

Unfolding the Unexpressed: The Grotesque, Norms and Repressions

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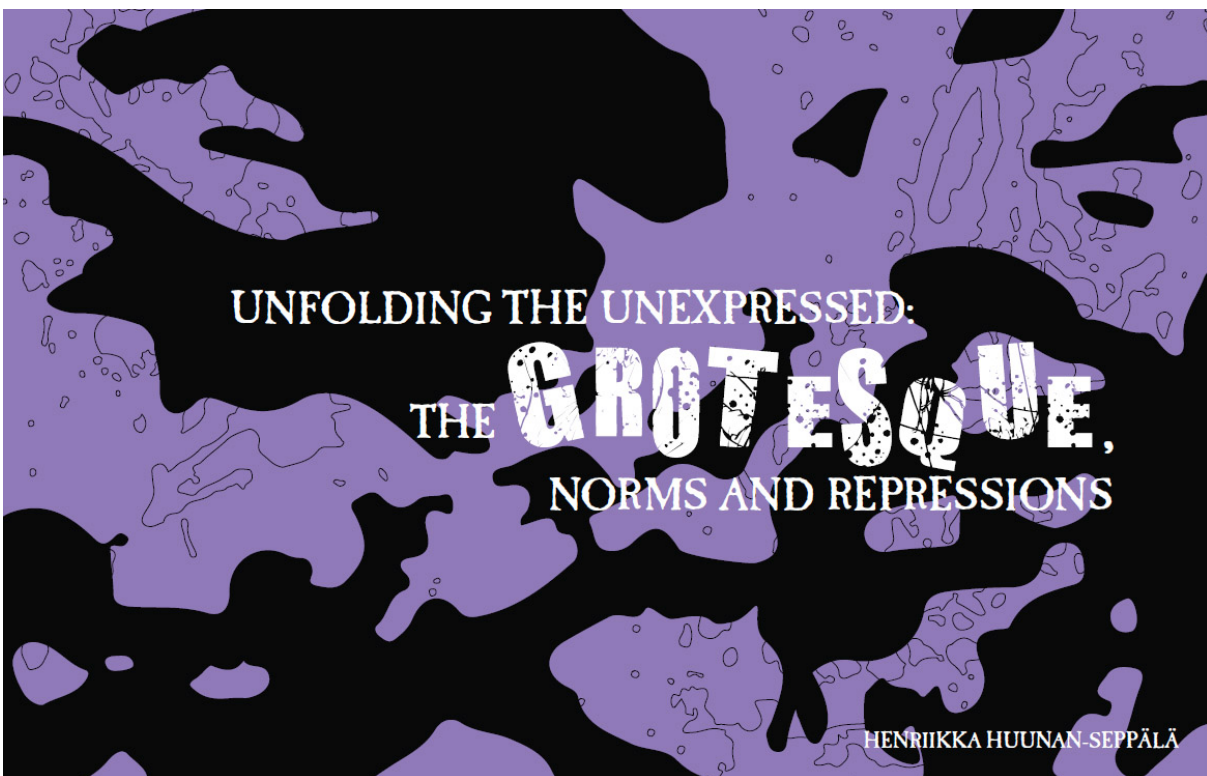


Figure 1

Have you ever wondered why contemporary media imagery is so full of grotesque figures, bodies and violence – such as grotesque monsters and gory mutilations – and why people are so

keen on this imagery? Have you thought that this kind of imagery might have a deeper meaning, and a crucial function within our society?

What I propose here is that grotesque imagery is very influential because it affects people, consciously and unconsciously, as regards issues of identity and social difference – for example, in relation to gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, class, disability, and appearance.



Figure 2

We live in a world in which appearance, and appearances, image and first impressions rule.



Figure 3

In contemporary visual culture, various representations efficiently mold our attitudes, persuade and dissuade people in their beliefs and stances. It is therefore meaningful to explore this imagery.



Figure 4

For example, in the world of fiction, how is badness or monstrosity visualized? What kind of features can be found in various grotesque figures?

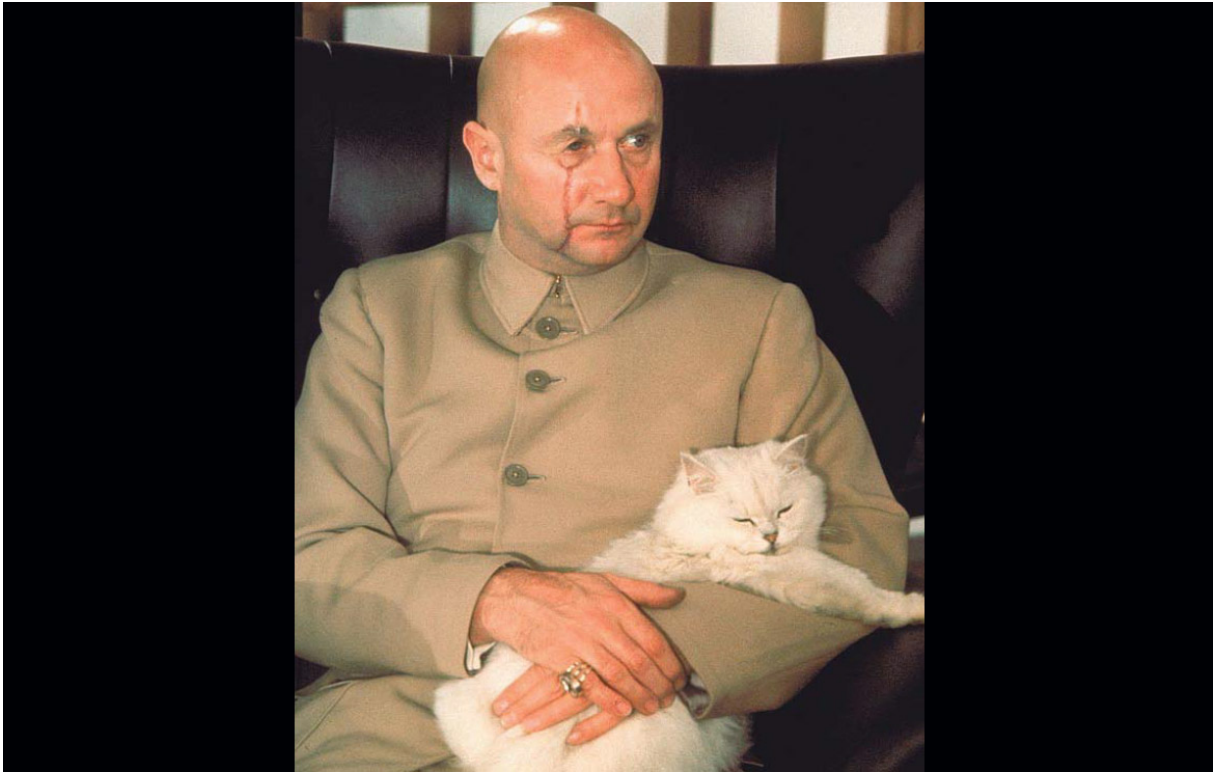


Figure 5

What kind of associations are proposed to us?



Figure 6

And how is gender associated with monstrosity or evil?

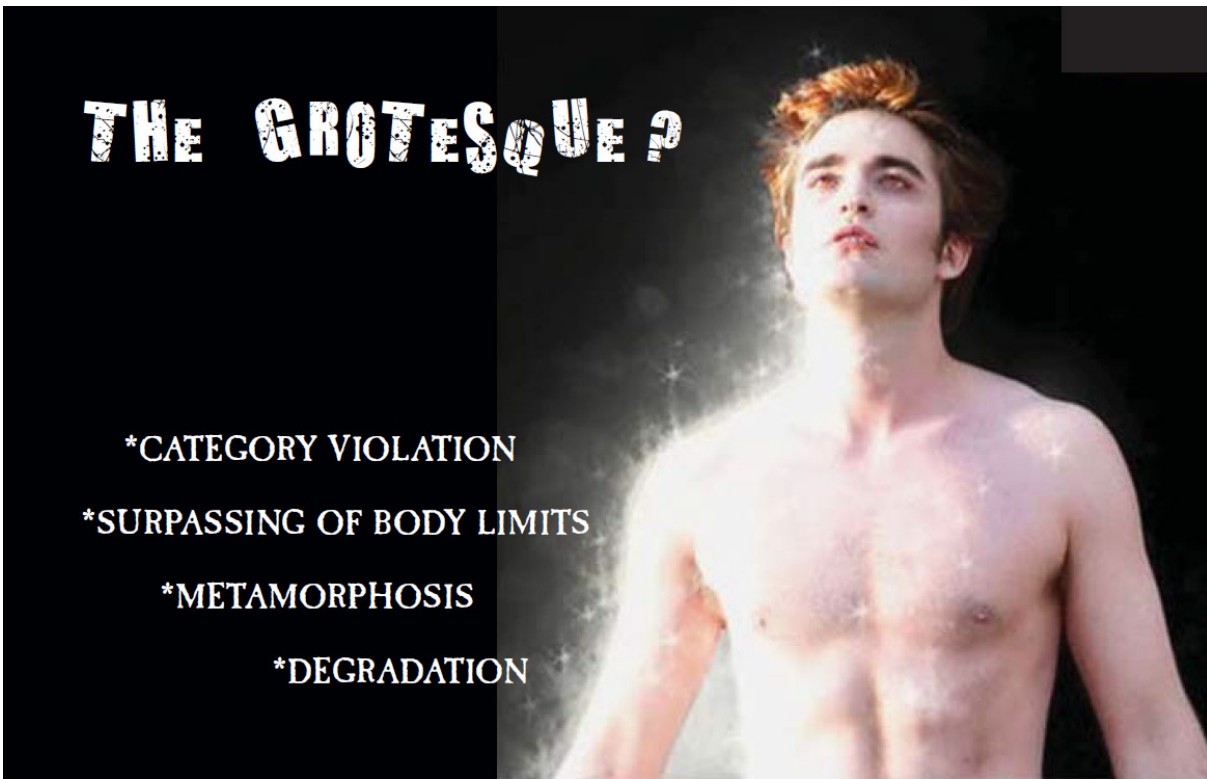


Figure 7

You may be wondering what I mean by the grotesque. I use the notion in a very wide sense, covering a range of concepts, such as the carnivalesque, the abject, and the monstrous. Actually, there are different sides to the grotesque, such as horrific, comic and miraculous. One example of the miraculous grotesque would be the superhero, which is an ontological anomaly, as endowed with otherworldly powers.

This leads us to the view of the grotesque as a category violation: as something that violates our common biological or ontological concepts and norms – as my renowned opponent, Noël Carroll, suggests in his article “The Grotesque Today” (2009).



Figure 8

In addition, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, a famous Russian philosopher (known for his writings on the carnivalesque), the grotesque is essentially related to the idea of metamorphosis and degradation – and the surpassing of body limits, realized for example through excessive eating, defecation, sex and violence.

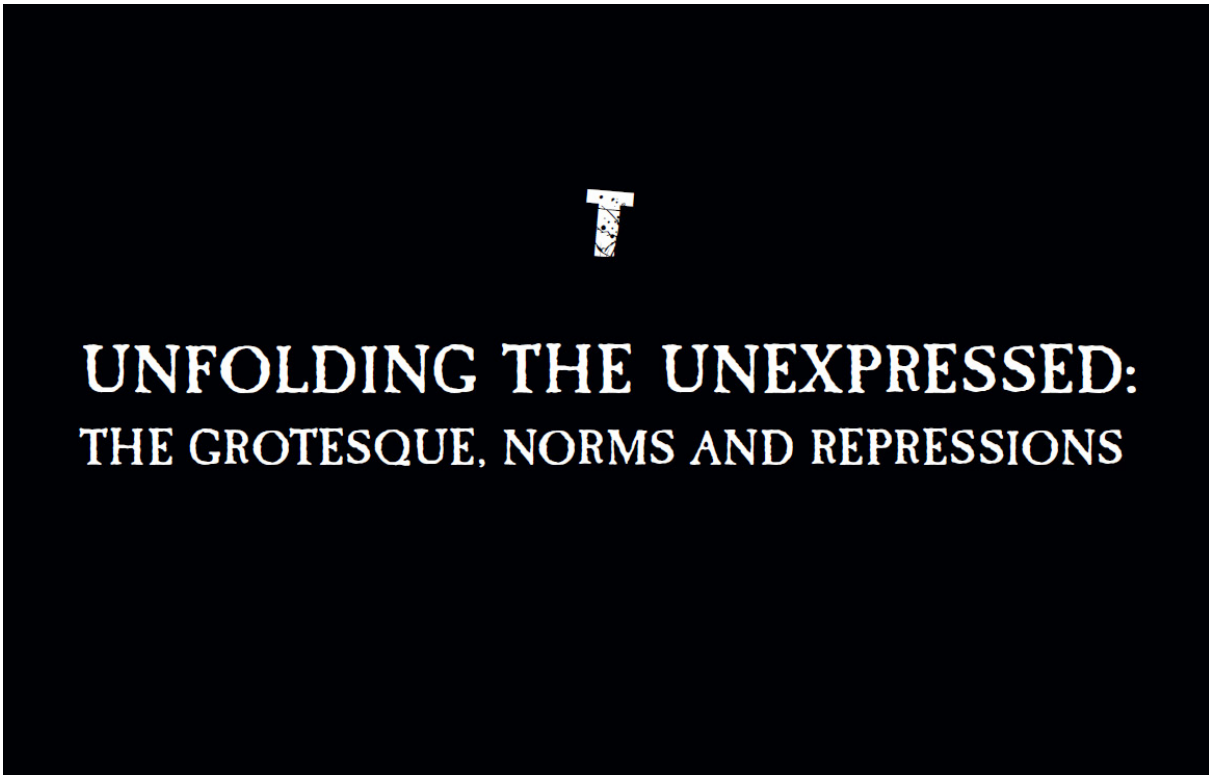


Figure 9

I believe there is a huge lack of studies in the field of contemporary visual culture. There are lots of images that are constantly before our eyes, images that exert their influence on us insidiously. These images, however, are not studied from the point of view of their societal and cultural meaning.

Representing a small fraction of these unexplored images, the subject of my thesis is grotesque bodily imagery in its various forms – whether the odd or the anti-ideal body, the fantastic or monstrous body, the caricatural body, the body that is grotesquely gendered, or the mutilated and abject body revealing its insides.



Figure 10

In my research, the grotesque characters include actual monsters but also monstrous humans; ghosts and witches; human–animal hybrids, humanoids and aliens.



Figure 11

In addition, in my material there are also deformed, excessive or lacking bodies, and minds – as well as bodies that are involved in various grotesque actions.

Nevertheless, my thesis is not about grotesque bodies as such, but about these bodies' relation to the wider field of society. In fact, in my research, the two most important connection points between the grotesque and society are gender and power.



Figure 12

Now, a few words about my approach.

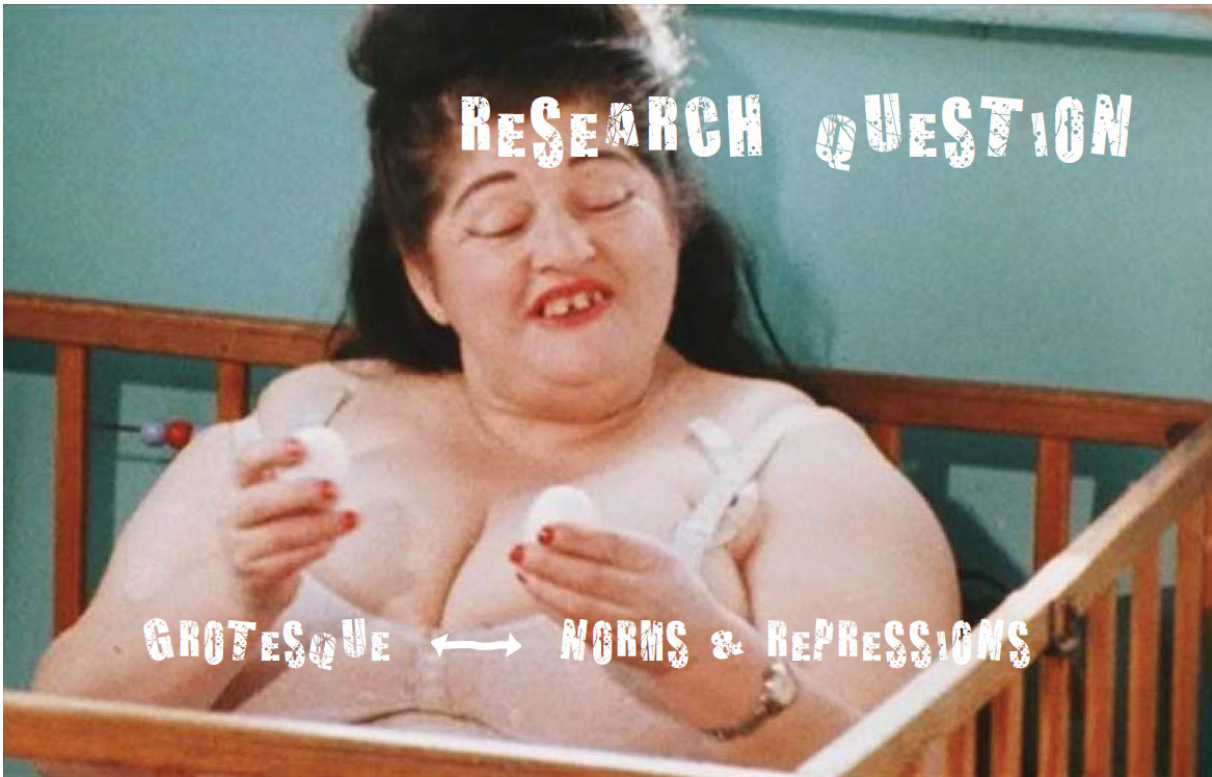


Figure 13

My main research question concerns the relation of grotesque imagery with cultural norms and repressions, including taboos and ideals, fears and fantasies.

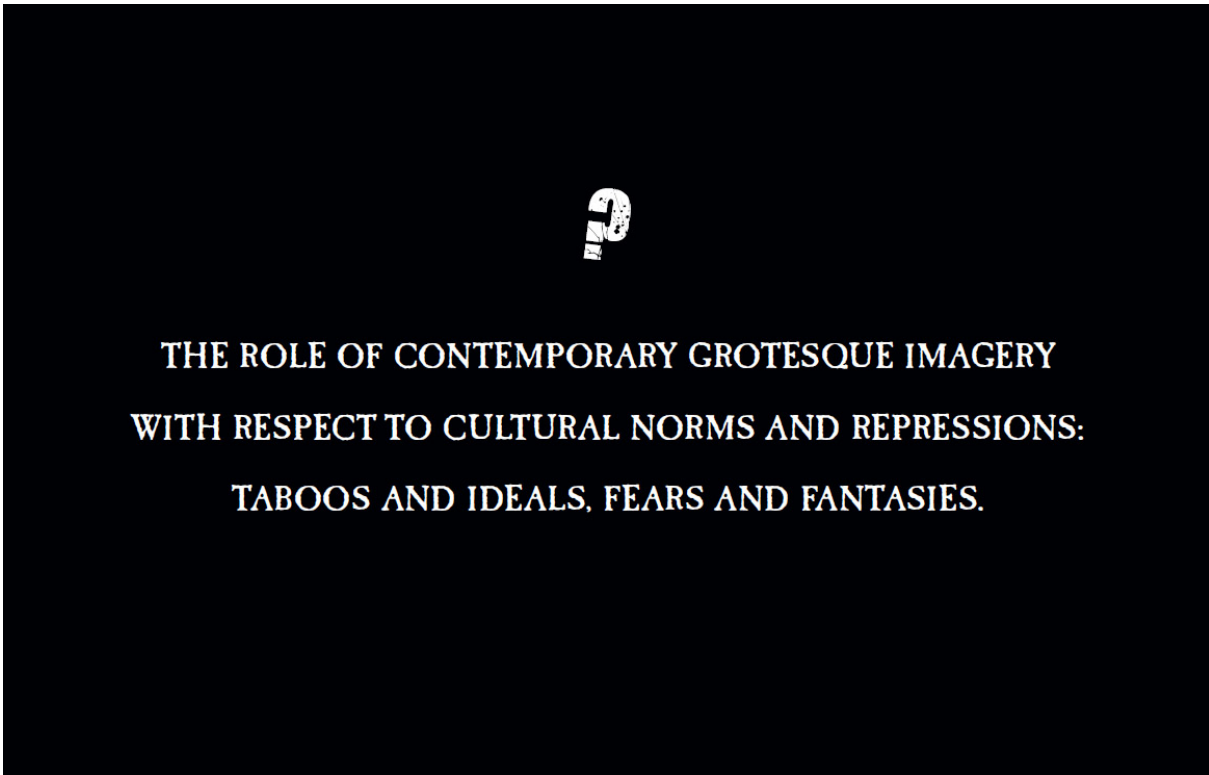


Figure 14

The key question is how grotesque bodily representations construct – and what they reveal about – our society’s norms and underlying structures.

To tackle this question, my research material consists of seven films:



Figure 15

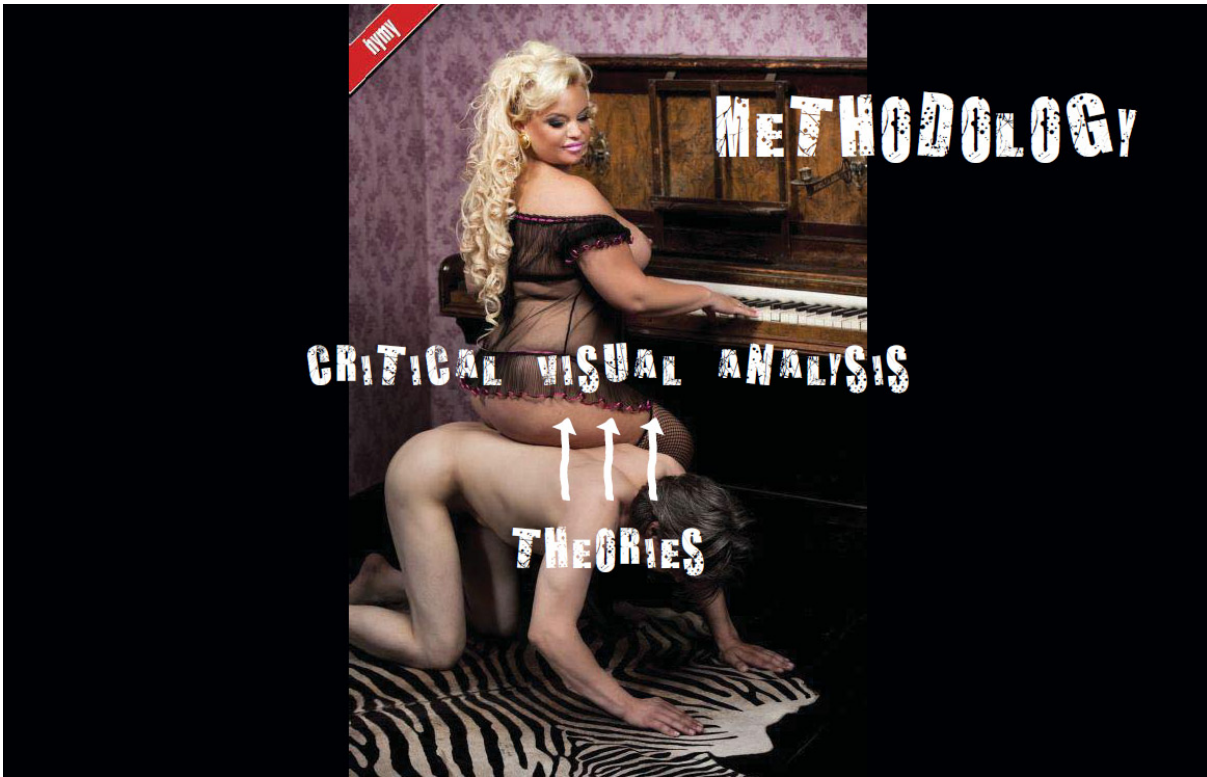


Figure 16

As regards my methodology, I decided to cherry-pick a few methods that suit my purpose, and these are thematic analysis, semiotic analysis, and feminist and psychoanalytic readings. Out of these practices, I devised my own method that I named ‘critical visual analysis’.

An important element in my method is the use of theories that all resonate with the subject, the grotesque, and that all conceptualize margins (or difference) from various perspectives: from ideological blind spots to the murky depths of the human mind. These theories are semi-otics, aesthetics, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic theory (which I regard, by the way, as a philosophy, and not as clinical reality.)

The outcome of my research, then, could be described as a roadmap to the multiple functions of the grotesque.



Figure 17

The final point I want to make here concerns the meaning of the grotesque. As I asked at the beginning: Why does the grotesque possibly have a deeper meaning, and a crucial function within society?

As I see it, the grotesque body is an agent through which culture explores, and also readjusts, its limits. The grotesque is a device that unveils the hidden within a culture: the unsaid, or the unknown; or the unwanted truth. And the grotesque is powerful, as it works at the level of myth and metaphor, reworking cultural myths, and stereotypes.

Ultimately, my claim is that the grotesque, wild and free, encloses the unexpressed.



Figure 18

IMAGES

the book cover: Tytti Halonen

<https://yandex.com/collections/card/5883252f1e37f65f7196458f/>

<https://fi.pinterest.com/pin/319122323568571961/>

https://nemgogol.blog.hu/2016/01/08/kic_a_no

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https://www.sideshowtoy.com/mas_assets/jpg/9119_press01-001.jpg

<https://www.ebay.com/itm/twilight-edward-cullen-body-shimmer-by-neca-rare-shine-like-edward-rave-edc/272863502707?hash=item3f87eea173>

<https://www.alimentarium.org/en/knowledge/sin-gluttony>

http://followtheart.info/kareff-Fri_2_10.html

DVD *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*. Universal Studios, 2003

DVD *Satyricon*. MGM Home Entertainment, 2004

DVD *Pink Flamingos*. New Line Productions, 2012

DVD *Antichrist*. Artificial Eye, 2011

the murky abysses of the Internet

Figure 19

Delivered on the 14th of December 2018.