' These questions are posed but not easily answered and, as a result, they lead to ambivalence about the abnormal. In this, the ambivalently abnormal is part of the state of uncertainty where predetermined conditions and ways of seeing the normative world are challenged.

To return to Patrick McGrath's novel *The Grotesque*, the narrator says that his butler, Fledge, is not 'normal': he is, we are told, 'cunning', 'secret', 'lustful', 'decadent' and prone to violence, possibly murder (McGrath 1989: 73). The butler's 'monstrous anomalies', the narrator continues, 'violate the natural order' of things and, as such, 'Fledge's "normality" must be seen ... for what it is: a sort of double inversion, an inversion of inversion itself (McGrath 1989: 114, 70). Here, the word 'inversion' is a clear reference to homosexuality, and the narrator is obsessed with Fledge's queer sexuality – but to invert something is also to turn it upside down or place it in a reverse position. Inversion often connotes deviation from the norm, putting something in reverse order or arrangement. And it can refer to that which has been overturned, upturned or turned around – something that is the opposite of

something else. An inversion is, then, a reversal of the normal order of things, such as the butler who becomes the master.

We sometimes speak of things as being 'all over the place' or 'topsy-turvy', meaning they are in a state of confusion, disorder or in disarray. But what is a 'double inversion'? Is such a thing possible? And how might this shed light on 'normality'? Patrick McGrath's novel poses these questions and, in so doing, suggests that the first inversion is cancelled out by the second. That is, if one inversion turns something upside down, making it 'topsy-turvy', then another inversion of the same thing would allow it to revert to its original position. This is significant because it suggests that the grotesque has the power to eliminate borders: it can reveal how the boundaries between the 'normal' and 'abnormal' are fluid, not fixed, and how grotesquerie can lead to an erasure of common distinctions. At the end of the novel, for instance, the increasingly delusional narrator describes the boundaries between himself and the monstrous Fledge as dissolving. 'I am his grotesque double', he states; Fledge 'reads in me the outward sign of his own corruption, I am the externalization, the manifestation, the fleshy representation of his true inner nature – which is a deformed and withered thing' (McGrath 1989: 173).

Grotesque figures can cause the dissolution of the borders separating the normal and abnormal, inside and outside, internal and external. One extreme flows into another. Territories will not be bounded as clear-cut divisions are dissolved. This erasure of common distinctions speaks to debates over stigmatization and normalcy, what it means to exist outside the norm, and what the norm is. After all, normalization is a powerful discourse for control and institutionalization, for dominant institutions sanction certain forms of 'normalcy', and this always comes at the expense of others, which are constituted by contrast as abnormal, inferior or even shameful. This lack of 'normalcy', indeed the very idea of normality itself, can lead to an uneven distribution of shame in people's lives, resulting in the negative consequences of exclusion, demonization and even violence. The ab/normal aspects of the grotesque, and the provocative way in which that lack of normality is represented, have inspired some critics to condemn it as a marker of what is 'uncivilized', thereby offensively reinscribing the distinctions between the

norm and its deviations. This perspective suggests that, like a number of other terms that can operate through binary logic, grotesquerie revolves around the categories of inclusion (the norm) and exclusion (the abnormal) in order to preserve marked distinctions between 'us' and 'them', 'self' and 'other'.

But the word 'grotesque' can also be harnessed as a powerful force to resist the tools of normalization. A grotesque figure can disrupt notions of normality in favour of conceptualizing and recognizing broader varieties of being and expression as dignified and respected. In this, the grotesque can criticize the idea that there is some ethically compelling aspect to 'normality' by suggesting that the normal range is simply a statistical category to which there is no ethical obligation to correspond. If normal just means within a common statistical range, there is no reason to be normal or not.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume challenges categories of normalization through grotesque images of decapitation. Hume's 'Guillotine' appears in book three of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40) in an argument that criticizes those writers who make normative claims about what 'ought' to be based on positive premises about what 'is'. This 'is–ought problem' arises when someone makes assertions about what 'ought' to be on the basis of statements about what 'is'. For Hume, the normative can occur discursively when there is a significant difference between descriptive statements (about what is) and prescriptive or normative statements (about what ought to be). The problem arises when it is not obvious how we move from making descriptive statements to making prescriptive declarations. The gap between 'is' statements and 'ought' statements renders 'ought' statements of dubious validity. In this, one cannot make a normative claim based on facts about the world, implying that normative claims cannot be the conclusions of reason. This complete severing of 'is' from 'ought' has been given the gory designation of Hume's Guillotine and illustrates the removal of the head from many ethical arguments about what it means to be 'normal'.

CRITICAL GENEALOGIES

One of the most influential studies of the grotesque is *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957) by the German critic Wolfgang Kayser. Kayser traces the historical development of the grotesque

from the Italian Renaissance through the epochs of Romanticism and nineteenth-century realism, to its modern forms in poetry, dream narration and surrealist painting. Throughout European literature and painting, Kayser finds the grotesque in the combination of the horrific with the comic: he writes, the grotesque 'appears to us in paradoxical guise ... and it elicits from us paradoxical responses' (Kayser 1981: 56). It would be wrong to say that Kayser argues for an evolution of the concept. Instead, he relocates the integral element of significance from inherently grotesque form/function to grotesque as an effective description of the act of mediation itself. In this, he assesses the grotesque as the appearance of a reality that is simultaneously of and opposed to the worlds in which the audience exists. The direction from which he approaches this definition is unique, for he does not abandon the basic concepts of unity, or disunity, in form and function but integrates them into a consideration of a new concern for effect that propels the grotesque toward a psychological trajectory. This criticism, then, facilitates a comprehensive assessment of the role of the grotesque in European literature and art, thus helping us to unpack Mikhail Bakhtin's deployment of the term in relation to the carnivalesque through the inversion of reality by temporarily destabilizing a closed, hierarchical society (see Chapters 2 and 7 of this book).

On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature (1982) by Geoffrey Galt Harpham offers a response to Kayser's approach. Harpham's writing about grotesquerie tries to demarcate its parameters and to distinguish it from related writing that can be defined as absurd, surreal, funny or weird. The grotesque, he maintains, is an ambiguous category for analysis, but it is also one that is helpful when it is clearly defined and made distinct from other forms of art and literature. One of the methodological problems when approaching grotesque texts is that the label can be over-determined: it can mean everything and nothing. A way to deal with this problem is to recognize that the grotesque appeals to readers and audiences across periods and regions, but that which is considered grotesque is tied to an historical context. What is considered grotesque to a twenty-first-century audience, for instance, might not have been thought to be grotesque by an Early Modern audience. Thus, in order to understand the grotesque, the work

must be placed and understood in relation to the socio-historical context in which it is produced. This process, he continues, can be difficult because the grotesque is always about that which is estranged, defamiliarized and dislocated. Thus, critics of grotesque works are faced with a double sense of alienation: the critic might be alienated from the context in which the work is created, but the work itself will also be estranged within the historical moment. In this, a grotesque work is not a cultural product based on fantasy, for the materiality of its relation to the reality of the world around is vital for its impact on the audience. The grotesque, then, functions according to its audience expectations in time and place: its effects of discomfort, discomposure and uneasiness are reliant on the historical standards of 'normalcy' and what is 'proper'. As a result, a grotesque work influences a collective consciousness, a shared set of social, cultural and historical assumptions that arise from conventional beliefs and attitudes. It is for this reason that Harpham regards the grotesque as always being relegated to the margins of the society in which it is created.

Since the 1970s, there has been a strand of literary criticism that has focused on the American grotesque. Influenced by Irving Howe's 'The Book of the Grotesque' (published in his 1951 study of the American author Sherwood Anderson), the grotesque in American fiction has, for some critics, tended to focus on estrangement and loss: the grotesquerie of an isolated rural life, depressed landscapes populated by deformed characters, the inhuman and inhumane racial grotesque, the outcasts in a community of rugged individualism, grotesque versions of evangelical Christianity, and the excessive consumption associated with material success. In this, grotesque figures and images lie in sharp contrast to the economic and social mythologies of an 'American dream' or the religious utopic vision of the 'city on the hill'. The grotesque existence that the characters of such novels must endure is often read as symptomatic of the unhealthy and deformed nightmare of a malign nation. Indeed, for some literary critics the frightening descriptions of America by early American writers such as William Bradford, Mary Rowlandson and Cotton Mather, with their allusions to a terrifying wilderness and its even more terrifying inhabitants, represent the nascent elements of the American

grotesque, a tradition that emerged in full force in the nineteenth-century writings of Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville. While the interest in this genre has varied over the years, it has been a consistent stream in American literature up to the present day, a form that is evident in the work of authors as diverse as Frederick Douglass, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy and Toni Morrison. Taking a wide variety of forms, including the religious grotesque, the frontier grotesque and the southern grotesque, it has proved an enduring genre for examining social and cultural concerns, as well as issues of race, gender and class, as seen in, for example, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), McCarthy's *Child of God* (1973) or Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

In his interdisciplinary study of the American grotesque, *Modern American Grotesque: Literature and Photography* (2009), James Goodwin explores meanings of the term in twentieth-century texts and images. As contemporary life is increasingly influenced by mass media and new communications technologies, he argues, the deeply rooted representations of the grotesque in the United States have become ubiquitous and have proliferated in a multiplicity of forms. Thus, grotesquerie is a significant part of the national scene: it appears in diverse genres from tabloid journalism and horror films to reality TV, from celebrity news to YouTube and popular fiction. Goodwin reads texts and images to explore how the grotesque is continually re-worked and recontextualized to depict different versions of American culture, society and history. 'The grotesque figure and its meanings', Goodwin writes,

are designed to be detected and understood in terms of pronounced, and often absolute, contrasts. Much modern American literature and photography of the grotesque depends upon iconographic processes that enlarge awareness of the social sphere through delimiting one's perspective on it to antitheses such as perception/obscurity and light/dark.

(Goodwin 2009: 2)

Studies focusing on national traditions of the grotesque have arisen alongside gendered readings of the form. In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1995), Mary Russo