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Author	Shuan-liang Chao
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The Grotesque Sublime: Play with Terror

Shun-liang Chao (University College London)

I too exclusively esteemed that love,
And sought that beauty, which, as Milton sings,
Hath terror in it.

(William Wordsworth, "Book XIII," *The Prelude*)

In "La Préface de Cromwell" (1827), Victor Hugo sees the grotesque as both contrary and essentially complementary to the sublime; the combination of these two categories, he adds, gives birth to the modern genius: "c'est de la féconde union du type grotesque au type sublime que naît le génie moderne" ("it is out of the fruitful marriage of the grotesque type and the sublime type that modern genius is born") (70). Throughout the "Préface," Hugo treats the sublime and the grotesque as different realms without seriously expounding upon their distinction. In examining the major treatises of the sublime, however, one will find that the grotesque actually resides *inside* the sublime in terms of evoking violent emotions, especially terror. This essay, then, aims to bring into relief the essential similarities between the grotesque and the sublime, thereby drawing attention to the role of the grotesque in the construction of artistic or aesthetic modernity.

The sublime was initially described by Longinus in the first century C. E. as a stunning burst of passion; his view was later refined and re-conceptualized by his followers in the eighteenth century as the paradoxical combination of pain and pleasure or terror and delight. It then became the rich loam for the growth of the expressive theory of art and literature in the Romantic era.¹ The sublime mixture of

terror and pleasure corresponds to John Ruskin's oft-quoted statement of 1853 that "the fearful" and "the playful" are two elements essential to Renaissance *grotesche* (n. grotesques): in encountering grotesque images, "the mind, under certain phases of excitement, *plays with terror*" ("Grotesque Renaissance" 140; emphasis in original).² The mind's play with terror, as we shall see, arises from the deformed and/or incomplete nature of the grotesque image or object: by (con)fusing human and animal/vegetal forms, the grotesque object engenders not merely deformed monsters, but also ever-ongoing metamorphoses, i.e. changes in incomplete form. The grotesque object, so to speak, is one without any defining form. And the idea of deformity (or, in Kant's terms, "Unform") and incompleteness lies at the very centre of the sublime. With this in mind, I shall seek to inscribe in the context of the sublime the grotesque object/image as a source for arousing pleasant pain, or rather, delightful terror.

In *Peri Hupsous*, Longinus considers the sentiment of sublimity to be a lofty style of discourse that sparks "ecstasy" (*ekstasis*); among the several sources achieving the sublime sentiment, "strong and inspired emotion" deserves our careful attention since it is the one type of emotion most intimately related to the grotesque (462, 467). Extremely conducive to the arousal of emotion, he said, is "visualization," or *fantasia*, the ability to create "the situation in which enthusiasm and emotion make the speaker *see* what he is saying and bring it *visually* before his audience" (477; emphasis in original). Longinus regarded *fantasia* as the production of image and consequently linked it to the rhetorical device that contributes to sublimity, namely, metaphors or tropes, for which "passages involving emotion and description are the most suitable field" (491). He cited Plato to illustrate the use of (bold) metaphors by a sublime writer. In so doing, significantly enough, Longinus

brought to the fore the unconscious ways in which, like poets, Plato himself was “often carried away by a sort of literary madness” (491), thereby deconstructing the Platonic principle that philosophy is true knowledge and that poetry, due to its irrational quality of divine afflatus, is far separated from truth. In the hands of Longinus, then, Plato’s notion of *furor poeticus*—in the form of daring tropes—developed into an instrument for evoking ecstasy or powerful emotion in the minds of the audience.

Nicholas Boileau legitimately shifted the centrepiece of the Longinian sublime from the style of writing to the effect on the audience, i.e. from the rhetorical sublime to the pathetic sublime.³ In the “Préface” to *Traité du sublime* (1674), his rendition of Longinus’s *Peri Hupsous*, Boileau argues that by sublime, Longinus means not what the orators call “le stile sublime: mais cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui frappe dans le discours, et qui fait qu’un ouvrage enleve, ravit, transporte” (“the sublime style, but the extraordinary and the marvellous that strikes in discourse, and that makes a work elevate, ravish and transport”) (338). The sublime, he emphasized, does not necessarily exist in a grand style; instead, a single thought, figure, or turn of phrase can be sublime if it contains something either “extraordinaire” or “surprenant” (338). Boileau thus made it possible to have the sublime move from the rhetorically lofty style to the marvellous, the surprising, and the extraordinary. In other words, it might be possible for one to find the sublime in all the arts, particularly those of fantastic or surreal nature. Boileau thereby left ample room for grotesque art to be in touch with the sublime.

Taking a cue from Boileau, English poet-critic John Dennis, as Samuel H. Monk points out, carried the Longinian sublime one step further by subordinating all traits of the sublime to emotion, and, more importantly, making the emotion of terror predominant in his own theory of the sublime (54).⁴ Regarding the relation of art to

emotion, Dennis declares in *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701): “Passion is the Characteristical Mark of Poetry, and therefore it must be every where; for without Passion there can be no Poetry, no more than there can be Painting”; “where-ever a Discourse is not Pathetick, there it is Prosaic” (215). Furthermore, in *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), Dennis holds that the sublime “is never without Enthusiastick Passion: For the Sublime is nothing else but a great Thought, or great Thoughts moving the Soul from its ordinary Situation by the Enthusiasm which naturally attends them” (359). And of all enthusiastic or aesthetic passions, terror “contribute[s] extremely to the Sublime,” because, accompanied by



Fig. 1. Marco Dente, ornamental engraving, 1525.

(Reprinted from Berliner, *Ornamentale Vorlage-Blätter* 46)

admiration, surprise, and astonishment, it is arguably “the violentest of all the Passions, [and] it consequently makes an Impression which we cannot resist, and

which is hardly to be defaced: and no Passion is attended with greater Joy than Enthusiastick Terror, which proceeds from our reflecting that we are out of danger at the very time that we see it before us" (361). Those which are able to stir up enthusiastic terror, he enumerates, are: gods, demons, hell, monsters, lions, earthquakes, torrents, and so forth (361). In terms of Dennis's logic, then, *grotesche* exactly embody joyful terror: we are terrified by grotesque deformed monsters (Fig. 1) and yet infinitely pleased because "we are out of danger at the very time we see [them] before us." Or, as Lee Byron Jennings has observed: "The grotesque presents the terrible in harmless guise, and its playfulness is constantly on the verge of collapsing and giving way to the concealed horror" (16). We will see that this thread of thought is fully developed by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.

Dennis's idea of joyful terror found an echo in his contemporary critic Joseph Addison, who in *The Spectator* elaborates upon one of the "Pleasures of the Imagination" produced by terrible and strange descriptions: "When we look on such hideous Objects, we are not a little pleased to think we are in no Danger of them. We consider them at the same time, as Dreadful and Harmless; so that the more frightful Appearance they make, the greater is the Pleasure we receive from the Sense of our own Safety" (No. 416, 568). Nonetheless, it should be noted that for Addison, terror, *per se*, without greatness, cannot generate the sublime. In ascribing the pleasures of the imagination to the great, the beautiful, and the uncommon, he actually identified greatness with sublimity: Homer, who "strikes the imagination wonderfully with what is great," imbues "his Readers with Sublime *Ideas*" (No. 417, 564-65; emphasis in original). The aesthetic value of *great* objects, such as the ocean or an immense desert, lies in the fact that "Our Imagination loves to be filled with an object, or to grasp at any thing that is too big for its Capacity. We are flung into a pleasing Astonishment at such unbound Views, and feel a delightful Stillness and Amazement

in the Soul at the Apprehensions of them” (No. 412, 540). The idea that the unbound fills the imagination with a sort of pleasing wonder points ahead to Burke’s and Kant’s conception of infinity or incompleteness as a source of the sublime and, as we shall see, also of the grotesque.

Addison more often associated terror with the uncommon or strange, which “raises a Pleasure in the Imagination, because it fills the Soul with an agreeable Surprise, gratifies its Curiosity, and gives it an Idea of which it was not before possest. . . . It is this that bestows Charms on a Monster, and makes even the Imperfections of Nature please us” (No. 412, 541). Ovid is the poet of what is strange *par excellence*, insofar as he “every where entertains us with something we never saw before, and shews Monster after Monster to the end of *Metamorphoses*” (No. 417, 566). It would follow, then, that monstrous grotesques are aesthetically significant because they delight the imagination at least with the strange, if not the great or sublime.

It should be noted that the beautiful, rather than the sublime or the strange, was considered ideal by Addison: “there is nothing,” he contended, “that makes its way more directly to the Soul than *Beauty*, which immediately diffuses a secret Satisfaction and Complacency thro’ the Imagination, and gives a Finishing to any thing that is Great or Uncommon” (No. 412, 542). Whilst treating the great as well as the uncommon indulgently, Addison still had to privilege the beautiful in order to meet the Neo-Classical standards of taste, which can be adumbrated by John Dryden’s remarks of 1695: “*The principal and most important part of painting is, to know what is most beautiful in nature, and most proper for that art*” (136; emphasis in original). The beautiful and the strange or grotesque had not become legitimately identical at least until Charles Baudelaire—who saw himself as a literary disciple of Edgar Allan Poe, the writer of the horrible and grotesque—declared in 1855 that “*Le beau est toujours bizarre*” (“The beautiful is always bizarre”) (“Exposition universelle 1855:

Beaux-Arts" 956).⁵

Whilst the Neo-Classical criteria for ideal art were subsumed under the domain of the beautiful, the sublime, together with the strange, "came as a justifiable category into which could be grouped the stronger emotions and the more irrational elements of art" (Monk 85). This is evident in Kant's 1764 observation that "The sublime *moves*, the beautiful *charms*" (*On the Observations* 47; emphasis in original). Several years earlier, Burke privileged the sublime over the beautiful, terror over pleasure. In contrast to pleasure, the emotion central to the beautiful, terror, he says in the *Enquiry* (1756), "is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime." For "[n]o passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain" (53-54). If, nevertheless, pain and terror "are so modified as not to be actually noxious . . . [and] clear the parts . . . of a dangerous and troublesome incumbrance, they are capable of producing delight, not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror" (123). This is akin to what Kant, in *Critique of Judgment* (1790), calls "the dynamical sublime," which generally takes place when the might—in the form of terror or awe—of nature is so modified as not to be hazardous. For instance, compared to the might of the stormy ocean or erupting volcanoes, our will or power to resist is no doubt frustratingly insignificant. "Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place" (§28, 120). For this situation "calls forth our strength . . . [to] regard nature's might . . . as yet not having such dominance over us, as persons, that we should have to bow to it" (§28, 121). Instead, we become aware of a superiority over (the threat of) nature and therefore feel delightful (§28, 121).⁶

Delightful horror, as mentioned earlier, constitutes the very emotion of the grotesque in light of Dennis's and Addison's aesthetics. Burke, in the *Enquiry*, does momentarily write of the grotesque when building the borders between obscurity and clearness, sublimity and beauty, pleasantness of pain and pleasantness of pleasure. For Burke, obscurity, a counterpart of infinity, is much more effective than clearness in *affecting* the imagination: "in nature dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions than those have which are more clear and determinate" (58). In the arts, then, poetry, as a verbal art, is always able to raise images of this obscure, confused kind, whereas the images in painting present clear, visible ideas of objects and therefore lose the effect of the unbound: "hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea" (57-58). Implicit in Burke's arguments is that poetry, owing to its obscure nature, is the sublime proper and painting is the beautiful. His concept of the sublime thus becomes dangerously verbo-centric.⁷

Since painting, which by its definition is "clear representation," should fall under the category of the beautiful, it becomes ridiculous to represent in painting *clear* grotesque figures—which, in Burke's eyes, should be the property of the (verbal) sublime:

When painters have attempted to give us clear representations of these very fanciful and terrible ideas, they have I think almost always failed; insomuch that I have been at a loss, in all the pictures I have seen of hell, whether the painter did not intend something ludicrous. Several painters have handled a subject of this kind, with a view of assembling as many horrid phantoms as

their imagination could suggest; but all the designs I have chanced to meet of the temptations of St. Anthony, were rather a sort of odd wild grotesques, than any thing capable of producing a serious passion. In all these subjects poetry is very happy. Its apparitions, its chimeras, its harpies, its allegorical figures, are grand and affecting. . . . (58-59)

In other words, poetic obscurity—e.g. verbal grotesques—is for Burke sublime exactly because, as W. J. T. Mitchell says in *Iconology*, “it is a frustration of the power of vision. Physiologically, it induces pain by making us strain to see that which cannot be comprehended” (126). This would explain why Burke equated ugliness with sublimity under this following condition: “But I would by no means insinuate that ugliness of itself is a sublime idea, unless united with such qualities as excite a strong terror” (109). It is fair to say that visual grotesques are for Burke clearly ugly but not sublime, insofar as they lack obscurity or infinity, the qualities that excite or delight the imagination with a sort of strong terror, or rather, that have “a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime” (67). Therefore, I disagree with Arthur Clayborough’s observations that the sublime and the grotesque are for Burke antithetical (27). As a matter of fact, Burke, as we have seen, did not oppose the sublime to verbal grotesques, but only to visual grotesques, or broadly, visible or sensible images.

Nevertheless, visual grotesques are that which push Burke’s verbo-centric arguments into an aporia. In nature, according to Burke, spring and young animals, in contrast to full-blown summer and full-grown animals, have something sublime in them because they are “far from being compleatly [*sic*] fashioned” and thus “the imagination is entertained with the promise of something more” (70). This is also true of “unfinished sketches of drawing,” wherein “I have often seen something which pleased me beyond the best finishing” (70). If the unfinished or incomplete is a

sublime source because it pleases the imagination with something unknown, uncertain, then visual grotesques are sublime *per se*, in that they are, as Mikhail Bakhtin has put it, “contrary to the classic images of the finished, completed man” (25). Like unfinished sketches, they are incomplete representations. Rather, visual grotesques embody, according to Bakhtin, “a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming” (24). The ongoing, never-quite-complete metamorphosis combines two poles or bodies in one: “the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born” (26). The grotesque body (*cadavre*) is “pregnant death, a death that gives birth” (Bakhtin 25), or *Thanatos* that breeds *Eros*; it is a death that is, in Burke’s words, “so modified as not to be actually noxious” (123), thus invoking horror or pain that gives *delight*. It is proper to say, then, that pleasant pain or delightful terror—“the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime” (Burke 67)—speaks directly to the paradoxical or dialectical metamorphoses of the grotesque body.

Furthermore, in terms of representation, the unfinished, constant metamorphoses of *grottesche* serve as a possible index to that which is unrepresentable in the Kantian sublime. Speaking of the contrast between the beautiful and the sublime, Kant maintained that a natural object without any defining form cannot be regarded as beautiful, whereas “the sublime can also be found in a formless object, insofar as we present *unboundedness*, either [as] in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality” (§ 23, 98; emphasis in original). Thence arises the pain and pleasure of the (mathematical) sublime. In experiencing the sublime, the mind listens to the demand of reason for the idea of the unbound or infinite in its totality (§ 26, 111) and yet painfully finds out that the imagination, the faculty of (re)presentation, “the greatest power of sensibility,” is inadequate to make apparent an object that matches the idea

of the absolute whole (§ 27, 115). In contrast, the failure of the imagination pleases the mind with the “awareness that this inadequacy in relation to an idea of reason [which defines us as human beings] exemplifies our ultimate vocation—to make reason triumph over sensibility” (Crowther 99). In other words, the sublime cannot occur without the unresolved conflict between reason and the imagination, the ability to conceive and the ability to present a phenomenal totality equal to the concept. “We can,” as Jean-François Lyotard has said of the Kantian sublime, “conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to ‘make visible’ this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible. . . . They can be said to be unrepresentable” (78).

For Lyotard, it is the presentation of the unrepresentable that gives birth to modern art: “I shall call modern the art which devotes its ‘little technical expertise



Fig. 2. Cornelius Floris, ornamental engraving, 1556.

(Reprinted from Berliner, *Ornamentale Vorlage-Blätter* 163)

(*son 'petit technique'*), as Diderot used to say, to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists. To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible" (78). One can therefore say that *grotesche*, as "the epitome of incompleteness," seek to render visible what is called by Kant "Unform"—namely, formlessness or deformity—by creating the grotesque body or object that constantly and perpetually "outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits," and transforms its nature, to the point of being monstrous in the Kantian sense: "An object is *monstrous* [and so can be sublime] if by its magnitude it nullifies the purpose that constitutes its concept" (§ 26, 109; emphasis in original). Grotesque objects (Fig. 2) are *limitlessly* interwoven with human beings, animals, and plants; as such, we are constantly terrified by and attracted to their perpetual, incongruous, and immeasurable metamorphoses so much so as to fail to classify what objects they are, comprehend where they begin or end. As Ernst H. Gombrich says of grotesque hybrids: "there is nothing to hold on to, nothing fixed, the *deformitas* is hard to 'code' and harder still to remember, for everything is in flux" (256). The grotesque object, so to say, is a deformed or formless entirety, or, as Paul de Man writes of the Kantian sublime, "it knows of no limits or borders, yet it has to appear as a determined totality; in a philosophical sense, it is something of a monster" (74).

Both in antiquity and the Renaissance, grotesque images, according to David Summers, were called "monsters," because they were born of "unnatural combinations of natural things" (24). They do not respect borders, rules, positions; instead, they penetrate the orderly empirical world and unveil the penetralia of nature and being in which objects are not perfectly defined and designated but melt into and

permeate one another, or contraries exist side by side without cancelling each other out. The grotesque, in a nutshell, is the product of nature in its chaos, which, as Kant has put it, “most arouses our ideas of the sublime” (§ 23, 99).

¹ For a pithy discussion of Longinus’s bearing on the expressive theory of art, see Meyer H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953), 72-78.

² As one or the other of them prevails, says Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice* (1853), the grotesque “falls into two branches, sportive grotesque and terrible grotesque; but that we cannot legitimately consider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements; there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all ideas of jest” (126).

³ As Samuel H. Monk explains: “The difference between the rhetorical sublime and the pathetic sublime of the early eighteenth-century theorists is largely that in the one emotions have a practical value, to persuade against the will and the reason of the audience, and in the other they are regarded as the source of aesthetic pleasure. In the latter case, the sublime can be sought in all the arts” (84).

⁴ The fact that Dennis privileged terror in his theory is of some historical significance and interest: “terror,” as Monk indicates, “is the first of several qualities that, finding no very happy home in the well-planned, orderly, and carefully trimmed domain of neo-classicism, sought and found refuge in the sublime, which constantly gathered to itself ideas and emotions that were to be prominent in the poetry and prose of the romantic era” (52).

⁵ Baudelaire’s high regard for the bizarre is even more evident in the essay “De l’essence du rire” (also published in 1855), wherein he privileges *le grotesque* over *le comique* in the plastic arts. Unlike *le comique*, which is primarily an imitation, *le grotesque* is mostly “une création mêlée d’une certaine faculté imitatrice d’éléments préexistants dans la nature” (“a creation, mixed with a certain faculty of imitating elements pre-existing in nature”), and expresses “l’idée de supériorité, non plus de l’homme sur l’homme, mais de l’homme sur la nature” (“the idea of superiority, no longer of man over man, but of man over nature”) (985). Here Baudelaire paves the way for André Breton, who sees *le merveilleux* (the marvellous) as the *sine qua non* of the Surrealist image—which has been often cited as exemplary of the Modern grotesque: “le merveilleux est toujours beau, n’importe qu’ell merveilleux est beau, il n’y a même que le merveilleux qui soit beau” (“the marvellous is always beautiful; anything marvellous is beautiful; indeed only the marvellous is beautiful”) (24-25).

⁶ Incidentally, Kant divided the sublime into two types: the mathematical sublime concerns magnitude and the dynamical sublime might. Besides, it is worthwhile to mention Paul de Man’s penetrating analysis of the interaction among nature, reason, and the imagination in the dynamical sublime: “the faculty that establishes the superiority of the mind over nature is reason and reason alone; the imagination’s security depends on the actual, empirical physical attraction and, when this situation is threatening, it swings toward terror and toward a feeling of free submission to nature. Since, however, in the experience of the sublime, the imagination achieves tranquillity, it submits to reason, and achieves the highest degree of freedom by freely sacrificing its natural freedom to the higher freedom of reason. . . . The loss of empirical freedom means the gain in critical freedom that characterizes rational and transcendental principles. Imagination substitutes for reason at the cost of its empirical nature and, by this anti- or unnatural act, it conquers nature” (86).

⁷ Burke went so far as to make the following claim described by W. J. T. Mitchell as “iconoclastic, antivisual”: “Indeed so little does poetry depend for its effect on the power of raising sensible images, that I am convinced it would lose a very considerable part of its energy, if this were the necessary result of all description. Because that union of affecting words which is the most powerful of all poetical instruments, would frequently lost its force along with its propriety and consistency, if the sensible images were always excited” (155). Burke’s logic, if pushed far enough, will become that “the verbal sublime finally has nothing at all to do with images, clear *or* obscure” (Mitchell 136).

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