THE PROMINENCE OF GROTESQUE FIGURES IN VISUAL CULTURE TODAY. RETHINKING THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF THE (MOVING) IMAGE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE GROTESQUE[1]

Annie van den Oever

'[F]rom a merely statistic point of view, the grotesque is one of the leading forms of mass art today […] the grotesque seems omnipresent. Thus it appears timely to address it theoretically.'
-- Noël Carroll (2003)

ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that the new – as opposed to habitualised – optical and digital technologies as used in the cinema today have a strong perceptual impact on individuals by creating all sorts of visual distortions that cause a profound deautomatisation of perception and a destabilisation of the ontological status of the image. An uncanny disruption of the perceptual process, a destabilisation of the cognitive routines, a sudden sensitivity to the medium and an instant emotional response are at the heart of these disruptive viewing experiences. I argue that these effects are reinforced by the presence of "grotesques" and "monsters" which are so prominent in visual culture today.

Key terms:

Viewing experience, art experience, medium-sensitive experience, grotesque experience, perceptual process, cognitive routines, (de)automatisation, (de)stabilisation, (de)naturalisation, (de)sensitisation, attractions, embodied cognitions.

Introduction

In his reflection on the dominance of the grotesque in mass art today, Noël Carroll (2003) recalls growing up in the United States in the 1950s and early 1960s with a constant craving for the monstrous, yet in the cinema of those days he scarcely found any hybrids, deformed creatures, weird beings of gargantuesque proportions, aliens, or monsters. But the times have changed, as he ironically writes, and now 'the grotesque seems omnipresent' (Carroll 2003:293-294).

Carroll's approach to the grotesque is interesting in many ways. He analyses Matt Groening's Homer Simpson, Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*, the self portraits by Cindy Sherman, the brachiosaur in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) and other "grotesques" (see Figures 1–4). He argues that these grotesque figures are structurally similar in so far as they all fuse and subvert distinct biological and ontological categories (Carroll 2003: 296). Disproportion (of parts), fusion, formlessness, and gigantism are the most frequent recurring ways of realising this structural principle, according to Carroll

(2003:297).[2] In other words, though these images are utterly different in terms of their formal features, they are structurally similar in that they all subvert our categorical thinking. As such, they may well trigger an immediate and strong emotional response, 'namely, horror, comic amusement, and awe' (Carroll 2003:298). Interestingly, Carroll (2003:298) also argues that these emotional responses have striking family relations with each other and with the core structure of the grotesque. Pivotal is the subversion of 'our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order' (Carroll 2003:298). Indeed, to this type of subversion, which touches upon the fundaments of human knowledge, viewers respond strongly: the categories of our understanding suddenly and momentarily fail, as Wolfgang Kayser (1957/2004) already argued in his seminal work on the grotesque in the late 1950s.

Carroll's argument that the grotesque is a dominant format in mass culture today is new and thought-provoking. His further insights, which are in line with standard research on the grotesque,[3] are convincing, for example, the mixing of categories and the prominence of biological hybridity; the failing of the categories of understanding; the strong emotional impact. Particularly enriching is Carroll's analysis where he deepens the already existing knowledge in the field with his analysis of the cognitive disorientation and the affective states elicited by the grotesque. Carroll's explanation for the current prominence of the grotesque in mainstream culture, however, is far less satisfying, as I will argue below. He sees a relation between the present 'quickly accelerating entertainment industry' with the demand for an endless variety of new and fantastic grotesque beings, which are triggering sudden and strong emotions (Carroll 2003:309-310).Yet, he overlooks the current period in history as a medium-oriented one, with medium-sensitive viewers who are temporarily sensitised to the medium by the new optical and digital techniques they are not yet familiar with.[4]

Figures 1-4: Matt Groening's Homer Simpson; Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*; a self portrait by Cindy Sherman; the brachiosaur in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*. Images sourced through *Google Images*. Rights reserved by the creators

More specifically, he overlooks the perceptual experience of these new techniques as a *paradigmatic experience of the grotesque*. In other words, the experience of the grotesque, as I will argue below, is not merely or exclusively a perceptual experience of grotesque (fused, hybrid, monstrous) beings; it is, more fundamentally,

an experience of the distorting powers of the new technologies themselves effectively "working" on the percipients in the perceptual process and destabilising their notion of images, representations, beings and meanings. Note that new optical techniques almost inevitably distort, fuse, enlarge and/or deform the seen in some way, and thus typically subvert our biological and ontological categories and destabilise our cognitive routines. Widely discussed examples are computer generated imagery (CGI) and other digital techniques: the enormously enlarged IMAX cinema's wide screens and, arguably, the "new" 3D techniques, all technological novelties introduced in the cinema since the late 1980s.[5]

My central claim is that contemporary cinema technologies challenge the film viewer perceptually in that they bring the ontological status of the images into question. (Is it an image? If so: does it represent something? If so: what does it represent?) My second claim is that new technologies (as opposed to the old technologies which viewers use in an habitual or "automatised" way) create a disorienting and disruptive perceptual experience, which basically has the structure of the grotesque experience, in so far as both involve the perceptual experience of the destabilising effects of the (optical or pictorial) techniques which fuse, enlarge, distort, and deform the seen.[6] My third claim is that the effects are only temporary and that the effects of destabilisation disappear once "habituation" or "automatisation" sets in. This also implies that the image will (re)gain its ontological status as image / representation once the viewing process becomes habitual and automatised. It also means that viewers will lose their sensitivity to the medium in the end and that, as a result, they will basically overlook the techniques working in the perceptual process: they may altogether stop taking note of the ontological difference between a tree in nature and one on a canvas, photo, TV, IPhone, laptop or IMAX wide screen.

To create some insight in the impact of new technologies and the perceptual processes they trigger, two historical examples of the introduction of a new technology are presented in the next two sections: 1) the "birth" of the close-up and 2) the "birth" of the grotesque. I will link the findings of these two sections together with the idea of the dominance of the grotesque in contemporary culture in the closing section.

The "birth" of the close-up

The close-up has become so normal, natural, and familiar, after more than a century of film, that we now have tremendous difficulties understanding the initial impact of the close-up on early audiences. We tend to forget that a close-up on a film screen creates a distortion of the natural proportions and, as such, is a disturbance to our perceptual-cognitive system. Regardless of the ways the "alien" powers of the close-up become domesticated and are put to use over time, all enlargements are in fact disproportionate;[7] they are "attractions" (in the sense of filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein) for this very reason: they may easily create 'emotional shocks in the spectator' (Eisenstein 1969:30). Interestingly, they were presented as such to the spectators of early cinema. A famous example is provided by The Warwick Trading Company's catalogue for April 1901, proudly announcing *Grandma's Reading Glass* (1900), in 'which objects are shown in *abnormal size* on the screen when projected.' The company proudly states that this is to show objects and beings 'in their *enormously enlarged form*. The big print on the newspaper, the visible working of the mechanism of the watch, the fluttering of the canary in the cage, the blinking of grandma's eye, and the inquisitive look of the kitten, is *most amusing to behold*. The novelty of the subject is sure to please every audience' (Routt, emphasis added). Clearly, 'enormously enlarged' things were considered "attractions" in 1901,

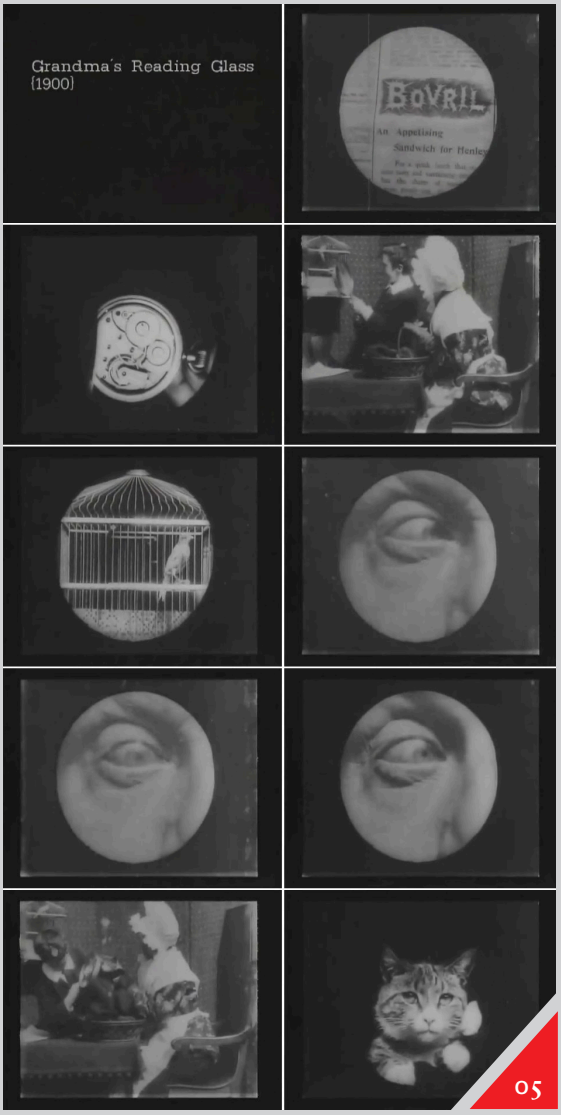

Figure 5: Stills from *Grandma's Reading Glass*, directed by George Albert Smith, 1900, 1 min 20 secs. Source: www.terramedia.co.uk/brighton/brighton_films_reading_glass.htm

and as such 'most amusing'. Grandma's eye projected on the screen must have been enlarged about a hundred times and isolated, on the screen, moving about on its own as a fish in a bowl, the eye suddenly becomes an "alien" or "fantastic" object (Figure 5).[8]

I suppose the eye may have "amused" its audiences in much the same way as watching an elephant in the zoo may amuse us, since its size and forms are "fantastic" and almost beyond the real. Note that this new "attraction" was promoted to demonstrate the "monstrous" powers of the close-up (Eisenstein), as well as to "monstrate" (Gaudreault 2006) the marvelous technical novelty of enlargement in the cinema at the same time. This close-up has been marketed as a first demonstration of enlargement, and a quite remarkable one. Warwick expected the audiences to have a strong response simply to the enlargement, and rightly so. Theoretically speaking, distortions of natural proportions tend to have a disorienting effect on spectators almost instantly, and even more so when a creature is turned into something abnormally large or gigantic. Such a gargantuesque being suddenly falls outside known biological categories; for example, a gigantic cockroach is not a cockroach, but a monster (Eisenstein). Note that by enlarging it, the ontological status of the being is changed, as is the spectators' relation to the gigantic "cockroach" or "eye". Distortions of natural proportions almost automatically turn an otherwise normal creature into a (horrific or amusing) "monster". Thus the close-up basically feeds on the spectacular powers of the freshly enlarged, distorted and disproportioned, and the technique itself may easily produce 'emotional shocks in the spectator' (Eisenstein 1969: 30).[9] The close-up is ultimately a technique which feeds on the powers of the grotesque experience; that is to say, until habituation sets in and the differences in size between natural being and represented image no longer destabilise the audience.

Interestingly, in the so-called phase of the *transformation of the cinema* (between about 1907 and 1915 in the USA), critics in *The Moving Picture World* and other journals started to utter objections to the close-up (see Bowser 1990:97-98; Routt). Disregarding the context of close-ups as amusing "attractions" and regarding them within the new context of narrative cinema, viewers became critical of the distortions of

the proportions of the seen. Within the new context, one can easily find objections to the "monstrous," the "absurd," and the "grotesque" powers of the close-up by the dozens (see Bowser 1990:97-98; Routt). William Routt discusses one of these (anonymous) critics who, in 1909, complained of '*the total lack of uniformity* in a film which contained medium, long and extra-long shots (no real close-ups at all).' This writer objected to the fact that '*in an hour's entertainment of a moving picture theatre, the visitor sees an infinite variation in the apparent sizes of things as shown by the moving picture*' and called the 'disproportion' simply '*absurd*' (Routt, emphasis in original). In a 1911 article from *The Moving Picture World*, a critic complains about the fact that 'figures closer than *the nine foot line*, where the top of the head is at the top of the screen and the feet are at the bottom, *assume unnecessarily large and, therefore, grotesque proportions*' (Routt, emphasis in original).[10]

These rejections form interesting material for Film and Media Studies, because they quite adequately and precisely indicate the need for the new institute, "cinema," to radically reject or appropriate the "alien" powers of the new technique in the name of the new narrative cinema coming into being in the USA from 1910s onward (Gaudreault 2006:98). Inevitably, the "grotesque" and "distorting" powers of enlargements were among the ones to be rejected.[11] Interestingly, these objections to the "grotesque" in the cinema sound surprisingly similar to the famous antique and Renaissance rejections of the grotesque, by Vitruvius and Ruskin respectively,[12] in so far as that all these objections are typically uttered in defence of the representational powers of art. Basically, they are a rejection of that which does not represent or "mean anything." This second phase of the institutionalisation of the cinema – the phase of *transformation of the cinema*, as Eileen Bowser (1990:97-98) calls it – marks a truly innovative interval in time, in the perception of the new institute itself: it initiated narrative cinema and rejected the technical powers it did not need. From an artistic and avant-garde point of view, however, the true moment of innovation is the "birth" of the new medium itself and the glorious moment of "monstration" of the new technology as a celebration of its "monstrous" powers. Whatever one's perspective, it must be noted that new traditions in representation are not born in the medium-specific first phase of the "birth" of the new techniques – a festive moment of monstration and celebration of its "monstrous" or grotesque powers[13] – but rather from it, in the successive, second phase of rejection of these "alien" and "primitive" qualities (Gaudreault 2006: 88, 99).[14] Both need our attention as two distinctively different phases in cinema's history.

In the history of cinema, the objections to the "attractions" of early cinema clearly indicate the need to reduce and control the spectacular powers of film for a narrative cinema being established in the USA. They indicate the shift away from an early phase in cinema, primarily engaging its spectators in the "primitive"[15] pleasures of *looking*, to a more "sophisticated" narrative cinema which represents the world and primarily gratifies the sense for meaning. It was inevitable that the new institute would reject most of early cinema's monstrous powers. That the close-up survived the process is in itself a sign that these powers could be put to use in (classical) narrative cinema: they create 'visual pleasure,' as Laura Mulvey has argued.[16] It shows that the monstrous powers of cinema are neither incidental nor exclusive for film attractions in early film: the very attraction of film as a *visual medium* is based on these powers; film simply feeds on them. Film is basically a 'hypnotic monster', as Pier Paolo Pasolini (1974:73) wrote. One may indeed argue, as he did, that cinema is in fact not very well suited to tell stories at all. If it were to do so, it would have to lose much of its 'original,

dream-like, barbaric, disorderly, aggressive and visionary power' (Pasolini 1974:73). It would be a mistake to assume that these qualities are of marginal importance now. The spectacular is not a marginal concern for the cinema ever, it seems to me. The "alien" quality of early cinema, which traditional film historians tend to overlook, as Gaudreault (2006:99) states, is 'a *properly irreducible* alien quality.'

In terms of writing cinema's "proper" history, it is important to include both the radical rejections of early cinema's "alien" qualities in the process of institutionalisation of narrative cinema as well as the fierce opposition to its rejection, which is a rich tradition in itself. Symptomatic for this (avant-garde) tradition are the many attempts to reinvent and reinvest silent cinema's "poetic", "evocative," "spectacular," "non-narrative" powers in the cinema of the 1920s, and later. Examples one may contemplate are the essays on the "photogenicity" (*photogénie*) of cinema by Louis Delluc, a term adopted by Boris Eichenbaum, in *Poetika Kino*, in the 1920s. One may also think of Delluc's pupil, Jean Epstein, who wrote a passionate essay on the close-up as 'the soul of the cinema' in 1921, defending its "magnifying" powers.[17] However, the most obvious example of all may be Eisenstein's essays on the montage of (film) "attractions," from the early 1920s. These were written after the first medium-specific phase of cinema in pre-revolutionary Russia. While firmly rejecting the young narrative cinema of the USA, Eisenstein analysed and defended the "monstrous" or grotesque powers of cinema, thus grounding a new "historical-materialist" cinema in the USSR. These powers were domesticated and put to use in Eisenstein's own new cinema, in a precise, *constructivist* form, as *mathematically calculated* "attractions." Eisenstein's (1969:30) own films served one purpose only, as he wrote: to force upon his audiences his post-revolutionary 'ideological conclusion.'

It seems that one can learn several things from this historical example. Generally speaking, it confirms that the "birth" of the close-up as the "birth" of deautomatised cinema audiences, thus creating distinctly disruptive moments in cinema's history, as well as intervals of medium sensitivity, with a heightened awareness of the medium. Indeed, this points to abrupt shifts in cinema's history, as well as some more gradual ones. As Laura Mulvey (2006:52) argues, '[f]ilm historians have pointed out, quite correctly, that the cinema and its prehistory are too deeply imbricated ideologically and technologically, for an abrupt "birth of the cinema" to be conceptually valid. But from the perspective of the uncanny, the arrival of celluloid moving pictures constitutes a decisive moment.'[18] It seems to me that the introduction, marketing and dissemination of the first close-ups as a technical novelty well worth seeing, may indeed indicate that a technique was needed only four years after the "birth" of cinema to counteract the (predictable) first signs of habituation to the novelty of the moving pictures. Moreover, the "birth" of the close-up seems to signal that the phase of celebration of and experimentation with new techniques was in full swing. The close-up was thus framed and advertised as an extraordinary thing – and it was in part received accordingly – receiving either positive and affirmative or negative responses.

The "birth" of the close-up did not go unnoted, as reviews have testified. Unsurprisingly, the *rejections* of the powers of the close-up to make the seen look "abnormal," "disproportionate," and "absurd" seem to coincide well with the rise of the institution of cinema, as well as its endeavors to create a narrative cinema to represent story worlds. In its early years, the institution of cinema predictably *needed* (1) rejection (of the close-up's "grotesqueness"), (2) habituation to the medium, (3) appropriation of the powers of the new techniques, and (4) institutionalisation of its own

production and dissemination practices to establish a firm and stable relation with its audiences. In the end, all of these factors would help to establish the more or less stable ontological status of the moving image needed by cinema to represent the world in its narratives. Further research is needed to augment our knowledge of the process that helped to shape the medium in its first and second phase, taking particular note of the distinctive roles the de-automatisation of new techniques played, the viewers' rejections, the viewers' habituation, the appropriation of the institute, and the avant-garde celebration of the ways in which new techniques could transform the seen and have an impact on perception.

The "birth" of the grotesque

Several transitional periods in European culture seem to be marked by a distinct and sudden interest in the aesthetics of the grotesque. In fact, the history of the grotesque (as described in seminal studies by Kayser (1957/2004), Bakhtin (1968), Harpham (2006), and others) provides a real treasure trove for insights into the transitional, medium-sensitive viewing experiences of the new that we currently often experience. For this very reason, I would like to go back to yet another famous transitional moment in European history, moving from the pre-modern to the modern era: the (Italian) Renaissance. Its early years are marked by the discovery and excavation of the *Domus Aurea* or the Golden Palace, built by Nero around 64 AD, not in Rome but on Rome, as Tacitus commented.[19] It was thought that Nero had burnt down the very heart of Rome to build his disproportionate palace and revenge came within half a decade. The Palace was destroyed and Titus built his now famous Baths on top of the ruins. Across the street, where Nero's little pond used to be, the Colosseum was erected to satisfy and enchant the people of Rome. The Golden Palace seemed not to have left a trace. It was only in about 1480 that painters discovered many hundreds of marvelous little drawings of hybrids on the ceilings and the walls of what was once Nero's Palace, yet what they then thought to be a "grotto." Hence, these fascinating little figures were called *grotteschi* or grotto-esques.[20] Again and again, painters descended into the *grottos* with torches through holes in the ceiling to marvel at what they saw – Raphael among them[21] –and they may have felt they could suddenly see the antique Roman's mind via a hole in the skull, as the novelist Ian McEwan (2005) would later write. In *On the grotesque*, Geoffrey Harpham (2006:27) writes: 'Of all the recoveries of classical Rome made by the Renaissance, this [the *Domus Aurea*] was to be the most exciting, influential, and confusing.'

Inspired by the site, the Renaissance painters made their imitations or *grotto-esques*, and it took only a few decades for the new style to become popular and spread all over Italy (Udine, Florence, Venice), France, Spain, and the Low Countries. Most renowned are the ones made by the 'master of the grotesque', Giovanni da Udine in the Vatican Logge. For many years now, I have visited Rome with a group of Masters students to study these grotesques to deepen our knowledge of these still stunningly attractive grotesques. Being guests of the Royal Dutch Institute in Rome,[22] we get permission to visit the private and silent paradise of the Vatican Logge. What we see in the Logge is, as we tend to exclaim euphorically, absolutely amazing, astonishing, awe-inspiring – an "attraction" indeed, as descriptions from the early Renaissance onwards have testified.[23] Having had this fantastic experience myself, I am keen on descriptions of it by others, who often describe similar sensations in surprisingly similar words. I consciously use the word "attraction" here, firstly, because it is this very term which is constantly and spontaneously used by art historians to describe their experience of

seeing these grotesques; secondly, because the term "attractions" was introduced to the field of film by Eisenstein (1969:30), as noted above, to describe a system of triggering 'emotional shocks in the spectator,' and, thirdly, because that specific use of the term has gained conceptual relevance in Film and Media Studies in a longer process of trying to get to grips with early cinema's "special appeal" on its spectators.[24] It is that "special appeal" of grotesque "attractions" I am interested in.

The Vatican Logge as a garden of amazement

The art historian George L Hersey (1993:227-228) almost euphorically describes the Vatican Logge as a 'painted garden of amazement' where 'temples sprout from blossoms and gods from flowers,'[25] a garden 'full of charm' and 'unforeseen attractions':

> One's first impression, walking into the Logge, is of bewildering richness. … Thus as Bernice Davidson writes, the visitor is: "dazzled by the galaxy of images represented in the stucco cameos studding every pier and pilaster the length of the Logge. It may be a long time before one realizes that on each pilaster surface there are four such reliefs".[26]

Note that both Hersey and Davidson, whom is quoted by Hersey, describe their reactions to the capricious images on the walls (Figures 6, 7). They do not describe their reactions on the imagery on the ceiling, which contains the biblical story of creation from the very beginning till the end of the history of the world. There is obviously a narrative thread in the story of creation, which comes with a well-known iconography: we see Adam and Eve, the snake, God's Paradise, and so on. As opposed to this, Giovanni's *grotteschi*, of which one finds dozens on both walls and pillars, offer no story at all and their status in relation to each other and to the story of creation, as well as their meaning overall, is uncertain. One may, even today, easily feel "bewildered" or "dazzled," as Hersey writes, looking everywhere in the search for order and meaning. Thus, one takes in dozens of surprising and outrageous figures. These grotesque ornaments, both in the Vatican Logge as those in the Golden Palace, present all sorts of hybrids and fusion figures, deformed, disproportional and "fantastic" beings in *a true proliferation of forms*. Davidson, though a trained art historian, testifies that the imagery on the walls in the Vatican Logge is indeed so overwhelming that it 'may be a long time before one realizes that on each pilaster surface there are four … reliefs' (Hersey 1993:227-228),' whereas Hersey (1993:227-228) tries to convince himself that 'the dazzle of this apparent disorder can eventually be resolved. Doing so is part of the fun.' Nevertheless, one has to leave some habitual viewing practices behind, because, as Hersey (1993: 227-228, emphasis added) states:

> *choices are simply optional ways of "doing"* this painted garden of amazement … *Perhaps the only mistake is to think that only a single message lurks behind the riot of possibilities. … Losing one's way, discovering unforeseen attractions, entertaining vain hopes, and a final release – these are some of the pleasures to be had*.

The Vatican Logge seems created to stimulate wander and wonder. To do so and enjoy the experience, one has to let go of the thought that only *a single message lurks behind the riot of possibilitie*s. Interestingly, both Hersey and Davidson tend to understate the confusion ("dazzle") which comes with the acknowledged "disorder." They do not explicitly reflect on it. Yet is not an amount of confusion and disorientation at the heart of this viewing experience? It seems to me that the Renaissance artists may have painted grotesques in the Vatican Logge to evoke in their spectators the very experience

Figures 6 and 7: The frog/man and detail from the Vatican Logge. Images by the author

they themselves may have had in the grotto-esque Golden Palace, that place which 'inspired the imagination as it resisted comprehension, and in fact for decades no visitor knew exactly what he was looking at,' according to Harpham (2006:27).

The double appeal of spectacular attractions

Crucial to the viewing experience is that the grotesque figures in the Vatican Logge have a *double* appeal to the spectators: one of *looking* and one of *understanding*. To put it differently: there is a perceptual appeal as well as a cognitive appeal. These two impulses seem to be kept in a balance. As for the perceptual appeal: one may well enjoy the Vatican Logge, as Hersey (1993:227-228) writes, as an 'abundant, complex, and joyous testament to their [Raphael and his team] collective talents.' They present a 'display of virtuosity and skill', created for the 'delight on the part of those who see it', made 'for delight rather than necessity', to 'flatter the habits of sense through the delight of the eyes and the ears' with 'extraneous marvels of art', providing 'attractions of artistic novelty and license', as David Summers (2003:22) writes of the *antique* grotesques which were imitated by the Renaissance artists.[27] No doubt, they strongly appealed to the Renaissance artists who themselves provided the novelty to their spectators for them to look and indulge in the seen, and to wander in the Vatican Logge and wonder.

The impulse to *understand* these grotesques figures, to grab their meaning, is obviously an impulse which is kept at a low level, as if put to sleep, by the very fact that these figures or beings are part of an ornamental pattern and seem to be made for decorative purposes only. In Harpham's (2006:34, emphasis in original) words:

> *In them the eye is continually soothed by the balance and proportion of the figures, and continually* reassured that nothing means or coheres, nothing signifies. *All is lively and symmetrical, with figures alternating in subtle rhythms from architectural to human to animal to foliate forms. For all the animation and activity on the pilasters, there is almost no narrative interest at all: the figures give the impression that their postures and attitudes express nothing, but merely fill the available space, the space left by the other figures.*

Soothing the spectators with ornamental patterns, the impulses to see and understand seem to be balanced. However, the balance is not stable and it may well collapse in the process of viewing. In fact, there are two basic problems: a perceptual impulse to be immersed and the cognitive impulse to understand and know. As to the first: the grotesques in the Vatican Logge have an extraordinary strong perceptual appeal on spectators. One reason for this is that these grotesque ornaments are not positioned in the margins and *out of focus*, as are the antique ones. Giovanni's grotesque figures in the Vatican Logge are positioned centrally on the walls. The antique ones presented themselves as tiny and marginal "*parerga*,"[28] which were hard to find and easily overlooked, and possibly never meant to really be seen, as they were hidden in corners and humble household corridors or behind wooden window panels, high on the ceiling,[29] or only a few centimetres from the floor. One is inevitably *face to face* with Giovanni's Renaissance grotesques, however, as they are prominently positioned on the walls of the Vatican Logge.

One of the *new* perceptual experiences when one does focus on the grotesques – and one will at some point, given their central position on the walls – is that one feels overwhelmed by the abundance of forms and shapes. The multitude of visual details brings one to

the verge of a dazzle, much the same as in a Federico Fellini film, when the screen is filled from top to bottom with visual details and simultaneous actions. One is perceptually fully indulged. Once drawn in, a cognitive problem easily arises from the fact that one is somehow uncertain of what it all means, and where one is supposed to look exactly, and to what purpose. *Do* these ornamental grotesques, provided in decorative patterns, really not signify or symbolise anything? This question becomes imperative within the context of this new type of images: what is their ontological status? Are they ornamental? Or are they representations? And if they are representations: what on earth *do* they represent? The answers to all these questions are far from obvious – which is perhaps just another way to say the new techniques of the "grotto-esque" used by the school of Raphael destabilise the ontological status of the image.

As we have seen, grotesque figures are rarely so prominent or demanding, or so irregular, that questions like these are imperative, yet one cannot really escape the problem in the Vatican Logge, as one cannot escape being face to face with them. Note what happens when one stops wandering for a moment and starts asking questions about this and starts focusing on a single figure. A wall full of grotesque figures may evoke perceptual pleasure and delight, owing to the symmetries and colours, whereas *one* grotesque figure, singled out as it were and focused on, may easily pose a cognitive problem in a more urgent way.

If we take the hybrid frog as an example, a grotesque figure from the Vatican Logge chosen at random (Figure 6) : one sees a typical hybrid or fusion figure (human/plant, human/animal), with the head of a man, the legs of a frog and the wings of a butterfly – yet these wings look a bit like the leaves of a plant, and, typically, the hat-like or crown-like plateau on the head of the figure serves for yet another two grotesque figures to rest on. The torso of the frogman is painted with an impressive amount of anatomical precision (a feature unknown to the antiques and new for the times), yet the legs are not. From a distance, his legs may seem similar, but on closer scrutiny his left leg seems to end in a claw with a long sharp nail, whereas his right leg ends in what looks like a clubfoot. Seeing all this, one is aware, however, that some of these details may not *mean* anything: perhaps they are there merely accidentally or, perhaps, they are there for reasons of symmetry and decoration only.

Indeed, one becomes uncertain of the status of the things one sees. All these tiny (yet funny!) irregularities (which turn the decorative symmetries in pseudo symmetries): are they all meant to *represent* something? What then about the fat on his hips, which makes him look a tiny bit obese? What to think of that dark "liquid" leaving his body in a stream? Is it meant to be there, and is it meant to be seen, or is it there only by coincidence? Is it dripping paint? Has it always been there or is it a sign of damage or wear? Again: what is this? What is the ontological status of the image? And what is the ontological status of that frog/man? Interestingly, art historians of the period tend to paper over these questions and seem not to like to address the problem head-on. An expert of the grotesque, Harpham, does, however, address some pivotal questions these strange figures trigger. He rightly indicates, to my experience, that there is a 'struggle for primacy' of the two impulses, the one to *look* (at the ornament) and the other to search for meaning in the seen (as in representational art) (Harpham 1982:48-49). Another question is: how must we understand that Renaissance spectators referred to these grotesques figures as "monsters" from our retrospective perspective? Does their use of the term "monster" indicate that they too felt the balance between seeing it as an ornament and seeing it

as a representation that was instable and in fact on the verge of collapsing? That if the frog/man was not an ornament, then inevitably it was a (fantastic) monster?

The attraction of the "monstrous"

Giovanni's frog/man looks quite unlike Boris Karloff playing Frankenstein's monster. One may nevertheless argue that Giovanni *and* Frankenstein (*and* Mary Shelley) created beings that stand outside nature. These creators all made distorted and disproportioned fusion-figures. Dr Frankenstein made his monster from various parts of dead bodies; Giovanni mixed (body) parts from various biological species. Fusion-figures like these, in which biological features are mixed and distorted, pose a cognitive problem, not only to a pre-modern or Renaissance spectator, but also to a modern mind, since they disturb and confuse our basic biological and ontological categories and schemes.[30] This basic cognitive disturbance, as well as an amount of perceptual disorientation and uncertainty about the ontological status of the imagery,[31] is the very power the aesthetic of the grotesque feeds on. And precisely because these grotesque figures are biological and ontological "anomalies" (in Carroll's words), they disorient us and it is as *such* that they have a specific aesthetic appeal on spectators. We may well call this the attraction of the "monstrous." Note that there is disorientation on two levels: regarding the status of the image, and regarding the status of the being. Note also that "monstrous" is the Renaissance synonym for the grotesque. As the word indicates, the appeal is disturbing and quite different from the calmer sort of appeal of both ornaments, gratifying our sense for order, and *classical beauty*, gratifying our sense for proportion, order, harmony, and symmetry. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the cognitive disruption signaled here is basically a negative one; instead, it seems the type of disturbance described as a pivotal part of the experience of the grotesque (by Kayser) as well as the sublime (by Kant): when the categories of our understanding suddenly and momentarily fail, viewers may very well be fully immersed in a free flow of the imagination. Indeed, the *unnatural* and the *disproportionate* have their own appeal.

Cognitive effects of distortions and disproportions

Both Harpham and Carroll indicate that not only the fusion of categories but also the distortions and disproportions of the figures play a crucial role in triggering the overwhelming effect these figures have on spectators. They approach this problem from two different perspectives:

1) the proportion (or disproportion) of the figures in relation to each other;
2) their proportion (or disproportion) in relation to nature.

As Harpham indicates, when speaking of the balance and proportion of the figures, the proportionate, in the first sense, is provided in the Vatican Logge in abundance as all the grotesque figures on the wall have the same size – about half an arm – and follow the same ornamental pattern. This pleases the eye, as symmetry and repetition do; regularities appeal to our sense of order. Irregularities, however, play on our sense of meaning and they trigger the impulse to start a search for it. In the Vatican Logge, there is an abundance of irregularities, yet it may take some time before we are aware of them, since the regularities of the ornamental patterns so strongly stimulate and gratify the 'more primitive demand for a sense for order', as EH Gombrich (1979:160-162) argues in *The sense of order*.[32] Most likely, therefore, the irregular

and unnatural proportions of a single figure will first escape the attention of the spectators and may then suddenly surprise them and strike them as strange.[33] An example of this is the frog/man, since this figure typically provides striking distortions of the natural proportions, for example, of leaves (too big), the head of the man (too small), the legs of the frog (too big for a frog, too short and thin for a man). Moreover, the frogman is missing his arms. This is the type of disproportion and distortion Carroll singles out as features that *subvert our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order* in them, apart from or on top of mixing biological categories. The distortion of the natural proportions of men, frogs, and leaves, in this fusion, poses a cognitive problem in its own right (as an Escher image, in some ways): otherwise strikingly regular ornamental patterns provide a mixture of what is logically and ontologically incompatible and impossible. What could possibly have been the function of the cognitive disorientation created in this way?

Monstration, the monstrous, and media-specific moments in time

In light of the current medium-specific interval in history, one is tempted to ask whether the Vatican Logge does not stand out as an almost avant-garde-like celebration and discovery of the contemporary aesthetics of the grotesque. Raphael and his school developed a new system to attract their spectator's attention, as we saw. They did so by offering both ornamental symmetry and half-human figures – which were even anatomically correct, here and there. These were all true (technical) novelties in those days.[34] They balanced the two impulses struggling for primacy wonderfully: one to see and one to *understand*. In fact, they created an uncertainty in their spectators about the ontological status of the seen. Did these ornaments mean nothing? Were they human figures, representing something? They capitalised on the uncertainty for as long as possible. It seems to me that the uncertainty about the ontological status of the seen attracts us and draws us in even deeper, much the same as in love relations, when all we see *is* something to us, and means something to us, and we go from discovery to discovery, and nothing is stable (or dull). When we take the world in through our senses, the sensual is never far away and once attracted and drawn in, the attractions may really "work" on us. In this part of the process, *everything* 'means a lot' to us.

As we have seen, the artists in the Vatican Logge kept their spectators in the perceptual process for as long as possible. Thus, spectators are kept on the verge of seeing "it" as decoration only and they are kept on the verge of a system which may collapse at any moment. The minute an "ornamental figure", only meant to perceptually satisfy, 'to please the eye,' *nevertheless* triggers a more or less distinct quest for meaning, the "ornament" starts to function as a *medium*: one does not look at "it" but into "it" or even through "it", to see the world it envisions, and the dots on the wall are turned into a means mediating meanings.[35] This is a decisive moment in its (the medium's) history, as its cultural impact is crucially changed by it.

The experience of the moment of change is disturbing, and even stupefying. One is speechless as one is *suddenly* fully uncertain of *what it is* one sees. The categories of our understanding fail, as Kayser stated in his conclusions: this is indeed a destabilising experience. Since the new techniques have not yet established a stable relation to the spectators, to them the seen will easily seem to present something *not from this world*. For the early modern spectators, not yet used to a novelty in the arts like this – ornaments with *figures* in them, and anatomically correct painting, and hybrids

like the frog/man – this "grotesque monster" must have seemed a sign from above or a miracle. As the frog/man is a creature which does not exist in nature, yet it stands in front of them, it is inevitably a monster in that specific sense of the word: *monstrum*, in Latin, means *sign*, or *portent*, as well as *monster* (or monstrosity); the word is etymologically connected with the Latin *monstro*, meaning to *demonstrate* (or *show*), as in the term "monstration."[36] The frog/man is a *monster* in all these senses of the word: a fantastic creature as well as a sign, shown to them by an assumed higher power. Most likely, therefore, these grotesque "monsters" were meant to inspire *awe* in their Renaissance spectators, since who else would be capable of putting such awesome creatures in front of them but God? It seems not unimportant, when one is presenting one's work to the pope, and is paid by him, to also create a good moment of "monstration" of one's technical novelties. Is it therefore not highly likely that Raphael and his school tried with this technique to inspire awe for God's creation and for their own creation *in one go*? The moment of stupor comes with a sudden spur of the imagination. In part it is best understood, perhaps, as the speechless moment of the sublime, described by Kant in the *Critique of Judgement*.[37]

An era for the aesthetics of the grotesque to bloom

Though rejected for decades, today the grotesquely distorted reappears as the visual medium's *most distinct feature*. This means that the early and the late modern era, as well as both ends of cinema's young history, are marked by the grotesque. Interestingly, both phases may be referred to as a 'medium-specific period in film history'– the term was coined by Yuri Tsivian (1994:217). Today, the 'grotesque seems omnipresent,' according to Carroll (2003:309-310). This is certainly an interesting observation. However, Carroll's (2003:309-310) explanation that this is because 'the entertainment industry' has 'grown so dramatically' and *needs* the grotesque now as 'a ready source of intense emotion and novelty,' is not very satisfying. It leaves the crucial point unquestioned: what is the relation of the prominence of the grotesque with this specific phase in (film and media) history? This is typically a medium-specific phase, marked by confrontational experiences of new (optical, audio-visual, and digital) techniques, noticed by 'medium-sensitive spectators,' who are 'not yet deadened' to the novelties of the new techniques (Tsivian 1994:216-217). This therefore implies two things:

1) a confrontation with the monstrous powers of the new medium in its phase of monstration
2) a confrontation with the instable ontological status of the seen

Ad 1): Instead of seeing the world in its *unmediated* or *natural* form, many people have shifted to seeing it in its *mediated* and *unnatural* form most of the time. This implies seeing it in a distorted, disproportionate, fused, spectacular or monstrous form. Furthermore, since new optical and digital techniques created radically new spectacular formats at least every single decade for the last 50 years, it also means that people see the world in radically new *distorted* ways every so many years (the zoom-in is the digital camera's favourite function). Touch screens have spread the visual even further. The multitude of media implies a constant re-reproduction of imagery. This in itself may have a profound impact on viewers.

Ad 2) If anything, it means that the ontological status of the image is now widely and profoundly destabilised (and questioned), perhaps in more radical ways than we have ever seen before in history. The tradition of representation itself may in fact be called destabilised (and questioned) by these confrontational experiences

of "new media". Hybrids and monsters as well as category problems are centre stage (for the time being) and our categories of understanding may easily fail when we are face to face with them. This does indeed seem like a perfect time for the aesthetics of the grotesque to bloom.

Closing remarks

Three things are highly remarkable in light of the above. The first is that an era full of new technical devices, as the current one is – an era which we may expect to destabilise our perceptual experiences – coincides well with the prominence of grotesque figures in visual culture today. Indeed, grotesques, hybrids and monsters are prominent and dominant in mass culture (cinema, television) and also in galleries nowadays, as Carroll rightly argues. Part of the shift into this world of biological and ontological anomalies – gaining prominence in visual culture since the 1980s, it seems (Carroll 2003:309-310) – can be seen as a reinforcement by artists of the initial experience of destabilisation and disorientation created by the initial and incidental distorting effects of the new optical and digital technological novelties being introduced to the field. Part of it can be seen as a further celebration of and experimentation with these technologies and the way they transform and reinforce the perceptual experience by gallery artists and mainstream filmmakers alike (for example, see the "gallery art" of Cindy Sherman, or Marlene Dumas).

The second remarkable thing is that Carroll, though quite sensitive to and aware of the presence of the grotesque in current culture nevertheless *overlooks* the very connection between new technologies and the grotesque under discussion here. And he leaves the ontological status of the images fully unquestioned. How is this possible? This question brings me to the third remarkable phenomenon with regard to the grotesque and new technologies: both – the initial disturbing effects of new technologies as well as the initial medium-sensitive experience of images as "distorted," "unnatural" or "grotesque" – fall prey to the process of habituation to the technology, and to the images. When we get used to them, the audience's sensitivity to the initially felt "strangeness" ("newness") simply disappears, and for this very reason the initially strong effects of the new (strange) may nevertheless be very easily overlooked after a while (and be fully overlooked in retrospect).

The situation seems to be like this: (1) initially new optical (and pictorial) technologies may easily stupefy and disturb us and in the midst of this moment of de-habituation (or deautomatisation) we become sensitised to the medium, yet we do not properly understand its workings, effects and impact initially; (2) after a while, getting used to the technology, in the process of habituation, the once new technology becomes an everyday medium (for example, television) and we are made to look "through it" and not "at it" and on top of this we are made to overlook its specific technological make-up and perceptual impact. In other words, it is quite difficult to find the right point (in time) and the right angle (in research) to study technology's "proper impact". Symptomatic for Carroll's retrospective perspective is that he speaks of grotesque beings instead of images of grotesque beings, clearly habitually overlooking the technologies / media processing the imagery. I would argue, however, that a precise analysis of the different phases in the process of de-habituation to technologies, both historically and perceptual-cognitively, is needed to write cinema's and art's "proper history". Moreover, I would like to argue that this type of research may well benefit from the study of the grotesque: because the (well-studied) experience of the grotesque

provides a model for the analysis of these (understudied) medium-sensitive experiences of the "strange," the "disproportionate," or the "unnatural," for which the grotesque experience seems emblematic.

Notes

1 This article on grotesques figures in visual culture today and their relation to the current destabilisation of the ontological status of the moving image draws on lectures and papers on the topic presented to staff and students from the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Pretoria in October 2011. I am sincerely grateful for the invitation to lecture on the topic and for the input of staff and students in the debate and I would like to thank two persons in particular: Amanda du Preez and Jeanne van Eeden, for their kind invitation and their inspiring presence. Part of the article draws on my yearly study visits to Rome with my own Masters students, also described in an earlier paper presented at the Udine Film Conference in March 2009 and published as: 'Monstration and the monstrous. The grotesque in the Very Beginning and at the Very End' (van der Oever 2010a).

2 There is a considerable consensus on this in the field of study of the grotesque and Kayser (1957/2004) may, once again, be considered the first to have noted and carefully described the recurrent use of these particular strategies or techniques.

3 Kayser's *Das Groteske. Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung* (1957/2004) is considered the first highly valuable academic study of the grotesque, even by one of his most radical opponents (for example , Mikhail Bakhtin), as it researched the history of the word, the concept and the art works (*Wortgeschichte*, *Begriffsgeschichte*, and *Sachgeschichte*) and declared the grotesque an aesthetic category in itself in the conclusions. Kayser created consensus in the field with regard to his major points and his study was followed by a series of studies in the German language area by Leo Spitzer, Otto Best, Christian Thomsen, and others. There is a further series of studies worth mentioning; a revelation is Mikhail Bakhtin's, *Rabelais and his world* (1968); a treasure trove of brilliant insights is provided by Geoffrey Harpham's *On the grotesque. Strategies of contradiction in art and literature* (2006); a helpful introduction into the grotesque and its psychological impact is provided by Philip Thomson's *The grotesque* (1972).

4 The terms "medium sensitive" and "medium aware" were initially used by Yuri Tsivian (and Tom Gunning) for the responses of viewers to the first movie screenings and the ways in which they responded to the materiality of the medium and the technical novelty itself more deeply than to the content of the movie. See the conclusions of Tsivian (1994) and Gunning (1994). For a further elaboration on the term, see Van den Oever (2010b). The problem of medium sensitivity is also discussed in Van den Oever (2011).

5 Distinct moments in the history of technology were created by the introduction of 3D, first in the 1930s in the field of science, reanimated in (mainstream) cinema today in which the technology is meant to create a sensation of novelty and the "new," as the marketing of *Avatar* once again indicated; it did not always fully succeed, however, as the (Internet) debates on 3D have elaborately analysed and argued. CGI is a technology presented to audiences by *Jurassic Park* in striking and successful ways: it may indeed be argued to have triggered a thrill and "awe" among audiences, as Carroll (2003: 306-307) also argued, though he exclusively focused on the grotesque figure of the brachiosaur as an "awesome" monster, and overlooked the

disorienting and thrilling effects of the technological innovation itself that made the "awesome" monster possible. For an elusive reflection on the impact of new and renewed old technologies and their "uncanny" potential to destabilise viewers and in particular to re-animate the sense of instability of all mimetic representation, see Gunning (2003).

6 Note that I do not create a distinction between the effects purposefully created by artist or incidentally by techniques – since the difference does not express itself in the perceptual process. Note also that the twin terms of *automatisation* and *deautomatisation* were conceptualised by Viktor Shklovsky (1965) against the background of the 'general laws of perception', as he called them. Interestingly, he did so within this very context of the "birth" of the cinema and the "birth" of the avant-gardes of the turn of the century. In *Ostrannenie* (Van den Oever2010b), we argue that this context was important for his theorising and that in fact Shklovsky was *made* to theorise on the problem of "techniques" that "de-automatise" the perceptual process by early cinema's and the avant-garde's strong perceptual impact; he most famously did so in his 'Art as Technique' (1917). Deautomatisation, as he explained, means that new techniques that disrupt the automatic routines of perception by 'making [the seen] strange' notably slow down, complicate and deepen the perceptual process. Secondly, it means that new techniques typically trigger a sensitivity to the techniques involved in the process, as well as a so-called "art" experience, which, according to Shklovsky (1965), is a prolonged experience of things 'as they are perceived and not as they are known'. Note also that Shklovsky used the word *priom* and that *technique* is but one of its translations; *device* is another one. By taking the 1910s as a medium-specific interval in history into consideration, we can see that Shklovsky did not merely write a modernist manifesto but basically created the conceptual space to analyse the perceptual impact of new *technologies* and (artistic) *techniques*, which is not only relevant for art studies, but also for cinema, television, and media studies today. Since I approach the problem from a perceptual perspective, I will use the words technology and techniques as synonyms here. For our contextualisation of Shklovsky, see *Ostrannenie* (Van den Oever 2010b).

7 "Disproportionate" here means: huge in terms of the proportions of beings in nature as well as huge / disproportionate in relation to the other body parts shown in the film in medium and long shots. Both forms were indeed noted by contemporary viewers, taking note of the 'abnormal size' of the 'enormously enlarged form[s]' (see below). The obvious awareness of the distortion in viewers is theoretically interesting as the historically evident confrontational experience seems to confirm the presence of the so-called embodied cognitions of natural size and scale (see Garbarini & Adenzato 2004).

8 For a screening of this little film, in particular to sense the "strangeness" effects added to this close-up's enlargement by the eye's movements, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-LVBb3TXAs

9 As Eisentstein's mentor, Meyerhold may well have shown him the way to the strong and immediate (shock) effects gained by inducing the *unnatural* or monstrous on an audience. Meyerhold himself tended to stay away from "realism" in the theatre. Rather than natural movements, he favoured mixed and unnatural, "biomechanic," and grotesquely enlarged movements in what Symons (1973) refers to as Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque. Interestingly, when Eisenstein wrote his now famous

essays on the "Montage of attractions," (s.a. / 1923) and the "Montage of Film Attractions" (s.a. / 1925), he did not reflect on the specifically disturbing (shock) effects of the close-up in terms of the "unnatural," "disproportionate," or "shocking". He nevertheless planned close-ups to obviously trigger strong emotional shock effects from very early on; for examples, see the close-up at the end of his *The Strike* (s.a.) as described by himself in his "Montage of Film Attractions" (s.a.:39 / 1925) as follows: 'Close-up. Filling the whole screen. The dead bull's eye. Final title'. Most of the emotional shocks Eisenstein describes are typically caused or triggered by so-called *category problems*. Going against the categories, schemes, and proportions of the natural or biological proves to be a strong way to create shock effects in an audience. By and large, Eisenstein's "Montage of (film) attractions" (s.a. / 1924) may be understood as a *politics or a poetics of the cinema*. Whereas classical aesthetics "follows nature" and strongly rejects the unnatural, in Eisenstein' montages the deformed, distorted, rearranged, and "dis-membered" will come centre stage, as "attractions," to have an impact on his spectators. See David Summers (2003:22, 24) on classical aesthetics 'following nature' and rejecting the 'unnatural.'

10 Routt interprets objections like these in terms of a "grievance" which is 'surely based upon an upset in the writer's expectation of how story space should appear on the screen; not upon the field of vision one is liable to employ in everyday life, but upon a filmic convention, a narrative *place*, established within fourteen years of the Lumière Brothers' showings at the Grand Café.' Routt (emphasis added) also speaks of 'adjectives so *hysterically* employed by those who deplored variations in camera distance in *narrative* films …'. In terms of their perceptual impact, it is of course not only interesting to see that the'adjectives [are] so hysterically employed' but also that the words used – for example , absurd, abnormal, disproportionate, unnatural, and grotesque – are used in a strikingly negative way, expressing an impulse to reject in this phase of reception. Note, however, that these same terms are used in either a descriptive or in a positive and affirmative way in the phase in which the perceptual experience is sought and reflected upon from an aesthetic perspective.

11 Pierre Sorlin (1998:120) argues that 'filmmakers who are not as willing to impress us as Dreyer or mainly try to neutralise the close-up.' Indeed, the institution of narrative cinema, which initially tended to reject the close-up, did appropriate the technique but continued to refuse its routine deployment. Such 'neutralisation' occurred mainly through editing practices such as shot-reverse-shot, which succeeded in attributing a clear function to close-ups, preventing their isolation and autonomous, menacing powers. The close-ups came to be used sparingly in cinematic practices. They provided emotional emphasis, brief moments of shocking impact or, quoting Laura Mulvey (1975:6-18), exquisite moments of 'erotic contemplation.' The close-up is often simply too strong, too monstrous, too repulsive, and it needed to be rejected by the industry. As Sorlin (1998:119) points out, '[h]owever strange it may sound, close-ups are still rarely used in films.' Even in DW Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) – a film notorious for its use of the close-up – Sorlin (1998:119) counts only 26 close-ups in a total of 1600 shots.

12 These antique and Renaissance rejections by Vitruvius and Ruskin are often cited and discussed in studies of the grotesque, for example, by Kayser (2004), Summers (2003), and Harpham (2006), whose discussions are highly interesting and whom

I will follow here. Ruskin digresses in his study of the Renaissance Grotesque in Venice to *attack* Giovanni's work in the Vatican Logge. Though Ruskin clearly *admires* the 'care, skill and science, applied to … the drawing of the figures' as 'intense, admirable, and accurate,' he strongly *rejects* the fact that Giovanni's skills serve no purpose, to his taste; Giovanni 'ought to have produced a grand and serious work, not a tissue of nonsense. If we can draw the human head perfectly, and are masters of its expression and its beauty, we have no business to cut it off, and hang it up by the hair at the end of a garland. If we can draw the human body in the perfection of its grace and movement, we have no business to take away its limbs, and terminate it with a bunch of leaves' (Ruskin in Harpham 2006:35).

Illuminating is also Harpham's(2006) discussion of Vitruvius' antique attack in *De Architectura* (ca. 27 BC) on grotesque designs like the ones in the *Domus Aurea*. Vitruvius: 'On the stucco are monsters rather than definite representations taken from definite things. Instead of columns there rise up stalks; instead of gables, striped panels with curled leaves and volutes. Candelabra uphold pictured shrines and above the summits of these, clusters of thin stalks rise from their roots in tendrils with little figures seated upon them at random. Again, slender stalks with heads of men and animals attached to half the body. Such things neither are, nor can be, nor have been. On these lines the new fashions compel bad judges to condemn good craftsmanship for dullness. For how can a reed actually sustain a roof, or a candelabra the ornaments of a gable, or a soft and slender stalk a seated statue, or how can flowers and half-statues rise alternatively from roots and stalks? Yet when people view these falsehoods, they approve rather than condemn' (Vitruvius in Harpham 2006:30). Harpham argues that we may be grateful for rejections of the grotesque like this one, 'for Vitruvius' misapplication of the canons of representation to ornament … has proved enormously useful. EH Gombrich (1979) has demonstrated that all the labels learned by undergraduates tracking the progress of art – Classic, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Mannerist, Baroque, Rococo, Neo-Classical, and Romantic – are easily reducible to two terms, Classical and Non-classical.' As one may add: representational tradition rests on the "Classical," whereas the transitions and innovations of representational tradition come from the "Non-classical," and Non-canonical. In Harpham's (2006: 30-31) words: '… the style Vitruvius attacked, which had no descriptive name and violated all categories, has provided the means of distinguishing all our major stylistic categories and so has contributed crucially to the study of art history as it is generally conceived.'

13 See Kayser (2004:197-203) for a more elaborate statement on the appearance of grotesque art in times of transition. Interestingly, Kayser was the first to note in his study of 1957 that the grotesque is appreciated only in transitional periods in culture, such as the Renaissances, Romanticism, and the twentieth century avant-gardes, to be rejected (and referred to quite negatively) in other periods in time. Kayser does not refer to these transitional periods as being "medium-specific" periods in time, but I definitely would suggest this within the field of cinema and media studies, as it may stimulate research of what seems a close relation between the introduction ("birth") of new optical media to culture in their monstrative phase; their *disruptive* impact on culture in so-called transitional intervals in history; and the innovation of representational tradition from

such an interval in time. See Tsivian (1994:217).

14 Gaudreault emphasised the quite radical rejection of the earlier phase by the new institute "cinema" fiercely, and rightly so, but it must be added that though the "alien" was rejected, it was also domesticated and put to use in part. A good example is of course provided by the close-up: rejected in part, but certainly not entirely.

15 See Gombrich (1979) on the non-representational, or "ornamental" powers, which appeal primarily to the more "primitive" impulse to look, as Gombrich put it. Note that Gaudreault (2006:88,99) also favours the word "primitive" for early cinema or the "cinema of attractions."

16 See Laura Mulvey's famous words on "visual pleasure" in her well-known *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*, first published in *Screen* in 1975. The history of the close-up, which still has to be written, may in itself show that the close-up has been a safe haven for the monstrous in the cinema over time.

17 Interestingly, many film makers have kept well in touch with early cinema's first phase, and symptomatic for the defense of the spectacular powers of cinema are both an amount of opposition to narrative cinema, as we see in Pasolini's reflection on the "lyrical" and "subjective" in film, but also in Fellini's work; he pays one of the finest tributes to it in the opening sequence of *E la nave va* (1983). One may think of Chaplin too, and all the others filmmakers who created a safe haven for these powers in the genre of the "comic." One may even name directors from the heyday of classical narrative cinema, for example, Billy Wilder, who paid his slightly ambiguous tribute to "silent cinema" in his classic, *Sunset Boulevard*. Jean Epstein's famous essay on the close-up as 'the soul of the cinema' was published under the title "Grossissement," in *Bonjour Paris* in 1921, and was translated in *October* as "Magnification" in 1977. For all information and the text in English translation, see:http://books.google.nl/books/jean.epstein.magnification.

18 See also 'Conversation with Laura Mulvey' in Van den Oever (2010:185-204).

19 The story of the *Domus Aurea* is told by many historians, including Pliny, Tacitus and Suetonius. More recent studies are available from Giuseppe Lugli, HP L'Orange and Axel Boëthius. For an extensive inventory and reconstructions by Ponce, see Nicole Dacos (1969) and for an interesting analysis, see Harpham (2006).

20 Several sources confirm this history of the place and the word; for example, see Nicole Dacos (1969) and Harpham (2006). The first study of the history of the word was, however, Kayser's book (1957).

21 Among the artists always mentioned in this perspective were: Filippino Lippi, Pinturicchio, Perugino, Signorelli, and Ghirlandaio.

22 I would like to thank the staff of the Royal Dutch Institute in Rome (KNIR) for their hospitality and generosity in sharing their knowledge with us. I would also like to thank our PhD on the grotesque, Iwona Gucs, and the Masters students who joined me on visits to the *Vatican Loggia* for their contributions to our debates.

23 See descriptions of the *Loggia* by David Hersey, Bernice Davidson, Geoffrey Harpham, and David Summers later in this article.

24 See Strauven (2006:11-27). Gunning and Gaudreault, inspired by Jacques Aumont's work on Eisenstein, initiated this type of research on early cinema under the name of a "cinema of attractions," conceptualising several new terms for Film Studies, for example, "attractions", "monstration", and an "aesthetic of astonishment" among them. For an overview, see Eisenstein's *The cinema of attractions reloaded*.

25 George Hersey refers to words by Vitruvius here, describing *antique* grotesques; see below.

26 These grotesques by Giovanni da Udine are clearly imitations of hybrid figures in the *Domus Aurea* by "Fabullus", yet closer scrutiny learns that the Renaissance grotesques are relatively more "human" and less *purely decorative*, more "substantial" than the antique ones they imitated. For example, there is substantially more flesh on the bones, and, typical for the Renaissance, the torso and other parts of the body are more or less anatomically correct, a feature the antique grotesque figures lack.

27 Note that Summers describes (responses to) the antique grotesques from the so-called Third Roman Style, slightly older than the ones in the *Domus Aurea*.

28 In art history, these grotesques are often referred to as *parerga* (see Summers 2003:22).The Greek *paraergon*, means *outside one's (main)* work (see also the German term *Beiwerkchen*, meaning the same). These terms express that the work done is considered of marginal importance, whatever its qualities, and were *literally* placed in the margins of *figural* or *representational* art. One of the truly great experiences when one does look at them, even study them, is the mastery and overwhelming joy in visual abundance that went into them.

29 Interestingly, the tiny grotesque figures made in the *Domus Aurea* by Fabullus (who was not considered an important artist) were mostly hidden like this, for example, on high ceilings, yet when the Renaissance painters entered the "grotto" *from* above and lay on the debris to study them and copy them, they must have been very close and they must have had them well in *focus* most of the time, which indeed adds to the confusion / attraction of the experience.

30 It is in a confrontation with grotesque figures like these that the categories with which we normally orientate on the world suddenly crash and give up, as Wolfgang Kayser (1957/2004) argued in his standard work on the grotesque. In his words: *Zur Struktur des Grotesken gehört, das die Kategorien unserer Weltorientierung versagen*. This is, he stated, specific for the aesthetic category of the grotesque. There has been a striking consensus on Kayser's cardinal point ever since. Noël Carroll (2003:296-297) argued that something indeed only counts as an instance of the grotesque if it is 'a being that violates our standing or common biological and ontological concepts and norms. That is, the grotesque subverts our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order. Fusion, disproportion, formlessness, and gigantism are the most frequently recurring ways of realising this structural principle'. It must be added that from the context in his article it is (more or less) obvious that Carroll is not discussing beings here (such as a sheep with two heads) but images of beings or representations of them, if you will.

31 Note that uncertainty and disorientation is created in modern or postmodern cartoonesque grotesque figures too, in much the same way: by confronting spectators with roughness and sketchiness in some areas of the image and an abundance of precision and detail in other areas, creating the uncertainty and ontological instability described here.

32 For an interesting discussion of the problem, see Harpham (2006:47).

33 Kayser (2004:198) stresses the suddenness or *Plötzlichkeit* in his analysis over and over again as an important element in the effect of the *grotesque: Esistunsere Welt, die sich [plötzlich] verwandelt hat. Die Plötzlichkeit gehört wesentlich zum Grotesken*

[It is our world, which has changed. The suddenness of it really belongs to the grotesque].

34 The *Loggia* artists did use the technique of anatomical precision, whereas Fabullus and other painters of the grotesque in antiquity *did not*. It may be one of the crucial inventions the masters of the Renaissance came up with in the *Loggia*: to add the *human* to their grotesque figures and thus deeply disturb the purely ornamental function of these figures – but I will have to leave this question unaddressed here.

35 A further philosophical and psychological discussion of the divides between *looking/understanding* and *esse/essential* would be needed to clarify the ways in which the experience of the grotesque needs a representation and needs assumptions about the represented creature for the disruptive perceptual experience to develop.

36 Moments of monstration, in which new optical techniques are shown to spectators, almost inevitably feed on feelings of the seen to be "monstrous" *in all these meanings of the word*.

37 Evidently, an analysis of the disruptive experience within the context of the literature on the sublime would also be productive and relevant; I certainly think of Herder within this specific context too, as he included the qualities of the beautiful (harmony, order, proportion, and so on) in his reflection on the sublime. An exploration from the perspective of the sublime would certainly bring new different aspects of the artefacts and the perceptual experience to light than an analysis from the perspective of the grotesque.

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